



**SOCIAL
FARMING
IRELAND**

New Opportunities + Connecting People + Enhancing Lives

Social Farming and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)



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Preface

This publication from Social Farming Ireland explores the interactions and collaborations between Social Farming and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) and highlights the potential for Social Farming to provide positive outcomes for SICAP clients. It opens with an introduction to Social Farming and to the SICAP Programme and describes the current level of engagement and activity between both. It presents two detailed case studies of Social Farming placements funded and supported by SICAP which provide strong qualitative evidence of the relevance and benefits of Social Farming to clients. It provides a summary of the synergies between the goals and values of Social Farming and those of the SICAP Programme and concludes that Social Farming is delivering – and has significant further potential to deliver – positive outcomes and added value for SICAP clients and target groups across a number of key thematic areas, including; Promoting Personal Development and Well-being; Providing Life-Long Learning Opportunities; Preparing People for Employment and to Remain in Work; and Addressing Barriers and Gaps in Life-long-Learning and Employment. The document closes with a description of how Social Farming placements work in practice and the pathways which can be taken by SICAP staff wishing to explore this innovative community inclusion opportunity for their clients.

1. Social Farming in Ireland

1.1 Background and Definition of Social Farming

Social Farming provides an outcome focused, support placement for people on a farm using the natural assets of the people, the place, the activities and the community to support a person to achieve some of their own chosen goals. It is based on spending time with farmers and their families in the natural environment of the farm, but also encompasses two other key elements: carrying out valuable and meaningful activities, and developing social connections and relationships, both of which combine to deepen its impact further, as Figure 1 overleaf demonstrates. In the Irish context, the social farm is not usually a specialised or treatment farm – as can be the case in other countries – but rather, remains a typical working farm where people take part in day-to-day farm activities in an ordinary, non-clinical environment. While most social farms are small to medium sized holdings which operate mixed farming systems, there is growing variety in the type of farms which engage in Social Farming. These include very small horticultural units up to large operations of many hundreds of acres, with some farms specialising in particular areas such as equestrian, horticulture, floriculture or woodland management¹.

People who have successfully participated in Social Farming in Ireland include: people with mental ill health; people with disabilities (intellectual, physical, sensory); the long term unemployed; young people and especially those who are NEET²; older people; people recovering from substance misuse; and refugees. A wide range of benefits of Social Farming to participants have been identified in both national and international studies (Hine et al., 2008; Elings, 2012; Leck et al., 2015; Bragg & Atkins, 2016; SoFI, 2018 (a); SoFI 2018 (b)). These benefits include:

- Development of occupational and life skills from undertaking farm based activities
- Increased social and interpersonal skills from working alongside others in a supportive environment
- Improvements in mental health and well-being from spending time in the fresh air, in nature, working with animals and plants
- Sense of achievement and of having made a positive contribution
- Increased self-esteem and confidence
- Increased sense of purpose and vitality
- The establishment and development of valued social roles
- The development of new interests in areas such as gardening, animal welfare, nature, heritage, etc.
- Improved physical health and well-being from being more active but in very natural way
- The development of social relationships and connections with the farmer and their family
- Improved wider community connections and an expanded social circle

¹ However, for simplicity, the terms social farm and social farmer used throughout this document are taken to encompass all farms and farmers engaging in Social Farming.

² Not in Employment, Education or Training

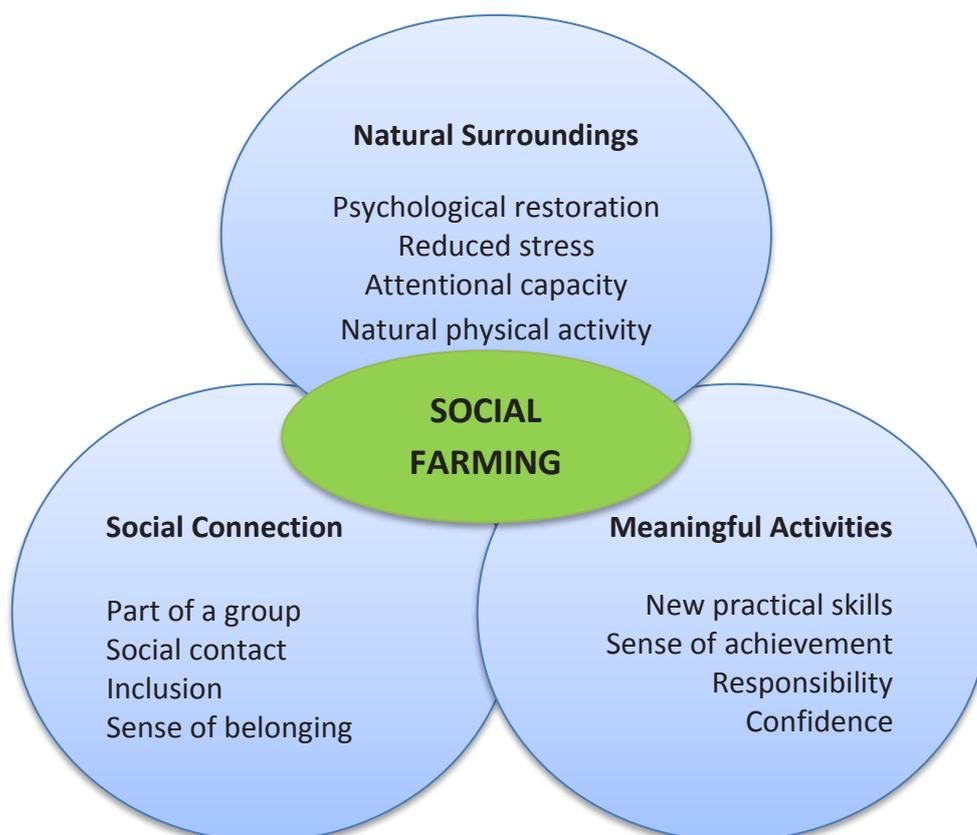


Figure 1: Three Key Elements of Social Farming (Adapted from Bragg and Atkins (2016:46³))

1.2 Social Farming Activity in Ireland

Social Farming, also known in the European context by a variety of names such as care farming, farming for health, and green care has developed at varying rates at the European level in the last decades. It is considered to be at a more advanced stage of development in the Netherlands, Norway and Italy and is moderately developed in countries such as France, Finland, Germany and the UK. **Ireland falls somewhere between what we could describe as pioneering and moderately developed status; it is a relatively new concept and practice but the number and diversity of social farms is growing and national and regional networks of stakeholders are developing and consolidating.** The box overleaf describes the structure and governance of Social Farming Ireland, the key national-level organisation progressing and developing Social Farming in Ireland.

³ Bragg, R. and Atkins, G. (2016). *A review of nature based interventions for mental health care*. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 204.

Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)

Social Farming Ireland, the National Social Farming Office, has a 4-year contract (2017-2020) from the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) under the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund for the development and progression of Social Farming at national level. It is based in Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG (Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim) and supports the national development of a Social Farming Network and an Evidence-based Research Project alongside regional partner organisations where regional development officers (RDOs) are based. These are South West Mayo Development Company CLG (West Region), West Limerick Resources CLG (South-West Region), Waterford Leader Partnership CLG, (South-East Region) and Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG (Border-Midlands Region).

Social Farming Ireland provides a wide range of services and initiatives which support the development of social farming nationally, including: dissemination of information on social farming; farmer recruitment, training and development; working with health, social care and other services to activate social farming placements; and evidence-based research activity and policy development.

