

NATURAL GROWTH

LEADER 2015 – 2020 in southern Shropshire

Local Development Strategy (LDS) Overview

This document is intended to give an overview of the Southern Shropshire Local Development Strategy for potential applicants. It should be used in conjunction with the LEADER Handbook and application forms.

Background

LEADER is European funding, part of the Rural Development Programme for England. For more details of the national LEADER Programme go to the Defra website: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/rural-development-programme-for-england-leader-funding>

LEADER funding must support at least one of the national priorities. These are to:

- support micro and small businesses and farm diversification
- boost rural tourism
- increase farm productivity
- increase forestry productivity
- provide rural services
- provide cultural and heritage activities

LEADER in Shropshire

In Shropshire there is one LEADER area in the south, the eligible area is shown below. There is no LEADER programme for North Shropshire as the application for funding in the north of the county was unsuccessful.

Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme Eligible Area

The map below shows the eligible area of the Southern Shropshire LEADER programme. The area covers rural southern Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin, from a line through Shrewsbury approximately along the M54/A5/A458 heading east to west. Applications will only be eligible if they are of benefit to this area.

Southern Shropshire LEADER Eligible Area



A large part of the LEADER area is the nationally important landscape designated as the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), containing iconic features such as the Wrekin, the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, Wenlock Edge, the Clee Hills and the Clun Valley. The AONB's special qualities include the diversity and contrast of its landscape; its hills, farmland, woods and rivers; the important geology, wildlife and heritage they hold; plus scenic quality and views, tranquillity, culture and opportunities for enjoyment. These qualities are also found in varying degrees across the whole landscape of southern Shropshire, which is, in a national context, of a high quality. This key characteristic of the area informs the overall approach of the proposed LEADER programme to generate economic benefit in harmony with nature and the landscape.

Vision for the Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme

Southern Shropshire will be an area that strongly encourages business growth and development which draws on but also supports the area's environmental and cultural assets and qualities. As a result there will be an improvement in the environment for business, leading to an increase in employment and investment by businesses, along with improvements to environmental sustainability and in quality of life for all parts of the population.

Overall purpose of programme

To improve the economic wellbeing of the area and its people through sustainable development drawing on its environmental and cultural assets and qualities.

Cross-cutting themes

- ***Exemplifying the LEADER approach through networking and co-operation.***
- ***An embedded approach to low carbon and sustainable development.***
- ***Social inclusion and innovation.***
- ***Protecting or enhancing natural and cultural qualities which provide an economic asset for the future.***

Priority Themes

These have emerged from the consultation, and we will expect activities to contribute to one or more of the priority themes outlined below:

1. Helping businesses thrive in rural southern Shropshire

The programme will support physical and virtual approaches to improve productivity, connectivity and the adaptability of small/micro businesses, including farming and forestry.

The LAG will support projects that support business start-up and entry into self-employment for a wide cross section of the rural community.

We will support ideas and approaches that address the challenges of living and working in rural southern Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin, whilst embracing the very best that the area has to offer in its character and assets.

2. Exploring opportunities for growth and addressing market failure

The LAG will be proactive in developing ideas and ways of working that exemplify the LEADER approach. We will work with local businesses and organisations to target growth areas most effectively and address market failure. There are real opportunities for innovation and technology development across rural sectors, drawing on resources both within the area and beyond.

The Partnership will support solutions based on networking and co-operation that have a lasting reach beyond that which the funding can provide.

3. Building the resilience of local communities

The LAG will support projects that create the conditions for resilient, economically active rural communities and an environment where businesses can thrive. Our ambition is to provide relatively small-scale targeted support to assist communities to achieve sustainable economic growth and job creation, and support the transition to a lower carbon economy.

One approach will be to target those people who face particular barriers to work including older entrepreneurs, young people, women and the socially challenged.

4. Nurturing southern Shropshire's local distinctiveness

The LAG will support projects that nurture southern Shropshire's distinctiveness and make it a uniquely special place to live, work and visit. This includes the countryside and market towns, and the close inter-relationships between these. We will support projects that link economic activity with the natural and cultural asset base while maintaining and enhancing those assets, and demonstrating how the natural environment, culture and heritage and the local economy are mutually supportive.

