SOCIAL FARMING IRELAND

New Opportunities + Connecting People + Enhancing Lives

Social Farming and Intellectual Disability Services

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Key Messages

This publication from Social Farming Ireland is aimed at services and advocates working with people with intellectual disabilities. It provides learning and insights from Social Farming practice in Ireland and elsewhere on how this innovative model is enhancing the lives of individuals. It also describes pathways for services wishing to explore this option for the people who use their services. 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, govern and guide Social Farming practice.

Section 2 opens with an outline of the **service and policy context** within which Social Farming is developing, and outlines how Social Farming can deliver on commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion and provide more choice and autonomy for people with intellectual disabilities. It goes on to offer a detailed **literature review** and **key insights** from a range of studies on Social Farming generally and on the value of Social Farming as a support for people with intellectual disabilities

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 since 2017 with people with intellectual disabilities around the country who participated in Social Farming placements. It sets out a number of key conclusions from the research as to the relevance of Social Farming to current policy and practice in the intellectual disability sector.

Section 4 provides an explanation of the way in **which social farming is currently delivered** and **governed** and sets out the **pathways** which a person, a service provider or representative group or advocate can follow if they are interested in commissioning Social Farming for themselves or for the people with whom they care for or work with.

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, support 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 the international literature and from qualitative research conducted by Social Farming Ireland suggests that Social Farming has significant potential to enhance the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. The benefits and outcomes clearly exist across multiple dimensions of well-being and functioning, including those related to health and well-being, social connectivity, skills acquisition, confidence, capacity and physical health and vitality.

4. The Social Farming model provides support to people which is social, convivial and community-based, and which enables them to do 'ordinary things in ordinary places'. This provides an innovative opportunity for intellectual disability services seeking options for people for whom this type of support may be particularly suitable and beneficial.

5. Social Farming is leading to changes in service delivery and to service reform and re-organisation for people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. It is helping services to deliver on Government policy in this regard as the model of support is wholly in line with the shift from a medical to a social model of service provision and with the goal of expanding the choices available to people with an intellectual disability. It provides an opportunity for stakeholders within intellectual disability services to deliver on their commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion, equality and of supporting people to achieve their personal goals and aspirations and be active, independent members of their community and society.

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

1.1 Background and Definition of Social Farming

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

People who have successfully participated in Social Farming in Ireland include: people with disabilities (intellectual, physical, sensory); people with mental ill health; the long term unemployed; young people and especially those who are NEET[2]; 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 (Bragg & Atkins, 2016; Elings, 2012; Hine et al., 2008; Leck et al., 2015; SoFI, 2018 (a); SoFI 2018 (b)). These benefits include:

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

[1] However, for simplicity, the terms social farm and social farmer used throughout this document are taken to encompass all farms and farmers engaging in Social Farming.
[2] Not in Employment, Education or Training

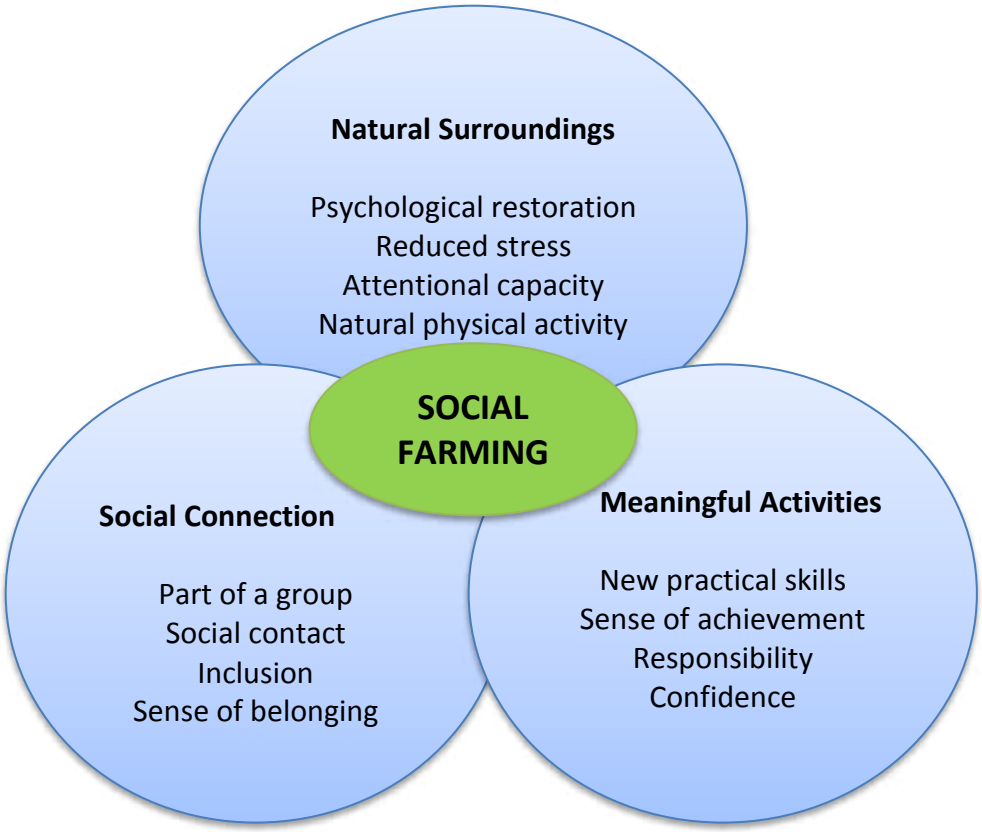


Figure 1: Three Key Elements of Social Farming (Adapted from Bragg and Atkins (2016:46[3]))

1.2 Social Farming Activity in Ireland

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

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

Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)

Social Farming Ireland, the National Social Farming Office, has two 4-year contracts (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 operated by Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG (Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim) and supports the development of a National Social Farming Network and an Evidence-based Learning / Research Project, engaging with regional partner Local Development Companies where regional development officers (RDOs) are based. Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG operates across the Border-Midlands Region and the partners are South West Mayo Development Company CLG (West Region), West Limerick Resources CLG (South-West Region) and Waterford Leader Partnership CLG, (South-East Region). Social Farming Ireland has recently established as a social enterprise to ensure sustainable development in the future across the country.

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

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

The increased interest in and the particular development of Social Farming in Ireland in recent years has also been **driven by a set of interlinked government policies and institutional developments**[4] which are increasingly guiding practice in the health, social care and social inclusion sectors. These include the emergence of a social model of disability; the emphasis within mental health policy and practice on recovery in the community and on a more holistic approach to mental well-being; and

[4] These include: New Directions (2012); Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services in Ireland (2012); The 'Make Work Pay for People with Disabilities' Report (2017); 'A Vision for Change' (2006); the Mental Health Commission Strategic Plan (2016-2018); Connecting for Life (Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020); the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme 2018-2022.

the increased use and focus on an individualised, person-centred and community-based approach within most social inclusion and disability services.

From a low base, predominately in the border counties of the Republic, Social Farming **activity** In Ireland has grown rapidly in the last three years. In 2016/2017, Social farming Ireland delivered almost 1700 placement days to over 120 participants on 28 farms spanning 11 counties across the country. In 2018, there were over 2600 placement days for almost 300 participants across 22 counties and it is anticipated that activity will grow by at least a further 50% in 2019. There are currently almost 80 active, trained social farmers and a further 60 who have received training and are at various stages of development 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 commissioners. The range of services with whom social farming is working is also growing and now includes Brothers of Charity, Rehab Care, Western Care Association, Ability West, Sisters of Charity, a range of local and regional intellectual disability service providers, Cope Foundation, Camphill Communities, Muiriosa Foundation, HSE Disability Services, Mental Health Ireland, HSE Mental Health services in a number of CHOs, advocacy organisations such as Down Syndrome Ireland, Local Development Companies, SICAP Programme Implementers in a number of counties, a range of local services working with long-term unemployed, Foroige, Refugee and Asylum seeker programmes and the Simon Community. Through the work and activity of Social Farming Ireland, approximately €75,000 has been generated in match funding from the various services with which they have engaged. In addition, in 2018, €40,000 was accessed through the Healthy Ireland Fund and a further €7000 for placements came directly from the SICAP (social inclusion) programme.

As is the case in other jurisdictions, intellectual disability services are amongst those most likely within the broad health and social care sector to avail of Social Farming: intellectual disability services account for just under 60% of Social Farming activity within the Social Farming Ireland model. In 2018, 160 of the almost 300 participants were referred from an intellectual disability service and this accounted for 1570 out of the 2600 placement days. In 2018, 24 out of 48 (50%) of the service providers with whom Social Farming Ireland engaged were in the intellectual disability sector.

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 to support them to meet their own goals through spending time on ordinary working family farms. It is *progressive*, and promotes independence and equality 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, with the natural environment and within the community which is respectful of people and their dignity and allows them to take measured positive risks. As it develops universally across every county in Ireland, Social Farming is now also providing accessible and real opportunities for social inclusion in communities rather than in 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, families / advocates, services and the statutory and quality authorities that the placement experience is valuable, enjoyable and safe. Social Farming opportunities for people are *additional* and are not duplicating existing supports or service provision. They are being offered in an impartial and fair way with sufficient information communicated clearly to people to ensure genuine choice. The Social Farming opportunity is also offered to commissioners in the most efficient way possible, with every effort made to ensure the supports are cost-effective and provide good value for money.

2. Social Farming and Intellectual Disability Services: Service/Policy Context and Literature Review

2.1 Intellectual Disability Services in Ireland: Service Context

The most recent statistics from Census 2016 suggest that there are just over 643,131 persons with a disability in Ireland (13.5% of the population). 66,611 people (1.4% of the general population and 10.3% of the disabled population) had an intellectual disability in 2016 although only a proportion of these people access disability services. The National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) gathers figures for those people in receipt of a health service; 28,388 people with an intellectual disability registered on the NIDD in 2017 of which 59% were male and 41% female.

