



East of England Rural Forum

**Report on the
East of England Rural Forum's
Consultation Workshop
on the
Rural Development Programme for England 2007-2013
22 March 2006**

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Introduction

1. This is a report from a workshop held on 22 March 2006 on the proposed Rural Development Programme for England. The workshop was organised by the East of England Rural Forum as a contribution to Defra's national consultation. Sixty five people took part in a two-hour discussion and analysis of key questions on the document and the priorities under each of its three themes. There was a reasonable balance of representatives from interests under each of the three themes: environment, agriculture & forestry and rural opportunity.

Summary of key findings

2. The main messages for Defra's national consultation arising from the workshop are:
 - The risk of duplication is high, particularly for themes 2 and 3 but also for theme 1. This arises, in part, from an unresolved tension between national prescription and regional flexibility - currently there is enough of the latter to cause duplication and confusion but not enough to allow this to be worked out at a regional and local level.
 - There is an appetite for considerably more regional control over priorities, measures and approach, with a wish that the national document confine itself to defining outcomes, strategic targets and performance measures (Like PSAs)¹.
 - LEADER, or the LEADER 'approach', is little understood and little valued.
 - Integration of the three themes is vital if it is to work as a programme and if it is to have maximum impact at ground level, but the mechanisms for achieving this are not clear at either a national or regional level.

Background, methodology and context

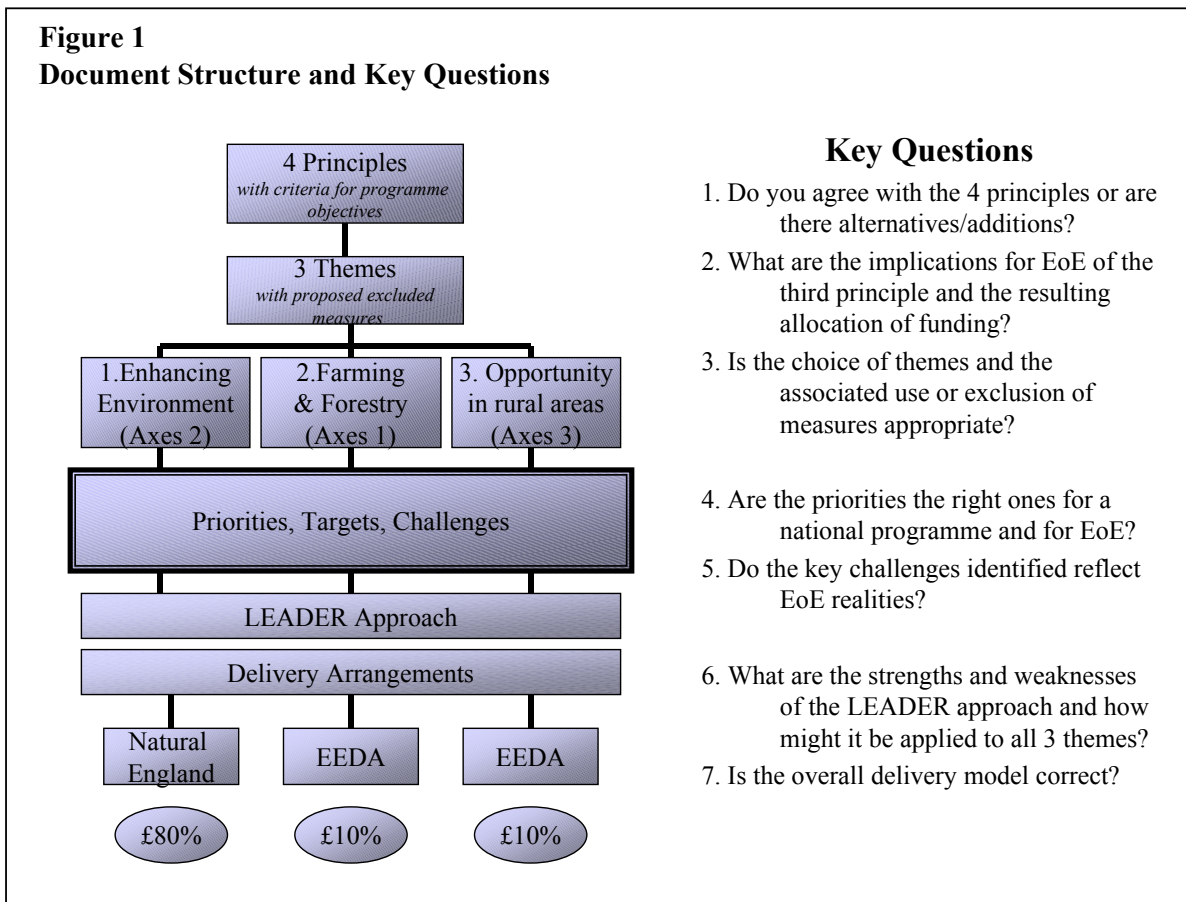
3. The workshop encouraged participants to consider the document as a whole, from principles through to delivery arrangements and the proposed priorities. To do this in a short time, the 20 questions in the consultation document were reduced to seven key questions. These reflected the key parts of the document and most were a synthesis of the actual questions (see figure 1). Some were not posed in the document but were included to enable participants to consider vital aspects of the strategy, such as the proposed allocation of funding across the three themes. The time was divided between plenary discussion of the overarching questions and group work to examine the priorities under each theme.
4. The plenary questions sought to improve understanding of the document. There was clarification of some points through questions to the Defra representatives at the meeting but no great challenge to the principles and themes and basic delivery arrangements. This is not surprising, given that the principles are fairly high-level

