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**Teagasc Advisory  
Regional Review**  
*Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-  
Monaghan*  
**Final Report**

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Author(s): Eric Long, Andrea Knierim, Stan  
Lalor, Michael Harlin

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## **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, 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 (KT) activities. The programme currently supports almost 140,000 individual farmers with 44,000 farmers contracted to Teagasc for services annually.

This review of the Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-Monaghan Advisory Region was undertaken in the Teagasc Mullingar Office on October 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2018. The Peer Review Panel (PRP) (see **Appendix 2** for panel composition) prepared this report based on meetings with management, staff representatives, enterprise specialists, farmer stakeholders and, analysis of documents such as the Region's Programme Description and Self-Assessment document, business plans, staff questionnaire, Teagasc Strategic Pathways for the Teagasc Agricultural Advisory Service 2015-2020 document, the Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-Monaghan Advisory Region strategy and the Teagasc Statement of Strategy, 2017-2020. The farmer stakeholder panel which the PRP panel met consisted of three dairy farmers, two beef farmers and one sheep farmer.

The overall objective of this review is to identify current strengths and weaknesses in the delivery of quality services and the value to 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 Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-Monaghan Advisory Region in Context**

There is a great variety of soil types in the region ranging from generally light and quick drying soils in the midlands, which facilitate earlier turn out of livestock. The downside, as experienced in 2018, is that such soils are more prone to drought. Soils in Cavan and Monaghan are heavy with appropriate drainage necessary to increase productivity. Drainage issues in Cavan and Monaghan are being highlighted with two farmers participating in the Heavy Soils Programme with results generated on these farms being transferred to the general farming public through farm walks.

There are 16,768 farmers in the region which represents about 4.62% of the total population. The majority (76% of farm holdings) are engaged in cattle production. Dairying is the main enterprise on 12% of farms with larger numbers of dairy farmers in Cavan and Monaghan compared to Westmeath and Offaly. Since the abolition of milk quotas in 2015, there has been a significant increase in milk production in the region particularly in Westmeath and Offaly where some beef cattle farmers are converting to milk production. Overall, there has been a 23% increase in the number of dairy herds. Six per cent of farmers in the region have a tillage enterprise, with most of these farms located in Offaly and Westmeath. Farm size at 31 hectares is marginally lower than the national average of 32.7 hectares. With 3.4 parcels per farm, the region's farms are a bit

less fragmented than the national average of 3.8 parcels per farm. Forestry accounts for 8 % of the land area of the region on average, ranging from 12% in Offaly to 4% in Monaghan.

The 3,779 Teagasc client base in the region consists of 2,714 beef clients, 785 dairy clients, 150 sheep clients and 130 tillage clients. The Regional Advisory Programme is made available to farmers through a network of 4 main offices (one per county) located at Tullamore, Mullingar, Ballyhaise and Monaghan and two clinics are located in Birr County Offaly and Baileboro County Cavan. The main element of the education programme in the region is the Level 6 Award Holders Green Certificate Course. This is approximately an 18 months course and includes a significant component of self-learning. There is one Benchmark Farm in Westmeath which is used for discussion group meetings with students. Ballyhaise Agricultural College is based in the region and Gurteen Agricultural College is adjacent to the region, just outside Birr in Co Offaly. In 2017, 295 students graduated from the various courses in the region.

The Regional Advisory Programme is delivered through a multitude of KT channels including 1,233 farm visits, 5,721 consultations, 59 discussion groups, 448 discussion group meetings, 3,061 SFP applications, 18 Dairy Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS) applications, 774 e-profit monitors, 33 farm walks and 35 meetings and seminars. The Regional Programme is integrated with stakeholders as evidenced by 3 Joint Programmes operating in the region with Arrabawn, Aurivo and Lakeland Co-op. The first two both have monitor farms, while Lakeland funds an Advisor as part of its joint programme. There are 5 BETTER farms (2 in Offaly and one each in Westmeath, Cavan and Monaghan), 2 Demonstration farms (both in Westmeath) involved in the Teagasc /Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme and 2 farms involved in the Heavy Soils Programme in Cavan and Monaghan.

The number of advisory and education staff increased slightly over the period under review from a combined total of 23 in 2015 to 26 in 2017 and the number of administrative staff supporting the programme increased from 7 to 8 over the same period.

