



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



Mid Leinster Farmer Wellbeing Programme

Final report



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



Ollscoil
Teicneolaíochta
an Oirdheisirt
South East
Technological
University



AGRICULTURE AND FOOD DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Executive Summary

It has been well documented that for the past 20 years, as rural populations decline due to the migration of younger generations to urban areas, that isolation and associated mental health issues have become major concerns among those that remain, particularly among the farming community. Increasing age profiles, lower farm gate prices, increasing input costs and burgeoning bureaucracy have left a significant number of farmers at their under stress. Covid 19 has been a compounding factor. Through the European Innovation Programme (EIP), the development of a “farmer focused” training/development programme for the Mid Leinster region was devised to provide training and upskilling on some of the more traditional skills (hedge laying, new hedgerow establishment, dry stone wall building), and introduction to ICT skills (using the internet to access AGFOOD, online services including banking) and finally, introducing the participants to new skills and experiences to ‘broaden their outlook’ of participants.

The Operating Group (OG), in collaboration with Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP), developed an ambitious training programme that would enhance the quality of life of participants. A considerable amount of time was devoted to identifying course content that might attract and maintain attendees for the duration of the programme and add some improvements to their lives beyond the training. Assumptions were made about the relevance of traditional skills, inputs around the changing regulatory environment, and personal development and adventure elements.

The programme was heavily advertised and highlighted through several media forms, from radio interviews, local press, farm organisations, social media, poster campaigns and sisters Local Development Companies (LDCs) within the catchment area. Programme 1 was attended by 8 participants. It was the intention that participants would devote 1 day per week to the programme. It was quickly established that this time requirement was too great, with work requirements on farms being the biggest obstacle. They were encouraged to participate with an open mind, and that their honest feedback would assist in the development of future courses. With this feedback in mind, a decision was made to reduce the contact time to a half day. Overall, the participants were happy with the course content and structure, even the traditionally difficult topics of mental and physical health. Participants spoke openly about their own experiences, the impact it had on relationships and work, and how they understood that change was necessary. They also openly identified people within their own communities that would benefit from course participation but were unsure how best to approach these individuals with an invitation to participate. It was often mentioned in discussion that those most in need were that hardest to engage. This is not a new phenomenon and remains the most difficult aspect of dealing with these issues.

Participants in the subsequent Programmes 2 & 3 were also enthusiastic about the benefits of attending. It is important to note each course had a 100% retention rate, which reflects a connection to the programme content. Participants agreed that they enjoyed the experience and would recommend it to others. However, recruitment was a persistent challenge. Despite extending the contract, reshaping the structure of the time spent on each programme and the exploration of new locations of the training, the extensive promotion of the programme and outreach – we could not attract sufficient numbers. While we got good feedback on programme content and were flexible in the delivery format over time, the assumptions made at the start were – just that – assumptions on relevance. We can only speculate on potential barriers; the hardest to reach are most difficult to

engage – this is seen in particular concentrations of people for whom we haven't fully figured out who we can engage with them in progressive ways for example people who are long term institutionally unemployed. Some of the participants would have better histories of engagement and more personal agency. They too benefited from the experience, but we also failed to attract this short for further programmes too.

Project Description

The overall objective of this programme was to act as a “Social and Structural Connection” for a cohort of farmers from the Mid Leinster region that as affected by mental health issues. These issues have been compounded by Covid 19 and are further exacerbated by their marginalisation due to a lack of education, poor incomes, digital literacy, and isolation. The need for the project was informed by on the ground agri-professionals and by available and continuously evolving research on the mental health, loneliness, and isolation of small holding farmers.

With a focus on talk therapy, peer learning, adventure, traditional skills, and the delivery of modules around digital skills, managing change (changing policy & regulatory environment), and time management strategies the programme aimed to recruit 100 farmers in the region to participate in developing a social support network via training in action experience.

The aims of the project sought to; establish as set of relationships that would extend beyond the life of this project with 100 hard to reach farmers and through the content of the programme would enable participants to shift their mindset/ thinking (change, grow personal resilience). This would be achieved through the initiation of a process where the individuals change to become more self-actualised and achieve higher levels of organisation in their lives, become more socially connected via this social structure (Network) Peer learning and stablish relationships with agencies that could provide ongoing support if needed.

