

## Article

# What Do the Public Want to Know about Farming and Why? Findings from a Farmer-Initiated Public Consultation Exercise in Ireland

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**Abstract:** With advances in information communication technologies and sustainability-driven changes in consumer behavior, farmer–citizen communication is a communicative dyad that is receiving attention. Farmers and citizens view farming practices through very different lenses of prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values, presenting unique communication challenges. Dialogue-based communication can help to build empathy and trust. Initiated by a committee of farmers, a public consultation exercise was carried out to facilitate citizens to deliberate over farming and farming practices in Ireland to better understand their views and perspectives, and identify information needs and knowledge gaps. Employing a participatory deliberative approach, 10 focus groups were carried out with members of the public ( $n = 65$ ) carefully selected to represent diverse demographics in the general population. Findings are structured around two central themes. ‘Bridging the disconnect’ reflects the strong support found across the focus groups for farmer-led dialogic communication with citizens on farming practices. ‘Understanding knowledge gaps’ revealed the nature and underlying motivations of public information needs and knowledge gaps in specific areas: (1) the basics of farming; (2) the life of the farmer; (3) minding animals; (4) minding the environment; and (5) buying local and natural. Dialogue-based communication between farmers and citizens offers opportunities for supporting connected and sustainable food and farming systems through value-driven and responsive behavior change.

**Keywords:** behaviour; citizens; consumers; communication; deliberation; farmers; public engagement; public consultation



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## 1. Introduction

The systemic and sustainable behaviour change required in food production systems to combat challenges such as climate change, biodiversity, biosecurity, and food security requires motivation and commitment from multiple actors [1]. A transition towards more sustainable food production needs to be cognisant of technical and economic viability, societal needs and values, and ethical acceptability [2]. These transitions are fraught with conflict and tension. It is for this reason that dialogue-based participatory processes are encouraged to pinpoint divergences in values and needs, alert to common ground, facilitate mutual understanding, and negotiate acceptable action [3]. Processes to ensure dialogue and deliberation exist in policy (e.g., public engagement) and research (e.g., user-centred design). However, less formalised encounters can take place between actors including the social dialogue that occurs directly between farmers and citizens. This communicative relationship is one that has received little academic attention [4], despite the significant potential of this dyad to impact the behaviour of both actors.

### 1.1. Farmer–Citizen Engagement

The public is variably engaged with food production and farming practices. As farms have become increasingly specialised, mechanised, and intensified, many nonfarming communities have become increasingly disconnected from, and unaware of, the specifics of production systems and practices [5]. Rural migration into urban centres has also resulted in increased physical, and psychological, distance between citizens and farms [6]. Traditionally, consumers' main connection to the food supply chain has been through point-of-purchase at supermarkets or catering outlets [7] or through mainstream media and advertising. In certain circumstances, these communications have served to represent the farming sector akin to the "rural idyll" [8], whereby a sanitised version of rural life and of farming is presented to the public [9]. This presents significant challenges when the public are then exposed to information about farming practices (e.g., cow–calf removal, antibiotic use, new technologies) that may appear benign to a well-acquainted agricultural community, but which are discordant to the farming imagery the public hold [10]. In the past, opportunities for direct communication between farmers and consumers have been scarce, with "loose feedback loops" in place between both parties [1]. However, with advancements in information communication technologies, the dynamic of farmer-to-consumer communication is changing.

The public are increasingly exposed to information about food production and farming through multidirectional information flows online [6]. Social media has reconfigured the communicative relationship between farmers and nonfarmers, whereby citizens can increasingly dictate the nature and pace of social debates about farming [11]. Citizen-led communications on farming practices are now a common feature; for example, in areas such as farm animal welfare and ethical veganism [12]. This form of communication extends beyond online channels (e.g., to billboards and traditional advertising); however, social media has been a primary catalyst in opening the conversation up on farming to a wider audience. Research has shown that agricultural involvement in such social debates can be reactive rather than proactive, with communication often coming after a 'hot topic' farming practice has already become the centre of contentious conversation, thus the tone can come across as defensive rather than engaging [13]. However, social media has also presented opportunities to the farming community: traditionally, third party gatekeepers (e.g., retailers, journalists) have dominated public messaging on agricultural issues, often bringing their own particular framing biases [14]. In contrast, social media platforms have fostered the development of a new era of farmers empowered to take public communication into their own hands and speak directly to the consumer-citizen [11]. Short food supply chains such as farmers' markets and artisan retailers also offer opportunity for direct conversations between consumers and food producers/farmers about food and farming [15]. Unquestionably, the number of channels available for facilitating farmer-to-consumer communication has never been as large or as varied. The nature and the purpose of the communication that takes place is also variable.

Some farmer-led public communication has taken the form of "agvocacy" (agriculture + advocacy) [16], whereby the aim of the engagement is to promote some particular stance within a broader public debate about farming. Other forms of communication aim to educate and raise awareness of farming issues and practices [9]. Other farmer-led communication aims to communicate a grassroots depiction of the culture and identity of the farmer and their rural life [9,16]. Farmer-led communication offers the opportunity to present a more realistic portrayal of farm life, and a chance to address traditional tropes that may be perpetuated through third-party communications. Arguably, the most valuable form of farmer–consumer communication is that which facilitates empathy, mutual understanding, and trust building. Transparency is of particular importance to the public with respect to how their food is produced. The provision of accurate information from farmers has been found to be the most significant factor in building public trust in farmers—more so than judgements of farmer competence or reliability [17]. For the farming community, there is an appetite to communicate the day-to-day practices and realities of

