

The just right farm: the role of occupational therapists in strategically placing participants on farms to promote mental wellbeing

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Abstract

Purpose – This practice piece follow-up reflects on the original publication by Deegan *et al.* (2023) "Nurturing Mental Health and Well-being Using Ordinary Farms". This study aims to review the development of occupational therapy-led social farming placements five years on from the pilot programme.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper details the structure and function of an established occupational therapy-led social farming committee across two core domains: Implementation and Oversight, and Education, Research and Promotion.

Findings – The role and function of the occupational therapy-led social farming committee is presented as valuable to the success of placements. While existing assessment tools offer meaningful insight into individual recovery and goals, there is scope to develop a bespoke, occupation-focused outcome measure designed specifically to capture the unique nuances of potential occupational change that occurs during and after placements.

Research limitations/implications – This paper and presented views focus on the authors' practice experience within their local service, and do not reflect comparative and empirical data nor does this paper provide systematic outcome data of the referenced assessment tools.

Originality/value – This paper offers recommendations to support occupational therapists developing social farming initiatives in community mental health settings. It is hoped this paper will open discussion with stakeholders to consider the development of a multi-organisational co-produced occupation-focused outcome measure. The development of such a tool would pave the way to facilitate cohesive national research to the benefit of occupational therapy practice nationally.

Keywords Occupational therapy, Social farming, Mental health

Paper type Brief report

Introduction

Social farming (SF) is an emerging, evidence-informed, community-based intervention within Irish mental health services that enables individuals to engage in meaningful farm-based activities alongside farmers and their peers (Social Farming Ireland, 2021; Gorman *et al.*, 2024). Recovery-oriented practice underpinned by the CHIME principles (Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment) emphasises the importance of individuals living meaningful lives beyond symptom management [Health Service Executive (HSE), 2023]. Grounded in recovery-oriented practice and aligning with national and international policy priorities, including Sharing the Vision (Department of Health, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021; Department of Health, 2026), SF supports mental health recovery including social inclusion and community participation through engagement in ordinary, non-clinical occupations within natural environments.

Engagement in meaningful occupation is central to both SF and occupational therapy (OT) practice and is recognised as fundamental to health, wellbeing and social inclusion

(Townsend and Polatajko, 2013). Research indicates that participation in everyday activities within naturally occurring environments supports recovery, social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Slade, 2009). Occupational therapists (OTs) are uniquely positioned to support SF initiatives through their expertise in activity analysis, environmental assessment and person-centred practice, enabling farm-based activities to be matched to individuals' abilities, strengths and recovery goals (Crepeau *et al.*, 2003; Gillen and Brown, 2024; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2019).

The person environment occupation model provides a robust framework for occupational therapy involvement in SF, emphasising the importance of achieving an optimal fit between the individual, the farm environment and meaningful occupation (Law *et al.*, 1996). Within SF contexts, this fit can be flexibly adapted across a range of agricultural and

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/0791-8437.htm>



Irish Journal of Occupational Therapy
Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0791-8437]
[DOI 10.1108/IJOT-03-2026-0017]

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Received 9 March 2026

Revised 9 July 2026

24 August 2026

Accepted 24 August 2026

horticultural settings, allowing participation to be tailored to diverse physical, cognitive and psychosocial needs (Jarabkova *et al.*, 2022). These authentic environments offer opportunities not only for therapeutic benefit but also for participation in valued community roles.

Clinical and reflective reasoning underpin occupational therapy decision-making within SF placements. OTs assess participants' strengths, interests and needs alongside the demands and supports of individual farm environments to identify an appropriate "just-right" placement. This process is informed by standardised assessment tools and purposeful activities that support sustained engagement and occupational performance (Creek and Lougher, 2011; Gagliardi *et al.*, 2019).

Research suggests that an effective pairing process supports occupational identity, which is an individual's sense of self, developed through participation in meaningful occupations (Taylor *et al.*, 2023), enhancing engagement and fostering a sense of belonging within SF placements (Gorman *et al.*, 2024; Social Farming Ireland, 2021). High levels of participant retention within occupational therapy-led SF initiatives further reflect the suitability of this approach. In total, 43 out of 45 participants completed their placement over the past five years. Typically, placements occur once weekly for 10 weeks with small group sizes of mixed demographics.

