Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

Wales Rural Network Support Unit Evaluation

Complete Report, including Parts I & II

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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
CAR	Cellule Animation du Reseau
CLLD	Community Led Local Development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
ENRAW	Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being
LAG	Local Action Group
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale
NRN	National Rural Network
NSU	National Support Unit
PMC	Programme Monitoring Committee
PWDR	Programme Wallon de Developpement Rural
RCDF	Rural Community Development Fund
RDP	Rural Development Programme
RWDR	Réseau Wallon de Developpement Rural
SU	Support Unit
TG	Thematic Group
WRN	Wales Rural Network
WRNSU	Wales Rural Network Support Unit

Executive Summary

Introduction

i.   This report presents the findings of the external evaluation of the Wales Rural Network Support Unit (WRNSU).

ii.   The WRNSU is the Support Unit and secretariat administrating the Welsh National Rural Network (NRN) which was established to support the delivery of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) in Wales. Each EU country is mandated by Section 1 of Article 54 of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) Regulation to set up and operate a National Rural Network (NRN) with the following aims: to increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development, to improve the quality of rural development programmes, to inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries or rural development policy and funding opportunities, and foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.

iii. NRNs act as a central point through which stakeholders across different sectors and policy areas within rural development can interact and share knowledge and learning. Having previously supported the delivery of the LEADER Programme in previous funding periods, in the 2014-2020 funding period NRNs have supported the delivery of the RDP as a whole, aiming to increase the involvement of stakeholders in rural development. National Rural Networks therefore serve as a conduit between policy makers, practitioners and the wider rural community, facilitating the flow of information between stakeholders within rural development.

iv.   NRNs also interact with the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), which is itself a hub for the exchange of information on how rural development policy, programmes and projects are working in practice. Through the ENRD, NRNs share best practice and facilitate cooperation and interaction between rural development stakeholders across the EU.

v.   The WRNSU has received £2,366,885 in public funds in the 2014-2020 programme period, of which £1,017,761 is provided by the EAFRD and £1,349,124 has been co-financed by the Welsh Government.

vi.   The WRNSU evaluation involved the following:

   a) A desk-based review of all relevant policy, documentation and relevant data;
   b) Production of a logic model and wider Theory of Change for the WRNSU, including the delivery of an online logic model workshop with the WRNSU delivery team;
   c) In-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders across rural development in Wales and beyond, including key policy stakeholders in rural development, beneficiaries of RDP funding, WRN Steering Group members, and administrators of LEADER Local Action Groups;
   d) Interviews with administrators of the England, Scotland and Northern Ireland NRNs;
   e) Collection of qualitative and quantitative data through an online survey of the rural development community;
   f) Workshops with the WRN Steering Group and with LEADER Programme administrators;
   g) The production of three case studies of best practice NRNs, featuring Wallonia, Finland and Ireland;
   h) An assessment of future post-RDP funding scenarios in which the WRNSU or an equivalent network could operate,
   i) A detailed assessment of future options for the WRNSU or an equivalent network post-RDP;
   j) The production of a series of recommendation for the WRNSU going forward.

Key Findings

vii.   There is a clear need for a rural network function in rural development. Most stakeholders agreed with this assertion, noting the benefits that a network function brings to encouraging interaction between stakeholders, disseminating information to the rural development community, and supporting the implementation of LEADER.

viii.   The WRNSU has faced challenges to its operations due to resource constraints. Of the six current WRNSU team members, only two are full-time employed, with the four other staff members working part-time. In addition, in the last twelve months, the WRNSU has faced further issues with staffing. Some team-members have been periodically reassigned to carry out work for purposes beyond their original remit or work not relating to the WRNSU. This has led to the WRNSU team being spread more thinly across WRNSU tasks.

ix.   The WRN Support Unit staff were seen as competent, knowledgeable and had good experience within rural development, including extensive contacts and relationships with stakeholders representing traditional rural sectors. European stakeholders noted that the Support Unit was an effective NRN support unit, particularly at representing and championing Welsh rural development at international events.

x.   There was a lack of awareness of the remit and activities of the WRNSU among rural development stakeholders outside of the LEADER Programme. This was attributed to the WRNSU having to serve, in this programme, areas of the RDP not previously included in its remit, and an insufficiently formalised requirement for stakeholders, including WG policy and scheme leads, to engage with the Support Unit. It should be noted that other NRNs spoken to had faced similar challenges.

xi.   While members of the WRN Steering Group recognised its potential value to the delivery of the WRN, the steering group was perceived by stakeholders spoken to as 'rubber-stamping exercise', lacking in the

authority to 'steer' the WRNSU in its operations. There was criticism that the Steering Group was established too late to influence the delivery of the WRN, and that it was also made up of the 'usual suspects'. Steering Group meetings also became less frequent in recent years due to issues with resourcing, with some members leaving the Steering Group. There is still, however, a strong appetite among Steering Group members to steer and participate in the rural network and the RDP more generally. Additionally, logistical barriers faced in convening the Steering Group can be overcome through the use of videoconferencing, with the most recently held virtual Steering Group very well attended.

xii. There was concern among stakeholders that the WRN was not being delivered to its full remit, with a lack of proactive engagement noted as a common theme. Stakeholders acknowledged that this appeared to be due to issues with significant changes in staffing, especially across the Welsh Government, which had been an impediment to the delivery of the WRN. Stakeholders believed that activities carried out by the Support Unit were hamstrung by constant staff changes. Some interviewees expressed that a lack of suitable resourcing for the WRNSU has impacted the capacity of the WRNSU to fulfil its potential.

xiii. The communications function of the WRNSU was viewed positively by stakeholders and is the clearest and best example of it fulfilling its remit. The website in particular was highly spoken of, with many stakeholders recognising the work that had gone into establishing the website to be independent of Welsh Government and have the ability to publish content more freely.

xiv. While the WRNSU has facilitated networking events during the current programme period, there was a perception among stakeholders of a drop-off in the number of events held between 2017 and early 2020. However, events were held in Wales throughout this period, with other events facilitated by the WRNSU taking place beyond Wales. Stakeholder perceptions on this issue point to a

difference between stakeholder expectations and the number and types of events held. Despite the closure of the RCDF and the move to ENRAW, the majority of stakeholders (including RDP beneficiaries and LAGs) stated that they would have liked to see more thematic and cooperation events within Wales.

xv.   There was however recognition from stakeholders of the positive developments made in 2020 in the form of virtual events organised and hosted by the WRNSU, capitalising on the shift to online meetings in order to host networking events and workshops. The WRNSU has run a series of thematic events and workshops online since September 2020. The relative ease with which stakeholders were brought together to explore thematic issues in this way bodes well for a more fruitful event schedule in the future.

xvi.   Stakeholders stated that face-to-face events between three to five years ago were beneficial to stakeholders, such as supply chain meetings for farmers, wool and textiles discussion groups, and roadshows. These events gave beneficiaries of RDP funding the opportunity to share experiences and best practice. Data has yet to be collected as the benefit of recently held virtual events, such as the October 2020 online wool and textiles event.

xvii.   LAGs were on the whole critical of a lack of proactive facilitation of networking and cooperation on a Wales-wide level. LAGs predominately networked regionally within Wales, with groups communicating within the south-east, the south-west and the north. Interviewees stated these interactions were generally borne from existing relationships, with little facilitation from the WRNSU. LAGs spoke of the potential for the WRNSU to have further aided co-operation opportunities and developed existing relationships. Despite suggestions being made to the WRNSU for this to take place, this has apparently as yet not occurred. An issue identified was a lack of understanding as to who had responsibility for leading on cooperation and networking, with LAGs and the WRNSU each looking to the other to facilitate these engagements.

xviii.   The WRNSU was considered to be an enthusiastic contributor to the ENRD at co-operative events, sharing ideas, initiatives and examples from Wales. They were also considered useful as an exemplar to other countries of what a small country can contribute to the ENRD.

Recommendations for the remainder of the RDP period

xix.   *Re-scope the purpose of the steering group*: re-engage with the steering group to use their expertise and experience in order to assess how the WRN can best support the transition from the RDP to new funding opportunities. Explore the possibility of using thematic sub-groups in order to address pressing needs for LEADER and the other rural development stakeholders.

xx.   *Better communicate the role of the WRNSU to stakeholders*: re-engage with RDP scheme leads and broader stakeholders to remind stakeholder of the service that the WRNSU can provide. This exercise can also scope out the short-term needs of various RDP schemes to identify ways that the WRNSU can support the transition to post-RDP funding scenarios.

xxi.   *Establish clearer procedures for developing event ideas from LAGs and establish clarity as to where responsibilities lie*: the issues identified in turning ideas for events from LAGs into events points to a problematic process for turning event ideas into a reality. The bottleneck or barriers need to be addressed. A clear expectation of who has responsibility to push the development of the event forward is needed, as is an improved process for turning an event idea into a project.

xxii.   *Mandate for scheme leads to get in touch*: seek a more formalised relationship with scheme leads across the RDP to open up regular communication. Establish the precedent of formalised introductions and an open channel with key stakeholders, especially policy and scheme leads.

xxiii.   *Build on recent thematic events held online*: Pursue a more thematic delivery in organising events and capitalise on the shift to online working to bring together stakeholders.

xxiv.   *The WRNSU should consider encouraging LAGs across Wales to follow the good practice set by the south-west LAG group in terms*: The south-west Wales LAG meetings are a good practice model that should be considered by LEADER administrators across Wales. The involvement of LAG chairs provides an avenue to better engage LAGs in networking and provides administrators and LAG members with a forum to share ideas and best practice, and address issues.

xxv.   *Explore possibility of workshops for LAGs on preparations for post-RDP scenarios*: identify, perhaps in consultation with LEADER Programme administrators and LAGs, themes and topics that can be covered in workshops which would re-energise LAGs and begin the process of planning for a future beyond RDP funding. Many LEADER stakeholders noted waning interest from LAG members due to the end of the RDP. Activity is needed to maintain momentum into future funding scenarios. The Scotland Rural network has run workshops on alternative funding for LAGs, it is recommended that this approach is emulated.

Summary of Part II

xxvi.   Part II of this report looks to the future and possible options for a rural network post-RDP.

xxvii.   The future scenarios analysis presents three potential scenarios for rural development in Wales, that the rural network may operate within. These are based on different levels of intensity with regard to the policy, legal and funding framework for rural development.

xxviii.   The scenarios are as follows:

Table 0.1 – Summary of Scenarios

	Policy framework	Legal framework	Funding framework	Other elements
Scenario 1	• Clear Welsh & UK rural policies • WG to keep WRN policy • Synergy with other Welsh place-based policies • Connection with EU policies	• Dedicated legal instruments for rural development (UK & Wales) • Connection with international programmes	• Dedicated Welsh pot of funding for RD • Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) with RD support	• Welsh Rural Network • UK Rural Network • Possibility to join EU projects • Continuation of LAG and LEADER types of approach
Scenario 2	• Weak UK policy on RD • Some WG policy objectives • No connection with EU rural policy or CAP	• Welsh legal instruments for agriculture and only partially for RD. • Some legal instruments for local development (rural & urban)	• Shared pot of funding for economic development covering rural and urban areas (Welsh Framework) • Low level of match funding from private and community sectors	• WRN within existing future networks (NRW?) • Informal UK network • Weak local community approach • Informal contacts with EU and international partners
Scenario 3	• No focus on rural development or economic development policies. • Non-alignment (clash) of agricultural policies across the UK.	• No specific instruments for RD.	• No funding earmarked for rural areas. • No funding from Welsh or UK governments.	• No rural network at all • Sectors working separately • Weak or absent community development

xxix.   The report then sets out potential roles for the WRN in relation to the three scenarios outlined:

Table 0.2 - Potential roles for a WRNSU in the Post Brexit scenarios

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
Networking	• Maintain existing and develop new national and international contacts. • Active participation in UK RDP network • Maintain existing LAGs and create a Welsh network.	• Maintain informal contacts with stakeholders across the UK • Foster contacts outside the UK • Support local development	• Nurture existing networking contacts (regional, national, and where possible international level).

		approaches where possible.	
Governance / advocacy	• Active support to a Welsh rural network • Represent network on stakeholder groups in Wales and UK.	• Represent rural interests in relevant policy fora at Welsh and UK level • Liaise with regional partnership and provide support.	• Continue to liaise with relevant groups at local and regional level to facilitate intervening changes.
Cooperation	• Proactive role in developing cooperation projects. • Arrange study visits and events	• Contribute to cooperation activities of Welsh Government and Local Authorities.	• Act as antenna to possible cooperation activities in the UK and abroad.
Information	• Build on current information and dissemination activities • Develop innovative communication services for rural stakeholders to enable change	• Provide information and support to stakeholders on post Brexit context. • Continue to promote best practices and share examples.	• Contribute as information tools of WG departments and other organisations in Wales to promote rural development.
Funding	• Support access to funding schemes through dedicated services • Promote access to national and international funding programmes relevant to rural groups and beneficiaries.	• Support access to funding programmes (training, seminars) • Contribute to the preparation and design of WG funding programmes (rural proofing).	• Provide information services on funding opportunities relevant to rural

xxx.   Section 8 presents a series of post RDP scenarios and the implications on the WRN and WRNSU.

Key Recommendations (Part II)

xxxi.   Part II of the report, through setting out potential options for the WRN post-RDP based on the feedback from the stakeholders engaged with and pest practice examples from the three case studies, is able to set out a series of recommendations relating to the re-structuring, remit, and role of the WRNSU under a future funding programme.

xxxii.   *Recommendation 1: continuity in communications*: Where possible, there should be continuity in the communications service delivered by the WRNSU during the transition period post-RDP to ensure that progress to date is not lost and can be built on. The WRNSU should remain the avenue through which information is communicated to the rural development sector. This need is amplified during a transition period.

xxxiii.   *Recommendation 2: support events during transition:* The WRNSU should explore events and workshops that can be held in the transition period to encourage LAG members to continue engaging and to provide support, guidance, and networking opportunities.

xxxiv.   *Recommendation 3: redefine remit of WRN + SU:* Once there is some clarity to the structure of a post-RDP landscape, and where there is greatest need and opportunity, the remit of a WRN and Support Unit should be determined, with its scope and responsibilities clearly defined. This must then be clearly communicated to all key stakeholders and potential beneficiaries, with clarity on formalised mechanisms of engagement and support provision provided to all potential actors in the network.

xxxv.   *Recommendation 4: agree on external / internal provision of WRNSU delivery:* Following the determination of a post-RDP Rural Network and Support Unit remit, it should then be decided whether this remit will best be served by an internal or externally sourced unit, or a mixed approach.

xxxvi.   *Recommendation 5: a representative steering group and robust mandate:* The existence of a Steering Group with a robust mandate and strengthened role in the governance of the WRNSU will be

important for a post-RDP Rural Network and Support Unit. Personnel in the Steering Group should represent and reflect any redrawing of remit and scope and should be in place at the commencement of any decision making about the WRNSU.

xxxvii.   *Recommendation 6: mapping of rural development sector:* Delivery of WRNSU activity in any post-RDP scenario will benefit from a mapping exercise of the rural "ecosystem" in Wales, with the responsibilities, areas of interest, and sectoral coverage identified of different actors.

xxxviii.   *Recommendation 7: agree models of stakeholder engagement:* Avenues for effective stakeholder engagement and engagement activity should be formalised, or at least informally agreed, especially between the Support Unit and policy leads. Several models of engagement should be explored, including the form of a membership structure, to encourage strengthened and more in-depth engagement and stakeholder buy-in and demands for quality delivery.

xxxix.   *Recommendation 8: regular surveying of the sector:* In addition to establishing more formalised and routine stakeholder engagement, a regular surveying effort of the wider rural development sector would ensure that the activities of the WRNSU and the function of the network continues to meet the needs and demands of stakeholders and beneficiaries.

xl.   *Recommendation 9: maintain some structural alignment with other EU NRNs:* In all post-RDP future scenarios, some degree of transnational cooperation will be possible at both national and regional levels. The ease with which this is enabled, particularly within the EU, is increased if there remains some similarities and alignment in the

structure and organisation of the Wales Rural Network with its European counterparts.

xli. *Recommendation 10: enable the WRNSU to carry out a more strategic role:* There is great potential for the WRNSU to carry out a more strategic role in coordinating and facilitating networking and cooperation across the rural development, something which was also widely called for. As a result, it is advisable therefore that this role be written into any newly defined remit for the Unit. Effective delivery of this role would also rely upon adequate resourcing.

xlii. *Recommendation 11: Introduce thematic working at the core of the delivery of the WRN:* A focus on thematic working can bring together stakeholders in rural development to cooperate and share best practice around subjects deemed of greatest importance.

xliii. *Recommendation 12: Establish an Innovation Thematic Group:* Establishment of an Innovation Thematic Group, along the lines of the group in the Wallonia RWDR, should be a priority. This can involve a mapping of innovation within the rural development sector, and the development of an innovation exchange system.

xliv. *Recommendation 13: Establish relationships with Welsh Research Institutions:* Rural development policy must be informed by a comprehensive evidence base. The WRNSU is well placed to contribute directly, by collecting valuable data, views, and information from its stakeholders, to feed in directly to policy making bodies.

xlv. *Recommendation 14: Embrace and capitalise on remote events:* The WRNSU has already effectively moved to deliver a series of effective online events. It should now fully embrace advances in

videoconferencing and people's improved capacity post-Covid-19 to operate remotely, in order to create full programme of remote events and better facilitate networking between stakeholders, using remote technology.

xlvi. *Recommendation 15: Seek out opportunities to cooperate and collaborate with partners beyond Wales:* There is no one as well placed as the WRNSU to maintain existing relationships with other UK and EU NRNs. Therefore, every effort should be made to continue coordinating and communicating through all channels available, both informal and formal, with UK and EU counterparts, as well as maintain a presence where possible in Brussels.

xlvii. *Recommendation 16: assess training needs for stakeholders:* A routine assessment of training needs for stakeholders, particularly to build capacity in LAGs, should be incorporated into the Support Units periodic activity plan. This might be built into the wider survey of the sector (recommendation 8), to help inform a schedule of training events that align with greatest needs.

xlviii. *Recommendation 17: facilitate networking between LAGs:* The WRNSU should proactively ensure that there is more comprehensive networking between LAGS a Wales-wide basis, rather than leave this largely to the LAGs itself.

Part I – The Evaluation of the Wales Rural Network Support Unit

1. Introduction

1.1 This report presents the findings of the external evaluation of the Wales Rural Network Support Unit (WRNSU).

Wales National Rural Network

1.2 National Rural Networks (NRNs) are supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and aim to facilitate the delivery of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) (2014-2020). Each EU country's NRN is constituted by Section 1 of Article 54 of the EAFRD Regulation.

1.3 NRNs work under the principle that successful rural development stems from community-led local development (CLLD). The networks therefore act as a central point through which communities and wider stakeholders across different policy areas and levels can interact, share knowledge and learning to generate common understanding and implement bottom-up rural development.

1.4 National Rural Networks can also serve as a conduit between policy makers, practitioners and the wider rural community, facilitating the flow of information between those on the ground and those that legislate and administer rural development policy.

1.5 NRNs also interact with the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), which is itself a hub for the exchange of information on how rural development policy, programmes and projects are working in practice. Through the ENRD, NRNs share best practice and facilitate cooperation and interaction between rural development stakeholders across the EU.

1.6 The Wales Rural Network (WRN) is the NRN for Wales. The WRN has received £2,366,885 in public funds in the 2014-2020 programme

period, of which £1,017,761 is provided by the EAFRD and £1,349,124 has been co-financed by the Welsh Government.

The Wales Rural Network Support Unit

1.7   Each National Rural Network is overseen by a Network Support Unit. According to the National Rural Network Guidebook, its role is to provide the structure needed for running and animating the NRN[1]. This involves supporting the implementation and administration of Rural Development in that country. In Wales, it is the Wales Rural Network Support Unit (WRNSU) which fulfils that role. The WRNSU must support the delivery of the four objectives set out in the EU Regulation 1305/2013:

- To increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development
- To improve the quality of the implementation of rural development programmes
- To inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities
- To foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.