It was planned that the programme would be delivered over 7 rounds at the Discovery Park in Castlecomer North Co. Kilkenny. The parks natural assets had the capacity to facilitate the delivery the adventure, traditional skills, and nature-based elements in particular but it also had good facilities to deliver the more formal modules also.

The project was supported by an Operational Group made up of; Prof. Paul Horan; TCD, Dr. Noel Richardson; SETU, Michael Somers; Teagasc, Dr. John McNamara; Teagasc, Gina Delaney; Mental Health Ireland, James Hennessy; Farmer & ICMSA, Paddy Bruton; Forestry Sector, and John Keane; Macra.

Baseline data;

Irish farmers have demanding jobs and face challenges that are often compounded by issues such as economic uncertainty, vulnerability to weather events, and rural isolation. Research from Trinity College Dublin shows “Determining underlying psycho-social factors influencing farmers’ risk-related behaviours (both positively and negatively) in the Republic of Ireland” outlines that 6 per cent of farmers presented with depressive symptoms;

and a farmer sample outlines that 15 per cent of farmers aged over 55 can have ‘moderate or severe depressive symptoms’ (Horan, 2019). Like ailments such as chronic pain, poor mental health can make it difficult to manage other stressors that are common in farmers' lives (Carruth, 2017). This collaborative project aims to harness the support of key community actors and address a key challenge in many rural communities around Ireland. It provides an innovative and transformative programme of adventure & nature-based therapies as a key outlet for the local farming community to support mental and physical wellbeing. The project will provide the tools to support a community spirit, building resilient, practical responses and develop life skills that will cater for the range of stages of participant’s careers.

If we take Co. Kilkenny as a snapshot we can see Farmers, Age Profile and Farm Size: According to the 2016 Census of Population, 3,263 people worked directly in agriculture in Kilkenny (Table below). They comprised 2,884 farmers and 379 agricultural workers. At 8.4%, the county rate of workers in primary production (which includes forestry) was above the regional average (7.2%) and nearly double the national average (4.4%). This rose to 13.4% of all workers in Castlecomer LEA and 11.8% in Callan-Thomastown LEA, indicating the ongoing importance of farming to those areas in particular. At the time of the most recent 2020 Census of Agriculture, which is a more complete picture of farming in the county, there were 3,573 family farms in Kilkenny¹.

Farmers are not only living longer but often failing to secure young successors with the energy and interest necessary to farm unless they are viable enterprises, which depends on land resources – both quality and scale. Nationally, one-third of farmers in 2020 were aged 65+ years while just over one-fifth were under 45 years. Kilkenny had the second youngest average farmer age in 2020 at 56 years after Cork at 55.5 years (Dillon *et al.*, 2022). Farmers with larger holdings of 50-100ha and over 100ha were younger at 52.7 years, while those with smaller farms of less than 30ha tended to be older at pre-retirement ages of 58-60 years (*ibid.*). DAFM’s Regional Veterinary Office which covers the Kilkenny area highlighted that the ageing demographic profile among farmers and rural isolation are risk factors for animal health and welfare issues (Quinn, 2023).

In 2020, while 1,484 (41.5%) of farms in the county generated in excess of €50,000 worth of produce, 1,158 (32.4%) of Kilkenny farms produced less than €15,000. Thus, even in a commercial farming county such as Kilkenny, many farm families remained dependent on jobs beyond the farm gate and *some relied on social welfare*. Among farmers and/or their spouses nationally, between 54% (on cattle finishing farms) and 62% (on dairy farms) had off-farm jobs and the trend towards off-farm work is rising, including in the South-East Region (Dillon *et al.*, 2022).

