



#UnderstandAg

Farming in Ireland: A Public Consultation Exercise

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1. Background to the Project	5
1.2. The Irish Public and Farming	5
1.3. Public Engagement.....	7
1.4. ‘Listening Mode’	7
1.5. Aims and Objectives.....	8
2. METHODOLOGY	9
2.1. Design.....	9
2.2. Sampling Strategy	10
2.3. Materials	13
2.4. Data Collection.....	14
2.5. Data Analysis.....	15
3. RESULTS.....	16
3.1. Participants	16
3.2. First Impressions of Irish Farming	18
3.3. Public Image of Irish Farming.....	19
3.3.1. High Quality Meat and Dairy.....	20
3.3.2. A Hard Life.....	22
3.3.3. An Important Sector.....	25
3.3.4. Not without Flaws	27
3.3.4.1. Worrying Environmental Practices	27
3.3.4.2. Animal welfare Issues and Practices of Concern	30
3.3.4.3. Farm Safety Record	30
3.3.4.4. Lacking Diversity.....	31
3.3.5. In Need of Government and Consumer Support	34
3.4. Public Information Needs regarding Irish Farming	36
3.4.1. Information Insufficiency	36
3.4.2. Concerns and Curiosities.....	39
3.4.2.1. The Basics of Farming	44
3.4.2.2. Farming as a Profession	45
3.4.2.3. Animal Welfare	48
3.4.2.4. Buying ‘Local’ and ‘Natural’	54

3.4.2.5. The Environment.....	58
3.5. Communication Preferences.....	60
3.5.1. Getting the Full Facts	60
3.5.2. Hearing Directly from Farmers.....	60
3.5.3. Targeted Communications.....	62
3.5.4. Preferred Platforms	63
3.5.5. Impact of Public Engagement	63
3.6. Evaluation of the Focus Groups	65
3.6.1. Educating.....	65
3.6.2. Empowering	67
3.6.3. Encouraging Reflection	67
4. FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS	70
4.1. The Value of Deliberation	70
4.2. Hot Topics	70
Appendices.....	74
Appendix 1: Interview Guide	74
Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet	77
Appendix 3: Farmer video transcripts and screenshots	80
Appendix 3: Participants’ farming questions	82

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Project

Funded by the Golden Jubilee Trust, the Understanding Agriculture Committee was formed to develop a communications campaign to increase public understanding of farming in Ireland.

The committee sought out the advice of social and behavioural scientists in Teagasc about an evidence base to inform the development of the communications materials to be used within the campaign.

Following a number of meetings to discuss the purpose and strategy of the campaign, the Understanding Agriculture Committee commissioned Teagasc to carry out a “public engagement-style” exercise which would ensure a bottom-up and user-driven approach was used to develop the communications campaign. The aim of this was to ensure that the campaign would specifically target public information knowledge levels, information needs, and beliefs regarding Irish farming.

The aims of the exercise were to: (1) identify current public knowledge levels and interest in Irish farming; (2) identify current areas of public concern and knowledge gaps regarding Irish farming; and (3) inform a future communications campaign including key communication channels and content which could be targeted.

To address these aims a programme of research was undertaken to conduct a qualitative exploration of the general Irish public. 65 members of the public took part in a series of 10 focus groups.

The current report outlines the approach used to undertake this public consultation and the findings from this exercise.

1.2. The Irish Public and Farming

Considerable research has already been carried out exploring Irish food consumers’ perceptions and behaviours with respect to areas such as food safety, food quality, new food technologies, animal welfare, and food choice.

However, very little in-depth research has been carried out exploring public perceptions of Irish farming, and there is little in-depth data available regarding public information needs and communication preferences in this area.

Several surveys (Figure 1) can give us an overview of public interactions with, and perceptions of, farming in Ireland. This type of quantitative information gives us an indication of the extent of public understanding of agriculture, and the extent of concerns around certain farming practices. However, it does not give us enough information about the specific beliefs and information gaps that need to be targeted.

Further research using a more in-depth focus group approach with the public will provide us with more detailed information on the current perceptions that consumers hold with respect to Irish farming – and *why* they hold these beliefs; their specific information needs; and their communication preferences.

The Irish Public and Farming: Facts & Figures

- ♣ 14% of Irish people have never heard of the **Common Agricultural Policy**¹
- ♣ 64% of Irish people believe agriculture is one of the major **causes of climate change**¹
- ♣ 52% of Irish people believe agriculture has already made a major contribution in **fighting climate change**¹
- ♣ 65% of Irish people would like more information about the conditions under which **farmed animals are treated** in Ireland²
- ♣ 72% of Irish people **rate animal welfare conditions as good** on dairy farms and on beef farms³
- ♣ 43% of Irish people feel that Covid-19 has made them more aware of the relationship between **animal health management and human health**³
- ♣ 90% of Irish people believe agriculture contributes to the **beauty of the countryside**⁴
- ♣ 90% of the Irish public believe agriculture helps to preserve and protect **rural areas**⁴
- ♣ 61% of Irish people prefer to buy **local foods** from local producers rather than large mass producers⁵
- ♣ 72% of Irish people want to know more about how their **beef has been produced**⁶
- ♣ 30% of Irish people are concerned about **pesticide residues** in food⁷
- ♣ 75% of Irish people trust farmers as a source of information about **food risks**⁷

Figure 1: The Irish Public and Farming: Facts and Figures

¹ Special Eurobarometer 504 (2020): nationally representative survey of the Irish public (n = 1,239)

² Special Eurobarometer 442 (2015): nationally representative survey of the Irish public (n = 1,000)

³ Teagasc SWAB Project (2020): nationally representative survey of the Irish public (n = 693)

⁴ Special Eurobarometer 389 (2012): nationally representative survey of the Irish public (n = 1,007)

⁵ Bord Bia Local Food Project (2017): nationally representative survey of Irish public (n = 951)

⁶ Bord Bia Where's the Beef Project (2018): nationally representative survey of Irish public (n = 1,045)

⁷ EU Special Eurobarometer EB91.3 (2019): nationally representative survey of Irish public (n = 1,067)

1.3. Public Engagement

“The involvement of specialists listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with, non-specialists” (HEFCE, 2006).

Public engagement happens frequently in many different sectors and settings in life – a highly publicised example is Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly that brings together different members of the public to hear about, discuss, deliberate and offer decisions on particular societal topics (referendum issues, population aging, climate change, gender equality, etc.).

Public engagement exercises are beneficial because they help us to understand and reflect on different views that exist on a topic, so that we can better communicate with others who may be coming from different perspectives. Public engagement can help to lessen the disconnect between different groups and resolve or prevent possible polarisation amongst different groups. It also ensures that assumptions are not made about the target audiences’ knowledge levels, beliefs or motivations.

The ‘Understanding Agriculture’ public engagement campaign is being led by farmers (‘specialists’) who want to engage with members of the general public (‘non-specialists’) so that both groups can better understand perspectives on farming in Ireland.

1.4. ‘Listening Mode’

“The public is heterogeneous, there are multiple publics.”

The first stage of the Understanding Agriculture public engagement campaign can be described as a public consultation carried out in “listening mode” whereby

the perceptions and opinions of the public are collected. The feedback from this public consultation will then be considered by the Understanding Agriculture Committee before further engagement and communication with the public takes place.

When we talk about ‘the public’, we need to ensure that the people we engage with, and listen to, are representative of a wide and inclusive range of ‘everyday’ members of the public. We also need to ensure that we provide a structured space where members of the public are facilitated to openly discuss issues of importance to them. Using established and validated social science methods and techniques can ensure these conditions are met, and the information that is collected is robust and reliable.

The public consultation phase of this campaign is facilitated by trained, independent social and behavioural scientists. A structured research approach will be used to listen to and find out the public’s thoughts, opinions, concerns and questions on the role of farming in Irish society.

The outputs from the public consultation stage will be delivered by the research team to the Understanding Agriculture committee. The insights and content will then be available to use to inform the development of a public engagement campaign utilising chosen communication platforms (e.g. farm visits, website, billboards, social media etc.). Irish farmers can take the questions asked by members of the public and answer them in detail, offering knowledge, insights and practical experiences and examples of life on an Irish farm. This allows the Irish farming community to demonstrate a genuine and meaningful willingness to engage with,

listen to, and open up a conversation between everyday consumers and everyday farmers, allowing the Irish public to become more engaged with the realities and facts of Irish farming. By funding this public engagement campaign, Irish farmers are demonstrating to the public their commitment to openness, transparency and inclusion and ultimately increasing trust amongst the public in the Irish farming sector

1.5. Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the public consultation study is to listen to the public and find out their views on the role of farming in Ireland.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- ♣ To understand how Irish farming is currently perceived by the general public in Ireland
- ♣ To understand how familiar the general public feel they are with Irish farming
- ♣ To understand how interested the general public are in finding out more about Irish farming
- ♣ To identify the specific types of questions that the general public have about Irish farming

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Design

Focus groups were chosen as the best method to engage with members of the public in a bottom-up manner and to provide a space for active deliberation and open discussion. Focus groups are a form of qualitative research that involve collecting data through moderated group discussion based on participants' perceptions and experience of a topic, predetermined by the researcher (Kreuger, 2009; Morgan 1997; 1996; Kitzinger, 1996). In this way, focus groups create an authentic research setting that allow participants to co-construct meanings and produce multiple, and often conflicting, narratives and positions. Through this interactivity, researchers can obtain a rich, in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs in relation to the topic under study, as well as an understanding of the meanings that lie behind those views (Gill et al. 2008; Morgan, 1997).

The group discussion is facilitated by a trained moderator who has experience in keeping people on track talking about the subject under investigation, making sure they do not go off-topic too much, making sure everyone is able to give their views and that the conversation is not dominated by any one person in the group. An interview guide (a list of questions and prompts) is used by the facilitator to structure the discussion. A trained note-

taker is also present, observing the dynamics of the group and capturing initial observations of the group discussions.

Focus groups are frequently used tools for public engagement and consultation. This is because the format of a focus group is conducive to facilitating 'deliberation'. Deliberation is a key facet of public engagement. Deliberative activities have been characterised as thoughtful, careful, and lengthy considerations of information by individuals (Davies, 2009). It is argued that two features – representation and argumentation – are required for deliberation to occur (Gonzalez-Bailon et al. 2010). Representation (i.e. diversity of participants) can be addressed through a rigorous sampling strategy which was put in place for the current study (section 2.2.). Argumentation (i.e. information exchange and debate) can be facilitated by ensuring participants are exposed to new and diverse information, and are provided with an opportunity to query, agree, or disagree with that information. This was ensured through the use of focus groups, and the selection and development of the materials used in the focus group (section 2.3).

Ensuring these principles of representation and argumentation are in place provides reassurance that the outputs from the focus group are legitimate and fair

representations of general public opinion on Irish farming.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

In order to ensure representation in the public consultation exercise, a purposive (selective) sampling strategy was designed by the research team and agreed with the Understanding Agriculture Committee. Purposive sampling involves an iterative process of selecting research subjects rather than starting with a predetermined sampling frame (Eitkan et al. 2016). A purposeful sampling technique is often used to select informants based on their particular knowledge of, and/or experience with, the focus of empirical inquiry. Purposive sampling is a sampling design that is not intended to offer a representative sample, but rather to focus in on particular phenomena and/or processes. This strategy ensured a diverse and varied range of members of the general public would be facilitated to take part in the focus groups.

To be eligible to take part in this study, all participants had to fulfil the following basic criteria:

- be aged 18 years and older
- must not live or work on a farm currently, or in the past

For each focus group, a number of additional selection criteria were applied so as to reflect a diverse range of members of the general public (See Figure 2). Focus groups were designed to be relatively homogenous on particular demographic criteria - clustering people together on a common attribute (e.g. age, region,

employment) makes for a more comfortable and conversational setting for the participants to discuss issues in-depth (Kreuger, 2009).

Recruitment was carried out by Amárach Research. The sampling strategy was provided to Amárach Research who then organised recruitment of participants from their existing panels (6000+ members renewed and refreshed monthly). A screening questionnaire was administered by Amárach to their panels and individuals were invited to take part in the focus groups once they met the specific recruitment criteria for a focus group. Prior to the focus group, all participants were provided with an information sheet and asked to provide their informed consent to participate in the study (See Appendix 2). Ethics was covered under the local institutional arrangements of Amárach.

Amárach provided the Teagasc research team with a list of details of all confirmed participants prior to each focus group which included the participant's first name, age, gender, county, urban/rural, education level, children under 16 years (y/n); household income; pet owner (y/n); previous farm visits; dietary preferences (meat-eater, vegetarian, vegan, other: name). Amárach handled all participant communication including administration of the Zoom link to attend the focus group prior to the meeting, and the payment of incentives to the participants following the meeting.

Amárach recruited 65 participants in total to take part in 10 focus groups (5-7 participants per group).

Focus Group	Inclusion Screening Criteria
‘Seniors’	Aged 55+
‘Urban young adults’	Living in urban area Aged 18-25 years No children
‘Mixed young adults’	Living in rural or urban areas (mix) Aged 18-25 years No children
‘Young professionals’	Aged 25-35years Full-time employment (ABC1) No children
‘Adults with no kids’	Aged 35-54years No children
‘Low SES urban parents’	Living in urban area Parents of young child(ren) under 16 years Low socio-economic category
‘High SES urban parents’	Living in urban area Parents of young child(ren) under 16 years High socio-economic category
‘Rural parents’	Living in rural area Parents of young child(ren) under 16 years of age
‘Vegetarians & vegans’	Vegetarians or vegans
‘Foodies’	Not working as a chef, café or restaurant owner, baker To tick at least 3 of the following statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>I cook most of my meals from scratch/raw materials</i> - <i>At least once a week, I post about food on a social media platform</i> - <i>At least once a week, I go to places other than supermarkets to buy ingredients (e.g. farmers’ market, an artisan food producer, a specialist food store)</i> - <i>At least once a week, I read food magazines or food blogs/websites</i> - <i>I am always looking out for new food ingredients to try at home</i>

Figure 2: Recruitment criteria for focus groups

“

Dora: I think this exercise is hugely important and it was great to hear that you were doing this. It's a great opportunity for people, ordinary folk to have a chat about these things that you wouldn't ordinarily get the opportunity to do.

Ivor: Communication is good thing. To talk about things is always good. Find out what other people think. And often I think, you know that a lot of the perceived problems aren't even problems. Sometimes the very vocal minority kind of dominate, and the sort of more moderate, you know, people are left, you know, not saying anything too much, or they are not getting an opportunity. So I think it's... it's very good to be able to talk about it.

- (Vegetarians & Vegans)

”

2.3. Materials

As a public consultation tool, focus groups embed principles of meaningful deliberation and active participant engagement into a data collection process. In the current study, argumentation was ensured by providing a focus group setting where participants could discuss – at length and in a facilitated fashion, their views on farming. Furthermore, materials were integrated into the design of the focus groups to stimulate argumentation. Utilising prompt materials within focus groups can engage people in a way that approximates the more everyday processes of information seeking and sense making.

In developing the study design, the emphasis was on getting members of the public to engage in an in-depth conversation on the topic of Irish farming which was achieved by introducing the following elements into the focus groups: (1) ensuring a *bottom-up approach* to the development of the interview guide; (2) presentation of *videos featuring 'real life' farmers* presenting information about their farm in bite-size chunks; and (3) prompting and facilitating *question-asking* specifically. All of these methodological facets were built into the focus groups in order to stimulate participant deliberation and thoughtful, careful, and lengthy considerations about the topic of farming in Ireland (Davies, 2009).

A semi-structured topic guide, informed by Krueger's (2002) recommended style of questioning (opening, introductory, transition and closing) was developed by

the research team (See Appendix 1). The research team were particularly careful to keep prompts and questions vague and deliberately did not introduce any specific topics or areas of farming into the discussion. This ensured that the participants themselves could introduce topics, concerns, issues and information needs that they themselves felt were of importance.

Short videos of 4 'real-life' farmers – a dairy farmer, a beef farmer, a sheep farmer, and a tillage farmer – were used as prompts within the focus groups to provide participants with new information directly from farmers themselves. Each farmer recorded a short video of themselves standing and talking in a field on their farm (approx. 1-2 minutes long). In the video, they introduced themselves and provided an overview of their farms, the type of work that happens on the farm, and where the produce from their farm ends up. Appendix 3 details the full transcripts of videos with anonymised screenshots.

Finally, in response to the new information provided in the farmer videos, participants were encouraged to specifically ask questions. Question-asking in particular is a useful tool for encouraging deliberation as it requires the participants to attend to, engage and reflect on the material (the farmer videos) in front of them (Marcu et al., 2014; Rutsaert et al., 2014). The questions asked can then be analysed to highlight specific knowledge gaps and information needs.

2.4. Data Collection

Data collection took place over a 3 week period during April and May 2021. Given Covid-19 restrictions in place during the data collection period, all focus groups were carried out online, using a specialised video conference software (Zoom Pro). All participants kept their video on so as to encourage a group discussion setting.

Each focus group had a trained facilitator and note-taker present. The facilitator moderated the discussion during the focus group, while the note-taker kept notes of the main topics and themes emerging, alerted the facilitator to key ideas arising during the focus group, and dealt with any audio or technical issues which arose during the focus group.

According to Krueger (2009), a well-conducted focus group requires the moderator to employ certain principles prior to its commencement, such as: (a) creating an open environment for participants to freely express their views and one in which they can respond actively, positively and respectfully to the questions asked of them; (b) moderating without participating; in order to minimise the introduction of researcher bias into the conversation; (c) being prepared for views that may be critical of a topic deemed important to you; and (d) being comfortable and natural so that participants will feel relaxed over the course of the discussion. Furthermore, Bloor (2001) argues that the moderator should be able to prevent the discussion being dominated by one group member so that all participants have ample

opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way; allow differences of opinions to be heard and discussed fairly, and, if required encourage withdrawn participants to make a contribution. All of the aforementioned expert recommendations were employed by the researchers, during the focus group discussions.

Prior to each focus group, all participants had received an informed consent sheet from Amárach. At the start of the focus group, the aims of the study were outlined to participants and were once again assured that their participation in the study would be both confidential and anonymous.

The focus group began with a short ice-breaker where participants introduced themselves and gave a weather update on the location they were dialling in from. This allowed participants to become comfortable with one another, while also allowing the research team to ensure no audio issues existed. The moderator followed the interview guide using the questions and prompts to encourage discussion amongst participants and ensure that the conversation stayed on track.

After each focus group, the note-taker completed a summary of the group discussion based on the notes taken during the focus group and their immediate impressions around the group dynamic and themes emerging during the discussion. Data collection ended after the 10th focus group as all target key informant groups had been included. The research

team judged that data saturation had been reached by the 6th focus group with no significantly new themes emerging. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes.

