

# The mental wellbeing of young farmers in Ireland and the UK: driving factors, help-seeking, and support

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## ABSTRACT

Whilst research attention on the mental wellbeing of farmers is growing, there are few studies focused on young farmers. Our research set out to better understand the factors affecting young farmer mental wellbeing and help-seeking behaviour. We draw insights from a combined study in Ireland and the UK, supplemented by separate studies by the same author team in both places. Through the use of young farmer interviews and surveys, as well as interviews of those who support young farmers with their mental wellbeing, we identify a mixed picture of mental wellbeing and a plethora of factors affecting it. Though many of these factors have been identified in the wider literature, the impact of socialisation and time off the farm, and sexism/misogyny affecting young female farmers, were specifically identified in our study. In some cases, young farmers were considered to be better at speaking about mental wellbeing than their older counterparts, but our study indicated that some people in this demographic fail to seek assistance because of stigma, stoicism, and possible lack of confidentiality. Improving the accessibility of mental wellbeing services, as well as normalising conversations on the subject and providing support in informal social settings, were identified as key recommendations.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the factors affecting the mental wellbeing and help-seeking behaviour of young farmers. There has been a proliferation of social research to understand the prevalence and drivers of poor mental wellbeing in farming communities across all demographics, as well as the availability and accessibility of support services. A recent

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study by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) in England and Wales discovered that around a third of farmers were probably or possibly depressed (RABI, 2021; Wheeler & Lobley, 2022), whilst state-level analyses in the United States suggest that farmers and ranchers die by suicide at higher rates than people in other occupations (Miller & Rudolphi, 2022). In Ireland, farmer mental health and suicide is a major concern for those actively involved in farming with 23.4% of farmers being considered at risk of suicide (Stapleton et al., 2022). Drivers of poor wellbeing, such as unpredictable/bad weather, public criticism, loneliness, financial pressures, stressed personal relationships, and animal and crop diseases, are widely documented (Deegan & Dunne, 2022; McAloon et al., 2017; Meredith et al., 2020; Wheeler et al., 2023; Yazd et al., 2019; Younker & Radunovich, 2022). As the emphasis on more sustainable farming practices has increased, agricultural policy transitions are being made across the world, including the decline of the livestock industry in some parts of the world and a push towards digitalisation. These transitions create uncertainty and are also affecting farmer mental wellbeing (Carolan, 2023; Stapleton et al., 2022).

Whilst we may still lack detailed information on whether and how the prevalence and driving factors of poor mental wellbeing vary between different types of farmers, workers, and family members (Chiswell, 2022), recent studies have indicated that demographics does have an influence (see section 2). However, there is still relatively little academic research which specifically examines the drivers of poor mental wellbeing and the help-seeking behaviours of young farmers, including in the UK and Ireland. Our study combines insights from studies in Ireland and the UK with the specific aims of understanding the drivers of poor mental wellbeing in a young farmer demographic, as well as help-seeking behaviour. We seek to build the empirical knowledge base to make recommendations for how to understand wellbeing in this demographic and how to ensure that support interventions are best targeted towards them.

## 2. Literature review

Isolation, lack of anonymity in close-knit communities, and poor accessibility of support services have long been known to challenge mental wellbeing in rural communities (Philo & Parr, 2004; Philo et al., 2017). As a key part of rural communities and as essential workers providing food for society, farmers, farm workers, and their families are also known to suffer from poor mental wellbeing. Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations regarding the level of injuries and fatalities. Farm work or agricultural work can involve long working hours, labour and high levels of stress due to unpredictability of weather and farming demands (Glasscock et al., 2006; Mulkerrins et al., 2022). Looking across the public as a whole, the medical literature illustrates a clear link between mental and physical well-being (Burgard & Lin, 2013; Chesley, 2014; Frone, 2008). Ohrnberger et al. (2017) argue that there is a 'strong' link between mental and physical health, although the causality is under-studied, while Punton et al. (2022) find that long waiting times for young adult mental healthcare in the UK made underlying physical conditions worse amongst their study participants. In the agricultural sector, poor mental wellbeing co-existed alongside poor physical health in the RABI survey (2021) whilst stress and anxiety play a role in worsening health and safety.

In the ‘Big Farming Survey’ of England and Wales by RABI, reports of poor mental wellbeing were more common in some farming sectors than others (e.g. dairy) whilst women were more likely to report problems with anxiety/depression (Wheeler & Lobley, 2022), a pattern also seen in a further UK study by Rose et al. (2022). The nature of farm and family tasks vary by gender; for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the disproportionate burden of childcare and home schooling falling on farming women caused enhanced stress (Budge & Shortall, 2023). In the RABI study, working-age women were more likely to report suffering from anxiety and loneliness due to gender-based pressures, such as childcare and caring (Wheeler & Lobley, 2023). Men particularly (although not exclusively) may be more likely to suffer from the stigma of admitting problems which prevents help-seeking (Hammersley et al., 2023).

Age also appears to play a role. Though there are relatively few studies that focus on young farmer wellbeing specifically, a number of studies have been able to draw out statistics for this demographic. The RABI survey found that younger age groups were more likely to highlight challenges with their mental wellbeing, with 40% of 18–24-year-olds reporting problems with anxiety/depression compared to just 12% of their non-farming peers in the UK (RABI, 2021; Wheeler & Lobley, 2022).

Loneliness, isolation, and forced pandemic lockdowns are also strong drivers of poor mental well-being in young people and young farmers specifically. Young people were more likely to feel lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic and suffer from poor mental well-being (Bu et al., 2020; Gagné & McMunn, 2023; Groarke et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020). In a previous study, Rose et al. (2022) found that a higher number of young farmers in the UK reported a negative impact of isolation caused by COVID-19 lockdowns: 86% of 18–24-year-olds and 74% of 25–34-year-olds said that lockdowns had impacted on their mental health compared to 58% of the sample as a whole.

