The Development of a Family Focused Advisory Programme in the Republic of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Advisory services in Ireland have evolved towards a technical focus, away from the farm family and household. However, even though there is less overall involvement of families in the running of farms, decision making is influenced by more than the farm operator. Teagasc introduced the ‘Opportunities for Farm Families Programme’ in 2001, which recognised that the challenges facing farmers required a 'whole family' response. The fundamental objective is to help farm families generate additional household income and improve quality of life. The aim of the research outlined in this paper was to determine the views and attitudes of advisers and farm families to the programme. The majority of advisers and participants considered that the programme helped farm families to take a realistic look at their current situation and was useful in terms of identifying ideas to improve their income and quality of life. Family participation in the programme is significantly higher than other programmes. Families who participated together derived greater benefit than individuals.

The key lesson learned from this research was the importance of early evaluation of new advisory approaches. Educational institutions and extension agents need to highlight the importance of an objective assessment of both the delivers (advisers) and target (participants) views on extension programmes. For assessments during programme delivery to be successful, they must be focused on the development of the programme and not the monitoring of extension agents. The information gathered must inform the development of the programme and appropriate training for advisers.
INTRODUCTION

The ‘Teagasc Opportunities for Farm Families Programme’ is a new approach to the provision of advisory services to farm families in Ireland. It was introduced by Teagasc (Agriculture and Food Advisory, Research and Training Body) in 2001. The mission statement of the programme is: ‘to proactively encourage, stimulate and support farm families in building the capacity of the farm household to achieve and sustain viability’.

The fundamental objective of the programme is to help farm families generate additional household income and to improve their quality of life. A further objective of the programme is to change the method of delivery of advice to farm families by providing training to help advisers. This training helps advisers facilitate group meetings and explore on-farm and off-farm options in a systematic way.

The change in approach and content from previous Teagasc advisory programmes has required both staff and farm families to adapt. This paper presents the findings of the research conducted with the extension agents (Teagasc advisers) and the target group (participating farm families).

Programme Outline

The programme is free to families with less than 100 income units (180,000 litres of milk quota; 100 beef cattle; 600 sheep; 100 hectares cereals or equivalent). Stage 1 involves viability appraisal leading to the identification of a ‘Way Forward Guide’. In this stage the family identifies their main household viability concerns and explore possible options (on-farm and off-farm). This stage is delivered by way of three facilitated group discussion meetings.

Stage 2 involves options analysis leading to the development of a ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ Specific measures to generate additional income and/or improve quality of life are identified by the family in conjunction with an adviser. It also identifies the specific advice and training needs of the family and makes appropriate referrals to other agencies.

In Stage 3 the farm family implements the actions specified in the ‘Way Forward Action Plan’. Advisory support is provided to the family during this period. Referrals to other agencies are also pursued during this Stage.

PURPOSE

The aim of the research study outlined in this paper was to determine the views and attitudes of advisers and participants to the Opportunities Programme. The specific purpose of the research was to inform the development and enhancement of a family focused advisory service. Specific objectives were set for both advisers and participants (farm families).

The specific objectives of the adviser’s research were to:

1. Determine the views of advisers on the achievement of the objectives of the programme;
2. Determine the views and attitudes of the advisers towards the programme in general; and
3. Determine the views of advisers on the programme content and delivery.

The specific objectives of the participant’s research were to:
1. Determine their reasons for participating in the programme (and expectations);
2. Determine the views of participants on the achievement of the objectives of the programme;
3. Determine the views of participants on the programme content and delivery;
4. Determine the views of participants on the Way Forward Action Plan (Stage 2); and
5. Determine the views of participants on the benefit of the programme.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data was collected from a sample of 61 advisers who were involved in the delivery of the programme at local level. A sample of farm families who were participants in the programme were interviewed in three counties: Mayo; Meath and Offaly (which were selected as being representative of the country overall). It was intended to collect 50% of the sample who had completed Stage 2, and the remainder who had only completed Stage 1. However, the reality in collecting the data was that there were much fewer farmers who had both stages completed and this is reflected in the sample which includes 175 farm families who had completed Stage 1, 56 of whom had completed Stage 2. The sample was selected from the Teagasc Client Management System. The main criteria in the selection of the sample was those families who had most recently completed Stage 1 or received their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’.

RESULTS

The research findings are provided separately for the advisers’ and participants’ surveys.

Advisers Survey

The findings represent the views of advisers who were actively involved in the delivery of the programme.

