# Loneliness and Social Isolation in Farming Communities:
# Summary of research findings

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# Foreword

UK farming is undergoing significant change. The speed and breadth in which this change is being implemented has necessitated the need to reach out to farmers and farming families and to provide them with information and support around new agricultural policies and their implications.

This transition, as well as the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic which we continue to see, and complications as a result of the UK's exit from the European Union, have brought into stark realisation many of the challenges associated with reaching and supporting the wider farm community. Many farming families have farmed their land for generations, operating within a framework that they have understood for many decades - and which has allowed them to manage their businesses in a way that may no longer be viable for some. This places enormous pressure on farmers to find ways of staying profitable in a rapidly changing industry. With many of these challenges being unique to agriculture, many involved in farming can feel disconnected from wider society.

Farming is inherently isolated, with many farmers and farm workers living in rural areas with low access to amenities, poor internet access and a lack of social mobility and opportunities. While isolation is not always a negative thing – some enjoy their own company and appreciate the remote tranquillity of the countryside – there are many occupational, physical and psychological risks associated with lone working, long working hours and a lack of social interaction. While many of the challenges facing farmers across the UK have been widely reported on in the press - helping the public to better understand concerns in relation to mental health, supply chain disruption, labour shortages and other challenges – there are still significant obstacles preventing farmers from being able to, or indeed feeling they should, access support services.

This report provides fascinating and timely insights into the lived experiences of farmers at this time. Many farmers featured in the report have received help from FCN or other farming support charities, supporting them through difficult periods in their work and home lives. Many of the themes we see throughout the report, such as a reluctance to take time off work; a willingness to endure long, exhausting hours; a stigma around mental health; and a hesitance to seek help, approach mental health services or visit the GP, are prevalent across farming and must be addressed. Attitudes are slowly changing in a positive way, but there is much work still to be done. Farming needs to be well resourced, allowing farmers to take time off and ensuring they have a better farm-life balance. FCN advocates for this balance, which is necessary to avoid burnout and feeling overwhelmed.

We hope the findings of this report will help to provide better understanding of the experiences of those living and working in our farm community, and will ultimately help to inform and develop stronger, more tailored support services for everyone across agriculture.

Dr Jude McCann
CEO, The Farming Community Network

# 1. Introduction

Farming can be a lonely occupation, even for those who embrace and cherish the way of life it affords. Commonly located in rural areas with sparse populations, farmers (and we include farm employees in this description) often work alone, particularly as technological advancements and pressures to make efficiencies have reduced levels of farm labour, and many also work very long hours with little opportunity for building and maintaining social relationships. Some may also live alone and have little face-to-face contact with other farmers or business contacts. It is not hard to imagine how factors such as these can lead to loneliness, both for the farmer themself and any family members around them. However, experiences of loneliness and social isolation among members of the farming community – and their potential relationship with the high-levels of stress, mental health problems and suicide that are now recognised within the industry - are not well understood. For instance, how do some farmers avoid social isolation and loneliness? (For not all farmers are lonely!). Why does social isolation lead to loneliness in some cases but not others? And how might poor mental health, including stress, anxiety and depression be related to being socially isolated and/or lonely? Our research sought to explore such questions in order to understand more about how social isolation, loneliness and mental health problems are experienced and managed by members of the farming community, and what is being, or can be, done to alleviate the issues. Such efforts are particularly important at the current time, when the industry is facing mounting pressures from a range of issues such as changes to post-Brexit trading and public payment arrangements, climate change and other environmental issues, pests and diseases, and declining profit margins.

Importantly, our research recognises loneliness and social isolation as two distinct concepts. Although sometimes related to one another, loneliness is generally considered to be a negative phenomenon arising from an individual's subjective experience of insufficient social relations (whether that is in the quantity or quality of social connections), whereas social isolation is more of an objective assessment of a lack or absence of social connections. Thus, some people may be socially isolated but content with their situation and not necessarily lonely and, conversely, others may appear to be surrounded by friends and family yet still feel lonely. Our research aimed to explore stories of social isolation, loneliness and poor mental health among farmers and farming families in order to:

1. Understand the role of farming-specific cultures, identities and environments in experiences of loneliness, social isolation and mental health problems.
2. Examine the wider implications of these experiences for the wider health of the farmer, farm family and farm business.
3. Explore the roles that different types of social relationships play in multidirectional pathways between social isolation, loneliness and mental health problems among farmers.

This report provides a summary of the findings from the research, but more detailed findings on some of the issues it identifies will be published in academic journal articles at a later date.

# 2. Methods

The research focused primarily on livestock farming because previous studies indicate that these types of farms face particular issues in terms of challenging economics and high levels of stress. However, some mixed and arable farms were also included in order to provide wider context and perspective. The key methods used in the research were:

1. An online workshop with 11 farm support practitioners in December 2020. The workshop discussions helped identify some of the key issues around social isolation and loneliness in farming communities, including an overview of what support is currently available and what further support might be

needed. The outcomes of this workshop helped inform the design of the subsequent interview questions.

2. In-depth interviews with 22 farmers/members of farming families and 6 farm support practitioners (4 of whom also had a farming background themselves), conducted either by telephone or video-call between March and July 2021.

Some of the farming interviewees had previously received support from FCN, who directly invited them to participate in the research, and others volunteered to take part in response to an invitation email that was sent to existing CRPR contacts. 27 of the 28 interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full (where consent was given) and 1 was recorded as detailed notes that were shared and confirmed as accurate by the participant. All interviewees were offered the opportunity to view their transcript before analysis commenced. Farmer/farm family member participants were also offered a £15 voucher of their choice to compensate them for their time. Two of the farming interviewees also had experience as volunteers for FCN.

The six farm support practitioner interviewees represented three separate organisations. Five were female and one was male. Farmer/farm family member interviewee characteristics were as follows:

- Gender: thirteen men, nine women.
- Age range: 19 to 79 (two 18-29 year olds; three 30-39 year olds; six 40-49 year olds; two 50-59 year olds; seven 60-69 year olds; and two 70-79 year olds).
- Farm type: Predominantly livestock or mixed farms (six dairy farms; eight beef/sheep farms; six mixed farms; and two arable farms).
- Farm size (where specified): Ranged from 6 to 324ha but the majority (fourteen) were 50-199ha.
- Tenure: Mix of owned and rented (fourteen wholly/mostly owned; six wholly/mostly rented; one half owned/half rented; and one wife of a farm worker with no farm of their own).
- Location: Throughout England but with a focus on the South West (thirteen South West; three South East; three North West; one North East; one East; and one Midlands).