¹ Facilitators comment – there is a general lack of understanding of the extent to which Defra is obliged by European requirements to be prescriptive at a national level, e.g. whether the choice of measures needs to be made at a national level and whether programme priorities need to be declared. Better information about the parameters and 'room for manoeuvre' in the national strategy would help mediate the tension between national and regional ambitions.

and because they and the delivery arrangements largely continue a direction already established in the current ERDP and in the Rural Strategy 2004. Most of the views in this report came from the discussion of priorities and challenges in the break-out groups.

5. This report does not substitute in any way for the detailed and particular views that individual organisations will make in their own response to Defra. Nor does it seek to provide a single consensual East of England view on the questions or issues. What it does is present a range of views, especially on the priorities and some key messages on the overall strategy.

Structure of the consultation and response to questions



6. **Key Question 1: Do you agree with the principles or what alternatives or additions might there be?**
There was no disagreement with the principles and no alternatives or additions were suggested.

7. Key Question 2: What are the implications for the East of England of the emphasis on environmental stewardship and the resulting allocation of funding across the three themes?

The one comment made on implications was that the effect of the emphasis on stewardship will be to transfer funding from commercial to hobby farmers. The remainder of the discussion was questions and clarification about how hard and fast the 80/10/10 allocation to themes 1, 2 and 3 was (the split is a simplification but is close to what is expected) and whether there will be a regional budget and any flexibility to alter this split (Final decisions on regional budget are yet to be made, especially on Natural England and the Forestry Commission's allocation, although the allocation to EEDA for themes 2 and 3 is relatively settled.)

8. Key Question 3: Is the choice of themes and the associated use or exclusion of measures appropriate?

There was a challenge to the exclusion of the measure to support the setting up of young farmers, on the grounds that support for new entrants was needed in this region. The response and the main point to come from this discussion was that the exclusion of this (and other measures) did not necessarily mean that the underlying objective was rejected. In this case for example, the view was that this measure did not meet 'value for money' criteria and an alternative means of encouraging new entrants, through the industry-led 'Fresh Start' Initiative, was favoured.²

**9. Key question 4: Are the priorities the right ones for a national programme and for EoE? (and)
Key question 5: Do the key challenges identified reflect EoE realities?**

These two questions were considered in more depth by break-out groups. Grids such as those in Figures 2 and 3 were used to:

- Enable the groups to consider the priorities in systematic way, using a set of criteria.
- Provide a quick and visible assessment that could be reported back to the plenary.

