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Executive summary

The Northern Rural Network is an active learning network, founded in 2000 by the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University. The NRN's aim is to promote learning and understanding of contemporary rural development issues and to provide a forum for networking amongst rural development practitioners.

In April 2008, the NRN entered its' third phase in the form of a three year project, funded primarily by the Northern Rock Foundation, One North East (ONE), and Newcastle University.

In 2010 Women in rural Enterprise (WiRE), was commissioned to evaluate the impact of the NRN 3rd phase, 2008-2011. This evaluation has been undertaken in 2 stages, and combines an overview of previous studies and existing evidence, with an impact evaluation based on a membership survey and follow-up interviews.

The NRN has, since 2007, had five stated objectives:

- To provide an independent forum to promote learning and understanding of contemporary issues and challenges facing rural development in the North
- To showcase applied research from within the North and beyond, to inform analysis of the current state of rural economies and communities in the North
- To facilitate the exchange of best practice and highlight innovation in rural development
- To provide a forum for networking amongst rural development practitioners, including public, private and voluntary sector bodies, and including post graduate students
- To use the dialogue within the NRN to shape new academic and applied research agendas in the North and beyond.

This study looked for evidence that the NRN is meeting these objectives as well as the outputs required by the project; in addition to seeking to identify, characterise and quantify any impacts arising from its work.

Conclusions of the Review of Existing Evidence

The review of evidence collected by the NRN for phase 3 shows it to be a highly successful learning network that has visibly met the targets and expectations of its three key stakeholders; the University, NRN funders and its membership.

For the University it has successfully created an influential outlet for strategically important Knowledge Transfer (KT) and forum for Knowledge Exchange (KE). The Network has heightened the profile of both the Centre for Rural Economy and the University in a positive way, showcasing high quality KT provision from within the University to its membership.

For the NRN funders, particularly for ONE, the NRN has delivered the output requirements of increased membership and attraction of rural businesses in to the Network. It has also broadened its reputation and prominence both within and without the region as a Rural Development Centre of Excellence and adhered to the ONE requirement to do so by using the "latest research, theories and practise on knowledge transfer to the benefit of the rural economy".

For the membership, the NRN has delivered a programme of events which are held in high regard and rated by participants as well organised, with excellent content and giving access to high level information and expertise. This high satisfaction level is corroborated by the high attendance rates at most events and the number of people willing to travel to NRN events from outside the region.

Impact Evaluation Conclusions

The online survey had a return rate of 17% and a sectoral profile broadly in line with that of the membership database. Additionally, although baseline data was not available and the on-line survey covered only the period 2008-11 in the detailed questions; respondents are likely to have drawn on their total experience of the NRN going back to their first contact in answering the more open-ended questions. This is especially valuable as ten years is a more realistic timescale than three in the search for ripples of neo-endogenous impact. As such, we feel confident in drawing some broad conclusions from the data provided by the online survey.

The survey provides abundant evidence of both the quantity and quality of the output generated by the NRN during the period 2008-2011.

NRN events are highly regarded and well-attended. Both through the events and the website the NRN gives access to academic research, reports and information and the survey demonstrates that members are making use of this access in downloading documents.

The membership feeling towards the NRN is very positive and they find the events to be of high quality. They attach high value to the access to high level information and current thinking on the subjects covered that the NRN provides.

The value placed by the membership on the NRN's role in providing a forum for cross sector networking is strikingly demonstrated by the Wordle word clouds generated from the narrative sections of the survey, an example of which forms the front cover of this report. The NRN performs an overarching role, particularly across the North East region, connecting "rural." It serves to provide rural practitioners from across all sectors, with networking opportunities and access to current thinking from leading academics and practitioners across regional and sectoral boundaries.

Successful knowledge transfer (KT), is clearly evidenced in the survey results. In addition to the KT taking place at events, over half of respondents claim to have read CRE publications and policy documents (63% and 50% respectively); and 17% to have engaged in R&D with the CRE (16% with the wider University).

As such it provides an ideal flagship for the CRE and the wider University. As a result of contact with the NRN 36% of these responding to the survey had accessed expert advice from CRE and 27% from other departments. Similarly 57% had attended other events across the University

In terms of the positive impact of the NRN activity and outputs, we have identified positive impacts of three types. These are benefit or gain to the individual, their employer or business which is: Financial, either directly or indirectly; Non financial but tangible and specific; Non financial, tangible but non-specific.

Financial impacts are reported at a low but consistent level. These include: time saved, new business gained, business growth and changes in work practice. It is interesting to note that even where there is a clear

financial value to the benefit reported, for example “new business gained”, this is not always recognised by the respondent.

Non-financial but tangible and specific impacts included accessing information, helping develop or implement policy and helping research and development. Examples of these emerged in the narrative sections of the survey and three are presented as case studies (Knowledge Transfer, Neo-endogenous development, Research agenda and Knowledge Exchange).

