

Scottish Parliament LEADER debate - transcript

Tuesday, 6 March 2018

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-10223, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the LEADER programme. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated

That the Parliament acknowledges the excellent high-quality projects currently being delivered by the LEADER programme, the EU fund that has been supporting community-led local development in rural areas for over 25 years; notes what it considers the solid and unique framework provided by LEADER, which creates local partnerships between individuals, rural-based enterprises and communities, enabling them to innovate, diversify and become more sustainable; recognises the value of LEADER in facilitating co-operation between community-led projects in different parts of rural Scotland, including in Angus North and Mearns, the UK and Europe; commends the LEADER staff and local action groups across the 21 programmes in Scotland, which have, to date, approved, or are in the process of approving, more than 400 projects since 2014; notes the interim report by the National Council of Rural Advisers, which it understands highlights that, in terms of targeting resources, there is scope to learn from the application of the LEADER approach that drives community-led local development and has a unique role in enabling local partnerships, and notes calls for urgent clarity from the UK Government on what will replace this funding once the UK is no longer a member of the EU, including how money will be allocated, how projects will be approved and delivered, and what the total allocations will be.

Mairi Gougeon (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP):

I am really glad to be able to host this debate to focus on the future of the LEADER programme, which is an issue that affects all our rural communities. I will start by providing some background information on how the programme evolved.

LEADER is a French acronym. I will attempt to pronounce what it stands for; I hope that I will not put my French family to shame. It stands for "liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale", which translates into English as "links between the rural economy and development actions". LEADER comes under the common agricultural policy. Pillar 1 of the CAP deals with direct support to farmers; LEADER falls under pillar 2, which relates to wider rural development.

The purpose of LEADER is to be a bottom-up, grass-roots method of delivering support to our rural communities. It aims to encourage businesses, individuals and community groups to develop projects that drive action on climate change; that enhance rural services and facilities, including transport initiatives; that enhance natural and cultural heritage, tourism and leisure; that support food and drink initiatives; and that build co-operation with other local action groups across Scotland and the United Kingdom, and in Europe.

The programme was first launched 25 years ago. Initially, it involved just 217 regions and focused on disadvantaged rural areas. The results from those regions were positive and encouraging, so the LEADER method was mainstreamed as a fundamental part of the European Union's rural development policy. By 2013, the programme covered 2,402 rural territories across the member states.

What is so effective and innovative about the LEADER method? Prior to the early 1990s, different approaches to supporting vulnerable rural communities were tried out, but they were typically sectoral and aimed at farming, and they were top-down approaches, with schemes and funding being decided at regional or national level. The effectiveness and innovation of LEADER come from the principle of the bottom-up and area-based approach that involves the local community—the principle of community-led local development. The decision-making process is driven by local action groups that are made up of people who represent the social and economic interests of the local area, and who

represent public and private bodies. Those groups assess and decide on the projects that they think fit the priorities that are to be pursued in their local areas.

What has LEADER delivered? In the previous programme funding period from 2007 to 2013, LEADER awarded £92 million to more than 2,500 projects. That created more than 1,500 jobs in communities and helped more than 60,000 people from rural areas into training. For every £1 that was awarded, LEADER leveraged in an extra £1.38 through matched funding. That figure is set to be even higher in the current programme, which runs until 2020.

However, what is so great about the fund is the sheer breadth and variety of projects in our rural communities that it has helped to support. In the current programming period, the 21 local action groups across rural Scotland have, through LEADER, helped to deliver glamping pods, artisan tea, apple orchards, the Fife pilgrim way, the conversion of derelict outdoor pools into caving spaces, jazz on the lochs, equestrian tourism, outdoor nurseries for children, cycling hubs, and a project that introduces young children to aeroplane design, to name just a few.

In my Angus North and Mearns constituency, LEADER has been worth £2.7 million to Angus and £2.8 million to south Aberdeenshire, and it has contributed to the Caledonian railway, which is based in Brechin, to help to fund a replacement station building at Bridge of Dun. It has provided funding towards new mobile cinema equipment for Brechin community cinema and has helped the Murton Trust for Education and the Environment in Forfar to create a centre for developing rural skills.

I hope that I am not stealing Graeme Dey's thunder and that he will not mind my mentioning this too much—that was a very deliberate AC/DC reference for any budding fans or those who are paying attention. LEADER helped to support DD8 Music, which is a youth music group in Kirriemuir, in the previous funding period. It helped that group to find premises to set up its own recording studio. From that, the group was able to grow, and it now organises Bonfest, which is one of the biggest festivals in the north-east. This year, Bonfest will happen on the first weekend in May. I will invite the cabinet secretary to it again this year, as I did the last time it was mentioned. In 2016, the event pulled in more than 5,000 visitors. The estimated economic impact was £403,000, which is a huge amount of money for the local economy.

