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Analysis for Policy



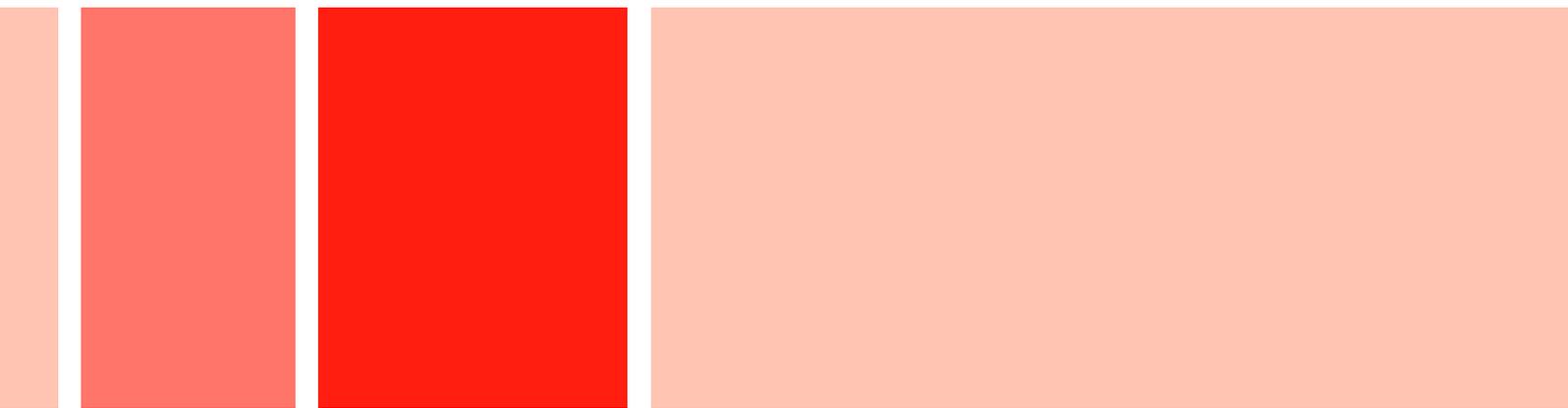
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Vibrant and Viable Places Targeted Regeneration Investment Process Evaluation - Executive Summary Report



**Vibrant and Viable Places
Targeted Regeneration Investment
Process Evaluation
Executive Summary Report**

Report author: Steven Donbavand / Wavehill Ltd

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

For further information please contact:

Jane Richards

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

Tel: 02920 823781

Email: regenerationpolicy@wales.gsi.gov.uk

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Executive Summary

Background

1. 'Vibrant and Viable Places' ('VVP') is the current regeneration policy framework of the Welsh Government. All VVP programmes are administered by the Homes and Places division of the Welsh Government. There are six distinct investment programmes within the VVP policy framework, but this evaluation focuses on the flagship VVP Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) programme. The programme has awarded £100m of capital funding to 11 areas, to be spent over a 3 year period. It has focused on deprived Town Centres, Coastal Communities and Communities First Clusters. TRI projects are selected to reverse market failure through transformational place-based regeneration delivered by local partnerships.

Aims of the study

2. This study evaluates the current TRI process. As such, the research does not consider the *outcomes* of TRI, but rather focuses on the design, management and delivery of the programme.

3. Specifically, the study looked to:

- Review the programme design
- Review the set-up and implementation of the Programme
- Review the project delivery structures and models
- Learn lessons to inform future programme development:

Methodology

4. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as there are many aspects of this research which are exploratory and the research covered some complex themes which deserved a nuanced description. There were three stages to the research:

- a. A review of key documentation
- b. The development of an Evaluation Framework
- c. Interviews with stakeholders

5. Researchers spoke with 54 stakeholders in the summer of 2015, either in small groups or through one-to-one interviews. Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were undertaken. The research encompassed

Internal stakeholders:

- Members of the Welsh Government Homes and Places Division leadership team and Welsh Government internal stakeholders from other departments (5 interviews).
- Welsh Government Homes and Places Division Regeneration Managers (9 interviews).

