



Education and Training
Inspectorate

An Evaluation of Axis 1
Measures of the Northern
Ireland Rural Development
Programme (2011-2012)

November 2011 and March 2012



Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



CONTENTS

Section	Page
PART ONE	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. METHODOLOGY	1
3. CONTEXT AND SUMMARY OF EACH AXIS 1 MEASURE	2
PART TWO	
4. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS	4
PART THREE	
5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	5
6. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	6
7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	7
PART FOUR	
8. CONCLUSION AND KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	9

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

All of the data included in this report is supplied by Countryside Services Limited.

Performance Levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

PART ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report summarises the findings of an evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) of three programmes within the Axis 1 Measures: Focus Farms, Farm Family Options (Agricultural Business Mentoring and Skills Training), and Supply Chain Development¹. The Axis 1 Measures were introduced by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (the Department) in 2008 to assist those living and working in rural areas across Northern Ireland. The aims of the Measures are to protect and enhance the rural environment; enable those engaged in rural activities to take advantage of new approaches and emerging technologies; and to invest in the key resources of human and social capital, allowing rural areas to look to the future with increased confidence. The Axis 1 measures target farm households, micro, small and medium agri-food enterprises, farm businesses and a range of other input sectors.

1.2 Countryside Services Limited is contracted to manage the delivery of the Axis 1 Measures on behalf of the Department. The company, trading under the Countryside Agri Rural Partnership, is limited by guarantee and has its registered offices in Dungannon. The company is a subsidiary of the Ulster Farmers' Union and has been in operation since 1998 to provide a range of commercial and professional services to the farming and rural community in Northern Ireland.

1.3 The Farm Family Options programme includes Agricultural Business Mentoring and Skills Training. The management and delivery of the Agricultural Business Mentoring and Supply Chain Development programmes are run by Countryside Services Limited. Artificial Insemination Services (AiServices) and the Rural Development Council (RDC) are sub-contracted by Countryside Services Limited to deliver the Focus Farms and the Skills Training programmes respectively.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 The Department commissioned the Inspectorate to evaluate the quality of the provision of those programmes within the Axis 1 Measures that included a discrete training element. The main aims of the evaluation were to:

- report on the effectiveness of the training programmes in meeting the needs of those living and working in rural areas in Northern Ireland;
- assess the quality assurance arrangements in place and determine their effectiveness in improving the quality of the provision; and
- assess the quality of the learning experience for participants.

2.2 A team of four inspectors carried out a two-phase evaluation (November 2011 and March 2012) of the training programmes within the Axis 1 Measures. Discussions were held with the senior management teams and members of staff who were managing, facilitating and delivering the training programmes within the contract. The inspectors met with groups of focus farmers, who have been selected by the Department to provide farmer-led training. They also met with an extensive range of participants, including project leads, mentors,

¹ The evaluation did not include other programmes within the Axis 1 Measures funded by the Department, for example, Benchmarking and Farm Modernisation. The Benchmarking programme, which includes the processing and marketing of grants was part of the inspection of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provision in January 2011. The Farm Modernisation and the processing and marketing grants programmes do not include a training element.

mentees, facilitators and supply chain groups and visiting farmers. In addition, they visited a small number of training events and conferences facilitated by Countryside Services Limited, and AiServices to focus farmers and participants. The team also observed 13 Focus Farm training sessions, and examined a wide range of documentation presented by Countryside Services Limited, AiServices and the RDC including self-evaluation reports, minutes of meetings, progress reports, Focus Farm quality files, survey forms and their analysis, and staff curriculum vitae.

3. CONTEXT AND SUMMARY OF EACH AXIS 1 MEASURE

3.1 FOCUS FARMS

3.1.1 The Focus Farm programme has been running since 2009. It aims to contribute to the competitiveness of agricultural and horticultural businesses in Northern Ireland through farmer-led training.

3.1.2 The Focus Farm programme provides farmers with the opportunity to share experiences, solve common problems, and measure their own business performance through the adoption of good practice in terms of production, environment, welfare, market awareness and business management. The initial 55 Focus Farms recruited and verified by the Department are commercial farms that aim to demonstrate good farming practice, the use of modern technology and innovative farming methods, and on-farm research through farm walks, discussions and follow-up mentoring to other farmers. Focus Farms have been competitively recruited throughout Northern Ireland and across the following enterprise sectors; dairying, beef, sheep, pigs, arable, commercial horticulture, organic, renewable energy, diversification and environmental.

