

COOPERATION IN IRISH AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT



CAP
Network
Ireland

SUSTAINABLE
AGRICULTURE
AND RURAL
INNOVATION

2026 Edition



Co-funded by
the European Union



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



FOREWORD

As Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am delighted to introduce this collection of inspiring case studies highlighting the various forms of cooperation being undertaken to support Irish agriculture and rural development under Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

Ireland has had a long and proud tradition of cooperation since the establishment of the Irish co-operative movement in the late 19th century. This movement was the start of a radical transformation of rural society. That tradition continued into the 20th century, when co-operative creameries, credit societies and agricultural stores played a leading role in the modernisation of Irish agriculture and the development of an agri-business sector that, today, exports Irish agricultural produce to 190 markets worldwide.

Rural areas are now facing new challenges, and cooperation is flourishing again amongst landowners, rural communities and state bodies as we all seek new solutions to modern problems. Cooperative land ownership, the development of local food processing infrastructure, the establishment of machinery rings, and renewed efforts to preserve our shared rural heritage are just some examples of the fresh thinking and new ideas that I am seeing in action.

The stories in this booklet highlight incredible examples of community, resilience and innovation that will inspire others to meet new challenges through cooperative approaches, which will in turn ensure that rural areas will thrive into the future.

I am proud to say that the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027, co-funded by the European Union and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, is playing a crucial role in supporting many





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of these initiatives. Through a wide range of supports, food producers are strengthening their position in food supply chains, and we are making rapid improvement in the environmental, social and economic sustainability of local economies and communities. I want to congratulate everyone involved for their endeavour and commitment, and I wish them continued success in the future.

I would like to thank CAP Network Ireland for producing this important publication, and for their continued work in promoting innovation, sustainability and knowledge sharing across the agriculture and rural development sectors. As Minister, I remain committed to the development of an agricul-

tural sector that works for everyone involved in it. My hope is that this publication will help spark new ideas, create new connections, and inspire continued progress. This will be for the benefit of individuals, families, and rural Ireland as a whole.

Martin Heydon T.D.
Minister for Agriculture, Food and the
Marine

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CAP Network Ireland would like to sincerely thank everyone who contributed to the creation of this publication; for their time and commitment to sharing their story and for inspiring others to find solutions to challenges found within agriculture and rural areas.

The case studies in this booklet were developed and written by John Murphy, Niamh Concannon, Leo McGrane, Sinéad Grimes and Chloé Delmon. The booklet was designed and produced by Paddy Malone.

For readers, this booklet offers:

Visibility & Recognition:

A platform to showcase the people, farms and communities making cooperation farming work in practice across Ireland.

Inspiration & Role Models:

Real examples of farmers and groups working together, offering ideas, encouragement and practical inspiration for others.

Policy Relevance:

A grounded look at how cooperation farming under Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan (CSP) can support wider policy ambitions and rural development.

Diversity of Experience:

A collection of different approaches, experiences and perspectives that demonstrate there is no single model for successful cooperation.

Momentum for Change:

Stories that highlight what is already happening on the ground and encourage more farmers and communities to explore what can be achieved by working together.



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& RURAL DEVELOPMENT



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INTRODUCTION

Cooperation between food producers, landowners, local communities and relevant experts is proving to be an extremely effective catalyst for change in rural Ireland.

One individual on their own can only achieve so much but groups of individuals across Ireland coming together to work towards a common purpose are proving that their efforts are creating multiplier effects far greater than the sum of their parts.



Cooperation in rural Ireland is enhancing farmers' negotiation leverage, improving their livelihoods, and fostering economic resilience. Seemingly insurmountable challenges such as improving biodiversity at the landscape level are being overcome by mobilising rural communities to effect change. New innovative solutions are being explored to give people greater access to land and to participate both in the rural economy and in the community.

Endangered ancient breeds of livestock that were once common in the rural landscape and central to our shared heritage are being revived and making a niche but important contribution to modern land management again.



Public funding is playing a vital role in facilitating and unleashing the potential of rural communities to find solutions to local problems. **The CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) 2023-2027** has a budget of €9.8bn, including €2.28bn in national funds, over five years, and is designed to address local needs while aligning with broader EU objectives, including the European Green Deal.

The objectives of the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 include:

- **Sustainability:** Promoting environmentally friendly farming practices and enhancing biodiversity.
- **Rural Development:** Strengthening rural economies and improving the quality of life in rural areas.
- **Food Security:** Ensuring a stable food supply and supporting farmers' incomes.

The case studies featured in this booklet are just a snapshot of an impressively wide range of cooperation initiatives currently underway in Ireland where CSP support is involved. They are testament to the idea that access to information and expertise, the provision of adequate funding and the facilitation of unleashing creativity lying dormant within rural communities are the ingredients required to effect incredible changes in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

The CSP is providing the framework for this to happen and is contributing to a sustainable and prosperous future in rural Ireland.





SUPPORTS FOR THE FACILITATION OF COOPERATION UNDER THE CAP STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2027

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are committed to supporting the growing number of farmers participating in cooperative farming in the Irish agricultural sector. Various support options are available and are funded under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 in partnership with the European Union, and through the national Rural Innovation and Development Fund.

CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027

ACRES Cooperation (CP)

Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) is Ireland's flagship Agri-environmental programme to combat biodiversity decline.

ACRES Co-operation is open to farmers in defined high priority geographical areas and involves results-based payments as well as bespoke farm and landscape actions. Contracts have been awarded for the management of Co-operation Projects (CP), and farmers are supported by new teams to develop local action plans for their zones. Commonages are a common feature of these zones.



European Innovation Partnerships (EIP)

The European Innovation Partnership Scheme funds projects that allow farmers, scientists and other experts to collaborate together to develop new practices that are environmentally friendly and economically sustainable.

The ultimate aim of these innovation partnerships is to road-test new ideas and practices which can then be used more widely by farmers and others to improve productivity and enhance resource efficiency.



Collaborative Farming Grant Scheme

The scheme provides financial support to encourage farmers to form partnerships which improve scale and efficiency in farming. The grant is aimed at covering part of the legal, advisory and financial services costs of setting up a partnership agreement.





