

Looking Back to Go Forward

A Review of Rural Development Funding
Processes and Delivery

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Report Commissioned by Rural Community Network
and Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network.

March 2022



Rural
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Network



The 
Community
Foundation
Northern Ireland

Supported by The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to research participants who generously gave their time to participate in interviews and focus groups. The steering group offered invaluable guidance and support in delivering the research. Thanks to Dr Adrienne Attorp for providing help with focus groups. A final thanks to Rural Community Network and Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network for commissioning the research.

Background to the Report

This research was jointly commissioned by Rural Community Network and Northern Ireland Rural Womens' Network to take stock of how rural development funding has been delivered in Northern Ireland since the 1990s. We believe that it is timely to reflect on previous Rural Development Programmes as Northern Ireland prepares to deliver a new Rural Policy Framework post Brexit.

On 31/01/2022 AERA Minister, Edwin Poots MLA, spoke about the need to learn lessons from LEADER and the importance of a bottom-up approach to engage local communities in his statement on the Framework to the Assembly.² He made the point that it is too early to say how the programme will be delivered and a range of delivery options is being considered. We believe this research can make a valuable contribution to that consideration.

The aims of the research were to identify what worked well with the previous LEADER approach and what is worth retaining in any future programme. It also aimed to identify what the challenges have been and what needs to be changed to improve delivery of rural development funding. The report makes recommendations on how inclusive delivery processes, like participatory budgeting, could increase engagement of rural citizens, promote openness and accountability in decision making and begin to address the well documented under-representation of women, young people and other S75 groups as applicants to, and beneficiaries of rural development funding.

The research also aimed to explore how new approaches to funding delivery can support innovation in rural communities to address the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change, Brexit and Covid recovery. The research also considers how the Framework can complement place shaping, community planning and community wealth building agendas.

Obviously, all this assumes that we will have a rural policy framework that will be on a similar scale to the previous versions of the LEADER programme. Despite UK government assurances that levels of EU replacement funding would be maintained post Brexit the delay and the lack of engagement by Westminster with NI Executive departments in the roll out of the Community Renewal Fund (precursor to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) is a serious concern. The Minister's statement on 1 February indicated that the Department aims to bid to the NI Block grant budget, Peace PLUS, EU Farm Replacement funds and Green Growth funding. We welcome the ambition within the Department for a significant delivery programme for the Rural Policy Framework. This is an opportunity to match the ambition and innovation already thriving across rural communities. We will continue to play our part in seeing that ambition realised.

Finally, a few words of thanks. Thanks to Professor Ruth McAreavey from the University of Newcastle. The project has benefitted immeasurably from her professionalism as well as her experience and insight into rural development in Northern Ireland and globally. Thanks to members of the research advisory panel who generously contributed their perspectives and insights. We would also like to thank the Community Foundation NI who funded the project and without which it would not have been possible.

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¹ <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-31-01-2022.pdf>

Executive Summary

Thirty years on from the introduction of the LEADER² in Europe, the programme has left a noteworthy footprint across rural communities in Northern Ireland, not least the legacy of a bottom-up, participatory approach to development. It has improved local services, nurtured knowledge exchanges and stimulated local groups to engage in a plethora of activities. Rural policy in Northern Ireland is at a genuine crossroads. As policymakers identify new initiatives to replace EU programmes and to recover from the pandemic, there is an unquestionable opportunity for bold moves in the policy domain. It is an opportunity to try something new, to build on existing partnerships while also developing new relationships and alliances and supporting new forms of engagement. As part of this process, policymakers should commit to be inclusive and wide reaching in involvement. The other option is to rebuild what has gone before; that does not seem to be a shrewd alternative – the programme has always been packaged as a community-led process, but in recent years it has become much more led by government, local and central. There needs to be a realignment of expectations from all rural development actors and a re-building of relations.

This report is based on research that evaluated community led local development (CLLD) in Northern Ireland, including different versions of the LEADER programme. It presents a range of recommendations to inform the development of new rural policy.

There is great willingness among different rural development actors to achieve a new rural policy that is suitable for the needs of rural communities in the twenty-first century. Already there are sizeable assets within the community that could be used to anchor activities. Rather than reinventing what has become a government-led initiative, DAERA has an incredible opportunity to nurture an innovative and truly inclusive rural development process. Time is of the essence; already there are concerns around the loss of expertise given the unavoidable gap between the recent programme and its replacement. By engaging with rural networks, development trusts and the range of other partners that exist in the energetic rural development landscape, DAERA, as the policy lead, sits in a powerful position.

Relationship building lies at the core of successful rural development. Trusting relations will be important. This requires all actors recognising each other's constraints and trying to work through those limitations to achieve maximum impact. Transparent processes are a fundamental prerequisite to building trust and achieving inclusion.

The LEADER approach has become ever more selective, that is to say, it is less expansive than previous generations of the programme, most recently funding only specific activities across four key themes. This has shrunk the programme and it has lessened its vibrancy.

Three measures can be taken to reverse that trend. Firstly, barriers to entry should be lowered, including, taking proactive measures to widen inclusion, all of which needs to be carefully monitored. Over the years, barriers have increased and, in the most recent programme, they served to exclude many small-scale and grassroots initiatives, leaving little space for bottom-up development. Consequently, data from Local Action Groups (LAGs) shows how Section 75 groups, including women, young people and people with disabilities, benefit much less from the programme and are less involved in its governance. Proactive measures can be taken to address this longstanding gap. Additionally, measures should be taken to engage with minoritized communities, particularly relevant in certain geographic areas. Secondly, exchanging good practice both within Northern Ireland and with rural development actors from beyond should be brought back into the programme. Slowly this has been deprioritised when in fact it sustains responsible innovation and risk taking. Exit from the EU should not result in withdrawal from wider knowledge exchange networks. Besides, the Good Friday Agreement supports learning across the island and this should be used to enhance the new

² For ease of reading LEADER is still referred to here in relation to Community Led Local Development (CLLD), even though the process was mainstreamed within the European Union's Rural Development Programme under Priority 6 measures within the Northern Ireland programme.

programme. Thirdly, genuine partnership building is needed to bring in different partners with different interests, to recognise the value of voluntary effort, to shift the programme away from its council-centric focus and to achieve a strategic approach overall.

For sure, councils have a role to play, but as an equal partner in a wider process. All partners need to be respectful of their particular positions and limitations. Social partners bring a range of resources that should be recognised accordingly and yet the extent of voluntary effort on previous programmes was not formally captured. Failure to capture this work is a major gap that should be addressed. DAERA meanwhile, as the core government body, has a leadership role to play. That role includes encouraging a collaborative approach as well as assuming a strategic role that ensures attention is paid to important societal issues, such as those emerging from the climate crisis. This requires working across traditional departmental 'silos' and engaging with other government departments where appropriate and necessary.

Summary of key recommendations:

- Community wealth building and local development
 - Lower barriers to entry; create multiple entry points
 - Reinvigorate grassroots involvement
 - Support responsive and flexible solutions
 - Support territorial development
 - Capture the extent of voluntary effort within a programme
- Partnership building with equal power relations
 - Clear alignment of expectations
 - Re-balance power relations
 - Re-connect with capacity building (and process of CLLD)
 - Accept innovative approaches to engagement and participation
- Strategic programme oversight
 - Introduce robust monitoring and evaluation
 - Ensure proactive inclusion of women, young people and minoritized communities and other S75 groups in programme governance and as applicants and beneficiaries
 - Achieve a balance between focus on rural development budget expenditure with need to animate grassroots rural communities and new rural development actors.
 - Capture social value, including the value and impact of voluntary effort
- Good practice - within and beyond Northern Ireland
 - Addressing equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion
 - Engagement with TRPSI, Peace+, Participatory Budgeting
 - Engagement with actors and policymakers beyond Northern Ireland

Practical actions that can be taken

1. Proactively encourage participation, e.g. provision of (funding) support for caring responsibilities to enable wide participation.
2. Annual (light-touch) reviews to consider gaps in inclusion and how they can be proactively addressed (S75 groups), particularly in relation to women, young people and minoritized communities.
3. Availability of development and support expertise to work directly with local communities - capacity building and animation.

4. Oversight committee should include some representatives from outside the programme e.g. Lottery, PEACE and from outside Northern Ireland to lever in the widest expertise and good practice.
5. The use of different means to consult, including social events in community spaces, events organised through youth organisations, and virtual activities.
6. Testing new ways of capturing 'value' and shifting the narrative away from jobs and economy to recognise wider benefits from community cohesion and wellbeing. Tools to explore this include Social Value Engine and wellbeing indicators.
7. Testing new ways of distributing funding e.g. participatory budgeting.
8. Support territorial development to ensure action goes beyond departmental silos. This could be through delegated funds to respond to ideas emerging from within the community that do not fall within programme parameters.
9. Provide accessible training for those wishing to become involved in delivery mechanisms.
10. Making funds available up-front for those groups with few resources.

The image below summarises the key messages emerging from this research for rural development actors:



Introduction

Rural development in Northern Ireland has for a long time been supported by EU funds. One of the main tools for implementing community based rural development was the LEADER programme. It is well recognised that LEADER, established in 1991, represented a shift from a sectoral policy approach to one that was territorial. Area based action groups formed an important part of the funding infrastructure. The underpinning philosophy behind LEADER was one of Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and this approach was eventually mainstreamed through EU rural development policies. With the exit of the UK from the European Union, the UK government has put in place alternative funding streams under the Levelling Up Agenda. Those structures are currently being designed and implemented and so it is timely to review the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (RDP) which relied heavily on EU funds. The RDP was led by the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD³) and it built on the work of the Rural Action Project between 1985 and 1989.

The CLLD approach has not been without its shortcomings. As explored in this review, previous research has pointed to a range of challenges associated with the process. These include the legitimacy of actors; problems of participatory governance; masking of inequalities and fault lines (relating to gender, class, status); and asymmetric power relations (Storey 1999, Bruckmeier 2000, Shucksmith 2000, Derkzen et al. 2008, Bosworth et al. 2016, Müller et al. 2019). These are further examined in this review of rural development which continues by describing the approach to the research then briefly critiquing the LEADER methodology. It moves on to provide a timeline of the programme before highlighting key challenges that have been identified from a range of European contexts and also for the specific case of Northern Ireland. The latter draws from empirical data collected between October 2021 and February 2022. The review explains the wider policy context for the CLLD approach, including the replacement funds created in the light of UK exit from the EU, i.e. the Levelling Up agenda. Finally, conclusions are presented.

Approach to the Research

The research brief was to identify how the UK government's replacement funds, as promoted through its Levelling Up agenda, can best be tailored to meet the needs of rural communities in Northern Ireland. It was focused on ensuring any future delivery processes are participative and inclusive. The research reflected on and synthesised experience and knowledge to date. It took a qualitative research approach and comprised a literature and policy review; key informant interviews; focus group and a workshop, culminating in this final report. The research took place between October 2021 and March 2022. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

An international review of the literature and grey material⁴ evaluated existing academic and policy and practice literatures. It therefore included existing evaluations of LEADER and of other rural community development approaches across Europe i.e., Community Led Local Development. Following the review, 20 key informant, semi-structured interviews explored primarily: what has worked/not worked in the RDP; and future challenges and opportunities. Interviewees included representatives from DAERA, local government (LAG staff, councillors), and individuals working in or volunteering for voluntary and community sector organisations, including LAG board members. As interviews were tailored according to interviewees, the themes varied slightly but all probed aspects of the CLLD approach that worked and that

³ On 9 May 2016 the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) became the new Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). The new department brought together existing functions from DARD (except Rivers Agency), Environment and Marine Group from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), Inland Fisheries from the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Sustainability Function from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) (NISRA 2014).

⁴ Grey literature includes documents and research that is published outside the traditional academic domain. It includes, but is not limited to publications from third sector organisations (reports, policy briefs, annual reports, evaluations), government documents (white papers, evaluations).

warrant carrying forward to a new programme as well as issues that have been less successful. Interviews also explored new opportunities that have emerged due to the shift in the funding landscape, largely arising from UK exit from the EU. The context of an evolving society with increased diversity, particularly in some rural locations, was also a consideration. Thus depending on the interviewees, interviews explored direct experiences of accessing funds; perceived strengths and weaknesses of the CLLD approach; identifying and recognising different communities; benefits to the community; connections to wealth building and wider strategies to place shaping and community planning. The sampling strategy targeted key informants based on their knowledge of community engagement and participation, including, but not limited to, experience of the RDP, mostly in Northern Ireland. A number of respondents were also from Ireland, Scotland and England and they were chosen to bring a wider perspective and identify good practice from elsewhere.

In addition to the interviews, four focus groups were held representing the following interests/organisations: community asset building; LAG staff/board members and local government; DAERA; and women involved in rural development. Data was then coded using thematic analysis with initial findings presented to the steering group and discussed extensively before further coding was conducted. Due to public health restrictions, interviews, focus groups and the workshop were held over Zoom.

The LEADER philosophy

The LEADER programme reflected a wider recognition from the European Union that rural could no longer be equated with agriculture, and that a wider body of stakeholders had a legitimate interest in rural society. Partnership working was at the core of the programme, as was innovation, networking, bottom-up development and co-operation. Evolving to be recognised as Community Led Local Development (CLLD), this approach is as much about a process of development as it is of the products emerging.

Although, as this review shows, that perspective is not always shared by different rural development actors. LEADER relies on partners to help shape the agenda for an area by identifying priorities for action - a so-called endogenous approach to rural development. It is founded on the notion of bottom-up development that recognises the capacity of local communities to understand their needs and to take action accordingly.

Leader reflects a 'neo-endogenous' approach as it takes account of extra local expertise and input (Ray 2001). The thinking behind neo-endogenous development is that local areas can mobilise internal resources while leveraging external resources (be it knowledge, capital and so forth) and also managing the impact of uncontrollable external forces in the area (Ward et al. 2005). As an endogenous model of development, it relies on local skills and knowledge to successfully lever funds that support local projects, according to rules that have been created outwith the locality. Not only does this raise concerns about whose agenda is being met, but wider questions remain about the ability of a community-led approach to fill gaps that have been left by central and local government due to a reformed welfare system, austerity or other structural forces that fundamentally affect the delivery of public services. The role of the LAG is crucial, and in circumstances where a managerial approach is observed, in particular where risk aversion is apparent, it can be difficult to animate local people resulting in a diminished drive for innovation (Bosworth et al. 2016). A managerial approach across a programme may require standardised evaluation metrics which can leave little room for effective self-evaluation that will stimulate localised learning (Furmankiewicz and Janc 2011 cited in Bosworth et al. 2016).

