

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT, BIA AGUS MUIR

JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

Dé Céadaoin, 1 Nollaig 2021

Wednesday, 1 December 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 5.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 5.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Martin Browne,	Victor Boyhan,
Matt Carthy,	Paul Daly,
Michael Collins,	Tim Lombard.
Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Joe Flaherty,	
Paul Kehoe,	
Michael Ring.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Eugene Murphy.

Teachta / Deputy Jackie Cahill sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Common Agricultural Policy and Young Farmers: Engagement with Macra na Feirme

Chairman: No apologies have been received. Before we begin, I remind members that in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions only the Chairman and staff are present in the committee room and all members must join remotely from elsewhere in the parliamentary precincts. The secretariat can issue invitations to join the meeting on Microsoft Teams. Members may not participate in the meeting from outside the parliamentary precincts. Please mute microphones when not making a contribution and use the raise hand function to indicate when you would like to speak. Please note that messages sent to the meeting chat are visible to all participants. Speaking slots will be prioritised for members of the committee.

The agenda today is the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, and young farmers. I would like to welcome the following representatives from Macra na Feirme: Mr. John Keane, president; Mr. Shane Fitzgerald, chair of the agricultural affairs sub-committee; Mr. Derrie Dillon, head of advocacy, membership and policy and acting CEO; and Ms Gillian Richardson, agricultural and rural affairs policy officer, who are all joining remotely. You are all welcome to the meeting. You will be given ten minutes to make your opening statement before going into a question and answer session.

Before we begin, I must read an important notice on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give to the committee. However, if you are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and you continue to do so, you are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of your evidence. You are directed that only evidence connected to the subject matter in these proceedings is to be given. You are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, you should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Participants in the committee meeting from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within the parliamentary precincts does not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or to what extent, such participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

Before Mr. Keane starts his opening statement, I must note that there is a strong possibility that the meeting will be interrupted by votes both in the Seanad and in the Dáil. I propose to members that if the votes do not clash and if Senator Lombard is on the call, he can take the Chair for me if there is a Dáil vote and we can continue the meeting.

I invite Mr. Keane to make his opening statement.

Mr. John Keane: The opportunity to speak to the committee is greatly appreciated.

Chairman: Please wait a moment, Mr. Keane. The audio could be a little bit stronger. Can we make it a bit stronger if it is possible? I apologise for interrupting you, Mr. Keane.

Mr. John Keane: I thank the committee for opportunity to speak with it this evening. Over the past number of months the committee has facilitated discussions with us on a number of occasions, and I would like to acknowledge that at the start. The committee and Chair's continued engagement with young farmers is greatly appreciated. This evening, our ask has a particular focus on the area of young farmers in relation to the Common Agricultural Policy.

Over the past number of months and, indeed, even years, the next tranche of the Common Agricultural Policy has been up for debate and negotiation both at the EU and governmental levels. We are now getting to the crunch period before it has to be submitted to the Commission before the end of December. The documents that have been circulated on the CAP strategic plan over the past number of months have been positive in light of being visible for farm organisations as well young farmers across the country. However, we view it in the context of the ever-changing environment in which farmers and young farmers see themselves in, particularly in the context of the European Commission in 2017 and 2018. Elevating generational renewal is one of the main key deliverables and objectives under this Common Agricultural Policy. It is key to remember that during the course of those negotiations at European level and, more recently, at national level, the importance that has been placed on ensuring that there is a sustainable and viable sector for future generations to partake in within the sector. Young farmers play a key role in addressing the challenges that we as an industry face, but also see a huge amount of opportunity in terms of bringing the sector forward over the next number of years and into the decades beyond.

In Ireland, our agricultural land base is primarily based in terms of our livestock sectors, supported by and spread across tillage and other enterprises also. The breakdown of young farmers across those enterprises over the past decades has decreased significantly. Even in the five years from 2011 to 2016 there has been a 15% decrease in the number of active young farmers under the age of 35. It is to the backdrop of those stark figures and in the context of general society, where the workforce within other economic and entrepreneurial sectors across the economy shows that the average workforce under the age of 35 represents almost 30%. In that context, the support for young farmers in the context of CAP and even in the national envelope needs to be strengthened and increased.

If we look at the traditional barriers that have existed for young farmers over the course of the past number of decades, whether that be access to credit or land, investment support or start-up aid, we see a lack of support and commitment within the current guise of the CAP strategic plan for young farmers to address those barriers that we face on an ongoing basis. If we also look at our counterparts across other EU member states, covered very eloquently by Diana Lenzi, the current president of Conseil Européen des Jeunes Agriculteurs, CEJA, the European Council of Young Farmers, at our annual conference last Friday, those barriers exist across other EU member states also. However, there have been discussions and parameters are being put in place to support and address those barriers in other EU member states.

We look a little closer to home in terms of the context of access to land and we look at our own land mobility service being called out within Commission's proposals and documents and the lack of support in terms of the Common Agricultural Policy and the CAP strategic plan. We acknowledge the commitment from the Minister in the past week for an increase of funding from the national envelope for next year but it is important that service is committed and is provided into longer term.

In regard to access to credit from a young farmer's perspective and under current state aid rules, we realise we are working within the parameters of those state aid rules and recognise that one of the only possible alternatives to address that is support for young farmers with financial instruments. We have seen it called out within the Common Agricultural Policy within the Commission's proposals. We have also seen some of our counterparts within other EU member states, notified to us by CEJA, have engaged in endorsing and developing financial instruments specifically to support young farmers. We see that within our own CAP strategic plan that

critical access to finance and that the barrier for young farmers over past decades has not been addressed. We believe that is a significant limiting factor in ensuring the sustainability of the number of young farmers under the age of 35 as we move forward. From a delivery point of view in the course of this CAP period, we believe the litmus test of this CAP period will be the number of active young farmers under the age of 35 farming actively by 2027. Agriculture, as I previously touched on, is a complete outlier in terms of what the people and the demographic of the sector look like. Over the past ten years the number of farmers over the age of 55 and, indeed, 65 has increased, while the number of active and progressive farmers under the age of 35 has decreased.

Addressing the issues in terms of succession pathways to enter the industry has been something that we in Macra na Feirme have called for over many years as well as addressing the need in order to provide an opportunity for older generations to have financial security as they exit farming while also ensuring that young farmers have supports to enter the sector. In regard to what we can do to develop a succession scheme that provides for that, issues have been identified with previous early retirement schemes. Our proposals have centred around a succession scheme as opposed to an early retirement scheme. We recognise that within media outlets over the past number of weeks there has been a recognition or a floating of a scheme related to decarbonising, and a succession scheme relating to that. We believe any scheme must offer an opportunity for young farmers to enter the sector while also supporting those who are exiting the sector.

The key issue for our members that has spanned almost a decade at this stage has been the forgotten farmers. This is a cohort of farmers who set up agricultural holdings before 2008, many of whom are still under the age of 40 but have low value entitlements and are also deemed ineligible for young farmers access to the national reserve. We recognise the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, has committed to resolving the matter of forgotten farmers in the context of the new CAP arrangements and to ensure those farmers are not forgotten any longer. We see within the current proposals of the CAP strategic plan that that cohort of farmers has not been facilitated nor provided for in an amount of funding to address that issue. Approximately 3,500 farmers are in that category. They feel they have been forgotten and left out from valued supports, such as installation aid, young farmer top-ups and supporting schemes throughout the CAP.

The other key issue from a young farmer's perspective is start-up aid. We recognise there is a contribution from the national envelope and tax relief to encourage young farmers to enter enterprises. However, we recognise and have seen from our counterparts across the EU that start-up aid and installation aid have formed part of previous CAP plans in other EU member states and have been used effectively to ensure that initial boost of capital for young farmers to establish their enterprises while also meeting the challenges of compliance which we understand will increase on farms over the next couple of years. The cost of establishing and setting up a farm enterprise is a huge initial investment for a young farmer. For someone coming into the industry who lacks collateral or security, that initial injection of capital investment can prove a barrier.

Moreover and more wholly in terms of the eco-schemes that have been proposed in the context of CAP, we believe there is a gap and a need and an opportunity for additional eco-schemes and measures to be included. The CAP proposals from a Commission point of view include a progressive and increased day's grazing at grass, while also looking at the actions which enhance animal welfare and address antimicrobial resistance, such as faecal dung sam-

pling and milk recording. It is in that context that we should continue to improve and drive our performance. When we compare ourselves on the latter to the average EU performance, we are less than half in terms of our antibiotic use within this country and that is something we should be proud of but also something we should endeavour to improve. In the context of the eco-schemes and when we look at our countryside, we are unique in the hedgerow cover we have throughout the country. We have looked for a hedgerow management policy and measure. That can benefit both the farmer and biodiversity throughout the country. We recognise this is something that all farmers have a role to play in.

I reiterate my comments at the start. I appreciate the engagement of the Chair and the committee. My fellow Macra na Feirme members, Mr. Dillon, Ms Richardson, Mr. Fitzgerald, and I look forward to the questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Keane. As usual, that was a very comprehensive statement from Macra na Feirme. We are focusing on young farmers and I will make one comment before I hand over to the members. The focus and comments have been on CAP. It is about generation renewal. Current farmers have to be confident and secure in passing responsibility on to the next generation. That is something that needs to be addressed if we are going to encourage transfer of land. We must think of the older generation as well and ensure it is confident in doing so. Many points have been very well made there. The forgotten farmers have been talked about in regard to many CAP programmes but no initiative has been put in place for them. Hopefully this time around, there will be some financial recognition of the fact that through no fault of their own, they lost out, as Mr. Keane mentioned, on installation aid, young farmer's top-ups and the grants and incentives for younger farmers.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome Mr. Keane and his colleagues. I regret we are not able to meet in the committee room. I thank Macra na Feirme for its ongoing engagement with the committee and its constructive role not only in assisting this committee in its different deliberations but also in helping to shape Irish farm policy more broadly in a very progressive direction. I commend everybody involved in that. For a young farmers' organisation, its professionalism is evident in all of our interactions.

I have a number of questions, which I will ask separately. Mr. Keane or any of his colleagues can respond to them as they see fit. The starkest figures referenced in the opening statement were the difference between 2005 and 2016 in terms of young farmers acting as farm managers. The figure was down from 10.7% in 2005 to 6.1% in 2016. The overall figures that 5% of our farmers are young farmers and that 30% are over 65 years of age points to a crisis. Do the witnesses think we have moved from the position where we were heading towards a terminal decline or do we have the foundations, if not the building blocks, to reverse that trend?

Mr. Keane mentioned that we cannot manage what we do not measure. What type of targets need to be set in regard to the next CAP so that we can measure the success of the next programme to 2027? In other words, what is the bare minimum? Do the witnesses believe the strategic plan, as currently outlined, is fit to deliver that purpose?

