

Kent & Surrey LEADER Evaluation Report - Draft

Produced on behalf of East Kent, Kent Downs and Marshes, West Kent
and Rural Surrey LEADER Programmes

Report structure

The report is structured as follows:

- **Part 1** provides an introduction to the report
- **Part 2** provides an overview of the national LEADER Programme in England, the National Priorities and how the LEADER programme operates at a local level via a system of Local Action Groups and the principle of Community Led Local Development.
- **Part 3** individually examines each of four LAG Programme areas across Kent and Surrey and will look at:
 - Headline analysis for each LAG area, including the quantified core outputs and impacts to date and anticipated in the future
 - The resulting project portfolio for each area, including the volume and type of projects approved in each LAG area and the split of investment by national priorities and local themes.
 - Case studies for each LAG Programme area
- **Part 4** looks at the processes involved in the delivery of LEADER across the 4 LAG areas, with feedback from grant beneficiaries, LAG Executive Board members and Accountable Body Programme staff. This section will report on:
 - Cumulative summary of LEADER investment across Kent and Surrey, as well as cumulative outputs
 - In depth analysis of the processes used to identify and approve projects, including publicity outreach and the application and approval process.
 - Feedback on the LAG and Community Led Local Development model from members of the LAG Executive Board
 - Feedback on the claims process
 - Wider economic, environmental and social benefits delivered by LEADER investment as identified by grant beneficiaries
- **Part 5** provides conclusions and lessons learnt from the four programme areas.

Part 1: Introduction

The LEADER Programme is a rural community-led, local development scheme (CLLD) providing funding and advice for projects in England which help businesses and rural communities to grow and develop the local rural economy.

As part of this, Programme grants to assist rural businesses and communities were awarded by a network of Local Action Groups (LAGs). For the 2014-20 Programme, 79 LAGs operated across England.

LAGs are entirely autonomous in their decision-making and represent an agreed, defined area. Regional Groupings were formed for reporting back to the Rural Payments Agency and Defra. The **South-East of England Group 1 (SE1)** covers the LAG areas of Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

The South-East LEADER Group 1 and the Kent, Surrey, Sussex Network

The LAG areas in Kent, Surrey and Sussex oversaw six separate LEADER Programmes, each managed by their own respective LAG under the direction of an accountable body (usually a local or county council) which were responsible for providing administrative support and governance to the LAG. The Accountable Bodies were Kent County Council, Surrey County Council, The West Kent Partnership, West Sussex County Council and Plumpton College.

The SE1 Network was particularly active and met every six weeks to not only agree collective responses to the RPA and Defra on policy, but also to share best practice, suggest improvements to the Programme and cooperative working. It was known as **the Kent Surrey Sussex Network (KSS)**.

A Joint Evaluation covering Kent and Surrey

With the exception of the Sussex-based LAG areas (who have undertaken their own internal assessments), the remaining members of the South-East Group covering the LAG areas of **Kent** and **Surrey** have collaborated on this report to undertake a joint-evaluation across their four respective LAG areas.

Together, the Kent and Surrey LEADER programmes have reviewed their LEADER Programmes and explored future socio-economic initiatives for the respective Accountable Bodies to consider and to help inform future rural development/grant programmes as part of any initiatives the UK Government has for replacing EU structural funding Programmes (recognizing that the newly launched Rural England Prosperity Fund – ‘REPF’ - will provide a funding framework with capital grants for the rural economy for a number of District and Local Authority areas for 2023/24 and 2024/25.)

A joint evaluation is a more comprehensive evaluation

By combining our efforts, the four LAG areas (East Kent, Kent Downs & Marshes, West Kent, and Rural Surrey) are able to provide a **more in depth evaluation** of the

programme across Kent and Surrey. A joint evaluation adds value having access to a larger data set detailing programme expenditure, project type and outputs.

The uncertain nature of replacement funding and the wider regional context

This report aims to make recommendations to support the continued use of LEADER's Community Led Local Development (CLLD) approach to **rural funding** as part of any future UK rural funding replacement scheme. The principle of CLLD remains and should be factored into future models.

Scope of the Report

The aim of this evaluation is to assess the four LEADER programmes across Kent and Surrey, looking at how the programmes have been delivered, the wider benefits achieved due to intervention, and lessons learnt, which can be used to inform and recommend how any future UK rural funding scheme could operate.

This assessment draws on local insights and wider knowledge to evaluate the processes and impact of funding, as well as identifying constructive recommendations and lessons.

- The report will carry out an assessment of the extent to which projects have contributed towards the achievement of outputs and priorities set out in the respective Local Development Strategies and LAG Delivery Plans.
- The report will identify how the experiences of the LEADER Programme can shape future funding opportunities in Kent and Surrey. This will be used to develop a **Future Positioning Paper** on how best to use future rural grant funding such as the REPF as highlighted above to support businesses and rural communities. The Future Positioning Paper will:
 - Identify the key elements of the programme that achieved jobs and growth and any common characteristics shared by successful beneficiaries that could be replicated in future funding.
 - Make recommendations for how LAG partnerships could be improved and adapted to support the delivery of future rural funding.
 - Identify if a CLLD approach would be an effective mechanism to support the achievement of objectives in key regional and sub-regional policies. This will include an assessment of whether the current LAG boundaries are appropriate.
 - Assess whether there were any key elements missing from LEADER, which would have supported businesses to achieve better outputs.
 - Consider the case for the involvement of rural communities in the design, development and delivery of future grant funding in rural Kent and Surrey and the role of animation in delivering this.

Interim evaluation

It should be noted that the nature of LEADER funding is that outputs are typically contracted to be delivered over a period of three years after their final claim has been paid. In addition, due to the COVID pandemic, there is an acceptance that projects lost significant periods of time in which to deliver their original targets. This has resulted in some projects having to re-profile the delivery of outputs to allow for the disruption COVID during 2020-21. Consequently, the success of the programme in terms of outputs achieved cannot be fully measured yet and, in a number of instances, not until the three-year post-payment monitoring has been completed in 2024-5.

Study approach

This document has been drafted in order to record the delivery and impact of the programme across four LAG areas in Kent and Surrey. Data has been drawn from:

- Desk-based research of programme documentation including each of the LAG's Local Development Plans;
- Statistical analysis of contracted outputs and performance indicators by each LAG area and LEADER priority – with raw data taken from, the national database of LEADER projects;
- Primary research to gather qualitative information from a sample of grant beneficiaries from each LAG areas on their experiences, the impact grant funding had on their business or organization and the wider intended and unintended benefits to the rural economy and area.
- Primary research to gather qualitative information on the administration of the fund from members of the 4 Executive Local Action Groups across Kent and Surrey;
- Consultation with the respective Accountable Body programme delivery teams;
- Any other relevant research or studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of LEADER and applying this to the LEADER Programmes in the SE1 area.

Part 2: The LEADER Programme

What is LEADER funding?

LEADER is a European Union structural fund initiative for assisting rural areas to improve their quality of life and economic prosperity, and has been made available to farmers, growers, foresters, rural businesses, environmental and heritage organisations, and communities to help secure a sustainable future.

LEADER is a French acronym which translates as “Liaison Among Stakeholders in Rural Development”.

The LEADER Programme (part of The Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)) is a way of spending money on local issues, identified by people living in that area. This bottom up identification of local problems leads to locally tailored opportunities based on the social, economic, environmental and land based needs of the LEADER area.

It is characterised by **autonomous local decision-making**. The money is locally controlled, with decisions about which projects are assisted being made by a Local Action Group (LAG), a group of local volunteers with local knowledge and expertise in their rural area who operate under the established principle of **community led local delivery** to deliver a Local Development Strategy.

LAGs are community panels comprised of volunteer representatives of local private, public and voluntary sector organisations with a wide range of experience and knowledge of local rural issues in their area. Membership includes representatives of forestry, farming rural businesses and community organisations. By bringing together local people with expertise and knowledge of the relevant sectors and the local rural area and economy, each LAG is able to make sure that LEADER funding is being used to fund local responses to identified local needs. The success of LEADER is in its localised decision-making.

How LEADER is delivered across England

From UK Government to Local Action Groups

In England, the **Rural Payments Agency (RPA)** is the delegated body tasked with delivering the Rural Development Programme for England. To document how the funding will be administered and disseminated across England, the RPA produced an Operational Programme setting out the eligibility criteria for awarding funding, the national priorities which LEADER funding needs to deliver against and the process for awarding and disseminating funds across the country.

Local Action Groups

Typically, government grant schemes are usually administered by larger regional organisations, such as Local Enterprise Partnerships or, prior to that, English Government Offices or Regional Development Agencies. The LEADER scheme, however, is based on a much smaller **sub-regional** distribution and management system of grant funding delivery via a network of **Local Action Groups (LAGs)**. Throughout England, there were **79** LAGs in operation at the start of the Programme.

An **Executive Board (ELAG)** is identified from within the wider LAG comprising of individuals who are able to give more time to the development and work of the LAG vis-à-vis helping to co-ordinate, deliver the programme and make funding decisions. In this respect, the ELAG is a subgroup of the wider LAG and the decision-making body tasked with making sure the local programme is being delivered according to the **Local Development Strategy (LDS)** and an annually prepared Business Plan. The ELAGs review full grant applications for approval and check that those projects which are awarded grants deliver against nationally and locally-set priorities. Typically, the ELAG will meet every 6 to 8 weeks.

In the South-East of England covering the counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex (the South East Group 1 area), there are 7 LAGs in operation.

Accountable Bodies

Each Local Action Group is overseen by an Accountable Body. The Accountable Body is the lead partner for administrative and financial matters, and is responsible for the governance of the Programme in its area. The role involves:

- Contracting with successful applicants for individual projects;
- Providing an internal audit function and procuring external audit (if applicable, depending on fund requirements);
- Processing claims, securing Programme funds from the Managing Authority or nominated payments agency (The Rural Payments Agency)
- Supporting the Local Action Group to ensure correct procedure and compliance;
- Reporting to the Managing Authority on the performance of the LEADER programme in its area.

The Accountable Body will typically be a Local Authority or organization with established procedural governance systems.

Eligibility Criteria

National and Local Priorities

National Priorities

Each Local Action Group makes decisions on LEADER funding based on a set of National and Local Priorities. The National Priorities are laid down by Government (Defra) in the Operational Programme.

The National Priorities for the last LEADER Programme are;

1. Support for increasing farm productivity
2. Support for micro and small enterprises, and farm diversification
3. Support for rural tourism
4. Provision of rural services
5. Support for culture and heritage activities
6. Support for increasing forestry productivity

For all priorities, the emphasis is on providing jobs and growth within the rural area.

Local Development Strategies & Local Priorities

Aligned to the national priorities, Local Action Groups set specific local priorities in a Local Development Strategy (LDS). The LDS will be informed by local economic conditions, needs local policy.

Local priorities are set within local themes and are developed through the local knowledge and experience of LAG members, who represent diverse local sectors including land based businesses, food production, entrepreneurs and SMEs, the environmental sector, community-based, heritage and cultural organisations, and economic development teams within local authorities.

The Local Themes for each LAG are detailed in the following chapters.

What does LEADER fund?

LEADER is a **capital** grant scheme. In other words, it only funded capital projects (e.g. the purchase of equipment or building costs). Revenue funding was only considered in exceptional circumstances.

How much grant funding is available for projects?

The minimum grant allocation was £2,500 (although LAGs were free to set their own levels). The maximum amount varied by priority but was typically between £50,000 and £100,000 (increased under certain circumstances). Grants were awarded at a rate of 40% of total eligible costs for commercial projects, 80% for non-commercial projects and in some circumstances 100% where there was no direct economic gain for the applicant and where the benefits were wholly enjoyed by the local area.

Who can benefit?

LEADER funding was available to:

- Farmers;
- Foresters;
- Tourism businesses;
- Rural businesses;
- Environmental and Heritage organizations
- Voluntary organizations
- Rural community organizations.

To be eligible for funding, applicants had to demonstrate they met at least one of the local investment priorities. Projects which were able to demonstrate increased job numbers and/or increased productivity were given priority.

Area specific funding

LEADER is also **area-specific** and only applications from within the defined geographical boundary of each LAG were eligible.

Part 3: The Kent & Surrey LEADER programmes

The following section looks at the 4 LEADER areas across Kent and Surrey.

Each section details the local development priorities for the respective areas, how LEADER funding was disseminated and where funding was targetted, and as assessment of how each programme area has delivered against the targets detailed in the Local Development Strategies.

