

LEADER Programmes for Rural Economic Development – Heart of Wessex progress report

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Purpose of the Report

To brief Area Committees on the progress with establishing district wide coverage of the new LEADER programme for rural economic development and report on the success of funding bids.

Public Interest

Over the last 5 years much of rural South Somerset has not qualified for the LEADER Programme, which supports locally designed, rural development initiatives. This year, 3 existing programmes have bid for funding to extend their reach within South Somerset resulting in full coverage of SSDC qualifying rural areas. The successor programme will run for 5 years from January 2015 and will focus on rural economic development.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the success of the bid for programme funding for the Heart of Wessex and consider future promotion next year.

Background

This is an update from the report to Area Committees in June 2014 about proposals to extend coverage of the LEADER programme in South Somerset from 2015.

Projects funded under the new LEADER Programme (2015-2020) will need to focus on delivering jobs and growth, 70% of all projects funded under LEADER will directly support the rural economy (e.g. through creating and developing micro and small sized rural businesses) 30% of projects will also need to demonstrate that they are contributing to improving the rural economy. The new Programme has 6 priorities:

- (1) increasing farm productivity
- (2) micro and small enterprise and farm diversification
- (3) rural tourism
- (4) rural services
- (5) cultural and heritage activity and
- (6) forestry productivity

LAGs will align activities to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP), Local Authorities, Rural Growth Network Pilot areas, Rural and Farming Networks etc. The Local Development Strategies (LDSs) have been written to complement the activities of the relevant LEPs and for the LEPs have formally endorsed the LDSs

The coverage of the 3 LAGs for the new programme all consist of large rural areas, extending well beyond South Somerset with populations approaching 150,000 people. These are:

- *The Levels and Moors* – is an established area stretching from A303 to the Somerset coast. Minor boundary changes in South Somerset means that it has been possible to consolidate full coverage of Area North. The accountable body is Somerset County Council
- *Making it Local* – is largely based on the Blackdown Hills and into Devon. The boundary has been extended eastwards to take in Chard and western parishes of Area West, including the Ilminster area. The accountable body is Devon County Council
- *Heart of Wessex* – follows the A303/A30 corridor area, which is a strong economic area due to the impact of these major transport routes into Wiltshire. It includes much of South Wiltshire and eastern Mendip also covering all of Area East, parts of South and West taking in the Crewkerne area (Yeovil is not eligible). The accountable body is Wiltshire Council

Award of Funding for the Programme Covering Area East

The scheme managers have been notified of indicative funding for their programmes.

Below are details of the indicative award for the Heart of Wessex LAG covering Area East. The Programme Manager has now had written confirmation that the proposal can expect to be funded in the range £1,647,000-£1,816,000. The final programme sum is dependent on negotiations with rejected programmes. A final figure should be known by mid-February and the contracts signed off by end March 2015. Nothing can progress until the Rural Development Programme is finally agreed between Defra and EC. Defra will inform Groups of the timetable for this shortly. There should be no formal promotion of this programme until the RDP is signed off. A verbal update will be given at the meeting.

Preparatory work for new Leader Programme – Heart of Wessex

Each prospective Local Action Group submitted a proposed local development strategy to Defra in September 2014. In the Eastern part of South Somerset this has been followed up by awareness raising about the programme through a number of Funding Advice Workshops across the Heart of Wessex Area held in November. These were well attended by over 50 people in all and have the objective of ensuring that some projects come forward early in the programme.

Date	Venue
4 November	Boyton, Nr Warminster, Wilts
6 November	West Hatch, Tisbury, Wilts
20 November	Haselbury Plucknett, Nr Crewkerne, Somerset
25 November	The Royal Bath & West Showground, Nr Shepton Mallet, Somerset
27 November	Balsam Centre, Wincanton, Somerset

An Interim Executive Committee is being formed in early December. SSDC will be represented on this by Cllr Mike Lewis who has been on the Steering Group for the LAG. A launch event is planned for the evening 20th January 2015 at the Cheese & Grain in Frome

The Programme Managers are also to await the operating manual in order to be able to open the programme for bids.

All details of the programme are on the web site: www.heartofwessex.co.uk

Financial Implications

At its February 2014 meeting AEC set aside up to £10,000 towards participation in the proposed Heart of Wessex LEADER programme, to help to secure full coverage of the Area and maximise the benefit of the programme over the years to 2020. To date £3,000 of funding has been allocated leaving a balance of £7,000 towards programme implementation

Corporate Priority Implications

The Council Plan states that

We want a strong economy which has low unemployment and thriving businesses

One of the stated ways we will address this is to

Work in partnership to deliver investment and development that local people value

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

In due course this designation could provide a way to supporting local employment and promote local produce/ services to our communities contributing to greater self-containment thereby reducing carbon emissions

Equality and Diversity Implications

Rural communities are vulnerable to isolation from services and markets and face higher transport cost. This programme provides an opportunity to support locally important economic initiatives

Background Papers: DEFRA guidance documents for LEADER programme
