



**Evaluation of the Impact on Farmers  
Participating in Teagasc Beef Discussion  
Groups 2012-2014**

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- Participants in a project workshop, including Professor Frank Vanclay, University of Groningen;
- Farmers who participated in the research survey and the focus group meetings; and
- The survey interview team.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Farmer discussion groups are a proven method of knowledge transfer in agriculture. The *Food Harvest 2020 Report* identified that discussion groups play a key role in improved performance at farm level and the *Beef 2020 Activation Group* recommended the provision of funding for discussion groups in the sector. The Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP) was introduced for a three year period (2012-2014). The introduction of BTAP has resulted in a significant increase in the number of beef farmers participating in discussion groups. As a result of the increased farmer participation in beef discussion groups and the increased adviser involvement, Teagasc has commissioned this independent evaluation to assess the impact on farmers of participating in beef discussion groups. This report is an evaluation of the Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Programme not just the BTAP but it provides useful analysis and feedback on the Teagasc delivery of the BTAP.

### **Purpose Objectives and Method of the Evaluation**

The purpose of this evaluation is to:

- Examine the impact and/or effectiveness of Teagasc beef discussion groups in terms of the knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and performance of group members; and
- Make recommendations which will enable Teagasc to continuously improve its delivery of beef discussion groups.

The overall objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Compare farm performance (both physical and financial) of group members and non-group members;
- Examine the impact of Teagasc beef discussion groups on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of group members;
- Identify opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of discussion group delivery;
- Identify ideas for the financing, design and implementation of new national programmes to further improve beef discussion group participation; and
- Establish the views of advisers/facilitators and group members on how discussion group membership has affected the Teagasc/client relationship.

### **Method**

The evaluation utilises both internal and external expertise. Physical and financial assessments are included from the National Farm Survey (Teagasc Agricultural Economics and Farm Survey Department). Ms Martina Moran (Teagasc Walsh Fellow) undertook a research study in the Northwest involving surveys (2012 & 2013) of drystock discussion group members, non-discussion group drystock farmers and Teagasc advisors/facilitators. The external component of the data collection and overall project evaluation was undertaken by Broadmore Research. A telephone survey was undertaken with a random sample of discussion group participants. A telephone survey of Teagasc beef clients who were not members of discussion groups was also undertaken. Three focus group meetings (advisers/facilitators, farmers and administrators) were held to complement the survey data. A workshop (involving Teagasc management, research, advisory staff and Professor

Frank Vanclay, University of Groningen) was held on the emerging findings to explore the research findings and recommendations.

### **Summary of Evaluation Findings**

A brief overview of the key findings is presented in the following sections.

#### **Comparing Farm Financial Performance of Group Members and Non-Group Members**

On average discussion group members in 2013 had higher output (€363/ha), higher costs (€268/ha), and an overall higher average gross margin per hectare (€174/ha) than non-member farms (National Farm Survey). On average net margin was higher (€95/ha) on discussion group farms<sup>1</sup>.

Over 40% of group members earn a gross margin per hectare of greater than €500 compared to less than 20% of non-member farms. A little over 3% of group members earn negative gross margins compared to 10% of non-group farms. When beef farmers are compared across their production systems, on average farmers participating in discussion groups have higher stocking rates than non-discussion group farms and higher gross margins. Group members' farms also on average received higher prices for cattle sold which when combined with higher stocking rates per hectare largely explains the consistently higher level of gross output per hectare on group members' farms.

Evidence from the farmer evaluation survey shows that the majority of discussion group members surveyed made improvements to overall profit (61%), liveweight gain (70%) and days at grass (75%). Half of discussion group members have seen a financial benefit from their involvement in the group and the same proportion anticipates future financial benefits.

The level of discussion group functioning (according to an index developed for this evaluation) has a significant impact on the extent to which farmers perceive that they have received a financial benefit to discussion group membership. Similarly those with the highest level of practice adoption are most likely to have experienced financial benefits. The main financial benefit from beef discussion group membership are identified by farmers as coming from improved grassland management, cost control and breeding/fertility/compact calving.

#### **Description of Farmers Participating in the Evaluation Survey<sup>2</sup>**

Discussion group members are mainly involved in suckler to weanling systems. When compared with non-group members, they have: larger farms; more beef livestock units; a higher level of formal agricultural training/education; and a higher level of off-farm employment. Discussion group members are also younger on average than non-group members.

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<sup>1</sup> These performance outcomes cannot be attributed solely to discussion group participation since farms that are group participants may have higher profits than non-discussion group farms even in the absence of discussion group programme (due to sample selection bias).

<sup>2</sup> The sample of discussion group members is representative of all discussion group members across the country. However, the sample of non-members does not have the same statistical representativeness.

### **Discussion Group Membership**

The main reasons identified by farmers for joining their discussion group originally are: learning; information/ideas; the BTAP payment; and meeting other farmers. The BTAP payment brought a momentum to beef discussion group membership. Three-quarters of discussion group members state that they will continue to be a member of their discussion group if the BTAP payment ends.

In a workshop dedicated to this topic it was highlighted that farmers are '*not all the same*', that they have different styles of farming, personalities and goals. Therefore, not every farmer is suited to group methods or not every group will be the same. The benefit of conducting further research on those who do not join discussion groups was also highlighted.

### **Impact of Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups on the Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviour**

The areas of most benefit/impact of participation in a Teagasc Beef Discussion Group identified in the survey of farmers are '*gaining information on farm management practices*' and '*ability to compare my farm against other farms*'. The '*social impact of meeting other farmers*' is also a benefit.

### **Knowledge/Information**

- Farmer knowledge in key areas of management increased over the course of discussion group membership. Moran (2013) found that discussion group members had more knowledge on breeding, grassland and financial analysis than non-discussion group members.
- Evidence from the focus group meetings indicates that there is a significant sharing of both knowledge and problems once members become established within groups. The most learning takes place in groups when meetings focus on: key elements of efficiency; small projects; external speakers; and encouragement of on-farm measurements.

### **Attitude Change and Adoption of Farm Management Practices**

Participation in a discussion group had a significant influence on the adoption of farm practices due to both the specified tasks and the learning from group interaction. In addition:

- For both 2012 and 2013 there was a relatively positive attitude towards improving aspects of grassland, breeding and financial management. Decisions about the adoption of technologies are often influenced by the opinions of other farmers.
- Practically all members completed the Teagasc e-Profit monitor (directly influenced by the requirements of BTAP).
- In terms of specific practices, 91% of members engaging in rotational grazing, 69% aiming for 12 week breeding season, 68% reseeding 10% of grass in last 3 years, and 59% using the Suckler Beef Index.

- Non-members have a lower level of practice adoption than group members. The main influences on for non-members are Teagasc and the Irish Farmers Journal.
- Groups that adhere to best practice in terms of operation appear to be the most effective and have the highest levels of practice adoption.
- It can be difficult for facilitators to gauge the extent of change occurring on farms as not all farmers share the extent of progress that they are making with the group.
- The main financial benefit from beef discussion group membership are identified by farmers as coming from improved grassland management, cost control and breeding/fertility/compact calving.

### **Other Impacts of Discussion Group Membership**

- Social interaction is one of the benefits to discussion group membership. It is a benefit that many farmers do not anticipate or expect prior to joining their group. Social interaction impacts both on the functioning of the group and on the wider benefits that farmers realise from participating in discussion groups. The organisation of and engagement in social activities is considered to be part of a well functioning and vibrant group.

### **Opportunities to Improve the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Discussion Group Delivery**

Some of the main characteristics of groups surveyed include:

- Half of groups have a chairperson;
- 37% hold an AGM every year;
- 98% have regular meetings;
- 87% travel to outside events/meetings/farms;
- 17% engage in social activities; and
- High level of attendance at discussion group meetings.

### **Operation of Discussion Groups**

In terms of group operation, the survey results show that the majority of members agree that the: *'facilitator is well prepared for group meetings'*; the *'facilitator encourages members to take ownership of the group'*; the facilitator *'encourages members to take ownership of their group'*; and the facilitator *'encourages quieter and controls talkative members'*. However, only 55% of members agree that there are always outcomes/actions from discussion group meetings.

### **Suggested Improvements to Discussion Groups**

- The main suggestions made by discussion group members in the research survey for improvements to their group and/or facilitator included to: encourage quieter members to talk and contribute more to meetings; provide more information on the requirements from beef processors; organise group members along similar levels of performance; and provide greater follow up on actions at subsequent meetings.



- Concern was raised by facilitators regarding their ability to service the needs of a growing number of more demanding (in terms of follow up service) discussion group members in the future.
- Suggested that there is now potential to allow more flexibility to facilitators within BTAP in planning and organising the annual programme of activities for groups.
- Farmers believed that the optimum number of meetings was 6-10 annually with most considering that 6-8 meetings is adequate.

### **Administration of Future Programmes such as BTAP**

There is scope for considerable improvement in operational efficiency by developing a shared understanding between facilitators and administrators (Teagasc and DAFM) on the administration process protocols and by rigorous and efficient implementation of the administration procedures.

Some of the issues identified which should be addressed included: the use of different BTAP forms (Teagasc and Department in some regions); a clear protocol needs to be adhered to by facilitators for responding to requests from farmers to make changes to their records and any changes communicated to administrators effectively; and timely submission of programme documents for processing.

### **Impact of Discussion Group Membership on the Teagasc/Client Relationship**

- Four out of five farmers state that they mainly engage with their facilitator equally through their discussion group and on a one-to-one basis.
- Differences emerge between discussion group members and non-members in terms of their agreement with statements on their adviser/facilitator:
  - *'Tailor advice to my needs'* – 85% of members agree;
  - *'Knows my farm and technical requirements'* – 81% of members agree;
  - *'Understands me and my farm/household situation'* – 67% of members agree; and
  - *'Understands my plans and ambitions'* – 64% of members agree.

In all cases, non-discussion group members have a lower level of agreement with these statements than members.

- The extent of agreement with these statements is influenced by: whether farmers had experienced a financial benefit from group membership; the level of discussion group functioning; and the level of practice adoption.
- Three quarters of discussion group members believe that the focus placed by Teagasc on discussion groups has increased the level of support they receive from their facilitator while 24% said that it has had no change on their level of support. The majority of non-group members, state that the focus placed on discussion groups has had no impact on the level of support received from their adviser.
- Three quarters of discussion group members state that they have a *'better working relationship with their adviser'* as a result of their participation in their discussion group while two thirds agree that Teagasc is *'better meeting their needs'*.
- The development of the discussion group programme has provided facilitators with a greater opportunity to engage directly with farmers and influence change at farm

level. In doing so, it has enhanced the relationship with many beef farmers with whom they had a previously low level of contact. Therefore, facilitators believe that the development of beef discussion groups (and the introduction of BTAP) has strengthened the relationship with farmers who are members of groups.

- Farmers who have already experienced financial benefits as a result of participation in their discussion group are more likely to intend to continue involved in groups in the future compared to those who have not yet experienced financial benefits.

### **Relationship with Teagasc for Non-Group Members**

- Two thirds of non-discussion group farmers state that their only contact with Teagasc is for '*form filling*', while a further one fifth state that they have a '*low level of advisory contact*'.
- Facilitators believe that the relationship with and service provided to non-discussion members has weakened as a result of the emphasis placed on discussion groups.
- Facilitators also state that as a result of the introduction of BTAP and the focus on discussion groups, there are now less general farm events at county level which have a wide appeal and are fewer opportunities for those with least advisory contact to gain general information.

### **Conclusions from the Evaluation**

Members of Teagasc beef discussion groups are benefiting from discussion group membership and the BTAP. They are in general satisfied with the operation and delivery of the discussion group programme by Teagasc. The task driven approach to BTAP has proven effective in encouraging farmers to address specific aspects of farm management.

### **Farm Performance**

It is clearly evident that discussion group members are focused on productivity. Higher costs on these farms are countered by higher output to deliver overall higher margins. It is also evident that the differences between members and non-members in terms of farm performance are greatest among those farmers in the lowest margin categories.

### **Discussion Group Membership**

The personality of individuals impacts on their engagement in discussion groups, it is accepted that group members must be open to discuss their farm details in public, open to new ideas and willing to adopt new practices. Quieter people may need more convincing of the merits of joining discussion groups and confidence building before joining a group. Farmers are motivated to join discussion groups predominately to learn and gain information to improve their farm management and profitability.

The BTAP incentive was beneficial for introducing farmers to the discussion group concept and it brought a momentum to the development of beef discussion groups. The BTAP payment was an incentive to join but the importance of the BTAP payment to farmers declines as other benefits are experienced.

Discussion group methods may not suit all farmers and a standard discussion group approach or model may not suit all groups or members. Farmers currently not involved in discussion groups appear to generally have little interest in joining in the future and it could take considerable effort to convince them to join a group.

### **Impact on Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviour**

The introduction of BTAP has provided both farmers and facilitators an opportunity to focus on addressing efficiency and development on beef farms. Well run groups (according to an index developed for this study) appear to lead to greater learning and subsequent benefits.

The delivery of the BTAP focuses on tasks and farmers have obviously responded to this in terms of practice adoption. For the majority of discussion group members, they are still at a very early stage in their membership (third year) for significant tangible benefits in terms of productivity/profitability at farm level to be realised.

Social interaction within groups, outside of groups during regular farm activities and in non-farm settings is an important benefit of discussion group membership. Group members provide emotional support to each other in managing and developing their farm businesses. Social interaction also builds trust between farmers and between farmers and their facilitator.

### **Improving Efficiency and Effectiveness of Discussion Group Delivery**

Many farmers are hungry to learn more but with that, their expectations will increase and place increased demands on the facilitators engaged in delivery of advice. Maintaining the vibrancy of groups and preventing them from getting stale is one of the ongoing challenges for facilitators.

The chairpersons' role is viewed as critically important in the group to provide direction, act as a group organiser and to serve as a link between farmers and the facilitator (including the provision of feedback), however, in practice many groups do not have a chairperson. The lack of a chairperson may reflect group dynamics or the stage in group development where no suitable candidate for the role has emerged.

The administration system appears to be effective and efficient and the main improvements required relate to communication and avoidance of duplication between administrators and facilitators. However, there also appears to be more potential to place the onus for compliance onto farmers, that they adhere to rules as set out in terms and conditions and reduce the unplanned burden of queries on administrators.

### **Impact On Teagasc/Client Relationship**

The involvement of farmers in discussion groups has increased their level of contact with their facilitator; however, the majority of non-members feel that the emphasis on discussion groups had no negative impact on the level of support they received. That is not to suggest however, that discussion groups are a potential replacement for a range of advisory approaches including one-to-one consultations. The interaction of facilitators with farmers through groups makes more efficient use of facilitators' time. However, group meetings stimulate further one to one work for facilitators and may generate increased demand for additional advisory services.

The development of the discussion group programme has provided facilitators with a greater opportunity to engage directly with farmers and influence change at farm level. In doing so, it has enhanced the relationship with many beef farmers with whom they had a low level of contact prior to this. The interaction with discussion groups on a regular basis is viewed as having the benefit of improving the technical knowledge and competence of facilitators (by challenging/questioning them in group discussions) which in turn benefits all clients.

Despite the fact that non-members are satisfied with Teagasc, facilitators perceive that the relationship with these clients may have been weakened as a result of the emphasis placed by Teagasc on discussion groups. Facilitators are concerned about the weakening of this relationship.

While there is a general satisfaction among farmers that discussion groups are effectively meeting their needs, not all farmers are convinced that their facilitator understands them and their plans.

### **Summary Recommendations**

Recommendations for the development of Teagasc beef discussion groups are presented based on the evaluation findings and the expert contributions in the review workshop.

#### **Strategic/General issues**

- Develop a long-term advisory strategy for beef farmers – group participants and non-participants. The strategy should include the delivery of programmes such as BTAP and also plan for the future of beef discussion groups in the absence of direct financial support.
- The potential growth in farmers participating in groups should be addressed within the strategy and the ability of Teagasc to meet their needs.
- In order to inform the strategy, undertake research on Teagasc clients who are not members of discussion groups.
- The strategy needs to consider the approach to increasing the number of farmers participating in discussion groups in terms of whether this may be achieved by creating new groups or by expanding existing groups. The inclusion of new members into existing groups should be explored on a group by group basis.

- Particular efforts should be undertaken to promote the financial and social benefits of active discussion group membership.
- Teagasc needs to ensure that there is a focus on discussion group development included as part of the delivery of a future BTAP programme.
- To support the development of group structures, each group should ideally be encouraged to have a chairperson or a contact person/link. An annual chairpersons' group meeting could be held on a regional basis to support members in this role
- As part of the group development process, each discussion group should have a review meeting at the end of each year.
- The BTAP requirements could be considered as the minimum standard for Teagasc beef discussion groups. To enhance the benefit from group participation and to encourage greater engagement:
  - A minimum of 6 meetings/events but a target of 8 meetings per year;
  - Farmers encouraged to complete tasks in excess of the minimum requirement;
  - Focus on overall farm management targets in addition to task completion;
  - Social activities/events should be actively encouraged; and
  - A mechanism whereby discussion groups can provide feedback to management on their facilitator.
- Young farmers should be introduced to group discussion methods in training/education courses and students on placement should be obliged to attend (where possible) the discussion group sessions in which their host farmer participates.

### **In-Service Training**

Ongoing facilitation training is required particularly in dealing with new and weaker members/groups and the process of group development.