Early Stage Support for Producer Organisations (ESSPO)

The Early-Stage Support for Producer Organisations (ESSPO) Scheme aims to support groups of producers to form recognised Producer Organisations across the following seven sectors – beef, sheep, milk, potato, tillage, plant amenity, fruit and vegetables. Applications for recognition will be accepted on a rolling basis from 2025 to 2027 inclusive.



LEADER

The LEADER Programme is based on the 'bottom-up' approach to rural development which empowers local communities to actively participate in decisions affecting their area. The 2023-2027 LEADER Programme grant support is available in rural areas under the following themes:

- Economic Development and Job Creation
- Rural Infrastructure and Social Inclusion
- Sustainable Development of Rural Environment and Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation



Knowledge Transfer Programme (KT)

The KT Programme is a three-year Programme administered by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and is delivered by a network of approved KT Facilitators, with farmers participating in the Programme. The Programme aims to foster knowledge exchange and innovation between advisors, farmers and other stakeholders and will play a crucial role in helping farmers meet current and future challenges.



Relevant Supports under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund (RIDF)

Social Farming

Social farming is the practice of offering, on a voluntary basis, farming and horticultural participation in a farming environment as a choice to people who avail of a range of therapeutic day support services. These operations are run in a number of settings ranging from working family farms, local community initiatives through to more institutional frameworks.





01 National

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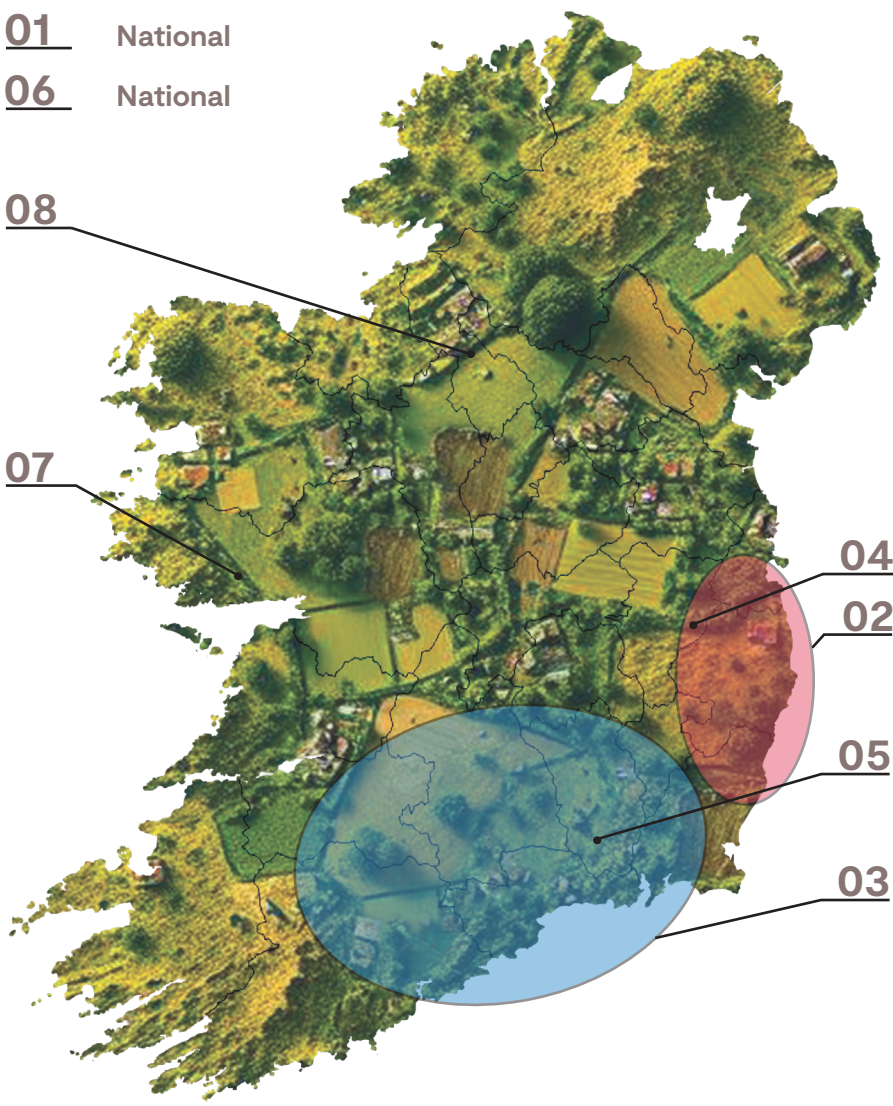
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IRISH ORGANIC MILK SUPPLIERS COOPERATIVE: CREATING LEVERAGE IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Gavin Lynch is an organic dairy farmer from Co. Wicklow and Chairman of the Irish Organic Milk Suppliers Co-operative (IOMS). IOMS Co-op are a group of farmers working together to address the fundamental issues holding the organic dairy sector back; lack of processing infrastructure, limited routes to market and insufficient competition within the sector. *“The Irish organic milk sector started from nothing. Glenisk were the first company to see an opportunity in the Irish market, and they formed the basis of the entire organic dairy industry,”* Gavin explains, *“the sector is now dominated by one or two processors, the sector is highly concentrated, which leaves organic farmers with limited bargaining power.”*



Rapidly rising input costs was the catalyst that spurred this group of organic dairy farmers into action. *“The idea for IOMS Co-op came out of necessity really,”* say Gavin, *“there had been a few tough years. After the invasion of Ukraine, organic feed went from €500/ton to €900/ton in the space of a couple of months. The processors didn’t really respond to*





“The sector is now dominated by one or two processors, the sector is highly concentrated, which leaves organic farmers with limited bargaining power.”

that, we were really feeling the squeeze, so we came together to try and get some kind of leverage back in the hands of farmers.”

The group met with Joe Kelleher, Organic Dairy Specialist with Teagasc, who outlined two options available to them. *“We eventually went for both; one was to form a cooperative and the other was to form a Producer’s Organisation*

ADDRESSING ISSUES HOLDING THE ORGANIC DAIRY SECTOR BACK



(PO). They both sounded good. So, what we did was form a cooperative and we then registered with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as a PO.” This process was supported through a successful application to the Early-Stage Support for Producer Organisations (ESSPO) scheme to become Ireland’s first recognised Dairy Producer Organisation.

