

Department of Agriculture
and Rural Development

Strategic Plan
2012-2020

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CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	3
The Context	5
Our Vision	8
Our Aim	10
Our Role	10
Overview of Strategy	12
Strategic Goals and Objectives	13
Equality Overview	23

Preface

I am pleased to present the Department's draft Strategic Plan for the period to 2020.

In coming years, the agri-food industry will be facing a period of considerable opportunity and challenge. Many factors will contribute to sectoral challenges ahead such as: bank lending; market prices; feed and fuel costs, coupled with the larger global uncertainties of food security and climate change. But there is also cause for optimism and opportunities for growth, as the agri-food industry has proved to be one of the most resilient during the recent market downturn. I have already indicated my commitment work with DETI/InvestNI to develop the 'Focus on Food' document into a longer term strategy and action plan for the sector support further development of the industry and to maximise the benefits across the supply chain.

My Department will continue to focus its interventions on improving the economic return for the farm family household. This includes both those whose income is predominantly derived from farming, and all those who contribute to farming or who are seeking training or employment off farm.

My Department invested heavily in animal and plant health in the last budgetary period and will continue to take a pro-active approach to improved animal, fish and plant health, as prevention is better than cure and is fundamental to developing a sustainable industry.

My Department has a distinctive contribution to make in helping to conserve and enhance the rural and marine environments. We will continue to promote sustainable farming practice which will deliver greater resource efficiency and reduced environmental impact.

My Department has a three tier responsibility towards rural communities. My Department will monitor the implementation of the Rural White Paper Action Plan, encouraging action by other Government Departments. We will provide advice and guidance on Rural Proofing. We will also strengthen the sustainability of rural communities, either directly through elements of the Rural Development Programme and our Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation Programme, or by collaborating with other Government Departments, statutory agencies, and the community and voluntary sector to identify and develop solutions to rural issues.

My Department will continue to ensure that equality and good relations are central to its decision-making processes; we will continue to work to tackle inequalities and under-representation levels; and improve access to our services and information for our rural customers and communities.

This draft Plan focuses upon a number of Goals which are interdependent and will address key issues and contribute to the achievement of the Department's

Vision. These include: helping the agri-food industry to prepare for future market opportunities; improving the lives of rural dwellers; improving equality outcomes across the Department's remit; enhancing animal health, including mainstreaming the philosophy that 'disease prevention is better than cure'; and delivering environmental outcomes. Achievements in one area impact on others; for instance better performance in terms of animal health and welfare and our carbon footprint contributes to the marketability and value of the food produced by the industry.

In order to achieve these outcomes, especially the social, economic and environmental goals, there will need to be greater co-operation and partnership not only across Government departments and agencies but also with the agri-food industry and the communities involved. My Department will plan and use its main resources, such as the current and future Rural Development Programme to deliver on the range of actions in this Strategic Plan.

In taking forward the priorities outlined in this Plan, I will ensure that my Department fully meets its statutory obligations and Equality Scheme¹ commitments, and the specific targets we have set out in our Audit of Inequalities² and Action Plan (2011-2016)

Michelle O'Neill MLA
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 0.1 Do we need a Strategic Plan to 2020?
- 0.2 Are these still the right Goals?
- 0.3 Should there be a priority ranking?
- 0.4 Are we doing enough to meet our equality targets and commitments?
- 0.5 Is there anything else DARD could be doing to meet our equality targets and commitments?

¹ Our Equality Scheme (2011) is available to read at <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/agenda-for-equality/agenda-for-equality-dard-equality-scheme-2011.htm>

² Our Audit of Inequalities and Action Plan (2011-2016) area available at - <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/agenda-for-equality/audit-inequalities.htm>

The Context

The Economy

An estimated 20% of all private sector employment in Northern Ireland is derived from the agri-food sector, representing around 92,000 individuals employed. The food and drink industry here turns over approximately £3.7bn per annum. The industry has proved resilient during recession, continuing to grow despite the difficult financial climate and shrinking of other sectors of the economy.³

The food and drinks processing industry here has recorded impressive growth in turnover over the last ten years, with the growth rate well above the average for the manufacturing industry as a whole. In particular, the sector has been very successful in growing its sales to external markets, which have more than doubled over the last ten years. The food and drinks sector exports more than any other manufacturing sector.

