



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

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Summary

- The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union will have a considerable impact on the agricultural industry in Wales. Welsh Government are developing policy proposals which aim to support farmers in adopting sustainable farming practices. Their Sustainable Land Management policy framework is based on policy analysis and two consultations, and aims to mitigate the loss of support as a result of Brexit.
- We recommend learning from the experiences of Fferm Ifan, a farmer-led group, in the development of this framework. The farmers, their project manager, and their partners, should have an opportunity to contribute their scientific and experiential evidence during the design of the new Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales.
- Funding farmer-led groups can lead to implementation of more sustainable farming practices at a landscape-scale.
- High levels of social cohesion can offer a group greater levels of coherence and collective power in the policy-making process.
- Facilitation is a crucial factor in ensuring collaborative working is successful, and allowing group members to focus on implementation, as opposed to administration.
- Farming Connect, one of four schemes funded in the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, employ a network of facilitators to support farmer groups across Wales. The availability of this network should be advertised more effectively, to encourage more farmers to use the service if they would like to explore the possibility of gaining funding for a collaborative project.
- Assess the current consultation and co-design processes, and ensure workshops are appropriately advertised across the agricultural sector, to allow all those who would like to attend the opportunity to do so.
- Evaluate the successes and failures of historic agri-environment schemes, and work with farmers to develop land management solutions which will improve on previous efforts.
- Consider how agricultural and environmental policy can also deliver socio-economic and cultural benefits across rural communities.

Introduction

This report will use a case-study example to explore how one farmer-led group have responded to changing farming policy, through engaging in a participatory approach to developing landscape-scale solutions in north Wales. In doing so, it will answer the following question: How can a participatory approach to the design of collaborative, sustainable land management practices, prepare farmers for changes in the sector as a result of Brexit?

The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union will have a considerable impact on the agricultural industry in Wales. Agricultural policy is a devolved matter, for which the Welsh Government is allocated an annual budget by the UK Government; prior to Brexit, this funding was delivered through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. In 2021-2022, Wales' allocated budget is £242 million, £137 million less than anticipated (Farmers' Union of Wales, 2020). To mitigate the impacts of this loss, Welsh Government have been developing policy proposals which aim to support farmers in adopting sustainable farming practices, with a focus on payment for the production of public goods. Based on policy analysis and two consultations since the 2016 referendum, the Government has developed a Sustainable Land Management policy framework, which will provide guidance throughout this period of significant change. Their proposals are informed by the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, meaning sustainable development is at their heart, and they speak directly to Welsh Government's wider ambitions for Welsh society. Welsh Government have set out their intentions for primary legislation and ambition for reform in the Agriculture (Wales) White Paper, released in December 2020. The White Paper was out for consultation until 26th March 2021, and includes the following principle:

[The Bill] will be informed by the best available evidence - including economic, environmental and social - which will be used to assess and fully understand the impact of our proposals to reflect the Welsh context. We will be clear and transparent about our sources of data and our assumptions and we will engage with stakeholders as we develop our evidence base so they have the opportunity to help shape and inform our analysis. (Welsh Government, 2020:1)

This clear commitment to participatory decision-making reflects the recognition of the importance of public participation in environmental decision-making in several major pieces of environmental legislation (Jager *et al.* 2020). The 1998 Aarhus Convention established numerous public rights with regard to the environment around three core themes: access to environmental information; public participation in environmental

decision-making; and access to justice (European Commission, 2021). This commitment to participatory approaches comes from a desire to compensate for a 'perceived lack of democratic legitimacy and responsiveness' (Newig and Koontz, 2013: 249). It is hoped that with a shift from "government" to "governance" (Newig and Koontz, 2013: 249), environmental decision-making will be more effective. This optimism is based on several assumptions which ignore the complexity of the participatory process (Drazkiewicz *et al.* 2015). There is currently little empirical evidence on the benefits of participatory approaches, nor their outcomes and impacts (Louis, 2009; Jager *et al.* 2020). Though this process *can* lead to constructive dialogue in which it is possible to influence future policy direction (Blomkamp, 2018), it is not achieved without considerable effort to facilitate the diverse stakeholder involvement (Newig and Koontz, 2013; Blomkamp, 2018), nor can it happen without significant financial commitment (Sutherland *et al.* 2017). For a group to work together effectively throughout the decision-making progress, a sufficient length of time should be allocated for members to develop trusting relationships, through which they can establish shared norms and values (McAfee *et al.*, 2021). Through regular communication, group members build social capital and begin to appreciate the attributes their peers bring to the group (Drazkiewicz *et al.* 2015; Blomkamp, 2018). These processes are psychologically motivating (Louis, 2009): they have been found to promote collective learning (Newig and Koontz, 2013), encourage engagement in decision-making (McAfee *et al.*, 2021), and improve the implementation of policies (Drazkiewicz *et al.*, 2015).

