

Farmers' Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Farming is a vital part of the economic, social and environmental landscape of the UK, but the sector is under multiple pressures that put considerable stress on farming families. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted individuals, communities and sectors across society, and there is concern across government, third sector and communities about the impacts of the pandemic on mental health.

This Policy into Practice brief discusses the drivers of farmers' poor mental health in the UK and the provision of support through and beyond the pandemic. It presents findings from the 12-month research project '**Landscapes of Support: Farmer wellbeing and rural resilience through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic**', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19. The research is led by the University of Reading supported by the Universities of Sheffield and Exeter.



OVERVIEW

- There has been poor mental health in farming **prior to the pandemic**.
- Multiple **pre-existing stressors** are intensifying as a result of the post-Brexit Agricultural Transition.
- The COVID-19 **pandemic has added to this** through social isolation, supply chain issues, etc.
- We need to **understand the organisations and networks** that help farmers in order to better support farmer mental health and rural resilience through and beyond the pandemic.
- Mental health challenges are **experienced differently by different family members** and this needs to be recognized in the provision of support.
- Support organisations have faced **challenges to delivering mental health support** to farmers through the pandemic.
- **Better coordination between support organisations** is important to avoid duplication and service gaps.
- **Mental health training for farm advisers** and **improving rural connectivity** is key.

1. BACKGROUND

As COVID-19 spread throughout the UK from early 2020, the government introduced measures to contain and control the pandemic. These initially involved 'stay at home' and 'shielding' advice for citizens aged 70+ or identified as clinically extremely vulnerable, and continued through a series of national and regional lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, and work from home advice, social distancing and other measures.

As well as the cost to human life, the societal, economic and cultural impacts of the pandemic have been great, and will outlast the health crisis itself. They include changes to communities, issues around trust in government, widening inequalities, mental ill-health, revenue challenges for government and rising unemploymentⁱ. In agriculture, we have seen difficulties around the availability of migrant labourⁱⁱ, supply chain issues^{iiiiv}, and increased isolation for some already vulnerable or 'harder-to-reach' farmers^v.

In an industry already affected by high rates of poor mental health, it is important to understand the provision and effectiveness of the support available.

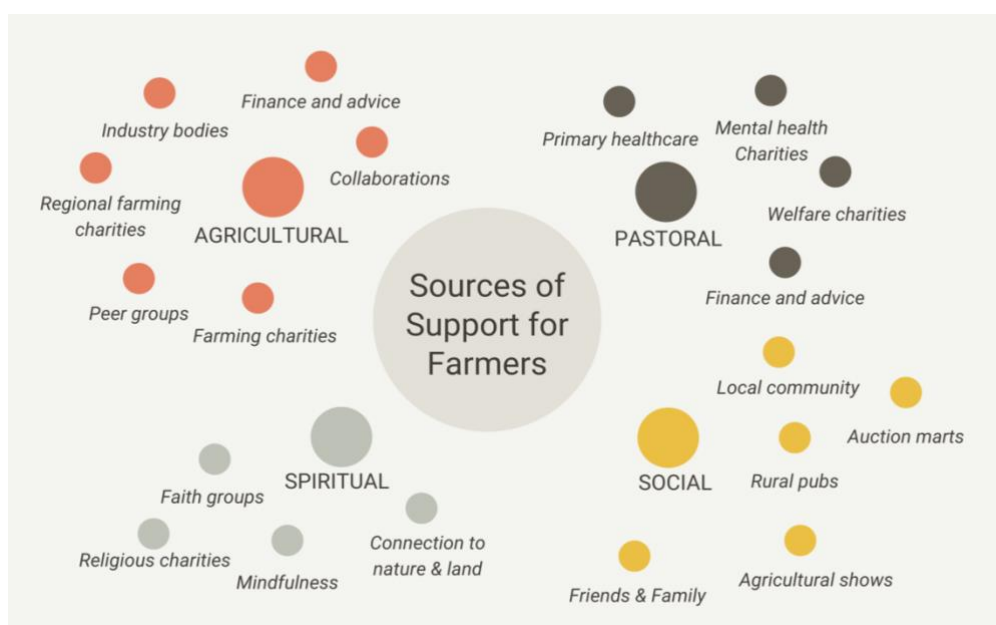
2. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND FARMING

2.1 FARMING STRESSORS

Stress is a common aspect of life and its impacts can vary from mild anxiety through to life-threatening mental ill-health & suicidal thoughts. Farmers face a unique set of acute and chronic stressors including farm bureaucracy, climatic conditions, animal and crop disease outbreaks, time pressures, work-place hazards, rural crime, finance, isolation, machinery breakdowns and media criticism^{vi vii}. Concurrent to the pandemic, January 2021 saw the beginning of the post-Brexit Agricultural Transition Period, with major shifts in the public payments that farmers and land managers receive and changes to international trade agreements.

External shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit can generate new acute stressors for farmers and rural communities and intensify existing chronic stressors. Together, they can create distress and uncertainty for many^{viii} and negatively impact individuals' mental health and wider community and sector resilience^{ix}.

Stressors can be external (such as adverse physical conditions) or internal (physical or psychological), short-term (acute) or long-term (chronic)



2.2 LANDSCAPES OF SUPPORT

A range of organisations support farmers in times of stress and distress. These include government, trade and third sector bodies, and peer and community groups. They variously offer formal and informal support such as: counselling, financial aid, crisis relief, advocacy, advice, friendship, information exchange and spiritual and religious guidance. There is little research on how elements of this landscape work together^x.

Fig. 1. Sources of support for farmers

3. OUR RESEARCH

Our research sought to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on farmers' mental health and on the organisations that support them. In March 2021, a 12-month programme of work began with a rapid scoping review of existing literature, in-depth expert interviews with 22 individuals who support farmers' mental health, and an online survey of 93 employees and volunteers from supporter organisations and 207 farmers.

Respondents were asked about: (1) general drivers of poor farmer mental health; (2) barriers to help-seeking; (3) the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on farming mental health; (4) the impacts of COVID-19 on people's ability to support farmers; (5) recommendations on how to improve support offered to farmers in the future.

Unless the fundamental problems are addressed, farmers' mental health will continue to suffer.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 FARMERS' MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

We asked farmers and support organisations about the mental health of farmers during the pandemic. 67% of farmers surveyed reported feeling more stressed, 63% felt more anxious, 38% felt more depressed, and 12% felt more suicidal (Fig. 2.). We asked farmers about the challenges that had affected their mental health during that time (Fig. 3), and the primary drivers they identified were decreased social contact, issues with the general public on private land, and moving online for social events.

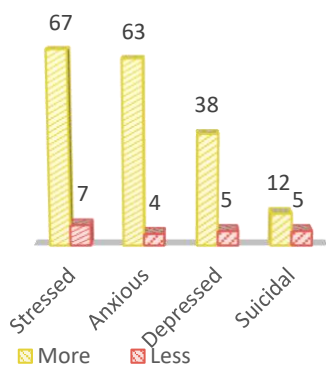


Fig. 2. Self-reported changes to mental health during the pandemic. Results from farmer survey.

4.2 WHEN DO FARMERS SEEK HELP?

When multiple stressors occur, the experience of stress can be amplified and have a negative impact on mental health. Support organisations described the relationship between poor mental health and other challenges on farm (financial, administrative, animal welfare, accidents) as being cyclical as well as directly linked. In interviews we heard repeated statements along the same lines that 'farmers find it difficult to ask for help'. But some farmers do seek support, albeit later in the experience of distress when the issues have become very complex to unravel or resolve. 'It's usually the eleventh hour when they call out, then they will reach out to outside help from somewhere else' (Supporter Interview).

The supporter survey results showed that the main reasons that farmers reached out to organisations for support during the pandemic were loneliness and social isolation (89% of supporters selected this), family or relationship issues (87%), financial problems (82%), illness (75%) and pressure of regulations and inspections from government (66%).

4.3 HOW DO FARMERS SEEK HELP?

Farmers often live and work in a way that is both independent (self-employed and geographically remote) but also embedded in social and professional networks (of farming communities and connections). The routes through which farmers might seek help for mental health issues are therefore varied and often indirect.

'they might talk to vets, they might talk to feed merchants or those people who visit regularly, but after that then, when it gets to that emergency point, they will then look for help elsewhere, to organisations like the Farming Community Network, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, or one of the other organisations which are offering support.' (Respondent 003)

An important dimension of help-seeking and support is that farmers want to reach out to individuals and organisations that understand farming.

'The small minority that we do get welfare problems with are almost always because the farmer is suffering from mental health issues and so we rely quite heavily on the Farming Community Network, because, you know, understandably, the farmers won't really talk to us.' (Respondent 009)

The pandemic has affected both the routes and barriers to help-seeking.

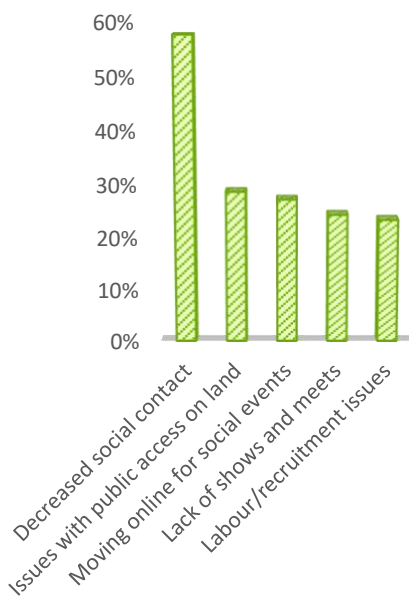


Fig. 3. Challenges affecting mental health during the pandemic. Results from farmer survey.

