EVALUATION OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR ENGLAND (RDPE) NETWORK

FINAL REPORT, AUGUST 2014
### GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Third sector</td>
<td>Voluntary or Community sector</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACRE</td>
<td>Action for Communities in Rural England</td>
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<td>AESG</td>
<td>Agri-Environment Stakeholder Group</td>
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<td>AONB</td>
<td>Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with statutory protection</td>
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<td>CAP</td>
<td>Common Agricultural Policy</td>
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<td>CLA</td>
<td>Country Land and Business Association</td>
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<td>CLLD</td>
<td>Community Led Local Development</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Commission for Rural Communities</td>
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<td>Defra</td>
<td>Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs</td>
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<td>DG Agri</td>
<td>Directorate General for Agriculture at the European Commission</td>
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<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
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<td>ENRD</td>
<td>European Network for Rural Development</td>
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<td>ESI</td>
<td>European Structural and Investment fund</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>EWG</td>
<td>External Working Group</td>
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<td>FFIS</td>
<td>Farming and Forestry Improvement Scheme</td>
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<td>LAGs</td>
<td>Local Action Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>A European funded initiative aimed at promoting economic and community development in rural areas.</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
<td>Local Enterprise Partnership</td>
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<td>LNPs</td>
<td>Local Nature Partnerships</td>
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<td>Network</td>
<td>RDPE Network</td>
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<td>NRN</td>
<td>National Rural Network</td>
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<td>NSU</td>
<td>Network Support Unit</td>
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<td>RCAN</td>
<td>Rural Community Action Network</td>
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<td>RCC</td>
<td>Rural Community Councils</td>
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<td>RCPU</td>
<td>Rural Communities Policy Unit</td>
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<td>RDA</td>
<td>Regional Development Agency</td>
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<td>RDP</td>
<td>Rural Development Programme</td>
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<td>RDPE</td>
<td>Rural Development Programme for England</td>
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<td>REG</td>
<td>Rural Economy Grant</td>
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<td>RSN</td>
<td>Rural Services Network</td>
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<td>TFA</td>
<td>Tenant Farmers Association</td>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A National Rural Network (NRN) is a requirement of the Rural Development Regulation (1698/2005). Its purpose is to support delivery of the Rural Development Programmes. This evaluation examines the performance of the England Rural Network (the RDPE Network) to date, taking a forward-looking view of how the Network could support the delivery of the 2014-2020 RDP, with its additional obligations to support rural development more widely, increase participation and support innovation. NRN evaluation is in its infancy, the approach here is principally policy and process oriented. Methods used in this evaluation include documentary analysis, a stakeholder questionnaire, an online questionnaire, cascaded regional workshops/focus groups and case studies of other rural networks in the UK and the NRNs of two other Member States.

The resourcing and role of the RDPE Network were envisaged by Defra to be modest. The realignment of the institutions associated with delivery of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) resulting from the demise of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and the Regional Development Agencies had a profound effect on the capacity of the Network to operate effectively. As Network Support Unit (NSU) host, the CRC’s focus was on Axes 3 and 4 which connected closely to work of the Regional Development Agencies. The transfer of the NSU staff into Defra created potential for more holistic RDPE network functions but, in practice, limited resources and the changes in regional delivery mechanisms meant that the Network had a modest role in supporting RDPE delivery in the 2007-2013 period.

The Network is operating in a crowded field. The Carnegie Trust suggests that there may be over 200 operational rural networks in the UK. Because there is a proliferation of networks, there is a need for the Network to offer added value and/or differentiated functions. One possibility would be for the RDPE Network to function as a hub for all rural networks, up-to-date information on the RDPE, good practice examples of uptake of measures and create a platform for other subject- or area-specific networks to support rural development.

Consulted stakeholders saw an important potential role for a National Rural Network. They wanted both accurate and up-to-date information and understanding on the RDPE and a platform for knowledge exchange on good practice to underpin their capacity building. Knowledge exchange, provision of good practice examples and networking activities are undertaken to a limited extent but are not currently being delivered effectively by the Network, which has low visibility and generates only modest stakeholder engagement.

The RDPE Network is perceived by a wide range of stakeholders as not having a clear vision or sense of purpose. There is a need for clarification of its role, so that stakeholders have a clear understanding of the functions it should perform.

The NRN is widely perceived as an information conduit, not a platform for knowledge transfer and exchange. Whereas a network implies a multidirectional flow of information and knowledge among different actors, the RDPE Network is to a large degree involved in unidirectional flow of RDPE-related information from Defra. If the NRN is to meet stakeholders’ aspirations, it will need to function much more as a network and engage much more closely in knowledge transfer and exchange and in showcasing good practice.
Stakeholders indicated that a Defra-based Network Support Unit was desirable. Good governance of the Network would suggest closer connection to the multiple constituencies in rural development to enhance the effectiveness of the Network in its support of rural development. This could be in part achieved by strong stakeholder representation on an NRN steering group.

Other countries’ networking practices and other UK networks reveal a sharper thematic focus (which, in the Finnish NRN, varies from year to year at national level), a multi-level approach to create outreach to regional and sub-regional actors which respects regional differences and recognition that different facets of the RDP connect to very different networks and their related constituencies. Where there are strong networks supporting specific elements of the RDPE, for example, Natural England’s work with Axis 2 measures, these should be retained, but connected more effectively to the NRN so that good practice lessons regarding multi-level network operation can be more widely shared.

Experience to date of Network operation suggests it has not been pivotal in delivery of the RDPE, and it is not ‘on the radar’ of many stakeholders. The new Network should have a clearer intervention logic regarding its role is and its functions which should emphasise knowledge sharing and good practice to improve rural development practices and outcomes. It can only become a pivotal network if properly resourced. It is almost certainly the lowest-funded NRN in Europe on a per capita basis. It merits increased support in order to function effectively and efficiently.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Study Objectives
This evaluation is an independent assessment of networking activities carried out by the RDPE Network under the 2007-2013 RDPE. It considers the performance, role and impact of the Network in supporting the delivery of the RDPE, the value added through this activity and assesses current and future needs. It is forward-looking in developing conclusions and recommendations to inform the development and delivery of networking activity under the 2014-2020 RDP in England. The study objectives have evolved through discussion in the study steering group which led to a strengthening of the future-oriented dimension.

1.2. Methodology
The evaluation methodology was carefully designed to take account of the nature and scale of the intervention, the EU and England's policy objectives and the target groups. This was also conditioned by recognition of the likelihood of limited scale and nature of any expected effects and the associated monitoring and reporting data understood to be available. The study therefore principally took the form of a policy and process evaluation and the research tools were developed accordingly. Design was consistent with the principles set out under the Rural Development Regulation (RDR) Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework developed by the European Commission and, as such, is broadly consistent with the UK Treasury Magenta Book. The evaluation process was also designed as a participative process with the explicit intention of extending stakeholder awareness of and engagement with the Network.

The evaluation involved an extensive programme of 31 carefully and purposively targeted stakeholder consultations, an online survey of actual and potential network participants (with 248 respondents), a programme of three regional stakeholder workshops and case studies. This has allowed the assessment of the respective experiences, perspectives and needs of the range of possible network constituents. The mix of tools is designed to help balance out any disproportionate influence e.g. the high level of Leader-originated survey responses or the small user group cell sizes for some of the online survey responses. Through inviting stakeholder organisations to participate in the consultations, workshops and the dissemination of the survey, the study has sought to achieve balance and extend awareness of the relevance and potential of the Network.

A key element of the study approach has been to understand the distinction between the Network and the Network Support Unit (the NSU, the team which support networking activities). This distinction is not always clear to stakeholders and beneficiaries etc., not

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1 The March 2014 newsletter of the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation) reported that 'The main methodological challenges in the assessment of National Rural Networks consisted of their specific intervention logic, the complex character of National Rural Networks, the definition of programme-specific indicators capable of capturing the expected effects on broader rural networking and the generated added value. Against this background, the application of robust evaluation methods to assess network results and impacts was particularly difficult.'

least as in many respects it is the tasking and activities of the NSU which affect what takes place on the ground.

1.3. Structure of the Report
The report has been structured into six main chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the evaluation, the second an overview of the RDPE network, the third chapter focusses on findings from the stakeholder consultations, the online survey and the workshops. The fourth chapter considers lessons the English networking case studies with the fifth chapter drawing lessons from wider experience in other NRNs, how they have been operated and with what success. The final chapter draws together the findings from the study and highlights the key lessons learned for the RDPE Network under the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme.
2. RDPE NETWORK OVERVIEW

2.1. Introduction
This chapter reflects on the background to rural networking in England along with the evolution and role of the RDPE Network. It considers the services provided by the RDPE Network as well as the scope of the UK NRN and opportunities for UK-wide networking in the 2014-2020 Programme.

2.2. Background to Rural Networking

2.2.1 EU Requirements
The RDPE is a seven year (2007-2013) £3.7 billion funding programme which has implemented the European Union (EU) Rural Development Regulation EC No 1698/2005 in England.

This regulation requires all Member States to establish a National Rural Network, ‘each Member State shall establish a national rural network, which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development’. In addition to specifying the delivery structure for such a network, the Article sets out the following basic elements it should address:

- Grouping the organisations and administrations involved in rural development;
- Identifying, analysing and providing information regarding transferable good practice;
- Organising exchanges of experience and know how;
- Training for (new) Leader Local Action Groups; and
- Technical assistance for cooperation activities.

The majority of National Rural Networks (NRNs) operate at Member State level. The RDPE Network is one of four ‘regional’ networks that have been established covering England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland under the auspices of the United Kingdom National Rural Network (UKRN). Each National Rural Network is serviced by a Network Support Unit (NSU). The NRNs and NSUs both vary in scale and remit across Europe.

2.2.2 EU requirements for information and publicity
The Managing Authority (MA) is required by Article 76 of Regulation 1698/2005 to provide information and publicity regarding the national strategy plans, Rural Development Programmes and the European Community contribution. The MA should ensure transparency of EAFRD assistance and publicise the results of the Programme. The National Rural Network is the commonly applied means to fulfil the publicity requirements of the programme. The information and publicity responsibilities and requirement for an NRN are often integrated. In England, the NRN was used for Axis 1 and 3 and LEADER communication more extensively than for Axis 2 communication. Natural England and Forestry Commission led communication for the schemes they delivered.

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2.2.3 Overall requirements for an NRN

In addition to the regulatory requirements, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) provides relevant advice in their networking tool kit. This identifies six key elements in an NRN which contribute to their being an effective rural development policy tool.

1. Effective stakeholder engagement;
2. Building a common understanding of common policies;
3. Collection, analysis and dissemination of good practices;
4. Exchange of relevant experience and know-how amongst rural stakeholders and actors;
5. Capacity building and training, and
6. Cooperation and joint actions, including specific attention to promoting cooperation between Local Action Groups (LAGs).

This study has assessed RDPE Network performance with respect to these functions and in the requirements of the Regulation.

2.2.4 Rural Development Networking in the UK, status and importance

Development and implementation of Rural Development Programmes, regardless of whether they are funded by the EU, depend on well-developed networks for information, promotion and programme delivery. Well-organised networks help to overcome weaknesses caused by sparsity of population and distance and, according to a Carnegie Trust Study the UK now benefits from over 200 rural networks. The Carnegie study added that government should help to simplify networking and to clarify roles.

2.2.5 Design and management of the 2007-13 RDPE Network

The RDPE Network and NSU were established for the 2007-13 RDPE in order to provide a networking resource for all applicants and stakeholders. Initially run by the Commission for Rural Communities, (CRC - the former government agency that provided advice on rural affairs), it has been run in-house by Defra since late 2010.

The 2007-13 NRNs were designed and established along similar lines to the Leader+ Networks that existed in the previous EU funding period. Unlike previous programme periods, the NRNs were formally part of the RDPs. The RDPE Network was therefore required to provide a networking function across all of the component parts of the RDPE.

The 2007-2013 RDPE Programme Document sets out:

- The organisations and administrations participating in the RDPE Network;
- The procedure and timetable for establishing the RDPE Rural Network;
- The main categories of activity to be undertaken by the RDPE Rural Network; and
- The amount reserved for establishing and operating the RDPE Rural Network.

The Programme Document does not set out any specific objectives or intervention logic for the establishment and operation of the RDPE Network.

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4Rural Development Networks; 2012
http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=4063ad9f-18b4-4a89-843c-4f102d07461c
2.2.6 Establishment and evolution of the RDPE Network

In 2008 Defra commissioned the CRC to act as the Network Support Unit to facilitate and co-ordinate the structures necessary for the development and operation of both the RDPE Network and the UK National Rural Network. Study respondents report that Defra’s RDPE Policy Team made it clear at this initial stage that the priority was to meet the Regulations’ requirements. Accordingly, the Network Support Unit (NSU) was set up with just one member of staff in its first year; and provided with a modest delivery budget. Staffing increased subsequently to circa two full time dedicated members of staff with additional senior management support.

Consultees have reported that the CRC was given a relatively free hand to establish the Network and develop its approach to networking and communication within the resources allocated. Whilst the CRC was expected to submit its annual plans for approval, Defra took a relatively hands-off approach to the detailed delivery plans. This enabled CRC to set a wide remit for RDPE Network activities:

*The RDPE Network is for everyone involved in the design, programme management and programme implementation of the RDPE. Specific stakeholders will vary according to the focus of the activity, related axes, delivery level and region.*

(Source: CRC NSU Annual Working Plan; 2009)

According to the RDPE Network website, the role of the RDPE Network is to support the delivery of the programme through:

- Providing tools and opportunities for those involved in RDPE to share their ideas, practice and experience;
- Operating across the four Axes of the programme and link information at EU, UK, national and local levels; and
- Working with existing information exchange mechanisms and networks, to avoid duplication and maximise joint opportunities.

The main purpose of the NSU is to facilitate networking activities and co-ordinate services to stimulate the exchange of ideas and experience. These roles are delivered through a number of services coordinated by the NSU. These services comprise:

- Website;
- Enquiry phone line/helpdesk;
- RDPE programme communications and information;
- News and publications;
- E Newsletter (Leader & General Newsletters – now merged);
- Project database;
- Events;
- Links to other UK NRNs and ENRD;
- On line Discussion forums;
- Leader resources and events;
- Project partner and cooperation search; and
- Leader exchange group.

Evaluation of RDPE Network
2.2.7 Market Research

CRC commissioned external Market Research in 2008-9 to gain a better understanding of user requirements in order to inform Network development.

The Market Research concluded that the Network should:

1. Build on current communications, (and that) the purpose of the Network should be clearly expressed, in terms of the EU requirement to contribute to the implementation of RDPE, via exchange of experience, lessons learnt and good practice.
2. Build on the existing principles of wishing to avoid duplication and work with and through others; existing arrangements for sharing good practice within the regions should not be disturbed and be actively supported wherever possible, linking them up to the RDPE Network, for benefit across England and the UK.
3. The Network should focus specifically on exchanging good practice on: (a) Integration between the Axes; (b) Support for capacity building and networking between the LAGs; (c) Innovative programme design and delivery arrangements; (d) Provision of feedback from stakeholders to delivery agencies on programme management and delivery.

The Market Research also concluded that the Network should have its own identity, but should work through others wherever possible. The research reported that the ‘widest call was for the Network to have clarity of purpose with defined objectives and a high level of relevance.’ It set out the proposed operational principles, delivery structure and actions but again did not suggest or specify objectives.

The research (particularly point 2 above) was used to justify the way in which the CRC subsequently developed the NSU approach by focusing on socio-economic dimensions of the programme. Thus the focus was not on farming per se or Axis 2 stakeholders which were thought to be serviced adequately by other networks.

