



New Opportunities • Connecting People • Enhancing Lives

Social Farming and Mental Health Services



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Introduction and Key Messages

This publication from Social Farming Ireland is aimed at services and groups/advocates working with people experiencing mental health difficulties. It is divided into four sections as follows:

Section 1 provides an **introduction to Social Farming** with a strong focus on the model which is developing in the Irish context. This section presents a snapshot of the **activity** which is taking place around the country and describes the **values** which underpin and guide practice.

Section 2 opens with an outline of the **service context** within which Social Farming is developing, and focuses on the role of Social Farming in delivering on the commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion and a recovery model contained within *A Vision for Change*. It goes on to offer a detailed **literature review** and **key insights from theory and practice** in other jurisdictions in the broad area of 'green care' and in Social Farming specifically.

Section 3 presents key findings from research carried out under the Social Farming Across Borders Project (SoFAB) in the period 2012-2014 and more detailed **findings from qualitative research** undertaken in late 2017 with 24 participants from mental health services around the country who took part in Social Farming placements. This research is presented under a number of headings: Motivations for Social Farming Placements; The Social Farming Placement Experience (Participant and Service Perspective); and Participant Outcomes.

Section 4 provides an explanation of the way in **which social farming is currently delivered** and sets out the **pathway** which a service or group or advocate can follow if they are interested in exploring and experiencing Social Farming for their clients.

The **key messages** from this publication include:

1. Social Farming has developed significantly in Ireland in recent years and growing numbers of people from a range of services are now being given the opportunity to take part in outcome focused, supported placements on ordinary family farms.
2. The key national-level organisation progressing and developing Social Farming is Social Farming Ireland, based in Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG, which provides a wide range of services and initiatives which support the development of Social Farming nationally. It has developed processes and procedures which ensure safe, meaningful and enjoyable experiences for participants and which provide a high level of governance and quality assurance for commissioners of Social Farming placements.
3. Evidence from international literature and from qualitative research conducted by Social Farming Ireland suggests that Social Farming can deliver a wide range of benefits across multiple dimensions of functioning and well-being for those experiencing mental health difficulties. This includes those related to psychological health and well-being, social connectivity, skills acquisition and physical health and vitality. In terms of outcomes, there is strong evidence of progression in terms of self-care, self-efficacy, self-confidence and motivation amongst the majority of participants in the Social Farming Ireland research.

4. The Social Farming model provides support to participants which is social, convivial, community-based, and above all, 'ordinary' rather than clinical. This provides an innovative opportunity for mental health services seeking options for clients for whom this type of support may be particularly suitable and beneficial.
5. At the level of mental health services, the Social Farming model is wholly in tune with policy as envisaged in *A Vision for Change*. It is also increasingly in tune with practice and provides an opportunity for Community Mental Health Teams and other stakeholders within mental health services to deliver on their commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion and a recovery model in a safe, effective and positive way.

1. Introduction to Social Farming: Definition, Activity in Ireland and Values

1.1 Background and Definition of Social Farming

A strong and growing body of evidence points to the role of nature, and ‘green care’ in delivering a variety of benefits and positive outcomes for individuals with a range of needs (Alcock et al. 2014; Gullone, 2000; Hansen-Ketchum, 2009; Leck et al., 2015). Interventions such as Social Farming, animal assisted therapy, social and therapeutic horticulture, eco-therapy and wilderness therapy are increasingly being explored by health and social care services working in areas such as mental health, disability and youth-work. **Social Farming** provides a planned, 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 fundamentally based on spending time with farmers and their families in the **natural environment** of the farm, but also encompasses two other key elements; **valuable, meaningful activities** and **social and community connection** which combine to deepen its impact further and to support recovery, as Figure 1 below demonstrates.

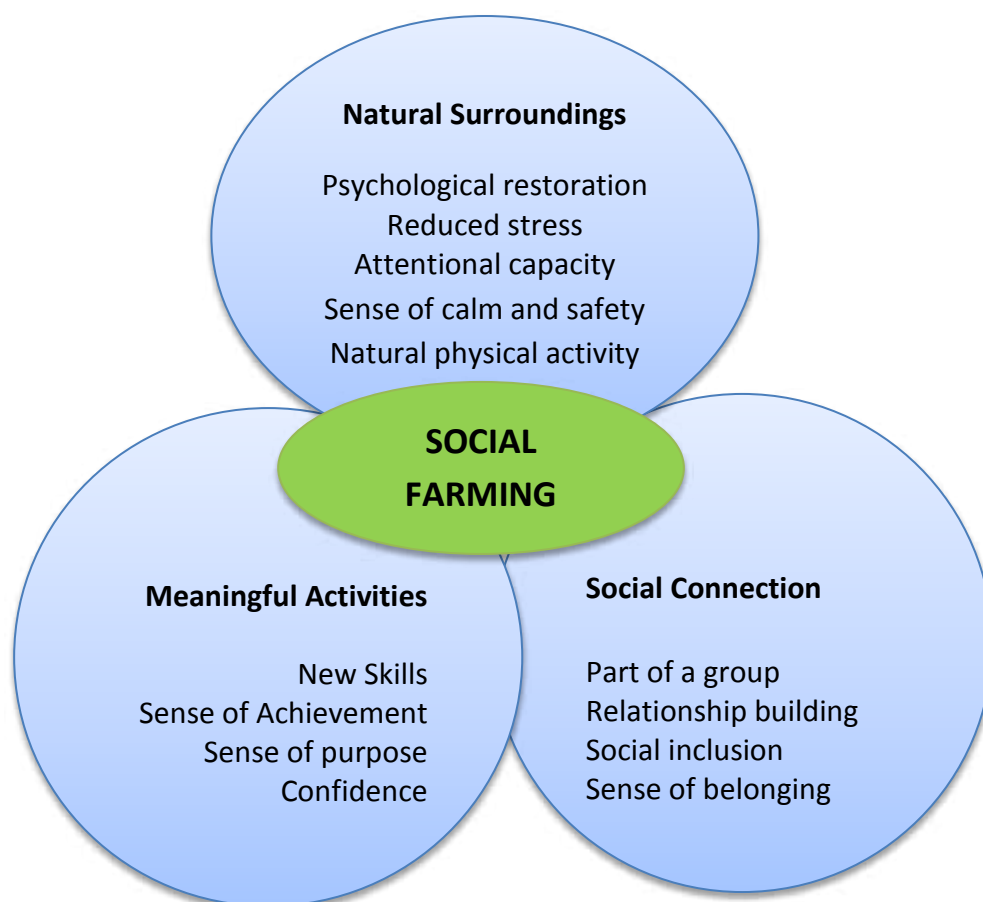


Figure 1: Three Key Elements of Social Farming (Adapted from Bragg and Atkins (2016:46))

In the Irish context, the farm is not a specialised or ‘treatment’ farm – as is sometimes the case in other countries – but rather, remains a typical working farm where people take part in day-to-day farm activities in a 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 engaged 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)) and will be explored in further detail in Sections 2 and 3. 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

1.2 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 at an 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 the network of stakeholders is developing and consolidating.** Box 1 overleaf describes the

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

structure and governance of Social Farming Ireland, the key national-level organisation progressing and developing Social Farming in Ireland.

Box 1: Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)

Social Farming Ireland, the National Social Farming Office, has a 4-year contract (2017-2020) with 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 development of a national Social Farming network 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).

SoFI 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 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 University College Dublin 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 and social farmers.

The increased interest in and the particular development of Social Farming in Ireland in recent years has been driven by a set of **interlinked government policies and institutional developments**³ which are increasingly guiding practice in the health, social care and social inclusion sectors. These include the emphasis within mental health policy and practice on recovery in the community and on a holistic approach to mental well-being; the emergence of a social model of disability; and the increased use of a person-centred and progressive approach within most social inclusion work.

³ 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 Plan (2016-2018); Connecting for Life (Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020); the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme 2018-2022.

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. 648 of these placement days were delivered to participants from mental health services. In 2018, there were over 2600 placement days for almost 300 participants across 22 counties; approximately 35% of activity (927 placement days) was in the mental health sector.