The information shared by interview and workshop participants was analysed in order to draw out key themes and develop a fuller understanding of the various ways in which loneliness is experienced by members of the farming community. This report presents the key findings from this work and considers some of the implications for future forms of farm support. We have included a large number of (anonymised) quotes in this report, as it is our participants' experiences that we are interested in and we want their words speak for themselves. There were, however, numerous other quotes that we could have included and behind every finding there are many other stories and examples that were shared with us by members of the farming community. Unfortunately, space limits us to choosing only some that are illustrative of the issues we discussed. Some of the themes identified in this report will, however, be examined in more detail in future publications.

**The Covid-19 pandemic**

The workshops and interviews were carried out amidst the Covid-19 pandemic (although not in a period of full Lockdown) and this may have influenced the findings to some degree. There were certainly a couple of interviewees who specifically talked about how they had experienced loneliness as a result of the pandemic, and others said they could imagine how Covid-19 restrictions would have exacerbated loneliness for some (particularly for livestock farmers who could no longer socialise at auction marts due to the introduction of 'drop and go'). For the most part, however, participants' experiences of loneliness were not particularly related to the pandemic and a number said that they felt farming was relatively unaffected by Covid-19 in that respect because it was already a demanding occupation where social isolation was common. The findings presented in this report therefore remain pertinent regardless of Covid-19, although there is no doubt that experiences of loneliness will have been (and will continue to be) exacerbated by the pandemic in some cases.

# 3. Types and drivers of loneliness

Loneliness is not of course a phenomenon unique to farming and some of the factors that our participants identified as contributing to the loneliness that they had experienced or witnessed are relevant to anyone whatever their occupation (e.g. bereavement; relationship breakdown). There were, however, a number of farming-specific factors commonly cited as contributing to, or exacerbating, the issue within the agricultural community. Many of these factors will come as no surprise to those living and working in farming, but their prevalence throughout participants' stories were notable and are not necessarily widely understood or recognised by those outside of the industry (or at least are not perceived to be by many farming people).

We have separated the drivers of loneliness identified in the research into three separate categories because, although all interconnected, they relate to slightly different types of loneliness, which we refer to as i) social; ii) emotional; and iii) cultural loneliness. These can, of course, also be experienced simultaneously, potentially increasing the sense of isolation an individual might feel.

## 3.1 Social loneliness

Social loneliness is about an individual not having the social connections or opportunities that they would like. This could be a result of social isolation in terms of not knowing many other people, but it could also be that the individual has friends or family but feels they don't/can't spend enough time with them. The following factors were identified as particularly contributing to loneliness, both for farmers and their families:

- **Long working hours** - Partly driven by the demands of farming and pressure to keep the business going.
- **Lone-working –** Felt to have increased in recent years in line with farm labour changes driven by mechanisation and farm restructuring (i.e. fewer, bigger farms but with fewer workers)
- **Lack of social opportunities** – Finding time away from the farm for leisure or socialising can be difficult for farmers because of a lack of time and farm-related responsibilities (e.g. livestock care).
- **Geographical isolation** - Many farms are in rural locations with poor connectivity and transport links, providing further barriers to off-farm socialising. Young farming people can feel particularly isolated from their non-farming peers as a result of this.
- **Declining business-related contact** - Business transactions increasingly taking place online rather than face-to-face, and the decline in the number of local auction marts over recent decades has reduced social opportunities for livestock farmers, many of whom rely on these as a way of combating social isolation[1].

*"At that point in my life I just couldn't see anywhere to go. Because all I was doing, back then I was working on average I reckon 15-18 hours a day, we were contracting… I'd be sat on the tractor seat all day trying to earn money to keep the business afloat" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID5)*

*"I don't get time to socialise really because I am just too busy, I am just too busy. The animals, obviously, need looking after and then, at night time there is dinner to cook and you are just knackered, so, you don't really want to go out anyway" (Farming woman, age 50-59, ID17)*

*"Being on a farm in the middle of nowhere... you are out on a limb in agriculture…the internet is rubbish, you can't quickly send a message to someone, you can't call someone because you won't have signal, and there are so many hurdles in order for you to get anywhere, both physically and mentally. It just really takes its toll and just slowly grinds you down" (Farming woman, age 18-29, ID21)*

[1] As recently highlighted in research by the CRPR for the Prince's Countryside Fund: see More than a Mart: The role of UK livestock auction markets in rural communities by Nye et al. (2020).

## 3.2 Emotional loneliness

Emotional loneliness can be described as an absence or loss of meaningful relationships, of people who you can talk to and confide in. From the stories told to us in our research, we found that there were a number of complex factors relating to personal circumstances and personalities, family life, and the business environment that might be associated with this type of loneliness. Although many of these broad themes are not unique to farming, our findings suggest that there are certain features of farming life that affect how they contribute to experiences of loneliness within this context. Drivers of emotional loneliness that we identified in the research included:

- **Business stress and responsibilities** – The numerous stressors affecting farmers and farming families can lead to or compound a sense of loneliness where the individual feels they have no one to share their worries with. Having sole decision-making responsibility (for whatever reason) can be particularly stressful and emotionally isolating in this regard.

*"I spend most of the day on my own but I wouldn't say it's the loneliness in itself that gets me down. It's probably the loneliness within the context of the business. The pressure comes to me on my own and I have to deal with everything on my own" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID11)*

*"I don't feel the loneliness like I used to but I know when I first started, when you're working with your family you kind of lose some of that family support because farming takes over all the family time. So I did feel quite lonely at times, especially when you've broken something and you're getting an earful from your dad and then you go home because you're living with your parents still. It was quite a tough time I suppose" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID15)*

*"At that point I hadn't had any kids, not really had relationships as such because I've always put everything into the farm... I've actually had a daughter since but me and her mother split up because I worked too many hours" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID3)*

*"My husband died four years ago and I miss him dreadfully. I'm living alone now but it's just things like decision making… there are lots of issues that I think oh, if only he was here and we could sort it together… I've got a wonderful family life but it's just not the same" (Farming woman, age 70-79, ID1)*

- **Family pressures and tensions** – All families have their tensions and difficulties, but the combination of business and family life in family farming can be particularly difficult to negotiate. Expectations about taking on the family farm can put pressure on younger generations and issues around retirement and succession are notoriously difficult to address in some cases. Such pressures are hard to bear alone but confiding in family members is difficult in these kinds of situation.

- **Lack of work/home boundaries** - It can also be difficult for farmers to discuss personal problems and feelings with family members because, unlike most occupations, the boundary between home and work can be very blurred - families live and work together, with the farmhouse often being the office and the centre of the business too.

- **Absence of romantic partner or relationship difficulties** – In part related to the long working hours involved in farming, some participants talked about how difficult it was for themselves or people they know to form and maintain romantic relationships, leaving a sense of loneliness even if they have other friends or family around them.

