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Welsh Government

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European Innovation Partnership Wales: interim evaluation (summary)

An interim evaluation report of the implementation and impact of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Wales scheme as part of the Rural Communities: Rural Development Programme 2014 to 2020.

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Introduction

This evaluation has been commissioned to assess the implementation and impact of European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Wales. Just under £2m has been made available from the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development Programme (2014 to 2020) as direct, 100% grant funding to deliver 46 farm- and forestry-based projects under the EIP Wales scheme over six years from 1 August 2016 to 30 June 2023. These projects are delivered by Operational Groups (OGs), which are led by farmers or foresters alongside other stakeholders such as research institutes or NGOs, and are designed to test innovative technologies or ideas within farming and forestry businesses in order to foster innovation and improve practices. The scheme is run by Menter a Busnes (MaB), in partnership with Farming Connect (FC), and supported by the Knowledge Exchange Hub (KE Hub) and Innovation Brokers (IBs).

This interim report is primarily concerned with evaluating the implementation process, whilst we also consider the impact of projects completed to date. It has been informed by a survey of 84 OG members and 30 non-beneficiaries, interviews with 17 delivery personnel, IBs, and external stakeholders, and a comprehensive review of the scheme's monitoring information. The final evaluation report will be completed in 2023 and will primarily seek to provide an impact assessment of the EIP projects and of the scheme as a whole in terms of the overall aims, performance indicators, and outcomes.

Eight evaluation questions were used to guide the interim evaluation stage. In this executive summary we address each question and discuss the key findings and recommendations.

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What is the level of engagement with the scheme?

The geographical distribution of participating farms broadly reflects the distribution of farms throughout Wales. The scheme has involved farmers and foresters from across Wales, although some areas have been underrepresented, namely Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, and Gwynedd, whilst 10 counties less known for agriculture but collectively accounting for 13% of all farms in Wales have no representation in the scheme.

Red meat has been one of the main sectors covered in the scheme, reflecting its prevalence within Welsh agriculture, whilst dairy farmers are substantially overrepresented, perhaps indicative of the challenges faced by the sector in recent years, which have acted to heighten the need for innovation.

Farming businesses participating have been larger than is typical in relation to their size and turnover, reflecting that it is a scheme designed for more commercially minded organisations that are interested in improving their business operations. Similarly, they have mainly been businesses that are more 'plugged in' to the wider support infrastructure, which embrace new skills, information and technology. Thus, the OG members can generally be described as the 'usual suspects' for the most part, although other farming businesses have been engaged too; for example, 26% reported that they had not received other grants or financial support from the Welsh Government or other public bodies in the last five years.

Besides a target of engaging at least three forestry projects, the recruitment process was very open with no specific sectors, types of businesses/projects, or areas targeted specifically. The delivery team only sought to ensure that there was a broad cross section of projects and businesses engaging with the scheme. Whilst this is in keeping with the bottom-up, non-prescriptive nature of

the scheme, it also means that the scheme had less control in ensuring that supported projects corresponded to the areas in greatest need of innovation and to the relevant strategic objectives.

Recommendation 1

EIP schemes throughout Europe have varied in their level of prescriptiveness, from a top-down approach to the bottom-up approach favoured in Wales. Whilst there are clear benefits to the approach adopted in Wales, future schemes may wish to consider adopting some level of targeting to ensure that projects do correspond to strategic objectives and areas of greatest need. Underpinning this, there should be analysis to identify the main areas within agriculture and forestry that require innovation.

The expertise offered by the scheme was a more important motivation for businesses' engagement than was the financial support to deliver the projects. This is an important point to consider when thinking about what future schemes should look like and whether there should be a facilitation component.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government should consider placing more emphasis on the provision of expertise and facilitation support and potentially less on grant support in future schemes that are focused on trialling innovative approaches within the farming and forestry sectors.

Routes into the scheme have encompassed a mix of proactive communication through various FC channels, albeit primarily the Development Officers, and through word of mouth, particularly from peers. There is a concern, however, that farmers who are not already 'plugged in' to the support infrastructure will have been much less likely to have found out about the scheme, given the

reliance on FC channels.

