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Evaluation of Scottish National  
Rural Network and  
Scotland Rural Development  
Programme  
Communication Plan

**EVALUATION OF SCOTTISH NATIONAL RURAL  
NETWORK AND SCOTLAND RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME  
COMMUNICATION PLAN**

**Rural Development Company**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stakeholder communications regarding the Scottish Rural Development Plan (SRDP) are undertaken through two principal means, which are requirements of the European Commission on Member States. First, Member States were obliged to produce a Communications Plan<sup>1</sup> to coordinate their Rural Development Programme communication and publicity activities ; second, Member States were required to establish a National Rural Network the remit of which includes that it ‘facilitate the sharing of common issues and examples of good practice by rural development practitioners and stakeholders.’<sup>2</sup>

This report evaluates the implementation of the SRDP Communication Plan and the operational effectiveness of the Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) in order to provide recommendations for the 2014 - 2020 SRDP. Its findings are based on documentary analysis, interviews with key rural organisations and interests, government officials and rural stakeholders, a facilitated workshop with a cross-section of these stakeholders and an on-line survey of rural people, businesses and organisations.

### **The SRDP Communications Plan**

A Stakeholder Communications Plan was produced by Scottish Government officials to support the delivery of the 2007-2013 SRDP. However, this was not made widely available nor was it regarded as an important working tool. The SRDP was introduced at a time of major political change in Scotland with a new administration coming to power, major reorganisation within Scottish Government, in particular within the newly formed Rural Affairs and Environment Directorate. The overlap of this reorganisation with the launch of the new RDP placed heavy demands on management and administration resulting in rather limited focus on communication plan implementation.

The initial research established that due to the limited implementation of the communications plan any formal evaluation of its effectiveness would have very limited value. The emphasis of this part of the study was therefore redirected towards more forward looking consideration of the key needs of the plan for the 2014 - 2020 SRDP.

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<sup>1</sup> Such a communications plan to ensure coherent provision of information and publicity on rural development activities benefitting from EAFRD support and defining is a requirement under indent 41 of the RDR implementing regulation (Reg EC 1974/2006). The plan should define the obligations of managing authorities and beneficiaries. Article 76 of Reg EC 1698/2005 specifies that this communications plan is the sole responsibility of the managing authority (Scottish Government) and defines its coverage as publicity and information for potential beneficiaries and the general public specifically including the Community contribution.

<sup>2</sup> From the SNRN website accessed 30<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

The 2007 – 2013 SRDP was launched through a programme of public meetings at centres across rural Scotland early in the period. These highlighted the overall SRDP vision, an explanatory booklet was also produced and distributed. Thereafter delivery scheme-specific communications rather than SRDP level became the norm. Scheme-specific communications clearly had an important role in the roll out of support to rural Scotland; such an emphasis in the approach is therefore understandable. In practice this has tended to result in the SRDP mainly being identified with the Rural Priorities scheme; non competitive schemes such as LFASS accessed through the Single Application Form are much less strongly identified with SRDP.

The Scottish Government's website on the SRDP was an important source of information to stakeholders, but this was not always kept fully up-to-date. Respondents were adamant about the need for a single portal as a totally up-to-date and reliable source of information about the available support, in particular about any changes in the funding priorities and the programmes regulation and administration.

A considerable proportion of applicants became highly dependent on consultants/agents to develop and submit applications. This resulted from the early difficulties in implementing the 2007 – 2013 SRDP, i.e. the administrative complexity and high broadband speed requirement. The subsequent frequent scheme changes made it even more difficult for applicants to be up to date. Agents became skilled at working out what was needed for a successful application and could spread the costs of keeping up to date between multiple clients. This and the way in which SRDP information was cascaded by Government resulted in agents becoming key gatekeepers to the system.

The overall vision of the SRDP was lost in the implementation challenges which resulted in communications revolving around an approach focused on scheme and support delivery, rather than in trying to deliver the SRDP and Scottish Government policy objectives for rural Scotland.

The obligatory acknowledgement of the important European contribution to the SRDP has been somewhat inconsistent in Scottish Government communications.

### **The SNRN**

The Scottish National Rural Network was established with a limited budget, limited ambition and modest scope, compared to many other Member States. The SNRN has kept good records of web-hits, events and user satisfaction. User satisfaction with the SNRN was high.

However, for many rural stakeholders, SNRN was 'not on their radar'. SNRN was seen as more associated with rural community development and the LEADER constituency, rather than rural business development and was only modestly connected to land-based businesses. SNRN has not succeeded in engaging a wider

constituency of RDP beneficiaries and rural actors and remains very community-focused.

Those involved in the land-based community stressed the importance of their own networks rather than the SNRN in delivering advice about the SRDP or rural policy and development issues. This is not a criticism of SNRN but recognition of a crowded field of information providers and subtle functional differentiation of purpose.

The on-line survey generated 346 responses and showed a 76% awareness of SNRN. LEADER was the most common entry point to SNRN. Third sector and community development actors were more likely to make use of the SNRN website than farmers and land managers.

Generally, respondents saw the SNRN website as meeting their needs. Perspectives on the various types of events were more mixed. Although project visits did not score highly by respondents, post-visit evaluation suggests that these were highly valued by participants; stakeholders also placed a high value on these as a future opportunity.

In terms of future services, there was very strong recognition by respondents of the potential of doing more in developing connections, bringing rural organisations together and creating potential through collaboration and co-operation. Across the board, much scope was seen in the identification and exchange of best practice and associated research and analysis with a focus on improving rural development outcomes.

Stakeholders' overwhelming view was that there was only weak engagement with the SNRN and mixed awareness, coupled with some disappointment that this was the case. The new RDP provided an opportunity to launch a revamped SNRN with stronger engagement with a wider range of constituencies. It was recognised that the SNRN was lightly resourced and so had limited opportunities to increase its range of activities at present. SNRN's optimal future role was seen as a centre supporting networking between networks. Stakeholders suggest that SNRN should be seen as a hub which disseminates learning opportunities from good practice models, using various types of meetings and fora, including workshops and using a variety of other means and media.

Four different governance models were considered with respect to the future SNRN, based on current experience in Scotland and other member states, some outsourced and independent, others in-house. Their relative merits were considered in some detail in the workshop. The preference was for governance through an outcome-orientated steering group with strong stakeholder representation and decision-making power. There was a majority of opinion in favour of an in-house ring-fenced network support unit. In all cases considered, it was clear that effective stakeholder participation should be improved, that this was valued, and was considered an

important contributory element in strengthening the relevance, legitimacy and credibility of the network and as such to NRN success.

The proportionately higher budgets given to NRNs in other member states reflect the importance attributed to them. In other countries, NRNs ran themed events and in general were able with enhanced budgets to cover a wider range of issues, although only in one case was the network seen as the access portal for all RDP-related information.

In all countries examined there are uncertainties as to how the NRNs will operate in the future. The new NRN needs to be more of a network with real two-way engagement and flows of information. It needs to be able to coordinate more actively between networks and stakeholders. This will require adequate staff, tools and resources and specialists may need to be contracted in. There is a need to ensure that those managing the Programme are fully engaged in the network.

### **Overall conclusions**

In summary, the internal and external communications associated with the 2007-2013 SRDP have been extensive but their effectiveness has been significantly compromised by flaws in both their design and delivery. There was a widespread perception that the early transformational vision for the 2007-13 SRDP had been jettisoned in favour of ensuring faster delivery of schemes, after early implementation 'hiccups'. From mid-programme onwards, a pragmatic approach to communications prevailed to enhance delivery rather than improve SRDP effectiveness and outcomes.

The SNRN has operated with a limited budget to reach effectively rural community interests but it has been limited by the available resource to engage in wider activities such as has occurred in other Member States. The new NRN should lead to a network of networks which adds value by improving their links, synergies and complementarity strengthening networking and reducing duplication of effort.

### **Recommendations**

1. The communications plan for the 2014 – 2020 SRDP should be developed, implemented and monitored to ensure that all relevant staff understand the policy objectives and the mechanics of their delivery.
2. The Scottish Government should communicate SRDP policy objectives and the delivery arrangements to potential beneficiaries in a concise and carefully targeted manner using appropriate communication tools and based on an understanding of their needs.
3. In order to help staff deliver and communicate the new RDP, appropriate needs-focused training should be provided.

4. The acknowledgement of the European Union contribution should be strengthened and supported by monitoring action.
5. An adequately funded National Rural Network should be established, focused on communicating with the range of Scotland's rural stakeholders and their existing networks, strengthening the connections and fostering knowledge transfer to improve Rural Development outcomes.
6. Engaging more effectively across the full range of rural constituents is a priority for the new SNRN. The branding and identification of the SNRN should be strengthened and more distinct to improve recognition and clarify its wider relevance.
7. The design and establishment of the SNRN and the basis of its engagement with rural constituents should be founded in sound analysis of their needs.
8. The SNRN should be developed as a ring-fenced, in-house agency guided by an advisory board of stakeholders.
9. The new NRN should play an enhanced role in strengthening SRDP communications.
10. In order to meet the diverse range of needs and demands placed on a National Network Unit, it is recommended that a policy of flexible resourcing be adopted.
11. The SNRN should promote good practice in rural development in more interactive ways, particularly peer-to-peer learning, good practice events and collaborative projects.
12. More formal networking arrangements and training support are required specifically for LEADER to improve delivery, outcomes and the exchange of good practices.
13. The selection and communication of good practice examples to help improve RDP outcomes should be enhanced.
14. The new NRN should take a more explicit supporting function on innovation and innovation systems in rural areas.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The following report was completed by the Rural Development Company Ltd and Associates on behalf of the Scottish Government and presents an evaluation of the Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) and Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) Stakeholder Communication Plan. The primary aims of the study are to determine how effective the existing SNRN and SRDP communication activities have been in achieving their aims and objectives and in meeting key stakeholder needs; consider other NRN/rural development communication models across the UK and Europe; and provide options for how communications and networking could be most effective under SRDP 2014-2020.

## 1.1 Study objectives

The detailed objectives of the review were to:

- Determine how the delivery of the SRDP Communications Plan and SNRN has met both domestic and European requirements;
- Obtain views of key stakeholders, delivery partners and beneficiaries on the performance, role and impact of the Communications Plan and SNRN on supporting the delivery of SRDP;
- Determine how the delivery of the SRDP Communications Plan has met the needs of stakeholders and the general public;
- Assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery model adopted for the SNRN and how it has met the needs of relevant stakeholders;
- Determine whether stakeholders are making good use of the SNRN services:
- Identify the value or otherwise of the individual communication and networking activities undertaken;
- Review the communication activities under each SPDP scheme and how well these have been aligned and their complementarity;
- Review different approaches to networks and rural development communication across UK and Europe and identify good practice;
- Review how SNRN and the Communications Plan could be further developed for SRDP 2014-2020;
- Identify how the SNRN under SRDP 2014-2020 might relate to relevant European initiatives, specifically, the European Innovation Partnership Network, the European Network for Rural Development and the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development;
- Assess the extent of any future needs and opportunities, and provide a clear set of recommendations to assist the Scottish Government with the planning for 2014-20; and
- Provide an assessment of the SNRN and communications which can feed into the ex-ante evaluation for SRDP 2014-2020 and meets the EU

requirements for monitoring and evaluating Rural Development Programmes.

The objectives were subsequently modified as seen below at section 1.3.

## **1.2 Method Used**

The method was designed to undertake the two evaluation tasks in parallel and involved consultations with internal Scottish Government staff, external stakeholders and beneficiaries. We were conscious at all times to make best use of consultees' time during a very busy period in the programme cycle. The following tasks were undertaken as part of the research process:

### **1.2.1 Desk based analysis**

The desk research undertaken took the form of investigation of various reports, minutes and quarterly reports, the SNRN Action Plan and the SRDP Communications Plan. The majority of data in the desk-based analysis referred to the SNRN. Data analysed included web statistics, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the SNRN both for the website and the events contract.

### **1.2.2 Interviews and survey**

Two separate programmes of in-depth interviews were undertaken following discussions with the Project Board at the inception meeting. It was considered that face-to-face meetings with internal Scottish Government (SG) officials made the best use of their time and the study's resources, rather than undertake the workshop originally suggested in the proposal. In total 11 interviews were carried out with SG staff (9 face-to-face and 2 telephone). The second programme of interviews took place with 26 stakeholders (19 face-to-face and 7 telephone) from a broad range of organisations representing agriculture, crofting, forestry, the community, the third sector and LEADER. A further 6 interviews were carried out with representatives from other UK and European Networks.

### **1.2.3 Online survey**

A simple on-line survey was produced and cascaded for completion through the SNRN website and key stakeholder organisations' websites in public, private and third sectors including NFUS, Scottish Land and Estates, Scottish Government, LEADER LAGs, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) etc. thereby covering agriculture, crofting, forestry, community, the third sector and LEADER. The survey was also distributed through the key stakeholder organisations' email contacts with the aim of reaching as broad a range of rural constituents as possible. A total of 346 responses were received.

### **1.2.4 Workshops**

A workshop with 18 representatives from a wide range of rural stakeholder organisations was undertaken in Edinburgh on 16th May 2013. This workshop

explored the lessons to be learnt for communication in SRDP 2014-2020, provided the opportunity to discuss the parameters of what the SNRN should aim to deliver and explored the different delivery models that could be used in the 2014-2020 RDP.

### **1.3 Change to study method and reasons**

The major change to the study method was the re-focusing of the study to look more at how communication had taken place within the SRDP and the lessons that could be learned rather than evaluating the Communications Plan itself. There was a desire from the client for a more forward-looking report, with a stronger focus on the SNRN and its role in the 2014-2020 RDP. The main reason for this was that it became clear near the beginning of the study that the SRDP Communications Plan had not been delivered as originally envisaged. The Plan was written part way through the Programming period, circa 2010, but had not been followed through. It was suggested that one reason for this might be due to the move away from having a dedicated SRDP communications resource following a restructuring of the various Communication Teams within Scottish Government.

### **1.4 Structure of report**

The report has been structured into three main chapters. The first two chapters review SRDP Communications and the SNRN. The third chapter draws together overall conclusions and makes recommendations for the 2014-20 Programme.

<b>Summary of Chapter 1: Introduction</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This report evaluates the Communication Plan and effectiveness of communications associated with the delivery of the Scotland Rural Development Programme and the operational effectiveness of the Scottish National Rural Network over the period 2007-2013. The methods used include documentary analysis, stakeholder interviews (including of government actors), a questionnaire and a facilitated workshop.</li></ul>

## **2 SRDP STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION PLAN**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) is a programme of economic, environmental and social measures, with an overall value of €1.2 bn; at current values it utilises some €680m of European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) funding plus domestic Scottish Government funding. The programme is designed to support rural Scotland from 2007 to 2013. The SRDP is delivered through the following schemes and mechanisms:

- Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme (CCAGS)
- Food Processing, Marketing and Co-operation Grant Scheme (FPMC)
- Forestry Commission Challenge Funds (CF)
- The LEADER initiative
- Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS)
- Rural Priorities (RP)
- Land Managers Options (LMO)
- Skills Development Scheme (SDS)

A European Commission requirement of the SRDP is that it provides information on, and publicises national strategy plans on, the programme and the contribution the European Community makes. The information provided is aimed at the general public and ensures transparency of European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)<sup>3</sup> assistance.

### **2.2 What was intended**

#### **2.2.1 Plans**

The SRDP Stakeholder Communication Plan was developed part way through the 2007-2013 programming period (circa 2010) and took more of a strategic look at communications. Information provided in previous revisions of the Operating Programme had been more descriptive of steps taken to introduce the 2007-2013 SRDP to potential applicants.

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<sup>3</sup> The EAFRD delivers support under Pillar 2 of the CAP through Rural Development Programmes of which the SRDP is one.

## 2.2.2 Aims and Objectives

The stated aims of the Communication Plan were twofold:

- To raise awareness and understanding of the opportunities and benefits that the SRDP brings to rural Scotland and the contribution made by the Community; and
- To encourage the submission of high quality applications for projects that deliver tangible benefits to rural Scotland.

There were no objectives stated in the communication plan. However, its success was intended to be monitored in a number of ways as follows:

- Assessment of media coverage
- Number and quality of applications to SRDP
- Measurement of stakeholder relationships (qualitative)
- Staff and delivery partner understanding of SRDP (measured through successful delivery of funding)
- Scottish Government / Scottish National Rural network website hits
- Scottish Government / delivery partner intranet hits
- Twitter / Facebook hits (only applicable for the last 18 months of the SRDP programme )
- Monthly newsletter circulation

At the start of the study, it proved difficult to obtain data relating to the monitoring criteria that were set out in the Communications Plan. On further investigation, it became clear that one of the reasons for this was that the Communication Plan was not implemented as originally envisaged. This is referenced in section 1.3.

However, had the Communication Plan been implemented, there do not appear to have been any targets set against the monitoring criteria so it would not have been possible to comment on the success or other wise of the plan. Consideration might also have been given to the definition of the monitoring criteria which in some instances are vague and very difficult to measure or attribute to communications.

At the outset of the study attempts were made to gather data to support the identified monitoring criteria in the Communications Plan. This proved to be very difficult for some criteria and some of the issues that arose are detailed below:

- Assessment of media coverage: - the media monitoring department within the Scottish Government were not able to provide this information as it was seen to be outwith their remit and capacity. SNRN do not routinely record this either.
- Number and quality of applications to SRDP: – this information is not gathered on a regular basis across the programme and is a very large task in itself (although RPID staff often had clear opinions). Some work was done on this and can be seen below, see Table 1.
- Measurement of stakeholder relationships (qualitative): - Stakeholders were spoken to during the consultation process.

