An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail
Department of Rural and
Community Development

Independent Review of LEADER Delivery Models
For the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme

Contents

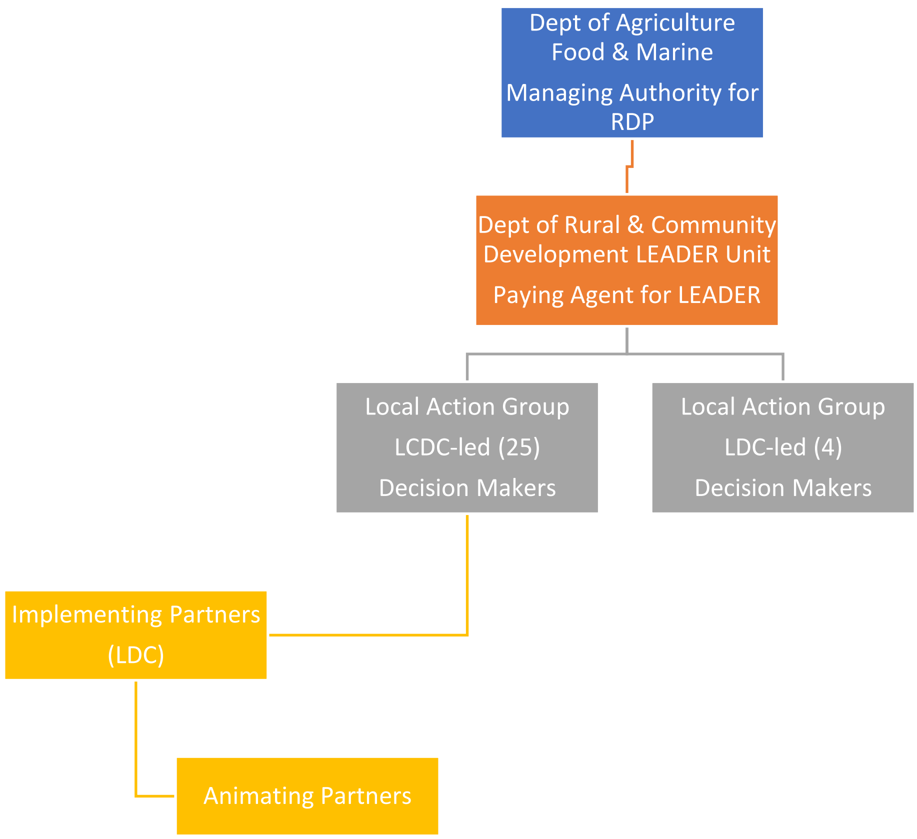
1 Introduction and Summary

This document sets out an independent review of the delivery models used to implement the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme across Ireland. The review has been carried out, independently, by Venture International Limited (Venture). Venture was appointed following the submission of a response to a terms of reference issued by the Department for Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

It is important, from the outset to state that this is not an evaluation of the overall 2014-2020 LEADER Programme. This review focuses on the effectiveness of the two delivery models used across the 29 LAG catchments to implement the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme.

There were 28 sub regional areas with 2 LAGs delivering in Galway, the original distribution of funding had a single allocation for Galway but this was subsequently split as the selected LDS covered only part of the county and a second selection process was undertaken. In 25 LAG areas, the LAG is the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC), with the Implementing Partner (IP) engaging with potential project promoters on the LAGs behalf. The remaining four are led by the Local Development Company as the LAG in its own right. These are in Counties Kilkenny, Clare and Galway (which has two LAGs).

Infographic 1: Programme Delivery Structure



The review process was informed by stakeholders from across the delivery structures set out above. The following table sets out the level of engagement in the review process:

Table 1: Engagement Levels

Category	No. in each	No. Completed/Engaged	%
CO LCDCs CEO LDCs	29	21	72
IP CEOs	34	27	84
DOS LEADER	52	12	23
ILDN subgroup	10	8	80
CCMA SG	4	4	100
LDC Board Members	522	84	16
LAG Members and Project Officers	620 *	133	21
DRCD Personnel	14	14	100
LEADER Beneficiaries	400**	191	48
Total	1,685	494	29

* = estimate

**=Representative sample

The focus of this review process is the effectiveness of the delivery models (two models across 29 LAG catchments) and to use the findings of the review of these models to inform the process of appointing LAGs to deliver the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. The conclusions of the review process are:

- There is very strong support for both the LCDC and local development company led models.
- It is recognised that the local development companies have a 30-year track record of delivering LEADER and therefore both a strong sense of its history and ethos and a deep sense of ownership of how LEADER has developed and delivered across Ireland.
- Equally, it is acknowledged that whilst the LCDCs have a shorter track record in the delivery of the LEADER Programme, it is clear that they are committed to LEADER and perceive it as a major part of the approach to facilitating and supporting rural communities. The long term strategic and regeneration experience of local authorities cannot be ignored.
- The review process must recognise that the impact of the 2014 Reform of Local Government Act opening the way for the development of the LCDCs and the Local Economic & Community Plans (LECPs) also created the potential for the LCDCs to position themselves (with partners) as the LAG.
- This review cannot ignore the feedback that the communication between all of the stakeholders could and needs to be more effective. Feedback indicates that it is at best functional and that there is little sense of the stakeholders working towards a shared vision for the LEADER Programme and a more collaborative approach to developing the Programme or addressing the issues and challenges which inevitably arise across the delivery timeframe of a regeneration programme delivered on a national basis.

- It is noted that stakeholders from across local authorities and local development companies indicated that whilst communication may have been challenging at the outset of delivering the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme, they improved over the implementation timeframe when relationships were developed and as they gained a better understanding of their respective cultures and operating processes.
- The 2014 –2020 LEADER Programme was delivered by two models; the LCDC and local development company led models. Given the high level of project approvals and that all of the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme budget has been allocated it is concluded that both models have been tested/proofed and have proved effective. Accepting that there are passionate advocates for each and merits for both the independent review process must conclude that both are fit for purpose.
- A small number of stakeholders communicated that the island communities face particular challenges and that an island specific delivery model might merit consideration.
- Ideally, any delivery model should combine the potential for strong sub-regional/local authority area coordination which brings together a vision for that area, regeneration and development priorities and a sense of how all regeneration and development programmes contribute to the delivery of the vision and priorities. Equally, it should have access to high quality, capable development personnel (animation, capacity building, innovation and signposting) who can work with communities and businesses to connect them with the funding provided by the LEADER Programme or to signpost them to other more appropriate forms of support.
- It is clear that there wasn't sufficient alignment (in most cases) between the LEADER Development Strategies for the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme and the emerging LECPs. The reason for this position is clear on the basis that the LECPs were a new strategic process at local authority level resulting from the 2014 Local Government Reform Act. The guidelines supporting the development of the first LECPs came after the development of the current LEADER Development Strategies. Given the potential to develop the LECPs in advance of the LEADER Development Strategies for the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme there is a real opportunity to provide clearer alignment between both.

The review process makes the following recommendations:

- DRCD should recognise that both delivery models are proven and therefore not prescribe one as a preferred model over the other.
- DRCD should carry out a transparent selection process, in line with EU Regulations, and provide proponents of either of the two delivery models the opportunity to position themselves as a LAG for the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. It should also be acknowledged that other organisations might legitimately feel that they can meet the requirements to form a LAG and an open selection process ensures that they have the opportunity to enter that process.
- The specification for the selection process should provide guidance on the need for prospective LAGs to demonstrate how the LEADER Development Strategy aligns to the

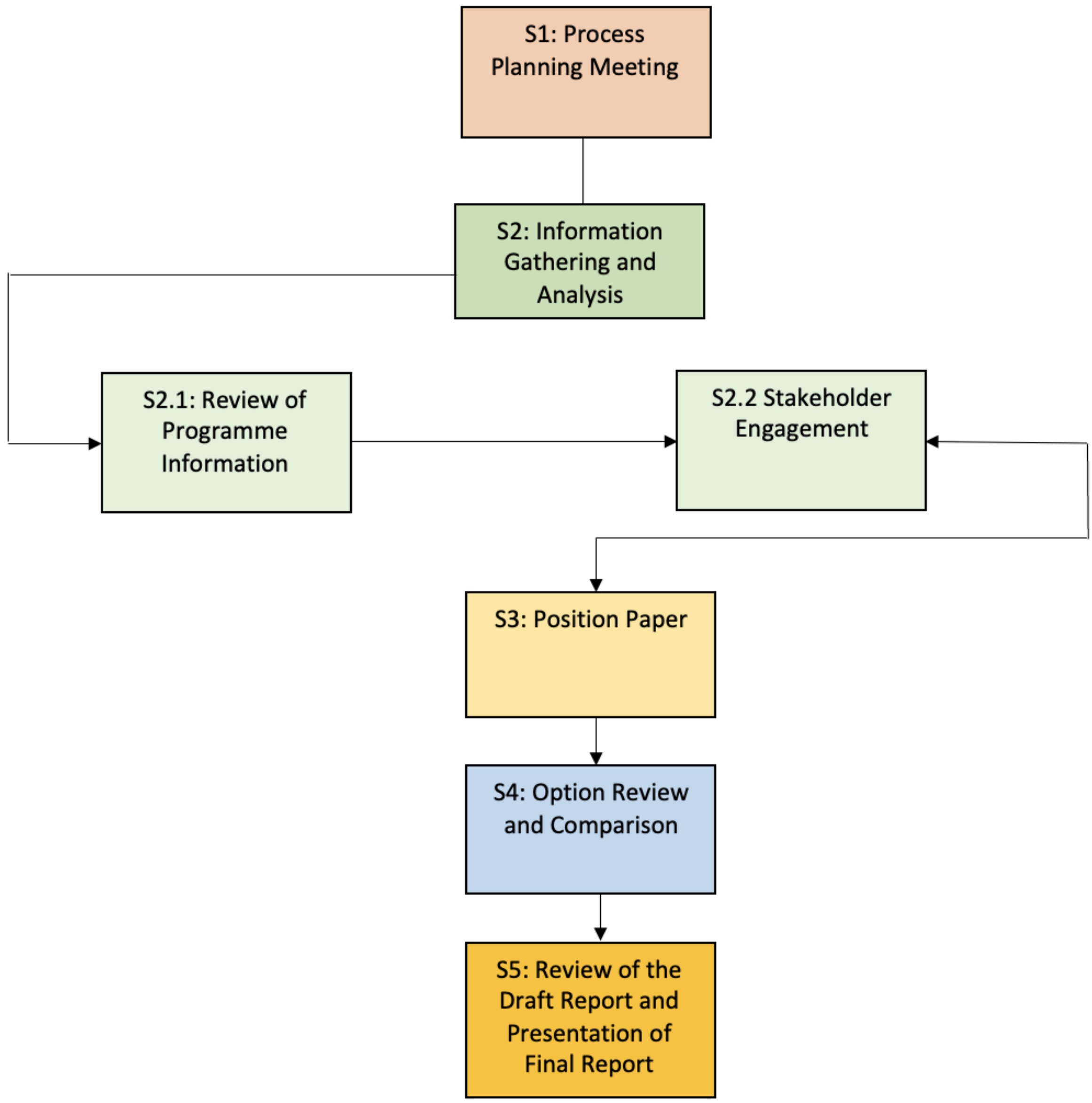
Local Economic Community Plans; helping to deliver on the vision, priorities and outcomes set out in it.

2 Terms of Reference and Independent Review Process

This independent review of the delivery models for the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme in Ireland has been undertaken by Venture International Limited (Venture). Venture responded to a Terms of Reference issued by Department for Rural and Community Development (DRCD) which is included as Appendix A.

Based on a review of the Terms of Reference and prior experience in undertaking independent reviews, Venture developed a five-stage review process which is set out in the following process map.

Infographic 2: Venture Five-stage Review process



Central to the DRCD's aims for the review process were:

- That it was independent
- That all stakeholders involved in the delivery of the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme were provided with an opportunity to engage with and inform the review process

The review process designed by Venture to deliver on DRCD's Terms of Reference sought to deliver on the Department's aim of a high level of engagement with the independent review. A range of engagement processes were agreed with DRCD including:

- Online surveys
- Semi-structured interviews/consultations

It was also agreed that DRCD would introduce the independent review team to all of the stakeholders prior to the Venture review team 'reaching out' to them to communicate opportunities to engage in the review. Table two sets out the number of stakeholders' representatives who have contributed to this independent review process:

Table 2: Stakeholder Engagement

Category	No. in each	No. Completed/Engaged	%
CO LCDCs CEO LDCs	29	21	72
IP CEOs	34	27	84
DOS LEADER	52	12	23
ILDN subgroup	10	8	80
CCMA SG	4	4	100
LDC Board Members	522	84	16
LAG Members and Project Officers	620 *	133	21
DRCD Personnel	14	14	100
LEADER Beneficiaries	400 **	191	48
Total	1,685	494	29

* = estimate

** =Representative sample

Table one demonstrates there was a high level of engagement in the independent review process and that it has been informed by representatives from all of the main stakeholder groups/sectors and interests.

3 Context for the 2014 – 2020 Review of LEADER Delivery Models

The LEADER Programme was first launched in 1991 and since then has helped rural communities across the European Union including Ireland to actively engage and to direct the local development of their area, through community-led local development.

LEADER 2014-2020 is administered at a local level by 29 Local Action Groups (LAGs). These contain local representatives from the community, public and private sector.

The Common Provisions Regulation (EU Regulation 1303/2013) defines that Community-led Local Development (CLLD) shall be led by LAGs composed of representatives of public and private local socio-economic interests and cover a population not less than 10,000. The make-up of the LAG is referenced in Article 32-2b of the Common Provision Regulation and the population is referenced in Article 33-6.

LAGs act independently and their members are responsible for the planning and decision-making associated with the LEADER funding for that catchment. Each LAG is responsible for selecting and awarding LEADER funding to projects within their geographical area.

A project must be aligned with the priorities of the Local Development Strategy (LDS).
The total funding available under the LEADER 2014-2020 Programme was €250 million.

EU Rural Development Policy

In terms of legislation, LEADER is governed by two main EU framework regulations. The Common Provisions Regulation (EU Regulation 1303/2013) is a single framework for the implementation of the five European Structural Investment Funds, which seeks to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of the funds. In addition, the RDP is supported by a more specific regulation relating to the EAFRD (EU Regulation 1305/2013), which details the types of supports for rural development, including LEADER.

