Rural Networks in the UK

Case Study

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Executive Summary

The UK has developed a two tier system for RDP networking which consists of four regional rural networks and an umbrella UK National Rural Network. The differing structures and functions of the regional NRNs are explored including their location, how their activities are selected and planned, their function and how it has evolved to meet the needs of their differing user groups. The role of the UK network as a conduit for the flow of information between the four regional networks and the European Commission is also explored with the potential barriers to its success discussed.

There are a vast number of rural networks present in the UK with widely differing roles and activities. Amidst this plethora of networks it can be problematic for the regional NRNs to demonstrate their added value. It appears however that networks and networking are perceived positively at Government level yet when new networking activities are implemented little coordination with existing networks has taken place, expanding the overabundance of networks further. This situation is made more challenging when new initiatives are labelled as networks even when this is not part of their activity.

The regional networks believe their success is based on differing elements of their structure or the activities they deliver; further demonstrating the diversity of networks and how they have adapted to the requirements of their user groups and national or regional context. A recurrent theme of their success was their ability to support partnerships to work across a range of sectors integrating several aspects of the RDP.

Many NRNs felt the value of their activity was not well recognised or understood at a strategic level within their Managing Authorities. There were however many positive statements made about their future role. The regional networks identified a need to be able to come together formally at critical points in the Programme period, most notably during its development. Apart from this the informal networking that has been taking place without the involvement of the UK Network has provided the majority of the networking needs of the four regional networks. As they evolve the networks remain committed to exploring new ways of working together and continuing to share best practice across the UK.

Introduction

The UK has a taken a unique approach to structuring Rural Development Programme (RDP) networking across the country. A two tier system has been implemented which consists of four regional rural networks which operate in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with each of these also coming together under the umbrella of the UK National Rural Network.

This use of four regional networks mirrors the nature of regional Government across the UK which in turn has led to regional differences in implementation of the RDP. The establishment of the UK Network is a reflection of the European Commission requirement to work directly with a Member State level network as well as providing added value to the four regional networks in terms of sharing experience across the UK.

The differing structures and functions of the regional rural networks

Initially three of the four regional networks were established within independent organisations commissioned by their managing authorities to deliver networking in their region. The exception to this has been Wales where the network unit has been located within the managing authority since its inception. Due to the recent 'austerity' measures and the resulting funding cuts the organisation which housed the English Rural Network has been abolished and this network has now also been relocated into its Managing Authority.

The English Rural Network believes that this move has left them better placed to influence Government policy makers and promote the added value of networking, whilst also enabling them to become more aware of the policy agendas developing at Government level. It is difficult however to gauge whether this move has resulted in a perceived lack of independence of the network amongst the network users.

In contrast to this the Scottish Network is managed and delivered by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) which the Scottish Government believes has worked far more effectively than developing an in house team. They feel that SCVO's long term relationship with existing rural networks and its historical bottom up approach to delivering activities means it is better placed to add value to networking activities and gives the network more credibility. As the SCVO is a community focused organisation there has however been the potential for this dimension of the RDP to have greater emphasis within networking activities.

The Northern Irish network is also delivered independently through the Rural Development Council (RDC). The RDC acts as the lead organisation within an Agri Rural Forum that includes organisations representing all aspects of the RDP such as the Ulster Famers Union, Rural Community Network and the Northern Ireland Environment Link. The agricultural, economic and community sectors are all quite distinct in Northern Ireland and it was hoped that this forum would provide a more robust cross sectoral approach to networking. The activities of the network are resourced wholly through the regional budget without the use of Commission match funding.

At their inception the functions of the four regional networks were all very similar with a focus on establishing their core networking tools such as a website and projects database, coordinating the exchange of information, gathering and disseminating best practice, supporting the development of cooperative projects and, with the exception of the English Network, delivering training. Unsurprisingly these functions are very similar to network users most commonly reported reasons for accessing networks identified by the Carnegie Trust UK (2012)[1].

