

# The Big Farming Survey

The health and wellbeing of the  
farming community in England and  
Wales in the 2020s

# About RABI

The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution – RABI – is a national charity that provides local support to the farming community across England and Wales. Established in 1860, we have offered guidance, financial support and practical care to farming people of all ages for generations.

## Our Vision

No member of the farming community should have to face adversity alone.



## Our Mission

We exist to provide guidance, practical care and financial support to those in need within the farming community.

# Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Foreword   | 2  |
| Introduction   | 3  |
| The farming community: mental health and wellbeing     | 4  |
| Mental health and wellbeing: age and gender            | 6  |
| Sources of stress amongst the farming community        | 8  |
| The farming community: physical health                 | 10 |
| The future of farming businesses                       | 12 |
| What next: creating a better future for farming people | 14 |
| Endnotes   | 16 |
| Methodology  | 16 |
| Acknowledgements                                       | 16 |



**Published by:** The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution  
**Published:** October 2021

## Foreword

---



We are living through a period of profound change. Uncertainties brought about by a once in a generation change to farming policy, coupled with the multitude of inherent challenges farming people face, have the potential to impact even the most robust of us.

It is perhaps seen as an inevitable truth that these challenges must have resulted in widespread issues for our community. Concerns regarding levels of poor physical and mental health and the effects on farming families and businesses echo across our sector. However, what we have never had is the evidence that sets out the scale of the issues we are facing.

This report, and the research behind it, is RABI's contribution to refreshing the discussion about farming people's futures. We hope the evidence contained within it will help to spur debate and drive forward action. We believe that needs to start now.

These findings represent the testimony of over fifteen thousand farmers, farm workers, contractors and their households. The depth and breadth of the matters outlined suggest that many of these issues have been hiding in plain sight.

The conclusions raised will surprise few who work in and around agriculture. They should, however, be of concern to all. As an accurate reflection of farming people's experiences, thoughts, and feelings, they act as a wake-up call to all who want to help build a better future for the farming community.

The poor experiences described in this report cannot and must not continue. Farming people matter. We owe it to every one of them to use this evidence to increase awareness of the issues raised and take action. We now have a unique opportunity to build on the existing resilience and optimism of farming people, which is also evident in this report.

I am immensely proud to be the president of RABI during this time of change. Our farming communities will require our backing more than ever over the coming months and years. At RABI we are committed to ensuring farming people across England and Wales have access to the services and tools they need to build resilience and empower them to move forward.



**HRH The Duke of Gloucester**

# Introduction

## Farming people in 2021

Farming people matter. DEFRA estimates that 472,000 people work in commercial agriculture across the UK, including farmers, farm workers and their households. Working across an estimated 219,000 holdings, almost half of which are under 20 hectares, farming people are responsible for 71% of UK land<sup>1</sup>.

Farming people often work for modest financial rewards. A recent DEFRA report estimates that over a fifth of farming businesses lost money in 2019/20. Indicators paint a picture of decline: the amount of land farmed is decreasing, as are livestock numbers. A shrinking – and ageing – workforce, falling productivity and falling output echo this decline.

For farming people – farmers, farm workers, contractors, and their households – their health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to the business of

farming. They face challenging, isolated conditions characterised by long working hours. Farming people work in a sector with a rate of accidents 20 times higher than the all-industry rate<sup>2</sup>. In addition, farmers and farm workers can often face physical health challenges: musculoskeletal injury, for example, is over three times the rate for all industries. More than one farmer a week takes their own life. Less visible are high rates of mental ill-health and poor quality of life.

Against this background, farming businesses must now plan for the most significant changes in policy and support for generations. The phasing out of the Basic Payments Scheme represents a fundamental shift in farming support policy and, imminently, the incomes and lives of farming households. A changing climate and shifting food preferences present longer-term challenges in a period already disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### The agricultural community in England and Wales, 2020

**Regular employees, salaried managers and casual workers – 171,500**

**Farmers, business partners, directors and spouses (PT) – 153,500**

**Farmers, business partners, directors and spouses (FT) – 147,000**

## This report

This report is about farming people: their health and wellbeing; their work and business; their hopes and fears; and their future. RABI commissioned the research supporting this publication to understand better how farming people are faring and how the farming business impacts their health and wellbeing. This report begins to tell the story of

a much bigger, more detailed picture of farming people in England and Wales in the 2020s. It is a picture that varies by farm size and type, age and gender. It raises as many questions as answers, and we will explore these in more detail in the coming months as we respond to the report’s findings.

