

# Limerick Organic Beef Discussion Group strives for better profitability

The Croom Organic Beef Discussion Group operates to the mantra that 'a good discussion group generates better profitability'

**Padraig Fitzgerald**  
B&T Drystock Advisor, Teagasc,  
Kilmallock, Co Limerick.

**T**he organic farming message really took hold in Limerick and historically there have always been a large number of organic producers in the county. Currently, there are 125 organic producers in Co Limerick. 2016 saw the introduction of the new KT discussion group scheme and with it many new discussion groups were born, one of those being the Croom Organic Beef Discussion Group.

This group brought together participants from existing groups and farmers entirely new to the discussion group concept. The Croom organic group, like many Teagasc discussion groups, has a wide and varied membership. It has 18 group members, most of whom are farming part-time while holding down a full-time off-farm job. The members come from right across the county but find the benefit of the group meetings worth travelling for.

The difficulty for organic farmers in existing groups was that they were in with a group of conventional farmers and were not benefiting fully from their membership. It made sense to bring these farmers together.

The average farm size of the group is 27.5ha with an average stocking rate of 1.2LU/ha. This will increase in the next few years as there are five

new entrants to farming in the group who are building livestock numbers and stocking rate.

The organic status of the group members varies. While some members have full organic status and have many years of farming experience; others are starting out on their journey and are in the conversion two-year period before they achieve full organic status.

It's this range of experience that is so valuable. The experienced members have much information to pass on to the new ones who in turn bring great enthusiasm to the group. This drives on the experienced members to get even better.

So why is organic farming such a success in Co Limerick and why are there so many people interested in it? There are a number of reasons. The members of the Croom group want to be profitable. They were looking at their traditional beef systems and could see that they were making little or no money from them. Outgoings were high and the price of beef didn't cover the costs of the system.

Members of the group are all producing organic beef either as an animal for slaughter or as a weanling or store animal for sale in the organic sales. The majority of the group are producing weanlings while the others are buying in cattle to finish. The outlet for most organic beef is export to European countries as a high-value food product. So these farmers aimed to get a better price for their beef, often up to 25% more than conventional prices and also to reduce their costs in the system, for example very low fertiliser and feed costs.

Another reason why farmers went into organic farming was because of the Organic Farming Scheme. At present the scheme is closed due to the fact it has been so successful in recent years attracting over 600 new entrants in the last number of tranches.

With low returns from beef systems, these farmers were looking for ways



to boost farm income, and the organic grant looked attractive. A number of farmers in the group are young new entrants who are starting out in farming so they saw the scheme as a way of boosting their income in those first difficult years as they were getting established.

## What members want from the group

Organic farms today are being run more and more commercially and economic factors are influencing the decisions being made.

The Croom organic group is no different. Gone are the days where, if you were organic, you were seen to be just hobby farming and keeping the thing ticking over.



Padraig Fitzgerald (left) with the Croom, Co Limerick, Organic Beef Discussion Group.

The members of the Croom group are driven and like the new entrants to farming in the group they want to see a return for their hard work. They are looking in the long term at organic world markets and seeing where their product is going to end up and what prices they hope to get into the future. It takes a lot of long-term planning to be an organic farmer.

Over the next 12 months, the group want to concentrate on three main objectives: increase productivity, increase efficiency and increase profitability.

There are no easy or simple solutions to these objectives and the answer will be different for each person.

### Benefits

The group have listed the benefits that they enjoy from being in the Croom organic group:

- **A huge amount of valuable experience:** Farmers new to organics, and members going through conversion plans, find the experience that they can tap into invaluable.
- **They can make better decisions:** Many decisions have to be made on a farm daily, weekly, monthly and yearly. If these members can get a small bit of help in making these decisions they will take it. This often comes back to individuals' own experiences and what they did in a similar situation in the past and whether it worked.

- **Establishing personal relations within the group:** Teamwork and building personal relations and friendships is critical in business and it's no different in farming. The benefits of this networking are hard to quantify precisely but without a doubt the members place an important value on this in the group.
- **Problem sharing:** The idea of the group is that people can come to the meetings with their own production challenges and be confident that they will get help and non-judgmental advice. The information within the group also has to be real and factual. There's nothing woolly about this discussion group.