

**ROCKET  
SCIENCE**

**Dumfries and  
Galloway LEADER  
evaluation 2014-  
2020**

**Executive Summary**



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## Introduction to the evaluation

LEADER in Dumfries and Galloway is a vehicle for sustainable community development which has enabled communities and organisations across Dumfries and Galloway to thrive. The place-based, bottom-up approach to decision making has brought many benefits to the region, building community capacity and networks both within and between communities and business, and increasing tourism potential. Having experience with LEADER in Dumfries and Galloway for more than three iterations of the programme, the Local Action Group (LAG) and LEADER team hold a large knowledge resource and significant expertise in terms of understanding the region, different sectors and different geographies within the region, and links into communities.

This iteration of the LEADER programme has faced challenges over the past 6 years, including the decision for the UK to exit the EU and the impact of COVID-19. Within the programme, bureaucracy has presented an administrative burden which was prohibitive to small organisations and drew capacity away from strategic actions within the LEADER team. However, this evaluation demonstrates that despite these challenges, the LEADER team and LAG succeeded in distributing funding across the length and breadth of communities in Dumfries and Galloway, building community capacity and opportunities for growth.

Rocket Science was appointed in Autumn 2020 to carry out this evaluation of the LEADER 2014-2020 programme in Dumfries and Galloway. This review sets the 2014 – 2020 strategy within the context of the previous LEADER programmes within the region and highlights the reach, challenges and achievements of the current programme.

The mixed methods approach included:

- Desk research, including analysis of monitoring and performance data from the Local Actions in Rural Communities system (LARCs)
- Engagement with a range of stakeholders, including LEADER staff, LAG members and representatives from funded projects
- Online surveys of both successful and unsuccessful projects
- Case studies based Social Return on Investment analysis.



## Process evaluation

The LEADER team and LAG in Dumfries and Galloway are well-established and experienced. This was identified as a strength of the approach across interviews, focus groups and surveys. The continuity of staff and LAG members from previous LEADER iterations has strengthened this programme with the LAG providing strong roots into local communities and effective oversight of the programme. Members of the LAG noted they would like to see an increase in youth participation within the LAG and to ensure the LAG is fully representative of the diverse population of Dumfries and Galloway.

The focus of the LEADER team expanded their activities beyond distributing grants. They also focused on supporting projects and have developed long-term relationships with organisations and communities across Dumfries and Galloway, taking a partnership approach.

Stakeholders identified that in comparison with previous iterations of LEADER in Dumfries and Galloway, there was limited scope for 'risk-taking' in this programme, with fewer small grants distributed. This was in part due to a more rigid structure of the programme at a national level and due to bureaucratic processes, which prohibited small and voluntary organisations from proceeding with LEADER.

Challenging bureaucracy was a consistent theme throughout this evaluation, emerging from all stakeholder consultations. In particular, the Local Actions in Rural Communities system (LARCs) developed by Scottish Government, was considered onerous, with just 3% of projects agreeing that the process was straightforward. Organisations understood the importance of auditing public funds, but the complexity and time-consuming nature of this system was considered out of proportion to the size and nature of the grants, and prohibitive to smaller organisations and projects. Most projects who applied to LEADER and withdrew did so due to the administrative burden associated with the funding.

The claims process was considered unmanageable by a majority of those surveyed, with the lag time between claim and payment creating stress and anxiety for projects. Administration placed strain on the LEADER team and reduced capacity for strategic actions including raising the profile of LEADER in Dumfries and Galloway. Bureaucratic challenges have generated poor PR for LEADER which has been a barrier to new projects. However, the support provided by the LEADER team through these administrative challenges was high quality and valued by project representatives.



## Impact of LEADER 2014-2020

The total value of this LEADER programme, including match funding, was £11,267,121. In total 69 projects were successfully funded by LEADER 2014-2020, with an average approved grant size of £62,113. Of these, 71% were community projects, 16% were grants for small and medium enterprises and 13% were farm diversification projects.

Findings from this evaluation indicate a low degree of estimated deadweight from this funding, as 83% of projects surveyed said it would not have been possible to proceed with their project were it not for LEADER. Including funding for projects in Dumfries and Stranraer has been a positive new element of this LEADER iteration, which has opened opportunities to projects which are run through hubs in these rural towns.

Projects such as Amaze me LEADER, with a strong focus on youth participation, have successfully targeted and engaged young people in the region. LAG members thought that more could have been done to proactively reach people living in deprived communities, particularly in Dumfries and Stranraer, and those from ethnic minority groups.

Data available indicates that at least 2,225 people accessed training and development opportunities through LEADER funding and at least 603 volunteers were engaged. These are likely to be significant underestimates as data was only available from a small number of projects through LARCs. In general, limited outcome indicator data was available. This was mostly due to the complexity of the system, which was deemed 'not fit for purpose' and some projects having not completed at the time of reporting.