Taken together, the farming and processing industries contribute around £1 billion per annum of value added to the local economy. This represents approximately 3.5% of the total Gross Value Added for the region. The agri-food sector also accounts for approximately 6% of total employment.

The food and drinks industry has weathered the recession better than many other parts of our economy despite the difficult financial climate and shrinking of other sectors of the economy. Between 2007 and 2010, employment in food and drink processing increased by 6%, with 1,100 additional full-time equivalent jobs being created. This performance is doubly impressive when benchmarked against the processing industry in the south, where employment fell by 13% over this same period, and in Britain, where employment in food and drinks processing fell by 8%.

Agricultural Reform

The last few years have witnessed major reform in agriculture: the radical reform in 2005 of the Common Agricultural Policy has opened the way to a new future for farming. The decoupling of EU subsidy from production has freed farming to respond to the demands of the market place, its customers, the environment and local communities.

³ Value of Food & Drink Industry to Northern Ireland by Goldblatt McGuigan for NIFDA

Industry Skills and Innovation

To meet the opportunities and challenges, the industry has increased its demand for research and development, education, training and skills development. To address this we will need to develop a strategy that addresses industry needs and aligns with DARD's strategic objectives on competitiveness, the environment, animal health and rural development.

Following development of the Evidence and Innovation Strategy, our new arrangements for commissioning research and development (through the Programme Management Boards and the Research Challenge Fund) will deliver better and more focused outcomes, including improved exchange of knowledge and information with stakeholders. Over the next few years, we need to maintain this commitment and build the momentum as a basis for improving industry competitiveness and stimulating innovation. Looking to Europe, the Department will also focus on increasing engagement by local businesses and the Agrifood and Biosciences Institute in European research funding initiatives such as Framework 7 and Horizon 2020, in order to increase drawdown of competitive EU funds.

EU and global developments

It is vital that the agri-food industry is well positioned in the global marketplace to capitalise on the growing demand for food, worldwide. We are already a net exporter of meat and dairy produce, and there will continue to be opportunities to expand this, especially while developing countries are increasing the quantities of animal products they import.

The agri-food sector has proved to be resilient in recession, experiencing growth even during the economic downturn. It is one that can lead recovery, it makes use of local land and resources, has the potential to export to new markets, and crucially the profit from the industry is returned to rural communities.

However, the industry also faces a number of key environmental challenges. Sustainable Intensification –producing more from less – will be required to meet the predicted demand for food from a growing world population. Preparation and planning will be needed to deal with expected changing weather patterns and more frequent extreme weather events. Adapting to climate change and mitigating its effects by reducing the carbon intensity of food products will help ensure a more sustainable future.

Lowering carbon should complement and not compete with sustainable growth objectives and the drive to improve competitiveness in the agri-food sector. Another challenge is utilising the nutrients contained in slurry and manure more efficiently to reduce the environmental impact on water quality. This also provides an opportunity to reduce chemical fertiliser usage and

greenhouse gas emissions. Use of technology, such as advanced slurry spreading equipment supported through our Manure Efficiency Technology Scheme, can make a significant contribution to delivering environmental benefits along with increased production efficiency. More environmentally sustainable farming practice can also be more efficient farming.

Protecting against emergencies

DARD has a key role in protecting against outbreaks of animal and plant disease and emergencies in the food chain. Being alert to the potential risks has led to well developed plans, which are regularly tested. The Rivers Agency also plays a proactive role in flood emergency planning. External factors will continue to challenge preparations and this will impact on our work. We will ensure that we are able to deal with emergencies efficiently and effectively on the basis of risk assessment and by building resilience into Departmental plans.