PRODUCER ORGANISATIONS

ESSPO is co-funded by the Irish Government and the EU under the Irish CAP Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027 and aims to support groups of producers to form recognised Producer Organisations across the following seven sectors – beef, sheep, milk, potato, tillage, plant amenity, fruit and vegetables. Through this scheme IOMS Co-op secured up to €10,000 annually for three years to cover administrative functions, along with an additional €3,000 to engage approved facilitators for legal and business advice during the formation process and application submission.

Funding support from ESSPO has enabled IOMS Co-op to employ a part-time administrator, reducing the burden on founding farmers and allowing them to focus on their own farms. This financial support has also made it easier to attract new members, as farmers are not required to take on significant financial risk during the organisation's setup phase. IOMS Co-op currently has 35 members.

The establishment of a registered PO also gives IOMS credibility in the search for funding and technical support opportunities. PO status enables IOMS Co-op farmers to negotiate collectively and to sell their milk pool as a collective without falling foul of competition law.

POs can often be useful tools to assert leverage within a sector without requiring farmers to set up a full cooperative to process and market their own produce. However, Gavin believes that IOMS Co-op will eventually go down this route. *“Given the current realities within the Irish organic dairy landscape, we still lack meaningful negotiating leverage. We don’t have the ability to redirect milk elsewhere,”* Gavin explains. *“Eventually we are going to have to develop greater processing and market access capacity. When we are at that stage, we can use the PO to negotiate new opportunities.”*





DEVELOPING NEW MARKETS

IOMS has acquired additional funding to assist them in developing new markets. €60,000 over two years has been secured to promote short supply chains for primary producers and another €450,000 has been secured through two open calls to support the promotion and development of the Irish organic sector. IOMS Co-op are also investing €45,000 of their own funds. This funding has provided vital financial resources to hire consultancy services for business planning. IFAC Financial and Advisory Services are currently assisting IOMS Co-op with strategic planning and consultancy. A full-time position dedicated to developing the domestic market for organic milk in Ireland is now also funded and a new brand unique to IOMS suppliers; Three Cows, is currently being developed.

Milk collection from 35 members spread across the 32 counties of the island will need to be overcome in time. *“It gets expensive,”* Gavin admits *“but with any kind of start-up there are always going to be hurdles to overcome.”* The power of cooperating together is that these problems will be overcome more easily through collective action and accessing technical support and funding opportunities than attempting to solve these issues as individuals.

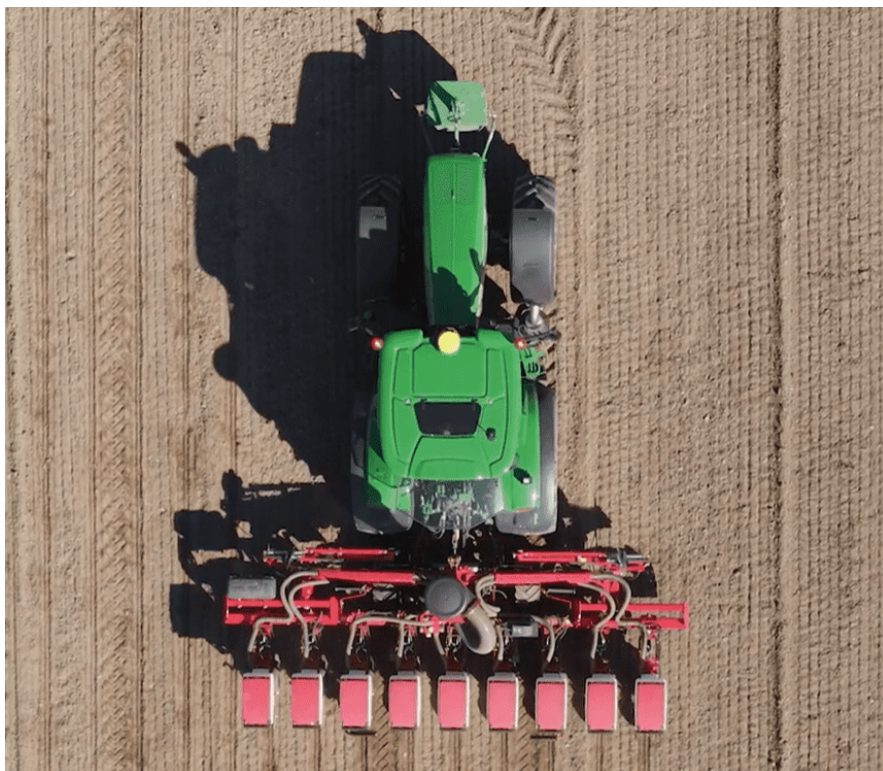
IOMS is also exploring collaborative approaches to improving feed security and input costs through engagement with Irish organic tillage growers, such as Organic Tillage and Vegetables EIP Project participants and wider supply-chain initiatives.





CULTIVATING COLLABORATION: INSIDE IRELAND'S ORGANIC TILLAGE AND VEGETABLES EIP PROJECT

Agriculture is undergoing a shift across Europe, driven by the dual needs for environmental sustainability and domestic food security. Under Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan (CSP), this evolution is championed by initiatives like the European Innovation Partnerships for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI), which funds collaborative, multi-actor operational groups trying to address unique agricultural challenges. One such Operational Group in Ireland is the Organic Tillage & Vegetables (OTV) EIP, an ambitious project led by Teagasc that brings together researchers, advisors, and growers to solve the challenge of non-chemical weed control in organic tillage and vegetable production.





THE STRATEGIC GOALS OF THE OTV EIP

At its core, the OTV EIP project is designed to tackle weed management in organic crop production. In conventional agriculture, chemical treatments offer a direct and immediate solution to weed infestations. Because organic growers do not have chemical options, they must rely on rigorous pre-planning, cultural methods and mechanical weeding to minimise weeds. To address this, the project is validating advanced weeding technologies under Irish soil and weather conditions, testing how these technologies scale in practical environments.