Working with its chosen focus, CRC sought to optimise the opportunity offered by the Network and work creatively with partners to add value where they could identify common interest and deliverables. CRC officers maintained that their main role was to influence the approaches taken by intermediaries, as well as engaging directly with beneficiaries. The resulting role and Network was therefore not visible to the majority of stakeholders across the RDPE programme and rather uneven in its national/regional engagement patterns.

2.2.8 Rationale for the approach adopted

The CRC took the decision that they were being resourced to provide a light touch national structure. They determined that, given the level of resources which were being devoted to regional programme development and delivery, including networking, they should not develop regional networks, as this was already being done by Defra and the Delivery Bodies, i.e. RDAs and Government Offices for Axes 1, 3 and 4 and by the Forestry Commission (FC) and Natural England (NE) for Axis 2.

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5Undertaken by Globe Regeneration and the Centre for the Rural Economy at Newcastle University.
It is clear from feedback from the CRC’s partners at the time that they worked hard to collaborate with the Delivery Bodies who provided the primary beneficiary interface function. In practice, a demand still existed for CRC to communicate with regional stakeholders, which was understandable, as stakeholders wished to triangulate between the information provided by the RDAs and other (particularly national) sources.

2.2.9 Action Plans
CRC prepared Action Plans (APs), of which those from 2009 onwards have been reviewed by the evaluation. The 2009-10 AP included two main groupings of activities:

- Those needed to run the Network structures (i.e. business and financial management); and
- Operational stakeholder activities (i.e. website, focused events etc.)

The AP framed the programme of activities of the NSU and the RDPE Network. According to the 2009-10 plan, “this sharing of knowledge and experience will take place across the four Axes and at EU, national, regional and local levels”.

The plan was based on the requirements of RDPE stakeholders as evidenced by the RDPE Network Market Research and Stakeholder Engagement Project, the priorities set at the Leader Approach event and dialogue with the delivery bodies and key stakeholder organisations.

Whilst the Network set out to include networking relating to the programme as a whole, the fact that neither Natural England nor the Forestry Commission were included in the development and the implementation of the APs shows that communication with some of the key delivery agencies appears to have been lacking from the start.

2.2.10 Organisational changes following the 2010 election
It is important to understand the role played by the RDPE Network within the context of the way wider rural networking has developed in England during the programme period. When the 2007-13 RDPE programme was established, England’s rural networking was in a very different position to that at the time of this evaluation. At the outset of the programme, each region benefited from a regional rural networking structure connecting local and regional rural stakeholders and facilitating a dialogue with Defra directly. This was organised via Rural Affairs Fora, the Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies, all of which communicated directly with Defra on rural policy matters. The CRC was also an active component of England’s overall national rural networking. Integrating the role of the NSU into the CRC added capacity to CRCs communication networks and added another dimension to the already comprehensive rural networking “landscape”.

The landscape for RDPE delivery and networking changed markedly following the 2010 election of the Coalition Government, which made a number of structural changes impacting on rural delivery bodies. These changes included setting up new local delivery bodies, the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and networking bodies, such as the Rural and Farming Networks; whilst Rural Fora, the CRC, Government Offices and the RDAs were abolished. At this point, Defra also took management of the RDPE Network and NSU in house.

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6 Source: 2009-10 Action Plan
The key effects of these changes on RDPE and the Network resulted from the decisions to abolish the CRC and dismantle the regional development “architecture”, including abolition of the RDAs, the Government Offices and the Rural Affairs Fora. This meant that the coordinated RDPE related regional to local networking activities supported by the delivery bodies ceased to function, along with wider network connections.

Whilst each region approached rural delivery in its own way, the Rural Affairs Fora (RAF) were a consistent ingredient and had a key role regarding the programme and networking. For example, regional delivery plans had to be signed off by the RAF.

The institutional context for the RDPE Network remains relatively dynamic with ongoing developments that are directly relevant to the end of the current programme and to the new programme period. These developments include:

- The expansion of the LEP remit to include significant strategic and delivery functions, including a strategic role in delivering Growth under the new part of the RDPE, as well as enabling links to be built with complementary national initiatives e.g., Regional Growth Fund;
- The Rural Growth Networks – performance and development of this programme is likely to be a significant learning ground for the future programme;
- The next tranche of EU-Funded programmes and initiatives, such as European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) Programmes, Horizon 2020 and the European Innovation Partnership (EIP);
- Local Authorities’ declining capability to play strategic roles beyond their statutory functions – which are likely to have an effect on local level networking, as well as resulting in a decline in the availability of local logistic and policy support to projects and partnerships.

2.2.11 Transition to Defra delivery
Following the summer 2010 decision to abolish the CRC, the NSU transitioned into Defra in December 2010. In parallel to moving into Defra, the NSU also needed to secure an exemption from the Government’s general Communications and Marketing Freeze, which would otherwise have severely restricted its externally focused activity. The main network functions, i.e. the website and newsletter continued but regional connections were much reduced, due mostly to the simultaneous removal of the RDAs. It is worth noting that RDPE continued to benefit from a regional presence through the RDPE Regional Delivery Teams (RDTs) which were focused primarily on scheme delivery and did not adopt a formal networking role.

2.2.12 Effects on National and Regional Delivery
The direct effect on the RDPE NSU was that it became embedded within Defra and it is clear that there were positive results arising from these changes with respect to information flow and stakeholder perception of the reliability of information. It is important to stress that this is a perception; stakeholders interviewed in the course of this study valued the fact that information about the programme came directly from the source. On the other hand, the Defra-run NSU was seen as being very close to Defra and this was also perceived as limiting open dialogue about the programme.
The picture at the local to regional level is different. The regional RDPE delivery capacity that had sat within the RDAs was also re-absorbed into Defra, although the teams remained more or less in the same locations and were re-branded as RDPE Delivery Teams.

The key change for the RDPE Network was the removal of much networking infrastructure at the regional level. This effect was not evenly felt, as those with their own networks, such as Farmers and Landowners through CLA and NFU, did not experience a significant change. Other Programme Stakeholders who had previously depended on the regional networks, and were then not included in the Farming and Rural Networks, such as the wider NGO sector and environment and community organisations, have cited a significant erosion of local to regional networking as a result.

2.2.13 The degree of cross-axis working
A common theme emerging from all forms of the research work has been that cross-axis working has been at a very low level. For parts of the programme, particularly between Axis 2 and other parts of the programme; there is little evidence of it taking place at all. The evidence from Network events and activities shows that communication activity has largely been run on an Axis-by-Axis or scheme basis. Cross-axis working was low both before and after the institutional changes in 2010. Initial discussions between CRC and stakeholder representatives indicated an appetite for cross-axis working; however, the scheme structure and the fact that delivery was split between organisations appear to have militated against programme-level collaboration.

2.2.14 The RDPE Network and wider rural networking
The consequence of the somewhat ‘silo-ed’ approach to scheme delivery has meant that wider rural networking aspirations have not been realised. Although CRC clearly wanted to support greater networking in the first half of the programme, it was simply not possible for this small national organisation to overcome the constraints of the structure of the programme, given the resources at its disposal.

The stakeholder consultations have shown that regional to local networking has declined; views are mixed regarding the effect of the 2010 institutional changes. Although few respondents note positive changes, there is a genuine mix of those who saw little change and those who felt there had been a decline.

It is important to point out that before 2010 all regional scheme delivery and associated networking was funded through either RDPE or Defra resources (including those used by the RDAs and the Government Offices), through Defra’s contribution to the Single Pot funding of RDAs and their contribution to the Government Office Network. Whilst the majority of resources that supported RDP-related rural networking were not badged as emanating from the RDPE Network, a substantial programme/Defra resource was spent in support of networking during this period e.g. support for rural networking posts in Government Offices, Rural Community Councils and RDAs, as well as funding the Rural Affairs Fora.

During the first half of the programme, the range of rural networking groups at the regional to local level was noteworthy. They included examples such as such as the Rural Affairs Fora, Rural Business Groups, Rural Accord Groups, Defra Family Groups, Rural Sounding Boards, Rural Voice Groups, etc. In general, RDA-led rural networking groups attempted to be more comprehensive than having a singular focus on RDPE. However, all of these groups took an interest in RDPE Networking and the fact that respondents are markedly
more likely to note decrease than increase in regional networking suggests that their functions are to some extent missed.

Even though the number of networks was reduced from 2010 onwards, there are still a large number of rural networks in existence. The Carnegie Trust Rural Development Networks report noted there are a surprising number of rural networks (they identified 222 in existence across the UK) and that rural stakeholders really valued these national and local networks, as they were regarded as providing them with the most relevant information. The report identified a need for leadership from governments to help address issues of duplication and confusion and to provide a clear view of efficient and effective rural networking. The way in which the ENRD engages and works with this diverse population is therefore an important design consideration for the NRN.

2.3. The UK NRN

The UK National Rural Network (UK NRN) is described as ‘linking the four Networks developed to support the RDPs in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The UK NRN’s key aim is to add value to the delivery of the RDPs in the UK through the exchange of experiences, knowledge and ideas’.

There are various different models of how national networking operates within EU Member States with multiple RDPs. The overall perception of the UK NRN is that it has operated mostly as a ‘virtual’ network which has focused its activities on the exchange of ideas between the four regional NSUs and the co-ordination of UK involvement at European level.

This ‘light touch’ co-ordination and exchange has been facilitated by quarterly teleconferences between the four networks which have become more regular in the latter stages of the Programme. These teleconferences are used to exchange information on what is happening in each region and exchange knowledge and ideas. Personnel involved in the UK NRN differ by region; in Scotland and Wales it has been mainly Managing Authority (MA) personnel, whilst in Northern Ireland they have come from the outsourced NSU. In England, the UK NRN was initially facilitated through CRC and has latterly come in-house to Defra. Within this setting, the Network relies heavily on informal links. Continuity of staff has been important in this regard and concerns were raised over those personnel changes which had occurred.

There is a UK NRN web page hosted on the RDPE Network website and there have been two UK NRN level events for stakeholders. The first, which was held in Belfast March 2010, looked at ‘Connecting Policy to Practice’ and the second, in Cardiff in November 2013, explored ‘Cooperation 2014-2020: Building a Better Rural Future’. The UK NRN is funded by the four UK regions via their NRN (funded under their technical assistance budgets), and inputs are split between them. The UK NRN has been chaired by the England for the whole programming period to March 2014.

2.4. Rural Networks under the 2014 – 2020 RDPs

The new Rural Development Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 establishes a new and strengthened role for networking in the new programming period. At EU level, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) will be established “for the networking of national networks, organisations, and administrations active in the field of rural development at Union level” (Art 52.1).
Each of the 28 Member States covered by the RDR also has to create a National Rural Network (NRN). These NRNs will have the same types of stakeholders, the same objectives and a similar range of tasks as set out in the RDR (Art 54).

The RDR also establishes a “European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability”, specifically to foster innovation in farming, forestry and the food chain by improving links between farmers and research, promoting transfer of innovative solutions and informing the scientific community about farming research needs (Art 55). A European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Network has been established to support the European Innovation Partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability to enable the networking of operational groups, advisory services and researchers.

In the Member States, EIP Operational groups shall be set up by interested actors such as farmers, researchers, decision makers and advisors or businesses to achieve the objectives of the EIP (Art 56).

The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development will once again be established as a subset of the ENRD in order to facilitate the exchange of expertise in the field.

Objectives for Rural Networking are set for both the ENRD and the NRNs with a high degree of consistency between them. The NRN objectives specified are to:

- Increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- Improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes;
- Inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities; and
- Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.

These objectives are more specific in their focus on improved implementation than under the previous programme. The first three objectives are directly consistent with the three objectives of the ENRD; the fourth objective is also consistent with two objectives of the EIP Network and is a significant addition to their remit. The structure, stakeholders and objectives of these elements and the way in which they inter-relate and complement each other is set out in the following diagram (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: EU Rural Networks

- **ENRD Contact Point**
  - Coordination, transfer
  - Increase in involvement of stakeholder in RDP implementation
  - Improve quality of RDP

- **Network Support Units**
  - Land Based organisations
  - Other Rural Networks
  - Environmental organisations
  - Community Organisations
  - LAGs

- **National networks**
  - Coordination, transfer

- **Broader public – rural society**
  - Inform, disseminate success

- **European Evaluation Network**

- **Evaluation Community In MA**

- **EIP Network**
  - Foster Innovation

- **RDP Delivery Stakeholders (MA, PA..)**

- **Operational Groups**
  - Farmers
  - Enterprises
  - Advisors
  - Scientists

Evaluation of RDPE Network
2.5. **Key Points**

1. The Rural Development Regulation 1698/2005 places an obligation on member states of the EU to set up a National Rural Network (NRN). The UK NRN and its constituent parts, including the RDPE Network, has fulfilled these requirements.

2. At the heart of an effective NRN is effective engagement with the full range of relevant stakeholders and creation of value for them through training, enhanced understanding of programme opportunities, knowledge of good practice and enhanced capacity built around knowledge exchange and accurate programme information.

3. The institutional architecture within which the RDPE Network operated changed significantly after 2010 when the cascading of delivery of Network support through the RDAs was terminated. These changes have impacted markedly on the performance of the Network. They have also heightened the importance of the role which the NRN can play.

4. The focus of the only previous national rural networks on Leader +, coupled with the original location of the Network has meant that the Network had limited reach into Axes 1 and 2 of the RDPE.

5. The new RDPE NRN for the next programming period will be expected to help rural development practitioners not just in implementing the new RDPE but also in supporting innovation in rural areas and rural development more widely.
3. RDPE NETWORK EVALUATION

3.1. Introduction
This chapter of the evaluation assesses the performance of the RDPE Network and is based on four of the five main elements of the research: the desk review; stakeholder consultations; online survey and the regional stakeholder focus groups. It draws the findings from these various elements together and develops relevant lessons regarding priorities for improvement in future.

The chapter is structured around the following main sections:

- Users’ awareness of the Network and the relevance of its provision;
- The engagement of the Network with rural stakeholders;
- An assessment of current RDPE Network services;
- Network delivery, governance and membership considerations;
- Future service priorities;
- Perspectives on the UK NRN; and
- Priorities for improvement.

3.2. Users Network Awareness and Relevance of Provision

3.2.1 Study process
The process of conducting the evaluation itself highlighted some headline issues with regard to overall awareness of the RDPE Network and its services. Stakeholder interviews were targeted to involve both those with direct experience of the Network and others for whom the Network should have had direct relevance. These proved to be very much harder than expected to arrange, partly due to a lack of prior engagement with the Network and partly due to a lack of knowledge or appreciation of the potential relevance of the Network by proposed respondents.

Workshop recruitment was particularly slow and initially concentrated within a rather narrow and principally Leader-related constituency. This improved latterly through the personal contact and greater relevance established in the interviews with other key stakeholders.

Despite the online survey weblink being cascaded via stakeholder organisations’ own communications systems, the response rate was lower than hoped7. Again, this improved latterly through stakeholder follow-up and the extending of the deadline beyond the close of the Defra CAP consultation.

As a result of the survey response level, some cell sizes e.g. for some user group types cannot provide a robust basis upon which to draw statistically valid conclusions. Appropriate informal weighting must also be placed on the high level of response from Leader LAGs and staff in interpreting survey findings.

Analysis of the consultation responses suggested a number of factors thought to contribute to the difficulties of generating a good level of response.

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7 In total 127 stakeholders and stakeholder organisations were asked to ‘cascade’ the link and covering letter to their databases of members etc. as well as being requested to post the link to the online survey on their websites. A total of 248 responses were received.
• The demand on respondents' time resources due to the study’s overlap with the CAP consultation;
• The Network is less well connected regionally than it was prior to the dissolution of the RDAs, possibly reflecting a lower level of RDP-related rural networking activity;
• A significant proportion of stakeholders selected for interview had previously been neither well-connected with nor well-informed regarding the Network;
• The effects of Network design, focus, target groups, resourcing and delivery on potential user awareness and engagement; and
• User perspectives on the website functioning more as an adjunct to Defra communications rather than being actively oriented towards networking.

