



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

European Innovation Partnership Wales: final report (summary)

European Innovation Partnership were projects delivered by Operations Groups led by farmers or foresters. Designed to test innovative technologies or ideas within these industries.

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Introduction

This evaluation was commissioned to assess the implementation and impact of European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Wales. Just under £2m was 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 were delivered by Operational Groups (OGs), which were led by farmers or foresters alongside other stakeholders such as research institutes or NGOs, and were designed to test innovative technologies or ideas within farming and forestry businesses in order to foster innovation and improve practices. The scheme was run by Menter a Busnes (MaB), in partnership with Farming Connect, and supported by the Knowledge Exchange Hub (KE Hub) and Innovation Brokers.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted over three phases. The first phase was delivered between March 2021 and January 2022 to establish the scheme's underpinning Theory of Change which was used to inform our Evaluation Framework. This process involved a comprehensive review of the core documentation and broader literature, scoping interviews and a workshop session.

The interim (Phase 2) and final (Phase 3) evaluations were informed by a survey of 132 OG members (38 of whom also took part in follow-up interviews to capture longitudinal data) and 30 non-beneficiaries; interviews with delivery personnel, Innovation Brokers, external stakeholders, and a comprehensive review of the scheme's monitoring information. Two observational visits were also undertaken at Farming Connect Open Day events which focused on EIP projects in order to assess the dissemination element (19 attendees were also

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interviewed as part of this exercise).

Our OG member survey sample incorporated different types of members (108 farm businesses, four forestry businesses, and 20 other organisations), which collectively represented a 42% response rate. Respondents had also been involved in 42 of the 46 projects funded by the scheme. This provided a robust sample for our evaluation.

The main limitation within our approach was the limited insight into the wider take-up of the new practices trialled through the scheme. Whilst we did gain some insight through the consultation with beneficiaries and individuals attending the dissemination events, an industry-wide survey would be needed to definitively determine the level of awareness and uptake throughout the sector.

Main findings on impacts

The evidence presented in our report demonstrates that the EIP Wales scheme has been successful, delivering its objectives and generating important outcomes through effective management.

The scheme successfully delivered the number of projects intended and far exceeded the target for the number of organisations engaged in Operational Groups. Beyond that, there was broad satisfaction with the delivery amongst each stakeholder group. The vast majority of Operational Group members believed that their projects were a success and that they had reaped the intended benefits.

The impact for Operational Group members was considerable, with most farmers/foresters reporting that they had made changes to their practices as a result of the research. The evaluation also found tangible benefits associated with those changes, notably improvements to animal health and reduction in

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health-related costs; improvements to businesses' produce; and environmental outcomes. These changes and benefits were found to largely have been sustained a year after they were first reported, and some represented substantial improvements in businesses' performance. Our evaluation also discovered that a good return on investment had potentially already been achieved for the scheme, where many of the changes can be attributed to reduced costs and increased income generation (although these estimates were highly speculative).

There was a small number of comments from respondents with completed projects, perhaps from Operational Group members who were not as heavily engaged, which suggested they had not been made aware of the results; thus, the scheme should ensure that all Operational Group members are alerted.

The team in Wales have certainly delivered on EIP-AGRI's overarching aim, which was to foster competitiveness and sustainability in the farming and forestry sectors through turning ideas from farmers and foresters into innovative action. In fact, EIP Wales appears to compare favourably with other EIP schemes when it comes to the impacts achieved.

The core aim of EIP was to provide a mechanism which farmers and foresters can use to pilot their ideas, and for this to be demonstrated to the wider sector, resulting in a broader uptake and thus a more transformative change. Whilst we cannot definitively identify the scale of change created by the scheme throughout the sector, there is an abundance of evidence presented in the report demonstrating examples of knowledge transfer to farmers and foresters not involved in EIP, as well as examples where this has led to improved practices outside the direct beneficiary group. Thus, we can say, with some confidence, that the scheme has delivered on its core remit.