Following the success of the 2020–2021 pilot, the occupational therapy department in partnership with Social Farming Ireland (SFI) have continued to support placements for individuals linked with Kildare West Wicklow Mental Health Services (KWWMHS). A subsequent five-year business case (2022–2027) was approved to integrate and embed occupational therapy-led SF placements within KWWMHS.

Social farming committee structure and function

To support implementation and ongoing development of the KWWMHS SF programme since 2021, a dedicated committee was established within the occupational therapy department. The committee comprises of four OTs representing a range of clinical grades and geographical catchment areas. Membership is maintained through the replacement of vacancies as they arise, with selection based on clinicians' demonstrated interest and experience in SF. The committee meets bimonthly, with additional meetings convened during key operational periods.

The work of the committee is organised across two core domains: Implementation and Oversight, and Education, Research and Promotion.

Implementation and oversight

Referral, screening and matching

A significant component of implementation relates to referral screening and matching participants to the "just right" farm.

Sector OTs use a structured pathway and screening tool (see Appendix 1) to safely match participants to the "just right" farm. An accompanying process map ensures consistent implementation, guiding staff through referrals, placement, and ongoing suitability reviews via mid-way visits and supportive phone calls (see Appendix 2).

Each potential participant is carefully matched to an appropriate farm to optimise compatibility between the

participant, the farmer and the farm environment. This intricate matching process considers task demands, the physical and social environment, group dynamics and available supports, recognising that successful engagement arises from the interaction between person, occupation and environment. Koretsidou *et al.* (2024) noted the importance of relationships and connectivity in recovery-oriented practice. Peer relationships are on an equal footing to the farmer/participant relationship, which highlights the importance of matching participants to each other, as well as to the farms and farmers. Drawing on multiple clinical opinions and expertise of four professionals ensures that collaborative decision-making is comprehensive and reflective. This process reflects core occupational therapy values: person-centred practice, "the just right challenge" and positive risk-taking, ensuring that opportunities for participation are balanced with safety and support.

Assessment

A further key role of the committee has been the review and refinement of assessment and outcome measures. Following the pilot programme, the SF committee reappraised the Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview and Rating Scale (OCAIRS) (Deshpande *et al.*, 2017) as a primary outcome measure. While valuable, it proved time-intensive, and micro-changes were difficult to detect over 10-weeks, prompting the need for alternative tools.

In response, a final year occupational therapy student on placement within the service completed a literature review and collated 12 potential evidence-based outcome measures. This work provided a foundation for the committee's decision-making and demonstrates the value of integrating student learning with ongoing service development while aligning with the CORU (2026) regarding evidence-based practice and professional development.

Drawing on the findings of this literature review, the committee elected to replace the OCAIRS with two alternative measures: The Questionnaire for the Process of Recovery (QPR) (Neil *et al.*, 2009) and an adapted Goal Attainment Scale (GAS) (Kiresuk and Sherman, 1968; Lannin, 2003). The QPR is a 15-item self-report measure designed to capture service users' subjective experience of their personal recovery. The GAS supports individuals to set goals that are meaningful to them.

These assessments align with both occupational therapy values (Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland, 2026) and the recovery principles embedded within the Department of Health (2020), which place strong emphasis on recovery-focused, person-led care. Although the National Framework for Recovery in Mental Health [Health Service Executive (HSE), 2023] was published subsequently, the QPR and GAS remain relevant under these guidelines. Both assessments are compatible with the goal-oriented nature of SF's Individual Support Plan document (Social Farming Ireland, 2024).

Day to day logistics

Management of the day-to-day logistics of the SF programme is a key role of the committee to ensure its success. The committee provides supervision and oversight before, during and after placements either directly with the participant or indirectly through the sector occupational therapy supporting

the placement. Transport to/from placements is considered for each participant. The committee lead works closely with the SFI co-ordinator in relation to the costings of placements and budgetary planning.

