

Evaluation of Cumbria Fells & Dales LEADER Programme

Executive summary



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

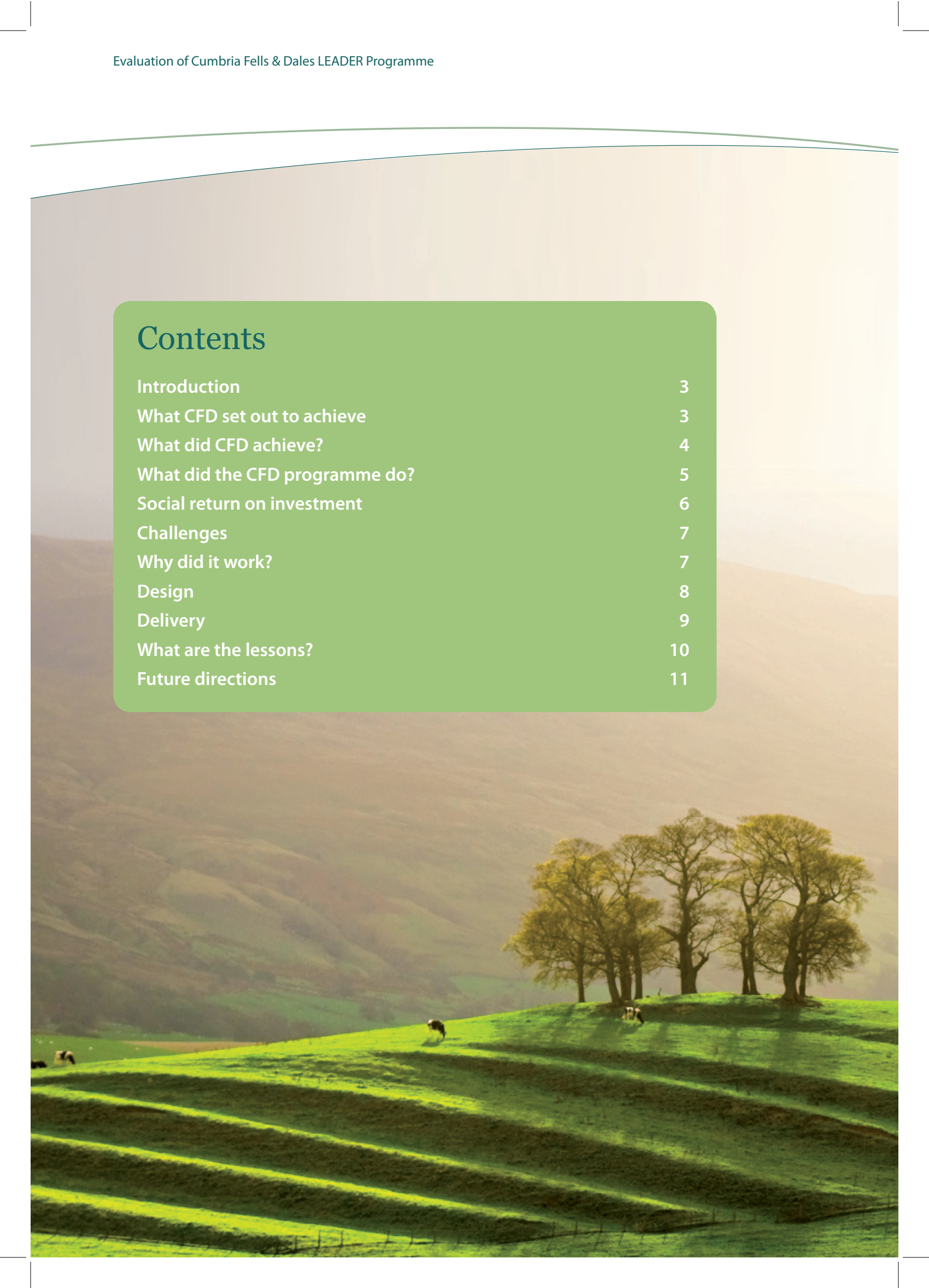


The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development: Europe
investing in rural areas



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Introduction

This report summarises the evaluation of the Cumbria Fells and Dales (CFD) LEADER programme. LEADER is a European / Defra Programme focused on community led solutions to rural development which has been operating in a number of different phases since 1988.