The same demand for food which provides opportunities for Northern Ireland in the global marketplace will also reduce access to our usual sources of food and feed. This may lead increasingly to procurement of food, feed and raw materials from new and novel sources. These pose unknown risks from both disease and contamination hazards and require a more integrated approach, between Industry and across Government, to carry out risk surveillance and risk management of the food and feed chain.

Our Vision

A thriving and sustainable rural economy, community and environment.

Our vision is a thriving and sustainable rural economy, community and environment. To achieve that we want to see a more efficient and competitive agri-food industry with joined up supply chains that maximise economic benefits for everyone from primary production to final processing. We will enter into strategic partnerships with industry leaders to develop a long term Strategy for the sector based on export-led growth and promote supply chain cohesion. We will continue to support research and development and improve the skills base of the industry and to promote innovation, in order to enable local products to compete successfully in international markets and achieve a growing contribution to the economy from the agri-food sector.

We will also enter into strategic partnerships to help improve animal health and protect the feed chain. We will promote a pro-active, risk-based and preventive approach. Stakeholders will take more responsibility for improving standards, and for protecting society and the economy from the risks of animal disease and contamination of the feed chain. We plan to develop and extend a partnership approach to animal health and welfare that supports industry-led herd health programmes.

We will continue to maintain a high plant health status, with particular emphasis on monitoring for emerging disease risks to grassland and arable crops, horticulture and forestry.

We have responsibility for forests, and we want to improve access and facilities for the public, including through the development of better caravanning and camping facilities and other recreational pursuits. We would also want to explore the potential for the generation of electricity from wind power at some forest sites. This would add to Northern Ireland's capacity to produce renewable energy, as well as bring a further benefit to the economy from the forest sites.

We have responsibility for flood defence, and we want to reduce the risk of flooding from rivers and the sea.

We will maintain sustainable marine fisheries and manage environmental outcomes in our territorial waters.

We will continue to deliver environmental enhancement by encouraging responsible management of the countryside.

We want to be an advocate within Government for the needs of the wider rural community. We want to promote and provide guidance on the issues facing rural communities, through Rural Proofing. We want to co-ordinate, across

Government, the delivery of the Rural White Paper Action Plan for the benefit of rural communities.

In the delivery of all our services and in implementing our policies, we will work to promote all aspects of equality and good relations, and to achieve measurable outcomes. We will continue to make a positive contribution towards wider government strategies impacting on the community as a whole. We want to deliver our services in a way that complies with European Commission requirements and yet is accessible, efficient and customer-friendly for our key stakeholders.

Our Aim

To meet our vision, the Department's aim is:

To be a Department that works with stakeholders, builds partnerships and values its staff; strives to work efficiently, responds quickly to change and focuses on achieving sustainable outcomes.

Our Role

The Department's role is to support joined up supply chains and improved efficiency, competitiveness and sustainability in the agri-food industry, to safeguard animal, fish and plant health and animal welfare; to maintain and invest in the environment; to improve the lives of rural dwellers, and to contribute to a successful rural economy and society.

We will work proactively in partnerships with other departments and stakeholders, and on finding ways to involve more external influences, in particular in research and education and, in areas such as rural tourism, to use our forests and aid programmes to contribute to wider economic and social agendas. We will seek to ensure that our interests are robustly represented within the EU to influence the future direction of policy and seek to avoid unnecessary complexity and cost in delivery. It follows from our vision and from our aim that we will be balancing continually the requirements of taxpayers, consumers and service users.

We will continue to promote access to services, engage with our customers to hear their views and take steps to remove barriers to services where they continue to exist. We will work to develop our relationships with other departments to ensure that they take into account rural needs in developing their policies and procedures.

