

# Appendix D – Satisfaction Surveys

## 1. Summary of Satisfaction Surveys

### 1.1 Introduction

This appendix presents the summary of a number of survey findings regarding the satisfaction level of beneficiaries of a variety of SRDP schemes. The reports that have been reviewed are listed below:

- Natural Heritage Monitoring Report;
- RPID Customer Satisfaction Survey to Inform the Futures Programme;
- SRDP 2014-20 Working Groups;
- 2014-2020 SRDP Consultations;
- 2014-2020 SRDP Ex-Ante Evaluation;
- 2007-2013 SRDP Mid-Term Evaluation; and
- The Evaluation of Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) and Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) Communication Plan.

### 1.2 How did beneficiaries become aware of SRDP Schemes?

In the Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (RPID) Customer Satisfaction survey three in ten respondents said that the Scottish Government is a source of news and information about rural and agricultural issues, with 28% of respondents citing RPID or the Scottish Government as their main source of such information.

Farming and rural media is also an important source of news and information with over a fifth of respondents accessing information from the Scottish Farmer.

Apart from the above mentioned, it was not made clear in the other surveys how it was that the beneficiaries became aware of their respective SRDP schemes.

### 1.3 Satisfaction levels with the information provided at the application stage

In the Natural Heritage Monitoring Report it was suggested that of the farms with just Land Managers Options (LMO), about half completed the application process themselves. Only 4% of farmers with LMO reported that they found the application process demanding or extremely demanding, with 45% indicating that it was easy. For farms with Rural Priorities (RP) options about a third of farmer's found the process easy, but compared to those with LMO's the process was considered harder, with around a third of farmers indicating that they found process as demanding.

The RPID Customer Satisfaction Survey found that overall, 64% of respondents were satisfied (21% very satisfied, 43% fairly satisfied) with the information and services provided by RPID, with 12% either very or fairly dissatisfied. Respondents were found to be more likely to be satisfied with their dealings with staff and generally positive in terms of their impression of RPID and its partners overall. However, they were found to be less satisfied (and more likely to be dissatisfied) with the amount of available information, the clarity of the information itself, the ease of finding information, and with aspects of the applications process.

The mid-term evaluations findings, which investigated satisfaction with a number of aspects of the application process across a variety

schemes, including: making the application, views on the support for applicants and views on the decision making process. It was found that the process of making the application varied across schemes. Those schemes consistently scoring well included: Crofters Community Agricultural Grant Scheme (CCAGS), Food Processing Marketing and Co-operation (FPMC), Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS), LMO and Skills Development Scheme (SDS). However average scores were lower for Challenge Funds (CF) and RP. They scored lowest for accessibility of forms, the user-friendliness of the process, and the detail and time required for the form.

In terms of the application process and the support made available for the applicants only CF scored below the mid-point across the criteria of availability of technical support, quality of support and staff knowledge. In contrast FPMC and SDS in particular score very highly and there was a good level of satisfaction with CCAGS, LFASS, LMO and RP.

In summary, of the reports which provided information on the satisfaction of beneficiaries with regards to the information they received at the information and application stage, it seems that satisfaction levels lay at either end of the spectrum depending on the scheme beneficiaries were applying for. This can be said as many beneficiaries were either very satisfied with the overall process and the level of information they received (FPMC, SDS, CCAGS and LFASS), or were found to be very unsatisfied with some aspects (CF and RP). In the case of LMO, there were two findings; that those under LMO were both satisfied with the overall application process, but found it harder to complete.

## 1.4 What improvements should be made?

The RPID Customer Satisfaction Survey found that in terms of the overall service offered, the availability and quality of information

emerges as a persistent issue of concern. A significant minority of respondents reported encountering problems with the clarity and ease of finding information about schemes, also with the ease of filling in application forms, and the quantity and clarity of guidance for the filling-in of forms.

Improving these areas could help to draw more customers in to using the RP Options system. Most customers were happy with RP itself, just over half, 57%, of users said that they found the RP site easy to navigate.

In the Natural Heritage Monitoring Report suggestions on areas of the scheme which should be altered included:

- the negative effects associated with the time restrictions on management which is imposed by the schemes, such as for grazing and cutting, difficulties establishing vegetation;
- detrimental impact on farming activity (not being able to care for the animals); and
- issues with penalties especially when some issues are considered to be out of the control of the farmers (boundary changes – land being lost to the sea).

Typically suggested improvements to scheme information concerned the accessibility of information via the application process and the availability of guidance for applicants, ease of accessibility and use of scheme websites for information.

Apart from the issues mentioned, it was unclear in the other reports surveyed whether or not beneficiaries had suggested any improvements to their respective schemes.

## 1.5 Were beneficiaries dependent on consultancy or agent support to complete their application?

In the Natural Heritage Monitoring Report it was indicated that for beneficiaries taking up RP options, 90% of farmers used an agent, with half of those completely relying on the agent. However, LMO farmers did not rely on assistance from an agent.

