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Women in agribusiness: 'we are not men in skirts'

[Amii McKeever \(/journalists/amckeeper\)](#)

Following seven years as the UK's Groceries Code Adjudicator, Christine Tacon speaks to Amii McKeever about her background, why she is leaving this role and women in agribusiness



Christine Tacon. \ Barry Cronin

Christine Tacon is proud of her achievements, not only as the first ever UK groceries code adjudicator, but also in her previous roles and her work with other women in the industry.

And she should be, the list of achievements is long. She spearheaded the transformation of Co-operative Farms and as the Government's regulator for the groceries sector, her work has resulted in issues experienced by retail suppliers being cut demonstrably.

Not from a farm

Although Christine's mother worked for the National Advisory Service as a milk quality adviser, she herself, was not encouraged into agriculture. Instead, she studied engineering at Cambridge.

Her real introduction to farming came when she worked for Anchor (owned by Fonterra) on their butter, cream and cheese marketing. And this introduction to British farmers wasn't entirely positive.



Christine Tacon Groceries Code Adjudicator Christine Tacon pictured at the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association's annual 'Appetite for Growth' conference . \ Brian Morrison

“There were quite a few complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority from the British farming industry about my TV advertisement, which marketed Anchor as free-range butter.

“In response, we had analysed the amount of space you have to give a hen for her to be considered free range, compared that to the space cows in New Zealand had, and believed our description was justified. The complaints were not upheld.”

When Christine took on the role at Co-operative Farms (2000) it was the largest farming business in Britain with 100,000 acres, 13 dairy farms, pigs, sheep and a huge amount of arable. However, the business was in trouble and the management was looking for someone with a strong commercial focus. Initially uninterested in the role, Christine upon reflection started to think: “I am spending my time promoting New Zealand product, my uncle is a British dairy farmer; why don't I work to support British farmers?”

 **My focus was to get out of the loss-making areas quickly and expand what we could grow, pack and sell**

“Within the first three years, I took the business out of pigs, sheep and dairying.

“My focus was to get out of the loss-making areas quickly and expand what we could grow, pack and sell as branded co-op store product – and that was fruit and veg.

“The co-op has very strong social ethics and one way this was demonstrated was in our farm to fork education programme where children spent a day on farm learning how food was grown and cooked. We also had a big environmental programme where every farm had a wildlife programme.

“By the time I left we were farming half the acreage but had gone from losing £6m per year to making £6m per year.

“Now you see more of the large scale farms working closely with the retailers, that much closer integration of growers and retailers that I was trying to achieve within the co-op. You won't find a retailer in the UK that isn't trying to work more closely with their growers.”

Moving on

Leaving the co-op, she took the advice of Baroness Barbara Young, she suggested getting a solid role on two to three days per week and building a non-executive portfolio around it.

“I wanted to work full time so this advice appealed to me.

“My husband and I were based in Macclesfield and the children had been there for 11 years, and this way of working, allowed us to continue to live there.

“This role (groceries code adjudicator) at three days per week was exactly what I wanted.”

Diversity is not new

It could be said that Mars, the company Christine was working with at the time, were ahead of the time in 1992, when it mandated management to get females at all levels of management.

Christine said it was interesting to watch women becoming the “first woman at a level”. Some, she said tended to act like men when promoted.

She did not want to do this herself.

“The message I am always trying to get across is that we are not men in skirts. People want diversity on a board because we have different priorities and we think differently.

“The business will do better because it is diverse.”

“Well I might not have experienced a problem being a woman in a man’s world but that is not to say that other people don’t

She does admit that at first she actively resisted involvement with women’s networks. “I didn’t want to be part of it as I didn’t like to feel different about being a woman. I just wanted to be a person in a job no matter what sex I was.”

It was only later that she started to think: “Well I might not have experienced a problem being a woman in a man’s world but that is not to say that other people don’t. When I left the co-op, many people said, ‘You can’t leave, you are a role model for a lot of women in this business’.

“The main aim of setting up the Women in Food and Farming Group was to get women under 30 to come so that they could talk to people who were more experienced and use us as a network as they go through their careers – and possibly as mentors.”

The group came about when the chief executive of LEAF and the CEOs of Natural England and the Soil Association met one day on a farm and said: “Gosh we are all women. We need to do more to support each other.”

Christine says: “They contacted me and Jane King who was running *Farmers Weekly* at the time. We had lunch and brought two people that none of the others knew.

“The next time everyone brought another guest and the next time those guests brought guests. The names were added to the database and it has grown to over 400 now.

“Having a mentor really helps when things get sticky. It is all about learning, having someone who is impartial that will say, ‘Don’t worry you haven’t failed, you need to move on or yes this is you, you need to develop and just stick it out’.”

What next for Christine?

There is no defined plan in Christine’s mind post-2020 when she finishes in her current role but continuing with a mixed portfolio of roles is her aim.

She currently chairs a graduate training business MDS Ltd which provides a two-year management training scheme in the food industry for graduates.

She also is on the board of the AF Group Ltd, a £250m purchasing co-operative for agri businesses.

When *Irish Country Living* questions her motivation to leave?

Her response is simple: “I have served two terms, a total of seven years. In that time there has been significant improvement on the big issues that I have tackled here but there is no single issue that I am tackling anymore, and I am working with all the retailers to embed code compliance right through their business before I finish in June.

“Throughout my career I have been keen to pursue fresh challenges

“I think that I have completed what I set out to achieve and it is time for someone new to come in with new ideas.

“Throughout my career I have been keen to pursue fresh challenges and would like to be able to keep using my experience and expertise to continue to add value to the food and farming industry.”

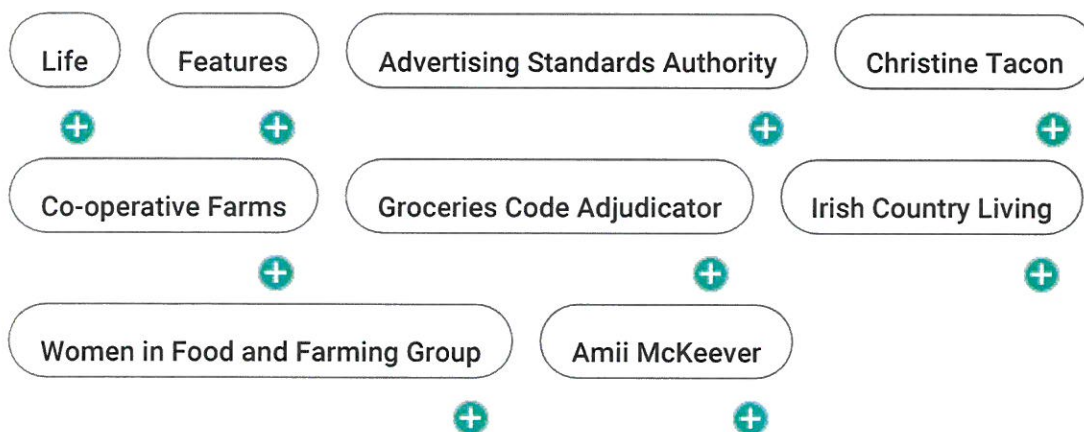
Irish Country Living doubts she will be idle for long.

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