

2007-2013 'Ex-Post' Evaluation

Scope of evaluation

This evaluation covers the 2007-2013 Rural Development Plan. It should be noted these findings **do not** relate to the delivery of the current 2014-2020 programmes. This offers a synthesis of previous evaluation work and summary of final monitoring data. Findings have already therefore been addressed in the design and delivery of the 2014-2020 programmes: this is described in Annex A of this paper.

Achievements of 2007-2013

The 2007-2013 Rural Development Plan (RDP) invested around €994m of EU funds to support rural development in Wales. This support was spread across four areas: supporting agricultural and forestry sectors, developing the rural economy, improving the quality of life in rural areas and the supporting the natural environment.

Funds provided through the RDP supported public, private and third sector organisations to deliver a range of activities to support the rural economy, rural communities and the environment and countryside of Wales. The success of these activities can be seen in many ways.

Since 2007, activities funded under the RDP have increased the competitiveness of businesses working in the farming and forestry sector, supported the creation of 3,000 jobs, of which half of these are directly attributable to the programme and are sustainable jobs. RDP activities have also resulted in an increase in GVA of around €48.3 million in the rural economy.

The RDP provided a variety of environmental land management activity that contributed to biodiversity, improving water quality and climate change mitigation. While the impact of this has yet to come to fruition modelling work suggests that Glastir is expected to have positive impacts on water quality and woodland creation options could lead to a 15% reduction of eroded soil and phosphorous delivery to waterbodies.

The RDP was also seen to have benefits for rural communities with 91% of surveyed beneficiaries reporting benefits for their local community as a result of activities undertaken. As a result beneficiaries reported: new or improved facilities introduced (22% of surveyed beneficiaries); the bringing together of the community (20%); and an increased usage of existing facilities (13%). The LEADER approach was also seen to make a positive contribution to local governance and encouraging local democracy, community engagement and ownership.

Economic context

In considering the achievements of the RDP it is important to consider the economic context in which this programme operated. The financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent recession of the UK economy created unprecedented challenges. These

conditions required a degree of flexibility within the RDP, for example there was a rebalancing of resources between axes, with additional resources being allocated to supporting the agricultural and forestry sectors. The difficult economic conditions required a response from parts of the RDP; for example the Process and Marketing Grant scheme provided producers with vital access to funding to improve efficiencies at a time in which credit was constrained and businesses lacked confidence to make investments.

At the same time the Rural Development Plan maintained a focus on the long term issues affecting the rural economy in Wales. Therefore these immediate pressures in responding to the recession were carefully balanced with the need to retain focus on the strategic priorities of the programme in supporting the rural economy, contributing to agricultural and forestry businesses and managing of natural resources in Wales.

Purpose of evaluation

The purpose of the Ex Post evaluation, which is a legislative requirement, was to provide an overall assessment of the 2007-2013 programme and to identify where the programme was successful and where lessons can be learnt to inform the future delivery of the rural development programme and future support for rural communities in Wales. The evaluation involved a review of existing axis, scheme and project level evaluations and, where necessary, further primary research such as interviews.

Key findings

The Welsh Government welcomes the many positive findings of the evaluation, in particular:

- That at programme level the RDP was coherent, both effective and efficient in its delivery and that resources were allocated appropriately.
- That axis 1, which specifically aimed to support the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry, had delivered upon this aim and provided improvements to the competitiveness of businesses operating in the farming and forestry sectors. While axes 2 and 3 did have some impact on competitiveness, this impact was, minimal. This was to be expected as Axes 2 focussed on improving the environment and countryside while Axis 3 aimed to improve the quality of life in rural areas.
- That the RDP did assist in supporting the rural economy and contributed to an increase in GVA for supported beneficiaries. The relative contribution to the rural economy as a whole was modest, though this is also expected given the modest size and budget of the RDP allocated to socio-economic measures.
- The clear contribution of the RDP to improving the quality of life in rural areas predominantly through the provision of public goods, village renewal and development and conservation activities.

The Welsh Government welcomes the recommendations made in the report and has incorporated these recommendations into the current 2014-2020 programme. A summary of these recommendations and the Welsh Government response is provided in Annex A.

For example, to address the finding that a clearer distinction was needed between mainstream and innovative activities the 2014-2020 RDP has placed an increased emphasis on the LEADER (community-led local development) and EIP (European Innovation Partnership) schemes as the key sites of innovation in the programme. The Welsh Government has also developed a new monitoring system for the 2014-2020 RDP to better collate all monitoring information in line with the recommendations outlined in the report. While the Welsh Government welcomes the assessment that the RDP made every effort to be inclusive and included specialist support for young farmers and women, it highlights data limitations that meant more robust analysis of the cross cutting themes was not possible. In response to this the Welsh Government has put in place mechanisms to address this in the 2014-2020 RDP.