The four LEADER areas are:

- **West Kent LEADER**
- **East Kent LEADER**
- **Kent Downs and Marshes LEADER**
- **Rural Surrey LEADER**

2014-20 Programme

For the 2014-20 programme, there was an additional Government requirement to focus funding on projects which promoted economic growth and job creation. This was a significant change from the previous programme (2007-13), which also supported community projects to support and sustain important community groups in rural areas. A national target of 70 % of project funding was to be allocated to projects that directly delivered jobs and/or growth.

Forecast Outputs

Outputs included in the following LAG area sections are forecasts. They are still to be fully achieved and recorded as part of the Programme's Post-Payment Monitoring, with some projects to complete their outputs by 2025.

Kent Surrey Sussex Network

The end of this section, looks at the Kent Surrey Sussex LEADER Network, comprising the various accountbale bodies tasked with supporting and delivering the LAG programmes across the sub-regional programmes areas in Kent, Surrey and Sussex. As previously explained, this report is focussed on those LEADER programmes in Kent and Surrey only, which make up the majority of the KSS Network.

West Kent LEADER

Summary

- **50** local projects supported
- **£1.812 million** grant awarded, resulting in over **£4.5 million** of investment into West Kent

- Number of jobs created: **74.7**
- Wage bill increase: **£1,454,480**
- Number of additional day visits: **7,101**
- Number of additional overnight visits: **9,862**
- Number of new techniques developed: **27**
- Number of new products developed: **19**

West Kent Area: Overview

West Kent LEADER lies within the three local authority areas of Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells plus parts of Gravesham south of the A2. In total this is an area of approximately 550 square miles and represents some 38% of Kent.

Local Priorities

West Kent's Local Development Strategy (LDS) committed to give high priority to projects which supported:

- The growth of local farming and forestry enterprises, with an emphasis on job creation and economic growth through diversification, new techniques and products.
- A desire to develop new or expanded existing small and medium-sized rural enterprises, with particular emphasis placed on projects which add value to the rural economy and create additional local employment opportunities.

70% of the programme's grant resources would be allocated to the key areas of farming, forestry and rural businesses. The remaining 30% of funds would support tourism, culture and heritage and rural services (again, with priority given to projects which contributed to job creation and economic growth).

Further to the national priorities and the local needs and challenges highlighted in the West Kent LDS, the LAG set the following **local priorities**:

- Improve competitiveness and financial sustainability of West Kent's farming and forestry
- Encourage innovation and diversification in West Kent's land-based sector
- Support new and existing rural businesses and promote entrepreneurship in rural West Kent

- Encourage the development of local heritage and rural tourism-related businesses
- Promote the provision of additional rural services to encourage vibrant rural communities
- Ensure best practice in land management and promote sustainable development

Programme Delivery

The delivery of the programme is overseen by the West Kent Local Action Group (LAG), supported by the Accountable Body's LEADER Programme Team, with Sevenoaks District Council acting as the designated Accountable Body for the West Kent Partnership.

West Kent Local Action Group (LAG)

The West Kent Local Action Group (LAG) was responsible for drafting the Local Development Strategy (LDS), under the authority of the Accountable Body and making decisions on which projects applicants to award funding.

The wider LAG was developed over the course of the previous LEADER programme and consists of 59 members from across all sectors including local community, public sector, private sector and civil society with a strong landowner / farmer involvement. Membership is representative of the local area and reflects the funding priorities in West Kent, which are to largely support the land-based sector and rural businesses. Some members represent pan-Kent, regional and national bodies, to help ensure that there is joined up thinking across the region with complementary working.

The membership of the ELAG for this programme was 23, which ensured an average meeting attendance of 10 – 12 representatives from the full cross sector of interests, with a wide range of experience and expertise.

The LAG Executive met on average every six to eight weeks and a total of 29 meetings were held over the lifetime of the Programme.

Accountable Body

The West Kent Partnership (WKP), the economic and strategic partnership operating across Sevenoaks District and the boroughs of Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge & Malling, provides overall management and support for the LEADER programme and has endorsed the priorities as set out in the Strategy.

On behalf of the West Kent Partnership, **Sevenoaks District Council** acts as the accountable body to run the programme across West Kent. Sevenoaks DC has been the Accountable Body for West Kent LEADER for both this programme and its predecessor.

The Programme Team

For the majority of the programme, SDC employed a Programme Manager and Support Officer to deliver the programme, alongside the West Kent Partnership co-ordinator. All three members of staff continued in their roles from the previous LEADER programme, ensuring continuity of expertise and knowledge from the previous round.

The LEADER team sits within the wider Economic Development Team at Sevenoaks District Council.

Programme Overview

Over the course of the Programme, West Kent LEADER:

- Received 109 Expressions of Interest
- Supported 50 projects
- £1.812 million has been awarded in grant funding, attracting £4.5m investment into West Kent
- Projects are projected to create 74.4 jobs

Committed Expenditure

West Kent spent £1.807 in grant funding to September 2022 (with an additional £5,000 to be spent by the end of 2022).

In addition, the Accountable Body has claimed approximately £410k in Running Costs and Animation for staff working on the programme (and any indirect costs incurred).

Projects Portfolio

The Level of Uptake and Grant Awards

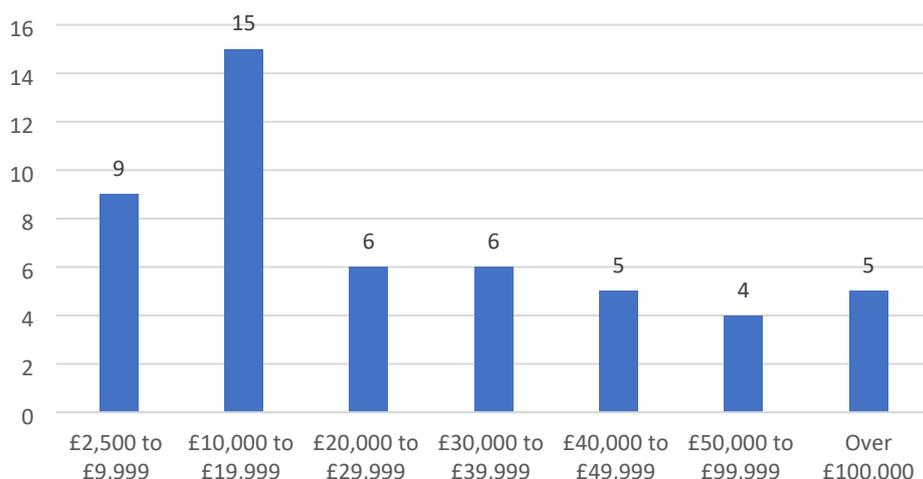
West Kent LEADER has supported 50 grant funded projects.

As highlighted above, during the course of the programme, 109 Expressions of Interest (EOIs) were received from prospective grant applicants. Of these, 56 were awarded a grant. This represented a conversion rate of 51% from EOI to funded project status.

Grant Sizes

The smallest grant awarded was **£3,820** and the largest was **£149,762**. The average grant size in West Kent was **£36,251**.

Distribution of Grant by Size



Most funded projects (15) fell within the **£10,000 to £20,000** grouping. In all, 29 projects supported low level grant projects (under £20,000). This equates to roughly 60% of the projects awarded funding. Within this, almost 20% of all grant beneficiaries were for small projects under £10,000.

Leverage

West Kent's total grant award of £1,812,550 has leveraged an additional £2.687m of project investment, resulting in over **£4.5m** of investment into West Kent.

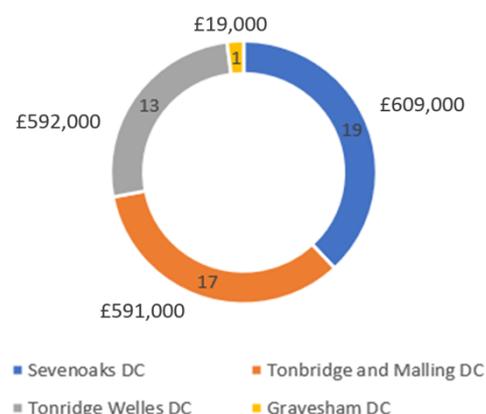
West Kent LEADER by district

The split of funding across the 3 local authorities within the West Kent LAG area has been proportionate, with each local authority areas receiving about one-third of the funding each.

Most projects were awarded to projects in the Sevenoaks District Council area (19), followed by Tonbridge and Malling (17) and then Tunbridge Welles (13).

Despite having slightly fewer projects, Tunbridge Welles actually had a slightly larger share of the total committed spend than Tonbridge and Malling.

Split of West Kent Projects by Local Authority District

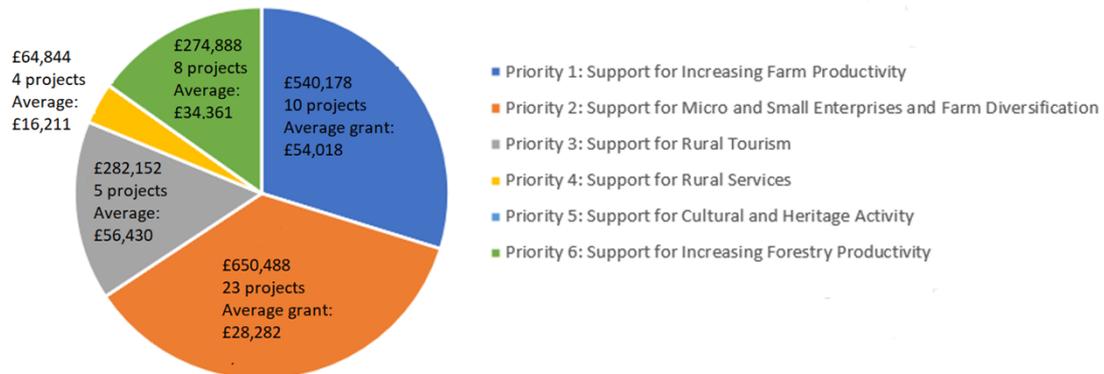


Performance against National Priorities

Type of project beneficiary

Split of projects by National Programme Priority and grant allocation.

Grant Award by National Priority



Conclusions

Supporting farming, forestry and rural businesses: The LAG gave priority to supporting farming, forestry and rural businesses, with a target of directing 70% of the programme's grant resources to these sectors. This target was achieved with 80.9% of the programme's grant committed spend being allocated to the farming, forestry and rural businesses.

Distribution of funding across West Kent: The West Kent LEADER programme has been successful in splitting their allocation of funding broadly equally between the 3 main district councils which make up the West Kent area.

WEST KENT CASE STUDIES

COBHAM BOWLS CLUB

THE BUSINESS: Cobham Bowls Club was founded in 1921 and is one of the oldest bowls clubs in Kent. It is affiliated to both Bowls England and Kent County Bowls Association. It is mixed club with approximately 90 bowling members, whose ages range from teens to 90's. It hosts competitive games at National, County and District level, as well as their own Internal Competitions and, equally important, friendly social games with other clubs and amongst members. The club strives to offer something for everybody and seeks to promote the game to all irrespective of age or ability, whether for competition, exercise or general wellbeing.

PROFILE

- **Location** Gravesend, Kent
- **Priority 4: Provision of Rural Services**
Investment in new/existing workplace
- **Total Project Cost** - £130,217
- **LEADER Grant** - £19,533
- **Intervention rate** – 15.00%

OUTPUTS

- **Population benefitting:** 1,469

THE PROJECT: Cobham Bowls Club applied for a grant to install a new artificial all-weather bowling green and 4 new floodlights, helping to prolong the bowling life of existing elderly members and new elderly members the club is aiming to attract (as well as attracting other members across a broader age range). The new artificial surface will be more durable than natural grass, less prone to damage and will require lower maintenance and associated costs. The installation of floodlights will provide more user time, allowing the club to be open all year round instead of just for 6 months each year.



THE RESULTS: With the all-weather purpose green and the installation of floodlights, Cobham Bowls Clubs is now able to offer bowling from 10.00am to 10.00pm throughout the entire year. The speed of the green is constant and similar to that of an outdoor grass surface in high summer. This enables younger bowlers and the frail to enjoy their bowls throughout the year. As a result of this project, the club is open over a longer period and able to be used by a larger number of people, offering a social outlet to many in the local area and benefitting an estimated 1,469 people.