Education, research and promotion

Over the past five years the committee has engaged in a range of educational and promotional activities across the micro (team-based), meso (service and organisational) and macro (national) levels of practice; championing SF at every step (see Figure 1). These initiatives have ensured that the wider multidisciplinary team (MDT) develops a grounded understanding of the programme's therapeutic value, thereby supporting informed and appropriate referrals.

At the 2022 SFI Conference "Shaping the Future", one programme participant, Brendan, discussed how SF boosted his confidence and responsibility during a fireside chat with key stakeholders. Brendan was later invited to share his experience again, co-producing an information morning for mental health service MDT members as potential referrers to the programme. This aligns with the promotion of recovery-oriented services and the emphasis on "partnership and consultation with those who use services" within the National Framework for Recovery in Mental Health [Health Service Executive (HSE), 2023].

In March 2023, as part of the MDT teaching platform within KWWMHs, all disciplines were invited to attend an open morning, allowing staff to experience a typical placement day. The purpose of this initiative was to expand professionals' understanding of SF and support a sustainable referral stream across community mental health teams. This responded to recommendations by Deegan *et al.* (2023) to broaden referral sources and aligns with recent findings by Gorman *et al.* (2024), who noted that farmers can experience frustration when the therapeutic potential of SF is not fully appreciated by healthcare providers.

Wider dissemination has taken place through presentations and posters at professional conferences and events, including the

Association of Occupational Therapists in Ireland, Health and Social Care Professionals and National Implementation and Monitoring Committee for Sharing the Vision, contributing to a broader awareness of SF within mental health services.

The growing legitimacy and visibility of the SF programme within KWWMHs is reflected in its increasing recognition at organisational and national levels, including professional conference dissemination and receipt of a HSE Staff Excellence Award. Such recognition evidences a shift in professional perceptions of SF – from an emerging intervention in KWWMHs to a credible, occupation-focused therapeutic intervention – supporting its ongoing integration within mental health service provision.

The committee has and continues to embrace the position of student OTs as they come through the department on placement. They are invited to attend committee meetings, attend the farms for induction days and half way visits and are regularly invited to contribute to committee goals including literature reviews.

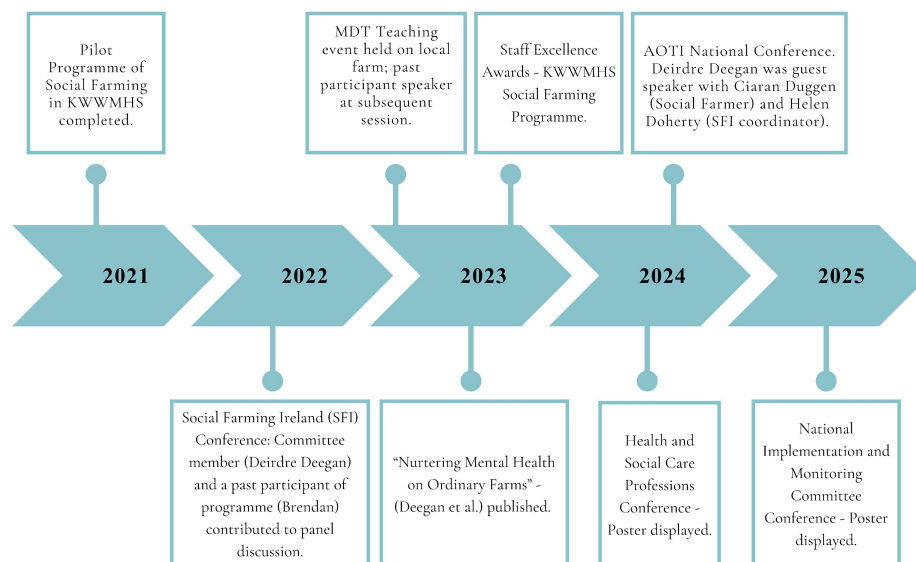
Overall, the committee's aforementioned actions around education, research and promotion of SF align largely with national policy including the HRB National Mental Health Research Strategy four pillars of Infrastructure, capacity, co-production and collaboration (Health Research Board, 2024).

