



# EVALUATING NATURAL HERITAGE BASED DEVELOPMENT

**ADVICE FOR LEADER+ COORDINATORS, PROJECT  
MANAGERS AND LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (LAGs)**

*The EU LEADER+ programme runs until 2006 and funds locally led rural development projects in certain areas. It tests out new ideas, with an integrated approach to all the key rural areas including land use, tourism, social services, transport and environment. Sustainable development and local management – the “bottom-up approach” – are essential to LEADER+. The Programme should improve rural policies in the future, so the lessons learnt must be analysed and publicised. Policy makers, rural businesses, and communities across Scotland and the EU will all benefit.*

*Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) contributes to LEADER+ at national and local level. We believe it can help us understand how environmental projects provide economic and social benefits, and vice versa. Several Scottish LEADER+ groups have based elements of their strategies on the natural heritage, and we hope that the lessons learnt will be of wide use throughout rural Scotland. SNH will help by contributing to case studies of good projects and programmes.*

We hope this advice will help LEADER+ project managers and project planners. Some elements may apply more to one of these jobs than another, but the key messages are the same. Above all we aim to explain why good evaluation of projects is important, and why it is needed in LEADER+. Natural heritage related work is not really different from other sectors, but it is very typical of LEADER+: small scale, often novel, and producing benefits that go beyond jobs or economic output. So our advice is of special importance for natural heritage, but also covers wider issues relevant to LEADER+.

## **MAKING IT HAPPEN**

*Ask  
questions.....*

LEADER+ is about testing and learning, so the most important thing to do to help monitoring and evaluation is to ask questions, at all stages of the process. But they must be the right questions if the answers are to help local rural development. So you should also question the monitoring process itself:

- What is it for?
- What do you really need to know?
- How can information be obtained, and how can it be used?
- When should you expect projects to show results?
- What outside influences might also be affecting things?

*...and explain  
the reason for  
the questions*

If you can answer these questions it will be much easier to persuade project staff why evaluation is important, and that they should do it too. Getting this message over to the project staff, and getting results back from them, depends on good communication. This will help

project managers to ask the right questions, such as how can they measure the effects, what works and why, or how can resources be used better?

*Everyone has a role.*

So project staff must have guidance and training about evaluation, and you must check they have got the message. You can't monitor the projects or the Programme without their involvement and commitment, but in many development programmes this is where a gap in information and understanding begins. It is essential to involve the project staff, and you must encourage them to participate and take ownership of their role in the process.

## **PROJECT MONITORING**

*(Something is happening here but you don't know what it is)*

*What is the project for?*

Before project monitoring starts you must be clear about objectives. The time to think about them is when you are appraising project applications to decide which ones should be funded. So both programme and project managers should be involved. The appraisal identifies the project objectives and how they fit with the programme strategy and objectives. It must also look at how they relate to the overall programme monitoring and your guidance to project staff must explain how the monitoring will be done.

*How can we find out what happened...*

Once the project appraisal has clarified these points it will be easier to identify simple and focused questions about the results. Firstly these should aim to find out what actually happened as a result of the project. There is no need to be tied to traditional questions (many of these will be dealt with at programme level), and evaluating unusual or complex projects may need imaginative ideas. It may help to think about what the applicants thought the project would do: their objectives are just as valid as those of the programme planners. Evaluation that tests both will be very useful.

*...and was it any use?*

LEADER+ is primarily concerned with change, so evaluation must measure what changed, whether this was good, and what lessons can be learnt from it. Project managers should provide the evidence, but programme staff should promote the lessons arising across all the projects. The cycle of testing and learning will assist future projects, and should lead to adjustments in the local programme. In this way good evaluation improves the value of the programme, and becomes more than just a defence when it's all over. It also provides the basis for LEADER+ to fulfil its role as a pilot programme that influences rural policy at European and national levels.