Though most studies focus on farming populations as a whole, some research on driving factors for poor farming mental wellbeing has specifically focused on young farmers. The Farm Safety Foundation raises awareness of mental health issues amongst farmers aged 18–40 in the UK. Such research has inspired new training specifically aimed at young farmers.<sup>1</sup> In their 2022 survey (457 young farmer responses, Farm Safety Foundation), 94% of the UK’s young farmers said that poor mental health is one of the biggest hidden problems, and respondents talked about the difficulty of opening up and seeking help on this issue.<sup>2</sup> Through the use of mixed methods, our study enabled us to probe further qualitatively on the reasons behind these statistics. In a US study, 170 young farmers responded to a survey of which 35.9% mentioned mild symptoms of anxiety and 34.7% reporting more moderate or severe symptoms (Rudolphi et al., 2020). Driving factors for this anxiety were found to be personal finances, time pressures, economic conditions, and stressed intrapersonal relationships. A further study in the US found that those young farmers and ranchers who died by suicide were more likely to have relationship problems (Miller & Rudolphi, 2022).

The literature on help-seeking behaviours and the landscapes of support for farmer wellbeing is growing (Shortland et al., 2023). Various barriers to farmers seeking help have been identified including, but not limited to; the stigma of asking for help (Roy et al., 2017), especially in close-knit communities (Philo et al., 2017; Philo & Parr, 2004) which may support certain macho stereotypes (Hammersley et al., 2023; Herron et al., 2020); poor accessibility or availability of formal support services in rural communities, made worse by a digital divide (Hagen et al., 2021; Philip et al., 2017); financial barriers

to access support which is not free (Hagen et al., 2021); long hours and workload reducing the ability to enjoy time off the farm (Wheeler & Lobley, 2023); and lack of understanding about farming from health professionals (Shortland et al., 2023).

A study in Australia by Vayro et al. (2022) indicated that young farmers may be more willing to talk about mental health issues than older farmers, but this is not currently supported widely elsewhere. In the RABI study, younger farmers were less likely to confide in anyone about poor mental wellbeing and more likely to report feeling lonely (RABI, 2021). This supports findings in the wider medical literature which has indicated that young people may be less likely to seek support for their mental health (Marcus et al., 2012; Rickwood et al., 2007). A literature review by Vanheusden et al. (2008), which accompanied an empirical study, found multi-country evidence (e.g. New Zealand, Finland, The Netherlands) of young adults declining to access mental health services if they were struggling. The study suggested that this may partially be driven by personal experience and knowledge of services, but also as a result of mental health services not adequately engaging young people in accessible ways (see also Patel et al., 2007).

In farming, landscapes of support are diverse and varied (Shortland et al., 2023) but informal spaces of support provided by family, friends, and peers are critical (Furey et al., 2016; Knook et al., 2023; Nye et al., 2022). Some young farmer-specific studies have focused on help-seeking and support, but this is a relatively under-explored area. Syson-Nibbs et al. (2009) describe a project amongst young hill farmers in England which utilised photographic methods encouraging the farmers to record their feelings and experiences of farming. These photos were shown in an exhibition and the process was found to improve the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the young farmers. Other studies suggest that different support methods may need to be utilised to reach young farmers, including talking at Young Farmers Clubs, using social media more, and making support seem less 'clinical' (Malaztky et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2017; Shortland et al., 2023). Informal spaces of support from family, friends, advisors, and in the community are also likely to remain important (Furey et al., 2016). Digital interventions, such as the use of social media or apps, are also useful for a young audience (Fergie et al., 2016; Newbold et al., 2020; Rickwood et al., 2007). A recent publication on the 'digital self-care' practised by young farmers in the UK illustrates the potential to support wellbeing in digital spaces (Holton et al., 2023). Holton et al. (2023) interviewed 28 young farmers in the UK, exploring how they practise digital self-care through the curation of social media. From a geographical perspective, the online space (if accessible in rural communities with poor connectivity) offers the potential to overcome the physical problem of isolation and poor accessibility of mental health services. Indeed, Holton et al. (2023, p. 2) report on research that shows that mobile phone apps and social media are 'essential tools for generating belonging and embeddedness within rural communities'.

Nevertheless, there is still relatively little academic research which specifically examines the drivers of poor mental wellbeing and the help-seeking behaviours of young farmers, including in the UK and Ireland. Our study combines insights from studies in Ireland and the UK with the specific aims of understanding the drivers of poor mental wellbeing in a young farmer demographic, as well as help-seeking behaviour. We seek to build the empirical knowledge base to make recommendations for how to understand wellbeing in this demographic and how to ensure that support interventions are best targeted towards them and sufficiently resourced.

### 3. Methods

For this paper, we combine insights from two separate studies and one joint study by the listed authors (see [Figure 1](#)). Though the initial two studies were conducted separately during 2019 and 2021 respectively, there are valuable lessons learned in drawing themes together, which inspired the joint interview work conducted in late 2022/early 2023. When outlining the results, we report distinctly on the separate methods, before reflecting on key lessons. We targeted two specific groups in this research, young farmers themselves and those who supported farmer wellbeing in various roles. We discuss the methods used to gain insights from each group below. For all data collection, ethical approval was gained from the relevant institution (UCD, Reading, Cranfield). We have created some appendices containing further details of the two studies – questionnaire designs and sample information, etc. – that are included in a Supplemental