The priorities are those from the document. The criteria are also from the document and are those that are proposed as the basis for establishing objectives for the new programme. The priorities and related challenges for theme 1 are laid out fairly clearly. This is not the case for themes 2 and 3 however. Theme 2 gives five strategic policy priorities and two broad priorities for the programme. Within this there are a list of 'emphasis' which is what the group focussed on, these being the more specific statement of what Defra proposes to achieve with this part of the programme. There are no challenges as such listed under theme 2. Theme 3 gives a single priority, three areas for targeting and a list of seven more specific areas that they propose to foster. Again, it is this more detailed list of seven points that was the focus for the group.

² NB: Reasons for exclusion of measures are provide in the annex of the consultation document.

Participants were asked to identify areas where they thought the criteria would not be met by the proposed priority by 'voting' with red spots. Clusters of spots indicate 'hotspots' where there is concern about the priority.

23. Theme 1: Enhancing the environment and countryside.

Two groups looked at this theme. The resulting grids are reproduced separately in the annex and combined in figure 2.

The main areas of concern are around:

- The priority of promoting public access and understanding, where it is felt that most of the criteria might not be met.
- The criteria of 'would it happen otherwise?', where a question mark is raised for all of the priorities.
- The criteria of 'will there be duplication?', where it is suggested that duplication is a real risk for four of the six priorities.

24. A number of additional priorities or actions were proposed as important additions to those currently listed in the consultation document:

- Priority v. ('Protect natural resources') should include measures to improve the efficiency with which water resources are used, particularly given the limited supplies and increasing demands in this region. (The existing list includes actions on water quality but not use).
- Adaptation to climate change - this is omitted yet is a high priority and one that bears on all or most of the listed priorities. The priorities should include flood risk management and coastal protection for example.
- The creation and maintenance of greenspaces and green infrastructure for the growth areas is a high priority in this region that should be included in the priorities. There is an opportunity for RDPE to contribute to the greenspaces and a need for it to work in harmony with the green infrastructure funding.

25. Participants suggested a number of challenges that it was felt should be recognised in the document:

- Adapting to climate change should be recognised explicitly as a challenge (not just increased mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions as currently listed).
- The programme needs to significantly 'raise the game' in terms of delivering measurable environmental improvements beyond that currently being achieved.
- The objectives for environmental stewardship need to be made more strategic and the approach more targeted and relevant to people at a local level.
- Communicating benefits to the public is an important challenge.
- A major challenge is to establish an integrated landscape approach, involving integration across the three themes, new land management practices, realistic targeting and striking a balance between access and habitat quality.

Figure 2
Assessment of Theme 1 priorities: Enhancing the environment and countryside

Priorities	i. Conserve wildlife/biodiversity	ii. Maintain & enhance landscape quality & character	iii. Protect the historic environment	iv. Promote public access & understanding	v. Protect natural resources	vi. Promote sustainable forest management.
Criteria						
Clear evidence to justify funding?				● ● ●		
Demonstrable and significant need?	●			● ●		
Funding is the most appropriate solution?				● ●	●	
Would it happen otherwise?	● ●	●	● ●	●	● ● ●	●
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?			●			
Will there be duplication?	●		● ●	● ●	● ●	
Is it environmentally sustainable?			●	● ● ●		
Is it value for money?		●				

26. In addition, a number of points were made the adequacy of the evidence base and the delivery arrangements for this theme:

- The need for a robust evidence base and a robust process (comprehensive and transparent) to inform targeting (a broad consultation is required).
- The adequacy of the evidence base differs across the 6 priorities, with access (Priority 4) being particularly weak and in need of improvement.
- Priority 4 (promote public access and understanding) needs a strategic approach. It could be environmentally unsustainable if not delivered properly.
- It should not be assumed that the incentives are sufficient to ensure good take up and application of the programme – ‘facilitation’ will be required to make it happen.
- Greater clarification is needed on what ‘regional flexibility’ amounts to - Does regional flexibility allow us to instigate regional schemes for example?
- Governance: need to ‘join-up’ and address questions such as what will replace the Regional Programming Groups and what will the reporting lines be?

