



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Landscapes of support

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

Project team



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Methodology

Informed by a literature review of c100 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)

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

- 1 SOCIAL:** Bereavement, isolation, 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:** Crop or animal disease, COVID etc.

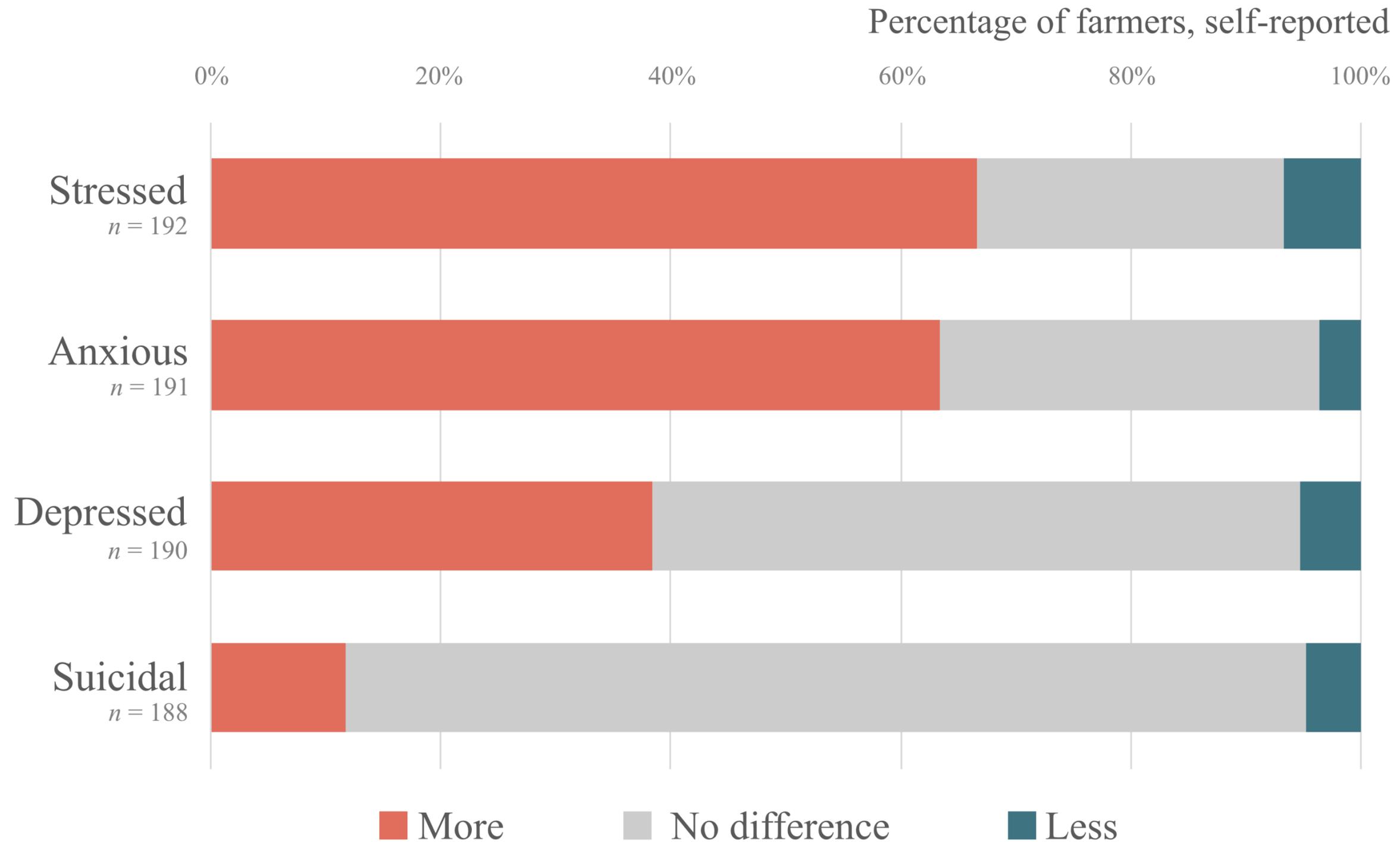
*'if your anxiety levels are up, then anything that might be lurking that you would normally cope with, you don't cope with' - **Farmer survey***