The Department is a major direct service provider, but we will remain open to exploring alternative delivery models where they are likely to produce better outcomes for the industry and taxpayer.

We will become more efficient in delivering programmes and will seek to provide more customer-focused services, information and flexible choices. Our workforce will continue to be committed to improving service to our customers and stakeholders and we will support them in delivering this role.

We operate as a Paying Agency for European funds, authorising, executing and accounting for payments and the recognition of debts. The Department will want during the period to position itself as a high-performing paying

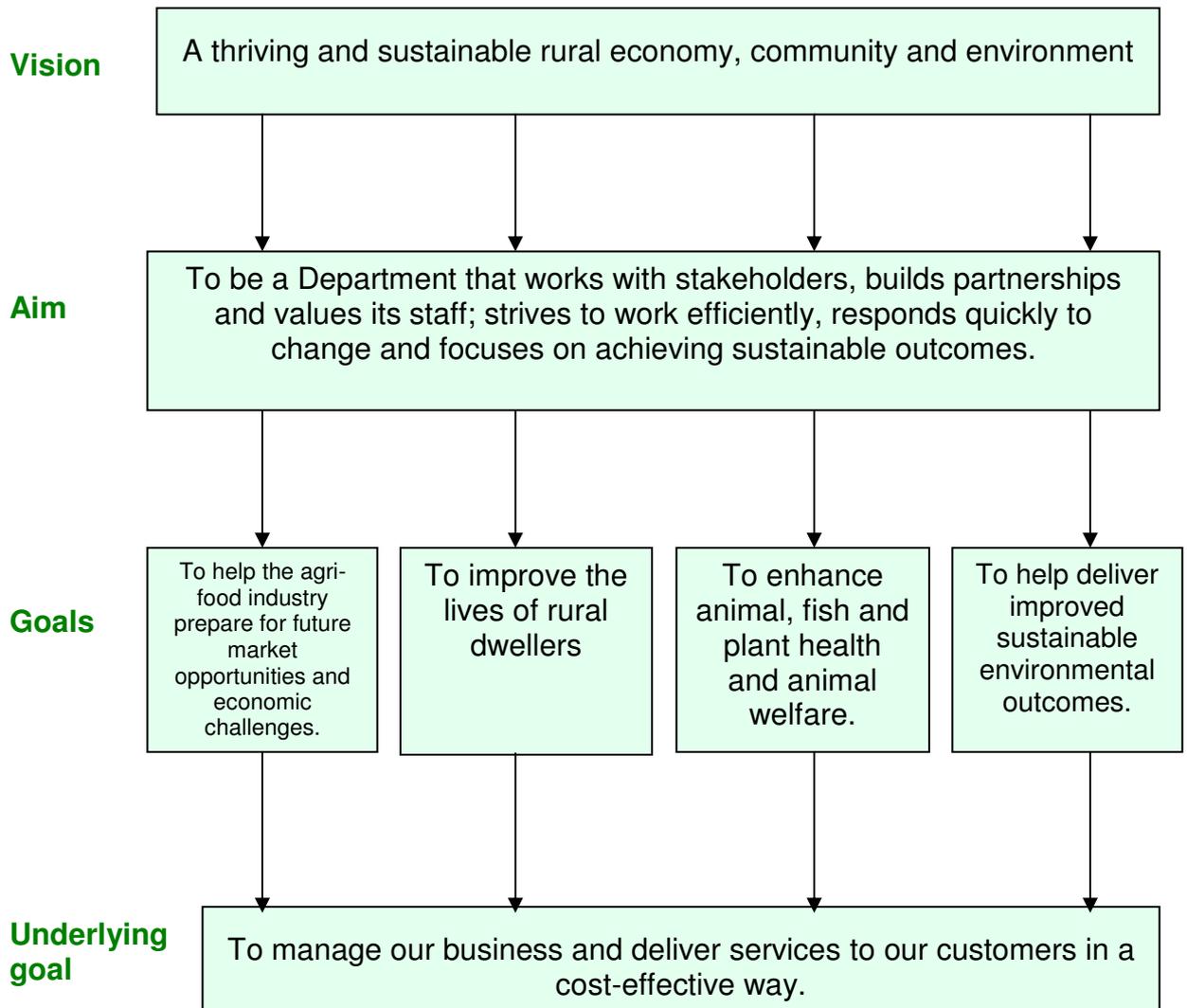
agency; active in keeping abreast of developments affecting paying agencies across the EU; and one that is in a position to demonstrate to the Commission that the quality of its control of EU expenditure satisfactorily meets European Commission requirements and where people, technology and processes have been managed to ensure efficient and effective delivery of schemes.

