

An Evaluation of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) Business Development Groups

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Introduction

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) opened the knowledge transfer through Business Development Groups (BDGs) scheme for applications from farmers/producers in November 2015. It is a scheme which is part-funded by the European Union through the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme. The scheme has been extended and is now due to finish in March 2023.

Over 3300 applications were received and 2941 applicants were recruited prior to the scheme commencing¹. The scheme uses a group training approach that allows sharing of knowledge with the aim of improving the technical efficiency and profitability of farm businesses. Delivery of on-farm training events commenced in May 2016 with 154 BDGs being established across Northern Ireland (NI) for 14 different sectors: apples; arable; cut flowers; dairy; beef finishing; mushrooms; ornamental crops; pigs; potatoes; poultry; sheep; soft fruit; suckler beef; and, vegetables. Also, a number of new agri-environmental groups commenced in January 2020. Each group normally has between 12 and 20 members. For the first two years, each participant received a payment for attending meetings, provided attendance was at least 75%.

Four further tranches of recruitment resulted in 1272 additional applicants joining the scheme. In the financial year ending 31 March 2021, 3240 participants were registered on the scheme. At the point of the final phase of the evaluation being conducted, there were 2556 registered farm businesses with some of these participants belonging to more than one group.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to carry out a longitudinal evaluation of the BDGs scheme. The main aim of the evaluation is to evaluate the quality and impact of the BDGs provided by CAFRE. The evaluation was carried out in four phases between November 2016 and December 2021.

Review Objectives

The main objectives of the review were to:

1. Evaluate the quality of the BDG provision to determine its effectiveness in terms of:
 - meeting industry needs;
 - the outcomes for the participants, to include the impact of the programme on their business;
 - the quality of the learning for participants;

¹ The data used in this evaluation has been supplied by CAFRE or is from the ETI confidential online questionnaire issued to participants in November 2021.

- the quality of the leadership and management; and
 - the effectiveness of the quality improvement planning processes to determine their impact on the quality of the provision.
2. Identify good practice, including examples of innovative and sector leading provision.

Summary of key findings

Strengths

- The recruitment target for the scheme has been exceeded with an overall total of 4343 participants from 3085 unique farm businesses engaged in the scheme since its inception.
- It is significant that the participants who completed the ETI survey indicate that over one-quarter (28%) of the participants are engaging with CAFRE for the first time.
- Over the five years of the scheme, the retention rate is high at 94%.
- Most of the participants who attend the group meetings are motivated and engage well in their learning.
- Nearly all of the participants interviewed reported that as a result of the BDG scheme, the quality of their work practices improved resulting in safer working environments, better animal welfare and more efficient techniques, thereby promoting more sustainable farms.
- Participants reported that they have further developed their communication and interpersonal skills, resulting in increased confidence which has enabled them to work more closely and collaboratively with others in their groups.
- The importance of the social interaction and the contribution the BDGs has made to the participants cannot be underestimated. Often they work in isolation and report the importance of the social aspect created through their participation in BDGs, and how it has contributed to their overall well-being.
- The facilitators and participants collaborate effectively to design and develop relevant and meaningful curriculum content within each of the groups. While there is some uniform content for each sector, there is appropriate flexibility to respond to local and topical issues.

- An effective group training approach is used and in almost all (93%) of the sessions observed, the quality of learning, training and teaching was good or better with two-thirds being very good or outstanding.
- Nearly all of the participants report that they are well supported by the facilitators and support staff, including the extensive preparation that takes place to enable them to host a meeting on their farm.
- The CAFRE senior leadership team demonstrate a strong strategic vision that has resulted in a large number of participants benefiting from the BDG scheme to improve their work practices.
- Staff have clear roles and responsibilities and have been well supported through professional development opportunities including a level 7 Facilitation Programme, and opportunities for peer-to-peer observations.
- The CAFRE middle managers have worked hard to effectively manage a huge change process to deliver the objectives of a challenging scheme.
- The CAFRE senior advisors' forum provides a valuable opportunity to share effective practice across all the groups and to support each other as they work to resolve ongoing challenges.
- Management information processes have been developed and implemented to monitor, evaluate and review the provision across all the BDG groups at both a strategic and operational level. This has resulted in a comprehensive data set with a number of key performance indicators that are used well to further improve the provision.
- A comprehensive and robust self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process has been put in place at all levels by CAFRE for the BDG scheme. This process provides an accurate reflection of the provision, with appropriate areas for improvement identified which are addressed in a concise, clear college quality improvement plan.

