SOCIAL FARMING IRELAND

New Opportunities + Connecting People + Enhancing Lives

Social Farming & Healthy Ireland

....nurturing health and wellbeing using ordinary farms

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

CEDRA

Leitrim Development company

West Limerick Resources

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Introduction and Key Messages

A range of international and national studies (Hine et al., 2008; Elings, 2012; Leck et al., 2015; Bragg & Atkins, 2016; SoFI, 2019 (a); SoFI 2019 (b)) have demonstrated that Social Farming can provide a unique and community-based setting in which to deliver benefits and positive outcomes across multiple dimensions of health and well-being for people with a range of needs. Between 2017 and 2019, 128 people supported by 32 individual services across eight counties received support from social farmers to enhance their lives and health outcomes in placements commissioned through funding or co-funding from Healthy Ireland. This publication provides learning and insights from this experience and demonstrates how Social Farming has contributed and can contribute further to meeting the broad goals of Healthy Ireland, the government-led initiative aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of everyone living in Ireland.

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

- Section 2 looks at the **international and national evidence for the health benefits of Social Farming.** It highlights three areas in which Social Farming is of particular benefit: mental health and well-being; physical health and well-being; and social connection. It concludes with a description of the **synergies** between the goals of Healthy Ireland and the Social Farming model and practice.

- Section 3 provides a brief description of the Social Farming **activity to date which has been commissioned as a direct result of funding or co-funding from Healthy Ireland**.

- Section 4 provides a detailed **case-study of** Social Farming activity funded by Healthy Limerick and highlights the benefits and outcomes experienced by the participants in this case. It closes with a description of some of the challenges experienced and of the key learning points.

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

1. Social Farming has developed significantly in Ireland in recent years and growing numbers of people from a range of backgrounds are now being given the choice and opportunity to take part and to experience positive health outcomes on ordinary family farms. Healthy Ireland have been one of the key champions and innovators in supporting this activity in a number of counties since 2017. As well as improving health and reducing health inequalities for the individual participants concerned, support has helped extend the reach and impact of Social Farming nationally.

2. The international and national evidence to date and the case study in section 4 demonstrate that there are **clear synergies between the Social Farming model of support and the goals set out in the Healthy Ireland framework**. They also show that Social Farming has a real role to play in creating a healthier and more equal society. Social Farming draws participants from groups in society who usually have poorer health profiles and outcomes, thus helping to reduce health inequalities. It provides a strongly holistic approach with multiple dimensions of well-being addressed, including physical health and vitality, mental health and well-being and social connectivity. Activity is set in a natural, social and community context, with greater potential for impact and long-term change than more individualised or specialised approaches. It also empowers and enables people to participate in everyday, ordinary occupation and physical activities which they choose and which are of interest and value to themselves and others. Spending time in the healthy, prosocial environment of the family farm has also provided opportunities for participants to learn about and put in place positive lifestyle changes around diet, sleep and exercise.

3. With national reach and an ever-growing number of farmers trained to provide Social Farming supports in every corner of Ireland, Social Farming has a role to play in delivering on the Healthy Ireland goals significantly beyond the levels of activity to date.

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

1.1 Background and Definition of Social Farming

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

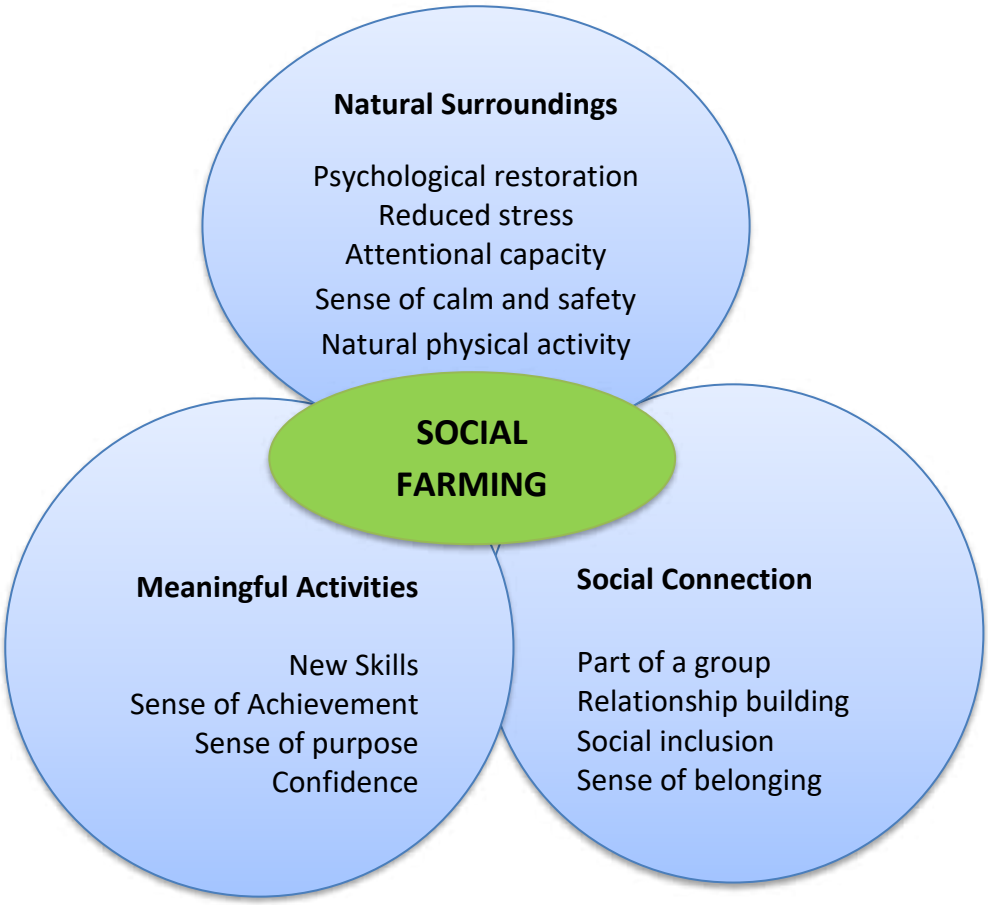

Figure 1: Three Key Elements of Social Farming (Adapted from Bragg and Atkins (2016:46))