Programmes of Activity

The local application of the six national LEADER priorities is as follows:

- Increasing **farm productivity** in ways which enhance natural capital
- Developing sustainable **micro and small enterprises and farm diversification**
- Building **rural tourism** making the most of Shropshire's assets
- Improving **rural services** to support business growth and development
- Enhancing the **natural, cultural and heritage attractions** of the area
- Increasing **woodland and forest productivity** in ways which enhance natural capital

The programme of activities will be used to deliver the southern Shropshire LDS themes. Although the programme activities can deliver under each of the priority themes, the table below highlights how the activity best delivers under the priority themes.

Programmes of activity Priority themes	Increasing farm productivity in ways which enhance natural capital	Developing sustainable micro and small enterprises and farm diversification	Building rural tourism making the most of Shropshire's assets	Improving rural services to support business growth and development	Enhancing the natural, cultural and heritage attractions of the area	Increasing woodland and forest productivity in ways which enhance natural capital
Helping businesses thrive in rural southern Shropshire						
Exploring opportunities for growth and addressing market failure						
Building the resilience of local communities						
Nurturing southern Shropshire's local distinctiveness						

Applicants will be expected to provide evidence of how their project fits with at least one of

the programme activities.

The six programme activities are described in more detail below. Bullet points are provided as examples of the kind of activity the LAG wishes to support. These are however only examples and are by no means exhaustive lists.

Increasing farm productivity in ways which enhance natural capital

Farming in the area has during recent times witnessed a period of significant change, challenge and upheaval. Falling farm incomes have accelerated the trend of smaller, family farmers leaving the industry, and although many farmers are doing their best to adapt, a proportion are struggling to stay in business. This LDS seeks to support farmers and landowners to find innovative and environmentally sustainable solutions to the challenges faced in today's agricultural industry and the demands of the rural economy.

Agriculture still plays an important economic role in Shropshire. The vast majority (85%) of the county's land area is dedicated to agricultural production, and in 2007, 3.5% of Shropshire's Gross Value Added (GVA) was attributed to agriculture (£143 million). This is five times the % contribution of farming for the UK as a whole.

Farming also supports significant food processing and manufacturing industries both upstream and downstream in the supply chain. The agri-food sector contributed £97.1 billion or 7.4% to national GVA in 2012. By increasing farm productivity the benefits to the rural economy of southern Shropshire will be far reaching and not just directly within the agricultural industry.

Southern Shropshire's farming sector is diverse and dependent on soil type, topography and climate. The southern Shropshire area has a large proportion of upland and lowland livestock farms (mainly sheep and cattle). Dairy farming is more significant towards the north of the LEADER area, though it becomes more predominant further into North Shropshire and Cheshire. The large dairy group Müller have a presence in the southern Shropshire area as a result of the proximity to farmers who can supply adequate quantities of milk. The dairy sector is however in long term decline, and where production costs exceed farm gate milk prices, dairy farming is no longer a viable option. Cereal production is a less significant sector than in other parts of the country but it does provide an important link in the food chain, in particular through the production of livestock feed. Pigs and poultry are less significant in Shropshire than in England as a whole,

although the poultry sector has seen significant growth over recent years. The area has good representation of organic farming and strong skills and networks in this sector.

Networking and collaboration, a major element of the LEADER approach, has been shown in farming to increase outputs, reduce business risk and reduce costs. Whether it is through sharing of machinery and labour or developing joint ventures with others, this LDS will encourage approaches to increasing farm productivity that are network based, collaborative and innovative.

Farmers, landowners and estate managers are the custodians of the countryside and the natural infrastructure on which we, and future generations, all depend. The LEADER Programme will support projects that help to manage the landscape and ecosystems sustainably, and at the same time improve the performance of southern Shropshire's agricultural sector. Applicants will be judged on their ability to drive the rural economy in a way that is sensitive to and enhances the defining features of the southern Shropshire landscape.

Examples of possible activities the programme may support:

- Co-operative and network based approaches to increased farm productivity.
- Investment in animal health and welfare improvements, sheep and cattle handling systems, weigh scales for animals, pregnancy scanning equipment to identify parasites in livestock, cattle comforts, better flooring, slat changes, improvement of cattle gates, improving ventilation in sheds to reduce pneumonia, woodland shelter belts and other activities to support the health of livestock.
- Processing, marketing and/ or development of agricultural products.
- Improving the overall performance and sustainability of the agricultural holding especially with regard to reducing dependency on fossil fuels.
- Projects to support precision farming e.g. GPS, computer programmes to improve business efficiency, benchmarking and budgets to improve farm account management.
- Water catchment and water resource protection.
- Improving slurry lagoons to improve nutrient efficiency and reduce costs on farms.
- Improving soil structures through minimum tillage, infiltration, in-field wetlands (to reduce sediment in watercourses) and grass/pave/core systems for gateways to reduce soil erosion.
- Making a transition to more extensive farming practices (pasture-fed livestock, traditional breeds, etc.) to reduce reliance on high input/high output farming systems.

