Landscapes of support

Farmer wellbeing and rural resilience through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

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Health and wellbeing of the agricultural community in England & Wales

- **15,296 survey responses**: 76% male, 23% female; Range of farm sizes, types & tenures; Geographically representative

- Questions on mental wellbeing, social contact, physical health and farm business performance & planning

- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale: **36% possibly or probably depressed**

- Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7): **47% of respondents experiencing anxiety to some degree. For 18% this anxiety was moderate or severe**

- EQ-5D-3L: **31% self-reported moderate/severe anxiety/depression**

- **Women aged 24-44:** Low mental wellbeing; High anxiety; Low self-rated health

- **Specialist pigs, dairy and livestock farms** associated with higher likelihood of depression & anxiety

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RABI
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helping farming people

Environmental Land Management and policy change

- **Biggest change to agricultural policy in over a generation**

- Moving from an area-based payment (land managed) to public payments for the delivery of "public goods"

    – ELM needs to take into account farmers' **'productivist' identity** and start where they are

- **42% of farms in the UK would not make money** without Basic Payment Scheme under the CAP (NAO 2019)

    – **Aim is to enrol 82,500 farms** – need distributional analysis to understand where and who may be negatively affected if they do not sign up to ELM

- Need to address uncertainty – **"what do you want us to deliver?"**

- Covid-19 has created the **'perfect storm'** – dealing with current challenges makes us less likely to think about future strategies

What have we done?

Objective was to explore the landscapes of support for farming mental health in the UK, to improve rural wellbeing through and beyond COVID-19

Informed by a literature review of 93 articles and reports

INTERVIEWS (SUPPORTERS)

22 interviews of support organisations (charities, chaplains, mart staff, NHS/counsellors) across Britain

SURVEY (FARMERS)

207 responses from farmers across the UK. Focusing on drivers of mental health and help-seeking.

SURVEY (SUPPORTERS)

93 responses from various supporters of mental health across the UK. Focusing on interview themes.

Drivers of poor farming mental health/wellbeing (not COVID specific)

1 **SOCIAL:** Bereavement, isolation and loneliness, family breakdown, sexuality, poor health

2 **CRITICISM:** Media and online criticism from vegans, animal rights activists or environmentalists