3.2 FARM FAMILY OPTIONS: AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS MENTORING AND SKILLS TRAINING

3.2.1 This programme has been running since 2009 and is planned to operate until 2015. The aim of the programme is to strengthen the competitiveness of the farming families in Northern Ireland through a programme of training and mentoring. The objective of the programme is to assist farm family members to consider their options and provide the necessary training and mentoring support to secure the viability of the farm business and financial well-being of family members.

3.2.2 Within the Agricultural Business Mentoring programme, an experienced mentor with a broad range of skills supports the farming family to look critically at their business and, where appropriate, agree options for the future development of both the farm and the farm family members. As an outcome of the mentoring process, an action plan is drawn up to set out the steps needed to make the changes identified, for example succession planning. Financial assistance is available to help towards the costs of professional legal and financial advice to address issues identified in the action plan. The mentors have a good knowledge of the options available within the Axis 1 suite, such as the Focus Farm and Supply Chain Development programmes and, where appropriate, refer participants to these options.

3.2.3 The Skills Training programme aims to support the development of both on the farm and off the farm work-related skills. At the time of the evaluation, however, access to the programme was not available as all participants on tranches one to four had completed their training. Discussions in relation to the nature and scope of further tranches are taking place between Department officials and Countryside Services Limited.

3.3 SUPPLY CHAIN DEVELOPMENT

3.3.1 This programme has been operational since 2010 and is contracted to run until 2015. The aim of the programme is to increase the number of collaborative initiatives in the agri-food sector by developing an appropriate supply chain which will lead to more effective and sustainable products from the producer to the customer.

3.3.2 The Supply Chain Development programme is primarily aimed at early stage projects which have not developed fully, by helping the producers establish a culture of collaboration between themselves and relevant processors and retailers in the supply chain. The programme seeks to move the projects to a stage where they have the confidence to adopt new supply chain processes by providing them with greater knowledge in order to satisfy the market for the product. Additional support, such as specialist mentoring and business tools including, marketing, co-operation and support is also available to project groups to progress their supply chain development ideas. A study tour may be funded within the programme, which can provide producers with an appropriate opportunity to observe good practice and innovation.

PART TWO

4 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

The quality of the programmes evaluated within the Axis 1 Measures is good.

4.2 The main strengths are the:

- good quality of the leadership and management of the contract by Countryside Services Limited;
- well-experienced, highly committed and credible facilitators, mentors and focus farmers who are sufficiently flexible in their delivery to meet the individual needs of most of the participants;
- good or better quality of the training and learning evaluated and observed;
- positive feedback about their experiences and outcomes of their programme from almost all of the participants spoken to during the evaluation;
- good transfer of knowledge between the participants and facilitators, mentors and focus farmers; and
- good relationships established at all levels within the contract.

4.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- lack of a strategic and cohesive vision between key stakeholders and rural agencies to inform and support rural development in Northern Ireland;
- overly bureaucratic procedures and protocols in place which interferes with the efficient management of the contract;
- access to a relevant Skills Training programme; and
- further development of the quality assurance arrangements to measure effectively the impact of the Axis 1 Measures on rural families in Northern Ireland.

PART THREE

5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.1 The quality of the leadership and management of the three programmes evaluated within the Axis 1 Measures is good.

5.2 The operational leadership and management of the contract by Countryside Services Limited is good. There is a strong commitment by Countryside Services Limited to support, promote and manage the contract. The managing director of the organisation is ably supported by a cohesive team of well qualified staff who work effectively together to deliver the contract. A particular feature is the clear and open channels of communication that have been established between Countryside Services Limited and the sub-contractors, and between the facilitators, mentors, mentees and project groups. Relationships are good at all levels within the programmes. Effective links and partnerships have been established with a number of appropriate organisations within the farming community in Northern Ireland, including the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association, the Ulster Farmers' Union, the National Beef Association and the National Sheep Association. These links are used to good effect to support the achievement of the key aims and objectives of the Axis 1 Measures.

5.3 The rationale of the programmes evaluated within the Axis 1 Measures is well-aligned to the Department's aim to support those living and working in rural areas across Northern Ireland. These programmes however, are mostly working in isolation. Apart from mentors signposting farm family members to agencies for advice and support, they are not availing of the many good quality training and learning opportunities available from other agencies and sectors which have programmes that will enhance more effectively the educational pathways of those living and working in rural areas. There is a need for a cohesive strategy, better communication and greater sharing of information between policy makers and the rural agencies to inform and support rural development in Northern Ireland.

