

LEADER 2023 – 2027



Local Development Strategy Stage 2 – Frequently Asked Questions

Week 16: Questions up to Wednesday, 21 June 2023



Funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development



Question 1: The LDS guidance notes that “costs associated with the administration validation checks on project applications and payment claims (previously referred to as article 48 checks) will be funded outside of the 25% administration budget and as such it is not necessary to make provision for these costs when preparing the financial plan Following the conclusion of Stage 2, DRCD will engage with LAGs selected to outline the specific arrangements in this regard.” Is there any indication as to, who is to take on this role (Pobal, LA etc) and the funding allocation associated with this workload?

Answer: This is currently under review by DRCD and as advised in the LDS Guidelines, DRCD will engage with LAGs selected to outline the specific arrangements.

Question 2: The LDS states “LAGs may decide that a partner will have a more operational role in the delivery of LEADER and will be designated as an implementing partner in the local context. The implementing partner may be responsible for undertaking distinct tasks within LEADER (e.g., animation, administering calls for projects, financial management)”. Are there any restrictions as to who can take on this role, specifically are local authorities excluded from taking on the operational role in the delivery of the LEADER programme as Implementing Partner?

Answer: DRCD is not prescribing a delivery model for the LEADER programme. Applicant LAGs are required to clearly demonstrate all of the following elements

- The centrality of partnership in the formation of a LAG, public and private interest groups coming together to deliver the programme.
- Clear strategic direction and coordination with existing EU, regional and national rural development policies.
- Clear connection to the community and the local animation process to underpin the LEADER model.
- Financial capacity to deliver the programme to high governance standards.

It is the responsibility of the applicant LAG to identify in their LDS who would take on the operational role (if successful). There are no restrictions as to who the identified organisation is, but the applicant LAG should be mindful of the need to ensure relevant capacity and experience as per section 3.2 of the LDS Guidelines.

Question 3: Can you please clarify if the three areas of the LDS to be submitted to Pobal for assessment between 17th and 28th April, are to be based on the methodology to be used for the consultation and engagement, etc. or is it a completed draft showing the findings which are intended to be included as part of the final LDS?

Answer: Applicant LAGs can submit a Draft LDS and Pobal will review 3 areas only of the Draft LDS (Section 3.3 LDS Area Profile, Section 3.4 CLLD and Participative Planning, Section 3.6 LDS Action Plan) and focus on the weaknesses only. In the LDS, applicant LAGs are asked to provide an overview of the consultation process (including the methodology used) and a summary of the outcome regarding the key findings and areas / themes for local development (see section 3.4 of the LDS Guidelines). On that basis, for the submission of the Draft LDS, it is recommended that applicant LAGs include the findings from the consultation process as this will inform the content of the area needs analysis, LDS Objectives and actions.

Question 4: We are seeking clarification in relation to the LEADER guidance document. Section 3.7 LDS Financial Plan – states in the first paragraph that for groups that indicated their LDS will only be covering part of a sub-regional area that they will be advised

separately by the DRCD of the available administration budget in their defined area. In this regard, how can an LCDC identify what is the remaining budget they have to work with if they are unaware of what the other groups are being promised?

Answer: The funding allocations that have been announced relate to the full sub-regional areas. If any group is submitting an LDS for the full sub-regional area, then the LDS that is developed by applicant LAG should be on the basis of the budget for the full sub-regional area. The outcome of the LDS selection process will determine the successful applicant LAG(s) for a sub-regional area.

Question 5: With regard the instruction that applicant LAGs must plan the administration and animation costs out to 2029 to facilitate the closure of the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme, from experience the local development companies that partner with us already find it difficult to manage with the administration budget that is allocated over the initial 5 years of the previous programme and would not have been able to survive without the additional exchequer funding that was provided for 2021-2022. We allocated the full 25% admin budget to our LDCs and they struggled even at that level of funding. In this regard, I do not see how it is feasible to stretch the admin budget out to 2029 without it resulting in redundancies or more serious damage.

