

Scottish National Rural Network

1. Summary

1.1 Aims, Objectives

The EU Rural Development Regulation¹ (RDR) requires that each Member State set up a national rural network grouping the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. This reflects the perceived success of pan-European networking activity under the 2000 – 2006 LEADER+ Programme. The UK has 4 different rural development programmes reflecting each country's specificities each with its own rural network; these are linked together at the UK level.

The overall aim of such networking is that through an enhanced understanding of national and regional rural development issues, rural development stakeholders will be better placed to learn from one another and to take advantage of development opportunities.

The vision of the Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) is therefore to contribute to enabling rural development; the principal aim is that this be achieved through establishing connections between rural stakeholders and by providing a means of communicating. This is summed up in the strap line from the Scottish National Rural Network website which is 'connecting rural Scotland, promoting rural growth'.

1.2 Relevant Measures and Activities

National Rural Networks are supported under the Technical Assistance provisions, Measure 511. The SNRN has pursued two main types of activity directly in line with those provided for and specified under the RDR; these are

1. Establishing the structures needed to run the network; and
2. Delivering an action plan containing at least;
 - o the identification and analysis of good transferable practices and the provision of information about them;
 - o network management;
 - o the organisation of exchanges of experience and know-how;
 - o the preparation of training programmes for local action groups in the process of formation; and
 - o technical assistance for inter-territorial and transnational cooperation.

¹ 1698/2005 Article 68

Activity under the first heading is largely undertaken in house by the network managers within the Scottish Government. Much of the activity under the second heading is delivered through contracted service providers.

1.3 Strategic Rationale

The strategic rationale for rural networking is enshrined in the RDR as explained at 1.1 above. The intention in Scotland is that the SNRN should enhance the delivery of the SRDP and the attainment of the objectives for rural development. Specifically it is intended that the sharing of stakeholder knowledge and experience amongst various interest groups at country, national and transnational level should help strengthen the rural voice in policy design, maximise the use of the rural development resources and contribute to community empowerment.

2. Management and Delivery

2.1 Management and Governance

The SNRN is managed directly by the Scottish Government Rural Community Empowerment Branch; the Head of Branch has direct responsibility for the management of the SNRN. There is no network management group or steering group in place neither is there any formal membership structure, individuals or organisations may however register on the website as network members. Delivery of the two main client facing services, the programme of regional events and the SNRN website is undertaken by subcontractors who were appointed through a competitive tendering process, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO).

2.2 Activities

There are three main fields of activity or services which the SNRN undertakes, these are;

- An annual programme of regional networking events throughout rural Scotland;
- An annual national rural networking event; and
- A rural networking website.

The 2009-2010 regional networking events were organised in the 20 LEADER LAG areas in conjunction with the LAGs. The SNRN website was launched in late April 2009 and the national event took place in September 2009. The SNRN has also been involved in hosting a European Cooperation Fair in 2010 and supports groups and individuals in ambassadorial visits to overseas rural communities and events.

2.3 Monitoring and Reporting Procedures

The main regular forms of monitoring and reporting which are employed are the compilation of the website usage statistics and the completion and analysis of participants' event registration, attendance and their evaluation forms. A number of surveys have also been conducted through the SNRN website. SCVO prepares written reports on the regional coordination service on an annual basis.

Website usage statistics are generated by the IT system and are collated by the SNRN managers on a rolling basis and a reporting spread sheet drawing these details together is prepared on a monthly basis. The data sets which are reported comprise;

- The total number of visits;
- The number of different countries or territories involved;
- The number of unique visitors to the site;
- The total number of page views;
- The average number of pages viewed per visit;
- The average time spent on the site by each visitor;
- The % of new visits as a proportion of the total;
- The % bounce rate, i.e. the % of visitors who only open a single page; and
- A listing of the top 10 countries by number of visits.