The HSE has primary responsibility and oversight for the provision of specialist disability services to all eligible persons and is the main funder of disability services. The HSE allocation for disability services was €1,763 million in 2018, with around two-thirds of expenditure relating to residential services for approximately 8,500 people, with another 20% of funding going towards providing day services for approximately 25,000 individuals. Other services provided include disability allowances; multidisciplinary teams; personal assistant services; respite services; rehabilitation; aids & appliances; and early intervention teams. However, while intellectual disability services have evolved considerably over the last century, current service provision has deep roots in the extensive involvement of religious orders from the early to mid- 20th century and the more recent involvement of non-religious voluntary 'parents and friends associations' from the 1960s onwards. In this time period, the state had minimal involvement or oversight and provision for people with intellectual disabilities thus developed into what has been described as a 'hit or miss' service (Linehan et al., 2014).

In the modern era, the State has taken a much more proactive oversight and funding role, as evidenced in the significant number of government-led reviews, plans and strategies described in Section 2.2 below. However, while the HSE may fund services, the delivery of most of the residential and day care services in particular are largely transferred to a large number of locally-based voluntary, non-statutory organisations, many of which have their roots in or are the modern iterations of these same religious and voluntary service providers. These non-statutory providers are essentially commissioned by the HSE to provide disability specific services on behalf of the HSE (Section 38) or to provide a similar service, or ancillary to, a service that the HSE may provide (Section 39). There are over 200 separate disability providers in the country and these account for between 85% and 90% of service provision. These range from very large organisations with a presence nationally or in multiple locations, such as Brothers of Charity, Rehabcare, St John of Gods, Sisters of Charity, etc. to smaller organisations which may only have a local remit. Both the diffuse and somewhat complex nature of service provision and the transfer of delivery to non-statutory organisations have implications for service reform – as discussed below – and for the state's capacity to optimise HSE disability spending and deliver the maximum benefit for individuals across all parts of the country and at all levels of need (Department of Health, 2012; Linehan et al., 2014). The

research which underpins New Directions[5], for example, found a diversity of programmes and activities had developed within day services, with wide variability in the use of essential tools such as individualised planning and quality assurance systems across different organisations and regions (HSE, 2012).

2.2 Intellectual Disability Services in Ireland: Policy Context

Public policy on intellectual disability services in Ireland has undergone significant changes in the last 20 years in particular, which can be broadly characterised as a shift from the medical model of provision which prevailed until the 1990s, to a social model which aims to be more person-centred, inclusive and community based in its approach. This shift is underpinned by a range of international and national level policies and plans which both reflect and contribute to changing expectations and practices. At international level, the normalisation movement initiated by Wolfensberger in the 1970s - which asserted that people with disabilities have the right to and have the opportunity of living their lives as close to normal in community based, mainstream settings – and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006[6]) – which reaffirmed the right of every person with a disability to self-determination, autonomy, equality and dignity – were amongst the key drivers of change. This shift in public policy and increasingly in practice is also driven by broader social and cultural movements for change, by increased expectations for quality of life for people with disabilities and increasingly, by demands from people with disabilities themselves and their families/advocates for greater autonomy, independence and choice. The most significant and influential policy documents at national level which underpin current thinking and shifts in practice include:

- The Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities **"A Strategy for Equality"** (1996) was a landmark document with three guiding principles informing its work; equality, maximising participation and enabling independence and choice. It also laid the foundation for the **National Disability Strategy (2004)** which built on existing policy and legislation, including the policy of mainstreaming public services for people with disabilities. It was designed as a whole of government approach to promoting equality and inclusion of people with disabilities.
- **Time to Move on from Congregated Settings; A Strategy for Community Inclusion (2011)**. This provides a clear strategy for supporting people with disabilities to move from large institutions (congregated settings) to their own homes in the community with the supports they need. It is underpinned by the necessity of supporting people to 'live ordinary lives in ordinary places'.
- **New Directions: Review of HSE Day Services and Implementation Plan (2012-2016).** New Directions arose from the desire to shift away from the kind of adult day services for people with disabilities which were carried out in segregated services, away from local communities giving limited options, experiences and choices. New Directions proposed that day services in the future take the form of a menu of 12 individualised, outcome-focused supports which

[5] Review of HSE Day Services and Implementation Plan 2012-2016.
[6] Ratified in Ireland in 2018

would allow adults in day services to live a life of their choosing in accordance with their own wishes, aspirations and needs. The range of supports to which individuals would have access should equip them to: make choices and plans to support personal goals; have influence over the decisions which affect their lives; achieve personal goals and aspirations; and be active, independent members of their community and society.

- **Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services (2012).** This review proposed a fundamental change in approach to the governance, funding and focus of the Disabilities Services Programme, with the migration from an approach predominately centred on group-based service delivery towards a model of person centred and individually chosen supports. It suggested that in order to achieve better value for money there needs to be a concerted effort to move away from the medical and professional model of care to a model which focuses on the independence of service users. It argued that this must be accompanied with a transparent system of resource allocation. Individualised funding, where "money follows the person's needs" should replace the current block funding of providers in relation to their person-to-person services.
- The **Transforming Lives Programme (2012)** is the overarching programme to deliver on the strategic aims and recommendations of the 'Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services in Ireland' and provides the framework for putting policy into practice across the key reports: Time to Move on from Congregated Settings; New Directions; and Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People, which is focused on improving therapy services for children.
- The **National Disability Strategy (2017 – 2021)** sets out to support persons with a disability to take part in their communities. This strategy also calls for the active citizenship of all persons. The National Disability Strategy (2017-2021) calls for Ireland to implement a number of key recommendations from previous policy reviews including Transforming Lives (2012).
- **Towards Personalised Budgets for People with a Disability in Ireland: Report of the Task Force on Personalised Budgets (2018).** The overall vision statement of this report is that personalised budgets will enable a person with disabilities to have choice and control over individualised supports in all aspects of their lives, to enjoy an independent life and to be an active participant in their community. It concludes that the final design of any system of personalised budgets in Ireland can only be decided upon once a series of initial demonstration projects have been evaluated and the findings assessed, alongside the outcomes achieved by the person and the financial sustainability of the system as a whole. This process is ongoing.

In the last number of years, a number of reviews and studies on progress on the key policy documents or on particular elements of them have been conducted (Inclusion Ireland, 2018; Linehan et al., 2014; NDA, 2017). Overall, these would suggest that the direction in which service delivery is going is a positive one and that this shift towards a more person-centred, inclusive and community-based approach is delivering life enhancing changes in the lives of individual service users. However, challenges remain in the full implementation of these policies, including; a lack of real understanding of person-centeredness and what person-centred planning means; fear and resistance to change amongst management and/or staff; industrial relations and HR issues; lack of relevant skills and risk-taking capacity amongst leaders and managers; over-reliance on paperwork and templates; lack of

additional resources needed to implement best practice; logistical issues around transport, especially outside of pre-existing provision; environments which present limited opportunities; and resistance to change or passivity amongst some service users and/or their families (Inclusion Ireland, 2018; Linehan et al., 2014; NDA, 2017).

2.3 Literature on Social Farming and Intellectual Disability

As noted by Kaley et al. (2018) and Rotherham et al. (2017), specific studies on the impact of care or social farming[7] in the intellectual disability sector are limited, despite this being one of groups most likely to avail of this support. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the challenge of designing research tools which will enable the voices of those with intellectual disabilities to be heard and captured (Rotherham, 2017) and the difficulty in measuring changes such as, for example, progression towards employment compared to groups such as those experiencing mental health difficulties or young people. Two valuable studies – Kaley et al. (2018) and Rotherham et al. (2017) – have emerged recently and this literature review will draw on these, as well as the broader literature on social or care farming to deepen our understanding of the role of Social Farming in intellectual disability services and more importantly, in enhancing the lives of people with disabilities. The findings of Social Farming Ireland research presented in Section 3 will add further to this understanding.

2.3.1 Social Farming and intellectual disability: A brief historical perspective

The relationship between the natural environment and human health and wellbeing has been intuited, recognised and sometimes intentionally harnessed on farms for many centuries (Leck et al. 2015). There is a strong history and tradition of residential intellectual disability services having their own farms and gardens for both practical purposes – the production of fresh food on site - and for the therapeutic benefits, including the mental and physical health benefits associated with carrying out productive activities in a natural environment (Leck, 2013). As noted by Sempick et al. (2010) factors such as the development of scientific medicine, the evolution to a more risk adverse society, and the fear that vulnerable people might be exploited for labour led to more natural elements being largely excluded from "treatment" and institutional settings during the latter half of the 20th century.

There has however been a shift in thinking again towards nature-based and in some cases farm-based settings as sites with significant potential to deliver a range of benefits to people across multiple dimensions of well-being. Communities such as Camphill continue the tradition of incorporating gardens and farms into their mission and operations. It is also common in day services for people with intellectual disabilities to encompass some kind of gardening activities or to be part

[7] In this literature section, the terms 'Social Farming' and 'care farming' are used interchangeably. The term 'care farming' is the term most commonly used in the literature, a reflection of the fact that it is the most widely used term to describe this type of farm-based activity in the European context. While there are some differences between the 'care' farming and 'social' farming models, the limited literature to date on Social Farming specifically requires a wider search for learning and insights from within the broader green care literature, including that on care farming.

of a Community Garden. Equally, the use of Animal Assisted Therapies, Animal Assisted Activities, Equine Assisted Therapy, etc. is increasing, particularly in working with people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Fallon and Kilgallon, 2014). Social Farming falls within this broad umbrella of nature based interventions but also encompasses the key elements of social connection and meaningful activity as outlined in the diagram in Section 1. It has experienced significant growth and development in many developed countries and is currently most widespread in Western Europe and in particular in the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway and the UK (Leck et al., 2015).