## Main report recommendations

### **1. Management and Leadership**

- 1.1 The numbers of staff directly reporting to the Regional Manager should be reviewed at a National/strategic level to facilitate more personalised career and development support for all staff and to mitigate the risks of negative impacts on organisational effectiveness and service delivery.
- 1.2 Develop, implement, regularly review and continuously improve a more structured and formal multi-channel strategy for internal communications and information sharing across the region, particularly within the Drystock Advisory team.
- 1.3 Teagasc should consider options to redefine the Advisory Region's boundaries to reduce the extent of land type and farm enterprise diversity and mitigate the risk of negative impacts on service delivery in line with client needs.
- 1.4 Review Posts of Responsibility (POR) and Advisor roles at Regional and National levels, to identify opportunities to mitigate risks of administrative function ingress having a negative impact on Teagasc's service delivery, regionally and nationally.

### **2. Productivity and Service Delivery**

- 2.1 Continue to review the channels and processes being used to deliver knowledge and information to farmers, to inform on-going improvement of service delivery, effectiveness and efficiency.
- 2.2 The culture that supports innovation amongst Advisors to 'try new things' is evident as a key strength and needs to be further developed, particularly in cross-county and cross-office initiatives. The PRP highlight not just the need for wider roll-out of current innovations already in place, but more importantly the benefit of continuing to nurture the culture of innovation that is apparent amongst the Advisors and their programmes within the region.
- 2.3 Develop and implement a policy for the self-assessment of client impact, to include random sampling of clients by Advisors.
- 2.4 Resource optimisation with Ballyhaise Agricultural College's research provision should be a key factor in future strategic development of the region for all enterprises, in addition to dairy.
- 2.5 Continuous development of Advisors in the 'soft' skills of facilitation and advisory work is a key priority for inclusion in the Continuous Professional Development provision.

### **3. Relevance and Impact**

- 3.1 There are opportunities within the region for the improvement of knowledge exchange amongst Advisory staff on best practice innovation and collaboration with industry stakeholders, within the premise of safeguarding the independence of Teagasc's reputation.
- 3.2 A detailed survey/evaluation of the services and perception of the Teagasc Advisory and Educational programmes within the region would be useful to help the region evaluate its service delivery from a customer perspective. This should be inclusive, and span the non-client and client base of Teagasc, as well as the full breadth of farm scale, enterprises and demographics. The results of this survey should inform future strategy to develop how non-KT farmers might have better access to relevant knowledge transfer, advice and information support.
- 3.3 Encourage more farmers to join KT groups and seek to continuously improve service delivery to maintain high levels of participation and retention across KT programmes.

	Measures to consider how the long-term sustainability of each group can be improved should also be factored into the business plan.
3.4	Review the strategy, resourcing and intended impact of the tillage and poultry provision in the region. The objective should be to identify the key areas within the sectors where Teagasc can offer a unique service that will add value to these sectors.
3.5	More fully consider the diverse range of needs and interests of farming communities across the entire region when reviewing the Advisory Region Strategic Plan and Business Plan.
<b>4.</b>	<b>Positioning for the Future</b>
4.1	Develop, effectively communicate and implement a clear strategy to integrate sustainability, and optimise opportunities for public goods delivery and enhancement of farm business resilience, across mainstream production agriculture provision, in line with the unique characteristics of the region.
4.2	Monitor and further embed the success of the pilot initiative to maintain active engagement with post-Green Certificate students and Ballyhaise Agricultural College and Gurteen Agricultural College graduates/Alumni and share this best practice with other Advisory Regions.
4.3	A process to conduct a more thorough SWOT analysis for the region should be put in place, with the objective of establishing a more detailed understanding of the enterprise and the region's specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Each point included should be more conducive to the development of a clear and actionable goal within future strategy and/or activity target within the business plan.
4.4	Consideration should be given to using the peer review criteria to guide a self-evaluation process (to enable further improvements to quality assurance and impact of Teagasc's service provision) at Advisor, Regional Manager and Head of Advisory Service levels.
4.5	The long-term sustainability of the region as a coherent management unit should be reviewed in the context of the very wide expanse of the geography of this and neighbouring Advisory Regions.

