

SOCIAL FARMING CONFERENCE ‘KEY VALUES AND NEXT STEPS’ JUNE 1ST, KILLASHEE HOTEL

Social Farming Ireland Conference was delighted to have Minister Frank Feighan and Joanne O’Riordan as our Keynote speakers. Joanne O’Riordan gave an inspiring and motivational speech to kick start the day, with great energy and enthusiasm.

Our Social Farming Conference highlighted that Social Farming really works, for participants and their families, for support services and for social farmers. This theme of mutual benefit was one of the key messages to come out of a major national conference run by Social Farming Ireland and held in the Killashee Hotel in Co Kildare on June 1st. For participants, the sheer variety of activities naturally available, the family environment which they can become part of, the ‘realness’ of what happens on the farm: these are all of tremendous value and impossible to replicate in an institutional or clinical context. This was made very clear in multiple contributions from front-line staff from service and range of national and international speakers and most importantly, from people who have had the opportunity to experience Social Farming themselves.

Brendan Bright, who has spent time on Val and Una Crosses social farm in Kildare spoke of what firm friends he has become with the couple and of how it was on their farm that he got the chance to fulfil his ‘bucket list’ dream of getting back on a horse, something he had last done as a teenager. Brendan is not from a farming or rural background but the experience has helped bring him back to life especially in the post-Covid period. As he put it himself, the closest he had ever gotten before to a cow or calf was seeing them from a moving car yet he found himself getting a great kick out of feeding them, recalling how “you’d have some row with those calves if you didn’t the mixture out to them fast enough!” Minister Frank Feighan who officially opened the Conference, spoke of his support for Social Farming both in his role as Minister responsible for Healthy Ireland and from his personal experience of spending time on social farms and seeing for himself the impact on people.

Over 150 people attended the Conference either in person or online, testament to the tremendous support for and goodwill towards Social Farming as an ordinary activity with extraordinary outcomes. But there was also strong agreement that the support to date from the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, the huge demand for it from individuals and services and the increasing availability of social farmers opening up their farms needs to be matched by mainstream funding from within core health and social care budgets. Currently, funding for Social Farming placements is fragmented both geographically and across support services/agencies which means both that latent demand cannot be met adequately and that significant resources have to be continually deployed by multiple stakeholders to access funding from a very wide array of sources. Marjolein Elings and Maarten Fischer from the Netherlands, where Social or Care Farming is “fully embedded within the Health and Social Care system,” spoke of how at least 30,000 people choose to avail of Social Farming as a support every year out of a population of 17.1 million. Translated to the Irish context, this would indicate that at least eight to ten thousand people would avail of this support if it were more easily available. Indeed, in a country with such strong agricultural and rural roots and traditions - and a vastly higher number of family farms – the potential might be greater still. There was strong support from speakers and from the Conference floor for two potential game-changers in bringing Social Farming to the next level; the availability of a multi-annual cross departmental fund for Social Farming and significant progress on Individualised/Personalised budgets for people with disabilities allowing people to choose the support they receive.

A point raised in a number of workshops held on the day was the role Social Farming could play in addressing some of the acute staffing issues in Intellectual Disability and Mental Health services at the moment. For example, a potential crisis situation is arising for young people with disabilities who are due to leave secondary school soon. Many services to whom they might traditionally transition to receive supports are saying that they may not have any places due to staffing issues. Might social farms provide a space and a place of support, growth and development for at least some of these young people in their own communities? The potential return on investment for these young people and the thousands of other people who could experience amazing – sometimes life-changing – outcomes on social farms is substantial and ultimately cost effective. The magic of Social Farming is that it is opening up existing local rural resources of the farm and the farmer, making innovative use of these wonderful resources and their local community setting.

For further information on Social Farming or the conference, contact Helen Doherty, Social Farming Ireland National Coordinator at helen@ldco.ie or 071 964 1772 or go to the Social Farming Ireland website www.socialfarmingireland.ie.