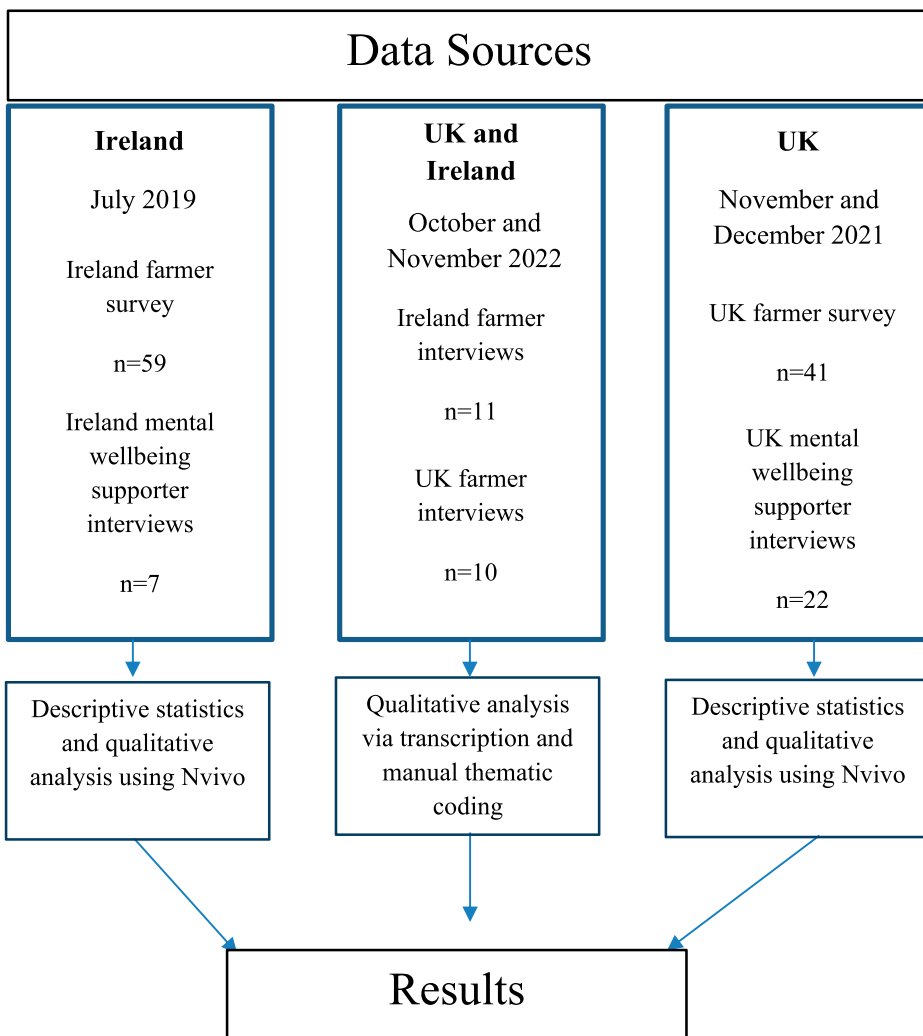


**Figure 1.** Methods used in our study. Source: authors.

Information document available with this paper on the *Scottish Geographical Journal* website. Those appendices are cross-referenced in the text below.

### 3.1. Young farmers

Definitions of what constitutes a 'young farmer' vary, but for the purposes of this research, interview and survey recruitment focused on farmers between the age of 18 and 40 (in line with an EU definition<sup>3</sup>). We gained the views of 21 young farmers via common semi-structured interviews in Ireland and the UK, as well as two separate surveys in the same countries. The interviews focused on the two main objectives outlined above: drivers of poor mental wellbeing and help-seeking/support (see Appendix 1). In the UK, volunteers were recruited between October and November 2022 via social media posts (Twitter, LinkedIn, The Farming Forum) and by emailing student unions and representatives at the major UK agricultural colleges and universities (see Appendix 1). In Ireland, volunteers were recruited between October 2022 and January 2023 via the young farmer organisation (Macra na Feirme), agricultural colleges and universities, and agricultural extension services (see Appendix 1). Sampling attempted to ensure we had representatives across farming sectors and genders. The sample was skewed towards male farmers (Ireland [10 males, 1 female], UK [7 male, 3 female]) and towards the livestock sector in Ireland (see Appendix 1).<sup>4</sup>

We conducted ten interviews in the UK with farmers aged between 20 and 36, from England, Wales, Scotland, and NI and eleven interviews in Ireland, with farmers aged between 21 and 32 (see Appendix 1). The UK interviews lasted between 13 and 31 min and the Irish interviews lasted between 20 and 60 min. Interviews were conducted over the phone or online, recorded, transcribed, and manually thematically coded to pick out drivers of poor mental wellbeing and views related to help-seeking and support services (one person analysed all interviews). In the UK, interviews were carried out by one female researcher and in Ireland interviews were carried out by two male and one female researchers.

The UK survey focused on factors affecting both farmer wellbeing and help-seeking (see Appendix 2), but did not specifically target young farmers. It used an online survey distributed via social media and farmer contacts in the UK between November and December 2021. In total, 207 responses were gathered with 41 responses from farmers under 35 being analysed in this paper (the next category was 35–44 so was excluded from analysis).

The Irish survey specifically targeted young farmers in July 2019. Containing open-ended and closed-ended questions, the survey was composed of several sections, including background and farmer wellbeing, understanding of services and mental wellbeing, availability of support services, and accessibility to support services and a mental wellbeing scale (see Appendix 3). The questionnaire was completed by 59 farmers aged 17–40 across the North-West of Ireland (see Appendix 4).

We recognise the relatively small sample sizes in both surveys and therefore caveat quantitative statements made in the results. However, we also utilise qualitative information from these surveys alongside in-depth comments, italicised in what follows, arising in the interviews.

### 3.2. Supporters of farmers and farmer wellbeing

Supporters of farm mental health include formal individuals/organisations (healthcare, mental health charities) and informal individuals/organisations (farmer peer groups, advisors, auction mart staff, chaplains) which may not overtly focus on mental wellbeing (Shortland et al., 2023). Their perspective gained from working with young farmers is important to include in our assessment of driving factors and help-seeking behaviours. We included these perspectives in this paper via two separate semi-structured interview guides.