BORE PLACE



THE BUSINESS: Bore Place dates back to the 1300s. A substantial property in late Tudor times, by the 1800s the land and property were farmed by tenant farmers. The core of Bore Place House is late Tudor and the converted farm buildings date from the 1700s. In the early 20th century the buildings were added to as part of a thriving mixed farm, and the house renovated. The Commonwork Trust was set up in 1977 by Neil and Jenifer Wates after they bought Bore Place in 1976. The founders' vision was to explore how to live and work sustainably, understanding and recognising the interconnectedness of the environmental, social, economic and political aspects of sustainability. Bore Place works towards sustainable solutions in farming, education and the environment and welcomes 1000s of visitors, of all ages and abilities throughout the year. Some come to develop their own work and projects, others to take part in the other activities and opportunities Bore Place offers.

PROFILE

- **Location:** Chiddingstone, Kent
- **Priority 2: Support for Micro & Small Enterprises and Farm Diversification**
Business Development
- **Total Project Cost** - £321,728.00
- **LEADER Grant** - £128,691.20
- **Intervention rate** – 40.00%

OUTPUTS

- **Overnight stays:** 2,100
- **Wage bill increase:** £7,000
- **Jobs created:** 0.35 FTE

THE PROJECT: Bore Place applied for a grant to bring a dilapidated heritage building into use as 2 two-bedroom holiday lets, to provide high quality accommodation in an area lacking accommodation. One of the properties will be fully accessible to enable people of all abilities to stay on the farm. Visitors will also support the wider rural tourism economy.

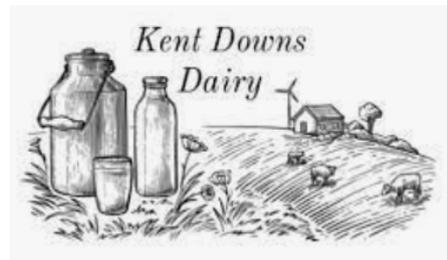


THE RESULTS:

Bore Place now offers two holiday let cottages to people visiting this part of Chiddingstone in Kent, increasing visitor numbers to the farm and benefitting other local businesses by bringing visitors and custom to the local economy. It has restored a heritage asset and developed an income stream to maintain the asset and provided two new holiday cottages into the district for farm stays.

KENT DOWNS DAIRY

THE BUSINESS: Kent Downs Dairy Ltd is owned and operated by the Betts family which has been dairy farming at Platt House Farm since 1947 and as family farmers in Kent since 1495. The dairy farm is also involved in cheese production as has been producing cheese as Winterdale Shaw since 2006. The farm also operates a farm shop selling a range of English cheeses and other farm produce. Kent Downs Dairy Ltd was incorporated in April 2020 in response to an increase in the demand for locally produced products.



PROFILE

- **Location** : Wrotham, Sevenoaks, Kent
- **Priority 2: Support for Micro & Small Enterprises and Farm Diversification**
Business development (food and drink)
- **Total Project Cost** - £149,653.00
- **LEADER Grant** - £59,861.20

OUTPUTS

- **Jobs created:** 2 FTE
- **Wage bill increase:** £30,000

THE PROJECT: Kent Downs Dairy was awarded grant funding to:

- Install a milk pasteurising and cream separator to produce milk for sale.
- Bottling and capping machine for milk produced on site, and a labelling machine to include the relevant company details and other key messaging to be included on the sold bottled product.
- An electric van to distribute the milk to purchasers.
- To upgrade their electrical supply to power the milk processing equipment described above.



East Kent LEADER

Provisional headline outputs (subject to final review and sign off by KCC Programme staff)

- Supported **32** projects (average grant per project £45,648)
- £1,460,726 has been awarded in grant funding into East Kent
- Number of jobs created: **62** (average grant per job created was £23,560)
- Wage bill increase: **£1,178,775**
- Number of additional day visits: **123,852**
- Number of additional overnight visits: **13,287**
- Number of new production techniques developed: **14**
- Number of new products developed: **31**

[under review by Kent County Council programme staff – to be included in Final Version]

Kent Downs and Marshes

Summary of outputs (please note these are provisional and subject to review and sign off by Kent County Council Programme Staff)

- Supported 54 projects (average grant awarded per project £35,629)
- £1,923,961 has been awarded in grant funding
- Number of jobs created: 92 (average grant per job created £20,913)
- Wage bill increase: £1,351,849
- Number of additional day visits: 11,583
- Number of additional overnight visits: 6,087
- Number of new production techniques developed: 32
- Number of new products developed: 9

[under review by Kent County Council programme staff – to be included in Final Version]

Rural Surrey

**[under review by Surrey County
Council programme staff – to be
included in Final Version]**

Kent Surrey Sussex LEADER Group

The Kent Surrey Sussex (KSS) networking group was set up in 2009. Membership of the KSS group covered six LEADER areas in total: 3 LEADER areas in Kent, 1 in Surrey and 2 in Sussex. The LAG programme areas were:

- East Kent (new area. Joined 2014)
- Kent Downs & Marshes
- Rural Rother & Weald
- West Sussex
- Rural Surrey

The Group was set up to:

- Share good practice between members for learning;
- Identify and resolve common issues;
- Discuss and respond to various policies and processes laid down by Defra with 'one voice'.
- Explore opportunities for joint working;
- Sharing programme costs such as on publicity, appraisals and evaluations.
- Represent the area at national LEADER meetings.

Benefits

This collaboration has been extremely useful for all member groups, with each Accountable Body programme lead being able to regularly liaise to discuss common issues, share best practice and explore opportunities for collaborative working. This has continued during the current programme round.

Mutual support and sharing resources

- The KSS network provided support to the Rural Rother & Weald LAG, initially for the first six months, whilst they recruited new members of staff and develop a new accountable body and make a prompt start to the programme.
- The three Kent LAGs discussed further opportunities to share the appraisal function between them, with the programme manager from another Kent LAG appraising projects on a reciprocal basis and reporting to the LAG appraisal panel. This helped to make better use of the resources available, promote awareness between programme managers of potentially complementary / best practice projects underway in neighbouring LAGs and allowed the sharing of the different skills and areas of expertise of the programme staff in different subject areas.
- The three Kent LEADER groups worked collaboratively to promote the “LEADER in Kent” initiative, holding joint drop-in sessions as part of the consultation process and working with stakeholders on looking at pan-Kent projects across the Kent Downs AONB and the High Weald AONB.
- The Kent LEADER programmes also explored options for joint projects. Where a joint project was agreed between the Kent LAG areas, one particular LAG area took the ‘lead’ for the project.

Joint analysis of policies, procedures and guidance and ability to represent their views and interests with ‘one voice’

- The Group discussed new government policies, procedures and guidance, as drafted by Defra and the RPA (e.g. amended reporting forms). A designated member of the Group would feedback and liaise with Defra or the RPA and then feedback to the wider group.
- KSS meetings allowed members to relay their experience of using new guidance or procedures to the wider group, as well as highlighting particular issues experienced (e.g. where other members might experience a similar issue).
- Members would also report back on any conferences attended relevant to the work of the LAG or rural funding and inform others of the key points.

Meetings

The KSS Group met once a month for the duration of the 2014-20 programme.

Some meetings included representatives from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Rural Payments Agency (RPA), as well as other LAG Programme Managers from outside the membership invited to share their experiences on certain projects or local issues. This allowed the KSS Group to prepare jointly and put questions to key representatives where there were issues or queries regarding new processes and/or guidance and set out their issues together.

Joined-up thinking and Strategic fit with the wider Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

The various members of the KSS Group all fell under the local LEP and this allowed them to jointly consider how they collectively represented and delivered on the wider rural strategic goals of the LEP.

In particular, where LEP funding was available in support of wider rural policies across the South East, the KSS members were able to consider how to complement LEP support with additional LEADER funding. For example, where the South-East LEP (SELEP) provided strategic input and investment to support project infrastructure, the LEADER programmes could invest additional funds to provide capital support to the individuals and businesses, for example in equipment purchase. This meant that the individual programmes could tailor their investment priorities to complement the wider aims of the LEP in a cohesive and joined-up way.

Part 4: The Management Structure and Delivery

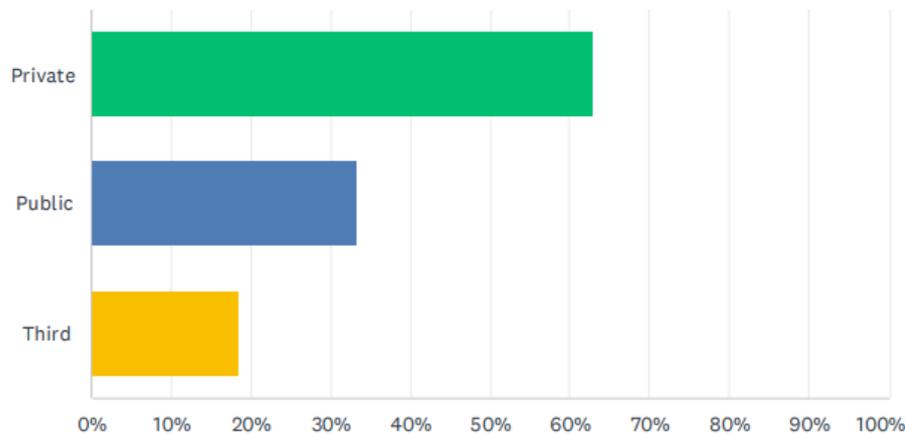
Local Action Groups

The survey was sent to members of the Executive LAG (or Decision-making LAG), rather than the wider LAG membership. This was because the ELAG has a greater role in the decision-making processes for awarding LEADER grant money and requires a greater commitment of time than that expected of a wider LAG member (who would only typically attend a couple of meetings of year).

ELAG membership

Across the combined LAG areas, the largest group of members were from the private sector (62.96%), with a third of members from the public sector (33.33%) – mainly from local authorities within the LAG area - and the remainder from the third sector, i.e. non-governmental and non-profit-making organisations or associations, including charities, voluntary and community groups (18.52%).

What sectors did/do you represent?



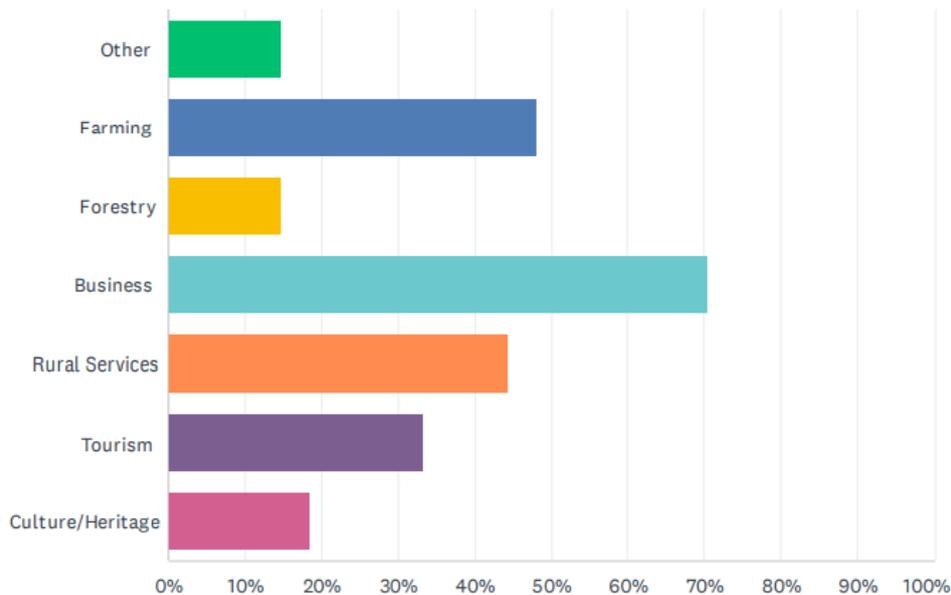
Members' expertise, skill or experience

- The most LAG Executive members had **business** expertise, skills or experience (70.37%), those from a **farming** background (48.15%) and those who worked in **rural services** (44.44%). One-third had expertise in the **tourism industry** (33.33%).
- Less well-represented groups included those within the **culture and heritage industry** (18.52%) and those who had a **forestry** background (14.81%).
- A remainder group of 14.81% identified as bringing 'other' skills or expertise to the ELAG, which from the survey details mainly indicate a background in public sector provision such as local government or elected representatives.

Examples of members' backgrounds include:

- Chartered surveyors practicing in rural matters
- Land agents acting on behalf of various landowners and farmers
- Farmers and members of National Farmers Union (NFU)
- Those with previous district councillor or local government experience
- Academics in rural studies
- Business backgrounds
- Business advice and support backgrounds
- Representatives of nature partnership bodies and AONBs

What is your expertise, skill or experience you bring to the LAG?



