

Entrepreneurial Young Trained Farmer Case Study

Karol Devaney, Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo



National Rural Network

Supporting young farmers wishing to enter the agricultural sector is a key priority of Ireland's Rural Development Programme (RDP). Throughout the European Union, such measures aimed at stimulating generational renewal in agriculture are increasingly viewed as crucial to the survival, continuity and future prosperity of the agri-food industry, traditional family farm model and broader sustainability of rural society.

One of the key objectives of the Irish National Rural Network (NRN) is to promote innovative initiatives that can help people in the farming community and in rural areas to maximize the success of the objectives set out in the Rural Development Programme on behalf of the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM). A recent Entrepreneurial Young Trained Farmer case study carried out with 27-year-old Karol Devaney is a key example of how the network communicates important opportunities and outputs in the RDP to relevant stakeholders.

Karol graduated from University College Dublin (UCD) in 2019 with a degree in Agricultural Science majoring in Food and Agribusiness Management. He now farms at home at the foot of Benbulbin in Barnaribbon, Drumcliffe, County Sligo, where his family has farmed since the 1960s. His progression in farming over the past few years, as well as his entrepreneurial endeavours to date, is an inspiring story, and one that can assist and encourage other young Irish farmers to actively engage with, and avail of the various schemes and supports available to them under the Rural Development Programme, as well as to 'think outside the box' in relation to the future trajectory of their career in agriculture.



Farm Background and System

Farming runs through Karol's blood, with his family being farmers for as far back as he knows, both on his mother and father's side. 'My grandfather Tom was raised in Glencar, County Leitrim, and he went to America to work for around 8 years and then came back and bought the farm or family has now. Ironically enough, he says he did the deal for it on the same day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, which was the 22nd of November 1963! Today, my Dad and Uncle, along with myself and my Sister Joanne farm here on a mixture of owned and rented land. We farm predominantly Blackface Mountain Ewes with some Blackface crosses. These are then mated to a mixture of Blackface, Cheviot and Charollais Rams. Our farming system is designed to be time and labour efficient. We try to use easy lambing rams and hardy, easily maintained ewes. We lamb them all outside and don't feed any concentrates to our ewes in Spring. This

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Farm Background and System (contd.)

suits us for multiple reasons, namely because we have a large number of sheep, our farm is quite fragmented, and we all work off farm. We also own a sheep shearing business here called DSS Devaney Shearing Services. Dad has been shearing for over 30 years and built up a good reputation locally, so we are carrying on the shearing tradition now. It's tough work but good money once you get faster at it. Both myself and my sister Joanne have financed our studies through shearing, Dublin and UCD are expensive places to live and study!



Support under the Rural Development Programme

Since graduating from UCD in 2019, Karol has leased a nearby farm and entitlements in his own right. He has also availed of an additional top-up payment on his Basic Payment (BPS) under the National Reserve - Young Farmer Category upon doing so. Karol explains that this approach has 'certainly been very beneficial for me personally in terms of getting a start in farming, I am the eldest of 9 children and dad is only in his early 50's so he has a good farming career ahead of him and it made sense at the time for me to start my own flock. As there is now good money out of farming, I have noticed however that there is a lot of competition for land locally both for leasing and buying and it's difficult to expand. The fact that I am leasing both my entitlements and land means that at the end of the lease I could be left with nothing but a flock of homeless sheep! That being said, it has given me a good lift off in my farming career. All going well I will buy some land of my own in the next couple of years'.



Entrepreneurial Activities - Eweknit

As well as being a Young Trained Farmer, Karol is also an entrepreneur, having set up the Eweknit brand for farmers in 2018. He explains that 'with Eweknit, I create content for farmers in the form of a regular podcast as well as supplying gear and clothing for members of the farming community too'. Explaining the background and motivations for establishing this enterprise, Karol says that he 'went shearing fulltime in Australia and New Zealand after I graduated from UCD, but once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I was forced to stay in Ireland, and it was then that I started the podcast, and then a few months after that, started selling clothing. Eweknit has been very well received so far so I intend to bring out more products and expand the business. I have quite a few international listeners on my podcast, and a number of orders have gone overseas to countries such as Australia, the US and around Europe also. The prospect of building a global brand for farmers



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Entrepreneurial Activities - Eweknit (contd.)

is an exciting one! I am also looking forward to getting out to shows and events when things begin to open-up again. I intend to support worthy causes with Eweknit and sponsor some shearing competitions, and stock judging shows, etc. Supporting good causes and events is a great way to build a brand while also giving back to the industry that has given me so much. Having stalls at shows should be a fun and effective way to get in front of farmers and sell gear too!'.