Rural development is a key component of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It is supported through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which in turn is delivered through nationally co-financed Programmes. Three long term strategic objectives have been identified for EU rural development policy for 2014 -2020:

1. enhancing the competitiveness of agriculture
2. ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action
3. achieving a balanced regional development of rural economies and communities

The regulatory framework further identifies 6 Rural Development Priorities to ensure that Member States adopt a common approach to the design of their RDPs. The core priorities that Member States must have regard to are:

1. Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas
2. Enhancing the viability / competitiveness of farms and all types of agriculture
3. Promoting food chain organisation and risk management in agriculture;
4. Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems dependent on agriculture and forestry
5. Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift toward a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors
6. Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural area
7. LEADER is specifically programmed under priority 6: promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

National Rural Development Policy - Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2020 (RDP)

The Rural Development Programme (RDP) is part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), a common set of objectives, principles and rules through which the European Union (EU) co-ordinates support for European agriculture. The CAP framework is comprised of two complementary pillars; Pillar 1 deals with direct payments to farmers and market measures while Pillar 2 covers rural development measures which include those that are beneficial for the environment and climate change. Previous Irish RDPs have included measures such as the Disadvantaged Areas Schemes (DAS), Agri-Environment Schemes such as the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), and wider community development initiatives delivered under the LEADER programme. The suite of rural development measures under the RDP 2014 -2020 were designed to enhance the competitiveness of the agri-food sector, achieve more sustainable management of natural resources and ensure a more balanced development of rural areas.

The RDP was developed taking account of available financial resources and EU regulatory requirements. It was based on a thorough analysis of sectoral needs and priorities identified over a lengthy period of consultation with stakeholders. The identified themes (1) Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation; (2) Social Inclusion; and (3) Rural Environment. For further detail on the RDP see Appendix B.

LEADER falls within measure 19 of the RDP.

Measure 19 Support for LEADER Local Development (CLLD – Community-Led Local Development)

LEADER ensures that all members of rural communities have the opportunity to participate in decision making at a local level through the formation of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and the design and implementation of Local Development Strategies (LDS). Through these strategies Local Action Groups determine the needs in a local area and make decisions on what types of investment are best suited to address those needs. This “bottom up” or community-led local development approach is designed to lead to a more integrated and coherent approach to local development that involves community and local government organisations in leadership roles, guiding a more integrated and coordinated approach to the delivery of all funding (both European and National) at a sub- regional level.

Measure 19 – is further broken down into sub measures:

19.1 LEADER preparatory support:

All support activities and associated costs incurred before the delivery of the LDS fall under preparatory support (this is defined in Article 35(1)(a) of the Common Provisions Regulation) The LAG is tasked with undertaking consultation to identify the local needs and development potential that might be addressed in the LDS.

19.2 LEADER support for the implementation of operations under the CLLD strategy:

Projects that are awarded LEADER funding must be aligned with a local objective in the LDS as well as meeting eligibility requirements. Projects may potentially focus on issues such as enterprise development; enhancing the competitiveness of existing businesses; rural deprivation; diversification of the rural economy; development of social enterprises. In accordance with the community-led approach, the main reference point for assessing the eligibility of a project is its contribution to the LDS local objectives.

19.3 LEADER support for the preparation and implementation of co-operation activities of the Local Action Groups:

Co-operation between CLLD partnerships at both national and European level has been shown to be a vital channel for exchanging and transferring good practice, and for helping to "scale up" successful project ideas. In this context, LAGs can outline in their LDS how they propose to use co-operation to achieve its aims and objectives.

19.4 LEADER support for running costs and animation:

During the implementation of each Local Development strategy, the running and animation costs for each LAG area should not exceed 25% of the total public expenditure incurred for this strategy. Running costs and animation are directly linked to the implementation of the strategy.

The LAG will also deliver a range of training and supports to build the capacity of potential promoters. This may include assisting individuals and organisations to generate innovative ideas that correspond to the LEADER sub-theme or enabling them to develop a viable project proposal and apply for LEADER funding.

The LAG will provide support to the local promoter for the duration of the project. The costs are defined in Article 35(1)(d) and (e) of the CPR have reference.

LEADER 2014-2020 - Achievements

Prior to the commencement of the LEADER Transitional Programme on the 1st April 2021, the LAGs had allocated over 99% of their LDS project budgets. This percentage equates to over 4,100 individual projects, which have a corresponding value in excess of €169m.

Over 2,200, or 53%, of all project promoters, had received a Final Payment in respect of their completed LDS project at this juncture also.

National Strategic and Policy Context for LEADER

A range of regional and national strategies and policies have been examined to establish the context within which the LEADER 2014-2020 Programme was developed and operates. Appendix C contains the full strategic context, and the strategies and policies reviewed include:

1. Ex-Post Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme Ireland (2007-2013)
2. Putting People First, Action Programme for Effective Local Government/Local Government Reform Act 2014
3. Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas 2014 (CEDRA)
4. Programmes for Partnership Government 2016
5. Action Plan for Rural Development – Realising our Rural Potential 2017
6. Programmes for Government – Our Shared Future 2020
7. Project Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework

The CEDRA report laid the foundations for subsequent rural policy and strategy development for Ireland. The national planning framework was published in February 2018 and identified key national strategic outcomes a number of which were of particular relevance and have been supported by LEADER. LEADER has clearly supported the objectives and commitments of both the 2016 and 2020 Programmes for Government. The LEADER Programme has also been one of the key mechanisms for supporting the 2017 national Action Plan for Rural Development. The LEADER model and funding supports and compliments the LCDC/LECP approach which were put in place following the Local Government Reform Act 2014. The evaluation of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 supported the continued use of the LEADER model for delivery.

LEADER: The Rural Development and Regeneration Funding Landscape

LEADER is one of a suite of rural development funds in Ireland that support the rural regeneration and development across rural Ireland; the other funds include:

1. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)
2. Town and Village Renewal
3. CLÁR (Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais)
4. Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme

5. Connected Hubs

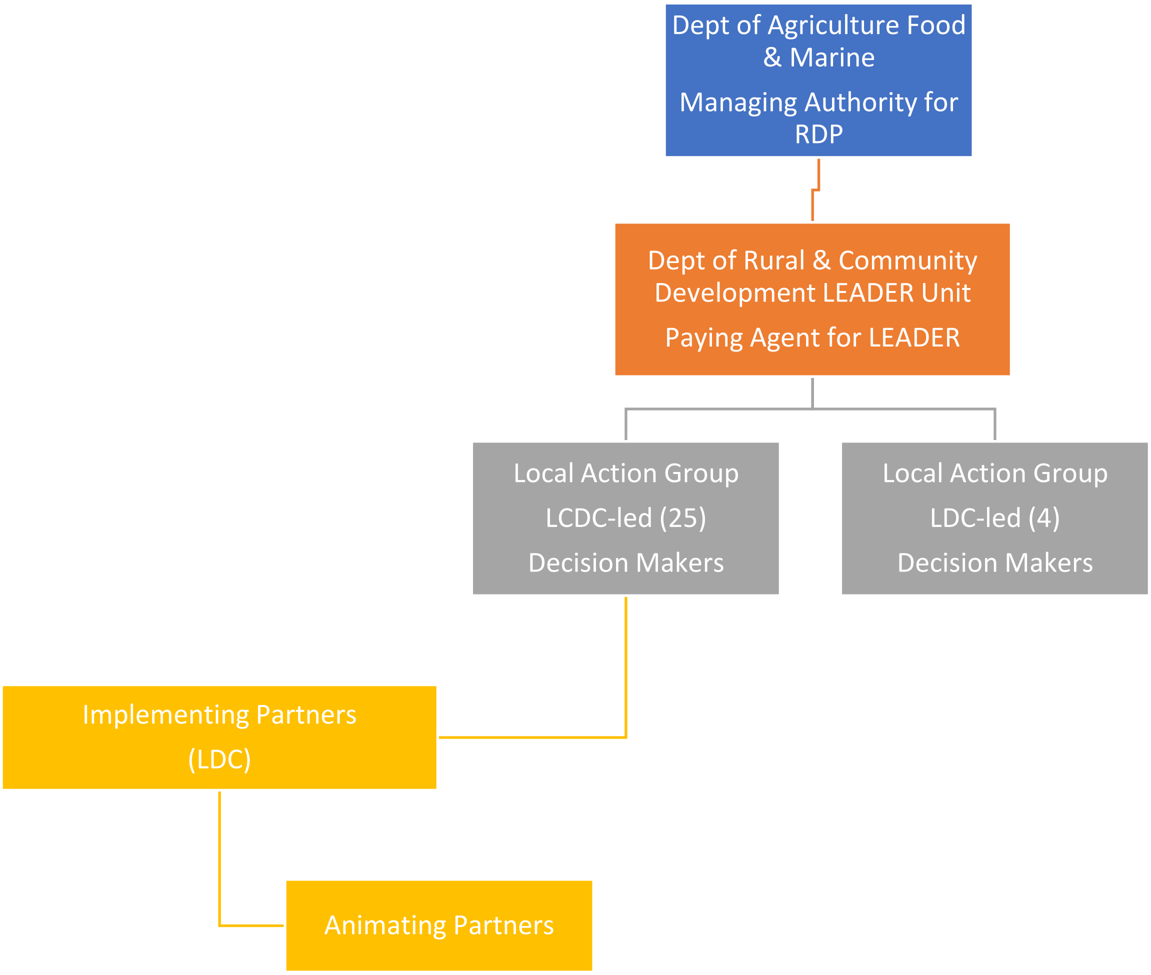
Each of these Rural Development funds have defined objectives and remits. LEADER is unique within the range of Financial Support Programmes as decision making is local and independent and it includes resources to animate and support communities and promoters.

A full overview of these funds is set out in Appendix D.

Overview of the LEADER Programme Operating Environment

The LEADER programme period was 2014-2020 aligned with that for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The structures and invitation to LAGs to submit LDSs was not in place until July 2015 and therefore the plans submitted therefore covered the period 2015-2020. LAGs were also required to develop and submit an Annual Implementation Plan that provided a high-level overview of how the LAG would deliver against each of the agreed local objectives and strategic actions for that particular year.

Infographic 3: LEADER Delivery Structure



Managing Authority

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is the Managing Authority and lead Government Department for Ireland's RDP 2014-2020.

Paying Agency

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) is the Contracting Authority with delegated Paying Agency functions and managing authority responsibility for LEADER. The Department is responsible for ensuring that the systems and processes that support this function are compliant with all regulatory requirements. This includes inter-alia monitoring LAG compliance with financial management and decision-making requirements, for example through the annual performance review and annual planning process. In addition, the Department is responsible for the on-going checks and controls in respect of LAG expenditure and reporting to the European Commission and DAFM.

Pobal

Pobal provide ongoing technical support to DRCD, to support it in its role as the delegated paying agency for LEADER. In the preparatory stages this involved Pobal providing technical support to conduct and manage the LDS selection process and to design and implement the ICT system for the ongoing management of LEADER interventions. Pobal also play a substantial role in the management of the monitoring for LEADER, it conducts Article 48 administrative checks on all administration and animation expenditure, on all LAG 'In-House' project and all projects from LDC LAGs, including associated project expenditure on behalf of the Department.

Local Action Group (LAG)

LAGs are tasked with developing the LDS and implementing the actions contained within the strategy. They are responsible for animation, capacity building, managing calls for projects, decision-making on local projects that are awarded funding and the financial management and monitoring of projects and the overall LDS. LAGs report directly to DCRD on all financial elements as well as the monitoring and evaluation requirements of the programme and to the Department and/or its agents on the oversight of the LEADER monitoring framework.

The LAG membership is a balanced representation of public and private sector socio-economic interests from the relevant rural area. A LAG includes local authority elected members and officials, business representatives, representatives from the community and voluntary sector, local development representatives, farming interests and local State agencies.

The LAG was required to demonstrate in the LDS that it has the requisite structures and processes to facilitate:

- Good governance

- Transparency
- Sound financial management
- Informed decision-making
- Accountability to stakeholders

The minimum requirements of a LAG and the list of LAGs are outlined in Appendix E.

Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)

Local authorities have adapted the LCDC structure to meet membership, representation and decision-making requirements for the LEADER programme. Accordingly, in these areas, the LEADER LAG is broader than the LCDC. The LCDC led LAG model decision-making processes should complement and be consistent with LECP objectives and goals.

Local Development Strategy (LDS)

The guiding principles for a LDS were:

1. Participation
2. Representative
3. Responsive
4. Strategic
5. Integrated
6. Realistic

The basic elements that needed to be included in a LDS for 2015-2020 were developed by the then Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) and the framework included 11 sections as outlined below:

1. The LAG
2. LDS Area Profile
3. Participative Planning
4. LDS Action Plan
5. Strategic Integration
6. Networking & Co-operation
7. Monitoring, Review & Evaluation
8. Financial Plan
9. Additional Information
10. Form of Declaration
11. Appendices: (Mandatory & Non Mandatory)

The LDS was required to be in line with the themes and sub-themes for the RDP, as outlined in Appendix B. In addition, LEADER has three cross cutting objectives that form common goals across the RDP. The cross- cutting objectives are seen to add value to the overall programme as well as enhancing the individual strategies developed by LAGs. The design and implementation of the LDS had to incorporate the three cross-cutting objectives, which were:

1. Innovation
2. Climate change
3. Environment.

LAG Evaluation Committee

Each LAG has at least one Evaluation Committee established for the purposes of assessing and evaluating applications submitted by project promoters. The Evaluation Committee makes recommendations to the LAG as regards the suitability of projects for funding based on objective criteria.

LAG Financial Partner

Where the LAG is a partnership of bodies and interests, rather than a corporate entity in its own right, it selects a lead partner from within the LAG to manage administrative and financial operations.

LAG Implementing Partner

The LAG Implementing Partner deliver the majority of project and animation related actions associated with the implementation of the LDS. The Implementing Partner will manage calls for proposals up to, and including, the final submission of project recommendations for assessment by the LAG Evaluation Committee, and approval or otherwise by the LAG. The tasks assigned to the Implementing Partner will be decided by the LAG Members.

LAG Animation Partner

The local animation partner will work closely with the Implementing Partner to assist with the Animation and Capacity Building of projects in that area. It will also place whatever physical and built resources it has, at the disposal of the Implementing Partner, where necessary, for the purposes of enhancing the local LEADER presence. It will also assist the Implementing Body with local knowledge and make introductions with project promoters.

Project Promoter

A project promoter is an individual, group or other body (e.g., company) that submits a funding application to the LAG and, where successful, is given a contract to deliver the approved project. The project promoter, as a designated beneficiary of funding under LEADER, is responsible for the delivery of the project. The LAG can also apply for LEADER funding as a project promoter – LAG-led projects called “in-house projects”.