Developing sustainable micro and small enterprises and farm diversification

Small and Micro Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in southern Shropshire's economy. The main factors determining whether a company is 'micro' or 'small' used by the Commission for the purposes of European funding are i) number of employees and ii) either turnover or balance sheet total.

Company category	Employees	Turnover	or	Balance sheet total
Small	< 50	≤ € 10 m		≤ € 10 m
Micro	< 10	≤ € 2 m		≤ € 2 m

These ceilings apply to the figures for individual firms only. A firm which is part of larger grouping may need to include employee/turnover/balance sheet data from that grouping too.

SMEs usually employ local people, and are economic drivers that create the conditions for money to move through the rural economy. Successful local businesses allow owners to remain in place and generate opportunities for further local employment and more opportunities for other entrepreneurs. Without a thriving SME sector, rural economies will experience loss, as the money moves away from the local community. This leads to a reduced local offer and a reduction in basic services such as transport and local shops. The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal stated in April 2000 that:

*'The problem is not necessarily that too little money flows into a neighbourhood. Rather it is what consumers, public services and businesses do with that money. Too often it is spent on services with no local presence, and so immediately leaves the area.'*¹

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) highlighted² the issues facing small businesses in rural areas, and in particular the common factors which have enabled some to continue to grow and to thrive in the recent challenging economy. Whilst accepting that there are specific factors such as sector, location or the availability of finance, which mean that every business will need its own recipe for success, the CRC identified the following factors behind the continuing success of some rural micro-businesses:

- Diversification – being able to react to changes in the market, so that the business continues to be relevant to the needs of its customers.
- Identifying a niche market, either with a specific rural-focused product or service, or in a location where that product is currently hard to obtain.
- Understanding the needs of a rural local market, and being able to adapt to meet them. Successful small rural shops have tended to do this, for example.
- Networks, through which businesses are able to work together to offer a combined package of products; and are able to learn from each other and link to wider markets, services, or public sector initiatives. In rural areas it is common for small, tightly-knit networks to exist, sometimes formally and sometimes less so.
- Maximising the benefits of being in an attractive rural location. Some self-employed professionals have obtained great quality of life through relocation; and some farmers have let business units in former farm buildings on the strength of an idyllic location.
- Finances – some business costs, such as fuel, are higher in rural areas, but for some businesses costs such as rent, rates and parking charges can be lower.

The LAG supports sustainable, inclusive and innovative approaches to addressing challenges faced by small and micro enterprises that ultimately lead to an increase in jobs and growth. This LDS supports the development and the innovation of the southern Shropshire SME sector.

Farm Diversification is one of the ways that farmers can improve the economic performance of their business. By diversifying, farmers can generate income from sources other than conventional agricultural commodities and by doing so improve the economic viability of their businesses.

The southern Shropshire LEADER area has a diverse farming landscape. In a large part of the area, especially in the west, the farming landscape is primarily upland. The importance of the English uplands is evident in the Uplands Policy Review (Defra 2011):

“Our intention is to support and encourage all hill farmers to improve the competitiveness of their core agricultural business. At the same time, it is vital that hill farmers grasp the opportunities to diversify, whether as managers of the natural resources and ecosystems of the uplands, or through other business opportunities”

*“Our uplands are endowed with natural assets that are important for delivering a range of these valuable “ecosystem services”, including food and fibre, water regulation, carbon storage, biodiversity, renewable energy and recreational opportunities for health and wellbeing”.*³

If farmers are to get more involved in the supply chain and improve their business performance through diversification, new commercial skills need to be developed. Diversification will play an important role in the continued business success of the local farming sector and therefore the management and stewardship of the landscape and environment, which is one of the area's key economic assets.

¹ National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: a framework for consultation, Social Exclusion unit, April 2000

²The Commission for Rural Communities January 2013: Rural micro-businesses: what makes some thrive in a challenging economic climate?

³ Uplands Policy Review (Defra 2011)

Shropshire County Council's Farm Study⁴ highlighted that farm-based recreation was the most popular area of diversification, followed by holiday accommodation and farm shops. The failure rate for new ventures was one in six. At that time, the main reasons for failure were low profitability and problems with legislation.