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 Ireland is working is also growing and now includes: Mental Health Ireland, HSE Mental health services in a number of CHOs⁴, a range of services working with people with Intellectual Disabilities, advocacy organisations such as Down Syndrome Ireland, Local Development Companies (SICAP⁵), 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 Social Farming Ireland, 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 has come 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 for all.

⁴ In the case of Sligo Leitrim Mental health services, this has culminated with a Service Level Agreement between the HSE and Leitrim Integrated Development Co. CLG for the delivery of Social Farming placements on an annual basis.

⁵ Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

2. Relevance and Benefits of Social Farming to those Experiencing Mental Health Difficulties: Literature Review & International Evidence

2.1 Background and Service Context

One of the groups which have been found to benefit significantly from the opportunities provided by Social Farming are people experiencing mental ill health. The prevalence of mental health difficulties is significant and growing at both international and national level (WHO, 2017; Frankish et al., 2018). Mental illness is now a leading cause of disability in the developed world (WHO, 2017) and is associated with a number of social problems, with economic costs in terms of lost productivity and more fundamentally, with a range of negative impacts on individuals, families and communities. It is estimated that up to 1 in 4 people will experience some level of mental illness at some point in their lives (WHO, 2017) and this is both a private issue for individuals and a public health issue for governments and wider society. The most recent Census data for Ireland (2016) shows that the percentage of people with a psychological or emotional condition increased by almost 30%, between 2011 and 2016. Meanwhile, the Healthy Ireland Survey 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016) reports that almost 10% of the Irish population over age 15 has a 'probable mental health problem' (PMHP) at any one time. The situation is more severe for children and young people, with almost 20% of young people aged 19-24 years having had a mental health disorder and 15% of children aged 11-13 years also having experienced a mental health disorder (Cannon et al., 2013).

The key strategy document underpinning mental health service provision in Ireland is *A Vision for Change* (2006), which describes a framework for building and fostering positive mental health across the entire community and for providing accessible, community-based specialist services for people with mental illness. The key principles of *A Vision for Change* include: a person-centred treatment approach; the use of a multi-disciplinary and holistic approach to addressing the biological, psychological and social factors that contribute to mental health problems; and the strong focus on maximising recovery for mental illness and building on the resources within service users and their immediate social networks to allow them to achieve meaningful integration and participation in community life. While a range of supports and interventions such as General Practitioners, counselling and psychotherapy services, support groups and helplines can be accessed directly by those experiencing mental health difficulties, within the framework of HSE supports, the core service – and typically the key point of contact for Social Farming Ireland – are the local Community Mental Health Teams. These teams cover services for all ages and services including child and adolescent mental health services, adult mental health services and psychiatry of later life services. Treatments may include services or supports which are based in the community or hospital-based, with a focus on treating people in their own home and community where possible, in line with the policy shifts envisaged within *A Vision for Change*.

There are a number of significant challenges within the mental health care sector in Ireland. It is widely acknowledged that the sector continues to be under-resourced, despite the clear economic and social return on investment in mental health supports and interventions. The Healthy Ireland

Framework (Department of Health, 2012) estimated that mental health difficulties were costing the Irish economy 11 billion euro per year. In recent years, mental health services as a proportion of the total health budget has amounted to approximately 6% (WRC, 2017). WRC (2017) also identified that a comparative positioning of Ireland internationally suggests that the percentage resource allocation today is lower than in some of the countries with better developed and better performing mental healthcare systems, with figures of 10-13% in countries such as Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, France and the UK. The most recent Mental Health Commission Annual Report (2017) noted a number of key areas in which *A Vision for Change* has not been implemented fully, including: staffing, recruitment and retention levels across all sectors (especially in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services); gaps in the availability of the full complement of staff on multi-disciplinary teams; continuing delays and challenges in delivering on a fully person-centred approach to care and support; ongoing issues and tensions with the integration between the biological (i.e. medical/clinical model) and psychological/social model of support; and the lack of available psychosocial therapies.

It is within this context of rising levels of mental ill-health and stretched internal resources that innovative community-based supports such as Social Farming offer an opportunity to services to deliver on their commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion and a recovery model. *The Evidence Review to Inform the Parameters for a Refresh of a Vision for Change* (WRC & LSE, 2017) makes explicit reference to the potential offered by commissioning arrangements – such as those with Social Farming Ireland – to address some of the challenges in the mental healthcare system, including helping to overcome recruitment challenges and achieving greater universality in the overall system. This document specifically refers to the experience in the Netherlands where regulated universal insurance arrangements make it possible for clients to actively choose external psychosocial options such as Social Farming or other community based supports which may be particularly effective in supporting their individual recovery.

There is strong evidence from the international literature described below that the benefits of Social Farming to individual clients of mental health services can be significant and wide-ranging. The response of individual clients to the Social Farming experience and its impact on them will depend on a range of personal factors including the severity of their illness, their existing capacities and their inherent interest in this kind of activity as well as the particular qualities of the Social Farming experience. Kaley et al. (2018) differentiate between experiences of Social Farming which are *transformative* in progressing participants along a recovery journey and those where the therapeutic power of the social farm resides in its ability to *ameliorate* challenging life situations, thus offering a site of respite or refuge. While it is beyond the scope of this document to explore this differentiation in any detail, it is clear that both types of experience – and those which fall somewhere in between – can be inherently valuable in enhancing the lives of individuals.

Section 3 will describe in detail the results of research carried out amongst participants in Social Farming in Ireland but the remainder of this section will offer an insight from both theory and practice in other jurisdictions in the broad area of ‘green care’ and in Social Farming specifically. We referred in Figure 1 to Social Farming as having three key elements – Natural Surroundings, Meaningful Activities and Social Connection – which combine to deepen its impact. We will now look at these in turn in discussing Social Farming as an innovative support option for both services and individual clients.

2.2 Therapeutic Value of Nature

A range of studies draw attention to the role of nature-based interventions in promoting mental wellbeing and physical health. The notion that time in nature can be restorative and nurturing is central to a number of influential theories which have emerged to valorise the relationship of man with nature, including the *Biophilia Hypothesis* (Wilson, 1984) and *Attention Restoration Theory* (ART) (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). The Biophilia hypothesis suggests that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life, that negative consequences potentially follow from a separation from nature and that a wide range of positive outcomes are associated with seeing or spending time in green spaces. Studies have demonstrated outcomes such as faster healing times after illness, reduced stress levels, reductions in domestic violence and other crimes, improved physical health, and cognitive and psychological benefits in individuals and in populations as a whole (Taylor et al., 2001; Grahn and Stigsdotter, 2003; Hartig and Staats, 2006). Of particular interest to us in our discussion of the value of Social Farming is the distinction drawn by Tidball (2012) between ‘seeing green’ and ‘doing green’. He draws on a range of studies (Austin and Kaplan, 2003; Ryan and Grese, 2005; Helphand, 2006) to highlight the particular value of ‘hands-on’ activity in nature – gardening, caring for animals, community gardening, working in woodlands, etc. – in enhancing human health and well-being, particularly for those who have been disenfranchised or who have experienced trauma.

Similarly, *Attention Restoration Theory* (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) hypothesises that interaction with nature has the capacity to renew our attention, our energy and ourselves (Clay, 2001). Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) propose four cognitive states on the way to restoration which are of particular interest in the context of mental health recovery. The first of these is characterised by a clearing of the mind, the second involves recovery from mental fatigue, the third state is what they describe as ‘fascination’ or interest and the fourth is reflection and restoration where the individual is able to relax, restore their attention and reflect on their life, priorities, actions and goals (Han, 2003). Social Farming has the potential to provide some key components of a restorative environment described by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989). These include the opportunity to ‘be away’ from ones usual thoughts and concerns, the chance to have one’s attention held but in a way which doesn’t require intense thought (i.e. fascination) and the experience of being immersed and engaged in a novel but still comfortable and relaxing environment. According to Elsey (2016, 99-100), the process of non-taxing engagement allows the mind to relax, thereby “reducing the constant bombardment of worries and concerns that are such a feature of mental ill-health”. Di Iacovo and O’Connor (eds.) (2009) draw attention to the value of the quietness and sense of space and peace associated with the farm environment with far less stimulus than more urban areas. The results of studies by Gonzalez et al. (2011) on the impact of a therapeutic horticulture intervention show statistically significant increases in attentional capacity and statistically significant declines in depression levels, stress levels and perceived rumination amongst participants both directly following the intervention and in three month follow up assessments.