Along with its companion programme in Cumbria: Solway, Border and Eden, CFD is the largest of the 64 LEADER programmes in England with a budget of £7.5 million.

This evaluation was commissioned specifically to: examine the overall success of the programme, its impact on all stakeholders, identify its contribution to wider social and economic outcomes and produce a series of lessons learnt for the future.

What did CFD achieve?

In 'big picture' terms CFD achieved the following outputs:

- Over new **150 jobs were created** and **50 safeguarded**
- Over **300 farms and microbusinesses were assisted**
- **10,000** training days were delivered, **5000** people benefitted directly
- Over **50,000 new visitors** were attracted
- Over **£7.5 million of grant** was allocated – this raised over **£8 million in matched funds**
- In 2012 alone the programme assisted businesses to deliver **£12.5 million of additional GVA** to the county economy.

In terms of broader impacts, our review of the evidence along with structured discussions with stakeholders and external commentators has established that:

- It gave **expression to local skills/initiative** enabling a more resilient economy.
- It gave **businesses confidence to invest** during a recession.
- It helped business to **replace some of the jobs lost in the public sector**.
- It enabled **communities to deliver more services for themselves**.

Research with individual projects indicates that they feel it:

- Made the area more self sufficient.
- Delivered better facilities for the community.
- Made the area a friendlier place (increasing social capital).
- Made the area more prosperous.

What CFD set out to achieve

The LEADER model involves the formation of a Local Action Group (LAG) to govern the resources allocated to each area. It is the responsibility of this group, to implement a Local Development Strategy (LDS) to deploy LEADER resources. In Cumbria CFD followed directly on from a former LEADER programme. Building on previous experience a team led by the County Council prepared the approach for the current programme. They engaged in community consultation, commissioned independent research and worked in partnership with local, regional and national organisations to develop the LDS and recruit the LAG.

It was agreed with the Regional Development Agency which had ultimate responsibility for its structure that LEADER in North West England, should focus on both Axis 1 and Axis 3 within the Rural Development Programme for England. This enabled the programme to seek to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector, the quality of life in rural areas and diversify the rural economy. In most regions of England LEADER was limited to Axis 3 only and therefore unable to work directly on the competitiveness of farming and forestry. Along with its considerable budget this breadth of remit enabled the CFD programme to develop a more comprehensive rural development agenda than most LEADER groups. Setting an overall aim of: ***'Sustaining farm and rural livelihoods in and around the Cumbrian uplands'*** the following detailed objectives were established:

- To continue to upgrade the skills base in the rural economy.
- To add value, increase production and co-operation in agriculture and forestry.
- To assist the agriculture and forestry industries meet the challenges of modernisation and communicated more effectively with the public.
- To assist farm diversification creating new non – farm based business.
- To create a micro/social enterprise culture that diversifies the rural economy in tune with an area of high nature conservation.
- To increase the 'sense of place' and eco-muse high nature conservation and specialist sector tourism economy.
- To develop new solutions to social economy delivery and build capacity amongst local communities to resolve issues.
- To celebrate local distinctiveness through events, sites and cultural activity.
- To match these priorities with Natural England and the Forestry Authority.
- To enter into co-operation projects with other areas of the UK and Europe.

What did the CFD programme do?

Approaching 300 projects were supported by the programme. They can be grouped into the following nine areas of activity:

Assisting farmers and farming in meeting the challenges of the market place and acting as 'guardians' of the countryside – This theme involved a programme of knowledge, awareness raising and understanding delivered through the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), and a project led by The University of Cumbria. Smaller projects supported horse logging, an initiative to train environmentalists about hill farming and apprentice hill farmers.

Bringing woodlands back into management and to utilise the burgeoning wood fuel market and other end uses of Cumbrian timber – This theme involved developing a new woodland advisory service for owners and managers of unmanaged woodlands. The whole supply chain was tackled with chainsaw operators trained, processing equipment purchased and wood-fuel as a renewable form of energy promoted.

Growing the blossoming local food and drinks market – The previous Cumbrian LEADER programme had the primary focus of creating a local food and drink 'added value' culture. It provided the starting point for this theme, which involved further supporting the development and expansion of local food producers. The largest single project supported free range egg producers, down to the smallest, a honey and beeswax candle producer.

Engaging the farming sector in the possibilities of renewable energy – This programme supported a number of renewables projects based around farmers both developing their resources to produce renewable energy and increasing their own use of renewables. It also led to the formation of a renewables consultancy business. An example of wind, water, solar and ground-sourced renewable energy was supported before the rules (FITs) were changed.

