

DISABILITY PARTICIPATION & AWARENESS FUND 2021



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth



Social Farming Funded Counties

7

Donegal Mayo Leitrim Longford
Cavan Meath & Kildare



Participants who benefited

135

New **83**
Participants

Repeat **52**
Participants



103

32



Services engaged



28

Participant Days

1,699



79

45-65

51

18-45

5

0-18



Social Farming and the goals of the DPA Fund: Key synergies

- Social farming provides a genuinely **non-clinical and community-based** option for people, **rooted in everyday local life**.
- Social Farming supports people in **meeting a very wide range of personal and social goals** but in a non-directive and person-centred way.
- Social farms are **places of natural connection and friendship**, outside of professional settings.
- Social Farming provides an opportunity for people to be - and to see themselves - as **active, independent, valuable, and visible** citizens and members of society and their community.
- It has particular value for those who may be otherwise disinclined to engage with disability-specific interventions. The **relatability** of Social Farming and the **homely, informal** nature of the support circumvents some of the barriers which might exist in preventing people with disabilities in participating fully in everyday life in their community.
- It also fosters and encourages **social inclusion** and consistently challenges and helps to **overcome common societal barriers and assumptions about capacity**.
- Overall, it implements and promotes the vision and specific aims of both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (**UNCRPD**) and of **Disability Policy at national level**.



Improved physical health & well-being

The **natural and everyday tasks** on a farm - walking to feed the animals, walking up and down hills and on uneven surfaces, bending, stretching, digging, lifting - can all make a big difference to physical fitness strength and vitality. Many support workers noted how people had improved their fitness *"without even realising it"* and there was an increased willingness to keep moving off-farm too. A number of people had joined the gym or another sporting activity and two participants who met on the farm subsequently met each other to play pitch and putt. Physical activity is much more likely to 'stick' when it is in the company of others.



Improved mental health and well-being

While Social Farming will have a **positive impact on mental health and well-being for almost everyone** who participates, it can be an especially valuable support for people with **specific mental health challenges**. For Eamonn, for example, it *"helps him relax and reduces his anxiety levels."* For Conor, another participant, it *"has been a most valuable intervention"*. Conor's psychiatrists had expressed concern that if they couldn't do something to change his environment, that his mental health issues would worsen considerably. Social Farming has provided that change. As his support worker noted, *"Tuesday was a great day as it was something to look forward to and offered relief after the weekend, which could often be a tough time for him"*. She also noted that that she never saw him smile like when he sees Liam [the farmer] and that he benefited from *"meeting people who were nice to him."* Staff have already begun to notice negative changes in Conor since the placement ended. The individual services supporting both Eamonn and Conor are determined to find a way to continue to offer social farming to them, such is the value they attach to it..



Potential unlocked and realised

This is one of the *most* consistent themes to emerge in the end of placement reviews. Social Farming seems to have a particular capacity to discover and unlock the sometimes **untapped potential** that lies in people - their existing skills and knowledge, their work ethic, their curiosity, their potential to contribute and to grow in capacity when given the **right supports in the right setting**. As one support worker noted; *"this has been a real eye-opener for us"*

Improved Employability

In a number of cases, the **skills and confidence** gained from Social Farming have led directly to employment or new voluntary activity, in farming or elsewhere. Peter's goal was to meet new people, and learn about farm life. Since finishing Social Farming, he has got a job in a local shop. The support worker noted: *"Social Farming build his confidence hugely...He only comes to the service once a week now because he's busy with other things."* The social farmer who worked alongside Peter reflected; *"Peter was a great worker, he was up for all tasks. He had a great work ethic."* Other participants have started voluntary work or are now keen to get paid employment and are being supported by services to do so.

John's story

John started Social Farming with the personal goals of working on a farm, gardening and spending time with animals. He had a really rewarding time on D's busy mixed farm, with D noting how good he was at following instructions, his ability to stick to a job, his drive and passion and his work ethic. *"...he didn't even have time to finish his tea and lunch, he couldn't wait to get back to it"*. John also became good friends with another worker on the farm.

