Business Strategy for a Vegetable Micro Enterprise

31st October 2025

Authors: Grainne Kelliher, James Burke & Martin Bealin

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland
Arna chomhchistiú ag an Aontas Eorpach
Co-funded by the European Union
Tionól Réigiúnach an Deiscirt
Southern Regional Assembly
Enterprise Ireland

Business Strategy for a Vegetable Micro Enterprise

Teagasc states that vegetable production in Ireland is an important part of the horticultural industry, with approximately 4,237ha of field vegetables grown annually worth €76m (DAFM, 2018) at farm gate. In addition, there are 163ha of vegetables grown under protection valued at close on €29m. Production is concentrated in Dublin, Meath, Wexford and Cork, with approximately 200 growers. The largest 50 growers (in terms of area) account for 75% of the total field vegetable production area. The industry is labour intensive, employing in excess of 1,000 people full-time. These large-scale production units are highly professional and efficient, focused on producing high-quality vegetables at a competitive price for supermarkets. Ireland is about 60% self-sufficient in vegetables, and the seasonal climate means that the remainder must be imported.

Bord Bia has identified a lack of new entrants to the field vegetable sector, which is contributing to farm consolidation. As older growers retire without successors, production is increasingly concentrated in fewer, larger operations. This presents concerns for diversity, resilience, and the long-term viability of the sector.

Currently, only 84 field vegetable growers are listed on the Sustainable Horticulture Assurance Scheme (excluding potato and protected crop growers), which enables participants to use the Bord Bia Quality Mark to promote locally grown produce.

In 2023 Bord Bia stated "If you take the field vegetable sector as an example, we did a census back in 1998 and there were about 400 growers. Currently, we estimate on the commercial side of field growers, there are about 60 growers" backing up the dramatic fall in grower numbers.

Key National Trends

- Fewer, bigger growers with production concentrating in a smaller number of large, mainly east/south-east growers.
- High-cost base e.g. labour (often 40–43% of costs), energy, packaging and inputs remain elevated, squeezing margins.
- Weather/seasonal disruption leads to delayed or uneven supply and creates occasional shelf gaps. Also, there is little spare capacity.
- Imports remain very competitive with Irish growers having to secure price recognition to stay in the retail mix.
- Policy support is mainly to stabilise, with DAFM investment schemes aiming to hold and modernise, not to expand rapidly.
- Channel diversification is seeing successful growers spreading sales across retail, foodservice, farm shop and local/online.

A previous feasibility study on the Dingle Peninsula entitled An Garraí Glas 2005 – 2006 which looked at providing fresher local food to the consumer, and the option of off farm sales of fruit and vegetables, was also reviewed as part of this research. The report stated that there was very little fresh produce grown locally with most produce trucked in. As part of the same research, a 2005/06 survey of 30 local food businesses however found strong willingness to buy local veg (70%).

2024/2025 Research Findings

- Grower numbers have declined significantly in recent years, with succession challenges and rising costs impacting viability.
- Interviews and farm visits confirmed that most remaining growers operate at very small scale, selling through established local outlets.
- Attempts to organize a live trial were unsuccessful due to insufficient supply; however, one grower participated in a seafood market stall and expressed interest in future collaboration.

Cultural and Heritage Considerations Vegetable growing has deep roots in the Peninsula’s heritage, traditionally linked to mixed farming and family plots. There is a risk that these skills and traditions could disappear without intervention.

Opportunities Identified

- Growers indicated willingness to plant more if reliable, visible outlets existed that paid fair local prices and promoted “grown on the Peninsula” produce.
- A short food supply chain model—integrated with lamb and seafood initiatives—could reduce marketing/admin burdens and create seasonal crop pipelines.
- Story-driven marketing could help position vegetable growing as a viable, respected part of the local food economy.

Immediate Action A practical short-term solution is the creation of a WhatsApp group for growers to share crop availability with local retailers and foodservice operators.

Conclusion Due to limited and decreasing supply and existing routes to market for current growers, the vegetable feasibility study did not progress beyond desktop research and engagement. However, opportunities remain for future integration into a shared services model if supply improves.