## 1. Quality of Management and Leadership in the Region

### Management and Leadership

- The PRP commends the commitment and positive engagement of all staff and farmers who contributed to the review process.
- It was very apparent to the PRP that the management of the region was benefitting from having been well settled in recent years with experienced managers in key positions, both in overall management, administration, and technical leadership.
- The PRP observed a very flat management structure is in place in the region. There are a total of 32 staff in the region across Management, Administration and Advisor roles. Seven administration staff report to the Regional Staff Officer. However, all of the remaining staff report directly to the Regional Manager. There are five staff with “Positions of Responsibility” (POR) within the structure, which have no responsibility for line management.
- The PRP identify a potential threat to human capital development of the region arising from this flat management structure. The Regional Manager has, through the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) system, the responsibility for the professional development of a large number of staff. There is a high risk that with so many staff to directly manage, that the individualised management, support and development may be compromised due to management resource being spread too thinly.
- Risks arising from this include exposure of new and less experienced Advisors to insufficient mentoring and support, and the potential demotivation of Advisory staff due to lack of individual contact with their line manager and the consequent risks of negative impacts on delivery and further development of Teagasc’s service provision.
- While the existing Regional Manager, being highly experienced in the role, is managing well regarding his high number of direct reports, the future management of the region may be more sustainable with a structure that reduces the number of direct reports to a single line manager.
- The staff survey confirmed that staff are proud to work for the Regional Advisory team, but highlighted some opportunities to improve internal communications and the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences, particularly across the full geographic expanse of the region.
- Comments in the staff survey should be discussed at regional level, acted upon and staff informed about progress with these actions. This includes feeding back about what will not be addressed and why.

### Technical Leadership

- The PRP was impressed with how technical leadership in the region is driven by the influence of the POR’s and innovation of individual Advisors, which is well supported by specialist services both remotely and locally.
- The technical leadership of the Dairy Advisory team is well lead by the POR in this area, and is well coordinated in order to harness collaboration across the whole region. Monthly conference calls amongst the Dairy Advisors are being used to good effect, and this measure is effectively enabling information sharing, goal setting for business planning and alignment of regional activities and impact to the national programme.
- The level of cross-region collaboration is less well developed amongst the Drystock Advisory team and while there are excellent initiatives underway within offices/counties, the PRP observe that there could be more coordination and sharing of information and ideas across the region as a whole.

## Resources

- The diverse geographic scope of the region and diversity of farming enterprises poses a challenge to a coherent programme strategy across the region with the PRP identifying a divergence between Cavan-Monaghan and Offaly-Westmeath.
- The PRP note the effective utilisation of the POR role in the development and support of programmes. However, a risk associated with potential administrative function creep into POR responsibility was identified with the internal Health and Safety function being one example.
- The PRP noted the effective structure and operation of administrative support across the region. The high extent to which the administration team are integrated into the overall service delivery by the regional unit was apparent and highly positive.
- The PRP heard how the availability of peer-mentoring support for new Advisors had regressed and needed to be re-prioritised and enhanced. The latter was linked with outsourcing and staff resourcing pressures. The PRP noted the existence of an induction programme and planned mentoring support for new staff, including the allocation of this responsibility to a POR role, and the PRP highlights the importance of the delivery of this programme.

## Recommendations

- 1.1 The numbers of staff directly reporting to the Regional Manager should be reviewed at a National/strategic level to facilitate more personalised career and development support for all staff and to mitigate the risks of negative impacts on organisational effectiveness and service delivery.
- 1.2 Develop, implement, regularly review and continuously improve a more structured and formal multi-channel strategy for internal communications and information sharing across the region, particularly within the Drystock Advisory team.
- 1.3 Teagasc should consider options to redefine the Advisory Region's boundaries to reduce the extent of land type and farm enterprise diversity and mitigate the risk of negative impacts on service delivery, in line with client needs.
- 1.4 Review Posts of Responsibility (POR) and Advisor roles at Regional and National levels, to identify opportunities to mitigate risks of administrative function ingress having a negative impact on Teagasc's service delivery, regionally and nationally.



## 2. Productivity and Service Delivery in the Region

### Productivity

- The PRP acknowledge that productivity in terms of Advisor numbers, output and key activities appears to be high with Advisors reporting busy and active schedules. Farmer comments support this assessment, as do staff and management outside the region.
- The PRP probed how metrics around some activities have been fluctuating in the past three years and for some indicators such as events, have even reduced. The PRP was reassured to hear that this has been a deliberate change arising from business planning decisions and reflects positively on an apparent strategy to continually challenge the KT channels that are used within the region to deliver the programme.
- Farmers reported very positively on the productivity of the service being far more current, relevant and useful when compared to that in the past. The reduction in Advisory visits to farms was not considered by farmers as being a limitation to accessing Teagasc's service provision. KT/Discussion Groups are generally regarded to be more useful and effective than the one-to-one delivery model.
- KT/Discussion Groups have been very effective in reaching and servicing higher client numbers when compared to the previous service delivery model. Farmers speak very highly of the value of the support received through KT and Discussion Groups, to their farm businesses.
- The administrative burden around schemes and KT programme delivery is placing extra pressure on the delivery of the technical service. Both farmers and Advisors highlight the negative impact of this on the capacity to deliver a development-focussed KT service.
- The PRP noted that the performance of the region on a number of metrics, such as Profit monitor, compared well with National figures.