3.2.2 Overall awareness
There was a very high level of awareness of RDPE (93%) amongst online survey respondents; a lower proportion of respondents, (74%), were aware of the RDPE Network. The online survey shows Defra to be the most important source overall for RDPE information (55%). The survey also showed that 31% of respondents were most likely to go to the RDPE Network for information on the RDPE. RDPE programme and funding information ranked highest for meeting user’s needs.

Stakeholder interviews revealed that there is a significant difference in awareness between user groups relating to the use of the Network and understanding of its purpose. This is also borne out in the online survey. Leader respondents’ awareness was 100% (44% of the total survey respondents aware of the Network); land-based sector awareness was 54%, Third sector and community 76%; and other delivery bodies 53%. This may reflect the extent to which the survey respondents self-selected for those actively interested or the pathways through which the Network connects.

Of those survey respondents aware of the Network, 46% came into contact through Leader, 31% through RDPE and scheme sources and 13% by word of mouth as shown in Chart 1. Amongst land-based respondents, 37% made contact with the Network through Leader, 21% via the various RDPE sources, and 16% for each of trade/specialist press and word of mouth. Leader was therefore an important connection to the Network for a range of different actors.
When the awareness and usage amongst the different stakeholder groups across the consultations and survey was considered, it was often lower than might have been expected. Overall, it appears that the RDPE Network has operated somewhat “under the radar” throughout the period i.e. although it has been active, this has not always been evident to stakeholders.

Discussions during the three regional workshops confirmed this perspective and highlighted the need for a greater awareness and significantly higher overall profile for the Network. Greater and more proactive publicity was thought to be needed to help ensure that those concerned with the RDPE in the widest sense actually know that the Network is there to support them.

3.2.3 Relevance

The survey analysis of the pattern of Network awareness was largely consistent with the pattern of stakeholder perspectives on Network relevance. This was ranked highest for Leader and lowest for all forms of business; other economic actors, such as LEPs and intermediaries, also ranked low. Even in those types of target groups where the Network has concentrated, consultees considered that it should do better in strengthening its relevance.

Analysis from all the research tools suggests that a major issue was that of the lack of clarity and definition of the Network’s vision and purpose, of what and who it is for. The objectives of the RDPE Network appear to lack definition and are unclear; and stakeholders had differing perceptions of these. Its relevance across the range of rural stakeholders was neither well established nor well understood.

This issue became particularly clear through the stakeholder workshops. Statutory agency stakeholders were particularly likely to identify this issue. The general perception which
emerged was that it was very socio-economic and Leader-specific in its focus. The priority which emerged from the workshops was a need for greatly improved targeting linked with a clear purpose and objectives to secure involvement and ‘buy in’ from all stakeholder groups.

Across the breadth of consultation, the clear perspective which emerged is that the Network and NSU should be very clear about their role(s). The NSU should not try to do everything directly. Their role should be in managing the processes of networking, not doing it all themselves. The NSU should concentrate on delivering this and do it well. In particular, duplicating other organisations’ activities should be avoided. Land-based groups, who already benefit from well-developed networks, were most likely to point to this issue.

The Network should therefore have a clearly established and understood focus with clearly identified target groups, well-defined and SMART objectives and a set of core of activities to deliver this. This set of objectives and activities should then form the basis of its performance measurement.

3.2.4 Service Awareness

The consultations showed stakeholders’ service awareness is highest overall for the website, followed by the e-newsletter, and RDPE programme and funding information. Another group of services including news and publications, events, and the project database were relatively popular. Some 80% were highly or moderately aware of the website, whilst 60% were highly or moderately aware of the project database.

Service awareness from the survey was highest for the website at 55% (high awareness), followed by the e-newsletter, RDPE programme and RDPE funding information (markedly higher than for stakeholders) and Leader events (all circa 40%).

There was a low level of awareness of the Network’s ability to provide links to other networks, NRNs in the UK and EU, cooperation project partner search, the phoneline/helpdesk function and its social media and discussion forum activity.

Overall, the view which emerged was that the targeting and differentiation of Network services is poor. This may reflect particularly on the influence of the website and what is delivered through it. The target market for the website is a broad one and the groups are highly differentiated in their needs and responses. This may be an area where the low level of resources has been a significant constraint. The workshops specifically highlighted the lack of differentiation between the Network and main Defra webpages from the users’ perspective as contributing to this confusion.

Respondents of all types suggested that one major area of confusion lies in Defra’s RDPE and networking communications being insufficiently distinct from each other; this clearly reflects the website issue. The feedback suggests that the Network and NSU should not attempt to communicate both networking information (re networking services designed to improve rural development) and primary RDPE information such as scheme publicity. The RDPE communications and the networking communications functions should be more clearly split. Whilst there is a role for the Network and NSU in RDPE communication, this should

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8 See technical annex for respondent types
concentrate on networking objectives with appropriate signposting to the main Defra or delivery partner sources for direct RDPE communications.

Difficulties over the Network’s awareness or recognition were also clearly evident in relation to events. Responses from the survey and stakeholders make it clear that there is some confusion over what constitutes an RDPE Network event. The majority of stakeholders were either unaware of Network events; or unaware that RDPE events were in fact being run by the Network. When prompted, stakeholders were normally aware of the events that were being run by the Network, but unaware of the RDPE Network’s role; most seeing the events simply as Defra events. For example, many event attendees assumed that the regional workshops for the CAP consultation events in November 2013 were run by Defra, rather than the Network given the numbers of Defra staff involved in running them.

3.2.5 Service relevance
The relevance of the services provided was mainly addressed in terms of the extent to which they met respondent’s needs. The survey and consultations show there is a marked difference between awareness on the one hand and whether the service met the needs of the respondent on the other. Typically, respondents service satisfaction levels in terms of having their needs met were significantly lower than their levels of service awareness. This is reported further in the overall assessment of services presented in section 3.4.

3.3. Engagement
Consultations indicated serious limitations to stakeholder engagement, with only two consultees describing the extent and nature of this as either reasonable or moderate. Almost a third said that they have not been engaged in the Network at all and 44% don’t know. All consulted offered comments, most frequently to the effect that the Network has not ‘registered’ with them or their organisation. Amongst this cross section of rural stakeholders, awareness of it as an entity appears low and awareness of what it does even lower. Consequently, and regardless of Network performance, any respondents’ attribution of impact will also be low.

Engagement with Network services thus far has mainly been via the website or e-newsletter. Both tools appear to be limited in their success and in providing access to the other functions and resources, given the low numbers overall who are signed up to them.

The survey’s analysis of users’ preferred means of engagement with the Network showed a strong preference for personal contact e.g. face to face or by telephone, through regional offices and active networking (37%) and the website (35%). Social media and mobile technologies were less favoured and ranked very low (65% of those responding ranked them in the bottom two of eight categories). Local and themed events were both markedly more popular than national events and were also mentioned in the context of the personal contact preference. Chart 2 illustrates this based on the sum of survey respondent’s first and second preferences.
With respect to the role the Network played acting as an interface between Defra, those involved in RDPE delivery and beneficiaries thought it important. Perspectives on the contribution of this to improved RDPE delivery range from none to very important. RDP delivery chain links do need to be strengthened but whether the Network is the answer is open to question.

It appeared that there was a (substantial) body of networking activity not currently directly connected or linked with the Network. Some of this was clearly RDPE linked e.g. NEs extensive Axis 2 activities which may offer significant potential for wider Network engagement. This was highlighted further in the workshops, where the clear potential to develop stronger links with the NE and FC constituencies was highlighted. This could involve the development of direct links with their delivery structures and grant schemes. This forms the focus of one of the case studies in chapter 4.

The workshops also stressed the potential for substantially greater engagement to be developed through links with other networks e.g. in forestry and agriculture, NIA, LNPs, ACRE and RCCs through a more coordinated and inclusive approach across the RDP. Links to LEPs were highlighted in particular.

Overall, the view from across the consultation tools was that there was further potential for the Network and NSU to do much more, but at this stage there was limited perception of additionality.

AgriChatUK, a relatively new online community linking rural and agricultural people through a twice weekly Twitter chat has gained 11,000 followers in a less than a year. This contrasts with the 1,451 RDPE Network Twitter followers. Although the two networks are not directly comparable, there is an overlap in terms of potential user groups and it may be worth the NSU exploring any lessons for the Network in this experience.
3.4. Current RDPE Network Services

3.4.1 RDPE communications and information

The survey explored RDPE information and how and where this was accessed. The consultations explored the importance of access to different information categories and the Network role in facilitating this, as well as RDPE information sources. In the workshops, the critical role of accessible information and effective communication was highlighted.

Stakeholders consulted view access to general RDPE information (including delivery schemes material) and information on RDPE objectives to be of greatest importance to inform participation and contribute to achievement. They also highlighted the importance of good practice information. This view was strongly supported across the workshops. Two way communication and feedback was a priority for a number of respondents. Information on other NRNs was generally thought to be of low importance.

There was some surprise that the Network could be the source for some of the information topics listed in the interview topic guide9. Once raised, this greater awareness contributed to a clear demand for more and better information. A much stronger focus on information provision is thought to be needed here.

The Network is an important information source as are stakeholders’ own organisations, Defra and scheme-specific information. The survey identifies Defra’s own RDPE information provision (55%) as the main source. LAGs (36%), the RDPE Network (31%) and scheme specific sources (26%) are significant sources. Other than this, there is a mixed and slightly confused picture; a need for more clearly defined provision appears to be indicated. Chart 3 below summarises survey respondents’ preferences.

Chart 3 - Where are you most likely to go to find information on the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)

![Chart 3](chart.png)

9 See technical annex
There are marked differences as to where different user groups in the survey source RDPE information, all use multiple sources.

- Many land based businesses rely on Defra as the main source (41%) together with other sector specific sources, Rural and Farming Networks (33%) and scheme-specific sources (31%), only 13% use the Network.
- The 3rd sector and community rely on Defra, (55%), their own community organisations (48%), networks or other rural organisations, with 38% using the Network.
- Leader sources used rank evenly between the LAG and Defra (69%), and are most reliant on the Network at 63%.

The workshops, survey and stakeholder consultations all questioned the lack of website differentiation between the Network and Defra and the extent of user awareness of the differences. The importance of transparency over who is involved and a clear line between Defra and the Network was stressed; issues of impartiality and objectivity were raised. The importance of this on line differentiation is considerable as the survey shows that broadband is the principal means used in accessing information, 60% of those responding do so at work, 49% at home, some both.

By contrast, only 22% report mainly using printed media. This is ranked most important for farmers at 37% and by 17% of other delivery bodies and 10% of LAGs. Only 2% rely on mobile devices.

Overall, some 47% of those responding to the survey thought the Network was important in providing information on the RDPE and Leader, with 22% rating it very important. Amongst Leader respondents, 77% rated it important or very important, 59% of responding farmers rated it similarly as did 50% of 3rd sector and community groups.

Stakeholder respondents suggest that the Network contribution to facilitating access to information is poor in all areas. The Network is not really registering or visible in these fields, the issue may well be more one of recognition due to the lack of differentiation rather than actual involvement as funding information is the major element of website activity evident from the analysis. The workshops on the other hand clearly illustrated the central importance of good information provision and its effective communication and the Network was seen to have a potentially pivotal role here.

3.4.2 Knowledge transfer and exchange of good practice

Stakeholder demand is high for knowledge transfer activities across a wide range of topics such as food, tourism, competitiveness, catchment-based approaches and CLLD. Some stakeholders suggest that as all topics are important the overall approach is the priority.

Project database

The project database is provided through the website and holds user-generated information on individual RDPE projects, website users have medium to high levels of awareness. This represents a well-regarded resource for the programme, it is one of the services most valued by stakeholders.

Holding over 2000 projects this is seen as a valuable resource that can be accessed and utilised by intermediary bodies and final beneficiaries alike, depending on their needs; e.g.
whether they are looking for project partners, good practice, or simply trying to understand the breadth of what is possible under RDPE. It is user-generated and so genuinely comes from the membership as a whole.

Analysis of the database shows that there are few projects from outside the remit of Axis 3 and 4 indicating a lack of reach into farm development and agri-environmental projects. Discussions with programme managers and Defra staff show that it has been more straightforward to gain contributions from Leader groups than from other parts of the programme. This is also probably a reflection of the fact that Leader and the pre-existing Leader Network already had an established approach to developing the database.

The online survey showed that the database did not meet user expectations and the page view statistics show it is the least well used part of the website. Online survey comment indicated that the relatively low levels of satisfaction could be related to the structure of the project database. User feedback indicates it is a feature that should be improved and maintained under the new arrangements. The newsletter uses the project database well in reporting on progress in uploading project examples and in highlighting projects that might be of interest to readers. The workshops also identified the need for a database function that was easier to interrogate with improved navigation and in which good practice examples were systematically identified.

Survey respondents rate the Network’s importance in finding out about good practice highly; 43% rate this important and 17% very important. 33% of farmers think this important and 17% very important. Leader and the 3rd Sector/community groups rank this even more highly, at 43% and 47% respectively for important, 20% for very important.

All the consultative tools show that support for exchange of best practice is strong, particularly through regional and national events, although current satisfaction is less so. Adapting the approach to the specific needs of the topic and target group is important; the direct relevance of the topic and approach needs to be evident and strong. Strengthened networking links are important in this, bringing people together to train, discuss, exchange and transfer knowledge (although lowest demand overall was for links with other UK NRNs; however, this view may not be informed by experience of the UK Network).

The Network’s success in contributing to information exchange is considered very low by stakeholders; 10% rate performance as moderate, over 60% rank this as limited or not at all. Suggested reasons include poor Network visibility, a lack of differentiation from Defra and weak user engagement. The Defra-driven approach is thought to limit value here. The links to Defra’s regional RDT teams appear to be limited.

3.4.3 Newsletters

Newsletter

The Newsletter was launched in November 2010 with a circulation of 987 subscribers, which has risen to the current circulation level of 1,307. This compares with Scotland’s newsletter circulation of over 1,600 and Northern Ireland’s 261 registered users. Wales Rural Network no longer has a stand-alone Network Newsletter but now incorporates their

10 As at July 2013, statistics provided by RDPE Network Information Officer, Defra
news into the general magazine on Agriculture and Rural Affairs published by the Welsh Government with a circulation of circa 40,000. Between November 2010 and July 2013, there have been 25 Network newsletters delivered. Readership, i.e. recipients divided by % opened\textsuperscript{11} varied between a modest 263 and 442. However, due to the format of the Newsletter, not all subscribers have to ‘open’ the Newsletter to read the content, as many can read it in their email browser. A separate Leader e-news was also produced (see below). The two newsletters were merged in 2012.

Information provided on the number of ‘clicks on links’ shows how many people investigated the articles in the Newsletter further. The total numbers of ‘clicks on links’ varied between 171 and 542 per newsletter, apart from November 2012 when this jumped sharply to 2,623 (correlating with the first FFIS funding round). The average ‘clicks on links’, excluding November 2012, is 360 per Newsletter, this suggests that there is the opportunity to increase the take up of following the links quite considerably.

Sign-up to and circulation of the newsletter is modest in terms of gross numbers and in terms of click-throughs. This compares unfavourably with Scotland, which has over 1,800 signed up to receive the newsletter (from a much smaller population). SNRN has also engaged in a wider range of social media with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr. The latter two, which RDPE Network does not utilise, appear to be very popular with 4,430 and 75,594 hits respectively\textsuperscript{12}.

**Leader E-News**

Leader E-News was circulated separately to the RDPE Newsletter from October 2010 until March 2012 after which it merged with the RDPE Newsletter. Circulation started with 543 and concluded with 732 subscribers. There were 33 editions of Leader E-news, with readership varying between 119 and 212, and ‘total clicks to links’ of between 92 and 396 with an average of 195 clicks per edition. Again, this suggests there was limited take up in following the links provided in the E-News.

