

Keeping in touch

Managing uncertainty

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The COVID-19 crisis has, and will continue to, test our mental and physical capacity to deal with uncertainty. It seems that we have to adapt different way of doing everyday things that normally we take for granted.

However, life goes on our farms, and the work at these busy times is prioritised as best we can, we are fortunate to be busy and to live in semi-isolated environments already. We, in Ireland, are also very fortunate to have long-established support systems for our inputs and outputs, our farm organisations and support services. These are the people we depend on in a crisis to be innovative and to find solutions to problems quickly.

I am impressed by the response of farmer clients to the workaround solutions put in place by Teagasc staff across all the enterprises and activities. We have many alternative ways to do our work and these have been developing and gaining popularity gradually. YouTube videos, Facebook, podcasts, webinars, Moodle, etc, have grown in usage and popularity in recent years.

Being able to do work without face-to-face contact is a solution for this crisis but I am sure that what we learn will impact on our plans to deliver advisory and education services in future.

For the many who do not have good digital connectivity yet, this is a harder time and maybe it will ensure that the public commitment to rolling out fast broadband to all will accelerate. Mobile phone usage is high among farmers and we have used text messaging for 20 years or more. We are doing a lot of work over the phone and it is quick and efficient with call or text options and for some the possibility to use FaceTime.

For discussion groups, it is really important to continue a schedule of regular meetings by phone. These have started and while current social distance restrictions apply they will

continue. Who knows, maybe we will continue to expand our work through digital formats

Teagasc advisory staff are using a suite of digital advisory and communication tools and operating "virtual offices" to cope with the current COVID-19 restrictions which required the closure of the advisory offices.

The onset of the COVID-19 crisis has speeded up the introduction of digital communications methods that Teagasc had been trialling on a pilot basis. Advisors and their clients have taken to the new approach quickly and most of the farmers are accessing the new services on their smart phones.

• **Basic Payments Scheme (BPS):**

All BPS consultations with clients are now being done over the phone. Rather than come into the office the clients just ring in at the appointed time. All clients get a hard copy of their application posted or emailed to them as a permanent record.

• **Helpline:** Teagasc has put in place a helpline for farmers to get advice on the range of issues that they may face as they continue to do their essential work in maintaining the food supply chain. This helpline is open to all farmers.

• **Labour database:** Teagasc has set up a national database to link farm families where a farmer or a farm worker becomes ill with COVID-19, with an available relief worker. This is being done in collaboration with the Farm Relief Services (FRS), and with the support of the IFA and ICMSA.

• **Teagasc Daily** is a new service to supply farmers with timely daily management tips across all enterprises. Each day, new topics are dealt with in a short article that is added to the Teagasc website, Teagasc Facebook and Twitter pages.

• **Education courses:** Teagasc education officers and teachers are working with students by phone and via online channels providing guidance for self-study of theory elements of courses. Student discussion groups are being conducted just like the regular discussion group meetings using a range of platforms and course assessment



Wexford drystock farmer and Teagasc client Debbie Sunderland (above) says she was pleasantly surprised by how well a recent 'virtual' discussion group worked.



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Advisors in all Teagasc regions have been using a range of digital communication technologies including telephone and video conferencing to hold “virtual” discussion groups.

“I was surprised how well it worked,” is Debbie Sunderland’s comment about a ‘virtual’ discussion group meeting recently facilitated by Teagasc Wexford drystock advisor James Doran. Debbie farms at Aske, Gorey, Co Wexford and is a member of the Enniscorthy East Beef group.

“I was concerned that we might be all talking at the same time, but that didn’t happen and we were able to address all the issues people wanted discussed, in particular about the new beef scheme.

“James had given us good instructions (via WhatsApp) in advance about how to ring in, etc, so there were no problems there. I’d say a virtual meeting is not as good as where we all meet face to face, but you save on travelling time and I could see how it would be very useful to have a virtual meeting during a busy time such as sowing or calving.”

Will Griffin, who is a dairy farmer located between Tullow and Shillelagh in Co Wicklow, saw some distinct advantages during a recent ‘virtual’ discussion group facilitated by Tinahely Teagasc advisor Paul Keogh. That meeting was held on a video platforming service Zoom.

“Paul was able to go into Pasture-Base and pull up everyone’s grass wedge – that part worked really well. You couldn’t do that on a farm. We are fairly remote but the link seemed to work well, only one farmer had minor issues.*

“Not actually meeting other farmers is a disadvantage but I could see a role for virtual meetings in the future. They might be shorter but more frequent, with face-to-face meetings in between.”

*Teagasc is conscious that broadband is not universally available across the country but phone-based conferencing is universally available using the Teagasc Lync communication system.

is being done using assignments and other methods.

Teagasc regions keeping in touch

Advisors communicate with their clients through a range of digital communication channels including the local website, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as

other communication tools such as WhatsApp, texts, phone, etc.

Virtual discussion groups

Teagasc advisors facilitate over 700 farmer discussion groups across the country. Social distancing and limits on travel due to COVID-19 have prevented these groups meeting.