3 **POLICY:** Brexit uncertainty, inspections, paperwork

4 **BUSINESS FACTORS:** Weather, climate change, rural crime, accidents, financial pressures, succession
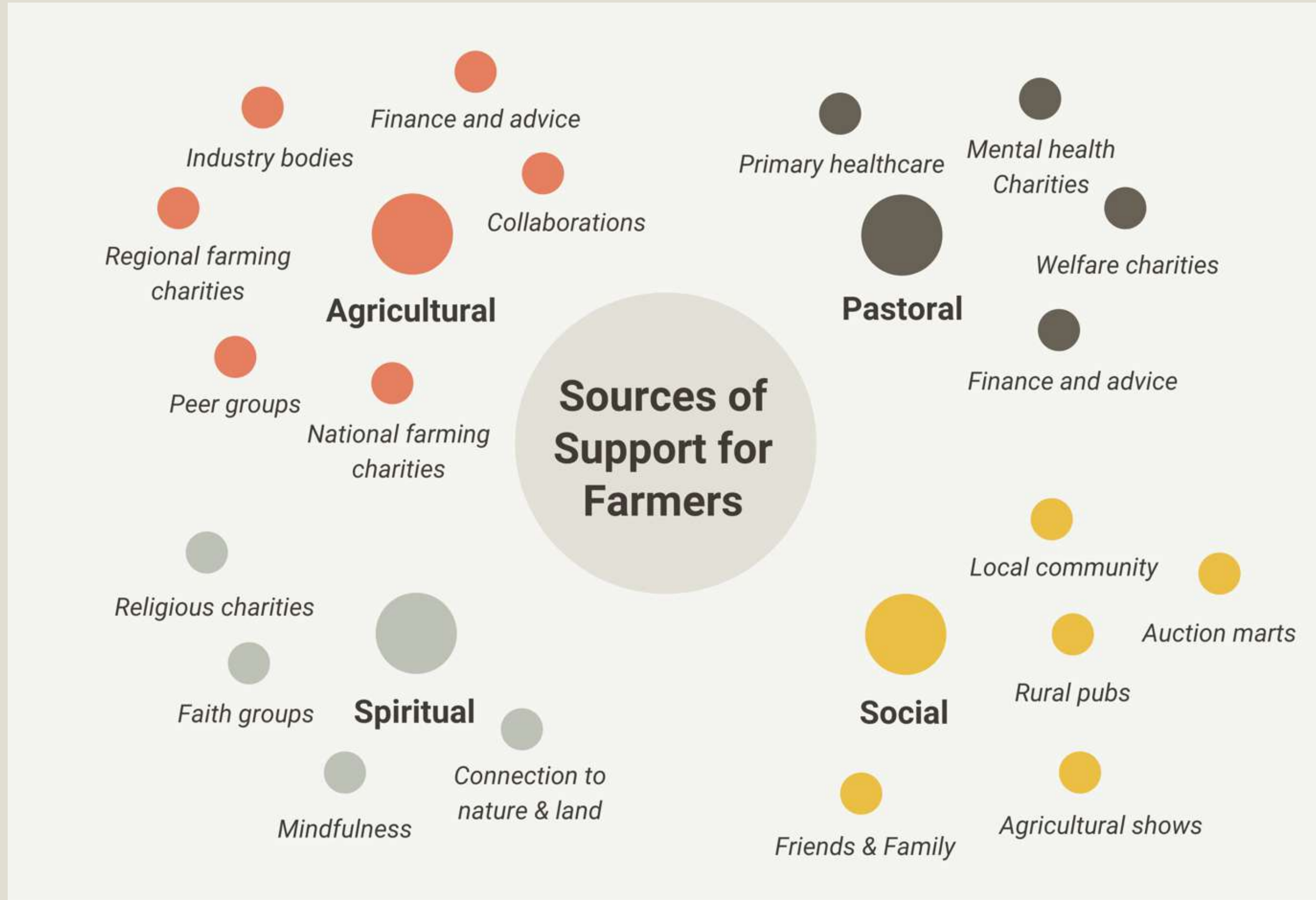
5 **CRISIS EVENTS:** Animal disease, COVID etc.

'if your anxiety levels are up, then anything that might be lurking that you would normally cope with, you don't cope with' **- Farmer survey**

COVID exacerbates these underlying drivers

'You know, farming's always been volatile but along comes Covid-19 and really throws a spanner in the works.' - **Supporter**

Landscapes of support for farming mental health

Sources of Support for Farmers

Agricultural
- Finance and advice
- Industry bodies
- Collaborations
- Regional farming charities
- Peer groups
- National farming charities

Pastoral
- Primary healthcare
- Mental health Charities
- Welfare charities
- Finance and advice

Spiritual
- Religious charities
- Faith groups
- Mindfulness
- Connection to nature & land

