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Northumberland
NE65 8RR

20 September 2016

Anne Marie Trevelyan – Alnwick Office

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Dear Mrs Trevelyan,

I'm writing to you to introduce myself as Chairman of the Northumberland Coast and Lowlands Leader group, to thank you for your recent intervention in clarifying the status of Leader funding to one of our applicants, and to ask for your help. We're seeking to secure improvements in Defra-owned processes that will help us to get more of our money distributed to farmers, rural businesses and local community groups in your constituency.

By way of a reminder, Leader is an EU funded programme that is administered through Defra. Uniquely it relies on local representatives to form a Local Action Group and make funding decisions that fit the specific needs of our area, and we have an enthusiastic and talented group of community and business volunteers to help us to do just that. Our current 5 year programme is worth approximately £2m, and I have every confidence that with the right support we'll be able to lever a further £2m in match funding create approximately 100 new jobs and support around 80 local businesses by 2020. Our previous 2007-2013 programme supported 341 businesses and led to jobs safeguarded and created, more day visitors and more overnight stays to our beautiful area. We are supported by Northumberland County Council who act as our accountable body and employ our staff, and by the Rural Payments Agency who verify the grant applications.

The current programme is starting to deliver real benefits, we have contracted 4 projects and have another 50-100 in various stages of development. But we are facing real problems as a result of increasing Defra and RPA beaurocracy which does nothing to support our aim to get the money working in our patch and is

actually hindering our efforts. To be clear, we do need support in administering funds, but successive alterations in the process have resulted in a centralised, top-down, inefficient process that prevents us from distributing funds that our rural population is entitled to, and furthermore disenfranchises the local volunteer LAG members that are the lifeblood of this programme.

Our accountable body is now replicating the assessment of projects that our LAG is more than capable of doing as a result of new demands from Defra/RPA – I calculate that by 2020 this will result in approximately £40k of needless and unwelcome repetition, an amount equivalent to the cost to create 4 new jobs in our patch. Moreover, it ties up our project staff in needless paperwork instead of spending their time supporting applicants through the onerous application process. We need your help.

Firstly I'd ask for your support in applying pressure on Defra and RPA to trust and enable local people in making funding decisions and take action to simplify the process. Local Action Groups across the UK are fed up with increasing intervention and complex processes, and we're seeing talented local volunteers drifting away from the groups in frustration. In particular changes should be focussed on:

- Reversing recent changes to assessment of projects, and putting LAGs at the heart of deciding which projects should be supported
- Supporting applicants by streamlining processes
- Engaging with LAGs when making improvements – so they meet our needs
- Reducing central involvement to the bare minimum to secure legal compliance, rather than stifling the process with complex processes

Secondly I'd ask for your support in ensuring the Leader process is supported beyond this years Autumn Statement, so that we can continue to create jobs and support communities in Northumberland. Whilst Leader is an EU programme, and whatever your views on EU Exit, I hope we can all coalesce behind the concept that the Leader programme is ultimately UK taxpayer funded. We want to grasp a huge opportunity to create new jobs and support local communities in the Northumberland Coast and Lowlands Area, and would welcome your support in doing so.

I'd welcome the opportunity to meet you to discuss what we do, and to explore how you may be able to support us in unlocking the issues explained above.

Yours Sincerely,

Ross Lowrie

Chair – Northumberland Coast and Lowlands Leader

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