



Evaluation of the Scottish Rural Network



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Executive Summary

The Scottish Rural Network (SRN) is the National Rural Network (NRN) for Scotland, supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).¹ The network is managed through the Network Support Unit (NSU), which is based in the Scottish Government's Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate and managed by the Rural Economy and Communities policy team. The purpose of the network, as it is specified in European legislation, is to support the delivery of the 2014-2020 Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP). The SRDP delivers Pillar 2 of the European Union (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and comprises of a number of rural schemes aimed at improving outcomes in both the rural economy and agricultural sector.²

This evaluation was produced by the Scottish Government's Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services Division in late 2019/early 2020. The EU promotes such evaluation and this was undertaken with the purpose of understanding what the SRN had delivered and how. The research involved an analysis of previous reports, analysis of SRN documentation and 17 interviews with internal and external stakeholders. The findings can help inform decisions about future iterations of any Scottish rural network following the UK's exit from the EU. Publication of the evaluation was delayed by over six months by the Covid-19 pandemic. While minor amendments have been made to reflect on this period, it is important to be aware that the context at the time of publication is different to when the evaluation was undertaken, due to both Covid-19 and the greater proximity to EU exit.

The aims of the SRN are as follows:

- Get more people from rural communities, businesses and the wider public involved in policy developments that affect them
- Help improve the delivery of the Scottish Rural Development Programme
- Inform farmers, rural businesses and communities about policy and funding opportunities
- Encourage innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas

Overall, the SRN has contributed towards the goals specified for it in legislation³, although it can be observed that some areas have been better addressed than others. This evaluation provides an outline of the activities the SRN has organised and considers their potential impact.

What has the SRN provided?

During the 2014-2020 SRDP, the SRN has undertaken the following activities:

¹ <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/esiflegislation/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=34439337>

² The SRDP is comprised of a range of schemes, including: Less Favoured Area Support Scheme, Forestry Grant Scheme, Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme, LEADER, the Farm Advisory Service, the Beef Efficiency Scheme, the New Entrants and Young Farmers Start-Up Grants and the Food Processing, Manufacturing and Co-operation grant, amongst others. Further information is provided [here](#).

³ The legislative provisions can be found [here](#).

- Developing, managing and delivering a large number of events and workshops concerned with rural development policy. For example, the SRN has helped to organise the Rural Youth Project in 2018, supported the development and delivery of the Rural Transport Convention in 2018, and organised the 2019 Rural Enterprise Futures event.
- The SRN has maintained a website with information about rural Scotland and links to support and funding information. Between the beginning of 2020 and October 2020, 73, 326 sessions were logged on the website, indicating ongoing demand.
- The SRN has contributed to the development of LEADER⁴ through logistical support, meeting facilitation and case study development.
- Communicating information about the SRDP via the SRN's dedicated website and other communication channels and producing information about the SRDP, including case studies of projects, event reports and summaries of the programme.
- Supporting the delivery of the SRDP via the development of the Rural Innovation Support Service (RISS) This has involved providing support for SRDP activities, particularly support for the LEADER programme.
- Sharing additional funding opportunities and good practice with rural stakeholders through a range of communication channels developed and maintained by the SRN, including videos, e-mail, use of social media, case studies etc.
- Supported Scottish Government policy areas seeking input from rural Scotland, including the promotion of consultation exercises on topics such as Air Departure Tax, After Hours Child Care and Rural Housing initiatives. They have also undertaken events to support Scottish Government cross-cutting policy areas. For example, the Rural Entrepreneurship event in September 2019 which encouraged networking between stakeholders and SG policy across different areas, including climate change, business, connectivity and transport to support rural development.
- The SRN has effectively maintained links with partners in the European Union. This has involved, in practice, contributing to pan-European projects on, for example, Smart Villages and short-supply chains. This has, in turn, contributed to the development of policy in these areas.

In addition, although it took place outside of the main scope of the data collection, the SRN has been involved in supporting the Scottish Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic across rural Scotland. This has included developing a dedicated [page](#) within its COVID-19 Hub detailing locations and dates for mobile testing units (MTU) in Scotland, signposting to this resource through its social media channels and ensuring delivery partners were able to share messaging with their networks of contacts. As of September 2020, the Covid-19 Information Hub has been viewed 14, 613 times since launch. The mobile testing information schedule and testing information pages have been viewed 21, 707 times since May 6th.

⁴ LEADER is a scheme for community led local development, available in EU countries and funded through the RDP, that supports communities with funding to undertake locally relevant projects.

Additionally, the SRN utilised the annual Mental Health Awareness week to promote COVID-19 related mental health and wellbeing initiatives and resources (w/c 18 May). The SRN also provided support to Ministerial stakeholder meetings and development of a rural recovery plan, worked within the Rural Intelligence Centre (RIC) and produced video content for use at stakeholder meetings.

What are the challenges?

- The data from interviews found the perception that the SRN had largely worked with LEADER, and that work on the promotion and engagement with other schemes had been limited. This may reflect a range of factors. However, the SRN has produced case studies for several SRDP projects, which outline individual examples of funded projects. While the majority of case studies related to LEADER projects – and were in some cases specifically requested by those groups – the case studies generally provide examples of how the funds can and have been used, indicate their benefits and share good examples. The extent to which these drove additional scheme engagement is, however, hard to assess.
- Given the network's broad remit and multiple work-streams, there have been examples where network activities have slightly overlapped with other Scottish Government functions. In some cases, this has created confusion and frustration.
- From the perspective of evaluating the SRN, while it is relatively simple to identify outputs from their work, it can be more challenging to identify the impacts that have resulted from this. As noted in the literature review, evaluating rural networks is broadly recognised as difficult. This challenge has two components:
 - On the one hand, the SRN's interventions are largely concerned with supporting rural development through the engagement of communities. As a result, impacts are likely to take varying amounts of time, and manifest themselves in inconsistent ways. For example, data collection indicated that event feedback received by the SRN was supportive and participants reported making important contacts and obtaining relevant information. However, the eventual outcome of these contacts and new information will vary considerably. There are also likely to be 'soft' benefits, such as changes to participant mind-sets, that are challenging to measure.
 - On the other hand, it may also be the case that more effectively identified strategic goals, with an emphasis on collecting supporting data for monitoring purposes would make it more straightforward to demonstrate impacts. Several recommendations are made with the aim of supporting this process in any future network.

Going Forward:

Given the pressing rural challenges related to climate change, rural economic development and demographic trends including rural depopulation, the 2019-20 [Programme for Government](#) made a commitment 'to support the development of a rural movement that will engage with communities between rural parliaments to include a more diverse range of voices, including those in disadvantaged communities'. It may be that a future network could

contribute to this goal. If a future rural network is to be part of this approach to pursuing rural development, this evaluation recommends:

1. **Clarifying the network's intervention logic:** A key finding from this evaluation is that while the SRN has undertaken a range of activities in pursuit of their broader goals, these have not always been connected to a broader strategic plan or a clear set of desired outcomes around which to organise the network's activity. This, in turn, has made it more difficult to demonstrate a cumulative impact from the network's extensive organising of events, managing communications and working with parts of the SRDP. Any future iteration of the rural network will require a set of clearly defined goals in relation to which other activities can be strategically deployed. This could be clearly linked to a policy model with a clear intervention logic that understands and makes use of the network's capacities to engage with rural communities.
2. **Improved co-ordination internally:** In reflection of the concerns noted above, about the under-representation of schemes other than LEADER in the SRN's work, any future network should be more effective and pro-active at engaging with internal SG stakeholders. This would maximise opportunities for internal policy/analytical colleagues to utilise the reach and capacity of the network while minimising overlap.
3. **More regular reporting on activities:** Any network could continue the recently adopted practice of issuing quarterly reports to the wider Directorate to provide a clear description of outputs.
4. **More inclusive goal setting:** Any future network could enhance their current processes for identifying and agreeing key priorities at the beginning of the year, to ensure they have an appropriate focus. This might be improved by a more formal process of meeting with external and internal stakeholders, to ensure all perspectives are considered.
5. **Making the broader rural network more visible:** Any future network could develop a publicly accessible online mapping tool that collects and displays the range of community based rural activism taking place nationally, including that which the network have actively participated in. By doing this, the goal of developing a 'rural movement' may be enhanced, while providing a clear mechanism for rural stakeholders and individuals to engage both with the network and other like-minded individuals.
6. **Adopting a membership structure:** Any future network may wish to adopt a formal membership structure for affiliated groups and individuals. This would create a durable structure for the network, provide a mechanism for identifying members' concerns and priorities and for delivering consultations and events. It would also clarify the extent to which there is demand for the network's services.
7. **Expand delivery methods:** There is further scope for innovation in the delivery of the network. For example, digital communications – webinars, digital skill sharing, podcasts, and so on which may offer advantages over face to face engagement. In the current context of Covid-19, this recommendation takes on an additional pertinence.
8. **Follow-up impact evaluation:** Finally, in order to learn more about the ways in which the network can influence change and deliver benefits, any future network could

commission a detailed, stakeholder-led case study about a group/area that they have supported to demonstrate the benefits of their approach and what lessons can be learned. The selection of case studies could be undertaken by internal stakeholders using previous examples of the network's planned work and be produced on an annual basis via engagement with participants two to three years after the initial work of any future network has taken place. The cost of commissioning the case study would need to be incorporated into a future network's budget.