LEADER continues to evolve and innovate. I have spoken before in the chamber about the Angus Council's crowdfunding platform and its funding team, which is dedicated to improving community capacity. Crowdfund Angus now works in synergy with the Angus LEADER programme. The programme provides 50 per cent of the crowdfunding target for projects that seek to reduce inequalities, support better connectivity or create first-class community facilities. Such projects are underpinned by the desire for stronger local economies.

LEADER has delivered a hugely diverse and impressive list of projects, so it is imperative that post-Brexit we ensure, as far as possible, that we develop policies and funding programmes that support the innovation and creativity that, in turn, support our rural communities.

Now to the crux of the matter. What now? There are no concrete proposals about what will replace this element of rural development funding. The only hint that we have is from the Conservative manifesto, where a UK-wide "shared prosperity fund" was mentioned, through which it is proposed that money that is spent will "help deliver sustainable, inclusive growth based on our modern industrial strategy." That will, allegedly, involve extensive consultation of "the devolved administrations, local authorities, businesses and public bodies." However, as far as I am aware, that process has not started, and with just over a year to go until Brexit and two years until the LEADER programme comes to an end, that is a big concern.

I wanted to hold this debate on LEADER because, among the myriad of EU funds that have drawn attention and on which there are various campaigns, it should get the focus and the attention that it deserves. I thank the East of Scotland European Consortium for taking the lead in looking at the issue, alongside the local action groups, and for all the briefing information that it has provided for the debate.

LEADER needs to be acknowledged for the positive impact that it has had on communities across Scotland. As of January this year, 914 projects had applied for funding across the 21 local action groups. The value of the LEADER commitment is £25 million, with a value in matched funding of £37.5 million.

The sad thing about the Brexit process is that it is only by going through it that we will fully appreciate what we have now and what we will lose. We cannot afford to lose the LEADER programme without having in its place a rural development strategy that will work for our communities on the same bottom-up principle. That strategy needs to be developed by working with the local action groups, local authorities and the people on the ground who work to deliver the funding and who therefore know it best. I hope that we can all unite in that message tonight and that each of us will work to ensure, as far as we can, that our rural communities do not get left behind in the Brexit process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

First of all, I ask the people in the public gallery to refrain from clapping—or booing, or reacting in such ways. We move to the open debate. A lot of members want to speak, so I ask that contributors stick to four-minute speeches, please.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):

Given where the balance lies, it is entirely understandable that debate on what will replace the common agricultural policy has focused on farm payments. Indeed, given how much of the money is distributed through pillar 1, and that farming has a powerful lobbying voice that was perhaps inevitable. However, pillar 2 does so much more than just support farming activity: it provides for the environment, rural communities and the wider rural economy. Therefore, I very much welcome tonight's debate on the LEADER programme and congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing it.

I have seen up close in my constituency the good that LEADER does. The Angus LEADER fund for 2014-2020 totals just more than £2 million. To date, about £1.25 million has supported 23 projects across the county, and it is anticipated that the remaining £800,000 will be snapped up by the autumn. We are at the point already where new enquiries are being turned away: that is how popular LEADER is.

I will offer just a few current examples of what the fund has supported in my constituency. It has backed the Friockheim Community Hub Ltd project, in which the old Eastgate primary school is being developed into a fantastic focal point for the village, to the tune of almost £138,000. Auchlishie Livery in Kirriemuir received £200,000 to help to tackle an undersupply in the local bunkhouse market, and almost £20,000 went to support the development of a Scottish artisan tea growers collaborative, which works across a number of areas. Also, two glamping projects between them attracted support totalling £40,000.

Ogilvy Spirits, which is one of several burgeoning food and drink businesses in Angus South, was awarded £125,000 for a visitor centre and tasting experience. East Haven Together was awarded £4,000 to hold the Angus litter summit, at which I was pleased to speak. Muirhead & Birkhill Millennium Hall Committee received more than £55,000 to support car-parking improvements for the community.

Tourism, community activity, food and drink and environmental projects—all things that matter to rural constituencies such as mine—have been supported by LEADER. I use Friockheim hub, the millennium hall and Eassie, Nevay and Kirkinch Community Association's hall for surgeries, and I have worked with Ogilvy Spirits and the tea growers, so I know how important the LEADER support has been.

The Angus LEADER fund is having to turn away applications, which is evidence of the continuing demand for its backing. High take-up of LEADER funding is not confined to Angus; the programme is universally popular throughout Scotland. Through direct funding and matched funding, LEADER has injected £223 million into Scotland's rural communities over the past 11 years. The sudden removal of a funding structure of that magnitude would be devastating for communities. It would impact on local facilities, infrastructure and, ultimately, jobs. Just as farming needs certainty over funding post Brexit,

so do Scotland's rural communities and businesses, which seek clarity and assurance on what will come next for them.

The UK Government has a duty to step up and take serious action on behalf of such groups. Although Westminster Conservatives have made passing comment on the construction of a new shared fund, it is unacceptable that an incompetent negotiating team could leave Scotland's rural communities with a serious gap in funding.