As the Networks have evolved to meet the needs of their different user groups so has the activity which they deliver. The methods for identifying and agreeing appropriate activity and setting the priorities of the annual Delivery Plans differs between each network. The activities of the Scottish Rural Network are decided in conjunction with the Managing Authority – the Scottish Government. Priority target groups such as young people and thematic areas such as short supply chains are identified using organisational knowledge and through on-going dialogue with the Leader community. They also endeavour to take an innovative approach to networking activities to ensure their work is as effective as possible however recognise that the available resources also require a certain level of pragmatism.

The English Network has suffered from a recent range of budgetary cuts and so has now modified its approach to delivering activity. This scarcity of resources has resulted in the Network having to carefully target its activity, filling the gaps left by other networks and organisations. As well as Managing Authority direction and feedback from users the Network also attempts to respond to requests from stakeholders. To take a proposed activity forward the Network has to ensure that it is relevant, is a good use of the limited resources, is feasible to deliver and is not being delivered through any other vehicle. This can be challenging when the large number of existing rural networks is taken into consideration.

The Northern Irish network is a membership organisation with 180 members. This is primarily made up of those involved in delivery of the RDP and is supplemented with memberships from a number of academic institutions. Feedback on required activities is received from these members with additional activities emerging from the use of a range of thematic working groups. Through this phase of the Programme the Network has evolved its activities to focus on supporting delivery by sharing best practice, sourcing and disseminating case studies, promoting the Programme to the wider public and supporting the slower spending measures including issues around sourcing match funding.

In Wales the Managing Authority allows a great deal of flexibility in the approach the Network takes with their activities being decided by a Steering Group of 15 key rural development practitioners. The Group manages the annual Action Plan and is kept up to date with news and activities from the Network. It is a mix of public and private sector organisations which originated from the RDP Programme Monitoring Committee and has evolved to include an increasing amount of involvement

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[1] Miller, M. and Wallace, J. *Rural Development Networks A Mapping Exercise*. 2012. Carnegie UK Trust.

from Welsh LAGs. Many of the members of the Steering Group are involved in delivering Axis 3 and 4 of the RDP as these are the areas which the Network has most interaction with. The Welsh Network sees this Steering Group as one of their key strengths and feels it ensures the activities they are delivering are those most needed.

UK network

The UK Network was established as the countrywide network for the UK as a whole to function as a conduit for the flow of information between the four regional networks and the European Commission and to support networking between the regional networks. Initially the four regional networks contributed a small amount from their budgets to fund a one day a week post to deliver the UK Network activity and this was initially undertaken by the Manager of the English Network.

The UK Network organised regular meetings between the four Networks to exchange ideas, best practice and discuss country level and European events and established a shared UK Network website that was regularly updated. Different members from the four networks were selected to represent the UK Network at events and feedback the results at forthcoming meetings. The proactive nature of the UK Network Manager supported the four networks to interact with the UK Network however, particularly during the start-up phase, the individual networks tended to be more focused on activity in their own region and ensuring this developed in a robust and sustainable fashion.

A mixture of budgetary cuts and changes in staffing have since seen the operational function of the UK Network be absorbed into the remit of the UK Managing Authority. In light of this change key tasks related to the UK Network were identified jointly by the four regional Networks and were shared out between them for future delivery. Staff turnover has however meant that this process has been difficult to follow through as information no longer resides in one central location. As this role is now no longer provided by one individual little coordination activity appears to have continued. In fact several members of staff of the four regional networks did not know and had not been made aware of the contact within the Managing Authority that was delivering the UK Network function.

Several of the regional networks felt that this had resulted in the dissemination of information becoming sporadic with no single known portal of contact in the UK for receiving information from or delivering information to the European Commission. This had been mostly overcome through the dissemination of networking and cooperation information from the European Network for Rural Development directly to all four regions and through the other networks the four regions are associated with. Overall it was felt that currently there is little or no capacity within the UK Network to deliver activity at a UK level although the regional networks were exploring whether their events could take on a UK focus by extending the invitation list.

