
Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Research and Education Advisory Panel

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The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Fáilte romhaimh.

I wish to advise Assembly Members on the future of a DARD advisory NDPB, the Research and Education Advisory Panel, known as REAP

REAP was established in 2005 in response to one of the recommendations of the independent O'Hare Review of the arrangements for agri-food education and research and development in the north of Ireland. Its role, as set out in its Terms of Reference, is to provide independent expert advice on DARD's research, education and knowledge transfer policies.

The Review

In line with best practice in the management of public bodies and an earlier commitment to DFP, I commissioned an independent review of REAP and our interaction with it in 2008.

The review examined the rationale for an independent advisory panel, taking account of the wider political and strategic context; the most appropriate model for that advice, as well as the Panel's performance. The review was completed in consultation with the REAP membership, DARD officials and a range of stakeholders. It also drew on the experience of a range of comparable advisory bodies in Scotland, England and the south of Ireland. I am grateful to those who contributed to the review and helped me reach the decision I am announcing today.

The review acknowledged that REAP had been very productive. The Panel provided valuable scrutiny and input to the development of the DARD Evidence and Innovation Strategy which was well received by the research and wider stakeholder community. REAP also contributed to our thinking on the processes needed to commission, manage and quality assure DARD's substantial research programme. Finally, the Panel has also indirectly influenced our current approach to stakeholder engagement in developing other policies.

The review concluded that DARD still required independent expert advice on its research and education functions; that the existing panel should be formally stood down and a new panel launched later that year. It also made a number of more detailed recommendations on the future structure, operation and reporting arrangements for any new panel.

Following receipt of the report, I accepted the recommendation to stand down the existing panel but indicated my intention to consider further the review findings further before announcing a final decision on the way forward.

Changes in Strategic Environment

Not unexpectedly, the strategic environment for DARD's research and education policies has evolved very considerably since REAP's launch in 2005. In April 2006, we created a Non Public Departmental Body, the Agri-food Biosciences Institute to provide scientific research and services to government, non-governmental and commercial organisations. This was also one of the recommendations of the independent O'Hare Review. In addition, in February 2009, we appointed our first Departmental Scientific Adviser and our Evidence and Innovation Strategy, published in July 2009, is beginning to drive the DARD research agenda. We have also established new internal structures for commissioning and managing DARD-

funded research which provide for increased engagement between policy-makers, research organisations and stakeholders in identifying research needs, setting priorities and ensuring effective knowledge exchange. DARD is also strengthening its relationship with other research funders in Britain through various mechanisms, and we are also planning to explore the potential for further cooperation with the south of Ireland on research.

Furthermore, a number of cross-government strategic reviews of skills and innovation have concluded recently and new structures, such as MATRIX and the Food Industry Advisory panel have been established which will help guide the Executive's support for industry in these areas. At the same time, DEL is consulting on a revised Skills Strategy for the north of Ireland, which will provide the overarching policy context within which DARD education policy must fit. And, of course, we also have the benefit of Lantra and Improve, the respective Sector Skills Councils for the land based and food industries, to provide policy input and advice on skills needs.

Finances must also be a consideration, both for any revised body and the associated secretariat support. The Executive faces the significant budget pressures over the course of the coming four years and we will all have to make difficult choices about spending priorities.

It is against this background that I have assessed again the review recommendations and DARD's future need for an independent advisory body on research and education and I have come to the conclusion that REAP should now be formally dissolved.

In reaching my decision, I am mindful of the fact that research and skills remain important to our efforts to help the agri-food industry rise to the challenges of food security, climate change and an increasingly competitive global economy; and in achieving the vibrant rural community and environment, we all want to see. However, I am confident that through the new structures and arrangements referred to earlier, DARD can continue to secure improved quality and transparency in the development and delivery of our research and education policies.

I, therefore, believe the decision to dissolve REAP is the right one, given our present circumstances. My Statement will be available on the DARD website in due course.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.