



4th April 2023

Response by PLANED, to the Consultation Post EU Regional Development Funding

As a community development based charity that has delivered for over 34 years, initially in Pembrokeshire, and now across wider Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire as well, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee on the consultation & inquiry into post-EU regional development

PLANED has been fortunate to have been successfully awarded the responsibility of the EU LEADER Funding programme previously for Pembrokeshire, and administer this key grant to support innovative, community led projects.

The ability to support the development and implementation of over 67 local projects awarded funding in the last round of funds, enabled the distribution of funds across a broad range of projects, whilst also helping to retain and develop a highly knowledgeable, and community focused team within PLANED by the end of the Programme in 2021-22.

Having this level of skills and expertise within the work of communities, that was independent of local government, embedded within key local projects, and connected to other grass roots independent local organisations, provided confidence, security, and assurance for our communities, as PLANED, and others, became the "First Sector" within communities for support, across West Wales.

However, the loss of the longer term EU Funds, has resulted in a greater transience of personnel, as the short term nature of funding within the wider voluntary and third sector across Wales, in which organisations do not have the wider cash flow or reserves of the public sector to support them, results in all staff being placed on short term and fixed contracts. This therefore does not promote or support the retention of many exceptionally skilled and knowledgeable personnel to work with our communities, as within the current challenging economic climate, people need longer term security in terms of employment and their own personal finances, and so are looking for any permanent roles that arise, rather than the fixed term roles which may better meet their skills.



What has worked well so far:

At the time of writing we have been through the UK Community Renewal Fund, and have just completed the application process for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and therefore awaiting decisions on project bid submissions.

With the focus at county level for the new rounds of UK Government funding, this has enabled a more localised approach, and enabled the potential for a larger number of smaller community led projects, to have an opportunity to draw down the funding for their own projects.

The focus on local award of funding within counties, has also to some degree, helped to promote a greater collaboration amongst community organisations and projects, to work together on joint bids, in order to demonstrate value for money in the outputs to be delivered within and across communities.

Projects which had previously been thought of, as a, “would be nice to do”, suddenly had the ability with funding from UK level, to become realised and delivered.

Similarly, those projects or elements of, from previously EU funded projects, were able to have an opportunity to demonstrate the lessons learnt and evidence of change needed, to continue to be funded for key elements that would become sustainable, or make a positive change within communities.

What has been less effective so far:

As above, at the time of writing, PLANED, alongside many others, have just completed the submission of project bid proposals for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund after a three week window in which to complete all the necessary paperwork required.

Whilst many people bemoaned the volume of paperwork and detail required for EU funding, many, have also found the quantity and level of detail required for the Shared Prosperity Fund particularly, both overly rigorous, tiresome, and questionable. Is there really a need for a series of 9 spreadsheets to be completed, where one example of which is 75 columns by 85 rows? Is this necessary, and how are community projects and groups, who rely only on volunteers spare time & goodwill, are expected to have the knowledge, patience, and willpower, to even contemplate completion of this supposed, required undertaking?

Another challenge which has resulted from the county led fund promotion, is the increased competition now generated between community focused organisations. Whilst there are those who have proactively embraced collaboration to maximise deliverable opportunities for communities, it has also seen other community organisations withdraw from open dialogue, and see protectionist



and a sense of delivery vagueness pervade any discussions openly on SPF, as if unwilling to share their routes and plans for application.

This lack of transparency in sharing of intention whilst understandable to protect the larger county focused community organisations and their staffing, also then does not enable the culture of collaboration which our communities should see, in realising the benefits of what is meant to be “shared prosperity”, even at a local county level.

Processes and Timescales:

The timings associated with the funding has also been more challenging than enabling, with the sudden announcements of funds opening with little notice, creating additional tensions.

Although each Local Authority promotes and controls the funds available at a county level, there is no promotion of regional opportunities in the wider sense genuinely, to enable cross border working and collaboration on sectors and deliverables which are demonstrably already delivered on a regional footprint. Therefore, some community led organisations such as PLANED, will in theory have to amend three separate but relatable bids to three different county funding pots, to retain parity of opportunity for those communities.

However, for not just PLANED, but other long established and embedded community led organisations such as PLANED, the risk to all our communities without greater clarity and opportunity to promote and apply a regional application, is that one or two counties out of the three, may lose out should that Local Authority decide not to fund what another one of two may do so out of the three LA’s in this example. Therefore, how fair is it then, in that what should be a regional positive deliverable in terms of a project, may then benefit only half of its intended population and client base due to the inflexibility and separatist nature of the funding applied only in the main, at county level?

Also, the increasing frustration with many community led organisations, who do not have the resources and support functions of the wider public sector in Wales, is that whilst we only had three or so weeks to complete all the considerable paperwork to submit our project applications and bids, the same courtesy of timeframe does not appear to be intended to be applied in respect of consideration and award of funding.

Fully appreciating the challenges to colleagues within our local authorities, possibly the national SPF guidance and framework also needs to potentially look at providing more depth of resources to be made available to the existing small grants teams within our county councils, to support them provide the same urgency in response, as they expect from us in the submission of bids.



Challenges & Opportunities:

The opportunities from these funds have already been highlighted, in that they do allow the continuation of sorts, of both service delivery, and retention of skills & expertise within organisations. For communities who rely on the independent and trusted resources outside of the wider and more bureaucratic (in their opinion) public sector organisations, these projects and their teams are most valued and trusted delivery partners who can demonstrate greater flexibility and innovation than larger organisations.

The challenges are consistent in the lack of longer term funding being promoted and made available. Whilst for both CRF and SPF, this was not originally promoted as being the case, the subsequent delays in release of guidance, confirmation of funding amounts, and support for local authorities in their administration and facilitation of the funds being challenging time wise, have resulted in the delivery windows be likely half, of what they could and should be.

The further challenge for those project deliverables within a more restricted timescale, is for some community organisations, looking to deliver over multiple seasons for example to allow benchmarking and comparative data to be collated, is that this is no longer viable, and therefore, not providing sustainable community benefits potentially.

Conclusion:

Whilst replacement funding for that from the EU is both welcome, and necessary, the promotion and release of the funding from national to local government, does not prove to be effective.

In order to properly support our communities here in West Wales, and continue to address their well-being needs and requirements, the timescales of the funding being made available needs to be much longer, and released much sooner, otherwise the funding becomes a 'sticking plaster', and not allow the delivery of innovative, sustainable, community led solutions that benefits all.

With kind regards,

Iwan Thomas

Prif Weithredwr PLANED Chief Executive