1.8   The manner by which the WRNSU attempts to meet each of these objectives is laid out in its annual workplan. Delivery of the workplan and the four objectives is supported by the six staff within the unit comprising the Head of the WRN, three WRN Managers, a Finance Manager and a Website/Content Manager.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

1.9   Miller Research were commissioned in September 2020 to carry out the external evaluation of the WRNSU.

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[1] http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf

1.10   Miller Research's evaluation involved a combination of desk based research and qualitative fieldwork, to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the activity of the WRNSU against its remit (as dictated by EU regulation and Welsh Government objectives), as well as the identified need and rationale for a WRN and accompanying Support Unit. This process was organised around the construction of a detailed operational logic model (see Annex A).

1.11   In addition to evaluating the WRNSU's current activity, and in recognition of the shifting context in which it operates, leaving European policy, legal and funding frameworks, the second half of the report considers the future for the WRNSU (or an equivalent network and support unit). We consider future scenarios and delivery options available, including opportunities, restrictions and implications within each, followed by a series of recommendations for actions to be taken now, during transition and in the future. These are based on the conclusion that there is clear value in a network of this nature and the need for an administrative body to manage and oversee the network.

1.12   Our evaluation was organised into the following tasks:

Engagement

1.13   **Stakeholder interviews.** The evaluation team conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with key WRNSU stakeholders. Interviews with 41 stakeholders were carried out. Interviewees included Support Unit and steering group members, scheme policy leads, LAGs/administrative bodies, beneficiaries of RDP funding, and other UK NRN's. The qualitative data generated through these interviews provided an invaluable source of evidence for this report.

1.14   **LAG workshop.** Following the interviews, the evaluation team conducted a virtual workshop with a sample of five LAG representatives from different regions in Wales. Discussion focused on discussing the support received and the support desired from the WRNSU alongside developing future recommendations. The

qualitative data generated through the workshop helped inform the findings set out in this report.

1.15   **Steering group workshop.** A virtual workshop with members of the WRNSU steering group was facilitated by the evaluation team. The workshop focused on understanding the current and potential role of the steering group, the activities undertaken by the WRNSU, and the recommendations for the WRNSU in the future. The qualitative data generated through the workshop helped inform the findings set out in this report.

1.16   **Options workshop.** Following completion of the interviews and above workshops, the evaluation team conducted an options review workshop with key stakeholders. The workshop focused on consolidating and reviewing recommendations and suggesting future options for the WRNSU in relation to rural development in Wales.

1.17   **Online survey of beneficiaries.** To further understand the support received and support desired by beneficiaries of RDP funding, the evaluation team produced a short online survey. The survey was publicised via the WRNSU newsletter, social media and through key stakeholder channels. It received a total of 92 responses (43 complete, 49 partial). The data gathered through this survey helped inform the findings set out in this report.

Desk-based research and analysis

1.18   **Contextual review.** The evaluation team reviewed policies, strategies, and other relevant documentation in order to understand the WRNSU, its surrounding context and to develop a logic model and evaluation framework.

1.19   **Communication review and engagement analysis.** A communication review and engagement analysis were carried out by the evaluation team. WRNSU publications, social media channels and web analytics were reviewed in order to understand the nature and effectiveness of communications against objectives and target

audiences. The findings of this analysis are included in section 2 of this report.

1.20 **COVID-19 research review.** The evaluation team carried out a review of relevant documentation and collected fieldwork data to understand the impacts and implications of COVID-19 on the rural economy and WRNSU activity. The findings of this review are presented in section 5 of this report.

1.21 **Case studies of National Rural Networks.** The evaluation team produced three case studies of Wallonia (Belgium), Finland and Ireland based on a review of documentation and interviews. These case studies aimed to highlight alternative models of activity offered by differing NRN's to support RDP delivery and provide a valuable point of reference in exploring post-Brexit options in Wales. These case studies are presented in section 9 of this report.

Report Structure

1.22 The evaluation output from the evaluation of the WRNSU is made up of two reports. Part I is a review and assessment of performance and effectiveness to date. Part II is a review of the likely future scenarios for rural development in Wales, and an assessment of the options for a rural network function post-RDP. It also includes case studies of best practice NRNs to inform the development of the network in the future, and a series of recommendation for a future post-RDP network function.

1.23 The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Sections 2 provides a review of the delivery of the Wales Rural Network by the Support Unit and assesses the effectiveness of this delivery.
- Section 3 is a communication and engagement analysis of the WRNSU's channels of communication.

- Section 5 is a Covid-19 research review, summarising important impacts of the pandemic on RDP and how the rural community has responded.
- Section 6 assesses the delivery of the WRN against the remit with conclusions as to the performance of the WRNSU. A set of recommendations for suggested improvements in delivery for the remainder of the RDP period are set out.

The Part II report is structured as follows:
- Section 8 presents a series of post RDP scenarios and the implications on the WRN and WRNSU.
- Section 9 presents case studies of NRNs in three other countries, to draw direct comparison with the WRNSU and to explore ideas for future options and recommendations.
- Section 10 presents a review of future options for delivery informed by the findings from the evaluation.
- Section 11 provides a set of actionable recommendations for developing a post-RDP rural network.

2.   Wales Rural Network Delivery

2.1   In this section we will consider the current needs and objectives of the WRNSU and the effectiveness and efficiency with which it delivers its core activities.

Overview of Delivery

2.2   This chapter will provide an overview of the activities and services provided by the Wales Rural Network, along with a discussion as the effectiveness of each and their contributions made towards meeting the goals of the Wales Rural Network.

2.3   Key questions:

- What are the need and objectives driving the WRNSU?
- How effectively has the WRNSU been governed and managed?
- How effectively have these tasks/activities been delivered?
- How have these activities contributed to the goals of the WRN?
- To what extent have these actions contributed to the delivery of the RDP?

Needs and objectives

2.4   Before assessing delivery of the WRN by the Support Unit, this section will consider and assess the needs that the WRNSU address and its objectives.

Needs

2.5   A number of needs were identified for the WRNSU through the documentation review and engagement work with stakeholders. These are clear and important services that can be provided, or requirements that can be met through the activity of the WRNSU.

Table 2.1: Needs for the WRNSU

NEEDS
To promote the benefits of EU funds
To facilitate and enhance the delivery of the RDP
To support community led-rural development
To support the wider WRN
To champion and promote rural development in Wales nationally and internationally
To inform the Welsh Government on the delivery and impact of the RDP

WRNSU Evaluation Logic Model

2.6 There was a general consensus that the needs listed above in Table 2.1 were appropriate and accurate and stakeholders generally agreed that there was a clear need and a role for a Rural Network in Wales. In addition, and by extension, this included the need for a specially designated Support Unit to manage and oversee this network.

2.7 The functioning of an effective network was in fact seen as integral to meeting the needs highlighted above and was rarely called in to question. This sentiment was widely expressed in fieldwork and was summarised by one stakeholder, who noted the great value in bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in rural development outside the usual suspects, and in providing a communication service to individuals and organisations across the broad rural development constituency. This was also described as being key to the success of LEADER, as an effective network is a vehicle to improve LEADER delivery and foster cooperation and innovation.

2.8 The collection, curation, and dissemination of information relevant to rural development was also widely emphasised by stakeholders and beneficiaries as being important and a key enabler to meeting the needs highlighted above. The need for information on grants and funding opportunities was specifically highlighted by two thirds of respondents in our online survey.

2.9 An organised network and support unit was also seen as having a critical role in ensuring continuity, consistency and cohesion in efforts and approaches taken across rural development. It was argued that the lessons learnt from projects and programmes are at risk of being lost when they come to end and staff move on, and that a functioning

network can ensure lessons are appropriately learned, recorded, shared and applied. This is key to continued progress in the RDP and in rural development more generally, and to effectively meet the main aim of the WRNSU in supporting the implementation and delivery of RDP in Wales.

2.10 There was very broad consensus amongst stakeholders for the need to have a strong representation of rural development concerns and issues within Welsh Government, as well as a champion of rural Wales within the UK and further afield, to ensure that opportunities are not missed, that emerging policy is 'rural proofed', and the needs and concerns of rural communities are properly considered. An effectively administered network was viewed as integral to successfully achieving this, to organise a diversity of rural voices across the network and effectively communicate and advocate on their behalf.

2.11 Although there was general consensus for the need of a WRN and Support Unit, this was not universal. Some confusion was expressed, particularly to the exact nature of the remit of the WRN and the Support Unit. This was more the case with stakeholders outside of LEADER. In particular, beneficiaries of RDP funding (including from forestry and timber, and farming and agriculture) stated the opaqueness of the WRNSU's role and were unclear of the benefits they provided. This is largely an issue with engagement communication, rather than evidence of an informed and specific doubts of the value of the WRNSU. It highlights the need for better communication of the role and the potential benefits of the WRNSU to certain stakeholder groups and sectors of the rural community.

Objectives

2.12 The objectives of the WRNSU were identified through the documentation review. They incorporate the objectives set out in Article 54 of the EAFRD Regulation 1305/2013 as well as additional

objectives outlined in the WRN Workplan and the UKs Rural
Development Programme (Wales).

Table 2.2: Objectives of the WRNSU

OBJECTIVES
To inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities
To increase the engagement of stakeholders with an interest in the delivery of the RDP
To communicate and promote activities of RDP scheme management activities and delivery bodies
To increase the networking and transnational co-operation of RDP stakeholders across Wales, UK, and Europe
To improve the quality of the RDP in Wales
To foster innovation in agriculture, food production and forestry in rural areas

WRNSU Evaluation Logic Model

2.13   There was broad consensus as to the appropriateness of the objectives outlined above for the WRNSU. The extent to which these objectives are effectively being met is explored in the Overview of Delivery and Assessment in Delivery below. However, it is important to note that there was some lack of awareness and understanding amongst a number of interviewees as to what the Unit's stated objectives and remit are. This is supported by results from the online survey of beneficiaries conducted, where over a third of respondents reported having little to no awareness of the WRN at all, let alone the role or remit of the Support Unit.

2.14   This lack of awareness was attributed to the WRNSU often playing a peripheral role to the activities of stakeholders and the lack of a formalised requirement for stakeholders to engage with the Support Unit. The result is not only a lack of awareness and understanding amongst stakeholders as to the remit and objectives of the Support Unit, but an underutilisation of the resource and services that the Support Unit can provide. Some of the lack of engagement between the WRNSU and certain stakeholders can be explained by the existence already of key players in various spaces, such as the role played by Farming Connect in the agriculture sector. Some stakeholders spoken to noted that stakeholders, especially RDP

scheme and policy leads bore some of the responsibility for not engaging with the WRNSU, and to better utilise its resources. However, establishing a more effective, routine and formalised practice of stakeholder engagement with Scheme Leads would help address this issue and ensure greater awareness of the WRNSU within different rural sectors and foster a better understanding of the services that the WRNSU can provide.

2.15   As with other criticisms of the role of the WRNSU that we raise in the report, interviewees were clear to highlight that these are higher level issues, to do with governmental structure and organisation, and resource and support availability, rather than related to the personnel involved in the delivery of WRNSU activity. This was a common and strongly emphasised clarification.

2.16   It should be stated however, that even amongst those more familiar with the Network and Support Unit, several interviewees highlighted a lack of clarity as to its objectives and remit.

2.17   There was greatest awareness and recognition of the WRNSU's communication and signposting role, as well as its stakeholder engagement and work championing Rural Wales and raising the profile of Welsh RDP outputs, including on an international stage. This is explored further below.

2.18   It was also commonly felt that there was an imbalance in the emphasis placed on the various objectives and scope of its activities. A concern from the steering group was that the WRNSU had not served all parts of the RDP equally and greater efforts could be made to target people beyond farmers and foresters. However, there remained concern from agriculture and forestry stakeholders that the WRNSU was disconnected from these groups, with farmers in particular interfacing with Farming Connect. These stakeholders questioned the relevance of the WRN for farmers. Whilst it was believed that the WRNSU could raise the profile of RDP funding and

work, interviewees including LAGs were unsure as to the traction it received.

2.19 A number of improvements on the role and remit of the WRNSU were also reported. Some LEADER stakeholders suggested that the role of the WRNSU had improved over the last eighteen months due to a change in the roles within the WRNSU team. The engagement since then was described as more hands-on, with one stakeholder in particular stating that they now had an improved understanding of their point of contact. Another stakeholder in LEADER noted that the WRNSU had been proactive over the last eighteen months in engaging with them.

Governance

Steering Group

2.20 The steering group currently consists of 10 members. They represent a cross-section of the RDP and their remit involves advising and assisting with the development of the WRNSU work plan.

2.21 Steering group Selection originally occurred via an application process, which members believed led to an experienced and able group with members representing appropriate sectors and different perspectives. It was also stated there was a good gender-balance within the group, a departure from the usual male-dominated steering groups. However, members were disappointed regarding the fact the group consisted of the 'usual suspects', and had a lack of representation from the private sector, the farming unions and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). It was also believed that there lacked a direct line between the group and policy makers, prompting suggestions that steering group members should either have some representation in decision making or advisory boards, or the position of steering group chair should be a representative from the Welsh Government, rather than a member of the wider steering group. It was initially decided that having a chair selected from within

the Steering Group would encourage buy-in, but this should be re-visited.

2.22 There was also concern that, over time, members of the group were lost without replacement. There was a suggestion from several interviewees that this was often down to members of the group feeling disenfranchised. One stakeholder suggested that this could be due to a restriction on the access the group had to relevant information. This was attributed to bureaucratic restrictions symptomatic of the WRNSU operating within the Welsh Government, rather than as an independent entity, which would have greater freedom on its administrative organisation.

2.23 The group has traditionally met 2-4 times annually. However, only one meeting was held in 2020 (in the Autumn) with the previous meeting over a year ago. Whilst members believed that COVID-19, Brexit and internal budget issues may have led to the absence of meetings, they also stated that they believed meetings had reached a natural stopping point due a break in the system, disorganisation and the belief that travel time to the meetings was not worth it in the end.

2.24 Members of the group recognised the potential value of the group, to bring together key stakeholders and share rural development information and stated that original group discussions held were beneficial. However, there was belief that the steering group was established too late as a 'tick-box exercise', meaning that the reality was a quasi-steering group which lacked power, were unable to provide direction despite expertise, and had no influence over decisions (which were made by the WRNSU prior to consultation and contrary to advice). Members also struggled to ensure accountability of the Support Unit due to a lack of communication with the WRNSU, including an absence of feedback regarding actions taken and lack of minutes from meetings.

2.25 An issue was raised regarding the expectations of the members of the Steering Group. While the purpose of the group was to steer the

activities and development of the WRN, there was an expectation expressed by Steering Group members that the Steering Group should also have influence over broader rural development policy. The purpose and remit of the Steering Group therefore needs to be clarified. Due to the members on the Steering Group and the sectors that they represent, the role it can play in relation to rural development more generally can be recognised. It appears that for LEADER representatives on the Steering Group, the loss of the CLLD group, usually chaired by the deputy director for CLLD, has meant an important outlet for discussing and shaping policy has been lost. This group was described as a good link between LAGs, policy and the WRNSU. The WRNSU Steering Group has therefore become an important outlet in the absence of the CLLD group. It is recommended that the WRNSU Steering Group is either recognised as a body that can fill the void left by the CLLD group, with its remit adjusted accordingly, or the remit of the WRNSU Steering Group should be limited, with a clarification as to its focus.

The Support Unit

2.26   The Support Unit aims to support the delivery of the four objectives set out in the EAFRD Regulation 1305/2013. The Unit is comprised of:

- Head of the WRN
- Three WRN Managers
- Finance Manager
- Website/Content Manager

2.27   Of the WRNSU team members, only two are full-time employed, with the four other staff members working part-time.

2.28   LAGs stated that the WRN managers provided a useful and responsive service from the middle of 2019, sending information via emails to any queries. Managers also attended regional LAG meetings on an ad-hoc basis.

2.29   Other stakeholders that had worked with the WRNSU also emphasised that the staff were competent, knowledgeable and had good experience within rural development, including extensive contacts and relationships with stakeholders representing traditional rural sectors. The perspective from European stakeholders in particular was that the Support Unit was an effective unit, particularly at representing and championing Welsh rural development at international events. They were also perceived to have closer, more productive relationships with rural stakeholders than other countries, and were used as an exemplar of the contribution possible from smaller European countries at international events.

2.30   It should be noted however, that there was concern among a number of interviewees regarding the consistency of staffing, both within the Support Unit and across the Welsh Government, with a high turnover of Welsh Government staff noted by many stakeholders as an issue, and an impediment to the delivery of the WRN. Stakeholders believed that activities carried out by the Support Unit were hamstrung by constant staff changes, preventing continuity and understanding of the WRNSU's role and remit. Some interviewees attributed financial resources as partially attributable to issues regarding the ability of staff and the WRNSU to carry out its role.

2.31   In the last twelve months, the WRNSU has faced issues with staffing. Some team-members have been periodically reassigned to carry out work for purposes beyond their original remit or work not relating to the WRNSU. This work includes the monitoring of LEADER, supporting the ESNR, and contributing to policy work for rural policy. This has led to the WRNSU team being spread more thinly across WRNSU tasks. Members of the Steering Group expressed frustration that resources allocated for the WRNSU had been appropriated for other tasks. The numbers employed directly under the WRNSU have gone from 7 FTE at the start of the programme to significantly below that level at present, with all but two staff members working part time.

2.32   However, there was a perception among some stakeholders that resource was available, but that it was not being capitalised on by stakeholders, particular by policy and scheme leads that could benefit from the services available from the WRNSU to organise events and disseminate information.

2.33   Some stakeholders believed instead that the issue was less about how the organisation was structured within Welsh Government, but instead about whether it sits within the government structure at all. A NRN may be established either within the national/regional authority, outsourced to an external entity, or a "mixed Support Unit" is also possible.[2]

2.34   Specific concerns about the nestling of the Support Unit in the Welsh Government related to its ability to operate independently, something that was believed to be hamstringing the WRNSU's effective operation in key areas. This includes adopting a more dynamic, innovative, and proactive approach and engaging better with stakeholders who might otherwise have been wary or less open due to the Support Units close affinity with the Welsh Government. The recent establishment of a separate website space under the control of Business Wales, away from the main government site, was seen as a positive step to establishing a degree of independence and a separate identity more representative of their wider stakeholders.

2.35   A number of stakeholders mentioned the Ireland National Rural Network as an example of an NRN that outsources its Support Unit to an external entity successfully. It is thought that this has helped it become more dynamic, innovative, and proactive as a result. This is something we have explored in the Ireland case study in Part II.

2.36   It was also noted however, often by the same individuals, that an externally operated Support Unit does not guarantee an improved operation. Examples were highlighted where procurement of an

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[2] http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf

external organisation had resulted in a poorer delivery of services. The quality of the procurement process is clearly critical.

Communications

2.37   A large part of what the WRNSU does involves communication across various channels with stakeholders, beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries of the RDP, as well as the wider rural community. As a result, particular emphasis was placed on evaluating this element of delivery, with a communication review and engagement analysis conducted. The results of this can be found in Section 4.

Networking, Events and Stakeholder Engagement

2.38   The Support Unit have emphasised the importance of their networking role, and specifically highlight their stakeholder engagement as a key priority and activity that enables successful networking. The facilitation of interactions between rural development stakeholders to exchange information and develop collaborations, is key to meeting all of the WRNSU's objectives to some degree, but it is especially important for the following objectives:

- To increase the engagement of stakeholders with an interest in the delivery of the RDP
- To increase transnational co-operation of RDP stakeholders across Wales, UK, and Europe
- To improve the quality of the RDP in Wales
- To foster innovation in agriculture, food production and forestry in rural areas

Networking and Co-operation within Wales

2.39   Within Wales, the WRNSU aimed to facilitate networking between LAGs and other rural development stakeholders. Examples of networking events from 2017 to 2020 include:

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- NRN meetings/LEADER Conferences (national and international)
- RDP funding fairs
- RDP theme specific events, for example:
    - National Forest Plan Workshop
    - Rural Economy – Supply Chains
    - Women in Entrepreneurship workshop
    - Wool / Textile Discussion Groups
- Presence at wider events, including:
    - Vale of Glamorgan Agricultural Show
    - Royal Welsh Show.