To provide an example of how a participatory approach may deliver evidence of what works on farms in Wales, this report examines the work of Fferm Ifan, a farmer group based on the National Trust Ysbyty Estate in Conwy, who have aimed to deliver environmental benefits, and generate experiential evidence of best practice throughout the period in which they have been funded by the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS). The SMS is part of Welsh Government's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which was co-funded by the Welsh Government and a European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) grant. The SMS aimed to 'provide a stronger evidence-base for decisions and facilitate more bottom-up and adaptive working' (Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2017: 5). The group have worked on several goals with the support of a project manager and representatives from partner organisations, who were able to bring formal evidence to support the expertise of the farmers (Blomkamp, 2018). The group have been able to address problems specific to themselves in innovative ways. However, their work demonstrates the complexity of the participatory process. It highlights important issues which must be addressed if co-design is to be used effectively in agricultural policy development. This must be a design-led process, in which numerous kinds of people, and their knowledges are brought together to focus on solving agricultural and environmental issues (Blomkamp, 2018). Recommendations for how the findings of this report may be used during this

period of policy change are also provided. The following section describes the structure and work of Fferm Ifan in more detail.

Fferm Ifan

The Fferm Ifan farmer group consists of 11 National Trust tenant farmers on the Ysbyty Ifan Estate in Conwy. The group's application for SMS funding was successful, and in 2013 they became the first farmer-led group to start land management trials with the support of several partners. The SMS was funded by an EAFRD grant and aimed to 'provide a stronger evidence-base for decisions and facilitate more bottom-up and adaptive working' (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017: 5). The farmers made a decision to apply for this funding after recognising their work needed to speak to the current policy agenda, which focuses on public goods, as opposed to continuing solely with their successful lamb cooperative. It was hoped that through this funding they would be able to explore business strategies, and experiment with locally appropriate solutions, to address their concerns over future policy uncertainty, including through collaborative working (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017). During their funded period, the group have received £696,352 to carry out capital works on their farms, including ditch blocking, installing feeding pads and culverts, and planting hedges and trees. Through carrying out this work, they aim to restore the natural environment, and manage the natural resources on their land more sustainably and effectively.

The UK Government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) provided match-funding for a report on the opportunities for collaborative action to support Sustainable Intensification (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017), which allowed the group to work with the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH), and Bangor University (BU). CEH worked with farmers to support their application, identifying appropriate actions through the use of landscape typology tools, while staff at BU provided further suggestions and support with policy language. The group worked with other partners throughout the process, including Natural Resources Wales (NRW), the National Trust, Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA), and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), all of whom contributed their opinions on which issues should be addressed through the SMS, and how best the farmers might approach them.

Encouraged by Welsh Government to apply for the SMS funding after an unsuccessful Nature Fund bid, this partnership approach to working allowed the group to develop a strong application based on their ambitions for the area (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017). They were able to provide scientific evidence of the issues they faced on their land, and suggest viable solutions based on extensive landscape modelling, supported with

appropriate scientific and experiential evidence, which indicated their solutions' likelihood of success.

Methodology

Fferm Ifan were chosen as a case-study group as they were one of the first farmer-led groups to receive funding through the SMS. Participants had seven years of SMS experience to draw upon in their interviews; thus, they were able to contribute rich qualitative data for this report.

An initial, desk-based literature review was conducted to identify the key actors. Following contact with the project manager and staff at BU, in which I learned more about Fferm Ifan's structure and development, I arranged interviews with four farmers and two further partner organisations.

Eight semi-structured interviews were designed to capture participants' experiences of contributing to evidence which may be used to inform future policy. During the interviews, participants were asked to contribute their thoughts on the application process, their opinions on the potential for sustainable management at a landscape-scale, and the extent to which they felt their work as a group could contribute to the policy-making process. Recognising the importance of social capital development in participatory decision-making processes, the interviews included a section in which participants were asked to discuss their relationships with other group members and project partners.

Interviews were carried out over the phone, and lasted between 25 minutes and 86 minutes, with an average time of 52 minutes. These were manually transcribed and uploaded to NVivo QSR 12 for content analysis. Key concepts were developed from the themes which informed the interview schedules, and the transcripts coded accordingly.

Actor-Network Map

To gain an understanding of the actors involved in the group's network, and their relationships with one another, an actor map was created. This map is specific to the context of Fferm Ifan; however, it shows the complexity of a participatory system and provides a tool through which it is possible to explore the influence of information and

funding flows, and identify opportunities for positive change within the system (Gopal and Clarke, nd.). Solutions to complex environmental issues require knowledge to be shared across networks, rather than the traditional linear transfer of knowledge from specialist, to extension agent, to farmer. As our understandings of the complexity of such systems has improved, using actor maps as a way of tracing interactions between heterogenous actors has become more commonplace (Wood *et al.*, 2014; Skaalsveen *et al.* 2020).

The information displayed in Figure 1 was captured in two phases, to ensure the final map was a comprehensive evaluation of those involved in the process (Gopal and Clarke, nd.). The first involved a desk-based review of documents detailing Fferm Ifan's work and the funding they received, which allowed for a working actor-network map to be generated. This was augmented by data collected in interviews with actors identified in the initial desk-based review. During the interviews, participants had the opportunity to discuss their relationships with other actors, the level of engagement they had with one another, and the influence of this engagement.

This map is informed by the manner in which relationships are presented in documents and in the interviews; as such, it should be noted that the map may not be a completely accurate representation of the relationships depicted, nor is it possible to display the nuances of these relationships, for example, changes in power balances over time

Strength of relationships

Relationships are stronger between those actors shown in the dark grey area. These actors engaged in frequent communication, and the organisations worked closely with the farmer group, to help them develop their collective objectives and draw together an application. Those in the light grey area were rarely, if ever, mentioned by farmers in their interviews.

