

LEADER Capacity Building Workshop - Summary Report

On June 10th, CAP Network Ireland, in collaboration with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG), hosted a LEADER capacity building workshop at the Athlone Springs Hotel, Co. Roscommon. This half-day networking event brought together Chief Executives and Chairpersons of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and their Implementing Partners (IPs) involved in delivering the LEADER Programme across rural Ireland.

This short summary report presents the key messages from the workshop, starting with the opening presentations and followed by insights from two interactive table discussions.



From left to right: Alistair Prior (EU CAP Network), Daniel Bennett (CAP Network Ireland), Marie Duffy (Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht), Juha-Matti Markkola (Finnish Rural Network) and James Claffey (CAP Network Ireland).

OPENING PRESENTATIONS

The event began with three opening presentations.

Daniel Bennett, from CAP Network Ireland, provided an overview of the project's key activities to date, before moving on to emphasise its engagement with the LEADER Programme.

He highlighted recent initiatives such as the [There's More to The Story](#) social media campaign, which showcases the

environmental progress of Ireland's agricultural sector, and the publication of good practice [case studies](#) demonstrating the diversity and geographical spread of projects and initiatives funded under the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) 2023-2027.

Daniel also promoted the recently launched [2023-2027 LEADER Programme: How to Apply Guide](#) as a valuable resource for rural stakeholders. Additionally, he encouraged participants to keep an eye out for a dedicated Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Implementing Partners (IPs) Interactive Map, to be launched later this year.

Marie Duffy, from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, delivered an update on the current LEADER programme cycle. She informed participants that the programme is now fully operational across all 28 sub-regional areas in rural Ireland. As of the end of May 2025, LAGs had approved 456 projects with a combined value of approximately €23.2 million. An additional 112 projects valued at around €5.8 million are progressing through the application process.

Marie announced that the DRCDG has recently begun publishing details of projects approved under the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme. These details, as well as additional information on the LEADER Programme nationally, can be found on the [DRCDG website](#).

Alistair Prior, from the EU CAP Network, outlined the structure and role of the network. He began by summarising its involvement in organising events such as the [Agricultural and Rural Inspiration Awards](#), as well as other [Thematic Group meetings and](#)

workshops designed to facilitate networking and knowledge exchange. Alistair also highlighted the range of supports available through the EU CAP Network for LAGs and IPs, including good practice publications, a dedicated LAG Directory and LEADER Cooperation support tools.



Q&A after the opening presentations

INTERACTIVE TABLE DISCUSSIONS

Following the presentations, participants took part in two interactive breakout sessions.

Topic 1 – The Added Value of LEADER

This session opened with a presentation by **Juha-Matti Markkola, from the Finnish Rural Network**, titled ‘How Other EU Member States Capture Added Value’.

Setting the context, Juha-Matti noted that 95 percent of Finland’s surface area is classified as rural. He went on to outline Finland’s step-by-step approach to demonstrating LEADER’s impact at both local and national levels. Over the past two years, this work has led to the development of an Added Value model aimed at promoting and monitoring LEADER’s effectiveness in (i) responding to local needs, (ii) strengthening local communities, and (iii) increasing opportunities to make a difference.

Following this presentation, participants took part in five parallel table discussions, where they were invited to answer three key questions related to the topic. Responses are collated in the next section.

Q1) What does the added value of LEADER mean to you?

- ‘Bottom up’, community-led.
- Builds capacity in communities.
- Animation in LEADER is unique.
- Fosters innovation.
- Flexibility – actively supports the development of a diverse range of people and projects.
- Sustainability – creates jobs and supports climate action.
- Provides small start-up opportunities.
- The multi-actor structure and strengths of the LAG itself is the added value.
- The national and international co-operation it encourages.
- Acts as a stepping stone to other programmes such as EU LIFE.

Q2) What are the key challenges in capturing added value of LEADER in Ireland?

- Difficult currently to quantify added value. The systems and processes to capture data on added value are not in place. i.e. How do you effectively capture:
 - volunteer hours
 - indirect benefits of LEADER
 - time and resources expended from the Expression of Interest (EOI) stage to actual application
 - animation, particularly when this leads to non-application
 - the qualitative impact of LEADER.
- Engaging communities and groups who haven’t applied for funding before.
- Engaging young people.
- Bureaucracy – red tape and paperwork.

Q3) Have you any suggestions as to how capturing the added value of LEADER can be made easier?

- Examine whether a national framework or guidance model similar to what been rolled out in Finland could be developed in Ireland to capture LEADER’s added value more effectively and in a practical, simplified manner.
- Develop a ‘How to Capture the Added Value of LEADER’ guide or toolkit.

- Share case studies / testimonials of successful projects via social media / develop a map of funded projects nationally, to clearly demonstrate the added value of LEADER.
- LAGs should conduct ongoing self-evaluation to understand how it is doing in this regard, with a view to continuous improvement. An annual questionnaire could be completed by all LAGs.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing on this topic with other EU countries so learnings can be transferred.
- Partner with third level institutions to conduct studies on LEADER's added value.



Opportunities for networking on the day

Topic 2 - Delivering Your Local Development Strategy

This session focused on practical experiences in implementing local development strategies under the 2023-2027 LEADER Programme.

Once again, participants were invited to respond to three key questions related to the topic.

Q1) What has worked well when delivering your Local Development Strategies (LDS), in particular when engaging hard to reach communities?

- The experience of staff members in delivering strategies, the level of local engagement, and the trust that has been built with communities.
- Collaboration with existing organisations and groups. TidyTowns was mentioned.
- Hosting community meetings in the preparation of the LDS.

- Flexibility of the LEADER programme as level of demand changes.
- Bringing services directly to communities.
- The wrap around supports provided to groups and communities.
- Understanding it's a slow process and allowing sufficient time.
- Leveraging champions in the community.
- Engaging hard to reach communities in the design of LDS.

Q2) What challenges have you faced when delivering your Strategies, in particular when engaging hard to reach communities?

- Systemic issues with regard to fragmentation of funding, red tape etc. There is a need to simplify the scheme.
- Attracting volunteers, particularly those of a younger demographic.
- Procurement and price increases.
- Organisational change.
- The gap between the 2014-2022 and the 2023-2027 LEADER programme has resulted in groups applying for alternative funding which doesn't always align with development strategies.

Q3) At what stage do you consider doing Targeted Calls to maximise spend under each sub-theme?

- There is a requirement to do one targeted call per year.
- If there is a low number of applications under a certain LEADER sub-theme, or if there is an opportunity to highlight something not on the radar of potential LEADER applicants, a targeted call can generate interest.
- Often, targeted calls relate to Theme 3: Sustainable Development of Rural Environment and Climate Change Mitigation.

LOOKING AHEAD

James Claffey (CAP Network Ireland) outlined plans for upcoming workshops to build on the day's outcomes. **You can find more information on the LEADER programme on the CAP Network Ireland [website](#).**