- Staff and delivery partner understanding of SRDP (measured through successful delivery of funding): - It would be possible to gather these figures on the amount of funding delivered. However concerns were raised about how useful a criterion this was, as a causal link or attribution is not clearly established and good project out-turn on poor proposals with limited impacts could still be seen as 'success'.
- Scottish Government / Scottish National Rural network website hits: - Data was provided on the SNRN website. It was not possible to get data from the Scottish Government broken down by SRDP pages beyond 2009 and it was thought by Scottish Government that without a comparative measure to previous hits this would be counterproductive.
- Scottish Government / delivery partner intranet hits: – This indicator lacks definition and it was not possible to gather data for it.
- Twitter / Facebook hits –Twitter/Facebook have only been in regular use as part of Scottish Government communication activities in the last 18 months of the SRDP programme. SNRN were able to provide data on hits.
- Monthly newsletter circulation: – there are 11,021 subscribers to the Rural Issues newsletter circulated by the Scottish Government.

In an attempt to test the validity of the 'number and quality of applications to SRDP' as a measure of communications performance the data shown below in Table 1 was gathered from Rural Priorities. It shows the percentage of projects approved by the Regional Proposal Assessment Committees (RPACs) on a yearly basis from 2008 to 2012 and an average of all the RPACs by year. It does not include projects that were 'on-going for approval'.

**Table 1. Percentage of Projects Approved**

<b>RPAC</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>
<b>Argyll</b>	90%	72%	66%	73%	70%
<b>Ayrshire</b>	96%	84%	78%	76%	71%
<b>Borders</b>	95%	79%	65%	78%	63%
<b>Clyde</b>	93%	56%	77%	72%	57%
<b>D&amp;G</b>	93%	83%	68%	73%	78%
<b>Forth</b>	93%	80%	65%	74%	57%
<b>Grampian</b>	96%	79%	61%	66%	61%
<b>Highland</b>	92%	85%	77%	60%	64%
<b>Northern Isles</b>	95%	79%	79%	93%	90%
<b>Outer Hebrides</b>	80%	76%	58%	75%	58%
<b>Tayside</b>	97%	84%	67%	76%	66%
<b>Average per Year</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>67%</b>

It is clear from Table 1 that the percentage of applications approved overall reduced quite considerably over the years from an average of 93% in 2008 to an average of 67% in 2012. If there was a correlation drawn between communication and the quality of projects it may have been expected that the percentage of Rural Priorities projects approved would increase over time due to increase in knowledge and experience rather than decrease. However, the decrease is likely to be due to a

number of factors, including: the available budget, the experience of the RPACs in assessing projects, awareness of local priorities and progressive delivery of local priorities as well as the quality of projects submitted. This complicates linking the 'number and quality of applications to SRDP' to the way in which SRDP was communicated. Further investigation of other SRDP schemes showed that, for example, no projects had been rejected in the Skills Development Scheme (SDS) during the whole programme. Further, the Less Favoured Areas Support Scheme (LFASS) and Crofting Communities Agricultural Grants Scheme (CCAGs) are wholly or predominantly eligibility-led so there was no quality judgement to make.

## **2.3 Internal Communications**

### **2.3.1 Co-ordination and Structures**

There are a number of teams within the Scottish Government that have a role to play in communicating the SRDP.

- The RPID Communications team is based at Saughton House and works closely with the RPID staff delivering schemes such as RP, LMO and LFASS on internal and stakeholder communications.
- Scheme Managers and staff have ongoing responsibility for communicating their schemes to stakeholders using the RPID Communications team, webpages or their own meetings and joint working with stakeholders.
- 'Communications Greener' support the work of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment and Minister for Environment and Climate Change through Ministerial announcements and external media communications. In the past 18 months Communications Greener have also used social media alongside news releases to communicate key messages within the Greener portfolio.

### **2.3.2 Respondents views**

In order to understand how effectively the SRDP was communicated, a series of interviews were carried out with all SRDP Scheme Managers, the Rural Development Policy Team Leader and individuals within the RPID Communications Team. These 11 interviews were undertaken instead of the internal SG workshop that was originally proposed. The reason for this change was to try to reduce the demand placed on the internal SG staff's time. Unfortunately many of the key officials of the Communications Plan were no longer in the same post and few respondents had been involved since the start of the SRDP which has made evidence collection quite challenging.

During these interviews, it became clear that there was a very low awareness of the existence of the SRDP Stakeholder Communications Plan. This suggests that the Stakeholder Communications Plan in itself was not fully implemented throughout the programme although individual elements of communication as noted above did continue.

Further investigation with current Communications staff revealed that this may have been partly due to changes mid-way through the programming period which resulted in the loss of a dedicated resource responsible for implementing the SRDP Communications Plan.

Following restructuring, a new team was created to look after Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (RPID) internal and stakeholder communications. This remit was more focused on communications for RPID schemes including LFASS, LMO and Rural Priorities (RP) and did not include all eight schemes covered by SRDP. This may have been a pragmatic shift in emphasis as there are likely to be quite different communications needs depending on the scheme i.e. LFASS may have more need for compliance communications but not the same need for uptake communications. Throughout this period larger scale press relations and Ministerial announcements continued to be provided by the Greener Communications team.

Some of the Scottish Government staff interviewed think that it would be useful to have greater ability to engage with social media as it is seen as a new and less formal way of engaging with beneficiaries. Social media has only been routinely used across Government over the past 18 months but some SRDP policy and delivery areas are making full use of this tool.

From the interview respondents it also became apparent that there was still a lack of clarity amongst those involved in delivery as to the respective responsibilities of the teams involved in stakeholder Communications. Comments from those interviewed suggest that there were no clear lines of responsibility, a lack of coordination and little strategic direction. As far as web based communication was concerned, it was acknowledged that responsibility for keeping individual webpages updated lies with each business area, with advice from communications where necessary. It is understood the structure of the web site may well change moving into the new Programme. To this end a review of some of the SRDP web pages is already underway as part of a process of continuous improvement in line with developments of the Futures programme.

### **2.3.3 Planning**

Due to the staff changes from the start of the 2007-2013 programme the current Scheme Managers' knowledge of previous communications was limited. It appears that no formal process was in place to ensure both awareness and continuity of the Communications Plan.

SRDP seems to have been communicated as more of an overarching policy at the outset of the programme and latterly become much more focused on individual schemes communicating technical information. It was suggested that the initial 'focus was too much on policy objectives, rather than operational – and then policy left the scene'.

Scheme Managers that were involved in SRDP at the start of the 2007-2013 programme were able to provide a copy of an SRDP promotional booklet that was developed and distributed to stakeholders at the outset of the programme. This

booklet gave an overarching description of SRDP and laid out the policy objectives of all eight schemes included in the SRDP: Rural Priorities (RP), Land Managers Options (LMO), Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme (CCAGS), Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS), Food Processing and Marketing and Co-operation (FPMC), Skills Development Scheme (SDS), Challenge Funds and LEADER.

In addition to the booklet, a series of publicity events 'road shows' took place throughout the country. A particular effort seems to have been made to reach the more remote communities, and these events were well received. These road shows were used to disseminate information on the 2007-2013 SRDP using a centrally devised presentation which was delivered either by someone from 'HQ' or by a Senior Agricultural Officer at the Local Area Offices and/or the Chair of the RPAC. These meetings were open to the public and uptake varied across the country with most often farmers, agents and landowners attending. In more agriculturally based communities such as Orkney a wider audience often attended these road shows. One Agricultural Officer commented that some farmers attended multiple meetings to ensure that the same information was being given; this reinforcing the awareness of anxiety held by applicants regarding consistency of message.

Since these road shows, it appears that in most instances there has been very little or no formal planning by the scheme managers on how they communicate with their beneficiaries. Scheme Managers reported that they were not proactively seeking applicants largely due to their schemes not being undersubscribed and so there was no need to proactively promote them. There were also concerns about raising expectations that could not be met. In addition, in the middle section of the programming period, for a number of schemes, the internal pressures placed upon them by audit meant that all their resources were focused on ensuring these obligations were met. Similarly, since a number of the schemes are of a competitive nature, it was considered by scheme managers that the onus was on individual applicants to choose to engage rather than be targeted.

The SDS, CCAGS and FPMC were all felt to be broadly well-known in the industry amongst potential applicants and as 'niche' schemes it was not felt that there was a significant need for wider awareness raising. Uptake was slower but nonetheless seen as adequate.

Equally, being non-competitive and eligibility based LFASS required no promotion directly to applicants for uptake, with generally high if not full awareness, and a simple application tick box in the Single Application Form (SAF). Whilst little promotion was required to ensure uptake of support the objectives sought could have been more clearly communicated particularly given the high political visibility of LFASS.

Agents were acknowledged to be important in driving a number of schemes on the ground, most commonly within forestry schemes, and to a lesser degree agri-business development and agri-environment schemes. The applicant was often the instigator in the latter two but needed the agent to work through the eligibility and scoring criteria.

LEADER was seen as being different with the majority of direct communication with beneficiaries undertaken by the LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) with little need or demand for it to come from a central Scottish Government source.

The SRDP website was seen very much as a way of disseminating technical information to applicants who are already involved in SRDP rather than an initial introduction to the scheme. The website had developed over time and was considered generally to be an effective tool for instant and up-to-date information, despite its complexity. The volume of information, however, was unavoidable since there were so many components of the scheme and prescriptions. It appeared that this was also the most important tool for information internally amongst core and peripheral staff working on SRDP and that the bulk of this was for information on Rural Priorities.

Scheme Managers felt that general information about the schemes and what was available was largely getting out to farmers through word of mouth and through agents. This is particularly true for updates to the technical aspects of each scheme as many applicants could not afford the time to scrutinise changes and simply required reliable, accurate and up to date knowledge, more readily available from professional agents or local offices. Farmers and land managers felt that is precisely what they pay their agent to do. A number suggested that improvements could be made in alerting beneficiaries to changes and updates relevant to their scheme.

#### **2.3.4 Resourcing**

An indicative budget of €438,000 was originally estimated to take forward the Communications Plan. However no central budget was allocated or reported on, so no information is available on how much has been spent on SRDP communication activities. Individual scheme managers reported that they did not have a budget line for communications. The Technical Assistance budget for SRDP is managed by the Rural Communities Team. However, this budget is primarily reserved for funding the Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) and the Monitoring and Evaluation of the SRDP. A very small proportion of Technical Assistance budget has been used for stakeholder engagement, such as the annual LEADER conference.

#### **2.3.5 Co-ordination**

Corporate identity has not existed or been developed with regard to the SRDP, with generally very little steer being given to Scheme Managers on the main messages to communicate or communication objectives. While the objectives were relatively clear at the outset, as disseminated through the original booklet and the road show events, the messages since this time appear to have been lost in the administration of scheme roll out and the resolution of the difficulties that this created. Few felt that the broad objectives of what farmers and other applicants were aiming to deliver through their management were clear. Rather, it was assessed that applicants applied for what they wanted, often through the interpretation of an agent, and if by coincidence it delivered a target, then it would be deemed a success.

Technical information for applicants was the main form of communication from the Scheme, with the remainder of communications coming centrally on behalf of the Minister, usually in the form of press releases on approvals of funding or scheme

administrative changes. All major publicity for schemes is through ministerial announcements following a round of approvals, payments or the introduction of a new component.

Many of the schemes have their own distinct identity due to being 'niche schemes' (FPMC & SDS) or by virtue of their long history (LFASS, CCAGS), and as a result they are not always seen as being part of the SRDP brand, even by some of the Scheme Managers. With its own brand identity LEADER stands out clearly here as it is not a 'scheme' as such, although is often seen that way.

The variety of different means of applying for respective grants within the SRDP add to the lack of corporate identity e.g. applying for LFASS, LMO options and claiming RP annual recurrent payments are made on the SAF so it may be perceived by farmers more as Pillar 1 support. The LFASS and LMO schemes are eligibility-based rather than competitive and are rarely referred to under the SRDP umbrella. LEADER is also not seen as being part of SRDP but considered as a separate funding support mechanism. This leaves Rural Priorities (RP) as the most commonly known scheme under the SRDP label, and the two acronyms are often conflated, a factor exacerbated because of RP's high profile.

## **2.4 External Communications**

### **2.4.1 What were Scottish Government objectives in communicating**

The overarching intentions of SRDP as set out in the original scheme booklet were that 'SRDP provides a framework to deliver European and Scottish Government funding promoting social, economic and environmental benefits. It gives a major opportunity to enhance Scotland's dynamic rapidly changing rural economy – targeting resources to the areas where they will make the most difference, encouraging positive environmental management and supporting remote rural communities.'

It was seen as an 'ambitious programme designed to serve Scotland's needs – encourage innovation, building on our strengths in five key areas'.

- business viability and competitiveness
- biodiversity and landscape
- climate change
- water quality
- thriving rural communities

The messages communicated by the Scottish Government that were presented at the outset of the programme have changed slightly, as reflected in the section of the Scottish Government's website entitled 'What is SRDP?' where SRDP is described as being 'outcome-focused and primarily aims to deliver a Greener Scotland and to promote a Wealthier and Fairer rural Scotland. It will contribute to the Government's Healthier and Smarter objectives and will help to strengthen rural communities.' This reflects the change in Government and its emerging policy which coincided with the point at which the SRDP was being submitted to the European Commission.

## 2.4.2 Needs

The need for a Government-driven communications system to be in place is arguably self-evident. The Scottish Government has clearly communicated its overall purpose and it was obviously necessary to connect the SRDP to that overall purpose. The principles and approach are explained on the Scottish Government website (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Performance/scotPerforms/purpose>), but this material is not designed with the general public or farmer applicants to the SRDP in mind. Nevertheless, there is still a need to connect the SRDP to that wider purpose.

Given the breadth of the SRDP the complexity of the make up of the target audience for associated communications is considerable, one size cannot fit all. Different people have different communication and information needs both in terms of what is communicated and how that is done. This is acknowledged by SG who are currently exploring the design of an improved portal.

Arguably, there are three principal needs with SRDP communications to external audiences. The first relates to generating as wide an awareness of the SRDP as is possible, and through public meetings and leafleting and the cascade of information that was picked up and passed on by representative bodies, the press and others. This awareness raising might have focussed on two main issues:

- What is in it for me as a potential applicant?
- What do I need to do to comply with programme/scheme requirements?

The second principal need is for the vision of the programme to be communicated. The early leaflets do communicate the vision, but it would appear that the communications strategy rapidly morphed from one conveying grand vision to one determined to show the operationalisation of the programme and particularly of the more challenging measures such as RPs.

The third principal need is for the modifications to the programme to be communicated to enable effective delivery. As the programme evolved and the various schemes became semi-autonomous delivery entities, there remained a need to connect with interested external bodies including past recipients of funding in that field, to consultants, to target constituencies.

As a general principle, the longer the communications chain the greater the danger that the message becomes distorted, as in a game of 'Chinese whispers.' Further, given the dependence on consultant/agent intermediaries, there is a clear danger that the grand design principles are ignored in what became the pursuit of a funded proposal.

## 2.4.3 Methods and sources

The website was seen as a critical resource for all 'constituents' with farmers, foresters and rural businesses seeing it as the most important source of information. The website provides not only the technical information regarding eligibility and rules

of schemes but is also the only way to apply for RP funding. It is still possible to apply for some of the other schemes on paper.

From an internal point of view the SG are keen to keep all the SRDP information in one place and this is welcomed by external stakeholders. There were concerns raised about the accessibility or 'user friendliness' of the web site and the perceived difficulties in navigating around it. However, the overwhelming concern raised time and again were the serious problems caused by the out-of-date guidance that was still on the website when it had been in practice post-dated. It was suggested that instead of adding updates to scheme guidance it should be possible to have only one guidance document for each scheme that is fully up to date and 'the gospel'. It was also suggested that notifications that changes have been made should be pro-actively publicised rather than relying on people checking the web site 'just in case there has been a change'. This information, it was suggested, could also be cascaded through stakeholder organisations such as NFU, SLE, RSPB, SNH etc.

Agents and intermediaries have played a hugely important role in communicating technical aspects and scoring criteria of the schemes within the SRDP. The Scottish Government has communicated directly with agents and due to the volume of applications they are involved with, many agents have developed a high level of understanding of the complexities of RP and how to write successful applications. There is still a huge demand for the use of agents and intermediaries in the application and claims processes for a number of schemes. This not only happens in complex schemes like RP, but also in schemes such as FPMC where applicants may see themselves as 'cash rich and time poor.' With little prior knowledge of the scheme it is cost-effective for these businesses to buy in expertise. Agents and intermediaries were also seen to be of great benefit to applicants as they are expected to be up-to-date with all the changes in the schemes. The time saving benefits for beneficiaries of picking up the phone to ask an agent far outweighed time spent searching the internet for the advice and answers. One consultee commented that farmers want to be told 'what they can apply for' (e.g. a fence or a shed) and only then will they be interested in the benefits that may take place i.e. improved water quality or better livestock health. In other words the consultant/agent argued for turning the communication process upside down to expose the direct benefits to farmers with the wider environmental and Scottish Government benefits riding pillion on this. In some ways this is the service the agents are providing, driven by an instrumental approach to getting money to land managers rather than delivering to overarching programme aspirations.