27. Theme 2: Making agriculture and forestry more competitive

The group did not complete the grid (see annex), making instead the general point that detailed priorities and the use of exclusion of measures need not be prescribed at all at a national level. The preference in the region would be to regard the

priorities and 'emphasis' as a useful menu of possibilities, or a checklist of objectives to be sought from projects. Regional players could then refer to this when establishing a more focussed set of priorities and when appraising projects.

28. The following points were made on priorities and challenges:

- The main priorities, 'skills & knowledge transfer' and 'Innovation', were not contested. Nor were the more detailed priorities or 'emphases', although they do seem a rather strange mix with a lot of emphasis on wood. The group did have some views on which of these were more important in this region. For example encouraging and facilitating the development of new markets (not just for forestry), improving supply chain efficiency (not just food chain). The proposed emphasis appears far too prescriptive and narrow, especially for a 6 year programme. There are a range of activities that could deliver the same outcomes as those narrowly worded examples which are provided – and are not described as “examples” but an intended emphasis.
- It is important to recognise that the big challenges for farming and forestry in this region will not be solved through RDPE. For example the low underlying profitability of farming and forestry at present presents a major challenge and risk to the RDPE aims but theme 2 (axis 1) will play only a small part in tackling this. Partly because the total amount of funding is very limited and partly because other forms of intervention will have a much greater effect. E.g. Energy crops offer an important potential solution in this region where cropping predominates, but fiscal measures by the Treasury to promote the bio-fuels industry would have a much greater affect than RDPE.
- This is not to say that RDPE funding is insignificant. Rather it is to recognise that it will play a small role and to be most effective it needs to be deployed very carefully amongst a complex package of other objectives, outcomes and support mechanisms. For this reason, micro-management at the national level needs to be avoided.
- To be most effective, funding for agriculture & forestry competitiveness needs to be understood and used alongside the funding available through the other two themes. Environment funding (Theme 1) is highly relevant to innovation and skills & knowledge transfer. It is the integration of the three strands into a package of support to land holdings that will achieve results by hitting targets across the whole programme and aggregating funding into quantities that significantly impact on profitability.
- Thus the message here is that the agenda for theme 2 is that it should no longer be seen or used as a narrow programme to help farmers in or out of the business. Nor is it just about cranking up the efficiency of existing businesses. Instead it should be more about broadening the business base by making use of new or under-utilised natural and business resources. It is more about setting up a new generation of land based industries that can be sustained through a combination of income streams and on-farm, off-farm enterprises. This requires that the RDPE programme be used in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

29. With an increase in pluri-activity comes a blurring of distinctions between farmers and non-farmers. This needs to be accommodated in the targeting and eligibility criteria for the new programme i.e. it cannot be targeted exclusively at full-time farmers.³
30. Cooperation and goodwill from farmers is essential for the successful implementation of RDPE, yet there is resentment that the RDPE represents a removal of funding previously received through area payments. For this reason, it is thought to be important that theme 2 is used in part to fund projects that are seen as beneficial and accessible to a large number of farmers. For example priorities such as support/training to improve business skills might be given greater prominence.
31. Although wide-reaching and quick 'hits' are required from the outset of the programme if it is to have credibility, it is also suggested that the programme should be prepared to support activities that have a longer time frame. In particular, it is thought that investment in the 'soft' infrastructure of partnerships and networks is required if there is to be a sound basis for developing and selecting projects. The view is that there are various 'Curry' bodies, such as the English Food and Farming Partnership, that are doing the right things but which need ongoing support.
32. Greater collaboration and efficiency in supply and food chains are included in the proposed priorities and the value of these is accepted, but in addition it is thought that encouraging farmers up the supply chain should be a priority. Otherwise there is the risk that opportunities for greater diversification and profitability will be lost. A related priority is the importance of local and regional branding as a means of product differentiation and adding value. This will often depend upon making positive links with distinctive environments in the region such as the Norfolk Broads and Suffolk heaths, which again emphasises the need to integrate support across the themes.

