

Area North Committee – 17<sup>th</sup> December 2008

## 8. Somerset Levels & Moors – Local Action for Rural Communities (LARC) Programme

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### Purpose of the report

To update members on the progress of the Levels and Moors Local Action for Rural Communities investment programme.

The accountable body for this programme is Somerset County Council.

The programme manager, Alex Sherman will attend the committee to present this report and answer questions.

### Recommendation

That members note and comment on the report.

### Background

In July 2008, the South West Regional Development Agency awarded £1.8 million from the Local Action for Rural Communities Scheme (part of the Rural Development Programme for England – RDPE) to the Somerset Levels and Moors Local Action Group.

This followed a lengthy and competitive process to prepare and submit bids (referred to as a Local Development Strategy) and was one of 20 submitted by groups across the South West region.

This major investment is intended to be delivered through a programme of community-led initiatives and projects, between 2009 and 2013 in order to deliver positive benefits to the Levels & Moors area for its long term economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Detailed information on the bid, the Local Development Strategy and the programme itself are available from the Programme Manager, Alex Sherman.

### What is 'Local Action for Rural Communities'?

This is a programme funded by the European Union to support the positive development of communities and businesses in specific rural areas through Local Action or community-led projects.

- Local Action is the name for this programme in the South West region of England, also known as the Leader Approach, which adopts 7 main principles:
- Area based approach (the Somerset Levels & Moors)
- Managed by a Local Action Group (a partnership of public, private and voluntary groups)
- Based on principles of 'Bottom-up', with decision making made at the local level - with regular and open opportunities for consultation and direct engagement with projects and the programme.

- Encouraging innovation and experimentation
- Co-operation – this may be locally between projects and partners, but also nationally and across Europe in some cases
- Using networking to encourage all of the above
- In the South West, the funding to the Local Action Group is through the local Regional Development Agency as part of the larger Regional Development Programme for England (RDPE).

An interim steering group working with an expanded and existing LEADER+ Local Action Group developed the bid in consultation with local communities, businesses and representative agencies.

The full Levels & Moors Local Action Group seeks to be fully representative of local communities, businesses, environmental agencies, local authorities, and other sectoral groups, working with private, voluntary and public sector organisations.

- The Local Action Group is an entirely new partnership. Although representing the Levels & Moors, it is not a replacement for LAMP and does not operate with the same remit. The Group is established for the lifetime of the funding until 2013. The primary focus of the group is to boost economic development and prospects, recognising and utilising the high quality of the environment as a key stimulus. Other key areas include the governance of the area, a greater level of strategic approach than previously and delivering sustainable projects with long-term benefits.

### **The Somerset Levels & Moors**

A unique geographical landscape with a community bonded and developed as a result of flooding, terrain and location. Home to a huge amount of wildlife and nature, the area is one of the best examples of a man-made lowland wetland expanse in the world.

The bid area extends from Burnham on Sea and Cheddar in the north to South Petherton and Martock in the south, from North Petherton in the west to Glastonbury in the east. This includes a population of 130,000 people and 82 parishes across four of the five districts in Somerset.

As a result of detailed local consultation and reviews of a wealth of local strategy and planning documents, the interim Local Action Group established the following vision, aims and objectives. These represent the key focus of activity for Local Action funding in the Levels & Moors throughout the programme.

#### **Our Vision**

“Promoting sustainable development in the Levels & Moors to strengthen the economy, vibrancy and environmental quality for all residents, businesses and visitors.”

#### **Our Shared Aims**

- Sensitively and sustainably utilise and enhance the natural and cultural heritage resources, characteristics and attractiveness of the Levels & Moors, to promote and boost sustainable tourism, local infrastructure, rural communities and economic opportunities throughout.
- Assist and enable businesses and social enterprises, organisations, community groups and clusters and individuals throughout the Levels & Moors to adapt practices and adopt and integrate greater environmental awareness, especially in the face of climate change.

- Promote and develop respect, awareness and long-term security for the landscape, cultural heritage and biodiversity of the Levels & Moors, including positive and sustainable development of these where possible and appropriate.
- Develop greater cohesion and opportunity for the Levels and Moors through the positive interaction of the Market Towns and rural areas for residents, visitors and businesses to make the area vibrant, sustainable and a distinct entity and destination.

### Specific Local Objectives

In developing the Local Development Strategy, the following key objectives and themes form part of the agreement with the South West Regional Development Agency.

