

# Minutes of the Horticulture Forum Meeting

Monday 15 March 2016, 7:30 pm, Portadown Rugby Club

**Chair:** Keith Crawford

**Present:** Mark Conway, Peter Donnelly, Jilly Dougan (Edible Gardens), Peter Donnelly, Patricia Erwin, Eric Long, Hamilton Loney, Roy Lyttle, Robin McKee, Paul Mooney, John Shannon, Patrick Taggart, Doug Thomson

## 1. Apologies

Barclay Bell, Barbara Erwin, Kieran Hughes, Sam MacNeice, Elaine Shaw, Lyn Sherriff

## 2. “Sow, Grow, Munch”, Jilly Dougan

Jilly outlined her school food growing initiative, which aims to reconnect Northern Ireland’s 330,000 school children with locally-grown food through provision of a toolkit to Northern Ireland’s 1178 schools. This toolkit, the “Sow, Grow, Munch” manual will provide: advice on how to set up a school garden; growing guides for produce that can be harvested while schools are open; recipes for using the produce; and explanations of why buying locally and seasonally is important. The manual will be available in hard copy and on-line.

The initiative will be promoted at Balmoral Show and Garden Show Ireland and CEA is considering embedding food growing in the curriculum.

Jilly has been looking for sponsorship for the project (eight sponsors contributing £1500 each). In return, each sponsor will receive prominent acknowledgement and promotion opportunities. She has already found seven of the eight sponsors and is considering extending the opportunity to more sponsors. Organisations interested in sponsoring the project can contact Jilly at: [jillydougan@hotmail.com](mailto:jillydougan@hotmail.com).

## 3. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were accepted.

Keith Crawford reported that Mark Mather has been approached and has said that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association is willing to consider providing representation on the Forum.

**Paul Mooney to send Mark Mather’s details to Patrick Taggart, who will progress the possibility of NILGA joining the Forum.**

Melina Quinn (NIEA), who was unable to attend because of the meeting’s date change, is available to come to the next meeting on 16 May to talk about the All Ireland Pollinator Plan.

#### 4. EU membership

Patrick relayed the views of Barbara Erwin and Sam MacNeice.

Barbara had reported that while NIFFA did not vote on the issue there were a number of concerns about the possibility of Brexit: effect on currency exchange rates; impact on businesses reliant on exporting to member states (e.g. Republic of Ireland); future availability of eastern European labour; the future of farming subsidies; and the implications of Turkey possibly joining the EU.

Sam had reported that FIF is in favour of remaining within the EU. Leaving was seen as a risk to exports to Republic of Ireland and other member states.

John Shannon reported that HTA has adopted a position of neutrality on the referendum.

Doug Thomson reported reluctance among Growers NI members to engage in the debate. He observed that Brexit might facilitate a “fortress” approach to plant health but would probably make exports more difficult.

Peter Donnelly said that NISFGA favoured remaining within the EU as much stock comes from the Netherlands.

Roy Lyttle was concerned about possible problems with labour availability in the event of Brexit.

Hamilton Loney echoed Roy’s concerns and added that safeguarding exports to the Republic of Ireland was also a concern.

Patricia Erwin explained that, since no compelling argument to show that agriculture would be better off following a Brexit, the UFU currently favours remaining within the EU. She added, however, that the UFU would not tell members how to vote.

Keith Crawford reported that ALCI is concerned about how a Brexit would affect plant availability.

Forum members agreed that although they shared concerns about the possible effects of Brexit they did not feel it appropriate to issue a statement advising industry how to vote.

**Patricia Erwin to circulate UFU statements on the referendum to members. Patrick Taggart to circulate details of the QUB debate on the referendum, to be held on 26 April, to members.**

## **5. Event at Parliament Buildings**

Members agreed, in view of the imminent dissolution of the Assembly, not to rush into planning the event. Care will be taken to tailor a message, representing all sectors of the industry, to the audience.

**Patrick Taggart to ask Neil Cummings for a report on the HTA's Scottish event.**

**Eric Long to forward guidance on creating a communication strategy to Patrick Taggart.**

**Patrick Taggart to draft and circulate for consideration a communication strategy for the Forum.**

**Patrick Taggart to enquire whether funding may be available through the RDP for the Parliament Buildings event and other communications.**

## **6. Participation by horticultural businesses in Business Development Groups**

Doug Thomson expressed concern that some members of Growers NI applications to the Business Development Groups (BDGs) Scheme had been unsuccessful due to not having Category 1 Business IDs.

Eric Long explained that CAFRE's Knowledge Transfer Project Board had considered this matter and concluded that it is not possible, for legal and governance reasons, to amend eligibility criteria at this stage. He said that Kieran Lavelle, CAFRE's Senior Horticulture Adviser, and his team had alerted industry to this matter well in advance but that some businesses had not applied for Category 1 status in time. He added that businesses refused admission to BDGs would be eligible to avail of the Farm Family Key Skills Programme and other knowledge and technology transfer support. Whilst there is currently no prospect of a further call for the BDG Scheme, should such an opportunity arise in the future, eligibility criteria would be reviewed in light of the issues set out above, with the aim of improving access for horticulture businesses.

The Forum decided not to write to the present Minister on this matter at present, and agreed to await an update on BDG Scheme delivery later this year.

Hamilton Loney expressed frustration about registration arrangements for businesses accepted into BDGs. Insufficient notice had been given of registration events and communication from CAFRE, following notification of inability to attend, had been poor.

Eric Long apologised for any shortcomings in CAFRE's service in the wake of significant reductions to CAFRE's admin staff resourcing arising from staff retirements due to the Voluntary Exit Scheme and during this period of

departmental restructuring, and made a commitment to follow up Hamilton's concerns with CAFRE colleagues.

Members were concerned by the possibility of horticulture being neglected, compared to other sectors, by DARD at a time of contracting resources. Members agreed to seek a meeting with Martin McKendry, the new CAFRE Director, to make him aware of horticulture's importance and needs.

**Eric Long to investigate alleged difficulties with BDG registration.**

**Eric Long to seek to improve access to BDGs and other knowledge and technology transfer services by horticulture businesses in future, in line with BDG Scheme rules/protocols and available resources.**

**Members to consider key messages to communicate to Martin McKendry.**

## **7. Update of Action Plan**

Members agreed to update the Action Plan, under the facilitation of Ian Duff, at the next meeting.

**Keith Crawford to arrange for Ian Duff to take on this task.**

**Patrick Taggart to email members the Review and Strategic Priorities for the Development of the Horticulture Industry in Northern Ireland (2012).**

## **8. AOB**

The Arable and Horticulture Sub-group of the Agri-food Strategy Board will have a key role in identifying research needs that will help meet Going for Growth targets.

**Members with research area suggestions to contact Hamilton Loney or Roy Lyttle (who are both members of the Sub-group).**

Paul Mooney drew members' attention to CAFRE courses. More information will be available at open days (Loughry Campus on 19 April, Greenmount Campus on 20 April and Enniskillen Campus on 23 April), or from the website: [www.cafre.ac.uk](http://www.cafre.ac.uk).

## **9. Date of next meeting**

16 May at 7.30pm. Venue to be confirmed.