

Cultivating Good Relations through Social and Community Farming

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Introduction

Social and community farming are similar approaches to connecting society with farming and farming with society. Their benefits are diverse and multidimensional, and can include social, economic and environmental elements (Jarábková et al., 2022; O'Hara et al., 2024). Both social, and to a lesser extent, community farming have developed in Northern Ireland over the last decade. Of the two processes, social farming has witnessed greater practical uptake and policy support, the latter particularly at the confluence of agri-rural and health policies (DAERA, 2022; Rural Support, 2019). It has focused primarily on working with adults with learning difficulties and/or mental ill-health, and has mainly been delivered by and on family farms.

In contrast, community farming is less common in Northern Ireland and has received very limited policy support to date. Its focus has been less on disadvantaged groups and more on general community-led sustainable development, usually on land owned or operated by community projects (O'Hara et al., 2024). There is also overlap between the processes. For example, some community farms in Northern Ireland deliver social farming, while some social farms are also involved in community engagement.

To date, both social and community farming have engaged with and contributed to good relations in Northern Ireland more implicitly than explicitly. However, despite the challenges of the twin approaches, which in addition to varying degrees of policy support can also include funding, logistics and bureaucratic inertia, there is significant overlap between their multidimensional sustainability benefits and the principles and potential of good relations (Gray et al., 2023; The Executive Office, 2022).

This Policy Brief considers the development of social and community farming in relation to improving connections between differing religious, political and ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. It also discusses the policy context for the growth of both approaches in this space, focusing especially on social farming with refugees and asylum seekers, and community farming with minority ethnic groups. Although there are also many urban community gardens which can deliver similar outcomes, this briefing focuses mostly on rural farming enterprises and initiatives.

Social farming in Northern Ireland

Social farming is defined as ‘an innovative use of agriculture to provide therapy, rehabilitation, education and social services in rural areas’ (Rural Support, 2019). The process is also known as care farming or green care in other contexts, including Britain, and the terms are often used interchangeably. In their overview of social farming across Europe, Jarábková et al. (2022) noted that health was the most commonly-cited benefit in the 134 studies considered, with social benefits second, followed by educational, environmental and economic themes.

In Northern Ireland, and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, social farming was catalysed by the INTERREG-funded Social Farming Across Borders (SoFAB) project, 2011-14 (Rural Support, 2019). This pilot project, and the subsequent establishment of the Social Farming Support Service in Northern Ireland delivered by the farm support charity Rural Support, capital grant investment to social farms, and a partnership referral fund have been supported by the (now) Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs’ (DAERA) Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework (DAERA, 2022). More recently, social farming has also been promoted and supported through the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland, not only through the health and wellbeing pillar but also, as a form of farm diversification, via the innovation and entrepreneurship component (ibid).

However, it is social farming’s focus on wellbeing, especially of community-based delivery of health and social care to adults with learning difficulties and mental ill-health (termed participants), that has brought the process significant policy support from the Department of Health (DoH). This has been via the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board, as well as each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts (Rural Support, 2019). Crucially, this also brought important funding to enable the medium-to-long term provision of social farming, including via, for example, service-level agreements and personal independence

payments. As of 2024, there were 18 social farms delivering services across Northern Ireland (Rural Support, 2024).

Good relations have been an implicit part of this development of social farming in Northern Ireland in a number of ways. Firstly, through the initial SoFAB pilot project, whose INTERREG funding was an important component of the ‘Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC)’ strategy across Northern Ireland and border regions (The Executive Office, 2022). Secondly, through the statutory requirement of both DAERA and DoH to include due consideration of cross-community relations in any and all policies, in addition to considering those of rural communities via the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (DAERA, 2022).

Cultivating good relations through social farming

Agri-environmental and social policies have often existed in separate policy silos in Northern Ireland. For instance, the Sixth Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report (Gray et al., 2023) does not mention biodiversity, land, landscapes or nature either at all or in the environmental sense of the words. Yet there is a growing acceptance of the need to connect these previously-disparate areas. In referencing climate change 12 times, Gray et al. (2023) note that ‘dealing with broader structural issues will require stronger linkages between economic, social and environmental policies.’