Information is still often communicated externally on a one-to-one basis either in person or on the telephone. However, feedback suggests that this has reduced over time since knowledge has grown about schemes and the information provided on the web site has grown. There is still quite a lot of one-to-one communications between Area Offices and beneficiaries, possibly more in the more remote areas where fewer beneficiaries have easy access to the requisite broadband or even a computer.

In LEADER, one-to-one communication is far more important as the role of the Local Action Group (LAG) Co-ordinator includes acting as an animateur. It would be seen to be normal for applicants to speak directly and often to the LAG Co-ordinator as part of the application and claims procedure. One of the valued aspects of LEADER

is the 'cradle to grave' care given to project holders. However LEADER is unlikely to spread wider SRDP messages as the project holders and beneficiaries do not tend to be land-based businesses and the RPID officers could not handle this intensity of customer care.

Public meetings were seen to take place more frequently at the beginning of the Programme or when there was a very major change to the SRDP. Public meetings were valued as a very important and useful way of communicating the same information to a large number of people in an interactive and accessible way. These public meetings and their messages were obviously picked up and further communicated by the press.

Information packs, fliers and newsletters are still a valuable source of communications for SRDP. They were used more frequently at the beginning of the programme but were latterly used a lot less, primarily due to printing costs and environmental considerations. There are varying opinions on whether paper is any more effective than electronic media. Some schemes still send out paper notices at claim time; however, not all scheme managers are convinced of how successful this is.

A number of stakeholders keep in touch with their constituents via email, e-newsletters and public meetings. One stakeholder commented that it would be very helpful for the Scottish Government to pro-actively email key individuals in the industry alerting them to changes in the programme.

There is a good amount of information communicated through the national and farming press. In some areas, good use is made of the local radio, with one consultant reporting that they have a monthly 'slot' on the local radio, allowing them to keep folk up to date on current developments and as well as generating business for themselves.

Word of mouth was seen by many to be a very valuable communication method particularly within small rural communities. Although not seen as a formal communication practice, anecdotally it is seen to be reliable and often relied upon in the absence of proactive targeting of some of the schemes or certain options.

The most popular method of communicating for farmers, foresters and crofters was seen to be through the web or via agents; with rural businesses most likely to use the website or email. For LEADER, other rural organisations and agents the chosen method of communicating was one-to-one. Only a handful of stakeholders recorded any form of communication with the general public.

When consulting stakeholders it was clear that most of the information their constituents were looking for was technical information and they were clear that this was to be found on the official Scottish Government website.

#### **2.4.4 European Union**

There is a requirement placed on Member States Managing Authorities to ensure compliance with Article 76 of Regulation 1698/2005 on Information and Publicity and to report on the steps taken to do so. In essence the requirement is to provide information on and publicise national strategy plans, Rural Development Programmes and the Community contribution. Specifically the information needs to be aimed at informing potential beneficiaries, professional organisations, the economic and social partners, bodies involved in promoting equality and the NGOs concerned of the possibilities offered by the programme and the rules for gaining access to programme funding. It should further inform the beneficiaries of the Community contribution as well as informing the general public about the role played by the European Community and ensuring the transparency of EAFRD assistance. There is also a requirement to publicise the results of the Programme.

LEADER was highlighted as being very pro active in acknowledging the EU component of funding and appears to be clearly and consistently associated with the 'EU badge'.

The obligation to publicise the EU contribution with regard to the other schemes within SRDP and the Programme as a whole could be more positively and rigorously embraced. This is inconsistently referenced on key SRDP pages on the Scottish Government website e.g. being completely omitted on the 'What is the SRDP' and the scheme specific pages. European co-financing of the SRDP is sometimes not acknowledged in wider public communications including the press, leaflets and posters. There was a common view that the Cabinet Secretary's press announcements did not give the EU contribution a high profile. Certainly consultees did not consider that the EU was consistently acknowledged in communications regarding the other Schemes within the SRDP.

There was a good awareness that all projects over €50,000 are required to erect a plaque acknowledging the EU contribution to the project and that this was part of compliance checks. In the view of the consultees there was a general lack of awareness of EU publicity objectives and that many applicants were aware of the EU involvement 'mostly due to EU being blamed for the attendant administration.'

RPAC chairs did not believe that it was their role to promote this recognition and one respondent felt that the relationship between applicant and government could better bring this out.

#### **2.4.5 Stakeholder involvement**

Many of the key rural organisations have taken it upon themselves to communicate SRDP to their constituents; others have been asked by clients, members or Scottish Government to take on this role. This has been done for a number of reasons, including to encourage business growth; attract better quality applicants; keeping their members informed; to help bring funding into remote rural areas and to ensure successful understanding and delivery. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) appear to

have taken the strategic decision to provide targeted communications of SRDP to specific interest groups to meet their delivery objectives.

The media used for communication by stakeholders were often similar to the Scottish Government, i.e. via their websites, through one to one meetings, newsletters, emails etc. Many of these organisations also provide an advisory service to beneficiaries or directly to agents, which again they use as a means to communicate SRDP. One consultee advised that SRDP had been made a regular topic at their local area meetings and this had been very successful.

The Enterprise Companies' main communications were with the less agriculturally focused schemes, such as LEADER and SDS. This was done either directly or by sign-posting applicants through Business Gateway. SNH and RSPB reported that a lot of their communications on SRDP were internal, rather than being aimed at the general public, while many RPAC chairs saw it as their responsibility to also communicate SRDP internally to case officers in order to gather good quality applications and best effect of funding.

Whether the communications process was done formally or informally varied between organisations. In general, the process seemed to be more formal at the outset of the Programme, becoming less so latterly. It appears that the main agriculturally focused membership organisations have built communications formally into their planning. In general, intermediaries and other rural organisations are felt to be delivering much of the communication around SRDP and a better co-ordinated and more focused approach by Scottish Government would be welcomed.

#### **2.4.6 What has not worked**

Throughout the consultation processes stakeholders perceived there to be a lack of clear and simple explanation of how an applicant can contribute as an individual or business towards the bigger picture. The objectives of the programme were seen by some as vague, generic or as broad political high-level targets, which were little understood by applicants. While the vision included integrated land management and supporting wider rural communities, this has had limited manifestation. One stakeholder considered that Scottish Government did not have a strong nor coherent rural vision. The focus, it was felt, appeared to be to ensure that the money is spent and the audit process is adhered to rather than ensure effective delivery of outcomes.

Many recognised the communications and delivery challenges that were caused by the lateness of the programme start, resulting in a pressure to roll out approvals quickly, rather than as part of a well-thought-through process of communication. A number of stakeholders felt the communication methods exacerbated the negative view that success was biased to large expenditure going to the biggest farm or rural businesses, but considered this as an unintended consequence rather than an active strategy. One interviewee noted the irony of trying to improve quality of applications with a detached 'tick-box exercise', and in particular the rollover of existing schemes without reassessment, which gave them mixed messages (business as usual vs transformational change).

By and large, despite the successful commitment of budget; few felt that the objectives of communicating the SRDP had been well achieved by Scottish Government. This was as a result of both the low visibility of any formal and coherent communication approach on objectives or outcomes, and the poor image (driven by the complexity and exclusivity of gaining access of RP) of the SRDP as a whole. It was suggested that the single banner approach employed has been too broad brush to be understood by the spread of beneficiaries and has lacked clarity of focus.

Consultees commented that there had been very little communication on where funds had been committed and minimal, if any, management information for either RPACs or the general public. From a decision making point of view, RPACs found it difficult to access commitment and spend figures in their area or at Scotland level. Consultees thought that it would have been useful to see more of a break down in commitment and spend, possibly by axis as well as scheme and area, in order to target funding to help meet SRDP objectives. As mentioned above (2.2.2) it has been very complicated to even get a feel for the number of applications that have been funded under each scheme at a Scotland level.

It was felt there was a lack of visibility of the achievements within SRDP and the sharing of best practice. There were a number of projects chosen to be 'Case Studies' as a way of showing examples of projects that had been funded through Rural Priorities. There was a feeling from some consultees that these projects appear to have been selected centrally and were not always seen as good examples locally despite the fact that these case studies were provided by local RPACs. The case studies were limited to a description of what had been funded and the intended outcomes. There was no further analysis of the projects or any reporting of the actual outcomes, as no information appears to have been gathered after the project was initially approved. It does not appear that other schemes under SRDP provide case study examples on the Scottish Government web site. In contrast, LEADER LAGs host their own websites independently of Scottish Government and the majority of them provided information about the projects funded, often including a full financial breakdown. Their project descriptions also tend to focus on the projects at their outset and do not provide information on actual achievements or outcomes.

The SRDP aims of building cooperation and collaboration between applicants and integrating business and the environment were not seen as particularly successfully achieved in communication or outcomes terms.

As in so much of the SRDP, communications issues get masked by the administrative challenges of implementing the programme. To many the lack of success in communications was blamed on administrative and practical procedures being difficult to handle.

#### **2.4.7 Future priorities - consistent message**

There is a clear call from all stakeholders that it is vital for simple, clear and consistent messages on key priorities which need to be in place from the outset of the new programme. This came through from both the individual consultations and the workshop held in Edinburgh. There is an understanding that changes do take

place during the life of a Programme, but again there is a call for a simple and clear explanation of this in an easily understandable way. It is felt that even if people do not agree with all the messages, if they are clear and robust they will at least understand the reasons.

It is suggested that there needs to be a clear statement of the overall aims, objectives and key priorities of the SRDP as a whole; this necessarily is likely to be policy focused, but should be framed in language that is accessible to a wide audience.

There was also a call for consistency of messages within individual schemes, whilst at the same time acknowledging the difference between them. Rural Priorities is the most complicated scheme and it is challenging to ensure consistency when each RPAC area has its own priorities. It is seen to be important to tailor the programme to local conditions, whilst maintaining basic standards across the board.

LEADER was highlighted as having struggled with consistency of message within the scheme, in particular with regard to guidance which has changed frequently during the programme. There is a feeling that the 'goal posts' keep being moved, suggesting to applicants that the objectives of the programme are unclear as well as causing serious delivery issues. Moving forward to the new Programme, Scottish Government are encouraged to listen to stakeholders and take their views into account. They are urged to have a simple and coherent plan from the outset which clearly articulates the main messages. In the words of one consultee: 'don't pussy foot – be blunt and brave'.

As part of this, Scottish Government should become more aware of their target audience and not underestimate the breadth of this audience. A better understanding of the people they are working with would help in this aim. There should be a stronger justification on what is done and why to the general public and more attempts to explain private vs public benefit.

It is suggested that there should be clearer differentiation between national objectives and regional objectives and better communications between agencies involved in delivery, taking advantage of these agencies to cascade information in a more structured and planned way.

Production of a communications manual to help increase 'corporate' identity was suggested by one consultee. One point that was raised consistently throughout the consultation was the benefits that would accrue of developing a procedure that would be followed each time there was a change in rules or an update to a scheme to avoid haphazard or random acts taking place. The website was seen to be fundamental to this.

## 2.4.8 Coherence

The communication of SRDP at the outset of the Programming period appears to have been planned and considerable effort was put into travelling to rural communities and explaining the new programme through a series of road shows and information booklets. When communications became more difficult ('unstuck') during the early stages of implementing SRDP this is when communications appear to have shifted from being 'corporate SRDP' to having a greater 'individual scheme' focus. The evidence from the consultations suggests that the main reason for this was the focus on the need to encourage uptake and spend due to the late start of the Programme and the difficulties encountered in Rural Priorities due to its complexity.

### **Summary of Chapter 2: SRDP Stakeholder Communication Plan**

- A Communications Plan was prepared for the 2007-2013 SRDP. The public meetings and leaflets associated with the SRDP launch and early communications followed what might have been expected of a plan. Most officials involved in SRDP delivery were unaware of the plan or who was responsible for its implementation. Communications during SRDP delivery therefore became rather ad-hoc and lacking in co-ordination.
- The communications associated with delivery of the SRDP mostly became scheme/measure-specific. Certain schemes such as LFASS were not even perceived by stakeholders as part of the SRDP, which was seen instead as revolving around Rural Priorities.
- Because of the complexity of the SRDP and the requirement for broadband to access it, consultants and agents rapidly emerged as pivotal gatekeepers, both in helping land managers apply and in conveying information to them on scheme requirements.
- The SRDP website was an important source of advice, but some stakeholders asserted that it was not always up-to-date. They argued understandably that there was an absolute necessity for having a single unambiguous source of information.
- The early vision of an SRDP supporting a more transformational approach to rural development was clouded by implementation challenges and by a much more instrumental approach to scheme delivery.

## **3 SNRN**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The overall purpose of this element of the evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the network facilitation activities and coordination services seeking to stimulate the exchange of ideas and experience among Rural Development Programme practitioners. As the National Rural Network is established as part of the SRDP and supports its delivery, the evaluation also considers Scottish Government and European Commission requirements.

The main objectives in this part of the evaluation are forward-looking and improvement-oriented. In considering the effectiveness and efficiency of network services and delivery, the study therefore examines the relevance and value of services provided together with an examination of future needs and opportunities in the context of the 2014 – 2020 period. Extensive rural networking experience has been developed under RDPs in the other Member States. Accordingly, in arriving at conclusions and recommendations, additionally to the consultations and other research tools, consideration is given to relevant and transferable lessons from other countries.

### **3.2 Background**

#### **3.2.1 National Rural network**

The requirement for Member States to establish a National Rural Network is set out under Article 68 of the Rural Development Regulation EC No 1698/2005 . In addition to specifying the delivery structure for such a network, the Article sets out the following basic elements it should address:

- Grouping the organisations and administrations involved in rural development;
- Identifying, analysing and providing information regarding transferable good practice;
- Organising exchanges of experience and know how;
- Training for (new) LEADER Local Action Groups; and
- Technical assistance for cooperation activities.

The vast majority of National Rural Networks operate at Member State level. These vary considerably in scale and remit: four are established as RDPs in their own right in turn covering multiple RDPs within those Member States. National Rural Networks are serviced by network support units which also vary in scale and remit and between in house (Managing Authority) and externally facilitated delivery models.

At UK level, Rural Networks were established under each of the four Rural Development Programmes, with a UK National Rural Network established in effect as an umbrella organisation. This was originally managed by the Commission for Rural Communities who also provided the England Network facilitation service for Defra, but latterly both functions have been taken in house.

### **3.2.2 Scotland: National Rural Network (SNRN)**

In Scotland the SNRN is managed directly by the Scottish Government Rural Communities team. This team lets contracts for the provision of a variety of network facilitation services of which the two core contracts are the main focus of this part of the evaluation. These are:

- The management and editorial control of the content elements of the SNRN website; and
- The management and delivery of a programme of networking events.

Both these contracts are managed by the SCVO rural team. The website launched in 2008 and predated the 2009 events contract. Further individual contracts are let e.g. for specific events such as the national Rural Gathering or the transnational cooperation event.

Website hosting, design and management are subject to a separate contract with a separate provider. The SNRN website was developed from the former SCVO Rural Gateway website and still uses that URL. The evidence gathered in this evaluation suggests that this has resulted in confusion over the NRN identity and its wider relevance to rural stakeholders.

Although the two main contracts at the heart of this evaluation are the principal substantive elements of the National Rural Network in Scotland, it is important that the evaluation recognises their relatively modest ambition and limited scope. The contracts relate to core network services around which there was an aspiration that wider rural networking would develop enabling diverse stakeholder interests from across rural Scotland to share knowledge and experience and strengthening the rural voice in policy design. Notwithstanding this ambition and whilst comparable to the approach elsewhere in the UK, the remit and contracted services do not comprise a full service National Rural Network support unit as this might be understood elsewhere in the EU.

### **3.2.3 Performance Management**

Monitoring of the SNRN is considerably more extensive than of SRDP communications possibly due to the requirement that the external contractor produce quarterly reports and hold quarterly review meetings with Scottish Government on both contracted services. The nature of monitoring is however limited, quarterly reports consist of activity counts for the period concerned and event reports. A status report on recent and future developments is also given. Targets appear to be restricted to the specified number of events agreed with the Scottish Government at the start of each year.

#### SNRN Website

In addition to these meetings and reports two Ipsos MORI surveys have been carried out. A qualitative usability review of the SNRN website was carried out in February

2011 with five registered members of the SNRN. The survey findings confirmed that the website was well received by these users with no major issues identified in terms of finding information, layout design and content. The Newsletter emerged as a very valuable source of information.

The survey provided SCVO and Scottish Government with a helpful insight into improving the intuitive navigation of the website and the barriers that need to be addressed to encourage more interaction with the 'Join In' section of the website.

It has been possible through Google Analytics to capture data on the activity that has taken place on the SNRN website during the period of April 2009 to December 2012. The data provided in Table 2 below, have also been referred to as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). As no targets or benchmarks appear to be set against these KPIs it is not possible to comment on the extent to which the Website has met Scottish Government's expectations or not.

**Table 2: Web Statistics for SNRN April 2009 to December 2012**

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Visits</b>	51349	79200	75908	64207	<b>309,524</b>
% new visits (average)	63.60%	60.20%	61%	62.40%	<b>61.80%</b>
User submissions	432	714	421	114	<b>1681</b>
User registration	1255	484	517	336	<b>2,592</b>
Newsletter opt-in	807	351	371	278	<b>1,807</b>
Support incidents raised	79	43	17	13	<b>152</b>
Projects added	423	402	191	403	<b>1,419</b>
No. of new consultations	0	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Social networking</b>					
Twitter	started this year	543	488	977	<b>2,008</b>
Facebook	n/a	118	333	289	<b>740</b>
YouTube	170	936	2323	1001	<b>4,430</b>
Flickr	no. n/a	no. n/a	44900	30694	<b>75,594</b>

The data show that the website has had over 309,000 hits and has 2,592 registered users, of which 1,807 have signed up to receive the newsletter. The website holds a total of 1,419 projects and case studies. Social media has become more popular in recent years and SNRN have engaged with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr. Twitter use is increasing; You Tube and Flickr appear very popular with 4,430 and 75,594 hits respectively.

