

**ABERDEENSHIRE LEADER STRATEGY GROUP
MEETING WITH SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT
MINUTES OF MEETING
THURSDAY 20 MARCH 2008
WOODHILL HOUSE, ABERDEEN**

PRESENT

Iain Matheson	Scottish Government
Lorraine McEwan	Scottish Government
James Knowles	Aberdeenshire Council
Vicky Thomson	Aberdeenshire Council
Morna Harper	Aberdeenshire Council
Reid Hutchison	Aberdeenshire Council
Liz Gordon	Aberdeenshire Council
John Risby	Forestry Commission
Ewan Cameron	Scottish Natural Heritage

APOLOGIES

Fiona Malcolm	Communities Scotland
Clair Wright	Scottish Enterprise Grampian
Dennis McFarlane	VisitScotland

1.0 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- 1.1 James Knowles welcomed the visitors from the Scottish Government and asked those present to introduce themselves.
- 1.2 JK explained that much had happened with regard to LEADER over the last two weeks since the Strategy Group met, and then gave a summary of the agenda topics to be covered, these included:
- The interview panel for the LEADER Co-ordinator post.
 - The launch date for LEADER.
 - Request for organisations to join the LEADER Action Group.

2.0 LEADER FUNDING ALLOCATION AND MATCH FUNDING

- 2.1 Iain Matheson spoke about the financial aspects of the LEADER programme. He confirmed that the award for the Rural Aberdeenshire LAG was good and explained how the money had been allocated. A total of £33 million had been earmarked for Round 1 bids, excluding the £19 million convergence monies for HIE area. A small proportion, around £1m, has been retained as reserve, with the final allocation to Round 1 being £31.75million.
- 2.2 Funds were allocated between the 16 bids submitted, mostly weighted in favour of population and the remoteness factor, but this was unworkable so the km² area of the LAG was considered. The

weighting was approximately 66% in relation to population and 33% in relation to area for the bids submitted in Round 1. A second round relating to 4 LAG areas had now commenced and it was intended to hold a third round to ensure all monies were allocated appropriately.

- 2.3 A selection panel made up of 3 representatives from the Scottish Government, 1 representative from Scottish Enterprise, 1 from SCVO and 1 rural economist from Northern Ireland assessed the bids. The panel scored four elements:
- Alignment with SRDP, CPP and Structural Funds
 - Details on the partnership
 - Leverage (how much bringing in)
 - Quality and realism.
- 2.4 IM explained the funding allocation will be profiled annually, with any under spends unable to be carried forward to the next financial year, so the clear message was “use it or lose it”.
- 2.5 JK asked about LEADER+ (2000-2006) and how much of the budget was unused at the end of the programme. IM replied that only a small amount was unused, roughly £0.5 million.
- 2.6 JK asked whether funds could be moved between LEADER LAG areas, and the response was that there is still £1million to be allocated based on need in the final round. The third round will take place in 12 – 13 months time to cover any issues that arise.
- 2.7 IM confirmed an advance award of 5% would be disbursed to the LAG in the near future. Vicky Thomson asked about future drawdown of monies. IM indicated quarterly returns would be submitted to the Scottish Government on behalf of the LAG based on actual expenditure incurred in the quarter.
- 2.8 JK indicated that Scottish Enterprise Grampian has a problem in honouring their commitment of £16,400 pa towards administration costs for the LAG. Also the match funding of £170,000 pa was now unlikely. It was noted that Aberdeenshire was not the only Council in this situation and that Angus was also affected by the re-focus to strategic national projects within Scottish Enterprise.
- 2.9 Morna Harper asked for a definition of LAG partner match funding, ie: whether it was public sector or a mix of public and private contribution. IM confirmed it was the latter.
- 2.10 IM spoke about the public sector buy-in and how this would benefit the community. IM explained that the LEADER Scottish Statutory Instrument (SSI) detailed the maximum grant level of 95%, however, the overall balance on all awards made would be in the region of 50%. If a higher grant was offered on a project with specific need, this would require to be counter balanced by a lower

grant rate on other projects where need for funding was less. It was confirmed that there would be flexibility on the level of award to projects, with each LAG setting its own priorities.

- 2.11 IM indicated that they would need to check the Finance system at Aberdeenshire Council, and that a Service Level Agreement would require to be signed by Aberdeenshire on behalf of the LAG with the Scottish Government, setting out responsibilities, controls and checks.
- 2.12 IM indicated following the 5% advance, the Scottish Government would need to be notified quarterly of any spend and then the LAG's budget would be topped up. The first claim for the 2008/09 financial year could include costs incurred from January 2008.
- 2.13 IM said the Scottish Government needs to be notified of Aberdeenshire Council bank codes etc, but it was suggested that the LAG is made a business so that it could be assigned a unique Business Reference Number (BRN) for BACS payments.
- 2.14 IM confirmed the Scottish Government will monitor the progress of the LAG in delivering its strategy, ie: number of projects approved etc. Monitor indicators were still to be confirmed.

3.0 LEADER GUIDANCE AND CRITERIA

- 3.1 A set of guidelines will be on the Scottish Government website hopefully in the near future, and these will be updated when necessary and the Co-ordinators notified. The Scottish Government will meet with the Co-ordinators in May to go through the guidelines and procedures.
- 3.2 The guidelines will not be black and white but are to be used as a framework by LAGs. The guidelines will set out elements such as eligible receipts etc. Explanation will also be given of in-kind contributions, it will not mention salary limits, or set out limits for consultancy work but will limit the amount in respect of contractors eg: architects etc.
- 3.3 MH pointed out that the Business Plan submission did not contain indicators and she was expecting guidance on this. IM explained that economists were working on the indicators and had created a long list that required narrowing down. They were hoping to base the indicators on a format produced by Wales in 2005 and once finalised this would also be available on the website. The Scottish Government would be looking for an update on indicators on a quarterly basis with a more detailed submission annually.

