

Why it's nice to have options

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The Teagasc Options for Farm Families Programme is designed to encourage new thinking and new ideas, leading to additional income on and off farm.

The programme consists of a series of workshops covering a wide range of topics. Guest farmers who have successfully diversified speak at these workshops and Teagasc specialists are available to answer questions.

Visits to farms with successfully diversified farm enterprises are a vital aspect of the programme. Participants also have the opportunity to network with local development and training agencies.

The Tipperary Options Programme in 2018 took place over four consecutive Tuesday nights in November. The course covered a broad range of topics including artisan food, horticulture, social farming, snail farming and poultry.

Artisan producers

On the first night Patrick Killeen gave an overview of the local Leader group and its role for artisan and food producers.

Con Trass spoke about his apple business giving an insight into his farm shop and displayed some of his produce on the night, which included apples, strawberries, sparkling juice, apple juice and cider vinegar.

Maurice O'Dea from Canvas Brewery shared his experiences of diversifying into craft beer to complement the family tillage enterprise.

John O'Connell shared his experience of integrating truffles into his forestry enterprise and his intention to establish a community of truffle growers.

In the second workshop, Teagasc specialist Stephen Alexander gave an overview of the horticulture industry and highlighted opportunities.

Maeve O'Hare spoke about growing organic lettuce and supplying it locally. She described growing demand from hotels and restaurants for fresh local produce.

Eva Mika from Carlow, who is running a snail farm, explained in detail what this involved.

Stephaney Jaeger Liston explained to the audience about social farming and highlighted the benefits of it for the elderly, people with special needs and those who are rehabilitating from social problems.

The third night explored rural tourism. John Birmingham, Mullinahone, gave an insight into developing out-buildings on his farm to accommodate various events, which include weddings, music concerts and B&B. John has integrated this business



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into his forestry enterprise.

Tipperary Leader group was also present on the night and members gave an overview on the funding available to farmers for diversifying into rural tourism.

Ailbhe Gerard gave an insight into how she made best use of GLAS to enhance the honey bee pollination through the use of the correct seed mix under the wild bird cover action.

She displayed samples of her produce, including beeswax candles, beeswax lip balm and organic honey. She also runs yoga classes on the farm.

Poultry

The final night looked at poultry. Teagasc poultry specialist Michael Duffy gave an overview of the poultry industry and gave ideas of simple options into which farmers could diversify.

The Options Programme looks at:

- The generation of ideas
- Successful case studies
- Grant aid for new start-up businesses through collaborative delivery with external agencies (Leader, Enterprise Ireland)



Kylie Magner and Sean Cooney.

Jack O'Connor explained to the audience about how poultry manure had become an environmental risk on his farm in Limerick. Jack, through collaboration with University College Limerick and local authorities, came up with an innovative and sustainable solution to the problem.

They developed a unit that now uses the poultry manure to heat the chicken houses.

The final speaker on the night was Kylie Magner who is running an organic free-range egg business in Fethard, Co Tipperary.

Kylie is a full-time farmer who grew up on a mixed farming enterprise in New South Wales, Australia. After studying for a bachelor of business in agricultural commerce at Sydney University, Kylie undertook work in various marketing and equestrian roles from Sydney to Japan before landing in Fethard where she met her now husband Billy.

The couple bought a 20-acre holding and started farming sheep and cattle. "I very soon realised that it wasn't

The farmers who could consider diversifying are those:

- With surplus labour capacity
- Looking to change farming enterprise
- Looking to generate extra farm income inside the farm gate

possible to make the holding viable," says Kylie. "So we decided to diversify into the poultry business by converting a three-bay hay shed and starting free-range egg production."

There are currently 300 hens on the farm producing an average of 1,700 eggs per week. The hens spend their days grazing on chemical-free natural grass, with fresh air and clean water. At night, they retire to their warm custom-built shed.

They are moved to fresh grass every week, sometimes every day and they leave behind their organic fertiliser for the pasture to thrive on.

All the eggs are graded on the farm and are sold at markets in Cahir, Fethard and other retail outlets. Some of the produce is also going into hotels.

A new product which Kylie has begun developing is chicken broth. The gelatin in chicken broth has been known to have many positives in restoring human gut health.

Kylie is marketing this based on its many health benefits. Kylie distributes this product locally at farmers' markets and various other outlets.

"My aim is to increase the flock to 1,000 free-range hens," says Kylie. "As for livestock, grass is a great feed and I plan to buy or develop a portable grazing hut so we can move the birds to paddocks which are further from the barn."

Eavaun Carmody

Eavaun Carmody from Dublin purchased Killenure Castle and 16 acres in Dundrum, Co Tipperary, 12 years ago. "My original idea was to use the castle as my family home and run a small drystock farm," says Eavaun. However, this plan soon changed after a local told her about the Dexter breed which originated in Dundrum in 1776.

At the time, there were no Dexters in the area, despite them being a huge part of the local identity of Dundrum. Stock is small in stature, weighing between 350kg and 400kg mature liveweight.

At the time, the breed was not an economically viable option for farmers. The only incentive was the €200 per head in AEOS which was capped at 10 animals.

For Eavaun, there seemed to be little commercial future for Dexters until she met with some international visitors who were intrigued by the story of the Dexter. Eavaun had attended previous options courses run by Michael White in the Teagasc office in Thurles.

Funding sources

"I heard about some of the various sources of funding from the different agencies," says Eavaun. "And I relied a lot on the Teagasc Advisory Service for help in the practical farming elements of the business."

Today, Eavaun farms 800 Dexter cattle through collaborative arrangements with many local farmers. The majority of the finishing takes place on the grounds of the castle and on a rented farm.

All Eavaun's finished animals are slaughtered locally by craft butchers John and Ciaran O'Dwyer. Every part of the animal is used and there is no waste. The hides are sent to Italy and are used to make handbags, wallets, washbags, laptop sachets, diaries and passport covers. Tipperary is the home of hurling and Eavaun has distinctive sliotars made using Dexter leather.

Premium price for meat

The beef is available locally and in other outlets globally at a premium price. The fat of the Dexter is used to make a gourmet dripping. As Eavaun has added value to the carcass of a Dexter, she can afford to offer a premium price to the farmers, with Dexter beef €5.00/kg deadweight – considerably more than that paid for conventional beef. This also allows her to offer her B&B farmers a premium price for their services of grazing animals.

"I want to be able to return as much of the market share to the primary producer as possible," says Eavaun. In the future, Eavaun aspires to secure markets in Hong Kong. She also hopes to secure funding for research into Dexter milk and the benefits of their A2 milk.

Eavaun concludes: "Diversifying in farming can be challenging and farmers who embark on such a journey can feel alienated at times – perseverance is essential!"

The Teagasc Options Programme provides a forum for farmers to share ideas and insights about how they have overcome some of the challenges which they may encounter with their business.



Eavaun Carmody