

# IRISH ORGANIC ASSOCIATION

13 Inish Carraig, Golden Island, Athlone, Co. Westmeath N37 N1W4

Tel: 090 64 33680 Fax: 090 64 49005 Email: [info@irishoa.ie](mailto:info@irishoa.ie)

Web Address: [www.irishorganicassociation.ie](http://www.irishorganicassociation.ie)



## The Irish organic sector's contribution to LEADER 2023-2027

*Irish Organic Association, May 2023*

### Introduction

The Irish Association wishes to highlight the role that organic enterprises can play in supporting the economic development and job creation, and environmental and climate action themes of the forthcoming LEADER Local Development Strategies (LDS). The growing interest in organic farming<sup>1</sup> and demand for organic produce amongst Irish and EU consumers is a good news story for the agri-food sector across Europe and an opportunity for Irish agri-food enterprises<sup>2</sup>. The National Organic Strategy 2019-2025 has highlighted many ways that the organic sector can make an active contribution to community-led local development (CLLD). These include:

- that the quality and taste of local Irish organic produce is considered very high;
- the growing demand for locally produced food, emerging trends related to health and lifestyle; and
- the prospects of supporting local employment in rural areas.

Forthcoming LDSs have the potential to support the wide range of new and existing organic enterprises nationwide, many of them well-placed to contribute to sustainable development of urban and rural areas nationwide.<sup>3</sup> Not only is organic farming recognised by Irish and EU policymakers for its contribution to the EU Farm to Fork Strategy, EU Rural Vision to 2040 and several of CAP objectives<sup>4</sup>, but it is also supported by Irish citizens as part of Ireland's response to our biodiversity and climate crisis<sup>5</sup>. In particular, the 'bio district' concept is a key action for the Member States in the EU Organic Action Plan<sup>6</sup> (Action 14) designed to reinforce local and small-volume processing and foster the short trade circuits. It is one area that should be strongly encouraged for inclusion in the Local Development Strategies (LDS) of the Local Action Groups (LAGs).

Prioritising organic enterprises in Local Development Strategies can enable organic food and farming businesses to reach their full potential and build organic value chains from the ground up. Many organic operators have already availed of LEADER funding under previous programmes. Going forward there is scope under the 2023-2027 programming period for LAGs to renew their efforts on:

- working collaboratively with local organic enterprises/community groups, on an ongoing basis, to develop self-sustaining and viable businesses and community initiatives that are needs-focused<sup>7</sup>;
- taking full advantage of the 'experience economy' to increase the attractiveness of local/seasonal organic food and other products/activities for residents and visitors both at home and abroad; and
- ensuring complementarity and joined-up thinking between LDSs and the work of other public bodies as well as other funding streams, including helping organic enterprises to navigate the different options.<sup>8</sup>

Below we highlight some of the ways that organic enterprises are already and can be further enabled to make a positive contribution to their local areas and regions in terms of stimulating entrepreneurship and community-led development to sustain local businesses and communities (Informed by our SWOT Analysis under Annex 2).

### Supporting the development of local organic short-supply chains

Over the last decade, organic produce has recorded strong growth trends in organic food sales both in Ireland and across the EU.<sup>9</sup> Alongside government targets, LDSs have the potential to further develop organic short-supply chains and rural food production in the following ways by:

- Supporting the establishment of regional branding for locally produced organic products, to increase the visibility and sales of certified organic products, add to agri-food tourism offerings as well as other trade (e.g., exports), drawing on experience from other EU regions (see Annex 1 b);
- Promoting the further development of direct sales, producer-consumer groups, food coops, and other trading relationships to increase availability and access to locally produced organic products and create new business opportunities.



The **Urban Co-op (Limerick)** is a community grocery co-operative, wellness hub and education space located in Eastway Business Park in Limerick city. The enterprise operates a 7-day organic and local grocery business with 5 full-time and 4 part-time employees. 66% of food supplies are sourced from Irish suppliers, with the Coop working with several local organic producers and actively engaging with the local community. With organic food representing two-thirds of sales, the Co-op is also mindful of its wider impact on the environment, currently limiting waste to about 1% of sales. It also manages general and purpose-built spaces, that promote health and wellbeing, and social engagement and community ownership in Limerick city and surrounding region. The Co-op has over 2,300 community or co-operative members, with a membership policy open to all and a variety of options to facilitate different levels of contribution and commitment. More information: [theurbanco-op.ie](http://theurbanco-op.ie)