Reports on the rural coordination service comprise both a narrative overview and statistical data regarding key performance indicators (KPI). The KPI employed are;

- Number of regional events conducted;
- Number of people attending events in total, split by sector and by age group;
- Number of people attending events by event, split by no registered, no attending and the no of presenters and exhibitors;
- Numbers using or registered on the website or not and registration intention;
- Summary event evaluation feedback from delegates covering the organisation, venue and catering, the various presentations and the discussion session;
- The number of new connections established by delegates and the number of these with whom further contact is sought; and
- A breakdown of the places where event delegates would be likely to meet.

The final two indicators are stressed as those which indicate the connections established.

The contract for provision of the regional coordination service is subject to review on the basis of monitored performance in 2011.

2.4 Administration costs

There are three distinct elements to the SNRN administration costs, the core SG costs, the regional coordination service and the costs of the website.

The SG team running the SNRN split their time between LEADER and the SNRN, the SNRN element involves a proportion of the Branch Heads time and various proportions of each of four other team members. A policy officer spends 50% of

their time on SNRN management, another contributes to implementation, two senior team members contribute a proportion of their time to relevant policy elements.

The whole staff resource applied involves 50% of one senior policy officer and 20% of one policy officer on contract management and supervision. Amongst other rural community empowerment responsibilities, the Branch Head is a member of the UK NRN steering group and oversees and contributes to policy development of the SNRN. In turn SNRN policy contributes to 2 Scottish Government strategic areas - SRDP development and Rural Community Empowerment.

The costs of the regional coordination service and website are fixed at the contracted rate; the national rural event is a one off cost contracted separately, the total annual cost for the first year of operation is £230,000. In the evaluators judgement these management and administration costs appear to be low in relation to the complexity of the tasks involved, the number and scale of the events concerned and the level of networking activity and engagement which has been achieved.

3. Review of Performance

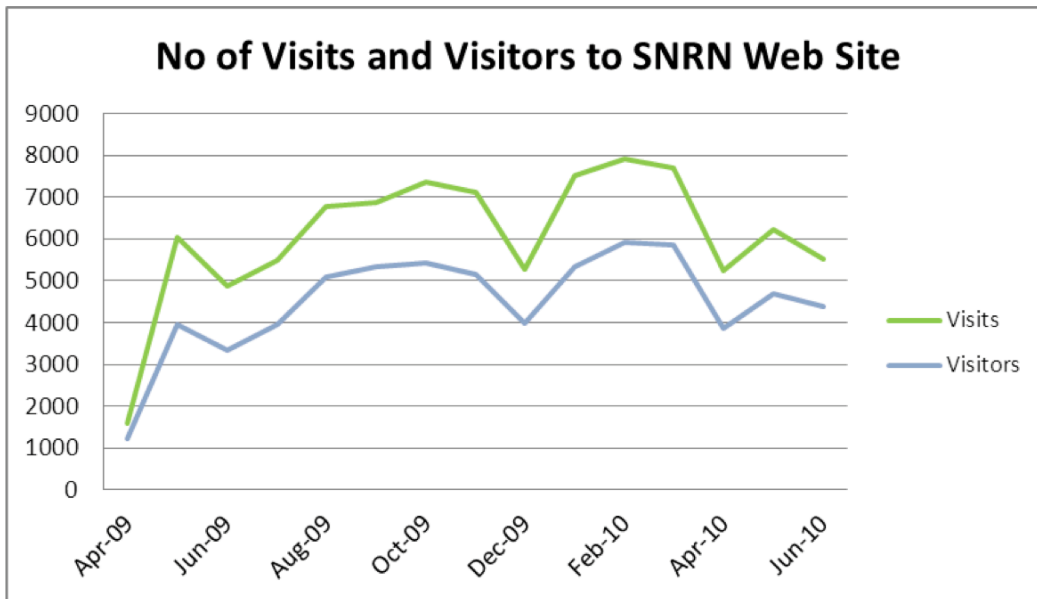
3.1 Monitoring Data

3.1.1 The SNRN Website

The SNRN website monitoring data show a clear start up effect in most areas reported with initial levels of activity which then dropped off and levelled out after the first quarter. In the course of the first year's operation of the website it was decided to enable visitors to sign up on line as members, a total of 1,709 registrations have been made at Dec 2010.