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***



Mental health of farmers during the pandemic



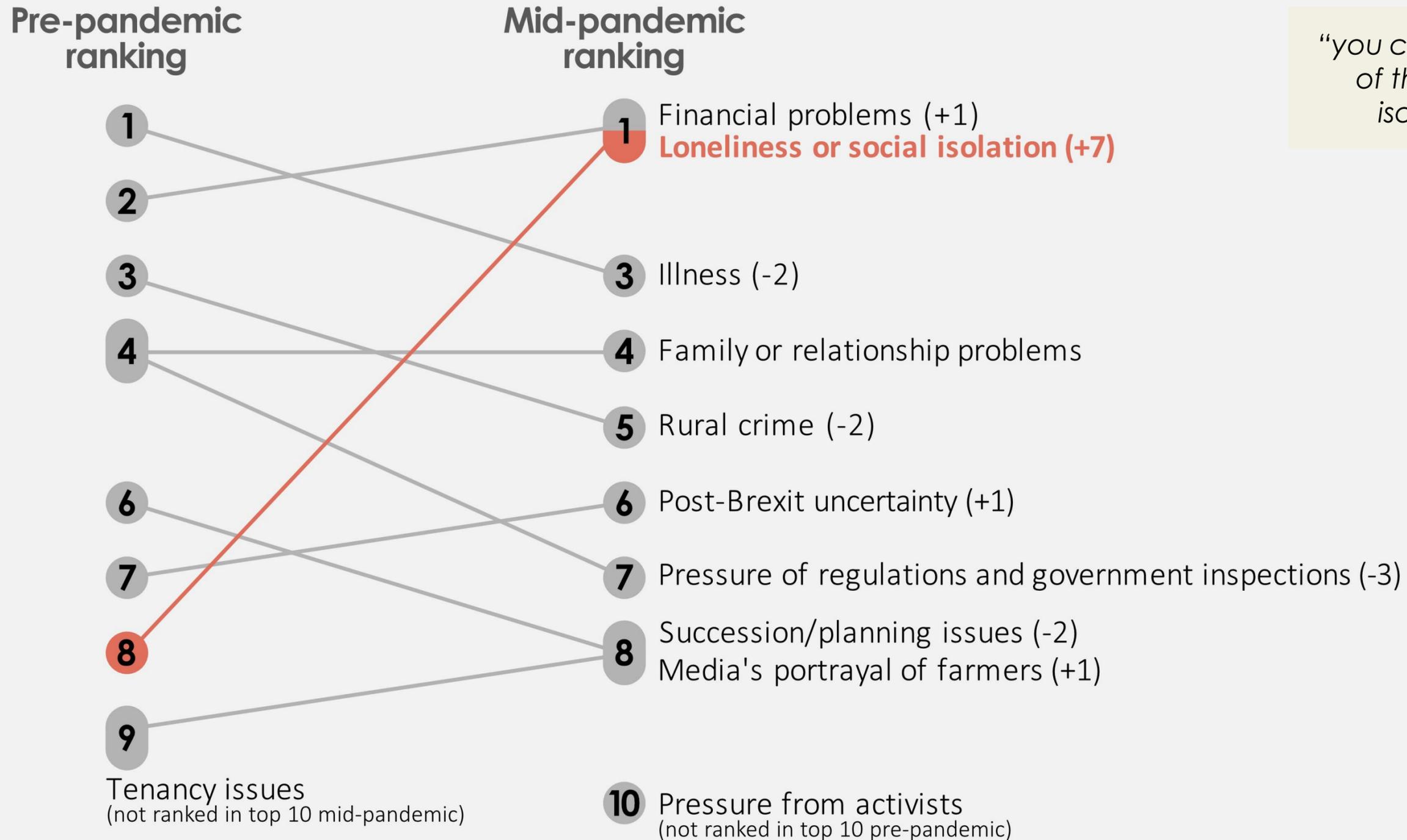
Why did COVID-19 stress farming families' mental health?