A number of studies (Loue et al., 2014; Pedersen et al., 2016) draw attention to the new or renewed sense of connection with nature which Social Farming facilitates and nurtures – and the benefits of this connection to participants. Loue et al. (2014) refer to the benefits associated with direct observation of and connection to biological cycles, such as those of plant growth while Pedersen et

al. (2016) report on themes such as excitement about and absorption in the growth process throughout the season emerging in discussions with participants. A number of other studies refer to the positive benefits of *caring* for plants, thereby contributing to producing something which has a direct and observable legacy (Iancu et al., 2014; Blood and Cacciatore, 2014). One of the participants in Iancu et al.'s study (2014), for example, described how impressed he was to see that the trees he pruned grew fruits as an effect of his care.

The opportunity which Social Farming usually provides to work alongside and care for animals has been shown to be highly beneficial. A number of research studies focused on animal-assisted interventions have reported declines in levels of anxiety and depression and improvements in client self-efficacy (Berget et al., 2008; Berget et al., 2011; Pedersen et al., 2011). In their meta-study on the role of farm animals in providing care at social farms, Hassink et al. (2017) identified a wide range of benefits which are of particular relevance to participants with mental health difficulties, including: feelings of closeness, warmth and calmness; the opportunity to have positive physical contact with another living creature; renewed experience of the basic elements of life; distraction from worries and difficulties; relationship building without complications or stigmatisation; the opportunity to be the one giving care to another living creature instead of receiving it; increased confidence and self-esteem from having learnt how to be around and care for (often large) animals; and being physically active in a very natural, implicit way. Gorman (2017) refers to the role of animals in farm settings as being a conduit through which new forms of contact and relationship building between humans can also happen; the animals, their care, their characteristics provide a topic for conversation and an effortless focus of attention, what Andrews et al. (2006) refer to as an 'experiential anchor' between participants, farmers and support workers.

2.3 Occupation and Meaningful Activity

A large body of literature highlights the general benefits of occupation in mental health (Haertl and Miyuki 2006; Lim et al., 2007). In their review of this literature, Kelly et al. (2010) reveal many similarities in the underlying beneficial characteristics of occupation, including: a re-established routine; skill acquisition; competence, productivity and feelings of meaning and purpose; normalisation; a safe environment; and a sense of social support and cohesion. In the context of Irish mental health care services, both *A Vision for Change* (2006) and the *Evidence Review to Inform the Parameters for a Refresh of A Vision for Change* (2017) place significant emphasis on the importance of occupation and employment in supporting recovery. The latter document notes that people with mental health problems are significantly less likely to be in employment compared to people without mental health conditions and according to the Mental Health Reform 2015 analysis on the progress made on *A Vision for Change*, there has been little new action to improve the employment outcomes of people with a mental health difficulty since 2006. The *Evidence Review to Inform the Parameters for a Refresh of A Vision for Change* (2017) also notes that mainstream linkages between employment services and mental healthcare services remain under-developed in Ireland compared to practice in countries such as the Netherlands, that there is a need to expand this area of support and that the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model is of particular value.

An option such as Social Farming has a role to play in providing meaningful activity in the context of the placement itself (discussed below) but also in providing opportunities for skill acquisition, confidence building etc., which may progress participants towards further training, supported employment, part-time employment or in some cases, full mainstream employment (Iancu, 2013). While Social Farming it not specifically an employment intervention or focused on employment outcomes, recent research on the relevance of Social Farming to SICAP clients in Ireland highlighted the potential its individualised and multi-faceted approach has in providing a 'bridge' or transition for clients with complex needs and challenges to progress both occupationally or educationally (SoFI, 2018)(b). This has led to some participants taking up employment, self-employment or supported employment following from and as a result of their Social Farming placements.

In the context of the placement experience itself, a recurring theme in the literature on the Social Farming experience is that of *meaningful* activity, that there is a particular value attached to the kind of activities undertaken and the modes of working which is about more than 'filling time'. A number of studies refer to Social Farming as providing inherently fulfilling and occupying tasks (Hassink et al., 2010, Gorman, 2017). The care and welfare for the environment, for plants and animals inherent to activities on social farms provide opportunities for participants to feel they are needed, that they are doing responsible and socially valuable work and that there is a result attached to what they do (Gorman, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2012). This literature would suggest that Social Farming can play a role in increasing feelings of *eudemonic* well-being and happiness, i.e. that sense of well-being which comes from having as sense of meaning and purpose, of fulfilling ones human capacity and of working towards goals. The 2013 report on the UK based Ecominds scheme (which supported 130 ecotherapy projects across England) notes that programmes and interventions such as Social Farming which are purposeful and practical and which offer activities which are 'socially acceptable' and culturally valuable are much more likely to engage the interest of men in particular, who are traditionally less likely to come forward for help with mental health problems or to engage in psychosocial supports (Bragg et al., 2013). This feeling of being part of something, of carrying out 'natural labour' also tends to encourage participants to pay attention to daily routines (time-keeping, reliability, etc.) and to be motivated to continue (Pedersen et al., 2016).

Hassink et al. (2010) have referred to Social Farming as an empowerment oriented and strengths based intervention. The skills acquired in Social Farming are inherently practical and valuable and allow participants to gain the self-efficacy that comes from learning and implementing these skills, bringing a sense of confidence, purpose and hopefulness which is vital to mental health recovery (Elsey, 2016; Pedersen et al. 2012). Pedersen et al. (2016) note that compared to other work experience opportunities, there is huge variation in the work tasks that can be carried out on a farm, allowing for continual adaptation and flexibility. A number of studies (Iancu et al., 2014. Pedersen et al., 2014) draw attention to the multiple opportunities the average farm provides to switch between activities according to interests, levels of functioning, mood on the day, etc. Related to this is the opportunity the farm provides to facilitate participants having choices, an important theme for the participants in Ellingsen-Dalskau et al's study (2015). Finally, links with physical activity and mental health are well-established. Farm-based activity provides significant opportunity for physical activity that is performed for a useful purpose and almost unconsciously, usually in the fresh air, giving a sense of satisfaction and 'positive tiredness' which in turn promotes relaxation and sleep (Elsey, 2016).

2.4 Social Connection

As noted in a range of studies, mental health difficulties are often associated with feelings of social isolation and loneliness and social network size is typically smaller among mental health services users than in the general population (Lauder et al., 2004; Palumbo, 2015). Equally, as Wang et al. (2017) note, there has been a growing realisation among policy makers and practitioners that social relations play an influential role in mental health and psychological wellbeing and that service users themselves place high importance on them. This focus on social connection is reflected in *A Vision for Change*; reference is made throughout to the importance of building service user's social capital, to the need for integration into mainstream community life, to the importance of work and other shared activities in building social connections and thereby promoting well-being and recovery, to the role of peer support and to the significant value of the community as a resource to support mental health and well-being. Recent research on mental health and well-being in rural Scotland (Support in Mind Scotland, 2017) found that there is a strong need and desire to create ways for people to connect with one another but that the strong preference is for these connections to be "low-level", in non-clinical and informal settings, through trusted people and networks. Social Farming provides a community-based and non-clinical environment in which social connections and relationships can be formed in a natural and 'ordinary' way.