Extending circuits of knowledge are important as they can overcome the lack of local expertise or knowledge that might exist and it avoids the tendency to 'interpret experiences in recursive processes of sense making rather than solely following rational models of action' (Bosworth et al. 2016, 440). This is an ongoing activity and it means that networks are constantly evolving, building on earlier achievements and accumulating local learning. It is not surprising then that research has shown that

LAGs with previous LEADER experience were more effective in terms of familiarity of partnership working and being able to adapt to changes in the programme. Those groups with members who have extensive networks are also in an advantageous position as they can lever in significant social, economic and cultural capital. This raises questions around how to nurture participation and engagement from communities with little history of involvement.

The LEADER approach remains an important tool for developing European rural areas through innovation and community-led local development (European Commission 2014). In a context of EU exit, there is a lot to be gained by retaining the features from LEADER that have worked well. This period also offers an opportunity to mitigate known programme weaknesses and gaps, all of which have hindered the realisation of full community participation and engagement in some areas (as borne out in programme data on beneficiaries).

Complexities of Participation

Decentralization and the reform of political structures, as evident during the evolution of European rural policies, bring the concept of participation centre stage. Decentralisation enables citizens to more actively participate in structures of 'governance' - an institutional framework broader than the government, it is based on the idea of partnership, devolving power, and the community, public and private sector (Jessop, 1990; Tandler, 1997; Pearce et al., 2005). Power and interest are shifted and redefined in processes of governance where all forms of government, private and civil society come together (Stoker 1998; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003:5; McAreavey 2009a). Government-actor relations are transformed in these new rural development structures with communities often being given a central role in taking control of their areas.

Community led local development is a tool that allows the realisation of this approach. It relies on local communities participating and engaging in development processes to unlock funds that can be used to advance priorities within a particular area.

Participation is not a straightforward process implicating actors and creating complex power relations (Cornwall 2004, McAreavey 2009a). Part of the challenge with programmes that seek to nurture community engagement is that structures maintaining the power of the ruling elite are often maintained and parameters for participation are established from outside the community (McAreavey 2009a). Furthermore, the publics, subject positions, objects of concern, procedural formats, participatory skills and devices are often presupposed as already existing before entering the stage of residents' involvement (Müller et al. 2020). Müller et al. further argue that 'participation' is not a self-evident lay activity. Instead, it is defined and realised as a concrete governance practice involving lay actors in ritualised performances' (2020, p. 224). Understood in this way participation and the associated roles are shaped and constructed by the process itself (Turnhout et al. 2010), it is relational and it draws on norms, values and culture. It is a 'concrete governance practice' that must 'be practiced, negotiated and legitimised in specific-physical-spatial settings' (Müller et al. 2020, p, 223). Particular conditions and practices will therefore influence how participation is played out in the community, as will personal relations and interactions.

Participation in LEADER had been found to be more limited than intended (Storey 1999), even with the development of projects that are not truly local in their origin (Barke and Newton 1997). Although LEADER can create conditions where the community is empowered to take the lead, this may be within predefined parameters. There is therefore a very real danger of community led development becoming an elite and technical space (Bochel 2006, McAreavey 2009a). Other criticisms have been waged from the European perspective at the LEADER programme, including that narrow interests can capture the process and use it to exert power (Perez 2000) and of excessive bureaucracy and control (Atterton et al. 2020). We go on to consider the LEADER programme in Northern Ireland.

LEADER Timeline

During the pilot LEADER (1991-93), 217 Local Action Groups across Europe participated, paving the way for an expanded programme, LEADER II, which ran from 1994-99 (Scott 2004). 2000-2006 saw the implementation of LEADER +. Following the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Leader approach was then mainstreamed into the EU's Rural Development Programme during the programming period 2007-2013.

In an attempt to simplify the implementation of the EU's rural development policy, financial instruments were shared with the CAP under the single programme, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (NISRA 2014). Priorities were the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry; environment and the countryside; and quality of life and economic activity of rural areas; and the LEADER approach.

During 2014-2020 the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach was applied across different funds (including EAFRD, EMFF, ESF and ERDF), opening up wider funding streams for Local Action Groups (European Network for Rural Development).

The EU priorities for rural areas during the 2014-2020 programming period related to competitiveness, sustainability and rural development , specifically defined as follows:

- **Objective 1** - Improving the competitiveness of the agriculture, forest and food industries;
- **Objective 2** - The sustainable management of the region's natural resources; and
- **Objective 3** - The development of rural areas.

SME competitiveness was the main area of expenditure, followed by environmental protection and resource efficiency. During this period, rural development funds were channelled into Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as Shucksmith et al. (2021) note, the EU aimed at 'achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities, including the creation and maintenance of employment' (European Union 2013, Article 4). The compulsory ring-fencing of five percent of each Member State's EAFRD allocation for community led local development (i.e. LEADER-style activities) continued in the 2014-2020 period from the previous programme period. Under the framework of a national rural development programme, LAGs were responsible for promoting opportunities to a particular territory and following an application process, allocating funds to selected appropriate projects.

Rural Northern Ireland: economy, environment and society

Currently the population in Northern Ireland is 1.89 million and most growth is due to natural change rather than migration. The population overall is ageing, fertility rate is declining and it is estimated that by 2028 there will be more older people (65+) than children (NISRA 2021).

⁵ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_en

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/rural-development_en

Although Northern Ireland is not very ethnically diverse, pockets of migrants have settled across rural space. Between 2001 and 2011 the proportion of the population that was born outside the UK and Ireland rose from 1.5 percent to 4.5 percent (NISRA 2013). This is spatially varied with some rural wards having upwards of 10 percent of non-UK/Ireland migrants, including areas in the counties of Tyrone and Armagh (Doyle and McAreavey 2016).

Three in five people in Northern Ireland live in an urban area. Rural residents report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, as well as better health, than their urban counterparts. Connectivity, both broadband and access to public transport, are worse in rural areas. In 2018 the median annual salary was £20,030 in rural areas and £22,089 in urban areas (NISRA 2021). Rural pensioners are nearly twice as likely to experience relative or absolute poverty than their urban counterparts (DAERA 2020).

The legacy of a regime in favour of development prevails and the countryside is peppered with single dwellings, so-called 'ribbon' development. This has been found to nurture strong locality bonds that are built around family and friends (Murray 2010) and it means that Northern Ireland effectively functions as a collection of small towns that is connected by larger towns (McAreavey 2021). Overall rural population growth occurs in rural areas that are close to urban centres and is outstripping that of urban areas - between 2001 and 2018 rural growth was 16 percent as compared to six percent in urban areas. The challenges of rural housing are multidimensional and include issues of housing quality and conditions; retention of dwellings (through refurbishment of empty homes); and the provision of new homes in villages and outside settlements (Housing Executive 2006, Scott and Murray 2009). House prices are higher on average in rural areas than in towns and cities and more people own their homes in rural areas (80 percent) compared to those in urban areas (63 percent) (DAERA 2020). An adequate supply of social and affordable housing is a challenge for individuals and families where local wages remain low and house prices high. These housing challenges are likely to intensify due to shifting work patterns arising from the pandemic.

The agri-food sector plays an important role in the economy in Northern Ireland. At 5.8 percent in Northern Ireland, it has the largest proportion of the working population employed in agriculture within the UK (DAERA 2020). The average farm size is slowly increasing and is currently just under 42 hectares and relatedly the trend is that of a slow decrease in the number of farm businesses⁷ (DAERA 2017, 2020). The economy is three times more reliant on the agri-food sector than the UK overall in Gross Value Added Terms and 113,000 jobs are supported by the sector (Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association 2021). Over half of businesses in Northern Ireland are located in rural areas (58 percent) but they account for less than a quarter of employees (20 percent) and 25 percent of total business turnover. Rural businesses are focused on agriculture, forestry, fishing and construction. Tourism is less important in rural (18 percent) than in urban areas.

Much of the agricultural land in Northern Ireland is designated as being in a Less Favoured Area (70 percent), with lowland landscapes comprising 67 percent and upland landscapes 33 percent of Northern Ireland's 1.4m hectares (NISRA 2014). Agriculture and forestry account for 80 percent of the Northern Ireland landmass and so they have a major impact on the rural environment - flora, fauna and landscape. While beef and dairy are important, the largest growth sectors are poultry and pig production (DAERA 2020). Attorp (2022) draws attention to the impact of diffuse agriculture pollution across the island of Ireland arising from intensive and extensive farming practices (see also Cave 2015). Indeed an assessment of water quality in 2018 reported a decline in the quality of waterbodies from 36.6 percent as compared to 37.4 percent in 2015 (NIEA 2019). This is going to remain a challenge as the agricultural sector continues to restructure following the removal of the CAP.

In theory, incoming climate change legislation ought to address the challenges of pollution, including that arising from agriculture. However, the government in Northern Ireland has, to

⁷ In some years this increases slightly, for example in 2017 there were 428 more farm businesses compared to the previous year (DAERA 2017)

date, favoured farming and the economy over the environment, as demonstrated through the emergence of the Climate Change Bill. The two priorities of agricultural policy in Northern Ireland are that of increasing agricultural productivity alongside protecting and enhancing the natural environment and supporting sustainable practices. The tension between the environment and agriculture is palpable: two different Climate Change Bills were originally under consideration, one introduced by the Green Party as a private member's bill aiming for net zero by 2045 and the other introduced by the DAERA Minister that called for an 82 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. The DAERA minister favoured a less ambitious bill because of the impact on the farming community indicating that a net zero target would be devastating for the farming community.⁸ The Minister's amended bill passed through the legislative process in March 2022. It has set a target for net zero by 2050 and includes other amendments including a climate change commissioner; a just transition fund to support agriculture; and targets for soil quality and biodiversity. The bill has been welcomed by civil society groups and campaigners who had previously criticised its lack of ambition.

Leader in Northern Ireland

This section reviews the programme as it evolved in the Northern Ireland context, before analysing the specific challenges and opportunities that the programme presented. The four generations of the European rural development programme have been quite distinct from one another, each with particular challenges.

During the first phase of the programme (1991-93), the NI Rural Development Council (RDC) was the sole distributor of the £4.5 million allocation⁹. Projects were funded under a range of measures including: technical assistance, rural tourism, vocational training, small enterprise and agricultural diversification. The original LEADER programme was characterised by large scale capital projects in each county such as the Rural College in Draperstown. LEADER II (1994-1999) was implemented by 15 LAGs and nine Other Collective Bodies (OCBs) and a budget of £14m was spent across four measures (Acquisition of Skills, Rural Innovation Programmes, Transnational Co-operation and Networking). The programme was jointly funded by DARD (35 percent) and three of the EU Structural Funds (European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF) and the Guidance section of European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF)). It resulted in significant levels of local engagement with the programme. LEADER+ (2000-2006) was implemented by twelve LAGs that covered 43 percent of the population in Northern Ireland. This represented something of a shift in focus as economic development became a priority within the three programme themes: Territorial Rural Development Strategies; Co-operation; and Networking.

The mainstreaming of the subsequent programme (2007-13), simply known as LEADER¹⁰, denoted a return to the role of local communities (right across rural Northern Ireland) in bringing about change in their area, a fundamental premise of the programme. The NI RDP was delivered across five axes. Seven Local Action Groups in partnership with council clusters delivered the programme. Six priority themes were relevant during this phase: Diversification into non-agricultural activities; Business creation and development; Encouragement of tourism activities; Basic services for the economy and rural population; Village renewal and development; and Conservation and upgrading of rural heritage. The 2007-2013 NIRD was approved by the European Commission on 24th July 2007 and the overall EU allocation to the 2007-2013 NIRD was approximately €329.5m. The final eligible spend under the Programme was €329.3m, or 99.92 percent of the allocation available. Over 6000¹¹ applications were received from across Northern Ireland to LAGs (the LEADER approach) and the total fund for community led local development was worth £105.8m (NISRA 2014).

⁸ <https://www.cieh.org/ehn/environmental-protection/2021/october/two-climate-change-bills-go-head-to-head-in-northern-ireland/>

⁹ Data in this paragraph sourced from RSM McClure Watters' ex ante evaluation of the NI Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (2014) and from the ex post evaluation of the 2007-2013 programme carried out by NISRA

¹⁰ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-resources/leader-historical-resources_en

¹¹ <https://ruralnetworkni.org.uk/sharing-practice/case-studies/NI-LEADER-Programme-2007-2013>

The programme evaluations had 36 recommendations including that LAGs should have more authority regarding budgets and themes; be flexible in relation to changes in projects and that staggered calls should be used; simplified application procedures for smaller projects be considered (ibid).

Recommendation 34 stated *'To ensure that consistent, high quality information and coverage of EU monitoring and evaluation requirements is available for future programme evaluations, comprehensive guidance should be issued on the content and approach for evaluations of measures, schemes and LAGs and that proposals for these are systematically checked'* (ibid).

The evaluation of the 2007-2013 Programme identified the need for 'a greater focus on the participation of women and young people' (NISRA 2014, p. 248), also noting that there was little or no evidence of targeting these groups. Some of the data showing the participation of women and young people was 'encouraging' (p. 249), the lack of data on which to make an appropriate assessment was noted. Accordingly the evaluation advised 'that steps are taken to ensure the collection of monitoring data which allows proper analysis of scheme participation in the future and that actions are taken at the outset of any new scheme to include all potential beneficiaries' (p. 249). As becomes clearer later in this report, those steps appear not to have been taken in the most recent programme.

The NI Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 was underpinned by the Community Led Local Development approach. It was worth in the region of £643m (DAERA 2018), funded through EU, DAERA and NI Executive. Programme priorities were:

- Rural Business Investment Scheme
- Rural Basic Services
- Village Renewal
- Rural Co-operation

Ten LAGs, aligning with local authorities, were responsible for administering funds. The economic and social partners and associations were required to make up at least 51 percent of the LAG. This meant that the LAG did not have more than 49 percent of its members drawn from any single sector (elected councillors are regarded as a single sector).

