



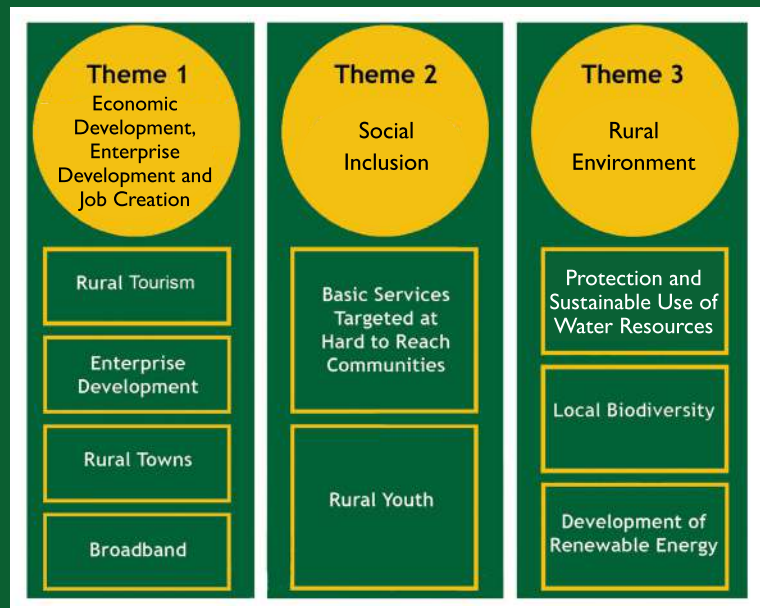
LEADER FUNDING: HOW TO APPLY

The LEADER Programme provides funding to support community-led rural development. This guide explores how the LEADER funding process works in practice, providing an overview of the main stages and requirements when making an application.

Some basics: where to apply and project types supported

THREE UNDERPINNING THEMES

The LEADER Programme 2014-2020 provides resources to stimulate rural economic and social development. It targets funding towards key areas in need of support reflecting the needs of rural Ireland. Projects are supported in three thematic areas. Themes are broad enough to enable funding of a diverse range of community-led projects both from private enterprise and community groups. Some types of activity cannot be funded such as insurance, legal expenses, planning application fees and working capital.



Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Implementing Partners (IPs)

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) is the overall managing authority for LEADER in Ireland. However, decisions on LEADER funding applications are made at a local level by a network of 29 Local Action Groups (LAGs). They approve applications that align with the objectives of their Local Development Strategy, which is developed in consultation with the local communities. LAGs are made up of local community members, as well as both public and private partners. Local Development Companies in each area are responsible for the day to day management and co-ordination of the LEADER Programme, either as implementing partners (IPs) in a wider LAG or acting as the LAG itself. Applications for LEADER funding are made to these Local Development Companies. Depending on the nature of a project, different requirements can arise.

- Project Officers with your nearest Local Development Company are the first port of call when thinking about applying for LEADER funding.
- To find your local LAG and Local Development Company, consult the National Rural Network's [interactive database](#).

Targeted and rolling calls

LAGs may operate a 'rolling call' for LEADER funding applications and accept applications on an ongoing basis. Additionally, targeted calls allow LAGs to concentrate funding in specific strategic areas of need or opportunity. LAGs must undertake at least one targeted call annually from 2017 to 2020.

Rates of funding

Depending on the nature of the project and the applicant type, different rates of funding aid apply. For example, analysis and development projects from a private business can be funded up to 75% of the total project costs, while for community applicants it is up to 90% (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF CURRENT LEADER FUNDING CEILINGS AND SUPPORT RATES

TYPE OF PROJECT	APPLICANT	MAXIMUM RATE OF AID	MAXIMUM FUNDING
Community Projects not involving Economic Activity	Community	Up to a maximum of 75%	€500,000
Investment & other supports (including promotion undertaken as part of the implementation of a project)	Private	Up to a maximum of 50%	€200,000
	Community	Up to a maximum of 75%	
	Community under basic services targeted at hard to reach communities sub-theme	Up to a maximum of 90%	
Analysis and Development	Private	Up to a maximum of 75%	€30,000
	Community	Up to a maximum of 90%	
Training	Private or Community	Up to a maximum of 100%	€200,000

Source: LEADER Operating Rules: Rural Development Programme Ireland 2014-2020

Administrative checks

The LEADER Programme is subject to EU regulations. 'Article 48' of the Implementing Regulation 809/2014 requires Member States to carry out administrative checks on all LEADER funding applications and payment claims. For example, when an application is submitted, checks will verify all legal requirements have been met, such as around procurement and state aid. At payment stage these checks will confirm the project is completed and costs have been incurred. Pobal or the Local Authorities are responsible for administering these checks as part of the LEADER Programme.

Applying for LEADER funding

STEP 1: Expression of interest

Before formally applying for LEADER, funding applicants must submit an 'Expression of Interest (EOI)'. This helps to establish a project's eligibility, such as its fit with the Local Development Strategy objectives. It also facilitates applicants in becoming familiar with what is involved in applying for LEADER funding. LAGs at the local level can require applicants to submit an EOI application form or alternatively the LAG will directly input details of the potential project, including a number of minimum requirements, to the LEADER IT system. Each LAG uses the same standardised EOI application form.

EOIs are then assessed by the Project Officers in the Local Development Company. Before proceeding to the full application stage, the Project Officers must establish the eligibility of the applicant and project, such as alignment with LEADER Programme themes and Local Development Strategy objectives. After this, eligible applicants are invited to proceed to submit a full application.

