



Northern Ireland LEADER Network

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Model for a  
**Learning in Action Self Evaluation Project**  
**'LIASE'**



March 2000

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## Acknowledgements

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Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) for facilitation and production of the report

The Rural Development Council Northern Ireland for financial support and endorsement.

Particular thanks go to the three participating LEADER companies and their managers for both the work undertaken and their financial assistance in the production of LIASE.

South Down and South Armagh LEADER Group, Manager Miceal McCoy;

Fermanagh Local Action Group, Manager Brenda Hegarty;

The Rural Action Project in Derry, Manager Brendan Boner;

An to Kate McFaul for co-ordinating the LEADER Network response.

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## Preface

The Northern Ireland LEADER Network (NILN) is the mechanism by which the beneficiaries of the European Union Community Initiative LEADER II Programme in Northern Ireland communicate. The Network was formed in 1996 and has performed a continuing and crucial role in the establishment and operation of the LEADER II Programme in Northern Ireland since then. It is an active participant in the UK LEADER Network (UKLN) and has engaged in considerable networking activities at a local, national and European level. The Network has links with Comhar LEADER na h'Eireann and also operates a partnership with the Rural Community Network in the delivery of the UK LEADER Network.

The position of the Northern Ireland LEADER Network experience within the context of rural change is of vital importance if best practice is to emerge from the experiences to date. The LEADER II programme had been perceived as an “add on” to existing rural development programmes, however, results have shown that the local ownership and delivery of the process, in addition to its flexible, innovative and collaborative approach, has led to considerable success.

For many people in Northern Ireland the LEADER II Programme was a rural development mainstream programme, and despite this situation, LEADER remains somewhat on the periphery of decision and policy making.

Given the complexity of understanding the LEADER II results and the knowledge that there has been some ground breaking results this has underpinned the desire to understand the process more fully. The NILN continue to look to AEIDL in respect of innovative thinking and quality publications on the emerging rural development experience. It is against this backdrop that NILN intend to make further contributions to both embedding of best practice in LEADER delivery as well as influencing the wider debate on the most appropriate approaches to future rural development actions.

### Northern Ireland LEADER Network Activities

The Northern Ireland LEADER Network has developed into a strategic programme development, monitoring and networking organisation since its inception in 1996. The Network aims to enhance the innovatory, transferability and pilot nature of LEADER through its networking forum. This has, and continues to be achieved through collective examination of the LEADER experience at programme concept, organisational and operational level. This has been achieved through meetings, conference and workshop activities, specific pilot studies and the production of reports.

Experience of delivering LEADER has revealed many unforeseen outcomes and outputs and whilst some of these have been clearly quantifiable and assimilated into the outputs of LEADER at both National and European level, others have not. The nature of LEADER, its local, innovatory and laboratory function, has produced extensive results which if fully evaluated and understood, could offer very important guidance and knowledge for local development programmes in the future.

The Northern Ireland LEADER Network wish to embed best practice and knowledge for future benefit, as well as explore new methods of monitoring the LEADER type programme and as such has undertaken an innovative and comprehensive exercise into self evaluation of LEADER which may help to more fully explain and explore the evaluation of LEADER processes, outputs and outcomes.

The exercise was complementary to the LEADER seven Specificities Evaluation model produced by AEIDL and experimented with approaches to self evaluation in the local context which could add colour and a deeper exploration of the LEADER II process in Northern Ireland.

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## Endorsement by the Rural Development Council for Northern Ireland

Evaluation is not just about quantitative data, facts and figures, but also about qualitative process information, detailing the insights and lessons learned in implementing a development programme or strategy. Evaluation is not just about recording systems either, but includes the way in which an organisation and its people engage in reflective action.

The LEADER programme is intended to be an experimental and innovative, and also to involve people with local knowledge working to maximise the potential of local resources and opportunities. To make the most of the added value that LEADER can contribute to rural development, a practical but comprehensive approach to an evaluation methodology is required which combines both quantitative and qualitative information, which supports Local Action Groups to reflect on progress and capture the lessons learned. In this way the programme can be accountable and seek to inform future development policy and practice.

Until now, most effort has tended to focus on quantitative evaluation. The LIASE project is one of the very few initiatives, which has sought to address the tools and techniques to enable a qualitative and continuous evaluation. The RDC has welcomed and supported this initiative and additionally welcomes the model presented in this report. It is an important baseline from which to continue to refine and improve techniques of continuous evaluation and active learning into the next round of LEADER, to help ensure that the full benefits of the programme are understood and appropriately integrated into mainstream policy.

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## Introduction

In 1998 the Northern Ireland LEADER Network (NILN) commissioned Community Evaluation for Northern Ireland (CENI) to assist in the development of a model of self-evaluation for local and rural development partnerships (Local Actions Group - LAGs) who were delivering the LEADER II programme in Northern Ireland.

The delivery time-frame for LEADER II throughout Europe began in 1994, however the programme had only commenced operation in Northern Ireland in 1995. At the local programme level, an adequate evaluation framework had not been properly developed and Northern Ireland LEADER Network were keen to ensure that all of the LEADER II beneficiaries (LAGs/OCBs) would be provided with a model of self-evaluation, that would ensure proper techniques of evaluation could be adhered to as they reached the final phases of delivery in 1999/2000.

Discussions took place between NILN and CENI with regard to the proposed collaboration and financial aid was secured in 1998 from the Rural Development Council (RDC). The subsequent project was named Learning in Action Self Evaluation (LIASE) and was launched in November 1998.

The following document is in two sections, the first section contains a summary report of the LIASE process covering the context, rationale, objectives and structure of LIASE. Section two provides an outline set of guidelines, which emerged from the experience. These have been distilled into eight key stages and are intended to guide rural development partnerships through the process of organising an internal review of their organisation.

## Key features

Ideally self-evaluation should be built in from the start of a programme. However, the absence of an evaluation framework for LEADER at the local level and a lack of evaluation capacity within LEADER Groups meant that this had not been possible. The Northern Ireland LEADER Network through LIASE sought to address these needs by focusing on a sample of three Local Action Groups (i.e Local Action Groups - LAGs) to produce a framework to organise an internal review and develop the skills and capacity to carry this out. This process would have two key outcomes,

1. the three participating Local Action Groups would produce their reviews and be equipped to apply ongoing evaluation within their organisations
2. the organisational framework could be transferred and applied by other Local Action Groups to put evaluation in place as they move towards the end of the programme.

The organisational framework or 'guidelines' as contained in this document are to be disseminated to the rest of the Northern Ireland LEADER Network for comment. The three Local Action Groups who participated in the pilot will further test and refine the guidelines within their own operations.

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# Summary report of the LIASE Self-Evaluation project

## Context for the Development of LIASE

### 1. Origins of LEADER

The origins of the LEADER programme lie in the European Union's response to the changing face of European agriculture. LEADER was designed to react to changing global economic forces and the Common Agriculture Policy in particular. These changes necessitated support for rural diversification initiatives and strategies to retain rural communities.

LEADER I (1991 – 1994) established an experimental 'laboratory-style' special programme, funded under the Community Initiative, to pilot innovative rural economic approaches and projects through a local partnership mechanism. The projects and developments supported were expected to be drawn from outside the 'agricultural' sector, and demonstrate imaginative, potentially transferable and in some cases trans-national characteristics, and be of lasting economic and/or social benefit to the local communities.