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I might bring in my colleague, Mr. Fitzgerald, on this. To touch on the Deputy's initial remarks in terms of the number of young farmers and the number of farmers over the age of 65, to broaden that out to a wider context and given that we are in Covid-19 times and are joining the meeting through Microsoft Teams, if the health service had an age demographic similar to that we have described in terms of young farmers, the Deputy would be correct in saying that it would be a crisis in that sector. From a

young farmer's point of view in our sector, and addressing the challenges and the opportunities we have to meet as we move forward, where we are right now and given the trend we have seen from 8,700 young farmers in 2016 or 2017 claiming the entitlements and the payments for young farmers, down to about 7,400 last year, show that trend is continuing. That has to be verified by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, but those are the figures we are dealing with. I agree there is a need and pressure to ensure that demographic is reversed and changed. In terms of targets we can set as a sector as we move forward, we benchmark and reference it with other sectors across the economy at somewhere between 35% and 30% under the age of 35. We must be realistic and live in the real world and realise that we are not going to get to those levels in a three to five-year period. The measures being proposed to address the key barriers that exist for young farms are not going to deliver a numerical change in the number and percentage of young farmers under the age of 35. If we look across some of the more progressive EU member states and at supports for young farmers, the percentage of young farmers in Austria and some of the Nordic countries is in the mid-teens, anywhere between 14% and 18%. There are regional figures in other countries, including Germany, France and elsewhere, where those figures are similar, and even higher. From our side, that is where we need to aim. That is the benchmark and the water level on which this CAP strategic plan must deliver. The key issues are access to land, credit and initial start-up support. The point the Chairman made about ensuring that older generations have security as they move out of the sector is one of the key things. As young farmers, we recognise there is a need to ensure that those people who have contributed so much to the economy and to the sector over 30, 40 or 50 years are not just pushed to one side. We must recognise their experience, their input and the progress they have made in the past 30 and 40 years, and not let that be overlooked. We must ensure that both ends of the spectrum are supported. As well as young farmers entering through the measures I have touched on, there should be a succession scheme and a pathway to ensure that older farmers have that financial support and security as they move on their career.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In terms of the other member states operating within a EU framework that have much better and healthier proportions of young farmers operating, is there a key flagship programme that some of those operate under? Is there a number of simple examples that we can take from any of those and simply extrapolate them into the Irish plan?

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Deputy. Yes, there are a number of countries with various instruments and schemes. They are not all solely confined to the CAP. There are taxation measures within their national envelop that provide for it, whether that be, as I mentioned earlier, early retirement schemes, or early transfer of land and favourable conditions for that within their national taxation systems, or identification of a successor at the mid-50 mark so that somebody is there to take over the farm when those people reach retirement age. In the context of CAP, we have seen increased supports exist in other EU member states with respect to installation aid or start-up aid. We have seen higher levels of support in terms of investment support. We have also seen the use in other EU states of that critical issue of access to credit. Other member states operate specific targeted financial instruments aimed at supporting young farmers, in particular. Within our own context of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, and other loan schemes for farmers in general, naturally enough, we see that when those are put out through pillar banks and other institutions, the lowest risk option will be selected. If you compare a young farmer who might have limited collateral, a limited track record or limited security versus the person who has 20 or 30 years' experience in an industry or business, has a more secure backing, some collateral and a proven track record, naturally enough, when there is a limited pot of money, they are going to move towards the latter. That is why that specific element of the financial support, which we have seen working in other countries and jurisdic-

tions, addresses that key need. It is something we need in this country for young farmers, in particular.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank Mr. Keane. When he becomes aware of those specific schemes that operate well in other states, will he please inform this committee of them for our work?

In regard to the figures Mr. Keane gave on the farmer share in the value chain, and the fact that we saw a decline in farmer share during a period when added-value was actually increasing, where does he see the potential for improvement? Would he be looking at unfair trading practices legislation and at the regulator or Ombudsman playing a role in that? I know it is broader than young farmers but what is the answer to that issue in terms of added value?

Mr. John Keane: That figure reduced during a period when the value of our products increased and the overall value of the industry increased. When we look at Food Vision 2030 and the ambition to reach €21 billion over that period of time, if the trajectory of the return of the value from the food chain of the farmer continues, despite the value of our product increasing, it will not be delivering for farmers. That is not a situation farmers can tolerate.

In regard to the solution piece, I recognise measures regarding the unfair trading practices, UTPs, have a role to play. However, when the measures on UTPs were being drafted and were out for public consultation, Macra na Feirme looked for a number of additions to them to further protect farmers. I cannot provide those off the top of my head right now. They are not on the tip of my tongue, but we can certainly send them on to the Deputy. It was more in line with ensuring that the farmer at the base level had more of a say, more control, and more sight over what happened within the supply chain.

We recognise the food ombudsman has a role in providing clarity and to help redistribute that. We understand there is a procedure and a protocol that has to be gone through. From a farmer's point of view, in general, we recognise that in the 2021 budget, €1 million was set aside for the establishment and development of the national food ombudsman. Roll the clock 12 months forward, in the 2022 budget, which we heard in October, €4 million was set aside for the establishment and development of the national food ombudsman. Some 12 months further on, from a layman's and a farmer's point of view, we have not seen much progress in the establishment or development of that. We understand it is not among the regulations and the Bills in the Houses before Christmas. There is an urgency around this. Ensuring farmers have a valued place within the food supply chain has never been more important. From a young farmer's and a farmer's point of view, it begs the question of the urgency around ensuring that clarity is brought to the sector and that redistribution of supply and power is brought into the sector. From our side of things, urgency is needed on that given that we are 13 or 14 months on since the initial allocation of €1 million for its establishment and development.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The big issue is going to be around generation renewal and succession if we are going to do all that Mr. Keane said. He mentioned on-farm succession schemes previously. Could he give a view in terms of what an on-farm succession scheme would and should look like to Macra na Feirme?

Mr. John Keane: I might bring Mr. Fitzgerald in on this, although I know I said that the last time.

In regard to what our succession scheme looks like in the context of CAP, it looked like a

support payment for the older farmer. Similar to what happened in the previous one, for a period of five years, there was a stepped payment with the transfer of land for the young farmer over that period of time as well. That support payment provided to the older farmer is provided on a stepped basis, on a yearly basis, based on the percentage of the land that is transferred to the younger generations. We also looked at it in the context of the previous scheme, which was called the early retirement scheme, and the need for the older farmer to completely separate himself or herself from on-farm activity. We recognised that was neither a healthy relationship nor feasible, relevant or practical for the older generations to completely leave the wellingtons at the back door and never go further than that. There has to be recognition within that that the older generations stepping back from farming still have a role within the farm business, whether that be advisory, herding the cattle or travelling to the local mart. That social element for the older generation is intrinsically important to ensure their own well-being and their value of place, because we recognise that being in a sector for 30 or 40 years and putting a blunt end at the end of it and stopping one morning is not conducive for the well-being of the older generation.

That support payment tapered out over a period of five years as well as the land transaction for the young farmers, the financial contribution from young farmers and the financial understanding of young farmers being developed over that period has been a critical part of it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is Mr. Keane happy enough that we can devise a scheme? I agree that when farmers retire, the sense of driving them off the land entirely and forcing them to have no part in the workings of the farm is crazy. That is one reason the previous schemes did not have greater buy-in. The argument in favour of that type of approach is to ensure that this is more than just a paper exercise and the older farmer remains the boss on the farm but we do not see generational renewal. Is Mr. Keane happy that a scheme can be devised that mitigates against that risk but allows the input of an older farmer in terms of the knowledge built up over many years?

Mr. John Keane: The on-farm partnership model works relatively successfully at the moment. I have mentioned financial access and financial contribution. Over time, the young farmer must have exercised financial control, as well as ownership of the land. Those two key things have been shown within the partnership model, and a lot of them are being facilitated through the land mobility service. That shows there is the opportunity and possibility for that to deliver. That demonstrates and shows that financial control and financial contribution from a young farmer's point of view, as well as the transfer of the ownership of the land while also recognising, as the Deputy has rightly highlighted, the importance of the older farmer to the enterprise with the knowledge and experience on which you really cannot put a price. We recognise that those two things are important and can go hand in hand.

Mr. Shane Fitzgerald: I will give a broad perspective on the first point the Deputy made about generational renewal. I agree with all of the points made about the succession scheme. Earlier the Chair also mentioned how important it is that the older generation feel comfortable and confident enough to pass on the farm to the next generation.

Last Friday, we had our national conference and Mr. Declan McEvoy of IFAC Accountants made good points on what happens on farms. As Mr. Keane mentioned, there is a succession scheme. Obviously there must be a transitional period beforehand. The whole area around a conversation and communicating about a succession scheme between the parents and their child or whoever is going to inherit the farm must happen early. That communication is nearly the biggest barrier and in a lot of cases, such communication does not happen soon enough.

It is by starting that conversation that you can get the ball rolling and then look at gradually transferring the land.

As for the early retirement scheme, the name of the scheme was probably the biggest mistake as everyone knows that farmers do not retire and they definitely do not retire early. I think that the older generation still must be involved in farming. While there is a fear that the older generation will still have control and will not hand over enough responsibility, it is important to strike the right balance because farming requires experience, youth and education. Once things are done in a transitional way, then the farm succession partnership model is one that can be built on. Mr. Declan McEvoy mentioned points on a possible top-up in that regard as well and I think that is the approach that has to be taken.

I will make a general comment on generational renewal, why numbers are so low and why it is going in the wrong direction. You need to put yourself in young farmers' shoes - and those of all farmers - and the problem is there is so much uncertainty about the future. The goalposts are changing the whole time between carbon budgets, nitrates and everything else. As things are constantly changing every week or two, young farmers find it very hard to plan ahead. It is very hard to entice young people to join the industry when there is so much uncertainty.

The Common Agricultural Policy has been mentioned. In terms of the eco-schemes, we welcome the new proposal that is on the table but the original five proposals were all about reduction. There was nothing really there for progressive and highly educated farmers and when young farmers see that it is not going to entice them into the industry, which is the biggest concern. A lot of farms all over the country do not provide enough income to support two farm families, which again is not going to encourage generational renewal.

It is important to have a clearly defined roadmap for farmers and young farmers in general. Mr. Keane has already mentioned access to credit, which is a huge barrier for young farmers. You cannot put a plan in place if you do not know the number of livestock or land area involved. How can you get finance from the banks if you do not have these projections? We must plan from year to year and there is no other industry that does that. I mean everyone else can plan for five or ten years ahead. Farmers need to have a clearly defined roadmap, need more certainty and need to be supported.