The supporter interviews in Ireland, conducted in July 2019 and lasting up to 20 min, addressed the topics of: (i) the level of mental wellbeing of young farmers in the north-west of Ireland; (ii) examination of the support services available to young farmers; and (iii) an assessment of the services that are offered (see Appendix 5). Seven key informants in the agricultural industry were interviewed who worked to provide advice to farmers, including on wellbeing. These key informants were identified through the leading organisations of Macra Na Feirme, Irish Farmers Association (IFA), Mental Health Ireland (MHI), and the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM). A pilot study for the questionnaires was carried out with agriculture students at University College, Dublin. Pilot interviews were also carried out with Macra Na Feirme. A full transcription of each recording was carried out immediately after each interview. The transcriptions were then imported into the statistical analysis software NVivo for thematic coding.

The UK interviews of supporters of farm mental health did not specifically ask questions about young farmers, but they were discussed in many of the interviews and this data has not been specifically reported on before (see Appendix 6 for questions). Organisations were selected through the *Prince's Countryside Fund National Directory of Farm and Rural Support Groups* (2021),<sup>5</sup> as well as known contacts. Interviews were carried out in England, Wales, and Scotland due to the contacts we were able to generate at the time. We interviewed 22 supporters of farmer mental wellbeing, including ten mental health charities, three healthcare workers, three farmer peer groups, two chaplains, an agricultural organisation, a member of a local council, a local community group member, and one staff member at an auction mart. They were conducted online or on the phone during the months of May and June 2021, which varied in length from 30 to 70 min. They were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were undertaken by three researchers on the project team; interviews were coded both manually and by using NVivo by two co-authors. Analysis for this paper specifically searched the transcript for comments related to young farmers in relation either to drivers or poor wellbeing or help-seeking behaviours.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Factors affecting young farmer mental wellbeing

Respondents to the young farmer survey in NW Ireland were asked to define mental wellbeing and their answers can be grouped into three main themes:

1. *Being happy, content or relaxed* ('being happy in yourself and your surroundings' [farmer], 29 comments).

2. *Having a positive, enjoyable or healthy mindset* ('being able to get out of the bed in the morning to do what you enjoy doing' [farmer], 15 comments).
3. *Having the calmness and resilience to deal with stressful situations* ('being able to deal with the daily ups and downs life throws at us' [farmer], 11 comments).

This survey also asked young farmers if they thought mental wellbeing was an issue amongst their peers in the region, to which 55/59 (93%) said 'Yes'. When asked to describe their daily mental wellbeing, it was clear that not all young farmers in the sample were struggling, since 37/57 of young farmers answered 'good' or 'great' (65%) with 16/57 rating it as 'average' (28%) and just 4/57 (7%) as 'poor'. The statistics are not necessarily contradictory – young farmers in our study and in the survey carried out by the Farm Safety Foundation<sup>6</sup> (2022) could legitimately say that mental well-being is an important issue amongst their peers while not struggling themselves. Some of our interviewees expanded on reasons why they enjoyed farming, and also the quotes around socialisation in section 4 indicate that some enjoy access to supportive social networks. This finding illustrates the danger of making assumptions that mental wellbeing is bad for all farmers, including the younger demographic. In the interviews, several young farmers described how they '*love farming*' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 9) and that it has a positive impact on their mental wellbeing:

When you are up and say you're finished milking and you would be maybe going down on the quad on a nice day and the cows are out grazing, it's a really nice place to be, you would feel very content. (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 3)

I suppose being out in fresh air and out and about is the best thing for mental health. (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 7)

I consider myself very lucky to live here and work here. (Female farmer, UK, interview 6)

I've had bad PTSD from the past and working with animals helps me. (Male farmer, UK, interview 3)

A farmer from Wales positively compared their mental wellbeing on the farm to experiences of working in other professions:

*I am definitely not built for an office job. I like being outside, being around cows, having the peace and quiet.* (Female farmer, UK, interview 1)

A part-time farmer in Ireland agreed and said that 'farming helps reduce ... stress from my electrical business' (Irish farmer survey).

Many of the supporters of farming mental wellbeing in Ireland agreed that it was not a problem for everyone, indeed being 'quite good' (Irish supporter, interview 3) for some. However, one supporter said (interview 4) who worked extensively in the NW Ireland region said 'you never know what's going on behind closed doors'.

In both surveys, we asked about factors affecting young farmer mental wellbeing. In the UK survey, to which 20 and 18 farmers (out of 41) replied they had not reached out for support with their mental wellbeing either before or after the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who had sought support, prominently ranked drivers before the pandemic were (in order from highest to lowest):

1. Illness (including mental illness) – 7
2. Family or relationship issues – 7
3. Financial problems – 7
4. Rural crime – 6
5. Succession – 4

This differed slightly from the top five list of prominently ranked drivers for all 207 farmers across all ages (Rose et al., 2022). Across all farmers, ‘succession problems’ – meaning who was going to inherit or take over the farm – was not ranked in the top five, being replaced by ‘pressure of regulations and government inspections’.

For those who had sought support, prominently ranked drivers during the pandemic were (in order from highest to lowest):

1. Loneliness and social isolation – 9
2. Rural crime – 8
3. Illness (including mental illness) – 6
4. Family or relationship issues – 6
5. ( = ) Succession, post-Brexit uncertainty, media farmer portrayal, financial problems – 4

The changes indicated that loneliness and social isolation created particular problems for young farmers during the pandemic and rural crime also became a bigger driver of poor mental wellbeing. This mid-pandemic ranking was slightly different than for all 207 farmer respondents across all ages (Rose et al., 2022). For all farmers, financial problems and loneliness were ranked equally first, followed by illness, family problems, and rural crime. Succession was only ranked eighth.