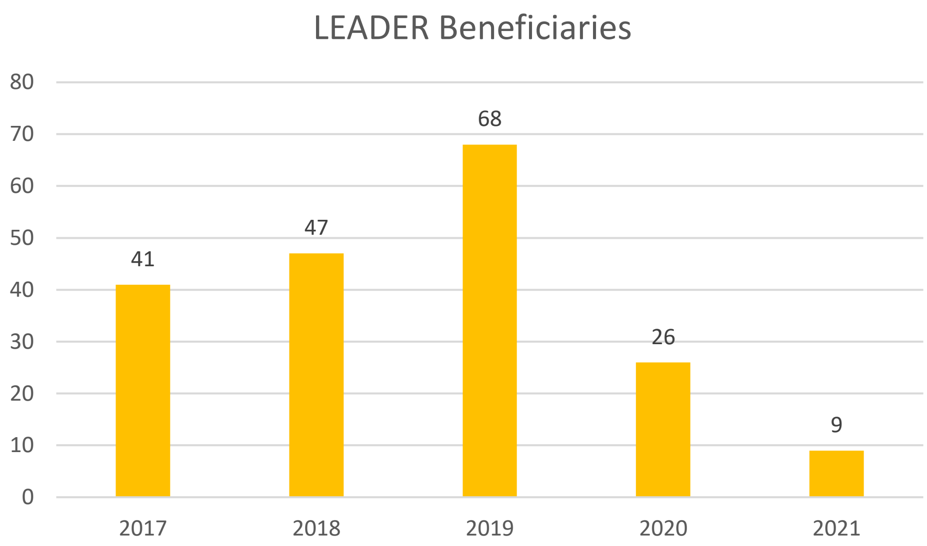
4 Engaging and Listening to the 2014 -2020 LEADER Stakeholders

This section of the review report brings together the outputs of the engagement with the beneficiaries through online surveys and semi structured engagements. This type of engagement tends to generate a wide range of information about the fund which is the focus of the review; in this case the LEADER Programme. This review focuses on the delivery models which were put in place to deliver the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the feedback on the delivery models rather than that for the overall programme. The full outcome of the survey is presented in Appendix F.

LEADER Beneficiaries

There were 191 respondents to the survey from across the country.

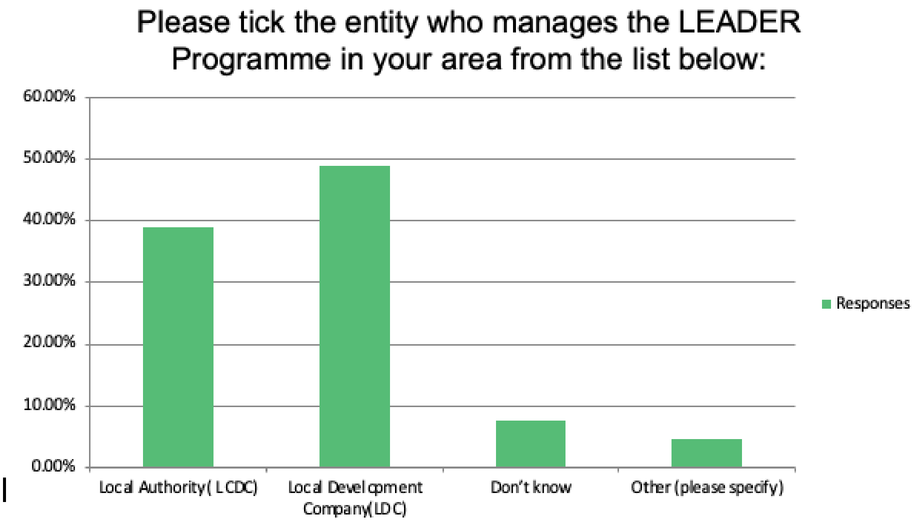
Infographic 4: Distribution of LEADER applications



Source: Venture Analysis

The distribution recognises that extension monies became available and that applications were made and processed in 2021.
The beneficiaries were asked to indicate the entity who manages the Leader Programme in their local area, see responses below:

Infographic 5: Perception of LEADER Programme management



Source: Venture Analysis

- Just under 50% of respondents identified that the Local Development Company managed the LEADER programme.
- Approximately 40% of respondents identified that the Local Authority (LCDC) had responsibility for management of the LEADER programme.
- The remainder of respondents [c.10%] identified another managing organization or were unaware of who managed the programme.

The feedback confirms that the beneficiaries do not always have a full understanding of the nature of the delivery model. Their perceptions are based on the support/help they received.

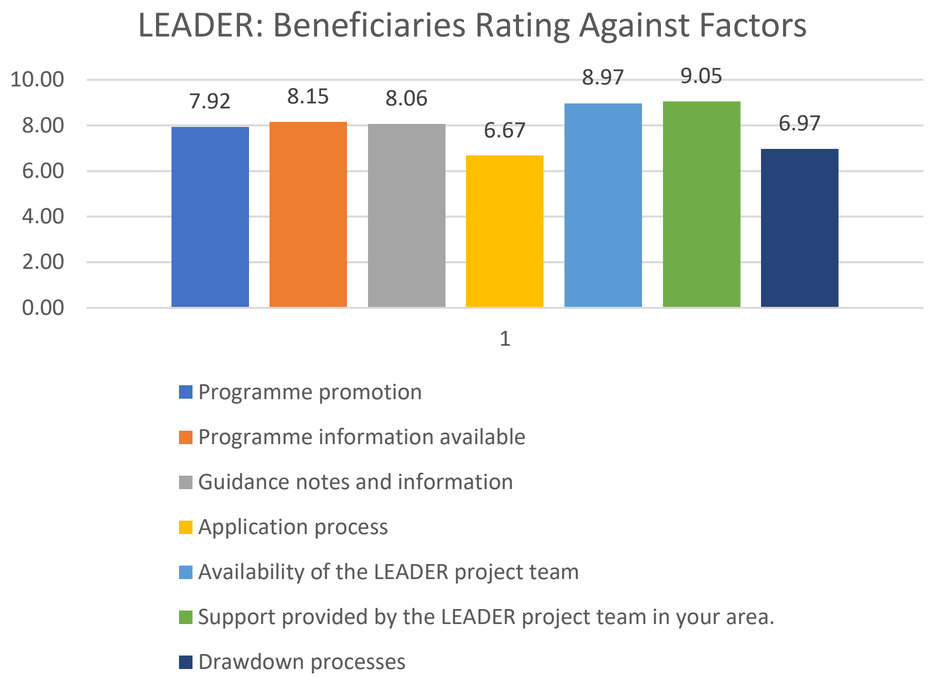
The LEADER Programme beneficiaries' perceptions of the positives of the LEADER Programme and their connection to the delivery model were:

- The support, guidance and professionalism of the LEADER staff were significantly identified as the most positive aspect of the engagement. Survey findings consistently identified the LEADER staff as helpful and having excellent programme knowledge contributing to a better programme experience.
- Unsurprisingly, the availability of the funding was identified as a positive aspect. This included the flexibility of the use of the funding, the range of items it covered, that it facilitated the building of business, expansion, and upgrade of equipment, etc. Survey findings also identified some mixed views on what funding should be permitted to cover.
- The respondents reported the support of project staff (both local development company and local authority as crucial in helping them decide if LEADER funding was appropriate and for what element of their project.

Analysis and Rating of LEADER 'experience'

In summary, LEADER beneficiaries (project promoters) rated their experience of applying to LEADER against 7 factors, as follows.

Infographic 6: Beneficiaries experience of applying to LEADER



Source: Venture Analysis

- Overall, there was a very favourable experience against the 7 factors in applying to LEADER.
- Particularly, support from the 'LEADER project team' and 'availability of the LEADER project team', were identified as highly favourable. Positivity towards the LEADER team in general was a strong theme in the survey findings.
- The 'LEADER application process' was the only weighted average score significantly under 7. This score underpins findings from the survey which identified frustrations in relation to the application process and associated perceived bureaucracy.
- Challenges with funding drawdown were identified consistently in the survey findings and a score of 6.97 reflects perceived issues with this process.
- Programme promotion, information and guidance notes available on the programme all scored reasonably well at 7.92, 8.15 & 8.06, respectively. The survey findings were also reflective of a general level of satisfaction in these three programme areas.
- Both the application process and funding drawdown process scored at a level that would suggest these might be areas for further consideration in light of any new LEADER programme going forward.

Survey of LAG Members/Project Officers

In total, 133 LAG Members and Project Officers responded to the survey. The responses received are summarised below:

LAG Members

The survey engaged both LAG members and Project Officers. The distribution of responses was:

- 52% of respondents were LEADER LAG members
- 35% of respondents were LEADER Project Officers

It is noted that 13% did not confirm whether they are either a LAG member or Project Officer.

The LEADER model:

- 78% were associated with a LCDC led LAG; and 22% were associated with a LDC led LAG

Their feedback was as follows:

- The ‘community’ and ‘partnership’ elements of the LEADER programme were highlighted as the most positive aspects by LAG Members and Project Officers. Specifically, ‘community focus’, ‘involvement’ and ‘engagement’ were identified as programme strengths.
- Respondents also identified a clear ‘bottom-up’ approach as a positive aspect of LEADER delivery.
- Another positive identified was the programme link to the LCDC and its representation of ‘Community’, ‘Social’, ‘Business’ and ‘Statutory’ sectors.
- There was also a consistent view that the LEADER programme offered clear engagement and cooperation with the Local Authorities and synergy with other agencies which were viewed as positive aspects of delivery.
- It was clear from survey results that strong ‘governance’, ‘accountability’, ‘project assurance’ and ‘oversight’ were part of the LEADER delivery model – this was viewed as very positive (but is linked in part to a perception that the programme was bureaucratic with heavy administration processes).
- There was also a consistently strong view that ‘local delivery’ and ‘local decision making’ are a strength of the LEADER programme.
- The independence of the LEADER process was highlighted as a strength; the fact that investment decisions are made locally and not centrally by a Department. These were identified as positive aspects of the governance function of the programme.

Survey of LDC Board Members

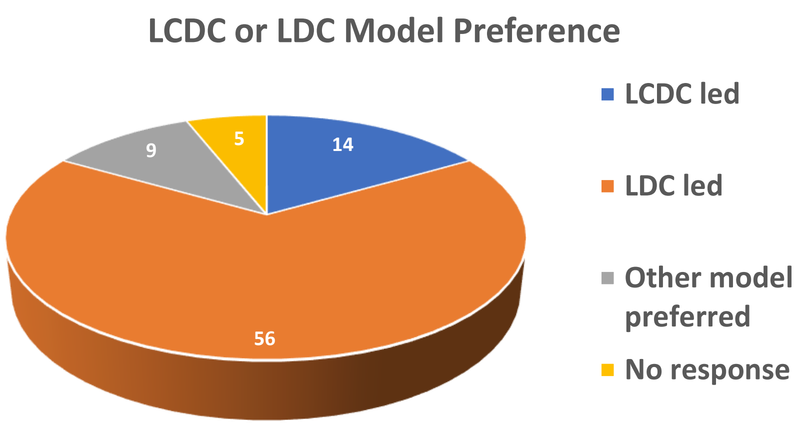
In total, 84 LDC Board Members responded to the survey of LEADER and represented a wide range of geographical coverage throughout Ireland:

- Board members reported, in their area, that 51 LEADER partnerships were LCDC led and 30 were LDC led with 3 'no responses'.
- 67% of LDC Board Members identified the LDC model as preferable.
- 17% of LDC Board Members identified the LCDC model as preferable.
- 11% of LDC Board Members identified another model to be preferable; however no other delivery model was articulated.

Of these, a summary of the specific commentary and suggestions is as follows:

- An LDC led model with LCDC representation on the LDC Board.
- The previous LEADER model was fit for purpose and should be reinstated.
- The LDC should act as the LAG.
- A 'locally led' partnership approach.
- Complete local autonomy.
- A reinvigorated LDC model which focuses on more capacity building and greater meaningful local participation and representation.
- LEADER should directly assess and process applications; this should be a Local Development company responsibility and should not necessitate local authority or LCDC involvement.

Infographic 7: LEADER Model Preference



Source: Venture Analysis

Semi Structured Engagement

The semi structured engagement process engaged the following stakeholder groups:

- LAG Managers (LCDC and LDC)
- Local Authority Directors/Heads of Service
- Local Development Company CEOs

The semi structured engagements generated a range of perspectives on the effectiveness the delivery models used to implement the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme. There were many areas of consensus and equally there were strongly held views on the merits of the two models. The feedback also provided much information which relates to the wider LEADER Programme and the operational elements of it; much of this falls outside the terms of reference for this review but has been appended so that it can be used to influence decision-making around the development of the incoming 2023-2027 LEADER Programme.

There was a high level of consensus that the LEADER Programme is a very important element of the suite of interventions to support rural regeneration and development. Furthermore, there is a very clearly held view across the stakeholder groups that its uniqueness (independent, representative and providing animation and support to promoters) must be retained and that it should not ‘get lost’ in the wider range of national rural development programmes (which are more conventional finance interventions).

Over the 30 years from the introduction of the LEADER Programme an increasing range of funding options including RRDF, TVR, CLÁR and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme have become options to fund the delivery of rural regeneration and development projects. Feedback confirms that none of these funding programmes provide the level of animation and promoter support which the LEADER Programme does. The unique feature of LEADER is very important in engaging the most deprived rural communities, where community capacity has traditionally been low or where resources are limited.

The stakeholders were in agreement that the challenges and opportunities for rural communities are continuing to evolve. The impacts of COVID-19, BREXIT and the increasing importance of climate change will have significant influence on our wider society. By extension, our rural communities and economy will require to deal with these issues. Therefore, there will be a need to provide supports across and beyond the 2023-2027 timeframe of the forthcoming LEADER Programme. The strengths of the LEADER model and approach will be imperative in addressing these challenges through innovation, through building capacity and capability and provision of resources.

If rural communities are to effectively address the challenges and position themselves to benefit from the opportunities (increased repopulation as people choose to live in less densely populated areas as an example) they will need support to develop the capacity to manage change and develop innovative solutions i.e., projects and programmes. The unique ethos, principles and focus on animation and support of the LEADER Programme (combined with its access to good/best practice across its EU wide network) mean that the LEADER Programme is and should/must continue to be managed strategically and locally in a manner which allows it to fulfil this role.

Stakeholders also expressed the view that given the range of rural regeneration interventions there needs to be a higher-level definition between them. There is a perception that there is an overlap between them and that this can result in competition/displacement between funds. Consistently stakeholders communicated that there needed to be more strategic co-ordination and alignment nationally and at a local authority level.

The stakeholders communicated that if the range rural regeneration interventions are to be fully effective and to complement each other there needs to be a higher level of co-ordination between what they invest in and where they invest across our rural communities. This will help to ensure that the maximum impact is derived from the investment of these rural regeneration funds (including LEADER) across each LAG catchment/local authority area.

There are divergent views on the independence of the two delivery models which implemented the current LEADER Programme. Stakeholders from the local development company perspective are of the opinion that their LAG is more locally based and more representative of the rural communities. They have been working in these communities for 30 plus years and therefore have a real understanding of the communities and the issues faced by them. Over time they have developed trust-based networks in the rural communities.