The third category of impact, non-financial, tangible but non-specific is variously recorded by most respondents to the survey. Members of the NRN feel positive impacts in terms of professional development, making useful contacts and social benefits (personal and community). This positive feeling towards the NRN and feeling of having benefited – of knowing more and of being connected – is a striking feature of the survey responses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this evaluation study has found the NRN to be meeting its own stated objectives and to have met the targets and objectives set out by the funders of Phase 3. There is clear evidence of impacts and ripples of neo-endogenous development arising from the activity and outputs of the NRN.

The NRN has clearly been successful and should continue to be supported, championed at the highest levels and maintained. However the model that it currently operates may need to change, given that the political climate for public sector funding has changed. Precisely where and how this support will evolve remains unclear, but is likely to dictate the emphasis of any future alterations. Notwithstanding this, we would strongly urge that the key strengths of the NRN should be central to its next phase. The findings presented in this report should inform the future business model of the NRN. In particular the findings that members of the NRN value the network very highly, but not in financial terms and that the NRN creates substantial value in terms of Knowledge Transfer and reputation for both Newcastle University and the North East region.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Matthew Taylor Seminar and Local Activity Follow Up

High Impact – Knowledge Transfer(research) neo-endogenous development

Background

On the 23rd July 2008, Matthew Taylor, author of 'Living Working Countryside: The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing' submitted his report, at the request of the Prime Minister, to the government.

On the 25th September 2008, the NRN organised a day seminar at the Centre for Life, Newcastle upon Tyne, focused around rural housing and invited Matthew Taylor to speak to his report. The format of the day was organised to hear Matthew Taylor, supported by invited responses from representatives covering the environmental (CPRE), the social (CRC) and the economic (CLA) aspects of rural life. This was followed by a panel discussion and dissemination of overview of community led planning from both a national and local perspective that was followed by an 'open space' for participants to question and respond.

The seminar was developed to provide and disseminate important, current information to those involved in the implementation of rural planning, building and housing policy at a grass roots level upwards. As identified by Matthew Taylor, the attending participants were critically 'place shapers' - those that implemented and empowered others at ground level to 'shape places'. Equally important for him was that the participants were also 'policy shapers' in so far as the place shaping cannot be achieved without shaping the policy. To that end, his attendance was to an extent premised on the ground level feedback responses to the report in order to encourage the 'Whitehall decision takers' to implement the recommendation based on received ground level or grass roots responses (NRN, 2008). The seminar agenda provided that process to be facilitated.

It was then developed by the NRN a stage further through the staging of 3 subsequent local development activity workshops with a group of invited 'place and policy shapers':

22/4/09 Kirkharle, Northumberland

03/07/09 Hamsterley village Hall Durham

26/01/10 Newcastle upon Tyne

Process

This case study concentrates on the outcome of the event in Northumberland which brought together 'representatives from land-owning, planning and community interests to talk about the implications of the Matthew Taylor Review and the Government's response to this review for rural Northumberland' (NRN website, 2010).

Case Study 1 *contd.*

Professor Mark Shucksmith presented research that further contextualised the Matthew Taylor review and provided workshop case study materials for discussion and exploration of the implications at a local level. Subsequent reporting of the event evidences that the participants found this knowledge transfer process very empowering. The NRN event report of the follow up event noted an overall positive response to the event with participants recorded as commenting that the event leaves those taking part

“in a great position to do something. They don’t do this kind of work very often. Is there a role for informal networks like this elsewhere in the country or beyond?”

Clearly participants felt informed and enabled also commenting that

“this is a very good model of different people coming together, with Chatham House rules. NRN is independent, credible, an intermediary, in a forum not driven by sectoral interests. In developing ways of working, trust is important and may not be there if ‘controlled’ by one organisation”

The NRN in response were able to report that

“A note of the event will be taken to the Commission for Rural Communities Board meeting next week. The CRC has its own housing task group- tackling housing during the credit crunch”

Neo-endogenous development – Community Action Northumberland

A key participant at the event was Community Action Northumberland (CAN). Who have been “proactive in supporting community-led social housing solutions in Northumberland's villages” from the early 1980s having recruited in 1989 one of the first Rural Housing enablers in Britain, through to 2004 when lack of funding precluded further development in 2004. Following this, in Northumberland, the attention of partner organizations then moved to the market towns and CAN as a smaller community group became less of a focus in rural housing matters.

Case Study 1 *contd.*

The observation of CAN was that the

“events which focused on the Matthew Taylor report were a timely reminder that the social housing needs in the villages within the North-east were largely being ignored, and that the need was as strong as ever for expert and independent community-focused Rural Housing Enablers, who could work in an even-handed and authoritative way, between community groups, parish councils, landowners, local authorities, housing associations and funders.

In effect, the NRN events gave us and our fellow-Rural Community Councils the resolve to re-establish a Rural Housing Enabler service in the North-East” (David Francis, 2010)”

As a result of the initial seminar, CAN began discussions with regional staff of the Homes and Communities Agency and the National Housing Federation in early 2010 to re-establish the post of a rural housing enabler. Unfortunately the new government's financial cutbacks and structural reforms have delayed any further developments, but CAN remain “hopeful that we can make further progress in 2011”.

The effectiveness of the process of dissemination and knowledge transfer to the right audience in the right way is a powerful working example of the critical role that the NRN plays in local development.

