

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE IRELAND

Love the countryside

Review of Support Arrangements For LFAs in Northern Ireland

A Response by

**Countryside Alliance Ireland
The Courtyard
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May 2009

Countryside Alliance Ireland (CAI) is an expert and informed rural campaigning organisation, representing 30,000 people throughout Ireland. We and our members, work, live and participate in recreation in Northern Ireland's countryside and therefore our interests and expertise are directly relevant to this consultation.

We commend DARD on its professional approach and systematic delivery of information to all stakeholders within the forum and we welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation.

We are pleased to submit our views on 'LFAs. We hope they are helpful and we look forward to continuing to work constructively with DARD for the good of our countryside and its people.

We will respond in to each of the consultation questions in turn, as outlined in the letter dated 5 March 2009, attached to the Consultation Report.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Chapters 5 to 11 of the Report detail the evidence that has been collated to inform this review of LFA support and guide decisions on the way forward.

1. Are you content that all of the relevant issues have been captured and adequately explored?

Yes, we believe that all relevant issues have been captured and adequately explored.

2. Are you content with the conclusions that have been reached within the evidence chapters?

Yes, we are content with the conclusions that have been reached within the evidence chapters.

A continuation of the current LFACA Scheme is not possible as a consequence of Council Regulation (EC) 1698/2005 that is due to take effect from 1 January 2010. Therefore, four Options have been presented in Chapter 12 of the Report for future action. Options 1, 2 and 3 are presented in recognition of the fact that there is no requirement under the EU Regulation to operate an LFACA Scheme, i.e. LFA is an optional measure.

3. Do you agree with Option 1 that there should be no future LFACA Scheme and that the funds released should not be reallocated to other rural development measures? If so, please explain your reasons for this choice in the context of the evidence that has been presented in this review.

No, we do not agree with Option 1.

We believe the funds should be ring fenced for the rural community. In 1990 70% of Northern Ireland's farms were located in LFAs; of these, 55% were in the SDA and 45% in the DA, this substantiates our belief that funds are

needed to secure the future of farming, conservation and rural communities in general.

Withdrawal of the scheme would further decimate farming and the rural sector. Land abandonment and significant environmental problems would result if this option were implemented.

4. Do you agree with Option 2 that there should be no future LFACA Scheme and that the funds released should be reallocated entirely to Axis 1 and Axis 3 measures of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme? If so, please explain your reasons for this choice in the context of the evidence that has been presented in this review.

a. If your choice is Option 2, to what priorities under Axis 1 and/or Axis 3 should the monies be directed, and why?

No, we do not agree with Option 2.

It is neither practical, nor fair to totally reallocate the funding, to the exclusion of farming activities. It would also be very difficult to assess and allocate the funding in a fair manner. Farming activities have a vital role to play in Northern Ireland through their sustained management of the land.

5. Do you agree with Option 3 that there should be no future LFACA Scheme and that the funds released should be reallocated entirely to the agri-environment programme? If so, please explain your reasons for this choice in the context of the evidence that has been presented in this review.

a. If your choice is Option 3, should the additional monies be directed through the existing agri-environment measures, or are adjustments to the programme required (including, for example, ring-fenced monies for certain areas)? Please give reasons for your answers.

No, we do not agree with Option 3.

We believe it is obvious that a number of factors need to be considered to improve the rural way of life for rural dwellers and this means all rural dwellers, not just farmers.

The administration of the funding needs to be clear cut and it is important to differentiate between environmental and LFA schemes. We believe that guidelines should be produced for both environmental and LFA schemes, clearly outlining the application criteria for each.

6. Do you agree with Option 4 that there should be a future LFACA Scheme? If so, please explain your reasons for this choice in the context of the evidence that has been presented in this review.

Yes, we agree that there should be a future LFACA Scheme.

A LFACA Scheme will help ensure the survival and improvement of the countryside eg in terms of helping prevent land abandonment, maintaining habitats and to support viable, productive farming methods.

a. Do you agree with the broad outline for such a Scheme that has been given and the reasons for this? If not, what changes would you like to see and why, in the context of the evidence that has been presented in this review. In particular:

(i) Do you agree that the focus of future of support should be the SDA (or any future designated LFA)?

Yes. The focus of support should be on LFAs.

(ii) Do you agree that applicants to the Scheme should farm at least 10 ha of land in total (of which at least 3 ha must be in the SDA)? If not, what would you like to see as the minimum size and why?

Yes, we believe this a reasonable requirement.

(iii) What are your views on the range of farm enterprises that would make a farm eligible for support?

All reasonable requests should be considered when assessing eligibility of a farm enterprise for support.

(iv) What are your views on the use of minimum and maximum stocking densities?

Minimum and maximum stocking densities should be set and based upon the use of the land and taking into account the required level of conservation.

(v) What are your views on the use of a possible environmental option within an LFA support scheme? What sort of environmental issues could usefully be addressed by such a mechanism?

We believe an environmental option should be contained within an LFA support scheme. For example, land may be considered for the production of an alternative energy source – eg wind power.

7. Are there any equality issues that you would like to raise that have not been addressed adequately?

No, we believe all issues have been covered.

8. Are there any issues relating to rural proofing that you would like to raise that have not been addressed adequately?

No.

9. Are there any other issues you would like to draw our attention to in the context of this review?

Countryside Alliance Ireland would like to reiterate our belief that the continuation (albeit revised) support arrangements for LFAs must remain to

ensure the sustainability and growth of the countryside and rural way of life. This is all encompassing and should take into account environmental and agricultural factors, as well as considering the needs of farming dwellers and rural inhabitants.

If you have any queries or would like clarification on our response, please do not hesitate to contact us – 028 9263 9911 or info@countrysideallianceireland.org

Lyll Plant
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

29 May 2009