The only option that will avoid a potentially detrimental impact on communities and businesses is to ensure that a like-for-like funding alternative is in place by March 2019. As the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity made clear in his letter to the UK Government this week, Scotland must not in any way be worse off in respect of its funding allocations.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and remind members of my farming interests.

I welcome this opportunity to debate the LEADER programme, which provides vital support for rural businesses and organisations. The programme is part of the EU common agricultural policy scheme that is delivered under pillar 2. I will widen the debate to cover all support for farming and rural businesses.

I agree with much of what Mairi Gougeon says in her motion. The LEADER programme has delivered some excellent, high-quality projects. It is unique in targeting funding well, because local action groups are at the heart of deciding which projects get funding. A local action group is made up of individuals, local enterprises and communities, who understand their area and its needs and can therefore make wise decisions about which projects deserve support. They guide the project through the application process and supervise it through to completion.

In my region, LEADER funding for projects from the north Aberdeenshire local action group has had a positive impact. For example, the Aden caravan park in Buchan updated its facilities to include glamping pods, closed-circuit television and wi-fi after receiving a £32,000 grant from LEADER. The update is helping to attract more visitors to the area, which is boosting the local community.

CC Powell Ltd, an agricultural machinery dealership, which is based in Banff, secured £100,000 of LEADER funding to complete its project to construct a store and parts building and a retail outlet, to meet its needs. On the project's completion in 2017, new jobs were created in the area.

In my home village of Strichen, LEADER funding of more than £15,000 will see the Strichen Townhouse open to the public, after refurbishment, as a library, museum and archive. In a small village such as mine, that will be a fantastic space in which to bring the community together.

I have said that LEADER funding is important for rural businesses, communities and activity groups. It is a good scheme. However, the responsibility to put a new scheme in place does not lie with the UK Government. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made the situation clear: "We will maintain the same cash total funding for the sector until the end of this parliament: this includes all EU and Exchequer funding provided for farm support under both Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 of the current CAP. This commitment applies to each part of the UK."

Therefore, the money is there. Michael Gove has made it abundantly clear that the Scottish rural support system will be designed, and put in place, by the Scottish Government to best suit Scotland's needs. He has been absolutely clear that he does not wish to become involved, apart from in agreeing the high-level rules and regulation that we need to protect our internal UK single market.

If Mairi Gougeon wants a LEADER scheme in place post-Brexit, she needs to lobby her own Government ministers to come up with a plan. It is their responsibility and in their hands. Instead of the Scottish National Party Government planning for Brexit to fail to further its own political aims, it should start listening to our rural communities and get on with the job of governing. Fergus Ewing,

who is sitting listening to the debate, must start giving some guidance on the new system of support, which our farmers and rural communities expect and deserve. Right now, he is failing them.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):

I, too, thank Mairi Gougeon for securing tonight's timely debate on the LEADER programme.

A lot of attention has been paid to EU funds in recent years, given the Brexit situation. A lot of the focus has been on pillar 1 of CAP and common agricultural payments. However, as has already been said, the LEADER programme is part of pillar 2. It might be less well known in urban parts of Scotland, but that pillar is equally important. Mairi Gougeon and others across the chamber have laid out what the LEADER programme is, so I will not go over the same ground.

I want to draw attention to some projects in Dumfries and Galloway, where I live. The LEADER programme has invested in excess of £10 million in communities across the region over the past 20 years. LEADER funding has been invested in projects such as the Wigtown book festival in Scotland's book town. The funding gives year-round support to literary events in the region. There is also spring fling, which is probably the biggest open studio event in the UK, and the Dumfries and Galloway arts festival, which is another year-round festival. Those projects have really put the region on the map as a leader in creativity. They contribute greatly to the region's economy, and the initial investment from the LEADER programme has allowed those initiatives to grow and to leverage funding from other sources.

Dumfries and Galloway received just short of £5.6 million from the current LEADER programme. Half of that funding comes directly from the EU, with the Scottish Government match funding the other half. That was the third largest allocation across Scotland and, since the programme's launch in September 2015, it has supported 42 projects, with grants in excess of £2.6 million.

Those projects include community-led initiatives such as the Speddoch hall project near the small village of Dunscore, which has allowed the local community association to rebuild the village hall, which was destroyed by fire in 2013. The programme also supports projects in the rural business sector, such as the Ninefold distillery project. The micro distillery, which will be set up in a renovated stone farm steading building on Dormont estate, will increase the diversity of income to the business and bring in new and skilled employment to rural Dumfries and Galloway.

In the year of young people, the LEADER programme, importantly, funds a number of initiatives that support the youth of the region, including the bridge to employment project, which helps young people with additional support needs to enter the world of work. The project aims to establish an alternative post-school progression route for those young people in Stewartry, which is another very rural area. Those young people mostly have autism spectrum disorder. They have already gained national qualifications, but they require additional support to take the next step into work. Another project for young people is the upland creative network, which provides a platform on which young people can consider employment opportunities in the creative industries.