## **WHAT IS EVALUATION?**

*(You don't need a weather man to know which way the wind blows)*

Evaluation means finding the merit or worth of something. It may be a national issue - "did the minimum wage reduce poverty?" - or a local one - "did the baker's new oven allow her to bake more bread?"

Evaluation also tests whether a project's targets have been achieved. These were used to appraise it before it was selected so evaluation can help improve project selection in the future

*Keep it simple...*

Be practical about what you are trying to achieve and what is suited to the scale or type of projects. Don't use an off-the-shelf approach better suited to a large regional programme, or invent a new bureaucracy. Programme and project managers know best how their projects will work, and will be most directly involved in monitoring them, so don't be afraid to base your approach on their own ideas about what will be useful. Think too about ways of using previous work on project objectives and appraisal to help the evaluation.

*...choose your own methods...*

Think about good techniques for assessing results and effects, ones that work locally or for an economic sector or community. Don't be hypnotised by numbers – numbers can be misleading and always appear to have greater weight. Good qualitative information may be more useful in some cases. Usually a variety of approaches will paint the best picture, and different methods may be needed at different stages in the project or programme.

*...and cribbing is allowed*

Focus on the most important and feasible questions for individual projects so that people don't get snowed under with evaluation, and try and achieve the spread of information you need by looking at the programme as a whole. The intensity and cost of monitoring and evaluation must be appropriate to the scale of the projects involved. You may evaluate some of the more difficult issues (e.g. community attitudes) better at programme than project level. Make use of existing information - you don't always have to do it yourself.

*Cover the full range of effects...*

Natural heritage related projects have direct social and economic results, but often their main purpose is to improve the environment. The full social and economic benefits of this may be quite long term and very difficult to tie back to the original project. In this case it is important to measure the direct environmental results. As with some other types of project (particularly community development) an evaluation of all the effects of the project may have to be based on some projections of the final effects. This is useful so long as it is based on research or evidence, perhaps from elsewhere, and is not just wishful thinking.

*...and the time they may take to appear*

## **THE STORY SO FAR**

Evaluation of natural heritage projects under LEADER+ cannot be done using a standard model, and it may not be wise for a LAG to apply its own system too rigidly. Local or project specific solutions are needed, and these require some effort to develop. But they also offer the possibility of being more useful and relevant. All the participants in LEADER+ should support and contribute to evaluation, and a wide range of questions about the programme should be answered. Where this works well the benefits of

LEADER+ locally, and its contribution to wider rural policy, will be greatest.

## ELEMENTS OF EVALUATION

*(May you always know the truth)*

*There are several levels of evaluation...*

In a perfect world evaluation would tell you what each project and the programme did (**output**), what was achieved (**result**) and what the effects were (**impact**). The world is not like this, but it should always be possible to record **output**. You should be able to record some **results**, even if a full assessment is impossible. **Impacts** are more difficult to pin down, particularly at the scale of LEADER+ and with work related to natural heritage.

*...be clear which ones you are using*

Despite these difficulties, evaluation should still be based on this categorisation. It helps to make it clear how much the evaluation is telling us, and where the gaps are. It may also help to identify where you could make additional efforts to complete the picture.

*Be realistic about LEADER+ in comparison with other rural changes*

The changes you observe from your evaluation may not result from LEADER+ activity. It is important and often difficult to separate out what's happening in the rest of the world – sometimes literally: terrorism has affected tourist numbers for instance. Other longer term trends like population change and agricultural decline are also important. So evaluations must take account of **attribution**, to identify what caused a change. It is difficult to do so precisely, but information about wider scale trends (in similar or larger areas) can help.

The term **additionality** is familiar to people dealing with EU funding, and describes how much of the observed change would have happened anyway (perhaps because other programmes would have been used), and how much was due to the specific EU funding. Often a personal view is all that is possible, but any information is better than none.

