

Social Farming & the Leaving Cert Applied Programme

A Case Study



Social Farming Ireland 2019



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



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Introduction to the Case Study

This case study from Social Farming Ireland describes Social Farming placements undertaken by Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) students from Carndonagh Community School in Malin Head, Co. Donegal which took place in late 2018/early 2019. It highlights the potential for Social Farming to deliver benefits to LCA and other secondary level students, particularly those who are disadvantaged in some way, who may be experiencing behavioural and social difficulties or who are at risk of becoming early school leavers. It is based on interviews with the school's Leaving Cert Applied Coordinator and with the social farmer involved, on focus groups/interviews with the students at various stages throughout the placement and on the observations of the researcher from Social Farming Ireland.

Section 1 provides background and context for the case study and an introduction to the Leaving Cert Applied Programme and to the practice of Social Farming. Section 2 describes the international and national evidence to date of the benefits and outcomes of Social Farming for disadvantaged young people. Section 3 describes in detail the logistics of the placement, the overall experience for all of the parties involved, the benefits of Social Farming for this group of young people and the challenges which arose in rolling out this intervention. Section 4 describes the overall conclusions and learning which can be drawn from this case study and which are relevance to this school and to the over 300 post-primary schools around the country which offer the Leaving Cert Applied Programme.

1. Background and Context

1.1 The Leaving Cert Applied Programme

The Leaving Certificate Applied is a distinct, self-contained Leaving Certificate programme. It is designed for those students who do not wish to proceed directly to third level education or for those whose needs, aspirations and aptitudes are not adequately catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes. The Leaving Certificate Applied is structured around three main elements – Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education - which are interrelated and interdependent. This programme is characterised by educational experiences of an **active, practical** and **student-centred** nature. It sets out to recognise the talents of all students and to provide opportunities for developing personal responsibility, self-esteem and self-knowledge and apply what they learn to the real world. Leaving Cert Applied is available in over 300 post primary schools around the country and in 2019, 2774 students completed the Programme. While this case study focuses on Leaving Cert Applied students, Social Farming also has potential to provide benefits and outcomes for other young people in secondary school, particularly those undertaking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or those attending units within secondary school such as Autism Spectrum Disorder Units.

1.2 Social Farming: Definition and benefits

Social Farming provides the opportunity for people with a variety of needs to spend time and carry out activities on typical working family farms. Social Farming is fundamentally based on spending time with farmers and their families in the **natural environment** of the farm, but also encompasses two other key elements; **meaningful and practical activities** and **social context** which combine to deepen its impact further, as Figure 1 overleaf demonstrates. It is outcome focused, using the natural assets of the people, the place, the activities and the community to support a person to derive benefits across multiple dimensions of wellbeing and to achieve some of their own chosen goals.

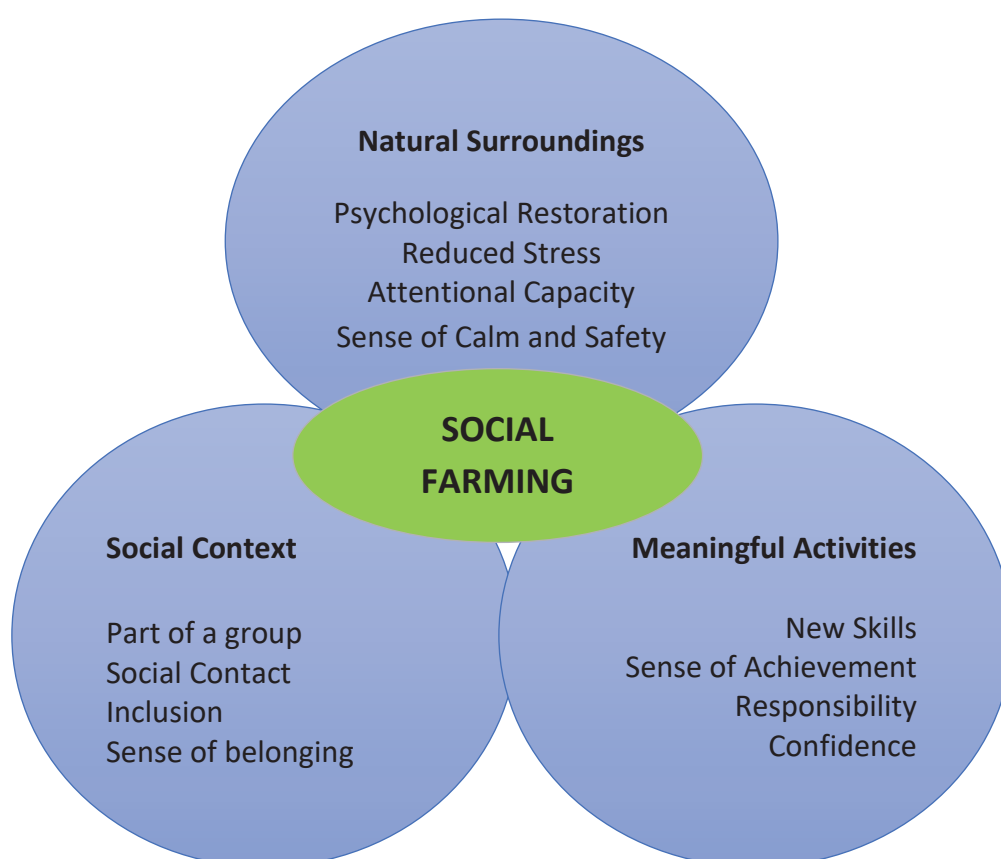


Figure 1: Three Key Elements of Social Farming (Adapted from Bragg and Atkins (2016:46))