As can be seen from the findings, each LAG represents a **broad range of expertise and backgrounds**. This is vitally important to gathering a range of perspectives and experience: it enables local decision-makers to develop a detailed, considered and wide-ranging Local Development Strategy; it also enables grant applicants to have recourse to a local decision-making group with a range of relevant skills and knowledge to help advise and support applicants.

Some respondents felt that without the broad range of LAG members involved in decision-making, the current programme could have been too narrow in its remit, effectively operating as an agricultural/land-based programme, and not a rural programme. It was therefore “vital to ensure that not only the current programme could deliver for rural communities but that any future programmes received learning from this one so that agendas on left-behind areas or levelling up might have recent successes to build on.”

To make sure each LAG had broad representation, the Accountable Bodies undertook various outreach and LAG recruitment exercises and training to engage and attract a wide range of diverse local expertise e.g. local rural bodies and organizations, advertising for LAG members at rural events and through other established rural networks and rural communication channels.

Time spent on LAG related work

Across the combined 4 LAG areas, the average amount of time spent on ELAG related work was just over 7 hours (i.e. one day) per month, including attendance at meetings, reading background papers, emails, supporting applicants and travelling to meetings. The least amount of working hours was 2 hours and the most was 20 hours per month. In fact, 10% of respondents reported working just 2 hours per month and another 10% reported working more than 2 days. The rest broadly fell within spending half-a-day to a full-working day per month.

Regularity and number of meetings

In terms of the commitment, all respondents stated that the number of, and regularity of ELAG meetings, were **about right**. Whilst there were some small differences between the four LAG areas, each ELAG met at least once a month with exceptions for a month in the summer and during the Christmas holiday period: on average, 10 meetings per year. The regularity of meetings was determined by the volume of applications to be reviewed. The most common view was that the number of meetings was **sufficient** to manage the work and that the level of commitment was correct to consider applications for funding properly. It was felt any increase in meeting regularity would have been too much for those with other commitments.

“The meeting frequency was sufficiently spaced to allow applications to come in, be assessed and evaluated before making any decisions”

“Good mix to allow business owners to allocate time off to invest in LAG meetings as well as being able to prepare for cases presented.”

Respondents felt each meeting had a manageable number of project applications to prepare for and review with sufficient time for a detailed discussion to make considered decisions. Additional feedback stated this was largely due to the work of the **Programme Staff**, who had already assessed Expressions of Interest from prospective projects and then managed the pipeline of project applications presented to members of the ELAG at each meeting. Feedback opined the meetings were constructive and effective in terms of appraising applications and making considered decisions. Moreover, the number and frequency of meetings did not impose too heavily on ELAG members' time and other commitments.

“We met when there were a number of applications to review – the [programme] team organised things very well”

“With this timescale we were able to read the papers and discuss the applications in enough detail to properly consider them and come to a decision”

Benefits of LAG membership

All respondents described their experience of being an ELAG member as either Good (34.62%) or Very Good (65.38%) and highlighted a number of benefits from their membership.

The **most** important benefits were:

- 1. Gaining a greater understanding of their local rural economy and the wider issues facing their rural areas**
- 2. Increased knowledge sharing between members**
- 3. Exposure to innovative ideas and best practice**

The most important benefit to ELAG members was **“Gaining a greater understanding of their local rural economy and the wider issues facing their rural areas,”** with 96.15% stating this was either Important (38.46%) or Very Important (57.69%). Members felt membership gave them a greater insight into the challenges faced by rural SMEs. It was also an opportunity to keep up-to-speed on issues affecting the rural economy and to be able to support rural businesses. Several responses highlighted how their participation in the LAG brought a wider knowledge and understanding to the LAG’s collective role but also how other members’ experience and expertise enhanced their own knowledge and understanding of wider issues. LAG members felt they were able to impart a lot of knowledge and experience but that they also learned a lot as well about other aspects of the rural economy (across a range of sectors), including the wider issues their area faced and the various support mechanisms which could be employed to help rural businesses and develop robust rural economies and communities.

The second most important benefit was **“Increased knowledge sharing between members”**. One respondent stated that the LAG had a far wider base of experience than other rural-based organisations like the Country Land and Business Association (CLA). The ELAG also had members from local government, which added another dimension to the knowledge of the group, bringing experience of public sector policy and administration to sit alongside private and third sector interests. This fostered a greater awareness and understanding of the other sectors represented on the committee. Overall, respondents felt there was a good mix of public, private and third sector experience, with a pool of different knowledge and skill sets.

The third most important benefit was **“Exposure to innovative ideas and best practice”**. This was a key element towards contributing towards improving economic outcomes, as innovation and sharing best practice allowed other businesses to develop, thereby creating a stronger rural economy. Several members saw the value in approving innovative projects that would have not been possible without LEADER and there was an opportunity to learn from successful projects which could benefit other businesses and organizations in the local area. Membership of the ELAG also gave exposure to how rural businesses were developing or diversifying and this knowledge helped the ELAG to advise and improve prospective project applications for funding: with a mix of member experience, learning from previous projects and using examples of successful innovation as examples of best practice. Members felt they also benefited from a greater understanding about the range of rural diversification being implemented across the different agricultural, horticultural and forestry sectors, and it was often through good examples of diversification that rural businesses were able to adapt and survive in a sustainable way whilst also often benefitting the wider rural economy (increasing growth and creating jobs).

Least important were **“Personal development opportunities for you and your business”**, **“Opportunities to work collaboratively with other LAG members”** and **“Increased networking with other rural businesses”** (considered not important by 34.62% of respondents).

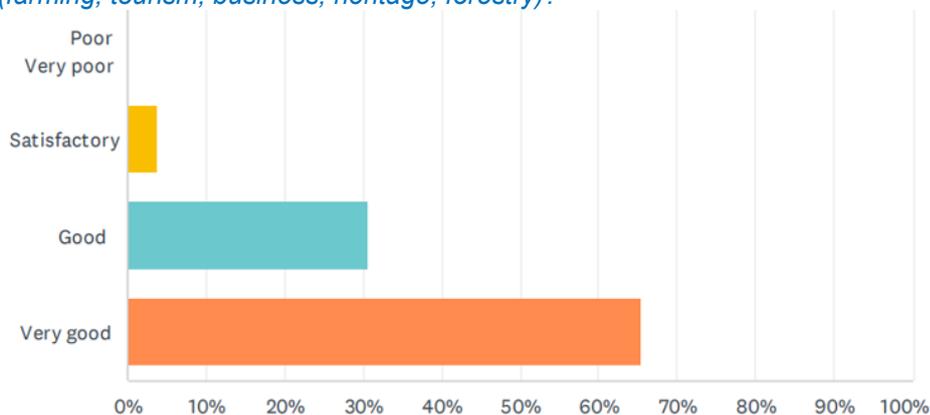
This demonstrates a seemingly **altruistic** motivation for members to be involved in local decision-making. Indeed, a common theme throughout the survey feedback was the satisfaction and personal enjoyment LAG members got from using their experience to help applicants and, ultimately, contribute to improving their local rural economy and the wider community. To this end, members:

- assisted in the development of local businesses and the wider economy by imparting their knowledge to inform and shape local development strategies and also to develop better project proposals and plans as part of their assessment of grant applications;
- gave their time to promote and support the rural sector, enabling effective improvement across the local rural economy and community; and
- contributed to improving economic outcomes by encouraging and supporting innovation and learning by approving projects that otherwise would not have been undertaken (and using these as a basis for developing learning more widely).

Managing a balanced mix of funded projects

The overwhelming majority of respondents felt their LAG had successfully managed a balanced mix of funded projects, with 96.15% describing their LAG's performance as either Good (30.77%) or Very Good (65.38%). The remaining 3.85% described their LAG's performance as Satisfactory.

Apart from the information provided in the technical appraisals, how do you think the LAG performed in managing a balanced mix of funded projects across the LAG area and the LEADER priorities (farming, tourism, business, heritage, forestry)?



Respondents attributed this success to two factors:

- **Outreach, publicity and promotion** were common themes to explain why LAG areas had been successful in achieving a good mix of projects across different local themes. There had been a mix of business engagement to raise awareness of LEADER funding locally and over the course of the two LEADER programmes dating back to 2006, the accountable bodies and local authorities within their LAG area had become more effective at outreach methods and promoting LEADER. As such, the range of applications was diverse and spread across the range of local businesses and organisations which LEADER supports.

- **Effective programme management:** Several responses cited the excellent management of the programme by programme staff as a key factor in successfully promoting LEADER across the LAG area. This ensured a fair mix of representation on the ELAG Board, so that project applicants from various sectors had their sector represented on the Board who understood the relevant sectoral issues and opportunities. The representative ELAG, with the support of programme staff, were mindful of ensuring a balanced mix of projects across local priority themes, with programme staff assisting in the sifting and assessment of project applications to make sure the overall portfolio was broad across their respective priorities.
- Programme staff were also instrumental in facilitating the process for deciding the local priorities within the LDS and making sure the strategy covered all national priorities. Through managing the administrative function of the ELAG in determining local priorities and managing the assessment process, staff were both mindful and well-placed to make sure the project portfolio was wide-ranging and not predominantly focussed on one or two priorities. It was their efforts in making sure LEADER was promoted to a wide range of sectors, businesses and organisations and facilitating the assessment and appraisal process to make sure there was a mix of projects which supported the area's local priorities as set out in the LDS. As one respondent remarked, "the ELAG was always aware of the priorities allocated in the LDS." Other respondents praised that programme staff for their research and briefings on project applications.

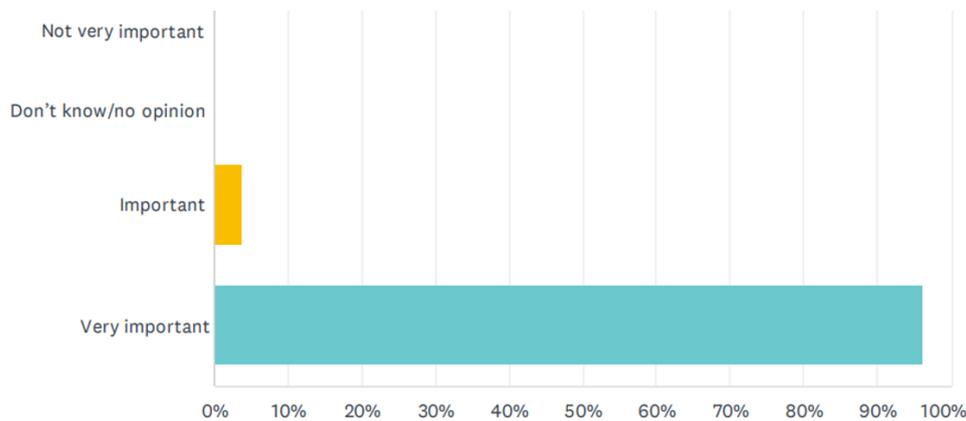
However, a minority felt that if their area did create a good mix of projects across priorities, this was achieved **more by luck than by design**. Whilst some respondents acknowledged they were presented with a very diverse mix of projects for assessment, some sectors were not as well represented as others. One respondent commented that it was **only in retrospect** that balance is viewed as good and this might not be due to successful targeting of the LEADER fund across a wide range of local sectors and businesses. To ensure the balance is better in future, they suggested **better targeting of under-represented sectors**, with a stronger communications strategy and resource, as well as ring-fencing some budget for particular under-represented sectors.

Local Decision-Making

The importance of local decision-making

Almost all respondents agreed that local decision-making was Very Important (96.15%) to awarding grant funded support.

Overall, how important do you think local decision-making is to awarding grant funded support?



The reasons given as to why local decision-making was important, included:

- Local people have knowledge of the unique local challenges to their area and not all areas are the same:** Respondents stated the national and regional rural investment policies prior to LEADER did not serve local rural communities adequately, effectively “leaving them behind” as one respondent commented. In essence, different areas have different needs: as such, meeting the challenge of local problems requires local people who know the area and can set-out a response. LEADER’s focus on localism encourages local decision-makers to develop broad mix of bespoke investment priorities (under the umbrella of national priorities); the resulting targeted investment contributes to economic growth and, where applicable, community development, helping to remedy local issues with local solutions. In this sense, LEADER has proven to be much more effective than a strategy being set by a more distant larger-regional body, lacking knowledge of the nuances of local areas. Local business leaders and individuals are acutely aware of the local issues and concerns. It is this knowledge of the local conditions and needs of the business and local communities which leads to better decision-making and better **outcomes** for the local area.

“It is about finely nuanced investment that meets local need, has been decided on in an accountable fashion, and brings about meaningful change.”