LEADER I was managed and delivered by the Rural Development Council – which co-ordinated project applications and financial support for community led rural projects.

This was in contrast to how LEADER I was delivered in other member states, where locally based partnerships of business people, community activists and public representatives managed and promoted the initiative and adopted the principle of subsidiarity in the promotion and management of the initiative.

### 2. Launch of LEADER II in Northern Ireland

LEADER II was promoted through the NI Department of Agriculture, which established the outline terms of reference and guidelines, and the partnership model, which had proven itself effective in many other parts of the EU, was recognised as the most suitable mechanism and bids were requested from interested existing or new partnership bodies.

The Department accepted that there needed to be a staggered approach to the application of LEADER, and accepted 7 bids under the Measure A – Acquiring Skills instrument of LEADER II. These first round of Local Action Groups would enable the programme to get underway, with a further 8 partnerships receiving LEADER funding under Measure B.

The nature of these partnership bodies differed greatly. Some were totally new entities, drawing experienced people and organisations together in a given rural area to develop and deliver the programme. Others were variations of this model, with the Local Authority taking a central organisational role, or as in some cases a partnership of local councils and other organisations.

### 3. Principles, Resources & Assumptions

The specific features of LEADER were the particular and unique aspects, which described the scale, scope and approach of the initiative since its launch in 1991. The Notice to Member States identified them as follows.

- a. An Area-based Approach
- b. A Bottom-up Approach
- c. Co-operation between local organisations
- d. Innovative activity
- e. Linkages between Actions – integrated and multi-sectoral approaches
- f. Local, Regional, National and Trans-national networking
- g. Efficient and transparent management and financing

In Northern Ireland the programme aims as articulated by the Department of Agriculture NI (DANI) in 1991 were:

- (i) to stimulate innovative measures by those engaged at local level in all sectors of rural activity
- (ii) to make known the results of these experiments throughout the Community; and
- (iii) to assist rural operators in different Member States who wish to profit from the lessons learnt elsewhere and to work jointly on some projects.

As with other Member States, Northern Ireland had two categories of beneficiary:

- (a) The Local Action group – a partnership of public and private parties which jointly devises and implements a strategy and a series of innovative measures for the development of a coherent rural area;
- (b) Other Collective Body – either a private or public body or agency which individually or in partnership implements a sectorally-based project which has benefits for rural development and which fits in with relevant development objectives.

From the outset of the programme, DANI operated the standard requirement for monitoring the work and progress of the LEADER beneficiaries. This was operationalised through reporting on a quarterly basis to the European Monitoring Committee (which oversees all European Union programmes in Northern Ireland). These reports were basic if detailed, and largely quantitative and financial in content.

To assist the Action Groups complete these reports and understand and use their contents, Community Evaluation Northern Ireland became involved through an Other Collective Body (Project Information Management Systems – PIMS OCB) to develop a range of monitoring, reporting and evaluation products including a computer-based information management system. CENI's role was to develop the awareness and skills of the Local Action Groups to effectively understand and use the data generated both internally for management purposes and externally to report actions and progress to the Monitoring Committee, the Department and other interested parties.

## 5. Engagement on Monitoring

CENI's work with PIMS focused particularly on developing appropriate mechanisms to complete section 6 of the DANI monitoring form, that is, the qualitative component. The NILN requested CENI to assist along with others in developing a draft qualitative reporting instrument which might better reflect the breadth and depth of Local Action Groups work in a relatively standard and easy-to-use format.

This work, undertaken through a Northern Ireland Leader Network working group, produced a four page report pro-forma document and facilitated a wide-ranging discussion about the extent and nature of all the activity that the Groups were engaged in. The motivation for the Local Action Groups at this point was to provide fuller and more comprehensive reports for internal satisfaction of data to external bodies, particularly the EU Monitoring Committee. The revised report was accepted by the Rural Development Division of DANI and was used by many of the Local Action Groups directly or as a guide to their qualitative reports.

The outcome of this monitoring-focused process was to stimulate debate about what information was being gathered at local level, and how the limited scope of the Quarterly Reports was insufficient to capture the extent of the creative development processes that were evolving at local level. The very nature of LEADER required innovative and flexible methods and approaches that often did not lend themselves to easy translation into quantitative reports. Furthermore, there was an awareness and skills issue for the Local Action Groups themselves. Managers and board members were unfamiliar with the apparent complexities of qualitative monitoring and evaluation and consequently outputs were not being recognised as qualitative issues.

The ex-post evaluation of LEADER I throughout the European Union identified the need for skills development and 'capacity building' at local level, particularly for directors of the Local Action Groups. There were obvious logistical issues with providing this personal development input to groups of very busy volunteer directors, but there was a consensus amongst Local Action Groups that more effective management and delivery could be enhanced by a clearer understanding of the work and progress of the Groups on the ground.

Many of the Local Action Groups had 'inherited' their strategic plans from working parties and firms of consultants. There was also a time delay between the writing of the bids and the commencement of LEADER II, which in some cases rendered parts of their plans out-of-date. Additionally, other funding and development initiatives had arrived on the scene, most particularly the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, which had changed the needs and perceptions on the ground of both the Local Action Groups and their potential promoters and of the wider public.

Consequently Local Action Groups needed to revise their operational and strategic plans and re-evaluate their appropriateness. While this was not in contradiction with the innovative and experimental aspect of LEADER, it did pose considerable administrative and practical problems for the both the Local Action Groups and the Department of Agriculture as the local administrative authority.

## 6. Capturing Creativity – External to Internal Needs

These internal needs (internal to the operation of the Local Action Group) stimulated the Northern Ireland LEADER Network to explore ways to clarify approaches to capturing and recording the richness of the local development task, and to consider how best to assist the other Local Action Groups to demonstrate the problems and solutions developed locally.

These explorations were informed by the assistance of CENI through its work with the Local Action Groups on monitoring and evaluation under the auspices of the PIMS OCB, and indeed was further enhanced by the interest and commitment of Northern Ireland LEADER Network to developing viable approaches to embedding self-evaluation skills and strategies within the Local Action Groups.

## 7. The Evolution of the LIASE Concept

These various factors led to the exploration of a possible ‘practically-focused’ awareness-raising and learning initiative developed by the NILN and the Local Action Groups themselves and supported by CENI. Any initiative would have to reflect the realities of Local Action Group operations, the voluntary nature of their boards, the broad nature of their work and the differences between each of the Local Action Groups themselves.

What emerged were a series of brief position papers attempted to address the perceived needs of the Local Action Groups but place some of the outcomes within the wider LEADER and European evaluation context. The Rural Development Council (RDC) was supportive in this process and indicated in early 1998 that funding might be available to meet the professional costs of such a project, and outlined the following criteria:

- A commitment to have the Local Action Groups engage in a process of learning and action research that produced documented results within the life of the current round of LEADER.
- The outputs of the process could include constructive guidelines to replicate the process in other Local Action Groups, could develop a model approach and be transferable.
- That Local Action Groups demonstrated their commitment to the process by committing money and time up front to initiate the process.

Indeed, critical to the successful implementation of the project was the role played by the Local Action Groups themselves in devising, developing and funding the project through its initial proposal phase. The Northern Ireland LEADER Network through the Local Action Groups was keen to see the eventual integration of the lessons learned, become an integral part of future management of LEADER on the ground.

