Diversification

Why it’s nice to have options

Sean Cooney, Teagasc, Thurles

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 insight into his farm shop and displayed some of his produce, including beeswax candles, beewax lip balm and organic honey. He also runs yoga classes on the farm.

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 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.

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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 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."

The Options Programme looks at:

The farmers who could consider diversifying are those:

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The generation of ideas

Successful case studies

Grant aid for new start-up businesses through collaborative delivery with external agencies (Leader, Enterprise Ireland)

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The generation of ideas:

Success in starting and expanding businesses: through collaborative delivery with external agencies (Leader, Enterprise Ireland)

Looking to generate extra farm income inside the farm gate

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 dressing. 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 embrace 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.