People who have successfully participated in Social Farming in Ireland include: people with disabilities (intellectual, physical, sensory); people with mental health difficulties; young people and especially those who are NEET¹; Leaving Cert Applied students; the long term unemployed; 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, 2019). These benefits include:

- Development of occupational and life skills from undertaking farm-based activities

¹ Not in Employment, Education or Training

- 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

Social Farming in 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 Farming projects is growing and networks are developing and consolidating. A National Social Farming Office (Social Farming Ireland) funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the CEDRA Innovation and Development fund and based in Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG (based in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim) supports the national development of a Social Farming network alongside regional partner organisations where regional development officers (RDOs) are based. These are South West Mayo Development Company CLG (Western Region), West Limerick Resources CLG (South-West Region) and Waterford Leader Partnership CLG, (South-East Region).

2. Relevance and Benefits of Social Farming to Young People: Evidence to date

Though up until now no specific research has been carried out amongst Leaving Cert Applied students – or their direct equivalent – a range of international and national studies have highlighted the relevance and benefits of Social Farming to disadvantaged young people who may be experiencing behavioural and social difficulties or who are at risk of becoming or who are categorised as Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET) or of not completing secondary level education.

In the Netherlands, farm-based residential farm work projects have been developed in the Noord-Brabant region for young people between 16 and 20 years of age who are experiencing serious problems in terms of family relationships, non-attendance at school, anti-social behaviour, etc. While the model is substantially more developed and intensive than is currently available in the Irish context – it comprises four separate six-week residential stays on a farm over a period of six months, followed by intensive follow-up work for another six months – the results highlight the potential of the Social Farming model in working with young people. A study conducted by Hassink et al. (2011) indicates that there have been statistically significant positive shifts in behaviour and other relevant indicators amongst the 45 young people who participated in the study and crucially, that these have been maintained and are still present six months after the completion of the intervention. Table 1 below highlights the shifts identified by the case managers working with young people from the beginning to the end of what they describe as a Social Farming trajectory.

Table 1: Youth behavioural indicators at beginning and end of Social Farming Trajectory (n=45)

Indicator	Start SF Trajectory	End SF Trajectory
% in school or work	15	81
% in contact with police	78	19
% positive use of spare time	2	42
% experiencing addiction	86	40
% demonstrating serious behavioural problems	68	11
Average well-being score	4.0	7.2
% reporting self-esteem as reasonable/good	6	63

Adapted from Hassink et al. (2011)

The experience of Jamie's Farm in the UK (described in Box 1 overleaf) gives further evidence of the potential for Social Farming to improve the lives and the life-chances of disaffected and disadvantaged young people. The model of Social Farming is again somewhat different to that pursued in the Irish context and involves participants spending a one-week block on the farm rather than a day per week over a longer period. However it does provide further insight into the kind of outcomes which can be achieved, in this case over a relatively short space of time.

Box 1: Social Farming at Jamie's Farm

Jamie's Farm, a charity based near Bath in England, is a traditional mixed working farm, which sells its produce locally. Established in 2010 with support from ethical bank, Triodos Bank, the farm specialises in engaging young people from challenging backgrounds who are at risk of social exclusion. Many of these young people are from urban areas with high levels of deprivation and often their five days spent on the farm are their first real experience of rural life. Jamie's Farm focuses on building their self-awareness and self-esteem, helping them to create positive relationships with both their peer group and adults.

Activities such as feeding and caring for livestock, fencing, cleaning the farmyard, or harvesting fruit, are combined with daily walks, food preparation, creative art, music and drama sessions as well as one-to-one sessions with the farm's psychologist. The farm provides a safe environment built upon mutual trust and respect, where a positive family culture is modelled. Teachers report significant behavioural changes in the young people, whose outlooks can shift dramatically following short stays at Jamie's Farm. Jamie's Farm uses a rigorous set of sources to capture the impact of the work they do with young people; young people themselves asked to complete the internationally validated Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale ([WEMWBS](#)) using bespoke electronic software. They also take ratings from teachers and data from school systems both 6 weeks and 6 months following a visit to ensure that they understand the complex long-term impact of Jamie's Farm. Evidence from the 2016/2017 academic cycle showed the following:

- 54% of young people showed improved behaviour six weeks after their time on Jamie's Farm.
- Almost a third of young people moved from being 'not on track' in terms of academic attainment to 'on track' or 'exceeding' in the six months following their time on the farm.
- Improvements in teacher-rated behaviour, engagement and self-esteem were also clear 6 weeks after the farm visit, with further increases seen 6 months later, affirming that the effects of a visit endure well beyond pupils leaving the farm gate. For example, 60% of young people showed improved self-esteem 6 weeks after their visit to Jamie's Farm, rising to 67% after 6 months.
- 68% of young people at risk of social school exclusion were no longer in that category six weeks after their visit

