

The Value & Values of Social Farming

Key Findings from a Cost Benefit Analysis



This Cost Benefit Analysis was undertaken by Social Farming in 2020 and involved an in-depth survey of 76 service providers, interviews with 72 farmers and analysis of 30 sets of farmer log books. For more information on this research contact SoFI Policy officer Dr. Aisling Moroney at amoroney@ldco.ie.

The theme of mutual benefit underpins the Social Farming experience....

Participant Benefits and Outcomes....

- **90%** of services/commissioners that have supported people to participate in Social Farming felt that there had been improvements in **confidence and self-esteem** amongst participants.
- **78%** felt that participants had acquired new farm skills and **88%** that they had developed **new interests**.
- **83%** of services felt that participants had an improved **sense of belonging** and social inclusion.
- **85%** felt that participants had improved their **social skills**.
- **78%** felt that **new friendships** and relationships had been forged.
- **84%** felt that participants have experienced improved **mental health** from their time spent on the farm.



.... which extend to front line service provision

- Social farming provides an added value option for services, advocates and families seeking genuine, community-based and person-centred options for the people they support.
- It is especially relevant for some people who are traditionally hard to reach, such as older males. In many cases, it has been much more effective in engaging people's interest than other supports which are typically available.
- It creates new connections and builds social capital for services with the farm family and with the wider local community and local organisations.
- Advocates and staff gain real, everyday knowledge and insight into people's interests, skills, potential, challenges etc. and can therefore support them in a more effective and targeted way.
- It has led to a shift in mindset in individual services, in recognising the true value of natural, community-based supports, as well as the latent capacity of the people they engage with and the need to support their choices.
- It has provided significant job satisfaction for staff to see the people they work with grow in confidence and happiness and do more than they might have thought possible.

"I really enjoyed that many of clients would open up when sitting around the table having tea and get involved in the conversation...to hear them talk and laugh and tell their stories. It's also fantastic when a client would come to you with a goal that the social farming experience inspired them to achieve, such as learning to cook or making a book shelf."

....with benefits for farmers and rural society.

- Farmers experience a strong sense of personal satisfaction from making a difference in people's lives, from their contribution to breaking down barriers in society, and from inspiring others to learn new things.
- It provides an opportunity to share native knowledge of farming, food, and nature more widely, a key value for social farmers which is of wider social benefit.
- Farmers have an opportunity to derive additional farm income and make better use of **ALL** the assets of the farm: the people, the place, the environment and the community.
- It has encouraged further farm diversification (56% of social farms) and stimulated next generation involvement in and interest in the farm (56% of social farms).
- In supporting people to be part of their own communities in a very ordinary and visible way, it has contributed to a more inclusive and open society,



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The Value Embedded in Social Farming

The People....

- **Social farmers** are ordinary people, trained and mentored by Social Farming Ireland to provide natural support to people on their farms.
- The farmer carries out ordinary farm activities alongside participants and adapts to their capacities, skills, and interests on the farm on a given day: it is their needs and goals which are the key focus.
- Participants benefit not just from the farmer's time and interest in them but from their skills, their life experience, and their existing family and community connections. Farmers can and do leverage these natural connections to provide wider experiences and occupational and other opportunities for participants.
- 90% of social farmers also draw on the skills and input of other family members or friends/neighbours in delivering Social Farming supports, providing a wider web of familial and community support to participants.



"The relationship our service user has built with the farmer and the value he places on this and his sense of achievement and belonging from attending the farm and his sense that there is mutual support, that he is helping the farmer as well as the farmer helping him, that is a very new experience for him and is invaluable."

The Place and setting



- The farm is a natural landscape and setting which typically includes farm animals, gardens, woodland, fields, walkways, views, fresh air, seasonal variety, and a wide range of natural sensory experiences.
- The farm sheds, buildings, polytunnels, etc. - and where appropriate, machinery - are usually part of the Social Farming day.
- The farmhouse, farm kitchen and the kitchen table provide a space for cooking, eating, chatting, and socialising.
- There is an ongoing investment by the farmer over time in health and safety enhancements and other farm improvements, farm insurance and extra equipment and tools which are used by participants.

The Activities.....Choice, Variety, Flexibility

Social farms provide an ever-changing mix of different types of activity depending on the season, weather, type of farm, the interests, capacities and skills of participants, and the needs of the farm on a given day. Four main types of activities have been identified:

- Everyday routine tasks which are necessary to sustain the health and well-being of both the animals and plants on the farm and which gives purpose and meaning to the participant's time on the farm.
- Activities that underpin the smooth running of the farm (e.g. dosing cattle or power-hosing or weeding) which teach new skills, highlight the need for planning and routines, and provide learning and engagement for participants.
- Activities that focus on the home and domestic sphere which help to build participants' own interest and skills in cooking and domestic activities, emphasise the benefits of good and wholesome foods and help create and build a sense of homeliness and ease.
- New or special projects such as building new pens for poultry or starting a new vegetable plot, which teach new skills, provide continuity and interest between placement days, and build a sense of ownership and pride.

