

# Offaly Smallholder Initiative - 10 years in operation

Agriculture in County Offaly is experiencing a period of uncertainty with declining farm incomes and farmers face difficult hurdles regarding future viability. There are a significant number of smallholdings of which are non-viable and depend on off farm income. Against this backdrop there is a unique farm service that aims to tackle viability issues providing a broad range of supports.

West Offaly & OAK Partnership, with the support of Teagasc, launched the previous small farm advisory service at the 1997 ploughing Championships. This service was re-launched in 2001 as the present Smallholder Development Service.

The era of the single farm payment has, and will bring, significant changes to farming in the county. Farmers now more than ever need to examine the way that they do things, and look at their enterprise in a new way. The Smallholder Service will assist farmers in identifying ways to increase income through making the farm work best for them.

This service provides agricultural advice, information on social welfare and Employment opportunities, and organises training programmes for farm families in County Offaly.

The service is FREE to those individuals or farm families with less than 50 livestock units with off-farm earnings less than €20,000. Teagasc support and have engaged with the service in delivering successful opportunities and Planning Post Fischler programmes and currently the 'Options Analysis Programme'. The options programme examines farm income and assists farmers in exploring options to boost income and improve quality of life.

**Achievements:** There have been many achievements over the past number of years. Innovative programmes such as 'Care in the home training programme'; OAK Future Options Programme; Teagasc Options Programmes; Launch of case study and information booklet for farm families launches by Minister Eamon O'Cuiv (beside ). Also the service featured on RTE'S 'Primetime' in 2002.



**Agricultural Advice:** Many smallholders have received advice on schemes such as Area Aid, REPS, Forestry, Installation Aid, Farm Retirement etc. Discussion groups were very well attended from the Hall in High Street Belmont to Walsh Island.

**Income Supports:** Significant numbers of farm families have, and continue to benefit directly from income supports such as farm assist, pensions, medical cards etc.

**Employment Supports:** Obtaining some form of off-farm employment for Smallholders is essential in achieving household viability. The service provides information on various options such as OAK Employment Service Edenderry 04697 33350 to the Jobs Club in Birr 05791 21155. Young farm family members are encouraged to up skill and avail of apprenticeships through FAS. The service assists smallholders entering employment and many have taken up positions on Community Employment, part time or full time positions and in recent times the rural social scheme where it has 50 clients working in rural areas of the county.

**Alternative Farm Enterprise:** In the last couple of years 10 smallholders have set up their own business and together with Teagasc the service is planning a '**Rural Business Start Up Course**' in the Autumn for farmers who have a business idea that they wish to turn into reality. The course will be facilitated by Teagasc's Paul McCarthy and Partnership Enterprise Officers. Any smallholder in the county is advised to attend the Teagasc pavilion between 2 and 4pm at the show on Sunday to enrol in this unique part time course.

**Training Programmes:** One of the aims of the service is providing farm families with the necessary skills to avail of employment opportunities. Practical skills training has been the norm with Welding Courses, computers organised through Offaly VEC. A **multi Skills Course** is planned for the Autumn in Birr focussing on carpentry, tiling etc and is FREE to Smallholders in receipt of farm assist or any other payment and also those that don't have a leaving certificate.

**Adult Learning for Smallholders** focusing on upgrading reading and writing skills will take place in September facilitated by Offaly VEC. Application forms available from Offaly VEC & or West Partnership Offices, Crank House, Banagher.

**Welding & Fabrication** will take place in Rathangan in September and is open to smallholders in Kildare and Offaly through OAK Partnership.

**Crossroads Programme-** Unique programme for farm families comprising of 4 night sessions followed by one to one coaching & Mentoring. This programme focuses on breaking down barriers to change and implementing a range of actions through ongoing one to one supports. Teagasc 'Options Programme' forms part of the training programme as an added bonus.

The results of the programme have been excellent and has major life changing effects on the majority of the 80 farm families who participated in the county to date. As one client stated 'the day I walked through that door and took on this programme was the day that changed my life for the better'. The next programme will take place in September 2007. To enrol contact the Smallholder Service in Edenderry or Banagher and or Cindy Mahon, Teagasc Tullamore at 057 93 21405.

Finally the Service owes a debt of gratitude to Management of both West Offaly and OAK Partnership Brendan O'Loughlin & Pat Leogue respectively together with both boards and Teagasc for supporting the service over the years.

Offaly Smallholder Service would like to highlight to all potential clients that we are to help in a very practical way. We have increased client numbers significantly over the years and hope that future years will be as productive.

To avail of the services above contact Offaly Smallholder Advisor Kieran Kelly at:

Crank House Banagher: 05791 51622

OAK Partnership Edenderry: 04697 33350 Mobile: 086 8336873