- **Other personal circumstances** – Other circumstances and life events, such as bereavement, ill health or caring responsibilities can be emotionally stressful and isolating, particularly for someone who lacks – or who has lost - a close confidant.

## 3.3 Cultural loneliness

Cultural loneliness refers to feelings that arise from a sense of difference with others in the wider community, perhaps feelings of being an outsider or being misunderstood by other cultural groups. Again, people might be surrounded by friends and family but still experience a sense of cultural loneliness and isolation. This type of loneliness repeatedly emerged in participants' stories, with many farmers describing or alluding to a strong sense of disconnection with the wider public, and of feeling undervalued and misunderstood. There were a number of issues that appeared to contribute to, or exacerbate, such experiences, including:

- **Changes to/conflicts with the rural community** – Increased urban-to-rural migration has left some farmers feeling marginalised within the local community, particularly where there are conflicts regarding things like public access, or complaints about noisy machinery and farm smells, etc. In some instances this can lead to farmers feeling unable to walk their own land, or carry out essential farming activities, without being hassled by members of the public; an understandably isolating position to be in.

- **Contraction in the size of the farming community** – Reductions in the numbers of farmers and other agricultural workers (as noted in Section 3.1) over the last few decades has, for some, reduced the opportunity to talk to other farmers and can lead to a sense of isolation, particularly where there may be conflicts with other members of the rural community.

- **Public disconnection with farming** - Participants conveyed a strong sense that the general public has little understanding about what is involved in farming, the pressures farmers are under, and the valuable roles that they play in producing food and managing the countryside. Farmers can thus feel unappreciated and undervalued, particularly given the low financial returns they receive for their work.

- **Public pressure** - Many farmers feel victimised by the public, press and social media about issues such as climate change, water pollution and animal welfare.

- **Policy demands, inspections and regulation** - Policy demands and regulatory processes are perceived as bringing a heavy (and stressful) burden of inspection to farmers, exacerbating a sense of being unappreciated and unfairly scrutinised.

*"The other loneliness that affects farmers is the community loneliness in that the local village the demographic has completely changed in the past 20 years. And you get sly comments from a footpath walker, or you get someone flicking you the Vs on the road or beeping their horn because you're in the tractor going from A to B. You get the sense that the local community isn't really your best friend, so you feel a bit of an alien on your own doorstep" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID 11)*

*"When you talk to people there is such pressure from really the Government, DEFRA and the public… they have so much to say on how the farmer should carry on. And that, to me, that just brings loneliness because you feel so isolated and so helpless" (Farming man, age 70-79, ID 4)*

*"I don't understand what people want from British agriculture anymore. That's what makes me feel a bit lonely and a bit sad really" (Farming man, age 50-59, ID7)*

*"There is always the undercurrent of the loneliness in farming anyway, because most people don't work the hours, they don't understand the life unless they live it and breathe it and they don't understand" (Farming woman, age 40-49, ID3)*

*"Public perceptions are getting worse. When people ask what I do I'm worried to say that I'm a dairy farmer because I just get abuse… Even when I do say what I do, I just get a barrage of questions and I just don't want to answer them or think about it when I'm trying to relax" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID14)*

### 3.4 Trigger points

There is often no single event that leads to feelings of loneliness or poor mental health, with issues instead gradually building over time and, as one participant put it, 'slowly chipping away' at a person's wellbeing. Another described it as 'death by a thousand cuts'. Our research did, however, identify various circumstances that can act as the trigger that makes people 'crack', and particular stages in farming life that can be especially stressful and potentially isolating. These included: death or illness of a loved one; unmanageable debt; farm inspections; moving farms; becoming parents; returning to or taking on the family farm; retirement; planning battles; being the victim of rural crime; bovine TB; relationship breakdown; and witnessing suicide.

## 4. Women's experiences

Although traditional gender roles in farming are beginning to change with more women acting as the sole/primary farmer or having an equal partnership in farm businesses, men and women still typically carry out different roles within the farm business and household, particularly in a family farming context. In many cases, women continue to act as the primary caregiver in the family, often in addition to working out on the farm, administrating business affairs and/or bringing in additional income through working off-farm or in diversified enterprises. Women's experiences of loneliness in farming can, therefore, differ from those of men. We heard a number of stories of women who at times felt very isolated on the farm, carrying out multiple business and family-related tasks alone whilst their husband or partner spent long hours working on the farm. Childcare responsibilities and geographical isolation can make it difficult for women to find time to socialise away from the farm, and having young children or a new baby can be particularly tough if women do not have strong personal support networks nearby (as is often the case in rural areas).

Off-farm employment can sometimes bring a welcome change of scene and opportunity for social contact for women, as well as a sense of independence and self-esteem. Some of our participants talked about how important this was to them, or how much they missed this when, for various reasons, they were unable to continue with it. One woman, for example, talked about how she had felt very lonely throughout the Covid-19 pandemic because it had meant she was now working from home rather than in the office, so she was not getting the social contact that she was used to and enjoyed. The blurring of home-work boundaries entailed in working from home also meant that she was also continually getting pulled in to helping out on the farm, putting further pressures on her time.

*"The farm just sucks the men. And because women are women, they go out and they just, you know, they get frustrated… There is a lot of lonely women out there with little kids" (Farming woman, age 60-69, ID6)*

*"Winter was particularly wet and hard and yeah, I felt pretty darned isolated I must say, because I was sort of on my own... my husband was working and yeah, having to cope with it all yourself it is quite difficult and there's no-one to sort of bounce ideas off either" (Farming woman, age 50-59, ID17)*

*"I still couldn't work full-time on the farm because I would just never see anybody and I couldn't do it. As much as I love being on the farm and helping, I couldn't do it full-time" (Farming woman, age 40-49, ID12)*

*"Farmers are a breed that, they're so very stubborn buggers aren't they? I mean even now it's a man's world, you have got to be one damn good woman to be accepted" (Farming woman, age 60-69, ID2)*

*"Typically dad is the lead farmer, the wife or partner is supporting, and then children as well. You've got the chap out all day working, mum doing the school runs… and then coming back to help on the farm and filling in everything else in between. So she's spending her day running about and then on her own, doing jobs separate from him. And he's out all day" (Farming support practitioner 4)*

# 5. Farming culture and loneliness

Most people have heard the old adage 'farming is not a job, it is a way of life' and, indeed, many of our interviewees referred to it in this way. Farming life, particularly in family farming, involves particular living and working arrangements, practices and environments that are uncommon in other walks of life. There are also certain traditions, values, and ideals that permeate the farming community and that help shape people's everyday lives, ambitions and relationships. Our research found that certain elements of this farming culture are particularly relevant to understanding experiences of loneliness and how they are managed. These are summarised here.