3.4.4 Website

**Performance**

The Website is one of the most important means of engagement with RDPE Network as the single point where RDPE Stakeholders can gain open access to:

- Scheme information – all scheme information can be accessed through the website;
- Project Database – with over 2000 projects;
- Events – arranged by the Network;
- Activities, e.g., Sub-groups such as the Leader Exchange;
- News – highlighting key developments such as the CAP consultation; and
- Social Media feed – e.g., Twitter Feed.

Between 1\textsuperscript{st} July 2009 and 30\textsuperscript{th} June 2013, 149,615 unique users\textsuperscript{13} visited the Network website, generating over a million page views with an average of 3.9 pages viewed per visit. There were a total of 262,678 visits, with a noticeable peak between November 2011 and

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\textsuperscript{11} recipients multiplied by % opened

\textsuperscript{12} SNRN data

\textsuperscript{13} Google Analytics as at July 2013, provided by RDPE Network Information Officer, Defra
June 2012, which correlates with FFIS funding round 1 and 2 and the REG round 1 expression of interest stage. The average visit duration was just under 3 minutes (peaking in the spring of 2012), with 56% of visitors being new visitors to the site.

During the same period, 38.5% of website visitors were referred from other sites, although this figure varied from 12.3% (June 2013) to 52.6% (October 2011). The vast majority of referrals were from Defra (62.4% of referrals), with the second and third most frequent referral sources being the UK National Rural Network (2.5%), Business Link (1.3%) and Rural Services Network (1.1%).

The most frequently viewed website content areas over time were pages related to funding sources, FFIS, REG, and the homepage. Amongst those surveyed, the scheme information, projects database and news items were seen as the most useful. The overall bounce rate\(^\text{14}\) (the % of visitors who landed on a page and immediately left) in the same period was just over 50%, but across the six most frequently visited webpages bounce rate varied between 19.7% and 74.7%. Interpreting bounce rate clearly depends on context, and high rates may indicate that specific information queries were answered immediately and the user had no further reason to engage. Only 25.1% of visitors landed on the homepage and left immediately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Page views</th>
<th>Bounce rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/funding-sources</td>
<td>111,538</td>
<td>28.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/funding-sources/farm-and-forestry-improvement-scheme</td>
<td>94,395</td>
<td>61.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/funding-sources/rural-economy-grant</td>
<td>83,237</td>
<td>59.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/homepage</td>
<td>57,126</td>
<td>25.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/funding-sources/rural-community-broadband-fund</td>
<td>33,139</td>
<td>74.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/projects</td>
<td>30,962</td>
<td>19.66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Google Analytics provided by RDPE Network Information Officer, Defra

Feedback

The website is seen as a valuable tool but it needs to deliver the right services. Information about development issues in rural England is overwhelmingly accessed online, with only 22% of online survey respondents accessing information through the various forms of printed media. The findings from the evaluation’s various research methods highlighted the need for a high-quality, accessible, user-friendly and distinctive RDPE Network website to enhance and add value to the provision of information on rural development.

The strongest performance in website services meeting needs is in those categories where awareness is high i.e. the same pattern is reflected. The highest ranking for needs being fully satisfied is 24% for RDPE funding information. However, respondents considered that the level to which website service provision has met their needs ranks well below service awareness levels overall. The poorest ratios for the level of awareness and the extent to

\(^\text{14}\) The % of visitors who landed on a page and immediately left
which needs are met are for sharing best practice, the project database and online discussion fora.

The survey found that 71% of ‘Network aware’ respondents use the website. When user group use is examined, we find that only 29% of farmers are users as opposed to 85% of Leader respondents and 59% of those from 3rd sector and community groups.

Website use is predominantly from workplace (82%) rather than home. An interesting aspect to arise from the survey is that it appears to be particularly used by those with a technical/policy involvement in the programme. The greatest frequency of website use is once a month (30%) followed by once a week (17%), with the balance of use less frequent. The user group which comprises the most frequent users is those associated with Leader (20% once a week and 40% once a month). The third sector and community groups are the least frequent users (50% less than once in six months in both cases).

The survey’s analysis of the different website areas’ usefulness shows News and Publications (63%) to be highest ranked overall followed by Projects (57%) and Funding and Support (55%). The Activities and Contacts sections ranked 29% and 24% respectively. Areas of high relevance to Leader users were distinct, particularly high for News and Publications (79%) and Activities (49%). The 3rd sector and community groups found Funding and Support and Projects (both 78%) to be most useful and ranked contacts more highly than others did.

The news and publications section was valued as a way of keeping up to date with current developments and was thought to be a good way by some stakeholder organisations to cascade information to their broader constituency. Information on the RDPE is of high importance as a service, but stakeholders question is it a Network function? A key consideration is that core information provided must be consistent between Defra and any other provider.

Discussion forums have a very low level of sign up and usage; only 19% of those who are aware have registered and this is highest amongst Leader respondents.

There was a call from stakeholder consultees for the RDPE Network website to increase the visibility of its sign-posting to multiple relevant agencies with an ambition that it should be the ‘ultimate resource’ for information and contacts.

3.4.5 Network Events
The NSU has organised a variety of events and meetings both when it was based at CRC and after its move into Defra’s RCPU.

These events comprise a mixture of Network branded or hosted events, events delivered in partnership with other organisations and jointly branded and Defra-branded or hosted events, facilitated and/or funded by the Network. In total, this amounts to some 18 England events, with a significant NSU involvement with a further two at UK level. The NSU was also involved in the delivery of RDPE and CAP consultation events concerning the new Programme. The NSU has also led or participated in a variety of meetings e.g. with the other UK Networks, the Leader Exchange Group etc.

The most recognisable Network organised events have been Leader events. Network branding of events appears to have been stronger when the NSU was based within CRC.
Since the NSU transferred to Defra, branding has been closer to the corporate Defra brand. Consequently, Network involvement is sometimes neither fully evident nor recognised by participants. In consequence, the perceived impact of Network activity may be reduced, even where the Network is active.

Overall, some 53% of the ‘Network aware’ survey respondents had attended a Network event of some form. Levels of participation in events varied between different user groups; 21% of land manager respondents had attended an event as opposed to 72% of Leader and 17% of 3rd sector and community groups. A high proportion of the events identified have a link to Leader, with the remainder organised by the NSU in partnership with others, including a number of RDPE consultation events.

Some stakeholder consultees were supportive of the events held by the RDPE Network. However, a larger proportion of stakeholders were unaware of events; and unaware that RDPE events were in fact being run by or in partnership with the Network. Responses make it clear that there is some confusion over what constitutes an RDPE Network event. An example of this is the series of regional CAP Consultation events held in autumn 2013, which were not widely recognised as Network events. The RDPE Network paid for the venues and the team assisted with logistics and made sure relevant material was available from Defra policy teams. However, the events were badged as being delivered by Defra. The rationale for this was to avoid participant confusion. In contrast, the Leader events were in the main badged as Network events.

National events appear to be valued by national organisations as an opportunity to have direct dialogue with Defra; although some more senior partners commented that national events seemed un-targeted in terms of invitees, leading to very mixed audiences (in terms of types and levels of invitees) with the result that events do not meet the needs of more senior stakeholders. Regional events have been limited to the six events with the Rural and Farming Networks, CAP consultations, mentioned above and one event run in conjunction with the Northern Rural Network.

Amongst survey respondents there are two main reasons for attending networking events with almost identical rankings, information exchange at 39% and networking opportunities at 38%. The benefits of involvement in events are clearly consistent with the rankings, namely benefits in networking connections and links to others, developing wider perspectives and connections, enabling knowledge transfer and accessing information on RDPE and funding.

### 3.4.6 Leader Exchange Group

In 2012, Defra created a Leader Exchange Group to facilitate a two-way dialogue between the 64 English Local Action Groups (LAGs) and the Managing Authority (MA) to enable issues in the current programme to be discussed. The RDPE Network co-ordinates the meetings and provides follow up support. There are three meetings per year and they discuss a range of topics from reallocation of spending for LAGs in the current programme, concerns from LAGs about reporting to discussions about the next programme. This forms the basis of one of the case studies in the following Chapter.

### 3.4.7 Ad hoc activities

The Network Support Unit undertakes a number of activities that do not fit with the above headings. These include responding to between 15 and 30 telephone and e-mail enquiries a
3.5. Delivery, Governance and Membership

A consistent thread throughout the evaluation was concern over limited stakeholder engagement. This clearly links to issues of Network membership, governance and delivery.

From the online survey, it was evident from some of the responses that there were concerns over a lack of clarity over the structure, focus and function of the Network and NSU. The NSU link with Defra tended to be seen as too strong or dominant and resulted in confused roles. The NSU was perceived as being external to the Network when it should be an integral part. Stakeholders also had reservations here: Defra are seen to be constraining by being top-down and bureaucratic. At national level, Defra are thought to lack real rural connectivity (in contrast to agricultural connectivity) which impacts on Network relevance and ownership. Some saw positives in the NSU being connected to the Defra core, e.g. in shortening the communication chain and, as a consequence, being consistent and credible in terms of messages conveyed.

The consultations highlighted similar concerns. When asked about Network brand identity, 50% thought it to be important (interestingly the ENRD brand was thought much stronger). The overwhelming perspective is of a need for clarity of identity, coupled with clarity of function and objectives. Stronger, more direct engagement with stakeholders and rural actors across rural England is needed to strengthen identity; and there is a real need to strengthen relevance and credibility. Ultimately, the Network’s identity can best be established through actions.

Consideration of arm’s length delivery options for the NSU function identified some positives and some negatives. The positive benefits were couched in terms of greater flexibility, adaptability, connectivity, identity and responsiveness. The negatives identified included the NSU’s legitimacy, trust, risk of remoteness from Defra and potential costs.

The stakeholder topic guide included questions concerning how wider involvement of rural stakeholders, actors etc. in the Network might be encouraged. Stakeholders thought that formal Network membership has its plusses and minuses and that, on balance, a formal membership was probably unnecessary. What was even clearer, however, was that there is a strong belief that there has to be considerably stronger identification with the Network. Actively connecting with participants through networking activities is a priority.

Critical factors were identified to underpin network success. Clarity of Network presence and offer is an absolute prerequisite, as is the relevance and quality of the services offered. Some suggested that more direct service delivery e.g. seminars, events, working groups would also be beneficial here, although clearly this has cost implications. The concept of supporting the networking of the existing networks and cascading Network priorities through this was strongly supported.

A strong body of opinion suggested that some form of steering group would be beneficial to steer the work of the Network and NSU thereby strengthening relevance and stakeholder buy in. This could be similar to the current RDPE external working group. During the
consultations and workshops, there was a clear and almost universal willingness amongst stakeholders to participate in such a group. Membership by invitation was suggested in order that the strongest contributors may be recruited to meet specific selection criteria.

The issues identified here, together with the research into other governance and delivery models, informed the three regional workshops. During these workshops, four potential models were discussed; the findings of this are presented in Chapter 6.

3.6. Future Services

The online survey explored the importance of possible future activities as identified in the ECs draft NRN fiches\textsuperscript{15}. All of these received a 60% high or medium importance rating.

The highest rating was for ‘Bringing those involved in rural development together’ which was accorded a high rating by 65% of respondents, with a further 24% rating it of medium importance. The workshops developed a strong focus on the need to establish ‘common ground’ strengthening stakeholder buy in to networking and sharing information and experience. This is a clear priority, a conclusion reinforcing feedback from the other elements of the consultations.

The next priority from the survey was ‘Collecting, analysing and sharing good practice’ which 54% of respondents ranked as high and 38% medium, again reinforcing the other feedback. This emerged as a high priority in the workshops with a strong demand for substantially improved provision both in relation to processes and projects.

‘Research and analysis to improve RDPE schemes, projects and results’, ‘Networking activities to support innovation’ and ‘Developing and delivering a communications plan for the next RDP’ were all also rated as highly important. The workshops identified a real need for more effective knowledge sharing, best practices, case studies etc. including new research, innovations and evidence, who is doing what and how to connect with them. The potential for this to feed into a greater degree of cross-sectoral cooperation was thought to be significant.

Training to support the formation of new Leader Local Action Groups scored lowest in the survey; somewhat surprisingly given the extent of Leader participation it achieved. Leader respondents scored this markedly lower than did third sector and community groups. Providing links to the ENRD was also accorded a low ranking. The workshops were rather more positive in this regard with strong support for elements of technical support and capacity building across the programme as well as specifically for LAGs.

The workshops focused on the website and its pivotal role in the Network as the main means through which people engage with the NSU and its services. The user-friendliness and, in particular, the ‘searchability’ functions of tools are thought to need considerable improvement if its role as the central resource is to be enhanced.

Analysis of user group priorities from the survey shows that land managers score all priorities generally lower than other groups. ‘Bringing those involved in rural development together’, ‘research and analysis’, ‘RDPE communications’ and ‘collecting, analysing and

\textsuperscript{15} The ECs DG Agri has produced a series of fiches which provide the specification for specific elements of Rural Development Programmes including the National Rural Networks.
sharing good practice’ ranked highest with this group. ‘Networking support for innovation’ also scored highly.

Leader priorities are ‘bringing those involved in rural development together’, ‘collecting, analysing and sharing good practice’, ‘networking support for innovation’ and ‘Networking activities for Leader LAGs to exchange experience and know how’. When medium priorities are added, ‘research and analysis’ has greater importance. Somewhat surprisingly, the lowest priorities for Leader are ‘new LAG training’ and ‘RDPE communications’.

Unsurprisingly, the priorities for the 3rd sector/community are ‘bringing those involved in rural development together’, ‘collecting, analysing and sharing good practice’ and ‘RDPE communications’. Interestingly, ‘new LAG training’ is much more important for this group, as is ‘information and communication’ for the wider public.

The stakeholder consultations showed that there is a distinct appetite across all stakeholder groups for improved services from the Network. Stakeholders across all user groups rated all the services offered by the Network as having greater potential than is currently being realised.

3.7. Perceived added value of the Network

Stakeholder consultations identified that the main direct added value consideration was the Network’s contribution to improved RDPE implementation. A small number of stakeholders felt that the contribution here had been considerable but the overwhelming majority attributed only a small effect or could not say what any effect had been. Why this was so was explored further. The findings here understandably reflect common themes from other elements of the study. The main reasons for the limited added value perceived are poor awareness of the Network across rural England and the limited engagement with the full range of potential users. In fact, the Network may be doing more than is perceived but this was not apparent to many respondents. Their own view and their perception of the wider perspective is that the Network (and NSU) being seen to be Defra-driven has limited its effectiveness.

The dissolution of the RDAs is seen by the majority to have resulted in a serious decline in networking activity on the ground at the regional and local levels. Although some local networking activity is being developed, building on former RDA-based activities, the situation e.g. in relation to the organisation and provision of networking services and opportunities was described as confused by some consultees. The loss of connectivity between organisations at regional level has been considerable and the perception is that links between national and regional levels have broken down. This was compounded by the organisational and management changes affecting the NSU in its transition to Defra and subsequent staff changes.

There was seen to be substantial scope for the Network and NSU to add value to the work of other networks. It will be essential to identify and target Network participants and activities much better, to develop a clear focus, with clarity of purpose and a defined mission. The Network and NSU should use more and different tools and identify new priorities on knowledge transfer and technical assistance. Each network should do what they do best; and the Network and NSU should build on what is already there. They can add further value to what is there simply by using it; building traffic to make networking stronger.
3.8. The UK NRN
As part of the evaluation, consultations took place with staff in the NSUs of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in order to establish their perceptions of the UK NRN and what the implications are for the future of the UK NRN.