As noted in Section 1, a wide range of participant groups have been found to benefit from Social Farming, but those with intellectual disabilities are amongst the most prominent. As Rotherham et al. (2017) note, people with a learning disability are typically exposed to multiple and persistent layers of disadvantage and social exclusion: in restricted access to education, employment, housing; in a lack of autonomy and independence; and in having higher incidences of chronic health conditions and experiencing poorer health outcomes than the population in general. Hall (2010), amongst others, has argued for a move away from a reductionist, biomedical approach to health and towards a broad definition encompassing the emotional and social wellbeing of people with an intellectual disability. As we have noted in the discussion above, public policy on intellectual disability services in Ireland also favours a shift from the medical model of provision to a social model which aims to be more person-centred, inclusive and community based in its approach. It is in this broad context that we can understand the particular focus on people with intellectual disabilities in the development and practice of Social Farming to date. Five key themes emerge from the literature on Social Farming which are of particular relevance to people with intellectual disability: **Social Farming as a space of well-being; connection with nature; meaningful activity; personal development; and social connection.**

2.3.2 Social Farming as a space of well-being

Rotherham et al. (2017)'s study of care farming as it relates to people with intellectual disability makes a valuable contribution to our understanding in its conceptualisation of such farms as 'spaces of wellbeing', which mean far more to participants than simply attending an intervention. Participants in their study associated the time spent on the farm with feelings of pleasure, happiness, enjoyment and anticipation. These positive feelings came through in the enthusiasm and animation of the participants in their study when talking about the farm. Some participants were so keen to talk about how much they loved the farm it was the first thing they expressed, for others it was what was repeated at the end of their interview. They report that all participants indicated that they thought the farm contributed positively to their mental wellbeing. This is supported by the finding of Leck et al. (2015) that clients with a learning disability in their broader study were found to have improvements in mental wellbeing scores, with higher scores in clients who had spent the most time on the social farm. For the participants in Rotherham et al.'s study, this improvement in mental wellbeing was evidenced in three ways: firstly through linking time on the farm with positive emotions associated with wellbeing; secondly by being able to realise their own abilities within the farming environment which enabled them to feel that life had purpose and meaning; and finally through the sense of achievement and confidence that participants expressed at being given the opportunity to take on responsibilities within the farm environment.

This theme of the social farm as a space and place of wellbeing also emerged strongly in Kaley et al.'s study (2018) with participants reporting as feeling 'at home' in comfortable and familiar surroundings. This apparently constituted a strong stabilising force for participants and offered them feelings of security which in turn helped some people to feel less anxious, happier and more able to cope in their everyday lives. They note that for many people with intellectual disabilities, the farm came to represent an important space of refuge; a place where people could go to forget about their fears or anxieties, be supported to engage in activities that they enjoy or to exert more autonomy over their lives.

Physical inactivity is one of the key lifestyle factors in causing ill health and increased risk of chronic diseases in people with intellectual disabilities (Emerson and Baines, 2011). As Kaley et al. (2018) note, Social Farming engages users in a range of activities which have the potential to improve or enhance physical health and well-being. They suggest that activities such as feeding and caring for animals, maintenance, gardening, etc. require more physical effort than activities offered at regular day centres, thus improving the fitness, agility and strength of the participants over the course of their Social Farming experience. As Elsey (2016) also notes, this is physical activity that is performed for a useful purpose, out in the fresh air and almost unconsciously, all of which is more natural and perhaps more likely to appeal than interventions which are labelled 'exercise'. Some of the participants in Kaley et al.'s study (2018) reported feeling fitter and stronger and more able to carry out exercise such as walking and cycling in their everyday life, which demonstrates how farming activities can confer wider health benefits outside the farm setting. A further benefit of Social Farming may be improved sleeping patterns. Elsey (2016) suggests that farm-based activity can give a particular sense of satisfaction and of 'positive tiredness' which in turn promotes relaxation and sleep.

2.3.3 Connection to 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 humans with nature, including the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) and the 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, improved physical health, and cognitive and psychological benefits in individuals and in populations as a whole (Taylor et al., 2001; Grahn and Stiggsdotter, 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. Social farming is one such activity. As Sempick et al. (2010) conceive it, green care is an *intervention* i.e. an active process that

is intended to improve or promote health (physical and mental) and wellbeing, not purely a passive experience of nature.

A number of studies (Loue et al., 2014; Pedersen et al., 2016) have drawn 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 fruit as a result of his care. Di Iacovo and O'Connor (eds.) (2009) also 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 opportunity which Social Farming usually provides to work alongside and care for animals has been shown to be highly beneficial in a number of studies. 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 including: feelings of closeness, warmth and calmness; the opportunity to have positive physical contact with another living creature; fresh 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. Kaley et al. (2018) found that for participants with intellectual disabilities, spending time with farm animals, touching them, feeding them and generally caring for them, helped some people feel calmer or less anxious and provided people with a sense of reassurance, stability and security through the routines this necessitated. Gorman (2019) also 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. Kaley et al. (2018) go further and refer to animals as co-constituents and co-participants of therapeutic spaces.

2.3.4 Meaningful activity

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' (Elings, 2012). A number of studies refer to Social Farming as providing inherently fulfilling and occupying tasks (Hassink et al., 2010, Gorman, 2019), while Bock and Oosting (2010) theorised that the 'real' work being carried out on farms might be an important source of value for participants. 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, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2012).

While social farms do not provide paid employment for participants, they often refer to it as 'work' or a 'job' (Rotherham et al., 2017). As noted by Kaley et al. (2018) the regularly performed tasks and the repeated farm routines gave participants in their study the freedom to perform their new identities as farm workers, without fear of discrimination or unwanted surveillance. The findings from Rotherham et al.'s study suggest that for most participants, social farms provide a secure and protected space of work where people with a learning disability are valued as part of the farm team. It is a space where participants are able to find self-fulfilment in their work without the risk of exclusion or feeling 'less than' the other people. The participants in their study were able to develop their skills and abilities in a safe and secure environment, where they felt accepted and understood. Pedersen et al. (2016) also noted that 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. In this way Social Farming can help people to progress towards work and employment goals.

2.4.5 Personal development

Hassink et al. (2010) have referred to Social Farming as an empowerment oriented and strengths based intervention. Speaking specifically of participants with intellectual disabilities, Elings (2012) refers to social farms as places where clients are engaged on the basis of their potential, while Rotherham et al. (2017) refer to social farms as a 'space of capability'. 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 and purpose (Elsey, 2016; Pedersen et al. 2012). Kaley et al. (2018) make some notable observations about the style of learning on a typical social farm. In their study, they observed that engaging in farm activities encouraged participants to move their bodies in new and different ways and suggest that performing rhythmic or repetitive movements, such as digging, weeding or stacking logs helped participants to embody and retain these skills. They describe this as 'learning through movement' rather than verbal instruction and this perceived to be particularly important and valuable for people with intellectual disabilities, who may prefer outdoor-based forms of learning which enable them to retain the knowledge and skills learnt, compared to learning in a traditional classroom environment.

Pedersen et al. (2016) note that compared to other many other work experience opportunities, there is huge variation in the tasks that can be carried out on a farm, allowing for continual adaptation and flexibility. Studies by Iancu et al. (2014) and Pedersen et al. (2014) draw attention to the multiple opportunities the average farm provides to choose and to switch between activities according to interests, levels of functioning, mood on the day, etc. As Rotherham et al. (2017) note, this allows clients of varying intellectual and physical capabilities to exercise choice, independence, mastery and autonomy, all of which were associated with positive wellbeing by the participants in their study. These factors contributed to personal development as the clients realised their abilities and it was evident that being able to take responsibility for tasks was important to participants. As Kaley et al. (2018) note, as time goes on, participants can also begin to refine the skills they have

learnt and embody those activities which they preferred or were particularly good at. 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). There is also strong scope within the Social Farming context for independent activity for some participants. The participants in Rotherham et al.'s (2017) study expressed a sense of achievement and confidence after being left alone to complete tasks independently. Research by Hine et al. (2008) into the extent and potential of care farming in the United Kingdom has also identified some of the social benefits for participants in care farm projects, as reported by farmers, in the areas of independence, teamwork, development of social skills and personal responsibility.

2.3.6 Social connection

A range of studies (Gilmore and Cuskelly, 2014; Rotherham et al., 2017; Kaley et al., 2018) suggest that the social networks of people with a learning disability are often limited and that they often experience loneliness and social, spatial and cultural exclusion in their everyday lives. At a simple level, taking part in a Social Farming placement immediately expands the social network of participants with intellectual disabilities as they meet the farmer/the farm family, other participants and other people who may be on the farm such as other farm workers, the vet, neighbours, etc. (Elings, 2012). Iancu et al. (2014) argue that the Social Farming placement can allow people to in some cases 'break the circle of isolation'. At a somewhat deeper level, social farms can provide, as both Rotherham et al. and Kaley's studies suggest, an environment for people with an intellectual disability to develop meaningful relationships and real friendships. Kaley et al. (2018) note that some of the participants who took part in their study said that care farming had helped them to make friends, and some had even begun to spend time with friends they had made on farms doing other things, like going to the cinema, going to the pub or attending local football matches. Social Farming in these cases provided participants with new opportunities to form meaningful adult relationships, which was described as having a significant impact on wellbeing and as facilitating feelings of belonging and social inclusion.

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. 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 study by Di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009) 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 (2009) 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; social farms are what Rotherham et al. (2017) refer to as an integrative space. Their study amongst Social Farming participants with intellectual disabilities found that social farms are a collective space of social inclusion that, although outside the mainstream, are providing an alternative collective space as day centres close or shift focus. This idea of community emerged as a highly-valued aspect by service-users in the Di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009) 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). As Elsey (2016) has noted, engaging on the farm provides a non-threatening opportunity for social interaction, where focus on the work on the farm means connections are not the focus of the activity but rather 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 engaging side by side on the task at hand. Rotherham et al. (2017) also noted that this 'working alongside' reduces the social barriers that normally affect the ability of people with learning disabilities to participate in society and everyday activities.

A further benefit of the Social Farming experience may be an altered and deepened relationship between participants and their care workers, particularly in cases where they remain on the farm. As noted by Rotherham et al. (2017), in the farming environment, carers, farmers and clients typically all work together. In this space, relationships between clients and staff can thrive, providing support, comfort and encouragement. They also note that the collaborative nature of the work creates a space for interdependent relationships to grow and for a shift in the power imbalances often found between staff and clients / service users.

