



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

Process evaluation of the Welsh Marine and Fisheries Scheme: summary

An evaluation of the first three funding rounds to understand the effectiveness of scheme delivery.

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Introducing the Welsh Marine and Fisheries Scheme

In December 2022, the Welsh Government launched its Welsh Marine and Fisheries Scheme (WMFS). WMFS is designed to “support environmentally and economically sustainable growth in the Welsh seafood industry and encourage the Welsh coastal communities to thrive”. (<https://www.gov.walesnull>)^[footnote 1] (<https://www.gov.wales#foofnote-1>)¹

The WMFS utilises new powers for Welsh Ministers contained in the UK Fisheries Act 2020, and a set of regulations approved by Welsh Ministers in 2022 using powers conferred on them by the Act (‘Marine, Fisheries and Aquaculture (Financial Assistance) Scheme (Wales) Regulations 2022’).

The WMFS comprises periodic funding rounds that target specific policy objectives. Each round can cover one or more of 18 separate eligible activities. (<https://www.gov.walesnull>)^[footnote 2] (<https://www.gov.wales#foofnote-2>)¹ The funding rounds are delivered via Rural Payments Wales (RPW).

The first three funding rounds were: Marketing Measures (Round 1), Energy Efficiency and Mitigation of Climate Change (Round 2), and Health and Safety (Round 3). Rounds 1 and 2 involved a two stage application process, with an Expression of Interest and full application. Round 3 (Health and Safety) adopted a one stage application process, applying a standard cost approach.

A total of 41 (full) applications were submitted across the first three rounds. There were six applications, but no successful applications, under Marketing Measures. There were seven applications, and one successful application, under Energy Efficiency and Mitigation of Climate Change (which was claimed and approved). There were 28 applications, of which 22 applications were successful, under Health and Safety (of which 13 grants were claimed and approved).

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The evaluation

In December 2023, the Welsh Government commissioned SQW to undertake a process evaluation of the first three rounds of the WMFS. The evaluation was delivered between December 2023 and September 2024.

Main aims of this evaluation

- To explore how the first funding rounds have been delivered including their successes, areas for improvement and lessons learned.
- To understand whether any lessons can be learned from other UK Administrations delivering similar schemes.
- To understand whether the WMFS is meeting the needs of the marine and fisheries sector in relation to marketing, energy efficiency and climate change mitigation, and health and safety.

The evaluation adopted a primarily qualitative approach. This involved:

- four scoping interviews with the Welsh Government (including the Marine and Fisheries Funding policy team and RPW)
- a review of background programme and strategic documentation
- analysis of secondary data on the marine and fisheries sector in Wales
- interviews with six successful applicants and two unsuccessful applicants from two rounds (Energy Efficiency and Mitigation of Climate Change and Health and Safety)
- interviews with seven stakeholders from the marine and fisheries sector
- interviews with three representatives involved in the design/delivery of other relevant Welsh Government schemes, alongside a review of documents/data on these schemes
- interviews with three representatives from similar schemes in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, alongside a review of documents/data on

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these schemes

The evaluation also involved two online surveys: (i) a survey for successful applicants (Health and Safety only) which received five responses and (ii) a survey of those that did not receive funding, which was open to those who applied for WMFS funding but were unsuccessful and the wider sector who did not apply for funding. The survey received no responses from unsuccessful applicants and six responses from the wider sector. Due to the small sample size, the findings reported below should be interpreted with caution.

Summary of main findings

Activities delivered through the first three funding rounds of the WMFS

Overall, the scale of activity delivered through the first three funding rounds was modest. In aggregate, £73k in grants were claimed and approved by 14 successful applicants under the Energy Efficiency and Mitigation of Climate Change and Health and Safety funding rounds. There were no successful applicants for – and therefore no activity delivered through – Marketing Measures.

Where activity was funded through the WMFS, it was generally delivered as intended according to successful applicants interviewed/responding to the online survey. The Health and Safety round enabled the purchase of a variety of items – including searchlights, lifejackets, handheld radios, ladders, net bins, and autopilot systems. It was reported by all successful applicants that this equipment is now being used (or is available for use when designed for emergency use only).

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What has and has not worked well about the application process for and delivery of the WMFS to date, and what improvements could be made to the application and delivery process of WMFS funding rounds in the future?

Feedback from successful applicants suggests the application assessment, and subsequent contracting and claims process worked well overall for those supported. However, there were some issues identified including timescales (with some delays in decision making and contracting impacting on project delivery), and the complexity of the claim requirements.