### **Facilitators**

- Ongoing need to provide guidance, encouragement and support to farmers in both the completion of specific tasks and their general involvement in discussion groups.
- Support the building of the confidence and trust of members.
- Ensure that there are specific outcomes/actions from every meeting.
- Establishing a routine for meetings, agreeing meeting dates at the start of the year.
- Simplifying the notification process for meetings (e.g. text message).
- Guiding and facilitating the discussion process without dominating the meetings.
- Seeking to gain a better knowledge and understanding of group members.
- Striving to achieve best practice in discussion group delivery.
- Adhering to programme deadlines and minimising duplication of administration.
- Encouraging social interaction and social activities among group members.
- Encouraging young farmers and non-members to consider joining a discussion group.

## **Administration**

- Work closely with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to seek to reduce duplication of effort in all areas.
- Clearer differentiation of programme administration procedures in order to minimise duplication and/or confusion between facilitators and administrators.
- A shared understanding among facilitators and administration staff, regular communication, planning, monitoring and rigorous implementation of protocols in terms of programme administration, record keeping, uploading of documents and programme deadlines.
- Examine the Document Management System to determine areas for improving the efficiency of operation.

## **Farmers**

Farmers can contribute to the future development of discussion groups by:

- Taking greater responsibility for compliance with BTAP;
- Actively engaging in the discussion group process and freely sharing information;
- Taking ownership of their own groups, encouraging and supporting other farmers to become more involved and making a greater contribution to discussion;
- Being willing to take on roles such as chairperson of the group;
- Working with facilitators to organise a meeting schedule which achieves a balance in terms of timing and location of meetings; and
- Contribute to the overall development of a vibrant discussion group.

## **Future Programmes to replace the Beef Technology Adoption Programme**

Specific recommendations include:

- The BTAP programme (or similar) should be retained;
- Teagasc should seek to inform the future BTAP programme with the learning from this evaluation and ongoing feedback from farmers and facilitators;
- The financial incentive to participation should be retained;
- Completion of the e-profit monitor should be considered as a pre-requisite;
- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine should work with Teagasc to seek to reduce duplication in administration and recording;
- A specific recommendation is that BTAP attendance registers be better structured;
- The task driven approach should be retained in principle but modified to provide for:
  - An opportunity to address broader areas of farm management practice rather than specific tasks;
  - Greater autonomy to individual discussion groups (farmers and facilitators) to identify their own tasks (which should be measurable and verifiable);
  - Progression and development of groups where priority issues evolve;
  - The organisation of a broader annual programme tailored to the needs of members; and
  - Greater flexibility in the organisation of shared meetings and the involvement of external experts/speakers.

## **1. INTRODUCTION TO TEAGASC AND EVALUATION OF BEEF DISCUSSION GROUPS**

Teagasc, the Agriculture and Food Development Authority, is the national body responsible for providing integrated research, advisory training services to the agriculture and food industry and rural communities in Ireland. Teagasc provides its services through three directorates: Research; Operations; and Knowledge Transfer Directorates. Discussion groups are a key methodology used by Teagasc to transfer knowledge to farmers.

Discussion groups are a proven method of knowledge transfer in agriculture. They provide an ideal conduit for the provision of advice, sharing of information, learning, sharing new ideas and technologies between/among facilitators and farmers. Discussion groups allow farmers to share ideas and debate issues in a constructive and supportive environment. They also have the benefit of providing a social network for farmers who have become increasingly isolated on their own farms. A beef farmer discussion group is a group of farmers engaged in the business of beef farming. The primary purpose of the group is to provide a forum suitable for learning to take place. The group may have either a specific focus, or may wish to cover a number of topics throughout the year (Teagasc, 2014)<sup>3</sup>. Teagasc has developed a *'Best Practice Protocol'* to ensure that each discussion group operates effectively for the benefit of its members. The three attributes of a successful discussion group are deemed to be: regular meetings; a committed facilitator; and an identified and active group chairperson and secretary.

The Food Harvest 2020 report (DAFF, 2010)<sup>4</sup> identified that *'discussion groups play a critical role in the achievement of improved technical and financial know-how'*. Specific reference is made to achieving improved performance among beef farmers *'primary producers must be encouraged to optimise efficiency by adopting new technology and best commercial practice. Attendance at relevant discussion group meetings, farm walks and demonstration events should be built into the conditions of new schemes as appropriate'* and *'strong collaboration between State agencies is required to ensure that relevant research outputs are applied at farm level, especially through the greater use of the BETTER farms programme and discussion groups'* (DAFF, 2010)<sup>5</sup>.

The Beef 2020 Activation Group – *Growing the Beef Sector* report (DAFM, 2011)<sup>6</sup> recommended that *'an effective group system be provided and participation encouraged through publicly funded support'*. The Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP) was introduced for a three year period (2012-2014) to support farmers in seeking to achieve the targets for the beef sector set out in the Food Harvest 2020 Report. The programme is based on the discussion group model and aims to provide participants with the knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Teagasc, 2014: Tender Document of Evaluation of the Impact on Farmers Participating in Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups 2012-2014.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2010, Food Harvest 2020: A Vision for Irish Agri-Food and Fisheries.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2011, Beef 2020 Activation Group – Growing The Beef Sector.

and skills necessary to increase profits on their farms (DAFM, 2012)<sup>7</sup>. The main objective of the BTAP is to encourage efficiency gains on beef farms through an expansion of the level of participation in discussion groups. All participants are required to focus on improving performance in a number of key areas affecting beef profitability including financial management, grassland management, breeding, herd health and producing animals to market requirements.

There are currently 289 active Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups with 4,900 farmer members which is almost three times the number engaged in groups in 2010 (Teagasc, 2014)<sup>8</sup>. As a result of the increased farmer participation in beef discussion groups and the increased facilitator involvement in the facilitation of group meetings and serving the needs of farmers, Teagasc has commissioned this independent evaluation to assess the impact on farmers of participating in beef discussion groups. This report is an evaluation of the Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Programme not just the BTAP but it provides useful analysis and feedback on the delivery of BTAP by Teagasc.

### **1.1 Purpose and Objectives of the Evaluation**

The purpose of this evaluation is to:

- Examine the impact and/or effectiveness of Teagasc beef discussion groups in terms of the knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and performance (both physical and financial) of group members; and
- Make recommendations which will enable Teagasc to continuously improve its delivery of beef discussion groups.

The overall objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Compare farm performance (both physical and financial) of group members and non-group members (Section 3);
- Examine the impact of Teagasc beef discussion groups on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of group members (Section 5);
- Identify opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of discussion group delivery (Section 6);
- Identify ideas for the financing, design and implementation of new national programmes to further improve beef discussion group participation (Section 7); and
- Establish the views of facilitators and group members on how discussion group membership has impacted on the Teagasc/client relationship (Section 9).

The evaluation provides an insight into how discussion groups have contributed towards performance improvement. The outcomes will be used by Teagasc to ensure consistent delivery of a high quality discussion group experience resulting in improved farmer performance. It will also allow an opportunity to provide the Department of Agriculture,

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2012. 'Minister Announces Beef Technology Programme – Programme a Key Driver in Implementing Food Harvest 2020 Targets' – Press Release Issued by Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

<sup>8</sup> Teagasc, 2014: Tender Document for Evaluation of the Impact on Farmers Participating in Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups 2012-2014.



Food and the Marine feedback on the design and financing of future programmes to promote discussion group involvement.

## **1.2 Method**

The evaluation utilises both internal and external expertise to collate data collected by way of evidence for analysis. Physical and financial assessments are included from the National Farm Survey (Teagasc Agricultural Economics and Farm Survey Department). Ms Martina Moran (Teagasc Walsh Fellow) undertook a research study (as part of a M.Agr.Sc. project) *'An Assessment of the Effectiveness of Drystock Discussion Groups in the North West of Ireland as an Extension Tool'*<sup>9</sup>. This research involved surveys (2012 & 2013) of drystock discussion group members (9 groups and 125 farmers), non-discussion group drystock farmers (20 farmers) and 20 Teagasc facilitators.

The external component of the data collection and overall project evaluation was undertaken by Broadmore Research. A research survey was undertaken with a random sample of discussion group participants across the country. The data collection was undertaken by way of a telephone survey (farmers were informed of possible inclusion in the survey sample by notification in the Teagasc Beef Newsletter and by text message (where possible)). A total of 357 survey questionnaires were completed in July 2014. A telephone survey of 51 Teagasc beef clients who were not members of discussion groups was also undertaken. The sample of group members is representative of all discussion group members across the country (95% confident that the results among all farmers are within +/- 5% of those in this sample). However, the sample of non-members does not have the same statistical representativeness. Therefore the results are not directly comparative but the findings for the non-members provide an indication of likely trends among that group. Survey questionnaires were developed in consultation with the Teagasc project team.

Three focus group meetings (facilitators, farmers and administrators) were held to complement the survey data and to gain the insights of facilitators and administrators in addition to farmers<sup>10</sup>. A workshop (involving Teagasc management, research, advisory staff and Professor Frank Vanclay, University of Groningen) was held to explore the emerging research findings and recommendations and provide expert input. The evaluation was guided by an internal project team who worked closely with the external evaluator.

A brief overview of the Beef Technology Adoption Programme is provided in Section 2. The farm performance of group members and non-members is examined in Section 3 using National Farm Survey data. In Section 4 a description is provided of the farmers who participated in the discussion group members' survey. Section 5 explores the impact of Teagasc beef discussion groups on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of group members. Opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of discussion delivery

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<sup>9</sup> Moran, M., 2013: An assessment of the effectiveness of drystock discussion groups in the North West of Ireland as an extension tool. Unpublished M.Agr.Sc. thesis, University College Dublin. Throughout the report, this research will be referenced as Moran, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> The methodology for the focus groups was drawn from Macken-Walsh, A. (2013) A Subjective Appraisal of Discussion Group Functioning, REDP Working Paper Series. Teagasc REDP.

are presented in Section 6. Section 7 examines the impact of discussion group membership on the Teagasc/client relationship. Conclusions are drawn from the research in Section 8 and recommendations made in Section 9.

## **2. THE BEEF TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION PROGRAMME**

This report is not an evaluation of the Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP) per se but an evaluation of Teagasc Beef Discussion Group programme which includes the delivery of the BTAP. At farmer level, there is no real differentiation made between BTAP and the Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Programme, for farmers the BTAP is inextricably linked to discussion groups due to the significant increase in the number of both farmers participating in and groups overall. BTAP was introduced in 2012 with the intention of providing farmers with a financial incentive to engage in discussion groups and in doing so, acquire knowledge and skills which are necessary to improve the productivity and profitability of their beef enterprise. The discussion group programme is delivered by Teagasc and private accredited facilitators. The programme has run for 2012, 2013 and 2014. New entrants were allowed into BTAP in 2012 and 2013 but not in 2014 (DAFM, 2014)<sup>11</sup>.

The activities of each discussion group are managed by a facilitator. A maximum of 20 farmers per group is recommended and permission must be sought from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for groups larger than 23 members. Discussion groups are also required to be properly structured with an active chairperson and secretary. The level of payment is up to a maximum of €1,000 (dependent on the overall number of participants nationally) (DAFM, 2014)<sup>12</sup>. Some of the key requirements for eligibility include: sign up to ICBF Beef Herdplus service; farmers participating in the Sheep Technology Adoption Programme (STAP) must complete different tasks to the BTAP; participants may have a nominee who can attend the meetings in their place if they are unable to do so; farmers must attend a minimum of 6 discussion group meetings or at least 4 meetings and 2 qualifying national events; farmers must sign a register of attendance at events; facilitators must give advance notice to DAFM of meetings; and farmers are required to host an on-farm group meeting. In 2012 it was mandatory in either year 1 or 2 to complete Task 1 (Teagasc Profit Monitor) and one other task. In 2013, farmers were required to complete Task 1 if they had not already done so, complete a baseline survey and three-year farm plan and two tasks (one other if Task 1 was completed). In 2014, farmers had the option of completing Task 1 or two other tasks.

The tasks are as follows:

- Task 1: Complete Teagasc e-Profit Monitor;
- Task 2: Provide on-farm weights to ICBF;
- Task 3: Increase the genetic merit of the herd by one of a number of methods;
- Task 4: Whole farm soil analysis (only allowed in one year only);
- Task 5: Reseed a minimum of 10% of grassland;
- Task 6: Complete a herd health plan with a vet;
- Task 7: Register calf birth information online, maintain DAF herd register online and apply for Single Farm payment online (only allowed in one year only);
- Task 8: Put a rotational grazing system in place (only allowed in one year only);
- Task 9: Pregnancy scan suckler cows and breeding heifers; and
- Task 10: Complete Bord Bia Carbon Navigator/Footprint calculator for the farm and obtain an analysis of at least two silage samples.

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<sup>11</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2014: Beef Technology Adoption Programme Terms and Conditions.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The breakdown of the tasks selected by farmers participating in the Teagasc BTAP discussion groups for 2012-2014 is provided in Table 1. The predominant task is the completion of the e-Profit Monitor as it was compulsory in 2012/2013.

**Table 1 BTAP Tasks Selected by Teagasc Participants (2012-2014)**

		<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>
<b>Task</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>(n=3916)</b>	<b>(n=4881)</b>	<b>(n=4560)</b>
		<b>% of Participants</b>		
<b>1</b>	<b>e-Profit Monitor<sup>†</sup></b>	43.6	92.7	83.1
<b>2</b>	<b>On-Farm Weighing</b>	18.2	13.6	4.6
<b>3</b>	<b>Increase Genetic Merit</b>	49.8	12.8	4.1
<b>4</b>	<b>Whole Farm Soil Analysis*</b>	11.1	12.6	2.6
<b>5</b>	<b>Reseed Minimum of 10% of Grassland</b>	10.1	8.4	1.5
<b>6</b>	<b>Herd Health Plan</b>	8.8	10.5	2.2
<b>7</b>	<b>Online Registrations*</b>	31.5	9.1	1
<b>8</b>	<b>Rotational Grazing System in Place*</b>	27.1	5	0.9
<b>9</b>	<b>Pregnancy Scan</b>	-	29.2	8.6
<b>10</b>	<b>Carbon Navigator and Silage Samples</b>	-	6.1	1.2
	<b>*Task allowed in one year only</b>	<b>Tasks 9 &amp; 10 introduced in 2013</b>		
	<b><sup>†</sup>Mandatory in either year 1 or 2</b>	<b>Two Tasks Required</b>	<b>Two Tasks Required</b>	<b>Task 1 or Two Other Tasks</b>

### **3. COMPARING FARM FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE OF GROUP MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS**

In order to assess the actual performance at farm level and impact of discussion group membership, information is drawn from the Teagasc National Farm Survey.

*One of the challenges in undertaking the comparisons in this section on the performance of group members and non-members is the issue of sample selection bias of the discussion group members. As a result, drawing conclusions that farmers that are discussion/BTAP members are more profitable because they are discussion group/BTAP members may not be statistically warranted. This problem arises because farmers that join discussion groups may not be representative of the general population of farmers because of unobserved characteristics of the farmer that affect both the likelihood of participating in discussion groups and farm profitability. Farms that participate in discussion groups/BTAP might in the absence of discussion group/BTAP participation have been more profitable than average.*

*The sample selection bias problem means that in order to conclude that participation in a discussion group leads to higher profits (in a statistically or econometrically robust fashion), the sample selection bias issue must be addressed by using specific procedures<sup>13</sup>. Due to the absence of Teagasc NFS data on participation by drystock farmers in discussion groups prior to the introduction of the BTAP it has not been possible to empirically assess the impact of discussion group/BTAP participation on farm profitability using statistical or econometric methods that account for sample selection bias.*

*The comparison of average levels of profitability of farms in a discussion group with the average level of profitability of farms that do not participate in discussion groups remains valid, once it is acknowledged that the likelihood that many discussion group participants, in the absence of a discussion group involvement, would have had higher than average levels of profitability.*

On average for 2013 discussion group members have higher gross output (€363/ha), higher costs (€268/ha), and overall a higher average gross margin per hectare (€174/ha) than non-group farms (Table 2). On average the negative net margin on the discussion group farms was lower (€95/ha) than that on non-group member farms. The findings on performance are similar for 2012. These performance outcomes cannot be fully attributed to discussion group/BTAP participation since it is likely that farms that are discussion group/BTAP participants would have higher profits than non-BTAP/group member farms even in the absence of a discussion group/BTAP programme (sample selection bias).

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<sup>13</sup> Läpple, D., Hennessy, T. and Newman, C., 2013: "Quantifying the Economic Return to Participatory Extension Programmes in Ireland: an Endogenous Switching Regression Analysis." *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 64(2):467-487.

**Table 2 Average Gross and Net Margins Per Hectare for Discussion Group Participants and Non-Participants (All Cattle Production Systems) - 2013**

2013 Performance	€ per Ha			Difference – Members & Non-Members
	All	Group Members	Non-Members	
Gross Output	907	1215	852	363
Gross Margin	319	467	293	174
Total Costs	1,045	1,273	1,005	268
Net Margin	-139	-58	-153	95

Source: National Farm Survey

Almost 10% of cattle farms in 2013 earned negative gross margins per hectare (Table 3). Over 40% of discussion group members earned a gross margin per hectare of greater than €500 while less than 20% of non-member farms earned more than €500 per hectare. A little over 3% of discussion group members earned negative gross margins while 10% of non-member farms earn negative gross margins.

