

# The benefits of social farming

## ■ Minister pays visit to North Tipp

MINISTER of State for Mental Health and Government Chief Whip, Mary Butler, recently spent a day engaging with Social Farming Ireland, the national network for social farming, during visits to two social farms in Shallee, Nenagh and Ballygagin, Dungarvan, Co Waterford. The visits provided an opportunity to meet participants, families, mental health service staff and social farmers and to see first-hand the benefits of social farming as a non-clinical, community based support for people in recovery from mental ill health.

### SOCIAL FARMING IRELAND - THE NATIONAL NETWORK

Social Farming Ireland was established in 2016 with core funding from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) by Leitrim Development Company, in collaboration regionally with three other local development companies, South West Mayo Development Company, Waterford Leader Partnership and West Limerick Resources. The network now includes over 200 trained social farmers and engages with service providers, families and advocates across disability, mental health, social care, education, justice, and community development sectors. The network recruits and trains farmers, supports placements, ensures governance and safeguarding, and develops and promotes social farming nationally and internationally.

### MEETING CAMHS PARTICIPANTS IN NENAGH

In the afternoon, Minister Butler visited the farm of Michael and Oonagh O'Connor in Shallee, Nenagh. Social farmers since 2021, they have supported people from disability services, mental health services, CAMHS, and family support organisations. The focus of the visit was the HSE CAMHS North Tipperary team who have supported young people to engage in social farming. We heard from parents of young participants who spoke about increased confidence, routine, and the wellbeing benefits that their children have experienced.

Theresa Tierney CNS with CAMHS gave us an insight into the impact of the social farming experience on the team including clinical nurses, doctors and key workers and the progress they see in the young people they support. Being removed from their usual clinical setting and participating in farming activities alongside each other, had both participants and staff seeing each other in a different way on the farm - appreciating different life skills and qualities they both bring to the table.

The minister encouraged the importance of sharing if a person is experiencing mental health difficulties. Minister Butler said: "For anyone that needs that little bit of extra support, and at some stage of our lives most



HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) North Tipperary team who support young people to engage in Social Farming as a non-clinical support with Minister Butler (fourth from left)

of us need that little bit of support. Knowing that you are coming onto a farm such as this and getting the benefits of social farming, knowing that there is someone there to help you that also helps parents too. There is a pathway forward for everyone."

She went on to speak of her own experiences of visiting mental health services with government officials across Europe, noting Ireland's strong reputation internationally for community based- supports such as social farming and social prescribing. She has been an advocate of social farming for some time now and takes pride in sharing the concept of social farming with international counterparts and its importance in the delivery of health and social care supports.

### WARM WELCOME AT BALLYGAGIN FARM

Earlier, the minister began her day at Ballygagin Farm meeting their hosts Ger and Ann O'Grady, who have been social farmers with the national network since 2022. Residents from Seabreeze, the state-of-the-art high-support community mental health residence in Dungarvan, welcomed the Minister warmly. Participants spoke about their social farming experiences and described the sense of purpose and connection they have gained from caring for animals, growing vegetables, and spending time with the O'Grady family on their farm.

Clinical Nurse Manager Willie Browne highlighted the strong partnerships between Seabreeze, the

HSE and Social Farming Ireland reflecting the meaningful impact of the programme.

Waterford Leader Partnership CEO Christine Rossi mentioned the importance of funding opportunities to ensure these placements are available to more people in the local area that need to avail of this valuable community based non-clinical supports.

### A DAY OF INSIGHT, CONNECTION, AND COMMUNITY

Helen Doherty, Social Farming Ireland Operations Manager, gave the minister an overview of the work Social Farming Ireland is engaging in with mental health services and how social farming has grown at grassroots level across the country and they are looking to future development at regional area level.

She also highlighted the upcoming Social Farming Ireland National Conference which takes place on April 24 at The Heritage Hotel, Portarlinton, Co Laois, celebrating ten years of the national network, which will be opened by the Minister for Agriculture, Minister Martin Hayden.

Minister Butler spoke of her appreciation for the work of Social Farming Ireland, the participating farmers, and the staff who support placements. She said: "I want to thank the social farmers because there would be no social farming without the farmers and you are doing it because you want to give something back, you are opening up your farms and listening to your stories - people know you are there for them."

The minister then acknowledged the dedication of the two local development companies she met on the

day - Waterford Leader Partnership and West Limerick Resources for their pivotal role in delivering the Social Farming Ireland National Network at community level.

The visits to Dungarvan and Nenagh showcased the powerful impact of social farming on participants, families and advocates, medical staff, key workers and local communities, demonstrating how innovative non-clinical supports such as social farming can complement mental health and social care services across Ireland in line with Sharing the Vision Policy.

As the visits concluded, Minister Butler expressed her steadfast commitment to supporting the continued development of social farming across Ireland through the National Network Social Farming Ireland. She stated that hearing directly from participants, families, and staff strengthened her understanding of how valuable community based, non-clinical supports can be.

Minister Butler said: "I don't need any convincing about Social Farming, I'm there already. I remember being on a farm with a person with intellectual disability who spoke his first words on that farm. I will never forget it as long as I live."

Minister Butler reiterated her appreciation for the valuable work being done on the ground by Social Farming Ireland and the Local Development Companies - Leitrim Development Company, South West Mayo Development Company, Waterford Leader Partnership and West Limerick Resources and her determination to see these opportunities grow for the people and the communities she represents across Ireland.



Local social farmers, Minister Mary Butler (centre) and three members of Social Farming Ireland's team.