

LEADER

Community-Led Local Development



National Rural Network

LEADER 2014-2020 (EXTENDED TO 2022) NRN CASE STUDY

LEAHY'S OPEN FARM - ICE CREAM AND CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Summary

Leahy's Open Farm in East Cork was officially opened to the public in 1996. Offering amenities and activities ranging from a museum and indoor play barn, to petting animals and adventure trails, the family run open farm caters for birthday parties, school tours, communions, company days out, holiday visitors and much more. Over the years, Leahy's Open Farm has benefitted greatly from LEADER, delivered through SECAD Partnership CLG (previously ECAD), the Implementing Partner of the programme in their area. The open farm was one of SECAD's first significant LEADER projects and their financial support as well as their belief in what the open farm was trying to achieve in terms of agri-diversification, was instrumental in getting the business off the ground.

In 2018, Leahy's Open Farm secured funding under the LEADER Food Initiative to support the purchase of production equipment for their on-site ice cream and chocolate factory. This equipment has greatly enhanced the farm's capacity to produce ice cream, has increased the availability and visibility of their ice cream and chocolate products, and has facilitated the development of new events and workshops for all the family in the ice cream and chocolate factory.

LEADER FOOD INITIATIVE

Project name: Leahy's Open Farm - Ice Cream and Chocolate Factory

Date: October 2018 – August 2019

Local Action Group: Cork South Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)

Implementing Partner: SECAD Partnership CLG

Type of Beneficiary: Small Medium Enterprise (SME)

Project Beneficiary Name/Organisation: Leahy's Open Farm

Address: Dungourney, Midleton, Co. Cork

Further information:

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#)



Teresa and Donal Leahy, co-owners of Leahy's Open Farm, showcasing their produce as part of a celebration of the LEADER Food Initiative in Co. Cork – Source: Diane Cusack Photography

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Context

For many years leading up to the official opening of Leahy's Open Farm, the Leahy family ran a successful pig and dairy enterprise which at its peak farmed up to 3,000 pigs and 50 cows. Due to price deflation and high costs associated with the pig farming, a lack of grazing for the cows, and the need to develop the open farm, a decision was taken to cease traditional farming in the early 1990s.

Around this time, sparked by a personal interest in old machinery, the Leahys decided to display some of their own antique belongings in the front yard of the farm every Sunday and encouraged those in the area to drop in and have a look for themselves. The history behind each item was shared and explored while guests were treated to tea and apple tart. What started initially as a hobby grew organically over time into a business in 1996, when Leahy's Open Farm officially opened to the public offering a display of antiques, a playground for the children and a café. The open farm has developed and expanded over the intervening period and now offers a wide array of indoor and outdoor activities for people of all ages.

In 2016, after many years without a cow on the farm, the Leahys decided to buy a small Jersey cow called Maisy. They recognised an opportunity to educate people about livestock on the open farm and to explain the process of milk production. Since then, a milking demonstration has been organised daily at 4pm on the farm with



Maisy the cow - Source: Leahy's Open Farm

space for 50-60 people to observe. This demonstration is carried out with a single unit milking parlour, which essentially is a small machine with a glass churn, so people watching can see the milk coming directly from the cow into the glass churn. This is extremely popular with school groups as it helps students make the connection between the cow and the milk in the churn.

At the end of each day, the Leahys noticed that they were left with 25 litres of milk from the demonstration. First they considered using it for the purpose of butter-making and then yoghurt-making. However, the high butter fat content in the milk of a Jersey cow meant that it would be most suited to ice cream making, and that is what they did. Initially, the Leahys bought a small counter top ice cream maker and started making ice cream, using various ingredients and trying out different recipes, which they regularly handed out for free to seek feedback from those visiting the farm.

Although the ice cream proved to be extremely popular with customers, the process of making it was very labour intensive. To address this issue, in 2018, the Leahys decided to apply for LEADER funding to support the purchase of production equipment for use in their ice cream and chocolate factory.

Objectives

- To expand the capacity of ice cream and chocolate production on the farm to better meet the demand of customers.
- To put the farm's own unique stamp on East Cork by providing people of all ages with another exciting reason to visit.





Activities

Leahy's Open Farm had previously availed of LEADER funding on a number of occasions to support projects including the purchase of antique memorabilia for the farm's on-site museum; the building of a maze, crazy golf course and adventure trail; and the purchase of JCB mini diggers.



The digger park provides children with the opportunity to operate a real JCB – Source: Leahy's Open Farm

Prior experience applying for LEADER support helped Leahy's Open Farm with their application on this occasion. Over the years, the Leahys have built up a strong relationship with SECAD Partnership CLG, the Implementing Partner of the LEADER Programme in their area, who offer support and guidance throughout the LEADER application process. SECAD reviewed their application and made suggestions on how it could be amended and improved.

"The rules, terms and conditions of the LEADER process have changed over the years but the structure has generally stayed the same. We gained a certain amount of confidence that SECAD believed in what we were doing when our first application for funding was approved. We have since developed a

really good relationship with them." *Teresa Leahy, Co-Owner, Leahy's Open Farm*

The Leahys are currently participating in the SECAD-led 'Sustainability for Food and Drink Businesses' programme which aims to provide practical training support to food and drink businesses wishing to pursue more environmentally conscious actions within their business operations. This training is also fully funded under the LEADER Food Initiative.