**Table 3 Distribution of Gross Margin for Discussion Group Participants and Non-Participants (All Cattle Production Systems) – 2013**

	All Farms	Group Members	Non-Members
Gross Margin/ha	%		
< €0	9.1	3.3	10.1
€0 ≤ - <€150	21.4	12	23
€150 ≤ - <€300	23.6	15.9	25
€300 ≤ - <€500	23.6	26.7	23
≥ €500	22.4	42.2	18.9

In order to get a more in-depth understanding of the technical performance on cattle farms, an analysis of different systems of production (on the basis of what age farmers sell their cattle) (weanlings, store cattle, finished cattle and others) was undertaken. The proportions of discussion group members and non-members farms in each of the production systems are similar.

On average farmers participating in the discussion group programme have higher stocking rates than non-participants. On farms with a store production system the higher stocking rates reflect on average the higher quality land that is farmed. Where weanling or finisher production systems dominate, there is little or no difference between discussion group members and non-member farms in the average quality of land farmed on those farms. Despite the on average equivalence of agricultural land quality between member and non-member farms in each of the weanling and finisher production systems there are differences in the average intensity of agricultural activity per hectare between discussion group member and non-group member farms. Some of the main differences are summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4 Performance of Discussion Group Members and Non-Members for Different Farm Systems (2013)**

Performance Measure	Weanling Producers	Store Producers	Finisher Producers	Other Producers
	% by Which Discussion Group Members are Better than Non-Member Farmers			
Stocking Rate	19	24	10	14
Gross Output	52	48	34	37
Gross Margin	67	72	73	34

Differences in the stocking rate per hectare between discussion group members and non-members explain much but not all of the differences in the value of gross output. Discussion group member farms also on average received higher prices for cattle sold off of the farm. The higher prices per head of cattle sold when combined with higher stocking rates per hectare largely explains the consistently higher level of gross output per hectare on discussion group member farms. The largest percentage differences in cattle prices received were for weanlings (+12%) and cull cows (+19%), differences in prices received for male and female store cattle and finished cattle were positive but less than 10% (Table 5).

**Table 5 Average Animal Sale Prices for Discussion Group Members and Non-Members for 2013**

2013	All Farms	Discussion Group Members	Non-Members	% Difference – Members & Non-Members
	€/animal			
Weanlings	756	826	738	11.9
Male Stores	975	1029	966	6.5
Female Stores	928	952	924	2.8
Male Finished	1,519	1,541	1,513	1.8
Female Finished	1,355	1,435	1,334	7.6
Cull Cows	1,139	1,290	1,080	19.4

Further analysis on the performance of cattle farms was undertaken by breaking the farms into three groups (top, middle and bottom) on the basis of gross margin per hectare. Across the top, middle and bottom categories of farms, discussion group members on average have higher stocking rates, farm on better soil, have higher output, higher direct costs but also higher gross margins per hectare than non-group members. The percentage differences in gross margin earned per hectare are smallest on those farms that are in the top one third (on a gross margin per hectare basis) of the member and non-member farms. The most dramatic percentage differences in gross margin per hectare occur in the bottom category of farms. It should be noted that the absolute difference in profit earned per hectare on the top and middle member and non-member farms is very similar at close to €200/ha, while the absolute difference in average gross margin per hectare on the bottom member and non-member farms is €128 per hectare.

#### 4. DESCRIPTION OF FARMERS PARTICIPATING IN THE EVALUATION SURVEY

The discussion group members' survey sample consists of a total of 357 farmers from 25 counties and the non-discussion group members' survey sample consists of 51 farmers (who are Teagasc clients but not participating in discussion groups) from 19 counties. Both samples contain a broad cross-sectional sample of beef farmers in the country. The sample of discussion group members is representative of all discussion group members across the country (95% confident that the results among all farmers are within +/- 5% of those in this sample). However, the sample of non-members does not have the same statistical representativeness. Therefore the results are not directly comparative but the findings for the non-members provide an indication of likely trends among that group. At all stages in the report where comparisons are made between these two samples, ***it is important to bear in mind that the non-discussion group member sample does not have the same representative coverage.***

##### 4.1 Farm and Personal Profile of Farmers

Half of the discussion group members are mainly involved in suckler to weanling production while 37% are engaged in suckler to finishing and 16% involved in weanling/store to beef systems. The most popular other farm enterprises are sheep, tillage, forestry and pedigree breeding. The non-discussion group members are mainly involved in suckler to weanling production (63%) with one fifth purchasing weanlings/stores and finishing to beef and 16% involved in suckling to finish. The most common other farm enterprise for these farmers is forestry.

Overall discussion group members are carrying 60% more beef livestock units on their farms than non-discussion group members (64.3 LU's compared to 40.1 LU's). Table 6 provides a breakdown of the numbers of beef livestock present on the farms of discussion group members and non-members.

**Table 6 Average Beef Livestock Numbers For Teagasc Discussion Group Members and Non-Discussion Group Members**

Beef Livestock	Discussion Group Members		Non-Discussion Group Members	
	% of Farms Where Present	Average Number Per Farm Where Present	% of Farms Where Present	Average Number Per Farm Where Present
<b>Sucklers</b>	85.7	35	78.4	20.5
<b>0-1 years</b>	90.8	34.4	88.2	22.5
<b>1-2 years</b>	91	28.8	88.2	17.6
<b>2 years +</b>	73.9	8.6	56.9	11.5

The average area farmed (owned and rented) is 45 hectares for discussion group members, the average is 36 hectares for those not involved in discussion groups. While the research did not explore the scale of other livestock on the farms, it is fair to assume on these figures that if the beef stocking rate on these farms is compared, there is a wide disparity between the two groups (1.43 beef LU's/hectare for discussion group members and 1.11 beef LU's/hectare for non-discussion group members).



#### 4.1.1 Agricultural Education and Training

One third of discussion group members have no formal agricultural training, one quarter have undertaken short courses while 40% have completed agricultural college/acquired the Green Cert and 4% have an agricultural diploma/degree. Overall, non-discussion group members have a lower level of formal agricultural education/training

#### 4.1.2 Non-Farm Income

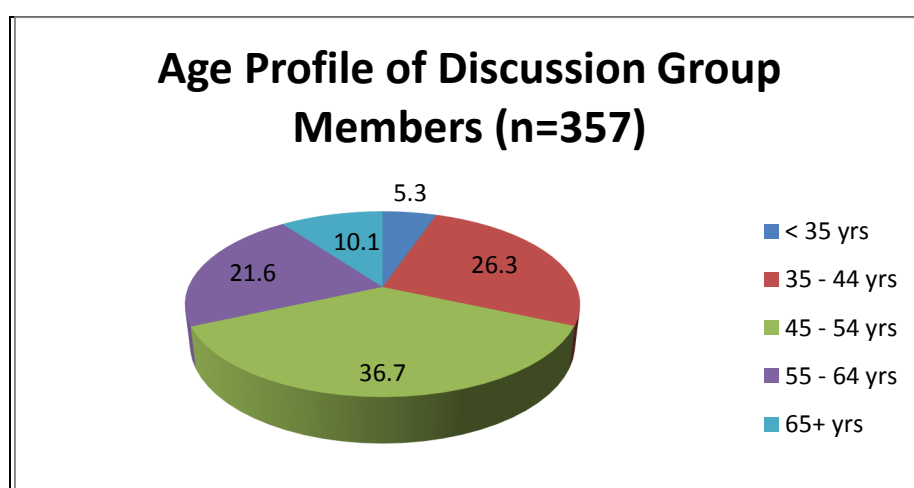
Some 70.8% of beef discussion group members either have an off-farm income themselves or their spouse/partner has an off-farm income (Table 7) while it is lower at 58.8% for non-discussion group members. Almost half (47%) of discussion group members have themselves got another source of income.

**Table 7 Presence of an Off-Farm Source of Income (job/other business) for Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Members and Non-Members**

	Discussion Group Members (n=357)	Non-Members (n=51)
<b>Off-Farm Income</b>	%	
<b>Respondent Only</b>	22.1	11.8
<b>Spouse/Partner Only</b>	23.8	15.7
<b>Both</b>	24.9	31.4
<b>None</b>	29.2	41.2

#### 4.1.3 Age of Farmers

Only 5% of discussion group members are aged less than 35 years, while only one in ten farmers are aged over 65 years (Figure 1). The non-members are older on average than members with 29% aged over 65 years. When compared to CSO<sup>14</sup> (2010) figures, discussion group members are younger on average than the national beef farmer population (particularly in the 35-54 years age group).



**Figure 1 Age Profile of Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Members (n=357)**

<sup>14</sup> Census of Agriculture 2010 (CSO): CSO figures for specialist beef farmers and mixed grazing livestock (2010): < 35 yrs (5.6%); 35-44 yrs (16.3%); 45-54 yrs (24.4%); 55-64 yrs (25.4%); and 65+ yrs (28.2%).

## 4.2 Discussion Group Membership

It is obvious that the introduction of BTAP has brought about a huge increase in discussion group membership and the evidence from the evaluation survey shows that the majority of farmers joined the Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups since the introduction of BTAP. The main reasons identified by farmers for joining their discussion group originally include: learning (40.4%); gaining information/ideas (27.1%); the BTAP payment (21.8%); and meeting other farmers (17.8%) (Table 8). Other important reasons include: developing and improving the farm (13.3%); the opportunity to visit other farms to compare performance (12.4%); and because they were specifically asked to join (12.1%). Only one fifth of farmers specifically cite the BTAP payment as their reason for joining even though three quarters of farmers joined since the introduction of the BTAP. It is likely that the introduction of the BTAP has brought a momentum into beef discussion groups from the perspective of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc/Consultants and farmers.

**Table 8 Main Reasons for Teagasc Discussion Group Members Joining Their Group (n=354)**

Main Reasons for Joining Discussion Group	%
<b>Learn (from facilitator and other farmers)</b>	40.4
<b>Gain Information/Ideas</b>	27.1
<b>BTAP Payment</b>	21.8
<b>Meet Other Farmers</b>	17.8
<b>Develop and Improve the Farm</b>	13.3
<b>Visit Other Farms to Compare Performance</b>	12.4
<b>Asked to Join (Facilitator/Neighbour/Friend)</b>	12.1
<b>Social Aspect/Overcome Isolation</b>	3.4

\* Respondents could identify more than one reason.

Evidence from the research undertaken by Moran (2013) in the Northwest shows that few farmers cited the payment as the main reason for joining their discussion group with the majority citing '*learning from other farmers*' (72%), while to '*improve the farm and increase profit*' was identified by 23% of farmers. However, it is evident that learning from others can also lead to improvements and increased profit.

The research in the Northwest, identified that: 46% of farmers stated that the BTAP payment had no influence on their membership; and a further 36% stated that they would still be a member without the BTAP payment. Some 38% of farmers stated that they did '*not know that discussion groups existed*' and 29.1% did '*not have enough information about groups*' prior to BTAP (Moran, 2013). The significant increase in membership of discussion groups nationally shows that the financial incentive did play a role either consciously or sub-consciously in the decision by farmers to join a discussion group. It may also have encouraged increased activity among facilitators to encourage beef farmers to participate, hence farmers may feel it was the encouragement of the facilitator (77% first heard about the BTAP from their facilitator or at the series of Teagasc information meetings held in 2012) which was the deciding factor and key influence rather than the actual BTAP payment (Moran, 2013). BTAP brought a focus on discussion groups and the financial payment while not the most influential factor may have encouraged farmers to seek information on discussion groups. One fifth of those who stated that they were '*too busy*' prior to 2012 to

join a discussion group were motivated to make time for group participation subsequently (Moran, 2013).

#### **4.3 Non-Membership of Discussion Groups**

None of the non-members have ever been part of a discussion group. The main reasons cited in the non-member survey for not joining a discussion group include: no specific reason (40%); lack of time (22%); not asked (12%); no interest/not bothered (10%); age (8%); farm too small (6%). Further evidence on non-participation in BTAP is provided for 2012 from National Farm Survey data (it is possible that some of these farmers participated in subsequent years). The main reasons for non-participation in BTAP in 2012 (first year of the programme) included: lack of awareness of the programme; unwilling to host a farm meeting; lack of time to participate; and insufficient financial incentive.

The majority (58%) of non-discussion group members in the evaluation survey state that they would not consider joining a discussion group in the future, only 6% definitely would join and 26% may possibly join a group. Some 88% of non-members say that there is no particular incentive or aspect which would encourage them to join a discussion group (16% state that they simply are too old), while 12% would join if there was more money (greater BTAP payment) was available for membership and 5% would consider joining if asked.

#### **4.4 Perceived Differences Between Discussion Group Members and Non-Members**

The perceived differences between discussion group members and non-members were explored in focus group meetings with facilitators and farmers (Table 9). Focus groups were asked to describe typical personas for members and non members. Non-members are generally perceived as being older even though there is a wide cross section of age of farmer involved in groups. The non-members are considered as being more private and confidential while members are perceived to be more open, forward thinking and driven by quality of life as well as farming motives.

Discussion group members are described as being financially aware and profit driven, open to exploring solutions to problems on their farms, more engaged in planning and aware of market trends. Non-members are described as being less driven by profit, less engaged in planning, less efficient, less open to new technology, slower to change and implement new practices. Whether valid or not, some of these farmers are perceived as having '*given up*' on making further improvements or achieving efficiencies on the farm.

Discussion group members benefit from a wide range of sources of information. In contrast the non-members are more dependent on information in the Irish Farmers Journal, low level contact with Teagasc and information received from other farmers at livestock marts.

Overall the differences between discussion group members and non-members are perceived to relate to openness to new ideas, attitude to change and willingness to consider new ideas and adopt new practices. There is possibly a fear or reluctance among some farmers to get involved in discussion groups and they may not be fully aware of what groups

have to offer. Some farmers may actually lack the self-confidence to get involved in groups even though they could benefit greatly from participation in a discussion group.

Discussion group members are considered as having the confidence to challenge facilitators and other farmers on the best options to pursue on their own farms. They make more demands on the facilitators both within and outside of the group meetings. Confidence is perceived as growing with membership and they gain the ability to plan, analyse and more intensively explore options and new ideas.

**Table 9 Perceived Typical Persona's of Discussion Group Members and Non-Members**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Non-Group Farmer</b>	<b>Discussion Group Member</b>
<b>Age</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally older – over 55 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most likely between 35-50 years</li> </ul>
<b>Family Status</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Married or single</li> <li>• May have off-farm job</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single or married</li> <li>• Less likely to have off-farm job</li> </ul>
<b>Interests</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main interests are farming related</li> <li>• Frequent mart goer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main interests are Farming related</li> <li>• Involved in family &amp; takes time off</li> </ul>
<b>Farm Type</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Range of enterprises: suckling; finishers; weanling/stores</li> <li>• Smaller area farmed &amp; lower stocking rate</li> <li>• Not as focused on stock quality</li> <li>• Calving pattern spread out</li> <li>• Farm system may have to fit in around other job</li> <li>• Competing with others at marts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time farmer but many members may also have jobs</li> <li>• Generally in suckling or weanling/store production</li> <li>• Medium sized farms but not the biggest</li> <li>• Higher stocking rates</li> </ul>
<b>Sources of Farm Information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irish Farmers Journal/media</li> <li>• Marts</li> <li>• Teagasc Adviser – low level contact</li> <li>• Attendance at local events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion group and other farmers</li> <li>• Teagasc advisers/specialists – make contact on issues</li> <li>• Irish Farmers Journal/media/radio</li> <li>• More attendance at open days/seminars/events</li> <li>• Teagasc newsletter</li> <li>• Consultants</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• BETTER Farm programme</li> </ul>

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Non-Group Farmer</b>	<b>Discussion Group Member</b>
<b>Approach to Farm Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less efficient</li> <li>• Less forward planning not very open to change</li> <li>• Not using ICBF</li> <li>• Not using information technology</li> <li>• Less technical knowledge</li> <li>• Not completing profit monitor</li> <li>• Negative attitude to technology transfer</li> <li>• Given up on more productivity – less interest in improving</li> <li>• Possibly underutilising the farm</li> <li>• Accepting the future is the SFP</li> <li>• Happy to stick with current system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More profit driven &amp; seeking efficiencies</li> <li>• More technically and financially aware and completing profit monitor</li> <li>• Engage in planning for the future</li> <li>• Flexible to enterprise opportunities and willing to make changes</li> <li>• Tighter calving spread</li> <li>• Aware of market trends and aspects of farm management e.g. grass management, breeding, herd health and welfare</li> <li>• Not afraid to admit problems</li> <li>• Signed up to and using ICBF Reports</li> </ul>
<b>Plan for Next 10-15 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No real plan for future - holding the fort</li> <li>• Not much change – semi retirement</li> <li>• Year to year approach</li> <li>• Land might be rented out or sold</li> <li>• May transfer to next generation</li> <li>• Possibly change enterprise – reduce intensity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue farming</li> <li>• More likely to change system as a result of planning</li> <li>• Mix of lifestyle and economics will influence decisions</li> <li>• May involve successor in the group</li> <li>• Might convert to dairying</li> </ul>
<b>General Mindset</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why change now? - this is all they know</li> <li>• Focused on single payment and schemes</li> <li>• Some are happy go lucky</li> <li>• No pressure to improve efficiency</li> <li>• Not willing to share information – private and confidential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking to improve from current situation</li> <li>• Willing to challenge facilitators</li> <li>• Generally positive outlook</li> <li>• Innovative and open to change</li> <li>• Flexible in approach</li> <li>• Focused on increasing efficiency and profit</li> </ul>

Note: The personas provide insights to the differences that farmers/facilitators perceive between discussion group members and non-members, thus highlighting the impact of discussion group membership according to farmers /facilitators perspectives (developed in Focus Group Meetings by farmers and facilitators).

