

Mid Term Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme for England – Communications Update from the evaluation team, August 2010

The Mid Term Evaluation (MTE), led by Hyder with ADAS and DS Research, is now well underway. We will issue bulletins regularly via a range of channels with information regarding the progress of the evaluation and the activities the evaluators will be undertaking in the coming weeks.

What we have been working on over the last month

Our emphasis over the last month has been to develop the evidence base, on which the evaluation will be based. The activities which we've been carrying out are summarised below:

- It is important that we review progress against performance indicators that were agreed at the start of the RDPE in 2007. Delivery agencies, the RDAs, Natural England and the Forestry Commission have provided monitoring data from their databases. This enables the evaluators to identify where we are 'on track' to achieve or exceed these targets. Similarly, where potential shortfalls are suggested by these data, we will investigate further and analyse any underlying reasons. Recommendations can then be developed to help the Programme to enhance its performance through to 2013.
- It is important to understand how effectively the RDPE is being delivered across England's regions and how this is aligned to regional priorities and linked to other programmes. We are therefore carrying out profiles of each region, enabling us to explore different delivery models across the RDPE, and learn the lessons from the diversity of approach. To date this has included an analysis of Regional Implementation Plans and interviews with regional RDA RDPE managers. Defra and the evaluators ran a workshop to enable the key messages from each region to be shared. This was useful to enable themes to be identified and developed which will be investigated in further detail during the forthcoming case studies. Key issues include the delivery approach adopted (strategic vs. applicant-led); the balance of measures funded and policy instruments used (support vs. grant funding) and the role of the Leader approach. The case studies will enable the evaluators to understand in detail what is working well and where change is needed by engaging those with responsibility for delivering the programme and those impacted by it (stakeholders) within the context of specific regional economic and environment priorities.
- The experiences and views of those who have been awarded RDPE funding is an integral part of the evaluation. It is important that the programme is accessible by those it seeks to support and that the impacts are consistent with the wider EU policy framework. Similarly, where people have not benefited from the Programme we want to understand why, and their perceptions. Preparations for survey fieldwork have now started. Letters are being sent providing the opportunity for farmers to 'opt out' of the telephone survey. We have piloted some questionnaires, and the response so far has been positive.

What's coming up in the next month?

- Survey field related to Axis 1, 3 and 4 (and axis 2 forestry measures) will continue, with telephone interviews getting underway. Surveys are voluntary, should last no longer than 20 minutes, and will be conducted by specialist market researchers. As many of the evaluation questions cannot be answered by existing evidence, such as published research or monitoring data, surveys are required to ensure the evaluation addresses all aspects of RDPE. Participants will be invited to share views on the application process, any advice received, and expected achievements of their project.
- The evaluators are also reviewing 'third party' evidence of the impacts of rural development activity. It will be important for the evaluators take account of the considerable body of published literature and evidence on rural development and the various funding mechanisms available under RDPE in drawing up their conclusions. The findings from other studies will help the evaluators to better interpret the datasets which they are gathering. These reviews of 'third party' evidence will be shared with Defra and delivery bodies before being incorporated into the evaluation.
- Regional case studies will take place to enable evaluators to obtain in-depth qualitative information about RDPE's performance, relevance, implementation and efficiency. Case studies will be undertaken in three regions: South West, North West and East Midlands. Focus groups for each of

these have been arranged for the second half of September to allow regional stakeholders to inform the evaluation. These will be supplemented by interviews with key delivery agencies, notably Natural England, Forestry Commission, and the RDAs, and bodies sub-contracted to deliver the programme. Invitations have been issued for the focus groups.

- Evaluators are also interested in understanding how the Leader model of delivery is performing, and to explore how this varies across different geographical areas. The regional case studies will include an investigation into one Local Action Group (LAG) from each of these regions. The LAG that will be evaluated will be chosen shortly, and the LAG managers invited to participate during September.
- The initial recommendations and conclusions from the evaluation will be presented in mid October to the RDPE MTE Steering Group. They will then develop the analysis, conclusions and recommendations ahead of the submission date of the MTE to Defra on 6 December. Defra, as the Managing Authority, is then required to provide the MTE to the European Commission by end of 2010.

We report to a Defra chaired Steering Group on which Defra policy leads and delivery bodies are represented. . These monthly meetings provide a valuable opportunity to update members on the initial findings and emerging messages. These meetings also enable Defra policy leads and delivery bodies to advise the evaluators of wider research underway, to discuss future policy priorities, and to agree on solutions to any technical challenges.

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We would like to thank all those who have contributed time, data and publications to the evaluation to date.

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