## 8. The LIASE Project

Through a process of working meetings the NILN and CENI devised a project proposal that became known by the acronym LIASE – Learning In Action Self Evaluation. The core components of the project approach were:

- A formative, participative and negotiated approach  
*This would enable Local Action Groups to produce a self-evaluation development strategy that they both understood and owned*

- A step-by-step process of skills development and facilitation  
*A graduated process attempting to fit in with a very busy working schedule and incorporating as many volunteer directors as possible*
- A collaboration between CENI the Network and Local Action Groups  
*Engaging the primary stakeholders in both the designing and implementation of the project*
- An ‘action research’ self-directed approach  
*A fully participative cycle of planning action and review that serves the key requirements of project accountability, the need for debate and dialogue and the necessary development of skills and understanding*
- A ‘working’ rather than ‘academic’ emphasis  
*Working to ensure clarity of concepts and language, regular ‘reality checking’ that participants were understanding each stage and concise reporting*
- A dialogical process of enquiry (Alan Beattie, 1995)  
*Ensuring that each learning stage within the Action Group stimulated group debate, examination and analysis – exploring the range of internal views and understanding and reflecting also the various interests and agendas of external bodies that would ultimately be shared and disseminated beyond the three participants in the project*

## **9. Developing Understanding – Establishing the Conditions for Self-Evaluation**

Following the initial period of development leading to the production of a successful proposal, the NILN set about the process of recruiting Local Action Groups from within the network to participate in the pilot exercise. Selection criteria were established based on the commitment of time and resources required. Out of this process three Local Action Groups were eventually selected to participate.

The challenges facing the LIASE project were many and complex. It had to remain flexible enough to meet the particular and differing needs of each participant Local Action Group. It had to ensure Local Action Groups were enabled to undertake the facilitated self-evaluation review of their operations. And furthermore it sought to ensure that Local Action Groups would be able to re-apply the skills and information acquired to their ongoing work.

The most important factors in establishing the right conditions were:

- 1) the involvement of the Local Action Groups via the NILN in the long and involved process of developing the LIASE project proposal itself,
- 2) the process of recruitment and induction of the participating Local Action Groups into LIASE, and
- 3) the negotiated and incremental method of delivering skills training and facilitation to each Local Action Group self-evaluation team.

## 10. The Focus for Evaluation - Operational Reviews

Participants agreed that the most effective focus was to commence with – their original operational plan – and undertake a comprehensive review of how the plan evolved from the start of their programme up to 31/12/98.

This review was to have a number of objectives as follows:

- to achieve a ‘point in time’ measurement of performance relative to operational plan
- to enhance the almost exclusively quantitative data set with qualitative information gathering and analysis of the development processes, the views and aspirations of board members, beneficiaries and other agencies
- to test and refine the Local Action Group’s self-evaluation experience and skills

The fundamental approach of the project was to take incremental steps – of learning and discussing and then doing – through the medium of a sub-group of the board of each Local Action Group.

## 11. The LIASE Process – individual, comparative and dissemination

The LIASE process was conceived as having three overall stages,

- 1) work with individual participating Local Action Groups to produce Operational Reviews,
- 2) comparing and reviewing the individual results to produce a common template with guidelines,
- 3) disseminate and share the results of the process with the wider LEADER Network.

In practice the demands of the first stage were such that the scope for comparative review and wider dissemination within the original time-scale became severely limited. In reality this amounted to a single half-day group discussion between the three participating Local Action Groups, followed by a two-hour presentation to the network. Therefore in this final reporting phase of the project, the dissemination of the experiences and testing of draft self-evaluation guidelines set out below have acquired even greater significance.

The responsibility to share and develop the self-evaluation processes and products rests with the NILN, as does ownership of the LIASE concept and approach. Opportunities are already presenting themselves to investigate ways to take LIASE forward into the final year of LEADER II as an aid to Local Action Groups in their completion of their programmes and its potential for the new round of European rural development funding under LEADER *Plus*.

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# Guidelines for Local Action Group Self-Evaluation

## Introduction

The experience of the pilot LIASE process, which ran from November 1998 until June 1999, has been distilled into a number of key elements, which can be operated in eight stages, or steps as outlined overleaf. These stages are intended to inform or guide Rural Partnership Companies through the process of organising an internal review of their organisation. They are not intended as a technical manual on evaluation, (there are numerous such texts available<sup>1</sup>), rather they focus on that aspect of the process which most technical manuals either overlook or underestimate, i.e., how to organise an evaluation as an inclusive and democratic process. The LIASE process was one which sought to develop capacity within the organisation (knowledge, skills and understanding) to be able to evidence their performance. This evidence of course could then be subjected to validation by an external evaluation. The emphasis here is on organising an internal self-evaluation.

The guidelines are presented here in draft form for discussion and examination by the Northern Ireland LEADER Network. At present they reflect the views and experience of Community Evaluation Northern Ireland and the three participating Rural Partnership Companies.

## Unique Features of the Pilot LIASE Project

While it is intended that these guidelines should function as a generic reference for any Rural Partnership Company wishing to organise its own evaluation, it should be pointed out that these are predicated on the experience of the LIASE project, which had a number of unique features.

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Inclusive</b>                | The crucial component was the involvement of everyone at each level of the Rural Partnership Company in the process. This ensured ownership and democracy of the exercise. It required clear identification of roles and responsibilities and the establishment of mechanisms and working practices from the outset. This need to fully engage with all stakeholders dictated the pace and slowed the process considerably. However this was essential in that Rural Partnership Companies considered it more important 'to get this right' rather than rush to achieve deadlines. |
| <b>Facilitated</b>              | The service of a full-time facilitator was available for the duration of the process. This was essential to liase and co-ordinate activities, tailor the process to individual Rural Partnership Company needs, develop skills and probably most importantly to act as an independent arbiter in stimulating, focusing and structuring debate  |
| <b>Focus on whole Operation</b> | Each of the Rural Partnership Companies in the LIASE process embarked on a full-scale review of their operations from inception (approximately 3 years). All the Rural Partnership Companies agreed that a full review would provide a common focus for the exercise, and so facilitate sharing and learning between the Rural Partnership Companies. However, the same principles would apply to looking at a unique aspect or project of an individual Rural Partnership Company.  |

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<sup>1</sup> LRDP, Guidance to Monitoring and Evaluation, UK LEADER II National Network Working Paper, October 1999