The Department will continue to promote the principles of Better Regulation and Simplification, reducing the administrative burden associated with complex regulation and encouraging the use of that time to help the industry deliver economic growth. DARD will work with other Departments in the North, the UK and other EU Member States to promote simplification issues, provide clear information to businesses and improve the regulatory environment.

The Department's will meet the commitments in its Equality Scheme which sets out the actions we will take to ensure that DARD meets its statutory equality obligations under Section 75 of the NI Act. The Department also shares responsibilities with other NI Departments to take forward a range of actions contained in other NI-wide strategies, action plans and UN conventions.

The Department will strive to meet the commitments in its Audit of Inequalities and Action Plan (2011- 2016) and has committed to monitoring progress towards the published targets.

Overview of Strategy



Strategic Goals and Objectives

GOAL 1 To help the agri-food industry prepare for future market opportunities and economic challenges

The Department will encourage the development of sustainable, profitable and joined-up supply chains throughout the agri-food industry, based on efficient and competitive production systems.

What success will look like

1. An industry that is positioned to exploit market opportunities, supplying the right products, at the right price and the right time.
2. A better skilled, more innovative, more efficient and more integrated agri-food supply chain working to an agreed long term plan.
3. More strategic partnership between Government, industry and other stakeholders, working towards a shared vision.

Key actions

1. Deliver our targeted strategy for research and development, knowledge exchange and support for innovation, and promote industry collaboration in research.
2. Create and deliver a targeted strategy for education and life-long learning.
3. Develop, with government and industry partners, a long term strategy and implementation plan for the agri-food sector.
4. Support dialogue and assist the functioning of supply chains.
5. Argue for a well funded, flexible and simplified Common Agricultural Policy.
6. Develop a 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme which helps support the competitiveness of our agri-food sector.
7. Advocate our policy position on decentralisation, transferable fishing concessions and phasing out discards in the Common Fisheries Policy.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 1.1 What do you see as the role of Government in relation to the skills and support needs of the sectors?
- 1.2 How should the 2020 strategy seek to maximise market opportunities?
- 1.3 How could this strategy result in better equality outcomes for all under-represented groups?
- 1.4 How could increased collaboration and integration within supply chains be promoted?
- 1.5 How can Government and industry better work together to increase investment in agri-food R&D and innovation?
- 1.6 How can Government and industry better work together?
- 1.7 What are the key drivers to improved efficiency in the agri- food sector and how do we overcome barriers to adoption?

GOAL 2 To improve the lives of rural dwellers

We will promote equality of opportunity and good relations for rural dwellers. We will tackle rural poverty and social isolation by working with the Executive, other Departments and Agencies, and rural stakeholders. The Department will provide a range of services including technical advice and support focused on the farm family household. We will also take steps to help the wider rural community and under-represented groups to benefit from funding programmes and initiatives such as the Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation Programme.

What success will look like

1. A better awareness of the Department's Section 75 equality duties; its commitment to tackling inequalities and under-representation and to ensuring measurable and improved equality outcomes.
2. Sustainable rural businesses and jobs.
3. A better understanding of the challenges facing rural communities and a more integrated approach, inside and outside government, to addressing them and developing rural potential.
4. Improved representation and participation by under-represented groups.
5. Targeting of interventions to achieve best economic and social return.
6. Economically sustainable farm family households.
7. Rural households with equitable access to services.