# The farming community: mental health and wellbeing

## What do we mean by mental health and wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing describes our ability to cope with the ups and downs of everyday life. Poor mental wellbeing can make it harder for people to cope with daily life or to work productively<sup>3</sup>. Long periods of low mental wellbeing can lead to poor mental health, characterised by diagnosable conditions such as anxiety or depression.

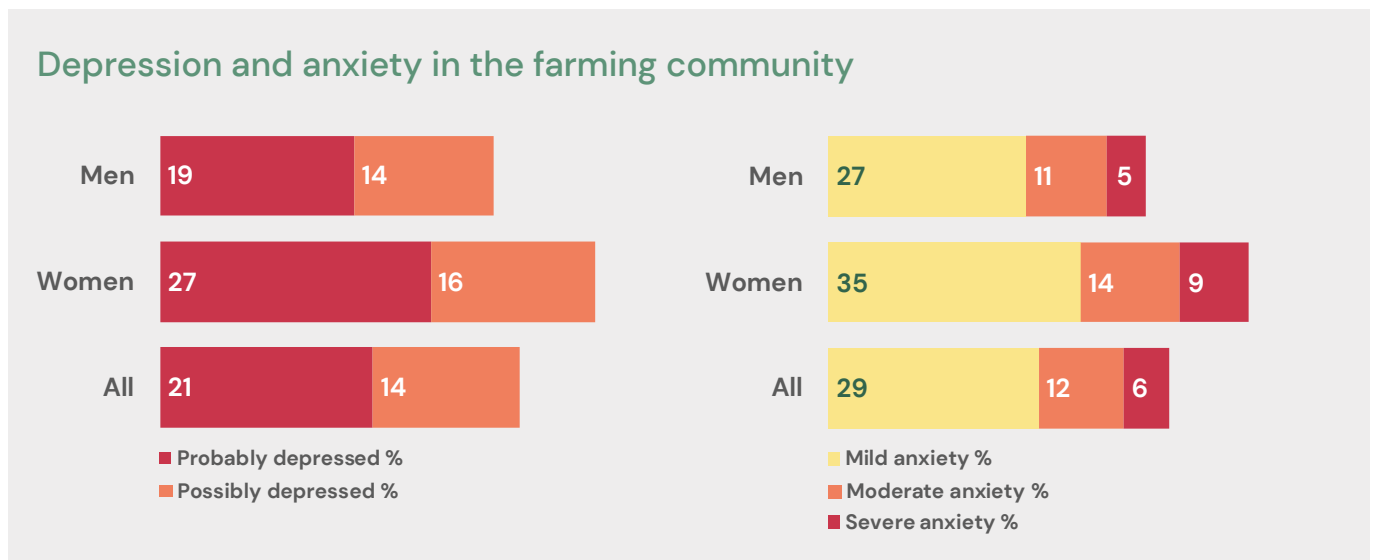
## Poor mental wellbeing affects many in the farming community...

The internationally recognised Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale enables us to measure mental wellbeing. Using this scale, the farming community has a lower average mental wellbeing than the UK population, although estimates for the wider population predate the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>4</sup>.

## ...with over one-third of the community likely to be possibly or probably depressed

Based upon widely recognised thresholds in the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, over a third of respondents (36%) have mental wellbeing scores that are sufficiently low to cause concern.

15% of respondents are possibly depressed. Over one in five (21%) are probably depressed, based upon threshold points used by the NHS.



## Almost one-half of the farming community are experiencing anxiety

Using a different scale to measure anxiety, the General Anxiety Disorder 7-scale, our data indicates that almost half of the farming community (47%) are experiencing some form of anxiety<sup>5</sup>. Of particular concern is that a substantial

