



SOCIAL AGRICULTURE

case study

SOCIAL FARMING IRELAND

Social Farming Ireland (SoFI) is the national network for the development of Social Farming in Ireland which is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). Social Farming Ireland is based in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim and is led by Leitrim Development Company. It supports the development of a national Social Farming network in collaboration with three other Local Development Companies where regional hubs are based (West Limerick Resources Ltd, South West Mayo Development Co., Waterford LEADER Partnership Co.).

"The development of Social Farming in Ireland is driven by a number of factors. There is a strong drive to support the rural economy and see how farms can be used in more innovative ways. Irish farms were seen as an untapped resource in terms of people, place and environment that were not always used as they could be. On the other hand, there were unmet needs amongst people with all sorts of challenges in life for the kind of natural supports which social farming can provide. In many cases, people were being sent out from their own rural areas into the centre or into more clinical settings, but there was this idea that maybe they could find activities in the rural areas where they came from, and could choose how they receive the support they need."

Aisling Moroney

MODEL IN A NUTSHELL

- **Website**
www.socialfarmingireland.ie
- **Social channels**
facebook.com/SocialFarmingIreland
twitter.com/Lairdhse06
- **Country**
Ireland
- **Main sector**
Voluntary
- **Specific sector**
Health, agriculture, labour and social integration, local development
- **Stage of development**
Project
- **Our work in SDGs**



FROM FEW TO MANY

In 2006, a number of people – including academics from University College Dublin (UCD), such as Deirdre O’Connor, formed a Community of Practice of individuals from academic, local development, and healthcare settings who were interested in **social farming**. This group included many people who remain involved to this day, including Brian Smyth (Social Farming Ireland National Project Manager), Jim Kinsella (member of National Coordination committee and academic advisor/mentor) as well as a number of others from a range of agencies and backgrounds.

A key stage in the development of Social Farming in Ireland (SoFI) was the approval of the **INTERREG for the Social Farming across Borders (SOFAB) Project (2011-2014)** which came about through cross-border cooperation between Queen’s University Belfast, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland (DAERA), UCD and Leitrim Development Company (Co.). This Project piloted social farming on **20 farms** in the Border region and was administered by Leitrim Development Co. In the original pilot INTERREG SOFAB programme, Leitrim Development Company was the rural development partner. It is now the lead and the contract holder for the current development of a National Social Farming Network in Ireland, and the SoFI project. In delivering on this contract on a national basis, Leitrim Development Co. works with three subcontractors who each host a regional hub and employ a regional development officer. A National Coordination Committee guides the Project and is made of the CEOs and Social Farming staff from the four local development companies as well as Prof. Jim Kinsella from UCD and a representative from the Social Farming Support Office in Northern Ireland. A National Advisory Committee sits outside this structure. It is a more fluid committee which receives input from other European countries including the Netherlands and the UK.

We refer to the people who benefit from social farming support as ‘participants.’ The majority of them are **people with an intellectual disability or people with mental ill-health** but we also (increasingly) have participants from the following groups:

- people who are long term unemployed;
- youth from secondary school and youth at risk;
- young people in the care system;
- refugees and asylum seekers (those in direct provision);
- people with dementia;
- people accessing addiction or homelessness services.

FROM IDEA TO ACTION

Though there has been a shift to a more urbanised society, Ireland is traditionally very rural, where there is a huge familiarity with farms, a strong cultural connection with rural life and amongst many, a yearning to reconnect with the past and with the land. **Social Farming is therefore a very good ‘fit’ in the Irish context** and it is very much about the use of ordinary farms and enabling people to take part in ordinary farm activities in natural and homely settings. Indeed, this is why the first members of the Community of Practice group began looking at the growth of social farming in other European countries began investigating how Social Farming might be applicable to the Irish farming context. Their meetings and investigations led to the national Community of Practice which was then boosted by the SOFAB project. Since **2017**, and building on this experience, Leitrim Development Co. have received funding from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for the development of a national Social Farming Network and so SoFI was launched. Leitrim Development Co. is a not-for-profit organization which runs a number of **social inclusion and community development programs**, including LEADER and youth and training initiatives. Leitrim Development Co. is run by a voluntary board. The business model is sustained both by funding from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and national and international (European) grant funding for projects.

Our core business is developing **social farming at a national level**. We provide **training and development** supports to new and existing social farmers and we work with services/commissioners to organise placements and act as the intermediary between farmers, services and participants. Our key value is **offering this service to ordinary farms**, not institutional farms, using the assets already present. Our objective is to support and utilise the existing farming system in Ireland and not to change it.

Social Farming provides people who use services with the opportunity for inclusion, to increase self-esteem and to improve health and well-being by taking part in day-to-day farm activities on a family farm. In most cases, participants go to the farm once a week for a period of time and in very small groups, usually of 3 or less. Equally, the majority of our farms are only involved in Social Farming activities one or two days per week and **the farm remains very much a “working farm”**. In short, our main activities are to:

- **train farmers** who want to become social farmers;
- **match participants** with social farms;
- **secure funding** for social farming activity
- **promote and develop social farming** in Ireland.

To date, since 2017, Social Farming Ireland have delivered over **6,300 placement days** to approximately **790 participants** on 77 social farms throughout the country.

FROM OLD TO NEW

Social Farming is highly innovative, as:

- It is **tapping** into the uniquely **social nature** of Irish society
- It is **building** new **connections and relationships between sectors - and people** - which may have had little or no previous contact (e.g. farming/agriculture and health/social care)
- It is **putting the 'culture' back** into agriculture
- It is focused on **using existing underutilised resources** (the farms and the farmers) – this is in tune with the need for innovation to build on what we have, to have minimal or a positive environmental impact.

Social Farming addresses a number of societal needs. It both contributes to, and promotes a shift from, a medical care model to a social, community-based model where you try to find what people's passions and interests are and try to meet their needs more effectively. It activates **opportunities to provide support** which will meaningfully improve people's lives. It helps farmers to **diversify their income sources** and to make better use of the untapped resources present on farms. It supports the existing system of small family farms in Ireland and reduces the sense of isolation which can be associated with modern farming, **reconnecting farmers to their communities**.

Social Farming also contributes to breaking down barriers between people and the creation of more genuinely inclusive and healthy societies both in rural communities and more widely. Social Farming practice is also associated with significant **environmental and biodiversity enhancements** and supports and encourages a more sustainable and low-carbon model of farming - 25% of the current farmers active in the Social farming Ireland network are **registered organic farms** and 40% are mixed operations. On social farms, we move away from a strictly productivity model to one where farms are places where a lot of things are happening, many of which are of environmental benefit. Farms are a collection of assets, including environmental assets, that help mitigate climate change.



FROM NOW TO THEN

There should be social farms in every area of the country with as many as **10 per county** on average to meet the demand from all sectors.

For that it is necessary to:

- achieve buy in from the Health & Social Care sectors in terms of funding and support
 - have continued developmental support for Social Farming Ireland
 - continue to deliver on outcomes on an individual basis for participants and assure quality of the services and connections
- Amongst the challenges we face are a) a continuing need to source funding, b) resource limitations and c) current situation with Covid-19.