

Ireland National Report





Ireland National Report March 2019

Policy/Background:

Farming Overview

Agriculture and farming have long been an integral part of the Irish economy and Irish society. Prior to becoming a member of the European Union in 1973, the country was almost totally economically dependent on farming and agri-food is still the most important indigenous sector, employing 8.6% of the working population. Crucially, that employment and economic activity is spread throughout every corner of the country and delivers a more significant return than equivalent activity in other traded sectors of the economy. While numbers have declined significantly in recent decades, there are still approximately 137,500 farms in Ireland. As such agriculture and farm life remains a key underpinning of the economy overall and of a relatively vibrant rural economic and cultural life. <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/publications/2018/January2018Factsheet120118.pdf>

Agriculture in Ireland is primarily a grass based industry and the key products are beef and dairy which account for approximately 60% of output. Farms are generally small to medium sized by European standards with an average size of 32.4 hectares. In line with this relatively small scale and the nature of the outputs, family-run farms continue to make up the fabric of Irish agriculture. Farming is very reliant on subsidies, which accounted for over 56% of family farm income on average in 2017. Off-farm employment, part-time and multifunctional farming are common, particularly in some of the more marginal land areas of the west and North West though take-up of diversification opportunities is typically low.

National policy on Social Farming/related to Social Farming

There is no specific national policy on Social Farming in Ireland but it falls strongly within a number of policy areas and developments across multiple Government departments which are detailed below. Its recent development has been supported by a range of national and EU funding programmes. The first of these was the EU funded SOFAR Project (Supporting Policies for Social Farming in Europe, 2006-2008) which concluded with a report on the state of the art in 2007.

<http://sofar.unipi.it/index file/Final Irish Revised State of the Art May 2007%5b1%5d.pdf>

An EU INTERREG IVA funded Project SoFAB (Social Farming Across Borders, 2014-2016) piloted Social Farming on 20 social farms on either side of the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Building on these foundations, Social Farming Ireland, the National Social Farming Office, 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



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Project Number:
2018-1-UK01-KA202-047975**



development and progression of Social Farming at national level. Most recently it has received funding and support from the Social Innovation Ireland Fund and the Department of Rural and Community Development for social enterprise development. Social inclusion and community development principles inform the activities and programmes of Ireland's Local Development Companies (LDCs) and Social Farming has emerged from and is currently based in Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG (Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim). It supports the development of a national Social Farming network alongside regional partner organisations where Regional Development Officers (RDOs) are based¹. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine also funds two other smaller Social Farming projects with the Cork Branch of Down Syndrome Ireland and with South Kerry Development Partnership. From the perspective of the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, Social Farming supports multifunctionality and diversification, helps farmers connect with the wider community, fosters rural development and provides a collaborative framework for different Departments and agencies to work together. The Department of Rural and Community Development is interested in supporting the development of sustainable social enterprises and sees Social Farming Ireland as providing a valuable services across the country in this emerging sector.

Health and social care policy and practice overview

In Ireland, the delivery of Health and Social Care services come under the auspices of one Government department, The Department of Health. Delivery of services is the responsibility of a separate government agency, called the Health Service Executive (HSE) and services are generally categorised by acute care, primary care, continuing care and community care services - such as disabilities, mental health, social inclusion and children and family welfare services. One notable feature of the Irish system is the high level of involvement of charitable /voluntary providers (in many cases originally religious congregations) contracted by the HSE to provide services in care settings, and in particular in the disability sector.

The increased interest in and the particular development of Social Farming in Ireland in recent years has also been driven by a set of interlinked processes and developments in health and social care policy, including:

- The emergence of a social model of disability and in particular, the emphasis within the Health Service Executive's New Directions (2012) and the Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services in Ireland (2012) on choice, person-centred principles and approaches, community inclusion and active citizenship. There is also policy and actions to decongregate institutional settings where people with disabilities resided and "received" services. The development of HIQA (Health Information and Quality Authority) has also moved service provision to be more responsive to individuals needs and circumstances and also pushed an agenda of quality improvement in people's services provision and indeed in their lives.

