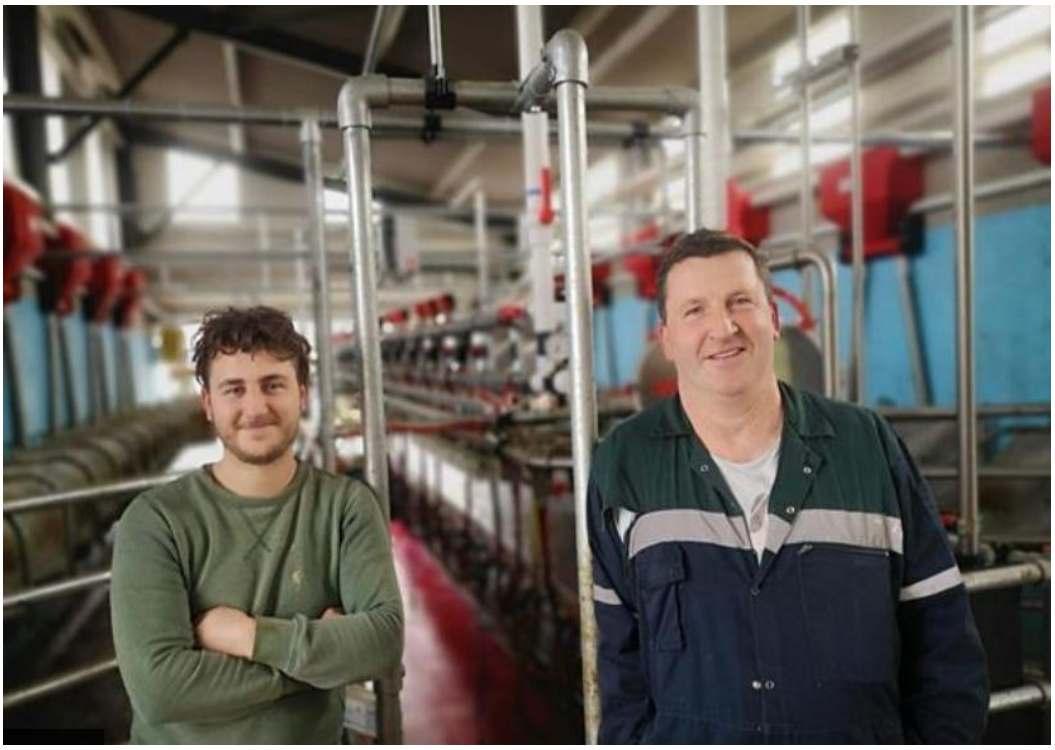
NRN Case Study

A Young Farmers transition from Drystock (Beef & Sheep) to Organic Dairy Farming

Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) schemes within the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 have far reaching benefits, giving farmers much-needed added income streams allowing them to improve biodiversity, animal health and protect soil and water quality on their farms.

There are many funding initiatives available under RDP 2014-2020 extended 2022, such as the Targeted Agriculture Modernisation Scheme (TAMS II), the Green Low-Carbon Agri-environmental Scheme (GLAS), the Area of Natural Constraint (ANC), and the Organic farming Scheme (OFS).

The National Rural Network team recently met with Tom and Alan Phelan from outside Abbeyleix Co. Laois. Tom and Alan are farming in partnership running an organic dairy herd. The farm began its transition from a conventional drystock farm, comprising of beef and sheep to an organic dairy farm in 2018. Tom and Alan milk a Holstein/Jersey crossbred cow which Alan notes are providing milk solids that are on par with conventional dairy farms. The farm is located in the Nore catchment and consists of almost 60 ha, of these, 12 ha consists of a very high-water table and are prone to flooding, this area is known locally as “The Mash”. Each year the area supports a diverse range of feathered visitors such as ducks, swans and geese, who visit the area to graze.



Tom explained “Alan had always wanted to become a farmer; We knew that for both Alan and I to make a living from the farm we needed to change how things were managed. The beef and sheep enterprise I had been managing would not have been a viable option for us. We realised that there was a gap in the market for organic dairy, after seeking advice, we both agreed this would be the best solution for us. Regardless of the business decisions that needed to be made on farm, maintaining the biodiversity that thrives here was one of our key considerations.”

