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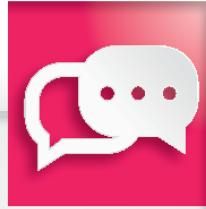
Mapping of agricultural policies in Northern Ireland

A review of the Future Agricultural Policy

27 March 2025

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Mapping of agricultural policies in Northern Ireland

A review of the Future Agricultural Policy

A report submitted by [ICF Consulting Services Limited](#)

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Executive summary

Study background

This report, produced by the ICF-led team for the Office of Environmental Protection, reviews agri-environment rural incentive schemes in Northern Ireland with a focus on the Future Agricultural Policy. The review took place from September 2024 to March 2025.

DAERA published the Future Agricultural Policy (FAP) in March 2022 after public consultation. The FAP aims to improve agricultural productivity, environmental sustainability, resilience to external shocks, and the agri-food supply chain's effectiveness. It includes eight core workstreams, five cross-cutting workstreams, and one sectoral workstream. The FAP combines payment schemes, knowledge and innovation measures, and data-led initiatives designed to deliver benefit for land, livestock, people and infrastructure.

In February 2025, the FAP was redesigned as the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP), with an updated timeline and vision. Despite the changes, the workstreams remain similar. Since the SAP was announced towards the end of this study, it was not fully considered included in the analysis. This report focuses on the FAP.

This report builds on a prior study by the ICF-led team for the OEP. The study devised an approach for the OEP to analyse and report on government progress toward EIP environmental goals. It introduced the Environmental Policy System Review (EPSR) tool to help the OEP identify areas of adequate activity and gaps or concerns in environmental policy. This study applied the EPSR tool to the FAP.

The Environmental Policy System Review (EPSR) Tool

The EPSR tool supports the OEP in understanding and capturing, in a concise form, the development and delivery status of high-level and broad ranging environmental policies. The EPSR framework has six key components: **vision**, **evidence**, **strategy**, **action plan**, **delivery plan** and **evaluation**. These components consider the factors that are likely to be required to ensure successful design and delivery of government portfolios, programmes, and policies. Each component has evaluative statements and questions, which can be used a guide to assess 'what success looks like' and identify gaps based on evidence available.

Methodology

The EPSR has an eight-step process, five of which were conducted during this study:

1. **Define review aim and purpose:** The study aims were iteratively defined in collaboration with the OEP.
2. **Conduct data searches:** Data searches were conducted and information about the FAP published by DAERA was reviewed, a full list of sources reviewed is shown in Annex 1.
3. **Extract data and summarise:** The evidence available was extracted into an excel template and into a 'messy' mind map format following the EPSR components in Miro. The evidence was synthesised into a descriptive summary of the FAP in line with the EPSR framework components.
4. **Test and refine evidence:** The study team conducted a position paper review, two DAERA interviews and workshop with nine stakeholders to understand key perspectives on the FAP and to test and refine the evidence gathered through the desk review.
5. **Assess and summarise:** Each EPSR component was assessed, using the EPSR evaluative statements and questions as a guide.

Study aims

The study aims were to:

- Assess the extent to which the FAP has a coherent **vision** and **strategy**; and is underpinned by relevant **evidence**.
- Assess the **action plan** and **delivery plan** at policy level to determine alignment with the FAP's vision and strategy, drawing on evidence from selected priority workstreams when appropriate.
- Consider at a high level the extent to which **evaluation** is embedded across the FAP.

Key findings

Vision: The FAP lacks clarity, consistency, and a defined approach. It sets four core objectives: productivity, environmental sustainability, resilience, and a responsive supply chain, but prioritisation is inconsistent. Terms like sustainability and resilience are not clearly defined. An overarching statement could link the objectives and clarify the vision. There are few targets, and they are generally not SMART. Clear, achievable targets would strengthen the policy.

Evidence: The FAP uses scientific evidence, expert input, and pilot schemes to understand environmental systems, including drivers, pressures, enablers, dependencies, and influences. Improved application of evidence could enhance policy effectiveness. Published evidence supports some but not all workstreams. Key drivers and pressures are not fully addressed by current policies. The Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group offers diverse perspectives, but the resource-intensive co-design process can lead to rushed decisions and limited options. FAP pilot programmes test new approaches and gather evidence, yet concerns exist about implementation, evaluation details, and inconsistent funding affecting long-term planning.

Strategy: The Future Agriculture Policy (FAP) integrates payment schemes, knowledge and innovation measures, as well as data-driven initiatives. The workstreams within the FAP are designed to mutually support each other. However, the absence of a theory of change makes it difficult to comprehend how these workstreams are intended to achieve the overarching vision. The fourteen workstream vary in their stages of policy development and implementation. There is a notable lack of clarity surrounding the Farming with Nature scheme and the Farm Sustainability Standards, while the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is well-developed.

Action plan: The FAP action plan faces challenges due to an unclear timeline, insufficient funding, and poor communication. Funding is inadequate for the required changes, leading to concerns among stakeholders about ambition without resources. Clearer details on funding redistribution and the timeline would help reduce uncertainty. The new Farm Sustainability Standards lack comprehensiveness, and better engagement with the farming community could improve support, as current communications from DAERA have been fragmented.

Delivery plan: The FAP programme board in DAERA oversees policy delivery and coordinates workstreams. Challenges include resourcing, aging technical experts, and potential knowledge loss. Limited resources hinder simultaneous implementation of all workstreams. Partners like CAFRE lack capacity for in-person knowledge transfer activities, relying on online delivery instead. More information is needed about other partners' capabilities. DAERA engages with the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group, but inconsistent communications have left farmers with knowledge gaps and insufficient support for necessary cultural and behavioural changes.

Evaluation: Despite a workstream focused on Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation, there is insufficient information about this component. Seven overarching metrics relate to four core policy outcomes, but no detailed evaluation or monitoring plan exists. The annual FAP evaluation report has not been published, and its release date is unclear. Specific

workstream metrics are still under development and unpublished, making it difficult to assess their suitability.

Recommendations

This study presents recommendations concerning the FAP based on desk research, interviews, and the stakeholder workshop. These may be areas for DAERA to develop and subjects for further examination by the OEP:

- Establish a clear vision through an overarching framework
- Define key terms
- Set (SMART) targets
- Conduct further research focused on drivers and pressures
- Clarify the strategy in relation to the vision
- Formulate and publish a Theory of Change
- Consider publishing a longer-term and more detailed timeline
- Review funding
- Improve knowledge transfer by better supporting delivery partners
- Continue to improve the communication strategy for farmers
- Consider long-term investments in capacity building among future policy design and delivery teams
- Continue developing the evaluation approach

This study also establishes recommendations for the OEP to consider in relation to conducting or commissioning further research in this area:

- Apply steps 6-8 of the EPSR process
- Consider researching FAP/SAP governance
- Conduct detailed research into the SAP
- Collate, compare and reflect on the use of the EPSR tool

Glossary

CAFRE – College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise

DAERA – Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

FAP – Future Agricultural Policy

FSDP – Farm Support and Development Programme

FwN – Farming with Nature

NIEL – Northern Ireland Environment Link

NILGA – Northern Ireland Local Government Association

SAP – Sustainable Agriculture Programme

UFU – Ulster Farmers Union

1 Introduction

1.1 Study background and objectives

The following report is a deliverable of a contract awarded to ICF (supported by CECAN Ltd and Matthew Baumann Associates) by the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) to conduct a policy review of agri-environment rural incentive schemes in Northern Ireland (NI), with a focus on the Future Agricultural Policy (FAP). The policy review was completed between September 2024 and March 2025.

This report builds on a previous study conducted by the ICF-led team for the OEP¹. This study developed an approach for the OEP to use in future analysis of, and reporting on, government progress for each of the EIP's environmental goals. It developed the Environmental Policy System Review (EPSR) tool which could be used to guide and focus the OEP's analysis and monitoring by identifying aspects of environmental policy where there is sufficient activity and those where there are significant gaps, ambiguity or concerns about policy logic or deliverability.

The OEP's mission is to protect and improve the environment by holding government and other public authorities to account. Part of this role involves monitoring, critically assessing and reporting on the government's progress in improving the natural environment. This study supports the OEP to critically assess and monitor the FAP using the ESPR tool.

The aims of the study are to:

- Assess the extent to which the FAP has a coherent **vision** and **strategy**; and is underpinned by relevant **evidence**.
- Assess the **action plan** and **delivery plan** at policy level to determine alignment with the FAP's vision and strategy, drawing on evidence from selected priority workstreams when appropriate.
- Consider at a high level the extent to which **evaluation & learning** is embedded across the FAP.

1.1.1 Future Agricultural Policy Background

The Future Agricultural Policy (FAP) Decisions document was published by DAERA in March 2022 after a public consultation process. The FAP is a portfolio of measures developed to address four key agricultural outcomes in NI: increasing agricultural productivity; improving environmental sustainability; improving resilience of the agricultural sector to external shocks; and ensuring the effective functioning of the agri-food supply chain. The FAP encompasses eight core workstreams, five cross-cutting workstreams, and one sectoral workstream, designed to collaboratively deliver benefits for land, livestock, people, and infrastructure. Due to a phased implementation three of the FAP workstreams have started, whilst others are in development or in pilot phases. Further details on FAP are in Annex 5.

¹ [Developing an Environmental Policy System Review Tool Final Report.pdf](#)

The FAP² has undergone several changes since its publication, it was renamed as the Farm Support and Development Programme (FSDP) in 2023³, and it was recently (February 2025) redesigned as the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP)⁴. The FSDP included a timeline for the delivery of FAP workstreams. The SAP included an updated timeline for delivery and an adjusted vision. The workstreams across FAP, FSDP and SAP remain broadly the same. Further details on changes from FAP to SAP are in Annex 6.

The announcement of the SAP came as this report was being drafted, and the timeline of the project did not allow for it to be fully considered in the analysis conducted. As such, this report focuses on analysing the FAP. The team has integrated early reflections on the SAP where relevant. This approach is further explained in the methodology (see Box 3.2)

1.2 Report structure

This document provides a detailed review of agri-environment rural incentive schemes in NI, focusing on the FAP. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Environmental Policy System Review (EPSR) Tool, including a breakdown of the EPSR framework components and an explanation of the EPSR step-by-step process. Chapter 3 outlines the study methodology, in line with the EPSR step-by-step process. Chapter 4 presents the key findings from this study split out by EPSR component. This section integrates insights from the desk review, interviews and the workshop. Finally, there is a conclusion and a set of recommendations from the policy review.

² [Consultation on Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

³ [Announcement of timeline for the new Farm Support and Development Programme | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁴ [Sustainable Agriculture Programme | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

2 The Environmental Policy System Review Tool

2.1 Overview

The EPSR tool supports the OEP in understanding and capturing, in a concise form, the development and delivery status of high-level and broad ranging environmental policies.

This section provides an overview of the Environmental Policy System Review (EPSR) tool. The EPSR combines a framework and a process to capture evidence on the development and delivery of environmental policy. Section 2.2 explains the EPSR Framework. Section 2.3 summarises the process used to gather, structure and analyse information related to a specific environmental policy and summarise it in a concise format. This process, when applied together with the Framework is the Environmental Policy System Review tool. Further detail on the tool and the development process are available in the previous report.⁵

The EPSR tool is designed to provide a quick and cost-effective way to understand a complex policy landscape. The study is a rapid review, and findings are limited by the availability and quality of information and the time and resources available to review this information. Further consultation with DAERA and access to additional policy documents would have improved the quality of information used in this study. The emerging findings from this study help to summarise the current policy context and provide initial recommendations. The study findings and recommendations could be validated and further developed through future research

2.2 EPSR Framework components

The previous study identified six components as the required ones to ensure successful design and delivery of government portfolios, programmes, and policies. These were identified following a review of existing policy frameworks and literature on key elements that ensure policies are successful. The EPSR framework six key components are:

- **Vision**: a description of the aim of the portfolio, policy, programme along with the associated targets which indicate the desired outcomes and metrics for success.
- **Evidence**: the evidence used to underpin the vision and targets, and the associated strategy, plan and implementation arrangements.
- **Strategy**: an articulation of the approach and associated 'change mechanisms' along with specific 'actions' that will be used to address the pressures, solve the problem(s), deliver the targets, and realise the vision. This could include a mental model or theory of change for how the portfolio, programme, or policy is expected to achieve its outcomes.
- **Action Plan**: a plan that defines the level of funding required and available for delivery, and some of the preparatory steps required to establish the portfolio, programme or policy (e.g. g stakeholder buy in, arrangements for any major legislation required to put the actions in place).

⁵ [Developing an Environmental Policy System Review Tool Final Report.pdf](#)

- **Delivery Plan:** how the portfolio, policy or programme is managed, the capacity and capability of people to deliver the strategy, and governance systems to support it.
- **Evaluation:** how the portfolio, policy, or programme will be assessed over time and how the evidence will be used.

Figure 2.1 Environmental Policy System Review Framework



The EPSR framework, shown in Figure 2.1, helps to map and understand a policy against each of the six components. It then asks evaluative questions (see Annex 7) to assess the extent to which each component may be successful or not.

2.3 EPSR System Review process

The EPSR 8-step process is represented in Figure 3.1. The steps are⁶:

1. **Define review aim and purpose** - Identify and define the environmental policy objective of interest and the purpose of reviewing it, e.g. internal scoping research and analysis, preparation for stakeholder engagement, and/or external communication and publication.
2. **Conduct data searches** - Collate data sources relevant to the objective, e.g. government policy documents, implementation plans and reports from arms-length bodies, or academic research reports.
3. **Extract data and summarise** – Identify and group the information to be used to describe the objective:
 - Review original data sources to identify material relevant to each framework component.
 - Group information under each component (e.g. cutting and pasting the information under the component headings using an online white board, spreadsheet or table; and using links/references to original sources to facilitate subsequent reviews). Summarise this information in the framework graphic to provide a descriptive overview of what is known on the policy.
4. **Test and refine evidence** – Use expert workshop(s) or individual interviews to identify additional data sources to further build the knowledge base and refine extracted evidence. Insights from experts may *also* include judgements on the progress of government action for each of the components of the framework. This can help to support analysis and assessment of these areas against the evaluative standards. This step will refine the description of the components and gather evidence to inform the assessment in step 5.
5. **Assess and summarise** - Evaluate the evidence collated for each component, including any insights gained from expert consultations. Use evaluative statements and questions as a guide to assess 'what success looks like' based on evidence available and identify gaps. Generate summary text capturing judgement for each component using the prompts from the EPSR Framework.
6. **Whole system review** - Review the evaluative framework and consider:
 - What are the strengths, weaknesses, gaps in policy development and delivery?
 - What does the evidence and statements across the framework suggest about progress of the policy development and delivery towards the environmental objective of interest?
 - What are the priorities for further evidence and analysis?

⁶ [Developing an Environmental Policy System Review Tool Final Report.pdf](#)

7. **Test review assessments** – review and develop individual component assessments and whole system review. Depending on the purpose of the review, this could be done internally or with external stakeholders.
8. **Reporting and actions** – what are the conclusions from the EPSR review? What recommendations and actions need to be taken forward internally or externally? How and where are findings to be reported?

3 Methodology: Applying the Environmental Policy System Review Tool

This section outlines the study methodology in line with the step-by-step EPSR process (see Section 2). As agreed with the OEP, this study applied Steps 1-5 of the EPSR tool, as outlined below. Steps 6-8 were not in scope for this study. These steps could be conducted by the OEP or commissioned by the OEP as part of a follow-on study. Steps 6-8 would likely require additional stakeholder consultation to test and refine the assessments.

3.1 Step 1a: Define review aim and purpose

The study followed an iterative and collaborative approach to defining its aim and purpose with the OEP. This process involved an online inception meeting in late September 2024 and an in-person meeting in early October 2024 with the OEP to discuss the review aim and purpose.

The initial purpose of the study was to:

- Ensure that the OEP can focus its efforts on critically assessing and monitoring progress of the FAP.

The aim was to:

- Highlight any risks to the achievement of FAP objectives
- Explore how the FAP would address the five drivers and pressures impacting biodiversity in NI, including land-use change, nutrient pollution, natural resource use and extraction, invasive species and climate change.

3.2 Step 2: Conduct data searches

To populate the framework, the team reviewed and extracted information from sources publicly available in October and November 2024. The full list of sources reviewed is shown in Annex 1. These documents were:

- Key policy documents related to FAP related to the policy decisions⁷ and DAERA's consultation on FAP⁸.
- Documents related to the Future Farm Support and Development programme⁹, including a ministerial statement¹⁰, a presentation to the Ulster Farming Union¹¹ and supporting documentation for the Communications Strategy¹².

⁷ [Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁸ [Consultation on Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁹ [Future Farm Support and Development](#)

¹⁰ [Minister's Oral Statement on Farm Support and Development.PDF](#)

¹¹ [Farm Support and Development Programme - UFU Meetings - autumn 23.pdf](#)

¹² [Guide to Rural Needs Act NI - Appendix 1](#)

- DAERA website updates and publications related to specific workstreams including the Farm Sustainability Payment¹³ and the Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme¹⁴.

The 54 FAP related decisions included in the policy decisions document were mapped and catalogued at a granular level using an Excel framework. Information about each policy measure from supporting documentation was also captured in this Excel framework. This process enabled the study team to gain a detailed understanding of the policy in descriptive terms. Each FAP workstream was then summarised also in Excel. Following the cataloguing of the policy, the study team mapped the relevant information against each component of the EPSR framework in Miro, an online whiteboard and mind mapping platform.

3.3 Step 1b: Refining the review aim and purpose

This step was not originally planned when the EPSR tool was designed¹⁵. In November 2024, the ICF-led study team and the OEP redefined the review aim and purpose based on the evidence gathered during Step 2:

- Assess the extent to which the FAP has a coherent **vision** and **strategy**; and is underpinned by relevant **evidence**.
- Assess the **action plan** and **delivery plan** at policy level to determine alignment with the FAP's vision and strategy, drawing on evidence from selected priority workstreams when appropriate.
- Consider at a high level the extent to which **evaluation & learning** is embedded across the FAP.

