

## The Social Farming Research Project

Social Farming is the practice of offering an outcome focused activity placement on working family farms or with growers. The farm is not a specialised treatment farm; rather it remains a typical working farm where people in need of support can build relationships and confidence and take part in day-to-day activities in a relaxed and non-clinical environment to enhance their lives and their health.

Participation in social farming provides people who use health and social services or who have various other needs with the opportunity for improved community connections, increased self-esteem and improved health and well-being. It provides the opportunity to do 'ordinary things in ordinary places' and to develop and progress participant's own personal goals with the support of the farmer/grower and their family and community.

The National Social Farming Office, funded by the Department of Agriculture Food and the

Marine (DAFM) and the CEDRA Fund, is based in Drumshanbo and is led by Leitrim Development Company. It supports the development of a national social farming network in collaboration with other Local Development Companies, namely West Limerick Resources, Waterford Leader Partnership and South West Mayo Development Company where regional social farming development officers are based.

### 2017 Research involved:

- > 15 farms around the country in a Project funded by DAFM.
- > 54 participants on farms who came from a range of sectors including Intellectual Disability, Mental Health, Garda Youth Diversion Programmes, Dementia Services and Long Term Unemployed.
- > Each social farm delivered placements to between one and four participants for one day a week for a minimum of 8-12 weeks, resulting in almost 600 participant delivery days.

## Methodology

### Participants

- > Interview at the end of placements
- > Use of OT assessment tools in some cases
- > Observations by researcher
- > Farmer log books
- > Analysis of diaries, scrapbooks, etc.

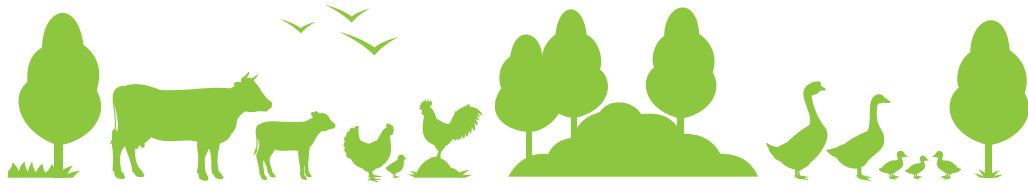
### Farmers

- > Interviews at beginning and end of placements
- > Farmer log books
- > Observations by researcher

### Support Workers/Service Providers

- > Interviews at beginning and end of placements
- > Participation in focus groups (sample)





## Policy Environment

The recent development of social farming in Ireland has been supported by policy change and measures such as:

- > The emergence of a social model of disability as described in the HSE's New Directions (2012) and the 'Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services in Ireland' (2012).
- > The emphasis within 'A Vision for Change' (2006) and the recent Mental Health Commission Strategic Plan (2016-2018) on a holistic view of mental illness and on maximising recovery and allowing meaningful integration and participation in community life.
- > The increased use of person-centred, progressive and outcome focused approaches with individuals in social inclusion work such as youth work, work with the long-term unemployed, minorities, etc.

- > Progression to individualised and personalised supports and budgets within the health and social care sectors and the proposed reform of service provision in this regard, particularly in disability services.
- > The shift from a productivist towards a multifunctional agricultural regime at the EU level, with social farming recognised as a community inclusion activity which can foster multifunctionality on farms and rural development which can contribute to re-connecting farming and wider society.
- > The strong stimulus and the significant learning provided in Ireland by a number of EU supported pro-programmes in the last decade, including the SOFAR Project (Supporting Policies for Social Farming in Europe, 2006-2008) and the SoFAB Project (Social Farming Across Borders, 2011-14).



## The Social Farmers

Most farmers/growers who engage in social farming have small to medium holdings, do not farm intensively and have mixed farming systems. Many have diverse skill sets, such as woodworking or cooking and there is typically a strong emphasis on the maintenance of traditional farming skills, welfare of animals and the heritage and ecological value of the farm.

The farmers identified benefits of social farming to themselves as:

- > A strong sense of personal satisfaction from making a difference in participant's lives.

- > Improved community connections and reduction in isolation.
- > A sense of enjoyment and fun from having participants and others spend time on the farm.
- > Meaningful use of perhaps under-used assets and resources of the farm and improved income.

Farmers felt that the framework of support, training and linkages to service providers provided by the Social Farming National office and regional development officers was critical to successful social farming.