Introduction

This section describes:

- The legislative context of the SRN
- The structure of the SRN
- The budget of the SRN
- The methodological approach of the evaluation
- The sources of data

The Structure and Purpose of the SRN

The Scottish Rural Network (SRN) is the National Rural Network (NRN) for Scotland, supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).⁵ The purpose of the network is to facilitate the delivery of the 2014-2020 Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP). The SRDP delivers Pillar 2 of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and is comprised of a number of rural schemes.⁶

The SRDP seeks to support agricultural and forestry businesses, to protect and improve the natural environment, to address the impact of climate change and to support rural communities. The emphasis on rural development - in Pillar 2 of the CAP - can be distinguished from the emphasis on direct farm subsidies found in Pillar 1. The current cohort of rural networks – in each member state and in each of the four nations of the UK – are constituted by section 1 of Article 54 of the EU Regulation 1305/2013. Article 54 of this EU Regulation 1303/2013, in turn, requires the Scottish Government to evaluate programmes within the SRDP.

European legislation prescribes four key functions to national rural networks, which are intended to be provided by the network support unit (NSU). The NSU can be understood as synonymous with ‘the SRN’ for the purposes of this evaluation. Both refer to the core team in Scottish Government that provide this. The four key tasks are:

“Networking by the national rural network shall aim to:

- (a) increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- (b) improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes;
- (c) inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities;
- (d) foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.”

⁵ <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/esiflegislation/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=34439337>

⁶ Insert list of RDP components.

The SRN is managed within the Rural Communities Policy and SRN Support Unit, which sits within Rural Economy and Communities in the Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Economy. The SRN, at present, has four staff, alongside a policy team leader with experience of the wider rural community landscape. The current staff are as follows:

- Network Manager
- Rural Policy Officer
- Communications and Content Officer
- Stakeholder & Business Engagement Officer

The next section will consider the background and policy context which has led to the emphasis on networking within the current SRDP.

The European Policy Background of Rural Networks

The establishment of rural networks as a policy device in the EU has evolved since the 1980s, specifically with a view to encouraging endogenous, community led rural development. This can be understood as emerging in opposition to approaching rural development as something which is ‘done to’ rural areas by external forces. As the ENRD note in their description of networks, on the subject of policy development:

“...there was a growing recognition that development actually occurs through people sharing or exchanging ideas, information and resources. This can happen in a variety of ways and across different geographical scales, but reflects the role of networks and networking in rural development.”⁷

From this perspective, a rural network can be understood as a crucial tool in the ‘activation’ of endogenous rural development, by facilitating community led rural development and linking rural development to the goals of rural communities. The current approach, wherein member states are tasked with cultivating rural networks as a matter of national policy, commenced in the 2007-2013 RDP programme. As the ENRD suggest, networks can play an important role in improving the social capital in rural areas by acting as a central point around which communities can co-operate. The emphasis on ‘people’ as being the core of the network is emphasised throughout the ENRD’s discussion of networks:

“Most importantly, rural development networks are networks of people, many of them volunteers, and it is their enthusiasm and commitment that these structures depend upon. The success of networking thus depends on the individuals that make up the network, and their ability to make the most of the opportunities offered by the networking ecosystem, such as events and activities organised by Network Support Units.”⁸

⁷ European Network for Rural Development (2019) Networking: The Power of Networks. EU Rural Review No. 27. Available [here](#), pp. 5

⁸ Ibid, pp. 15

This is also perceived to have important benefits for policy development, as it can result in the inclusion of far more ‘voices’ in the process and incorporating ‘bottom up’ approaches in policy development, in a context where a wide range of stakeholders can be brought on board.

Finally, the ENRD emphasise that networking will play a key role in the next stage of the CAP (2021-27) wherein each member state will have a National CAP network that feeds into a broader European network. Going forward, this background informs the recommendations of this evaluation, which are concerned with ensuring that any future networking activity is effective in maximising the opportunities for community led approaches to rural development. The next section outlines the current context of rural policy in Scotland.

UK Policy Context

The UK has left the EU. One result of this will be a new responsibility for developing rural policy in a context where the EU has had a formative role in both the nature and structure of rural and agricultural development. It is worth noting that ‘rural’ should not be conflated with ‘agriculture’. Scottish Government research indicates that, in 2018, the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sector comprised only 1.6% of gross added value (GVA) in the Scottish economy.⁹ While this is higher in some areas, i.e. 7% in islands and remote rural areas, and 5% in mainly rural areas, it is nonetheless important to emphasise that ‘rural’ areas should not be thought of solely as ‘agricultural’ areas.

At present, several pressing policy issues have emerged with substantial rural components. In particular, the 2019 Programme for Government (PfG) notes the importance of supporting rural development and emphasises that “...we need to do more to stem rural depopulation and to attract more people to live and work in rural and island communities.” In this context, the PfG emphasises that these achievements will come from effective engagement with these areas:

“We will work with Scottish Rural Action and others to support the development of a rural movement that will engage with communities between rural parliaments to include a more diverse range of voices, including those in disadvantaged communities.”

Other specific policy developments include the introduction of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the development of a new National Islands Plan. The Act introduces a requirement for responsible authorities to carry out Island Communities Impact Assessments which require, in essence the ‘island proofing’ of strategies, services and policies to make sure that islands are not adversely impacted. In October 2019 a Private Member’s Bill [was launched](#), which suggested a parallel ‘rural proofing’ approach for Scotland’s remote rural communities. The need for the development of specific, rural focused business support that engages with the opportunities presented by the rural economy is also under discussion within policy teams. In addition, the ‘climate emergency’ continues to be a cross-cutting policy issue, in which rural communities have an important role.

⁹ Data provided by RESAS.

Operational Structure

The SRN's primary operational planning takes place via an annual communications plan and operational plan, both of which are signed off by the SRDP team. These are also presented to the Rural Development Operational Committee (RDOC), which meets on a biannual basis. This is pursued over the course of the year, alongside work developed in response to ad-hoc requests for case studies, events and other forms of support. The SRN then proceeds to enact these plans through collaborative working that incorporates both rural stakeholders, communities and Scottish Government policy. As observed above, the challenge for both evaluation and policy development is effectively monitoring the impacts of this activity and continually improving performance in light of this information. As discussed in the conclusion, this evaluation provides several recommendations that may enhance this process should there be a future rural network in Scotland.

SRN Spending and Budget

The total allocated budget for the 2014-2020 funding cycle is £4 million.¹⁰ This equates to less than 1% of the overall budget of Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the same period, which was £1.2 billion.

Methodology

This evaluation is best characterised as a process evaluation. It provides an account of the activities that the SRN has undertaken, and provides feedback from interviewees about their perceptions of the network and its use. This can be distinguished from an impact evaluation which would be able to demonstrate what the outcomes of the intervention have been. The latter has not been possible in the current context, reflecting both the lack of monitoring and reporting of SRN outcomes in the current SRDP period and the challenges presented by the structure of the network itself. As above, the nature of outcomes are likely to be diffuse and non-systematic (although this does not mean they are not important). There is also limited scope to establish what would have happened without the network because, as a national service, we cannot meaningfully compare the outcomes of the SRN to a rural context without the SRN. However, as noted, the key recommendations of the evaluation relate to ensuring that a future rural network is easier to monitor.

The methodology is mixed, using a combination of interviews with internal and external stakeholders, alongside analysis of the information provided by the SRN. Interviews were conducted with 17 participants in total, including the SRN team, stakeholders from within Scottish Government and with stakeholders external to it that have worked with the SRN. The secondary material for analysis includes SRN outputs like event records, communications and other forms of data from their internal monitoring system. Interview participants have been selected for their thematic relevance, i.e. having worked with the SRN in the past or

¹⁰ All information on funding obtained from https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networking/nrn-profiles/uk-scottish-rural-network-status-31012020_en Specifically, this figure comes from the profile for the Scottish National Rural Network.

being able to offer a valuable external perspective. The qualitative data was analysed thematically, and illustrative quotations are provided throughout the evaluation to provide further context.

Purpose and Structure of the Report

This evaluation does not make a recommendation on the future of the SRN. Given the severe impacts of Covid-19 in Scotland, the uncertainty surrounding future funding for agriculture following the UK's departure from the EU and the potential for considerable legislative change following this, the broader budgetary and resource context does not allow for this. Instead, the evaluation provides an overview and analysis of what the SRN has contributed to the SRDP, where there has been scope for improvement and suggests a range of mechanisms that could underpin the design of any future rural network.