In the Irish context, the farm is not a specialised "treatment" farm – as is sometimes the case in other countries – but rather, remains a typical working farm where people take part in day-to-day farm activities in a non-clinical environment. While most social farms are small to medium sized holdings which operate mixed farming systems, there is growing variety in the type of farms which engage in Social Farming. These include very small horticultural units up to large operations of many hundreds of acres, with some farms specialising in particular areas such as equestrian, horticulture, floriculture or woodland management[1].

People who have successfully engaged in and benefited from Social Farming in Ireland include: people with mental ill health; people with disabilities (intellectual, physical, sensory); the long term unemployed; young people and especially those who are NEET[2]; older people; people accessing homelessness services, people recovering from substance misuse; and refugees. A wide range of benefits of Social Farming to participants in terms of health and well-being have been identified in both national and international studies (Hine et al., 2008; Elings, 2012; Leck et al., 2015; Bragg & Atkins, 2016; SoFI, 2019 (a); SoFI 2019 (b)) and will be explored in further detail in Sections 2. In summary, these benefits include:

- Improvements in psychological health and reduced stress and anxiety levels from spending time in the fresh air, in nature, working with animals and plants
- The opportunity to reconnect with nature and with the basic elements and cycles of life
- Improved physical health and vitality from engaging in every-day, natural, productive activities on the farm
- Improvements in sleep patterns
- An increased awareness of the value of healthy, natural foods and improvements in diet
- The development of social relationships and connections with the farmer, the farm family and with the wider community

1.2 Social Farming Activity in Ireland

Social Farming, also known in the European context by a variety of names such as care farming and farming for health, has developed at varying rates at the European level in the last decades. It is considered at an advanced stage of development in the Netherlands, Norway and Italy and is moderately developed in countries such as France, Finland, Germany and the UK**. Ireland falls somewhere between what we could describe as pioneering and moderately developed status; it is a relatively new concept and practice but the number and diversity of social farms is growing and the network of stakeholders is developing and consolidating.** Box 1 overleaf describes the structure and governance of Social Farming Ireland, the key national-level organisation progressing and developing Social Farming in Ireland.

[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

Box 1: Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)

Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG operating **Social Farming Ireland,** the National Social Farming Office, has a 4-year contract (2017-2020) with the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) under the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund for the development and progression of Social Farming at national level. It is based Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim and 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 (West Region), West Limerick Resources CLG (South-West Region) and Waterford Leader Partnership CLG, (South-East Region) and the Border-Midlands Region is based in Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG.

SoFI provides a wide range of services and initiatives which support the development of Social Farming nationally, including: dissemination of information on Social Farming; farmer recruitment, training and development; engaging with participants and their advocates who want to choose social farming and working with health, social care and other services who wish to commission and activate placements; and evidence-based research activity and policy development.

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

For more information on the activities of SoFI and Social Farming in general go to the website www.socialfarmingireland.ie.

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

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

From a low base, predominately in the border counties of the Republic, Social Farming **activity** In Ireland has grown rapidly in the last four years. Since late 2016/2017, over 8,500 participant days have been delivered to over 830 supported participants. There are currently almost 100 active, trained social farmers and a further 75 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. Since 2016, Social Farming Ireland has engaged with over 200 service providers in the statutory as well as community and voluntary sectors. The range of services with whom social farming is working is also growing and now includes: HSE Mental Health services in a number of CHOs[4], Mental Health Ireland, a range of services working with people with Intellectual Disabilities, advocacy organisations such as Down Syndrome Ireland, Local Development Companies (SICAP), a range of local organisations working with long-term unemployed, Foróige, Refugee and Asylum Seeker programmes and homelessness services.

Nationally in 2018 over €38,000 was accessed through the Healthy Ireland Fund to commission health outcomes from social farming and a further €35,000 in 2019. Over the two years, 128 participants were supported through this funding with average placements being 10 weeks long. These participants were supported by a variety of service providers such as HSE Mental Health Services, intellectual disability service providers, homelessness services, services for the long term unemployed, refugee services and addiction services. Intellectual disability services received some 62% of the funding, with Mental health services 23% and the remaining 15% allocated between the other types of services in the broad health and social care sphere.

1.3 Values of Social Farming

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

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

2. Social Farming and Health

As noted previously, a range of international and national studies have highlighted the benefits and outcomes of Social Farming for participants in terms of improved health and well-being. Some of these are common to all participant groups – such as increases in physical activity – and others such as decreases in anxiety levels may be of particular value to some participant groups, such as those experiencing mental health challenges. This section will highlight three areas in which Social Farming is of particular benefit in terms of health and well-being: mental health and well-being; physical health and well-being; and social connection. It concludes with a description of the synergies between the goals of Healthy Ireland and the Social Farming model and practice.