Consistently the stakeholders reference the importance of the project staff/officers working to animate communities and support promoters. This implementing partner role (provided by local development companies personnel) is central to the effectiveness of the LEADER Programme and model. All stakeholders recognise the importance of a well skilled and locally connected implementing personnel as central to the effectiveness of any delivery model.

There was consistent feedback that there needs to be much more coordination between the LEADER Programme and other financial interventions and support programmes at a sub-regional or local authority level. This would support the LEADER Programme to retain its unique identity (focused on animation, promoter support, innovation and capacity building) rather than a conventional funding programme which makes financial investment without this 'wraparound' support.

There is a strong sense that the introduction of the LECP as an output of the 2014 Reform of Local Government Act has potential to bring a stronger level of coordination at a local authority level. However, this was introduced after the development of the LEADER Development Strategies (LDS) for the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme. It is recognised that there may have been a stronger level of coordination or alignment to the LECP if it had been developed in advance of the production of the LEADER Development Strategy.

It is acknowledged by stakeholders that, given DRCD, has just issued guidelines to the local authorities and LCDCs on the development of the new LECPs that a greater level of alignment could and should be possible for the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme.

Consistently stakeholders communicated that the turnover of staff within the local authorities has an impact on the development of relationships between local development companies/implementing partners and the local authority. Officers delegated with responsibility for the LEADER Programme within the Council (or on secondment to the LCDC) often move to alternative roles within local government (either within the same Council or in another Council). This is recognised by the independent review but equally is part of how human resource management and allocation works across local government; people have the right to apply for and move to new roles.

There is a recognition across all stakeholders that some of the challenges faced by our rural communities are also national agenda items. Particularly referenced in the review process is the need for all communities (including rural communities) to develop projects and programmes which contribute to meeting local and national climate change targets and also targets around bio-diversity and the environment. It is accepted that the wider LEADER delivery network will need to find ways to develop competency and capacity in these areas.
The implementing partners are of the view that the 'reality' of animation and delivering animation is not fully understood. There are concerns that the budget available to support animation and administration is not sufficient if the implementing partners are to fully engage, heretofore, non-active rural communities and businesses from both regeneration and rural economic development perspectives.

5 Conclusions

This section of the review report sets out the conclusions of the independent review team based on the analysis of all of the views provided to it by stakeholders involved in the delivery of the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme.

From the outset it must be stated that this is not a review (or a post programme evaluation) of the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme; this is a review of the two delivery models used to implement the current Programme.

Before setting out the conclusions on the effectiveness of the two delivery models used to govern and implement the 2014-2020 programme there are a number of important conclusions which form the context for the conclusions on the delivery models. They are:

- All of the stakeholders entered the review process in a proactive and positive manner. Accepting the clear preferences from certain stakeholders for one model over the other it is clear that both have delivered the LEADER Programme in a compliant manner and effectively invested the LEADER budget allocated to them to rural communities and businesses.
- LEADER is an important rural regeneration programme and is valued by all of the stakeholders involved in its governance and delivery across the 2014-2020 timeframe
- There is a clear consensus that LEADER has played and will/must continue to play an important role in supporting rural communities in Ireland to meet the evolving challenges and opportunities. LEADER's independent decision-making structures and emphasis on animation, innovation and promoter support define it from conventional rural regeneration funding programmes.
- If the impact of all of the rural regeneration funding and support initiatives (including LEADER) is to be maximized, there needs to be clear definition about the role and purpose of each of them and how they work collectively in respect of LEADER. This will help ensure that LEADER's unique definition and purpose (independent decision-making and an emphasis on innovation, capacity building, animation and promoter support) is not lost in the range of more conventional funding programmes.

The focus of this review process is the effectiveness of the delivery models (two models across 29 LAG catchments) and to use the findings of the review of these models to inform the process of appointing LAGs to deliver the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. The conclusions of the review process are:

- There is very strong support for both the LCDC and local development company led models.
- It is recognised that the local development companies have a 30-year track record of delivering LEADER and therefore both a strong sense of its history and ethos and a deep sense of ownership of how LEADER has developed and delivered across Ireland.

- Equally, it is acknowledged that whilst the LCDCs have a shorter track record in the delivery of the LEADER Programme, it is clear that they are committed to LEADER and perceive it as a major part of the approach to facilitating and supporting rural communities. The long-term strategic and regeneration experience of local authorities cannot be ignored.
- The review process must recognise that the impact of the 2014 Reform of Local Government Act opening the way for the development of the LCDCs and the LECPs also created the potential for the LCDCs to position themselves (with partners) as the LAG.
- Communication between all of the stakeholders could and needs to be more effective. Feedback indicates that it is at best functional and that there is little sense of the stakeholders working towards a shared vision for the LEADER Programme and a more collaborative approach to developing the Programme or addressing the issues and challenges which inevitably arise across the delivery timeframe of a regeneration programme delivered on a national basis.
- The 2014 –2020 LEADER Programme was delivered by two models; the LCDC and local development company led models. Given the high level of project approvals and that all of the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme budget has been allocated, it is concluded that both models have been tested/proofed and have proved effective. Accepting that there are passionate advocates for each and merits for both the independent review process must conclude that both are fit for purpose.
- Ideally, any delivery model should combine the potential for strong sub-regional/local authority area coordination which brings together a vision for that area, regeneration and development priorities and a sense of how all regeneration and development programmes contribute to the delivery of the vision and priorities. Equally, it should have access to high quality, capable development personnel (animation, capacity building, innovation and signposting) who can work with communities and businesses to connect them with the funding provided by the LEADER Programme or to signpost them to other more appropriate forms of support.
- It is clear that there wasn't sufficient alignment (in most cases) between the LEADER Development Strategies for the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme and the emerging LECPs. The reason for this position is clear on the basis that the LECPs were a new strategic process at local authority level resulting from the 2014 Local Government Reform Act. The guidelines supporting the development of the first LECPs came after the development of the current LEADER Development Strategies. Given the potential to develop the LECPs in advance of the LEADER Development Strategies for the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme there is a real opportunity to provide clearer alignment between both.

6 Recommendations

The review process has gathered and analysed the perspectives of the stakeholders who were (and still are) centrally involved in the implementation of the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme. This provides an information base to support the development of a series of recommendations which can help to direct the selection of delivery models for the forthcoming 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. The review process has concluded that both the two delivery models used to implement the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme proved effective and compliant. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- DRCD should recognise that both delivery models are proven and therefore not prescribe one as a preferred model over the other.
- DRCD should carry out a transparent selection process, in line with EU Regulations, and provide proponents of either of the two delivery models the opportunity to position themselves as a LAG for the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. It should also be acknowledged that other organisations might legitimately feel that they can meet the requirements to form a LAG and an open selection process ensures that they have the opportunity to enter that process.
- The specification for the selection process should provide guidance on the need for prospective LAGs to demonstrate how the LEADER Local Development Strategy aligns to the LECP; helping to deliver on the vision, priorities and outcomes set out in it.

The review process has also identified a number of areas which should be addressed to support the work of the LAGs/delivery models which will be appointed to implement the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. These include:

- Approaches should be examined to bring about more effective communication between the main stakeholder groups and increase the levels of collaboration working towards continually improving the delivery and accessibility of the LEADER Programme.
- DRCD and its stakeholders across local authorities, LCDCs and the local development companies should agree a terms of reference for a coordinating programme/board/panel to lead shared thinking around how to protect the unique character of the EU resourced LEADER Programme and continue to develop approaches which maximise its impact across rural Ireland.
- Climate change is likely to be a significant agenda item nationally and in our rural communities. Despite the significant expense of many of those involved in the delivery of the LEADER Programme approaches will be required to develop innovative thinking and capacity/competency in this area.

Appendices

Appendix A: Terms of Reference for the Review of 2014-2020 LEADER Delivery Models

Appendix B: Rural Development Policy

Appendix C: Strategic Context

Appendix D: Rural Development & Regeneration Funding Landscape

Appendix E: LAG Specification & List of LAGs

Appendix F: Full Stakeholder Survey Analysis

Appendix A: Terms of Reference for the Review of 2014-2020 LEADER Delivery Models

Terms of Reference – LEADER 2014-2020 Review

Introduction and Background

The Department of Rural and Community Development was established in 2017 and is a department of the Government of Ireland. It is led by the Minister for Rural and Community Development who is assisted by a Minister of State. Its Mission is to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland. It delivers a wide range of policies and programmes to this effect, one of which is LEADER, a rural development programme co-funded by the EU. LEADER is an integral rural development component of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which, for the 2014 – 2020 programme period was implemented through Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) in each Member State. The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) is the Managing Authority for Ireland's RDP, with the administration of LEADER being delegated to the Department of Rural and Community Development. Ireland's RDP provides for EU Priority 6 *(social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas)*, Focus Area 6B *(local development in rural areas)* to be targeted via measure 19, LEADER. The total LEADER programme allocation for the 2014-2020 period was €250m (62.8% of which was co-funded by the EU). There are four sub-measures within measure 19 - Table 1 provides Ireland's planned expenditure for FA 6B, via LEADER measure 19 (broken down by sub-measure) [1].

LEADER Sub- Measure	Sub-Measure Description	Planned Expenditure
19.1	Preparatory support	700,000
19.2	Support for implementation of operations under the CLLD strategy	[2] 194,350,000
19.3	Preparation and implementation of co-operation activities of Local Action Groups	10,000,000
19.4	Support for running costs and animation	44,950,000

Table 1 - Extract from *Overview of the planned output and planned expenditure by measure and by focus area*[1]

July 2020. *Ireland - Rural Development Programme (National)*. V9. p.431. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6606a-rural-development-programme-rdp-2014-2020/>
[2] This includes €15m project funding for LEADER Food Initiative Projects.
< https://assets.gov.ie/3304/261118125554-e274752737b04f5985c16944480a7c52.pdf>

LEADER 2014 – 2020: Key Programme Features

The LEADER Approach – Community Led Local Development (CLLD) [3]

As a Community Led Local Development (CLLD) initiative, LEADER is an integrated development process designed to engage, enable, resource and empower local communities in undertaking local development. There are three common and interlinked elements fundamental to the CLLD approach: the area of territory; the partnership; and the integrated Local Development Strategy (LDS).

Local Development Strategy [4]

Article 2 (19) of the Common Provision Regulation (CPR) (Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013) provides a definition of a Local Development Strategy (LDS) as: *"[A] 'community-led local development strategy' means a coherent set of operations... to meet local objectives and needs, and which contributes to meeting the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and which is designed and implemented by a local action group."* [5]. Local participation is one of the cornerstones of the whole CLLD approach and the community's involvement in the preparation of the LDS is therefore absolutely fundamental. Article 33 of the CPR sets out the essential minimum content for an LDS:

- The area and population covered by the strategy;
- The community involvement process;
- Development needs and potential of the area;
- The hierarchy of objectives, including measurable targets;
- An action plan;
- Management, monitoring and evaluation arrangements;
- Financial plan, including planned allocation of each ESI Fund.

With regard to the LDS Financial Plan, each LDS includes financial tables, profiling the expected expenditure over the full period of the programme, including LAG running and animation costs.

[3] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_en [4] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/enrd-guidance_lds.pdf
[5] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013R1303

Delivery Model Background [6]

LEADER has formed part of the policy framework for rural development in Ireland since its inception in the 1990s. There were a number of changes to the delivery mechanisms in respect of the LEADER approach for 2014 - 2020 compared to previous RDPs.

Partnership Approach

For the 2014 – 2020 programme period Ireland supported the implementation of rural development interventions (via LEADER) at sub-regional level using a partnership approach - the aim was to draw on the skills and expertise of local public and private socio-economic interests, including local development expertise, local authorities, community and voluntary organisations, etc., in consultation with the wider population. The priorities arising from this partnership method would subsequently provide the basis for programme-specific priorities in each sub-regional area, leading to local development involving community and local government, guiding a more integrated and coordinated approach to the delivery of all funding (both European and National) at a sub-regional level.

In essence the LAG model has evolved under the current RDP, so that in 25 of the 28 LEADER sub-regional areas (29 LDS areas)**:**

- the Local Action Group (LAG) is the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) *(established under the Local Government Reform Act 2014)* - the committee of the Local Authority charged with developing, coordinating and implementing a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development
- with the Local Development Company (LDC) in these areas acting as Implementing Partner (IP), engaging with potential project promoters on the LAGs behalf, and having responsibility for the direct implementation of the programme.
- In the remaining four cases (Kilkenny, Clare and the 2 LDCs in Galway), the LDCs themselves are the designated Local Action Groups (including the role of Implementing Partner) [7].

July 2020. *Ireland - Rural Development Programme (National)*. V9. p.341 - 343. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6606a-rural-development-programme-rdp-2014-2020/>

[7] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c45498-local-action-groups/

Area of Territory [8]

LEADER and CLLD is based on a different way of doing things, linking the three elements of a local area, partnership and development strategy within a single approach. The area forms the basis for the development of the local partnership and strategy, creating a positive vision for what could be backed up by an active alliance of local stakeholders. Under the *'Area-based approach'* the programme funding targets the priorities of the area as a whole, not specific projects or groups of projects (thus it is distinct from a 'project-based approach') [9].

For the 2014-2020 programme period Ireland reconfigured the way local and rural development interventions were to be implemented in sub-regional areas to be in line with Government policy – for local government to support the effective and efficient delivery of local services, including rural development interventions, as part of the overall vision for local government to be the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level.

For the purposes of RDP 2014-2020, rural areas in Ireland were defined as those areas outside the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. In the first instance sub-regional areas would correspond with County Council administrative areas with two exceptions –

1. As there are rural communities located in each of the Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal and South Dublin County Council areas, and because these areas are statistically small and contained within one geographical county boundary, they were considered as one sub-regional area.
2. The second exception related to County Cork - in view of the size of the Cork County Council area, this was divided into three sub-regional areas. This resulted in 28 sub-regional areas in Ireland for LEADER 2014 – 2020 purposes.

[8] July 2020. *Ireland - Rural Development Programme (National)*. V9. p.341 - 346. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6606a-rural-development-programme-rdp-2014-2020/>
[9] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_en 4

Ireland's LEADER 2014 – 2020 programme allocation was €250m, 62.8% of which was co-funded by the EU, with the remainder provided via exchequer funding. The overall LEADER programme complement was apportioned on the basis of the 28 sub-regional areas (29 LDS areas (Galway sub regional area has 2 LDS areas)). The allocations to the 28 sub-regional areas was determined using the following three objective criteria: [10]

- Each Sub-Regional area was given a minimum allocation of €3 million to ensure that each county received a viable allocation in line with European Commission guidelines. Cork was allocated €6 million as a minimum in order to ensure a viable allocation to each of the three municipal districts. The fact that the population in Cork, outside the city, is almost twice that of any other county and more than three times many, was also taken into consideration.
- A measure of population density (county population divided by km2) was used to distribute one half of the remaining fund (€69.5m). An 'average amount' based on 26 counties was calculated. Each county's population density was then compared to the average population density for the country.
- The second half of the remaining fund (€69.5m) was allocated to each county using a Resource Allocation Model (RAM). The model was developed by Trutz Haase using information from the 2011 census and the Trutz Haase deprivation index as a measure of deprivation. The underlying variables of the model include consideration of demographic decline, social class deprivation and Labour Market Deprivation. The model also used CSO area classification to measure the urban- rural spectrum.