33. Theme 3: Enhancing opportunity in rural areas

Two groups looked at the priorities under this theme. The combined results of 'voting' on the grids are shown in figure 3 (refer to annex 1 for grid from each group). The main area of concern that this highlights are:

- The priority 'enhancement of rural heritage assets' (v), which was questioned on five of the eight criteria.
- The criteria 'would it happen otherwise', which it is thought may not be met for most of the priorities and especially for innovative farm diversification (ii) and enhancement of heritage (v)
- The risk of duplication, which is a concern on all but one of the priorities.

³ It also compounds the problem of duplication as the line between support to farmers and other entrepreneurs becomes increasingly blurred.

34. The main points made on this and other aspects of the priorities were:

- The concern about duplication and ‘would it happen otherwise?’ comes from recognition of the similarity between the priorities proposed here and those of other schemes operated by RDAs, LSC and others.
- The view is therefore that the RDPE theme 3 funding could very easily get lost in a maze of other initiatives, particularly because the scale of the funding will be relatively small. The comments made in discussion suggest that the answer to this is knitting-together and niche-finding at a regional and sub-regional level. To allow this, regions should have the maximum permissible flexibility to decide priorities and configure delivery arrangements.
- Another suggestion is to focus RDPE funding on providing evidence of need and thereby act to lever additional ‘big money’ into the region to address problems, perhaps through Local Area Agreements or RDAs.
- The target groups for participation in the labour market should go beyond women and young people, as currently proposed in the document.

35. Amongst the priorities currently listed in the document, the ones that were thought to be of greatest importance were ‘improved skills in the rural workforce’ (iii on grid) and ‘enterprises that provide key services or tackle social exclusion’ (vi on grid)

Figure 3

Assessment of Theme 3 priorities: Enhancing opportunity in rural areas

Priorities	1. Micro-enterprise support, particularly in low-pay areas.	ii. Innovative farm diversification & woodland enterprises	iii. Improved skills in rural workforce	iv. Participation in labour market for women and young.	v. Enhancement of rural heritage assets.	vi. Enterprises that provide key services/ tackle social exclusion
Clear evidence to justify funding?		●			● ●	●
Demonstrable and significant need?			●		● ● ● ●	
Funding is the most appropriate solution?		●				●
Would it happen otherwise?		● ● ● ●	●	●	● ● ● ● ● ●	
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?						
Will there be duplication?	● ● ● ● ●	● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	
Is it environmentally sustainable?						
Is it value for money?	● ●				● ●	

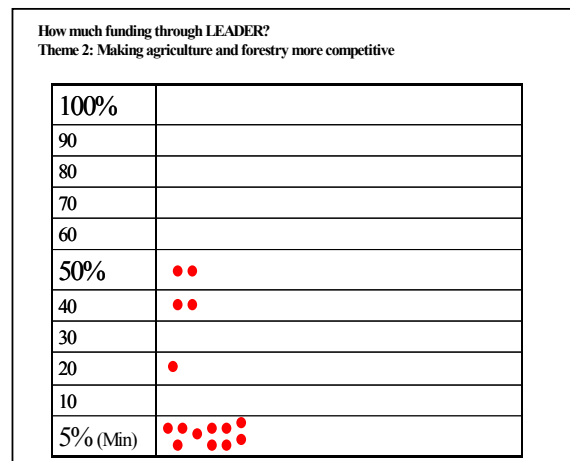
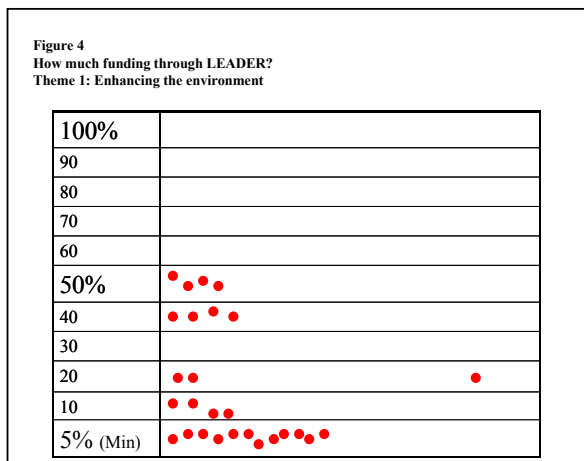
36. Key question 6: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the LEADER approach?