3.8.1 Perception of UK NRN
The UK NRN is seen not only as a requirement of the Regulation but also to have potential benefits to each of the Regions (nations) within the UK. It is thought to be valuable principally in transferring experiences and information between the Regional NSUs.

The two UK stakeholder events it has held, one in 2010 and more recently in Cardiff in November 2013, were thought to represent a clear benefit of the UK NRN. The Cardiff event provided an opportunity to facilitate and strengthen interaction between rural stakeholders, raise awareness and broaden horizons of what has been and could be achieved throughout the UK. The facilitation of co-operation and partner search at UK level, particularly for Leader groups, is seen to have been beneficial, if limited, in the 2007-2013 Programme. There is a perception that the UK is able to ‘punch above its weight’ at European level when the four NRNs act together.

It is thought that the UK NRN lacked a clear remit and common understanding for joint operation at the outset, which caused some tensions between the Regions. There is a perception that there was a change to a more informal network at the time the RDPE Network moved from CRC in-house to Defra. The move from CRC to Defra and changes of staff within the regions are seen as being possible contributory factors to the declining levels of engagement from the Regions. Limited resources within Regional NSUs sometimes created a tension between building up regional networks and the UK NRN. The UK NRN’s resources were seen to be too limited to do the job properly.

3.8.2 Implications for the future of the UK NRN
Overall, the UK NRN is valued by the regional NRNs consulted and a number of key points were offered for consideration in the design of the UK NRN for the new programme.

The feeling overall is that the new UK NRN should be light touch in its modus operandi. It should focus on coordination activity at UK level and gain sufficient commitment from all involved. An important role is also to coordinate UK representation at European level.

A strong feeling expressed by many stakeholders and those involved in the workshops was that the UK NRN needs to be adequately resourced and that mutual agreement on how it will be funded needs to be reached at an early stage in the programme cycle. It is, however, recognised that the four regions are likely to concentrate their efforts on their own NRNs if resources are tight.

It was thought helpful to clearly set out both the remit and protocols of the UK NRN at the outset to ensure a joint understanding of what the UK Network is for and what it can and cannot do. This would help mitigate adverse impacts of changes in staff and ensure momentum is maintained. It was suggested that it might be possible to draw up a shared action plan for the UK NRN, as long it is light touch and practically orientated.
Although England has taken the lead to date, there is an appetite for shared responsibility both in day to day organisation and holding the position of Chair. It was suggested that the Chair and associated responsibilities should rotate annually.

Actions such as joint events and shared training resources were thought to be beneficial, although demand for particular topics should first be ascertained. With the increased emphasis on cooperation in the new programme, joint events were seen as a good way of increasing the levels of stakeholder networking across the UK. Sharing best practice between networks and stakeholders was seen as a way to give a wider perspective on activities under the RDPs; the transfer of experience is seen as a priority. The use of a thematic approach to joint events was suggested to help maintain UK identity at events rather than becoming too nationally focused.

3.9. Priorities for Improvement

3.9.1 Introduction

The workshops posed the specific question: ‘what is the single most important thing which could be done to improve RDPE-related rural networking in England?’ The main priorities which emerged from these workshops16 can be grouped to form the following principal concerns relating to the Network:

- Establish greater clarity of purpose, targeting and user orientation;
- Strengthen the profile of the Network and potential participants awareness;
- Encourage greater and more effective coordination of the Network within and across the RDP and with other networks;
- Adopt a more overtly inclusive approach to include delivery partners and other relevant stakeholders;
- Improve the adequacy of resourcing; and
- Design and support more effective knowledge transfer within and between sectors.

Incorporating the workshop feedback and the findings from the other elements of the research, the following priorities for improvement may be identified in relation to the Network:

- Objectives and intervention logic;
- Delivery and governance arrangements; and
- The services delivered.

These themes are in turn reflected in and consistent with the evaluation’s overall lessons.

Overall, those consulted tended to see scope for improvement in all areas; possibly the strongest messages overall related to the need to clarify the role and objectives of the Network and to improve all aspects of communication. As one comment in the workshops highlighted, the priority is to ‘Ensure networking leads to improved implementation not just pleasant talk’.

16 The summary of workshop findings is provided at the technical annex.
3.9.2 Objectives and logic

Clearer explanation of the Network, what it is for and how it might be useful to a wider group of potential users should be a priority. Establishing the Network’s relevance more clearly and more widely should also improve awareness and understanding. This in turn is expected to lead to greater stakeholder buy-in and participation.

A clear priority is for the establishment and communication of a far greater clarity of purpose with a clear vision and objectives linked to an outcome-oriented plan. The objective should be to demonstrate clearly to potential participants that there is real value in being involved. Greater clarity from the outset that the Network is inclusive i.e. that it applies to all aspects of the RDP is also a priority.

Ensuring the Network’s relevance and needs orientation will be dependent on identifying and engaging with the different target audiences of stakeholders and developing an understanding of their differing needs. By setting this out much more clearly and making it easier to understand what is going on, the wider ownership of the Network and buy-in from across all aspects of rural society will be enhanced.

The establishment of such greater clarity of purpose and motivation for participation should help to reduce any confusion between the multiplicity of rural networks and organisations. The development of clearer, stronger and more inclusive links with other existing networks should in turn lead to greater awareness of the opportunity the Network presents and more effective networking between the various networks and overall.

There was a strong overall concern expressed that awareness of the Network needs to increase. It was considered that a higher profile is needed if it is to be effective. Whilst a clearer role and purpose will contribute to this it is also thought that there is a marked need for the NRN and what it can offer to be better and more widely publicised. The aim should be to make sure people know the Network is there and what it can do.

3.9.3 Delivery

Respondents suggest that the whole Network delivery offer needs to be improved and its relevance strengthened. What is provided and intended needs to be better packaged and more clearly interconnected. There is demand for a consistent approach across the breadth and lifespan of the RDPE to allow external change (political, economic, social and environmental) to be accommodated.

Improved identification and awareness of target audiences and their needs should inform this. A much clearer understanding of what stakeholder organisations and other networks already provide is needed, alongside the identification of where gaps exist and where new priorities are emerging. Identification of these needs should reinforce the relevance of the Network’s role and strengthen the understanding of ways of reaching and involving target groups.

There is considerable support for a more regionally differentiated and specific approach to better facilitate links with local delivery bodies. Regional delivery has a strong functional rationale. Network design should recognise that rural England is not homogenous, not everything will be relevant to all, that there are differences in areas’ capacity and activity and in the different impacts sought. The range of networking tools employed and the way
they are deployed needs careful consideration (and expansion) to help meet specific needs or circumstances appropriately.

Stakeholders held a fairly strong and consistent view that the Network should make better use of existing networking initiatives and activities across the rural spectrum; in effect, rationalising networking via existing networks. This could reinforce rural networking and engage those who might otherwise not be reached. Some survey respondents suggested stronger links with ACRE, the RCC network and Leader; some going as far as to suggest rationalisation with the Network becoming part of another network, e.g. ACRE or RSN.

By connecting and working with other organisations, establishing more and better links between the Network and other rural organisations and focusing on strengthening the networking ethos, rural networking overall should be improved. More direct contact between those affected, enabling participants to speak to a much wider audience about common issues and providing opportunities for face to face networking are key objectives.

Stakeholder organisations and other respondents are keen that the Network (and NSU) should consider wider rural networking, and consider more deeply what is provided and how this connects with other sectors. This was a strong theme in the workshops where there was considerable discussion of the need to understand how the RDP Network fits with and complements other networks (e.g. NIA, LNPs, LEPs, Catchment based etc) and how it can help it members to engage with these e.g. how to deal with large-scale LEPs.

Priority links identified as desirable were to mainstream economic development and regeneration policy and delivery and to other non-RDPE projects and European Funding streams. Stronger links to the wider UK NRN were also highlighted as desirable.

There is strong demand evident for greater local connectivity, with stronger and clearer links to local offices (undefined but presumed to be Defra) and ‘regional groups’ (this appears to be NSU-focused). More local-level engagement by the Network to highlight local opportunities is suggested, resulting in greater local activity and networking service delivery.

A similar thread suggests a need for more personal contact with the NSU with the ability to talk directly to staff (who are perceived positively as being helpful, friendly and approachable). Greater proactivity on the part of the NSU was also a delivery improvement priority.

3.9.4 Governance

Network governance considerations focused on the need for improved dialogue with the NSU and Defra and for greater independence of the Network (and NSU) from Defra.

This issue was explored in some depth in the workshops when delivery and governance models were considered and this is developed further in Chapter 6. The priorities for improvement identified are quite clear, however:

- The Network should have a strong steering group to drive it forward;
- Clear terms of reference are needed for such a group with regular meetings and a rotating or independent chair; and
- It should be independent – that is to say it should help to ensure a clear line and transparency between Defra and the Network.
Stakeholders and survey respondents stressed the necessity for improvements in two-way dialogue. Input and feedback loops are needed to ensure that rural issues are listened to and action taken (recognising that this is difficult with web-based tools, and even more so under a Gov.uk scenario). Demands for greater transparency from Defra were linked to a desire for more open discussion on the RDPE and more information-sharing with Defra through events.

The limitations of the current NSU and Network funding were recognised across the research work, which identified repeated and strong demands for increased funding for the NSU and Network delivery. Adequate resourcing is essential in terms of finance and manpower to enable effective networking across the RDPE. The NSU and Network need to be both better designed and better resourced and its role more clearly understood.

3.9.5 Leader
A distinct Leader subset of comments understandably address LAGs-specific needs and priorities but, on occasion, appear to lack understanding of the wider rural networking context and the NSU role. These comments frequently extend into the governance and delivery aspects of the Network and NSU. Some suggest networking should be delegated to Leader or that the Network should champion the Leader approach, whilst others identified that LAGs’ local engagement offered an opportunity to improve Network engagement.

Rather than any greater Leader focus, the majority of respondents suggest a need for more differentiated Leader provision such as specific events, enhanced information-sharing between LAGs, identification of cooperation activities and Leader-specific technical assistance (e.g. an online forum and a regular programme of training and learning for all LAGs staff and members). There appears to be a deficit in opportunities for LAG networking with demand for more LAG networking opportunities outside and within their immediate region. This is reflected in LAG demand, capacity and scope to improve and increase Leader networking at UK and England level.

3.9.6 Services:
The quality of information provision is fundamental to the Network’s contribution to improved rural development with two main priorities: the RDPE and collection of information on and exchange of good practice. The website is the primary tool here and, to be effective, this must deliver data and information succinctly and effectively, where necessary focused by sector or area and should use plain English.

Knowledge transfer
The scope, need and enthusiasm for improvements in knowledge transfer through meaningful networking is considerable. Encouraging and sharing area to area learning and exchanging best practices is prioritised by many stakeholders and survey respondents. The workshops stressed the need and inherent opportunities in more intelligent knowledge transfer. The potential of knowledge transfer to facilitate improved programme delivery, sharing examples of success and contributing to innovation and cooperation activity across social, environmental and economic sectors was clearly recognised as a Network priority.

The NSU can also play an important role in linking the Network to wider European experience, to exchange good practice and opportunities e.g. in broadening the boundaries to enhance large projects or in developing participation in knowledge sharing events or joint activities.
RDPE Information

Improved and current project information is a key contributor to this with requests for enhanced access to all relevant projects (particularly RDPE-approved projects). It is suggested that the Network could share basic information on all projects that are approved, indicating their overall timeframe and providing updates.

How this information is provided is important: i.e. what is needed is not just a database of projects but e.g. a project directory organised by theme and beneficiary type so that it is readily accessible and intelligently searchable. This could provide a means to share successful project examples. Encouraging participants to submit projects supported to such a resource can encourage participation by identifying relevant contacts across the country to discuss ideas and share experiences with.

Confidence in the currency of information provision is a high priority for respondents. This needs to be kept up to date with regular updates and real time information, and is a priority for the new RDP. Technical assistance improvements requested revolved around helping users to gain a wider and better understanding of RDPE objectives and opportunities. Better information on project requirements, match funding and administration was also requested and the provision of this on the website was seen as highly important.

Website

Website improvements are a priority underpinning most of these other improvements and are suggested as necessary by many respondents if the network is to help improve rural networking. An improved and more comprehensive networking gateway relevant across the RDP and user types is needed. There is a strong preference that this be developed as the entry point to the customer journey as a portal or single information hub to help streamline information provision.

Improvements to its graphic design, targeting, content, currency and the extent and nature of its interactivity are also needed. Greater accessibility and ease of use is needed to enhance its function as a networking facility, sharing information and resources, and going beyond information provision and RDPE signposting. This includes improved links from the Defra web pages and better definition of the Network site.

Clear, concise messaging is required. Better management of email, alerts (e.g. gov.uk) and greater responsiveness to enquiries etc. is suggested. Some respondents reported experience of inconsistent performance. For example, to be more useful, the discussion forum needs more active and responsive management.

Events

Overall, there is strong demand for networking events, possibly for more with strengthened quality, relevance and accessibility. Priorities include more themed events and more regional, local and community events, and, in some cases, a mix of the two. Themed national events also attracted some support. Local events should be short and to the point. Themed events and activities should identify and consider new priorities.

There is a concern that some events can be too focused on telling ‘stories’ rather than exchanging useful information of wider relevance, this is particularly so for events involving Leader groups. The demand is often for a more factual approach, e.g. RDPE beneficiary events to exchange experience and endorse programme effectiveness.
There is support for a greater number of more integrated events with other rural networks. This could include building upon other pre-existing network events such as e.g. ACRE Network conferences, AONB Conferences etc. (other examples are of course possible).

Wider links
The scope for greater integration extends well beyond events. This again was identified across all elements of the research but was particularly evident in the workshops. The scope to make greater use of e.g. Natural England stakeholders and partners through their refreshed approach which is very much focussed through new and more autonomous Area Teams represents a very considerable opportunity to enhance networking. Similarly, the Forestry Commission is perceived to have significant potential to be proactive in talking to forestry sector and determining their needs and how the sector could best be assisted. It may be possible to brigade relevant information across the RDPE for ease of onward dissemination e.g. in relation to innovation and grant schemes.
3.10 Key Points

1. The Network is operating in a crowded field of information providers about rural development issues. Many respondents felt that the Network had low visibility and lacked a clear role and sense of purpose.

2. If the Network is to occupy a pivotal position in the enhanced delivery of the RDPE and rural development more widely it needs to be clearly established and recognised in this role.

3. The Network therefore requires a clear intervention logic. Stakeholders saw a need to enhance clarity of the Network’s role, improve its profile, strengthen its co-ordination function, broaden its reach, strengthen its credibility and increase its knowledge transfer and exchange activities. This can only be achieved with increased resources.

4. Consideration should be given as to whether a strengthened stakeholder role in Network governance would help overcome some of the identified problems of weak engagement and perceived limited relevance.

5. Learning from other forms of rural development networking and identifying and replicating good practice is likely to enhance Network effectiveness. The more closely it can become a hub at the centre of a set of networks, the more it will be valued by the multiple constituencies involved in rural development, but this is less likely to be achieved without a clearer sense of purpose and resources to back stronger stakeholder support and engagement.

6. The web presence and the information database are highly valued by many stakeholders but outreach to stakeholders wishing to learn about good practice has been very limited. The Network seems to be more valued as a source of information than as a platform for knowledge transfer and exchange.

7. The Network for England operates alongside the NRNs for Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and there is an umbrella UK NRN. The consensus was that this should be a light-touch entity which should
4. LESSONS FROM ENGLISH NETWORKING CASE STUDIES

The following sections summarise the main findings from three RDPE-related networking case studies. The full case studies are presented in the technical annex.

