



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

*Overview of project recommendations*

# Landscapes of Support

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

# Project Team



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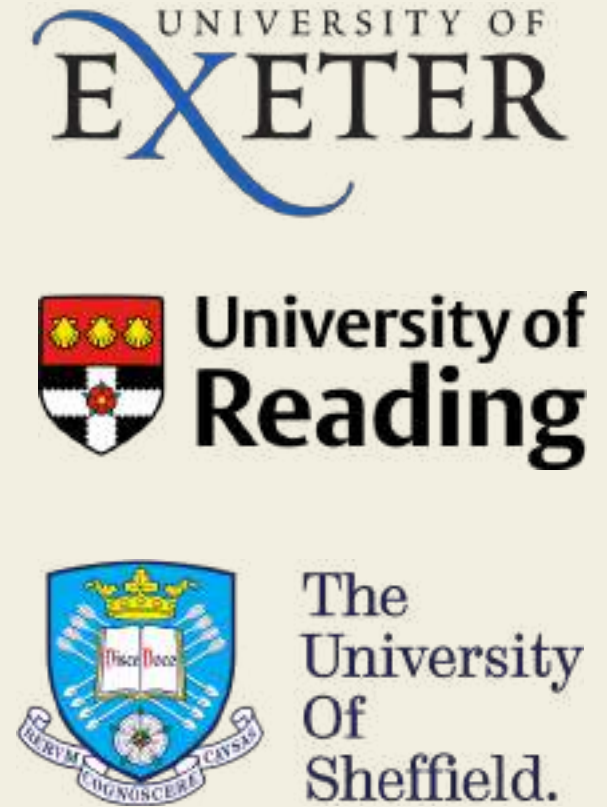
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# Methodology

Informed by a literature review of 93 articles and reports

## INTERVIEWS (SUPPORTERS)

**22 interviews** of support organisations (charities, chaplains, mart staff, NHS/counsellors) across GB, focusing on experience of pandemic

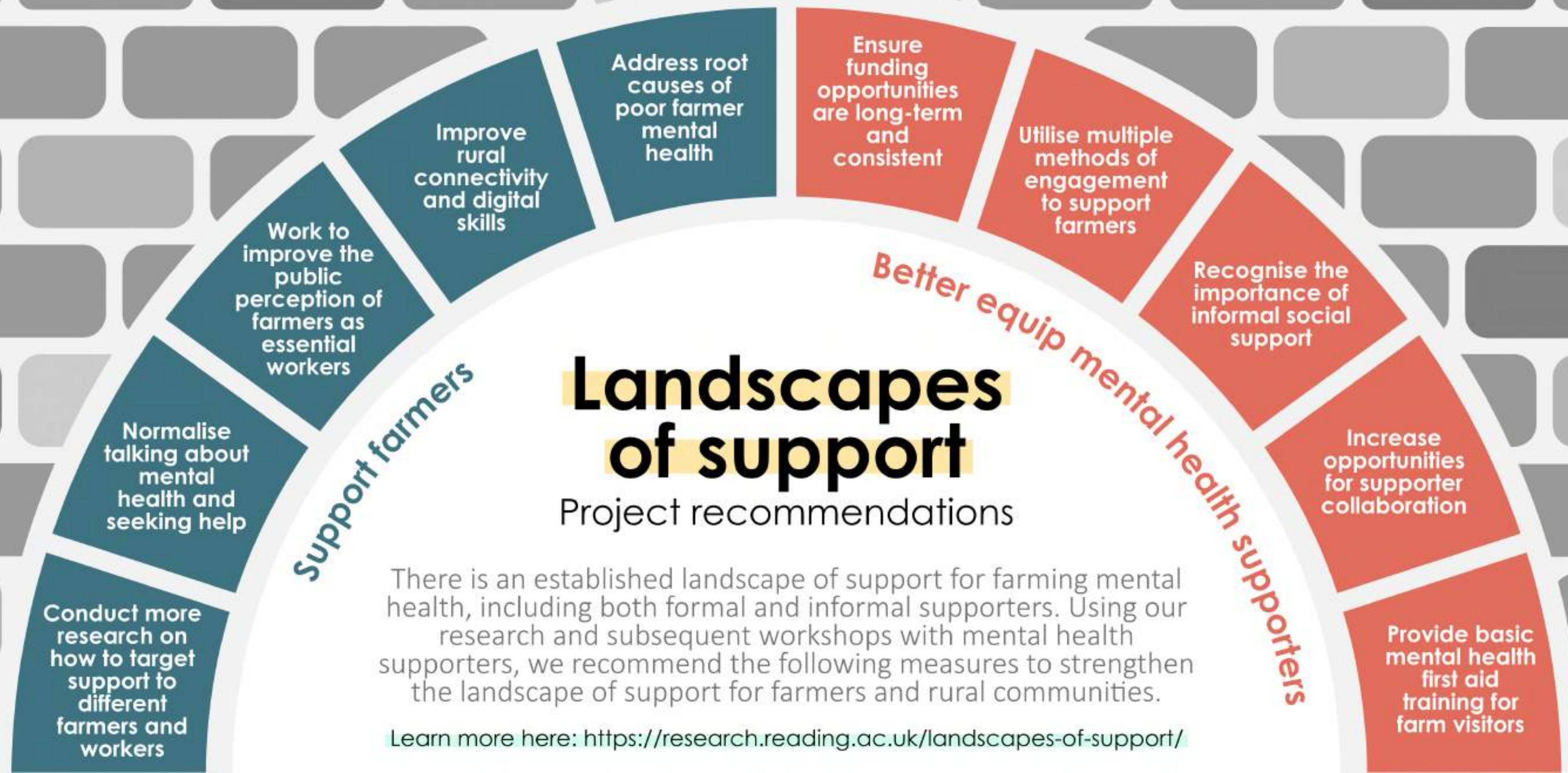
## SURVEY (FARMERS)