## 5.1 Farming pride and attitudes to work

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the research was that the long working hours that many farmers engage in, and which can even be said to typify the occupation, is one of the main drivers of loneliness – both for the farmer themselves but also often for other members of the farming family. Several of our participants stressed the unavoidability of this situation, with the demands of the job and the low returns farmers receive for their products often forcing farmers to work these long hours, without the means to pay employees to ease the workload. But there was also a strong sense that 'hard work' is an accepted and valued part of what it means to be a farmer, and that this can lead to pressures and expectations – both from the individual themselves and those around them – to work harder whatever the situation. Some participants described how these types of attitudes can make it difficult for farmers to make changes to their lifestyle, or to leave farming altogether even where that might be the best resolution, for fear of being seen as 'failing'.

*"And then you have got the likes of my husband's family. If you have an hour off, it is a sin" (Farming woman, age 60-69, ID6)*

*"It's where my passion is. And I don't want to fail at it. I think that's the bigger problem. It is because I think in myself I can get it to work. I've just got to keep working basically" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID5)*

*"And then, having to make that decision of, do I keep going or do I sell up? And there is probably more of a taboo on that than in most businesses because if people sell their cows or something most of the time it is seen as giving up. Lots of people will sell a shop in a town and go and do something else and they wouldn't be giving up; but, in farming it is always seen that you are giving up, like you have given up on trying anymore rather than perhaps you just can't keep a herd anymore" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID20)*

Other participants stressed how working such long hours does not necessarily need to be the case, and that making the effort to draw a line under work for the day and get off-farm is essential for maintaining wellbeing. This will be easier said than done for many farmers, but there does appear to be a need for a culture change that not only permits farmers to feel they can take a break from work without fear of judgement, but actively promotes it as an essential part of successfully managing a farm business.

*"So everybody has this image of farming being isolationist. Farmers make it isolationist. I mean okay yes, you're working on your own, but I suppose I've always made sure I've had some leisure time... We had a contractor come in here one day, he's an ex Young Farmer I've known all my life, and he said 'I've been sitting on this tractor for 43 days drilling corn for everybody, isn't that good?'. I just said 'no, that's really sad. That's really sad. At least take a couple of days off'" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID18)*

*"I think there is a bit of a culture of, if things aren't going right, or if you're not earning enough, you just have to work harder. Which of course you know I'm sitting on the outside can see that that's not always the case" (Farm support practitioner 4)*

## 5.2 Familial expectations and living arrangements

Those living or working in farming will be familiar with the attachment that farmers feel to their land, an attachment which is part and parcel of their drive and desire to farm. This can be a source of joy and satisfaction but, for family farmers in particular where the farm may have been passed on through multiple generations, it can also often come with a whole host of personal and family pressures and expectations about maintaining the viability of the farm and keeping it within the family. This can heighten the feeling of needing to work hard and avoid 'failure' that we discussed above, with the weight of responsibility sometimes becoming a lonely burden to bear.

*"I think for the parents heading up that farm, you know mum or dad, having that weight of that farm and the whole responsibility for keeping it going for the whole family, that's really lonely" (Farm support practitioner 3)*

*"The farm itself is, I don't feel pressure. I probably pressurise myself. I don't think I could ever sell the farm. I think this is the case for many people. It feels like an old grandma… there's a lot of history in it from the family's perspective. And you've got five or six generations worth of work you're looking at. Would you be the one to sell it sort of thing. But probably more of an emotional attachment to it than anything. Quite a deep emotional attachment to it if I'm deadly honest. I'd hate to sell it and walk away" (Farming man, 40-49, ID11)*

*"I think in that particular case they are blaming each other for it… It is her family farm but it belongs to her father who is still alive and they all live together which is kind of bad news for a relationship in the first place isn't it? When you live with your in-laws" (Farming woman, age 60-69, ID2)*

Younger members of farming families are often subject to similar pressures, particularly where they might be expected to take on the farm, even if it is not something they would otherwise choose to do. Some participants also talked about how growing up in a farming family, whilst wonderful in many ways, can be hard and isolating, as children are often required to 'pitch in' from a very young age and are not necessarily able to spend as much time with their friends as their non-farming peers. The expectation to work hard and 'tough things out' without complaint can thus start young.

Living with, or close to, members of the extended family (an arrangement much less common outside of farming) can also lead to or exacerbate tensions within the home. Our participants' stories included many examples of where living with in-laws, adult siblings and/or multiple generations contributed to conflict, leaving people feeling lonely even when they were surrounded by family. Family members can be a great source of comfort and support (and several participants talked about how important their spouses were in this regard), but we also heard examples of unhealthy relationships where spouses, or parents or siblings with whom farmers lived, were in themselves a source of the problem, either in the sense of being abusive, manipulative or simply unsupportive. As noted in Section 3.2, the common lack of separation between work and home life in farming can also make it difficult to resolve any issues and maintain harmonious relationships. Yet changing or escaping these types of situations is difficult in the context of a family farm where people are living and working together, where shared capital is tied up in farm assets, and where there may be unresolved questions about succession and the future of the farm.

## 5.3 Stoicism and a reluctance to talk

There is a conventional view of (particularly male) farmers as proud and stoic individuals who subscribe to masculine ideals of strength, courage and independence and - whilst undoubtedly not always the case and arguably beginning to change - our research suggests that this depiction does hold truth in many instances. Participants talked about how loneliness and other mental health problems can be compounded for farmers

by a reluctance to talk about their worries, sometimes even to those closest to them. Linked to attitudes around 'hard work' and farming pride discussed above, there was a sense among participants that farmers feel that they are expected to be strong and resilient and that admitting they are struggling and need help would be an admission of failure, of somehow not being a 'good farmer'. Such stoicism was perceived to be one of the primary barriers preventing members of the farming community seeking help for loneliness and related mental health issues.

Sometimes this issue is not just about the individual being reluctant to talk, but also about a general family culture of not discussing mental health, linked in part to wider taboos about the issue within the farming industry. For instance, one farmer spoke openly in the interview about having attempted suicide in the past but said that he had never discussed it with his parents (who he continues to work with on the farm and who were aware of his suicide attempt) despite being otherwise close to them. Another participant described how when she had tried to talk to her parents about her mental health problems, they had dismissed the issue and she felt they lacked an understanding of mental health in general. This idea of mental health as a 'closed topic', and of farmers being stoic and carrying on regardless of how overworked, lonely, isolated or depressed they feel, was perceived by our research participants to be one of the primary barriers to farmers seeking help and support (particularly from healthcare professionals) for their problems.