- Local governance and ownership – to ensure funding is truly led by the community to best represent the area and support and promote the identity of the Levels & Moors. Regular open meetings and consultation events along with an annual Business Conference will be open to any resident of the Levels & Moors and widely advertised. The Executive decision making group will be elected annually.
- Environment – promoting sustainability throughout and the unique environmental quality of the area. Recognition of the high quality environment is essential to create greater respect for it and raise the profile of the Levels & Moors nationally and internationally as a location of natural importance and worth. This has clear benefits to economic activity and the preservation of the landscape.
- Small business and social enterprise development and support – assisting existing businesses and recognising new potentials. Particularly focusing on strengthening existing businesses through better more co-ordinated marketing and attracting new customers.
- Local produce sectors – strengthening the link between produce and landscape for residents and tourists and the identity of the Levels & Moors. Building on the existing brand recognition of the area and better development of markets for existing produce.
- Sustainable tourism – to better represent the area and ensure tourism is a positive but sustainable asset for the area. Tourists have always been attracted to the area and it is essential to make sure this continues in a more sustainable manner and providing more options for high quality visits and recognition of the environmental and wildlife assets of the area.
- Minimising impact – to make the best of what is local and conserve the area for future generations. Particularly looking to car free enjoyment of the area, sustainable development and management to minimise the impact of visitors and residents to facilities. Making better use of alternative energy sources.

The aim of the programme is to support and deliver projects that link together to give coherent solutions to issues and needs identified within the area. There has and is a lot of good quality consultation that gives a picture and evidence base of need in the Levels & Moors (Community Plans, Parish Plans, Local Area Agreement, business mapping etc) and Local Action provides an opportunity to address some of these needs.

As well as grants to projects, commissioned activity is also possible to create a more strategic and sustainable approach. This is more likely to positively impact on issues and create longer-term solutions.

A small grants programme is also highly likely to be established to support projects on an individual and localised basis.

## What happens next?

The first Local Action Group meeting took place at the end of November and this approved the membership of the Executive Group for the first year of operation. The first Executive Group meeting is on the 10th December.

The interim Steering Group will prepare and submit a delivery plan for the first year of operation to update the Local Delivery Plan. Once approved by the South West RDA, full work can start.

The Local Action Group will be issued with a formal contract from the South West RDA – once this has been received the Local Action Group will be able to issue grants directly for projects. In the meantime, detailed project information cannot be considered but there will be a public launch for the grants when they become available. Still a lot to do in the next couple of months!

## The Executive is as follows:

Name	Organisation	Public/Private
Charlie Ainge	Country Land & Business Association	Private
Heather Black	Somerset Rural Youth Project	Private
Paul Chadwick	Somerset County Council	Public
Stephen Davis	Natural England	Public
Pam Earnshaw	Polden Post	Private
Cllr Anne Fraser / Julie Cooper	Sedgemoor District Council	Public
Philippa Hawks	Community Council for Somerset	Private
John Hebditch	National Farmers Union	Private
Janet Keeble	Somerset Wildlife Trust	Private
Scott McMillan	Somerset Youth Volunteering Network	Private
Ellen Musgrove	Musgrove Willows	Private
Sally Rackard	South West Regional Development Agency	Public
Gregory Rees-Smith	Langport Town Council	Private
Cllr Paull Robathan / Charlotte Jones (subject to confirmation)	South Somerset District Council	Public
Trevor Wall	Taunton Deane Borough Council	Public
Ros Wilkins	Mendip District Council	Public

A Business Development Plan covering the period January to December 09 is being finalised and will layout the structure for operation of the Programme in the first year. Once approved, the South West RDA will award the formal contract. This is expected early in January.

It is expected that the Small Grant Scheme will be launched and open for business in February 2009 with the main grant programme finalised and approved to open in March 2009. Applications to the Small Grants are expected to follow a one-stage approach – project application submitted and decision made.

The larger main grant fund is expected to be a two-stage approach. Invitation to submit an Expression of Interest will be offered – probably on a cyclical basis and submissions should demonstrate how needs have been identified and will be addressed. From this stage, a number will be invited to develop full proposals in consultation and with assistance from the Programme Manager. Full applications will be appraised by people with expertise in the subject area with recommendations made to the Executive. A decision may then be made on the application.

**Appendix A** includes Draft Terms of Reference.

**Appendix B** includes coverage map.

For more information about Local Action: [www.southwestrda.org.uk/local-action](http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/local-action)

Local Action bids press release:

[www.southwestrda.org.uk/news/release.asp?ReleaseID=2648](http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/news/release.asp?ReleaseID=2648)

**Background Papers:** Local Development Strategy, and bid documentation. Business Delivery Plan.

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