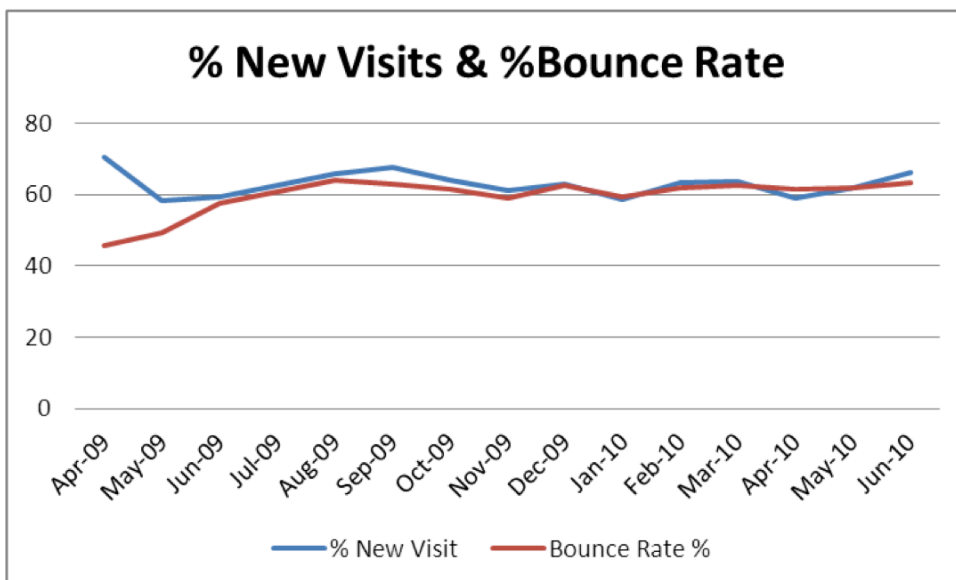
Analysis of the web visit statistics shows a very strong correlation between the number of visits and the number of visitors, **Figure 3.1**. From the point of the website launch the number of visits climbed to a peak of almost 8,000 by February 2010 but then slipped back to around 5,500 by June 2010. The number of visitors peaked at almost 6,000 in February 2010 before also slipping back to around 4,400 by June.

Figure 3.1



The percentage of new visitors per month consistently varies between 60% and 65% of the total implying that the proportion of repeat visits ranges between 35% and 40%, ref **Figure 3.2**. When the bounce rate is viewed against the new visitor rate a high degree of correlation is evident. The number of pages viewed per visit has remained relatively consistent after the start-up phase averaging 3.1 between July 2009 and June 2010.

Figure 3.2



Analysis by origin of visitor shows that vast majority of visits are from UK with a relatively small number of visits from other EU member states, in fact the USA, Canada, India and Australia all feature regularly in the top ten countries.

Strengthening links with other EU member states rural networks appears to offer scope for building wider connections.

Taken together these data may suggest that a strong core user group has developed but that this may have stabilised and not be expanding significantly at the moment.

3.1.2 Regional and National Networking Events

In the first year of operation commencing October 2009 the regional coordination service organised and delivered 20 regional networking events which were attended by just over 1000 individuals. The attendance at regional events varied considerably between areas ranging from 13 to 125 however these numbers represent the extremes, e.g. the second largest event had two thirds of the numbers attending.

The demographic profile of delegates tended towards the older age groupings, some 78% of those attending were aged over 40.

The monitoring data indicate that the largest proportion of delegates (48.5%) came from the community development sector; the smallest involvement was from the primary industrial sectors, the fisheries sector (2%), food (7%) and farming (9.6%) the forestry sector also showed a low level of involvement.