The existence of a less active UK Network was seen as an obstacle to the four regional networks being able to engage successfully at an EU level. Several networks pointed to the fact that the UK Network generally receives only one or two invitations for meetings that all four networks would wish to attend and due to the structures and delivery objectives of the RDP being different in each area the importance of having representation from all four was noted.

All the networks interviewed identified lack of resourcing and changes in staff and therefore the level of expertise and personal relationships as the key obstacles to the success of the UK Network. The importance of coming together regularly to share best practice and experience as four regional networks was recognised and has continued, although on a more informal basis.

A divergence of views does exist over the need for a UK Network with several of the regional networks believing that in relation to supporting their activity it was nice to have but not a necessity. The type of more bottom up informal networking that has occurred between the four networks since the structural changes in the UK Network took place are seen as continuing the most valuable function which the UK Network used to deliver. The more recent top down role of the UK Network, most importantly the dissemination of information between the regional networks and the Commission, is perceived as not working effectively and in some cases even hindering the work of the regional networks.

Other networks

The work of the Carnegie Trust UK identified a plethora of existing rural networks across the UK working at a local, national and international level. Despite geographical and thematic differences these networks were used by participants to obtain advice and information, identify sources of funding and share local learning and experiences. All these are functions delivered by the regional networks for their RDP and rural stakeholders.

The use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter were becoming ever more frequently used by networks to disseminate information and encourage user group discussion. These media are as yet not being widely utilised by the regional networks and their uptake in this Programme period will be severely limited by resource constraints.

The key finding of the report was the recognition of the importance of partnership working among networks. It was felt that this would increase the lobbying potential of networks, prevent duplication of effort, increase efficiency and improve users access to information.

Against this background of a large number of existing networks the regional networks can struggle to demonstrate their added value and successes. In Scotland many umbrella organisations exist at a regional level acting on behalf of a number of localised or thematically similar networks minimising some of the confusion in the minds of user groups.

Wales has a relative small pool of rural development practitioners to draw upon consequently personal relationships have been built up over time between colleagues and peers. This has helped to raise awareness of individual networks and their function and so has limited the number of new networks developing in the region.

The Northern Irish network has worked hard to build partnerships with existing rural networks and feels there is good understanding of their role and functions across the region.

England is currently witnessing further increases in rural networks being established and resourced at a national level. At the beginning of the year the UK Government announced the launch of 14 new Rural and Farming Networks established across England to provide a direct line of communication between Ministers and rural and farming practitioners. These have been set up as cross sectoral rural networks to include broader community, environmental and rural business issues. It could be suggested that although working at a sub regional level much of the activity and many of the users of these networks will be similar to that of the English Network. The coordinator of these new Rural and Farming Networks is located in the same office as the English Network so it is hoped good partnership working will develop.

At the same time Rural Growth Networks have also been launched in England. Local Economic Partnerships have recently been established across England to deliver economic growth, replacing the Regional Development Agencies which were disbanded with the change in Government. Five of these areas have been selected as network areas and resourced with a budget of £15 million charged with creating jobs and supporting rural businesses. These five areas will take a strategic approach to economic growth and act as pilots to enable the assessment of their achievements. Despite being referred to as networks there appears to be little or no requirement to deliver a networking function, more acting as a distributor of the funds at their disposal.

These examples would suggest that networks are perceived positively at a Ministerial level yet when implemented through the development of new policies little coordination with existing networks has taken place. It also appears that the positive perception of networks and networking has led to new initiatives being labelled as such even when this function is not part of their activity. It is likely that the continued introduction of new networks and mechanisms referred to as networks will create continued confusion amongst user groups and further minimise the financial resources available to established networks. The English Network felt however that the on-going organisational and structural changes taking place in the UK Government would improve this situation with more policy direction leading to better coordination within networks.