[10] https://assets.gov.ie/3304/261118125554-e274752737b04f5985c16944480a7c52.pdf 5

Local Authority's - Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) [11]

To ensure alignment with government policy for local government to support the effective and efficient delivery of local services, including rural development interventions, for the 2014-2020 programme period LEADER sub-regional areas were configured to correspond with the County Council administrative areas in the first instance. As part of the local government reform process, six year Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) were developed for each of the Local Authority areas. The LECP was an integrated plan for the economic and community development of the functional area of the Local Authority - the economic elements of the LECP being developed by the Local Authority, and the community elements being developed by the LCDC - the committee of the Local Authority charged with developing, coordinating and implementing a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development.

Public, stakeholder and community participation in preparing each of the elements of the LECPs was a crucial requirement, with specific provision for community participation in the preparation of the community element of the LECPs. During 2015, integrated LECPs were adopted by each local authority, with a requirement that they be consistent with the Local Authority Development Plan. As part of a more co-ordinated and joined-up planning approach, each LDS was required to be consistent with the sub-regional LECP.

In the context of the RDP, this area based approach envisaged community representatives and local/development agencies working in partnership with local authorities through the LCDCs with the need for co-ordination with economic and community development processes being a requirement for each LDS selected.

Programme for Government Commitments

The Programme for Government (Our Shared Future) contains a commitment to support a LEADER programme and deliver a Rural Development Programme that is led by independent Local Action Groups and supported by Local Community Development Committees.

[11] July 2020. *Ireland - Rural Development Programme (National)*. V9. p.343 – 344 (LECPs). Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6606a-rural-development-programme-rdp-2014-2020/>

Aims of the 2014-2020 LEADER Review

The overall aim of the review exercise is to gauge the effectiveness of the 2014-2020 LEADER programme and should give consideration to the following:

1. To what extent did the locally led partnership approach enable the achievement of the LEADER 2014-2020 programme objectives;
2. Determine the extent to which the locally led partnership and area based model achieved the aim of a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development;
3. The review should explore how the delivery mechanisms for LEADER 2023-2027 programme could be implemented, building upon the partnership approach adopted in the 2014-2020 programme, while having regard to the PfG Commitments and the locally led partnership approach, together with EU regulatory requirements.

Benefits of a review of 2014-2020 LEADER Programme

1. Engage with a range of stakeholders to ascertain what worked and what did not in the 2014-2020 delivery mechanism to inform the approach to the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme.
2. Provide data and evidence to support potential delivery mechanisms of the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme.

Key Timeline

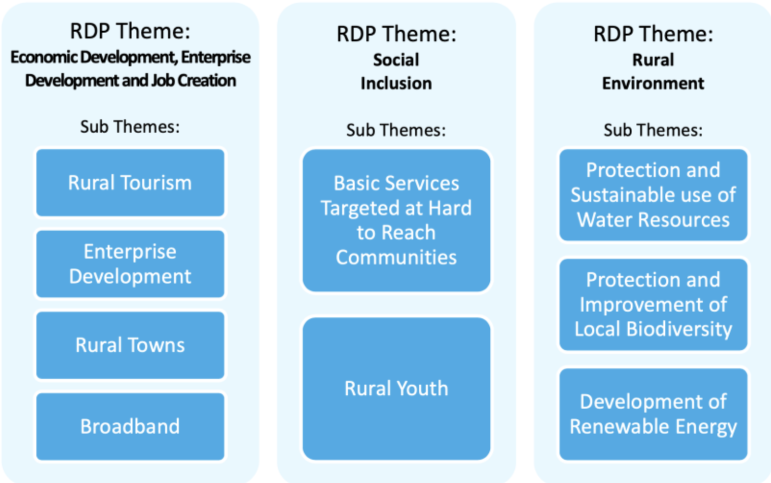
The review must be complete by the mid-September

END

Appendix B: Rural Development Policy

Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2020 (RDP)

The following themes, which emerged from the preparatory analysis underlying the RDP and also included information contained in the 2014 report of the Commission on the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), provided the framework for the development of the Local Development Strategies:



The Programme is co-funded by the EU's European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the national exchequer. The EU support for the RDP via the EAFRD was initially €2.19 billion over the 7-year Programme lifespan, see the table below.

Measure	€
Measure 1 - Knowledge transfer and information actions	125,800,000
Measure 2 - Advisory services, farm management and farm relief services	8,300,000
Measure 4 - Investments in physical assets	425,000,000
Measure 7 - Basic services and village renewal in rural areas	6,000,000
Measure 10 - Agri-environment-climate	1,531,005,630
Measure 11 - Organic farming	56,000,000
Measure 12 - Natura	73,250,000
Measure 13 - Payments to areas facing natural or other specific constraints	1,370,000,000
Measure 14 – Animal Welfare	100,000,000
Measure 16 - Co-operation	62,000,000
Measure 19 - Support for LEADER local development	250,000,000
Technical Assistance	8,145,000

National Strategic and Policy Context for LEADER

Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas 2014 (CEDRA)

CEDRA was established in 2012 and reported in 2014. CEDRA's vision statement was:

'Rural Ireland will become a dynamic, adaptable and outward looking multi-sectoral economy supporting vibrant, resilient and diverse communities experiencing a high quality of life with an energised relationship between rural and urban Ireland which will contribute to its sustainability for the benefit of society as a whole'

The report highlighted a changing rural dynamic in Ireland with significant population shifts. During the period (1991- 2011) the national population increased by 30% from 3,525,609 to 4,588,198. The population living in the countryside (areas outside the cities and towns) increased by 44% (1.8 million to 2.6 million) i.e., from 51% of the population nationally to 57%. Changes were not uniform and there was substantial spatial variation, some areas experienced very large increases in population whilst others experienced declines. In general, rural areas close or accessible to the main cities and larger towns experienced substantial and sustained growth in their populations. In contrast those that showed a decline in population between 1991 and 2011 tended to be more remote or less accessible to towns and cities. The changing population trends also had implications in terms of rural labour force and employment and on the economic capacity if rural areas.

From a policy perspective CEDRA highlighted the need to establish a more coordinated approach to the design and implementation of policies and programmes that impact on Rural Development and the need for a Rural Economic Development Statement detailing how Government would support integrated rural economic development to 2025 and the need for defined ministerial and departmental responsibility for delivering and coordinating rural economic development. As well as highlighting co-ordinated approach to strategy development at a national, regional and local government level, the report also highlighted the need for strategies to be tailored to the needs of local communities and that 'one size' did not fit all.

CEDRA research also showed that rural towns had felt the impact of the economic downturn more acutely than cities and larger urban centres with higher rates of unemployment due largely to a disproportionate reliance on industrial sectors with falling employment, higher poverty rates and the fact that one third of working age households were without a job. In order to address this directly CEDRA proposed the implementation of a targeted rural town stimulus programme.

Following the publication of the CEDRA report, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government was tasked with formulating the Government's response. Over the ensuing two years, until the formation of a new Government in May 2016, many of the recommendations of the report were implemented by, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and other bodies.

The CEDRA report laid the foundations for subsequent rural policy and strategy development including the shaping of the LEADER programme.

Project Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework

The national planning framework was published in February 2018. The framework identifies key national strategic outcomes and the following are of particular relevance and have been supported by LEADER:

Compact Growth – Carefully managing the sustainable growth of compact cities, towns and villages will add value and create more attractive places in which people can live and work.

Strengthened rural economies and communities**.** - Rural areas play a key role in defining our identity, in driving our economy and our high- quality environment and must be a major part of our country's strategic development to 2040. In addition to the natural resource and food sector potential as traditional pillars of the rural economy, improved connectivity, broadband and rural economic development opportunities are emerging which offer the potential to ensure our countryside remains and strengthens as a living and working community.

A strong economy supported by enterprise, innovation and skills - creating places that can foster enterprise and innovation and attract investment and talent. It can be achieved by building regional economic drivers and by supporting opportunities to diversify and strengthen the rural economy, to leverage the potential of places. Delivering this outcome will require the coordination of growth and place making with investment in world class infrastructure, including digital connectivity, and in skills and talent to support economic competitiveness and enterprise growth.

Enhanced amenity and heritage - This will ensure that our cities, towns and villages are attractive and can offer a good quality of life. It will require investment in well-designed public realm, which includes public spaces, parks and streets, as well as recreational infrastructure. It also includes amenities in rural areas, such as national and forest parks, activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways. This is linked to and must integrate with our built, cultural and natural heritage, which has intrinsic value in defining the character of urban and rural areas and adding to their attractiveness and sense of place.

Programmes for Government

Ultimately all investments by Government of either state funds or those secured as part of EU funding should contribute to the direction and outcomes set out in the Programme for Government. The 2014 -2020 (and extension) LEADER Programme is an investment which should be aligned to and contribute to two Programme for Government plans as follows:

2016 - Programme for a Partnership Government

The Programme for a Partnership Government recognised the importance of putting in place measures to revitalise all of Ireland so that the benefits are felt inside every doorstep and in every community. The key objectives focused on LEADERship on Jobs & Rural Development; Attracting New Investment; and Protecting Local Services. The LEADER Programme has supported and facilitated these objectives.

2020 - Programme for Government – Our Shared Future

The Government's objective is to achieve the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging local economic growth, arresting decline, and ensuring that rural Ireland continues to be a vibrant and lived-in place, meeting the needs of all communities.

Commitments throughout the Programme for Government which will benefit rural Ireland include the development of town centres, better transport services to connect rural communities, support for outdoor tourism initiatives, the development of the Circular Economy, a Just Transition to a climate neutral society, broadband rollout, maximising the potential of the marine sector, and supports for farming and farm families.

The LEADER Programme of activities supports the objective and commitments.

Action Plan for Rural Development – Realising our Rural Potential

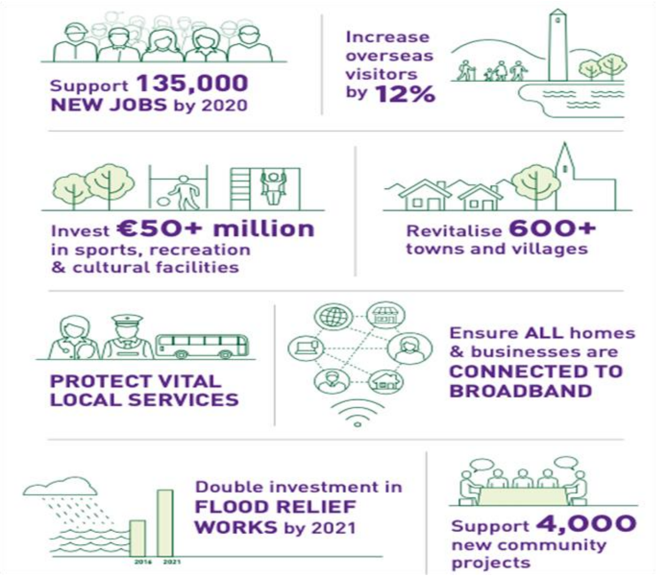
In January 2017, *Realising our Rural Potential*, the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development, was launched. The Plan was a whole-of- Government initiative and contained over 270 actions across five related pillars, to be delivered by Government Departments, State agencies and other groups. The Plan set out to support sustainable communities, support enterprise and employment, maximise rural and recreation potential, foster culture and creativity, and improve rural connectivity. This plan acted as a policy vehicle for rural development initiatives.

The five pillars:

1. Supporting Sustainable Communities
   Key Objectives: Make rural Ireland a better place in which to live and work; Enhance local services in the community; Empower Local Communities; and Build better communities.
2. Supporting Enterprise and Employment
   Key Objectives: Grow and attract enterprise and jobs through the roll out of Action Plans for jobs and development of an Atlantic Economic Corridor to promote balance regional development; Support sectoral growth including agri-food sector, renewable energy and international financial services; Ensure rural communities have the necessary skills; Support rural jobseekers and Support farm and fishing incomes Support farm and fishing incomes.

3. Maximising Rural Tourism and Recreational Potential
   Key Objectives: increase tourist numbers to rural Ireland; Support sustainable jobs; Develop and promote Activity Tourism; Develop and promote our natural and built heritage.
4. Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities
   Key Objectives: Increase access to the arts and enhance cultural facilities in rural communities; Further develop and enhance culture and creativity and Promote the Irish language as a key resource.
5. Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity
   Key Objectives: Bring high speed broadband to every premises in Ireland; improve mobile access; Improve rural transport links; and Implement flood relief and other land management measures.

The key deliverables:



The LEADER Programme was one of the key mechanisms for supporting this national action plan.

Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025, *Our Rural Future*

The vision:

'Our Vision is for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development, which is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and which recognises the centrality of people, the importance of vibrant and lived-in rural places, and the potential to create quality jobs and sustain our shared environment.'

The key deliverables:

- Remote working
- Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages
- Jobs for Rural Ireland
- Rural Living
- Rural Ireland's Unique Tourism, Culture & Heritage
- Supporting Communities to create their own future
- Agriculture, the Marine and Forestry
- Island and Coastal Communities
- Transitioning to a climate neutral economy

The policy specifically references the implementation of a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme for community- led rural development for the period 2021-2022.

Putting People First, Action Programme for Effective Local Government / Local Government Reform Act 2014

The Action Programme for Effective Local Government was published by the Irish Government in 2012 and outlined the Government's policy for reform and development right across the local government system. The report proposed that local Councils have:

- an enhanced and clearer role in economic development and enterprise support;
- close involvement in community and local development;
- devolution of specific functions from central level and delegation of greater authority or relaxation of specific central controls on local authorities; and
- widening the reach of local government by using its capacity to undertake functions with or on
  behalf of other sectors and performing a broad co-ordination and LEADERship role locally.

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 put in place the legislation to implement the reforms to Council structures and it provided for a range of changes to the organisation and work of local authorities. Among other things, it faciloitated the amalgamation of a number of local authorities; the abolition of town councils; the abolition of city and county development boards; the establishment of Local Community Development Committees and it provided for a range of changes to the functions carried out by local authorities.