2.40   The events that have occurred were stated to be beneficial by the attendees spoken to. They enabled the transfer of information and the sharing of knowledge between groups in different localities and across projects. This is supported by responses from the online survey, where 71% of respondents listed 'making connections with others' as a main benefit of events, and 43% also indicated that 'meeting like-minded people' was also a main benefit, along with acquiring new knowledge. Interestingly, only 21% of respondents considered opportunities for cooperation projects as a main benefit of events. This suggests that the desire to make new connections and network is not primarily driven by the desire to cooperate on projects, but more to share ideas and experiences.

2.41   Whilst workshops and events were facilitated by the WRNSU in order to promote networking, the closure of Rural Community Development Fund (RCDF) and the introduction of ENRAW has seen less discussion across groups. Therefore, there has been a decline in the number of events facilitated from 2017 to 2020, though 2020 saw more events being held through the use of videoconferencing suites for online events and workshops. Despite this, the majority of stakeholders (including RDP beneficiaries and LAGs) felt that the number of events put on did not meet expectation, and that the WRNSU could have played a larger role in facilitating cooperation within Wales in this way.

2.42   Some stakeholders noted that the dissemination of information
        through the WRNSU's channels was only reaching the "usual
        suspects", and that they would be more likely to utilise the network if
        they were confident in reaching beyond these groups, perhaps even
        to other sectors.

2.43   A number of RDP beneficiaries also stated that they felt unsupported
        by the WRNSU in developing their own networks, with a lack of
        assistance in establishing contact with potential collaborators.

2.44   Some of these issues were attributed to a lack of backing from the
        Welsh Government in establishing a more effective, and routine
        practice of stakeholder engagement with policy leads and other
        stakeholders. Results from the online survey, showed general
        consensus around the need for improved stakeholder engagement
        between the WRNSU and government departments. There must
        clearly be appetite on both sides in order to improve this engagement
        and organise and formalise this relationship. Currently, a lack of
        awareness and linkage between some stakeholders and the WRNSU
        is resulting in underutilisation of the resource, service and personnel
        of the unit which would otherwise be benefiting them and others.

2.45   The WRNSU does engage with policy and scheme leads at periodic
        intervals, and have a template form that goes out to scheme and
        policy leads to request ideas for how the WRNSU can best support
        them. While it was noted by some stakeholders that scheme and
        policy leads should better communicate with the WRNSU and make
        better use of their resources, the fact that this resource is
        underutilised flags an issue. The stumbling block needs to be
        addressed. The processes through which stakeholders and the
        WRNSU communicate can be strengthened, with more formalised
        introductions, regular communication, and a requirement to engage
        more fully suggested.

2.46   The absence of the Managing Authority Group was noted as a cause
        for the lack of engagement between the certain stakeholders such as

scheme and policy leads and the WRNSU. The WRNSU used to sit on the Managing Authority Group, along with a deputy director, and as policy and scheme leads would interact with this group, there would be a clear avenue of communication between them and the WRNSU. A paper was published in 2019, written by the head of the WRNSU, stating that the removal of the Managing Authority Group has left a gap that has yet to be filled in terms of the monitoring of projects and the loss of channels of communication.

2.47   LAGs predominately networked regionally within Wales, with groups communicating within the south-east, the south-west and the north. Interviewees stated these interactions were generally borne from existing relationships, with little facilitation from the WRNSU. LAGs spoke of the potential for the WRNSU to have further aided co-operation opportunities and developed existing relationships. Despite suggestions being made to the WRNSU for this to take place, this has apparently as yet not occurred. Many LEADER stakeholders did however highlight the value of the project database and interactive map on the WRNSU website for networking, enabling accessible interrogation of details of projects conducted, as well as details of project leads to contact.

Networking and Co-operation transnationally

2.48   The WRNSU also aims to increase transnational co-operation of RDP stakeholders both across the UK and Europe. A mixture of views was collected on the efficacy with which this is being achieved. Stakeholders with experience of European networking events were complementary of the contribution made by the WRNSU at these events in promoting the Welsh Rural Development activities transnationally. The WRNSU was considered to be enthusiastic contributors to the ENRD at co-operative events, sharing ideas, initiatives and examples from Wales. They were also considered

useful as an exemplar to other countries of what a small country can contribute to the ENRD.

2.49   This reputation on an international stage, and work championing rural development activities, is clearly valuable (more so as we leave the RDP), however, there was less confidence amongst interviewees that these relationships prove conducive to improved transnational cooperation amongst LAGs and LEADER groups.

2.50   LAGs spoke highly of both the UKNRN meetings in Belfast (2017) and in Glasgow (2019). However, there was uncertainty whether these events were organised by the WRNSU or its Irish and Scottish counterparts. Representatives from the WRNSU Steering Group also were unsure as the origin or content of the events. Whilst the Scottish and Irish events were found to be beneficial, some LAGs stated they were too late in the programme period to have much of a positive impact.

2.51   Internationally, whilst there has been cooperation between LAGs in Wales and other countries, stakeholders stated these relationships were mostly forged independently of the WRNSU and that international networking events were often advertised with too short notice. The lack of transnational networking was attributed by one stakeholder as a consequence of lack of support or interest from the Welsh Government for such activity.

2.52   Some LEADER administrators spoken to stated that LAGs lack the capacity, due to time and resource constraints, to check potential collaborations via the ENRD website and consequently are reliant on the WRNSU to be a proactive facilitator. There appears to be an issue of expectation with the role of the WRNSU in facilitating international cooperation. Responsibility for sourcing international cooperation projects lies with LAGs and not the WRNSU, though the WRNSU is able to facilitate this cooperation through supporting the hosting of events. LAGs do have access to the ENRD database to source opportunities for international cooperation. The remit of the WRNSU

in this regard needs to be clarified to LAGs, however the role that the WRNSU can play in facilitating international cooperation needs to be looked at.

2.53   The value of transnational cooperation and networking was repeatedly emphasised by a number of stakeholders, yet responses from the online survey of RDP beneficiaries showed that only 35% of respondents considered support for such cooperation to be a significant need for rural development.

Events and Event Support

2.54   Stakeholders stated that events held between three and five years ago were beneficial to stakeholders, such as a Co-operation and Supply Chain workshops, a wool and textiles discussion, and RDP funding fairs. These events gave beneficiaries of RDP funding the opportunity to share experiences and best practice, to network, and to learn about policy developments and future opportunities.

2.55   Building on these, stakeholders advocated the use of thematic events and networking as opposed to those organised geographically. It was suggested that a number of these thematic events were proposed a while ago, but ultimately did not materialise.

2.56   Stakeholders reported that until recently, there has been a relative absence of events organised by the WRNSU, potentially exacerbated by COVID-19, Brexit, and resource constraints for the WRNSU. The perception was that there had been a drop-off in the number of events held between 2017 and early 2020. However, events were held in Wales throughout this period, with other events facilitated by the WRNSU taking place beyond Wales. Stakeholder perceptions on this issue point to a difference between stakeholder expectations and the number and types of events held. The issue, therefore, may be that stakeholders had an expectation of a greater number of networking and cooperation events than the WRNSU were able to deliver. The majority of stakeholders, including those involved in LEADER as well

as the RDP more broadly, stated that they wanted more networking and thematic events.

2.57   LEADER administrators and LAGs were often tasked with delivering the events themselves, though in some instances were reimbursed by the WRNSU to support the event retrospectively. Interviewed stakeholders questioned whether event organisation was still part of the WRNSU's remit and advocated the need for more regular training events and workshops. There appears to have been a lack of clarity as to who held responsibility for arranging events. LAGs with ideas for events would approach the WRNSU, but it appeared that events often failed to materialise. There was confusion expressed as to who was responsible for planning the event and for pushing it forward, with LAGs having expected more input from the WRNSU, and the WRNSU increasingly reliant on the LAGs to push events forwards in light of resource issues. The failure to see events put together points to a problematic process for turning event ideas into a reality, with a clear bottleneck at some point in the process. A clear expectation of who is to push the development of the event forward is needed, as is an improved process for turning an event idea into a project, bringing LEADER administrators and LAGs on board, and seeing the plan come to fruition with support from the WRNSU.

2.58   It is important to note however, that since September 2020, the WRNSU has run a series of four thematic events and workshops online. These have been apparently successful and well attended, though we do not have any primary data from interviews to support this. Although online events cannot replicate the benefits of face-to-face events in every way, the ease with which stakeholders can be brought together to explore thematic issues bodes well for a more fruitful event schedule in the future. This is also explored in the COVID-19 review in section 5.

Support and Capacity Building

Training and support for LEADER

2.59   LAGs expressed concern that the WRNSU have not provided them with sufficient training, and that they had had insufficient guidance in areas including training and administration, CLLD, finding and approaching projects, and monitoring performance indicators.

2.60   While the WRNSU does have a mechanism to ask LEADER groups about training needs through its monitoring arrangements, but a more regular opportunity to ask about capacity building and training needs can perhaps be built into the quarterly reports that are submitted by LEADER administrators.

2.61   Regional meetings organised by LAGs appear to be a significant source of mutual support and capacity building. The WRNSU attends regional meetings held by the with south-west and central Wales LAGs. This enables discussion around common issues and prompt answering of queries. Originally, a WRNSU officer used to attend individual LAG meetings but that has since dropped off. A particular benefit of the south-west group is that their meetings have involved LAG chairs. Training and capacity building for LAG chairs was raised as an issue by a number of LEADER stakeholders, but this involvement by LAG chairs provides an avenue for sharing knowledge and experience between LEADER groups and LAG chairs. The meetings would involve a separate LAG chair meeting, providing a forum for LAG chairs to discuss issues at their level.

2.62   The south-west Wales LAG meetings are therefore a good practice model that should be considered by LEADER administrators across Wales.

2.63   There were mostly positive responses from stakeholders involved in LEADER as to the effectiveness of getting answers to questions – a key support function that a number of LEADER stakeholders spoke of. Overall, LEADER administrators claimed that the WRNSU had been good in responding to their queries for information and clarification on RDP matters. Some LEADER administrators noted

that this channel for queries had improved in the last 18 months, with regional managers answering queries straight away.

2.64   One minor negative noted by a LEADER stakeholder was that while questions on structural or procedural issues were responded to quickly, there was less support for questions relating to project ideas and development. The stakeholder suggested that this was due to a lack of skills in the more detailed aspects of developing and delivering projects.

3.   Communication review and engagement analysis

3.1   A key role of the WRNSU is the communication of relevant RDP information to stakeholders and the public through several different channels which are discussed below. Effective communications are integral to meeting the needs identified for the WRN and SU, and as a result are also central to meeting the objectives identified.

3.2   For this review of communications and engagement for the 2014-2020 programme period, we considered responses from qualitative interviews, the online survey, analytic and engagement data available, as well as the objective view of a communication specialist.

General response

3.3   Overall, there was recognition from stakeholders that the WRNSU's communications activity was a prominent part of their remit, and often the most recognised contribution of the Support Unit.

3.4   Communication material is of generally a high quality, well written and presented, covering a wide remit of rural development activity. The information presented has clear potential value to stakeholders and potential beneficiaries, particularly details on funding and support opportunities, the sharing of best practice and project details and latest news and developments in rural development in Wales.

3.5   The WRNSU's communication activity is perhaps the clearest example of the organisation delivering on key elements of its stated remit. It reflects the efforts made by the WRNSU in the last four years to make improvements in this area. There is, however, room for further improvement, explored below, and as explored in Part II of the report, maintaining and enhancing this communication role is a priority for future activity, especially during transition post-RDP.

3.6   Responses to the online survey showed common use of the WRNSU's communication channels, with over 70% of respondents indicating engagement with the WRNSU website, including nearly a third that had

utilised the Case study Database. Both the WRN Social Media and Newsletter had also been engaged with in some capacity by over half of respondents. This is perhaps unsurprising given that both these channels of communication were used to disseminate the survey, yet engagement with the website was far more common than with WRNSU events, which only 19% of respondents had engaged with. This indicates the importance of WRNSU communication channels as the primary means of engagement for a majority of individuals, including information about funding opportunities, which was highlighted as one of the greatest support needs for rural development by over 70% of survey respondents, followed closely by 'knowledge exchange between interest groups / organisations' (seen by 54% as one of the greatest needs).

3.7   Stakeholders interviewed had a largely positive view of WRNSU communication, though believed that there was still more that could be done. Whilst stakeholders agreed that communication from the WRNSU had improved over the last year, they highlighted the disconnection of the Support Unit, absence of information, and infrequent and sporadic communication prior to this point.

3.8   Stakeholders also raised the belief that the communication by the WRNSU could go beyond the website and newsletters, with the need for more tailored information sharing, support and dialogue both within regions and across Wales. It was occasionally commented on that communication was too "one-way" and did not encourage dialogue or had few means with which to collect or present dialogue or discussion.

Website

3.9   The website is an important part of the WRN's function, and a key pillar of its communication strategy. It serves as an important tool to engage with stakeholders across the RDP. The website is active and updated regularly, and hosts information, including regular news and updates on RDP projects, and information on upcoming events. The website also hosts written and video case studies of RDP projects, including projects from LEADER, Smart

Villages, and the EIP, and hosts further resources such as webinars and online workshops. The website also provides a database and interactive map of LEADER projects in Wales.

3.10   There is a large amount of quality material on the website. Information is written clearly and in an appropriate stye for online content. Visually, information is often accompanied by high quality images and photos, so that webpages are appealing and enhanced by thematically appropriate visuals.

3.11   It is now a very valuable repository for news, as well as evergreen content[3] and resources. However, as this repository continues to grow, the accessibility of the content, in terms of how it is presented and the ease with which desired content is searched for and found, could be improved, in order to maximise its utility. There is a risk that some valuable content will be lost, including the excellent video case studies hosted on the site. Opportunities for more accessible presentation of evergreen content should be explored.

3.12   The website was previously housed in the main Welsh Government online portal, but underwent a major revision during this programme period and was re-launched under the Business Wales umbrella site. The result was a more distinct identity for the WRN, away from the WG website, as well as the Support Unit having greater ability to manage and tailor content directly. Visits to the website have greatly increased since the relaunch. The website currently receives around 10 000 visits a month, and as of August, had received 107,048 visits this year (2020), compared to 26 248 in all of 2018.

3.13   An average bounce rate on the homepage (percent of visitors that quickly leave the page) for the months for Aug-Oct of 46% and an exit rate of 42%, is fairly good, suggesting more than half of visitors stay on the website for a period of time and visit web pages beyond the homepage.

3.14   Most visit to the website are direct visits, with visits to the website through social media generally fairly low, with an average of 60 / month through Facebook and 94 / month through Twitter, though this did vary between months, and there is potential to improve this rate through better integration.

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[3] Evergreen content is search-optimized content that is continually relevant and stays "fresh" for readers over a long period of time.

The highest number of daily visitors each month, in the three-month period (Aug – Oct 2020) for which we had data, all followed the release of the monthly newsletter. Although we do not have data on click throughs from Newsletter to Website, it is clear that the Newsletter is driving visitors to the website. Again, there is even greater potential for this by integrating more onward journeys to the website in Newsletter content.

3.15   Web analytics can only tell us part of the story however, as the quality of the content and its suitability to the needs of its users are the most important factor. As a result, a survey of website users would therefore be recommended in order to obtain a more comprehensive information on the usefulness of content, however responses from stakeholders interviewed gives us some indication of its value.

3.16   The website was the most recognised form of communication from the WRNSU by stakeholders. Many interviewed stakeholders – including representatives of LEADER administrative bodies, the steering group, and strategic stakeholders – spoke highly of the website, stating its use for highlighting and sharing project ideas and potential networking opportunities. A number of LEADER administrators stated that they regularly scanned the website to keep up to date on developments in other LEADER areas. It was recognised by the majority of stakeholders that the WRNSU fought hard to establish the website in its current form and to obtain the freedom to manage its content – the site sits under Business Wales, meaning it is not required to have communications material approved by the Welsh Government.

3.17   Some stakeholders emphasised, however, that while the website was good, the WRNSU was too focused on it as its principle means of engaging with stakeholders. As one stakeholder noted, aside from the website and newsletter, little was done beyond LEADER. While necessary, stakeholders spoke of the importance of more proactive engagement beyond the website and newsletter.

WRN Newsletter

3.18   The WRNSU provide a monthly email newsletter, in both Welsh and English, providing information regarding networking, projects, and best practice relating to the Welsh RDP and beyond.

3.19   Over 57% of respondents of the online survey had engaged with the Newsletter and stakeholders generally found it a useful resource. Newsletter subscriptions continue to increase, from 6544 in January 2019 to 8389 in August 2020. The amount of content in the newsletter and the way it is presented in a visually appealing and structured way, compared to iterations viewed in 2016, has clearly been improved.

3.20   Many stakeholders interviewed saw the newsletter as a means to forge connections and discussions, however it is necessary also to consider that a number of stakeholders interviewed expressed concerns about an overreliance on the newsletter.

3.21   There was a lack of awareness of the newsletter amongst some stakeholders however, including LAGs and RDP coordinators. Concern was raised regarding its digital format, with belief that that may limit its audience, with one stakeholder raising the point that many farmers may not have access to the Newsletter due to tis digital format. LAG members also stated a lack of time and capacity to provide information to the newsletter, or even read it and act on the information.

3.22   Some stakeholders raised concerns that the WRN newsletter was duplicating the information disseminated by Gwlad, the Welsh Government's newsletter for agriculture and forestry. However, others noted that both newsletters serve distinct purposes for different audiences, and that having a separate WRN gave attention to LEADER and rural communities in a way that Gwlad could not. A LEADER administrator for example stated that while there is the odd echo of the WRN in Gwlad, the latter focused on what farmers needed to know. They added that were they merged together, then LEADER would be overlooked.

Social Media

3.23   The WRNSU maintain and continuously update social media which includes both a Twitter and Facebook account. These accounts are very active, with content often posted daily on both channels, with a slightly greater frequency of posts on Twitter, where several posts commonly posted a day. Within the month of August 2020, the WRNSU twitter channel posted 82 times, including 26 retweets and 1 quote retweet. This included content across all core sectors they represent (Agriculture, Food, Community, Tourism, Agriculture, Environment and Forestry).

3.24   The channels are used to promote new content on the Website, largely new case studies and news updates, and are also heavily been used to promote WRNSU events, most recently the four online workshops/events run. In addition, both channels are used to share content from other users and organisations involved in rural development. This will most often be content related to the recent activities of rural stakeholders, or upcoming events.

3.25   Similar content is posted on both Facebook and Twitter, often relating to the same news stories and events. There is in fact very little difference in the content between the two.

3.26   Generally speaking, there is very low engagement with content posted, however this is not uncommon for social media channels with relatively low followings (Twitter – 1755 followers, Facebook – 417 follows). Even other NRN twitter channels with greater numbers of followers (Scotland Rural Network - 6769, Irish Rural Link, 3695), have similar levels of engagement with content. Although progress has been made in increasing followers overall, this has stalled, with only 123 new total followers acquired in 2020. There are some improvements that could be made to increase both numbers of followers, and more importantly, levels of engagement with content.

3.27   A number of posts include content that has been previously posted, primarily details on grant schemes and events. This is common practice, as it cannot be assumed that your audience will find or read a single post made. However, this content was commonly repeated with the exact same massage and wording each time. When content is not varied, the result is often diminishing returns in terms of engagement. It also gives the overall

impression for followers that the channel contains little new information. Simple variations in wording and images used, including text overlays to images to boost messages, as well different linkages through hashtags and @s will increase the likelihood of engagement. A good example of this working effectively is a post on August 22nd, which was repeating a previously made advert for a Woodland Workshop. However, a new image and wording was used, including text overlay on the image, as well as a new hashtag, including the word wildlife. The post was shared 22 times, far in excess of any other sort of engagement received. On inspection, one of the shares was from The British Nature guide, who have over 51,000 followers on Twitter. This undoubtedly was a big factor in this increased engagement. It is likely to also explain the fact that the webpage for this event was one of the most visited on the site in the month of August. A strategy to secure more shares in this way is clearly valuable, and more important than frequency of posts. Mapping potential organisations and individuals to link posts to, and hashtags to incorporate would be a useful start.