The evidence for each component varied across the workstreams and across the EPSR components. This reflects the phased implementation of the FAP (see the FAP implementation timeline in Table A6.1) and the timing of this study in relation to the policy development stage.

At the time of the study (November 2024 to March 2025), there was less publicly available evidence for the action plan and delivery plan components of the EPSR and for workstreams that had not yet been implemented. Because of this, the study team decided to select three workstreams to supplement the assessment of the action plan and delivery plan. Following consultation with the OEP, the study team selected three key workstreams based on their potential to impact the drivers and pressures of biodiversity in NI: (1) Farm Sustainability Payment; (2) Farming with Nature; and (3) Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. The additional focus on these workstreams helped to provide more evidence to allow for an assessment of the entire FAP across the EPSR components, which remains the focus of this study.

Box 3.1 Suggested amendments to the EPSR tool

The step added is a minor adjustment to the EPSR tool 8-step process as set out in the original report. It suggests that a more iterative and collaborative approach can be adopted while using the tool and may better reflect the reality of this type of analysis. The study team added this adjustment to revisit the study aims and

¹³ [DAERA provides clarification on the Transition to the New Farm Sustainability Payment | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

¹⁴ [The Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2023](#)

¹⁵ [Developing an Environmental Policy System Review Tool Final Report.pdf](#)

purposed following early findings based on the initial desk research, this is represented in Figure 3.1. It helped focus the study team resources effectively to better support the OEP.

Figure 3.1 The Environmental Policy System Review Tool 8-step process, amended iterative version



3.4 Step 3: Extract data and summarise

In November and December 2024, the team focused on summarising the evidence available moving from a 'messy' mind map format in Miro (see step 2) towards a synthesised descriptive summary of the FAP in line with the EPSR framework components. The descriptive summary is shown in section 4.1.

3.5 Step 4: Test and refine evidence

The project team tested and refined the available evidence between January and February 2024. The project team:

- Reviewed stakeholder commentary on the FAP via a position paper desk review¹⁶.
- Conducted two interviews with a senior official at DAERA.
- Facilitated an in-person stakeholders' workshop.

A summary of each activity is below:

3.5.1.1 Position paper desk review

The aim was to gain an initial understanding of stakeholders' perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses and gaps in the FAP as well as their recommendations.

¹⁶ Position papers were written by Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA); The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and Northern Ireland Environmental Link (NIEL). References included in Annex 1.

The team reviewed published position papers on the NI FAP, following its publication. These were written by Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA); The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and Northern Ireland Environmental Link (NIEL). The study team summarised the key information from these position papers and categorised these under the key components of the EPSR framework. The review provided important background and context for the stakeholder workshop.

3.5.1.2 DAERA interviews

The study team conducted two interviews with one senior official at DAERA. The first interview was held on 22 January 2025. The aim of this interview was to better understand the design, development and implementation of the Future Agricultural Policy. The first interview was semi-structured and followed the topic guide shown in Annex 3. During this first interview the senior official informed the study team of the upcoming revision of the Future Agricultural Policy (FAP) into the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP), which was due to be published the week before an already planned stakeholder workshop. The announcement was made on 29 January 2025, and the workshop was held on 4 February 2025 (see section 0 below). The second interview with the DAERA senior official was held on 3 February 2025 to discuss the key changes made in the SAP and their implications after the ministerial announcement.

After a discussion with the OEP, the team agreed to some changes to the study to adapt to the announcement, as explained in the Box 3.2 below.

Box 3.2 Study team's adaptive approach to integrating the SAP evidence

The team found out about the SAP announcement during an interview with a DAERA senior official on 22 January 2025. The SAP revision was officially announced on the 29 January 2025. The team had already planned and invited stakeholders to a workshop on 4 February 2025.

The study team and the OEP discussed the implications of conducting the workshop in the context of the SAP announcement, as the team and the stakeholders would not have enough information or time to assess the potential significant changes from FAP to SAP. The decision was to continue with the study as planned and adapt in an agile manner to the new information if and when it was published.

To do this, the study team did the following:

Before the workshop:

- Held a second interview with a DAERA senior official to discuss the key changes and implications of the SAP immediately after the ministerial announcement.
- Reviewed the documents relating to the initial announcement, did a rapid assessment of the differences between FAP and SAP.

During the workshop:

- Presented a summary of the known changes to workshop participants.
- Addressed the FAP to SAP context and provided workshop participants with an opportunity to discuss changes.

After the workshop:

- Drafted the report and incorporated key SAP elements as part of the FAP assessment based on documents published on the DAERA SAP webpage¹⁷. These are presented on boxes at the end of each FAP component discussion.
- Shared the report with DAERA officials and experts to validate findings

Further consultation with additional DAERA colleagues could have helped to address knowledge gaps in specific areas. For example, it would have been useful to interview a DAERA official involved in monitoring and evaluation.

3.5.1.3 Stakeholder workshop

The workshop was held on 4 February 2025. Nine stakeholders from across the environmental and agricultural social sciences attended the workshop, including four from NGOs, two from the OEP's college of experts, two from farming associations and one from an agri-food research institute. Stakeholders tested the evidence and information already collated under each component of the EPSR for the relevant workstreams and provided an initial assessment of the adequacy of the FAP to meet its objectives. The workshop was facilitated by members of the ICF project team. OEP staff also attended.

A briefing document, shown in Annex 4 was circulated in advance of the workshop which outlined the study background and provided participants with a list of pre-read materials, including the descriptive summary of the FAP and the refined EPSR evaluative questions. The evaluative standards used to guide the workshop discussions were refined and selected in collaboration with the OEP to ensure that the most relevant questions were included.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Discuss the adequacy of policy components that are in place for the FAP for achieving key objectives set out in the policy.
- Identify key areas of concern and risks for successful delivery.
- Identify priority areas for OEP monitoring linked to the NI Environmental Improvement Plan.

As explained, the workshop remained focused on the FAP, but the study team asked participants to reflect on the SAP and reflect on any key changes. This study focuses on the analysis of FAP conducted during the study period and integrates SAP updates as appropriate.

3.6 Step 5: Assess and summarise

The final phase focused on combining evidence gathered throughout the study to assess and evaluate each component of the FAP against the EPSR evaluative standards.

The evaluative standards were refined in collaboration with the OEP to ensure these were relevant to the FAP and study context. The evaluative standards, phrased as questions, are shown in Annex 7. A description of each component and summary of its evaluative standards are included before each assessment section below.

¹⁷ [Sustainable Agriculture Programme | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

This report is the output from this step. The team has evaluated each EPSR component following the desk review, the stakeholder workshop and the DAERA interviews. The team also facilitated a reflective discussion with the OEP where key findings were discussed.

The team shared an early draft of this report with the OEP, the stakeholders that attended the workshop and DAERA. This report reflects their comments.

4 FAP Policy Review: EPSR findings

This section summarises the evaluation of each of the EPSR components in relation to FAP. It's a synthesis of the evidence gathered during the EPSR process. Given the changing policy context, at the end of each section, the team has included a box explaining key changes for each EPSR component due to the recent policy announcement of going from FAP to the SAP. Any evaluative implications are highlighted there as well.

4.1 Descriptive summary of components

Figure 4.1 presents the descriptive summary completed by the team for each of the components. It primarily draws upon evidence from the initial document review and was refined further based on additional information gathered from the position papers, interviews and the workshop.

4.2 Evaluative assessment of components

Figure 4.2 presents a summary of the evaluative assessment completed by the team for each of the components. It draws upon evidence from the review, position papers, interviews and the workshop and focuses on making evaluative assessments rather than describing the policy.

Figure 4.1 Summary visual of the descriptive EPSR framework



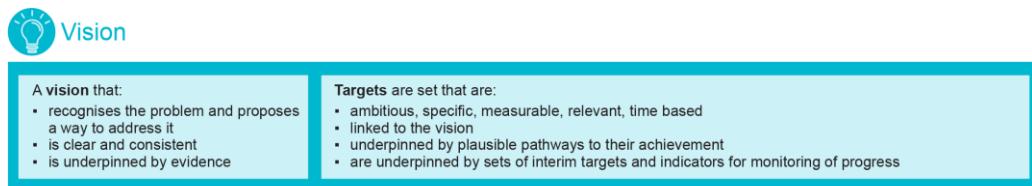
Figure 4.2 Summary visual of the evaluative EPSR framework

<p> Evidence</p> <p>Overall The FAP uses scientific evidence, expert input, and evidence from pilot schemes to build an understanding of the environmental system including the drivers, pressures, enablers, dependencies & influences. The FAP does not present a holistic understanding of evidence as the evidence presented focuses on some areas or workstreams more than others.</p> <p>Scientific evidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published evidence across six of the workstreams establishes an incomplete baseline, supports the workstream mechanisms and highlights the potential effectiveness, however there is not published evidence supporting all workstreams. There is evidence highlighting additional challenges which has not been translated into related policy measures. 	<p>Expert Input</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group provides diverse perspectives and enhances the understanding of the agri-environmental system. The co-design process is confined by existing options rather than allowing stakeholders to propose new ideas. 	<p>Pilot schemes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FAP pilots offer opportunities to test new approaches and gather supporting evidence, however it is not clear how evidence from pilot schemes has been applied.
<p> Vision</p> <p>Overall The FAP lacks clarity and consistency. There is no clear approach on how it plans to deliver the vision and what the benefits from the vision may be. Farmers require more specificity to buy-in to the vision. The FAP could benefit from an overarching umbrella statement to explain the vision, link the four objectives together and state the benefits expected.</p>	<p>Objectives The four objectives are not clearly or consistently prioritised. Key terms used in the objectives, like sustainability and resilience, can have multiple interpretations and are not clearly defined.</p> <p>Targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no policy level SMART targets and ten of fourteen workstreams do not have any quantifiable targets The policy could be strengthened by incorporating SMART targets with clear pathways to achievement 	
<p> Strategy</p> <p>Overall The FAP combines payment schemes, knowledge and innovation measures, and data-led initiatives. The FAP workstreams are designed to support each other. There could be a clearer justification around why each workstream has been selected.</p> <p>FAP Theory of Change: There is no publicly available theory of change. A theory of change could help to establish a "golden thread" linking the vision, strategy and action plan. Publishing the theory of change could ensure the pathways and assumptions are tested and improved.</p>	<p> Plan</p> <p>Portfolio Action The action plan for the FAP is limited by a lack of funding, a lack of clarity on the timeline and a disjointed communication strategy. Additional availability of long-term funding is crucial to deliver the FAP's objectives. One stakeholder summarised the situation aptly: "There is ambition but no money."</p> <p>Paying for public goods - funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding allocated by DAERA is not enough to support the delivery of workstreams and promote a generational shift in farming practices. There is a lack of clarity around how and when funding will be redistributed from the Farm Sustainability Payment to other workstreams. 	<p> Delivery</p> <p>Portfolio management & oversight: There are resource and capacity challenges within DAERA and delivery partners that are impacting the timely delivery of the policy and the clarity of communications. There is not sufficient capacity to deliver all workstreams in parallel.</p>
<p>FAP workstreams: The 14 workstream are at different stages in terms of policy development and delivery.</p> <p>There is a lack detail on the mechanisms within some workstreams, such as the Farming with Nature scheme and the Farm Sustainability Standards, whilst the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is well-developed.</p> <p>Environmental drivers and pressures: More evidence is needed to understand whether the FAP adequately addresses environmental drivers and pressures. The Farming with Nature workstream is a key policy lever, however there is a lack of available information on this policy and concerns about the mechanisms.</p> <p>Policy and regulatory coherence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The FAP explains the relationship between workstreams and considers in-combination effects. Some workstreams are linked together through eligibility requirements. The FAP considers compliance and coherence with existing regulation and policy The FAP could be better integrated with other policies aiming to address environmental drivers and pressures 	<p>Timeline and phased implementation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lack of a clearly defined timeline has led to uncertainty among stakeholders The transition between existing Environmental Farming Scheme (ending 2023) and the Farming with Nature scheme (starting 2025/2026) has left farmers with a gap between support programmes. Some workstreams met the 2023 timeline, most are delayed. <p>Compliance and Eligibility Compliance measures, including the new 'Farm Sustainability Standards' system, aim to simplify current standards by moving from 20 standards to 7 standards. However, there are and concerns about the removal of some standards.</p> <p>Stakeholder engagement and buy-in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial stakeholder reactions to FAP were positive, however DAERA has not consistently and regularly communicated with stakeholders Enhancing engagement and establishing trust from the farming community is crucial for the successful adoption of the FAP 	<p>Capacity, capability and resourcing of DAERA teams: DAERA is struggling to recruit teams with appropriate policy and legislation skills. This is compounded by challenges related to aging technical experts and the potential loss of historical knowledge within DAERA.</p> <p>Capacity, capability and resourcing of delivery partners: Delivery partners, such as CAFRE, have limited capacity and capability to deliver the FAP workstreams. CAFRE does not have sufficient resource to deliver knowledge transfer activities in person and therefore is relying on online delivery, which is less suitable for farmers. More information is needed to understand the capacity, capability and resourcing of other delivery partners.</p>
<p> Evaluation</p> <p>Monitoring, Evaluation The workstream on 'Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation' sets out seven high level metrics that relate to the four core policy objectives.</p> <p>There is no clear evaluation or monitoring plan available beyond a description of these seven metrics.</p> <p>The FAP aims to publish an annual evaluation report, however nothing has been published yet despite delivery of some elements and pilots starting in 2023. This limits opportunities for learning.</p>		<p>Workstream level monitoring and evaluation The workstream level specific metrics are still in development and have not been published. It is not possible to assess whether these metrics are appropriate.</p>

4.2.2 Vision

This section explores the vision of the FAP. The vision component evaluative standards set out in the EPSR framework are shown in Figure 4.3. The rest of the section assesses the FAP vision against these evaluative standards and the evaluative questions, shown in Annex 7. It assesses whether the FAP has a clear and consistent vision; whether the FAP delivery mechanisms are well-defined, and whether the FAP targets set are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based.

Figure 4.3 EPSR component standards – Vision



The FAP sets out four core objectives on (1) productivity, (2) environmental sustainability, (3) resilience and (4) a responsive supply chain (see Box 4.1)

Box 4.1 FAP objectives

- 1) An industry that pursues increased **productivity** in international terms as a means to sustained profitability, closing the productivity gap which has been opening up with other major suppliers.
- 2) An industry that is **environmentally sustainable** in terms of its impact on, and guardianship of, air and water quality, soil health and biodiversity while making its fair contribution to achieving net zero carbon targets. This outcome is an integral part of the new Green Growth Strategy and associated Climate Action Plan which will be the Department's initial route map to climate action, green jobs and a clean environment.
- 3) An industry that displays improved **resilience** to external shocks (such as market and currency volatility, extreme weather events, etc.) which are ever more frequent and to which the industry has become very exposed.
- 4) An industry which operates within an integrated, profitable, efficient, sustainable, competitive and responsive **supply chain**, with clear transmission of market signals and an overriding focus on high quality food and the end consumer.

Stakeholders highlighted their appreciation for DAERA's efforts to get the framework right, praising the departments comprehensive approach and the framing of some objectives. This recognition reflects stakeholders' acknowledgment of the thoughtful and thorough work put into the FAP. Workshop participants emphasised the importance of recognising the positives and opportunities within the FAP, with one stating, "*It is important to point out the positives and opportunities in this.*" They acknowledged that productive agriculture has always been encouraged, not just farming, and appreciated the strong foundation and collaborative environment, saying, "*we have a good place to start from*". While there are concerns to the vision of the policy, this stakeholder highlighted that this is the opportunity to make things right.

There is a lack of clarity, particularly related to the definition and understanding of key terms. On the other hand, stakeholders expressed that the vision lacked clarity and consistency. Workshop participants noted confusion

amongst themselves and DAERA when it comes to defining and understanding key terms like 'sustainability', 'productivity' and 'resilience'. These terms define the objectives are used throughout the FAP. A workshop participant explained that there are "*lots of words in the policy that nobody agrees on the definition. It goes back to: what are we trying to achieve and how is that understood?*"¹⁸. For example, FAP reflects a limited understanding of the term "resilience", predominantly focusing on economic aspects. While economic resilience is undeniably important, a more holistic approach is necessary, encompassing the resilience of the land, farms, farmers, and ecosystems¹⁹. A participant reflected that the concept of social-ecological resilience is a particularly pertinent one considering the escalating impacts of climate change and broader environmental challenges²⁰. This broader perspective on resilience would ensure that the policy is better equipped to address the multifaceted nature of contemporary agricultural challenges²¹, and would be more coherent with the environmental sustainability objective.

The ambiguity in terminology can lead to misunderstandings and misaligned goals during implementation, making it difficult to achieve the desired outcomes. Workshop participants explained that without agreed-upon definitions, it also becomes challenging to align efforts and measure progress effectively.

The vision lacks consistency and it is not clear how potentially conflicting objectives are prioritised. Participants mentioned the vision was divided. This is because the FAP considers the (1) productivity and (2) environmental sustainability objectives separately. Workshop participants raised that this separation could lead to several issues: inefficiencies and missed opportunities for synergy, conflicting goals where productivity efforts might harm the environment, and confusion among stakeholders working to implement the policy.

Stakeholders also mentioned that the prioritisation of these two objectives has changed between ministers from prioritising productivity under the previous minister to prioritising sustainability under the current minister. This reprioritisation occurred officially when SAP was published, discussed further in Box 4.2. However, this new prioritisation of objectives is not made explicit in the policy documents, beyond a simple renumbering of the objectives. It is also not clearly communicated through a vision statement. This is critical as productivity and environmental sustainability can conflict, and it creates confusion over whether the primary aim of FAP is to protect farming productivity or to protect the environment. Also, the changing political vision makes it difficult for stakeholders to plan ahead and to trust the consistency of the vision.

An overarching vision statement could integrate the objectives and provide a cohesive sense of purpose. According to multiple workshop participants, the FAP would benefit from an overarching vision or umbrella statement that integrates the four core objectives. The vision should extend beyond mere implementation to encompass a comprehensive ambition that is currently absent²². By unifying the four objectives under a single, overarching statement, their collective impact could be enhanced.