Furthermore, in the RPID Customer Satisfaction Survey it was suggested that more than half of respondents had contacted RPID or its partners for guidance to help them complete an application, or querying payment procedures.

The mid-term evaluation Findings indicated that the use of consultants or agents' support to complete the application was widespread, with the exception of SDS. The use of external assistance was particularly common with the RP scheme. A typical perception of users of agents was that they needed consultants' expertise and knowledge in order to make a high quality and successful application. This was also picked up by the SRDP 2014-2020 Ex-Ante Working Groups – particularly in relation to Axis 3, leading to low take up of some options.

The above findings suggest that reliance on agents was dependant on the levels of complexity of a scheme, with RP, CF and SDS requiring more support than other schemes.

## 1.6 Application Process and Procedures

The Natural Heritage Monitoring Report included a number of comments about the application process such as: that it was time consuming, the points system was difficult to understand, the scheme was difficult to get accepted onto, engaging with an agent cost around £1,000 which was considered an outlay as it didn't guarantee acceptance onto the scheme.

Other elements of the scheme that farmers and farm managers had reported as working well included:

- that the scheme requirements fits in well with existing farm management; and
- that they were satisfied with the provision of resources for hedgerow creation and a range of other land management options.

As well as this in the RPID Customer Satisfaction Survey those who reported dissatisfaction (10%) provided the following reasons:

- not enough information available (reported by 29% of dissatisfied respondents);
- reasons relating to the length of the application process or form (25%); and
- information or guidance not being clear or accessible (21%).

Seventy-seven per cent of respondents agreed with the statement “Staff from RPID and its partners are helpful towards customers”, while only 5% disagreed.

Respondents were asked to gauge their satisfaction with twelve factors of the service offered by RPID and its partners: The majority of respondents were found to be satisfied with each of the twelve factors, with respondents most likely to report being satisfied with factors involving contact with staff or RPID itself:

- being promptly directed to staff who can help (72% satisfied);
- enquiries being resolved quickly by staff (70%),
- written correspondence with RPID or its partners is clear (69%); and

- staff being knowledgeable about schemes scored most highly in terms of customer satisfaction (69%), with small proportions dissatisfied (typically around 5% to 8% across various characteristics).

Respondents were also more satisfied with inspection staff acting professionally (63% versus 2% dissatisfied) and receiving consistent information from different members of staff (59% versus 11%).

In the mid-term evaluation findings it was indicated that beneficiaries were generally very satisfied with the scheme information. Information issues were raised by some 60% of beneficiaries, regarding the accessibility, quality and relevance of scheme information; many asked for a simpler application process, preferably once which is not solely in an electronic format.

Feedback on the decision making process of the application stage was also typically good across the three criteria of information on scoring criteria, decision speed and application feedback. The best scores were received from CCAGS, FPMC and LFASS. CF scored lowest on the speed of decision making. A number of schemes (LFASS, LMO, RP and SDS) received more neutral scores on the level of information on scoring criteria.

In the SRDP 2014-2020 Ex-Ante Working Groups report it was indicated that respondents believed that those applying under Axis 3 should receive more assistance with the application process under LEADER as they believed it to be unnecessarily complicated. The topic of the IT system was perceived as very frustrating.

Simplification of application process was suggested as applicants do not necessarily understand the strategic concept of the integrated approach, but if these links can be made “behind the scenes” by the appraisers, this would help.

Others felt that maintaining visible links to the higher level outcomes was important to securing transformational change. However, this would rely on quite an intensive process of awareness raising and know-how transfer to applicants, which could not simply be accomplished by asking a lot of questions in an application form.

The speed of the application process was also a point of dissatisfaction for many as it could take months from first application, which is particularly problematic if the activity is seasonal or 'windows of opportunity' in relation to other funding streams or initiatives are missed or jeopardised.

Findings from the 2014-2020 SRDP ex-ante consultations to this effect included many comments about the skills and expertise required by those promoting the programme and case officers. Many were not convinced that the current complement of case officers had sufficient skills and expertise to provide high quality, consistent advice. Moreover, the skills and expertise required of advisors and case officers had not been fully defined. There was concern about how this would be addressed and how it would be funded. However, it was suggested that time be made available to brief and instruct those responsible for promotion, advice and assistance sufficiently from the outset.

Beneficiaries highlighted the importance of transparency and specifically wished to emphasise the value of site visits and having an early indication of the likelihood of success; constructive feedback on all applications; a clearly defined appeals process; and a scoring system which commanded support.

Many wanted to know that there would be a holistic assessment process and a shared understanding across agencies and organisations of what constitutes a 'good' application.



Similarly, the 2014-2020 SRDP ex-ante evaluation proposed the need for a common application process (excluding LFASS, which is administered in parallel with the Single Payment Scheme). It was also proposed that a comprehensive new IT system be introduced to monitor delivery.