2.4 Conclusions

The growing body of literature on Social Farming to date suggests that it has significant potential to enhance the lives of participants with intellectual disabilities. The benefits and outcomes clearly exist across multiple dimensions of well-being and functioning, including those related to health and well-being, social connectivity, skills acquisition, confidence and capacity and physical health and vitality. The model of support is also wholly in line with the shift within the Irish context from a medical to a social model of service provision and with the goal of expanding the choices and horizons available to people with an intellectual disability. It is both in tune with and contributes to the wider process of service reform and changes in service delivery which have been in train for the last number of decades. It provides an opportunity for stakeholders within intellectual disability services to deliver on their commitments towards person-centeredness, social and community inclusion and of supporting people to achieve personal their goals and aspirations and be active, independent members of their community and society. The next section presents results from research undertaken with individuals with intellectual disabilities 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. Social Farming and Intellectual Disability Services; Evidence from Irish Research

3.1 Introduction

This section presents the results of a number of pieces of research carried out with people who participated in Social Farming, with intellectual disability services and with social farmers. Section 3.2 summarises the findings from research carried out under the SoFAB Project, 2012- 2014. Section 3.3 contains more detailed findings from four individual pieces of research carried out by Social Farming Ireland since 2017. Section 3.4 is an individual case study which traces the journey and experience of Brothers of Charity Galway, who have extensive experience in offering Social Farming as an option for people and of working with Social Farming Ireland, culminating in a Service Level Agreement with Social Farming Ireland for the delivery of social farming placements for 2019. The final section sets out a number of key conclusions on the relevance of these results to policy and practice in the intellectual disability sector.

3.2 Evidence from Social Farming Across Borders (SoFAB) Research (2012-2014)

SoFAB was an EU INTERREG IVA Funded Project which operated in the Border counties of Ireland and all of Northern Ireland in the period 2012-2014. 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. Thirty-seven of the 66 participants in SoFAB came from intellectual disability services, while 29 came from mental health 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 intellectual disability services. Some of the key findings included:

- The average attendance of people with intellectual disabilities on these 30-week Social Farming placements was 88%. 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 participants identified improvements or benefits in their personal health and wellbeing 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.

3.3 Evidence from Social Farming Ireland Research (2017-2019)

Running parallel with the growth and development of Social Farming throughout the country in the years since 2017, Social Farming Ireland has continued to build the evidence base and learning on Social Farming[8]. The results of four distinct pieces of research which have been carried out since 2017 are brought together in this sub-section to present an overall picture of the role of Social Farming in the intellectual disability sector from the perspective of participants themselves, services and advocates. These pieces of research are:

A. In 2017, Social Farming Ireland carried out extensive research on Social Farming activity on 15 farms around the country with 54 participants in total. Eighteen participants from intellectual disability services who took part in Social Farming placements lasting between eight and twelve weeks were included in this research. The researcher from Social Farming Ireland interviewed the social farmers and support workers from the service from which the participants came 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.
B. A smaller scale case-study of seven participants from Mullingar Resource Centre[9] who participated in Social Farming was carried out in 2018 as part of an exploration of synergies between the SICAP[10] Programme and Social Farming. This research involved visits to the farms involved, a focus group with participants, interviews with the manager from Mullingar Resource Centre, and interviews with SICAP staff.
C. A case study of seven participants from the RehabCare service in Limerick City who participated in Social Farming in 2018, funded under the Healthy Limerick Initiative. This

[8] This research is carried out under the Evidence Based Learning Project funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine under the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund.
[9] An Intellectual Disability day service run by the HSE
[10] Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

research involved visits to the farms involved, a focus group with participants and interviews with the support worker from RehabCare and with the farmers involved.

D. Finally, the researcher observed and contributed to a quarter-term review of 42-week placements conducted with six participants in Social Farming in Co. Galway from Brothers of Charity. Participants, support workers and farmers shared their experiences to date and reflected on how their goals had been met.

All participants in the research, including the Social Farming participants, gave their consent for this research to be undertaken and recorded. The research was also reviewed and approved by a specially convened Research Ethics Committee established by the Leitrim Development Company and by the relevant HSE regional hospital research ethics committees.

The combined results of these various pieces of research are presented under a number of headings; **motivations for and background to social farming placements; social farming activities; overall experience of social farming; social farming as positive and novel experience; social connection and social inclusion; connection with nature; health benefits; and personal development.**

3.3.1 Motivations for and background to Social Farming Placements

All participants arrived at their Social Farming placements through their engagement with a particular Intellectual disability service and with its support and encouragement. The model of Social Farming described in this project is firmly based on a direct relationship with services in order to ensure the participants are supported fully at all stages of the process of Social Farming. As noted in Section 2, there is a strong tradition in intellectual disability services of using horticulture and farming as therapy within the service setting. For participants coming from intellectual disability services, some experience of gardening and farming within the service is not uncommon. For example, four out of the eighteen participants in the national level Research Project (A) had engaged in farming at a Camphill community and another participant had participated in a Community Garden. One participant had taken part in Social Farming under the SoFAB Project. What differentiates the model of Social Farming described in this research is the opportunity it provides to spend time on ordinary family farms rather than farms which have been established within a service.

The choice to come and do Social Farming does in many instances tap into a strong preference – in some cases a yearning – to pursue farming or to work in nature. In some cases this is linked to positive childhood memories of helping on the family farm and a desire by some participants to reconnect with that part of themselves;

> "My father was born in the farm, he was a farmer and he got the farm from his father…….It was good fun at the time because we had a black cow and she would come straight down to the gate when she would see Daddy coming with a bucket……. my mother used to make butter with the milk…. and we used all eat it. Farming is great fun."

> "I had a late aunt, Mary, she had a farm, we used to get turkey and ham at Christmas. I was chased by a rooster there when I was younger."

> "I think he just showed a particular interest in the farming and being on the farm here in B where he just seems to shine from it. He seems to have that interest, it just seemed to be a natural fit. He seemed very drawn to it and very happy when he was there." (Support worker discussing the experience of a participant who is non-verbal)

One participant from the Social Farming placements in Co. Galway (D) came from a farm, helps his brother who still farms with tasks such as de-horning cattle and has his own cow at the home farm. One of his key goals and motivations in doing Social Farming was to pass on and share his own knowledge of farming to others, including the farmer and other participants. This participants story was not an uncommon one; an adult with an intellectual disability who had grown up on a farm and been very much part of farm but who now has limited or in some cases, no access to a farm as an adult. Social Farming in these cases has the potential to bring back happy memories, to reconnect participants with a farm family environment and to rediscover their own knowledge and capacity in a setting with which they are comfortable.

In other participants, the interest in Social Farming is based on an interest in animals or gardening or nature or on a sense of curiosity as to the nature and rhythms of the farming life. The starting point for the Social Farming placements from Mullingar Resource Centre (B) was the interest shown by a number of people using the service. The manager recalled how people had, over time, expressed an interest in going out to a farm on work experience or spending time on a farm. In a focus group, the participants recounted their own motivations, which included the opportunity to work with animals and in the peace and quiet of the countryside. While eager to support this choice, the manager felt that there were significant barriers to this – including health and safety concerns, safeguarding concerns, etc. – which seemed difficult for the service to overcome. The supports and quality assurance provided by the Social Farming model addressed these concerns and helped ensure a safe, meaningful, farm based experience. This enabled the manager to offer this choice to interested service users. The wider purpose was to enhance their inclusion in the community and to provide people with options to improve their lives through self-direction and independence.

Other motivations of participants were not specifically linked to the farming experience. Foremost amongst these was the expressed desire to 'meet new people' and to widen their social circle. Other motivations included the chance to do something different or new, to get out of the house or the Day Centre and to get away from the usual routines or to get into a better routine. A small number spoke of their desire to get more exercise and in a way which was natural and based outside and in the fresh air.

3.3.2 Social farming activities

Social Farming provides the opportunity for participants to take part in a wide range of farm-based tasks and activities, which naturally vary according to factors such as the type of farm, the season and the capacity of the participants. The activities carried out on the farms these participants attended include:

- Taking care of livestock: checking, foddering, moving, etc.
- Taking care of poultry: collecting eggs, cleaning sheds, etc.
- Walking and grooming horses and cleaning out stables
- Sowing, weeding, watering and harvesting in the garden and poly-tunnels
- General farmyard maintenance: painting, repairing, sweeping, weeding, etc.
- Working with wood to make items such as bird boxes and stools
- Restoring old farm machinery
- Building and maintaining stone walls
- Woodland maintenance and gathering and cutting of fuel
- Observing, recording and photographing or painting / drawing wildlife on the farm
- Cooking and baking
- Helping to prepare food for lunch and tea / coffee breaks
- Going to local events or to the local hardware store, co-op shop, garden centre etc. for supplies

3.3.3 Overall response to Social Farming experience

There was an overwhelmingly positive response amongst participants to their Social Farming placements, with 17 of 18 participants in the national level research study (A) describing their experience as very good, and one as good. Participant's elaboration on this question and their responses to the later question as to what they liked about social farming revealed an array of positive experiences and benefits. In most cases, each individual experienced a wide range of benefits, across multiple dimensions of well-being. The testimony from one participant from Limerick (C) (see below) captures the wide range of benefits and the **holistic nature of the experience.**

Participant Testimony after 10 week placement

I would recommend the Social Farming Programme because it was a totally new experience for me. I got to meet new people and I got to communicate with new people such as the farmer and others, along with the animals. It was outdoors on a farm with nature and beauty all around us. It was lovely to hear the sounds of the animals and the noises in the background such as the tractor, the cows mooing, chickens clucking, horses neighing and whinnying, the sounds of running water.

I got the opportunity to plant flowers and lettuce. I also got to bake brown bread and scones. I also experienced the snow in the country.

The programme was on for 10 weeks. It gave me a new routine, something to look forward to. I got in touch with the animals. I held a red hen and she jumped out of my hands. I felt the horses harness and observed the ploughman ploughing the field. It was nice to spend time in the countryside away from the city noise to a more peaceful and natural sound. I experienced the fresh air and it gave me a better appetite.

I was in the glass house and we learned all about what we grow in it.

I would recommend this programme to people even just to try something new, to gain a new experience into the unknown. If I had my way I would like to settle down in the countryside with P (my sister) and live in a lovely country cottage surrounded by lovely scented flowers and shrubs. We would go for long walks together and enjoy our peaceful surroundings.

While the benefits and outcomes of Social Farming are clearly interlinked, the remainder of this section explores them separately under a number of **themes** based on participant's reported experiences and the inputs of farmers and support workers: **social farming as positive and novel experience; social connection and social inclusion; health benefits; connection with nature; and personal development.**

3.3.4 Social farming as a positive and novel experience

Perhaps the most important and obvious measure of the success of an initiative such as Social Farming is how enjoyable it typically is for those who take part. As noted by a number of support workers, 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. In describing their experience of Social Farming, the participants in this research repeatedly used positive words and phrases such as 'fun' 'great craic' 'laughed a lot' and 'enjoyed ourselves' as demonstrated in the following comment:

> "C [farmer] was a very nice man and we always had a bit of fun and joy."