### Service Delivery

- Farmer feedback on their experiences of service delivery was very positive and reflects the commitment and capability of the team to service their clients. Feedback from specialists also reflected very positively on the engagement and commitment of Advisors to the technical and business development on-farm within the region.
- The PRP heard farmers highlight how the capability of Advisors, not only technically, but also in personal connection and facilitation skills, was the primary determining factor to the quality of service delivered, which indicates the strategic importance of on-going Continuous Professional Development (CPD) across the full array of competences required by Advisors to be effective in their roles.
- Exit surveys appear to be implemented occasionally for some events. However, the PRP found it difficult to fully evaluate the true impact of events and other KT delivery methods. The overall impact of the combined service is well understood and presented but the impact of specific KT programmes is more subjective. More insight into the activities that deliver most impact could be beneficial to help future strategic decision making on the use of Advisory resources, in particular of staff time and skills development.
- A policy is currently in place for quality control and auditing of outsourced activities, under the remit of the Soils and Environment POR. This is a critical activity to engage in to reduce the risk to Teagasc of litigation.
- The decision around outsourcing of activities appears to be strategic and well balanced to the customer needs. The collation of quality performance by out-sourced service providers should be monitored and factored into contract negotiations.
- Leverage of the linkage with Ballyhaise Agricultural College's research provision within the region is currently relatively strong for dairying, but not very apparent for other enterprises.

- The strategic decision to target more farm visits on dairy farms in Offaly / Westmeath, and the Dairy Start-up programme support, shows a clear plan on how to go about harnessing the opportunity of having increased staff to improve the service delivery, which is commendable. Similar strategic initiatives for other enterprises are required, particularly for the new poultry service, and also for tillage given the potential identified for a number of crops in the area.
- The provision of education services is well embedded within the region, with linkages to Ballyhaise and Gurteen Agricultural Colleges and also with advisory input into courses delivered locally, which is commendable. Keeping in contact with as many young farmers as possible that are completing education programmes is strategically very important.

### **Recommendations**

- 2.1 Continue to review the channels and processes being used to deliver knowledge and information to farmers, to inform on going improvement of service delivery, effectiveness and efficiency.
- 2.2 The culture that supports innovation amongst Advisors to 'try new things' is evident, and needs to be strengthened, particularly in cross-county and cross-office initiatives. The PRP highlight not just the need for wider roll-out of current innovations already in place, but more importantly the benefit of continuing to nurture the culture of innovation that is apparent amongst the Advisors and their programmes within the region.
- 2.3 Develop and implement a policy for the self-assessment of client impact, to include random sampling of clients by Advisors.
- 2.4 Resource optimisation with Ballyhaise Agricultural College's research provision should be a key factor in future strategic development of the region for all enterprises, in addition to dairy.
- 2.5 Continuous development of Advisors in the 'soft' skills of facilitation and advisory work is a key priority for inclusion in the Continuous Professional Development provision.

### 3. Relevance and Impact in the Region

#### Programme relevance

- The PRP noted multiple examples of innovative and very effective collaboration with industry stakeholders from the Dairy Advisory team and Monaghan Drystock Advisors, which is a key strength.
- The PRP heard from the farmer panel that the change in the Teagasc delivery model in recent years, involving a much stronger focus on group-based programmes, has resulted in significant improvements to the overall quality and value of service they receive.
- There appears to be greater potential to harness stakeholder involvement across the region for the drystock sector. However, the development of these initiatives needs to be highly cognisant of the importance of the independence of Teagasc. This point was highlighted very strongly by farmers.
- The PRP was satisfied that there is good alignment between the design and implementation of national programmes and the regional programme. Locally, Advisors are well engaged in trying to adapt their approach to maximise the impact of the service locally, but also confirm that they are also well guided and aligned to the National programmes. The emergence of the KT/Discussion Group specialised for robotic milking is a good example of local adaptation based on client needs.
- Having reflected upon the farmer panel session and the documents submitted for the review process, the PRP was not convinced that the diverse range of needs and interests of the farming communities across the region's wide ranging geographical area had been adequately considered when developing the region's strategic plan.
- The PRP noted a lack of clarity on the intended impact of the poultry and tillage programmes in the region, notwithstanding the observed commitment and enthusiasm of the Advisors on the ground, and the high level of tillage specialist service support in place. There appears to be good opportunities for these sectors in the region, and Teagasc should consider the correct strategic priorities for the service they can provide to add value to these sectors.
- The development of the dairy service in Offaly and Westmeath has been impressive in response to the high demand in this area for support of expansion and new entrants. The PRP note very positively the development of the Advisory staff resource allocation in this area, and the renewed strategic focus on young and/or new entrant dairy farmers.