In summary, there was varied satisfaction with the application process. A common theme found from investigating all reports was that satisfaction levels were very different across the different schemes, with some having a more straight forward process (CCAGS, FPMC and LFASS), than others (LMO, RP and SDS). Many beneficiaries of a variety of schemes typically suggested simplification of the application process, regardless of satisfaction with their overall experience.

## 1.7 Claims and payment processes

The mid-term evaluation findings split feedback regarding payment and claims processes into three sections: level of detail in claims, payment speed and payment frequency. The most positive feedback was received from CCAGS, FMPC and SDS schemes.

CF scored poorly across all three aspects, particularly in relation to the level of detail in claims and speed of payment. Speed was also an issue with the RP scheme (40% of beneficiaries reported being unsatisfied). LMO scored poorly on payment frequency, and although most beneficiaries were satisfied with payments speed, a quarter were unsatisfied.

Findings from the RPID Satisfaction Survey indicated that overall, two thirds of respondents said that they were satisfied with the process with only 12% being dissatisfied. This survey also indicated that of those who had sought information on how to appeal, 77% reported that they were satisfied (25% very satisfied and 52% fairly satisfied), with 10% dissatisfied.

In summary, the above findings suggest that there was a variety of satisfaction with claims and payment processes associated with respective schemes, and that satisfaction levels lay again on either end of the spectrum depending on the particular scheme. Those schemes which received more satisfactory responses included: CCAGS, FMPC and SDS. With RP, CF and LMO receiving lower levels of satisfaction with regards to claims and payment processes.

However, apart from the issues mentioned above, other reports did not seem to comment on the satisfaction levels regarding claims and payment processes.

Regarding possible improvements to the payment and claimant processes, findings from the RPID Satisfaction Survey indicated dissatisfaction with the lack of information, or information not being easy to find, unclear guidance, and problems relating to the length or complexity of the process.

Only the RIPD Satisfaction Survey stated clearly the main reasons for dissatisfaction with regard to the process of claiming and payments.

## 1.8 Awareness of the Scottish National Rural Network

The evaluation of Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) and the SRDP Communication Plan indicated that the general level of awareness of services amongst stakeholders was low. Some respondents had little or no experience or awareness of the SNRN or its services, and some questioned the relevance of it to rural Scotland as a whole.

Overall, one in three respondents had attended an SNRN event, or an event organised by SNRN, with land-based businesses having the lowest participation rates. Participation was highest among community and third sector respondents (over 40%), followed by other rural businesses and LEADER.

Attendance at local events was lower overall than at national and regional events. Project visits were attended least overall and not at all by land based or business respondents. Networking and information exchange were the principal reasons identified for attending events, particularly amongst businesses. Information on funding ranked lowest overall although somewhat higher amongst communities and third sector respondents.

The mid-term evaluation Findings indicated that SNRN's programme of delivering 20 regional events in under one year was ambitious but resulted in a formulaic approach which was not universally well received. Involvement tended to be concentrated within the territory rather than involving wider experience. This limited the exchange of good practice and establishment of wider links. Local involvement at the LAG level was nevertheless reported to be limited; each LAG represents a significant local network with wider links to other territories and sectors.

Therefore, it was suggested that the Scottish Government and SRN should consider a programme of events which more directly involve regional stakeholders in both their design and delivery to strengthen the relevance of the approach. Events should be based on a wider geographical area in order to strengthen inter-regional networking and exchange.

### SNRN up-take and provision

The Evaluation of SNRN and SRDP Communication Plan indicated that the importance of the SNRN as a source of information on the SRDP and LEADER was split relatively evenly between those who see it as having some importance (56%) and those who see little or none. There was little differentiation by user group.

The SNRN's importance as a source of information on good practice in rural development was similarly rated, especially among other rural

businesses, communities/third sector and private individuals. Land-based businesses ranked this markedly lower but only 16% saw good practice dissemination as of no importance.

The mid-term evaluation findings suggested that in its start-up phase, the SNRN had some success in broadening the base of rural networking in Scotland, but that the main challenge facing it was in engaging the wider community. The beneficiary survey raised questions over the way in which rural stakeholders are being informed and the overall communication strategy. This appears to be reflected in the uptake of service which, after the initial spate of activity, was rather limited and relatively static after 15 months operation.

It was also suggested that the Scottish Government and SNRN should review the approach to communication with and engaging rural stakeholders with a view to improving wider engagement. Given its objectives this should be an immediate priority for both the website and the regional coordination service.

It was also suggested by beneficiaries that the Scottish Government and SNRN should review the service provision to identify potential improvements to strengthen relevance and uptake by rural stakeholders. As well as this, the SNRN should take forward the provision of the exchange of more good practice examples, as a development priority for Scottish Government and SNRN managers.