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Evaluation of the Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Advisory Services Programme

Executive Summary

1. Introducing Farming Connect

- 1.1 Farming Connect is funded under the Welsh Government Rural Communities–Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, a seven-year European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) programme. With a total programme budget of £27.7m over this programme period, Farming Connect aims to improve the profitability, competitiveness and environmental performance of farm, forestry and food businesses, and by extension, promote the economic growth and development of rural areas. The programme is supporting the forestry and farming industry through a period of significant change and will help support the adjustment away from reliance on direct payments (Common Agricultural Policy {CAP} payments).
- 1.2 Farming Connect is a longstanding programme in Wales, originally introduced in 2001. The current programme (2014-2020) is delivered through three integrated “Lots” of activity: (i) the knowledge transfer programme; (ii) the lifelong learning and development programme; and (iii) advisory services. These include a wide range of freely available activities, including group sessions/advice, mentoring pairings, one-to-one advice and a range of tools and events. The range of support on offer is designed to reflect the differing needs of farmers, their stage of business/career, experience of innovation and preferred styles of learning and development. It aims to tackle attitude-based barriers to change, build confidence and equip farmers with the know-how and skills needed to implement change. It also provides the opportunity for farmers to progress through the offer towards more innovative and transformational change as individuals’ confidence grows.

2. The Evaluation

- 2.1 SQW, with Arad and our agricultural expert Martin Collison, has been commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Advisory Services Farming Connect Programme (2014-2020), known as Farming Connect. This report presents findings from the first phase of evaluation; a second evaluation report will be produced in Spring 2020.
- 2.2 The focus of the evaluation is three-fold: first, to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of implementation; second, to gather evidence on the nature and scale of outcomes achieved to date, the extent to which these are additional (and would not have been achieved otherwise) and address the original aims and objectives of the programme; and third, to learn what works (and why) to inform ongoing delivery and the design of future programmes.
- 2.3 A largely qualitative approach to the evaluation, in line with the original Specification for the study from the Welsh Government. This has involved a review of programme documentation and analysis of monitoring data, 18 in-depth consultations with governance, management and delivery staff at the Welsh Government, Menter a Busnes (MaB) and Lantra, and C10 consultations with wider stakeholders. We have also held four regional focus groups with beneficiaries and a series of 13 in-depth case studies, which involved detailed consultations with delivery staff and around five beneficiaries involved in each activity. The case studies will be longitudinal, and so beneficiaries will be revisited next year to track their ongoing journeys through Farming Connect and whether anticipated outcomes have been realised.

3. Summary of key findings

- 3.1 In the paragraphs that follow, we summarise the key findings from this first phase of the evaluation against our original research questions.

What activities have been delivered to date, compared to expectations?

- 3.2 Overall, the programme has performed well in terms of engagement, and specifically the volume of farmers involved and activities delivered. The programme is “well known”, “trusted” and “well respected” across Wales, and the longevity and continuity of Farming Connect has been important in this respect. Good progress has been made against output targets to date across all three “Lots”. Some targets have already been exceeded, including mentoring, demonstration network events, discussion groups and one-to-one surgeries, group advice and the proportion of discussion groups benchmarking. Targets for factsheets, technical articles and press notices have already been exceeded by double or more. However, progress towards management exchange targets has been slower.

How intensively do farmers engage with the programme and progress through the offer, and what drives this?

- 3.3 Nearly 20,000 individuals had registered with Farming Connect by December 2018. At the time of writing, just over two-thirds (69%) of registered individuals had actually engaged with the support available. However, the majority of these have only engaged with activities under one of the “Lots” and very few have engaged with activities under all three “Lots”. Consultation feedback also suggested that a smaller group of beneficiaries are engaged intensively with multiple aspects of the programme and progress through

the offer as they become more confident and ambitious. However, for many, engagement with the offer can be relatively narrow and/or light touch. In part this is due to the time constraints of farmers, but navigating the offer and knowing where to go next after receiving support from one aspect of the programme appears to be an issue for many. Development Officers have played a key role in facilitating some farmers' journeys through Farming Connect, but this is often down to the farmers themselves to navigate and many found this a challenge. Beneficiaries expressed frustration with the lack of a single point of contact within the programme and difficulties in navigating the website (even for those who are very IT literate)¹. Both farmers and external stakeholders suggested there was scope to provide more "personalised" and "holistic" support through the customer journey to better integrate Farming Connect activities. Crucially, it was argued that Farming Connect needed to develop "*a true package of support*" for beneficiaries (combining knowledge, skills and investment) in order to deliver real impact and the "step change" needed in the sector.