Each local authority had to establish a Local Community Development Committee (LCDC). The main function of an LCDC is to prepare, implement and monitor the community elements of the six-year Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP). It must consider the economic elements of the plan in order to enhance co-ordination with the community elements and ultimately integrate the two elements but it does not have a role in deciding on the economic elements. It has a general role in seeking to ensure effectiveness, consistency, co-ordination and avoidance of duplication between the various elements of local authority activities in the community. The LCDC must be consistent with the local development plans made by the elected members and with the regional spatial and economic strategies.

The membership of the LCDCs include members of the local authority, local authority staff, representatives of public bodies which provide services in the area; representatives of local community interests; local community representatives; and representatives of publicly funded or supported local development bodies.

The LEADER model and funding supports and compliments the LCDC/LECP approach.

Ex-Post Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme Ireland (2007-2013)

An independent evaluation of the Rural Development Programme Ireland 2007-2013 was completed by Indecon International Economic Consultants in 2017. This included a review of Axis 3 & 4 of the programme which incorporated the LEADER measure.

The aim of Axis 3 and 4 of the RDP was to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to encourage the diversification of economic activity. The evaluation concluded that the existence of the LEADER approach over four programme cycles was likely to have had created a local competence and resource and encouraged communities to self-identify projects which could improve the quality of life and economic resilience of many rural towns and countryside areas. It also highlighted that the use of the bottom-up approach represented a very useful addition to the broader RDP, by creating a means to communities to develop their own projects. These measures were also important as they were the only part of the RDP which allowed for the support of elements of the rural community other than farmers.

The evaluation supported the continued use of the LEADER model for delivery. It recommended that the future vision of a vibrant rural Ireland would require primary, secondary, and tertiary industries, and non-farming projects should continue to be funded through the RDP. It further recommended that ways to reduce administrative burdens on beneficiaries/project promoters should be considered. It suggested that there were a number of ways in which these could be applied in the RDP 2014 – 2020. For example, the introduction of a small number of targeted indicator data would reduce administration. In addition, they recommended greater use of online systems as standard for meeting administrative requirements. However, they also strongly supported ensuring that sufficient information was obtained in order, to facilitate evaluation and full regulatory compliance.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)

RRDF is a commitment of €1 billion by government to be invested in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027.

Projects supported through the fund include:

- infrastructure that may be needed to support town centre housing and/or commercial development.
- measures to address building vacancy including building refurbishment, redevelopment and/or demolition.
- the development of community or public facilities infrastructure including improvements to roads, bridges and car parking facilities.
- infrastructure that improves telecommunications connectivity.
- projects that support job creation, entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas (for example: development of Digital Hubs, Enterprise Hubs, Creative Hubs, or training facilities) the provision/enhancement of recreational or leisure facilities.

The fund focuses on all settlements and rural areas with fewer than 10,000 people which are located outside the five city metropolitan areas.

Town and Village Renewal

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme was first introduced in 2016 and is one of a series of national and local support measures designed to rejuvenate small rural towns and villages throughout Ireland, under the Department of Rural & Community Development's "Rural Development Investment Programme". It is managed on behalf of the Department by the local authorities, and the programme is funded under Project Ireland 2040. The Town and Village Renewal Scheme is targeted at towns and villages with a population of 10,000 or less and all projects funded under the Scheme must be completed within a 12 to 18 month period.

Since the launch of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme in 2016, over €93 million of funding has been approved for more than 1,340 projects across Ireland.

The Scheme supports the revitalisation of towns and villages, to improve the living and working environment of their communities and increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future.

Clar (Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais)

The CLÁR-Funding for Small-Scale Rural Projects is a targeted investment programme which provides funding for small-scale infrastructural projects in rural areas that have suffered the greatest levels of population decline. The fund is targeted at social and community development measures including:

Measure 1: Support for Schools/Community Safety Measures

Measure 2: Outdoor Community Recreation Facilities

Measure 3:Community Wellbeing Measure:

a) Community Gardens and Allotments

b) Mobility and Cancer Care Transport

CLÁR Innovation Measure

The new CLÁR Innovation Measure is targeted at piloting new ideas which address specific challenges faced by communities in CLÁR areas, including those associated with rural isolation, village decline, service accessibility, population change, social disadvantage and marginalisation in communities within the CLÁR areas. This Measure seeks to support fresh ideas and new ways of working that might not otherwise be identified or supported.

Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme

The Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme provides funding for the development of new outdoor recreational infrastructure. It also provides support for the necessary repair, maintenance, enhancement or promotion of existing outdoor recreational infrastructure in rural areas across Ireland.

The scheme supports sporting and recreational pursuits. It helps to make use of the resources of the countryside that contribute to healthy active lifestyles. It supports the economic and tourism potential of the area for both local communities and tourist visitors alike.

It provides funding for:

- development, extensions and repair of trails, walkways, cycleways and blueways
- improved access to outdoor leisure or recreational facilities
- development of outdoor recreational infrastructure

Connected Hubs

The primary objective of the Connected Hubs fund is to support and complement the development of a National Hub Network, which is a key action of the Rural Development Policy – Our Rural Future and the National Remote Working Strategy – Making Remote Work.

The Connected Hubs Fund will expand existing hub facilities, providing additional hot desks, office spaces and meeting rooms for remote working.

The funding can be used to install electric car charging points, upgrade disability access and improve IT facilities located within hubs or Broadband Connection Points (BCPs).

LAG Specification

The LAG – Minimum Requirements	
Organisation Details	• Legal Name of LAG, Business Name (if applicable). • Postal Address, Telephone No., Email Address, Website.
Primary Contact for LEADER	• Name of Contact Person, Position. • Postal Address, Telephone No., Email Address.
Legal Description of LAG	• Date of establishment. • CRO No. and Tax Clearance Certificate (TCC) Expiry Date (if applicable). • Legal Structure i.e., Company Limited by Guarantee with/without share capital, public-private partnerships e.g. committee structure etc. • Operational ethos: description of main activities.
LAG Composition & Decision Making	• List of current LAG members: name; organisation; areas of expertise. • Outline of the ongoing selection process for new LAG members and rotation of members over the course of the LEADER programme. • Description of decision making structures/procedures including sub- committees and advisory groups (this can also be illustrated through process maps). • Frequency of LAG committee meetings.
LAG Roles & Responsibilities	• Roles & responsibilities of LAG members for LEADER regarding financial management; administration; animation and calls for proposals; management of staff; monitoring/evaluation.

LAGs Financial Management	• Financial controls and management procedures for LEADER. • Procedures for management oversight of the implementing body that has responsibility for financial management of LEADER (if applicable). • Adherence to public procurement requirements. • Confirmation of the LAGs 'financial partner' for LEADER and how the system will operate. If no 'financial partner' has been identified, the LAG should outline how this function will be undertaken.
LEADER Staffing	• Current number of full-time equivalents in the LAG (if applicable). • Organisational chart illustrating the proposed management & staffing structure of the LAG, or where appropriate, the management and staffing structure of LAG financial / implementation partners.
Project Selection Procedures for LEADER	An outline of the: • Procedure for managing the appraisal and selection process for project promoters & the LAG, to ensure a transparent selection procedure (e.g. conflict of interest and LAG decision-making procedures on project selection etc.). • Project selection criteria and scoring framework. • Statement from the LAG confirming the required 40% minimum project budget has been allocated to 'time-limited' calls for proposals.

Relevant Experience	Details of any previous experience of the LAG partner organisations in: • Managing and administering calls for projects to local promoters. • Developing an area-based approach to economic development in rural areas. • Delivering interventions that support social inclusion and poverty reduction, in particular those that target 'hard to reach' communities. • Management of relevant Exchequer or EU funding in the last 3 years. • Leveraging additional match funding from other sources.

Include as an Appendix	• Governing document of the LAG (if applicable). • Statement of Roles and Responsibilities between LAG member organisations. • Operational Procedures: a list of key procedure/policies of LAG (or implementing body) that are currently in place for the operation of the organisation. • Job descriptions for LEADER staff members of the LAG or LAG partner, including the required level of experience, hours and remuneration.

Local Action Groups (LAGS)

Local Action Group (LAG)	Implementing Partner (IP)
Carlow LCDC	Carlow County Development Partnership CLG
Cavan LCDC	Breffni Integrated Ltd
Clare Local Development Company Ltd	Clare Local Development Company Ltd
Cork North LCDC	Avondhu Blackwater Partnership CLG
	Ballyhoura Development Ltd
	IRD Duhallow Ltd
Cork South LCDC	Avondhu Blackwater Partnership CLG
	IRD Duhallow CLG
	South and East Cork Area Development Partnership CLG
	Údarás na Gaeltachta

Cork West LCDC	Avondhu Blackwater Partnership CLG
	South and East Cork Area Development Partnership CLG
	Comhar na nOileán Teoranta
Donegal LCDC	Inishowen Development Partnership
	Donegal Local Development Co. Ltd
	Comhar na nOileán Teoranta
	Údarás na Gaeltachta
Dublin Rural LAG	Fingal LEADER Partnership
The Galway Rural Development Co. Ltd	The Galway Rural Development Co. Ltd
Forum Connemara Ltd	Forum Connemara Ltd
Kerry LCDC	South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd
	IRD Duhallow Ltd
	North, East & West Kerry Development
Kildare LCDC	County Kildare LEADER Partnership
Kilkenny LEADER Partnership	Kilkenny LEADER Partnership
Laois LCDC	Laois Community & Enterprise Development Company
Leitrim LCDC	Leitrim Integrated Development Company Ltd

Limerick LCDC	West Limerick Resources
	Ballyhoura Development Ltd
Longford LCDC	Longford Community Resources CLG
Louth LCDC	Louth Leader Partnership
Mayo LCDC	South West Mayo Development Co
	Mayo North East Leader Partnership
	Comhar na nOileán Teoranta
	Moy Valley Resources Ltd
	IRD Kiltimagh Ltd
Meath LCDC	Meath Rural and Social Development Partnership Ltd
Monaghan LCDC	Monaghan Integrated Development Ltd
Offaly LCDC	Offaly Local Development Company
Roscommon LCDC	Roscommon LEADER Partnership
Sligo LCDC	Sligo LEADER Partnership Company Ltd
Tipperary LCDC	North Tipperary LEADER Partnership
	South Tipperary Development Company
Waterford LCDC	Waterford LEADER Partnership CLG

Westmeath LCDC	Westmeath Community Development Ltd
Wexford LCDC	Wexford Local Development
Wicklow LCDC	County Wicklow Partnership

Survey of LEADER stakeholders

The survey of LEADER stakeholders was focussed on a number of key groupings that engaged extensively on the LEADER programme across a range functions. A separate survey process took place for each stakeholder group. The survey groups included:

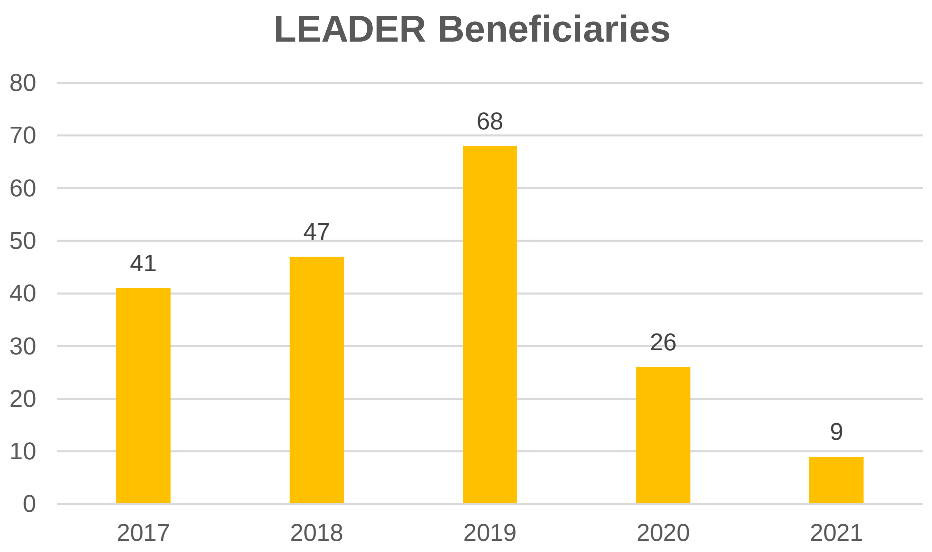
[a] LEADER beneficiaries;
[b] LEADER LAG Members & Project Officers;
[c] LEADER Board Members.

The findings of the survey should be read in tandem with the findings of the face-to-face interviews carries out with other LEADER stakeholders.

[a] Survey of Beneficiaries

1. There were 191 [total] respondents to the survey from across the country.

2. The applications to LEADER from the 191 respondents were most active between 2017 and 2019 with the majority being received in 2019, 68 (34.69%). The proportion received in 2017 and 2018 were 41 (20.92%) and 47 (23.98%) respectively. The applications tailed off to 26 (13.27%) and 9 (4.59%) in 2020 and 2021 respectively. This recognises the extension to the programme and that applications were made and processed in 2021.