Newsletter opt-ins and user registrations were, as would be expected, higher at the launch of the website and have tailed off over the remaining period, although there are still new users registering each month. The average number of new visits to the site has remained constant over the period at circa 61% which, when coupled with the numbers of total hits and user registrations suggests a relatively small core user group. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the website focuses on community and third sector issues and does not relate to the agricultural or business sector in the same way. We therefore attempted to gather information on the content posted on the SNRN website. Information was provided however it was not in a format that was easily assimilated. In order to verify the desired balance of content on the website it might be useful to consider ways of monitoring or categorising content as it's posted.

It is understood that great store was set at the launch of the website on high volumes of flow through being generated, as this was thought to offer proof of success. This view changed latterly, seeing that lower flow through only indicated less traffic going through the site, rather than it becoming less popular. Improved connections between rural actors are now considered of greater interest; however this is much more difficult to measure.

### SNRN Events

In addition to the quarterly reports and meetings annual Co-ordination Summary reports have been produced by SCVO for each of the three contract years. These reports draw together data from the events and make useful analysis of the current and previous years' activities.

There do not appear to be formal KPIs for the co-ordination service however monitoring has taken place. Over the duration of the contract SNRN have held 39 events with 1,722 delegates in attendance. The first year saw the highest number of delegates with 1,005 attending the programme of 20 regional events. The structure of events changed in year two with 5 thematic events and 5 project visits hosting 498 delegates. Year 3 saw 219 delegates attending 6 project visits and 3 thematic events.

Events have been monitored in terms of sectoral representation showing participation from a broad range of backgrounds. The balance between sectors tended to reflect the theme of the events, for example farming representation increased from 7.8% in year 2 to 16.9% in year 3 due to the Care Farming event and project visit. User demographics monitoring also took place.

SNRN events organisation and content monitoring uses delegate feedback forms with response rates increasing year on year, 25% in year one, 41% in year 2 and 54% in year 3. The results indicate that the overall success of the events as perceived by attendees has been high.

### **3.2.4 SRDP Mid-Term Evaluation**

As part of the SRDP, the SNRN fell within the scope of the mid-term evaluation (MTE) of the SRDP. This reported in 2011 at a relatively early stage in the programme's implementation. This element of the overall MTE was relatively light touch and principally involved stakeholder or service user feedback.

The evaluation found that in its start-up phase the Scottish National Rural Network had some success in broadening the base of rural networking in Scotland. The delivery of regional events had mixed results and was limited in good practice exchange and broadening shared experience.

The SNRN's principal challenge lay in engaging the wider rural community through the website and events. To improve this, those responsible for the SNRN should therefore review the approach to communicating and engaging with rural stakeholders. This should include a review of service provision to identify potential improvements to strengthen relevance and uptake by rural stakeholders. Stakeholder involvement in service design was recommended. The provision and exchange of more good practice examples was identified as a priority.

### **3.3 SNRN Role**

The research has identified some variation in the understanding of the role of the current network service provision amongst rural stakeholders and SRDP delivery managers. There was some indication of poor initial specification followed by poor translation from a variety of those consulted. There was a view from some that there is a gap between the concept (ideal, wider and broadly endorsed) and the narrower and more limited reality in practice.

For many stakeholders in the land-based sectors, there was a lack of awareness: SNRN was 'not on their radar'. They knew that the network was to be established but did not connect the exchange orientation expected and what has subsequently happened. Perceptions varied between seeing the website as a replacement for the Rural Gateway website; a site for communications, particularly about funding information; to an effective meeting place for organisations and people active in rural development, with full active collaboration, sharing of best practice and information provision (particularly re LEADER). Use tended to be informed by wider experience. Perceptions of the degrees of linkage to LEADER varied as did perceptions of the importance of the links. Some see evidence of overlap and possible displacement e.g. re events.

There was a clear split evident between those who see SNRN as being primarily community-oriented vs those who see its wider (potential) relevance. The SNRN has not succeeded in engaging a wider constituency of RDP beneficiaries and rural actors and remains very much community-focused.

The dominance of the SNRN Website makes it difficult for many stakeholders to see it as having a function beyond web-based information dissemination. There is a tendency to equate the NRN with the website and therefore perceive its role as limited and linked primarily to community issues.

There is some confusion as to whether the SNRN should be SRDP-specific or operate with a wider rural development remit. The majority view is that the network should indeed cover the totality of issues and policies impacting on rural development. The SNRN has had a limited role in SRDP communications but this is not a strong one. If seen as primarily linked to SRDP Axes 3 and 4 delivery schemes then it appears to not be sufficiently well connected. It should be stressed that SNRN is not there to provide technical information to SRDP applicants. The approach to networking developed by the European Commission has always had a pan-European dimension, expressed in funding, for example of Inter-Reg schemes such as the Northern Periphery programme, or through the EU Rural and Rural Evaluation Networks. There have been press releases on these on the SNRN site, where there have been Scottish partners but there would appear to have been limited ability to engage with wider/pan EU themes, issues or networks.

Land-based respondents and some others stressed the importance of their existing networks, in respect of relevance to them. The SNRN is operating in a crowded place and cannot expect to meet all users' needs. This is not a criticism but an observation, but it does reinforce the need to consider who the key constituencies are with which it should engage.

Given that information provided on rural development comes from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms, it is a matter of debate as to how much information on SRDP should come direct from government, via the SG Communications Team, 'interpreted' through trade websites or newsletter, or provided by SNRN.

### **3.4 SNRN users' awareness and relevance**

#### **3.4.1 On-line survey**

A total of 346 responses to the on-line survey were received. The profile of survey respondents (and multiple responses were possible) revealed that 28% comprised community group representatives, 27% third sector organisations, 17% each for private and LEADER, 15% farmers, 10% other non-land based rural businesses, with 24% across other land based i.e. crofting and forestry. There was an almost equal gender balance of respondents, and three quarters were aged over 40 years and over.

Amongst those responding to the online survey, 76% were aware of the SNRN. Awareness was lowest amongst foresters and crofters at approximately 50%. Awareness among farmers and estate owners or managers and private individuals was around 70%. Awareness was highest (over 80%) amongst other rural businesses and representatives of community groups or organisations etc.

With regard to how respondents became aware of the SNRN, LEADER was the most frequent source (38%) and was twice as likely as any other route, followed by word of mouth (20%) and SRDP website link (18%). Other important sources included SCVO and Rural Direct, making up around 15% of respondents. Just over 1 in 10 (12%) became aware of the SNRN through social media. Overall, business organisations had very low awareness of the SNRN and crofters had the most

fragmented range of sources. LEADER and word of mouth was most important for land managers/farmers, rural businesses and agents, while SCVO and Rural Direct were important for the third sector. The SRDP link was the most frequent route for the various types of businesses.

Respondents accessed SNRN communications most frequently through broadband at work (67%) and broadband at home (50%), with double responses possible. Around a quarter accessed communications using printed media, with those involved in land management doing so most frequently. Respondents from the third sector were most likely to access SNRN at home, whereas farmers, rural businesses, private individuals, community groups, LEADER and crofters were most likely to access the website while at work.

Although the majority of website users in the survey were businesses, it is notable that estate owners, managers, and farmers were markedly less likely to be active website users. Respondents from the third sector, other rural businesses, community groups or organisations, LEADER and crofters were the most likely website users.

The survey findings indicate that SNRN was of lowest relevance to land-based businesses and organisations together with other rural businesses and intermediaries, and was also surprisingly low for respondents from the public sector. It was highest for Rural Communities, Community groups, LAGs and other rural organisations. A number of stakeholders had such low awareness they did not feel that they could comment. The general perception was that SNRN was not as relevant as it should be particularly for land-based businesses.

The survey revealed that 43% of respondents regarded grant scheme and funding information as the most popular in terms of topics sought. While this was true for all user types, it was somewhat higher for business interests. Rural policy (21%) and general information about rural areas (16%) were the next highest rated areas of interest amongst respondents. Regional meetings and events were the strongest area of secondary interest.

There were high levels of interest in rural policy issues amongst estate managers, foresters, other rural businesses, agents and consultants. The general level of interest in regional meetings and events was high, especially for LEADER, other rural businesses, crofters, agents, third sector and private users.

### **3.5 Current SRDP services**

In the sections below, we summarise both stakeholders' and on-line questionnaire responses. Firstly, we consider their perspectives on current SNRN services, their usage, adequacy, relevance and importance, including their role in supporting the delivery of SRDP. Secondly, we then report their views on the range of possible future services including those proposed under the 2014 – 2020 RDP and the priorities for improvement.

### **3.5.1 Awareness and importance**

#### Stakeholder views

The general level of awareness of services amongst stakeholders was low. Some respondents had little or no experience or awareness of the NRN or its services, and some questioned the relevance to rural Scotland as a whole.

While there was high recognition of the website by some respondents, a number had issues over relevance (e.g. to businesses) and over duplication (e.g. with SRDP or other network means). All-in-all, it was seen to have the greatest relevance for community organisations. The newsletter scored relatively well amongst respondents. It was seen as simple and accessible, and although still valued of low significance overall, was seen to have potential. Overall, SRDP communications were rated very low other than their ability to engage with some of those who are otherwise hard to reach.

With a small number of exceptions national events awareness barely registered, although there was some perception that they may be useful as a forum for exchange. Awareness of regional events was somewhat stronger but still very limited. A number of respondents were critical of these with some questioning the quality of these events. Overall, their relevance was seen to be limited largely to community groups/LEADER. The SNRN's ability to convey information on best practice was regarded as limited, but there was acknowledgement of high potential. For example, among the activities sought, project visits were seen to have strong potential particularly by land-based and other businesses. A stronger consideration of event content was suggested by some respondents as a means to strengthen their relevance.

The networking ability of the SNRN to provide connections was not seen as currently important but some argued it had potential. This might be enhanced through an improved approach to events.

#### Survey views

There was no great variation between users in overall service awareness. The website and e-newsletter scored highest overall. Networking opportunities, SRDP information and funding information all scored slightly lower. Project visits, themed events and sharing best practice were those with the lowest levels of recognition overall.

Over 80% of respondents ranked their awareness of the website as high/medium. Awareness levels were highest amongst agents, LEADER, third sector and community respondents. Businesses awareness levels were highest in the other rural businesses category. Levels of website awareness amongst all land-based respondents reached about 50% across the various non-business interests while land based business awareness levels were lower. The SNRN e-newsletter recorded the second highest level of awareness overall (76% High/Medium awareness); only foresters had low awareness of this.

Information on funding opportunities was third highest overall and markedly higher among community, LEADER and third sector respondents and other rural businesses. Awareness of SRDP information provision ranked fourth overall with 71% of respondents ranking this as high/medium. Awareness of SRDP information provision was relatively high for all respondents, other than foresters and other land-based business categories.

There was a reasonably high awareness of national events with over 80% of respondents ranking their awareness as high or medium. Awareness was dramatically higher amongst LEADER, third sector and community interests but over 70% of agents and other rural businesses also ranked awareness of national events as high/medium. Awareness of local events was marginally lower overall; more even and slightly stronger within land based sectors, but markedly lower in third sector organisations.

Awareness of themed events, second lowest overall, scored highest with other rural businesses, but was also strong with communities, crofters and third sector respondents. Project visit awareness was lowest overall, community and LEADER respondents showed greatest interest in SRDP projects, and there was relatively strong awareness from land managers. Awareness of networking opportunities was relatively high across a range of respondents.

Although awareness of opportunities for sharing best practice was relatively low overall, it is notable that this was highest amongst other rural businesses and that half of farmers ranked this highly.

### **3.5.2 Use of services**

#### Website

The survey probed respondents' use of the website and its services. This revealed that one third use the website weekly; one third monthly; with the remainder using the website less frequently. Most frequent website use was by private individuals, third sector and community respondents, other rural businesses and agents. Over half (56%) used the website for business purposes, 7% for personal purposes while 37% used the website for both business and personal purposes.

Almost all website users (over 80%) valued the news section of the website most highly. Over half of respondents found information on funding and support (52%) and events (50%) as the next most useful areas; followed by projects (38%) and SRDP information (31%). All other types of information scored very low.

Crofters, other rural businesses and agents, third sector, community and LEADER respondents were those users most interested in funding. SRDP information was ranked as having moderate usefulness amongst respondents. Those who ranked the projects area as being of greatest usefulness were farmers, communities, LEADER respondents and private individuals. Respondents from these groups also ranked events most highly.

## Events

Overall, one in three respondents had attended an event, with land-based businesses having the lowest participation rates. Participation was highest among community and third sector respondents (over 40%), followed by other rural businesses and LEADER.

Attendance at local events was lower overall than at national and regional events. Project visits were attended least overall and not at all by land based or business respondents. Networking and information exchange were the principal reasons identified for attending events, particularly amongst businesses. Information on funding ranked lowest overall although somewhat higher amongst communities and third sector respondents.

## Information source

The perceived importance of the SNRN as a source of information on the SRDP and LEADER was split between those who see it as having some importance (56%) and those who see little or none. There was little differentiation by user group.

The SNRN's importance as a source of information on good practice in rural development was similarly rated, especially among other rural businesses, communities/third sector and private individuals. Land-based businesses ranked this markedly lower but only 16% saw good practice dissemination as of no importance.

### **3.5.3 Meeting needs**

Based on their experience, survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a range of SNRN services met their needs.

The website recorded a high overall satisfaction level (71% of respondents rating it as high/medium). Other rural businesses ranked this particularly highly; at 84%. Land based interests, farmers, estates, foresters and other land-based businesses ranked this lower in terms of meeting their needs (<55% high/medium). All other respondent groups recorded at least 70% satisfaction levels. Newsletter satisfaction ranked second highest overall but was ranked relatively lower by LEADER, and ranked moderate by farmers and other land based businesses. Funding opportunities ranked third overall (at 55% high/medium) but results here were polarised. The higher satisfaction levels were indicated by crofters, other rural businesses, agents, communities, LEADER and the third sector, with the other land-based sectors scoring low.

Satisfaction with local events was relatively lower overall with 53% of respondents rating this as high/medium. They scored highest among third sector respondents, agents, other rural businesses and community respondents; low for land-based respondents; and mainly medium for others. National events scored lower overall, but were strongest amongst other rural businesses and the third sector.

Below these, best practice, networking and SRDP information all scored at broadly similar but lower levels of satisfaction (around 55%). SRDP information was most

valued by other rural businesses, agents, community, LEADER and the third sector and less so by land-based businesses. Networking satisfaction was highest with other rural businesses and the third sector, although satisfaction levels were broadly similar across all categories. Best practice scored lowest with land-based businesses and highest with third sector respondents, community and other rural businesses.

SRDP project visits (38%) and themed events (38%) scored lowest overall. This finding is rather at odds with markedly more positive stakeholder perspectives and post event evaluation responses and may reflect the low level of awareness and participation within the group of respondents. It is notable that SRDP project visits were most valued by other rural businesses, private, community and third sector respondents. Themed events scored highest for other rural businesses and third sector respondents. Given these differing perspectives and the high importance placed on knowledge transfer in RDP rural networking this clearly merits further investigation in future planning.

### **3.6 Future services**

The relative importance of a range of future SNRN services was explored with both stakeholders and those responding to the survey. Stakeholders were asked to consider this more generally than the very specific range of services offered in the online survey.

#### Stakeholder

There was very strong recognition of the potential of doing more in developing connections, bringing rural organisations together and creating potential through collaboration and co-operation. Links to other networks nationally and across the EU were seen as increasingly important. Stakeholders commented that building connectivity was also something that occurs informally e.g. Twitter, Facebook etc.

An effective website was viewed as essential but respondents thought that there was much scope for improvement in the future. The core demand was for basic, simple SRDP information, made easy to follow. While the newsletter was seen as having high potential, there was a perceived need for improvement in its relevance to the wider rural constituency.

Across the board, much scope was seen in the identification and exchange of best practice and associated research and analysis. While this has worked successfully locally, some identified more widespread potential both within Scotland and the UK more generally.

There were somewhat mixed perspectives on local events and project visits. Many viewed these as having high potential, particularly in land based/business sectors, although there is not a strong history of prior engagement. National events were seen as a moderate priority, with a need for strengthened focus and relevance.

Scope for training was evident but responses were very varied, ranging from application-oriented training, (including farmer agent avoidance) to training in LAG

cooperation. Questions were raised about the need to avoid duplication of existing training and to make it very needs-focused.

SRDP communications were of moderate importance to stakeholders. Here, targeting is likely to be important with fine-tuning of messages to segments, in recognition that it is not the main route through which people obtain information.

### Survey

In terms of future services, the networks role in bringing rural stakeholders together was thought highly important overall, over 87% of respondents ranked this as high or medium. Networking was ranked as high/medium by 69% of all respondents. Businesses tended to rank this higher with almost 70% of farmers and over 80% of other rural businesses ranking it as high/medium. Within this an effective website is overwhelmingly seen as being an essential component of a new NRN. Two thirds of all respondents saw future ENRD links as being of particularly high importance.