2.1 Mental Health Benefits

A range of studies draw attention to the role of nature-based interventions such as Social Farming in promoting mental wellbeing. The notion that time in nature can be restorative and nurturing is central to a number of influential theories which have emerged to valorise the relationship of man with nature, including the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) and 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. – in enhancing human health and well-being, particularly for those who have been dis-enfranchised or who have experienced trauma.

Similarly, Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) hypothesises that interaction with nature has the capacity to renew our attention, our energy and our sense of ourselves (Clay, 2001). Social Farming has the potential to provide some key components of a restorative environment described by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989). These include the opportunity to 'be away' from one's usual thoughts and concerns, the chance to have one's attention held but in a way which doesn't require intense thought (i.e. fascination) and the experience of being immersed and engaged in a novel but still comfortable and relaxing environment. According to Elsey (2016, 99-100), the process of non-taxing engagement allows the mind to relax, thereby "reducing the constant bombardment of worries and concerns that are such a feature of mental ill-health". Di Iacovo and O'Connor (eds.) (2009) draw attention to the value of the quietness and sense of space and peace associated with the farm environment with far less stimulus than more urban areas. The results of studies by Gonzalez et al. (2011) on the impact of a therapeutic horticulture intervention show statistically significant increases in attentional capacity and statistically significant declines in depression levels, stress levels and

perceived rumination amongst participants both directly following the intervention and in three-month follow up assessments.

A number of studies (Loue et al., 2014; Pedersen et al., 2016) draw attention to the new or renewed sense of connection with nature which Social Farming facilitates and nurtures and the benefits of this connection to participants. Loue et al. (2014) refer to the benefits associated with direct observation of and connection to biological cycles, such as those of plant growth while Pedersen et al. (2016) report on themes such as excitement about and absorption in the growth process throughout the season emerging in discussions with participants. The opportunity which Social Farming usually provides to work alongside and care for animals has been shown to be highly beneficial. A number of research studies focused on animal-assisted interventions have reported declines in levels of anxiety and depression and improvements in client self-efficacy (Berget et al., 2008; Berget et al., 2011; Pedersen et al., 2011). In their meta-study on the role of farm animals in providing care at social farms, Hassink et al. (2017) identified a wide range of benefits 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; and being physically active in very natural, implicit way.

A large body of literature highlights the general benefits of occupation in mental health (Haertl and Miyuki 2006; Lim et al., 2007). In their review of this literature, Kelly et al. (2010) reveal many similarities in the underlying beneficial characteristics of occupation, including: a re-established routine; skill acquisition; competence, productivity and feelings of meaning and purpose; normalisation; a safe environment; and a sense of social support and cohesion. An option such as Social Farming has a role to play in providing meaningful activity in the context of the placement itself (discussed below) but also in providing opportunities for skill acquisition, confidence building etc., which may progress participants towards further training, supported employment, part-time employment or in some cases, full mainstream employment (Iancu, 2013).

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

This theme of the social farm as a space and place of wellbeing also emerged strongly in Kaley et al.'s study (2018) amongst people with intellectual disability, 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.

2.2 Physical Health and Well-being

The physical health benefits of Social Farming are multiple and of relevance to all of the people and groups people who take part in social farming. The farm environment provides significant opportunity for a wide variety of physical activities and movements; walking around the farm, often on hills and on uneven surfaces, bending, stretching, digging, forking, lifting, etc. which can develop the physical fitness, strength and agility of participants. As Elsey (2016) 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 formal interventions which are labelled 'exercise'.

A further benefit of Social Farming to all social farming participants 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. Participants in research undertaken on Irish social farms (SOFI, 2019a, 2019b) spoke of the simple pleasure of being physically tired at the end of the day from having done something instead of being tired from inactivity. A number of participants in the SOFI research also spoke of an increased awareness of the importance and value of healthier and home-cooked food and of changes to their own eating habits outside of the placement days.

One of the groups who may benefit particularly from Social farming in terms of improvements to physical health are people with intellectual and physical disabilities. 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, 2010). Kaley et al. (2018) 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. 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.

The opportunity to do physical labour was a key benefit for a large number of participants in research undertaken by Social Farming Ireland amongst participants with mental health difficulties (SOFI, 2019a). In some cases, this was due to strong interest in and preference for physical work, and in

others, an awareness that much of their daily life was overly sedentary because they weren't working or in a daily routine.

2.3 Social Connection

As Wang et al. (2017) note, there has been a growing realisation among policy makers and practitioners that social relations play an influential role in mental health and psychological wellbeing. This focus on social connection is reflected in many of the key policy documents guiding practice in health and social care. In A Vision for Change, for example, reference is made throughout to the importance of building service user's social capital, to the need for integration into mainstream community life, to the importance of work and other shared activities in building social connections and thereby promoting well-being and recovery, to the role of peer support and to the significant value of the community as a resource to support mental health and well-being. Recent research on mental health and well-being in rural Scotland (Support in Mind Scotland, 2017) found that there is a strong need and desire to create ways for people to connect with one another but that the strong preference is for these connections to be "low-level", in non-clinical and informal settings, through trusted people and networks. Social Farming provides a community-based and non-clinical environment in which social connections and relationships can be formed in a more natural way.