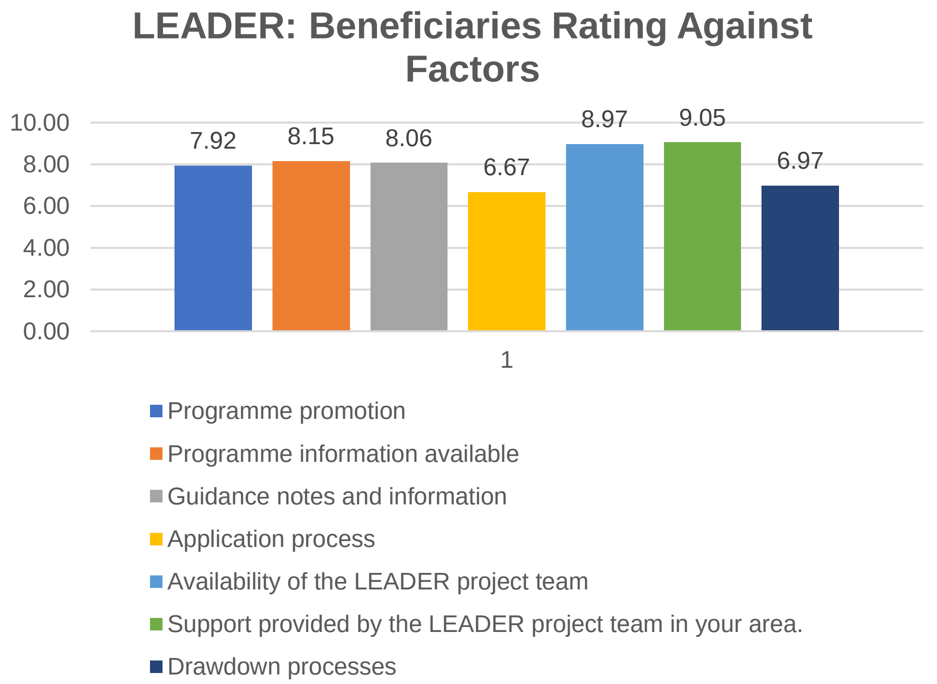


Source: Venture Analysis

3. Project promoters were asked to rate their experience of applying to LEADER against a range of 7 factors.

1) Programme promotion
2) Programme information available
3) Guidance notes and information
4) Application process
5) Availability of LEADER project team
6) Support provided by the LEADER project team in your area
7) Drawdown processes

The average ratings across the 7 factors were reported, as follows:

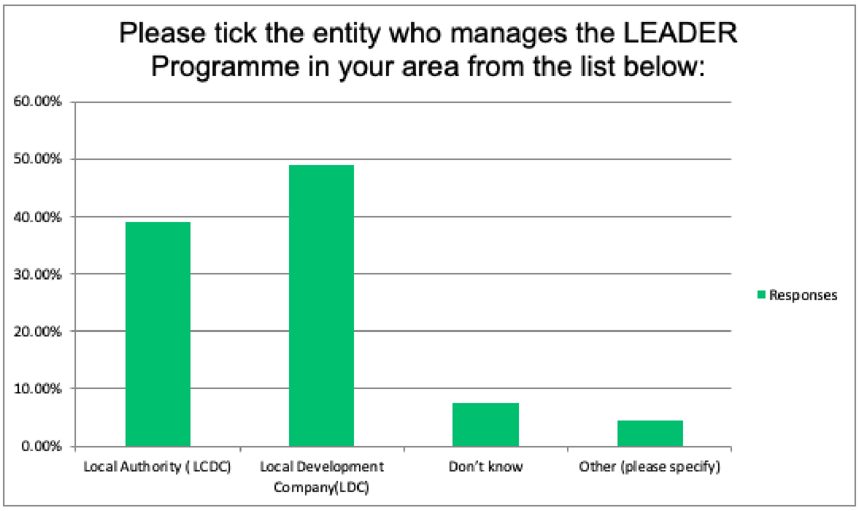


Source: Venture Analysis

- In general, there was a very favourable experience against the 7 factors in applying to LEADER;
- Particularly, support from the 'LEADER project team' and 'availability of the LEADER project team', were identified as highly favourable. Positivity towards the LEADER team in general was a strong theme in the survey findings;
- The 'LEADER application process' was the only weighted average score significantly under 7. This score underpins findings from the survey which identified frustrations in relation to the application process and associated perceived bureaucracy;
- Challenges with funding drawdown were identified consistently in the survey findings and a score of 6.97 reflects perceived issues with this process;
- Programme promotion, information and guidance notes available on the programme all scored reasonably well at 7.92, 8.15 & 8.06, respectively. The

survey findings were also reflective of a general level of satisfaction in these three programme areas;
- Both the application process and funding drawdown process scored at a level that would suggest these might be areas for further consideration in light of any new LEADER programme going forward.

4. The beneficiaries were asked to indicate the entity who manages the LEADER Programme in their local area, see responses below:



Source: Venture Analysis

- Just under 50% of respondents identified that the Local Development Company managed the LEADER programme;
- Approximately 40% of respondents identified that the Local Authority (LCDC) had responsibility for management of the LEADER programme;
- The remainder of respondents [c.10%] identified another managing organization or were unaware of who managed the programme.

The mixed views expressed above are not altogether surprising. Brand awareness (who does what) in the economic development sector is very challenging and beneficiaries of grant schemes often do not correctly perceive where the funds are coming from and who is administering the scheme. Equally, the survey findings would indicate a very low level of understanding amongst beneficiaries and a new LEADER programme may wish to consider how its marketing and communications strategy could better promote the funding source and management authority for the programme.

5. 191 respondents identified the three most positive aspects of their engagement with the 2014-2022 LEADER Programme, the highlighted positives were, as follows.

**[Responses in respect of 'Positives' and 'Constraints' have been grouped into categories to identify relevant quanta of opinion. The categories are identified by survey responses and* *differ from question to question based on responses. Responses have also been considered under 'Rank 1', 'Rank 2', and 'Rank 3' depending on the priority placed on the response by the respondents. The tables below reflect the categorised findings of the survey responses against each question. The categories are therefore bespoke to each question]*

- The support, guidance and professionalism of the LEADER staff were significantly identified as the most positive aspect of the engagement. Survey findings consistently identified the LEADER staff as helpful and having excellent programme knowledge contributing to a better programme experience. This was the highlight of the survey findings;
- Unsurprisingly, the availability of the funding was identified as a positive aspect. This included the flexibility of the use of the funding, the range of items it covered, that it facilitated the building of business, expansion, and upgrade of equipment, etc. Survey findings also identified some mixed views on what funding should be permitted to cover. Top of this list was 'technical & animation' but also identified a wide and varied number of potential sectoral focusses, none of which consistently identified a clear sector for future consideration. Funding reaching local communities for the purposes of development was also identified as a positive aspect of the financial inputs.
- Other aspects highlighted [at a moderate level] included the ease of application and drawdown, communication, and the availability of information however, it should be noted that the application process and funding draw down were also identified strongly in the questions identifying programme constraints. It is likely that some beneficiaries, having been successful in the LEADER process, potentially view the end to end process as favourable.
- In summary, beneficiaries identify programme positives in relation to the **LEADER staff/team** and the **Funding/finance available**

POSITIVES: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Accessibility	3
Application process	7
Business development	6
Communications	2
Funding	57
Information	5
LEADER team	108
Life changing	1
Query handling	1
Youth development	1
Grand Total	**191**

Source: Venture Analysis

POSITIVES: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Accessibility	1
Application process	13

Business development	1
Clarity	1
Communication	8
Community impact	2
Efficiency	1
Flexibility	1
Funding	57
Information	14
LEADER team	65
None	17
Partnership working	1
Timeliness	8
Transparency	1
Grand Total	**191**

Source: Venture Analysis

POSITIVES: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Application Process	21
Communication	2
Community Partnership	2
Confidence development	1
Flexibility	2
Funding	32
Further help	1
Governance	1
Information	9
LEADER team	52
Local availability	2
Networking	1
None	43
Programme knowledge	3
Programme visibility	2
Project challenge function	1
Range of funding themes	1
Resources available	1
Timeliness	14
Grand Total	**191**

Source: Venture Analysis

6. The respondents identified the three least positive aspects of your engagement with the 2014-2022 LEADER Programme, the main issues highlighted:

- A significant number of respondents identified 'no' negative aspects of the programme … this is not unusual when surveying those who benefitted from the programme and should be considered with caution as it could be a reflection of unwillingness to identify issues [having successfully been awarded funds] as it is a determination that 'no' issues actually exist. Consistency of findings in the survey would suggest the former is more likely to be accurate, as follows;
- The level of bureaucracy is identified as the least positive aspect of the LEADER programme and is consistently reflected across all three ranks. Specifically, respondents have identified the volume of paperwork required and proportionality in relation to small versus large projects. These issues are relatively typical of grant led programme and demonstrate a disconnect between the level of administration deemed necessary by the funding/managing authority and the level of administration applicants felt was required in the LEADER;
- The application process, in particular the time taken to complete was also identified as an issue in programme delivery. This is consistent with the view that the programme was bureaucratic and administratively challenging to complete. The application process was consistently identified as the second most challenging part of the LEADER programme;
- In addition, the overall process from application to drawdown was identified by respondents as 'too long' … this is again consistent with a view that overall, the programme was too bureaucratic;
- The need for bridging finance and promoter contribution prior to funding have presented challenges to applicants who appear to have experienced significant difficulty in matching LEADER funding. This should also be an area for further consideration as there appeared to be a strong view that the LEADER programme requests in relation to project funding were particularly challenging [in comparison to other funding sources].

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Application process	32
Bridging & other finance	9
Bureaucracy	56
Communication	2
Covid impact	2
Duplication of information	2
Evidence provision	2
Funding drawdown	20
Indecisiveness	1
Information	5
Lack of advisory support	1
Lack of local knowledge	1
Limited funding range	1
None	14
Positive experience	6
Procurement process	7

Proportionality	1
Timeliness	24
Grand Total	**186**

Source: Venture Analysis

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Advisory support	3
Application process	9
Bridging & other finance	20
Bureaucracy	41
Central decision making	2
Changes in staffing	1
Changing procedures	1
Duplication of information	5
Flexibility [lack of]	1
Funding drawdown	16
Information	2
Limited funding range	1
None	46
Ongoing support	1
Positive experience	2
Procurement process	13
Proportionality	1
Structure of programme	3
Timeliness	17
Covid impact	1
Grand Total	**186**

Source: Venture Analysis

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Advisory support	7
Application process	1
Brexit	1
Bridging & other finance	15
Bureaucracy	25
Changing procedures	1
Covid impact	2
Duplication of information	2
Flexibility [lack of]	1
Funding drawdown	11
Information	4
Limited funding range	1

None	80
Procurement process	13
Programme uncertainty	1
Structure of programme	2
Timeliness	19
Grand Total	**186**

Source: Venture Analysis

7. The respondents were asked to identify three changes which might be introduced to the 2023-2027 Programme to improve the process, the main areas of improvement suggested were, as follows:

- Reduce the number of forms required, simplify the paperwork and reduce the level of bureaucracy were consistently reported as having potential for positive change in any future programme;
- Related to the administrative challenges, simplification of the application form and making it shorter and more user friendly were identified as necessary moving forward. The introduction of an online application form was identified consistently as an area of opportunity for a future LEADER programme;
- Bridging finance was identified strongly as an area for change. Respondents identified paying for costly loans and bridging facilities as detrimental to the process. Respondents requested consideration of paying grants in advance n[under certain conditions] and suggested introduction of a 60-day payment schedule as an opportunity for future development;
- There was a consistent view that the LEADER eligibility criteria should be clearer and suggestions that a checklist for applicants supported with comprehensive guidelines should be developed and presented in an online format – these suggestions are positive and could be relatively easy to implement;
- Respondents identified a view that a support and advice service should available to help develop project ideas and support the development of applications. This view is again consistent with a general view that processes were administratively burdening and a requirement for help is necessary;
- The end to end LEADER process was identified as being too long and turnaround times for project applications was specifically identified as being too slow;
- There was a consistent view that one body should manage the LEADER processes [and that too many organisations were involved in overall delivery];
- The e-tender process associated with the programme was consistently highlighted as challenging [as was procurement processes in general]. Respondents identified a clear need for review of procurement to make it more manageable and flexible;
- In general, better use of online technology and processes were identified as an opportunity that could be made available to applicants with the potential to make the process more efficient.

CHANGES: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Advisory support	14

Animation/technical	1
Bridging & other finance	18
Business mentoring	1
Clearer guidelines	9
Decision making	2
Flexibility [use of grant]	4
Focus on impact projects	1
Funding drawdown	10
Governance	2
Improve communication	1
Improve timeliness	6
Keep LAG fresh	1
LAG based in local area	2
local decision making	1
Local engagement	1
None	7
Online facility	3
Procurement process	6
Programme promotion	1
Proportionality	3
Reduce bureaucracy	40
Reduce duplication	2
Remove targeted call	1
Satisfactory	4
Simplify application process	26
Site visits	1
Structure	6
Support small projects	1
UK suppliers	1
Grand Total	**176**

Source: Venture Analysis

CHANGES: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Advisory support	13
Bridging & other finance	16
Clearer guidelines	14
Focus on impact projects	4
Funding drawdown	15
Improve timeliness	7
local decision making	2
None	47
Online facility	3

Procurement process	11
Programme promotion	1
Proportionality	2
Reduce bureaucracy	22
Reduce duplication	1
Remove targeted call	1
Satisfactory	2
Simplify application process	10
Structure	5
Grand Total	**176**

Source: Venture Analysis

CHANGES: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Advisory support	7
Bridging & other finance	15
Clearer guidelines	4
Flexibility [use of grant]	8
Funding drawdown	9
Improve timeliness	4
Local engagement	1
None	89
Online facility	3
Procurement process	6
Proportionality	1
Reduce bureaucracy	15
Reduce duplication	3
Satisfactory	4
Simplify application process	4
Structure	3
Grand Total	**176**

Source: Venture Analysis

8. Respondents were offered the opportunity to provide 'open text' feedback regarding any other points they wished to raise regarding the LEADER programme. A summary of the categorised responses is, as follows:

- The vast majority of open text responses identified a picture of satisfaction regarding the LEADER programme and the contribution the programme and its funding has made to local communities across Ireland. The feedback was very positive.
- In addition, respondents also identified the LEADER delivery teams as being a significant reason why the programme was successful.
- In terms of areas of focus for future improvement, levels of bureaucracy specific to the programme processes and its associated paperwork requirements was the most

evident open text response. It was also noted that where satisfaction was evident, in many cases this was with a caveat that the funding process was difficult to navigate and was heavily paperwork led.

OPEN RESPONSE CATEGORIES	Count
Application process	3
Bureaucracy	14
Clearer guidelines	1
Communication	2
Funding critical	3
Funding levels	3
Implementation planning	1
Information sharing	2
LEADER team helpful	12
None	26
Online facilities	1
Political	1
Procurement	3
Proportionality	1
Rural & local reach	2
Satisfactory	58
Structure	3
Timeliness	7
Grand Total	**143**

Source: Venture Analysis

[b] Survey of LAG Members/Project Officers

In total, 133 LAG Members and Project Officers responded to the survey. The responses received are summarised, as follows.

1. LAG Members
   - 52% of respondents were LEADER LAG members

2. Project Officers
   - 35% of respondents were LEADER Project Officers

3. The LEADER model:
   - 78% were LCDC led and 22% were LDC led.

4. The respondents identified three of the most positive aspects of this LEADER delivery model identified, the most common highlighted were:

- The ‘community’ and ‘partnership’ elements of the LEADER programme were highlighted as the most positive aspects by LAG Members and Project Officers. Specifically, ‘community focus’, ‘involvement’ and ‘engagement’ were identified as programme strengths;
- Respondents also identified a clear ‘bottom-up’ approach as a positive aspect of LEADER delivery;
- Another positive identified was the programme link to the LCDC and its representation of ‘Community’, ‘Social’, ‘Business’ and ‘Statutory’ sectors;
- There was also a consistent view that the LEADER programme offered clear engagement and cooperation with the Local Councils and synergy with other agencies which were viewed as positive aspects of delivery;
- It was clear from survey results that strong ‘governance’, ‘accountability’, ‘project assurance’ and ‘oversight’ were part of the LEADER delivery model – this was viewed as very positive [but is linked in part to a perception that the programme was bureaucratic with heavy administration processes];
- Unsurprisingly, access to money and availability of funding for a wide range of projects at a local level was identified as a positive aspect of LEADER. Specifically, respondents highlighted ‘inclusive’ and ‘targeted’ interventions which were beneficial for the local community. The financial intervention that LEADER provided was consistently identified as one of the strongest programme elements;
- There was also a consistently strong view that ‘local delivery’ and ‘local decision making’ were at the heart of the programme and its ability to bring local knowledge together in a way that best serviced local need;
- The independence of the LEADER process was highlighted as a strength as was the ‘project challenge’ function. These were identified as positive aspects of the governance function of the programme.