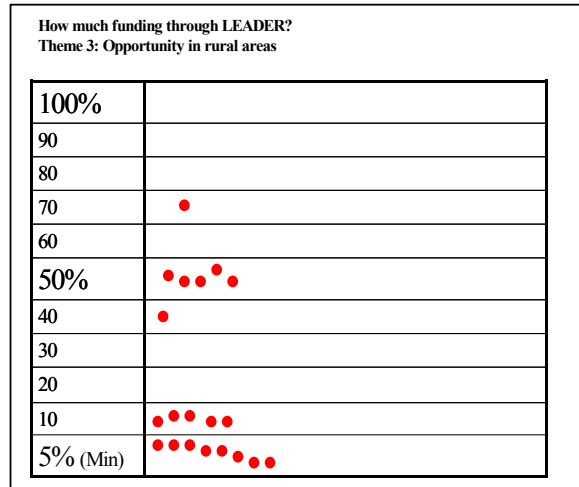
The points in the table below were made in response to this question:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEADER attracts ground level or local support • Can maybe integrate all themes. • It has shown itself to be good at innovating. • Cohesive partnerships exist and can be built on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive bureaucracy • Questions about who leads • Aspirations exceed capacity and resources, leading to unrealistic expectations of what can be done through LEADER.

37. Participants were also asked: how much of the EU funding should be spent through the LEADER approach (at or beyond the minimum 5% specified)? Red voting stickers were used again to give a rapid (and crude) assessment of the value that participants placed on the LEADER approach as a central plank of delivery. The result of this for each theme is shown in figure 4.

38. Most elected to channel the minimum amount of funding through the LEADER approach. This was particularly so for theme 2: making agriculture and forestry more competitive. A smaller cluster of votes around the 50% funding level indicates that there is a counter view that places a higher value on LEADER. There was little opposition to the principles of LEADER such as the ‘bottom-up’ approach and the involvement of private and community people in developing and appraising projects. Scepticism was more related to poor perceptions of how LEADER operates in practice. In particular, there was dissatisfaction with the way Local Action Groups had operated.





39. Key question 7: Is the overall delivery model correct and sufficiently flexible?

Beyond the comments on LEADER above, there were no strong challenges to the proposed delivery arrangements – namely the use of Natural England and the Forestry Commission to deliver theme 1 and EEDA to deliver themes 2 and 3.

However, the importance of integration of the three themes was raised again with a suggestion that greater national and regional attention needs to be given to the mechanisms that would ensure the delivery bodies would work together to deliver an integrated programme.

40. The importance of efficiency in the delivery arrangements was emphasised, so that as much of possible of the funding finds its way to the ‘end-users’ or ‘customers’.

March 2006

Annex 1: Evidence recorded at the workshop groups

Enhancing the environment and countryside: Priorities v's criteria

Priorities Criteria	i. Conserve wildlife/biodiversity	ii. Maintain & enhance landscape quality & character	iii. Protect the historic environment	iv. Promote public access & understanding	v. Protect natural resources	vi. Promote sustainable forest management.
Clear evidence to justify funding?						
Demonstrable and significant need?				●		
Funding is the most appropriate solution?					●	
Would it happen otherwise?					●	
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?			●			
Will there be duplication?			●	●	● ●	
Is it environmentally sustainable?			●	● ●		
Is it value for money?						

