

What About The Mid-Term Evaluation?

*A summary of the Mid Term Evaluation of the
Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme*

2007-2013

Introduction & Context

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-2013 was established to help rural communities meet the changing economic environment. It is worth over £500million.

What Is The Purpose Of The Summary Report?

The Mid Term Evaluation of the NIRDP 2007-2013 was compiled in June 2010 with information which was available at that time. The document amounts to over 300 pages. This summary report, developed by the Rural Network for Northern Ireland, is designed to give an overview of the full report, including main findings and recommendations, so that readers gain an understanding of what's in the report without having to digest the entire document.

What Is The Programme About?

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-2013 was established for the benefit and enhancement of all rural areas. It is just one of 94 different Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) across Europe. It aims to protect and enhance the rural environment and contribute to the development of competitive and sustainable rural businesses and thriving rural communities.

The programme in Northern Ireland is worth over £500million across four axes: Farming and Food - £50m; Environment and Countryside - £350m and Rural Life - £100m. In total it represents one of the largest ever investments in rural communities in Northern Ireland. In context over €230 billion will be invested in European Union (EU) rural development projects and initiatives during the period 2007 to 2013.

What Is The Mid Term Evaluation?

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 is now at the mid-point stage which means we are half way through the programme. The figures in the report are accurate up to June 2010.

Why Is A Mid Term Evaluation Required?

Like all EU regions we have to report on our performance. It is also a useful way of looking at the achievements so far and considering possibilities to improve the way the programme is being run.

What Are The Challenges?

It is anticipated that gloomy future budgets may affect the programme and have a serious detrimental impact on the willingness and ability of banks to be able to lend funds to match those from the programme. There is some evidence that the economic outlook has made rural dwellers and those in the farming community cautious about expanding, diversifying or considering new business start ups.

A large proportion of the rural economy focuses on agriculture. Some of the challenges facing this sector include modernisation of activities and improvement of skills. Although these challenges will not be easily addressed they in turn provide opportunities and could be dealt with positively through the funding and guidance provided by the current programme.

The lack of value placed on education and training by rural dwellers needs to be addressed so that the potential for new private businesses can be realised and opportunities seized. Areas for potential include tourism and services which need to be developed to enable sustainable future businesses. Ensuring that the Local Action Groups encourage and promote spend in their areas is paramount. The claim process needs to be smoother and less bureaucratic.

How Is The Programme Performing?

At the stage of the Mid Term Evaluation, June 2010, the Programme had made good advances in implementing the measures across all three Axis however many projects were still in the early stages of implementation. Progress in Northern Ireland is in line with the performance of other UK regions.

At the end of June 2010 the Programme has had the following impact:

- Over £192 million of expenditure has been made. This is 34 % of funding for the period.
- Projects have been supported across all of the Axes and across all of Northern Ireland.
- Almost 5,000 individuals have participated in training under Axis 1.
- Over £16 million has been invested in the food processing sector under the Agricultural and Forestry Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG) Scheme.
- Over 1,000 farm businesses have adopted new plant, machinery and equipment to modernise agricultural holdings.
- Over 13,000 holdings have been supported in areas with handicaps, covering almost 520,000 ha.
- 12,600 holdings are currently contracted to the agri-environment schemes, covering 468,000 ha of land.
- There have been 356 new entrants to the forestry schemes supported under the Programme.
- £9 million in value of grants (based on letters of offer at June 2010) has been committed under Axis 3 and the LEADER approach.



What Are The Main Recommendations For The Programme?

The Mid Term Evaluation has indicated a series of recommendations which need to be acted on to ensure that the Programme is on target to deliver real impact to rural beneficiaries. The tables attached give more detailed proposals from the main report however some of the key recommendations are as follows:

Programme management is crucial to its successful performance therefore there is a clear need for DARD and the Programme Monitoring Committee to show strong leadership and guidance to those delivering the programme.

The main area of concern is around Rural Life Axes 3 and 4 where expenditure accounts for only 3% of allocation. Spend needs to be increased here and it is recommended that DARD undertake a review of the current LEADER 'bottom up' delivery structure which is not operating as desired.