**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.

Research findings informed a further workshop and discussions with ≈30 people from a range of backgrounds (including academics, farmers, government, supporters, farming bodies etc)



There is an established landscape of support for farming mental health, including both formal and informal supporters. Using our research and subsequent workshops with mental health supporters, we recommend the following measures to strengthen the landscape of support for farmers and rural communities.

Learn more here: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/landscapes-of-support/>

# Recommendations in detail



# Increase opportunities for supporter collaboration

**BARRIERS:** No one organisation can deal with all of the mental health problems being experienced by farmers, yet there is still a lack of a joined-up approach in some places. This lack of collaboration can lead to a duplication of services, which can be counterproductive and create competition between service providers. Furthermore, when there are many organisations carrying out similar roles, farmers may have a difficult time knowing who to go to when they are seeking help.

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Coordinate between industry, government and farming sector
- Create a platform to share knowledge, best practices and opportunities – learn from one another and from what other countries are doing
- Ensure that all organisations get a “seat at the table,” including smaller organisations and local/regional organisations
- Provide mechanisms for charities and organisations to feed into government policy
- Ensure secure referrals between organisations so no farmer falls through the gaps





# Ensure funding opportunities are long-term and consistent

**BARRIERS:** Short-term funding for support services prevents the development and delivery of sustainable services. The associated lack of certainty can be stressful for supporters, as can complex funding applications (e.g. demonstrating impact is difficult due to confidentiality).

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Government to provide short term funding to plug gap caused by COVID-19
- In addition, long-term and consistent funding opportunities should be created that provide support services longer term assurance
- Aim to make core services less reliant on funding applications by increasing funding by local authorities
- Develop less complex forms for funding applications
- Increase number of funding proposals for joint projects that incentivise collaboration between service providers
- Increase number of grants





# Utilise multiple methods of engagement to support farmers

**BARRIERS:** Farmers can sometimes be difficult to reach and engage with, for numerous reasons. Age and lack of broadband, for example, can limit farmers' ability to access digital/online services.

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Support organisations should take a blended approach to reaching farmers, using multiple delivery mechanisms, including different methods and partners in an attempt to engage farmers in a way they like
  - e.g. older farmers may be easier to reach through print media over social media, younger farmers may prefer text/WhatsApp
- Be visible on the ground, e.g. at agricultural shows
- Build on existing relationships, groups and networks that involve farmers
- Ensure organisations have employees with diverse skillsets in order to support farmers across diverse issues
- Recognise that some farmers can be “harder to reach”





# Provide basic mental health first aid training for farm visitors

**BARRIERS:** People going up the farm drive and interacting directly with farmers (e.g. advisers, vets, rural chaplains) may not have the training to recognise signs of poor mental wellbeing.