- 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



Top 10 reasons for accessing mental health support



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



'[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

Positive impacts of COVID-19 on farmers

Recognised and valued by society as essential workers (short-lived)

Increased community cohesion

Decrease in rural traffic and visitors during strict lockdown

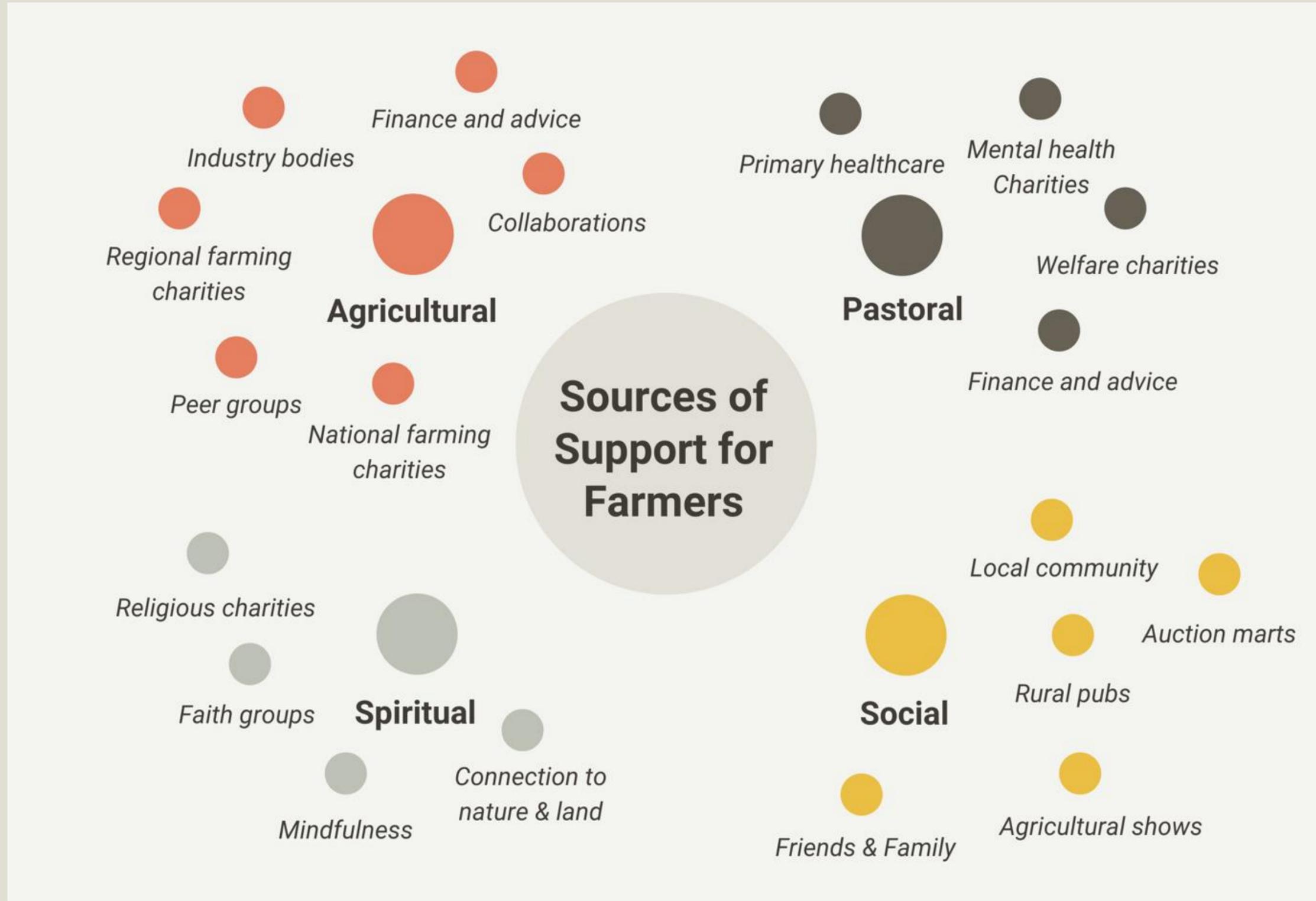


Business opportunities for farmers (e.g. farm shops, buying local, buying British)