Adapted from information from: <https://jamiesfarm.org.uk/about-us/our-impact/> and <https://www.positive.news/2011/lifestyle/wellbeing/4958/care-farming-natural-health-service/>

In the Irish context, research undertaken by Social Farming Ireland (SOFI, 2018) with four young people from a Foroige Garda Youth Diversion Project who undertook a 10-week Social Farming placement revealed substantial progression and personal development amongst participants, even in a relatively short time-frame. At the heart of this placement was the warm and trusting relationship with the farmer who simply treated the participants as people and who saw their capacity and potential and who acted as a strong role model in their lives. The youth service worker was seeking to achieve positive outcomes for the participants across four key areas; employability skills, impulsivity control, empathy and communication skills. Research conducted with the farmer, the youth worker and the participants themselves found that participants achieved significant progress in each of these areas but also on others which will be of ongoing benefit, including

- A new interest in farming life and work and the development of new practical skills and knowledge.
- Increased self-esteem and sense of self-worth; participants learned in a very real way that there is valuable work to be done in their own communities which they can both do and perform well at.
- Improved levels of social confidence and an increased capacity to interact and communicate with others, including each other, the youth worker, the farmer and the other people with whom they interacted during the placement.
- Improved capacity to commit to something and to see it through.
- Improved capacity to make positive choices both in the context of the placement and in their lives outside of it.

Overall, this case study provided clear evidence that the Social Farming placement supported these young people to uncover and develop a range of occupational, social, life and relationships skills which will enhance their chances of meeting their own life goals. It did so in a very natural, ordinary and culturally relevant way which seemed to resonate strongly with the participants. Further information on this case study is available on <https://www.socialfarmingireland.ie/resources/research-and-case-studies/>.

Taking these studies together, we can say that in addition to the more general benefits of Social Farming listed in Section 1, a range of *specific* benefits for young people from spending time on farms have been identified:

1. The learning and skills development associated with Social Farming provides an alternative to traditional/formal educational settings, of which some young people may have a negative previous experience. This learning can be provided alongside such formal settings – as in the case of the Leaving Cert Applied Programme - or after the young person has withdrawn from them.
2. It provides opportunities for a new and positive connection with nature, animals and plants for a generation who due to societal changes, are amongst the most disconnected from the natural environment.
3. Working with other people and with plants and animals builds capacity to care for and consider others and increases empathy.
4. Time on the farm can remove young people from negative networks or influences or the kind of triggering events which can provoke challenging behaviours. Those at risk of engaging in

criminality, anti-social behaviour, etc. can see and experience an alternative to the path they might be on and may re-evaluate potentially destructive lifestyles.

5. Farmers and farm families provide positive role models and an experience of a positive family culture, particularly for those with challenging home lives.
6. Social Farming provides a positive and pro-social environment in which to learn how to work effectively with others, to take direction, to control negative impulses and behaviours and to contribute as an individual to the whole.
7. It can lead to a reduction in conduct problems, hyper activity and the use of non-productive coping strategies.

Hambridge (2017); Hassink et al (2011); Hine et al. (2008); SoFI (2018a).

3. Social Farming and the Leaving Cert Applied Programme: The Carndonagh Case Study

3.1 Origins and Organisation of the Placements

The origins of this placement lie in contacts between the Social Farming Ireland Regional Development Officer (RDO), Inishowen Development Partnership and the *Spraoi agus Spórt* Family Centre in Carndonagh in the summer of 2017. The latter organisation provides social, recreational and educational activities for the community which are focused on family development and which bring social, recreational and economic benefits to the area. While no placements emerged from these particular conversations, through them the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) Programme Coordinator in Carndonagh Community School heard about Social Farming. She then contacted the RDO in June 2018, wishing to explore the possibility of students from the school undertaking Social Farming placements.

Carndonagh Community School is a large mixed post-primary school with over 1000 pupils from a wide and largely rural catchment area in the Inishowen Peninsula in the northern part of County Donegal. As well as the Junior and Leaving Certificate, the school offers Transition Year, the Junior Cert Schools Programme, the Leaving Cert Applied Programme and the Leaving Cert Vocational Programme. It is also included in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Programme to address educational disadvantage and as such receives additional supports and funding. In 2018/2019, The Leaving Cert Applied Programme in Carndonagh Community School had 25 students spread across 5th and 6th year.

Following meetings between the LCA Coordinator, the RDO and the identification of a suitable social farmer within a reasonable distance of the school, it was agreed that Social Farming placements would go ahead during the school year 2018/2019. A total of 13 students from 5th year – 9 boys and 4 girls – took part. In groups of three (and in one case, four), the students spent one day per week on the farm for a period of eight weeks. These four eight-week placement ‘blocks’ took place on Wednesdays and Thursdays between November 2018 and May 2019. School holidays and the necessity of students attending work experience placements meant that the eight days were stretched out over a longer period than eight weeks. Participation in Social Farming was voluntary and students were free to withdraw if they wished. One of the students went for one day and didn’t feel it was for her so withdrew but all other students completed their eight weeks. Funding for the Social Farming placements came from the Social Farming Ireland Sampling fund with a contribution from the school, including funding for transport to and from the farm which was provided by the farmer.