As we have constantly stated, young farmers will step up to the plate to tackle environmental challenges and meet targets. At the moment, we know that we probably can only get to approximately 18% by adopting new technologies such as low-emission slurry spreading and using multiple species of clover. We rely on research or a silver bullet to come along to reach 22% or 30% because if we do not then there will have to be reductions. It is important that there is funding and support for Teagasc and for research, that people are educated and that young farmers are supported because we are the ones who are going to adapt to the changes faster and we need to be supported to make these changes. If young farmers do not join the industry then we do not have a hope of meeting these targets.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Well said. Access to finance is something that this committee has heard about quite often. I ask Mr. Keane to elaborate on the specific problems encountered by younger farmers and the measures that are needed to address them. I will finish at that and will comment at the end when other members have finished, if there is time.

Mr. John Keane: I will deal with the problems that young farmers face and ask my colleague, Mr. Derrie Dillon, to outline the solution that we feel would help to resolve the issue.

As for what young farmers are traditionally identifying to us in terms of the barriers to access to credit, we have cases where young farmers have told us they have been refused access to credit up to nine times. A number of young farmers have told us that they have been refused access to credit up to ten times and were eventually successful. The issues they have clearly identified as barriers are as follows. First, the pillar banks will seek a proven track record in terms of repayment capacity. The second thing they seek is collateral or security. We find that young farmers, naturally enough as they are in the early stage of business, have limited collateral or security to put against a loan for investment in capital infrastructure, livestock, land purchase or whatever. There is a limited capacity and limited security that can be offered in terms of securing finance.

I will outline what young farmers have consistently told us in terms of access to credit. This follows on from what Mr. Fitzgerald said. Particularly in the last 12 to 18 months, there has been uncertainty regarding the value of product in terms of what will be achieved from it, as well as the future propositions for the sector in terms of meeting the climate targets and climate ambitions the sector hopes to achieve and which Mr. Fitzgerald has touched on. The feedback is that the security, certainty and confidence in the ability of a young person, who is, naturally enough, more exposed to fluctuations in the market given his or her position in it and who would find it difficult to meet that repayment capacity, is proving to be a challenge. That whole area of future certainty and of ensuring there is a value in a product and that the value will be received, as well as the budgeting based on that, is proving to be a challenge. If you look at the dairy side of things, there is processor uncertainty. In the beef sector, there is uncertainty around price and in particular around the whole emissions piece, how that will be calculated and the talk about what the national herd will look like in the future. Action 3.1 in the climate action plan refers to developing a sustainable herd as we move forward but there is no clarity or certainty yet around what that will look like. That does not provide an environment for certainty on which to base lending or to provide a solid business plan for a young farmer as he or she moves forward because there is no guarantee that the goalposts will not move. The Ag Climatise roadmap that we developed in 2019 has now been put in the parking lot and we are looking at developing something else in early 2022. We recognise that change is important and good but at the same time, you need a roadmap for young farmers.

My colleague, Mr. Dillon, will comment on the solution piece.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: In response to Deputy Carthy, we have spoken about succession schemes and particular sectors that are challenged whether that is access to credit or availing of other incentives. There is an opportunity to create greater alignment between the Common Agricultural Policy schemes and our taxation code. That is a part of the CAP strategic plan too and that opportunity should not be lost. We talked about succession earlier. For sectors that are not incentivised enough by taxation measures - we all know which ones we are talking about - there is an opportunity to tweak existing taxation schemes to make them more attractive to those sectors.

Moving to sectors where young farmers have difficulty accessing credit, a report published by Indecon in 2016 was an *ex ante* evaluation of the use of financial instruments within Ireland's rural development programme at the time. It identified a market failure to the tune of €105 million in 2016, increasing to €350 million over the 2020s. A particular group, namely, young farmers, had been experiencing market failure when trying to access credit, particularly within the pillar banks. A recommendation Indecon made related to the use of financial instruments within the rural development programme. We have sought that, at a minimum, they would be piloted among young farmers within this rural development programme.

This is not new from Macra na Feirme; we sought it in the case of the current development programme. We cannot see any other solid mechanism, allowed under state aid rules, that would provide for young farmers to be able to access credit outside of financial instruments. Financial instruments are made available through the rural development programme. It is an revolving fund that is available and that is self-financing over time. It supports farmers who experience market failure in accessing credit to be able to avail of investment supports within their sector and to grow and drive their business, naturally on a solid business case, which is still a requirement in the context of financial instruments. Financial instruments constitute the premise of what we are considering, given that they are allowed under the rural development programme, whereas the other mechanism we examined is not allowed under current state aid rules.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I am, and always have been, impressed by Mr. Keane and the Macra na Feirme organisation. Young farmers are in really good hands with the likes of him and his team, and I do not say that in any other way than that which I mean. They are professional, slick and progressive and are on the message and on the money. That is not just me saying that; other people have said it to me. I know from the level of contributions they have made, having engaged with this committee since I have been a member, that they are highly focused and professional and they make really good presentations. I want them to convey that to their broader executive because it is an important vote of confidence. It is something I have observed within their organisation and it is worth saying.

I took the time earlier to print and examine their draft submissions to the CAP strategic plan 2023-2027 and I noted the professional nature of the document, how it is laid out, the objectives, the key messages and the summaries. It is slick and professional and it is really good for young farmers that they have people who are advocating so strongly for them.

I read Macra na Feirme's statement to the committee, which was submitted and circulated earlier. We have taken on board, and it has been well covered by Deputy Carthy, the issue of succession pathways, the land mobility services, the forgotten farmers, who are a particularly important cohort, the financial instruments and supports, the start-up grants and the eco systems, which I will focus on for a moment because they are important. There is much talk about them and there is support for them not only in Europe, in the context of the European Green Deal, and nationally among the tripartite coalition Government. The reality is that the Green Party is in power and it is an advocate. There is very much a green agenda - I say that in a positive way - among the Government and we need to tap into and maximise the potential and supports for that.

There are the seven strands of eco-schemes. I do not need to set that out for our guests, given they are at that business every day and know it well. In their submission, the witnesses state they would like to see further increases in the integrated hedgerow management measure, and I fully agree with and support that. We have not quite seen that in CAP. Good hedgerow management should be a key feature of CAP and it is something I would like our guests to tease out in more detail. It makes absolute sense. There have been big issues with carbon research and all those areas, and it is a hot topic. Will our guests tease that out?

The reduction of the age of first calving is a reasonable request and it makes sense. As for the increased number of days of pasture, we have an ideal climate, and for many farmers who outwinter cattle or who could do so for a longer period, that would also make sense and would be good news for them. I have said so many times at meetings of this committee that I know sections of the west of Ireland where cattle are outwintered all year round successfully and they

are in top condition. They do not call many vets and their cattle are sought after. They would not call themselves organic farmers but rather practical farmers, and they have developed a system that works for them. While there might be some controversy about ring feeders, moving around the ground, inspectors and so on, they are successful at what they do. They manage it well and they have healthy systems.

How can we tease out these eco systems and maximise them? How can we tap in and recognise that farmers are both custodians of the land and business people? Sometimes people forget that, but it is right and there is a natural synergy between them. What more can we do in the context of good hedgerow management? In the hedgerow appraisal system, a survey was carried out by Neil Foulkes, Janice Fuller and Declan Little, with whom our guests may be familiar. There is much substance in what they say. The eco systems are the way to go but how can we maximise that?

Finally, in the context of the CAP strategic plan, our guests spoke about agriculture initiatives such as further training, innovation and learning modules for young farmers, particularly in a practical way, given that many young farmers work on the farm too. How is that done in such a way that works around their ability to work and farm? Are there new initiatives or models in that area our guests would like us to pursue?

I thank them for their presentation.

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Senator for his kind remarks. I will direct them to Ms Gillian Richardson, who is attending remotely. He spoke about professionalism and the slickness of the documents, and I assure him she is almost the sole person responsible for that and she puts in a great deal of effort to it. I pass all those kudos, therefore, to Ms Richardson.

On hedgerow management, I might bring in Mr. Fitzgerald. The Senator referred to pastures and the age of calving. Hedgerow management is critical and is even called out in an advisory document from the EU about developing our CAP strategic plan, whereby Ireland benefits and has the advantages of one of the highest shares of farmland given away to permanent grassland but which also has a well-established network of hedgerows that support rich biodiversity and its protection and enhancement, which is important. Our network of hedgerows averages in the region of 7% or 8% of the coverage across the country in terms of area. From a management point of view, we recognise the importance to nature of ensuring hedgerows provide a biodiverse rich nature for habitats, creatures, insects and nesting birds. That is part of what we need to deliver under the CAP. It is not about reinventing the wheel. We have hedgerows on every farm across the country. Therefore, why would we not use them to our benefit and to provide an opportunity for habitats, biodiversity and all of that development?

Moving on specifically to what we are looking for, the Senator mentioned the document and reference was made to some of the research. The research indicates a hedgerow which is 2.5 m to 3 m wide at the bottom and between 1.5 m to 2 m wide at the top is the most beneficial, secure and provides the most opportunity for nesting birds, biodiversity and habitat development. If we are to develop a scheme it should enhance the value of develop hedgerows towards those measurements. The geotagging app has been used for on-farm measurements. Farmers provide those data and they can be marked on a map, as well as where a photograph was taken. Those are measures that can be used to monitor and develop a progression model for hedgerow development over a number of years. We recognise some of the other measures within eco-schemes, whether it be the planting of trees or hedgerows, can be knitted within this measure to improve the overall biodiversity benefit of hedgerows across farms. We recognise that is a crucial way to

move forward. Integrated management policy is a gap within those eco-schemes. The Department has highlighted eco-schemes are open to all farmers and there is an opportunity for them to access them. Integrated hedgerow management is a measure that can be adopted by almost every farmer, if not all farmers, across the country and it can provide a benefit to the farmer, shelter for animals, a habitat and a biodiverse rich nature for nature on farms.

We have mentioned the age of calving, faecal egg sampling and milk recording. We recognise their benefit and have suggested their use to the Department. The feedback has been that, from an environmental point of view, they are quite sector-specific in terms of milk recording. However, with respect to faecal egg sampling and milk recording in the context of antimicrobial resistance and looking to the farm to fork strategy - around which policy is being developed as we speak at European level that will come into effect in the next few years - and the reduction targets around that, and it being called out as one of the seven measures which can be used within eco-schemes, as required by the European Commission from which the Government can select, it would be a missed opportunity not to use those, partly because it can benefit antimicrobial resistant targets at an EU and farm-to-fork level, which will be translated to Government level, and, from a farmer's point of view, it can be used as a practical tool to reduce the antibiotics usage on farms, ensure more appropriate use of them such that they can be specifically targeted when needed. That can provide benefits for the environment and animals and it would enhance our reputation as a sector on the international scene from a market point of view. The figures indicate Irish farmers are already among the best in Europe on our antibiotic usage. We are leaders on it. Our application of them is less than half the EU average. Those are measures that would further develop and enhance that reputation, while also providing benefits to the environment, animal welfare and meet our objectives under the farm to fork strategy. This would be a benefit for all sectors.