*People must be honest, and objective...*

These approaches help to make evaluation as accurate as possible – in other words they help to reduce errors. If the lessons of LEADER+ are to be of any value, locally or nationally, evaluation must be accurate. It must be based on the most objective approach possible, and everyone contributing to evaluation must be committed to this. But it does not necessarily mean that numerical data are best – they can be very inaccurate. An objective approach to collecting people's views about the additionality of LEADER+ funding is likely to be the most useful way of reporting, for instance. You should be able to find simple advice about standard approaches to collecting qualitative **information**<sup>1</sup>, and exchange of experience between LEADER+ groups may also help.

*...and you must plan the evaluation carefully*

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<sup>1</sup> Developing a Questionnaire, Bill Gillham (2000), Continuum, London ISBN 0-8264-4795-3

Small scale evaluation, Colin Robson (2000), Sage, London ISBN 0-7619-5510-0

## DEVELOPING AND APPLYING INDICATORS

*(Please, please, give me indication...)*

Indicators are tools that help Programme and project managers measure what has been achieved. Think carefully about whether you are using the right ones:

Indicator	Category of indicator	Good because..	Bad because...	Useful in this case?
<b>FOOTPATH PROJECT</b>				
Metres of difficult path	Condition	Focused on work needed	No idea how important in area - % of total would help	?
Metres of path improved	Output	Easily measured	How much better is it?	✓
Visitor numbers	Result	Can be measured by counter or survey	What is the change? Are they spending money?	✓
Tourism business activity	Impact	Important economic measure	Very difficult to survey. Wider economic factors dominate, link to project unclear.	✗

<b>WOODLAND MANAGEMENT PROJECT</b>				
Protected status of site e.g. Natura 2000	Condition	Good measure of site quality	Won't be affected by project in any way	✗
Area of invading scrub cleared	Output	Focused on project, easily measured	Other action may be needed to improve quality of woodland	✓
Jobs created	Result	Good socio-economic measure, easy to count	Are these long-term results? Information on training would help.	✓
Community attitudes to project	Impact	Long term, and linked to future development opportunities	Special survey required, may be costly	✓

Indicator	Category of indicator	Good because..	Bad because...	Useful in this case?
<b>FISHING BOAT CONVERTED FOR WILDLIFE TOURS</b>				
(Declining trend) in amount of fish landed	Condition	Focused on problem	No indication of viable alternatives	✓
Boat converted	Output	Simple to measure, makes sense	Is it getting any trade?	✓
Number of passengers	Result	Easy to measure by survey or records	Are there enough to make a profit?	✓
Extra tourist spend locally	Impact	Important to local economy.	Difficult (but not impossible) to survey. Lack of other opportunities to spend money may dominate	?
<b>VILLAGE HALL RENOVATION</b>				
Physical state of hall	Condition	Good measure of resource quality	Does not assess demand for use	✓
Hall and facilities upgraded	Output	Easy to measure and understand	Does not measure whether people are using it	✓
Jobs created, spend on local businesses	Result	Good socio-economic measure	Any long term results?	?
Community attitudes, new community services established	Impact	Long term and linked to wider community development	Special survey may be needed, may be costly	✓

The four types of indicator in this table are used in all EU programme evaluations. They help distinguish between short and long term effects, and between project specific or wider effects:

- **Condition** describes the quality of a resource
- **Output** is a measure of what was done
- **Result** measures what was achieved
- **Impact** measures the wider effects

The examples in the table show how the indicators differ. This system helps to ensure that evaluation questions will provide useful answers. The indicators used must also be sensible ones, chosen with the type of project in mind. This may lead to a variety of indicators, and if this helps to get better answers, all to the good. But you should also think about whether you want to report back at a higher level, grouping together a number of projects within a Programme Measure or across the whole Programme. If so, some standard indicators will be needed, so you can add them up. You will need to find a balance between general indicators and more targeted ones.