There are simply too many projects to mention in a four-minute speech, but I hope that I have given a flavour of the importance of the LEADER programme in just one corner of rural Scotland. It has an enormous impact and the potential loss of that funding has been a recurring issue. It has arisen on several occasions in the Parliament's Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee, which I convene.

In last week's debate on the timetable for consideration of the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill, I quoted from my committee's report on Scotland's future relationship with the EU, in which we said that powers that were devolved under the Scotland Act 1998 should come straight back to the Scottish Parliament. Our report also said that the return of those devolved powers should be accompanied by a funding mechanism that results in "no detriment to Scotland." That is extremely important, because we know that Scotland gets far in excess of its population share of the CAP funds.

Despite what Mr Chapman said, we have not been given any indication of how the UK Government plans to replace the funding shortfall.

Peter Chapman:

Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

Ms McAlpine will have to close.

Joan McAlpine:

Yes—I am afraid that I do not have time.

Are we to go down the route of the Barnett formula? If we were to do that, there would be an enormous shortfall in the amount of money that we received. The UK Government has still given no indication of the answers to such questions. Today, I have written to the Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, in an effort to get clarity on those issues, because time is ticking.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):

I congratulate Mairi Gougeon on her impressive strike rate in securing members' business debates and, following her recent leading of the hen harrier debate, I thank her for picking another subject that has real resonance in my Orkney constituency. I also pay tribute, as the motion does, to all the LEADER staff, including Phyllis Harvey at Orkney Islands Council, and the local action groups across the country that put in such a colossal amount of work

If we look at the Orkney LAG members, we must pay testament to the talents of the wide variety of individuals who give up their time to assist in the process by facilitating co-operation and supporting individuals, rural-based enterprises and communities across Scotland, the UK and indeed Europe.

The tragedies of Brexit are manifold. I still believe that it is an act of self-harm on an epic scale. One particular area in which our participation in European integration over the decades has borne quiet but profound dividends is that of rural development and wider structural funding support for our peripheral communities. Such support existed prior to us joining the Common Market in the mid-1970s, but I think that its provision was given impetus and ambition thereafter.

With just over 12 months to go before Mrs May intends to pull the ripcord, sadly, what is to follow in terms of rural development—as in so many other areas—is as yet unclear. For those of us who represent rural and island communities, that is deeply concerning.

Mairi Gougeon has spelled out how, over the past 25 years, LEADER has had the Heineken effect as regards community development across Scotland. In Orkney, it includes support for small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises, as well as farm diversification; Orkney's crucial tourism, cultural heritage, crafts and food and drink sectors; community services and facilities; Orkney's natural environment and sustainable energy; and the development of our fisheries sector. In each of those areas, an array of initiatives, whether on innovative fisheries-related research, skills training or improving access to natural heritage and tourism sites, has been supported. All have benefited from LEADER and the collaboration that it engenders with other partners, such as the council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and community councils.

That is not to say that, looking forward, improvements cannot be made. There is an opportunity to consider what works well and needs to be preserved, and what is in need of reform. I know from personal experience of watching my wife wrestling with the requirements of LEADER as part of an application for funding to allow the expansion of the Orkney Fossil and Heritage Centre in Burray—which, thankfully, was successful—that the process can be a bureaucratic nightmare. I seem to recall her using language that was a good deal less parliamentary than that.

It is true that potential applicants can be put off engaging with the programme. We need to bear in mind who is the target beneficiary. Many community groups are run by volunteers in their spare time. We also need to bear in mind the desired outcome from the funds—projects coming to fruition and leaving a lasting legacy in their communities. Therefore, I think that there is scope to simplify the application process and the guidance, and to make them more straightforward and less susceptible to constant change.

In addition, we should ensure that penalties for errors are proportionate rather than punitive, and there should be a more intuitive information technology system for applications and claims that does not require LEADER staff to reset passwords, which is not always easy in the evening or at the weekend when many applications are being put together. That would also allow applicants to print off applications for discussion at committee meetings or retention by treasurers. Again, that is not currently possible.

However, we must continue with the grass-roots approach, with locally agreed strategies and local decision making on applications. There is also scope for more local control over budgets and reallocation in response to changed local circumstances. There is food for thought on how we improve LEADER in the future, but what is in no doubt whatsoever is that the need for that sort of support will remain, whatever emerges from Brexit.

I thank Mairi Gougeon again for enabling this debate to take place and I look forward very much to seeing what Orkney-related topic she goes for next time.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):

I thank my friend and colleague Mairi Gougeon for securing this important debate on liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale, which is otherwise known as LEADER.

LEADER is, of course, a community development scheme with funding from the European Union that has benefited many communities across Scotland, including those in my constituency of Renfrewshire South. The greater Renfrewshire and Inverclyde local action group, which is responsible for the delivery of LEADER in my area, takes in the Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde local authority areas. Of the 17 settlements covered by the greater Renfrewshire and Inverclyde local action group, seven fall within my Renfrewshire South constituency, namely Lochwinnoch, Kilbarchan, Howwood, Brookfield, Linwood, Uplawmoor and Neilston, with the Craigends area of Houston also included. The social and economic diversity of those areas reflects the wide range of communities that benefit from LEADER.

