

National Rural Network (NRN) Social Farming Case Study

What is Social Farming?

Traditionally, farms have been categorised as places where food is produced, however in recent times they have become more multifunctional. For example, farming has become increasingly linked to tourism activities leading to the establishment of a number of on-farm rural tourism enterprises. In more recent times the concept of 'Social Farming' has also grown roots in Ireland.



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Social Farming is unique in that it supports multifunctional farming, whilst also overlapping with health and social care policy by providing valuable supports to people with a range of needs and challenges. Its aim is to provide an opportunity for inclusion, allowing participants to engage in everyday on-farm activities, boosting their social skills, self-esteem and confidence, as well as allowing them to improve their health and wellbeing by being out and involved in the natural environment. Those who use social farms come from a range of different backgrounds including people experiencing mental health issues, people with intellectual, physical and sensory disabilities, older people, the long-term unemployed, young people who are at risk, and refugees, among others. Farmers who have become involved and facilitate social farming in Ireland are paid for their time and expenses incurred as part of providing this support. This helps them to enhance their viability and use the valuable natural and human capital on the farm.

Social Farming placements usually last for between 10 and 12 weeks and occur one day per week. An important and unique aspect of social farming in Ireland is that it takes place on ordinary working farms that are not altered in any way to engage in social farming, meaning that those participating are based on a normal working farm and in a non-clinical environment. Social Farming takes an individualistic, person-centred approach in that each participant decides to participate in social farming and sets their own goals or objectives that they hope to achieve out of their placement. This allows organisers to match participants with suitable social farmers and allows the farmer to cater activities to specific interests.

Social Farming in Ireland

Social Farming in Ireland is in a relatively early stage of development but has grown substantially from the onset. The activity is particularly well advanced in countries such as Norway, the Netherlands and Italy, where it can also be known as 'Care Farming', 'Farming for Health' or 'Green Care'. It can also take on different forms, whereby farms are not ordinary working farms like in Ireland but rather can be specialised facilities.



Social Farming became established in Ireland as part of an EU INTERREG IVA Funded project called 'Social Farming Across Borders' (SoFAB) which operated in the Border counties of Ireland and all of Northern Ireland from 2011 to 2014. This project was the precursor and led to the establishment of 'Social Farming Ireland' (SoFI), an entity which was developed to continue to support and help develop Social Farming in the Republic of Ireland. SoFI opened in April 2015 in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim and is led by Leitrim Integrated Development Company, due to its involvement as a partner in the SoFAB project. It has been strongly supported and funded since 2015 by the Department of Agriculture Food & the Marine, largely under the CEDRA (Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas) fund. One of its key roles is to support the development of a national Social Farming network and it does this by collaborating with a number of other Local Development Companies to drive this forward on a national basis. These development companies are based in different regions and include Leitrim Development Company (Border Midlands), West Limerick Resources (South West), Waterford LEADER Partnership (South East) and South West Mayo Development Company (West) which support the roll out of Social Farming regionally and act as a support to social farmers in the region. SoFI provide a range of services to help the roll out of social farming on a national basis including dissemination of information about what social farming is and how it works; recruiting farmers to participate and providing them with training; and engaging with health and social care service providers from the state, community and voluntary sectors to commission placements on behalf of participants based on their needs. It also conducts research that can impact on policy and future developments in social farming in Ireland. Put simply, SoFI acts as the intermediary between farmers, the health and social care organisations, and the participants to make social farming happen. Since its inception in 2015, SoFI has delivered over 6,300 placement days to approximately 790 participants on 77 social farms throughout the country.

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Social Farming Case Study: Tommy Earley, Mount Allen Farm, Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim

Tommy Earley runs a 100-acre farm situated by the shores of Lough Allen in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim. This farm has been operated by the Earley family since 1888. Tommy started farming organically in 1996 and currently rears Aberdeen Angus cows and calves, grows vegetables, harvests his own timber and has also developed a number of trails for 'farm eco walks' which he provides as part of his eco-tourism business 'Mount Allen Ecotours'. Tommy has a keen interest in biodiversity and farming in an environmentally sensitive way; he was most recently featured on RTE's 'Ear to the Ground' for his involvement in a project with Queens University, Belfast in the potential of restoring bogs to sequester carbon, which he is trialling on his farm. His farm harbours a range of different habitats including bog land, lake shore, woodland which he showcases as part of his eco walks, and it was this involvement in giving farm Eco walks that made him more open to engaging in social farming, which he began in 2014. According to Tommy ***"I was doing tours anyway..... I was kinda used to bringing people around in a way that they were learning a little bit about the local history or the local environment, whereas now it was more towards helping them in other areas of their life"***.