A number of support workers who work with non-verbal participants agreed that they appear to feel the same. As noted by one, referring to one of the people with whom he works;

> "You can tell from his facial expressions that he really enjoys it. He's definitely having fun".

A key measure of this enjoyment is the repeated references to feeling excited about or looking forward to going out to the farm, of missing it when it ends and of wishing it could continue. For most of the participants in this research, the Social Farming day was a highlight of the week. It also provided a positive experience of anticipation of the time on the farm in the days beforehand and something to talk about and positively reflect on for a number of days afterwards.

There are a number of distinctive and novel features of the Social Farming model which seem to contribute to the enjoyment which participants derive from it, particularly when compared to some of the other activities which participants undertake. As is clear from the list of activities described in Section 3.2.2, the diverse environment of the farm provides **a wide range of new experiences** and the potential for each participant to find at least one thing in which they are particularly interested. A key value of Social Farming is to provide a high degree of **choice** within each placement with participants empowered to work at a pace which suits them and to **contribute to decisions** about which activities to do and when to do them. This is very much in line with person-centred planning and is particularly important for those coming from an institutional setting where as one support worker put it;

> "Choice and empowerment are not really there to the extent that they should be due to the constraints of the environment they are living in."

Equally, participants typically learn over the course of the placement the necessity and value of doing core farm jobs every week, be that foddering cattle or checking for eggs. One support worker

spoke of the increased capacity amongst participants as the weeks went on to stick at tasks and see them through, even those which were more mundane.

The manager of the Resource Centre in Case Study B identified the particularly **personal and individualised nature of the support** as being key to its success. In the typical work placements which the people who use the service typically undertake, they are usually given relatively routine and basic tasks to carry out, with a staff member/owner checking in periodically to see how they are doing. In contrast, the Social Farming model provides the opportunity to carry out what are arguably more meaningful tasks *alongside* other participants and the farmer and with the latter's encouragement and guidance. As the manager of the Resource Centre in this case noted;

> "I have never seen them go on a work experience where they become so involved with people, where they are so relaxed and at home."

The **small size of the groups** in Social Farming – no more than four – also helps ensure an individualised and personal model of support. The supports provided by Social Farming were regularly described as being notably **homely and warm** with the farm spanning the boundaries between home and business. One participant articulated the views of many;

> "I just felt really at home here. R is lovely, great craic "

As noted by one farmer;

> "The people who come here get to see and experience a different way of life and farming really is a way of life isn't it?"

The kitchen and the kitchen table are central to the Social Farming experience. It is here that the participants will usually gather in the morning and have a cup of tea and a catch up and agree on the activities for the day. It is also where simple meals can be prepared or eaten together in the hub of an ordinary family home, a particularly valuable experience for those coming from a more institutional setting. On a small number of farms, there is music and singing, especially in very wet weather.

The farm is also a **'live' and ever-changing environment** where participants have the opportunity to be part of unfolding events, such as the birth of an animal or the need to cut timber after a tree has fallen and where nature, the weather and the conditions can be truly felt and experienced, as in the examples described below;

> "The vet was coming this morning so we helped get the cattle in. It was great to see him do his job."

> "It was really muddy one day on the farm and didn't I slip and fall straight on my bum into some cow dung, well we had such a laugh about it. We've been talking about it since."

This was echoed by a number of the farmers interviewed who found that giving participants the opportunity to spend time away from a more structured clinical environment such as a day centre and in a more natural and 'normal' environment was particularly valuable. As one noted;

> "On a working farm, the activities are 'whatever needs to be done' which keeps it very real. We get to chat about everyday farming issues like the shortage of silage, fattening lambs or issues related to trees or the weather. In my opinion, that is what participants find interesting, the contact with real issues."

Equally, the live environment of the farm is one where people with intellectual disabilities are supported to take **risks in a positive way and at an appropriate level,** in line with evolving best practice in social care.

Another key feature of the Social Farming model is a strong **sense of ownership**, and of contributing to the whole which is typically experienced by participants;

> "I enjoyed it really well… getting to meet people and talking to people and helping out with whatever needs to be done. I'm very good at splitting timber for fires."

> "He is very switched on, he has grown into his own little role." (Support worker speaking about participant who is non-verbal)

> "I like the outside work such as sweeping and tidying up….I like to keep the place tidy in case anyone calls in."

In relation to the latter participant, a gardener working alongside one of the farmers said that the farmer had in fact learned from the participant;

> "C [social farmer] learned things from him about tillage and grass, about the right time of year to do things, it's just in his head from growing up, he had grown his own bits when he was growing up. He has a good knowledge of tractors and machinery, he loves going to the mart, he likes stock/cattle."

Social Farming also provides an innovative opportunity for services to meet the needs of the people they work with in a community-based, every-day and mainstream setting and to contribute towards re-orientating services towards their personal preferences and interests, in line with wider development such as the increased focus on person-centred planning. As one support worker noted;

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

3.3.5 Social connection and social inclusion

Fundamental to the Social Farming model is the opportunity it presents for warm, natural and everyday social connections and relationships between the farmer and participants, between participants themselves and amongst the other people who come and go on the farm. A majority of the people with intellectual disabilities who take part in Social Farming have as one of their goals the opportunity to 'meet new people' and to widen their existing social circle; this is also typically a goal of the service supporting them who wish to provide a forum in which natural and meaningful relationships can be developed. Most of the participants interviewed for this research would describe these new connections – which they typically describe as friendships – as the most significant benefit and feature of their placement. The case of 'F', a participant in Galway is illustrative.

> "Yes, it's been good, it has built up my confidence around people. I met J, he's a gas man. I met the staff from the other centres, they are lovely people. I get on with people. I like to see people coming and going. I did the ridges with Deirdre's Dad[11] last week. It's my favourite day of the week apart from going to the mart."

This participant's support worker confirmed both that connections are very important to him and that they have brought a lot of happiness to him. This was echoed by 'J', another participant on the same farm;

> "I love the farm. I'd love to do it two more years. Meeting people, having a cup of tea, having a laugh. I get on with everybody. There's nothing I don't like."

The connections and relationships are characterised by **good humour and fun**, with banter between the participants and between the farmer and participants. While the researcher was present and speaking with the farmer on one of the farms in Co. Galway, one of the participants came in to say that the wheelbarrow had a flat tyre. He joked with the farmer "now who's going to change the tyre, me or you, you dosser". There followed much teasing of one another and laughter amongst the group. This vignette was typical of the kind of engagement and atmosphere which is found on social farms.

A further important dimension of Social Farming for some of the male participants appears to be the opportunity it provides to send time with and working alongside other men, in cases where the farmer is male. The workforce in social care tends to be predominately female; for those men who spend a lot of time in a care setting, this opportunity can be a positive and uplifting dimension of the Social Farming experience. One participant who normally attends a day centre spoke of the simple joy of being out on the farm with 'the lads';

> "I enjoyed it really well…getting to meet people and talking to people and helping out with whatever needs to be done. …. J [farm worker] and I get on very well. He looks out for me and I look out for him… this is my favourite thing in the week."

[11] Deirdre is a horticulturalist who works alongside the social farmer in supporting the participants.

A number of features of the Social Farming model seem to contribute to the depth and nature of the connections formed. A number of farmers noted the opportunity to spend time working alongside other people in a non-pressurised environment; it is in this **'side by side'** space that conversations are started, stories told and relationships developed. The researcher also witnessed many times how the live environment of the farm and the seasonal and unfolding nature of farming life provides ongoing and natural topics of conversation to which participants can contribute, such as how the calves or lambs are growing, or how the vegetables which were planted are coming along or how the hedgerows are change with the seasons. The **setting of the family home**, and of having the opportunity to eat meals together, drink tea, etc. also contributes to the development of natural and warm relationships.

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 the people with whom they work. As noted by one support worker;

> "This is our job, getting people involved in their local community. This is what is great about social farming for them. Some of the people they have met had said they had never heard about our centre in C and would love to visit so it's a two-way friendship….They are working with run of the mill people and that's what fantastic for us."

In this case, as in many others, the **relationship is reciprocal;** it is common for farmers and their families to visit the day or residential settings from which the participants come to see their 'place'. A number of support workers also noted that the strong community dimension of the model contributes to improved knowledge and understanding in wider society of disability and improved social integration. Social Farming has been a conduit through which rich new relationships and connections have been created between participants and farmers most obviously, but also between staff from services, individual farmers and members of the wider farming and rural community.

3.3.6 Health Benefits

Chief amongst the benefits of Social Farming articulated by participants is **improved mental health,** with many speaking of feeling better in themselves or happier since commencing social farming. The reasons for this are highly individual and multi-faceted but amongst those most commonly mentioned were the new friendships, the increased sense of routine and purpose, the break from the Centre or the house and the development or renewal of interests such as gardening, taking care of the animals, working with wood, painting, working in nature, etc. A small number spoke specifically of how Social Farming helped to ameliorate difficult life circumstances or feelings of sadness or depression;

> "It made me feel so relaxed. It was good for my mind. I'd love to do it again."

> "It took my mind off things happening in my life, it made me feel happy."

> "I lost my brother to bone cancer so it was great that I got out in the fresh air. What they done there [on the social farm] was incredible."

The ripple effect of this improved mental health extends into the participants lives outside the farm gate. Support workers spoke of participants being happier throughout the week, of having something to look forward to beforehand and something to reflect on afterwards. Social Farming gives participants an interest and something to talk about to their friends and family. A number who attend day centres or live in a group flat or house said that they loved going back and telling everyone about their day on the farm. One support worker in Galway also noted the feedback from one of the participant's families;

> "The positive benefits are being brought home, his family are very positive about it."

The opportunity to get out and about and carry out **natural, purposeful physical activity** was of significant benefit to participants. Improvements in agility, mobility and physical capacity which come from carrying out everyday tasks and from walking around the farm were widely noted amongst support workers. The manager from Mullingar Resource Centre noted how the participants not only willingly took part in the more physically demanding tasks such as mucking out stables, wheeling barrows, etc. but increased their proficiency as the weeks went on, demonstrating improved confidence in their own capacities and improved strength and agility, as was also the case for one participant in Galway;

> "In the beginning, he didn't have the coordination or confidence with the horses, now he is feeding them, his coordination has really improved."

