

Written Evidence submitted by The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust (MH0010)

The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust is a registered charity supporting gamekeepers, stalkers, ghillies and their families in whatever difficulty arises. This may be typically health, mental health, financial difficulty, redundancy, housing related or loneliness and isolation.

The Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust provides grants for those in ill health, poverty and disability and increasingly for those in working lives. Provision is extended to those who have or who are depending on gamekeeping for their living, and in later life. There is also assistance for students who wish to make gamekeeping their career and who otherwise would not be able to take advantage of further education. Assistance is also provided with a wide range of information, fact sheets and support as well as keeping in touch with the isolated and lonely on a regular basis by telephone call, letter and gifts. Jamie's Helpline is open 24/7 and provides support and information and above all a listening service for anyone who is struggling with a particular issue or is lonely. A separate website is available which provides a job register with assistance on c.v's and letters, and any issue relating to jobs i.e. contracts, housing etc.

Gamekeepers often live in remote locations, in rural areas with few services which can particularly impact on young families and people in later life. Housing is predominantly provided during working lives through service occupied accommodation which can bring its own challenges. Redundancy, retirement or illness and early death usually necessitates moving to housing, which is often expensive, and difficult to source especially in a location near family and friends. Gamekeeping is a physical occupation and thus gamekeepers are vulnerable to mental ill health when physical health is compromised. Essential tools of the trade are shotgun and firearms for gamekeepers and stalkers and there are serious issues where individuals will not seek help because of the fear of having their guns taken which can mean losing jobs and homes. This cannot be underestimated and changed legislation which necessitates a doctor's submission will only exacerbate these issues. We know of many individuals who will not ask for help when mentally or physically ill for fear of removal of their gun licenses.

The Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust works with many other rural charities and organisations and has long term relationships with the Farming Community Network, RABI, RSABI, Perennial and others to ensure that support is available for anyone seeking support. The Princes Countryside Fund plays an important role also in bringing many local organisations together to provide a holistic service.

As for many rural occupations, increased regulation and extremists are making life very difficult. Gamekeepers and farmers feel isolated, not listened to, and undervalued, and even vilified in their occupations. Social media targeting gamekeepers and their families to an extent that many school children feel unable to speak about the professions of their parents especially on urban fringes. Jamie's Helpline receives calls from anyone in the rural community but predominantly those in the gamekeeping and stalking professions. Calls are received on a wide range of issues but predominantly health and job related. Mental health is affecting at least one third of all callers on a wide spectrum from anxiety and stress to extreme ill health and sometimes those at risk of suicide. However, career related calls are

becoming more prevalent i.e. stress relating to a job many feel has no future, tighter regulation, gun license problems, housing, a public and political arena which feels totally out to step with the countryside and its interests, and then of course covid 19, weather related problems, bird flu, and other diseases in game birds which have impacted on the wild bird population i.e grouse, and in rearing sheds earlier in the year. Stalkers across the country are horrified at widespread culling of deer because of re-wilding totally without regard to the welfare of deer i.e. night shooting and culling out of season. There is a sector who are suffering from mental ill health directly because of these issues. Gamekeepers love the countryside, are the custodians who know in intimate detail their flora and fauna and are not regarded as the experts they undoubtedly are sometimes with generations of knowledge within a single family. This is causing mental ill health across the profession.

The Covid 19 pandemic has added to pressures on rural communities and gamekeepers are particularly vulnerable where housing is required, as rents and house prices have soared. Employers have found alternative employment if possible but on estates where other streams of income have also been reduced i.e. farm shops, holiday cottages this has become extremely difficult. Increased woodland creation particularly in upland areas to offset carbon footprint and the widespread devastation of the winter storms has directly impacted on the gamekeeping profession.