Two key committees guide the work and evolution of Social Farming Ireland. The **National Coordination Committee** is comprised of the Social Farming Ireland Support Office team including the National Project Manager and National Project Coordinator, along with the CEO's of the partner Local Development Companies, the Regional Development Officers, academic partners from UCD and representation from the Northern Ireland counterpart. The group meets bi-monthly and acts as a forum supporting and endorsing the work of the project. A **National Advisory Committee** meets twice a year and acts as a forum for the inclusion of a broad range of expert information, expertise and advice from national and international practitioners and sources. It is comprised of representatives from Leitrim Development Company CLG, University College Dublin, partner local development companies, service providers, participants, social farmers and international social farming experts from the UK and Holland.

The recent development of Social Farming practice in Ireland emerged out of the integrated response of a number of staff in Local Development Companies through their work in both social inclusion and community/rural development initiatives and programmes. The emphasis on social inclusion came from previous Social Inclusion programmes (particularly the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme or LDSIP) where smallholder farm households and their family members were a named target group of the programme. There was also a specific initiative within the programmes from the late 1990's known as the Low Income Smallholder Household Initiative (LISHI) with Rural Resource Workers (RRWs) in place to support them.

The increased interest in and the particular development of Social Farming in Ireland in recent years has also been **driven by a set of interlinked government policies and institutional developments**⁴

⁴ These include: New Directions (2012); Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services in Ireland (2012); The 'Make Work Pay for People with Disabilities' Report (2017); 'A Vision for Change' (2006); the Mental Health Commission Strategic

which are increasingly guiding practice in the health, social care and social inclusion sectors. These include the emergence of a social model of disability; the emphasis within mental health policy and practice on recovery in the community and on a more holistic approach to mental well-being; and the increased use of an individualised, person-centred and community-based approach within most social inclusion work.

From a low base, predominately in the border counties of the Republic, Social Farming **activity** In Ireland has grown rapidly in the last two years. In 2017, Social farming Ireland delivered almost 1700 placement days to over 120 participants on 28 farms spanning 11 counties across the country. It is anticipated that in 2018, there will have been over 2600 placement days for almost 300 participants across 22 counties.

There are currently almost 60 active, trained social farmers and a further 60 who have received training and are at various stages on the journey to becoming active social farmers. Most counties in Ireland – 25 out of 26 – now have at least one Social Farming Ireland trained social farmer and development work is ongoing to increase the choice of farms available to meet demand from services. The range of services with whom social farming is working is also growing and now includes Brothers of Charity, Rehab Care, Western Care, Sisters of Charity, a range of local and regional Intellectual Disability service providers, Cope Foundation, Camphill Communities, Muiriosa Foundation, HSE Disability Services, Mental Health Ireland, HSE Mental Health services in a number of CHOs, advocacy organisations such as Down Syndrome Ireland, local development companies, SICAP Programme Implementers in a number of counties, a range of local services working with long-term unemployed, Foroige, Refugee and Asylum seeker programmes and the Simon Community. Through the work and activity of SoFI, approximately €75k has been generated in matched funding from the various services with which they have engaged. In addition to that, €40k was accessed through the Healthy Ireland Fund and a further €7k for placements came directly from the SICAP programme.

1.3 Values of Social Farming

The model of Social Farming which has developed in Ireland is based on a number of **core values**. It is fundamentally *person-centred* and individualised, with a strong focus on providing new and innovative *opportunities and choices* for participants to meet their own goals through spending time on ordinary working family farms. It is *progressive*, aiming to achieve a range of *positive and life-enhancing outcomes* for those who take part. There is a strong focus on providing opportunities for *natural connections* both with other people and with the natural environment. As it develops in every county in Ireland, Social Farming is now also providing accessible and real opportunities for social inclusion in communities rather than segregated specialist or clinical settings. Ensuring a high *quality of support* is fundamental: social farming practice as delivered by Social Farming Ireland is underpinned by *rigorous governance systems and processes* which provide assurances to participants, advocates, services and the statutory quality authorities that the placement experience will be valuable, enjoyable and safe.

Plan (2016-2018); Connecting for Life (Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020); the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme 2018-2022.

2. The SICAP Programme

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2018-2022 provides funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion through local engagement and partnerships between disadvantaged individuals, community organisations and public sector agencies. These supports administered by Pobal and funded by the Irish Government through the Department of Rural and Community Development, (DRCD) also receive funding from the European Social Fund under the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020. The SICAP Programme is *overseen* at a local level by 33 Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), who collaborate and network through the ILDN (Irish Local Development Network) with support from local authorities. The SICAP programme is *delivered and managed* on the ground by Local Development Companies who are referred to as programme Implementers (PIs). Local Development Companies work with marginalised communities and a range of target groups and service providers using a community development approach to improve people's lives. SICAP supports disadvantaged communities and individuals including unemployed people, people living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, single parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma communities and other disadvantaged groups.

Of particular relevance to Social Farming is Goal 2 of SICAP which is 'to support disadvantaged individuals to improve the quality of their lives through the provision of lifelong learning and labour market supports'. Typical activities include helping people to progress through a series of supports to find work or to upskill, providing CV training or a personal development course, or helping people onto a work placement programme such as CE or Tús. In the first round of the SICAP programme, which ran from 1 April 2015 to 31 December 2017, SICAP supported 110,044 individuals on a one-to-one basis. There are a number of thematic areas within SICAP in which Social Farming can potentially play a role in delivering positive outcomes for some of these existing clients and for new clients in the SICAP Programme for 2018-2022:

Thematic Area G2:1	Promote Personal Development and Well-being
Thematic Area G2:2	Providing Life-Long Learning Opportunities
Thematic Area G2:1	Prepare People for Employment and to Remain in Work
Thematic Area G2:1	Address Barriers and Gaps in Life-long-Learning and Employment

3. Social Farming and the SICAP Programme: Engagement and Activity to Date

There has been a growing level of engagement between Social Farming and the SICAP Programme in recent years. This engagement operates at a variety of levels, from that of general awareness of Social Farming through to direct funding of Social Farming placements in a number of cases. The range of activity described below is indicative of the opportunities for further engagement for Programme Implementers around the country, including those who may not be in a position to directly fund Social Farming.

3.1 *Social Farming in SICAP Annual Plans*

The Local Development Companies (Programme Implementers) are required to submit a SICAP Annual Plan to the relevant Local Community Development Committee, setting out their proposed SICAP Plan for the coming year. It outlines the proposed actions for the following year and the targets and outcomes that will be achieved as a result and is shaped by both the socio-economic conditions and the key issues, challenges and opportunities which exist at a local level. During the planning phase of the current SICAP programme (2018-2022), Social Farming Ireland engaged with Local Development Companies around the country and discussed how Social Farming presents an opportunity for supporting and enhancing inclusion and could be included in SICAP plans. A survey of SICAP Coordinators around the country conducted in September/October 2018 revealed the following:

- Of the twenty-one SICAP Coordinators or staff who responded, ten had social farming written into their SICAP Plan(s).
- Of the eleven who responded that they did not have it written in their annual plan, three were engaging at the time in social farming activity and a further six either planned to incorporate social farming into future plans or were liaising with social farming initiatives with a view to undertaking future activity.