Social Farming also taps into a preference for natural physical work amongst some participants who might have been resistant to some of the other opportunities for exercise on offer within their service. Linked to this is this is the improved sleep and eating patterns noted amongst some participants in Social Farming which can be attributed to factors such as increased levels of physical activity but also being out in the fresh air, having decreased levels of anxiety and having something to look forward to. A very common comment from support workers working with people in group or residential homes was that the Social Farming day was the one day where some participants – normally more sedentary – were very happy to get up out of bed and get dressed and ready, eager to get on the bus or in the car and away to the farm. A strong theme to emerge is that Social Farming gives participants a feeling of positive tiredness, of being tired from having done something and pushed themselves, as described by one support worker;

> "He is good tired at the end of the day, he is being stretched. He'd even be tired the next day but that's good. He needed it."

One support worker for a participant with intellectual disabilities spoke of the profound change in his overall health, including diet and sleep;

"I think he is a changed man, physically he has lost a lot of weight and he has a much healthier diet. He is working harder outside so he needs more good food. He is eating proper food and he is sleeping better and in physical form, he looks better, he has lost weight, he's keeping strong."

3.3.7 Connection with Nature

Also fundamental to the Social Farming experience is the opportunity it provides to spend substantial and active time in a natural environment. The opportunity to be around animals and to work with them was to the forefront of the participants minds when recounting their experiences. There are number of dimensions to this: the chance to see animals born in some cases and to see them grow and develop; having a real role in minding and caring for them; and having the sensory experience of handling and holding the animals.

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

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

"I fed the chickens and I had the hen in my hands. She flew off."

"I liked working with the horses, the horses are nice."

"I'm a sheep man myself, I love the sheep."

A number of farmers observed that spending time with and caring for the animals seems to have a relaxing and calming effect on participants. Support workers also noted how dealing with the larger animals in particular improves the confidence and capacity of participants which can be translated into other parts of their lives, as in the case of participants in Westmeath and Galway respectively;

"R would have said she was afraid of horses at the beginning but within a few weeks she was walking the horses from one paddock to another."

"In the beginning, S didn't have the coordination or confidence with the horses, now he is feeding them, his coordination has really improved."

Overall, Social Farming provides a multi-sensory experience with the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of nature and the farm generally seen as positive and life-enhancing for those participating. There is a strong aesthetic appeal in being able to observe and experience the beauty of nature, the turning of the seasons and the cycles of life and a number of participants referred to the beauty of the skies or the trees or green grass or of the younger animals. The simple value of being out in the fresh air was noted by many participants;

"Compared to other work experience; you're not stuck inside, you're in the fresh air"

"I get fed up with the Centre, I do art there but I prefer the outdoor work on the farm."

Linked to this is the value attached to the relative quietness of the countryside setting but also to the natural sounds of the farm and the countryside;

"The peace and quiet out here is just lovely."

Working with the soil and growing plants also provides a very grounding sensory experience;

"I liked the feel of the soil on my hands, it reminds me of baking"

These sensory experiences are perhaps of particular value for those with profound intellectual and sometimes physical disabilities. As described above, the farm environment inherently provides a non-clinical, rich – and for many, novel – sensory environment with the sounds and smells of the animals and farmyard, the smell of wood or turf smoke, etc. One group of participants attending a farm in Co. Sligo are coming from a residential setting, which most of them have lived in for much of their lives. These participants have a range of profound physical and intellectual disabilities and all are in wheelchairs. The social farmer in this instance has worked closely with the service to provide a range of sensory experiences for these participants who can't move around or experience the farm in the way some other participants can. They get to ride around in the trailer in their wheelchairs, experiencing the feeling of being high up, going faster than wheelchair speed but out in the fresh air. The farmer uses different types of feed which the participants get to feel and run through their hands. One participant is both blind and hearing impaired and her support workers found it difficult to communicate with her that it was the day to go Social Farming. The farmer gave the support workers a bag of sweet smelling hay which they could bring to her on the placement day and the smell and feel of it would let her know that today was the day she would be going to the farm.

3.3.8 Personal Development

At a very simple level, Social Farming has provided an opportunity for participants to learn, develop and in many cases master 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. In many cases, participants will be trying something for the first time;

"Did I do something new? Yes, I enjoyed watering flowers, had never done that before. And working with the horses, the horses are nice."

Participants typically have a sense of pride in the nature and scale of work they have carried out, much of which is fundamental to the overall farm operation. This contributed to participant's personal development as they realised their abilities and value. The descriptions from participants in Limerick and Galway respectively were typical;

> "What I did out there, I did everything. I fed the cows. I put milk in to feed the calves. I cleaned out the cow shed of all the cow crap."

> " I was sowing plants, yes, raking in the tunnel, sowing seeds in the polytunnel and sheds, digging, getting the beds ready for planting, removing scutch grass from around the trees, we spent a whole day doing that. I like doing different things."

Farmers and support workers and the observations of the research confirm that participants in the farm environment are often challenged beyond how they might have been previously and have developed their personal capacity and their sense of self-worth. One support worker who works with a man who is non-verbal and who requires intensive supports shared her experience;

> "From my observations I saw M very engaged and very relaxed and happy to be there doing work with timber and measuring it cutting it and in particular using the cordless electric drill putting things together and we have some nice photos which tell that story. I think the fact that he was constructing something was the biggest thing for him and knew that it was something that it was going to be really good at the end of it…. it was fantastic to see him making that project come together."

Social Farming has the flexibility to allow for a variety of work styles and preferences. For some participants who have a strong work ethic and good energy levels, Social Farming provides the opportunity to carry out useful and practical work and to feel the value of that contribution. A social farmer described one of the participants who comes to his farm;

> "C is a get up and go guy, he won't even take the whole lunch break if it's busy. The big project at the moment is painting the fence. He loves work, practical jobs and is a tasty worker too."

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.

> "I like making the chairs and the furniture."

> "Making different things and going out on the fields and getting flowers for C's [farmers] wife. She loves flowers on the table and we go off and get flowers and put them in the vase. And baking bread or something like that and we made jam for the opening day and I enjoyed that."

In some cases, the placement has sparked or uncovered an interest in a particular skill or activity. One participant on a farm in Co Galway has particularly enjoyed the opportunity to renovate a chair that one of the people working with the farmer brought in. He helped to put it together, sanded it,

painted it using his own paints and now gets to keep it. He has had an opportunity to both tap into and develop his interest in woodwork but in an informal and relaxed way and in the context of the broader farm environment rather than taking a specific course.

The Social Farming model helps develop the **independence, capacity and confidence** of participants. As noted by many support workers, the farmers usually assume a level of capacity and are encouraging in a way that is qualitatively different to that coming from professional support workers. Equally, a number of farmers noted participants often 'allow themselves' to be cared for and have things done for them when social care workers are present. As noted by one;

> "The support workers who come with them are so good and so kind but I think maybe they do a bit too much for the lads sometimes. Like I'd say to J [participant], "now you're well capable of bringing that cup over to the sink yourself"' and of course he is. Well I start from the basis they can do things and work from there and I think they surprise themselves sometimes and they certainly surprise the people that are coming here with them."

Farmers recounted many instances where the Social Farming placement appeared to be the first time a participant had made a cup of tea for others or helped with the washing up or lit a fire. The support worker for one participant in this 30's with a mild intellectual disability spoke of his development over the course of the placement. One of the goals of the placement had been to develop his independent living skills, which he had had very limited opportunity to do living at home with his parents;

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

Amongst the most frequently cited reflections from support workers at the end of Social Farming placements are that they cannot believe how much someone achieved, or how capable they were or how much they could do for themselves and others. One common example, cited by many support workers, is where participants are happy to take the lead on showing visitors or support workers the operation of the farm. This confirms the social farm as what Rotherham et al. (2017) have described as a 'space of capability'.

A number of support workers also noted how the setting of the social farm and the placement experience has enabled them to get to know the people they work with 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. This in turn enables them to identify further supports and opportunities which may benefit them. The wider 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 participant and support worker.

Significant improvements in **social skills and confidence** over the course of their Social Farming placements were also noted by support workers, farmers and participants. All spoke of the benefits which come from being able to interact, have fun and get on with other people in the everyday environment of the farm. The opportunity to meet and have a chat with people from the wider farm family, with neighbours and family friends who call in, with people coming on to the farm to work, and with staff in the local shops, garden centre, hardware store, etc. was also noted. The support worker for one participant spoke of the benefits to him;

> "J is more confident in himself, much more relaxed, he is happier to go into a shop now. He wasn't as good at community based activities before, he was always in the day centre with not as many experiences. Even this level of interaction [the interview with the researcher] would not have happened 6 months before."

In the participants from Mullingar Resource Centre for example, one participant in particular was very shy at the beginning of the process with little confidence in herself. By the middle of the placement, the support worker found her much more chatty and assertive. For example, she participated fully in the focus group with the researcher, which the support worker says she would never have felt able to do previously.

3.4 Social Farming, Service Reform and Sustainability: The Case of Brothers of Charity Galway

As noted in Section 2, there is now a significant focus across all intellectual disability services on delivering on New Directions, on service reform and on individualising supports. Service providers are actively seeking new ways to commission and to engage with supports and new choices for their service users. Brothers of Charity Galway have embraced and demonstrated this reform process over the past four years through their engagements with and more recently the commissioning of longer term Social Farming support for the people using their services. This short case study traces and explores the development of this relationship between Brothers of Charity Galway and Social Farming Ireland and highlights the factors critical both to its success and to the opening up of options and choices for the people with whom they work. It suggests a clear pathway for other services and advocates within the intellectual disability sector to potentially follow as their own knowledge and experience of Social Farming grows.

In November 2015, a senior staff member from Brothers of Charity Galway attended an information and networking event on Social Farming in the West of Ireland. When funding and support became available from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to help facilitate the development and sampling of Social Farming placements in late 2016/early 2017, this staff member advocated strongly to commission a number of sampling placements. They felt that Social Farming could be of significant interest and benefit for some of their service users. **In 2017, 15 service users from Brothers of Charity Galway choose to participate in 10 week sampling support placements across two social farms.** The arrangement of these support placements allowed for the build-up of understanding of the governance for the placements, the logistical and practical

arrangements required and the "commissioning" relationship which involved a Memo of Understanding (MOU), a participant Individual Support Plan, an induction event and risk assessments. Over this time period, Brothers of Charity provided some funding towards the cost of the support placements to match the sampling funding provided by Social Farming Ireland. Having seen the impact and the positive outcomes of this new community support for the participants and in their lives, **Brothers of Charity committed to providing match funding for further sampling in 2018. In 2018, 20 support placements were commissioned and funded through sampling over 10 week blocks.** This comprised of mostly new participants, some of whom completed two placement blocks in 2018, but also a small number who had experienced Social Farming in 2017.