Key actions

1. Implementation of our Equality Scheme; achievement of targets set out in our Audit of Inequalities and Action Plan (2011-2016) and placing equality and good relations assessments at the centre of policy and decision-making processes).
2. Advocate on rural issues across government.
3. With other Departments, monitor and implement the Rural White Paper Action Plan.
4. Complete actions under the existing Rural Development Programme and develop the 2014-2020 programme.
5. Identify and undertake rural pilot projects in partnership with other Departments and stakeholders
6. Deliver our targeted strategy for research and development in order to build the evidence base to better understand and influence policy on the social and economic challenges and opportunities facing rural communities.
7. Improved equality monitoring arrangements.
8. Develop focussed support for farm family households
9. Ensure that the Common Agricultural Policy includes the flexibility to address rural challenges in an integrated way.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 2.1 What specific actions could DARD undertake to ensure improved equality outcomes for disadvantaged and under-represented groups?
- 2.2 What should our key equality actions be?
- 2.3 Should DARD actions include a specific focus on issues relevant to farm family units?
- 2.4 Should DARD's rural policy be focused on advocating across government, rural proofing and the Rural White Paper Action Plan?
- 2.5 With a reduced budget, should DARD focus support on those prepared to invest in and develop themselves?
- 2.6 Should the Department focus support to certain disadvantaged rural areas or identify specific rural issues and help address those where they arise?

GOAL 3 To enhance animal, fish and plant health and animal welfare

The Department will develop effective partnerships which support implementation of and compliance with agri-food legislation, and to improve and protect animal, plant and fish health and animal welfare standards, in support of the competitiveness of the farming sector. We will promote the benefits of a preventative approach to animal health and welfare. While lead policy responsibility for food safety rests with the Department of Health and the Food Standards Agency, DARD will play its specific role in implementing a programme of inspection, sampling, enforcement, licensing and guidance in relation to food safety.

What success will look like

1. Eradication of Brucellosis by March 2014 and a clear direction for the eradication of Tuberculosis.
2. Absence or insignificant levels of other animal or plant diseases that are of important public health or major economic consequence.
3. Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is fully implemented.
4. Enhanced traceability system to support trade and disease control.
5. A more developed and extended partnership approach to animal health and welfare between Government, industry and other stakeholders.
6. Wide recognition across all stakeholders of the benefits of a preventative approach to developing a sustainable agri-food industry.
7. Risks to animals and consumers arising from the livestock feed chain are insignificant.

Key actions

1. Work with stakeholders to develop a long term strategy for the eradication of TB in cattle and implement cost-effective disease control measures to reduce and eradicate the level of serious endemic animal diseases.
2. Use risk-based surveillance to detect disease early. Maintain robust controls and contingency plans for preventing and controlling major animal, fish and plant disease outbreaks and plant pest outbreaks.
3. Deliver our targeted strategy for research and development to build the evidence base to underpin animal, plant and fish health policy objectives, including the eradication of TB and horizon scanning to identify new plant and animal disease threats.
4. Develop and implement a regulatory approach which is both proportionate and effective in enforcing animal health and welfare policies.
5. Advocate our policy position in the development of a new EU Animal Health law to help achieve the objectives envisaged in the All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy.
6. Develop legislation to implement the provisions of the new Welfare of Animals Act 2011.