Around 25% of those attending completed event evaluation forms, from these satisfaction levels with all elements appear consistently high with ratings exceeding 70%. The highest satisfaction rating was for project presentations, the lowest for the discussion session.

Reflecting the SNRN focus on establishing connections data were captured on the average number of new people met by delegates at each event. There is no clear pattern to the average number of new people met other than a link with the total attendance at the events. Overall delegates met an average of 12 new contacts of whom they wished on average to meet 5 again.

The SNRN national rural networking event, the Rural Gathering, was held at Perth Racecourse in September 2010 and was attended by 270 people.

The EU rural cooperation event involved representatives from 23 member states and was attended by 270 people.

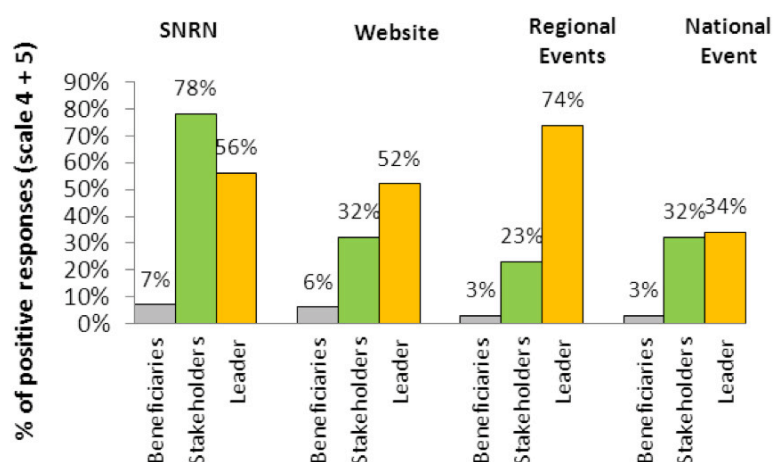
3.2 Survey Responses

A standard questionnaire was used for the survey of SRDP beneficiaries, LEADER LAG case studies and the stakeholder interviews to probe their awareness, use of and experience of the SNRN and its services. The LEADER and stakeholder consultees were asked further questions to deepen the understanding of the responses. Those stakeholders with a direct involvement or responsibility for the SNRN were excluded from these questions. LEADER consultations involved LAG staff, LAG members and project holders.

3.2.1 Awareness

Figure 3.3 provides a breakdown by consultee group of those with significant levels of awareness of the various aspects of the SNRN. The levels of awareness of all aspects of the SNRN were lowest amongst the beneficiaries surveyed as might be expected. The extreme low level of awareness across the board is surprising as this is not a random sample of the rural population; rather it is a sample of those who are already engaged with the SRDP of which the SNRN is part.

Figure 3.3: Awareness of Scottish National Rural Network



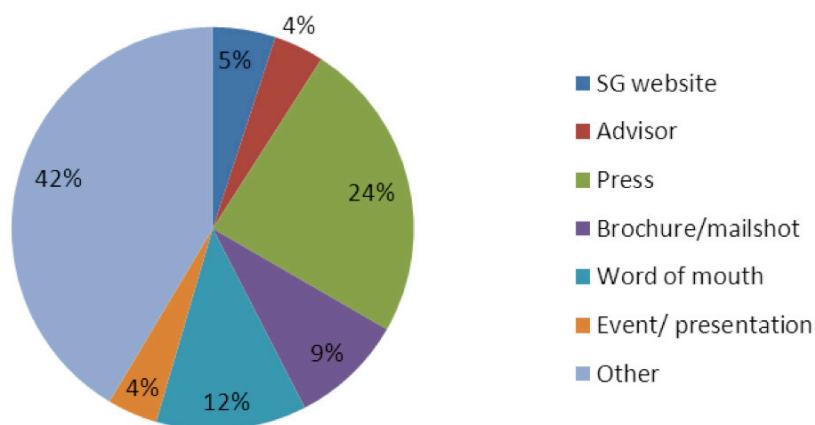
Stakeholder SNRN awareness is reasonable although it would be expected to be high within this group. What is surprising here is the relatively small proportion with high levels of awareness of the website and, to a lesser extent events; many did however have a moderate level of awareness.