**Resource Intensive**

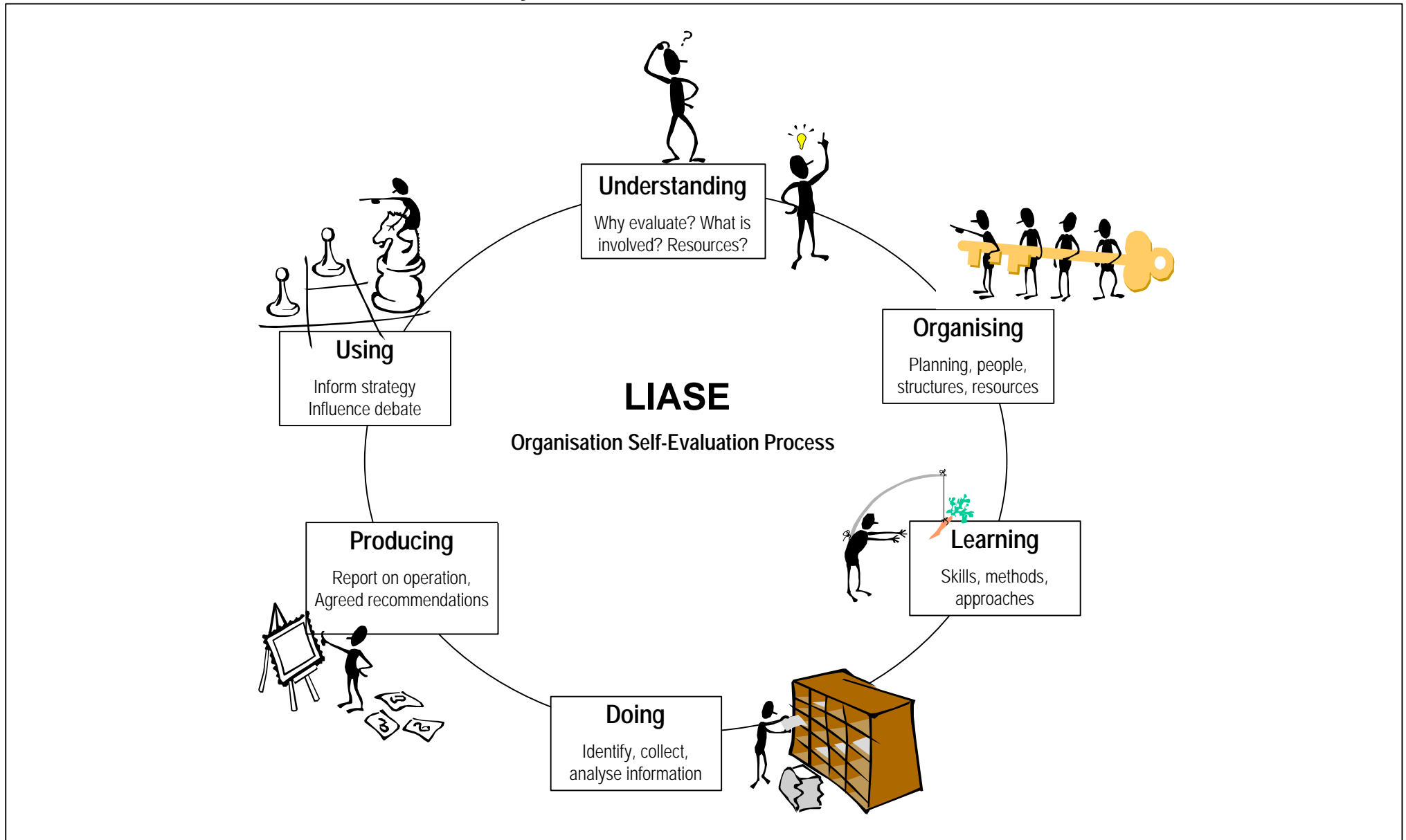
Considerable resources were invested into the exercise. Primarily the engagement of a dedicated and full-time facilitator was the greatest financial cost. In addition the time commitment from each of the participating RURAL PARTNERSHIP COMPANIES was considerable. Indeed this exceeded expectations in all cases. However, it also has to be said the experimental nature of the exercise and the point in the life cycle of the Rural Partnership Company also contributed to the amount of time required.

**Network**

The LIASE process operated through the NI LEADER Network, therefore providing a focus for sharing and comparing. The participating Rural Partnership Companies were able to learn from each other's experiences. They were all working at broadly similar levels and with the same focus, i.e. to produce a review of their operation. This helped to produce a generic organisational template or framework as described in the guidelines.

While the above features were specific to the pilot LIASE project, there are a number of key principles or elements, which can be drawn out and would inform the core of any organisational self-evaluation exercise. These are represented overleaf in diagrammatic form and then described in summary. The guidelines, which follow, indicate how these elements can be operationalised in practice.

# Key Elements of the LIASE Process





## The Key Elements of LIASE

The diagram above outlines the basic cycle of the LIASE process. This includes a number of key elements. These are not necessarily in chronological sequence, but will overlap and be ongoing throughout the process.

### Understanding

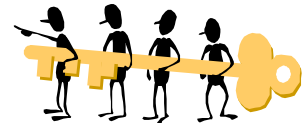
The key starting point is to ensure that the organisation as a whole understands and commits to the idea of evaluation. They need to be aware of the potential benefits of evaluation as planning and management tool - how it can help the organisation as a whole to be clear on what it is about, what it has achieved and where it is going?



The organisation then needs to be clear about what they are evaluating and why – what should the evaluation focus on, who should be involved, how will this be organised, how long will it take, how much will it cost?

### Organising

The key to the success of this exercise is that it is inclusive, i.e. that everyone at all levels in the organisation has a stake in the process. There needs to be collective responsibility for planning and implementing the process. Therefore, structures and mechanisms to achieve this need to be established and sustained. Identifying and allocating responsibilities at each level in the organisation is necessary. At the level of governance, the board of directors will have overall responsibility and active involvement in initiating, overseeing and endorsing the process. At the level of operation, the staff and a subgroup of board members will have responsibility to plan, implement and report on the process. The guidelines indicate how this structure would operate to ensure both ongoing accountability for and practical implementation of the process.



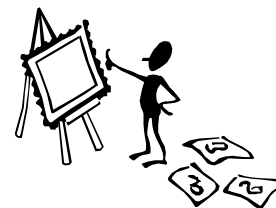
### Learning & Doing

Learning and doing go hand in hand with this process. The intensity and focus of training and support will differ at each level. Most importantly time and space need to be allocated to facilitate debate and reflection throughout the process. The full board will be educated to understand the process and make informed decisions at each stage. The staff /subgroup are given ongoing training in the methods of evaluation and facilitated to apply this learning to carryout the review of their organisation. Through this process they learn how to identify the information they need, find it, collect it and make sense of it and then present it in way that demonstrates their achievements, problems encountered and most importantly indicate future direction and priorities.



## Producing

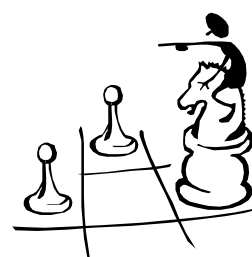
The outcome of the process is production of documented evidence in the form of an evaluation report, which is agreed and endorsed by the whole organisation. This should include, why the organisation engaged in this work, what they sought to achieve, how they went about this, what worked, what did not and why, the conclusions to be drawn from this and clear recommendations for the future.



## Using

The documentation produced can be used internally to inform management decisions on how to better organise and plan strategy for the future.

The document can also be used externally and disseminated to influence broader debate in the LEADER and rural development field. The evidence from the LAGs own experiences can be used to contribute to debate on the nature of the problems and issues affecting rural areas, the interventions that work and do not and how this should inform future programmes.



The next section operationalises these elements as a set of guidelines, which provide a step by step route through the process. The stages are in broadly chronological order from initiating the idea, to organising the process, to disseminating the results. The process operates at two levels:

- (1) **Organisational level**, involving the full board, management and staff of the LAG, who have responsibility for initiating, overseeing and endorsing the process and
- (2) **Operational level**, involving an appointed/elected board subgroup and LAG staff who have responsibility for planning, implementing and reporting the process.