Views of Advisers on the Achievement of the Programme Objectives

Some 88.5% of advisers believed that the ‘Opportunities Programme’ can help farm families take a realistic look at their current situation, the main reason cited was that the process focuses their thinking on their own situation (21%). The process also encourages families to discuss wider household and family issues. Almost three-quarters (74%) of advisers believed that the programme could help farm families generate additional income, mainly through improved efficiency (31%). Almost three-quarters (73%) of advisers believed that the ‘Opportunities Programme’ could help farm families to improve their quality of life, mainly through better work organisation (54%).
Views and Attitudes of Advisers to the Overall Opportunities Programme

Four out of five (81%) advisers believe that the ‘Opportunities Programme’ has something to offer their clients. This highlights that the programme was not ‘more of the same’ but involved an overall change in approach to the provision of advice. The most important aspect was an opportunity for clients to appraise their own situation and options (47%).

The time constraint on advisers in dealing with farm families was cited by one fifth of advisers as the main weakness of the programme. Some 16% of advisers identified a lack of options for farm families as a weakness and 14% considered recruitment into the programme as a weakness.

Views of Advisers on the Opportunities Programme Content and Delivery

Some 95% of advisers believed that the Stage 1 sessions provided for good interaction and discussion among participants, 39% of advisers stated that this depended on the facilitator and the composition of the group. Some 92% of advisers considered it important that more than one family member participated in the programme.

Some 72% of advisers believe that the Stage 1 sessions generate enthusiasm among participants. Some 21% of advisers believe that the level of enthusiasm of participants depends on the input of the facilitator. Almost two-thirds (64%) of advisers believe that Stage 1 of the ‘Opportunities Programme’ instils a belief among participants that they can improve their income/quality of life. One fifth (19%) of advisers stated that the level of belief of participants in what they could do to improve their income/quality of life depended on the attitude of participants coming into the programme, while 12% stated that it depended on the facilitator.

Over three-quarters (77%) of advisers believe that Stage 1 is a necessary component of the programme, the main reason being that it allowed for an exchange of views and opinions. However, 19% of advisers felt that a one-to-one advisory session would be better.

The vast majority (84%) of advisers believed that the local co-ordinator and one adviser should deliver the Stage 1 sessions. The ideal number of participants for Stage 1 was identified by advisers as an average of 15 people.

The main problems with the discussion sessions identified by the advisers were: generating discussion; a reluctance to discuss financial matters in public; and getting the programme worksheets completed. The main improvements suggested included: getting more of the family involved; keeping a clear focus; using ice-breakers/discussion openers; ensuring that the group are interactive; and presenting real farm examples.

Some 95% of advisers considered the programme worksheets to be important to the overall programme. Advisers estimated that 60% of participants completed or attempted to complete the worksheets. The main problems with the worksheets identified by advisers included: getting them completed; accuracy of the information; and too intrusive/sensitive.
The main concern about Stage 1 identified by advisers was recruitment (25%). However, one in five (21%) advisers had no concerns about the delivery or content. Other concerns included: limited options available for families; advisers are not trained as facilitators; too many sessions; and content needs to be strengthened (mainly in terms of technical aspects). The main change suggested by advisers to Stage 1 was to reduce the number of sessions and increase the income units’ limit for participation.

**Participants Survey**

Two thirds of participants surveyed were the farm owners, while 29.5% were joint owners with their spouses. The majority (71%) of respondents were married and two-thirds (67%) had children. Just over one quarter (26%) had identified a successor, over half (53%) of those successors were farming either part-time or full-time.

Some 58% of respondents were employed full-time on the farm, while over half (54%) of their spouses were either in off-farm employment (mainly part-time) or involved in an alternative enterprise. Overall, 63% of households had another source of earned income.

**Reasons for Participation in the Programme**

The main reasons why farm families participated in the ‘Opportunities Programme’ were because they were asked (53%) and loyalty to their adviser (43%). Only 14% of respondents stated that concern for the future was their reason for attending the programme.

Couples who attended the programme together were more likely to have done so out of loyalty to their adviser than individuals (60% versus 36%) (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=7.085, degrees of freedom=1 and significance=0.008). Those who were fully dependent on their farm income were also more likely to attend out of loyalty than those with an off-farm source of income (58% versus 34%) (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=10.282, degrees of freedom=1 and significance=0.001).

Some 39% of farm families had no expectations about the programme prior to their participation, while 21% expected to improve their income. The majority (55%) of the Stage 1 sessions were at night which reflects the preference among farm families for night-time meetings (70%). The majority (71%) of respondents attended the Stage 1 sessions on their own and one third of married couples attended together. The main reason (70%) why more than one family member did not attend was because they had no time, for 13% it was because the spouse was working.