At a very simple level, taking part in a Social Farming placement immediately expands the social network of the participant as they meet the farmer/the farm family, other participants and other people who may and go on the farm such as other farm workers, the vet, neighbours, etc. Iancu et al. (2014) argue that the Social Farming placement can allow people to in some cases 'break the circle of isolation'. However, the key relationship in the Irish Social Farming model is typically with the farmer themselves and in some cases, their family. The 'ordinariness' and natural warmth of the connection emerges in a number of studies as key to its value. Di Iacovo and O'Connor (eds.) (2009) found that participants in their Europe-wide study felt that they were approached as 'normal' people rather than being seen as patients and experienced respect without prejudice. Service-users in this study who had experienced psychiatric difficulties mentioned that it is important to receive such respect and a relief not to have to tell their whole history again as is often the case in clinical settings. Similarly, Hassink et al. (2010) discuss how feelings of value and well-being are created from being approached as normal people not as patients, with clients from youth care appreciating that there is 'less fuss' about them on a care farm than in a more conventional care setting. Participants in Ellings and Hassink's study (2010:246) reported that they felt that the atmosphere – which they described using words like 'sociable', 'feeling of community', 'working together', 'spontaneity/lack of rules' – was unique to care farms and that they were unlikely to encounter it elsewhere.

Service-users in the Di Iacovo and O'Connor (eds.) study also mention the personal relationship with the farmer and his/her concern for them as an important quality of the Social Farming experience. A study by Pedersen et al. (2012) found a favourable connection between talking with the farmer and a decrease in anxiety. The multi-task oriented nature of farm activity, the small size of the group and side-by-side nature of the work also provides an opportunity for the farmer to build the skills and confidence of participants in a very natural and intuitive way. Elsey (2016) notes that the farmer can act as a non-judgemental mentor, supporting participants to complete farm tasks, while the

participants in the Di Iacovo and O'Connor (eds.) study noted that the farmer gave them confidence and a sense of responsibility.

A further important component of the Social Farming model is the group nature of activities and the opportunities this provides to create connections and relationships between members of the group and a broader sense of community. Hassink et al. (2010) reported on how one of their participants with severe mental illness indicated that in their everyday life they were alone, but when attending the care farm, they found themselves part of a community where they felt accepted, safe and respected. This emerged as a highly-valued aspect by service-users in the Di Iacovo and O'Connor (eds.) study also; service-users indicated that they felt safe and at home in the group and that they were accepted for who they were. This theme of 'being oneself' also emerged in Ellings and Hassink's study which found that in the Social Farming context "people are not judged on their past or problems. They can be themselves, as there is no pressure to behave differently to how one is." (Ellings and Hassink 2008:308). This study also drew attention to the opportunity that Social Farming can provide to work alongside and develop relationships with others with a similar background, thus providing some level of peer support; such support is increasingly recognised as an important component of the recovery process for people experiencing mental health difficulties. A study by Gonzalez et al. (2011) found that levels of group cohesiveness correlated positively with improvements in mental health and perceived stress and a majority of participants in their study reported a higher level of social activity after the intervention. As Elsey (2016) has noted, working on the farm provides a non-threatening opportunity for social interaction, where the focus on the work means connections are not in the spotlight but are a (happy) by-product. As she notes, this takes the pressure off social interactions, with attention no longer solely on the individual – as might be case in more clinical settings – but on working side by side on the task at hand. This opportunity is particularly valuable for those who experience social anxiety.

2.5 Conclusions

The growing body of literature on Social Farming to date suggests that it has significant potential to enhance the lives of individuals experiencing a range of mental health difficulties. The benefits and outcomes clearly exist across multiple dimensions of functioning and well-being, including those related to psychological health and well-being, social connectivity, skills acquisition and physical health and vitality. At the level of mental health services, the Social Farming model is wholly in tune with policy as envisaged in *A Vision for Change*. It is also increasingly in tune with practice and provides an opportunity for Community Mental Health Teams and other actors to deliver on their commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion and a recovery model in a safe, effective and positive way. The next section presents results from research undertaken with individuals who had experienced mental health difficulties and who took part in Social Farming placements across Ireland in the last number of years. The findings chime with much of the research undertaken in the international studies described above, but also reflect the distinctive character of the Irish model of Social Farming.

3. Relevance and Benefits of Social Farming to those Experiencing Mental Health Difficulties: Evidence from Irish Research

3.1 *Evidence from Social Farming Across Borders (SOFAB) Research*

SoFAB was an EU INTERREG IVA Funded Project which operated in the Border counties of Ireland and all of Northern Ireland in the period 2011-2014. The implementing partners were University College Dublin, Queens University Belfast and Leitrim Development Company. It established Social Farming supports on 20 pilot farms throughout the region on which 66 participants undertook 30-week Social Farming placements. The experiences of farming families, participants and service providers were documented throughout the process using a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques. Twenty-nine of the 66 participants in SoFAB came from mental health services and 37 from intellectual disability services. While there is no differentiation in the results between participants from these two types of service backgrounds, the overall findings are nonetheless noteworthy from the perspective of mental health services. Some of the key findings include:

- When asked to rate their feelings about their involvement in the project, 68% gave it the maximum positive score of 10. The majority (87%) of participants indicated that they would like to continue their participation in Social Farming beyond the 30 weeks offered through the SoFAB project. Amongst the reasons for wishing to continue Social Farming were: the enjoyment or 'craic' factor; the opportunity to learn new things; the social connections made; improvements in mental health; the development of life skills, enjoyment of the environment and the animals and an increased sense of purpose.
- 37% of service users identified improvements or benefits in their personal health and well-being as a result of Social Farming.
- Social inclusion benefits were identified by the 81% of participants. They spoke of the benefits of their interactions with SoFAB staff, of meeting new people in general, of making new friends, of developing an interest in the farmer's home environment, of visiting other farms or places for supplies and of going to events such as animal sales/shows.
- 80% of participants identified the development of skills as a benefit of Social Farming to them and these included both practical farming skills and learned social skills. The practical skills included: horticulture; animal care; construction; farm management; and woodwork. The social skills they identified included: independence; communication and interpersonal skills; coping and listening skills; and working as part of a team.
- 27% of participants felt that the project was a progression to future employment while others said it changed their idea of what they would like to do in the future. A stronger desire was to continue on the social farms and to progress in attempting new things (54% of service users) such as driving a tractor or using a piece of equipment.

3.2 Evidence from Social Farming Ireland Research

Throughout 2017, Social Farming Ireland carried out extensive research on Social Farming activity on 15 farms around the country in a Project funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Of particular interest to us in this publication was the qualitative research carried out with 24 participants from mental health services around the country who took part in Social Farming placements lasting between 8 and 12 weeks. The researcher from Social Farming Ireland interviewed the social farmers and support workers from mental health services – usually an occupational therapist and in a small number of cases, a social worker – at the beginning and at the end of the placement. Participants were interviewed on the last day of their placements. In addition, the researcher observed the activities and dynamics on the farm during a typical placement day. In a number of cases, the occupational therapist shared the results of their occupational therapy assessments (such as OCAIRS or MOHOST) carried out at the beginning and end of placements and the results of a number of these are shared below. All participants in the research, including the Social Farming participants, gave their consent for this research to be undertaken and recorded. The results of this research process are presented under a number of headings: **Motivations for Social Farming Placements; The Social Farming Placement Experience (Participant and Service Perspective); Participant Outcomes.**

3.2.1 Motivations for Social Farming Placements

All 24 participants arrived at their placement through their engagement with their local Community Mental Health Team. The model of Social Farming pursued by Social Farming Ireland is based on a direct relationship with specific health/care services with which participants are engaged or other such service provider or advocate (commissioner) in order to ensure they are supported fully at all stages of the process. Placements in this study were in all cases guided by care professionals from within the participant's Community Mental Health Team, usually an occupational therapist or a social worker. Notwithstanding this, participation was based on a clear *choice* to pursue farm-based activities and/or to be out in nature. The opportunity to do physical work was a key motivating factor for some participants:

“I work in the woodwork but I have not done any physical hands on dirty work for a long time and I thought it would be nice to try my hand at it again and see how it goes, see do I like it or do I not like it.”

A further key driver was that taking part would motivate participants to get up earlier in the day with a definite plan and purpose;

“Well the first thing was just to get me out of the house in the morning.... I didn't know whether I would find it interesting or enjoy it. Like everything else you don't know until you try it.”

