



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

Paper 29/16

16th February 2016

NIAR 37-16

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NIRDP 2007-13 – progress made since mid-term evaluation and overview of issues/difficulties with the Programme

1 Context and background

This briefing paper provides an overview of the progress made over the course of the delivery of the 2007-13 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme. The paper draws particular attention to the mid-term review of the programme carried out in 2010 and the mid-term evaluation update issued in 2013, highlighting issues and associated recommendations for action identified in both of these key documents. The paper also gives some consideration to the current situation pertaining to the final out turns and evaluation of the programme.

The 2007-13 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) was formally launched by the then Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Michelle Gildernew

in 2007. The entire programme had a value in excess of £500 million and was structured around four so called Axes as follows:

- Axis 1, Farming and Food – focus on improving the performance of the farming and forestry sectors – total notional budget of £45million;
- Axis 2, Environment and Countryside – focus on helping farmers to manage the land sustainably and improving the quality of the environment – total notional budget of £390million;
- Axis 3, Rural Life and Axis 4, LEADER Approach¹ – focus on improving the quality of life in rural areas – open to all rural people including farmers and farm families. LEADER approach relates to the delivery of Axis 3 support by the so called Local Action Groups (LAGs) – total notional budget of £100million.

There were also a number of associated measures within each of these Axes and these are set out in table 1 below.

Table 1: 2007-13 NIRD Axes and associated Measures

Axis	Measures	Delivery responsibility
1 – Farming and Food	Measure 1.1: Vocational Training and Information Actions Measure 1.2 - Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability Measure 1.3: Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings Measure 1.4: Supply Chain Development Programme	DARD and The Countryside Agri Rural Partnership (a consortium led by Countryside Services Ltd, working together with the Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC) and AI Services Ltd delivering the Focus Farms, Farm Family Options, Farm Modernisation, Benchmarking and Supply Chain Development measures)
2 – Environment and Countryside	Measure 2.1: Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowances Scheme Measure 2.2: Agri-Environment Programme Measure 2.3: First Afforestation (forest expansion) Measure 2.4: Forest Environments	DARD
3 – Rural Life	Measure 3.1: Diversification into non-agricultural activities Measure 3.2: Business creation and development Measure 3.3: Encouragement of tourism activities Measure 3.4: Basic Services for the economy and rural population Measure 3.5: Village renewal and development Measure 3.6: Conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage	Local Action Groups(LAGs) and Joint Council Committees(JCCs)
4 – LEADER Approach	Measure 4.1: Implementation of Local Development Strategies Measure 4.2: Inter-territorial and Transnational Co-operation	Local Action Groups(LAGs) and Joint Council Committees(JCCs)

¹ Whilst defined as two separate Axes, they are taken in unison as Axis 3 is the focus of the activity and Axis 4 is the approach taken to deliver this activity.

	Measure 4.3: Running costs, Acquisition of skills and Animation	
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The overall initial headline targets for the 2007-13 NIRDP and associated Axes/Measures are difficult to determine as the figures evolved over the life of the programme but those identified within the 2010 mid-term evaluation report are included as a tabled paper to accompany this paper.

DARD acted as the overall management authority for the NIRDP and in this role has responsibility for the correct implementation of the Programme. As set out in table 1, actual delivery of the 2007-13 NIRDP was split between DARD and The Countryside Agri Rural Partnership (Axis 1), DARD (Axis 2) and the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Joint Council Committees (JCCs) (Axis 3).

DARD's work as the overall management authority was overseen by a Monitoring Committee within the 2007-13 Programme. Within the context of this paper a key responsibility of the Monitoring Committee was to consider and approve proposals to amend the NIRDP and periodically review progress made towards achieving the specific objectives of each of the programme measures.

2 Mid-term evaluation of the 2007-13 NIRDP

A key requirement for all EU Rural Development Programmes is the completion of a so called mid-term review. Within the 2007-13 programme period this requirement is set out by Article 86 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)².