Turning from farm *output* to farm *incomes*, the Teagasc 2021 National Farm Survey offers the most recent assessment. Nationally, dairy farms had the highest average family farm income in 2021 at €98,745 on the second largest average farm size at 64ha (Dillon *et al.*, 2022). Tillage farms had the second highest family farm income with €57,939 on the largest average farm size at 68ha (*ibid.*). These figures lay in stark contrast to the other types of livestock farms. For instance, 2021 incomes were well-below the average industrial wages on sheep farms (€20,794, with an average farm size of 45ha), cattle/beef finishing farms (€17,233, with an average of 36ha) and cattle rearing/suckler farms (just €10,865, with an average of 33ha).

¹ Data in this section was sourced from <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-coa/censusofagriculture2020-preliminaryresults/farmstructure/>, accessed 21 June 2023.

Farm incomes on livestock farms are either entirely or almost entirely dependent on direct payments, such as the Single Farm Payment, agri-environmental schemes, and organics. While direct payments subsidised 21% of the average dairy and 48% of the average tillage farm family income, this rose to 90% on sheep farms, 92% on cattle other/finishing farms and 139% on cattle rearing/suckler farms. In other words, the farming systems with the lowest incomes are also the most dependent on direct payments funded through the national and EU exchequers. Furthermore, the average cattle rearing farm eats into a significant proportion of its direct payments to cover operating losses (ibid.).

Economic Viability of Farms by System: Teagasc then triangulated this picture of farming realities through a summary of the economic viability of farms by system (Figure _ (below); Dillon *et al.*, 2022:31). They found that 85% of dairy and 73% of tillage farms were *economically viable* in 2021 and thus performing comparatively well in the market economy. But this dropped to just one-third of cattle finishing and sheep farms and only 14% of suckler farms. Between one-third to half of remaining livestock farms were described as *economically sustainable*, i.e. they were only sustained because the farmer and/or their spouse/partner had an off-farm job. The final one-third of these three types of livestock farms were classed as *economically vulnerable*, which meant that the farmer and/or their spouse/partner had no off-farm job and the household was likely surviving on social welfare or the State pension. Data source: Teagasc National Farm Survey, 2021.

Figure 1 Viability of farming systems, 2021.

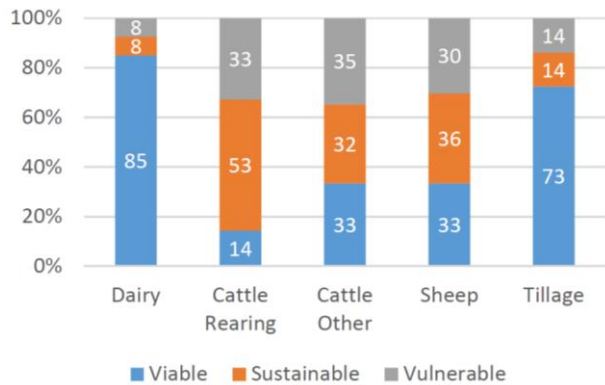


Figure 1 Viability of farming systems, 2021. They found that 85% of dairy and 73% of tillage farms were *economically viable* in 2021 and thus performing comparatively well in the market economy. But this dropped to just one-third of cattle finishing and sheep farms and only 14% of suckler farms. Between one-third to half of remaining livestock farms were described as *economically sustainable*, i.e. they were only sustained because the farmer and/or their spouse/partner had an off-farm job. The final one-third of these three types of livestock farms were classed as *economically vulnerable*, which meant that the farmer and/or their spouse/partner had no off-farm job and the household was likely surviving on social welfare or the State pension. Data source: Teagasc National Farm Survey, 2021.

This demographic snapshot reveals a cohort of family farms with low incomes, that in turn threatens farm succession, which is enhanced by enterprise viability. For example, high-income dairy farming has the youngest farmers (average 54 years) (ibid.). The cost-price squeeze of modern farming within the wider agri-food industry necessitates continued expansion of remaining farms and/or intensification of their production in order for primary producers to maintain a livelihood and raise a family. In the absence of enlarging the farm and intensifying its production, the farm’s survival depends on the off-farm income of a spouse/partner and/or farmers themselves in order to supplement otherwise unpredictable or low farm incomes.