Social
- Local community
- Auction marts
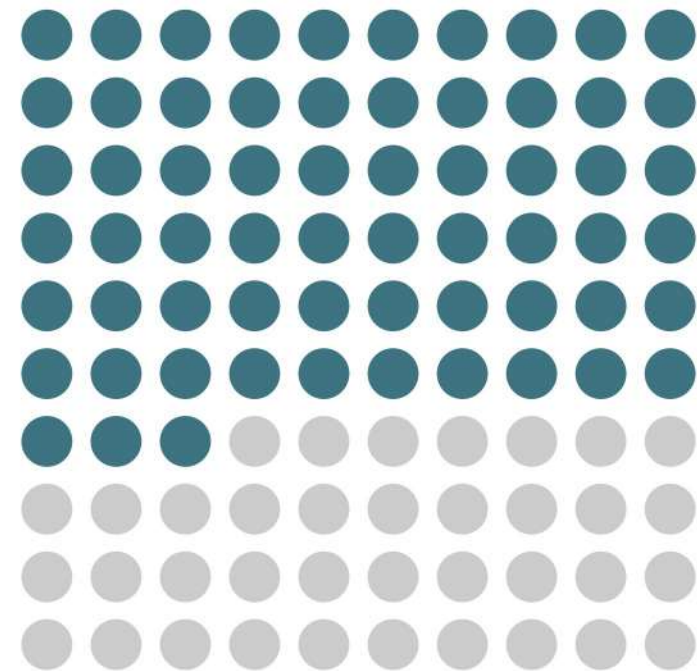- Rural pubs
- Agricultural shows
- Friends & Family
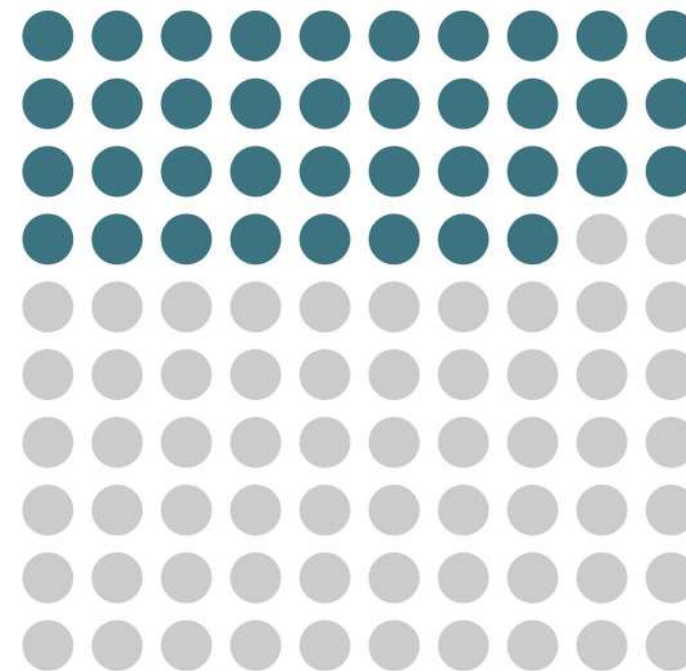
Mental health of farmers during the pandemic

67% of farmers surveyed reported feeling more **stressed**
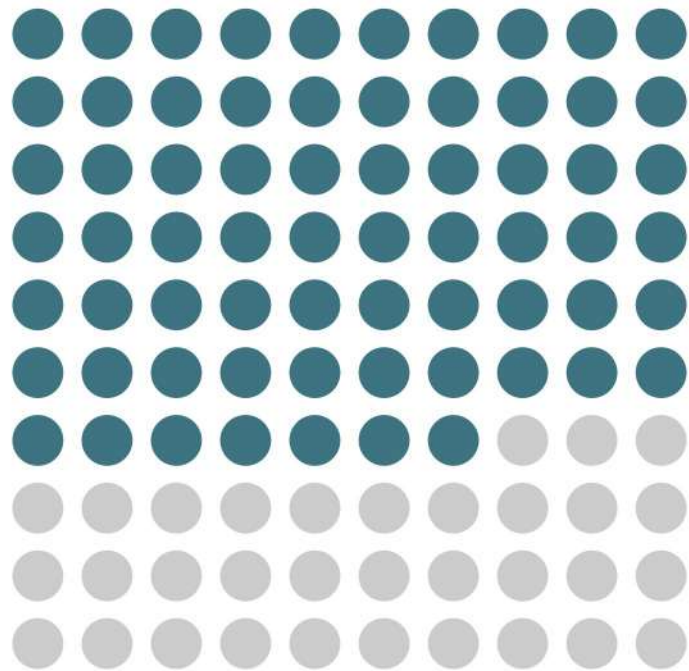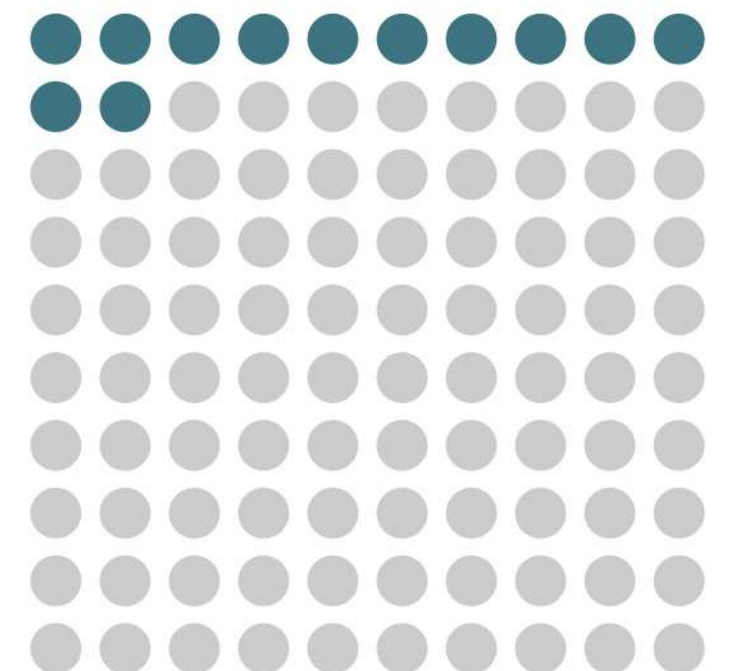
63% of farmers surveyed reported feeling more **anxious**