Within Northern Ireland the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) was commissioned to undertake the mid-term review and NISRA subsequently published its final report in November 2010³.

This final report identified a number of challenges facing the 2007-13 NIRDP that included:

- the increased difficulty of holding or securing match funding;
- concerns with the Axes 3 and 4 expenditure, with declared expenditure accounting for only three per cent of total allocation at the point of the mid-term evaluation assessment;
- an overall lack of performance data for some measures due to the delayed rollout;
- little evidence to date, from the research undertaken, of active targeting of women and young people in the current Programme;

² [COUNCIL REGULATION \(EC\) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\), 20 September 2005](#)

³ [Mid-term evaluation of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme \(NIRDP\) 2007-2013, Final Report, NISRA, November 2010](#)

NISRA also provided an assessment of the performance of each of the individual Measures within the programme and this data is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2:

Measure	Summary of Outputs / Main Findings
1.1 - Vocational Training and Information Actions	The measure has made good progress to date. There is a clear need to push the Farm Family Options Mentoring.
1.2 - Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability	The measure has made good early progress. Uncertainty remains regarding the measure's future at present, which may be impacted by future National funding pressures.
1.3 - Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings	The measure has made good progress to date and should attain the targets set. Demand is extremely strong for the FMP side of the measure.
1.4 - Supply Chain Development Programme	The measure has made a lack of progress to date. There is a clear need to move the measure along in the near future.
2.1 - Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowances Scheme	The measure has made good progress to date and remains on target to attain the targets set. It is recommended to re-focus the scheme for the next Programming period (2014-2020) to address the needs highlighted in the review of Less Favoured Areas, such as the continuing fall in cattle and sheep numbers in the LFA, particularly the SDA, and the increasing evidence of the environmental impact of that in terms of under grazing, scrub encroachment and rush infestation. There are also possible changes in the EU legislation governing the Measure which may need addressed.

2.2 - Agri-Environment Programme	The measure made good early progress. Concern exists that National funding pressures may impact in the future. There may also be a need to re-focus the scheme in the future due to changing priorities.
2.3 - First Afforestation (forest expansion)	The measure made slow progress initially; however has shown some recent movement, due to a strong PR campaign. It is recommended the measure further promotes the benefits of forestry schemes.
2.4 - Forest Environments	The measure has had very low uptake to date, and may need to be addressed within the remainder of this programming period.
3.1 - Diversification into non-agricultural activities	Limited data exists due to the early stage in the rollout of the measure. There is some concern in relation to attaining the targets set. There is also a perception that saturation levels may be occurring in relation to diversification. There is a need to actively progress the measure.
3.2 - Business creation and development	Limited data exists due to the early stage in the rollout of the measure. There is some concern in relation to attaining the targets set. There is a need to actively progress the measure.
3.3 - Encouragement of tourism activities	Limited data exists due to the early stage in the rollout of the measure. There is some concern in relation to attaining the targets set. There is a need to actively progress the measure.
3.4 - Basic Services for the economy and rural population	Lack of data exists due to the early stage in the rollout of the measure. Uncertainty exists among the LAGs regarding what the measure will deliver. There is a need to progress the measure.
3.5 - Village renewal and development	No data exists yet. There is a need to progress the measure.
3.6 - Conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage	No data exists yet. There is a need to progress the measure.

Responding to these and other challenges NISRA identified a total of 37 recommendations relating to the delivery of the remainder of the 2007-13 (all 37 are available in appendix 1 of this paper). Whilst a number of these recommendations were Axis/Measure specific a number of the more general key recommendations under particular themes/headings included:

- **Application processes** - maintain and improve on the current customer service levels, and continually review procedures to ensure the highest levels of satisfaction in the client base. This may include enhancing the initial application form, stating clearer rules of eligibility and providing more information about what will be required from successful applicants in the future implementation of their projects.
- **Target Groups** – enhanced contact with youth groups and women to increase inclusion and uptake whilst also exploring how the Rural Network can utilise their expertise and reach within target groups to promote the programme more effectively;
- **Axis specific Targeting** - targets to be re-visited in autumn 2010, once the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) has been published, and when more data are available for Axis 3 measures. It is recommended that the Department take this

forward as part of their ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities associated with the Programme;