Awareness levels of SNRN activities were highest amongst LEADER consultees, this is to be expected given the nature of the initiative and the history of rural networking in previous generations of the programme. Interestingly awareness of the SNRN lags awareness of the regional events, as these were organised on a LAG by LAG basis these may have been regarded as LEADER activity by some. A rather large proportion of the LEADER group, some 35% had low or no awareness of the website.

3.2.2 Communicating

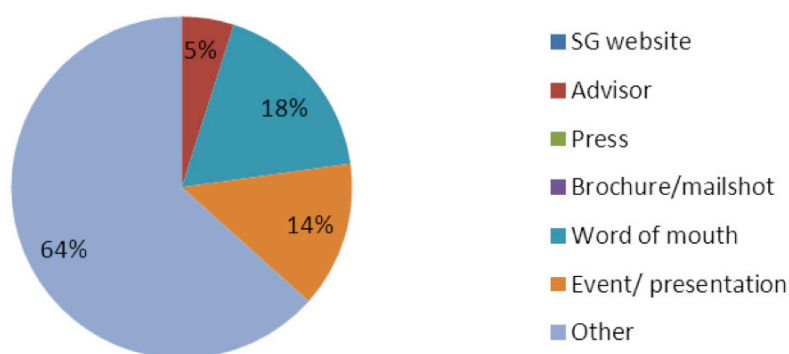
As establishing connections and communicating are key objectives for the SNRN how people become aware of it is a question of some importance. **Figures 3.4 to 3.7** below provide an analysis of how the three different groups consulted first became aware of the SNRN. These figures exclude those with no awareness.

Figure 3.4: How beneficiaries became aware of SNRN



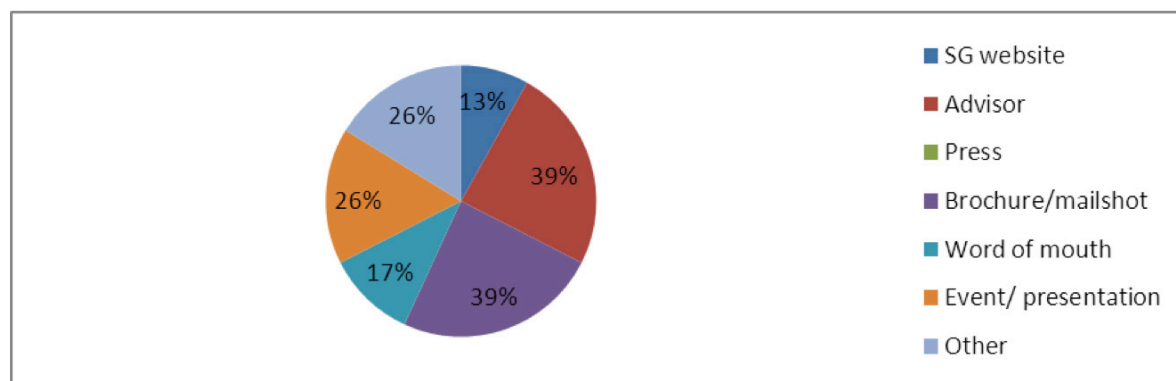
The striking figure here is that only 5% of SRDP beneficiaries who are aware of the website made that connection through the SRDP website. Some 66% of those responding became aware through the informal routes of word of mouth and 'other', this begs questions about the formal communication strategy.

Figure 3.5: How stakeholders became aware of SNRN



Stakeholders became aware of the SNRN predominantly through 'other' means.