7. Work with stakeholders to develop and implement an electronic cattle identification and data transfer system.
8. Work with stakeholders to develop an industry-led herd health programme to help tackle production diseases that have significant economic impact at farm level, including the eradication of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD).
9. With stakeholders, use risk-based surveillance to detect contamination of the livestock feed chain early and maintain robust controls and contingency plans for preventing and controlling major contamination incidents.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 3.1 Should there be a greater role for industry in leading the agenda for animal, fish and plant health and, if so, what should that role be?
- 3.2 Should we develop and extend a partnership approach to animal health and welfare that supports industry-led herd health programmes alongside those for statutory disease? If so, what should be the respective roles of Government and industry?
- 3.3 Do you agree that tackling BVD should be a priority? If so, how should this and similar herd health programmes to tackle other production diseases that have significant economic impact at farm level be funded?
- 3.4 How can animal, fish and plant health policies better recognise good practice?
- 3.5 Are there any equality and good relations issues under this Goal that you feel we should be addressing

GOAL 4 To help deliver improved sustainable environmental outcomes

While lead policy responsibility for the environment in Northern Ireland rests with the Department of the Environment (DOE), DARD has a distinctive contribution to make. DARD aims to encourage farming and fishing methods which help to conserve and enhance the rural and marine environments. Reducing the intensity of greenhouse gas emissions from the agri-food sector will help it to operate in a more efficient and environmentally sustainable way. DARD is working increasingly closely with DOE on issues of common interest to achieve a joined-up approach and deliver environmental improvement and sustainability without imposing disproportionate costs. DARD is the Competent Authority for the implementation of the EU Floods Directive and the Rivers Agency is developing Flood Risk Management Plans which will provide sustainable solutions to manage the risk from flooding.

What success will look like

1. Sustainable farming practice delivering greater resource efficiency and reduced environmental impact
2. Improved water quality in rivers and lakes.
3. Lower carbon intensity in our agri-food products.
4. Increased tree cover and enhanced landscape.
5. Sustainable exploitation of commercial fish stocks.
6. Enhanced biodiversity on farmland.
7. Sustainable flood risk management plans and watercourse and coastal flood management.
8. Reduced impact of river and coastal flooding incidents.

Key actions

1. Deliver the environmental components of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 and prepare and implement new environmental measures for the –2014-2020 programme.
2. Work with DOE to manage the implementation of environmental policies, in particular the River Basin Management Plans, developing the Marine Bill and on the NI Biodiversity Strategy.
3. Deliver a new policy framework for forestry and promote expansion of tree cover.
4. Deliver flood risk management plans in compliance with the Floods Directive.
5. Implement the Agriculture and Forestry Greenhouse Gas Reduction Strategy and Action Plan with the agri-food industry.
6. Maintain contingency plans to deal with environmental threats.
7. Commercial fish stocks will, by 2015, be exploited at fishing mortality levels consistent with achievement of Maximum Sustainable Yield in the medium to long term.

8. Deliver education programmes on sustainable farming methods.
9. Deliver our targeted strategy for research and development to build the evidence base to support environmental policy.
10. Deliver a new strategic management framework for inshore fisheries.
11. Develop legislation to regulate the risk of flooding from reservoirs.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 4.1 How could the Department increase the environmental benefits from its agri-environment schemes?
- 4.2 How do we educate the public on the benefit of these schemes?
- 4.3 How can we ensure that there is a public benefit from the investment in agri-environment schemes?
- 4.4 How can funding be targeted to achieve the best environmental outcomes?
- 4.5 Are there any equality and good relations issues under this Goal that you feel we should be addressing?

GOAL 5 To manage our business and deliver services to our customers in a cost-effective way

By delivering better services to its customers, the Department will achieve its Aim. The Department will work to defined standards for its services, operating within the resources allocated to it, reflecting its obligations to the taxpayer and other stakeholders as well as its aspirations to satisfy customers.

