

'Farming is my GAA'

Mayo beef producer Cathal Irwin loves farming but he's determined that it pays its way and is manageable alongside his family and business priorities

Gabriel Trayers
Teagasc Future Beef Programme

Cathal Irwin farms 45 acres (18ha) just outside Castlebar in Co. Mayo. He also works off-farm, running his business, Advanced Safety, which he founded in 2003. The company supplies Personal Protective Equipment and signage to manufacturing and construction companies all over Ireland and Europe.

Cathal participates in the Teagasc Future Beef Programme and I visit the farm regularly but on the last visit I took a small detour to view his business premises on the edge of town. I was intrigued by how Cathal had built the business to where it is now, employing a workforce of 23.

"After leaving school I completed a business degree and started working with a well-known brand," he says. "I had always wanted to set up my own business so I finished my job on a Friday and started selling safety equipment the very next day.

"In those early days I travelled from site to site selling items like boots, gloves, safety helmets and jackets directly to the end user – it was simple as that." From the very start, Cathal focused on customer service and surrounding himself with talented people; that is still his mantra.

"I was in the right place at the right time to maximise the opportunities of the building boom," he says. "It took off and I remember storing products in a shed close to the farmyard and I used a room in my parents' house as an office – I don't know how they put up with me!"

Eventually he moved into his own premises and like any good businessperson he started to diversify. He is now selling to manufacturing, pharmaceutical and construction companies.

When asked for his advice to farmers on what they should be using to protect themselves he says: "As a farmer myself I will only use anti-cut gloves. There are vermin around



Gabriel Trayers, Cathal Irwin and Shane O'Haire.

farmyards and I don't want to get a cut that would expose me to something undesirable. Masks are also very important, there is always dust from meal and straw. These products are not expensive and can make a big difference in protecting yourself."

Cathal and his wife Bridgin have two children, Siofra and Conor. He says spending time with the family is his top priority. The family live away from the yard and with Cathal calv-

ing 20 suckler cows on a fragmented farm one may wonder where he gets the time and energy!

"My father passed on the farm in 2015 and I am passionate about cattle breeding in particular. Farming is my GAA. My main objective for the farm is to be as efficient as possible, for what I have, I am not looking for more land or to expand."

Work-life balance

Cathal's week typically follows this pattern.

- 7.00am - 8.00 am: breakfast and help to get the children ready for school.
- 8.30am to 5pm: work at Advanced Safety.
- 5:30pm to 7pm: family time.
- 7.00pm to 8.30pm: farming.
- 8.30pm to 9.30pm: visits his parents
- Saturday: 7am to 2pm, farming (he says this stint sets him up for the week)
- Sunday: farming, one hour max

There will be more time needed at calving when Cathal is able to check cows in the morning and he says that, where necessary, he will run out home at lunchtime as well. "To be calving cows and working full-time off farm, you need flexibility with your job I am lucky enough to have that." Through working with

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I want the farm to stand on its own two feet which means better output. The target is 20 calves from the 20 cows, selling the males as u16 month bulls and breeding my own replacements. It's a simple system that suits the farm and me.

the Teagasc Future Beef Programme and with his local Teagasc advisor, Shane O'Haire, Cathal has put a plan in place that will make the farm more sustainable for the future.

A sustainable farming strategy

The ambition is to have a more efficient and more profitable farm that will be environmentally sustainable while taking no more than 20 hours per week of Cathal's time. A tall order you might say, but his first step is building a new slatted shed.

Cathal's slatted shed was built in the 1980's and is not sufficient to house all of the cows. There are no dedicated calving facilities.

Under TAMS, Cathal has applied for a new three bay slatted single shed with creep area and calving pen plans. Subject to approval he plans to construct the shed this year. This will eliminate the need to move cows prior to and post calving.

Farming system

The overall farming system will be changed from calving in late October /November/December to calving in late January/February and March. There are a number of reasons for this change:

- The existing slatted shed is not fit for purpose to handle newborn calves



Cathal urges farmers to wear good gloves to avoid infection.

- Winter calving is more expensive with cows feeding a calf and having to go back in calf while indoors on silage and meal
- A spring calving herd will maximise the use of grass. Cathal is an

excellent grassland manager.

- Less labour – cows will be calving when the days are getting longer and can be turned out to grass given good ground and weather conditions.
- Compact calving – Cathal will aim to calve all the herd in 6-8 weeks.
- The overall system will be changed to finishing the male calves as u16 month bulls.
- A bull system suits a heavy type farm where the males are housed as weanlings and then finished indoors the following May and June. It also adds to the output of the farm without increasing cow numbers.
- Cathal has recently purchased a Simmental bull to breed high value replacements. The male progeny would not be suitable for the live trade – the option for these males is to be finished to slaughter.

Reflecting on this strategy, Cathal says: "My philosophy is always to be improving and it will take a couple of years to reach our goals. I want the farm to stand on its own two feet which means I need to get better output.

"The target is 20 calves from the 20 cows, selling the males as u16 month bulls, breeding my own replacements and selling any surplus weanling breeding heifers – it's a simple system that suits the farm and me."

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