

Advisory services in the United Kingdom: exploring ‘fit for purpose’ criteria

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Abstract

The concept of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS) offers a multi-actor perspective designed to deal with the complexity and the diversity of information sources and channels in rural areas. Advisory services are a subsystem of AKIS that are meant to provide farmers with relevant knowledge and networks around innovation, as well as adjustments to policy and markets in agriculture. It is contested whether a fragmented AKIS and associated advisory services is problematic and policies should strive to enhance its integration and coherence, not least because the multiplicity of service providers is confusing to farmers and land managers. Other authors argue that with the diversity of farmers’ practices and information needs, an array of providers that operate simultaneously is needed to address these needs while a uniform national approach is neither useful nor necessary. The current UK AKIS and the advisory sub-system are characterised by a diverse advisory community and fragmentation. This paper takes the discussion beyond fragmentation to investigate whether the UK advisory system are ‘fit for purpose’. We explore the characteristics of advisory services by means of identifying criteria for well-functioning services and investigating to what extent they are currently met. Data were collected in an online survey of 80 agricultural advisory organisations across the UK. Findings show that most criteria are met but a number of client groups are not targeted by advisory services and some organisations use only a narrow range of advisory methods.

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