For example, farmers in the projects have used a precision drill to sow beet down to a depth of 50 millimetres. This depth allows the farmers to run a tine harrow through the field four to five days post sowing, just as weeds hit the fragile “*white thread*” stage, dislodging seedling

weeds to dry out on the surface without disrupting the beet seeds from emerging. Furthermore, the project is testing advanced technologies like a camera-guided inter-row hoe that will facilitate weeding within crop rows but also between plants, significantly reducing labour costs associated with traditional manual weeding.

These technologies and cultivation methods open doors to vital crop diversification. Currently, oats form the backbone of Irish organic tillage rotations, constituting roughly 70% of crops, a concentration that is unsustainable over the long term. By demonstrating that advanced machinery can handle weed control in organic crops, the EIP aims to safely extend crop rotations to include crops like beet, peas, and maize. Ultimately, this diversification works toward a major macro-economic and policy objective – reducing Ireland’s current reliance on importing over 70% of its organic fruit and vegetables.





THE ECONOMICS OF SHARED INNOVATION

The core ethos of EIP-AGRI projects is all about multi-actor collaboration, and the OTV EIP embodies the theme of cooperation flawlessly. The project's Operational Group unites seven farmers in a highly deliberate blend: four primarily organic tillage farmers and three organic vegetable growers. This structural mixing allows both sub-sectors to discover co-benefits and practical complementarities that would otherwise remain siloed by traditional industry divisions.

A primary pillar of this cooperation is the development of machinery sharing models. Specialised organic weeding and drilling technologies are prohibitively expensive for individual, smaller-scale farmers to purchase independently. Sharing models not only grant timely equipment access but distribute the heavy capital

investment burden equitably across the group, optimising asset utilisation.

This financial cooperation directly impacts operational viability. Vegetable production faces notoriously high labour costs, averaging 57% of total costs, which spikes over 60% for small-seeded crops like onions and carrots due primarily to intensive hand weeding. By co-investing and cooperating around advanced machinery, growers can significantly reduce or eliminate hand weeding expenses, boosting the economic resilience of organic farms.

TWO-WAY PEER-TO-PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE





BENEFITS OF PEER-TO-PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Beyond hardware, the true engine of the project is its dynamic, two-way peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. Because the Operational Group intentionally blends seasoned organic tillage growers with specialised vegetable producers, it sparks a cross-pollination of skills that traditional, siloed farming groups completely miss. Tillage farmers guide horticultural growers through the nuances of managing large-scale field rotations, establishing diverse break crops, and scaling mechanical weeding across broader acreages. In return, vegetable growers share their intensive expertise in precision row spacing, delicate soil biology management, and high-value weed suppression.

Participating farmer Tommy Delahunt highlights how this collaborative learning environment opens entirely new production avenues for everyone involved, expanding what they can confidently plant. A practical example of this integration in action is Tommy's son, Tom, who operates the shared precision machinery across the different member farms, acting as a literal conduit for cross-farm learning. Instead of working in isolation, a grower looking to diversify can directly consult a peer who has already weathered the trial-and-error phase of that specific crop. This collective intelligence ensures that the entire group succeeds,

transforming individual farm trials into a shared playbook of practical *"dos and don'ts"*.

Through this deep-rooted cooperation, the OTV EIP project proves that the future of organic farming relies not just on better machinery, but on stronger human connections.

Watch the Organic Tillage & Vegetables EIP Innovation Spotlight to hear first hand accounts from the participating project members how the project will validate weeding technologies in an Irish context.





SLÍ NA FEIRME: REBUILDING SMALL SCALE MEAT PROCESSING INFRASTRUCTURE

Siobhain Hubbard is an organic pig and lamb farmer near Lismore in Co. Waterford. In a country with a meat industry designed for export markets, her business; Newbard Farm (<https://www.newbardfarm.com/>), has found it increasingly difficult to sell her meat products to a domestic market within the existing meat processing system. Siobhain decided that change was needed and has worked tirelessly in recent years towards the creation of Slí na Feirme, a cooperative of small-scale farmers looking to build small-scale animal processing infrastructure. Newbard Farm, started in 2021 in response to friends and family looking for high quality, locally produced pork. Siobhain and her husband Ross initially sold much of their meat through the Neighbour Food initiative during the Covid lock down era. They sold around 100 pigs in their first year and their supply has since risen to nearly 200 pigs to meet consumer demand



Their commitment to high standards and sustainable stewardship of their 50 acre farm means that they emphasise quality over seeking scale for the international export system. *“We can’t look after the land if we keep putting more and more animals on it,”* Siobhain says, *“that’s why we have been involved with Bioregioning Southeast Ireland, Talamh Beo and with other farmers to bring back local production of meat for the domestic market.”*





ORGANIC FARMING SCHEME

In 2021, Newbard Farm joined the Organic Farming Scheme supported under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027. *“We did that because people needed to trust where their meat came from. So even though we were organic we needed a level of certification and guaranteed standard of quality*



to assure people of the quality of meat that they were buying from us.” Newbard Farm sells their meat direct from the farm, through farmers markets and online sales. They try to keep sales within a 100km radius to save on the cost of fuel and to keep their food local.





DEVELOPING A SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

Siobhain identified the lack of meat processing facilities as the main impediment to the prosperity of her business. *“That’s definitely the biggest roadblock in any domestic producers’ path when it comes to processing pork, lamb and beef for local consumption. The processing capacity just isn’t there.”* Siobhain, who also works for her Local Development Company, is no stranger to writing applications. In 2024 she led an application to apply to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine’s open call for stakeholder projects for the development of short food supply chains in Ireland.

The call sought innovative proposals to maximise the return to primary producers from short supply chains through the development of premium markets closer to home, encouraging collaboration among stakeholders, supporting small food producers, encouraging farmers markets and the development of community gardens.