life on the farm and a desire to address misperceptions they believe persist about particular farming practices [4]. Farmers and nonfarmers are driven by a disparate set of experiences, values, and worldviews. Often, farmers and nonfarmers hold differing knowledge, perceptions, and interpretations which lead to different views on issues such as farm animal welfare [18] and the use of technology [19]. This lack of alignment has led to fear amongst farmers of losing public trust and a ‘social licence’ to farm and thus, an increased emphasis on initiatives by the farming community to engage with the public on farming practices [4]. Fear of public rejection of farming practices and innovations has led to increased calls to ‘educate’ the public [20]. However, this assumption of increased knowledge leading to increased acceptance is based on an outdated ‘deficit model’ approach which assumes that ignorance alone drives public concern and inquiry [21]. Advancements in the sociological and psychological understanding of public risk perception have led to the rejection of this deficit model [22] in favour of a model that acknowledges public opinions are formed not only by knowledge, but also by personal values and experiences [23]. To avoid (further) polarisation, finding mechanisms for different actors to understand and empathise with the values and perceptions of others is important. Often, public communication from the agricultural community has been unidirectional, with a primary aim of ‘educating’ [5]. In contrast, a dialogue-oriented communication style includes a ‘listening mode’, with an aim to equalise the contributions of other actors, empathise with their values and views, and build mutual understanding and trust [24]. The current study presents a dialogue-based communication exercise initiated by a group of farmers in Ireland aiming to understand the views and information needs of the public, in a bottom-up manner.

### *1.2. Study Context: Understanding Agriculture*

Agriculture in Ireland is an important economic sector, and it has traditionally played a cultural role in the country, particularly in rural communities, with small, family-owned farms being a traditional mainstay. However, Irish farming is facing macro- and microlevel challenges in areas such as economic sustainability (e.g., farmer reliance on grant aid, Brexit-induced export uncertainties); environmental sustainability (e.g., methane emissions, biodiversity, water quality); and social sustainability (e.g., high rate of farm accidents, rural declines, social isolation). Societal debates are ongoing on these issues and what future lies ahead for the farming sector in Ireland, in particular, with respect to livestock farming, which is currently the dominant farming sector. A large amount of literature has explored Irish food consumers’ decision making and purchasing behavior in areas relating to food choice, including, for example, use of food labels [25]; willingness to pay for higher value products [26]; and acceptance of new food products [27]. However, less research has explored consumer–citizen knowledge, perceptions of, and information needs surrounding farming and farming practices in Ireland. Several survey-based studies give us an overview of public interactions with, and perceptions of, farming in Ireland [25–35]. The survey studies show a public who are keen for more information on farming practices, particularly in areas such as climate action, animal welfare, transparency, and food safety. These survey studies give us an indication of the extent of public understanding of agriculture, and the extent of concerns around certain farming practices. However, very little in-depth research has been carried out exploring public perceptions of Irish farming, and there has been little empirical research exploring the specific knowledge gaps and information needs that the public have.

The Understanding Agriculture Committee was formed to develop a farmer-led communications campaign to engage with the public on the topic of farming in Ireland. The committee was made up of a small group of farmers, coming from different sectors and regions across the Republic of Ireland. Prior to developing their communications campaign, the committee sought out the advice of social and behavioural scientists about an evidence base to inform the development of the communications materials to be used within the campaign. Following a number of meetings to discuss the purpose and strategy of the campaign, the Understanding Agriculture Committee commissioned a research team to

carry out a participatory deliberative exercise to understand the views and information needs of consumer-citizens, ensuring that a more dialogue-oriented, bottom-up, and user-driven approach underpinned the communications campaign. This exercise aimed to be both inclusive of the general public and responsive to their needs [2]. Although many different definitions exist, at its core, public engagement is “the involvement of specialists listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with, non-specialists” [36]. In practice, public engagement materialises in different forms, existing on a continuum from public consultation through to public participation [37]. In the current study, a public consultation in the form of a participatory deliberative exercise was carried out to inform the broader communications campaign. While initiated and funded by the farmer committee, the consultation was facilitated by trained and independent researchers, and participated in by a wide and diverse range of members of the public. The aims of the consultation were to facilitate groups of citizens to deliberate over farming and farming practices in Ireland to understand their views and perspectives, and to identify value-driven information needs and knowledge gaps.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Design

Common public consultation tools include opinion polls, surveys, referendums, consultation documents, focus groups, task forces, town meetings, and online platforms. A defining feature of the methodologies used for public consultations has been the ability to facilitate deliberation amongst a group of citizens. In order to engage citizens on a complex issue, it is necessary to create conditions which will enable meaningful deliberation [38]. It has been argued that group interaction is a defining element of public engagement to facilitate deliberation [39]. Focus groups were chosen as the tool for the participatory deliberative exercise in the current study. As a recognised tool for public consultations [2,40], focus groups embed principles of meaningful deliberation and active participant engagement into a data collection process.

A second defining feature of the public consultation design relates to what Lynch et al. [2] refer to as ‘enrolment’: the way in which actors are brought into the participatory deliberation exercise. A robust and transparent method for selecting participants is required to ensure diversity of opinion, prevent accusations of bias, and provide input legitimacy for the exercise [24]. Based on recommendations from the literature [2,24,41], in the current study, a recruitment agency was used to obtain a stratified and diverse sample of the public with respect to key demographics.

A final design consideration in organising the participatory deliberation exercise related to the model of participation [2]. In the current study, this was addressed through methodological facets introduced into the design of the focus groups. The interview schedule made no assumption about the level of knowledge held by participants about farming, or the types of issues they would want to discuss. Questions were deliberately broad and nontopic-specific to allow participants to set the agenda for discussion. Prompt materials within focus groups can engage people in a way that approximates the everyday processes of information seeking and sense making. Videos featuring ‘real life’ farmers presenting information about their farm in bite-size chunks were introduced during the focus groups to stimulate discussion. We acknowledge as a caveat that the videos themselves have a framing effect on subsequent discussions; however, the videos were a critical tool to enable and stimulate the sense-making and question-asking processes engaged in by citizen-consumers when faced with communications from farmers directly. An important element of public consultation is to understand and capture citizens’ perspectives in a given area. An important but often neglected part of this is about understanding the questions that citizens may have about a particular issue [42,43]. The focus group design placed a specific emphasis on eliciting questions from the participants. After watching the farmer videos, participants were encouraged to voice the questions they would like answered by the farmers. There is often an almost exclusive focus in quantitative research on eliciting

opinions expressed in responses to questions posed by researchers [44]. Even within most qualitative research and deliberative participatory exercises, while question asking can arise in the course of general discussions, there is often little systematic attention to deliberately eliciting questions from participants or analysing the specific nature of questions. The process of eliciting questions is a useful way of assessing the major uncertainties in individuals' understanding of objects, and these uncertainties can be regarded as important insights into the mind of participants [23,43]. Some questions will be asked to fill an information gap; however, we should not assume that people ask questions and seek answers only because of an information deficit. Questions can also be asked as a mechanism to express concern, dissatisfaction, or to frame one's position on an issue [42]. We pay particular attention to this distinction in the analysis of the questions asked by the participants in this exercise.