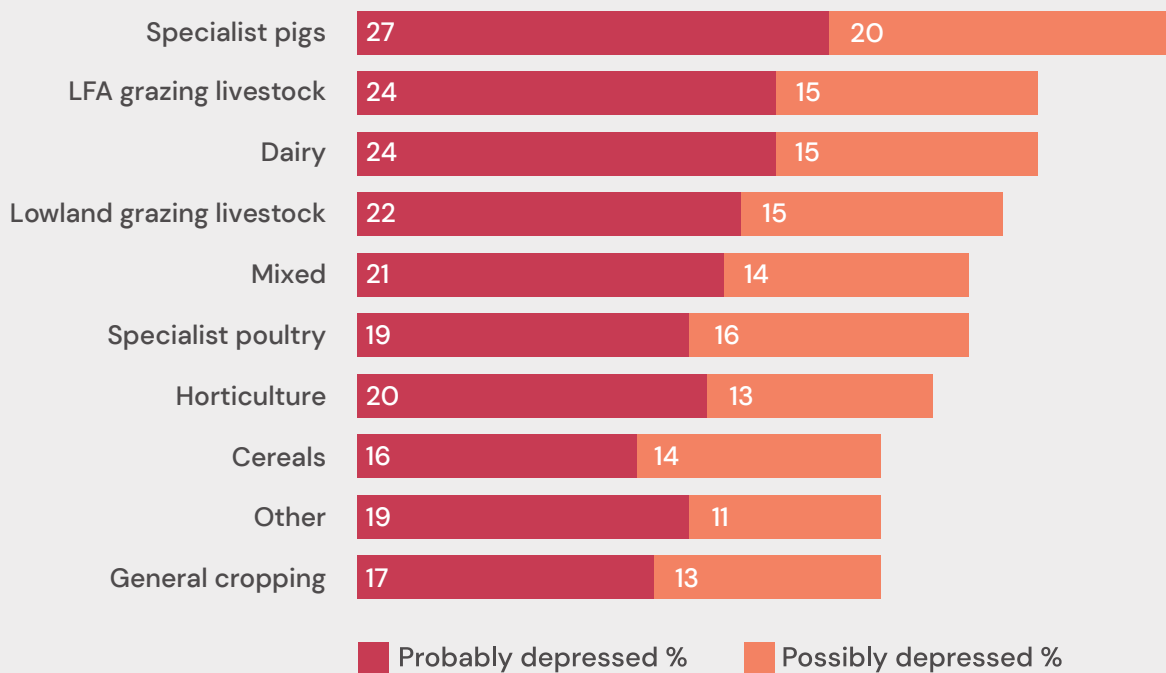
minority of farming people are experiencing either moderate (12%) or severe anxiety (6%). Our analysis indicates that greater levels of anxiety and lower levels of mental wellbeing are related.

## Mental health is a particular problem amongst some sectors of the farming community...

There is a relationship between people’s mental health and the sector of farming they are involved in. The farming community is most likely to report poor mental health in four sectors of agriculture: specialist pigs, dairy, Less Favoured Areas (LFA) grazing livestock and lowland grazing livestock. People working in these farm types are more

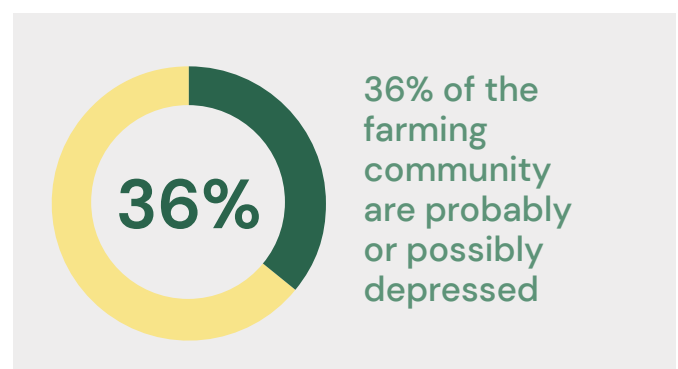
likely to be possibly or probably depressed. For three of these farm types – specialist pigs, dairy, and LFA grazing livestock – farming people are more likely to experience moderate or severe anxiety. Farm type also appears to be a stronger predictor of depression for men.

### Depression rates across different farming sectors



### ...but less so for other farming sectors

More positively, the prevalence of depression and anxiety is lower in some types of farming. Over two-thirds of those working in cereals, general cropping (both 70%) and horticulture (67%) are likely not experiencing depression. People farming in these areas are also less likely to experience moderate or severe anxiety.