POSITIVES: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation/Technical	1
Application process	1
Community & partnership	58
Efficiency of delivery	2
Fair process	2
Financial aspect of programme	21
Flexibility	1
Food initiative	1
Governance	24
Independence	5
Innovation	1
Local decision-making	7
Mentoring	1
None	3
Regional reach	2
Shared objectives	1

Social inclusion	1
Water quality	1
Grand Total	**133**

Source: Venture Analysis

POSITIVES: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation/Technical	2
Community & partnership	36
Encouragement	1
Environment	1
Financial aspect of the programme	19
Flexibility	2
Governance	47
Independence	1
Innovation	1
Local decision-making	5
None	13
Regional reach	5
Grand Total	**133**

Source: Venture Analysis

POSITIVES: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Accessibility	1
Animation/Technical	2
Community & partnership	26
Diversity of projects	2
Environment	1
Financial aspect of the programme	9
Flexibility	3
Food initiative	1
Governance	44
Innovation	1
Local decision-making	3
None	31
Regional reach	6
Skills	1
Useful	1
Wildlife	1
Grand Total	**133**

Source: Venture Analysis

5. Respondents were asked to identify up to three constraints of this LEADER delivery model, the main constraints identified were:

- Again, consistent with the findings of the survey of beneficiaries, LAG Members and Project Officers highlighted programme bureaucracy as significant and identified this as the main programme constraint;
- Too many layers of ‘management’ and too many ‘bosses’ were identified by respondents as a ‘hierarchy’ in the approval process which was excessive and not necessarily conducive to practical, effective and efficient delivery of the LEADER programme; A clearer and more concise process was identified as a potential programme improvement and a possible way forward;
- The timeline from application through to grant payment was identified as too long and survey responses suggested a need to consider a shorter process more conducive to supporting community groups with varied levels of expertise;
- The ‘bottom up’ approach, having been identified as a positive in the previous question, was identified as having been ‘diminished’ and it was also identified that there was a lack of reach to the most vulnerable and least experienced applicant groups. It is very likely that LAG Members and Project Officers have opposing views on the extent to which LEADER reflects a ‘bottom-up’ approach and thus this is reflected as both a positive [in the previous question] and a constraint;
- In the context of LEADER decision-making, rural development expertise was identified as lacking and there was concern this had the potential to impact negatively on projects demonstrating a rural development theme;
- Again, consistent with the survey of beneficiaries, the e-tender process was identified as difficult and procurement processes and procedures in general, were highlighted as an issue in delivery [specifically, these were identified as being too cumbersome and lacking in proportionality … i.e., same regardless of project size and therefore unfairly heavy for smaller projects];
- The need for community funding [bridging finance] before drawdown was identified in a recurring theme around match funding. Providing the balance of funding for projects was identified as challenging and was highlighted as something for review in the context of any new programme moving forward;
- Some respondents identified ‘political’ influence as a concern in programme delivery.

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Bureaucracy	59
Cannot fund community childcare	1
Conflict of interests	1
De-minimus	1
Funding levels	4
Governance	1
Lack of programme knowledge	2
Lacks independence	1
Loss of bottom up approach	6
No faults	2

None	4
Political	2
Programme has a low profile	1
Project Cashflow	2
Promoter capacity dictates success rather than need	1
Reach too wide	1
Resourcing	1
Restrictive focus	2
Structure of programme	20
Timescales	19
Grand Total	**131**

Source: Venture Analysis

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation/Technical	6
Bureaucracy	32
Capacity of community groups	1
Community reach	5
Duplication	1
Environment category absent	1
Funding levels	5
Governance	1
Loss of bottom up approach	8
No facility to allow decommitments	1
None	22
Programme has a low profile	2
Programme knowledge	3
Proportionality	1
Regional reach	1
Restrictive	3
Sectoral reach	1
Structure of programme	15
Targeted calls	3
Timescales	17
Too competitive	1
Transparency	1
Grand Total	**131**

Source: Venture Analysis

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation/Technical	3
Bureaucracy	31
Cashflow	1
Community reach	1

Funding	7
Loss of bottom up approach	2
None	48
Political	2
Programme knowledge	3
Programme profile	2
Restrictive	4
Rural reach	1
Structure of programme	13
Timescales	13
Grand Total	**131**

Source: Venture Analysis

6. The respondents were asked to suggest, based on their experience, which LEADER delivery model they would consider to be appropriate to deliver the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme bearing in mind the Programme for Government Commitments and the locally led partnership approach of the 2014-2022 Programme?

    - 58 [44%] of the respondents preferred a LCDC led approach;
    - 68 [52%] of respondents preferred a LDC approach;
    - 7 [4%] respondents did not identify with either model of deliver

    This balance of response is reflective of differing views between the LAG Members and Project Officers.

7. Respondents were invited to identify any other points they wished to make in relation to the LEADER programme.

    - A significant number of respondents identified satisfaction with the LEADER programme highlighting the funding as critical to local communities and the support received from the LEADER team;
    - Programme process bureaucracy was again identified as an issue by respondents particularly to the volume of paperwork required and the level of detail needed to satisfy the application process;
    - Respondents identified a perceived loss of the 'bottom up' approach which has been a feature of previous iterations of LEADER.

OTHER VIEWS: OPEN TEXT CATEGORIES	Count
Administrative costs should be examined	1
Animation/Technical help needed	2
Bureaucracy	19
Community & partnership	1
Competitive programme	1
Governance good	2
Integration with other programmes	1
Loss of bottom up approach	10

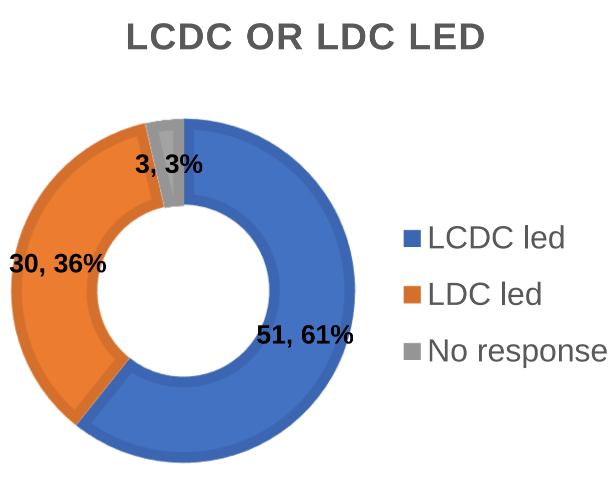
More funding	1
More needs focussed	1
Move programme online	1
None	5
Political influence not positive	1
Regional boundaries reviewed	2
Regional reach	1
Review required	6
Satisfied with current programme	27
Structures challenging	9
Support more projects	1
Supports more capable groups	2
Timescales	1
Grand Total	**95**

Source: Venture Analysis

[c] Survey of Board Members

1. In total, 84 LDC Board Members responded to the survey of LEADER and represented a wide range of geographical coverage throughout Ireland.

2. Board members reported, in their area, that 51 LEADER partnerships were LCDC led and 30 LDC led with 3 'no responses'.



Source: Venture Analysis

3. From your perspective can you rank up to three of the most positive aspects of this LEADER delivery model?

    - Respondents primarily [Rank 1] reflected a wide range positives regarding the LEADER programme;

- Local delivery and presence of the programme in local areas was highlighted as particularly positive;
- The community development focus, especially, impacts of LEADER at a local community level were identified as positive;
- The local delivery of LEADER particularly the availability of local staff and advisory supports were identified as positive.

POSITIVES: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation & technical	1
Board engagement	1
Board skills	1
Bureaucracy [Negative]	1
Communication	2
Community development	12
Environmental	1
Financial partner positive	1
Flexibility	1
Funding	11
Governance	9
Inclusivity	1
Innovation	1
LEADER team	3
Local delivery	12
Networking & partnership	7
None	9
Reduce bureaucracy	1
Sectoral breadth	1
Structure [Negative]	3
Structure [Positive]	2
Structure of delivery	1
Targeted calls	1
The LDC knowledge	1
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis

- Additionally [Rank 2 and Rank 3] the 'community development' impacts of LEADER were again highlighted as a positive aspect of delivery. This included local impacts and funding for local projects across a variety of sectors and themes;
- A significant number of respondents did not further identify positive programme aspects of the LEADER delivery model [22 and 29 respondents, respectively].

POSITIVES: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation & technical	1
Board skills	5
Communication	2

Community development	17
Flexibility	2
Funding	7
Governance	5
LEADER team	5
Local delivery	9
Networking & partnership	6
None	22
Structure [Positive]	1
The LDC knowledge	2
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis

POSITIVES: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Animation & technical	1
Board skills	2
Bureaucracy [Negative]	1
Community development	14
Funding	7
Governance	3
Inclusivity	2
Innovation	1
LEADER team	5
Local delivery	3
Networking & partnership	7
None	29
Sectoral breadth	6
Structure [Positive]	3
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis

4. From your perspective can you rank up to three constraints of this LEADER delivery model?

- Consistency across the three ranked constraints, the structure of the LEADER delivery model was identified as a concern. Predominantly, opinion that the current structure offered too many authority levels, was confusing for programme applicants and the structure led to a reduction in local autonomy, were the main responded themes;
- Secondly, programme bureaucracy [which was also linked in responses to a perceived inefficiency in the current delivery structure] was identified as a concern. Excessive levels of paperwork, duplication of information requests, layers of process, procurement processes and a general view that the application process was too ‘heavy’ for many of the applicant groups to navigate easily;

- Respondents consistently also identified restrictions in relation to funding. A reduced LEADER budget [overall], an inability to fund some sectors and themes, the need and challenges for local groups to attract necessary 'match' funding and a general view that a lack of flexibility existed regarding the use of funding at both pre and post project commitment stages.
- Again, linked to structure and bureaucracy, the timeliness of the LEADER processes was identified as a concern. Respondents communicated a view that the process was too long which potentially negatively impacted on projects.

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 1 CATEGORIES	Count
Agility / flexibility	1
Animation / technical	1
Application process	1
Board members [lack of time]	1
Bureaucracy	21
Covid-19 impact	1
Finance [match funding]	1
Focus [negative]	1
Funding [lack of / restrictions]	9
Hard to reach [missing out]	1
Job creation not tracked	1
Knowledge [lack of]	1
Local decision making [lack of]	3
None	6
Not customer focussed	1
Procurement	1
Proportionality	1
Recognition [lack of]	2
Structure [negative]	26
Timeliness	3
Uncertainty	1
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis

CONSTRAINTS: RANK 2 CATEGORIES	Count
Agility / flexibility	1
Application process	1
Bureaucracy	15
Communication [lack of]	1
Funding [lack of / restrictions]	6
Hard to reach [missing out]	2
IT system [negative]	1
Knowledge [lack of]	3
Local decision making [lack of]	10
None	11

Recognition [lack of]	3
Risk aversion	1
Sectoral reach	3
Staff [lack of]	2
Strategic alignment [IDA & EI]	1
Structure [negative]	11
Timeliness	12
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis

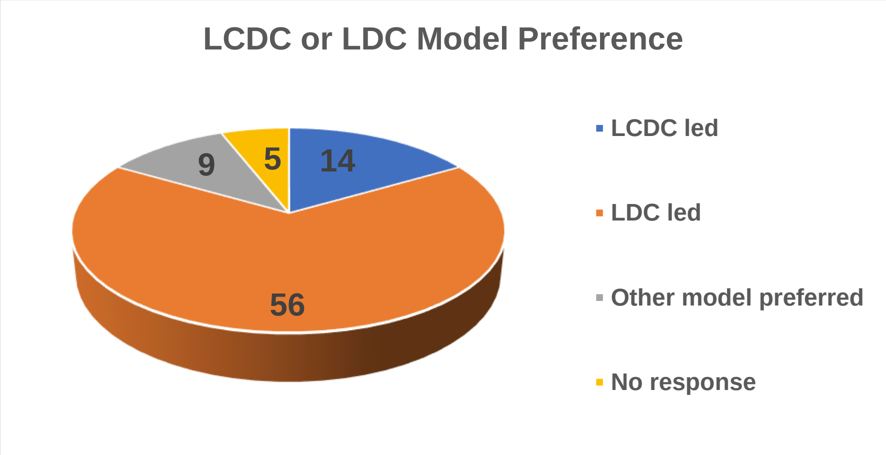
CONSTRAINTS: RANK 3 CATEGORIES	Count
Agility / flexibility	2
Bureaucracy	7
Communication [lack of]	4
Covid-19 impact	2
Efficiency [lack of]	2
EU connection [lack of]	1
Funding [lack of / restrictions]	10
Innovation [lack of]	1
Local decision making [lack of]	7
None	25
Recognition [lack of]	1
Risk aversion	1
Sectoral reach	3
Staff [lack of]	1
Structure [negative]	14
Timeliness	3
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis

5. From your experience what LEADER delivery model would you consider to be appropriate to deliver the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme bearing in mind the Programme for Government Commitments and the locally led partnership approach of the 2014-2020 Programme?

- 67% of LDC Board Members identified the LDC model as preferable;
- 17% of LDC Board Members identified the LCDC model as preferable;
- 11% of LDC Board Members identified another model to be preferable. Of these, a summary of the specific commentary and suggestions is as follows:
    - An LDC led model with LCDC representation on the LDC Board;
    - The previous LEADER model was fit for purpose and should be reinstated;
    - The LDC should act as the LAG;
    - A ‘locally led’ partnership approach;
    - Complete local autonomy;

- A reinvigorated LDC model which focuses on more capacity building and greater meaningful local participation and representation;
- LEADER should directly assess and process applications.



Source: Venture Analysis

6. Any other comments?

- LDC Board members significantly identified a return to the previous model of LEADER and an LDC led model under 'any other comments';
- The current LEADER structure was identified as having too many layers, a Local Authority control and lacking local decision maker autonomy.

OTHER VIEWS: OPEN TEXT CATEGORIES	Count
7 specificities	1
Bottom up approach preferred	3
Bureaucracy	2
Communication	1
Community led focus	1
Duplication	1
Flexibility [social economy & disadvantaged areas]	1
Fund 1 or 2 statement projects	1
Funding increase	1
LDC led model	22
LEADER staff [positive]	1
Local Authority Oversight [negative]	1
Local decision making is missing	1
None	31
Satisfactory	4
Sector reach	2
Structure [negative]	9
Timeliness	1
Grand Total	**84**

Source: Venture Analysis