Chapter 2 reviews pre-existing evidence on the network, and reviews the (limited) academic research into the EU's rural network approach to rural development. It also considers the SRN's own data collection through surveys and the most recent evaluation of the network during the 2007-2013 session of the SRDP.

Chapter 3 reviews the SRN's work on stakeholder engagement and communications. This reviews the SRN's work developing events and communicating funding opportunities.

Chapter 4 reviews the SRN's efforts to improve the implementation of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) and support for innovation.

Chapter 5 provides a short conclusion, drawing together the findings from the other sections, before providing recommendations that may assist any future network in pursuing their goals.

Literature Review

Key Findings:

- There is limited academic literature available on the subject NRNs. Available literature argues that national rural networks are challenging to evaluate owing to their loose structure and lack of clear intervention logic.
- An evaluation of the previous SRN (2007-2013) highlighted a lack of visibility, a lack of focus and the need to become a 'network of networks'.
- Annual Implementation Reports have noted that the SRN has contributed to its objectives, although expressed concern that it may have overemphasised LEADER in its contributions to the RDP.

Academic Analysis

There has been limited work on rural networks in academic and policy literature, and limited comparison of networks across different national contexts. This section will, first, consider the limited existing academic analysis of NRNs. It will then consider existing Scottish Government research on the subject, including an evaluation of the previous Scottish rural network and the information available about previous SRN activities in Annual Implementation Reports (AIR) produced by Scottish Government for the EU.

Marquardt¹¹ conducted a survey of NRNs in Europe in 2010, which involved administering questionnaires to different rural networks. The research asked about the impact of the networks and found broad agreement amongst respondents that the networks facilitate the implementation of rural development measures and enhance the quality of rural development projects. However, despite this, networks were generally unable to provide evidence to underpin these views. Most networks, in this work, focused on outcomes like publications and website visitors. By contrast, concrete measurements that could detect improvements resulting from the network's actions were generally lacking. It should be emphasised that this does not show that the networks have no positive effect, but simply that such an effect is difficult to demonstrate. Overall, Marquardt's main claim is that, without a clearly defined set of targets, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the networks:

“...there still exists a clear need for systems to evaluate the instrumental effects of NRNs. The survey results reveal that although the network units are convinced of the

¹¹ Marquardt, D. (2011). Rural networks in the funding period 2007-2013: A critical review of the EU policy instrument (No. 133). Discussion Paper, Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Central and Eastern Europe. Pp. 23

positive effects of NRNs, they are unable to provide evidence to underpin this. This applies particularly to the impact of networking, which is often described as added value. Consequently, it will be hard to corroborate formally the assumed value of network activities.“

Marquart frames this as a structural issue. The author argues that, at the EU level, many dimensions of the NRNs have been neglected, primarily intervention logic, definitions of good practice and governance, and an absence of clearly defined targets. As above, this closely parallels the situation here, where numerous participants in the evaluation viewed the network as positive, but could not necessarily identify clear evidence for this being the case.

Previous Evaluations and Reviews of the SRN

The 2007-2013 SRN Programme Evaluation

In 2013, an independent evaluation of the 2007-2013 SRN and SRDP communication plan was published.¹² The evaluation notes that the budget of the SRN was modest compared to many other Member States, although the precise funding levels and comparisons to other NRNs is not discussed. The analysis involved an online survey with 346 responses, circulated via the SRN website and to other stakeholders, and a workshop with 18 rural stakeholders (along with additional interviews with internal Scottish Government personnel).

The primary findings of the evaluation were that, in large part, the SRN was ‘not on the radar’ of many stakeholders and that there were many competing sources of information and some overlap in provision. Of the survey respondents, 76% were aware of the SRN, with LEADER as the most common entry point. In general, stakeholders perceived there to be weak engagement with the SRN, although there was a strong recognition that the SRN could have a useful function as being the centre of a network of networks. The website was perceived relatively positively, and post-visit evaluations of project visits showed these were highly valued by participants. The evaluation concludes with a number of recommendations for how the SRN can overcome these challenges.

The evaluation also argued that, while the SRN website was perceived as helpful, the SRN had “not succeeded in engaging a wider constituency of SRDP beneficiaries and rural actors and remains very much community-focused.”¹³ The evaluation advocated that the SRN could potentially act as a network of networks, to create links between rural communities. Reporting on a stakeholder workshop, they note:

“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

¹² Scottish Government (2013) Evaluation of Scottish National Rural Network and Scotland Rural Development Programme Communication Plan. Social Research.

¹³ Pp. 32

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 animaters is to be strengthened.” (2013: 63)

This finding parallels a recurring theme within this evaluation: the need for more clearly defined outcomes on which to focus and a clear strategic vision for the organisation. It seems unlikely that a network of this kind would ever fully dispense with providing ad hoc support when appropriate. However, the absence of a clearly defined intervention logic and outcomes that the network intends to achieve make it difficult to assess the overall benefits that the network has produced.

SRDP Annual Implementation Reports

Since the launch of the current version of the SRN in 2015, it has been discussed in four Annual Implementation Reports (AIR). AIRs are produced for the purpose of monitoring the SRDP as a whole. Two of these reports were Enhanced Annual Implementation Reports (EAIR), which offer an extended description of the SRDP.

The AIR 2015 discussed the formation of the new Network Support Unit (NSU), which was established in the 2014-2020 programme as an in-house Scottish Government responsibility. Activities in 2015 were focused on developing a website, establishing links with the European Network for Rural Development and European Rural Networks, supporting the establishment of a new rural parliament, recruitment and raising awareness of the SRN with stakeholders and delivery partners.

Generally speaking, the assessments and evidence provided by the AIRs and EAIRs have been positive. In the 2016 AIR, the evaluation concluded that the SRN had substantially contributed to its objectives, with a similar conclusion in the 2018 AIR. However, the 2018 EAIR also noted that:

“It is clear the SRN has worked well with LEADER, but there is less evidence that the SRN has worked as effectively as it might with other schemes such as KTIF.”¹⁴

This finding echoes the views of several participants in the current evaluation.

SRN Self-Administered Surveys

In addition, the SRN has conducted several surveys which have been distributed through their mailing list and website. These surveys are generally small and self-selecting, with limited scope for general inference. However, given the consistencies of some of the findings, they are worth noting here for illustrative purposes.

¹⁴ 2018 EAIR pp. 89

2016 User Survey: This survey, with 199 respondents, found that while 75% and 74% of respondents were aware of the SRN's weekly newsletter and website respectively, only 32% were aware that the SRN provided funding information and 38% were aware of networking events. 'Word of mouth' was the most common means of hearing about the SRN, at 30%, although 23% of respondents had found out about the SRN through an online search engine. Among stakeholders and colleagues, 68% and 63% respectively, noted that, of their colleagues, 'some are aware' of the SRN, compared to 3% and 15% who said 'most'. Around 69% of respondents reported that they were not in any way involved with the SRN in 2015. Among those who had been involved, visiting the website or registering for the newsletter were the most common forms of involvement, although 27% mentioned meeting with one or more of the staff.

2017 Stakeholder Survey: In 2017 the SRN undertook a small survey of stakeholders, with 106 responses. This found, among other things, that 'word of mouth' was the most common means by which individuals became aware of the SRN and that, among the respondents, 54% reported that 'some' of their stakeholders were aware of the SRN (as opposed to 12% who reported 'most'). Similarly, 41% said that 'some' of their colleagues were aware of the SRN, compared to around 16% who said 'most'. Around 65% of the respondents had not attended an event run by the SRN. When asked about the extent of knowledge of SRN services, only 36% of the respondents were aware of funding information, and 35% were aware of networking events (compared to 74% who were aware of the website and 64% who were aware of the weekly newsletter). These proportions are comparable to those found in 2016.

2019 Communications Survey: In 2019, the SRN administered a small online survey (respondents = 82) to get feedback on their communications strategy. The survey found that around 41% of respondents had learned about the SRN through word of mouth (the next most popular option was social media, at approximately 14%). While this is insufficient data to generalise from, the clear prevalence of awareness facilitated by 'word of mouth', as distinct from social media or events, indicates that informal channels may be an important source of awareness about the network.

Conclusion

Previous research into rural networks clarifies a number of key features of the network. In short:

- While the goals of NRNs may be specified, they are relatively vague (i.e. do not specify clear, numerical targets) and emphasise process rather than outcomes. This makes them inherently challenging to evaluate. This is despite the fact that those involved in them frequently report that they perceive them to be useful.
- In the last funding period, the SRN was judged to be relatively unknown among stakeholders and a lack of focus was emphasised.

- The AIRs have noted that, while the SRN has effectively performed its roles, there was a perception that it had tended to focus on engagement with LEADER rather than with other schemes.
- Internal communications surveys conducted by the SRN are difficult to interpret, owing to their mixed findings and small samples. However, they appear to indicate that, for those who use the SRN's resources, use is relatively narrow (i.e. funding information or news about events). In terms of awareness more broadly, the surveys indicate that, for most respondents, the SRN is not known to the majority of their colleagues. However, it is hard to generalise much from this, as it not clear that awareness about the SRN in general, is a goal, as opposed to within particular communities. Moreover, general awareness about the SRN is more appropriately thought of as an outcome of effective engagement, than an end to be pursued in itself, so the implications of increasing awareness are not clear.

