

## Meeting minutes

### Horticulture Industry Forum Committee Meeting Grower Event

Date: 12<sup>th</sup> November 2025 9.30am to 2.30pm

Attendees: Event open to all Growers – Speakers listed below

Name	Sector/Organisation	Name	Sector/Organisation
Orla McManus	Mushrooms/ Co Chair	Michael Healy-Rae	Minister of State
Mark Walsh	Mushrooms	Emer Gallaher-Hall	Bord Bia
Martin Flynn	Protected Crops	Robert Malone	IFA
Val Farrell	Amenity	Louise Byrne	DAFM
James O Donoghue	Apples	Deirdre Fay	DAFM
Paul Brophy	Field Veg	Tamsen Harward	DAFM
Sean Ryan	Potato	Sinead Mulcahy	DAFM
Kitty Scully	Organics	Niamh Kellaghan	DAFM
Niall McCormack	Soft fruit		

107 growers and stakeholders attended the event from all sectors of Horticulture industry, state agencies and DAFM.

#### Opening of the meeting

Chair Orla McManus welcomed all present to the HIF and gave a brief overview of the history and purpose of the HIF. Co-chair Minister Healy-Rae was then invited to open the meeting.

Minister Healy-Rae opening the meeting thanked all who had taken the time and effort to attend. In the opening address Minister Healy-Rae outlined that the meeting is an opportunity for all present to get an overview of how the forum operates and to meet the sector representatives, encouraging all stakeholders to make use of their time and meet with their sector representatives present at the forum.

At the beginning of his address, the Minister reiterated his commitment to the horticulture sector, and his efforts in securing an increase in supports for the sector in Budget 2026. Minister Healy-Rae announced the opening of the *Horticulture Innovation & Diversification Scheme for 2026* and emphasised the Horticulture Grant Scheme closing date of Dec 12<sup>th</sup> for 2026 applications. In relation to the Horticulture Strategy 2023-2027, Minister Healy-Rae outlined that the sector is currently ahead of target on farmgate value of €688million for 2027. Finally, the Minister emphasised the importance of completing census information requests as having 'good data' is vital in planning for the sector, he stated that the Department can only rely on the data that they receive.

Chair Orla McManus addressed the meeting outlining the concerns of all in relation to rising labour costs, increasing input costs, threats to Irish food security and increasing imports across the sector. The HIF existence is to bring issues to the table and outline the need for support. The minutes of the last meeting were approved (proposed by Paul Brophy and seconded by Mark Walsh).

### **Tamsen Harward (DAFM) – Horticulture Strategy – Mid Term Review**

- Mid Term Review to be available on DAFM website. Additional challenges to the strategy at midterm review were outlined: Increasing input costs, reduced EU funding for marketing campaigns, access to labour and associated costs.
- National Strategy had identified eight key strategic actions, which are considered, in the Mid Term Review under four key interventions.
  - 1:** Strengthened Growers – key supports outlined in relation to Producer Organisation membership, Innovation schemes, Horticulture Grant Schemes, importance of commodity groups.
  - 2:** Sectoral promotion & Education – Board Bia campaigns, BLOOM and example campaign running Food Dudes, Incredible edible outlined. Funding mechanism for further campaign to be reviewed - for example a grower levy.
  - 3:** Talent Skills and labour- Education review published June 2025, Tamsen pointed out that Dr Owen Doyle was present at the meeting today if there were any questions. The Teagasc Apprenticeship Scheme was outlined, and it was stated that there needs to be continued engagement with DoJ and DETE on employment issues in the sector.
  - 4:** R&D, Innovation and markets support – Overview Teagasc Projects and Board Bia market research.
- Tamsen asked growers to engage in the strategy review – closing date 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 2025 and further emphasised the importance of data collection.

### **Robert Malone (IFA) – Horticulture Strategy – Retail Engagement (KSA in Charter)**

- Robert Malone began by discussing the aims of the proposed ‘Retail Charter,’ which would formalise fair relationships between growers and retailers.
- Robert provided a summary of the engagement with the five main retailers topics covered; promotion of Irish growers, tendering process to favour long term relationships, pricing structure on F&V, reduction in food waste and outline the challenges with each retailer.
- Target for resolution on outstanding issues is Q1 2026 and signed charters with retailers to be in place by that point. The next step will be to move to consolidators for review / focus, with the aim of drawing up a ‘Consolidator Charter.’