In the workshop discussion, it was highlighted that farmers are *'not all the same'*, that they have different styles of farming, personalities and goals. This can also vary from group to group. Therefore, not every farmer is suited to group methods or groups may not appeal to them.

## **5. IMPACT OF TEAGASC BEEF DISCUSSION GROUPS ON THE KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR OF GROUP MEMBERS**

The impact of discussion group membership on farmer knowledge/information, attitude change and behaviour change is explored in this section.

### **5.1 Knowledge/Information**

Participation in discussion groups leads to a high level of expectation from farmers in terms of delivery of information on key farm management practices. Evidence from the research in the Northwest (Moran, 2013) in terms of two aspects: grassland management; and profit monitor analysis shows that discussion groups rate as the most preferred method of learning, with a higher level of preference than the more traditional methods of farm visits and farm walks.

While the timeframe for change to occur in the Moran study (2013) was short (2012-2013), it does however indicate that the level of farmer knowledge increased significantly among discussion group members on: rotation length; grazing management; gross margin calculation; and net profit calculation. The knowledge of those who were new members of discussion groups was at a lower level than those who were long-standing members, indicating that knowledge increases with engagement in discussion groups.

When a comparison was made between discussion group members and non-members, members had more knowledge on breeding, grassland and financial analysis than non-discussion group members. Non-group members were mainly dependent on farm visits (from adviser), farm walks and newsletters for learning on grassland management.

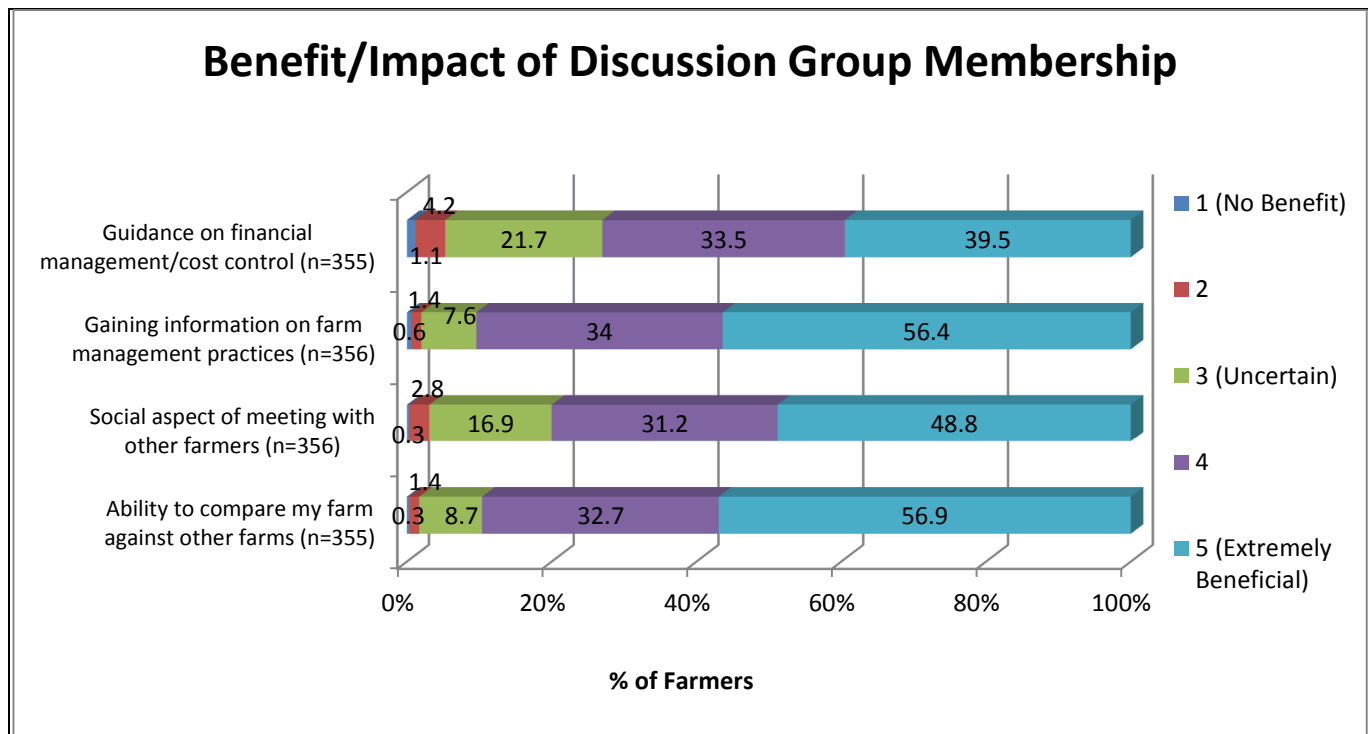
Evidence from the focus group meetings indicates that there is a significant sharing of knowledge once members become established within discussion groups. Farmers who have an appetite to learn make the facilitation of discussion groups and sharing of information much easier. Farmers realise that they are not alone in facing problems, that others face similar problems and the group helps both in solving them and dealing with the associated stress.

*'There is a great sharing of knowledge within groups ..... farmers realise that if they have problems they are not alone. When they arrive at the meeting with lots of problems and they think they're only their own but when they get there and they share them, they get others solving the problems.'*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

Farmers identify a number of factors which impact on the extent of learning from discussion group meetings including: the focusing on key elements of efficiency; undertaking small practical projects where all farmers can see the differences for themselves; involving external speakers who can contribute new information; encouraging on-farm measurements; and providing handouts on information at meetings which farmers can use as a reference at a later stage.

The area of most benefit/impact of participation in a Teagasc Beef Discussion Group is 'gaining information on farm management practices' (90.4% rate as a benefit) (Figure 2). A similar proportion rate the 'ability to compare my farm against other farms' as beneficial. Four out of five farmers consider the 'social impact of meeting other farmers' as a benefit, higher than the 73% who rate 'guidance on financial management/cost control' as beneficial.



**Figure 2 Rating of the Benefit/Impact of Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Membership to Members**

Farmers who anticipate a future financial benefit from discussion group participation are more likely to consider that 'the ability to compare my farm against other farms' is beneficial. Those who intend to continue involved in their group in future are most likely to consider the 'social aspect of meeting with other farmers' to be a benefit. This provides evidence of the particular benefit of discussion groups as relating specifically to peer-to-peer support and learning.

### **5.2 Attitude to Change**

Moran (2013) explored the attitude of farmers to change by way of the level of agreement (on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree)) to statements relating to: grassland; breeding; and finance. The evidence shows that for both 2012 and 2013 there was a relatively positive attitude towards aspects of grassland, breeding and financial management. However, farmers were less positive in 2013 than 2012 but this could have been due to the difficult weather and poor growth rates encountered.

Macken-Walsh et al. (2012)<sup>15</sup> in their research with beef farmers highlighted that farmers' decisions about the adoption of technologies are often influenced by the opinions of their peers.

*'I know people who will not change because they are afraid ..... others have made changes because of the confidence of being able to talk to other farmers.'*

(Farmer Focus Group)

### **5.3 Adoption of Farm Management Practices<sup>16</sup>**

In the survey of discussion group members, practically all farmers state that they are completing a profit monitor however, this is directly influenced by being a mandatory requirement of the BTAP for 2012/13 (BTAP tasks are presented in Section 2, Table 1). Nine out of ten discussion group members state that they practice rotational/paddock grazing (78% of non-members) while two thirds of members say that they have re-seeded 10% of grass in the last 3 years (Figure 3) (57% of non-members). A similar proportion (69%) of members aim for a 12 week breeding season (however, farmers indicate that this is not always possible to achieve but this is the intention at the start of the breeding season) (47% for non-members). Some 44% of members state that they use an annual herd health plan<sup>17</sup> and 30.5% regularly weigh cattle (none of the non-members regularly weigh their cattle). The level of practice adoption is considerably higher than one would expect from consideration of the BTAP tasks (Table 1). However this may be due to a number of factors: farmers identifying a task that most suits them in a particular year; and possibly over stating the actual level of practice adoption on their farms). Due to the requirement to comply with specific tasks in BTAP, practice adoption of discussion group members is influenced by both the BTAP requirements and the learning acquired from group participation.

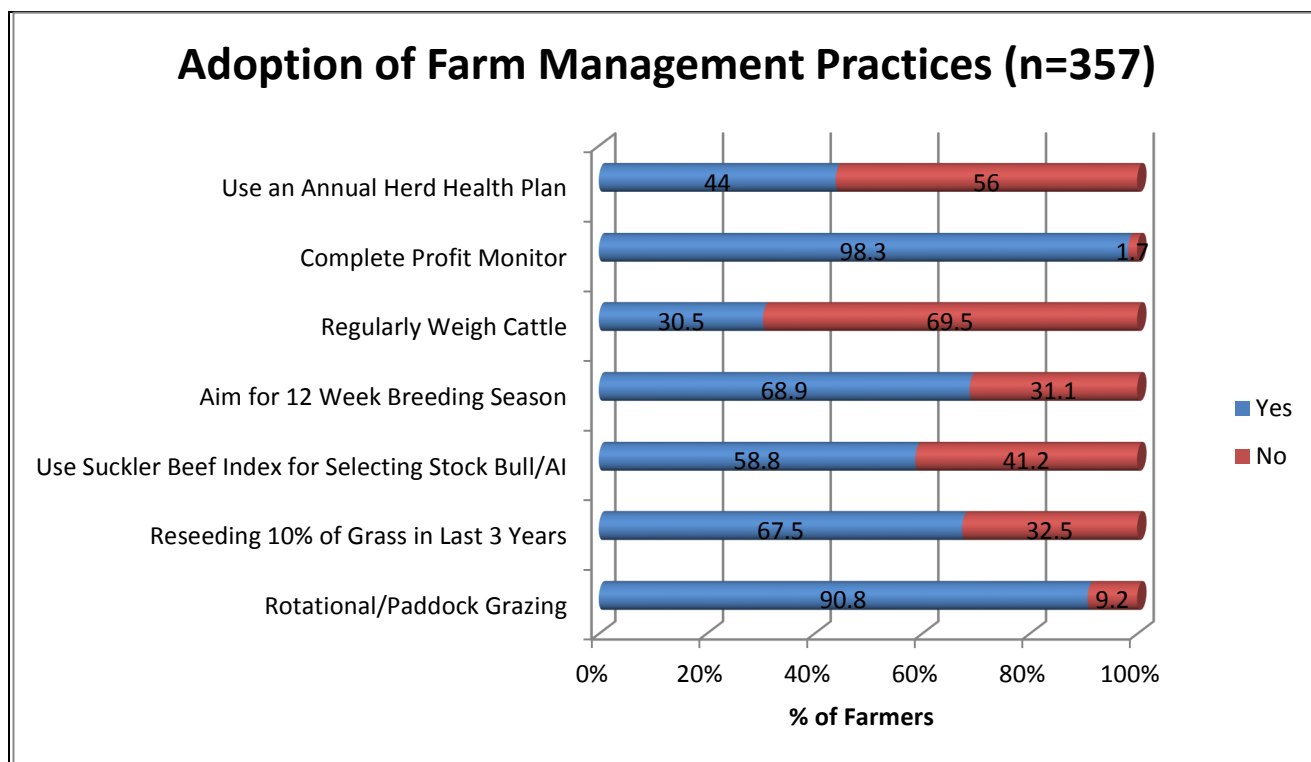
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<sup>15</sup> Macken Walsh, A., Crosson, P. and Murray, A., 2012: A Qualitative Study of Irish Beef Farmers' Production Decisions: Summary and Implications for Extension. Teagasc.

<sup>16</sup> These findings appear to indicate a higher level of practice adoption than one would expect from the experience at farm level. There is likely to be an element of over stating of practices by farmers however they are likely to have taken some action on these practices as a result of the learning in discussion groups. However, the level of practice adoption is higher for discussion group members than non-members (even if there is an overstating of the level of adoption).

<sup>17</sup> While farmers were specifically asked in the survey if they were using an annual herd health plan, it is unlikely that this proportion actually have herd health plans developed in conjunction with their vet as specified in BTAP Task.





**Figure 3 Level of Adoption of Farm Management Practices by Members of Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups (n=357)**

Farmers who intend to continue in the discussion groups even if the BTAP payment ceases have a higher level of practice adoption than those who intend to leave their group.

The adoption of 20 practices (relating to grassland, breeding, nutrition, animal health, traceability and finance) which Teagasc promotes through discussion groups was examined by Moran (2013) in the Northwest. Four practices showed a significant increase in the rate of adoption between 2012 and 2013 (two of which were mandatory BTAP tasks and one optional, while the other practice (BVD testing) was compulsory for all beef farmers in 2013) while a further six showed a slight increase in adoption. It is not possible to attribute this change exclusively to discussion group membership but it is likely that membership positively affected the uptake of these practices. The study also showed that as the length of time farmers are involved in a discussion group increases so too, does the level of practice adoption.

Discussion group members had higher levels of adoption for the 20 selected practices than non-discussion group members (statistically significant for 18 practices). Some of the practices were specifically related to participation in BTAP, however, discussion group members adopted on average 11.4 practices in 2013 compared to an adoption level of 4.9 for non-group members (Moran, 2013). These findings demonstrate the extent of learning and application of that learning by discussion group members. Evidence from the research on beef farmers by Macken-Walsh et al. (2012)<sup>18</sup> highlights the importance of considering a package of practices rather than focusing on individual technologies.

<sup>18</sup> Macken Walsh, A., Crosson, P. and Murray, A., 2012: A Qualitative Study of Irish Beef Farmers' Production Decisions: Summary and Implications for Extension. Teagasc.

### 5.3.1 Influences on Practice Adoption

The completion of profit monitors is almost totally influenced by membership of the discussion groups (97%) (Figure 4) which is to be expected considering that profit monitors was a mandatory task in one of the first two years of the programme. Use of a herd health plan is primarily influenced by group membership (72%) and two thirds of discussion group members indicate that the weighing of cattle is influenced by membership. Just over half (54% of farmers) are influenced by their group in using the Suckler Beef Index for selecting sires and in the decision to reseed grassland. All of these findings indicate a significant influence on farm practice adoption as a result of discussion group participation. The highest level of practice adoption is among those where both the farm operator and the spouse/partner have an off-farm job (68% rated a higher level of practice adoption) and lowest where there is no off-farm employment (47% rated a higher level of practice adoption). Factors such as the level of discussion group functioning<sup>19</sup>, experience of financial benefits and area farmed also influence practice adoption.

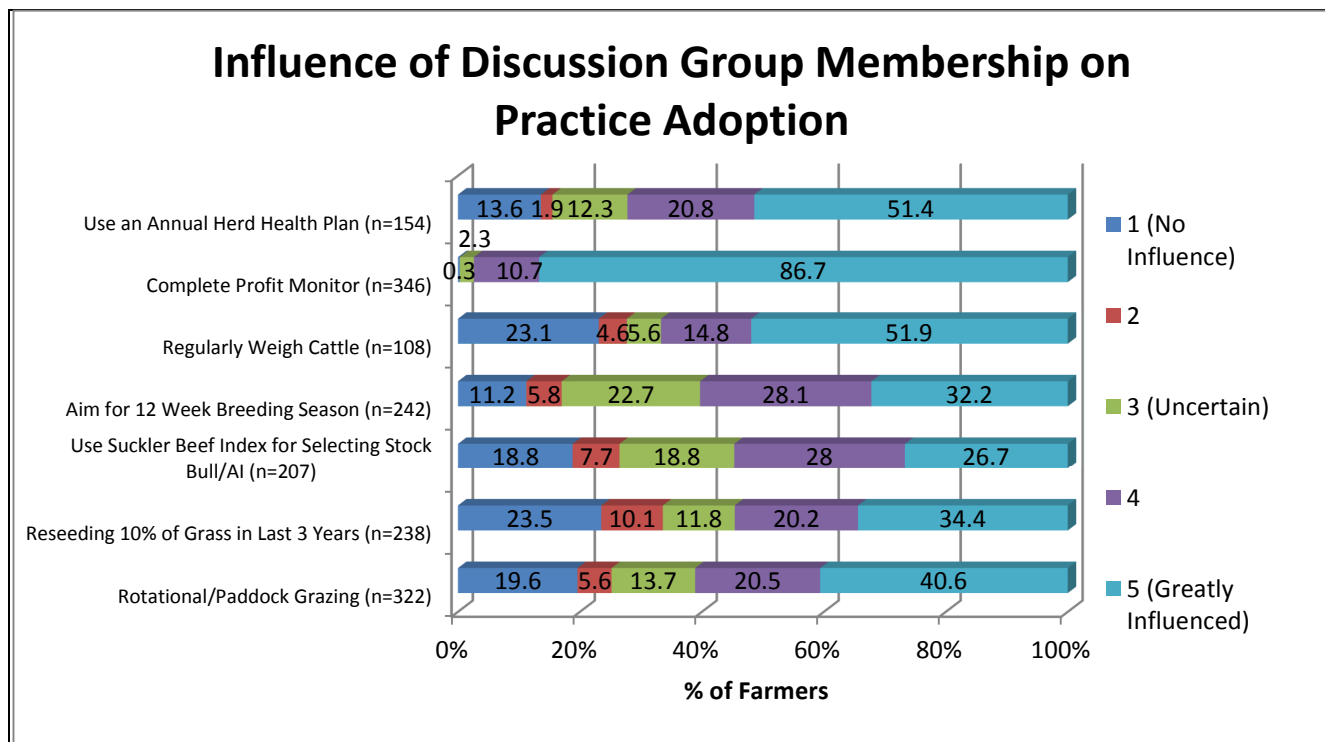
*'The discussion group puts a bit of pressure on you to actually take action.'*  
(Farmer Focus Group)

For the discussion group members, 23% fall into the lowest category of practice adoption<sup>20</sup> and 26% in the highest category. In contrast, seven out of ten (71%) non-members have the lowest level of practice adoption and only 2% have the highest level.