5.4 The managers leading the programmes are suitably experienced and bring significant skills and enthusiasm to the programmes they manage. There is, however, a lack of flexibility in the delivery of the Supply Chain Development programme, which is overly bureaucratic, limits innovation and, in some instances, delays the progress of projects. In addition, there is limited flexibility within a Focus Farm visit for visiting farmers to consider the range of enterprises available on the farm, such as the production agriculture, diversification and the use of renewable energy.

5.5 There is a good deployment of appropriately qualified and experienced facilitators, mentors and focus farmers who are consistently held in high regard across the sector and provide very good mentoring and support to mentees, project groups and visiting farmers. They are sufficiently flexible and highly committed to the delivery of the programmes, frequently going above and beyond the minimum requirements. They remain enthusiastic and supportive regardless of difficult challenges and often burdensome administrative processes.

5.6 The management of Countryside Services Limited has made good progress in addressing some of the areas for improvement identified during the first phase of the evaluation, including the appointment and use of specialist mentors within the supply chain development for key areas of marketing and business development, to address a few of the procurement issues and help reduce bureaucracy. In addition, Countryside Services Limited has made a good start in supporting staff to exchange and share good practice internally through organised facilitator training sessions, and the production of newsletters.

5.7 The overall quality assurance of the programmes within the Axis 1 Measures is satisfactory. Countryside Services Limited demonstrates a good commitment to quality as evidenced in the implementation of quality frameworks for procedures and management through Certification Europe ISO 9001 and ISO 27001. Whilst positive elements of quality assurance are in place, including regular recording and systematic reporting arrangements and key performance audits, there is a need to develop more systematic and formalised processes, to determine and evaluate the impact and outcomes of the respective programmes on families living and working in rural areas, as well as to better inform the review of the current provision.

6. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

6.1 The quality of all the training sessions, conferences and training events evaluated and observed ranged from good to outstanding. Most of the observed training sessions were very good or better. All of the three programmes provide good opportunities for nearly all of the participants, mentees and visitors to reflect on their own practice and to gain an improved awareness of the emerging technologies available to enable them to adopt new methods and systems to help make their businesses more efficient.

6.2 The main strengths of the training sessions observed include the well-planned farmer-led training, the innovative training and learning strategies used to engage and challenge the participants, mentees and visitors, the very good quality of the presentations, and the excellent transfer of knowledge between key stakeholders. A particular feature of the provision was the high levels of discussion and engagement by the participants, mentees and visitors. For example, most of the supply chain project groups have undertaken study trips where they have gained specialist knowledge, developed valuable contacts, established realistic goals and targets and learned important lessons from the results of other projects.

6.3 With the support of AiServices, the Focus Farm programme has developed greater opportunities to share good farming practice within the Northern Ireland farming community. Having received very good analysis of farm data through the CAFRE Benchmarking and Farm Modernisation programme, all of the focus farmers are able to compare their farm performance with that of other benchmarking farmers for the benefit of the visiting farmers. The sharing of benchmarking performance adds greater credibility to the overall Focus Farm learning experience. The visiting farmers report that they value highly the support, and that it introduces them to the potential benefits and impact of new technologies and different farming practices on the day-to-day management of their businesses. In addition, very good use is made of visiting speakers by focus farmers, including, veterinary surgeons, animal feed nutritionists and animal geneticists. The speakers are carefully chosen and are very well briefed about the session they are to support.

6.4 The evaluation evidence shows that the mentors on the Agricultural Business Mentoring programme encourage the participants to engage with the options and learning opportunities available, as a means of assisting employability, enhancing skills and encouraging business development. The participants report that discussions with the mentors focus on areas such as farm and off-farm income, farm systems and practices, succession and retirement planning, health issues and off-farm employment or diversification opportunities. A particular feature of the programme is the identification of key organisations and individuals who may be able to provide further support, advice or funding to the farm family. It is, however, a significant constraint to the successful functioning of the programme

that access to relevant training and development opportunities through the Skills Training programme are not accessible at present as the programme is temporarily unavailable due to tranches one to four having completed. The nature and scope of further tranches is not yet decided, with discussions presently ongoing between Department officials and Countryside Services Limited.