3.2 Motivations to experience Social Farming

For the LCA Coordinator, there were multiple motivations for sampling Social Farming amongst this cohort of pupils. She liked the idea of the students going out independently to try something new and the opportunity it presented to experience farm life and work, especially for those who had never done so. She spoke of the grounding she hoped it would give them in what are often complicated lives:

“A lot comes back to the idea of active citizenship. I wanted them to know how a farm works, that it’s hard work, you can also sit and have your cup of coffee and chat, but you can also get to see new life, to get mud on their hands, to get dirty, the fundamentals of life. They come back with mud on their noses. They see what life is really all about. I want them to know how important farming is to Irish history and identity.”

The Coordinator knew the farmer beforehand and his availability was a key factor in her enthusiasm for the placements;

“I knew W [the farmer] and he was a very important factor in it for me, he is a very quirky, free spirited person and I knew he would give them respect. If there had been another farmer who I knew wouldn’t treat them the way I wanted them to, it would be different. He was a big reason I went into it.... These kids need to be encouraged, they don’t need to be talked down to, they get enough of that sometimes at home and at school. W isn’t like that, and I’m quite glad he didn’t ask me too many questions about these kids.”

She also spoke of the value of getting students out into the fresh air, of the opportunity it presented for teamwork and of doing something different but which is based in their own community and which is of high social and cultural value in that community. She also spoke of how Social Farming might play a role in terms of retaining pupil interest in Leaving Cert Applied and in staying in school, which can be challenging for this cohort of pupils.

“It would get them thinking, this is what LCA is going to give me, it’s going to get me out of school a day a week and to get to have other experiences.”

The students were all at least partially motivated by the opportunity to get a day a week away from the formal school environment. Other motivations included the desire to learn more about farming, and in the case of a small number of students to get to spend time on a farm other than their own. All were willing to try it as something different but there was a nervousness in a small number of cases as to whether they would like it. A small number of students described themselves as ‘townies’ for whom farming was very much outside their experience and comfort zone.

3.3 The Placement Experience

Logistics and Activities

The farm on which the placements happened is close to Malin Head, approximately 10 kilometres from the school. It is predominately a dairy farm milking approximately 50 cows but with a number of other animals as well; a horse, goat, dog, etc. The farmer picked each group of students up from the school in the morning and brought them back to the farm and then back to the school in the afternoon. This coincided roughly with school hours and ensured the students could still get the school bus to and from school. Having the farmer agree to do the transport at minimal cost was a key factor in ensuring the placements went ahead as the cost of taxis could have been prohibitively expensive.

The decision was taken that the students wouldn’t be accompanied by a teacher during the placements. The LCA Coordinator feels that this was absolutely the right decision for them:

“I am so glad that we didn’t send someone out with them, including myself. I know W and I would have been talking as adults and they would have maybe acted differently if I had been there. It would have taken away from the experience, they mightn’t relax as well.”

The farmer shared this perspective and experienced no behavioural problems in interacting with the students without teachers present:

“Not one of them ever refused to do anything, they were very respectful and polite, they kept the ground rules.”

Social Farming activity is always guided by the capacity of the participants. In this case, the participants had the youth and physical capacity to take part in the great majority of the everyday activities of the farm:

“Whatever is going on that day is what they are doing, bar maybe some machinery work because of the danger and because I only have one spare seat on the tractor.” Farmer

The farm work largely centred on the care of the cattle; mixing the feed and feeding the calves and ensuring they had clean bedding; moving stock; keeping the yard clean; clipping and dosing/injecting cattle; and in some cases, taking part in milking or calving. Other tasks included fencing, tidying the sheds, brushing down the horse and splitting logs. Following a full risk and safety assessment and with guidance and supervision from the farmer, the students also got to try things like welding or driving the digger or the jeep in the field.

General Feedback on the Social Farming Experience

The three key stakeholders in these placements – the students themselves, the LCA Coordinator and the social farmer – were all overwhelmingly positive about their experience:

“I am so positive about it, it is a fantastic initiative. I can’t think of any negatives from a student point of view.... Anecdotaly, I’ve spoken to some of the parents and they would say it’s just the best thing, it’s the highlight of the week for the kids.” LCA Coordinator

“I would definitely work with a group like this again, it was good craic, we got along great.” Farmer

“I thought it was going to be quite boring but it was really fun. I really liked the work. I mean we don’t understand how much farmers have to do but we learned lots about that.” Student

“This is one of the highlights of LCA. It’s more than just getting out of the school, it’s the farming itself that was brilliant”. Student

“We had such good craic, I was with my friends too.” Student

Attendance and participation were excellent overall which was itself indicative of its success with the students. As noted by the LCA Coordinator, this is a cohort of students that will be very straight and honest if they are not enjoying or benefiting from something;

“They’re the one group that if they didn’t like it, they’d let you know and they’d shut down pretty quickly and not attend.”