Involving farmers in cooperation and collaborative working – This theme helped bolster the work of a number of key collaboration initiatives including the Cumbria Farmer Network and work amongst commoners groups. It also supported national engagement by these groups to promote the benefits of their work.

Enabling farmers to further diversify their businesses – This theme helped farmers broaden their diversification activities into new and value adding areas over and above traditional activities such as the provision of bed and breakfast accommodation. It involved the development of leisure businesses and niche food products.

Helping local communities in tourism opportunities – This theme supported the establishment of locally distinctive tourism approaches. It concentrated on those areas at the fringes of the traditional Lake District offer. It also supported the development of major new and refreshed visitor attractions including 'Telling the Blue Bird Legend' and the Windermere Steam Boat Museum. It funded both direct expenditure on attractions and marketing alongside detailed feasibility work.

Encouraging communities in sustaining and enhancing themselves through enterprise and innovation

– Projects under this theme involved employing people to ensure the best use of a cluster of buildings, including using environmental technologies to reduce long term costs. It also supported activities which build community capacity such as; aspects of the work of the Upper Eden 'Big Society' pilot and the development of the credit union movement. It also helped transplant the Age UK community support scheme for the elderly – 'Village Agents' into the area.

Developing enterprising opportunities in the heritage sector and traditional built environment

– This theme responded to an English Heritage report about declining skills. The core of the project was the training of workers in old crafts, and of architects and 'specifiers' in the use of traditional crafts and craftspeople. The training stimulated a range of interest and some build projects were initiated partly to provide training opportunities in connection with it.

LEADER allows 20% of its budget to be allocated to administration. The CFD programme operated on a very economic and efficient basis, delivering these outcomes for 16% of the overall budget – this meant it spent **£300,000 less on administration** than planned.

Social return on investment

Traditionally LEADER programmes only count contracted outcomes and only consider the performance of projects during the duration of their contracted funding. Using a Social Return on Investment approach this evaluation was able to scope out the longer term social return to the community, of a cluster of LEADER funded projects in Millom and a training related project delivered by the Cumbria Farmers Network. It established that over the whole projected lifetime of each element considered: the Millom projects will deliver a social return of £3.97 for every £1 and the Hill Farm Apprenticeship scheme £4.78 for each £1 invested. These projects were chosen as examples.

The SROI analysis suggests that if this level of outcome was generated across the programme as a whole, a gross social return on investment on the £15 million expenditure generated overall by CFD would deliver, (at £4.50 as a balanced rate of SROI) a social return on investment of **£67.5 million**.

Challenges

The programme did also experience some challenges. These were identified by the project applicants' survey and through a dialogue with stakeholders.

The highest number of comments from applicants related to an aspiration for a simpler application and claiming process and concern over a cash flow scenario where projects have to wait for up to 3 months to claim defrayed expenditure. An attempt was made to arrange a number of delegated small grant schemes, rule interpretation meant these did not go ahead, nor did sub LAG areas, both of these could have added simplicity and specific targeting to the mix.

Retaining a full staff complement at the CFD Office, within the RST and at the local RDA/Defra office was a challenge throughout. The recession created obstacles, not least budget reductions and reduction in business confidence. Despite these issues, all those involved retained determination to deliver for the client. This focus on fulfilling the needs of the end users and customer satisfaction is reflected in the stakeholder comments.

Some stakeholders felt that the scale of resources available to the programme had not been converted into sufficiently transformational impacts. At the nub of this view is a philosophical dialogue about the relative impact of multiple small scale interventions compared to a limited number of large scale projects. The debate here could be characterised as a 'bottom up' versus 'top down' approach. Whilst there is clearly an argument to point to the success of large scale rural development projects in some areas of the UK – for example until recently the Eden Project in Cornwall, there is equal merit in arguing that a comprehensive range smaller scale investments can have a cumulatively transformational impact. On balance we believe there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that CFD has delivered a transformational impact on this basis.

Why did it work?

The theory of LEADER is based on a holistic model of rural development. This theory is focused on harnessing local knowledge and stimulating innovation, with a view to improving all aspects of the quality of life of a locality. In England a more 'top down' model of economic development has led to LEADER being seen as a supplementary grant fund to other larger scale interventions. In many areas this has challenged the operation and impact of the programme.