Figure 3.6: How LEADER became of SNRN



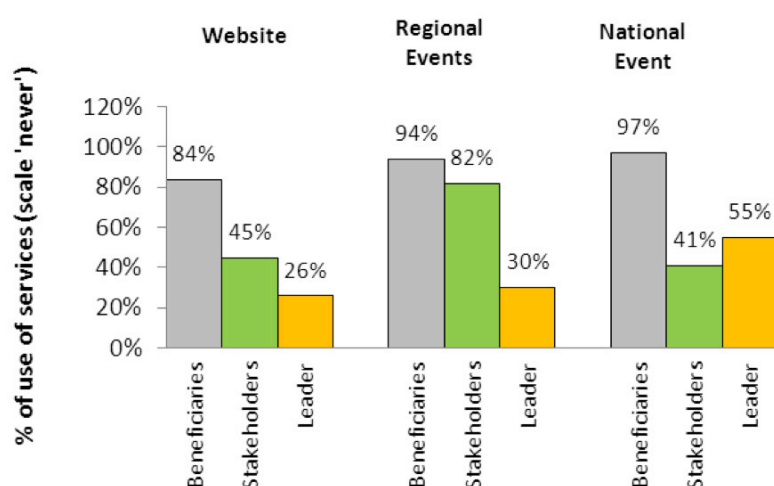
LEADER respondents awareness of the SNRN came through a much wider and more balanced variety of sources than the other two groupings with the formal routes seemingly more effective with this grouping. Nevertheless over 40% were dependent on 'other' or word of mouth.

Overall the lack of connections made via the SRDP website is the most striking feature of this analysis. There appears to be a clear need for a reappraisal of the publicity and communications approaches.

3.2.3 Usage

In considering the frequency of service usage the figures for frequent usage were so low as to make their graphic representation almost meaningless. Figure 5 here has therefore been approached from the opposite perspective.

Figure 3.7: Percentage of respondents who had never used the service



The vast majority of beneficiaries make no use network services, only 5% use the website frequently, i.e. over 4 times and a further 5% moderately, between 2 and 4 times. Only 6% have attended any regional events.

Stakeholders website use is also relatively low with only 9% reporting that they are frequent users and 32% doing so seldom. Their most frequently used service is the national rural event which 59% had attended. This perhaps reflects the characteristics of the target group for that event, rather surprisingly only 5% have attended 2 or more regional events.

LEADER consultees are the most frequent users of the website and regional events, 22% are frequent website users and a further 30% are moderate users. 69% of this grouping has attended at least one regional event and 26% had attended 2 or more. A relatively high proportion had attended the national event, 43% again reflecting the target population for this.

The LEADER groups appear to be the most active networkers through website and regional event attendance, stronger multiple regional event involvement might have been expected and the figures suggest that networking is occurring at sub regional (LAG) level mainly.