*"We are insular, bloody minded, very secretive sometimes about what we do. Think we can do it all ourselves, we have always done it" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID8)*

*"We don't talk enough. People are too embarrassed and too ashamed of what's going on in the real world and they don't open up…. A farmer is very proud and very good at hiding stuff (Male farmer, age 40-49, ID5)*

*"I think it is a much more taboo subject within that farming community because you have got to have an image of being strong and nothing will phase you. But, at the end of the day we are all human and we all have our breaking-point" (Farm support practitioner, ID2)*

*"I suppose there will be help out there if you need it; but you know what farmers are like, we are a hardy bunch, we just keep things close to our chests and rant and rave at our livestock or the family and hope that it goes away" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID13)*

## 5.4 It's not all bad!

Although the above discussion has focused on what might be seen as more negative elements, or consequences, of farming culture, it is worth stressing that this is because it is these aspects that were found to be associated with loneliness in a number of circumstances. There will be other instances where elements of farming culture (sometimes the very same elements discussed above) actually contribute to positive wellbeing. For many people, farming is an essential and treasured part of their identity and the culture that surrounds it is integral to this. Some participants, for example, portrayed growing up on a family farm as key in instilling a good work ethic and as building their character and resilience, which for some might help mediate feelings of loneliness. As one farmer said, *"I would always pride myself in having a good work ethic. And I think that very much comes from growing up on a farm. You very much learn to just get on with it you know?" (Farming man, age 18-29, ID16).* There were also references to the close-knit nature of farming communities, with a sense that farming people generally look out for each other and support their peers. One participant, for example, talked about how, when he had suffered a mental breakdown some years ago, his farmyard had suddenly filled with people rallying around to help him both practically and emotionally. As with any culture, there is much to be celebrated; but that should not preclude also acknowledging a need for change.

# 6. Impacts and implications of loneliness

Experiences of loneliness vary widely and can be problematic to different extents. For many farming people, loneliness is a relatively transient feeling, perhaps occurring at particularly busy times in the farming calendar, or at particular moments in their life and, whilst not an easy or pleasant experience, it can be coped with relatively well on a short-term basis without having significant impacts on their wider health. For others, however, feelings of loneliness are intermingled with other negative feelings and it can be difficult to separate loneliness out from other stresses or mental health problems they may be experiencing. Loneliness can also have implications for the physical health of the individual, and for the health and happiness of people around them. We detail just some of such implications identified in the research below.

## 6.1 Loneliness and mental health

Loneliness was rarely presented as the sole or even main source of distress by our research participants, with the conversations instead encompassing a plethora of examples of the pressures farmers are under, as well as many stories of associated stress, depression and anxiety. Nevertheless, it was widely acknowledged that feeling alone, isolated and unable to confide in others undoubtedly contributes to or exacerbates such problems. Some participants talked about how being alone for long periods of time (as many farmers frequently are) can lead to 'overthinking', where negative thoughts spiral and proliferate, feeding doubts about self-worth. The type of cultural loneliness described in Section 3.3 - a sense of being undervalued and misunderstood - can similarly contribute to such feelings.

There were also examples of where loneliness can affect the behaviour of individuals in ways that do not help with building and maintaining social relationships, potentially exacerbating the issue further. For instance, one woman talked about feeling she had to be careful not to 'run off at the mouth' when she did see people after days and days alone, as she believed that would annoy people and push them away. Similarly, another participant described a farmer she knew who lived alone and who had alienated some people within the community by continually gossiping – a behaviour that she attributed to his own loneliness and desire to talk to somebody. Feeling lonely can also be connected to a lack of social skills, or a loss of confidence in social situations, making it more difficult to build relationships with new people or even to ask for help. Individuals may also withdraw from existing social contacts when suffering from depression, or when struggling with grief following the loss of a significant family member, compounding the risk of loneliness.

*"Loneliness does play a big part, because being by yourself, your thoughts spiral when you are alone. You think, 'oh, I'm alone and then oh, why am I alone? Is it something I've done?'... You take it out on yourself and that is when the poor mental health comes along because as soon as you start to think negatively about yourself, it just spirals from there" (Farming woman, age 18-29, ID21)*

*"It can get you down as well. I have had depression, probably because I have got nobody to talk to" (Farming woman, age 50-59, ID17)*

*"When you are farming and you are alone you have got time to think and your mind is a very, very powerful thing and the results are either good or bad. It goes around in circles and the next thing you are thinking, who else is going to turn up?... Who is going to be on the phone or what mistake have you made?" (Farming man, age 70-79, ID4)*

*"He lost his wife and his daughter and then by the time we got there to visit the house was stacked with everything, he hadn't thrown anything away. There was no heating, the windows were broken, he'd been targeted by youths who damaged the property, and his feet were in such a bad condition that he couldn't get his wellies on or off anymore. So he slept in his wellies. He just completely shut down and wasn't talking to anybody, not even the people that he was buying feed from, he'd just leave notes out and that kind of thing. Completely withdrew" (Farm support practitioner 4)*

## 6.2 Loneliness and physical health

Participants gave a number of examples of how mental health and physical health were related; for instance, where physical health problems were caused by stress and overworking; and/or where physical health problems caused stress or depression. Implications of poor mental health that were identified as subsequently having consequences for physical health issues included tiredness; sleeplessness; unhealthy eating habits; overworking as an avoidance mechanism; and alcoholism. Ill-health can also be difficult to come to terms with, particularly in a physically demanding occupation such as farming, and some participants gave examples of where physical health conditions such as chronic fatigue, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and farmer's lung (which were themselves associated with farming-related activities or injuries) had led to the sufferer feeling frustrated and despondent about the limitations it placed on their everyday lives. Loneliness was not identified as a primary driver of poor physical health in itself but, as discussed above, it was recognised as exacerbating related mental health problems. Social isolation was also noted as contributing to vicious cycles of poor mental and physical health as, for instance, not having people around to take the strain on the farm can lead to farmers ignoring ill health in order to continue working. It can also increase the risk of problems being hidden from view, rather than being picked up on by others who might be able to offer support.