With more than £2 million of funding, the greater Renfrewshire and Inverclyde LAG has been supporting jobs and initiatives in Renfrewshire South, such as the tag-n-track project at Clyde Muirshiel regional park, near Lochwinnoch. Through the use of satellite tags and geographical information system technology, the project allows children to track the movements of lesser black-backed gulls and barn owls. Previous projects in Renfrewshire have included supporting community groups and the restoration of a historic building. Analysis of the 2007 to 2013 programme highlights a number of other positive impacts, including the creation of more than 150 volunteering opportunities and 130 training places, the safeguarding of 13 jobs and the creation of an additional three jobs.

Just as important as the resources made available is the way in which decisions are taken. The greater Renfrewshire and Inverclyde LAG's local development strategy for 2014 to 2020 was developed following extensive engagement with the local communities. In Linwood, which was new to the LAG area, a consultation meeting was held with members of the community, representatives of local groups and key agency stakeholders, which generated a range of ideas for projects that would meet the needs of the local community. One would not normally associate Linwood with being a rural community, so that tells us something about the range of communities that benefit from LEADER. East Renfrewshire Council undertook an online survey of interested parties, and such engagement means that the programmes of local action groups are, in effect, co-designed and contribute to our shared ambition to further empower our communities.

It is clear to me that my constituents in Renfrewshire South have benefited from LEADER in terms of resources provided and the opportunity to play a greater role in shaping their communities. Sadly, all that is now under threat because of Brexit. Along with the majority of my constituents, I voted in 2016 to remain in the EU, but we now stand to see communities in Renfrewshire South undermined by the potential loss of programmes such as LEADER, just as we see our local and national economies threatened because of fanatical, hard-right, Brexit ideologues in the United Kingdom Government—and a few in here, too.

If the UK Government is going to inflict the Brexit catastrophe on us, it has a duty to start setting out how it will compensate my constituents in Renfrewshire South and the many other communities across Scotland that currently benefit from LEADER. The UK Government has had nearly two years to get its act together on Brexit, so it had better start coming up with answers—and it had better start coming up with them fast.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):

I thank Mairi Gougeon for lodging her motion and Tom Arthur for explaining the LEADER acronym, which has saved me from doing it badly. This debate provides a great opportunity to highlight the excellent community-led work that is supported by LEADER programmes across Scotland, but I hope that it will also begin the discussion on how we ensure that that work—and the best possible rural development support—is maintained whatever the final outcome of Brexit is.

As we have heard, LEADER funding provides support for a host of vital work in all our constituencies and regions and, crucially, it is led at a local level. That means that the specific nature of the projects can vary widely, but LEADER provides local solutions to local problems and opportunities. That is the key to its success, as I have seen in my South Scotland region.

In the current round of funding, almost £23 million has been allocated to local action groups in Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway, the Scottish Borders, Tyne Esk and South Lanarkshire. As a councillor and chair of Dumfries and Galloway Council's economy committee, I had the privilege of being a member of the LEADER programme local action group and I saw at first hand the real difference that the programme made in my home region.

The programme supports a host of innovative community projects in Dumfries and Galloway such as the exercise to happiness project, which is working with local football club Greystone Rovers to create a service for people with mental health problems, and the care campus initiative at the Crichton campus in Dumfries, where a new model to provide housing, social and community support with access to care for older people will be tested and developed.

Rural enterprise projects are also being supported. The Crafty Distillery in Galloway has a project working across the food and tourism sectors to create a Galloway menu and gin tour, and support for the "Hold the front page!" initiative created a multimedia community interest company to ensure that the *Esksdale & Liddesdale Advertiser* continues to deliver news to the local community for many years to come.

In the Scottish Borders, the LEADER project funds projects ranging from youth work to tourism and skills development. For example, the musik shak project has allowed young people to learn, play and record music together, and the 7stanes marketing project promotes the hugely important mountain biking opportunities in the region.

In Ayrshire, LEADER funding enabled the Ayrshire rural transport network to employ a community transport co-ordinator to develop transport in Carrick, and the Drongan challenge us project, a community and employability initiative that was targeted at unemployed young people, used arts to develop self-esteem and teach transferable employment skills.

In South Lanarkshire, support from LEADER for Castlebank horticultural and environmental training centre helped Lanark Community Development Trust to convert derelict buildings into community hubs from which training and volunteering opportunities can be delivered.

In Tyne Esk, the LEADER programme includes work to transform Gullane village hall into a hub for cultural, leisure, sporting and educational activities, and a project called seed to soup, which enables young people to develop horticultural skills.

I could spend the next hour highlighting the way that LEADER-funded projects are working across South Scotland to strengthen rural communities, boost their economies and improve the wellbeing and the opportunities of the people who live there, and I would still not scratch the surface. That begs a question. How do we ensure that this invaluable work continues?

