
Teagasc Advisory Regional Review Cork East

Final report

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Main report recommendations	3
1. The Quality of Management and Leadership in the Region	4
2. Productivity and Service Delivery in the Region	5
3. Relevance and Impact in the Region	6
4. Positioning of the Region for the Future.....	7
Conclusion	7
Appendix 1 Response of Management and Staff to the Report.....	7
Appendix 2 Advisory Regional Review Panel	9
Appendix 3 Advisory Regional Review High Level Evaluation Criteria.....	10

Introduction

Teagasc is the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority. It is the national body providing integrated research, advisory and training services to the agriculture and food industry and rural communities. It was established in September 1988 under the Agriculture (Research, Training and Advice) Act, 1988. The organisation is funded by State Grant-in-Aid; the National Development Plan 2007 to 2013; fees for research, advisory and training services; income from national and EU competitive research programmes; and revenue from farming activities and commodity levies.

The overall goal of the Teagasc Advisory Programme is to support the on-going development of sustainable family farms in Ireland, through efficient and effective knowledge transfer activities. The programme currently supports almost 140,000 individual farmers with 45,000 farmers contracted to Teagasc for services annually.

This review was undertaken in September 2013 as a pilot of the Advisory Regional Review evaluation model. The panel (see Appendix 2 for panel composition) has prepared this report based on meetings with management, staff representatives and farmer stakeholders, and analysis of documents such as the region's self - assessment document, business plan, staff questionnaires, and Teagasc Advisory programme documents.

The overall objective of this review is to identify current strengths and weaknesses in the delivery of quality services and value to the customers of the services provided. This evaluation had four main criteria (a more in - depth description of each is outlined in appendix 3):

1. Quality of management and leadership in the Region
2. Relevance and impact of services to the Region's customers
3. Productivity of staff in relation to key performance indicators and outcomes
4. Positioning of the Region to meet current and future service delivery challenges.

The Cork East Advisory Region in Context

The Cork East Advisory Region is one of 12 Teagasc advisory regions. It is entrusted with service provision to 5,783 farms (64% of which are clients). Cork East has increased from 3,211 paid - up clients in 2002 to 3,752 paid - up clients in 2012.

In relation to farm structures, farms in the Cork East region are larger than the national average, with 55% of farms over 30 hectares compared to the national average of 41%. Cork East has 16% of the national dairy herd and 9% of the national beef cattle herd.

Cork East Advisory Regional Review

Table 1 outlines some of the key recent performance metrics. Since 2010 the number of advisor full - time equivalents (FTEs) has fallen from 22.5 to 18.8, resulting from retirements and the moratorium on recruitment.

Table 1 Cork East Advisory Region Performance from 2010 to 2012

	2010	2011	2012	2013 Planned
Advisor FTE	22.5	22.2	21.4	18.8
Income Achieved %	97	133	104	100
Client Numbers	3588	3632	3752	3493
Visits	2589	2219	2084	2120
Consultations	6090	6635	6683	4260
Profit Monitor	258	408	767	601
Derogations/Revisions	490	502	746	591
SPS On-Line	2042	2484	2923	2879
SPS Manual	1484	892	719	403
No. Discussion Groups	64	62	66	71
Farm Walks	38	26	37	18

Over this time client numbers and consultations have been maintained, with a small reduction in individual client visits. The number of Teagasc eProfit Monitors has increased dramatically to 767 in 2012, assisted by it being a requirement under the Dairy Efficiency Programme and the current Beef Technology Adoption Programme.

Main report recommendations

1. Management and Leadership

- 1.1 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop systems to ensure that target setting and achievement are valid and consistent across the team.
- 1.2 The Cork East Advisory Region should endeavor to provide opportunities for all staff to develop leadership skills, including being an integral part of the decision - making process.

2. Productivity and Service Delivery

- 2.1 The Cork East Advisory Region should seek routine farmer feedback on a more regular basis (possibly through focus groups) and enhance stakeholder engagement in the development and delivery of programmes.
- 2.2 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should ensure that the technical skills and experience of advisors are utilised efficiently and effectively to generate the greatest benefit for local farmers.
- 2.3 The Region, in conjunction with Teagasc Education needs to set its own objectives for the development of staff skills in the critical areas of teaching and learning.