One of the students agreed that Social Farming captured his interest and attention more than many other things he has tried.

“Just the fact that I could go out and stick it for 8 weeks, which I wouldn’t always do. I came out here the first day and I thought, I’m definitely coming back. We had good craic that first day even. I haven’t missed a day.”

Students typically came back from the day on the farm in high spirits and good form, something which also spilled over into their life at school and at home, as noted by parents and other teachers. The LCA Coordinator noted:

“The just came back buzzing. For me it was a mental health day, it was for that ‘look, this is what life is all about, this is what I can get out of LCA’.”

Meaningful Activity in the Natural Environment of the Farm

In very broad terms, the students who undertook these Social Farming placements can be divided into two categories. The first, smaller in number, were those with some experience of farming or other manual work and for whom Social Farming was more of a natural fit. For these participants, all of whom were boys, the placement was an opportunity to experience another farm but also to demonstrate their own knowledge and skills. As the LCA Coordinator put it:

“The three boys that are more used to farming, they came through the Junior Cert School Programme. They find school really hard but all of a sudden, they weren’t afraid to go here. Whereas everything in school, they are nearly afraid to do because they might fail, they went out with real confidence so that was great for them... they got to be the best at what they were doing, and I loved that. And then when we would talk about it when they came back, and looked at the photos, it was all talk that it was no bother to them. It was great for them to be able to shine.”

The second category were those for whom farming would be very much outside of their daily life experience or previous interests. In these cases, the students spoke of their own enjoyment of it and the opportunity to do try something new in a natural and ‘live’ setting:

“I surprised myself with the things I was able to do. Like when we were milking the cows, I didn’t think I’d be up for it but I was, and it was cool to learn about it.” Student

“I loved the horse, we got to groom her. I really enjoyed digging when we put the posts down. We were outside too which was nice.” Student

“Compared to other work experience, there’s lots of variety, you learn lots of new things.”
Student

The LCA Coordinator shared her impressions of one boy’s reaction to the experience:

“There are two boys who are constantly gaming, up very late at night doing it, living very sedentary lives, I wasn’t sure how they would react; well one of them in particular, I thought he might come back and say, ‘well I’m not doing that again’ but he came back with a smile from one ear to another, just buzzing. In as much as you can be city kid living in Inishowen, he’s a city kid but he loved it.”

For all of the students, the farm was a live environment which provided a wide variety of experiences and opportunities for learning and the capacity to cater to varying interests:

“There was something different and new and good every week, it’s hard to pick one thing.”
Student

“Learning to drive the jeep², that was funny. Took about three turns to get started; William sat down beside me and went through it nice and slowly.” Student

“Farming is good because you’re working alongside one another and there’s good variety compared to any other work experience or physical jobs where you might be just doing the one thing.” Student

Amongst the multiple activities, the opportunity to be around and care for animals emerged as one of the most valuable and grounding aspects of the farm experience:

“Messing around with the animals, that’s what I really enjoyed.” Student

“We got to see a wee calf being born.” Student

“The new experience of being out working with animals was brilliant.” Student

The placements have built the student’s knowledge of what is involved in farming, in the level of work required and of what the life of a farmer is like. Most of the students found this interesting and stimulating, particularly those students with limited previous exposure to farm life.

“Learning about the different jobs that the farmer has, how the machinery works, how the farmyard is laid out, how to take care of the animals.” Student

Social Connection and the Relationship with the Farmer

Fundamental to the success of this placement was the **warm and mutually respectful relationship** which the students developed with the farmer. A key social farming value is seeing and treating people as individuals and as people rather than ‘cases’; it is the very ordinariness of the farmer who operates outside of the world of professional teachers, youth workers, social workers, etc. which seemed to

² As noted previously, this was following a full risk and safety assessment and with the supervision and guidance of the farmer.

resonate with the students in this case study. The farmer spoke of this approach to the students which was to see them just as a group of young people coming out to his farm:

“I didn’t know any background, I had no pre-conceived notions, as far as I was concerned it was just a crowd of wains, each with their own personality. I think that’s a good way of doing it.”

Every student spoke warmly and positively about the personality of the farmer and the good humour and sense of fun which underpinned all the activity:

“W was really nice too, I thought we’d get a crabby old farmer but he wasn’t like that at all.”
Student

“Aye, we got on brilliant with W, you couldn’t find a better person.” Student

“He’s just a great guy, absolutely brilliant.” Student

“I think it’s all about getting the right farmer, I don’t think you could find someone better than W, he just has the craic with you; he’s like a good friend; you could chat to him about anything.” Student

“He knows how to chat to us and have good craic with us.” Student

The farmer’s approach was to guide rather than explicitly teach the students and to support them in learning for themselves by doing:

“One thing I learned very quickly was not to lecture them, I hate being lectured to myself, I’d be more inclined to tell them stories. If you try teaching or telling them something, these guys will just sit back and won’t take it in but by going out and doing it, and saying; ‘listen lads, we’re doing this because of...or this is why we’re doing it’. Like some of them were wondering why we needed to get on with the everyday tasks with the calves at X time and I’d ask them would they like to be hungry and sitting on dirty bedding and they got it then.”