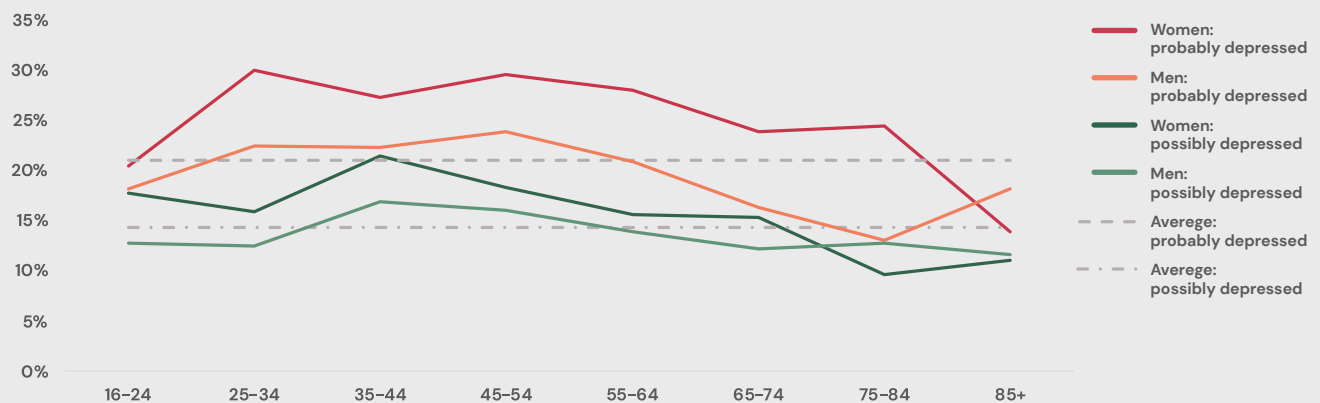
# Mental health and wellbeing: age and gender

## Mental health and wellbeing amongst women in the farming community is a cause for substantial concern...

Evidence for the wider population suggests that women are more likely than men to experience poor mental health and wellbeing. Amongst the farming community, these differences are starker. Levels of mental wellbeing are lower, while levels of anxiety are higher. The data suggests that 43% of women are possibly or probably depressed,

compared with 33% of men. In addition, over one-half of women (58%) experience mild, moderate or severe anxiety, compared to 44% of men. After controlling for other factors, our analysis indicates that gender is a significant contributing factor to poor mental health and wellbeing.

Depression amongst men and women, by age

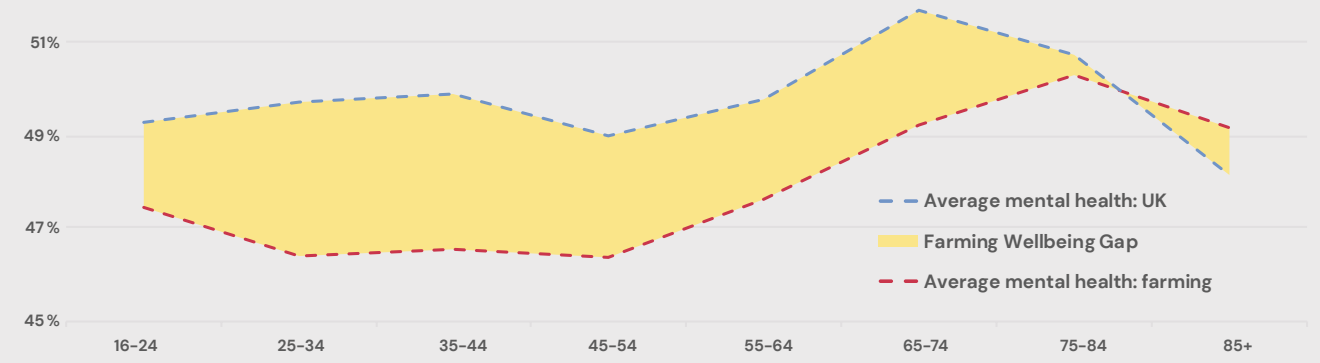


## ...while mental health and wellbeing during working age are relatively poor

Working-age farming people – those aged 16–64 – also experience lower levels of mental wellbeing and higher levels of anxiety, in this case when contrasted with those over 65. When

we compare average wellbeing scores with the broader population, there is a farming mental wellbeing gap that is widest in early working life.

