

Social Farming Support Service Northern Ireland: Review and Update

September 2016



Social Farming

Social Farming is an innovative use of agriculture to promote therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas. Central to the concept is:

1. the farm, which remains a typical working farm where people in need of support can benefit from participation in farm activities in a non-clinical environment and
2. the farmer, who is remunerated for the provision of the service.

Social Farming activities provide vulnerable people of a variety of backgrounds with the opportunity to be looked after in a non-traditional care setting in which their personal needs are met through participation in farming activities. By its nature Social Farming promotes social inclusion and citizenship. Small groups of service users visit a working farm and participate in activities on the farm with the farm family. The Social Farmers have had training which equips them to work effectively with people of differing abilities and provide entertaining and enjoyable tasks which encourage the learning of new skills.

Social Farming Support Service

The Social Farming Support Service is funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (DAERA) through its Tackling Poverty and Rural Isolation Programme (TRPSI). The Service is located within the charity Rural Support at Loughry College, Cookstown. Rural Support works to help farming and rural families deal with challenges and to enjoy rural life through a number of different initiatives including a helpline and a Farm Business Support project. The Social Farming Support Service follows on from the Social Farming Across Borders (SoFAB) project that piloted the concept on 20 farms in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

The Social Farming Service Coordinator is Aoibheann Walsh. Aoibheann was the Research Assistant/Development Worker within the SoFAB project and witnessed the benefits of Social Farming for the participants and the farmers and their families. The Service Coordinator will work to further develop the network and provide opportunities for individuals to avail of and benefit from Social Farming activities while continuing to raise public awareness amongst farming communities and social service agencies of the concept. In addition, the promotion of best practices in the delivery of services and provide bespoke training to key stakeholders is a key objective.

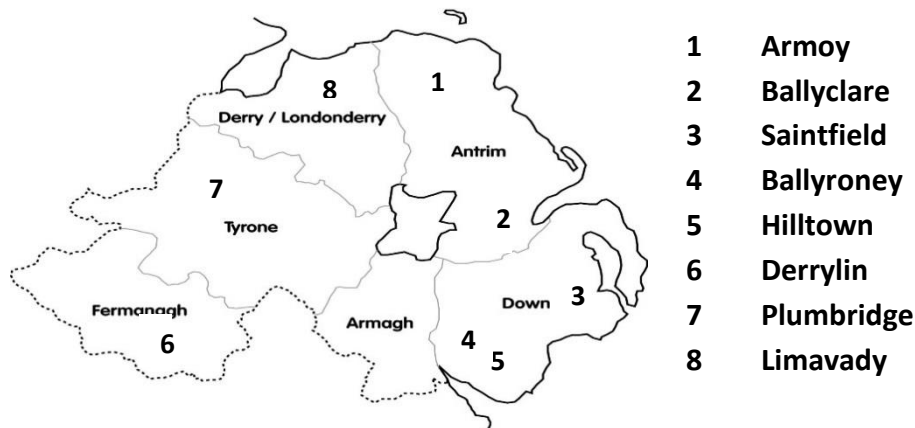


**Aoibheann Walsh,
Social Farming Service
Coordinator**

Social Farming Taster Sessions Funded by the Public Health Agency

A key development in Social Farming activity in 2016 was a taster sessions project funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA). The Social Farming Service Coordinator within Rural Support facilitated the project, highlighting the important role they can play in supporting Social Farming activity.

During the months of March to May 2016, 8 farms across the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland delivered 6 taster sessions of Social Farming to 29 service users, totalling 148 engagements. A taster session was termed such as it offered an opportunity for service users who had not previously engaged with Social Farming to do so. The service users were identified and referred to the sessions by their support staff within the Learning Disability and Mental Health services which they engaged with.