These two years of collaboration, co-operation, learning and sampling between and across the service provider, the people with disabilities, the social farmers and the Social Farming development staff led to a position where all of the stakeholders, including Brother of Charity wanted **to develop a more sustainable and longer term arrangement.** Throughout 2018 and as placements were ongoing, discussions and negotiations took place between Social Farming Ireland and Brothers of Charity Galway to move towards a more sustainable model where they as disability service providers could fully commission Social Farming placements. The discussions centred on agreeing on governance, cost, safety and safeguarding, and on defining a Service Level Agreement (SLA). While discussions were ongoing, the Brothers of Charity had moved towards fully funding placements on one farm in the second half of 2018. Two blocks with four participants each were completed under a Memo of Understanding and supported by Social Farming Ireland. By the end of 2018, these discussions concluded with an SLA between Brothers of Charity and Social Farming Ireland, implemented through the Western Regional Office (at South West Mayo Development Company), for the full commissioning of Social Farming placements for 2019. **This SLA facilitates a total of twelve participants to participate in Social Farming one day per week for 42 weeks in 2019, with supports fully commissioned by Brothers of Charity Galway.**

From discussions with the key people involved, this research has identified a number of factors which have been critical in progressing this relationship and the process of service reform:

- **A strong and continuous focus from and across all of the stakeholders, at all times, on the person** (the participants/service users) and their views and choices throughout the Social Farming placements
- **Delivering on choice, dignity, empowerment, independence and respect for the people who are participating** in these social farming placements**.**
- **Collaboration and open communication** in developing an understanding of the benefits, value, cost and challenges in designing such new and innovative commissioning arrangements to support people
- Establishing and defining **clear governance, best practice and quality processes** to manage the placements, to deal with issues, concerns etc. as they arise and to review the placements throughout and at the end
- **Building durable and trusting mutually beneficial relationships** between and among all of the stakeholders
- **Being creative, flexible and proportionate in the placements** so that people can and will benefit and at the same time avoiding duplication. The goal is to move towards a position

when such placements can be universally available within Brothers of Charity to any service user who chooses Social Farming as an option.

The progress of Brothers of Charity Galway from concept, to discussions and information sharing, to sampling placements, to negotiating and agreeing a successful Service Level Agreement (SLA) for people in their service is indicative of the significant value which they place on Social Farming as a community based support option for a cohort of their service users. A senior manager in Brothers of Charity puts it very simply**; "we are doing this because it just works for the individuals involved. It is a wonderful experience for them."** For this manager**, Social Farming "fits like a hand in glove with service reform" because it is person-centred and widens the options and choices available to people in their communities.** It enables them (BOC) to support people to make choices and to do things in the community which they love and which deliver significant benefits for them. Their experience of working with Social Farming Ireland and with the social farmers has also been very positive and the senior manager also highlighted the additional value of Social Farming in supporting the family farm, particularly in more marginal areas.

Crucially, the **funding for this SLA has come from rearranging / shifting resources around creatively *within* the service rather than sourcing 'new' external or additional funding; this is a real example of service reform and service reorganisation to support the choices of service users.** Overall levels of funding for disability services remains a significant challenge and availability of funding is the only barrier to Brothers of Charity Galway extending this option to be a universally available choice for all their service users. For Brothers of Charity, it is an ongoing challenge to find the resources to engage in a genuinely person-centred and individualised support, regardless of how positive an experience it is. That they have done so, to the extent that they have, is indicative of the value that the people they support (service users) and the management and staff in Brothers of Charity attach to Social Farming. This case provides **valuable learning in a national context** in its demonstration of the potential to deliver efficient, effective and individualised supports for people which deliver good value for money. This is innovative and the first attempt to deliver on effective and negotiated commissioning of support on an individualised basis as envisaged and defined under the report Towards Personalised Budgets for People with a Disability in Ireland: Report of the Task Force on Personalised Budgets (2018).

3.5 Relevance of Results to Policy and Practice in the Intellectual Disability Sector: Key Conclusions

The results of the research carried out amongst participants in Social Farming placements confirm that **it delivers a wide range of benefits across multiple dimensions of well-being for those with intellectual disabilities**. Of particular note are the warm and natural connections which were made with the farmers, their families and other participants, the quality-of-life and sensory benefits which being out in nature and working with animals and plants has delivered and the sheer enjoyment and fun derived from the experience. In terms of outcomes and personal development, there is strong evidence of participants being 'stretched', of progression in terms of self-confidence, capacity and skills acquisition and of significant improvements in physical fitness and well-being.

There are a number of **distinctive and novel features** of the social farming model – the individualised approach, the home setting, the side-by-side work, the level of choice and variety it affords, the interest stimulated by the 'live' environment – which contribute to the enjoyment which participants derive from it, particularly when compared to some of the other activities which they may undertake.

However beyond the inherent value of these opportunities and experiences to participants, we can also draw a number of **wider conclusions from the research as to the relevance and value of the Social Farming model.** Similar core values and principles underpin the key policy documents and policy drivers within this sector which we listed in Section 2, including New Directions (2012-2016), Transforming Lives (2012) National Disability Strategy (2017-2021) and the most recent report, Towards Personalised Budgets for People with a Disability in Ireland (2018). The chart below sets out some of the main values and principles underpinning policy with respect to people with intellectual disabilities, and also references the National Disability Authority's Services Outcomes Framework. **It demonstrates how Social Farming both reflects these values and principles and supports individuals, advocates and services to realise them in practice.**

Key Values/Principles in Intellectual Disability Policy and Best Practice	The Social Farming Model: What the Research Tells Us
Person-centeredness	- Social farming is inherently centred on discovering, valuing and realising the talents, skills and contribution of individuals. - The approach is highly individualised and person-centred, facilitated by the small number of participants and the strong focus of the social farmer on supporting and working alongside the participants.
Dignity	- Social Farming provides significant – in many cases, previously un-realised – opportunities for autonomy, for trying new things and for taking positive risks in a 'live' and natural environment.
Empowerment	- People are empowered to choose Social Farming as an option and in some cases, to remain doing so for extended periods of time. - Within the placement experience, people are also given opportunities to exercise choice and to contribute to decision-making and to the everyday operation of the farm.
Choice	- Social Farming support is always the choice of the person themselves, informed by meetings with the Social Farming Ireland RDO, possible pre-placement visit(s) to the farm, an induction day on the farm and a clear understanding that people can withdraw at any time if social farming is not for them.

	- The Individual Support Plan stimulates meaningful discovery and dialogue on participants own goals and desired outcomes, interests, needs, etc. - The Social Farming model also provides a high level of variety and choice *within* each placement as to the activities undertaken and the pace of activity.
Social Inclusion	- Social farming is community-based; participants spend time in the ordinary setting of the working family farm, itself a vital part of the economic and social fabric of Irish life. - Participants build real and meaningful friendships and relationships with the farmers and the farm family and new connections with a wider circle of people in their own communities - These connections are often reciprocal, with farmers also connecting with participants, their families and services. - The new connections formed also play a role in breaking down barriers and challenging attitudes to and perceptions of disability in wider society.
Independence	- Social Farming participants are empowered to engage with the farmer and the activities as independently and freely as possible and to exercise choice *within* the placement - The level of support provided by the services to individual participants on social farms is kept at the minimum necessary for safety and well-being. - The natural farm-based model of support contributes to building the confidence, independent living skills and capacity of participants.
Equality	- Social Farming provides the environment and the model of support whereby people are able to work side-by-side on tasks with the farmer and others and to contribute to the whole. The farm is a very 'levelling' place
Respect	- Participants in Social farming are treated as adults, with their views sought and respected, and their contribution and sense of responsibility nurtured and valued.
Personal Development and Fulfilment	- Social Farming contributes to the personal development and progression participants across dimensions such as practical and farming skills development, improved levels of independence, confidence and capacity, and the development of social skills and confidence.

Valuable Social Roles	- Social Farming provides significant opportunities for participants to engage in meaningful, purposeful and above all, ordinary activity (including some work activities) in a setting – the family farm – which itself plays an important and valued role in both wider Irish society and in local communities. Social Farming enhances participants own sense of self-worth and identity as valuable and engaged members of society and expands the expectations of support workers, advocates and family members of what they can contribute and achieve.
Health and Well-being	- Social Farming enables participants to take part in some level of physical activity, but in a very purposeful and natural way, out in the fresh air, in nature and often in scenic surroundings. It has led to improvements in physical fitness, strength and agility. - The opportunity to really connect with animals and plants is a very positive and life-enhancing experience. The rich sensory environment of the farm may be particularly valuable for those with profound disabilities, including physical disabilities.

The most recent policy document within this sector – **Towards Personalised Budgets for People with a Disability in Ireland: Report of the Task Force on Personalised Budgets** – sets out the principles which should underpin the way in which personalised budget system is implemented or operated. The research carried out for this Report and knowledge of current practice within Social Farming Ireland would suggest that **the Social Farming Ireland implementation and funding model is also strongly aligned with these principles**, as the table below demonstrates:

Principles Underpinning Personalised Budget System	**The Social Farming Model: What Research and Practice Tells Us**
Creative	- In current practice, placements for Social Farming are funded from a wide range of sources, with funding for individual placements often coming from more than one source. - There is a high degree of creativity deployed in bringing together these resources and in ensuring that they can be harnessed to support the person who wishes to participate in Social Farming and in some cases, to ensure that participation can continue over a longer period of time.
Flexible and Proportionate	- Each individual participant or service with which Social Farming Ireland works is unique. - This requires a flexible, person centred – and sometimes service centred – approach to meet challenges and resource issues to ensure that each person who wants the opportunity to participate

	in Social Farming gets the chance to do so.
For the benefit of the person with a disability	- While Social Farming Ireland work with a range of stakeholders, including farmers, services, support workers, families etc., it is the participant's interests and perspective that remains central at all times.
Impartial	- Participation in Social Farming is based solely on an individual participant's desire to do so. - The goal is to have the *opportunity* available to anyone who wishes to avail of it, not necessarily to make Social Farming standard or routinised.
Informative	- Social Farming Ireland have a substantial and growing body of written and web-based materials on Social Farming which are available to interested individuals, services, etc. - However Social Farming Ireland staff, including the RDOs, are the key resource in building knowledge and understanding of how Social Farming works in practice. They work with people and services in a very flexible and individual way to make placements happen.
Efficient	- Every effort is made to ensure that the supports provided are as cost-effective as possible for services and individuals, while also ensuring that supports are individualised and of a high quality.
Outcome focused	- Social Farming placements are outcome focused, supporting participants to achieve *their* goals and meet their needs.