Reporting to the Monitoring Committee on the progress of the Programme was on the basis of meeting programme priorities, and the schemes that contributed to those priorities. Rural Support Networks offered assistance to LAGs including organising events, meetings and study visits, and promoting and sharing partner search requests.

Despite the findings of the evaluation of the 2007-2013 programme, the ex ante evaluation of the 2014-2020 programme confirmed that an Equality Impact Assessment examined the impact on gender. The evaluation of the forecasted programme foresaw that women would have a full and active role to play. Even with this positive evaluation, the ex ante evaluator recommended to DARD that information on the gender perspective is included and taken into full consideration from the outset of the programme. The following sub-section outlines gender representation in the programme.

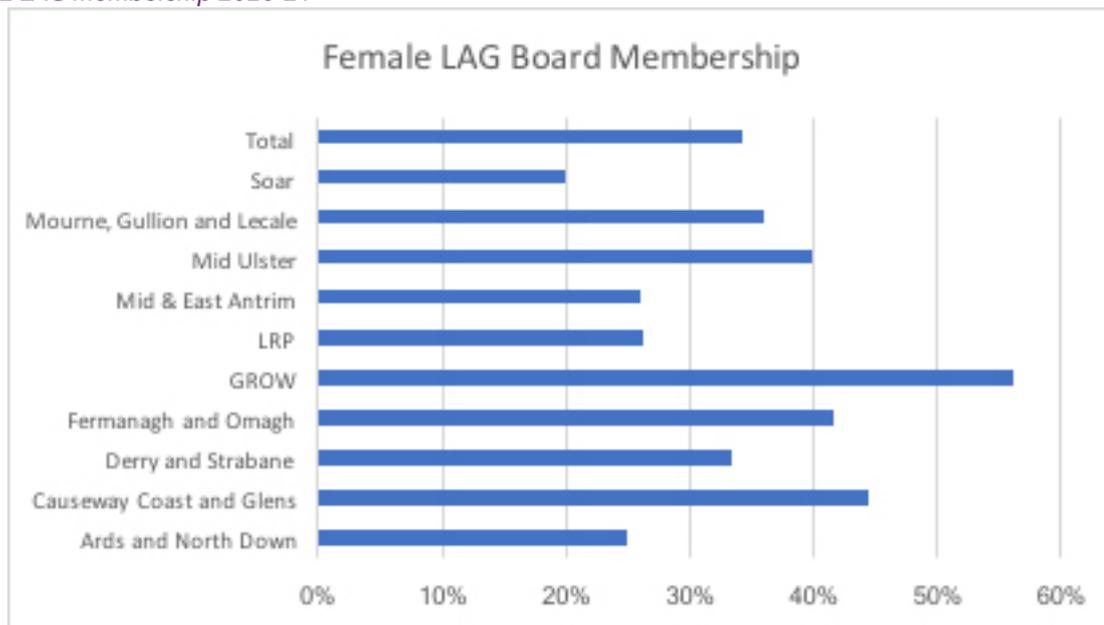
Gender representation

¹²According to data produced in 2021, women did not participate to the same extent as men in the programme. The following chart is based on 108 Section 75 survey forms that were returned from Northern Ireland's 221 LAG Board members giving an overall response rate 49 percent in 2018 compared to 87 percent in 2016. 88 percent of respondents indicated they are LAG Board members, 6 percent of respondents indicated they are a LAG member and not a board member, and 6 percent of respondents did not answer the question. 48 percent of respondents indicated they are a public representative (i.e. member of the council) and 52 percent of respondents indicated they are a private representative (i.e. not a member of the council) or did not answer the question.

Figure 1 Applicants by gender and religion



Figure 2 LAG membership 2020-21



¹² Data in this section taken from the 2021 report on the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP 2014-2020) <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-rural-development-programme-nirdp-2014-2020-section-75-report-2020>

- Rural Business Investment Scheme: At 25 percent, the proportion of female applicants is under-representative of the rural population where 50 percent are female. The proportion of successful female applicants is lower again at 21 percent.
- Rural Basic Services Scheme: At 26 percent, the proportion of female applicants is under-representative of the rural population where 50 percent are female. The proportion of successful female applicants is slightly lower at 23 percent.

The LAG Boards are over-representative of the rural population over the age of 40. Although, the LAG Boards have increased their female representation from 31 percent in 2016 to 37 percent in 2018, their membership is still under-representative of the rural population. Among its conclusions the 2021 report states 'Overall, women, disabled people and the 16-24 age group are under-represented across both the LAG Boards and the two LEADER schemes' (p.15).

Although the pre-programme evaluation expected that women would play an equal role in the programme, it is evident that this did not come to pass. Some data has been collected in the recent programme but it remains unclear how it was used to monitor its ongoing implementation and thus to take remedial action where appropriate. It does not seem to have formed part of a robust management process.

The UK's Levelling Up Agenda and Shared Prosperity Fund

Without a clear definition, Levelling Up has been criticised as empty rhetoric. Michael Gove is the Minister in charge and the delayed White Paper was published in February 2022. According to the Local Government Association, the government's Levelling Up agenda 'presents an opportunity to reset the relationship between central and local government and put councils at the heart of delivering the Government's ambitious programme to improve opportunities in all parts of the country¹³.' The white paper includes plans for a new strategy for community spaces and relationships based on community power; better understanding the evidence base and 'what works'; listening to and engaging with communities to identify priorities; and reaching out to engage with 'disconnected' communities¹⁴. It will focus on improving living standards, growing the private sector and increasing and spreading opportunity¹⁵. Rural Services Network¹⁶ points to a number of critical issues that arise from the White Paper, including that fewer outcomes can be achieved in rural areas for the same amount of funding when compared to the urban context. It is not yet clear how the particular context of Northern Ireland, including Section 75 legislation or the Rural Needs Act, will be taken into consideration. After all the duty is not applicable to any Westminster Department.

The Shared Prosperity Fund is very much a centralised fund and gives the UK government new powers as set out in the UK Internal Market (UKIM) Act (2020). According to Sargeant and Stojanovic (2021, p.5): 'The UKIM Act gives UK ministers broad powers to provide financial assistance to any part of the UK for the purposes of promoting economic development, providing infrastructure, supporting cultural and sporting activities, and supporting education and training activities and exchanges. In these instances, the UK government could spend money directly in devolved policy areas, which it is expected to do through the allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which will replace EU structural funds.' They go on to note that the Act amends the devolution statutes which gives the UK government power to design and implement public subsidies to replace EU funding.

¹³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/levelling-agenda-house-commons-15-june-2021>

¹⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-publish-levelling-up-white-paper>

¹⁶ <https://rsonline.org.uk/rural-lens-review-of-shared-prosperity-fund-prelaunch-guidance>

The Levelling Up Fund will invest in infrastructure across the UK. Three investment programmes will support communities and help them prepare for the Shared Prosperity Fund – The Community Renewal Fund (revenue funding, 2021-22); The Levelling Up Fund (capital investment, local authority led, 2021-25); and The Community Ownership Fund (1st round capital investment, 2021-25). The Renewal Fund is targeted at providing localised support:

*'We recognise that each area has its unique challenges requiring unique solutions. So each pilot will empower places to explore how best to tackle local challenges- whether through building skills, supporting local businesses, supporting communities and places, or providing employment support - to build communities where people want to live, work and visit, while allowing government to evaluate how best to ensure levelling up right across the country'*¹⁷.

The Shared Prosperity Fund will replace European Union structural funds by creating opportunities to innovate and trial new approaches.

Nice et al. (2021) draw attention to the promises made in the Conservative Party's 2019 general election manifesto that the new UKSPF would “at a minimum” match the level of EU spending in each of the four nations of the UK. This is not insubstantial, they go on to explain the level of spending across the UK, this is presented in table 1 and figure 3 below. As shown, when compared with England, allocations of EU structural funds per person were therefore a little over a third higher in Scotland, more than twice as high in Northern Ireland, and six times as high in Wales (Nice et al. 2021, 11).

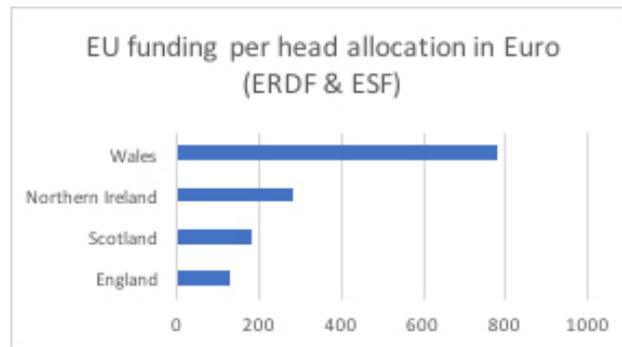
Table 1 EU funding across the UK 2014-20

EU ERDF & ESF allocation across the UK 2014-20		
	€ per head	€ total
England	130	7.1bn
Scotland	180	940m
Northern Ireland	280	510m
Wales	780	2.4bn

The Northern Ireland Executive has a long history in administering EU funding to support community relations. Many communities have benefited from the targeted approach of various funds, including CLLD programmes. There is a risk that a UK-wide scheme, run by the UK government, would fail to tap into this expertise and would not secure vital cross-community support in Northern Ireland (Nice et al. 2021). Indeed the SPF is likely to bypass devolved administrations, thus potentially funding projects that are not considered a priority in the jurisdiction (Sargeant and Stojanovic 2021) or leading to duplication or fragmentation of services. Early indications are that some of these fears have come to pass with the first round of Community Renewal Funds (CRF) being allocated to large entities, including the largest award in Northern Ireland going to an Oxfordshire-based call centre¹⁸.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus-2021-22>
¹⁸ <https://www.irishnews.com/business/2022/02/15/news/gb-call-centre-is-ni-s-biggest-recipient-under-new-london-controlled-fund-to-replace-eu-aid-2588843/>

Figure 3 EU funding profile per head in UK (2014-2020)



Unlike in other parts of the UK where Community Renewal Funds (CRF) are managed by lead authorities/councils, in Northern Ireland the UK government will centrally manage the fund. This means that local applicants apply directly to MHCLG, without needing to go through either local councils or the Northern Ireland Executive, reflecting a very centralised approach to how the fund will be administered. Importantly, while the Renewal Fund does not set a precedent for Shared Prosperity Funds, it is expected to build capacity and pave the way for future funding programmes. Four priority areas have been identified in the Renewal fund:

- Investment in skills
- Investment for local business
- Investment in communities and place
- Supporting people into employment

In the first round¹⁹, £12m was allocated for projects in Northern Ireland, with £1.8m being the largest grant and being spent on a business training programme championed by four councils but, as mentioned above, being led by a private sector company based in Oxfordshire²⁰. Across the other two strands, one project in Northern Ireland was awarded Community Ownership Funds worth £0.3m (Glens Digital Hub) and seven projects were awarded Levelling Up funds. The latter are largely infrastructure projects e.g. Dundonald Ice Bowl, an electric vehicle charging network and a cycling development project. As yet it is unclear how these new funds will ensure that they dovetail with other policies including Shared Island and Peace programmes, a very real fear held among those active in the third sector.

Other relevant domestic and Shared Island programmes and policies

Nearly thirty years ago, Navarro et al. (1994) observed that increasingly LEADER has come to reflect governance by hierarchy, while being presented as promoting localism and networks. Understanding the scales of governance into which local action groups fit is important if they are indeed to undertake animation work and help to bring communities to a level where they can sufficiently access funding. While it is not the intention here to provide detailed insight into the other programmes, this section gives a brief overview of other relevant programmes and policies across Northern Ireland. The RDP sits alongside many other programmes and funds including the Peace and Reconciliation Programme; Fisheries LAGs; Interreg and the PEACE programme (in the past there were programmes supported through objective one status and accompanying EU structural funds which resulted in area-based development programmes).

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/new-levelling-up-and-community-investments>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-59155924>;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/12-million-for-skills-and-local-business-in-northern-ireland>

Rural Needs Act and Rural Proofing

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was introduced into Northern Ireland to ensure councils, government departments and public authorities give consideration to the needs of people in rural areas when making policy decisions (DAERA 2018). Otherwise known as rural proofing, it is something of a 'feel-good' idea and thus hard to see why anyone would be against it (Shortall and Alston 2016). It champions rural policies, and uses auditing to ensure mainstreaming has occurred (ibid). According to Sherry and Shortall rural proofing in Northern Ireland 'entirely stands on an assumption of rural disadvantage, the nature of which is never articulated' (2019, 336). They question connections between how rural is understood, the lack of appreciation of social change and wider public policy development. It is considered by DAERA as a key rural policy tool and yet evaluations have identified major problems with it including the heavy focus on rural proofing rather than on the "due regard" duty (DAERA 2018). It is not clear how this duty will interconnect with UK Shared Prosperity Funds (discussed later).

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Inclusion

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Inclusion (TRPSI) was introduced by DARD in 2008 through the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework (APSI) 2008-2011. The current framework, the third in the series, continues to provide a broad mechanism which 'Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural sector can work in partnership to develop new and innovative ways to help alleviate the effects of poverty and social isolation in rural areas, particularly among vulnerable groups'²¹. The annual budget is approximately £4m and it includes various measures such as the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme; Community Development to support the six Rural Support Networks; micro-capital grants (£200-£1500); and the Farm Families Health Checks Programme (latter in partnership with the Public Health Agency and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust). It is positive that the programme plainly takes a broad understanding of rural poverty and social inclusion.

The Peace Programme

The peace process in Northern Ireland has been receiving financial support from the EU since 1989, through both EU regional policy and EU contributions to the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). The purpose of the EU PEACE programme is to support peace and reconciliation and to promote economic and social progress in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland. The current period is the fifth generation of the programme²²:

1995-1999 PEACE I

2000-2006 PEACE II

2007-2013 PEACE III

2014-2020 PEACE IV

2021-2027 PEACE+

²¹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/tackling-rural-poverty-social-isolation-new-framework>

²² <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/102/northern-ireland-peace-programme>

The two main aims of the programme are community cohesion between communities in the programme area and economic and social stability. It is set to continue into the future (worth approximately £1 billion). It takes a bottom up approach and relies on the engagement of local people to support victims, survivors, young people. It supports SMEs, infrastructure and urban regeneration and projects that celebrate the community cohesion and ethnic diversity within society.