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<sup>19</sup> For purposes of analysis an index of group function was constructed based on a number of variables: presence of a chairperson; holding of an AGM each year; holding regular meetings; allowing members to input into meeting agendas; providing recommendations to the host at each meeting; summarising the main points at the end of each meeting; travelling to outside events/meetings/groups/farms; and engaging in social activities outside of group meetings. A positive response was assigned a score of 3, sometimes was assigned a score of 1 and a negative response assigned a zero value. The index was further divided in 4 categories (minimal, low, high and maximum) for undertaking cross analysis.

<sup>20</sup> For purposes of analysis an index of practice adoption was constructed based on a number of variables relating to practice adoption: rotational/paddock grazing; reseeding 10% of grass in last 3 years; use suckler beef index for selecting stock bull/AI; aim for 12 week breeding season; regularly weigh cattle; complete profit monitor; and use and annual herd health plan. A positive response was assigned a score of 3 and a negative response assigned a zero value. The index was further divided in 4 categories (minimal, low, high and maximum) for the purposes of cross analysis.

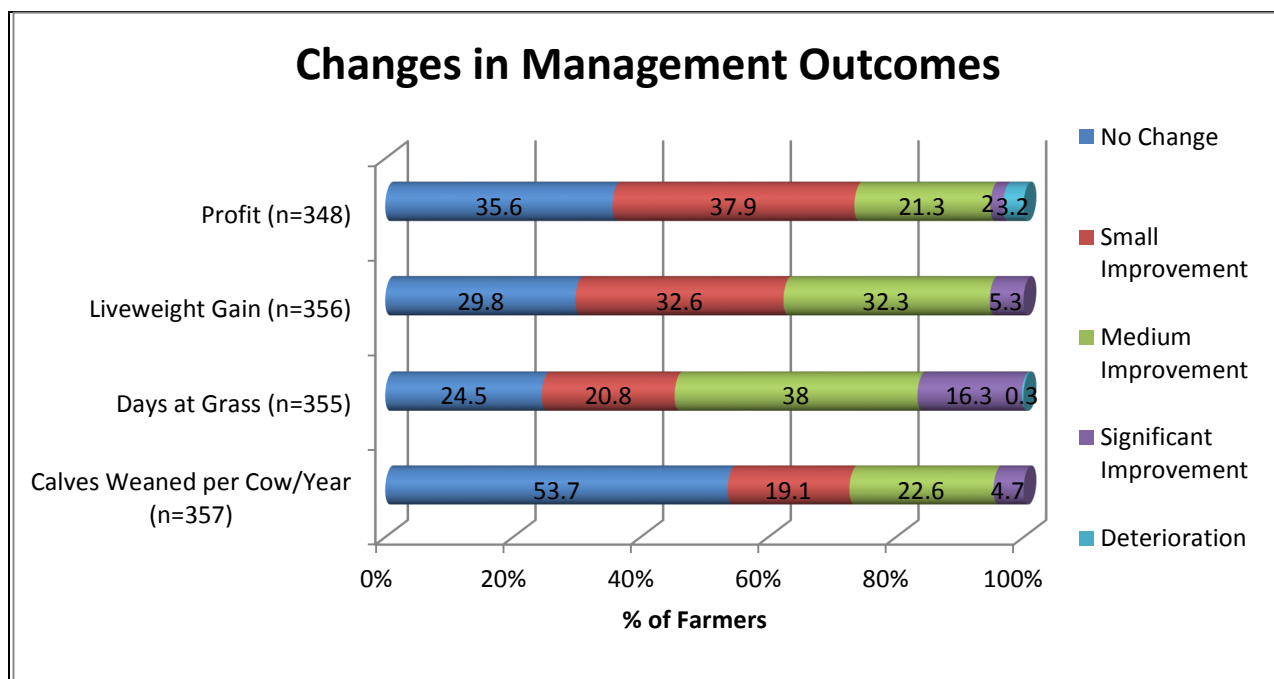


**Figure 4** Extent of Influence of Teagasc Discussion Group Membership on Practice Adoption

The main influences on practice adoption identified in the survey by the group non-members are Teagasc and the Irish Farmers Journal. Despite the fact that these farmers are not discussion group members, Teagasc has a significant influence over their farm management practices.

#### 5.4 Outcomes of Farm Management Practices

Three quarters of discussion group members improved the number of days at grass as a result of their contact with Teagasc while 70% improved their liveweight gain (Figure 5). For those who are not members of a discussion group, only 45% increased the number of days at grass and 58.8% made improvements in liveweight gain. Some 61.2% of discussion group members attribute improvements in profit to their Teagasc contact. However, only 40% of non-members improved their profits. Less than half (46%) of discussion group members attribute a change in the number of calves weaned per cow per year to their contact with Teagasc.



**Figure 5 Main Changes in Areas of Management as a Result of Contact With Teagasc Over Past 3 Years**

Some of the factors influencing changes in farm management outcomes include level of group functioning, practice adoption and experiencing a financial benefit to group participation, among others.

Outcome	Aspects Which Influence Outcomes
<b>Profit (n=348)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 44% of farmers in the lowest functioning discussion groups improved profit compared to 72% of highest functioning discussion groups.</li> <li>• Some 58% of highest practice adopters improved profit compared to 46% of lowest adopters.</li> <li>• 76% of those who intend to continue in their group improved their profit compared to 43% of those who do not.</li> </ul>
<b>Liveweight Gain (n=356)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 84% of farmers participating in the groups with the highest level of functioning improved liveweight gain compared to 53% of those in the lowest functioning groups.</li> <li>• 78% of highest practice adopters compared to 56% of lowest practice adopters improved liveweight gain.</li> <li>• 81% of those who experienced a financial benefit improved weight gain compared to 32% of those who did not experience a financial benefit.</li> </ul>
<b>Days at Grass (n=355)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 87% of members in the highest functioning discussion groups increased days at grass compared to 69% of members of lowest functioning groups.</li> <li>• Those farming between 30 and 50 hectares are most likely to have increased number of days at grass.</li> <li>• 84% of farmers who experienced a financial benefit as a result of participation in their discussion group increased numbers of days at grass.</li> </ul>

Outcome	Aspects Which Influence Outcomes
<b>Calves Weaned per Cow/Year (n=357)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One third of farmers participating in groups with the lowest level of function improved the number of calves weaned compared to 59% of those involved in discussion groups with the highest level of functioning.</li> <li>• 55% of farmers who experienced a financial benefit improved the number of calves weaned compared to 18% of farmers who did not experience a financial benefit.</li> </ul>

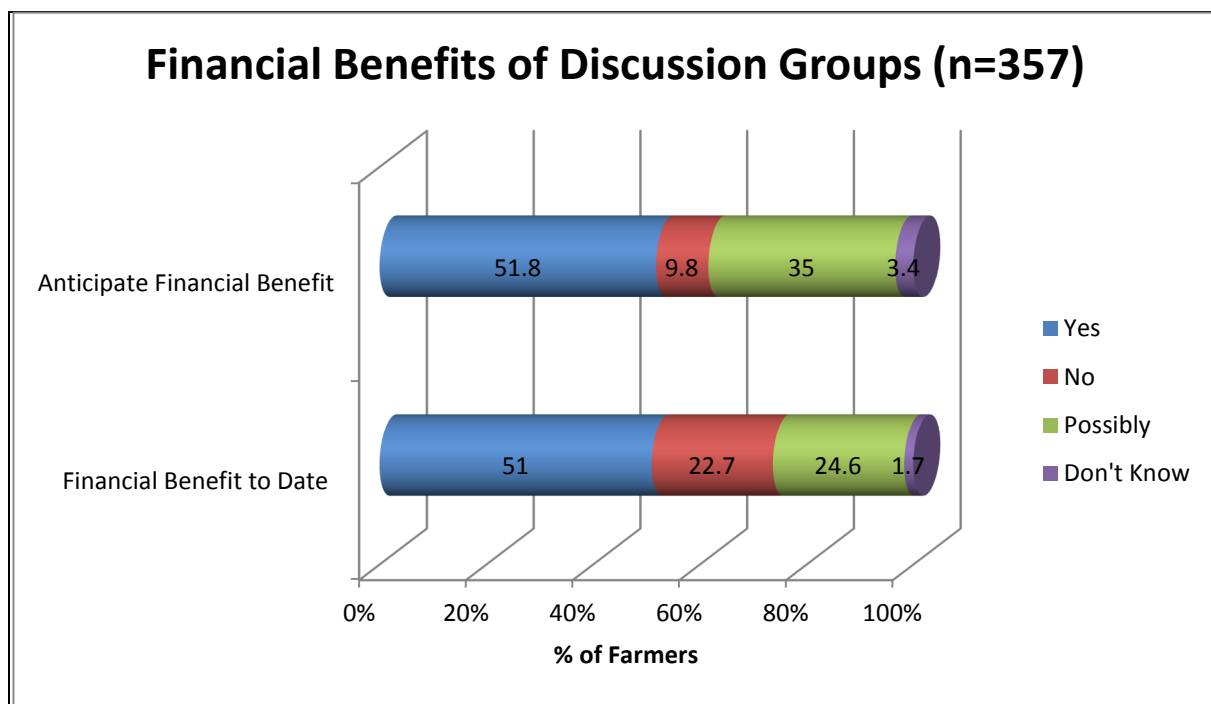
### **5.5 Financial Benefits of Discussion Group Membership**

The perception of financial benefits arising from participation in discussion groups is also explored in the discussion group members' survey. Half of discussion group members perceived a financial benefit to date from their involvement in the group and a further one quarter have seen a possible benefit (Figure 6). Similarly half of members anticipate a future financial benefit and a further one third (35%) a possible benefit. Practically all farmers (97%) who have already seen a financial also anticipate future financial benefits from discussion group membership. Of those who have not see a financial benefit to date, 28% expect a financial benefit in the future and a further 52% possibly expect a benefit. Only 7% of discussion groups members have not seen a financial benefit to date (including possibly) or do not anticipate a future financial benefit (including possibly).

Some 84% of farmers who intended continuing in their discussion group even in the absence of the BTAP payment have seen a financial benefit to membership, however, half of those who intend to leave their group have not seen any financial benefit.

The level of discussion group functioning has a significant impact on the extent to which farmers perceive that they have received a financial benefit to discussion group membership. Two thirds of farmers involved in groups with the lowest level of group functioning have experienced a financial benefit, however, this increases to 84% for those involved in groups with the highest level of functioning.

As could be expected those with the highest level of practice adoption are most likely to have experienced financial benefits (87%). Only 62% of those with the lowest level of practice adoption have experienced financial benefits.



**Figure 6 Financial Benefits to Date and Anticipated Financial Benefits as a Result of Membership of Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups (n=357)**

The main financial benefit from beef discussion group membership is perceived to be from improved grassland management (53% including general management, reseeding and paddock grazing) (Table 10). One quarter of farmers identify cost control and one fifth breeding/fertility/compact calving as the way that they achieved a financial benefit. Similar to past financial benefits, the main anticipated future financial benefits are in the areas of grassland management, breeding/compact calving and cost control/reduced costs. An overall benefit to participation in discussion groups identified by farmers in the focus group meeting is the opportunity to see the costs of different farm systems and to see how other farmers achieved changes on their farms.

**Table 10 Main Financial Benefits (Past & Anticipated) From Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Membership**

	Past (n=260)	Future (n=274)
<b>Main Financial Benefits to Discussion Group Membership</b>	<b>%</b>	
<b>Improved Grassland Management/Longer Grazing Season</b>	33.8	37.2
<b>Cost Control/Reduced Costs</b>	26.2	25.5
<b>Breeding/Fertility/Compact Calving</b>	19.6	28.1
<b>Better Overall Performance as a Result of Small Changes</b>	16.2	9.9
<b>Use of Profit Monitor</b>	14.6	8.4
<b>Reseeding</b>	11.9	12.4
<b>Nutrient Use (Slurry/Soil Testing/Fertiliser/Lime)</b>	11.5	2.9
<b>Paddock Grazing</b>	7.7	5.8
<b>BTAP Payment</b>	5.8	1.8
<b>Reduced Concentrate Feeding</b>	5.4	3.3

Note: Farmers identified more than one main financial benefit.

## **5.6 Other Impacts of Discussion Group Membership**

Social interaction is one of the benefits of discussion group membership identified by both facilitators and farmers. It is a benefit that many farmers do not anticipate prior to joining their group. Social interaction also impacts both on the functioning of the discussion group (more interaction and sharing of information/ideas) and on the wider benefits that farmers realise from participating in discussion groups. This aspect is supported by research on beef farms by Macken-Walsh et al. (2012)<sup>21</sup> *'without social supports the pursuit of development plans to enhance farm efficiency and financial performance would seem unlikely.....the importance of social supports as a pre-requisite for successful agricultural extension to take place is probably underestimated and undervalued.'*

*'There is a good social aspect to groups ..... groups differ and some have more social events.'*  
(Facilitator Focus Group)

Farming is a lonely working environment and the discussion group meetings provide an opportunity to meet other farmers and explore common challenges and problems. As a result of participating in the discussion groups, farmers are getting to know other farmers better and engaging in more interaction between group meetings (both formally and informally). This aspect has been particularly beneficial in times of pressure or stress when farmers are able to make contact with each other and provide mutual support (particularly during the busy spring period).

*'They are out there calving, every farmer is going to get a bad run whether it's bad calving or whatever it is but they are more likely to ring another farmer in the group than an advisor'*  
(Facilitator Focus Group)

There is a wide variation between groups in terms of the extent of their social interaction with longer established groups more likely to engage in trips away and general social activities. The extent of social activities evolves over time with some groups including specific social elements from the start and others slower to do so. Social events provide the opportunity for farmers to get to know each other and build trust between each other and with their facilitator. They also allow for a greater understanding of individual situations both farm and personal. Social activities can also provide an opportunity to explore how the group is working which may not be possible during routine group meetings. The organisation of and engagement in social activities is considered by facilitators as part of group development and important for a healthy and vibrant discussion group.

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<sup>21</sup> Macken Walsh, A., Crosson, P. and Murray, A., 2012: A Qualitative Study of Irish Beef Farmers' Production Decisions: Summary and Implications for Extension. Teagasc.

## **6. OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF DISCUSSION GROUP DELIVERY**

In order to explore options to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of discussion groups, it is first necessary to examine how groups operate and function currently.

### **6.1 Discussion Group Functioning<sup>22</sup>**

Only half of Teagasc Beef Discussion Groups have a chairperson (48% of farmers who joined their group subsequent to the BTAP have a group chairperson in contrast to 71% of farmers who were involved prior to this) and only 37% hold an AGM each year (Figure 7). In contrast practically all (98%) discussion groups hold regular meetings every 6-8 weeks (for many, they cited regular meetings as being during the period of March to October<sup>23</sup>, this was the period for their group to be active and not all year round).

A strong discussion group chairperson was considered as an important link between the group members and the facilitator. The chairperson provides guidance on what members are looking for and feedback on the performance of the group to the facilitator.

*'Chairperson and secretary are hugely important in building the link between the facilitator and farmers. We would see them once a month or once every five weeks but if they have a link person, then if there is a difficulty or problem within the group, farmers can go to that person in the group.'*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

Members have a high level of input into their discussion group agenda (94%), the key points are summarised at the end of year meeting (87%) and recommendations are provided to the host farmer at each meeting (80%). The majority (87%) of groups travel to outside events/meetings/groups/farms, however 83% of discussion groups do not engage in social activities outside of group meetings. While 6% of farmers who joined discussion groups post BTAP engage in social activities, the level of engagement in social activities for longer involved farmers is 23%.