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Provide basic mental health first aid training for everyone who comes in contact with farmers – make them aware of the signals of poor mental wellbeing, of how to have challenging conversations and how to refer farmers for further help if deemed necessary
- Provide more mental health training in agricultural colleges





# Recognise the importance of informal social support

**BARRIERS:** The role of informal social support can sometimes be overlooked as a key mechanism for supporting farming mental health. Spaces of informal social support are under threat due to various pressures on rural communities.

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Recognise and respect the importance of informal social support (e.g. through the local community, rural pubs, auction marts, agricultural shows, friends & family etc)
- National and local government need to develop policy instruments to help spaces of rural community to thrive





# Address root causes of poor farmer mental health

**BARRIERS:** There are numerous underlying causes for poor farmer mental health. Some examples include: the rapid rate of change in the industry, lack of knowledge about the future of their farm business (e.g. impact from loss of BPS), lack of respect from the public, media and online criticism, government bureaucracy, business factors (e.g. succession) and crisis events (e.g. animal disease).

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Recognise that talking about mental health in separation to anything else on the farm is not useful
  - **Mental health is linked to the farm business.** If there are issues with the business, these need to be addressed simultaneously
- Create an environment where farming is respected in the wider community and farmer self-esteem can be built instead of attacked
- Help farmers diversify their farm income
- Provide income support for farmers and rural communities – e.g. a contingency fund





# Work to improve public perception of farmers as essential workers

**BARRIERS:** Farmers perceive a lack of respect from the general public. There is also a lack of understanding of the farming context by some medical professionals, which means their mental health challenges may not be appreciated by external support mechanisms.

**SOLUTIONS:**

- Break down the barriers between farmers and non-farmers
- Increase understanding of where our food comes from – to increase public trust in farming and recognise farmers as essential workers
- Create an environment where farming is respected in the wider community
- Educate medical professionals about farmer specific contexts





# Improve rural connectivity and digital skills

**BARRIERS:** Rural connectivity and limited digital skills are still an issue that may prevent farmers from engaging with mental health support services. The switch to “digital to default” engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic may have made some farmers even harder to reach.

**SOLUTIONS:**

- Invest in improving rural connectivity and digital skills
- Utilise a blended approach (digital & in-person) for reaching farmers, so that those who are unable to access the internet can still seek support
- In addition to digital connectivity, the provision of other services in rural areas should also be improved (e.g. public transport)





# Normalise talking about mental health and seeking help

**BARRIERS:** The stigma of speaking out about mental health can be strong in rural communities. There is also a perceived lack of confidentiality in small communities, meaning farmers may be worried their community will find out if they seek mental health support.

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Reduce the stigma around seeking help by creating healthy conversations about mental health by:
  - Having more people talking openly about mental wellbeing
  - Having farmers act as ambassadors by sharing their story
  - Using social media to promote conversations on what mental health looks like
- This should help farmers recognise that they are not alone in their experience of mental health challenges
- Don't use the term mental health "illness"
- Give farmers the opportunity to join mental health workshops online where they can remain anonymous
- Encourage farmers to talk about their physical health first, this may help them open up about mental health challenges





# Conduct more research on how to target support to different farmers and workers

**BARRIERS:** The word “farmer” is often used to describe all the people who make up the farming industry, while, in reality, people in different roles in the industry will experience different mental health challenges.

## **SOLUTIONS:**

- Recognise that different actors within the farming industry will have different contributing factors to mental health challenges and may need different types of support
- Ensure future research does not just consider “farmers,” but also farm workers, farming families, farm business and rural communities – how can these different groups best be reached/supported?







## To learn more:

- **Landscapes of Support website:** <https://research.reading.ac.uk/landscapes-of-support/>
- **Policy brief:** <https://research.reading.ac.uk/landscapes-of-support/wp-content/uploads/sites/204/2022/01/Brief.pdf>
- **Article in *The Conversation*:** <https://theconversation.com/covid-fallout-hit-farmers-hard-they-need-better-mental-health-support-174440>