Type of information shared and why

The actors in the bottom left corner of the map shared information based on their scientific expertise with the farmer group, to assist them in developing their application and skills. They were also required to report back to Defra, as their work had been funded as part of a review of Sustainable Intensification (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017).

The bottom right section of the map is divided into those organisations with a statutory duty to report information back to the government, and those who, as charities, do not have this obligation. Again, these groups were responsible for working alongside the farmers, and providing them with information based on their expertise. The project manager is one of the key actors. Funded by the SMS grant, they are responsible for overseeing the group's work, arranging meetings, and reporting progress to actors across the map.

Actors in dark grey were more engaged in the group's work; with the exception of NRW, each organisation had one or more individuals committed to working directly with the farmer group. Those in the light grey did not send individuals to work with the group. These actors are responsible for making funding decisions, and ensuring those involved in the SMS process meet their statutory obligations.

Welsh Government had to provide a formal programme document for their Rural Development Fund (RDF) to the European Commission. This document provides an ex-ante evaluation of the RDF, identifies and justifies the needs addressed by the funding, and outlines proposals for scheme implementation (Welsh Government, 2019).

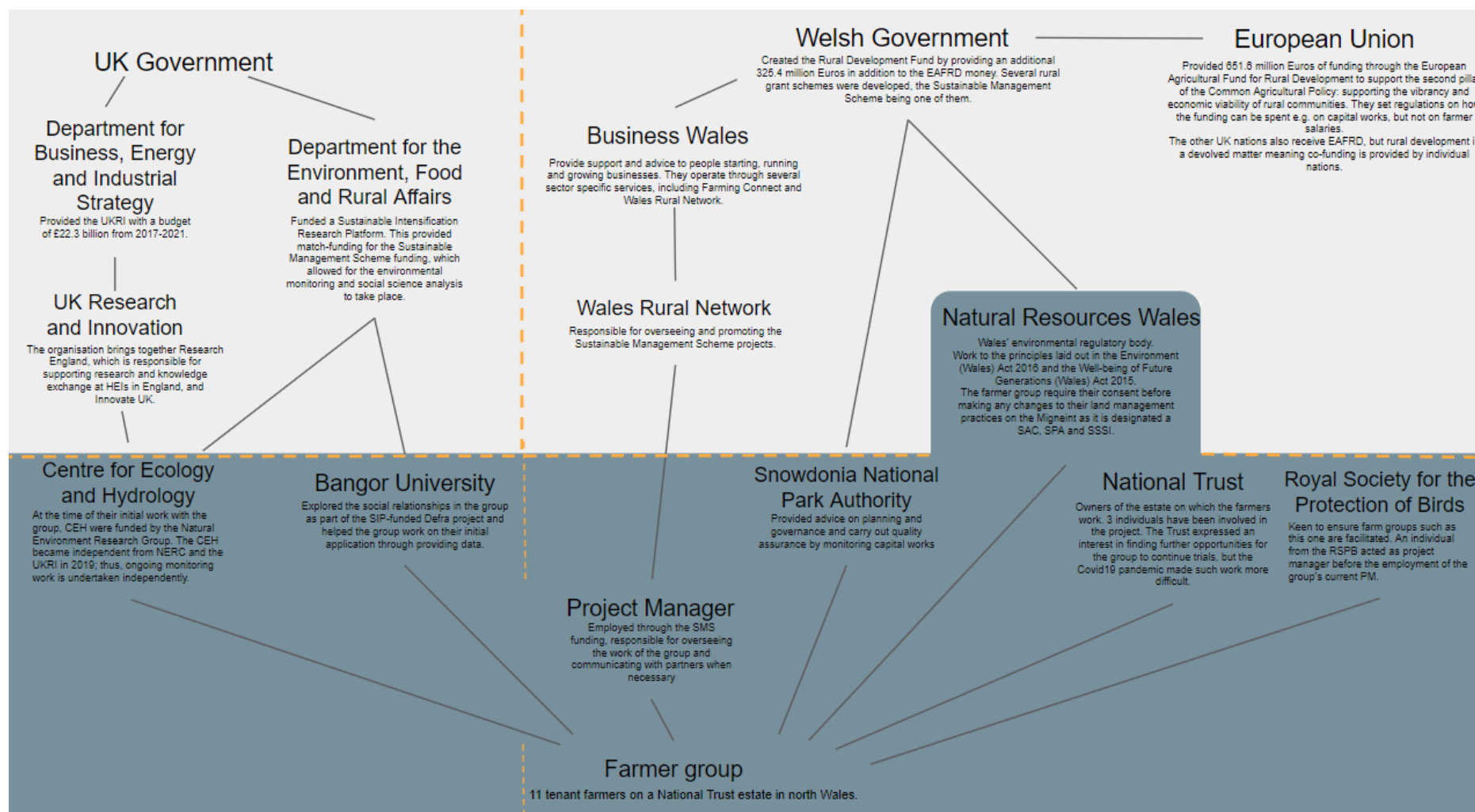


Figure 1: An actor-network map of the Fferm Ifan group, showing group partners and funding streams.

Findings

The experience of Fferm Ifan's members and partners offers a useful insight into the ways in which knowledge is generated and transferred within partnership groups. The participatory approach to identifying the key issues and potential solutions led to a significant amount of knowledge exchange, and allowed the group to pursue viable options for them, based on both experiential and scientific evidence. The impacts of social cohesion and the results of the group's partnership working are discussed in the following section.