Keys to success

Due to the different form and functions of the regional networks all felt their success was based on different elements of their structure or the activities they deliver. Both the Scottish and Northern Irish networks felt that their independence from the Managing Authority meant they were better connected to existing rural stakeholders and were able to develop open relationships built on trust

more effectively. The English Network felt that their success was linked to their high level of collaboration and their commitment to only deliver activity that is driven by stakeholders and is not being replicated elsewhere. The Welsh Network felt the nature of their Steering Group including cross sectoral public and private sector members ensured that their activities were all needed and relevant. Both the Welsh and Northern Irish Networks also identified the use of thematic working groups or clusters as essential to their success, bringing together different sectoral members and encouraging more integrated working.

These elements are all broadly based upon the Networks ability to bring together partnerships of individuals and organisations in order to direct network activity or to support the delivery of various aspects of the RDP. A recurrent theme mentioned was the ability of the Networks to support these partnerships to work across a range of sectors integrating several aspects of the Programme.

Future

Differing opinions emerged on the level of understanding of the value of networking within Managing Authorities. Many felt that the activity of the networks was not well recognised and in many cases the networks were not understood at a strategic level within their Managing Authorities. There were however many positive statements made about the future role of the networks.

In Scotland the future is seen positively with a desire to evolve the network into a full Scottish Rural Network that provides support for all rural activity including the RDP. For this to occur there is however a strong desire for the outcomes of networking to become the assessment focus rather than the level of budgetary spend.

The Welsh Network has recently commissioned an evaluation of the efficacy of their activities and how they add value to the delivery of the RDP. The results of this will help guide the future development of the Network ensuring it evolves to further effectively support its user groups.

The Managing Authority in Northern Ireland has a good understanding of the value of networking and recognises it proactively supports them in delivering the RDP Programme. The Northern Irish network works to ensure that all their activity delivers an output or outcome that can be recognised and understood. Through the next Programme period the network recognises the need to further support innovation and hopes to play a larger role in supporting the development of cooperation projects and for promoting cross sectoral projects working across the region.

The ability to network at a European level with other NRNs was also seen as a priority for future development of the networks. Several of the regional networks suggested that it could however be difficult to highlight the importance of this activity in a time of limited resource availability when it could be perceived as a perk of the job rather than a key aspect of RDP networking.

Conclusions

The four regional networks in the UK all have differing structures, influences and functions. These have evolved as resources have changed and the needs of the RDP delivery agents have matured with the Programme.

The need for partnership working between networks was identified in the Carnegie UK report as the most important element of successful networking. In this context the partnership networking between the four regional networks and their use of the UK Network to achieve this is of interest. Taking into account the views of all four networks there is a perceived need for the regional networks to be able to come together formally at critical points in the Programme period, most notably during the development and inception of the Programme when they felt a united voice would carry more weight at a European level. Apart from this the informal networking that has been taking place without the involvement of the UK Network itself has provided the majority of the networking needs of the four regional networks.

Other networking areas which were highlighted as essential and had not taken place since the positioning of the UK Network changed included regular face to face meetings between the four networks. This was felt to be particularly important during the start up phase of the Programme and when new staff members joined. The importance of these meetings and the opportunities to develop personal relationships were highlighted by all regional networks.

Creating and maintaining a clear identity in a context of many other existing rural networks has been a challenge. The Northern Irish network has achieved a good level of recognition working through its forum organisations and creating partnerships with other networks.

Success has been focused on activities which enable the networks to develop joint working to support their activity or to develop activity amongst user groups. This development of partnership working is also a key skill of all the networks involved.

The future of the networks appears positive despite the perceived lack of understanding of their added value amongst several of the Managing Authorities. As they evolve the networks remain committed to exploring new ways of working together and continuing to share best practice across the UK.