Linked to this was opportunity to meet other people and integrate better into the community, which was cited by a number of participants:

“Just to meet with up with say E [another participant] and a few other men there, do the farming, have a bit of craic and enjoy ya”

Services were motivated by a desire to deliver the anticipated benefits of Social Farming to their clients and in many cases, to try something novel and innovative with those of their clients for whom Social Farming might be a good fit.

3.2.2 Overall Experience of Social Farming: The Participant Perspective

There was an overwhelmingly positive response amongst participants to their Social Farming experience: 21 described it as ‘very good’, 2 as ‘good’ and 1 as ‘neither poor nor good’. In most cases, each individual experienced a wide range of benefits, across multiple dimensions of well-being, often over and above their own expectations or goals for the placement. The following comments capture the **holistic nature of the experience**:

“I find it exciting because I’m interested in it. I find it very therapeutic, doing up the cart was therapeutic, painting and sanding and learning about the cattle and learning about the ivy and very informational you know, and I have a good interest in it and I’ve told a lot of people about it already.... [I] enjoyed it and it’s good for you as well, a bit of walking involved, gets you out into the countryside and fresh air and you get to hear more sounds and it’s more, its more easier going than a city or a town out in the country you know and that’s about all I’d say you know, I found it very good.”

The **benefits** of Social Farming articulated by the participants in this research can be explored under four headings:

- a) Mental Health Benefits
- b) Social Benefits
- c) Physical Benefits
- d) Educational/Skills Benefits

a) Mental Health Benefits

Participants spoke of the **fun, happiness and enjoyment** they experienced on their Social Farming placements:

“..... I said it to M [farmer] that I probably do more laughing here than I would in a week away from here..... he is very funny and he has a lot of funny stories..... I felt more encouraged to try and get that part of me across.”

For many of the participants, the **connection with nature**, with the soil, with the animals has had a strongly therapeutic effect:

“Out here it's a lovely bright day and it's totally mind opening. You see the lake you see the mountains the animals the sky and everything around is positive.... there is no negativity here at all. Even if it rains it's not negative we have to have it, it's all part of the cycle.”

“I'd say feeding the cattle, I enjoyed that part of it, we, we feed the cattle everyday a bale of silage. I enjoyed that and to see their hungry faces when you come along and then to see them eating away it's... I like that.”

The farmers interviewed for this study also noted the therapeutic effects of being in nature, of observing the turn of the seasons, of breathing in fresh air and having the senses exposed to a range of sensations. The placements provided a chance to spend time with and to care for animals which most farmers feel has a relaxing and calming effect.

Many of the participants spoke of a renewed sense of **confidence**, **achievement** and **purpose** from their time on the farm;

“It's a very positive place to be. It's very, 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 you 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.”

“It's helped me get my confidence back, just from working with other people, doing different things, cutting timber, working with cattle, fencing.”

A number of social farmers noted that from their observations, participants experience **an increased sense of personal capacity** that comes with simply embarking on the placement in some cases, but also from contributing to the work done on the farm and from mastering new skills. This is also associated with an **increased sense of self-worth and self-esteem** which can both derive from participants own success at Social Farming and which can also be fostered by positive feedback and encouragement from the farmer.

A strong theme running through the participant's comments was that Social Farming represented something **novel**, which often gave them a different perspective on life. This is strongly associated with the variety of activities typically carried out on social farms.

“Because there was something different to be done every day and you didn't know when you came, what you would be at and you know it was kinda, it was relaxing in a way and it made you think as well. I liked it anyway.”

“It's been different...It's nice to get out and do something that you have not done before and meeting new people and getting to do new things.”

The clarity and simplicity of purpose which much farm activity provides, where participants can see the results of their efforts on an everyday basis, is a notable benefit of Social Farming over and above some other opportunities which might be available to participants.

b) Social Benefits

The opportunity which Social Farming provides for meaningful social interaction is perhaps the greatest contributor to improved mental health and well-being of participants. At the heart of this is the developing **friendship and relationship with the farmer** and in some cases, the wider farm family. Participants spoke of being made to feel at home, of being made to feel genuinely welcome, of feeling part of a team on the farm. The following comments were typical;

“T [farmer] is one of a kind as far as I can see. For him to put up with the likes of me coming on to his farm knowing nothing about farming but still thinking that I know something about it can't be easy for him but he takes it in his stride. He takes it absolutely in his stride. Nothing seems to frustrate him, he is there and if there's a problem he deals with it very easily. There is no panic or fuss. It's very low key, it's very relaxed atmosphere and that's what I find great.... the positivity of it is hugely invigorating for me. When I leave C in the morning and I'm heading out here I'm on a different planet. It doesn't matter what we are going to do there are lots of things that I won't be able to do and I know that.”

Some participants spoke of feeling able to talk to the farmer about things in a very natural and non-pressurised way as they work side by side. A number of the social farmers interviewed for this study also noted that it is in this **'side by side'** space that conversations are started, stories told and relationships developed. This continues around the kitchen table, which is at the heart of the Social Farming experience. As one social farmer recalled;

“One of the participants told me, ‘I've told you more crap about my life in 10 weeks than I've told any psychologist in ten years.’”

Social Farming also provides natural and spontaneous opportunities for **peer support** and new connections amongst those who have experienced similar challenges in life;

“I like eating in the mornings and the food in the evenings and you know and the chat with the lads – you know, meeting, meeting people my own type with mental health issues, that's very good as well you know, meeting them and enjoying their company and getting to know new people, it's important for me you know, my only other social outlet would be AA meetings and I don't go out drinking or anything and you know. I don't socialise that much and it's good for me you know, Social Farming you know.”

The farmers noted that the Social Farming placement provides an opportunity to meet and have everyday chat with people from the wider farm family, with neighbours and family friends who call in, with people coming on to the farm, and with staff in the local shops, garden centre, hardware store, etc. A further social benefit, noted by a number of participants, is that engaging in Social Farming gives participants **an interest** and something to talk about to their friends and family:

“I remember what I'm at and I can talk about it. [It] gives me something to talk about to friends and family and talk about Social Farming. I'm doing something a hobby you know. It's good, good for me so.”

c) Physical Benefits

The opportunity to do physical labor was a very strong benefit for a large number of participants. In some cases, this is due to strong interest in and preference for physical work, and in others, an awareness that much of their daily life was overly sedentary.

“I like the physical work. Well, I was brought up on a farm as well, so I love that. I had my own cattle. I had 11 cattle at one time, so ya.”

“I would say that it was good to bend my back again..... a lot of it was just to get the muscles working again because in the last 45 years I have gotten very sedate or lazy would be another way of putting it. I think it was good for giving me a bit of a stir, to take me out of my comfort zone.”

A number of participants spoke of the simple pleasure of being physically tired at the end of the day from having done something instead of being tired from inactivity.

d) Educational/Skills Benefits

At a very simple level, Social Farming has provided an opportunity for participants to learn **a variety of skills associated with farming**, and in particular with the more mixed farming operations typically found in this sector. These include foddering cattle, feeding other animals, taking care of the animals, collecting eggs, weeding, gardening, cutting hedges, cleaning out sheds and outhouses, cutting timber etc. Gaining these practical skills is particularly attractive for some participants who in many cases would have had a poor experience with formal education. Many of the farmers/farm families have an additional skill set such as cooking or woodwork or horsemanship which they share with the participants and which were a source of interest and enjoyment. Of particular note is the opportunity which many of the social farms provide to share an **alternative approach to farming** with participants, with most having a strong emphasis on animal welfare, on biodiversity, on heritage and on organic or more holistic approaches to farming.

“On the organic farm here there is no fertiliser used and that kind of thing. A completely different change to the way that I was brought up farming, ‘cause we always used additives and dosing cattle and all that type of thing but there is none of that now according to M [farmer] so it’s a change for me to see the cattle and the different breeds of cattle.”

For some with previous experience of farm activity, the placement **brought back forgotten knowledge** and skills, while for others, the particular approach to farming and the specific methods of many of the social farmers provided new learning and ideas.