Local Authorities

Community Planning:

The Local Government Act (NI) 2014 places duties on the 11 councils in Northern Ireland on leading the community planning process and having due regard for Community Plans in the exercise of their functions. Community planning therefore has a statutory basis and brings together all those involved in delivering public services to improve the wellbeing of everyone. Community Plans identify long term priorities for improving social, economic and environmental wellbeing. The Department for Communities plays a key role in supporting the process as its remit covers housing, social welfare, reducing poverty and historic environment.

Research has identified weaknesses associated with Community Planning including that it does not take account of unequal power differences between communities of place, identity and interest (Rafferty 2020). Rafferty (2020) further argues that the nature of involvement lacks clarity and detail on how it is to be operationalised.

Perhaps even more critically, he found that practitioners used the language of engagement and co-production when activities were no more than public consultation (ibid). Thus, although it is perceived that power shifts to the community, power relations are imbalanced as government retains authority over decision making.

The lack of evaluation of Community Planning means that it is difficult to create conditions that will address these known thorny issues but is reflective of wider structural deficiencies within the Planning system in Northern Ireland (see for example Northern Ireland Audit Office 2022).

Participatory budgeting (PB):

Simply put, this is about 'local people deciding how to allocate part of a public budget'²³. It is about building trust within communities and allowing communities and anchor organisations to have greater opportunities to share power; to have a role in priority setting; and to spend local public budgets. With its origins in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, PB has been found to help shift priorities and better support the poorest parts of the city - improving infrastructure, strengthening governance and increasing citizen participation²⁴. Community Places²⁵ has been working with communities across Northern Ireland on PB and are part of a wider campaign to mainstream the approach. Research found that while PB can build capacity, confidence and competencies of individuals and communities, the impact is limited due to weak legislation and lack of central and local government commitment (Grounds and Murtagh 2018).

Community Wealth Building

In its charter for building an inclusive economy, Development Trusts (NI) points out that the traditional 'trickle down' method does not work; instead it deepens inequality, increases poverty and advances precarity (DTNI n.d.). An inclusive economy approach works to reshape the economic system to make it better serve people and community interests, and embraces people and communities as active players in wealth creation.

²³ <http://www.participatorybudgetingworks.org/>

²⁴ <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/public-service-reform-tools/engaging-citizens-devolution-5#:~:text=Participatory%20budgeting%20began%20in%20Porto,governance%2C%20and%20increasing%20citizen%20participation.>

²⁵ <https://www.communityplaces.info/>

It highlights four key areas where attention is needed in Northern Ireland, all of which resonate with activities funded or aspired to within past RDPs:

- A - Advancing local community power
- B - Building local community wealth
- C - Commissioning and procuring for social value
- D - Developing finance to support local economies

The charter draws attention to the lack of power within local government in Northern Ireland. They argue for stronger civic powers and local rights to facilitate and enable meaningful local relationships across the public, social and commercial sectors, and to stimulate innovation and creativity.

Rather than focusing on what is 'wrong' in a community, wealth building takes an asset based approach with respect to financial, physical and social dimensions. It recognises the importance of an independent community sector and of strengthened powers for local government. Fundamentally it seeks to rebalance power relations, achieve equity and equality, and it necessitates a radical change in mindset regarding how things are done. That cannot be done without a significant cultural shift within central government departments, such as within DAERA. This is not just a remote aspiration, but as the OECD (2017) points out, systems change can follow crisis, such as that experienced through the pandemic when societal norms were upturned.

The impact of Community Led Local Development in Northern Ireland

There are many things to like about the LEADER approach. In the early days of the programme in Northern Ireland it was seen as advancing participative democracy, creating opportunities for innovation and making a contribution to Targeting Social Need (Hart and Murray 2000). However, critical questions were also raised across a range of issues including the legitimacy of rural development partnerships; tension between goals and processes of rural development; pre-development and capacity building; and institutional fragmentation (Hart and Murray 2000; Shortall and Shucksmith 2001). It was thus not always clear how LEADER related to formal structures including those of local government. During the early days of LEADER, there was a crowded partnership environment with partnerships for Peace and Reconciliation and for Department of Agriculture Area Based Strategies, to name but a few (Shortall and Shucksmith 2001). The tension between product and process has been problematic in the Northern Ireland context (see for instance review by LRDP 1994 cited in Shortall and Shucksmith 2001). In other words, the benefits accruing from bringing people together and working through often contested issues, was not always considered sufficient - even though this often brought wider value in terms of bridging entrenched social divisions arising from civil unrest. Other research underscores the benefits and real difference to local communities from what could be considered small in economic investment terms (Ekosgen 2010 in Bosworth et al. 2016).

Ensuring that funding goes beyond the 'usual suspects', avoiding narrow interest lobbies (Convery et al. 2010) or local elites (Wellbrook et al. 2013) and that it reaches under-represented groups such as minoritized communities, has long been recognised as a challenge (Macken-Walsh 2011, Skerratt and Steiner 2013). Discussed in a Northern Ireland context (Shortall 2008, Shortall and Shucksmith 2001, Scott 2004), there are very specific issues related to politics and good relations. A challenge connected to that of supporting the usual suspects, is that Local Action Groups that do not take on a proactive role are overly represented by those with higher levels of capital, skills and expertise. This means that those who have not participated much or at all before are potentially even more marginalised (Commins and Keane 1994 in Shortall and Shucksmith 2001).

Bosworth and colleagues spoke to one LAG chairperson who noted '[t]he places needing the most help have the least capacity so we need to be proactive' (2016, p. 439). They further note that local knowledge and commitment from key personnel is important for promoting opportunities in a locality. This has a political dimension in Northern Ireland, with evidence of more activity within Catholic communities who generally were more distrustful of the state and were willing to undertake self-help and community development activities (Shortall and Shucksmith 2001). In the most recent programme, Protestants were under-represented, accounting for just 31 percent of successful applications (DAERA/NISRA 2021).

Considering the significant and profound changes that have occurred across society in Northern Ireland, including the increase in immigration and the recognition of the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, it can be expected that significant pre-development work will still need to be done. This will be necessary in circumstances where these groups have not participated in local development projects and to ensure their engagement in civil society.

Pre-development work will also be important for places that have experienced other challenges, such as economic stagnation, that have resulted in their marginalisation. Local assets and prevailing characteristics with respect to social and economic networks greatly influence the scope for successful community-led local development (Bosworth et al. 2016). Additionally, entrepreneurial animateurs have a central role in rural development to support the infrastructure required for rural communities to engage in development processes (Annibal et al. 2013)

Developing a new rural framework for Northern Ireland

In preparation for the new rural framework, DAERA led five working groups, which included stakeholder representatives, to develop priorities around five goals as follows:

1. To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish
2. To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment
3. To reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers
4. To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas
5. To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas

A rural stakeholder event was held early 2020 to tease out further ideas in relation to the above themes. This was reported to DAERA who then drafted up a proposed framework that went out to consultation during the summer of 2021 (closing September 2021). This consultation work informed the emerging rural policy framework.

In January 2022 the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs issued a statement on the new rural policy framework. The statement specified the overall aims of the new rural policy and will include²⁶

...initiatives that address barriers to sustainable growth and that promote equal access to services. That means dealing with issues such as connectivity, economic development, environmental challenges, poverty, loneliness and isolation in rural areas.

The rural policy framework is the framework against which those policies will be introduced. It is a living document that will support a fair and inclusive rural society where the people who live

²⁶ NI Assembly Hansard 31st January 2022 available at <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/officialreport.aspx>

and work in rural areas will benefit from improved access to services, improved quality of life and greater opportunities from sustainable growth. The rural policy framework focuses on five thematic pillars supported by 19 priorities for intervention. The five thematic pillars will support initiatives in innovation and entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, health and well-being, employment and connectivity.

The Minister recognised the value of what has preceded the new programme, including TRPSI, LEADER and PEACE monies. In particular the community led-local development approach that underpins LEADER was recognised as a benefit and as a means of retaining knowledge key stakeholders will be involved in an oversight committee:

The need to learn lessons from the LEADER programme, in particular the importance of the bottom-up approach in engaging with local communities, was also highlighted by respondents. Throughout the LEADER programme, the immense contribution of local action groups (LAGs) has been invaluable.

I want to ensure that the best elements of that approach are retained to support future schemes in an efficient, effective and flexible way. I have decided therefore to establish a rural stakeholder oversight committee to ensure the continued involvement of key stakeholders and rural communities in helping to shape future rural investment.

I recognise the importance of continuing to work in partnership with other public bodies, the private sector and rural stakeholders to ensure the best outcomes for our rural communities.

We will therefore work closely with partners in government to champion the needs of rural communities across a range of issues, including housing and other public services

Although a partnership approach will evidently form a critical component of the delivery mechanism, the details are not yet agreed, but it is anticipated that the new programme will be more 'efficient' from a purely cost perspective and correspondingly, that administration costs will be reduced:

At this stage, it is too early to say how the programme will be delivered. As a result of the work that we have done through LEADER, TRPSI and our pilot schemes, we have experience of successfully delivering for rural communities in a variety of ways. I want to ensure that, for each scheme in the new programme, we use the most efficient and effective delivery mechanism possible. That means that a range of delivery options will be considered as the design of the new schemes progresses.

At this point, it is too early to give an indication about the budget, because the overall Budget has not yet been resolved.

We will bid to the Northern Ireland block grant Budget, which has obviously increased as a consequence of Brexit. We will also bid for PEACE PLUS money; EU farm replacement funding, where appropriate; and green growth funding. When we get beyond the term of the current Parliament, we will take stock of what is available.

In addition, the LEADER programme carried administrative costs of almost 20 percent. That meant that just under £12 million of the £73 million that was available was directed to administrative costs rather than being targeted at rural communities. We want to put some focus on how we can deliver the funding more efficiently and ensure that we can take that figure, which is close to 20 percent, hopefully, down to a much smaller figure – I want to see it in single figures – and, therefore, deliver more money to communities and spend less on administration.

Given that delivery mechanisms have not been agreed, it is appropriate to reflect on the previous programme and to extract lessons and good practice to embed into the emerging rural policy framework. However, as the following sections illustrate, there is a need to balance the reduction in administration with commitment to spend on animation and community engagement. This will help to achieve a greater spread of project promoters and beneficiaries.

Taking stock of the Leader approach

This research revealed very many positive reflections on the value of the LEADER approach and of rural development activities that were funded under the RDP. Respondents talked about the positive differences that the benefits had brought to individuals, communities and their lives. The creation of jobs was greatly valued as was the start-up of new companies. The development of basic services and village renewal infrastructure was also welcomed. For some there was immense value in coming together and developing relations over time, moving on to do other activities for the benefit of the community. The extent of voluntary effort on the programme has not been formally captured, but given the tasks completed by volunteers, it is evidently extensive. Failure to capture this work is a major gap that should be addressed.

Bringing together partners from different sectors, largely the community and voluntary sector and local and central government is not without its challenge. There have been significant hiccups and complications within the programme, not least the copious administration that has grown over the lifetime of the RDP, resulting in burdensome audit and reporting. This practice diverges from other funders such as the Lottery, who provide inhouse support in application processes. Other complexities relate to contestations over funding priorities and the allocation of funds.

Before exploring these issues in detail, it is worth highlighting the LEADER ideology. In so doing, it is clear from this research that the LEADER approach that has been operational and mainstreamed within the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme, has shifted from its original underpinning philosophy which had the following seven aspects:

1. Area-based local development strategies
2. Bottom-up elaboration and implementation of strategies
3. Local public-private partnerships: Local Action Groups
4. Integrated and multi-sectoral actions
5. Innovation
6. Co-operation
7. Networking (European Commission 2006)

As the analysis of the findings demonstrate, there were many benefits from the RDP, but equally the programme brought with it significant challenges. Issues do not stand alone but intersect with one another. For example, bottom-up participation was greatly valued but it also raises challenges in relation to ensuring that those representing their community possessed appropriate skills and knowledge to fully participate.

This spans a breadth of tasks including properly influencing important decisions; setting the agenda; challenging decisions; and thinking strategically (beyond individual interests). Therefore in designing a new programme, it will be important to consider the way that its constituent parts are interconnected.

LEADER successes

The following analysis draws largely from the words of participants to reflect on the key issues that were raised, both positive and negative. Key themes include decision making; trust and power relations; programme governance; programme priorities and processes. Each of these is considered in turn, although as will become apparent, they do not sit in isolation from one another.

As already stated, this evaluation seeks to identify strengths, opportunities and programme weaknesses in an attempt to inform the future rural policy framework. The robust allocation of future public funds are important as a new policy framework is rolled out. With that in mind this report draws attention to the positives from the LEADER approach, as well as identifying what did not work well.

Interviews and focus groups reveal the distinct value of the programme, including the following (noting that some of these features were perceived to have been eroded in recent iterations of the programme):

1. Local decision making and influence on expenditure
2. Grassroots engagement
3. Job creation and getting money spent
4. Capital infrastructure
5. Positive connections (not specifically community relations)
6. Diversity of initiatives supported
7. Supporting small rural projects
8. Knowledge exchange with other regions and countries

Significant gaps were also identified, some of which are the flip side of the identified positives:

1. Lack of transparency around programme monitoring
2. Perception of a council-centric programme
3. Focus on capital infrastructure at the detriment of revenue funds
4. Lack of trust and collaborative approach between DAERA, Councils, LAGs
5. Poor representation of women across the programme
6. Bloated audit and bureaucratic processes
7. Grant rather than capacity building programme
8. Insufficient recognition of local knowledge
9. High barriers to entry
10. No room for calculated risk taking and so innovation was stifled.

The report continues by exploring these different issues.

Local decision making

As the quotes below demonstrate, there was consensus among participants that a major benefit from the LEADER approach was that it provided opportunities for local people to make decisions in relation to what was happening in their area. The bottom-up approach was favoured for the positive interactions that resulted and the enthusiasm that it generated, but it was noted that this was given less prominence in later stages of the programme:

local people making decisions...because it gives people ownership of it...

local decision making and people scoping out what was happening at the local level

...the process is maybe not every bit as important, but it's a really important part it, gets people more involved with community development, gets more involved with rural development, lets them maybe understand a little bit more about the big picture that works around them and if it's done properly, it does give them some powers, I think we've got to allow communities to decide their own priorities.