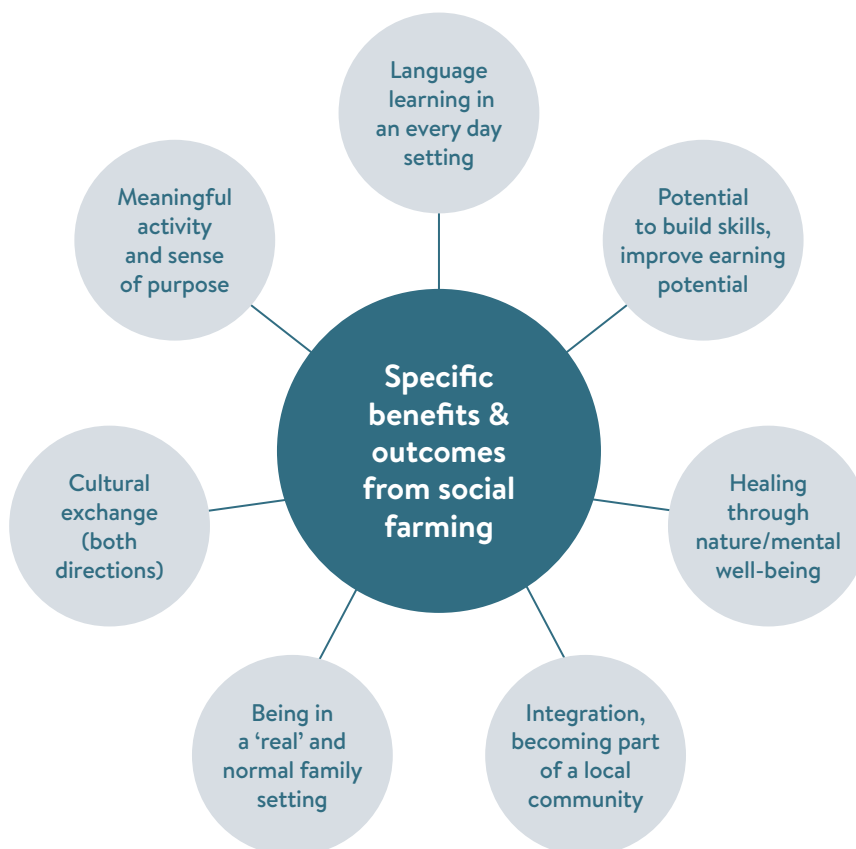
An example of this is some good relations initiatives under the T:BUC strategy, which have begun to deliver environmental projects (The Executive Office, 2022). Through T:BUC Trees, these have included tree planting in partnership with The Woodland Trust and beach cleans in conjunction with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, both aimed primarily at young people. The Urban Villages Initiative often includes the development of community gardens and green spaces, while Peace Plus has biodiversity and nature-themed funding streams.

However, despite this increasing environmental element of T:BUC, there have been limited formal engagements between good relations and agricultural strategies. The Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland (DAERA, 2022), for example, only mentions good relations twice, both in light of the department’s statutory obligation under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) to give due consideration to the issue. It is increasingly important that social, economic and environmental policies are considered in tandem. This approach reflects the growing significance of environmental themes in good relations funding and the contribution and potential of social farming to provide benefits in these areas, especially for and with disadvantaged groups. As such, there is clear potential for a more formal focus on cultivating good relations through social farming in Northern Ireland. In the remainder of

this section, we consider this in relation to asylum seekers and refugees specifically.

Social farming with refugees and asylum seekers can provide multiple benefits to both participants and social farmers (Figure 1). Yet there have been very limited projects with this participant group to date in Northern Ireland, with somewhat more initiatives in the Republic of Ireland (Social Farming Ireland, 2023). Jubilee Farm in County Antrim, the first community-owned farm in Northern Ireland, pioneered the first known example of this work, with project scoping beginning in 2017 and project delivery in early 2019 (O’Hara et al., 2024; J. Hanson, personal communication). Referrals to the service were via a Belfast-based centre for asylum seekers and refugees, and the project was funded through multiple small grants from trusts and foundations.