Equally, a wealth of information has been amassed and captured effectively in reports and other publications which can be used to generate further knowledge transfer. Whilst there has been some activity to disseminate findings, the level of

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awareness throughout the sector is not known. The potential impact of this research would likely be enhanced, and generate a greater legacy, if the dissemination of findings was embedded and sustained. Without this, the risk is that the learning will be lost after these initial impacts.

Lessons for future delivery

Firstly, we note that the scheme has demonstrated its value when considering the impacts outlined above. There is a strong case for maintaining this type of activity given the impact on improving practices and the continuing need for the sector to innovate and become more profitable.

With regard to what a future scheme should look like, there are many lessons that can be drawn from EIP Wales to help inform future delivery.

Beneficiary profile and communication

We note that, whilst the initial promotional activity was effective in engaging farmers, it has been swayed more towards progressive farm businesses that were already innovating and plugged into the support network. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that the support has increased the appreciation for innovation and confidence and ability to innovate, this may have been limited slightly given that they were already quite innovative. It is entirely legitimate to support these businesses because, as we have already noted, the main intention was to use the projects to demonstrate ideas so that they become common practice. That said, future schemes may wish to engage with more businesses which have greater needs around increasing their profitability and propensity to innovate. It is important to note that the scheme did manage to engage some farming businesses that have not been involved in previous interventions to the same extent (e.g. 30% reported they had not received any

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financial support in the last five years). However, a better balance could potentially be struck between the proportion of farming businesses supported that are already heavily engaged in the support infrastructure and those that are less so.

Application and appraisal processes

The application and appraisal processes were robust, which allowed projects to be assessed on their scientific merit. Whilst the process was comprehensive and likely too time-consuming and difficult for most farmers to complete, this was mitigated by the fact that Innovation Brokers were given a licence to lead the process. The farmers and foresters were generally satisfied with this compromise. However, there may be an opportunity in post-RDP interventions to streamline some elements of the process to make it more accessible and potentially reduce the level of input required from consultants.

There was a lack of selectivity in the processes, with the grants being awarded almost on a first come, first served basis (provided they met the eligibility criteria). Securing a broader group of projects from which to choose could have potentially led to a different or perhaps better selection of projects.

The expertise offered by the scheme was a more important motivation for businesses' engagement than the financial support given 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.

Assessment of the Innovation Broker role

The Innovation Brokers have played a crucial role in supporting each aspect of delivery, from the initial work to establish Operational Groups and submit applications, to delivering the research trials. This has been important in

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ensuring that the projects were professionally managed with an appropriate structure, thereby ensuring sufficient scientific rigour to give credibility to the results. In most instances, Operational Group members have been overwhelmingly positive about their involvement. The balance of evidence suggests that the Innovation Brokers have provided good value for money, although it is also possible that much of the facilitation activity could have been delivered more cost-effectively at a more junior project officer level. We note that, whilst the expertise provided by Innovation Brokers has been valuable in some situations, for the most part it was not a material part of Innovation Brokers' input, with a greater need for interpersonal skills and the ability to bring people together. Thus, beyond anything else, the scheme has shown the importance of having facilitation support to deliver the projects.

Whilst the importance of retaining facilitation support is evident, the variability in the complexity of projects may suggest a case for a blended model whereby the more straightforward projects could be supported at a more junior level. This would perhaps provide the best balance with regard to securing value for money, ensuring scientific rigour, retaining a thorough application process to help identify the best projects, and having a ground-up approach.

Delivering a farmer-led/group-working initiative

Regarding other design considerations for future delivery, there was broad agreement that the value of grants provided under this scheme worked well and was particularly effective when it came to supporting projects that farmers and foresters were more interested in, and when it came to making sure the funding could go as wide as possible.