4.1. Case Study 1 - Leader Exchange Group (LEG)

Background
The Leader Exchange Group (LEG)\(^{17}\) was established by Defra in 2012, following a review of Leader. The LEG has met seven times since March 2012. Area representatives from Local Action Groups and Accountable Bodies were nominated to come together to discuss Leader policy, implementation and delivery of the current programme, as well as helping to develop an approach for Leader for the next round of European programmes. The group has a discussion and information-sharing role but does not have any formal decision-making functions. According to the group’s Terms of Reference, the main responsibilities of the group are to:

- Provide a structured environment for LAGs, Accountable Bodies, Defra and other appropriate Government Departments to share ideas, experience and views on the Leader approach;
- Support Leader groups throughout 2014, this being the transition year in between RD programmes, sharing information on programme performance, close down, management and delivery issues;
- Support the development of the Leader approach in the future RDP in England including Community Led Local Development as it applies to other European funds;
- Support and promote better communication between Defra, the RDPE Network, LAGs/Accountable Bodies and the wider Leader community;
- Support the development of evidence and research projects related to RDP implementation; and
- Nominate and act as a source of information and support for a representative to sit on the RDPE Programme Monitoring Committee and External Working Group, up until which time both groups are likely to be reviewed for the next programme.

LEG members and LAGs who engaged with their area representatives viewed top-down information dissemination as the primary role of the LEG. This clear information provision with clarifications from Defra staff was clearly highly valued. Timely provision of meeting papers and agendas to enable constructive input by a wider constituency was seen as a priority.

Opinion as to the role of the RDPE Network in facilitating the LEG varied. The NSU provides the LEG secretariat, but some LEG members did not distinguish between Network and Defra policy team staff and did not identify the LEG’s facilitation as a specific Network activity.

\(^{17}\) http://rdpenetwork.defra.gov.uk/activities/all-activities/England-Leader-Exchange-Group
Rural Networking

It was widely accepted that the LEG’s primary role was to enable communication as part of a change management process, rather than it being the catalyst of networking per se or the sharer of best practice around Leader specificities. Informal networking does take place during and after LEG meetings with other LAGs, accountable bodies and senior Defra colleagues and is highly valued if limited in what it can achieve.

LAG engagement with the LEG varies by region; in some regions, LEG members value it highly. Some LEG members believe that frustration amongst those who value it less is based in part on confusion as to the LEG’s role in tackling strategic rather than operational issues. There is a belief that the LEG remit could successfully be broadened to encompass RDPE knowledge exchange, involving Natural England, The Forestry Commission and Defra delivery teams.

Achievements

The effectiveness of the LEG partly depends on the way in which regional representatives have cascaded information. Regular regional Leader co-ordinator meetings have been beneficial and the LEG has, to a limited extent complemented regional Leader networks.

LEG members feel that Defra staff listen and take on board issues and concerns raised through the LEG and LEG members feel more connected to each other.

Lesson-Learning Opportunities

- The LEG is highly valued by those who participate. Clearly, it does not replace the need for regular sharing of innovation and best practice amongst Leader practitioners. More regular national themed networking events would be highly valued by LAGs across England, especially in the build up to LDS submissions later in 2014. The NSU note that their calls to LAGs for agenda items have resulted in relatively few responses.

  However,

  - Regions would value agenda items being sent out well in advance of a LEG meeting. This would also enable LEG regional representatives to consult and obtain the opinions of colleagues from across their area more effectively.
  - LAG engagement is a challenge in some regions and more notice of agenda items would help nominated LEG representatives to consult more adequately.
  - As a consequence of an intense period of change, at times the LEG has been reactive rather than proactive in obtaining the opinions of Leader stakeholders. More frequent meetings during the current period of rapid change would be welcome.
  - Broadening the LEG’s remit to involve all RDP delivery partners could help address the frustration of many LAGs over a local and regional information gap which has arisen following the demise of RDA-facilitated information exchange.
4.2. Case Study 2 - CAP Consultation

Background
The CAP consultation took place in November 2013 and comprised an online consultation, Twitter discussion and ten facilitated workshops. Rural and Farming Networks (RFNs) were engaged in six workshops earlier in the spring of 2013. Ongoing engagement with the RDP External Working Group (EWG) and Agri-Environment Stakeholder Group (AESG) also made up part of the wider consultation process.

Rural Networking and Achievements
Few specific examples of networking value creation from the CAP consultation process have been identified, so rural networking and more general achievements are considered together for each type of consultation.

RFN Events
Attendance at the six events was high with involvement beyond RFN membership, and in some cases RFNs profile as a local stakeholder network was raised as a result. Feedback was generally positive; most respondents ranked events they attended as useful or very useful.

NSU staff believe that the events were valuable in contributing to a common understanding between stakeholders and Government of key issues and in making stakeholders feel they were involved and being listened to. NSU staff suggested this common understanding validated and strengthened conclusions reached in other fora thus helping crystallise the suggested role and priorities of the RDP. This was further developed in the preparation and analysis of the consultation survey and local engagement events. Some stakeholders question how the findings from the RFN events shaped the CAP consultation process?

Defra analysis indicates that the RFN events revealed the need for a flexible, “grass-roots” RDP responsive to local needs. Uncertainty remains over the roles of various local networks and players (such as LEPs, LAGs, RFNs, LNPs, RCAN18). By bringing RFNs into contact with a wider constituency, their potential to develop their membership and engagement was highlighted; dialogue with LEPs and others to agree rural priorities as a basis to help ensure that rural priorities are developed at local level is seen as an urgent need.

Online Consultation
The NSU staff view is that the online consultation process worked well and was user-friendly but questions could have been simplified as the analysis of responses was a challenge. The design of the process and tools would have been considerably improved if it had been more strongly externally oriented on the target audience, their needs and the constraints they face in contributing.

Twitter discussion
The NSU report that both facilitated 'AgriChatUK' events were popular but responses were limited by Twitter constraints as a medium for detailed debate. The simple format and success in stimulating dialogue has increased the future likelihood of such online Q & A

18 LEPs (Local Enterprise Partnerships), LAGs (Local Action Groups/Leader groups), RFNs (Rural and Farming Network), LNPs (Local Nature Partnerships), RCAN (Rural Community Action Network)
interaction subject to policy leads engagement to answer questions in an appropriate manner.

Consultation Workshops
NSU staff think these ten workshops worked very well with a good range of representation and key local issues were raised. Debate was lively and participants were able to write down what they were not prepared to say out loud. In total, around 770 people attended enabling local stakeholders to discuss and provide input on RDP priorities with policy and delivery representatives.

RDP External Working Group
The EWG has been instrumental in informing policy development. It involved stakeholders in the development of the future RDPE, including developing ideas for engagement and consultation with stakeholders, acting as an effective sounding board to flag up and help resolve programme-level issues, and disseminating key information and updates to stakeholders. The diverse make-up of the group results in considerable diversity of opinion which is both an asset and a challenge in any network activity.

Lesson-Learning Opportunities
- Consultation workshops have worked well in meeting demand and generating dialogue. They helped address a perception of Defra as remote, especially in discussions over policy.
- Workshops should be kept simple and focussed, with consideration for participants who may not have attended a workshop style event before.
- Development of the online consultation would have been improved through greater internal coordination which focused on the end users.
- Informal ongoing consultation with stakeholders outside of formal mechanisms helps build trust and understanding.
- A clearer strategic vision for what RFNs should deliver would help RFN Chairs generate local interest and engagement.
- All aspects of NRN event organisation and consultation should be developed with a user focus in mind in order to optimise their opportunity to participate effectively.
4.3. Case Study 3 - Natural England

This case study considers Natural England-facilitated networking at both national and local levels. National activity examples comprised the Agri-Environment Stakeholder Group, while local networking examples comprised Agent Meetings (North East), Upland Grazing Groups (Weardale) and Catchment Sensitive Farming (River Cherwell).

4.3.1 National Networking Activity

Background

The Agri-Environment Stakeholder Group (AESG) is a forum where ideas, challenges and solutions concerning Agri-Environment (AE) schemes are discussed and developed between Natural England and its stakeholders. Meeting three times a year, twenty five organisations are represented. Natural England share scheme delivery statistics and the group considers issues raised by stakeholders. The group also acts as a sounding board of future plans for the current or new programme (e.g. NELMS), but it has no specific decision-making powers.

Through the sharing of information and advice the AESG exerts a strong influence on the way that AE schemes are operated. Over the last two years the AESG and the RDPE Network have increased their collaboration. The AESG secretary disseminates RDPE Network communications to the group and speaks to the NSU team on a regular basis.

Rural Networking

The group has been the catalyst for a successful two way information exchange between stakeholders and Natural England. Involvement of senior Natural England staff who understand issues raised by stakeholders and are available between meetings has been a key contributing factor as is actions being proactively followed up within a few days of a meeting.

Achievements

- Defra has utilised the AESG meetings to test developing proposals for NELMS. It was also used during the ‘Making Environmental Stewardship More Effective’ (MESME) programme to investigate improving the effectiveness of the existing schemes resulting in the introduction of new Entry-Level Stewardship (ES) options.

- The group is routinely used to seek key stakeholders feedback on draft communications to customers regarding operational issues. This ensures communications are clear and timely and that stakeholders are well-sighted, ready and able to respond when approached by their members regarding such correspondence.

- The group is also used to provide key partners with advance versions of tools, Questions and Answers and information notes; Natural England responds according to their feedback.

- Natural England utilises the group to test out the effectiveness of communications to the industry as a whole on specific issues e.g. re the usefulness of current communications tools regarding CAP Reform.

Lesson-learning opportunities;

- Such groups provide opportunities for stakeholders to be involved at an appropriate stage of scheme development, to prevent delays further into delivery when stakeholders might flag up issues that might not have been thought of.
Adequate preparation should be undertaken before a new idea is presented to stakeholders.

4.3.2 Local Networking Activity

Background
In the North West, Natural England organise quarterly Agents Meetings, involving local land agents and organisations such as the NFU and Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services. Natural England land management and customer services staff communicate current programme developments and consult on forthcoming issues around new scheme development and CAP negotiations. The Natural England Land Management team in the North West are also setting up Upland Grazing Groups in order to update agri-environment agreement holders on the direction of travel of schemes.

Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) is about working with farmers in specific catchments to reduce pollution on farm. In the Upper Cherwell Catchment, just north of Banbury, CSF activities have sought to reduce pesticides, nitrate and phosphate loads in the river Cherwell.

The Agent’s Meeting, Upland Grazing Groups and Catchment Sensitive Farming activities operate independently of the RDPE network.

Rural Networking
The expectation of participants at the Agents’ Meetings is that they will cascade information to their clients. Likewise the Upland Grazing Groups relies on information being disseminated by participants, who are generally influential members of the local farming community.

Local Natural England Land Management Advisors have sought to ensure that farmers in Durham Dales and Yorkshire Dales receive consistent advice by sharing best practice with colleagues from Yorkshire, and from this year, Cumbria, through annual team meetings with colleagues from outside the North East.

As a result of Natural England’s regional autonomy, there are different approaches employed to farmer engagement in each region, but an internal management network passes on best practice at a senior management level.

Achievements
The most significant outcome of both the Agent and Upland Grazing Groups is that ‘less things go wrong’, as relevant messages are disseminated quickly. In the current period of transition, the Agents’ Group has helped manage expectations by cascading information as to what type of agreements Natural England might be able to run in 2014, and what the new programme priorities are likely to be.

In the River Cherwell catchment, there has been significant farmer engagement through one-to-one farm visits, farm walks and a newsletter (up to quarterly but as when there is something of relevance to report). There are a range of specific examples where catchment level networking activity has helped to effectively disseminate, share information and raise awareness in this context.
Lesson-learning opportunities

- Rather than relying on intense farmer interaction at the start of the programming period, it is better to plan for ongoing engagement through facilitated themed events.
- When relying on the cascading of information through farmers’ own informal networks, it is desirable to allow group members to recommend and invite new participants.
- It is important that agency personnel are approachable, understand each farming business and the pressures and issues faced, and keep bureaucracy to a minimum.
- With diverse engagement approaches employed throughout the country, networking between Natural England colleagues to share best practice is of high importance.
4.4 Key Points

1. Axis 2 measures have been largely off-radar in the work of the Network but communication between stakeholders and policy intermediaries is ensured through the national Agri-Environment Stakeholder Group and more local liaison groups which deal with regionally specific issues such as moorland management or catchment sensitive farming. Such a cascade of engagement at different spatial scales is entirely sensible and can help strengthen partner organisations relevance and engagement locally.

3. Defra involvement with the NRN in the various forms of consultation is generally perceived positively and has helped address a perception of Defra as remote, especially in discussions over policy. Approachability and accessibility are highly important.

4. A more strongly user focused approach is beneficial in facilitating beneficiary and stakeholder involvement, careful consideration should be given to consultation methods employed, locations and recruitment processes. Themed events appear to be an effective approach to engaging with farmers.

5. Networking between colleagues within delivery organisations is important in sharing and disseminating best practice. Such exchange is also important in the formulation of the messages to be communicated.

6. Consultative groups provide opportunities for stakeholders to be involved at an appropriate stage of scheme development and help to improve user orientation and implementation.
5. LESSONS FROM WIDER EXPERIENCE

5.1. Introduction
This chapter focuses on the transferable lessons which can be drawn from wider experience of RDP networking activity in the UK and elsewhere. There are three main elements to this:

- A summary of relevant findings from the European Network for Rural Development study of NRNs across Europe 19;
- A review of relevant aspects of the delivery of the Swedish and Finnish National Rural Networks (desk-based and supported by NSU consultations); and
- A review of the experience in the three other UK NRNs based on consultations with the respective NSUs.

5.2. EU NRN Study
The ENRD (European Network for Rural Development) has recently undertaken a study of NRNs across Europe and produced a helpful typology and classification of activities.

The report provides an extremely helpful benchmark for this study, as it has enabled the study team and the clients to examine the management, delivery and policy options under consideration in the light of comparable current practice.

The study identifies that three aspects of network operation distinguish between different types of NRN:

- Organisational form of the entity assigned with network animation (74% of the NSUs are located within public administration);
- NRN’s decision making process (84% approve the AWP or assign the NSU/NRN members with priorities and/or specific activities applying formal steering committee-type processes); and
- Requirements linked to participation in the NRN (61% have a formal membership).

Of the 31 NRNs studied, 15 operated within the MA, eight were outsourced and eight were set within delegated agencies.

The study also found that although all NRNs have been required to work across the programme as a whole, themes linked to Axis 3 and 4 of the RDPs dominate the thematic initiatives currently undertaken by the NRNs. Most frequently addressed individual themes include Leader (61%), Rural Entrepreneurship (45%), CAP post-2013 (35%), Renewable Energy and Local Products (32% respectively).

Almost all NRNs consider Publications (94%), Websites (90%) and Events (81%) as their principal communication tools for the dissemination of RDP-relevant content.

Networking support remains a key component of most NRNs, with networking Tools and Methodologies attracting the highest level of cooperation interest amongst NRNs, with 25 Networks interested. Active support to LAGs and promotion of Transnational Cooperation remained an important function for NRNs (in 2/3 of MS).

19 http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=70E8FB20-06F1-455B-5B33-D1A45AC8A3B4
Exchange of experience and learning is a key role of the NRNs with Databases, Websites and Publications the main channels for dissemination.

5.3. Overseas Examples

5.3.1. Finland

Background
Finland’s National Rural Network (NRN) seeks to establish and promote synergies between rural actors and to improve competencies in order to develop the countryside. The Finnish NRN has been fully operational since October 2007 and consists of the main stakeholders involved in RDP implementation from both public administration and civic organisations. It also encompasses numerous rural development actors operating at a local level. A Network Support Unit (NSU) coordinates the activity of the NRN and implements its tasks, managing operational activities and the implementation of action plans. The NSU sits within the Managing Authority (MA), part of the Department of Agriculture of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, which is responsible for the implementation of RDPs. This arrangement was new for the current programme, with all staff recruited externally. Staff members have a range of specialisms, from forestry to education and training. The NSU is not outsourced and there are no regional NSUs.