## 2.2. Focus Groups

Ten focus groups were facilitated by two researchers who alternated positions as moderator and note-taker for each group. The focus groups took place between April and May 2021. Due to local COVID-19 restrictions, all focus groups took place online using Zoom Pro. Participants and facilitators kept their cameras on at all times. A semistructured topic guide, informed by Krueger's [45] recommended style of questioning (opening, introductory, transition, and closing) was developed by the research team (Supplementary Materials Section S1). Prior to the focus groups, participants had provided informed consent via the recruitment agency. At the outset of the focus groups, participants took part in an icebreaker to introduce themselves and become acquainted. Thereafter, participants were asked questions about their familiarity with farming, likes and dislikes of farming, and their hopes for the future of farming in Ireland. In the middle of the focus groups, participants were asked to watch four short videos featuring real-life farmers from the dairy sector, beef sector, sheep sector, and tillage sector. Each video was between one and two minutes long and was filmed by the farmers. During the video, the farmer introduces who they are and where they live, who they farm with (if anyone), an overview of their farm (e.g., numbers of animals/size of farm, types of animals/crops), the type of work that takes place on the farm, and what output comes from their farm and where it ends up (Supplementary Materials Section S2 provides anonymised video transcripts). Following each video, participants were encouraged to voice aloud the types of questions they would like to ask the farmers. The focus groups then finished with discussions about interest in finding out more about farming, preferred communication channels, and participants' thoughts on taking part in the focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 min.

## 2.3. Participants

Participants were recruited through a recruitment agency from their existing panels (6000+ members renewed and refreshed monthly). A purposive sampling strategy was provided to the recruitment agency who administered a screening questionnaire to their panels before inviting particular demographics to take part based on the sampling strategy. Inclusion/exclusion criteria meant that participants must be: (1) aged 18 years or above; and (2) must not live or work on a farm, now or in the past. The sampling strategy ensured a diverse sample of the population based on their geographic location, rural–urban setting, age, gender, having children, education, household income, pet ownership, dietary habits, and previous farm visits (Table 1). Focus groups were clustered to be homogenous based on specific demographic criteria whereby participants were grouped on a common attribute (Table 1), ensuring a more comfortable conversation setting. The recruitment agency managed all participant communication prior to, and after, the focus group, including payment of an incentive (€50). Participants reflected an even spread of rural–urban living, with proportional representation from the different geographical regions in Ireland (Munster, Leinster, and Ulster & Connacht).



**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants in the 10 focus groups and overall sample ( $n = 65$ ).

Sociodemographics		Focus Groups									
Focus Group <sup>a</sup>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Total
Sample size	7	6	7	6	5	6	7	7	7	7	65
Gender											
Male	3	4	2	1	2	2	0	3	4	1	22 (34%)
Female	4	2	5	5	3	4	7	4	3	6	43 (66%)
Age											
18–35	0	6	7	6	0	2	0	0	2	1	24 (37%)
36–55	0	0	0	0	5	4	7	7	1	4	28 (43%)
56+	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	13 (20%)
Province											
Munster	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	0	1	1	15 (23%)
Leinster	4	2	1	4	4	4	5	4	1	4	33 (51%)
Connacht & Ulster	1	1	5	0	0	0	0	3	5	2	17 (26%)
Living											
Rural	1	0	2	1	0	0	3	1	1	0	9 (14%)
Semirural	0	0	3	0	0	0	4	0	0	2	9 (14%)
Suburban	3	2	1	1	3	4	0	4	4	3	25 (38%)
Urban	3	4	1	4	2	2	0	2	2	2	22 (34%)
Children <16 years	0	0	0	0	5	6	7	0	0	0	18 (28%)
Education level											
Primary	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1 (1%)
Secondary	2	3	5	0	2	0	2	0	2	2	18 (28%)
Trade/tech/voc.	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	1	0	7 (11%)
Bachelor's	2	2	1	3	0	5	3	3	0	3	22 (34%)
Master's/PhD	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	2	4	2	16 (25%)
Prefer not to say	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (1%)
Household income											
<€30,000	0	1	3	1	3	0	0	2	0	2	12 (18.5%)
€30,000–59,999	1	2	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	18 (28%)
€60,000–80,000	2	1	2	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	12 (18.5%)
>€80,000	2	2	0	2	0	2	3	1	3	2	17 (26%)
Prefer not to say	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	6 (9%)
Pet ownership											
Yes	6	5	3	4	5	4	6	6	4	3	46 (71%)
No	1	1	4	2	0	2	1	1	3	4	19 (29%)
Farm visits											
>10 times	3	2	4	2	3	3	4	3	4	4	32 (49%)
6–9 times	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	2	9 (14%)
2–5 times	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	0	15 (23%)
Never/once	2	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	9 (14%)
Dietary preferences											
Meat eater	6	6	7	6	5	5	7	7	0	7	56 (86%)
Vegetarian/Vegan	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	7	0	9 (14%)

<sup>a</sup> Focus groups: A. Seniors; B. Young Adults (Urban); C. Young Adults (Mixed Urban/Rural); D. Young Professionals; E. Low SES Parents (Urban); F. High SES Parents (Urban); G. Parents (Rural); H. Adults with no Kids; I. Vegetarians and Vegans; J. Foodies.