**Manna Organic Store (Kerry)** is an organic food shop, selling a wide range of organic fruit, vegetables, and organic whole foods. As much stock as possible is sourced from their own organic farm near Tralee as well as other local and Irish organic producers. The business is built on the philosophy that everyone should have access to safe, healthy, nutritious and delicious food. To connect further with its customers, farm open days are also organised where people can visit the farm and learn about how vegetables are grown and animals raised as well as the farm's contribution to the environment. Their business also applies a circular bio-economy approach with organic waste from the farm and the shop recycled as compost or as animal or poultry feed. More information: [mannaorganicstore.ie](http://mannaorganicstore.ie)



### Stimulating a circular bioeconomy through agri-tourism and other product development

The entrepreneurial and innovative nature of many organic enterprises makes them a good fit to contribute to a circular bioeconomy - in line with organic principles. In many cases local organic enterprises have been pioneering such approaches for years. LDSs could continue to stimulate this by:

- Encouraging the growth of organic enterprises who wish to engage in agro-tourism from hospitality and education to health and wellness that can add value to the local community with an emphasis on the sense of place, heritage and natural resources of the area; and
- Stimulate opportunities for natural products such as organic health and beauty and other organic certified materials. For instance, there is potential for regions to contribute to the development of an Irish organic wool industry<sup>10</sup>, and promote small-scale composting at farm or district level.<sup>11</sup>



**Mount Briscoe (Offaly)** is a seventh-generation working organic farm and hospitality business near Daingean Co. Offaly. Run by Margaret Edgill, the farm specialises in native and traditional Irish cattle breeds including Moiled, Shorthorns and Herefords. As well as her interest in preserving our rural heritage, and rare/native breeds, Margaret hosts hospitality events, self-catering accommodation and glamping, with opportunities for guests to learn about life on a working organic farm covering everything from the rare breed cattle and heritage orchards to beekeeping and hedge laying. Mount Briscoe also sells a range of artisan food and other products using the best of seasonal, local, organic and wild foods. More information: [mountbriscoe.ie](http://mountbriscoe.ie)

The Burren Nature Sanctuary (Galway) is an organic farm in the heart of the Burren near Kinvara dedicated to nature, run by Mary and Roy Bermingham. It aims to provide visitors a snapshot of Burren biodiversity - with parts of the farm rewilded or managed for conservation - including an orchid-rich wildflower meadow, native woodland, a native botany collection, and a unique protected wetland area. Visitors have the option to learn about the unique flora of the area, with mini-introductions to the botany of the Burren and nature walks through different habitats. Visitors can also meet farm pets, and enjoy the on-site café and playground area. The Burren Nature Sanctuary also offers a self-catering apartment with broadband and Slow Cabins® where guests can slow down and take a break from the stress of every day life in a peaceful and secluded countryside life. The cabins are organised based on the principles of Slow (travel). More information: [burrennaturesanctuary.ie](http://burrennaturesanctuary.ie)



### Contributing to community-led development on the environment and climate action

The sustainability credentials of the organic sector are increasingly recognised by Irish policymakers and citizens.<sup>12</sup> Initiatives under LDSs, which complement other CAP schemes, can give organic farmers and businesses opportunities to further contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas. In particular:

- Support organic farmers/businesses to implement relevant actions under the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan that complement ACRES and schemes, such as active management/mowing regimes of existing hedgerows/ green verges e.g., via local guidance, performance-based awards/competitions<sup>13</sup>; and
- Organic farming has the potential to initiate improvements in Ireland’s water quality. Notably local authorities and groups in France and Germany, promote organic farming conversions to improve the quality of drinking water in water catchments (complemented by other measures).<sup>14</sup>