4.0 PROJECT ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE (PAC)

- 4.1 JK explained that once the LEADER is launched the Strategy Group would evolve to form the Project Assessment Committee

(PAC). To facilitate decision making, it was proposed the PAC is a small group with representatives from:

- Aberdeenshire Council (lead partner in LAG)
- Environment
- Land Based
- Community
- Business

It was confirmed the PAC would make recommendations to the LAG on projects, and that the overall decision to award grants would be the LAG's responsibility. John Risby agreed that the PAC needs to be kept a small group, and confirmed he was happy with the arrangements and would continue to be represented on the LAG.

- 4.2 There is already confirmation that SNH will be represented on the PAC - on behalf of SNH and FCS (a substitute will also be required). Both organisations will be represented on the full LAG Partnership.

An enquiry has been made to NFUS and SRPBA regarding Land Based representation on the PAC. It will be confirmed in the near future which organisation will represent the land based sector on the PAC and which would be substitute. Both organisations will continue to be represented on the full LAG Partnership.

It is proposed Community stakeholders within the LAG Partnership agree a representative and substitute to sit on the PAC.

Likewise, it is proposed Business stakeholders within the LAG Partnership agree a representative and substitute to sit on the PAC.

- 4.3 JK asked for confirmation that the five groups as proposed was acceptable, with one extra representative if required. This was endorsed by the Scottish Government, and it was agreed this proposal would be put to the LAG partnership in the afternoon meeting.

5.0 LEADER TIMETABLE

- 5.1 The posts for LEADER Co-ordinator and LEADER Administrator had been graded and the posts would be advertised as soon as possible
- 5.2 It was agreed that a representative from the LAG would be in regular contact with the Co-ordinator, once in post, to ensure that matters were kept on track.
- 5.3 There should also be a link between the LEADER Co-ordinator and the ERDF Manager and Case Officers for Rural Development

Contracts (RDCs) in the SRDP.

- 5.4 IM stated that by 16 April he had to work out SRDP overlaps. He also needed to identify the differences between ERDF, Structural Funds and LEADER funding in order to give guidelines to groups when applying for funding.
- 5.5 IM also referred to the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) in which Axis 4 would relate to fishing communities, with funds to be disbursed through a LEADER approach. It was suggested that the funding was kept in two pots of core money and allocated to either Rural or Coastal (EFF) projects.
- 5.6 JR mentioned regional priorities in SRDP and the need to build in links for Case Officers dealing with RDCs and LEADER.
- 5.7 IM would like all Community projects to default to LEADER rather than RDCs and then major items be referred back to RDCs if appropriate. He explained that there was a budget stream of £30 million in RDCs for community type projects. He also mentioned that SCVO had been awarded £200,000 to facilitate community projects through RDCs, but the links should also be retained with LEADER to ensure best fit for projects between the two funding streams.

6.0 LEADER ACTION POINTS

- 6.1 VT explained the action points that were required prior to scheme launch. The posts of LEADER Co-ordinator and LEADER Administrator are currently in the process of being approved, prior to advertising. It is hoped that the posts will be filled by mid June.
- 6.2 A panel needs to be agreed to undertake the interviews. Ewan Cameron from Scottish Natural Heritage agreed to sit on the panel.
- 6.3 An office and furniture needs to be sourced along with IT equipment etc.
- 6.4 A dedicated LEADER website needs to be established. A tender brief had been prepared and would be issued shortly. EC offered to look over the draft layout once contractors were commissioned.
- 6.5 LEADER needs to be promoted throughout Grampian and it was suggested VisitScotland should work with Aberdeenshire Council on this. A leaflet needs to be designed for circulation and issue at local events, Ewan Cameron offered to help with drafts of the leaflet.
- 6.6 JR referred to a forthcoming forestry event and hoped this could be used to raise LEADER awareness.
- 6.7 VT said that she would collate LEADER enquiries with a view to

distributing information on the programme, once available.

- 6.8 MH mentioned that the criteria may change once the indicators were announced; this was accepted by Scottish Government.
- 6.9 VT mentioned the proposal for a Small Grant Scheme that covered grants from £1,000 - £5,000. IM referred to Angus Council who had delegated a Chair and one other to consider small grants for approval as a fast track small grant system, to be reported to the LAG. Also an example of where £200,000 was allocated for community funding and then groups applied for individual grants up to £5,000 from this amount.
- 6.10 MH asked how rigidly the Business Plan needed to be adhered to, IM replied that the Business Plan was a working document and could be amended where needed and that LEADER was about innovation.
- 6.11 The draft timetable for assessment rounds, PAC and LAG meetings issued by VT was endorsed by JR as this fitted in with the Forestry Commission's timetable.
- 6.12 MH suggested that there was important to state on the website that when downloading an application form the Co-ordinator be contacted for guidance prior to completing the form. IM pointed out that the application form would be on the LAG website not Scottish Government's so it would be up to the LAG to action this. The Claim Form would also be held on the LAG website. IM indicated that LEADER funding can be used to match fund an application for another EU fund.
- 6.13 Ewan Cameron referred to wording in the recent Press Release, saying he did not intend it to come across that SNH spoke on behalf of all partners. Partners acknowledged this.
- 6.14 JK mentioned the enquiry from NHS to be represented on the LAG. It was agreed a response be sent asking what NHS could contribute to the programme in terms of resources.
- 6.15 JK thanked all for attending the meeting which had been most informative.
- 6.16 It was agreed the next meeting of the Strategy Group would be held Thursday 15 May.

Please note this date has since been changed to Tuesday 13 May 2008

Fiona Smith/Vicky Thomson
28 March 2008