- **Programme Objectives and Priorities** - the Managing Authority commission or undertake a Mid Term Evaluation update in 2012, to ascertain if objectives are likely to be met;
- **Implementation and Delivery Structures** - DARD, JCCs, and LAGs should come together to identify difficulties for all parties and seek to make procedures for drawdown, open calls and auditing more flexible and streamlined, where possible, in the context of the existing EU regulations. Attention was also drawn to the need for greater active networking and a need for DARD to revisit the animation/facilitator roles within LAGs/JCCs, in addition to better communication and increased timeliness of processing projects.

Turning to Axis specific recommendations the NISRA final report highlighted the particular need for all of Axis 3 to be progressed in the immediate future to ensure that the rural area gains from the multiplier effects the measures can bring.

3 Mid-term evaluation update of the 2007-13 NIRD

Whilst the EU regulations did not require a mid-term evaluation update, building upon the recommendation to do so within the mid-term evaluation, DARD commissioned NISRA to undertake the work, which was subsequently issued in 2013⁴.

The 2013 report included the following comments/observations on the ongoing development/implementation/operation of the 2007-13 NIRD:

- Evidence that increased marketing of schemes raised awareness and led to an increase in application numbers;
- While marketing can increase interest and applications to schemes, it should be targeted to the appropriate audience in order to avoid a subsequent high rejection rate;
- Some schemes found the administrative effort involved in processing applications to be excessive and this had a negative effect on these schemes. In some cases this led to the temporary closure of schemes and in others considerably slowing down application processing times;
- There was a degree of speculative application, particularly apparent under Axis 3. All of these applications had to be processed and therefore there was a considerable administrative overhead to schemes receiving high volumes of applications of this nature. The experience in Axis 3 was that this occurrence clogged up the system and slowed down application processing times;
- Eligibility and subsequent requirements under schemes were in some cases misunderstood. With exceptionally high dropout rates there was clear evidence that

⁴ [Mid Term evaluation update, 2007-13 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme, NISRA, 2012](#)

confusion around eligibility was also partly responsible for the high level of speculative application and drop out which took place under Axis 3.

- The economic climate had a direct impact on the performance of some schemes. The ongoing challenge of the economic situation in Northern Ireland was evidently a barrier to achieving some objectives. The issues faced by applicants relating to match funding, and issues around bank lending practices were areas which definitely had a negative impact on the Programme;
- There was general consensus that the continuing harsh economic environment was having a detrimental effect on Axis 3 delivery. Recently a decision was taken to redirect funds to strategic projects which was anticipated would enable Local Government to bring forward projects in partnership to impact on a larger catchment area.

The mid-term evaluation update also provided an analysis of the financial performance of the programme with the main headlines relating to each Axis being as follows:

- **Axis 1** - the financial data shows that it is reasonable to anticipate that Axis 1 **will not achieve full spend**⁵ over the remainder of the Programme. At the time of the MTE write-up in 2010, Axis 1 had spent 16.7% of its allocated budget. By June 2012, the Axis had spent £19 million; representing 39.3% of its allocated spend of £48.6 million. Profiled spend to the end of 2015 is £22.2 million (based on total letters of offer minus spend).
- **Axis 2** - performed well and is **expected to spend out well**⁶ during this Programming period. At the time of the MTE write-up in 2010, this Axis had spent 38% of its allocated budget. By June 2012, the Axis had spent £280 million; representing 79% of its allocated spend of £353.52 million;
- **Axis 3 – At the time of the MTE write-up in 2010, Axis 3 had not spent any of its allocated budget. By June 2012, the Axis had spent just under £18 million, representing 24% of its allocated spend of £76 million**⁷. Axis 3 has committed spend to the end of 2015 of approximately £42 million, representing 55% of its allocated spend. This projection is based on total grants awarded less the sum of the total paid, excluding advances. However, **having experienced year on year underspend, it is expected that the re-focussing of expenditure towards larger and more strategic projects will have a considerable investment effect within rural areas enabling recovery of lost ground with delivery and realising sustained benefits in rural communities**⁸.