Enhancing the environment and countryside: Priorities v's criteria

Priorities Criteria	i. Conserve wildlife/biodiversity	ii. Maintain & enhance landscape quality & character	iii. Protect the historic environment	iv. Promote public access & understanding	v. Protect natural resources	vi. Promote sustainable forest management.
Clear evidence to justify funding?				● ● ●		
Demonstrable and significant need?	●			●		
Funding is the most appropriate solution?				● ●		
Would it happen otherwise?	● ●	●	● ●	●	● ●	●
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?						
Will there be duplication?	●		●	●		
Is it environmentally sustainable?				●		
Is it value for money?		●				

Making agriculture and forestry more competitive: Priorities v's criteria

Priorities Criteria	i. Skills and knowledge transfer (see emphasis p.20, including) •Business improvement tools, training & info. •Increased access to resource protection training •Training and support for biomass production etc.	ii. Innovation (see emphasis p.20/21, including:) •Improving technology uptake, •Promoting collaboration/cooperation, •Encouraging new markets and value-added products etc.
Clear evidence to justify funding?		
Demonstrable and significant need?		
Funding is the most appropriate solution?		
Would it happen otherwise?		
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?		
Will there be duplication?		
Is it environmentally sustainable?		
Is it value for money?		

Enhancing opportunity in rural areas: Priorities v's criteria

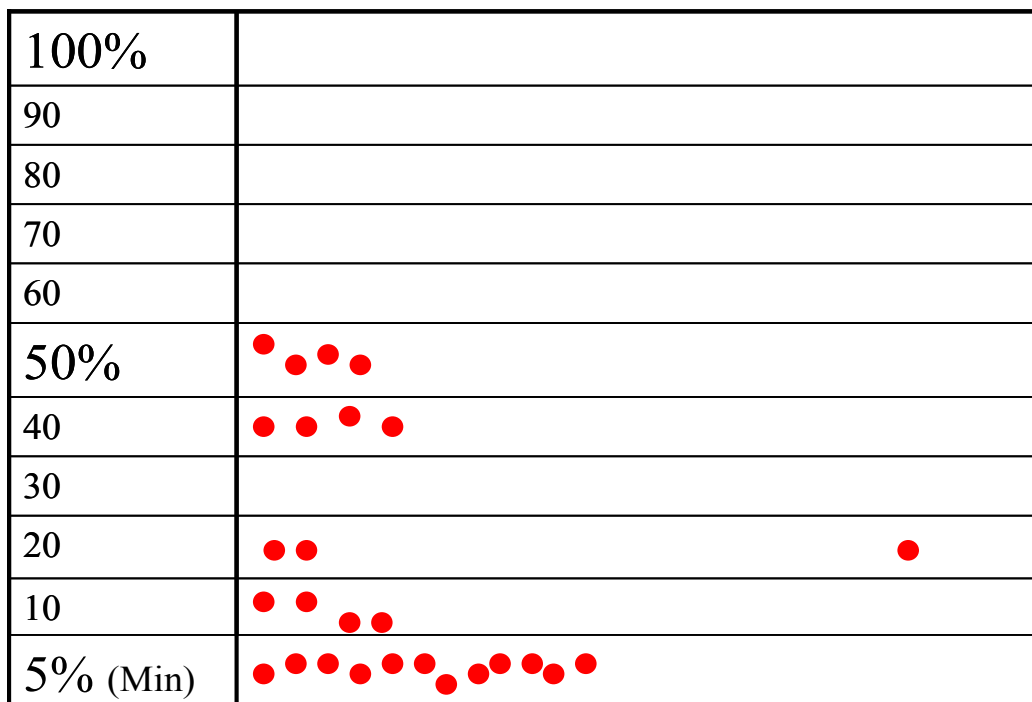
Priorities Criteria	1. Micro-enterprise support, particularly in low-pay areas.	ii. Innovative farm diversification & woodland enterprises	iii. Improved skills in rural workforce	iv. Participation in labour market for women and young.	v. Enhancement of rural heritage assets.	vi. Enterprises that provide key services/tackle social exclusion
Clear evidence to justify funding?		●				
Demonstrable and significant need?			●			
Funding is the most appropriate solution?						●
Would it happen otherwise?						
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?						
Will there be duplication?	● ●		●	● ●		
Is it environmentally sustainable?						
Is it value for money?						