In the Irish survey of young farmers, the five most highly ranked factors affecting wellbeing were: workload and time available to socialise off the farm; financial concern; isolation and loneliness (including lack of sexual relationships); family challenges (relationships, childcare, illness); and weather. Several comments noted how individual stressors combined to create multiple challenges at the same time.

In our young farmer interviews in the UK and Ireland, a number of similar and additional factors were raised, as shown in Table 1. To this table, we also add insights gathered from UK and Irish interviews from those people who advise and support young farmers.

Broadly, these factors affecting mental health can be split into four categories, although they overlap:

1. *Farming specific* – animal/crop disease, work performance, regulations, workload, weather.
2. *Social* – illness, loneliness and isolation, relationships, time off the farm, sexism, succession.
3. *Economic* – finances and business performance.
4. *Public engagement* – media negativity and rural crime.

Although research seeking to understand drivers of poor mental wellbeing is gathering pace, Chiswell (2022) argues that finer level detail is still lacking about the prevalence of problems across farming communities, particularly on why some farmers appear to be

**Table 1.** Factors affecting mental health in young farmer interviews and surveys (UK and Ireland). Source: authors' own research.

| Factor (A–Z)                        | Description                                                                             | Sample quote/s                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Animal disease, death, crop failure | Trauma of dealing with loss/crises on the farm                                          | 'sick animals or weather where crops are suffering with a prolonged dry spell or a wet spell and your crops are suffering which will have a negative effect on you.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 4)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Crime                               | Dog attacks, vandalism                                                                  | 'we've had people smashing signs and trees up in fields and a dog attack on sheep. I bought 5 sheep the day before it happened and they've never been the same since. I was in tears, I was that stressed.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 3)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Family illness                      | Caring for family members                                                               | 'I know that grandad is at home too, he is getting on and he struggles and the blood pressure is going up and down.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 1)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Finances                            | Cost of production, poor returns                                                        | 'stress of finances plays a major part.' (Irish farmer survey)<br>'low incomes, long days, lonely, can work 12 hours a day and never have spoken to anyone.' (Irish farmer survey)<br>'poor prices for stock and animal feed.' (Supporter, Ireland, interview 3)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Loneliness                          | Isolation reduces socialising (platonic and sexual relationships)                       | 'working long unsociable hours and not meeting or mixing with people enough.' (Irish farmer survey)<br>'farming can be very isolating, and I think that's a big one.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 11)<br>'there isn't much for them. There's no clubs. You know, if this was in London, you've got the local clubs, you've got the local places. Here, there is nothing.' (Chaplain, UK, interview 6)<br>'very few girls around during the week' (Irish farmer survey)<br>'the socialising they do is really critical for their wellbeing ... if you're a young farmer, they work really hard, but they play really hard.' (Mental health charity, UK, interview 1) |
| Media negativity                    | Criticism of farming on social media and TV/radio/papers                                | 'as more and more social media has become available there's probably quicker access to maybe negative press in the media ... everywhere you look if you go on online, on social media.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 5)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Performance on the farm             | Good days and bad days, mistakes made on farm                                           | 'a time where I bought a stock bull and the stock bull didn't work, that was a tough time.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 4)<br>'when I first entered the industry it was like, Oh, my God, I don't know anything so anytime that you'd maybe get something a little bit wrong, and your boss would have a go at you.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 4)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Regulations                         | Pressure of satisfying and understanding regulations                                    | 'too much pressure to do things by government rules who know nothing of the land.' (Irish farmer survey)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Relationships                       | Strained personal relationships can be difficult, but family/friends offer good support | 'I'm very fortunate to be in a very nice interactive family like we work together, very family based, it always has been a huge point of why I would be very happy on my farm.' (Female farmer, Ireland, interview 2)<br>'we have seen an increase in younger people getting in touch ... wanting to take the farm in a different direction ... but they're coming up against a block with their parents or their father ... to have a younger member of the family to come along and say, 'well, I don't quite agree with that,'                                                                                                                                        |

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** Continued.

| Factor (A–Z)      | Description                                                     | Sample quote/s                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sexism/misogyny   | Women in farming not respected                                  | <p>can always cause difficult relationships between family members and can lead to relationship breakdown essentially as well.’ (Mental health charity, UK, interview 12)</p> <p>‘it’s very much a common factor that would annoy me or impact me would definitely be sexism in our culture, like older men coming to the farm where I have got numerous comments about me being on the farm and not in the kitchen ... if you are female in agriculture, you have to make yourself as strong as the other people around you in there to prove whatever they are able.’ (Female farmer, Ireland, interview 2)</p> <p>‘You also feel degraded, being a woman in agriculture, because you’re just automatically sexualized and told you’re not a real farmer because you wear boots and white jeans when you’re going to feed the cows. Sometimes you can feel sick because you’re sexualized.’ (Female farmer, UK, interview 1)</p> <p>‘they implied that I was sleeping with the boss to try and work my way up or get to use the big toys.’ (Female farmer, UK, interview 5)</p> |
| Succession        | Worries over succession or pressure to take over the farm       | <p>‘there would definitely be a worry for me around succession, as I said my farm is family based which has its pros and cons, so the idea of an easy succession is a major area which I am worried about.’ (Female farmer, Ireland, interview 2)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Time off the farm | Socialising off the farm improves mental health                 | <p>‘taking myself out of the farming environment every so often is definitely [good] and then also being involved in other activities like. You just take your brain away from just thinking about things.’ (Male farmer, UK, interview 9)</p> <p>‘getting time away. And then coming back definitely, you feel a bit more energized and excited to get back into, you know it makes you appreciate what you’ve got. Also you’ve gone away. You’ve done something so you’ve earned it.’ (Male farmer, UK, interview 10)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Weather           | Bad and unpredictable weather stresses the farm, body, and mind | <p>‘constant stress from the weather.’ (Irish farmer survey)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Workload          | Physical stress and reduces socialising off the farm            | <p>‘the long hours take their toll.’ (Irish farmer survey)</p> <p>‘working long unsociable hours and not meeting or mixing with people enough.’ (Irish farmer survey)</p> <p>‘As a mother of young children it’s tough getting jobs done on the farm.’ (Irish farmer survey)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