Turning to the performance of specific Measures within Axes the mid-term evaluation updated highlighted a number of issues as set out in table 3 below.

⁵ emphasis added by researcher

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

Table 3: Particular issues/observations relating to particular 2007-13 NIRD DP Measures

Measure	Issues/observations
1.2 - Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG) scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accounts for £23.6 million or 49% of the allocated budget within Axis 1 so critical impact on overall Axis spend/success. • Scale and complexity of some of the projects under Measure 1.2 meant long turn around times, requiring full business plans and economic appraisals. • Significant financial commitment by the applicants/companies was also required. • Number of companies had difficulty securing the necessary co-financing for investments from banking institutions. As a result a number of companies did not progress as quickly as had been expected and in some cases the project promoter had to downsize the original project or was not able to accept a Letter of Offer. • At 26%, by far the highest rate of “terminated” applications within Axis 1.
2.4 -Forest Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projected to spend only 13.1% of its budget within the programming period; however with an allocated budget of just £600,000 overall, this represents a very small proportion of Axis 2 spend.

In drawing these and other observations/comments together the 2013 NISRA report drew a number of conclusions and associated recommendations that included the following:

- A need for streamlining of the application process and a need to strike a balance between the level of complexity required, stringency of the rules and the amount of funding being applied for;
- Some forms, for relatively small amounts of funding, were very time-consuming to complete and had the potential to put applicants off applying;
- Whilst streamlining the application process is clearly desirable lessons should be learnt from the experience of Axis 3 where the application process was “overly simplified” and not accompanied with sufficient animation which resulted in a high level of speculative applications and this in turn had a negative effect on administrative processing times;
- Eligibility requirements and the follow up / supplementary information that will be requested for the different schemes needs to be clearly communicated to potential applicants at the start of the process;
- Marketing campaigns can increase interest in measures and lead to an increase in applications however any future marketing campaigns should be carefully targeted;
- It would also be beneficial to applicants if schemes could make it clear up front how long the turnaround time for applications is expected to be. This would help reduce drop-out rates and mean that applicants would be more realistic about timescales and requirements.

4 Current situation and Ex Post Ante review

As things currently stand DARD has declared all of its expenditure to the EU relating to the 2007-13 NIRD (as required by the 31st December 2015). The final expenditure data and overall achievements of the programme are now beginning to enter the public domain and in a press release on the 12th February 2016⁹, Minister O'Neill revealed that the provisional final drawdown of funding for the 2007-13 NIRD was approximately €329.4 million which equated to just over 99.96% of the funding available. When combined with the DARD match funding this meant the programme had a final value of over £506 million within Northern Ireland. The data released by DARD also shows that there has been an underspend of €125,291.97 across the entire programme, a figure which constitutes 0.038% of the total EU finding allocation within the programme. In terms of specific outputs from the Programme the Minister's press release further identified the following:

- creation of approximately 1,200 jobs;
- establishment of 447 rural micro businesses; and
- 257 rural villages benefitting from the village renewal and development scheme.

Whilst these overall final financial and output figures for the programme are useful DARD has yet to put any more Axis and Measure specific data into the public domain.

Turning to what happens next, DARD is required to undertake an ex post ante evaluation of the 2007-13 NIRD (see Articles 86 and 87 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005¹⁰) which has to be completed by the 31st December 2016. Within this context the terms of reference for the ex post ante evaluation have been agreed, and NISRA have been contracted to undertake the work. DARD is currently working with NISRA to develop the work plan for the evaluation.

