

Written Evidence from Mentera

ARFOR – Delivery Insights, Lessons, and Recommendations

1. Executive Summary

Our role: We contributed to the design and delivery of ARFOR interventions spanning inspiration and careers, enterprise development, challenge-led investment, and community activation across the region.

We specifically delivered the Challenge Fund (Cronfa Her) and Llwyddo'n Lleol (in partnership with Menter Môn), therefore our comments will mainly focus on our lived experience in these two strands, as well as our experience of being part of the delivery partnership.

What worked:

- The vision behind ARFOR deserves real recognition. Since its inception, clear effort has been made to ensure that each of the four counties received appropriately tailored support.
- A regional, place-based strategic approach that recognises the distinct needs of rural and urban communities – especially where economy and language intersect.
- Llwyddo'n Lleol (careers/placement and campaign) exceeded initial placement ambitions and showcased ARFOR as a place to live and work very effectively.
- The Mentro initiative (enterprise cohorts) attracted more applicants than could be supported, showing a clear demand for entrepreneurial support. With light touch finance, new Welsh-speaking businesses were created or given the confidence to grow.
- Cronfeydd Her ARFOR (Challenge Funds) enabled innovative, cross-sector solutions to regional challenges, strengthening the economy-language link, with an emphasis on partnership working.

Key challenges:

- The short-term and stop-start nature of the programme created unnecessary uncertainty for staff, delivery partners, and beneficiaries.
- The programme's complexity risked spreading objectives too widely and increased risk of duplication in delivery.

Top recommendations:

- Socio-economic interventions require long-term stability and a consistent policy framework. This must be central to the design of any future support. It is also important to acknowledge how much was achieved with what was a relatively modest budget.
- Give programme greater long-term certainty through longer funding commitments, allowing for more strategic planning, to protect capacity and help build momentum.
- Simplify the offer (e.g., a single Challenge Fund; clearer brand direction), with distinct objectives for commercial vs community activity.
- Retain and refine Llwyddo'n Lleol (building on the success of the Mentro initiative), and community activation (Bwrlwm ARFOR / Cymunedau Mentrus) with enhanced follow-up and measurement.
- Consider extending the programme to include other Welsh-speaking heartlands, for example north Pembrokeshire, Bro Ddyfi, Ponsenni.

2. Introduction

About the Organisation: Mentera is Wales' leading independent business development company, a not-for-profit with a track record spanning 36 years and a turnover of over £20 million.

We help small and large businesses to grow and prosper whilst supporting and encouraging people to set up new, innovative businesses. We achieve this across Wales by providing high-quality tailored services, and by utilising our staff's expertise, our physical presence across the country, as well as our partnerships and contacts in industry and government.

Four of our five offices are in the ARFOR region and many of our 160 staff live and work in these communities.

Scope of Submission: This evidence summarises delivery insights, outcomes, challenges, lessons, and recommendations from our lived experience of delivering on ARFOR, including proposals for its long-term success.

3. Overview of ARFOR Delivery

Objectives (as implemented):

- To strengthen the relationship between the economy and the Welsh language, supporting vibrant communities where people can live and work in Welsh-speaking areas.

Activities Delivered:

- **Llwyddo'n Lleol (Marketing, Inspiration & Careers):**

A marketing campaign encouraging people to put down roots or return home to the ARFOR region by promoting local employability, enterprise and family support, and challenging the stereotype that success requires leaving the region. Supported individuals acted as ambassadors, sharing strong real-life examples.

The campaign was underpinned by four initiatives:

- 1. Mentro Initiative (Enterprise Cohorts):** Group-based training, expert support and seed funding for new enterprises; demand exceeded capacity.

- 2. Gyrfaol Initiative (Employment Opportunities / Placements):** Funding for work placements with local employers. Against a target of 40, the initiative placed 56 individuals across 49 businesses. County officers also facilitated social activities to showcase ARFOR as an attractive place to live and work.