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

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

A further important component of the Social Farming model is the group nature of activities and the opportunities this provides to create connections and relationships between members of the group and a broader sense of community. Hassink et al. (2010) reported on how one of their participants with severe mental illness indicated that in their everyday life they were alone, but when attending the care farm, they found themselves part of a community where they felt accepted, safe and respected. A study by Gonzalez et al. (2011) found that levels of group cohesiveness correlated positively with improvements in mental health and perceived stress and a majority of participants in their study reported a higher level of social activity after the intervention. As Elsey (2016) has noted, working on the farm provides a non-threatening opportunity for social interaction, where 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 working side by side on the task at hand. This opportunity is particularly valuable for those who experience social anxiety.

2.4 Social Farming and Healthy Ireland: Synergies and Potential

The Healthy Ireland Vision is:

A Healthy Ireland, where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential, where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone's responsibility.

The Healthy Ireland goals which are of particular relevance to Social Farming are Goals 1, 2 and 4, i.e.

> **Goal 1:** Increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life This means addressing risk factors and promoting protective factors at every stage of life - from pre-natal, through early childhood, adolescence, adulthood and into old age, to support lifelong health and wellbeing.
>
> **Goal 2:** Reduce health inequalities. Health and wellbeing are not evenly distributed across Irish society. This goal requires not only interventions to target particular health risks, but also a broad focus on addressing the wider social determinants of health – the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age – to create economic, social, cultural and physical environments that foster healthy living.
>
> **Goal 4:** Create an environment where every individual and sector of society can play their part in achieving a healthy Ireland. It is beyond the capability of any one Government Department or organisation to promote society-wide health and wellbeing. This can only be done through society-wide involvement in and engagement with health and wellbeing promotion and improvement activities - from individuals making positive lifestyle choices and projects run by community and local groups, to policy and legislation.

As the literature shows and as the case study in section 4 demonstrates, Social Farming can deliver significant health benefits and outcomes to individual participants with a range of needs. More

broadly, the Social Farming model and Social Farming practice is wholly in line with the overall vision and with the main goals of the Healthy Ireland framework and has further potential to deliver good outcomes throughout the country. The **specific synergies** include:

- Participants in Social Farming typically come from groups in society who usually have poorer health profiles and outcomes, such as people with intellectual and physical disabilities and people experiencing mental health difficulties. Social Farming provides an opportunity to *reduce health inequalities* and *to increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life.*
- Social farming provides a strongly holistic approach with multiple dimensions of well-being addressed, including physical health and vitality, mental health and well-being and social connectivity.
- It empowers and enables people to participate in everyday, ordinary occupation and physical activities which are of interest and value to themselves and others. Activities on social farms may not come labelled as 'exercise' – which may in some cases alienate people - but will deliver benefits in terms of overall fitness, strength, agility, etc. in a very natural and intuitive way.
- Social Farming activity is set in a social and local community context, with greater potential for impact and long-term change than more individualised approaches.
- It draws on and utilises local natural resources and assets which are already present in rural areas, demanding no special equipment or additional new resources.

3. Social Farming and Healthy Ireland: Activity to Date (2017-2019)

There has been significant and growing activity funded by Healthy Ireland on social farms since 2017.

- **One hundred and twenty-eight participants** in total have undertaken Social Farming placements wholly or partly funded using Healthy Ireland funding.

- Eleven participants completed two blocks of placements using Healthy Ireland funding, giving a total of 139 placement blocks.

- **Thirty-two individual services** around the country have engaged with supporting the people they work with in availing of this opportunity using Healthy Ireland funding.

- Activity to date has been concentrated in eight counties: **Tipperary, Limerick, Waterford, Leitrim, Kildare, Louth, Mayo and Sligo.**

- Activity has taken place on **25 different farms**, all of which have their own unique identity and range of activities and offerings.

The **specific services which have supported people to avail of social farming supports** are listed in Table 1 overleaf. To summarise:

- **62%** of participants availing of social farming supports which were funded by Healthy Ireland were supported by an **Intellectual Disability service.**

- **23%** were supported by a **service working with people with Mental Health difficulties**

- **15%** had other **general health concerns and were interacting with a range of other services in the broad health and social care sphere,** including homeless services, services working with the long term unemployed, addiction services, and those working with refugees. Social Farming supports have a role to play in meeting a range of needs and there has been growing interest from people and services outside of the core areas of intellectual disability and mental health. It is therefore expected that this figure of 15% will increase in the future.

Table 1: List of Services from which participants were supported by type, 2017-2019.

Type of Service	No of participants overall	Service supporting participants	No. of Participants by supporting service
Intellectual Disability Services	**79**	Rehabcare Limerick	11
		St Cronans, Roscrea	8
		Moorehaven Centre, Tipperary Town	6
		Carriglea services, Waterford	6
		New Haven, Sligo	6
		Down Syndrome Ireland, Waterford	5
		St John of Gods, Kildare	5
		Western Care, Mayo	4
		Gortboy, Limerick	4
		Brothers of Charity, Waterford	3
		Brothers of Charity, Limerick	3
		Rehabcare, Louth	3
		St Joseph's Foundation, Charleville	3
		Stewarts Care, Dublin	3
		Saol Beo, Leitrim	3
		NLN, Carrick on Shannon	3
		KARE Kildare	1
		Gateway Community Care Ltd.	1
		Rehabcare Waterford	1
Mental Health Services	**30**	Louth Mental Health services (HSE)	12
		Rehab Psychiatry Services, Limk. (HSE)	4
		Nenagh Mental Health Service (HSE)	3
		Cashel Community MH ((HSE)	3
		Waterford Mental Health (HSE)	3
		Churchtown Day Hospital (HSE)	2
		MH Day Hospital Kilmallock	2
		Kildare/West Wicklow MH (HSE)	1

Other Services	**19**	SICAP, Leitrim Dev. Co Limerick Homeless Service (HSE) Focus FRC, Killeshandra Turas Addiction Services, Louth Refugee Resettlement Prog., Mayo TACU Youth service/FRC, Mayo	6 4 3 3 2 1

Table 2 overleaf summarises Healthy Ireland funded/co-funded **social farming activity by county.** Limerick, the county upon which the case study in this report is based, had the most significant amount of social farming activity with 33 people getting to experience social farming since 2017. Tipperary, Waterford, Louth and Leitrim have also had significant activity.

