

Scotland National Rural Network
Forth Valley & Lomond Event
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Update on Rural Priorities
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SRDP

The Scottish Rural Development Programme is a £1.6 billion programme of economic, environmental and social measures designed to develop rural Scotland over the next six years. Individuals and groups can seek support to help deliver the Government's strategic objectives in rural Scotland:

- Business viability and competitiveness
- Environmental improvements (water / climate change / landscape and biodiversity)
- Thriving rural communities

Rural Priorities:

- is one of the key funding mechanisms within SRDP. It covers approximately 40% of the spend for the programme – i.e. over £600 million.

- combines previous rural funding programmes of Scottish Government Rural Payments & Inspectorate Division (RPID), Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage, and is jointly administered by those 3 bodies.

- is competitive to ensure that contracts are awarded for the proposals which are best able to deliver the objectives of the programme.

- is delivered through a regional structure of 11 regions covering the whole of Scotland. Forth Valley falls within the Forth region – which covers 8 local authority areas (City of Edinburgh, East / West / Mid Lothian, Fife, Clacks, Falkirk and Stirling) plus a significant part of the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park. Large, complex and diverse area.

Funding decisions are taken by a Forth Regional Proposal Assessment Committee – RPAC for short – with members from SNH, FCS, RPID, SEPA, Scottish Enterprise, Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park and local authorities. Meetings are held every 4 months or so.

Rural Priorities / LEADER

There are overlaps between Rural Priorities and other elements of the SRDP, including LEADER. There is no single rule of thumb to follow as to which funding route is appropriate – it depends on what the project is, where it is and who the applicant is. However, generally LEADER is best for:

- smaller projects (less competition and unlikely to score well in rural priorities),
- projects which involve employing project staff,
- feasibility studies
- projects involving training.

Rural priorities is best for larger, more complex, more expensive projects.

Advice is available from Rural Direct, LEADER programme managers and Rural Priority case officers. We all talk to each other regularly, with formal meetings every 6 months and informal contact in-between. Frank Beattie from Scottish Enterprise sits on both the Forth Valley LAG and the Forth RPAC.

Regional Priorities

Each RPAC sets its own regional priorities for projects it wishes to fund (although in truth at present these are very similar across the country). These cover:

- Business Viability and Competitiveness (Priority 1-7)
- Biodiversity (Priority 8-12)
- Landscape (Priority 13-14)
- Built & Cultural Heritage (Priority 15)
- Water and Soils (Priority 16-20)
- Adaptations to Mitigate Climate Change (Priority 21-24)
- Public Access (Priority 25)
- Diversification of Rural Enterprise (Priority 26-30)
- Thriving Rural Communities (Priority 31-32)

It is likely that the priorities will be reviewed and revised over the coming year.

Main 'Community' Priorities

Given the make up of today's audience, it is the latter 2 priorities which will probably be of the most interest. These can provide funding for, for example:

- Developing community buildings and facilities
- Meeting service needs identified through community planning
- Taking over community-led services from other public sector providers
- Helping build capacity in community groups to deliver local projects
- Support wider access to cultural events and activities

The other priority which may be most relevant is that relating to Public Access which offers funding for the creation, improvement and promotion of paths and related facilities (such as car parking, toilets etc).

SRDP Review and Improvement

Rural priorities is both ambitious and complex, combining a number of different rural funding programmes and requiring close co-operation and joint working across a range of public bodies. It has not been without its teething problems, and some remain, but there have been continuous improvements in the guidance and in the support available to applicants.

The SRDP was reviewed in the first half of last year (by Peter Cook) following which there have been a number of improvements, with more to follow. Those so far have been:

- Allowing applicants to bypass the first stage of the process – Statement of Intent – should they wish.
- Ongoing approval of most forestry cases (i.e. they do not need to wait for an RPAC meeting for decision)
- More realistic timescales for submission and assessment of applications
- More support to case officers. Centres of Expertise – Historic Environment and Rural Communities. Training – business plan assessment and business viability.
- Quicker notification to applicants of decisions via email.
- Increase in the maximum rate of grant for the community services and facilities option from 50% to 90%. Consideration is still being given to transferring this option from Rural Priorities to LEADER.

Forth RPAC to date

679 Statements of Intent received, of which 253 (37%) are within the Forth Valley and Lomond area.

Around 75% of SOIs are given an 'amber' rating – proceed to next stage – although this figure has steadily increased over the lifetime of the programme as the quality improves.

The vast majority of applications have been from traditional rural industries, either to support farm and forestry businesses and / or help them to diversify, and for agri-environment measures. There have been relatively few applications in the rural communities (22) and public access (21) priorities, in part because of the complexity of the scheme and unfamiliarity with the application process (addressed via support available from Rural direct) but mainly due to difficulties in getting match funding (addressed through increases in maximum funding rates).

There have been 6 RPAC rounds to consider fully worked up proposals since the first in August 2008. To date, the Forth RPAC has approved approximately £20 million of expenditure across the whole region, including £5.6 million allocated to projects in Forth Valley and Lomond.

The majority of projects supported in Forth Valley and Lomond fall into one of the following categories:

- Farm buildings
- Woodland creation and restructuring
- Improving the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- Self-catering tourist accommodation
- Footpath creation and upgrade

Community Projects

There have been 2 community projects approved for funding to date in the Forth Valley & Lomond area:

Fintry Sports Club Extension – enhancing an important community facility by increasing its capacity and flexibility. Also, the facilities running costs and carbon footprint will be reduced by improving the efficiency of the heating system.

Kippen Sports Field – proposal is to level the football pitch, lay a running track and install a sustainable drainage system to allow the facility to be used year round. This secures the future of this key recreation facility in Kippen, allowing it to fulfill a much wider range of community functions.

As mentioned earlier, the number of community projects coming through rural priorities to date has been low - primarily because of the difficulty in securing match funding when the maximum grant rate was 50%. The increase to 90% will see more applications coming forward – we are anticipating around 100 communities projects coming to the various RPACs around Scotland in April. Regardless of whether these projects are funded via Rural Priorities or LEADER in future, the key message is that funding support will continue to be available for good projects so I'd encourage you to discuss your ideas with us.