The key to the success of the CFD programme lies in the fact that it has been able to operate in a way which is closely aligned to the full principles of LEADER. It has been able to do this because of the breadth of activities it has been able to support and the scale of resources it has been able to deploy.

There are two key aspects of the programme which characterise its distinctive achievements namely: its design and its delivery approaches.

Design

The programme was developed on a 'team basis' and it sought to take account of the work of other strategies and actions. It also set out to develop a holistic approach to project development – seeking to encourage and support projects through approaches, which were true to the 'integrated and multi-sectoral' philosophy of LEADER. This found expression (see the LDS) not just in a process of project animation and support, but in a wider set of values which sought to position LEADER in the context of environmental as well as social and economic development.

The programme undertook an evidence based approach. Priorities were translated into an operational model by undertaking a detailed SWOC (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges) analysis. This approach, along with an extensive process of consultation, enabled it to work out how best to shape its strategy to fit the local history, traditions, capacity and needs of the area. Examples of the insightful local 'fit' of the programme to its geography include:

- Promoting local distinctiveness approaches to tourism to maximise the potential of the unrealised assets of the area.
- A concentration on using the natural resources of the area for economic development, for example in relation to wood fuel and local food.
- Building sustainability by promoting renewables and networking.
- Tapping into the resourcefulness of local farmers by promoting business diversification outside of the traditional bed and breakfast offer.
- Supporting the distinctive social character and needs of the area including the community development activities of the Upper Eden Community Plan and responding to the 2009 Cockermouth Floods.
- Responding to national issues relevant to Cumbria such as the building of the capacity of commoners, the advocacy of farmer networks and the funding of projects to address the deficit in the skills of the heritage sector.

The LAG also realised that there were others with specialist expertise who could be engaged to get to the heart of the activities it wanted to stimulate. It therefore commissioned a number of third parties to help it deliver the LDS. Examples of this approach include: the up-skilling of farmers (Scottish Agricultural College), the development of the forestry sector (Cumbria Woodlands) and the extension of heritage skills (North of England Civic Trust). This approach maximised programme impact by complementing the skills of the LAG and LEADER team.

Delivery

The experience of the LAG Decision Making Board in terms of their sectoral expertise and their knowledge of LEADER is more significant than in many other LEADER areas where there is not a previous tradition of the programme. The LAG also interacts particularly strongly with the LEADER team and has established a 'value adding' approach to project animation and support, characterised by the LEADER Manager as set out below:

- 1) Recognise the end beneficiary – help them diagnose their actual needs.
- 2) Identify how can we deliver this in a true partnership.
- 3) Establish what needs to be done together, so that the beneficiaries 'own' the project as much as possible.
- 4) Minimise the administrative burden for each project as much as possible.
- 5) Disengage as soon as is feasible (it's their project not ours) but keep a watching brief (hard to do with so many projects running at once, but this is another strength of a LAG who are well embedded in the local community).

In addition to supporting projects practically on this basis the LAG and LEADER team are committed to supporting projects at the **most local level possible**. This has been achieved by:

- Commissioning an Agricultural Investment Study (jointly with SBE LEADER Programme) led by the Cumbria Farmer Network to focus the funding allocated by each LAG through Axis 1 to achieve maximum impact.
- Allocating funding under Measures 114 and 115 to Cumbria Woodlands to operate a Woodland Advisory Service focused on making the most of the potential of this sector 'on the ground'.
- Commissioning a major programme of training and development under Measure 111 led by the Scottish Agricultural College, to build the skills base of individual farmers and foresters.
- Responding to the Cumbrian Floods 2009 by offering a Flood Debris Recovery Grant (under Measure 413) to help individual farm businesses.
- Working to ensure LEADER complemented other community programmes. For example, CFD Programme staff managed CRISP2 – a programme aimed at both social enterprises and commercial businesses that provide jobs and services in rural areas at the micro level.
- Using the LAG and its networks to spread the message about LEADER funding and its potential benefits as widely as possible.

The CFD approach also involves recognition of the importance of supporting applicants extensively through the monitoring and claims process. It recognises this as a crucial next step on from considering and agreeing funding support for individual projects. In many LEADER areas project engagement from the LAG ceases once funding has been approved.