What success will look like

1. Delivery of accessible and equitable standards of service that meet the needs of our customers, stakeholders, partners and staff and equality scheme commitments.
2. Stakeholders value the important contribution which the Department and its staff make to a thriving and sustainable rural economy, community and environment.
3. EU payments delivered in accordance with European Regulations.
4. A simplification of processes to allow the industry to comply with regulations with the minimum bureaucracy possible.
5. Customers transacting business with DARD primarily by electronic means through integrated, relevant and secure systems linked to effective and efficient processes.
6. Confident, customer oriented, appropriately skilled staff with access to modernised information systems.
7. Effective working relationships with stakeholders
8. An estate that meets the needs of DARD business in a cost-effective way, including a new headquarters.
9. Benefit optimised from participation in EU programmes.
10. DARD's policies and strategies are assessed for equality and good relations impacts and informed by a sound evidence base.
11. Working in partnership across government to achieve common objectives.

Key Actions

1. Implementation of all aspects of the Department's Equality Scheme and targets set out in the Audit of Inequalities.
2. Implement defined customer service standards throughout the Department.
3. Further develop an assessment function to ensure that policy and delivery mechanisms are simplified as much as possible.
4. Deliver services electronically.
5. Monitor progress towards Equality Scheme targets and Audit of Inequalities.

6. Maintain and deliver personnel processes to ensure that the Department resources, trains and rewards its staff to meet business needs.
7. Maintain and develop control and payment processes to meet changing EU requirements.
8. Develop strategic partnerships.
9. Relocate DARD Headquarters to a rural area.
10. Optimise exploitation of the estate.
11. Engage effectively with the EU and develop and implement appropriate EU programmes.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 5.1 What service should DARD offer?
- 5.2 What opportunities do you see for greater participation by different groups of people in decision making?
- 5.3 Are there specific groups of customers who find it more difficult to use our services?
- 5.4 What more should DARD do to address under-representation on our decision-making boards, committees forums, etc?
- 5.5 What more could DARD do to ensure it provides services which are accessible and equitable for the needs of different groups of customers?
- 5.6 What opportunities do you see for different delivery models and what would be the advantages of them?
- 5.7 What do you think is the best balance of public and private funding regarding regulation?
- 5.8 Should the Department carry out more focus groups and direct advisory sessions?
- 5.9 What incentives would encourage you to take up online services related to grants and subsidy schemes, and other transactions?
- 5.10 How can we ensure that by 2020, Departmental transactions with our customers are accessible and primarily carried out online?

Equality Overview

Our Equality Scheme

In taking forward our Strategic Plan, the Department remains fully committed to its Section 75 statutory duties. Section 75 of the NI Act (1998) requires public authorities in carrying out their functions to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across a range of categories⁴. The Department has recently revised its Equality Scheme⁵ and has set out a range of actions to further promote equality and good relations and to ensure that section 75 is at the core of decision and policy-making processes.

Our Audit of Inequalities (2011-2016)

Whilst considerable progress has been made in recent years, we are aware that there are persistent inequalities that remain across our society. In its new Guide⁶ the Equality Commission recommended that public authorities should carry out an audit of inequalities across their business functions and produce an action plan setting out how they proposed to address the inequalities identified. Our Action Plan sets out a range of measures to tackle inequalities across our business remit, it will be aligned with our corporate and business planning cycles as recommended by the Commission; and we will regularly review and publish detail setting out our progress.

The Department is also represented on a range of inter-departmental groups and teams working to meet targets in various NI wide equality and human rights strategies and action plans.

The Department has an Equality Steering Group (ESG), which is a sub-group of our Departmental Board. It meets quarterly, is chaired by our Permanent Secretary and monitors the Department's overall progress towards meeting its equality targets and Equality Scheme commitments. The ESG membership includes representatives from various external organisations with an interest in rural equality issues and this helps ensure that it has an effective challenging and scrutinising function.

The Department recognises the importance of engaging, listening and partnership working with others in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, as well as with our different groups of rural customers and their representative organisations.

⁴ See DARD Equality Scheme (2011) - <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/agenda-for-equality/agenda-for-equality-dard-equality-scheme-2011.htm>

⁵ As above

⁶ Section 75 of the NI Act 1998: A Guide for Public Authorities (2010)