

VISIT OF MINISTER AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE CHARLIE MCCONALOGUE TO SOCIAL FARM OF WILLIAM MCLAUGHLIN, MALIN, CO. DONEGAL

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue described his first visit to a social farm as “inspiring” and social farming as a “prime example of people working together at all levels”. For the last number of years, social farmer William McLaughlin has supported people with disabilities and young people taking the Leaving Cert Applied programme on his dairy farm on the Inishowen peninsula. During his visit, the Minister saw first-hand the projects which these young people were involved in and heard from a number of them how they benefited from William’s support and their time on the farm. Carndonagh Community School was the first in Ireland to place students on a social farm and its success, documented in a Social Farming Ireland case study, has prompted a large number of other schools in the country to pursue this unique on-farm support for their students. Elaine Meehan, the LCA coordinator at the school spoke to the Minister about the very real difference this made for the school’s efforts to retain students and to the students’ own commitment to completing their Leaving Cert Applied Programme.

Minister McConalogue’s Department has been funding the development of Social Farming Ireland, the National Social Farming network through Leitrim Development Company since 2017. Brian Smyth, Project manager outlined that “We now have 120 social farms (at least one in every county) which have delivered support to 1,400 people across 13,400 participant placement days” He noted that people with many challenges such as disability, mental ill health, educational disadvantage, exclusion, inequality, unemployment, addiction and homelessness have recognised that the support of a local farmer and the natural farm assets of place, activities and community is of great benefit to them in dealing with and meeting their challenges. The Minister recognised that funding for social farming placements provides valuable additional income to the social farmers trained and mentored through the Social Farming Ireland Network.

Dr Aisling Moroney, Policy officer with Social Farming indicated that research has found that not only are farm incomes improved but that social farming can act as an impetus for diversification, for environmental and other farm improvements and also stimulates next generation interest and involvement in the farm. “Farmers and their families can see that the farm is not just a place which produces food, but has many other assets which can be used in variety of ways to increase the social and economic sustainability of the farm into the future.” William shared some of the many other benefits for social farmers and their families and talked of having new social connections and friendships with the participants, having a real buzz around the farm and not being as isolated in his work with more people around and interested in the farm.

The Minister agreed that Social farming is a great opportunity and a win-win for people, farmers, communities and wider society and that he will examine ways to help mainstream such on-farm support.

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