The Rural Network Northern Ireland (RNNI) has proved to be a crucial and respected part of the Programme - this position should be maximised in the future. DARD need to re-engage with target groups e.g Women and Young people, Youth Groups, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, Young Farmers to ensure the programme remains inclusive.

Where Can I Get A Copy Of The Full Report?

This short summary is an outline of the main findings and recommendations of the Mid Term Evaluation. The full report is available on the Rural Network website www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk and on the DARD website www.dardni.gov.uk or in hard copy format by contacting DARD on **028 9052 4999**

And What Of The Future?

As the Mid Term Evaluation was carried out in June 2010 and published in November 2010 many issues have become apparent and others have been resolved since then. There have been several main elements which have progressed including:

Several measures have moved forward with calls for opening in Axis 1 including Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme (PMG) which has reopened and has a Measure allocation of £21.5million and a third tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme worth £4.1million which will reopen in 2011.

DARD has responded to some of the barriers to Axis 3 and has tasked the Rural Network for Northern Ireland to review 4 key areas relating to issues associated with spend, match funding, self implementation projects, structure and best practice. The Rural Network for Northern Ireland is scheduled to present on findings at the end of June 2011.

NIRDP 2007-2013: Recommendations MTE for remainder of NIRDP 2007-2013

Please note this is only the summary of the recommendations taken directly from the Mid Term Evaluation Final Report. For a better understanding of the rationale and context in which these are made, it is recommended that the full report is reviewed. The full report is available on the DARD website www.dardni.gov.uk or the Rural Network site www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk

Application Processes	1) It is recommended that delivery bodies seek to maintain and improve on the current customer service levels, and continually review procedures to ensure the highest levels of satisfaction in the client base. This may include enhancing the initial application form, stating clearer rules of eligibility and providing more information about what will be required from successful applicants in the future implementation of their projects.
Target Groups	2) It is recommended that contact should be made again with Youth Groups, such as the Young Farmers Club of Ulster (YFCU), with a view to making the Programme more inclusive for this target group. Views should be sought on what issues / barriers affect them. This should also help shape how future Programmes can address these issues. 3) It is recommended that the Managing Authority should consider how the Rural Network and various implementing bodies can utilise their expertise and reach within target groups to promote the Programme more effectively. 4) It is recommended that the Managing Authority should give consideration to giving particular focus to younger farmers for the remainder of the current Programme through Axis 1, as a way of encouraging younger people into the farming side of the Programme. 5) It is recommended that the Managing Authority and Implementing Bodies re-engage with the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) with a view to exploring how the Programme can be more inclusive for females.
Axis / Measure Specific – Axis 1	6) Measure 1.1 Vocational Training and Information Actions – It is recommended that in the future the Farm Family Options – Mentoring scheme is actively pushed forward, with the measure leaders working closely with the delivery agent in this regard. 7) Measure 1.2 Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability – It is recommended that the future of the schemes are clarified by the Department as soon as possible. It is recommended that every avenue is explored in ways in which the schemes can carry forward for the remainder of the programme, including whether the delivery partner, Invest NI, can possibly move forward alone. 8) Measure 1.4 Supply Chain Development Programme - There is a clear need for the management associated with the Programme to ensure that the measure is making the necessary progress in the near future. It is recommended that the measure is further marketed and progressed.
Axis / Measure Specific – Axis 2	9) Measure 2.3 First Afforestation (forest expansion) – It is recommended that the measure should endeavour to further promote the benefits of forestry schemes, especially the benefits of agroforestry, with a view to achieving the targets set. 10) Measure 2.4 Forest Environments – It is recommended the measure should further promote the benefits, with a view to achieving the targets set. However it is noted it may be prudent in the future to re-assess the level of support, and corresponding targets, should the low uptake persist.
Axis / Measure Specific – Axis 3/4	11) Measure 3.1 Diversification into non-agricultural activities – It is recommended the Department monitor closely the perception that saturation levels may be occurring in relation to diversification in this Programme. 12) Axis 3 - It is evident that all of Axis 3 will need to be progressed in the immediate future, to ensure that the rural area gains from the multiplier effects the measures can bring. 13) Axis 4 (Cooperation) - It is recommended that the Department fully utilise the Rural Network Northern Ireland (RNNI), with their relationships at a UK and cross border level to drive the trans-national aspect of the Programme forward.
Axis Specific Targeting	14) It is recommended that targets are re-visited in autumn 2010, once the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) has been published, and when more data are available for Axis 3 measures. It is recommended that the Department take this forward as part of their ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities associated with the Programme.
Programme Objectives And Priorities	15) It is recommended the Managing Authority commission or undertake an MTE update in 2012, to ascertain if objectives are likely to be met.