Calculating the Unit Cost

Based on the research conducted alongside the taster sessions, it is suggested that the fee per day for Social Farmers (based on attendance of 3 service users) is **£180** for short to medium terms of service (between 6 and 20 weeks) and **£160** a day for longer terms of service (20 to 40 weeks). In calculating the cost of a Social Farming programme, the cost and value of the Social Farmer's input, appropriate insurance cover required, and minimum material costs had to be considered.

Evaluation of the Taster Sessions

This was the first opportunity for Rural Support to facilitate Social Farming sessions and the experience as a whole appears to have been predominantly positive, although there were a few challenges and negative experiences, about which feedback and discussion was welcomed.



Moving lambs in Saintfield



Teamwork in Hilltown



Calf training in Ballyclare

Social Farming Activity and Development

‘Rural initiative a growing success’

Two farms have come together as a partnership supported by the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020. The SoFarm project operates on Gortilea Social Farm in Claudy and Butterlope Farm in Plumbridge and provides land-based educational opportunities for individuals with a Learning Disability and individuals recovering from a Mental Health issue. Rosaleen Harkin, Western Health and Social Care Trust Assistant Director Adult Learning Disability Services, stated: *“This Social Farming Project improves participants’ physical and mental health and develops their social skills as well as achieving qualifications in a supported environment. The focus of the project is to use Social Farming to enable people with disabilities to achieve their aspirations and play a fuller role in society by undertaking training on the Social Farms”*. A project launch was held in March 2016, which included a farm walk on Gortilea Social Farm. The then Minister for Employment and Learning Dr. Stephen Farry attended the event and presented certificates to project participants who have completed their Level 1 LANTRA qualification.



SoFarm participants – Gortilea Social Farm



Farm walk at SoFarm launch



Social Farming participant and former Justice Minister David Ford

DEL Committee and Social Farming Showcase in Stormont

The Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) Committee as part of their inquiry into post Special Educational Need provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland, visited a Social Farm in late 2015. During the visit, committee members had the chance to meet Social Farmers, and to hear from the service users themselves about the benefits of Social Farming. As a result of the successful visit, a delegation of Social Farming stakeholders were invited to a Social Farming showcase in Stormont buildings in January 2016. The event placed the focus on the service users who were able to talk to politicians in the Executive about why they look forward to their day on the farm and how they want to continue availing of the opportunity. The positive atmosphere in the room reflected the essence of what Social Farming is about—making connections and social inclusion.

Social Farming Benefits

Social Farming – Offering personalised choice

“I have never been so happy in a long time. I am tired when I get home but it’s a nice tired. I feel like I have contributed something and that feels good. Please could the Trust provide some funding to continue this as I prefer it to being at home or in day care. It’s a dream come true.”

[Social Farming Participant on the PHA funded taster sessions project]

Social Farming – Meeting need

“I have found it very personally rewarding. I didn’t think when I started that I would have enjoyed being involved as much as I have. It has been good for me”

[Social Farmer providing a service on the PHA funded taster sessions project]

Social Farming – The environment

“Looking forward to the fresh air, the scenery, the peace and quiet”

[Social Farming Participant on the PHA funded taster sessions project]

Social Farming – Increased motivation/Improved mood

“Ryan gets out of bed readily on farm mornings – whereas it is usually difficult to get him up and going in the mornings. So nice to see him animated about an activity”

[Social Farming Participant’s Key Worker]



**Walkway maintenance in
Derrylin**

Taking the Next Step

Farmer interested in Social Farming:

- Contact the Social Farming Service Coordinator
- Consider Social Farming would fit on your farm
- Plan participant activities
- Complete relevant training
- Meet with service provider(s) in the local area

Service provider interested in Social Farming:

- Contact the Social Farming Service Coordinator
- Consider funding sources for the opportunity
- Identify service users who could benefit
- Research transport options
- Meet with Social Farmer(s) in the local area

Get in Touch

If you are interested in learning more about Social Farming contact the Social Farming Service Coordinator Aoibeann Walsh at Rural Support.

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