5 Observations/Potential questions

- Looking at many of the issues/challenges identified within the mid-term and mid-term update evaluations it would appear the late roll out of particular Axes and Measures within the 2007-13 NIRD was a contributing factor, most particularly in relation to Axis 3 as a whole. Given this circumstance and the fact that roll out of the current 2014-20 NIRD has been delayed, how likely is the current programme to be beset by many of the issues/challenges experienced previously? What steps is DARD actively pursuing to try and minimise any of these effects? Looking towards any future NIRD developed post 2020, and pending the outcome of the forthcoming UK EU Membership referendum, what steps are within DARD's power to ensure that a future programme starts on time?

⁹ [O'Neill hails £506million Rural Development spend a huge success, DARD press release, 12th February 2016](#)

¹⁰ [COUNCIL REGULATION \(EC\) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\), 20 September 2005](#)

- The success of the 2007-13 NIRDP has proven challenging to assess. Whilst DARD has published an overall investment figure for the programme in excess of £506 million and has recently provided data that highlights figures such as the total number of jobs created and micro businesses created, the researcher has found it difficult to access data around the original targets for the programme against which to track performance. Part of the challenge here has been that targets have evolved in response to changing circumstances and as a result it would be useful for DARD to provide additional data here.
- At a practical level what steps has DARD taken to address issues such as the need for targeted marketing, accessible and commensurate application processes, better networking and animation, clarity around eligibility and a need to reduce dropout rates within the 2014-20 NIRDP?
- Given the issues around match funding and bank lending processes that hampered or saw the withdrawal of projects within the 2007-13 programme what steps has DARD taken, or can it take, in order to minimise or eliminate these issues within the 2014-20 NIRDP?
- The late roll out of the 2007-13 NIRDP meant the mid-term evaluation was extremely challenging due to a lack of data in certain areas, and these circumstances saw the requirement for the completion of the additional mid-term evaluation update. Was the cost of this additional report factored into the original mid-term evaluation costs or did DARD have to find more money to complete it? If additional monies were required, how much did this amount to?
- Building upon the previous point, will the late start to the current 2014-20 NIRDP mean that the mid-term evaluation of the programme will face similar challenges to that completed within the 2007-13 programme? What steps is DARD taking to ensure that the mid-term evaluation can be effective? Is there a risk that the current programme will also require a mid-term evaluation update?
- It seems clear from the available information that the 2007-13 NIRDP evolved over time in terms of delivery, focus and targets. Whilst the mid-term evaluation and mid-term evaluation update reports provide some sense of this it would be useful for DARD to expand on this actual process in relation to particular Axes and Measures within them. The available data suggests that the Monitoring Committee minutes and Action Plan emerging from both evaluation reports may well hold this information as the Monitoring Committee had responsibility for assessing delivery of the programme and for consideration and approval of amendments to the NIRDP. There may be particular value here in looking at the evolution of the Axes and Measures which appeared to present particular challenges within the programme, namely all of Axis 3, Measure 1.2 - Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG) scheme and Measure 2.4 - Forest Environments.
- A significant change within Axis 3, alluded to within the mid-term evaluation update, was the move to focus on larger, so called strategic projects, in order to increase spend. Does DARD view this change to the programme as being a success or

failure? Could the need for this significant change have been avoided, and if so how?

- Whilst DARD was, and is required to undertake mid-term and ex post ante evaluations of the 2007-13 NIRDP, there does not appear to be a requirement for the European Commission to respond to DARD with either observations, advice or guidance. This does raise the question as to whether the requirement to complete these exercises adds any value to the development and delivery of current and future Rural Development Programmes at an EU level. Within this context it would be interesting to know if other jurisdictions have faced similar issues/challenges to DARD in relation to Axis 3 Measures for example. Similarly, if the experience with Axis 3 has been commonplace across the EU, how or will the Commission ensure that challenging issues of this nature can potentially be avoided within any future programme?
- How does the provisional underspend of €125,291.97 across the entire programme, a figure which constitutes 0.038% of the total EU finding allocation within the programme, compare to data from other parts of the EU, and in particular the rest of the UK and Republic of Ireland?
- Will there be an opportunity for the ARD committee to have sight of the ex post ante evaluation prior to its submission to the European Commission? Is NISRA on target to complete the final report within the allotted time?