¹⁸ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

¹⁹ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

²⁰ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

²¹ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

²² Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

While a cohesive vision is currently lacking, an overarching framework could be crucial for providing stability and adaptability amidst changing political priorities. A workshop participant explained that an overarching Agriculture Bill is a missing link between vision and delivery. Another workshop participant explained that an example of a similar approach can be seen in Wales 'sustainable land management' as outlined in their 2023 Act, which, despite its imperfections, serves to illustrate the potential benefits of such a framework²³. The Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 establishes Sustainable Land Management as the framework for future agricultural support and regulation within Wales and empowers Welsh Ministers to set regulation and provide support to improve sustainability within the agricultural industry. Sustainable Land Management incorporates the environmental, economic, cultural and social contribution of farmers. Workshop participants suggested that an overarching framework or bill could ensure consistency, coherence, and stakeholder engagement, even as priorities shift to address issues like pollution, food poverty, or inadequate food processors.

The vision does not clarify the scale of change needed across the different objectives. It is necessary to acknowledge the nature of the transformation needed—from 'what is' to 'what should be'—to fully realise the FAP's potential. There is not quantification of the scale of change needed and no comparison about relative progress across the objectives.

The FAP does not clearly identify a way to deliver its vision²⁴. As discussed above, workshop participants pointed out the lack of coherence of the vision and the absence of an overarching framework to guide the implementation of the vision. Findings in the policy documentation support this view, the objectives and vision are not clear from the FAP Decisions Document²⁵.

There was a need for clear pathways and mechanisms to ensure that the vision can be effectively translated into actionable steps²⁶. As it stands, the policy remains vague, and shifting political priorities further complicate its delivery²⁷. ²⁸. One workshop participant stated, "*a shift in priorities can indicate a shift in timeline, money going into one priority and not the other*" whilst another explained that "*the political party that the Minister comes from has significant impact*".

The policy lacks specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based targets and interim targets. While the FAP has defined four objectives, it does not set out SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) targets at overarching policy level. There are some targets at workstream or measure level. Still, stakeholders noted the measure level targets were vague and that these would need to be clearly defined. There is a lack of SMART targets related to FAP workstreams (see Table A8.1 in Annex). It may be useful to consider both achievability and ambition when setting targets at both policy level and workstream level.

Setting clear targets could help to establish collectively agreed and clear pathways to achievement. Given the lack of targets, it is not possible to assess whether the targets are consistent or have clear pathways to achievement. Findings

²³ The Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 Introducing the Sustainable Land Management Framework

²⁴ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

²⁵ [Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland \(Final\) \(002\).pdf](#)

²⁶ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

²⁷ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

²⁸ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

from a Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) position paper suggested the FAP needs to strengthen its strategies for achieving long-term environmental goals and addressing climate change. They could do this by setting clear, measurable objectives and ensuring that environmental measures are integrated into all aspects of the agricultural policy²⁹. Similarly, a Northern Ireland Environmental Link (NIEL) position paper called for the development and publication of SMART objectives for the Farming with Nature initiative. These targets could clearly outline how the initiative will deliver key priorities within the forthcoming Environmental Improvement Plan and carbon budgets³⁰. Setting interim targets and indicators could also ensure progress is monitored overtime and help to keep core targets on track.

Box 4.2 From FAP to SAP - Vision

The overall objective of the SAP “is to transition to a more sustainable farming sector by seeking to implement policies and strategies that benefit our climate and environment, while, very importantly, supporting our economically and socially significant agri-food sector”.³¹ The SAP is highlighted by DAERA as an essential policy lever contributing to tackling climate change as well as protecting and restoring NI’s natural environment.³²

The SAP retains the four core objectives published in the FAP, but the main change is a reprioritisation of the objectives. The first objective set out in the SAP focuses on ‘improved environmental sustainability’, whereas in FAP the first objective was focused on ‘increased productivity’.

The reordering of these objectives is significant; during an interview the DAERA policy official explained that the change represented a re-prioritisation of outcomes and schemes. However, the republished vision does not explicitly state that environmental sustainability objectivity is the new priority. Further to this, there were minor changes to the wording of the four objectives, such as moving from “an industry that pursues increased productivity” to “an industry with enhanced productivity”. It is not clear what these minor changes signify.

Box 4.3 Summary evaluative assessment of Vision

Overall, there is a lack of clarity and consistency, and a need for a more clearly defined approach to delivering the vision. The FAP sets out four core objectives on (1) productivity, (2) environmental sustainability, (3) resilience and (4) a responsive supply chain. There is a lack of consistency around the prioritisation of these core objectives. There are also key terms, such as sustainability and resilience, which are not clearly defined. An overarching umbrella statement could help to explain the vision and link the four objectives together. There are no overarching targets and only a few workstream level targets, which are generally not SMART targets. Setting targets with clear pathways to achievement could strengthen the vision.

4.2.3 Evidence

This section explores the evidence component of FAP. The evidence component evaluative standards set out in the EPSR framework are shown in Figure 4.4. The rest of the section assesses the use of evidence within FAP against these evaluative standards and the evaluative questions, shown in Annex 7. It evaluates FAP’s current understanding of the environmental/agri-food system including key drivers

²⁹ Northern Ireland Local Government Association. (2024). NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework: Stakeholder Engagement Final Submission.

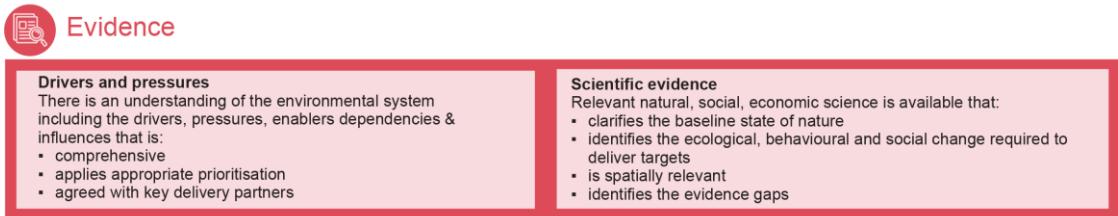
³⁰ Northern Ireland Environment Link. (2024). Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature.

³¹ Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF

³² Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF

and pressures in NI, and any gaps in the evidence about the system and the proposed FAP change mechanisms.

Figure 4.4 EPSR component standards – Evidence



DAERA used published and applied scientific evidence, experts' inputs and pilot schemes to design the FAP. These were all successful to some extent.

Evidence underpins the policy mechanisms and demonstrates the potential effectiveness of proposed workstreams. The FAP knowledge transfer and innovation scheme focuses on sharing knowledge with farmers to improve technical efficiency, sustainability, resilience, and productivity. DAERA explained that evidence underpins the focus on knowledge schemes and peer to peer learning which shows that this approach can help to drive change more quickly. The FAP included evidence from several external documents, including the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), the Habitats Regulations Assessments and multiple evidence papers. These papers present background on the status of existing related schemes, evidence from other schemes or programmes, and information on the drivers of biodiversity decline, water quality deterioration and climate change. The evidence presented helped to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of the proposed interventions. For example, one of the evidence papers showed that a reduction in first calving age from 36 to 24 months can reduce emissions intensity by up to 6.9%, which for saleable meat equates to 2.43 kg CO₂e/kg/dry weight beef³³.

The application of evidence in the design of the FAP workstreams was not consistent and does not identify the scale of change needed. The background evidence papers only covered evidence to some of the workstreams, including: the Farm Sustainability Payment, Beef Sustainability Package, Farming for Nature, Farming for Carbon, Farm Sustainability Standards and the Knowledge and Innovation Measure³⁴. The evidence papers include background information related to existing policies in each area. However, the evidence is not consistently presented, for example some workstream sections include detailed section on the related problem, drivers and needs addressed by the workstream whilst others do not. There is generally a lack of quantification that could help to assess whether the measures could deliver the scale of change required. A more comprehensive analysis of the evidence presented could be conducted to uncover additional evidence gaps.

The evidence presented in the background evidence papers also indicates that the current workstreams may not appropriately address all key drivers

³³ [Background Evidence Paper V2.pdf](#);

³⁴ [Background Evidence Paper V2.pdf](#); [Background Paper -Knowledge Measures.pdf](#)

and pressures in NI. For example, a stakeholder at the workshop noted global and local evidence on the contribution of farming to climate change, water pollution, and biodiversity loss. While the evidence paper published by DAERA recognised that livestock farming is a key driver of climate change; the Beef Sustainability Package does not include the reduction of the number of livestock as a potential mitigation. According to the stakeholder, this suggestion could help address the challenges presented, not just their slaughter age. The stakeholder suggested the measure could focus on lower density livestock farming and reduced number of livestock in NI alongside payments for nature and carbon and incentives for other forms of agriculture. Instead, the measure focuses on improving livestock management practices without addressing the overall number of livestock. In this instance, the evidence identifying the problem has not translated into a policy that attempts to comprehensively address this problem.

The co-design process facilitates the inclusion of expert input and evidence, however there are concerns that the process is restricted, rushed and linked to delays. The development of the FAP has been supported by an Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group, which was established in June 2021. The group includes representatives from food, farming and the environment sectors to ensure that a range of stakeholder views are understood and considered during development. Stakeholders involved in the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group meet regularly as a collective group and have been involved in the co-design of the SAP. The stakeholders explained that the co-design approach was very valuable as it brought together around 20 experts with varied experiences to provide a better understanding of the environmental/agri-food system. Workshop participants agreed that this collaborative environment provided a good starting point for the policy design. However, stakeholders would have liked to see more robust mechanisms to ensure a comprehensive understanding of NI's environmental/agri-food system. They noted that the FAP provided only a partial understanding, as the co-design process resulted in rushed decisions in some cases. Stakeholders also expressed concerns that ongoing co-design and decision-making post-publication of the FAP, as part of the ongoing strategy and adaptive management, also lacked thoroughness. The stakeholders explained that the co-design process is limited and questioned whether it could be called co-design as they are often restricted by options that DAERA are proposing rather than being able to propose alternative solutions themselves. One stakeholder explained that "*co-design comes with lots of caveats and compromise. We sometimes feel like we are forced down certain lines. Are we picking A or B or are we free thinking?*". Expert input from the stakeholders is constrained by the formal co-design process. This has led to gaps in addressing key drivers and pressures within the sector.

Technical expertise within DAERA has been applied during the design of FAP schemes, however there are concerns about ongoing technical capacity.

Workshop participants also expressed a worry about losing corporate memory within DAERA and the lack of consistent technical expertise. One participant said, "*We do have a concern that we lose the corporate memory, but we have opportunities to make this right*". From the publicly available information, there do not appear to be plans to address this. DAERA acknowledged that retirement and promotions can create challenges related to capacity and technical capability within DAERA teams.

The FAP includes several pilot schemes. These have been used to inform the development of and support the effectiveness of workstreams, however there are concerns about intermittent funding, implementation and delays associated with pilot schemes. A series of test and learn pilots have been proposed as part of the Farming with Nature scheme to test new delivery and reward models such as hybrid

approaches that combined actions with outcome-based approaches or the use of novel monitoring technologies. Stakeholders explained that pilots could help to provide evidence which supports the effectiveness of the workstreams. However, the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs at the NI Assembly explained that there was a lack of detail about how and when pilot projects will be implemented and evaluated.³⁵ The Committee questioned the value of pursuing new pilot projects in NI when evidence was available from similar on-farm eco-schemes across England, Scotland and Ireland. A stakeholder at the workshop raised concerns about pilot schemes, noting that the intermittent funding, which starts and then stops two years later, makes it difficult for farmers to plan due to the time limited nature of these schemes.

Box 4.4 From FAP to Sustainable Agriculture Programme - Evidence

The SAP is adopting a co-design approach which takes into account views from key expert stakeholders from across food, farming and the environment. The SAP republished the same SEA and REA that informed FAP without changes. This shows that similar evidence has been applied to define the SAP. There is a gap in evidence between the papers published to support SAP (2021) and the publication of SAP (2025). It is likely that new studies not included in the 2021 evidence reviews will have been concluded or published during 2021-2024, however it is not clear whether DAERA has made use of this evidence in its production of the SAP. The SAP does not mention additional evidence gathering and there are no new published evidence papers.

The SAP update states that the FwN Landscape Projects Pilot is in development, further detail is not available at this stage. The update does include detail about other ongoing pilots in the Farming for Generations scheme and the Protein Crops scheme.

Box 4.5 Summary evaluative assessment of Evidence

The FAP uses scientific evidence, expert input, and evidence from pilot schemes to build an understanding of the environmental system including the drivers, pressures, enablers dependencies & influences. However, further attention to the application of available evidence could help to ensure evidence translates into a comprehensive and effective policy approach. Published evidence supports FAP mechanisms and highlights the potential effectiveness of some proposed workstreams, however there is not published evidence supporting all workstreams. Some key drivers and pressures are not comprehensively addressed by policy measures. The Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group provides diverse perspectives and enhances the understanding of the system. However, there are concerns about the co-design process, which is resource intensive, can lead to rushed decisions and is confined by existing options rather than providing an opportunity for stakeholders to make suggestions. FAP pilots offer opportunities to test new approaches and gather supporting evidence. However, there are concerns about the lack of detail regarding the implementation and evaluation of these pilots, as well as the intermittent nature of funding, which poses challenges for long-term planning.

4.2.4 Strategy

This section assesses the strategy of the FAP. The strategy component evaluative standards set out in the EPSR framework are shown in Figure 4.5. The rest of the section assesses the FAP strategy against these evaluative standards and the evaluative questions, shown in Annex 7. This includes evaluating whether and how the policy sets out the programme logic and theory of change, the logic behind the

³⁵ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/agriculture-environment-and-rural-affairs/policy--scrutiny/future-agricultural-policy-proposals-position-paper.pdf>

selection of the workstreams and whether the workstreams are sufficient to meet the vision. It also explores the policy coherence of FAP.

Figure 4.5 EPSR component standards – Strategy



Strategy

The strategy logic

The range of actions that are needed to mitigate the pressures, deliver the targets, and realise the vision. The strategy should:

- be traceable to the vision and understanding of drivers and pressures
- be coherent with the different policy areas, identifying synergies and trade-offs
- articulate why the types of measures have been selected and why they should be successful

Programme logic

The FAP combines payment schemes, knowledge and innovation measures, and data-led initiatives designed to deliver benefit for land, livestock, people and infrastructure. Input from DAERA clarified that the policy is trying to change farmers behaviours with knowledge, incentives and ultimately regulation however did not indicate the relative importance of these policy levers. They also explained that the evidence which underpins the focus on knowledge schemes and peer to peer learning shows that this approach can help to drive change more quickly.

The FAP includes eight core workstreams, five cross cutting workstream and one sectoral workstream (see Annex, Table A5.1). There could be more clarity around how the workstreams have been selected and prioritised. The Farm Sustainability Payment is an essential workstream for the success of FAP. It is an area-based payment, viewed as a 'gateway' support platform for most of the future agricultural support framework. DAERA explained that they expect to phase out the funding from the Farm Sustainability Payment and redirect it to other payment schemes, such as the Farming with Nature scheme as is the case in England. They explained the Farm Sustainability Payment is an important safety net for farm businesses and will support a transition to new funding mechanisms. One stakeholder at the workshop expressed support for this gradual transition away from area-based payments.

There is no published theory of change (TOC) for the FAP. DAERA informed the study team that there is an internal TOC focused on knowledge interventions and peer-to-peer learning to drive change among farming communities. Stakeholders at the workshop expressed that seeing a FAP TOC would be helpful to understand how DAERA envisions the pathways to change and potential opportunities for improvement. A workshop participant explained that a TOC could help to establish a "*golden thread*" linking the vision, strategy and action plan. A TOC could also help to demonstrate how the policy addresses key environmental drivers and pressures. One stakeholder expressed that publishing the TOC could improve transparency and ensure there is an opportunity for the TOC and assumptions within it to be tested and improved.

The workstreams within the FAP are at different stages in terms of policy development. Stakeholders agreed that the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme was clear, well-developed and internationally recognised. However, stakeholders also identified that there was a lack of clarity around other workstreams, such as the Farm Sustainability Standards and the Farming with Nature scheme. Three workstreams are in progress, although not all elements of these workstreams have started. For example, the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme has been implemented across three of four zones and the Farming for Carbon full schemes are due to start in early-mid 2025 but the Livestock Dietary Emissions Challenge fund has started. One

workstream, the Farm Sustainability Payment, has released a transition payment and two workstreams have started pilot schemes. The other six workstreams are still in development.³⁶

Mechanisms and incentives within certain workstreams may not be effective in delivering change. Stakeholders also explained some issues with the mechanisms within specific workstreams. For instance, unintended consequences of the Beef Sustainability Package may undermine its effectiveness. Specifically, while the Package is meant to support farmers to transition to more sustainable models by giving them an incentive; in reality actors further down the supply chain started offering Northern Irish farmers lower prices for beef compared to their counterparts in England or Scotland as soon as the Beef Carbon Reduction incentives was announced³⁷. In another example stakeholders discussed challenges with the outcomes-based approach within Farming with Nature, explaining that although a result/outcome-based payment is favoured it can pose a major risk for farmers and delay payments substantially. There needs to be early investment support, interim/milestone payments, and some form of insurance/guarantees³⁸.

There are identified policy gaps within the FAP. NILGA suggested that it would be important to ensure adequate and equitable distribution of funding to support the economic viability of all farms, particularly smaller and family-run operations.³⁹ A workshop participant explained that the exclusion of smaller farms, farms below 3ha, from the Farm Sustainability Payment will have significant detrimental impacts. Small farms are a key component within communities and often have a positive impact on biodiversity such as by managing hedgerows⁴⁰. The UFU recommended that the FAP could consider specific support measures for sheep farmers, which could be an opportunity to ensure the sustainability of sheep farming.⁴¹ NILGA also suggested that supportive labour policies and policies that mitigate potential trade barriers could be beneficial.⁴²

More evidence is needed to understand whether the FAP adequately and appropriately recognises and addresses the environmental drivers and pressures in NI. The Minister states that the delivery of the workstreams are essential to addressing phosphorus and ammonia issues, and meeting requirements set out in NI's Environmental Improvement Plan.⁴³ However, a workshop stakeholder explained that there is a lack of published detail on how the workstreams will coherently deliver against the policy objectives and address the agricultural drivers and pressures facing the environment and biodiversity. There are challenges with the Farming with Nature scheme due to a lack of clarity and accessibility as well as concerns with the policy mechanisms and potential compliance approach, as explored in Box 4.6.

