

Mid Term Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme for England

October 2010 communications bulletin

The Mid Term Evaluation (MTE) is being delivered by Hyder with ADAS, DS Research and other specialist advisors. Since we last wrote, we have completed extensive fieldwork and consultation, and are now preparing the draft report for Defra.

The evidence gathered over the summer months will form the basis for the analysis and recommendations made in the MTE report. It is perhaps helpful to look back to the start of the MTE process in May 2010, and provide a recap of the report's objectives, and the questions which the evaluators seek to address.

The MTE will provide an important source of evidence for Defra on the effectiveness of the RDPE, to inform thinking about possible modifications for the second half of the current programming period to 2013, and to contribute to planning for the next Rural Development Regulation in 2014-20. It will assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme, and propose measures to improve quality where necessary and address new challenges.

The MTE also seeks to identify the extent to which programme implementation has been successful, and the factors which have contributed to this. Highlighting good practice is an essential component, to ensure that knowledge can be shared with everyone responsible for RDPE delivery.

The evidence base for the evaluation therefore consists of the following aspects, which have been finalised over the last month:

Consultations: RDPE is delivered at a national scale (e.g. Environmental Stewardship); at regional level (e.g. support for creation of micro-enterprise) and locally through Local Action Groups (LAGs) using the 'bottom up' approach. Consultations for the MTE have reflected this, including interviews with national stakeholders and delivery managers, supported by profiles of delivery in each region. The three regional case studies provide a valuable comparison of the different delivery models adopted by the RDAs in the South West, North West and East Midlands. Finally, local-scale case studies of three Leader areas (Fells & Dales Local Action Group in Cumbria; Coastal Action Zone Partnership, Lincolnshire; Western Somerset Local Action Group) enable us to understand in greater detail issues around Leader implementation and achievements. We have also considered a non-LAG area, the Cotswold Edge and Severn Vale in Gloucestershire, to gain an appreciation of rural development in the absence of Leader funding and cooperation. Given that many Local Action Groups are relatively new, much

of the analysis within the MTE report focuses on the application process, evidence of cooperation, and what lessons can be learned for wider dissemination.

A parallel study, carried out by Ekosgen, has examined the Economic Impact of the Leader approach, and the MTE has exchanged data and evidence with this team.

Survey data: The response to the telephone interviews has been very positive, and we have achieved the anticipated sample sizes for Axis 1, 3 and forestry schemes. We also sampled about 400 people who have not participated in RDPE, to provide a comparison to those who have received grants. The survey data enables us to examine attitudes towards the application process and detailed information about achievements such as enhanced skills or jobs created. The survey also enables us to test aspects of rural policy, such as whether behaviours and attitudes towards land management practices are likely to have changed as a result of the funding.

Many participants of the England Woodland Grant Scheme employ(ed) an agent to apply for funding on their behalf. We have consulted with a selection of forestry agents, since this user group have extensive experience of the application process and can help identify opportunities for improvement.

Monitoring data: we have received extensive information from monitoring databases operated by Natural England, the Rural Payments Agency, Forestry Commission and Regional Development Agencies.

Literature reviews: the European Commission requires Defra to continually evaluate the RDPE, reported in Annual Reports, and supplemented by the MTE. Extensive research has been undertaken by Government and academics which supports this continuous evaluation process. Research findings have been reviewed and incorporated into the MTE evidence base. In particular, the evaluators have drawn upon wider longer-term studies into biodiversity, natural resource protection and the public goods element of RDPE schemes.

What's coming up in the next month?

Testing our findings: we have run team workshops and have shared our early findings with the Steering Group, in order to refine and update our likely conclusions.

Evidence analysis and answering the evaluation questions: the European Commission has set out a series of common evaluation questions, for each measure and across the programme; we are currently working to provide detailed answers to these questions, based on the evidence base summarised above.

Ensuring a quality evaluation: we will submit our draft report to Defra on 8 November for appraisal by the Steering Group. We also have specialist peer reviewers working alongside the evaluation team, checking our findings and ensuring that conclusions and recommendations are robust and grounded in evidence.

Submitting the Mid Term Evaluation report: Defra is required to submit the completed report to the EC by the end of December 2010.

Looking ahead to 2011

The MTE has generated extensive data and evidence since May 2010. Whilst the current focus is upon delivering the report on time and in compliance with the EC and Defra's requirements, the evaluators are also starting to look ahead to the next tasks.

Participants in agri-environment schemes were not included in this year's telephone surveys, given that extensive research has already been published upon which the MTE has been based. We will, however, be surveying this group during late January and February 2011 with the objective of 'testing' attitudes to development of the schemes in line with recommendations arising from the MTE. Opt out letters will be sent to farmers before Christmas, and voluntary, confidential telephone interviews will start in the New Year.

Thank you...

Thank you to everyone who has shared their time and experiences with us over the recent months. This has included those who have been interviewed, taken part in focus groups, promoted or participated in the survey, and contributed to the Steering Group.

Any questions?

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