## 2.4. Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed via an automated transcription software (Otter.ai). The research team then re-listened to each audio recording, checked, and revised the transcripts where needed. An inductive thematic analysis was carried out [46]. Two researchers separately read and coded the data by hand, grouping words, phrases and ideas with similar meanings. The researchers discussed their coding, merging, and collapsing codes to produce an initial coding list. Nvivo 10 software (QSR International) was used to manage and document the remainder of the data analysis process. Key themes and subthemes were developed by merging similar codes together, and illustrative quotes were selected to describe key themes.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The first theme highlights participants' views on farmer-to-citizen communication, revealing an expressed desire for increased and two-way engagement to reduce disconnects and information insufficiencies. The second theme presents the specific expressed information needs and knowledge gaps that consumer-citizens hold about farming, and the myriad of motivations and values that drive them.

#### 3.1. Bridging the Disconnect

Overall, most participants felt their familiarity with and knowledge of farming was limited. They described fleeting encounters with farming life through observation (e.g., driving country roads and seeing farms), information (e.g., browsing social media), or experiences (e.g., visiting farmers' markets). Participants expressed that they had limited, outdated, or no knowledge at all of specific practices and operations that occur on the farm.

*"I see farms all around me, and all my neighbours are farmers. But I actually don't know what they do in their day to day like ... yeah, I have no idea how they manage the farm"* (Foodies)

Echoing previous survey research [30,35], a majority of participants perceived high information insufficiency and expressed that they would be keen for more information about farming. Central to such discussions was the *nature* of how that information would be delivered. Participants commented on how much of the information that exists out there is developed with a farming community in mind, or an audience that has a good understanding of farming; highlighting how citizens perceive that conversations about farming often take place within echo chambers [47], and rarely involve them. Supporting the assertion of "loose feedback loops" currently between farmers and consumers [1], many of the participants expressed a desire to feel more connected to the farming community. Some felt that food advertisements were the only way the public can currently connect with farmers; a disconnect they feel should be addressed and "closed".

*"Our information comes from food advertising, and that's the only connection we actually have with those farmers. But we don't understand how difficult sometimes their lives are. And we don't understand how food is produced generally, just sort of, a broad idea. So I think we need to move sort of closer and close up that disconnection"* (Seniors)

Reinforcing previous survey research that found citizens trust farmers as a source of information [29], participants were very interested in the prospect of hearing directly from farmers themselves, with no intermediary body involved. Participants judged the farmers to be the experts, and they wanted to hear from them for a trusted and authentic experience: "... getting farmers, you know, involved in that, I mean, they're the ones that produce it. They're the experts" (—Vegetarians & Vegans). Previous research [15] has highlighted the social sustainability benefits of short food supply chains for strengthening the connection between farmers and consumers, increasing trust and recognition. In the current study, participants expressed that they would like more face-to-face communication with farmers. Being able to chat directly to the farmer, for example, at farmers' markets, was alluded to as a positive experience by many of the participants.

*"I keep going back to the farmers market, because the farmers are there, it's so easy to just get chatting to them, and you get to know them ... and they start chatting to you. And you overhear them saying [something] and oh, I didn't realize that and they start telling you what they're using, you know, things like pesticides or not, how they're treating their animals, etc. And when you're actually up close, and you've actually made that communication with them, and that sort of that link, almost like a bond, you just feel so much better about eating that food and supporting them and knowing that actually they're just regular people that just work real hard and you know"* (Adults no kids)

Participants felt direct communication between farmers and citizens would lead to a greater reassurance over farming practices and greater food production transparency, as

well as more informed decision making about the types of food purchases made. Participants felt the public needs to know more about the “good and bad” aspects of farming so that they can develop a broader understanding of, and trust in, farming. Participants indicated a strong preference for communications that are cast without a hidden agenda or stake. These findings echo previous research that points to transparency and accurate information provision from farmers as the most important factors in building public trust in farmers [17]. Participants also talked about the dangers of the absence of information being presented on a topic—wherein a lack of transparency can be perceived as though something is being kept from them, or the vacuum is filled with misleading information and assumptions that can be subject to error.

*“I would be very interested in something that was coming from a factual perspective, something positive, future focused. Being totally honest, what I would not be interested in is another kind of, you know, representative body giving out about everything, you know, that’s the kind of perception I have in terms of some of those interest groups. But absolutely would love to hear from people on the ground, explain it, but with a kind of a positive future focused lens.” (Foodies)*

Participants used the exemplar of participating in the focus groups themselves as an example of the positive outcomes that can result from farmers taking the time to communicate with citizens (i.e., through the farmer videos), and citizens taking the time to deliberate over farming practices. Dialogue-induced deliberation aims to get participating actors to reflect upon their previously held views and consider alternative perspectives [3]. Participants themselves indicated how information in the farming videos made them reflect upon previously held beliefs and views. Participants spoke of the power of the videos in seeing a more human portrayal of farming and the impact that this can have on shaping perceptions of farming subsequently. During the deliberations, participants reflected on their own relationship with food production; in particular, they began to question the extent to which they are unaware of—and divorced from—the realities of food production.

*“I knew it already but I think it’s occurred to me even more this evening how divorced we are from like the products we buy in the shop and the products we consume.” (Low SES Urban Parents)*

However, such deliberation-induced reflexivity was not viewed as the sole remit of the citizen alone; participants were quite clear that two-way, dialogic communication is important, and that similar reflection should be reciprocated by farmers. Participants again used the example of the focus groups as a valuable exercise for farmers to learn more about what members of the public know and think about Irish farming. They spoke about the need for farmers to step outside of their “farming bubble . . . get an idea of their consumer base and what the consumer wants” (—Mixed Young Adults). Participants speculated that a positive impact could be achieved if the farming sector is facilitated to listen to and understand the wider views of society on the role of farming. They felt that if farmers could understand consumers’ views on food and farming, they could act more responsively to their needs.