- Building local resilience:** LEADER has also been successful in that it has built a process and system of resilience in local communities. There is a functioning local body with increasing expertise which can identify local issues, set a strategy to remedy these issues by prioritising funding and confidently assess and award grants to worthy, deliverable, sustainable and effective projects. In effect, a local approach cements the local effort and encourages continuity and engagement locally. In a post-LEADER environment, the structures and the people which delivered rural funding programmes under LEADER are still there and these networks can be used to develop other new rural programmes, using or copying existing administrative structures. ELAG members have built-up important knowledge of the area and the skill set to assess grant funding applications.

The importance of a LAG for bottom-up and localised approach to a rural grant funding scheme

Respondents were asked to assess in terms of importance various perceived benefits a LAG brings to rural grant funding. The three most important factors were that a LAG:

1. **Provides local knowledge of the rural economy, sectors and businesses**
2. **Provides a local network of existing private businesses, public sector and third sector expertise to consider grant applications**
3. **Provides a good understanding of the local needs in the local economy and wider sectoral needs (farming, forestry, tourism, etc.);**
and
Provides a bottom-up approach to choosing locally needed projects to solve local issues

The highest-ranking benefit of a LAG structure for effective local decision-making was ***“Provides local knowledge of the rural economy, sectors and businesses”*** with 100% of respondents stating this was Important (3.85%) or Very Important (96.15%). Respondents felt this was important as decisions were made in the geographical area being affected, by local partners who know the area, the local businesses and community organisations, and the issues and opportunities relevant to the area. This was therefore the best opportunity for local intelligence to be reflected in decision making

Second was ***“Provides local network of existing private businesses, public sector and third sector expertise to consider grant applications,”*** again with 100% of respondents stating this was Important (15.38%) or Very Important (84.62%). The collective knowledge of the Board meant that there was always someone who had expertise to assess the applicant proposal. The breadth of knowledge also meant that the Board had a wider pool of knowledge which could offer additional advice to enhance the application (e.g. through positive suggestions to improve the project or by attaching conditions to the grant): each Board member was able to bring a unique perspective to the application based on their own background and expertise.

The third most important benefit was shared between two functions, both with 23.08% stating it was Important and 76.92% as Very Important. The statement ***“Provides a good understanding of the local needs in your local economy and wider sectoral needs (farming, forestry, tourism, etc)”*** was important to respondents who felt that local knowledge in rural development was crucial to the success of the programme. Feedback indicated that even at county level, there were unique sub-county issues and opportunities which were better served at a sub-county level. The contrasts within Kent alone highlighted why it was necessary to have three distinct LAG areas for East Kent, Kent Downs and Marshes, West Kent, irrespective of the split into three distinct areas primarily being driven by population size. It was also true that these three areas of Kent each had different issues and

needs: which is why their local priorities were not the same across the county. As members of the LAG were from the local area, there was a very good understanding of the local economy with a good spread across the LAG area. Most projects that were evaluated had a LAG member who knew the project area.

Joint-third was **“Bottom-up approach to choosing locally needed projects to solve local issues”**, again with 23.08% stating this was Important and 76.92% viewing this as Very Important. Feedback stated that only local decision-makers truly understood the importance of project outputs and outcomes on the local economy and community. Local decision-makers were therefore acutely aware of the type of projects required to bring about successful outcomes for their areas. Any attempt to make decisions above the LAG (sub-regional) level would be undertaken by people disconnected from the local needs of the area.

Other additional benefits derived from a localised model included:

- **Decision-making is not faceless:** Decision-makers lived in the local area and represented sectors within the local area. This gives confidence to applicants that the decision-makers understand local issues and can make a considered judgement. It's likely the applicants will know the people, businesses, organisations and local authorities represented on the decision-making body. Appraisers of application forms were also locally sourced and were therefore engaged in the issues with a local knowledge of the rural economy. As such, the localised approach meant there was a greater consideration and appreciation of local issues and the implications for certain sectors regarding funding decisions.
- **Localism encourages and emboldens small-businesses requiring modest but critical investment:** Feedback suggested that a localised model encouraged smaller local businesses to apply for funding – indeed, a large proportion of grants were for relatively modest amounts. , Some feedback suggested smaller businesses can be put off from applying for funding from a larger regional body representing a larger area, perhaps in the knowledge that the number of applicants for funding would also be larger (and therefore more competitive). Many structural fund grants are set at a higher minimum grant level, whereas for LEADER the minimum grant is £2,500. As such, the amount of funding required by the project applicant is not necessarily onerous or burdensome, particularly if there are seeking smaller levels of investment. The breadth of grant level investment makes it a programme which can benefit small start-ups which require small grants or much larger businesses seeking significant grant investment.

Accountable Body & Programme Support

Feedback from members of the ELAG and also the various Grant Beneficiaries of the Programme highlighted the important role Programme Staff played in supporting both the decision-making body (with the administration of the Programme) and assisting projects with developing their applications and guiding them through their programme experience.

The importance of Programme Staff to managing the LAG

Respondents were asked what they felt was particularly useful in having LEADER programme staff in place working with the LAG. The three highest positive responses were::

1. **Giving LAG members advice and support with application appraisals**
2. **Giving applicants personal assistance with application advice and support**
3. **Giving professional help and guidance to applicants – sharing their knowledge and expertise to create better projects**

ELAG members stated that **“Giving LAG members advice and support with application appraisals”** was the most important function provided by Programme Staff, with 96.25% of respondents saying this was Very Important, with the remaining 3.85% describing this as Important. The Programme Staff provide important assistance to the project applicants, liaising with them during the application process and assisting them in developing their proposals. Staff also engage an independent appraiser (or a dedicated member of the Programme Staff) to undertake a review and score each application, with the programme staff presenting the appraisal to ELAG members at regular meetings. Queries on the application were often directed to programme staff to answer or to ascertain further information. As such, the programme staff were in an important element of the process to advise and support the ELAG members with queries on applications prior to their decision on whether or not to award funding.

“The LAG is also a Non-Executive board so without the programme staff nothing would be done.”

The second ranked function was **“Giving applicants personal assistance with application advice and support,”** with 92.31% of respondents stating this was Very Important and 7.69% viewing this function as Important. The Programme Staff undertake an initial assessment of Expressions of Interest and often advise prospective applicants to develop their proposals as per the application format. LEADER attracts applications from a significant number of small rural businesses, often with very little experience of developing proposals for grant assistance. As with other national schemes, the LEADER application process is prescriptive and often viewed as detailed and burdensome to complete. It is therefore helpful to the applicant to have recourse to dedicated staff who can assist them with completing their application; it is also important to ensuring that businesses or organizations wishing to secure funding are not put off by the process and that deserving projects are not deterred from the process because they lack the experience or know-how of applying for government funds.

“The application system was so very difficult like too much of central government systems that without this support only the larger companies

would be able to apply for grants most being put off by the application process.”

The third most popular statement was *“Giving professional help and guidance to applicants – sharing their knowledge and expertise to create better projects”*. Programme staff were on hand throughout the programme to help and advise beneficiaries applying for funding, using their experience of assessing similar projects and lessons learnt from how those similar projects performed.

Other benefits of having a dedicated programme staff included *“Programme staff keep LAG members informed of project progress, providing output monitoring data and project updates”*. The post-payment monitoring of outputs needs to be managed and reported so that the ELAG and other interested parties (e.g. the Accountable Body and local authorities within the LAG area) can quantify the success of programme investment. It is incumbent on the programme staff to gather data directly from the projects and report this back to all interested parties, in particular the LAG members who undertook the initial funding decision based on the project rationale.

Another benefit is that *“Programme staff act as a conduit with other LEADER programmes for knowledge sharing, best practice or ability to pursue cross-LAG joint projects.”* The programme staff responsible for managing LAG areas across Kent, Surrey and Sussex have developed a strong relationship, meeting at monthly intervals over the course of both this and the previous LEADER programme. This has been very useful in terms of sharing knowledge and best practice between the LAG areas. However, the scope to pursue cross-LAG joint projects has been limited. Whilst there were examples in the previous programme, cross-LAG projects were not pursued during the current programme. In part, this is because the ability to work on cross-LAG projects requires larger geographical projects to come forward and this has simply not happened.

There has traditionally been greater cooperation between the three Kent LAG areas, though this in part could be due to projects being largely county or inter-county in their nature. Feedback from the ELAG survey also raised the issue that inter-territorial cooperation (and also trans-national co-operation) work was not conducted in the spirit of previous programmes: inter-territorial and trans-national budgets needed to be bid for centrally (rather than included as part of each LAG's budget).

Where there was co-operation (in the case of pan- Kent projects), the project would be led by one LAG alone, regardless of the geographical reach of the project across other LAG areas: again, examples were solely in relation to Kent-wide organisations who wanted to deliver a single project across multiple LAG areas. Feedback also highlighted the lack of national LAG events and there was disappointment that events did not focus on examples of best practice in rural community-led local development, but rather were primarily focussed on the administration of the fund. As such, the role of programme staff in knowledge-sharing and brokerage of co-operation projects was vital and totally dependent on each LAG area developing their own networks in lieu of a national or regional network.

The **least** important role was regarding the programme staff's role in ***'Providing an informal networking and local knowledge/intelligence brokering service, linking people, businesses and organizations for their mutual benefit'***. Whilst 96.15% of responses said this was Important (30.77%) or Very Important (65.38%), this statement scored the lowest in the Very Important response rate of those surveyed. This probably also reflects that more can be done in this regard.

Other Structural Fund programmes such as the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund often have local networks of projects where project sponsors and organizations can regularly meet and network. However, ESF and ERDF projects are generally run over a much longer time period with significant revenue and/or capital investment and, as such, many of the projects gain value in talking to other projects about their project and their shared issues regarding their administrative responsibilities (e.g. quarterly grant claims and data monitoring). LEADER is different in that the projects are often much smaller, bespoke and the investment work is time-limited to the purchase and installation of capital equipment. There are no formal networks for grant beneficiaries to meet with other projects. Rather, programme staff are instead on-hand to link people, businesses and organizations together based on their knowledge of the area and the sectors.

"The staffing of the LEADER project was the thing that really made it work as an effective grant making organization. The staff had to liaise with central government/Defra/other LEADER groups, help people enquiring with funding, with their applications, bringing forward applications to the executive, administering contracts and checking expenditure . . . goes on and on. They really did a good job."

The survey identified other key benefits of having a dedicated programme staff managing the LAG:

- **Effective Communication:** LAG programme staff are the central communicative function linking all aspects of the programme together. Several respondents highlighted the programme staff's role in linking the disparate parts of the process together and acting as a conduit between several groups (from conveying national policies and processes to the LAG, publicising the funding locally, acting as a link between the appraiser and the LAG decision-making body, and communicating with other LAG areas for wider knowledge sharing). As one respondent stated, programme staff are "the glue that stick everything together."
- **Continuity:** As local authority staff with experience of running the LAG administrative functions, the programme staff provide an important level of continuity and resilience for local decision-making. Their presence enables expertise to be developed and a more effective and efficient programme to be delivered. Indeed, it is this continuity of expertise and knowledge that will greatly assist in delivering other post-LEADER rural schemes.
- **Ownership and accountability (managing the entire process):** The programme staff perform a wide variety of functions across the management of the programme from start to finish. In many respects, they bind the administration of the LAG throughout the various phases of activity: recruiting members to the LAG; overseeing the publicising of the fund; managing the application process; facilitating the appraisal of applicant proposals and presenting

suitable projects to the Board; undertaking audit visits to projects to provide assurance expenditure commitments have been met as per grant agreements; processing project claims subject to proof of expenditure; and undertaking post-payment monitoring to ascertain if outputs targets have been met.