Conversion Timeline:

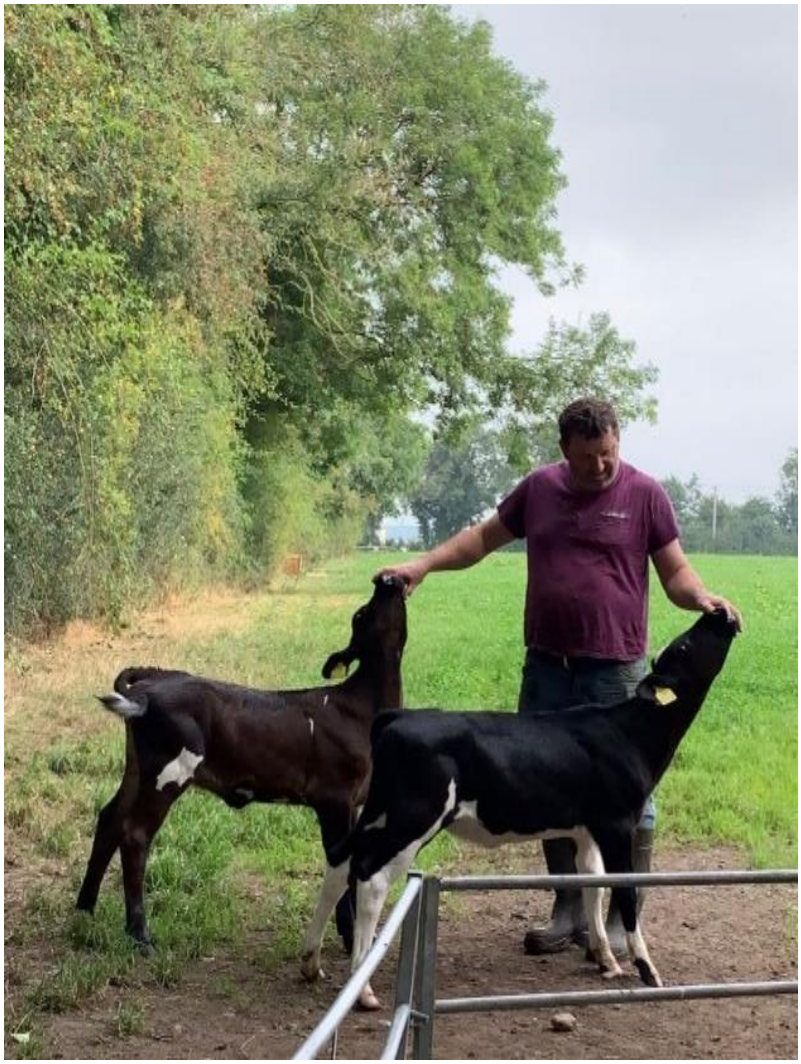
In 2017, Tom completed an educational organic course which was the first steppingstone in converting the farm to organic.

In July 2018, Tom in conjunction with his advisor applied for the OFS through his agfood account. Following the application Tom purchased 75 heifer calves, aged between 6-8 weeks, to be reared on the farm over the two-year conversion period (2018-2020).

In 2020, Alan completed a two-year distance learning Green Cert through Gurteen Agricultural college and graduated as a qualified young farmer.

In January 2021, Alan, who was now an eligible young farmer, along with his father set up a DAFM Registered Farm Partnership and applied for the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS II) which helped to improve many of the farm's facilities, such as winter housing, installation of dairy equipment and scrapers.

In July 2020, the farm was certified organic by the Irish Organic Association, the calves purchased in 2018 had begun to calve and the milking operation commenced.



The farm is preparing to enter its third year of milk production. Calving takes place from June to October, allowing milk to be produced all year round. Producing milk through the winter months is known as winter milk production and a premium price is payable as national supply, especially organic is reduced during this time. Breeding an efficient cow is a key priority on the farm, the economic breeding index (EBI) is used to identify the most suitable AI bulls to be used during the breeding season.