3.2 *Engagement with Social Farming under SICAP: Two Key Models of Support*

Moving beyond the level of general awareness of Social Farming and the inclusion of Social Farming within individual SICAP Plans, SICAP Implementers can and are engaging with Social Farming throughout the country in a variety of ways. The type of engagement varies according to factors such as the socio-economic conditions, the levels of engagement by SICAP staff with the type of people with significant levels of need who are accessing Social Farming, the level of rurality and engagement with farmers/farming community by the Local Development Company (LDC) and the level of connection with Social Farming Ireland. Broadly speaking, two key models of support are emerging and growing;

1. **Direct financial supports** for Social Farming participants/SICAP clients
2. **A range of non-financial/developmental supports** for Social Farming

Which model is followed is strongly linked to the level of flexibility at local level within the SICAP plan and by the Local Development Company as to how they choose to allocate their resources and the level of annual budgets available under SICAP. Research undertaken to inform this report suggests that some LDCs choose to allocate the greater proportion of their action costs to salary costs for staff to support individuals and therefore have very limited capacity or flexibility to directly fund or cover any access costs for their clients or to co-fund other supports, external activities or opportunities, such as Social Farming. However, even in this context, there are a variety of ways in which Social Farming placements and the development of Social Farming can and are being supported, as described below in Section 3.4.

Other LDCs choose to allocate a proportionately greater share of their overall SICAP budget to non-salary actions. This gives them the flexibility to invest more directly in and with their clients' needs and supports. This means that they can and do directly fund or part-fund – usually with small amounts of money amounting to less than €1,000 per person – access costs such as course fees, transport costs, basic materials or other external activities such as training, programme fees and costs, such as those for Social Farming placements. These two broad models of support are described in greater detail below.

3.3 Direct Financial Supports for Social Farming Placements

Social Inclusion Programmes over the years, including SICAP, target supports and interventions towards particular target groups who may fall between the gaps in statutory services or whose individual needs or circumstances may not easily fit within existing options or within a group or 'one size fits all' approaches. The response for the SICAP client in many cases must be multi-dimensional, integrated and individualised for their own particular needs, with the signposting of a range of options based on a process of discovering the persons circumstances, individual needs etc. through the Personal Action Plans (PAP). In many cases, the SICAP Officer and Programme are also developing a range of other tailored initiatives and interventions locally which can support their clients to progress and develop different aspects of their lives. SICAP supports individual progression through confidence building, capacity building, making supports accessible (transport, course fees, etc.), providing skills sampling, and supporting training, educational and employment opportunities. In many cases, the SICAP Officer also directs clients to health, social care and other statutory services to ensure that they are accessing all of their rights and entitlements. In addition, there can often be personal and family issues which require the SICAP Officer to provide guidance and support.

In line with the above, between mid-2017 and mid-2018, participants in four areas were directly supported under the SICAP Programme to participate in Social Farming:

- **Leitrim via Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG.** This was a 10 week placement on a social farm in the centre of the county which took place in mid-2017. The three participants were all SICAP clients from different parts of the county with a variety of needs and challenges. (For more, see Case Study A)
- **Westmeath via Westmeath Community Development.** In 2018, seven participants took part in two separate 10 week Social Farming placements on two local farms (three participants on one farm, four on another). The mechanics of this placement differed from that in Leitrim in

so far as all of these participants are engaged with Mullingar Resource Centre, a HSE funded Resource Centre for people with intellectual disability and were seeking community engagement options through SICAP. (For more, see Case Study B).

- **Cavan via Breffni Integrated Development Co.** In 2017, five participants took part in Social Farming placement blocks on two local farms in Cavan. These participants were also engaged through a number of different services (the Employability service (3), Cavan Mental Health team (1) and the Focus Family Resource Centre (1)) and were also supported by staff from these services.
- **Carlow County Development Partnership.** In 2018, nine participants took part in social farming placements on local farms in Co. Carlow. Three participants from BEAM, a voluntary organisation providing day, respite and residential facilities to adults with a learning disability participated in two separate 8 week placement blocks. Six participants from Cairdeas, a second day service for adults with intellectual disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders took part in two 12 week placement blocks (with 3 participants on each placement block).

These four placements had some common elements but also some notable variations:

- The participants had multidimensional needs and in most cases, a range and variety of supports. They all experienced exclusion in multiple and different ways in their lives.
- Part of the costs of these placements for participants was provided by the Local Development Companies through SICAP in all four cases; the remainder of the funding came from the Social Farming Ireland sampling fund, through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine under the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund.
- In the case of the Leitrim Development Co. placements, direct support and staff resources were provided by a SICAP staff member to both activate and commission the placements and to support individual participants directly during the placement e.g. occasionally giving lifts to the farm, calling in to check how the placement was going, texting the day beforehand to make sure the participant was going to be there. (For more detail on this type of support, see Case Study A).
- In the case of the Westmeath Community Development and the Carlow County Development Partnership placements, much of this type of in-placement support was provided by staff from the respective Intellectual Disability Services. Similarly, in the case of Cavan, in-placement support was largely provided by the individual services with which participants were linked, although one of the Breffni Integrated Development staff members funded under SICAP who is also a trained counsellor provided some of this type of support to some clients.
- In the case of Westmeath Community Development, SICAP support extended to formal pre-placement preparation for participants, which included farm safety training, CV preparation, purchase of personal protective equipment (For more detail on this model of support, see Case Study B).

This direct co-funding of Social Farming is continuing in both Cavan and Westmeath at the time of writing; a twelve-week placement for three participants is taking place in Cavan and a ten week placement for six participants in Westmeath commenced in October 2018.

In addition, three Social Farming placements will be directly co-funded by the SICAP Programme in West Limerick Resources, Co. Limerick in late 2018/early 2019. At the time of writing, SICAP staff and the Social Farming Regional Development Officer are working together to identify and place clients who would benefit from Social Farming. These participants will be supported by a SICAP worker in a similar way to that which has pertained in the Leitrim case study (i.e. transport to the farm, in-placement support, etc.) In addition, participants will receive some pre-placement supports such as participation in a Manual Handling course, farm visit, etc.

3.4 Indirect and 'Soft' Developmental Supports for Social Farming

Three of the four⁵ Local Development Companies who are partners in the development of a National Social Farming Network are implementing SICAP in their areas. Their interest in the concept of Social Farming stems as much from the possibilities for inclusion for participants as it does from its contribution to rural development and to delivering benefits for social farmers and rural communities. Many more Local Development Companies have engaged with Social Farming through a variety of other, non-financial or more indirect ways where SICAP (and other) staff and the SICAP Programme are working to make Social Farming available as an option for their clients and others.

Local Development Companies, through their networks and institutional contacts at Board⁶ level and in particular those of SICAP staff on the ground, have valuable local knowledge, connections and interactions with the sectors and target groups who can benefit from the supports provided by social farms. As noted by one support worker employed through SICAP and interviewed for this report; *"it's not always about bringing money to the table, it's the connections we can make between people which can be of the greatest value"*. They have helped to identify local organisations, service providers and other programme and initiatives and contacts for whom Social Farming may be of interest (Dublin, West Cork, Donegal). In other instances, SICAP staff are very closely connected with the farming/rural community and have been very helpful in informing farmers and farm families who they engage with about social farming. Many of these have subsequently completed Social Farming training and have become social farmers providing support and inclusion in their communities to SICAP clients (West Cork, Leitrim, Cavan, Wicklow, Kildare, Limerick, Kerry). SICAP staff have also worked with Social Farming Ireland to raise awareness of Social Farming amongst their clients. Examples of this include supporting, hosting and organising events and seminars, or including a segment at general events or showcases which they run for SICAP clients. (Kilkenny, Roscommon, Carlow, Clare, Kerry, Mayo).

In other cases, SICAP staff also activate placements and support participants on placements in a variety of ways even where SICAP is not directly funding (or co-funding) the placement. For example, Programme Refugees have been accessing supports and inclusion in the community through a placement on a social farm in Mayo, supported by staff from South West Mayo Development Co. SICAP staff have also worked independently and with other linked organisations to leverage *external*

⁵ South West Mayo Development Company CLG, West Limerick Resources and Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG.