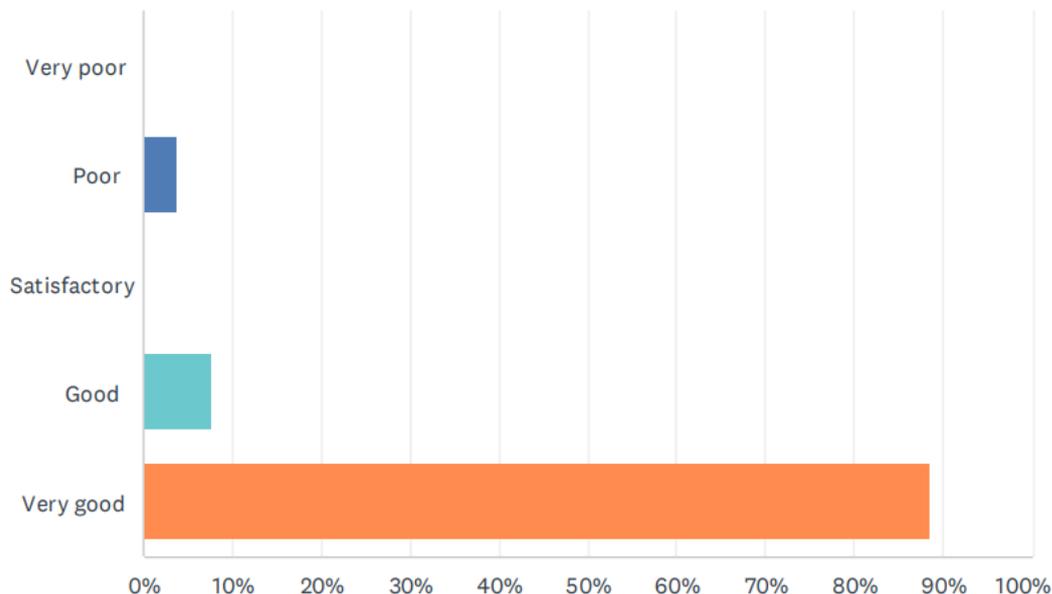
“I find it difficult to see how the LEADER operation in its various aspects (applications, assessments, advice, networking etc) could operate satisfactorily without the presence of staff.”

- **Strategic support:** The programme staff facilitated the process of developing the local development strategy and its local priorities, taking into account the wider relevant strategies of local authorities within the LAG areas and other sub-regional and national policies and priorities. The ELAG needed this knowledge provided by programme staff to strategically join the dots between local, regional and national rural policy.

LAG satisfaction with LEADER support staff

The vast majority of ELAG members described the support they received from Programme Staff as either Good (7.69%) or Very Good (88.46%). However, 3.85% described this support as being Poor.

Overall how do you rate the support you received from the accountable body tasked with governance of the LAG (i.e. the local authority Programme Staff providing direct support, guidance and advice)?



Respondents were very positive regarding the support they received from programme staff:

“The LAG was provided with good quality accurate information and the programme staff were able to provide assistance when required.”

“They provided expert support and insight . . . Paperwork was meticulous.”

“The project team are very knowledgeable and helped us understand better the projects put forward.”

“Very accessible and supportive and responsive staff.”

Issues

For those who felt the performance of programme staff was poor, their issues were with the Accountable Body’s wider policies and resource provision for the rural sector. Some respondents drew a line between the (valued) support provided by programme support and what they perceived as a wider lack of support for rural development interests.

Application and Appraisal Process

The ability of the Kent and Surrey programmes to secure strong and varied portfolios of projects was dependent on having a well-run application and appraisal process, which utilised wide ranging local expertise and knowledge in assessment and decision-making.

This section looks at the Application and Appraisal process from the perspective of both the project beneficiaries who successfully applied for funding and the members of the ELAG Executive Board tasked with assessing their applications as decision-makers.

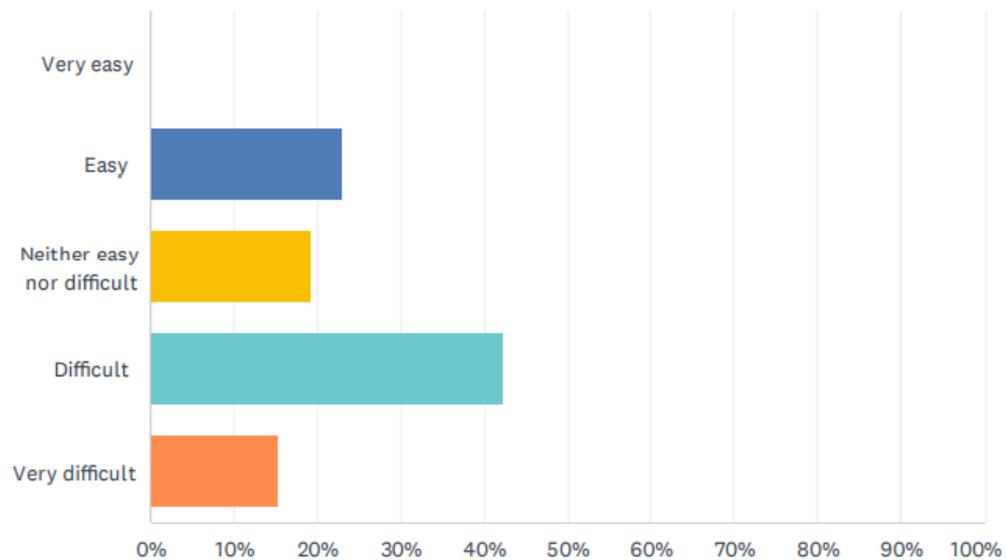
A Complicated and Onerous Process in Need of Reform

The LEADER application and approval process is designed to be both robust in its ability to interrogate project proposals and consistent in the level of assessment regardless of the grant award or the size of the applicant business or organisation. Each applicant must demonstrate clearly their project rationale and submit themselves to a thorough examination and that process is consistent for all applicants. However, as can be seen further below, both Grant Beneficiaries and ELAG grant decision-makers feel the process is too detailed and onerous, particularly when a significant number of grants are viewed as ‘small’ scale support.

The Beneficiary Perspective

Overall, as can be seen from the chart below, well over half of beneficiaries surveyed stated that they found the application process to be either **Difficult** or **Very Difficult**. By contrast, just over 20% of beneficiary respondents thought the process was Easy.

Overall, how easy did you find the application process for your LEADER project?



The application process was seen as being **too detailed** and **onerous**, which many respondents felt put off many prospective applicants from applying. It was commonly referred to as “**complicated**”, time-consuming, frustrating to complete, and for some required professional support from a consultant. It was felt that the application form did not appreciate a small rural business needs or perspective, which required a more simplistic yet focused approach.

“I seem to recall there were over 100 pages of forms to be filled and accounts to be rendered, in a two-stage application. You could never call this easy.”

“It took literally hundreds of hours of senior management time to complete all the paperwork for instance getting three quotes for everything, making presentations, completing follow up forms.”

“For the first round it took a solid month of doing nothing but completing the forms.”

The LAG Executive Board Perspective

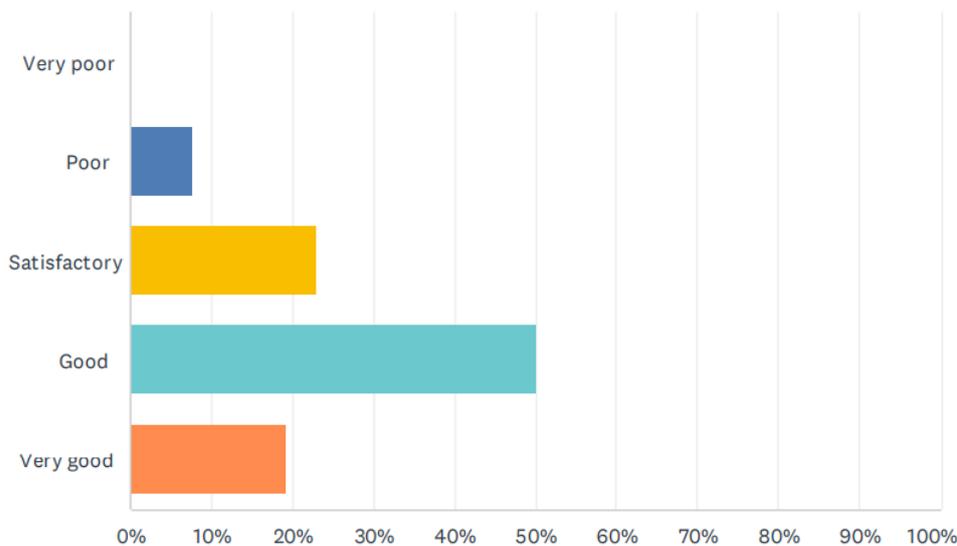
Based on their experience of assessing applications and feedback from applicants, respondents were asked to rate the overall application process including the application form, applicant guidance and the LAG decision-making process.

Almost 70% of the respondents thought that the overall application process was either Good (50%) or Very Good (19.23%). The local delivery was generally described as excellent with respondents saying the process worked.

“It is a fair process with good guidance and decision-making process.”

However, just over one-fifth described the process as merely Satisfactory (23.08%) and 7.69% described the overall application process as Poor. There was some concern expressed for the level of information the applicants had to provide an agreement with many applicants that, in this respect, the application process was far too onerous. There was also dissatisfaction with the level of information the LAG decision-makers had to review, with several stating they often felt overwhelmed.

Overall, there was a recognition that the process had to be robust to fully test applicants but that, in a significant number of cases, the level of rigor was disproportionate to the relatively small grant amounts being applied for.



What is interesting about the perspectives of both grant beneficiaries and LAG decision-makers is the recurring opposing themes of the process being, on the one hand, too onerous on the applicants against the demand for rigor in making sure applications are of sufficient quality to succeed in their stated outputs and the projects are sustainable.

The Application Process

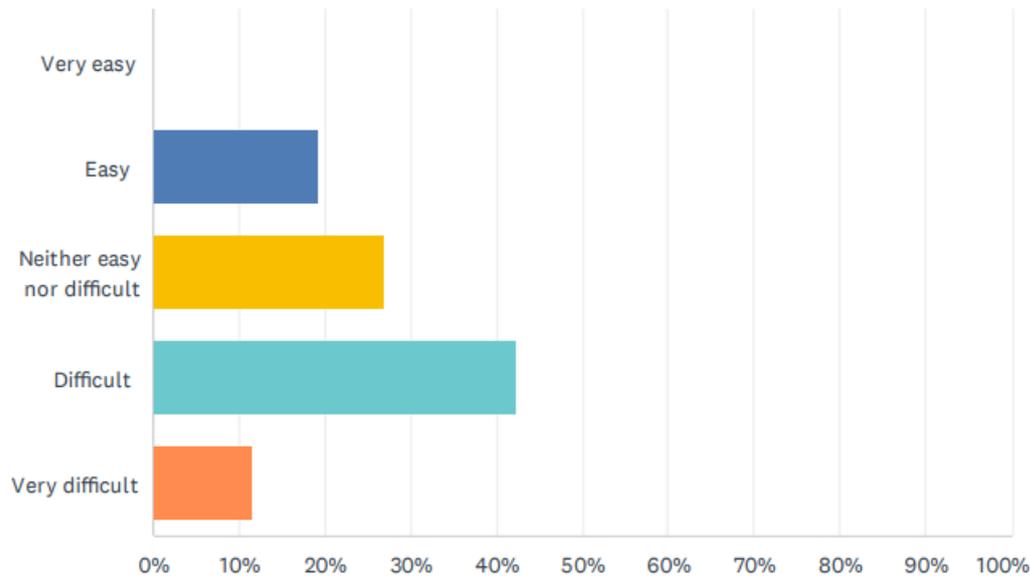
To assess a typical applicant's journey through the Application Process we asked a sample of grant beneficiaries to comment on the following elements of the process:

- Application Form
- Application Handbook and Guidance
- Support of the Programme Delivery Team

The Application Form

Over half of respondents described completing the form as being either **Difficult** (42.31%) or **Very Difficult** (15.38%). By contrast, less than 20% of respondents described the application as easy to complete.

How easy was the application form to complete?



Too onerous versus the need for rigour

Too onerous to complete

Several **beneficiaries** were critical of the application form, stating it was “very time consuming and intense” with “a lot of writing for each section”. Beneficiaries felt that the questions took a lot of research and information to answer fully to the standard required and you needed to have some experience of the process to be able to do this correctly.

“The whole process was difficult, for someone who's not a professional "applier-of-grants”.”

Feedback from **members of the LAG Executive Board** also recognised the pressure the application form and process placed on applicants, many of which were unfamiliar with the grant funding application process:

Several LAG members described the application process as being overly complex for the applicant, stating many applicants would have found the form and process daunting despite having support from the programme team.

A number of LAG members also felt the process was too onerous for the relatively small grant amounts being applied for.

LAG members also feared the process may have deterred some potential projects from applying, particularly smaller businesses which might have little experience of drafting funding bids and likely to be put off by the level of information required.

Onus on rigour and testing the business model

However, other **beneficiary respondents** accepted there was a need for a detailed form based process and they were accepting of this process to receive public funding and the rigour involved to test the rationale and develop a stronger case to deliver success.

“The process is incredibly thorough as it should be given that it is public money investing into projects.”

“Inevitably it was long and detailed because the Lag team did not want to waste money.”