Good practice and research and analysis were considered very important amongst all respondents. Good practice exchange ranked slightly higher amongst the non-land based respondents, while research and analysis was rated highly by agents, farmers, LEADER and third sector respondents.

Innovation scored highly amongst respondents, and was highest in the non-land-based sectors. Almost 90% of other rural businesses and 66% of farmers rated innovation as of high/medium importance, as did 74% of LEADER respondents.

LEADER-specific elements tended to score lower overall (65% high/medium), this perhaps reflects the narrower extent of LEADER interests amongst those responding from the LAGS. Whilst clearly of higher importance to LAGs the overall level of importance accorded is still substantial.

There is wide support for broader public communications across the board at 78%. LEADER and other land based businesses were most sceptical of the value of this here, the community and third sector remarkably so, i.e. more so than farmers. Perspectives on future events were mixed. Themed events, although ranked low across the piece were relatively highly rated by farmers and other land-based respondents. Local events also ranked low but were rated highest by farmers, crofters, agents and other rural businesses.

### **3.7 Engagement**

The aspiration for the SNRN is strongly focused on improved engagement of rural stakeholders as indicated in the ITT through which the support services were procured. This notes:

‘The success of the network will depend on the engagement of stakeholders and pro-active regional co-ordination will be pivotal in all of this. The successful contractor will be required to provide the regional coordination service to support the on-going development of regional stakeholder groups throughout the SRDP period both in terms of their capacity to undertake rural development projects and their

knowledge of what might be possible. Primarily, the regional coordination service will be a technical service facilitating local events within a coherent framework designed to maximise local knowledge of rural development issues, opportunities and inspirational practice throughout Scotland, the UK and Europe.

In this section we report on the survey findings in relation to respondents preferred means of engaging with the NRN before going on to consider the stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of this.

### **3.7.1 Current engagement**

#### Survey

The website is the overwhelmingly favoured form of engagement across the board. Publications and the newsletter rank a strong second, and were most important for farmers, foresters, other land-based and other rural business respondents. There was some strong support evident for increased use of social media but there was high variation among respondents; the priority was rather low other than for crofters, agents, communities, third sector and private respondents. Personal contact was the next most favoured means of engagement and was strongest in land-based and business sectors.

LEADER followed by local events, national events and themed events all ranked as moderate amongst respondents as a means for future engagement.

#### Stakeholders

The overwhelming view was that there was only weak engagement with and mixed awareness of the SNRN, with some stakeholders expressing disappointment that this was the case. Many felt that they should have known more about SNRN and questioned why they did not. It was seen as too strongly focused on one sector and one part of society (white middle class) which has shaped what it has done and created particular patterns of engagement. It was felt that a stronger presence was needed, with clearer promotion, a more defined identity, more active engagement (particularly of a grassroots nature), with greater practicality, and active facilitation. Some stakeholders viewed the new RDP as an opportunity for the relaunch of a revamped SNRN. It was envisaged that this would have greater distinctiveness of purpose, with less overlap, clearer pathways and a route to better information (including website enhancement with improved architecture). The distinction between this and SCVO's other services such as Rural Direct was seen by some as unclear and confusing.

Stakeholder involvement is viewed as a priority to achieve ownership, relevance and commitment with grass roots engagement locally and regionally. Further the network should be more proactive in being inclusive. It is suggested by some that by involving the wider constituency (and reducing the community focus), this could actually dilute the vested interest influence of e.g. land-based interests and result in more engaged and balanced approach. If this is to be achieved then there is a need to clarify the offer.

By enhancing accessibility, using multiple tools, developing a wider range of communications methods, getting up to speed with new technology, but not using it indiscriminately, the network could occupy a pivotal position. There is also a need to plan communications place within the network, build in feedback loops, and provide better links to demonstration projects.

A principal need is to engage with people who are busy, and for whom time is tight, and to ensure that the network delivers to their needs. If this is to be achieved involvement in the NRN needs to offer real benefits through participation. People will value a network when it gives them important information more easily than other sources.

The network can and should engage directly with existing events and services etc. to add value and reach a wider audience. It is, however, essential to avoid duplication since many membership organisations already have well used and effective networking services. There is perhaps more of a gap in relation to brokering and facilitation of the available services and resources rather than assuming a need for direct provision.

The network will flourish if it delivers services that other networks cannot deliver but this can be seen to require a clear knowledge and understanding of others' failings as well as a very finely tuned appreciation of demand. On such a broad front, this is a very challenging task. It would result in a stronger theming and focus on stakeholder groups and their needs. It should also support signposting to advice and expertise. It needs to be reliable, credible and consistent.

In disseminating information, there therefore needs to be close consideration of the target/user and the case for going beyond the main SCVO 'community' audience was compellingly made by many consultees. The desirability of targeting under-represented groups in Rural Development, including, in particular the young, would help to energise the SNRN.

The use of networking and communication tools by the current SNRN has been rather limited. More could be done as with other NRNs e.g. webinars, use of video, working / focus/ thematic groups, virtual think tanks etc.

This aspiration for wider engagement maximising rural development knowledge proved to be unrealistic given the nature and cost of the contracts commissioned. SCVO advises that there was an expectation that wider networking would arise from the events and website almost through a process of 'instant combustion', but this was unrealistic. The evolution of pro-active regional and local coordination was, however, unlikely to be achieved without substantially more facilitation and this would have required a much larger contract to enable the resource commitments.

### **3.7.2 Links to other networks**

The consensus from the consultations and workshop was that the SNRN cannot function independently of other networks. Its success will depend on engagement with those networks, without imposing power over them. Where networks already exist with particular constituencies (e.g. community ownership, woodland management, renewable energy) the SNRN must work with them rather than try to provide a substitute service. This was particularly so with regard to the wider EU rural and rural evaluation networks and in particular the new Rural Innovation Partnerships.

Elsewhere, we have referred to the SNRN's role as providing a centre for a network of networks. This requires it to have a distinctive and useful set of functions and a clear mission. That mission should be recognisable from the Scottish Government's purpose and the connection between that purpose and rural development policy. Some elements of activity will focus on enhancing SRDP delivery but over time the nature of that task is evolving as enhanced outcomes are sought with less resources and emergent issues such as innovation system support acquire greater prominence.

### **3.7.3 Future engagement**

The scope for enhanced engagement with a wide range of rural stakeholders is contingent offering useful messages using appropriate media. Its strength will increasingly lie in it becoming a centre for a network of networks. The challenge is to use the right technologies to meet the information needs and communications challenges of particular constituencies, as well as or better than competitors. With such a central role, it can better connect to the myriad of networks and better connect the different rural constituencies to those networks.

The network of networks model should allow engagement across scales, between EU, national, regional and local and across subject areas (e.g. from agriculture to woodfuel), in the latter case by making connections that would not otherwise have been evident.

#### Summary of issues

In general the replies received reinforce the need to consider core purpose (narrow vs broad) and key constituencies (rural as a whole or community subsector) and in particular reinforce the need to consider SNRN's actual and potential role in the dissemination of information about rural issues, particularly where it sits alongside the SG website on the SRDP. We suggest that SNRN should be seen as a hub which disseminates learning opportunities, from good practice models, using various types of meetings and fora, including workshops and using a variety of other means. The SRDP site should provide both administrative detail and high-level vision.

There is and can be no one-size-fits-all communications channel for those interested in the SRDP or rural development more widely. Stakeholders consist of different people, with different preferences for using different types of media and although we can offer interim generalisations, the more important fact is that such a wide range of

media are valued and will continue to be valued, but at different levels by different rural constituencies and by different members of those constituencies. Multiple methods of communication are possible, and a stronger development strategy is needed to reach out to both the principal constituent groups and especially to those recognised as hard to reach.

SNRN is currently perceived to give more attention to rural community development (potentially through its association with SCVO), but other groups, such as consultants, also make significant use of its services. Any further development of the networking function needs to build on recognition that there are already networks in place that function and that what is needed is not replication but additionality. The additionality can come from two principal sources: breadth of coverage; or provision of a platform for experiential learning through engagement with good practice. Because there are already established channels of communications among particular sets/subsets of stakeholders there is a need to operate a tailored approach that is sensitive to network actors already functioning. Even in an area of SCVO strength – communities - the Scottish Community Alliance operates a website with regular information feeds to those signed up.

The information obtained from the two sources (key informants and on-line questionnaire respondents) suggested a clear desire for peer-to-peer learning on visits and a need to connect to good practice and create an organisation that fosters learning in a variety of ways. This potentially creates a clear separation of function between pure information which comprises the administrative rules of the game (and rule changes) which would come from the Scottish Government website, leaflets and other communication channels and a learning/inspiration/engagement function that could be promulgated and supported by SNRN in a variety of ways, some of which would be based on peer-to-peer learning with a much stronger focus on networking.

Most importantly any development requires underpinning with: a much more sophisticated understanding of network structures and communication practices in the rural sector, particularly in the land-based business sector but also in other rural businesses; recognition of the hard to reach and identification of strategic responses to the challenge and a clearer sense of purpose.

### **3.8 Delivery structures, governance and membership**

#### **3.8.1 Introduction**

From the work undertaken on the various approaches to the operational structure and governance of National Network Units, the following typology of options was developed. Although these were defined for and considered during the stakeholder workshop, these are presented here to illustrate some of the considerations which followed with regard to the NSU structure, governance and membership models. Broadly speaking these options reflect the various examples considered in the following chapter and that are employed currently in Scotland.

Scotland:	Governance Model 1 and Delivery Model 1
The Netherlands:	Governance Model 1 and Delivery Model 2

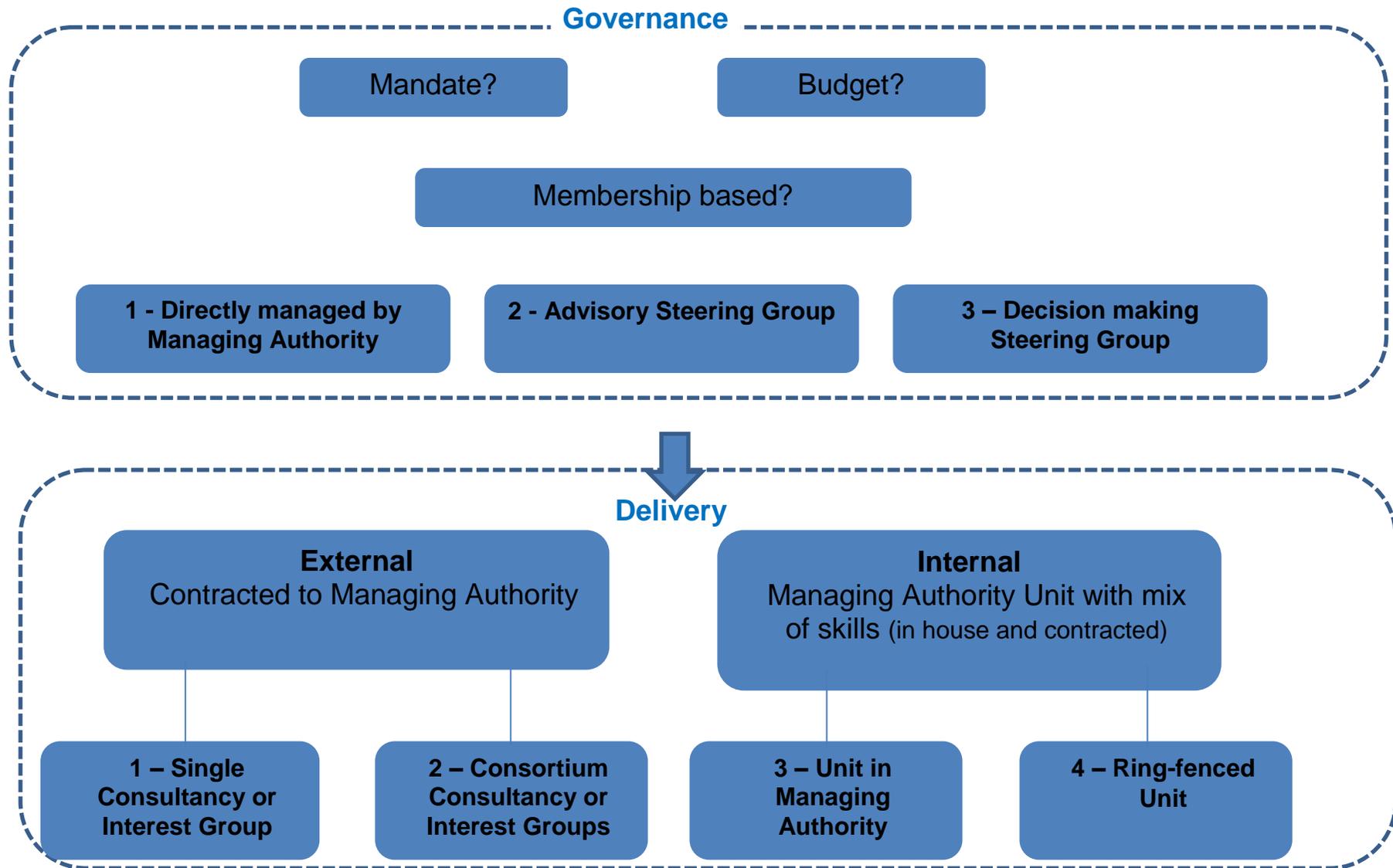
England: Governance Model 1 and Delivery Model 3

Sweden: Governance Model 3 and Delivery Model 4; and

Finland: Governance Model 2 and Delivery Model 3.

Of these only Scotland and the Netherlands have no formal Network membership.

Figure 1: Typology of options for governance and structure of National Network Units



### **3.8.2 Governance**

Stakeholder consultations revealed opinions very strongly in favour of involvement in governance but such engagement has to enable the right sort of contribution at the right time for the right reasons. Busy stakeholders wanted to make best use of their potential contribution. To get the right people, it is necessary to make it worthwhile for the organisations concerned and their members etc. It may displace other demands on their finite time and resources.

One facet that stakeholders argued was essential was to feed in information from the coalface of practice. The governance structure could and should provide a means of effective feedback from practice to policy communities.

A key lesson which emerged from understanding the demise of Rural Forum nearly 20 years ago is that rural constituencies do not always agree on policies and will, to an increasing degree, be chasing and competing for a declining budget. The new SNRN needs to avoid politicking except where it represents rural 'in the round'; it needs to beware of political entanglements that can arise from taking fixed policy positions. It should be a facilitator and networking body, not one that tries to shape policy, but nonetheless it must be a body that can provide a sounding board and comment on implementation issues such as those that bedevilled the early operation of the 2007-13 SRDP.

Stakeholder feedback was widely sought and freely given in trying to correct some of the implementation challenges of the 2007-13 SRDP. In this case, the enfranchisement came from external consultants conducting reviews. Had there been strong across the board stakeholder representation on the SNRN and its role been to tap into feedback, some of the delivery challenges of the last programme might have been overcome more rapidly and with enhanced outcomes and impacts.

### **3.8.3 Structure**

Stakeholders see plusses and minuses in both the internal (within government) and external (by a third party on behalf of government) approaches to the delivery of network services. The current approach is a bit of a mix. It is important to recognise that the current Scottish approach is something of a hybrid, being neither wholly outsourced nor wholly in-house.

The independence of the outsourced approach is viewed positively by many. It was seen as more accessible, closer to the user, less bureaucratic, more independent and with greater freedom of operation, dissociated from regulatory functions. Being 'not government' was important for some. Some respondents saw lobbying potential (although not in current set up or realistic in any RDP-funded model) but most partnership models work best where the memberships works for the common good rather than a particular (sub-) group. Some see the Network as more clearly defined and easier to understand if it is independent, whereas others took the opposite view. Whatever form it took, it needed to be flexible, readily adaptable and 'fleet of foot'.

Although there was generally no presumption against outsourcing, there were nevertheless caveats and downsides identified. Visibility, identity and identification

are all challenged. The delivery capacity and nature of the contractor is critical; it needs to be in the right place to cover the breadth of demands and engender the confidence of users. The Network must be able to engage credibly with the wider rural community/sector. Some strong opinions favouring a consortium approach were expressed as a means to improve credibility across a range of constituencies.

Some suggestions were made that SCVO had been under-resourced because of the size of the contract rather than any disengagement by the contractee, (leading to the contract being underserved with respect to needs). The resource available under the contract is of course critical. So too is involving the right people with the right knowledge and skills regardless of delivery model. Considerable discomfort was expressed over the single contractor model, especially one with a dominant sectional interest. A consortium approach would help address this, bridge the gaps and might help to mitigate resourcing challenges.

Under a consortium model, the links and connectivity to policy at Scottish and EU levels may be weaker, less informed and less adequately resourced. Outsourcing needs management of the interface and excellent communications to avoid misunderstandings arising in the communication chain. Communications through an intermediary are more challenging, in effect second hand, and consequently sometimes inaccurate, poorly informed or communicated. If the NRN is to be effective it has to be fully informed and up to date.

The internal model has strengths in its closeness to policy and the administrative aspects of the RDP. It gives more direct communications and lines of communication, and top down direction towards priorities. It is likely to have higher visibility. It minimises duplication of effort, and provides in-house an additional step in delivery chain, without regurgitation or dilution of message. It may be more credible. It is more likely to be 'on message', and consistent with policy and delivery, and should help avoiding unrealistic expectations. It has more direct and singular accountability. And, if it creates the opportunity, feedback can be more direct.