The marketing and promotion of the scheme was also seen by successful applicants engaged in the evaluation, and stakeholders interviewed, to be broadly appropriate. This said, a small number of applicants and stakeholders suggested that marketing and promotion could have been improved to ensure messaging was clear and accessible for the sector.

There was considerable feedback on aspects of the application process that worked less well. Many of the points raised were also suggested as opportunities to improve the application and delivery processes going forward. There was a high level of consensus from both successful and unsuccessful applicants, and from stakeholders, on aspects of the application process that worked less well.

Main points

- The time and level of information required to complete the application was not seen as proportionate, particularly for businesses/organisations applying for a small grant. Some of the evidence required was thought to be difficult for sole traders/micro businesses to provide.

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- There was a lack of clarity over the types of activities which could be funded through the scheme. This led to ineligible applications and some frustration from applicants.
- The RPW online system – initially designed for the agriculture sector – was reported to be difficult to use, as the marine and fisheries sector was largely unfamiliar with the system. Also, some of the questions were reported to be difficult for marine and fisheries businesses/organisations to complete (for example, calculating future fuel usage and daily catch), especially considering the current uncertain trading conditions.
- There could have been greater support made available during the application process. Applicants could contact RPW, but some difficulties were raised including a reported/perceived lack of practical understanding of the marine and fisheries sector by RPW.

To what extent have the needs of the sector been met in relation to the first three funding rounds of the WMFS?

Overall, the evidence suggests that the targeted approach in the first three funding rounds of the scheme have not fully met the needs of the marine and fisheries sectors. This is evident in the qualitative feedback from applicants, the wider sector survey, and stakeholders. It is also indicated by the low level of demand for the first two funding rounds (Marketing Measures and Energy Efficiency and Mitigation of Climate Change), and the subsequent modest scale of activity delivered. In practice, very few sector actors have been supported by the first three funding rounds, and fewer than anticipated by the Welsh Government. The context within which the WMFS has been delivered is also important and likely to have an influence on application numbers – as discussed further in paragraphs 3.9 – 3.12. The Welsh Government has recognised and adapted to address some of the challenges experienced. This included providing capital funding in Round 3, and pivoting in Round 4 (out of scope for this evaluation) to include both capital and revenue funding, provide more funding categories to support a broad range of projects, and the development of more

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relevant result indicators.

Feedback from stakeholders emphasised that the type of funding (i.e. revenue only) and the targeted approach dampened demand for the first two rounds. The Health and Safety round saw greater engagement and generally met the needs of successful applicants. This said, with around a third of approved applicants not claiming the grant (7 of 22), the conversion rate from application approval to claim approval was low given the nature of the intervention (i.e. standard cost for pre-qualified eligible items). The main reason why approved applicants did not claim was an inability to source the equipment to the specifications required.

Feedback from stakeholders and successful/unsuccessful applicants highlighted the importance of ongoing engagement and collaboration between the Welsh Government and the sector to provide clarity on sector needs and priorities, which in turn should inform scheme design and delivery for future rounds. (<https://www.gov.walesnull>)

Further, stakeholders thought that there is scope to improve the quality of engagement between the Welsh Government and the Marine and Fisheries Funding Stakeholder Advisory Group, that was established specifically for the scheme. This could include the provision of more regular updates on delivery progress to the Group, and the Welsh Government encouraging and facilitating constructive discussion and challenge by the Group.

What are the reasons individuals, organisations and businesses in the marine and fisheries sector may have chosen not to apply for funding via the WMFS?

The evaluation sought to engage widely with the sector via an online survey which was disseminated multiple times by the Welsh Government and sector associations, bodies and organisations in Wales. However, the response rate was low. Therefore, the evidence base on the reasons why businesses/ organisations in the sector may have chosen not to apply for funding via the

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WMFS is limited and the findings should be interpreted with caution.

The wider sector survey – that was completed by six respondents that did not apply for funding – suggested a lack of capacity to complete the application process and limited alignment at times between business/organisation priorities and the type of activity which could be funded and the type of funding available (i.e. capital/revenue) were key reasons for not applying.

Further, the feedback from applicants and stakeholders on aspects of scheme design and delivery that worked less well set out above provides further evidence on why businesses/organisations may have chosen not to apply to the scheme. A consistent theme from stakeholders was the actual or perceived complexity of the application process, which was seen to have deterred applicants. The tight timescales for delivery were also reported to be a deterrent.

