

The Organic Conversion Information Service – have your say

The Organic Advisory Service (OAS) has delivered this service in England since 1996 and the contract has recently been extended to March 2007, which will give a period of 10 years continuous delivery. The only disruption to the service was of course the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001. Prospective producers will continue to be encouraged to contact the OCIS Helpline on 0117 922 7707 where they will be introduced to the service, provided with information and, where appropriate, passed on to the OAS for the delivery of the free visits that have been the trademark of the service.

The Defra website www.defra.gov.uk/farm/organic/farmers/ocis.htm has the following statement: “The amount of money available annually for OCIS is determined in advance. In order to avoid budgetary overrun, Defra in collaboration with OCIS need to ensure that the service is channelled to those businesses capable of making a viable contribution to achieving Defra Organic Action Plan commitments for the long term sustainable growth of the sector. In order to do this, it should be pointed out that not every call to the Helpdesk will necessarily lead to an on farm visit.”

Defra has focused considerable attention on OCIS in recent months with the commissioning of what was the third major review of the service in its history. The review was carried out by ADAS Consulting and Organic Centre Wales. EFRC is a partner member of OCW and this led to the slightly bizarre situation of having to be excluded from some of the activities of what is usually a very open partnership. Anyone wishing to view the final report can do so on the Defra website at: <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/reports/organiccon/default.asp>. In broad terms the report concluded that OCIS provided a valuable service to farmers and contributed to the effective use of public funds such as organic conversion payments. It made a number of recommendations intended to improve various aspects of the service. It also concluded that OCIS should remain a free service, it should be run as a separate service given the detailed and specific nature of conversion advice, it should remain a national service and not be regionalised.

The review has clearly set Defra thinking as a full consultation on the future of OCIS was announced on 12th April. The consultation net has been cast very wide across the food production sector, a wide range of environmental groups, development agencies, local councils, certification bodies and research institutions among others. Anyone can contribute to the consultation process by going to <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/ocis-future/index.htm>. If you have any views or have been a recipient of the service in the past I would encourage you to participate. In broad terms it covers the structure of the service, access to the service, delivery of the service, the scope of the advice offered, signposting to and from OCIS, accreditation of advisors, and funding.

Defra are working on this consultation as part of an early start to develop proposals for taking the service forward from the start of the 2007/08 financial year. The consultation touches on specific areas as outlined above but responses need not necessarily be confined to the questions posed. It is clear that the organic market is continuing to grow with dramatic growth rates in some sectors. It is also clear from other work that we are doing in the organic vegetable sector that demand could run ahead of supply thus reversing the trend in import reduction seen in recent years. There is a clear case for continuing the service in my view but the shape that it takes will depend very much on the responses to this consultation.

Roger Hitchings: Head of Advisory Services, OAS