Social cohesion in the farmer group

There is a high level of cohesion within this group, which has developed throughout the years the farmers have worked together. Having set up an Agrisgôp group in 2008 to seek better prices for their lamb, the farmers have a collective pride in their produce, and also the benefits their deal with Randall Parker Foods delivered to their local community. This deal offered both economic power, as they gained a 25 pence premium on their lamb in an otherwise difficult market, and subsequently social sustainability, as the money made through this deal was used to make charitable donations to the local school, village hall and Young Farmers Club (Wynne-Jones *et al*, 2017). These were two important benefits of their cohesion that the group were keen to continue to develop with their application for SMS funding. The collaborative work supported by SMS resources also afforded the farmers further collective power in the policy decision-making process; this power was something of which the farmers were aware, and it was something which motivated them:

It takes more time and energy to do stuff together, but the rewards are bigger, so it's a positive thing. (Farmer 4)

The coming together of this group allowed the farmers to form a coherence which made their knowledge and experience more influential in the policy decision-making process, particularly when the support and evidence provided by partner organisations was taken into account. This is important, as though it can be difficult for policy-makers to take into account a specific 'piece' of evidence, the smoothing out of nuances through processes of interaction within the group, means it may be more readily

incorporated into their assessment of the credibility and usefulness of the evidence with which they are provided (Cairney, 2017; Cairney and Oliver, 2017).

The benefits associated with high levels of cohesion extend beyond the environmental work the group set out in their SMS application. It has been shown that participatory decision-making improves social capital and cooperation, as group members establish shared norms and develop an appreciation of the skills which individuals bring to the group (Newig and Koontz, 2013; Drazkiewicz *et al.* 2015). In Fferm Ifan's case, this was evident in several areas, including: farmers and partners appreciating one another's expertise when developing the SMS application; farmers working together to implement grazing on the moorland; and, as discussed, a strong commitment to the local community, through investments designed to ensure social and cultural sustainability. The group should be recognised as one which can provide evidence, not only of what works to enhance environmental sustainability, but also how group working can deliver 'a Wales of cohesive communities' (Welsh Government, 2015). Of particular note is the importance of the Welsh language; all farmers interviewed spoke Welsh as their everyday language, and all group meetings were conducted in Welsh. The group also submitted all scheme documentation in both Welsh and English:

We were adamant as a group that because we live here, we wanted to send our application in Welsh and English. (Farmer 4)

The Rural Wales Vision (Welsh Local Government Association, 2021: 8) recognises the essential role agricultural communities will play in the maintenance of the Welsh language and rural communities' cultural heritage, as an NFU survey found 53% of farmers spoke Welsh (Woods *et al.* 2021: 47). Welsh Government (2015: 4) have made a commitment to the Welsh language, and in the Agriculture (Wales) White Paper (2020: 70) seek responses as to how they can ensure the language is treated no less favourably than English. For this to be the case, they must publish all scheme documentation in Welsh and English simultaneously. There is an assumption that people across Wales have high levels of English proficiency, but as the quotes below explain, this is not always the case, and it is vital the language used is accessible to all farmers and land managers:

People think they can all speak English just as well as anyone else, and some of them can't so it's really important to have meetings in Welsh and then having specialist scientists speaking in Welsh too, or at least speaking in layman's English. (Partner 3)

My English is quite good because I've lived in England and abroad, but some of the group find it much easier to discuss in Welsh. (Farmer 4)

Careful attention must be paid to the translation and explanation of policy specific, or scientific language, as some words may be unfamiliar to those reading the documents. A further benefit of ensuring the timely and accurate publication of documentation in both Welsh and English is that individuals are more likely to buy into the scheme options which are presented to them. Where individuals feel their values and opinions are taken into account, they are more likely to buy into the proposed solutions. Welsh is of great significance to many agricultural communities, and a policy process which is considerate of this will increase its legitimisation within rural Wales.

The level of social cohesion was not an outright positive, particularly for other farmers in the area and across the wider estate. It is here that the complexity of the group's dynamic, and the participatory decision-making process itself, is most evident. Farmers expressed a desire to keep the group closed, based on the significant amount of work which they had put into their application, and the high levels of trust and mutual understanding they had attained within the group:

A new tenant has come onto the estate and he's been welcomed into the lamb side of things, but because we were so far into the SMS we didn't want him to come in because it would change the dynamics of the group. (Farmer 2)

This is not uncommon, and the SNPA faced similar issues when setting up another group in the National Park. After taking on a project at the end of its development stage, they opened the work up to all those within the catchment, meaning the group grew from its six original members to 22. Initially, the original members were hesitant, as their relationships with the incomers were not as strong; however, the SNPA was seen as a broker, with the capacity to divide the work fairly. As owners of the Ysbyty estate, the National Trust have played a mediating role, providing justification for the funding through explaining the work which has been carried out.