Extended grazing has been called out in a Commission communication to our Department. We have seen the average grazing period of animals across the Europe Union, depending on the member state, ranges from zero up to 80 or 90 days. We are a complete outlier in having a grazing period of 190 to 210 days. As progressive young farmers, we are driving the environmental benefits of extended grazing. Teagasc studies and research on the sector's climate contributions and the emissions profile when animals are out at grass show that emissions are significantly decreased when animals graze outside versus when they are housed. That is related to the make-up of their diet. Freshly grazed forage cover from grass at a low cover, which many young farmers are doing, reduces methane output, and the emissions profile of those animals. Why would we not seek extended grazing or a days-at-grass measure as a key component of an eco-scheme? Given the nature of our enterprises and our livestock sector and the green image we portray across the world, which is reflected in what we do, outdoor grazing of beef animals or dairy cattle benefits the environment in respect of their emissions profile, it benefits animal welfare and it drives on-farm profitability in ensuring, most importantly, as touched on by Mr. Fitzgerald, that our sector remains viable into the future. Mr. Fitzgerald might comment on that also.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Mr. Keane might also comment on agri-training for young farmers.

Mr. John Keane: I might comment on that after Mr. Fitzgerald deals with the other point. Apologies for not covering that.

Chairman: I call Mr. Fitzgerald.

Mr. Shane Fitzgerald: Regarding an extended grazing period, that is low-hanging fruit. I am a dairy farmer with 200 cows in Waterford. Some people would call that an intensive farm but there is no such thing as an intensive farm in this country. Some people would lead one to believe that having more than 100 cows constitutes intensive farming. We have had our cows out full-time, day and night, and they were only been brought in today. That has been of major benefit to ourselves and the environment. Very little slurry was produced and we have not had to buy any feed. It is very efficient and we are self-sufficient. We have a unique and competitive advantage in this country. Young farmers are educated. We are all measuring grass and can utilise it to the best of its ability. In other countries such as Holland, farmers are paid a bonus for their milk for having cows outdoors for 60 days. In the UK they get paid a bonus for having them outdoors for 120 days. Mr. Keane mentioned we have cows outdoors for an average of 190 to 200 days. Why can an eco-scheme not be developed to encourage farmers to graze cows outdoors for up to 250 days or to add an additional days to what they had in previous years? That could be monitored through Bord Bia. That is recorded there. There are ways of doing that. Having extended grazing is a low-hanging fruit. It would be a win-win for the farmer and for the environment. It is definitely a measure that should not be overlooked.

Briefly, on hedgerow management and the habitat area, there are four principles with respect to hedgerow management, namely, maintain, retain, enhance and create. First, we have to maintain and retain what we already have. That is a key point. It is great for people to set new hedgerows and that is important but there is no point in planting new hedgerows if you do not maintain those they already have. That is what happened with previous schemes such as the action-based schemes like the green, low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, where new hedgerows were planted but the old hedgerows were being managed in a box shape. They were cut very low and narrow, which was not good for birds, insects or wildlife. It is important they are managed properly. Farmers in derogation are doing certain things already. They are leaving hawthorn trees every 300 m, they are cutting hedgerows on a three-year cycle or cutting a third of the farm every year. Why can every farmer not do that? That would be simple to do. That is an important point. Hedgerow management needs to improve. We all see hedgerows that are cut too tight and that is not good for biodiversity. We have the infrastructure already in place for wildlife; we just need to look after it better. Introducing an eco-scheme is the perfect way to do that. Mr. Keane mentioned the other points raised and I will not go into them.

On efficiency with respect to the age of first calving, milk recording and faecal sampling, there needs to be more for productive and efficient farmers in eco-schemes. We cannot have them all geared towards reduction, particularly for young farmers. We want to be as efficient as we can be to protect our future. It is important eco-schemes also incorporate some of those more efficient measures.

Chairman: Does Mr. Keane want to address the other point Senator Boyhan made?

Mr. John Keane: Yes. On the Senator's question on training modules for farmers and what that looks like, this is not something new for Macra na Feirme. We conducted research on this in 2015 to 2016 and the Broadmore report was produced by the late Pat Bogue in 2017 on what a continuous professional development, CPD, framework looks like for the agricultural sector. That is a whole-of-sector approach to developing a CPD framework that delivers for farmers. We have had that constantly on the agenda for the past three or four years with little movement in getting it developed, bringing the CPD framework into the limelight and having it as an approval system for farmers as they develop. We should compliment farmers on being very good at what they do but if they were in any other profession, they would have to maintain

a certain number of credits or points over three or four years, or whatever it might be. It offers an opportunity for farmers to get the credit for the training modules they are doing. They could be on-farm safety, grass production, nutrient management or soil management modules. Farmers are already actively engaged with all of these things. It is through such an overall arching framework that we see the development of a training framework for farmers. We have some offerings where a CPD stamp is put on training modules for farmers when there is no accreditation or verification system and no overall framework for that. We recognise that within different organisations, our own included, our Skillnet programme has a huge role to play in providing training for farmers and non-farmers alike. That could be the practical application of farming through the likes of our dairy, artificial insemination, AI, freeze branding or other such practical courses or leadership development, dairy engagement or grassland-based modules.

That is where we see it coming from but there has to be an overall framework in which to develop that. We have engaged with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Heydon, on it and there has been progress and discussions on it in recent months. We need that stakeholder group to be set up to oversee the establishment and verification of that. Macra na Feirme does not want ownership of this and we recognise that other organisations and institutions such as Teagasc have a huge amount to contribute. It is not that Macra na Feirme wants to own these kind of things but we want the establishment to ensure it is there for the wider population of farmers and to ensure those are delivered to a relevant standard.

Deputy Martin Browne: I welcome the contingent from Macra na Feirme and I agree with Senator Boyhan. Any time I have dealt with that organisation in the past 12 months, they have been professional. I agree with the Cathaoirleach that any scheme must be delivered for both the older farmers, existing farmers and younger farmers coming through. I have three brief questions, some of which have been touched upon already. I mention the start-up grant aid and I want to talk about the young farmers scheme for a moment. Mr. Keane says that 4,000 of 8,700 applicants received the last young farmers scheme payment in 2019, even though many still qualified for it due to the five-year rule. He has also pointed out that there are not enough young farmers to replace those who have moved out of the schemes. Can Mr. Keane outline the consequences of this to the committee and what he would like to see happen to address this particular issue with the system?

Mr. John Keane: The number of applicants was 8,700 a number of years ago and we are now down to 7,400 so I will outline how we propose to address that in the coming years. When we are dealing with it in reality, if you look back to 2014 when the previous CAP was due to expire and the current CAP was due to start, in 2015 there was an increase in the number of young farmers who took up the young farmers scheme and who accessed the national reserve that year because of negotiations and the uncertainty around where the ball would land with it. We anticipate, as does the Department, that in 2023 there will be some bounce from that also. I refer to getting more young farmers into that scheme and into the national reserve and what that should look like. I know the Deputy touched on the five-year rule and we have made contributions to the Department on the extension of same up towards seven years because the reality is that there is a short window in which to draw the funding down. I might come back to that point later.

The number of people entering Teagasc colleges and doing farming-related modules has never been higher than it has been in recent years and that is a credit to the education that is being provided there. We need to see a follow-through from that education to active young

farmers on the ground doing that. A one-size-fits-all approach will not do that and there is no single measure or silver bullet that will resolve it. We see addressing those barriers we touched on earlier as the key. A fully funded national reserve, which we currently have in the draft, is crucially important to that. The barriers for people starting off in their careers also must be addressed.

As Mr. Dillon touched on, those are finance, land and the start-up or installation aid. That initial boost of capital is crucially important because young farmers are coming back to us and saying that if they are drawing down the investment support under the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, at the 60% rate that currently is in place, given the increase in the overall cost of inputs over the past 12 months that we have seen, that 60% represents somewhere more in the region of between 38% and 45% of the overall cost of the investment. Young farmers do not have the financial capacity to meet that balance, whether that be 40% or 60% of the total cost. They do not have the financial power or backing to do that. What is happening is that the necessary development at farm level, whether that be in infrastructure, buildings, livestock, grassland or grazing, is needed by a young farmer in order to provide a lifestyle and an income. If someone starting out is not able to do that then it becomes an onerous and arduous job because he or she does not have the right facilities, tools or grazing infrastructure and it makes the job difficult. It is a turn-off for young farmers when they have entered the job. During the initial two-year period when someone starts out in their career in farming, that start-up and installation aid is providing for that gap in finance, which leaves young farmers the ability to invest in the newest technologies and research that return income and make the lifestyle on the farm easier because those facilities are more amenable to shorter and more productive working hours and reduced labour intensity on the farm.

A number of issues will resolve that as opposed to a one-size-fits all approach. We recognise the commitment to the national reserve and we hope that remains fully funded, as well as the €35 million per annum for the young farmers scheme. That must remain fully funded over the period of the next CAP as well because both of those measures are crucially important in starting out.

Deputy Martin Browne: On the succession and land mobility service, Macra na Feirme must be credited with the initiative it took in the establishment of the land mobility service. I understand it has been in place since 2014 and has proven to be a successful initiative to tackle issues in the area of land succession, particularly in the lack of preparation in identifying future successors and making those generational links. This was needed and Macra na Feirme's initiative has proven to be successful in respect of the level of buy-in to the service. I want to talk about how Macra na Feirme sees the service developing into the future. I understand that Macra na Feirme has been developing links across the EU with a view to expanding it, given that the figures for 2017 showed that 31% of all farmers in the EU were older than 65 and only 5.6% of all European farms were run by farmers under the age of 35. How are those efforts progressing? Does Macra na Feirme foresee itself having to adapt the service further to deal with the current transition that farms are undergoing in respect of environmental demands? Is there any aspect of the partnership arrangements that is proving problematic in any way and that needs attention?

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Deputy for the questions and I might ask Mr. Dillon to come in on some of them. On the land mobility service, we have received Department funding for a number of years and that has been increased to €100,000, which the Deputy probably saw last week. That is welcome and much appreciated. The service has a footprint and there is support

for it through a number of the dairy co-operatives. That footprint is based around where that support is coming from geographically. There are areas of the country, be it in the south, the south west or the west, where the service has a limited capacity because the funding is not in place to provide a full service for it.