The preceding section indicates that while a significant sector of the agricultural community is thriving there is also a section of it that isn’t. The majority of farming families engaged in livestock production in Kilkenny for example who are dependent on off-farm jobs and/or social welfare to sustain their holdings require different forms of attention and support to be delivered into this cohort. In fact, based on the income data above, they are as vital to the survival of a significant proportion of family farms involved in livestock production in the county as agricultural policies (if not more so). However, in such a commercial farming region as the region covered by this project where the dominant narrative around agriculture celebrates high input and high output farming especially in the dairying, tillage and commercial beef production, there may be understandable cultural and social barriers to such farm households identifying themselves within farming circles and learning about the supports available to them. DAFM’s RVO input revealed that apart from the dairy sector, farmers in the region are an ageing population characterised by *older couples and single farm holders* on

small holdings without any succession plan in place. These farms are very vulnerable to a lack of farm succession onto the next generation and thus most likely to be subsumed into neighbouring commercial operations through lease or purchase eventually. This weakening web of Ireland’s smaller family farms is eroding the ‘Living Countryside’ hailed in the Cork Declaration as an important part of the EU’s rural culture worthy of recognition and protection (European Commission, 2016). Consequently, they may lack help around the farm from other family members. Furthermore, those who live in less densely populated areas may lack the support of neighbours too. Such family and community structures are why this group has been flagged as “vulnerable and socially isolated” and thus ‘most-at-risk’ of poor human health and wellbeing (and by extension, poor animal welfare) (Quinn, 2023).

These negative outcomes of ageing smallholders, rural isolation and associated health and wellbeing issues were predicted by Macra na Feirme research conducted at the turn of the millennium, which explored school leavers’ farming career plans and concluded that “part-time farming would be a one-generation phenomenon” (Conor Cleere, KLP, pers. comm.). The anticipated knock-on effects of rural restructuring in the wider economy are already becoming apparent because the small rural village business sector is in demise. This is due to the tendency of farming families (a shrinking population) to spend their income locally while new rural dwellers tend to spend further afield and online (ibid.).

Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s)

Key Performance Measurements	Programme Outcomes
<p>1. Measure Attendance: Time Commitment from the farmers 11 weeks 2 evenings a week. 8,400 hours of contact time for this cohort in terms of engagement in social structure</p>	<p>3 programmes completed, ranging from 10 to 12 weeks in duration. Recruitment involved local radio, printed press, social media, and a poster campaign. The number of expressions of interest in participating in each programme was encouraging, however, the attendances were disappointing – 8 in course 1, 8 in course 2 and 7 in the final course. On a positive note, there was 100% retention of participants for each programme, and the feedback sessions reflected a high-level of satisfaction with the content of the programme. Each attendee had no hesitation in recommending the course to others within the farming community.</p> <p>Recruitment was by far the biggest challenge faced within this process. The Operating Group was made up of representatives from various farming organisations & Teagasc, and while these members recognized the benefit and need for participation in such gatherings, it wasn’t reflected in the numbers of attendees.</p> <p>There were many variables that affected attendance, from weather to seasonal workload, to “mart days”. A commitment to a full day of training (Programme 1) was seen as too of a time commitment</p>

	in one block in the working week, requiring the course structure to be revised between each successive programme to try to find a happy medium.
2. Measure Distance Travelled throughout the 11 weeks. Measure entry competency and self-evaluation. Measure exit show the improvement.	<p>Distance travelled was measured through an introductory onsite interview with attendees, which gave a background to each individual and their hopes and aspirations from participation in the course.</p> <p>A final interview was carried out at the end of each programme, from where the experiences and learnings of the course participants were recorded and documented. Several participants shared their own experiences of mental health and isolation, and how change was necessary to live a fulfilled life outside of the farm gate. Many of the participants felt that those in attendance were not necessarily the most disadvantaged, and they could identify numbers of individuals that would benefit much more from attending a similar programme, but the question of engagement and participation of these individuals remained unanswered. Personal confidence was identified as a significant barrier to attendance, even though the message in recruitment was that participation was entirely voluntary, and engagement would be at whatever level they felt most comfortable with.</p>
3. Support peer Connections that are fostered through the experience via ongoing “men’s shed” type meet up at the Discovery Park to maintain the upgrades	<p>The initial course was attended by a group that were largely familiar to one another, and although they may not meet on a regular/ structured format, contact has been maintained.</p> <p>The 2 subsequent groups were unknown to each other, and while it was discussed among the cohort to create or maintain some semblance of a structured network/ support group, the appetite for same reduced over time.</p>

