

## **Written evidence submitted by the Administrative Data | Agricultural Research Collection (MH0017)**

### **Background to the AD|ARC project**

The AD|ARC (Administrative Data | Agricultural Research Collection) project aims to integrate the human dimension with data on farming activities, to better understand the demographic, health, education and economic characteristics of farm households associated with different types and sizes of farm businesses. This will provide the insight needed for decision makers to improve future policies and enhance the wellbeing (and mental health) of farmers and their families.

AD|ARC brings together esteemed data linkage researchers and experts in agricultural affairs with partner organisations from each of the four countries of the UK, including the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales (PHW). The programme brings together teams within the individual nations of the UKRI ADR UK investment, led by Dr Paul Caskie of the Agri-Food and Bioscience Institute, Northern Ireland and principally supported by a team at ADR Wales (Administrative Data Research Wales), a collaboration between Welsh Government and Swansea and Cardiff Universities.

AD|ARC makes use of DEA accredited Trusted Research Environments (TREs) across the four nations of the UK to make de-identified, linkable, person level data accessible to accredited academic researchers. We are building a Research Ready Dataset in each of the four nations to conduct our own research, but we will also make a population level research resource available to accredited 'safe' researchers for research and statistical purposes. This resource will be made available to research projects that will deliver policy relevant research which would result in benefit to the general public.

The AD|ARC research plan is formed around the four research areas of:

- Health and wellbeing (including mental health)
- Household socio-economic characteristics
- Prosperity and business resilience
- Environment and place

The project outputs will be determined by close engagement with farming stakeholders and scientific researchers across the UK and will consist of separate but coordinated work streams for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with the resulting 'research ready' datasets aiming to be complementary so that analysis at a UK level is possible.

### **AD|ARC and rural mental health**

Mental health has always been a strong driver for the project. The AD|ARC concept was inspired by the findings of the 2019 Public Health Wales report titled "Supporting

Farming Communities at Times of Uncertainty”. This report outlined serious concerns for the mental health of farming communities ahead of the challenges facing the sector even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although AD|ARC has primarily been created to understand farming households and businesses, a key aspect of this is separating out effects specific to farming as opposed to wider rurality. In order to achieve this, the research platform will also contain the entire rural population for England and Wales and a sample of the rural population for Scotland and Northern Ireland. An important part of this project is working with experts across the UK to define what we mean by rurality and creating new indicators of rurality from administrative data to better understand how location affects citizens.<sup>1</sup>

Across the UK, AD|ARC is assembling a variety of health related datasets which will be anonymously linked to the population Census in each country, as well as data on farm activities and rural payments made to farm households (and education data for households where available). This will provide a far more holistic understanding of farm households (and rural households in our control groups) than has previously been possible using other research methods. By bringing together this data, we can explore how mental health is correlated with a variety of other factors affecting rural households.

Stakeholder organisations across the UK have recognised this project as having a huge potential to aid future policy development. Conversations are progressing with academics and policy makers across the UK to develop our research questions, with initial ideas focusing on a range of issues, including, for example, rurality as a barrier for accessing support and the late presentation of mental health issues in the farming population.

### **The future of AD|ARC**

Although the first phase of AD|ARC is far from over (due to be completed by March 2023), there is already a huge appetite to expand it further. Currently, the data is built around 2010/2011 as this is when the most recent available population and farm activities censuses took place. There is additional health and economic data for more recent years in the current dataset allowing to do some longitudinal analyses. However, as part of a proposed second phase the 2021 censuses would be added, allowing us to understand how farm households have changed over the past ten years and potentially unpick some of the early impacts of the pandemic.

We also intend to bring in additional datasets on farm activities such as animal health notifications and spatial data on flood risk and natural habitats which will help us to understand how a range of ‘disruptions’ affect farmer mental health. It would also benefit the platform hugely to add data from HMRC on income and data from DWP on welfare benefits in order to increase the potential to explore how economic drivers affect household mental health.

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<sup>1</sup> This would build on existing work of Welsh Government:  
[Rural Wales: definitions and how to choose between them | GOV.WALES](#)  
[Statistical focus on rural Wales: 2008 | GOV.WALES](#)

However, for this to happen, the argument needs to be made for the use of the new powers enabled by the Digital Economy Act for more de-identified data linking and provision of data to accredited researchers. Across government, there is sometimes still (understandably) a hesitation to provision data for this kind of research either through a default of risk averse attitudes or in some cases a lack of understanding of what is and isn't permitted. By increasing the profile of projects like AD|ARC, we hope to demonstrate the invaluable public good of de-identified administrative data research and encourage data owners to more proactively use legal gateways to share data for future research projects.

Even in the absence of these datasets, however, AD|ARC is uniquely placed to investigate some of the questions the Committee is interested in answering and would be keen to work with them going forward in order to do so. For example, during its first phase, linking data for farming and rural households to routine health records, will deliver evidence around the specific mental health conditions being experienced by those living and working in rural communities. Furthermore, we can attempt to identify any effects specific to shocks such as the widespread flooding events of 2019 and mass animal culls. Should AD|ARC be successful in acquiring funding for its second phase, it will furthermore be able to investigate whether other linked professions have similar issues. By working with our stakeholder groups, we will be able to place these findings in context by drawing on the insights of representatives from the farming sector across the UK.

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