So well did the placement go, that when it finished, D asked John to join the team on the farm as an employee. Staff from the service supporting John highlighted the value of D *"seeing something in John....it's just heart warming to know D saw potential in him that others do not. That's the struggle these guys are up against."* They noted; *"John was always an outgoing person, however after these placements, he is motivated and determined to fulfil his job role."*

the building of skills, knowledge and capacity



Social Farming provides fantastic opportunities to learn practical skills by doing and to build knowledge of farming life and work. Those with prior knowledge of farming get to both share their knowledge and build it further, while those who don't get to experience a whole new set of skills and interests.

The **flexibility and variety** of the farm setting means that farmers can also respond to people's interests as they develop. On one farm with goats, for example, the participants were taught how to train them for shows and got to both parade and milk them. The farmer noted how participants learned so quickly on the farm; *"they were like sponges"*. And they had shown such an interest in how the farm worked, the farmer also took them on a few off-farms to explore, including a commercial goat farm, a community garden, a bee-keeping farm and robotic farm, leading to many more conversations and questions. On another farm, one participant in particular really wanted to milk the cows: the farmer *"facilitated this and let us stay back one evening to try this out."*

Kate's story

Kate started Social Farming with the personal goals of socialising with others and getting involved in the community, getting involved in new experiences and farm activities and learning new skills. It has delivered all of that and more. Kate has learned loads about farming, which she is very proud of - she even tells people she meets that she is now a farmer. M, the farmer noted that she was willing to try anything and gave everything her best effort. Such was her vigour and enthusiasm for sweeping the yard, she even managed to break M's new brush handle in half, a source of great amusement to all.

Kate had been quite isolated since COVID-19, and had not attended work since the beginning of the pandemic. She was living with her elderly mother and not really socialising with others. Her support worker feels that Social Farming has done wonders for her confidence and social skills. Within four weeks of Social Farming, Kate went back to work in the charity shop in her local town. She and another participant have built a real friendship from working alongside one another. M noted that Kate was extremely quiet at the beginning of the placement and would not look anyone in the eye. By the end, she was sitting around the kitchen table telling stories to the Social Farming Ireland development officer who she had never met before. Her support worker feels that Kate has really *"came out of herself"* and that the whole experience has *"brought her great joy."*

Feeling at home on the farm

Social Farming is based on **real farms** and in **real homes** where people can feel relaxed and be themselves. Participants speak of the pleasure of doing simple things like being able to just go and get a cold drink from the fridge or going for a spin in the jeep around the farm, or playing with the dog, or having an ice-cream and a chat together at the end of working day. There is also no judgement on the farm; as one participant said to the farmer he was working with; *"you don't mind if we say stupid things."*

The daily lives of people with disabilities are often characterised by a culture of risk minimisation and paternalism. In contrast, the **live environment of the farm** is one where people can be supported to enjoy the sense of **freedom and space**, to **take risks**, to **extend themselves** beyond what they thought they could do. As one farmer recalled reflecting on his experience; *"all the women became more relaxed as the placement progressed, they enjoyed having their own space, their own activity....and not having support workers."*

Friendships and social skills

Social farms are places of great **natural connection and friendship**, where bonds are created from shared tasks and experiences and from simple things like preparing and eating lunch together in the family kitchen. These new friendships with the farmer and their families, with other participants and with other people on the farms are both **life-enhancing and confidence building** and the social skills developed can be brought to other settings too. And these **friendships are two-way, real and enduring**: in many cases, participants continue to visit the farm and keep in touch even after placements have ended.

A frequent comment from staff supporting participants and from farmers is that they saw people **'come out of themselves'**. Like Jimmy whose growing sense of confidence and sense of comfort around others was described by the farmer: *"We were doing a job one day and out of nowhere Jimmy began to sing. Everyone was shocked as he was very quiet. This continued on through the placement. We had the best fun singing".*

Fun and laughter

In every description of the Social Farming experience, fun, laughter and craic feature prominently! The shared experiences and occasional mishaps, the banter around who's doing what and of course the *"bit of divilment"* and *'coddling'* that goes on are all **good for the soul**. Support staff comment frequently on how happy people are at the end of the social farming day, the stories they have to tell, how much they talk about it and how much they look forward to going again.