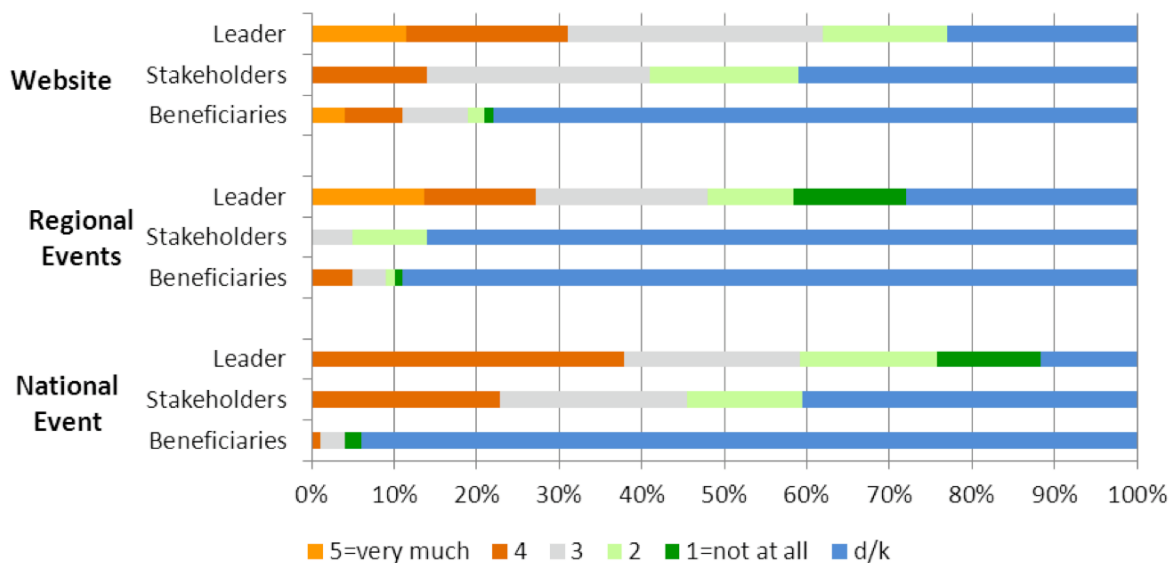
3.2.4 Satisfaction

The following chart, **Figure 3.8** provides a breakdown of the recorded levels of satisfaction with SNRN services amongst the three user groups consulted.

Given the level of don't know responses it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions for the SRDP beneficiary group other than that there was a general satisfaction.

Stakeholders appear to have a range of experience with regard to the website but concentrated within the middle range of satisfaction, proportionately they had the lowest level of satisfaction however. LEADER, which reported the most extensive experience of the website had the highest level of satisfaction here, overall the website had the most positive satisfaction rating.

Figure 3.8: Level of satisfaction with the SNRN



Opinion of the regional events is rather evenly split within the LEADER group of respondents although there is some clear divergence of opinion with equal proportions rating their level of satisfaction as ‘not at all’ and ‘very much’. Stakeholder involvement in the regional events was low, those who were involved were not particularly satisfied, the small number of beneficiaries attending tended to be more satisfied than the stakeholder group.

There is again a broad range of satisfaction ratings for the national event within the LEADER group of respondents although and also some clear divergence of opinion, the largest proportion were satisfied but none was highly satisfied, fewer were dissatisfied overall but 13% were not at all satisfied. Stakeholder opinion is in the middle range here. Beneficiary involvement was not significant.

4. Summary of Findings

4.1 General

The single biggest issue which emerged regarding the SNRN was a lack of clarity and understanding with regard to its purpose, the strategic aims, its relevance to rural Scotland and the benefits it provides. There is a feeling amongst respondents that the focus and purpose could be strengthened. As one of those consulted said ‘No one really seems to have a handle on what this is about’ – ‘It is hard to get people there’. Others perceive that the SNRN is too narrowly focused on (S)RDP related issues and not wider rural issues was a common concern. Greater clarity appears to be required. Whilst wider rural networking experience shows that this was always likely to be a challenge it is clear from the surveys that targeting and communication could be strengthened.

Communications was one of the particular aspects where it was felt that lessons could have been drawn from the previous LEADER+ Networks. Similarly it was felt that lessons could have been learned in terms of demonstrating relevance through the benefits that may be achieved through high quality networking activity. This was clearly anticipated and signposted in the RDR.

Whilst lessons might be learned there were also evident tensions over what was perceived by LAGs as the loss of the dedicated LEADER network and this has caused some difficulties in network management. It appears that informal networks are operating outwith the official SNRN. LEADER LAGs are experienced here and tend to be positive proponents of networking, they could contribute more positively here. A joint approach to strengthening LAG member and staff participation offers an opportunity to strengthen rural networking at EU, national and regional levels.

Strengthening regional engagement appears to be important to many of those consulted. It was rather striking that several RPAC chairs appeared not to be informed or engaged. In response to questions on the SNRN one chair indicated 'I am not close enough to it to know', others that it 'doesn't serve a need' or 'don't know what it is for'. Strengthening the perception of the benefits would help to reinforce the purpose and achieve wider engagement and active participation.