NIRDP 2007-2013: Recommendations MTE for remainder of NIRDP 2007-2013 Cont....

- NIRDP Impacts** 16) There is a clear need to find a NIRDP solution that adds value to the remainder of the Programme in relation to impacts, that are meaningful for Northern Ireland. This will facilitate a proper evaluation of the actions supported and their impact in the region. In this regard it is recommended that the Managing Authority, as part of their system of ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities, address this issue once the current uncertainties have been clarified.
- Implementation And Delivery Structures** 17) It is recommended that the following areas are addressed for the remainder of the current Programme in respect of Axis 3.
- DARD, JCCs, and LAGs should come together to identify difficulties for all parties and seek to make procedures for drawdown, open calls and auditing more flexible and streamlined, where possible, in the context of the existing EU regulations.
 - Strategies should be reviewed straight away with a view to moving forward. This is especially in relation to the quality of life measures (i.e. basic services) due to guidelines changing since the strategies were devised. Areas such as 'renewable energy' clearly also require guidance in the short term.
 - DARD should revisit animation / facilitator roles within LAGs / JCCs. There is strong evidence that this is currently required to aid Programme Implementation.
 - Communication should be addressed. Due to the complex structure that exists it is necessary that communication is timely and user friendly. All parties to seek to move this aspect of the delivery structure forward.
 - Active networking should be encouraged between LAGs / JCCs. It is widely regarded that not enough networking is taking place between LAGs, compared with previous Programmes. This could possibly be facilitated further by the Rural Network.
 - Ensure that Systems 2007 is fit for purpose. This is a necessary aspect of the ability of LAGs and JCCs to manage their projects effectively and efficiently and as such should be rectified straight away.
 - Increase timeliness of processing of projects. There is evidence that by LAGs and JCCs sitting on the same day to assess projects that the timeframes are considerably improved, with queries minimised.
- Support Mechanisms / Programme Management** 18) The lack of monitoring information is clearly impacting on the ability of the Monitoring Committee to take a more strategic approach to assessing the implementation of the Programme. Issues around Systems 2007 are also clearly impacting on the ability of bodies responsible for implementing the Programme. It is recommended that issues around Systems 2007 are addressed as soon as possible.
- 19) It is recommended the Managing Authority, and delivery bodies, maximise the use of the RNNI. This should continue to facilitate Axis 3 and cooperation projects, and the recommendations made, and also extend to support the other areas of the Programme.
- 20) It is recommended the Managing Authority reviews the Monitoring Committee composition, with a view to obtaining a more representative sectoral balance. This may include exploring the possibility of experienced independent representatives, who in turn may provide a different viewpoint. It is recommended, as part of the review of committee composition, that groups with an attendance of less than 70 per cent (member or deputy) are contacted regarding their ongoing participation in the Programme.
- 21) It is recommended that the Managing Authority contact Monitoring Committee members with a view to ascertaining if refresher training is necessary to enable members to fully fulfil their position in the Programme. It may be that members would also benefit from project presentations or study visits to gain more insight into the Programme at grass roots level.
- 22) It is recommended that the Managing Authority remind Monitoring Committee members of their duties and responsibilities, and how they should abide by the core principles and values agreed at the outset of the Programme.
- Publicity And Awareness Raising Activities** 23) It is recommended that the Department roll out a continuous PR and Publicity Campaign for the remainder of the Programme. This is with a view to maximising the awareness and final impact of the Programme.
- 24) The local press has been the most successful medium for reaching individuals about opportunities around the Programme to date. There is a benefit in continually drip feeding stories and case studies about the Programme to ensure a steady interest in the Programme. It is recommended the local press is utilised fully for the remainder of the Programme.