*"It was an amazing experience.....We got to know each other, I treated them with respect and they treated me with respect. There was no boss in the group, we just did our thing and we had a lot of fun. I would say I got more out of it than the four lads. It taught me how to relax and take things easier as well. I think if a farmer could take one day out of his week or one half day and give it a social farming, he would get massive benefits out of it."*



## The Participants: Route to Social Farming

- > Three out of every four participants had no previous experience of social farming.
- > The choice to come and do social farming was made by the participant and usually tapped into a strong personal preference to pursue farming or to engage with the natural environment.
- > Other motivations included the desire to do physical activity, the need to establish a routine and sense of purpose, the chance to learn new skills and improve employability and the opportunity it provided to meet new people and develop new interests.

**87%**  
of participants described their social farming experience as **'very good'**

*"I enjoyed it really well....getting to meet people and talking to people and helping out with whatever needs to be done. I'm very good at splitting timber for fires. I like being on the tractor too, it's deadly craic so it is. ... this is my favourite thing in the week."*



*"It's a very positive place to be. ...It makes you feel good about yourself, you feel a sense of achievement and that type of thing. When you finish the job, you can see the fruits of your labour, like in the polytunnel we can have a head of lettuce to bring home with us and stuff like that."*

## The Participants: Benefits of Social Farming

- > Participants experienced a wide range of benefits, across multiple dimensions of well-being, including improved mental health, enhanced social contact and confidence and improved physical well-being.
- > Two out of every three participants said they had made changes to their lives since they commenced social farming, such as improving their levels of self-care, being more motivated in everyday tasks and increasing their levels of social interaction.
- > Some participants noted improved appetite and/or better diet and a much larger proportion noted an improvement in their sleeping.
- > 80% of the participants who responded felt they had either completely achieved or mostly achieved the goals they had set for themselves before starting their social farming placements. This was particularly notable in those participants coming from the youth and long term unemployed sub-groups.

## The Participants: Future Plans

- > The majority of participants had definite plans and a sense of purpose regarding their futures.
- > All but two participants across all sub-groups would like to continue the placement they were on when interviewed or to engage in a further social farming placement.





*“Especially now since we’re trying to meet all this New Directions Policy...for the people we serve it’s not all about lovely buildings and lovely programmes, it’s about exploring this type of thing that works for people and that’s what works really and as you have seen today the smiles on the lads faces. You know that it’s working for them because if it wasn’t working it would be a different atmosphere.”*



*“I think that there’s something very homely about the support.... it’s very casual and there are no airs and graces and people feel like they fit right in and it’s very comfortable and they don’t feel that they need to be somebody else and they can say whatever they want and they can dress whatever way they want.”*

## The Service Providers

Support workers identified a range of specific features of the social farming experience which differentiate it from other opportunities:

- > The sense of warmth, ease and enjoyment associated with social farming and the group nature of the activities.
- > The non-medicalised and non-clinical nature of interactions, engagements and activities and the benefits of being active, outdoors in the fresh air, in nature and engaging with animals.
- > The social inclusion benefits of going out to an ordinary working farm or grower rather than into a ‘service’ type setting.
- > Its ‘fit’ and cultural relevance, to some male participants in particular, relative to some of the other options available.
- > The opportunity to develop both the relationship between client and support worker and the support worker’s understanding of the client’s needs, skill set and potential.

Support workers found the National Social Farming Office and the regional development workers to be valuable sources of knowledge and experience of social farming who have provided critical financial and other supports. They act as the key intermediary between services and farmers and provide assurance that placements are being delivered in a way that is safe, enjoyable and supportive of participants.

The key challenges in supporting social farming include:

- > Transport for participants to and from farms.
- > Some additional requirements for farmers for safeguarding, insurance, and health and safety.
- > The capacity and willingness of services/commissioners to fully fund individuals who choose social farming placements.

## Key Messages from Social Farming Research

1. The working family farm provides a unique environment in which to address various dimensions of the well-being and development of participants but in a very ordinary, natural and holistic way.
2. Social farming is fundamentally relational: participants, farmers and rural communities all benefit from these new relationships and connections.
3. The social farming model explored in this research is very much in tune with wider policy developments such as the increased focus on person-centred planning and an individualised and progressive approach to meeting needs and delivering positive outcomes for service users.
4. The work of Social Farming Ireland through the regional development officers is vital in progressing and developing social farming on farms and in communities across the country.
5. Even within the context of challenges and funding constraints, there is a strong commitment amongst support workers to supporting and finding ways of covering the cost of what is widely perceived to be one of the most positive and promising options to emerge for particular clients.