*“I think it’s [public consultation] a great idea. Because, they are getting the feedback straight from the consumers themselves, and not from like, just a board or a body. They get to understand like ‘oh gosh well maybe I didn’t think about that from a consumer point of view?’ I think it’s really good . . . The farmers know what we actually want from them, rather than them being dictated to by supermarkets, you know, telling them what the people want, or what they want to sell, rather than what we actually want to buy. So I think it’s a really good link to have.” (Urban Parents Low SES)*

Facilitating more dialogic or discursive conversation between ‘experts’ (e.g., farmers) and ‘lay people’ (e.g., citizens) is argued as a means of empowering both types of actors to become involved in decision-making processes that impact them and their communities and ultimately ensure more intelligent decisions are made as a result of ‘collective wisdom’ [23,48]. Generally,



there seemed to be a strong appetite amongst the focus group participants for a forum where citizens can discuss farming practices openly with farmers. The public consultation was viewed as inclusive by the participants as the focus groups enabled those who may not normally have a voice on the topic of farming to be heard. This was an important point, as several participants discussed how “the normal, everyday person” rarely has a chance to engage in these types of discussions on farming.

*“D: I think this exercise is hugely important ... It’s a great opportunity for people, ordinary folk to have a chat about these things that you wouldn’t ordinarily get the opportunity to do.*

*I: Communication is good thing. To talk about things is always good. Find out what other people think. And often I think, you know that a lot of the perceived problems aren’t even problems. Sometimes the very vocal minority kind of dominate, and the sort of more moderate, you know, people are left, you know, not saying anything too much, or they are not getting an opportunity. So I think it’s ... it’s very good to be able to talk about it.”*  
(Vegetarians & Vegans)

What we can take from the findings of this first theme is a strong public appetite for direct engagement from farmers with citizens, in an open and engaging manner where both parties are facilitated to engage in deliberation and reflection. Although participants in this study expressed high information insufficiency when it comes to farming information, they do not express a desire to be simply “educated” [20]. Instead, they express a desire for a meaningful two-way dialogue between farmers and citizens. The current study represented a public engagement exercise on the lower end of the dialogue scale (public consultation) [37]. There is value in considering the impact that could be realised by facilitating more in-depth public engagement exercises between farmers and citizens drawing on new approaches to public engagement seen in areas such as energy and climate transition [23,49]. Whereas in the past, many structured public engagement exercises would have been led by policy-makers and scientists, there may be value in considering how best to more deeply integrate the front-line ‘living experts’ (i.e., farmers) into these exercises to leverage the benefits that likely would accrue from direct farmer-to-citizen dialogues.

### 3.2. Understanding ‘Knowledge Gaps’

The second theme analyses the questions and information needs explicitly expressed by participants in relation to farming in general, and in relation to the four farming videos viewed during the focus groups. Inspired by a previous coding structure used to explore how deliberative reasoning unfolds [50], Table 2 presents a break-down of what questions were asked by participants and why. The latent factors underlying questions and expressed information needs are further discussed under five descriptive topics that emerged as common across the focus groups, and across all four videos: (1) the basics of farming; (2) the life of a farmer; (3) minding animals; (4) minding the environment; and (5) buying local and natural produce.

In cases of divergence in opinion between citizens and the agricultural community, there has been a tendency to want to ‘educate’ the public on farming practices to increase acceptance [20,21]. This deficit model approach to communication between experts and lay people is widely accepted as flawed as it makes assumptions that citizens’ concerns or inquiries are grounded in ignorance and knowledge deficits. With increased academic attention on this issue, we know that when faced with a topic unfamiliar to them, individuals will draw on their existing values and beliefs, past experiences, and automatic affective responses to make sense of the issue and form opinions [18,19,23]. Thus, to interpret a question asked by a citizen as a simple knowledge gap that needs to be filled would be a mistake. We must also pay attention to the underlying motivations and values that drive the citizen to ask that question or express an information need. Simply put, we must look at both the descriptive element of the question (what is being asked?) and the latent element (why is the question being asked?). There is significant methodological value in seeking out and analysing the questions that

citizens themselves pose about a particular issue [42,43]. A question can signify something that matters to the participant, thus understanding why participants ask a question, and what drives an information need is of particular value to allow for more targeted and responsive actions by the listening party. Rather than viewing questions and concerns as indicative of knowledge deficits or antifarming sentiments, analysing participants' questions in this manner in the current study revealed that citizens have a much more nuanced, sensitive, and considered way of thinking about farming and farming practices.

**Table 2.** Understanding the questions asked about farming by citizens participating in a deliberative focus group exercise ( $n = 65$ ).

Descriptive Understanding (What types of questions were asked)	Latent Understanding (Why questions were asked)
The basics of farming	Inquiry
The life of a farmer	Empathy; Inquiry; Reflection
Minding animals	Validation; Reasoning; Reflection
Minding the environment	Validation; Reasoning; Reflection
Buying local and natural	Reasoning; Validation

### 3.2.1. The Basics of Farming

A lot of the questions asked by participants in response to the four farmer videos pertained to finding out more information about the day-to-day operations on farms and the fundamental activities involved in running a farm: the so-called 'basics of farming'. These questions generally tended towards an introductory level of learning about farming: how animals and crops are managed; the lifespan of animals on the farm; and the day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year practices that happen on a farm. In particular, participants had questions about tillage farming as this was the sector they knew least about; this aligns with the predominant imagery that the public have of farming in Ireland as livestock-based [9]. Questions under this subtheme were asked largely out of curiosity ('inquiry') and an interest to learn more about the facts of farming.

*"I would like to see, for all of them, like 'a day in the life of' that sort of thing. Like, what do they actually do? At a high level, yeah, I know what they do. But you know, getting into the kind of the detail, like, what does a typical day look like? ... I'd definitely be interested to find out."* (Young Professionals)

That this was such a strong line of questioning reinforces the much-discussed increasing citizen–farming disconnect. In the past, farming was a more central focus in rural communities, but increasingly citizens are viewed as having more physical and psychological distance from farming practices [5,6]. This results in little familiarity with on-farm practices and can present challenges for finding common ground for communication.

### 3.2.2. The Life of a Farmer

Participants were curious about farming as a profession, and about what life as a farmer entails. Underlying this theme was a strong sense of empathy for the farmer with respect to what the participants perceived to be hard working conditions. Participants wanted to find out more about economic conditions, work-life balance, how the profession is changing, motivations to get into farming, and diversifying the farming profession.

