

## Focus on: Land Mobility Service

# The perfect partnership – pairing farmers who want to retire with keen young starters

Paddy Walsh was looking to step back from his Kilkenny beef farm but he didn't have a successor; Donal Phelan 'never wanted to do anything else other than farm' but he didn't have any land. Macra's Land Mobility Service brought them together, and the relationship is working smoothly

**Azmia Riaz**



**O**n a 135ac beef and tillage farm in Kilkenny, change is underway. After tending to the animals and land for nearly all his life, Paddy Walsh is ready to take a step back at the age of 68.

After the 77 cattle he reared over winter were sold, 32-year-old Donal Phelan took over much of the groundwork in the new year. The two were brought together by the Land Mobility Service, a Macra initiative that connects land-owners with young farmers looking for opportunities.

"I've been farming here since I was 14," says Paddy. "It's a family farm that was handed down to me by my father. I've loved animals and growing crops as far back as I can remember."

"It's a great variety of life when you work so close to the earth. Even as a little boy, I was excited to start working. I never wanted anything else, really."

"I don't want to give up farming entirely, I'd still like to be involved and help out. I can also say that I can take a week off without worrying about having the responsibility of looking after the farm. Donal being here helps me get some rest after all these years."

"I don't have the burden of worrying about all these new regulations. I've been doing that all my life, trying to keep things right, and I've had enough of it now. I think it's a job for a younger person."

"Now we share our responsibilities and that's the way it has to be. We

share a vision as well and that's what helps make this partnership easy."

It's not hard to imagine what brought the pair together. After discovering his love for farming at 13, Donal was involved in the contract rearing of heifers. He got started on a 30ac piece of land just three miles away from the farm he now works on.

"I also come from a background of farming, never wanted to do anything else," he says. "My life has revolved around machinery, livestock and crops for as long as I remember."

"No other interest — no football, no movies, no nothing."

"I have a cousin who works for Macra and he told me about the Land Mobility Service. It was Paddy who approached me and I was very happy about it."

"We agree on the most important things: we believe in doing what's best for the environment, not polluting and using natural fertilisers. We also try to be as economically friendly as possible."

A Macra report on the future of agriculture from last year stated:

"In order for any enterprise to be sustainable, there needs to be a continual influx of new blood into the industry."

"In our industry with only 5pc of farmers under the age of 35, it is safe to call the situation a crisis. Were we to continue on as we are, in a short period of time, farmers will be an extinct species."

The report also pointed out that young farmers in Ireland don't receive as much support as many of

their EU counterparts.

The contrast between Patrick's and Donal's journeys point to how farming has changed over the years. Today, older farmers may not have someone to pass on their land to or the younger farmers may not inherit enough land to start something of their own.

After the pair approached him, Austin Finn, who heads the Land Mobility Service drew up an agreement for them. The subsidised service was introduced in 2015, with around 100 partnerships being facilitated each year.

Austin explains: "The service was introduced to support people like Paddy and Donal. A farming family could decide to step back and retire, but instead of letting a younger person in through generational renewal, they might cut down on the number of cattle."

"There will be less of an income but they are happy with just availing the schemes and drawing payments out."

"This is what has caused people to stay in farming for longer than they need to. If someone has a son or daughter who wants to farm, the process is relatively straightforward. "Without the help or support, they

keep going with fewer resources and a minimal top-up. Maybe the farming gets simpler but they're getting older."

"From a health and safety perspective, farming is in reality a young person's game. Or at least, if there's an older person, they need a younger person helping them."

"The plus side is that it gives opportunities to young farmers who may not have any land, or not enough. It fills in those gaps where a lot of schemes are disappearing and there isn't a support system."

Austin points out that there are two categories of young farmers: those who have established home farms that are financially sound that they will inherit; and "potential young farmers" — people who have done their agricultural training but have no land, or have to share their land with siblings.

"Most of the schemes we have in place are for the first category but they're taken care of by generational renewal," says Austin.