All of the feedback from the students suggests that this approach was very successful and that the atmosphere was positive, respectful and unpressurised, particularly important for these students who may have had negative previous experiences of formal education. This in turn seems to have made the students more receptive to learning:

“He’s not trying to be a teacher, he explains it, he’ll show you how to do it. He helps us out if we don’t know what to do.” Student

“He’s very calm, he would make sure you have it right but in a nice sort of way.” Student

“You wouldn’t be scared to ask him for help, he’d be patient. He’s well easy to chat to like.”
Student

“W is a lot easier to work with than a teacher, he’ll have the craic with you.” Student

“We have learned from him, farm and non-farm stuff, he has lots of good stories.” Student

Of particular note was his apparent ability to encourage the students to try new things and his demonstrable faith in their inherent capacity. He explained his own approach:

“Like they might start off saying ‘I can’t do it’ and you just encourage them and say you can and then they can and they feel so happy with themselves....I knew they were doing a lot of things for the first time and that it takes time to learn, the same as it would be for me. They can all do it, they just need to build the skills over time.”

Interviews with students and with the LCA Coordinator confirmed that this approach worked very well and encouraged the students to try new things and to push themselves outside of their natural comfort zone:

“W would be good at pushing you to try things, like things you wouldn’t think you could do.” Student

“He’s very straight forward with you, he just tells you what he wants doing and you go and do it and he does have faith in you to do it. After two or three weeks you get used to the routine, like one of the jobs is cleaning the milking parlour and now we just start doing it without having to be asked.” Student

“I never would have thought I could work on a farm but since I’ve come out here, I’ve seen that I could do more. Maybe for a summer job, I’ve never really gone and worked until I came out here. Now I think I could.” Student

Overall, the LCA Coordinator confirmed that the relationship which developed between the farmer and the students – and between herself and farmer – was characterised by mutual respect and a positive approach:

“I do think the personality of W is key, I don’t know would another farmer be quite as good. For a start, he’s been a father of teenagers, he’s a bit quirky, left of field. He’s very positive and encouraging without patronising them. He was so easy for me to deal with too which is important. Sometimes people outside the school can be very critical of the kids and you do get annoyed and protective of them. He wasn’t ringing me complaining. Every contact has been positive and he sends through pictures and videos.” LCA Coordinator

3.4 Benefits to Students

Students themselves, the LCA Coordinator and the farmer articulated a range of benefits from these short Social Farming placements. Students were exposed to what was for most, a **novel environment** and a novel experience. As the LCA Coordinator noted:

“This is a whole new world and a different one for the participants who may be grappling with all sorts of problems.”

For some of these students, the experience has provided a respite and a positive and life-enhancing experience in the midst of what can be very challenging personal circumstances. The LCA Coordinator shared her reaction to one girl's experience:

"One of girls, when she put her hand up and said she would go, I thought my heart would break. The excitement of the first day and the pictures that came back, the happiness on her face. She has really loved it."

It exposed the students to some of the fundamentals of life – the production of food, the care for the environment and the animals, the value of team work – and this seems to have provided **a grounding experience**, particularly those students who are living more isolated lives or spending a lot of their time indoors or gaming. The LCA Coordinator reflected:

"Just being outside, it's very foreign to some of them, they literally go from school to home and they don't leave the house over the weekend. How good is this for these kids, to get a glimmer. Imagine telling mam and dad about it. I know one of the boys, Grandad has a farm but he's never done anything on it but maybe in the future he could or could at least have a conversation with Grandad about it. "

She shared the progression of one student over the course of the placement:

"You know it's funny, at the start of the year, he was going on about doing gaming design, and you want to encourage them, but now all of a sudden he's talking about doing more practical things, that might earn some money in the summer."

Most of the students interviewed articulated that they **had learned something about themselves** from the Social Farming placement and that it has expanded their own sense of who they are and what they can do:

"You find out a wild lot about yourself." Student

"I surprised myself with the things I was able to do. Like when we were milking the cows, I didn't think I'd be up for it but I was, and it was cool to learn about it also." Student

"I'm a lot stronger than what I think I am. I discovered that about myself. One day we were trying to lift a trailer out of the field and it was well stuck, we'd put the poles and all underneath and I actually realised I was quite strong. I was wild happy with myself." Student

"I was thinking it would be dirty and it'd be stinking but it's not that bad. I thought it was going to be way worse, I was so used to sitting there with my nails and my makeup and this is the complete opposite but it's really good." Student

Linked to this is the increased **sense of pride, confidence and satisfaction** from having contributed in a very real way to the life of the farm or of having mastered new tasks themselves. The farmer shared two stories which demonstrate this:

“Today we went in to feed the calves, the young lad couldn’t get the calf to suck, the calf was starving hungry and just over-eager and so was he, so it was hard for them to connect. And he was getting advice from everybody. But you know he stuck with it and finally he was able to do it and he was really proud of himself. He felt it and I know how that feels.”