Examples of possible activities the programme may support:

- To support small/micro businesses and farm diversification, including cross-LAG/transnational co-operation.
- Support for network based, co-operative approaches to work and digital media and IT solutions to enable small/micro businesses to be more effective and/or better networked.
- An inclusive and targeted approach to addressing barriers to work for women, young people, disabled people, entrepreneurs aged 55+ and the socially excluded.
- Support for entrepreneurship, business start-ups, social enterprises and CICs, and entry into self-employment.
- Support for sustainable, innovative projects to increase farm diversification.
- Support for small food and drink producers and diversification into food/drink production. Innovation support and sharing of best practice between small businesses and centres of technical expertise.

Building rural tourism making the most of Shropshire's assets

More than 10 million tourists visit Shropshire overall (including Telford and Wrekin) each year, with the industry worth around £560 million to the economy annually.⁵ Given the growing importance that tourism has on the southern Shropshire economy, this strategy aims to ensure that resources are properly focused on priority areas. The Partnership endorses and supports the key objectives set out in the Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism in the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow 2011 – 2016⁶ and the Bridgnorth Area Tourism Action Group's Plan, which together cover the whole LEADER area. The LAG will look to support projects throughout the southern Shropshire area that deliver actions from these strategies and align with their guiding principles as described below:

- Building an integrated destination, linking the towns and the landscape.
- Ensuring effective partnership working between stakeholders at all levels.
- Growing tourism spending year round and throughout the area.
- Bringing out opportunities to enjoy the area's special qualities and distinctiveness.
- Being ambitious about the sustainable aspects of tourism.
- Providing a quality experience for all visitors.

Tourism activity supported by the southern Shropshire LAG will have to demonstrate a sustainable approach. The World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme have defined sustainable tourism as *'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'*.⁷

The LAG has excellent established links with the Shropshire Hills & Ludlow Destination Development Partnership (DDP) which includes tourism representatives from across the whole LEADER area, and with

⁴ Farm Study, Shropshire County Council 2002

⁵ Volume and Value of Tourism in Shropshire, 2005, Heart of England Tourism

⁶ Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism in the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow 2011 – 2016 - The Tourism Company with Alison Caffyn

⁷ World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme, *Making Tourism More Sustainable* (2005)

Shropshire Council's Visitor Economy Team. The Partnership will work with the DDP and similar structures for neighbouring areas to ensure alignment and delivery of appropriate tourism projects.

Examples of possible activities the programme may support:

- Support to help new tourism enterprises to establish, and existing enterprises to grow and upgrade (includes accommodation, attractions, catering and retail).
- Support to market tourism operations in conjunction with other enterprises, for example, how rural tourism business and local food outlets can work together.
- Co-ordinated approaches to marketing for the area's destinations.
- Collaborative work by locality or theme-based groups of tourism businesses
- Opportunities to extend the visitor tourism season.
- Tourism based on walking, cycling and other outdoor activities, including improving access connecting centres of population or businesses to natural or cultural sites.
- Accommodation upgrades.
- Support for events and festivals, including arts and crafts.
- IT and e-bookings systems, and innovative ways of providing visitor information and guidance.
- Promoting and developing green tourism, heritage and wildlife tourism.

Improving rural services to support business growth and development

Services are fundamental to any community. Access to healthcare, shops, public transport and broadband for example are vital to people's wellbeing and economic activity, and help to create and enhance a feeling of belonging and a sustainable future for the area. In recent times rural communities especially have experienced significant social change. An increasing number of villages in southern Shropshire struggle to offer adequate services for the local community. This forces people to travel further out of their community to access services such as doctors' surgeries, schools, shops and post offices. For many, private transport, either a car or taxi, is the only way of accessing these services.

The increased costs of accessing services together with the increased costs of housing has led to living in rural Shropshire becoming less and less affordable, and for some completely unaffordable. This is particularly a problem for older people, families with young children and young people.