#### Knowledge Transfer

- The KT programme is working well and is positively received by participating farmers. Despite all the challenges over regional re-structuring and declining Advisor numbers over the years. The feedback on the service is that it is well positioned and effective in the servicing of client's needs.
- The PRP observe a strong willingness and capacity for innovative ideas to arise and be developed among the Advisory team. Examples include the 'Grass on the Bypass' initiative in Offaly, the Maiden Heifer Group, Monaghan Lamb Group, Monaghan Cattle Group, Suckler START programme, Cleanacres Drystock Farm Infrastructure Initiative and group innovation competitions, all of which is most commendable and adds high value to the customer focus of the region.
- Teagasc farmer clients across the region have been successful in national innovation, milk-quality and farmyard competitions. Advisors are rightly proud of their connections with these farmers.
- Following on from this, this culture of innovation to address regional challenges should be encouraged and form part of the future strategy, both for the region and nationally.
- The PRP noted examples, such as the Lakeland Dairies Joint Programme, which are targeted more at non-clients. However, the overall focus on how to be more proactive

with non-clients of Teagasc in the region should be further developed. The current client base of 24% of the total farmers in the region highlights a vulnerability and risk to future external challenges regarding the relevance of the overall combined activities to the full breadth of agricultural activity in the region.

- Farmers highlighted the critical importance of the capacity of the Advisor in terms of facilitation and personal relationship as being equally important to technical ability in delivering the service.

### Reputation

- Client-farmer feedback suggests that the reputation of Teagasc is held in good stead across the geography and enterprises within the region. Future attention to establish and positively develop the feedback of non-clients is important for the long-term sustainability of the reputation of the service in the region.
- The effective capacity of the KT service in the region to deliver timely support for farmers during difficult situations, most notably during the recent drought, was affirmed very strongly by farmers, and bodes well for the appreciation farmers have for the service.
- In the context of stakeholder collaboration, the PRP was made aware of the importance of Teagasc's reputation for independent advice, which requires particular consideration when developing Joint Programmes with industry.

### Recommendations:

- 3.1 There are opportunities within the region for the improvement of knowledge exchange amongst Advisory staff, on best practice innovation and collaboration with industry stakeholders, within the premise of safeguarding the independence of Teagasc's reputation.
- 3.2 A detailed survey/evaluation of the services and perception of the Teagasc Advisory and Educational programmes within the region would be useful to help the region evaluate its service delivery from a customer perspective. This should be inclusive, and span the non-client and client base of Teagasc, as well as the full breadth of farm scale, enterprises and demographics. The results of this survey should inform future strategy to develop how non-KT farmers might have better access to relevant knowledge transfer, advice and information support.
- 3.3 Encourage more farmers to join KT groups and seek to continuously improve service delivery to maintain high levels of participation and retention across KT programmes. Measures to consider how the long-term sustainability of each group can be improved should also be factored into the business plan.
- 3.4 Review the strategy, resourcing and intended impact of the tillage and poultry provision in the region. The objective should be to identify the key areas within the sectors where Teagasc can offer a unique service that will add value to these sectors.
- 3.5 More fully consider the diverse range of needs and interests of farming communities across the entire region when reviewing the Advisory Region Strategic Plan and Business Plan.

#### 4. Positioning of the Region for the Future

##### Robustness and Sustainability

- The PRP identified that there is work to be done to close the gap between the future demands for improving the sustainability credentials of farming systems across the region with the on-going development work that has been based more on productivity and profitability. Advisors dealing with main stream agriculture do not appear to have a fully clear understanding and strategy around how best to integrate sustainability into their activities, despite having a good awareness and acknowledgement of the importance of doing so. The PRP observe that this is an issue for the wider Teagasc strategy and programmes, and not confined solely to this region.
- The emergence of the Agricultural Sustainability Support Advisory Programme (ASSAP) service poses an opportunity regarding the improvement of the environmental impact of farming in the region. However, the PRP observe a high risk that this resource will be seen as adequately covering the overall farm sustainability agenda, resulting in a lack of inclusivity of the sustainability issue in the mainstream programmes. The issue of farm sustainability needs to be more 'normalised'/better integrated in the everyday work of all Advisors, rather than being 'departmentalised' as being the responsibility of a relatively small number of advisors.
- The PRP acknowledge the prioritisation of mentoring and support to early career Advisors in the region and emphasise the strategic importance of maintaining this commitment. The allocation of part of a POR to this activity is noted to address this need.
- The PRP acknowledge the merit and success of the policy and processes to maintain active engagement with post-Green Certificate Students and Ballyhaise Agricultural College and Gurteen Agricultural College Graduates/Alumni.