We can summarise the above as follows:

- Social Farming is an inherently positive, valuable and life-enchancing experience for the people who participate in it. The ordinary working family farm provides a unique environment in which to deliver benefits and outcomes across multiple dimensions of development and well-being.
- The values and principles of Social Farming are both wholly in line with and demonstrative of those underpinning government policy and best practice in the intellectual disability sector. This includes the most recent policy developments on individualised budgets.
- Engagement with Social Farming can play a significant role in enabling intellectual disability services and Government to deliver on commitments towards person-centeredness, community inclusion, active citizenship and high-quality service provision in a very real way in local communities.
- Finally, the case of Brothers of Charity in Galway demonstrates that translating a set of values and principles in supporting people with intellectual disabilities into a model of

commissioned social farming practice and placements is challenging, but possible. This case study demonstrates the potential for other intellectual disability services to embed Social Farming as an ongoing and sustainable option within their service. It is also a strong example of service reform and of a genuinely individualised and person-centred approach to fulfilling the aspirations of the people with whom they work.

4. Social Farming and Intellectual Disability Services: The Basics of Delivery and Pathways for Services

The previous three sections have provided learning and insights on the potential for Social Farming as a support to people with intellectual disabilities. This final section brings the relationship between intellectual disability services and Social Farming Ireland to the forefront and answers the very practical question as to **how services can make Social Farming happen for the people with whom they work**. There is currently some variation in the level of knowledge and awareness of Social Farming within intellectual disability services. There are services which have worked with Social Farming Ireland to provide this opportunity for their service users over a number of years, some as far back as 2012 under the SoFAB Project in the border counties. Others have some practical experience with Social Farming placements under Social Farming Ireland funding or are currently exploring this opportunity for their service users. There are also services for whom this guide may be one of their first introductions to Social Farming.

This section is primarily aimed at those services which have limited experience to date, though there is useful information for all services and particularly for new staff in experienced services who wish to clarify how Social Farming under the Social Farming Ireland model works in practice. Section 4.1 provides a detailed explanation of how Social Farming is currently delivered and Section 4.2 sets out the pathway which a service or advocate (i.e. commissioner) can follow if they are interested in exploring and experiencing Social Farming for the people with whom they work. This section is only intended as an introductory guide: **it is the contact and relationship with the Regional Development Officers and/or Social Farming Ireland which will guide a service through the process of making placements happen for the people with whom they work or provide supports to individuals or advocates wishing to explore this opportunity.**

4.1 Social Farming: The Basics of Delivery

Based on experience over a range of funding programmes[12], 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

[12] The EU SoFAR initiative (2006-2008), the Social Farming Across Borders Programme (SoFAB 2012-2014) and the current national programme to develop a Social Farming Network.

The **key elements of the Social Farming Ireland model** are as follows:

- **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 intellectual disability, the commissioner may be a voluntary or non-statutory organisation, charity or advocate group, the HSE, or in some cases family members, using individualised supports or budgets. For simplicity, the term **'commissioner'** is used 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. This is for a defined period of time, called a block of weeks. This could be anywhere between eight and 42 weeks depending on the needs and aspirations of the participant. In a small number of cases, participants from intellectual disability services do continue to return to Social Farming over a number of years, in what could be described as enduring placements. 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, which would be the average length of time spent on the farm per day.

- Social Farming takes place on a **farm or horticultural setting in reasonable proximity to the service and/or participants**. As more farmers become trained and experienced, the level of availability and choice for services and participants will naturally increase.

- In current Social Farming practice there are **usually three to four participants present on each day,** which is considered beneficial from the perspective of social engagement. However, there is also flexibility based on participant and service needs and individual placements do occasionally happen. The farmer is usually commissioned to provide support 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.

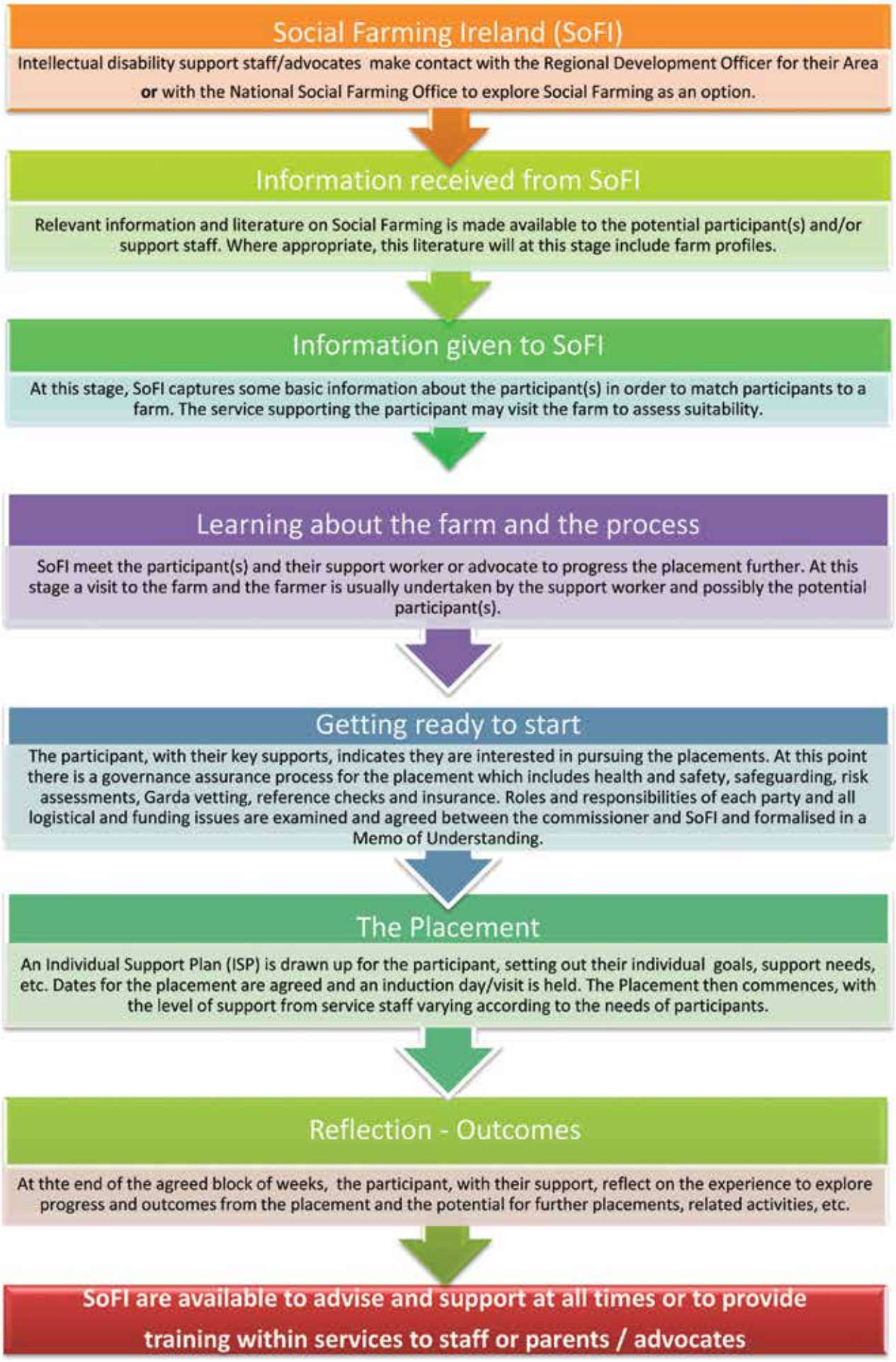
- The **level of support provided to participants during placement days by support staff who may be working with them is highly individual** and depends on factors such as the capacity and confidence of participants, the perspective of the farmer and the stage in the placement. In line with the desire to provide as natural and independent an experience as possible, services usually aim to provide only the level of support which is really necessary for the safety and well-being of participants. 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.

- Participants engage in activities and projects alongside the farmer and sometimes other members of the farm family. The kinds 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, HSE Safeguarding for Vulnerable Adults, HSE Children First, 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: Pathways for Services

Social Farming Ireland is the key national-level organisation progressing and developing Social Farming in Ireland and for those interested in exploring Social Farming further, the first point of contact will usually be the National Social Farming Office or one of four Social Farming Ireland Regional Development Officers (full contact details for all staff are provided in the Appendix). The Social Farming Ireland website (www.socialfarmingireland.ie) also contains a range of resources and useful information for those looking for more general information on Social Farming. The chart overleaf summarises the typical pathway which is followed when a commissioner, guided by the wishes and choices of potential participants, wants to give people the opportunity to spend time on a social farm. **This chart is only intended as a indicative and preliminary guide; the contact and relationship with the Regional Development Officers and/or Social Farming Ireland will be what will guide the service through the process of making placements happen for the people with whom they work or provide supports to individuals or advocates wishing to explore this opportunity.**


Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)
Intellectual disability 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 the potential participant(s) and/or support staff. 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. The service supporting the participant may visit the farm to assess suitability.
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 and all logistical and funding issues are examined and agreed between the commissioner and SoFI and formalised in a Memo of Understanding.
The Placement
An Individual Support Plan (ISP) is drawn up for the participant, setting out their individual goals, support needs, etc. Dates for the placement are agreed and an induction day/visit is held. The Placement then commences, with the level of support from service staff varying according to the needs of participants.
Reflection - Outcomes
At thte end of the agreed block of weeks, the 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 or to provide training within services to staff or parents / advocates

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Appendix: Social Farming Ireland Contact Details

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