38% of farmers surveyed reported feeling more **depressed**

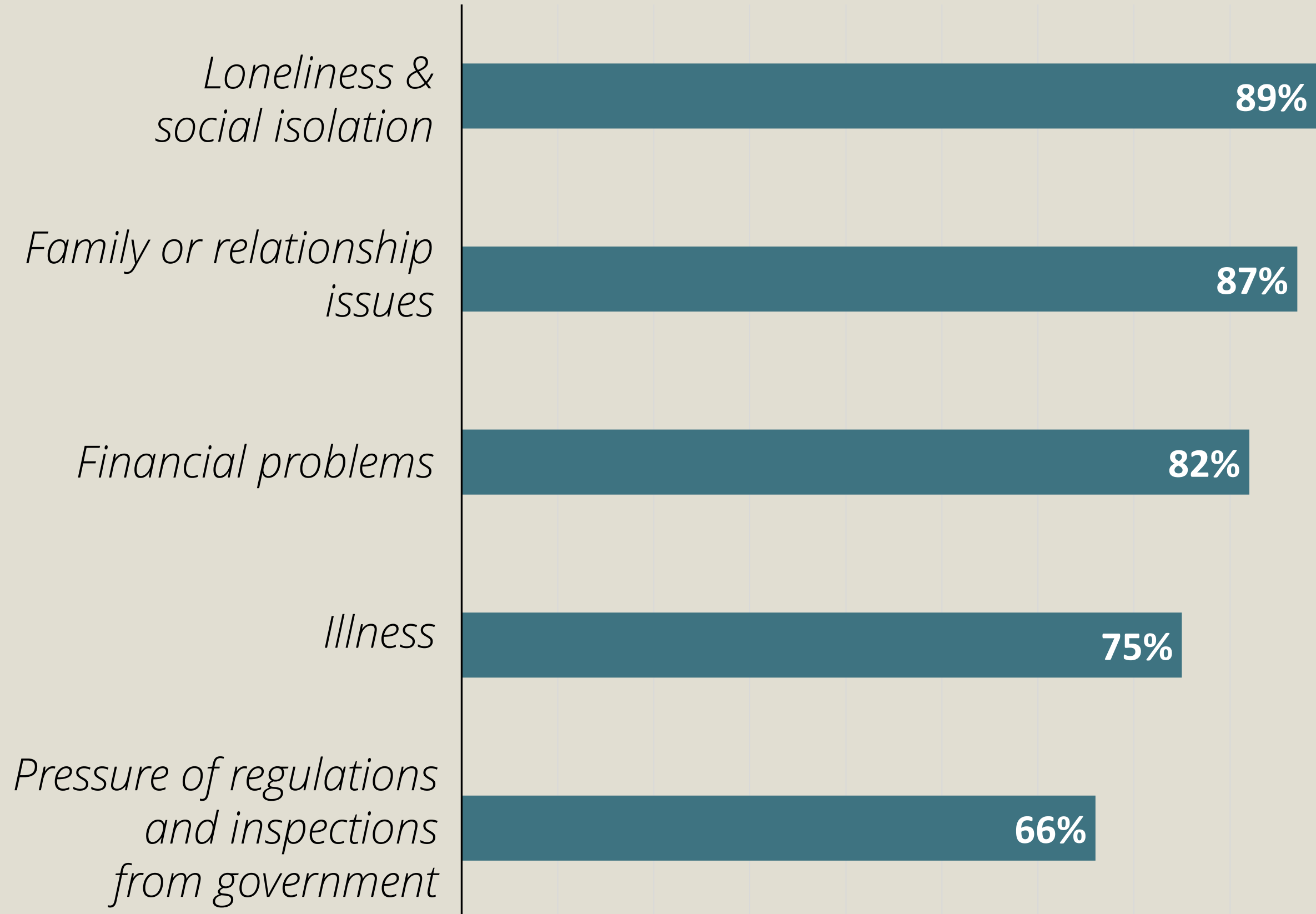**12% of farmers** surveyed reported feeling more **suicidal**