*'Everyone is more comfortable with each other now. Guys have gone away on a trip/tour and the lads are more together and they are more willing to talk, before that it would have been very scattered, it does [trip/tour] gel people together.'*

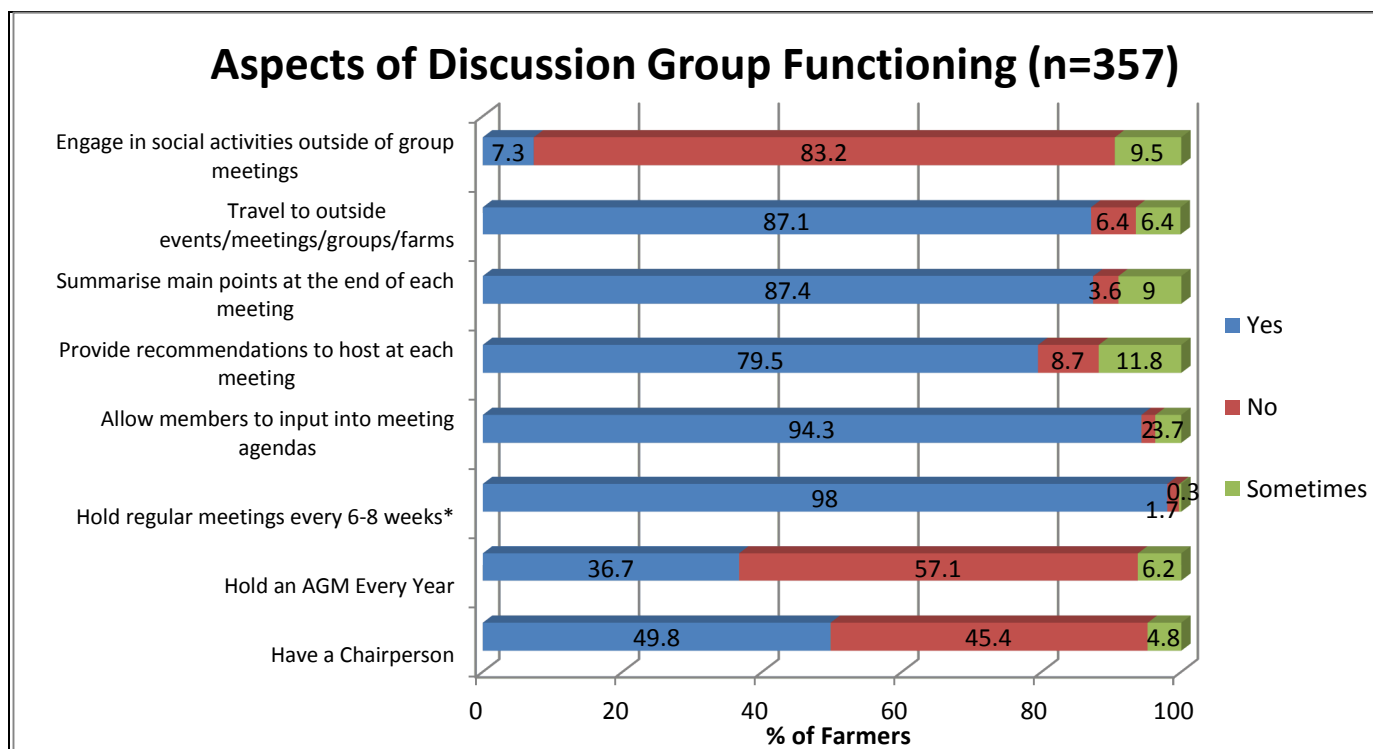
(Farmer Focus Group)

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<sup>22</sup> The index of discussion group functioning used in the earlier analysis is developed using the variables in Figure 7.

<sup>23</sup> Relates to the fact that it is a requirement of BTAP that farmers attend the minimum number of meetings/events by 31<sup>st</sup> October annually.





\*For many, they cited regular meetings as being during the period of March to October. For them, this was the period for their group to be active, not all year round.

**Figure 7 Aspects of Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Functioning (n=357)**

Three-quarters of members state that the majority of members (over 75%) attend every Teagasc Beef Discussion Group meetings and a further 22% state that there is ‘around a 75%’ attendance level. It was suggested in the focus group with facilitators that the organisation of group meetings is critical to ensuring good attendance. If farmers know the dates of meetings well in advance, they can better plan to attend them e.g. a particular day of the month when meetings take place. The agreement on a set date for group meetings also has the potential to simplify the notification procedure to farmers. Some facilitators notify farmers of meetings by letter while others send a text message 5-7 days in advance and then again on the day before the meeting.

Three out of five (61%) discussion group members believe that the talking at the discussion group meetings is shared equally between facilitator and farmers (everyone gets to talk). However, 30% say that it is the facilitator that does most of the talking, while 7% say that it is dominated by a small number of farmers.

*‘It is hard to get people to talk, some meetings that you got to, maybe three quarters of the group will say very little for the whole meeting.’*  
(Farmer Focus Group)

Two thirds (67%) of farmers who intend to stay involved in their discussion group<sup>24</sup> (even in the absence of the BTAP payment) consider that the talking at their discussion group meeting is ‘shared equally among the group’ compared to 38% of those who do not intend

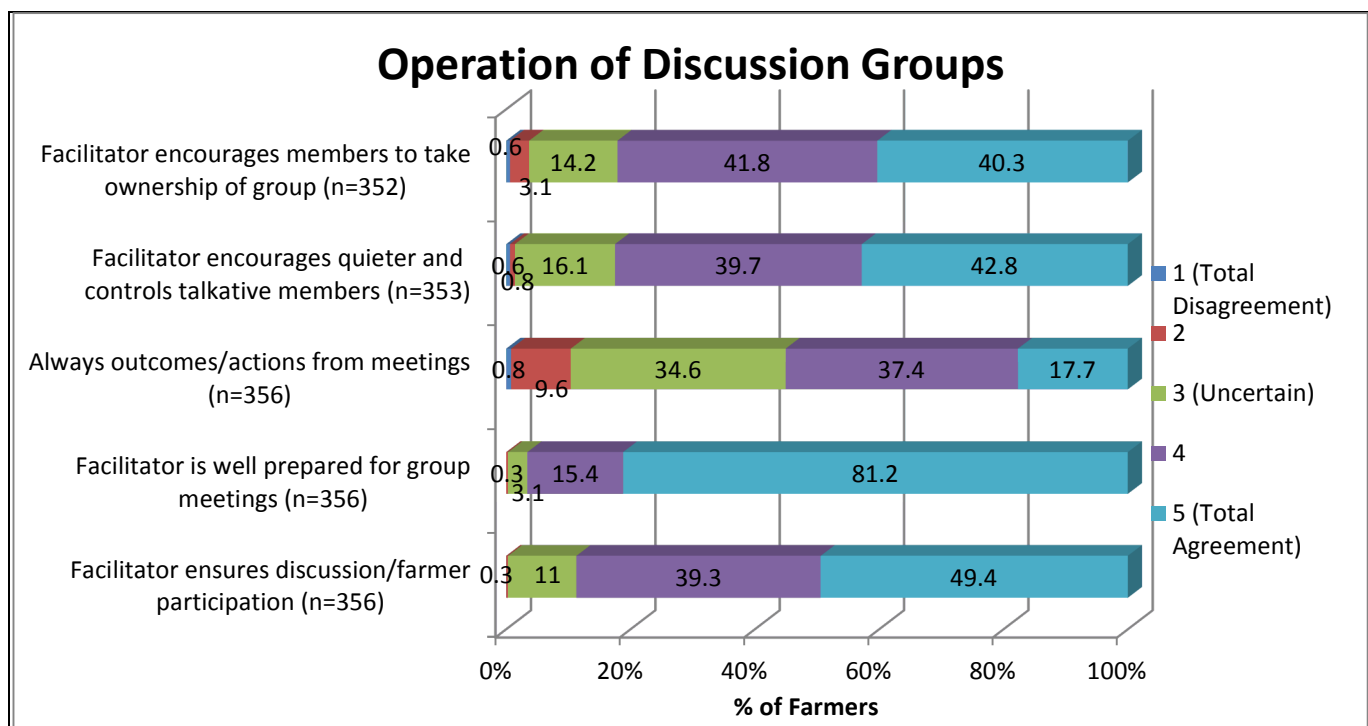
<sup>24</sup> Further detail on continued involvement in discussion groups is provided in Section 7.2 – 75% of farmers expressed the intention of staying involved in their discussion group even in the absence of the BTAP payment.

to continue. Half (51%) of the farmers who intend to leave their group say that the facilitator does most of the talking compared to a quarter (24%) of farmers who intend to stay involved in their group. However, the fact that the facilitator *'does most of the talking'* may be due to group dynamics where farmers are not working well together as a group, and, in cases, it may be difficult for the facilitator to overcome such dynamics.

Almost half (48%) of farmers involved in groups with the lowest level of functioning consider that the talking is equally shared at group meetings in contrast to 70% of farmers in groups with the highest level of functioning.

### 6.2 Operation of Discussion Groups

In terms of group operation, the area of most satisfaction for farmers is that the *'facilitator is well prepared for group meetings'*, 97% of farmers agree with the statement (Figure 8). Almost nine out of every ten farmers agree that the *'facilitator ensures discussion/farmer participation'*. Four out of five farmers agree that the facilitator *'encourages members to take ownership of their group'* and *'encourages quieter and controls talkative members'*. However, only 55.1% of members agree that there are *'always outcomes/actions from discussion group meetings'* (relates to actions which farmers can address on their own farms).



**Figure 8 Perception of Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Members on the Operation of Their Group**

The discussion group facilitators highlighted that it is important to have an annual programme for events for discussion groups, which should include the farms to be visited for each meeting. There are many methods of selecting the farms to host meetings however, it was suggested that one way of overcoming reluctance or hesitancy is to visit farms on an alphabetical basis which eliminates argument and also allows farmers to know

in advance of when it is their turn to host a group meeting. Having a social dimension was also highlighted as important in building the trust and relationship between farmers and with their facilitator.

*'When you're seeing them in a social setting it gives you a better relationship. You know them better, can respond better to their needs and they get to know you better too.'*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

### **6.2.1 Characteristics of an Ideal Facilitator**

Farmers who participated in the focus groups meetings identified a number of key characteristics of an ideal facilitator including:

- Having a good personality to get on well with farmers but also to gain an understanding of them;
- A strong personality to push and encourage farmers to take action;
- Knowledgeable and able to share that knowledge;
- A good communicator in one-to-one and group situations;
- Willing to let discussion flow in meetings and summarises the relevance for farmers;
- Have a flexible approach to meetings so that issues of concern can be accommodated;
- Be interested in the farm and the farmer;
- Have a network of contacts to call on if required; and
- Be contactable and approachable.

Farmers recognised that the facilitator has a key influence on the group and in encouraging and motivating them. However, they believe that is important that there is the opportunity to provide feedback on the facilitator to Teagasc in the event that the facilitator is not meeting the needs of the group.

### **6.3 Suggested Improvements to Discussion Groups**

Only 36.4% of discussion group members suggested improvements to their group and/or facilitator which indicates a high level of satisfaction with the group currently but also it may reflect that they are still learning about discussion groups and not yet at a stage where they can critically appraise their own discussion group. Of those who commented, the main suggestions were to: encourage quieter members to talk (13.8%); provide more information on the requirements from beef processors (12.3%); organise group members along similar levels of performance (8.5%); and provide greater follow up on actions at subsequent meetings (8.5%) (Table 11).

**Table 11 Main Improvements to Teagasc Beef Discussion Group/Facilitator (n=130)**

Main Improvements to Discussion Group or Facilitator	%
Encourage Quieter Farmers to Speak up and Share More Information	13.8
More Information on Beef Processor Requirements	12.3
Structure Members into Groups of Similar Aims/Performance	8.5
Follow Up From Meeting to Meeting on Recommended Actions	8.5
Address Repetitiveness Within Meetings	7.7
More Open Discussion and Truth in Figures	5.4
More Events/Farm Walks/Outings	5.4
Greater Discussion on Finances/Performance	4.6
Control Talkative Farmers	4.6

*'Three or four members in our group don't seem to want to share information with others.'*  
(Farmer Focus Group)

'Keeping groups vibrant' was the highest rated challenge for facilitators in preparing for discussion group meetings (Moran, 2013). For the inexperienced facilitators, 'deciding on the questions to draw information from farmers' was also a challenge. It was suggested that this may relate to facilitators not having adequate knowledge of some of the farms of newer members.

Improvements to in-service training were suggested by facilitators in the Northwest (Moran, 2013) relating to content, process undertaken and organisation of training. Comments relating to content included: fewer topics at each session; facilitators input into content; and more of a focus on financial management. There was a suggestion to run the Teagasc in-service training in a discussion group format and also to plan it at the start of the year with sessions addressing time specific problems.

A challenge identified by facilitators in the running of beef discussion groups is that the large influx of new members since the introduction of BTAP has brought in a diversity of farmers into groups, many are eager to learn and improve the profitability of their farm but some are perceived as just being involved in order to collect the BTAP payment. By encouraging farmers to take ownership of their own groups, they may set the standard for the group overall and encourage all farmers to become more involved and make a greater contribution. Those farmers who primarily joined the groups due to the availability of the BTAP payment need to be shown/convinced that there is benefit to group participation which is greater than the actual payment.

Some specific areas for improvement in discussion groups were identified in the focus groups for both Teagasc and BTAP by farmers and facilitators.

<b>BTAP</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitators accepted that the BTAP programme required strict terms and conditions initially in order to ensure that a proper programme was put in place. However, it is suggested that there is now potential to allow more flexibility to facilitators in planning and organising the annual programme of activities for individual groups.</li> </ul>

- Facilitators suggested that they should be involved in the discussion on the development of future programmes and ensure that a new programme builds on the success of the current programme and does not become so complicated that it would turn farmers off participation.
- It is considered worthwhile to bring different discussion groups together for meetings and that there should be greater flexibility in a new programme's rules to allow this. This would allow for more sharing of ideas between groups and greater opportunity to involve external speakers.
- Facilitators commented on the fact that some of the longer established discussion group members are frustrated by the fact that the BTAP programme complicates the running of groups which previously functioned without rigid terms and conditions.

### **Teagasc**

- The scheduling of in-service training and national events can impact on discussion group schedules and it was suggested that an annual schedule of training days and events should be produced for each year and strictly adhered to in order to facilitate planning of discussion group schedules.
- A concern was raised regarding the further development of discussion groups and the ability of facilitators to service the needs of enhanced numbers of discussion group members.
- Facilitators recognise that it is important to ensure that all groups have a chairperson and secretary in place. However, they admit that significant importance may not have been placed on these roles initially as the priority was placed on getting the groups established, however, discussion group members now need to be convinced of their importance.
- Some farmers are slow to engage in discussion and need to be encouraged by facilitators in order to build their participation and their confidence. The suggestion was made that their confidence could be built by encouraging pairs or small groups of farmers to share information together as a first step to wider discussion.
- The fact that many beef farmers have off-farm employment places additional pressure on facilitators in terms of organising evening or Saturday meetings to facilitate their participation. In the event of discussion group numbers growing further this will be an additional burden on facilitators and will need to be addressed.
- Facilitators suggested that ongoing facilitation training is required particularly in dealing with new and weaker members/groups.
- It was suggested that farmers should be encouraged to get involved in more measurement of performance (e.g. grass, weights etc) which could provide facts to assist in management decision making but also for more informed discussion/debate.
- Farmers believed that the optimum number of meetings to be 6-10 annually with most considering that 6-8 meetings is adequate.
- Guaranteeing security of information is a big issue for farmers in terms of encouraging the participation and building their confidence. Facilitators need to provide guidance to farmers in maintaining group confidentiality.

#### **6.4 Administration of the Beef Technology Adoption Programme**

As outlined earlier, this evaluation is of Teagasc Discussion Groups not the BTAP per se, however, when exploring the issues with Teagasc administrators, their focus is very much on the administration of the BTAP programme as this is their main area of work with regard to beef discussion groups. This section addresses specific issues identified by administrators with regard to programme and areas for improvement.