Finally in terms of delivery approaches, the programme has deliberately supported rural development as part of a wider Cumbrian approach. At a practical/delivery level, this has led CFD to work in concert with other funders to offer joined up solutions to the overall challenges facing rural communities.

The level of joint funding and strategic interface particularly with the SBE programme has been so extensive as to enable LEADER to offer a range of 'pan Cumbria' benefits to a level and extent not seen anywhere else in the UK.

What are the lessons?

A number of broader learning points emerge from the CFD experience.

1. There is a real advantage in following an established programme rather than starting from scratch. It enables the partnership to 'hit the ground running' consider the good and less good aspects of previous performance and provides them with a number of practitioners and former projects to support the development of the programme.
2. A well considered and widely consulted approach to programme planning enables an LDS to be developed which fits the locality effectively. This is important if the programme is to have the maximum impact in terms of both soliciting individual projects and generating wider impacts in the locality.
3. Commissioning projects both extends the skills base for the implementation of the programme and helps target the resources most effectively to the point of delivery.
4. Cooperation can work effectively at two levels. By cooperating intensively with adjoining LAGs economies of scale can be generated and by working at a transnational level group learning can help drive innovation.
5. Whilst a sensible balance needs to be maintained between providing support and creating dependency, the administrative challenges and cash flow issues facing many smaller projects call for relatively intensive support throughout the life of their activity.
6. It is definitely worth understanding how LEADER fits with other local regeneration activity to ensure that LEADER applicants are provided with the right support on the widest, most beneficial and ultimately most sustainable basis. This requires active networking and the influencing of the design and promotion of other funding strands in the locality by the LEADER team.
7. There is a strong argument in favour of creating a cluster of small term project impacts, which when aggregated together can deliver sustainable transformational change, as an alternative to a small number of large scale investments.
8. Finally there is real merit in judging the impact of LEADER over the longer term, using a Social Return on Investment approach, to consider the full range and the duration of its achievements.

Future directions

Going forward a number of learning points should be considered for the establishment of any new programme. They are as follows:

Building on good practice – consolidating networks across the whole of Cumbria to maximise the integration of LEADER with other funds; ensuring any new LDS has a strong local flavour; operating as widely as possible across the six new national programme priorities to maximise the scope for impact; maintaining a focus on geographical boundaries with which people identify for any future programme; continuing to commission projects to maximise impact and focus, building on the cooperation achievements of the current programme; continuing to support projects at all levels of development and implementation to maximise their success and finally planning an evaluation strategy from the outset, taking account of social return on investment approaches.

Enhanced project animation – there is definite value in building upon existing social/community LEADER funded initiatives (e.g. Village Agents) and the concentration of LEADER investment in settlements (e.g. Millom). Harnessing the experience of successful projects, any new programme could establish a 'community-to-community' learning approach, getting those with knowledge of 'the system' to support their peers through a specific system of mentor training and networking.

Enhanced programme planning – could be achieved during transition through thematic networking with grant recipients in sectors. For example, to build upon farming achievements in the existing programme the LEADER team could bring farmers together to identify gaps and address these in commissioning activities (e.g. genetics, breeding, benchmarking). This process could be strengthened further by involving delivery bodies in these sectors (e.g. farming – National Centre for the Uplands, Sector Skills Council, Forestry – Forestry Commission, Cumbria Woodlands) to distill good practice. This approach could be extended to other programme themes for example: arts and culture, tourism, environmental technologies.

Practical programme design – could involve: re-examining the scope to develop a delegated fund for smaller projects; establishing dedicated sub-groups to support programme delivery, each sub group would focus on a theme rather than have a geographical focus (e.g. conformity with the LDS, awareness raising and publicity, financial profile and spend); building on the achievements and model of CRISP 2 as an example of funding provision that has enabled LEADER applicants to access money from three different funding streams using just one application process; horizon scanning in any future programme to identify other funders who could assist projects with cash flow and finally developing protocols with other grant funds to ensure that they route all eligible applicants to LEADER and are receptive to referrals from LEADER to their programmes.

Final conclusion

CFD, and Cumbrian LEADER as a whole, continues to deliver benefits not readily delivered through other programme approaches. Those benefits are delivered with good value for money. The benefits are delivered in traditionally 'hard to reach' sectors/subsectors – specifically hill farming, local food, the woodland sector, heritage skills and providing services to remote rural communities. CFD is an outstanding example of the LEADER method delivering successful rural development and growth.

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