Following on from these findings, a key focus for the recommendations of this evaluation is identifying ways in which to make any future network more amenable to ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Stakeholder Engagement and Communications

Key Findings:

What has gone well:

- The SRN has supported stakeholder engagement through the development of and participation in events and workshops.
- The SRN has informed the public about rural development funding.
- The SRN has developed and grown a range of communication channels, including a mailing list and social media profiles.
- The SRN has produced a range of case studies highlighting the benefits of the RDP.
- The SRN has been able to assist in facilitating engagement in consultations with rural stakeholders.

What the challenges are:

- While it is positive that communication networks have grown, it is not always possible to link this development to the achievement of core SRN aims.
- Stakeholder engagement is hard to objectively measure, making the effectiveness of the approach challenging to evaluate. Similarly, it is challenging to evaluate the impact of non-systematic interventions, like events and filmed case studies.

Policy Priorities

The responsibilities for stakeholder engagement and communications are reflected in the first and third priorities assigned to the SRN. The first priority is:

“Get more people from rural communities, businesses and the wider public involved in policy developments that affect them.”

This is further subdivided into the following requirements

- establish and maintain a central "network of networks" relating to rural development;
- organise and facilitate national, regional and local initiatives and events to inform policy development and programme implementation¹

At a general level, this requires the SRN to increase the number of stakeholders and participants involved in policy developments that are relevant to them. Methods for doing this are then specified. They include maintaining a central 'network of networks' and organisation

initiatives and events. For ease of reference, the above goal will be called ‘stakeholder engagement’.

The second priority is:

“Inform public and potential beneficiaries about policy and funding opportunities (as per the Information and Publicity Strategy)”

This, again, is broken down into different, more specific goals:

- promote best practice in rural development through the use of case studies, best practice competitions and peer-to-peer learning;
- gather information, photos and videos showing good examples of projects covering all priorities of the SRDP;
- provide a new or refreshed NRN website;
- disseminate information to the public through newsletters, website articles, videos, social media and public events.

How has the SRN Pursued These Goals?

The SRN has pursued the above goals via the organisation of and contribution to events, the production of case studies to share best practice, and communication across a range of mediums. These are discussed in detail below.

Events and Event Support

Events were mentioned by a number of participants as being a particularly valuable part of the SRN’s contribution to the RDP. Throughout the 2014-20 period, the SRN has developed, contributed to and facilitated a range of events concerned with rural policy development. In particular, these have offered opportunities for rural networking among attendees, learning, and policy discussion. Where appropriate, they also generated some outputs from events, including reports, summaries and short films. Key events which the SRN has played a major role in shaping and delivering include:

- 2016-2018: Support for both Scottish Rural Parliaments to date.
- 2016: LEADER conference
- 2018: Rural Youth Festival of Ideas
- 2018: Rural Transport Convention
- 2018: The 11th OECD Rural Development Conference
- 2019: LEADER Cooperation Workshop with the Republic of Ireland
- 2019: Rural Enterprise Futures Conference

As this list indicates, the relevant events are varied in scope. Restricted to SRN events, the number of attendees over the period has been:

- 2016: 401
- 2018: Approximately 600, including 400 at the OECD event.
- 2019: 247

It was emphasised by participants that the SRN had a useful capacity to feed into event development, undertake the complex logistics of organisation and promote events to their network. As an example of logistical support, participants mentioned the SRN's input to the 2016 Rural Parliament. It was emphasised that the SRN's work here permitted the primary organisers – the SRA – to focus on event content and workshops, with the SRN taking on the considerable logistical burden of event organisation, providing assistance to the planning of workshops and the development of outputs.

Participants in the evaluation also emphasised that, in the context of events, the SRN had contributed to the planning, organisation and facilitation of meetings and workshops, owing to their experience with rural policy. This has allowed them to play a useful role in developing event programmes, co-ordinating with speakers, identifying appropriate themes and facilitating discussions designed around maximum stakeholder impact. The following quotation indicates the kinds of activities event organisation involves, in relation to the 2019 Rural Enterprises Futures event mentioned above:

“[The SRN] worked with representatives of the LAGs and FLAGS¹⁵ chairs group. As part of the event working group they worked closely with them to develop the event programme, source venue, and assist with identifying speakers. Additionally, as there was a Minister speaking, they liaised with ministerial offices, produced briefing materials and wrote speech content.”

(Anonymous Evaluation Participant)

Another example concerns the 11th Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Rural Development Conference. Here, the SRN acted as a local partner for the OECD event. This involved developing the agenda, inviting speakers, organising the venue and managing the event and facilitating discussions.

Engagement with events has also been used to raise the profile of Scottish rural policy in a European context. For example, in 2019, the SRN co-ordinated the submission of 10 Scottish nominations to the Network Rural Inspiration Awards, two of which made it to the final round. This work involved considerable co-ordination and organisation, and is a valuable example of how the network has helped to link Scottish rural policy with European rural policy more broadly. The form of this engagement, typically, involves quarterly meetings with ENRD colleagues to develop rural policy via workshops, which the SRN has contributed to. For example, recent developments around smart villages and short supply chains have received substantive contributions from SRN colleagues.

¹⁵ LAGS are Local Action Groups, while FLAGS are Fisheries Local Action Groups. These are the groups that are set up to deliver LEADER projects in their local areas.

Another mechanism through which the SRN has contributed to stakeholder engagement is by directly using their network to feed into specific policy challenges. An example of this was noted by an evaluation participant:

“There was a consultation with communities who use rural airports regarding Air Departure Tax (ADT). [The SRN] were asked by the lead policy to publicise the consultation. They promoted the consultation through an article in the SRN newsletter and also through our social media channels. As the target audience was quite a specific sector and demographic. [The network] went directly to partners, like Crofting Federation Scotland, Scottish Island Federation, all the various LAGs that were in those physical locations, and asked them to share the messaging through their channels and to their networks in order to broaden engagement. The survey generated a lot of interest and as a result the response rate far exceeded the expectations of the academics undertaking the analysis of the results and the lead policy area. The feedback [the network] received was that the results were superb, they had no expectation of the high volume of the responses that they would receive.”

(Anonymous Evaluation Participant)

While this is an example of an ad hoc use of the network's capacity, it shows that the maintenance of a wide rural network may have considerable benefits for policy development. Another example of effective, but ad hoc work involving the network was with the Wester Ross community. Here, the SRN was approached by the Wester Ross Biosphere group with a view to improving the area's capacity as a tourist destination. The SRN worked with the group to design and facilitate a workshop, the outputs of which will be used to inform a community action plan to maximise the area's natural assets and heritage to increase sustainable tourist engagement within the area. While, in this particular case, the benefits may have been somewhat lessened in light of the Covid-19 pandemic this is a useful example of how the SRN can apply their skills to pursue Scottish Government objectives while supporting community led development.

Key Finding: Overall, the SRN's capacity to provide ad hoc event support in this way was generally perceived as useful, and they have contributed to a valuable programme of events. However, it should be noted that the scheduling of specific events is largely driven by stakeholders outside of the SRN, rather than necessarily reflecting an agenda directed by the SRN. Overall, however, it can also be noted that these sorts of ad hoc forms of support, where the agenda and purpose of the activities is largely driven externally, may be less effective in terms of generating measurable changes than a programme of events designed by the network themselves. While ad hoc responses are valuable and are likely to always be necessary, there may also be potential in any future network for a more regular process of consulting and engaging with rural communities in line with overall strategic goals.

SRN Newsletter

Since 2014, the SRN has provided a weekly e-newsletter. The newsletter provides information on rural news, funding opportunities and information about ongoing projects. The mailing list has grown from an initial membership of 700 in 2014 to 1,812 at the most recent count (October 2020). The focus of the newsletter is on rural news, funding opportunities, consultations and events information. Evaluation participants emphasised that the newsletter sought to share best practice and inspiring examples of rural development while promoting good news stories, upcoming events and sources of funding. The SRN also produce a LEADER newsletter, which currently has 266 subscribers. While it may, in principle, be valuable that this communication network has been developed, there are broader questions about the 'added value' of this newsletter, in a context where there are multiple sources of information on the topics above e.g. ARE Comms, the Farm Advisory Service, Scottish Rural Action. Pointing out the crowded landscape is not intended to diminish the efforts of the SRN here, but simply to highlight the issue for policymakers making decisions in the future on this matter.

Case Studies

The SRN has produced a range of filmed and written case studies, often accompanied by text and images, which document successful examples of community led rural development. As of June 2020, there were 50 case studies available on the SRN website, 24 of which included short films produced by the SRN. Since 2014, the number of these produced each year has fluctuated from a maximum of 23 to a minimum of 5. The case studies consider a wide range of relevant rural topics. Recent examples include videos exploring examples of community led rural housing development, a recent visit of Swedish fisherman to a LEADER project and a video documenting the recent 'Smart Villages' event in Stirlingshire.

