

Written Evidence submitted by The Farming Community Network (MH00009)

About FCN:

The Farming Community Network (FCN) is a voluntary organisation and charity that supports farmers and families within the farming community through difficult times. FCN has over 400 volunteers, located throughout England and Wales, many of whom are involved in farming, or have close links with agriculture and therefore have a great understanding of the issues farm workers and farming families regularly face. In addition to local groups of volunteers, FCN runs a confidential national helpline (03000 111 999, open 7am-11pm every day of the year) and e-helpline (help@fcn.org.uk).

FCN is a member of the Farming Help alliance, supported by the Prince's Countryside Fund. We work closely with other farming charities to provide wide-reaching support to people across agriculture.

Evidence from FCN:

- **What specific mental health challenges are faced by those living and working in rural communities?**

FCN Helpline and volunteer support

Through FCN's national Helpline, we regularly hear from people involved in agriculture from across the UK – and in particular England – about the challenges they are experiencing and their worries for the future. From April 2020 - March 2021 over 8,000 volunteer hours were spent on our Helpline in support of the farm community and we helped over 1,300 callers.

Through calls to our Helpline, common presenting issues include mental wellbeing, financial concerns, physical wellbeing and family relationships. Mental health concerns, such as stress, anxiety and depression, are regularly a component of calls presenting to FCN's Helpline on a monthly basis.

Our wide network of volunteers across England and Wales interact with farmers regularly on-farm and at farming shows, markets, marts and events in the farming calendar. Through conversations and case work we speak directly to farmers who are struggling – cases are often complex, with a multitude of issues involved that often has a direct impact on the mental health of the individual and their family.

We estimate approximately 6,000 people benefit from FCN's help each year, including through our Helpline, training and presentations, local case work, events, conversations or other interactions.

Research with Centre for Rural Policy Research

Some of the causes of mental ill-health in farming are explored in our new research with the University of Exeter's Centre for Rural Policy Research (launched November 2021): <https://bit.ly/3I5Mn2G>

The research has identified reasons why farmers and farming families can feel isolated and lonely – and loneliness was found in the study to be linked to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

This research involved in-depth interviews with 22 farmers/members of farming families and 6 farm support practitioners in England, conducted either by telephone or video-call between March and July 2021.

Farmers said the long hours they work trying to keep their business going despite low returns leaves little time for socialising, relaxing, or spending time with their family. Other challenges include a lack of social opportunities, geographical isolation and declining business-related contact.

Poor rural broadband and transport connections add to this sense of isolation, as well as a general feeling that the public has a limited understanding of what is involved in farming and the array of challenges farmers face in producing food and managing the countryside.

The research found that farmers are keen to highlight the vital role they play in producing food, and the positive actions they are taking to care for and improve the environment, but feel these are often overlooked in media stories about agriculture and environmental issues such as climate change. This can lead to farmers and their families feeling unappreciated and isolated from wider society.

The research also provides a number of important recommendations for improving support to farmers, including continued investment in rural broadband; further education and outreach to help the public understand farming and its challenges; and normalising taking time off-farm and finding a healthy work-life balance.

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- **What are the causes of the higher than average rate of suicide amongst those working in agriculture? Are there other linked professions, such as vets, that have similar issues? How effective are suicide prevention services offered to these groups?**

Mental health issues factor into many cases presenting to FCN. In October 2020 we reported that mental health concerns, including stress and anxiety, are now – for the first time - the main factor in calls to our Helpline. Since this date, mental health is regularly a core component in cases presenting to FCN and month-on-month is one of the most common presenting issues.

Isolation and loneliness play a role in the high rates of suicide in agriculture compared to most other industries. Working long hours, often in solitude - alongside the many challenges unique to farming – can exacerbate mental health issues and cause someone to feel trapped or like they have no way out of their situation.

The stigma around talking about mental health that exists in farming, as well as a lack of available time or lack of access to support services, can make it challenging for people to seek or receive help. The stoic culture of farming – and guilt often associated with taking time off – can also make it difficult to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

Farmers are often subject to criticism in the press and from the public, including being held responsible for issues such as climate change or having to contend with activists critical of their profession and livelihood. Rural crime is a significant challenge, from theft or damage of property to harm caused to livestock.

There is an ageing population in farming and succession is an uncomfortable and uniquely challenging conversation for many farming families. Farmers often struggle to retire as many are still

living on the farm; and some will have no successor to pass the farm business onto, forcing them to continue working, which can lead to or exacerbate health issues and create additional stress.

Labour challenges in farming has seen significant media attention in recent months, highlighting the reliance the supply chain has on overseas labour, including butchers, veterinary workers and HGV drivers. Farmers are often at the mercy of challenges beyond their control – whether they be political (policy changes), financial (subsidy reduction) or environmental (extreme weather; animal disease; crop disease). With change comes increased stress, and it is the pace of change especially that can cause significant challenges – for example new rules, new trade deals, phasing out of BPS etc.

Due to the nature of their work, farmers also have access to machinery, equipment and firearms that can make suicide an option that would not be possible in many other occupations. New technology can be challenging to get used to using and can pose additional risk, especially to those untrained in its use.

The significant stresses involved in farming – and the lack of public understanding or empathy for what is involved – can all create heightened feelings of disconnection and discontent, which can over time cause mental health issues or increase suicide ideation.

- **Is sufficient mental health support made available to rural communities following “shocks” such as flooding or mass animal culls?**

The recently reported on pig and poultry industry crises and the effects of Storm Arwen provide good examples of recent ‘shocks’ to the industry.

In the former, supply chain issues and labour shortages caused significant challenges for farmers in these sectors, many of whom were threatened with the prospect of having to cull their animals. Anecdotally, some farmers expressed a concern that the Government hadn’t understood the gravity of the situation and took too long to respond.

In the latter, many people in rural communities, particularly in the north of England, faced a loss of power due to Storm Arwen as well as risk to livestock and damage to property. In these situations, many people have to wait considerable lengths of time for help.

Some of this assistance can be provided by charities such as FCN, Forage Aid and Addington Fund, including support for practical and pastoral needs; forage, feed and bedding; housing and emergency relief; mental health and wellbeing; and training and development. Greater efforts to ensure people in rural communities are aware of The Farming Community Network and other charities would help to ease the pressure during and following ‘shocks’.

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