

**2016 Manifesto to Political Parties and Dáil
Éireann Election Candidates**

GENERAL ELECTION 2016



Macra na Feirme

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Supporting young farmers and rural youth

Macra na Feirme is a national voluntary organisation for young farmers and rural young people that are dedicated to their personal development and the shaping of their own futures. Young people are our future. They are the lifeblood of our economy and rural areas and need to be a key focus in this election.

Supporting rural young people through the provision of targeted infrastructure and services delivers on the objective of achieving sustainable and vibrant rural communities and economies.

For Irish farming to grow and expand it requires a continual increase in the proportion of younger farmers. Supporting all young farmers helps deliver jobs and employment in rural areas, helps grow the agri-food sector, drive efficiency, innovation and productivity at farm level. Supporting agriculture delivers a huge multiplier effect that benefits and sustains rural areas and the economy as a whole.

The agri-food sector is one of Ireland's most important industries, employing 150,000 people directly and many more indirectly. Ireland exports 85% of its food to more than 160 countries worldwide and research shows that investment in Irish agriculture produces a far bigger return than investment in other sectors.

This document briefly outlines some of the key challenges facing young farmers and rural youth and proposes various responses to these issues.

Challenges for Young Farmers

Farm progression - young farmers need to be involved in the decision making on farms or installed on holdings at a young age, when they have the energy and time to develop their enterprises and time to achieve their full potential.

Viability of the family farm – the market for agriculture produce for various enterprises often fails to deliver a margin to cover the costs of production. We have a strong family farming model that should be protected.

Access to land - structural issues particularly around access to and use of land currently prove a constraint on increasing output and hamper young farmers from getting a viable start in farming.

Investment on farm – ongoing reinvestment in farm businesses is essential to ensure future viability however, this is challenging in an era of low margins and price volatility.

Access to credit and cash flow – access to credit on terms that are favourable to young farmers developing their farm business can be challenging. Cashflow can put enormous strain on new entrants to farming.

Training and skills development – access to agricultural education, advice and up skilling opportunities is essential for young people to ensure farmers are skilled professionals in food production to meet the ever rising standards and compliance issues around food production.

Farm Safety - The level of farm deaths and accidents in Ireland in recent years is at an unacceptable level.

Response required for young farmers

Young farmer proof all CAP schemes – EU and National schemes targeted at young farmers need to be accessible and favourable to all young farmers. Under the Common Agriculture Policy the young farmer ‘five year rule’ which commences from the date of activation of a herd number has excluded a lot of young farmers who are still at the development stage from accessing schemes.

Basic Payment Scheme National Reserve – a well funded reserve is essential to ensure young farmers who commence farming from now to 2020 with no or low Basic Payment can access entitlements so as not to be at a serious disadvantage to more established farmers.

Future Common Agricultural Policy reform - Supports in future reforms to be targeted at active farmers instead of all landowners.

Encourage and support collaborative farming and initiatives that encourage access to land - currently, outside of a family farm, there is very little opportunity for a young person to get established in farming. Encouraging and supporting land mobility initiatives and ensuring young farmers in new forms of collaborative arrangements are eligible for EU and national schemes and incentives is essential to encourage greater access to a career in farming. Overall the taxation code should favor the active use of the land.

Resolve CAP eligibility issues for existing partnership – farmers involved in New Entrant Parent Partnerships arrangements should only be deemed young farmers on activation of a herd number and not when they joined the arrangement.

Targeted supports in Rural Development that meet the investment needs of young farmers – greater focus on supporting productive assets such as developing grazing infrastructure in schemes such as the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme in the Rural Development Program. Ireland does not have an Installation scheme grant for young farmers under the Rural Development Program which puts Irish young farmers at a disadvantage to some of their European colleagues. Grass measuring equipment and methods should be encouraged and incentivised to help farmers deliver on Food Wise 2025 objectives.

Access to loans for young farmers on favourable conditions through the European Investment Bank fund – Ireland needs to include a Financial Instrument in the Rural Development Program to facilitate access to this fund. EU Commissioner is encouraging member states to access this funding.

Resourcing education, training and advisory provision for young farmers – Ireland has a world class reputation for food production and it is important that farmers have access to advisory supports for knowledge transfer and continuous professional development. Resourcing agri education to satisfy all current scheme requirements and future knowledge needs is essential.

Tackling income volatility through taxation measures – an initiative to help address volatility in farm incomes would provide more financial stability to farmers in a price volatile climate. Macra believes there is justification to introduce a new initiative to alleviate farm income volatility for farmers operating as sole traders. The principle would be the creation of a Government bond/fund to allow farmers deposit surplus profits in good farming years and withdraw reserves in years with poor returns subject to certain limits. On encashment the value of the bond or funds would be liable for income tax.

Enhancing taxation measures – taxation measures that favour on farm investment (e.g. stock relief and capital allowances) have yielded a significant economic return to the exchequer through increased output and productivity.

Encouraging young agri entrepreneurs - helps foster competitiveness and ensures that agriculture can become a guarantor of jobs and sustainable growth in rural areas.

Farmers charter of rights – there are clear objectives and targets for scheme delivery under the Farmers Charter of Rights between DAFM and farmers and it is important that these are adhere to and delivered.

Flooding – to help alleviate flooding the allocation of funding for dredging of rivers is necessary. Also farmers should be able to carry out necessary works to prevent flooding. Instead they are being restricted by a raft of regulations and directives that prevent them from carrying out necessary works on drainage.

Challenges for rural youth

Rural Infrastructure – access to key infrastructure such as high speed quality broadband is having a detrimental effect on rural communities and young entrepreneurs based in rural areas.

Positive mental health initiatives - mental health continues to emerge as a very important issue for rural young people.

Employment and support services – youth employment especially in rural areas continues to be a challenge for young people. A more favourable student loan system and a greater focus on apprenticeships and employment schemes is a priority for rural youth.

Rural transport – rural transport can be a limiting factor to access opportunities, services and employment.

Rural crime - the rise in rural crime is a concern for all.

Response required for rural youth

CEDRA report - this comprehensive report on developing rural Ireland sets out strategic initiatives that will ensure rural areas contribute to sustained and sustainable national economic growth and development in the future. Government needs to make available the necessary resources for the full implementation of the recommendations in the CEDRA report.

Broadband – prioritise the provision of high speed quality affordable broadband to all rural areas and rural business. Young people establishing businesses need broadband access.

Prioritising and resourcing positive mental health initiatives - the implementation of the “Connecting for Life”, Ireland’s National Strategy to reduce suicide 2015-2020 remains very important. Supports to combat rural isolation are essential.

Third level education - costs and barriers to accessing third level education need to be tackled.

Rural crime – tackling this issue by increasing the number/visibility of Gardai in rural areas, bring back community policing and introducing grants for security systems.

Youth Services – services that Macra provides are funded by the Youth Services Grant Scheme administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In recent years this grant has been cut very significantly making it more and more difficult for Macra to deliver services to rural youth. The next Government needs to increase the investment in youth work through the Youth Services Grant Scheme.

In order to capture the potential of youth and young farmers as a driver of the growth agenda Macra is calling for the points in this document to be addressed in the next programme for government.