³⁶ Excludes two cross cutting schemes (metrics, monitoring and evaluation and environmental assessment). Based on information collected through the desk review, including cross referencing the SAP timeline.

³⁷ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

³⁸ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

³⁹ [Northern Ireland Local Government Association. \(2024\). NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework: Stakeholder Engagement Final Submission.](#)

⁴⁰ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

⁴¹ [UFU lobbies area committee on critical need for sheep support](#)

⁴² [Northern Ireland Local Government Association. \(2024\). NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework: Stakeholder Engagement Final Submission.](#)

⁴³ [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

Box 4.6 Farming with Nature

The main workstream focusing on addressing NI's environmental drivers and pressures is the Farming with Nature (FwN) package. Stakeholders observed that the lack of detail on the package makes it difficult to assess whether the policy adequately addresses the drivers and pressures. NIEL believe that the FwN package has the potential to transform agriculture in NI by integrating environmental actions into farming⁴⁴. The FwN scheme could help to address land use change, nutrient pollution and natural resource use and extraction, which are three of the five key environmental drivers and pressures on biodiversity in NI⁴⁵.

However, stakeholders at the workshop explained that there is a lack of clarity on the Farming with Nature scheme. There were also concerns that the scheme might not be accessible for all farmers, as the incentives can be geographically specific which blocks farmers from participating if they are not in the right location. In a position paper published by NILGA it was suggested that the FwN scheme should develop tailored approaches that consider the unique regional and sectoral characteristics of NI's agriculture and create specific measures that address local conditions and needs. Therefore, the FwN scheme could benefit from considering unique spatial needs alongside improved and balanced accessibility across geographic areas.

Further, one stakeholder stated that the scheme might take money away from farmers, explaining that farmers had to put a huge amount of effort into the previous Environmental Farming Scheme⁴⁶ to meet specifications that were often too specific. Stakeholders provided potential improvements, suggesting that the FwN scheme could take a natural capital approach and become a "profit centre" for farms. Another stakeholder expressed that some payments for actions or specific milestones within the FwN scheme would be necessary as considerable investments may be required.

The policies are designed to support each other and align with existing policies, however there are opportunities to improve coherence. The FAP policy documents explains the relationship between the new workstreams and across new workstreams and existing policies and regulations.⁴⁷ The "workstreams are not standalone policy instruments" and are designed to support each other⁴⁸. The details of these potential 'in-combination' effects are explored in the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). For example, some of the payment schemes are linked to the data-led initiatives through eligibility criteria, and the SEA explains that the Farm Sustainability Payment has the potential for direct, long-term and positive

⁴⁴ Northern Ireland Environment Link. (2024). Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature.

⁴⁵ OEP report on the drivers and pressures affecting nature in Northern Ireland | Office for Environmental Protection – OEP collaborated with the study team to map each workstream against the 5 key drivers and pressures outlined in this report

⁴⁶ The Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) offers participants a 5-year agreement to deliver a range of environmental measures and has three levels: a Higher Level, primarily for environmentally designated sites and other priority habitats; a Wider Level to deliver benefits across the countryside, outside of environmentally designated areas; and a Group Level to support co-operative action by farmers in specific areas such as a river catchment.

⁴⁷ Document analysis, varied sources including in reference list.

⁴⁸ Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland – Strategic Environmental Assessment – Environment Report

effects on soil health as the participation in the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is an eligibility requirement⁴⁹. The policy documents also consider how the new workstreams intersect with or replace existing policies. However, stakeholders suggested that the Farming with Nature scheme could be better integrated with other relevant policies aiming to address environmental drivers and pressures in NI, such as the River Basin Management Plan.

Box 4.7 From FAP to SAP – Strategy

The schemes in the SAP map onto the schemes set out the FAP, as shown in Table A6.2. The SAP strategy appears to broadly reflect the changes in prioritisation expressed in the vision statement, as there is a focus on the Farming with Nature scheme. It is not possible to make a further informed assessment of how the strategy differs from FAP as the detail of each scheme has not yet been published.

Box 4.8 Summary evaluative assessment of Strategy

The FAP combines payment schemes, knowledge and innovation measures, and data-led initiatives. The FAP workstreams are designed to support each other. However, without a theory of change, it is challenging to understand how these workstreams are intended to achieve the overall vision. There could be a clearer justification with policy documents around why each workstream has been selected. A theory of change could help to establish a “golden thread” linking the vision, strategy and action plan and improve transparency. Publishing the theory of change could ensure the pathways and assumptions are collaboratively tested and improved.

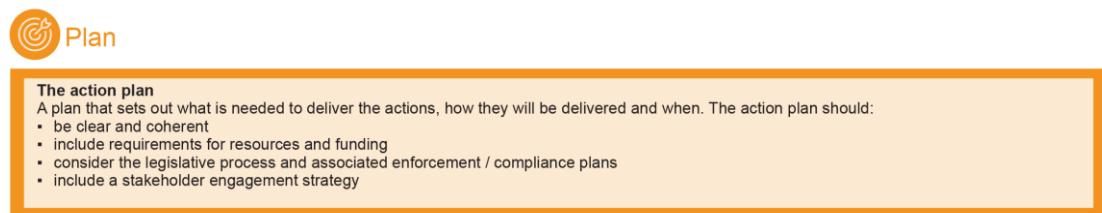
The 8 core workstreams, 5 cross cutting workstream and 1 sectoral workstream are at different stages in terms of policy development and delivery. There is a lack of clarity, particularly around the Farming with Nature scheme and the Farm Sustainability Standards, whilst the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is well-developed. The FAP explains the relationship between workstreams and considers in-combination effects. Some workstreams are linked together through eligibility requirements. The FAP considers compliance with existing regulation and coherence with existing policy. The FAP could be better integrated with other policies aiming to address environmental drivers and pressures.

4.2.5 Action Plan

This section assesses the FAP action plan. The action plan component evaluative standards set out in the EPSR framework are shown in Figure 4.6. The rest of the section assesses the FAP action plan against these evaluative standards and the evaluative questions, shown in Annex 7. This includes assessing whether there is an implementation plan that specifies the requirements for executing the actions, including methods and timelines for delivery. To do this, it looks at funding, timeline, compliance, and stakeholder engagement.

⁴⁹ [Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland – Strategic Environmental Assessment – Environment Report](#)

Figure 4.6 EPSR component standards – Action Plan



The action plan
A plan that sets out what is needed to deliver the actions, how they will be delivered and when. The action plan should:

- be clear and coherent
- include requirements for resources and funding
- consider the legislative process and associated enforcement / compliance plans
- include a stakeholder engagement strategy

There is insufficient funding to support the scale of change required.

Workshop participants expressed concerns about funding and resources constraints and long-term funding availability. According to stakeholders, the funding available is not enough to deliver the impact the FAP aims to achieve. There needs to be generational shifts in farming practices which, as one stakeholder noted, "you cannot make generational shifts without shifts on funding and long-term funding". Another participant mentioned "we don't have enough funding to scratch the surface. DAERA have spoken about the ambition – are communicating this. But there is no clear path to me – how do you get anywhere without funding?". Findings from a NIEL position paper stressed the need for adequate resourcing for the design and delivery of schemes within the policy⁵⁰.

There is a significant funding shortfall particularly in relation to environmental payments. A report referenced during the workshop⁵¹ argues that an investment of up to £414 million per year is needed to meet nature and legally binding climate targets in NI⁵². The existing NI agricultural budget is £329 million, with direct environmental payments accounting for less than 3% of this budget⁵³. This means that only approximately £9.87 million is currently allocated towards environmental payments, resulting in a significant shortfall of around £404 million needed to meet the targets. The report also emphasises that the cost of inaction would add costs in the long term and calls for urgent long-term investment to future-proof the agricultural sector⁵⁴. These findings support the workshop participants' concerns about the need for substantial and sustained funding to achieve what the FAP outlines.

There has been a lack of clarity on the timeline for implementation. When the FAP was announced, a detailed timeline was not included which posed challenges for stakeholders. The timeline was later published in June 2023 through the Farm Support and Development Programme (FSDP) and set out a phased implementation of FAP workstreams from 2023 to 2026. The timeline has also been criticised for not extending beyond 2026.

There are insufficient resources available to deliver all workstreams simultaneously, so a phased implementation approach has been adopted.

According to DAERA, the phased approach is needed due to limited staff resourcing and their capacity to develop and implement schemes within the department,

⁵⁰ [Northern Ireland Environment Link. \(2024\). Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature.](#)

⁵¹ [For farming, nature and climate: Investing in the UK's natural infrastructure to achieve Net Zero and nature's recovery on land.](#)

⁵² [£414 million needed per year to help save nature – new report reveals](#)

⁵³ [£414 million needed per year to help save nature – new report reveals](#)

⁵⁴ [For farming, nature and climate: Investing in the UK's natural infrastructure to achieve Net Zero and nature's recovery on land.](#)

especially for more complex schemes. The phased implementation approach also enabled DAERA to “*take people with us on this journey as we have to move at a pace that we can change behaviour*”⁵⁵.

The transition between existing schemes and new schemes has been unsteady. This phased timeline has been criticised by stakeholders, particularly regarding the order in which some of the schemes are being implemented due to later start dates for selected schemes. A NEIL position paper highlighted the need for a structured transition approach and a detailed 2030 transition plan for the FAP, including timelines, budgets, and milestones.⁵⁶ UFU also explained in their position paper the importance of developing new measures quickly to ensure a smooth transition and provide the farming industry with much-needed certainty from 2024⁵⁷. NIEL explained that the planned start date for the Farming with Nature scheme (pilots due to start late 2023 with the full scheme due to start in 2026) contributed to a disorderly transition between the existing Environmental Farming Scheme which closed in 2023, and new Farming with Nature scheme.⁵⁸ NEIL highlighted that the gap between schemes risks leaving over 4,000 farmers who have invested in nature-friendly farming without an agreement for two years. NEIL also suggested that quickly implementing the Farming with Nature Testing Pilots and making public statements about the initiative's importance could ensure transparency and stakeholder preparedness.

There has been a lack of progress since the policy was released and delays to many workstreams. As of February 2025, many workstreams have not adhered to the initial timeline set out in the FSDP and have experienced major delays, (see Table A6.2 in Annex for a detailed timeline of each workstream). One workstream, The Farm Sustainability Payment have adhered to the proposed timelines. Elements of two other workstreams, the Beef Carbon Reduction and the Livestock Dietary Emission Challenge Fund, have adhered to the proposed timelines. The Farming with Nature timeline has recently been moved forward through the SAP revision and is now due to start in mid-2025 rather than in 2026. This could indicate that there was not a sufficient plan in place to support the timely implementation of the FAP. However, it is important to note that changes in political leadership have significantly impacted the delivery of the programme, more so than resource constraints. One stakeholder remarked, “*We are not where we wanted to be at this stage, but that's to do with resource*”, referring to both funding and capacity/capability⁵⁹.

The FAP includes a redesigned approach to compliance, however there are concerns with the new approach. The Controls and Assurance workstream within the FAP is focused on compliance. The scheme will replace current compliance standards with a simplified ‘Farm Sustainability Standards’ system, which will apply to the Farm Sustainability Payment and the Farming with Nature package. There will be seven new Farm Sustainability Standards that will replace the 20 current cross compliance standards, a full list of these standards is shown in Annex 9. These standards seek to simplify current cross compliance Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAECs) and Statutory Management Requirements

⁵⁵ DAERA policy official interview.

⁵⁶ [Northern Ireland Environment Link. \(2024\). Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature.](#)

⁵⁷ [Ulster Farmers Union. \(2024\). UFU respond to Future Agriculture Policy.](#)

⁵⁸ [Northern Ireland Environment Link. \(2024\). Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature.](#)

⁵⁹ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

(SMRs) to better meet local needs, with a penalty system designed to be effective but fair. The DAERA policy official stated that the Farm Sustainability Standards will replace cross-compliance by January 2026 and will cover various aspects of farm management practices such as soil protection, habitat protection, and water management⁶⁰. A workshop participant expressed concerns about the Farm Sustainability Standards, compared with cross compliance, suggesting that it would not offer continued monitoring, which they believed was essential to securing environmental goals. The removal of some standards from the FSS compared to the EU's cross-compliance system is concerning, especially given the additional regulatory complexities introduced by Brexit, which have further complicated the environmental regime⁶¹. Furthermore, a DAERA policy official mentioned that the new farm sustainability standards which are set to replace cross-compliance by January 2026, will require adequate funding and resources – which is currently uncertain⁶².

Current compliance schemes face challenges related to trust and the effective transfer of knowledge. Workshop participants explained that trust was damaged due to the compliance policies on the Environmental Farming Scheme. These policies were perceived as overly stringent and inflexible, leading to frustration among farmers. The lack of clear communication and support further exacerbated the issue, making it difficult to maintain engagement and cooperation with farmers. One stakeholder commented, "*on the EFS scheme, there is an overzealous regime that has burned bridges*"⁶³.

Effective communication and education are essential to ensure farmers understand and comply with regulations. The decline in knowledge transfer activities associated with capacity constraints may also hinder engagement and stakeholder buy-in. These challenges suggest a tension between the need for stronger compliance measures, such as more standards and continuous monitoring, and the desire for a softer, less vigorous approach to foster trust and support⁶⁴. Addressing this tension is crucial to strengthening the current plans to verify compliance and better support engagement and trust. Additionally, knowledge transfer remains an ongoing challenge that DAERA needs to address to ensure effective compliance. However, this aspect is currently missing from their plans, which could further complicate efforts to maintain engagement and trust among stakeholders.

Workshop participants emphasised the importance of trust, effective communication, and education among farmers, stakeholders and policy officials. A DAERA policy official explained that initial stakeholder reactions to the FAP consultations have been positive, recognising the integrated nature of the program but also acknowledging the long road ahead. The focus on consistent messaging through the Agri Professional Programme is seen as a positive step towards effective communication and support for the farming community. This programme, part of the SAP, aims to enhance communication and support by providing professional development, technical expertise, and practical support to advisers, consultants, and other industry professionals. Workshop participants also explained that farmers in NI take pride in their land and environment projects, which

⁶⁰ DAERA policy official interview.

⁶¹ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

⁶² DAERA policy official interview.

⁶³ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

⁶⁴ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

can be viewed as an opportunity to build trust and support between the farmers and DAERA. This pride presents an opportunity for DAERA to leverage the farmers' connection to their land and environmental efforts, fostering mutual respect and collaboration, and ultimately strengthening the relationship between the farming community and DAERA⁶⁵.

However, the challenges related to funding and resource constraints, as well as a long-term vision for the sector hinder engagement and stakeholder trust. One participant noted, "*trust element comes in big time here*"⁶⁶. As explored in previous sections, stakeholders have raised concerns and provided DAERA with recommendations related to timelines and transition plans, uncertainty within the farming community, and overzealous compliance schemes. One workshop participant highlighted that "*thinking outside the box and getting community involvement would be highly beneficial*"⁶⁷. These recommendations highlight the need for DAERA to secure sufficient engagement and buy-in to ensure the uptake of FAP.

By addressing the concerns raised by stakeholders and implementing the recommendations, DAERA can foster a more collaborative and supportive environment, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the FAP. Notably, DAERA has undertaken co-design for the first time, and stakeholders have responded positively. However, challenges such as funding constraints, the pace of progress, compliance issues, and DAERA's historical difficulties with stakeholder engagement make this a complex task. It is crucial for DAERA to maintain ongoing engagement and inclusivity with all stakeholders, ensuring that this collaboration leads to actionable solutions despite these obstacles.

4.2.5.2 Summary evaluative assessment of Action Plan

Box 4.9 From FAP to Sustainable Agriculture Programme – Action Plan

The SAP announcement included the publication of an updated timeline. As shown in Table A6.2, the Farming with Nature scheme is the only scheme that has been bought forward. This aligns with the enhanced focus on the 'improved environmental sustainability' outcome and the prioritisation of the Farming with Nature scheme mentioned in the ministerial announcement.⁶⁸ The Farm Sustainability Payment and the Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme are both on track, whilst all other schemes have been delayed compared to the initial timeline set out in 2023. While the advancement of certain schemes like Farming with Nature is promising, addressing the delays and ensuring robust support for all workstreams is crucial to achieving the comprehensive goals of the FAP. This approach would help balance immediate priorities with long-term sustainability and stakeholder engagement. Additional detail on the schemes has not yet been published and therefore it is not possible to provide further commentary on the action plan of the SAP.

Box 4.10 Summary evaluative assessment of Action Plan

The action plan for the FAP is limited by a lack of clarity on the timeline, a lack of funding and a disjointed communication strategy. There is insufficient funding to support the scale of change required. One stakeholder summarised the situation aptly: "There is ambition but no money." More clarity could be provided around how and when funding will be redistributed across the workstreams. The timeline was not clearly defined and has caused

⁶⁵ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

⁶⁶ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

⁶⁷ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.

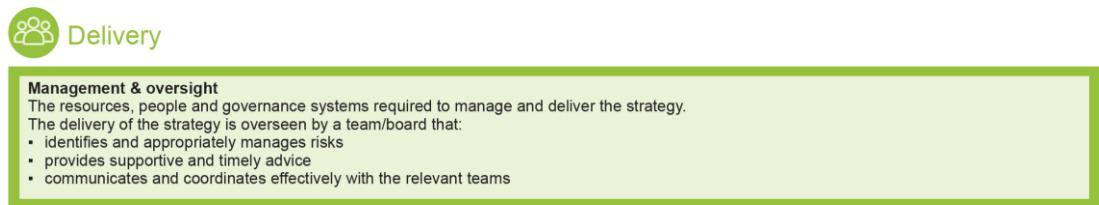
⁶⁸ [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

uncertainty among stakeholders, especially due to gaps between existing and replacement schemes. The policy sets out to establish a new compliance scheme, through the Farm Sustainability Standards, however there are concerns that the new standards are not comprehensive. Further efforts to engage with the farming community could enhance stakeholder buy-in, as DAERA communications with stakeholders has been disjointed.