Particular issues identified with regard to administration include:

- There is scope for considerable improvement in operational efficiency by developing a shared understanding between facilitators and administrators (Teagasc and DAFM) on the administration process protocols and by rigorous and efficient implementation of the administration procedures.
- The hosting of events (regional and national) entails significant work in terms of maintaining a register of attendance and ensuring that farmers from other areas and consultants are credited with attendance (details sent to each of the Teagasc regions and other private consultants).
- In some Teagasc regions, there are two different BTAP task forms in use (one for the Department of Agriculture records and one for Teagasc) which leads to confusion and process inefficiencies at facilitator and administrator level.  
*'Within our unit, some staff members are using the Department form and others are using the Teagasc form, leading to duplication and confusion.'*  
(Administrator Focus Group)
- A clear protocol needs to be adhered to by facilitators for responding to requests from farmers to make changes to their records (e.g. task or nominee). Adequate records of changes to Department of Agriculture documents and meeting notifications need to be maintained and communicated to administrators effectively to eliminate confusion and duplication of work at a later stage.  
*'Constantly changing the task sheet is the biggest problem.'*  
(Administrator Focus Group)
- Processes and staff involved should ensure comfortable adherence to programme deadlines and turn-around times (for submission to the Department of Agriculture) with timely submission of all required documents to allow for processing and checking.
- It was suggested that BTAP attendance registers could be better structured in order to provide more space for physically recording of names of farmers at meetings/events.
- The Teagasc Document Management System is perceived as being slow and it can delay the processing of programme records and is area for improvement.
- The introduction of the Sheep Technology Adoption Programme has also added more complexity to administration when farmers are participating in both programmes.
- Farmers tend to expect administrators or facilitators to deal with their queries on BTAP and this takes time and effort as it involves checking the system, clarifying with facilitators and checking with the Department of Agriculture.
- There is an ongoing need to remind farmers of the terms and conditions of the programme and of the importance of adhering to them in a timely manner. It is also

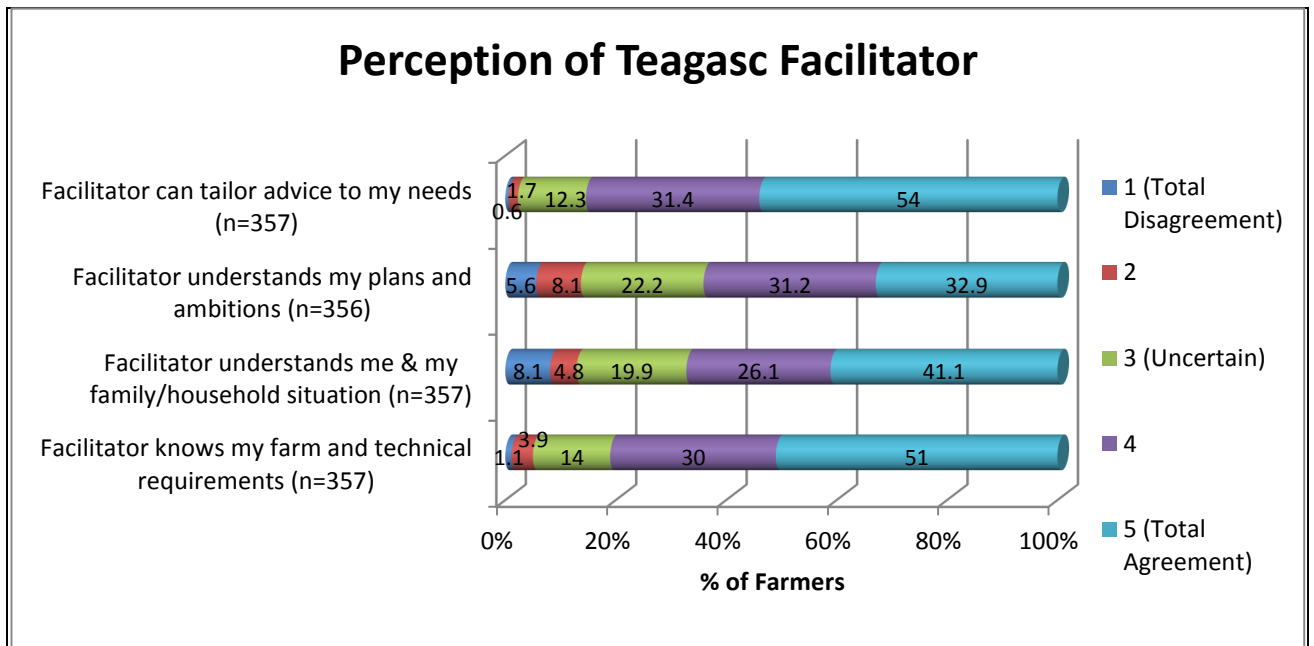
important to ensure that farmers realise that the onus is on them to comply with the terms and conditions.

- The Department of Agriculture and Teagasc need to have a clear protocol on the administration requirements in advance of the roll-out of a new programme subsequent to BTAP.
- It was suggested that efficiencies could be further improved by regular meetings involving relevant management, staff and administrators to plan events, share and update information and monitor progress on administration.

**7. IMPACT OF DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERSHIP ON THE TEAGASC/CLIENT RELATIONSHIP**

Four out of five discussion group members state that they mainly engage with their facilitator equally through their discussion group and on a one-to-one basis, while 15% state that it is mainly discussion group and 4% mainly one-to-one.

Some 85% of discussion group members agree that their facilitator can ‘tailor advice to my needs’ (Figure 9) (only two thirds of non-discussion group members agree) while 81% agree that the facilitator ‘knows my farm and technical requirements’ (62% for non-members). Two thirds of members agree that the facilitator ‘understands me and my farm/household situation’ (43% for non-members) and slightly less 64% agree that the facilitator ‘understands my plans and ambitions’ (59% for non-members).



**Figure 9 Level of Agreement Among Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Members on Statements Relating to Their Facilitator**

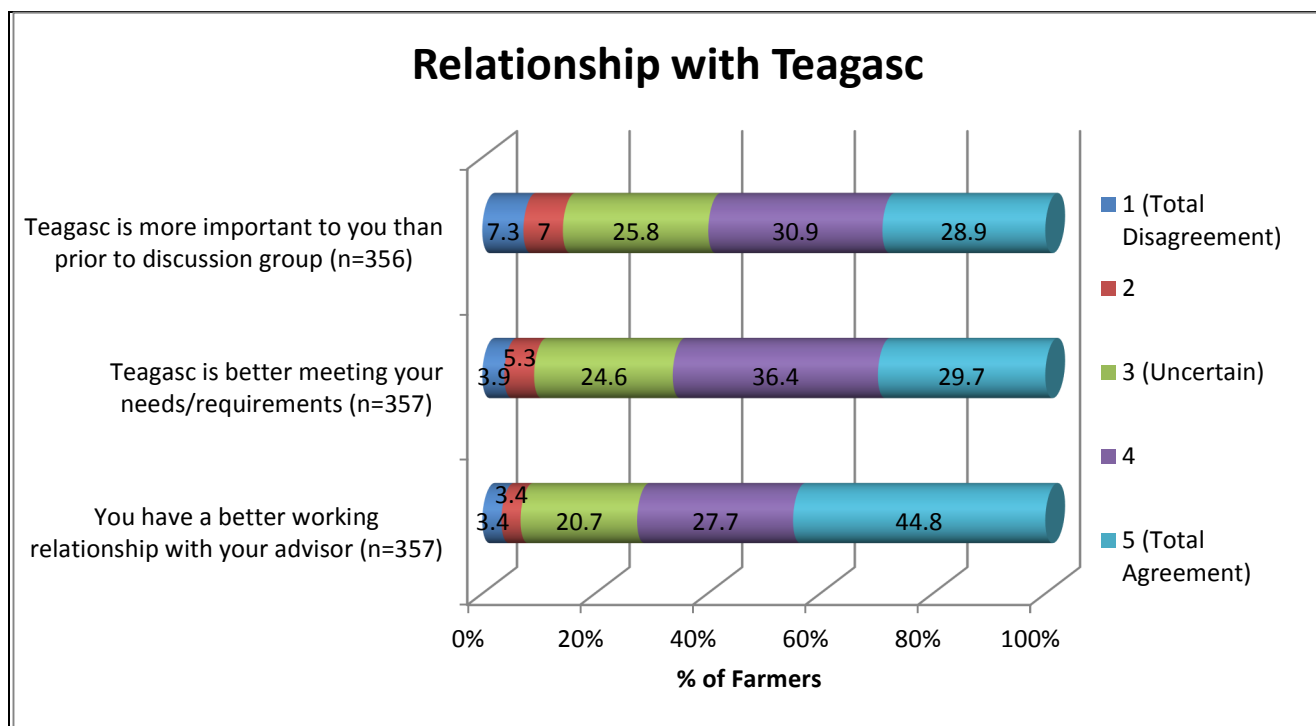


Some of the factors which influence the level of agreement to the statements for discussion group members include:

Statement	Influences on Level of Agreement with Statements
<b>Facilitator knows my farm and technical requirements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 86% of farmers who perceived a financial benefit from discussion group membership agree with this statement compared to 61% of those who did not experience a financial benefit.</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitator understands me and my family/ household situation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmers in the highest functioning discussion groups are most likely to agree with the statement.</li> <li>• Those with highest level of practice adoption are most likely to agree.</li> <li>• 73% of those who experienced a financial benefit from discussion group participation agree compared to 45% of those who did not experience a financial benefit.</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitator understands my plans and ambitions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some 70% of those who experienced a financial benefit agree compared to 42% of those who did not experience a financial benefit.</li> <li>• Farmers in the highest functioning discussion groups are more likely to agree with the statement than those in the lowest functioning groups.</li> <li>• Those with highest level of practice adoption are most likely to agree.</li> </ul>

Three quarters of discussion group members believe that the focus placed by Teagasc on discussion groups has increased the level of support they receive from their facilitator while 24% said that it has had no change on their level of support. While for non-discussion group members, 84% state that the focus placed on discussion groups has had no impact on the level of support received from their facilitator (10% believe that their level of support has reduced).

Some 73% of farmers state that they have a *'better working relationship with their facilitator'* as a result of their participation in their discussion group while two thirds (66.1%) agree that Teagasc is *'better meeting their needs'* and 60% agree that *'Teagasc is more important to them than prior to discussion group membership'* (Figure 10).



**Figure 10 Level of Agreement Among Teagasc Beef Discussion Group Members on Statements Relating to Their Relationship with Teagasc (n=356)**

Some of the factors which influence the level of agreement of discussion group members to the statements on the relationship with Teagasc are as follows:

Statement	Influences on Level of Agreement with Statements
<b>Better working relationship with your facilitator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As practice adoption increases, the level of agreement increases from 52% for the lowest adopters to 84% for the highest adopters.</li> <li>Less than half (47%) of those who have not experienced a financial benefit agree compared to 80% of those who have experienced a financial benefit.</li> </ul>
<b>Teagasc is better meeting your needs and requirements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As the practice adoption increases, the level of agreement increases from 46% for the lowest adopters to 75% for the highest adopters.</li> <li>One third (35%) of those who have not experienced a financial benefit agree compared to 75% of those who have experienced a financial benefit.</li> </ul>
<b>Teagasc is more important to you than prior to discussion group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some 69% of farmers who have the highest level of practice adoption agree compared to 40% of those with the lowest level of practice adoption.</li> <li>Some 68% of farmers who have experienced a financial benefit agree compared to 31% of those who have not.</li> </ul>

The facilitators who participated in the focus group meeting believe that the development of the discussion group programme has provided them with a greater opportunity to engage directly with farmers and influence change at farm level. In doing so, it has enhanced the relationship with many beef farmers with whom they previously had a low level of contact.

As a result facilitators found discussion groups to be challenging but very rewarding work to engage in. The interaction with discussion groups on a regular basis is viewed as improving the technical knowledge and competence of facilitators which in turn benefits all clients both discussion group members and non-members.

*'Advisors have improved technically because they are out with farmers and working in groups.'*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

Therefore, facilitators believe that the development of beef discussion groups (and the introduction of BTAP) has strengthened the relationship with farmers who are members of groups. These farmers are meeting the facilitator at the group meetings but they are also making more demands on the facilitator in addition to the group contact. They are now perceived to be getting a better service overall (accepting that they are probably paying a higher fee than previously).

*'The discussion group members probably make better use of the advisory service.'*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

The farmers considered that their relationship with their facilitator has improved as a result of engagement in discussion groups. However, there was a decline in one-to-one contact for some farmers. Overall, the perception is that farmers are getting better value from their contact with their advisor. For many beef farmers, there is a reconnection with Teagasc and farmers are now challenging the advisor more than in the past and making more demands on the facilitator.

### **7.1 Concerns About Discussion Groups**

Only 6% of discussion group members expressed concerns about discussion groups. The comments made are varied including:

- Facilitators need more practical experience before providing advice to farmers;
- Facilitators no longer have time for one to one meetings;
- One size does not fit all in the provision of advice;
- Lack of positive information at meetings;
- Some farmers set in their ways, will not change and don't add anything to groups;
- No time to explore other advisory methods;
- Some farmers only involved for BTAP payment; and
- Preference for one-to-one services.

## **7.2 Continued Involvement in Discussion Group**

Three-quarters of discussion group members state that they will continue to be a member of their discussion group if the BTAP payment ends and a further 16% are uncertain. Therefore only one in ten discussion group members intend to leave their group if the BTAP payment ceases.

*‘Once established in discussion groups, the BTAP payment is minor compared to the other financial benefits.’*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

The level of certainty with regard to continuing their involvement in the discussion group increases as the level of discussion group functioning increases. While 63% of farmers involved in groups with a low level of functioning intend to continue in their group even if payment ends, this increases to 87% of those in the highest functioning groups. Those farmers involved in groups at the lower level of functioning are more likely to be uncertain about continuing to be involved in the future.

Similarly, the level of intention to stay involved in the discussion group increases with the extent of farm practice adoption. Three out of five farmers with the lowest level of practice adoption intend to continue with their group even if payment ends in contrast to four out of every five of those with the highest level of practice adoption.

Over three quarters (77%) of farmers who have already experienced financial benefits as a result of participation in their discussion group intend to continue in the future in contrast to only 46% of those who have not yet experienced financial benefits. The findings are similar for anticipated future financial benefits, those expecting financial benefits are more likely to intend to stay involved in their discussion group compared to 52% who do not expect financial benefits.

Of those farmers who intend to cease their discussion group participation if the BTAP payment ends or are uncertain about continuing, half of them cite the removal of the payment as their reason (Table 12). Almost one in five (18%) say it is due to lack of time while 8.5% believe that they are not learning much from their group.

**Table 12 Main Reasons for Uncertainty About Continuing in Discussion Group if BTAP Payment Ends (n=94)**

<b>Main Reason for Uncertainty About Continued Involvement</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Removal of BTAP Payment</b>	50
<b>Lack of Time</b>	18.1
<b>Considering Change to Dairying</b>	8.5
<b>Not Learning/Getting Much From Group</b>	8.5
<b>Age</b>	6.4
<b>Group Not Very Progressive</b>	4.3
<b>Too Much Paperwork</b>	3.2
<b>Too Many Meetings</b>	3.2

### **7.3 Current Relationship with Teagasc (Non-Members)**

Over two thirds (69%) of non-discussion group members state that their only contact with Teagasc is for 'form filling', while a further one fifth state that they have a 'low level of advisory contact' and 12% have a 'medium-high level advisory contact'.

The facilitators who participated in the focus group meeting believe that the service provided to non-discussion member clients and the relationship with these clients has been weakened as a result of the emphasis placed on discussion groups. Facilitators expressed concern about weakening the relationship with the non-members as they continue to be Teagasc clients and if they do not receive a certain level of service, they may move away from Teagasc. There is less time to service the non-discussion group clients and ultimately less time to get to know them and their farms. Less time available is due to both meeting the needs of discussion group members but also the time spent on addressing the administration requirements of groups and troubleshooting on behalf of farmers regarding the BTAP payment or compliance issues. Facilitators also stated that as a result of the introduction of BTAP and the focus on discussion groups, there are now less general farm events at county level which have a wide appeal and there are fewer opportunities for those with least advisory contact to gain general information. Farmers in the focus group meeting also had some concerns about the decline in the level of service provided to non-discussion group members, however they perceived that this level of service may be sufficient to the needs of non-discussion group members.

*'Facilitators are not spending the same amount of time out with farmers, doing what they should be doing and the more time that you spend on administration the less time you have in contact with farmers.'*

(Facilitator Focus Group)

## **8. CONCLUSIONS FROM THE EVALUATION FINDINGS<sup>25</sup>**

The intention of this evaluation is to assess the wider Teagasc Beef Discussion group programme not just the delivery of the BTAP programme by Teagasc. However, the reality is that it is very difficult to differentiate between the two currently for a number of reasons: few farmers in the evaluation survey were involved in discussion groups prior to BTAP; farmers' experience of discussion groups is of BTAP; and for farmers, facilitators and administrators, their priority during the evaluation was to present their current experience of discussion groups which is BTAP.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from the evaluation is that members of Teagasc beef discussion groups are benefiting from discussion group membership and the BTAP. They are in general satisfied with the operation and delivery of the discussion group programme by Teagasc. The task driven approach to BTAP has proven effective in encouraging farmers to address specific issues in their farm management practices.

### **8.1 Farm Performance**

While it is not possible to determine the exact contribution of discussion group membership on farm performance given the issues of sample selection bias and the limited comparable financial data on discussion group membership, there are considerable differences between discussion group members and other farmers. It is clearly evident that discussion group members are focused on productivity. Higher costs on these farms are countered by higher output to deliver overall higher margins. In the difficult conditions in 2012/2013, the difference was in terms of lower financial losses.

Farmers not involved in discussion groups are more likely to have lower margins per hectare. It is also evident that the differences between members and non-members in terms of farm performance are greatest among those farmers in the lowest margin categories. There are potential benefits from joining a discussion group particularly for those farmers under the most income pressure.

### **8.2 Discussion Group Membership**

It is evident from the research that there are both actual and perceived differences between discussion group members and non-members. While perceptions may not always tally with the factual evidence, perception impacts on the decision to join a group and equally on whether discussion group members perceive it worthwhile to try to convince other farmers to join. The discussion group members tend to in general operate larger farms, carry higher stocking rates, are younger and have higher agricultural education/training. In particular it is evident that the non-members are significantly in the older age group. The introduction of the BTAP has led to a significant involvement of farmers in the less than 30 hectares category.

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<sup>25</sup> A number of conclusions are included from 'An Assessment of the Effectiveness of Drystock Discussion Group in the North West of Ireland as an Extension Tool' – Moran, 2013.

The personality of individuals impacts on their engagement in discussion groups, it is accepted that farmers must be open to discuss their farm details in public, open to new ideas and willing to adopt new practices in order to participate in groups. Quieter people may need more convincing of the merits of joining discussion groups and confidence building before joining a group. The confidence of individuals is perceived as growing with membership and they gain the ability to plan, analyse and more intensively explore options and new ideas. Trust develops between group members and the facilitator and they are better able to support and encourage each other.

Farmers are motivated to join discussion groups predominately to learn and gain information to improve their farm management and profitability. The emphasis on learning from other farmers highlights the importance placed on the knowledge and experiences of their peer group and the benefit of sharing experiences during meetings.

The more efficiently run groups and those adhering to best practice, lead to increased adoption and greater financial benefits for farmers and a higher level of satisfaction. If groups are well run and deliver to farmers, then farmers are more likely to stay involved in the future even in the absence of a BTAP payment.

