
Teagasc Advisory Regional Review Mayo

Final Report

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Mayo Advisory Regional Review Report

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 farm 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 a new evaluation model. This process included a two-day visit by the review panel (see appendix 2 for panel composition). The panel met with national and regional management, staff, and farmer stakeholders.

As part of the review process, the panel examined relevant documents which included the Region's self-assessment document, business plans, programme documents, and staff questionnaire.

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 services provided. This evaluation focused on four main criteria (an 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 Mayo Advisory Region in context

The Mayo Advisory Region is one of 12 Teagasc Advisory regions. It is entrusted with service provision to 10,860 farmers (37% of which are clients). Mayo has a considerable diversity between lowland and upland land types and has an average farm size of 22.4 hectares, compared with a national average of 32.7 hectares, according to the CSO 2010 Census of Agriculture.

In terms of market penetration 62% of clients are over 20 hectares, whereas in Mayo only 41% of farms are over 20 hectares which indicates good penetration of larger farms. Looking at specific enterprises 57% of Mayo's 390 dairy farms are clients, 37% of Mayo's mixed cattle / sheep 9,305 farms are clients, and 32% of the 1,121 sheep only farms (includes hill sheep) are clients.

Internally, since 2008 the Mayo Advisory Region has undergone significant change in resources as part of overall rationalisation in Teagasc. The region has gone from 9 offices in 2008 to 4 offices in 2013. Staff resources have also reduced considerably as a result of retirements and the moratorium on public sector recruitment, with Advisor full - time equivalents falling from 24.5 FTEs in 2010 to an expected 14.3 FTEs in 2014

Externally, the demand for advisory services in the region has not declined. Advisor client ratios have increased from 141:1 in 2010 to 249:1 in 2013. The Mayo Advisory region has managed to increase client numbers by nearly 600, and maintain the number of office consultations in the period from 2010 to 2013. The number of farm visits has declined over the same period, from 1939 to 1200, which is to be expected with the change in client advisor ratio and the shift in emphasis in service delivery to a group based approach.

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In terms of staff outputs as table 1 outlines, discussion groups have increased from 25 groups in 2010 to 58 in 2013, assisted by the introduction of the Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP) and the Sheep Technology Adoption Programme (STAP). Outputs such as the number of Teagasc eProfit Monitors completed will also rise significantly in 2013 (target of 659 compared to a figure of 71 in 2010). This was aided by the requirement to complete one under BTAP and STAP.

Table 1 Mayo Advisory Region Key Productivity Indicators for 2010 to 2013

	2010	2011	2012	2013 (target)
Client Interactions				
Number of Clients	3449	3627	3997	4057
Number of Farm Visits	1939	1331	1214	1200
Number of Consultations	4843	7053	6932	4727
Discussion Groups	25	25	45	58
Farm Planning Activities				
SFP submitted	3680	3451	3567	3906
Teagasc E - Profit Monitors	71	106	244	659
Environment / Regulatory Activities				
Simple fertilizer plans	175	170	404	400
Nutrient services	157	168	151	150
Derogations renewals/ revisions	20	25	34	37
Media Outputs				
Radio slots	298	273	282	288
Printed media / newsletter	23	27	14	14
Events Held				
Seminars	29	29	42	16
Farm Walks	23	31	12	7
Number of FETAC Level 5 students	n/a	n/a	n/a	30
Number FETAC Level 6 students	54	54	52	24

Source: Teagasc Productivity Variance

Main Report Recommendations

1. Management and Leadership

- 1.1 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop its existing business plan to clearly identify and prioritise the local needs of the region and demonstrate clear linkage to Teagasc national targets.
- 1.2 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop and formalise linkages with stakeholders to ensure their needs are adequately met.
- 1.3 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop a more formal engagement with research colleagues to ensure that research outcomes meet the needs of local farmers.

2. Productivity and Service Delivery

- 2.1 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop and implement a system which will demonstrate a valid and consistent evaluation of advisory achievements at local level.
- 2.2 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop a system to evaluate farmer feedback on delivery of the service. This should include a number of individual events complemented with focus group feedback.

3. Relevance and Impact

- 3.1 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop and implement a system which can more fully quantify its impact at a local level.
- 3.2 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should consider developing and delivering a pilot knowledge transfer programme which has clear targets set for on-farm adoption of research outcomes.
- 3.3 The Mayo Advisory Region should continue to develop stakeholder collaborations which will enhance impact and relevance.