2.5. Data Analysis

The audio recordings from the focus groups were uploaded to an automated transcription software (Otter.ai). The software generated an individual transcript for each focus group which detailed word-for-word the content from each recording. Each transcript was then reviewed against the original audio recording and quality-checked by the research team.

An inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data collected from the focus groups. The transcripts were read by the research team several times and compared against the notes taken after each focus group to start identifying patterns emerging across the

data. Transcripts were then initially coded by hand whereby the text in each transcript was actively read and words, phrases and ideas with similar meaning were grouped together to start generating a list of common codes appearing within and across the transcripts. Once an initial coding list was developed, Nvivo 10 software (QSR International) was used to manage and organise the remainder of the analysis.

As the research team coded each transcript, codes were revised, merged, deleted or renamed to better reflect the iterative analysis. Once all coding was completed, similar codes were grouped together to develop larger themes. The themes were then described in full by the research team and the theme names refined. Two researchers independently reviewed all codes and themes developed and then came together to discuss any divergences in coding and make any agreed amendments.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Participants

65 participants took part in 10 focus groups, representing a diverse cross-section of Irish society. Table 1 provides an in-depth overview of the demographics

across each focus group, and across the sample as a whole.

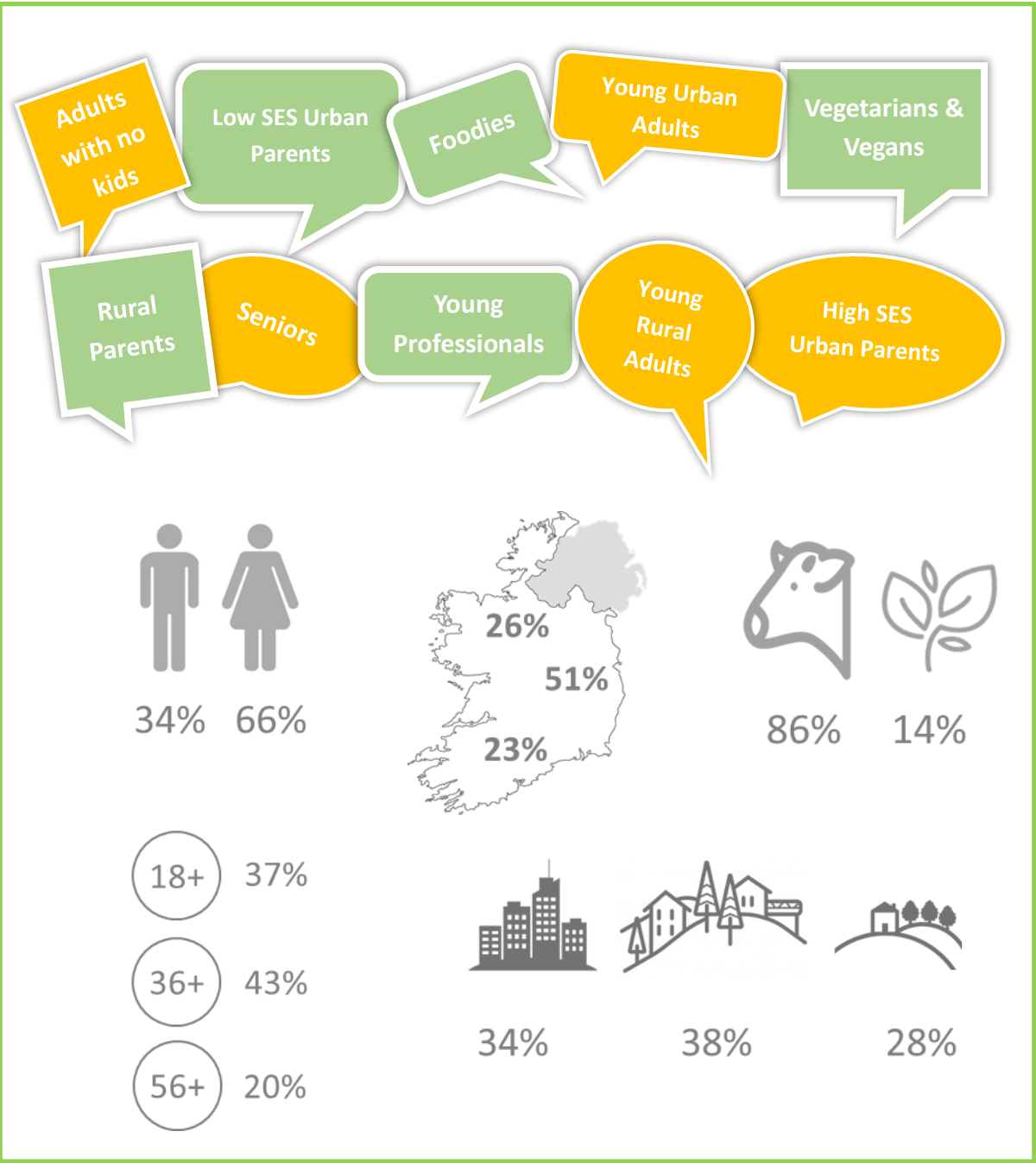


Table 1: Characteristics of participants in the 10 focus groups and overall sample (n = 65)

Socio-demographics	Focus Groups										Total (n = 65)
	1 (n = 7)	2 (n = 6)	3 (n = 7)	4 (n = 6)	5 (n = 5)	6 (n = 6)	7 (n = 7)	8 (n = 7)	9 (n = 7)	10 (n = 7)	
Gender											
Male	3	4	2	1	2	2	0	3	4	1	22 (34%)
Female	4	2	5	5	3	4	7	4	3	6	43 (66%)
Age											
18-35	0	6	7	6	0	2	0	0	2	1	24 (37%)
36-55	0	0	0	0	5	4	7	7	1	4	28 (43%)
56+	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	13 (20%)
Province											
Munster	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	0	1	1	15 (23%)
Leinster	4	2	1	4	4	4	5	4	1	4	33 (51%)
Connacht & Ulster	1	1	5	0	0	0	0	3	5	2	17 (26%)
Living											
Rural	1	0	2	1	0	0	3	1	1	0	9 (14%)
Semi-rural	0	0	3	0	0	0	4	0	0	2	9 (14%)
Sub-urban	3	2	1	1	3	4	0	4	4	3	25 (38%)
Urban	3	4	1	4	2	2	0	2	2	2	22 (34%)
Children											
<16 years of age	0	0	0	0	5	6	7	0	0	0	18 (28%)
Education level											
Primary	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1 (1%)
Secondary	2	3	5	0	2	0	2	0	2	2	18 (28%)
Trade/tech/voc.	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	1	0	7 (11%)
Bachelors'	2	2	1	3	0	5	3	3	0	3	22 (34%)
Masters/PhD	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	2	4	2	16 (25%)
Prefer not to say	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (1%)
Household income											
< €30,000	0	1	3	1	3	0	0	2	0	2	12 (18.5%)
€30,000-59,999	1	2	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	18 (28%)
€60,000-80,000	2	1	2	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	12 (18.5%)
> €80,000	2	2	0	2	0	2	3	1	3	2	17 (26%)
Prefer not to say	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	6 (9%)
Pet ownership											
Yes	6	5	3	4	5	4	6	6	4	3	46 (71%)
No	1	1	4	2	0	2	1	1	3	4	19 (29%)
Farm visits											
> 10 times	3	2	4	2	3	3	4	3	4	4	32 (49%)
6-9 times	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	2	9 (14%)
2-5 times	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	0	15 (23%)
Never/once	2	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	9 (14%)
Dietary preferences											
Meat eater	6	6	7	6	5	5	7	7	0	7	56 (86%)
Vegetarian / Vegan	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	7	0	9 (14%)

Focus Groups: 1. Seniors; 2. Young Adults (Urban); 3. Young Adults (Mixed Urban/Rural); 4. Young Professionals; 5. Low SES Parents (Urban); 6. High SES Parents (Urban); 7. Parents (Rural); 8. Adults with no Kids; 9. Vegetarians and Vegans; 10. Foodies

3.2. First Impressions of Irish Farming

To open the focus group discussion, participants were first asked to express what words or phrases came to mind when they thought about Irish farming. The key phrases/words that emerged across each of the focus groups were inserted into a word cloud; results of which are illustrated in Figure 3 below. The most frequently cited words/phrases are depicted by a larger font size in Figure 3, with medium-to-smaller sized fonts representing less commonly cited, yet nonetheless mentioned, key words. For example, “beef”, “dairy”, “cows” and “hard work” represent some of the words most commonly expressed by participants when they first thought about Irish farming. Less frequently mentioned words included “cruel”, “dirty”, “exported” and “old fashioned”.

This brainstorming activity provided an initial insight of the manner in which members of the public in Ireland think about Irish farming.



Figure 3: Word cloud displaying most frequently mentioned words, thoughts and phrases when participants were asked what first comes to their mind when they think of Irish farming.

3.3. Public Image of Irish Farming

Perceptions of Irish farming, including how participants thought about Irish farming, its current state of play and how they would like Irish farming to unfold in the future, were explored. Participants were specifically asked to provide opinions on (i) their likes/dislikes of Irish farming

currently, as well as (ii) what they would like to see change/remain the same, 10 years from now.

5 themes reflected the public image of Irish farming. These are shown in Figure 4. Each theme is discussed in detail in the sub-sections which follow.

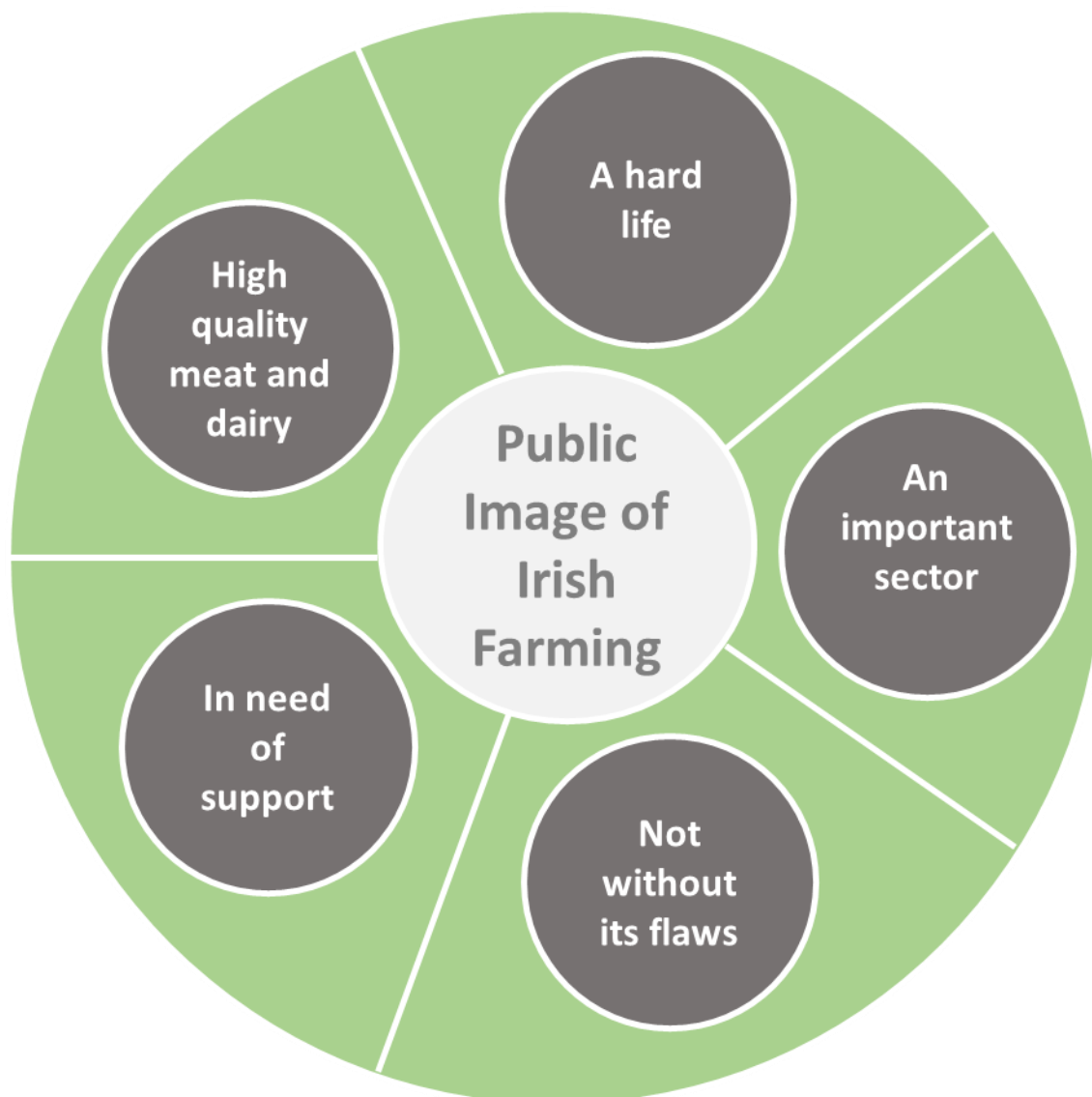


Figure 4: The 5 themes representing the public image of Irish farming held by participants in the public consultation ($n = 65$)

3.3.1. High Quality Meat and Dairy

Overwhelmingly, participants were positive about the quality of the farming produce in Ireland – when they thought of Irish farming, they largely automatically thought of “meat and dairy” and livestock farms – dairy, beef, and sheep, primarily. Quality of the food products coming from these farms was associated with certain characteristics, such as grass-based, small, local, family-run farms; all of which they felt characterised Irish farming. In particular, when they alluded to Irish farms being grass-fed they often made references to animals being able to roam and feed on grass and good quality land. Furthermore, they associated Irish farming with traceable produce and not that far removed from them, as a result of farms being small in size and local. This idea of small local farms appeared to give rise to feelings of comfort whereby they knew where their food was coming from and, in turn, this increased their trust in the Irish produce on offer.

They also associated Irish farming with generational, family-run farms; a concept they expressed that they associated with passion, dedication and high standards. In addition, they viewed Irish farming as quite “natural” – in that the animals are grass-fed, the produce is free-range, and the operations are less-intensive. Interestingly, they generally commented on how Irish farming was a lot more ‘natural’ or even organic compared to other countries, such as America, which they associated with

farming styles that involved “mass production”.

When participants spoke about the future of Irish farming, many hoped that farm sizes would not increase and become business-like operations (mass production) that could potentially compromise the high quality of foods (beef and dairy in particular) produced in Ireland. There was also a clear preference for maintaining smaller family-run farms in order to support peoples’ livelihoods rather than supporting one big farming business. Many also expressed that they would like the quality of Irish beef and dairy to remain as high as it currently is, globally well-renowned and hoped that advances in technology wouldn’t interfere with the quality of Irish beef and dairy. Participants were proud that Irish beef and dairy produce was a globally renowned brand. However, some felt that it might be hard for farmers to continue to produce such high quality foods in Ireland when the prices of meat and dairy are becoming cheaper for consumers. Nonetheless, a majority expressed that farmers should continue with their efforts of producing high quality foods and should always continue to build on that going forward. Lastly, some participants felt that Irish farmers have managed to successfully avoid damaging food scandals over the years and that farmers should continually work on maintaining a high level of integrity with respect to food production.

“

I think maybe I guess the reputation to stay the same, you know, even within Ireland and around the world, I guess Ireland's known for good quality produce, good quality meat, good quality dairy. That that would stay the same in 10 years.

- (Young Adults)

I perceive the food is better, that it's more genuine, farmers are more engaged in producing the foods. They're more dedicated to the food they produce. It's not just you know, off the shelf and off you go, they really are committed to producing good quality food.

- (Seniors)

”

3.3.2. A Hard Life

Almost all participants associated farming with hard, labour-intensive work - and hard work which they felt was not matched by high financial reward and participants commented that they felt Irish farming, particularly small Irish farms, were not economically sustainable. Participants frequently referred to Irish farmers as hard-working and dedicated.

There was a strong sense across focus groups that farmers have a hard life, in that given the tough nature of their work, and their hard-working ethic, they are being unfairly treated by and under extreme pressure from the general public and government; both of which many deemed as unacceptable and unnecessary. Others mentioned that they would like to see peoples' attitudes towards farmers changing; that instead of being under constant attack, they should be viewed as an asset, appreciated for all that they do and for the food they produce. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic some participants even questioned what would life have been like during the pandemic without Irish farmers? Many also felt that the government needs to create better paying conditions and overall support for farmers, whilst others declared that they would like to see an end to farmers having to take on a second job as a form of additional income. Going forward, a majority of participants hoped that current policies and procedures will still be in place to ensure that farmers will *continue* to receive subsidies in order to safeguard the longevity of their farms. Across the focus groups, many participants declared that

they did not have anything negative to say about farmers themselves, commended them on their hard work and expressed that they are always happy to support them.

Some alluded to bigger supermarkets not paying farmers enough for their produce. One participant commented that *"supply chain is the problem"*, as he felt that supermarkets are depending on selling in competition with other supermarkets at the lowest possible price and suggested that *"we need to move back to specialist food shops or specialist shops selling pre-prepared Irish food"*.

There was also a sense across many of the focus groups that consumers and restaurants should aim to support Irish farmers and sustain their livelihoods by choosing to buy locally produced foods and to be mindful of whether the produce is guaranteed Irish, as opposed to it just being packaged in the country. With respect to restaurants, some of the participants commented that restaurateurs should be given incentives (e.g. buy Irish and be given 10% back at the end of the year) to source and serve local foods instead of buying produce in bulk from other countries. Similar views were expressed with regards to businesses set up in Ireland, in that they should be made to sell locally sourced foods instead of buying in a majority of their food from other countries, such as Britain. Many also commended some of the supermarkets for replacing many of their imported products for Irish produce; and for marketing it as

such in stores, which they feel is instrumental in keeping the farming tradition alive. Market expansion was also raised as a possible way of supporting Irish farmers. Some participants expressed that it would be nice to see Irelands' market expand to other countries in order to create more jobs for farmers and enhance their financial predicaments. However, not everyone agreed and some participants had concerns that Irish farming was too export-driven and did not focus enough on meeting the needs of Irish consumers.

Some also felt it was very important to educate children on how to detect whether a food is produced in Ireland so that they can support the agricultural industry going forward, and equally, felt it was as important to educate adults about how much money Irish farmers are *actually* making from selling their produce. The low prices of beef and dairy was also raised by participants, whom felt that Irish people would be prepared to pay a little more for their meat and milk in order to support the Irish farming community.