“He has a beehive now and I’m not familiar with bees, so I learned about a beehive. He also bought a tree in Lidl and it’s growing pears on it. I never seen that before now, so that is quite interesting. That’s something new I learned now about the bees. And about, I didn’t think that a pear tree would grow in this country but it’s full of pears out there.”

Many participants also spoke of having greatly improved their **social skills** and capacity to interact with others;

“I don't know about new skills but meeting people. One thing about being in the training centre, it's the same people every day so it's meeting new people and people you haven't met and the confidence to meet new people and not be hiding.”

“Well I suppose M [farmer] is a very interesting person and even just listening to him you would learn something new. I don't know that I've learnt particular skills other than socially just chatting and starting a conversation with somebody and that would have been hard work for me before I had come here.”

The great majority of the participants in this research were overwhelmingly positive about their Social Farming experience and could not think of any improvements or changes which they would like to see made. Two participants mentioned that they would have liked more variety in the activities that were carried out while another said that he felt there were too many trips away and he would have appreciated more ordinary days on the farm. One participant felt that some would have the capacity to work harder and use their skills more productively than the Social Farming placement sometimes allows.

“But there could be more physical work for people that wouldn't mind a bit more physical if the farmer needed more of a help maybe and some maybe, some peoples training in some areas that has a mental illness but knows how to do a job or something like it would help them to do different stuff that the farmer needed jobs doing or something to bring two aside at the time. I'm doing the plumbing here and myself and M [farmer]. I enjoy doing it you know and stuff like that, focus on some, some of the other skills to maybe bring them back into their own skills if there's jobs to be done or brick laying to be done and someone that has a mental illness and has got sick, maybe that could be involved and found out what peoples trades was or that could help maybe.”

Apart from these, any criticisms or comments were centred on **the limited nature and duration of the placements** with significant numbers feeling that they would have liked to have come for extra days in the week, for a longer period of time or on an ongoing basis.

“The five hours that we are here and it's not really five hours, it's not really enough to be honest because it really flies.”

“There's nothing really from what I've seen in these eight weeks that I could improve much on. My expectations would be just to keep more than the eight weeks if I could on Fridays, you know because it's good to get away from the house one or two days a week.”

3.2.3 Overall Experience of Social Farming: The Service Perspective

Interviews with staff from mental health services highlighted many of the same benefits to clients as were noted by clients themselves. However, this research also sought to explore the **specific features of the Social Farming experience** which differentiate it from other opportunities and which provide an argument for support for it within service providers. Overall, interviews with service providers in the mental health sector highlighted the role that time spent on a social farm can play in addressing many dimensions of the well-being and development of interested participants but in a more ordinary, natural and holistic way than may be the case with other interventions. While

participants may be continually learning new skills and developing in various ways, it is done in a very enjoyable way and with a light touch. Above all, Social Farming is perceived as a fun activity. As noted by one social worker;

“[It’s] just upbeat and good craic and you know, you can have the banter with them, it’s not very prim and proper basically so you can get dirty and it doesn’t matter.”

Similarly, support workers spoke of the warmth and sense of ease with which farmers interact with the participants. The family/home environment and the opportunities for chat around the kitchen table are central to this;

“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 non-medicalised and non-clinical nature of Social Farming is widely seen as one of its most valuable characteristics. As one mental health support worker noted, Social Farming helps people to **work towards their recovery in a different way, based on a social rather than a medical model** and criteria. The very fact that farmers are *not* professional support workers is in this case seen as an advantage. One support worker in mental health services noted that Social Farming provided a break from being minded and watched over by professionals, however well-intentioned the care is;

“The placement allowed him to go to a place where there was a tranquil setting and you can connect with nature. There is nobody saying ‘oh God your tablets are due’ or ‘you must go down to see your doctor now’. He just went and he relaxed and he thoroughly enjoyed it.”

Equally, it was noted by a number of support workers that the level of trust and connection which was typically established between farmers and participants allowed farmers the opportunity to suggest positive changes and actions. One occupational therapist reflected on his experiences of having frequent discussions with a client about exploring a particular opportunity but it was only when the farmer said it that it ‘stuck’. This client went on to make a significant and positive change in his life which the occupational therapist largely attributes to the straight-talking and genuine approach of the farmer.

A number of support workers noted that being on a farm and the physical nature of the work was a better **cultural fit** for many of the male participants in particular than some of the alternatives currently available in their local areas. Similarly, a number noted that participants may be unsuited to formal classroom situations but will learn better by doing. One social worker reflected on one of his clients;

“...and like J [names participant], he really enjoys being involved in that kind of work. Rather than going into a day centre and doing yoga and stuff like that he is culturally more inclined towards the outdoors, being with other men and stuff like that.”

The group nature of the work and the opportunity it provides for ‘side-by-side’ interactions is widely seen as a positive feature of the Social Farming experience;

“I think the kind of chat you'll have digging the garden is different from the chat you'll have sitting across from somebody.”

The **community aspect of Social Farming**, where participants go *out* to an ordinary working farm rather than *in* to a service, where they get to meet the people on the farm and in the wider farming and rural community contributes greatly to services' social inclusion goals for their clients. A number of support workers also noted that the strong community dimension of the model should contribute to improved knowledge and understanding in wider society of disability and mental health issues and improved social integration;

“My hope for Social Farming is that it will give a new dimension to mental health, it will have a two-fold effect in that it should bring mental health more into the public arena, it will allow people to judge the person not the illness, and also that it will also show that people have more abilities than what they are actually credited for and that sometimes with a little bit of encouragement they can do an awful lot more for themselves.”

Support workers also reflected on the impact of Social Farming on their capacity to support clients into the future. The whole experience of Social Farming – which may include conversations around the possibility of the placement, the induction day(s), the buying of gear for going on the farm, the drive to and from, working alongside each other, the catch-up afterwards – has, in many cases, helped develop the relationship between client and support worker. One social worker reflected on how her own relationship with a client had shifted;

“[Our relationship] has become more enjoyable. Well I think that Social Farming, see while we have a merit in talking therapy and clinical work so to speak, there is far more therapeutic gain in getting your hands dirty and having a conversation informally at the same time. Those conversations that have taken place over cups of tea and biscuits at the start and the end of those farming days I feel has been very therapeutic for our participant, has given her a kind of a different view of the whole experience and kind of freedom to talk more.”

It has often enabled support workers to get to know their clients better, to see them in a different light and to witness first-hand their interests, skills and capacities outside of a clinical or more formal setting. A recurring theme amongst the support workers interviewed for this study was the extent to which participants greatly exceeded their [the support workers] expectations in terms of their capacity to contribute and their social skills. It is apparent that these competencies were both uncovered and increased by the Social Farming experience. This process of **'discovery'** in turn enables support workers to identify further supports and opportunities which may benefit their clients.

The **level of everyday supports from support workers** which were required during placements was highly variable and depends on factors such as the confidence and capacity of the participants and the relationship and dynamic which develops with the farmer and his family and the resources available to the service provider in terms of staff, transport, etc. This kind of hands on participation in the placement can be both a challenging and rewarding experience for support workers, as noted by an occupational therapist;

“There is that sense of leaving one setting and coming out to another. None of us have farming background or experience.... so you could be in the hospital in the morning in a

meeting with senior hospital management and then in the afternoon out in your wellies..... you're coming out and you're painting gates and you're feeding cattle and you're thinking how did this even happen!....It's about being adaptable flexible and client lead.... I'm not here to do Social Farming I'm here to support them to engage in it. It's challenging as a professional because it is different and I find it really empowering in that sense because if they are weeding we are weeding. There are the farmers and the participants and then the professionals and how do we bridge that gap.”

Overall, **flexibility is key** and as noted a by a number of support workers, you will not necessarily be able to predict how individual clients will react to the placement and what level of support they will need. Equally, a number noted that it is important in terms of the development and progression of clients that they are enabled to engage in the placement as independently as possible.