Why did COVID-19 stress farming families' mental health?

1 **SOCIAL SUPPORT:** Key areas of social support taken away from farmers, family breakdown, bereavement

2 **POOR HEALTH:** Poor physical health during COVID, shielding, anxiety

3 **ACCESSING SUPPORT:** Harder to access support for physical and mental health

4 **BUSINESS:** Disruption to supply chains, loss of labour

5 **PUBLIC TRESPASS:** Increase of rural visitors misbehaving on farmland

Not all negative: farmers viewed as essential workers, increased rural cohesion, uptake of digital tools, less visitors during complete lockdown, local food chains

Why farmers reached out to organisations for support during the pandemic
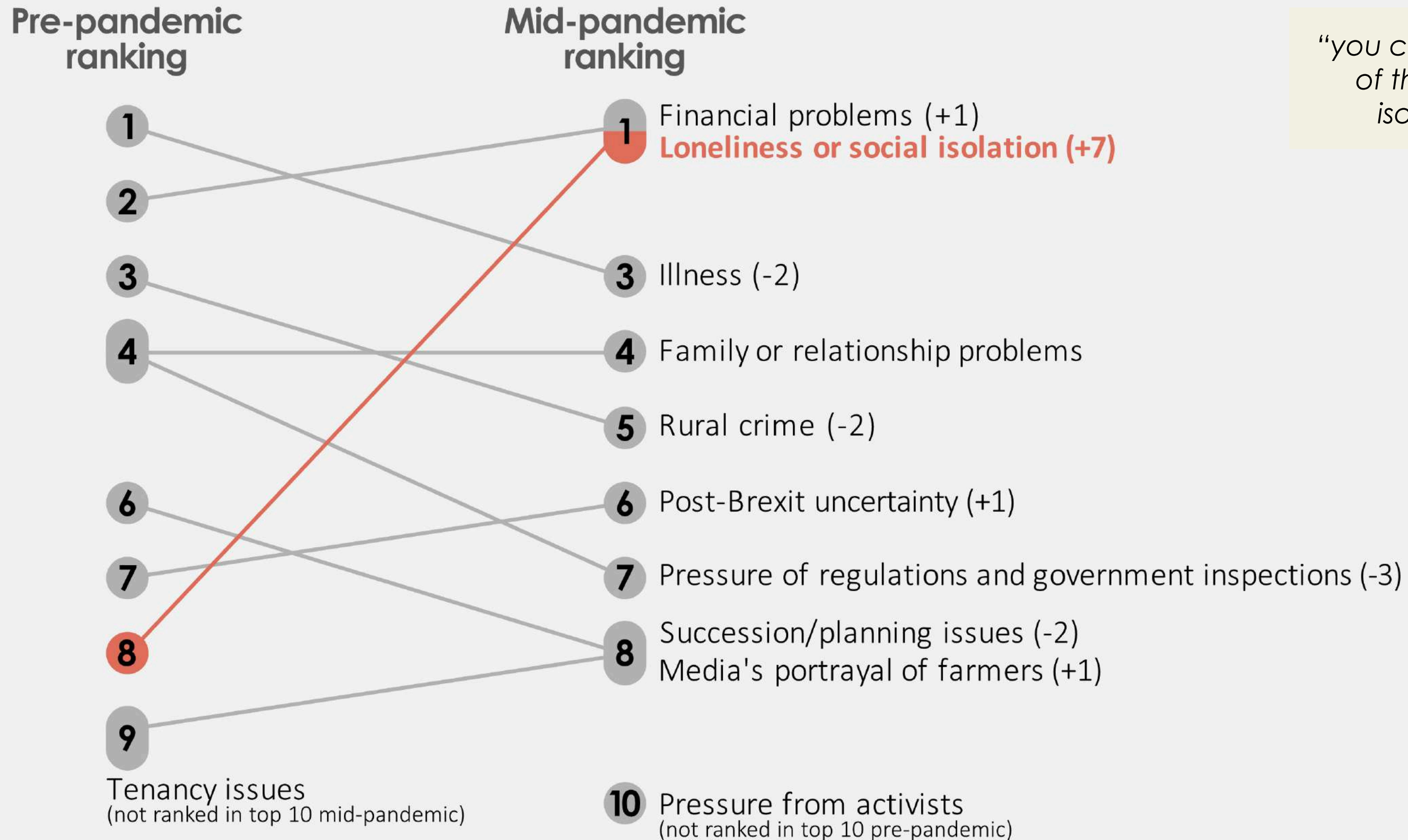