Areas for development

- While attendance at the BDGs has been impacted by the ongoing pandemic, nevertheless during 2020/21, levels were low at 55%.
- The uptake of the level 3 qualification is low at approximately 16%, and the achievement rate to date of 13% is low and well below the target of 30%.
- CAFRE benchmarks were collected from just over one-half (1293) of the 2394 farm businesses in 2019/20, which is well below the target.

- While nearly all participants have a business development plan, this is an area that needs to be developed further; to ensure they take more ownership, the system for storing the plans needs to be more accessible to the participants.
- In some cases, the BDG group composition and its operation needs to be reviewed so it better meets the needs of all participants.
- In future business planning by CAFRE for delivery of qualifications, consideration should be given to using its contact with participants to provide appropriate signposting to any who require support with the development of literacy, numeracy or ICT skills to ensure any barriers to learning are supported.

Key findings

Views of BDG members

Prior to the final phase of the evaluation, 214 participants took the opportunity to complete an ETI survey. The majority (72%) of the respondents work full-time in their business.

The responses were largely positive with most (89%) of them agreeing that their group is well managed, almost all (91%) that they find their meetings interesting and most (78%) indicated that they learn something new in most of the meetings.

In addition, most (84%) report that the BDG meetings are an important social event for them and most (88%) of them would recommend joining a BDG to a farmer or producer with a similar business.

Meeting industry needs

The knowledge transfer through the BDG model of learning has proven to be effective. It has engaged a significant number of participants from a large number of unique farm businesses. It is significant strength that just over one-quarter (28%) of the farmers/producers had no previous experience of working with CAFRE, and are engaging for the first time through participation in the BDG.

The participants are a mixture of those who work part-time and full-time in their businesses, which varies widely from small to large/extensive farms.

The BDGs have enabled most of the participants to gain a breadth of technical knowledge in their specific fields and to also develop new skills. As a result, in 2019/20 a majority (70%) adopted and implemented innovative practices and technologies within their own enterprises, including alternative dry cow therapies, improved grassland management practices, the regular monitoring of livestock performance, and the use of calving and heat detection monitoring systems.

An important aim of the scheme was to get the participants to engage in the CAFRE benchmarking service². This process uses both financial and physical information to generate a benchmark report on the farm business. The report provides comparative figures for the business over the last 3 years and also current average financial data for similar farms across Northern Ireland. This information allows the farmer to monitor their farm businesses year on year and to compare their results with the industry average so that they can make more informed decisions regarding their farm business. Part of the support assistant role is to visit farms to collect the required data to complete the benchmarking exercise. The original target of 3000 participants benchmarking their business has not been fully met. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) seriously impacted the number of participants benchmarking due to restrictions which meant that support assistants could not collect the required data.

Nevertheless, some progress has been made with financial benchmarking with the number of participants engaged increasing from approximately one-quarter (24%) at the start of the programme to almost two-thirds (65%) in 2019/20. Participants who complete this process report that they find it a very useful exercise as they can identify areas in their business that could be improved whilst also recognising areas where their business is performing well. Examples include increasing the daily live-weight gain of animals and reducing the cost of milk production.

Outcomes for participants

The recruitment target for the scheme has been exceeded with almost double the number of participants being recruited in the first year. By the end of March 2021, 4343 participants had been recruited, with some of them joining more than one BDG; prior to the final phase of the evaluation, there were 2556 registered farm businesses and 3240 active participants. Over the five years of the scheme, the retention rate is high with almost all (94%) staying on the scheme.

Overall attendance at the BDGs declined significantly from a high of 80% in 2016/17 to 53% in 2018/19, when the attendance payments scheme stopped. In addition, attendance has been further impacted by the pandemic.

Most of the participants who attend the BDG meetings are motivated and engage well in their learning; the participants report that membership of the groups has helped them to develop their confidence to enable them to make better decisions in relation to their farm businesses, for example changing grassland management practices to improve efficiency.

Nearly all of the participants interviewed reported that as a consequence of the BDG scheme, the quality of their work practices improved resulting in safer working environments, better animal welfare and more efficient techniques, thereby promoting more sustainable farms. They are able to transfer and apply their knowledge, skills and understanding across a wide range of aspects of their businesses, including the importance of having a herd health plan and safer animal handling facilities.

² [CAFRE benchmarking service](#)

The uptake by participants to a bespoke level 3 qualification has been low with only one-fifth (485) recruited during 2017/18. While the pandemic seriously impacted on its delivery, the achievement rate to date is low at 13% with 63 of the participants achieving at level 3, and a further 35 are currently working towards completion. This figure falls well below the target of 30% of the participants achieving a level 3 qualification.