This delineation of levels and demarcation of responsibilities is crucial to ensuring both the democracy and ownership of the process and its practical implementation.

# Learning In Action Self Evaluation (LIASE) Draft Guidelines

## Summary of key Stages

| Stage    | Organisation Level<br>Rural Partnership Board   | Operational Level<br>Rural Partnership Subgroup/Staff  |
|----------|---|--|
| <b>1</b> | <p><b>Establish conditions</b></p> <p>The whole Rural Partnership Company - Board and staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appoint facilitator</li> <li>• Commit to idea - purpose, focus, resources</li> <li>• Commit to action - set up Subgroup</li> </ul> |  |
| <b>2</b> |   | <p><b>Planning &amp; Organisation</b></p> <p>Subgroup defines its role, decides on working practices and plans agenda,<br/>Facilitator trains and assists subgroup to initiate, organise the evaluation exercise</p> |
| <b>3</b> | <p><b>Understand &amp; Endorse Plan</b></p> <p>Subgroup reports to board on proposals<br/>Debate and endorsement is crucial to democracy and ownership of process</p>   |  |
| <b>4</b> |   | <p><b>Implementation</b></p> <p>Subgroup implements the evaluation exercise with ongoing training and assistance from the facilitator</p>  |
| <b>5</b> |   | <p><b>Analyses &amp; Findings</b></p> <p>With assistance from facilitator, the subgroup collate their findings, carryout initial analysis and produce a draft report</p>   |
| <b>6</b> | <p><b>Consider, debate report</b></p> <p>The board consider the draft report - debate and agree conclusions and recommendations</p>   |  |
| <b>7</b> |   | <p><b>Finalise Report</b></p> <p>The subgroup amend/finalise their report and draw up future plan for the Rural Partnership Company based on the report</p>  |
| <b>8</b> | <p><b>Endorsement &amp; Dissemination</b></p> <p>Final report endorsed and strategy for implementation and wider dissemination agreed</p>   |  |

## Stage 1. Establishing the Conditions for Self-evaluation within the Rural Partnership Company

### Overview

This stage involves the whole Rural Partnership Company, and focuses on achieving organisational clarity and commitment firstly, to the idea of self-evaluation and secondly, to embark on the actions necessary to commence the assessment process.

This will require the provision of training and facilitation to the whole Rural Partnership Company - the directors and staff, to ensure that they are aware of the purpose of the self-evaluation exercise and the means by which they might carry this out. This will require two separate sessions or phases:

- 1) **Establishing commitment to the idea.** The first session introduces the concept of self-evaluation, explores the sorts of issues that might be the focus of the exercise, the potential scale and scope, and the likely organisational mechanisms and resources the exercise would require.
- 2) **Establishing commitment to action.** The second session moves to practicalities - setting up of an evaluation sub-group to take responsibility for implementation of the process, agreeing an agenda for action, and clarifying the respective roles of the various actors, including the facilitator, board members and staff.

| <b>1.1 Building Understanding and Commitment</b> |   |  |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
|--|---|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|---|--|---------------|---|---|-------------|---|-----------------------------|
| <b>Purpose</b>                                   | to clarify the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is self-evaluation?</li> <li>• What might it realistically achieve?</li> <li>• What should be the focus – particular project or whole operation?</li> <li>• How will it be organised?</li> <li>• Who should be involved?</li> <li>• How long will it take?</li> <li>• What resources will be required and how will they be accessed?</li> </ul>                         |  |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| <b>Method</b>                                    | Formal presentation to all directors and staff on concept followed by a facilitated debate exploring relevant issues.<br><br>Ongoing planning and discussion between manager and facilitator  |  |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| <b>Output</b>                                    | Introduce facilitator, establish understanding and potential working relationship.<br><br>Rural Partnership Company commitment to engage in focused self evaluation exercise  |  |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| <b>Outcome</b>                                   | Rural Partnership Company equipped with the informed capacity to decide and act on self evaluation  |  |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| <b>Stakeholders Roles</b>                        | <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Directors</td> <td>–</td> <td>Participate in presentation, debate, and decisions</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Rural Partnership Company Manager</td> <td>–</td> <td>Organise and participate in presentation session</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Administrator</td> <td>–</td> <td>Participate and document debate and decisions</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Facilitator</td> <td>–</td> <td>Educate, guide, and mediate</td> </tr> </table> | Directors  | – | Participate in presentation, debate, and decisions | Rural Partnership Company Manager | – | Organise and participate in presentation session | Administrator | – | Participate and document debate and decisions | Facilitator | – | Educate, guide, and mediate |
| Directors  | –   | Participate in presentation, debate, and decisions |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| Rural Partnership Company Manager                | –   | Organise and participate in presentation session   |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| Administrator                                    | –   | Participate and document debate and decisions      |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| Facilitator                                      | –   | Educate, guide, and mediate                        |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |
| <b>Indicators</b>                                | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recorded endorsement for focused self evaluation exercise</li> <li>2. Minuted agreement to move to action stage – electing a sub-group</li> </ol>   |  |   |  |                                   |   |  |               |   |   |             |   |                             |

| <b>1.2 Establishing commitment to action - How do we do this in practice?</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Overview</b>   | Having endorsed the principle of engaging in a self-assessment process the next step is for the board to establish a sub-group to carry out the work. This is vital to ensuring the Rural Partnership Company understands and 'owns' their evaluation process.  |
| <b>Purpose</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formalise ownership of the process at 'executive' level</li> <li>• Manage expectations of outputs of self-evaluation process</li> <li>• Establish local sub-group as main focus of work</li> <li>• Define and agree respective roles, responsibilities and mechanisms</li> <li>• Explore relevant systems and approaches to take the process forward</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>   | Facilitated training session with all directors and staff on managing an evaluation<br>Facilitated discussion on expectations, resources, realities etc.  |
| <b>Output</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reference materials on organising an evaluation</li> <li>• Establishment of Rural Partnership Company Evaluation Sub-Group</li> <li>• Appointment/election of directors and staff for sub-group work</li> <li>• Agenda for action agreed - record of debate and decisions</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Outcome</b>  | Establish 'Executive Clarity'<br><br>Achieve ownership and responsibility for the process from the start  |
| <b>Stakeholders Roles</b>   | <p>Directors – Participate in training, appoint subgroup and agree agenda</p> <p>RPC Manager – Organise sessions and take key role in the sub-group</p> <p>Administrator – Support the manager and sub-group</p> <p>Facilitator – Educate, guide, and mediate</p>   |
| <b>Indicators</b>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Minuted record of commitments made, responsibilities allocated, schedules agreed</li> <li>2. List of members of Evaluation Sub-Group</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement of All the Rural Partnership Company actors is critical to success</li> <li>• Real sense of ownership of the process is vital</li> <li>• Role of informed facilitator to draw out diverse opinion and have it considered as well as clarify and educate</li> <li>• Facilitator must manage the expectations of participants – keep the focus tight and realistic</li> <li>• Fundamental questions/concerns need to be addressed at this opening stage to prevent dissension/problems later</li> <li>• Honest recognition of the demands self-evaluation makes on time and resources helps keep plans realistic</li> <li>• Maintain accurate records of attendance, decisions, nominations, actions</li> </ul> |