Average mental health in the UK population and farming community





## Gender reinforces the working life mental wellbeing penalty

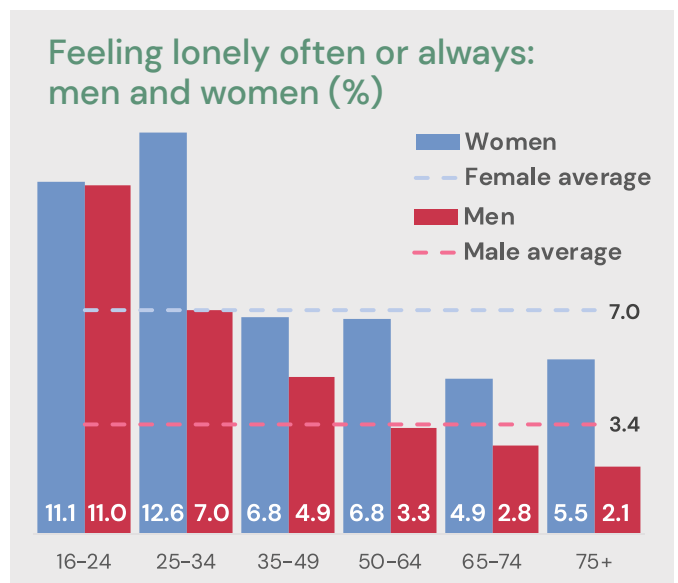
In turn, working age intersects with gender: farming women between the ages of 25 and 54 are particularly at risk of low mental wellbeing. Almost one-half of women in these age groups (48%) are possibly or probably depressed.

Similarly, over two-thirds of women (69%) between the ages of 25 and 44 experience some level of anxiety. This last group – women in the 25–44 age group – is a particular cause for concern.

## Young farming people are more likely to feel lonely..

Despite well-established concerns about loneliness across the farming community, our data indicates that people experience similar levels of loneliness to the broader UK population. One in four farming people occasionally feel lonely, with 14% sometimes and 4% often or always lonely.

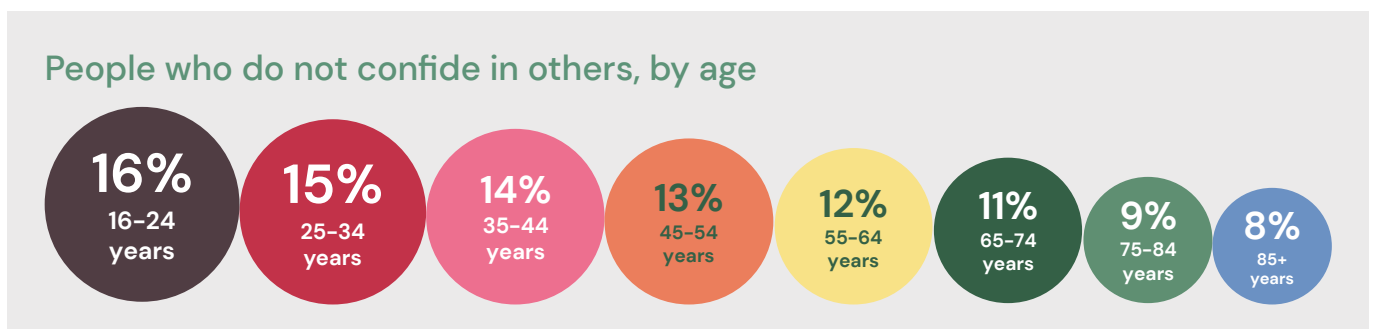
Feelings of being often or always lonely are most prominent in younger age groups. One in ten men and women in the 16–24 age group report feeling lonely often or always. For women, this proportion rises to 13% amongst 25–34 year-olds – the age group most likely to experience some level of anxiety. For the UK population, women are more likely than men to report feeling lonely, but the gap between men and women is more prominent in the farming community.



## ...and are less likely to confide in others

The challenges and problems of everyday life are more manageable when we can confide in others. The vast majority of people (88%) can speak to someone, whether family, friends, a health professional or another source of support. Younger farming people still confide in family, but friends play a more important role than for

those in older age groups. Worryingly, younger age groups are more likely to say that they do not confide in anyone, preferring to keep things to themselves. 16% of 16–24 year-olds do not confide in anyone, choosing to keep things to themselves.



# Sources of stress amongst the farming community

## Farming is a difficult and demanding activity

In their own words, the farming community describe farming as 'challenging' and 'hard', with 'stress' also widely used to describe farming life. Four factors are widely cited as significant by the farming community, causing stress to quite a lot or a large extent: regulation, compliance

and inspection (45%), the Covid-19 pandemic (44%), bad or unpredictable weather (43%) and loss of subsidies/future trade deals (40%). At the low end of the scale, 15% cite the risk of injury or accident as a cause of stress, despite relatively high levels of reported injury in the farming sector.