¹ These are South West Mayo Development Company CLG (West Region), West Limerick Resources CLG (South-West Region), Waterford Leader Partnership CLG, (South-East Region) and Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG (Border and Midlands).

- The emphasis within 'A Vision for Change'² (2006) and the more recent Mental Health Commission Strategic Plan (2016-2018) on a holistic view of mental illness, on a person-centered treatment approach and on maximizing recovering, and on focusing that recovery in community settings.
- The drive towards individualised and personalised budgets within the health and social care sectors.
- The increased use of a person-centred and progressive approach within most social inclusion and community work including youth-work, work with the long-term unemployed, asylum-seekers, refugees, etc.

Social Farming Practice:

Social farming in Ireland a general description

Social Farming in Ireland adopts a values based approach focused on inclusion, individual choice, building personal resilience, independence and capacity, supporting people with their own goals and valuing all and the contributions they make in their community. This is providing support to individual citizens and meeting their needs in line with Government policy. In this context Social farming in Ireland provides planned, outcome focused, support placements for people on a farm using the natural assets of the people, the place, the activities and the community around the farm to support a person to achieve some of their own chosen goals. It is fundamentally based on that person spending time with active farmers and their families in the natural environment of the farm, but also focuses on other key elements such as ordinary, valuable, meaningful activities and social and community connections which combine to deepen its impact further. The touchstones of Social Farming Ireland are:

- NEW OPPORTUNITIES for participants and for the social farmers, their families and the wider communities,
- CONNECTING PEOPLE, allowing for an informal non clinical setting for the development of natural connection and relationships between people and also facilitating connections between the participants and the environment, the plants, animals, the seasons, the routines of daily life, etc.
- all leading to the outcome of ENHANCING LIVES for the participants and all those involved.



²This is the strategy document which sets out the direction for Mental Health Services in Ireland

Geographical spread of Social Farming

From an earlier cluster of 10 social farmers in the border region – a legacy of the SoFAB project – Social Farming practice has now spread to every part of the country. There is now at least one trained social farmer in 25 of the 26 counties with most counties having many more. The map below gives an overview of the geographical spread of social farms in early 2019.





Social Farming Participants overview.

In 2017, Social Farming Ireland delivered almost 1700 placement days to over 120 participants. In 2018, activity more than doubled, with 2600 placement days to over 300 participants. It is anticipated that in 2019 this will double again on the 2018 activity. Social farming is happening now in all parts of the country and across many different sectors and participant groups.

Number of Farms

In early 2019 there are approximately 60 trained Social farms active with participants on their farms, and at least a further 60 social farmers who have received training and induction and are at various stages to becoming active and experienced social farmers. Training/ induction of new social farmers is continuing in 2019 with 58 people registered for the training in March-April, 2019. Significant development work is ongoing to increase the choice of farms available to meet demand from participant groups, service providers and commissioners.

Type of Farms

In the Irish context, the social farm is not a specialised or treatment farm – as can be the case in other countries – rather it remains a typical ordinary working farm where people take part in day-to-day farm activities in an ordinary, non-clinical environment. The majority of social farms provide social farming supports on only one or two days per week and continue with their regular on going farm operations and in some cases diversification opportunities. Research undertaken by Social Farming Ireland in 2017/2018 demonstrated that most social farms are small to medium sized holdings, which operate mixed and non-intensive farming systems. There is however growing variety in Ireland the type of farms which engage in social farming. These include very small horticultural units up to a small number which are large intensive operations of many hundreds of acres. Some farms have a significant focus on or specialise in particular areas such as equestrian, horticulture, floriculture or woodland management.

Profile of Farmers delivering Social Farming

While no systematic profiling of social farmers has taken place, certain trends and commonalities can be observed in terms of life experience, interests and approach to farming and agriculture amongst Irish social farmers.

- Many social farmers will have some family experience with particular needs and/or personal experience of the beneficial effects of spending time on the farm.
- It is common for members of the farm household to have some experience either in a professional or voluntary capacity in the health or social care sector.
- While a number of social farmers operate on their own, it is more common to have involvement by other member(s) of the family or in some cases a neighbour or friend.

