

We all know that life isn't a dress rehearsal, a dry run; it's the warts-n-all live-firing real deal. But while we learn, grow and improve through mistakes and feedback imagine if we lived "in Beta" not fully functional, waiting for the next update, we would get nothing achieved and relentless "down-time" would drive all around us bonkers!

So what is "Beta Testing"; what is a "soft launch"; are these just euphemisms for poorly thought through policies, excuses for incomplete products? Or are they genuine opportunities to learn about and contribute to the development of something truly fit for purpose. You might not have been familiar with these phases at all until recently but "BETA this is a new service – your feedback will help us to improve it," is a phrase that has been staring out at me from my computer for some time now.

Having spent nearly 10 years getting their previous system into a pretty reasonable shape the RPA chucked the baby out with the bath water and have attempted to launch a new IT system. This isn't a shiny new all singing, all dancing version though, this is the meccano version, the excruciating drip drip of new functions; like hiring a car and having to pop back to the shop because the manufacturer thought you could "test" it with only three wheels and no gears. The new system doesn't work and one has the feeling no matter how much feedback anyone gives it's not going to anytime soon. So much so that while writing Philip Hogan announced that he would "look favourably on extending the 15

Life in Beta



May deadline. "Oh how magnanimous of you oh great lord and master BUT you have to shoulder some responsibility for the tardiness of delivery and don't let the RPA off so easily! Extending the Beta period is not a solution, we need a different kind of Beta, as in Plan B(eta). Unfortunately as we are all too well aware Plan B now introduced sees us all regressing 10 years to fill in paper forms and complete sketch maps.

The RPA have extended the deadline to 15th June and at long last we are able to crack on with the work we need to do. It still appals me however that £154 million was spent on a system not fit for purpose.

It needs to be noted that the farce of this new system not only impacts on BPS claims but also on existing ELS and HLS agreement holders, due to the new requirement to claim payments annually and sign a declaration to confirm that your land is correctly shown on Rural Payments. The strongly worded declarations need some careful consideration as the powers that be look to absolve themselves of any errors in your agreement. The impact goes beyond land management sub-

sidies to impact the recently "soft launched" rural enterprise grants. New rural entrepreneurs, like BPS new entrants and young farmers, are not yet able to register on Rural Payments but this is a prerequisite if they would like to apply for a LEADER grant for a new farm shop or a grant from the LEP for a new winery or any other of a multitude of possible rural growth projects that will generate jobs and contribute to the rural economy.

In tech speak "Beta testing" comes after "Alpha testing" and before the "Release Candidate" and the final adopted or "Gold" version. One has to wonder what, if any "alpha testing" has been done. That is to say what testing and development was done internally by RPA before ruralpayments.service went live (I use the term "live" loosely). With ruralpayments.service abandoned for the time being goodness only knows when we will reach the "release candidate" stage let alone the "gold" stage, will it even be in time for 15th May 2016!?

In the meantime, if you are a registered RPA customer, you might want to turn your attention to "Water Grants" (aka

Catchment Sensitive Farming) "Countryside Productivity" "Countryside Stewardship" "LEADER" and LEP grants, all of which are being "soft launched" as we speak and all of which can make meaningful contributions to your business growth. Water grants can help with everything from covered yards to water course fencing, Countryside Productivity everything from firewood processors to remote crop sensing, LEADER with capital grants of up to £50,000 for business growth and the Local Enterprise Partnership can grant aid investment to the tune of £25,000 for every new job created.

Just make sure your business case is comprehensively stated, it's no good submitting a "beta" version and hoping that from an iterative feedback loop a "gold" version finally emerges. Mere applicants are not afforded the luxury of learning from their mistakes, they aren't able to amend and adjust, to iron out minor (or indeed major) glitches, it has to be right, or risk penalties. Don't bother with Beta go straight for Gold!



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- Basic Payment Scheme
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