Conclusion

The ex-post evaluation provides a valuable resource to inform future development of rural development approaches in Wales. It offers a clear synthesis of a wide range of project, scheme and axis-level evaluation work throughout 2007-2013. While it offers few new insights not covered in previous evaluation work, it does provide a view across the whole RDP and brings this evidence together in one place.

While the majority of findings and lessons have been incorporated into the current 2014-2020 programmes, this evaluation provides evidence of what has historically not worked so well and therefore lessons to avoid in the development of any future approach to rural development.

Annex A – Evaluation Recommendations from 2007-2013 RDP and WG Responses

Recommendation	Action
<p>Move away from the Axis approach - the Axis structure of the 2007-13 RDP was unhelpful in creating barriers between objectives. As the Axis structure is not replicated in the new RDP, it is recommended that advantage is taken of the opportunities for greater flexibility and complementarity.</p>	<p>For 2014-2020, the Axes structure has not been carried through into the WGRC-RDP. This is primarily due to changes in the European Commission's requirements for the design of the Programme.</p>
<p>Incorporate the Young Entrants Support Scheme (YESS) within the RDP - as young farmers continue to be a priority, it is recommended that post-EU transition this group should be targeted for support. Currently, this conflicts with Article 8 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005.</p>	<p>In the consultation for the WGRC-RDP 2014-2020, stakeholders expressed the view that it would be inappropriate to activate the RDP Measure to support young farmers in the new Programme. This is because the relevant Measure is insufficiently flexible to achieve the desired aims and objectives.</p>
<p>Rationalise the provision of support and information - it would appear rational to have a 'one-stop shop' covering the whole range of information and access to advice services provided by the RDP..</p>	<p>This recommendation has been implemented. The WGRC-RDP 2014-2020 has strong referral links with Business Wales' signposting role for business support. The Farming Connect scheme has also been refined to improve links to Business Wales. Food Connect will also run parallel to Farming Connect in supporting the food sector.</p>
<p>Consider making the Wales Rural Network independent of the Welsh Government - the Wales Rural Network helped to facilitate communication between stakeholders, but played less of a role in exchanging information with other RDPs and at EU level. Although the Welsh Government provided a sound rationale for the approach taken, stakeholders felt that the WRN's placing within government reduced its effectiveness.</p>	<p>This recommendation was considered by stakeholders as part of the development of the 2014-2020 WGRC-RDP, in particular via the RDP Steering Group. The group's preferred option was to maintain the Network within the Welsh Government; however, the Network's role has been revised with scope for broader outreach and greater engagement.</p>
<p>Review the Communications Strategy approach - several schemes ran their own communications activities, which suggests that there are problems with an integrated</p>	<p>A new Communications Strategy for the WGRC-RDP 2014-2020 has been developed. This seeks to ensure closer working between</p>

<p>approach to communications. The way of making beneficiaries aware of RDP support, and the degree to which this is centralised, should be revisited.</p>	<p>schemes and the central communications team.</p>
<p>Reconsider the delivery model for support under Axes 3 & 4 - although the approach of tailoring interventions to local development needs has its advantages, this can lead to provision that differs greatly between areas. The consideration of pan-Wales alternatives, with the use of scoring methods to allow for local variation, could be considered post-EU transition.</p>	<p>This recommendation has been implemented. The Axes 3 & 4 structure has not been carried through to the WGRC-RDP 2014-2020. With the exception of LEADER, the new Programme is delivering schemes on a pan-Wales basis.</p>
<p>Make a clearer distinction between mainstream and innovative/experimental activities - a clearer distinction would enable innovative and experimental activities to work more effectively and enable mainstream activities to maximise the amount of resources accessed and their impacts on RDP objectives. It would also make innovation, with the possibility of failure, more attractive.</p>	<p>For 2014-2020 a clearer distinction has been made between mainstream and innovative activities. This distinction is being made at both the European level, and in the Welsh Government's design of the WGRC-RDP 2014-2020. LEADER and the European Innovation Partnership are the primary Programme areas that will foster innovative activities and are distinct parts of the programme.</p>
<p>Improve the availability of evidence of performance - while great improvements have been made, in particular the way in which monitoring data are held and accessed, this evaluation has faced evidence gaps. It is recommended that improvements are put in hand for the new Programme.</p>	<p>This recommendation has been implemented via the introduction of a central database for 2014-2020. This will provide a central repository for all monitoring information, which will feed into and support the monitoring and evaluation of future activity.</p>
<p>Aim for greater flexibility within RDP planning - interventions and schemes that introduce rigidity should be avoided, with a focus on those that are flexible. The fundamental characteristics and problems faced by rural areas are unlikely to alter substantially, but the policy area almost certainly will. This suggests that future interventions should focus on developing the resilience of rural communities.</p>	<p>Although the requirements for EAFRD are set by the European Commission, the WGRC-RDP 2014-2020 has been designed to ensure that schemes are more flexible. This aligns with the approach taken by the Strategic Framework for Agriculture.</p>