### Annex 1: Examples of Bio-districts/Organic-districts and regional branding across Europe

What is a Bio-district?	
<p>A ‘bio district’ or ‘organic district’ is a geographical area where local authorities and rural-urban stakeholders aim to maximise the economic and sociocultural potential of organic operators present in the territory through a working partnership agreement. The partnership is designed to address common economic, social and environmental needs based on organic principles and practices. Each district addresses issues related to lifestyle, nutrition, human relations and nature considerations, with a strong emphasis on high-value local organic production as well as strong collaboration with the tourism sector.<sup>15</sup></p>	
	<p>In the Mühlviertel region in Upper Austria the “BioRegion Mühlviertel” territory and brand was set up in 2010, as a LEADER project, to promote local organic food producers, suppliers, tourism and food education in schools. More than half of Upper Austrian organic farmers (around 2,100) are involved, as well as a large number of organic processing companies located in the area. The brand is actively promoted as a marketing tool for 150 partner companies (including farming, processing, catering and tourism). BioRegion products are widely available in local hospitality establishments, with specific labelling to promote local organic produce to locals, and other visitors. Further information: <a href="http://bioregion-muehlviertel.at">bioregion-muehlviertel.at</a></p>
	<p>Launched in 2013, the brand ‘Bio Sud Ouest’ (literally Organic Southwest) aims at promoting local organic production or supply by supporting regional operators and proposing a clear identification of local organic products through a label. An initiative of the organic sector and local authorities in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region of France the brand is based on certain specifications e.g., the main product must be certified organic and produced and processed in the region. In 2017 there were about 556 certified products from 35 companies, with further development driven by the organic sector in the region. Further information: <a href="http://biosudouestfrance.com">biosudouestfrance.com</a></p>
	<p>The first bio-district in Europe was born in Cilento, Southern Italy (Campania) in 2009. “Bio-Distretto Cilento” was established by organic farmers and other stakeholders seeking to promote and market their organic produce. It covers an area of about 3,196 km<sup>2</sup> across 38 municipalities. Together with the local authorities, organic farmers started to work on strategic objectives for the sustainable development of the territory with a strong focus on local organic food promotion. Today the bio-district involves about 400 organic farmers, local government, tourism operators, consumers and schools. Bio-districts have grown incrementally nationally over the last two decades, with currently 40 established across Italy. Further information: <a href="http://www.biodistretto.it">www.biodistretto.it</a></p>

Source: Own Compilation

## Annex 2: SWOT Analysis of the Contribution of Organic Enterprises to Local Development Strategies

Strengthens	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Production of high-quality products, supporting the environment, animal welfare &amp; rural development that are verified, internationally recognised &amp; legally protected</li> <li>-Commitment from government &amp; public agencies (Bord Bia/Teagasc) to grow the sector, with increasing interest from farmers as a prospective business &amp; from consumers to buy</li> <li>-Support to develop the land area nationwide by 2027 &amp; 2030 &amp; consequently expand the supply of organic products</li> <li>-Strong culture of entrepreneurship &amp; interest in farm diversification, with organic farms more likely to have on-farm processing, &amp; other value-added or outreach activities</li> <li>-Recognition from two Citizens' Assemblies of the positive role &amp; benefits organic production can make for biodiversity &amp; climate action, including calls for more investment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Local organic food initiatives, agri-tourism &amp; value-added activities are underdeveloped compared to other EU rural and urban regions</li> <li>-Irish organic produce can be widely dispersed, which can undermine access and availability amongst consumers</li> <li>-Funding streams don't always respond effectively to the needs of local organic enterprises, which may be at different development stages in ensuring long-term viability</li> <li>-Scale and consistency of supply remain the main factors constraining the supply of home-grown Irish organic produce (particularly horticulture)</li> <li>-The high potential to develop local and regional organic branding has not been fully explored compared to other EU rural and urban regions</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Building Irish organic supply chains both at home &amp; abroad can support &amp; strengthen Ireland's clean green image &amp; credentials</li> <li>-Supporting organic short-supply chain development and positioning Ireland as agri-tourism destination by establishing "bio-districts"</li> <li>-Realising the potential for organic production to support local communities e.g., water quality</li> <li>-Innovative organic enterprises can help to stimulate the development circular bio-based economies based on organic principles e.g., organic wool industry</li> <li>-Support &amp; reinforce career prospects &amp; local rural employment through farm diversification and new rural enterprises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Blurring the identity of local organic produce that delivers multiple proved health and environments with food that only has single-issue attributes e.g., "local"</li> <li>-Consumers often expect Irish organic produce e.g., fruits &amp; vegetables to be in season all year round, with prices below the cost of production</li> <li>-Limited development of Irish organic supply chains results in increased competition from countries for food and tourism market spaces</li> <li>-Dependency on the importation of produce that can be grown locally weakens food &amp; nutrition security &amp; potentially increases our vulnerability to climate change &amp; other shocks</li> </ul>

Source: Own compilation

### About the Irish Organic Association

The Irish Organic Association is a member-owned, not-for-profit company that has been at the forefront of the organic movement in Ireland for the past 40 years (including organic farmers and other enterprises). We are an accredited certification body that covers the entire island of Ireland to provide organic certification for food and feed, as well as industrial products.