4.2.6 Delivery

This section assesses the delivery of the FAP. The delivery component evaluative standards set out in the EPSR framework are shown in Figure 4.7. The rest of the section assesses the FAP delivery against these evaluative standards and the evaluative questions, shown in Annex 7. This includes an assessment of the supporting structures and resourcing within DAERA as well as resourcing within delivery partners. The section also considers how DAERA is engaging with and supporting stakeholders and whether there are adaptive management processes in place.

Figure 4.7 EPSR component standards – Delivery



There appears to be a clear governance structure within DAERA which supports the FAP, however this information is not included in the core policy documents. The policy sits within the Agricultural Policy Division at DAERA. Each workstream has a Grade 5 policy lead and supporting delivery teams.⁶⁹ These workstream leads make up a policy programme board which according to policy officials ensures there is cross-fertilisation across workstreams.⁷⁰ There is also a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning team that supports the FAP within DAERA, however it is not clear to the study team how this is resourced or organised.

The resource available within DAERA to support the timely delivery of the FAP is insufficient. Workshop stakeholders noted that previously the EU managed agricultural policy and had ample resources to support this. Stakeholders noted that they initially appreciated the opportunity to shape agricultural policy within NI but acknowledged that this required significant resources for policy development (for DAERA and for the stakeholders). Since Brexit, DAERA has struggled with resourcing.

The resourcing issues are primarily linked to capacity and capability, rather than a lack of funding. Within DAERA there are not enough people with the appropriate skills to deliver on the FAP. The DAERA policy official acknowledged these challenges, explaining that DAERA had the funding necessary for roles but is struggling to fill these positions. DAERA is also facing difficulties associated with staff leaving, being promoted or retiring which creates a “*continuing challenge*”

⁶⁹ DAERA policy official interview

⁷⁰ DAERA policy official interview

around capacity" specifically related to policy and legislation skills.⁷¹ Stakeholders at the workshop mentioned that there is a challenge related to aging technical experts within the government leading to a potential loss of historical knowledge within DAERA and creating a lack of consistency within DAERA.

Delivery partners do not have adequate resources to deliver critical knowledge transfer schemes. As discussed in prior sections, knowledge transfer to farmers is a key challenge for implementing the FAP. There are further challenges related delivering the knowledge transfer from DAERA. They work with knowledge transfer partners such as CAFRE⁷², who are experiencing resourcing and capacity challenges. Knowledge transfer is perceived as critical and best delivered in person by individuals with relevant expertise.⁷³ The stakeholders explained that CAFRE currently lacks the capability and capacity to deliver knowledge transfer activities in person, so they have relied on online courses. This was perceived as not being enough support for farmers, and that proper farm advisory centres for knowledge transfer and advice were missing.⁷⁴ Stakeholders expressed concerns that, in the absence of comprehensive knowledge, farmers were receiving advice from private sector entities with vested interests in promoting specific solutions.

DAERA have extensively engaged the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group through a co-design process, however some stakeholders raised challenges and concerns with the current co-design practices in place. NILGA (2024) advocated for maintaining ongoing and meaningful engagement with all stakeholders, including local councils, to ensure the policy is comprehensive and inclusive. This includes regular consultations and feedback mechanisms to adapt the policy as needed. Workshop stakeholders explained that the co-design process was intensive and a strain on organisational resource. In addition to this, one stakeholder explained that it could have been more effective to have clear directions before each stakeholder meeting so that attendees can prepare for the meetings and meaningfully engage in the topic.

There are also challenges related to DAERA's approach to engagement with farmers and farm businesses and an apparent lack of understanding among farmers about the FAP schemes. Stakeholders explained that over the last 5 years DAERA has not been consistent in their approach to farmer communications and there is currently a "*big vacuum*" in relation to knowledge among farmers about the new schemes. The DAERA official explained that communications were paused due to budget uncertainties and that DAERA have been responding to requests rather than actively running an awareness programme. This highlights the knowledge transfer challenge previously mentioned. There are knowledge gaps relating to specific schemes, such as the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. Also, the UFU is "*increasingly asked by DAERA to disseminate knowledge*" and is investing in initiatives to offer advice to farmers, for example through providing water quality officers to provide farmers with advice on water quality issues.⁷⁵ Farmers are eager

⁷¹ DAERA policy official interview

⁷² DAERA's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) delivers training and further and higher education courses in the agri-food sector.

⁷³ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop

⁷⁴ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop

⁷⁵ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop

to understand more about the schemes and have considered setting up discussion groups to facilitate knowledge transfer.⁷⁶

Box 4.11 Soil Nutrient Health Scheme

Stakeholders further highlighted that the effectiveness of data-led initiatives, such as the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme, is often compromised by the lack of support and communication with farmers. One participant emphasised, "*Farmers need support with what to do with their data*". For example, stakeholders explained that farmers need help understanding how to interpret and act on the data gathered through the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. Knowledge transfer delivery partners could help to improve understanding of soil analysis results.

The policy outcomes are dependent upon a significant cultural and behavioural change that leads to more pro-environmental action in the future, and DAERA could do more to support this transition. Workshop participants acknowledged this, one participant said "*Communication is so important. Farmers can't change unless they know what to do on their farm and are supported in doing this.*" A communication strategy focused on how to support a significant cultural and behavioural change could be beneficial. This could be focused on establishing trust, avoiding blame and fostering collaboration.

Box 4.12 From FAP to SAP - Delivery and Management

There appears to be a renewed focus on stakeholder engagement and communications in the SAP. The minister released a statement on the 29 January 2025 which sets out a communication plan.⁷⁷ There are plans to release of a hard copy 'SAP Newsletter' to farm businesses and a series of Awareness Events hosted across a range of venues in NI. Further updates on DAERA and delivery partner resourcing for SAP are not currently available.

Box 4.13 Summary evaluative assessment of Delivery and Management

The FAP programme board within DAERA manage the delivery of the policy and coordinate across the workstreams. There are challenges related to resourcing and capacity within DAERA, linked to the need for appropriate policy and legislation skills. This is compounded by challenges related to aging technical experts and the potential loss of historical knowledge within DAERA. The phased implementation of FAP is related to insufficient resource within DAERA to deliver all workstreams in parallel. Delivery partners, such as CAFRE, have limited capacity and capability to deliver the FAP workstreams. CAFRE does not have sufficient resource to deliver knowledge transfer activities in person and therefore is relying on online delivery, which is less suitable for farmers. More information is needed to understand the capacity, capability and resourcing of other delivery partners. DAERA engages extensively with the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group, however there is a knowledge vacuum among farmers around the new FAP schemes and DAERA communications have been inconsistent. DAERA is not engaging appropriately with farmers to support the significant cultural and behavioural change necessary to meet the policy objectives.

⁷⁶ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop

⁷⁷ [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

4.2.7 Evaluation

This section assesses the evaluation of the FAP. The evaluation component evaluative standards set out in the EPSR framework are shown in Figure 4.8. The rest of the section assesses the evaluation of FAP against the EPSR evaluative standards and questions, shown in Annex 7.

Figure 4.8 EPSR component standards – Evaluation



There are high level metrics, however there is a lack of information about a monitoring and evaluation approach. A cross cutting workstream within the FAP is dedicated to monitoring and evaluation and sets out seven high level metrics,⁷⁸ which are linked to the four programme objectives, as shown in Table 4.1. This demonstrates that the metrics have been developed in relation to the vision. Four of the seven metrics are designed to monitor progress against objective two on environmental sustainability. Most of these metrics are already reported on, for example through the Nutrients Action Programme data on Nitrogen and Phosphorus balances was published in 2021.⁷⁹ The stakeholders at the workshop shared understandings based on existing and relevant monitoring information. For example, explaining progress related to water and nitrate levels whilst highlighting ongoing challenges related to phosphorus. However, no available information about FAP wide evaluation plans or evidence of commissioning was found. It is therefore difficult to assess whether the MEL plans are adequate and appropriate.

Table 4.1 High level evaluation metrics mapped onto objectives

Objective	High Level Metric	Indicator and baseline status
An industry that pursues increased productivity	■ Total Factor Productivity for Northern Ireland Agriculture	■ Baseline data provided within FAP policy documents and through the statistical review of NI agriculture ⁸⁰
An industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of its impact on air and water quality, soil health, biodiversity and climate	■ Net GHG emissions for Northern Ireland Agriculture and LULUCF (Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry)	■ Baseline data provided within FAP policy documents
	■ Nitrogen and Phosphorus balances	■ Reported through the Nutrients Action Programme
	■ Ammonia emissions from farming	■ Baseline data provided within FAP policy documents

⁷⁸ Metrics set out on page 128 [Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland \(Final\) \(002\).pdf](#)

⁷⁹ [Agricultural Nutrients and Water Quality June 2021_0 \(1\).pdf](#)

⁸⁰ [Statistical review of NI agriculture 2007 onward | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Objective	High Level Metric	Indicator and baseline status
	■ Indicator species	■ DAERA refining the metric
An industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks	■ Net Farm income derived from the market	■ Baseline data provided within FAP policy documents and through the statistical review of NI agriculture ⁸¹
An integrated, profitable, efficient, sustainable, competitive and effective functioning supply chain	■ Gross Value Added from agriculture and food processing	■ Not included in FAP documents, and through the statistical review of NI agriculture ⁸²

The data-led schemes are a strength of the FAP and are integrated into the policy mechanisms. Stakeholders explained that the monitoring programmes in NI are good, specifically in relation to water and soil. The Soil Nutrient Health Scheme was highlighted by stakeholders as a key strength of the Future Agricultural Policy⁸³. The scheme aims to establish a baseline for soil nutrient health and carbon stocks. One stakeholder raised a reservation with the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. The scheme classifies areas as 'above optimal', 'optimal' or 'below optimal'. The stakeholder explained that areas of unimproved or semi-natural grassland marked as 'below optimal' may be identified for increased nutrient inputs which could impact biodiversity. The data-led schemes are linked to payment initiatives through eligibility requirements to incentivise data collection.

The policy document also states that specific metrics will be developed at workstream level, however at present these metrics have not been published. Stakeholders at the workshop explained that more monitoring of the specific schemes would be helpful. The DAERA policy official highlighted the importance of monitoring and evaluation schemes using scientific evidence and explained that the workstream specific metrics will be published in the future⁸⁴. It is difficult to assess whether the metrics are appropriate to the portfolio of schemes without the publication of the additional workstream specific metrics. The status of monitoring and evaluation of individual schemes is therefore not known.

To date, there is no evidence that MEL activity has been reported on and shared publicly so relevant stakeholders can access information on progress of the portfolio against targets and milestones. DAERA plans to publish an annual evaluation report on the FAP to share findings with stakeholders, however no annual report has been published yet and there is no publicly set date for this⁸⁵. Delivery of some elements of FAP, including pilot schemes, started in late 2023. The pilot programmes provide an opportunity for adaptive management and shared learning. There appear to be planned evaluations of pilot programmes, however there are no publicly available evaluation reports or findings based on the pilot programmes.

Box 4.14 From FAP to SAP - Evaluation

⁸¹ [Statistical review of NI agriculture 2007 onward | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁸² [Statistical review of NI agriculture 2007 onward | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁸³ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop

⁸⁴ DAERA policy official interview.

⁸⁵ DAERA policy official interview

The approach to evaluation appears to be carried through from FAP to SAP. The same seven high level metrics are mentioned in SAP communication documents.⁸⁶ Indicator species has been updated to biodiversity as the condition of environmental features and wild bird populations. The published information on SAP reiterates that evaluations of pilot programmes will be used to inform the development of full schemes; however, no interim results or evaluation reports have been shared. There are no further details available on the workstream specific metrics, on a monitoring and evaluation plan, on expected publication dates for the annual report or on a learning element connected to the evaluation programme.

Box 4.15 Summary evaluative assessment of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

There is a lack of information about monitoring, evaluation and learning, despite one of cross cutting workstreams being specifically focused on Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation. This workstream sets out seven high level overarching metrics that relate to the four core policy outcomes. However, there is no clear evaluation or monitoring plan available beyond a description of the seven high level metrics. The annual evaluation report on FAP has not been published yet and there is no clarity on when this will be published. The workstream level specific metrics are still in development and have not been published. It is therefore not possible to assess whether these metrics are appropriate.

4.2.8 External factors

This final section summarises external factors highlighted during the workshop. These are political context, climate risk, farmer attitudes and trust, and the agri-food system. The EPSR framework establishes that if the evaluative standards for each component are well evidenced, there can be increased confidence that the portfolio, policy or programme evaluated has the potential to meet its objectives. External factors will also influence the success of the portfolio, policy or programme evaluated. As such, these need to be discussed.

The EPSR framework could include an external factors section to recognise the importance of understanding and considering the specific context in which a policy, portfolio or programme is developed and delivered.

Political context

The political context, including changes in ministers and their differing priorities, influenced the policy direction of the FAP. One workshop participant explained the previous Minister had a focus on productive agriculture, whilst the current Minister emphasises sustainable agriculture. This shift in priorities, if not well managed, can lead to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in policy implementation, negatively impacting the delivery of the policy. Further to this, the Minister acknowledged that communications around the programme have been *“far from ideal due to the negative impact of the lack of future budget”*.⁸⁷

Climate risks

One stakeholder emphasised the importance of farm resilience in the face of climate change, explaining that while farmers are making appropriate changes, they have to manage extreme weather events causing significant damage. Another stakeholder explained that it may be necessary for schemes to provide payments within certain

⁸⁶ [PDF Version - Master - Sustainable Agriculture Programme Q&A - 24 February 2025.PDF](#)

⁸⁷ [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

scenarios where farmers have taken all the appropriate actions (e.g. tree planting) and then a climate event causes significant damage. Innovative solutions will be necessary within the context of worsening climate change⁸⁸.

Farmer attitudes and trust

There is a lack of trust in Government among the farming community for several reasons. For example, stakeholders at the workshop explained that there is a real sense of fear within the farming community following the Westminster budget announcement related to Inheritance Tax. This announcement demotivated the community and undermined the farmers' confidence and trust in those working with them. Another stakeholder explained that the EFS has faced issues with "overzealous" regulation, which has "*burned bridges*" and affected trust. Workshop stakeholders also noted that farmers feel blamed for environmental issues, leading to anger and a loss of trust. The farming community's lack of trust and fear of being penalised was identified as a key risk to the FAP's engagement and success.

Agri-food system

Stakeholders also highlighted the influence of agri-food sector businesses on farming businesses. At the workshop, stakeholders discussed the importance of considering the influential role of food processing actors. This was explained in relation to the reduced price paid to Irish beef farmers by supply chain actors as a result of the Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme.

4.3 FAP strengths and weaknesses

This section includes a short summary of the key strengths and weaknesses of the FAP identified by stakeholders in the workshop. Stakeholders highlighted key strengths and weaknesses of the FAP during a workshop exercise, more detail on this is included in Annex 2.

FAP strengths: Participants identified the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme and the Farming with Nature Scheme as the strongest elements in the FAP. Stakeholders also saw the application of scientific evidence as a notable strength and one stakeholder thought that DAERA's stakeholder engagement and buy-in related to the Action Plan was a strength.

FAP weaknesses: The main weaknesses identified were an unclear vision for the FAP, an absence of targets and no Theory of Change. The fact that there is not enough funding for key workstreams was also perceived as a significant challenge. Stakeholders indicated that resource shortages particularly among delivery partners and inadequate support for stakeholders to deliver actions were other significant weaknesses.

⁸⁸ Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop

5 Conclusions

This section presents the study conclusion in relation to the review aims and purpose defined at the beginning of the EPSR process.

5.1.1 **Assess the extent to which the FAP has a coherent vision and strategy; is underpinned by relevant evidence.**

The **FAP's vision** is based on delivering four key objectives (1) productivity, (2) environmental sustainability, (3) resilience and (4) a responsive supply chain. The recent SAP announcement reprioritised these objectives, as the new minister is placing a greater emphasis on environmental sustainability. This is a change in political direction from the previous minister who prioritised productivity.

The current vision lacks clarity and consistency. It could benefit from having an overarching framework to explain how the vision will work, establishing clear definitions of the key terminology used in the objectives (e.g. sustainability, resilience), and developing targets, including SMART targets where appropriate.

The **FAP strategy** combines payment schemes, knowledge and innovation measures, and data-led initiatives designed to deliver against the four key outcomes. However, the strategy does not have a published Theory of Change. Without this it is difficult to understand how the schemes work coherently to deliver against the four key outcomes. Further, having this overarching framework with a developed Theory of Change could help DAERA to explain how FAP/SAP and other related policies, including environmental and agricultural policies, work together to achieve change.

There is a lack of detail available on certain schemes which makes it difficult to assess whether the policy adequately addresses the country's drivers and pressures. There are also concerns related to some mechanisms within FAP schemes, as these can lead to potential lower prices and increased financial risk for farmers. Another concern is a potential lack of incentives for certain farming communities such as smaller farms or sheep farms.

The **FAP leveraged evidence** from several external documents, including various background evidence papers, to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of proposed interventions. However, there are inconsistencies in the application of evidence across all workstreams. The development of the policy builds on public consultation and a continued process of co-design with the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group. However, there are concerns that the co-design process is resource intensive and linked to delays.