3.28   Another area for improvement is to increase the use of retweets on Twitter or shares on Facebook that include a comment from the organisation. This contextualises content and creates engagement, and also means that if shared, then it links back to WRNSU, rather than the original author of the content. It also encourages greater traffic to the relevant content on the WRN website as well. Much more could be done to direct traffic from social media channels to the website and the resources there.

Finally, a common criticism of WRNSU communications was their one-way nature. If done well, social media channels have enormous potential for creating interaction and dialogue. It can be hard to create this culture and build a critical mass, but given there is an appetite for discussion and interaction, efforts could be made to utilise social media in this way. Primarily this involves the use of surveys and polls as well as the introduction of different thoughts, opinions, and questions, rather than being used primarily as a posting board.

4.   COVID-19 research review.

4.1   The following is a summary of key impacts and implications of COVID-19 on the rural economy, rural communities, the Wales Rural Network, and its wider activities. It is the result of a review of relevant documentation, data, and evaluation fieldwork.

Impact of Covid-19

4.2   Covid-19 has been an external shock to social and economic systems globally and has tipped the UK economy into the deepest recession on record, with approximately 314,000 jobs lost in the three months to September 2020.[4]

4.3   Rural development has been affected by change in demand, lower farming output, closure of pubs, restaurants, and hotels, and has hampered prices of meat and dairy exports due to the fall in demand. Impacts include:[5]

- Farming - Wool prices halved due to export cuts
- Forestry – both positive and negative effects. Fall in demand from construction but increase from packaging.
- Tourism – stalled over 4 months, 70% of the Tourism labour force has been furloughed. Fall in income by a median of 20%, with up to an 80% drop experienced by some businesses.

4.4   Much of rural Wales' economic dependence relies on the tourism and hospitality sectors.[6] Therefore, the fall in tourist activity that has occurred as result of the pandemic has impacted local rural businesses. This is reflected in the high uptake of the Covid-19 Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) within rural local authorities, making up a significant proportion of the total Welsh uptake.

4.5   The increase in homeworking has also had significant consequences. The opportunity to work from anywhere has made the countryside an appealing

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[4]
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/november2020
[5] EPW Uplands presentation
[6] https://www.coronavirusandtheeconomy.com/question/how-coronavirus-affecting-welsh-economy

relocation opportunity for many. A survey by Rightmove found that in the UK around 30% of property buyers were interested in rural opportunities in the few months before August.[7]

4.6   The increase in demand for rural living has been viewed as a threat – a potential cause of cultural and linguistic displacement and also gentrification. There is a concern of upward pressure on property prices due to prospective increase in demand and limited properties.

4.7   A Covid-19 period relocation could however also bring benefits to the rural economy through an influx of a wide range of skills, and the return of young people to communities with ageing populations. The positive multiplier effects might include an increase in rural entrepreneurship, with an increase in independent businesses in areas such as: Agriculture, Environment, Food and Tourism.

Response

Digital development

Vulnerabilities in the way things currently operate, and the inequalities of the rural structure that Covid-19 has exposed, could also provide an opportunity for change. For example, digital development can counteract market failures relating to limited access and poor connectivity, which is hindering growth. The Welsh Government is working with the UK government to introduce the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, a scheme that will look to provide rural homes and businesses with super-fast broadband by 2025.[8]

Investment

4.8   In response to Covid-19, and the EU transition, the Welsh Government is supporting the Wales rural economy with over £100m funding boost to cover the next three years which is expected to support the following areas:[9]

- Woodland creation and restoration

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[7] https://rsnonline.org.uk/surge-in-interest-for-rural-properties-following-covid-19-pandemic
[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-welsh-governments-team-up-on-big-broadband-boost-for-rural-wales
[9] https://gov.wales/more-ps100million-new-investment-wales-rural-economy-announced

- Building resilience into Wales' natural resources and improving biodiversity,
- Helping food businesses to improve their supply chains, business resilience
- Supporting farm businesses to help ensure their sustainability
- Delivering food and drink sector Covid-19 Recovery Strategy.

4.9   However, this investment should be viewed in the context of potential funding cuts and budget constraints elsewhere, further exacerbated by the continuing uncertainty of post Brexit trade deals. The UK Government Spending Review (November 2020) has revealed a £95 million shortfall against the £337 million expected in the 2021-2022 Wales agricultural and rural development budget. The full loss when taking into account the full RDP spend and 15 per cent pillar transfer is potentially £137m.

Response and implications for Wales Rural Network

4.10   COVID-19 has had a number of direct impacts on the activities of the WRNSU, most notably the inability to organise and facilitate face to face events and meetings. However, the pandemic has also further emphasised the need for effective communications, stakeholder engagement, and cooperation, particularly when combined with the uncertainty around the EU transition. It also emphasises the value in an effective network to support national and local responses.

4.11   The following are key issues raised during fieldwork in response to the pandemic and resulting lockdowns.

Supporting COVID-19 recovery

4.12   Various new policies have been initiated or fast tracked in response to the pandemic, particularly around a Green Recovery. The WRN has been effectively reporting on and disseminating this information through their communication channels and virtual events. A recent example includes running a Virtual Workshop in support of the Supply Chain Development

Scheme and emerging Framework for Welsh Wool,[10] bringing together interest stakeholders from across the network.

The value of LEADER and community response

4.13   The provision of support in rural communities, particularly early on in the pandemic was often initiated and organised locally, with an important role for community led action. It highlights the importance of LEADER groups in disseminating information throughout rural communities, utilising local relationships and networks established over years.

4.14   Local LEADER groups also organised and initiated action across rural communities in Wales, from digital inclusion work, to foodbank coordination. They also provided support to projects through the administration of grant funding and the development of new projects. The WRNSU has played a role in sharing information about these actions on their website (where there is a designated COVID-19 section), through their newsletter, and by compiling specific LEADER case studies.[11]

4.15   The value of LEADER in supporting local resilience in rural communities has been brought into focus, as has the importance of a supporting rural network.

Remote events

4.16   The WRNSU has effectively transitioned to delivering remote events. This has been well received and events have received good attendance. While some stakeholders raised the fact that remote working cannot replicate the additional value that comes from face-to-face events particularly the informal networking that takes place, the ability to bring large numbers together with relative ease has great benefits and is a habit that should continue post pandemic.

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[10] https://businesswales.gov.wales/walesruralnetwork/news-events-and-case-studies/event/welsh-wool-industry
[11]
https://businesswales.gov.wales/walesruralnetwork/sites/walesruralnetwork/files/Wales%20Rural%20Network%20-%20COVID%20-%2019%20LEADER%20activities%20Review%202020%20-%20English.pdf

The need to support newcomers and new ideas and enterprise

4.17   As discussed above, COVID-19 has led to an influx of new people to rural communities, a pattern that was already established but has perhaps been accelerated. This also brings new skills, new enterprise and ideas. As a result, a number of stakeholders suggested that the WRN should be mindful of, and open to newcomers in rural development and new models of operation alongside traditional ideas and audiences. The benefits of embracing new audiences and ideas are particularly important when aligned to the Welsh Government's push for a Green Recovery, embracing innovation and transformation.

4.18   Therefore, in order to capitalise and maximise their potential value, efforts should be made to extend the network, reaching out to newcomers and considering their needs alongside the more traditional groups involved in rural development.

5. Assessment of Delivery Against Remit

5.1   In this section, we can provide an assessment of the WRNSUs delivery against the remit as defined by Article 54 of the EAFRD regulation, and against the logic model developed as part of this evaluation.

5.2   This assessment will be made against the following aims:

- Inform the broader public and stakeholders in the rural community about developments within rural development;
- Increase the engagement of, and networking between stakeholders with an interest in the delivery of the RDP;
- Increase networking and transnational co-operation of RDP stakeholders across Wales, the UK and Europe;
- Foster innovation within rural development;
- Improve the quality of implementation of the RDP in Wales.

Successes and challenges of the delivery

Informing the broader public and stakeholders in the rural community about developments within rural development

5.3   The WRNSU has been successful in meeting some of the objectives regarding informing the rural community about developments in rural development. The website and social media channels of the WRNSU reach a relatively large audience, and the website's quality was noted by many stakeholders. LEADER administrators in particular were very reliant on the website to receive information about developments in the sector and about potential opportunities for cooperation.

5.4   It is harder to assess the extent to which the WRNSU has informed the general public about rural development, though the accessibility of the website and the activity on the social media channels do provide an avenue for interested members of the public to access information.

5.5   While the WRNSU has performed well in terms of communications, an area for improvement would be direct communication with stakeholders beyond

LEADER. There is scope to be more proactive in directly engaging with scheme leads, RDP project leads and broader stakeholders to maintain clearer channels of communication.

Increase the engagement of, and networking between stakeholders with an interest in the delivery of the RDP;

5.6   With regards to networking and engagement, stakeholders that had attended events organised by the WRNSU spoke of their benefit. Some stakeholders spoke positively of thematic events that had been held at the start of the programme period and were disappointed that they were not continued with.

5.7   Networking and engagement have been a challenge for the WRNSU due to the difficulties faced in engaging the sectors of the RDP beyond LEADER. The former issue has impacted the capacity of the WRNSU to link together the different sectors of rural development through a vehicle such as thematic workshops.

5.8   This latter issue was also faced by other NRNs spoken to, and was the result of agriculture and forestry having established support organisations and publications in place prior to the expansion of the WRNSUs remit.

5.9   Networking between LAGs has also been identified as an issue, with many LEADER stakeholders stating the need for more proactive facilitation between LAGs in order to encourage greater sharing of best practice and to encourage a greater emphasis on thematic cooperation.

Increase networking and transnational co-operation of RDP stakeholders across Wales, the UK and Europe;

5.10   Transnational cooperation and networking were seen from Europe as having been successful. European partners noted the WRNSUs enthusiasm and proactivity within the ENRD and spoke of Wales as an exemplar of the contribution that a small country could make. Other UK NRNs also spoke positively of the WRNSU, noting the good relationship they had built with them. A particular highlight of the WRNSUs transnational networking was the

Glasgow event hosted by the WRNSU in which Welsh produce were showcased.

5.11   Transnational cooperation was seen less positively from the Welsh perspective. Some LAGs noted having had to source their own cooperation projects with partners in the EU, with no support from the WRNSU. One LAG noted that the WRNSU had come to them with cooperation opportunities with EU LAGs only after they had used all their transnational cooperation budget. What LAGs wanted to see was greater proactivity in linking together Welsh and EU projects and opportunities, with the WRNSU being a conduit to securing cooperation projects. There is, however, a degree of confusion as to who bears responsibility for sourcing trans-national cooperation projects, with LAGs looking to the WRNSU for guidance and the WRNSU having a limited role in this regard.

Foster innovation within rural development

5.12   Stakeholders pointed to the website and the wealth of case studies it held as strengths of the WRNSU. Sharing best practice is a key element in driving innovation, and in this sense, the WRNSU has good resources available for future rural projects to draw upon.

5.13   However, direct contributions to innovation are less evident. The provision of case studies is a passive means to foster innovation, but there appears to have been a lack of active measures to drive innovation forwards, such as was done well by the NRN in Wallonia (see case study 1 below) through the development of an Innovation Thematic Group, and the development of a system of knowledge exchange.

Improve the quality of implementation of the RDP in Wales

5.14   The impact of the WRNSU on the quality of delivery of the RDP is difficult to assess. The support provided to LEADER has been valuable to its operations, while there are also several areas where this support could have been more proactive and beneficial. The impact of the WRNSU beyond

LEADER is harder to identify due to a relative lack of engagement with the broader RDP. The events that have occurred were stated to be beneficial by the attendees spoken to, and there is strong appetite among for more thematic events to be facilitated.

Recommendations for remainder of the RDP-funded period

5.15   *Re-scope the purpose of the steering group*: re-engage with the steering group to use their expertise and experience in order to assess how the WRN can best support the transition from the RDP to new funding opportunities. Explore the possibility of using thematic sub-groups in order to address pressing needs for LEADER and the other rural development stakeholders.

5.16   *Better communicate the role of the WRNSU to stakeholders*: re-engage with RDP scheme leads and broader stakeholders to remind stakeholder of the service that the WRNSU can provide. This exercise can also scope out the short-term needs of various RDP schemes to identify ways that the WRNSU can support the transition to post-RDP funding scenarios.

5.17   *Establish clearer procedures for developing event ideas from LAGs, and establish clarity as to where responsibilities lie*: the issues identified in turning ideas for events from LAGs into events points to a problematic process for turning event ideas into a reality. The bottleneck or barriers need to be addressed. A clear expectation of who has responsibility to push the development of the event forward is needed, with all parties aware of roles, and the limits of the WRNSUs support. An improved process for turning an event idea into a project is needed which can bringing LEADER administrators and LAGs on board to see a plan come to fruition with support from the WRNSU.

5.18   *Mandate for scheme leads to get in touch*: seek a more formalised relationship with scheme leads across the RDP to open up regular communication. Establish the precedent of formalised introductions and an open channel with key stakeholders, especially policy and scheme leads.

5.19 *Build on recent thematic events held online*: Pursue a more thematic delivery in organising events and capitalise on the shift to online working to bring together stakeholders.

5.20 *The WRNSU should consider encouraging LAGs across Wales to follow the good practice set by the south-west LAG group in terms*: The south-west Wales LAG meetings are a good practice model that should be considered by LEADER administrators across Wales. The involvement of LAG chairs provides an avenue to better engage LAGs in networking and provides administrators and LAG members with a forum to share ideas and best practice, and address issues.

5.21 *Explore possibility of workshops for LAGs on life post-RDP*: identify, perhaps in consultation with LEADER Programme administrators and LAGs, themes and topics that can be covered in workshops which would re-energise LAGs and begin the process of planning for a future beyond RDP funding. Many LEADER stakeholders noted waning interest from LAG members due to the end of the RDP. Activity is needed to maintain momentum into future funding scenarios. Activities can involve training on sourcing alternative sources of funding beyond the RDP such as Lottery funds and crowd funding and exploring through workshops with LAGs the role that they can continue to play in CLLD their communities. The Scotland Rural network has run workshops on alternative funding for LAGs, it is recommended that this approach is emulated.

Part II – The Wales Rural Network and the Future

Introduction

This report on the Wales Rural Network and the future is the second part of the output produced during the evaluation of the WRNSU, carried out between September 2020 and February 2021. This report provides a review based on available information of the likely future scenarios for rural development in Wales, and an assessment of the options for a rural network function post-RDP. This second part of the evaluation output also includes case-studies of three other NRNs which provide best practice examples relevant to the Welsh rural development context. This report concludes with a series of recommendation that can guide the development of a past-RDP rural network.

Key Findings from Part I[12]

i.   There is a clear need for a rural network function in rural development. Most stakeholders agreed with this assertion, noting the benefits that a network function brings to encouraging interaction between stakeholders, disseminating information to the rural development community, and supporting the implementation of LEADER.

ii.   The WRNSU has faced challenges to its operations due to resource constraints. Of the six WRNSU team members, only two are full-time employed, with the four other staff members working part-time. In addition, in the last twelve months, the WRNSU has faced issues with staffing. Some team-members have been periodically reassigned to carry out work for purposes beyond their original remit or work not relating to the WRNSU. This has led to the WRNSU team being spread more thinly across WRNSU tasks.

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[12] Taken from the executive summary for Part I

iii.   The WRN Support Unit staff were seen as competent, knowledgeable and had good experience within rural development, including extensive contacts and relationships with stakeholders representing traditional rural sectors. European stakeholders noted that the Support Unit was an effective NRN support unit, particularly at representing and championing Welsh rural development at international events.

iv.   There was a lack of awareness of the remit and activities of the WRNSU among rural development stakeholders outside of the LEADER Programme. This was attributed to the WRNSU having to serve, in this programme, areas of the RDP not previously included in its remit, and an insufficiently formalised requirement for stakeholders, including WG policy and scheme leads, to engage with the Support Unit.

v.   While members of the WRN Steering Group recognised its potential value to the delivery of the WRN, the steering group was perceived by stakeholders spoken to as 'rubber-stamping exercise', lacking in the authority to 'steer' the WRNSU in its operations. There was criticism that the Steering Group was established too late to influence the delivery of the WRN, and that it was also made up of the 'usual suspects'. Steering Group meetings also became less frequent in recent years due to issues with resourcing, with members leaving the Steering Group.

vi.   There was concern among stakeholders that the WRN was not being delivered to its full remit, with a lack of proactive engagement noted as a common theme. Stakeholders acknowledged that this appeared to be due to issues with significant changes in staffing, especially across the Welsh Government, which had been an impediment to the delivery of the WRN. Stakeholders believed that activities carried out by the Support Unit were hamstrung by constant staff changes. Some interviewees expressed that a lack of suitable resourcing for the WRNSU has impacted the capacity of the WRNSU to fulfil its potential.

vii.   The communications function of the WRNSU was viewed positively by stakeholders and is the clearest and best example of it fulfilling its remit. The website in particular was highly spoken of, with many stakeholders

recognising the work that had gone into establishing the website to be independent of Welsh Government and have the ability to publish content more freely.

viii.   While the WRNSU has facilitated networking events during the current programme period, stakeholders were disappointed by the decline in the number of events held between 2017 and early 2020. Despite the closure of the RCDF and the move to ENRAW, the majority of stakeholders (including RDP beneficiaries and LAGs) stated that the WRNSU could have played a larger role in facilitating cooperation within Wales, with more regular and better communicated networking events than what has been delivered.

ix.   There was however recognition of the positive developments made in 2020 in the form of virtual events organised and hosted by the WRNSU, capitalising on the shift to online meetings in order to host networking events and workshops. The WRNSU has run a series of four thematic events and workshops online since September 2020. The ease with which stakeholders were brought together to explore thematic issues in this way bodes well for a more fruitful event schedule in the future.

x.   Stakeholders stated that face-to-face events between three to five years ago were beneficial to stakeholders, such as supply chain meetings for farmers, wool and textiles discussion groups, and roadshows. These events gave beneficiaries of RDP funding the opportunity to share experiences and best practice. Data has yet to be collected as the benefit of recently held virtual events, such as the October 2020 online wool and textiles event.

xi.   LAGs were on the whole critical of a lack of proactive facilitation of networking and cooperation on a Wales-wide level. LAGs predominately networked regionally within Wales, with groups communicating within the south-east, the south-west and the north. Interviewees stated these interactions were generally borne from existing relationships, with little facilitation from the WRNSU. LAGs spoke of the potential for the WRNSU to have further aided co-operation opportunities and developed existing relationships. Despite suggestions being made to the WRNSU for this to take place, this has apparently as yet not occurred.

