



Actions

West Cheshire and Warrington Local Action Group Meeting

Tuesday 13 October 2015, 1.15-3.15pm

Room G1, Wyvern House, Winsford CW7 1AH

Present:

Rev Canon David Felix – DF
Chris Brown-Bolton – CBB
Cllr Harry Tonge – HT
Annette McDonald – AM
Joanne Butterill – JB
John Heselwood – JH
Rebecca Wainwright – RW
Mike Baker – MB
Sean Bell – SB
Joanna Douglass – JD
Mandy Sibthorpe – MS
Ellie Morris – EM

1. Introductions & Apologies

Introductions took place around the table.

SB reads out list of LAG members who have offered apologies:

Cllr. Louise Gittins
Andrew Hull
Heather Hayes
Doug Haynes
Lizzie Aldridge
Martin Ledson
Cllr Michael Young
Craig Bradley – Mike Baker attends in his stead
Matthew Morris

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting

DF went through previous minutes page by page, asking for comments or questions, none were raised. DF asked if the rural funding matrix mentioned at the last meeting is now available, AM mentions she has one she could circulate, EM mentions she and Rachel Bolton (Cheshire East Council) are collaborating on one too.

DF confirms LAG are happy with minutes, everyone agrees, DF signs minutes as an accurate record.

DF asks if LEADER LAG meeting minutes should be made public. MB says they should, JD adds that meeting minutes can be published on the Cheshire LEADER website, but potential applicant names will likely be removed and replaced with the organisation they represent as per data protection procedures.

3. Declaration of Interests

JD explains the role of Register of Interests, it acts as a living record of members' interests so that the LEADER team can monitor for conflicts of interest. LAG members will also be expected to declare conflicts of interest in meetings and withdraw if necessary. SB adds that while some LAG members are yet to register their interests, everyone currently at the meeting has already contributed.

4. LEADER Update

JD explains that she is aware the LAG is keen to see progress and reassures them that much work has taken place to bring LEADER towards launch, particularly on the Delivery Plan which details extensively how the programme will be delivered, and which DF has signed.

JD and MS have also produced the Business Continuity document, which details how LEADER will be delivered in the event of major disruptions such as loss of personnel, equipment or facilities, and the Information Assurance Questionnaire, which details how the Cheshire LEADER team will handle all information collected during the programme, including information security standards and procedures.

JD thanked the LAG for their feedback on the opening page of the Applicant Handbook that was sent out to LAG members for feedback, and hoped they will agree it is now much more reader-friendly, particularly to potential applicants. She added that she is yet to receive the final version of the Handbook from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA).

The LEADER Operations Manual is also still being iterated upon by the RPA; it currently contains 37 documents and more are yet to be added. These missing documents are the reason CWaC has not yet signed the agreement with RPA.

JD mentioned a new addition to the application procedure that was discussed at the previous meeting; the 40 working day deadline from Final Application to LAG decision must also now include 10 working days for the RPA to check the appraisal of the project. These 10 days must occur within the existing 40, and are not additional.

LEADER grant expenditure has also been revised due to the late programme start; there is now no expected spend in LEADER's first financial year. [ATTACH] The RPA have agreed that if any projects come through that will require funds in year one they can still receive funding, but JD and MS wanted to calibrate the LAGs' expectations.

DF mentioned that this budget does not include Running Costs & Animation (RCA), JD confirmed and added that it only shows grant expenditure, not total project values.

DF asked what we can expect from the LEADER National Event *[An event in London on 14/10/15 to which two representatives from each LAG are invited; DF, JD, MS and EM are attending on behalf of the Cheshire LAGS]*. EM says it should be interesting as it will place the LEADER team in good company and provide opportunities to ask questions and give feedback on the programme thus far.

JD hoped that agreements will be signed soon after the National Event, but in the meantime she and MS are continuing to work on guidance for applicants, including documents to guide them through filling in all RPA-provided application forms. As soon as the programme launches, the Cheshire LEADER team will contact everyone they have on file who has shown an interest in the programme, currently in the region of around 160 potential applicants across both Cheshire LAGs. By the next LAG meeting, provisionally in January, there should be a list of outline applications we can discuss.

AM asked how many of the expressions of interest are viable LEADER projects, JD says it is difficult to say as it is simply a record of everyone who has made enquiries, mentioning that at the Ploughing Match there was a good mix of genuine viable applicants and people who simply wanted to know about the programme and realised it may not be for them. But there were certainly a considerable number of viable projects ready to go.

AM asked about output targets, as she has concerns that aiming to create an average of three jobs per farming diversification project may be optimistic in the current climate. MS mentions that she visited a potential farming diversification applicant just yesterday who is looking at taking on three full-time staff plus seasonal part-time workers, though she agrees that certainly not every such project will create three jobs.

JH mentioned that he is working with a community café project, and asked if it is best for him to just hand potential applicants over to the Cheshire LEADER team to develop their projects and understand the necessary outputs for LEADER. JD reiterated that she and MS are working on guidance for applicants that includes outputs, JH clarifies that he is more concerned with the etiquette of handing projects over to the Cheshire LEADER team to avoid potential conflicts of interest. JD asked JH to send over any potential applicants' details and she would update the contact list accordingly.