On the SRN website, the focus of case studies are somewhat weighted towards examples of LEADER funding. Of these case studies, the majority – 27 – were based on LEADER funded projects. The next most common subject of case studies related to the Food, Processing, Marketing and Cooperation grant, with seven case studies. As was observed by the evaluation participants, this could reflect both the fact that LEADER had specifically sought out this sort of help, while other schemes may have been less forthcoming, and the fact that LEADER projects are very amenable to the case study format and provide interesting content. This is discussed further in chapter 4.

The importance of these case studies was emphasised among the evaluation respondents. Among other things, they helped to make developments in rural Scotland visible and pertinent in high profile contexts:

“Having a body of case studies is really helpful for Ministers. If Ministers are already going out somewhere to do something...is there some case study of best practice out there that they can go and visit, and enrich the picture of rural Scotland?”

(Anonymous evaluation participant).

Case studies were also perceived to potentially provide inspiration and information to those considering similar projects. They were also reported to have additional value for demonstrating the value of the SRDP and had been praised by the European Commission to this effect:

“The [EU] Commission love them, and they quite often share them across Europe....They see it as a real positive and are very keen that [these are there] for communicating the programme in that digestible, easy to use format.”

(Anonymous evaluation participant)

In some cases, stakeholders had specifically sought out the SRN to develop case studies. This was reported with regard to many of the LEADER case studies, as well as the Highland and Moray Fisheries Local Action Group, who requested that the SRN film a case study of the Ullapool Jetty project they had developed.¹⁶

The soliciting of these case studies is a useful indication that these are perceived as adding value to local projects, and it is valuable to have visual examples of some of the SRDP schemes for both communication and promotion. At the same time, while the case studies may well have influenced applications for funding and rural projects, it is not straightforward to demonstrate this. While this may simply reflect the limited scope of this evaluation, it appears that there is limited evidence of specific initiatives to produce case studies with a view to, for instance, encouraging applications for specific funding opportunities or the funding of work in a specific area, with accompanying monitoring to measure the effects.

Videos

The SRN also maintains a Vimeo channel, which hosts a total of 159 videos.¹⁷ The videos hosted here are the case studies described above, alongside a range of videos documenting LEADER events, highlights from events that the SRN participated in, short interviews/vox pops and information about projects. Between 2015 and August 2020, SRN videos have been viewed 23, 217 times and finished 6,376 times. The most popular videos, when last checked, were the Scottish LEADER programme (3,008 views), the Scottish Rural Development Programme (2,218 views) and an animation about LEADER (2,025 views).

SRN Website

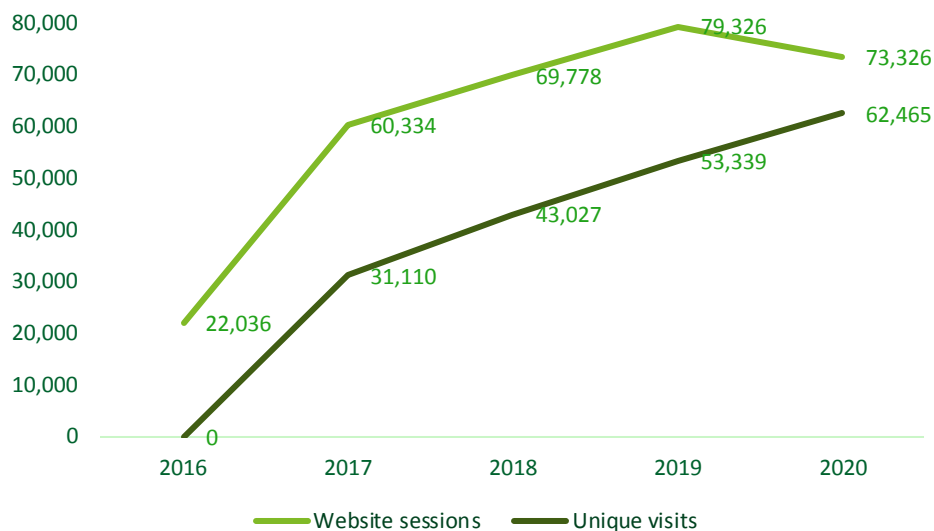
The SRN website plays an important role in the network's communications and stakeholder engagement. It hosts a range of useful resources and case studies for those seeking to develop rural projects. It also played an important role in hosting the LEADER Expression of Interest forms at the beginning of the 2014-2020 SRDP. These forms constituted the first part of the LEADER application process, without which initial enquiries could not be made. In 2016, 2017 and 2018, this resulted in over 1000 LEADER Expression of Interest (EoI) forms

¹⁶ The case studies can be viewed here: <https://www.ruralnetwork.scot/case-studies>. For specific links to videos, see, for example, 'Living Seas Project' [here](#), 'Ullapool Jetty', which is [here](#) and, 'The Workshop: Aberfeldy', which is [here](#).

¹⁷ Last accessed 16/06/2020

being submitted (1,520, 1,270 and 1,316, respectively). The number sharply dropped in 2019, to an estimated 292 over the course of the year. However, this is likely to reflect the natural decline in applications as the current LEADER funding cycle winds down.

Figure i: Website sessions and unique visits to SRN website, 2016-2020 (2020 = Jan-October)

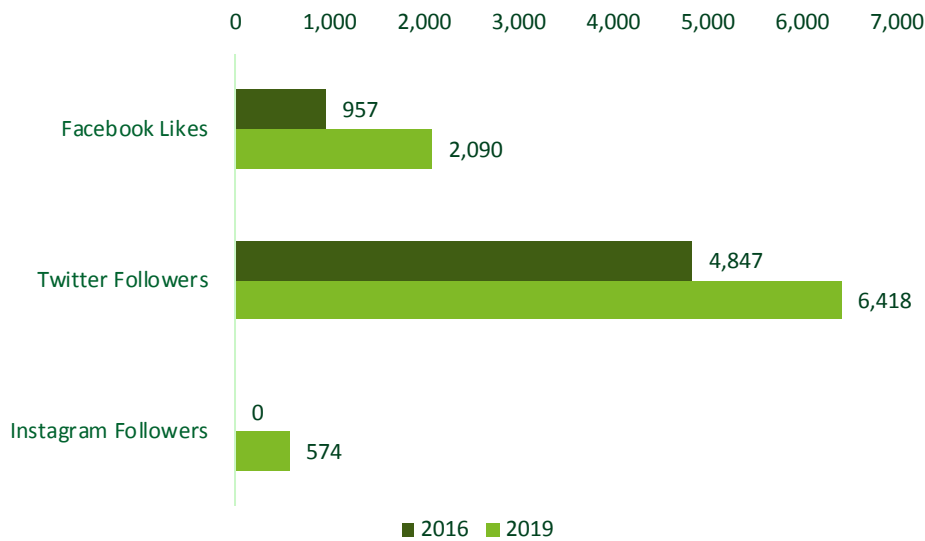


The development of sessions, unique visits, and use of the funding search portal over time can be seen in Figure i. As this demonstrates, website traffic in all cases has tended to trend upwards over the period as a whole (with the exception of the most recent year, although this is likely to reflect the fact that the year is not yet complete). This indicates both an ongoing and potentially increasing need for these resources, while evidencing the SRN’s effectiveness in engaging their user base. So far in 2020, there have been 73, 326 website sessions as of October 2020, indicating this demand is being maintained.

Social Media

The SRN has also maintained an active Twitter profile, Facebook page and Instagram account. In all cases, the trends indicate growth and, by proxy, an increase in demand from the public for SRN services (see Figure ii). As of the most recent data in June 2020, there are 2, 666 Facebook likes (+586), 6, 718 twitter followers (+298) and 1, 065 Instagram followers (+491).

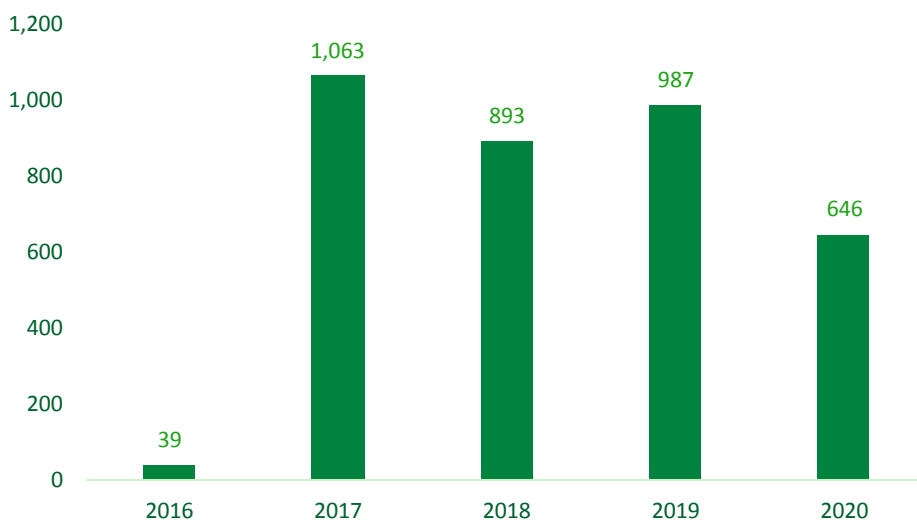
Figure ii: Social Media Engagement with SRN 2016-2019



SRN Funding Search

The SRN website also provides a funding search engine. This is delivered by the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). Based on the numbers using the service, this appears to be valuable. The service launched in 2017, and its use over time can be seen in Figure iii. While use has not increased substantially since 2017, the consistency of use indicates that demand is being maintained. The funding search came online in 2016 (hence the low use in this year and 2015). The use of this service indicates that, irrespective of future policy decisions, this may be a valuable resource to maintain.