⁶ The kind of organisations typically represented on the Boards of Local Development Companies which may be of relevance include the HSE, Teagasc, IFA, local Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and local community organisations.

resources or funding to allow for their clients to access Social Farming placements. Working closely with Social Farming Ireland, SICAP staff have in many cases led successful applications for funding for placements under Healthy Ireland, having seen the benefits and added value which Social Farming has for inclusion and for the health and well-being of their clients. In 2017, Healthy Ireland funding was secured in four counties for social farming/SICAP clients and in 2018 this has increased to seven counties (Kildare, Louth, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Limerick, Tipperary).

In other cases, simply having Social Farming written in the SICAP Annual Plan has raised awareness of the concept and practice in key local decision-making bodies such as the Local Community Development Committee. In a number of instances – such as Sligo – it has been a key factor in securing Healthy Ireland funding to support social farming placements at local level.

4. Case Study A: Social Farming Placements via SICAP, Leitrim Development Company

4.1 *Introduction to the Placement and the Participants*

In 2017, three participants from Co. Leitrim took part in a ten week Social Farming placement on a local farm. The placements were the outcome of collaboration between the SICAP officer, known locally as the Education and Youth Support Worker (EYSW), the Social Farming Ireland Regional Development Officer (RDO) and other Social Farming Ireland staff, the farmer and the participants themselves and all of these stakeholders were interviewed to complete this case study. The three participants were clients of SICAP and their participation in this innovative opportunity arose out of their own particular and individual circumstances and needs, as described below. SICAP supported the placements by providing funding of €400 per participant for a 10 week placement. This covered 50% of costs associated with the support for the placements, with the remaining 50% paid by the sampling fund which is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund.

Participant 1 was a young person (early 20s) who had recently moved to the area and who had no formal education, a very poor experience of the mainstream education system and who was quite socially isolated. They had been on a Youth Reach programme but found it difficult to cope with the structure of it. They were resistant to engaging with any of the other mainstream educational or supported employment options which were potentially available but in discussions with the SICAP EYSW, had always spoken of a love of animals and horses in particular.

Participant 2 was a middle-aged person who was a participant on a Tús scheme in a community resource centre. As the conclusion of the Tús scheme approached, the SICAP EYSW had on-going discussions with the client about what they might be interested in doing afterwards. They had expressed an interest in pursuing a horticulture course in Drumshanbo but would have had difficulties getting there every day and didn't wish to move from the town they were in where they felt settled and had made connections. This person expressed an interest in horticulture and nature/the environment, which suggested that a Social Farming placement could be of significant benefit.

Participant 3 was a person in their 30's with a mild intellectual disability who worked on the family farm alongside their parents. While they had the capacity to work and possessed a full driving license, they had limited interactions and interests outside of their own family and had expressed a desire to spend some time off the farm and engage independently with other people and places.

4.2 *Motivation to Participate in Social Farming*

Each participant had their own particular motivations to take part in Social Farming. Participant 1, who had a long term goal of becoming a horse trainer, was specifically interested in learning more about horses and in gaining some experience of handling them. Participant 2 had a strong desire to learn more about and develop their interest in ecology and organics;

"I have developed an interest over the years in ecology. I have mates of mine who have bits of land and I see their places..... these are guys of my age who have done that and so when I heard about this I thought I would love to give this a go. It's great to see it first hand and I'm a townie and I never grew up with any farming. I was delighted to be asked and to know about it."

Participant 3 had somewhat broader goals of meeting new people and learning more about farming outside of their own home farm.

The SICAP Education and Youth Support Worker's interest in Social Farming arose from what she perceives as a gap in support (service) provision for clients who wish to progress in their lives but who may have difficulties going straight into a formal education/training settings;

"Many of the individuals who come to me come wanting to go back into education, they have been out of the education system for a long time and they lack confidence and self-esteem.... If we put them into a course they may feel pressured into it from Social Welfare that their payment will be cut and then they will be a week in the course and they will drop out because it's all too much, the pressure gets too much."

For these clients, the more informal and individualised model of support in Social Farming can promote personal development and growth which is intrinsically valuable but can also provide a bridge to further opportunities. As she notes;

"[Social Farming] would start off a structure and a routine. A lot of clients are not engaging with people, they are very isolated and excluded... they would be engaging now with the farmer and there are other participants on the farm. It's a kind of an introduction back into the wider world."

4.3 The Social Farming Placement: Model of Support and Activities

The farm in this case is a mixed organic farm set on a lakeshore and the farmer has a particular interest in and knowledge of ecology and local history. Prior to the commencement of the 10-week Social Farming placement, the Social Farming Ireland RDO met with the participants individually to discuss with them what the placement would involve and to ensure that this was something they really wanted to pursue. This was followed by an induction session on the farm. As is standard practice in Social Farming, an Individual Support Plan (or ISP) was developed with each person, which outlined their own goals and desired outcomes for the placement, identified any individual support needs and set out the logistics of the placement. The SICAP support worker provided high levels of support in initiating the placement and in the early stages of the placement itself but after that would just call in briefly each day as the placement progressed. As she noted; *"it was their space and their learning."* Attendance overall was excellent and only one of the participants required a phone call or text the day before to check that they would be attending. The SICAP support worker would also give lifts to and from the farm where necessary, but took the approach that in order to maximise the participant's own growth and development, she would only provide as much support as was really necessary;

"I made that clear in the beginning that it was them who signed up for it so that they had to take that personal responsibility. While they were all different age groups, they were all

adults. I had no problems of providing support but that there was going to be no extreme hand holding."

A distinctive feature of the Social Farming experience is that the **relationship with the farmer** is not clinical or mediated through a professional lens but rather is based on personal relationships and doing 'ordinary things in ordinary places'. As the SICAP support worker put it,

"We find our participants tend to be accessing a lot of other services and they feel that people are judging them and looking at their circumstances and I think that's a big thing because the farmers don't want to know anything unless it's necessary and then everything else is learning."

The SICAP support worker confirmed the strength of the relationship with the farmer and the value of his approach to people;

"He is just so calm, he's a gentleman and he treated them all as individuals. Whatever they were interested in or whatever they enjoyed doing, he listened to their story which made them fit in and feel relaxed."

She shared the story of one of the participants who was complaining of cramps in the stomach because they simply wouldn't have had food in the fridge for breakfast due to very low income. The farmer suggesting that they all sit down and have tea and toast together when the participants arrived in the morning, thus dealing with the problem effectively but in a very understated and supportive way. As the SICAP staff officer noted;

"He bent over backwards to help them in any way."

Participants took part in wide range of **activities** on the farm, including; taking care of the cattle, walking and grooming horses, gathering and cutting fuel, wildlife watching, biodiversity walks, working with traditional crafts (wicker bags, loys, etc.), maintenance works and gardening and weeding. As this case demonstrates, the diverse environment of the farm allows for participants to have a wide range of experiences and opportunities for learning, skill sampling and progression. Equally, the small size of the group ensures that the model of support provided within Social Farming can be highly individualised and tailored to the particular needs of the participants within each placement block. For the farmer, the farm is *"a place where they can be themselves and grow."* This is clearly illustrated in this case where three participants with very different backgrounds, motivations and goals each felt that these goals were met and exceeded. The flexibility of the model was noted by the SICAP support worker;

"The pace of work is geared to where the group is at. It's gentle enough that people feel comfortable, they could stop and chat and tell stories and that pace suited some participants. And maybe others wanted to be busy the whole time and he [the farmer] allowed for that as well. So he adapted and was able to adapt to participants."