Leader 2 and its follow-up, Leader plus, were probably in my view the best examples, they retained some independence from councils, but councils were now becoming much more involved

...from day one from Leader 1, I always felt it was one of the best programmes out there because it was bottom up, it was community led and all the rest of it with an equal share from elected representatives on it as well, that has always been the case from day one.

...yeah I think the Leader approach was very important in the fact that it led to that grassroots element and involvement in the strategic direction of the programme

in the past Leader gave small grants to groups who were setting up to do small things like you know, put on their luncheon club for 10 weeks at a time or to run classes and that Leader funding allowed them to dip their toe in the water without too many repercussions and not too much paperwork or being over burdened with paperwork and that was the enabling factor

The report proceeds by examining the positive and negative aspects of the programme, many of which are two sides of the same coin. For example, for some the working and practical relations were considered to be very positive:

I think what Leader has done very well is [that it] obviously encouraged good practical working relationships.

I think we probably shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the reason there was a need for a rural development programme was the absence of any central government support for rural interventions.

But not everyone agreed on the quality of the working relations. This depended to an extent on their status as social partner or council representative as well as on basic interpersonal relations. As might be expected given evolving social interactions, this changed over time as power relations shifted, something that is explored further in the next section.

Trust and power relations

Effective partnership working revolves around trusting relations that give rise to shared power. It has long been known that the micro-politics of rural development can make or break a process (McAreavey 2006). Micro-politics encompass trust, norms, shared knowledge, perceptions, understanding, social networks, values and personality traits. Positive relations are eroded through various actions including inappropriate meeting behaviour, meetings being held outside meetings. New friendships, new groups, the 'feel good' factor and positive social interaction are more positive aspects of micro-politics. These processes are fundamental to the effective workings of different groups and for positive relations between different partners.

The importance of trust and equal power relations between LAGs, DAERA and local government were discussed many times. It is virtually impossible to disentangle these relations, they were complex, fluid and multi-dimensional.

Relations between DAERA and councils were not always fruitful:

...bit unduly restrictive and I think there would have been mechanisms available for councils and community social partnerships to work in a much more flexible way which would have actually resulted in, whether it's across grants or other mechanisms of support, the money coming out much more quickly. I think there was generally a mistrust between DAERA and councils and particularly between some DAERA officials and councils and I think that resulted in a bit of a mixed bag as to how maybe the Leader approach was rolled out across the council districts.

DAERA's position as managing authority created distance between it as an organisation and the communities who were benefiting from the programme. However, depending on the individuals involved, relations with LAG members varied, as this DAERA officer explained:

at a local level we have a great relationship with the council and the LAG chair and the vice chairfor each LAG it's down to the personality and the strength and the interest of their chair and their vice chair to run it successfully.

Particular personalities played a very strong role in the programme. This can be problematic when dynamics degenerate into personality conflicts and misinformation or if the relationship is simply not productive.

DAERA staff recognised that their position could be used in a less than constructive way, a dynamic that was not necessarily welcomed by them:

the department is brought in when difficult decisions have to be made, when there's difficult issues within the LAG and the way that it has gone isn't working - council doesn't want to deal with that and therefore then the managing authority or the department is wheeled in to be the bad person, to say, no you can't do that or that's the wrong decision and having to take a very hard line...

Indeed one LAG member, recalls being on the receiving end of getting told off for doing something incorrectly.

I can't remember what the issue was about, but it was almost being treated like naughty children we then had the Chief Executive coming in from the council and sitting down observing and various other DAERA officials...

That individual described conflicts and tensions, including how sometimes LAG members took things out on LAG staff who in turn were pulled in different directions - by the community and by the Council. Part of the difficulty appeared to be in how the relationship between the different players in the programme was perceived to be and then how those relations were played out on the ground.

Rather than a fully collaborative approach where partners involved in the programme take collective responsibility, power relations were skewed:

The councils were always told that you can't get too close, you can help them to a certain degree and tell them in terms of you know what their application needs to include you can't help them... You are trying to build a relationship with a community and you are trying to bring forward an application for funding but then you are assessing that application and there is a conflict there.

This directly contradicts and undermines the LEADER approach of capacity building and community empowerment. The rationale was that ultimately the Council would be issuing contracts and awarding grants, albeit through the LAG. Given the level of audit and control from the managing authority, it is suggestive of a mistrustful relation, rather than enabling and supporting a process, directing and instructing was the mode of operating.

However, when asked if they thought there was a lack of trust between DAERA and the LAG, some LAG members expressed disappointment, demonstrating a strong desire for more productive relations:

I would be disappointed if anybody within the Department had taken that attitude to be honest with you because what we have delivered on the ground and certainly our own LAG we've always delivered on time...

The focus in this LAG member's mind was on the delivery of grants rather than the wider impact of the programme, including the quality of what was delivered or an evaluation of what worked. On the issue of relationships, it was striking from focus group discussions and interviews how different organisations perceived different relations across the various partners. It is evident that the relationship between DAERA and Councils was not always smooth. Part of this was due to their position as managing authority and their role at various times in mediating between the LAG and the Council. The LAG is not the same as the council, but in the recent programme, it was often perceived by social partners to be acting more in the interests of the associated council than of the wider community. Relations between LAGs and DAERA cannot be generalised as 'good' or 'bad', context greatly impacted on interactions. That stated, there was a clear sense, especially among social partners, that LAGs had little influence on how things were done - the 600+ page desk manual (issued by DAERA) is testimony to that. In other words, the very design of the programme governance mitigated against the development of collaborative relations.

Power is therefore not given, it is circumstantial. The different mandates of different partners needs to be given due recognition and circumstances created that allow for more equal relations and associations. This could be recognising that in some domains, certain partners are in a more powerful position, while in others they are less powerful. At the very least that would give equal voice to local knowledge as compared to technical funding skills.

Participating in Community Government Led Local Development

Balanced partnership ensures equality of opportunity and recognition of different knowledge as well as appropriate access to resources and skills, with partners sharing decision making and each having the power to influence what happens. Questions have been raised in the past about the capacity of communities to participate in programmes that are led by government/public sector due to the way they are designed. This reflects the findings from other research that has shown how the ability to participate in pre-defined funding schemes relies on particular skills, knowledge and expertise (Taylor 2003, McAreavey 2006).

From the outset of the last programme, little time or space was given to build capacity of the new LAG members. Volunteers were expected to dedicate as much time as paid councils officials and participate in what was often perceived by social partners to be an intimidating space, that of the LAG committee meeting. Participation is not a lay activity, it requires very particular skills and investment in training:

It's not just good enough to have the 50/50 or the 51/49 approach, it's important that the people who actually sit on the board from the social and community and economic sector are strong individuals or have within themselves the knowledge that they have as much power or in terms of decision making as the elected members.

I think there needs to be something in terms of the rigour of the exercise in getting the social partners through the door ...so you have more of a strategic sense and experience in order to bring opinion on to the board.

I think it's important that the individual [has a] certain level of competency or ...I suppose experience to sit and question decisions that's been put to the board...And challenge decisions and how they've been made. You found in a lot of our LAGs you know the elected members have swayed the decisions and some of the people who came from the community and voluntary sector sat on the board, but they weren't very vocal at the meetings and ... there's a sort of a perception that the elected members have more knowledge and kudos.

Because the process is so complicated, some groups used consultants to write applications. This is not a situation that sits comfortably with many funders in Northern Ireland. Thus for instance, the National Lottery provide local officers to help with the application process. This is also something that LEADER officers undertook in earlier phases of the programme. Without that support embedded within the programme, some groups were at a clear disadvantage:

...the ones that are gonna be successful are the ones that can afford to bring on somebody who, who can talk the language and, and do business cases and do business plans and put forward an application which works well so that leaves out those that don't have that they don't have access to that, they don't have the funds to be able to do that.

...are the groups that are already very well established, very well placed and yes some of them are maybe doing really important innovative things but some of them are just very good at getting the money in and getting the money spent and it's not reaching the smaller groups.

Clear barriers to programme participation were identified.

Some participants talked about how the 'entry ticket' to participation was around £30,000 as this was the approximate cost of quantity surveyor and architect fees for capital projects. To elaborate, if a group wished to apply for capital grants, they had to do certain things at risk, including engaging an architect, a quantity surveyor, gaining planning permission and writing a business plan. Taken together, this equates to a pre application investment of up to approximately £30,000.

It is a prohibitive barrier to entry and reflects how the programme has shifted from being genuinely community-led to a government-led²⁷ initiative.

Appropriate levels of (community) participation

Other research has identified that appropriate participation does not necessarily equate to a single act, such as committee membership, but that there are different entry points for participation (McAreevey 2009b). It also shows that it is not a self-evident activity – it is defined and becomes concrete practice through ritualised performances – often defined by powerful actors outside of the community (Müller et al. 2020).

The most recent RDP placed substantial emphasis on the mechanics of funding. In fact participation in rural development ought to be much broader. It is about a range of activities and approaches including the following:

- Design of a programme that will meet local needs
- Capacity building and skills development
- Decision making on funding and investment
- Linking, networking and learning
- Building alliances, partnerships and joint working
- Levering in external resources
- Strategic planning for future projects and programme
- Flexibility to meet changing local needs

Participation needs to be universally understood by all partners. It should then also be considered within the wider context of whose voices are heard and whose voices are excluded; who is making important decisions about how to spend money and allocate resources. Fixing participation and representation at the start of the programme was not considered to be a helpful practice by social partners as community actors and community priorities/circumstances are known to change over time. As one respondent eloquently explains:

...a more flexible form of representation which might have been better linked to the themes of the action plans as we went forward, I think we did get a number of gatekeepers on LAGs and I think those gatekeepers often controlled interventions which perhaps wasn't always helpful.

²⁷ DAERA and local government

Good practice from elsewhere involved creating opportunities for multiple entry points as explained by this person:

...it was about developing different entry points for people in the programme so those communities that had never accessed Leader funding before were able to kind of come in and be a part of our programme without going through the full application process.

This relates to the way that funds are provided for projects. As already explained, communities without knowledge of accessing funding or without sufficient cash flow were at a disadvantage:

I would also like to see the ability for a bit more advance payments, they were starting to come in...advance payments, particularly for small projects are essential. You can't have a group that's got £3,000 in its bank, it's undertaking a £10,000 project and it fails.

At the wider programme level, there was some reflection of what constitutes appropriate institutional participation. A number of respondents explained how it was not always appropriate for a community-based organisation to lead on particular activities such as economic development while in other cases it would be more suitable to have the community leading the process. Importantly there should be a clear and equitable distribution of resources, so that communities are not just confined to accessing the smaller pots of money but have a say in how larger sums are allocated.

and I have made it very clear we need to make sure there is an equitable spread of the money across the board...

LAG staff and board members described how they developed trusting relations with their communities, being answerable to them and supporting their needs:

... I can maybe relate to these guys and maybe have a yarn and break down the barriers, I can say we're not here to test you, to catch you, to hang you, we want to get this money out to you just trust us and roll with it. We've had instances there with those three projects where they had a consultant on board, three of them had a consultant on board which he was very much not willing to let their guard down and I had built up such a good reputation with those other three, I says let the consultant go, you do not need him, we are here we can do what needs to be done and that has worked very, very well, so that is a big trust thing really to be honest with you

Programme priorities and processes

Among the many challenges of working in a partnership are those of navigating between partners' varied priorities and interests; establishing common ground; ensuring that collective responsibility is practiced and synergy is achieved. The role of trust in this process was acknowledged earlier in this report, but even where trust is abundant, organisational constraints exist.

All organisations involved in the RDP had specific constraints, be they that of operating within a civil service context, or in the case of local government, operating within the new circumstances of local government reform and the accompanying larger structure of the new councils. Councils were also legally obligated to higher levels of government as contract holder for the LAGs. Social partners have their own challenges, including reliance on volunteers and, depending on the

organisation, potentially less knowledge of funding processes and procedures. The nature of the most recent programme was such that it demanded significant action on the ground to get projects ready to make an application to the programme. LAGs were conscious of trying to ensure that their budgets were spent; this was sometimes at the expense of other projects that were primarily supported by community representatives:

...but it's trying to achieve a spend as well within a timescale and trying to get a project scored and put on the ground and the work completed within the timescale to draw down the funding issue...

You had council sort of, maybe slipping projects in that they would have been wanting, that's what worries me going forward. You know it just can't be seen as a council slush fund, I think we need to be setting stronger parameters you know for the community. It's not just a council pet project we're doing, it's something for the wider community.

...probably been one or two projects certainly that I would have been aware of that the council would have been pushing forward and certainly that caused a bit of rancour...but I suppose to be fair to it there was an element that by the time you put out a call for projects and then accept them and score them or whatever and then try to get those projects delivered on the ground on the timescale...The council seemed to have a few projects sitting in the wings that certainly I've heard caused a bit of a wee bit of friction.

Projects that were favoured by the Council were perceived to be at an advantage as they were likely to receive necessary match funding making them more viable than other initiatives from within the community (that were not recognised from the outset and written into the formal/strategic plans, unlike Council projects that tended to be identified well in advance):

As match funding was an important element of the programme, those projects where that correlated with the priorities of councils' Community Plan were more likely to be approved.

It was the ones that were easily delivered the ones that the council could deliver quickly and match fund because, obviously there was a match fund element required, so they were gonna match fund what they wanted to deliver and therefore you ended up getting programmes such as play parks and local walks in nearly every village.

Again that comes down to that pressure of programme spend, councils could get the money out and get it spent and have something shiny enough at the end of it with all the pictures and everything else you might want to go with it.

Here, the particular political context ought to be acknowledged. During part of the programme period Stormont had collapsed due to scandal relating to the Renewable Heat Initiative. A direct consequence of this is that projects that could have been funded through government departments ended up being funded through LEADER. The reality is that within the programme, some of the criticisms directed towards council representatives was that they were not only parochial, but political, often supporting projects according to political affiliation:

...sometimes the political representation took the lead as opposed to the social representation and forced, and that's the word I'm using, forced projects through. It was more politicised than that you know...it was a particular community background, and those projects were being forced through and that did cause issues within LAGs. In particular I had one LAG where I had been to the LAG meeting couple of times and it was particularly around that that one side of the community, the political representation were pushing projects through that others didn't feel should have been pushed through, so yes, you're talking about the LAG representation but was it truly representative of the community or was it politicised?