Answer: Administration Costs are required to be completed for 2028 and 2029 to facilitate the closure of the 2023-2027 LEADER programme. This may not require the same level of administration costs as previous years.

Question 6: What is the definition of Rural Youth under LEADER 2023-2027? Is it the same as the current programme (18-35 years old)?

Answer: For the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme a young person is defined in the CAP Strategic Plan as aged 18-40 years old. The reference date for calculating this upper age limit is 1 January 2023.

Question 7: The Local Action Plan template asks for a financial allocation for each objective. Are these indicative amounts or will we be held to the figures at delivery stage?

Answer: Applicant LAGs are required to develop a financial plan that provides a forecast of expenditure for the implementation of the LDS. This a profile of expected expenditure each year, and applicant LAGs will not be held to these figures as deviation from these figures can be expected throughout the lifetime of the delivery of the LDS.

Question 8: Our organisation has been allocated funding towards the cost of the work associated with the development of the LDS. Can you let me know how this is to be reported. Will it be part of the LEADER returns to Pobal?

Answer: 50% of preparatory support is paid up front. Upon submission of the Local Development Strategy the remainder will then be paid. At the conclusion of the LDS selection process the Department will be in contact in relation to claiming this amount. Any invoices associated with the development of the LDS should not be included in the monthly returns. Relevant procurement rules should be adhered to where appropriate.

Question 9: Regarding the structure of the Independent Evaluation Committee, the current LEADER operating rules are as follows:

The structure, membership and specific arrangements for the Evaluation Committee are a matter for the LAG, however, the LAG must ensure the integrity of the evaluation process and put in place arrangements that are –

- *fair and non-discriminatory – all applicants must be treated equally; and,*
- *open and transparent – applicants must be informed of the methodology and approach to evaluating each application, and the results of the evaluation should be made available to the applicant together with the LAGs final decision.*

*The Evaluation Committee membership may vary according to theme, call for applications, etc. Evaluation Committee members **cannot** be LAG members. Similarly, where the LAG has assigned implementing responsibility to an Implementing Partner, no person associated with the Implementing Partners can be a member of an Evaluation Committee considering a LAG/Implementing Partner in-house project, i.e. no staff member, no Board member etc. can be a member of the Evaluation Committee.*

With regard to this rule, we understand that an implementing partner board has been the entire IEC for a LAG in the last programme. Can you please advise whether this will be allowable under the new scheme or whether the above rule will apply for the new LEADER programme? We are aware of the requirement for open and transparent approach, however we would appreciate confirmation on this.

Answer: The structure, membership and specific arrangements for the Evaluation Committee will continue be a matter for the LAG.

The LAG will be required to ensure the integrity of the evaluation process and put in place arrangements that are –

- fair and non-discriminatory – all applicants must be treated equally; and,
- open and transparent – applicants must be informed of the methodology and approach to evaluating each application, and the results of the evaluation should be made available to the applicant together with the LAGs final decision.

The Evaluation Committee membership will still be permitted to vary according to theme, call for applications, etc. Evaluation Committee members **cannot** be LAG members. Similarly, where the LAG has assigned implementing responsibility to an Implementing Partner, no person associated with the Implementing Partner can be a member of an Evaluation Committee considering a LAG / Implementing Partner in-house project, i.e. no staff member, no Board member, etc. can be a member of the Evaluation Committee evaluating an in-house project of the Implementing Partner, they must declare a Conflict of Interest and leave the meeting when the in-house project is being evaluated – this must be recorded in the Evaluation Committee minutes.

Question 10: Regarding TUPE, currently the LDC is the implementing partner on behalf of the LAG. Now, both the LDC and the LCDC are applying to be the LAG. For the purposes of this example, presume the LCDC "win" the LDS stage and becomes the LAG, further presume that the LCDC and the LDC cannot agree for the LDC to act as the implementing partner. Our question is do staff who are 100% funded by LEADER in the LDC transfer either to the LCDC or to a new implementing partner under TUPE or do they stay with the previous LDC?

Answer: Given the complexities relating to this issue, it is up to each individual entity to seek their own legal advice and assurances on this matter and the Department is not in a position to advise.