Based on the experiences of facilitators, it could be concluded that the range of farmers who are involved in discussion groups include: farmers who are really keen to learn and improve and contribute greatly to the group; those who are taking some things on board and making some contribution to the group; and those who are involved for the BTAP payment and take little from and contribute little to the group overall. Therefore, even within groups, there are improvements required to encourage farmers to move to a level where they are willing to share more information and fully contribute to the groups.

The BTAP incentive was beneficial for introducing farmers to the discussion group concept. The introduction of the BTAP payment brought a momentum to the development of beef discussion groups: promotion by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; information, promotion and recruitment by Teagasc and others; media promotion and debate; farm organisation support; and farmers generally more aware of the opportunities presented by discussion groups. In addition, while farmers generally state that the BTAP payment did not convince them to actually join, it was a '*carrot*' for them, and may have helped them in the decision but it also importantly covers the additional cost of advisory support (extra fees involved for participation in discussion group). It is evident that the importance of the BTAP payment declines as other benefits emerge from learning, information received on management practices and changes in practices adopted. However, the BTAP payment is a factor for those farmers who intend to leave if the current programme and payment ceases, highlighting that for those who the payment is important, it is a critical factor.

It is important to keep in mind the observations that farmers are '*not all the same*' and that they have different approaches to farming and goals in life and business. Therefore, farmers have different objectives from their participation in discussion groups. Also those not involved in discussion groups may not be '*discussion group type*' farmers or may not have yet realised what discussion groups have to offer them. Discussion group methods may not

suit all farmers and the one discussion group approach may not suit all groups. Group dynamics may also be deterring some farmers from participating, they do not get involved because other individuals are involved or because they do not know others who are involved. Similarly the task driven nature of the BTAP may not appeal to all farmers.

Farmers currently not involved in discussion groups appear to generally have little interest in joining in the future (could be related to the large proportion aged over 65 years). In the event of seeking to further increase the level of participation in discussion groups in the future, it will take considerable effort to inform them, promote the concept, sell the idea to them and convince them to join a group. These farmers particularly need to be convinced on the benefits of participating in groups and on overcoming the fear of sharing information. This will take on the ground and one-to-one efforts as general media and public promotion may not work. The BTAP payment available will also be important in convincing them but will be unlikely to be a sufficient incentive on its own.

### **8.3 Impact on Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviour**

Overall there is a higher level of knowledge among discussion group members, which increases with the number of years involved in discussion groups. While this cannot be accredited totally to group membership (as there may have been a higher level of knowledge in advance of membership) it does show a level of learning within groups. The introduction of BTAP has provided both farmers and facilitators an opportunity to focus on addressing efficiency and development on beef farms. The extent of learning and knowledge is influenced by the running and operation of groups, well run groups according to an index developed for this study, appear to lead to greater learning and subsequent benefits.

When the adoption of general farm management practices are explored, there is a significant gap between members and non-members. Even if pre-existing differences are considered, discussion group members are engaged in practices which are more likely to improve their profitability. The presence of off-farm employment also influences the level of practice adoption which could reflect differences in the attitude of these farmers, the income pressure on them or indeed the age profile of this group.

Practice adoption is significantly influenced currently by the tasks within the BTAP programme. The delivery of the BTAP focuses on tasks and farmers have obviously responded to this in terms of uptake. A particular emphasis was placed on the completion of profit monitor within BTAP, however, it may have limited the uptake of other tasks.

The overall lower level of practice adoption for farmers not involved in discussion groups indicates the potential for improvement that exists for these farmers. It is accepted that even though the older age profile of these farmers may not lead to significant improvements, there is potential nonetheless.

Farmers link the adoption of farm practices with financial benefits (both realised and future). Therefore, despite the difficult weather and growth conditions experienced in 2012 and 2013, discussion group members believe that practice changes are yielding or will yield



future financial benefits. For the majority of discussion group members, they are still at a very early stage in their membership (third year) for significant tangible benefits in terms of productivity/profitability at farm level to be realised. Given the difficult conditions encountered in 2012/2013, it is likely that further benefits will be realised from the learning gained since joining their group.

Both discussion group members and non-members report positive outcomes in terms of management practices from their contact with Teagasc facilitators (through general information and advice). This highlights that even those not involved in discussion groups perceive that they are achieving tangible benefits from their advisory contact. The Irish Farmers Journal also plays a significant role in influencing farm management practices for non-members.

While it is difficult to be certain of the actual contribution of discussion group membership to the differences in financial performance, farmers themselves perceive that there are financial benefits to discussion group membership (both already realised and anticipated for the future). Those who are experiencing benefits or expect them in the future are most likely to stay involved in discussion groups in the future even if the BTAP payment is not continued. The benefits are derived primarily from grassland management, financial management and breeding which are key elements of the BTAP and Teagasc beef advisory programme.

One of the challenges for facilitators in running discussion groups is that it is difficult for them to gauge the extent to which farmers are taking on the learning from the groups and applying it on their own farm. Some farmers are quietly making changes but do not have the confidence to share that with the group. It is likely that the full benefits of engagement in groups will only be seen down the line.

There is a social benefit to discussion groups even though groups have a low level of organised social activities. Social interaction within groups, outside of groups during routine farm operations and in non-farm settings is an important benefit of discussion group membership. This is an outcome that many potential members do not expect. Farming is a lonely occupation for many and groups are providing an opportunity to meet other farmers, share problems and support each other. Group members provide emotional support to each other in managing and developing their farm businesses. Discussion groups provide an opportunity for farmers to re-engage with other farmers which lead to the sharing of ideas but importantly provide support in times of pressure and stress. Social interaction also builds the trust between farmers and between farmers and the facilitator.

#### **8.4 Improving Efficiency and Effectiveness of Discussion Group Delivery**

Due to the early stage of engagement in groups for the majority of farmers, they are still in a learning phase and many not in a position to make critical comment on or make significant suggestions for improvement to their discussion groups. Many farmers are hungry to learn more but with that, their expectations will increase and place increased demands on the facilitators engaged in delivery of advice. Maintaining the vibrancy of groups and preventing them from getting stale is one of the ongoing challenges for facilitators.

One of the stated requirements of the BTAP programme is that discussion groups have an active chairperson and secretary. However it is evident from the research that this is an area for improvement. The chairpersons' role is viewed as critically important in the group to provide direction, act as a group organiser and to serve as a link between farmers and the facilitator (including the provision of feedback). The lack of a chairperson may reflect group dynamics or the stage in group development where no suitable candidate for the role has emerged. While it can be accepted that facilitators placed the emphasis on getting groups established initially, it is now at a stage where all groups should have a chairperson or a contact person in place.

The discussion group facilitators highlighted that it is important to have an annual programme of events for discussion groups, including the farms to be visited for each meeting. However, there appears to be insufficient emphasis placed on the holding of AGM's where annual planning can take place involving both facilitators and farmers. The task driven nature of the BTAP may have reduced the need for an AGM as farmers and facilitators may feel that the programme is largely prescribed.

The BTAP has brought a focus on the minimum number of discussion group meetings each year but the meetings appear to be concentrated between March and October which may not be the best approach to maintain the momentum and long-term membership of groups. There is scope to extend the seasonal nature of the group meetings if they are to continue to prosper.

The administration of the discussion group programme is focused on meeting the BTAP requirements and administering the programme on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The administration system appears to be effective and efficient and the main improvements required relate to communication and avoidance of duplication between administrators and facilitators. However, there also appears to be more potential to place the onus for compliance onto farmers, that they adhere to rules as set out in terms and conditions and reduce the unplanned burden of queries on administrators.

There is a need to place a greater focus on outcomes from meetings. This is important for the future of membership and ensuring that groups remain relevant, that farmers leave meetings with specific outcomes/actions in mind.

### **8.5 Impact On Teagasc/Client Relationship**

The involvement of farmers in discussion groups has increased their level of contact with their facilitator, however, the majority of non-members feel that the emphasis on discussion groups had no negative impact on the level of support they received, however this is influenced by the fact they predominantly use Teagasc for form filling or a low level of advisory contact. That is not to suggest however, that discussion groups are a potential replacement for a range of advisory approaches including one-to-one consultations.

The interaction of facilitators with farmers through groups makes more efficient use of facilitators' time as farmers are coming to them rather than the facilitator having to meet

each farmer individually. In addition time can be saved by addressing common problems collectively rather than individually. However, group meetings stimulate further work for facilitators with follow up queries, necessary administration while some problems still need to be addressed on a one-to-one basis.

The development of the discussion group programme has provided facilitators with a greater opportunity to engage directly with farmers and influence change at farm level. In doing so, it has enhanced the relationship with many beef farmers with whom they had a low level of contact prior to this. However, there was a decline in one-to-one contact for some farmers. For many beef farmers, there is a reconnection with Teagasc and farmers are now challenging the facilitator more than in the past and making more demands on the facilitator. Members are now perceived to be getting better value from Teagasc and getting a better service overall (accepting that they are probably paying a higher fee than previously). The interaction with discussion groups on a regular basis is viewed as having the benefit of improving the technical knowledge and competence of facilitators (by challenging/questioning them in group discussions) which in turn benefits all clients both discussion group members and non-members.

Despite the fact that non-members are satisfied with Teagasc, facilitators perceive that the relationship with these clients may have been weakened as a result of the emphasis placed on discussion groups. Facilitators are concerned about the weakening of this relationship as these continue to be Teagasc clients and if they do not receive a certain level of service, they may drift away from Teagasc. There is a less time to service the non-discussion group clients and ultimately less time to get to know them and their farms.

While there was a general satisfaction among farmers that discussion groups were effectively meeting their needs, not all farmers are convinced that their facilitator understands them and their plans. Therefore, the facilitator may not be fully informed in providing guidance to these farmers. This is a limitation of meeting large numbers of farmers in groups, facilitators may have not had adequate opportunities to get a full understanding of individual farmers.

## **9. EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations for the development of Teagasc beef discussion groups are presented based on the evaluation findings and the expert contributions in the review workshop.

### **Strategic/General issues**

Develop a long-term advisory strategy for beef farmers to take account of the diversity among farmers: those participating in discussion groups; those who potentially could participate in groups; and those who engage with advisory services but have no desire to join a discussion group. The strategy should include the delivery of programmes such as BTAP and also plan for the future of beef discussion groups in the absence of direct financial support for participation.

The potential growth in overall discussion group numbers and farmers participating in those groups should be addressed within the strategy and the ability of Teagasc to meet those needs in terms of advisory and administration resources.

In order to inform the strategy, undertake research on Teagasc clients who are not members of discussion groups in order to better understand: their farm and personal aims and goals; their advisory support needs; how Teagasc could meet those needs; their reasons for not joining discussion groups; and how if possible, they could be encouraged and supported to participate in group methods. Research should also be undertaken on the benefits of discussion group membership and the extent of achievement/progression made by farmers.

The strategy needs to consider the approach to increasing the number of farmers participating in discussion groups in terms of whether this is undertaken by creating new groups or expanding existing groups. The inclusion of new members into existing groups should be explored on a group by group basis so as not to damage the current dynamic. The priority must be to retain the current members and build the cohesion between them. Farmers must be engaged in the process of development in terms of the overall focus and direction of the group and how and when new members could be included.

In the event of seeking to further increase the level of participation in discussion groups in the future, it will take considerable effort to inform potential new members, promote the concept, sell the idea to them and convince them to join a group. These farmers particularly need to be convinced on the benefits of participating in groups and on overcoming the fear of sharing information about their farm. This will take on the ground and one-to-one efforts as general media and public promotion may not work.

Particular efforts should be undertaken to promote the financial (additional to any monetary incentive for participation) and social benefits of active discussion group membership.

Teagasc needs to ensure that there is a focus on discussion group development included as part of the delivery of a future BTAP programme. There is an opportunity to develop a long-term sustainable discussion group programme but this may not happen if farmers are not

encouraged to take responsibility for the running of their own group, determining the focus and priorities.

To support the development of group structures, each group should ideally be encouraged to have a chairperson or a contact person/link. An annual chairpersons' group meeting should be held on a regional basis to support members in this role. This could be run in a discussion group format on the farm of an actual group chairperson, involve discussion on the role of chairperson and a general information sharing session on group operation.

As part of the group development process, each discussion group should have a review meeting at the end of each year. In the current task driven programme, it could be as part of an AGM. This is an opportunity to review the achievement on tasks for the year, how the group has functioned, determine aspects that worked and those that did not and explore what the group collectively and farmers individually want from their participation in the group. The outcomes of the review could inform Teagasc and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on programme delivery.

The BTAP requirements could be considered as the minimum standard for Teagasc beef discussion groups. To enhance the benefit from group participation and to encourage greater engagement:

- There should be a minimum of 6 meetings/events but a target of 8 meetings per year to facilitate the inclusion of additional aspects within the annual programme;
- Farmers should be encouraged to complete tasks in excess of the minimum requirement as all tasks are beneficial;
- The focus should be placed on overall farm management targets in addition to task completion;
- These targets should be challenging but realistic and achievable and driven by either financial, quality of life or social goals;
- A target range should be considered where there is significant diversity within the group either in terms of performance levels and/or ambitions/goals;
- Farmers should be encouraged to interact outside of group meetings;
- Social activities/events both formal and informal should be actively encouraged for social/emotional benefits and to support group development; and
- Teagasc should have a mechanism in place whereby discussion groups can provide feedback to management on their facilitator.

Young farmers should be introduced to group discussion methods in training/education courses and students on placement should be obliged to attend (where possible) the discussion group sessions in which their host farmer participates.

### **In-Service Training**

Ongoing facilitation training is required particularly in dealing with new and weaker members/groups and the process of group development. In-service training for discussion group facilitators could include: a specific focus on a small number of topics at each session; input from facilitators into content; and a focus on financial management. In-service training could be run in a discussion group format (where possible) and sessions could address time

specific problems during the year. An annual schedule of training days and events should be produced for each year and strictly adhered to in order to facilitate planning of discussion group schedules at local level.

### **Facilitators**

Many of the earlier recommendations also impact on facilitators, further additional recommendations include:

- Ongoing need to provide guidance, encouragement and support to farmers in both the completion of specific tasks and their general involvement in discussion groups;
- Support the building of the confidence and trust of members in the discussion group concept and particularly in guaranteeing the security and confidentiality of information shared in the group meetings;
- Seeking to ensure that there are specific outcomes/actions from every meeting which members can strive to apply to their own farms;
- Establishing a routine for meetings, agreeing meeting dates at the start of the year which facilitate greater farmer participation;
- Simplifying the notification process for meetings (e.g. text message 5-7 days in advance of the meeting and on the day before);
- Guiding and facilitating the discussion process without dominating the meetings;
- Engaging in assessment of facilitation skills with management as groups evolve and working with management to address any deficits;
- Seeking to gain a better knowledge and understanding of group members – utilise the opportunity of visiting discussion group host farmer to gain an insight into their goals/ambitions;
- Striving to achieve best practice in discussion group delivery;
- Adhering to programme deadlines and minimising duplication of administration;
- Encouraging social interaction and social activities among group members; and
- Encouraging young farmers and non-members to consider joining a discussion group.

### **Administration**

Some of the specific issues which should be addressed with regard to administration include:

- Work closely with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to seek to reduce duplication of effort in all areas. Internally Teagasc should seek to harmonise record keeping/documents (where possible) with the Department of Agriculture templates to minimise duplication and confusion;
- Clearer differentiation of programme administration procedures in order to minimise duplication and/or confusion between facilitators and administrators;
- A shared understanding among facilitators and administration staff, regular communication, planning, monitoring and rigorous implementation of protocols in terms of programme administration, record keeping, uploading of documents and programme deadlines; and
- Examine the Document Management System to determine areas for improving the efficiency of operation.

## **Farmers**

Discussion groups have been proven to be a significant benefit to farmers and they have a responsibility and can contribute to the future development of discussion groups by:

- Taking greater responsibility for compliance with BTAP terms and conditions and adhering to programme deadlines in a timely manner;
- Actively engaging in the discussion group process and freely sharing information at group meetings;
- Taking ownership of their own groups, encouraging and supporting other farmers to become more involved and make a greater contribution to discussion;
- Being willing to take on roles such as chairperson of the group;
- Working with facilitators to organise a meeting schedule which achieves a balance in terms of timing and location of meetings (takes account of working hours and other commitments of members and facilitators); and
- Contribute to the overall development of a vibrant discussion group.

## **Future Programmes such as the Beef Technology Adoption Programme**

Specific recommendations relating to future programmes include:

- The BTAP programme (or similar) should be retained and available to farmers for another period of 3 years. It should build on the success of the current programme;
- Teagasc should seek to inform the future BTAP programme with the learning from this evaluation and ongoing feedback from farmers and facilitators;
- The financial incentive to participation should be retained. In the event of declining resources, the incentive should be prioritised for new members;
- Given the importance of financial management, the completion of the e-profit monitor should be considered as a pre-requisite for future participation and not one of the optional tasks;
- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine should work with Teagasc to seek to reduce duplication in administration and recording;
- A specific recommendation is that BTAP attendance registers be better structured in order to provide more space for physically recording of names of farmers at meetings/events;
- The task driven approach should be retained in principle but modified to provide for:
  - An opportunity to address broader areas of farm management practice rather than specific tasks;
  - Greater autonomy to individual discussion groups (farmers and facilitators) to identify their own tasks (which should be measurable and verifiable);
  - Progression and development of groups where priority issues evolve over time;
  - The organisation of a broader annual programme tailored to the needs of members; and
  - Greater flexibility in the organisation of shared meetings and the involvement of external experts/speakers in group meetings.