Table 2 also outlines the **funding model in each county.** To summarise:

- In counties Sligo, Leitrim and Louth, the 40 placements which took place were 100% commissioned using funding from Healthy Ireland. This represents 31% of the total number of placements.

- In the remaining five counties - Limerick, Tipperary, Waterford, Kildare and Mayo – Healthy Ireland funded a proportion of the cost of the 88 placements.

- In the case of 72 placements (or 81% of the total number of co-funded placements), this funding was at 50% of the placement costs.

- In the remaining 19% of co-funded placements, funding was provided at between 40% and 60% of the cost of placements.

- Co-funding for placements came from two main sources. In the case of 46 of the placements (or 52% of the co-funded placements) co-funding was provided by the service supporting the participant. In 39 of the placements (or 44 % of co-funded placements), the co-funding came from the Social Farming Ireland Sampling Fund.

Table 2: Summary of HI funding for Social Farming by county, including funding model

County	No of Participants	No. of Services	Average proportion of funding from HI for each placement	Other funding sources for each placement
Limerick	**33**	8	50%	- Services (19 participants) - SoFI Sampling Fund (11 participants) - Parents of participants (3)
Tipperary	**20**	4	40-50%	- SoFI Sampling Fund (11 participants) -Services (9 participants)
Louth	**18**	3	100%	n/a
Waterford	**18**	4	50-60%	- Services
Leitrim	**16**	5	100%	n/a
Kildare	**10**	4	50%	- SoFI Sampling Fund
Mayo	**7**	3	50%	- SoFI Sampling Fund
Sligo	**6**	1	100%	n/a

4. Social Farming and Healthy Limerick: A Case Study

4.1 Introduction to Healthy Limerick

Healthy Limerick is part of the Healthy Cities and Counties programme which promotes lifelong health and wellbeing and provides a means where local issues can influence national policy. It is based on the concept of Healthy Communities/Cities which aim to promote a comprehensive and whole-system approach to planning for health and wellbeing, where health is everyone's business. Healthy Limerick is funded by Healthy Ireland and is a Limerick Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) initiative that is strategically led by an LCDC subcommittee. At an operational level, Healthy Limerick is managed by Limerick City and County Council and is embedded in the Social Development Directorate (in Urban and Rural Community Development). A full-time Coordinator oversees the coordination and development of Healthy Limerick. Rather than having a specific Healthy Limerick plan – the approach taken in some other counties – the approach has been and remains to links actions to and work in support of the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) and associated plans. Throughout 2018, the LECP was supported by Healthy Limerick and Healthy Ireland without the creation of new strategies or reporting structures and this remained the approach in 2019.

The work of Healthy Limerick is informed by two key national policies: *Healthy Ireland: A National Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025* and *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government.* The **stated purpose** of Healthy Limerick is:

> *"We will improve health, positive wellbeing and quality of life by ensuring all sectors are aware of and collaborate to achieve a healthy Limerick working with a social determinants approach to health."*

The key cross-cutting theme which underpins the ethos and activities of Healthy Limerick is **Social Connectedness**, with a focus on what makes people's lives go well. The choice of this theme was based on the strong relationship between health and social connectedness. The factors which will build social connectedness in Limerick are *physical environment*, *accessibility of services and opportunities, active participation* and *a culture of connectedness*. As we have noted in Section 2, improved social connectedness is a key benefit and outcome of Social Farming. The strongly holistic approach inherent to the Social Farming model is also in line with both the focus on social connectedness and the social determinants approach to health. Overall then, as confirmed by the Healthy Limerick Coordinator (HLC), Social Farming is a good fit with the overall vision, goals and themes of Healthy Limerick.

4.2 Social Farming Activity Funded by Healthy Limerick.

In 2018/2019, Healthy Limerick supported 33 people to enhance their health and wellbeing through the commissioning of Social Farming placements, the highest number in any county. These participants came from eight different services: four in the intellectual disability sector; three in the mental health sector; and one in the homeless services sector.

Service	**No. of participants**
RehabCare, Limerick City	11
Rehabilitation Psychiatry Services, St Josephs (HSE)	4
HSE Homeless Services, Limerick City	4
Gortboy (ID Service)	4
St Joseph's Foundation, Charleville	3
Brothers of Charity	3
Churchtown Day Hospital (HSE)	2
Mental Health Service Kilmallock	2

People generally attended a social farm for one day per week for 10 weeks and were on average 50% funded by Healthy Limerick with the remaining 50% paid by the services from which the participants came, by the Social Farming Ireland Sampling Fund and in the case of one service, by the parents of participants. As noted by the Social Farming Ireland Regional Development Officer, this collaborative funding model was in tune with Healthy Limerick's policy of encouraging organisations to come together and work together. The placements took place across five farms; one near Rathkeale (Farm A), one in Killaloe in Co. Clare (Farm B), one near Clarina, one near Shanagolden and one near Kilmallock.