STEP 2: Making a full application

Each LAG uses the same standardised application form. It asks for information such as the activities and expected impacts of the project and for a budget. Supporting documentation is also required.

When submitting an application for LEADER funding details required depend on the type of applicant and project. For example:

- Farmers need to provide their herd number and businesses must provide their company registration number.
- Community organisations must supply their relevant governing documents. For formalised community groups, a founding constitution is required.
- A VAT number is required or, where not registered for VAT, applicants must provide up-to-date written confirmation from the Revenue Commissioners that they are not VAT registered.
- Enterprise projects must give details of the business age, size, turnover, financial projections and submit a business plan with their application.

Applicants must also include details of the proposed project such as a timeline, its main activities, expected job creation (if appropriate) and wider anticipated local impacts. Applicants are also asked to outline how they intend to promote the project.

STEP 1: EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

Preliminary applicant eligibility assessed and eligible applicants are invited to submit a full application

STEP 2: FULL APPLICATION

Applicants prepare and submit an application with relevant supporting documentation

STEP 3: EVALUATION AND FUNDING DECISION

Evaluation committee assess application and decision on funding is made

STEP 4: IMPLEMENTATION

Funding contract accepted by applicant and project is implemented

STEP 5: COMPLETION AND GRANT PAYMENT

Applicant submits funding claim, along with supporting documentation, and grant is paid

Budget and Procurement

A budget must be provided based, for example, on quotes obtained from potential suppliers. If the project is also supported through other funding sources, these must be outlined and evidence documented. Previous public funding support must also be disclosed. Carrying out a procurement process is required. LAGs may offer the option of gaining provisional approval before procurement is completed.

- Those awarded total funding of more than 50% of the project costs (from LEADER and/or other public sources), must follow National Public Procurement rules. Guidelines are available which set out requirements and spend thresholds on how supplies and services must be purchased, such as the number of quotations to obtain and if an open public tendering process is required.
- Those awarded total funding of 50% or less of the project costs (from LEADER and/or other public sources) may choose not to follow the National Procurement Guidelines and instead follow the LEADER Specific Procurement Guidelines.

Supporting Documentation

A range of supporting documentation must also be included with an application. Procurement evidence must be supplied, such as an appropriate number of quotations based on the project costs. Accounts for three years and bank statements (three months minimum) for all accounts held are required. Depending on the applicant different types of accounts are acceptable.

- Audited accounts are required for an existing business.
- Unaudited accounts signed off by the applicant/their agent are acceptable for companies not obliged to carry out an audit.
- Income and expenditure accounts are required for community/voluntary groups.
- For applicants who are not companies, such as sole traders or partnerships, unaudited accounts are acceptable.

Depending on the type of project, other requirements may be needed such as planning permission, a marketing plan, a business development plan and evidence of leasehold. Specific requirements for individual projects can be discussed and determined with Project Officers.

Match Funding

Projects generally require match funding. This can come from private funds or, for community applicants, it could also be other public funds. Public funding from other EU sources is not permitted as match funding. Contributions-in-kind (e.g. voluntary labour) can be used as match funding but cannot constitute the full amount. Supporting documentation providing evidence that match funding is available is needed. It also must be confirmed that match funding is not from other EU funds. A minimum cash contribution of 5% is also required from community groups.

STEP 3: Application Evaluation and Funding Decision

An evaluation committee from the LAG evaluates applications. Each application is evaluated and scored using set evaluation criteria and the committee makes a recommendation to the LAG decision-making members as to the suitability of the project for funding. If a project is not approved for funding, applicants are informed of the reasons for this. Decisions can also be appealed. Once a project is approved by the LAG, a letter-of-offer and contract is issued to the applicant. This is accepted in writing and returned to the LAG. The project must not start before the date of the letter of offer acceptance by the applicant. A completion date for the project is also set.

STEP 4: Implementation

Once the applicant accepts the contract they can proceed to implement their project in line with its terms and conditions. LEADER funding recipients must also comply with publicity requirements, such as including relevant logos (e.g. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, LEADER, DRCD) on all posters, plaques, publications and websites as relevant.

Bridging Finance

The LAG must also ensure that the applicant has adequate resources (or bridging finance) in place to deliver the project and evidence of this is required. Bridging finance can be sourced through lending organisations such as Clann Credo, Community Finance Ireland, Micro Finance Ireland or Credit Unions.

STEP 5: Completion and Grant Payment

When the project is complete, the applicant submits a claim form to IP with the required supporting documentation such as invoices and the relevant bank statements. Depending on the project, the supporting documents needed will differ. For example, this can mean certificates of compliance with planning regulations for projects that include building works each for heritage projects confirmation of compliance with the LEADER Heritage Project Rules. A Project Officer will carry out a site visit to verify the project is complete. A grant payment claim is then made by the LAG to the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). Once the funds are paid to the LAG, the grant is paid by electronic fund transfer to the applicants designated account as soon as possible and within a maximum of 15 working days. Applicants can also request phased payments (of five or less) but must exceed €1,000 and at least 20% of eligible costs must have been incurred.

Post Project Monitoring

At the end of the project, to assist evaluation of the overall LEADER programme, IPs collect additional data. Depending on the project, the type of data collected varies. For example, enterprise projects provide data on the number of jobs created or sustained and for training projects the number of participants. For social inclusion projects, data is collected on the number of people using the service annually. Information on broader results is also collected, such as achievements and lessons learned.



More information

To find contact details for your local LAG and Local Development Company, consult the National Rural Network's interactive database here: <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/local-action-groups/>

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