Given that a significant minority (30%) of those who completed the survey reported that they had no relevant agricultural qualifications, in future business planning by CAFRE for delivery of qualifications, consideration should be given to targeting those participants who require support with the development of their literacy, numeracy or ICT skills.

Participants reported positively that they have developed their oral communication and interpersonal skills, including their ability to work in teams which has enabled them to work more closely and collaboratively with other participants in their groups and to respect differences in perspectives.

The importance of the social interaction and the contribution that the BDGs has made to the participants personal and social development cannot be underestimated. Often they work in isolation and they reported the importance of the social aspect created through their participation, and how it has contributed to their overall well-being.

Participants often provide a support network for each other, outside of the formal BDG group setting, for example through maintaining contact on social media groups, to help resolve business difficulties, provide assistance and discuss challenges that they face in the workplace.

Quality of provision

A wide and appropriate curriculum offer is provided to the BDG groups which is well-matched to individual need. The provision is accessible right across NI with participants being allocated to a local group in their business sector. The curriculum has an appropriate focus, for example on animal health, new technologies, benchmarking performance, and health and safety. The facilitators and group members collaborate effectively to design and develop relevant and meaningful curriculum content. Within each of the BDGs they have appropriate flexibility to respond to local and topical issues.

Effective practice

Bio-security restrictions on pig farms make visits for members of BDG pig groups difficult due to the high risk of disease transmission. As an alternative to physical visits, the facilitator carefully selected a high performing pig farm that was not part of the BDG membership. The farm had made a range of technology adoptions that were being used well and were of interest to the participants. The facilitator worked with the farmer to produce a high quality video recording using the record function on the video conferencing software that demonstrated the technology adoptions

on his farm and the impact they had on the farm business. This recording was used during a BDG group meeting. As a result of highly effective planning and preparation, this proved to be a very effective learning tool that stimulated a lot of discussion and provided useful insights into the benefits of adopting these technologies.

CAFRE staff have developed and obtained approval for a Level 3 Extended Certificate in Agricultural Business Development qualification³ designed specifically for BDG participants. The curriculum is stimulating and relevant and focuses appropriately on farm business management, health and safety on the farm with options in: energy efficiency on farms; personal development and communication skills; plant health integrated pest management; animal health and welfare; and farmyard planning. Delivering the qualification has been challenging and required more support outside the normal BDG scheme than anticipated. Further recruitment processes were halted due to the pandemic with a focus being placed on supporting those participants who were already enrolled. While the take-up for enrolling for the qualification has been low, the small number of participants interviewed who have completed the qualification reported that they were well supported and they found it interesting, rewarding and worthwhile.

In almost all (93%) of the sessions observed throughout this evaluation, the quality of learning, training and teaching was good or better with two-thirds being very good or outstanding. The characteristics of the very good and outstanding practice included: effective group management and use of very good facilitation skills; the skilful use of questioning that leads to high levels of engagement; highly effective peer-to-peer learning; the facilitators' up-to-date expertise; well-established relationships including high levels of trust; and, the use of benchmarked data to demonstrate where improvements are possible and to stimulate discussion.

Effective practice

In a BDG where high levels of trust had been established between the participants, the facilitator uses relevant financial and physical benchmark data, including margin over concentrates, during the meeting to highlight the benefits of benchmarking and to encourage others to complete the process. The host participant shared selected data from his business with the other participants to highlight the improvements made as a result of adopting new technologies for example tailoring animal feed levels to match the production outputs of the individual animals.

The participants within each sector group attend a number of BDG meetings each year (currently six) that are normally hosted by a group member on their farm, providing an opportunity for everyone to experience the business first-hand.

Almost all of the respondents to the questionnaire agreed that they found the meetings interesting, and they particularly welcome the opportunities to visit other businesses and they learn a lot during the visits. However, they have now visited all of the group members' farms at least once and would welcome further stimulation and the

³ [Level 3 Extended Certificate in Agriculture Business Development](#)

opportunity to visit other farms outside of their group. Some of the participants from larger or more efficient businesses reported that they felt they would gain more benefits from the scheme if all of the participants in a group operated on a similar operational scale.

Effective practice

In a BDG where the topic of the meeting was alternative dry cow therapies, the facilitator made excellent use of a specialist visiting speaker who was asked to cover this topic. The planning was highly effective with the facilitator providing a comprehensive briefing that included: information about the group; an insight into the whole process of technology transfer in BDGs meetings and an agreed programme that included a short introduction to the topic, a demonstration by the visiting speaker; and the opportunity for some of the group members to carry out the procedure. During the time when the practical activities were taking place, the facilitator encouraged group members to ask questions and to share experiences. At the end of the meeting, the visiting speaker summarised the learning and shared important data on the importance of adopting this technology. The visiting speaker used appropriate language that was understood by all of the participants throughout the session.