The issue of succession was also raised across many of the focus groups. Many of the participants felt that, nowadays, young people find it less appealing to be handed down a family farm as it is very hard to make a good living from it and potentially due to the hardship their parents endured as farmers. However, there was a desire amongst participants, that, the option would be there for young people to keep the family farm business alive, if that is the path they do desire to follow. In such cases, they hoped that young people will be incentivised/provided with adequate support to make a good living from their parents' farm. Others mentioned that there is a need to encourage more young people to take on farming as a career, to make it more sustainable as a career and to introduce more innovation to farming in order to keep the Irish farming tradition alive, which, they declared that *"everybody is so proud of in Ireland"*, and not to let it fade away into the past.

“ *Nigella: We should be pushing as consumers to support farmers by ensuring that we're buying Irish and the markings on food, sometimes it's packed in Ireland but has the mark of Irish and it's not an Irish product, I think we should restrict ourselves as to where we purchase meat, or grains or whatever.*

Brendan: Farmers are getting a raw deal. They are getting hockeyed out of it by the big supermarkets slashing prices. That end product means that farmers could only be getting as little as 20 cent for a kilo of spuds. And like, you know, you can't send three kids off to university on 20 cent a kilo. Irish farming, I guess - it's not respected enough by the supermarkets.

Nancy: I would agree with Brendan, that they do seem to be very undervalued, we're an agriculture country and I do think that they're not supported enough. And they do work so hard.

And I don't blame them when they go on these protests to be quite honest with you.”

- (Rural Parents)

”

3.3.3. An Important Sector

Many participants felt that the general public need to get behind the farming sector seeing as it is one of the older industries in Ireland, and also one of the most important sectors for the Irish economy.

Participants discussed how Irish farming was such an important part of Irish culture and heritage and that these cultures and traditions needed to be maintained for future generations. For example, some commented that they would like to see some of the old farming traditions passed down to the next generation, such as how to milk a cow in the traditional manner.

More predominantly, participants discussed the position of 'small family farms' in the future. There was a sense amongst participants across many of the focus groups that they would rather see the smaller farmer and farming families kept in business, to keep traditional Irish farming alive, than to see bigger farming enterprises taking over. Some commented that with a small farm, consumers often know the farmer who owns the land, where the food has come from and how the food/animals have been treated on the farmers' land. Some also added to this by stating that the smaller farmers are more passionate about their land as it has been in their family for generations and taking good care of the land is "in their DNA". Arguments were also made that farmers running bigger farms are often only looking to make a profit rather than personally taking great care of the animals, and that they will eventually wipe out the smaller farmer. Others, however, expressed that

bigger farms play a large role in Ireland's past history and heritage, that they are not necessarily a 'bad thing', they represent peoples' livelihoods and they are something we should be proud of. For others, there was a feeling that farmers operating larger herd sizes should focus on producing high quality produce, whilst smaller farms should diversify and, for example, focus on producing organic produce only.

There was also a fear amongst some older participants that the younger generation's shift towards plant diet diets might put the farming industry at risk (*"We will progress more towards the younger generation progressing more towards vegetable based foods, and then all your animal products will be gone. And there may not be a farming industry in the future"*). In contrast others felt that farming represents such a large component of Irish culture that they do not envisage the population going vegan en-masse anytime soon (*"it is part of our history and culture and heritage and stuff. That's what a lot of Irish people are very proud of. So I don't see a lot of people going vegan or anything anytime soon"*).

Government policies were also raised as a possible issue for farming going forward. Some expressed worries that governmental or EU policies could have detrimental effects on the farming industry, especially on the small farmer who may not be positioned to farm the land in line with strict regulations (*"can't afford to, you know, put the safety measures in place about greenhouse gases and things like that"*). Many of the

participants felt that the small farmers are the 'real farmers of Ireland' and it would be a shame to see the small farmer go out of business as result of environmental

policies. Others expressed that it would be disappointing to see anyone left behind as a result of new regulations; particularly family-run farms.

“ *I think as well as I get older, I suppose you recognize the contribution that farmers make to the country. And not just in terms of food, but like it's for Ireland, it's part of our culture as well. And as somebody mentioned earlier, you know, custodians of the land, they play a huge role in Irish society and Irish culture. And you know, visually, I am very lucky because I live on the border, and my daily commute to work is over the mountain. So I get to see all the farms every day and all the livestock and there is just nothing better than to see the mountainside covered in the sheep and the cattle and so on, you know, a real Irish perspective, I suppose. - (Foodies)* ”

3.3.4. Not without Flaws

Numerous concerns and challenges relating to farming were also raised by participants.

3.3.4.1. Worrying Environmental Practices

Participants had concerns about the impact farming practices were having on the environment. Specific concerns mentioned included: water pollution, emissions, pesticides, biodiversity, waste disposal, and lack of renewable farm technologies.

Water pollution and carbon emission were two primary environmental concerns. Participants talked about fertilizers entering into rivers, streams, lakes and waterways from the farm and harming water quality, wildlife and human health. Others mentioned the need to reduce herd sizes due to the negative impact methane gases are having on the environment. Some commented that they already have decided to actively consume less meat to protect the ozone layer. With respect to the future, some of the participants mentioned that, consumers need to concentrate on looking after mother earth, the animals and what they are 'putting inside themselves', e.g. need to become more mindful of the consumption of pesticides via food and water, which, were perceived to cause cancer in both animals and humans. Others mentioned that pesticides should be made completely organic in the future.

“

The only thing I could think of is maybe like fertilizers and pesticides and like our waterways being polluted as a result of that. I don't know how you get around that. That would be a negative that stands out to me, I suppose not being rigorous or careful enough that we're not contaminating water with pesticides and fertilizers that we're using on farmland”
- (Mixed Young Adults)

”

“

I don't like that our whole country's covered in fields. It's not our native landscape. I'm a big advocate for kind of restoring our native woodlands. I think farmers should also try and restore some of its biodiversity... we are meant to be the Green Isle and we have the lowest percentage of trees in Europe per land like. - (High SES Urban Parents)

”

Biodiversity, waste disposal and recycling on farms were also

mentioned as key concerns for some participants. Participants noted how better efforts should be made by farmers to restore some of Ireland's biodiversity and alluded to Ireland having one of the lowest percentages of trees in Europe. Others commented that there seems to be a lot of plastic used on farms (e.g. for covering crops and hay bales) and queried whether farmers are being held accountable for their overall use of plastic. Some participants mentioned that they were disappointed that farmers are still burning rubbish on their farms, causing environmental damage; a concern they felt farmers need to be more considerate of.

Many also felt that Ireland needs to stop relying on British imports, particularly for produce that can be made in Ireland, such as potatoes and flour, and further, felt that such imports are giving rise to unnecessary pollution and transportation costs. Others expressed that as a country we need to focus on growing our own wheat, barley, potato and sugar beet and need to make use of our polytunnels to grow peppers, strawberries and tomatoes, whilst others commented on the need to start introducing more crop rotation practises to Ireland rather than relying on a semi-monoculture to grow our plants. All of these practises were expressed as ways in which farmers can make better efforts to protect the environment.

Some participants felt that Irish farming is currently very beef/dairy focused and intensive, similar to farming practises in North America and worried about larger herd sizes having a negative impact on the environment. Some of these participants expressed a preference for a return to the type of farming practises their parents experienced pre-war times, such as keeping chickens in the back garden, whilst others strongly stated that they were against people giving up meat and the bad press farmers endure over methane gas emissions. They also argued that the larger herd sizes seen on dairy and beef farms are a clear reflection of consumers' demands for the produce in these sectors, whilst others contradicted this point by expressing beliefs that it is simply impossible that Irish people are consuming all of the beef that Irish farmers are producing.

One participant in particular stated how it was nonsensical for the general public to believe that soy vegan burgers which are intensively grown and imported from other countries are more environmentally friendly than cows grazing in nearby fields, whilst another stated that it was not economically viable for farmers to reduce their herd sizes. With respect to the latter issue, some of the participants argued that farmers are not economical as it stands given their reliance on government subsidies to survive, and thus the tradition of keeping smaller farms alive should be abolished in order to reduce methane gas emissions.

The issues of climate change and global warming were also raised across a majority of the focus groups when discussing how they would like to see Irish farming *unfold 10 years from now*. Many participants felt that the farming industry does currently contribute to greenhouse emissions and will face significant pressure to change in order to protect the environment going forward (*"One thing you would like to see change is definitely I suppose the whole greenhouse emissions. You know, I don't think we're anywhere near kind of, from what I'm reading, meeting the targets at the moment".*). Some felt that as a result of this pressure, farmers will start to make more use of renewable sources of energy for their farm work or take up crop farming practices in place of animal farming. Others declared that they would like to see tighter restrictions on slurry spreading e.g. that it has to be spread within a tighter timeframe than what is currently in place, as the impact on air quality could be having a negative impact on human health. Finally, some mentioned that they would like to see farmers protecting the environment more by (i) making use of electric machinery instead of running their operations on diesel or petrol; (ii) finding more sustainable ways of dealing with pests and weeds and (iii) incorporating solar farms and wind farms into the existing farms in order to reduce fossil footprints.

3.3.4.2. *Animal welfare Issues and Practices of Concern*

Participants on the whole did not have a negative perception of animal welfare in Irish farming; many participants discussed how they felt Irish farming “*is trustworthy*” (Urban Young Adults) and that farmers looked after their animals well. However, there were some practices that participants raised as concerning which included live exports, isolated cruelty cases, and intensive poultry farming. Following the videos, participants also began to discuss animal welfare to a much greater extent. Despite not expressing any negative overall image of animal welfare, this topic did emerge as one which greatly interested and concerned participants and one where further information was requested – a more detailed account of participants’ views on Irish farming and animal welfare is provided in section 3.4.2.3.

3.3.4.3. *Farm Safety Record*

A minor theme, the issue of recurring farm accidents and negative press resulting from TikTok challenges were both raised as negative aspects of Irish farming. The dangers of farming was highlighted as an area participants would like to see improve, particularly when it came to children on farms. Some participants didn’t blame farmers themselves for farming accidents, instead they felt they could happen due to farmers being so comfortable in their workplace. Others, however, felt that accidents occur because farmers can be reckless, or indeed, do not always adhere to safety standards when it

comes to their farming vehicles/tractors. Some participants felt that too many farming accidents happen in Ireland “for such a small country” and that certain accidents seem to happen too often e.g. falling into slurry pit. Some participants referred to recent TikTok challenges popular amongst young farmers which were unsafe and which participants judged to portray farming in a negative light regarding safety standards.



During the summer season, when they are busy, and they're on the road, they can be kind of reckless... they can be dangerous, their vehicles wouldn't always be up to the safety standards that they should be. You see kids hanging off the backs of tractors...Like, farms are extremely dangerous. It's not a playground.
- (Rural Parents)

3.3.4.4. *Lacking Diversity*

Some participants felt that Irish farming lacked diversity. This referred to both the type of farming being carried out, and also the type of farmer.

In particular, some expressed that beef over-consumption is an issue in Ireland and that farmers should instead start growing more crops such as fruits, vegetables and chickpeas to enable the country to become more sustainable, self-sufficient and accommodating to those following plant-based diets. However some responded with a counter argument that Ireland does not have the climate to grow foods, such as, chickpeas and that participants have to be accepting of the idea that Ireland cannot be 100% self-sufficient when it comes to food production (*"I don't think we can be totally self-sufficient if we want to have a nice varied diet"*).

Furthermore, on the topic of crop production, some participants mentioned that instead of relying on importing a majority of our supermarket vegetables to Ireland, they would like to see more vegetables being grown by farmers in this country (*"I'm amazed that I pick up asparagus and it's from Kenya. Like why isn't there Irish asparagus?"*), and that consumers should make an effort to eat as locally and seasonally as possible rather than consuming exotic imported goods (e.g. avocado at any time of the year).

Others commented that there is a stubborn resistance from both farmers and lobbying groups to adapt to the desires of

those who want to consume, by choice, a plant based diet; they felt that farmers need to make more effort to diversify and adapt to the consumer.

Others, however, commended farmers on their current efforts to diversify, particularly younger farmers, who have been innovative with their farming practises, such as those growing potatoes to produce Irish confectionary foods. Some also praised older farmers for their diversification efforts and alluded to some of the older generation who were combining beef and crop farming (e.g. planting wheat and barley) practises in order to survive. They also mentioned that, like other industries, external pressures are driving farmers to change their way of thinking when it comes to the future of Irish farming practises; however it was noted that larger farms will be better positioned to tackle diversification pressures more readily compared to smaller family run farms. One participant however stated that smaller sized farms can overcome this issue if they specialise in a particular area and promote their specialised produce well; whilst another commented that caution is required with regards to farmers' specialisation efforts, in that new produce should be kept traditional, genuine and maintain a high quality standard; all of which they felt could be lost through EU trade deals or agreements with Northern American countries.



Also mentioned was the idea of moving farms into urban areas so that consumers can start growing their own produce (in back gardens) or working towards an all-island organic approach to farming. The latter point however was argued by some participants who felt that consumers want to buy the best produce at the best price rather than paying for organic produce. Counter arguments were made by few, in that government support could help some, but not all, farms to convert to an organic style of farming. In particular these participants felt that, in the future, consumers will become more 'savvy' about the foods they are eating and will want to know where they have come from and how they were slaughtered prior to consumption.

Some of the participants commented that more technology is needed to

revolutionise agriculture in Ireland, to stay ahead of other countries and that younger people are needed to operate such technologies. Some hoped that the government will work towards financing farmers in introducing new technologies that would better support the environment, yet produce the same high quality standard of food currently available in Ireland. Tensions arose with respect to technology however, as some labelled it as *"double edged sword"*. These participants acknowledged that new technologies will lead to greater levels of food production, but their use may come at a cost of losing Ireland's old farming family traditions. Lastly, some participants stated that peoples' eating habits change and that farmers simply have to adapt to these changes.



More and more people will want to be really, really educated as to not only where their food came from, but how the animals were treated prior to slaughter.

You know, what goes into this, if I take milk, for example, you know, the range of things that go into milk, to keep it sustainable. And I think people will be getting far more savvy about that type of thing. And farmers who can't keep up with that I think will be left behind and will end up closing down.

- (Young Professionals)

”

With respect to diversity of the farming profession, gender inequality was raised as an issue by many of the participants. Some felt that agriculture is still very male-orientated and that it should be promoted as a career for females also (possibly through TV programmes). Others mentioned that colleges need to become more open to women and young people (who do not have farming backgrounds) enrolling on their courses, should they express an interest in farming as a career. Some of the women across the focus groups declared that there was no option to study agricultural science at the schools they had attended as adolescents, and that this closed down opportunities for them. Others mentioned that there was an opportunity to study agricultural science in their school, however it was never promoted amongst the girls (just amongst the boys) at school.

Few participants also commented that farming is still viewed as an ‘old fashioned’ career, that it is not well advocated for and that more promotion and apprenticeships are needed to encourage young people to follow it as a lifetime pathway (“I don't think it's kind of advocated for in the same way that other professions are”). Some felt that apprenticeships could be valuable for those wishing to start up their own farm; that the experience would teach them the skills required so that they can make a

success out of a farming business (“be used to complement starting up one's own farm... because I just, I just see so many people unfortunately failing”).

“

There seems to be a feeling that farmers are all kind of stuck in the past, but I do wonder are they? We don't know, do we? It is an 'us and them' divide, the city versus the country, which is getting in the way really.

- (Vegetarians & Vegans)

Farming is viewed as old-fashioned...when people are looking at careers, there's not really a focus on pathways into farming.

- (Young Professionals)

”

3.3.5. *In Need of Government and Consumer Support*

There was an underlying worry amongst the participants, on behalf of the farmers, that governmental policies will leave many farmers in a vulnerable position, potentially unable to make the changes being asked of them in order to better protect the environment. One participant questioned whether there would be enough government support/grants given to farmers *now* to become more environmentally sustainable in the *future* e.g. to put solar panels on top of dairy parlours. Some of the participants were confident that the Irish government will be motivated to support Irish farmers to make the changes needed in order to reduce the country's reliance on imported goods. They also expressed hope that governmental support will continue beyond this generation, so that it will be sustainable for the next generation to continue farming Irish land rather than it abruptly stopping at this point in time. Furthermore, many of the participants hoped that Irish farmers will exhibit enough resilience to withstand the changes being asked of them now, in order to better protect the environment, yet, sustain Irish farming 10 years from now.

With respect to climate change, some participants mentioned the need for government incentives to encourage farmers to branch out into forestry in order

to keep emissions low and to protect the farming industry, whilst others expressed that farmers need to make an effort to restore Ireland biodiversity. In contrast to this view, many commended farmers for already moving in this direction e.g. restoring Irish woodlands. Many of the participants also expressed that they would like to see incentives given to farmers for selling locally, as this would help to reduce travel and carbon emissions.

Examples of how farmers are currently not being given the support they need were also mentioned, such as tractor protests outside government buildings (the Dail). Some mentioned that new machinery costs should be divided amongst farmers within a community so that all farmers can become progressive with their work in a more affordable manner or that there should be an openness towards young farmers going down easier paths of farming, such as brewing or cheese making.

“

There needs to be more encouragement, monetary and otherwise, for the growth of deciduous trees...to absorb the carbon emissions that agriculture accounts for



Traceability and shopping local were raised as topics of importance to many of the participants in the focus groups (*“Butchers have that now where they can tell you basically the address of the cow”*). Many of the participant’s expressed hope that external situations and environments wouldn’t change the quality of Irish products and shops would continue to sell local high quality goods as opposed to succumbing to cheaper priced goods on the importation market.

Others commented that they would like to continue seeing the traceability of foods on packages (e.g. seeing the local farmers on Lidl products and Aldi brochures) and to see Ireland’s traditional farming practises being used. Others commented that they would like to see incentives being given to farmers who sell locally and demonstrate the traceability of their foods. Some also raised the idea of developing a marketing strategy for farmers to demonstrate how short the food trip was from “farm to fork”.

Some expressed frustration in relation to imported goods as that they felt much of what is imported to Ireland can be grown in Ireland and, if grown here, would help to support farmers and that consumers would have more faith in the meat they are buying if it was produced in Ireland (*“I would by preference like to see food or buy food that is made in Ireland, grown in Ireland or produced in Ireland, but produced from Irish product, because some products we have produced in Ireland is actually being made from imported animal”*).

Others questioned how much of the food produced in Ireland is being sold on the import market and that consumers views are perhaps somewhat distorted into thinking that each animal grazing in Irish fields is going to end up on one’s dinner plate. Others mentioned how the Covid-19 pandemic was in somewhat beneficial to farmers in that more peoples were buying locally and cooking meals from scratch.