*"Quite often farmers will ignore health complaints and continue as long as they can because they know they can't be out of action, because nobody will be able to do the work. There's nobody to fall back on. So they do just continue regardless" (Farm support practitioner 4)*

*"There are some very difficult days when I get up in the morning and I think why am I bothering. Since the TB results in March we've been constantly working and I can't see me having a day off before at least the end of July. And I've got tennis elbow now from working all the time… And that's some of what my father's problems are about too, bits of his body being worn out from working, and he's had accidents on the farm because he's been too tired or working too late or not using the equipment correctly" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID14)*

*"So exercise used to work really well for me, but then of course you get older and your knees start going so you can't run anymore. And then you get really bad lower back from all the tractor driving… So you get into a rut with your depression and your body aches and you don't sleep properly and you get this whirlpool effect and you know in your sensible head that exercise would help. Why don't you go for a run? But your body just says f** that, I'm going to go to bed. Lie in bed worrying and not sleeping" (Farming male, age 40-49, ID11)*

*"I think what happens is you kind of have the worries and anxieties and then you probably go home and probably have a couple of extra glasses of wine. I was going down the gym twice a week, I couldn't go down the gym [because of Covid restrictions]… And of course then you put weight on, of course you don't sleep so well. And of course you don't sleep very well, you feel tired during the day and you feel lethargic and that kind of starts a vicious cycle up" (Farming male, age 50-59, ID7)*

*"I've definitely seen accidents with cattle. It's pressure I would say, and that pressure may come from social isolation because you're not sharing that in any way. So the pressure is mounting and growing. But I've certainly had a farmer who was in poor health and who had been trampled by a bull, and it was only by chance that he crawled out and somebody was driving nearby and sort of saw him crawling up the field. And it was only chance that he was then saved" (Farm support practitioner 3)*

## 6.3 Implications for family members and the business

Feeling lonely and isolated and/or undergoing other problems such as stress, anxiety and/or depression not only affects the individual who is experiencing such issues, it also inevitably has implications for the people around them, as well as on how they carry out their everyday work and lives. This is particularly pertinent in the case of family farming, where living and working together can intensify relationships (and thus tensions), and where the lack of separation between 'home' and 'work' – and the imperative of maintain a viable farming business – can amplify stress. A reluctance to talk about personal and mental health issues (see Section 5.3) can also be frustrating for family members and place a strain on relationships, as well as increasing the risk of issues spiralling out of control with negative impacts for both loved ones and the farm business.

Examples of loneliness and/or poor mental wellbeing (or factors associated with it) affecting the family of the sufferer identified in the research included:

- General irritability / unpleasant to be around
- Lack of time spent with family (due to working long hours)
- Emotional strain on loved ones trying to offer support
- Increased workload for others where working capability is affected
- Relationship strain/breakdown (particularly where issues are not talked about)

*"If a father or a brother or someone starts withdrawing it would have a huge impact on family life. And, you know, we hear of families that have split up because of it and oh, it's just so tragic. Because you know the problems just exacerbate" (Farming woman, age 70-79, ID1)*

*"There is always that anxiety over everything. So if you are not feeling well with toothache, you have got to ask your boss for a day's holiday or something, you know, to go to the dentist, all that is making you feel stressed, isolated and it is an impact, not just on my partner, but it affects me because it affects him and the overall feeling" (Farming woman, age 40-49, ID3)*

*"And you've also got the levels of debt that the farmer's maybe struggling with... And that impacts on family life and the time that those children are being able to have from their parents. Because if dad's not coming in 'til 9 or 10.00 and mother's run ragged too, it's that kind of, you see it when you visit, that there's loneliness in each of those lives" (Farm support practitioner 4)*

*"Where there's suppression of those feelings perhaps, then the release of that comes in different ways… maybe people are snappier with each other, have got less patience with each other…there's definitely situations where that isolation, that pressure, people holding that in, can erode the relationships with the people around them" (Farm support practitioner 3)*

*"Sometimes it can make you a bit tetchy, so if you get a bit tetchy you almost always take it out on people close to you, don't you" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID10)*

Examples of implications for farming activities and the farm business arising from poor mental health included:

- Falling behind with paperwork
- Making mistakes with paperwork
- Being less effective / carrying out work at a slower pace
- Missing business opportunities
- Neglecting farm work / animal welfare responsibilities

Of course, none of these issues are connected in a simple causal manner. Rather, they are intricately related with multiple context-specific factors unique to each individual both feeding into, and dependent on i) mental wellbeing (including feelings of loneliness, stress, anxiety and depression); ii) physical health; iii) the wellbeing of the wider farming family; and iv) the success and challenges of the farm business. Issues in one of these areas can easily lead to, or be exacerbated by issues elsewhere, with the individual being caught up in vicious cycles that are hard to break.

*"We could see things happening which didn't add up to us, and that was with cattle, and we just couldn't work out what was going on. He wouldn't talk about it. Then eventually it came out that he had got into a real muddle with paperwork and BPS and it had all got completely on top of him, and he'd split up with his wife" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID8)*

*"People can get into a terrific pickle financially, you know, just with things going on with their mental and physical health. So yes, and all this really I think is about communication and if somebody ceases to communicate that's when problems really set in I think" (Farming woman, age 70-79, ID1)*

*"The feed price dropped and I vaguely thought I should do something about that, but then I got side-tracked and never did, and then the price went back up and it cost us quite a bit of money. And that's something that never would have happened before, I was really cross with myself, I always used to be on the ball with things like that" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID14)*

*"I have been a bit lax with the paperwork, I really hate it anyway, but it is a job that has to be done and there are quite a few things I need to catch-up with" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID17)*

*"When I'm really down I definitely I find it harder to do a proper day's work and it definitely lowers my work rate for sure. It's harder to make difficult phone calls as well when you're really down. You know, challenging phone calls or awkward emails that come through. I think there's the potential to react to stuff the wrong way and things like that" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID11)*

# 7. Tackling loneliness and mental health problems within farming

## 7.1 Preventing and coping with loneliness

Loneliness is experienced to different degrees within farming. Some participants said they had never personally experienced loneliness, or that they had done so only fleetingly without it becoming a significant issue. Others had suffered loneliness and/or poor mental health during a particular period in their life but were now (for a variety of reasons) in a healthier place and were able to connect better with those around them. And for a few, loneliness and poor mental health were ongoing challenges that they continue to grapple with. Participants were therefore able to offer a range of perspectives on the ways in which loneliness might be mitigated against or coped with, and on how positive mental health can be maintained. Such strategies included:

- **Regular social contact and getting off the farm** – This is perhaps an obvious point, but many participants stressed how important they found engaging in social activities for positive mental health. There was also a sense among some participants that, whilst farming-related social activities are beneficial, non-farming activities can be preferable for maintaining good mental health as they offer the opportunity to mentally break from work and gain a different perspective.

*"I just think that the whole industry, we're fairly insular. I've had quite a few meetings and that and that's what gets me off the farm and you realise there is more to life than just sitting behind a cow's bottom" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID18)*

*"[Off-farm activity] has probably been the biggest cure in the last four years…I take myself out of the farming community for that. I actually think that's great because I bump into guys from [a nearby city] who've got completely different problems to me but much more, you know, real worldy problems. It puts my head on a much more level path and understanding that I'm not alone and actually my problems are manageable compared to other people's" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID11)*

*"I listen to a lot of podcasts as well to keep me going, just somebody else and, not someone to talk to but someone who is talking to me, if you know what I mean" (Farming woman, age 50-59, ID17)*

- **Taking time off (including holidays)** – Like the above, this is easier said than done for farmers, but finding ways of taking a break from farming was seen as essential for living and working well and for avoiding loneliness (both on the part of the farmer and their family members) through spending less time working and more time with loved ones.