There is no doubt that Brexit is creating huge uncertainty for many communities across rural Scotland, and it is vital to develop a replacement for the LEADER programme. It is essential not only that the funding that is currently provided through the LEADER programme is matched, but that the character and focus of the programme is largely replicated. Improvements can be made to the processes, but the overall principle must be maintained.

As the motion notes, a report by the National Council of Rural Advisers highlighted how effectively the programme targets and allocates resources. The approach that is taken by the LEADER programme is incredibly effective, and the emphasis on promoting community-led development and enabling local partnerships must not be lost.

The clock is ticking, and so far there has been very limited progress. Rural Scotland is not interested in the UK and Scottish Governments arguing. It wants the two Governments to work together to develop the support that is so important to Scotland's rural communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

Before we move on, I note that there are still a few members who wish to speak, and I am happy to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Mairi Gougeon to move that motion. That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

Mairi Gougeon:

Motion agreed to.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):

I congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing this members' business debate. I will not go back over the ground that has already been covered about the LEADER programme. Suffice it to say that it has been hugely beneficial to all of Scotland, including my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency.

Before I go on to talk about my constituency, I want to make one point to Peter Chapman. He spoke about the money for the programme being guaranteed until the end of the current session of Parliament, but what guarantees has his UK Government offered to protect his cherished UK single market post the current session of Parliament? I think that we all know that the answer to that is zero.

Two projects in my constituency have benefited from the LEADER programme so far. The first is the Ardgowan distillery, which received £25,000 as part of a funding package and which will, it is hoped, deliver 50 new jobs in Inverkip. The second is the Gourrock golf club, which received £80,600.

I will talk about the Ardgowan distillery first. It also received just under £1 million from the Scottish Government through the food processing, marketing and co-operation grant scheme last November, and it was the cabinet secretary who awarded that sum. It will be Inverclyde's first new distillery in decades. As well as creating up to 50 jobs locally, it is certain to be a huge tourist attraction.

The Ardgowan distillery will be situated in the village of Inverkip on the historic Ardgowan estate, which has links to both King Robert the Bruce and Pocahontas. My colleague Graeme Dey is having a wee chuckle, so I will explain why. Sir Michael Shaw Stewart, who was the fifth baronet, married Eliza Farquhar, who was a direct descendant of the Native American princess Pocahontas, who was one of the most significant figures in the early colonial history of America.

The project will help many of the cruise ship tourists who disembark in Greenock. Last year, just over 106,000 people disembarked in Greenock, and over the course of the next 10 years that figure is going to increase to up to 200,000. At the moment many of them leave Inverclyde and go on distillery tours elsewhere. When we have our own distillery, which is due to open in 2020, many of those people will stay, and the money that they spend will be regenerated within the Inverclyde economy. That can only be a good thing.

The second example is Gourrock golf club, which I recently visited to see its state-of-the-art development studio. Its total cost was £184,000, so LEADER funding paid for half of that facility. The Gourrock golf club is performing well, but the new facility will bring in more people, including many

from outside Inverclyde, who will spend money in the local community. That investment will provide for an all-year-round facility for the local community. Children under 18 and community groups such as the scouts, the Girls Brigade, the Boys Brigade and others will be able to use it for free. The club has a partnership with the Inverclyde active schools programme, through which it can be used for free as well. Recently it has also begun partnerships with local groups that work with adults with learning disabilities, which will benefit many people in the community.

The EU LEADER programme is beneficial to many communities. The two projects that I have just highlighted prove that it is for my constituency. I echo Mairi Gougeon by saying that I hope that, when Brexit happens, a similar fund will exist.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):

I congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing the debate, not least because she has achieved her endgame. During a conversation last week, when I said that I wished to speak in the debate, she made clear to me how important it is to highlight this funding stream, acknowledge the good work and the types of work that it supports and ensure that all who need it can access it. I am pleased to help in that regard.

At the outset, the motion calls for the Parliament to acknowledge “the excellent high-quality projects” that the LEADER programme currently delivers. Many members have done just that for their own areas, noting that its funding is vital to their constituencies. Some people have supplied us with concrete evidence, such as the useful infographic that was supplied by the Cairngorms LEADER project to highlight the value of its funding to community-led local development in the Cairngorms.

For my own region of the north-east, I specifically highlight the funds given to the Strathorn Riding School to develop and build an indoor horse riding and driving arena, which will provide facilities for a disabled group and an area for people in the community who share an interest in horses. There are also funds to enable Aberdeenshire Highland Beef, which is an already successful local business, to expand by setting up an on-farm butchery and an online shop to produce and market local beef, which means jobs and money going into the local economy.

The motion goes on to ask Parliament to note “the solid and unique framework provided by LEADER, which creates local partnerships between individuals, rural-based enterprises and communities, enabling them to innovate, diversify and become more sustainable”. It is true that LEADER does that, as is demonstrated by the refurbishment of Drumoak church project. Using LEADER funds, the community will provide basic utilities for the building such as drainage, kitchen facilities, toilets and broadband. That will create a multi-purpose open-plan area for the community groups that currently use it, including beavers, cubs, mother and toddler groups, a music group, a youth cafe, an over-60s club and yoga classes. That is what community and partnership are all about—and that is what LEADER is all about.