### **Emer Gallagher-Hall (Board Bia) – Overview Strategic Mission/ Horticulture Priorities 2025-2028**

- Emer gave an overview of the strategic mission of Bord Bia, specifically the 6 Horticulture priorities, which were discussed under the following:
  - 1: Enable clients to maximise domestic market opportunities
  - 2: Increase consumer and customer awareness and loyalty
  - 3: Export fit clients and market development
  - 4: Foster innovation & new opportunities through insights and data
  - 5: Build Industry resilience, future leadership, and market development
  - 6: Develop BLOOM for the white sector – leveraging the Bloom appeal to increase customer awareness and allow to wider industry to showcase innovations.

On promotional and other updates, Emer outlined:

- The Make Your Mark Campaign to be extended to Horticulture in 2025/2026
- Outlined the importance of the Board Bia Quality Mark
- Shared the Board Bia Platform— asked growers to access and engage with platform.

#### **Sinead Mulcahy (DAFM) – Horticulture Investment Aid Schemes Update**

- Further to the Minister’s announcement an overview of the three Innovation & Diversification Schemes was provided outlined each of the schemes intentions, who/what is eligible, the minimum investment amounts, the upper limit of each scheme and the rate at which aid is paid.
- Closing date for applications to the 2026 Innovation & Diversification Schemes is 23/01/2026 with a payment date of 01/11/2026. Scheme launched in 2024, and number of applicants has risen each year.
- 2025 Hort Grants – 169 applicants with 100 being processed for payment, 35% of applicants have requested extensions into Nov / Dec.
- Request to growers to prioritise investment in applications for 2026 – closing date for application 12<sup>th</sup> Dec 2025

#### **Niamh Kellaghan (DAFM) – Official Controls and Food Safety**

- Niamh Kellaghan gave a brief talk on official controls in food and food safety.
- Most horticulture producers are also Food Business Operators (FBO) with associated responsibilities.
- An overview of the relevant official control legislation was presented to the forum with the key points highlighted in relation to safety of produce, identification of risk and risk assessments to be conducted in your business outlined.
- DAFM risk rating is based on details kept in the FBO register – growers urged to ensure that it is kept up to date. An overview of what official controls are looked at during an inspection was presented. The importance of traceability was highlighted as a key requirement.
- Niamh finished by outlining that more information was available on the Department’s website and also pointed to a DAFM funded project which is looking at the risk of foodborne pathogen contaminants in fresh fruit and vegetable production, asking relevant stakeholders present to get involved.

#### **Sector Representatives – Introduced by Orla**

##### **Martin Flynn (Tomato grower) represented the protected crops sector.**

- Raised the issue of fake branding used by some retailers, which is leading to very few producers using their own brand on products – call to put pressure on the retailers to stop this practice.
- Cost of doing business has increased significantly only five growers now in protected crops and consumer demand is increasing – increasing labour costs are having a significant impact.
- Mr Flynn requested that a potential PRSI exemption/rebate for primary producers be considered.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

DAFM are aware of the fake branding issue, however the Minister stated that we must be mindful of how this is approached as practice is not illegal but acknowledges that it is a huge issue facing the sector currently. In relation to labour costs, the Minister pointed out that there has been some success in relation to permits, however he and his department will continue to highlight this to the government and consult with the Dept of Finance on the matter.

**Mark Walsh represented the mushroom sector.**

- Mr Walsh thanked both the Minister and DAFM for their continued support to the industry.
- Outlined that input costs are up by 51% since 2021, the mushroom industry is struggling and 85% of mushrooms produced in Ireland are exported to the UK, competition from Poland producers with no other markets are available in addition to rising labour costs are having a significant impact.
- Mr Walsh requested support on the following on behalf of the sector.
  - 1: A pause in the GEP for a long as possible
  - 2: New fund be made available for semi-automated harvesting support approx. He requested approximately €15million annually.
  - 3: Management of straw resources
  - 4: Peat Challenges

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

Minister Healy-Rae assured Mr Walsh that the challenges of automation are recognised, and support will be provided where it can be within the constraints of what is possible. In relation to the GEP the minister outlined that this is under review.