- **Socialising and talking with other farmers** – Although socialising with non-farmers may bring particular benefits of its own, participants also talked about how talking with farming peers offered the opportunity to share problems and anxieties with other people who understood the issues and who were experiencing similar issues themselves. Such discussions might take place informally with neighbours or within/around farm-related networks, discussion groups and events. Livestock auction marts were seen as particularly valuable in this regard. Young Farmers clubs were also repeatedly noted as valuable for providing social opportunities – and a break from normal farm work - for young people within farming.

- **Building good relations with the local community** – There were some examples of where social isolation in particular was mitigated through farmers having good relationships with the local community. Where participants were involved in community activities (e.g. the parish council) or regularly chatted to people in their local village, there was a greater sense of social connection and benefits for both parties. For instance, one woman who spent a lot of time alone on her farm drew pleasure from inviting local children to come and feed the lambs. Social relations in any locality are complex and such opportunities might not

always be easy, but building on opportunities where possible may be valuable for addressing feelings of cultural loneliness (see Section 3.3) in particular.

- **Self-help strategies** – Some participants who had personally experienced loneliness and/or mental health problems had found their own ways of easing or coping with their negative feelings. These included: reading/watching YouTube videos to learn about and understand mental health issues; listening to podcasts; taking more exercise; and planning/managing time more effectively.

Participants also talked about the comfort offered by supportive partners or other family members when feeling stressed or lonely, or of how their feelings were linked to the prosperity of the business. Such factors are to some extent beyond the individual's immediate control, but taking positive steps for mental health such as those described above can still be beneficial. Some individuals will need support (whether emotional and/or physical) in order to do so, but there are a number of factors that can prevent members of the farming community from doing this and seeking help.

## 7.2 Barriers to help-seeking

The research identified multiple factors that commonly hinder or discourage farmers from seeking help for mental health issues, or which might affect the acknowledgement of loneliness in particular. These included:

- **Stoicism and stigma -** As noted in Section 5.3, farmers are renowned for often being stoic individuals who are reluctant to talk about the personal challenges they may be facing. This sense of stoicism – as well as a wider stigma attached to mental health issues in particular within farming – emerged in our findings as perhaps the key barrier to help-seeking among members of the farming community. Admitting to being lonely and/or needing help can be very difficult within this cultural context.

- **Reluctance to visit GP** – Farmers are typically reluctant to seek help from their GP for a number of reasons, including: a perception that their GP will not understand their farming-specific circumstances; an unwillingness to take medication; lack of time; and fear that their shotgun licence will be revoked if they are diagnosed as having a mental health condition.

> *"They are a proud breed these farmers. It is whether or not they would ever ask for it [help]" (Farming woman, age 60-69, ID2)*
>
> *"I'm a typical farmer in that I hate taking tablets. I just won't do that. I know I get down but I want to work out myself how to sort of live, improve my situation really… I know it's probably completely the wrong thing to say, but I want to be stronger than that. I'm sure I can be" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID11)*
>
> *"It's been double edged because really, the work is the stress and the pressure and you need to take them away from that, but they haven't got the time to get away from that because of the work and pressure" (Farm support practitioner 5)*

- **Lack of time** – Long working hours can make it difficult to find time to seek support from professionals. If farmers are already reluctant to talk about their issues then finding time to do so is unlikely to be a priority.

- **Lack of understanding and awareness of support** – Whilst arguably improving, awareness and understanding of mental health issues is still perceived to be relatively low within the farming community, which can discourage people from talking to those around them. A number of participants also noted that many farming people are not aware of the support that is available and how to access it.

- **Not wanting to burden others** – One reason given for people not talking to about how they are feeling was that they are worried about 'burdening' others – who may themselves be feeling stressed or anxious - with their problems. Some people also perceived their issues to not be 'bad enough' to warrant seeking help.

## 7.3 Farming-specific support

The importance of providing farm-specific mental health support for members of the farming community cannot be overstated. Participants were unanimous in their opinion that it is essential to have healthcare/ support professionals who understand the particular demands and characteristics of the farming context, particularly if some of the barriers to help-seeking identified above are to be overcome. A number of people we spoke to had contacted a Farming Help charity in the past, but even those who had not (some of whom were not aware of such organisations at all) said they would be much more likely to talk to someone from a farming background than a generic doctor or counsellor about mental health issues.

*"I don't think people who haven't been involved in agriculture - or even those who are but haven't farmed themselves - can relate to the problems at all. When I speak to non-farmers I just feel like banging my head against a brick wall" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID 14)*

*"My husband, they said he ought to have counselling, well that was a waste of time. She came up here this woman, she was very nice… She said after the second time she'd give up because she couldn't break through because all he would talk about was farming" (Farming woman, age 60-69, ID2)*

*"It is really difficult to explain unless you are from a farming background because you don't, I want to say you don't understand it but you really don't unless, until you are in that mindset, by yourself" (Farming woman, age 18-29, ID21)*

Accordingly, there was consistent praise for existing farm support organisations and campaigns (including FCN, RABI, YANA and Yellow Wellies) among those participants who had some experience of their work. Being able to talk freely to someone who understood farming issues but who was separate from their own farming and family circle was seen as invaluable by those who had utilised such support. Practical help, for example by FCN volunteers assisting with resolving particular administrative and planning issues, and financial assistance provided by RABI in times of crisis, was also greatly appreciated and seen as vital in enabling those individuals to recover from highly stressful situations. The relatively recent establishment of farm support outreach at livestock markets and other events was also noted as an effective way of making support more accessible to farmers who may not otherwise seek help.

*"FCN has been really, really good. I talk to two ladies and they are really lovely, I can talk to them about most things and they are from the farming community as well… They were fantastic, a really sympathetic, lovely lady… not judgmental in any way, just listened" (Farming woman, age 40-49, ID3)*

*"If we didn't have FCN involved, she would have put me in the ground" (Farming man, age 40-49, ID5)*

*"We talked and it was settled within a day or two. I know there are other occasions for other people when things don't work out so well, but, it is talk, and that is why it is important" (Farming man, age 70-79, ID4)*

However, whilst such farm support organisations are relatively well known within some farming circles, many members of the farming community remain unaware of their existence or of what type of support they offer. Others see reaching out to these organisations as a 'last resort', meaning that by the time they are contacted the situation may have already deteriorated and be more difficult to manage. Although participants generally felt it was easy to find the details of these charities once you looked for them, doing so requires more effort than, as one participant put it, a 'drip-drip' awareness approach where people gradually become accustomed to the presence of this support and the idea of accessing it. More awareness raising and signposting would therefore be beneficial (although one participant felt there was a risk of 'overdoing' mental health to the point that people switch off from it: perhaps something to be aware of).