This case study focuses on the experiences of people from Rehabilitation Psychiatry Services in St Josephs Hospital and from RehabCare, both based in Limerick city. The placements took place on Farms A and B. It encompasses the perspective of the people themselves, the support workers from services and the farmers, all of whom gave their consent to participate.

4.3 Activities on the Social Farms

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 and interests of the participants. The activities carried out on the two farms these participants attended included:

- Taking care of livestock: checking, foddering, moving, feeding calves, etc.
- Sowing, weeding, watering and harvesting in the garden and poly-tunnels
- Taking care of poultry: collecting eggs, cleaning sheds, etc.
- General farmyard maintenance: painting, repairing, sweeping, weeding, etc.
- Observing the flora and fauna of the farm
- Simple cooking and baking using farm produce
- Helping to prepare food for lunch and tea / coffee breaks

4.4 Overall Experience of Social Farming

Participants from both RehabCare and St Josephs were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of Social Farming. In most cases, each individual experienced a wide range of benefits, across multiple dimensions of well-being and all participants would do it again if the opportunity arose. One participant put it succinctly:

> "Where could you spend a better day?"

The testimony from a participant from RehabCare which was shared with the researcher 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 horse's 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.

4.5 Mental Health Benefits

Perhaps the most important and obvious measure of the success of an initiative such as Social Farming is how **enjoyable** it is for those who take part. 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'. The placement experiences were characterised by good humour and plenty of opportunities for laughter and good-natured teasing, particularly amongst the participants coming from RehabCare, as these examples demonstrate:

> "One of the lads was counting the cattle and he counted a rock by mistake, we couldn't stop laughing."

> "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."

In the presence of some of the participants, the support worker from RehabCare talked the researcher through a set of photos taken on the farms; her description captures the liveliness of the day and the enjoyable atmosphere typical of social farming.

> "Here's P. holding the hen and he was rubbing the hen. Now here's J., he was bringing the hen from one enclosure to the next and it was the worst day we could have picked to do it, it was full of muck and the whole place was full of muck. We had such a laugh doing it because we were slipping and sliding and then Harry [the other support worker] had to chase the hen. We had some skit, didn't we lads?"

One notable feature of farm life is that it is a **'live' and ever-changing environment**, providing stimulation and interest for people who become part of it. As Farmer B put it:

> "One of the appeals of the farm is that anything can happen, you can set out the day all you like but things change like the weather and that's one of the things people like about it."

Chief amongst the benefits of Social Farming articulated by participants is **improved mental health,** with many participants 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 amongst these participants were the fun they had, the increased sense of routine and purpose, the break from the Centre or the house, the development or renewal of interests such as gardening or taking care of the animals and the chance to work outside in the country. The support worker from Rehabcare reflected on how Social Farming's benefits extend beyond the day itself and lead to an improved sense of wellbeing overall:

> "This is different, it's got an element of a whole load of different programmes put together. It's really the therapy side of it. Everyone came back so happy every day after being out on the farm and they talked about it non-stop until they went out again. It's not just the day itself, it's what they bring into the next day, talking about what they did."

A small number spoke specifically of how Social Farming helped to **ameliorate difficult life circumstances** or feelings of sadness or depression;

"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."

"I felt happier in myself from doing it, all the things we did. "

The support worker from RehabCare reflected on the particular benefits to one of the participants:

"One man, J., he was going through a very difficult time health wise, no one can say what the Social Farming Programme did for him. It lifted him up, it was therapy for him, mentally and physically, but in a very nice way. It was massive for him. He is a very intelligent man, loves to gather information, loves the farming side of thing and the horses, he lights up when he talks about this sort of thing. When he's going back and talking about it and it reminds him of his past, the endorphins absolutely are just flourishing, it's great for his health and well-being. It was his lifesaver at the time."

The OT supporting the participants from St Josephs noted that Social Farming provides a **novel experience** and opportunity to get away from the usual routines:

"It's a break, even the trip out there is part of that."

For participants with mental health difficulties in particular, finding something which will spark interest can be challenging. For some, getting up and going to something is in itself an achievement, as noted by the support worker:

"The feedback even from the people who would know the clients more than us would be that they would really enjoy it. Our sign is that they are up and going or even if they're not up, they're quick to get ready. They're asking questions, you can see the interest there."

She also noted the variety inherent to the Social Farming experience and its capacity to engage people's interest as they move from task to task:

"For some of our clients, concentration wouldn't be great, but what's good about social farming is that we're out there maybe four hours, there's a variety of tasks to keep the energy going and sometimes at the end of the group we talk about people enjoyed the most and it would sometimes surprise you."

Allied to this is the **sense of satisfaction** from having accomplished something through one's own efforts, from literally being able to see the fruits of one's labour, as noted by the support worker from St Josephs:

"It's using your hands, there's satisfaction, you've achieved something at the end. It's nice to have a project that they start when they go out there and then it's done."

The support worker from St Josephs, who is an occupational therapist, noted the value of occupation to positive mental health; Social Farming provides **occupation which is also meaningful and socially valuable:**

> "Obviously it's an occupation for people, it's good to have things on for people most days if we can, whatever it is. Getting people to engage in something meaningful is really good. Also, there's a sense of follow on with Social Farming."

A further contribution to improved mental health is the **increased sense of confidence** it has given participants from having experienced new things and pushed themselves out of their comfort zone, as described by one of the participants from St Josephs:

> "At first I thought I wouldn't be able for it, that it would be heavy work. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to do it, to take instruction. I was very nervous the first day, the road over and everything, I was weak-ish. But I'm making grand progress with that now. I was well up for it, pulling weeds and that."