Tommy Earley pictured here at home in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim.



Dr Teresa Hooks (NRN) pictured here with Tommy Earley.

Tommy became involved in social farming when he attended a social farming event and heard the story of one of the participants speaking about how social farming had helped them. Tommy explains that ***"I went to an open day on a farm walk in Cavan... and there was a guy who spoke at it, one of the participants...everything had been going super for him - married, house, business really going well but he got knocked out with depression. And lost everything. Marriage went, the house went, everything went and he was in a really bad place and as part of the treatment...he got a chance to go on a social farm and it made a major difference to him... so I thought, if it could make such a difference to him if I could get it going on the farm here it might make a difference too... so that's what tempted me to try it more than anything"***.

Tommy then made contact with SoFI in Drumshanbo, where he got more information about becoming involved in social farming and received training on social farming facilitated by SoFI. Before getting involved himself, he was invited by another social farmer to come and attend his farm to see how a typical day social farming works. Tommy reveals that ***"I found that was great, that set my mind at ease with a lot of stuff. So you can kinda see how it works, the interaction with people and all that... so that was a great chance to get onto a social farm that's already up and running and just to see how does it work"***.



Tommy Earley's picturesque Mount Allen Farm in Co. Leitrim.

Practicalities of Social Farming

To become a social farmer, there is a requirement to have insurance and undergo specific training provided by SoFI. Tommy notes ***"besides that you are as careful as you can be, and for the most part people are walking around talking. But then you have a whole range of contacts there... it's not as if you're being thrown in the deep end, there is a lot of support... You know if they are dropping off someone new, they might stay with you on the farm for the first couple of days and then melt away into the background"***.

Currently Social farming placements are short term, typically 10 weeks, for one day per week lasting for 5-6 hours. Participants usually set out their interests and goals before their placement and this helps the farmer to set out activities which are suitable to match the different participants and their abilities. Tommy, speaking about his first day in social farming, explains that ***"you're thinking of all the things that could go wrong...but the thing is...you're over thinking it... and your aware of everything, whereas in reality it was an awful lot simpler than what you would be expecting"***.

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Practicalities of Social Farming (Contd.)

In setting tasks or activities for the day, Tommy emphasises that the crucial point is to keep things as simple as possible. He explains that the the aim is mostly to *“help people to be at ease. I think that’s the critical bit... it’s not so much the activity that you’re doing. You know activities can be wide ranging you could be looking at leaves on trees, looking at flowers, or picking spuds or splitting sticks but it doesn’t matter what you’re doing, it’s that the person or whoever is doing it is happy out at what they are doing”*.



Social Farming participants pictured here by Tommy’s lakeshore.



Tommy and his social farming participants laying walking trails.

Benefits of Social Farming

Tommy explains that social farming has led him to have a much greater appreciation for his health. He adds that many of his social farming participants had *“gone on to do other things... some of them have took up employment and gone off to do courses and different things, so it’s nice to think that the farm here was a stepping stone for them”*.

Tommy relayed one example of how he and his farm helped social farming participants who were non-verbal to achieve their goal. He outlines that *“those couple of ladies that were coming, the hope was that they would get a couple of new words... simple as that. So what I would do was take a picture of the hen out there and got it photocopied and we made a little scrapbook. So we’d go out and be looking at the hen and then come back in to the table and look and the picture in the scrapbook and say ‘hen, hen’, by the time they had left they had 5 or 6 words. That doesn’t seem like a lot, but to the people that were over them they were just absolutely delighted with it. So it’s making a big difference...they might be small little things but they are very big to somebody and to be able to be maybe some of the cause of that happening is a nice thing, that’s what makes it worthwhile”*.

One of the main aims of social farming is to promote social inclusion. Tommy notes that it’s not only him that the participants become familiar with but also the community. According to Tommy, *“neighbours are getting familiar with them and always delighted to meet them and ask them where they are from and chat about different bits and pieces”*.

Advice for those Considering Social Farming for their Farm

Tommy’s advice for those thinking about becoming a social farmer is to get as much information as possible from SoFI. He adds that *“if you can get out onto a social farm when there is a group there, and kinda come blend into the background and just see how it works, it’ll be a good experience... because I suppose we’re all fearful of the unknown”* and his key message is *“that social farming works, it’s very good for the participants and its good for the farmer”*.



Social Farming Ireland (SoFI) is a key resource.

Further Information on Social Farming in Ireland

For more information and resources on Social Farming in Ireland please visit the Social Farming Ireland website. See:

<https://www.socialfarmingireland.ie/>



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