In the context of the CAP, the Deputy is right that our partners in the European Council of Young Farmers, CEJA, were instrumental in driving that narrative at Commission and European level for this proven service facilitating land transfer and land mobility in Ireland. It was adopted into the Commission's proposals as an example of how a land mobility service can work across member states and the European Union. Through our CEJA context, we have had a number of engagements with our partners in other EU member states on how the service works and what it looks like on a practical basis on the ground. What we have not seen in the context of our own CAP strategic plan is a long-term sustainable funding element for the land mobility service. If we are building a service for three to five years, we need to build on what is there in terms of the financial contribution from the Department and we need to develop that on a wider geographical footprint such that we can offer a service across the country as opposed to what is being offered now, which is a footprint across different areas of the country. If somebody from an area not covered by the service calls on the service he or she is facilitated but there is not a focus in those areas. We need sustainable funding over a three to five-year period which, essentially, is over the course of the next CAP and ring-fenced funds for the development of a service like this so that we can ensure there is a geographical footprint, as well as a service that matches it. The feedback from Mr. Austin Finn, the lead person within the land mobility service with over 700 arrangements done at this stage, is that the service can develop both in terms of what we are doing now, that is, developing partnerships, land mobility transfers and share arrangements within farm and that there also is a need for a piece to complement the succession scheme we have proposed, in terms of the conversations that happen around kitchen tables countrywide with farmers, to provide an independent service for mediating that to ensure that both aspects are properly accounted for. That part of the service will be critical in terms of moving the succession piece forward and having more young farmers under the age of 35 actively farming. I will ask Mr. Dillon to contribute further on that as I know he is very involved with the intricacies of it.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: There are a number of elements to it. As mentioned by Mr. Keane, our ambition is to grow the service. We need to grow it. We have identified that approximately 30,000 family farms are without succession plans or identified successors. We want to be in every parish and every area in Ireland to help to support those farm families in their succession decisions. We want to help young farmers and older farmers and to work with organisations such as Teagasc, which provides supports to farmers, as well as with private advisers, to get these discussions happening and to get these arrangements in place. To grow the service, we need in the region of €1.5 million per annum of direct support from the Common Agricultural Policy. We need this in order that we can provide between 18,000 and 20,000 facilitation hours per annum of engagement with the 30,000 farm families across the country who are challenged when it comes to succession and the options that are available to them.

That is our ask in terms of the rural development programme and supporting the land mobility service.

Deputy Martin Browne: During a previous meeting with Macra na Feirme a few months ago, Mr. Keane spoke about the potential to establish the CPD framework within the agriculture sector. Am I correct that since we last spoke, that has not been set up? If so, what is the reason

for the delay in setting it up?

Mr. John Keane: What has been identified in the report as the initial step is the establishment of that cross-organisational stakeholder group. To date, that stakeholder group has not been established. I am unsure as to the reason we have not succeeded in that regard. At this stage, we are four years on the road with this particular proposal. There have been numerous setbacks and delays, but I am unsure as to the main reason the stakeholder group has not been established to commence the development of that framework. It is something we are very passionate about and strongly believe needs to happen.

Deputy Martin Browne: Is the delay at the Department's end?

Mr. John Keane: The proposal in terms of the establishment of the stakeholder group is currently with the Department.

Deputy Martin Browne: I thank Mr. Keane and I wish Macra na Feirme the best of luck into the future.

Chairman: The next speaker is Deputy Flaherty.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the president and his colleagues for the very informative presentation, as always. I will try not to plough the same ground, if you will excuse the farming cliché. I want to hone in on the land mobility service. To give the president a break, I will direct this question to Mr. Dillon.

We know that succession is not an exclusively Irish issue and that it is an issue right across Europe. Let us call a spade a spade: farming as a career is not the most attractive option. As rightly stated, under the land mobility service approximately 700 arrangements for 140 farms were put in place in 2020. The scheme has, undoubtedly, been very successful. It was mentioned that there are 30,000 farm families. One of the challenges to date in terms of the mobility service is that success has been very much regionalised. If one is to be truthful that is because the most - I am loath to say profitable - viable farms are in those regions. If one goes to the west, it is a harder sell. In terms of the research, we know that some of those 30,000 farms will never come up with succession plans. Realistically, what are the numbers for, say, the next five years? Assuming €1.5 million in funding is secured, based on the current numbers and what we see in terms of profitability, how many of those farms will transition to the next generation? We are seeing large-scale acquisition of lands as well. I ask Mr. Dillon to set out what would happen to the landscape if the €1.5 million came into play.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: As stated by the Deputy, there are many variables and many challenges, including cultural challenges. We see that across European countries. There are some things that need to align as well to help us. I mentioned an alignment around the taxation code and schemes under the Common Agricultural Policy. They are important as well. The succession partnership which we mentioned earlier is more attractive to the profitable sectors because there is a tax credit per annum. For sectors that do not have a significant taxable income, the schemes are not as attractive, but that is not to say they cannot be. With some adjustments, they can be also attractive to those sectors. That would help on the journey.

On the figures, our ambition is to have an average 100 arrangements per facilitator. There will be many inquiries, perhaps in the range of 500 to 700 per facilitator. Our ambition is to take on 12 facilitators to cover the country. Each facilitator could potentially receive up to 750 inquiries, which will then be distilled into the region of 500 practical or measurable engage-

ments, leading to, we would hope, a final outcome of in the region of 100 to 150 arrangements per facilitator per annum. That is our ambition based on our current model if we scale up that model. They are our aims and projections for the service.

Chairman: I must interrupt Mr. Dillon. Senator Lombard is going to take the Chair as I must attend another meeting. Mr. Dillon may resume then.

Senator Tim Lombard took the Chair.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Assuming Mr. Dillon gets the €1.5 million, is it correct that he is probably looking at 7,500 arrangements over the five years?

Mr. Derrie Dillon: If you have got the full range of facilitators.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: That would be 12 facilitators.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: That would be 12 facilitators with roughly 100 to 150 arrangements per facilitator.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Realistically, a quarter of those farm families could transition.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: On that model, yes. We would also expect support from external sources as well, which we have at the moment from co-operatives and others. In order to give stability and longevity to the service, we need that support from the Exchequer or the Common Agricultural Policy to grow the service. If we find that there is a greater demand, then our ask would have to be greater but we feel that is the right level at which to pitch the service based on our past experience and what we feel we could deliver in engaging with those 30,000 farmers and what we could turn into viable and feasible arrangements going forward around succession.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: It still does not get away from the fact that it is going to try to pick the most viable farms. A creative solution will be required in cases where there will be a transition and off-farm income as well. Will another model not need to come into play?

Mr. Derrie Dillon: Where we have facilitators based is where we have the highest level of arrangements and engagements, which is natural from a geographical perspective. There certainly had been a higher number in the dairy sector. I suppose that is natural and inevitable. However, we are seeing a good response from other sectors as well. There could be a greater focus on those sectors. If the taxation incentives could be tweaked in order to make it more attractive for those sectors to engage in succession and if the models could be tweaked a little bit in terms of the type of arrangements that are possible, I think we are not limited then by our ambition but we need to act from a taxation point of view as well.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I wish to make one very quick point on that as well. I know Macra na Feirme has a path worn to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine but has it had much engagement with the Department of Finance on the taxation issue in terms of succession?

Mr. Derrie Dillon: We make a submission every year to the Department of Finance through the pre-budget mechanisms. We lobby each year on those items. We have had a range of direct engagements with the Department of Finance through our communications channels. It is something we are not giving up on. We have not seen the level of change or ambition that we would like to see in taxation measures. We have primarily engaged with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I am not being critical in any way, it is just a case of seeing how we can help because it is important for rural Ireland that we are as creative and inventive as possible when it comes to transitioning farm families. I thank Mr. Dillon.

I have two more pieces to raise. I will ask Mr. Fitzgerald the next question. He mentioned faecal sampling and milk recording as potential measures under the new eco-scheme proposals. Macra na Feirme has had some discussions with the Department on that. What kind of feedback is he getting on them?

Mr. Shane Fitzgerald: The feedback so far, as Mr. Keane mentioned, is that the Department has not been too keen on sector-specific eco-schemes, in particular the milk recording proposal. That is the main reason that has been used. Some of the reasons used for some of the other proposed eco-scheme options not being taken on board is that they are not as easily inspected or monitored and the administration burden on the Department can be a bit high. That seems to be the main reason to go against some eco-schemes. The Department seems to be looking for simple schemes that could be monitored easily. A lot of them seem to be around land use as well, so that is the reason it is going for such options as the planting of trees, extensive livestock production and fertilisers. It is not just us, everyone has pushed for milk recording. Faecal sampling has been mentioned previously and it was included in Ag Climatise to push the antimicrobial side of things. The Department is probably looking at it from the environmental side and we are trying to come at it from a different perspective as regards antimicrobial resistance. It does not seem to be something the Department is too happy with at the moment. Young farmers want to try to encourage more efficient measures to support and facilitate more progressive young farmers. The likes of these measures are more efficient and avoid wastage but the Department is probably worried about how it would monitor these type of arrangements. That is where some of these proposals could fall down. Mr. Keane might want to come in on that point as well.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: That is okay, because I am conscious that other speakers want to come in. I have one last question, which I will direct to Mr. Keane. This committee spends a lot of time discussing forestry. Notwithstanding the challenges in the sector currently, it is probably not hot on the agenda of young farmers. Traditionally, it is older farmers who go into forestry. What is the feeling among young farmers on forestry? Given the issues evident in the sector currently, is it something they are going to avoid or that they will embrace if the seemingly insurmountable issues within the sector can be resolved by the Department?

Mr. John Keane: I have two quick points to make in response to other questions, but I will make them at the end. Young farmers right now do not see forestry as being a viable opportunity for them, based on the roadblocks that are there, the issues with felling licences and thinning licences. It comes back to the initial point both Mr. Fitzgerald and I made, which is that certainty into the future is not there for them at the moment. The number of planting licences this year was reduced and the amount of planting was far below the target of 11,000 ha. Young farmers are not being provided with certainty at the moment. It is very much a long-term commitment and investment to put an acre or hectare of ground into forestry. The current issues could potentially be resolved but it does not provide certainty for young farmers to invest in it as an opportunity. There is not proving to be a huge appetite for it among our members. The numbers on both of those fronts would suggest the same as well.

In terms of land mobility, there is an important piece on it too in terms of the service. I acknowledge the Minister's comments last week on the role Teagasc and Macra na Feirme will hopefully play together in the coming year or so in terms of the development of the service.