- 3. Profi Initiative:** Employability resources and sessions for schools and colleges, highlighting Welsh-medium local job opportunities and building employability skills, with potential for mainstreaming.

- 4. Ymgartrefu Initiative (Resettlement):** Financial support and advice to encourage families and young people to return to the region.

- **Cronfa Her (Challenge Funds):**

A mechanism for piloting innovative responses to regional challenges through cross-boundary, cross-sector partnerships, with the aim of strengthening the link between the economy and the Welsh language. Applicants were encouraged to submit joint proposals, as collaboration and partnership working were integral to the project's design.

- **Cymunedau Mentrus:**

Business grants aimed at creating high-quality jobs and increasing the everyday use of the Welsh language within communities.

- **Bwrlwm ARFOR:** A communications programme designed to raise awareness of the ARFOR programme, promote local businesses, and generate a sense of energy and enthusiasm (“buzz”) across the ARFOR region.

4. Evidence of Impact

The recent [independent evaluation](#) of ARFOR 2 by Wavehill noted the following:

- High levels of satisfaction from participants (69% very satisfied with support received under Llwyddo’n Lleol, and 71% for Enterprising Communities).
- 68% of participants reported that the support had raised their business aspirations.
- 250–330 jobs created (although this is also caveated because of the risk of displacement elsewhere in the region).
- 78 new businesses created (60 from Llwyddo’n Lleol and 18 from Enterprising Communities).
- 48% increase in the number of businesses assessing Welsh language capability as part of recruitment process.
- 59% of programme participants reported that the programme had given them confidence they could achieve their aspirations without having to move away.

Other quantitative outcomes:

- 56 young people placed; 49 businesses engaged under the careers strand – surpassing the original target of 40 placements.

Other qualitative outcomes:

- Campaigning and event presence challenged stereotypes and raised awareness of viable local futures, helping position ARFOR as “a good place to live and work”.
- Enterprise cohorts: strong participant demand, with many requesting deeper follow-up – evidence of a readiness to start/grow businesses with light-touch finance and coaching.

- Challenge Funds enabled collaborative problem-solving across multiple sectors and borders, aligning economic vitality with language outcomes.

Success Factors:

- Place-based design with regional coordination worked well.
- Flexible pilot ethos (test, learn, iterate) should be encouraged further.
- Cross-sector collaboration (Challenge Funds) creating practical solutions in sectors including food, agriculture, creative industries, hospitality, sport, education, digital tech, and communities.

5. Challenges and Barriers

Programme Design:

- Complexity across multiple strands/funds (e.g., separate funding programmes, different marketing campaigns) caused confusion; simplification recommended.
- Short delivery windows limited longitudinal follow-up and outcome measurement.
- Broad aspirations for the programme meant that limited funding was spread too thinly, risking impact of the interventions.

Delivery/Cross-cutting:

- Lack of financial continuity reduced ability for long-term approach and limited impact.
- Stop-start approach disrupted delivery and made staff retention more challenging.
- Communications: Brand awareness of ARFOR is low and further diluted by multiple sub-brands/strands of work. Need to clarify the ARFOR brand direction and re-package elements of Llwyddo'n Lleol more clearly for audiences.

External Context:

- Uncertainty over the future of the SPF, which local authorities have depended on for ARFOR transition, amplifies the need for a more

proactive and long-term approach to supporting the most rural and deprived communities.

6. Lessons Learned

What Worked Well?

- The vision behind ARFOR was innovative and deserves recognition. Clear effort was made to ensure that each local authority area received appropriately tailored support. A lot was achieved in a small amount of time and with relatively small amounts of money, through innovation and collaboration.
- Campaign plus placements approach (Llwyddo'n Lleol) is persuasive and scalable and provides a clear call to action and incentive; event presence drives visibility and aspiration.
- Cohort based enterprise with microfinance unlocks participation; there is clear appetite for post-programme 1:1 support.
- Challenge led investment is one of ARFOR's most innovative features and yet it has been difficult to quantify impact in the timescale. Future programmes should look to retain the pilot/innovate ethos to address structural challenges but include long-term and effective evaluation methods from the start.