These issues raise questions over the appropriate size for groups such as these. For example, many participants felt that eleven represented an optimal size in which the group was large enough to make itself heard by policy-makers, but small enough to ensure all members were able to contribute to goal setting:

I've always been keen on a smaller group, because if you have a group of 20 to 25 it's difficult to make decisions and get things done. We're eleven now, and I think that number works quite well. (Farmer 4)

With 11, it's much easier than if there were 30, there would be bound to be some who aren't comfortable. It's manageable with 11, I don't know how it would work with a larger group, would you hear all the

voices the same? With 11, I can phone them or they can phone me if they're not comfortable saying it in front of everyone and I can say it on their behalf at the next meeting. (Project Manager)

Further work should be completed to explore the credibility of evidence produced by smaller groups, and the extent to which those in larger groups have the ability to contribute their opinions to the decision-making process.

Finally, though all participants agreed it was necessary to devote an appropriate amount of time to developing relationships to ensure there was a high level of trust, their project manager suggested there was an element of 'collaboration fatigue'. Similar to the 'participation fatigue' described by Pappers *et al.* (2020), group members found the sustained commitment to a process demanding, as it required the farmers to engage with one another far more intensively than they had done in the past:

Elements of the collaboration have been good, but it is hard work to commit to everything and I'd say after 12 years of working together some people are feeling collaboration fatigue. It's taken a lot of work to reach this point and I don't think some people would ever do it again! (Project Manager)

Where groups are likely to need to collaborate for extended periods of time, it is essential collaboration, or participation, fatigue is taken into account, and appropriate exit routes are provided. Exiting the group should, where possible, be of no detriment to those who choose to do so.

Key lessons

- High levels of social cohesion can offer a group greater collective power in the policy making process. Project managers and/or facilitators must develop and manage activities and events which allow their group to develop this cohesion.
- Language is a crucial element of community cohesion and, in this case, should not be treated as a secondary point when organising events or meetings.
- Establishing collective goals toward which all group members are motivated to work increases the likelihood of their implementation.
- The size at which a group may work together best will vary depending on the individuals involved, and their goals. Facilitators should listen to their group members regarding this matter, to ensure the group stays at a size in which effective communication is possible.

Partnership working to deliver credible evidence of what works

Farmers had developed relationships with their project partners prior to receiving the SMS funding. This was essential as it allowed them to develop trust in one another:

Creating relationships with your partners is so, so important. They need to know you and trust you. (Project Manager)

Without this trust, both farmers and project partners agreed that it would have taken far longer for the project to get off the ground, and there would have been more barriers along the way. As many of the participants had worked with one another in the past, all parties were aware of one another's priorities, and found they were able to discuss issues from their point of view, without their ideas being invalidated by others at the table:

You have to appreciate some people have more specialist knowledge in specialist fields and if they have comments on things you've put forward you have to be grown up about it and say I'll defer to your knowledge and information on the subject and let you take priority on that one. (Partner 2)

When you're asking someone to be a partner in something you've got to acknowledge what they know... There's no point asking someone to be a partner and then dictating what we're going to do, the reason they're a partner is we want to learn something from their experience. (Farmer 3)

The coming together of farmers and partners at the partnership meetings allowed the group to address the limits of their individual knowledge, and created an environment in which they could ascertain the viability of proposed solutions, based on all available evidence. From discussions in the initial partnership meeting, small groups developed in which participants focused on specific areas of the group's overall plan. Though ideas from all stakeholders were discussed, the final decision to implement them lay with the farmers:

It was up to us, really. The National Park and the National Trust would support us or show caution if necessary. (Farmer 1)

We were more in control, there was a feeling we were in charge so we had to make it something which worked for us, something which we've developed personally and we wanted something out of it at the end. (Farmer 3)

Farmers reported that they had taken the majority of land management suggestions made by their partners forward, but further work is required to determine exactly how many have been continued successfully, and which were discontinued due to their potential impacts on future productivity and income. Business viability was at the heart of many of their decisions, for example, where the RSPB recommended wide riparian woodland corridors, farmers chose to plant the narrower corridors suggested by CEH, so as to retain a larger area of their productive land.

Though the SMS project was farmer-led, the partnership approach to working provided three distinct advantages throughout the process:

1. Partners were able to provide scientific evidence of key environmental issues and suggest solutions based on their data.

The group had been keen to carry out work on a landscape scale for some years prior to receiving SMS funding, having applied unsuccessfully for a Nature Fund project in 2015 (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017). Welsh Government encouraged the group to take their ideas and use them in an application for the SMS; thus, they developed their original ideas, aligning them with the SMS objectives, and drawing on their partners' scientific expertise. Farmers felt this expertise lent credibility to their application, whilst also improving their knowledge of the most appropriate approach to managing their land:

The support of the partners helped us prove a lot of things. (Farmer 1)

CEH and BU helped us with NRW constraints, with what experiments we needed and what information and data we'd need to collect.
(Farmer 2)

The modelling work was really helpful, CEH put a lot in and it was great.
(Farmer 4)

As stated, farmers were free to use the information as they wished, and discussed evidence with their partners to determine their proposed solutions' feasibility:

We provided maps of rare bird locations on their farms... then we discussed which ones might be of more interest, or more feasible.
(Partner 3)

For example, though the RSPB would have liked to focus on habitat for black grouse, this would have involved cutting dense heather on the moor. Obtaining consent for the moorland area poses particular issues, as the area is a designated Special Area of Conservation and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); thus, it was decided to pursue more feasible, on-farm options, such as improving lapwing habitat.