Appendix 1 – NIRDP mid-term evaluation recommendations¹¹

NIRDP 2007-2013: Recommendations MTE for remainder of NIRDP 2007-2013	
<p>Please note this is only the summary of the recommendations taken directly from the Mid Term Evaluation Final Report. For a better understanding of the rationale and context in which these are made, it is recommended that the full report is reviewed. The full report is available on the DARD website www.dardni.gov.uk or the Rural Network site www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk</p>	
Application Processes	1) It is recommended that delivery bodies seek to maintain and improve on the current customer service levels, and continually review procedures to ensure the highest levels of satisfaction in the client base. This may include enhancing the initial application form, stating clearer rules of eligibility and providing more information about what will be required from successful applicants in the future implementation of their projects.
Target Groups	2) It is recommended that contact should be made again with Youth Groups, such as the Young Farmers Club of Ulster (YFCU), with a view to making the Programme more inclusive for this target group. Views should be sought on what issues / barriers affect them. This should also help shape how future Programmes can address these issues. 3) It is recommended that the Managing Authority should consider how the Rural Network and various implementing bodies can utilise their expertise and reach within target groups to promote the Programme more effectively. 4) It is recommended that the Managing Authority should give consideration to giving particular focus to younger farmers for the remainder of the current Programme through Axis 1, as a way of encouraging younger people into the farming side of the Programme. 5) It is recommended that the Managing Authority and Implementing Bodies re-engage with the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) with a view to exploring how the Programme can be more inclusive for females.
Axis / Measure Specific – Axis 1	6) Measure 1.1 Vocational Training and Information Actions – It is recommended that in the future the Farm Family Options – Mentoring scheme is actively pushed forward, with the measure leaders working closely with the delivery agent in this regard. 7) Measure 1.2 Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability – It is recommended that the future of the schemes are clarified by the Department as soon as possible. It is recommended that every avenue is explored in ways in which the schemes can carry forward for the remainder of the programme, including whether the delivery partner, Invest NI, can possibly move forward alone. 8) Measure 1.4 Supply Chain Development Programme - There is a clear need for the management associated with the Programme to ensure that the measure is making the necessary progress in the near future. It is recommended that the measure is further marketed and progressed.
Axis / Measure Specific – Axis 2	9) Measure 2.3 First Afforestation (forest expansion) – It is recommended that the measure should endeavour to further promote the benefits of forestry schemes, especially the benefits of agroforestry, with a view to achieving the targets set. 10) Measure 2.4 Forest Environments – It is recommended the measure should further promote the benefits, with a view to achieving the targets set. However it is noted it may be prudent in the future to re-assess the level of support, and corresponding targets, should the low uptake persist.
Axis / Measure Specific – Axis 3/4	11) Measure 3.1 Diversification into non-agricultural activities – It is recommended the Department monitor closely the perception that saturation levels may be occurring in relation to diversification in this Programme. 12) Axis 3 - It is evident that all of Axis 3 will need to be progressed in the immediate future, to ensure that the rural area gains from the multiplier effects the measures can bring. 13) Axis 4 (Cooperation) - It is recommended that the Department fully utilise the Rural Network Northern Ireland (RNNI), with their relationships at a UK and cross border level to drive the trans-national aspect of the Programme forward.
Axis Specific Targeting	14) It is recommended that targets are re-visited in autumn 2010, once the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) has been published, and when more data are available for Axis 3 measures. It is recommended that the Department take this forward as part of their ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities associated with the Programme.
Programme Objectives And Priorities	15) It is recommended the Managing Authority commission or undertake an MTE update in 2012, to ascertain if objectives are likely to be met.