6.5 The Supply Chain Development programme provides good opportunities for capacity building for participants and groups through training and specialist mentoring support, with a strong emphasis on developing collaboration with appropriate processors and retailers in the supply chain. Countryside Services Limited has created good learning opportunities to project groups in relation to innovative industries. For example, access has been provided to specialist mentors in anaerobic digestion aimed at helping participants access information on new farming opportunities. Facilitators provide good flexibility across the project groups regarding the availability of skills and expertise. All of the participants interviewed report their high regard for the professionalism of their respective facilitators, characterised by their accessibility, assistance in interpreting the Department's administration requirements, and support in advising on timescales and action planning.

7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

7.1 Across the three programmes evaluated, the achievements and standards are good.

7.2 Almost all of the visitors on the Focus Farms programme are enthusiastic and highly motivated. The training sessions provide practical demonstration of how new farming technologies can be implemented successfully on the farm. Focus Farms have become a well established method of knowledge and technology transfer, within a continuous professional development ethos. The target for the programme is to have 10,000 visitors participate in Focus Farms within the life of the programme and, as some farmers will make more than one visit to a Focus Farm, to have 6,000 individual farmers trained via this programme. To date, the programme has far exceeded one of the key performance indicators set, having achieved its four year visitor target in less than three years. Since 2009, almost 10,000 visitors have availed of the programme, encompassing 6,000 individual farmers and approximately 700 groups.

7.3 The Agricultural Business Mentoring strand within the Farm Family Option programme is having a mostly positive influence on the farm business, and the needs of the whole family in particular. Through the mentor, all the farm family members are able to reflect on their current situation, identify challenges and consider available options with signposting to relevant advice and agencies. The programme places an appropriate focus on the harder to help family farms. Almost 90% of participating farms are not, or have not been involved in any other initiative provided by the Department. The participation rates of the family farms in the programme are, however, well below the overall target of 2150. Whilst the number has improved since the first phase of the evaluation, the uptake is currently 38%. Countryside Services Limited has implemented a range of marketing and communication activities aimed at increasing the uptake of the programme. Subsequently, there has been a significant increase of 43% in the number of applications received during the four month period from October 2011 to February 2012.

7.4 The Supply Chain Development programme is currently providing excellent support to a wide range of innovative projects, including renewable energy projects in biomass and anaerobic digesters, growing native trees, marketing wild venison and the production of speciality cheeses. Most of the project groups are enthusiastic and demonstrate high levels of commitment. They are developing the appropriate skills to enable them to build up and manage a business and to develop it commercially. Whilst most of the groups are making good progress, this momentum is only achieved towards the end of the project due to the

long lead-in times and issues relating to the procurement of specialist support and services. A minority of the groups are either slow to progress or unlikely to deliver the outcomes expected, due to the very challenging economic climate and/or apparent commercial tensions between group members. The Department must reflect on these difficulties in order to improve action planning, intervention and project approval arrangements. The continual monitoring of the participants entering this programme is crucial to ensure that they have a full and realistic understanding of the demands of supply chain development. The target objective of the programme is to facilitate 60 project groups over the duration of the measure. Whilst Countryside Services Limited has made effective use of feeder events to promote the programme more widely, the participation rates are, however, well below the overall target. Since 2010, approximately 57% of the target has been achieved.

PART FOUR

8. CONCLUSION AND KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

8.1 The quality of the programmes evaluated within the Axis 1 Measures is good. The three programmes evaluated have done much to enhance the learning experiences of the participants and farmers accessing them. The programmes have been well-managed by Countryside Services Limited, and they are having a mostly positive impact on the lives of those living and working in rural areas across Northern Ireland.

8.2 The evaluation has identified the following key priorities for development:

- the provision of a more coherent and strategic approach between policy makers and the rural agencies to inform and support rural development in Northern Ireland;
- the urgent provision of relevant training and development opportunities for farming families in Northern Ireland through access to an appropriate Skills Training programme;
- the review of the procedures and protocols in delivery planning to reduce any unnecessary bureaucracy; and
- the further development of the quality assurance arrangements to determine and evaluate the impact of the Axis 1 Measures on families living and working in rural areas of Northern Ireland and to further improve under-performing programmes.

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2012

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part, except for commercial purposes or in connection with a prospectus or advertisement, provided that the source and date thereof are stated.

Copies of this report are available on the ETI website: www.etini.gov.uk