Enhancing opportunity in rural areas: Priorities v's criteria

Priorities Criteria	1. Micro-enterprise support, particularly in low-pay areas.	ii. Innovative farm diversification & woodland enterprises	iii. Improved skills in rural workforce	iv. Participation in labour market for women and young.	v. Enhancement of rural heritage assets.	vi. Enterprises that provide key services/tackle social exclusion
Clear evidence to justify funding?						
Demonstrable and significant need?						
Funding is the most appropriate solution?						
Would it happen otherwise?						
Will it make a significant and measurable improvement?						
Will there be duplication?		(3 or 2)				
Is it environmentally sustainable?						
Is it value for money?						

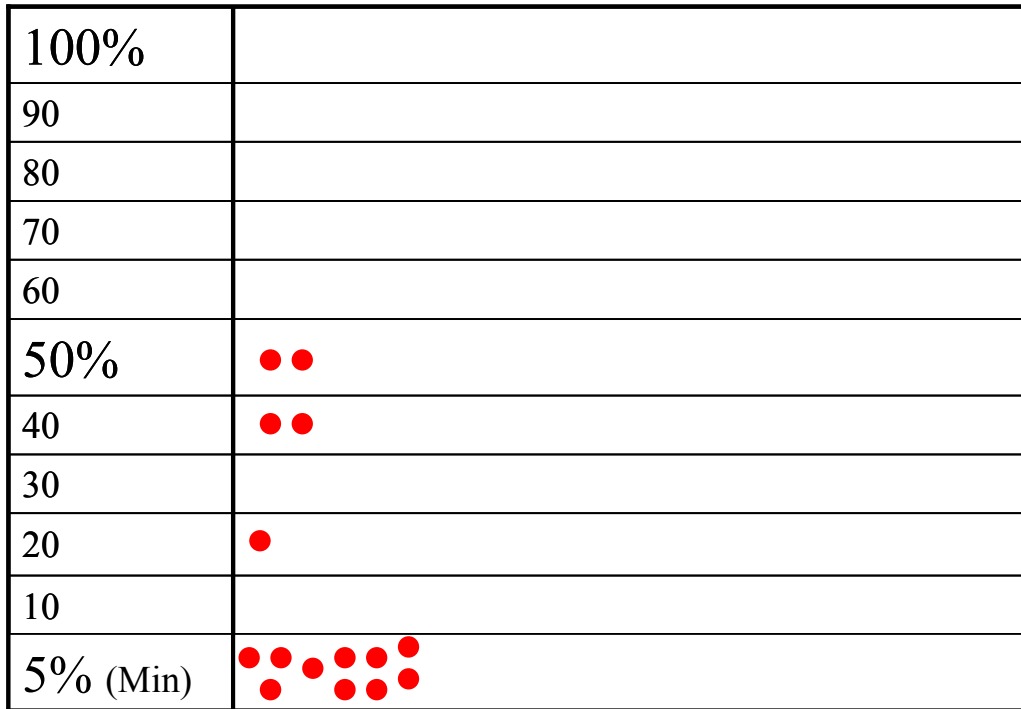
How much funding through LEADER?

Theme 1: Enhancing the environment



How much funding through LEADER?

Theme 2: Making agriculture and forestry more competitive



How much funding through LEADER?

Theme 3: Opportunity in rural areas