**Views of Participants on the Achievement of the Programme Objectives**

Over seven out of ten (71%) farm families believed that the programme could help them to take a realistic look at their current situation, while a further one quarter (26%) believed it could possibly do so. Some 88% of couples who participated in the programme stated that it helped them take a realistic look at their own situation compared to 68% of those who
attended the sessions on their own (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=6.635, degrees of freedom=2 and significance=0.036).

Some 86% of farm families considered the programme useful or possibly useful in terms of new ideas for generating more income. Half of respondents believed that the programme was useful in terms of giving them ideas to improve their quality of life. Over two-thirds (68%) of couples who participated considered that the programme gave them ideas to improve quality of life compared to only 44% of individuals (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=7.893, degrees of freedom=2 and significance=0.019).

**Views of Participants on the Programme Content and Delivery**

Overall the views of respondents on the programme content were positive: 83% of respondents considered the information presented in the sessions to be either mostly or all relevant to them; 42% considered the facilitators good; and 41% considered the content interesting. The main comment with regard to the relevance of the information presented in the sessions related to the difficulty of meeting the needs of a diverse group – some material would not be relevant to all (56%). Some 99% of respondents considered that the information presented was clear and understandable, while 68% stated that the sessions were well explained. Some 98% of participants felt that they had adequate opportunity to participate/contribute to the discussion in the programme.

Some 84% of participants stated that they completed or attempted to complete the programme worksheets. While 98% of couples attempted the worksheets, only 80% of individuals did likewise (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=6.887, degrees of freedom=1 and significance=0.009). Some 80% found the worksheets to be worthwhile/useful.

Some 92% of participants considered the Stage 1 discussion sessions to be either important or very important to the overall programme. Couples who attended were significantly more likely to consider the discussion sessions to be very important (23%) than individuals (8%) (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=6.13, degrees of freedom=2 and significance=0.043).

Three-quarters of participants considered the number of sessions in Stage 1 to be about right with only one participant stating that 3 sessions was too much. Over one-third (35%) of couples who attended indicated that there were not enough sessions compared to 11% of individuals (using the cross-tabs procedure, pearson chi-square=4.343, degrees of freedom=1 and significance=0.037).

**Views of Participants on the Way Forward Action Plan**

Over half (54%) of respondents were the only family member involved in the development of the ‘Way Forward Action Plan’, while 38% were jointly involved with their spouse. Almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents identified the one-to-one consultations with their adviser as the most beneficial aspect of the Programme.
Some 96.3% of participants with income concerns considered that their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ addressed those concerns. Some 93.3% of those respondents stated that their quality of life concerns were addressed in their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’. However, only 44.4% of those farm families with other (non-income/quality of life) concerns stated that their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ addressed those other concerns.

Two-thirds of the participants had their ‘Way Forward Action Plans’ completed within two months of Stage 1. While 52% of participants considered the gap between Stages 1 and 2 to be about right, 46% considered it to be too long. Some 97% of participants were happy with the level of contact with their adviser during the development of their plan. Some 93% considered that the ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ was clear and understandable and 94% of participants stated that the actions in their plan were realistic/achievable. Some 45% stated that they would implement or start to implement the actions in their plan in the next 12 months, while a further 50% said they would possibly do so. Some 84% of participants considered their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ to be important to their future.

**Views of Participants on the Benefit of the Programme**

Over three-quarters (76.1%) of respondents considered the programme to be either some or a significant benefit to them. The most important benefit of the programme identified by participants was that it provided ideas to improve income (14%) and helped to improve financial management (13%). Some 84% of participants would recommend the programme to a neighbour/friend, the main reason being that it focused on the reality of their situation.

**RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The objectives set out for the programme were the improvement of income and/or quality of life, therefore it can be concluded from the research findings that both the advisers and participants believed that the programme was successful in terms of meeting these objectives. The process involved (discussion sessions) has encouraged farm families to discuss and explore their options and wider household and family issues. However, to date the achievements for farm families are mainly aspirational as they are recent participants into the programme and the tangible outcomes have not yet been realised. Therefore, these families will need support in order to achieve their income and quality of life objectives. However, overall, the sessions were successful in creating enthusiasm and belief among participants that they could make positive changes.