affected more than others. Recent studies have begun to explore the variations in levels of mental wellbeing between different types of farmers (e.g. by age, gender, enterprise), as well as how drivers themselves might vary (Miller & Rudolph, 2022; Rudolph & Barnes, 2020; Wheeler & Lobley, 2022). While all of the factors outlined in Table 1 have been identified before as driving factors in previous literature (see reviews by et al., 2019; Younker & Radunovich, 2022), there is limited research specifically on why – and the extent to which – individual factors (which readily combine to create multiple stressors) affect young farmers specifically.

Our research highlights the particular importance of socialising (described as ‘critically’ important in our study) to young farmers and the value of spending time off the

farm. We know that this demographic in the UK had reported a higher negative impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on their mental health (Rose et al., 2022). Socialising is made difficult by intense workloads, the struggle to make money, and the challenge of either feeling forced to take over the farm or struggling to become established in the industry for those without farming backgrounds. It is also challenged by geographical isolation, which further reduces time for building platonic and sexual relationships that are so important for young people. Our research further notes the impact of sexism and misogyny faced by some women in farming, although it should be noted that we only spoke to four female farmers. There were different manifestations of this problem noted by three female farmers; on the one hand, misogynistic comments about appearance and relationships, and on the other hand, sexism relating to the stereotype that women may not be seen as being as strong as men and therefore had to work harder to give the appearance of strength (even in the midst of having additional non-farming responsibilities).

#### 4.2. Accessing support

Various sources of support were identified by the participants in our studies, including professional help (i.e. GPs, mental health nurses, counsellors and psychiatrists), mental health charities, family, friends, and farmer groups, particularly young farmers clubs. Our data collection instruments noted a number of different factors affecting the help-seeking behaviour of young farmers. Table 2 provides an overview of the factors collected from our farmer/supporter interviews and surveys; again factors are interlinked (e.g. stigma being affected by stoicism). By far the most prominently discussed theme was the stigma around seeking support for mental wellbeing, particularly (but not exclusively) for young male farmers.

The factors listed in Table 2 have been identified before in previous literature on farmer help-seeking behaviour. Previous research has identified lack of awareness and accessibility of support as key factors (Hagen et al., 2021), the importance of support from family and friends (Furey et al., 2016; Knook et al., 2023; Nye et al., 2022), and the value of offering support that is less 'clinical' in nature, more informally framed, and digitally for younger generations (Cole & Bondy, 2020; Fergie et al., 2016; Holton et al., 2023; Malaztky et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2017). Research has also identified the role of stigma and stoicism in reducing help-seeking, especially within communities where there are high levels of social connectedness (Philo et al., 2017; Philo & Parr, 2004; Roy et al., 2017). Our research suggests that stigma might especially affect farming men, which has been noted previously (Hammersley et al., 2023; Herron et al., 2020), but the influence of the macho stereotype clearly affects both genders. As noted above when highlighting the issue of sexism, a female farmer in Ireland (interview 2) said in our study:

There is a stigma to it. I think when you look, especially if you bring this into young farmers ... [there] will be a high percentage of males where mental health has always been an issue ... [but] the male gender being able to talk or ask for help [is more difficult] ... if you are female in agriculture, you have to make yourself as strong as the other people around you.

The literature gives mixed views about whether young people (and young farmers) are better or worse at seeking help for their mental health, although much literature seems

**Table 2.** Factors (and possible solutions) influencing the help-seeking behaviour of young farmers. Source: authors' own research [all data sources].

| Factor (A–Z)           | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Quote/s                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Suggested solutions<br>(many common solutions for multiple factors)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accessibility          | Extent to which support services are available and accessible in rural locations (when time is poor)                                                                                                                                                                                          | 'being very rural locations, so maybe for those farmers, if it was an in-person support they were looking for, yes, potentially they might not be nearby for them.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 10)                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | More investment in local support services. Investing in forms of support that do not require travel and that young people use, e.g. text, digital.<br>'We also offer counselling by text message. It's not our preferred option, but for some people, particularly amongst the younger farmers, text is their preferred way.' (Mental health charity, UK, interview 5)<br>'if it's something over the phone ... , then their location shouldn't really impact.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 10)<br>'our biggest challenge will be engaging with maybe a younger demographic ... Younger people might not be too keen on picking up the phone.' (Mental health charity, UK, interview 12) |
| Awareness              | Level of knowledge about where to go for support. Our survey conducted in NW Ireland asked young farmers if they were aware of mental health services available to them. The responses provided, with 28/59 (47.5%) answering 'No' and 31/59 (52.5%) saying 'Yes', shows a fairly even split. | 'Apart from the GP, I wouldn't know where you could go. I am sure you could google it but I wouldn't be confident enough to say I would know where you could go.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 4)<br>'I think most people have definitely that level of understanding about it. I think that most people can find a number fairly fast like that if you have to get on to someone.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 10) | Normalising conversations, advertising around the issue of mental wellbeing.<br>'I recommend the farm office there should be like a poster.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 2)<br>'I think when I was in college they did quite a few talks over the two years.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 4)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Informality of support | Farmers may be more likely to access wellbeing support that does not specifically talk the language of wellbeing and mental health. Young farmer clubs were commonly identified.                                                                                                              | 'I think if there was any support service focused at young farmers it would need to be very informal. I wouldn't even use the word mental health in the title as you would be less likely to get people to buy in.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 3)                                                                                                                                                                      | Offer support in places where farmers are and make it less overtly focused on mental wellbeing.<br>'I think if you were hosting events, it would have to be like social events masquerading as farmer mental health where you would need to hide your aim. A lot of farmers wouldn't buy in if they knew it was on mental health.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 3)<br>'starting on the ground, I suppose meeting young farmers in settings that they will be going ... so that will be that agricultural shows, ploughing matches, livestock marts, livestock shows.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 6)                                                                                 |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