Previous research has shown that Irish citizens have little awareness of the Common Agricultural Policy, and thus may be unaware of payment schemes for farmers [28]. In the current study, this was a strong information-seeking topic for participants. Participants were interested in how profitable farming is for farmers and how farming incomes worked. This line of questioning seemed to be driven by both a lack of awareness as to what type of financial reward farming offers as well as curiosity as to what economic security a job in the farming sector can offer. Across all four of the farming videos, participants had questions about the economics of each sector and making a living from the different types of farms. Many of the economic viability queries stemmed from concern for farmers getting a 'fair'

price for their produce and for their work; this was a particularly strong line of questioning for dairy farms and their relationship with milk processors. Previous research has shown that citizens do empathise with the livelihood of farmers, and consider it when thinking about changes in the food and farming systems [27].

*“S: I think it’s kind of important to know are the farmers being treated well?”*

*A: Why don’t we know as much about that as we would about, like, makeup brands? You’d know everything about how well treated workers in cosmetic plants are, but you wouldn’t know much about the treatment of farmers by the big businesses that buy from them and the big businesses that benefit from their manual labour, you know? I remember the farmers strike and I remember listening to it and being absolutely shocked that like, they were being treated as badly as they were and it’s like, they’re carrying the country in a way? So it’s like, for such a big job, why is the money so little at times?”* (Mixed Young Adults)

Participants were interested in the working conditions on a farm, and this appeared to be driven out of concern for the farmer’s work-life balance. These types of questions cropped up in response to the sheep farmer’s video, but particularly so for the dairy and tillage videos where participants perceived the job of these farmers to be quite labor-intensive and ‘hard work’. This line of questioning was often accompanied by empathy for the farmer and an appreciation amongst many participants of a dedication by farmers to their farms, and the hard work that farming entails.

*“It’s a busy day there like, you know, twice a day, two hours milking each day. Like, how does he manage to get time off? Does he get help in like? He doesn’t have weekends off anyway, that’s for sure! The cows don’t know it’s a Saturday and Sunday.”* (High SES Urban Parents)

Participants questioned whether the entry path into farming is always family- or inheritance-based, or whether other pathways exist. They queried what motivates people to get into farming and what motivates people to stay in farming. In asking these questions, participants discussed that the public perception of farmers and farming needs to change. Underlying these sentiments was a reflection by participants that farming is a job carried out by a closed segment of the Irish population. Participants felt it is not an accessible career choice to young people, particularly those living in urban areas, and this not only makes farming an inaccessible career choice, it also is feeding into the disconnect where farming is perceived as something carried out by faceless ‘others’ [5,6]. This sentiment also illustrated some concern about the lack of diversity in the farming profession with questions asked around how open farming as a profession is to not only urban dwellers, but also females. Participants were curious about whether supports existed to support new people who wanted to get into farming.

*“The likes of LinkedIn, or social media, in general, you can learn quite a lot about a lot of different lifestyles and careers. But like, farmers—now I’m stereotyping again!—but they’re not going to be the type of people who, they don’t need a LinkedIn profile. They don’t necessarily use social media. So they’ve less of a kind of connection with the rest of the public. And there is that kind of disconnect, that we don’t actually understand what the life of a farmer is like, and we don’t really have the opportunity to ask them the questions like we’ve been saying, like we don’t, you know, it’s not every day, like you’re going to walk past a farm, let alone, stop and chat.”* (Mixed Young Adults)

Several participants mentioned the perception that farmers tend to be ‘old-fashioned’ and reluctant to change; however, they questioned whether this was an accurate perception. They indicated that it would be useful to hear from the farmers about how they viewed change within their profession and sector and how prepared farmers were to adapt and embrace change. This included understanding whether they were *willing* to change and whether they were being *supported* to change. Participants were keen to hear how farmers were adapting to changing consumer trends. This was particularly pertinent for the dairy

and tillage videos. Specific trends mentioned included veganism and reduced intake of milk, dairy, beef, and organic farming. They were also interested in hearing the farmers' views on adapting to technological change and adopting new technologies in the future.

### 3.2.3. Minding Animals

Participants felt they did not have enough information currently on how animals are looked after on farms, echoing previous quantitative research [30,35]. Some questions were driven from a motivation of validation: participants wanted information to feel assured and confident that the processes used to bring their food to market were ethical and welfare-friendly. Many participants wanted to know more about the regulations and standards in place to govern animal welfare on farms. They indicated that they would like to see more transparency about how exactly welfare is safeguarded in the farming sector (*"I presume they have certain standards that they have to abide by? But again, that's something that I don't know if they do or not"*—Low SES Urban Parents). Being able to access this information and assurances on welfare was strongly associated with an increased sense of trust in farming.

Participants felt they did not have an opportunity to hear the farmer's voice very often on this topic. Some commented how different lobbies and activists were already communicating with the public on animal welfare, and that the farming sector needed to also provide a voice in this public discourse for the public to have a more balanced perspective. Participants made explicit references to vegan advertising in Ireland, and to international documentaries on Netflix about veganism and commented on how this form of communication tends to be one-sided (*"It's the worst of everything that you're seeing"*—Urban Young Adults). Rather than hiding away from uncomfortable information about farming practices, participants felt it was important to have more transparency on the 'hard truths' of what it takes to bring food onto the supermarket shelves. This ties in with the sentiment of 'responsible consumerism' [25] which was noticeable amongst participants who felt it was their responsibility to ensure they were informed and knew about the processes involved in bringing their food to market. The questions they asked were strongly linked to validation; they felt obliged as consumers to ensure they knew that the produce they were buying and supporting was ethically farmed.