Many of the support workers noted that while involvement in Social Farming has added to their **workload** in some respects – organising transport, completing paperwork, visiting the farm, etc. – there was a strong consensus that the benefits to clients and the value they attach to it made it entirely worthwhile. As noted previously, it is sometimes in this interaction *surrounding* the placement that stronger relationships can be forged between support workers and clients and barriers broken down. As noted by one social worker;

“So while I would say obviously it adds to your workload in terms of you have to, there’s the picking up and there’s the dropping, it’s a day really. But I wouldn’t see it as a hindrance. I see it as a benefit.”

There was strong agreement that the **supports and guidance provided by the Social Farming Ireland Office and the Regional Development Officers** have been of a very high quality and fundamental to the capacity of services to explore this option for their clients. The key components of this support include the knowledge and experience of Social Farming, the collaborative work to enable the placements to happen from a practical point of view (transport, logistics, liaising with the farmer, etc.) and the putting in place of systems and processes such as farmer training and health and safety checks, induction sessions, etc. which provide assurances to services that placements will be safe, enjoyable and effective.

A number of **barriers and challenges to Social Farming** were articulated in interviews with support workers. Perhaps the most significant every-day challenge in supporting Social Farming, according to the support workers, is **transport**. By their nature, the majority of social farms are at a distance from population centres and not on pre-existing public transport routes. Management of the transportation issue involves a level of juggling of various options – lifts from staff or from farmers, use of locally based private or community transport options such as mini-buses and taxis, or use of the transport options attached to services – and can only really be done on case by case basis. A second challenge or barrier with regard to supporting Social Farming mentioned by a small number of support workers was the levels of **bureaucracy and red-tape** around insurance and health and safety in particular. The weight of much of this falls on the farmer and the Social Farming Ireland staff but does occasionally impinge on the ability to begin placements in a timely fashion which in turn impacts on the service provider. There is a general acceptance that the level of paperwork associated with involvement in the Project is not necessarily excessive and that the Regional Development Officers are proactive and supportive in minimising the workload on services. The **strong desire to maintain the ease and naturalness of Social Farming, to not excessively monitor or**

bureaucratise it is a recurring theme amongst the support workers interviewed for this study. Another practical challenge and barrier to Social Farming which was mentioned by a small numbers of support workers was the cost of Personal Protective Equipment such as wellingtons, steel capped boots, raingear, etc. for those on low incomes.

However a higher-level challenge in moving forward in Social Farming remains **the capacity and willingness of service providers to fully fund the cost of placements into the future**. Support workers described a range of challenges in securing funds from within their own organisation's resources. A number of support workers working from within the HSE noted that in the context of limited budgets overall, it can be difficult to make the case for this level and type of funding which will benefit relatively small numbers of clients at any one time. As noted by some support workers, even though more individualised supports may ultimately deliver better value for money because they offer people what they want, they do appear more costly in the short term. However, even within the context of these funding constraints, there was a strong commitment to 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. Many support workers spoke of the necessity of increasingly re-orientating services towards the personal interests of clients, in adopting a more holistic approach, and of supporting initiatives such as Social Farming which support meaningful integration and participation in community life, all of which are in line with *A Vision for Change*.

3.2.4 Outcomes of Social Farming placements

Participants described a wide range of changes which they have made to their lives and progress across a number of dimensions of well-being. A recurring theme was an **increased sense of motivation and a willingness and capacity to get on with work and other tasks** outside of Social Farming.

"I don't tend to put things off so much. I'd put the washing off for another day because I was tired or something like that, I tend to get on with things more now. It's sort of has that effect on me that I'm more motivated to do things and that."

"I often thought I wouldn't like [physical work] because it was hard. But I actually enjoyed it. My father was putting up a shed and I had to level the place and do the cement."

"Well I applied for college and I'm waiting to hear back there and when I went to the first Social Farming, about that time I gave up cigarettes 'em what else, I don't, I don't let jobs like I kinda' go out and do them now, mow the garden or whatever."

Others spoke of an **increased confidence, capacity and willingness to talk and interact with others** after completing their Social Farming placement.

"I would tend to not go out very much, certainly before I came here I would not have been out very much and I would have been fairly anxious talking to people to be honest... getting to know M [farmer] and T [participant] a little bit has given me a little bit more confidence even just to do simple things like going to the shop and buy something. It's not really the

sort of thing that I would have been doing a lot of before I came here but now I've got used to talking to people outside of my own family I suppose."

For some, the placement has brought a wider perspective on their lives, increased **clarity and a new capacity to plan for the future.**

"I know now there are options out there to start doing something else."

"When I come out of here my head just clears from the whole week because you're out in the countryside and you're doing work so you're not focusing on what has happened that week so it just goes over your head and it's a big relief."

There was strong evidence of **greater levels of self-care** amongst many of the 24 participants:

"I'm on a diet now. I didn't have a bun this morning. I had two bits of bread and two eggs but eh I'm on a diet, I'm trying to walk more, be more active with my friend in the evenings farming. I enjoy that, walking the fields and helping him out em, my heads a bit clearer, its helped me a lot the fresh air and everything twice, sometimes twice or three times with my friends and then this as well, it's been good you know. It's helped my head a bit."

A small number noted that their **appetite** is much greater on the days they are out Social Farming while others felt that they had been inspired by the produce and the cooking methods used by the farmers to cook and eat more healthily themselves.

"I started copying bits M [farmer] was cooking with us. I cooked an omelette yesterday for my dinner, it was lovely. It's healthy for you an omelette and eh I took on board seasoning that M does use with the cooking.... I bought tomatoes there the other day and I hadn't bought them in a long time because I had tomatoes last week here you know and tomatoes are supposed to be good for you so I think it's, it puts food fresh in my head like that you know that I should maybe buy instead of what I might have bought before like that mightn't be as healthy.

A much greater proportion noticed a change in their **sleep pattern** with a large number of participants noting that they slept significantly better on the nights they did Social Farming, usually attributed to a combination of fresh air and exercise. One participant noted that the experience of Social Farming has been one factor in decreasing his sense of anxiety and isolation, therefore leading to better sleeping patterns. Another noted that Social Farming has broken a bad sleeping pattern, while others referred to the positive effects of having to get up early in the morning at least once a week.

"I am getting more fresh air which naturally helps you at night and in the job that I was in it was all fresh air and that's what I was used to and I always had a good sleep pattern. This has brought me back to that sleep pattern again."

Participants were also asked **what has motivated them to make these changes.** For many, the motivation has come from their own desire to make a change and the choice to engage in Social Farming was itself perhaps the first important step in a different direction.

"Well I suppose I wanted to feel better within myself and that's why I kinda reached out to something that was a new social outlet for me. So I suppose I wanted to try something new and I think it's been good."

Others have been motivated by an increased confidence in their own capacities that comes from trying new things. The guidance and support of the farmers has also been a factor in building skills and in giving participants greater faith in their own abilities.

“M [farmer] was very good and he was great at explaining things and very patient and I need patience because I would not be that fast to learn.”

In a similar vein, participants were asked **whether how they felt about themselves has changed since they started Social Farming**. The level of responses to this question was low, but for those who did respond, a number noted a new interest in life and an increased sense of their own worth and capacity.

A further outcome of the Social Farming placements has been a definite **focus on the future**. For some there was a renewed emphasis on **work and employment** with Social Farming perceived to have helped build the confidence and skills of participants.

“I am interested in getting back into paid work. This or [names agricultural business locally], I was hoping I might be able to get a reference off R [farmer] and go there. I would like to be working three or four days a week.”

“I hope to go to my uncles now that I know a bit about farming and I will be more confident going up to help him now because I know a little bit about it. It will give me confidence towards work to know that I can do these things. The basics is what I was struggling with so I have that covered now.”

Others spoke of plans to do **courses** in college or otherwise that would progress them further along the road towards paid employment or which would be fulfilling in other ways.

“Well I'm looking for part-time work and if not I'm going to do a Focus Ireland course in Limerick, I'm probably going to take that up. It's a self-improvement course and it's geared towards finding work.”