Throughout the consultation process, poor broadband and mobile connectivity has been raised as one of the major challenges for businesses, including farmers and the self-employed in southern Shropshire. There are also rising expectations of these services among people visiting for leisure and tourism. Access to broadband is of wide relevance to the delivery of rural services, with more and more service providers are expecting their users to access information or seek advice or pay for services online. The Office of Fair Trading have examined access to broadband for communities in remote areas⁸, concluding that many consumers in these areas had only one option of broadband provider and that connection speeds frequently fell short of those advertised. Slow speeds and intermittent connections are seen as particular problems by businesses who wished for example to access financial services, submit forms and documents online, market their services, take online bookings and facilitate unmanned payment systems. Although alternative funding provision is available for broadband infrastructure, parts of southern Shropshire will not be able to access super-fast broadband for the foreseeable future. The mainstream provision of broadband services lies beyond the scope of LEADER, but this strategy supports the development of innovative solutions to broadband accessibility, such as community access hubs that do not involve infrastructure.

Climate change and fuel security is another issue facing the rural communities of southern Shropshire. Due to the dependency on fossil fuels, the future supply and affordability of energy for rural communities is becoming more of a threat. Communities need to be encouraged to develop and reduce this dependency and effects of climate change through community schemes e.g. greening village halls, local recycling facilities, energy audits and community energy schemes.

⁸ Office of Fair Trading, Price and Choice in Remote Communities, OFT (2012)

The LAG supports projects that create the conditions for resilient, economically active rural communities and an environment where businesses can thrive. This can only be achieved through communities that have strong basic services.

Examples of possible activities the programme may support:

- Supporting innovative and co-operative approaches to addressing declining rural services and essential local businesses such as shops, pubs and post offices.
- Enabling communities to access and effectively utilise broadband – enabling take-up, ensuring equal access to technology.
- Support for innovative projects to address the problems associated with limited public transport – car sharing schemes, use of social media etc.
- Support for local communities to reduce dependency on fossil fuels and the impact of climate change.

Enhancing the natural, cultural and heritage attractions of the area

Southern Shropshire is rich in its natural, cultural and heritage attributes, and it is largely these which define the area and create its unique identity. These qualities attract people to live and work in, and visit, southern Shropshire which is vital element of the local rural economy. The 2014 Shropshire Business Summit identified Shropshire's landscape as the top factor in why the county was a good place for business.

Natural attractions and ecosystem services

The area's landscape character is one of variety and of transition – between the lowland plains of the English Midlands and the uplands of Wales, and between north and south of Britain. This is reflected in both ecology and patterns of human activity. The LEADER area contains around two thirds of the Landscape Types defined in Shropshire's Landscape Character Assessment⁹. The key components of the southern Shropshire landscape are the hills, farmed countryside, woodlands, rivers and river valleys (including the Severn). The high quality of the natural environment is reflected in the AONB designation, several Special Areas of Conservation and numerous SSSIs.

The valuable habitats of southern Shropshire, especially heathland, grassland, woodland and rivers are linked to a long history of relatively sympathetic land management. Due to the transitional position, southern Shropshire has an unusual mix of species associated with both upland and lowland.

The 2011 UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UK NEA) concluded that the natural world and its ecosystems are vitally important to our wellbeing and economic prosperity. They are however consistently undervalued in conventional economic analyses and decision-making. Ecosystem services can be divided into four categories:

- Provisioning (e.g. food, energy, raw materials),
- Regulating (e.g. air, climate, water),
- Cultural (e.g. aesthetic, recreation),
- Supporting (e.g. soil, nutrients, primary production)

Though some economic sectors have little direct connection with the land, the environment still provides basic resources for urban and rural populations alike. Functions such as clean air, water and food production sustain life and are vital for health, and effective catchment management to maintain water quality, reduce soil erosion and mitigate flooding in major settlements has huge economic benefits.

Cultural

The southern Shropshire LEADER area spans a wide spectrum of cultural settings, from the urban fringes of Telford and Shrewsbury through to the rural hinterlands of market towns such as Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Craven Arms and Much Wenlock to some of the sparsest areas of population in England along the Welsh border. The southern Shropshire area has been a cultural inspiration for writers such as A E Housman, Mary Webb and Malcolm Saville. The area also has some notable film locations, the Olympic heritage of

⁹ Shropshire County Council (2006) The Shropshire Landscape Typology
<http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/environment/shropshires-landscape/shropshire-landscapeassessment/>

Much Wenlock and events and festivals, all of which help to attract visitors. Opportunities for enjoyment and wellbeing are open to both locals and visitors with walks and outdoor activities respecting the area's qualities.