Each BDG group has a dedicated facilitator. Nearly all of the members report that they are well supported by the facilitators and support staff, including the extensive preparation that takes place to enable them to host a meeting.

The emergence of the pandemic in March 2020 caused the normal operation of the BDGs to be disrupted. CAFRE introduced remote learning in the BDG scheme at an early stage which was challenging due to the rural nature of where the participants lived, with some of them having either poor or no access to the internet. In addition some of the participants faced further barriers due to their lack of ICT skills. CAFRE adopted a video conferencing system that provided the option for those without an internet connection or ICT equipment to join the meeting using their phone to provide as much accessibility as possible for the participants. During this time, the facilitators provided effective learning opportunities including one-to-one support and group delivery, using a range of strategies including on-line meetings, videos, webinars, telephone calls and face-to-face meetings where possible to best meet the needs of each participant and their circumstances. The measures put in place were effective with most of the participants remaining engaged in the scheme. The online provision for BDG participants was part of the wider baseline review of the delivery and impact of remote learning in CAFRE carried out in November 2020 by ETI⁴.

⁴ [Report on the delivery and impact of remote learning provided by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise \(CAFRE\)](#)

Effective practice

During an online BDG meeting, the facilitator encouraged participants to send questions that they would like to ask the host farmer via the facilitator using text messages. This proved to be a very effective way to handle questions during an on-line meeting, particularly where the participants are more reticent to take part. Quite a number of questions were forwarded to the facilitator and due to the anonymity several important questions regarding finances were asked. As a result of this process a lot of discussion was generated around financial issues that would not normally have taken place.

Technology Demonstration Farms are part of the new Innovation Technology Evaluation Demonstration Scheme and they provide a valuable resource where BDG meetings can take place to provide further challenge to the participants in terms of how they could make better use of technology.

Effective practice

The Technology Evaluation Demonstration Scheme⁵ recognises that early adopters of innovations and technologies play an important role in convincing their peers to take more innovative approaches to traditional systems. As part of the scheme, Technology Demonstration Farms were used effectively to host BDG group sessions to see technologies demonstrated, hear the experience of the farmer including data from his business with opportunities for the BDG members to ask questions about the financial impact of adopting the technologies.

The facilitators provide support to members to prepare a business development plan to help improve the technical efficiency and sustainability of their farms. As a consequence, the target of having 3000 participants complete a business development plan has been met. The plans include appropriate medium and long term targets with short term objectives that are regularly reviewed. Good progress is being made in achieving the targets by the participants interviewed. However CAFRE's online system for storing the plans needs to be reviewed so that the participants have greater ownership by being better able to access the uploaded plans on an ongoing basis as working documents.

Leadership and management

The CAFRE senior leadership team demonstrate a strong strategic vision that has resulted in a large number of farmers/producers benefiting from the BDG scheme to improve the sustainability of their farm businesses. The BDG model of delivery has necessitated a challenging change management process for both the CAFRE staff and the participants which has been successfully managed.

⁵ [Technology Demonstration Farms](#)

Prior to the introduction of BDGs, the CAFRE advisors worked mainly with farmers/producers on a one-to-one basis and this support was supplemented by a range of large one-off information events that all farmers/producers could attend. The BDG scheme required a significant change in working practices for these advisors, who have consequently taken on a knowledge transfer facilitation role delivered through an effective group training approach, with the aim of improving the technical efficiency and profitability of participants' individual businesses. They have adapted to new ways of working and demonstrated high levels of flexibility and resilience.

A recent restructuring of the CAFRE management functions has put it in a strong position to support farmers/producers in a challenging and rapidly changing environment going forward.

Effective practice

CAFRE managers displayed high levels of commitment making supportive visits to BDG meetings from an early stage to help them understand the challenges being faced by the facilitators who were implementing a large and diverse provision that required significant changes to their former working practices. As a result, these leaders had a good understanding of what was happening on the ground and they were able to put an effective range of processes in place to support the facilitators.

CAFRE staff have clear roles and responsibilities. The CAFRE director is well supported by the head of the Knowledge Advisory Service (KAS). The KAS has five heads of branch with specific responsibility for facilitating the BDG scheme across the various sectors and they provide effective management and leadership to the senior advisors who manage groups of facilitators based in geographical regions.