Recommendations for the remainder of the RDP period

xii. *Re-scope the purpose of the steering group*: re-engage with the steering group to use their expertise and experience in order to assess how the WRN can best support the transition from the RDP to new funding opportunities.

xiii. *Better communicate the role of the WRNSU to stakeholders*: re-engage with RDP scheme leads and broader stakeholders to remind stakeholder of the service that the WRNSU can provide. This exercise can also scope out the short-term needs of various RDP schemes to identify ways that the WRNSU can support the transition to post-RDP funding scenarios.

xiv. *Establish clearer procedures for developing event ideas from LAGs, and establish clarity as to where responsibilities lie*: the issues identified in turning ideas for events from LAGs into events points to a problematic process for turning event ideas into a reality. The bottleneck or barriers need to be addressed. A clear expectation of who has responsibility to push the development of the event forward is needed, as is an improved process for turning an event idea into a project.

xv. *Mandate for scheme leads to get in touch*: seek a more formalised relationship with scheme leads across the RDP to open up regular communication. Establish the precedent of formalised introductions and an open channel with key stakeholders, especially policy and scheme leads.

xvi. *Build on recent thematic events held online*: Pursue a more thematic delivery in organising events and capitalise on the shift to online working to bring together stakeholders.

xvii. *The WRNSU should consider encouraging LAGs across Wales to follow the good practice set by the south-west LAG group in terms*: The south-west Wales LAG meetings are a good practice model that should be considered by LEADER administrators across Wales. The involvement of LAG chairs provides an avenue to better engage LAGs in networking and provides administrators and LAG members with a forum to share ideas and best practice, and address issues.

xviii. *Explore opportunities for more experienced staff within CLLD to mentor or train newer staff:* Until the end of the current RDP period, the WRNSU could work with LEADER administrators to ensure that channels are put in place for more experienced staff to mentor and train less experienced colleagues. Training can be facilitated also through online workshops and events in order to encourage newer staff to meet and learn from colleagues from across Wales.

xix. *Explore possibility of workshops for LAGs on preparations for post-RDP scenarios*: identify, perhaps in consultation with LEADER Programme administrators and LAGs, themes and topics that can be covered in workshops which would re-energise LAGs and begin the process of planning for a future beyond RDP funding. Many LEADER stakeholders noted waning interest from LAG members due to the end of the RDP. Activity is needed to maintain momentum into future funding scenarios. The Scotland Rural network has run workshops on alternative funding for LAGs, it is recommended that this approach is emulated.

Structure of the Part II report

5.22 This report considered the future delivery of the Wales Rural Network and the Support Unit. It proceeds as follows:

- Section 8 provides a review of future post-RDP funding scenarios based on current information, with the intention to assess the future context for any rural network.
- Section 9 sets out an assessment of options for the WRNSU or an equivalent network and support unit, based on data collected from stakeholders and the assessment of future funding scenarios.
- Section 10 contains three case studies of best practice NRNs, featuring Wallonia, Finland and Ireland.
- Section 11 provides a series of recommendations for moving forward, and for the delivery of a network function post-RDP.

6.   Road Ahead and Post-RDP Scenarios

Introduction

6.1   The context in which the WRNSU currently operates can be broken down into three main frameworks: policy, legal and funding. The three frameworks are strictly interlinked and operate jointly. Each framework has an EU, a UK, and a Welsh dimension (see table 8.3 below).

6.2   The **policy** framework of the WRNSU's context contains the main drivers that inform the activities and sets out the objectives to achieve. The **legal** framework establishes the instruments and legal boundaries within which the policy activities are carried out. The **funding** framework provides the financial resources necessary to carry out the activities.

6.3   By outlining the current context and considering how it may evolve in a post-Brexit context, it is possible to try sketch out some scenarios and identify what the role of the WRNSU unit might be in the future.

The current context

6.4   The delivery of rural development in Wales is largely based on EU elements. The main policy drivers, the legal instruments, and the funding streams have been determined at EU level for the period 2014-2020, and they are subsequently implemented and delivered at Welsh level. As agriculture, and RDP within it, is a devolved competence, the UK dimension does not have a strong relevance. In terms of governance however, it is important to note the informal networking that has happened in the current period among the four UK rural networks of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, which has helped the sharing of information in the absence of a formal UK wide network.

6.5   The main EU policies are **CAP (Pillar 2)** and **Cohesion**. The **CAP** drives the policy objectives of the RDP, supports networking and the LEADER approach. **Cohesion** policy supports economic and social development and has provision for the CLLD approach. The UK and Welsh policy elements are mostly aligned to the EU policies.

6.6   The **legal** instruments informing the RDP implementation are firstly the EU regulations for Rural Development, with the provision of the **national rural network**, and, to certain extent, the regulations pertaining to Cohesion policy. Welsh government provides additional legal instruments such as guidelines on the application, implementation and reporting requirements.

6.7   Finally, the **funding** dimension is defined by the EAFRD funding and the match funding provided directly by Welsh government. They operate in accordance with the legal instruments above. RDP schemes are not funded at 100% however, and beneficiaries have to contribute with their own resources. The WRNSU is funded from the Technical Assistance budget of the fund.

The future context

6.8   As the UK is not a member of the EU as of February 2020, **the future context** will be determined mostly by the UK and Welsh dimensions of the frameworks. Nevertheless, some elements of future EU policies and programmes may play a role in the scenarios in which Welsh rural stakeholders will operate. Therefore, for the purpose of scenario drafting in this report, only relevant EU elements are considered here.

6.9   The post-Brexit context for rural development in Wales is still very unclear. Although it is underpinned by some positive and clear policy intentions, there is a lack of funding resources to support those ambitions and no legal instruments to inform implementation.

6.10   Since the 2016 referendum, the **Welsh Government** has outlined its **policy** position which is generally **in favour of rural development.** Namely, it affirms that *"It is vital that rural interests are protected and feature strongly as Wales works towards a future outside the EU"* and *"[t]he Welsh Government will continue to work with farmers, the rural communities and the fishing industry to map a dynamic future".*[13]

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[13] Securing Wales' future - Welsh Government White Paper, 2017.

6.11   Regarding the current RDP, it stated that "The Rural Development Programme for Wales will continue to operate under EU regulation until the end of the Programme, which could be until 2023".[14] These are among several statements in various policy documents demonstrating that the Welsh Government is intending to have a rural development policy, albeit strictly connected to agricultural policies, to be developed after Brexit and the transition period ending in 2020.

6.12   Another important policy element is the intention to continue to work on **co-operation** at national and international level as stated in a number of policy documents. For instance, in "Securing Wales' future":

> *"Wales has a particularly close co-operation with the Irish Republic […]. And When the UK leaves the EU this […] co-operation will become, if anything, even more important and, in particular, we are committed to strengthening the relationship between Wales and Ireland."*

> *"We wish, too, to remain engaged with existing European networks and bi-lateral links and we will remain open to forging new and deeper relationships in pursuit of Welsh interests".[15]*

6.13   There is also a developing framework, not yet policy, on supporting cross-border and international cooperation.[16]

6.14   This strong commitment provides the opportunity to explore future roles **in international cooperation**, and that the existing links developed through the RDP may provide the basis for future connection in the EU, starting with the Republic of Ireland.

6.15   The **legal framework** of the future context that will affect rural development is still under development.

6.16   In the UK, the **EU Withdrawal act** brought some EU laws within the fold of the UK legal environment to avoid a legal void while the UK replaces them.[17]

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[14] Brexit and our land: Securing the future of Welsh farming, Welsh Government consultation, 2018.
[15] Securing Wales' future - Welsh Government White Paper, 2017.
[16] A Framework for Regional Investment in Wales: proposal for supporting cross-border and international working, 2020
[17] EU Withdrawal Act 2018, Institute for Government, 2018

Among other effects of the Act, this enables Welsh Government to **carry on the implementation of RDP** until 2023.

6.17   A second important instrument is the **UK single market bill**, which is reaching its final stages of approval. The bill makes provisions on how some of the powers and competences repatriated from the EU will be implemented in the UK. Among other things, the bill enables the UK government to spend across the UK including on economic development initiatives, thus providing the legal basis for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.[18] However, as this competence was devolved until Brexit it is important to review how this bill will be passed in its final version and how it will affect rural development policy and funding in Wales.

6.18   A third legal instrument that will have some influence on rural development is the **Agriculture act**, approved on 11th November 2020. Most of the bill affects directly only England, but it will have a direct effect on Welsh farmers as it amends the direct payment rules across the UK. It will also have an indirect effect as the way farming and rural development are carried out in different nations across the UK will influence each other. At the moment there are no finalised legal instruments for agricultural and rural development in Wales, post-Brexit.

6.19   The **funding context** post Brexit has not been developed or set up at the time of writing. For the last three years the UK government has been looking to develop the *UK Shared Prosperity* Fund (UK SPF) as a funding scheme to replace the EU structural and investment funds, including the rural development funding programme. However, no details of the UK SPF have been published.

6.20   The September 2020 report from the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee on the Shared Prosperity Fund notes that:

> *'Despite announcing the Shared Prosperity Fund more than three years ago, the Government appears to have made negligible progress in developing its replacement for European Structural and Investment funding. Its repeated promises of a consultation and of imminent*

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[18] UK Internal Market Bill, Institute for Government, 2020

announcements have failed to materialise, demonstrating a lack of priority.'[19]

6.21   Secretary of State for Wales reiterated in September 2020 that all commitments made about the UK Shared Prosperity Fund still stand, with previous commitments including that the UK Government commitment to funding in Wales would at least match that currently provided by the EU.[20]

6.22   As yet, it is unclear what form it will take and when it will be available, which creates a major issue as the policy ambitions and legal instruments cannot be sustained without appropriate funding.

6.23   However, the Welsh Government has developed a framework on how possible future funding streams could be deployed in Wales to support economic and community development:

> *Our Framework focuses on four investment priority areas: business productivity and competitiveness, healthier, fairer and more sustainable communities, the zero carbon economy, and reducing economic inequalities for people.[21]*

6.24   The framework outlines priorities and objectives encompassing a wide range of aspects. Although it does not have a specific focus on rural development it covers many aspects that are relevant to rural development.

6.25   As for the EU dimension, the three frameworks - policy, legal and funding - are reaching the final stage of development and should be in place by early 2021. There are some important changes proposed that make it a departure from the current situation. Those that might be relevant to the future scenarios are mostly related to the policy and legal frameworks.

6.26   Firstly, the future equivalent of EAFRD is not going to be part of the structural funds anymore, which signals a separation of place-based policies for economic development away from rural areas.

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[19] House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, Wales and the Shared Prosperity Fund: Priorities for the replacement of EU structural funding, 29 September 2020, pp. 11
[20] House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, Wales and the Shared Prosperity Fund: Priorities for the replacement of EU structural funding, 29 September 2020, pp. 10
[21] A Framework for Regional Investment in Wales, Welsh Government, 2020

6.27   At the same time the rules for LEADER become part of Cohesion policy but funded under the agricultural budget lines.[22] The CAP will be built around nine priorities with a strong focus on environment and competitiveness. Some of the priorities chime with the current activities of the WRN, such as P8 on rural communities or P6 on environmental care. The proposal is for the future rural networks to be more inclusive bringing a wider representation of the farming and agriculture sectors. It is likely that it will continue to have a strong element of networking also at international level, but **the linkages with third countries are not yet defined**.

6.28   Finally, the European Commission has set up an initiative to develop a long-term vision for the future of rural areas by 2040.[23] Although these elements will not have a direct impact in Wales, they may determine some of the activities that can be carried out to interface with international partners.

Scenarios

What are the future post-Brexit scenarios, opportunities, barriers and considerations, and their implications for the RDP and WRNSU operations as well as the wider policy landscape?

6.29   Although the frameworks of the future context are not yet fully developed, based on current proposals at UK level it is possible to provide broad indications on how the scenarios could be shaped and perhaps identify a direction of travel in the medium term (3-5 years) and long term (5-10 years).

6.30   The three scenarios are based on a decreasing degree of intensity of the policy and funding commitments form the UK and Welsh Government to rural development in general and the opportunities to carry on with any rural network or similar types of activity. In

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[22] Towards a post-2020 common agricultural policy, European Parliament factsheet, November 2020
[23] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12525-Long-term-vision-for-rural-areas

6.32   are sketched out the main elements for each framework. Here below a summary of the main aspects of each scenario, and an outline of

6.31	Policy framework	Legal framework	Funding framework
Scenario 1	• Clear Welsh & UK rural policies • WG to keep WRN policy • Synergy with other Welsh place-based policies • Connection with EU policies	• Dedicated legal instruments for rural development (UK & Wales) • Connection with international programmes	• Dedicated Welsh pot of funding for RD • Shared Prosperity Fund (SF with RD support
Scenario 2	• Weak UK policy on RD • Some WG policy objectives • No connection with EU rural policy or CAP	• Welsh legal instruments for agriculture and only partially for RD. • Some legal instruments for local development (rural & urban)	• Shared pot of funding for economic development covering rural and urban areas (Welsh Framework) • Low level of match funding from private and community sectors
Scenario 3	• No focus on rural development or economic development policies. • Non-alignment (clash) of agricultural policies across the UK.	• No specific instruments for RD.	• No funding earmarked for rural areas. • No funding from Welsh or U governments.

considerations on opportunities and barriers.

6.33   **Scenario 1** - This scenario is characterised by a strong policy and funding support for rural development enabling the Welsh Rural Network to continue to exist, albeit with possible adaptations in scope to reflect a new context based mostly on domestic elements. New funding schemes such as a UKSPF and regional investments in Wales would provide the opportunity to set up Welsh-led funding programmes to implement activities dedicated to rural areas. Given the current situation, it is an unlikely scenario to materialise in the short term. However, this could be the long-term trajectory of place-based policies that have a strong focus on rural areas. The focus of the UK agriculture act on environment and public goods may act as an overarching element within this scenario because of its impact on the agricultural sector and rural areas.

6.34   Under this scenario – and perhaps under scenario 2 – there could be the opportunity to reinforce a UK-wide network of rural development (or creation of a brand new one), to enable sharing of information, practices and perhaps improve cooperation within the UK. Under this scenario there is also the chance for active meaningful engagement at international level, leading to cooperation projects, based on the policy statements and the commitment to rural development, subject to policy development at an EU level.

6.35   **Scenario 2** - In this scenario there is a weaker commitment to rural development, where place-based policies have a wider scope, i.e. they are not specifically focussed on rural areas. The funding streams would also support a wider range of activities. Given the current state of the elements available this is the most likely scenario. This context would probably entail a competitive process for accessing funding resources with the risk of low take-up or availability for rural stakeholders, especially if allocations of funding are result-oriented rather than needs-based.

6.36   In this scenario a rural network might still exist albeit not necessarily in its current format. It may have an important role to play firstly to ensure visibility and promote the engagement of rural stakeholders in a wider funding landscape. It can perhaps even provide an enhanced role of representing their views in a wider forum of economic development and place-based policies that are not just focussed on rural areas. In this scenario there would still be the opportunity to develop networking opportunities across the UK and at international level, but they would probably take a much less formal approach and would need careful development. In this scenario a bottom-up approach to local development would probably be more difficult due to the lack of policy focus and funding commitment. Therefore, there may be a stronger role to play for a network and the Support Unit in order to maintain the engagement and results achieved so far.

6.37   **Scenario 3** - In this scenario there is a minimum level of policy focus on rural areas and rural development, a lack of dedicated funding and support for stakeholders. Given the economic and geographical characteristics of Wales and the policy statements of Welsh Government so far, this is an unlikely scenario to materialise in the medium or long term. However, there is a risk

that it will be the likely situation for the very short term of transitioning out of the EU and also transitioning out of the current rural development provisions, as underpinned by the EU programmes until 20203. The main risk of the scenario is the loss of the knowledge and results built so far in at last the three iterations of Rural Development Programmes in Wales. Nevertheless, a possible role of a Support Unit could be to capitalise on the experience gained, and contribute to the development of other economic development initiatives of the Welsh Government.

> *What feasible **options** of activity and support exist to replicate or improve upon the positive effect and impact of the RDP and WRNSU?*
>
> *What are the most preferable options and models for supporting sustainable rural development in Wales for each potential post Brexit scenario and why?*

6.38   The main element that is common to all scenarios is that in a post-Brexit period there will be major changes that will affect the whole rural development environment. This has been picked up for instance in the Welsh Government workshop on EU Exit Scenarios:

> *"Change is the only certainty […] There is significant risk that rapid unmanaged disruptive change in the economy as a result of Brexit could have negative impacts on rural communities, social structures, the Welsh economy and our environment, further exacerbating pressures on natural resources and reducing ecosystem resilience".[24]*

6.39   The changes will affect all stakeholders, in all sectors of rural development. As outlined above the changes will happen in all different areas, whether it is within legal frameworks or reduced funding opportunities. Notwithstanding the specific roles that a rural network and the Support Unit could play in any scenario, there is certainly a role to play in guiding the stakeholders and beneficiaries through the changes that will happen. Given the experience accumulated so far, the depth of knowledge, and the extensive network set

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[24] Summary of EU Exit Scenario Planning Workshops, Paper from the Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs' Evidence and Scenarios Roundtable Sub-Working Group, February 2018

up, the Support Unit is well placed to provide at least help and support to those that will operate in rural areas. Depending on the remit that will be assigned there is also the potential for the rural network and the Support Unit to steer and lead the changes to the benefit of the stakeholders.

"Rural communities will need leadership, clear direction and new skills to adapt to the changes on the way".[25]

6.40   In all three scenarios there are possible roles, or at least activities, that a future Support Unit and a rural network could be playing. *Table 8.2 - Potential roles for a WRNSU in the Post Brexit scenarios* below provides some suggestions grouped by different headings, under each scenario. The elements of cooperation are probably the most interesting as they enable the network to play a specific role that not many other outfits within the Welsh Government can play, at least in terms of rural organisations, and it builds on some of the experiences of the current programme. The information and networking aspects are also interesting as they enable the SU to capitalise on current experience and at least maintain relationships with groups and stakeholders informed.

6.41   The LEADER approach, the LAGs, and the networks built so far, are probably the most difficult elements to include in the forecast as they are heavily dependent on future policy and funding arrangements. However, as they are the less structured groups, but still likely to play a role in any future place-based policy, the SU could play a valuable role in supporting them in the transition to the post-Brexit scenario, and perhaps help build their strengths to a national (Welsh) level network.

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[25] Ibidem

Table 8.1 - Summary of scenarios

	Policy framework	Legal framework	Funding framework	Other elements
Scenario 1	• Clear Welsh & UK rural policies • WG to keep WRN policy • Synergy with other Welsh place-based policies • Connection with EU policies	• Dedicated legal instruments for rural development (UK & Wales) • Connection with international programmes	• Dedicated Welsh pot of funding for RD • Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) with RD support	• Welsh Rural Network • UK Rural Network • Possibility to join EU projects • Continuation of LAG and LEADER types of approach
Scenario 2	• Weak UK policy on RD • Some WG policy objectives • No connection with EU rural policy or CAP	• Welsh legal instruments for agriculture and only partially for RD. • Some legal instruments for local development (rural & urban)	• Shared pot of funding for economic development covering rural and urban areas (Welsh Framework) • Low level of match funding from private and community sectors	• WRN within existing future networks (NRW?) • Informal UK network • Weak local community approach • Informal contacts with EU and international partners
Scenario 3	• No focus on rural development or economic development policies. • Non-alignment (clash) of agricultural policies across the UK.	• No specific instruments for RD.	• No funding earmarked for rural areas. • No funding from Welsh or UK governments.	• No rural network at all • Sectors working separately • Weak or absent community development

Table 8.2 - Potential roles for a WRNSU in the Post Brexit scenarios

	Scenario 1	*Scenario 2*	*Scenario 3*
Networking	• Maintain existing and develop new national and international contacts. • Active participation in UK RDP network • Maintain existing LAGs and create a Welsh network.	• Maintain informal contacts with stakeholders across the UK • Foster contacts outside the UK • Support local development approaches where possible.	• Nurture existing networking contacts (regional, national, and where possible international level).
Governance / advocacy	• Active support to a Welsh rural network • Represent network on stakeholder groups in Wales and UK.	• Represent rural interests in relevant policy fora at Welsh and UK level • Liaise with regional partnership and provide support.	• Continue to liaise with relevant groups at local and regional level to facilitate intervening changes.
Cooperation	• Proactive role in developing cooperation projects. • Arrange study visits and events	• Contribute to cooperation activities of Welsh Government and Local Authorities.	• Act as antenna to possible cooperation activities in the UK and abroad.
Information	• Build on current information and dissemination activities • Develop innovative communication services for rural stakeholders to enable change	• Provide information and support to stakeholders on post Brexit context. • Continue to promote best practices and share examples.	• Contribute as information tools of WG departments and other organisations in Wales to promote rural development.
Funding	• Support access to funding schemes through dedicated services • Promote access to national and international funding programmes relevant to rural groups and beneficiaries.	• Support access to funding programmes (training, seminars) • Contribute to the preparation and design of WG funding programmes (rural proofing).	• Provide information services on funding opportunities relevant to rural

Table 8.3 – Current and future context

Policy framework	Legal framework	Funding framework
Current context		
CAP (Pillar 2)m (LEADER) Cohesion Policy (CLLD) Rural Development Plan	ESI regulations CAP regulations WG guidelines	EAFRD WG match funding Other EU
Future context		
CAP 2021-2027 Securing Wales' future WG - Our Land Taking Wales forward	UK Common frameworks UK Agriculture bill UK Internal market bill	UK Shared Prosperity Fund Regional investments in Wales City deals

7. Case Studies

7.1   In this section we present three case studies that highlight different aspects of best practice by National Rural Networks identified across Europe. The case studies have been selected to compliment the focus on the WRNSU.