Prior to filling out their LEADER application, the Leahys conducted a considerable amount of research into the most suitable production equipment for their ice cream and chocolate factory. Initially, they visited ice cream production facilities in Ireland but found many of these to be producing ice cream on a similar scale to themselves. It was difficult, at the time, to find a facility that was a little more advanced in terms of the scale of ice cream it was able to produce. As a result, the Leahys made visits to the UK and Italy. Before making their final decision on what equipment to include in their LEADER application, they watched YouTube videos, read online reviews and interacted with suppliers of a wide array of equipment.





Results

LEADER funding supported the purchase of production equipment for Leahy's Ice Cream and Chocolate Factory, which opened to the public in the summer of 2018. This equipment included a fridge, a pasteurizer (to carry out the initial heat-treatment process of the milk), a batch freezer (to churn the product mix into the frozen state of ice cream), a blast freezer (to keep the integrity and the texture of the ice cream in place), additional freezers (to store the finished product) and a display cabinet (to showcase the various flavours of ice cream and sorbets to the customer).



Inside the ice cream and chocolate factory - Source: Leahy's Open Farm

This new equipment has greatly increased the capacity for ice cream production on Leahy's Open Farm. Initially inspired by the 25 litres of leftover milk at the end of each day, the Leahys have since been able to source Jersey cross cows in two neighbouring farms to produce the milk needed to meet the heightened demand.

"We are now able to make ice cream in a more efficient way that is less labour intensive. This has enabled us to meet demand initially on the farm and has opened up the possibility of supplying shops and

restaurants with our ice cream." Teresa Leahy, Co-Owner, Leahy's Open Farm

As of early 2021, Leahy's Open Farm supplied over 30 premises with its ice cream and chocolate products and this number continues to expand. In addition, the business was successful in applying to the 'Grow with Aldi' supplier development programme. This initiative, created in partnership with Bord Bia, is designed to help small and medium producers develop their brand. For three weeks in June 2020, Leahy's Open Farm ice cream featured on Aldi shelves throughout Ireland.

"This would not have been possible without the new production equipment... 'Grow with Aldi' really helped with brand awareness. We received comments on our Facebook page from all over the country." Teresa Leahy, Co-Owner, Leahy's Open Farm



Leahy's Open Farm ice cream on display - Source: Leahy's Open Farm

The availability and visibility of Leahy's Open Farm products has helped the business to promote and reinforce the message that their delicious ice cream is widely available, that visitors can come and see it being made, taste it, and also visit the open farm while there.





“A lot of our customers tend to stay in local hotels or eat in local restaurants. A family will come and visit the farm, they’ll taste the ice cream while they’re here. Then they might go back to a local restaurant that night and on the menu they’ll see ‘Leahy’s Open Farm ice cream’. It becomes a talking point. Or maybe a family might not have heard of our business but when they see our ice cream on the menu, they’ll ask ‘Oh, what’s Leahy’s Open Farm?’ and maybe then they will come and visit us the following day.” *Teresa Leahy, Co-Owner, Leahy’s Open Farm*

Another added bonus is that the business is now able to offer a range of new events and workshops. The farm has started running chocolate workshops and chocolate birthday parties. Prior to the pandemic, a wide range of Transition Year school groups visited the ice cream and chocolate factory. Students were given the opportunity to learn how to make their own chocolate and had loads of fun in the process!

“Leahy’s Open Farm is a fantastic example of how innovation in the food sector has been supported through the LEADER Food Initiative. The business has always placed a strong focus on innovation by consistently adding to the variety of activities and facilities on the open farm. Due to their rural location, enhancing the visitor experience has been critical to attracting visitors and sustaining the highly valuable jobs created as a result. The opening of their ice cream and chocolate factory is one of the latest hugely successful additions to their business and SECAD Partnership were delighted to work with Teresa and Donal Leahy to provide the support necessary to secure vital LEADER funding.” *Katie Kearns, Development Officer, SECAD Partnership CLG*

Successful LEADER funding applications over the years have had a transformative impact on the business’ ability to create jobs in a very rural area in East Cork.

When Leahy’s Open Farm first opened to the public back in 1996, it was predominantly staffed by family members. Fast forward to 2022, and as a direct result of various LEADER supported projects which have added greatly to the overall service offering on the open farm, the business now employs 21 staff members (15 permanent and 6 part-time) and up to 80 seasonal employees throughout the year.

Lessons

Managing the LEADER application process

Although the LEADER application process can require a significant amount of time and effort on behalf of the applicant, Teresa recommends using this time to hone your project idea and to reaffirm that you are doing the right thing.

“The funding application takes such a length of time to fill out, and such an amount of detail to get your paperwork in order. It can take 6-8 months to fill out... but this actually gives you time to be certain of what it is you are looking for. Ask yourself: is this something that we really need, something that will benefit our business and something that will transform it completely?” *Teresa Leahy, Co-Owner, Leahy’s Open Farm*

Importance of preparation and research

With this type of project, which involved the purchase of equipment that ultimately impacts on the quality of ice cream and chocolate produced, Teresa stresses the importance of doing your research in advance.

“It’s really beneficial to do your research in advance to establish what exactly it is you are looking for. Meet with suppliers, it’s important to build a good relationship with them.” *Teresa Leahy, Co-Owner, Leahy’s Open Farm*





Funding

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii)	€90,798.00
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+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	€45,399.00
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	€28,510.57
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	€16,888.43
+ (ii) Private / Own funds	€45,399.00
+ (iii) Other funding sources	-

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