**Niall Mc Cormac represented the soft fruit sector.**

- Availability of labour and cost is biggest challenge, requested that the seasonal work permit scheme be revisited in relation to the pay rate (other EU countries rate is set at minimum wage), timings (scheme was delayed to May 2025), scheme to be made more grower friendly to promote and have uptake of the scheme in the industry.
- GEP cost highlighted as an issue
- Request reviewing the possibility of a third HIF meeting annually.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

The Minister outlined that both his office and DAFM have an open door to growers if advice/help required, stakeholders are welcomed to raise their issues outside of the HIF meetings. In relation to the Seasonal work permit acknowledged that availability of labour is a challenge.

**Val Farrell represented the amenity sector.**

- Mr Farrell outlined the issues in relation to peat alternatives, retailers having ongoing issues with returns and customer complaint as the peat alternatives are encountering drying out issues at point of sale. Mr Farrell outlined that up to 10 years is required to allow growers to adjust and address these issues both in the growing and selling cycle. This is a major problem for the industry as the cost of changing over to peat alternative is exceedingly high.

- Mr Farrell raised the issue of commercial rates and demand for rate payments by some county councils to nursery owners.
- The apprentice scheme needs to be promoted across the industry to have uptake, Mr Farrell encouraged those present to take part in the scheme.
- The European Nursery Conference taking place in March 2026 – Mr Farrell extended an invitation to Minister Haely-Rae to attend.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

The Minister acknowledged the challenges in relation to peat and agreed that time is required to move across to alternatives smoothly. In relation to rates the Minister is aware of the issue and this sits with local authorities.

**James O Donoghue - top fruit sector (Cider)**

- Thanked the HIF for the opportunity to discuss issues on cider labelling and the direct impact on the sector.
- 60% of the cider apple market taken by one manufacturer, there has been significant decrease in the tonnage of apples used in the cider making if this continues it will result in orchard removal having a direct impact on craft cider products and cider brandy production, there would also be a large environmental impact if this were to happen.
- Mr O Donoghue outlined that Ireland currently has no official definition for cider, marketing standards for cider are being considered at EU level and concerns raised that Ireland has not clearly outlined its position on this.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

The Minister agreed to follow up on this issue.

**Kitty Scully – represented the organic sector.**

- Ms Scully acknowledged and thanked the Minister and DAFM for their continued support.
- The success of the apprentice scheme in the organic sector was highlighted, having currently ten apprentices on the scheme.
- Ms Scully did highlight some challenges in relation to the administrative burden of the scheme supports and request that DAFM link in with users to be proactive rather than reactive.
- Ms Scully expressed gratitude on behalf of the sector for support post Storm Ewoyn in early 2025, requested that a contingency fund be put in place for storms / disruptive events in the future.
- Ms Scully request feedback on the small grower's survey conducted in 2024.
- Annual Organic Conference 25<sup>th</sup> November – open to all.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

The Minister outlined that contingency funding is both difficult to secure and manage, the Department must spend the money available to them, but he will take the suggestion on board.

**Sean Ryan represented the Potato sector.**

- Mr Ryan highlighted the issue on seed potato supply and supply issue being impacted due to outstanding issues on another area audit – these needs to be addressed.
- Concerns raised by Mr Ryan on certification required by retailers – Global Gap requested by some retailers – sector highlighting that Bord Bia certification should be sufficient.
- Issue on loss of Plant Protection products – some in use not effective on use or cost.
- Mr Ryan acknowledged the work of the Food Regulator and requested that the Food Regulator have additional powers to ensure information is supplied by the retailers when requested by the regulator.
- Mr Ryan also raised concerns on rates being sought from members of his sector.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

The Minister gave his support on the Bord Bia issue raised, agreeing that the burden was too heavy. In relation to the seed potato issue, he assured Mr Ryan that DAFM officials are monitoring developments on this issue between the Commission and the UK, and finally he shared the concerns on the Food Regulator.