Closing Evaluation

Table 1.2 provides an overview of the number of participants who attended each cycle of the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing Programme, along with delivery dates and number of sessions pertaining to each cycle. In total, 23 individuals participated in the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing programme. This was considerably less than the ambitious target of 100 individuals participating in programme, as outlined in the initial AGEI-EIP project application. Participants were required to attend the Mid-Leinster farmer wellbeing programme one day per week. The duration of the programme varied from 9 to 12 weeks. The variation occurred due to weather conditions and availability of participants.

Fig 2 Overview of Programme Delivery

Group	Programme Delivery Date	Number of Sessions	Number of Participants
1	22 March – 10 May 2022	10	8
2	22 September – 15 December 2022	12	8
3	29 March – 31 May 2023	9	7

The first cohort of participants (n = 8) were recruited in January / February 2022. The first training session commenced at the Castlecomer Discovery Centre on 22 March 2022 and ceased on 10 May 2022. The project application had envisaged 3 groups of 15 participants working

simultaneously in Spring 2022. However, the operational group faced significant difficulties in recruiting farmers to participate in the wellbeing programme. Therefore, this initial first group were considered a pilot group for the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing Programme.

The second cohort of participants (8) commenced the programme on 22 September 2022. It was completed on 15 December 2022. The final cohort of participants (7) were recruited in February / March 2023. The wellbeing programme commenced on 29 March 2023 and was completed on 31 May 2023.

Activities pursued during the Mid-Leinster Farmer Wellbeing Programme; A diverse range of activities were incorporated into the Mid-Leinster Farmer Wellbeing programme delivered by Castlecomer Discovery Centre.

Prominent examples include:

- **Live Willow Traditional Skills Workshops**
Participants created natural gates and living structures by using willow. The traditional skills developed during this activity could be replicated on participants farms. Issues pertaining to biodiversity and CAP reform were also discussed during the willow making workshops.
- **Social Gatherings**
The weekly workshops incorporated a mid-morning break for participants. This social activity enabled participants to engage in peer-discussions, thereby acting as a mechanism to combat loneliness / isolation (a challenge encountered by some participants).
- **Hedgerow Management**
All cohorts were provided the opportunity to learn about the importance of building and maintaining hedgerows on farms. One group applied this knowledge through constructing a hedge on site in the Discovery Park. It was not available to the other groups as it is a season specific activity.
- **Forest Bathing**
This forest-based wellbeing activity incorporates meditation, mindfulness, sensory exploration as well as learning about medicinal herbs and remedies found in nature. This activity had a high level of engagement, with the participants opening up about challenges they are facing in their personal lives.
- **Digital Skills**

This activity was focused on giving practical support to the group in the area of digital skills. A specific emphasis was placed on accessing and completing forms issued by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and the Marine. This activity was facilitated by staff from Kilkenny LEADER Partnership.

- **Dry Stone Walling**

Participants learnt the traditional skill of dry-stone wall building over a number of weeks. A number of walls were built through the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing Programme and provide a lasting legacy of this AGRI-EIP. This activity enabled participants to further hone and develop their teamwork skills whilst having a space to talk and socialise.

- **Yoga**

An introduction to yoga, breathing and gentle stretching was provided by a qualified specialist.

- **Creative Mandala / Symbollage.**

One group participated in a mandala / symbollage activity, co-ordinated by Dominika Stoppa an artist and educator who believes in the transformative power of creativity for inducing well-being. Her unique experiences have received widespread acclaim for their innovative approach to merging art and self-discovery. This mindful art experience is designed to help individuals express themselves by using a unique set of visual symbols, photos, quotes, and other elements that hold personal significance.

