

KT Masters in Agricultural Innovation Support (MAIS) Project Summary 2025

1. Project Title

An Assessment of Farmers' Diversification Needs and How Teagasc Can More Effectively Deliver Relevant Services

2. Project Background

This study will focus on the role of knowledge transfer as it pertains to farm diversification. Since 2009, Teagasc has implemented 'Options' programmes across Teagasc regions. The most recent iteration, the 'Options for Farm Business' programme focuses on providing business start-up training and mentoring in conjunction with Local Enterprise Offices. The research will explore the current strategies employed by Teagasc to support farm diversification, while whilst also gaining the perspective of farmers who have diversified as a result of interaction with Options, along with the perspectives of Options Coordinators. Given the context of current national government and EU efforts to increase sustainability and support rural development, farm diversification is to the fore and thus an investigation of this nature is timely.

From a policy and strategy perspective, 'Our Rural Future' cites diversification as central to the sustainability of rural areas, with action 123 specifically citing the 'Options' workshops. Similarly, the Climate Action Plan refers directly to farm diversification as holding a role in the future climate resilience of the sector. In addition, Food Vision 2030 notes the requirement for value added food products, which are often an output from food-based diversification. Further to this, Teagasc is currently piloting a new advisory strategy in two regions which will see the role of advisors split into Programme Advisors, Enterprise Advisors, Farm Advisors, and Scheme Support Advisors. This work will contribute to the development of the Teagasc advisory strategy and place diversification within an appropriate advisor category.

3. Project Aims and Objectives

The project aims to better understand farmers' needs and how best to improve the role of knowledge transfer as part of the suite of supports available for farmers seeking to diversify their farm business. The objectives include:

1. Literature review on farm diversification in Ireland, UK and EU

2. Collate and build on previous Options analyses (Teagasc surveys and diversification case studies) to extract relevant learnings
3. Needs analysis: ascertain farmers' primary diversification needs
4. Gain an understanding of the ways in which Teagasc can streamline the flow of information/access to supports from rural agencies to farm families
5. Review alternative methods used by Teagasc which may assist in information flow e.g. 'Expand your Horizons' (with EU CAP Network) and 'Transferring the Family Farm' (FMRD)
6. Prepare recommendations on how Teagasc can best build their impact on farm diversification and incorporate diversification into the advisory strategy.

4. Suggestions for Methodology

It is envisaged that a mixed methods approach will be taken for this study to gain insight into the perspectives of farmers and advisors. A sequential design approach will be employed including:

- Developing an understanding of challenges in farm diversification in Teagasc and internationally
- Developing and implementing a survey of farmers in the Teagasc Advisory Strategy pilot regions to gauge their interest in diversifying, and to identify the barriers that farmers foresee in engaging with diversification and the supports that would be most useful
- Semi structured interviews with Teagasc Options coordinators, with the objective of eliciting suggestions to improve farmers' progression towards diversification
- Focus groups with wider rural support agencies and Options participants.

This overall approach should provide information on how the current knowledge transfer activities interact with farm diversification pathways and how to improve delivery of Teagasc Options diversification supports within the new Advisory Strategy.