Organic regulation and therefore certification, covers the entire supply chain, from farm to retail, requiring rigorous system verification to ensure compliance with the overarching EU organic regulations. Organic regulations have been developed over many years since it was first legislated by the EU in 1991. Organic is defined in law and is the only agroecological production method with a legally ensured guarantee system.

The ongoing development of the regulations has resulted in comprehensive standards that have evolved around achieving sustainability at every stage of production, from permitted inputs on farm to prohibited additives in food processing. Its strict controls and inspection at each stage rewards operators with the use of the EU Organic logo, which has gained recognition with consumers worldwide.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Representing about 4% of Ireland's Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) as of 01 January 2023

<sup>2</sup> Retail sales have doubled in value in Ireland and Europe over the past decade. For further details see [The World of Organic Agriculture: Current Trends and Statistics 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in 2021 over 18% of farming members from the Irish Organic Association had on-farm processing, 32% of them are managed by women. Furthermore, circa. 49% of Irish Organic Association processing licensee holders are either managed and/or owned by women.

<sup>4</sup> Notably CAP specific objectives 8 and 9 in the context the LEADER programme

<sup>5</sup> Citizens' Assemblies on [biodiversity loss](#) (2023) and [tackling climate change](#) (2018).

<sup>6</sup> [An action plan for the development of organic production](#) aims to boost consumption, stimulate production and processing and contribute to the EU's wider sustainability objectives. Several actions/recommendations are directly relevant to Ireland's own organic 2027 and 2030 targets.

<sup>7</sup> For example, many Local Action Groups and implementing partners are seeking to continuously improve their understanding of social and environmental needs and issues affecting local communities through ongoing training and regular field trips to speak directly local enterprises

<sup>8</sup> In particular the 3 regional assemblies for the Northern and Western, Eastern and Midlands, Southern regions, Bord Bia, LEO, Fáilte Ireland/Tourism Ireland as well as funding streams under the European Structural and Investment Funds, Just Transition Fund and Rural Innovation & Development Fund etc.

<sup>9</sup> As well via supermarkets, organic producers are also actively engaged and have pioneered the development of other routes to market including direct sales to consumers via farm shops, markets and online channels as well as to trade customers including processors, hospitality and the food service and producer-to-producer sales.

<sup>10</sup> The movement away from synthetic textiles and growing interest in natural fibres presents organic sheep farmers with the potential to increase the market value of their Irish wool through different market routes for textiles, filled products e.g., mattresses, insulation and fertilisers as evidenced by the DAFM commissioned [review of market opportunities for Irish-grown wool-based products \(2022\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> Composts for use in organic production must be certified by the organic control body under its Certified Products Scheme or subject to the Publicly Available Specification for Composted Materials (PAS 100)

<sup>12</sup> Organic Farming Scheme, organic farmers are prioritised under Ireland's flagship Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) reflecting their potential to support environmental and climate goals

<sup>13</sup> For example, in France annual open competitions are used to raise awareness and incentivise the agro-ecological management of farmland forestry, hedgerows and grasslands. Originally established by France's Regional Natural Parks with a special focus on farmland protected areas, it aims to showcase management practices that contribute to biodiversity as well as production (such as taste and quality of products).

<sup>14</sup> The promotion of organic food and support for organic farming has been used in regions of France and Germany to improve water quality in sensitive catchment areas supplying drinking water to large cities including Paris, Munich and Leipzig. A whole supply chain strategy is often applied, complementing national organic farming support, with farmers offered advisory services on organic relevant land management and supported in the marketing of their products including produce, including collection, sale, and distribution.

<sup>15</sup> FAO (2017) The experience of Bio-districts in Italy. Agroecology Knowledge Hub. Available at: [www.fao.org/agroecology/database/detail/en/c/1027958/](http://www.fao.org/agroecology/database/detail/en/c/1027958/)