Figure iii: Use of the SRN Funding Search 2016-2020 (2020 = Jan-October)



Key Finding: The SRN has, as demonstrated above, developed their communication capacities considerably and now offer a wide range of outputs to support rural development.

In particular, the website and the funding search facility both show high levels of engagement and have grown over time.

Have These Activities Contributed to the Goals of the Network?

It is clear that the SRN has contributed to rural stakeholder engagement and the provision of information to relevant parties. As discussed above, it is not possible to infer clear and measurable impacts that have followed on from these approaches. At the same time, the consistent increases in the social media presence, website visits, mailing lists, and other engagement should provide evidence that, at the least, there is a demand for these services.

As many of the events involving the SRN involve collaboration with other organisations, the SRN's contributions cannot be assumed to be uniform. Numerous participants emphasised, however, that the logistical support and experience that the SRN could offer to smaller, grassroots organisations could be extremely valuable in supporting rural actors.

One challenge that becomes apparent from looking at the range of SRN activities is that they are operating with an extremely wide remit, i.e. 'rural issues', which has, in practice, included a wide range of policy areas. In this sense, a concern is that there will be far more opportunities for engaging in rural issues than there is capacity to do so. However, this also creates potential opportunities to develop more innovative ways of working and leveraging digital technology to expand the capacity of actors within the network, including but not limited to the network support unit.

Finally, the above findings suggest two clear senses in which the SRN has added value. First, the SRN has acted as a platform for collaboration between rural actors. This is most apparent in the above instances where the SRN has facilitated events with rural actors and Scottish policy officials, such as the Rural Enterprises Future event in 2019. Second, it is clear from the discussion above that the SRN can play a useful role in developing narratives from rural Scotland, specifically in terms of the effects and consequences of rural policy and the support it can provide for community led projects. Particularly when combined with the funding information provided by the SRN, this may act as a powerful tool in encouraging ongoing development work. However, in both cases, more explicit goals for the network and a clearer strategic plan would make it easier to identify the impacts of this engagement on the broader goals of the rural development programme.

In the event that a network structure is used in the pursuit of rural development goals going forward, there are two primary steps that would contribute to the broader goal of delivering the rural network and making it visible and accessible to others. First, any future network should engage in steps to make the broader rural 'network' more visible and easier to define. This will support future monitoring and evaluation, as well as making the network easier to work with and to understand for those working internally to Scottish Government and those working with it from outside. As detailed in the recommendations section, one approach to this would be adopting a formal network membership structure that would allow organisations and individuals to 'sign up' to become members. This would not involve a financial cost, but it

would make it far easier to determine the extent, range and nature of those who benefit from the network.

This would have various benefits. It would mean being able to clearly demonstrate demand for the network, it would provide a clear view of the nature of the priorities and needs of members and it would make it possible to make inferences about the nature of and changes to this demand over time. It would also provide a format for more regular consultation with rural stakeholders for the development of priorities and feeding into the policy process, as well as identifying rural priorities.

Second, a future network should develop an online map that makes it possible to view the geographical distribution of rural community groups that have worked with the network and are actively supporting the network's goals. This would mean, at a glance, those external to the Scottish Government and internal to it would be able to see the extent and range of network supported projects. Such a service would be maintained by the network, but allow external groups and organisations to register their presence so that those local to them would have the opportunity to learn about their activity via the network.

Third, as will be discussed in the next chapter and conclusion, there may be value in clarifying any future network's intervention logic to reflect their success in relation to both developing narratives about rural Scotland and in facilitating rural collaboration.

Improving SRDP Implementation and Encouraging Innovation

Key Findings

What has gone well:

- The SRN has contributed to the development of LEADER through logistical support, meeting facilitation and case study development.
- The SRN has contributed to innovation through engagement with European networks and the creation of the Rural Innovation Support Service (RISS). RISS provides an example of the value the SRN has added by providing a national overview of the RDP and contributing to its development.

The challenges:

- The SRN has had limited engagement with the other aspects of the rural development programme. However, evaluation participants also emphasised that this may reflect a lack of engagement from the schemes with the SRN, as well as the fact that there are a range of existing mechanisms which also serve the function of supporting these schemes.

Policy Priority

The policy priorities underpinning the two goals of this chapter are the second and fourth. The second goal of the SRN is to:

“Improve the quality of SRDP implementation”

This is further specified to include the following:

- establish and coordinate thematic working groups and dissemination of outputs;
- establish and manage a national LEADER network, including a training programme and regular networking activities.
- Dissemination of monitoring and evaluation findings.

The fourth aim of the SRN is to:

“Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas (complementary with the support under measures 1 and 2)”.

This is further specified to include the following:

- organise project visits to encourage co-operation and the sharing of knowledge and experience;
- facilitate cooperative working between LAGs in Scotland, the UK and Europe by bringing them together to share ideas, identify common objectives, develop proposals and agree roles;
- facilitate the establishment of Operational Groups;
- disseminate outputs from Operational Groups and the EIP Network to stakeholders in Scotland

How Have the SRN Pursued This Goal?

This goal has been pursued by the network in four main ways:

- Engagement with LEADER
- Engagement with the other SRDP schemes
- Cross-European and UK networking to develop and exchange ideas
- The Rural Innovation Support Service (RISS)

It should be noted that, as above, the SRN was specifically required to support the management of LEADER.

Engagement with LEADER

During both the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programme periods, the SRN facilitated national staff group meetings, administered working groups on specific themes, and developed one-off events like the national meeting on co-operation in 2019. The SRN has also produced a LEADER specific newsletter and a large number of case studies that focus on completed LEADER projects. A full list of events the SRN has undertaken with LEADER is as follows:

- 2014: Organisational support with the LEADER Co-operation Working Group
- 2015: Support for LEADER Communications Working Group, Conference on co-operation/community-led local development.
- 2016: LEADER conference, LEADER transnational co-operation fair
- 2017: contribution to communications, support for LEADER LARCS group, LEADER co-operation exchange, and LEADER staff group meetings
- 2018: Support for LEADER monitoring and evaluation, LEADER co-operation workshop, LEADER lessons learned event, LEADER think tank meeting, two LEADER staff group meetings, LEADER communications working group, two events on

demonstrating value of LEADER/CLLD¹⁸ through evaluation, LEADER celebration event.

- 2019: LEADER Monitoring and Evaluation working group, two LEADER staff group meetings, LEADER evaluation training, UK and Ireland LEADER Cooperation networking event.

The participants indicated that the primary forms of support provided via these meetings was administrative, concerned with developing monitoring and evaluation, and support for co-operation.

The support for LEADER by SRN – i.e. organising national meetings, delivering a funding session, delivering social media and filming training– was generally praised by interview participants. This was perceived to have provided valuable, national support in a context where many participants were taking part on a voluntary basis. This is a useful example of the potential for an external network to take on a useful role in supporting local action.

The SRN has also contributed to the goal of co-operation, in the following ways:

- Several co-operation cafes were run earlier in the 2014-20 programme (2016 and 2017) to facilitate development of co-operation projects and to provided adequate time within the programme to bring projects to completion.
- The 2019 Co-operation event, specifically planned to push LAGs with remaining underspend to maximise their budget before the programme ended.

Data collection, however, did indicate some limitations in the network's approach. While the 2019 networking was praised for what it provided, some also viewed this as too late in the timeline to be of much assistance (co-operation projects can be time-consuming to organise). Critical respondents emphasised that this was indicative of a lack of pro-active planning and emphasised the need for strategic management in the context of a loose, flexibly defined network structure. In the case of monitoring and evaluation, perspectives were also mixed.

Another challenge that emerged during data collection was that, while the network's contributions were generally perceived as useful, there was also the potential for the network's work to overlap with existing functions within Scottish Government for managing LEADER resources. Concerns raised by participants included communications issues related to information sharing, the SRN engaging with LEADER stakeholders and, in some cases, the SRN undertaking responsibilities that were more appropriately held by the LEADER delivery unit.