Mr. Dillon touched on the numbers with Deputy Flaherty. In terms of the development of the relationship and the integration of Teagasc as part of the expansion of the service, there is an opportunity for resources to be aligned and shared. It involves both education and the provision of a knowledge transfer piece around succession and what the arrangements look like. In time, you would hope that would drive both the enthusiasm, engagement and need towards a service like the land mobility service. It is probably a good idea to look at it in terms of its own sphere and what can be delivered on that front. The multiplier effect of having an organisation and development agency like Teagasc involved as part of the development of the service in the coming years will grow it and develop it and provide a resource piece as well in terms of how we can ensure that the demand is met, should that piece be increased.

In terms of the eco-schemes and the antimicrobial resistance piece, part of the feedback relates to how we monitor whether there is a benefit to the antimicrobial resistance piece and the use of antibiotics, as well as the animal welfare piece. That is the feedback we have got from the Department but from our end, the answers are pretty much straightforward. We know our average figures for antibiotic usage and our laboratory capacity and throughput of faecal egg sampling. It is about the implication and monitoring of that on-farm, if we do so through the likes of Bord Bia and our Irish Cattle Breeding Federation, ICBF, programmes, and having the tools in place to monitor and measure that. Those are pretty much a win-win for all of us.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the witnesses for coming in to us. Mr. Dillon might tell me how many farmers we need who are doing the green certificate, for example, to be coming on stream on a yearly basis to keep the approximately 120,000 to 130,000 farmers in the country at present, on course?

Mr. Derrie Dillon: Our president mentioned the unprecedented numbers involved in agricultural education. If every young farmer going through agricultural college at present was successfully entering farming and engaging in the schemes, such as the young farmer top-up, per annum, we would be getting close to what we would like to achieve in sustaining farmer numbers. Our president called out the need for clear targets. We talk about targets for many areas, such as clear targets for young farmers and the level we want to see. We set out in the document the number from which it has dropped down to its current level but primarily, we are not seeing the numbers we have going through agricultural college coming through the current schemes and supports. Where are a number of them going? They are not engaging in schemes, which would lead you to believe they are not getting opportunities within agriculture.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Some of them are probably going on to do the two or three-year courses, which would probably bring them on to involvement in agriculture. I noticed in the witnesses' submission and I have heard them speak about it previously, a facility through the EU, perhaps a loan facility, for young farmers starting off. One of the witnesses said he had 200 cows. The guts of 300 acres are needed for 200 cows. The average application to the single farm payments is 32 ha, which is 70 or 80 acres.

I ask the witnesses whether there is a problem throughout the country in that no more land is being made, to put it very simply. There is no point in saying there is and we cannot make any more than what is there. Farms are getting bigger and bigger. There are parts of the country in which one cannot take land at the price for which it is being sold. If that continues, fewer farmers will be involved, because land is not available or some farms are getting bigger and bigger, while more are not able to get the facility, depending on the farming they are doing. I ask the witnesses how we counteract that problem.

I was surprised when the witnesses said they welcomed the 90 ha limit being removed from young farmers, because 90 ha is 225 acres, compared to the average 32 ha single farm payment application. Everyone welcomes the removal of an off-farm income limit. However, were we not better using the percentage of money going into the pot to help the young farmers starting off by raising the money in the young farmers scheme, for the five-year period, rather than going for more hectares, in order to give more money to more youngsters on less land? Was that not a better system?

As someone who is a farming contractor, if one had a big tractor years ago in 1990 or 1991, such as a Deutz-Fahr tractor, it was like a Rolls Royce pulling up and every youngster in the country wanted to drive it. One can have the most modern machines on the go today and they do not want to drive them. How do we counteract that, compared to where we were a number of years ago?

Mr. John Keane: I can deal with aspects of that and I will ask Ms Richardson and Mr. Fitzgerald to come in on others. I will put figures on the first point with which Mr. Dillon dealt. There are approximately 40,000 farmers over the age of 65. A target of 15% of young farmers being under the age of 35, based on the 130,000 farmers, would equate to 19,500 farmers and 20% would be 26,000 farmers. One is looking at those kinds of numbers coming through agricultural colleges into farming in the coming years to get our percentages up. That is where we need to set the benchmark.

As for the Deputy's question on the bigger farmers getting bigger and smaller farmers going out of business, we absolutely share that concern. While we are dealing with CAP today, the Vice Chairman might allow me to digress briefly. The whole suite of policy measures being proposed, such as in respect of the nitrates directive currently being put forward or the increase in output per livestock unit, will only increase the demand for land. We are coming from a young person's point of view and this concerns all sectors. Our members who come forward from lower-income sectors, in particular, highlight to us that they simply cannot compete because the measures are not there to support them into the sector. The measures are not there to establish, because in order to do so you will need somebody's support to get into it to generate an income or the agri-taxation reliefs are not there to meet the requirement on a young farmer starting out. The measures for access to finance have to be number one and the second measure for access to land and ensuring that young farmers have that support is the most crucial part in terms of addressing that.

The Deputy's question on the 90 ha for young farmers is in the context of the young farmers scheme and the removal of the €40,000 limit on off-farm income. My understanding is that limit is now 50 ha. I stand open to correction but that is the proposal for next year.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: My understanding the 90 ha limit will go in 2022 and one can go with whatever one wants.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: We might be speaking at cross-purposes in respect of the schemes. Is the Deputy speaking about the young farmer top-up or the young farmer national reserve?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The national reserve. My understanding is it will go from 90 ha of a national reserve at present to you being able to have 500 ha, if one wants. I ask Mr. Dillon whether this is right.

Mr. Derrie Dillon: The requirement at EU level was to remove any restrictions in respect

of national reserve. We were out of step, seemingly, at Irish level. No other European country sets restrictive criteria on a national reserve, but Ireland had put restrictive criteria on income and area in the past and-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I apologise for interrupting Mr. Dillon but my theory was that when trying to finance a young farmer starting off, if we did something with the package to increase the money for them in some way or another, as Mr. Keane had talked about earlier, rather than getting rid of the threshold, we would be better able to finance those starting.

Mr. John Keane: I will come in. The Deputy mentioned an increase in payment rate for young farmers, which we would absolutely support in terms of the basic payment and the young farmers scheme. Unfortunately, the reality is that convergence will put a cap on what can be done about that from a young farmer's perspective. Under the direction of the Commission, we would not be allowed to do that, which is unfortunate.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: While it is correct to set an equal platform throughout the country, young or old, my understanding is there are other options where funding could have been got out of that pot to help younger farmers.

Mr. John Keane: From our side of things, there was an increase in the area that was stipulated by the Commission and in a national context, we have limited control on it. The finding from the Commission was that we were an outlier. There was little scope for us to do something about the young farmer scheme and the national reserve. We were adamant that the 3% within the direct payments ceiling, which was brought from the direct payments profile, would be given specifically to young farmers and ring-fenced for that. To complement that from young farmers' point of view, we had requested that an installation support would be put beside that in order, as the Deputy rightly suggested, to get a larger pot of money available for young farmers starting out. That was where our submission came from.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Our guests acknowledged the Minister is trying to resolve the matter of forgotten young farmers. There is some suggestion of various ages and I do not know how many will be involved when it comes down to it. My understanding is that is being resolved under the new CAP proposals. Will the witnesses enlighten us on what talks they have had on that? As for the eco-schemes, do they support the ten measures? In my opinion, it gives some breathing space compared with the five that were there.

Mr. John Keane: From our reading of the draft plan that was put in front of us on 8 August and that which was put in front of us a number of weeks ago, and in the context of the funding outlined to us by the Minister at the end of October, there is no wording or text within the draft CAP strategic plan to address the issue of forgotten farmers. Similarly, a funding allocation has not been set aside within any of the proposals or the documentation released by the Minister. I find it difficult to believe, therefore, that within the context of the CAP as it stands, with both the wording and the financial allocation, and given the Department and the Minister have stated no more money will be found, the Department could say it will be dealt with in the context of the current CAP, unless there is something that will be imminently released that we are not aware of. That is our currently position on forgotten farmers.

We would not accept that a number of forgotten farmers would not be supported by whatever measure is brought in to support them. All those people who are now farmers were young farmers when, through no fault of their own, they fell through the system. It does not matter whether they were 34 years old at the time and they are now in their mid-40s, or whether they

were 21 years old at the time and are still young farmers. They were left out at that time and, therefore, they should all be treated equally.

On eco-schemes, we believe that from a productive point of view there is an opportunity, among the schemes we have measured such the additional days at grass, the antimicrobial resistance piece and the hedgerow management, that all farmers can access. There is the wider question from a farming perspective of practical application on the ground. When the suite of measures contained in the agri-environment climate measures, AECM, under Pillar 2, for the general measure of 30,000 farmers, is compared with the number of eco-schemes, a number of measures under the AECM under Pillar 2 under the general measure contain a higher payment rate than those measures contained in the eco-scheme under Pillar 1.

From a practical farmer's point of view, why would he or she not access the measures under the AECM under Pillar 2, get a higher rate of payment and forgo those eco-schemes under Pillar 1 because the payment rate is lower? That is why we need to see an increase in the number of schemes that diverge from those proposed under the general measures under the AECM in Pillar 2. We fully recognise the AECM has a limit of 30,000 farmers under the general measure, which we think is not enough, but from a practical sense we need farmers to have measures under eco-schemes they can access that are notably different from those under the measures in the general eco-scheme under Pillar 2, given that the higher rate of payment is contained in Pillar 2. At the same time, we need farmers to be able to draw down the €74 per hectare payment under Pillar 1, if 85% of farmers took up the schemes. I hope that answers the question.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What is Macra na Feirme's view on mixed-species swards? I presume liming is fairly good and soil-sampling is important. Has Macra na Feirme examined the use of mixed-species grasses?

Mr. John Keane: I might hand over to Mr. Fitzgerald to comment on soil-sampling and the liming programme. On mixed species, we would welcome the sentiment of the biodiversity element, the carbon element and the production in terms of livestock. When we look to research and practical implications from an on-farm point of view, we see that some of the herbs contained in some of the mixed-species swards currently out there, such as chicory or plantain, do not survive for more than two years under current grazing conditions, and that is with the help of research and on some of the best farms implementing best practices.

Our concern is that if we set the bar at six or seven species in the sward and the farmer has 6% of his or her area under the mixed-species sward, when there is an inspection in year 3 or whenever, the six species may not be in the sward through no fault of the farmer but because the herbs, such as chicory, plantain or whatever it might be, have not survived for longer than two or three years. There is an element of that uncertainty regarding the mixed-species sward and its persistence over a number of years, particularly in the context of grazing.