Category	Percentage
Loneliness & social isolation	89%
Family or relationship issues	87%
Financial problems	82%
Illness	75%
Pressure of regulations and inspections from government	66%

'[A farmer] said "this is all wrong. I've been with these lambs since they were born. I've looked after them. I've now had to leave them and at the last point in their life, I've had to go away." And he was all but in tears. Now, there are those who think farmers don't care about their animals because they're going to slaughter.'

Re: drop and go at mart policy during covid

Top 10 reasons for accessing mental health support

Pre-pandemic ranking

Mid-pandemic ranking

1
2
3
4

6
7

8

9

Tenancy issues
(not ranked in top 10 mid-pandemic)

1 Financial problems (+1)
Loneliness or social isolation (+7)

3 Illness (-2)

4 Family or relationship problems

5 Rural crime (-2)

6 Post-Brexit uncertainty (+1)

7 Pressure of regulations and government inspections (-3)

8 Succession/planning issues (-2)
Media's portrayal of farmers (+1)

10 Pressure from activists
(not ranked in top 10 pre-pandemic)

*"you cannot pull out any one of these [drivers] in total isolation" - **Supporter***

Positive impacts of COVID-19 on farmers

Recognised and valued by society as essential workers

Increased community cohesion

Decrease in rural traffic and visitors during strict lockdown

Business opportunities for farmers (e.g. farm shops, buying local, buying British)

Learning new methods of digital engagement

Enjoyment of having family at home

(although this was a stress for some)

FARMSHOP

How did support organisations adapt to COVID?

1 **ONLINE HELP AND PHONE CALLS:** To replace face-to-face interaction

2 **USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA:** To get people talking about mental health and encourage people to seek support, raise awareness

3 **NEWSLETTERS:** Greater use of online and paper newsletters to farming communities

4 **MORE ONLINE EVENTS:** Raise awareness, bring people together, even giving some digital tablets away to some farmers

"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"

Support providers adapted, but faced challenges (next slide)

Challenges to support organisations during COVID

1 **LOCKDOWN:** Face-to-face support not possible

2 **ONLINE DELIVERY:** Training staff and working with clients lacking skills and connectivity is difficult

3 **FUNDRAISING:** Charities see fundraising hit by the pandemic

4 **STAFFING:** Shielding and poor health challenges support provision

**5** **EFFECTIVENESS:** Lack of face-to-face formats may reduce effectiveness (e.g. at marts, chaplains)

Support providers adapted, but struggled in many cases

Practice social distancing. Stand within this circle.

Barriers to seeking help

1 **CULTURAL/SOCIAL:** Shame, stigma, macho image, lack of social capital, fears

2 **INFRASTRUCTURE:** Poor broadband, lack of ICT skills, landscape doesn't always understand farming

3 **GEOGRAPHIC:** Isolation means support isn't always available, time

4 **AWARENESS:** Lack of awareness about where to go, who will provide best support, how to access it