## Stage 2. Subgroup – Planning and Organisation

**Overview** This stage operates at two levels. First, the Subgroup meets to focus decisions made by board i.e. define its role, decide on working practices and plan detailed agenda; Second, the subgroup undergoes initial training with the facilitator to initiate planning and organisation of the actual evaluation exercise.

| <b>2.1 Define relationships, establish practice</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Purpose</b>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining the role and approach of the sub-group</li> <li>• Develop working relationships at sub-group level</li> <li>• Establish commitment of individuals</li> <li>• Produce schedule of objectives, tasks.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>                                       | Initial meeting of Subgroup and staff coupled with training/facilitation session<br>Ongoing meetings of subgroup  |
| <b>Outputs</b>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functioning Evaluation Sub-group</li> <li>• Draft sub-group work plan</li> <li>• Outline terms of reference for Rural Partnership Company self-evaluation plan</li> <li>• Evaluation Portfolio set up</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Outcomes</b>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to implement evaluation exercise</li> <li>• Working relationships and methods understood</li> <li>• Tasks and schedule of work planned</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>                            | Board Subgroup – Commitment of time to training and tasks<br>RPC Manager – Organisation and documentation of evaluation plan<br>Administrator – Scheduling, organising, documentation, portfolio<br>Facilitator – Produce training plan and provide ongoing support   |
| <b>Indicators</b>                                   | 1. Documentation of evaluation plan with stages and tasks<br>2. Documentation of Sub-group and staff work plans with tasks and dates<br>3. Evaluation portfolio set up to hold all documentation and data collected   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The general clarification in stage 2 must be re-examined and ‘rooted’ with those with primary responsibility</li> <li>• Concerns and real issues need to be aired and accommodated to ensure commitment and full participation of sub-group members</li> <li>• The establishment of a ‘Portfolio’ i.e., a documentation trail containing the Work Plan and Evaluation Plan and all subsequent documentation, is critical to the success of the exercise</li> </ul> |

| <b>2.2 Initiate the evaluation exercise – Organising and Planning</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Purpose</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate first phase of Self Evaluation process</li> <li>• Develop basic skills of subgroup members</li> <li>• Produce first draft of Rural Partnership Company self-evaluation plan</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>   | <p>Training session - clarifying what Rural Partnership Company wants to achieve and identify methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Indicators - defining ‘indicators’ and use – measuring progress.</li> <li>▪ Data collection – addressing what information might be needed to assess progress against operational plan, how is it collected, who collects it, where is it obtained, when is it gathered, how is it sorted and ordered.</li> </ul> <p>Facilitation session - examine sample indicators to measure success, and explore the measurement instruments already in use e.g. the Monitoring Committee reports, Rural Partnership Company internal reports etc.</p>  |
| <b>Outputs</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic indicators understood and identified</li> <li>• Data collection tasks identified and planned</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts understood, basic skills developed</li> <li>• Outline terms of reference for evaluation exercise produced</li> <li>• Draft work plans produced</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>  | <p>Board Sub-group - Participation in training/facilitation session</p> <p>RPC Manager - Prepare and maintain work plans</p> <p>Admin - Record skills sessions and maintain portfolio,</p> <p>Facilitator - Delivery of skills sessions, relate training input to Rural Partnership Company work</p>  |
| <b>Indicators</b>   | <p>Portfolio updated with</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Documented draft terms of reference</li> <li>2. Initial indicators identified</li> <li>3. Sub-group self-evaluation work plan</li> </ol>  |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working up from a general understanding of what an indicator is – through those already in use to newly developed ones helps participants grasp this key evaluation instrument and its utility</li> <li>• Important for facilitator to seek consent that participants understand issues before they move to next stage</li> <li>• Careful recording of skills/facilitation sessions and sub-group decisions is vital to enable self-directed work between periods of facilitator contact</li> <li>• Agreement on content of work plans should be sought at each stage</li> <li>• Considerable manager/administrator/facilitator contact might be required to ensure these core concepts are bedded down within the organisation and thus undertake useful work later in the self-evaluation process</li> </ul> |

| <b>Stage 3. Rural Partnership Company Board - Endorsement of Self-Evaluation Plan</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Overview</b>   | The progress of the subgroup needs to be referred back to the full board for their information and endorsement. This is crucial to maintaining the internal democracy and ownership of the process.   |
| <b>Purpose</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure active involvement of all directors and staff in decision making</li> <li>• Agree terms of reference for the evaluative exercise</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Method</b>   | <p>Subgroup report to full board on draft terms of reference and work plans produced</p> <p>Facilitated debate with board on the following issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ defining the term ‘indicators’ and use in measuring progress of Rural Partnership Companies work.</li> <li>▪ what information might be needed and plans to collect, analyse and use</li> <li>▪ methods of obtaining views and experience of Rural Partnership Company beneficiaries</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outputs</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Board informed of progress and endorse sub-group work plan</li> <li>▪ Terms of reference and methodology for evaluation agreed</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Continued understanding and commitment of whole Rural Partnership Company to the process</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>  | <p>Directors – Participate in facilitated meeting</p> <p>Subgroup – Present progress report</p> <p>RPC Manager – Present progress report, lead discussion</p> <p>Administrator – Participate and record discussion and decisions</p> <p>Facilitator – Clarify technical issues and facilitate discussion</p>  |
| <b>Indicators</b>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Board discussion and approval recorded</li> <li>2. Issues raised are addressed and subsequent plans amended accordingly</li> <li>3. Board endorse methodology to elicit views of beneficiaries</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board time is required at this important session to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure maximum understanding of work and progress to date</li> <li>- facilitate expression of full range of opinions from directors</li> <li>- provide good grasp of value and limitations of eliciting beneficiaries views</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Rural Partnership Company staff (particularly manager) hold key responsibility to prepare for the board meeting and accurately report work undertaken to date (and issues arising)</li> <li>• Accurate minutes of views, questions, decisions is valuable for the later analysis of findings stage and the preparation of the evaluation reports</li> </ul> |

| <b>Stage 4. Subgroup – begin implementation of Evaluation Exercise</b> |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Overview</b>  | Once plans have been approved by the full board the sub-group and staff get down to the actual business of putting the evaluation exercise into action under the guidance of the facilitator   |
| <b>Purpose</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To initiate the data collection process</li> <li>▪ To move from planing to doing</li> <li>▪ To develop learning through doing</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>  | <p>Training/facilitation sessions with subgroup on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Documentation of baseline position e.g. where the Rural Partnership Company was at beginning of LEADER</li> <li>▪ Specify and agree range of indicators to be used e.g. trawl official indicators and adapt/develop Rural Partnership Company specific indicators as necessary</li> <li>▪ Data collection: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- secondary sources: what form is it in, how is it to be gathered, collated and used?</li> <li>- primary sources: beneficiary survey - sampling, fieldwork, analysis?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Implementation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Facilitator and subgroup produce final ‘indicator set’ to be used</li> <li>▪ Staff collect and collate secondary data from range of sources</li> <li>▪ Facilitator undertakes beneficiary survey</li> </ul> |
| <b>Outputs</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tasks clarified and focused</li> <li>• Indicators identified and agreed</li> <li>• Baseline documented</li> <li>• Data sources identified and data collected</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Outcomes</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real understanding – viewpoints and agenda become explicit</li> <li>• Real learning about the origins and work of the Rural Partnership Company is developed</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>   | <p>Board Sub-group - participate in sessions, oversee implementation process</p> <p>RPC Manager - participate in sessions and collect secondary data</p> <p>Admin - participate in sessions and collect secondary data</p> <p>Facilitator - training, facilitate process, conduct beneficiary survey</p>   |
| <b>Indicators</b>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Documented evolution of operational review process via portfolio</li> <li>2. Rural Partnership Company –illustration of budgets, targets and results to-date</li> <li>3. Clear and comprehensive Operational Review Plan</li> <li>4. Format, structure for the review report outlined</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This stage requires several days of administrators and Managers time to work through detailed Rural Partnership Company records, compiling evidence against the chosen indicator set</li> <li>• Facilitator undertakes beneficiary survey to ensure independence. Facilitator also begins to take less directive / more supportive role with sub-group</li> <li>• Important that sub-group meetings are carefully prepared for maximum benefit particularly with large volumes of data to be reviewed</li> </ul>  |