Programme processes

The favoured processes for administering the RDP funds, such as committee meetings or project appraisals very much reflect the norms of the public sector and replicate their processes for doing things. This includes the tone of meetings and their assumed formality. Not only does this imply that those processes are superior, but it also leaves little space for alternatives.

It means that rather than shaping a programme around the needs of the community, typically the community has to fit within programme parameters, not a straightforward matter:

...because I felt I had to learn a whole new language when I joined Leader and assist even, you know, in my role on the LAG, but also in my role in the community. I had to get to grips with this whole new system of words and what it meant...

The major gap for me is that there were there were no small grants, there were no small amounts of funding available for community organisations to be able to deliver whatever their programmes are in relation to meeting local needs whatever they had identified as a local need and I think earlier, in earlier programmes of Leader, those were available and they were possible.

Even respondents who are assertive, described how for the first couple of LAG meetings that they attended, they barely spoke as they found the meeting environment to be intimidating.

There was a default adoption of formalities that were the norm in a council. Although this was not explicitly designed into the process, it was supported through the programme desk instructions, issued by DAERA, which included wide ranging directives including instructions on agenda items for LAG meetings.

Where there were strong community voices, they were not always heard.

Participation that ignores particular voices has been shown to be disempowering for those involved and can lead to apathy more widely in a community, which in turn is difficult to reverse (McAreavey 2009b).

It was interesting to note that some found the interactions during assessment panels to be a positive experience:

...actually the assessment panels were interesting, there hasn't been an assessment panel for about 2.5 years but there was time for good discussion, there was time for kind of tussling things out and for the smaller conversations that weren't able to happen at the LAG, so that was actually quite a good experience the assessment panels.

This was not shared by all, reflecting the diversity across LAGs and Councils. Frustration existed around not being able to bring local knowledge to bear due the inflexible nature of the programme.

Local knowledge was not valued - technical and programming knowledge was considered more important...

Different people had different perceptions of what constituted CLLD. This comment from a social partner:

...but I'm almost sure that it never set out to build capacity. It's not a capacity building programme it never was meant to be delivering capacity... I suppose outside of the rural development programme DAERA does have a role in delivering, sorry developing capacity and they have delivered and developed that capacity through the TRPSI programme

There is clearly confusion about the purpose of the two programmes; LEADER is about capacity building, something that TRPSI was never about. The LEADER approach is centred on bottom-up development and local strategy development. This element seems to have been lost from the recent programme. TRPSI was never meant to be a capacity building programme, it was established to overcome poverty and exclusion. The closest it comes to capacity building is by making a small investment in networks. This is even misunderstood by officials, the following is from an individual working in rural development:

...the TRPSI programme is probably more, more well it has been in this last 10 years has been delivering on capacity building whereas previous to that maybe three, four programmes ago there was some element of capacity building within the rural development programme but the last 10 years or so we've lost that...

Meanwhile a LAG staff member described how:

...the (LEADER) programme was designed to look at capital projects, it is pretty much set aside as capital monies with the exception of feasibility studies and maybe research projects to inform what capital projects should go ahead, so I think the programme set a stall out early in terms of this will be capital led, it will be capital infrastructure and the delivery of projects along those lines...

This quote raises a number of issues that warrant reflection. Earlier in the programme, the only funding budget that domestic financial bodies had was capital – the programme suffered because of that – DAERA had no revenue funding and so they promoted the development of a capital investment programme. Thus the way the programme evolved was because of domestic budgets. As a capital programme some perceived that there was little room for individuals and groups with little experience of rural development to get involved:

I think the programme as it's currently designed, [it's] maybe too early for those types of groups to engage with at this stage ...a lot of this programme is very much developed and built around capital infrastructure.

Focusing on capital infrastructure is less than satisfactory for many working and supporting communities, it brings with it a number of problems, as this respondent comprehensively explains:

...what you find with community halls is that they're all dickied up and they look great and the key is turned in the lock and there is nobody there to run regular programmes, to get the community involved. To do that you need a paid worker and you need revenue funding. What you find is that the communities are chasing money all the time they're chasing small pots they don't have the capacity to put together applications. They get somebody to take the job but then the person doesn't stay in it very long. You're dependent upon volunteers and you have fatigue amongst volunteers who cannot keep things going. Because they're not in a paid post if their child is ill in the morning or their elderly parent is ill, they don't turn up to open up the facilities and therefore that group doesn't meet that day. I think going forward we do need to think about that.

Because funding is capital focused should not mean that it is only easily accessed by experienced groups. Capital resources ought to be evenly spread across rural communities but the programme design left little space for inexperienced groups to develop capital infrastructure. It also did not support them to either, continue doing what they were doing, or to advance smaller scale initiatives. Many people described the lack of smaller pots of funding for recurring core costs for community development activities:

We did look at a couple of projects...they sound[ed] potentially quite exciting but they were almost too big a scale for us, too big a commitment because, not only did they offer some funding to run activities or were linked to, you know the sort of refurbishment of the hall, some were quite well orientated to capital aspects, but they all required, and this was kind of the hook, and I understand where they're coming from on this is some sort of commitment to participate in activities that they were running you know training activities here there and everywhere and I mean we didn't have, we certainly didn't have the resource to do that ...what we wanted was something and it sounds awfully simple and I know it's not very attractive to funders but the thing that keeps me awake at night...it's how do I get enough money to pay the insurance bill you know our biggest single cost of the year it's the one thing that worries is the public liability insurance and those sort of programmes don't support that.

...more support put towards resource and expertise and professional services for the development of capital projects but also for the development of resource type projects on the ground is something that could be looked at.

There were limited opportunities to get involved and the evidence suggests clear misalignment of expectations around what the programme was about. This undoubtedly led to frustrations about programme priorities and therefore what type of initiatives would, and should, be funded. The upshot of misaligned expectations is disappointment in the impact of the programme within the wider community with a very real danger of apathetic responses to future state-led initiatives. Dressing something up as a community-led initiative that fails to generate equal power relations is therefore very damaging.

Assessment process

Assessment panels met to score project applications using a standard scoring matrix.

The panels would have been drawn up, you know cross community, male, female you know it would have been well balanced.

But not everyone shared that perspective, some women strongly believed that women were disproportionately picking up administrative tasks and doing a lot of the heavy lifting in relation to assessments and completing paperwork - an issue discussed during various focus groups and interviews, but less explicitly clear in monitoring data. This is an area that warrants closer scrutiny in a future programme to mitigate against disproportionately loading women with the administrative burden.

The scoring matrix is weighted towards projects with previous experience of project management; income generation and job creation.

... we were very limited in terms of the scoring it became very prescriptive. Literally it said your choice was 3 or 5 or 8 you know it they took away the ability you know the flexibility for people with local knowledge to kind of change the scores and influence that, just for instance we had high levels of youth unemployment in our area but you weren't able to offer more points for job creating in you know for youth it basically said, for this scale of job, for that type of work you know skilled, unskilled.

Although the assessment process was prescriptive, there was still room for value judgements. The perception of what was important within the RDP (which, as discussed, varied greatly among and between social partners and local authorities) seeped through to the assessment panels. The assessment process left little room for applying local knowledge as the same criteria were used across the complete programme, even though we know that challenges differ across rural Northern Ireland. Thus issues in South Armagh are distinct from those in the Sperrins and so on.

Whenever you brought local people around a table you should allow them to use their local knowledge you know to bring that to bear on the process, and then because of the prescriptive way it was set out that wasn't always possible...

Every time a community group or that thought they had got their ducks in a row, there was always another hurdle and they just seemed to keep coming up with new hurdles for community groups. But if it was a council backed capital build, everything was sorted so quick, so fast everything was in order and they scored the best scores. It just really frustrated me because who was this money for it was for the small communities, it was for groups who were managed by volunteers.

Calibration between different individuals who were scoring applications did not occur – a process that regularly occurs in other domains when projects are scored²⁸. Perhaps more critically, there did not appear to be a forum for assessors to voice concerns about scores that were considered a potential outlier:

Even though we had a prescriptive marking system different assessment panels were made up different people on it and they did score differently, cos I used to be a floater I would have been brought in to different assessment panels because I was available. So I would have been sitting there going 'I know that project shouldn't have scored lower than that project' but you know you couldn't say anything. That was really annoying whenever those groups were sitting at the end not knowing if they were gonna get funding or not.

Measuring success: process and/or product

As already discussed earlier in this report, the programme demanded particular levels of expertise and knowledge of funding processes. Those who described a successful programme talked about their success in getting money spent as well as developing community facilities and relations within their area.

The drive to spend money and have budgets allocated seemed to take priority over the process and the wider impact of LEADER. This is in contradiction to the more widely recognised objective of government funding to the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland; it is important that money is properly spent, but that should not be the primary aim (Northern Ireland Executive 2013).

We spent all our money allocated and within the timescale and certainly with a limited number of staff, but we always achieved our spend and we were able to if there was surplus funds within other LAGs we always tend to go for, probably drawing some of that down for the department if it was possible.

²⁸ Research funding panels typically do this. Some funders include draft project rankings based on high average scores and on standardised scores (to account for different individual application of the same scoring metrics)

Previous programmes placed more of an emphasis on process as well as product when compared to the most recent programme. These earlier versions of the RDP were considered by some respondents to be superior over the most recent programme, both in terms of community engagement and capacity to enact change, but also regarding the scope of projects:

...on Leader Plus as well and I think it was better, it definitely had the edge over the current programme it was a bit more diverse in terms of what it offered you know in terms of rural heritage, rural tourism you know there were more measures and there was a bigger variety of projects.

Not everyone shared this viewpoint. There were respondents from the community and voluntary sector, as well as those employed by LAGs, who believed that the most recent programme, was very successful. Success was measured within pre-defined measures of the programme, and not set within a wider strategic evaluation of the programme's impact.

I thought the business support element of it worked extremely well...I agree that if businesses were gonna' come forward that they needed to have a good business plan that they did need to link job creation to it or at least job sustainability to it and I think by and large most of the people who've got funded through that programme have done particularly well.

There was a belief that the benefits from the process are not always fully understood by (local and central) government with a prevailing focus on economic outputs and getting the money spent:

...targets on paper have been met and the money's been spent out and the paperwork has been completed efficiently and very few sanctions from DAERA, in terms of so yeah the bureaucracy and the administration more or less seems to have worked well for those who needed to deliver the programme...

What has worked well is getting the money out in terms of the mechanism of delivery and ensure there's not an underspend in the [LAG area].

This focus on money and expenditure obscures the wider value and benefit of the programme. Ultimately the programme metrics do not make clear what the cohesion and wellbeing benefits were. Failure to fully capture that data was a major gap in the programme.

Fundamentally, getting money spent and on budget is a relatively straightforward process, especially if less risky projects are supported. However, neglecting capacity building means that participatory processes, the longer term impact and programme legacy, are at the very least, little understood and potentially compromised. Alternative means of valuing community action and impact exist, including those promoted by the OECD²⁹ and the UK government³⁰.

Programme administration

Twenty percent of the programme budget was allocated for administrative costs - while high, this was likely essential given the various administrative demands some of which were perceived to come from the EU and some from DAERA. This is a form of 'gold plating'³¹ and it occurs where EU guidance picks up additional guidelines, procedures and requirements when implemented at the national level. For instance, desk instructions for LAGs were over 600 pages long and several versions were issued over the course of the programme. This included incredibly detailed instructions about everything from monthly progress reports (sent from the LAG to DAERA) to refreshments at meetings:

²⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/wise/measuring-well-being-and-progress.htm>

³⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1005388/Wellbeing_guidance_for_appraisal_-_supplementary_Green_Book_guidance.pdf

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-ends-goldplating-of-european-regulations>

Where a supply of tea, coffee or biscuits is purchased to cover a number of meetings a Form 1 should be completed and a copy of the receipt attached (p. 29)

There was partial awareness from DAERA officials of the complexity of desk instructions, not least the implications of how they changed at least five times over the programme and obscured a wider understanding of the strategic impact of the programme:

We're partly at fault as well because over the course of this programme we issued five separate versions of the desk instructions and you know that wouldn't happen in the private sector, you'd have one version at the start and that would be it... then the issue there is that whenever you have processes that complicated in place which are administering what you are looking at becomes about the process rather than what you're trying to achieve...

It has already been noted in the new rural policy framework that the administrative burden is to be reduced and the programme is to be made more flexible.

However, in the previous programme, where LAGs were awarded additional monies during the programme, this did not always allow for administrative spend which was significant in a scheme that is labour intensive and administratively heavy.

It is worth noting that when LAG Boards have zero budget left available for running costs, they lose autonomy from the council.

It is important to be clear about what constitutes administrative tasks as distinct from capacity building and developmental support.

This is a grey area. Cutting administrative support in a blanket way can be a false economy if delivery bodies are then unable to guide applicants, support networking and undertake a whole range of activities that are essential if inclusion is to be maximised. Streamlining administration is likely a better solution because it would reduce the burdensome bureaucracy for applicants that has evidently crept into the programme.

The bottom line is if administration costs are to be reduced, this needs to be done while maintaining the integrity and ambition of the programme to animate and nurture development.

Risk and audit

Earlier versions of the LEADER programme were considered to be more innovative and to take more risks, a feature that was connected to the makeup of the LAG:

Leader 2 was the one that took the most chances and that was because the boards were largely made of local players and local actors... if I'm right in this the majority of people sitting around the table were local actors and then the minority were councils

Different partners have different ideas of risk. As one person put it, 'innovation and risk taking is not part of the DNA of the state.'

DAERA, you know the managing authority was bringing down was very prescriptive you can only do A, B, C, D and that was for the whole of North of Ireland and, to be very honest, that didn't make sense because the priorities for [our area] are actually quite different to the priorities [elsewhere] and it didn't really reflect the flexibility that that required.

Radical change would be needed to shape programmes around a community, rather than expecting communities to follow in the shadow of government.