5.1.2 **Provide an overview of the action plan and delivery plan at policy level and for selected key workstreams to determine how these align with vision and strategy.**

The FAP **action plan** and **delivery plan** is insufficient and will require further development to achieve the policy objectives. Further, additional funding may be required to deliver the workstreams, and there is a need to strengthen the current plans to verify compliance. Finally, there are capacity and capability challenges within DAERA and within key delivery partners that hinder the effective delivery of the FAP. Adequate funding to deliver the FAP ambitious plans, and a more developed action plan could help ensure that the policy is implemented within the timeline set out as well as provide consistent support and guidance for farmers.

There is a lack of communication with the farming community and a lack of knowledge about FAP schemes among farmers. The poor communication around the FAP is likely to amplify farmers' existing lack of trust and confidence in the government. This appears to be a key area that the SAP is seeking to address through a clear and strategic communication strategy. Knowledge transfer was identified as a key part of the strategy, however there are challenges related to the delivery of knowledge transfer activities to date, specifically related to a lack of capacity and capability within CAFRE, a key delivery partner. The data-led schemes represent a core part of the FAP strategy and in particular the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme was highlighted as a strength by workshop stakeholders. However, the lack of training provided to farmers on how to interpret and act on the data may reduce the potential impact of this scheme.

5.1.3 Consider at a high level the extent to which evaluation & learning is embedded across the framework

Overarching **monitoring metrics** have been developed in relation to the key policy priorities and focus on monitoring the policies impact on environmental sustainability. However, there are no workstream specific metrics available and there is no a clear monitoring and evaluation plan for the FAP. Linked to the lack of plan, there is no timeline for sharing evaluation findings with key stakeholders or a clear process for integrating learnings from any monitoring or evaluation activities. The lack of clarity on how to measure success is a barrier to adaptive management.

In the workshop, stakeholders elaborated on several external factors impacting the success of policies, portfolios, and programmes, beyond the evaluative standards set by the EPSR framework. Their insights underline the complexity of achieving objectives amidst fluctuating political climates, growing climate risks, farmer attitudes, and the agri-food system dynamics. The development of a Theory of Change and consideration of a theory-based approach to evaluation, or another approach with an explicit causal logic, could help to ensure that these risks and external factors are incorporated into the FAP/SAP evaluation process.

5.2 Recommendations

The recommendations have been divided into a set of recommendations for DAERA, to strengthen the FAP and areas for further scrutiny from the OEP; and a set of recommendations for the OEP to further understand some of the gaps highlighted by the study and use the tool in a more effective way.

The recommendations related to the FAP for DAERA to develop and for the OEP to further scrutinise are below. Key recommendations are in bold text:

- **Establish a clear vision through an overarching framework:** The overarching framework could aim to improve coherency with wider policies and strategies such as the Environmental Improvement Plan. The vision should integrate the four core objectives of the FAP/SAP and provides a cohesive sense of purpose for all stakeholders, including the farming community.
- **Define key terms:** Collaboratively establish definitions for key terms used throughout the policy, such as 'sustainability', 'productivity' and 'resilience' which can have different interpretations, to improve collective understanding and alignment.

- **Set (SMART) Targets:** Introduce targets at policy level and at workstream level to guide the implementation and evaluation of the FAP/SAP. This could include setting ambitious targets in key areas, which clearly align with the vision and prioritisation of objectives. The target setting process could consider whether it is appropriate and effective to set Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) in specific areas. There is a need to balance achievability and ambition when setting targets.
- **Conduct further research focused on drivers and pressures:** Aim to more comprehensively understand, through evidence mapping, new primary research and effective monitoring, evaluation and learning strategies, how FAP addresses the environmental drivers and pressures in NI. Research should be ongoing and should not be a reason not to progress with other recommendations.
- **Clarify the strategy in relation to the vision:** Clearly map the current workstreams onto the vision and consider whether there are gaps in the current strategy. Develop the policies in relation to these gaps to ensure that the policy mix and mechanisms are appropriate, coherent and traceable to the vision.
- **Formulate and publish a Theory of Change:** Develop a Theory of Change to clearly outline the expected outcomes and the pathways to achieve them, enhancing the strategic planning and execution of the FAP. Co-develop the Theory of Change with relevant stakeholders and ensure the Theory of Change is publicly available. Commit to the periodic updating of the Theory of Change acknowledging it is both an ongoing process of refining how to deliver desired objectives and a product that captures existing understanding how this is best done. A Theory of Change could be developed at overarching policy level with nested, more detailed Theory of Change components to support core workstreams.
- **Consider publishing a longer-term and more detailed timeline:** The SAP timeline goes up to 2027, whilst stakeholders have requested a timeline up to 2030 to provide consistency, allow for planning and align with long term international targets. A more detailed timeline with budgets and milestones would be useful. This could include a transition plan focused on how and when funding will move from the Farm Sustainability Payment to other schemes.
- **Review funding:** Secure sufficient funding for key workstreams to ensure the effective delivery of the FAP. Publish details on how the funding will be distributed across workstreams.
- **Improve knowledge transfer by better supporting delivery partners:** Conduct research to better understand key barriers and then provide appropriate support to address capacity and capability challenges within knowledge transfer partners, such as CAFRE. This could help to enhance the delivery of knowledge transfer activities.
- **Continue to improve the communication strategy for farmers:** Develop and implement a communication strategy to improve engagement and knowledge among the farming community about FAP schemes.
- **Consider long-term investments in capacity building among future policy design and delivery teams:** Invest in training, education and outreach programmes to support future generations into careers in technical agri-environment policy design and implementation roles.

- **Continue developing the evaluation approach:** Including refining and publishing workstream specific metrics and communicating with key stakeholders about expected monitoring and evaluation outputs

The four recommendations in bold (**establishing a clear vision through an overarching framework, clarify the strategy in relation to the vision, reviewing funding and improve the communication strategy for farmers**) are foundational and underpin other recommendations. These are the EPSR components that are most important to take forward.

The policy is ultimately trying to incentivise and promote a significant cultural and behavioural change that leads to more pro-environmental action from farmers. To bring about this change it is necessary to be clear on the vision and strategy and invest in improving communication with farmers. As such, establishing a clear vision and clarifying the strategy in relation to the vision could improve stakeholder understanding, engagement, buy-in and uptake of the workstreams.

Funding is essential for the delivery of the FAP. Addressing other recommendations without considering funding is likely to have a limited impact due to the importance of providing funding and incentives to match the scale of change required. If funding is sufficient and communication is appropriate, it will support farmers to engage in pro-environmental actions and could help to re-establish trust. Addressing these four recommendations could increase the likelihood of success of the FAP.

Below are key recommendations for the OEP to consider in relation to conducting or commissioning further research in this area:

- **Apply steps 6-8 of the EPSR process:** There may be an opportunity to implement all the steps of the EPSR process and (6) conduct a whole system review, assessing the FAP more holistically based on the work done in this report (section 4.3 provides a starting point); (7) test the evaluative assessments provided in this report with consultations or desk research, (8) and further develop recommendations and actions.
- **Consider researching FAP/SAP governance:** While it is not an explicit element of the EPSR tool, evaluating the governance of the FAP/SAP could help OEP to better understand roles and responsibilities related to delivery, how decisions are made and how local knowledge is applied. This research could build on findings from the Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland.⁸⁹ This could be done in addition to scrutinising the FAP components recommended above
- **Conduct detailed research into the SAP:** As more information is published on the SAP there may be an opportunity to assess the extent to which SAP addresses some of the gaps and weaknesses identified through this study. This could focus on assessing whether the SAP addresses some of the recommendations above. For example, it could assess whether there is sufficient funding for workstreams or could focus on farmer attitudes towards and uptake of SAP workstreams, given the emerging focus on improved farmer communications.
- **Collate, compare and reflect on the use of the EPSR tool:** The EPSR tool is a recently developed tool. There is an opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of

⁸⁹ [Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland Call for Evidence January 2025 | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

the tool, explore how it can be adjusted to different study requirements and applied effectively.

ANNEXES

Annex 1 Source list

Source list

[£414 million needed per year to help save nature – new report reveals](#)

[Agricultural Nutrients and Water Quality June 2021_0 \(1\).pdf](#)

[Background Evidence Paper V2.pdf](#)

[Background Paper -Knowledge Measures.pdf](#)

[Consultation on Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

DAERA policy official interview.

[DAERA provides clarification on the Transition to the New Farm Sustainability Payment | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

[Developing an Environmental Policy System Review Tool Final Report.pdf](#)

[Farm Support and Development Programme - UFU Meetings - autumn 23.pdf](#)

[For farming, nature and climate: Investigating in the UK's natural infrastructure to achieve Net Zero and nature's recovery on land.](#)

[Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

[Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland – Strategic Environmental Assessment – Environment Report](#)

[Future Farm Support and Development](#)

[Guide to Rural Needs Act NI - Appendix 1](#)

[Minister's Oral Statement on Farm Support and Development.PDF](#)

[Northern Ireland Environment Link. \(2024\). Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature.](#)

[Northern Ireland Local Government Association. \(2024\). NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework: Stakeholder Engagement Final Submission.](#)

[OEP report on the drivers and pressures affecting nature in Northern Ireland | Office for Environmental Protection](#)

[PDF Version - Master - Sustainable Agriculture Programme Q&A - 24 February 2025.PDF](#)

[Stakeholder perspective expressed during the workshop.](#)

[Sustainable Agriculture Programme | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

[The Agriculture \(Wales\) Act 2023 Introducing the Sustainable Land Management Framework](#)

[The Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2023](#)

[UFU lobbies area committee on critical need for sheep support](#)

[Ulster Farmers Union. \(2024\). UFU respond to Future Agriculture Policy.](#)

[Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA s New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

Position Paper Source List

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. (2024). *Minister's Oral Statement on Farm Support and Development*. Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Minister%27s%20Oral%20Statement%20on%20Farm%20Support%20and%20Development.PDF>

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. (2023). *Farm Support and Development Programme - UFU Meetings - Autumn 2023*. Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Farm%20Support%20and%20Development%20Programme%20-%20UFU%20Meetings%20-%20autumn%2023.pdf>

Northern Ireland Environment Link. (2024). *Letter to DAERA Minister RE: Farming with Nature*. Available at: <https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Letter-to-DAERA-Minister-RE-Farming-with-Nature-2024.pdf>

Northern Ireland Environment Link. (2022). *Future Agri-Environment Schemes for Northern Ireland: Issues and Options*. Available at: <https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Future-Agri-Environment-Schemes-for-Northern-Ireland-Issues-and-Options-2022.pdf>

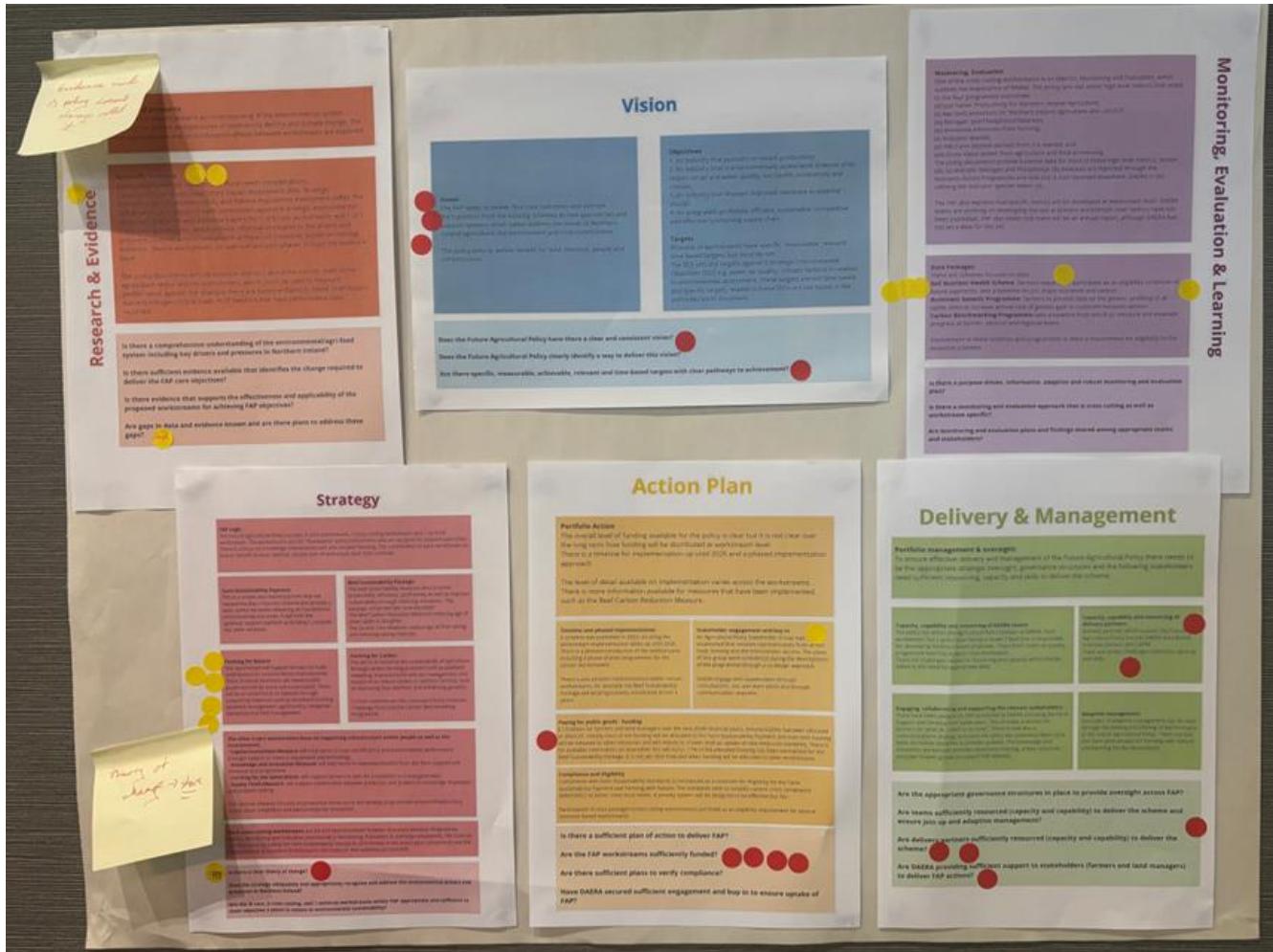
Northern Ireland Local Government Association. (2024). *NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework: Stakeholder Engagement Final Submission*. Available at: <https://www.nilga.org/media/1649/ni-future-agricultural-policy-framework-stakeholder-engagement-final-submission.pdf>

Ulster Farmers Union. (2024). *UFU respond to Future Agriculture Policy*. Available at: <https://www.ufuni.org/ufu-respond-to-future-agriculture-policy/>

Ulster Farmers Union. (2024). *UFU lobbies AERA Committee on critical need for sheep support*. Available at: <https://www.ufuni.org/ufu-lobbies-aera-committee-on-critical-need-for-sheep-support/>

Annex 2 Workshop output image

Figure A2.1 EPSR framework from the workshop showing strengths (yellow dots) and weaknesses (red dots) of FAP



A2.2 Strengths and weaknesses identified by stakeholders, as in Figure A2.1

Strengths:

- Two specific workstreams were identified by workshop participants as key strengths of FAP:
 - Soil Nutrient Health Scheme
 - Farming with Nature
- The application of scientific evidence (Evidence)
- Stakeholder engagement and buy in (Action Plan)

Weaknesses:

- Stakeholders identified several key weaknesses of the FAP related to the vision, strategy, action plan and delivery:
 - A lack of clarity around the vision (Vision)
 - No SMART targets (Vision)
 - A missing Theory of Change (Strategy) [also identified as an opportunity]
 - A lack of funding necessary to deliver key workstreams (Action Plan)
 - A lack of resources, particularly within delivery partners (Delivery)
 - Insufficient support provided to stakeholders to deliver FAP actions (Delivery)

Annex 3 Interview Topic Guide

To be read to interviewees:

As a reminder, ICF have been commissioned by the OEP to conduct a policy review of agri-environment rural incentive schemes in Northern Ireland, with a focus on the Future Agricultural Policy (FAP).

These interviews are to help us better understand the FAP including policy design, development and progress with implementation. We are using an Environmental Policy System Review (EPSR) tool to guide the assessment of the FAP in NI. This tool allows the study team to review and capture the development and delivery status of high-level and broad environmental policies.

What you tell us in this interview will be confidential and anonymised if included in any outputs we produce (i.e., it won't be shared with OEP or others).

Prior to starting the interview, ask if the interviewee has any questions and gain permission to record.

Note to researchers: tailor questions based on the individual's role within DAERA.

A3.1.1 Background

1. Please introduce yourself and explain your role within DAERA?
2. Please explain your roles and responsibilities in relation to the FAP?

A3.1.2 Policy design and development

3. How were the four core objectives within FAP developed?
4. Please could you explore the logic behind the workstreams and how the workstreams link to the objectives?
 - Is there a Theory of Change for FAP?
 - Are there certain workstreams that are underpin or could contribute to achieving all objectives?
5. Do you think there are any workstreams that are key to addressing the drivers and pressures of biodiversity in NI? If so, which workstreams?
 - The study team is considering selecting 3-5 workstreams within which to explore the action plan and delivery elements in more detail. At present our proposal is to select workstreams that are key to addressing drivers and pressures of biodiversity in NI including (1) Farm Sustainability Payment (2) Farming with Nature (3) Soil Nutrient Health Scheme.
6. Are there specific, measurable and time bound targets at overall policy level?
7. How were targets set at workstream level?
 - Based on our desk research, some workstreams have specific targets but others do not.
8. Please could you explain how the policy has evolved over time? Are there any key differences between the FAP and the Future Farm Support and Development programme?
 - How has the farming with carbon measure changed? Is the co-design of farming for carbon as a business enterprise still being considered?

A3.1.3 Policy implementation

This section focuses on information related to implementation and delivery of the policy and workstreams.