“One girl, was all going on about the smell of the poo and all that and complaining a bit. That all changed when she got into the digger³, the transformation was unreal, I stood there open mouthed. And the concentration on her face, she didn’t want to get out. She mastered it, I was telling her she might have a future in it, why not? She was a different girl after it but it wasn’t from me telling her she was good, she knew it herself.”

One of the most positive features of the placement experience was **the development of confidence and the capacity to use their own initiative** over the eight weeks. As the farmer noted;

“A week or two in, they knew where the yard scrapers were and just went and got them and started...They could see what was needed, asking me will I run down and get that, shall we do this.”

“There were groups there milking cows, calving cows, nearly every one hand-fed and bedded the calves. They went from standing up looking over your shoulder to coming in and doing things themselves unasked.”

Overall, it has **built the students confidence in their own capacity and skills;**

“Aye, I would feel a bit more confident to go out and get summer work farming maybe.”
Student

“Coming out here boosted my confidence a good bit. I feel a bit more confident in my abilities, especially after getting to try new things, like welding⁴.” Student

“I’d be a bit more confident, I didn’t think I’d be able to do it. Am better at getting stuck in now.” Student

The Social Farming experience has also contributed **to building and consolidating friendships** amongst the students, within what the Coordinator refers to as the ‘LCA family’.

“We were pretty good friends before we came out but expanded since.” Student

“It’s been a good way to get to know one another better, having the craic and all.” Student

³ As noted previously, this was following a full risk and safety assessment and with the supervision and guidance of the farmer.

⁴ As above

The farmer noted that some of the students who were particularly shy and withdrawn have come out of themselves at least somewhat and noted that working alongside one another on farm tasks provides natural topics for conversation and a relatively non-pressurised environment in which chat and craic can be had.

Amongst the goals of the LCA Coordinator is **to bring back the student's dignity** and to **raise the profile of the LCA Programme** within the school; the Social Farming placements have clearly contributed to the former but also to the latter. There was a notable buzz about Social Farming around the wider school population with many students envious of the opportunity provided to the LCA students. It has also highlighted for students the benefits and gains from remaining in school and undertaking the Leaving Cert Applied Programme which has the kind of flexible and person-centred approach which enables this kind of activity to happen. For most students, it was certainly one the highlights of the school year, even in the context of a range of external opportunities and days out outside of the school gates. As one student put it:

"The LCA programme is really good. But this stands out. It's just been a whole new experience." Student

Perhaps three or four of the students hope to **work in farming or in the broad agricultural field** when they finish school and the placement has further confirmed their interest in and enjoyment of that job and way of life:

"Oh aye, I could never see myself not farming. I was very sorry when this [placement] came to an end" Student

"Farming is something different every day, you're not stuck doing the same thing like with labouring where you're just mixing." Student

Another small number of students now feel they have the skills and confidence to do some farm work part-time or during the busy summer months for neighbouring farmers. The LCA Coordinator focused on the wider societal benefits of engaging the interest of these young people and showing them their own value:

"It's about keeping these young people in Inishowen, off the dole, giving them a chance of a decent life. It's about them seeing that these people who are often on the margins can be part of society. We need them to stay around."

As noted by the farmer, some of this cohort of young people are relatively unfit and live relatively sedentary lives and that the everyday farm work has been a challenge for some of them. The LCA Coordinator confirmed that this would be case for some but that this experience has stretched these students and is of benefit to their overall health and wellbeing:

"They find the early mornings hard, on the farm there's nowhere to hide. You've got to physically do something, they wouldn't be used to it. It's really good to see that. And to feel that yeah, it's hard work but to go and do it and then go home and have a shower and feel actually tired from working and the sense of satisfaction that comes from that."

A small number interviewed at the end of their placements noted that they do feel **physically stronger and more able** having completed their eight-week placement.

“I do feel a bit more able for the physical work now” Student

“Now when I’m in PE, I feel I’m a lot quicker and stronger because you’re gaining muscle or whatever. You’re going up and down them fields, you’re always on the go, always busy.”
Student

3.5 Challenges and Learning Points for the School

Overall, the Social Farming Placements which these 13 young people have undertaken have been an overwhelming success from the perspective of the students, the school and the farmer. A small number of challenges emerged from school’s perspective, which are largely centred on the logistics of timetabling and taking the students out of the school on a full day per week. As the students are in small classes, taking three or four students out can be disruptive to the overall dynamic of the class and can be challenging for teachers in getting key assignments done on time. Overall, there is agreement amongst the core teaching team on Leaving Cert Applied that the benefits outweigh the challenges and that the programme has exactly the kind of flexibility which can enable this kind of activity to be facilitated. However, if Social Farming placements are to run again, this may have to be managed more effectively in terms of the overall time-tabling, using some of the time allocated to work experience for social farming, etc.

The Coordinator would like in the future to link the Social Farming activity more closely to the curriculum and to other activities within the school and particularly to subjects such as Agricultural Science, where the teacher has been highly supportive and engaged. Some of the students are linking their experience on the farm to careers in the broad agricultural field as part of their career investigations process and this is to be further encouraged.

The cost of funding Social Farming is another key challenge for the school, operating as it does within tight budgets. However, this is being set against the particular value which it is delivering to the school and the students. The school management is committed to Social Farming continuing for students coming into Leaving Cert Applied in 2019/2020.

