

**Event:** Working together for sustainable farming: agri-environmental policy, practice and experience

**Date:** 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2021

**Organiser:** Teagasc

**Participants:** Inge Van Oost, Dr. Katrin Prager, Henry O'Donnell, Alex Datema, Margaret Murray, Mary Mulvey, Dr. Daire O'hUallachain (chair), Dr. David Meredith, Dr. Jack McCarthy

**Re:** Working together for sustainable farming: agri-environmental policy, practice, and experience – Q&A and discussion session.

**Overarching comments:**

- Ensuring that farmers get a fair return for their labour is central to delivering sustainable agriculture.
- Consultation and collaboration requires good, professional level of facilitation.
- Sustainable agriculture objectives should be pursued in all regions.
- There was in-depth discussion about the different capacities of different groups to engage with such initiatives.
- Collaboration between farms can greatly improve efforts to address environmental challenges at a landscape level. Collaboration needs further development in an Irish context.

**There was discussion of the application process involved in Ireland's EIP Initiative open call for proposal, including the following points:**

- There was a huge appetite to engage with the EIP Initiative.
- It was noted that different groups had different capacities to engage. Some groups emerged from previous initiatives, such as the LIFE projects, and already had substantial experience of working together and of applying to similar schemes. Other groups had no prior experience. In some instances good ideas with a clear plan of action was good enough. Other groups availed of third party support.
- There was discussion about the relative advantage of some groups based on prior experience and existing localised supports. This could be construed as an unfair advantage, or as a strong foundation.
- Advisory services can play an important role in supporting collaborative initiatives and broader development of AKIS.
- There was discussion about groups that applied but were not funded through the EIP Initiative. It was noted that funding is always limited so some applications will inevitably be rejected. Managing disappointment is part of the process.
- Some groups did regroup for subsequent applications. Others did not, or did not have the opportunity to do so.
- The Heritage Council supported networking between groups that were accepted and those that were not.
- The EIP Initiative is flexible and it's a pilot process: groups that have been accepted have tried things that didn't work and changed their approaches accordingly. The DAFM has accommodated such changes.

**Charismatic people and projects:**

- There was discussion about a reliance on certain individuals who lend their expertise to a variety of different groups. These people are valuable but it can lead to over-reliance and personality burnout.
- Flagship projects such as the Burren have taught us a lot, including scalability of projects and as a template for sharing knowledge.

**Lessons from the Netherlands' implementation of agri-environmental schemes through regional collectives:**

- Some farmers might not want to go into collective schemes. Alternatively, there is not always enough funding to accept all applicants. In such cases, a decision has to be made by those administering the project.
- As collective projects become established, and personnel gain experience, administrative costs do go down. Monitoring of results remain expensive.
- There can be fear among some farmers that new voluntary environmental initiatives may eventually become legal requirements.