3.4. Public Information Needs regarding Irish Farming

3.4.1. Information Insufficiency

Many of the participants expressed that they had little/limited/outdated knowledge/no knowledge at all of Irish farming when asked about their levels of familiarity with the industry. Others mentioned how they live in rural areas, are aware of what animals are on the surrounding farms, but that they have very little knowledge of the farming process itself, such as how the food ends up on their plate. Some of the participants living in urban areas expressed that they had a lot to learn/no familiarity with rural farming as they had never been exposed to it, whilst others mentioned that they sometimes listen to farming programmes on the radio (news talk)/watch farming programmes on TV (ear to the ground + nationwide), search the internet and/or attend the Ploughing Championships to familiarise themselves with the farming industry.

In contrast some felt they had some familiarity with the farming industry as a result of living in a rural area (*"I know a little bit about it because I live in an area that predominantly would be right beside the countryside"*), or otherwise e.g. (i)

driving the country roads; (ii) observing farming neighbours; (iii) growing up on a farm; (v) giving loans to farmers (vi) browsing social media (vii) observing food labels (packaged vs produced in Ireland); (viii) hearing about farm tragedies; (ix) watching documentaries and (x) being generally conversant with Climate Change Action Plans/Policies.

Some also alluded to other elements of farming/farming culture that were familiar with such as: (i) how farmers are known for "just getting things done" (ii) that the farming industry was changing; (iii) that farming goes beyond livestock to crop and forestry; (iv) how farmer markets are run; (v) that farming is not rewarding or profitable; (vi) that there is a divide between big and small farms; (vii) that some parts of the country are better at growing certain crops than others; (viii) the impact of Brexit on the import/export market and (ix) the increasing use of new technologies on farms. Some participants mentioned that their knowledge of farming comes from what they hear on the national news. Few commented how they had some familiarity with farming but wouldn't "dare to ask" a farmer about how they go about their practises e.g. sowing crops.

“

I see farms all around me, and all my neighbours are farmers. But I actually don't know what they do in their day to day like I know they have their livestock farmers rather than you know, fruit and veg farmers if you want to call it, but, yeah, I have no idea how they manage the farm

- (Foodies)

”

A handful of participants commented on family members (e.g. siblings, uncles, cousins, grandparents) running a farm nearby; some of whom declared that, as a result, were familiar with how farming operations took place (even dating back to childhood memories), while others admitted that they were not at all familiar with the work involved on their relatives' farms. Many also mentioned that their parents grew up on a farm and their knowledge of farming was based on that experience. Exposure to farming neighbours was also alluded to by some of the participants; which appeared to provide them with an insight of how farming is done. Some participants declared that friends of theirs were farmers and thus they had some level of familiarity through that (*"I do have very close friends who are small farmers and that is where I get an awful lot my information on the economy of the whole thing"*).

School farm trips, completing Ag Science in school and attending pet zoos/open farms

represented the level of familiarity some of the participants had with Irish farming. Some mentioned that they attended farmers markets and open farms with their parents to purchase locally sourced foods as children, while many others stated that they have been to open farms as adults and were fascinated by the technology demonstrations that took place on site. Some participants expressed how much they enjoyed attending farmers markets so that they can meet the producer of the foods there, whilst others commented on the high expense of the food being sold at such markets. One participant however declared that the advent of supermarkets has made it harder for farmers to sell things on the open market.

A majority of participants expressed that they would be keen to find out more information about Irish farming and that children should be educated about farming in schools. Some even commented that the focus groups discussion alone sparked an interest in the topic for them. Some also expressed a desire to hear from additional

farmers via videos (as done in the focus group) that are longer in duration so that they could learn more about the processes involved and teach their children/school pupils about farming in Ireland. Some expressed that they would love to be further educated by farmers if the communication content was fun, engaging, contemporary, honest, factual and non-biased, as many felt that current farming shows on TV are more directed at older generations or those who are knowledgeable about agriculture rather than at those who have no prior knowledge of farming. Some also expressed that they would like if farmers made it possible for non-knowledgeable members of the public to visit their farms, in order to acquire more knowledge or if they would become more engaging on social media so that the general public could feel more connected to them and ask questions of them.

Farming topics that they wished to find out more about included: (i) knowing what is going into your mouth and how it has been treated; (ii) Brexit and farming; (iii) how much work is involved in farming and how can the public help them; (v) the general facts of farming; (vi) what the different sectors within the farming sector do; (vii) a day in the life of a farmer; (viii) the importance of seasonality; (ix) cow/calf separation; (x) the grading system of meat; (xi) farming as a career for females; (xii) farming in the future and how do we all do it together; (xiii) the social side of farming and (xiv) the processes and the technological side of things.

Few commented that they would have no further desire to learn about Irish farming, that it is something they feel they are completely disconnected to and it would not be a priority of theirs to become more acquainted with it as a profession.

3.4.2. Concerns and Curiosities

This theme specifically discusses the information needs explicitly expressed by participants, and the specific questions asked by participants in relation to farming in general, and in relation to the four farming videos viewed during the focus groups.

Rather than the researchers posing questions on the participants; the participants were encouraged to ask questions of the farmers. This is an important methodological distinction. Analysing the content of questions asked can help us to construct ‘mental models’ of perception – that is, the types of questions being asked tell us more about how participants view, think about, and perceive farming.

Asking questions can provide insights into the beliefs of the person asking the questions. Analysing the content and nature of the questions posed can also help in ensuring future communications materials developed will best target and meet the needs and expectations of the public.

It is also important to analyse the content of questions so that we can better understand the *motivations* which drive the question-asking. Some questions will be asked to fill an information gap; however, we should not assume that

people ask questions and seek answers only because of an information deficit. Questions can also be asked as a mechanism to express concern, dissatisfaction or to frame one’s position on an issue. We pay particular attention to this distinction in the analysis of the questions asked by the participants in this exercise.

This theme provides topic-specific insights into the types of public attitudinal and behavioural insights specific to farming in Ireland that we gained through this consultation exercise. Questions and expressed information needs are presented under a number of different key topics which emerged as common across the focus groups, and across all 4 videos:

- ♣ *The Basics of Farming*
- ♣ *Farming as a Profession*
- ♣ *Animal Welfare*
- ♣ *Buying ‘Local’ and ‘Natural’ Produce*
- ♣ *The Environment*

Figures 5-8 shows the frequency with which questions within these topics arose under each farming video. A full list of the verbatim questions asked by participants is provided in Appendix 3, structured by video and categorised into the key topics and themes.

Questions on Dairy Farming			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a living out of dairy farming • Getting a fair price for milk • Working conditions on the dairy farm • Dairy farming as a career choice • Changes in dairy farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welfare of the dairy cow • Dairy cows' access to grass • Calf-cow separation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cow management • Lifespan of dairy cow • Milking the cows • Storing the milk 	
		Basics of Dairy Farming	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traceability • What's in our milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pollution • Sustainable practices
Life as a Dairy Farmer	Animal Welfare	Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'	The Environment

Figure 5: Frequency and type of topic-specific questions asked following the dairy farmer's video

Questions on Beef Farming		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing cattle The lifespan of cattle Beef versus dairy farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking after the cattle Farmer-cattle attachment The slaughtering process for cattle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exporting beef What's in our beef?
Basics of Beef Farming	Animal Welfare	Buying 'Local' and 'Natural' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making a living from beef farming Beef farming as a career choice
		Life as a Beef Farmer

Figure 6: Frequency and type of topic-specific questions asked following the beef farmer’s video

Questions on Sheep Farming		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lambing • Lifespan of the sheep • Managing the sheep • Products from the sheep farm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a living out of sheep farming • Working on a sheep farm • Sheep farming as a career choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking after the sheep and lambs • The slaughtering process for lambs • Live exports
		<p>Animal Welfare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulations on lamb meat • Exporting sheep products
Basics of Sheep Farming	Life as a Sheep Farmer	Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'

Figure 7: Frequency and type of topic-specific questions asked following the sheep farmer's video

Questions on Tillage Farming		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organic tillage farming Use of pesticides and fertilisers on tillage farms Healthiness of tillage products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacking awareness of tillage farming Managing the land and crops The impact of weather Products from the tillage farm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making a living from tillage farming Working conditions on tillage farms Tillage farming as a career choice
		<p>Life as a Tillage Farmer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of pesticides and fertilisers
Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'	Basics of Tillage Farming	Minding the Environment

Figure 8: Frequency and type of topic-specific questions asked following the tillage farmer's video

3.4.2.1. *The Basics of Farming*

A lot of the questions asked by participants in response to the 4 farmer videos pertained to finding out more information about the day-to-day operations on farms and the fundamental activities involved in running a farm; the so-called 'basics of farming'.

These questions generally tended towards a more introductory level of learning about farming about how animals and crops are managed, the lifespan of animals on the farm, the day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year practices that happen on a farm. These questions appeared to largely be asked out of curiosity and an interest to learn more about the facts of farming. Appendix 3 outlines the questions which came up for each sector under the basics of farming.

Only a small number of questions were asked with respect to the basics of *dairy farming*. These mainly related to finding out more about how the cows are looked after, the lifespan of cows, how the cows are milked, and how the milk is stored on the farm.

Quite a number of questions were asked about the basics of *beef farming*. These questions focused on how the cattle are looked after, the lifespan of cattle, and the difference between dairy and beef farms.

A large number of questions were asked about the basics of *sheep farming*, with some participants noting they would not feel as familiar with sheep farming compared to dairy and beef. Questions

referred to the lambing process, the lifespan of the sheep, looking after the sheep, and products coming from the sheep farm.

Tillage farming received a very large number of questions – this goes hand-in-hand with the reflection from many participants that they were largely unaware of tillage farming as a sector, that it was the sector they knew least about, and they knew little about how tillage farms operate. Participants talked about how when they think of farming in Ireland, they would not think about tillage or associated produce (such as flour and oats). Questions on tillage farming included: managing the land and the crops; the impact of the weather on tillage farming; products from the tillage farm.

"I would like to see, for all of them, like 'a day in the life of' that sort of thing. Like, what do they actually do? At a high level, yeah, I know what they do. But you know, getting into the kind of the detail, like, what does a typical day look like? ... I'd definitely be interested to find out."

- (Young Professionals)

3.4.2.2. *Farming as a Profession*

Participants were very curious about farming as a profession and career choice, and about life as a farmer. Underlying much of this line of questioning was a genuine curiosity as to what life as a farmer entails, as well as a strong sense of empathy for the farmer with respect to what the participants perceived to be hard working conditions. Participants wanted to find out more about what life as a farmer entails: what the economic conditions are like, what the work-life balance is like, how the profession is changing, what motivates people to get into farming, and how can new people be supported to get into farming.

3.4.2.2.1. *Making money in farming*

Participants were very interested in how profitable farming is for farmers and how farming incomes worked. This line of questioning seemed to be driven by both a lack of awareness as to what type of financial reward farming offers as well as curiosity as to what economic security a job in the farming sector can offer.

Many queries relating to economic viability and profitability related to whether farmers were getting a 'fair' price for their produce and for their work; this was a particularly strong line of questioning for dairy farms and their relationship with milk processors. There was some concern amongst participants that farmers seemed to be getting a raw deal with respect to the prices they receive from retailers and processors and this was something they wanted to know more about.

“Stephen: I think it's kind of important to know are the farmers being treated well?

Angeline: Why don't we know as much about that as we would about, like, makeup brands? You'd know everything about how well treated like workers in cosmetic plants are, but you wouldn't know much about the treatment of farmers by the big businesses that buy from them and the big businesses that benefit from their manual labour, you know? I remember there was like the farmers strike. And I remember listening to it and being absolutely shocked that like, they were being treated as badly as they were and it's like, they're carrying the country in a way? So it's like, for such a big job, why is the money so little at times?” - (Mixed Young Adults)

Across all four of the farming videos, participants had questions about the economics of each sector and making a living from the different types of farms. Participants were curious about whether enough money can be made from dairy farming to support a family; how steady a dairy farmer's income is from month-to-month; and of particular interest for some participants was whether dairy farmers could diversify into specialised food production in areas such as cheese-making

and ice-cream making to supplement their income.

Questions about economics relating to beef and sheep farming also related to how profitable these types of farms are, and the different types of income streams these farms have.

Regards tillage farming, participants questioned how profitable that particular type of farming would be in comparison to livestock farming. There was a perception amongst some that tillage farming involved more work, and there was a curiosity as to whether it reaped more profit as a result. There were also questions about the impact of weather on tillage farmers' incomes.

3.4.2.2.2. Work-life balance

Participants were also interested in the working conditions on a farm, and this appeared to be driven out of concern for the farmer's work-life balance. These types of questions cropped up in response to the sheep farmer's video, but particularly so for the dairy farmer's video and the tillage farmer's video where participants appeared to perceive the job of these farmers to be quite labour-intensive and 'hard work'. This line of questioning was often accompanied by empathy for the farmer and an appreciation amongst many participants of the dedication of farmers to their farms, and the hard work that farming entails.

"It's a busy day there like, you know, twice a day, two hours milking each day. Like, how does he manage to get time off? Does he get help in like? He doesn't have weekends off anyway, that's for sure! The cows don't know it's a Saturday and Sunday." – (High SES Urban Parents)

3.4.2.2.3. Farming as a career choice

Participants were curious about how people become farmers. They questioned whether the entry path into farming is always family-based or inheritance-based or whether other pathways exist. They queried what motivates people to get into farming and what motivates people to stay in farming.

Participants discussed how the public perception of farmers and farming needs to be changed, and actively prompted as a career choice to different types of people with the benefits of farming needing to be highlighted; this is also echoing participants' perceptions that farming is a tough, under-paid job, and thus an unattractive career choice for many.

Also underlying these sentiments was the perception that farming is a job carried out by a particular segment of the Irish population; it is not actively prompted as a career choice to young people, particularly those living in urban areas, and this not only makes farming an inaccessible career choice, it also is feeding into an urban-rural divide and disconnect; where farming is perceived as something carried out by faceless 'others'.

This sentiment also illustrated some participants concern about the lack of diversity in the farming profession with particular questions asked around how open farming as a profession is to not only urban dwellers, but also females. Participants were curious about whether supports existed to support new people who wanted to get into farming.

“The likes of like LinkedIn, or social media, in general, you can learn quite a lot about a lot of different lifestyles and careers. But like, I suppose, like, farmers - now I'm stereotyping again! - but they're not going to be the type of people who, they don't need a LinkedIn profile. They don't necessarily use social media. So like they've less of a kind of connection with the rest of the public. And there is that kind of disconnect, that we don't actually understand what the life of a farmer is like, and we don't really have the opportunity to ask them the questions like we've been saying, like we don't, you know, it's not every day, like you're going to walk past a farm, let alone, stop and chat.” - (Mixed Young Adults)

3.4.2.2.4. Farming in the future

Participants were curious about how farmers viewed their job changing into the future. Participants were interested to hear from farmers' themselves about where they felt the future of farming

was going and what direction their sector or their job would take in the future. A particular theme of 'change' was evident here; and participants wanted to know how prepared farmers were to embrace change. Participants wanted to know whether farmers were 'ready' and 'prepared' to adapt and change with wider societal changes. This included understanding whether they were *willing* to change (had they the motivation to change) and whether they were being *supported* to change (had they the capacity and opportunity to change). A number of participants mentioned the perception is that farmers tend to be 'old-fashioned' and reluctant to change – however they questioned whether this was an accurate perception, and they indicated that it would be useful to hear from the farmers in this regard about how they viewed change within their profession and sector.

Participants were keen to hear how farmers were adapting to changing consumer trends (e.g. organic farming, veganism). This was a particularly pertinent for the dairy and tillage videos. Specific trends mentioned included veganism and reduced intake of milk, dairy and beef, increased use tillage products (e.g. oat milk), and organic farming. They were also interested in hearing the farmers' views on adapting to technological change and adopting new technologies in the future. They wanted to know what role technology would play in the future on farms, and whether farmers were willing and able to adapt as new farming technologies come on board.

3.4.2.3. *Animal Welfare*

Animal welfare was an area which featured strongly as an information need for participants. Participants judged animal welfare as an important topic for public communication, with some participants feeling they did not have enough information currently on how animals are looked after on farms.

Participants wanted information to feel assured and confident that the processes used to bring their food to market were ethical and welfare-friendly. A number of participants indicated that they wanted to know more about the regulations and standards in place to govern animal welfare on farms. People assumed that there were standards and checks in place but they indicated that they didn't know much the regulations in place to protect animal welfare in farming. They indicated that they would like to see more transparency about how exactly welfare is safeguarded in the farming sector (*"I presume they have certain standards that they have to abide by. But again, that's something that I don't know if they do or not"* – Nancy, Low SES Urban Parents). Being able to access this information and assurances on welfare was strongly associated with an increased sense of trust in farming (*"We need to know that so we feel more confident"* – Susie, Adults no Kids). A number of participants discussed how it would be useful to have labels or logos on food products to assure the consumer of the ethical nature of the farming process.

"Martina: I think too, if maybe if the Bord Bia sign maybe encapsulated, well it can't say 'killed humanely' but if there was some symbol that people would know. And they might be happy with how the animal was slaughtered."

Gary: 'Responsible farming' - maybe that's the logo." - (Seniors)

Participants reflected on the need to hear all sides of the story when it comes to farm animal welfare. Quite a number of participants commented on the need to hear directly from farmers' on the issue of welfare so that they could try to understand their perspectives and experiences. Participants felt they didn't have an opportunity to hear the farmer's voice very often on this topic. A number of participants commented about how different lobbies and activists were already communicating with the public on animal welfare, and that the farming sector needed to also provide a voice in this public discourse in order for the public to have a more balanced perspective. A number of participants made explicit references to vegan advertising in Ireland, and to international documentaries on Netflix about veganism and commented on how this form of communication tends to be one-sided (*"It's the worst of everything that you're seeing"* – Sally, Urban Young Adults). Participants were strongly in favour of getting the full picture and indicated how they wanted to *"hear the other side of the argument"* (Kevin – Seniors) and would like to *"see a local Irish*

response” from the farming community (Lee – Urban Young Adults).

Many of the participants also stated that farmers need to be more explicit about the welfare of their farm animals given that many young people are currently being influenced by emotional advertisements or TV programmes linked to animal welfare concerns, and are subsequently moving away from meat-based diets towards a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle. They also commented that it is fashionable for young people to be eating plant-based foods, but that there would be no future for Irish farming if the younger generation continue to pursue plant-based diets and if vegan/vegetarian advertisements and campaigns continue to turn people against farmers.