The most hotly discussed welfare topic came from the dairy sector in response to the mention of cow–calf separation in the dairy farmer's video. A lack of awareness of the practice amongst participants triggered substantial numbers of questions. The language used by participants to discuss and ask questions about calf–cow separation was emotive. Participants, particularly mothers, tended to empathise with, and focus in on, the maternal–newborn bond being broken. There was a particular focus on the sentience of the calves and the cows, with participants questioning the ethical acceptability of separating the calf from the cow (*"They must have separation anxiety?"*—Rural Parents). Questions appeared to be driven in part by a need to engage in reasoning and reflection as to the necessity of the practice (*"Is there any kind of operation in place to keep them from experiencing distress?"*—Mixed Young Adults). Participants discussed how it is a practice that could take people by surprise given consumer disconnect from how food is produced. This reinforces that it is not enough to find out what information needs and knowledge gaps citizens have, but that we must also try and understand the underlying motivations and values that could frame their responses to new knowledge. For example, communicating to citizens based on the topic alone, without due consideration to underlying values or concerns, may simply, as [21] describes it, *"increase opposition to established practices . . . [and] . . . uncover aspects of the production system they ignored and that contradict their expectations"*. This is well summed up by the following participant who grappled with the reality of the farm practice:

*"It never really dawned on me before, obviously, a dairy farmer has to, like, they obviously have to take the calves away so the milk is available... Like it didn't occur to me, but then when you hear it, you're like, well, that's perfectly logical. Like, of course, that's what they do . . . it's funny that you don't think about where your milk comes from, like, people probably give a lot of thought to meat products . . . And maybe less so about the dairy, it feels like a little bit divorced from the animal, I suppose."* (High SES Urban Parents)

In response to both the beef farmer's video and the sheep farmer's video, participants were interested in information about the slaughtering process. They queried how humane the process is for the animal; how much pain the animals feel; and what regulations are in place to monitor poor practices in slaughterhouses. Participants wanted clarification on the age that animals are slaughtered. Two welfare issues of increased industry discussion in Ireland [51,52] received intense scrutiny by a minority in the focus groups. This included the issue of surplus male calves on dairy farms and live exports of animals. These participants felt quite strongly about these issues and wanted more information. It was evident there was uncertainty and a lack of clarity with what actually happens on Irish farms with respect to these practices (*"I didn't want to ask because I was afraid of what the answer might be"*—Foodies). In asking these questions, participants both wanted to know the 'hard truths' while also acknowledging they are happy to maintain a wilful ignorance and distance themselves from the process as a meat consumer (*"I suppose I do and I don't want the answer"*—Foodies). The theme of validation of responsible consumerism appeared here again, with participants indicating that ultimately, it was their responsibility to know the processes involved and to ensure they were happy with them.

### 3.2.4. Minding the Environment

Participants deemed farming and the environment as a critical area for public engagement. Some participants did not articulate very specific questions or information needs on this topic but rather deemed 'the environment' as an important topic overall, and seemed to be reflecting on the fact that it is a topical issue generating a lot of public discourse presently. Thus, there is an expectation that the farming sector would engage citizens in conversation.

*"Something the Irish farmers might do is educate the public on what they're doing to be more green and be more mindful of the environment in general. I think that might garner more support as well with the current set of affairs, what they're doing to change their carbon footprint."* (Urban Young Adults)

Others were explicit about what types of information were needed, including hearing more about sustainable farming practices and hearing about actions being taken by the farming sector to meet climate targets. These questions were grounded in participants' desire to reason and reflect on actions being taken by the agriculture community.

*"How are they targeting the, what are they doing with regards to climate? How are they playing their parts so that we meet that target, whatever it is, is it 2030? I think we're way behind. I suppose that's uppermost in my thoughts at this stage anyway."* (High SES Urban Parents)

In relation to the farmer videos, the dairy video and the tillage video elicited specific questions regarding the environment. These mainly pertained to what dairy farmers personally think about environmental impacts and actions which could be taken to mitigate impacts, as well as some questions about pollution and waste disposal on the farm. For the tillage video, participants had significant concerns and numerous questions related to the use of fertilisers and pesticides. Participants were interested in finding out what impact the use of pesticides and fertilisers could have on the environment around where they are used, including their potential impact on biodiversity, soil, hedgerows, local wildlife, waterways (rivers and streams), and other adjoining farms. These questions were associated with a level of concern from participants about damage to the environment.

*"Olive: How do they ensure that they don't damage or minimize the impact on the biodiversity within the vicinity of the farm and within, like the field itself?"*

*Seamus: Yeah, actually to jump on that as well, like I'd wonder how it doesn't damage the crop itself, all these pesticides?"*

*Angeline: Alongside that, like, what effect would it have on local wildlife? And like, if it were to say, run into a waterway, what effect would it then have on the life within that*



*river or that stream? Like, what effect does it have on the things around it?"* (Mixed Young Adults)

Following in the wake of late 20th century events such as the BSE crisis and the GM crops controversy, upstream public engagement has been an important concept in deliberative research [23]. The new ‘wicked problem’ for our time—climate change and the environment—can benefit from lessons learned about the need to ensure citizen engagement at a much earlier point in time when developing policies that will affect their community [50]. The means of *how* best to engage citizens in this debate remain elusive, and there has been much concern about marginalisation of actors in this debate and fears of growing polarisation. Consideration of how best to integrate and facilitate direct farmer-to-citizen conversations within formalised public engagement structures will have value.

### 3.2.5. Buying Local and Natural

A lot of the questions asked by participants pertained to the traceability, quality, and safety of the food produced from farms. Participants want to be assured that their food is both ‘local’ and ‘natural’ and thus, feel validated in their own behaviour and purchasing decisions; a theme that has long been established in the consumer behavior literature [26,33]. They were interested in areas such as pesticide and antibiotic use, animal welfare practices, sustainable farming methods, and traceability. Participants wanted to know more about regulation, inspections, quality assurance, and labeling. These were all noted as important to ensure consumers are informed and empowered.

*"If the product had kind of a list of like, we don't use any sort of chemicals on like, other products, we don't use them antibiotics on the animals, the cows being safe, certified, all that kind of stuff, it would feel a bit more secure. And it would just be easier to kind of like trust the product. Because a lot of times you go into a place and see like frozen meat and you're not really sure if you can trust it"* (Mixed Young Adults)

This desire for more information aligns with the strong theme of “responsible consumerism” emerging from the focus groups. Regarding traceability, participants felt communications which encourage the public to ‘shop local’ and ‘buy Irish’ were important: local was associated with quality, safety, and supporting Irish farmers. If the public were informed of the positive impact that ‘buying local’ had for their local farmers, participants felt they would make a bigger effort to purchase local or Irish produce. However, participants indicated they wanted more information than labeling alone would provide; it was clear that some participants were sceptical of traceability labels and wanted to have more information and assurances about what exactly ‘buying Irish’ meant.