##### SWOT

- The PRP identified that the SWOT analysis, while capturing many national and high level general issues, was insufficiently focused on regional specificities and, therefore, underutilises the potential of this exercise to input into a regional strategy.
- The PRP affirm the importance of the development of a 5 year strategy for each Advisory Region.

##### Recommendations

- 4.1 Develop, effectively communicate and implement a clear strategy to integrate sustainability, and optimise opportunities for public goods delivery and enhancement of farm business resilience, across mainstream production agriculture provision, in line with the unique characteristics of the region.
- 4.2 Monitor and further embed the success of the pilot initiative to maintain active engagement with post-Green Certificate students and Ballyhaise Agricultural College and Gurteen Agricultural College graduates/Alumni and share this best practice with other Advisory Regions.
- 4.3 A process to conduct a more thorough SWOT analysis for the region should be put in place, with the objective of establishing a more detailed understanding of the enterprise and the region's specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Each point included should be more conducive to the development of a clear and actionable goal within future strategy and/or activity target within the business plan.

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| 4.4 | Consideration should be given to using the peer review criteria to guide a self-evaluation process (to enable further improvements to quality assurance and impact of Teagasc's service provision) at Advisor, Regional Manager and Head of Advisory Service levels. |
| 4.5 | The long-term sustainability of the region as a coherent management unit should be reviewed in the context of the very wide expanse of the geography of this and neighbouring Advisory Regions.  |

## **Conclusion**

Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-Monaghan is a very large and diverse region with soils ranging from light and quick drying to heavy with poor drainage issues. The majority of farmers are cattle focused; however, there has been a 23% increase in dairy herds since the abolition of quota. Farm size in the region is marginally lower than the national average but farms are also less fragmented than the national average.

The PRP makes 19 recommendations across a variety of issues. Key issues around *Management and Leadership* include the implications of the flat management structure for staff support and career development and strategic planning; the development, implementation and review of a formal multi-channel strategy for internal communications particularly within the Drystock Advisory team; the consideration of options to redefine the Region's boundaries to reduce the extent of land types and enterprise diversity; and the need to review POR and Advisor roles to mitigate risks of administrative function ingress, were outlined by the PRP.

Focusing on *Productivity and Service Delivery*, to review the channels and processes used to deliver knowledge and information to farmers; strengthen the culture of innovation that exists among Advisors; develop and implement a policy for the self-assessment of client impact; resource optimisation with Ballyhaise Agricultural College's research provision for all enterprises in the region; include the continuous development of Advisors' soft skills of facilitation and advisory work in Continuous Professional Development provision, were identified by the PRP.

Turning to *Relevance and Impact*, the need to take advantage of opportunities for improving knowledge exchange among Advisory staff on best practice innovation and collaboration with industry; carrying out a detailed survey/evaluation of the services and perception of Teagasc Advisory and Educational Programmes so as to evaluate its service delivery from a customer perspective; encourage more farmers to join KT groups and maintain high levels of participation and retention across KT programmes; review the strategy, resourcing and impact of tillage and poultry provision in the region; and more fully consider the diverse range of needs and interests of farming communities across the entire region when reviewing Advisory Region strategies and business plans, were highlighted by the PRP.

In terms of *Positioning for the Future*, develop, communicate and implement a clear strategy to integrate sustainability and optimise opportunity for public goods delivery and enhancement across mainstream production agriculture; monitor and embed the success of the pilot initiative to maintain active engagement with post Green Cert students and Ballyhaise Agricultural College and Gurteen Agricultural College graduates; put in place a process to conduct a more thorough SWOT analysis for the region; consider using the peer review criteria to guide a self-evaluation process at Advisor, Regional Manager and Head of Advisory Service levels; and review the long term sustainability of the region as a coherent management unit in the context of the wide geography of this and neighbouring Advisory regions, were identified by the PRP.

The PRP hope the review can inform Teagasc's Regional Strategy and provide valuable feedback for the Regional Manager and staff, Head of Advisory Service and Director of KT to focus their efforts on the further development of Teagasc's Advisory Programme.

Sincere thanks to all involved for their openness, enthusiasm, and willingness to engage with the panel.