3. Relevance and Impact

- 3.1 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should initiate and develop more formal collaboration with research colleagues which should include agreement on the research needs of the region and agreed adoption/impact targets for research outcomes on farm.
- 3.2 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop a system to measure the outcomes / impact of its programmes on local farm businesses.
- 3.3 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should consider evaluation of all large-scale demonstrations to ensure that participating farmers' needs are met. Furthermore, they should consider gaining feedback from farmers who attend these events, but not other Teagasc programmes.

4. Positioning for the Future

- 4.1 The Cork East Advisory Region should develop a strategic plan which will provide direction to staff and meet the needs of local farmers. It is vital that this plan should identify priorities and fully utilise the staff resource to maximise the impact within the region and permit each of the sectors to achieve its potential.

Panel Report for the Cork East Regional Advisory Review

1. The Quality of Management and Leadership in the Region

- The Cork East Regional Management team provided a very good self-assessment document. There was evidence to demonstrate that the Cork East Business Plan has been developed to meet local needs and, in turn, provide linkage to the National Advisory Programme.
- There is good evidence of strong leadership at different levels in the region. This has been shown by the achievement of output targets and the wide range of programmes delivered. The Regional Manager has also shown leadership in reacting quickly to crisis situations, in particular the panel noted the recent Spring 2013 fodder crisis.
- The Regional Manager encourages advisory and education staff to be delivery focused and to tailor their programmes to meet the needs of local farmers. He provides strong direction and support and the staff survey recognises this, with over 90% of respondents proud to work in the Advisory Region. In addition, they also state that they are confident of support from management if issues arise. However, the panel did note that opportunities for less experienced staff to lead initiatives could be further developed. Opportunities should be given to these staff to allow them take more of a leadership role in programmes and feel more involved in the decision - making process.
- The Cork East Advisory Region provided strong evidence of collectively meeting and surpassing targets. However the panel observed a wide variation with individual staff members' achievement of targets. In particular, they noted linkage between those staff with a high number of clients and a correspondingly high number of SPS applications submitted. The Cork East Advisory Region should ensure that systems are in place to assess individual performance on an equitable basis.

Recommendations

- 1.1 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop systems to ensure that target setting and achievement are valid and consistent across the team.
- 1.2 The Cork East Advisory Region should endeavor to provide opportunities for all staff to develop leadership skills, including being an integral part of the decision making process.

2. Productivity and Service Delivery in the Region

- The Cork East Advisory Region provided strong evidence from their self - assessment, business plan and staff presentations of high levels of output from the team. In particular, the discussion group delivery method was viewed by advisers as an excellent vehicle to transfer information and knowledge to a large number of farmers.
- The panel spoke to four local farmer clients who expressed satisfaction with discussion groups. Furthermore, they commended the Cork East Advisory Region on their work to assist the transfer of research outcomes from Moorepark to local dairy farmers. They felt that it was essential for the advisor to 'add-value', for the local farmer, to the research outcomes. They recognised the importance of good research programmes, and dairy farmers interviewed felt that having Moorepark in their locality, farming under similar conditions, was a significant benefit to their farm business.
- Although the outputs, in terms of clients, groups etc, from the Cork East Advisory Region were viewed by the panel as very good, there was limited evidence of the region seeking formal feedback from farmers on a routine basis. This would provide independent evidence to support content and delivery methods of programmes into the future.
- Further evidence of the need to encourage routine feedback from farmers was given by their opinion on the current broad programme of activities from the Cork East Advisory Region. The opinion of the farmers interviewed was that too much emphasis was placed on form filling, in particular around SPS. They further stated that they had limited access to an advisor at a key time in the year when they were occupied filling forms. However advisers deemed this work as essential, and an important opportunity to interact with their clients about plans for the coming year.
- Education in the region has undergone a turnover of long - term staff. Demand is high and the Region has enrolled 53 students on an online ACA programme. The current education staff have recently received positive feedback from the external examiner for the manner in which files were presented for verification. The integration of advisors in delivery of education modules in their area of expertise was considered very good.
- Administration staff in the Region are very experienced and capable. In addition to their administration role, they have taken on extra duties such as eprofit monitor data entry, and REPS support. Administration staff numbers have been reduced by 2.5 FTEs in the last three years. The Staff Officer expressed concern at the lack of back up cover when admin staff cannot be in the office.