It is potentially important in contributing to internal communications and developing working relationships and understanding within the range of RDP delivery systems. Such challenges may grow if the Pack recommendations were to be implemented as trans-pillar communications would be essential.

However, embedding the SNRN wholly within government creates a risk of diversion from tasks to other priorities if they emerge, especially if public resources come under pressure. It could lose its arm's length relationship and be a mouthpiece for justifying policy rather than a means of expediting effective implementation of policy. Local connections may be more difficult under this more centralised model.

A number of Member States have addressed this through employing robust management arrangements and organisational architectures which in effect ring-fence such an in-house unit. This allows strong links with rural policy and its delivery to be implemented with strong feedback loops and connectivity. This affords them a relatively high degree of autonomy, particularly when they are reinforced through stakeholder involvement in their governance.

### 3.9 Lessons from wider experience

The National Rural Networks in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands were selected and agreed as suitable examples from which relevant lessons for Scotland may be drawn; the experience in England was also reviewed as this operates along with Scotland within the framework of the UK National Rural Network. Relevant findings from the evaluation of the Welsh National Rural Network were also considered. The following table, Table 3 highlights the main features of the four models considered, these can broadly be categorised as in Figure 1. Interviews were conducted with managers of all four networks and the perceived pluses and minuses of each are identified in the following text. Scotland is included in the table for the purposes of comparison.

**Table 3: Country Specific Examples of National Rural Networks**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>Managing Authority (MA) relationship &amp; mandate</b>	In-house RDP team, former CRC link perceived to be a barrier. Operates across the RDP supporting programme delivery through the exchange of ideas and experience.	Unit in MA, parallel to RDP unit but arm's length located out of centre. Mandate across rural development to inform RDP, good practice, cooperation and skills development.	Consortium led by not for profit company contracted to the MA. LDS delivery improvement, empowerment, focus, central, province, private intermediary	In house team with main services contracted out to SCVO	Under Board of Ag, parallel to RDP MA. RDP performance focussed by communicating information and experience. Participation oriented.
<b>Governance</b>	No external	Steering group, 21 members. Approves annual plan before submitting to Ministry. Full budgetary responsibility. Link to unofficial cross departmental LEADER team, other thematic links.	Act on behalf of the MA and Provinces	No external	Steering committee, 11 members, drawn from membership

<b>Feature</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>Management</b>	Head of rural team.	Director reports to MA.	Answer to Ministry, annual plan, quarterly reporting	Head of rural communities team	Answer to Rural Development Dept. Steering committee approves annual plan.
<b>Total Budget</b>	€1.7m*	€11m	€6.3m, national co-finance from Provinces	€1.3m	€8m, 50% for staff, balance on events
<b>Rural Population</b>	8.5m	2.3m	6.7m	1.2m	2.1m
<b>Staffing</b>	3+FTEs, Dedicated manager + 2 Defra core funded	7 FTE, Director, thematic leads, communications and support, multi task approach. Additional services contracted	Overall 10 members in team, all part time, from 5 partner orgs, specialists, bring skills etc from other work, includes other Ministry contracts	2 FTE in contractor plus 1 FTE in house.	7FTE, manager, 2 thematic, finance, admin and communications
<b>Membership or stakeholder involvement</b>	Open membership, 250 to 300 organisations, link to and support 17 Rural and Farming networks	Open membership, mainly rural development intermediaries. Between 3000 and 4000 participants in events each year.	No membership, under consideration	No membership	110+ organisations with national involvement in RD. No businesses.
<b>Link to previous network</b>	None		No direct link	No link	Yes, continuity in some staff

<b>Feature</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>Services:</b>					
<b>Website</b>	Yes, external, communications,	Yes.	Yes, external	Yes, external	Yes.
<b>Helpline</b>	Yes, core team	Not explicit	Not explicit	Not explicit	Core team available
<b>Thematic working groups or think tanks</b>	No	Each year is themed with events and activities to match e.g. entrepreneurship, rural youth etc. Dedicated working group per theme.	Yes, wide range but focused on integration / cooperation at local level, municipality communities of practice etc	No	Extensive use of virtual think tanks, means of consulting
<b>Task working groups</b>	Building on LEADER, future priority	Working groups on innovation, cooperation and LEADER.	Utilises task force working groups e.g. multifunctional farming, young farmers, works very directly with LAGs	No	Main focus, identified by membership
<b>Other events</b>	No	Between 60 and 100 events per annum in total, activity varies by theme. One overseas study trip per year.	Conferences etc e.g. re entrepreneurship	Programme of local events, limited number of national events, project and themed events	Yes, limited e.g. best practice, LEADER events

<b>Feature</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>Consultation or feedback</b>	Via 17 Rural and Farming networks	Through working groups, digital media and website	Strong role in policy analysis and working locally	Little formal	Via working groups and think tanks, steering group and membership
<b>Publications</b>	No	Contribute to Countryside + magazine, produce brochures and handouts	Magazine, digital newsletter	Newsletter	Yes e.g. good practice, working group reports etc
<b>Dissemination or exchange</b>	Little.	Different focus each year. Case studies. Best practice competition, gala event, highlight successes. Main focus website for dissemination	Very active, database of selected projects establish links between interest groups in NL e.g. rural/urban	Limited	Extensive through direct engagement e.g. Rural Best award No study visits as yet
<b>LEADER support</b>	Exchange groups Aim to extend exchange group	Focus on improvement. LEADER coordination group. LEADER working group. Work plan based on needs analysis. 2 working days P/A. LAG training. LAG quality management. TNC facilitation.	Strong engagement informing and supporting LAGs, cooperation fair and support. Training for LAG members e.g. self evaluation, area promotion	Very limited	Support national annual meeting. meetings of LAG coordination group. Smaller events, relatively intensive support, dedicated member of staff.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>RDP communications</b>	Limited, very LAG focused	Formal role re RDP, use regional approach. Have main role. Rural van for information provision.	Not formally in current RDP. Actively involved in consultations on new RDP, communication role foreseen in new RDP	Limited, communities focused	Very two way, through active participation as well as electronic.
<b>New technology</b>	Future, mainly in consultations, Twitter for announcements	Mainly website but also produce materials on Facebook and Twitter, aim to do more e.g. Facebook for good practice	Website and some blogging experience, limited value, Twitter, RSS and teleconferencing	Website, twitter and Facebook usage developing	Yes, expanding, website, Facebook and Twitter
<b>Network links</b>	Limited UK, improving, increasing ENRD	Baltic sea network and Activities, strong ENRD links. National link to Rural Policy Network	Well connected, sometimes stronger than MA etc. project links to other NRNs, link to regional Living Countryside Knowledge Network	Limited UK, improving, increasing ENRD	Strong, try to encourage membership involvement e.g. in ENRD groups.
<b>Future priorities</b>	Improve RDP delivery, support RDP staff. Stakeholder involvement e.g. in themed groups. Much larger budget. Aim to add value to RDP	Under review, moving to Agency of Rural Affairs, possibly narrower remit and more direct steer. May however be more strategic and influential, better	Unclear, probably internal autonomous model to strengthen credibility and relevance but with significant degree of outsourcing.	Purpose of this evaluation.	Unclear but expect innovation, agri/environmental and general rural development strands under a single structure

		information flow and stronger trust.			
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### 3.9.1 Plusses and minuses

#### Managing Authority relationship and mandate

The location of the Network Support Unit (NSU), whether in house or outsourced is often largely a political decision as is seen in all the examples considered. Where the NSU is located within the host organisation, this may also be politically influenced but is more governed by operational considerations. The availability of relevant and appropriate external contractors is a key consideration in outsourcing. All NRNs consulted expressed concerns over delivery by a single contractor, whether private sector, NGO or not for profit organisation. Association with a single body or interest group was perceived to compromise the NRN's credibility and wider relevance e.g. even the former English contractor, the Commission for Rural Communities was perceived to have a specific agenda with which perceptions of the NRN became associated. The use of a consortium as in the Netherlands was seen to be more balanced. However, even here, there were issues over a lack of clarity as to the mandate and on whose behalf the NRN was operating.

Location within the Managing Authority (MA) or Rural Department was seen to bring the NRN much closer to the core RDP functions and this closer relationship strengthened the functionality and credibility, particularly with the public sector. Outsourced models appear to experience some credibility issues with the public sector: on the one hand their independence is valued; but their power is compromised on the other by their not being 'part of the system'. This is particularly evident when interfacing with local or regional authorities where their status is unclear. On the other hand, outsourcing the NRN function was seen to confer a high degree of credibility with the wider group of users where that outsourcing was to an appropriate body or bodies. This was due to the perception of greater independence from central influence and of greater freedom of operation and, by implication, relevance and responsiveness to user needs. In the Netherlands, this has afforded a higher degree of connectivity with other rural actors, particularly LAGs, coupled with greater operational mobility, allowing them to work more freely with other partners in the Netherlands and EU.

Some tensions therefore exist regarding NRN functions and relationships when these are outwith the direct line of RDP management, particularly as the NRN is RDP funded but these tensions exist even when the NRN is a ring fenced unit. The most important consideration is the degree of functional and operational independence afforded together with the ability to function in service of the network. This is recognised to be crucial. In all cases, the ability of the NRN unit to undertake consultation and analysis and offer an informed and objective external perspective was recognised as being very valuable. In the internal, ring-fenced model, the NRN is better able to function as a two way conduit e.g. in influencing policy. In Finland, the NSU is able to interact directly with other Government Departments e.g. in working groups on new programme development, horizontal themes such as CLLD etc. The perspective amongst those consulted was that, on balance, in house but clearly ring fenced (or autonomous) delivery probably offers the best compromise in terms of mandate. In Finland this is structured as a parallel unit to the RDP MA but under same rural directorate. This enables the NRN to have a wider-than-RDP

remit. Although this is highly valued by the NRN team and those involved in wider rural policy as a result of restructuring, the approach is currently subject to review.

### Governance

The models considered illustrate three different approaches to NRN governance:

- direction either of the contract or in house delivery by the MA or relevant Ministry;
- the involvement of an advisory steering group of stakeholders; or
- an empowered and decision making steering group.

In England there is no external involvement in NRN governance. With the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), the relatively limited delivery functions were brought in house. The aspiration is that in future with a fuller NRN model, stakeholder involvement will be strengthened. In the Netherlands, the delivery consortium is contracted directly to the Ministry, the EAFRD component of the budget is co-financed by the Provinces but there is no direct reporting line. Here, a range of future delivery models and governance possibilities are under consideration, ranging from a fully fledged 'Rural Alliance' of the main rural organisations with the NSU as the service function or secretariat, to the more probable in house, ring-fenced delivery unit with some form of stakeholder steering group.

The other two examples employ stakeholder steering groups. The Finnish model is advisory, principally influencing the annual work programme. It comprises 21 members selected to cover a range of interests e.g. environment, research and with strong rural sector and geographical coverage. The Swedish group is representative with 10 members drawn from the membership organisations of the network and has decision making powers with regard to the work programme and budget. The Finns consider that their model could have been more directly influential in helping to shape their operations and plans. In Sweden, the approach reflects their strong priority to actively engage rural people and organisations in improving rural development policy and activity. This approach is dependent on those concerned having the motivation and capacity to become involved, which the very objectives of the approach seems to reinforce.

In all cases considered, it was clear that effective stakeholder participation should be improved, that this was valued, considered an important contributory element in strengthening the relevance, legitimacy and credibility of the network and as such to its success.

### Management, resources and staffing

The budgets for the NRNs considered and their staffing vary widely but it is important to understand that this may not show the whole picture as staff resources may be employed and deployed in different ways.

In budgetary terms, England (£200k per annum) is closest to Scotland at the bottom of the range considered here (and both are also clearly at the low end in EU terms).

Their staff team, approximately 3 FTE, are all Defra employees with salary costs funded through RDPE technical assistance. There is a clear recognition of the limitations of such a budget and an aspiration to substantially extend both the scope of NRN remit and activity and the budget under the next RDP.

The budget for the Dutch NRN is markedly larger, estimated at €600,000 per annum. This affords a larger staff capacity comprising 10 individuals from across the five partners, none of whom are full time on NRN work.

At the opposite end of the scale in Finland, the total NRN budget is €11m whilst in Sweden the NRN has a total budget of €8m. In Sweden, circa 50% of the budget supports the employment of the staff team of 8 (7.5 FTE); no comparable figure was available for Finland. In each of the three overseas cases, the level of budget enables a multidisciplinary team to be employed with thematic specialists in rural development, technical and management disciplines. The nature and scale of this enables them to pursue their extensive programme of participative engagement with rural people and organisations and supports a broader range of service delivery than either of the UK models.

Using staff who are engaged in other rural development work and who bring that experience and skill set to the NSU is a distinct benefit in the Dutch consortium model. This also contributes to the wider engagement of the Network. It enables a degree of flexible resourcing to meet new needs or issues e.g. being commissioned to undertake other complementary work. It does, on occasion, expose some potential conflict of interest challenges for the lead contractor to manage which an internal model avoids.

The ideal scale of the NRN budget cannot be estimated in isolation from consideration of the extent and scope of the other elements of rural support infrastructure and resourcing. To do so in relation to the overseas models is beyond the scope of this study. The budgets concerned would represent relatively small increments in those of the various Ministries involved and therefore, in the experience of the authors there is no reason to assume that the NRNs are filling gaps in core service provision by comparison with the UK.

#### Participation/membership and basis of stakeholder involvement

Membership models vary from the Finnish open membership to those based on closed memberships (organisations need to apply and be accepted) such as Sweden to those with no formal membership at all. Formal network membership appears to be of little importance of itself. Its main importance lies in the role it can play in contributing to participation and wider stakeholder involvement. This is achieved in a number of different ways. In Sweden, the membership is composed of a broad cross-section of organisations which must demonstrably be active in rural development across the country. This provides a strong base in effect networking of multiple networks and through which the NRN have built their participative approach. Relevant issues are identified through the membership of the Network and steering committee and are then addressed using the variety of tools they employ through which they engage with the membership. The thematic and target group-focused approach provides the basis of engagement. In Finland, although they have open

membership, the main clients are the intermediaries who work with the rural communities businesses etc., and who cascade engagement and services. In the Netherlands, there is no formal membership. This is under consideration but there is considerable uncertainty over the benefits of this.

The direct engagement of the NSU with intermediaries appears to have advantages. It is effective in facilitating and managing the process of wide stakeholder involvement and participation whilst keeping the demands on finite central resources at a manageable level. It takes advantage of existing networking arrangements and can add value to these through coordination support, which is particularly important when resources are limited as in the UK. It leads to wider involvement through active participation through tasked, thematic or working groups which are relevant and which offer benefits. It provides a clear structure within which participation can be encouraged and managed.

#### Thematic focus/ Services/Activities/ operational tools

NRNs deliver a fairly common range of core services determined largely by the specification in the EU Regulation. These include identifying and exchanging best practice, events, data bases, websites, publications, support for LEADER, cooperation and other communications. Such variation as there is, largely in terms of the extent and means of their application, is largely governed by scale and budget. The other major area of variation is in the extent of any theming or targeting. This was strong in all three overseas elements considered where the various tools and services were deployed strategically in pursuit of the wider NRN and RDP objectives. Where budgets are limited, this presents questions as to the feasibility of the full range of service delivery as envisaged in the new Regulation, given the resource requirement implications. Here the targeted or thematic function may help in focusing finite resource but there will be a need to define this carefully to avoid over-extending.

The use of thematic working groups is extensive and the three overseas examples all illustrate this, examples of such thematic work are cited below. All three involve a focus on improving RDP implementation. In Sweden, the programme of thematic work and the associated groups are the main means of service provision and engagement, and the majority of the NSU budget is dedicated to servicing these. They consider that the process of the network maturing has highlighted the benefits of this approach.

The Netherlands also has a strongly thematic approach to their work programme, involving events linked to the other elements of the work programme with a different theme each year. Here, there is a specific focus on broadening cooperation and involvement in rural development and strengthening links e.g. by linking traditional farming practice with wider rural development, promoting multi-functional agriculture and building 'communities of good practice' e.g. for local municipalities.

In Finland, the NRN also addresses a theme per year e.g. entrepreneurship, rural youth, the environment, with a special programme designed to support the theme with an associated information campaign e.g. roadshows re Axis 2 potential and

project examples. They also deliver one themed overseas study tour per Axis per annum.

Sweden has had considerable success in undertaking a series of virtual think tanks via telephone meetings. These can involve a succession of meetings which involve up to 50 or 60 people over two days as in the case of their review of RDP performance.

### Dissemination/exchange of experience

All the NRNs are tasked with the dissemination and exchange of experience. The degree of strategic and operational focus here varies considerably from England, where there is very little outwith LEADER, to highly developed and strategic approaches and tools in the other countries. In the Netherlands, links and exchange lie at the heart of the overall approach to broadening cooperation in rural development. Similarly, in the Swedish model with its approach to active participation, the collection, dissemination and exchange of experience and practice and supporting cooperation take place in order to improve the implementation of the RDP. They have examples of roll out of good practice e.g. a rural transport project now operating across Sweden, which constitutes a solid symbol of achievement. In Finland, they have a different focus for good practices each year chosen by the Steering Group. This year's focus is on results and drawing lessons e.g. through case studies. They stress the need to ensure that this focuses on adding value. All three examples run some form of best practice competitions. In Finland, they link this to self-evaluation, which works well and incentivises improvement. The competition process feeds in to their database of good practice, and a gala event provides the opportunity for political involvement. Sweden employs a themed approach with several categories in their competition. In each case, the NRN highlights these examples, compliments those who succeed, and illuminates the best, in all cases the NRNs find this very motivating for other project promoters. The overseas networks all actively disseminate good practice e.g. producing videos and materials on Facebook and feeds on Twitter etc, Facebook is thought to be particularly good for highlighting good practice examples.