| <b>Stage 5. Subgroup - Analyses &amp; Findings: Assessing the Emerging Picture of the Rural Partnership Company</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Overview</b>   | <p>This stage is possibly the most difficult and time consuming, but also the most rewarding. It covers the period during and after data collection, as the process of analysing and reviewing is an ongoing one. At this stage the particular experience of the directors is of great value in clarifying the origins, ethos and evolution of the Rural Partnership Company and its plan, and in their assessment of work done to date.</p> <p>The facilitator's role is particularly important to help maintain focus and keep to realistic work deadlines and schedules.</p>   |
| <b>Purpose</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise and make sense of data collected</li> <li>• Collective assessment of Rural Partnership Companies achievements, problems and learning</li> <li>• Focus format and content of review report</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>   | <p>Training/facilitation sessions on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data analysis - making sense of the data gathered in relation to original objectives of Rural Partnership Company and LEADER II</li> <li>• Format of draft evaluation report - summarising and ordering of data gathered, how this will be translated into a final report</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Outputs</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Systematic review and presentation of findings</li> <li>▪ Format of draft evaluation report to be presented to board</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conditions for informed discussion on what has been achieved and what led to this.</li> <li>▪ Collective understanding within the Rural Partnership Company about their purpose, nature and outputs of their work</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>  | <p>Board Sub-group - participate in debate on report format and data analysis</p> <p>RPC Manager - construct draft report format and compile draft contents</p> <p>Admin - assist manager with above</p> <p>Facilitator - training in analysis, report writing, facilitation of debates</p>   |
| <b>Indicators</b>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Record of debates, discussions and decisions</li> <li>2. Draft report format produced</li> <li>3. Series of Draft Review Report chapters</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator and staff work through drafting and editing each section of the report – use of email greatly aids this work and is more efficient use of resources</li> <li>• Important input from directors to describe the formation and growth of the Rural Partnership Company especially from the period that pre-dates staff appointment</li> <li>• Stage requires at least three facilitation sessions</li> <li>• Requires training input on report drafting</li> <li>• Sufficient time between meetings is needed to permit writing and editing – this is a key ownership issue and cannot be rushed!</li> <li>• Facilitation can help motivate and maintain tempo in this intensive stage</li> </ul> |

| <b>Stage 6. Rural Partnership Company Board - Consider draft report, reviewing work at Rural Partnership Company level</b> |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Overview</b>  | This is the culmination of the inclusive and participative evaluation process. In the case of an overall review of the Rural Partnership Company operation, the debate on the draft report can be used as a means to synthesise the competing and overlapping experiences and views of the Partnership into a collective understanding of purpose, history and achievements of the Partnership to date. This process will take several facilitated sessions with staff and the board to fully debate and analyse the wealth of new and detailed information produced. The full board will also begin to draft its comments about what they have concluded based on their understanding of the findings.          |
| <b>Purpose</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a board level review of the performance of the Rural Partnership Company or project based on the range of information brought together within the subgroup's draft report</li> <li>• Arrive at a consensus on interpretation of the conclusions and their implications for ongoing and future work of the Rural Partnership Company or project.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>  | Detailed and comprehensive presentation by the sub-group with the facilitator to the full board of directors (several sessions required)   |
| <b>Outputs</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comments and amendments to draft report</li> <li>• Draft set of conclusions and recommendations</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A fuller, informed understanding of the full range of Rural Partnership Company work to date</li> <li>• A detailed document charting and reviewing the life of the Rural Partnership Company up to the present</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>   | <p>Directors – Consideration and debate of draft report</p> <p>RPC Manager – Presentation of report in depth</p> <p>Administrator – Participate and record discussion, opinions, questions and decisions</p> <p>Facilitator – Assist, inform, mediate, encourage all opinions</p>  |
| <b>Indicators</b>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dedicated time allocated to presentation of draft report by Sub-group</li> <li>2. Directors comments and amendments documented and incorporated</li> <li>3. Initial set of Director's conclusions and recommendations</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'One day' or dedicated Board sessions are required – these issues cannot be adequately dealt with as a small part of a normal board meeting</li> <li>• Access to the draft report well in advance of the meeting enables the fullest engagement of the directors</li> <li>• The presentation of the report is made by the sub-group – staff and directors – but a major part of the task falls on the Rural Partnership Company manager</li> <li>• Careful recording of views, comments and decisions must be undertaken</li> <li>• Clear decisions must be taken and if necessary voted upon by the full board to give the conclusions validity and weight.</li> </ul> |

| <b>Stage 7. Subgroup - Distilling the views and experiences into final report</b> |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Overview</b>   | Following the full board session/s the sub-group distils and incorporates the views and comments made into a finalised document. This will also include a draft set of review recommendations – the actions to be taken as a result of the conclusions of the evaluation exercise.   |
| <b>Purpose</b>  | To produce a final report with proposed set of recommendations to be debated by the final self-evaluation session of the full board of directors   |
| <b>Method</b>   | Self-directed writing/discussion/editing of recommendations – partly arising through meetings with the external facilitator  |
| <b>Outputs</b>  | Report with proposed recommendations   |
| <b>Outcomes</b>   | Emerging views about the future action of the Rural Partnership Company<br>Report provides a reference point or ‘baseline’ upon which future work can be developed and progress measured.  |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>  | Board Sub-group      participate in debate on report recommendations<br>RPC Manager          - construct draft recommendations<br>Administrator        - assist manager with above<br>Facilitator              - facilitation of debates, general advice and comment   |
| <b>Indicators</b>   | 1. As above in ‘Outputs’   |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate records from the previous stage are essential to inform this work</li> <li>• The input of both staff and directors must be maintained through this stage</li> <li>• Care should be taken to make the recommendations clear and specific</li> <li>• By this point the facilitator acts in a non-directive, responsive role, shifting from trainer and guide to evaluation coach, as the participants evolve from ‘learners’ to ‘doers’ and owners of the process</li> </ul> |