4. Positioning for the Future

- 4.1 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop a strategic plan which will identify the key priorities within the region and deliver this in an efficient and effective way to meet the needs of farmers.
- 4.2 The Mayo Advisory Region should identify priority programme areas which enhance Teagasc's Mission statement and alternatively seek to ensure delivery of other programmes through external providers.

Panel Report for the Mayo Regional Advisory Review

1. The Quality of Management and Leadership in the Region

- a. The panel identified good management and leadership in the Region. Staff are motivated, proud to work in the Region, and demonstrate good teamwork and flexibility in the delivery of their activities/outputs.
- b. The Region has shown leadership in delivering outputs and meeting targets in particular in collaboration with key stakeholders, examples worthy of note are – Cregduff Catchments Programme, Aurivo Co-op, the South Mayo Lamb Producer initiative, and daily radio broadcasts on Mid - West Radio. The panel feels there is potential to further enhance this collaboration, in particular with the drystock sector.
- c. The panel reviewed both the Mayo Advisory Regional Review Self - Assessment and the Mayo Regional Unit Business Plan 2013. Both documents set out the main activities and outputs to be delivered by the Mayo Advisory Region. However the panel felt that the layout of the current business plan does not contextualise nor reflect sufficiently the key needs and priorities of the Mayo Region.
- d. The panel was made aware of and understands, the increased difficulties resulting from the reduced staff complement (reduction of 1/3 in advisory staff over the last three years) and the increasing pressure likely over the next few years. These views were clearly articulated by staff and farmers in the region. The options currently in operation to manage these difficulties were not viewed as medium/long term solutions. It is imperative that the Mayo Regional Unit engages with stakeholders, in particular farmers, to ensure the gap between their expectation and what can feasibly be delivered is managed.
- e. The panel found evidence of a link/connection between advisors and researchers; however this seemed to be sporadic and highly dependent on close working relationships built up over a number of years. Furthermore, the farmers interviewed identified local links with research as unsatisfactory.

Recommendations:

- 1.1 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop its existing business plan to clearly identify and prioritise the local needs of the region and demonstrate clear linkage to Teagasc national targets.
- 1.2 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop and formalise linkages with stakeholders to ensure their needs are adequately met.
- 1.3 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop a formal engagement with research colleagues to ensure that research outcomes meet the needs of local farmers.

2. Productivity and Service Delivery in the Region

- a. The panel found clear evidence of good productivity in terms of key advisor outputs from the Level 3 Business Plan, and it would seem that targets set for the region in totality are largely achieved. In fact, with a reduced staff complement overall client numbers have been maintained and there is increasing emphasis placed on delivery through discussion groups. This method of delivery was endorsed by the four farmer clients interviewed.
- b. However the panel observed significant variations in achievement of targets by advisory staff across the main output areas as defined in the Level 3 Business Plan. The panel found limited evidence of valid and consistent evaluation at local level of outputs from advisors on a sectoral basis, or between sectors. In particular, the panel noted a trend of high numbers of clients related to high numbers of SPS applications submitted on-line or higher numbers of profit monitors related to increased numbers of discussion/project groups.
- c. The farmers interviewed were very satisfied with the service they received from the Mayo Regional Unit. In particular they appreciated the independence of the service, and the dedicated personal service provided by Mayo advisors both during and after office hours. They valued highly the form-filling service associated with the SFP and also highlighted the BETTER farm model of delivery of research outcomes. This was an area they felt could be further enhanced, and potentially could include farmer to farmer mentoring.
- d. However the farmers were concerned that the Mayo Advisory Region was facing further staff reductions and the likely negative impact this could have on service delivery. The panel did not see evidence of a formal farmer feedback process leading to continual improvement in service delivery; therefore, it was difficult to fully evaluate local farmer satisfaction in the region, although, as previously stated, the farmers interviewed expressed satisfaction.
- e. Administration in the unit is strong. There are currently 7.4 administrative staff and they play an important role in supporting the reduced advisory staff numbers. Administrative staff in the region have been willing to accept new challenges, including assisting with eprofit monitor data entry, administration of outsourcing certain functions in the region. One of the admin staff also delivers administration duties on a national level.
- f. In terms of education the panel recognizes that the Mayo region has a strong tradition of delivering Level 5 and level 6 agricultural education programmes. Local advisory staff deliver modules. Mayo will redeploy an advisor to the education officer post when it becomes vacant in 2014, which signals that education is a priority. There is also a low level of legacy students in the region which is very positive.

