

Ten benefits of being in a discussion group

Teagasc facilitates more than 600 discussion groups in dairy, drystock, tillage and forestry. Mairead Kirk, a drystock advisor in Monaghan and dairy specialist George Ramsbottom outline the benefits from joining, or remaining in, a discussion group

1 You'll make more money
Independent research by Dr Pat Bogue has shown that farmers who are in discussion groups make more money than farmers who aren't, almost certainly due to a combination of all of the points below. GR/MK

2 The social aspect
Farming can be a lonely occupation. Throw in difficult weather and market conditions and the going can get really tough. The social aspect of discussion groups is often the first benefit mentioned by group members. Discussion group meetings give you a chance to share your farming experiences, good or bad, with like-minded individuals. MK

Joining a group allows farmers to get out of their own working environment for a couple of hours each month and meet people that they would have little opportunity to meet otherwise. GR

3 Awareness of schemes
In the drystock end of the business, a sizeable chunk of income comes from the successful participation in schemes such as GLAS, BDGP, BEEP, etc. While these may not be the main focus of discussion groups, they are undoubtedly given air time at relevant times of the year. Your facilitator and fellow members can contribute advice regarding the rules and regulations of these schemes and steer you through inspection processes

and procedures. MK

4 Personal development
I've been involved in facilitating discussion groups for over 25 years. I've watched the development of farmers who said that they'd never be able to chair a meeting or speak in public. Through becoming members of discussion groups, they've learnt how to interact with others, share information and gradually grown in self-confidence.

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Over the years, I've watched them become committee or board members of the milk processing co-ops, chair their discussion groups, speak at conferences and win awards. Things they'd never have thought possible a decade earlier. Group participation develops members as people too. GR

5 You'll receive technical information at the right time
As farming technology reaches ever forward, no one in the farming industry knows it all. Timely technical information at meetings from fellow discussion group members, facilitators, specialists, researchers, industry representatives, etc. can help to drive your farm business forward. MK/GR

6 You'll implement more technology
Research has shown that members of established groups have adopted a greater number of new technologies than those who are not in groups. Those in some of the newer groups were intermediate. GR

7 You'll do more goal setting
Good discussion groups formulate an annual plan with scheduled meetings and topics to be covered over the course of the year. Members can align their own farm business schedule to this plan and set targets accordingly. These can be something as simple as selecting start and end dates for the breeding season and committing within the group to have all herd breeding completed by a set date. Having to report back to the group encourages the farmer in his efforts to meet the targets. MK



The NEW suckler group

Padraig Mc Nally (back row, light blue jacket), Chairperson of the Nighttime, Evening and Weekend (NEW) suckler group facilitated by Mairead Kirk, believes that the social aspect has been vital in keeping the group together over the years. As Padraig says, "Being able to share your farming experiences and use group meetings to solve problems on your farm is invaluable."

As the group now approaches its 10th anniversary, they have organised a KT-approved health and safety event to mark this occasion on Padraig's farm in Carrickmacross on **Tuesday 30 April** at 4pm. Padraig says the focus on the day will firmly be on farming safely every day as the group acknowledges that there are still too many farm accidents and tragedies on Irish farms.

8 Positivity
Progress made by members of discussion groups is underpinned by the positive support that members receive from others in the group. A farmer said: 'I wouldn't have tried out the on-off grazing for myself if I hadn't seen some of the others [in the group] doing it themselves. They gave me the push I needed to try it out for myself - our group has a real 'try it out for yourself and see how you get on' attitude which I've really enjoyed.' GR

9 Financial discipline
On many drystock farms, off-farm income acts as a cushion

for farm finances and little effort is made to establish true farm costs. However, completing the annual Teagasc Profit Monitor gives discussion group members an insight into their farm finances and the ability to benchmark performance against other group members. The value of this quickly becomes apparent and the smart guys will tell you the Teagasc Profit Monitor results meeting is the most important of the year. MK

10 Problem solving
Someone else in the group has seen it happen before and can point you in the right direction. This past summer was

exceptionally dry. Discussion group members helped each other to decide on the decisions that members made during the height of the crisis.

According to one farmer, "I hosted a group meeting in early July. I was in denial about the drought, thinking we'd have rain any day and that things would green up again. After the meeting was over, I followed the plan set out by the group, buying whole-crop silage from a tillage farmer a few miles away and bales from a neighbour. While there was a good bit of spending involved, I was in control of my forage situation for the rest of the drought and had my winter feed sorted." GR