DF pointed out the difference between being an 'ambassador' for a project, and actually having a hand in the decision-making process. JD added that this is discussed in the Code of Conduct that appears in the draft LAG Partnership Agreement.

5. LAG Partnership Agreement

EM explained that partnership agreement is the agreement between CWaC and LAG members to deliver the LEADER programme. CWaC, as the Accountable Body, will administer the programme, monitor grant and RCA expenditure and ensure that the code of conduct is followed. The Accountable Body has an advisory position on the LAG, but no decision-making power.

DF mentioned that the document is the result of an extensive consultation with the CWaC legal team, and the Cheshire East document is identical. MS and JD clarified that some of the wording is slightly different due to the West LAG also covering parts of Warrington and Trafford. JD added that the document is also a requirement set by the RPA.

DF asked if projects will need approving in March or January. JD explained that January will likely only feature Outline Applications, which will need to progress to the Full Application stage before LAG decisions are required.

JD added that the appraisal procedure is yet to be finalised, MB mentions this will come soon as appraisal training is currently scheduled for November. He adds that the appraisal scoring procedure is incredibly detailed so that LAG members are in no doubt that all projects are scored accurately and rigorously.

MS asked if any appraisal training will be available for LAG members, MB said that the Accountable Body are required to cascade the training on to the LAG.

DF suggested that LAG members may simply not need to know the process in as much detail as the Cheshire LEADER team. MB mentioned that while the appraisal is detailed, the appraisal form has a précis on the front page. JD adds that we will go through Outline Applications in detail with the LAG so that if those projects succeed in their Full Application, the LAG members are already familiar with the project.

AM asked about the rigidity of application forms from previous funding programmes and whether or not LEADER forms will be the same, MB said that the new application forms should be detailed enough to allow applicants to avoid having to submit a full business plan. AM clarified that she found the forms incredibly difficult to use due to formatting problems and sections that could not be properly edited, MB said he will pass this feedback on.

JB asked if business plans will be completely unnecessary, MB said the Full Application form is designed to render them such as many small businesses lack the means to put full business plans together.

EM and JD mentioned that they have been advising potential applicants that a business plan should be in place. IP agrees that any business looking for funding should have a sound business plan already, EM suggested that the matter should be raised at the next LEADER Exchange Group (LEG) meeting.

MS asked JB if an organisation looking for a business loan would need a business plan, JB said they absolutely would, especially in cases of expansion. MB reiterated that business plans received in the past have been a huge undertaking for applicants and incredibly costly, JB mentioned that if government money is being given out then the greatest care should be taken. DF added that the wider problem is the lack of standardisation of business plans, which would make things easier for small businesses. HT agreed, adding that it's never simply a case of copying and pasting the relevant information, and extensive reformatting is always necessary.

6. Local Enterprise Partnership

EM discusses two other available funding calls (food, tourism) that are currently out and asks AM to enquire at the Rural Strategy Board as to what sort of interest there has been in both, as failed applicants may turn to LEADER.

EM/MB

IP handed out Business Support and Engagement Map and talked through it. Of particular interest to LEADER is the Business Growth Hub which will be managed by Blue Orchid. Two advisors will work in Northwich and will point applicants in the direction of LEADER (or other funding streams) and help applicants with the production of business plans. EM mentioned that Frank Titley (Blue Orchid) did join the Cheshire LEADER team at the Ploughing Match and was incredibly helpful, JD added that she and MS have met with Blue Orchid to develop their relationship and keep them in the loop on their progress with LEADER. JB commended IP's Business Support and Engagement Map, adding that it would be incredibly helpful to take it to local businesses to show them where help is available, as often the available opportunities are unclear.

7. Communications

JD and MS discussed the LEADER presence at this year's Cheshire Ploughing Match, explaining that they had a full day of talking with potential applicants to discuss how LEADER might help them. JD also mentions that SB and MS have produced a LEADER fact sheet, and will e-mail it out to LAG members.

SB

DF mentioned that press coverage of the Ploughing Match had little focus on the actual agricultural interest offered by the accompanying trade show. MS and HT add that despite this it seemed larger than previous years and very well attended.

SB explained that the LEADER website has now been unveiled and streamlined a little, and he will circulate the link to LAG after meeting for any feedback.

SB

8. Future Meetings

JD suggested the next LAG meeting should take place around the middle of January, with following meetings taking place quarterly thereafter. EM asks if LAG is happy to continue using Doodle polls to aid with setting dates of future meetings, no objections are raised. JD mentions that future meeting dates will be listed on the LEADER website so that applicants understand when to apply in order to meet the 40-day deadline.

DF enquired about the possibility of the Executive Board casting votes on projects electronically. JB says she would like to have had a discussion about each project to assess properly. JD absolutely agrees, but notes that page 23 of the LAG Agreement mentions the possibility of written/e-mail votes if deemed absolutely necessary. However, it is highly likely that any projects that have passed through the Full Application stage will likely have already been discussed extensively by the LAG at the Outline stage. MB also adds that long e-mail conversations can become difficult to record properly.

JD asked if there is a template for LAG decision summaries for the Chair to sign, MB says it should be on DORA.

9. AOB

Nothing raised, David thanks everyone for their attendance.