

RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE CONSULTATION ON THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR SCOTLAND 2007-13.

This is the response of the Sutherland Partnership (SP) to the consultation document on the Rural Development Plan for Scotland. SP is a local Community Planning Partnership in the county of Sutherland, and part of the formal community planning arrangements in Highland.

At Annex A, attached to this commentary document, is the SP response to the questionnaire. Whilst SP has an interest in the whole of the rural economy, we have confined our response to Q11, leaving the response on agricultural support measures to those partners with a detailed knowledge of the issues.

Notwithstanding that, our reading of the Consultation Paper strongly suggests that a rather monolithic view has been taken of the Scottish agricultural scene, in view of the wide divergence between, say, the cases of lowland arable farming on the one hand and Sutherland crofting on the other. References to the Highland case are remarkably few.

As a Local Community Planning Partnership, SP's greatest interest in the SRDP document is in its LEADER component, and springs from LEADER's role in funding of community initiatives. We have some concerns about the likely effects of linking LEADER into the other Axes of Regulation 1698/2005.

Incorporation of LEADER as Axis 4 is, of course EU-driven. We believe that there exists the possibility that the importation into the SRDP of a range of other previously-separate measures as well as LEADER, and the increasingly competitive funding climate, could prejudice funding of community projects through LEADER.

Components of the proposals which give rise to our concerns are as follows:

Funds Reductions. The consultation document makes clear the extent to which SRDP 2007-13 is likely to be affected by funding strictures. EU Funds are reducing (paras 65 and 66). SE funds will not make up the shortfall, because the tight Spending Review climate is likely to prevent additional SE funds from being allocated to SRDP. This is not a favourable background against which to bid for sufficient funds for the whole range of community initiatives.

Agglomeration of Previously-separate Funding Streams under SRDP. Against this tight funding background, the intention to bring into SRDP 2007-13 schemes which have been outwith SRDP 2000-6 (para 68) is, we believe, no more than simple good housekeeping, and an attempt to deliver a "balanced and integrated suite of measures" (para 68). To ensure maximum confidence, however, SEERAD needs to ensure transparency in the move

from old arrangements to new ones, particularly as it bears on the amounts of money available, and potentially the range of initiatives eligible for funding.

Increasing Competition Element. Another clear theme is the degree to which competition for funds will increase. This is due not only to the advent of Tier 3 measures, which will be competitive, but also to the integration of LEADER into the Axes and the use of the tool of “modulation”. The public consultation meeting which we attended showed the degree to which the farming and crofting community is concerned by the prospect of a reduction in financial support. Whilst we welcome the opportunity to work with the land-based economy, SP is concerned lest the LEADER and other rural development systems may be viewed as “compensation” for the modulation, rather than funding targeted against the wider rural community.

Axes or Themes? The value added by the SE’s themes, as opposed to the EU Axes, is not clear, and indeed we have two specific concerns about the Themes. In the first place, the fourth (Leader – Community Development – cross-cutting Axis) has no counterpart in the Themes, leading to a loss of profile. Secondly, Theme 3 subtly changes the wording of Axis 3. Whilst Axis 3 refers to “diversification and growth of economic activity” (without implying that this economic activity need necessarily be linked to agriculture), Theme 3 uses the phrase “a more diverse rural economy” which by its insertion of the word “rural” before “economy” could seem to suggest that this economic activity must be land-based. This suggestion needs to be strongly resisted, and it needs to be made quite clear that Theme 3’s coverage spans the wider countryside community, and not just agriculture and forestry. Agriculture and forestry enterprises, while key components of rural life and the rural economy, are only part of the whole: deserving economic enterprise in country areas needs to be supported, whether or not it is agriculture-linked.

Delivery. It is difficult to assess the likelihood of success for the LEADER programme as part of the SRDP when so little information is available about delivery mechanisms. A key determinant of success will be deciding on delivery mechanisms which are fit for purpose and which operate on a suitably-sized canvas. For example, who will form the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and how large a population will they cover (i.e. how will the LAG “10,000 to 100,000” guidance operate in Highland, and in Sutherland’s 12,000 population in particular?) The LAGs currently work admirably in promoting community development under the current system. We must ensure that availability of funds for community development purposes is not jeopardised by dominant agricultural and forestry interests, following the incorporation of LEADER arrangements under SEERAD.

ANNEX A

Question 11. *Should the LEADER mechanism be used to deliver across all Axes?*

YES.

The LEADER+ mechanism currently works well, and delivers marked benefits to communities through the current LAG system. LEADER's application across all Axes could be successful, particularly where a competitive element is present. However, whilst we welcome the opportunity to apply successful LEADER methodology to all Themes, the interests of wider communities should be safeguarded in a context where agricultural and forestry interests might have a tendency to dominate. Similarly, the SRDP needs to put support to the wider rural community at the heart of its objectives. Continued involvement of Community Planning Partnerships should help to ensure this, and to engage the full range of interest groups in rural communities.