

SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 38/2020
PUBLICATION DATE: 04/06/2020

Regional Engagement Teams Evaluation

Summary

1. Research aims

- 1.1 OB3 Research, in conjunction with Hatch Regeneris and Dateb, were commissioned by the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) in April 2019 to undertake an evaluation of the Regional Engagement Teams (RETs).
- 1.2 The aims of the evaluation were:
 - to assess the progress made by RETs towards their overall objective of maximising the benefits of the European Structural Investment (ESI) programmes to each region of Wales
 - to provide recommendations for RET activities for the remainder of the programming period and
 - to provide recommendations for approaches to regional engagement and regional investment in Wales after Brexit.

Method

- 1.3 The evaluation was undertaken between April and August 2019, and involved:
 - an inception stage, including attendance at an inception meeting with WEFO officials, scoping interviews and preparing an evaluation project plan
 - desk based research to analyse relevant policy, programme and operational-level documentation
 - reviewing European Structural Investment (ESI) programme delivery approaches across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland
 - reviewing the original Theory of Change (ToC) logic model in place for the RETs operation and facilitating a workshop to discuss this model
 - gathering the views of stakeholders and funded operations via a web survey
 - undertaking a package of fieldwork with each RET and their host local authorities
 - conducting fieldwork with a sample of 25 ESI funded operations, WEFO officials and other key stakeholder organisations
 - analysing the findings and developing a revised ToC logic model for the operation.

Regional Engagement Teams

- 1.4 Four Regional Engagement Teams (RETs) are currently funded as part of the 2014 to 2020 European Structural Investment (ESI) Operational Programme in Wales, with the objective of maximising the benefits of ESI investment to their respective regions. RETs are funded via the Technical Assistance (TA) priority across all four ESI programme operations in Wales.
- 1.5 RETs were established to help improve the way ESI funding would be used and managed across the current operational programmes and were expected to build upon those TA approaches adopted during previous programmes.
- 1.6 Following a call for funding proposals, the following four RETs were approved in 2016:
 - South East led by Bridgend County Borough Council and covering 10 local authority areas
 - Swansea Bay led by Carmarthenshire County Council on behalf of the Swansea Bay City Region and covering four local authority areas
 - Mid Wales led by Ceredigion County Council on behalf of the Growing Mid Wales Partnership and covering two local authority areas
 - North Wales led by Conwy County Council on behalf of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board and covering six local authority areas.
- 1.7 Funding of £2.55m was allocated to RETs activities, initially up until 31 March 2021 and thereafter extended until 31 June 2023, with the expectation that RETs utilise their underspend to fund this extension.
- 1.8 It was expected that RETs would be engaged in regionally proofing funding applications and ensuring that operations complement, rather than duplicate, each other during delivery. It was also expected that RETs would contribute towards five TA outputs indicators relating to training events, dissemination events, press releases, e-newsletters and number of co-financed employees.

2. Key findings of the evaluation

- 2.1 The key findings of the evaluation are:
 - RETs have operated within very dynamic and evolving regional landscapes. They have offered stability and played an important role in communicating these regional changes to others. There is scope to further embed and integrate the functions conducted by RETs into their respective regional partnership structures as the landscape evolves in the future.
 - RETs effort to regionally proof applications was restricted mostly to regionally-led operations due to the fact that RETs were established late in the day and after Welsh Government national backbone operations had been approved. As a result, RETs have focused on retrospectively regionally proofing some funded operations to ensure their alignment with regional priorities and needs.
 - Most funded operations who contributed to the evaluation were in regular contact with at least one RET and the majority thought that RETs were undertaking their role effectively.
 - Funded operations expressed very different levels of understanding about the role of RETs and occasionally confused them with a role undertaken by others, such as Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) and WEFO.
 - Funded operations regarded RETs as a useful resource to further their understanding about regional priorities, to keep them informed of evolving regional developments and to gain opportunities to engage with other operations.
 - Three of the RETs facilitate networks. The most effective networks were considered to be those which focused on specific themes and issues, were well attended and which also offered opportunities to develop close relationships with other operations.