*"It's all well and good, saying this is Irish produced on Irish farms. It's all good having that sticker on the packet, but it's really having the information behind it. Like, what does that mean? You know, what is an Irish farm? What's involved in this in terms of the process and the work and everything else that goes into it?"* (Young Professionals)

A number of participants spoke of the need to target young children in particular and to teach them about where food products come from, as they felt this was a particular growing disconnect which was happening currently in society, particularly amongst urban children.

A major theme of questioning and an evident information gap across focus groups was the topic of ‘natural’ food production and the impact of different farming practices on human health. Participants queried the use of antibiotics, hormones, fertilisers, and in particular, pesticides, in farming. Participants mentioned the use of hormones in poultry farming, while they discussed concerns about the use antibiotics more generally across all farming sectors. Research has shown that citizens are increasingly attuned to OneHealth issues such as antibiotic resistance as a result of COVID-19 [25]. Focus group participants also queried the use of antibiotics in farming contributing to antibiotic resistance, and also the possibility and impact of antibiotic residues remaining in food products consumed by humans.

*“The other question was generally the use of antibiotics in farming. I know on farms that there is a large number of antibiotics, and that affects human health, ultimately. So what is the controls around that? What are the plans in the future because we’re actually running out of antibiotics worldwide. So to understand . . . maybe some sort of a logo or something, that there is controls around that, that we can know that that’s not being misused.” (Seniors)*

The young professionals focus group were particularly concerned about milk production and had a lengthy discussion about antibiotics in dairy farming. One believed that antibiotics were being put into milk to preserve the shelf life while another participant queried if organic milk would be ‘free from antibiotics’. Participants indicated that there was a lack of transparency on this topic, indicating a clear information gap, as recent research has also shown [53].

The issue of fertiliser and pesticide use on farms was a particularly strong theme and many participants expressed specific information needs in relation to this topic including whether organic alternatives to pesticides and fertilisers could be used; whether there is any impact on human health when pesticides and fertilisers are used on crops for human consumption; and what types of pesticides are used on farms. Having information was linked to having control, having a choice, and feeling empowered with respect to the food decisions they make.

*“Yeah, I mean, I had cancer. Um, you know, I try my best to be as good to myself as I can. But if I can’t make informed choices you know, it’s very hard you know... if I want to choose not to have as much pesticides in my food, I don’t really have that choice. Unless I actually know the farmer that my foods coming from. You know, um so I’d like to, you know, if I can make an informed choice, it’s a much better choice for me. But if I don’t have any information, I can’t make choices.” (Adults no Kids)*

#### 4. Conclusions

With respect to the agri-food sector, two particular groups who historically have tended to have little agency or power are farmers and consumer-citizens [54]. Representing opposite ends of the traditional value chain, they reflect much of the diversity that exists with respect to (sometimes conflicting) needs, values, and behaviours. They also represent a key behavioural requisite for systematic change in the food system: farmers may or may not adopt new farm-level innovations or policies; and consumer-citizens may or may not purchase and/or accept new products or processes. At the same time, these two groups have little formalised means for engagement with loose feedback loops in place [1]. This is despite increasing evidence, including from the current study, that facilitating dialogic engagement between these parties can lead to more sustainable behaviour change and less value-driven polarisation.

Facilitating diversity of opinion and deliberation amongst actors with different perspectives is an important process for obtaining authentic insights into how different communities feel about a topic. In a deliberative setting, individuals can share their beliefs and assumptions and importantly—these beliefs can either be validated or challenged by others. This is an educative process but one that accounts for diversity in opinion and views; and one that allows for the testing and challenging of views and assumptions. In a deliberative setting, it is vital that people can hear as many different perspectives as possible, so that these can be compared against one’s existing beliefs—through the argumentation that accompanies, they can either reaffirm or adjust their beliefs. Thus, key to a deliberative setting is to ensure diversity of opinion and to ensure space and time for fair persuasion and argumentation to take place amongst the different members of the group. The current public consultation followed these principles and thus, the content of the current public consultation offers a rigorous and deliberated insight into the perceptions and value-driven information needs of the Irish public around farming in Ireland. Although the sampling strategy ensured that diverse members of the public representing different demographic categories were included, a limitation of the current study relates

to the possibility of recruitment bias: in the current study, participants with an existing interest in food production and farming practices may have been predisposed to agree to take part in the study. Future research should seek to triangulate these qualitative findings via quantitative research with a representative sample of the public. This in turn would provide an indication of the exact extent and range of sentiments and information needs held across different demographic groups.

The current study reinforces the value of *why* dialogue-based processes between farmers and citizens would be of value. Next, we need to consider the *how*—but this is not an easy question to answer. The *how* of engaging citizens in a structured deliberative process continues to be an area of academic debate [23,49]. Engagement between farmers and citizens can happen naturally and sporadically, as through ad hoc engagement on social media, or at farmers' markets [9,15,16]. However, there is also the possibility of structuring more formalised processes for farmers and citizens to engage. Previous exercises have focused on facilitating citizen deliberation on agri-food policy including, for example, the use of deliberative polls in Ghana [50] and the use of citizens' assemblies in Ireland [24]. However, there has been little academic focus on exploring the value and impact of specifically facilitating farmer-to-citizen dialogue within these exercises. The current study reflected a public consultation exercise on the lower end of the public engagement scale, whereby a farmer-led initiative encouraged members of the public to deliberate on issues related to farming, including providing farmer-led videos for the public to deliberate upon. This exercise reveals promising findings: participants were positive about learning from farmers, and farmers learning from them, and deliberated in a nuanced and sensitive way about information disconnects in the farming sector. Future efforts would benefit from exploring real-time, face-to-face dialogues that could take place between farmers and citizens in the context of formalised public engagement exercises, such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, or indeed new participatory exercises.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su14095391/s1>, Section S1. A. Interview Guide. Section S2. Farmer Video Transcripts.

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