The Opportunities for participants.....

- To be part of a team doing socially valuable and useful activities and projects.
- To undertake natural physical activity and movement which is not labelled exercise.
- For a process of discovery and learning: *"I never thought I could do that"*.
- To grow and develop as a person and to identify future pathways for self-development.
- For fun and laughter.
- For real and warm social connection, comradeship, and friendship outside of professional, clinical settings.
- To be in a homely and ordinary environment. This is especially valuable for those who come from more institutional settings or who live alone or who are particularly marginalised in society.
- To be part of a mutually giving and supportive environment with an opportunity to 'care for' rather than be 'cared for' and to do things for others.
- To be in an environment where positive risk-taking can be encouraged and supported, particularly valuable for participants coming from a more institutional or highly regulated environment or a family culture where risk is minimised.
- For real social integration for the most marginalised groups (for example refugees or people accessing homelessness and addiction services).
- To engage with the ordinary activities of the wider rural community through trips for supplies or to the mart or visits to neighbouring farms and businesses.



"The most significant value is the partnership, collaboration and social role valorisation experienced by service users when service is provided in a 'real life setting' as opposed to a clinical setting. The relationship building is invaluable."



"Our service user loves farm work. He has been unable to secure employment and this has knocked his confidence. The relationship he has built with the social farmer has been so important for his confidence and motivation to continue with his Teagasc education ..Social farming has been transformational in his life"

"One participant in particular benefitted from the placement by learning to trust people more. He had been homeless for a number of years, and subsequently found it very difficult to trust anyone, but regular contact with good people who were honest and open with him had a deep impact on him."

"Reduces stigma associated with mental health as it takes place in people homes with their families..... have definitely felt like an extension of the family network. This is a very important and unique aspect of social farming that is not provided by any other service we are linked with."

"Feedback from the farmer has been a vital support in identifying further development needs for our clients. One client now in employment was initially unable to consider working due to mental health issues ... The social farming experience was a major factor in this individual's pathway to recovery; learning to work with other people again, getting into a routine, rebuilding confidence in their own abilities."



Social Farming in the context of Health & Social care policy

The Social Farming model of support is both contributing to and driving good practice as envisaged in various strategies and policies in health and social care, including New Directions, The Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services, and Sharing the Vision.

- 85% of support services felt that it provides a community-based approach
- 80% that it provides a non-clinical alternative to current supports
- 80% that it provides a person-centered approach, and 73 % that it provides an individualised approach

Spotlight on Mental Health Services

- Responses to and outcomes from Social Farming are individual to each participant but can be *transformative* in progressing participants along a recovery journey, *ameliorative* in providing a therapeutic space of respite or refuge, or both.
- Increased support for external, non-clinical psychosocial supports such as Social Farming may be particularly effective in supporting individual recovery AND can help to address some of the challenges in the system, including recruitment/staffing and geographical and other disparities in the supports available to people.
- The model shifts support towards an upstream service which should over time, mean that more expensive and complex downstream acute and crisis response services are deferred or avoided.
- Strategic investment in Social Farming therefore can be seen as an investment rather than a cost: this logic is also particularly applicable to homelessness and addiction service provision and to working with at-risk youth.

Spotlight on Intellectual Disability

- For some participants with intellectual disabilities, getting to participate in Social Farming regularly is fundamental to living a life of their choice.
- For more, Social Farming provides a wide range of benefits and improvements in quality of life. It also creates pathways towards other opportunities for self-development and fulfilment, including voluntary work, training, employment, and the pursuit of new interests, It has a real role to play in building people's capacity to live independently and well within their own communities.
- Increased availability of personalised budgets in the future should enable more people to choose themselves to avail of Social Farming supports.
- This, and other strategic investment in Social Farming, is an investment in people and their ability and potential to live more ordinary, independent, fulfilling and activated lives.

The Bottom Line

- The evidence from our Cost Benefit Analysis and other research is that Social Farming works: for participants and their families, for support services, for social farmers.
- The value embedded in this model of natural support is substantial, multi-dimensional and impossible to replicate in an institutional service or clinical context.
- Social Farming makes innovative use of an existing set of resources which is highly valued by those accessing it, is cost effective and provides a significant and multi-layered return on investment.
- Social Farming is an established part of the health & social care system in other EU countries, with clear pathways for participants and those who support them. However the funding model in Ireland is currently fragmented both geographically and across many support services/agencies.
- Social Farming has potential to deliver benefits and outcomes to far greater numbers than currently. This requires increased and co-ordinated actions at government level in terms of funding structures as well as ongoing mental health and disability service reform to ensure provision is both more equitable and more accessible.