Recommendation 3

Schemes in the future should consider ways of engaging the ‘hard-to-reach’ farmers who are not part of the broader support infrastructure. The main way in which those businesses did find out about EIP Wales was through peers (for example, neighbouring farms). Future schemes could consider encouraging members to invite peers, who are not the ‘usual suspects’, more explicitly.

How effective is the application, assessment, and decision-making process?

The evaluation has found that the application and appraisal processes were robust, which allowed projects to be assessed on their scientific merit. Whilst it was comprehensive and likely to be too time-consuming and difficult for most farmers to complete, this was mitigated by the fact that IBs were given a licence to lead the process. The farmers and foresters were generally satisfied with this compromise, although some external stakeholders were concerned that it gave IBs too much influence on project design, thus affecting the bottom-up approach.

We did find that there was a lack of selectivity in the processes, with the grants being awarded almost on a first come, first served basis (provided that they met the eligibility criteria). Applying more selectivity would be more in keeping with the principles of RDP funding, and securing a broader group of projects from which to select could have potentially led to a different or possibly better selection of projects.

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Recommendation 4

Schemes in the future should consider adopting funding windows so that projects can be scored against one another, thus securing greater selectivity in the projects awarded funding.

How effective is the Innovation Broker role?

IBs have had a crucial role in delivering EIP Wales projects. In fact, very few would have been possible without the IB support, given the complexities of managing the initial application processes and the need to manage projects that can generate robust results. The main value has been the facilitation support, the help in coordinating activity and organising the various aspects, for example, sourcing materials, sampling schedules, data collection, etc. Some stakeholders felt that this role could be delivered at a lower cost by utilising a large team of core staff, whilst others believed that it should be completely run by farmers to stay true to the bottom-up approach in the purest form. There would likely be substantial disadvantages with both of those approaches, affecting the scientific rigour and, thus, value of the projects delivered. Equally, it is likely that not all projects require support from a specialist; they could be delivered with more elementary facilitation support from a delivery team member.

Recommendation 5

An element of the IB role should be retained in future schemes where projects require the expertise or experience that they can provide. However, future schemes could also consider having a larger team of core staff who could take responsibility for managing the 'simpler' projects.

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How effective are the other key aspects of the design of the scheme?

There was broad consensus that the size of the grant is appropriate, making it more accessible to farmers. Linked to this, most farmers do believe that their projects have been based on their ideas. There have been some examples in which another stakeholder (for example, a vet) has put forward the idea, or in which a strategic project has been encouraged by the Welsh Government, although these appear to be in the minority. When it comes to the actual delivery of projects, however, it seems to have been more mixed, with IBs leading on much of the activity.

Whilst the size of grants is appropriate to trial new ideas and foster innovation, some stakeholders were concerned about the strategic impact of such investments, as there was no mechanism in place to ensure that the impact would be felt more broadly throughout the sector.

Recommendation 6

Future schemes should consider incorporating a separate, follow-up fund which could be ringfenced for the most successful and most scalable projects and allow them to scale up activity by drawing in more farmers.

The level of collaboration within OGs has varied from project to project, although it has been positive overall. Some felt that this had been the best part of the project, and valued the opportunity to exchange information with other OG members. There have also been examples of businesses working with organisations from other sectors for the first time, whilst the vast majority indicated that they intended to maintain these relationships beyond the project delivery period. There has been less collaboration with other OGs, however,

despite there being an initial ambition for OGs to make contact with other groups across the EU that are working on similar themes.

Recommendation 7

The delivery team should consider whether there are opportunities for greater networking to share learning/disseminate knowledge both within Wales and beyond.

How effective have activities to disseminate the findings of projects been?

The dissemination of project findings has relied on a combination of the tried and trusted FC communication approach (for example, website, social media, FC magazine, and open days) alongside peer-to-peer networking. There are examples in which this approach is bearing fruit, particularly with regard to some of the successful open day events that have attracted a large number of farmers as well as anecdotal evidence with which to suggest that queries have been made about adopting new practices. However, the effectiveness of this approach will need to be tested further during the final evaluation stage, as less than half of projects had been completed in the period leading up to this report. Accordingly, it is much too early to make any conclusive judgements regarding dissemination, and we can only offer some emerging findings at this stage.