There are also implications from some of the research, as well as some practical implications that our members have raised regarding mixed species on farms, that in wetter conditions the poaching element is not as durable as grassland species on wetter soils, so on wetter days it is not possible to graze. Again, the herbs and so forth will die out of the sward, and the early spring and late autumn management is particularly weather dependent as well. There are a number of elements concerning what mixed-species swards offer for farmers, and research will, I hope, develop over the coming years. We recognise the role clover has to play in mixed-species swards, in terms of reducing nitrogen, increased protein in the diet and a reduced reliance on forage or imported feed. There are also benefits from reduced nitrogen and the environmen-

tal impact from that. From a clover point of view in a perennial ryegrass sward, the benefits and the science are shown.

I might ask Mr. Fitzgerald to respond to the questions on soil sampling and liming.

Mr. Shane Fitzgerald: Soil liming, like multispecies swards, is positive. Anything that helps soil health will be positive. There is a big issue with producing chemical nitrogen and that will be the key with all of this. If nitrogen has to be reduced on farms and it is done in an efficient way, everything will be okay. It will save farmers money and the environment will benefit as well. The problem is that if farmers reduce nitrogen too fast and do not have the appropriate tools in place to mitigate that, it could lead to a higher carbon footprint with more damage to the environment. By having a reduced feed on the farm, the farmer will not be as self-sufficient and will end up having to buy in more fodder and having more imported feed, which will have a knock-on effect on the financial side of things for the farmer. The likes of soil sampling and multispecies swards are positive, although there are question marks, as Mr. Keane outlined, over the persistence of multispecies. Soil sampling can be chosen only once every three years. We are big advocates for it and the majority of young farmers soil-sample every year, as do farmers in derogation. That is something we asked for at the start. The same is true of liming. Anything that will improve soil health has to be prioritised. We will be happy with anything that includes those measures.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: My regional colleague has joined the meeting and other members may wish to contribute, so I will leave it at that. I thank our guests.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice for giving way. It is lovely to have our guests here. I always enjoy getting emails from them. There is always a positivity about where we should go with environmental matters. They are approachable in that they suggest ideas and are very environmentally aware, and I appreciate that. Mr. Keane may have answered some of the questions for members and that is fine; the Vice Chairman will inform me later. I do not expect him to spend time going over the same ground again. On going forward with the CAP and our new schemes, what is his opinion on the environmental schemes as they are announced at the moment? I am confident that the number of schemes and choices will be extended. How does he look at them? Mr. Keane will have taken a good look at these and will have engaged on them. What are his members' opinions on them? Is there enough choice and are they are practical?

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Senator for his questions; they are much appreciated. I will quickly give a tour of the schemes in terms of our members' attitude towards them and the practicality of them. I might ask Ms Richardson to give a piece in terms of the future aspects of them. We touched on some of them as well but some of our other proposals are on additions.

As for the eco-schemes that are there right now, Mr. Fitzgerald touched on some of them. In the case of the productive farmer, that is, the efficiency farmer which young farmers are absolutely trying to be, if you look at the non-productive areas proposal, whether that be 7% or otherwise, or the extensive livestock proposal in terms of 95 kg of organic nitrogen per hectare - which in money terms at the moment is a suckler cow and a calf - or if you look at the current tree planting measures, while some of them might be beneficial to the environment, they are reductive measures in terms of the area of ground that is available for farmers and for young farmers, in particular. To follow on from Deputy Fitzmaurice's point, it is important in the context of how no more land is being made. In addition, from the point of view of our productive and efficient farmers across both livestock enterprises and others, it is proving to be a challenge

to meet the obligations under that.

When it comes to the fertiliser application piece and the GPS controlled fertiliser piece, there is no getting away from the fact it is a significant investment for farmers in the order of approximately €25,000 to invest in a load-sensing weight cell piece of machinery for spreading fertiliser. Practically, that is not something the majority of farmers will do. There will be reliance on contractors to do that if that measure is selected. Similar to when the low-emissions slurry spreading was introduced initially, there is a lack of equipment to meet the potential demand that might be there on foot of the requirement to meet that measure. In that sense, it is a measure which obviously has environmental benefits in reducing nitrogen, N, input, as Mr. Fitzgerald has touched on. However, from a practical point of view, there is neither the investment capital nor the investment potential there to meet that demand or to buy that piece of equipment for the majority of farmers.

In terms of the N rates, we recognise the menu in this regard has increased of those over the past week or so with the Department releasing the figures in respect of the stocking rate and the relatability to the output of N. This has been warmly received by our members. It offers an opportunity for farmers to reduce their input while meeting their forage demands through better use of fertilisers, increasing the amount of clover in swards and other environmental practices. Therefore, that has been positively received.

On the measures that we hope will be included, I welcome the Senator's comments, in that we all hope there will be more measures to be included and that they are practical for farmers on the ground. Ms Richardson will take us through some of the measures which we proposed. I thank the Senator for his questions.

Ms Gillian Richardson: To follow on from what Mr. Keane mentioned, we asked that all of these eco-schemes be inclusive and accessible for all farmers, that they are progressive and are complementary to what we already have. We proposed that the integrated hedgerow management eco-scheme should be included in it. The majority of farms have hedgerows on them and we would like farmers to improve them, maintain them and increase their number and length. That would be of benefit to both the farmers themselves and to the eco-schemes within that. Along with that, we also sought increased days at pasture. This is something the EU itself has outlined, namely, that Ireland has a high level of days at pasture and this is something that should be encouraged and rewarded.

The other one that we were looking at is reduced age at first calving, that is, making sure that the heifers are calving down at a suitable age that is suitable to their weight and age and getting the best out of the animal and for the farmers themselves. That is what we would be proposing.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I will be very brief; I will not hold up the meeting. I thank Mr. Keane and Ms Richardson for their answers. I am glad to hear them. This next point may have been touched on and I do not expect the witnesses to go into it again - just say it has already been dealt with and I will find out about it - but I read recently that a dairy farmer down south had about 150 acres and about 140 cows. As he said himself, he was not a mad environmentalist, but he had tried the new grass-clover mix. He found that buying the fertiliser, which is at an extraordinary price - and will be at an extraordinary price in 2022; I do not know how farmers will afford it - and the cost of hiring men to put it out was just short of €30,000 each year. Therefore, he decided to go over to the grass-clover mixes and reduced fertiliser. This had cut his costs by up to €20,000. The point he was making was that the yield from the cows was the very same. In other words, it had not dropped. Is this the way forward? I was just listening to

the answers that came on screen. Is there a difficulty with those mixes in the west, north west or midlands, where a lot of the land is just is not as good? It might only work well on better grounds. As I do not know, I am asking for Mr. Keane's opinion.

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Senator for his question. In terms of the research, which is where I would point, the Senator is absolutely right. The research that has been done in both Clonakilty and by Teagasc in Moorepark on the clover swards shows it absolutely has a benefit to reducing N input when managed appropriately with the techniques that I am sure the farmer the Senator mentioned is putting in place. There is no reduction in the output of the sward or the production over the course of the year. There is that management piece, in that early spring growth of clover is quite low, so your mix of species in your sward that you are sowing in has to have an early growth in the spring from a grassland point of view, to make up for the fact that clover starts growing at around 8°C versus grass at around 6°C. Absolutely, that is part of it.

I will deal with the Senator's second question in two parts. I mentioned this in terms of the mixed species swards earlier but it is absolutely apparent in respect of his question as well that in heavier soils, the requirement in terms of a clover mix is definitely more reliant on the different species of grass that you are going to use. A diploid perennial ryegrass, which has a much thicker, denser rooting base at the ground, mixed with a clover sward, has been shown to have benefits in terms of reduced N as well as productive growth and meeting that requirement. Therefore, it is an option in terms of heavier soils as well. My own farm at home has a heavier soil with that kind of mix in it. It is down to management as well, because obviously it is not going to be as easy to manage as on drier soils.

In terms of the mixed species sward which we have touched on, there is work to be done and more research needed on how long the herbs in the current mixes of the multispecies sward persist over a number of years. We have the reality on farms and what some farmers have found is that some of those herbs will be waning and weakening over the first number of years and may be non-existent after a two to three-year period within the sward. Our worry is that if someone is two or three years into the Common Agricultural Policy and has 6% in his or her multispecies sward and an inspection happens on farm. You are required to have six species in your sward but through no fault of your own, only two or three or four species are all that remain because some of the herbs have naturally just waned in the sward and that could be an issue.

For multispecies mixes, different management is required on wetter soils because of damage to the root, whether that be from a wet day or earlier in the spring because ground conditions are a bit more saturated or similarly at the back end of the year, as the recovery of some of the species in the multispecies sward is not the same as that of a perennial ryegrass plant. There is work to be done around ensuring that the multispecies mix meets the requirement for that and this is why our proposal is around the clover mixes, whether that be red and white clover mixes with perennial ryegrass included, in terms of availability to heavier soils wherever they are in the country, as they are easier to manage. Even within that clover, red clover, white clover and perennial ryegrass mix, there are benefits to the animal, the environment and the overall footprint in carbon and nitrogen use being reduced. We still see benefits from a multispecies point of view to that clover inclusion.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I apologise that I had to step out so my question might have been answered already. The question was on the forgotten farmers. They are young farmers but because they entered farming too early they were previously ineligible for young farmer supports. The Minister previously spoke about how this would be dealt with in the context of the forthcoming CAP. We were dealing with officials last week and there was a variance in that

response. Do the witnesses have an idea as to how this important cohort of farmers can receive the support they deserve and are entitled to? Has Macra na Feirme had interactions with the Minister and the Department on this? Is Macra na Feirme satisfied that within the context of the next CAP, or outside of it, this matter will be resolved in the coming year or so?

Vice Chairman: Mr. Keane may respond. I know he has already covered the matter briefly with Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Apologies for that.

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Deputy for the question. There is a nuance in it that has not been previously covered. I will deal with the engagement, which the Deputy is well aware of. On the draft strategic plan we saw on 8 August, the revised one we saw a number of weeks ago and the financial allocation the Minister released at the end of October, there is neither text in the draft strategic plan or a funding allocation within the funding that has been released from the Department to directly address the issue of the forgotten farmers. That is a fundamental flaw in the context of the CAP because we have seen the commitment from the Minister that they would be dealt with in the next CAP. The proposal and solution need to be in the context of the CAP because it gives certainty for five years that these farmers, who have been forgotten for 13 or 14 years, will get continuous support, whether that be to top up the low value basic entitlement they have experienced in recent years, to get access to the grant scheme at the 60% rate that they missed out on when they were young farmers or equivalent support from the installation aid that they also missed out on for that period. There are three or four different measures that are needed for those farmers and that is in the context of their peers before them receiving that support. Whatever the average of that was from a young farmers scheme point of view, from an installation aid point of view and from a national reserve point of view, that should be equitable to what is being produced now and being supplied to them. Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned that some of those forgotten farmers may now be over the age of 40, under the age of 30 or in their early 30s. That is irrelevant because they were young farmers at the time that cohort of 3,500 of such farmers were negatively impacted by the policy change and the decisions made. Regardless of their age now, the impact was felt by them a number of years ago and they need to be dealt with as a full cohort, as opposed to divvying out and dividing them up based on their age or whatever they might be doing now. They need to be dealt with as an entire group, instead of creating differences and barriers within that cohort.