Recommendations

- 2.1 The Cork East Advisory Region should seek routine farmer feedback on a more regular basis (possibly through focus groups) and enhance stakeholder engagement in the development and delivery of programmes.
- 2.2 The Cork East Advisory Region should ensure that the technical skills and experience of advisors are utilised efficiently and effectively to generate the greatest benefit for local farmers
- 2.3 The Region, in conjunction with Teagasc Education, needs to set its own objectives for the development of staff skills in the critical areas of teaching and learning.

3. Relevance and Impact in the Region

- The Region provided evidence of the delivery of programmes which met the needs of farmers and demonstrated positive impact on farm businesses. The farmers interviewed by the panel also commented positively on current programmes delivered.
- Joint Programmes with industry in the region, such as the Teagasc / Dairygold Milk Quality Programme are a good example of collaboration to achieve successful farm outcomes. There are opportunities for this model (or a modified version of this model) of delivery to be considered by the other sectors within the Cork East Team, in particular drystock. The format may not be the same as the dairy joint programme, but there is potential for further collaboration between Teagasc and industry partners in addressing technical challenges.
- There is evidence of a link between advisors and researchers in the region, with Moorepark viewed as an excellent resource to undertake research applicable to local farmers. The panel feels that the links between advisory and research could be considerably strengthened, and more formal structured collaborations developed. This, in turn should provide a greater evidence base to demonstrate impact at farm level.
- The Advisory staff provided good examples of large - scale demonstrations taking place in the region with a large farmer attendance. However, there was limited evidence provided of the impact of the event on farm businesses and, in fact, the farmers interviewed felt that although some farmers would only attend these larger events, they considered them to be less relevant to them and the event would have limited impact on their farm business. They considered smaller discussion group events much more targeted and much more relevant to their needs.

Recommendations

- 3.1 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should initiate and develop more formal collaboration with research colleagues, which should include agreement on the research needs of the region and agreed adoption/impact targets for research outcomes on farm.
- 3.2 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop a system to measure the outcomes /impact of it's programmes on local farm businesses.
- 3.3 The Cork East Advisory Region and Teagasc should consider evaluation of all large scale demonstrations to ensure that participating farmers' needs are met. Furthermore they should consider gaining feedback from farmers who attend these events but not other Teagasc programmes.

4. Positioning of the Region for the Future

- The Region has demonstrated strong leadership and the advisors are experienced and motivated to deliver programmes which they feel meet the needs of the region. The staff are fully aware of the likely industry changes which will occur following the end of dairy quotas and changes arising from CAP reform.
- The farmers interviewed by the panel highlighted the likely changes impacting on their farm business into the future and clearly articulated their business development needs which they felt could be delivered by Teagasc. These included production costs, business planning, labour management and land improvement. The farmers recommended that the Teagasc advisor in the future should be technically competent with strong business skills. They also felt that these skills should be fully utilised for farmers who wish to develop their business rather than lower skilled work for example form filling.
- Farmers interviewed also highlighted the potential for the delivery of apprenticeship programmes within the region to meet their needs going forward.
- The panel felt that there is potential for development in the area of farmer to farmer mentoring given the current staff resources.
- Furthermore as the staff complement becomes a limiting factor, the Cork Advisory Region should seek to prioritise the work which will be delivered by their staff and encourage targeted outsourcing of the lower priority tasks.
- Cork East is an intensive farming region with a very strong dairy influence. Meeting the future needs of the drystock and tillage sectors will also be important to ensure that they can work towards achievement of targets as set within Harvest 2020.

Recommendation

4.1 The Cork East Advisory Region should develop a strategic plan which will provide direction to staff and meet the needs of local farmers. It is vital that this plan should identify priorities and fully utilise the staff resource to maximise the impact within the region and permit each of the sectors to achieve it's potential.

Conclusion

The Cork East Advisory Region delivers a very good service to its clients. They are a highly motivated and driven team who seek to meet the needs of local farmers. The key focus for the team going forward is to prioritise delivery, with a reduced complement, to meet the changing needs of their farmers. The team must also seek feedback from their clients on a routine basis and challenge themselves to demonstrate to Teagasc management and their clients their impact at a regional level.