4.4 Benefits of the Social Farming Placement

Participants learned a wide range of new farm-based **skills** or developed and improved upon existing skills;

“I learnt how to make a loy.... a loy is a traditional Irish spade.... that's one thing I definitely learnt but it's not the only thing. We learnt all sorts of stuff, operating the timber machine which I never did before and we made up that wicker bag which I never did before We were doing the spuds and stuff, we built the road down there before putting the materials down underneath it. I learnt what an orchid looks like. He [the farmer] introduced me to horses and cows....” Participant 2

“There were a lot of things that I wasn't sure of like for instance walking a horse. I didn't believe that I was doing it right until he [the farmer] showed me. After I came here for a few days I knew how to walk her.... and weeding, I was doing that wrong. I used to pull them out but never actually pull them out by the roots and they grow again then and he showed me how to do it, also planting, how to do it properly and not to water them too much.”

Participant 1

Of particular benefit is the opportunity which Social Farming provides to **learn by doing** in an informal and relaxed environment which is particularly valuable for those who may have had a negative experience of or attitude towards more formal educational settings;

“It's peaceful... and you learn a lot of new things but you are outside and you're not stuck in the classroom and people don't like that..... and time flies because you're working so you're doing something.” Participant 1

The SICAP support worker noted that Participant 3 in particular gained hugely in terms of the development of **independent life skills**. At home, everything was done for them but on the Social Farming placement, they got the opportunity to try out and become proficient at the type of domestic tasks which are intrinsic to independent living. She noted:

“X cooked the lunch for the group every day, made the soup. That seemed to be a big breakthrough for that particular individual and it's not that they couldn't do it but it's just that they were never given the opportunity. One day T [farmer] said you could put on the fire and X was looking over at him to make sure they were doing everything right and T said ‘you know yourself’ and X went off and just flew through it. X needed reassurance because they were afraid to do something wrong and T said you head off there and you can do it.”

One of the participants in particular experienced a significant improvement in their **social skills** and willingness to interact with others;

“Yeah my mum said that she noticed a difference and I'm speaking up and I'm not sitting quiet all the time because I used to sit in my room all the time and now I'm down the stairs with the rest of them.... she's sees a big difference in it.” Participant 1

All three participants spoke of the benefits of the kind of **social interaction** which Social Farming facilitates. To the fore was the strong relationship with the farmer from whom the participants appear to have learnt a huge amount and with whom they formed a close relationship.

“Me and T [farmer] are close we are always talking and stuff.” Participant 1

“T [farmer] is very good, he is a gentleman, but he also has that genuine interest in ecology and coming from my point of view to see a man doing that is fantastic, [he]... is very interesting and you would always have something to do here and he would point out something to you... It's a lovely place here as well, the fresh air and the lovely scenery but T [farmer] is the main thing because he is dedicated.... without him it wouldn't have been the same experience.” Participant 2

This relationship extends beyond the formal placement; for example, one of the participants who loves camping has an invitation to come and camp on the lake shore at weekends if they want to while all have had some level of follow-up contact, including invitations to participate in events at the farm. The support worker noted;

“The feeling that he [the farmer] has not moved on and forgotten all about them, I think that in itself is very confidence building, that he actually cares about them. Oftentimes what is more meaningful is the aftermath, to get that text or that phone call that means they have remembered me and they want me back and to feel that I have something to give or something to share can be very rewarding.”

While the three participants in this placement were from quite different backgrounds and didn't necessarily have much in common, they did get on and work well together. The Social Farming placement gave the participants a positive experience of working alongside the farmer and others;

“Yeah teamwork is a big thing here, you could not go singlehandedly and do stuff..... and I'll boost up my confidence talking to other people. Like I never talk to people, so that would be a big one.” Participant 1

“I liked it being part of the group and being outdoors.” Participant 3

For the SICAP support worker, the relaxed and homely environment of the farm combined with the nature of the work allowed plenty of opportunity for social interactions;

“By the end of the placement they were having full blown conversations about everything that happened on the farm and other stuff that that they heard on the radio and TV programmes. [They were]having fun with each other and joking with each other and I think that's very natural and organic, you can't force that. It was because they wanted to engage in conversations and they were happier in themselves and their confidence had been built up and they felt that they were worth something.”

For Participant 2, the opportunity to spend **time in nature** and to learn more about and experience this more ecological model of farming was particularly valuable;

“It's just seeing first-hand farming in action especially with T [farmer], he has a specific organic tilt to his. It's hard to describe but I think it's wonderful to see this in action, the bog and the plants and the newts and things like this.... these are things that you wouldn't normally experience in the normal course of the day for somebody like me... it's a wonderful experience and there are different aspects to it.” Participant 2

There were also other benefits in terms of overall wellbeing. Participant 1 noted that they were eating a lot better since starting social farming, attributing this to being out in the fresh air and engaging in physical activity. They also felt that they were also sleeping better. Participant 2 focused in particular on how the opportunity to spend time on a farm run on organic principles has stimulated and further developed their intellectual interest in the subject and motivated them to do further research and reading on some of the things they learned. The SICAP support worker noted that participation in Social Farming has also had a significant impact on the participant's interpersonal relationships outside of social farming. For example, one participant who had limited contact with their family made the decision to attend a family function during the course of the placement. As she noted;

“Through the Social Farming experience Y decided that they would go to the family christening and said ‘you don't realise the confidence that I needed to go to that christening and it's the best thing that I ever did’ and it's just because that Y was getting out and about and was happier in themselves they felt the need to go back and reach out to their family.”

4.5 Outcomes of the Social Farming Placement

Almost a year has passed since the participants completed their Social Farming placement in the summer of 2017 and the long-term impact of their participation has been both positive and significant.

On completion of the Social Farming placement, **Participant 1** began a two year horsemanship course through the National Learning Network in autumn 2017. According to the SICAP support worker they are really enjoying the course and absolutely plan to continue with it. It is her view that that this participant would never have committed to and persisted with such a course prior to their positive experience of social farming.

Participant 2 is now taking part in a 4 year CE Rehabilitation scheme in Co. Leitrim and carries out maintenance and other work in the community resource centre in which they previously participated in a Tús scheme and in a number of other local community facilities. According to the SICAP support worker, the participant has subsequently said that Social Farming placement was the best experience they ever had. When asked whether they were interested in a second Social Farming placement, they said that they absolutely would be but that they wished that someone else would have the chance to experience it instead. This participant has continued to pursue their interest in ecology and nature.

Participant 3 completed a second Social Farming placement (funded by Healthy Ireland) on another farm closer to their own family farm. This farmer found the participant to be very strong (physically) and capable and they had another very positive experience on this placement. The participant has also completed a wood working course and hopes to undertake a horticulture course at QQI Level 4. While this participant needs ongoing support in developing their interpersonal and communication skills and

their capacity to work and live independently, they are, according to the SICAP support worker, on a more positive and personally fulfilling trajectory than prior to Social Farming.

The experience of supporting clients to participate in Social Farming was a very positive one for the SICAP support worker (EYSW) and she is committed to offering it as an option in the future for those SICAP clients for whom it may be particularly relevant and valuable.

5. Case Study B: Social Farming Placements via SICAP, Westmeath Community Development

5.1 *Introduction to the Placement and the Participants*

In 2018, seven participants from Co. Westmeath took part in two separate ten week Social Farming placements on two local farms. All of these participants are clients of Mullingar Resource Centre, a HSE funded Resource Centre for people with an intellectual disability. The placements were the outcome of collaboration between the (acting) manager of Mullingar Resource Centre, the SICAP Goal 2 Coordinator and other staff in Westmeath Community Development, the Social Farming Ireland Regional Development Officer and other Social Farming Ireland staff, the farmers and the participants themselves. All of these stakeholders were interviewed to complete this case study. The seven participants largely use the Resource Centre as a base from which they are supported to pursue a range of community activities, including voluntary work, physical activity, their own individual hobbies and interests, work experience and in this case, Social Farming.