Given the nature of the evaluation, which relied on qualitative data collection and analysis, it is difficult to offer a clear judgment on whose perspective is the fairest representation of the facts. However, the fact that some stakeholders had a more negative impression of this

¹⁸ 'Community Led Local Development'

indicates that, in the future, the clear management of expectations and capacity should be emphasised. As is recommended, more effective planning and integration of internal and external stakeholder goals may address these concerns.

Finally, a common finding in the participant interviews was that, while the SRN had worked extensively with LEADER, other SRDP projects had received less attention. This disparity is clear from the large number of LEADER focused meetings and the comparative number of case studies devoted to LEADER projects, compared to other schemes. Based on the accounts of the research participants, the emphasis on LEADER has, in practice, emerged from a combination of challenges in effectively working with other schemes and the amenability of LEADER projects to the structure and emphasis of the SRN.

Key Finding: The support for LEADER from the SRN has contributed to their goal of supporting the SRDP generally. However, the example also highlights some challenges of integrating the network effectively into the multiple policy and work-streams of the SRDP more generally. While there have been benefits to this, interviewees also noted challenges in overlapping work and a sense that efforts may be duplicated by multiple teams engaging with similar groups. This may be partially addressed by more effective internal communications, as noted in the recommendations.

The SRDP

In the first instance, several participants emphasised that, while efforts had been made by the SRN to offer support to other SRDP schemes¹⁹, these had tended to get only limited feedback. In the second it was emphasised that, by contrast, LEADER groups had in some cases actively sought out the SRN's support in making case studies. In addition, the administrative structure of LEADER, with a large number of national meetings requiring co-ordination and facilitation, relies on considerable social activation, as distinct from SRDP schemes that are more concerned with specific sectors. It's also worth noting that LEADER has approximately 90 staff throughout Scotland, making it more likely that this group would actively seek support, compared to far more limited numbers of staff involved with other schemes.

In the event of a future, comparable SRDP, it will be worth considering how valuable this part of the SRN's role is, given the relative success of the remainder SRDP in the context of limited SRN support. However, it should also be noted that the development of RISS (see below) may have, at least since inception, contributed to the SRDP more generally, by facilitating the support of innovative projects in obtaining funding.

European and UK Networking

¹⁹ There are a large number of additional SRDP schemes, including the Food, Manufacturing and Co-operation Grant, the Farm Advisory Service, the Forestry Grant Scheme, the New Entrants and Young Farmers Start Up Grants, the Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme, amongst others. For a full list and further detail, please see [here](#).

The SRN has played an important role in facilitating visits and events involving European and UK partners to share ideas and best practice. In some cases this has involved facilitating the visits of farmers or decision makers visiting from Europe, as well as contributing to conferences. Part of this relates to the EU-wide meetings of the National Rural Networks, which the SRN regularly participated in. In addition, they have effectively facilitated European engagement in the following contexts:

- 2016: Participation in the European Conference ‘Unlocking the potential of the SRDPs’ and European Network for Rural Development workshops
- 2018: Participation in the European Rural Network conference in Estonia, and acting as a local partner to the 11th OECD Rural Development Conference.
- 2018: Facilitated separate visits of Danish and Estonian local action groups
- 2019: Co-ordinated 10 Scottish submissions to the “Networx” Rural Inspiration Awards
- 2019: Facilitated visits from Swedish Fishery and facilitated European workshops around Smart Villages, an EU commission project concerned with rural regeneration.

The shape of the future relationship with rural policy actors in the EU is presently unclear. There is an ongoing emphasis on networking with the next phase of the CAP and several shared challenges of rural development – including depopulation in remote areas and sustainability - as well as the increasing emphasis on reducing the environmental impact of agriculture. There may continue to be substantial benefits that come from engagement here. The importance of sharing experience was noted by one evaluation participant:

“For me, talking to people that work in the national rural networks, it is so heartening to hear that rural areas across Europe face similar problems...so being able to engage with other European colleagues on what their experience has been of those issues [depopulation, climate change, rural housing] and what they’re doing to tackle it is sometimes one of the only genuine ways to get new ideas into government...”
(Anonymous Evaluation Participant)

At the same time, as policy emphasis shifts from Europe, there may be additional value in using the network to develop links with actors in non-EU contexts. For example, the Arctic Nations Initiative is a small network of Arctic nation countries, which includes Scotland. Here, there is considerable scope for the SRN to be part of a wider network of ideas, exchange and innovation. In the post-transition context, the opportunities for this sort of networking to establish links with other nations are only likely to increase, creating opportunities for networks of common interest. However, the need to maintain links with Europe – even if these are reduced and largely online – is also worth emphasising.

Rural Innovation Support Service

The Rural Innovation Support Service (RISS) was launched in February 2018, and is partially the culmination of SRN work to develop innovation in the Scottish agriculture system. RISS

allows farmers with innovative ideas to develop these with facilitation and assistance provided via the Soil Association (the contracted delivery partners).

The process is straightforward: individuals approach RISS with ideas, after which they are provided with a professional facilitator to help them develop the idea and put it into practice. If necessary, this will involve putting together a bid for funding to develop the idea. Once the idea comes to fruition, this may then be promoted by RISS and used to develop an example of good practice. Current working groups supported by RISS include those focused on Agroforestry, Recycling Plastic Farm Waste, Local Authority Vegetable Supply Chains and Mobile Abattoirs. A full list of current working groups can be found [here](#).

Evaluation participants emphasised that RISS offers a particularly valuable resource to farmers seeking to innovate, as it could engage effectively with those who were not yet at the stage of having a developed funding proposal, but were keen to develop their ideas into practice. Given that it facilitates work with other like-minded, professional facilitators and provides access to expertise, there was scope for increasing the level, quality and scope of rural innovation.

As numerous participants emphasised, there was potentially an important role for a rural network in providing a national overview of rural issues which might be lost in the day-to-day running of the schemes. From this perspective, the above development of a resource precisely designed to address gaps in the rural development programme – i.e. support for those who are developing new ideas - is a useful example of how important this role can be.

Have These Actions Contributed to the Policy Goal?

The SRN has clearly contributed to the goals of the SRDP, both through the facilitation of LEADER and the development of RISS. The contribution to the LEADER project shows that the SRN can effectively add value to community led rural development, and provide a national perspective on local projects. However, as noted, this has not been without its challenges. In the case of the remaining SRDP, however, the SRN were perceived to have offered limited additional support, albeit in a context where there was limited engagement from the schemes themselves. However, at the same time, the network's contribution to the development of RISS, although it did not exist for the first four years of the Programme, has and is likely to continue to support the SRDP, particularly from the perspective of engaging potential applicants who might have otherwise been discouraged. Going forward, participants emphasised that it might be preferable to develop a broader focus for the rural network:

“...I think, if there was any criticism, it would that it's been focused on LEADER and SRDP and while that is understandable given the fact that SRN are a requirement of SRDP and funded through its technical assistance budget I think the network could be used more broadly to promote rural policy development’

(Anonymous evaluation participant)

It is also clear that the SRN has a potentially valuable role in the facilitation of European and UK networks for innovation. However, there are also examples where these activities were somewhat time consuming. This was made clear in relation to, for example, the SRN's activities with hosting European partners visiting to learn more about Scottish Agriculture. Here, it was observed that this led to the SRN planning learning visits for various groups, ranging from Estonian livestock farmers to Swedish fishermen. The context was one in which, upon receiving a request for a visit from a partner – which could potentially come at any time without warning – SRN members would be required to plan a range of activities, site visits and events to facilitate the visit in question. While this is undoubtedly a valuable activity from the perspective of building European links, it also puts a strain on the relatively small network support unit with responsibilities that are already substantive. In this sense, a clearer policy focus could ensure not only that visits and shared learning are on specific subjects – which would improve the capacity of the unit overall – but would also allow any future network to take a proactive approach to organising a useful programme of events and visits that served this purpose.

It was noted above that the SRN has effectively demonstrated their capacity to cultivate narratives about rural Scotland and the impacts of policy therein, as well as acting as a platform for collaboration between rural actors. In this part of the evaluation, this has further been demonstrated in relation to RISS and the work of the SRN with LEADER. While concerns have been raised, clarification of the intervention logic of a future network and more effective collaboration with internal stakeholders going forward may address some of these concerns.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

This section reviews the key findings from the evaluation. This is followed by a section outlining some of the perceived benefits of networking and the role it could play in any future development. The third section provides details on how these conclusions can be adopted in the possible development of a future rural network.

As noted previously, the SRN has pursued four primary goals in the 2014-2020 SRDP:

- (a) increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- (b) improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes;
- (c) inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities;
- (d) foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.”

These are reviewed, in turn, followed by a discussion of the network’s main challenges.

Stakeholder Engagement

The SRN has contributed to stakeholder engagement through the development of events, communications and social media. While this responsibility has been discharged effectively, the broader context is one in which the impacts of such events are hard, in and of themselves, to evaluate as they are likely to have highly diffuse and non-systematic effects.