5 **FORMAT:** Effective support differs according to the individual

Again, COVID simply exacerbated existing barriers
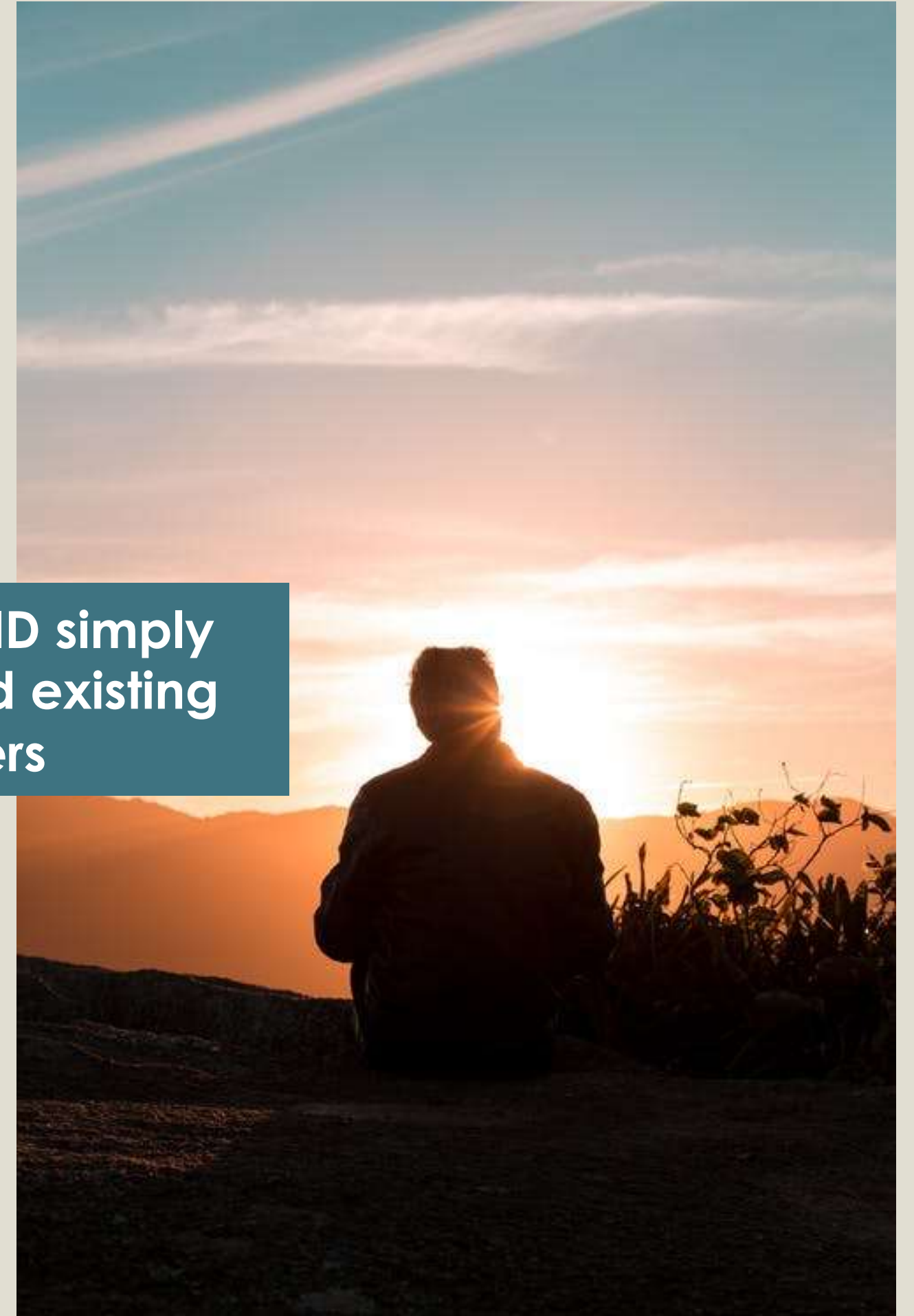
Recommendations

Organisations helping farmers need long-term support

Support people who come into regular contact with farmers with basic mental health first aid training

Normalise conversations around mental health to reduce the stigma of seeking help

Support services need to be designed to reflect the multidimensional nature of mental health issues

Urgent short-term need to plug the fundraising gap associated with the pandemic

The digital divide/ rural broadband issue needs to be addressed

Recognise the importance of peer support and 'safe places' to talk

Policy-makers to consider how to help a joined-up landscape of support for farming mental health

The root causes of poor farming mental health also need to be addressed