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 and sense of wellbeing as they realised their abilities and value. The descriptions from participant was 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."

It has also led to the **development of new interests** which can be taken forward from the social farming placement. One of the participants on Farm A had no previous interest in farming or growing but went on to do a full-time horticultural course. As noted by another participant:

> "It could be a very good hobby."

4.6 Social connection and interaction

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. 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 [Farmer B] is lovely, great craic."

Participants get to experience and become part of a normal farm and family life, Farmer A shared their experience:

> "Two of the ladies [participants] were swapping books with our daughters, they made good connections with the children and the 10-year-old would be asking 'when they are coming again'? My mum would be calling in too, it's just normal family life."

The support worker from the mental health service noted the real value of sitting around the kitchen table and chatting and planning together. 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.

> "You have the cup of tea, you know for some of our lads mixing wouldn't happen too often, it's about having that time at the table together and planning what we are going to do next."

The community aspect of social farming, where participants go *out* to an ordinary working farm rather than *in* to an institutional setting, where they get to meet the people on the farm and in the wider farming and rural community contributes greatly to **social inclusion** and the creation of new community connections. A number of participants noted the value of getting out the centre and into a more ordinary and homely environment.

The opportunity to spend time working alongside other people in a non-pressurised environment is an important aspect of the Social Farming model; it is in this **'side by side'** space that conversations are started, stories told and relationships developed. As noted by the support worker from RehabCare:

> "It's very social, there's just something about working alongside each other… and small things like us all putting our wellies on together and heading off to do stuff together."

Farmer A referred to the warm and mutually **supportive relationship *between* the participants** and the value of engaging in tasks as a group:

> "They knew each other so that was good, they supported each other and helped each other."

This connection was apparent in the focus group with the RehabCare participants as they chatted and laughed amongst themselves about how they got on. Equally, one participant from St Josephs shared his memories of spending time with the other participants:

> "Oh I got on great with the others. I know the lads anyway, I meet them when I come up here or when I go to Iniscara [a day service]."

The support workers both benefit from the interaction and experience themselves and are able to deepen their understanding of and relationship with the people they support:

> "What's good is that J [other support worker] and I partake in the activities as well, we're not the instructors, we're learning as well from the farmer. It is reducing the stigma as well."

4.7 Physical Health Benefits

The natural and every-day activities on the farm provide the opportunity for continuous movement and benefits in terms of improved agility, mobility and physical capacity. Farmer B noted **significant improvements in the physical capabilities of the participants** over the course of the placement:

> "Definitely they were more able to walk, we might be walking up some steep hills, and originally they might be holding on to somebody but it was noticeable how that changed."

Farming provides a wide variety of tasks which keep people occupied and moving in a very purposeful way, as described by Farmer A:

> "It's amazing, there's always jobs to be done. We actually got loads done, the jobs that had maybe been put to one side…. They were able to do lots, they were very ordinary. We did lots of maintenance, fencing, cleaning out and we fed the animals every day."

This was confirmed by the support worker from St Josephs who noted that Social Farming contrasts favourably with the more sedentary nature of some of the other activities to which participants have access:

> "It's physical work, a lot of what we do is table-top activities so not moving, so this is good."

Social Farming also taps into a preference for natural physical activities amongst some participants who might have been resistant to some of the other opportunities for exercise on offer within their service; this may be particularly the case for men attending services. As the support worker from St Joseph's noted in relation to one participant:

> "One of the guys for instance had stopped going to his other groups, he's big into manual work so we knew he would do it."

She also noted that the Social Farming day would tend to give a renewed **sense of vitality and 'liveliness'**:

> "It gives them confidence and energy, even the fresh air."

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 participant;

> "I felt absolutely wrecked after it… but you know, good tired."

A number of participants noted that their appetite was better and that they **ate well** the day the day they went out to the farm:

> "You'd be fine and hungry after it."

Both farmers noted the opportunity which Social Farming provides to provide a positive – and for some, novel – experience of growing and eating fresh food. Farmer A noted that the participants were very involved with the harvesting of the vegetables and generally took some of this produce home with them. Farmer B also highlighted this this exposure to fresh, healthy home-cooked food as one of the most positive outcomes of the placement:

> "I love the connection between growing food and eating food and being healthy. Some of the participants would have a poor diet, particularly those coming from St Josephs, they might not have food in the house, they wouldn't have had breakfast, they seem to live on coffee and cigarettes. And we are finding out more and more about the connections between mood and food and gut health. From social farming, people can have less fear about fresh food and what to do with it. People were introduced to foods they wouldn't

normally eat like lettuce, at least it's a start. Some were comfortable with trying new things, others not so much but that's ok."

This was confirmed by one of the participants from St Josephs:

"We had lunch there, R provided it. I got to try some new things which was really good."

Farmer B farmer also noted the mental and other health benefits which arise from the rituals around eating:

"Also the social interaction around food was very important, whether it be laying the table, it's small things like that which are very effective in making changes."