### LEADER-specific support

All the networks considered provide some degree of supporting and networking service for LEADER. In all cases, this involves some form of working group although the nature of these differs. At its simplest, England has the LEADER Exchange Group whose main function is as a forum for exchange between LAGs and between LAGs and Defra etc. There is a future priority to extend this activity to include a training and development function for LAGs. This is to be coordinated as a priority. There is also an intention to do more in relation to cooperation.

In Sweden, the Netherlands and Finland, a member of the core team has specific responsibility for LEADER and, in each case, the network engages with LAG members and staff through a working group; these working groups have differing bases. Finland has a formal thematic group, whereas Sweden operates by supporting the LAGs own coordination group. The NSU funds the meetings and provides the secretariat. There are proposals in Finland for a formal association of

LAGs. The Finnish approach sees the thematic group directly inform the work plan for support through a formal needs analysis. They also have an informal cross-Ministry coordination group for LEADER.

The independent NSU in the Netherlands is also very focused and strong. Their whole strategy is to engage across the country at the LDS level. Apparently this is to the frustration of the authorities, national and provincial, who perceive them to be too supportive of local actors rather than all elements of the multilevel system.

Each of the three networks in effect acts as a focal or contact point for LAGs connecting with each other and delivers fairly intensive provision of support. The degree of formality in the support programme varies but all dedicate specific time and resource. Support provided focuses on improving the quality of LEADER's work, and technical support is provided to LAGs in all three countries through training, smaller events or one-to-one meetings. Finland has implemented a formal quality management approach. All have a strong focus on facilitating cooperation linked to the ENRD.

Training provision is relatively consistent covering topics such as evaluation, TNC, area promotion, LAG board training, LEADER methods and systems. In Finland, the work on improving the quality of LEADER is all written up to help ease transition between programmes.

#### Communications plan, what and how

Of the four main networks considered, only Finland undertook a formal RDP communications function, although the others all communicate RDP information to their members to support implementation. Sweden addresses this from the perspective of their mission of being the 'arena for mutual cooperation and learning'. Strengthening communications, dissemination, exchange and feedback are all integral to this. In England, Defra are seeking to extend the NRN role in the delivery of the main RDP messages. The former NSU providers, the Commission for Rural Communities were seen very much as a pressure group, as rural advocates. It is suggested that this confused and compromised the communications role, and, given their abolition, a culture change is needed to provide appropriate support.

The main tool employed in each case is the NRN website, although all countries report increasing, but carefully targeted use of Facebook, and Twitter for wider communications. The Netherlands, Sweden and England all have their own NRN websites which are viewed positively, although the English NRN is likely to migrate to Defra's own site to help address the challenges faced. Both the Netherlands and Finland stress the need for and benefits of regional outreach in their communications e.g. in CAP consultations.

#### Performance measurement and evaluation

Approaches to performance measurement and the use of indicators is rather mixed. The Dutch are the most systematic, continuously monitoring outputs and outcomes. In the Netherlands, the monitoring and evaluation of the activities of the NSU are based on agreed indicators but, in common with the other networks, these are

largely activity counts e.g. the number of website visitors, the number of subscriptions, event satisfaction surveys, etc. The original Finnish plan in 2008 proposed indicators but again these were activity and participation-oriented. The Finns consider that performance is poorly measured and having trialled positioning the NRN within a Spider Web Network Analysis, are now planning a more advanced approach reflecting their objectives. In England, Defra uses in-house progress checks against their annual action plan rather than performance indicators.

Sweden is most focused on outcomes and identifies the main measure as the raised knowledge of how to use the RDP. Unfortunately, they too can only really measure this through participation, the number of hits etc., and evidence of any real improvement in knowledge remains incomplete. The other measure of success cited is the trust placed in them by the Ministry who increasingly ask them to contribute to policy debates, a similar trend was becoming evident in the Netherlands.

### Other network/ENRD links

The ability to network is highly valued by all of the example NRNs and by their client or membership base. In the three overseas Member State examples considered, external network links are generally strong, principally through LEADER, but there are also strong links to the ENRD (recently strengthening in the UK). There is a strong desire in all cases to see members or network stakeholders participate more in ENRD activities. Sweden has been particularly successful here e.g. involving practical farmers in the environmental services working group or a youth coach in the youth Focus Group.

There is less evidence apparent of strong bilateral networking between Member States. However, Finland has been involved in regional networking with other Baltic Sea Member States since 2008, working to a shared Baltic Sea strategy involving sharing events, exchanging experience, thematic initiatives and study trips. The Finnish NRN is linked to their national Rural Policy Network providing a distinct policy/delivery link.

The other area where networking is strong is in linking thematic or sectoral networks within the Member States. The Dutch suggest that a link to the Rural Innovation Network would strengthen NRN's link to agriculture. Sweden and Finland anticipate such future links at national and EU levels. There are concerns in the Netherlands that if the NRN function is absorbed into the Ministry that their independent and intimate links e.g. with LAGs will be weakened as they will be perceived to be part of that constituency and therefore partial. As an independent provider, they have been successful in joining the formal and informal elements up. It is suggested that this will be challenged. This does not seem to have presented a problem in Sweden and Finland with their ring fenced units.

The UK is the only one of the examples with a regionalised network but until recently this has in effect been mothballed. The connections have been re-established with some activity in common areas of work and in sharing resource and knowledge, and the four area teams now meet quarterly.

## Future plans

All the NRNs considered face considerable uncertainty over their future from a variety of different perspectives.

In Finland, an RDP working group is considering the future role and direction of the NRN. The NRN is thought not to be an RDP priority and this needs more discussion involving the Network Steering Group. The NSU view is that the NRN should have a strategic role in steering the RDP, a view supported by the Mid-Term Evaluation which suggested a single Rural Development unit and director with the NSU providing the secretariat, but this was rejected. A proposed shift of departments to the Agency of Rural Affairs, in effect closer to the MA may actually threaten their freedom of operation and wider scope and diminish their influence. There is a stronger likelihood of greater top down direction from a more technocratic culture. It is unclear whether the NRN will be pitched at delivering against the minimum or maximum against the RDP specification.

Despite these fears, there is a feeling that the Ministry is the 'right' home and that the NSU should be in the MA. It will be more strategic and influential. Improved data collection and analysis by the NSU could strengthen their advisory role and add value for the MA. There will be a better flow of information to all, and the natural links will be there. This will enable stronger feed in and dissemination with greater trust on all sides. Regardless of what emerges, it is clear that outsourcing of some activity will remain essential but should not reach a level where the transaction costs of managing this input become disproportionate to the benefits.

Future plans in Sweden are highly uncertain at the time of writing. There will be a new NRN, but they expect to have to do more with fewer resources. An umbrella function for three networks looks likely to be the main structure with individual networks for innovation, environmental services and agriculture and for general Rural Development. The participative approach and use of working groups is likely to continue; in fact in all the NRN's, formal and informal working groups are considered essential, as is their improvement-oriented culture.

In the Netherlands the status quo is possible but unlikely and certainly not with the same consortium. The Netherlands do not envisage a separate European Innovation Partnership and NSU. The MA are considering an internal largely autonomous unit for the future programme. This is seen to potentially strengthen the NRN's credibility and relevance both to the rural sector and to national and provincial governments. An in-house unit outsourcing specialist inputs and services appears to be a strong model and possibility. This would need two or three people in the Ministry at the core. The alternative is the 'Rural Alliance' of the 10 or 12 main rural organisations with the NSU acting as the secretariat. This appears to be very much a longer-term aspiration.

The example facing the greatest potential change is in England where Defra want the NRN to be very much more about improving programme delivery with the adoption of thematic groups and workstreams. It appears to have significant unfulfilled potential but is now on an upward trajectory, but addressing this is entirely budget-dependent. Now is an opportunity to do more. It therefore has to be

equipped to do so with some independence and stakeholder involvement. In order to achieve sufficient critical mass, a much bigger budget in millions rather than hundreds of thousands would be required. The aim is to achieve greater critical mass. This is clearly challenging. However, work is starting on the potential to convince Ministers of the merits of this. The ability to improve poorly performing elements of the RDP is the main opportunity to deliver real benefits, with scope for targeted improvement. There is a strong perception of a potential role in supporting RDP delivery staff to improve delivery and to enhance the quality of what is achieved. An improved NRN also offers the potential to contribute to policy priorities e.g. via thematic workstreams and stakeholder involvement. This is thought achievable given the political and delivery imperatives.

This is unlikely to be a radical change, however, rather an evolution focused on where the NRN can add most value in meeting evolving priorities over the course of the new programme. The former CRC association remains a barrier, which constrains the NRN.

### **3.10 Priorities for improvement**

Stakeholders consulted were asked to identify their priorities for improvement to the SNRN as a whole. Survey respondents were asked directly about improvements needed in relation to delivery, content, accessibility, communication and relevance. The workshop considered improvements to the delivery structure and governance of the NRN. These findings are integrated throughout the preceding text and the conclusions and recommendations and a brief summary of the principal elements is provided here.

Analysis of the survey confirms that there is a need for improvement in all five fields considered. Strengthening the relevance of provision was of highest priority overall (64% of respondents), closely followed by communications, with content ranked third overall. Land-based businesses see delivery as the biggest issue. This is closely followed by relevance and accessibility. Improved communications was most important for the community sector, other rural businesses, agents, LEADER and the third sector. In all these cases, improvements to relevance and delivery ranked as high second priorities other than the third sector where improved content was the next biggest need.

The main need for improvement identified by stakeholders was for a much more strongly user-focused approach. Associated with this was the need for substantially greater clarity of purpose and mission. This is particularly important in strengthening the perceived relevance of the NRN, which was another priority for improvement identified. In addition to this, stakeholders were commonly of the view that substantially greater visibility of the NRN was required with clarity over pathways to access the services. This was more important for businesses (there were frequent comments re poor awareness, e.g. 'I don't know why I didn't know, it is important', 'I work for RPID and didn't know' etc.'). The portal or gateway was seen as important in this regard.

The current relevance of the SNRN to the SRDP was perceived to be weak. It could be stronger in more general, big message SRDP communications, but there was little demand for stronger technical focus. The NRN needs to cover the whole field of the RDP and plays an important role in engaging the community element in this. The NRN should concentrate on providing general RDP information and signposting specific sources whilst making sure that the information provided is up to date. In this context, the NRN could play an important role in contributing to continuity in communications across the transition between programmes.

The SNRN appears not to be favoured as a means of delivering the whole communications plan. If there is to be single source, as favoured by most, then this probably is not it. A central approach with strengthened existing stakeholder links was the favoured approach to improvement here. The NRN approach does provide the opportunity for SRDP user feedback, and this was viewed as being of high importance by some respondents.

Major questions were raised over the NRN's communication capability and connectedness across rural Scotland and the way in which this links to its objectives and functions. There was a clear view that NRN communications should concentrate on the wider messages and be designed to help facilitate the exchange of experience, dissemination of good practices, reinforce knowledge transfer and foster integration and links across the RDP.

The use of social media is increasingly important but needs to be handled with care according to stakeholders. It has huge potential to contribute to better and more inclusive communications, but this needs careful targeting, structuring, use and management to be meaningful and valuable. It is an essential part of a rounded approach but it is important not to assume that this reaches all or has more capability than it actually does. It is an additional route and should not distract from the core or contribute to confusion or complication. The purpose must be really clear and clearly understood to avoid the danger of erroneous use. These media are thought appropriate for headlines and signposts as their speed and directness are the biggest assets. This can be important for busy people but it needs to communicate the right material.

The workshop stressed the importance of an improved, better structured and clearer and more outcomes-focused approach to the NRN based on an understanding of the existing regional and sectoral networks coupled with an analysis of user group needs. In effect this should lead to a network of networks which adds value by improving links, synergies and complementarity strengthening networking and reducing duplication of effort. Clarity of purpose and the communication of this is a priority particularly if engagement with and networking of rural development actors such as LAGs and regional animateurs is to be strengthened.

A more proactive approach e.g. to the use of the website in the exchange of best practice, creating greater awareness of development activity and the use of tools to access this was a priority. By linking this to strengthened communication of national strategic priorities at a local level this could all contribute to the NRN playing a stronger role in achieving the change outcomes sought. Establishing links to other EU funds that impact on rural areas / communities ESF, ERDF and EFF could

deliver further benefits here. The workshop went on to consider how this should be structured and delivered; the following broad principles were agreed.

The Network Unit needs to be adequately resourced and be capable of ensuring that it can engage and support other local and national networks e.g. EFF, LEADER (a specific LEADER network should be re-established). It needs to be more of a network with real two-way engagement and flows of information.

In order to do so, it needs to be able to coordinate more actively between networks and stakeholders. This will require adequate staff, tools and resources and specialist needs may be contracted in. There is a need to ensure that those managing the programme are fully engaged in the network.

The website needs further development in relation to best practice exchange.

A more thematic approach was favoured e.g. through the potential to sub-divide the NRN into sections e.g. farming, environment, business and community. Networking sector groups and associated thematic activities were viewed positively as offering a more meaningful approach.

The preferred structure which initially emerged appeared to be Scottish Government co-ordination of a federal organisation, a network of equals with a Stakeholder Group, an Operating Group, flowing down to delivery through sub-contractors.

A broad overall objective was discussed and met with general agreement. An overall objective of: 'Developing empathy and understanding between the key rural stakeholders in order to encourage new ways of thinking and new solutions to old problems.'

Consideration was given to the four models outlined in Figure 1. Model 1, delivery through a single contractor was discarded as being least suitable, as no single interest group should be in this position. Model 2 – the External Consortium was favoured by a significant proportion of participants largely because of its independence and distinct identity, together with the potential for a wider skill set and knowledge. The preference was for governance through an outcome-orientated steering group with decision-making power. There were concerns over how much autonomy government could afford such an NRN, who would lead the consortium and their influence and the potentially higher transaction costs.

The two managing authority hosted options also received significant degrees of support with an overall preference for the Ring Fenced model 4 with an advisory steering group. This was thought to offer benefits in terms of its credibility with all stakeholders and could in time evolve into a more autonomous model with more independent governance, elected as in Sweden. An independent chair would help ensure distance from Government. The core in-house resource could again be complemented by external specialists.

The internal direct delivery model would have advantages in the strength of its in-house linkages and the ability to rapidly develop momentum. Strong Managing Authority buy-in would be essential as would a representative steering group through

which the MA must listen to different constituencies. Again, the potential for evolution would need to be designed in. In all these models, the key issue is the commitment of Government, valuing the NRN and committing a commensurate budget.

<b>Summary of Chapter 3: SNRN</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Scottish National Rural Network was established with a limited budget, limited ambition and modest scope, compared to many other member states. Its reach was mostly directed towards rural community development and those who made use of its services were, in general, highly satisfied with its performance.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach of the SNRN to the land-based community was more limited. Stakeholders felt that a more broadly based SNRN could provide a valued network for the land based community. The use of the SNRN to enhance good practice and enable it to be shared could be developed more fully with the land-based community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although many organisations already provide members with web-based and desk officer support on the SRDP, it was thought that the SNRN could usefully become a central hub for a network of networks.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In terms of future services, there was very strong recognition by respondents of the potential of doing more in developing connections, bringing rural organisations together and creating potential through collaboration and co-operation.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative forms of operation and governance of NRNs were explored in other member states. Although there were varied views among stakeholders, the preferred model was an arm's length, in-house NRN, with a strong stakeholder steering group, backed, where necessary, by bought-in expertise.</li> </ul>

## **4. OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In the course of the delivery of the 2007-2014 SRDP, two parallel communications systems were operational: one within Scottish Government; and the other, networking and knowledge transfer, primarily through the externally funded SNRN activities. The Scottish Government communication role was primarily associated with the provision of information about the overarching aims of the programme and a description of the delivery schemes and measures that could be applied for. The SNRN activities tended to have a stronger focus on wider rural community and economic development matters and, although they did not neglect the land manager constituency, was not much used by land managers, although their agents reported making greater use of their information.

### **4.2 Conclusions on the Communications Plan and Communications within the SRDP in the 2007-2013 period**

The internal and external communications associated with the 2007-2013 SRDP have been extensive but their effectiveness has been significantly compromised by flaws in both their design and delivery. Although a Communications Plan was prepared by Scottish Government, most of those involved in the delivery of the SRDP had not seen it. There was no monitoring and any strategic communications vision embedded within it was overtaken by events.

Those who designed the programme did so with the best of intentions. They sought to use the SRDP to deliver transformational change through an integrated approach to the development of land based business in particular and rural communities more generally. Many more recent policy commentators including those looking forward to create a vision for the new SRDP from 2014 argue for a similar transformational approach.

With any public support scheme there is a constant tension between the acquisition of scheme benefits to the direct beneficiary and the higher-level aspirations of public servants seeking to maximise the public good and, in the specifically Scottish situation, to contribute to the Scottish Government's overarching aim of Sustainable Economic Growth. The applicant and/or his/her agent want accurate information on their eligibility and how to pursue a successful application. The Government wants discernible outcomes and impacts.