How effectively and efficiently is the programme being delivered, managed and governed?

- 3.4 Farming Connect adopts a multi-pronged approach to promotion, using a variety of materials and mechanisms that reflect the diversity of the target market. Its social media presence has a strong and growing following, allowing farmers to access knowledge/advice at a time that suits them. Development Officers' presence in the local community is seen as critical to facilitate access to the programme, and expanding the eligibility criteria and introducing attendance at events as a pre-requisite to grant support have helped to widen reach. Widening engagement remains a challenge for the programme, but some external stakeholders and beneficiaries questioned whether this should continue to be the aim (or whether intensifying support where there is potential for real change should be the priority). That said, consultees suggested there is scope to utilise partner and intermediary networks more effectively, enlist beneficiaries who are seen as "key influencers" to promote the programme, and tailor and target marketing materials more effectively.
- 3.5 Farmers needs are assessed at the outset in a number of ways in order to signpost to the most appropriate support. Again, Development Officers play a key role in this, through informal discussion with farmers in their community. Some activities within the programme also assess need, although this tends to be narrowly focused on the specific issue in question. Personal Development Plans have not been particularly effective – too often, they are seen as a "tick box exercise" to access training rather than a more rounded assessment of needs, and we found that these are rarely revisited by farmers. The PDP process was said to have worked better where the form was completed and revisited with support from a facilitator.
- 3.6 Across the Farming Connect activities, there are a number of features that have worked well to date, including self-help and action learning approaches, encouraging

¹ It is important to note that Farming Connect does have a single point of contact in the Farming Connect Service Centre, and the BAS client management system allows the programme to record all enquiries and conversations with farmers in order to allow consistency. That said, each farmer is not allocated a single person to liaise with throughout their journey, for example, via an account management type approach.

beneficiaries to self-define goals to ensure a close fit with their needs and ownership of the process, practical, farm-based learning and peer-to-peer support, and flexibility to adapt the focus of an activity in response to changing conditions and to suit the working patterns of those involved. The combination of group support and bespoke/confidential advice has also been important, alongside activities that address what needs to change and how this can be done. Facilitators in group activities play a key role in providing structure, momentum and (where necessary) challenge to ensure that beneficiaries move forward, alongside input from high quality and “trusted” advisors/speakers to provide inspiration and expertise. Some of the more intensive activities are delivered through competitions rather than open access and, whilst this approach is not appropriate for all aspects of Farming Connect, this approach does appear to secure strong commitment to the support and subsequent change. Benchmarking activities have also been very helpful in helping farmers to understand how their practices impact upon their financial performance, which is a key driver of change in behaviour. Again, benchmarking appears to be most effective where undertaken in discussion with peers or facilitators.

- 3.7 There have been some delivery challenges, including reported variability in the quality and consistency of facilitators/advisers (especially in relation to signposting/wrap around support), the capacity of Development Officers, the use of training application windows, and managing the use of “time limited” support. Consultees also suggested there may be missed opportunities for farmers who want to push ahead, with more inspirational and advanced activities and clear pathways for the most progressive farmers.
- 3.8 Finance was highlighted as a key gap in the current Farming Connect offer and, as discussed below, lack of capital was identified as one of the most important barriers to implementation. Specifically, consultees argued that a flexible and accessible fund for farmers to test and implement new/innovative ideas would help to facilitate more substantial change in the sector². Whilst the new Farm Business Grant³ is helpful, consultees raised concerns around the scale, timing and focus of the funding available through this mechanism.
- 3.9 There is also some concern that Farming Connect is “taken for granted” by many in the sector, with take-up driven by the presence of free support rather than a real need/motivation to change (and as a consequence, some argue this reduces the programme’s impact). Also, there is evidence to suggest a minority of beneficiaries would have paid privately for advice or training, but were re-directed to free/subsidised support, particularly where regulatory change is on the horizon. But we also found examples where Farming Connect has encouraged farmers to prepare for these changes more quickly than would otherwise have been the case (see findings on additionality below).
- 3.10 In terms of management, the arrangements in place appear to be working effectively. The day-to-day delivery is managed well by MaB and Lantra in close liaison with the Welsh Government. MaB and Lantra place a strong emphasis on feedback and continual improvement to maximise the effectiveness of Farming Connect in real time.