4.4 WHAT BARRIERS EXIST TO HELP-SEEKING?

There are a broad range of barriers that exist to help-seeking for mental health issues, which have existed before the pandemic. These include social factors such as pride and stigma, 'I think it is for everybody in society as well, but probably more so in farming.' (Respondent 014)

Farming culture is a key barrier to help-seeking and is linked to barriers that can be gendered: 'it's a typical man thing, you know. We don't like to admit that... a weakness.' (Respondent 009). There are also physical and occupational barriers to help-seeking, such as working long hours, lone working and geographical isolation, or less accessible rural services. The sense that 'time is extremely precious' (Respondent 008) is both a practical and attitudinal issue.

4.5 BARRIERS TO DELIVERING SUPPORT THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

The landscapes of support offered to farmers were radically disrupted by the pandemic. The top three barriers to effective support provision were: (1) Lack of face-to-face interaction, (2) Self-isolation / lack of trained staff, (3) Lack of funding / fundraising stopping. Informal peer support was directly affected by lockdowns and the loss of spaces of social interaction. The 'drop and go' policies of marts was identified by many, including one respondent who said that 'our canteen is probably [as] good a counselling for farmers as they'll ever get' (Respondent 10). Formalised support was also impacted, with the lack of face-to-face interaction the most highly reported barrier to delivering support. This was reported as affecting service provision and quality, as well as staff and volunteer wellbeing.

Some supporters found that farmers had positively adapted to online interactions (notwithstanding poor digital connectivity and skills in some rural areas) and that capacity for remote engagement had increased. Although some reported higher levels of engagement, others felt that 'those little chats, you can't have on Zoom' (Respondent 002), were lost opportunities to talk more openly about mental health.

4.6 ORGANISATIONAL AND POLICY CHALLENGES

While the pandemic underlined many organisations' resilience, a number identified practical and operational challenges in delivering support for farmers, including:

- **Training** new and existing staff and volunteers, including in using technology and in providing mental health support.
- **Funding** for additional short- and long-term government resourcing of third sector organisations; for NHS services that prioritise physical over mental health; and to identify support gaps and cooperation opportunities across organisations.

4.7 POSITIVE IMPACTS FROM THE PANDEMIC

The research identified some positive impacts. While such benefits weren't experienced equally, they included: increased community cohesion; farmers being recognized as key workers; enjoyment of being with family at home; less traffic for moving machinery; greater opportunities for online engagement; increased supply to local consumers, and increased post-lockdown tourism and diversification.

'It gave me an excuse to make contact on the phone with farmers and I was able to speak to a lot more than I would have'

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The COVID-19 pandemic is just **one of many potential stressors**, many of which are long term, therefore there is a **need for long-term support for organisations**.
- Support those who come into regular contact with farmers (e.g. vets and feed merchants) to access **basic mental health first aid training** and be equipped to **signpost to support services**.
- **Strategies need to be identified** in the farming community to **normalise conversations** around mental health in order to help **reduce stigma as a barrier to help-seeking behaviour**.
- Mental health issues are often multidimensional (e.g. stress and anxiety related to finances) so **support services need to be designed and accessible in a way that is equally multidimensional** in rural areas.
- There is an urgent **short-term need to plug the fund-raising gap** associated with the pandemic.
- The shift to online provision makes addressing the **digital divide / rural broadband issue** urgent.
- Recognise the **importance of peer support and 'safe places' to talk** such as Livestock Marts and rural pubs.
- Defra and other devolved administrations should consider what role they might play in supporting a joined-up landscape of support for farming mental health.
- The **root causes** of poor farming mental health also need to be addressed as well as improving support.

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LANDSCAPES OF SUPPORT

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PROJECT TEAM

- **Dr David Christian Rose**, School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading, D.C.Rose@reading.ac.uk
- **Dr Faye Shortland**, School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading, Faye.Shortland@reading.ac.uk
- **Dr Ruth Little**, Department of Geography, University Sheffield, Ruth.Little@sheffield.ac.uk
- **Prof Matt Lobley**, Centre for Rural Policy Research, University of Exeter, M.Lobley@exeter.ac.uk
- **Dr Caroline Nye**, Centre for Rural Policy Research, University of Exeter, cn293@exeter.ac.uk
- **Dr Paul Hurley**, School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading, P.D.Hurley@reading.ac.uk
- **Dr Jilly Hall**, Consultant, Supporting the People who Support Nature, jilly_hall@yahoo.co.uk
- **Juliette Schillings**, School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading.