

## Evaluation of the Cairngorms LEADER

Programme 2014-2020

# Summary



### Introduction

This Executive Summary presents the main findings of an independent evaluation of the Cairngorms LEADER Programme 2014-2020. The evaluation was commissioned by the Cairngorms Trust, the managing agent of the programme, and was undertaken between October 2020 and January 2021 by EKOS Ltd. The research involved a review of relevant information and data, alongside consultation and survey work with stakeholders and projects funded through the programme.

### Programme Development and Delivery

LEADER is the European Union's place-based, participatory and bottom-up approach to rural development. In Scotland there are 21 Local Action Groups (LAGs), which support delivery of area-based Local Development Strategies (LDS).

Through this, each LAG provides funding for projects that address its key objectives and priorities.

Each LAG and LEADER programme is overseen by an Accountable Body. Since 2002, the Accountable Body for Cairngorms LEADER has been the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

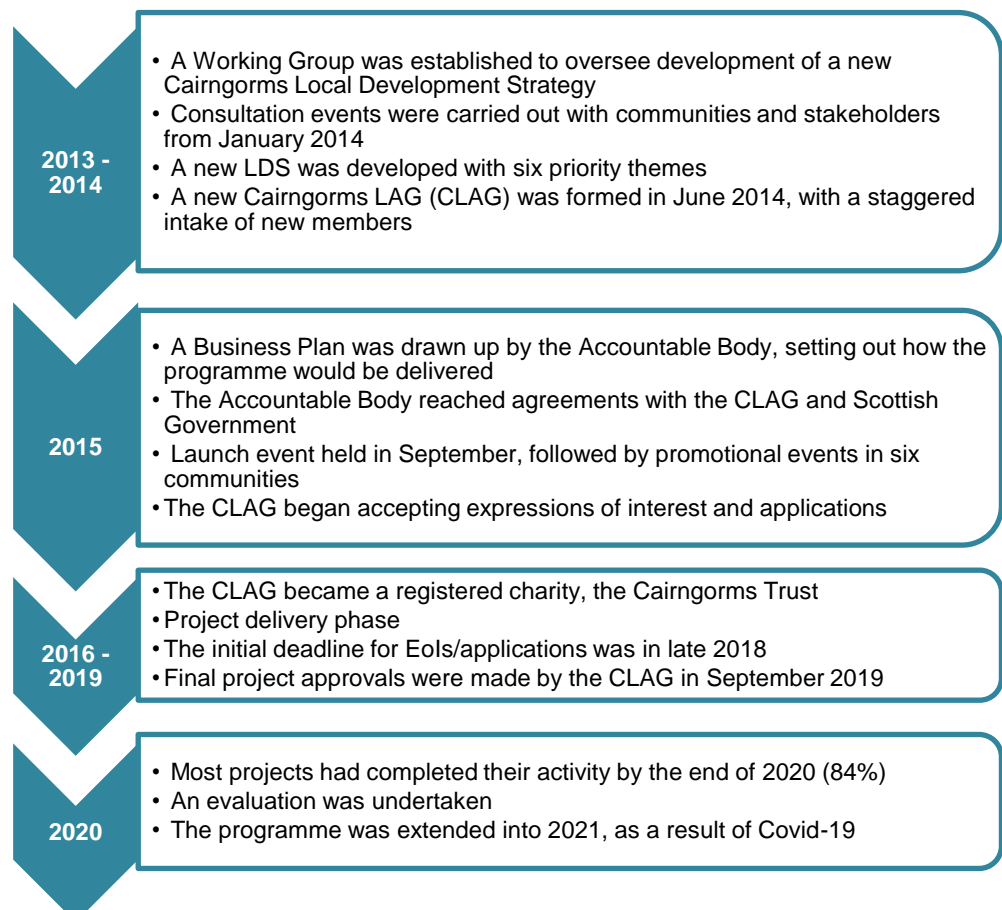
The timeline (right) shows the main milestones in programme development and delivery.



Kingussie Camanachd Club received a grant to enhance facilities at The Dell, the club's shinty ground. The success of the project saw the club host the national women's final for shinty in 2019.



The Cairngorms National Park were supported to pilot a volunteer ranger programme.



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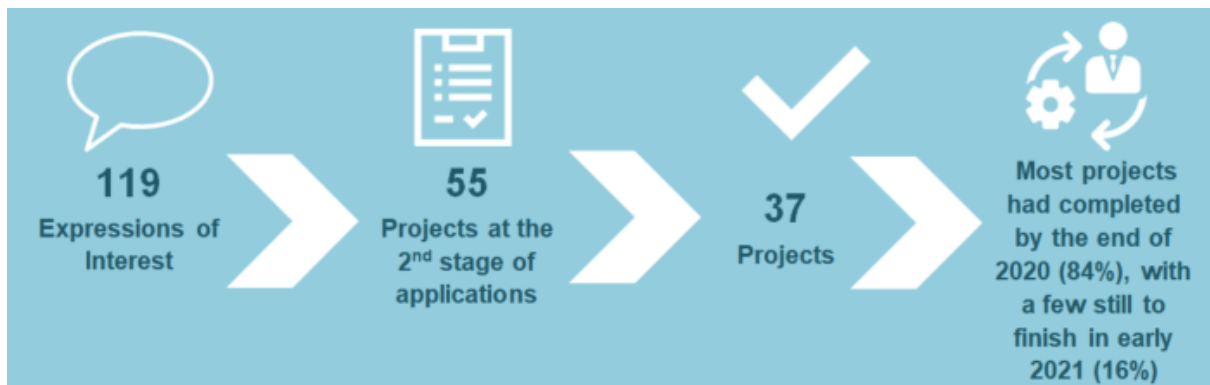
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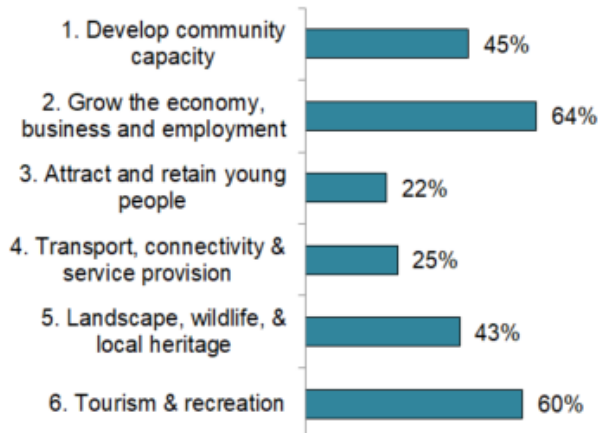
### LDS Programme Performance

The CLAG and supporting staff team considered applications for project funding over two stages, appraising them against set criteria and the priority themes of the LDS. The graphic below shows an overview of the projects awarded and their contribution to the LDS.

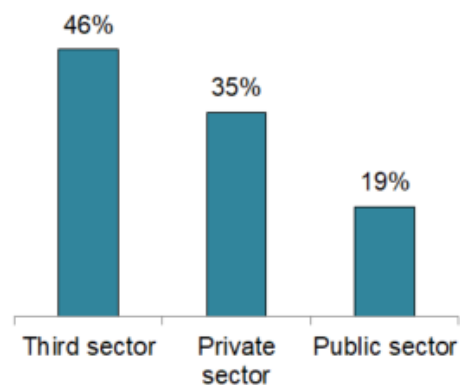


#### Breakdown of approved projects:

##### By LDS priority:



##### By delivery organisation:



**LEADER grants:**  
£2,467,300



**Total match funding:**  
£1,278,500

**£101k**

Average project size

Average award: £66.7k  
 Smallest award: £3,200  
 Largest award: £222,300

**Total project costs: £3,745,800**

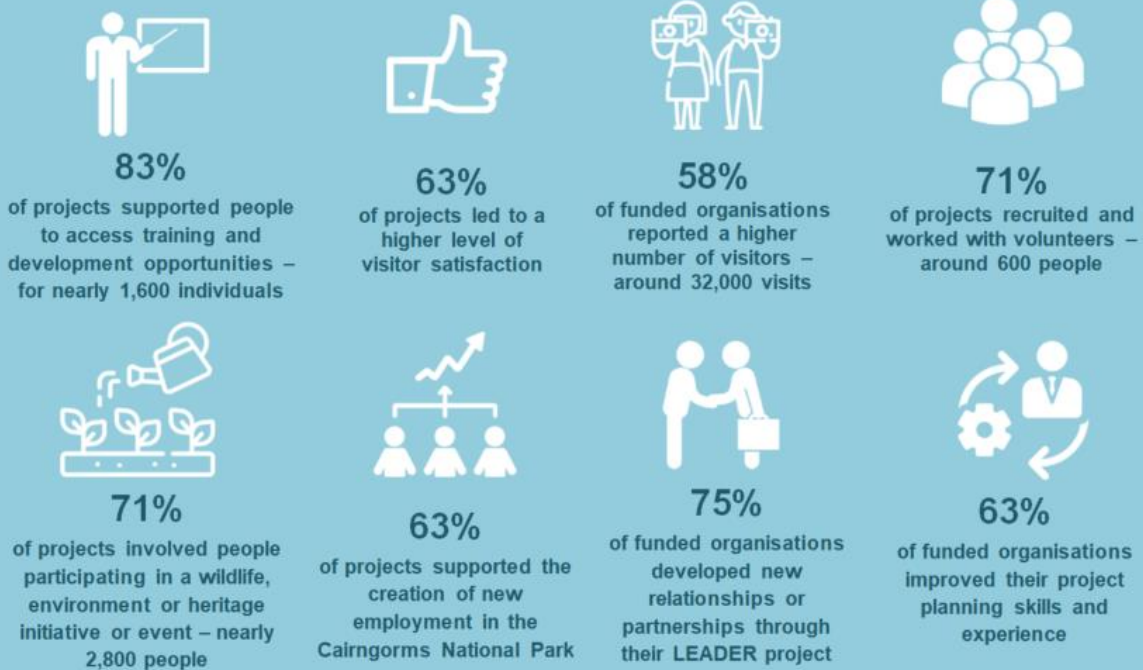
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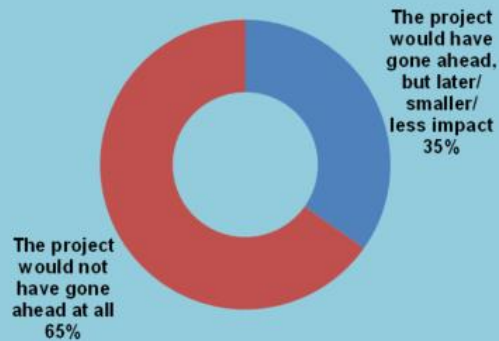
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Impact of Project Funding