| <b>Stage 8. Rural Partnership Company Board - Completing the Review, Plan Dissemination</b> |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Overview</b>   | The full board meets to take the final edited draft report, including a set of recommendations, in its entirety for debate and final ratification. The board also considers its strategy to make best use of the report. This should cover both internal management issues for the Rural Partnership Company and dissemination to inform and influence external audiences in the wider rural development field.  |
| <b>Purpose</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To produce a strategy for the future work of the Rural Partnership Company based upon the board's conclusions on performance to date.</li> <li>To produce strategy for dissemination to wider audience of interest in the rural development field</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Method</b>   | A well-prepared seminar comprising all staff and directors   |
| <b>Outputs</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Final draft report</li> <li>Final set of specific recommendations</li> <li>Summary report for wider dissemination</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High level of informed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Rural Partnership Company and its operation to date</li> <li>Potential to utilise this understanding to better manage and direct the Rural Partnership Company for the remainder of the LEADER II programme.</li> <li>Potential to inform, influence external debate on rural development</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Stakeholder Roles</b>  | <p>Board - Debate, endorse final report. Agree dissemination strategy</p> <p>Sub-group - Oversee implementation of report and dissemination</p> <p>RPC Manager - Write up summary report and implement strategy</p> <p>Administrator - assist manager with above</p> <p>Facilitator - facilitation of debates, general advice and comment</p>  |
| <b>Indicators</b>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Final seminar held and decisions documented</li> <li>Strategy for implementation - internal and dissemination - drawn up</li> <li>Summary report for dissemination produced by manager with sub-group</li> </ol>  |
| <b>Guidance Points</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior distribution of the report and recommendations to all board members</li> <li>As full participation as possible to 'write off' the final report</li> <li>Clear strategic guidance from the board on implementing and disseminating the outcomes of the exercise.</li> <li>The learning from the process should be communicated to programme administrators to influence monitoring and evaluation arrangements in future programmes</li> <li>While this may conclude the current exercise it is vital that 'evaluation fatigue' does not set in. It is important that the skills developed and lessons learned are translated into an ongoing strategy for internal monitoring and review. The Rural Partnership Company needs to consider how this can be achieved, i.e., the motivation and ongoing resources required.</li> </ul> |

## Conclusions and Observations

The guidelines provide an edited account of the LIASE process based on the experience of the Rural Partnership Companies who participated in the pilot project. However, because they are in an edited form they may not capture some of the texture and essence of the issues involved. Therefore, the following observations relating to the roles and experiences of the main stakeholders in the process are offered, by way of expanding and exploring some of these issues.

### Facilitator

The access to an evaluation facilitator was seen as crucial to the process – to develop the organisational framework, provide training and direct and assist the internal review process. The level of involvement was intense and drawn out, however, given the experimental nature of the pilot project it is anticipated that this input could be more focused in future with the clear guidelines now established.

The fundamental tasks of the facilitator were to provide the guidance, tuition and nurture a sense of self-confidence within the Rural Partnership Companies and Network to help each participant feel empowered and equipped to participate in the process. Ability to understand the wider LEADER and Rural Development issues as well as good technical and communication skills are all necessary attributes.

The critical role of the CENI facilitator was most apparent outside the training sessions. It was vital to establish an open and co-operative relationship with the Rural Partnership Company manager and then to support this person through the operational review process. One manager emphasised his belief that it was in the facilitation sessions that the ‘real’ learning occurred - where the difficult questions were asked and the relationships between issues began to be clarified. “It was the difficult questions that helped you analyse but you never felt criticised” as one manager put it.

The facilitator’s role and tasks changed and evolved during the course of the project. In the initial stages the facilitator was required to give direction and structure, taking participants through the process of exploring and understanding how the skills covered in the training could be applied to their circumstances. As they moved to the analysis phase of their Operational Review, the facilitator became the catalyst for constructive criticism and dialogue within the group. Participants found they could say things to each other ‘through’ the facilitator that they might not normally state directly.

At the Rural Partnership Company and group seminar a large proportion of the discussion centred on this element of the LAISE approach. Comments included:

- CENI’s input, through the facilitator, was critical and the key to the success of the project.
- Facilitation showed us how to build on what we do already – but do it systematically
- Facilitation drove the process forward in its early stages, then later assisted the communication and focusing of ideas which became the review reports, findings and recommendations.
- The facilitation took what had been discussed in the training sessions and connected it to the self-evaluation task
- The facilitator posed difficult questions and made the participants think hard for the equally difficult answers, drew out thoughts and made everyone else listen to them

### Directors

While the directors of each Rural Partnership Company were involved throughout the process, the level of engagement did vary between the participating Rural Partnership Companies. The model outlined in the summary stages describing the roles and functions at organisational level - full board and operational level – subgroup, did pertain, but with some Rural Partnership Companies the separation was not just as distinct. One Rural Partnership Company decided from the beginning that as far as possible the full board should be involved in the entire process, while the other two opted for the

subgroup option. The involvement of the full board while logistically difficult did ensure maximum inclusion and participation and so enhanced consensus and collective understanding. However, the subgroup approach is probably the most realistic in terms of getting very busy people operating in a voluntary capacity to participate.

The commitment required in terms of time cannot be underestimated. Given that this was a pilot project and so experimental in nature, the drain on people's time as the process wore on was substantial. However, it should be possible to co-ordinate and plan for this more effectively in future based on the guidelines that have now been established.

The process provided a mechanism for engagement between directors and staff in which pre-conceived notions and assumptions could be challenged and debate facilitated in a non-threatening neutral environment. For instance, Rural Partnership Companies discovered through the process of analysis 'that particular policy was not reflected in the operational plan'. One participating group thought 'the ethos of the organisation was understood and shared by all, but through debate realised it was only in the heads of a few directors – not written down anywhere'. They operated to an 'invisible' objective and through LIASE were able to articulate, document and incorporate this into their revised operational plans.

These review meetings required preparation and long hours of debate, but all participants reported this as the most informative and empowering aspect of the project. One director encouraged his colleagues to work to clarify and agree a section of findings because 'it was incumbent on them to do it our way...' evidence of how this part of the process was assisting a growth in ownership of the evaluation process. The analysis process took, in one Rural Partnership Company's case, four facilitated sessions before the participants were satisfied they had established a considered consensus on their performance. Once ownership of the self-evaluation process was established, the staff and director's fears of 'warts and all' exposure disappeared.

The whole self-evaluation project built confidence and provided the information and substantiated arguments to assist in the debate and planning about the sustainability of the Rural Partnership Company organisations.

### **Rural Partnership Company Staff**

While each of the Rural Partnership Company managers was directly involved right from the pre-development phase, a notable consequence of the process was the enhanced involvement and influence of the Administrators within each of the Rural Partnership Companies. The Administrators evolved from a somewhat passive and reactive role at the beginning, to become more pro-active and engaged as the process developed.

From the beginning the pivotal role of the Administrator was recognised and care was taken to ensure that they were involved directly and given a clear remit and responsibilities. The Administrators have primary responsibility for the collation and organising of information in the Rural Partnership Company office, such as the processing of funding applications and the completion of programme monitoring forms. Therefore, once indicators had been decided it was natural that it would fall to the Rural Partnership Company Administrator to gather, sift, recalculate and re-format documents, diaries and minutes etc, to extract the necessary information for evaluation.

This systematic gathering and reorganisation of Rural Partnership Company data gave administrators an unrivalled insight into the development of the Rural Partnership Companies operations. This allowed them to make informed contribution to the analyses stages and also take considerable responsibility, along with their managers, for the writing up of the draft and final reports

As a consequence of the process the 3 Rural Partnership Company administrators felt empowered to be more directive and imaginative with their analysis and presentation of the information they manage and want to find ways to do this in collaboration with their managers.