Recommendations:

- 2.1 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop and implement a system which will demonstrate a valid and consistent evaluation of advisory achievements at local level.
- 2.2 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop a system to evaluate farmer feedback on delivery of the service. This should include a number of individual events complemented with focus group feedback.

3. Relevance and Impact in the Region

- a. The farmers interviewed felt that current advisory support from the Mayo Regional Unit is both relevant and critical to their farm business and to their future as farmers. They provided good examples of current service delivery which they find beneficial to their business and these included, discussion group meetings, BETTER farm delivery of research outcomes and the form - filling service associated with SPS applications. They were also able to provide the panel with real examples of business improvement they had adopted as a result of intervention from the local advisor.
- b. The panel was also given good evidence from advisor presentations of impact at farm level with particular farm examples given. However there was limited evidence of collating this at regional level to demonstrate the impact of the Mayo Regional Unit on Mayo farmers.
- c. The four farmers interviewed were very positive towards the impact of the BETTER farm model in the region and they expressed their strong view that it was vastly more relevant to their local needs and conditions than national research centres. They also stated that large - scale demonstrations, both locally and nationally were not suitable methods for them to learn and adopt new practices. For the Teagasc staff, high attendances were important (an example given was a recent reseeding demonstration attended by 700 farmers), but farmers interviewed felt that they didn't learn as much from these days as a result of the high number of attendees.
- d. The farmers also stated that there was a real need to strengthen and enhance the BETTER farm model and they expressed a willingness to participate in Teagasc-led research trials on their own farm to encourage uptake and adoption.
- e. Although farmers and advisors were very positive towards the need to increase the adoption of research outcomes, there seemed to be a lack of connectivity with researchers as previously mentioned, since there is no local research centre the Mayo Advisory Region needs to address this gap as a matter of urgency.
- f. The panel saw good collaboration between advisors and external partners in the delivery of advisory programmes. The panel felt concerned that with higher advisory workloads, there is a danger that there will be less contact with external agencies such as ICBF, Leader, marts, co-operatives and meat processors.

Recommendations:

- 3.1 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should develop and implement a system which can more fully quantify its impact at a local level.
- 3.2 The Mayo Advisory Region and Teagasc should consider developing and delivering a pilot knowledge transfer programme which has clear targets set for on-farm adoption of research outcomes.
- 3.3 The Mayo Advisory Region should continue to identify key stakeholders and develop enhanced collaborations which will enhance impact and relevance.

4. Positioning the Region for the Future

- a. The core strength of the Mayo Regional Unit is a highly committed staff team that are willing to meet the needs of farmers in their region. The evidence viewed by the panel clearly indicates that client numbers have been maintained and the farmers interviewed were very positive about the service.
- b. There is obvious concern in the region from farmers and Teagasc staff alike that previous reductions in staff numbers, combined with further imminent reductions, will lead to increased staffing pressures and a likely negative impact on delivery of service.
- c. The panel saw evidence of new initiatives in the region to ensure continuity of service, and these ranged from advisors working with more clients, new delivery methods such as discussion groups and outsourcing of programmes such as REPS and education modules.
- d. The region is also unique in that it has a large number of smaller farms compared to the national average with a high percentage of sheep farms and low percentage of dairy farms. Mayo also has a significant proportion of farms operating in wetland regions. Mayo is also a region rich in habitats rivers and lakes of significant importance both in terms of ecology and as a resource for the attraction of tourism to the region

Recommendations

- 4.1 The Mayo Advisory Region should develop a strategic plan which will identify the key priorities within the region and deliver this in an efficient and effective way to meet the needs of farmers.
- 4.2 The Mayo Advisory Region should identify priority programme areas which enhance Teagasc's Mission statement and alternatively seek to ensure delivery of other programmes through external providers.

Conclusion

The Mayo Advisory Region has undergone significant change in the last three years as a result of a reduced staff complement and reduction in the number of local offices. This has created concern for the staff and the farmers they work with. It is therefore vitally important that the Mayo Advisory region sets out a strategic plan to ensure that the service of the future meets the expectations of both staff and farmers.

Appendix 1 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 Business 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 2 Advisory Regional Review High Level Evaluation Criteria

1. Management and Leadership

Management and Leadership refer 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 is 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.