

Knowledge Framework (Education Strategy)
[Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs]
Draft Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Brief Background to the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Area

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people, approximately 52,500 jobs and 7,175 businesses. The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km² (or 20% of NI) - and is the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in Northern Ireland. This is a key feature of the district but presents challenges in terms of accessibility and service delivery.

Consultation Response

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) believes in promoting a shared vision for prosperous and sustainable Agricultural and Agri-Foods, Fisheries, Forestry and Industrial Sectors. Modern, professional and profitable businesses, which have long term futures, are fundamental to the future success of Northern Ireland.

The Council believes that any Knowledge Strategy should be:

- Forward looking.
- Utilise local and international best practice.
- Safeguard, and enhance, the local natural environments.
- Supporting the creation of skilled jobs (taking advantage of equal opportunity for all).

The Council would urge the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Department) to work in partnership with relevant public authorities, organisations and the local community, in order to ensure that the long-term vision is realised.

Knowledge Strategy Aim

The proposed Framework states that the aim is to ensure that 'individuals, organisations, and businesses within the Agri-food industry have access to high quality, relevant and accessible education, training and technology exchange provision to improve productivity, resilience, environmental performance and sustainability'.

Whilst the Council agrees that this aim is both appropriate, and measurable, it can only be achieved through partnership-working as well as by promoting the benefits to all individuals within the sector.

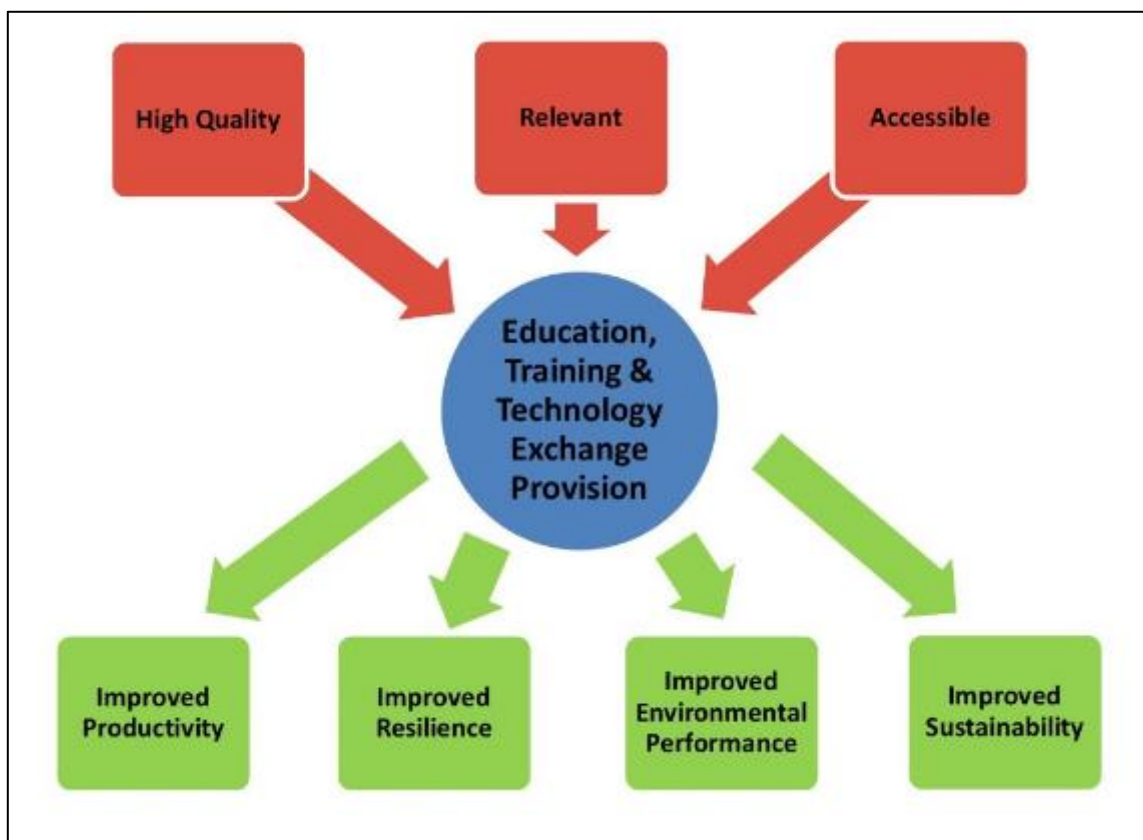
The Council recommends that the Department widens the aim to state:

‘A prosperous and resilient Agricultural and Agri-Food Industries (including: the Fisheries, Forestry and Industrial Sectors), in which individuals, organisations, and businesses within the industry have access to high quality, relevant and accessible education, training and technology exchange provision to improve productivity, resilience, environmental performance and sustainability’.

By including the term ‘prosperous’ the Department and its partners will work towards ensuring that associated businesses are both profitable and provided skilled employment opportunities. By including the term ‘resilient’, the Council stresses the need to work towards ensuring that businesses are robust and sustainable, as well as being able to effectively manage any future decline in funding levels.

