

What is Social Farming?

Social Farming is the practice of providing outcome based support placements on a family farm, using the natural assets of the people, the place, the activities and the community to support a person to achieve some of their own chosen goals. The farm remains at its core, a working farm, where the people availing of support can benefit from participation in the ordinary day to day farm's activities in a non-clinical environment. Social Farming also creates the opportunity to reconnect farmers with their local communities through opening up of their farms as a community-based support for a range of people with many different needs.

Who can avail of Social Farming?

People who have successfully engaged in activity include: people experiencing mental health difficulties, people with disabilities (intellectual, physical and sensory), older people, young people at risk, children, refugees, people availing of drug/alcohol rehabilitation services, people with dementia, and those in the justice system among others.

What type of farm is a social farm?

Social farms are not specialised. They are ordinary working farms. Our Social farms vary greatly in size and activity from a 1 acre horticulture only unit to a 700 acre dairy farm. There are all types of farming including suckler and dairy herds, equestrian, tillage, sheep, goats and many mixed farm enterprises. Our social farmers take part in a detailed training process in preparation to provide supports on their farms. They attend the Social Farming Ireland induction / training programme and the Regional Development Officers have numerous engagements with them on their farms before any placements happen. This support continues throughout placements.

What are the benefits of Social Farming?

The Participant: People who take part in Social Farming, choose to do so and actively participate in the planning of their placement. They have the opportunity to engage with a wide range of farming activities including the animals, plants, soil, natural environment, the farm family and the wider community.

Some of the benefits of Social Farming identified in a range of national and international studies include:

- **Mental Health Benefits:** improved self-esteem and well-being; restored feelings of purpose and worth; increased self-confidence; feelings of acceptance and belonging; a sense of enjoyment and fun
- **Occupational Benefits:** development of occupational and life skills from undertaking farm based activities; the development of new interests; opportunity to learn about farming, nature and biodiversity
- **Physical Health Benefits:** improvements in general physical fitness and vitality; opportunity to undertake natural, productive exercise; improved diet and sleep patterns; increased sense of calm and peace
- **Social Benefits:** improved social and interpersonal skills from carrying out activities alongside others in a supportive environment; the opportunity to meet new people and make friends; an expanded social circle; the establishment and development of valued social roles; greater integration and inclusion in the community.

Health and Social Care providers have the opportunity to partner with social farmers to evolve meaningful choices for the people who use their services. Social farming is an opportunity to enhance 'personal discovery' and progress the development of person centred plans. Service providers find that social farming is meeting the development and progression goals of clients in a very engaging and enjoyable way, and helping to develop new and meaningful social roles for their clients beyond the service itself.

Social farming can complement and contribute to mental health and social care policy and services by:

- Promoting overall mental health and wellbeing
- Adding value to therapeutic and occupational service provision
- Supporting user-determined plans and budgets

Some find social farming to be a more natural 'fit' for many participants than some of the other options on offer. The natural environment also frequently provides space to discover the talents and abilities of those they support.

Farmers have the opportunity to augment their income through the development of community based support provision, utilising their existing farming skills and the often underutilised assets of the farm. Social benefits include

- A strong sense of personal satisfaction and fulfilment from seeing the difference in participants lives and from contributing to efforts at social inclusion;
- The development of new friendships and connections and a reduction in the isolation of farming life. A new sense of perspective on the farm, on its social value and on its possibilities and its role in the community.

How is Social Farming developing in Ireland?

Ireland now has a growing number and diversity of social farms and the network of stakeholders is developing and consolidating. Leitrim Development Company was a key partner in the cross border pilot project, Social Farming Across Borders (SOFAB, 2011 – 2014) funded by Interreg Iva (through SEUPB) led by UCD. Leitrim Development Company currently has a 4-year contract (2017-2020) with the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) under the CEDRA Innovation and Development Fund for the development of Social Farming at national level. They are working with three other local development companies under the name of **Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)**. From a relatively low base, initially in the six border counties of the Republic, Social Farming activity in Ireland has grown rapidly since 2016 and in 2018 it delivered 2600 placement days on 56 farms for almost 300 participants across 22 counties. The numbers of farmers is growing all the time, as are the number and range of statutory partners, services and advocates with which Social Farming Ireland is working.

What does Social Farming Ireland (SoFI) do?

SoFI provides a wide range of services and initiatives which support the development of Social Farming nationally. We engage with farmers who are interested in Social Farming and provide the training and developmental supports which enable them to provide supports safely and effectively. We support the growth and development of a Social Farming **Network** nationally through meetings and events, publications and with online and social media presence. We promote the practice and values of Social Farming to a wide national and regional audience. We work with health, social care and other services to activate placements and to progress the commissioning of placements on farms across the country. A Policy Officer also works at national level to examine and establish best practice and to provide evidence-based learning on benefits and outcomes as Social Farming develops. The Policy Officer works alongside other staff to carry out targeted research, to develop user-friendly materials (reports, presentations, guides, etc.) which are of interest and use to different groups of stakeholders and to inform and influence the sustainable and long term delivery of this community-based supports Social Farming. This role is supported by an academic mentor from University College Dublin. The growth and development of Social Farming at regional and local level is being achieved through the regional hubs.

What do the regional Social Farming hubs do?

Four hubs are based in the Border Midlands (Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG), West (South West Mayo Development Company CLG), South West (West Limerick Resources CLG) and South East (Waterford Leader Partnership CLG). and (Border-Midlands Region). Regional development officers (RDOs) are based in each regional hub (contact details below). This enables a step-by-step rollout of social farming practice, knowledge and experience across the country. The regional hubs are a local source of support to Social Farmers, to participants and to services, advocates and family members and those interested in Social Farming. The hubs develop and implement Social Farming Ireland's best practice processes and procedures to allow for social farming to be practiced in a safe and sustainable way, offering community inclusion and positive outcomes for many people at a local level.

Where can I find out more about Social Farming?

Contact details below. If you want to be a part of Social Farming Ireland, to take part in any of the network activities, meet with our RDO's, to receive regular information or, to take part in training etc. We have a contact form on our website <http://www.socialfarmingireland.ie>. Being registered with Social Farming Ireland means you will receive information and updates on Social Farming and notification of forthcoming events, training, open days etc. Our social media platforms on Facebook, Twitter @lairdhse06 and You tube are also a valuable source of regular updates.

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