The programme has something new to offer farm families and is not ‘more of the same’ in terms of the approach to and delivery of advice. This is evident in the fact that the majority of advisers believed that the programme had something to offer their clients in addition to their existing advisory contact. The programme aimed to broaden the traditional farm operator/adviser contact to engage with more family members. It has been relatively successful in attracting the participation of other family members, particularly spouses. It is evident that families who attended the programme together derived more benefit from it and were more positive about the programme than individuals. This endorses the family focus of the programme and the success in involving families in the programme, however, it also
highlights the need for further effort to be employed in order to encourage more families to participate. Teagasc recognized the importance of family involvement but it was a major challenge to increase family participation.

The success of the programme is as much based on the process as the content – farm families appreciate the fact that they have an opportunity to appraise their own situation in addition to receiving technical information. However, the management of the programme requires the striking of a balance between the process and the provision of technical information. Many advisers feel that there is a need to provide more technical information because they believe that this is what farmers require and are not entirely comfortable with exploring some of the non-technical ‘softer’ issues such as quality of life, time management, succession and family/household issues. Participants were very satisfied with the discussion sessions, their ability to contribute/participate and the material presented even though some advisers were concerned about the suitability of discussion sessions and the fact that they considered some aspects ‘soft’.

There was concern among some advisers that discussion sessions may not be the best delivery approach – not suitable for quiet/shy individuals, however, the sessions led to good discussion/interaction among participants. Despite the scepticism among some advisers, it is evident that the majority believed that the discussion format was a critical component of the programme. However, a minority but nonetheless a core group of advisers believed that the number of sessions in Stage 1 should be reduced from three to two.

While the ‘Opportunities Programme’ has resulted in a change in the approach to advice, further change is necessary. This is evident in the fact that while the ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ in general addressed income and quality of life concerns (primary aims of programme), it was less successful in dealing with ‘other’ concerns of farm families. This is not to be interpreted as a failure of the advisers but highlights the need for more emphasis to be placed on training advisers to deal with wider family and household issues. These are areas that the advisory service has moved away from over time in an effort to meet the technical and scheme related needs of farmers.

Despite the obvious success of the programme in terms of the views of advisers and participants on the achievement of programme objectives, the programme is not attracting farmers on their own initiative to participate. The programme still has to be sold to them (large proportion who attend because they are asked and loyalty to their adviser). This is a challenge for an advisory service to sell a process driven programme following a period which had led to the emergence of a technical and scheme focused service – farmers have an expectation for a definite tangible output from advisory contact e.g. scheme application, grant/subsidy applied/received, technical targets established/achieved. The output from the ‘Opportunities Programme’ is often long-term or at least may not be obvious initially.
Recommendations for Change in the Programme

Recommendations for change to the programme were made as a result of the research. These recommendations were presented to Teagasc management. The key recommendations included:

- Farm families collectively and the individual members need to be asked to participate – personal contact;
- While the programme has definite benefits for farm families, these are not obvious and need to be marketed to the farm families;
- Stage 1 should continue to have 3 discussion sessions;
- The programme worksheets need to be clarified, explained and simplified;
- The on-going support and advisory needs should be closely monitored so that farm families implement the plans developed;
- The promotion of the programme in the aftermath of the CAP Reform (Fischler) is worthwhile, however, it is important that the programme does not become identified as a ‘Fischler Adjustment Programme’ – if it does, it may have a short life-span;
- The primary method of delivery should remain as facilitated group sessions;
- Specific training should be provided to advisers on the facilitation of quiet/shy participants;
- The merits of the programme need to be marketed to staff who remained unconvinced;
- Programme delivery should be evaluated locally on an on-going basis to inform advisers of necessary changes/modifications. There is a need to ask farm families their views (not make assumptions);
- Advisers need to focus on and emphasise the importance of the process of completing the worksheets as well as the accuracy of the information collected;
- It is important that the emphasis on discussion/interaction is maintained in the delivery of the sessions and that they do not become lectures/presentations;
- It needs to be reinforced with advisers that their role is that of a facilitator and not teacher/lecturer;
- Income units limit should be increased to allow wider participation;
- Advisers need to bear in mind that the process of discussion is equally important to the provision of technical information; and
- It is important that the wider household and family issues are debated and that the programme does not become dominated by technical farm issues.

Changes Made in the Programme

Teagasc reviewed the ‘Opportunities for Farm Families Programme’ in late 2003 and a number of key changes were made. It was re-launched in January 2004 as the ‘Planning Post Fischler Programme’. The main focus within the new programme was on adjusting to changes post-CAP reform. The key changes included:

- Reduction in the number of mandatory Stage 1 sessions to 2;
- Inclusion of the CAP reform measures in the discussion sessions;
- Programme available to all farm families and free to those with less than 150 income units;
- Programme worksheets have been simplified;
• Reduction in the number of mandatory worksheets;
• All advisers to be involved in the delivery of the programme; and
• Programme of in-service training for all staff.