“The vegans at the moment have ads everywhere around town, saying go vegan world, whatever it is, like I'm fully like, I have no problem with vegans. I feel bad when I see their ads, but I know I kind of still go home and drink a litre of milk. The farmers can be honest with us like the people like me, we won't hide. We do want meat. So we're not against them” - (Foodies)

Rather than hiding away from uncomfortable information about farming practices, participants felt it was important to have more transparency on the ‘hard truths’ of what it takes to bring food onto the supermarket shelves. Rather than seeing it as information which could turn

people of farming produce, participants felt it would reduce the disconnect that people have with how their food is produced and would actually increase trust.

This ties in with the sentiment of ‘responsible consumerism’ which was referred to by participants who felt it was their responsibility to ensure they were informed and knew about the processes involved in bringing their food to market. They felt obliged as consumers to ensure they knew that the produce they were buying and supporting was ethically farmed (*“It's important to know”* – Stephen and Seamus, Mixed Young Adults.). In the case of one participant, a *lack of information* was the cause of a lifestyle decision to stop eating beef (*“It just made me feel uncomfortable that I didn't know where any of it was really coming from...the slaughterhouse, the whole thing used to kind of overwhelm me.”* - Young Professionals).

A number of ‘hot-topic’ welfare themes were discussed which concerned participants, and which participants held specific information needs about; these are presented in the sections which follow.

3.4.2.3.1. Cow-calf separation

The most hotly discussed welfare topic came from the dairy sector in response to the mention of cow-calf separation in the dairy farmer’s video (*“Once they calve, we separate the calves from the cows because we milk the cows”*). The issue of separation provoked significant discussion within the focus groups. Many participants were unaware of the practice of calf-cow

separation on dairy farms: *“the comments as well about the separation of the calf from the cows as well, it was new to me I didn't know that.”* (Tara, Rural Parents). A lot of participants commented on how, prior to watching the video, they *“had never even thought about it before”* (Sinead, Seniors). Participants seemed surprised at the practice and wanted to know whether *“it had always been the way that the calf was separated from cows”* (Aisling – Rural Parents). When introduced to the information in the video, participants were concerned about the practice.

“I don't know whether as many people would drink milk if they knew that the calves are taken off all the cows. I don't know, like I do drink milk. But that's kind of nearly put me off. I definitely didn't know that. Why isn't that information available to everybody, like when you learn about the farm in school, you know?” – (High SES Urban Parents)

The lack of awareness and knowledge amongst participants triggered substantial numbers of questions from the participants.

Participants were particularly concerned with finding out what happens to the calves when they are separated from the cow and where do they go (*“Are they kept then for dairy as well or are they sold off when they're young as beef?”* – Sally, Urban Young Adults). A lot of the questions related to how the calves would be fed.

There was some concern associated with this line of questioning as participants queried whether the calves would receive adequate nutrients to replace the nutrients they would have otherwise receive from the cow's milk (*“Are they receiving the same like level of nutrition?”* – Angeline, Mixed Young Adults).

The language used by participants to discuss and ask questions about calf-cow separation was emotive, with participants frequently referring to the cow as the “mother”, and the calf as the “baby”. Participants, particularly mothers, tended to empathise with, and focus in on, the maternal-new-born bond being broken. Described as a practice which was *“inherently not great”* (Jenny, Adults No Kids), participants were uncomfortable with the idea of calves being *‘taken away from their mothers’* (Aisling, Rural Parents). There was a particular focus on the sentience of the calves and the cows as participants asked questions about the ethical acceptability of separating the calf from the cow and what emotional impact it may have on the animals. Participants wanted to know the extent to which the cows and calves would be distressed by the separation (*“They must have separation anxiety?”* – Julie, Rural Parents); and what practices could be put in place to ease that distress (*“Is there any kind of operation in place to keep them from experiencing distress?”* – Angeline, Mixed Young Adults). The maternal bond being broken was a particular topic of conversation in the parents' focus groups, with female participants themselves reflecting how they felt particularly sensitive to this issue

given they were going through or had gone through the process of nursing and bringing up their own babies.

“Aisling: It just sounds cruel? I didn't know did I sound crazy when I brought it up first I am glad everyone else agreed. I just never thought about it either. You know, and somebody just said there could they not leave the calf with the cow for even you know, a few weeks I don't know. I suppose we're thinking of our own babies if we have them, you know, if they are taken away. Sarah: I agree. I actually think if it was a man on here, he'd probably say a totally different thing. You know, he probably wouldn't get where we're coming from. You know, maybe it's just a woman, a mammy instinct.” - (Rural Parents)

Not all participants displayed these high levels of concern about the separation of the calf from the cow. Some acknowledged that despite not having been previously aware of it as a practice, they could understand why it happened when they reflected on it. Participants rationalised that in order for a dairy sector to exist, separation was an inevitable reality. One participant discussed how it is however, a practice, which could take people by surprise given consumer disconnect from how food is produced.

Participants had questions about when exactly the separation occurs (*“How sudden does it happen? If it's the case that*

it's more or less immediately...I think that's terrible.” – Michelle, Adults No Kids). While participant did seem to understand why the practice occurred, and that it was somewhat inevitable and required, there seemed to be a feeling that it would be more humane, and more acceptable, if the cow and calf got to spend some time together before being separated (*“Why don't the calves get at least some time with their mothers?”* – Martha, Adults no Kids); participants felt this would allow for some bonding to occur and for the calf to get some level of nutrients.

“It never really dawned on me before, obviously, a dairy farmer has to, like, they obviously have to take the calves away so the milk is available...Like it didn't occur to me, but then when you hear it, you're like, well, that's perfectly logical. Like, of course, that's what they do...it's funny that you don't think about where your milk comes from, like, people probably give a lot of thought to meat products, and if they can square that off, you know, eating meat, are they okay with that in terms of where that comes from? And maybe less so about the dairy, it feels like a little bit divorced from the animal, I suppose.” - (High SES Urban Parents)

3.4.2.3.2. Slaughter of animals for food

In response to both the beef farmer's video and the sheep farmer's video, participants

were interested to find out more about the slaughtering process. They queried how humane the process is for the animal (*"I'd like to know how they are slaughtered, is it humane? It's hopefully very, very quick"* – Susie, Adults no Kids); how much pain the animals feels (*"how much pain is involved in their death?"* – Adam); and what regulations are in place to monitor bad practices in slaughterhouses (*"I've heard some horror stories of abattoirs"* – James, Seniors). In asking these questions, participants both wanted to know the 'hard truths' while also acknowledging they are happy to maintain a wilful ignorance and distance themselves from the process as a meat consumer (*"I suppose I do and I don't want the answer"* – Adam). The theme of responsible consumerism appeared here again, with participants indicating that it was their responsibility to know the processes involved and to ensure they were happy with them:

"I wonder like about how the animal is killed? I have no idea. And you know, it's not something as a meat eater, you'd like to think about. But at the same time, if I'm happy to eat meat, maybe I should know about how the whole process is done. And if I'm happy, then I can go on and eat meat, but the way it is now I'm just ignorant to it. And I choose not to know, you know." – (Mixed Young Adults)

The age of slaughter of the cattle and lambs was also a topic of concern and

query. Participants wanted clarification on the age that animals are slaughtered. There was some confusion from the participants as to how young cattle and lambs are when they are sent for slaughter with some participants uncomfortable with the thought of very young animals being killed (*"I was quite taken aback. I just never thought about it through my life. I just didn't realise that the animal was so young"* – Dora, Vegetarians & Vegans). One participant directly highlighted the need and value of clearly communicating with the public about the age of slaughter:

"I would just have a suggestion, when he was talking about when the lamb goes to the factory, that they actually show that lamb because I believe they're quite big at that stage. And when he says lamb, we would have a perception of this tiny little sweet thing going into a factory. So my suggestion would be that they actually show the lamb, and to a non-farming person that would probably look like a sheep." – (Foodies)

A number of participants were curious about the ability of the beef farmer to maintain an emotional distance from the slaughtering process. This line of questioning was not associated with concern or judgement; rather participants acknowledged it is a difficult reality of beef farming: *'That's a tough job, raising an animal to kill it'* (Declan, Adults no kids) and seemed to be curious about how the farmer copes with, what the participants

viewed as, a difficult aspect of farming animals. They were curious to know whether the farmer views that as a tough part of their job. Participants questioned whether the farmer builds up relationships with their animals – *“Do they ever get attached to the animals?”* (Conor, Urban Young Adults) – and whether they experience emotions of sadness or guilt when they send the animals to be slaughtered.

3.4.2.3.3. *The great outdoors*

For all types of animals, participants had a strong preference for animals to be kept outdoors, and to have access to plentiful green grass and space to roam. They made a contrast to non-Irish farming systems which involved keeping animals indoors and in cramped spaces (*“intensive farming, awful conditions, overcrowded and quite filthy”* – Lily, High SES Urban Parents). In contrast, they felt Irish farming was much more welfare-friendly and they hoped that Irish farming would remain this way.

With respect to information needs, participants did have questions about the grass-based Irish farming system such as how long animals have access to the outdoors; whether they are ever housed indoors; and how much space they have access to when they are both outdoors and indoors.

“I have a question - are they ever indoors, because I honestly don't know, I've never seen, I assume they are not. But let's say if it's really bad weather, you need to bring them indoors. Why would that be? Would they have, like, you know, a place ready for them? Would it be decent and that not like, completely packed?” – (Foodies)

3.4.2.3.4. *Animal mistreatment*

One area of concern related to the prevention of animal cruelty on farms. Whilst there was not a sense that mistreatment and cruelty of animals was a widespread issue in Irish farming, participants did note the need to ensure any cases, however isolated they were, were prosecuted and addressed by the farming sector as a whole. Participants discussed how *“a couple of farmers doing dodgy things could tarnish it for an industry”* (Adam, Foodies) leaving a detrimental impact on the image of the whole farming sector. Along this vein, one participant referenced recent highly-publicised incidents in the horse racing and pet sectors which had left them questioning animal welfare practices even in the farming sector.

3.4.2.3.5. *Male dairy calves*

Despite being a welfare issue of increased industry discussion in Ireland, the issue of what happens male calves born on dairy farms was brought up only by a few participants in the focus groups. However, these participants felt quite strongly about it and did want to have more information

about this topic. They indicated how they had heard about the practice of killing male calves in other countries. Others discussed how they had come across information on the practice in Ireland also which concerned them.

It was evident there was uncertainty and a lack of clarity about this practice and how male dairy calves were dealt with on Irish farms (*"I didn't want to ask because I was afraid of what the answer might be"* – Caitriona, Foodies). The fate of male dairy calves in the Irish dairy sector is clearly a significant information need for some. One participant felt particularly strongly about the issue and indicated that while she was able to accept certain practices (e.g. calf-cow separation), the practice of disposing of male calves would be a tipping point which would lead to a lifestyle change to 'lean towards veganism'.

"I'm majorly concerned with what happens to the male calves. I understand they're a waste product and I literally don't know what happens, I would like to know what happens. I'm not vegan, and I'd rather not go vegan but I will be leaning that way because of that issue. I understand if the calves have to be fed something alternative in order for there to be a dairy industry, but, if male calves are a waste product that, to me, that's not worth it. I buy plant based yogurt, you know?" - (Adults no kids)

3.4.2.3.6. *Live exports*

Also a welfare issue which has received sector attention, only a small number of participants raised the issue of live exports as a practice they did not agree with and an issue they wanted to know more information about. These participants were not in favour of live exports because of animals *"getting stressed while being transported"* (James, Seniors) and because they did not trust the welfare standards in place in other countries and had concerns over the conditions of the slaughtering process in other countries. A small number of participants were particularly concerned by this issue, while others observed how the practice of transporting live animals was not a new one.

3.4.2.4. *Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'*

A strong theme, a lot of the information needs expressed by participants pertained to the traceability, quality and safety of the food produced from farms. Participants want to be assured that their food is both 'local' and 'natural' – and they want to have information which can help them to decide the extent to which the food they are purchasing ticks these boxes for them.

Participants wanted to know more about regulation, inspections, quality assurance, and labelling. These were all noted as important to ensure consumers are informed and aware and empowered about what actually is 'local' and 'natural'. Participants discussed how they wanted more assurance that the appropriate regulations were in place for the farm-to-fork journey. Participants discussed how they assumed regulations were in place,

but they felt like they were placing ‘blind trust’ in the regulations and in labels, and if they had more information, assurance and transparency, it would be easier to place their faith in these systems.

“But if the product had kind of a list of like, we don't use any sort of chemicals on like, other products, we don't use them antibiotics on the animals, the cows being safe, certified, all that kind of stuff, it would feel a bit more secure. And it would just be easier to kind of like trust the product. Because a lot of times you go into a place and see like frozen meat and you're not really sure if you can trust it” – (Mixed Young Adults)

Some participants indicated that they would be interested in more information on food product labels telling them about the production process – informing them about things like pesticide or antibiotic use, animal welfare practices, sustainable farming methods, and traceability. Having this information would empower consumers to be able to have a choice, and they indicated that they would be more likely to spend more if they had the information explaining why one product might cost a little bit more compared to another product. This desire for more information aligns with the strong theme of “responsible consumerism” emerging from the focus groups – participants again indicated that having more information on

production practices would reassure them, rather than put them off farmed food.

“Transparency doesn't mean that people are not, like, you're not going to stop drinking milk. People are not going to stop eating meat because of transparency.” – (Adults no Kids)

Regarding traceability, participants felt communications which encourage the public to ‘shop local’ and ‘buy Irish’ were important: local was associated with quality and safety and supporting Irish farmers. If the public were informed of the positive impact that ‘buying local’ had for their local farmers, participants felt they would make a bigger effort to purchase local or Irish produce. However, participants indicated they wanted more information than labelling alone would provide – it was clear that some participants were sceptical of traceability labels and wanted to have more information and assurances about what exactly ‘buying Irish’ meant. Participants wanted information “beyond the supermarket shelf”.

“It's all well and good, saying this is Irish produced on Irish farms. It's all good having that sticker on the packet, but it's really having the information behind it. Like, what does that mean? You know, what is an Irish farm? What's involved in this in terms of the process and the work and everything else that goes into it?” – (Young Professionals)

A number of participants spoke of the need to target young children in particular and to teach them about where food products come from, as they felt this was a particular growing disconnect which was happening currently in society, particularly amongst urban children.

“I think it's important to keep Irish products in Ireland as well. It's funny because I'm a preschool teacher and just something interesting. One of the children was asked where does milk come from? And they go 'from the shop' - they didn't know that milk comes from you know a cow so that again, it goes back to the primary school teaching of children. Start off at the grassroots and getting them more knowledgeable of where these go, where the product comes from.” – (Low SES Urban Parents)

Questions emerged under this topic for the videos. For the sheep and beef farmer videos, participants were very interested in hearing about where the products from the farms end up. They wanted to know about quantities of meat supplied to the Irish market compared to the export market; They wanted to know about where they could source Irish produce from these types of farms (including for example, products from the farm that they wouldn't have immediately thought of, such as wool).

A major theme of questioning and an evident information gap across focus groups was the topic of 'natural farming' and the impact of different farming practices on human health. The link between red meat and cancer was only brought up on one occasion, and this discussion took the belief of “everything in moderation” including red meat. Of more concern to participants was the use of 'chemicals' and 'additives' during the farming process. Participants queried the use of antibiotics, hormones, fertilisers, and in particular - pesticides in farming.

Participants mentioned the use of hormones in poultry farming, while they discussed concerns about the use of antibiotics more generally across all farming sectors. They queried the use of antibiotics in farming contributing to antibiotic resistance, and also the possibility and impact of antibiotic residues remaining in food products consumed by humans.

“The other question was generally the use of antibiotics in farming. I know on farms that there is a large number of antibiotics, and that affects human health, ultimately. So what is the controls around that? What are the plans in the future because we're actually running out of antibiotics worldwide. So to understand... maybe some sort of a logo or something, that there is controls around that, that we can know that that's not being misused.” – (Seniors)

Questions about the use of chemicals and additives were brought up in relation to the dairy video. The young professionals focus group were particularly concerned about milk production and had a lengthy discussion about antibiotics in dairy farming. One believed that antibiotics were being put into milk to preserve the shelf life while another participant queried if organic milk would be 'free from antibiotics'. Participants also indicated that there was a lack of transparency on this topic, indicating a clear information gap.

"Della Marie: what's put into milk? I think that's definitely a concern of the general public. That would be the priority to know.

Simon: I think there's just a vacuum. Am like, kind of Della Mary was saying it's very, very hard to get concrete information. And the risk with that is, people start assuming, and people start kind of adding, you know, kind of legs to things. And I think that's probably damaging too, there's probably a lot we don't know, and probably most of it is not the end of the world. But kind of like when you don't know what you don't know, you do start making up assumptions." – (Young Professionals.)

Participants were largely interested in the use of pesticides. Some participants queried whether the use of pesticides in farming are bad for human health (*"I know*

they are obviously not bad for us but, like, are they? I suppose I don't really know." – Urban Young Adults). Some participants were very concerned about the use of pesticides. Some participants perceived a link existed between the use of pesticides and cancer in humans. These participants had a strong information need to know more about the use of pesticides in farming and they wanted that information to be readily available, perhaps on the food labels (*"We really have a right to know what we're eating and how it's affecting us."*). Having information was linked to having control and having a choice, and feeling empowered with respect to the food decisions they make.

"Yeah, I mean, I had cancer. Um, you know, I try my best to be as good to myself as I can. But if I can't make informed choices you know, it's very hard you know... if I want to choose not to have as much pesticides in my food, I don't really have that choice. Unless I actually know the farmer that my foods coming from. You know, um so I'd like to, you know, if I can make an informed choice, it's a much better choice for me. But If don't have any information. I can't make choices." - (Adults no Kids)

The issue of fertiliser and pesticide use on farms largely came up in response to the Tillage farmer's video. It was a particularly strong theme and many participants expressed specific information needs in

relation to this topic including whether organic alternatives to pesticides and fertilisers could be used; whether there is any impact to human health when pesticides and fertilisers are used on crops for human consumption and what types of pesticides are used on farms. Not all participants were concerned by pesticides and fertilisers, and some participants were interested to find out more about the use of soil analysis and control programmes (as specified in the video), viewing it as progressive and scientific.

3.4.2.5. *The Environment*

The environment came up as an expressed information need, although less frequently compared to other topics. Despite this, participants deemed this a critical area for public communication. Some participants did not articulate very specific questions or information needs on this topic but rather deemed ‘the environment’ as an important topic overall; and seemed to be reflecting on the fact that it is a ‘topical’ issue generating a lot of public discourse presently and thus there is an expectation that the farming sector would be a part of that conversation and movement.