Karol also highlights the advantages of working for himself, in that his work is extremely variable, and suited to his own schedule and interests. 'One day I might be shearing sheep, the next day I'll be in the mart, the next day I'll be tweaking the website and the next day I'll be packing orders or recording a podcast with a guest. You have to fulfil multiple roles and learn quickly which seems to suit me'. Whilst shearing, ecommerce and podcasting appear to require different skillsets, Karol explains that they also overlap in surprising ways. 'Shearing or any other form of agricultural contracting is a great way to network with farmers and learn about different farm systems, even if it is sometimes what not to do! It's also a good way to hear about land that is coming up for leasing or buying locally. The podcast and the brand complement each other very well. With the podcast, I add value to participant's profile for free whilst simultaneously raising awareness about the brand. The podcast is also a great way to network with and learn from smart people. I have had some great guests on already who are far more knowledgeable and far better known in the industry than I am. People generally like coming on podcasts unless they're very busy. When we're farming, I also try to take photos of Eweknit gear for the website and for social media, it's a great way to do two things at once'.

Reflecting on the challenges and opportunities in starting your own business as a young entrepreneur, Karol admits that he 'often looks at fellow graduates from UCD working for big companies now, and sometimes I wonder am I going down the right path. They're certainly making more money than me at present. I guess the cool thing about having your own business however is the potential in the long term. Being a business owner, you take on more accountability and more risk than if you are working for someone, but the hope that is in the long term there will be greater upside'.

LEADER Programme

Karol also has an in-depth understanding of rural development policy and funding, particularly the LEADER Programme, having carried out his Professional Work Experience with County Sligo LEADER Partnership Company while studying at UCD. Commenting on this placement, he explains that he 'learned a lot about how rural enterprises operate during my time there and also got to see first-hand some of the projects and businesses that LEADER has supported. I think LEADER funding can play a huge role in helping to ensure the future sustainability and viability of rural Irish society, both from an economic and social perspective. I was also tasked with delivering a beginner digital marketing courses to small business owners while on placement at Sligo LEADER Partnership. This was a great chance to get some public speaking experience and



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LEADER Programme (contd.)

brush up on my marketing knowledge’, ultimately benefiting my subsequent entrepreneurial endeavours’.

Karol plans to avail of support under the LEADER Programme to help advance his Eweknit business over the next few years. ‘Eweknit is still in it’s infancy, so currently I am still building skills and building the brand. There isn’t any point in taking on big overhead costs at this early stage. I currently run the business out of my own bedroom and another spare room in my aunt’s house which is used for storage and it’s working quite well. In 2-3 years, when Eweknit outgrows the current set up, I will then look at the different grants available to rural enterprises, such as LEADER, in order to move into a dedicated premise to run the business from, for example’.



Ireland’s Rural Future

Looking towards the future of farming and rural society here in Ireland, Karol acknowledges that ‘while it’s hard to predict, it will certainly look different from the way it does today. I believe that efforts to make the agri-food sector more sustainable and viable by 2040 will be a big challenge, and will require some tough decisions and tremendous foresight from our policy makers. One of the biggest challenges, I think, will be keeping young people in agriculture. Technology is advancing on society like a tidal wave, and the focus is now on created jobs in the IT sector. Such roles are not for everyone though, and that is where the opportunity lies for agriculture. Farming, while challenging, is a rewarding lifestyle and a good, healthy way to make a living. I also think that farms should be smaller, rather than bigger, in the long term. This would result in more people being involved in the industry, with positive knock-on impacts to rural society more generally. If more people had their own farms and were growing even some of their own food for example, it would also make a huge difference to the environment’. Karol admits the ‘farms seem to be going in the other direction currently however, particularly in the dairy sector. It seems to be all about scaling up and installing robots. I can understand where they’re coming from too though, because robots don’t argue with you... not yet anyways!’.

On what advice he would give to other young farmers seeking to diversify their farm income, Karol explains that while he is still early on in his entrepreneurial journey, he would say that ‘if you’re thinking of doing something just start right away. Unless you hit the business lottery it’s going to take years to get to where you want to go, and you will not get it perfect the first time so just start. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Even as I look back over the last year since I started my online business, it looks completely different from how it began. and I have learned so much about all aspects of it. From content creation to products, accounting, web development, organic and paid digital marketing, sales and customer service, a business can be a brilliant vehicle for personal growth. There is much more out there to learn than you could ever learn in a lifetime so get to it! Don’t sweat the small stuff and enjoy the journey’.

For further information please visit: www.eweknitapparel.com



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Food and the Marine



The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development:
Europe investing in rural areas



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Ireland’s European Structural and
Investment Funds Programmes
2014-2020
Co-funded by the Irish Government
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