7.2   Wallonia (Belgium) was selected as it closely resembles Wales' position as a non-state NRN, instead serving a sub-state region. The Wallonia Rural Network also stands out for its inclusivity and degree of engagement with its rural constituents. Its focus on thematic working, and the development of an "innovation roadmap" also highlight the role that a rural network can play in further fostering innovation within rural development.

7.3   Finland was selected due to its widely recognised excellence as a rural network. Their innovation and high degree of engagement with rural communities marks them out as a key example of best practice for a rural network.

7.4   Finally, Ireland was selected as an example of a successful outsourced network, comprised of a consortium representing different stakeholders within rural development.

Introduction

Belgium has no single national RDP or network, rather two regional RDPs, one for Flanders and one for Wallonia. The Walloon and Flemish NSUs meet on a regular basis to update on each other work and to identify possible joint activities. Occasionally, the two networks co-organise events and other activities. In this sense the case of Belgium is similar to that of the UK with no national network and an informal cooperation taking place between the four nations of the UK.

This case study focuses on the Walloon RDP and NSU activities, as Wallonia has geographic and economic features similar to Wales and operates in a similar political context at national level; at the same time it has a different delivery model and approach, therefore it is useful to look their practices and achievements for possible inspiration.

Basic country details

Wallonia has a population of 2.2 million over a size of almost 15,000km2, which makes it a fairly densely populated area at 148 inhabitants/km2. The region has six urban centres of medium size and no large city. The agricultural land covers around 42% of the area. Most farms are medium sized and the tendency in the last few years is towards and an increasing size whilst the overall number is reducing. This intensification of the agricultural industry is creating pressure on the environment. Therefore, the Walloon RDP focuses on Priority 4, the protection of the environment, natural landscape and biodiversity. An important part of the budget is dedicated to measure 11 supporting the biological agriculture.

The Walloon Rural Network and RDP

The Walloon rural network (RWDR) is led by the Walloon Network Assembly, representing 34 organisations. The assembly determines the priorities and actions for the network and adopts a wide approach to enable linkages between the areas covered by the RDP and other development policies. Under the assembly there are thematic groups working on themes such as biodiversity, social dimension, and social forestry.

The Walloon RDP (PWDR) has a total budget of around €654m, of which around €264m is from EAFRD. The total budget for Technical Assistance is around €10m divided into two phases. The Wallonia Rural Network (RWDR) has a budget of €2,478,900.

For the first phase (2015-2018) the TA budget was split into two main funding streams: 46% on actions to increase administrative capacity of public administration in the delivery of the RDP, and 54% on the animation activity for the network.

The administrative capacity funding stream has enabled the Walloon department for agriculture natural resources and environment to have the equivalent of 12 FTE staff complete the closure of the previous programming period, improve the delivery of current schemes and prepare the launch of the current national

network (RwDR). It has also provided continuity in the knowledge base of the administration and dealing with stakeholders and service users.

The second part of the TA has been dedicated to the **animation activity** of the PwDR, the equivalent of the WRNSU. The activity is completely **outsourced** to an external service provider which has 6 members of staff. The service provider sits on the monitoring committee of the Walloon RPD.

Recommendations / lessons learned

The support unit or CAR (Cellule Animation du Reseau) has carried out the main functions of communications, dissemination of best practice, and training linked to Art 54. The two main characteristics of the CAR approach have been **proactivity** and **active engagement of stakeholders**.

Some of the specific activities that have been particularly beneficial to the network[26] are summarised here below.

1. Inclusive set up of the work plan - At the beginning of 2015 to prepare the workplan of the RwDR the CAR has carried out an analysis of the needs of the network and an extensive consultation with stakeholders, through events and workshops. This led to the creation of ten Thematic Groups (TG) and the creation of the innovation roadmap (see below). Some more thematic groups have been set up later on. The TGs cover a wide range of areas, including health infrastructure, energy and agriculture, tourism, financial and funding instruments. This initial exercise has enabled the preparation of a shared and comprehensive workplan for the network. Furthermore, it has put the basis for deeper networking cooperation by bringing together all the stakeholders from the very beginning of the launch of the RWDR.

2. Innovation roadmap - The CAR has been entrusted with the role of "broker" of innovation for the whole RWDR. One of the TGs has been specifically dedicated to innovation and has developed a number of tools and stimulated RDP beneficiaries to adopt innovative approaches. The group has organised an extensive number of seminars and events which have contributed to the creation of an innovation culture defined as AKIS Walloon - Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System. It has also developed a detailed mapping of the groups and stakeholders involved in innovation in the region. The roadmap is an active tool that the network can use to further promote innovation and beneficiaries can adopt to introduce new practices in their sectors. The innovation roadmap has ultimately enabled the progress of the concept of innovation in the agricultural sector, thanks

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[26] *Evaluation du Programme wallon de développement rural 2014-2020.* (Dec. 2019) (https://agriculture.wallonie.be/evaluation-du-pwdr)

to a systemic approach supported by a range of learning and dissemination techniques and engaging and involving a large number of stakeholders at a regional, national and European level engaging directly with the EIP.

3. Training for LAGs - After the initial selection of 20 LAGs by the RWDR, 5 of which were new in this period, the CAR has been instrumental in preparing and delivering training sessions to build the knowledge and confidence of the local action groups to engage with development at local level. The training modules have covered many technical aspects and the sessions have been attended by over 200 participants initially. Over the following years other training sessions have been organised attracting over 400 participants.

4. Support for cooperation – The CAR has been also actively involved in supporting RDP beneficiaries with cooperation projects. The immediate results are 15 projects launched in the first three years, of which 9 are interregional and 6 are transnational. The support of the CAR has been crucial in the preparation of the projects and helping to disseminate the benefit at regional level to the RWDR.

FINLAND

Introduction

Finland has two RDPs, one for the mainland and one for the autonomous region of the Åland Islands. This case study focuses on the mainland RDP. Established in 2007 the Finnish rural network is one of the oldest in the EU. It brings together the various actors involved in the rural development programmes, including Leader action groups, associations, advisory organisations and other stakeholders.

Basic country details

Finland size is 338,440 km2 with a total population of 5.5 million inhabitants, making it the most sparsely populated country in the EU with only 16 people per km2. Around 95% of the country is rural and around 87% of the land is forested and 8% agricultural. Finnish agriculture is mainly based on family-farming type of agriculture. There is a relatively high number of farms and their size is fairly small.

The Finnish Rural network and RDP

1. Resources (staff and funding)

The rural network **Support Unit** has 6 members of staff. A total funding of €10m, of which €4.2m is EAFRD, the remaining €5.8m is from public funds.

2. Management / government structure.

The ministry for agriculture and forestry is the managing authority for the RDP. The NSU is within Finnish Agency for Rural Affairs, which is the paying agency. The NSU has a workplan monitored and informed by the Steering Group which is set up for the duration of the programme. The SG has temporary thematic sub-groups, lasting up to two years; they cover themes such as environment, entrepreneurship, innovations, and young people and carry out specific projects/activities network activities.

3. Rural development schemes running

The total RDP funding in Finland is €8.3bn (€2.3bn EAFRD).The Finnish RDP covers all 6 priorities and concentrate about 60% of the funding on **Priority 4** (Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry). Which is mostly allocated to two measures: Areas with Natural Constraints (**ANC**) and Agri-Environment/Climate schemes (**AEC**). Under this priority there is also a specific measure (M16) for cooperation with a budget of €12m.

4. Number of regional groups (LEADER or others)

The three main stakeholder groups for the RDP and the NSU are: 15 ELY Centres (Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment); 54 LAGs; the local authorities. The involvement of the ELY centres enables cooperation with the initiatives and funding from national/central government level; local authorities are mainly involved in farmers payment.

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The Role of LEADER

Being a very sparsely populated country with over 4,000 villages, local community development and citizen engagement play a very strong role in Finland. This is reflected in the high number of LAGs. They bring a strong added value; for instance in 2018 they generated around 6 million hours of volunteering.

The national dimension

LEADER has a national dimension, for instance there is a national LEADER website (www.leadersuomi.fi). The national Support Unit plays a key role in helping to run the initiative and the website.

Local development activities have a national dimension and a governance structure articulated at national, regional, and provincial levels. Suomen Kylät is the association of villages, a national umbrella organization for local development, community well-being, and inclusion. The organization represents all the 54 LAGs and more than 4,000 villages and some urban groups as well. There are also provincial associations with similar functions, and they feed into the national association.[27][28]

The international dimension

When the Finnish network was launched, cooperation was initiated through networks in the Nordic and Baltic countries, and this is still going today. The national association also has an international committee which promotes and supports engagement with international initiatives.

LEADER has sub-measures dedicated to supporting cooperation at all levels, including interregional cooperation and international cooperation projects. In fact, international cooperation funding may be incorporated as part of a project when essential for achieving project objectives. Funding can be also pulled from other sources, giving maximum flexibility to the actions.[29]

Recommendations / lessons learned

1. The local level of activity (LEADER) can benefit from a regional and **national support framework** to help coordinate activities, facilitate knowledge transfer, and develop a sense of purpose.

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[27] https://suomenkylat.fi/

[28] As a result of determined work, Finnish village activities and Leader activities are already known internationally as an active, productive and co-operative network. The Finnish Village Operations Association and its networks at all levels are an organization that develops international co-operation and activities and influences international rural policy.

[29] Finnish local developers have the opportunity and obligation to make an international impact. Finland's experience, know-how and know-how are sought in international forums. Finland is being evaluated e.g. In the light of the OECD country qualifications, as a leading country in rural policy and local development.

2. The **cooperation element** (including international) is built-in in the fabric of project development and governance structure, building on existing links.

3. Communication: the national network support unit website has a dynamic calendar of events with a sophisticated filtering system and registered users and partners can load their events directly. It makes it easier to have in one place all the events going on at national level. This may provide a useful example to the WRNSU of how to best communicate a calendar of events.[30]

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[30] https://www.maaseutu.fi/en/trainings-and-events

Introduction

Ireland has one national RDP. In the current and previous programming period the Support Unit functions have been contracted from the Managing Authority to external organisations.

The Irish RDP model can be an interesting case study for the governance and delivery aspects. Furthermore, it is the only land border that the UK has with an EU country which makes it especially relevant.

Basic country details

Ireland's size is around 70,000 km2 of which over 98% are rural areas, and has a population of around 4 million inhabitants, making it a fairly sparsely populated area. Of the total area, agricultural land covers 71.6 % and forest land 11.5 %. Two main issues tackled by the RDP are GHG and generational change in farming.

Ireland's total Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions per capita are among the highest in the EU, of which with 32% are from the agricultural sector, against the EU average of 8%. Less than 7% of Irish farmers are under the age of 35 thus special effort is needed in terms of generational renewal.

The Irish Rural network and RDP

1. Resources (staff and funding)

The Irish Rural Network Support Unit has 5 members of staff. The funding allocated to the IRN is €3m, of which around €1.6 comes from the EAFRD. The overall budget for the RDP for Ireland for the 7-year period between 2014-2020 is €4.15 billion.

2. Management / government structure.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is the managing authority for Ireland's Rural Development Programme (RDP). DAFM monitors and evaluates the delivery of the RDP on an annual basis.

There is one national Network Support Unit, which is outsourced to an external service provider made up of a consortium led by Irish Rural Link in partnership with The Wheel, NUI Galway and Philip Farrelly & Co.. Irish Rural Link is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. As a body, it advocates for policies that support the interests of community groups in in disadvantaged and marginalised rural areas. The Wheel is Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises.

The NSU and the Managing Authority meet quarterly to discuss progress made and potential actions for the upcoming quarter.

The Managing Authority has provided the NSU with a contact list specifying who are responsible for the various schemes under the RDP. The NSU therefore makes contact with the individuals responsible for the different schemes and regularly coordinate activities of the RDP delivery.

3. Rural development schemes running

There are 29 LAGS set up operating at subregional level. The NSU provides a subsite within the main Website with information, bulletins, and an interactive map.

A central priority of the Irish RDP is restoring, preserving, and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry. Three quarters of the funds is allocated to this priority, targeting over 1 million hectares of agricultural area.

Recommendations / lessons learned

1. **The Governance** - The function of the Support Unit for the Irish Rural Network Support is contracted to an external organisation. It is a consortium of four partners that represent different sectors and experiences: rural development itself, the voluntary sector, the farming industry and the Higher education sector.

   The consortium leader is **Irish Rural Link**, itself a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development. **The Wheel** is Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, bringing the experience and knowledge of engaging with community stakeholders. The **National University of Ireland** (Galway) is part of the consortium with members from the Rural Studies Research Cluster of the University. Finally, **Philip Farrelly & Co** is a private farm advisory company with experience in EU policy and projects.
   The consortium operates through the Coordination group, the decision-making body, which where all members are represented with equal rights. The CCG meets quarterly to review activities and determine future ones.

2. A key benefit of the model is the ability of the SU to cover all the areas of rural development, from private to community sector, from innovation to local development. The consortium does not deliver RDP schemes directly, but it rather operates as strong liaison organisation across the range of stakeholders. The involvement of organisations with area specific knowledge enables a meaningful engagement with the different stakeholders involved in rural development, and access to a wide range of expertise.

3. The inclusion of NUI Galway in the consortium has resulted in mutually beneficial links between researchers and policy-makers. The direct line of communication between researchers and policy-makers has resulted in researchers being able to explore topics relevant for policy, with policy-makers being able to influence the areas of rural issues considered for research. This improves the evidence-base for decision-

making. Researchers have also been able to better inform policy-making through this improved relationship.

8. Options for Delivery: What should a Wales Rural Network look like?

8.1   In this section, we review the findings from the extensive fieldwork carried out as part of the evaluation and set out possible options for future delivery of a Wales Rural Network.

8.2   The options considered in this section are informed by three sources. Firstly, they will reflect ideas collected from stakeholders on the "ideal" or "best practice" delivery of a rural network. Secondly, they are drawn from the case studies, and from other NRNs encountered during the research. Finally, options for the future delivery of the Wales Rural Network and for the Support Unit will take into account the possible future scenarios outlined in section 6.

8.3   As many of the ideas collected from stakeholders reflect an "ideal scenario," some of the options considered below are ambitious. However, they set out what stakeholders felt would have been the best possible form of support or service from the Wales Rural Network and Support Unit and should therefore inspire future

iterations of a rural network. This section however will also consider options for less favourable future funding scenarios.

8.4   Within each heading under consideration below, options and ideas for a best practice rural network are set out. Some options will not be mutually compatible, and key decisions that will have to be made regarding the future structure and purpose of the Wales Rural Network are explored. Finally, within each heading, an assessment will be made as to how the three future scenarios identified in section 6 would impact the possible options.

Structure, Management and Governance

8.5   A key question for a future rural network is how it should be structured; specifically:

Should it sit within Welsh Government or be tendered out to a third party?

8.6   Stakeholders had mixed views on the question of whether the network should sit within Welsh Government or be granted greater independence, or indeed a combination of both.

8.7   The benefits of sitting within Welsh Government were noted as being greater access to Welsh Government resources and personnel, and a greater degree of continuity from the current service. Several stakeholders within LEADER claimed that the ability to send queries to the WRNSU, and for the WRNSU to be able to go to the Welsh Government to source answers to questions that arose was a helpful service. Having this direct access to those administrating the RDP is a benefit of the current arrangement.

8.8   While initially, significant limitations were placed on the WRNSUs ability to quickly share content on their website and social media due to their positioning within the Welsh Government, it is evident that this significant hurdle has been overcome.

8.9   A number of stakeholders spoke of the advantages of having a Wales Rural Network that sat outside of Welsh Government. Options floated included having the Wales Rural Network operated by a social enterprise, a private company, or a consortium or partnership of organisations as seen in Ireland. The potential benefits of such an arrangement were touted as a greater freedom and autonomy to be responsive and dynamic. A steering group member felt that were a third party to run the WRN, then they would have more impetus to perform, as their reputation would be "on the line."

8.10   Multiple stakeholders noted that independence from Welsh Government would enable the network to function better in some respects. It would be freer to advocate on behalf of rural interests, and its perception among stakeholders may improve as they come to see it as more that "just another Welsh Government body."

8.11   A key learning from the Ireland Rural Network case study was their assertion that sitting independently of government enables the network to better implement a rural development plan. This was stated as beneficial because government departments are often reactive, having to be responsive to political pressures; "dealing with what's in front of you" (Irish NRN Consortium Member). Sitting outside of government can provide space to pursue a development plan or roadmap unencumbered by the issues faced by government departments. The network would in theory be freer to pursue a work plan unincumbered by "politics."

8.12   Siting outside of government was also described as having enabled the Irish Rural Network to connect with a much broader group of people on the ground. Sitting as an intermediary between government and the rural development sector led to a more positive perception of the network's role, with stakeholder "seeing the NRN now as a place that will actually promote their work, and has their interests at heart" (Irish NRN Consortium Member).

8.13   Greater independence could enable the WRNSU to fulfil further roles, such as providing a strengthened forum for policy discussions. Greater independence can encourage the network to facilitate a more open forum to discuss the priorities and interests of stakeholders in rural development. This would encourage rural development stakeholders to set their agenda, with the network acting as an intermediary between stakeholders and government.

8.14   A third possibility regarding the relationship of the network to the government is a hybrid approach, with certain aspects of the network's delivery contracted out. These aspects could include event planning and delivery, innovation support, communications, and the production of case studies.

8.15   Other UK and European NRNs have taken a variety of approaches to the structure of NRNs vis-à-vis government.

8.16   The Scotland Rural Network, for example, has sat within the Scottish Government's Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate since 2014, having previously been contracted out. A noted negative of the previous pre-2014 contractual arrangement was that the contract with the Scottish Government required a 0.5 FTE team member to manage.

8.17   Since 2014, the SRN has contracted out some of its work, including some of the production of videos or case studies. The SRN has also contracted out the running of the Rural Innovation Support Service, which has been delivered by the Soil Association. This was due to a lack of in-house expertise.

8.18   Ireland's National Rural Network provides a valuable case study of an arrangement in which the Rural Network has been contracted out to a consortium which includes the National University of Ireland (Galway), The Wheel (Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations), Philip Farrely & Co. (a private farm advisory company), and Irish Rural Link as a lead partner, which is itself a

national network of organisations and individuals for sustainable rural development.

8.19   The benefit of this arrangement is that the partners cover a great deal of the areas of rural development, with links to a wide range of stakeholders, from business to academia and the voluntary sector serving rural communities.

Rural Network presence on governing bodies

8.20   It was noted in part I that the absence of the Managing Authority Group was a cause for the lack of engagement between the certain stakeholders such as scheme and policy leads and the WRNSU. The WRNSU used to sit on the Managing Authority Group, along with a deputy director, and as policy and scheme leads would interact with this group, there would be a clear avenue of communication between them and the WRNSU.

8.21   In a post-RDP rural development scheme, it would be advisable for the WRNSU to sit on the governing bodies that interact with and oversee the sector. One example would be an equivalent of the current Programme Monitoring Committee (PMC). Whereas previously, a PMC covered only rural development, the PMC in the current delivery period has covered all European Structural Funds. Having the Rural Network on the equivalent of the PMC and on any other governance bodies would be beneficial as it provides the Network with avenues to directly interact with all sectors of rural development and to be able to assess their needs. This role would enable the Network to tailor its programme based on the feedback received at the highest level of programme or scheme governance.