Learning new methods of digital engagement

**Enjoyment of having family at home
(although this was a stress for some)**

Landscapes of support for farming mental health

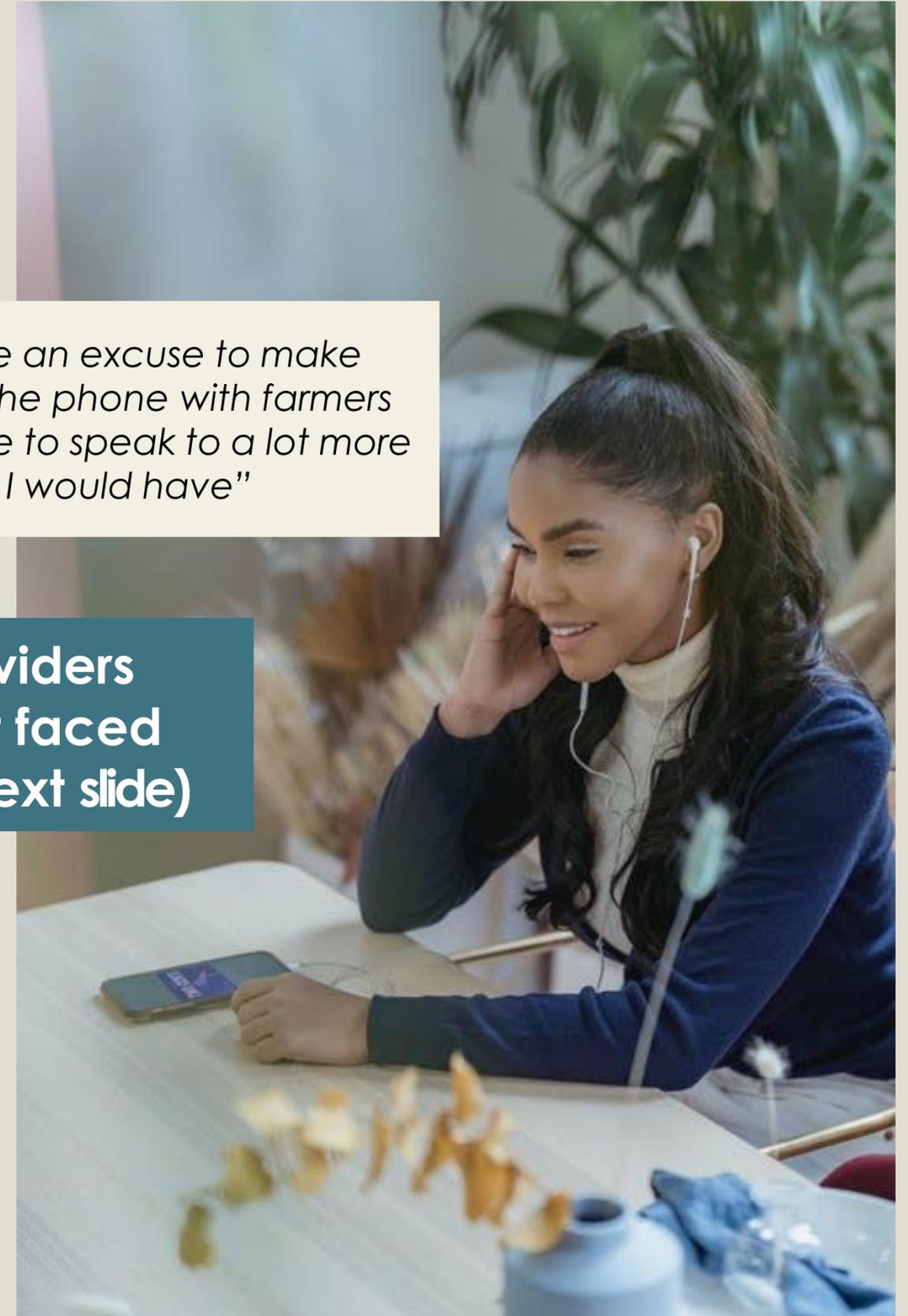


How did support organisations adapt to COVID?