Generally, most projects were conceived by farmers and foresters and based on their needs, albeit with extensive support from the Innovation Brokers in delivering them. However, it is important to consider whether this is the best approach. Some stakeholders felt that there was not always a clear strategic

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focus, likely linked to having such an open approach. Most other EIP schemes around Europe that are classed as having an open approach nonetheless identified particular needs and opportunities, or sectors on which to focus. Stakeholders favoured having an open approach but underneath an overarching strategy with perhaps four or five key themes on which to focus. This would help ensure that the projects deliver on the Welsh Government's strategic objectives as well as the farmers and foresters' needs or wants. This would also have the benefit of simplifying the articulation and dissemination of findings at a scheme level, i.e. by referring to groups of similar projects rather than 46 completely different projects.

A further weakness highlighted by stakeholders was the lack of dedicated funding to scale up EIP projects. Some saw the scheme as providing 'seed funding' to test numerous ideas at a relatively low cost and then backing those which showed the most potential, although there was no formal mechanism with which to undertake the latter.

The level of engagement and collaboration amongst Operational Group members appears to have varied considerably, with some evidence of non-engagement, particularly amongst non-farmers and foresters. Due to the small size of the team, there appears to have been a lack of oversight from MaB regarding individuals' engagement on the ground and Innovation Brokers' role in securing that engagement. This further suggests that a larger team of core staff would be a worthwhile addition to future schemes. EIP-England sought to secure engagement by mandating that all Operational Group members had to agree to terms of reference, thereby ensuring clarity on their roles (which does not appear to have always been the case in Wales).

There may be a case for awarding some form of compensation to Operational Group members for their time spent on the project. This was suggested by some members and stakeholders and would likely increase engagement, although other measures should be tested first, as the monetary aspect was not highlighted as an issue by the vast majority and there could be concerns around

the impact such a measure could have on the ethos of the scheme.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, EIP Wales has been a highly successful scheme that has delivered good outcomes for the participants and for the agriculture and forestry sectors more broadly. It has shown the value gained from investing in this type of scheme and there is a strong case for continuing to do so in future. Should that be the case, there are valuable lessons in this report which can be used to inform future delivery.

The following recommendations have been made, based on the findings presented in our report.

Recommendation 1

MaB should work alongside Innovation Brokers to ensure that all Operational Group members have received their project results where relevant.

Recommendation 2

There should be consideration of how best to deploy the knowledge generated from this research activity going forward, e.g. by embedding in Farming Connect literature or training for development officers, and engaging with other agricultural consultants, services, and colleges to ensure that the knowledge is embedded in their operations and then passed on to the individuals and businesses they support.

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Recommendation 3

An innovation partnership scheme that allows the farming and forestry sectors to test new technologies and ideas should be maintained.

Recommendation 4

Schemes in the future should consider ways of engaging the ‘hard-to-reach’ farmers who are not part of the support infrastructure. The main way in which those businesses found out about EIP Wales was through peers. Future schemes could consider encouraging members to invite peers, who do not typically engage in support provisions, more explicitly.

Recommendation 5

Before launching any future scheme, the application process should be reviewed and streamlined where possible.

Recommendation 6

Schemes in the future should consider deploying a more competitive application process to ensure the most appropriate projects are funded. This could include adopting a robust scoring matrix set against key criteria which all applications regardless of application windows would need to be scored against.

Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government should consider placing more emphasis on the

provision of expertise and facilitation support in future schemes that are focused on trialling innovative approaches within the farming and forestry sectors.

Recommendation 8

Future schemes should consider adopting a blended model approach with a larger team of core staff (project officers) employed to provide facilitation support and the more costly external consultants only commissioned where the complexity of the proposed project requires their input.

Recommendation 9

Future schemes should continue to provide small grants that prioritise farmers and foresters' ideas.

Recommendation 10

Future schemes should consider adjusting the open nature of the approach by setting out strategic themes and guidelines.

Recommendation 11

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

Recommendation 12

Operational Groups should be instructed to establish terms of reference with clear roles and responsibilities.

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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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