Heritage

Many ancient features survive in a landscape which has seen much less change than many parts of the country. Defences such as Offa's Dyke, Iron Age hillforts such as at Caer Caradoc and Bury Ditches, and medieval castles and fortified houses such as Clun and Stokesay tell of centuries of turbulent Marches history. Much of the southern Shropshire field and settlement pattern is very ancient with tiny lanes, villages and scattered hamlets and farms. There are also estates, parkland, planted settlements and abandoned medieval villages, along with areas of later, more regular Parliamentary enclosure. Stone and timber-framed buildings in a variety of styles reflect the diversity of local materials available, and there is a rich variety of churches and churchyards.

The southern Shropshire area has seen periods of thriving industry. The Severn Valley woodlands and the Wyre Forest have a long history of economic use, and the area around Ironbridge is described as the "Birthplace of the [Industrial Revolution](#)", in reference to the crucial step forward when [Abraham Darby](#) perfected the technique of [smelting](#) iron with [coke](#), in [Coalbrookdale](#), allowing much cheaper [production of iron](#). In 1986, nearby Ironbridge became part of a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) (which covers the wider Ironbridge Gorge area) and has become a major tourist attraction within Shropshire. The area has also witnessed other industries ranging from charcoal burning to lead mining and stone quarrying, often accompanied by haphazard 'squatter' settlements. The Severn Valley Railway is a significant part of steam railway heritage and also important to the visitor economy.

This LDS will support projects that consider ecosystem services in the design of their activities and the impact of their outputs. It is important that investment in the natural, cultural and heritage characteristics of southern Shropshire not only highlights the importance of the area, but also that it links to how these unique features can drive the area's rural economy.

Examples of possible activities the programme may support:

- Restoration or enhancement of nature reserves, heritage features or countryside sites.
- Visitor infrastructure and interpretation at natural, heritage and countryside sites.
- Skills development of volunteers and individuals in conservation and heritage skills.
- Smallholding advice and sympathetic land management.
- Heritage, wildlife and cultural tourism promotion.
- Water and catchment management, e.g. rewetting to attenuate water flows.
- Safeguarding soil resources
- Creation of village trails including path construction and interpretation relating to history and heritage of the area.
- Installing and promoting cycle routes linking areas of heritage and culture with economic activities e.g. accommodation, village shops, cafes and pubs.
- Research and development plans for local culture, heritage and environment, with the aim of regeneration to improve the local economy.
- Enterprises based on experience of the natural world and countryside.
- Conversion of heritage properties into a visitor attraction or essential service provider.
- Support for events and festivals which can attract visitors e.g. local music, arts and food and drink festivals.
- Support for promotion of the products of the area.

Increasing woodland and forest productivity in ways which enhance natural capital

Due in part to the shift towards renewable energy, the demand for forestry and woodland products is increasing. There is considerable potential to increase local supplies of logs, woodchip, and pellets with

associated development of supply chains, and stoves and boilers at the consumer end. It is important however that this is linked to improving the condition of woodlands, or some of the potential environmental benefits will be lost.

Use of local wood as higher value timber may remain relatively modest, but successful use of alder for flooring has shown that perceptions about the quality of local timber can be overcome, and significant niche markets for local materials can be expanded. Raising awareness and involving people remain important, and wood is an increasingly popular subject. The Green Wood Centre at Ironbridge, including the national Small Woods Association, is a valuable partner in the area.

28,000ha of woodland in the Marches LEP area is classed by the Forestry Commission as 'unmanaged'. Unmanaged woodland is not economically active and not always beneficial for biodiversity. The LAG supports the aims and objectives of the Marches Woodland Enterprise Zone and its strategic objective of bringing 2,250ha of woodland back into management and to develop local supply chains for both wood fuel and timber products.

Examples of possible activities the programme may support:

- Support for sustainable woodland management (including longer-term management planning) to allow small farm woodlands and private woodland owners to become economically active.
- Woodfuel and biomass supply chains – assessing what is there and the potential for biomass and other timber uses, bringing unmanaged woodlands into use.
- Support for new products and markets – e.g. brush for flood defences, venison, beanpoles.
- Support to increase production of higher value timber products – e.g. saw logs, specialist markets etc.
- Support for social forestry projects that support an economic output or job creation.
- Bringing woodland and forestry into the tourism offer.
- Timber extraction and processing, transport, handling and storage facilities.
- Management of deer and marketing of venison
- Development of woodlands to recreational and tourism attractions

Key growth areas:

As a result of the consultation the key growth areas identified are:

- Micro-enterprises, entrepreneurs and the self-employed.
- Food and drink, and added value in the farm supply chain, especially capitalising on environmental quality.
- Farm diversification, especially for small, traditional upland farms.
- Sustainable tourism.
- Supply and demand of woodfuel and other wood products.
- Digital media and creative arts.
- The Green Economy – renewables, natural capital, ecosystem services.
- Economically viable rural services.