| Factor (A–Z)               | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Quote/s                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Suggested solutions<br>(many common solutions for multiple factors)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stigma and confidentiality | Concerns about showing weakness and local people knowing you are struggling<br>Our survey in NW Ireland asked young farmers whether they were confident in talking about the topic of mental wellbeing, with 26/59 (44%) saying 'No' and 33/59 (56%) saying 'Yes. When asked if they thought it would be difficult to approach support services, 11/58 said 'No' (19%) and 47/58 said 'Yes' (81%). | '[young farmers are] self-hypnotised in terms of their own attitudes towards mental health and they may think that if I go to that talk on mental health what will everyone think.' (Supporter, Ireland, interview 7)<br>'How confidential is it? Who would know that I'm doing it? It's definitely a thing of who's looking over your shoulder? You wouldn't want anyone else knowing that you were looking for support. And also the main thing would be how do I do it in such a way that it disappears after I've done it. No trace.' (Female farmer, Ireland, interview 2) | Normalise conversations around mental wellbeing, not a sign of weakness. Emphasise confidentiality and offer ways this can feel more guaranteed (text over voice calls).<br>'they have a couple of days in the year where they'll have a lecture on mental health, but it's the case of 'ah no, we're not going to be driving tractors'. It's young lads. Bravado. I think if there was more of a push from people or companies ... if all the tractor lads are promoting this mental health, it can't be too bad to go and talk about it.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 11)<br>'What if they tell Dad, or what if they tell someone about what I just said, even though they maintain secrecy and confidentiality, you still have our shit? Well, you know them. What if I see them down the mart next week, and they might think different of me? So they've got a texting service, [which] is anonymous.' (Female farmer, UK, interview 1) |
| Stoicism                   | Stereotype of 'strong' farmers who must overcome struggles without showing weakness                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 'Young farmers are survivors, they are used to doing things on their own without help on the farm so they may not be willing to take help with other parts of their life also.' (Irish farmer survey)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Normalising conversations around struggle, not a sign of weakness.<br>'I think more focus in agricultural colleges, maybe more focus in universities.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 8)<br>'Suggest it was more talked about in things farmers read like farmers journal.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 1)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Trust                      | Farmers may be more likely to speak to people they trust, such as family and friends (if relationships are strong and open)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 'I would say family, because I think it's a safer kind of environment. And they're not going to go out with and tell people.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 10)<br>'I'm not so good at reaching out to my parents, and my friends ... my sister's got bit of mental trouble as well. When my parents deal with her almost every day, I think the last thing they need is their other child going 'Ooh! I can't do it' ... But I am quite good at reaching out to the professional help.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 2)                                                           | Normalisation of conversations around mental wellbeing in families and friendship groups.<br>'normalising those conversations.' (Male farmer, UK, interview 8)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Understanding of farming | Farmers may be more likely to speak to people who they think understand what they do and how they might feel. Also, public perception of farming could be improved. | <p>'Being able to see someone who understands the nature and challenges of the job.' (UK farmer survey)</p> <p>'I know agriculture only forms a small part of the workforce and a lot of people wouldn't have a good understanding of it and you could like I'd be thinking myself I was to ring up here now they would have a clue what I was talking about.' (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 1)</p> | <p>Sharing problems with like-minded peers.</p> <p>'going to a discussion group and you're talking to another farmer and he's going through the same problems as you might think you're fighting a battle on your own but if you be talking to another farmer more than likely he is fighting the same battle as you'. (Supporter, Ireland, interview 5)</p> <p>Public education.</p> <p>'A society that isn't out to constantly bash farmers down.' (UK farmer survey)</p> |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

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to suggest that younger adults may struggle most in seeking help (RABI, 2021) We heard from supporters of farmer mental wellbeing who thought that younger farmers were better at seeking help, although perhaps these are views based on helping young farmers who self-refer to them without necessarily speaking about the wider demographic who might not do so.

The younger generation are much better than the older generation. I think that's a universal factor in about acknowledging mental health issues ... they're much better about talking about their mental health. (Chaplain, UK, interview 3)

I think the young are better at coming forward, so ... it might be that it's stigma or that it's just more normal to be looking into those sorts of things. (NHS worker, UK, interview 8)

[T]here's been a few polls conducted, like the Scottish Association of Young Farmers, and they found there was a high percentage of young farmers coming through who are more open and believe that talking about mental health is a way to reduce the stigma, so we're maybe going to see a generational change over the next ten or so years about being a bit more open to talk about it. (Mental health charity, UK, interview 12)

Another thought that mental wellbeing was a more 'accepted terminology' (Mental health charity, UK, interview 22) amongst the young generation.