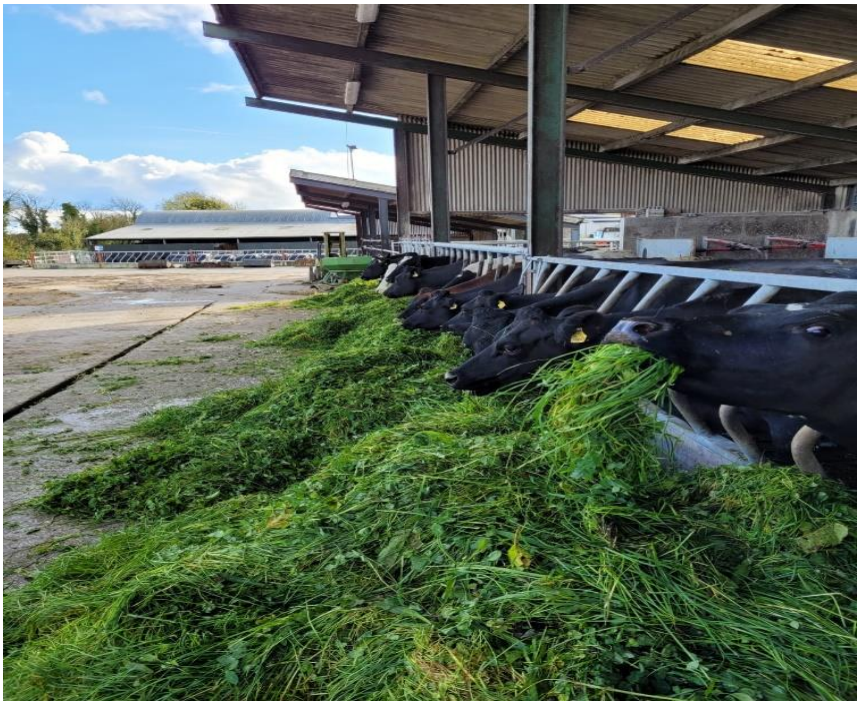
Complying with the rules to maintain organic status, no chemical fertiliser is permitted to be applied to the land. Alan acknowledges the importance of optimising resources within the farm gate, central to this is the efficient use of organic manures on grasslands. Regular soil testing and lime applications based on results is best practice. A healthy productive soil means grass production is sustainable.

“The first thing we did was take soil samples of the entire farm as optimising grass production will be key to keeping production costs down. All slurry is applied via low-emission slurry spreading (LESS), for years previous we had been using a splash plate, but LESS is more efficient and best suits the grazing rotation.”

It is a requirement for organic farmers to feed their livestock with organic feed. Clover incorporation into grazing and silage swards increases the feed quality of the forage. Red clover has the potential to fix the equivalent of 200kg/ha of nitrogen annually, that’s the equivalent to eight and a half 50kg bags of Urea. Red Clover incorporated into silage ground is best suited to three to four cuts per year and will produce a high-quality forage for winter feed.

“On this farm we take two cuts for winter forage and use the zero grazer to make up the third and fourth cut, feeding freshly cut grass to cows during inclement weather.”

Cows are housed from late October to early March depending on weather conditions and grass availability. Organic concentrate can be very expensive, averaging up to €560/t vs €300 /t of conventional feed, producing good quality silage is key to minimising farm costs.



Tom and Alan are active participants of the Organic Farming Scheme, since July 2020. They received €220/ha during the conversion period and since achieving full organic status receive €170/ha.

Tom and Alan are active participants of the Green Low carbon Agri-environmental Scheme (GLAS). Measures include protection of watercourses from bovines receiving €1.50 per m/year with a total of 2.7km of fencing, which has to be maintained. The rest of the GLAS payment is made up of the "Natura" Action on an area of land known as "The Mash".

The farm has benefited from the income streams provided by Rural Development Programme schemes. "Our objective is to earn a living off the farm, and farm within the natural limitations of the lands available to us, this is what will make us sustainable and helps contribute to other environmental targets. It's not hard to farm organically but it does take a shift in mindset which can be the hardest element to overcome," said Alan.

The NRN would like to thank Alan and Tom for their time and wish them every success in the future.