¹¹ sourced from [What about the Mid Term Evaluation, a summary of 2007-13 NIRDP Mid Term Evaluation](#)

NIRDP 2007-2013: Recommendations MTE for remainder of NIRDP 2007-2013 Cont....

NIRDP Impacts	<p>16) There is a clear need to find a NIRDP solution that adds value to the remainder of the Programme in relation to impacts, that are meaningful for Northern Ireland. This will facilitate a proper evaluation of the actions supported and their impact in the region. In this regard it is recommended that the Managing Authority, as part of their system of ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities, address this issue once the current uncertainties have been clarified.</p>
Implementation And Delivery Structures	<p>17) It is recommended that the following areas are addressed for the remainder of the current Programme in respect of Axis 3.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DARD, JCCs, and LAGs should come together to identify difficulties for all parties and seek to make procedures for drawdown, open calls and auditing more flexible and streamlined, where possible, in the context of the existing EU regulations. - Strategies should be reviewed straight away with a view to moving forward. This is especially in relation to the quality of life measures (i.e. basic services) due to guidelines changing since the strategies were devised. Areas such as 'renewable energy' clearly also require guidance in the short term. - DARD should revisit animation / facilitator roles within LAGs / JCCs. There is strong evidence that this is currently required to aid Programme Implementation. - Communication should be addressed. Due to the complex structure that exists it is necessary that communication is timely and user friendly. All parties to seek to move this aspect of the delivery structure forward. - Active networking should be encouraged between LAGs / JCCs. It is widely regarded that not enough networking is taking place between LAGs, compared with previous Programmes. This could possibly be facilitated further by the Rural Network. - Ensure that Systems 2007 is fit for purpose. This is a necessary aspect of the ability of LAGs and JCCs to manage their projects effectively and efficiently and as such should be rectified straight away. - Increase timeliness of processing of projects. There is evidence that by LAGs and JCCs sitting on the same day to assess projects that the timeframes are considerably improved, with queries minimised.
Support Mechanisms / Programme Management	<p>18) The lack of monitoring information is clearly impacting on the ability of the Monitoring Committee to take a more strategic approach to assessing the implementation of the Programme. Issues around Systems 2007 are also clearly impacting on the ability of bodies responsible for implementing the Programme. It is recommended that issues around Systems 2007 are addressed as soon as possible.</p> <p>19) It is recommended the Managing Authority, and delivery bodies, maximise the use of the RNNI. This should continue to facilitate Axis 3 and cooperation projects, and the recommendations made, and also extend to support the other areas of the Programme.</p> <p>20) It is recommended the Managing Authority reviews the Monitoring Committee composition, with a view to obtaining a more representative sectoral balance. This may include exploring the possibility of experienced independent representatives, who in turn may provide a different viewpoint. It is recommended, as part of the review of committee composition, that groups with an attendance of less than 70 per cent (member or deputy) are contacted regarding their ongoing participation in the Programme.</p> <p>21) It is recommended that the Managing Authority contact Monitoring Committee members with a view to ascertaining if refresher training is necessary to enable members to fully fulfil their position in the Programme. It may be that members would also benefit from project presentations or study visits to gain more insight into the Programme at grass roots level.</p> <p>22) It is recommended that the Managing Authority remind Monitoring Committee members of their duties and responsibilities, and how they should abide by the core principles and values agreed at the outset of the Programme.</p>
Publicity And Awareness Raising Activities	<p>23) It is recommended that the Department roll out a continuous PR and Publicity Campaign for the remainder of the Programme. This is with a view to maximising the awareness and final impact of the Programme.</p> <p>24) The local press has been the most successful medium for reaching individuals about opportunities around the Programme to date. There is a benefit in continually drip feeding stories and case studies about the Programme to ensure a steady interest in the Programme. It is recommended the local press is utilised fully for the remainder of the Programme.</p>

NIRDP 2007-2013: Recommendations MTE for remainder of NIRDP 2007-2013 Cont....**Publicity And
Awareness Raising
Activities
Continued...**

25) There is a clear need to ensure that what works for certain measures is maintained. Axis 3 is clearly reaching out to individuals through the web, while events such as road shows and feeder events are successful in Axis 1. It is recommended that Measure leaders ensure that Axis specific successes are maintained, and seek ways to enhance these mediums – such as the use of digital media (twitter, facebook etc) to target prospective applicants.