SICAP supported these placements by providing funding of €400 per participant for a 10 week placement. This covered 50% of costs associated with the support for the placements, with the remaining 50% paid by the sampling fund which is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund. As is detailed below, SICAP also provided 4 sessions of in-house formal pre-placement preparation for participants and purchased personal protective equipment (PPE).

5.2 *Motivation to Participate in Social Farming*

The starting point for this Social Farming placement block was the interest shown by a number of clients of Mullingar Resource Centre. The manager recalled how people had, over time, expressed an interest in going out to a farm on work experience or spending time on a farm. While anxious to support this choice, she felt that there were significant barriers to this – including health and safety concerns, safeguarding concerns, etc. – which would be difficult for the service to overcome. The supports and quality assurance provided by the Social Farming model addressed these concerns and helped ensure a safe, meaningful, farm based experience. This enabled the manager to provide this choice to interested participants. The wider purpose was to enhance their inclusion in the community and to provide them with options to improve their lives through self-direction and independence.

In a focus group, the participants recounted their own motivations. These centred on the chance to do something different, to get out of the house and away from the usual routines and the opportunity to work with animals and in the peace and quiet of the countryside.

Unable at that stage to secure the resources for such community engagements from within her own service, the manager of Mullingar Resource Centre approached the SICAP Goal 2 Coordinator in Westmeath Community Development for funding and support. The Coordinator was aware of the value of the Social Farming model, having already referred a person experiencing mental health difficulties to a placement. She was strongly motivated by a desire to reach out and provide supports

to people from target groups (people with intellectual disabilities) with whom the Programme had limited engagement to date. She felt that the opportunity to take part in Social Farming would have multiple benefits for participants: personal development and increased sense of well-being; the uncovering and development of potential skills, talents and interests; and enabling people to progress towards other training opportunities or employment, including supported employment. In relation to the latter, she was particularly interested in demonstrating to Community Employment supervisors and other similar stakeholders that people with intellectual disabilities have untapped potential to contribute in a real and practical way to their local communities;

“Traditionally, CE supervisors might not have considered people with intellectual disabilities for places on schemes but the success of these placements proves that it can work.”

5.3 The Social Farming Placements: Model of Support and Activities

The model of support provided within these placements is similar to that described in Case Study A, the key elements of which are intrinsic to the Social Farming Ireland model; meetings between the RDO from Social Farming Ireland and the participants, induction sessions on the farms and the development of an Individual Support Plan (ISP) with each person. Participants were given transport to and from the farm by the manager from Mullingar Resource Centre or another staff member. As is typical, the support worker (in this case, the manager from Mullingar Resource Centre) reduced her involvement on the placement days as they progressed and as the participants grew in capacity and confidence.

A distinctive feature of these two Social Farming placement blocks – and an example of a funder adding value to the placements – was what we might call the **‘wrap-around’ placement supports** provided by the SICAP Programme. Westmeath Community Development provided/facilitated four sessions in their own offices prior to the commencement of the placement. At these sessions, participants met with the RDO from Social Farming Ireland, worked on developing their employment skills and on preparing their CVs, received training on farm safety, and received their own Personal Protective Equipment (hi viz vests, boots, rain gear etc.). They also completed their own Personal Action Plans, drawing on their ISPs and other documents. The participants were also presented with Certificates of Participation at the end of the four sessions. In addition, the SICAP team have continued to work with a number of the participants in supporting them to take part in further training, with one participant embarking on a QQI Level 5 course in the area of hospitality. Although the pace of this course turned out to be excessively fast for the participant at this stage, the manager from Mullingar Resource Centre feels that *“avenues have now been opened up for them.”*

Participants took part in wide range of **activities** on these two farms, including; taking care of cattle, sheep and pigs, walking and grooming horses, handling poultry, general farm tasks, gathering and cutting fuel, making bird-boxes, sowing, weeding, watering and harvesting in the garden and poly-tunnels, and spending time in woodlands. Again, the diverse environment of the farm allowed for participants to have a wide range of experiences and opportunities for learning, skills sampling and progression and the small size of the groups – four in one placement block and three in the other – ensured an individualised and personal model of support. On both of these farms, the farmer was

aided by a trusted neighbour on placements days to ensure an even greater level of support, attention and community engagement was offered to each participant.

5.4 Benefits of the Social Farming Placements

This Social Farming placement delivered a range of benefits to these participants, as a group and individually. The opportunity to spend time in nature and particularly **working with animals** was particularly to the fore in conversations with participants;

“I liked the chicks, it was lovely to see them grow.”

“I liked working with the horses, walking them and all.”

“The peace and quiet out here is lovely.”

The second key benefit of the placement from the participant perspective was the chance to get to know and develop **connections with the farmer** and the other people on the farm;

“The farmer and all the people here, they are nice people. I’ve made friends with them.”

The Social Farming model is inherently social and the fun and banter between the farmer and participants is a key element of what makes it both enjoyable and effective. Those working with the participants – the manager of the Resource Centre, the SICAP staff and the farmers – all noted significant developments in the **social skills and social confidence** in participants as the placements progressed. One participant in particular was very shy at the beginning of the process with little confidence in themselves. By the middle of the placement, they were much more chatty and assertive. For example, they participated fully in the focus group with the researcher, which the manager of the Resource Centre says they would never have felt able to do previously. Similarly, the manager has observed a significant reduction in the symptoms of another participant who has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

The manager of the Resource Centre identified the **personal and individualised nature of the support** as being one of its key benefits and one of the sources of its success. In the typical work placements which the clients of the service usually take part in, they are usually given relatively mundane and basic tasks to carry out, with a staff member/owner checking in periodically to see how they are doing. In contrast, the Social Farming model provides the opportunity to carry out what are arguably more meaningful tasks *alongside* other participants and the farmer and with the latter’s encouragement and guidance. As the manager of the Resource Centre noted;

“I have never seen them go on a work experience where they became so involved with people, where they are so relaxed and at home.”

The **homely nature of the support** is illustrated by one small but significant development within the placements. In the early weeks, participants were bringing their equipment (boots, gloves, etc.) to and fro to the farms but after a few weeks, the farmers suggested they leave them at the farm in their own spot, thus extending this feeling of connection to the farm throughout the week.

The participants have also developed their **practical skills** in the activities mentioned earlier. Of particular note is the increased ease with being around animals and the increased capacity to care for them. One participant would have declared themselves afraid of horses at the beginning but within a few weeks was walking the horses from one paddock to another. Another was happy to pick a chicken up in their arms. Participants also took part in some of the more physically demanding tasks such as mucking out stables, wheeling barrows, etc. and increased proficiency at these kind of tasks improved both confidence and physical strength and agility. The manager of the Resource Centre also noted an improved capacity amongst participants as the weeks went on to stick at tasks and see them through, even those which were more mundane.

Participants also spoke of the value of the **'wrap-around' support sessions** within SICAP which we referenced earlier. It was something novel which most participants got benefit from;

"We learned interview skills and did our CVs and we got our wellies and our gloves. And A [the RDO] came to see us, he was very funny."

"I had never done anything like that before, it was really good."