Question 11: Regarding payment of the preparatory support budget recently received, please advise if the template as used for the 2014-2020 programme will be required for the 2023 -2027

programme.

Answer: The template is not required for the 2023-2027 programme. See also response to Question 8.

Question 12: Could you please clarify a line or two from Page 13 of the guidance. It mentions that the overarching policy context needs to include the Smart Villages concept and model which have become increasingly central in European rural development policy in recent years. It states that the preparation and implementation of Smart Villages strategies supported will be a result indicator for this LEADER programme. We can't immediately identify which theme or subtheme this type of project would fall under, possibly Rural Infrastructure? Also, our applicant LAG is part of the eligible area for PEACE Plus funding and the SEUPB have announced a €30 million funding stream specific to Smart Towns and Villages at 100% grant aid. This is being part-funded by the Department for Rural and Community Development in the ROI and DAERA in NI. This funding only applies to border counties. The programme lifecycle is the same as the LEADER 2023 - 2027 programme. Do we still need to actively seek to deliver on the preparation of these Smart Villages strategies under LEADER LDS even though that there will be another programme (PEACE/SEUPB) funding at 100% in the border counties? Will it impact on our LDS scoring if we exclude or reduce the emphasis of Smart Villages within our LDS?

Answer: Within the LDS, applicant LAGs are expected to demonstrate how their LDS aligns with and responds to the overarching policy context, one of which being the Smart Villages Concept. Smart Villages initiatives may be aligned with any of the themes or sub-themes.

If no Smart Villages initiatives are implemented by the LAG, it will not contribute to the overall result indicator in the returns made to the EU Commission. It is not necessary for a LAG to identify initiatives under all themes and but where one is excluded the rationale for its exclusion must be noted in the LDS and the evidence for the decision outlined.

Considering that the applicant LAG is expecting to deliver Smart Villages initiatives/activities under the PEACE Plus funding, it would be important that the LDS reflects this and a clear rationale is given for why Smart Villages do not feature in the LDS Action Plan (if this is to be the case). The needs analysis and public consultation process may also identify the need for smart village initiatives. If this arises, the LDS should also reflect this in sections 2 and 3, while also referring to Smart Village Initiatives being supported under the PEACE Plus funding.

Question 13: Can you please advise whether there is a template for the Service Level Agreement mentioned in the Guidance on the LEADER Local Development Strategy document? If there is no template, are there suggested sections or contents? *Implementing Partner*

...The specific tasks that are delegated to the implementing partner are at the discretion of the LAG and should be documented in a Service Level Agreement between the parties. A LAG may have more than one Implementing Partner.

Answer: There isn't a template for the Service Level Agreement as mentioned in the LDS Guidance, however the SLA for the 2014-2022 programme may be used as a basis for this purpose. It is up to the LAGs to agree the content and ensure that the SLA comprehensively covers the various elements and governance considerations for the successful delivery of the LDS. This should include at a minimum the roles and responsibilities of each partner; financial management controls; service implementation and associated outcomes; processes for reporting, monitoring and reviewing performance; measures to address performance concerns and values and principles that will underpin delivery.

Question 14: Does the Department have any concerns where LDS and LECP consultations are combined?

Answer: Consultation with local stakeholders is a central component of the development of the LEADER LDS. Applicant groups must undertake this consultation process and document it in their LDS. The Stage 2 guidance document on the development of LEADER local development strategies requires that applicant groups should outline in their draft LDS how proposed economic and community actions align with its LECP (or draft LECP) for their area. Consequently, DRCD have no concerns where both consultations are combined and has no objection to the consultation on the LEADER LDS being undertaken in conjunction with consultations in relation to the development of the LECP where the same cohort of stakeholders are involved. However, it is a matter for the LCDCs to ensure that any consultation carried out as part of the development of the LECP is undertaken in compliance with any guidelines issued in that regard.

Question 15: Can additional non-LCDC representatives sit on an LAG or must the memberships be identical?