Implications for future practice

While the QPR and the GAS offer meaningful insight into individual recovery and goals, the SF committee recognises that they do not fully capture the nuances of occupational change that have been observed by KWWMHs clinicians during completed SF programmes. Given the authors' position that occupational therapy is best placed to facilitate SF placements in mental health services, there is scope to develop a bespoke, occupation-focused outcome measure tailored specifically to this context.

The development of an assessment tool would be an invaluable next step and a strong opportunity for co-production

Figure 1 Timeline of education and promotion activities by the social farming committee (2021–2025)



between SFI, clinicians, participants and academic partners. Occupational therapy students, particularly those engaged in final year research within CORU-recognised university programmes, are ideally positioned to contribute to the development, testing and refinement of this tool. Their academic environment supports structured research supervision, methodological rigour and protected time for research. Collaboration between SFI, OTs, participants and university programmes would therefore offer a pathway to co-produce a meaningful assessment that authentically reflects the occupational and therapeutic complexities of SF.

Further development of the committee should include consideration of its structure to ensure meaningful and sustainable co-production. Brendan, as a past participant and his peers, both past and future participants, merit a seat at the committee table as invaluable stakeholders. Brendan has been involved in the committee under their remit of education, research and promotion but needs to now be incorporated into the oversight and implementation domain. The manner in which this happens is under review and will be considered in line with the guide to patient and public involvement in HSE research (Health Service Executive Research and Development, 2021). Any invitation for a participant to sit on the committee on a more consistent basis must ensure that their involvement recognises their contribution to the future development and roll out of the programme while ensuring participants' personal data remains confidential and compliant with HSE policy and GDPR regulations.

Most recently the committee and SFI representatives visited three new potential farms. Key to the sustainability of the programme is the need to regularly consider new farms, ensuring variety and diversity of activities available to participants to support our "just right farm" perspective. In doing so, the committee cannot lose sight of the importance of fostering and nurturing relationships with our farmers as the strength of these relationships are imperative to success. It is essential to weigh up the number of available farms while maintaining relationships, balancing quality over quantity. An outcome from recent site visits was to once again hold an MDT teaching session on a new farm in 2026, bringing new staff on board to experience the potential of SF. Koretsidou *et al.* (2024) noted the need to be reflective and evolve in designing and delivering recovery-oriented care. Promoting a unique initiative such as this lends itself to challenges. However, MDT teaching delivered on the farm itself allows all staff to immerse themselves first-hand in the experience and potential of SF.

In addition to staff attendance, the morning will be open to any potential participants, which includes any person availing of the KWWMHS at present, not just those already referred to the programme. One way to do this will be to ensure the peer support worker is invited and has the remit to extend that invitation to the people she engages with.

The position of the authors is that the success of SF placements in KWWMHS has been the result of the SF committee's considered implementation and oversight. The clinical skills of an occupational therapy-led committee have contributed to a sustainable and robust initiative that supports recovery and cements SF as a viable intervention on the "just-right" farm.

Limitations of this paper

This paper and presented views focus on the authors' practice experience within their local health service, and do not reflect comparative and empirical data, nor does this paper provide systematic outcome data of the referenced assessment tools.

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Appendix 1. Social farming screening tool

Social Farming Screening

Give a brief introduction to social farming and advise that this is a screen for suitability.

