

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

[Inquiry into EU funding opportunities 2014–2020](#)

Evidence from Gwynedd Council – EUO 16

Via e-mail: [enterprise.committee@wales.gov.uk](mailto:enterprise.committee@wales.gov.uk)

31 January 2014

Inquiry into EU funding opportunities 2014–2020

Dear Dr Siân Phipps,

I hereby submit Gwynedd Council's response to the Enterprise and Business Committee's inquiry into EU funding opportunities 2014–2020.

We are extremely pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and to convey our experiences, as a local authority, in dealing with a number of these European structural funds. We believe that other local authorities will have general experiences to share, and we trust that these will be conveyed via the response of the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). In support of this response, I would like to draw particular attention to what we regard as some of the main issues.

Experience of funds

Over the years, Gwynedd Council has been involved in a number of the programmes cited in the inquiry. Historically, a number of partnerships have developed between the council and a number of other European organisations through various territorial cooperation programmes aimed at sharing experiences on issues relating to democracy, governance and bilingualism. In addition, our education department has historically been active in setting up links with various schools in European countries in order to share experiences and arrange educational visits through programmes such as Erasmus+, and this work continues to be carried out periodically. Nevertheless, it should be noted that participation has been a somewhat random affair historically, as specific departments happen to receive information about relevant opportunities.

Supportive steps have also been taken in the past to facilitate town and community access to the Europe for Citizens fund. This has contributed significantly to the facilitation of meetings and educational exchanges between twin towns in Gwynedd and across Europe. Unfortunately, the council's capacity to provide intensive support in this area has been curtailed.

More recently, the council has been implementing an element of the Outdoor Tourism project, which is funded through the Ireland–Wales Programme 2007–13, along with Conwy Council, the Outdoor Partnership, Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown County Council, Kildare County Council and the Kilkenny Leader Partnership. This has been a very powerful example of how territorial cooperation programmes can be used for the benefit of all partners, and discussions have commenced on the potential for continuity in the next programmes.

#### Support and challenges

Aside from the specific examples referenced above, we have not, as a local authority, participated a great deal in these programmes recently for a number of reasons. There is no dedicated point of contact in north–west Wales, and local awareness and information about the programmes is therefore low. As budgets contract, the authority's focus is on targeting structural funds, and our officers are concentrating on these. Our European team tries to disseminate relevant information about cross–boundary opportunities among local contacts as appropriate, but time and information levels are low. Often, information about opportunities is received at short notice and with extremely tight deadlines, and opportunities are therefore certainly lost at a local level.

Historically, a lot of work has gone into developing the bids. Our experience is that a lot of support is needed at a local level to ensure that the information is correct, to find the right partners, to secure joint funding streams, to ensure the participation of different departments and external organisations, and to establish and implement any relevant structures when the bid is successful. Our experiences have been mixed in that sense; a lot of work has been put into some bids, with varying returns.

Moreover, a few exceptions notwithstanding, Gwynedd Council has historically been a partner in cooperative projects rather than leading on them. This is due to the additional burden that is imposed on lead bodies in cross–boundary projects.

## Benefits and opportunities

With the correct knowledge and leadership at a local level, we feel strongly that positive benefits may be derived from being active in relation to these programmes. With the right partners, we have seen benefit in sharing experiences and best practice in order to solve some problems with sustainable solutions. A number of strong links have been forged with other European areas, and these contribute to our cultural, social and economic enrichment. For example, in the Outdoor Tourism project implemented under the Ireland–Wales programme, we have seen huge benefits in working with comparable organisations in Ireland to gain access to expertise in other areas across Europe through educational visits and through the appointment of professional consultants in the Outdoor sector. This has allowed us to develop a robust programme of support for this growth sector locally, thereby offering new and more sustainable employment opportunities in the area. The cross–boundary element has allowed us to develop a high–quality offer in a relatively short space of time through early sharing of information and implementation experiences with our partners.

We feel strongly that there are firm opportunities in relation to a number of these programmes for the 2014–20 period; in particular, we could mention Creative Europe, European Citizens, Connecting Europe and Horizon 2020, as well as Interreg. As domestic and European budgets tighten, we need to look at other, more innovative ways of operating. As a result, more pressure will be placed on mainstream funds such as structural funds, and we will need to look at funds that have historically been underused in Wales. This also means that local authorities' financial forecasts will place further pressure on their ability to take up these programmes. With resources likely to dwindle in the future, securing information and support at a local level is vital.

## Findings

Our experiences across these programmes over the years have been mixed. On the whole, our experience of the programmes has been far more beneficial in cases where time and resources have been available to ensure their effective implementation and where the benefit for each partner has been identified from the outset. Where the correct support and resources are in place locally, we feel that

there are firm opportunities for further uptake of these programmes in the 2014–20 period.

Further to the issues that have been addressed previously in respect of the importance of securing the correct resources at a local level to facilitate uptake, ensuring the flow of information about these opportunities to regional and local organisations is vital. We understand that a number of programme elements are already being promoted by different organisations in other parts of Wales, but we believe that there is an obvious gap in north–west Wales. We should ensure that information about all European funding opportunities is available in an easy, timely and clear fashion for Welsh organisations and individuals.

In Wales, we now have a golden opportunity to ensure an integrated approach towards the implementation of all European funds. As developments relating to mainstream programmes mature, we have opportunities at a national level, through the Welsh Government and the Welsh European Funding Office, to facilitate access and the flow of information relating to all of these programmes, as well as offering funding opportunities to support and bolster the value of programmes in their entirety.

Sincerely,

Sioned E. Williams

Pennaeth Economi a Chymuned / Head of Economy & Community