The requirement for applicants to undergo a thorough examination was also supported by some **members of the LAG Executive Board** who emphasised the following benefits:

- A rigorous process can **weed-out weak applications**. As the information provided was comprehensive, any potential shortfalls were identified with either weak projects withdrawing or the project benefitting from a level of scrutiny to manage and negate identified risks.
- A rigorous process also **makes better applications**, focussing the applicant’s mind on the deliverability of their project to produce outputs with outcomes which will be sustained in the future. The process required the applicant to demonstrate how investment would produce outputs which would be sustained post-grant investment, thereby strengthening their application.

“It helped the applicant to fully investigate what they wanted to do, and what further options might be available to help make it a success.”

“It was very thorough, so it forced people to think about their project quite deeply.”

“Whilst some applicants felt the process was too complex, this helped make sure the full applications were viable projects.”

Overall, LAG members felt that the application process was suitably thorough to make the applicant think seriously about why they wanted the funding. The level of information required meant applicants had to give a great deal of time and thought to their application and be fully committed to the process.

Previous applicant experience or greater resources makes the process easier

Another common theme was that the level of detail required to complete the form was acceptable to those with previous experience of applying for grant monies or with the required skill set to complete the forms and provide the information. For

those who were less experienced, the form was much more daunting and the process significantly lengthier.

“I think this was due to my inexperience and not the form itself.”

“As a small rural business, it was not easy to adapt to the format of the application form.”

It is important to emphasise that the typical LEADER applicant is not the same as applicants for other larger EU or UK grant schemes and, as such, they do not have the personal experience or resources to complete a process held to the same standard as that applied to much larger businesses and organisations.

Usability of the form

Concerns were raised over the format and design of the application form, with many respondents stating they felt the form was not easy to complete due to its design:

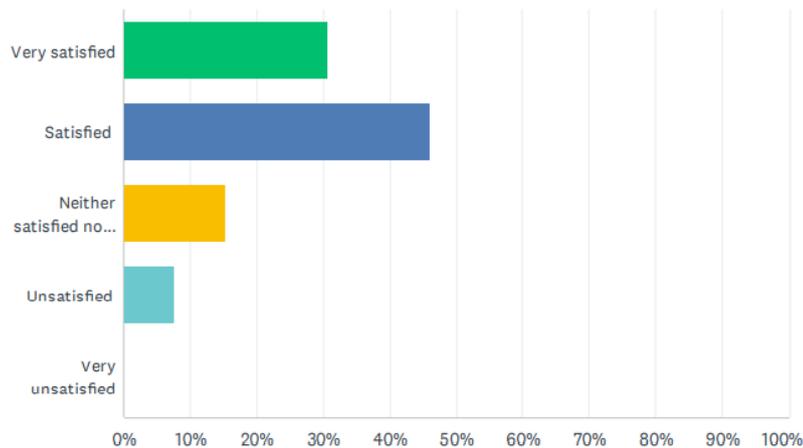
“Forms were poorly formatted online; bits were password protected and the categories were tricky to navigate. Printing the whole lot out & colour coding it with pens helped, though it used up a tree or two...”

However, there were some respondents who were more accepting of the process and the level of detail required in the application felt the form was not “unnecessarily complex” and information required was generally clearly requested and possible to provide. Though, it should be noted, these respondents were the exception, with only 20% stating they found the form to be easy, though a larger percentage of respondents (just under 30%) stated they found the form to be neither particularly easy or difficult to complete.

Application Handbook and Guidance

The application handbook and guidance received very good feedback from project beneficiaries, with almost 80% of those surveyed stating they were Satisfied or Very Satisfied.

How satisfied were you with the application handbook and guidance with helping you to complete your application?



At first glance, this positive feedback sits at odds with the majority of respondents who replied that the application process and application form were onerous, complex and difficult to complete. However, as one respondent stated who found the handbook to be **“very useful and walked you through each section well”**, their issue with the application was **“not knowing the answers to the questions.”**

“Very thorough application handbook with great guidance to complete the application.”

Whilst there was general consensus that the application handbook and wider guidance were well-written and useful, several respondents still stated they would not have been able to complete the application form without the additional support from the local programme staff

“The guidance was first class - any questions relating to the handbook were answered quickly and clearly”

Of those who felt that the application handbook and guidance was not helpful, they stated that the application handbook was **“incredibly long and complicated”** and **“a lot to take in”**.

This again demonstrated the issue with the application was not just how the form and guidance were presented, but more significantly about the type of businesses applying for funding and their lack of experience completing funding applications and/or their lack of resources and experience in dealing with government grant funding schemes. In this respect, the LEADER application is as detailed and thorough for a small rural business with limited resources and experience to complete as would be a similar grant funded scheme – such as ESF or ERDF – for a large organisation, charity or local council to complete.

Programme Support Team

Another key theme to emerge from the **beneficiary** feedback was the importance of having a dedicated programme support team to help the applicants through the process, dealing with any queries and giving the applicant the opportunity to have

face-to-face communication and support when required. The support provided by the various programme teams were mentioned as a significant factor in being able to complete the form.

Many highlighted the support they received from the LEADER group in guiding applicants through the process, which negated many of the complications they had in completing the application process.

One successful project applicant stated that when their business applied for additional funding the level of programme support they received diminished due to staff shortages towards the end of the programme and the application process became impossible. This emphasised how important the support they received from staff had been in relation to their previous application. They felt that LEADER was aimed at businesses which had staff experienced in applying for grant funding and it was therefore important to have a dedicated programme team to help guide the less experienced applicants through the application process.

“[The Programme Team] were extremely helpful and I couldn’t have got through the forms without them.”

“It was difficult but thankfully we received excellent support from LEADER staff.”

“We had huge assistance from the local Leader team but the process itself was complex.”

Similarly, **members of the LAG Executive Board** also recognised that applicants required a significant level of support to develop their project proposal prior to assessment and that for those without the financial means to hire a consultant, the accountable body’s programme support team were an invaluable resource and instrumental in supporting applicants to develop and progress applications.

Appraisal and Assessment Process

For the Appraisal Process we surveyed the **members of the LAG Executive Boards** tasked with appraising the applications and reaching decisions on whether to award grant funding.

- The importance of local decision-making
- Assessing application and appraisal information
- Programme support team
- How the process can be improved

The importance of local experience and wide representation to appraising applications

Wide-ranging local expertise

LAG members were keen to emphasise how their wider range of local expertise covering various different sectors and with a good understanding of the local economy, community and rural geography were essential to being able to make sound judgements on which projects to award grant funding.

The assessment process allowed members with a wide range of expertise and experience to take a balanced view of the merits of the projects before them.

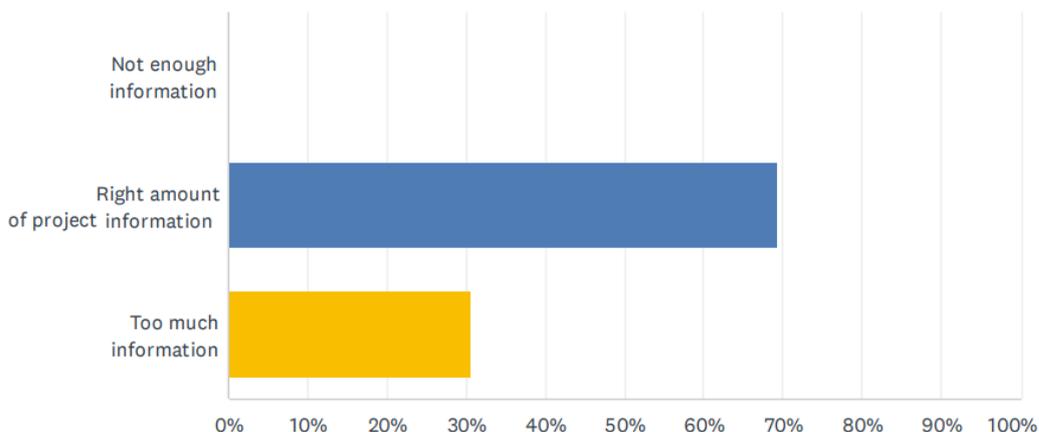
The appraisal process worked well in that it had experienced and knowledgeable LAG decision-makers who could assess the project rationale, outputs, outcomes and benefits working alongside a permanent programme staff who were experienced in the process and supporting the LAG in their decision-making.

For example, some cases were considered particularly difficult where the LAG had to assess the impact a project might have (displacement) on other local businesses. As such, local knowledge of the economy and the area was vital.

Assessing application information

Respondents were asked if the overall detail provided to help them make a considered decision on appraising a project application sufficient or was there too little or too much information.

When assessing project application form and appraisal, was the overall detail of information provided to help you make a decision sufficient or was there too much or too little information?



Almost 70% felt the amount of information detailed in the LEADER application and assessment forms and supporting information was correct and the balance of information was also sufficient. Respondents felt this was evidenced by projects successfully delivering on their objectives, implying the ELAG reached a considered and correct decision.

However, a significant minority of 30.77% felt that they had too much information. As reported above, a number of respondents felt the appraisal documents duplicated

a lot of information within the application form, though to some extent this is to be expected as it is an assessment of that application.

Too much information

Some respondents described the level of detail as sometimes being **overwhelming** in relation to the time they could commit. Of note, one of the appraisers responded that there was too much information.

A significant number of respondents felt there was too much duplication of information in the appraisal process. Respondents also stated that there was an element of duplication of the information provided within the application form and the appraisal form. On occasions, some respondents felt they didn't have time to read documents fully prior to meetings due to the time available from receipt of the documents to the meeting.

It was suggested that if project information were available online it could make the review and assessment process easier for LAG members to navigate, as opposed to receiving emails with several attachments.

Rigidity of the prescribed assessment and appraisal forms

Feedback stated there was also an issue with the presentation of information, which was not easily comprehensible due to the rigidity of the prescribed appraisal and assessment forms. Respondents wished to see a more succinct level of information presented to them, with a summary of the key points: ***“a well-designed pro-forma provides all the necessary information to make a decision”***.

In practice, the ELAGs were able to request additional information from applicants, with programme staff liaising with and assisting projects with advice and guidance. Were the application process to be simplified, additional information could still be requested, but only if necessary.

Improvements to the process

LAG decision-makers were asked if they were satisfied with the level of information they had to make a considered decision of awarding grant monies, how they would improve the process and to consider what other information would help them to make better decisions.

Survey respondents were asked what further information would have made their decision easier when considering applications. To this end, they would like to see:

- **Business plans:** Some respondents felt that projects should include a detailed business plan, which was not a requirement under the current programme. Some wanted to see more information on the project's exit strategy if the project could not fulfil its stated objectives.
- **Summary document:** To deal with some feeling overwhelmed with information, some wanted to have a summary appraisal document of key

project information, including an overview of the project, costings, output targets, and impact and benefit assessments to the local area.

- **Best practice case studies:** Some respondents wanted to see examples of projects from other LEADER groups to see which type of projects worked well and if there was any learning which could be applied to their local area. This could also be relevant if a similar project was presented for grant funding and members to refer to a relevant case study for information.

Other issues with the process

The ELAG members also highlighted various other issues with the application and appraisal process which they felt needed improving:

- **Constraints of the geographical area:** It was suggested that some local areas were excluded from LEADER funding because their post-code fell just outside the LEADER designated area and more discretion would be given to decision-makers, particularly if the project would have a beneficial impact for the wider populace within the LEADER area. Consequently, some worthwhile projects were not considered or progressed due to these geographical constraints.
- **Underrepresentation and outreach success:** Feedback also raised a concern that funding tended to go to the same businesses who were aware of the funding scheme and suitably skilled to undertake the application process, resulting in the “usual suspects applying for and getting grant support”. We therefore need to understand how we can reach those who need support but who for whatever reason aren't applying.
- **Constraints of acceptance criteria:** LAG members also feedback that they felt there was too much emphasis on jobs and growth for this LEADER programme round. They felt this deterred other community projects from applying as there was an assumption successful projects needed to deliver economic outputs.
- **Delays to awarding grant status:** Some highlighted contributing factors which delayed decisions being made which meant projects missed their initial delivery milestones. Blame was apportioned to applicants for missing information in their application, to external decisions such as planning permission, and to delays due to referrals made to the RPA for additional advice.

Programme Support Team – supporting the appraisal process

Programme staff were on hand throughout the programme to help and advise both beneficiaries applying for funding and the decision-makers assessing the funding applications and acted as a link between the two when the LAG required further information. Responses highlighted the reliance LAG members have on programme staff to assess and interpret applications and provide quality appraisals for the LAG members to consider.

