

# Partnership improves work-life balance

## Tom Curran

Farm Structures Specialist,  
Teagasc Rural Economy and  
Development Programme

**T**he Treacy and Fitzgerald families are dairy farming in a Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine-registered farm partnership near Littleton in Co Tipperary. Work began to set up the partnership in 2015 and the business structure began in earnest on 1 January 2016. The motivation was to deliver an income and a better work/life for both families.

Sean Treacy's Teagasc discussion group, facilitated by local advisor Sandra Hayes, were on an annual trip during which they visited a farm partnership in Co Louth. "The benefits from how the two farmers were working were clear and that sowed a seed in my head about a partnership," says Sean, who subsequently came to Teagasc to find out more about a partnership and how it could work for him.

Sean and his wife Lorraine have two children. At that time they were dairy farming on a fragmented farm, milking 70 cows, rearing replacements for the dairy herd and also rearing pedigree Friesian bulls for sale. With Sean working alone except for casual labour, the sheer volume of work meant that family life began to suffer.

Kieran and Angela Fitzgerald also have two children. Kieran had worked in the mining industry for 15 years. With the mine closing, Kieran was looking for a new opportunity. Prior to the mine, Kieran had worked as a farm manager (he is a Farm Apprenticeship Board graduate).

Sean mentioned the idea of working together on the farm in a partner-

ship to Kieran who is married to a cousin of his and had worked on the farm as a hobby for years. Sean had considered offering Kieran a job as an employee but he wanted to work for himself and had some capital available to invest in the business.

## Getting started

Sean and Kieran started the process by discussing the partnership with their wives and families. They then created a business plan; working out the financial figures to show that this partnership can deliver for both families. The 57-acre milking platform was carrying 70 cows and followers.

In 2015, two options to expand the scale of farm arose. Option one was to purchase 24 acres that had come up for sale near the grazing block. The second opportunity was to lease a 60ac farm two miles away for the long term. Sean and Kieran decided to lease the 60-acre block on a 10-year lease rather than buy the very expensive smaller block.

## Putting the plan into practice

The leased land created the room to expand using a zero-grazing system. This outside block enables the business to carry a higher stocking rate on the milking platform and the leased land is used for silage, young stock and zero grazing grass for the milking cows.

"The new block was more than we needed," says Sean. "But when the opportunity came up, we took it." The land reduced the stocking rate on the farm to approximately 160kg of organic nitrogen hectare. It was all reseeded in 2015 and is producing good-quality grass for grazing, cutting and silage. The additional land created a need to make more silage in 2016 as the stocking rate had not



increased sufficiently to utilise the extra grass through zero grazing and grazing with young stock.

The dairy herd is growing from within rather than through buying additional stock. This allows both men time to adjust to working together. "We are building cow numbers gradually; when the herd gets to 140, the numbers of young stock will be reduced." All calves were carried through last year and bulls were sold





Kieran Fitzgerald  
and Sean Treacy.

in November and December. The current herd EBI is €70 with a high-fertility sub index and good genetic potential for milk solids in the form of fat and protein. The 2017 calves have an EBI of €131 and maiden heifers are currently at €106. This shows that the cow type is right for the grass-based system.

With 45 heifers calved down in 2017, the herd has already increased to 96 cows from the 70 milked in 2016. The

aim is to supply one million litres of milk from these cows. In 2016, the herd supplied 6,300 litres per cow (506kg of milk solids) while including 46% heifers. As the herd matures, output of milk solids will improve.

#### Labour and work organisation

"We sit down every morning and have the tea and discuss the day," says Kieran. "It's about communication; we both go and do jobs – he knows

what I'm doing and I know what he is doing. Two jobs are done in the same timeframe and if we overlap or work on a job together, that is also done."

Decision-making is shared between Sean and Kieran. The morning chat over breakfast is very important to tease things out and make decisions. Sean says: "No hasty decisions are made." They sat down and created plan for the partnership. This was followed up with putting financial figures around the plan.

Sean says that the past two springs have been great with Kieran working with him. "In general we have every second night off. We both have access to the calving camera and if a second person is needed for a difficult calving, they can be called upon. "You don't feel it as bad when you are up during the night knowing that you can get a night's sleep the following night."

Lack of sleep is not good for your health. You have no time for family as they never see you when you are working alone. "I'm married to a dairy farmer and he does actually exist," says Lorraine.

#### Work-life balance

Lorraine says one the great benefits is that "we can book a family holiday months in advance, whereas we could never do that before".

There are health and safety benefits too. Lorraine says: "The benefits for your health and your family life are huge. We see a massive improvement." Research by Teagasc has shown that the nature of partnership with more labour available on a daily basis reduces work stress and creates an environment of social interaction.

#### Dealing with differences of opinion

"We are both fairly easy-going and don't let it come to arguments. If something is to be said, it will be said and dealt with," says Sean. They are open and honest with each other and the daily communication and sense of common purpose is a huge help in that regard.

"When something is in your head, it gets bigger and bigger, so you're better off to say it out. Get it off your chest, right or wrong and sort it out," says Sean.

Sean and Kieran say that working together has created support for each other in their work. "If something's going wrong you have someone to sound off, what do you do? What do you think?"

"If it was up to yourself you'd be so far into something. You would wonder are you doing the right thing or the wrong thing," Kieran says.

"A good partnership beats working on your own," concludes Sean.