The sector must be market focussed, alive to current demands and future opportunities. Production must be sustainable in the widest sense – economically and environmentally – with these outcomes being mutually compatible. While some farm businesses focus on one product, others may be well placed to produce several products, or to develop a wider range of ‘products’ such as renewable energy or managing the natural environment and water.

The below diagram is also included within the proposed Knowledge Strategy:



Although the Council, agrees with its contents in principle it is suggested adding two more ‘Red Boxes’, namely:

- Promotion/Communication: Promoting the benefits to individuals and organisations.
- Assistance Available: Outlining assistance/funding available to assist individuals and organisations take advantage of the programmes and initiatives outlined within the Strategy.

The Need to Maintain and Create Jobs

The Council agrees that achieving an 'increase in the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy', as well as the 'improvement of the local skill profile' (as stated in the draft Programme for Government), could assist the growth of the local Agricultural and Agri-Foods Industries. There are also a number of similarities between this Knowledge Strategy and the 'Economy 2030' document which is also out for public consultation.

The Council believes that it would have been worthwhile to ensure that all of the above three documents were consulted upon together, in order to ensure a synergistic approach to delivering progress.

The Council feels that the above-mentioned aims and Strategies, should provide a joint approach to 'maintain and create jobs'. Any increase in education/knowledge which ultimately leads to an increase in production, should also lead to an increase in demand for job opportunities.

The Department should also maximise the opportunity to encourage job creation by investing in the local Agriculture and Agri-Foods Industry, and encouraging (and monitoring) improving pay/working conditions. This would also include tailored support for any new businesses, with the provision of capital support where appropriate.

Rural Impact Assessment

One of the key recommendations which was outlined by the Fermanagh and Omagh Community Planning Engagement process, was the need to "improve the wellbeing of all our citizens and develop thriving rural and urban communities". It is important to recognise that a number of the areas within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area would be considered rurally isolated - 14 Council Wards appear in the 'Top 50' most deprived areas within Northern Ireland in relation to Proximity to Services (NISRA statistics).

The Council recommends that the Knowledge Strategy is subject to a robust Rural Proofing exercise, ensuring that that the proposed strategy is not detrimental to any rural community, business, group and/or individual.

Key Strategic Objectives

Although the Council agrees in principle with some of the objectives contained within the proposed Knowledge Framework, there are some issues which the Council urges the Department to consider.

The proposed Knowledge Framework contains two key objectives that the Council would like to comment upon, these are:

- i. By 2025, DAERA will seek to ensure that anyone taking over as head of a commercial farm or horticulture business (i.e. one where the farm represents the primary source of income) should have at least a Level 3 relevant qualification (equivalent to 'A' Level or level 3 NVQ), i.e. the minimum qualification for anyone in a managerial position.

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there are substantial numbers of Farm/Horticultural businesses. Of these businesses, particularly the farming businesses, quite a significant number could be considered to be operated on a part-time basis, with the owners working in other employment to supplement their income. It would be unreasonable to compel individuals who work in other jobs, as well as working on a farm in their other time, to study for a qualification to the equivalent of an A-Level or Level 3 NVQ.

Secondly, by enforcing a 'mandatory' qualification it also places an added expense on the small business – in this case farm/horticultural business. Some businesses like these are operating on already minimal profit margins, and to add additional costs on top would be totally unacceptable.

It is vital that people with relevant and vital skills, are not dissuaded from becoming involved in this business sector because of the need to pursue specific qualifications. The Council would also encourage the Department to consider putting in place a type of Business Mentorship programme for Young/New Business Entrants. This would allow business owners, and potential business owners, to avail of advice or practical guidance. This may be more beneficial to the development of businesses in the long-term, as opposed to imposing a compulsory qualification.

Locally, the education breakdown of the Fermanagh and Omagh District population is as follows:

- 26.7% qualified to NVQ Level 4 or above.
- 14.9% have no qualifications.

Therefore, it is clear to see that there are a substantial number of individuals within the District who do not currently possess the required qualifications – and for an individual who currently does not possess the necessary qualification, it may prove to be another unnecessary barrier to becoming involved within the Agriculture/Agri-Food Sector.

- ii. By 2025 DAERA, working with other providers, will seek to ensure that all new manager level appointees in the food processing sector should have at least a Level 5 qualification in a relevant discipline (equivalent to foundation degree or higher national diploma (HND), i.e. the minimum qualification for anyone in a managerial position.

The same issues, particularly in relation to rurality, apply to this recommendation. Whilst Council recognises that a level of qualification may be required for Manager Level Appointees in the Food Processing Sector, that level should be determined by the individual businesses who have an understanding of the requirements of the posts in question.

Better Regulation

It is vital that the imposition of any new Regulatory Framework on small businesses in the sector, is monitored in respect of the impact on the cumulative burden of compliance on the business, with particular regard to costs.

Conclusion

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council is supportive of any initiative which supports and enhances the sustainability of the Agricultural and Agri-Food Industries. However, it is essential that the imposition of mandatory educational qualification levels does not actively disadvantage smaller part-time farmers, and the Council urges the Department to take note of the comments made within this consultation response document in bringing forward the Knowledge Framework.