NIRDP 2007-2013: Recommendations MTE for remainder of NIRDP 2007-2013 Cont....

Publicity And Awareness Raising Activities Continued...

- 25) There is a clear need to ensure that what works for certain measures is maintained. Axis 3 is clearly reaching out to individuals through the web, while events such as road shows and feeder events are successful in Axis 1. It is recommended that Measure leaders ensure that Axis specific successes are maintained, and seek ways to enhance these mediums – such as the use of digital media (twitter, facebook etc) to target prospective applicants.
- 26) There is clear evidence that delivery agents and implementing divisions know a great deal about their customer base. It is recommended that the use of delivery agents/ implementing divisions is maximised in promoting the Programme.
- 27) All information made available to prospective applicants should be as accurate and accessible as possible. This is especially true around eligibility, with all information clear to those wishing to avail of funding. In this regard it is recommended that all information presented to the wider community is as accurate and available as possible.

Equality And Good Relations

- 28) Questions remain as to whether there is a need for a separate Equality and Good Relations sub group for the NIRDP. One avenue, that may enable a re-focusing of equality and good relations, could be for NIRDP Monitoring Committee members to sit on the Structural Funds equality sub group. Moving to an EU Programmes-wide group may enable a greater focus on equality and good relations issues themselves, and may enable a greater degree of complementarity across the NI Programmes. Thus it is recommended that the Managing Authority re-assess the need for the EGRSG.

If the NIRDP is merged with the wider group it is expected that recommendations 29 – 31 below would be addressed by this approach. If it is felt prudent to continue with a separate NIRDP sub group there is a clear need for recommendations 29 – 31 to be implemented for the remainder of the Programme.

- 29) It is recommended that the composition of the EGRSG should be addressed and aim to attract a more diverse membership. (It is noted that attempts have been made in this regard before).
- 30) There is wide spread agreement that the Good Relations aspect of Section 75 has not been addressed to date. It is recommended that this is a standing agenda item on future EGRSG meetings.
- 31) It is recommended that the EGRSG becomes more strategic, with the associated development of a high level work programme. It is recommended that the group focuses on the potential inequalities highlighted in the EQIA, and sets about ensuring that these groups are engaged with, with a view to including them in the remainder of the Programme.

The Environment

- 32) Questions remain as to whether there is a need for a separate sub group for the NIRDP. It is recommended that the Managing Authority re-examine the need for the ESG. In line with recommendation 28, the Managing Authority should explore the feasibility and potential benefit, of NIRDP Monitoring Committee members sitting on the current Structural Funds environment sub group.

If it is felt prudent to continue with a separate sub group for the NIRDP there is a clear need for recommendations 33 & 34 to be implemented for the remainder of the Programme.

- 33) It is recommended that the composition of the ESG should be examined with the aim of encouraging new members from outside the environment sector.
- 34) There is a clear need to address the Environment from a Programme wide perspective. In this regard it is recommended that the ESG drives forward the implementation of DPA in the Programme, embracing the recent paper developed for the Structural Funds working group.

NIRDP Wide

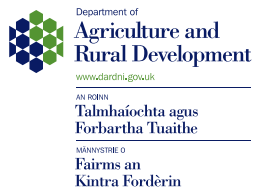
- 35) The need to maximise synergies between the Axes is recognised by the Managing Authority. It is recommended that this across-Axes working should be investigated and progressed for the remainder of the Programme, with a clear view to future programming periods.
- 36) It is recognised that future budgets will require clarifying post-CSR, and the future make up of the NIRDP made clear. It is recommended that the Department do all in their power to ensure the Programme can continue in its current form. This could include discussions with the Commission aimed at re-visiting the co-financing rates currently applied to activities in the Programme.
- 37) Future National Strategy Plan - It should be noted that should recommendations arising from the evaluation be taken on board it may be necessary to re-visit the Strategy in the future. It is likely that post CSR decisions will have to be made, which could impact on the future look of the Programme for the remainder of the period. Any changes arising post-CSR would also require the National Strategy Plan to be revisited. It is recommended that this situation is monitored closely and actioned as a matter of urgency once the situation becomes clearer.



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