Others mentioned plans which centred on **improving their health and well-being**, such as joining the gym, getting more exercise and fresh air, losing weight, reading more, and getting out and meeting and connecting with people more often. In some cases, the latter included continuing their friendships with the farmer and the other Social Farming participants on their placement.

Further evidence of progression and positive outcomes for clients is found in the Occupational Therapy assessments carried out by supporting occupational therapists at the beginning and end of a number of the Social Farming placements included in this study. Table 1 contains what is a typical Occupational Therapy assessment (OCAIRS⁶) of one participant (X) in Social Farming, in this case a participant who is a client of the Community Mental Health Team in Sligo/Leitrim. It demonstrates that over the course of the eight week placement (of which seven sessions were attended), this

⁶ OCAIRS is the Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview and Rating Scale. ©. Deshpande, S., Kielhofner, G., Henriksson, C. et al., A User's Manual for The Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview and Rating Scale, Version 2.0, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Ill, USA, 2002.

client shifted from 'Inhibits Occupational Participation' to 'Allows Occupational Participation' in 12 out of 24 domains. Tables 2 and 3 provide more descriptive qualitative end-of-placement Occupational Therapy assessments for two further clients (Y and Z) from the Community Mental Health Service in Sligo/Leitrim who have pursued Social Farming. They are illustrative of the progression which can be achieved for individual clients.

Table 1: Occupational Therapy Assessment Report of Social Farming Participant at beginning and end of 8 week placement (OCAIRS)

Domain	Initial (Week 1)	Final (Week 8)
Appraisal of Ability	I	A
Expectation of Success	I	A
Interest	I	A
Choices	I	A
Routine	I	A
Adaptability	I	A
Roles	I	A
Responsibility	I	A
Non-verbal skills	A	A
Conversation	I	A
Vocal Expression	I	A
Relationships	I	A
Knowledge	A	A
Timing	A	A
Organisation	A	A
Problem-solving	A	A
Posture and Mobility	F	F
Co-ordination	F	F
Strength and effort	F	F
Energy	A	A
Physical space	A	A
Physical resources	A	A
Social Groups	I	A
Occupational Demands	A	A

Key:
F – Facilitates Occupational Participation
A – Allows Occupational Participation
I – Inhibits Occupational Participation
R – Restricts Occupational Participation

©. Deshpande, S., Kielhofner, G., Henriksson C. et al., A User's Manual for The Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview and Rating Scale, Version 2.0, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Ill, USA, 2002.

Table 2: Occupational Therapy Assessment of Progress of Social Farming Participant Y

Measure	Before SF placement	After SF placement
Motor skills (fitness)	In good physical health but “not as fit as I used to be”	Able to walk more, running after sheep on the farm.
Pattern of occupation	Long periods of time in bed, get up to work at family restaurant “I can’t keep up with the orders”	Up and ready for a lift in the morning time, has started going to his own farm to help his Dad, less time in bed.
Social Inclusion	Limited	“I walk to town to get my lift, I think I might go back to the gym.”
Communication	Mainly replied yes or no to questions. Did not initiate conversation.	Enjoyed meeting the other lads, got into conversations about cars and how to register cattle online. Initiating conversation more.
Independent living skills	Did not prepare meals for himself, look after his own clothing, stopped driving, slow to get ready in the mornings and be on time for things.	Having breakfast, making a packed lunch, has reinsured the car, usually early for his lift. “I don’t want to go back to the social farm as I’m busy with my own farm.”

Table 3: Occupational Therapy Assessment of Progress of Social Farming Participant Z

Measure	Before SF placement	After SF placement
Motor skills (fitness)	Quite unfit, engaged in little physical exercise, moved slowly.	Walking long distances at the farm, feeling fitter.
Pattern of occupation	Would spend all day at home, would like to volunteer but only with animals, no opportunities for this in town. Slow to attend appointments unless they had a lift.	Getting a bus from town to the farm. Spending the day working with animals.
Social Inclusion	Has few friends, doesn’t socialise, rarely goes into town.	Getting the bus to town, meeting the farmer, working alongside others, would consider applying for veterinary nursing course.
Communication	Yes/no answers, rarely smiled or laughed.	Asking questions, looking up and giving information about the animals, interacting with the animals, smiling and laughing. Developing confidence.
Independent living skills	Reliant on mum and dad for everything although has the skills.	Beginning to talk about moving into her own house in town, has completed all application forms for social housing with minimal support.

3.5 Conclusions

The results of research carried out amongst participants in Social Farming placements suggest a wide range of benefits and potential benefits across multiple dimensions of well-being for those experiencing mental health difficulties. Of particular note are the warm and natural connections which were made with the farmers and their families, the quality-of-life benefits, skills acquisition and life learning which being out in nature and working with animals and plants has delivered and the improved capacity and willingness to connect with and enjoy being around other people. In terms of outcomes, there is strong evidence of progression in terms of self-care, self-efficacy, self-confidence and motivation amongst the majority of participants. Overall, the results suggest that time spent on a social farm can play a significant role in addressing many dimensions of the well-being and progression of people experiencing mental health difficulties and that it does so in a way that is social rather than clinical, convivial, community-based, and above all, 'ordinary'. Social Farming provides an innovative opportunity for mental health services seeking options for clients for whom this type of support may be particularly suitable and beneficial. Section 4 sets out the steps such services can take if they wish to progress to explore this option.

4. Social Farming and Mental Health Services: The Basics of Delivery and Pathway to Placements

The previous three sections have provided learning and insights on the potential for Social Farming as a support for people who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. This final section provides an explanation of the way in which social farming is currently delivered and sets out the pathway which a service or group or advocate (commissioner) can follow if they are interested in exploring and experiencing Social Farming for their clients. Based on experience over a range of funding programmes⁷, 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/engagements 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 the individual participants

4.1 Social Farming: The Basics of Delivery

- 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 mental health, the commissioner may be the HSE, charities or an advocate group or even in some cases family members, using individualised supports or budgets. For simplicity, the term '**commissioner**' is used throughout this document to describe the service, group, individual, etc. who is commissioning Social Farming supports from the social farmer on behalf of and with a participant.
- 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 periods which is typically between 8 and 24 weeks. The length of time spent on each of these days varies; sometimes participants will start off doing a small number of hours (two to three) and build up to five or six hours.
- 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 three to four participants present on each 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

⁷ 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.

placements for the participants on the farm on a given day by a single service or source. Occasionally participants on a farm will come via two or more commissioning sources and will be mixed but this is managed carefully to ensure a good dynamic, compatibility, etc.

- 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 will pursue on any given day vary 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 SoFI and its Regional Development Officers 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.

4.2 Social Farming: The Pathway

The chart overleaf summaries the typical pathway which is followed when a commissioner, 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 or RDOs (full contact details for all staff are provided in the Appendix). 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.

Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)

Mental health support staff/advocates make contact with the Regional Development Officer for their Area **or** with the National Social Farming Office to explore Social Farming as an option.

Information received from SoFI

Relevant information and literature on Social Farming is made available to support staff and/or the potential participant(s). Where appropriate, this literature will at this stage include farm profiles.

Information given to SoFI

At this stage, SoFI captures some basic information about the participant(s) in order to match participants to a farm.

Learning about the farm and the process

SoFI meet the participant(s) and their support worker or advocate to progress the placement further. At this stage, a visit to the farm and the farmer is usually undertaken by the support worker and possibly the potential participant(s).

Getting ready to start

The participant, with their key supports, indicates they are interested in pursuing the placements. At this point there is a governance assurance process for the placement which includes health and safety, safeguarding, risk assessments, Garda vetting, reference checks and insurance. Roles and responsibilities of each party are examined and agreed. All logistical and funding issues are discussed and agreed with the commissioner and SoFI.

The Placement

Dates are agreed and an induction day is planned. Placement commences with a high level of support for the initial days.

Reflection - Outcomes

Participant, with their support, reflect on the experience to explore progress and outcomes from the placement and the potential for further placements, related activities, etc.

SoFI are available to advise and support at all times

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Appendix: Social Farming Ireland Contact Details

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