I mean as a manager I found particularly near the end that we were funding projects that didn't need funding because they were the only projects we could fund because there was no risk. If there wasn't any risk, why were we funding the goddamn projects in the first place? I think there's got to be an acceptance of some risk I think you've got to have good governance you've got all the protections in place but assume, I think you really have to assume that 10 percent of your projects are gonna fail, that's a tremendous record go out and do that so that aversion to risk. I mean audit got to a ridiculous extent whereby and again my fellow Leader people will remember this, where if you did an audit report and you rounded up to half 'p' you actually got an audit report a letter came to you say no that was a mistake that should have been 1p less and you were asked to re change your letter of offer etc. It got to a nonsense in that sense, so you got to have that flexibility and they say that flexibility has got to be about the audit, it's got to be about the ability to help groups, the ability to help, particularly the smaller groups. They're the ones who are gonna get so badly left out here if we go down the Levelling Up road, there's a real need for facilitation.

This long quote is getting at the need for community engagement and animation and the need for that in the incoming programme. It will be important that the cost of this is not borne by social partners. The quote also encapsulates many of the viewpoints of respondents relating to the paperwork and audit required to participate in the programme. There was frequent reference to the avoidance of risk and of LAGs being over audited as audits were performed by DAERA, the NI Audit Office and European auditors. It is not clear why this level of scrutiny and audit was needed nor is it clear if this is comparable to other government-related grant-giving bodies.

...you've been worn into the ground with audits. It takes up a lot of the time that you could be spending on the delivery of projects and it takes up a hell of a lot of time of your staff that you could be doing other things. We have a...very good reputation in that we have at no major findings in any of our projects yet we are still seen, right up until last year, as medium risk. Now so I've examples in front of me here where I have three files that are selected for from the European auditors, three from article 48 for the department and three for the Northern Ireland audit office and they're all inspected on an ongoing basis so that's difficult.

...every LAG, right across the board, because the programme's new, you're seen as high risk which means that 100 percent of your projects that you get over the line in terms of hte spend, 100 percent of them are audited. That's at the departmental level EU, European Union Verification Unit, and the Northern Ireland audit office and they will inspect up to 100 percent of your files.

Although the requirements appeared to be set in stone, flexibilities were introduced during the pandemic which was greatly welcomed:

...we could submit photo evidence that projects were done, you know for the earlier phases and then what we did was that the last phase we went out and actually saw it delivered. But we would have vouched the earlier phases on photograph evidence submitted by the promoter and that would never have been possible you know, and again the online bank statements we were able to accept those and then just go out and vouch it once at the end and say, yes we've seen it. So yeah, a lot of things became possible, it was quite amazing!

Audit is a tool to check the allocation of funding and expenditure, but it became a threat to the programme and it suggests an overly controlling approach, typical when there are mistrusting relations. Deciding the level of audit that is appropriate for the variety of projects that is likely to be supported in a new rural development programme will be critical. The pandemic has revealed how less onerous requirements were allowed to be used while still retaining robust scrutiny of funding. It begs the question of why this more flexible approach was not introduced earlier.

Indeed nearly ten years ago, the Department for Communities identified that the disproportionate bureaucracy in grant administration is a cross cutting issue for government (Northern Ireland Executive 2013). Their report 'Addressing Bureaucracy' recommends a series of recommendations that can be achieved without compromising governance and control. Many of these are relevant for consideration in implementing a new rural policy framework. They include that the 'administrative requirements on the VCS in respect of public funding are proportionate and reflect the level of risk' (p.5) and that joined up delivery is achieved where possible (p.7) including sharing core information across public sector funders (p. 8).

Programme governance

The three key organisations within the rural development programme - the councils, DAERA and LAGs - worked well at times and at other times the relationship became fractious. Not all groups of organisations are the same - councils, social partners and so forth. Interactions were very dependent on the personalities involved. Thus some councils were viewed in a more positive light than others. As already mentioned, pressures were on councils to ensure a successful programme, this was set within the context of new council structures. It was noted earlier that different constraints existed for DAERA as a government department. LAGs were very much operating at the intersection of these bodies, while also representing the community in the area. Many LAGs had attempted to achieve wide representation aiming to provide a voice for different interests from across the community:

We did carry out exercises where we went directly to youth organisations, to women's organisations to farming organisations, to farming organisations, to, you know, single women, single men, we went to minorities etc to get their view but not always were we able to develop a programme that met their specific needs. We were able to develop programmes and projects that met the wider community.

However, not all groups are the same and not all have equal capacity to apply for funds. Proactive measures are often needed to bring new entrants into a programme. Good practice from elsewhere includes holding dedicated one-day events for groups and individuals with no previous relationship with a programme fund. Such events brief participants on funding opportunities that are available in an informal way.

As already mentioned, social partners represent a wide variety of interests and should not be considered as a homogenous group:

...we have a whole selection of different people from different backgrounds some from the private sector some that work in community development some that are community development volunteers, some that are working in various rural development guises locally and volunteering locally. They're not all paid workers...

There were very many views about what constitutes good programme governance, with some respondents favouring a strong council involvement while others were very much against that model

...the council, all they're good for is redistributing and adding another layer of bureaucracy

...well the LAG structure I think should continue with continued input from the social members of it, we've had no negative publicity we've had no bite back through social media or anything and I truly believe that that is because of the social member involvement which again is legitimised by their partnership with elected members

I think more autonomy has to be given to a LAG in terms of how the funding, it's not so much the decision making of the funding, but it's just the management of the funds and financial years.

I don't have much issue with the current structure to tell you the truth... Now I know other networks, other community social networks that don't necessarily have the same input, maybe even the same role or the same sense of ownership of their local LAG. Unfortunately that is the case in other areas, but it's not in our area, so I think this bottom up approach in our area has worked very well.

Clearly not all LAGs were the same and some areas experienced more community engagement and participation than others. This reinforces the importance of programme monitoring, rather than programme micro-management. Consequently important questions can be raised about who is participating and who is benefiting.

Synergy

In terms of wider governance, although some respondents did not have a clear preference about what the preferred infrastructure for delivering a programme would look like, others were cautious about the role of Councils, DAERA and about ensuring coherence across different programmes. The range of different pilots and policy interventions across Northern Ireland was notable. DAERA officers noted the pressures they are under to respond to demands from ministers, including those to administer pilots that were seen to be addressing particular issues. There appears to be no clear rationale for why some initiatives were not combined with others, such as TRPSI and the RDP. In fact there could be an opportunity to merge the things that worked well from LEADER with TRPSI. For instance, TRPSI adopted a flexible and tailored response across Northern Ireland, working closely with local actors to deliver support and responses aligned with local need. This approach mirrors the original premise of LEADER, but diverges from the most recent programme.

From a governance point of view, having so many initiatives raises questions around value for money and the costs associated with effective administration. Among some respondents there is less concern ultimately about who is running a programme, so long as it delivers, but that in itself raises challenges relating to how the programme is designed and how different programmes intersect on the ground (and the power afforded to different partners):

If the project's objective is around community development or empowerment of local communities or engagement and participation of people in isolated rural communities I don't care if that happens...whether it's through a regional organisation, local area one or regional one with good outreach and so on, as long as it works. I'd almost prefer that there was perhaps a single regional body with outreach, so there's not this sort of internal competition. We just don't seem to have that strategy and I'm not entirely sure if that is just a lack of resource issue or is it a lack of, if the department has the will to do that. I don't know if the voluntary sector itself has been strong enough in pushing that..

Well I don't mind as long as it's being funded to be honest... if it comes from rural development that's fine and TRPSI then that's fine.

They're [TRPSI and the RDP] not congruent... the rural development programme might not open up for another two years at which stage you're halfway through a capacity building programme but that might work in the long run.

Overall, there was a definite sense of the need to integrate delivery mechanisms to ensure a more coherent approach so that, for instance, Peace funds and rural development funds fully dovetail with one another. An important caveat is that such funds need to accommodate the scales and priorities of projects that typically emerge from a rural context.

...we're not linking up any of this stuff, the council, and the big one out there Peace+ which has got a lot of rural stuff in it you know what I mean why are we not discussing that? I mean there's an opportunity if you had a CLLD approach you could have some council on it you could have Peace Plus on it you could try and influence a levelling up so that they look upon these priorities...

Certainly, ideally you would need the two sitting side-by-side, basically the same, always bouncing ideas off each other - right you can fund this element and we go forward this way and share, share projects or share ideas or whatever, but I can't see that happening in the current structure or even the new structure going forward.

...I'd love to see something that looks like an area-based strategy with local players around a table with a budget that divides a strategy for their area, but that strategy has to read across to other programmes.

...making sure all pieces of work across local authorities and beyond even through community networks are aligned in some shape or form.

In the future, ensuring alignment between different funds will create a more sustainable rural policy infrastructure. Indeed many of the programmes have rural specific strands e.g. PEACE+ or measures that are relevant to rural communities e.g. Levelling Up funds.

Funding gap

There are concerns about the gap in the funding period between the programme that has just ended and the replacement programme. These worries were voiced by all research respondents and they relate largely to the loss of knowledge and expertise within the LAG staff pool. Even before the programme ended, there were instances where the council employed agency staff:

...the council, rather than putting people into those roles, went out to agencies which has been difficult... I don't think that agency workers should have been funded by admin monies from the programme, they didn't have to give any notice at all. They were sent off on three or four day training courses and a huge amount of money from DAERA was invested and the council, whenever we take on agency workers, won't send them for expensive training... there were many years where there were only two members of staff who were the permanent staff and then there was a turnover of agency staff...

I think there is key to the LAG working well that we had continuity of staff from the previous programme to this one you know the council retained as far as possible people from the previous programme and they were you know, they came in they knew the system they didn't have to you know they didn't have to go through a training programme from base to get the ethos of what the LAG is about so they knew what they were doing, they were in place when the thing was launched and when we were doing all that preparatory work they knew what it was about.

It will be challenging for the next programme to incorporate institutional expertise and ensure that knowledge and skills are not lost. In addition DAERA's evaluation of the most recent programme is not due to be completed for some time which raises this question: how will any findings and learning from the previous programme inform the new policy framework?

Programme oversight

Poor communication from, and the lack of monitoring and ongoing programme review by DAERA, was identified as a weakness in the programme. Failure to effectively do this resulted in frustrations. One LAG member described how DAERA informed them in June 2020 that no evaluation report would be required, a decision that would later be reversed at the point at which the LAG in question had spent its administrative budget. The lack of strategic oversight also hampered the resolution of tricky issues and caused problems in relation to project underspend:

...on a previous programme there was a sort of a group that met, it was Chaired and Secretaried by the department and all the LAG representatives came and well two representatives, the Chair and the Vice Chair and one other would have attended those meetings in Loughry College or wherever they were. If there were concerns they were sat round the table and the issues came out. That was with the senior official within the department, that didn't happen in the current programme that went by the wayside. The Chair and the Vice Chair and the manager met local DAERA officers, but there's no meetings with senior officials and that's where that's where I see the whole thing falling down in this current programme.

Given the scale of the change, a review and response mechanism should have been built in to see how LAGs were faring with their programmes in each region at about two years in. Funding should have been recirculated within the programme when there were underspends at set milestones.

The monitoring committee was for the whole RDP not for the CLLD (Leader) component. Leader was always the last item on the agenda until third sector committee members pushed for a change. Ultimately there was no opportunity for the LAGs and Monitoring committee members to hear and exchange ideas and information directly as DEARA was always the buffer to those direct conversations. Other problems were noted including the lack of transparency and scrutiny over funds, as the following quotes from monitoring committee members illustrates:

I suppose sitting on the [monitoring] committee and which, at the start of the [programme] seven, eight years ago, was quite an interesting role. You felt quite inclusive in terms of your opinions mattering, through to recent year, last couple of years where you really felt your opinion was irrelevant and the meetings became far less regular... the quality of data collection and therefore the ability to impact on equality issues has been negligible... when I first joined we had workshop events and we had events where we genuinely were having conversations as well as the big round table events with the advisors...

certainly on the previous programme we did raise some, some questions around particularly when there was underspends or when money needed to be moved it was suddenly being moved to councils very quick without the level of scrutiny I would have wanted to see happen.

The big problem at the moment is the targets don't include any element of equality within them.

Although some of the reason for the infrequency of meetings could be due to restrictions arising from the pandemic, it does not explain the poor monitoring described above. One further concern around programme oversight was articulated by social partners and DAERA officers. It was that due to the focus on getting the money spent, there was little or no attention paid to the strategic direction of the programme or on its wider equality and process impacts on rural communities. To be sure, reporting back to the EU was completed, but it did not encompass a comprehensive and strategic evaluation.

Looking forward: Recommendations and considerations for the future rural development programme

The global pandemic has had a profound impact on rural communities. With the shift to on-line working for many individuals, there has been a renewed sense of place and interest in rural life. The spotlight has been on rural space as more people have become interested in living and working outside of urban centres. More widely in society, the recognised 'normal' way of doing things has been challenged. Never before have service providers had to rethink and reshape their provision in such a short period of time. The OECD (2017) notes how system changes are influenced by crisis. The pandemic has presented a massive opportunity for new thinking in public service delivery and for moving beyond siloed thinking. As Development Trusts (NI) point out, 'we are faced with a choice between trying to rebuild the systems we had or building new ones. Community wealth building presents us with a real opportunity to build a new and inclusive economic system' (DTNI, 2022, p. 5).

In the context of rural development, a radical move by government would be to recognise how rarefied the space of rural development has become. Recognition would be given to the fact that it requires certain procedures, participatory skills and tools; and it is ultimately defined by government. Rural development is not a lay activity, it is imbued with specialisms and it demands extensive skills. To effectively participate, individuals need to be equipped with specific knowledge and skills, skills that are not automatically found among the general population, but that can be developed to enable participation.

Genuine community-led local development would create a vibrant space for local actors to work on equal terms with government representatives, identifying priorities for their area, determining rules of engagement and creating space for different forms of participation.

The more recent rural development programme has been state (DAERA and local government), rather than community, led. It has moved away from its core premise of CLLD.