Originally, Siobhain and four other farmers came together to submit an application for planning and consultation to establish an organic multi species processing facility in the southeast of Ireland. They were successful in their application and were awarded €24,000. Within 15 months their initiative has grown to 160 farmers from across the country looking to join the Slí na Feirme cooperative and with 60 farmers in the southeast with skills, knowledge and capacity to service a domestic facility. A small-scale abattoir is currently being upgraded and soon to be reopened in Mitchelstown, Co. Cork. Two small scale poultry facilities have also reopened in east Cork. *“Now we are looking at other facilities and other farmers to upskill to service a meat cutting and packing facility in Dunhill, Co. Waterford,”* says Siobhain, *“we are hoping to apply for the Organic Capital Investment grant to help build the facility.”*





BIOREGIONS EMPOWER GRASSROOTS COMMUNITIES

Siobhain has also collaborated with Bioregioning Southeast Ireland (BioSEI) (<https://bioregion.ie>) to help build capacity within the local area. *“Within the last 18 months, BioSEI have been a major support; to Slí na Feirme for helping to develop a cooperative model, to Newbard Farm and to the community. They have made a real positive impact,”* says Siobhain.

“We can’t look after the land if we keep putting more and more animals on it, that’s why we have been involved with other farmers to bring back local production of meat for the domestic market.”

Slí na Feirme recently received a grant of €19,000 from BioSEI to buy a refrigerated van. The van will be used to create an unbroken cold transport chain from abattoir to meat processor, to farmer. *“This means that transport can be done at a reasonable cost to the farmer, so they can get the meat back to their farm, their farm shop, farmers market or to a retailer.”* This is the advantage of organisations like BioSEI working with grassroots communities to identify and support overlooked but crucial pieces of missing infrastructure that can have large local impacts. *“We will happily continue to work with BioSEI because the next phase of Slí na Feirme is to legally establish the cooperative structure needed to protect our livelihoods, our domestic meat producers and our communities.”*





KYRIE FARM: CULTIVATING WELLNES BY INTEGRATING ORGANIC HORTICULTURE WITH RECOVERY-ORIENTED MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Tucked away down a quiet lane in the bucolic pasturelands of County Kildare, less than 20 minutes from Dublin's M50, is Kyrie Farm, a working organic farm on 23 hectares, with a vision to become a residential therapeutic community farm supporting mental health recovery and wellness in Ireland.

Conceptualised by John and Vicky McKeon, following the tragic loss of their son Kieran to suicide in 2013, this growing organic horticulture enterprise is evolving into a state-of-the-art step-down psychiatric community care service.

Through their lived experience, John & Vicky realised that *"Ireland is missing a vital piece in its mental health system"*. They observed that part of what is lacking is *"a step-down service from the psychiatric hospital, and for some an alternative to the psychiatric hospital, a place for people to recover, and rebuild their capacities for independent living"* explains John.

They envisioned treatment services delivered in the safety of a professional care team but embedded in a nurturing community and a healing natural environment. John credits visiting therapeutic farms, like Gould Farm in the US, with opening his eyes *"to what's possible when you combine nature, community, and meaningful work with professional support"*.

In 2021, John and Vicky founded a charity which purchased a 23-hectare farm in County Kildare, where they established an organic horticulture enterprise, further developed the land into a healing natural environment, and planned and designed a therapeutic farm for mental wellness.





THE ONGOING QUEST TO FUND HOPE FROM GRIEF

Kyrie Therapeutic Farm CLG operates under the guidance of a highly qualified, extensive voluntary Board of Directors and advisors comprising psychiatrists, social care workers, business leaders, financial experts and more.

The project received an initial philanthropic donation of €2 million and has since raised a further commitment of €1.25 million. The 40-bed residential and therapeutic complex is now 'shovel-ready' with

full planning permission having been secured from Kildare County Council and An Bord Pleanála.

As Ireland sits amongst the lowest-ranked countries in the OECD for the availability of mental health care beds, and with services under extreme strain due to underfunding, the need for urgent solutions is paramount. The development is now ready to go to tender and has entered the next phase of its funding journey, seeking strategic funding partnerships with government departments, philanthropists, and corporate donors to achieve the €30 million capital cost investment required to complete the project.

“The power of cooperating together is that these problems will be overcome”





DEVELOPING THE FARM

The farm currently operates as a working organic horticulture enterprise, spearheaded by John and full-time horticulturalist Nathan Jackson, and aided by a wide network of local community volunteers. Certified fully organic, the farm comprises native Irish grass and produces approximately 50 bags of fresh vegetables for sale each week.

Sustainable practices and actions for biodiversity are a key cornerstone of the philosophy of the farm. To date, 2,500 native trees have been planted, with plans to establish a native woodland of 12,000 trees. Two kilometres of native hedgerow is also planned, while two ponds will provide habitat for aquatic wildlife and birds, and two orchards will provide seasonal fruits.



A PIONEERING THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Centred around a 1500-year-old granite standing stone, the therapeutic centre will cater for up to 40 guests at a time. Clinical care, holistic therapy, and peer support for a wide range of mental health conditions will be provided, with residents staying for between 3 and 6 months. A multi-disciplinary team including psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, and peer support workers will offer a full suite of supports to guests.

The centre will operate as an integral part of the recovery support system in Ireland, acting as a step-down facility from acute mental healthcare and sitting within the HSE framework as a bridge between inpatient facilities and independent living. As John notes, *“collaboration with the HSE, community mental health teams, and the hospital sector is essential. The farm is designed to complement and integrate with existing services.”*



COOPERATING FOR CHANGE

Aligning with WHO recommendations on mental health care service provision and objectives set out in the Irish Government's Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone, the development aims to help bridge a major gap in existing mental health care services in Ireland. Working closely with Maynooth University and Gould Farm in the US will ensure that the therapeutic approach remains fully evidence-based.

The Therapeutic Farm is expected to create 50 jobs, and, if successful, the model could be replicated across the country. At a capital cost of €30 million, the charity is seeking multi-departmental government funding, philanthropic support and corporate donations.



"With the right government support, this desperately needed facility could be open in 18–24 months", says John. "The main challenge is that it's a new model in Ireland, so it requires understanding, support, and investment. But internationally, the model is well established".

For John and Vicky McKeon, this is ultimately a story about building hope from grief and creating a place where people can find the healing, purpose, and community support to begin rebuilding their lives.