## **Review of Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-Monaghan Advisory Region 2018**

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### **Action Plan for Implementation of Recommendations**

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Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2019

Submit to: Dr. Tom Kelly, Director of Knowledge Transfer; Dermot McCarthy, Head of Advisory Service.



This action plan outlines the recommendations from the report on the *Westmeath-Offaly-Cavan-Monaghan Advisory Region 2018 Peer Review*. To complete this action plan please specify the actions to be taken, if any, to implement the recommendations outlined, allocate responsibility for these actions and set a target date by which the recommendation is to be implemented.

### 1. Recommendations for Management & Leadership

No.	Recommendation	Actions to be taken	Person	Date
1.1	The numbers of staff directly reporting to the Regional Manager should be reviewed at a National/strategic level to facilitate more personalised career and development support for all staff and to mitigate the risks of negative impacts on organisational effectiveness and service delivery.	Issue for Senior Management	Tom Kelly/Dermot McCarthy	December 2019
1.2	Develop, implement, regularly review and continuously improve a more structured and formal multi-channel strategy for internal communications and information sharing across the region, particularly within the Drystock Advisory team.	Proposal to set up a monthly conference call with the drystock team similar to dairying monthly call	Conal Murnaghan (POR Drystock)	March 2019
1.3	Teagasc should consider options to redefine the Advisory Region's boundaries to reduce the extent of land type and farm enterprise diversity and mitigate the risk of negative impacts on service delivery in line with client needs.	Issue for Senior Management	Tom Kelly/Dermot McCarthy	December 2019
1.4	Review Posts of Responsibility (POR) and Advisor roles at Regional and National levels, to identify opportunities to mitigate risks of administrative function ingress having a negative impact on Teagasc's service delivery, regionally and nationally.	Issue for Senior Management/HR Roles will be more clearly defined in Business Plan	Tom Kelly/Dermot McCarthy	December 2019

## 2. Recommendations for Productivity and Service Delivery

No.	Recommendation	Actions to be taken	Person	Date
2.1	Continue to review the channels and processes being used to deliver knowledge and information to farmers, to inform on-going improvement of service delivery, effectiveness and efficiency.	Prioritise continuation of Discussion Groups following end of KT Programme We will formulate a Social Media Plan for the region We will use Evaluation Sheets on a sample of public events	Con Feighery + Advisory Staff	July 2019
2.2	The culture that supports innovation amongst Advisors to 'try new things' is evident as a key strength and needs to be further developed, particularly in cross-county and cross-office initiatives. The PRP highlight not just the need for wider roll-out of current innovations already in place, but more importantly the benefit of continuing to nurture the culture of innovation that is apparent amongst the Advisors and their programmes within the region.	Support advisers with new innovative ideas regarding knowledge transfer Innovation will be an item for staff meetings to encourage innovation by all staff across the region	Con Feighery	on-going
2.3	Develop and implement a policy for the self-assessment of client impact, to include random sampling of clients by Advisors.	Complete surveys with different cohorts of clients on a rotational basis	Con Feighery	December 2019
2.4	Resource optimisation with Ballyhaise Agricultural College's research provision should be a key factor in future strategic development of the region for all enterprises, in addition to dairy.	Further develop linkages with Ballyhaise research farm and new development in Ballyhaise of contract rearing of heifers	All staff	March 2019
2.5	Continuous development of Advisors in the 'soft' skills of facilitation and advisory work is a key priority for inclusion in the Continuous Professional Development provision.	Encourage all advisers to participate in the CECRA Programme (discussions held with each adviser as part of PMDS) Target CECRA Qualification by all advisory staff by end of 2022	Con Feighery	On-going