Two young farmers in interview complicated this view, however, echoing the conclusions of the RABI study (2021) which found that the youngest age groups were less likely to reach out for support:

[M]ental health in general, has always been quite taboo. A lot of people find it hard, and I don't want to stereotype a demographic here, but men tend to be like 'suck it up'. But in the last couple of years, like there is more of an acceptability to put your hand up and say I'm having a problem, but it wasn't always like that, and it's still not like that in a lot of places. (Male farmer, Ireland, interview 11)

It's seen as like a bit of a weakness, and I think it's still seen as a weakness, even though we're all aware of it now. A lot of people are aware of it. I think it's still seen as if you admitted you've got a bit of a problem people ... would look down on them. (Male farmer, UK, interview 7)

These quotes show that the stigma of help-seeking around mental wellbeing still affects young farmers. Our research illustrates that the landscapes of support for young farmer wellbeing will need to be diverse. Whilst young farmers tended to prefer to share problems informally with family and friends, as well as peers in informal social settings, this was not a route open to respondents who felt unable to share problems with those close to them. Some young farmers said that they benefited more from professional help. This finding strengthens calls for everyone who comes into contact with farmers – managers and colleagues on the farm, advisors, buyers, inspectors, the community, education settings – to do their 'bit' to support mental-wellbeing by normalising conversations and improving awareness.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

A specific focus on the mental wellbeing of young farmers has thus far been lacking from the literature. Our paper indicates that many of the driving factors for poor mental wellbeing identified in the wider literature hold relevance in the context of young farmers.

Furthermore, our findings on the mixed picture of farmer mental wellbeing, with some individuals struggling more than others who enjoy farming, are mirrored elsewhere in surveys across farming demographics. However, our focus on young farmer mental wellbeing particularly highlights the prominence of the impact of socialisation and time off the farm (or lack thereof) on the mental wellbeing of this demographic. Although we spoke to relatively few young female farmers, our research also suggests that the impact of different forms of sexism and misogyny is likely to be impacting the mental wellbeing of others outside of this study. Our UK survey also indicated that succession concerns may affect mental wellbeing of young farmers more than other age groups. Our findings reinforce recent calls for further research into the impact of the combination of multiple stressors on farmer mental wellbeing and how these are distributed across different types of farmers (Chiswell, 2022; Rose et al., 2022; Wheeler & Lobley, 2023). We know that different types of farmers – young/old, male/female, arable/livestock, etc. – face varying pressures that affect mental wellbeing. However, we need further research into understanding how the stacking of different demographics and situations affects mental wellbeing and which combination might make someone particularly vulnerable; for example, how do the drivers of, and risk for, poor mental wellbeing differ between a young, female, livestock farmer as compared to an old, male, arable farmer?

On the subject of help-seeking behaviour and the accessibility of support for poor mental wellbeing, we too noted some similarity in factors as identified in the wider literature, with stigma featuring prominently as a major barrier to gaining support. Our findings allowed us to reflect on whether younger farmers may be more or less affected by stigma, with mixed conclusions drawn from previous literature (RABI, 2021; Vayro et al., 2022). Whilst conversations about mental wellbeing may be more prominent than before in young farmer clubs and other social settings, our research indicated that stigma is still a primary factor affecting the ability of some young farmers to seek support. Further research is required to understand whether and how help-seeking is changing amongst the young demographic. Our research also reinforced conclusions in previous literature that informal social settings may be the best place to provide support to young farmers (e.g. Young Farmers Clubs), but professional support is still required, especially for those who feel that they cannot open up to friends, peers, and family. Our results further indicated that digital tools to support mental wellbeing could also be useful for young farmers in particular, and learnings from the literature on digital self-care (Holton et al., 2023) will therefore be useful to take forward in terms of how young farmers are engaging with social media. Academic studies of interventions to improve mental wellbeing for young farmers could test the efficacy of various methods of engagement, centring on variables like format (e.g. digital, paper), location (in-person, digital, young farmers clubs, colleges/universities, workplace), and who delivers it (e.g. peers, medical professionals).

Our recommendations to improve the accessibility and acceptability of support for mental wellbeing are rooted in the suggestions made by young farmers themselves. It is not just a case of improving the availability of support services in remote rural locations, increasing the farming knowledge of professional supporters, and equipping all individuals who come into contact with farmers with the skills needed to spot signs of distress and signpost towards support. Whilst all of these actions are important, further normalising conversations around poor mental wellbeing in all of the spaces

that young farmers occupy (schools, colleges, universities, workplaces, social settings) is vital. The root causes of poor farming mental health also need to be tackled. Normalisation may not always overtly take the form of support for mental wellbeing. Young farmers in our study argued for mental wellbeing support that masquerades as something less intrusive or scary; for example, social activities and discussion groups where farmers may be encouraged to open up or reflect on how they are feeling without the pressure of talking specifically about mental wellbeing. These actions also require assistance from a wide range of people who engage young farmers, therefore emphasising the need for farming support organisations (especially peer groups) to work in and beyond traditional farming settings and to embrace digital technologies as a means of complementing face-to-face support.

## Notes

1. <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/new-training-to-support-young-farmers-mental-health/>.
2. <https://www.yellowwellies.org/welcome-to-the-6th-annual-mind-your-head-week/>.
3. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/602006/IPOL\\_STU\(2017\)602006\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/602006/IPOL_STU(2017)602006_EN.pdf).
4. Ireland is predominantly a grass-based farming industry (84% of agricultural area is grass, 9% common and rough grazing) and so our interviewees covered various enterprises within the livestock sector. In Ireland 13% of farm holders are women. Around 55% of the farm workforce in the UK are women, although only 16% are registered farm holders (<https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/let-s-value-every-player-on-the-bench/>).
5. <https://www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Support-Groups-directory-2021-spreads-1.pdf>.
6. <https://www.yellowwellies.org/welcome-to-the-6th-annual-mind-your-head-week/>.

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## Data availability statement

Interview data is not available due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed and possibility to identify respondents. Survey data from Ireland is not available as there were no resources to anonymise and archive it. Anonymised survey data from the UK is available at <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/855791/>.

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## **The mental wellbeing of young farmers in Ireland and the UK: driving factors, help-seeking, and support**

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