Arguably, a well-designed and well-communicated policy can deliver both private and public good. But when receipt of public money is seen more as a proprietary right rather than rewards for a public good delivered, confusion can

prevail. Strong communication messages are needed to indicate the public purposes for which support is given.

The sense of cohesion and overall vision which is evident in the SRDP itself and the launch communications was rapidly jettisoned in favour of less cohesive scheme-specific communications (for example the guidelines for Rural Priorities launched in 2010).

Many respondents felt that there had been a distinct shift of mission within Scottish Government perhaps associated with the political change. The early communications centred on indicating the overall vision and intent of the programme. The subsequent communications, were much more concerned with getting the funding out to beneficiaries and designing and implementing a more workable set of administrative arrangements for implementing the schemes. In this second phase of communications pragmatism, a need to get fundable applications were the dominant, if not publicly stated, messages.

This pragmatic approach to supporting the programme uptake through communication is a far cry from the kinds of approach to communicating change management that would be seen as good extension practice and which is clearly manifested in for example monitor farm projects.

There were significant weaknesses in communicating the 'rules of engagement' internally with RPID and SEARS staff at the outset of the programme. Ad hoc training was introduced by some regional offices and the initial assumption in regional offices that the 2007-2013 was just another scheme to implement not unlike a number of previous farm development schemes, was quickly dispelled by trying to deliver the new scheme.

In effect, the communications bridge between Scottish Government, land managers and some other beneficiaries was occupied primarily by consultants and agents, whose expertise came to be seen as essential to ensure scheme delivery. Their understanding of the schemes became crucially important in delivering bankable projects, but as their expertise on the scheme grew, so it became clear to those vetting the schemes that impacts and outcomes might be less, but proposals were still being funded. Other beneficiaries used a variety of means of engagement.

European co-financing of the SRDP is sometimes not acknowledged in communications including some key SRDP pages on the Scottish Government website, the press, leaflets and posters. It is not clear whether this omission is unintentional or intentional, but there is a clear obligation on the Scottish Government to recognise EU co-financing and it appears this is not always being adequately complied with.

### 4.3 Conclusions on the effectiveness of SNRN

The SG Rural Communities team responsible for the Scottish National Rural Network contracted out two primary functions: the website (design, hosting and content) and the organisation of events. The SCVO 'home' for the SNRN gave it a natural reach to a rural communities constituency and to a section of those involved in rural economic development. This constituency has been serviced by information on the website and a range of regional and national events. For others it appears to have led them to question the relevance to their interests.

A number of stakeholders questioned the effectiveness of regional and national events and survey evidence suggested a relatively low rate of uptake. However, some respondents reported attending well organised and useful events.

For many rural land managers and some other business interests the SNRN was 'off-radar.' SNRN was seen as a means of communicating with the rural communities and rural development constituencies. Land managers communications networks around the delivery of the SRDP were based on communicating (often through agents) with RPID officers.

However, the SNRN has operated on a shoestring budget and unlike the NRNs in Nordic countries and the Netherlands, all of which have a massively larger budget, the ability of the SNRN to provide a platform to support much greater engagement of different rural constituencies with regard to the RDP and other development opportunities has been rather limited.

In other member states, there was much stronger evidence of a coherent strategic plan, of strategic issues being given a sharp focus for a period of time, of engagement with a wide community of practice and of much closer engagement with government policy priorities, consonant with the purposes of the NRN. In these examples there is a very clear focus on improving RDP delivery and outcomes. This is important and represents a significant and substantial untapped potential of an NRN in Scotland. The belief that the SNRN's functional role could grow on a shoestring budget was unrealistic.

Because of the limited use (and perception of usefulness) of the SNRN by particular constituencies, especially land managers, they have tended to source information differently. Trade organisations have been important intermediaries and a range of networks have provided information on the SRDP and its measures.

#### 4.4 Lessons and opportunities for the future

A number of lessons can be drawn from these investigations.

1. **The communications plan for the 2014 – 2020 SRDP should be developed, implemented and monitored to ensure that all relevant staff understand the policy objectives and the mechanics of their delivery.**

The development of a Communications Plan for the SRDP for the 2007-2013 programme period, but failure to operationalize within the Scottish Government, makes the assessment of the effectiveness of government communications regarding the SRDP a difficult task. The implementation of the SRDP-specific Communications Plan appears to have been shelved at a time that communication planning within the Rural Affairs and Environment Directorate was reviewed and a new RPID-wide communications strategy implemented. We understand why the plan was shelved but argue that there is a case for an SRDP-specific Communications Plan which addresses both internal communication needs within RPID and SEARS bodies and external communications to the whole range of rural constituencies.

With respect to the internal communications of the new SRDP, there is a need for a communications plan, which ensures that all staff inside government or arm's length agencies (SEARS) dealing with the plan, as desk officers, communications team etc. have a clear understanding of the policy logic, any novel features of the scheme, any changes in administrative arrangements intended at the outset of the programme or planned over its life. All staff who act as desk officers for the scheme should undergo training to ensure that they have a good understanding of the scheme and their role in its effective communication.

2. **The Scottish Government should communicate SRDP policy objectives and the delivery arrangements to potential beneficiaries in a concise and carefully targeted manner using appropriate communication tools and based on an understanding of their needs. An appropriate monitoring framework should be developed and implemented.**

After the inception of the programme when programme-wide leaflets were produced explaining the new SRDP, the subsequent communications regarding the SRDP were mostly scheme-based. There is a need for the Scottish Government to reflect on the appropriate balance between trying to communicate messages about the vision and overarching narrative of the SRDP and trying to operationalize it through its component parts. Given the administrative challenges early in the scheme, the Scottish Government understandably emphasised scheme delivery, but this was achieved with a loss of overall vision and a loss of connectivity to wider Scottish and European

rural development agendas. The Scottish Government should retain a primary communications function with respect to the SRDP to explain the policy logic, structure and administrative requirements of the different parts of the SRDP. Written documentation should accompany web-based materials. The web-portal should offer an easily understood cascade of information. The core written SRDP 2007-2014 was in several volumes, extremely long and difficult to assimilate and would have benefited greatly from a short background paper (rather like the statement for the general public in an EIA) which should provide an overview of the logic of the scheme and the measures proposed. We consider that there is a need to communicate the vision of the SRDP to the full array of rural constituencies, but recognise the benefits of scheme-specific communications in a nested approach. Accordingly, we endorse an approach to communicating specific measures with the SRDP based on segmentation of the client base and the product.

**3. In order to help staff deliver and communicate the new RDP appropriate needs focused training should be provided.**

The internal communications between centre and regional offices were poor and left staff ill-prepared for the assignment of delivering the new programme. Ad hoc training provided some remediation, but there is a clear need for officer training prior to the launch of a new programme. If the new programme is radically different, it is imperative that appropriate training be put in place and that this is communicated effectively to case officers. More arguably, case officers should have a clear grasp of the overarching vision of the programme as this will help them steer outcomes towards national rather than individual preferences. Where, as in the 2007-2013 SRDP, new constituencies such as (non-farm) forestry were drawn into the scheme's administration, there is a need for outreach activities to engage with intermediaries such as the sector itself (i.e. non-farm forest owners), trade groups and consultants to make them fully aware of the administrative requirements of the programme.

**4. The acknowledgement of the European Union contribution should be strengthened and supported by monitoring action.**

The acknowledgement of the Community contribution in the promotional and information materials associated is in some cases inadequate. Clearly the domestic contribution to the programme of support is greater than the EU contribution but this does not obviate the obligation for such acknowledgment. Press releases may well include acknowledgment of EU support but the very limited occasions on which this is in turn reported suggests that this may not be universally so. There is a danger that this could be perceived as a failure in compliance. Scottish Government managers and those personnel concerned

with communications and publicity should more actively monitor the compliance with this requirement and ensure the adoption of a common policy in all RDP related communications.

**5. An adequately funded National Rural Network should be established focused on communicating with the range of Scotland's rural stakeholders and their existing networks, strengthening the connections and fostering knowledge transfer to improve Rural Development outcomes.**

At the same time as the SRDP was being rolled out, the SNRN was launched by the Scottish Government Rural Communities team; specific services for the website and regional coordination were tendered and externally contracted. Whereas the SRDP Communications Plan was about creating sound administrative architecture for scheme delivery and informing the different constituencies of scheme requirements, the aspiration of the NRN was to build and nurture a network that embraced the RDP and rural development more widely. Although, arguably any communication plan should listen to feedback from the intended recipients of messages, the idea of a network implies a much stronger sense of collective learning and sharing of ideas and a strong multi-directional flow of information for example from network manager to network member, from informed actor/stakeholder to uninformed actor/stakeholder etc. A network structure such as that anticipated in the SNRN sits comfortably with contemporary thinking about collaborative learning by land managers as comprising good extension practice. As with monitor farms, farmers often find their peers good sources of information and innovative ideas. There was very strong recognition by survey respondents of the potential of doing more in developing connections between actors and stakeholders. Rather than trickling down information to different stakeholders, the network could and arguably should be helping different actors come together to build capacity. In doing so, the NRN would be contributing both directly and indirectly to the knowledge transfer and exchange which underpins the improvement sought in the delivery of RDP outcomes (a focus for many NRNs) and the improvement of those pathways and networks. We fully endorse the need for an adequately funded network that provides multidirectional communication channels amongst rural stakeholders at multiple scales. Thus there is a case for national level debate and discussion on key themes (which will broaden and embrace ERDF and ESF issues in the new programme), but there is also a need to operationalise local networks for collaborative learning and delivery as this is likely to be essential to deliver desired outcomes and impacts.

**6. Engaging more effectively across the full range of rural constituents is a priority for the new SNRN. The branding and identification of the SNRN**

**should be strengthened and more distinct to improve recognition and clarify its wider relevance.**

The funding of a single external agency to deliver major parts of the SNRN has produced a network which has become associated with the rural communities and rural development agenda of the contractor rather than with the totality of the SRDP. Given that the RPID/SEARS capacities with respect to rural development outwith the land based sectors are somewhat modest, the SCVO contract can be seen as providing some kind of balance. Whilst this may have been a necessity and beneficial in getting the rural communities part of the SRDP more informed and engaged, the case for having a more broadly based SNRN in the future is strong. Promoting the SNRN as an integral part of the SRDP through the overall communications approach should be prioritised. Accordingly we recommend that the SNRN has a mission to promulgate engagement across the full range of rural constituents and engages more fully with the land-based sector.

**7. The design and establishment of the SNRN and the basis of its engagement with rural constituents should be founded in sound analysis of their needs.**

In conducting this evaluation the limited extent of any evidence base either in terms of needs analysis or monitoring data was clearly evident. Stakeholders welcomed the process of consultation and contributed very positively regarding needs. Whilst this report goes some way towards addressing this, further research into the needs which the NRN could support is an essential part of an effective design process. As part of that process careful consideration should be given to establishing appropriate performance indicators and benchmarks against which performance in meeting identified needs may be measured.

**8. The SNRN should be developed as a ring-fenced, in-house agency guided by an advisory board of stakeholders.** The mission should be to maximise the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement, to maximise the quality of projects submitted and to provide a 'network of networks centre' acting as a wider gateway to the RDP and rural development including links to relevant EU networks.

A number of different models are used in different European countries from in-house NRNs to consultant run NRNs.

We recommend that the SNRN be developed as a ring-fenced, in-house agency, which should be less concerned with directly providing accurate information regarding the programme (this is the function of the SRDP communications team) and more engaged with a mission to maximise the

effectiveness of stakeholder engagement, to maximise the quality of projects submitted and to provide a 'network of networks centre'. This should act as a wider gateway to involvement in the RDP and rural development and include links to the relevant EU Rural Networks for Rural Development, Rural Evaluation and Rural Innovation. We do not wish to undo the good work undertaken by a range of rural organisations in communicating with their members, but we do want this hub organisation to create synergistic benefits among actors where such gains are possible. It should be guided by an advisory board that after a trial period could develop to become a management board. This opportunity might ensure commitment of key organisations. The board would have representation from all key stakeholder groups in rural Scotland.

**9. By virtue of being located 'in house' the new NRN should play an enhanced role in strengthening SRDP communications.**

The current links between the NRN website and SRDP communications are limited not least by the heavy dependency on and credibility of the Scottish Government website as the 'authoritative' source and understandable nervousness regarding third party communication of definitive guidance or instruction. The stronger in house links in the proposed NRN model would allow a more directly linked approach providing wider SRDP communications whilst signposting the Scottish Government site as the definitive source. This would enable communication of the policy objectives, programme progress, good practice examples etc. to be linked with a view to improving programme delivery and outcomes. In delivering this function the NRN would therefore enhance and bring greater coherence to SRDP communications.

**10. The National Network Unit should adopt a flexible resourcing approach to meet the range of needs.**

The majority of in house delivery models involve the use of a small group of specialist and appropriately qualified staff, which is essential in addressing the differentiated functions of the NRN. Such a team is necessarily compact and cannot therefore be expected to cover all the required competencies in house. In order to meet the diverse range of needs and demands placed on a National Network Unit it is recommended that a policy of flexible resourcing be adopted e.g. through secondment of specialist staff or, where appropriate outsourcing of services or contracting specialists. The involvement of a communications specialist appears to be essential.

**11. The SNRN should promote good practice in rural development in more interactive ways, particularly peer-to-peer learning, good practice events and collaborative projects.**

In the absence of an NRN that gave breadth of coverage and network support across the whole of rural Scotland other organisations have given excellent coverage on specific topics of interest to their narrower constituency. We value their contributions and the diversity of opinion that they embody. The SNRN manager should be tasked to create a hub organisation that enhances the scope for effective learning about the possibilities offered by the SRDP and related European Programmes, relevant networks and other sources of knowledge and best practice. Rather than being solely a cascade for information about the SRDP and rural development, the SNRN should aspire to promote good practice in rural development in more interactive ways, particularly peer-to-peer learning, good practice events and, if collaborative projects emerge as a more significant feature of the new programme, in means of maximising their chances of success. We recommend more of a collaborative learning approach to rural development and less of a transfer of technology approach. There is an extensive catalogue of good practice in other countries and a supporting technical and academic literature to draw on. Scotland is not without good practice, but this needs to be built on in more effective ways.

**12. More formal networking arrangements and training support are required for LEADER to improve delivery, outcomes and the exchange of good practices.**

There has been a lack of networking between project beneficiaries and LAG members in the current programme and this has been detrimental; not least to the sharing of good practice. The SG LEADER manager should take steps to establish more formal networking practices within the SNRN for LEADER Co-ordinators, LAG Members and Project beneficiaries. It is also recommended that networking between LEADER Co-ordinators and with the managing authority becomes more formalised with clearer objectives and parameters with regard to management and technical delivery issues. We further recommend that more targeted LEADER networking would be beneficial in meeting the requirements to provide technical assistance to LAGs in order to develop inter-territorial and transnational co-operation and to undertake the monitoring and evaluation of their local development strategies. External experts could provide training and advice on technical issues and methodologies relevant to delivery, cooperation and monitoring and evaluation.

**13. Improve the selection and communication of good practice examples to help improve RDP outcomes.**

A number of respondents were critical of the selection of good practice examples under the 2007-2013 SRDP. We note the requirement that the new NRN collects examples of projects covering all priorities of the Rural Development Programme. Good practice examples should be selected in consultation with local RPID or SEAR's informants and should be selected on the basis that they are likely to deliver excellent outcomes.

**14. The new NRN should take a more explicit supporting function on innovation and innovation systems in rural areas.**

Again, we note the burgeoning literature on rural innovation and the implementation of rural innovation partnerships and therefore stress the importance of the NRN connecting to this rapidly developing field of knowledge. We recommend that a number of innovation support teams are developed covering sectors and enterprises (including community enterprise).

<b>Summary of Chapter 4: Recommendations</b>	
1.	The communications plan for the 2014 – 2020 SRDP should be developed, implemented and monitored to ensure that all relevant staff understand the policy objectives and the mechanics of their delivery.
2.	The Scottish Government should communicate SRDP policy objectives and the delivery arrangements to potential beneficiaries in a concise and carefully targeted manner using appropriate communication tools and based on an understanding of their needs.
3.	In order to help staff deliver and communicate the new RDP, appropriate needs-focused training should be provided.
4.	The acknowledgement of the European Union contribution should be strengthened and supported by monitoring action.
5.	An adequately funded National Rural Network should be established focused on communicating with the range of Scotland’s rural stakeholders and their existing networks, strengthening the connections and fostering knowledge transfer to improve Rural Development outcomes.
6.	Engaging more effectively across the full range of rural constituents is a priority for the new SNRN. The branding and identification of the SNRN should be strengthened and more distinctive to improve recognition and clarify its wider relevance.
7.	The design and establishment of the SNRN and the basis of its engagement with rural constituents should be founded in sound analysis of their needs.
8.	The SNRN should be developed as a ring-fenced, in-house agency guided by an advisory board of stakeholders.
9.	The new NRN should play an enhanced role in strengthening SRDP communications.
10.	In order to meet the diverse range of needs and demands placed on a National Network Unit, it is recommended that a policy of flexible resourcing be adopted.
11.	The SNRN should promote good practice in rural development in more interactive ways, particularly peer-to-peer learning, good practice events and collaborative projects.
12.	More formal networking arrangements and training support are required specifically for LEADER to improve delivery, outcomes and the exchange of good practices.

13. The selection and communication of good practice examples to help improve RDP outcomes should be enhanced.

14. The new NRN should take a more explicit supporting function on innovation and innovation systems in rural areas.

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