Rather than starting by asking what skills do communities need to participate, the more radical questions would be: what are the assets within this locality and how can they be maximised? How can government best support community interests? The reframing of a rural policy framework in Northern Ireland is a chance for such fresh approaches. This research has identified a number of critical issues that need to be considered as part of that reframing. In the end, as the purse-holder, the government is in the powerful position in the process of redesigning rural policy. And so the first point of reflection for DAERA is to consider how radical it wishes to be.

(Co-)Designing a new programme

This research exposes the very complex and intricate nature of the so-called community-led local development process in Northern Ireland. The long history of EU policy involvement in rural development has created a legacy of individuals engaged with grassroots community engagement. It is clear that some of the underpinning philosophies of the original LEADER programme have been eroded, including the process of community development. Instead, what has been experienced in the most recent iteration of the programme, is more akin to a grant scheme than a rural development process. Even so, much enthusiasm endures among social partners and individuals who are keen to remain involved in community activities.

It is positive that, to date, DAERA has engaged in extensive consultation and engagement processes to develop the new Rural Policy Framework. DAERA and stakeholders have a general idea of what they want to do. What is less developed is the thinking around the design and 'the how' of policy delivery; that needs engagement and co-design. A new programme needs to be well-defined, avoiding raising expectations that cannot be met - this is not a one-sided issue, but relates to expectations of all partners and stakeholders including funders, government and social partners. There should be accurate information on what a new policy and approach is actually about. It entails involving community partners from the outset in a co-design process so that they are helping to lead the process (rather than 'merely' accessing funds and waiting for things to be done 'onto' them). This method has recently been achieved by the UK government through Defra and their work with farmers in developing the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (Lyon and Little, 2022). That Defra-led process has not been without its challenges and, while enthusiasm was high at the start, it has waned. Ongoing challenges include the lack of shared decision-making, lack of transparency and feedback regarding stakeholders contribution to policy development; and the perception that the process was closer to consultation than co-design (Aglionby 2020, Tsouvalis et al. 2022).

Trust and shared power relations go to the heart of effective co-design and result in inclusive and equitable activities. Truly collaborative work requires shared power relations where different partners have access to the resources that they need to fully and effectively participate. This was found to be lacking in the recent programme. The development of trusting relations is non-negotiable if an inclusive programme is to be developed and opportunities presented for all communities and individuals therein.

All partners must be recognised equally and their participation as equal partners nurtured through appropriate structures and processes. This is a tricky area, partners need to be clear about the processes through which they will be engaged, this includes giving close consideration to how decision making will happen in meetings and what capacity building investment will look like, both for those at the table and for those applying. Individuals cannot be 'stuck' in formal council approaches, or impeded by prescriptive funding guidances that automatically excludes applicants with different forms of capital (such as prescribing that a certain amount of "at risk" investment is required).

Effectively communicating with rural residents will play an important role in co-designing the new programme. Inviting people into neutral territory, such as community spaces for informal events - coffee and a chat, will be more attractive to individuals who have little experience of formal, council/civil service procedures. Otherwise a new programme will include the same old faces and others will continue to think that the programme 'is not for me'.

Innovation, risk and networks

Research has shown that successful rural development occurs where learning from elsewhere is brought into the frame. It can demonstrate what is possible; it can inspire fresh and creative thinking; and it supports rural development innovation. This relates to connections across the island and beyond, into European networks. Even within a programme, it is important to create space for officers to exchange ideas and generally support one another. The recent programme revealed uneven structures across local government areas. Having strong networks that allow relevant officers to exchange good practice could go quite some way to alleviate system blockages. Meanwhile taking inspiration from elsewhere can result in the implementation of new ideas, such as social prescribing or social enterprise.

Additionally connecting with other funding bodies will support knowledge exchange between funders. This includes sharing information on support for prospective applicants, monitoring systems and other procedural issues. For example the National Lottery, as a non-departmental public body has a duty to remain accountable for spending public funds, and is recognised in the sector as being a responsible funder. Linking with such bodies could identify systems suitable for adoption within a new rural programme.

In the previous programme, monitoring was included within the wider rural development programme. The new rural development framework is standalone and this presents an opportunity and a risk. On the one hand, it allows for proper review, monitoring and evaluation of CLLD activities. On the other hand there is a risk that without proper level of funding from Westminster and the Northern Ireland Executive, the programme will be marginalised.

Risk-taking does not always come naturally to government. And yet calculated risks can make for a more dynamic programme, supporting initiatives that would not have proceeded without intervention. It is too easy to pick the low-hanging fruit, knowing that certain projects are a safe option. A new programme ought to create space for riskier projects, recognising that a percentage of projects may well not have the planned outcome. There is precedent for this, urban development funding has for a long time incorporated calculated risk taking e.g. Pathfinder projects³². This allows project partners to test solutions, sometimes called Proof of Concept, through pilots. Where interventions are successful, they are rolled out in other areas.

Programme scale and accountability: lowering the barriers to entry

There were concerns in some LAG areas relating to accountability and community involvement. Indeed these issues are considered to be fundamental to a new programme and some respondents expressed real fears in relation to how a future programme would be locally accountable:

[The LAG is] accountable as well to the local people who put them forward whether they're councillors or whether they're social partner or whatever they're accountable they have to go out and explain.... who's going to be accountable within the department now if you're a civil servant they don't care ...they switch off at 4 o'clock on a Friday evening and they're away home and they don't care about anything 'til Monday. We as councillors or social partners, we're getting it on a weekend, we're getting it at night we're getting it all the time so there's issues there ...so I can't see how, how it'll work within the department.

³² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcomloc/1014/101407.htm>

https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/10744/place-based-approaches-report.pdf

Leader or CLLD, call it what you wish, should be out there doing the stimulating the finding small pots of money to get things started, working with councils. If a project gets a bit bigger, feeding in to the Levelling-Up [funds that are] out at the moment, what you've got is the Levelling Up fund, you've got probably a dozen people in a Westminster department going, right everybody apply in to us, it makes no sense they've no understanding and I'm not condemning the individuals they can't have any understanding.

Remoteness of programme administration from local communities is a major concern for social partners. There was evidence of council involvement in one project involving a public footpath, jeopardising the whole project because, being based 20 miles away, they did not appreciate particular nuances that were well known in the locality. This distance impacts on the responsiveness of a programme and its capacity to respond to actual and emerging needs within the community: communities are not static, they are constantly changing and policy needs to have built-in mechanisms to respond appropriately.

...we do need to make sure that in the new programme that number one, there's good quality the proper items in there for rural needs and community needs but also that the systems are there to make sure that they are being managed in an ongoing and flexible way moving forward, because community needs changes and you can't plan community need on a seven year basis because the actuality of that need will change.

...there's more of a need than ever for community led local development because levelling up is going to be an infrastructure based programme for large projects, I mean and also what the other thing that Leader was quite good at was reaching out to smaller groups.

Having a programme that is able to encourage the engagement of local groups and work with them through a process was invaluable in previous versions of the rural development programme. This support has been less evident in the most recent programmes, seemingly to the detriment of the programme overall as it excludes small scale initiatives and grassroots activity. Barriers to entry need to be lowered - where projects place emphasis on large scale capital projects, groups instantly need to find significant funds to undertake business plans so that they can participate in a programme.

Appropriate participation and governance

Not all communities wish to engage in large scale project activity. Many groups and individuals within communities are ambitious in their own terms, but those ambitions may be considered modest in programme terms. Creating multiple programme entry points will better sustain a wide range of community development activity, supporting very small scale groups through to larger projects. It requires a patient and phased approach which will build capacity, but also relationships (Communities in Charge 2019). Evidence from a Scottish study shows how facilitated community engagement can lead to participation from communities with little history of this activity (Steiner 2014). Support included providing dedicated staff support, external expertise and a budget to implement small scale activities. The value of this is intrinsically understood by those working in rural development in Northern Ireland:

There needs to be maybe a different pot of money for them you know like something you know like the kind of participatory budgeting stuff and erm you know that community wealth building kind of model.

...pick the things that Leader's good at, like for instance economic development and helping small businesses probably is better done by a council enterprise team, so I think that's one that could stay with councils. Things like village renewal should be community, things like small grants

for community activities, community halls, local tourism some of that stuff is very much down the line of where Leader should be and also Leader or CLLD call it what you wish should be out there doing the stimulating, finding small pots of money to get things started, working with councils if a project gets a bit bigger...

Appropriate participation spans upwards to the programme governance. Not everyone will desire to be part of committees who oversee the governance of funds and there should be alternate entry points to reflect the diverse interests and skills within the community, such as citizens' panels. While some people are likely to be involved in audit and assessment processes, others could have a role in supporting community outreach. People are at the heart of rural development and the way in which bureaucracy has expanded in the recent past has been out of step with the needs of the programme overall.

Particularly the earlier programmes were not 'just' about grant giving, but the intrinsic process of coming together was considered to be a 'good thing'. Even in the most recent programme, some respondents talked about the rich conversations that they had while discussing projects. The importance of the time and location of meetings should not be underestimated. Generally in society women carry out more caring duties looking after elderly relatives, sick family members and children. This is often the case for women living in rural areas. As one woman explained, a 'whole shuffle goes on before 9 o'clock' which starts again from 2pm. In her role as a LAG member in the previous programme she had a battle with male committee members in setting LAG meetings at a time that allowed women to participate (i.e. mindful of caring responsibilities). It is worth making the rather obvious statement: building support for caring can greatly assist women's participation. Other measures need to be considered to address barriers to participation for all of the Section 75 groups that were found to have under-representation across the programme (women, children and young people, people with disabilities).

Having meetings at the venues of member organisations can help break down barriers, people learn more about one another. Removing the mystique can build collaborative relations and help to overcome power imbalances.

Management and audit need to be appropriately scaled; it makes little sense to have the same monitoring and audit requirements for a large scale infrastructure project, such as a community building as for a smaller scheme, such as a village trail. Programme administration ought therefore to be significantly pared back, it should employ a rule of proportionality and it should adopt a pragmatic approach that more accurately reflects what is needed.

But this paring back of audit ought not to be at the expense of cutting developmental support, which is crucial for a rural development programme. Without developmental support there is a risk of failure to bring new actors into the process which can result in a lack of diversity of participants. In turn this can result in those governing a programme implementing projects that diverge from the community that they purport to represent.

There was a lot of emphasis on the desk instructions to LAG officers in the recent programme which focused on LAG meeting processes and yet thorough wider programme monitoring seemed to have been less visible. This included monitoring and evaluating the beneficiaries and the wider impact of individual projects:

Monitoring of the use of these buildings and the number of organisations and groups who provided advice and guidance has not really taken place. Also the number of people recorded who received support and advice is also limited. Covid was said to be the reason for this but information can be gathered by other means than physically visiting the sites.

A coherent approach to setting targets and collecting data to review progress was not evident, resulting in a lack of strategic programme oversight. Failure to capture and disseminate important data on equality and process impacts and on programme beneficiaries hampered the capacity of those involved in the programme to effectively monitor what was happening and accordingly to take remedial action. Moreover, the lack of transparency from DAERA in relation to programme monitoring frustrated some who were involved in the programme. This is of critical importance given the perception among some partners that certain groups are marginalised within the programme, an issue that was not properly discussed at programme monitoring. However, the figures show that women, children and young people and people with disabilities are less well represented both within LAGs and as programme beneficiaries (DAERA 2021).

Streamlining the bureaucratic burden of the programme could also be achieved through better joining up of resources across different programmes and policies. For instance Peace, TRPSI and rural development could easily sit more closely together from an administrative point of view, but that would require recognition of the value of a place-based approach.

Territorial development

In an ideal world, a synergistic approach to rural development would prevail; community plans would be fully integrated with the work of LAGs; and in turn other initiatives such as PEACE would be fully dovetailed. LAGs were originally designed to implement a territorial approach to development. However, this research has shown how they have drifted away from the original ethos.

And yet, place-based development has much to offer, it is person-centred and bottom-up and is 'used to meet the unique needs of people in one given location by working together to use the best available resources and collaborate to gain local knowledge and insight. By working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally, it aims to build a picture of the system from a local perspective, taking an asset-based approach that seeks to highlight the strengths, capacity and knowledge of all those involved' (Munro, 2015).

Development Trusts (NI) asserts that there is already substantial community architecture for community wealth building, but that it needs further investment if the benefits are to be properly felt (DTNI n.d.). Advancing community power and building community wealth are key components of this process and are issues that could easily be addressed through a well-designed rural development programme.

It is not clear how a new rural policy framework will dovetail with other existing and emerging relevant policies and programmes such as the emerging Climate Bill and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. DAERA has a leadership role to play to break down barriers with other government departments so as to ensure a co-ordinated approach that operates beyond civil service silos. A place-based approach would take into account what already exists and build on that; it would focus on assets rather than taking a deficit based approach. It would connect with existing structures on the ground, material and non-material. Throughout the research it was surprising that more reference was not made to the climate crisis and related challenges. Surely a new rural development programme needs to intersect with sustainable development goals?

The implementation of a new rural policy framework offers a remarkable opportunity to address the negatives from the previous programmes and embrace the positives. At the same time, DAERA ought to have the confidence to be brave and try new approaches. Rural communities are enthusiastic about participating in that process, but they need to be brought in and supported from the outset as equal partners.

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Appendix One: Data Collection

Data collection took place between November 2021 and February 2022. Ethics approval was granted by Newcastle University (REF 15102/2021).

Due to public health advice, all data was collected virtually using zoom. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed. A purposive sampling strategy was collected following to recruit participants who could provide in-depth and detailed information about the community led local development.

Twenty interviews were completed with social partners; LAG Officers and Board members; local government councillors. Some respondents had multiple roles, for instance as a LAG Board member they could also be a local government councillor. They included nine women and eleven men.

Four focus groups were held and included the following:

- Councils and LAGs
- Community Enterprise/Wealth Building
- DAERA staff
- Women involved in rural development in Northern Ireland

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were read, re-read and coded according to emerging themes. Those themes were discussed with the project steering group before further coding occurred.

Appendix Two: Project Steering Group

Aidan Campbell, NI Rural Community Network.

Kate Clifford, NI Rural Community Network.

Louise Coyle Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network.

Charlie Fisher, Development Trusts, NI.

Breige Jennings Rural Community Network.

Lisa O'Kane, NI Local Government Association.

Dr. Louise O'Kane Community Places, NI.

Michael Hughes, Community Foundation NI.