## Impact on LEADER and Scottish Government outcome areas

Overall, project representatives and LAG members identified that there had been a notable impact on enhancing natural/cultural heritage, tourism and leisure through the course of this LEADER programme. The programme is considered to have made an impact on all priority areas outlined in the Local Development Strategy and all Scottish Government outcome areas, with the exception of driving community action on climate change, which was identified as an area for improvement.

- 93% of survey respondents thought their project had made a positive contribution to improving local facilities and services
- 85% thought their project had built community capacity
- 78% thought the project had helped to stimulate the local economy
- 67% of respondents thought their project had benefitted hard-to-reach groups, and the LAG have identified this as an area for improvement and
- 52% thought their project had enhanced biodiversity and environmental sustainability.

LEADER funded projects have raised the profile of Dumfries and Galloway. 63% of survey respondents thought their project had a positive impact on tourism, with LEADER providing the funding for the development of attractions, events and accommodation attracting tourists to the region.

LAG members noted development of transnational links as a key strength of the programme, despite this historically being a challenging strategic area. The LAG has supported, at a 100% intervention rate, some small-scale cooperation projects with £5,000 grants, which aimed to develop transnational relationships. If LEADER funding was not coming to an end, they would have continued to develop these opportunities. The team hope that other funders will see the benefit of this exploratory work as a rationale for building on these programmes.

Day of the Region, a strategic grants project delivered by the LAG, was highlighted as a project which had significantly contributed to community capacity building across the region, in addition to developing transnational links. 30 projects obtained small grants through this project with an estimated 4500 people engaging with funded opportunities and events. Beneficiaries and stakeholders involved with Day of the Region identified that the project had improved community cohesion, brought opportunities for learning from transnational partners and made LEADER visible at the community level.



COVID-19 adversely affected the impact some LEADER projects were able to make from March 2020 onwards. 73% of those surveyed said their project was affected by COVID-19. Projects have been affected in a myriad of ways, including delays in project development, increased costs, cancellation of events, and in many cases forced closure of venues and accommodation. Despite this, most projects surveyed said that COVID-19 had not prevented their project from meeting its aims and did not result in an underspend on their projects.

## Social return on investment analysis (SROI)

Three projects were identified to carry out SROI case studies. Three in-depth interviews were carried out and available data was used to ascertain the social outcomes achieved by each project. An analysis matching a range of financial proxies to their respective social outcomes was then conducted. Allowing for a range of factors (including attribution when matching proxies to outcomes) an SROI for every £1 invested into the projects was determined:

- Whithorn Roundhouse Iron Age Grand Design: SROI of £5.82 for every £1 invested
- Solway Coastwise: SROI of £9.87 for every £1 invested
- Dumfries and Galloway Sensory Project: SROI of £14.29 for every £1 invested.

## Sustainability, legacy and future of the LEADER approach

*“Over the life of LEADER here, a number of projects that have sustained themselves beyond LEADER funding and become part of communities. This signals that this is not just a funding programme – it has triggered sustainable community development”.*

73% of projects surveyed are sustainable beyond the termination of LEADER funding. 90% of these projects said this was as a direct result of LEADER funding. This evaluation highlighted that relatively small LEADER grants have the potential to generate significant long-term impact in the region, as evidenced by projects including the Day of the Region, KPT Development Trust and the Care Campus. Collaborative working with communities has ensured that businesses supported by LEADER think beyond the solely financial benefits of their projects.



The UK leaving the EU is one of the main drivers for change within rural development and shifts how LEADER, Community Led Local Development and other rural development approaches are funded, designed, and implemented. The LAG felt that LEADER has provided an essential mechanism for supporting community led rural development as well as leverage for match funding into the region. The need for continuation of a similar type of support and level of financial investment is even more pertinent to help the region recover from COVID-19.

## Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerge from this evaluation:

- Future rural community development programmes should harness the significant local expertise, experience and connections the LAG and LEADER team have developed over the past iterations of the LEADER programme
- Future programmes should be proportionate and seek to implement a tiered approach to rural development funding, to ensure that bureaucracy differentiates between small and large grants in terms of administrative processes and audit requirements
- It is important to minimise the time between claim submission and distribution of funds, and potentially allow some payments to be made up front to projects, especially when grants are made to small organisations. Future programmes should have increased flexibility in processes and capacity for risk-taking, particularly when awarding small grants to organisations
- Scottish Government should evaluate the LARCs system, and invest in a new, streamlined system to replace it for future rural development funds which reduces demand on organisations and permits monitoring of projects in real time
- Future programmes should proactively support deprived rural communities in Dumfries and Stranraer and minority ethnic groups across the region. Learning from projects such as Day of the Region which demonstrate the long-term impact small grants can make in local communities is important.
- Future rural development approaches should aim to sustain the community capacity that has been built by LEADER in Dumfries and Galloway
- There is value in using a community led local development model, as embodied by LEADER, where place-based decision making is used, valuing the importance of local knowledge and taking an asset-based approach to funding that empowers local communities and creates important collaborations and unintended positive outcomes.

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