- **Mental Health Workshop - Mental Health Ireland delivered a workshop to one of the groups on “5 ways to wellbeing”. This workshop specifically focused on managing stress.**

A key focus was placed on developing traditional skillsets, with a specific emphasis placed on hedge laying; dry stone walling; and willow making. The participants enjoyed these practical and applied activities. It allowed the group to engage in team building as all participants had not met each other previously. The groups did not exhibit a strong desire to pursue adventure activities, albeit an archery session was provided on one occasion to one group. The initial plan for this AGRI-EIP had envisaged ‘Adventure Therapy’ being incorporated into the programme, whereby participants would be stimulated through new recreational outlets whilst also providing mental health benefits. However, the provision of ‘Adventure Therapy’ activities did not particularly suit the demographic profile who were recruited onto this programme.

Communication Strategy; The Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing Programme faced any challenges in recruiting participants. However, the Operational Group and Kilkenny LEADER Partnership, were very proactive in promoting the programme to farmers through a variety of traditional and social media platforms. A press release was prepared and circulated to local newspapers within the Mid-Leinster region; and representatives from Kilkenny LEADER partnership provided interviews on local radio. Furthermore, members of the Operational Group promoted the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing programme at various livestock marts in the region. These included: In addition to these traditional communications strategies, the operational group promoted the Wellbeing Programme through its member organisations websites and social media channels. Kilkenny LEADER Partnership also contacted relevant individuals who had previously pursued courses / programmes with the organisation. Despite these significant efforts, the Operational Group faced difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of individuals onto the programme.

Timing of Activities; the participants were very complimentary about the range and diversity of activities pursued during the training / wellbeing programme. However, the time commitment required to participate in the programme was deemed inappropriate. The commitment of one full day per week over 11 weeks was deemed impractical as farmers had to still pursue routine daily tasks on their farms. The participants would have preferred a half-day session, commencing at 9:00am and ceasing at 1:00pm.

Furthermore, spring / summertime was deemed to be a busier time on dairy/ beef and tillage farms in comparison to autumn / winter. It has to be noted that certain activities (willow-making / hedge laying) are typically undertaken in Spring. Therefore, the practical elements of the training / wellbeing programme are more suited to this time of the year.

The participants also stated that some of the activities (on certain weeks) could be scheduled for evening time. Prominent examples include ICT / digital skills; and presentations / talks on compliance; biodiversity; and CAP. This would enable participants to utilise their time more efficiently / effectively.

Group Size; the initial proposal had budgeted for approximately 14 – 16 members per group. However, the average group size for this project was 8 participants. Despite the smaller number of participants per group, it was the ideal size as it enabled the group to bond effectively together. Each group was able to pursue meaningful personal development activities – talk therapy, stress reduction, mindfulness and meditation. These activities might not have been as successful if the group size was larger.

Digital Skills; An overwhelming majority of participants on the Mid-Leinster Farmer Wellbeing programme stated they lacked ICT / digital skills. This lack of digital skills was not surprising due to the older age profile of participants. There was an eagerness to only acquire basic and necessary computer literacy skills. The participants had a desire to navigate through specific websites. These included: my.gov.ie and Department of Agriculture, Forestry and the Marine. Two groups participated in digital skills workshops.

Participants Perspective; This section outlines the feedback from participants, and it was gathered through the focus groups:

Content: The participants were happy with the content of the programme and in particular the practical skills such as ‘..the willow was very good and the building was very good’ .. ‘the nature and the plants was good’. Working outdoors in the setting was seen as a positive aspect of the programme. The diversity of the content of the programme was challenging but did broaden the mind which was helpful to participants that were open to these new experiences. Rating the course out of 10 ‘definitely give it a good 7’.

- Venue: The location in Castlecomer discovery park was seen as very good. The services available and the café was very good and overall, the facilities for the delivery of the course was seen as very positive and provided very good outdoor space and the overall natural environment for learning was excellent.

- Skills development: The willow and dry-stone building was excellent and one of the participants has indicated that they have taken on a similar project in their own property.

-

Female participants: There were a number of female participants on the programme, some who came in their own right and some who came with their partners. This was seen as a positive outcome for the course.