Suicide

The causes of suicide in the gamekeeping sector are broadly aligned to other rural land based occupations. That farmers, gamekeepers and veterinary surgeons have a wide range of tools to take their own lives is the case, but this fact is more complex than it immediately appears. There is also a mindset and general stoic attitude which recognises death as part of life, in livestock and other domestic animals i.e. working dogs. Animals are not left to suffer and at the end of working lives there is an acceptance that there is an end to life. Farmers and people from other land based occupations need to feel useful and their lives are intertwined with their work, dedication to their vocation is often “who they are”. Therefore, if they lose their job, or are too ill to continue and mental ill health is often a major cause or leading onto mental ill health after physical illness then suicide seems a solution of choice in these circumstances. There are recent examples of suicide in middle to late middle aged men who took their own lives after recent diagnosis of long term illness. Pride and stoicism take a part in this mindset and not wishing to be a burden. There are also recent examples of suicide after the news that they had to move from their homes in rural locations.

Young people and particularly young men are also vulnerable especially after broken relationships, jobs and sheer isolation as in one recent suicide of a gamekeeper at the end of 2021. Working long hours, exhaustion, isolation, a very limited network of friends and family are all factors both in suicide and mental ill health. Poor provision of services is also a factor where there are long waiting lists for support and again a reluctance to ask for help for fear of removal of guns and anyone learning of their vulnerabilities.

Suicide prevention organisations are definitely of value; however it can be a barrier in rural communities when individuals feel mis-understood and fear of being known; often pride and confidentiality are further barriers to reaching out. One gamekeeper spoke of his mental health team professional expressing her distaste for his job and who asked him not to speak of his work. This is not an unusual response. Having the appropriate information at the right

time is vital and when someone is at the end of their tether they are not thinking rationally or can sensibly consider who to call. It often is left to those closest to them, but it again is only with their permission which proves a difficult situation.

Mental Health information should be available after “shocks” however it does need to be sensitively handled as positive practical measures must come first, and support and information could be circulated and available in the following order:

1. To acknowledge the situation
2. To make an immediate practical difference in a crisis situation
3. Make information available from those who are trusted i.e. NFU, TFA, Auction Marts, Feed companies and trade organisations, NGO, SGA, BASC, CA
4. Ensure local health authorities, voluntary organisations are aware, and both supported and informed to disseminate information and offer support.
5. If possible ensure support i.e. mental health professionals (nurses in particular) are available in local practices.

Very often as was the case in the floods in Swaledale, practical measures are dealt with and long term consequences are felt later on, sometimes weeks and sometimes months thereafter. The devastation after Storm Arwen in Northumberland is similar, where rearing fields and woods have been completely ruined which have longer term consequences for jobs, finances and mental health.

The Government’s recent investment in mental health services leaves significant gaps in provision and is not apparent in rural areas to any great extent. Acknowledging and addressing basic need in agricultural communities is vital and does not seem to be dealt with (admittedly difficult in current economic and health related circumstances) with sufficient commitment or understanding. Local voluntary and charitable organisations are providing excellent services where possible but where mental ill health is diagnosed professional service is inadequate and patchy. Mental health nurses in local practices who are available in a practical and timely manner are so important. GP practices are referring but there is often a long gap between referral and provision leaving people on their own at their most vulnerable time. This is where funding needs to be targeted.

In the Gamekeepers’ Welfare Trust and as a local volunteer and previous coordinator of the Farming Community Network I am not aware of any real joined up approach from the key actors in rural and agricultural communities.

In conclusion the Gamekeepers’ Welfare Trust provides support throughout the UK in confidence, at no cost and for as long as required.

The Gamekeepers’ Welfare Trust represents gamekeepers, ghillies (river and deer) and stalkers as well as those who have left the profession, are in later life and families who have depended on or who are depending on the profession for their living.

We are grateful for this opportunity to express our opinion and evidence regarding mental health within rural communities and feel it is important that the voices of those who do not often express their disquiet or concern over issues affecting their lives but are increasingly worried and concerned for their future.

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