There were high levels of **added value** associated with the project funding from Cairngorms LEADER. Nearly two thirds (65%) said that their project would not have gone ahead at all without the grant support. Of the remainder, all (35%) said the project would have been smaller, been delivered later or had less impact without the grant support.



Source: EKOS primary research with 24 funded projects (2020)

Conclusions

**Implementation and Engagement:** the early stages of the programme were crucial in determining its overall success. The confidence and skills that came from previous programme delivery, and lessons learned from this, supported a focused and prompt start. Broad engagement took place during the development process for the new Local Development Strategy, with a strong level of input from across the National Park area. Project ideas were gathered from early on, and LEADER staff met with nearly all projects at the Expression of Interest stage. The two stage application process was treated as such, avoiding time and effort (from both applicants and staff) being wasted on projects that were unlikely to proceed.



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**LDS Objectives:** LDS performance has been measured on the basis of 21 indicators, each feeding into one of 14 outcomes and, in turn, six strategic objectives. Projects were asked to estimate their own contribution to the indicators, against which performance has then been monitored. As of mid-January 2020, 12 indicators had been met or exceeded, and a further five were at 75% or more of the original target. Projects have been closely monitored, with impacts reported on the basis of verifiable evidence.

**Contribution to National Objectives:** evidence from the primary research has shown that all projects contributed to at least one of the national objectives, set by the Scottish Government. In particular, all projects estimated at least some contribution towards achieving partnership working and cooperation. They have also provided detailed examples of their contribution to each of the objectives.

**The LEADER Approach:** the Cairngorms LDS was developed on the basis of strong grassroots input, achieving a high level of initial engagement. The CLAG brought together a mixed and balanced membership from across the National Park area, with a clear sense of purpose. Overall, the key aims and aspirations of the 'LEADER approach' to community-led local development have been achieved.

**Two Decades of Cairngorms LEADER:** Having now overseen three programmes over almost two decades, it is clear that considerable skills, expertise and experience have been built up in the CLAG, with a strong partnership between the group and the CNPA. There has been continuity between programmes, but also important lessons learned that has influenced the approach to local development. The ongoing work of the Cairngorms Trust will be important in continuing and building on this legacy.

**A Third Sector LAG:** the CLAG became a registered charity (a SCIO) in 2016. The new set-up has allowed the CLAG to diversify its approach to community-led local development, running a small grants scheme and fundraising campaigns. This represents a more strategic and adaptable approach and, in particular, will help continue its legacy post-Brexit. Working towards charitable objectives has also helped create additional community and social benefits.

**Lessons Learned:** the early start to LDS development maximised the time that would later be available to develop and support project applications. The help provided by Project Development Officers was appreciated by applicants. There are, however, still issues with the complexity of the project application and administration process, although this is far from a local problem. Despite these concerns, our primary research found that every grant recipient identified at least one benefit for them as an organisation from taking part in LEADER, such as developing or strengthening relationships and partnerships or increasing their understanding of their community.

**The Future of Rural Funding:** the exact nature of the proposed replacement for LEADER, the Shared Prosperity Fund, is still to be determined. Nonetheless, there is likely to be a role for local organisations/delivery bodies, and the Cairngorms Trust is well placed to capitalise on this. Certainly, there remains a strong case for delivery of such a fund at National Park level, complementing wider development activity in the area and responding to needs and demands that are well understood by locally based staff and CLAG membership. In the immediate term, recovery from Covid-19 is the key priority. More long term, there is a need to focus on climate change and sustainability, community resilience, and opportunities for young people.