References Case Study 1

David Francis, Community Action Northumberland 14th December 2010

Northern Rural Network, 2008. Matthew Taylor presentation
<http://www.northernruralnetwork.co.uk/archive/matthew-taylor-review> accessed 22/12/10

NRN MT Event Northumberland
<http://www.northernruralnetwork.co.uk/archive/matthew-taylor-follow-up-event> accessed 22/12/10

Living Working Countryside: The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing Published 23 July 2008, ISBN 9781409803287

Case Study 2:

The North East Tranquillity Study, and the 2006 National Tranquillity Mapping Project.

High Impact Outcome – Cross sector academic research

One of the main features of the NRN is the coming together of individuals with a general interest in rural development and specific areas of interest and expertise. There is certainly a “feeling” and some evidence that this can lead to innovative cross sector working and new areas of research being commissioned. During 2003 and 2004 attendance at various NRN events led to conversations, contacts and a new idea of what might be possible amongst individuals working for the then Countryside Agency (CA), the CPRE and academics at Newcastle and Northumberland Universities.

This dialogue led to research being jointly commissioned by the CPRE North East and the CA, with co-funding from the NE Assembly, Northumberland National Park Authority, Northumberland Strategic Partnership and Durham County Council. The study was carried out jointly by the two universities. This research developed an innovative new methodology to assess and map the relative tranquillity of rural areas based on public experience, established through participatory appraisal and then mapped with powerful GIS techniques. The North East Tranquillity Study then acted as a pilot for a wider national study – the 2006 National Tranquillity Mapping Project.

Huw Davies, now Programme Manager Transforming Biodiversity Delivery for Natural England and Andrew Baker, of Natural England’s Landscape Monitoring team (in 2004/5 Natural England was part of the Countryside Agency), were two of the individuals involved.

Huw Davies recalled “It was contact at the NRN that led me to assisting Andrew Baker who ran the Countryside Quality Counts programme at the Countryside Agency, to develop this work with CPRE & Newcastle/Northumbria.

“This led to spin-off research in the North East, the NE Tranquillity Study, and the Project it led onto namely the 2006 National Tranquillity Mapping Project.” (Huw Davies 2010).

Whilst this research was led and largely carried out by the universities, both projects involved cross-sectoral working groups and a significant degree of partnership between the respective organisations. This cross-sectoral work was significantly enhanced by the cooperation established through the regular contact of individuals facilitated by meetings of the Northern Rural Network.

References Case Study 2

MacFarlane, R., Haggett, C., Fuller, D., Dunsford, H. and Carlisle, B. (2004). *Tranquillity Mapping: developing a robust methodology for planning support*, Report to the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Countryside Agency, North East Assembly, Northumberland Strategic Partnership, Northumberland National Park Authority and Durham County Council, Centre for Environmental & Spatial Analysis, Northumbria University.

Jackson, S., Fuller, D., Dunsford, H., Mowbray, R., Hext, S., MacFarlane R. and Haggett, C. (2008). *Tranquillity Mapping: developing a robust methodology for planning support*, Report to the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Centre for Environmental & Spatial Analysis, Northumbria University, Bluespace environments and the University of Newcastle upon on Tyne.

These reports can be accessed at:

<http://www.countryside-quality-counts.org.uk>

Case Study 3:

Rural Strategy for the Hull and Humber Ports City Region

High Impact Outcome - Knowledge Transfer

In June 2009 the Humber Rural Partnership launched the Rural Strategy for the Hull and Humber Ports City Region. The development of this strategy was aided specifically by the academic work of the Centre for the Rural Economy at Newcastle University and more generally through a background of discussion and information gained through participating in NRN events.

The main piece of work used in developing the strategy was Midgley, Ward and Atterton - City Regions and Rural Areas in the North East of England, CRE May 2005.

Humber Rural Pathfinder Programme Manager Colin Walker, one of the strategy authors' commented: "This was useful in my general analysis in the Strategy section 1.2 "Why Should a City Region have a Rural Strategy", and is referenced there.

"It was particularly valuable in its insights into new living and working patterns, rural-urban interdependencies and counter-urbanisation. This thinking was central and critical to the rationale for preparing the H&H Ports CRRS.

"It gave a sound academic basis to the thesis we were expounding, and meant that our analysis that "the challenge of achieving sustainable economic growth while maintaining an acceptable level of high quality environment" must inevitably lead the City Region to consider the assets inherent in its rural areas"

"As well as this, I and colleagues have attended a number of CRE hosted seminars in which these kinds of ideas were discussed in some detail, and in more specific sectoral terms. These also provided very useful background info and context. Clearly the exposition from people like Neil Ward, Mark Shucksmith, Philip Lowe and others all proved highly informative and useful in the above respect." (Colin Walker 2010).

References Case Study 3

City Regions and Rural Areas in the North East of England, Midgley, Ward & Atterton, Centre for the Rural Economy, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, May 2005

Rural Strategy for the Hull and Humber Ports City Region, Humber Rural Partnership, June 2009, available at www.humberruralpartnership.org.uk