The evidence to date does show that peer-to-peer dissemination has been mixed, with just over half of OG members in completed projects stating that they have discussed findings with their peers. Given the importance of peer-to-peer knowledge transfer within agriculture, this could be a very important component of the dissemination approach and the overall success of the scheme.

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Recommendation 8

The delivery team should hold sessions with OG members to emphasise the importance of sharing findings with farmers and foresters from outside of the group. Where possible, OG members should be equipped with dissemination materials that can be used to share the key findings from their projects.

How innovative have the projects been?

The projects have been highly variable, representing a mix which have typically focused on practical and scalable activities, whilst a smaller number have been more 'left-field' and can be described as more innovative. Generally, the EIP Wales scheme does seem to have struck a balance between these different considerations, and has used a broad definition of innovation in order to ensure that the industry can benefit as much as possible.

What has been their impact?

The vast majority of OG members believe that their project has been a success. Most have introduced changes, most state that they have received the benefits that they hoped the projects would generate, and some were able to demonstrate cost savings or new income that has been generated as a result of their project. It is also worth noting that in some instances in which projects had not achieved what they originally planned, this learning in itself of what does not work could still be considered a positive outcome. Furthermore, the scheme does appear to have fostered innovation, with OG members stating that they are more confident, knowledgeable, and likely to conduct innovation in the future as a result of the support. The evidence suggests a high level of additionality with

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regard to these impacts, where it is likely that most of the projects would not have gone ahead at all without EIP Wales support.

Has the scheme addressed the cross-cutting themes and cross-cutting objectives?

The evidence reveals that the cross-cutting themes (i.e. Equal Opportunities, Gender Mainstreaming and the Welsh Language (CCT1), Sustainable Development (CCT2), and Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion (CCT3)) are addressed through EIP Wales, particularly with regard to sustainable development and tackling poverty, where the efforts to generate positive environmental and economic benefits are intrinsically linked within the projects.

Indeed, applicants were asked to demonstrate this during the initial application process, and our review shows that 45 of the 46 applications claimed that they would address CCT1 through having a gender balance within the OGs, or that simply no one would be excluded on the basis of their gender or social group. Many also spoke about involving the “next generation” and how the projects sought to provide better opportunities for young people, for example, by working with agricultural colleges. Moreover, 43 of the application documents claimed to deliver against CCT2, highlighting the direct impacts on the environment if the new practices were successfully implemented with regard to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Forty-three of the application documents also claimed to address CCT3 by improving skills, creating increased and improved employment opportunities, increasing financial profitability, and allowing farmers, who may face social isolation, to solve problems together.

Additionally, the scheme has contributed towards the three cross-cutting objectives of the RDP (namely innovation, environment, and climate change mitigation and adaptation) for much of the same reasons. There is an intrinsic link to innovation because the main thrust of the scheme is to help farmers and

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foresters to develop new and improved practices, whilst the potential environmental impact of these new practices correlates with the other two objectives.

The evidence in this report suggests that the EIP Wales scheme has been delivered effectively to date. There was broad agreement that the range of projects supported have been appropriate and with the potential for scaling up and, thus, generating positive impacts on a broader industry level. This has been aided by a robust application and appraisal process and effective facilitation support from MaB and IBs. Whilst there has been a large amount of variability with regard to the ownership taken by farmers and foresters, the engagement from OG members more broadly, and the collaborative activity, these are found to have been positive overall. The main question regarding what impact this scheme will eventually generate is whether it can raise awareness sufficiently and encourage other businesses within the sector to adopt new practices to expand the benefits farther afield. We have only started to explore this question in this evaluation report and have found that there are certainly examples in which this is beginning to happen. However, this will need to be a greater focus in the final evaluation phase. As noted in the introduction, the final evaluation report is scheduled for 2023 and will have a particular focus on assessing the impact of the scheme.

Contact details

Report authors: Ioan Teifi, Endaf Griffiths (Wavehill)

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

For further information please contact:
Research, monitoring and evaluation team

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