“Something the Irish farmers might do is educate the public on what they're doing to be more green and be more mindful of the environment in general. I think that might garner more support as well with the current set of affairs, what they're doing to change their carbon footprint.” - (Urban Young Adults)

Others were explicit about what types of information were needed including hearing more about sustainable farming practices; hearing about actions being taken by the farming sector to meet climate targets, and

“Barry: How are they targeting the, what are they doing with regards to climate? How are they playing their parts so that we meet that target, whatever it is, is it 2030? I think we're way behind and I suppose that's uppermost in my thoughts at this stage anyway. – (High SES Urban Parents)

In relation to the farmer videos, the dairy video and the tillage video elicited specific questions regarding the environment. The dairy farm video provoked only a small number of questions about the environment. These mainly pertained to what dairy farmers’ personally think about environmental impacts and actions which could be taken to mitigate impacts as well as some questions about pollution and waste disposal on the farm. For the tillage video, as discussed previously, participants had significant concerns and numerous questions related to the use of fertilisers and pesticides; one of the areas of concern related to their potential impact on the environment. This topic generated a significant number of questions for participants regarding the use of pesticides and fertilisers in tillage farming. Participants were interested in finding out what impact the use of pesticides and fertilisers could have on the environment around where they are used including their potential impact on biodiversity, the soil, on hedgerows, local wildlife, waterways

(rivers and streams), and other adjoining farms. These questions were associated with a level of concern from participants about damage to the environment.

“Olive: How do they ensure that they don't damage or minimize the impact on the biodiversity within the vicinity of the farm and within, like the field itself?

Seamus: Yeah, actually to jump on that as well, like I'd wonder how it doesn't damage the crop itself, all these pesticides?

Angeline: Alongside that, like, what effect would it have on local wildlife? And like, if it were to say, run into a waterway, what effect would it then have on the life within that river or that stream? Like, what effect does it have on the things around it?” – (Mixed Young Adults)

3.5. Communication Preferences

3.5.1. Getting the Full Facts

As they talked about their information needs and questions, a pattern emerged from the participants about the form which they would like communications to take. In particular, participants were clear that they did not appreciate, trust, or like one-sided information campaigns which clearly had an agenda and vested interest. Participants also talked about the dangers of the absence of information being presented on a topic – whereby a lack of transparency can be perceived and the public assumes something is being kept from them, or the vacuum is filled with misleading information and assumptions which can be subject to error. Participants commented that consumers need to be critical of where the truth lies in some of the messages being made by both vegan campaigns and by farmer lobbying groups.

“I would be very interested in something that was coming from a factual perspective, something that was positive, future focused, but being totally honest, what I would not be interested in is another kind of, you know, representative body giving out about everything, you know, that's the kind of perception I have in terms of some of those interest groups. But absolutely would love to hear from people on the ground, explain it but with a kind of a positive future focused lens.” - (Foodies)

Participants felt that the public needs to know more about the “good and bad” aspects of farming so that they can develop a broader understanding of the practise and that through this transparency the public will have increased trust in farming practises. Whatever the format of the communication, participants indicated that they would have a preference for communications which are cast without a hidden agenda; and instead should be informative and engaging so that farmers take the general public on “their journey” with them

3.5.2. Hearing Directly from Farmers

Participants were very enthusiastic about the prospect of hearing directly from farmers themselves, with no intermediary body involved. Participants judged the farmers to be the experts, and they wanted to hear from them for a trusted and authentic experience.

“I think education about food, how we use food, where it comes from, with children, starting right from them, and getting farmers, you know, involved in that, you know, I mean, they're the ones that produce it. They're the experts” - (Vegetarians & Vegans)

Some participants expressed that they would like more face-to-face communication with farmers e.g. visit the farmer at his/her farm to buy eggs/milk, whilst others alluded to farmers developing an informational website that the general public could turn to, to ask

questions or to seek out the information they need (*"If they had a website, there was an informational website. It's not that expensive now to put up videos about, you know, here's what I've been doing each day"*). Some expressed a contradictory view on the idea of developing a website, stating that consumers would not turn to Google to look for information about the food they were eating. It was also mentioned that the Department of Ag should run school programs for children/transition year students to visit farmers on their farms, and to pay farmers for this time. Some also mentioned paying farmers to make school appearances to discuss their experiences with children from a young age.

Being able to chat directly to the farmer at farmers' markets was alluded to as a positive experience by many of the participants. Gaining an insight to the practises used to produce the foods was something the consumers admitted they enjoyed hearing about at the market stalls. However some participants who, hailed from overseas, felt that there wasn't enough farmers' markets across the country and that more of an effort was needed to develop this culture in Ireland. Others stated that it would be useful for the public if information officers attended the farmers markets to educate consumers on what takes place in the farming world. Farming programmes were also alluded to, however many felt that this form of communication was ineffective as the public often feel "disconnected" or "detached" from the farmer.

"I keep going back to the farmers market, but because the farmers are there, it's so easy to then just get chatting to them, and you get to know them and then you feel quite, you know what I mean? And then they have this spill, and they start chatting to you. And you overhear them saying, Oh, I didn't realize that and they start telling you what they're using, you know, even things like pesticides or not, how they're treating their animals, etc., etc. And when you're actually up close, and you've actually made that communication with them, and that sort of that link, almost like a bond, you just feel so much better about eating that food and supporting them and knowing that actually they're just regular people that just work real hard and you know"
(Adults no kids)

Many of the participants expressed a desire to feel more connected to the farming community. Some felt that the whole country would engage with a farming series on TV (e.g. on Sunday nights for 6 weeks. A desire for a TV series over other forms of communication was expressed as many felt that TV provides the simplest way of connecting with the public, and that images are easy to follow, particularly when one is following a story "from start to finish". Some felt that food advertisements were the only way the

public can currently connect with farmers; a disconnect they feel should be addressed and “closed” (*so we’re getting our you know, our information comes from advertising, from food advertising, and that’s the only connection we actually have with those farmers. But we don’t understand how difficult sometimes their lives are. And we don’t understand how food is produced generally, just sort of a broad idea. So I think we need to move sort of closer and close up that disconnection*”). Increasing the number of farmers markets, developing new contemporary farming documentaries, making farm visits possible for the public and educating (farmer-led) children in school settings (particularly non-Irish nationals) about farming were also alluded to as ways of reducing public disconnect with farming.

3.5.3. Targeted Communications

Participants discussed the value of targeted communications, in particular highlighting that some members of the public will respond to communications differently.

They highlighted how some people will actively seek out information on farming, while others will only encounter information on farming passively. Some participants felt that there should be a segment devoted to farming on the Six one news each day so that the general public can become familiar with the practises conducted per farming season. Without this, they currently feel that you have to “go looking” for the farming information you need. Others felt that more information needs to be added to food

labels; that, currently, it seems the less information provided on a food label, the better, even though many consumers would desire more information. Some acknowledged that certain food products already effectively portray important information such as the origin and name of the farmer.

The development of a general database containing all of the desired farming information was also proposed. Some felt that, without such a resource, for those individuals who actively look for information - there is no place to seek out specific information about the food one is eating. For more passive information seekers, they felt that ads/posters in supermarkets would be an effective means of communicating to the public, as they would be seen by passer-by’s each day (*“I think the supermarkets and shops are, like such a good place too just because like everyone visits one at least once a week. And this is where they’re actually thinking about food”*).

Another important form of targeted communication mentioned by participants, was the need to target farming information to non-farming communities. Participants commented on how much of the information that exists out there is developed with a farming community in mind, or an audience that has a good understanding of farming.

Farming programmes aired on TV by RTE were alluded to by some, who, commended the broadcaster for airing programmes that offered a ‘live’ insight of

the day-to-day farming experience. Others felt that continued use of RTÉ to communicate with the general public about farming is necessary as it has the 'farthest reach' of all the communication portals. One participant suggested airing a programme that included lay people who knew nothing about farming trying to operate the farm, who could then be corrected on all that they do by the farmer; which in turn would act as an educational tool to relay messages about farming to the general public.

Many of the participants suggested using social media as an effective method of communicating with young people about farming e.g. Tick Tok/Twitter and Instagram. Some also suggested developing TV programs/documentary style content aimed at a younger audience, rather than what is currently being broadcasted on 'ear to the ground'. Educating school-aged children about farming was also alluded to as an effective way of getting young people interested in the topic. A general video based campaign was also suggested as an effective way of communicating with the general public about farming, as they are accessible to all, including those who are blind or those with hearing difficulties (subtitles can be added).

3.5.4. Preferred Platforms

A wide variety of preferences were alluded to across the focus groups when participants were asked how best farming information could be communicated to the general public (Figure 9). Preferences included (i) via celebrity chefs; (ii)

community groups; (iii) a dedicated informational website; (iv) existing agricultural TV programmes; (v) farm visits; (vi) additional information on food labels; (vii) newly developed (farmer-led) documentaries and farming shows; (viii) primary and secondary school systems; (ix) the radio; (x) on-site retail advertisements; and (xi) via social media platforms.

3.5.5. Impact of Public Engagement

Consumer engagement with farming/farmers was perceived to be of particular importance for a number of reasons. Some felt that farmer engagement would lead to (i) a greater awareness of the food process, from beginning to end; (ii) greater comfort levels with how animals are cared for in the farming process; (iii) a greater level of reassurance on why pesticides/antibiotics are used; (v) a greater awareness of how farmers and Irish agriculture can be better supported; (vi) a decrease in the urban-rural divide; (vii) a greater awareness of farming amongst school aged children/how to pursue farming as a career path; (viii) greater levels of knowledge on sustainable farming practices; (x) more informed decision making about the types of food purchases made (organic vs non organic); and (xi) a greater awareness of food production and food production transparency.

Some felt that it is nice to support the local farmer and develop a partnership with them e.g. source out where the best meat is supplied locally, and become conscientious of how the animal was treated prior to purchase. Others alluded

to becoming closer to farmers by frequenting the farmers market and developing a bond with them. Others questioned how consumers can better support Irish farmers e.g. what foods do not support Irish farming and thus should not be bought, whilst some commented that educating consumers on seasonality, quality control and about the level of work it takes to produce food will lead to a more

supportive consumer community. Furthermore, some participants admitted that the focus group alone demonstrated to them how divorced consumers are from Irish farming; and that more needs to be done to educate the public on how food is produced and the level of work it takes farmers to produce the food seen and bought on Irish supermarket shelves.

Primary / Secondary School Systems	New Documentaries and Shows	Social Media
Shopping Experiences	Food Packaging	Dedicated Website
Retail Advertising	Existing Agricultural TV Programmes	Farm Visits
Celebrity Chefs	Radio	Community Groups

Figure 9: Communication channels preferred for receiving information about farming (darker colours reflect more frequently mentioned channels).

3.6. Evaluation of the Focus Groups

Feedback from participants on the public consultation exercise was very positive. Participants were both appreciative of being able to contribute their views; and also enjoyed the focus group experience as an opportunity to learn and reflect.

Key features of the consultation which drove these positive evaluations included:

- ♣ the *openness* and *bottom-up* approach (being able to discuss any aspect of farming they liked – both negative and positive);
- ♣ hearing *directly* from farmers in the videos and finding out new information;
- ♣ being provided with *space and time* to deliberate farming issues;
- ♣ being asked to offer *their* questions and opinions on farming;
- ♣ and being aware that the insights from the consultation would be *fed back* to Irish farmers for consideration.

Participants valued the opportunity to listen, and the learning opportunity which came about from participating in the focus

group; and specifically, listening to and watching the farmers tell their stories. In many instances during the course of the focus groups, participants expressed they had learned something new from listening to the farmers' snapshot videos. In other instances, they encountered views or information in the videos which actively made them reflect upon their previously held beliefs and views about farming. The provision of new information, and having the time and space to deliberate on that information resulted in changed perceptions.

Participants valued the opportunity to be listened to and to be able to contribute their views and have their voices heard on the topic of farming in Ireland. Participants in the study expressed their satisfaction and enjoyment at being provided the space and opportunity to offer their questions and comments on the topic of farming in Ireland. Participants were not only appreciative of being able to voice their opinions, but importantly, they valued that these opinions would be acknowledged, and fed back to the Understanding Agriculture Committee.

Positive Evaluations of the Public Consultation		
	Farmers Stories - Learning and Reflecting	Public Voices - Being Heard
Educating	The public learning about farming	Farmers learning about the public
Empowering	Sparking public interest in farming	Making the public feel involved
Encouraging Reflection	Changing public perceptions about farming	Positive judgements of progressive farmers

3.6.1. Educating

During the course of the focus groups, participants commonly expressed how they

had learned something new about farming, largely based on the information provided by the farmers in the snapshot videos. Common

areas which participants observed that they had not known about before included the calf-cow separation in the dairy video; the sale of wool in the sheep video; the beef supply chain; and tillage farming in general. The act of asking questions about the content of each video appeared to make participants engage at depth with the content of the videos, making them realise and express that they had never known a particular aspect about farming previously.

“[on the dairy video]...First of all, it was really educational actually, I learned a lot in a minute..., like, I'm being educated here.” - (Rural Parents)

Participants positively appraised the focus groups as a useful learning environment and appeared happy to have learned new information by virtue of taking part in the study. Participants were quick to ask questions when prompted after each video indicating the sizable public interest in finding out more about farming; and the that they were facilitated to ask questions was welcomed.

Whilst there was many evident instances of the public learning about farming, there was also a strong sentiment from participants that learning should be a two-way proces. Participants considered the focus groups to be an equally valuable exercise for farmers to learn more about what members of the public know and think about Irish farming. Participants noted that the insights offered by them in the focus groups could lead to the development of more responsive and tailored future actions being taken by the

farming community that would be to the benefit of both parties.

“It's important for us to be able to ask the questions and ask, “I just don't understand how this works. I don't understand the whole agricultural system”. And it's important, I think, for them then to get our opinions back. Because we're the consumers, at the end of the day, like they're in their, like, farming bubble, where they know everything that's going on. But for us, you know, we don't know. So it's kind of good for them to get an idea of their consumer base and what the consumer wants, you know.” - (Mixed Young Adults)

Participants evaluated the public consultation exercise in the context of improving relationships and reducing the disconnect between the public and farmers, speculating about how a positive impact could be achieved if the farming sector is facilitated to listen to and understand the wider views of society on the role of farming. Participants felt that if farmers could understand consumers' views on food and farming, they could take action as a sector to be more responsive to their needs.

“I think it's [public consultation] a great idea. Because, they are getting the feedback straight from the consumers themselves, and not from like, just a board or a body. They get to understand like 'oh gosh well maybe I didn't think about that from a consumer point of view?' I think it's really good...The farmers know what we actually want from them, rather than them being dictated to by supermarkets, you know, telling them what the people want, or what they want to sell, rather than what we actually want to buy. So I think it's a really good link to have.” - (Urban Parents Low SES)

It is worth noting that one group, mixed young adults, did have a slightly different view on this front, as they felt that they were not informed or engaged enough on agricultural issues to be able to participate in a meaningful exchange of opinions with the farming community; the lack of knowledge they felt they had was a barrier preventing them from being able to engage in any meaningful with farmers on issues relating to farming.

3.6.2. Empowering

A number of participants indicated how new information from the farming videos had sparked an interest for them and they indicated their intention to engage in further information seeking following the focus groups. The deliberation and

discussion facilitated within the focus group had ignited an interest in these participants enabling them to want to become more engaged on certain topics relating to farming.

Taking part in the focus groups made the participants feel that their opinions were respected and valued by the farming community. The public consultation was viewed as inclusive by the participants as the focus groups enabled those who may not normally have a voice on the topic of farming to be heard – this was an important point, as a number of participants discussed how “the normal, everyday person” rarely has a chance to engage in these types of discussions on farming.

3.6.3. Encouraging Reflection

As well as learning new information, participants also indicated how information from the farming videos had made them reflect upon previously held beliefs and views, and prompted the development of new views. For some participants, the information provided by the farmers in the videos spoke specifically to beliefs they had previously held and made them think differently; for example, participants spoke about how information from the beef farmer's video had put test to assumptions they had previously held about the provenance of beef: “...the McDonald thing you hear them advertising Irish beef but you don't know. You wonder how true that is? So I suppose that's straight from the farmer's mouth to say that they do actually make burgers for McDonald's.” (Rural Parents)

Participants also spoke of the power of the videos in seeing a more human portrayal of farming and the impact that this can have on shaping perceptions of farming:

“It was very informative [the dairy farmer video], it was actually lovely. Getting a good kind of overview on the whole human side. Everything is kind of a horror story at the moment in terms of any kind of animal products. But it was nice to see it, they're out on their own, they're not just in a pen getting milked all day every day. They're not just stuck there. It was nice to see you know, like how many times they're milked and why the calves are taken away and how the calves are reared because it sounds very cruel from the onset, you're taking them away but do you know the thing, that the way that they're reared you know, it's kind of nice to see that as well... Very much. Everyone should have access to those kinds of videos. They're not in major detail, but they give you a very good overview of what's happening and like the whole farm to fork you can see or even told exactly, that it goes from here straight to slaughter and itself. There's no long food chain. – (Urban Young Adults)


Some of the information in the farmer videos also made participants reflect on their own relationship with food production; and in particular, made participants reflect upon the extent to which they are unaware of – and divorced from – the realities of food production. Participants discussed how there is a tendency amongst food consumers to engage in wilful ignorance as to the actions needed to produce food for wide public consumption.


“I knew it already but I think it's occurred to me even more this evening how divorced we are from like the products we buy in the shop and the products we consume. – (Low SES Urban Parents)

Participants complimented the committee driving the overall public consultation; remarking that it was an open, proactive and progressive move to engage with the public on the topic of farming. Participants remarked that it was a positive move for farmers to listen to and reflect on the opinions of the public.

“I think it's [the public consultation] very progressive. Adam: I think it's great that they're even interested in understanding it. And I think it's really, really good. It's really positive that it goes back to them, and that they understand themselves that they need to engage with the public.”- (Foodies)

Praise was also directed that the format enabled participants to bring up whatever topics they desired, whether they were positive or negative; the bottom-up nature of the conversation was positively appraised by the participants.