2. Partners provided support throughout the application process, including advice on policy language.

Despite its potential to overcome bureaucracy, through being a bottom-up scheme in which farmers can develop their own solutions, there was a consensus that the SMS application phase itself was difficult, and something the farmers would have struggled to complete alone:

The application process was more tedious than we expected. (Farmer 1)

Farmers were willing to engage, but needed support... it's difficult to know what some newer terms mean. (Partner 1)

Based on the complex nature of the application process, there was concern over the accessibility of the scheme to the general population of farmers. Fferm Ifan had advantages, in that they had worked together in the past, had a previous application to build on, the support of several partners (most of whom they had known for significant periods of time too), and a group member who had experience of working in policy:

One of the farmers used to work in policy, so they had someone who was quite well informed... that was confident in filling out the paperwork. (Partner 3)

Group members and partners alike felt that having a peer who had experience of policy was essential in getting their application off the ground. As Newig and Fritsch (2008) argue, groups must have the capacity to self-organise for approaches such as Fferm Ifan's to be successful. However, not all farmers will have access to an individual who is familiar with policy language and associated formalities. It is essential that support can be offered to those groups who may be unfamiliar with the process.

3. Partners were able to assist with monitoring environmental benefits and provide training to allow farmers to carry out monitoring exercises themselves.

Appropriate monitoring of environmental outcomes was emphasised as a desirable outcome of the SMS funding (Wynne-Jones *et al.* 2017). This was something which

partner organisations were able to assist with, and where possible, they were able to train the farmers to carry out the monitoring themselves, too:

CEH are getting some results from experiments on the mountain, they're about halfway through. (Farmer 2)

We had a morning of training from CEH on peat condition assessment, a morning of training from the National Trust on identifying vegetation and monitoring, those were very important for the grazing trials... we wanted to make sure best practice was being used. (Project Manager)

Offering training to the farmers improved their confidence in identifying the positive outcomes relating to their changing land management practices. The RSPB officer felt this was essential if farmers were to be responsible for monitoring, and suggested training modules could be offered through Farming Connect.

NRW and the SNPA also provided important input regarding governance and quality assurance. In many respects, NRW remained an arms-length partner, responsible for providing consent, and ensuring the work complied with regulations. Often, a different individual would be sent to the partnership meetings, which presented some cause for concern. Farmers and partners were 'reliant on getting the staff that know what's on the ground' (Partner 2), to ensure their worries over the divide between theories or modelling, and practical implementation, were appropriately addressed.

Key lessons

- If a group is to succeed, sufficient time *must* be allocated to developing trusting relationships. Where this does not take place, communication will not be as effective, and there will be a lack of understanding, which is detrimental to the way groups work as a whole (Drazkiewicz *et al.* 2015; Blomkamp, 2018; McAfee *et al.*, 2021).
- Facilitation is essential (Blomkamp, 2018). Having an individual through which communication is channelled reduces stress and allows all parties to focus on achieving their goals. More can be made of the existing Farming Connect funded facilitator network in Wales; the opportunity to work with a facilitator should be advertised more widely to encourage the development of more farmer-led groups.
- All stakeholders must be given the opportunity to present their views (Drazkiewicz *et al.*, 2015). Everyone involved in a partnership must be aware that others are there for a reason, and their expertise should not be dismissed. Scientific and experiential expertise should receive equal treatment.

- The application process remains bureaucratic, and thus for some, inaccessible as they lack the capacity to engage with the process (Newig and Fritsch, 2008). Further support should be offered during the application stages, to ensure schemes are accessible to all.
- There is the potential for farmers to carry out an increased level of self-monitoring, but this must be supported by appropriate training and certification, where deemed necessary.

Impact on policy decisions

Group members played a proactive role in setting their collective goals and found they had ample opportunity at partnership meetings to explain how they could make the suggestions, based on scientific evidence and modelling, work for them. With the support of their partners, the group established a level of authority, which allowed them to effectively question some of the decisions made for their farms. This was important in overturning decisions which had been made under old agri-environment schemes, such as Tir Gofal and Glastir, particularly regarding stocking rates. On one occasion, the group succeeded in arranging a visit from NRW staff to discuss the impact of cattle grazing on the Migneint. With the support of an advisor from the National Trust, the project manager was able to demonstrate how their proposed way of working would benefit the moorland far more than if they continued to do so under the current restrictions imposed as a result of the area being a SSSI:

We had a lot of trouble putting cattle up on the mountain, getting NRW to let us do that, they didn't want to listen to start off with... but X from the National Trust was very good at getting the message over to them, they came out in the end to see the places we were going to put cattle on, but it took maybe a year for that to happen. (Farmer 2)

NRW were slow giving us consent, they were very cautious, and after they had the regulations they put on us were quite heavy, they wanted to rotate the cattle in so many exact days, it wasn't realistic. But when they came up to see, they understood that our suggestion could be best. (Farmer 3)

This visit highlights the potential for experiential knowledge to be used in improving land management practices, and also led to increased satisfaction for the farmers and their partners. Farmers felt the same was true with other partner organisations, commenting that 'the people higher up don't understand' (Farmer 2), but those working locally understand the specific on-farm issues, and are able to provide solutions which

have an increased chance of working on the ground. Some partners explained how they had encouraged the group to directly involve NRW earlier in the process, to ensure their chosen actions would receive consent. Despite this, the group's practical successes from several years can be noted. And when the evidence generated from the continued research, and monitoring carried out by partners, is also taken into account, it is possible to form a consensus on what works when farmer groups are asked to deliver environmental benefits. As the farmers have been involved in the whole process, from the application to the implementation and knowledge sharing stages, they are all more confident in their ability to understand, and contribute to changes in policy.