What Should Change Next Time?

- Longer-term funding and strategic planning allowing for greater impact, certainty and better outcomes.
- Consolidate funds and differentiate objectives for commercial vs community activity.
- Build systematic follow-up (placements, enterprise cohorts, resettlement) to track long-term outcomes and cost-effectiveness.
- Mainstream "Profi" employability content into education pathways; embed early entrepreneurship exposure ("start your own business") across schools/FE/HE and into professional tracks likely to become self-employed.

Policy Implications:

- Socio-economic interventions require long-term stability and a consistent policy framework. This must be central to the design of

any future support. It is also important to acknowledge how much was achieved with what was a relatively modest budget.

- A regional strategic plan (six years) is needed to align language planning, rural development, and the foundational economy, with early mobilisation to achieve long-term, cross-programme impact.

7. Recommendations for Future Funding and Programme Design

Recommendation 1: Consider a longer-term strategic plan to tackle the socio-economic challenges facing Welsh-speaking heartlands.

Rationale: These are long-term and deep-rooted challenges that require longer-term focus and behaviour change based on research and evidence.

Recommendation 2: Retain and refine Llwyddo'n Lleol (campaign + placements).

Rationale: Demonstrated demand and outcomes (56 placements; 49 businesses). Expand targeting outside Wales while sustaining ARFOR wide awareness; embed structured longitudinal tracking.

Recommendation 3: Scale the Mentro Initiative with follow-on 1:1 support and microfinance.

Rationale: Oversubscribed cohorts indicate latent entrepreneurship; add modular post-programme support (business planning/marketing) and regular application windows.

Recommendation 4: Consolidate the Challenge Funds into a single fund.

Rationale: Reduces confusion, improves communication, and enables a portfolio of innovative, cross-sector pilots targeted at regionally prioritised challenges.

Recommendation 5: Distinguish commercial vs community objectives across funds.

Rationale: Position the Challenge Fund for commercial/market innovation; use Cymunedau Mentrus/Bwrlwm ARFOR to resource community and cultural activation that nurtures belonging and Welsh language use.

Recommendation 6: Maintain an innovation mindset.

Rationale: A conservative approach would run counter to ARFOR's founding principles; continue to pilot, trial, and invest during transition to prepare for scaled, strategic interventions from 2027 onwards.

Recommendation 7: Simplify programme, branding and strands.

Rationale: Clearer messaging and packaging will improve stakeholder navigation and uptake. There is a need to mitigate the risk of duplication between the marketing functions of Llwyddo'n Lleol and Bwrlwm. Llwyddo'n Lleol's core purpose was to deliver a marketing campaign, and its objectives overlapped with Bwrlwm's when promoting local opportunities and success stories. Note that the recent independent review commissioned by the Welsh Government and conducted by Wavehill states that '*Llwyddo'n Lleol is possibly the strongest element of the ARFOR programme*'.

Recommendation 8: Build early-stage entrepreneurship and employability into education.

Rationale: Career patterns are increasingly portfolio-based; introduce "start your own business" content and mainstream Profi within secondary and post-16 pathways.

Recommendation 9: Confirm and extend the transition period (≥ 12 months, ideally longer).

Rationale: Protects staff capacity, avoids provision gaps, and maintains momentum while designing a six-year strategy; aligns with electoral timing and delivery realities.

8. Conclusion

ARFOR has delivered momentum and innovation across career pathways, enterprise, and community activation, linking economic vitality with the Welsh language. We stand ready to provide further data and oral evidence if helpful.

With simplified structures, and a six-year strategic plan mobilised early, the next phase can consolidate gains, deepen impact, and offer strong value for money for rural and Welsh-speaking communities.

There is a need to streamline and focus ambitions and objectives, simplify the programme and embed evaluation and follow-up to fully understand long-term impact.