### 3. Recommendations for Relevance and Impact

No.	Recommendation	Actions to be taken	Responsible	Completion
3.1	There are opportunities within the region for the improvement of knowledge exchange amongst Advisory staff on best practice innovation and collaboration with industry stakeholders, within the premise of safeguarding the independence of Teagasc's reputation.	Liaise with stakeholders to create opportunities to deliver shared activities eg Joint Programmes, Succession/Inheritance Events Liaise with ConnecEd team in Teagasc to explore possible opportunities for collaboration	Con Feighery	December 2019
3.2	A detailed survey/evaluation of the services and perception of the Teagasc Advisory and Educational programmes within the region would be useful to help the region evaluate its service delivery from a customer perspective. This should be inclusive, and span the non-client and client base of Teagasc, as well as the full breadth of farm scale, enterprises and demographics. The results of this survey should inform future strategy to develop how non-KT farmers might have better access to relevant knowledge transfer, advice and information support.	We will liaise with National Farm Survey (NFS) to action survey	Con Feighery	December 2020
3.3	Encourage more farmers to join KT groups and seek to continuously improve service delivery to maintain high levels of participation and retention across KT programmes. Measures to consider how the long-term sustainability of each group can be improved should also be factored into the business plan.	A review is being completed currently by each adviser on the sustainability of each group to assess the prospects of continuing the groups once KT Programme is finished. This review will be followed by a series of targeted actions	All advisers	July 2019
3.4	Review the strategy, resourcing and intended impact of the tillage and poultry provision in the region. The objective should be to identify the key areas within the sectors where Teagasc can offer a unique service that will add value to these sectors.	Tillage programme priorities are being reviewed as part of the Business Plan In relation to Poultry service, we will be guided by feedback from our Poultry Stakeholder group to develop relevant business programme	Paul Fox and John Kelly	On – going
3.5	More fully consider the diverse range of needs and interests of farming communities across the entire region when reviewing the Advisory Region Strategic Plan and Business Plan.	This will be taken on board when the update of regional strategy take place later this year	Con Feighery	December 2019

#### 4. Recommendations for Positioning for the Future

No.	Recommendation	Actions to be taken	Responsible	Completion
4.1	Develop, effectively communicate and implement a clear strategy to integrate sustainability, and optimise opportunities for public goods delivery and enhancement of farm business resilience, across mainstream production agriculture provision, in line with the unique characteristics of the region.	Financial sustainability and environmental sustainability are key elements of the various enterprise programmes delivered as part of our Business Plan. Provide support to the ASSAP service Joint Programme with Lakeland and Aurivo Co-ops have sustainability as a key objective of the programmes	Con Feighery + all enterprise advisers	On-going
4.2	Monitor and further embed the success of the pilot initiative to maintain active engagement with post-Green Certificate students and Ballyhaise Agricultural College and Gurteen Agricultural College graduates/Alumni and share this best practice with other Advisory Regions.	Alumni Project to continue on an annual basis with new graduates New cohort of students will be targeted this year with further events	Con Feighery	On-going
4.3	A process to conduct a more thorough SWOT analysis for the region should be put in place, with the objective of establishing a more detailed understanding of the enterprise and the region's specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Each point included should be more conducive to the development of a clear and actionable goal within future strategy and/or activity target within the business plan.	This will form part of the annual stakeholder meetings in the region Stakeholder meeting will include advisers and stakeholders	Con Feighery	On-going
4.4	Consideration should be given to using the peer review criteria to guide a self-evaluation process (to enable further improvements to quality assurance and impact of Teagasc's service provision) at Advisor, Regional Manager and Head of Advisory Service levels.	Peer Review criteria will be used in the update of the Regional Strategic Plan Quality, relevance, productivity and positioning for the future are intrinsic parameters for the regional strategic plan review		
4.5	The long-term sustainability of the region as a coherent management unit should be reviewed in the context of the very wide expanse of the geography of this and neighbouring Advisory Regions.	Issue for Senior Management	Tom Kelly/Dermot McCarthy	December 2019

## Appendix 2 Advisory Regional Review Panel

Function / Role	Name
Chair	Dr Eric Long, Head of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise's (CAFRE) Knowledge Advisory Service within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), Northern Ireland. Previous roles include Principal of Enniskillen College of Agriculture, management of organisational improvement programmes within DAERA and private sector agricultural consultancy in England.
KT Professional with Advisory and/or Education background	Andrea Knierim is a Professor at Hohenheim University and heads the chair of Rural Sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences in Agriculture. She has a PhD in agricultural extension and education from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research interests focus on agricultural knowledge and innovation systems, voluntary change and learning processes in agriculture and rural development and on inter- and transdisciplinary research approaches.
Farmer stakeholder	Michael Harlin is a dairy farmer from Co.Meath, who graduated with a B.Agr.Sc in 1990 and has worked in agricultural consultancy since that alongside running a 120 cow dairy herd. He is on the board of Drogheda Milk Producers Co-op and is Chairman of the local Kilmessan Branch of the IFA.
Industry representative	Dr. Stan Lalor is the Head of the Speciality Division of Grassland AGRO, an Irish-based wholesaler of fertiliser and other agri-inputs. Stan has been working in the private sector since 2014, having previously worked in both the Advisory and Research Directorates of Teagasc.
Independent Teagasc Representative & Secretariat	Dr Kevin Heanue Teagasc's Evaluation Officer, leads the development of an evaluation culture in Teagasc through the cyclical evaluation of its research programmes, extension activities and once-off evaluations of organisational activities and functions. He provides a secretariat to the Peer Review Panel.

## **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.