Chairs, members and other regional stakeholders report a lack of information on what is being funded by the rest of SRDP and had hoped that the SNRN would enable joined up knowledge on all schemes within the region. Whether this is a role for the SNRN or for the RPAC is open to question however clearly there is a need for a strengthened link here.

The potential of making better use of the networks that already exist regionally and locally was highlighted, the SNRN 'could be much more effective if better linked in to the key organisations who manage and deliver the SRDP on the ground'. Many of the stakeholders consulted that stronger complementarity was needed and could be achieved through better engagement, planning and collaboration between SEARS partners.

4.2 Website

In the experience of those consulted the website was the most generally known SNRN element generally achieving a good rating. On the down side the view is that it doesn't do enough and isn't used much, this is consistent with the survey and the strongly held views that wider linkages need to be established, more could be done to demonstrate best practice and that knowledge transfer could be improved e.g. through the website. Examples of gaps cited include;

- best practice cases, RP cases and examples of wider UK/EU cases and links;
- SRDP information such as spend by region or type of project (although this may be a data limitation); and

- information on follow-on funding opportunities for beneficiaries.

There were also some concerns expressed over inaccurate or out of date information on the site.

4.3 Regional events

That there was some dissatisfaction with the programme of regional events was evident from the survey; this was concentrated amongst LEADER respondents who are most directly involved at that level. That this appears to contrast with the analysis of the evaluation sheets from the events may reflect the delegate response rate and the different group consulted here.

There were two main elements over which there was significant dissatisfaction and where improvements might be considered;

- the apparent inconsistency of the lack of local involvement and input in event design tailoring to meet local circumstances and needs with the wider objectives; and
- the imposition of what was perceived to be a rather formulaic methodology suggested to have been rather patronising and inappropriate, a number of respondents highlighted the extent to which they felt they were talked at.

The most obvious solution and direct response to these issues appears to be greater local involvement in the design and development of events to strengthen their relevance and the local benefits.

4.4 Wider links and ENRD

The network managers have been active at UK and EU level in engaging with the EC, ENRD and the UK network, Scotland currently chairs the UK network steering group. In these aspects it appears that the SNRN has established a relatively strong presence, visibility and reputation. The EU cooperation event which the SNRN hosted further contributed to this.

A number of those involved in the previous UK LEADER+ network were concerned that this had not been developed further to include the RDPs and build on the wider EU contacts and ideas. Some suggest that the approach has become more inward looking.

4.5 SG Outcomes

The SNRN contributes to a number of the Scottish Government's strategic outcomes. Managers suggest that this is strongest in terms of;

- reinforcing the attractiveness of Scotland as a place for doing business through the wider exposure achieved;
- contributing to education and skills through capacity building and knowledge transfer; and
- encouraging an inclusive approach in rural Scotland.

The SNRN also showcases achievements against other outcomes particularly those achieved through LEADER.

There are two of the common evaluation questions of relevance to the SNRN:

1. To what extent has the technical support increased the capacities of the managing authorities and other partners involved for implementing, managing, controlling and evaluating rural development programmes?

Here the SNRN has undoubtedly had a positive effect in the programme of events and through the website in enabling regional and national exchange and knowledge transfer. A clear need for strengthening the engagement of regional partners is evident however.

Scottish Government managers have been active in engaging with the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development participating in the annual UK focus groups and hosting one of these events. SG personnel and other rural actors participated in two of the thematic working groups of this network.

2. To what extent has the European Network for Rural Development contributed to establish good rural development practice?*

There has been a limited effect here which appears to largely be concentrated within the SNRN management and LEADER Local Action Groups who are the most active networkers. Scottish LAGs have been involved in number of the thematic working groups run by the ENRD. The EU cooperation fair hosted by the SNRN provided a platform for the development of good practice exchange amongst the 270 delegates attending.