The following outlines the positive aspects associated with the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing Programme:

- “It changed my outlook, and I enjoyed not being at home”.
- “Slowing down, not running around and being more organised”.
- “I want to get ready for the future and be ready with a 5-year plan”.
- “There is more to life than money-Quality of life must be appreciated. I appreciate things I never did before such as learning from the older generation and the value of the environment, having your own land and bringing up kids on a farm”.
- “Things will change for me. I am making plans for the future, and I will relax and maybe retire”.
- “We are all reinventing the wheel re task management-we should share information regarding efficiency and refining our practices”.
- “I got a new perspective on small-holding and an appreciation of the positive side of farming”.
- “I learned how to stop at the end of the day and finish at a good time”.
- “I know that smallholders have to change-especially regarding suckler farming and to cut back on the numbers of cattle”
- “When at home you would not have a good time structure. I now manage time better-I do paperwork first before starting to farm”.
- “The programme gave me clarity. I have now gone off-grid and realise the power of self-sufficiency and free from the factory system. We should be independent and grow fodder and free of debt, away from the big players. We can do this if we stick together”.

Some participants outlined some negatives associated with the Mid-Leinster Farmers Wellbeing programme:

- Scheduling was seen as a challenge for the participants, as farmers had to complete tasks on their own farms prior to attending the programme. The participants expressed a preference for the afternoon so that farm work could be completed.
- Weather: The course was based outdoors, and this was a good experience but was also challenged by the very poor weather in the winter months.
- Content: In response to the current content there was a very positive response to practical skills, but some participants were more challenged with some of the wellbeing elements. The people who delivered these elements were described as excellent and the participants who engaged found it useful but other participants found these to be outside their comfort zone and were reluctant to engage.
- Recruitment was a challenge, and it appears not to be attractive to people who are currently working.

Benefits of the Mid-Leinster Farmer Wellbeing Programme; In tandem with the practical and physical activities, the participants on the Mid-Leinster farmer wellbeing programme also attended a number of workshops, with a specific emphasis placed on mental health and wellbeing. The participants were very complimentary about the mental health workshop delivered Mental Health Ireland. The group would have enjoyed more sessions on this topic. However, these types of workshops should only commence from the mid-point onwards of the training programme as the group needs to become acquainted with each other. On the last day of the wellbeing programme, the participants engaged in ‘forest bathing’, whereby the group engaged in mindfulness and meditation within a native woodland. Kilkenny LEADER Partnership also provided a number of presentations on proposed changes to the new CAP programme; compliance; and impacts of over-fertilisation on biodiversity.

The participants also spoke about the importance of having a morning break within the programme of activities. This enabled the group to bond with each other and to develop a ‘community of practice’. Overall, the participants on the Mid-Leinster wellbeing programme found the activities enjoyable, relevant and applicable to their daily life on the farm.

The participants on the Mid-Leinster farmer wellbeing programme expressed a wide range of personal benefits due to engaging with this innovative initiative. It enabled participants to forge new friendships; and connect / bond with people (something which the farmers felt was missing during the COVID-19 lockdowns). The practical knowledge and skills acquired through this programme was deemed very important. One participant stated that ‘every day is a learning day’. During the facilitated discussion, it was noted that some of the farmers had not previously engaged with traditional farm skills (hedge-laying / dry stone walling). Therefore, the skills acquired during this training programme are going to be transferred and utilised on the farmers holdings. One farmer stated that he now knows the necessary skills to preserve stone walls on his farm. For some participants, there was a desire to continue onto further training, specifically in welding and carpentry.

Recommendations

The Farmer Wellbeing Programme was enjoyed by all participants. However, a number of recommendations should be considered in future roll-out of the programme: The Farmer Wellbeing programme was delivered solely from the Discovery Centre in Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny. Due to the high costs associated with fuel, this may have discouraged farmers to travel to Castlecomer on a weekly basis, especially those living a significant distance from the venue. In the future, travel costs could be provided to participants, similar to employment activation programmes offered by Department of Social Protection; and / or have multiple locations for the delivery of the farmer well-being programme.