Kyrie Farm's alignment to
"Sharing the Vision"
Ireland's Mental Health Strategy

Promotion prevention and early intervention	Service Access, Coordination, and Continuity of Care	Social Inclusion	Accountability and Continuous Improvement
- Creates an Optimal Healing Environment (OHE) for health and well-being. - Guests explore health across diet, lifestyle, relationships, and more. - Fully integrated in the local community to reduce stigma. - Volunteers raise mental health awareness. - Supports STV outcomes 1a-d.	- Broad accessibility with public and health insurance options. - Individualized recovery plans co-created with guests and families. - Acts as a "step down" from acute care or hospital alternative. - Focus on transitions to housing, work, education, and services. - Multidisciplinary staff provide evidence-based, recovery-focused care. - Peer farm recovery network. - Supports STV outcomes 2a-2c.	- Strong community ties through activities, employment, and events. - Supports transitions in housing, work, relationships, and services. - Peer leadership drives design and reduces stigma. - Inclusive to all groups in society. - Employment of peer support workers. - Supports STV outcomes 3a-3c.	- Co-designed infrastructure follows HSE mental health design. - High standards of research, care improvement, and ethics. - Independent evaluation by Maynooth University. - Adheres to national safety, governance, and policy standards. - Supports STV outcomes 4a-4d.

Kyrie Farm embraces the principles of "Sharing the Vision" recovery focused, trauma informed, human rights, value and learning.



ÉIRU FARM: A COOPERATIVE OWNED FARM SOLVING THE ACCESS TO LAND ISSUE

Éiru Farm is a cooperative land ownership model being pioneered in Ireland and may be the answer for people wanting to become new entrants into agriculture but do not have access to land. Noel Higgins is a founding member of the cooperative and he explains the concept.

Noel knew that he wanted to farm, but access to land was always a challenge. *“An opportunity came up to lease an organic farm, and I started growing vegetables commercially. I did that for quite a while. I did this in quite a few places over the years, but I was always looking for a new idea; a different kind of model where I could work with other people in a way that shared responsibilities. I had arrangements with organic farmers where I would live on their farms, and I would do*

work in exchange for a piece of land. It was great but there was no long-term security, I didn’t have control, and I struggled working for someone else.”





A COMMUNITY LOOKING FOR LAND

Through the Biodynamic Association, Noel met a community of like-minded people in a similar situation and discussed buying a farm together. While Noel was living and working in England, he received a call from his friend, Ward Smis, alerting him to a farm for sale near Thomastown in Co. Kilkenny. In 2024, Noel and eight of his friends became the joint owners of 47 acres and Éiru Farm (<https://eriufarm.ie/>) was born. *“Ward and his partner Marijke Danzeisen own most of it and I own a part of it,”* Noel explains, *“other people invested in it in different proportions for different reasons. The long-term goal is that the co-operative buys us out which frees up our capital and secures the land for future generations. So, one of the first things we needed to do was create a legal structure for ourselves.”* One member invested money into the farm with the condition that it would be put into a trust. Although the Land Trust option was explored, the group felt it was not an ideal model for their vision of owning and working land together.

Eventually they came upon *“Las pas sage”*, a non-speculative property cooperative ownership model that originated in France but now has examples in countries across Europe. In this model, property is taken out of the speculative market and ownership is owned by a cooperative. Cooperative members have a right to use the land, but they do not own it. Instead, they have ‘right to use’ contracts. Not all members need to be farmers; one couple simply wanted access to a space to build a therapy centre on the farm.

“In a way it is like a non-speculative bank,” says Noel of the model.

“You can put your money in, and you can get your money back without interest, but we work with inflation. Each member has their own Members Current Account Agreement with agreed terms on how to get your money back. For example, if you put in €100,000, you could get €20,000 back each year over 5 years.”





LEGAL STRUCTURES

Initially, Les pas sage offered support taking the group through the principles of the cooperative, internal regulations, statutes, financial mechanisms, different types of membership and current account agreements. Through a recommendation from the Irish Organic Milk Suppliers, Éiru Farm made contact with Ciarán Dolan, barrister and an agri-legal consultant, who converted this information into a cooperative suitable under Irish law. They soon found that the old industry and provenance cooperative model catered for under Irish law was not compatible. *“It was actually simpler to set up a Company Limited by Guarantee,”* says Noel. *“There are tax advantages, but it also gives us more credibility if we go to a bank as a company to look for a loan. So, Éiru Farm is now registered as a “not for profit” CLG and trading as Éiru Farm Cooperative.”*





BECOMING A MEMBER

There are three main different types of members; entrepreneurs (i.e. someone who has a business or enterprise in the cooperative), residents (i.e. someone who lives on the land) and impact investors (i.e. people who invest in the project and can get their money back). “*The idea is to bring in new members,*” he explains, “*if someone comes to us with an idea for a project, for example they want to start a market garden, we will meet with them and decide collectively if it’s a good fit, if they have a good business plan and we resonate with each other we can offer them land depending on their needs that they manage independently for a probationary period. They get a right of use contract; they are not our tenants and can eventually become*

full members. We collectively make decisions on a consensus basis, if we can’t it goes to a vote.”

All enterprises are managed independently but produce is sold under the Ériu Farm brand. The plan is to eventually increase the land area owned by the cooperative and increase membership. “*That’s the beauty of non-speculative investment in buying land, it’s making land available to those who can’t access or afford land, and we are getting a lot of interest from people.*”

“I was always looking for a new idea; a different kind of model where I could work with other people in a way that shared responsibilities.”





ACRES & BREEDING WADERS EIP: USING AN ENDANGERED IRISH CATTLE BREED TO ENHANCE BIODIVERSITY

Droimeann cattle have been a feature of the Irish landscape, particularly along the western seaboard, for centuries, but changing trends in modern agriculture resulted in a plummeting population and if left unchecked, this decline could lead to their eventual extinction. It was for this reason that a group of concerned breeders and non-breeders interested in the preservation of the Droimeann breed came together in September 2016 and founded the Droimeann Cattle Society (www.droimeanncattlesociety.com). The Society has since secured a Genetic Resources Grant to support AI and semen storage, protecting key bloodlines.

One member of the board of the Droimeann Cattle Society is John O'Halloran, a farmer near Clifden, Co. Galway who fell in love with the breed when he bought two cows as a gift for his wife and found that they thrived on his farm compared to the continental breeds, who struggled to maintain condition in the wild Connemara landscape.