"It's the 'potential young farmers' that we risk losing. Without other opportunities, they end up taking up other jobs in the agricultural sector with big corporations. They tend to get lost from farming."





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**Working together:** Donal Phelan (left) with Paddy Walsh on Paddy's farm at Bawnrickeen, Johnstown, Co Kilkenny; right, the pair with Paddy's tractor; below, in the sheds  
PHOTOS: ALF HARVEY



“Yes, the potential farmers build great careers for themselves, but they could have been greater farmers.”

“The Land Mobility Service is inviting them back to farming. We might lose some of them anyway but that’s their choice. How do we know unless we present them with the option?”

Séamus Wimms, 28, another ‘potential farmer’ that the service has supported, grew up on a big farm in Sligo with six siblings. With all but one of them taking a keen interest in farming, he had to look for opportunities elsewhere.

“I knew from early on that there wasn’t a future for me there,” he says. “The scale to make a living

wasn’t enough either. I wouldn’t say there was a lot of support for me.”

“Even for me to get where I am now, it took a lot of financial support from banks, most of whom rejected me. I had to take on a lot of debt, which made it really hard to stand on my own feet.”

“This is my third year with the Land Mobility Service and it’s still difficult for someone my age.”

“Slightly older people in their late thirties or early forties who are more established and have been running a farm for longer are much more likely to get land allocated to them than someone my age. I can’t lie, that’s been very frustrating.”

He works on a farm in Mayo where he takes care of the big jobs and his partner looks after the animals on a day-to-day basis.

Back on their farm in Kilkenny, Donal recalls his own fair share of struggles: “The Land Mobility Service is nearly frowned upon, would you believe it? It’s frowned upon for someone like me to be able to step forward and take on a farm like this.”

“People around us expect the big dairy men to take over, or that they are the only ones who are supposed to do this. For a person coming

from a small town and a humble background like me, I can’t go any further on my own without the big man stepping in.”

“I couldn’t go out in the open market and try to get 50ac of land for myself. I couldn’t even look at it because I’d be blown out of the water.”

“People who have the wealth and power manage to stay going, so we can’t even get started. The only reason this was possible for me was the service.”

Paddy remembers how things have changed from when he was a young farmer. He availed every scheme that was offered to him at the time, but he is concerned that it’s harder to do the same today.

“There’s a lot of worry. There are so many rules and regulations that genuine farmers are worried that they’re not doing things right even when they are doing their best,” he says. “It’s one of the reasons I’m glad to pass it over.”

“One piece of advice I’d give someone starting out is to travel and work as much as possible. One good thing that’s developed in farming over the years is that younger farmers are trained to go off and get the experience.”

“When I started, I just came home from school and learned by myself or from my father, but I really regret that I wasn’t educated in farming.”

Donal adds that working with Paddy has been just as educational. He explains that the reason their partnership has been successful has been learning from each other and their ability to fairly divide responsibility.

Looking at his partner he asked, “Do you remember when I was going to sow those two fields with winter barley, Paddy? He took one look at the fields I had in mind and said he wouldn’t sow anything in them because they are inclined to flood every two years. I took it on board and sure enough, it flooded in the very spot!”

“If you spring a new idea on Paddy, there’s no problem — he cares more about the farm than proving he’s right and I feel the same way, so we have these values holding us together.”

**‘It’s the ‘potential young farmers’ that we risk losing. Without other opportunities, they end up taking up other jobs in the agricultural sector with big corporations. They tend to get lost from farming’**



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Every Wednesday Evening

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Every Friday

Intake from 8.30am, New Sale time 10am sharp.

**Note:** New Relegations introduced by the department from 1st Feb will not affect the Sale of Cows and Bulls over 36 months.

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**Kerry Holstein Friesian Breeders**  
Wednesday the 15th March  
Details to follow.

**Next E&U Grade Sale**  
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**Heifers Weanling Wednesday 5th April**

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