**Paul Brophy represented the field vegetable sector.**

- Mr Brophy requested in relation to the administration of the PO scheme which has evolved and grown over the last number of years that additional resources in relation to IT administration be provided for this section of DAFM.
- The SEP issues were highlighted by Mr Brophy in relation to the rejecting of visa application by the Dept of Justice.
- The challenges around Plant Protection products and the decreasing number available to the sector was highlighted, Movento highlighted as an issue as no longer available in Ireland but can be used in UK. Ongoing challenges with regulations, consumer expectations and climate changes, new emerging pests. Mr Brophy requested additional resources for DAFM PCS division to allow for quicker research and approval of alternatives for the sector.

*Minister Healy-Rae response*

In response to the SEP – the Minister will engage with the Dept of Justice on this.

Donal Lynch (DAFM) gave an overview of the withdrawal of Movento from the market – this was a commercial decision by the manufacturers not to supply in the EU.

In relation to mutual recognition across the EU of plant protection products DAFM are working to expedite and a proposal on the simplification of the process is being worked on. Louise Byrne (DAFM) outlined that the Department are aware of this issue and are working on it.

**Minister Healy-Rae additional response to challenges raised and final comments.**

Minister Healy-Rae thanked Mr O Donoghue for highlighting issues on cider production and the impact on the apple sector, Deirdre Fay (DAFM) provided an update from the Food Industry Division who have responsibility for bringing IRL comments for discussion at GREX. Ireland did submit comments on the

proposal in Oct 2025; further comments will be feed into the Food Industry Division for discussion at EU in January of 2026.

Minister Healy- Rae addressed the concerns highlighted by sector representative on peat, he outlined that this is a complex issue and DAFM will work with the industry on this.

Minister Healy-Rae thanked all who took the time to attend the forum today on his departure he requested that Orla open the floor for questions/ comments.

Ms McManus once again thanked the minister for all his responses and the hard work he puts into the sector. She also thanked all sub-sector leads and asked that those present feed their queries into these people so that issues could be raised in the right spaces. Orla McManus finished by outlining the clear sense of determination in the Hort sector, that there was a desire to innovate, modernise and to keep the sector alive. She pointed out that the Forum would continue to shape policy, funding, and support, and that it would ensure horticulture is not left behind. She thanked all present for attending.

#### **Questions / Comments from attendees**

- **Following the break, Louise Byrne (DAFM) invited growers to raise their issues.**

Mr John Joe Hyland highlighted the issue on the cost of commercial insurance for young people entering the industry – cost prohibitive currently. He also highlighted the importance of engagement with the nursery sector when developing any future agri- environment schemes as to avoid issues on supply, pointing to issues with the ACRES scheme.

On the issue of SEP Mr McCormack requested that Dept of Justice, if possible, could attend the HIF meeting to discuss issues. Louise Byrne (DAFM) agreed to take this suggestion away for review and discussion.

Mr J Dockrell spoke of the importance of the SEP to and how it is beneficial to both the employer and the employee.

Mr Pat Farrell outlined the importance of communication on the permit schemes and discussed DETE attending the HIF. Growers need to know if the SEP is going ahead next year to allow for adequate planning – an early decision on this is requested.

Rachel Wisdom (DAFM) outlined that a review is due at year end and this will determine if the scheme goes ahead.

Mr Padraig Fahy highlighted the timing of grant aid schemes and Mr Martin Flynn queried if projects could commence prior to approval – Sinead Mulcahy (DAFM) outlined that the grants provided are subject to State Aid approval and therefore must abide by these rules which require any grant to have an incentive effect – not possible if the item is ordered before approval.

Mr Andrew Smyth highlighted concerns on the availability of land for cereals and other horticultural activities due to competition from other sectors. Lousie Byrne (DAFM) outlined the growth target of 400,000Ha for the tillage sector by 2030 and acknowledged that there is more to do on this.

#### **Next meeting**

Next meeting - date to be confirmed.