The Droimeann cattle seemed to cope on rough forage such as rushes, brambles, nettles and even tree bark. They wintered outdoors easily and required no intensive feeding. This hardy breed has reduced costs and labour for his farm business, but they have also been found to have benefits for the wider landscape.





THE AGRI-CLIMATE RURAL ENVIRONMENT SCHEME (ACRES)

ACRES is Ireland's flagship agri-environment climate scheme under Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027. This €1.5 billion results-based scheme is helping to address biodiversity decline while delivering an income support for up to 50,000 farm families in Ireland while delivering ecological and biodiversity improvements. The ACRES Cooperation project (ACRES CP) is the section of this scheme that targets High Nature Value farmland including semi-natural vegetation, Natura 2000 sites, and priority water catchments.

Supports available under ACRES CP have transformed the fortunes of the Droimeann breed. In 2020, Droimeann cattle gained rare breed status and have since been included under the Conservation of Rare Breeds action within the ACRES scheme. This has driven the breed's resurgence, as the measure helped many farmers secure entry into ACRES, and the associated payment has increased the breed's attractiveness. John notes that *"in 1997, there were 50 to 60 Droimeann females left in Ireland, with few bulls, whereas by 2025, there are almost 800 breeding females, along with registered bulls,"* proving that official support matters.

The breed is extremely suitable for conservation grazing, which also fits with other ACRES-supported measures. Conservation grazing is recognised by ecologists and the National Parks and Wildlife Service as essential for maintaining open habitats and biodiversity, particularly for certain threatened bird species. As natives bred for these environments, Droimeann cattle excel in this role. *"They've shaped this landscape for thousands of years, and now we're bringing them back to help maintain it,"* John notes.





BREEDING WADERS E I P

BREEDING WADERS EIP

The Breeding Waders EIP project (breedingwaders.ie) is a €25 million nationwide project, co-funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine that aims to secure existing Breeding Wader bird populations and support population recovery through landscape management and policy development.

Droimeann cattle are currently being used for conservation grazing on Clawinch Island in Lough Ree, Co. Longford. Cattle had not grazed on the island for over 30 years, and scrub was starting to negatively affect ground nesting birds. Local farmer, Mike Connell, along with Breeding Waders staff have overseen a programme of cutting and mulching of this scrub. It is hoped that by grazing and trampling, the Droimeann cattle will keep scrub from re-establishing on the island and therefore keep the habitat suitable for breeding wader birds in the future. The cattle are thriving in this coarse forage environment, and appear to browse more like goats, than graze like continental breed cattle.

"They're ideal," says Owen Murphy, Breeding Waders EIP Project Manager, "They're native and they belong in these environments. They keep the sward at the height that we need for nesting birds. Breeding waders need farming in order for them to survive. Scrubland is the opposite of what they need, and Droimeann cattle are the perfect land managers."

Virtual fencing is used to keep livestock away from the busy nesting areas while maintaining sward and structure on the rest of the island. This will help ensure that there are suitable areas for chicks and adults to feed once hatched, and the island terrain will remain open and scrub free for next year's breeding season.



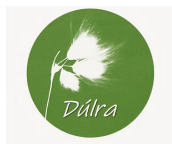


THE FUTURE OF THE DROIMEANN BREED

John O'Halloran is adamant that farming with Droimeann cattle must be economically viable for the breed to survive. The Droimeann Cattle Society aims to ensure that the Droimeann breed is not just viewed by farmers as a novelty breed, but as a productive animal for modern farming in specific landscapes. A beef box initiative has recently been launched to promote the high quality Droimeann beef and allow consumers to play their part in supporting this beautiful native breed into the future.

“Conservation grazing is recognised by ecologists and the National Parks and Wildlife Service as essential for maintaining open habitats and biodiversity, particularly for certain threatened bird species.”





THE DÚLRA PROJECT: HOW COMMUNITY-LED ACTION IS DELIVERING CAP OUTCOMES

The Dúlra project, delivered by FORUM Connemara CLG, successfully demonstrates how a locally led approach can deliver environmental outcomes in line with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), while strengthening rural communities and supporting farmers. Operating across Connemara and South Mayo, Dúlra focuses on the control of invasive species, particularly rhododendron, alongside peatland restoration and habitat enhancement. These actions directly support ACRES, Ireland's agri-environmental climate scheme, where land condition and habitat quality are central to farmer payments. Invasive Rhododendron ponticum infestation is a significant barrier to achieving high ACRES scores, as it suppresses native vegetation, reduces biodiversity, and limits the ecological value of land parcels. By working with

farmers and commonage shareholders to remove rhododendron and restore peatland habitats, Dúlra helps farmers to achieve higher ACRES scores while also contributing to improved biodiversity outcomes.





MOBILISING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

What distinguishes Dúlra is not just what it delivers, but how it delivers it. The project is rooted in a bottom-up, community-led approach and reflects the LEADER methodology, placing local communities at the centre of identifying needs and shaping practical solutions. Dúlra works directly with landowners through workshops, training and on-the-ground collaboration to develop solutions that are locally appropriate and aligned with farming realities. This shared ownership builds trust and ensures long-term commitment to maintaining results.

A key element of this approach is the use of a locally based workforce. Dúlra has trained and employed nineteen operatives from the local community to carry out invasive species control and restoration works. This not only reduces costs and increases efficiency, but also embeds the skills needed to manage these landscapes within the community.



As Dermot Flaherty, Dúlra's Stakeholder Engagement Officer, explains:
"People here know the land, they understand the challenges, and they have a real stake in getting it right. When you build that local capacity, you are not just delivering a project, you are creating a long-term solution."

This investment in people is central to the project's legacy. Operatives are trained in practical skills such as chainsaw use, habitat management, and restoration techniques, building a skilled workforce capable of supporting ongoing CAP delivery into the future.



TRAINING AND OUTREACH

Dúlra also recognises the importance of engaging the next generation of land managers. Outreach initiatives, including training days and youth-focused programmes such as Easter camps, introduce young people to peatland restoration and invasive species management. By connecting younger farmers and community members with these skills early, the project is helping to build a culture of stewardship that will extend well beyond the lifetime of any scheme.

FORUM Connemara's CEO, Karen Mannion, highlights this long-term vision:

"We are not just focused on hitting targets for today. We are trying to build a model where communities have the knowledge, the skills, and the confidence to continue this work into the future."