More broadly, it is important to consider the context in which the scheme has been delivered. Secondary data indicate that the fisheries sector in Wales has become smaller in absolute terms in recent years, contracting in the number of vessels, gross tonnage and regular fishers. It is likely that these trends can in part be explained by external influences (e.g. EU Exit and rising energy costs). The feedback from stakeholders indicates that these external factors influenced demand for the first three funding rounds owing to their impact on the long-term viability, and investment capacity, of many businesses/organisations across the Welsh fisheries and marine sector.

Have there been any unintended consequences of delivery of funding through the WMFS?

Feedback from both stakeholders and applicants suggests there have been some adverse unintended consequences from the first three funding rounds. Some applicants expressed their reluctance to apply for any future funding

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rounds if the process remains the same, because the application process is considered disproportionate to the potential financial award.

Further, stakeholders raised concerns that the sector has negative perceptions of the WMFS owing to the issues with the first three funding rounds, and this may deter businesses/organisations from applying in future.

That said, there was a recognition amongst some sector stakeholders that the Welsh Government has sought to respond in real time to the lessons learned as noted above. This was seen to help to mitigate these adverse unintended consequences.

What lessons can be learned from other UK Administrations delivering similar funding schemes?

The comparator review of similar programmes in other UK administrations identified several key learning points for WMFS. (<https://www.gov.walesnull>)

Implications of annual funding cycles

A preference for the ability to support multi-year projects, with associated budget mechanisms to enable this, was identified in some cases.

Transparency

The online publication of awarded grants/projects provides accessible and transparent information to the sector on what has been supported. This can help to both encourage engagement and take-up in future rounds and demonstrate the nature and scope of support provided.

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Consultation and industry and stakeholder engagement

The importance of allocating sufficient time and resource to engage with the industry, including individual businesses and external stakeholders to inform scheme design, and support subsequent implementation.

Cross-government working

Effective engagement and linkages with other government departments and agencies should be encouraged, at both devolved/national and UK level. This helps to reduce duplication and maximise alignment across different funding schemes.

Capacity matters

Cutting across the points above, sufficient delivery and management capacity is key, to enable effective engagement with other parts of government, industry and stakeholders, and active communications, alongside core programme management activities.

Lessons from the design and delivery of other Welsh Government programmes aligned with those above. The importance of proportional application and delivery systems and processes, and clarity of strategic purpose were also highlighted from the review of other Welsh Government schemes.

Are any short-term impacts identifiable from the WMFS?

Evidence of short-term impacts from the WMFS is limited at this stage. This largely reflects the low levels of engagement with the first three funding rounds. This said, there is some evidence of positive short-term impacts relating to safer

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working practices, increased capacity for catching/storage, and more efficient equipment leading to potential productivity and cost benefits.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence from this process evaluation, ten recommendations for the Welsh Government to inform the design and delivery of future funding rounds of the WMFS have been identified.

Scheme 'strategy and design' recommendations

1. Define more explicitly, consistently and clearly the overall aims and purpose of the scheme.
2. Enhance communication and engagement with the sector where practical and proportionate to inform the design of future funding rounds.
3. Explore the possibility of adjusting the current annual funding model with UK Government.
4. **Continue to offer a mix of capital and revenue funding support where appropriate.** (<https://www.gov.walesnull>)

Scheme 'delivery and management' recommendations

5. For any future standard cost rounds, explore the possibility of incorporating greater flexibility around specifications (e.g. bespoke kit) and/or the ability for applicants to make the case for the purchase of other equipment to encourage demand and alignment to industry needs.
6. For future funding rounds, work with industry partners and stakeholders to ensure that the stated round aims are transparent, unambiguous and understood fully by the sector.

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7. Implement a series of actions to realise a simpler and more proportionate application process, which includes access to support.
8. Include a condition that applicant contact information may be shared with a third party for the purpose of evaluation within the scheme privacy notice.
9. Enhance the transparency of the scheme by publishing annual data on projects supported by the scheme (within UK GDPR guidelines) from Round 3 onwards.
10. Seek to establish a regular and dedicated forum for the four UK nations to share knowledge and best practice on marine and fisheries scheme design and delivery.

Footnotes

(<https://www.gov.wales>)[1 (<https://www.gov.wales#1>)] Welsh Government (2022) **Welsh Marine and Fisheries Scheme: guidance relevant to all rounds** (<https://www.gov.wales/welsh-marine-and-fisheries-scheme-guidance-relevant-all-rounds>)

(<https://www.gov.wales>)[2 (<https://www.gov.wales#2>)] Ibid (see 'Activities that can be funded under the scheme' section)

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

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