The participants found the SICAP staff who worked with them to be *"very nice"* and also enjoyed the social element of going somewhere new, meeting new people and having tea and biscuits. The SICAP Coordinator identified the presentation of Certificates of Participation, where participants brought family members as being an important milestone, which validated their efforts and which allowed them to take part in the kind of ceremony which their peers, siblings, etc. usually get to experience at some stage. From the perspective of the SICAP Goal 2 Coordinator, the interaction with the SICAP staff and the activities they have carried out have provided new experiences for the participants. Both the SICAP Goal 2 Coordinator and the manager of the Resource Centre agree that it has facilitated community connections and also widened the circle of people who the participants know and who can potentially identify opportunities for inclusion and also progression which may be suited to their skills and interests.

5.5 Outcomes of the Social Farming Placements

These placements were still ongoing at the time the research was carried out, but have already delivered a range of benefits to the participants (outlined above) which will be of significant value to them in the future. Support workers, social farmers and the participants themselves have noted progression and development of social and occupational skills, increased levels of confidence and capacity and the development of wider horizons than might previously have been envisaged or expected. For example, one participant began a FETAC Level 5 course and although it was not necessarily the right time for them to complete it, the attempt was itself worthwhile. In the focus groups, participants spoke enthusiastically of their desire to continue to work with animals in some way, in either paid employment or in a voluntary capacity. The SICAP Goal 2 Coordinator argues that the skills and capacity uncovered and developed in the Social Farming placement demonstrates the capacity and interest of some participants to progress to supported employment such as CE.

Outside of the benefits to participants, the nature of the supports provided by SICAP staff and their deep involvement in the process enabled them to develop *their* own knowledge, skills and capacity to

support clients with intellectual disabilities into the future. The process of making these placements happen has also opened new connections at a local level between the Local Development Company and SICAP staff and services working with people with disabilities which can be developed further.

Both of these services – Mullingar Resource Centre and the SICAP Programme in Westmeath Community Development – are committed to supporting Social Farming placements in the future. In the case of the former, the manager wishes to put Social Farming in the Business Plan for the Centre, which will solidify the case for support. In the case of the latter, the SICAP Goal 2 Coordinator intends to allocate resources to support and fund Social Farming placements in the future and regards it as a good and value-for-money investment of their resources in their clients and in their progression.

6. Social Farming and the SICAP Programme: Synergies and Potentials

Evidence from the placements which have taken place to date suggests that there is a strong synergy between the goals, values and activities of Social Farming and those of the SICAP Programme. There is significant further potential for Social Farming to deliver positive outcomes for individual SICAP clients, particularly those with multiple or more complex needs and possibly for those with higher levels of support requirements.

The potential of Social Farming to deliver these outcomes can be summarised as:

- Social Farming provides the opportunity to support and work with people in a **holistic** way, addressing multiple dimensions of wellbeing, quality of life and personal and occupational development and delivering positive outcomes for individuals and wider society. The value of this more holistic approach is clearly indicated and validated in the current SICAP Programme Requirements (2018).
- A Social Farming placement allows for very practical **tailored and individualised progression support** for individuals for whom mainstream supports, training, work and other schemes currently provided by the statutory and voluntary sector may be more challenging or for which they are not yet ready. It also provides a very **local option in isolated rural areas** where there may be few or any other such services, supports, training or other options to engage and to progress for these ‘hard to reach’ individuals.
- The engagement and learning associated with Social Farming happens in a much more **relaxed, informal and individualised** way than that provided by traditional/formal educational settings, of which some people may have a negative previous experience. Social farmers work very closely *alongside* participants and activities are carried out with their support, guidance and encouragement. Research carried out by Pobal (2017:40⁷) with young people accessing SICAP supports suggests that novel, unique ways of learning – such as that which take place in Social Farming – are much more effective in engaging excluded young people than traditional ‘chalk and talk’.
- Social farming supports those who are long-term unemployed in particular to get back into a **regular work-type routine and setting** and provides a good reason to get up and out in the morning. This can be a first step to encouraging people towards employment or supported employment.
- Social farming **can spark or develop an interest in farming, horticulture, equine, or other environmental, nature-based activities** (e.g. animal husbandry, growing, biodiversity,) and also stimulate interest in many other areas such as machinery, workshop skills, cooking, photography, etc. which can be carried forward and developed by the participants beyond the Social Farming placement.
- Social Farming supports the **development of participants own sense of capacity, confidence and self-worth and allows them to exercise choice** in the pathway and “options menu” for their personal development and inclusion in their personal action plan (PAP).

⁷ Pobal (2017) *Kickboxing, Kindness and Going the Extra Mile: Good Practice for Working with NEETS under SICAP*.

- The farm setting and the physical nature of many of the activities can be a better **cultural fit for some male participants** than some of the other options which are currently available for SICAP clients. Its availability can help stimulate initial engagement with some of these clients.
- Social farming provides **valuable connections within the local community** and informal signposting and natural linkages to other supports and services (both informal and formal) which can enrich and open further doors in the lives of participants.
- Social farming participation can have **significant quality of life benefits**, including: improved physical and mental health and well-being; improved fitness levels; the development of friendships and bonds with the farmer, wider farm family and other participants; and an increased sense of belonging and value in the local community.
- Social farming placements help to establish **valued and valuable social roles** for people who may have experienced social exclusion and isolation. This happens in the ordinary community setting of the family farm, which itself plays an important and valued role in both wider Irish society and in local communities.
- Participation in Social Farming has often provided a tool and enabled support workers, including **SICAP staff, to get to know their clients better** and to tease out and witness first-hand their interests, skills and capacities outside of the formal, official settings within which they normally engage. This ‘discovery’ process adds value and in turn enables support workers to be more effective in identifying further supports and opportunities which match better and are more beneficial their clients progression, development and inclusion.
- In the SICAP Programme, a Personal Action Plan (PAP) enables individuals to reflect on their own abilities, aspirations, choices and progression pathways during their participation in SICAP; the current development of the Distance Travelled Tool will assess their progression over time. Measurement and assessment of progress for an individual is also inherent to Social Farming practice: participants in Social Farming are supported to develop an Individual Support Plan (ISP) and progress reviews for placements are built into the process. The Social Farming ISP also **contributes to the development and evolution of the client’s Personal Action Plan** and ultimately, can feed into the Distance Travelled Tool.
- Social farming adds value to and combines two SICAP goals by **applying community development approaches and releasing the community assets within the farming sector to impact positively on the lives of individuals who are excluded.**

Social Farming and SICAP: The Future

There is significant scope and potential for close collaboration, continuing and developing interactions and beneficial synergies between SICAP and Social Farming right across the country, with mutual added value in these interactions. With the continuing development and diffusion of social farming on a national basis, there are opportunities for more permanent linkages and interactions individually between the Local Development Companies and collectively through the ILDN and Social Farming Ireland. There is also merit in exploring how these linkages can embed at national level and across Government Departments in delivering on social and community inclusion for those hard to reach and excluded groups and individuals.

7. Social Farming: How it Works and Pathway to Placements

The previous sections have provided learning and insights on the potential for Social Farming as a support for SICAP clients. This final section sets out the basics of how Social Farming works and the pathway which SICAP staff and coordinators and other support and development staff can follow if they are interested in exploring Social Farming. Based on experience over a range of funding programmes⁸, Social Farming Ireland has developed **best practice processes and procedures** which underpin activity at all levels. From the point of view of services and those commissioning Social Farming placements, these processes and procedures are designed to:

- Ensure safe, meaningful and enjoyable experiences for participants
- Provide opportunities for participants to shape their own placement experience
- Provide a high level of governance and quality assurance for commissioners of Social Farming placements
- Ensure that all stakeholders *work together* to maximise the benefits from the Social Farming experience for individual participants

This sub-section focuses on two key elements of what those contemplating commissioning Social Farming placements need to know about social farming:

- 1) The 'basics' of how Social Farming works as it relates to SICAP and
- 2) The pathway which is typically followed to activate and manage Social Farming placements.

