

NEW GAME-PLAN CASE-STUDY

DEVELOPING INNOVATION PROGRAMMES TO DELIVER VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This case study summarises how we supported a programme of work to develop Innovation Programmes for the Agriculture sector in Northern Ireland. Our support included conventional workshops, discussions with subject-matter experts to refine draft ideas, and a Brain-Pool Workshop to share and validate refined proposals with key stakeholders. We worked in a joint project team with our sponsors throughout this process.

Background

In autumn 2004, the 'Fit for Market' Report of the Food Strategy Group for Northern Ireland set out a challenging agenda for the Agriculture sector. A Food Strategy Implementation Partnership (FSIP) was quickly established to take this forward. We were engaged to support the Partnership's Foresight Leadership Group in developing 'Innovation Programmes' to deliver a Vision for a distinctive and competitive Agriculture sector.

We initially facilitated a 'brainstorm' workshop in December 2005. This yielded ideas which we then developed, with further inputs from subject-matter experts and the Foresight Group, into four 'Visions for 2020', and 16 'Possible Innovation Programmes'. The focus was on articulating positive future states and how to achieve them.

The Stakeholder Workshop

The Visions and draft Innovation Programmes were then shared with some 50 key stakeholders through a New-Game-Plan 'Brain-Pool Workshop' held in March 2006. The stakeholders, many of them holding senior positions, came from varied backgrounds and organisations: all had an interest in innovation in the Agriculture sector.

Workshop process

A structured process was followed. There was a mix of presentations, discussions, and individual creative working. Special technology - a wireless network of mini-laptops - was used to collate contributions, and to enable participants to make their own inputs, and to read, review, and comment or build on the contributions made by others. This enabled collaborative review and development of the Innovation Programmes (see <http://www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Services/Brain-Pool.htm>).

The first session started with a dramatised presentation of the four 'Visions', the scene being a journalist visiting Northern Ireland in 2020 and reflecting on changes in the Agriculture sector since 2006. Following the presentation, attendees were asked to record: 'What do you like about each Vision?' and 'Do you have any positive builds to strengthen these Visions?' Some 407 contributions were collated. These were generally positive and constructive, validating the range of issues covered by the Visions.

Attendees then considered in detail the 16 'Possible Innovation Programmes' associated with the Visions. In a staged process, they discussed these, entered comments, and reviewed and commented further on the contributions made by others. Some 349 contributions - 'builds' and amendments - were received in this session.

During the Workshop lunch break, our Analysts reviewed the contributions received in the previous sessions. On the basis of these, they added builds to the Possible Innovation Programmes and also created two entirely new Programmes, bringing the total to 18. The Workshop attendees then systematically assessed the 18 'Revised Possible Innovation Programmes'. The outputs were intended to help guide the FSIP in judging priorities, but it was made clear that this assessment was not in itself a 'prioritisation' exercise.

The 'Revised Possible Innovation Programmes' were each assessed by the participants against five criteria:

- Importance in achieving the Visions;
- Distinctiveness in terms of expertise, resources and entrepreneurship;
- Sustainable benefits in economic, social and environmental terms;
- Feasibility;
- 'Passion' (an indication of personal 'gut feel').

Following the Assessment, participants considered 'enablers' - actions which are not strictly components of a given 'Innovation Programme' yet need to happen if the Programmes, and, in turn, their associated Visions, are to be delivered. Some 172 contributions were received, covering 10 different areas of 'enabling' activity.

Following the presentation of the results of the assessment, and the session focusing on 'enablers', John Gilliland, Chairman of the Foresight Leadership Group, summarised key points from the day. These included:

- The Visions, by lifting everyone out of their preoccupations with the challenges facing the Agri-Food sector today, had enabled them to look forward to a positive future.
- The contributions which had been recorded were immensely rich, diverse and positive.
- The sheer volume of contributions had been very impressive by comparison with similar events.
- The session on enablers, led by the contributions made by attendees, had underlined the need for this initiative to lead to action, rather than to 'another report' which simply gathers dust.
- The stakeholders represented would be able, through their efforts, to send a clear message from those outside Government to those in Government.

Following this review, participants were asked to record a message or learning point which they would take away from the Workshop personally and/or for their own organisation.

Workshop feedback

The Workshop concluded with an assessment of its contribution to 'Fit for Market – Developing Innovation Programmes', the value of the design and facilitation, and the contribution of the special technology. Participants also commented on what they liked about the Workshop and on what could be done differently or better.

Participants highlighted the 'novel approach' adopted in the workshop, commenting that it was 'A good way of getting a diverse range of opinions', 'Encouraged individual contributions without individuals and their views dominating, and 'Allowed efficient use of time to capture all inputs and allow participants to bounce ideas'.

Participants also welcomed 'The opportunity to contribute comments collectively, quickly, non-attributably'. One commented that 'the technology brought a new life to the workshop concept. Capturing people's views anonymously undoubtedly releases creativity'. Another added that 'It avoided everyone getting bogged down in a few small areas by allowing people to discuss and then all put in their own views'.

Other comments included: 'Took me away from the trees to see the forest...great experience...will remember'; 'New experience in collaborative thinking and interchange, the technology innovation mirrors the overall innovation theme'; and 'Clear and concise - with feedback available on the day - well done!'

After the Workshop

Following the Workshop, we delivered a Verbatim Report (64 pages) containing all the contributions, the assessments of the Innovation Programmes, and the Workshop evaluation. This was made available, within just a few days, to all participants. This ensured complete transparency.

Soon afterwards, we delivered a further Synthesis Report (32 pages) for the sponsors. This suggested further improvements in the wording of the Innovation Programmes, distilled the discussion on 'enablers', and presented our independent conclusions and recommendations.

The Leadership Group then used the Synthesis report in considering the next steps. Its formal recommendations were published in the report 'Vision Twenty:Twenty' (http://www.new-game-plan.co.uk/Papers/FSIP_Report.pdf).

Further Information

New Game-Plan is a specialist company which catalyses strategic change for leading global companies, public bodies and cross-sector groups. Our approach is innovative and distinctive, fusing Knowledge, Facilitation Services, a Practical Toolkit, and Supporting Technology. Our expertise and experience is broad, across many sectors. We have particular strengths in research and innovation. For further information, contact Dr Ray Smith: Telephone: 01428 661517. E-mail: info@new-game-plan.co.uk. Web: www.new-game-plan.co.uk.

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