# **Social Farming Awareness Week 2023 a huge success**

The weather may have been variable but the welcome and atmosphere was unfailingly warm and bright at each of the five social farms which opened their gates for Social Farming Awareness Week 2023. Last week at farms in Cork, Kilkenny, Mayo, Wicklow and Sligo, Social Farming Ireland held a series of Open Days to showcase what Social Farming is all about right there where it happens week in and week out on over 140 social farms throughout the country.

Social Farming is about providing opportunities and activities on ordinary family farms as a form of social support. People come to the farm, usually one day per week, and get to be part of whatever is happening on the farm on that day, with huge benefits and real outcomes across multiple dimensions of health and well-being. Speaking during the week, Social Farming Ireland National Coordinator Helen Doherty noted; *“Our social farms are both ordinary and extraordinary places. They provide such huge variety and choice for people regardless of their interests or capacities. People can get involved in every kind of activity, from caring for animals to walking the land to growing food from seed to harvest to maintenance activities like scraping the yard or power washing to cooking in the farm kitchen.”* She added; *“Every social farm is different and every person who comes to a social farm is an individual. It is that flexibility and ability to adapt to the goals which people have for themselves which makes Social Farming special. And running through it all of course is the most important aspect of all, the social connection, the friendship and the fun that exists between the participants, the farmer and farm family.”*

All of this and more was clearly in evidence during the whirlwind week of activity where over 300 people visited the five social farms which were showcased. It was clear from both the numbers attending and the very wide range of people and groups present that interest in and understanding of Social Farming is growing but also reaching into new sectors all the time. At Louise O’Mahony’s farm near Carrigaline Cork on Monday 2nd for example, amongst the most enthusiastic attendees were three men accessing supports from the Simon Community in Cork City. They were the first to step forward and help feed the goats, sheep and horses on a walk through the farm which one of the men described as being *“like a little bit of heaven”*. They are very keen to take part in Social Farming, something which Social Farming Ireland will now work with them and with the Simon Community to make happen.

Meanwhile at Violet and Stephen Kavanagh’s farm in the Wicklow mountains on Thursday 5th, a group of 16 Transition Year students travelled up from Good Counsel College in New Ross in Wexford. Their teacher, Kieran Barron is a great advocate of Social Farming and has been teaching the boys about the concept, with the opportunity to visit a farm the culmination of their learning. They were amongst the large crowd who sang a hearty Happy Birthday to Seamus, one of the attendees who just happened to be celebrating his 21st birthday on the day. Needless to say, there was also cake and candles! A visit to the polytunnel and Violet’s cosy crafting room were also highlights, as was the walk between showers to meet Bella and the rest of the flock of 78 sheep.

The opportunity to meet an even greater variety of animals presented itself to those who travelled to Galways farm in Kilkenny on Tuesday the 3rd. Richard and Aine have a beautiful and diverse organic farm in rolling countryside near Thomastown and along with their sons, introduced attendees to their pigs, horses, rare breed native Irish cattle and a very gentle alpaca who was only delighted to be fussed over. Amongst the contributors on the day was Michael a Social Farming participant who presence and enthusiasm has brought such joy to their farm that Aine was moved to say after he spoke that *“every farm should have a Michael!”*.

The contribution and the value that participants can bring to the farm was also emphasised at the Open Day the farm of Gerald, Kelly and Michael Doherty near Bunninadden in Co Sligo last Friday. Kelly’s son was only three weeks old when the family began Social Farming and often goes along with them as they carry out activities with participants. Gerald shared a story of how one particular participant went away one week off his own bat and made a playlist of the kind of music Kelly said that her little boy enjoyed, which they then played while they worked alongside one another the following week. This kind of easy family feeling is very difficult to replicate in almost any other setting, a point also noted by Ann McEleney, a Community Connector with the HSE Sligo/Leitrim Disability Service and who has been working with Social Farming Ireland since 2017. Ann explained how she had tried many different things with her clients such as petting farms, zoos, community gardens, vintage shows and many other things but there was never the same connection as was created on social farms; *“They really do enjoy it, they love getting out on their Social Farming days”.*

Over on Alan and Vivian Woods farm on the shores of Lough Conn in Co. Mayo last Wednesday, there was a strong emphasis on the mutual benefits which come from Social Farming. Killian, a participant from Western Care spoke about the wonderful time he has helping Alan and Vivian on the farm. Vivian noted that that Social Farming has also made a real difference to their lives, giving them an appreciation of what they have, forcing them to slow down on their busy dairy farm and helping them to see their farm with fresh eyes. Sabina Trench, CEO of South West Mayo Development Company reflected on what a special and thoughtful group of people social farmers are but also on the broader rural development benefits associated with it from their perspective as a development company.

Social Farming Awareness Week highlighted yet again what an amazing innovation this is in both farming and in health and social care. It is a true win-win-win initiative, bringing multiple benefits to participants, to farm households and rural communities and to service providers. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has recognised this and has funded and otherwise continued to support the development of Social Farming since 2017 in a variety of ways, including providing funding for the development of a National Social Farming Network. Last week also saw the announcement from the Department to extend this funding for another year. Leitrim Development Company, based in Drumshanbo in Co. Leitrim holds the contract for the development of the Network, known as Social Farming Ireland, but collaborate with three other local development companies to achieve national reach across four regional hubs. These hubs are based at West Limerick Resources Ltd. (Southwest), Waterford LEADER Partnership Co. (Southeast), South West Mayo Development Co. (West) and Leitrim Development Co. itself (Border, Midlands and East).

Anyone who wants to find out more about Social Farming can contact the National Office on 071 9641772 or check out the Social Farming Ireland website <https://www.socialfarmingireland.ie/>.