In its conclusion, the motion calls for “urgent clarity ... on what will replace this funding once the UK is no longer a member of the EU, including how money will be allocated”. That is a fair point, as these vital funds achieve a very specific and important purpose. However, I am genuinely confused by the motion’s call for “clarity from the UK Government”. The funds are distributed by the EU under pillar 2 of the CAP, under which the Scottish Government decides which projects it is spent on. The UK Government has made it absolutely clear that, until at least 2022, the same level of funding will be provided by the UK as we have received from the EU under the CAP. Michael Gove has been clear that how that money is spent is the responsibility of the SNP Government, so it is surely for the cabinet secretary to get his act together—to use Tom Arthur’s rather overblown rhetoric—and provide the clarity that is sought by the motion as to whether the SNP wants to carry on with a LEADER scheme. The issue is one of people’s livelihoods, venture and projects. Indeed, many aspects of the rural economy are at stake.

Tom Arthur:

Will the member give way?

Liam Kerr:

Not in the time that I have left, thank you. Our rural communities and enterprises need assurances on what comes next for them. The motion is therefore correct to demand clarity, but I cannot help but conclude that that clarity should be demanded from the Scottish Government, on which the onus lies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

The last of the speeches in the open debate is from David Torrance.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):

I, too, thank Mairi Gougeon for lodging the motion to recognise the success of the LEADER programme. The debate is an important one to have in the chamber, as it relates to the welfare of our rural communities in the wake of Brexit. Community-led local development in rural areas is an important factor in the continued wellbeing and development of Scotland as a whole. That is why we recognise the LEADER programme for its great success in facilitating community-led development via partnerships among individuals, businesses and communities to produce projects that contribute to local prosperity.

Our communities across Scotland have benefited as a result of the programme. According to the Scottish Parliament information centre, the LEADER programme is worth roughly £86 million over the current 2014-20 period. Half of that funding is from pillar 2 of the CAP and the other half is from Scottish Government co-financing. Millions of pounds have been provided to each of our 21 local action groups—funding that is the fuel of the projects that benefit our communities.

In Fife, the LEADER programme has funded more than 14 projects since 2014. Those include the restoration of three ecologically and economically important estuaries; a programme that aims to equip young people with knowledge, skills and support in the creation of microbusinesses and employment; a park with a campsite along the Fife coastal path, creating new green space and new jobs; the expansion and renovation of a busy working harbour; and the creation of a new long-distance road that connects hamlets and enhances existing paths. Those are only a few of the projects that have been funded in Fife out of many that have seen success or that are currently in the pipeline, and 20 other local action groups across Scotland are experiencing the same success in local, bottom-up improvements to rural communities, enhancing the lives of everyone involved.

The LEADER programme has provided extensive accomplishments in increasing support to our local rural communities and business networks, building knowledge and skills and encouraging innovation and co-operation to achieve local development objectives. The projects produced from programme funding also attract people into an area as well as visitors who utilise the developments. Such a grass-roots approach empowers people to improve their own lives and the lives of others.

However, this unique programme faces challenges as the United Kingdom secedes from the European Union and the substantive funding that the programme receives through the rural development policy of the CAP disappears. As Brexit looms ever closer, we must look into the future to gain a sense of the implications that leaving the EU has for the LEADER programme, and we must act on that knowledge.

Over the current 2014-20 period, LEADER is expected to create more than 550 jobs in rural areas. It has already resulted in more than 400 projects benefiting rural communities across Scotland. When the CAP pillar 2 funding disappears, the LEADER programme will lose 50 per cent of its funding. Looking into the future, we see the potential for additional accomplishments through the LEADER programme—projects that manifest jobs and improve the quality of life in our rural communities. We can see Scotland continue to prosper by empowering rural communities and giving the people who live there the opportunity to enrich their lives and those of anyone who visits. However, that is an option only if we maintain the LEADER programme with the same level of funding and support that it has at present.

The UK Government must continue to support the LEADER programme and provide clarity about how funding will be replaced after the United Kingdom leaves the EU. The social, economic and cultural benefits of the programme cannot be understated. Rural communities have been empowered to enrich local wellbeing and have developed innovative projects that benefit the lives of the community

while building knowledge, skills and relationships between local businesses and individuals. We must sustain the programme to ensure further success in our rural communities.

I once again thank Mairi Gougeon for securing the debate, and I thank the volunteers and participants in the LEADER programme for making the wellbeing of our rural communities a priority. We must continue to support the LEADER programme. Building up rural communities via a grass-roots approach is beneficial to those communities and to Scotland as a whole.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity (Fergus Ewing):

I warmly congratulate Mairi Gougeon on initiating the debate and for the lively and informative way in which she spoke to the motion.