The mandate of the NSU in Finland is to discover successes and failures across a range of rural interventions, including the RDP, in order to;

- Inform future RDP options and decision-making;
- Identify and exchange good practice;
- Support transnational cooperation; and
- Deliver training in order to build the knowledge and skills base of rural actors.

The NSU's budget is circa €11m. The team comprises seven people, including the director, thematic leads, communication and website staff and administrators. The team all multi-task, and team members have been in place over the whole programme period. The unit contracts in additional services through a series of open tenders.

Rural Networking
The NSU has an annual work plan, which is approved by a Steering Group before being passed to the Ministry (effectively the RDP unit). The NSU had hoped that the steering group would provide stronger guidance (e.g. have an input into early drafts of each annual work plan) and have given the steering group opportunity to be more involved in the NSU’s strategy and direction. The NSU feels that their networking remit should be wider than the RDP, but this view is not shared with the Ministry.

NSU activities focus on a different theme each year, e.g. entrepreneurship, rural youth, the environment, and each theme has a dedicated working group. There is also a Leader working group involving LAG staff and board members, and ongoing working groups themed on innovation, inter-regional cooperation and entrepreneurship. In total, the NSU delivers between 60 and 100 events per annum, involving between 3,000 and 4,000 people. Annual events include an annual overseas study trip per axis, thematic in focus and involving around 30 people on each trip, while broader NSU activities include an information campaign to highlight project examples, and best practice competitions which are linked to self-
evaluation. In 2013, the focus was on results and drawing together lessons from the current programme focused on added value.

As well as formal working groups, there is also an unofficial Leader group which involves other Ministries with a rural mandate. The group focuses on problem solving and the coordination of activities and has helped to smooth the Leader work of the NRN and has played a key role in the preparations for the next programme. Similar informal arrangements exist for other working areas such as the environment and enterprise.

NSU staff deliver LAG board training and help promote the Leader brand. Consultants help LAGs to develop quality management and assurance systems, which is resource-heavy but regarded as worthwhile by NSU staff. The NSU has sought to improve the quality of Leader work through clarifying procedures, systems and responsibilities.

The NSU has been involved in Baltic Sea networking since 2008, which has involved the development of a Baltic Sea Strategy, a joint transnational cooperation award, shared study trips and reciprocal arrangements with other EU member states, e.g. Estonia.

Achievements
Best practice competitions have worked well to incentivise project stakeholders to feed information onto the NSU data base, while gala events provide the opportunity for political involvement. With regard to RDP communications, the NSU has a formal role, and an approach whereby each province has its own communications manager has been piloted and was regarded as a success. However, in general, NSU performance is poorly measured, and in the original 2008 plan indicators were only for outputs and participation, although three stakeholder satisfaction surveys have been conducted and a participation index established. The NSU also believes that they could utilise social media more effectively.

Lesson-Learning Opportunities

• An independent NSU which contracts out specialist work is regarded as a successful model, although some NSU staff believe that a larger core team with fewer externals might be less resource-intensive. The NSU’s presence in the MA enables it to be strategic and influential. Outsourcing of specialist work is regarded as essential but in the early part of the current programme, transaction costs were significant.

• The NSU team acknowledge the need for clear network analysis to reflect objectives, and this will be in place for the next programme. In the future programme, the NRN will be under the Agency of Rural Affairs which may present a threat to the NRN’s independence, as the agency is perceived as being technocratic and may seek to narrow the NRN’s role.

• It is unclear how much activity the NRN will deliver in the future programme but it should have a strategic role in steering the RDP. The MTE suggested a single Rural Development Unit and director with the NSU providing the secretariat, but this was rejected and may have reduced NSU influence.

• The NSU collects some output data but this quantitative data is limited and, in retrospect, data collection could have been undertaken much better.

• Informal working groups are essential, and these should be open and improvement-oriented.

• Best practice competitions incentivise project stakeholders to feed information onto the NSU data base.
5.3.2 Sweden

Background
The main tasks of the Swedish National Rural Network, which has been fully operational since May 2007, are to facilitate the exchange of information and methods, to act as a contact point for LAGs, to support national actors’ dialogue with local and regional actors involved in the implementation of RDPs, to support transnational cooperation activities and to strengthen links between rural, regional and environmental policy.

The Network Support Unit (NSU) is neither established within the Managing Authority (MA) or outsourced but is delegated to a Ministerial Agency and does not include regional NSUs. The formal membership-based network has a secretariat, the National Network Unit (NNU), located within the Swedish Board of Agriculture. The NNU is not formally part of the RDP MA but is engaged directly by the Board of Agriculture, Rural Development Department, and sits parallel to the Technical MA.

Governance involves a Steering Group for the NRN, comprising of a chair and ten members. Members rotate every two years with the exception of permanent members such as the Federation of Agriculture. The Steering Group agrees action plans and budget allocations (circa €8m), approximately 50% of which is devoted to staff costs, with the remainder allocated to Thematic Working Groups (TWGs), an annual national NRN meeting, and Leader events. The staff team comprises of eight people, seven FTEs including a manager, finance and administrative team and two thematic specialists.

Rural Networking
Formal membership is free and open to diverse public sector and stakeholder organisations but not to individuals. The network has a membership of 110 to 120 organisations, each of which must demonstrate national level involvement in rural development in order to be approved by the steering group. Network members are engaged through a variety of tools, in particular TWGs, each of which involve eight to ten members. TWGs include environmental services, integration, gender, youth, bio-energy and balanced planning.

The NSU also run Virtual Think Tanks via telephone meetings. These can involve a series of meetings for up to 50 or 60 people, and in the case of a review of RDP performance, can stretch over two days. Other Virtual Think Tank topics have included multi-funding, Leader and youth.

Leader is supported through a series of events, one national LAG and FLAG meeting per annum and a series of smaller meetings with local stakeholders. The NSU provides funding and a secretariat for LAGs' own coordination group, which involves six chairs and six managers covering each region. The NSU also delivered initial training with the MA on transnational cooperation at the start of the current programme period.

The NSU organises a 'Rural Best Awards' competition each year, whereby projects or activities are nominated by LAGs and regional MA units from across the RDP and are judged by a jury supported by the Scientific Council. The best four projects in each category are described in a booklet and videos, and awards presented at a gala evening.
Achievements
The main measure of NSU performance is raised knowledge of how to engage with and utilise the RDP, but this is currently only measured through participation (in events, web-hits etc.). The number of reports produced and contributions to the ENRD are also considered as measurements of success, as is the trust placed in the NSU by the Ministry. The NSU has been asked to provide input into the new programme and has organised network Think Tanks to assess RDP performance. Examples of the national roll-out of good practice attributable to the NSU’s activities include a rural transport project which is now active across Sweden.

The NSU is engaged directly by the Board of Agriculture in the Rural Development Department. It is therefore very close to RDP governance and delivery and is aware of current performance issues and future programming priorities. By way of a practical example of the advantages this arrangement has delivered, for a recent Leader event both the MA and PA attended to discuss the development of the new RDP.

The new NRN will probably have to do more with fewer resources. An umbrella function for three networks looks likely, dealing with innovation, agri-environmental services and general rural development.

Lesson-Learning Opportunities
- TWGs have successfully engaged members but membership involvement needs a clear structure; TWG members were invited to write articles for the press but this has been unsuccessful.
- Virtual Think Tanks have been strongly engaged with and have received positive feedback.
- Measurement of NSU-supported achievements is limited and tends to focus on outputs rather than outcomes.
- ‘Rural Best Awards’ have successfully championed best practice and have engaged LAGs and regional MA units from across the RDP.

5.4. UK NRNs

5.4.1 Experiences of Regional NRNs
Experiences from how the different UK NSUs have managed limited resources, Leader, communications and governance were explored with NSU and Managing Authority staff.

5.4.2 Managing Limited Resources
All the Regional NSUs reported that, due to limited resources for their NRNs, there has been a ‘light touch’ approach to networking focused on complying with the regulation, but little more. In most cases, NRNs have focused their activities on and target the easier-to-stakeholders, often Leader. Wales reported a lack of continuity of staff which reduced their capacity to deliver which, in turn, reduced expectations.

There is a variety of delivery models across the Regional NRNs. Wales has a ring-fenced unit within the MA; Northern Ireland has outsourced its NRN fully; and Scotland has a hybrid of internal MA involvement with outsourced website and event co-ordination.
5.4.3 Dealing with Leader
Leader has been the largest target group for NRNs in the UK; too much so in the opinion of some respondents. This may have been due to the existence of a previous Leader+ network which gave an easy and known access point, compared to other rural stakeholders, such as the land-based sector, which traditionally has had its own networks. Northern Ireland was very actively involved with Leader where the Network played a facilitating role between the LAGs and MA and hosted sub-groups to support thematic working. Scotland have had a ‘light touch’ approach to Leader but intend to increase involvement for the next programme including a formal Leader network and training for LAGs.

5.4.4 NRN Role in RDP Communications
In the 2007-2013 Programme, the role that communications has played in the National Rural Networks has varied considerably between the four Regions. Currently, the RDPE Network has the strongest communications remit as all scheme information is channelled through the Network website for the seven Defra-delivered schemes in England. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the MAs are responsible for all RDP communication, with the Networks providing only links back to RDP information on the MAs’ websites. England and Scotland have latterly made use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Social media have not been a feature of Network activity in Northern Ireland or Wales.

It is not exactly clear how future communication will be addressed by each NRN. However, in looking to the new Programme, Wales has moved its communications resource into the Network Support Unit as they think integrating the function will work better within the new Regulation. The Scottish Rural Network intends to have a key role in communicating information about the SRDP and wider rural development policy to stakeholders and members of the public. A communication plan specifically for the SRN will be developed as part of the wider Communication Plan for the SRDP, with clear division of responsibilities. Wales and Northern Ireland intend to introduce the use of social media in the new RDPs.

5.4.5 Approach to NRN Governance
There is variation in governance structures across the UK. England and Scotland have broadly similar structures where the MA is responsible for setting the action plans for the NSUs. The Northern Ireland Network is fully outsourced and has a structure of committees with a core ‘Steering Group’, supported by a series of thematic sub-groups. The steering group, along with the contractor, develop the annual action plans which are then, in turn, agreed with the MA. Wales NRN has a steering group which is currently made up of a subcommittee of the PMC and comprises stakeholders from across the RDP, on an equal basis between the public/private/voluntary sectors. Wales intends to have only one PMC for the ESI funds to improve complementarity and communication across all EU funds. It is expected that the NRN steering group will have a Chair from the ESI PMC.

5.4.6 Transferable Lessons
A number of experiences were thought to be transferrable from the other Regional NRNs to the RDPE Network. The use of thematic meetings and focus groups, as well as exchange visits, often outwith the UK, have been found to be very beneficial to project beneficiaries. Greater priority should also be placed on complementarity with other funds. Links to other sources of funding, including signposting beneficiaries to alternatives was also seen to be a valuable function. Stakeholder steering groups were thought to be a good way to involve
stakeholders and broaden engagement in the Networks, as well as sense-checking that the services that the Networks are delivering are those valued on the ground.

It had been suggested that NRNs in the Regions have benefitted when they have had a relatively high profile. This has made senior level buy-in vital and often required a ‘champion’ to fight the Network’s corner in a very competitive environment.

5.5. Key Points

1. An NSU closely associated with the MA enables it to be strategic and influential but the independence of this is highly important. Outsourcing of specialist work is regarded as essential but transaction costs need careful management.

2. Stakeholder involvement in NRN governance and steering is thought to be effective and to strengthen NRN relevance and engagement.

3. Working across the RDP is the norm for NRNs however a strong focus on Axes 3 and 4 is common within this. Consideration of wider rural development and other linkages is common.

4. NRNs in two Nordic countries (Sweden and Finland) reveal much better resourcing and a higher level of network activity with far more events. Both countries take knowledge transfer and exchange on good practice much more seriously than the RDPE Network and both operate successful award schemes to engage beneficiaries and highlight good practice.

5. Informal and thematic working groups are essential in engaging members, involvement should be clearly structured and groups should be improvement-oriented. Virtual Think Tanks have produced strong engagement with positive feedback.

6. Different practices related to information dissemination and liaison on RDP-related issues can be found in different countries and different organisations and may offer clues as to how the Network in England could achieve more in relation to its core purpose.

7. The NSU role in data collection is important but where this has been done there is a need for improvement of both qualitative and quantitative information.

8. Measurement of NSU-supported achievements is limited and tends to focus on outputs rather than outcomes.

9. Experience of the other UK NRNs suggests that a lighter touch is required re the involvement of Leader to avoid its dominating the NRN.
6. KEY LESSONS

6.1. Introduction
This chapter highlights the key findings from the study, together with lessons for the next programme period. These are structured in the following sections:

- Findings on overall RDPE Network performance;
- Lessons for the future;
  - Objectives and intervention logic;
  - Services;
  - Delivery, governance and engagement; and
  - Performance framework.

The performance of individual services is addressed in Chapter 3.

6.2. Key Points on RDPE Network Performance

6.2.1 Overview
There is rather low recognition and understanding of the role and objectives of the Network and this is poorly differentiated from the NSU function and from Defra. From the user perspective, the Network is not well-defined; it needs greater clarity of purpose, clear, user-oriented SMART objectives and a distinct and well-understood focus.

There is rather low perceived added value achieved through networking to date but clear recognition of the high potential for better Network participation to contribute to improved rural development and RDPE outcomes. The role in support of the UK NRN and the level of interaction has been rather limited but has increased latterly.

These perceptions do not mean that the Network or the NSU have been ineffective in their role, but rather reflects the complex and changing context within which they have operated. In facilitating the Network, the NSU has been faced with balancing unclear policy priorities, limited resources and a rather narrow target group. This has been compounded by where they were positioned organisationally (and the changes in this) and the effects of these factors on the extent and scope of their reach.

6.2.2 Focus and objectives
A major challenge and limitation on the effectiveness of the Network is its narrow focus which is linked to its initial rather restricted tasking. Previous network experience (Leader+) and the location of the NSU within the CRC tended to reinforce the Axis 3 and 4 focus, as a consequence there is a perception that the Network is overly influenced by Leader interests. It is important that whilst Leader's specific needs be addressed that this should not dominate the Network.

Axis 2 measures have been largely off-radar in the work of the Network. Communication between stakeholders and policy intermediaries is ensured through the Agri-Environment Stakeholder Group operating at national level and a number of more local liaison groups which deal with regionally specific issues such as moorland management or catchment sensitive farming. Such a cascade of engagement at different spatial scales is entirely sensible.
There is strong support for the Network to refocus on wider rural development across the RDPE (and beyond) but this raises challenging questions over targeting, activities, resourcing and delivery models and connectivity to extant networks such as the NE networks supporting Axis 2 delivery. This will require a degree of co-ordination so that rural development is embraced more holistically by the Network.

6.2.3 Resourcing

The budget allocated to the RDPE Network is a major limitation on its scope and reach. Only Luxembourg, Malta and Slovakia have lower allocations than England and the RDPE Network budget is lower than that of the average RDPE LAG. On a rural per capita basis, this difference is very large.

Budgetary comparisons with other EU NRNs are not necessarily like for like as other NRNs may include RDP delivery tasks or responsibilities which Defra does directly. Nevertheless, given the level of variance in budget it is clear that the RDPE Network is among the least well-resourced. This raises significant questions over the level of importance and priority placed on the Network and its ability to address the extended core tasks under the new RDR.

Network Support Units examined in Sweden and Finland have significantly higher levels of core resourcing and network activity, resulting in more and more diverse forms of engagement and events. There is a very strong focus on knowledge transfer and exchange of good practice which is of a different level of magnitude to that in England. For example England has been slower than other parts of the UK to adopt innovations such as the use of thematic approaches.

