

# Why WhatsApp should be a done deal for your discussion group

Adopting this communication tool will greatly benefit your group's effectiveness

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It used to be that an application was something you sent to the guards, for a job perhaps, or a gun licence. Now the word in its shortened form "app" is everywhere. Thousands of apps are published every day. Some are free, many are not. They are generally easy to use with a bit of practice and some are extremely useful on farms. Those of you less enchanted by smartphones and computers may be reaching for that twelve bore, but bear with me.

The Teagasc PastureBase Ireland app for example is a great tool for grass management but let's look at the WhatsApp communication app in particular. It's easier to describe what WhatsApp lets you do than to explain how it works. In short, it allows you to send texts, pictures, videos, etc, free of charge to other people who also have the app on their phones. Many schools and GAA clubs use it.

As part of his Walsh Fellows masters degree, Teagasc colleague Fergus Bogue completed a survey of how dairy farmers were using WhatsApp within their discussion groups.

"One farmer described using WhatsApp as having a huge store of knowledge at your fingertips," says Fergus. "He said that WhatsApp allowed him to contact his Teagasc advisor and his discussion group colleagues instantly and get their opinion on a challenge he might be facing on his/her farm. More than half of the farmers using WhatsApp said they had learned technical information through interaction in their WhatsApp groups.

If all the members of a discussion group have WhatsApp on their phones they are in a position to create a WhatsApp group which can be restricted to people they choose to give access to.

"A lot of the negativity associated with social media such as Facebook or Twitter comes from the fact that strangers can write negative or malicious comments while remain-



ing anonymous. With WhatsApp, you don't have that risk," says Fergus.

WhatsApp is another way of reducing the challenge which isolation poses for farmers. Farmers can see that others face the same challenges they do and can compare notes on solutions, which was particularly useful during the difficult spring and drought in 2018. As with any communication tool, etiquette is required in how you use it. You wouldn't ring someone for a chat about football at 5am, for example.

Farmers in the survey said they like to have a set of rules, written or not, about how members will use the WhatsApp group.

A key point is that the members of the discussion group should be the drivers of whether they have a WhatsApp group and how it should be used. "The farmers should decide what they want to do and how they want to use the tool," says Fergus Bogue. "Any group intending to use WhatsApp should have a meeting set up with their facilitator and chair to set goals and establish a few simple rules. This might include what

their expectations are of each other such as response times and levels of engagement – if all members don't actively participate the benefits are greatly reduced."

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WhatsApp is easy to pick up but group members require a basic level of expertise. This can often be shared by more experienced members. Nearly all farmers have a wealth and knowledge and experience that can positively influence discussion groups on WhatsApp. You wouldn't expect to shoot well without spending some time honing your skill.