Due to the size of the provision, agency staff were sourced to support the delivery of the scheme, specifically a small number of facilitators and all of the support assistants. While the CAFRE middle managers (heads of branch) have worked hard to make this arrangement work effectively in an effort to meet better the benchmarking target, there have been difficulties with regard to staff turnover and the bureaucracy associated with the agency model.

CAFRE staff have been well supported through professional development opportunities including support to deliver online learning and the opportunities to take part in peer observations. The CAFRE facilitators also have had the opportunity to complete a level 7 Facilitation for Organisation Leadership module⁶, to-date 36 have completed the programme and a further 24 are currently enrolled.

Against the background of a number of challenges since the introduction of the scheme including its rapid roll out across a wide geographical area, the CAFRE staff being redeployed to deal with severe weather events, and the pandemic, the CAFRE heads of branches and senior advisors have demonstrated effective leadership.

⁶ [Facilitation for Organisation Leadership](#)

The senior advisors' forum has been established and has provided a valuable opportunity to share effective practice and to support each other as they work to resolve ongoing challenges. Management information processes have been developed and implemented to monitor, evaluate and review this provision across all the BDG groups at both a strategic and operational level. This has resulted in a comprehensive data set with a number of key performance indicators that are being used to further improve the provision.

Due to the nature of their work, the KAS staff had no previous experience of carrying out self-evaluation or quality improvement planning processes for this type of provision. A comprehensive and robust process has been put in place over time. This includes surveys and session observations and has resulted in a process that clearly compares the various sectors and provides an accurate reflection of the provision with appropriate areas for improvement being identified for action in the CAFRE quality improvement plan.

Each BDG senior advisor carries out a self-evaluation for the provision they manage. The larger sectors have four senior advisors who are responsible for geographical areas. The key performance data is summarised for each senior advisor's sector and area where appropriate. As a result of this process and the consistent use of data, performance in each sector can be benchmarked within the sector and across sectors and for the larger ones, they can also be benchmarked across geographical regions. This is a very useful tool for driving up performance across the BDGs and provides a better understanding the challenges faced by the sectors and in some cases the challenges posed by the geographical area in which they operate.

Based on the evidence available at the time of the evaluation, the arrangements for safeguarding learners reflects broadly current legislation and practice. The organisation needs to better contextualise safeguarding issues for the group members to make it more meaningful.

Conclusion

During the course of this longitudinal evaluation, unforeseen circumstances including disruptions caused by severe weather events, where some CAFRE staff were temporarily redeployed, and the pandemic impacted on the delivery of the BDG scheme.

Over the duration of the evaluation, the CAFRE staff have successfully launched and delivered a very challenging scheme to a large number of participants from a wide range of farm businesses across Northern Ireland. Just over a quarter of the participants were engaging with CAFRE for the first time. The scheme required new ways of working for the facilitators compared to their previous roles. Effective support has been provided to the facilitators by managers to help them make this transition successfully. They demonstrated flexibility and enthusiasm for the new peer-to-peer learning model. The quality of the provision has steadily improved over time with the facilitators growing in confidence and sharing effective practices to support the model.

Prior to the introduction of the BDG scheme, the KAS was not involved in CAFRE's Education Service quality improvement planning processes. Subsequently, the KAS now contributes to this process, with planning for BDG provision incorporated and staff at all levels have developed appropriate skills to carry out the process effectively. During the course of the evaluation there have been significant improvements in the collection, collation and analysis of data to inform the quality improvement planning processes.

There is clear evidence of the participants improving their work practices through the networks created. Over time trust has developed between group members and there has been an increasing willingness among the group members to share key performance measures, including financial data with other group members. This is a key feature of effective peer-to-peer learning where the participants have the confidence, in the context of their business, to challenge and be challenged by other group members.

The BDGs provide an important social interaction for a workforce that often operates in isolation. Through their participation in the scheme they have also developed their confidence and communication skills.

Appendix A: Methodology and evidence base

In advance of the evaluation, ETI met with DAERA officials to develop the terms of reference and also met with CAFRE to plan the format of the visits aligned to the review objectives. These arrangements were reviewed and revised over the course of the longitudinal evaluation as required.

During the longitudinal evaluation, ETI observed 27 staff and 424 group members in 29 group observations. Group members had the opportunity to complete a confidential ETI on-line questionnaire developed in collaboration with CAFRE. Inspectors also spoke to group members informally during group meetings and interviewed 12 group members on their farms/businesses during the last phase of the evaluation. Discussions were held with the CAFRE senior management team, heads of branch, senior advisors, and staff. In addition discussions were also held with managers and staff from the employment and recruitment agency. Relevant content and resources for the group meetings were reviewed.

Appendix B: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

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%

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