4. Overall Conclusions and Learning

This case study has described the first Social Farming placement to have taken place with a group of Leaving Cert Applied students in Ireland. It was a novel experience for the school, the students, the social farmer and indeed for Social Farming Ireland with all parties learning as they went along. The placements were also relatively short in duration. Nonetheless, some important conclusions and learning can be drawn which are of relevance both to this school and to the over 300 post-primary schools which offer Leaving Cert Applied:

1. There is clearly a **strong synergy between the active, practical nature of the Leaving Cert Applied Programme and the Social Farming model**. The engagement and learning associated with Social Farming happens outside of traditional/formal educational settings in the every-day, live environment of the family farm and in a relaxed, informal and highly practical way. Social farmers work very closely *alongside* participants and activities are carried out with their support, guidance and encouragement. Research carried out by Pobal (2017) with young people accessing SICAP supports suggests that novel, unique ways of learning – such as that which take place in Social Farming – are much more effective in engaging excluded young people than traditional ‘chalk and talk’. The positive feedback from the students in this case study confirms the validity of this finding.
2. The Leaving Cert Applied Programme is inherently student-centred and sets out to uncover and recognise the talents and skills of each individual students. Social Farming is also based on a strongly **person-centred approach**, with the diversity of the farm environment and the small size of the group ensuring that that there are opportunities for each individual to find things which interest them and to derive benefits which are meaningful to their lives and circumstances.
3. Linked to this can be a **process of ‘discovery’** which the Social Farming experience can facilitate for both the students themselves and people who work with them, where latent interests and skills are uncovered. The Social Farming experience has helped the students to learn about the farm but perhaps more so to learn about themselves. The example in this case study of the girl successfully operating the digger⁵ is demonstrative of this potential. This discovery process can also enable students and their teachers/career guidance counsellors to identify opportunities and progression pathways which they might not previously have considered.
4. More broadly, the students in this case study clearly developed greater **confidence and a sense of pride** in their own capacities, in their ability to learn and to grow and in the contribution they have to make, all of which can be underdeveloped amongst this cohort of students. The commitment to going out to the farm weekly, to carrying out necessary and routine tasks without complaint – especially those around the care and welfare of the animals – has also developed the sense of **personal responsibility** of the students and their sense of being a valued member of a team.

⁵ As noted previously, this was following a full risk and safety assessment and with the supervision and guidance of the farmer.

5. This case study demonstrates the **holistic nature** of the Social Farming model of support and its capacity to address many dimensions of the well-being and development of participants such as those from the Leaving Cert Applied Programme. These include personal and occupational development, the uncovering and building of skills and knowledge, improved mental and physical health and well-being, and the creation and deepening of social connections and friendships. Crucially, this is done in a very ordinary and natural way, with a light touch and outside of a professional context. Above all, these placements provided a **positive, enjoyable and life-enhancing experience** for these students, many of whom face significant challenges in their lives. With the increased focus on promoting wellness amongst all students in the secondary school sector, Social Farming may also have wider potential outside the LCA student cohort.
6. The **relationship of the students with the social farmer** – characterised by good humour, mutual respect and encouragement – was key to the success of the placement. It demonstrates the value of providing not just the setting (i.e. the farm) but also the right person who has the patience, the open-mindedness and the sense of fun necessary to really connect with these young people and to create a positive and relaxed atmosphere.
7. For those students from farm families or who actively wish to pursue farming, Social Farming provides an opportunity to spend time on another farm but also gives these students a chance to ‘shine’, to demonstrate and share their own skills and knowledge. The farm setting and the physical nature of many of the activities can be a better cultural fit for some of these young men in particular than more class-based activities.
8. The impact of this experience was perhaps particularly notable for those normal daily lives are far removed from the more practical, outdoors nature of farm life. In these cases, it has provided the opportunity for students to have entirely new experiences and to develop a positive connection with nature, the land and animals, all grounded in their own local communities and in the ‘real’ world of farming. The opportunity to actively contribute to the life and welfare of the farm, and particularly the farm animals, has also built the self-esteem of the students and widened their own understanding of their value and potential. The encouragement provided by the social farmer, and his belief in their capacities, were key to pushing this cohort of students in particular out of their comfort zone.
9. From being on the farm and working alongside the social farmer, these students have been immersed in a positive and pro-social environment. They have learned some valuable everyday lessons on the value of hard work, on the relationship between effort and reward, on the need to take direction, on the benefits of working together, and on what the LCA Coordinator refers to as ‘the fundamentals of life’. This may be particularly valuable for those who have challenging or chaotic family circumstances or who have struggled to find a place in the school environment.

Overall, this case study has demonstrated that Social Farming is an inherently positive and life-enhancing experience for participants. More, it has shown how the ordinary working farm can provide a unique environment in which to deliver benefits and positive outcomes across multiple dimensions

of development and well-being for at least some of the young people undertaking the Leaving Cert Applied Programme. The increasing availability of social farms across the country provides opportunities for LCA coordinators and school management seeking innovative options for their students which draw on the natural assets of people and place which exist in their own local communities.

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