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NRN self-evaluation activities

Mixed Methods - An Independent Evaluation of the Scottish National Rural Network

Basic information	
NRN:	Scottish National Rural Network
Keywords:	Evaluation, surveys, interviews.
Coordinator:	Jody Fleck, Scottish Government
Partners/evaluators:	Rural Development Company Ltd
Resources:	Approx €38K
Period:	2008-13

Description of the context of NRN self-assessment and/or evaluation activities:

The Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) was established in 2008 to support the implementation of the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP). The overarching aim of the SNRN is to connect rural Scotland and promote rural growth. For the 2007-13 programme, Scottish Government decided to achieve this primarily through two outsourced contracts:

1. The provision of a website, weekly newsletters and social media; and
2. An events coordination service to organise and run local events, project visits and national events.

With both contracts due to expire in 2013, Scottish Government undertook a procurement exercise in late 2012 to identify relevant experts to undertake an evaluation of the SNRN and the SRDP Communication Plan. It was felt that an independent evaluation was the best way to understand what had worked well and what had not worked so well, in order to inform plans for the NRN in 2014-20.

The main aims of the evaluation were to:

1) Determine how effective the existing SNRN and SRDP communication activities were in achieving their aims/objectives and meeting key stakeholders needs;
2) Consider other NRN/rural development communication models across the UK and Europe; and

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3) Provide options for how communications and networking can be most effective under SRDP 2014-20, based on 1) and 2) and the requirements under the proposed EC Regulation for the next programme.

The evaluation contract was awarded to the Rural Development Company and the evaluation report was published in December 2013.

Although there were two separate strands to this research project (the Scottish National Rural Network and the SRDP Communication Plan), the information provided here primarily relates to the evaluation of the SNRN.

Detailed description of the selected evaluation method, tool or practice used:

No single approach was considered appropriate to providing a full picture of the effectiveness of the SNRN, so the evaluation comprised of a mixture of research methods. This included:

- **Desk-based analysis** – This involved investigating various reports, meeting minutes, quarterly reports and the SNRN Action Plan. Data analysed included web statistics and Key Performance Indicators for both SNRN contracts.
- **Interviews** – This involved two separate programmes of in-depth interviews. The first involved 11 interviews with key Scottish Government staff (9 face-to-face and 2 telephone). The second consisted of interviews with 26 stakeholders (19 face-to-face and 7 telephone) from a broad range of organisations representing agriculture, crofting, forestry, communities, the third sector and LEADER. A further 6 interviews were carried out with representatives from other UK and European Networks.
- **Online survey** - A simple on-line survey was developed and cascaded through various channels, including the website and newsletters of the SNRN and those of key stakeholder organisations in public, private and third sectors. A total of 346 responses were received from a broad range of rural constituents including community group representatives, third sector organisations, LEADER Local Action Groups, non-land based rural businesses, farmers and other land-based businesses (i.e. crofters and foresters).
- **Workshop** - A workshop involving 18 representatives from a wide range of rural stakeholder organisations presented initial findings from the interviews and survey. Participants discussed what the SNRN should aim to deliver in 2014-20 and explored different delivery models that could be used in the future.

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The main elements of its success: i.e. why this method, tool or practice was particularly useful in the context of NRN evaluation?:

A mixture of research methods meant that the evaluation benefited from being both wide-reaching and in-depth. This enabled the evaluators to obtain views from a large sample of stakeholders, while also being able to delve into more detail on specific issues. We were particularly pleased by the number of responses to the online survey (the prize draw for respondents may have helped!).

Having an independent evaluation is very useful, although it does present the 'client' with the challenge of getting the right balance between steering the project in the desired direction, while avoiding impacting the impartiality of the findings. With this in mind, there are a couple of recommendations we would suggest to others considering an independent evaluation:

1) Ensure that the outputs from the project will be useful and, most importantly, <u>actually used</u> – in this case, the client directed the contractor to produce a more forward-looking report, with a stronger focus on the SNRN and its role in the 2014-2020 RDP.
2) Respect the views of others, be willing to accept constructive criticism and expect there to be findings that you may not agree with in full.

Summary of key self-assessment/evaluation findings:

Findings from the evaluation included:

- The SNRN has been limited by scope and budget.
- The SNRN has potential to improve RDP communications and outcomes.
- High awareness and importance placed on the SNRN website among stakeholders.
- Awareness of SNRN events is lower.
- The weekly SNRN newsletter is a very valuable source of information among stakeholders.
- User satisfaction with the SNRN is high.
- Good records have been kept of SNRN activities e.g. web-hits, event stats and user satisfaction.
- Stakeholders think good practice exchange should be the primary objective of the SNRN, but this is currently underdeveloped.
- SNRN has been very community-focused.
- There are pros and cons of hosting the Network Support Unit in-house or outsourcing.
- Many stakeholders use other networks to access advice about the SRDP or rural policy.
- SNRN needs to be more interactive – a two way conduit with greater stakeholder involvement.

The evaluation also set out recommendations for the SNRN in 2014-20:

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

- Engaging more effectively across the full range of rural constituents should be a priority for the new SNRN. The branding and identification of the SNRN should be strengthened and more distinct to improve recognition and clarify its wider relevance.
- The design and establishment of the SNRN and the basis of its engagement with rural constituents should be founded in sound analysis of their needs.
- The Network Support Unit should be developed as a ring-fenced, in-house agency guided by an advisory board of stakeholders.
- A policy of flexible resourcing for the Network Support Unit should be adopted, in order to meet the diverse range of needs and demands.
- The SNRN should play an enhanced role in strengthening SRDP communications.
- The SNRN should promote good practice in rural development in more interactive ways, particularly peer-to-peer learning, good practice events and cooperation projects.
- More formal networking arrangements and training support are required specifically for LEADER to improve delivery, outcomes and the exchange of good practices.
- The selection and communication of good practice examples to help improve RDP outcomes should be enhanced.
- The new NRN should take a more explicit supporting function on innovation and innovation systems in rural areas.

How did you or will you use these findings to improve the NRN activities?:

The evaluation has been used as a basis to develop proposals for the SNRN in 2014-20, as set out in the public consultation on the Scotland Rural Development Programme (see pages 86-90 of the consultation document – link below).

The evaluation, along with relevant responses to the public consultation, will continue to inform the development of the NRN and Network Support Unit in 2014.

Additional information and useful resources:

Links to:
- Evaluation report
- Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) 2014-2020 Stage 2: Final Proposals

Last Updated:

January 2014