Answer: Article 33(2) of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) 2021/1060 requires that local action groups (LAGs) are inclusive and ensure that there is a wide range of local interest groups represented in its decision making. The LAG is a separate and distinct body from the LCDC and is established solely for the purpose of delivering the LEADER programme. The LAG decision-making body is tasked with including a broad range of local actors such as, but not limited to, representatives of local non-governmental organisations, local development companies, development agencies, local community-based groups, marginalised communities, youth organisations, cultural bodies, sporting bodies, social movements, networks and relevant public bodies. Each LAG must aim to secure a balanced gender representation. The LCDC may appoint non-LCDC members to the LAG to broaden the representation on the LAG. LAG decision-making members may also be members of other local decision-making bodies such as a local community development committee (LCDC), local development company (LDC), state body or local authority. However, each member of the LAG decision-making body holds equal status on the LAG.

Question 16: How are rival bids for LEADER contracts being assessed? Was the award criteria issued?

Answer: The LDS appraisal criteria and scoring criterion are outlined in Section 5 of the Stage 2 guidance document on the development of LEADER local development strategies which was issued to all qualifying groups.

Question 17: In an area where the LCDC has submitted a countywide bid and an LDC has bid for a portion of the county, what will happen if the LDC bid is successful?

Answer: In areas where more than one strategy is submitted covering all or part of a sub-regional area, the Independent Selection Committee may select one or more strategies to deliver the programme. The final decisions regarding the selection and funding of strategies within a sub-regional area will rest with the Independent Selection Committee. Without prejudice to the independence of the selection process if, following the conclusion of the process, parts of a sub-regional area are excluded from the programme, as the chosen group has indicated that they will not cover the full sub-regional area, the Department will seek to address the situation in consultation with the local stakeholders.

Question 18: What are the budget allocations?

Answer: The funding allocations for each of the sub-regional areas of the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme were announced by the Minister for Rural and Community Development on 27 October last. The Department expects to be in a position shortly to provide funding breakdowns to the applicant groups in areas where more than one group was successful following Stage 1 and one or more of these groups have indicated that their strategy will not cover the entire sub-regional area. All applicant groups in the areas concerned will be advised of the funding breakdown.

Question 19: Re the format of the LDS as outlined in 3.1.1. - The restrictions on page count (100) in the LDS and (30) in appendices is noted. My query relates to the benefits of the use of hyperlinks in the LDS, which could assist document navigation and reduce the need for to insert large pieces of supportive text (i.e. Memorandum of Association etc). Is it acceptable to include hyperlinks in the LDS to (1) navigate within the LDS and (2) to reference and link to documents outside of the LDS?

Answer: The appraisal of the LDS submitted will be solely based on the content of the LDS. Therefore, hyperlinks are advised only where they are providing supporting documentation to content already provided in the LDS. Hyperlinks provided should go straight to the relevant section of the document that is being used to support content of the LDS.

Question 20: I wish to seek clarity as to what information is required on the CLLD Strategy Financial Template. The guidance notes on Sheet 1 of the workbook state, "(1) CLLD Strategy: these costs relate to the implementation of the local development strategy i.e. funding approved to beneficiaries for project activity in the period 2023-2027. This template must be consistent with the information provided in the LDS Action Plan." However, the guidance notes at the end of the actual CLLD Strategy Sheet state, "LAGs are required to provide an estimated annual breakdown of expenditure against Sub-Theme." Approvals and expenditure are two very different things. Which is actually required? If expenditure, the CLLD Strategy sheet should include columns for 2028 and 2029 also which it currently does not.

Answer: The guidance notes in both sheets are requesting the same information to be entered in the CLLD Strategy sheet. Applicant LAGs are being advised in both sheets to include what they expect to allocate to projects against each sub-theme within the given period of 2023-2027. The terminology of funding approved and estimated expenditure are used interchangeably in the context of a budgeting process within the timeframes given for that budget i.e. 2023 – 2027. The guidance notes in the CLLD Strategy sheet also states that actual expenditure incurred (by the LAG) will not be monitored against the funding approved/ estimated expenditure amounts allocated against each sub-theme in the LDS budget.