The Steering Group and its role

8.22   A number of suggestions were made as to how the steering group of the rural network could be better implemented in future. The exact

role of the steering group within the governance structure of the WRNSU will depend on whether the WRN remains within the Welsh Government or is positioned differently.

8.23   Suggestions were made by steering group members and other stakeholders as to how the steering group could be better integrated into the working of the WRNSU. An important suggestion from a steering group member was that whatever steps are taken towards establishing the Wales Rural Network post-RDP, a steering group needs to be involved from the outset in its development. Under scenarios 1 and 2, involvement of an empowered steering group from the earliest stage is essential to build buy-in and to utilise the expertise available in the rural development sector. This steering group member perceived the steering group's inception as ad hoc, stating that it was formed too late to be able to 'steer' the delivery of the Wales Rural Network. In future, they said, the steering group should be in place in order to influence the development phase of the rural network, and to provide their expertise at this crucial stage.

8.24   A steering group member noted that in future, the steering group could include a high-ranking civil servant as its chair. Noting that the steering group had been unable to exercise influence or authority over the running of the WRN, they suggested that having a high ranking civil servant chairing the group would enable it to have access to decision-makers within Welsh Government. They suggested that the responsibility of chairing the group should sit with a permanent employee of the Welsh Government as opposed to a minister to ensure continuity. This suggestion address the concern that the fact that the steering group chair was an elected member of the steering group itself resulted in a lack of closeness to decision makers and influential figures within Welsh Government, and contributed to its overall weakness.

A key point raised regarding representation on the steering group was the lack of representation from private businesses. Ensuring that private businesses representation on the steering group is

representative of the broad interests of private rural businesses in Wales would be a challenge. However, it is important that their voice is represented on the steering group as rural businesses are key to developing a resilient rural economy.

Remit and Activities

8.25   It is necessary to examine the future remit of the Wales Rural Network. A common criticism was a lack of understanding of the WRNs role and purpose among stakeholders beyond the LEADER programme.

8.26   An issue identified with the current delivery of the Wales Rural Network is that its remit is at odds with its resourcing, activities, and support from Welsh Government. From the current programme period, the role of the WRN has expanded outwards from servicing LEADER to cover the entirety of the RDP.

8.27   This change in role was a challenge for the WRNSU – and indeed for other NRNs. As one steering group member put it, by the time the decision to serve the entirety of the RDP was made, "other branches of the RDP already had an organisational and promotional setup." The stakeholder described there being no space for the WRN in an area where Farming Connect consumed a lot of the opportunities for engagement. As a result of this challenge, the level of engagement with the wider RDP has been inconsistent.

Remit and Stakeholder Expectations

8.28   The challenge of having to cover the entire RDP was not helped by the lack of awareness of the WRNs remit by those outside of LEADER. A stakeholder described the operations of the WRN as opaque. Transparency can be better achieved with a clearer remit, allowing all stakeholders to have clear expectations for the network's role, and how it relates to their organisations or operations. A

common statement from stakeholders outside of LEADER was that they did not know what exactly the WRNSU did and what services it offered. More clearly communicating the WRN's remit to stakeholders would have resulted in a better understanding of the service that they offered, even if it was limited to collecting information for newsletters and case studies. In future, clearer communication of the WRNs role would enable a greater transparency and establish stakeholder expectations for the WRNSUs role.

8.29   A lesson learnt from this funding period is therefore that however the network is structured following the end of RDP funding, stakeholders across rural development in Wales should have a clearer understanding of its remit. This can be achieved a number of ways.

8.30   Firstly, by scoping the rural development sector to assess how a network service can add value to their operations, the WRN can be set up from the outset to deliver a valuable service to key stakeholders. Listening to stakeholders on how the network can best support them, then implementing the service along these lines, will ensure that the WRNSUs remit reflects the needs of engaged stakeholders, and is therefore clearer to stakeholders.

Secondly, formalising the relationship between the WRNSU and scheme leads would lead to key players having a better understanding of the WRNSUs services. This was noted as a weakness of the status quo by one stakeholder, who stated that "many scheme leads aren't in touch with them [the WRNSU] or using the WRNSU. This is partly because there isn't a mandate or requirement to do it, nor is there an easy or agreed approach."

Formalising this relationship with a formal introduction at the commencement of a scheme, ensuring regular catch-ups or check-ins during its lifespan, and putting in place easy access to the WRNSUs services would ensure this issue is addressed in future.

8.31   Thirdly, by continually engaging with stakeholders across rural development, and regularly surveying their priorities and needs, the

WRNSU can ensure that they remain relevant to stakeholders. This approach would entail periodic "market research" of the rural development sector to stay up-to-date on its needs. Furthermore, this regular contact with stakeholders would improve both buy-in from stakeholders and the transparency of the WRNs operations, as stakeholders will have a two-way channel to influence the WRNs operations and receive relevant information about their work.

8.32 Finally, the WRNSU could explore the possibility of a membership structure for certain stakeholders. This could take the form of an additional type of membership structure whereby stakeholders such as rural scheme policy and administrative leads, private businesses, community groups, voluntary organisations and research and education institutions could sign up. The purpose of this additional membership structure could be to invite a deeper level of engagement from these stakeholders in determining the direction and activities of the network. This could involve regularly surveying these members on their needs and thoughts, letting them cast indicative "votes" on decisions and policy, getting their input on the topics for thematic working, and inviting these members to an (online) annual general meeting to discuss and influence the following year's activities. This membership structure would therefore sit somewhere between the steering group and newsletter recipients. Such a membership structure could result in a great degree of engagement and cooperation, as well as better buy-in, with stake holders across rural development that have been hard to engage previously.

Scope of the WRN

8.33 With the RDP coming to an end, the Welsh Government is no longer required to conform with Article 54 of the RDP which sets out the remit of rural networks. There is therefore an opportunity to re-shape the network's remit and scope.

8.34   While the potential future scenarios, and the degree of policy and financial support for rural development will certainly shape the remit of the WRNSU, other factors may shape its future remit also. For example, even under scenario 1, there may be a lack of political will to commit to a network function.

8.35   Some options to consider are as follows.

8.36   Under scenario 1, but also potentially under scenario 2, the Welsh Government has the option to provide sufficient support to the Wales Rural Network to allow it to fulfil a strengthened and more strategic role in rural development. Many stakeholders spoke of the benefits that a more proactive, strengthened rural network could deliver. The options and rationale for a strengthened rural network are set out in the remainder of this section, but benefits would include a greater strategic coordination of the rural development sector, improved linkages between projects, greater thematic working across the rural sector, bringing stakeholders together, and more hands-on support for CLLD delivery.

8.37   A strengthened remit would not necessarily be a significant break from the existing remit under Article 54. A stakeholder noted that the Article 54 regulations were in fact quite broad and were not necessarily a constraint on activity. The main difference under this option would be a better resourced and supported WRNSU – a WRNSU supported up to its full remit and capacity – with a clear agenda and purpose to proactively engage with stakeholders, following a rural development roadmap.

8.38   Another option to consider would be to expand the WRNs remit to also include working with FLAGs as a key stakeholder. There are opportunities for synergies between LAGs and FLAGs and for cooperation and mutual learning between two schemes engaged in CLLD.

8.39   Alternatively, under scenarios 1 and 2, the Welsh Government may decide to capitalise on the ability to now limit or reduce the remit of the Wales Rural Network under future funding schemes.

8.40   Considering the challenges faced in expanding support and engagement beyond LEADER, an option is therefore to identify where the network was most engaged and productive, and to formally remove responsibilities that it found challenging. For example, this may involve limiting the network's responsibility to LAGs and CLLD and removing the requirements to engage with sectors that currently fall under the broader remit of the RDP. Moreover, it could decide to limit the engagement with stakeholders beyond those involved in LEADER to only the collection of material for the WRN website and social media channels. Under scenarios 1 and 2, this would look like a network established predominantly for the purposes of supporting CLLD and the descendants of LEADER (whether this covers urban and rural local development is as yet unclear), with limited involvement with broader rural stakeholders, mostly in communications capacity.

8.41   A benefit of being defined more narrowly in this way would be that the boundaries of the WRNSUs responsibilities could be better known and understood by stakeholders, and the efforts of the WRNSU could be better concentrated on their area of greater success. Under scenario 2, where there is a shared pot of funding for rural and urban local development and limited Welsh and UK government support for rural development, concentrating the rural network's resources on rural LAGs that experience reduced levels of funding and support may be beneficial.

Communications

8.42   Communications were noted as a strength of the WRNSU, with the website in particular being spoken of highly. The WRNSUs communications through the website, social media and its newsletter

played an important role for many stakeholders. While the WRNSU's communications shares the rural sector space with Gwlad, the website and newsletter fill a particular need, with Gwlad and the WRNSUs communications complimenting one another well, serving different audiences.

8.43 In various future funding scenarios, it is essential that the communications function of the WRNSU continue. This role will be especially important in the transition from the RDP to post-RDP funding sources, as the change will result in a degree of uncertainty for rural stakeholders. The WRN should therefore capitalise on its position as an important source of information for stakeholders operating in new policy and funding contexts. In a time of uncertainty, having an established and recognised source of information on rural development is essential. One such role, for example, can be communicating new or alternative funding opportunities, collecting together information on potentially disparate sources of funding for projects traditionally funded through the RDP.

8.44 Even under scenario 3, in which a network would be unlikely to be funded, there would need to be a continuity in the service provided by the website and newsletter currently. Through disseminating information about rural development that goes beyond agriculture, the website and newsletter serve a key constituency of rural development that may otherwise be subsumed under the agriculture sector. Under scenarios 1 and 2, the communications function of the WRNSU should continue in order to build on the progress made to date.

Networking (inc. facilitating Welsh, UK, EU and wider cooperation activities)

8.45 Networking is a key function of the Wales Rural Network, and the type and scope of networking activities in future that the WRNSU can facilitate is an important area to explore. At present, the WRNSU facilitates networking in a number of ways within Wales, including

engagement with LEADER administrators, hosting workshops and events, and collecting information and evidence from actors within the RDP.

8.46   Under scenario 1, should rural development be adequately funded and supported, the WRNSU can play a strengthened role in networking within Wales. Networking can be strengthened across multiple fronts.

Networking within Wales

8.47   More proactive facilitation of networking between LAGs would be beneficial to the delivery of CLLD projects. Without a network function, one stakeholder stated that there was a risk of insularity and fragmentation between LAGs. This strengthened networking could take the form of the WRNSU organising and supporting regular meetings between LAGs.

8.48   Many LEADER administrators spoke of their desire to see greater inter-working between LAGs. As noted in section 2 above, some of these key stakeholders were critical of the WRN's passive role in LAG cooperation and inter-working. LEADER administrators spoke of the potential for the WRNSU to have further aided co-operation opportunities and networking between LAGs, especially on a Wales-wide basis. Regional networking by LAGs were arranged by the LAGs themselves. The south-west LAG group, for example, met regularly, and while the WRNSU attended, it was in a passive role. The south-east LAG group met less frequently but was described by a regular attendee as a forum where they would share ideas. A stakeholder from the south-east noted how there was little interaction with north Wales, but that greater contact with them would have been useful. They added that they felt there had been a schism between north and south in the delivery of LEADER, which speaks to the further need for a great degree of networking and interaction between all LAGs.

8.49   While distance and the inability to travel to regular meetings on the other side of Wales was noted as an obstacle to interaction, in future, it is certainly more feasible than ever to have a greater degree of networking and regular contact between LAGs on a Wales-wide basis using videoconferencing options.

8.50   The benefit of greater networking between LAGs is that more emphasis can be placed on thematic interworking. A greater thematic emphasis is key to encouraging synergies between various stakeholders and sectors in rural development in Wales (more on thematic working below). Greater networking and communication between LAGs will also aid innovation. A stakeholder spoke of how the innovation that stems for the LEADER approach works best when LAGs are better able to learn from one another, trialling projects from elsewhere in different contexts and circumstances. Working together encourages more sharing of project ideas and can facilitate more experimentation with ideas as they are developed, tweaked, and assessed in different Local Authority contexts.

8.51   Under less favourable future funding scenarios, such as scenario 2, the WRNSU can still perform a networking function for LAGs. Under a place-based or region-centred funding scenario, should rural development be in competition with urban interests, networking and cooperation between rural LAGs that miss out on future funding will become all the more important. A rural network can play a key role in encouraging sharing ideas and resources through cooperation to counter any disadvantage. In this scenario, both thematic and geographic-based cooperation projects may be more desirable for Local Authorities as it would enable them to pool resources to gain funding for CLLD projects servicing larger areas and populations.

8.52   More proactive facilitation of networking can go beyond LAGs and CLLD and can encompass networking between all stakeholders in rural development. This point will be developed further under the Strategic Oversight heading below, but by facilitating thematic events, the WRNSU can bring together stakeholders in rural development to

network and even cooperate around important themes within the sector.

Networking with other UK NRNs

8.53   On a UK level, there is still considerable uncertainty as to whether there will be a rural network framework across the UK and within all four nations. Under scenario 1 outlined in the previous section, there may well be sufficient commitment from Westminster to the idea of a rural network, which could lead to a UK-wide network of networks to replace the ENRD. However, some stakeholders noted the relative absence of a robust English Rural Network, and were concerned as a result that there may be little commitment to a rural network across the border in England. This would indicate also that a UK-wide rural network framework may be unlikely.

8.54   Under scenarios 1 and 2, it will be essential that the WRNSU retain strong connections with other rural networks within the UK. The scale of funding post-RDP may determine whether these are formal or informal links, but efforts should be made regardless to enable the sharing of best practice and the pursuit of relevant cooperation projects. Opportunities were highlighted by stakeholders in Wales and Scotland to continue with cooperation between the two nations. Stakeholders noted that it was important to retain a good working relationship with the Scotland Rural Network in particular as it was a key partner for the Wales Rural Network. The Government of Northern Ireland has yet to decide on the future of its rural network.

Networking with the EU

8.55   A key priority for the Welsh rural development sector in the short-to-medium term is to maintain as best as possible the links and relationships established with other European NRNs. Several stakeholders noted the difficulty of anticipating what a future relationship with the EU and ENRD will look like, with many noting the

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need to "wait and see" at present, and to "find ways of collaborating with EU networks and member states once things settle down" (SRN representative).

8.56   The WRNSU is well placed to continue a degree of interaction with other EU NRNs as a third-party country. This relationship will depend on the details of the Brexit deal that will be made with the EU. The contributions of the WRNSU to the ENRD were spoken of highly, with Wales' enthusiasm for networking at this level commended.

8.57   The extent of the relationship will depend on many factors, such as the resourcing available to the WRNSU, UK, Welsh Government and European Union policy, and the scope of identifiable opportunities. However, under favourable circumstances, activities such as attendance at conferences, contributing best practice examples and case studies to ENRD publications, and the facilitation of links between Welsh and EU rural development projects can potentially continue. It may also be possible to pursue bilateral relationships with EU countries, and the possibility of this should be explored if formal association with the ENRD cannot be maintained.

8.58   A figure at the ENRD suggested that continued interaction with EU countries would be easier if the WRNSU in future mirrored the structure of EU NRNs. This individual argued that for ease of cooperation, and to best harmonise with the activities of other EU NRNs, the WRNSU should not stray too far from the current model.

Networking with countries beyond the EU

8.59   Playing a sufficiently strategic role, the Wales Rural Network would be best placed to represent Welsh rural development projects and priorities with international partners beyond the EU.

8.60   The future direction of cooperation with international partners will depend on the Welsh Government's strategic priorities. Some stakeholders spoke of the possibility of exploring greater links with international partners beyond the European Union, such as Canada,

the USA, New Zealand and Australia, but pursuing these links would need to align with Welsh Government strategy and be sufficiently beneficial to pursue. One stakeholder noted that a logical development would be a smaller number of bilateral connections, based on Welsh Government strategy.

8.61 An example of a potential approach to international cooperation comes from Scotland. A member of the Scotland Rural Network noted Scottish efforts to engage with networks beyond the RDP. This includes engagement work with the Nordic cluster and arctic frontier countries as a potential successor to their involvement with the EU. This aligns with Scottish geopolitical interest. Welsh interests may lie in pursuing links with north Atlantic nations, or in pursuing thematic relationships with international partners.

8.62 Alternative events and networking opportunities can also be pursued through organisations such as the OECD.

Strategic Oversight

8.63 Many stakeholders spoke of the possibility of the Wales Rural Network playing a more proactive strategic role in facilitating and linking together activities within rural Wales.

8.64 The clearest opportunity for a greater strategic role lies with LEADER and CLLD schemes that will follow it; specifically, in proactively linking together LAGs when opportunities arise for cooperation. This is a role that could be played under scenario 1 or 2, though sufficient resourcing would be required to invest time into maintaining a picture of rural development activities, and into communicating opportunities for synergies between stakeholders.

8.65 This greater strategic role, however, would ensure that LAGs are made aware when developing and approving projects of similar work taking place elsewhere. The Rural Network is a vehicle to avoiding duplication. LAGs and LEADER local authority administrators face resource pressures and are not always aware of opportunities that

may be available. An overview function could enable LAGs to save time and strengthen bids for funding through encouraging greater cooperation.

8.66   A stakeholder noted that within CLLD, innovation was often lost due to lessons not being passed on, and a lack of successful adoption of previously piloted projects in new contexts. By playing a more strategic role, the WRNSU can potentially provide more guiding support to facilitate LAGs using their resources better. In the early stages of project development, for example, the WRNSU could facilitate links between LAGs that share an interest in themes or types of projects, which could translate into the sharing of best practice and lessons learned from previous pilots, or a formal cooperation.

8.67   This strategic role can also involve organising thematic events and networking opportunities. The WRNSU could also develop thematic agendas at the start of each year based on the interests and needs of LAGs, guiding improved cooperation across themes such as transport, digital connectivity, renewable energy and young people. This would aid in encouraging greater thematic working across Wales.

8.68   Thematic working can be aided by the Steering Group. The Finland Rural Network, for example, has temporary thematic sub-groups within its Steering Group which cover a range of themes. These come together for a period of around two years to address relevant themes.

8.69   In pursuing thematic activity, much can be learned from the RWDR of Wallonia. The RWDR presents a good example of how thematic working, involving a wide range of stakeholder, can be carried out, and the benefits of such an approach. The Thematic Groups set up by the RWDR have resulted in a shared and comprehensive work plan for the network, developed with stakeholders, and has enabled a deeper level of cooperation across rural development.

8.70   There are also opportunities for a greater strategic role in areas beyond LEADER and CLLD. The WRNSU, due to its position as a body that collects information and evidence from various sectors of

rural development in Wales, can play a more robust role in forging links across rural development. A stakeholder noted that what they would have wanted to see is the WRNSU doing

> "some of the strategic thinking, to have oversight across the RDP and link people together with information and advice that is relevant, or to ask people for information and advice that they can then interpret, process and then disseminate – do some of the thinking."

8.71   A role like this would involve more engagement with a wider range of stakeholders than has been carried out, but would go a long way to addressing siloed working and missed opportunities for cooperation between different sectors. The need for such strategic oversight will be heightened post-RDP, as established schemes and programmes will come to an end. Engaging with replacement schemes and programmes provides an opportunity to gain an overview of the rural development sector, and to assist stakeholders in the sector in coming to understand the opportunities for connections and linkages within the new context.

8.72   Even under scenario 2, where commitment to a rural network and resourcing is less favourable, the WRNSU can play this strategic role to the best of its abilities. The need still exists for oversight, the identification of opportunities for linkages and cooperation, and encouragement for stakeholders across schemes, programmes and sectors to network. Resourcing will constrain the extent of the strategic oversight role, but the WRNSU would still be well placed to take on this responsibility, even if the strategic oversight role were limited to LAGs.

8.73   This strategic role could also play a part in shaping the agenda of rural development. The WRNSU is well positioned to communicate with a wide range of stakeholders to collect views on the priorities and challenges within rural development, and to organise a calendar of events that bring together stakeholders to address them. In this way,

the WRNSU could help ensure that broader aims within rural development are kept on the agenda, and encourage the sector to work to the rural development roadmap set by the Welsh Government.