Alongside its core restoration work, Dúlra is also exploring innovative, circular approaches to land management. One example is the use of locally sourced upland sheep wool, currently classified as a Category 3 animal by-product, in ecological restoration. Trials are underway examining its use in peatland stabilisation and for invasive species control.





TURNING CHALLENGES INTO SOLUTIONS

In parallel, the project is producing biochar from rhododendron. This creates a closed-loop system where a problematic plant is removed, converted into a soil-enhancing material, and then reused to support habitat recovery and native planting.

Dúlra Project Manager Sinéad Grimes sees this as a key strength of the approach:

“For us, Dúlra is about looking at the full picture, not just solving problems, but turning challenges into solutions that deliver both environmental and economic value to local communities.”

This innovation is grounded in practical application. Trials are being carried out on pilot sites, in collaboration with farmers, universities and community

members, ensuring that solutions are scientific, workable and scalable.

FORUM Chairperson, Seán Heanue, who has engaged directly in trialling the biochar, notes:

“There is something very powerful in seeing these ideas tested on the ground. When farmers can see the results for themselves, whether it is bog restoration or the use of materials like biochar, it builds confidence and momentum.”

Ultimately, the success of Dúlra lies in its integration of environmental restoration with locally led delivery. By aligning its work with CAP objectives, particularly through supporting ACRES outcomes, the project provides a practical example of how CAP policy can be effectively translated into action at a local level.

Project Manager Sinéad Grimes summarises: *“Dúlra shows that when challenges are shared, understood, and addressed collectively, solutions are more effective, more sustainable, and more widely accepted.”*

“The project is helping to build a culture of stewardship that will extend well beyond the lifetime of any scheme.”





LEITRIM ORGANIC FARMERS CO-OP: DELIVERING FOR ITS MEMBERS

Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-op (www.leitrimorganic.com) was established in 1998, in response to a lack of markets and educational opportunities for organic farmers in the region. The early adopters of organics were mainly originally from the European continent who came to Leitrim escaping the industrialisation of their countries and intensifying farming systems. In addition, some locals had joined organics under SM6 of REPS and they were mostly small farmers with cattle and sheep. At this time there was limited market and educational opportunities within the country for organic farmers. Some farmers developed linkages with other farmers but as numbers and range of produce grew, market outlets were needed to stop produce being sold conventionally without a premium.

The first initiative of the co-op was to approach Drumshanbo Mart to arrange an organic livestock sale. This initiative has now gone to the point where there are monthly sales, and the mart has become the main centre for organic livestock sales in the country. The co-op established offices in 2001 and with assistance from Pobal secured a community services programme with a strong emphasis on improving the lot of smallholders in the Northwest. The membership base grew and the co-op developed its business, providing accounts services to members, and developing outlets for organic beef and lamb.

In 2005 it commenced selling beef and lamb at Carrick on Shannon farmers market which it established. The business is now continued by Irish





“The co-op now provides a full advisory service for its members so that they can provide a one stop shop for members. The co-op is represented on many fora both national and International.”

Organic Meats. The co-op went on to develop a relationship with Linden Foods in Dungannon and this has continued to date supplying organic beef through Slaney Foods in Wexford now ABP Slaney. The co-op was also instrumental in establishing Western Organic Network in 2004 which received Skillnet Funding for training programmes in Organic Farming. Working with Organic Trust and The Irish Organic Association this grew into National Organic Training Skillnet (NOTS).



In addition, the co-op now provides a full advisory service for its members so that they can provide a one stop shop for members. The co-op is represented on many fora both national and International.

The board of the co-op decided in 2022 that it should do something to encourage the growing of food locally and set about organising a community garden just outside of Drumshanbo at Mount Allen farm. 2025 has seen the project being recognised as a community garden, and the plan is to have the shortest possible supply chain for the produce coming from the garden meaning all the produce is consumed as local to the garden as possible.



TESTIMONIAL FROM A MEMBER

Aidan Gillan of Tattie Hoaker Farm near Cliffooney, Co. Sligo is a small organic horticultural grower who believes that being a member of Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-op has been extremely positive for his business. The cooperative staff are proactive in assisting the membership in accessing financial supports, such as the Organic Farming Scheme, that he otherwise might not have been aware of. *“Membership has made a huge difference for me.*

It has made me aware that there is assistance available for different purposes on the farm, whether it is for environmental measures or horticulture growing, such as polytunnels, sheds or tools.” His participation in their discussion group under the Knowledge Transfer Programme (KTP) has also broadened his horizons. *“That has made a big difference as well because we have evening meetings talking about what we can gain from applying to these*





schemes.” Membership of Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-op has been worth every penny for Aidan. *“You’re only paying a small amount of money every year. They source it (financial supports) for you. They check with you if you want it. They do the heavy work of applying and all I have to do is keep saying yes,”* he laughs. He recently applied to TAMS 3 for investment support to purchase a two-wheel tractor to lighten the burden of physical labour on the farm.



The value of being part of a knowledge transfer network proved its worth in the aftermath of the extremely destructive Storm Éowyn. Despite welcome help from his neighbours, one of his main polytunnels was unfortunately beyond repair. Aidan has since applied to TAMS 3 for investment support to replace it. For a small farm business, this could have been a significant blow. *“I’m quite happy to have help that makes a difference,”* he says, grateful in the knowledge that he does not have to deal with this financial setback to his farm on his own.

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.



CAP Network Ireland is Ireland's National Network dedicated to supporting the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan (CSP) for 2023–2027. The network is managed by an independent consortium, operating under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). These include Irish Rural Link (IRL) as coordinator, ERINN Innovation, an SME specialising in research-to-policy transfer, and Munster Technological University (MTU), bringing academic and rural innovation expertise.

CAP Network Ireland's mission is to promote stakeholder engagement, innovation, and knowledge-sharing to ensure Ireland's CSP achieves EU-level objectives on sustainable agriculture, environmental resilience, and rural vitality. We also play a central role in the Agricultural Knowledge & Innovation System (AKIS) Coordination Group.

Membership is free and open to all interested stakeholders: farmers, researchers, advisors, community groups, and all other interested parties.

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