Recruitment: People can be tentative in taking a step outside what they are familiar and in addition to the current methods ie. Advertise at Marts, farm organisations, ear to ground and local radio the challenge of recruitment could be helped by connecting with the women who appear to be important



gatekeepers in encouraging people to be open to this type of programme. At an organisational level there also appears to be an issue of translating names on a list to participants on a programme and ensuring commitment at the outset is challenging.

Scheduling: The suggestions about timing each day are important and also starting a little later in the year could be helpful. The suggestion that it be scheduled every fortnight to have a longer period of engagement with participants would also be helpful. This approach would facilitate longer engagement with the content of the programme and enable engagement with specific projects over the longer term.

Talking and isolation: There was agreement that there are farmers and farm families in every place are suffering from social isolation and that the experience is that many people in this category are the silent minority and that the related mental health challenges are very hidden but are significant. One participant spoke of the importance of lives saved through engaging with initiatives such as this. The increasing size of farms is also leading to uncertainty about the future of small and medium sized farms in Ireland and this is adding to increased uncertainty and pressures on farmers.

Structure and Format of the Course: The participants suggested that a different Structure for the Course could be beneficial. Working towards a regular engagement e.g. monthly engagement with a club (Farmer Wellbeing Club) could be a way of progressing (built on the Men's sheds model). Setting up a regular engagement on topics related to specific relevant content and use the opportunity to introduce eg. blood pressure testing, cholesterol etc that would be beneficial.

The importance of a facilitator (consistent presence) through this process is also critical to ensure engagement and follow through and pick up the different nuances (learning opportunities through the programme), e.g. Plan three to four sessions in advance and then use the participants to identify what other needs that they have which will form the beginning of the agenda and the next items for the group. The longer-term engagement would be beneficial and would enable initiatives that are introduced e.g. wellbeing to become integrated into the programme to ensure that the changes become a habit.

Mid-Leinster Farmer Wellbeing Project	Financial Overview
--	---------------------------

	Dec 21 - Feb 22	Mar 22 - May 22	Jun 22 to Aug 22	Sept 22 - Nov 22	Dec 22 - Feb 23	Mar 23 - May 23	June 23 - Sept 23	TOTAL
Personnel	€ 4,413.44	€ 7,061.52	€ 6,333.30	€ 5,560.98	€ 5,560.98	€ 6,487.81	€ 9,268.29	€ 44,686.32
Travel	€ -	€ -	€ -	€ -	€ 259.10	€ 74.62	€ 1,189.19	€ 1,522.91
Other Direct Costs	€ -	€ -	€ -	€ -	€ -	€ -		€ -
Administration	€ 370.35	€ 2,502.15	€ 2,383.19	€ 2,174.10	€ 2,508.55	€ 2,373.42	€ 3,490.86	€ 15,802.62
Implementation	€ -	€ 17,791.50	€ 6,667.01	€ -	€ 16,500.00	€ -	€ 29,832.99	€ 70,550.00
€ 206,821.00	€ 4,783.79	€ 27,355.17	€ 15,383.50	€ 7,735.08	€ 24,828.63	€ 8,935.85	€ 43,781.33	€ 132,803.35

Value For Money It was agreed in the planning stage of this project that KLP would host the project and assign a project coordinator and provide administration from the from the KLP team. All other elements of the project were tendered with the Discovery Park securing the training delivery elements. The quality of the physical resources in the park and the experience of the team combined with its strategic location in the region could not be matched by other suppliers. Costs were closely managed by a senior KLP Administrator.

While the project did not reach the KPI's at the outset spend on core programme delivery related directly to actual outputs. Challenges presented in recruitment of participant's and the development of strategies – the reshaping of the delivery format and the extra inputs required of the Coordinator to understand the to manage the constraints were outlined in reshaped project plans submitted to the DAFM as these were required.

Details of dissemination of project findings

A report analyzing the outputs of the project has been completed by Technical University of the Shannon. This has been shared with partners and is available from KLP. A short video here tells the stories that emerged from Programme 1 and the outcomes it produced for the participants.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtwGdX4Xlzg&ab_channel=KilkennyLEADERPartnership