Support offered from programme staff was cited by LAG members as a significant reason why the process worked well. LAG members stated the programme staff

made process easier to manage for both applicants and those tasked with making decisions.

A dedicated programme team also brought an element of consistency to the process, ensuring the programme maintained a standard of assessment which was applied across all projects.

Part 5: Conclusions and Lessons Learnt

Whilst LEADER has been an important funding scheme for local rural areas, the 2014-2020 programme has lost much of the traditional LEADER values evident in previous iterations of the programme. The LEADER approach in **England** is meant to emphasise and action a bottom up, community led engagement and decision-making process to deliver tailor made assistance and investment to specific area issues and opportunities but, unfortunately, much of this approach has been lost in the operation of the current Programme.

Due to the Managing Authority (RPA) making the current LEADER Programme as 'risk averse' and over prescribed as possible the LEADER Programme has changed from being a Rural Development Programme based on locally led Development Strategies, focussed on local issues but within the context of the bigger picture, into a grant giving tool hamstrung by an overly bureaucratic process that does not have the end user in mind.,

The concept of local-led decision-making, despite the over prescription of the process by the RPA, has resulted in a range of good projects being awarded grants and delivering job creation outputs. However, in placing more emphasis on safe projects which result in job creation, the programme is now less inclined to find innovative solutions to local problems (as previously intended). Moreover, local decision-makers have been told to look less favourably on community projects as they don't create jobs, despite being able to transform peoples' lives and self-worth, reduce loneliness and provide a sense of community to those who most need it.

Whilst the Programme is no longer what it was or was meant to be, the **idea** behind LEADER is still very much valid.

Lessons Learnt

What has worked well?

1. Localism and Community Led-Local Delivery

LEADER is successful because it is a programme run and administered by local people who have a vested interest in the wider rural socio-economic development of their area.

Balanced and Representative Local Action Groups

This **bottom-up approach** of spending money on local issues, identified by people living in the local area works well. Ultimately, this approach is dependent on:

- **A balanced Local Action Group with a broad range of skills and expertise:** The key to the development of LAGs is to ensure there is a balanced membership. For a rural funding scheme to be effective, it requires a local, independent voluntary group with breadth of local expertise and influence who understand what is required to advance improvement for a cross section of local residents (be that jobs, infrastructure, development, facilities, support, advice, community and environmental needs). They provide local intelligence, contacts and talent/skills sets, and ability to facilitate and influence local development (the eyes and ears on the ground). This development can contribute to and help influence other strategies and equally aid their delivery. They understand the distinctiveness of their area, what it needs and what it can offer. For a LAG to be effective in identifying local needs and remedies (as identified and set out in the Local Development Strategy), it is important to attract a broad and representative cross-sector membership to mirror (or represent) the local area it serves.
- **A representative Executive LAG (ELAG) to drive the agenda and progress:** In order to make consistent decisions with an oversight of the programme's key objectives, the LAG needs an Executive Board to steer decision-making, ideally with a strong Chairman. LEADER areas in some parts of England suffered performance wise due to lack of engagement from their LAG, so it's important to make sure there is a driving force within each LAG structure to make it function to the best of its ability. This is the role of the Executive Board.

A balanced and representative LAG with a broad range of skills and expertise is also vital to developing a well thought out **Local Development Strategy (LDS)**.

Identification of local issues (via consultation and as set out in the Local Development Strategy) leads to locally tailored opportunities based on the social, economic, environmental and land-based needs of the LEADER area. The better the LDS, the more committed these volunteers are to helping the Programme succeed, so getting the right membership and producing a strategy which inspires and has 'buy-in' is critical to the programme's success.

Autonomous local decision-making

The budget is locally controlled, with decisions about which projects to support being made by the LAG. There is no direct political interference. Final decisions are made by the LAG Executive Board.

The four LEADER programmes across Kent and Surrey have all performed well because the programme areas have created LAGs with broad representation of their local areas, which were able to correctly identify local needs and solutions using the expertise and knowledge of their members as set out in their respective local development strategies.

2. A successful programme requires a dedicated programme team

Each Local Action Group (LAG) is facilitated by **Programme Staff with the skills and ability to work with applicants** to develop projects that deliver the Local Development Strategy (LDS) and respond to local needs and development.

- They guide and encourage the applicant through complex process of project development, application, and claims.
- They advise and support the LAG and ensure the proper governance of the Programme is maintained.
- They also have local knowledge and intelligence and can provide advice to applicants on other funding programmes that may be more suitable to the applicant.

The staff are 'boots on the ground', have experience of what does and does not work and can challenge (fresh pair of eyes) an applicant on a potential project, raising questions that the applicant may not have thought of and/or eliminates problems further down the line. Staff are open and accessible and can provide a human touch to what is, for some, a daunting process.

Programme Staff across Kent and Surrey have established productive working relationships with the grant beneficiaries to help them develop their applications and offer ongoing advice and support after a grant award has been made to make sure projects are compliant with funding guidelines. The support of Programme Staff was viewed as incredibly important by grant beneficiaries in helping them develop their project proposals and navigate the application process (hand-holding). Likewise, Programme Staff were also highly lauded by LAG members for their administration of the programme and overseeing the process of application, appraisal and assessment. Staff were also vital in raising awareness of the LEADER programme and galvanizing interest across the local area.

3. The importance of small grants to rural communities

Whilst the Kent and Surrey LEADER programmes provided several grants between £50,000 and £150,000 to larger businesses across their areas, it is important to

emphasise that the majority of LEADER grants are relatively small and provide support to new start-ups or small rural businesses. It is often the case with other funding schemes that small businesses are not eligible for support as the minimum grant is much higher and they do not have the financial resources to provide a higher level of match-funding. LEADER is different in that it often supports small businesses with small but important grants.

It is clear from our survey data that LEADER funding has been valued by grant beneficiaries and enabled projects to go ahead which otherwise would not have without LEADER investment. The programme has also been able to support a range of projects, supporting a wide variety of businesses and organizations to deliver an equally wide set of activities: almost unique when it comes to government funding initiatives. It should also be noted that part of what makes LEADER special is it offers **small grant support**, whereas most programmes have a much higher minimum entry level of support, thereby dissuading or prohibiting smaller projects from applying. LEADER is an important funding outlet for small businesses and community organizations in rural areas, allowing them to address very specific issues relevant to their business or area to create jobs, grow their business or provide wider, often lasting, benefits to their local community. Without LEADER investment, these activities would not have been able to progress.

4. Match funding has resulted in increased investment in the local areas

The nature of a match funding programme means that LEADER funding has attracted additional private investment into the local rural economy which otherwise would not be there. LEADER applicants are required to state if they would be able to undertake their projects without funding as part of the eligibility criteria. Consequently, without LEADER funding these projects would not go ahead and the additional private investment in the area would not happen.

The intervention rate

It should also be noted that grant intervention of 40% results in 25% more overall investment in the area than a typical match-funding intervention of 50%.

For every £100k of grant intervention at 40% of project costs, projects invest £150k of private investment, totaling £250k of overall investment. Whereas £100k of grant intervention at 50% results in projects match-funding a further £100k, resulting in £200k of overall investment. For this reason, for the majority of projects, an intervention rate of 40% is still desirable for them to apply for funding and, at the same time, will result in greater investment in the local area (as much as 25% more investment).

What has not worked well or does not work?

1. Over focus on jobs and growth

The evolution of the Leader process from what it was under previous Programmes to what we have now. The changes to the Programme in England have not, overall, led to improvement. **Too much** focus on jobs and productivity has hemmed in the breadth of the Programme and its ability to respond to wider local needs. It has altered the balance of the Programme and moved it away from a willingness to assist projects that can support and underpin the development of jobs and growth. As a consequence, local infrastructure and support projects that give a roundness to the LDS and better reflect local needs, have been proportionally neglected.

2. An evolving process in constant change

The process has never been 'right' and has been subject to numerous alterations throughout its period of operation, suggesting that neither the RPA nor the LAGs are entirely happy with it. It is a curate's egg. This has caused confusion, inconsistency, and frustration with the constant tinkering at national level. It has often sown doubts and uncertainty in the minds of Programme staff (*hard to get it right*)... We all make it work, but it is almost despite, rather than because of, the prescribed nationally laid down process.

It is true that this Programme has been blighted by a 'stop start' nature for external reasons beyond the control of the RPA, such as the EU referendum, three General elections, local elections, and a comprehensive Spending Review. Consequently, it has struggled to get traction or momentum, with newer LAGs probably struggling most. This has been beyond the control of the RPA or the LAGs.

LEADER has been in operation in the UK for almost three decades. Whilst programmes do evolve and changes are sometimes required to prescribed forms and guidance, the point has surely been reached where each new programme can move forward with confidence that the administration of the programme and the various forms and guidance can remain consistent for the given period. Any changes should be made when moving from one programme period or iteration to the next, **not** during the programme itself.

3. Overly complex and bureaucratic

The Leader approach is an important mechanism for targeting rural economic and community growth, but the current programme is an extremely complex bureaucratic structure. There is wide recognition that it has provided both economic growth and underpinned community cohesion, but the scale of the bureaucracy involved tends to defeat its original purpose.

Applications were assessed against national guidelines, meaning the process was heavily prescribed and subject to a high level of scrutiny. Consequently, Local Action Groups had no recourse to simplify that process. Whilst it was acknowledged that there may have been legal requirements to provide certain information, several requests were made for information to be presented more clearly by overhauling the application form and prescribed reporting forms.

The 'one size fits all' application approach has not led to the intended consistency it was designed for. It has made the process too rigid, too inflexible and takes away

the willingness and ability of LAGs to 'give it a go' of 'take a punt' with some projects. There has been too much emphasis on compliance at the expense of common sense and not trusting the decision makers on the ground to reach a conclusion on a project by applying proportionality.

The project beneficiaries' journey through the application process was described by both project beneficiaries and the LAG Executive Board as **difficult** and **onerous**, and the level of scrutiny was often disproportionate to the grant sums being awarded. Though, decision-makers also recognised the need for rigor in the process and that, overall, the process worked well despite the demands placed on the applicants. For the applicant the volume of information required for a £5k project is much the same as for a £50k project. Proportionality is, again, lost. Projects are lost. It was felt these deterred applications from otherwise worthy projects who lacked experience and expertise bidding for grants.

The process has become over complicated and over engineered which associates LEADER with onerous bureaucracy; a long-winded undertaking that puts off many potential applicants, rather than a robust and rigorous process that challenges the applicant to come forward with well thought out projects that can benefit themselves and the local area.

Not all applicants could commit to the application process: Such was level of detail required to complete the application, not all applicants could sufficiently commit to the application process. There was concern that the time and resource commitment required to complete the application process ultimately deterred prospective applicants from applying and possibly led to some applicants withdrawing. One issue is that LEADER applicants are mainly small businesses or local charities, with less experience of completing government funded grant schemes. They are not necessarily experienced or sufficiently resourced to easily provide the level of information required to the standard required. Some successful LEADER applicants hire a consultant to complete the application form for them; smaller LEADER applicants are not in a position to do so, putting them at a considerable disadvantage. This created a divide between those applicants able to write bids, or employ someone who could, and those who had little experience of doing so. The latter were therefore more reliant on the LAG programme staff for advice and support and making an otherwise "difficult process far easier". There is a fear that previous difficult experience of the application process may deter other good projects from applying, leading to just the same businesses applying for funding (which is commonplace).

As such, the application and appraisal process would benefit from refinement to make it simpler to complete for applicants and less onerous for appraisers and decision-makers. It should be streamlined and simplified for all projects regardless of the size of grant being requested. Moreover, the system should be proportionate so that those applicants requesting smaller grants are not required to provide the same level of information and detail as those requesting larger grants. Similarly, the appraisal and assessment of applications should also be less onerous for those decision-makers tasked with considering these small grant applications.

A simplified and streamlined application and appraisal process would help to ensure that prospective applicants are not put off from applying, that the process has the end user in mind, and that it might incentivize repeat applications if the process is considered worthwhile for the gains (a number of applicants stated they would not apply for funding again due to the level of bureaucracy). The process should be user-friendly and for those without the experience of previously applying for public funding. It would be useful for the RPA to look at other small grant organisations to see a comparative analysis of the level of information required from the applicant and the level of scrutiny required of the grant making body, e.g. The Prince's Trust or even small business bank loans. There is probably much to learn in terms of making the process easier for all involved.

There was no proportionately in the process

All applicants were held to the same level of examination via the application and appraisal process. LAGs had no discretion to reduce the level of scrutiny or streamline the process for smaller grant applications.