 *“Declan: Good to see that the farmers are interested in getting feedback from general public and see if there's anything they can do better to maybe educate even schoolchildren, or the rest of us in society. Jenny: Yea, I was happy to take part and to raise some of the concerns that I'd have. And as I said, there's so much that's good. And there's so much to praise. And it was just great to get the opportunity. And I was glad that kind of all opinions were welcome. I sort of thought “oh I will shut up now”, (laughs) but you know, I was glad that they were genuinely open to all opinions. So it was a very positive experience. Thank you!” - (Adults no kids)*

“Yeah I think it's good that they're kind of using almost a grassroots approach and seeing what the knowledge is out there. Like I didn't have I don't really have an awful lot of knowledge about farmers and I'm glad I came on this evening and I look forward to seeing kind of what comes out of this, and I'll be looking out for things.”
(Young Professionals) 

4. FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS

4.1. The Value of Deliberation

Facilitating diversity of opinion and deliberation over different perspectives are important processes for obtaining authentic insights into how a community feels about a topic. These are also important considerations for choosing how to engage with a target audience.

Previous research exploring how public engagement may change the views of climate change sceptics found that participating in a deliberative process in a forum with other participants had the most significant impact in terms of making participants feel engaged and willing to reconsider their position on an issue (Hobson and Niemeyer, 2013). In a deliberative setting, individuals can share their beliefs and assumptions and importantly – these beliefs can either be validated or challenged by others. This is an educative process but one which accounts for diversity in opinion and views; and also one which allows for the testing and challenging of views and assumption.

In a deliberative setting, it is vital that people are able to hear as many different perspectives as possible, so that these can be compared against one's existing beliefs – through the argumentation which accompanies, they can either reaffirm or adjust their beliefs.

Thus – key to a deliberative setting is to ensure diversity of opinion; and to ensure space and time for fair persuasion and argumentation to take place amongst the different members of the group.

The current public consultation allowed these processes to be facilitated and thus, the content of the current public consultation offers a rigorous and deliberated insight into the perceptions and information needs of the Irish public around farming in Ireland. Further deliberation is facilitated through feeding back the findings of this public consultation to the farming community for further reflection.

4.2. Hot Topics

Based on a synthesis of the insights coming from the public consultation, the final section of this report presents some suggestions for 'Hot Topics' which could form the basis of future communications.

When choosing a 'Hot Topic' focus for a future communication, two things should be considered – the 'what' and the 'how'. The 'what' should be informed by the information needs that the public said they had and by the types of questions they asked and wanted answers to. The 'how' is informed by how they talked about these topics – how much do they already know? Are they concerned? Do they have certain

beliefs or perceptions that need to be addressed?

The “what” (possibly) isn’t new – but the “how” might be; these insights might prompt us to think about communicating with the public about the same topics, but in a slightly different way. The ‘how’ tells us what to be aware of and cognisant of when communicating on this topic – that this is what consumers are thinking, what you should or shouldn’t say, emotive elements, accounting for different beliefs and addressing certain (mis)perceptions or myths that are held.

The Hot Topics list presented here is not exhaustive, and further hot topics could be developed from the insights. This initial list can act as a template for further considering the insights in this report to decide the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of future communications with the general public on the topic of Irish farming.

HOT TOPIC IDEAS FOR FUTURE COMMUNICATION

Hot Topic	Insights from the Public	Ideas & Talking Points
Farming 101	<i>'Feel like we don't know anything'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'How does it work' series - Needs to be targeted to a public who feel very disconnected from farming
Real Truths	<i>'We need to know how our food is made'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slaughtering and processing - Full disclosure - Standards and checks
Calf-cow Separation	<i>'Low awareness; high concern'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Address emotionally-charged language - Respect for a detailed explanation
Farmers are Innovators	<i>'Not enough diversity and change in farming'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communicating that farmers have and continue to innovate - Addressing diversity issues
Farming as a Career Choice	<i>'Unattractive and inaccessible'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote the positives - Lessen the gap - Address diversity
What's in Your Food?	<i>'Seeds of doubt' and 'blind trust'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assurances on pesticides, fertilisers and antibiotics - Address specific perceived public risks - Provide assurance on rules - Address any uncertainties with empathy
Minding the Environment	<i>'Worrying practices' and a 'topical issue'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Action-oriented information - Collective responsibility
Local Foods	<i>'Highly valued' but 'mistrust in (some) suppliers'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wanting to hear directly from the farmer - Wanting authentic experiences
Youth Engagement	<i>'Disconnected children'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age-appropriate communications - Emphasis on non-farming, urban communities
Sector-specific	<i>'What's tillage farming?'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Broadening their 'first impressions' of Irish farming - Interested in the day-to-day
Future-focused	<i>'Uncertainty about our food future'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emphasis on working together - Positive and proactive messages

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Moderator and Note-taker: come off VPN, close all other programmes (except Zoom)

Moderator: Asking questions and facilitating group discussion

Note-taker: Recording observations/themes and keeping track of time in each section ⌚

i. Introduction ⌚ 5 minutes

Welcome everyone, thank you all for agreeing to take part in our focus group today.

My name is Áine Regan, and my colleague's name is Ursula Kenny. We are both researchers working with Teagasc – Teagasc is the agriculture and food development authority in Ireland.

We are running a series of focus groups with food consumers all around Ireland. The aim these focus groups is to understand public perceptions and questions about farming in Ireland.

So before we get into the focus group itself, ye all would have received an information sheet and consent form. So this is just a reminder that we are recording today's focus group and to reassure you that all data from this focus group will be kept confidential. Everything you say today will be kept completely anonymous and your name or details will never appear in any published material.

So with that I am going to **start recording**.

Moderator: Press record on Zoom and press record on handheld recorder.

ii. One Word Game Icebreaker 5 ⌚ minutes

We would have liked to have been able to meet you face-to-face today but for today, we will be making the most of Zoom.

So just to make sure everyone's sound is working ok and to make sure you are all ready to talk there – we will do a quick introduction.

One of the advantages of zoom is that we are all able to dial in from different places – I want everyone to look outside and come up with one word to describe the weather where you are today! So we will go around each of you, tell us your name, where you are dialling in from and give us a quick weather update from where you are!

iii. Current perceptions of Irish farming 🕒 10 minutes

- ☐ Ok, now today's focus group is all about farming; what is the *first thing* that comes to your minds when you think about Irish farming?
Have a think for a second there and start throwing out some words to me there.
Go around the group until everyone has contributed a word, or some thoughts.
- ☐ How familiar do ye feel ye are with how farming is carried out in Ireland?
Prompt: How much do you think you know about Irish farming? A lot or a little?
- ☐ What, if anything, comes to mind that you really *like* about Irish farming *currently*?
Probe: Why is that important to you? Do others agree or disagree with that?
- ☐ What, if anything, comes to mind that you really *dislike* about Irish farming *currently*?
Probe: Why are you concerned by that? Do others agree or disagree with that?

iv. Future of Irish farming 🕒 10 minutes

- ☐ Think about Irish farming in 10 years time – what, if anything, would you like to see change?
Probe: why would you like that to change? Do others agree or disagree with that?
- ☐ Think again about Irish farming in 10 years time – what, if anything, would you like to remain the same?
Probe: why would you like that to change? Do others agree or disagree with that?

v. Farmer Videos 🕒 30 minutes

I want to talk to you about a group of Irish farmers that have come together and want to engage with the public about Irish farming.

One of the main aims of these focus groups is to find out on behalf of this group of farmers - what do you think about Irish farming? What are you interested in hearing more about? What questions do you have that you would like answered by Irish farmers?

With that in mind, we are going to hear from a number of real Irish farmers through videos – they are going to tell you a little about their farms. As you watch the videos, keep track of any thoughts or questions that you have and have a think about what it is you would like to hear more about when it comes to Irish farming. There's 4 videos in total, each video is only about one minute long. After each video, we will stop and have a short group discussion.

Moderator: Have 4 videos loaded on desktop ready to play. Share the video via the app (don't share whole screen). Select only 'sound' (don't select optimise video). Leave the video small.

The first farmer is XXX. XXX is a dairy farmer. We are going to hear from XXX now himself.

Moderator: Play video 1 (Dairy farmer)

Now after listening to XXX, what kind of questions would you like to ask XXX about his farm – or about Irish dairy farms in general? **[7 minutes]**

- *Probe all participants to ask a question*
- *Follow-up: why would you like to ask that question?*

The second farmer is XXX. XXX is a beef farmer. Let's watch him now.

Moderator: Play video 2 (Beef farmer)

Now after listening to XXX, what kind of questions would you like to ask XXX about his farm – or about Irish beef farms in general? **[7 minutes]**

- *Probe all participants to ask a question*
- *Follow-up: why would you like to ask that question?*

The third farmer is XXX. XXX is a sheep farmer.

Moderator: Play video 3 (Sheep Farmer)

Now after listening to XXX, what kind of questions would you like to ask XXX about his farm – or about Irish sheep farms in general? **[7 minutes]**

- *Probe all participants to ask a question*
- *Follow-up: why would you like to ask that question?*

The fourth and final farmer is XXX. XXX is a tillage farmer.

Moderator: Play video 4 (Tillage Farmer)

Now after listening to XXX, what kind of questions would you like to ask XXX about her farm – or about Irish tillage farms in general? **[7 minutes]**

- *Probe all participants to ask a question*
- *Follow-up: why would you like to ask that question?*

v. Communication Preferences 🕒 15 minutes

Ok, so going back to the group of Irish farmers I mentioned earlier – their aims are to increase public knowledge of Irish farming and address any questions or concerns that the public might have.

- ☐ How interested would you be in finding out more about Irish farming?
- ☐ Can you quickly list, what priority areas do you think the public need to know more about when it comes to Irish farming?
- ☐ How do you think information about Irish farming could be best provided to the public?
- ☐ How important is it that you are given the opportunity to voice your opinion? And that these opinions are fed back to the farmers?
- ☐ That's all of our questions. Has anyone anything they would like to add?

Understanding Agriculture

Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest in the research project: **Understanding Agriculture. The Role of Farming in Ireland – Starting a Conversation with the Public**

I am required to provide you with a participant information sheet and consent form to inform you about the study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain the potential risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You are welcome to ask me any questions you may have. If you agree to take part, I will ask you to confirm your consent. PLEASE NOTE: you have received an email confirming the Focus Group details including Zoom Link with Meeting ID and Passcode to enable you login to the Focus Group. The Information Sheet & Participant Consent Form was attached to this email. By logging in to the Zoom Meeting you confirm your consent to participate in the Focus Group as outlined in the Participant Consent Form. Please take as much time as you need to read it. You should only consent to take part in this research when you feel that you understand what is being asked of you and you have enough time to think about your decision.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The aim of this project is to carry out focus groups with consumers to understand their perceptions and questions about farming in Ireland.

Researchers at Teagasc (Dr. Áine Regan and Dr. Ursula Kenny) are carrying out consumer research on behalf of the 'Understanding Agriculture' Committee. This committee has received funding from the Golden Jubilee Trust to carry out a public-facing communications campaign to increase public understanding of farming.

WHAT YOU WILL DO

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you consent to take part you will be asked to participate in a focus group. You will be invited to take part in a focus group with up to 6 other members of the public. The focus group will last approximately 1 hour and 15minutes.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The findings of this study will be presented back to the committee and used to inform a public-facing communication campaign. It is the aim of this campaign to have an impact on increasing public awareness and knowledge of farming in Ireland.

POTENTIAL RISKS

I do not foresee any negative effects arising from your participation in this study. Please understand that you are free to withdraw from participation in advance of the interview; to stop the research at any stage, or to withdraw immediately. All information and topics discussed are confidential and your anonymity is preserved at all times.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The data for this research will be kept confidential. The focus groups will be audio taped. Once the focus groups are completed, transcribed and analysed, the data will be anonymised. Anonymised versions of the data may be shared with and analysed by researcher collaborators. They will know the general location of the participants but no identifying information will be shared. The results from the project are likely to be published or presented at professional meetings but the material used will be anonymised at all times. Your name will never appear in any published material.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR REQUEST MY WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time or withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at the e-mail address below.

Summary

Participation in this study is on the clear understanding that your participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. A Consent Form accompanies this participant information sheet (last page). By logging in to the Zoom Meeting you confirm your consent to participate in the Focus Group. Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

Thank you for reading this information sheet – if you are happy to do so, please go to the Consent Form on the next page and read it in detail.

Áine Regan
Research Officer, Teagasc
Department of Agri-food Business & Spatial Analysis, REDP
Teagasc Mellows Campus, Athenry, Co. Galway, H65 R718
aine.regan@teagasc.ie

Consent Form

Please read and sign below

1. I confirm that I have read the participation information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and I have had enough time to consider the information.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
4. By logging in to the Zoom meeting I agree to volunteer to participate in this research study being conducted for the Understanding Agriculture Committee by its research partners.
5. I agree to the data being recorded for the purposes of data processing (if applicable) and to the collected data being archived in a digital repository subject to my name and identifying information being removed
6. I understand that I will participate with the researcher on the agreed topic.
7. I grant full authorization for the use of the above information on the full understanding that my anonymity and confidentiality is preserved in public use of these data.
8. I understand that I can withdraw my interview transcript at any time up until the results have been submitted and published and the data archived.

Appendix 3: Farmer video transcripts and screenshots



Dairy Farmer Video Transcript

Hi, my name is []. I live in [], with my wife, [name], and my children, and I am a dairy farmer. And these are some of my cows here, eating grass, we have around 250 cows. The cows calve between February and April. Once they calve, we separate the calves from the cows because we milk the cows. The calves are reared in batches of 10 to 20 calves each. We milk the cows twice a day, in the morning at 7am. And also in the evening, at half three, it takes us about two hours to milk the cows in the morning and two hours in the evening. We store the milk in a large cool tank, and it's collected then every two days by a company called Glanbia. They then process our milk and it can then be turned into either milk, which you find on your shelves, cheese products, or infant formula, or even into protein products. Yeah, that's a basic sum of what we do. Thanks very much for your interest.

Beef Farmer Video Transcript

Hi, my name is [], I'm a beef farmer based in []. I'm involved in a farm partnership with my parents and we run a suckler herd which basically, beef cows and they rear their calves until the calves are, anywhere from 7 to 10/11 months at which time they're weaned. All of the animals we have that are born on the farm are reared through to beef and are subsequently sold for slaughter to either Kepak or Dawn Meats and Kepak would be selling into Musgraves such as Centra, SuperValu. And there's some of that would go for exports and Dawn Meats would, beef from there would go to McDonald's among other outlets. And that's pretty much it.

Sheep Farmer Video Transcript

Hi, [] here, I'm a sheep farmer from []. I live here with my wife and my kids. This year, we're going to lamb 900 ewes. They'll lamb down between the end of February and the start of April. During this period, we'll have 24 hour supervision as they lamb down. Once they lamb down, they'll move out to grass fields, where they'll stay and graze grass. At 12 to 14 weeks, they'll be weaned from their mothers. And as they become fit, they'll go to the factory. The factory then will distribute lamb throughout the Irish retail market and European retail markets. We also shear the ewe's once a year and the wool goes on to be graded by a local merchant for either going into the garment industry or to make the likes of carpets. Thank you.

Tillage Farmer Video Transcript

Hey, my name is [anonymized]. I farm here in [] with my dad [name], we have a tillage farm. And we grow a mixture of barley, wheat, oats and oilseed rape. We sow some of our crops in the autumn time, so September, October time, and then the remainder is sowed in the spring, so somewhere around March, early April. I'm currently just standing in a field that has just been plowed. And we're harrowing it today. We're preparing this ground for sowing spring barley in the next couple of days. We follow a fertilizer program tailored to soil analysis that we carry out. And likewise, we have a specified pesticide control program for controlling diseases and weeds that are specific problems to the field. Most of our crops are harvested from July onwards, with the majority being cut in August. We supply a local feed merchant, an animal feed merchant, with most of our grain, some of it going towards animal feed, some of the barley goes towards malting or distilling and the oil seed rape can go for pressing for rapeseed oil that you find in the supermarket shelves. We have a milling wheat contract as well. The milling wheat will ultimately be made into flour for baking. And the straw that we produce, what's remained after when you cut the grain, the straw is sold to local farmers, local livestock farmers for bedding and for feeding during the wintertime. So that's ultimately what we do. Thank you.

