



Collaboration and policy implementation at the local level in Wales: a case-study evaluation of a farmer group in North Wales

Introduction

The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union will have a considerable impact on the agricultural industry in Wales. Welsh Government are developing policy proposals which aim to support farmers in adopting sustainable farming practices; their Sustainable Land Management policy framework is based on policy analysis and two consultations, and aims to mitigate the loss of support as a result of Brexit. Their intentions for primary legislation, and ambition for reform, are detailed in the Agriculture (Wales) White Paper. This report uses a case study evaluation of the experiences of Fferm Ifan, a group of 11 farmers on the Ysbyty Ifan estate in north Wales, to address the following question: *How can a participatory approach to the design of collaborative sustainable land management practices prepare farmers for changes in the sector as a result of Brexit?*

Fferm Ifan received £696,352 through the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS), part of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, funded by Welsh Government and the European Union Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. During their funded period, the group have worked on several goals with the support of a project manager, and representatives from several partner organisations. An actor map of key individuals and organisations is provided on page 11 of this

report and demonstrates the complexity of a participatory approach to working. Despite this complexity, a bottom-up, adaptive approach in which the group have had access to scientific and technical expertise through their partners, has allowed them to address problems specific to their land in innovative ways. Through carrying out this work, they hope to restore the natural environment, and manage natural resources more sustainably and effectively.



Understanding the experiences of farmers at this time of significant change in the agricultural sector is essential in ensuring policies developed offer an appropriate framework in which they are supported to make changes to their practices, in pursuit of sustainable land and resource management. The commitment to

participatory decision-making in the Agriculture (Wales) White Paper is a promising step towards recognising the experiential expertise of farmers and land managers during the policy-making process, though it will require significant effort and financial commitment to achieve its aims effectively (Newig and Koontz, 2013; Sutherland et al. 2017; Blomkamp, 2018).

Findings

Fferm Ifan are a highly cohesive group of farmers who have established strong relationships with their project partners. These relationships were important in both the application preparation and implementation stages of the SMS; partners provided technical and scientific support in the application preparation process, and provided training and monitoring as farmers began to work on the solutions they had agreed upon together. The group are committed to delivering social, economic, and environmental benefits to their local community, and have done so through establishing a successful lamb cooperative (prior to SMS funding), and implementing more sustainable farming practices. Their collective power has allowed them to influence policy decisions on their land, and the project manager has been in communication with the Welsh Government regarding the group's experience and successes.

Though the group's experience has largely been positive, there are several issues with this way of working which it is also important to highlight. Having spent a significant amount of time on preparing their application, group members expressed a desire to keep the group closed, limiting the extent to which other local farmers could share in the successful implementation of landscape-scale practices, and thus the extent of any potential environmental benefits. The level of commitment required also led some participants to feel collaboration fatigue. Farmers were concerned over the extent to which the Sustainable Management Scheme can truly be co-designed, and also expressed worry over the ever-changing policy direction

which makes it difficult to ensure the sustainability of their business decisions.



Key points

- Funding farmer-led groups can lead to implementation of more sustainable farming practices at a landscape-scale.
- High levels of social cohesion can offer a group greater levels of coherence and collective power in the policy-making process.
- Facilitation is a crucial factor in ensuring collaborative working is successful, and allowing group members to focus on implementation, as opposed to administration.
- Collaborative processes take time, and groups should be given sufficient time to ensure they can make progress towards their collective goals.
- Our understanding of land management practices and the environment has become more advanced over the last decade. Tir Cynnal, Tir Gofal and Glastir, Welsh Government's previous agri-environment schemes, have not had the desired impact in certain areas, and in these cases, it is necessary to reconsider land management regulations.

Recommendations

- Learn from the experiences of Fferm Ifan. Give the farmers, their project manager, and their partners, an opportunity to contribute their scientific and experiential evidence during the design of the new Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales.
- Assess the current consultation and co-design processes, and ensure workshops are appropriately advertised across the agricultural sector, to allow all those who would like to attend the opportunity to do so.
- Consider how agricultural and environmental policy can also deliver socio-economic and cultural benefits

across rural communities, particularly in relation to the Welsh language.

- Farming Connect, one of four schemes funded in the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, employ a network of facilitators to support farmer groups across Wales. The availability of this network should be advertised more effectively, to encourage more farmers to use the service if they would like to explore the possibility of gaining funding for a collaborative project.
- Evaluate the successes and failures of historic agri-environment schemes, and work with farmers to develop land management solutions which will improve on previous efforts.

Find out more

For the full report see Morse, A. (2021). **Collaboration and policy implementation at the local level in Wales: a case-study evaluation of a farmer group in North Wales.** Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy.

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For further information contact:

Dr Hannah Durrant

+44 (0)29 2087 5345

hannah.durrant@wcpp.org.uk

Wales Centre for Public Policy

Cardiff University, 10/12 Museum Place, Cardiff CF10 3BG



www.wcpp.org.uk



029 2087 5345



info@wcpp.org.uk



@WCfPP