- Mixed views were conveyed by contributors about RETs' role in prioritising applications across Priority 4 of the ERDF programme, particularly the Building for the Future operation.
- To date, RETs' access to performance data about funded operations has been limited and there is scope to prioritise this area of work for the remaining programme period.
- There is a constructive working relationship in place between RETs and WEFO with the RET steering group highlighted as a particularly effective forum.
- In terms of performance against revised WEFO funded targets, RETs are performing well against three targets relating to training events, dissemination events and e-newsletters.
- In terms of spend, all RETs were reporting an underspend against their profiled budget mostly due to delays in getting operations underway.
- RETs are successfully embracing several of their cross-cutting theme objectives but some of their proposed actions in this area of work have yet to materialise.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 3.1 The evaluation concludes that RETs have been able to make good progress to date towards their overall objective of ensuring that ESI funding benefits their respective regions. Their main achievements to date have been around engagement, communication and networking. RETs have helped to ensure that funded operations consider regional needs and strategies and played an important role in communicating information about evolving regional landscapes to funded operations and stakeholders. Regional networks are stronger as a result of RET activities.
- 3.2 RETs add value to funded operations as well as regional partnerships. Their events and activities are well regarded and useful to share best practice, gather information and forge relationships. However, the nature, frequency and usefulness of RET activities does vary from one RET to another and there would be benefit from aiming for greater consistency in how RETs engage with funded operations.
- 3.3 RETs are highly regarded and the prior experience of RET officers was identified as a strength. There is scope to broaden RETs' networks even further over the remaining duration of the programme.
- 3.4 When considering the original intermediary outcomes set out in the ToC model, the evaluation concludes that RETs have been able to make an effective contribution towards their objective of aligning interventions with regional priorities by engaging with operations and other players and facilitating dialogue between them. RETs have been curtailed from undertaking their regional proofing of ESI applications functions due to their late start and their lack of involvement in strategic backbone operations. Despite this, they have undertaken this task retrospectively in an effective manner. RETs are on track to contribute towards their outcome of getting operations to complement each other and have helped to minimise, but not eliminate, duplication across interventions.
- 3.5 It would be unrealistic to expect RETs to achieve their expected outcome of securing good uptake of operations in their region. The evaluation suggests that a more suitable outcome would be 'operations are well informed about other services so they can refer participants according to their needs'. Likewise, RETs cannot be expected to impact upon the number of regional or pan-Wales operations within their region as they have no responsibility for awarding funding. The evaluation sets out a revised Theory of Change logic model at Figure 9.1. This presents five intermediate outcomes which better reflect the actual activities of RETs, including outcomes not identified in the original model around operations engaging and collaborating with each other and operations being well informed about other services so that they can make appropriate participant referrals.

Recommendations

3.6 The evaluation recommends that for the remainder programme period:

- RETs should continue to fulfil their functions as is currently the case, but ensure that any staffing capacity issues be addressed as a priority.
- Welsh Government and local authorities work together to ensure that the uncertainty surrounding future funding does not impinge on RETs ability to retain skilled and knowledgeable staff.
- RETs should place a greater emphasis upon identifying and communicating the impact of ESI funding at a regional level.
- Any networks which are facilitated by RETs should seek to build upon the current good practice identified by contributors taking place, particularly across the south east, with a focus on addressing specific themes or issues in future events.
- RETs should explore how they could adopt greater consistency in their approach to working with funded operations in terms of the templates issued to gather information from operations on progress and outcomes and ensuring that relevant operations receive communication and invitations to events from all RETs.
- RETs, where it is not currently the case, should explore how they can disseminate information, such as contact data for themselves and other RETs, bulletins and newsletters, on-line.

3.7 We recommend that for the future:

- RETs continue to contribute to the current discussions to streamline and rationalise partnership structures
- Consideration is given as to how the current duties undertaken by RETs can be fulfilled as an embedded and integrated role within any future streamlined regional partnerships.
- Efforts are made to maintain the knowledge, expertise and contacts which are currently in place across the RETs structure for the benefit of future engagement work.
- If regional engagement activity is to be funded from a central fund, a more equitable distribution of funding should be adopted per region.

Report Authors: OB3 Research, Dateb and Hatch Regeneris.

Full Research Report: Bryer, N., Bebb, H., Burrows, E., and Mekki, G. (2020). *Regional Engagement Teams Evaluation*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 38/2020.

Available at: <https://gov.wales/regional-engagement-teams-evaluation>

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

For further information please contact:

Charlotte Guinee
Social Research and Information Division
Knowledge and Analytical Services
Welsh Government, Cathays Park
Cardiff,
CF10 3NQ

Email: charlotte.guinee@gov.wales

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

OGL © Crown Copyright Digital ISBN 978-1-80038-621-1