External stakeholders:

- Local authority staff and their partners which received TRI funding (10 visits (29 individuals) + 1 written submission).
- Representatives from local authorities who were not successful in the TRI process but received smaller awards under the 'Tackling Poverty' and 'Rural' themes (8 interviews).

Findings

6. The research produced the following findings:

Understanding of the programme

- Although the principles which underlie VVP were well understood, there was some confusion about which specific initiatives the VVP name applied to, outside of the flagship TRI process.

A focused placed-based approach

- Many external stakeholders felt that budget cuts created a requirement for the more targeted approach seen with TRI.
- There was generally an appreciation amongst external stakeholders that focused spend allowed for a more transformational holistic approach.
- However some internal stakeholders felt that regeneration funds could go further if used tactically in smaller amounts. These stakeholders argued that it might be beneficial to keep a small amount money aside to allow Regeneration Managers to respond to market opportunities or prevent market failure.

Principles used to allocate funding

- Most external stakeholders broadly supported the more transparent and objective allocation process which VVP had brought but delegation of decision making to regional-bodies also held an appeal for many stakeholders.
- The principle of directing regeneration spend at 'opportunity' as well as 'need' was accepted by many external stakeholders, but some internal stakeholders had doubts that VVP had achieved the correct balance.
- Some local authorities responsible for large rural areas felt that the premium placed on 'opportunity' was to their disadvantage.

The application and assessment process

- Internal stakeholders indicated that they would have liked to have been better informed of how proposed projects related to other policy areas, either by having time to consult with colleagues or through greater detail in the application documentation.
- The two-stage application process was popular in principle, but many external stakeholders felt that competitive pressures resulted in Stage One becoming more involved than intended.
- The level of planning required in Stage Two was welcomed by projects which had received large amounts of funding but felt to have been disproportionate for those who had received smaller amounts. Internal stakeholders involved in the assessment process felt that the level of detail provided by applicants had been helpful in assessing the bids.
- Stakeholders would have liked more time to complete the level of planning required in Stage Two, especially given changes to the scale and focus of the bids.
- There was a perception that changing political priorities within Welsh Government had steered the assessment process.
- The logic behind partial awards of funds to an unexpectedly large number of local partnerships was not understood by some stakeholders.

Planning

- Some of the project plans made during the application process contained many unknowns and rough estimates.
- There was a perceived conflict between forming an actionable plan at the application stage and writing a document which could win the award.
- Some stakeholders reported a 'feel-good factor' in the area after the award has been won. These stakeholders felt that there may be benefit in allowing more time for local partnerships to further exploit this momentum and potentially make additional partnerships or attract further investment.
- Local partnerships would generally favour a more elongated and guided planning process.

Project management

- External stakeholders felt that the administrative requirements had been excessive, especially for projects which had received relatively small awards.
- The excessive paperwork was partly felt to be due to the inherently complex nature of TRI projects, but stakeholders also reported that changes to the reporting requirements had created additional work.
- The administrative burden was exacerbated by local authority budget cuts and there was some confusion over whether project managers and administrators could be employed using TRI funds.
- The evaluation output measures were thought by most stakeholders to be appropriate but some felt the focus on outputs may miss more qualitative outcomes and fail to account for context and mitigating factors.
- There was a feeling that the TRI process did encourage innovation, but that excessive accountability requirements may hinder innovative approaches
- Local partnerships asked for more autonomy to change the details of their projects.

Partnership working

- External stakeholders described partnerships which had been formed or strengthened through their involvement in VVP, particularly between local authority departments, with housing associations the most mentioned external partner.
- There is room for further innovation in the types of partnerships which are formed, particularly with service providers.
- There were mixed views from stakeholders about whether regeneration partnerships between local authorities should be encouraged.
- Some progress had clearly been made in coordinating VVP with other policy areas at the national level, but there remained a perception that this could be improved, particularly in regards to other award programme.