



Cronfa Amaethyddol Ewrop ar
gyfer Datblygu Gwledig:
Ewrop yn Buddsoddi mewn Ardaloedd Gwledig
European Agricultural Fund for
Rural Development
Europe Investing in Rural Areas

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



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Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

Wales Rural Network Support Unit Evaluation

Executive Summary



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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 administering 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 of 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:

	Policy framework	Legal framework	Funding framework	Other elements
Scenario 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear Welsh & UK rural policies • WG to keep WRN policy • Synergy with other Welsh place-based policies • Connection with EU policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated legal instruments for rural development (UK & Wales) • Connection with international programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated Welsh pot of funding for RD • Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) with RD support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh Rural Network • UK Rural Network • Possibility to join EU projects • Continuation of LAG and LEADER types of approach
Scenario 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak UK policy on RD • Some WG policy objectives • No connection with EU rural policy or CAP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh legal instruments for agriculture and only partially for RD. • Some legal instruments for local development (rural & urban) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared pot of funding for economic development covering rural and urban areas (Welsh Framework) • Low level of match funding from private and community sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRN within existing future networks (NRW?) • Informal UK network • Weak local community approach • Informal contacts with EU and international partners
Scenario 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No focus on rural development or economic development policies. • Non-alignment (clash) of agricultural policies across the UK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No specific instruments for RD. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No funding earmarked for rural areas. • No funding from Welsh or UK governments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No rural network at all • Sectors working separately • Weak or absent community development

Table 0.1 – Summary of Scenarios

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

	<i>Scenario 1</i>	<i>Scenario 2</i>	<i>Scenario 3</i>
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain existing and develop new national and international contacts. • Active participation in UK RDP network • Maintain existing LAGs and create a Welsh network. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain informal contacts with stakeholders across the UK • Foster contacts outside the UK • Support local development approaches where possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nurture existing networking contacts (regional, national, and where possible international level).
Governance / advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active support to a Welsh rural network • Represent network on stakeholder groups in Wales and UK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represent rural interests in relevant policy fora at Welsh and UK level • Liaise with regional partnership and provide support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to liaise with relevant groups at local and regional level to facilitate intervening changes.
Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive role in developing cooperation projects. • Arrange study visits and events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to cooperation activities of Welsh Government and Local Authorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act as antenna to possible cooperation activities in the UK and abroad.
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on current information and dissemination activities • Develop innovative communication services for rural stakeholders to enable change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information and support to stakeholders on post Brexit context. • Continue to promote best practices and share examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute as information tools of WG departments and other organisations in Wales to promote rural development.
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support access to funding schemes through dedicated services • Promote access to national and international funding programmes relevant to rural groups and beneficiaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support access to funding programmes (training, seminars) • Contribute to the preparation and design of WG funding programmes (rural proofing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 best 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.

- xliv. *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.

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.