Cork East Advisory Regional Review

Teagasc and Cork East Management welcome the recognition of the achievements of Cork East in delivery of the targets in the regional business plan. The level of output of staff and the extensive and comprehensive discussion group activities in all enterprises. The review team also acknowledged the scale of the public events programme carried out in the region. The panel considered the joint programme with co-op's was a good model for collaboration with the industry. The panel also recognised the strong delivery on education in the region. It also recognised the role and support of the administration staff in the delivery of the advisory programmes.

Follow up actions on recommendation:

1 Management & Leadership:

- 1.1 The Business Planning Process and PMDS will be used to equalize in as far as possible the target and achievement of staff. While taking into account the diversity of farmers, land quality and previous advisory history.
- 1.2 In the absence of POR, staff of all level of service will be given responsibility for projects and management of certain public events as is the practice in the region.

2 Productivity in Service Delivery:

- 2.1 At all public events satisfaction surveys will be undertaken. This started at the recent Cross Compliance event – the findings will be used in the planning of future events
- 2.2 A new model of regional stakeholder groups will be set up to give feedback on major events and advisory programmes. These will consist mainly of farmers in discussion groups in each enterprise and other key stakeholders. Regular client feedback and co-operation with Walsh Fellows and other evaluations exercises will be used to study the impacts of advisory programmes at regional and national level.

3 Relevance & Impact:

- 3.1 It is proposed to formalise inputs of the regions into research programmes. Each manager with the help of his advisors will use a template to identify the research needs of their region. This would be presented to the heads of programmes at an annual meeting. Mid-year would be suitable time for discussion and feedback.

4 Positioning for the Future:

- 4.1 A strategic plan (2014-2020) for the advisory region will be developed in the new year, with reference to the Change Plan 3 and the advisory strategy, under the guidance of the head of directorate. This strategic document would be the context for the annual business plan and will help to identify particular or unique issues in the region.

Appendix 2 Advisory Regional Review Panel

Function / Role	Name and Contact details
Chair	Martin McKendry, Head of Development Service Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)
KT Professional with Advisory and Education background	Prof. Dennis Kauppila Farm Management Specialist, University of Vermont, USA
Farmer stakeholder with experience of Co-operatives / service industry	Mr. Seumas O'Brien, Knockballystine, Tullow Carlow Dairy Farmer, Current Chair of IFAC, ICOS board member.
Independent Teagasc Representative	James Maher, Business Planning Officer Teagasc, Oak Park

Appendix 3 Advisory Regional Review High Level Evaluation Criteria

1. Management and Leadership

Management and Leadership refers to the coordination and administration of activities in the Region. The focus in this area includes how the organization structure in place supports programme delivery, communication between staff and management (including staff in a coordinating role), the extent to which staff feel that their role is well defined, the scope for them to develop professionally and personally while contributing to programme objectives. How well regional objectives, resources, activities, and outputs are communicated internally and externally.

2. Productivity and Service Delivery

Productivity reflects the relationship between input and output. Output should always be judged in relation to the mission and resources of Teagasc and the Region and the needs of the customer. When looking at productivity, a verdict is usually quantitative in nature. In this case the list will include metrics such as client numbers, visits, discussion groups, meetings held, Teagasc eProfit Monitors, derogations, farm plans and so on. The panel are asked to include other forms of (qualitative) information in their assessment. The suitability of service delivery methods to customer needs and regional resources should also be assessed.

3. Relevance and impact

Relevance and Impact refer to how well the services delivered by Regional staff are aligned to national Advisory and Education programme priorities, and the needs of the Region's customers. The extent to which staff from the Region collaborate with community actors is also relevant in this context. The extent to which customers have improved their economic activities resulting from interaction with Teagasc is relevant, if this information is available. Feedback from customers and stakeholders gives an insight to the Region's reputation with stakeholders and customers.

4. Positioning for the Future

The Region's capacity to plan for and respond to present and future challenges. Including resources, expertise, and strategy in place. The strengths, opportunities, threats and weaknesses of the Advisory Region are taken into account.