Outputs

Projects will have to be able to demonstrate how they will contribute to the outputs below. The table also shows the budget allocated to each priority in southern Shropshire over the LEADER Programme period.

Overall funding and outputs profile

National Priorities	Outputs	
Support for increasing farm productivity RDPE Investment: £398,520 % of available grant 17.65%	projects	13
	holdings benefitting	14
	businesses benefitting	20
	individuals benefitting	50
	jobs created	6
	jobs safeguarded	0
Support for micro and small enterprises and farm diversification RDPE Investment: £774,900 % of available grant 34.32%	projects	38
	holdings benefitting	10
	businesses benefitting	10
	individuals benefitting	50
	jobs created	64
	jobs safeguarded	5
Support for rural tourism RDPE Investment: £442,800 % of available grant 19.96%	projects	13
	existing tourism activities supported	6
	new tourism activities supported	6
	jobs created	14
Provision for rural services RDPE Investment: £199,260 % of available grant 8.83%	projects	8
	businesses benefitting	15
	villages / communities benefitting	20
	jobs created	5
	jobs safeguarded	2
Support for cultural and heritage activity RDPE Investment: £221,400 % of available grant 9.8%	projects	7
	facilities benefitting	10
	jobs created	3
	jobs safeguarded	2

Support for increasing forestry productivity RDPE Investment: £221,400 % of available grant 9.8%	projects	10
	forests/woodlands/holdings benefiting	10
	jobs created	2
	jobs safeguarded	2

Totals	Total Outputs	
RDPE Investment £2,258,280	projects	89
	jobs created	94
	jobs safeguarded	11

Management and Administration

Management

The LEADER Programme will be overseen by the Local Action Group (LAG). The LAG is made up of people from the local community and the local public and private sector.

LAG members will be expected to play a steering role to guide the operation of LEADER in southern Shropshire. Members will help to champion the LEADER programme, its aims and objectives, and encourage good partnership working between public sector, business, community and voluntary organisations to ensure coordination of efforts within the programme area, and through co-operation activity with other EU member states. Members of the LAG will help to ensure integration with other activity, including funding streams managed by other organisations, particularly the Marches LEP. Members will also be part of a network of LEADER Local Action Groups to share best practice and help contribute to the delivery of the LEADER approach within the Rural Development Programme for England. The membership of the LAG is shown in Appendix 1.

Accountable Body

The Accountable Body for the Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme is Shropshire Council, who will be responsible for the overall running of the programme. The LEADER Programme Manager is employed by the Council, within the Outdoor Partnerships Team to manage the programme and all potential applicants should contact Pete Banford prior to making an application.

Project development and assessment procedures

Projects can be developed with the assistance of the LEADER Programme Manager, and through networking, best practice and partnership work. The projects will be assessed by an Appraisal Panel and the Rural Payments Agency, which will make recommendations and may ask questions of the applicants, which in itself may result in further project development. The LAG will make the final decision to approve projects for funding or not.

Claims and payments

The LEADER Programme Manager will provide support to project managers on the preparation of claims, and make initial checks for errors. Agreement has been reached with Shropshire Council's Financial Management team on the provision of a LEADER Financial Claims Officer. The Finance Officer will undertake the calculations and checks of grants due to be paid to projects. They will ensure that projects maintain a register of assets, in a format approved by Defra, including items funded or part-funded by monies received from the programme. They will perform management checks and inspections as laid out in the National Operational Manual.

Grant payments for the programme will be processed using the new IT system that is being developed to support the new CAP schemes, known as DORA. This will ensure that the payments are eligible and evidenced by scrutinising the financial claims submitted by project deliverers. Claims will only be recommended for payment where satisfactory progress of the project has been confirmed. Defra Rural

Development Team will assess these payment recommendations and successful claims will be paid through the DORA IT system. The project beneficiary will receive the payment directly.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Shropshire Council's External Funding Team has agreed to carry out the Monitoring role. The Monitoring Officer will identify possible weaknesses or risks in the operation of projects and provide for corrective measures to be taken. This will include routine and targeted inspections and monitoring the projects' progress by any other means. Project managers must supply a progress report with each grant claim. This will provide detail on the progress made against the forecasts in the application and contract. Larger and longer-term projects may need to supply a progress report every quarter.