Addressing Queries and Signposting

8.74   Under both scenario 1 and 2, the WRNSU can continue to fulfil its role as a body that addresses questions and issues the arise from the rural development sector. Stakeholders, especially those within LEADER, noted that the WRNSU played a valuable role in answering procedural questions that arose, and in sourcing information when needed. In one such example, a scheme lead was provided was support and assistance from the WRNSU in establishing a new programme, without which they would have struggled to launch it.

8.75   This role will become all the more necessary post-RDP, as existing schemes and programmes will be replaced. Administrators of programmes within rural development will inevitably face challenges in administrating under new funding schemes, and a direct line to a body that can provide or source answers to questions will be especially valuable. A successful service in this regard will go a long way to ensuring a smoother commencement of any new programmes and schemes.

8.76   It is necessary, therefore, to ensure that stakeholders across rural development recognise that the WRNSU can provide this service, and that they have sufficient access to key individuals within Welsh Government to be able to answer questions that arise.

Training

8.77   The WRNSU can play a significant role in meeting the training needs of various groups within rural development. Many stakeholders within LEADER noted that more training support from the WRNSU would

have helped their capacity. Suggestions for areas for more training included training for LAG chairs, training to encourage LAGs to be more proactive in finding and develop their own projects, and better training for processing and submitting claims. LEADER administrators spoke of having to find training on their own, with support from WRNSU not being sufficient.

8.78   Regional and national networking between related groups is also beneficial for capacity building and training as it enables staff to learn from one another. This was noted by one stakeholder as a key mechanism to enabling younger or newer staff members coming through to learn from their more experienced colleagues. A mentoring or similar approach could be built into networking opportunities in order to allow greater knowledge exchange from more experienced to less experiences staff members working across rural development, but particularly within CLLD.

8.79   Stakeholders spoke of the benefit that more proactive training needs assessment would provide, and the provision of resources that they can access when needed. Under scenario 1, with sufficient resources, the WRNSU can include an assessment of training needs in its interaction with LAGs to identify opportunities for capacity building. This could be extended beyond LAGs to groups within rural development that would benefit from some kind of training or informative event. For example, one steering group member noted that a beneficial function of the WRNSU would be to connect rural community groups, such as those involved in renewable energy, with expertise that can support projects. The example they gave was a workshop with a civil servant on how to source funding for their project.

8.80   Training can include training for LAGs on how to identify new sources of funding beyond the RDP and successfully bid for funds. The Scotland Rural Network has started running workshops with rural stakeholders including LAGs looking to identify and strategize around other potential funding sources, such as charitable trusts and crowd

funding. In the short-term, this can be a fruitful avenue of support that the WRNSU can provide to smooth the transition to post-RDP funding schemes, and to ensure that LAGs remain engaged.

Research and Innovation

8.81   There is an opportunity for the Wales Rural Network to play a role in facilitating greater coordination within rural research, and in interfacing between Welsh Universities and FE institutions and rural policy.

8.82   A stakeholder noted that research into rural issues in Wales was not necessarily joined up at present. The need to improve the interface between rural policy and academia, and to better coordinate the research carried out into rural Welsh issues presented an opportunity for a body like the WRNSU. In its function as a coordinating body between stakeholders in rural development, the WRNSU can provide that linkage between policy and academia and provide a mechanism to encourage gathering the evidence base for understanding and addressing rural issues.

8.83   A stakeholder noted that since the Wales Rural Observatory's role in researching rural issues came to an end, a gap has existed in the collection of an evidence base for rural issues. While the stakeholder noted that it was not necessary to return to the model of the Wales Rural Observatory, the need for a greater coordination of rural research and its linkage to the policy agenda exists.

8.84   The Ireland Rural Network provides an interesting example of how a rural network facilitates research into rural development. The Ireland Rural Network is delivered by a consortium, which includes a university with research expertise in rural development. This arrangement has provided policy makers with channels to consult researchers on rural matters, and shape research projects carried out by researchers that provide evidence and information on policy areas.

8.85   The benefit of the linkages between academia and policy were mutually beneficial. A representative of Galway University noted that the links to policy makers helped them to better understand how research into rural issues can feed into and inform policy making.

8.86   There is an important role therefore that the WRNSU could play in providing a forum for policymakers and researchers to interact in a mutually beneficial way. The need for evidence collecting and research into rural issues will only intensify as the UK leaves the EU single market. Rural Wales faces significant challenges in the years ahead, and the WRNSU can be the link that enables policy makers to access the best information and research in their decisions.

8.87   The WRNSU can also play a stronger role in innovation. The RWDR of Wallonia provides guidance on how the WRNSU can foster innovation within rural development. Among the RWDRs thematic groups is an Innovation TG, dedicated to developing innovation tools to stimulate RDP beneficiaries to adopt innovative approaches. This has included organising events and seminars. The innovation TG has developed a "roadmap" of innovation, based on a detailed mapping of groups and stakeholders involved in innovation. The roadmap has aided innovation through disseminating learning and engaging with stakeholders. The WRNSU can play a clear role in the establishment of an innovation thematic group, and can, through mapping stakeholders involved in innovation, develop a bespoke and cohesive knowledge exchange system or Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).

Advocacy

8.88   The WRNSU may be well placed in future funding scenarios to advocate on behalf of rural development in Wales. It has fulfilled an advocacy role previously for LEADER, representing the programme and showcasing its value to Welsh Government.

8.89   The advocacy role the WRNSU can play would be heightened under
        scenario 2, in which rural development received less funding and
        attention that at present. Under a regional investment framework,
        rural programmes and projects may compete with their urban
        counterparts for funding. Ensuring that a body can advocate on behalf
        of rural interests may address some of the challenges faced by the
        rural development sector in this scenario. Furthermore, the WRNSU
        could advocate for *rural development* should agricultural farm
        payments dominate the Shared Prosperity Fund.

8.90   The WRNSU could also advocate rural development as a means to
        deliver on wider priorities. By drawing attention to how issues such as
        climate change and poverty can be addressed through a focus on
        rural development, the WRNSU can press to highlight rural issues
        and communities as in need of attention.

8.91   Other bodies exist at present advocating for rural interests, such as
        the WLGA rural forum. In future, it would be recommended that the
        WRNSU identify ways of engaging with advocates of rural interests to
        ensure that the voice of rural development is heard within Welsh
        Government and also the UK Government.

Monitoring and Evaluation

8.92   The WRNSU has played a role in the monitoring of LEADER during
        this programme period. This could continue to be a part of its future
        remit, collecting monitoring information from LAGs on the
        implementation of CLLD programmes.

8.93   The role of the WRNSU with regard to monitoring has changed during
        the 2014-2020 funding period, which has added pressure on the
        WRNSU staff to expand their remit and work. In order to provide
        sufficient and suitable resourcing for carrying out any monitoring and
        evaluation role, the need for rural network involvement in the
        monitoring of CLLD can be established, with this role formally
        included in its remit post-RDP.

8.94   This role could also include ensuring that evaluations of programmes within rural development are sufficiently studied, with their lessons learnt and best practices disseminated across the rural development sector. The WRNSU already publishes evaluation on its website, which provides a great starting point to disseminate findings. The task of the rural network should be to translate the findings from reports into widely accessible and material that can be easily disseminated and understood. Turning findings into infographics would be one such way of disseminating findings and lessons learnt. This function would dovetail with the WRNSUs communications role.

9.   Recommendations

9.1   Based on the above, we submit this series of recommendations. They are organised according to the situation faced by rural development in the coming years, starting with recommendations relating to the transition away from the RDP, before moving on to steps that will need to be taken in re-configuring the WRNSU for any future programme, and recommendations for service that the WRNSU can provide to the rural development sector.

Stage 1 – Transition away from the RDP

Recommendation 1: continuity in communications

9.2   Where possible, there should be continuity in the communications service delivered by the WRNSU during the transition period post-RDP to ensure that progress to date is not lost and can be built on. This also includes maintaining a presence and communication channels on Brussels, to avoid operating in a vacuum.

9.3   The WRNSU should remain the avenue through which information is communicated to the rural development sector. This need is amplified during a transition period.

Recommendation 2: support events during transition

9.4   The WRNSU should explore events and workshops that can be held in the transition period to encourage LAG members to continue engaging and to provide support, guidance, and networking opportunities.

A productive topic for workshops for example, would be sourcing alternative funding streams for projects in place of RDP.

Stage 2 – Establishing a post-RDP WRN and Support Unit

Recommendation 3: redefine remit of WRN + SU

9.5   Once there is some clarity to the structure of a post-RDP landscape, and where there is greatest need and opportunity, the remit of a WRN and Support Unit should be determined, with its scope and responsibilities clearly defined. This must then be clearly communicated to all key stakeholders and potential beneficiaries, with clarity on formalised mechanisms of engagement and support provision provided to all potential actors in the network.

9.6   The effectiveness with which a newly defined WRN and Support Unit operates will be limited to some extent by whether this remit is fully acknowledged and supported by the Welsh Government. This could involve re-launch of the unit.

Recommendation 4: agree on external / internal provision of WRNSU delivery.

Following the determination of a post-RDP Rural Network and Support Unit remit, it should then be decided whether this remit will best be served by an internal or externally sourced unit. Alternatively, a mixed model could be adopted, where the unit continues to operate

within the national authority, but contracts out certain services to a third party or parties.

Recommendation 5: a representative steering group and robust mandate

9.7   The existence of a Steering Group with a robust mandate and strengthened role in the governance of the WRNSU will be important for a post-RDP Rural Network and Support Unit. Personnel in the Steering Group should represent and reflect any redrawing of remit and scope and should be in place at the commencement of any decision making about the WRNSU.

9.8   The role of a Steering Group is of extra importance should the WRNSU continue to exist within the national authority. This is in order that its actions are informed by the independent perspectives of representatives across rural development. By embracing online meetings, the Steering Groups can be more influential than ever.

Recommendation 6: mapping of rural development sector

9.9   Delivery of WRNSU activity in any post-RDP scenario will benefit from a mapping exercise of the rural "ecosystem" in Wales, with the responsibilities, areas of interest, and sectoral coverage identified of different actors. Organisations and bodies to be reviewed include Rural Network Wales, Arsyllfa, Farming Connect, and the WLGA Rural Forum.

9.10   Once a mapping has been completed, the role of the WRN in relation to these organisations and bodies can be outlined and formalised. This task is needed in order to address gaps in the delivery of the WRN that these other bodies exist to fill, identify areas of overlap or duplication, and review whether or not the WRN can add value to the work of these other bodies.

9.11   This effort should also include efforts to future proof the network, by incorporating future trends and new enterprise (particularly in light of a Green Recovery), as well as new rural audiences and actors.

Recommendation 7: agree models of stakeholder engagement

Avenues for effective stakeholder engagement and engagement activity should be formalised, or at least informally agreed, especially between the Support Unit and policy leads. Several models of engagement should be explored, including the form of a membership structure, to encourage strengthened and more in-depth engagement and stakeholder buy-in and demands for quality delivery.

Recommendation 8: regular surveying of the sector

9.12   In addition to establishing more formalised and routine stakeholder engagement, a regular surveying effort of the wider rural development sector would ensure that the activities of the WRNSU and the function of the network continues to meet the needs and demands of stakeholders and beneficiaries.

9.13   As a result, the requirement to periodically survey the sector should be established, as well as appropriate channels to conduct such a survey effort. The information from this assessment can initially be used to shape the WRNSUs roadmap and future priorities, and in subsequent years can serve as a check on the effectiveness of its delivery as well as a means of aligning any evolving priorities in the sector with the service it provides.

Recommendation 9: maintain some structural alignment with other EU NRNs

9.14   In all post-RDP future scenarios, some degree of transnational cooperation will be possible at both national and regional levels. The ease with which this is enabled, particularly within the EU, is

increased if there remains some similarities and alignment in the structure and organisation of the Wales Rural Network with its European counterparts.

9.15   Although leaving the EU provides an opportunity to restructure and redefine the network and its activities outside the current limitations of RDP, significant moves away from delivery structures and mechanisms in other EU NRNs should be limited, to enable the effective harmonisation of activity and interworking.

Stage 3 – WRNSU Function post-RDP

Recommendation 10: enable the WRNSU to carry out a more strategic role

9.16   There is great potential for the WRNSU to carry out a more strategic role in coordinating and facilitating networking and cooperation across the rural development, something which was also widely called for. As a result, it is advisable therefore that this role be written into any newly defined remit for the Unit. Effective delivery of this role would also rely upon adequate resourcing.

9.17   The role would involve significant continued engagement across the network, to maintain a picture of rural development activities and opportunities, and to communicate opportunities for synergies between stakeholders in line with the rural agenda. It also involves proactively linking stakeholders across schemes, programmes and sectors in response to emerging priorities and innovation.

9.18   Finally, there is an opportunity to link directly with the WLGA Rural Forum, providing an additional evidence base and representing the views of WRN stakeholders to inform the Rural Forum's lobbying efforts on behalf of rural Wales.

Recommendation 11: Introduce thematic working at the core of the delivery of the WRN.

9.19   A focus on thematic working can bring together stakeholders in rural development to cooperate and share best practice around subjects deemed of greatest importance (e.g., transport, digital connectivity, renewable energy, and young people). This differs from a predominantly spatial approach and is greatly enabled by advances in remote meetings.

9.20   Thematic agendas should be developed periodically with the Steering Group, based on the identified needs of LAGs and rural stakeholders. These agendas and subsequent activities can be supported by the establishment of temporary thematic sub-groups.

Recommendation 12: Establish an Innovation Thematic Group

9.21   Establishment of an Innovation Thematic Group, along the lines of the group in RWDR, should be a priority. This can involve a mapping of innovation within the rural development sector, and the development of an innovation exchange system.

Recommendation 13: Establish relationships with Welsh Research Institutions

9.22   Rural development policy must be informed by a comprehensive evidence base. The WRNSU is well placed to contribute directly, by collecting valuable data, views, and information from its stakeholders, to feed in directly to policy making bodies. By establishing effective relationships with Welsh Research Institutions, these valuable research finding can become part of an improved evidence base for rural development policy. The WRNSU can also incorporate relevant findings into events and communications and disseminate and share research with those that will benefit most.

Recommendation 14: Embrace and capitalise on remote events

9.23   The WRNSU has already effectively moved to deliver a series of effective online events. It should now fully embrace advances in videoconferencing and people's improved capacity post-Covid-19 to operate remotely, in order to create full programme of remote events and better facilitate networking between stakeholders, using remote technology.

9.24   While virtual events cannot fully replace in-person networking events, they do offer opportunities to forge stronger links between groups, and to include a wider range of participants in discussions.

Recommendation 15: Seek out opportunities to cooperate and collaborate with partners beyond Wales.

9.25   There is no one as well placed as the WRNSU to maintain existing relationships with other UK and EU NRNs. Therefore, every effort should be made to continue coordinating and communicating through all channels available, both informal and formal, with UK and EU counterparts, as well as maintain a presence where possible in Brussels. This is in order to continue the benefits of cooperation and information sharing where possible and to maintain an awareness of future opportunities of cooperation, whether bilaterally, or through organised frameworks and networks.

9.26   Efforts should also be made to cooperate with partners in rural development beyond the EU. Opportunities already exist through LEADER, as well as potentially through future trade agreements.

Recommendation 16: assess training needs for stakeholders

9.27   A routine assessment of training needs for stakeholders, particularly to build capacity in LAGs, should be incorporated into the Support Units periodic activity plan. This might be built into the wider survey of the sector (recommendation 8), to help inform a schedule of training events that align with greatest needs. This will also be informed by the

input of the steering group and thematic sub-groups (recommendation 11).

Recommendation 17: facilitate networking between LAGs

9.28   The WRNSU should proactively ensure that there is more comprehensive networking between LAGS a Wales-wide basis, rather than leave this largely to the LAGs itself.

9.29   This can be added greatly through the continued and improved use of online events and to facilitate networking (recommendation 14), as well as organising a greater number of thematic events to meet the identified needs of LAGs and LEADER groups and encourage shared best practice, synergies, greater innovation, and less duplication of efforts.

Annex A: WRNSU Evaluation Logic Model

NEEDS

What is the need for the WRNSU? There is a need…

- N.1 To promote the benefits of EU funds
- N.2 To facilitate and enhance the delivery of the RDP
- N.3 To support community led rural development
- N.4 To support the wider Wales Rural Network
- N.5 To champion and promote rural in Wales nationally and internationally
- N.6 To inform the Welsh Government on the delivery and impact of the RDP and future policy

OBJECTIVES

What is the WRNSU trying to achieve?

- O.1 Inform the broader public and rural stakeholders about developments in rural development, including on policy and funding opportunities
- O.2 Increase the engagement with, and networking of stakeholders with an interest in the delivery of the RDP
- O.4 Communicate and promote activities of RDP scheme management activities and delivery bodies.
- O.3 Increase the networking and transnational co-operation of RDP stakeholders across Wales, UK and Europe
- O.5 Improve the quality of implementation of the RDP in Wales
- O.6 Foster innovation in CLLD, agriculture, food production and forestry in rural areas

INPUTS / RESOURCES

What is the WRNSU inputting in order to achieve the objectives?

- IN.1 Support Unit:
  - Head of WRN
  - 3 WRN Managers
  - Finance Manager
  - Website/Content Manager
- IN.2 Steering Group
- IN.3 RDP Scheme Managers and Delivery Bodies
- IN.4 LAGs
- IN.5 WRN annual workplan
- IN.6 Monitoring and evaluation processes

ACTIVITIES

What are the WRNSU doing with the inputs in order to achieve the objectives?

- A.1 Implementing the annual workplan
- Acting as the WRN Steering Group secretariat
- A.2 Developing communication tools to inform the broader public and stakeholders of RDP activity
- A.3 Developing and maintaining the WRNSU website
- A.4 Producing publicity materials concerning the RDP to promote best practice from Wales and Europe
- A.5 Disseminating information via newsletters, website, video case studies and social media
- A.6 Organising networking events, training, seminars, conferences, field trips and study visits to Welsh and European projects to share knowledge
- A.7 Facilitating inter-territorial co-operation and networking amongst LAGs, Businesses and Projects
- A.8 Co-ordinating participation with the ENRD and representing Wales at ENRD events
- A.9 Collecting and disseminating monitoring and evaluation finding

OUTPUTS

What is being directly produced from the WRNSU activities?

- OP.1 Increased engagement with the WRNSU website, social media and news
- OP.2 Information dissemination of activity and best practices under RDP via:
  - Case studies
  - Newsletter
  - Events
  - Regional/national/international cooperation projects
- OP.3 Development of effective relationships with a range of internal and external stakeholders

OUTCOMES

What are the short and medium-term results from these outputs?

- OC.1 Increased involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of the RDP in Wales
- OC.2 Enhanced RDP implementation and improved quality of rural development in Wales
- OC.3 Improved connections and inter-working between rural development stakeholders both across Wales and internationally
- OC.4 Improved knowledge among rural development stakeholders of activities and operations within rural development
- OC.5 Enhanced innovation within RDP projects and in rural development through sharing of best practice and lessons learnt

IMPACTS

What are the long-term results from these outputs?

- I.1 Improved productivity, innovation, diversity and efficiency in the food, farming and forestry industries
- I.2 Sustainable rural economic growth
- I.3 Strong community led local development in Wales
- 1.4 Reversing depopulation in rural areas
- I.5 Improved inter-working between different sectors of rural development

DATA SOURCES

- WRN Workplan 2020
- AEM RDP for Wales 2019
- WRN Comms Split – LAGs, FLAGs 2019
- WRN meeting minutes 2018
- Presentation: Welsh Government Rural Communities RDP 2014-2020
- Reports to Commission – 2019 – RDP 2014-2020
- Wales programme monitoring committee – European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020
- United Kingdom – Rural Development Programme (Regional) - Wales
- Job Description – Head of Wales Rural Network

EXTERNAL FACTORS

What are the external factors impacting the outcomes of the WRNSU's operations?

- EF.1 Brexit – changed political context, affecting access to the ENRD, and political support for network function
- EF.2 COVID-19 – brake on delivery, interaction and activities in rural development

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