The new programme has incorporated a number of the recommendations from the research, however, it differs in terms of the number of sessions, the focus on CAP reform and the programme worksheets. While the research findings were clear on these areas, decision making in Teagasc is influenced by many other factors, in particular the attitude of advisers to the programme and the workload on advisers. Many advisers were unconvinced about the programme or the need to have 3 sessions in Stage 1. It was believed that it would be easier to recruit farm families into the programme if there were fewer sessions. There was also a perception that farmers would be more interested if some of the ‘softer’ aspects were removed and replaced with harder ‘technical’ farm aspects. In addition, farmers were demanding a service from Teagasc to assist them in deciding on their options post-CAP reform. The ‘Opportunities Programme’ was the most obvious programme to meet this need as it was focused on planning for the future and has now been modified.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE, IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION

This research specifically informed the development of the ‘Opportunities for Farm Families Programme’ by identifying weaknesses and areas for improvement. It provided real information and facts on the views of those delivering the programme and those for whom the programme was targeted. While all the recommendations for change on the programme were not accepted, it generated debate and discussion on the issues. The key lesson learned from this programme is the need for early evaluation of new advisory approaches in order to make prompt modifications, which are necessary to improve the effectiveness and impact of the programme. Therefore, educational institutions and extension agencies need to highlight the importance of an objective assessment of both the delivers (advisers) and target (participants) views on extension programmes.

It is important that the target group (farm families), are involved in the development or enhancement of advisory programmes (or at least are consulted about them). In practice, there tends to be more focus placed on the views of deliverers (advisers) than participants. In this case farm families were very positive about the programme even though this was not obvious to the advisers who were finding it a challenge to recruit participants into the programme and to generate discussion within the sessions. The real benefits were only seen at the one-to-one advisory when farm families had been primed for developing their plan.

It is a challenge to introduce a new advisory programme which differs significantly in both the content and the method of delivery from previous programmes. A significant amount of In-Service Training was provided for advisers in meeting this challenge, however while the ‘early adapters’ participated in the training and delivered the programme, greater effort should have been put into training the more reluctant advisers and convincing them of the merits of the programme for their clients. It is important that all those in contact with farm families are familiar with the programme even if they are not involved in the delivery –
their attitude and perceptions of the programme have a major impact on recruitment and participation in the programme.

Educational institutions and extension agencies need to recognise that for assessments during programme delivery to be successful, they must be focused on the development of the programme and not the monitoring of extension agents. This was particularly important in this programme because it was a change in approach, in terms of both the content and method of delivery of advice. While it is necessary to evaluate new approaches, it is critically important that it is not interpreted by those advisers who were actively involved in the delivery as a monitoring or measuring of their performance. It is also important that advisers become familiar with the concept of ongoing evaluation of advisory programmes (developmental not monitoring).

The full value of such assessments will only be realized if the educational institutions and extension agencies respond with appropriate targeted training for advisers and take consideration of the research findings in making modifications to the programme. To be worthwhile, research must be utilised in the development of the programme. Evaluations must have a purpose to inform the programme or else it is not worthwhile. However, researchers must also accept that there are practical and political realities and many other factors, which influence on programmes and the decisions made about them. Researchers need to put forward and follow them through with the decision makers, they must be willing to pursue the changes necessary as good research will not succeed in influencing decisions simply because it is good.

The focus of the programme was farm families, an attempt to change the traditional farm operator-adviser contact. Advisers by nature of the evolution of advice and the changes in farm families (less family members involved in the farm and a greater level of off-farm employment) had less contact with other family members and in many cases would have no knowledge of them. However, the challenge of family involvement was underestimated by Teagasc and its success very much determined by the advisers’ own initiative. No specific training was provided on family involvement. It must not be assumed because there is a linkage with advice within a household, that other family members will be aware of a programme and sufficiently interested in the programme to participate.

The other family members (mainly spouse) tend to be more concerned about the wider household issues (succession, work organisation, quality of life) and financial issues. The original format of the ‘Opportunities Programme’ provided more opportunities for discussion on these issues than the new format. It is therefore a concern that in the efforts of Teagasc to encourage greater farmer participation in the programme, that less family participation may result due to the change in emphasis to adjusting post-CAP reform which focuses on the technical aspects of farming which many spouses do not feel competent about.