Appendix 3: Participants' farming questions

Questions on....Dairy Farming (Approximately 109 questions)

The Basics of Dairy Farming	Managing the cows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the cows sold on or do the herds just keep growing bigger? • What do they feed the cows to make sure that they're producing the best quality milk? What type of grass or feed do they use?
	The lifespan of cows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long do they keep the cows for? What's the rotation of the cows? • What happens to the cows when they get big? Do they get made into beef or do they just keep the cows for milk? • What happens to the dairy cow when it gets too old to have a calf?
	Milking the cows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do they milk the cows? • Are machines used to milk the cows? • Is there an optimum age range for a cow to produce milk? • How long do cows produce milk for?
	Storing milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do they store the milk and dairy products to keep them fresh? • What are the storage facilities for the milk? • Who supplies the storage facilities for the milk – the processor, or the farmer? • Does the farmer have to invest money in setting up and maintaining the storage facilities? • Are there particular temperature requirements for storing milk? • What happens if one of the cows ends up sick and the milk batch is destroyed? How do they get rid of that milk? • What quantity of milk would he supply to the milk processor every time they come to collect milk?
The Life of a Dairy Farmer	Making a living out of dairy farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do you make money on dairy farming? • What grants are available? • Can dairy farming offer a viable income to raise a family? • Can dairy farmers make enough money to support their family from just selling milk? • Do dairy farmers need to have additional incomes in order to get by? • Does a dairy farmer make enough to live on and get by? • Does the government support the education of farmers to help them grow their business?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How reliable is their income source? Do they get a steady and consistent pay-check? Do they get the same income every month or do they make more or less money at certain times of the year? • Are there big differences in the amount of money different dairy farmers make? • How many cows do they need to keep in order to make a living? • Is the salary and pay sufficient for the hard work put in? • Is their state aid and support available to make dairy farming a viable option? • Do dairy farmers have the option to diversify into producing specialised dairy products? • Is there funding or grants available for dairy farmers to diversify into specialised enterprises such as making cheese or ice cream? • Have milk quotas been a good thing or a bad thing for dairy farmers? Should milk quotas be brought back in? • Do dairy farmers want to grow their herd and what is involved in that?
	Getting a fair price for milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are dairy farmers paid fairly for their products? • Do dairy farmers get a fair price from processors? • Who decides who the farmer sells his produce to? • How do dairy farmers get a price for their products? • Are dairy farmers stuck in a contract with their processors? Can they shop around for the best price? Can they switch processors to get a better price? • Is there much competition between processors or do certain processors have a monopoly over dairy farmers? • Do dairy farmers have any control over the prices they sell their produce to processors at? • Are dairy farmers happy with the terms and conditions offered by processors?
	Working conditions on the dairy farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do dairy farmers have staff to help them with the work? • Do dairy farmers ever get a holiday? • Do dairy farmers ever manage to get time off? • Are dairy farmers happy with the work and lifestyle?
	Dairy farming as a career choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do dairy farmers think their children have any interest in going into dairy farming? • What motivated them to get into dairy farming? • What motivates them to stay in dairy farming?
	Changes in dairy farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has COVID impacted the running of the dairy farm? • Has Brexit impacted the running of the dairy farm?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do dairy farmers see any changes to their job as a result of consumer trends to drink less milk (e.g. veganism)? Have they seen a reduction in sales? • Do dairy farmers see the market for organic milk growing? • If dairy farmers had to reduce their cows, what would they do instead and how would they feel about that? • Would Irish dairy farmers prefer an Irish market for their produce or an export market? • Do they think any improvements are needed in the dairy farming sector?
Animal Welfare	Welfare of the dairy cow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are cows treated well? • Are the cows in pain at all when expressing milk? • How do farmers treat their cows? • What kind of a life do farmers give the cows? • How long do the cows live for? • Are cows happy on dairy farms? • What happens if a calf is in poor health? • How young do calves go for slaughtering? • What level of abuse or mistreatment happens in dairy farming? What happens when abuse occurs? • What happens to pregnant cows? Are pregnant cows milked? • What happens to male calves on dairy farms? • Are farmers held accountable for how they treat their animals?
	Dairy cows' access to grass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long are the cows outdoors during the day? • How much room do cows have to roam in dairy farms? • Is there enough space for cows to roam in bigger herds?
	Calf-cow separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are calves taken away from the cow? • Has it always been the way that the calf was separated from the cow? • Why don't we know about this practice? Why is that information not made available to the public? • What happens to the little calves once they are born? • What happens to the calves when they are taken from the cow? • What happens to male calves when they are taken from the cow? • Where do the calves go? • Do they keep the calves on the farm or do they sell them on?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the calves kept for dairy or are they sold off as beef? • Do the calves get at least some time with their mothers? • Why are the calves not being given time with their mother? • How suddenly are the calves taken from the cow? • Is there absolutely no bonding between the calf and mother at all? • Does the calf suck off the cow at all? • Can the calf spend a short amount of time with the mother to get nutrients? • What does the calf eat instead of the cow's milk? • How does the calf get enough nutrients without the cow's milk? • Is there a lot of labour involved in hand rearing the calves? • Do they feed the calves with the mother's milk? • How are the baby calves fed? • Do they receive the same level of care that they would have received if they were left with their mother? • Are the calves bottle-fed? • Does the calf and cow experience separation anxiety? • How long does it take the cow and the calf to acclimatize to the separation? How long does it take for the cows and calves to become happy again?
Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'	What's in our milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is actually in the milk on our shelves? • How do they clean the milk? Is that a natural or unnatural process? • Are antibiotics going into milk to extend shelf life? • What happens when the milk is being processed? Is there anything being put into the milk? • Are cows eating chemicals and pesticides in feed or on the grass, and can that end up in the milk we drink? • Are antibiotics added to organic milk? • If the cows are sick, will that affect the milk?
	Traceability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the milk pasteurized in the south or in the north of Ireland?
The Environment	Sustainable dairy farming practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do dairy farmers think about the environmental impacts of dairy farming? • How might dairy farming minimise environmental impacts associated with the national herd?
	Pollution from dairy farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do they get safely rid of waste on the farm? • How could they minimise the use of plastic on the farm?

Questions on...Beef Farming (Approximately 55 questions)

The Basics of Beef Farming	Managing cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a prime seasonal time for beef farming? Or is it all year round? • Does he hold on to any cows on the farm for breeding / giving birth to calves? • Are they fed on grass all year round, or are they housed in the winter? • What's the ratio of bulls to cows on a beef farm? • Is there any difference in size and standard of the meat when a calf is kept with the mother compared to if it is weaned at an earlier stage? • How do they ensure that the meat quality is consistent throughout? • What is involved in the day-to-day running of a beef farm?
	The lifespan of cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long do they continue to breed the females or the cows? • How long do they keep the cattle for before they are slaughtered? • What age are the calves or cows slaughtered at? How many years do they keep their cows before they're mature enough to provide beef? • What age are the calves before they're sent from the farm? • What age do they slaughter the cows to get the beef?
	Beef versus dairy farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do farms only do one type of farming (e.g. dairy only, beef only)? Do farms ever decide to do both types of farming (dairy and beef)? • Do they use the same cows for milking and for producing meat? • When it's the same animal, why can't they use cows for milk and for beef? • How do they decide which cow is dairy and which goes for beef? • When and how do farmers decide what they are going to do with cows (e.g. whether they will be milked or used for meat)? • How do farms decide which sector they are going to specialise in? • Do beef farms need more space than the dairy farms? • Is a beef herd bigger or smaller than a dairy herd, or the same size? • What's the difference in size a dairy farm herd to a meat producing herd? • Is there a quicker turnover of cows in beef farming than there is in dairy? • What's the difference in how beef and dairy farms are run? • What's the difference in the daily running of a beef farm compared to a dairy farm? • What's the day to day like for a beef farmer as opposed to a dairy farmer?

Life of Beef Farmer	Making a living out of beef farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the economics of beef farming? • How much income is coming from subsidies versus other elements?
	Beef farming as a career choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What motivated them to get into beef farming? • What motivates them to stay in beef farming? • Are there supports for the next generation to be educated before getting into farming? • Are there supports available to attract and support young people to work as beef farmers? • Do people get into beef farming largely through inheritance and family ties? • What does a farm partnership involve? • What are the regulations around the treatment of cattle?
Animal Welfare	Looking after the cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At what age are calves weaned on a beef farm? • Are all cattle grass fed or are some them kept in barns? • Do the cattle go for live exports or is only processed meat exported? • Do beef farmers get paid enough to be able to maintain good welfare levels? • What are farmers' views on veganism and animal activists?
	Farmer-cattle attachment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How hard is it to let go of some of the animals? • Do beef farmers have compassion for the cattle? • Does the farmer ever get attached to the cattle? • Does the farmer get sad sending the cows away to be killed? • Does the farmer ever feel guilty sending the cows off?
	The slaughtering process for cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the cattle killed? What is involved in the whole slaughtering process? • At what age do calves go for slaughter? • How much pain is involved in the death of cattle? • Is the slaughtering process as good as it can be? • Are the cattle able to see what is going on in the slaughterhouse? • Are farmers happy with the practices in slaughterhouses? • Are there regulations in place for slaughtering? • Is there any more humane way to do slaughtering?
Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'	Exporting beef	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much of Ireland's beef produce goes abroad, and how much stays in Ireland?
	What's in our beef?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the cattle being fed? • What are the cattle eating up until the point they are slaughtered, and could that end up in the meat we eat?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are sprays or pesticides on the grass eaten by the cattle, which could end up in the meat we eat?
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Questions on...Sheep Farming (Approximately 57 questions)

The Basics of Sheep Farming	Lambing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do they monitor large numbers of sheep during the lambing season? • Is there much farmer/vet intervention required for a lamb to be born, or is it more of a natural process? • How many lambs would one sheep have, and what is the survival rate for the lambs born? • Is it normal or abnormal for a ewe to have more than one lamb at a time? • What is the breakdown of lambs to sheep on a farm? • Is there 24 hour constant supervision during the lambing season?
	Lifespan of the sheep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happens to the ewes when they get old? • How long do sheep live after they produce so many lambs? • How long does a sheep stay on the farm for? • Do all the lambs go for slaughter or does the farmer ever hold on to any lambs on the farm to rear? • How old are the ewes by the time they finish lambing? • What happens to the ewes when they finish lambing? • How do they determine when it's time to send a lamb to the factory for slaughter? • Do they keep any lambs on the farm to grow wool and shear? • How long would the farmer hold on to a sheep before selling it as mutton? • Does the farmer keep the same sheep on the farm to have lambs every year?
	Managing the sheep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the farmer replenish his stock? • What system does the farmer have in place to track the sheep on his farm and make sure he doesn't lose any? • Is sheep farming more intensive / large-scale than other sectors?
	Products from the sheep farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does the wool from the sheep end up? • Is the wool ever used for making garments in factories abroad? • What are the different cuts of meat that can come from sheep? • What are the different types of meat that can come from different ages of sheep? • Why do you sometimes get a very strong taste or smell of lamb meat? • What kind of effect would the weather and environment have on the quality of the lamb? • Where in Ireland produces the best quality lamb?

Life as a Sheep Farmer	Making a living out of sheep farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How profitable is sheep farming? • Is sheep farming an economically viable job? • How much money is earned from selling meat in comparison to selling wool in sheep farming? • What size a flock is needed to make a living out of sheep farming? • Are sheep more or less expensive to maintain than other types of farm animals?
	Working on a sheep farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many people work on a sheep farm? • Do sheep farmers have help on the farm? • Are sheep farmers able to have a good work-life balance? • How are they using technology on the sheep farm? • Have farming methods changed over the last 20-30 years on sheep farms?
	Sheep farming as a career choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is sheep farming an appealing career to go into? • What motivates them to become sheep farmers? • What motivates them to stay in sheep farming?
Animal Welfare	Looking after the sheep and lambs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When is the natural point of weaning the lambs from the sheep? • Do the farmers allow natural weaning of lambs or do they force the weaning? • Do the sheep feel anything when their babies are taken away? • Are the lambs and sheep ever kept indoors? Why would they be brought indoors? • Is there enough space for lambs and sheep if they do have to be brought indoors? • Is there supervision of the sheep when they are lambing to make sure nothing goes wrong?
	The slaughtering process for lambs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the lambs slaughtered? Is it done humanely? Is it very quick? • Have they ever received any backlash from activists? • Does the farmer have any control over how the slaughtering is carried out?
	Live export	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are lambs and sheep sent abroad for live export? • What kind of conditions do they have in the slaughterhouses in other countries? • Do they have to live export sheep and lambs? • What rules govern the live export process?
Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'	Regulations on lamb meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we know if lamb has been grass-fed or meal-fed? • Are their strict regulations in place for producing lamb meat?
	Exporting sheep products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much lamb goes abroad and how much stays in Ireland? • Has the pandemic impacted upon lamb supply in the Irish market?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where can we buy carpets produced from Irish wool?
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Questions on...Tillage Farming (Approximately 97 questions)

The Basics of Tillage Farming	Lacking awareness of tillage farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the term tillage mean? • What is tillage farming? • What does tillage farming involve? • What types of products are produced from tillage farming? • What does a normal working day on a tillage farm look like?
	Managing the land and the crops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the average size of a tillage farm? • Can they keep growing the same crops on the land each year? • Can they use the same fields every year to grow produce? Or do they have to rotate it? • Do they rotate the crops and what does that involve? • Are there are different requirements when you're growing crops for human use versus animal use? • Would they have to treat the crops differently if they were going directly to oats or porridge for humans? • How often do they have to do crop rotation? • How often do they have to change what they're doing in a particular field? • Would they keep livestock and animals on tillage farms also? • What is involved in the process from planting a seed through to having an end product?
	The impact of weather on tillage farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the impacts of weather on tillage farming? • Is it reliable or do they lose crops? • How does climate change impact on tillage farming? • In general what is Ireland like as a climate for that kind of farming? • How does the weather impact their year? • Can it be a complete washout if they have a very wet summer? And how does that affect their income? • Does bad weather and storms impact tillage farming? • Are they completely reliant on the weather or have they have they a protocol in place for the type of Irish weather we have and what they do if it's heavy rain, or if there's a blight issue? • Does the weather change the way they farm and the types of pesticides they use? • How do the changing seasons impact on tillage farming?

	Products from the tillage farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a big international market? • What impact might Brexit have on tillage farming? • Are we producing enough flour in Ireland to supply our own national market? • What motivated tillage farmers to start producing rapeseed oil? • Is rapeseed oil replacing olive oil in the market? • Is rapeseed healthy for humans to consumer? • What are the human health impacts of consuming different types of flours and cereals? • Who do tillage farmer supply their produce to? • Who do tillage farmers work with to get their produce to market? • How is their produce collected from processors or retailers? • How do they get their produce out to the retailers? • How have tillage farms adapted to new lifestyle trends like increased home baking and increased use of oat milk?
Life as a Tillage Farmer	Making a living from tillage farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How profitable is tillage farming in comparison to the other types of farms? • Is it more or less profitable to sell tillage produce as animal feed or produce for humans? • What happens if the crops fail because of bad weather? Do they have insurance to cover bad weather? • Is a tillage farm more expensive to run compared to other types of farms? • How economically stable is the income on a tillage farm? • Does the weather control the income on a tillage farm from year to year? • Is it more profitable to use the land for tillage compared to farming animals? • How many extra people do you need to employ at harvest time? • Can you make a living out of tillage farming?
	Working conditions on tillage farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do tillage farmers enjoy their job? • What do they enjoy about tillage farming? • Is tillage farming stressful? • Can tillage farmers go on holiday? • Do tillage farmers get any breaks during the year? • How do tillage farmers manage the stress associated with unpredictable weather?
	Tillage farming as a career choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do tillage farmers get into tillage farming? Is it inheritance and family based? • What are the options for women to work in tillage farming?
	Organic tillage farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How difficult would it be to change to organic tillage farming?

Buying 'Local' and 'Natural'		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long would it take to move to organic farming for larger scale tillage farms? • What percentage of crop they would lose if they went in a more organic way? • How important are fertilizers and pesticides to preserving crops? • Where can we access more organic foods? • Would tillage farmers get involved in growing organic oats? • What would a tillage farmer have to do to become an organic farm? • What would be the difference between what we are eating now, and organically-farmed produce? Would it have an impact on our health? Is there any evidence of this? • What's the difference in cost to the farmer in organic and non-organic farming? • What is the difference in organic farming and non-organic farming? • Are pesticides and fertilisers used on organic farms? • If a tillage farmer shifted to organic farming, what impact would that have on their business?
	Use of pesticides and fertilisers on tillage farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What exactly is being put into the earth? Do these chemicals go into the feed used for animals that we then eat? • Are the long-term effects of pesticides in human consumption known? • Is there another way to stop weeds growing without using pesticides? • What kind of fertilizers and pesticides are used on tillage farms? • What fertilizer products are used on tillage farms? • What types of pesticides are being used on tillage farms? • Can tillage farmers use an alternative to pesticides? • Are there any viable options for tillage farmers to use organic or natural pesticides? • How economically viable are alternatives to pesticides? • Are there any insects that can carry out the job of pesticides? • Does the government have adequate safeguarding policies and inspections in place to ensure compliance with pesticide and fertiliser use? • Is there any government funding to support the use of natural pesticide processes? • Where do tillage farmers get advice and evidence on best practice in growing crops? • Do the pesticides and fertilizers used on crops for animal feed, have an impact on the animals, and the food that we then eat? • What are the regulations on the use of fertilisers and pesticides in farming? • How does the farmer know how much pesticide to use?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the crops treated again after pesticides are used, and before they are made into food products?
	Healthiness of tillage produce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is rapeseed oil safe for human health consumption? Is olive oil healthier than rapeseed oil? • What are the health effects of different flours and cereals? • How can we improve our diet by using different types of cereals?
The Environment	Use of pesticides and fertilizers on tillage farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of fertilizers and pesticides are being used, and what's their potential impact on the environment? • Are the long-term effects of pesticides on the land known? What are the long-term effects? • How do they ensure pesticides are only used within the boundaries of the field? • Can hedgerows bordering the fields be impacted by the use of pesticides? • What's the impact of pesticides and fertilisers if they are seeping into the ground or going to adjoining farms? • Do pesticides and fertilisers used on farms get into waterways and what impact does this have on life in the water? • How do they ensure that pesticides don't damage biodiversity within the vicinity of the farm and within the field itself? • What effect do pesticides have on local wildlife? • Does the use of pesticides and fertilisers make the ground go infertile? • How do they strike a balance between keeping the crops healthy and killing pests and weeds? • What regulations, penalties and incentives are used to ensure the environmentally-safe use of pesticides, fertilisers and chemicals in farming?

Questions on....Farming in General (Approximately 40 questions)

Farming as a Profession	Making money in farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do farmers make their money? • What type of farm is the most profitable? • What is the average farmer income? • How financially stable is farming as a job? • How much do farming grants supplement a farmer's income? • Are farmers treated fairly by processors and retailers? • Do farmers receive a fair price for their produce?
	Work-life balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long is the working day? • Can a farmer take a holiday? • Are farmers able to get people in to cover them?
	Farming as a career choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are all the woman farmers? • What is the ratio of male to female farmers in Ireland? • What are the options for women to work in, in farming? • What motivates people to become farmers? • What motivates people to stay in farming? • Does the government offer any options for women to get involved in farming? • How can farming be made an attractive career choice for children from urban areas and non-farming families? • Is there anything being put in place to encourage women and teenagers to get involved in farming? • How can a positive perception of farming as an occupation be promoted?
	Farming in the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do farmers feel about the future? • How do farmers view the future? What do they think will happen in the future? • What do farmers think about the fact that the world is changing in many ways? Do they accept that change? Are they prepared for that change? • How much freedom to farmers have to make changes to their farms? • Do farmers have enough support from the government to make changes to their farms? • Where are we going in the future with food and farming, and how do we do it all together? • What does the future hold for farming?
Animal Welfare	Welfare regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When it comes to ensuring a farm animal's welfare, what exactly happens and why?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do farmers set their own animal welfare standards or are they regulated? • Are animals regularly checked by vets on farms? • What does 'free range' actually mean? • What are the regulations around labelling something 'free range'?
	Farmers' views on welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do farmers view animal welfare? What do farmers think about animal welfare?
Buying 'Local' and 'Natural' Produce	Traceability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we support our local farmer? • Where can we find good quality, local meat and vegetables? • What does it mean when you see a "produced in Ireland" sticker on food products? • What are the rules around selling 'local' and 'Irish' produce? • What exactly happens before the product gets to the shelf?
	Pesticides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are different pesticides being used in farming and food production? • What exactly is in the pesticides? What are the potential side effects from pesticides? • What are the risks of pesticides? • What are the side effects of pesticides on nature? • Do pesticides harm other animals and insects? • Do pesticides get into the rivers? • What impact do pesticides have humans? • Are pesticides bad for us?
	Antibiotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What controls are in place for the use of antibiotics in farming? • What are the plans to tackle antibiotic resistance in farming? • What is put into food products?
The Environment	Agriculture into the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How sustainable [will agriculture be] into the future and what challenges do they see coming forward?
	Sustainable farming practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do they think their industry can reduce environmental impacts? • What are they doing with regards to climate change? • How are they playing their parts so that we meet 2030 environmental targets?