Questions for participants:

1. What attracts/draws you to social farming? _____

2. What are your expectations of a social farming placement? _____

3. Is there anything that we would need to be aware of to make a potential placement more suitable for you? (E.g mobility concerns, physical conditions, communication challenges). ☐
Yes ☐ No
If yes then give a description: _____
4. Do you enjoy working alongside other people? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Do you drive? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, would you be willing to drive to a farm placement? ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Do you foresee any difficulties with working a full day on a farm? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, how could we support you? _____

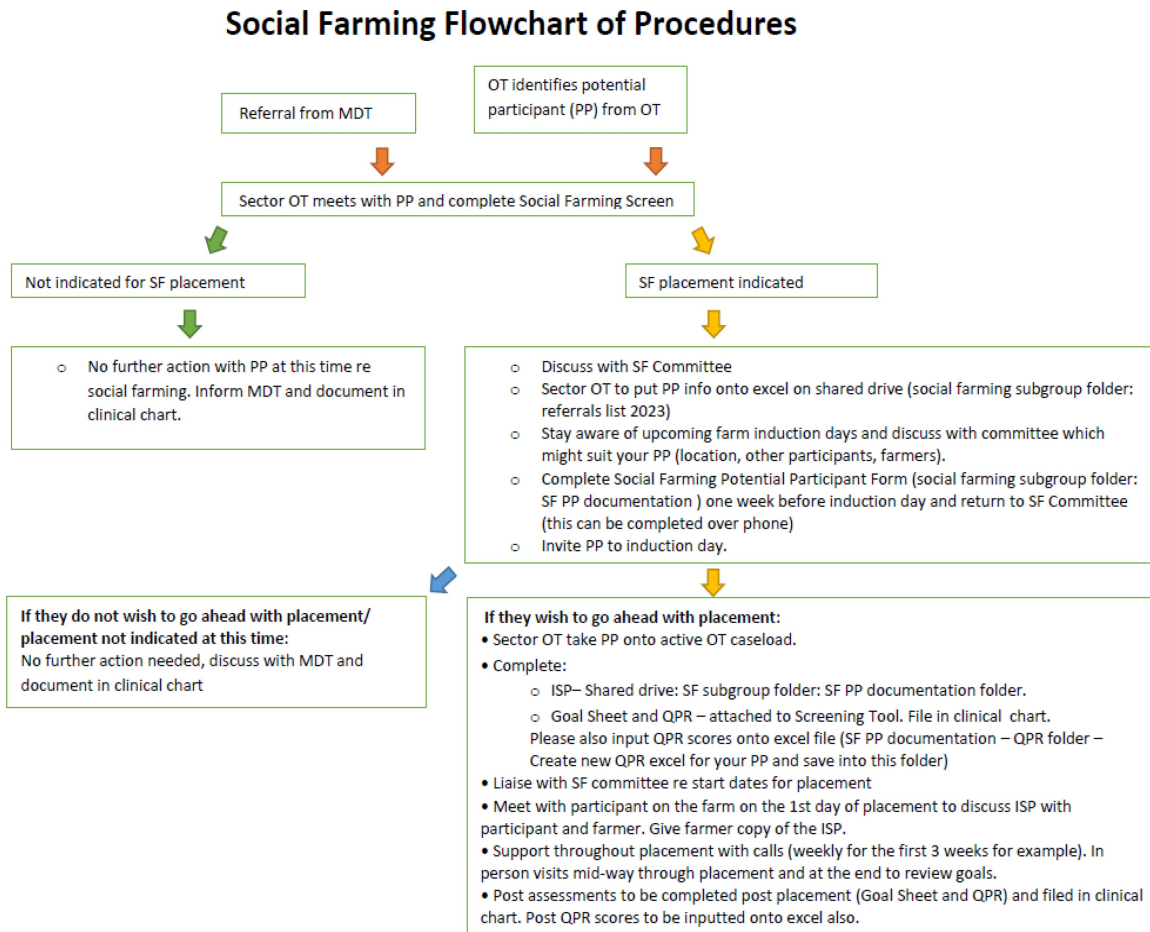
Questions for OT to consider:

1. Is the potential participant currently stable in terms of their mental health recovery? ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. Are there any past or current risks that need to be considered before induction day or potential placement? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, give a description _____
3. Any potential challenges with working in groups? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Does the person have a history of missing appointments? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, describe how OT will plan to support attendance _____
5. Is this person over 65? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, please flag with the Social Farming committee for a potential Older Persons placement.
6. Is this person a candidate for social farming? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, add the person to the waitlist.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Figure A1 Social farming process map

Figure A1 Social farming process map



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