## 7.4 Other support

There is clearly already much valuable work being carried out by farm support organisations and this should be continued and extended wherever possible. However, our findings also identified some specific areas where there may be further scope for action and progress - some of which lie beyond the remit of farm support organisations and require efforts from the wider agricultural industry and public bodies. These include:

*"There are some people that I have recently worked with that have said 'oh I have never really been aware that this has been out there for me'" (Farm support practitioner 6)*

*"It's the rules and regulations. They need to think about farmers' mental health, not just animal welfare. Arla have this 'happy cow' thing but afterwards everyone says, what about a 'happy farmer' index?" (Farming man, age 30-39, ID14)*

*"There needs to be an element of compassion and empathy and understanding of the multi-layer complexity that farmers are going through" (Farm support practitioner 6)*

*"It's solving the problems first isn't it? They'll come to us quite often with a very firm 'I need a cooker' or 'I need help with my car repairs'. But it's then when you sort of obviously dig a little bit deeper there are other things that they need. That's the tip of the iceberg" (Farm support practitioner 4)*

- **Mental health awareness raising** – Attitudes to mental health within farming are felt to be improving to some degree, but stigma persists and loneliness can be seen as a 'low-level' issue. Generational differences were noted in some instances. There is thus scope for more awareness-raising to be done on this theme.

- **Mental health training for supporting professions –** Mental health training for individuals involved in inspecting and auditing farms to ensure that these are carried out with sensitivity and awareness of the pressures farmers may be under was seen as important to develop. Paperwork, finances, and regulation are some of the biggest drivers of stress for farmers so agencies involved in these can play a big role in reducing the anxiety associated with such processes. Mental health training for other farm intermediaries such as vets and suppliers, who may build relationships with farmers and become trusted individuals over time, can also be beneficial for enabling these people to spot the signs of poor mental health and encourage farmers to seek support. Some participants gave examples of where such training is already being provided and advocated this being supported and extended wherever possible.

- **Developing social opportunities** – Taking part in social activities is important for evading loneliness and maintaining wellbeing but some participants felt appropriate opportunities did not exist in their area. Social networks and activities targeted at particular groups within farming (e.g. women; farm workers) were identified as especially lacking in some places. Social media groups were also noted as being helpful for creating networks and providing moral support to groups for farmers at both a virtual and local level.

- **Practical support** – Our findings highlighted the potential for some of the pressures and strains farmers face to be reduced through the provision of practical support. As already discussed, feelings of loneliness can be entwined with family tensions and business challenges so anything that can be done to ease these may consequently help improve mental wellbeing. Providing practical support can also circumnavigate taboos around mental health and open up opportunities for offering emotional support. As one participant said, "*If you start unlocking one thing, it might be one person that helps you unlock one thing which slowly unlocks all the others" (Farming man, age 60-69, ID19).* Examples of relevant practical support include; guidance on applying for agri-environment payments; business planning advice; farm worker grants; assistance with the planning system; skills training; and family/business mediation (including but not limited to succession planning).

# 8. Conclusion and recommendations

To those outside of farming, which let's face it is most people, when they think about farming they probably think of it as a bucolic life. However, as we have seen, for some farmers the reality can be very different. As we have seen, farmers can experience different types of loneliness, some of which can be exacerbated by certain aspects of farming culture (such as stoicism and a culture of long working hours and not getting off the farm) and which, in turn, can be associated with deteriorating mental and physical health. Attributing causality can be difficult and processes tend not to be linear, resulting in situations where multiple factors interact to produce poor health outcomes. This matters for a number of reasons. Firstly, out of concern for fellow humans but also because farmers are on the 'front line'; they are key workers in delivering not only our food but a range of environmental goods and services. Our farmers are facing the most radical set of policy changes in decades. The new operating environment for farmers will be very different and we need to help ensure that they are 'fit to farm' now and into the future. Undoubtedly, a large part of the 'solution' will come from within. Farming people helping farming people. But this requires resourcing, training, the joining up of services and use of delivery models that work in a farming context. Those of us in the non-farming community have a role to play as well. As we have seen, farmers are increasingly socially and culturally isolated, feeling unwanted, misunderstood and unsupported by wider society. Sometimes these perceptions are correct and sometimes they are not. In order to help counteract these feeling and the loneliness and isolation they can contribute to we need to build better relationships between farmers and non-farmers. We need to help farmers feel better about their work and their lives and to feel supported, appreciated and rewarded. The farming help charities do vital work in supporting the health and wellbeing of our farming community but based on the insights from this research we have a number of recommendations designed to help foster improved health and well-being amongst farmers and their families.

## Recommendations

**For central and local government**

- The work of the Farming Help charities, including FCN, is vital. These charities must be properly funded so that they can continue to provide support to all across agriculture through difficult times, crisis and periods of change.

- Provision of training for all regulatory inspectors and farm assurance assessors regarding mental health issues, approaching their work sensitively, spotting the signs of poor wellbeing and where to signpost people for appropriate help and support. FCN can help provide such training.

- Provision of information and training for rural GPs and Community Psychiatric Nurses on the specific issues and challenges faced by members of the farming community. Again, FCN is well placed to assist with this.

- Expansion of practical and business support for farmers, for example on business planning, finance, succession, and Environmental Land Management schemes.

- Continued investment in rural broadband access from local authorities/providers is essential to improve connectivity and reduce isolation.

- Further education of young people on food production, farming and environment is necessary in helping to attract more people into farming and also to reduce the feeling of 'disconnect' from wider society many farmers experience.

- Greater appreciation and recognition from government towards our farm communities for what they do, what they produce and the issues that they experience as highlighted in this report.

**For farm support organisations, the farming community and wider industry**

- Promotion of a culture change within the farming community that challenges attitudes to work and promotes taking time off as a respected approach to both maintaining positive wellbeing and running an efficient farm business. Spending time with family and getting away from the farm should be normalised.

- Employers should ensure they are providing healthy and safe working conditions for farm workers, including reasonable working hours, holidays and (where applicable) acceptable living accommodation.

- Continued awareness raising throughout the farming community regarding loneliness and related mental health issues, sources of support and the importance of talking with others. Farm support and outreach at auction marts should also be continued and expanded.

- Provision of targeted support for different groups (e.g. women) and different events/points in the life-course (e.g. returning to the family farm; succession; starting a family; relationship breakdowns; coping with bereavement; bTB).

- Creation of additional social opportunities and networks (both in-person and online) for farmers, farm workers and farm family members at a local level, targeted at particular groups where appropriate.

- Work to improve farmer-community relations and public images of farming by building opportunities for local engagement, highlighting positive public perceptions of farmers, and promoting the valuable role farming plays in producing food and managing the countryside.