4.8 Connection with Nature

Also fundamental to the Social Farming experience is the opportunity it provides people 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 participant's minds when recounting their experiences and in the responses from support workers and farmers. There are number of dimensions to this: the chance to see animals grow and develop; having a real role in minding and caring for them; and having the sensory experience of handling and holding the animals. Farmer A, for example, reflected on how caring for the calves really captured participant's interest:

"The calves worked very well; mixing the milk, feeding them, cleaning out, everything. And everybody had individual jobs and then we swapped them around the next week. For some reason there was a fascination with mixing the milk. It was great that they were here during calving"

Social Farming also provided a positive experience of observing the cycles of life and of participants seeing the fruits of their labour weeks after they had carried out a task. As Farmer A noted:

"The likes of seed-sowing, seeing the visual, seeing the cycles of growing is very good for people. One of the groups sowed the carrot seeds and are now taking them home. They can see the effect of whatever job they do weeks on and they are part of that."

Overall, Social Farming provides a multi-sensory experience for people 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 the green grass. Farmer B noted that the people from the Rehabcare service in particular seemed to have gained a lot from being in this natural environment:

"They were very tactile and really engaged with the animals, it was a good sensory experience for them."

One of the participants reflected this in her recollections of working with the soil and growing plants:

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

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"

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. As one participant noted:

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

This was confirmed by the support worker from St Josephs:

> "We have a garden group up here in St Josephs and it's lovely but sometimes it's about being removed from the city and out in the country."

The support worker from RehabCare similarly reflected on positive effects on mood of being out in country in the farm environment.

> "It was so uplifting, I don't know what it is about the fresh air and the countryside. You'd never be done in from it. There's something about putting on the wellies, it just relaxes you."

4.9 Challenges & Learning Points

The support workers from both St Josephs and RehabCare were overwhelmingly positive about Social Farming and felt it delivered significant benefits and outcomes to the people they work with in terms of health and wellbeing. However, they also identified a number of challenges in rolling it out within the service. For the support worker from RehabCare, one simple challenge is finding a day to go that will suit all of the people who are interested as well as the farmer. The people who attend their centre tend to have very full schedules, with a mix of activities both inside and outside the service. For the support worker from St Joseph's, the necessity of having a staff member on the farm there means that is quite resource-heavy for the service and the staff. As she notes:

> "It takes a long time, the whole day is gone, we have four pickups, sometimes people aren't ready so that can take up more time. But when we're out there, it's lovely, I do enjoy it but it takes nearly your whole day."

Both services also noted that compared to some of their other activities, Social Farming is a more expensive option, particularly when transport and the inputs of support staff are also considered. Notwithstanding that, both clearly see the particular *value* of Social Farming which is wholly in tune with the more person-centred, individualised and community-based approaches to supporting people to which they are committed. Both are actively working within their services to ensure support is ongoing for those who can really benefit from this particular model of support. In the case of St Josephs, plans were in place as this research was being conducted to both bring the consultant psychiatrist on the team out to spend time on a social farm and to move towards a position where Social Farming is more embedded as an option for clients within the service.

For Farmer B, the overall experience was very positive and rewarding and she felt that all of the participants enjoyed and drew some benefit from it. However, she drew a distinction between the experience of working with people from intellectual disability services and mental health services and

shared the particular challenges she found in working with the people from latter group. It also highlights the value of an individualised approach and the flexibility inherent to social farming practice.

> "With St Josephs, motivation and energy levels were quite low, people got tired very quickly. It was quite a challenge to keep people motivated, attentions spans were short. I learned a huge amount from it. I found it challenging to find the appropriate boundary of when to push people. It's almost like people were quite used to people cajoling them and giving them structure. I don't think I've fully resolved it, when to make it a little bit challenging and when to leave it…Rehabcare was quite different, it was quite chaotic but it was great fun."

4.10 Overall Conclusions from the Case Study

This case study has described just a sample of the Social Farming placements which have been funded or co-funded using Healthy Ireland funding since 2017. Some important conclusions and learning can be drawn from the case study which are of relevance to Healthy Ireland, to Healthy Ireland programmes in individual counties and cities and to services seeking to use this funding source to support placements.

- These placements provided a **positive, enjoyable and life-enhancing experience** for those who took part, many of whom face significant challenges in their lives.

- The participants in this study came from two of the groups in society who usually have poorer health profiles and outcomes, people with intellectual disabilities and people experiencing mental health difficulties. The participants have enjoyed this opportunity and experienced benefits in terms of increased feelings of happiness and mental well-being, improvements in physical health and vitality, the formation of new relationships and social connections and the opportunity to spend meaningful time in the natural environment. It has both **supported these participants to improve their own individual health and contributes to reducing health inequalities overall.**

- Social Farming is inherently social – as this case study demonstrates – and is therefore strongly aligned to the key theme of Healthy Limerick which is ***Social Connectedness*****.** It provides the setting where both social interactions and the benefits of being active together can be experienced naturally. The shared experiences which it provides also help support a culture of connectedness between participants, between farmers and participants and between participants and their support workers.

- Spending time in the healthy, pro-social environment of the family farm has provided opportunities for participants to learn about and put in place **positive lifestyle changes** around diet, sleep and exercise.

- Social farming represents **a strongly holistic approach, with multiple dimensions of well-being addressed**, including physical health and vitality, mental health and well-being and

social connectivity. It takes place in an **everyday environment in people's own communities**, using a **very natural and intuitive approach** which may have greater potential to encourage long term change.

- Overall, there is clearly a **strong synergy between the goals of Healthy Ireland and the model and practice of Social Farming.** This case study has shown how the ordinary working farm can provide a unique environment in which to deliver benefits and positive outcomes across multiple dimensions of health and well-being.

- With national reach and an ever-growing number of farmers trained to provide social farming supports**, Social Farming has a role to play in delivering on the Healthy Ireland goals far beyond the levels of activity to date.**

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