I have always believed that France can lay claim to being the architect of much of the world's civilisation that we all enjoy. However, I had not known that the French were also responsible for the LEADER programme, so for that knowledge I am indebted to Mairi Gougeon—who has, of course, forged her own auld alliance, as it were.

It is interesting to note that LEADER is a French concept. It is an excellent one. The debate has featured interesting contributions from across the chamber, with many examples being given of how LEADER has helped communities across Scotland. It has been a sort of extended version of “Tales of the Unexpected”, with a host of unlikely, vibrant and diverse examples from various communities. How many people of my generation—I am just on the wrong side of 60, sadly—would have thought that Scotland would be famous now for tea, or for vodka, which Graeme Dey mentioned? That is not something that one immediately associates with the county of Angus. Who would have thought that Inverclyde would be famous for its distilleries? Similarly, I was surprised when Pocahontas made an appearance in the debate, and I suspect that I am not alone in that.

The point is that, across Scotland, people are doing different things, and the beauty of LEADER is that, as Peter Chapman said, it is a bottom-up programme. That is the whole point. It is not my duty to say what communities should do; it is for them to decide. Were I to try to do that, communities would not be interested, would they? The whole point is to empower communities through a fund that enables that to happen.

I do not think that it has been mentioned that the LEADER programmes occur over a long period. There was a LEADER programme from 2007 to 2013, and then one from 2014 to 2020—both seven-year programmes. I do not want to be political, because members' business debates are not meant to be political—at least, that is what I understand from the ancient days when I was making my first remarks in Parliament—but I say that we must think long-term about the issue. People do not want political argy-bargy. They want the knowledge that, when the current programme ends in 2020, there will be a subsequent programme from 2020 to 2027.

The programme needs to be long term because it takes a long time to build up projects. I am acutely aware of that, having recently visited one of the local teams in Morayshire and met many of the people who are employed or volunteer there. My goodness! We have a lot to thank the 200 volunteers across Scotland for. Many of them are here tonight—you admonished them earlier, Presiding Officer, as no doubt you have to do in your role. As Mairi Gougeon and others said, the local action groups perform a terrific amount of work on behalf of their communities.

I do not want to get involved in the political arguments. All I will say is that we must find a way to ensure that when the current LEADER programme comes to an end, it is replaced by another one. So far as I know, there has been no funding clarity on that from the UK Government, which is why I have written to Mr Gove and why, when I met Mr Gove and representatives of the other devolved Administrations in Cardiff last Monday, I sought further funding clarity. I hope that once the UK Government's travails over the Brexit negotiations are eventually over, we will have that clarity.

LEADER is a fundamental part of local delivery and empowerment of communities. As we have heard, it forms part of the Scottish rural development programme, which helps rural communities. I was aware of that at 7 o'clock yesterday morning at the Fraserburgh fish market and, later that day, in Inverurie, when I awarded a food processing, marketing and co-operation grant of £4 million to help

Scotbeef to set up a new abattoir. This afternoon, I hosted a venison summit in Perth, at which it was clear that venison will play an increasingly important part in the diet of the nation because—as, I am sure, members know—it is the most nutritious meat available.

Pillar 2 of the CAP is designed in part to encourage all the other things. Although Peter Chapman is right that pillar 1 is for farmers—I am a great supporter of continued support for our hill farmers and others who require it—pillar 2 is designed to look at the wider community, and there is plainly a continuing need to do that.

In LEADER, we have introduced targets for farm diversification and rural enterprise, alongside the co-operation target. Colin Smyth and Peter Chapman both gave good examples of worthy diversification projects. The aim is to encourage more diversified support to our rural communities.

There are many examples around the country of different types of LEADER projects, but I will not run through them in the time that I have. I will say that it is absolutely vital that we direct attention to supporting young people. Young people with additional needs should, and I hope will, receive additional support in LEADER projects.

The statistics about LEADER are pretty impressive. It results in an enormous amount of funding being invested in Scottish rural communities, which is a good thing. As several members pointed out, the funding generates additional support through matched funding. For every £1, there has been an additional £1.43 in matched funding. In that sense, LEADER has been a highly successful programme.

Liam McArthur:

The cabinet secretary started off by telling us that this has been a debate littered with tales of the unexpected, and he is absolutely right. One of those tales was about to emerge as a result of Mairi Gougeon's invitation to the cabinet secretary to attend an AC/DC-inspired music festival. I hope that, before he concludes, he will put members out of their collective misery by informing us that he will indeed be taking up that kind offer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

The cabinet secretary has a wicked look in his eye.

Fergus Ewing:

I must admit that AC/DC is not my cup of tea, but perhaps you and I could enjoy listening to some Leonard Cohen together, Presiding Officer. I think that that might be better for the soul.

We need LEADER, or something like it, to continue; I think that we are all committed to that. I hope that if we all work together in Scotland, in years to come we will build on the success that LEADER has delivered for communities all over the land.

This transcript was extracted from the Scottish Parliament's [official report](#) on chamber business, 6 March 2018