Vice Chairman: Does the Deputy want to come back in on that?

Deputy Matt Carthy: No. Everything else I was interested in was covered. I thank our guests from Macra na Feirme again. I am sure we will see them again soon.

Vice Chairman: I want to ask the president of Macra na Feirme a few questions. I compliment him on his presentation this afternoon. He covered a range of topics from the eco-schemes and the young farmers scheme to training, soil sampling and the key issues that pertain to farmers. I want to ask about female participation in farming, particularly among young farmers. It is a significant issue to try to get young women involved in farming. Macra na Feirme is a youth organisation and plays a vital role in that. Could Mr. Keane elaborate on what should be brought forward in the CAP and how the CAP could be used as a model and vehicle to support young women in agriculture? Mr. Keane might elaborate on what Macra na Feirme's view on that issue is.

Mr. John Keane: Ms Richardson is involved in dealing with that exact issue so I will defer

to her on it in a minute. We are seeking clarification on one area. There is a scenario developing where a young farmer, male or female, receives investment support at 60% under TAMS when he or she is under 30 for five years. We have looked for that TAMS support to increase to 80% in line with what the Commission has said has been the upper ceiling for investment support for young farmers. That is in the context of the entirety of the conversation we have had today around the challenges for young farmers. There could now be a position where a young female farmer starting out at 21, 22 or even 25 has five years of access to 60% grant aid support until the age of 30 or 31. I should say this is our current understanding of the situation. Then there is a ten, 11, 12 or 13-year gap until that female farmer reaches the age of 40 and requalifies for a 60% grant under TAMS and investment support. It seems like an inequitable and unfair system that there is a period of development in between where the same support is not in place. We call for all young farmers to receive support for that period of time when they are defined as young farmers. We are looking for clarity that this scenario would not materialise for young female farmers and that they would continue to receive investment support. I ask Ms Richardson to comment on the future asks.

Ms Gillian Richardson: It might not necessarily be addressed within the CAP but the culture needs to change within Irish agriculture. At the dinner table it should not just be a matter of looking at passing the farm on to the eldest son. There should be an option to pass it to the daughter if she has proven she is interested. There is an opportunity here and it is a cultural change that we have to work on, perhaps in promotional campaigns. It is a matter of justice and we need to get down to the crux of the matter as to why young female farmers are not coming through the system. We need to look at those barriers and then address them to get them along so that there is equality for all our young farmers.

Vice Chairman: I ask Ms Richardson to elaborate. A body of work is required and the percentages are shocking. Farming organisations are trying to get female role models in the system and this is becoming a massive issue for the agricultural community. What body of work is required to ensure we make the progress we have unfortunately failed to make in the last decade, if not the last three decades?

Ms Gillian Richardson: It is not an easy question. Macra na Feirme itself has three female vice-presidents, which is not seen in other organisations. We need the likes of the Department or the Government to invest in a body of work to examine what the barriers are and how we can address them. Perhaps Mr. Dillon or Mr. Keane would like to come in on that.

Vice Chairman: Would Mr. Dillon like to comment?

Mr. Derrie Dillon: Maybe Mr. Keane would like to come in on this as well but Ms Richardson hit the nail on the head. We can have varying interventions and that is important because one has to see role models and ambassadors in the industry to get other female farmers involved. We need supports such as additional incentives but a lot of these measures are more short-term and they are only trying to get parity. We need to remove that barrier and get to the nature of what it really is to get to that justice level that Ms Richardson mentioned. We need to move beyond equality and equity. It is like putting supports under people to get them all at the same level. If they are watching a match, for instance, and the barrier in front of them is too high, you can put boxes under them to raise them up. Putting those supports under people is the same thing we are trying to do in the short term. We need to do that but we have to take away the fence that is in front of them in order that everybody can see the match. Therefore, individual supports would not be needed then because everybody would have equal access and parity and justice. That is what has to be worked at over time. It is a conundrum. It is not easy to get

a magic solution to this, but we need to look at it in the short, medium and long term. Where do we want to get to? What are the barriers? We need to identify them clearly and get the supports in to start with. The supports are not the long-term solution; they are only short-term measures. That is where we are at presently. That is how we see it from Macra na Feirme's perspective initially. Mr. Keane might have some additional comments in relation to the group.

Mr. John Keane: Is it okay to comment on that?

Vice Chairman: Yes.

Mr. John Keane: From a wider industry context point of view and what we are seeing within our membership and our group within Macra na Feirme, there is a recognition that almost half of our membership is female, which is something for us to be very proud of, as are a lot of our leaders. As Ms Richardson correctly said, three of our main leaders are fantastic women who are great advocates for the organisation. In the wider sectoral context, we provide role models and the opportunity for women to come forward. Looking at the 20x20 project in sport, the slogan was "If she can't see it, she can't be it". There is a role and appetite required in order to provide that equal opportunity for young women to come into our sector. That is at a number of different strands. As Ms Richardson said, that includes the conversation at the kitchen table around the expectation of what young female farmers or young women in farming enterprises might like to do.

It is also around tailoring an education piece that is suitable for young female farmers that meets their needs and identifies those challenges. We could look, as a sample, at the tractor course that is run in Pallaskenry in conjunction with the Women in Agriculture Stakeholders Group. There had been excessive demand there from young female farmers and because of that it was specifically provided for them and identified as a weakness. It is those kinds of initiatives to provide an opportunity of education for young female farmers that we need entering the sector. Those supports include the knowledge transfer, KT, groups. Over a period of time, the integration of those KT groups with those strong female representatives into the wider sector to ensure those role models are present within the sector is needed.

It comes down to an attitude shift within the sector as well of the role young female farmers can play as we go forward. We are all acutely aware in farming families across the country of the role of the female in the household - I am referencing my own mother - and the importance those people have within the farming enterprise is invaluable. It is about that recognition as well and identifying the barriers in the family home. The succession pathway is one of those issues about which a piece of research into what those is needed. There are barriers to education and access to education, be they peer pressure or the opinion one's peers might have of entering farming and that it is not a position or a career for X, Y or Z to take up. Barriers exist within the wider sector, be they within industry, employment issues, issues in terms of organisational development, us included. What are those barriers that prevent our young female people entering into those? There are three or four different strands required from a research point of view to help identify those, as well continuing to support and develop them further to break down both the stigma and the issues that exist around succession at family and farm level.

Vice Chairman: I thank the president. I do not think there are any more members who wish to contribute. I will ask the president one more question before we finish. We are 19 months down the line since the pandemic started. Macra na Feirme is an activity-based organisation that I was very much involved in as a younger man, such as in drama, Dublin city talent, debating and public speaking. They are all very important parts of what Macra na Feirme's ethos

is, including farm tasks. The organisation would traditionally be in the centre of running its competitions at this time. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the membership. Will Mr. Keane give us an update on how they have managed over the past 19 months? Online has been one way but how has the membership, which is quite large, managed both physically and mentally over the past 19 months regarding the lockdown? How have the changes in technology benefited Macra na Feirme? Will he sum up on that and we will then close the meeting?

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Vice Chairman and I appreciate those sentiments. I probably would not define him as not being a younger man any more. I would not ring-fence him to that solely. In terms of our activities, it absolutely has been a challenge to Macra na Feirme over the past 19 months. The online element started in March 2020. The shift to online was a novelty for three or four months but with that appetite - no more than with any of us on this committee call - Zoom has had a tiring and fatiguing effect, and that was felt throughout the membership for that period of time. As we started to return to physical activity over the past six or seven months, it has been a slow process for members to come back and engage with the organisation. We have seen those same concerns expressed by some of our partner organisations in terms of members re-engaging with the organisation. Thankfully over the past three to four months we have seen a huge increase in appetite in engaging with club and county activities, which is the bedrock on which we are based.

In terms of our social activities and our competition element, I am happy to say that our public speaking, impromptu speaking, national soccer finals, GAA finals and our other elements have gone on over the past number of months. They were held obviously in a physical context and we look forward to more of those in the springtime. The uncertainty about the new variant and those kinds of concerns have meant that we had to curtail some of our activities in the run-up to Christmas to ensure members are safe over the Christmas period and that Christmas Day, which is an important piece for an awful lot of people, is protected. Our club of the year competition, which is a major competition within the organisation, and the young farmer of the year competition, which members will be aware of as well, are considerations in terms of our models of hybrid and are physical.

From a membership point of view, the past 20 months have been very challenging in terms of the activity levels and the re-engagement piece. There is a body of work for us to do in terms of re-engaging with our members and showing us what the organisational benefits were. From a mental health point of view, and I have seen this through my work in Make the Moove, it has taken a significant toll on the social piece, the isolation piece at club and county level and through the wider demographic of the rural populations. That need from a mental health point of view post pandemic and even right now is huge, and those rural supports tailored for both young people and older farmers and people feeling loneliness due to isolation will become ever more important as we move into next year and beyond. That is something that will need resources and investment at rural and local level.

To finish, on behalf Ms Richardson, Mr. Dillon and Mr. Fitzgerald, and Mr. Denis Duggan who joined us previously on calls this year - I am seven months into the role as Macra na Feirme president and this is my fourth or fifth occasion coming before the Oireachtas joint committee on agriculture - I wish to acknowledge the engagement from committee members, including the Chairman, and their openness and willingness to speak to young farmers on our issues and our perspective on stuff. It is hugely welcomed and is very beneficial to us as an organisation for the challenge the members of the committee put forward for us to think outside the box and to think differently. It is hugely important from all our perspectives. That engagement is greatly

appreciated and we acknowledge the elevation of the young-farmer issues within the committee is hugely important. Bringing those issues to light and into the public arena is something which we are really appreciative of as an organisation and I know our members appreciate this as well. I thank the Vice Chairman and know he will pass those remarks to the Chairman. We look forward to future engagement in 2022 and beyond.

Vice Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I wish to thank the representatives for Macra na Feirme for briefing us on issues pertaining to young farmers that have to be addressed within the CAP. I wish to remind members that the select committee, which will be a private meeting, will be held at 8.35 p.m. A separate MS Teams link will be issued for that meeting.

The joint committee adjourned at 7.50 p.m. until 5.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 8 December 2021.