

Mid Term Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme for England: Communications Update July 2010

The Mid Term Evaluation (MTE), led by Hyder with ADAS and DS Research, is now well underway. We will be issuing progress bulletins regularly to a range of stakeholders with an interest in the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). The RDPE Network will also be used to circulate these bulletins which will provide news and information regarding the progress of the evaluation.

What's happened over the last month?

Our current focus is to obtain and review the substantial evidence base, upon which the evaluation will be based. This has included:

- Monitoring data which has been provided by delivery agencies, including the Forestry Commission, Natural England, Rural Payments Agency and the Regional Development Agencies. This data enables the evaluators to review progress against monitoring targets, and identify how various areas of the programme which are performing. We are equally interested in the reasons underlying these trends, which may include delivery arrangements, regional variation, behaviours/attitudes, and the application process. A wide-ranging consultation plan is therefore being implemented to explore these reasons further.
- Interviews have been held with rural policy representatives from a wide range of organisations, including Defra, the Forestry Commission, Country Land and Business Association, National Farmers Union, and English Heritage, amongst others. These interviews enable us to gain insights from many different stakeholders early in the evaluation process, and start to give a flavour of potential opportunities and challenges ahead. These interviews are now nearly complete.
- We are profiling each English region to explore different RDPE delivery models that have been chosen and 'learn lessons' from the variation in approaches.
- Work has continued in preparation for the telephone surveys which will help to address those questions cannot be answered by existing evidence.

What's coming up in the next month?

- The experiences and views of those who have been awarded RDPE funding is an integral part of the evaluation. Similarly, where people have not benefited from the Programme we want to understand why, and their perceptions.

Telephone surveys of these individuals and organisations are planned for mid-August, and this exercise will run for 5 weeks. Participation in the surveys is voluntary, should last no longer than 20 minutes, and will be conducted by specialist market researchers. Many of the evaluation questions cannot be answered by existing evidence, such as published research or monitoring data, therefore these surveys are needed to give build a full evaluation of particular aspects of RDPE. Participants will be invited to share views on the application process, any advice received, expected achievements of their project. Note that participants in the agri-environment schemes (Entry and Higher Level Stewardship, Organic Entry Level Stewardship and Uplands Entry Level Stewardship) will be surveyed in January 2011, to inform the additional evaluation reports being submitted to Defra in June 2011. No data collected in the course of these surveys will be attributable to individuals in the reports.

- Arrangements for delivering the Programme vary across England, and we are looking to understand what is working well from these various ways in which delivery is organised. We are continuing to profile each region this month, with interviews planned with RDPE managers at each Regional Development Agency. We may also be in contact with other regional representatives (e.g. Natural England and Forestry Commission).

- Case studies are planned to enable us to obtain in-depth qualitative information about RDPE's performance, relevance, implementation and efficiency. We want to explore the different approaches to RDPE taken across the regions, and to seek 'lessons learned' and recommendations for future Rural Development Programmes. Sub-regional case studies will be arranged for Leader, to examine Axis 4 in more detail. We will be choosing the three regions in which these case studies will be carried out by end of July and it's anticipated the work will be carried out from 16 August to 5 September. This will include various workshops in the three selected regions.

The evaluation team will draw together all of the qualitative and quantitative evidence towards the end of September, and will share our preliminary findings with the RDPE MTE Steering Group, which oversees the evaluation, in early October. We will then develop our analysis, conclusions and recommendations ahead of the submission date of the MTE to Defra on 6 December. Defra, as the Managing Authority, are then required to provide the MTE to the European Commission by end of 2010. Further reports are planned for 2011 – more detail on these will be provided as the evaluation progresses.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed time, data and publications to the evaluation to date, and look forward to working with a wider group of consultees over the summer months.

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