Figure 1: Benefits and outcomes from social farming with refugees and asylum seekers (Social Farming Ireland, 2023).



Another isolated example of a similar, though shorter-term project, was with Glenside Farm in County Down, which received funding through the District Councils Good Relations Programme to deliver a six-week program with a small number of asylum seekers housed in hotels (O'Hara et al., 2024; J. Hanson, personal communication). Ongoing research, scoping, training and fundraising work has sought to scale up the delivery of social farming with refugees and asylum seekers on multiple social farms across Northern Ireland, with an explicit focus on cultivating good relations (A. Walsh, personal communication; J. Hanson, personal communication).

Community farming in Northern Ireland

Community farming is defined as 'a process of collaborative transformation at the intersection of land, community and enterprise' (O'Hara et al., 2024). It represents a spectrum of approaches to community engagement with farming in rural and urban areas. The process can include more food-focused approaches, typically subscription-based models called Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), as well as initiatives that incorporate wellbeing, volunteering, conservation and tourism elements, for instance. Although much less studied than social farming, community farming can produce similar blends of social, economic and environmental benefits (O'Hara et al., 2024).

Despite its placement at the juncture of agri-environmental, agri-rural and community themes (DAERA, 2022; Gray et al., 2023; The Executive Office, 2022), the development of community farming in Northern Ireland has been characterised by a lack of policy support to date. In spite of this, multiple community farming projects, including Jubilee Farm, have emerged over the last ten years. More recently, the Co-op Foundation-funded Cultivating Community Farming (CCF) accelerator project provided mentoring, support, seed funding and training to ten early-stage community farming initiatives across Northern Ireland between 2022 and 2024 (O'Hara et al., 2024). In assessing the value created by the

CCF project using a Social Return on Investment approach (SROI), O'Hara and colleagues found an SROI ratio of 1:3.52. This means that for every £1 invested in community farming, £3.52 value was created, of which 90 per cent was social, 8 per cent environmental and 2 per cent economic.

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Most of the policy themes and documents discussed in relation to social farming are also relevant to cultivating good relations through community farming (DAERA, 2022; Gray et al., 2023; The Executive Office, 2022), particularly Gray and colleagues' call to consider social, economic and environmental policies concurrently. In their CCF project report, O'Hara et al. (2024) called for policy support from DAERA for community farming development generally, akin to their support of social farming; from the Department of Communities (DfC) in relation to community wealth-building initiatives; and from DoH in promoting 'better health for all', especially through volunteering and outdoor access. However, their report did not mention good relations per se. The same policy trends for community farming as for social farming – multidimensional benefits, emerging environmental themes in good relations funding, and the need for holistic solutions – suggest that the process has clear potential to more formally contribute to improving good relations in Northern Ireland.

This is as much the case with minority ethnic communities as between traditional communities, an increasingly important trend in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland (Gray et al., 2023). DAERA's (2022) Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland, for instance, calls for Black and Minority (BME) ethnic groups to be included in the development of community-led health and wellbeing interventions. A Heritage Lottery-funded Wildlife and Wellbeing project at Jubilee Farm ran between 2021 and 2024, and explicitly focused on such linkages (O'Hara et al., 2024;

J. Hanson, personal communication), but examples like this remain the exception. Just as there is clear potential for community farming to cultivate good relations with and between minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland, there is also a clear need for policy and funding support to fulfil this potential.

Conclusions

In connecting society with farming and farming with society, social and community farming create multiple social, economic and environmental benefits. As relational processes, they are fundamentally about reconfiguring relationships – within and between individuals, groups and nature – in positive ways. The development of

good relations in Northern Ireland, while similar in approach and scope, has often lacked an explicit environmental element. Similarly, the pursuit of good relations in Northern Ireland via social and community farming has largely been implied to date. However, as this Policy Brief demonstrates, both approaches have significant potential to improve relations between communities. This includes emerging opportunities with refugees and asylum seekers through social farming and with minority ethnic groups through community farming. With vision, policy support and funding, good relations can be effectively cultivated through social and community farming in Northern Ireland and beyond.

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