## **SETTING BASELINES**

*(where none is the number...)*

*Measure the starting point...*

Baselines provide a basis for all types of measurement and are particularly important for qualitative change: e.g. in values such as community capacity or public attitudes. These are relative measures that can only be judged by their change over time. In contrast quantitative measures such as jobs created can be interpreted more directly in terms of their economic impact.

*...as soon as you can...*

It is often easier to find existing information on quantitative measures, from tourism or other economic and environmental surveys, and LAGs could use these to establish baselines relatively cheaply and easily. More effort is often needed for quantitative measures, where baseline information may need to be collected specifically for LEADER+. This has to be done before the project or programme has begun to produce results, so it should be a high priority in the early stages of LEADER+.

*...unless someone else already has.*

It may be possible to build baseline data collection into other related projects, or to commission specific baseline studies. Resources were made available to LAGs at Programme and project levels to help with this. The work can be focused quite tightly on priority issues, though, so it should not be too demanding or costly. The remaining baselines can be based on existing surveys, and organisations such as Tourist Boards, Small Business Gateways, SNH and RSPB may be able to provide the information needed. Find out what they have, at what area, how it is recorded, when and how it is updated, how reliable is it, and whether you can use it, and contribute to it.

## REACHING THE PARTS OTHER PROGRAMMES DON'T

*(What do we need to make the country grow?)*

*LEADER+ is special...*

The importance of measuring the effects of Leader at the community level is absolutely fundamental. It's a bottom up programme so this is where the effects should occur, and where the evidence will be. LEADER+'s strength is its engagement at the local level, and its ability to report back from there. Mainstream programmes are often so large they cannot do this. At the same time, LEADER+ is very small and targeted, so its effects can only be seen at the local level.

*...if you all make it so.*

Project managers have a crucial role to play in this, but they should not take it on alone. They may require support and guidance from LEADER+ Programme staff. If they all work together they should be able to understand projects well and report on them, and this can form the basis for a sound overall evaluation of local LEADER+ Programmes.

## BARRIERS TO OVERCOME

*(Don't you understand, it's not my problem)*

In the past there has been criticism of the way the impact of Leader and other small-scale rural development programmes was measured. One of the main problems was the lack of measurement at the community level. The reasons for this failure include:

*Reasons for not doing it*

- It appears complex so it's avoided
- People don't like measurement and scrutiny
- They may be unwilling to record and provide information;
- Lack of perceived benefit
- No time and resources
- Action is thought to be better than reflection

Programme managers should understand these attitudes, and aim to reverse them. Evaluation is important to everyone because it can improve projects, can generate longer term benefits for the community, and that it need not be too difficult or demanding.

All that is needed is careful thought and the use of appropriate methods. If Programme managers involve project managers and communities, and....

*Reasons for doing it*

- stress the need for evaluation and demonstrate the benefits;
- make it simple, incorporating it in the project and programme;
- focus on outputs and results, not impacts;
- make allowances for the time and resources needed
- make sure people understand and provide feedback

....then evaluation is likely to be tackled with more enthusiasm, and will produce useful results.

## **SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE**

*(Well, I investigated all the books in the library)*

There are many potential sources of information and guidance in the area of monitoring and evaluation. Again it is important that this is appropriate to the scale and nature of your activity, so make sure that when you make enquiries people are aware of these factors.

Possible sources of information and guidance include:

- Scottish Executive Community Initiatives team
- Structural Fund Programme Partnerships
- Local Enterprise Companies
- SNH
- Rural Europe website (the former EU Leader Rural Observatory)
- UK Leader+ Network
- other Scottish LEADER+ staff

Use the Programme and the process to help you. All those listed have an interest in seeing this programme succeed and in learning the lessons from the Leader approach to sustainable rural development.

## **CREDITS**

This advice is based on research carried out by John Grieve and EKOS consultants for SNH. Sarah Eldridge of The Countryside Training Partnership helped with presentation. Ken McCulloch of Edinburgh University identified important reference sources.

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