Though there are positive examples of changes to address the impact of previous agri-environment schemes, there are still issues on which the group and their partners have been unable to reach a consensus, such as the management of heather on the Migneint:

On the mountain there's heather everywhere, it's about a metre high in places, such a fire risk. RSPB want to burn it, National Trust say we aren't allowed to touch it and NRW don't say a word... they want us to graze to make it better but it's a very poor place for things to go, it's worthless for the sheep, they'll congregate on the best bit and then the rest of it's overgrown, you move the sheep to where the big heather is, but they won't stay there because there's nothing there to eat unless you burn or cut the heather. (Farmer 2)

This area of land has several designations including Special Protection Area, Special Area of Conservation, and Site of Special Scientific Interest. Its designation as a SSSI means it is legally protected, and management must be carried out in accordance with NRW's site management statement (Evans *et al.* 2008). Heather management is a complex issue in itself, and NRW state 'burning is best avoided' (Evans *et al.* 2008: 16), though cutting may be appropriate (Evans *et al.* 2008: 23). However, this plan is now over a decade old, and much of the statements regarding grazing relate specifically to sheep as the 'overwhelmingly favoured agricultural livestock' (Evans *et al.* 2008: 43). As shown by the agreed change in grazing practices above, particularly regarding the use of cattle, there may again be something which can be learned through visiting the site and discussing appropriate options with the farmers involved in the SMS grazing trials. Though this represents a difficult issue to manage, the lack of communication on NRW's behalf has led to it being increasingly difficult to resolve, as other groups try to press their chosen agenda.

There was evidence of partners seeking to inform other organisations' policies. The SNPA were keen to be involved to 'balance things out', and not allow other

organisations to 'dictate what they wanted to see happening' (Partner 2). The staff member described how farmers found the SNPA easy to operate, due to the trust they had developed whilst working together for many years. The organisation was keen to support the group's SMS aspirations. In another example, the RSPB encouraged those working for the National Trust not to follow the Trust's overarching policy of planting as many trees as possible across their estates, as this would have a detrimental impact on curlews. The same is true for hedge planting. In this case, the RSPB made it clear that despite the positive effects of hedge planting on run-off and soil erosion, there were instances where the models provided by CEH should not be followed, as they would, again, be detrimental to bird populations, and that whilst hedge planting was an attractive option for many of the farmers, this alone would not be enough to enhance farmland bird habitats.

The project manager has been in communication with members of Welsh Government regarding the group's work. Though there was some initial scepticism about whether the group working approach would work, contacts were impressed with Fferm Ifan's achievements, and there have been discussions regarding the positive elements of their experience, from which key recommendations will be taken forward:

We had really good chats with him, he wanted our perspective on collaboration on a landscape scale, how did we work together to get the environmental benefits they wanted to see?... I think the Government believe in us and I think what we're doing is something they'd like to replicate in other places, I know other farmer-led groups have since been accepted. (Project Manager)

This direct line to government has been critical in ensuring the group's work reaches those responsible for future farming policy in Wales. However, as a new agri-environment scheme is developed, more must be done to ensure a diverse range of stakeholder voices are given attention, and there is a continued commitment to collaborative projects. This is particularly true of the consultation process, as farmers currently feel their opinions are not given due consideration; this fuels distrust in the process. One group member also expressed concern over the ever-changing policy direction, and the high turnover of staff responsible for policy development. This has become a particular issue in the agri-environment policy arena, as the specific outcomes of any changes to land management practices can only be measured after a considerable period of time and, as with the Migneint, they are not always as desired. With the policy focus potentially shifting every four years, it is difficult for farmers to make the best decisions for their business, as any changes they do make to suit the current focus will cost both time and money. This group member felt that whilst it was all well and good they had had opportunities to share what they had learned through

working collaboratively, there was scepticism over the lasting impact this new knowledge would have in government.

Given their experiences of the consultation process so far, farmers also have concerns over the extent to which new farming schemes can really be co-designed, suggesting that organisations were more likely to have their voices heard in the process. However, this does not corroborate with the experience of the SNPA officer who had been invited to a co-design workshop as a farmer, but is yet to be invited to a discussion group as a representative for the SNPA. This raises concerns over how, and to whom, co-design discussion groups are advertised. As shown in Fferm Ifan's experience, having individuals and organisations involved from the outset ensures their buy-in for proffered solutions, and increases the chances of implementation. Those involved in the consultation meetings want to see specific changes as a result of their feedback; this is something farmers do not feel is currently possible, given the belief that the current documentation for the new agri-environment scheme is lacking in detail.

Organisations must be willing to re-examine their position in the face of evidence from improved ways of working, such as NRW changing their legislation to allow Fferm Ifan to graze more intensively. This is essential in cases where regulations are over a decade old, as our knowledge base has moved forward considerably during this time. It is possible for forms of evidence to come together to form a consensus and for this to lead to emergent practices in which stakeholders feel happy to partake. Through offering farmers, land managers and other stakeholders with an interest in the future of land management a forum in which they can share their evidence, it is possible to forge a new pathway for land management policy which bears both experiential and scientific knowledges in mind.