Support for the SRDP

The SRN were largely perceived to have contributed to the delivery of LEADER, although were seen as contributing less to other elements of the SRDP. At the same time, it was emphasised by interview participants that, concerning agriculture specifically, other parts of the Scottish Government have also had responsibility for this. Overall, the SRN’s work with LEADER evidences both the productive role for a networking organisation, while also being indicative of the potential challenges of a network organisation in performing these roles. The challenges indicate that a network structure, to be effective, requires both good strategic governance and management, and close co-operation with internal stakeholders to minimise the risks around duplication and role confusion.

The SRN’s limited effectiveness in engaging with other SRDP schemes may reflect both structural and organisational factors. However, the role of any future network in promoting these forms of rural support – particularly when concerned with agricultural development - needs to be carefully considered in the future to ensure effective use of limited resources. The design of any future iteration of the network which is concerned with supporting a rural development programme should identify areas where the network’s resources are most valuable and prioritise network resource allocation to these areas.

Communication of Funding Opportunities

The SRN has also effectively grown their communications network. This has allowed them to disseminate information about funding opportunities, as well as rural development in general. Maintaining a weekly newsletter is also a notable achievement.

Innovation

The SRN has contributed to maintaining European networks and connections valuable to rural policy development. If this role is perceived as valuable going forward, this may be an important function for a future network. In addition, RISS is a good example of an area where work involving the SRN has sought to strategically improve SRDP implementation, facilitated by having a national overview of scheme delivery.

Summary

The network has broadly carried out the functions with which it was tasked, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness. However, the nature of the impacts are distributed and hard to characterise in terms of quantifiable differences that can be easily demonstrated. This is challenging largely because the nature of the network's goals are by their nature about encouraging endogenous development. Therefore, the impacts are not likely to be uniform and are partially contingent on the activities of others. However, this means that, going forward, any future network should ensure that consideration for monitoring and evaluation is central to how such a network is designed.

Perspectives on the Network Benefits

This section considers some broader benefits of the network identified by interview participants. While it does not necessarily provide evidence for the impacts of the network, it emphasises what people perceived to be valuable about it. One perspective noted was the importance of emphasising the broader rural economy and communities, as distinct from the more familiar approach to land-based industries. As one participant put it:

“There is a real tendency to take a short hand approach to the rural economy and think about it in the sense of farming, fishing, land...and what they've [the SRN] been able to do is highlight the broader perspective of the rural economy and communities.”

(Anonymous evaluation participant)

As this contribution suggests, having a network to support these activities while ensuring that they have a resonance inside government can be a valuable contribution to ensuring policy is effective, contextually sensitive and inclusive. This is particularly the case given the role of the SRA in developing a rural movement, where a participant perceived that a future rural network could play a crucial role in supporting this function:

“We’ve got commitments to have a rural movement in Scotland. If that rural movement is about getting people engaged in rural policy, they [the SRN] should be right at the heart of that.”

(Anonymous evaluation participant)

Another participant emphasised that:

“Now, more than ever, with the structural and organisational changes taking place nationally, with the impact of Brexit....what’s clear is that rural communities need something to go to. They need a resource that’s there at a national level, that they can buy into, that can help them.”

(Rural Activist)

It is also worth emphasising that the forthcoming period, in the context of both Covid-19 and Brexit, is likely to be challenging for rural communities. Therefore, there are several tasks where any future network could provide a valuable contribution:

- In the context of a changing SRDP, it will be essential to ensure that stakeholders and rural communities continue to be informed about new developments and included in the development of objectives in their communities.
- Continuing to facilitate the development of rural policy through stakeholder engagement in the specific context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on sharing good practice, examples and facilitating links with rural communities. This will help to spread innovative approaches to community development and support recovery in this context.
- Maintaining links with European networks for developing ideas and policy, as well as connecting with non-EU partners in the post-Brexit context.
- Continuing to work with other UK networks, in a context where the Welsh Government is planning to maintain a rural network.

In this context, it can also be emphasised that networking evolved naturally from EU experience in rural policy development, in response to rural development strategies largely focused on exogenous development. While this, alone, does not necessitate that networking is a necessary part of the policy approach, it does suggest that the needs to which networking responds may be a recurring feature of rural development policy.

Recommendations

This evaluation does not make a recommendation on whether networking should be pursued going forward. However, it does make recommendations with regard to how a future network might operate more effectively. As has been discussed, the challenge of evaluating and monitoring the network necessitates that, in a future network, mechanisms are put in place to improve Scottish Government’s capacity to keep the network’s activities in review, while also making its contributions visible to internal and external stakeholders. These recommendations are now listed, with additional discussion provided.

Clarifying the SRN's Intervention Logic

As discussed above, a key challenge related to demonstrating the impacts of the SRN relates to the lack of clear strategic goals focused on measurable outcomes. If some form of network is to be developed in a future phase of rural development, it is important that clear goals and targets for the network are generated, which take into account the network's primary strengths and capacities to influence rural communities. In the most recent phase, the production of case studies, cultivation of events and sharing of information have emerged as key elements of the network's approach. Developing mechanisms that tether this capacity for engagement with the aim of achieving clear policy outcomes is likely to improve the operation of any future network.

Improved Co-ordination Internally

This recommendation responds to the concerns expressed by some stakeholders about examples of overlap between the tasks of the SRN and other teams within Scottish Government, as well as the concern expressed that there have been some internal stakeholders who were not aware of what the SRN was able to provide in terms of support. Therefore, any future iteration of a rural network should be more effective and pro-active at engaging with internal SG stakeholders, to maximise opportunities for internal policy/analytical colleagues to utilise the reach and capacity of the network. This goal would be supported by the recommendation for more regular reporting on SRN activities, which would feed into this process, as well as a refreshed intervention logic.

More Inclusive Agenda Setting

This recommendation can be read alongside the first, as the process of establishing goals at the start of the year could be considerably enhanced by a more proactive method of soliciting the requirements of policy and research colleagues, as well as the requirements of those outside of government. Without wanting to be overly prescriptive on the precise form this would take, it could entail a wide ranging workshop with key internal and external stakeholders, which identifies and agrees key priorities at the beginning of the year, to ensure they have an appropriate focus. This participation could both shape the priorities of the network in the delivery of their goals, but also influence the delivery of the network by taking greater account of the needs of rural communities and their goals.

More regular reporting on activities

Recently, the SRN has started producing quarterly reports of their activities, which act as easily accessible accounts of the main network priorities and outputs. This has several benefits. It communicates the capacities of the network to others, allows monitoring from the perspective of easily identified areas where network time and energy is being expended, and can underpin more detailed analysis and evaluation at less regular intervals. A future network should continue this practice.

Making the rural network more visible

The next two recommendations relate to making Scotland's rural network more visible and accessible to those inside and outside of government. Any future network should develop a publicly available, interactive online map that documents the wide range of community activism and work occurring throughout rural Scotland. This would take the form of an interactive, digital map that displays the locations and nature of rural community projects that the network supports.

This would provide, at a glance, an overview of the key areas with which the network was interacting and offer an overview of the broader 'rural movement'. By being publicly accessible and providing information about ongoing community work, it would also provide a clear mechanism for rural stakeholders and individuals to engage with the network and other like-minded individuals. As noted by a stakeholder above, many active individuals are looking for 'something to join'. This could help to develop this goal.

Adopt a Membership Structure

Another, linked approach would be for a future network to adopt a formal membership structure for affiliated groups and individuals. This is currently the case in the Northern Irish rural network. By providing a short questionnaire to potential members, any future network could create a durable structure for identifying members' concerns and priorities and for delivering outcomes like consultations and events. This would also assist Scottish Government in assessing the extent to which there is a demand in rural Scotland for the network and the support needs of those using it.

Expanded delivery methods

Particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is scope for innovation in the delivery of the network to enhance the network's reach, make better use of resources by making events accessible to a wider range of participants, and ensure events can be delivered in a way that is compliant with government guidelines. In particular, digital communications – webinars, digital skill sharing, podcasts, etc. – would be particularly valuable, and built upon the network's success with case studies. Moreover, if events and workshops could be recorded, this would provide a valuable source of information for future evaluators about the value delivered by the network.

Follow up Evaluation

Finally, it is important that any future network is in a position to continually enhance their capacity through feedback and evaluation. However, as stated, there are distinct challenges in quantifying the network's impacts, given the nature of their approach. To address this absence, the SRN should, on an annual basis, commission a detailed case study which seeks to identify the impact of one of their high profile activities. This would not be an onerous requirement, but would likely involve several interviews or survey questionnaires to draw out the key benefits and scope for improving the network's activities. Ideally, this would engage with the communities that the SRN has been working with. For example, in 2019 the SRN helped to support a rural entrepreneurship event. As a hypothetical example, it would

be extremely useful for any future network to, around a year after an event like this, follow up with event participants to gain a better understanding of what has changed as a result and how the approach of the network may be improved going forward.



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