7.1 Social Farming: The Basics

- Working via Social Farming Ireland, individual social farmers are commissioned to provide Social Farming supports to participants. The commissioners of Social Farming supports come from a range of groups and bodies, including government services and agencies, development organisations, charities, voluntary groups, advocates groups, families, etc. In the case of SICAP, the commissioner is the Local Development Company.
- Social Farming supports are currently provided by the farmer via a **placement** which involves participants attending the farm usually for one day per week for a defined period which is currently typically between 10 and 20 weeks. The length of time spent on each of these days varies; sometimes participants will start off doing a small number of hours (2-3 hours) and building up to 6-8 hours per day.
- Social Farming takes place on a farm or horticultural setting in reasonable proximity to the service and/or participants.
- In current Social Farming practice, there are usually a maximum of 3-4 participants present on any day and they engage in activities and projects alongside the farmer and sometimes other members of the farm family. The farmer is commissioned to provide support placements for the participants on the farm on a given day each week by a single service or source.

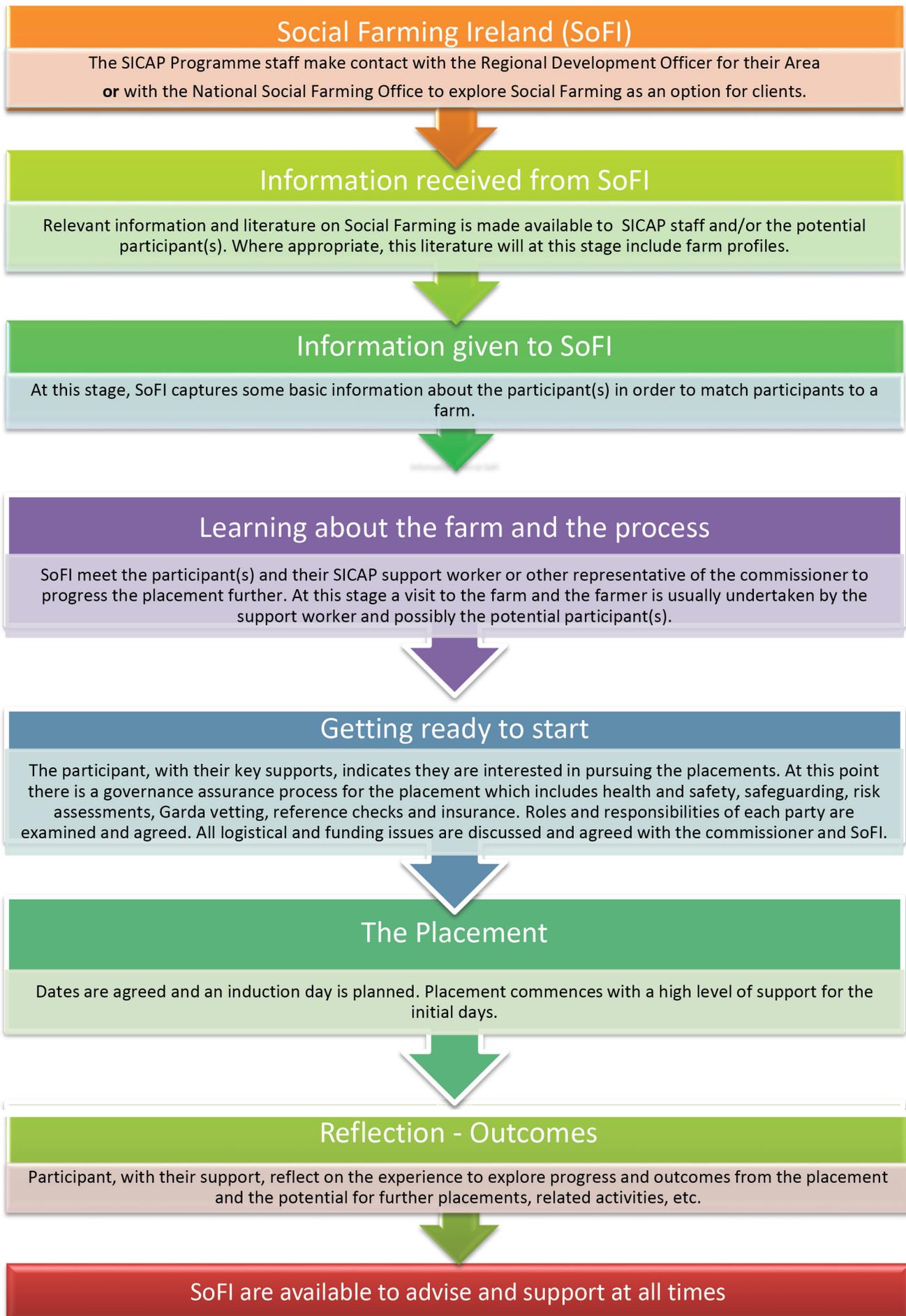
⁸ The EU SoFAR initiative (2006-2008), the Social Farming Across Borders Programme (SoFAB 2011-2014) and the current national programme to develop a Social Farming Network.

Occasionally participants on a farm will come via two or more commissioning organisations and will be mixed but this will be managed carefully to ensure a good dynamic and compatibility.

- The level of support provided to participants during placement days by support staff who may be working with them is highly individual and depends on factors such as the capacity and confidence of participants, the perspective of the farmer and the stage in the placement. Typically, the level of support required is highest at the beginning and many support workers find they are able to leave participants at the farm with the farmer after the initial weeks or otherwise take a step back. There is a requirement however that a support worker/key worker, advocate, etc. is, at the very least, available by phone for the duration of the placement.
- The kind of activities which the participants pursue on any given day varies according to the type and scale of farm and the time of year, the weather, the stage in the placement and most importantly, the capacity, interests, goals and choices of the participants. Most social farms are small to medium sized mixed operations which offer variety and choice in terms of what the participants get to do. Some of the more common activities include: feeding/foddering animals, planting, tending and harvesting vegetables and fruit, collecting eggs, grooming horses, general farm tasks and activities, weeding, painting and restoring gates, machinery, planters, etc., general maintenance, ploughing, and cooking/preserving home-grown food.
- Farmers who become social farmers with Social Farming Ireland have gone through a rigorous process of recruitment, vetting, induction and training and receive ongoing support and mentoring from Social Farming Ireland and its RDOs to enable them to provide supports safely, effectively and confidently with a range of participants. Farmers complete 'Training for Practice', a minimum of two days training which contain sessions on subjects such as Social Farming practice, safeguarding, working with vulnerable people, farm health and safety and others. All social farmers with whom Social Farming Ireland work are Garda vetted.

7.2 Social Farming: The Pathway

Figure 2 summaries the typical pathway which is followed when a commissioner such as the Local Development Company/SICAP Programme staff in an area, guided by the wishes and choices of potential participants, wants to give clients the opportunity to spend time on a social farm. Social Farming Ireland is the key national-level organisation progressing and developing Social Farming in Ireland and for those interested in exploring social farming further, the first point of contact will usually be the National Social Farming Office or one of four Social Farming Ireland Regional Development Officers (full contact details for all staff are in Appendix 1). The Social Farming Ireland website (www.socialfarmingireland.ie) contains a range of resources and useful information for those looking for more general information on Social Farming.



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