Network effectiveness has been further compromised by changes in the organisational landscape and the disruption to delivery and to networking links. Given the NSU’s targeting of Axis 3 and 4 the RDAs dissolution in 2010 has considerably limited the extent of the Network’s rural outreach through these regional organisations, events, services and networks. These limitations have significantly constrained its potential performance. As regional networking appears to have declined, so too has national engagement, whilst real needs appear likely to have increased during a challenging period for the UK economy.

6.2.4 Design

In order to strengthen user relevance and participation and the outcomes achieved, the whole approach to the Network support should embody a stronger needs and user orientation with clearly identified target groups. The Network does not or is unable to concentrate sufficiently on making the most of current networking activity, taking account of the services which others provide identifying and helping to address any gaps.

Despite any decline in formal regional networking, many rural networks and membership organisations exist across rural England. Many operate regionally or sub-regionally working with their communities of interest including many of the stakeholders consulted. These stakeholders almost unanimously committed to greater involvement in the Network and acknowledged the potential benefits of so doing. This suggests the priority, regardless of resourcing or targeting, is to focus on supporting the networking of networks and locating the Network as a hub of a network of networks. There is strong but unmet demand for greater Network and NSU connectivity which almost certainly demands much greater resources.
The strongest potential for the NSU to improve rural development and RDPE outcomes is to focus Network support priorities and activities on complementing, supporting and improving existing networks activities and their contribution to meeting rural development objectives. Such ‘adding value’ in effect becomes the underpinning objective for the Network.

6.2.5 Delivery
There are plusses and minuses in the current Defra-based delivery model and in other possible models e.g. involving varying degrees of ring-fencing or outsourcing. The other UK NRNs perceive that the RDPE NSU became more restricted and less independent when moved into Defra and it came to be viewed as an extension of the MA. It was more constrained and appeared to try to avoid stepping on other (Defra and RDPE) people’s toes. Other UK NRN’s perceive England as more bureaucratic than other Regions in its approach.

Regardless of the delivery approach favoured, there are priorities in the need for clarity and differentiation of the Network and NSU from core Defra activity, transparency over Defra involvement and clear definition of organisational and staff roles. For the website, there is a more specific identity issue as currently it is perceived to lack distinctiveness and independence from Defra pages. This compromises its effectiveness as a networking tool.

Stakeholder involvement in governance via a Network Steering Group empowered to steer Network activity appears likely to support a stronger and more independent Network identity with enhanced relevance, participation and ownership. Care is needed to select a balanced and effective membership.

6.2.6 Functions
Although the range of Network functions is obligatory the opportunity exists to prioritise those thought to offer greatest benefit. The research identifies ‘bringing those involved in rural development together’ as a priority, as are knowledge transfer elements and specifically the ‘Collecting, analysing and sharing good practice’ and linked activities such as ‘research and analysis to improve RDPE schemes, projects and results’ and ‘networking activities to support innovation’. Strong emphasis on delivery in these areas is needed.

The Network has an important role in improving RDPE delivery through improved information and access provision but is operating in a crowded field of rural development information providers. Developing and delivering a communications plan for the next Rural Development Programme is highly important but regarded as a core RDPE function. If primary RDPE communications is to be a function of the Network then this function must be clearly defined and the NSU established and recognised as the default information provider.

The Network should focus on networking and transfer of good practice with a strong emphasis on improving quality. Where another agency has taken a lead role e.g. Natural England, the Network should ensure that the linkages of agri-environment to other facets of rural development (such as tourism) are seen as a Network capacity building function.

The web presence and the information database are highly valued by stakeholders but outreach to those wishing to learn about good practice is limited. The Network seems more valued as a source of information than as a platform for knowledge transfer and exchange.
6.2.7 Summary
A major difficulty in establishing the added value and any impact of the current Network and NSU has been the deficiencies in the evaluation framework and the absence of a clear intervention logic with associated performance indicators.

Across the range of research tools employed responses showed that networking is a highly valued function, and there is an appetite for it to be expanded in future. In doing so this needs to be better targeted, more realistically resourced and more strategic in its focus. It needs to set out to actively pursue the targeted benefits in terms of participation, improved outcomes and innovation and then communicate this more widely.

The potential contribution of this to RDPE delivery and outcomes and to rural development more generally needs to be more fully recognised and resourced accordingly. Active participation needs to be extended to enhance ownership and involvement, and an improved governance structure is a priority.

In part, this recognises that despite the demise of the RDAs there remains an extensive body of networking activity taking place across rural England in and between public, private and community organisations and groups. The priority for the Network to find the appropriate niche within this whereby it can contribute most effectively and add most value to the ‘network of networks’.

6.3. Lessons for the Future
The main lessons for the future of the RDPE Network are divided into four groups, those relating to the overall objectives of the Network and NSU, those relating to the services it provides or supports, those which relate to its delivery, governance and engagement and finally an indicative performance framework is provided.

6.3.1 Objectives and Intervention Logic
The Network and NSU need to be more strategic in their approach. A much more clearly defined concept and shared vision of the Network’s strategic purpose, objectives and key functions and the links between them is required.

This requires a clear intervention logic for the RDPE Network positioning the Network and RDPE within the wider rural development context, including a specific set of networking objectives. This should set out how it will actually make a difference linking its core functions and objectives and must be communicated to stakeholders. Such an intervention logic will enable the RDPE Network to establish a reference framework that:

- Provides a basis within which to explore and respond to the needs of the various groups of rural development stakeholders;
- Links individual tasks and functions to the needs and overarching objectives; and
- Is a sound basis for observing and assessing the work of the Network and NSU.
The specific elements the intervention logic should encompass are;

- A description of the baseline situation;
- The identified needs (by target group);
- The objectives;
- The proposed inputs, tasks or activities;
- The outputs;
- The results; and
- The outcomes.

Outcomes are defined in terms of the needs addressed and assessed through evaluation in terms of any difference the intervention actually made, its extent, nature and additionality. This logic is then linked to the structures and functions for the future Network and NSU.

The core objectives for the Network are predetermined in the Rural Development Regulation, i.e. to

- Increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- Improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes;
- Inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities; and
- Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.

Although the main objectives and tasks are obligatory, those thought to offer greatest benefit to rural England should be prioritised. These include ‘bringing those involved in rural development together’ along with knowledge transfer elements e.g. ‘collecting, analysing and sharing good practice’ and linked activities such as ‘research and analysis to improve RDPE schemes, projects and results’ and ‘networking activities to support innovation’.

The specific intervention logic for the RDPE Network 2014 - 2020 should therefore be determined in relation to the overall objectives for the RDPE and the Network role and services foreseen. An example of how this might look in practice is given below in Figure 3.
Figure 3: Intervention logic model

Baseline Situation and Needs Analysis
- RDP priorities
- Stakeholder analysis
- Situational analysis
- Network analysis
- Gap analysis
- Problem definition
- Role definition
- Expected change by 2020

Target Groups
- Rural stakeholders
- Intermediaries
- Beneficiaries
- LAGs
- Rural & Agricultural innovation agencies
- Wider public
- Defra

Objectives
- Increase involvement
- Improve RDP implementation
- Wider communication to general public
- Support to innovation

Inputs, Activities
- Human, physical and financial resources
- Website
- Events
- Online database
- Facilities etc

Outputs
- Project examples
- Number of events
- Number of participants
- Number of meetings
- Number of web hits
- Number of thematic groups

Results
- Skills improvement
- Projects, more focused on programme objectives
- Programme development
- Number of new linkages
In embedding these objectives within a Network that is relevant and effective in the English rural context, it will be necessary to set out the baseline situation clearly in terms of:

- The Stakeholders to be included within the scope of RDPE Networking;
- A clear picture of the rural networking “landscape” within which the RDPE Network will operate and therefore add value most directly;
- A clear understanding of the roles of the RDPE Network in relation to other bodies and networks; and
- The expected changes and the means of measurement to be used.

Figure 4 sets out the flows and inter-relationships between these different elements.

**Figure 4: Linking the intervention logic**

6.3.2 Focus and resources
The Network should refocus on wider rural development across the RDPE by enhancing the clarity of the Network’s role, improving its profile, strengthening its co-ordination function, broadening its reach and increasing its knowledge transfer and exchange activities. This can only be achieved with substantially increased resources.

6.3.3 Services
The set of services which NRNs are expected to provide is clearly specified in the Regulation and it will be the job of the NSU to support the delivery of these. The research identified a number of priorities in terms of both what is to be provided and how that should be done.
Website
Enhancements to the website are required, given its centrality to the Network’s presence and service provision. Priorities here are:

- To strengthen its function as a one stop information source for customers; and customer orientation should be improved to make it more user friendly;
- Accessibility and searchability of resources should be improved, especially the project database which should be supplemented with easier to search best practices;
- Signposting of sources and resources needs to be clearer, particularly if the demand for a more multi-agency Network-oriented approach involving the range of delivery partners is to be delivered.

Given the importance placed on communications, accessibility and interaction as a basis for networking activity, strengthening the Networks distinct website identity and function is integral to its contribution to successful rural networking.

Knowledge transfer
There is a clear need and demand for stronger exchange of knowledge and information, particularly good practice examples of both projects and practices, of who is doing what and what is available. The Network should therefore substantially increase its activities and resourcing in relation to promoting and facilitating knowledge transfer. This should extend beyond England and the UK.

In doing so, best practice from other EU NRNs should be considered in developing more imaginative and innovative approaches to motivate, facilitate and inspire active exchange and achieve improved rural development outcomes. Specific consideration should be given to themes and target groups, e.g. theming activities for a year and employing thematic groups.

The Network should investigate and employ new tools and smart approaches as a priority. Important examples include peer-to-peer approaches such as mentoring and community coaching, using remote working methods and signposting to other relevant sources of support e.g. under other ESI funds or assisting in developing new links.

Developing rural networking capabilities
The Network and NSU needs to connect with, support and capitalise on existing networking activity in pursuit of its objectives rather than ‘reinventing the wheel’. This is particularly important e.g. in (re)establishing regional outreach and links with clusters of thematic activity e.g. upland farming groups etc.

Supporting the development of the capacity of rural development actors and organisations should be an underlying principle of NSU activities, developing this as a very distinct niche and role. In doing so it needs to be more outward looking. This should clearly take account of what others are doing in the rural development and related fields and recognise which aspects are adequately covered.

The NSU should take steps to identify skills and knowledge gaps, develop its focus on where it can best add value and work with partner organisations to address this. This will be of particular importance in connecting effectively with the LEPs and ensuring a rural development presence in their activities.
There is a specific need to develop training provision for Leader LAGs. The Network function in the provision of technical support should be a mapping and signposting one rather than a direct delivery role.

**Profile**
The Network should develop a higher profile, thereby creating greater visibility of English (and UK) rural development both at home and overseas. Ideally, this should be established through the quality and benefits of its work raising users awareness of its role and objectives. This should include stronger marketing of the RDPE, promotion of the objectives and opportunities to become involved and dissemination of information regarding the good practices and benefits it delivers. Better use should be made of the various mainstream media to disseminate positive RDPE and networking experiences.

6.3.4 Delivery, Governance and Engagement
The RDPE Network should be more strategic and user-oriented with a more coherent and adequately resourced Network and NSU support offer presented. This is essential if rural networking participation and activity is to be strengthened to deliver improved outcomes.

The stakeholder workshops considered four potential governance and delivery models for the future RDPE Network and NSU. The priorities identified for Network governance related to strengthening stakeholder buy in and sharing. These included:

- Developing more holistic participant understanding of different parts of the overall picture, breaking down RDPE and sectoral silos, contributing to greater transparency;
- The identification of ‘common ground’, collating and analysing views from different rural stakeholders in pursuit of an informed consensus;
- Facilitating more joined up coordination of the networks, getting rid of ‘Empires’; and
- Improving potential customers understanding of opportunities under the new RDPE.

Regardless of the delivery approach favoured clear priorities were identified here in the need for clarity and differentiation of the Network and NSU from core Defra, transparency over Defra involvement and clear definition of organisational and staff roles.

The Models
Four possible models were considered\(^{20}\). These examples were developed on the basis of the wider research and formed the central focus of these stakeholder events.

There are two potential in house models where the NSU would be located within Defra and two involving externally contracted delivery. All models have the potential to have an advisory or decision making steering group and to contract specialist external input or support to the extent required. The plusses and minuses of each of the four models were considered by the workshops and the findings were drawn together and compared.

**Model 1:** The NSU function is delivered directly by the RDPE Managing Authority within Defra. This was the simplest option and was thought to offer direct accountability to the public and to the Managing Authority (MA) and strong integrative potential. Negatives identified were thought significant. This model was seen to be potentially less flexible, too

\(^{20}\) These are described in more detail in the technical annex.
top-down and to lack independence with the risk of the MA being a dominant force. There were questions too over the availability of relevant skills and capacities.

**Model 2:** The NSU function being delivered by a ring fenced unit within Defra offered many of the benefits of Model 1 e.g. low costs, the direct connection to Defra and their institutional knowledge but with fewer of the negatives e.g. resources should be dedicated and protected. It was more transparent and flexible but Defra influence might constrain the perceived greater autonomy and flexibility of this model. It could be perceived as a ‘badge engineering’ exercise. Strong steering group influence would be essential.

**Model 3:** Delivery of the NSU function directly by a single consultancy or interest group offered benefits through distance from Government, independence and impartiality. It was thought to represent a ‘happy medium’ in terms of control vs flexibility. Significant risks were associated with a single contractor e.g. bias or in being a poor fit or performer.

**Model 4:** The NSU function delivered directly by a consortium of consultants and/or interest groups was thought to offer the greatest potential for stakeholder ownership and a spread of interests, especially if a decision-making steering group were employed. This model also had the greatest number of minuses and highest level of risk. The numbers of parties implied a danger of slow decision making or of the strongest voices or interests assuming control. Neither the institutions nor civic society may yet be ready for this type of approach.

The balance of evidence from the research suggests **Model 2** as the most appropriate and practicable basis for the new NSU. Appropriate safeguards are needed to ensure that it has sufficient autonomy or independence from RDPE management to pursue Network objectives. Adequate resourcing at a significantly different level will be an essential prerequisite of this; these resources must be effectively ring fenced.

The governance of the Network should involve an advisory stakeholder steering group. This appears likely to support a stronger and more independent Network identity enhancing its relevance, participation and ownership. Such direct involvement should also contribute to improved engagement and increased active participation. Over time this steering group may evolve in to a more formal decision making body as the Network develops and matures.

It will be important to ensure that the membership of the steering group is carefully selected to ensure a balanced, credible and effective membership.

The NSU should be able to contract in support services as required. It should make use of delivery partner capacity and expertise and that of stakeholder steering group organisations.

**6.3.5 Performance Framework**

A relevant and effective monitoring and evaluation framework capable of assessing the added value of networking activities is essential as part of the design of the Network under the 2014 to 2020 RDP. This was absent from the 2007 – 2013 RDPE Network.

The new Network will need to be clearly tasked, within a framework that brings together the RDR requirements along with the needs of stakeholders, the RDPE and Defra. The framework will also need to bring together the necessary focus on outcomes with a clear set of meaningful measures which track achievements. Such a Performance Framework should be founded on the following principles:
• There should be a reasonable expectation that the role established should be sustainable for the whole programme period.

• Whatever decisions are taken regarding location and functions of the Network and Network Support Unit; the Performance Framework needs to be simple and meaningful and should be kept under regular review.

• Performance should be monitored by a group that includes independent oversight.

• Data and evidence collected through the monitoring framework should be tested through ex ante, ongoing and ex-post evaluation.

A specific worked example of such a framework for the RDPE Network has been developed and is provided at the technical annex.