² Note, the European Innovation Partnership (EIP-Agri) is available for groups of farmers to test and implement new/innovative ideas as part of a collaborative project.

³ Note, this is separate to the Farming Connect programme.

However, the lack of strategic and external, industry-led strategic challenge and input to the design and delivery of Farming Connect was a concern shared by many consultees, particularly given the pace at which the sector needs to change.

To what extent are changes implemented on farms, leading to intended outcomes and impacts?

- 3.11 Overall, Farming Connect plays a crucial role in creating the “foundations for change”, with a substantial impact on personal outcomes – such as changes in mindsets, attitudes, confidence and ambition - evident across many of the activities reviewed in detail for this evaluation. Farming Connect also has a (recognised but often under-appreciated) impact on the mental health of farmers, by helping to identify clear and affordable solutions to issues that had caused considerable stress and anxiety.
- 3.12 In terms of implementation, for many farmers, the support is leading to small scale, incremental changes over a period of time, often through introducing more professional approaches to business management and health and environmental improvements. This incremental approach reflects the fact that many very small businesses are capacity and resource constrained, so changes need to be affordable and manageable. It may also reflect the way in which engagement with Farming Connect (and navigation of the offer) and the definition of goals within many of the activities are farmer-led. We found that these marginal gains across many aspects of the business are, on aggregate, helping to create more viable and sustainable enterprises in the longer term. In addition, for some of those involved, Farming Connect has had a more transformative impact on the business, through significantly reducing costs, diversification and new business ventures.
- 3.13 Overall, Farming Connect appears to be delivering outcomes that would not have been achieved at all, would have taken longer, been lower quality or less sustainable, in the absence of the programme. Where beneficiaries engaged with more than one aspect of the offer, it was often the combination of complementary support from different parts of Farming Connect that made the real difference to business performance, re-emphasising the importance of having a broad offer and being able to navigate it.

What are the key lessons to inform ongoing delivery and design of future interventions?

- 3.14 There was consensus across the various stakeholders and beneficiaries consulted that support to help the farming sector adapt and remain competitive will become even more critical in the immediate future and beyond, and that the current programme provides a strong, and widely appreciated, platform for this. The findings of this evaluation do, however, raise some questions that we believe the Welsh Government and partners should consider in the design of future programmes.
 - First, there is scope - and evident demand from some farmers - to introduce more inspirational ideas and external challenge into the programme to really drive new thinking. This raises a strategic question for around the balance between peer-to-peer, beneficiary-led and externally-led knowledge development in the design and delivery of this type of programme.
 - Second, strategic industry input into design and delivery is essential, working closely, formally and regularly with key partners in the process. Linked to this,

there is scope to strengthen partnership working to make better use of partner networks to raise awareness/reach of the offer, disseminate knowledge further, ensure consistent messaging, and enable more effective signposting. Given demand, and the changes likely in a period of economic and institutional uncertainty, the Welsh Government might consider inviting key partners (for example, those who would have been involved in the Industrial Advisory Board) to join the SAB⁴, giving partners a voice and influence, but also ensuring that there is up-to-date insight from industry shaping the offer.

- Third, with limited resources, there is a strategic question as to whether the future emphasis is placed more on focused in-depth assistance rather than on quantity/reach. Whilst the rationale remains strong to raise awareness/share knowledge with the farming community as a whole, there is growing evidence to suggest that a more intensive, personalised and integrated offer for those with most potential/in most need/most willing to change may lead to greater impact overall. This will clearly have resource implications.
- Fourth, the routes to impact on the wider community (beyond those directly supported by the programme) tend to focus on marketing activity by MaB/Lantra and written materials on the website. The responsibility for dissemination by beneficiaries themselves is rarely “baked in” to the activities, although word of mouth and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing is often flagged as one of the most effective mechanisms for this sector. There may be scope, for example, for farmers who receive more intensive support to be explicitly required to help disseminate what they have learned to other farmers. In effect, the programme would be “buying in” spillovers as part of the offer.

3.15 These issues will be explored further in the next phase of the evaluation, alongside a greater emphasis on outcomes and impact as this programme draws to an end.

⁴ Correct at the time of the research. However, since then such partners have been invited.

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Available at: <https://gov.wales/evaluation-knowledge-transfer-innovation-and-advisory-services-programme>

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

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