26) There is clear evidence that delivery agents and implementing divisions know a great deal about their customer base. It is recommended that the use of delivery agents/ implementing divisions is maximised in promoting the Programme.

27) All information made available to prospective applicants should be as accurate and accessible as possible. This is especially true around eligibility, with all information clear to those wishing to avail of funding. In this regard it is recommended that all information presented to the wider community is as accurate and available as possible.

**Equality And
Good Relations**

28) Questions remain as to whether there is a need for a separate Equality and Good Relations sub group for the NIRDP. One avenue, that may enable a re-focusing of equality and good relations, could be for NIRDP Monitoring Committee members to sit on the Structural Funds equality sub group. Moving to an EU Programmes-wide group may enable a greater focus on equality and good relations issues themselves, and may enable a greater degree of complementarity across the NI Programmes. Thus it is recommended that the Managing Authority re-assess the need for the EGRSG.

If the NIRDP is merged with the wider group it is expected that recommendations 29 – 31 below would be addressed by this approach. If it is felt prudent to continue with a separate NIRDP sub group there is a clear need for recommendations 29 – 31 to be implemented for the remainder of the Programme.

29) It is recommended that the composition of the EGRSG should be addressed and aim to attract a more diverse membership. (It is noted that attempts have been made in this regard before).

30) There is wide spread agreement that the Good Relations aspect of Section 75 has not been addressed to date. It is recommended that this is a standing agenda item on future EGRSG meetings.

31) It is recommended that the EGRSG becomes more strategic, with the associated development of a high level work programme. It is recommended that the group focuses on the potential inequalities highlighted in the EQIA, and sets about ensuring that these groups are engaged with, with a view to including them in the remainder of the Programme.

The Environment

32) Questions remain as to whether there is a need for a separate sub group for the NIRDP. It is recommended that the Managing Authority re-examine the need for the ESG. In line with recommendation 28, the Managing Authority should explore the feasibility and potential benefit, of NIRDP Monitoring Committee members sitting on the current Structural Funds environment sub group.

If it is felt prudent to continue with a separate sub group for the NIRDP there is a clear need for recommendations 33 & 34 to be implemented for the remainder of the Programme.

33) It is recommended that the composition of the ESG should be examined with the aim of encouraging new members from outside the environment sector.

34) There is a clear need to address the Environment from a Programme wide perspective. In this regard it is recommended that the ESG drives forward the implementation of DPA in the Programme, embracing the recent paper developed for the Structural Funds working group.

NIRDP Wide

35) The need to maximise synergies between the Axes is recognised by the Managing Authority. It is recommended that this across-Axes working should be investigated and progressed for the remainder of the Programme, with a clear view to future programming periods.

36) It is recognised that future budgets will require clarifying post-CSR, and the future make up of the NIRDP made clear. It is recommended that the Department do all in their power to ensure the Programme can continue in its current form. This could include discussions with the Commission aimed at re-visiting the co-financing rates currently applied to activities in the Programme.

37) Future National Strategy Plan - It should be noted that should recommendations arising from the evaluation be taken on board it may be necessary to re-visit the Strategy in the future. It is likely that post CSR decisions will have to be made, which could impact on the future look of the Programme for the remainder of the period. Any changes arising post-CSR would also require the National Strategy Plan to be revisited. It is recommended that this situation is monitored closely and actioned as a matter of urgency once the situation becomes clearer.