- Social farmers are typically altruistic, placing a strong emphasis on things such as volunteerism, community involvement, on the environment and biodiversity, on heritage and the maintenance of traditional farming practices /skills, on animal welfare and on the ecological value of the farm etc.
- A high proportion of social farmers in Ireland are certified organic producers, or farm organically or without chemicals.

Training in Social Farming/related to Social Farming available for farmers

Social Farming Ireland has developed and provides 'Training for Practice' a minimum of two days training which is required for all potential social farmers who wish to work with Social Farming Ireland. It contains sessions on subjects such as; Social Farming practice; safeguarding, working with vulnerable people, farm health and safety and other relevant subjects. This training is currently provided free of charge, usually once a year and is delivered at venues around the country. In addition to this training, on-farm health and safety mentoring and risk assessment is mandatory and is carried out by external health and safety consultants. Peer learning on experienced social farms is another component of preparing farmers for Social Farming practice.

Activities offered



A wide variety of activities are available to participants on Irish social farms, with each farm offering its own unique blend of activities and engagements depending on the farming system, scale, location, etc. Other factors such as the weather, the time of year and the skills and interests of the participants also come into play. Amongst the most common activities on social farms are: checking and feeding cattle, sheep, poultry and other animals; grooming and walking horses; collecting eggs; cleaning out sheds and yards; sowing seeds and plants; weeding, thinning and harvesting vegetables and fruit; restoring and painting farm machinery, gates, etc.; cooking and baking; gathering and chopping firewood; woodland maintenance; learning about the flora and fauna of the farm; and general farm maintenance and farm workshop activities. The Social Farming experience is usually enhanced further by off-farm trips to the hardware store, garden centre, local co-op shop, mart, café, etc.

Profile of Social Farming participants

People who have successfully engaged in Social Farming in Ireland include: people with mental ill health; people with disabilities (intellectual, physical, and sensory); the long term unemployed; young people and especially those who are NEET³; older people and those with dementia; people recovering from substance misuse; and refugees and asylum seekers. The two main commissioners for social farming supports are from mental health services and intellectual disability services, which together account for over 70% of participants. There are some detailed research reports on the engagements with some of these participant groups on the Social farming website at:

<https://www.socialfarmingireland.ie/resources/research-and-case-studies/>

How Social Farming is Driven

Social farming is being driven from a policy perspective by the need to provide accessible community based options for people with disabilities and mental ill health which are flexible and non-clinical and which can help them and support them to achieve a better quality of life and broaden their experiences and options in life. These outcomes can be occupational, social, economic or involve overall improvements in physical health and wellbeing.

Social Farming Ireland is the key national organisation, now constituted as a social enterprise, progressing and developing Social Farming in Ireland at the present time. Activities include dissemination of information on social farming, farmer recruitment, training and development; working with health, social care and other services and commissioners to activate social farming placements; and evidence based research activity and policy development. Interest in social farming is growing amongst both farmers and services – and key people from both groups contribute to the development and evolution of social farming – but Social Farming Ireland are the key interlocutor between farmers and services and the main drivers of Social Farming in this developmental phase.

Due to the fact that social farming now has an established network of stakeholders around the country with regular networking events, farm open days, seminars and even occasional national conferences/events, there is now a good general level of knowledge and understanding of the concept and activities of Social Farming. There are also regular features in the national farming press, on national television, regional newspaper and radio and occasional feature in other national newspapers on social farmers, on participants and on the benefits of Social Farming. There is also a strong online and social media presence for Social Farming in Ireland.

The research work initiated by and continuing with support through University College Dublin (UCD) and publications of Social Farming Ireland/Leitrim Integrated Development Company also attract attention and help to prove the benefits of Social Farming for participants. This is all helping to drive interest in and the expansion of Social Farming.