The Monitoring Officer will have the right to seek information regarding any project or any procedure carried out by the LEADER group, an executive group or any project deliverer where they believe that the correct procedure has not been carried out and/or where they believe that there has been financial impropriety. They may also seek information regarding projects selected by random sampling or any other method to satisfy themselves that the procedures are being carried out correctly. The Monitoring Officer should refer projects to Defra or the RPA for further investigation, if required.

The separate role of Monitoring Officer will help to ensure there are no conflicts of interest for the LEADER Programme Manager, the Finance Officer, and for LAG members.

Use of Grants

The Projects' Offer Letter will be the contract with the accountable body for the southern Shropshire LEADER Programme, setting out the terms conditions of the funding. It will include a list of "eligible costs", those attracting LEADER grant, specifically for the project.

LEADER grants will be paid in arrears, by the project submitting claims showing what they have spent on eligible costs. A Progress Report must be sent with every claim.

Detailed guidance and training from the southern Shropshire LEADER Programme Manager on claims procedures will be given to all project managers.

Match funding

Since applicants can only apply for a maximum of 40% towards project costs from the LEADER Programme, project applications will be expected to include a level of match funding from other non-European or public sources. Match funding refers to the finance or commitment put forward as a contribution to the eligible costs of a project. Identifying appropriate match funding is the responsibility of the project applicant, but the LEADER Programme Manager will provide assistance and support for applicants wherever possible. .

Applicants must consider the following when considering match funding for their projects:

- LEADER funding can never be used to match other European or Exchequer funding.
- Match funding must be part of the project and contribute to eligible project costs.
- Match funding must be in place before the project can receive final approval.
- There must be an audit trail to prove the value of the match funding.
- Opportunities exist for LEADER to contribute towards projects where the total project costs include funding that is not eligible as a source of Match funding.

Procurement

The LAG and all Applicants must comply with the EU and national rules for public procurement. This applies even if the project is not in the public sector. Procurement processes and decisions are open to scrutiny and audit. They must be open, transparent, well documented and give value for money.

Programme Evaluation

The Partnership will, in addition to quarterly and annual reviews, carry out a mid-term evaluation of progress under the LDS at the end of 2017. The evaluation will cover as a minimum:

- the continuing relevance of the Strategy
- promotion of the Strategy and take-up of resources
- financial and physical progress
- the effectiveness of the LAG staffing and processes
- the effectiveness of the LAG Partnership and processes.

The Partnership will work with project organisers to recognise their achievements and celebrate their successes. The LEADER Programme will provide a learning opportunity for all those involved. Best practice and innovation will be identified and will be shared with interested and relevant bodies.

Projects will be expected to carry out their own evaluations as they progress. The projects will also be expected to present their progress to the LAG. This will enable for any adjustment throughout the project duration and provide an opportunity for project owners to share their knowledge and experiences with others. An end of project evaluation will be completed and form the basis of whole project evaluation report.

The Partnership will undertake an end of programme evaluation which will be presented in an evaluation report in late 2020 early 2021.

Appendix 1- Membership of the Southern Shropshire LEADER Local Action Group

Organisation	Name of representative	Organisational role
CLA - Country Landowners and Business Association	Alex Carson – Taylor	Vice Chair for Shropshire
ESIF (LEP)	Cllr Cecilia Motley	Shropshire Cabinet member
Federation of Small Businesses	Ray Hickinbottom	Shropshire Branch Chairman
Forestry Commission	Donna Tavernor	Partnership and Expertise Manager
Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site Steering Group	Anna Brennand	Chief Executive, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust
National Farmers Union	Jonathan Evans	Shropshire County Adviser
Shropshire Council	Cllr Tim Barker	Shropshire Cabinet member
Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership	George Chancellor	Chair
Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership and Bridgnorth and District Tourist Assoc.	Anthony Webb	Chair of BDTA
Shropshire Rural Community Charity	Julia Baron	Chief Executive
Small Woods Association	Richard Thomason	Apprenticeships Officer
Telford and Wrekin Council	Kathy Mulholland	Inward Investment & Business Support Service Delivery Manager (Interim), Development, Business & Employment
WiRE - Women In Rural Enterprise	Marina Ibrahim	Ludlow WiRE Network Leader