Key lessons:

- The outcomes of historic agri-environment schemes must be evaluated, and changes made to policy where the desired outcomes have not been achieved.
- For complex environmental issues, site visits should be considered. Stakeholders should be able to present experiential and scientific evidence to support their case for changes in land management, and demonstrate how and where they would implement such changes on the ground.
- Ensure a viable communication channel exists between project managers and/or group facilitators and the Welsh Government, so reporting is a straightforward process.

- If further experimental schemes are to be trialled, consider making use of Section 22 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, and suspend statutory requirements for such schemes (Welsh Government, 2016: 13-15).
- Policy and environmental systems are asynchronous. Those involved in the design of agri-environment policies should ensure policy frameworks remain flexible enough to accommodate changes in our environmental understanding over time.

Conclusion

It is clear the Welsh Government and their legislative partners are making a commitment to a more inclusive, participatory decision-making process, particularly as they work towards the goals laid out in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. This commitment is promising, as this case study shows there is much to be learned from participatory approaches provide groups an opportunity to use *their* expertise, be it experiential or scientific, to influence policy, and construct an emergent practice which is attractive to all stakeholders. Fferm Ifan's Sustainable Management Scheme work provides a good example of evidence bearing actors coming together to forge a pathway for sustainable land management, which works in the specific local context. Though the environmental results of their work remain to be wholly determined, the group's commitment to implementing more sustainable farming practices is commendable. However, as Sutherland *et al.* (2017) maintain, this is an expensive process, and the importance of the SMS funding cannot be underestimated; were it not for money to fund capital works and the role of project manager, the farmers would have found it difficult to carry out work of this scale.

Their experience shows that participation works when all those involved have ample time to build relationships based on trust, and group members share a collective vision. Providing stakeholders with several opportunities to bring their knowledge into the conversation is important, but where possible, organisations should ensure the same individual attends partnership meetings, to ensure trusting relationships can be developed. As Farmer 3 suggested, the group had developed a programme of work, from the bottom-up, of which they were proud, and in which they wanted to invest time. This way of working stands in contrast to the prescriptive nature of national schemes, and allows farmers to adapt their work to suit the specific conditions of their local environment, an essential condition if schemes are to respond to what works and ensure the best possible outcome.

However, there are also clear examples of the barriers which must be overcome for participatory design to work effectively, and in such a way which ensures participants

are willing to implement the solutions proposed. These include having the capacity to respond to calls for participatory decision making (through group member knowledge and the support of their partners (Newig and Fritsch, 2008)); bringing together a group of stakeholders who agree on the overall environmental goals, and who are willing to commit to working towards them (Drazkiewicz *et al.* 2015); and ensuring schemes are not excessively bureaucratic. Finally, Welsh Government must ensure that if farmers are involved in the co-design of the new Sustainable Farming Scheme for Wales, that this process does not function merely as a smokescreen but serves as an open, engaging, and well-advertised process, to which all farmers are able to contribute. The results of this process should be used in a meaningful way to inform policy, rather than being used symbolically to justify existing policy decisions (Newig and Fritsch, 2008; Newig and Koontz, 2013). Participatory approaches are often criticised for low levels of implementation and inferior environmental outcomes (Drazkiewicz *et al.* 2015). Despite the success of the scheme, the sustainability of the changes carried out as a result of the group's experiments remains to be seen. On the whole, both farmers and partners demonstrated an increased understanding of how their actions will benefit the environment.

The group and their partners should receive financial support to continue the monitoring and evaluation processes to further investigate the environmental outcomes of their work. Equally important is the sustainability of the social and economic outcomes of the group; again, these should be monitored to ensure any potential negative impacts, such as those relating to collaboration fatigue, can be effectively mitigated.

Recommendations

This is a time of significant change in Wales' agricultural policy. The exit from the EU, and particularly the constraints of the Common Agricultural Policy, leave the country with an opportunity to design a policy which is considerate of the different needs and values of farming communities across Wales. When doing so, Welsh Government and their partners should:

- Evaluate the successes and failures of historic agri-environment schemes and work with farmers to develop land management solutions which will improve on those available in previous schemes.
 - Recognise the environmentally beneficial work that farmers have already carried out through other schemes, such as the SMS or Glastir. A farmer

should be eligible for payment, whether they are maintaining features or installing them for the first time.

- Learn from the experience of Fferm Ifan. Give the farmers, their project manager, and their partners, an opportunity to contribute their scientific and experiential evidence during the design of the new agri-environment schemes in Wales.
 - Focus on trials which explore payment for ecosystem services mechanisms, to ensure farmers are paid for the work they carry out and funding is not earmarked for contractors only.
- Explore ways in which the agricultural policy framework can meet the asks of the Welsh Local Government Association's Rural Wales Vision.
 - Consider how agricultural and environmental policy can also deliver socio-economic and cultural benefits across rural communities.
 - Realise the potential for farmer-led groups to work with partners to deliver on the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act goals, particularly A prosperous Wales, A resilient Wales, A Wales of cohesive communities, and a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.
- Assess the current consultation and co-design processes, and ensure workshops are appropriately advertised across the agricultural sector, to allow all those who would like to attend the opportunity to do so.
- Make better use of the existing Farming Connect facilitation network, and advertise its availability.
 - Assess the accessibility of scheme application processes, and simplify them where possible. Provide ample application support for farmers who require it.

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