³ Not in Employment, Education or Training

Commissioning of and support for Social Farming participation

Working via Social Farming Ireland, individual social farmers are commissioned to provide Social Farming supports to participants. The commissioners of Social Farming supports come from a range of groups and bodies, including government services and agencies, development organisations, charities, voluntary groups, advocates groups, families, etc. The participants are encouraged to choose Social Farming as an option for support in their lives and to help them to explore new opportunities and to engage in community activities of interest to them on a farm setting. A person-centred Individual Support Plan is drawn from their own wishes and life goals to guide what they hope to achieve from the placement on the farm. Then a memo of understanding (MOU) is drawn up between Social Farming Ireland, the farmer and the commissioning service for each placement to cover areas such as cost, hours and days of placement, provision for non-attendance, etc. The Regional Development Officer from Social Farming Ireland provides support to the farmer and the commissioning service throughout the placement and acts as the key intermediary between both. It is the commissioning service which provides the personal support to participants themselves, which includes: supporting the participant to develop their Individual Support Plan, supporting participants on placement days as appropriate/necessary; and being available by phone for the duration of the placement.

Funding for Social Farming delivery

Funding for Social Farming placements is typically assembled via a wide range of funding sources. At the heart of the current 4 year contract with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is a sampling fund which enables Social Farming Ireland to fund or co-fund placements with new services, new participants or on new social farms. The other key source of funding for placements at this time is full funding or partial funding by commissioners / services themselves. In a small number of cases, this has led to service-level agreements between services and Social Farming Ireland where services allocate budgets on a yearly basis to fully fund a set number of Social Farming placements.



Future for Social Farming



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Project Number:
2018-1-UK01-KA202-047975**



Social Farming in Ireland has experienced significant growth and development in the last two years in particular and the level of interest from participants, farmers and commissioners /services continues to grow and deepen. The model of Social Farming which is being emerging and developing in the Irish context is wholly in tune with some of the afore-mentioned policies and practice in health and social care and services, and work is ongoing to ensure the sustainability of supports within the mental health and intellectual disability services in particular. Social Farming also has significant potential to deliver benefits to other participant and commissioner groups with whom Social Farming Ireland has engaged most recently, including young people with a range of needs, those accessing addiction services, and those accessing homelessness services. There is strong and growing political interest in and support for the values and benefits of Social Farming which it is hoped will translate into ongoing support for its further development and will lead to the sustainable commissioning of social farmers to deliver these many benefits and which participants speak about from their placements and experiences to date.

Training Needs Identified

Training and induction for farmers (and others) is a key part of the work of Social Farming Ireland and the support for farmers is continually updated to take account of new needs, changes at the level of services, etc. With significant and growing demand in Ireland for information and training for social farmers and also for those organisations, agencies and people who wish to commission placements on Social Farms there is a need to provide information and training materials for them to make some decisions in the earlier stages of deciding how to proceed and to get involved. Answering individual queries and providing the information and materials to allow people to progress their knowledge and understanding of on the many aspects of social farming is very demanding and time consuming for staff. Providing clear accurate and accessible information and training material for the many interested parties and stakeholders but particularly for potential Social farmers is now badly needed.

Best practice sharing

Best practice sharing operates at a number of levels:

- The current contract between Social Farming Ireland and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine provides funding for an evidence based learning project, which allows for the gathering and dissemination of evidence on the benefits, outcomes and challenges associated with social farming and the identification of best practice in its delivery, governance, etc, This Project has produced a range of reports which have been widely disseminated and which are available on the Social Farming Ireland website (<https://www.socialfarmingireland.ie/resources/research-and-case-studies/>)

- The structure of Social Farming Ireland, with four regional networks /hubs , allows for information sharing and learning across the entire country. This process is ongoing, but the National Coordination Committee brings together more formally the CEOs of the partner Local Development Companies, the Regional Development Officers, and academic partners from University College Dublin and representation from the Northern Ireland counterpart. This committee meets 6 times per year.
- A National Advisory Committee meets twice per year and acts as a forum for the inclusion of a broad range of expertise and advice from national and international practitioners and sources. It is comprised of representatives from the local development companies, University College Dublin, experienced international Social Farming expertise, the national Agricultural advisory agency (Teagasc) service providers, participants and social farmers and the farming organisations.
- Social Farming Ireland has been involved in a range of European networking projects /opportunities over the last number of years, including Profarm and SoEngage.