9. Would you be able to share some more information about how FAP is funded? How will funding be distributed between the workstreams?
 - The desk research showed that initially most funding will be allocated to the Farm Sustainability Payment and 17% will be allocated to the Beef Sustainability Package. What funding is available for other workstreams?
 - At present, is there a plan in place for the release of funding from the Farm Sustainability Payment to other workstreams?
10. Are there any key barriers or enablers related to funding?
11. How was the timeline for the FAP workstreams developed?
12. Is there further detail beyond 2026?
13. How is the transition from current schemes to future schemes being managed? And have there been any challenges related to this?
 - The desk research showed there is a gap between Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) ending and Farming with Nature starting. Would it be possible to explore this a bit further.
14. How has communication with stakeholders been managed?
 - The desk research showed that a communications strategy has been produced, is this available publicly?
15. What processes are in place to promote compliance?
 - Please could you provide an update on the Farm Sustainability Standards
16. Are the appropriate governance structures in place to provide oversight across FAP?
17. Are DAERA teams sufficiently resourced (capacity and capability) to deliver the scheme and ensure join up and adaptive management?
 - What teams are in place within DAERA to support the FAP? Co-ordination, delivery, monitoring roles.
18. Are delivery partners sufficiently resourced (capacity and capability) to deliver the scheme?
19. What support is DAERA providing to stakeholders including farmers and land managers to deliver FAP actions?

A3.1.4 Monitoring and evaluation

20. How was the monitoring and evaluation workstream within the FAP designed?
21. Have any evaluation metrics at workstream level been developed?
22. Noted that there were plans to share findings through an annual report, has an annual report been produced yet? Or do you know when the first annual report will be published?

A3.1.5 Document review

23. Other DAERA colleagues to interview
24. Key additional documents published by DAERA to include in the review, beyond those listed below

Annex 4 Workshop brief

This note contains information for the workshop we are inviting you to attend. It includes:

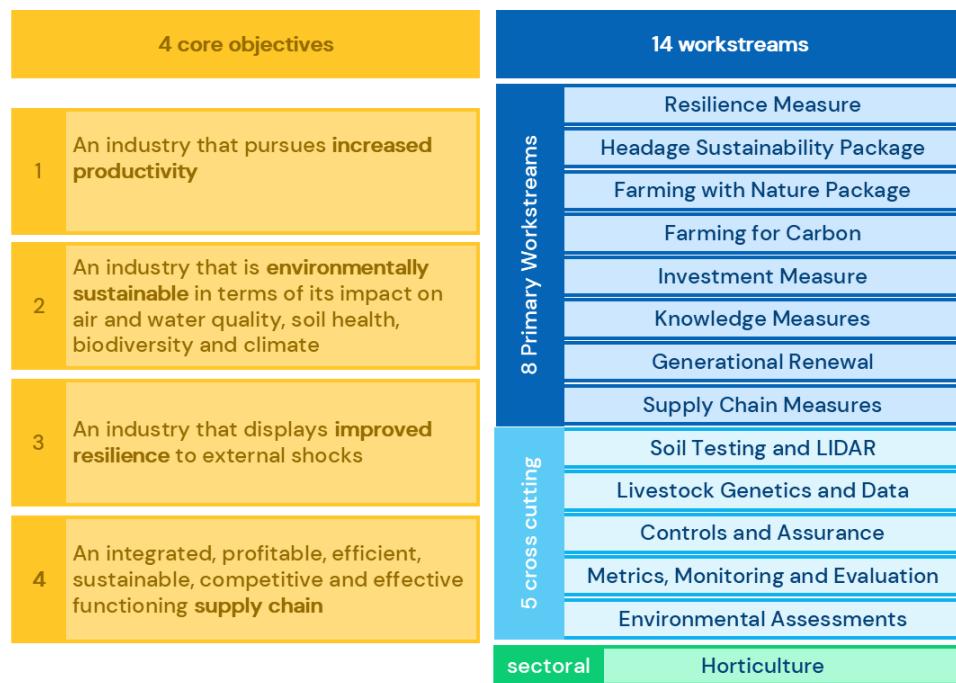
- A background section about the study, including an outline of the Environmental Policy System Review Tool
- Key workshop details and objectives
- Links to the pre-read materials
- A provisional workshop agenda

A4.1 Study background

The Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) mission is to protect and improve the environment by holding government and other public authorities to account. Part of this role involves monitoring, critically assessing and reporting on the government's progress in improving the natural environment.

The OEP has commissioned an independent consultancy, ICF, working in partnership with CECAN and Matthew Baumann Associates, to conduct a policy review of agri-environment, rural incentive schemes and regulations to be carried out for Northern Ireland (NI), focusing on The Future Agricultural Policy (FAP). The FAP sets out four key objectives and 14 workstreams, as shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 5.1 Figure showing FAP objectives and workstreams



To ensure that the OEP can focus their efforts on critically assessing and monitoring progress of FAP, the OEP are asking for experts in the field of environmental, agricultural, and social science/policy to share their opinions on FAP progress towards the objectives and to highlight any risks to the achievement of the objectives.

In this context, we will facilitate this workshop. We will use the Environmental Policy System Review Tool (EPSR) to support our conversation, see Figure 1.2. This tool was developed for the OEP by ICF team as part of a study to develop frameworks and tools which can be used by OEP to support future analysis related to the development and delivery status of high-level and broad ranging environmental policies.

A4.1.1 EPSR framework

The workshop will use the EPSR framework to assess the strengths, weaknesses, implications, and prospects of the FAP. The framework will explore the vision, strategy, action plan, delivery, evidence and monitoring & evaluation of the FAP.

Figure 5.2 Figure outlining the six core components of the EPSR tool

EPSR Framework	
Vision	a description of the aim of the portfolio, policy, programme along with the associated targets which indicate the desired outcomes and metrics for success.
Evidence	the evidence used to underpin the vision and targets, and the associated strategy, plan and implementation arrangements.
Strategy	an articulation of the approach and associated 'change mechanisms' along with specific 'actions' that will be used to address the pressures, solve the problem(s), deliver the targets, and realise the vision. This could include a mental model or theory of change for how the portfolio, programme, or policy is expected to achieve its outcomes.
Plan	a plan that defines the level of funding required and available for delivery, and some of the preparatory steps required to establish the portfolio, programme or policy
Delivery	how the portfolio, policy or programme is managed, the capacity and capability of people to deliver the strategy, and governance systems to support it.
Evaluation & Learning	how the portfolio, policy, or programme will be assessed over time and how the evidence will be used.

A4.2 Workshop plan

A4.2.1 Key information

The workshop will be hosted on the **4th of February 2025** and will last 3.5 hours. The workshop will start at 9.30am and finish at 1.00pm. A provisional agenda is shown in Annex 1, please note that this is subject to change.

The workshop will be hosted in Belfast in a meeting room provided by the OEP. The location is:

**Scottish Provident Building,
7 Donegal Square West,
Belfast,
BT1 6JH**

A4.2.2 Workshop Objectives

This workshop will aim to:

- Discuss the adequacy of policy components that are in place for the FAP for achieving key objectives set out in the policy.
- Identify key areas of concern and risks for successful delivery.
- Identify priority areas for OEP monitoring linked to the NI Environmental Improvement Plan

The study team will use the information gathered throughout the workshop to inform the final report for this study.

A4.2.3 Pre-read materials

Participants may wish to familiarise themselves with some pre-read materials which will be circulated at least one week prior to the workshop. This will include:

- A summary of some published information on the FAP represented in a EPSR diagram in the Miro board⁹⁰
- The list of documents used to populate [the Miro board](#).
- The previous [report on the EPSR Framework](#).

A4.2.4 Data Searches

To populate the framework, the ICF team reviewed and extracted information about the FAP from all key policy documents related to the policy decisions and DAERA's consultation on FAP. The study team also reviewed several documents related to the Future Farm Support and Development programme, including a ministerial statement, a presentation to the Ulster Farming Union and supporting documentation for the Communications Strategy. The study team also reviewed DAERA website updates and publications related to specific workstreams including the Farm Sustainability Payment and the Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme.

The ICF team also reviewed and extracted information from several stakeholder position papers. The following stakeholders wrote position papers and expressed their opinions on the Future Agriculture Policy, the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group, established in June 2021, which includes representatives from the Dairy Council NI, NI Agricultural Producers Association, NI Environment Link (including National Trust, Nature Friendly Farming, RSPB, and Ulster Wildlife), NI Food and Drink Association, NI Meat Exporters Association, Ulster Farmers Union, British Veterinary Association, and NI Grain Trade Association; the NI Local Government Association (NILGA); the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU); and NI Environmental Link (NIEL). The links to these papers can be found in Annex 2.

A4.2.5 EPSR Evaluative Questions

The following questions are related to each component of the EPSR framework and will guide the discussion during the workshop.

Vision

⁹⁰ Miro is a digital collaboration platform and online whiteboard used for brainstorming, project management, and team collaboration

- Does the FAP have there a clear and consistent vision?
- Does the FAP clearly identify a way to deliver this vision?
- Are there specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based targets with clear pathways to achievement?

Strategy

- Is there a clear theory of change?
- Does the strategy adequately and appropriately recognise and address the environmental drivers and pressures in NI?
- Are the (8 core, 5 cross cutting, and 1 sectoral) workstreams within FAP appropriate and sufficient to meet objective 2 which is relates to environmental sustainability?

Evidence

- Is there a comprehensive understanding of the environmental/agri-food system including key drivers and pressures in NI?
- Is there sufficient evidence available that identifies the change required to deliver the FAP core objectives?
- Is there evidence that supports the effectiveness and applicability of the proposed workstreams for achieving FAP objectives?
- Are gaps in data and evidence known and are there plans to address these gaps?

Monitoring and evaluation

- Is there a purpose driven, informative, adaptive and robust monitoring and evaluation plan?
- Is there a monitoring and evaluation approach that is cross cutting as well as workstream specific?
- Are monitoring and evaluation plans and findings shared among appropriate teams and stakeholders?

Action Plan

- Is there a sufficient plan of action to deliver FAP?
- Are the FAP workstreams sufficiently funded?
- Are there sufficient plans to verify compliance?
- Have DAERA secured sufficient engagement and buy-in to ensure uptake of FAP?

Delivery & Management

- Are the appropriate governance structures in place to provide oversight across FAP?
- Are teams sufficiently resourced (capacity and capability) to deliver the scheme and ensure join up and adaptive management?
- Are delivery partners sufficiently resourced (capacity and capability) to deliver the scheme?

- Are DAERA providing sufficient support to stakeholders (farmers and land managers) to deliver FAP actions?

A4.2.6 Workshop information and privacy notice

The workshop will be recorded for the purposes of notetaking. This recording will not be shared with any parties beyond ICF or the OEP and will be destroyed as soon as the report is completed. The workshop participation and outputs will be handled in accordance with the OEP's Privacy Notice, which is committed to protecting the privacy and security of participants information in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR). The OEP's Personal Information Charter sets out the standards which are upheld when processing personal information, with further guidance on how to view, change, or remove this data. Your contributions will remain anonymous, but we may use some anonymous quotes in reporting for illustrative purposes.

A4.2.7 Draft agenda

Please note that this is a provisional agenda for the workshop.

Time	Agenda Item	Description
9.30-10.00	Welcome & Registration	Participant arrivals and registration
10.00-10.05	Introduction	Introduction to the project and the work
10.05-10.30	ICF Presentation: FAP framework	The ICF team will introduce the workshop and outline the agenda. They will then provide a descriptive overview of the FAP using the developed EPSR framework.
10.30-11.10	Exercise 1: Where is FAP at now? Strategic level – policy design	As a group we will go through the following components of the framework – vision, strategy, evidence and evaluation. We will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of FAP related to those components only and identify potential risks to achieving its intended outcomes. This discussion will stay at a strategic level.
11.10-11.25	Break	Tea and scones

		As a group we will go through the following components of the framework – action plan and delivery.
11.25-12.25	Exercise 2: Where is FAP at now? Strategic and workstream level – policy implementation	We will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of FAP and identify potential risks to achieving intended outcomes related to implementation. This discussion will initially start at a strategic level and then move towards workstream level. We will focus the discussion on three key workstreams (1) Farm Sustainability Payment (2) Farming with Nature (3) Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. ⁹¹ This session could include breakout group discussions focused on these workstreams.
12.25-12.50	Exercise 3: What are the priority areas for OEP to scrutinise and / or monitor?	As a group we will work to identify and agree areas of FAP where participants feel the OEP should focus its monitoring and reporting work and why. We will invite all of you to vote for your top three areas for scrutiny.
12.50-1.00	Final Discussion	We will summarise the key takeaways from the session and the next steps for the work.
1.00	Lunch	Optional post workshop sandwiches

⁹¹ These workstreams have been identified in collaboration with the OEP as workstreams that are key to addressing the drivers and pressures of biodiversity in Northern Ireland.

Annex 5 FAP Workstreams

Table A5.1 FAP Workstreams

FAP Scheme	
8 core workstreams	
Farm Sustainability Payment	An area-based payment for active agriculture and horticulture businesses that will provide a basic safety net whilst delivering environmental outcomes.
Beef Sustainability Measure including Beef Carbon Reduction and Suckler Cow Schemes	Designed to boost productivity, efficiency, profitability and sustainability within the beef sector. The Suckler Cow Scheme incentivises earlier calving, as cows that first calve at an earlier age are more productive. The Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme incentivises the reduction of slaughter age for clean beef animals through a tiered payment system.
Farming with Nature	The scheme will support farmers across all land types to make substantial contributions to environmental improvements and sustainability through financial incentives and an outcomes-based approach. A range of measures would be encouraged including woodland planting, peatland management, agroforestry, hedgerow plantation and field management.
Farming for Carbon	The scheme will support carbon farming practices such as peatland rewetting, improved land and soil management, and measures to reduce carbon in livestock farming, such as improving feed additives and enhancing genetics.
Investment Measure	The scheme will provide on-farm capital investment to support policy goals. Key guidelines include prioritising certain investments, considering alternatives to capital support, avoiding overcapitalisation of NI farms, and promoting collaboration.
Knowledge Measure	Knowledge transfer and innovation programmes to enhance productivity, sustainability and resilience. Key principles include alignment with DAERA policies, evidence-based approaches, integration with other programs, peer learning, cooperation, continuous professional development, and the use of both face-to-face and online delivery methods.
Generational Renewal	This program will provide farming families with the knowledge, skills, support, and incentives needed to plan the successful transfer of farm management and inheritance to qualified successors. The goal is to ensure the transfer occurs at an optimal time, considering both the successor's readiness and the retiring farmer's needs and aspirations.
Supply Chain Measure	To build an information infrastructure for transparency and effective market signal transmission among supply chain partners.
5 cross cutting schemes	
Soil testing and Lidar	To implement a Soil Nutrient Health Scheme to establish a baseline for soil nutrient health and carbon stocks, making

FAP Scheme	
	participation a condition for receiving the Resilience payment.
Livestock Genetics and Data	To require the registration of sires for all calves born and the provision of specific data from suckler cows.
Controls and Assurance	To replace current standards with simplified Farm Sustainability Standards tailored to local needs. This system will apply to the Resilience Measure and Farming for Nature measures, focusing on education over penalties. Fixed Penalty Notices and training courses may be introduced to improve compliance.
Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation	The FAP proposes high-level metrics such as net GHG emissions, TFP, nutrient balances, ammonia emissions, indicator species, gross value added, and net farm income. These metrics will establish baselines, monitor progress, and enable benchmarking against other regions
Environmental Assessments	This involves conducting environmental assessments for the draft FAP, including rural needs, equality, regulatory impact, strategic environmental, and habitat regulations considerations.
Sectoral Workstream	
Horticulture	This workstream focuses on production horticulture, including food, ornamental, and pharmaceutical crops. It involves developing programmes with key stakeholders, improving supply chain integration through collaboration, and building partnerships for R&D and innovation. The strategy also provides access to knowledge transfer and innovation support, facilitates industry learning, optimises data precision for decision-making, and supports businesses in adopting new technology.

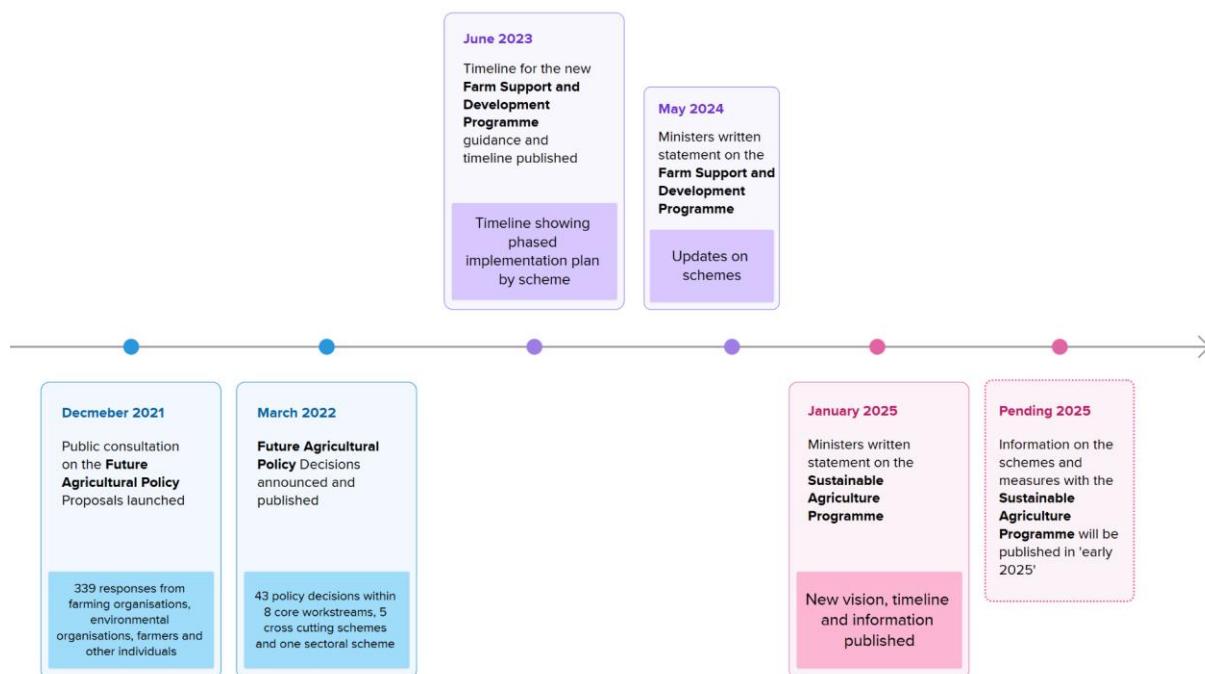
Annex 6 Sustainable Agriculture Programme Background

A6.1 Overview

The Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP) was announced on the 29th of January 2025 and will replace the Future Agriculture Programme (FAP). The Sustainable Agriculture Programme is the latest iteration; the policy had previously been renamed as the Farm Support and Development Programme in 2023, as shown in Table A6.1.