- 1 ONLINE HELP AND PHONE CALLS:** To replace face-to-face
- 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 not possible
- 2 ONLINE DELIVERY:** Training staff and working with clients lacking skills and connectivity is difficult
- 3 FUNDRAISING:** charity 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)

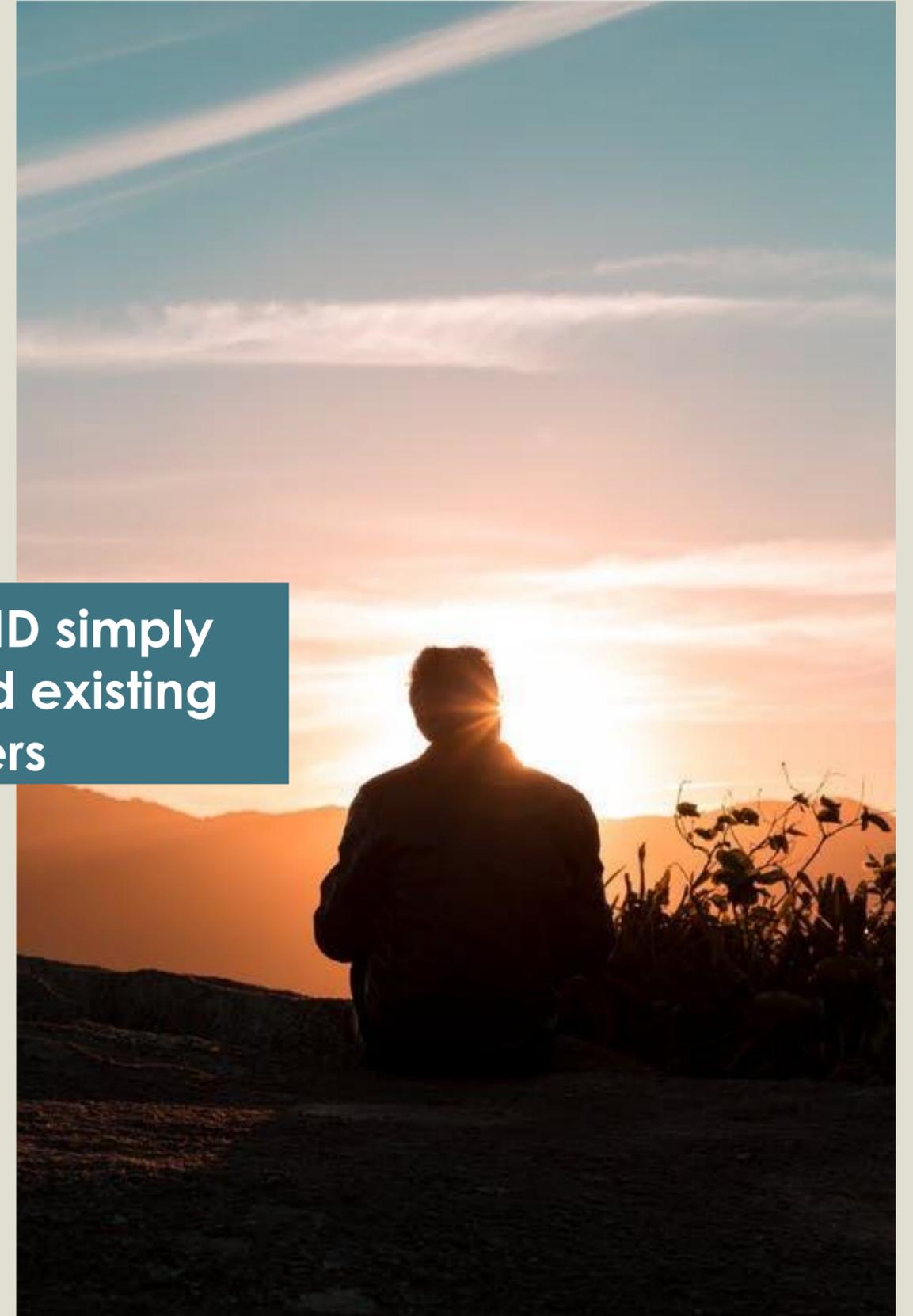
Support providers adapted, but struggled in many cases



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 or accessible, 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



Landscapes of support

Project recommendations

Support farmers

Better equip mental health supporters

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

Normalise talking about mental health and seeking help

Work to improve the public perception of farmers as essential workers

Improve rural connectivity and digital skills

Address root causes of poor farmer mental health

Ensure funding opportunities are long-term and consistent

Utilise multiple methods of engagement to support farmers

Recognise the importance of informal social support

Increase opportunities for supporter collaboration

Provide basic mental health first aid training for farm visitors

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/>

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?



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





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>