The announcement was accompanied by the publication of a new vision statement and updated timeline. At the time of conducting the stakeholder workshop and writing this report, the updated information on the schemes and measures had not been published. Existing supporting material from 2022 such as the FAP Environmental Assessment Paper and the Habitats Regulation Assessment were republished.

Table A6.1 Timeline from the FAP to the Sustainable Agriculture Programme



A6.1.2 Objectives

The overall objective of the SAP is “to transition to a more sustainable farming sector by seeking to implement policies and strategies that benefit our climate and environment, while, very importantly, supporting our economically and socially significant agri-food sector”.⁹² These SAP outcomes closely align with those set out in the FAP; however, the key difference is that the first outcome is ‘improved environmental sustainability’ which has been prioritised over ‘enhanced productivity’.⁹³

⁹² [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

⁹³ DAERA interview

The SAP sets out four key outcomes in the vision statement⁹⁴:

1. An industry with **improved environmental sustainability** in terms of its impact on, and guardianship of, air and water quality, soil health and biodiversity, while making its fair contribution to achieving net zero carbon targets. This outcome is an integral part of the new Green Growth Strategy and associated Climate Action Plan.
2. An industry with **enhanced productivity** in international terms as a means to sustained profitability, closing the productivity gap which has been opening up with other major suppliers.
3. An industry that displays **stronger resilience** to external shocks (such as market and currency volatility, extreme weather events, etc.) which are ever more frequent and to which the industry has become very exposed.
4. An industry that **operates within an effective functioning supply chain**, with clear transmission of market signals and an overriding focus on high quality food and the end consumer.

A6.1.3 Schemes

Information gleaned from the ministerial statement⁹⁵ and the updated timeline⁹⁶ indicates that the schemes within SAP will largely remain the same as in the FAP, as shown in Table A6.2. The updated information on the schemes has not been published so at this stage it is not possible to outline whether there are any material changes to details or mechanisms set out within the detail of each scheme. The ministerial statement indicates that the Farming with Nature scheme is one of the “top priorities” and this was echoed in the interview with the DAERA official.

A6.1.4 Timeline and implementation

The phased implementation approach is carried forward into the SAP. However, the timeline for most workstreams has changed, except for the Farm Sustainability Payment and Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme, which are on track. As shown in Table A6.2, when the 2025 updated SAP timeline⁹⁷ is compared to the initial timeline set out in the 2023 Farm Support and Development Leaflet⁹⁸ most schemes have been delayed. The Farming with Nature scheme is the only scheme where the timeline has been brought forward compared to the FSD 2023 timeline; this aligns with the prioritisation of this scheme announced in the ministerial statement.

A6.1.5 Communication strategy

The ministerial statement focused on outlining a clear communication plan.⁹⁹ This includes the release of a hard copy ‘SAP Newsletter’ to farm businesses and a series of Awareness Events hosted across a range of venues in NI.

⁹⁴ [Sustainable Agriculture Programme: Vision | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁹⁵ [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

⁹⁶ [Sustainable Agricultural Programme Overview Timeline | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁹⁷ [Sustainable Agricultural Programme Overview Timeline | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁹⁸ [Future Farm Support and Development](#)

⁹⁹ [Written Ministerial Statement - Update on DAERA's New Programme of Farm Support 29 January 2025.PDF](#)

A6.1.6 Co-design process

The ministerial statement also explained that the SAP had been developed through a co-design process with the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group. Stakeholders at the workshop explained that the co-design process can work but that it also comes with “*lots of caveats and compromise*”. A few stakeholders questioned whether the process could be called co-design as the stakeholder group were presented with options rather than being supported to develop their own ideas. Others explained that the co-design process is resource intensive and linked to delays.

Table A6.2 FAP to SAP analysis

Table Key
Advanced, timeline brought forward compared to 2023 timeline
On track, timeline matches the 2023 timeline
Minor delays, less than 1 year delay compared to 2023 timeline
Major delays, 1 year or more delay compared to 2023 timeline

FAP Scheme	FSD Scheme	FSD 2023 Timeline ¹⁰⁰	SAP scheme	SAP Category	SAP 2025 Timeline ¹⁰¹
8 core workstreams					
Farm Sustainability Payment	Farm Sustainability Payment	2025 Transition Payment; 2026 full implementation	Farm Sustainability Payment	Payment schemes	2025 Transition Payment; 2026 full implementation
Headage Sustainability including Beef Carbon Reduction and Suckler Cow Schemes	Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme	2024 Year 1	Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme	Payment schemes	2025 Year 2
	Suckler Cow Scheme	2025	Suckler Cow Scheme	Payment schemes	Early-2025
Farming with Nature	Farming with Nature	Late-2023 pilot; 2026 full scheme	Farming with Nature	Payment schemes	Mid-2025 full scheme
Farming for Carbon	Farming for Carbon Schemes	Late-2023	Farming for Carbon Schemes	Support Programmes	Early-2025
	Livestock Dietary Emission Challenge Fund	Late-2023	Farming for Carbon Schemes	Support Programmes	Late-2023
	Carbon Benchmarking Programme	Late-2023	Carbon Footprinting Project	Data Platforms	Late-2025

¹⁰⁰ [Future Farm Support and Development](#)¹⁰¹ [Sustainable Agricultural Programme Overview Timeline | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

FAP Scheme	FSD Scheme	FSD 2023 Timeline ¹⁰⁰	SAP scheme	SAP Category	SAP 2025 Timeline ¹⁰¹
Investment Measure		2025	Capital Investment Scheme	Payment schemes	2026
Knowledge Measure		Early-2024	Farming for Sustainability – Knowledge Transfer	Support Programmes	Early-2025 knowledge; Late-2025 Innovation
Generational Renewal		Late-2023 pilot; 2025 full scheme	Farming for the Generations	Payment schemes	2025 Pilot; late-2026 full scheme
Supply Chain Measure	Supply Chain Schemes	Mid-2025	Supply Chain Scheme	Payment schemes	Late-2026
5 cross cutting schemes					
Soil testing and Lidar	Soil Nutrient Health Scheme	Phased implementation across Zones: 2023 Zone 2; 2024 Zone 3; 2025 Zone 4	Soil Nutrient Health Scheme	Data Platforms	Mid-2024 to mid-2025 Zone 4
Livestock Genetics and Data	Ruminant Genetics Programme	Mid-2023	Bovine Genetics	Data Platforms	2026 commencement of data collection
Controls and Assurance	Farm Sustainability Standards	Not detailed	Not detailed	N/A	N/A
Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation	N/A	N/A	N/A		N/A
Environmental Assessments	N/A	N/A	FAP Environmental Assessments republished		N/A
Sectoral Workstream					
Horticulture	Horticulture Sector Growth Support Scheme	2024	Horticulture Schemes	Payment schemes	Mid-2025
	Innovation Encouragement and support Measure	2025		Payment schemes	
Other schemes					
N/A	N/A	N/A	Protein Crops Scheme	Payment schemes	2025 extended pilot

Annex 7 EPSR: Evaluative Questions

Below are the evaluative questions, those not relevant to this study have been deleted.

Component	Evaluation Question
Vision	
Vision	<p>Is there a clear description of the aims of the portfolio/policy/programme?</p> <p>Are the benefits of achieving the aims clearly described?</p> <p>Are the aims consistent across programmes of work and do they have government wide commitment and buy-in?</p> <p>Is there general agreement and buy-in from stakeholders on the vision?</p>
Targets	<p>Have government set targets which are specific, measurable, relevant and time based?</p> <p>Are these targets consistent with one other and do they have a clear pathway to achievement?</p> <p>Are the targets linked to the key dimensions of the vision?</p> <p>Are underpinned by sets of interim targets and indicators to enable monitoring of progress overtime to ensure delivery is on track to meet targets?</p>
Evidence	
Drivers & Pressures	<p>Is there a comprehensive understanding of the environmental system including the drivers, pressures, enablers, dependencies & influences?</p> <p>Has there been appropriate prioritisation of the key drivers and pressures which need to be addressed?</p>
Scientific Evidence	<p>Is there sufficient natural, social and economic evidence available that identifies the change required to deliver targets?</p> <p>Does the evidence identify the priorities for change at a spatial level?</p> <p>Has the baseline state of nature been clarified at sufficient spatial granularity?</p> <p>Have the appropriate ex-ante assessments been conducted that identify the effectiveness, costs, feasibility and acceptance of proposed interventions?</p> <p>Are the gaps in the data and evidence known, and is there a plan for addressing these gaps?</p>
Strategy	
Logic	<p>Is there a clear description, for example in a theory of change that describes the theory of how the strategy will deliver on the targets?</p> <p>Does the strategy adequately and appropriately recognise and address the drivers and pressures?</p> <p>Are the mechanisms likely to achieve the expected contribution?</p> <p>Is it likely that the strategy will contribute sufficiently to key targets?</p> <p>How are portfolio/policy/programme interdependencies captured and understood?</p> <p>How have/are stakeholders engaged in portfolio/policy/programme development? Has their buy-in been secured?</p> <p>How has/is spatial planning and prioritisation been/being incorporated into policy development and delivery?</p>

Actions and interventions that may be considered in the logic include:

Protecting or restoring nature through mobilising funds or payment schemes	Is there a strategy for mobilising the appropriate funds for supporting nature? Are incentive schemes outlined appropriate for the delivery of the required environmental outcomes?
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Designation or management of an area	Are areas for management or designations spatially targeted considering factors such as biodiversity and ecosystem services? Are the targeted areas in line with local and national priorities? Are plans for how the programme works in protected areas adequate?
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Plan	
Action plan	Is there a clear and coherent action plan for the portfolio/policy/programme? Is there enough money in the portfolio/policy/programme to deliver the scale of environmental change that is articulated in the targets? Has the legislative process been sufficiently considered within the timescales of delivery? Is there evidence that adequate resources have been allocated to delivery - both scale and continuity of resourcing? Are the risks and assumptions to delivery been identified?

Some of the elements the implementation plan should cover include:

Enforcement & Compliance Plans:	Is there a plan and appropriate resourcing for the enforcement of regulatory and control measures? Are the regulatory measures being enforced effectively and fairly?
Paying for public goods	Have the appropriate funding streams to support action for nature been mobilised? Is the funding sufficient to deliver the appropriate actions whilst also providing value for money?
Engagement & buy-in of the vision and strategy	Are stakeholders appropriately informed of the relevant suite of government actions that fall under the portfolio/policy/programme? Are stakeholders aware of and understand their role in delivery of policies? Do they comply with the policies? Are they involved in the continual development and design of policy improvement where relevant?

Delivery	
Strategic oversight and governance	How is oversight role given legitimacy/powers to address roles, responsibilities, structures, systems, decision making/leadership? Is there a team that manages the streams of work at the portfolio/policy/programme level to ensure co-ordination and delivery of work? Is there a team providing strategic support and advice to ensure effective delivery of actions? Is there a team monitoring and managing risks? Are there the appropriate governance systems to enable adaptive management of programmes and projects so that necessary changes can be implemented in response to MEL findings?

Some of the delivery issues to be considered include:

Capacity, capability and resourcing of DAERA teams	Are the appropriate DAERA teams assigned roles and responsibilities that are well understood? Do the teams have the capacity and capability to deliver on their tasks? Are DAERA staff aware of and collaborate with other relevant teams and partners to ensure effective delivery? Are the teams aware of the different streams of work and are able contribute across multiple issues to support the delivery of the overall strategy?
Capacity, capability and resourcing of delivery partners	Are the appropriate delivery partners assigned roles and responsibilities that are well understood? Do the delivery partners have the capacity and capability to deliver on their tasks? Are delivery partners aware of and collaborate with other relevant teams and partners to ensure effective delivery? Are delivery partners sufficiently empowered to adapt and evolve their strategies and actions in order to tailor them to contexts and achieve impacts?
Engaging, collaborating, and working with the relevant stakeholders	Is there sufficient and appropriate communication with stakeholders to keep them aware of developments in the policy area? Is advice and guidance provided sufficient to support stakeholders in complying with regulation? Is the advice and guidance provided sufficient to support stakeholders in taking advantage of different schemes available? Are government and engaging and listening to stakeholder's feedback on how the strategy is being delivered?

Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation	Have the needs, purposes and audiences for MEL been articulated? By and with whom? How are accountability and learning purposes being addressed by MEL? Is the MEL activity appropriate to the portfolio/programme/policy attributes? Are the MEL activities feasible given available resources and expertise? Is MEL activity reported on and shared publicly so relevant stakeholders are able to access information on progress of the portfolio against targets and milestones?
Learning	Are the MEL findings shared amongst the appropriate teams? Do the portfolio management teams provide strategic advice and guidance to support teams to adapt work based on evaluation findings?

Annex 8 FAP Workstream Targets

Table A8.1 FAP Workstream Targets

Workstream	SMART Targets
Farm Sustainability Measure Beef Sustainability Package Investment Measure Knowledge and Innovation Measure Generational Renewal Supply Chain Measure Ruminant Genetics Programme Controls and Assurance Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation Environmental Assessment	No specific workstream level targets - objectives and aims are outlined but not accompanied by time bound and quantifiable targets
Farming With Nature	No specific targets - links to existing targets - UN Leaders' Pledge for Nature by 2030
Farming for Carbon	No specific targets - links to existing targets - The Forests for Our Future Programme, launched in 2020, has the objective of planning 9,000 ha of new woodland by 2030
Soil Nutrient Health Scheme	<p>Specific, measurable objectives but not time based: This Measure has the following four objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="743 1012 1395 1125">1. To establish a robust baseline of soil nutrient status for all productive farmland in NI within the lifetime of the scheme, for up to 100% of participating farms. <li data-bbox="743 1125 1395 1320">2. To deliver baseline data on soil carbon stocks and modelling research to provide a better understanding of changes in soil carbon stocks across agricultural grasslands, which can inform on their carbon sequestration potential, for up to 100% of participating farms. <li data-bbox="743 1320 1395 1462">3. To deliver a LiDAR dataset and determine a baseline for the carbon stored within the above ground biomass and determine the carbon sequestration potential across NI's farmed landscape. <li data-bbox="743 1462 1395 1529">4. To provide Hydrologically Sensitive Area (HSA) risk mapping for the NI landscape.
Horticulture	No specific targets in FAP Decisions document ¹⁰² - the consultation document sets specific and measurable targets: The horticulture industry aims to double its output from £100m to £200m+ and increase its contribution to NI's agriculture output from 5% to 10% over the next 5-7 years. It seeks sustainable growth through collaboration, operates within an efficient and competitive supply chain, and is driven by knowledge and data. The industry focuses on innovation, environmental sustainability, professional development, and leadership to reduce market barriers and enhance its overall impact.

¹⁰² Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland (Final) (002).pdf

Annex 9 Compliance Standards

A9.1 Farm Sustainability Standards¹⁰³

Sustainability Standard	High Level Requirements
Protection of Waters from Pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Protection of waters from pollution caused by nitrates and phosphates – nutrients.
Protection of Habitats and Biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Protection of designated sites and permanent pastures. – Protection of wetlands and bogs for their biodiversity and carbon storage importance. – Protection of semi-natural habitats and smaller habitats (< 2ha); and – Prevention of encroachment by invasive species.
Protection of Landscape, Archaeological and Heritage Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Protection of landscape features. – Protection of archaeological features; and – Protection of heritage features
Protection of Soils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Protection of soil as a resource by preventing soil erosion and nutrient leaching
Food and feed, herd and flock health and biosecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Implementation of biosecurity measures on farm to minimise the risk of introduction and spread of disease – Requirement to comply with disease detection, control and eradication measures. – Requirement to comply with measures ensuring the production of food safe for human consumption.
Welfare and Protection of Farmed Livestock (including Transport)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Protection of the welfare of calves. – Protection of the welfare of pigs. – Protection of the welfare of farmed animals. – Welfare of animals during transport – Protection of welfare of poultry may be included.
Livestock Identification and Traceability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Identification and registration of cattle to facilitate their traceability; and – Identification and registration of sheep and goats to facilitate their traceability

¹⁰³ Master - Sustainable Agriculture Programme QA - 10 March 2025.PDF

A9.2 Cross-compliance Standards¹⁰⁴

A9.2.1.1 Statutory Management Requirements

- SMR1 Protection of water against Nitrates pollution
- SMR2 Conservation of Wild Birds
- SMR3 Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna
- SMR4 Food and Feed Law
- SMR5 Restrictions on the use of substances having hormonal or thyrostatic action and beta antagonists in farm animals
- SMR6 Pig identification and registration
- SMR7 Cattle ID and registration
- SMR8 Sheep and goat identification and registration
- SMR9 Prevention, control and eradication of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE)
- SMR10 Restrictions on the use of plant protection products
- SMR11 Minimum standards for protection of calves.
- SMR12 Minimum standards for the protection of pigs
- SMR13 Protection of animals kept for farming purposes

A9.2.1.2 Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition requirements

- Farmers must maintain all their agricultural land in GAEC.
- GAEC1 Establishment of buffer strips along watercourses.
- GAEC2 Irrigation Authorisations
- GAEC3 Protection of ground water against pollution.
- GAEC4 Minimum soil cover
- GAEC5 Minimum land management reflecting site specific conditions to limit erosion
- GAEC6 Maintenance of Soil Organic Matter level through appropriate practices including a ban on burning arable stubble, except for plant health reasons.
- GAEC7 Retention of landscape features.

¹⁰⁴ [Background Evidence Paper V2.pdf](#)