### Causes of stress amongst farming people (%)



## Several factors combine to cause stress in farming communities

A combination of different factors often drives stress in the farming community. On average, farming people cite six factors causing them stress to quite a lot or a large extent. Women cite more than the average number (6.7 factors), men cite less than the average number (5.6). Both men and women cite the Covid-19 pandemic and unpredictable weather amongst their three most significant stress factors. Women additionally cite the loss of subsidies/future trade deals, while men cite regulation, compliance, and inspection.



An average of six factors cause stress across the farming community

## Stress and anxiety are linked...

Farming people experiencing moderate or severe anxiety report a greater average number of factors (9.4 factors) causing significant stress. For the same people, concern about the future of the farm or farming is the most widely cited significant source of stress. Financial pressures are also widely cited by this group.

## ...but leisure time away from farming may not be an option for some

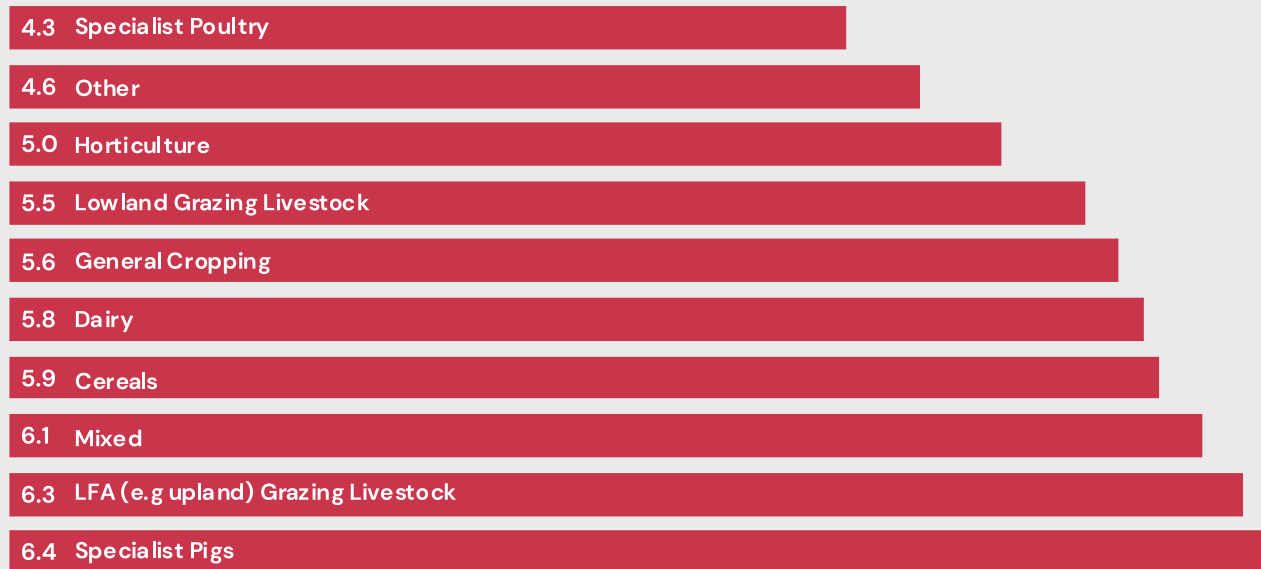
Leisure time away from work is an essential buffer from work-related stress. Our analysis suggests that taking time away from the farm improves mental wellbeing and reduces anxiety. Although 45% of respondents said they did, on average, leave the farm for leisure purposes at least once a week, almost a third (29%) hardly ever or never leave the farm.

## Stress factors vary significantly between different farm sectors

The number and causes of stress vary across different farm sectors. The number of significant sources of stress reported by different types of farm ranges from 4.3 factors in specialist poultry farms – the lowest number – to over six factors for LFA grazing livestock and specialist pig farming communities, the highest. The cereals and mixed sectors also report a higher-than-average number of stress factors.

The most important sources of stress also vary. For pig, dairy and mixed farming people, regulation is their most significant stressor. The Covid-19 pandemic is the most important stressor for horticulture, poultry and lowland grazing farming people. Other top stressors include weather (general cropping), subsidies and trade (LFA grazing livestock) and rural crime (cereals).

### Average number of stress factors, by farming sector



## Stress has an impact on the home and work lives of farming people...

In addition to the links between stress and anxiety, farming people report that stress impacts their home lives in particular. One in five farming people (21%) believe stress affects their ability to relax, while 15% cite an impact on relationships with family and friends. When stress affects working life, it is most likely to affect the enjoyment of farming rather than the quality of work people undertake.

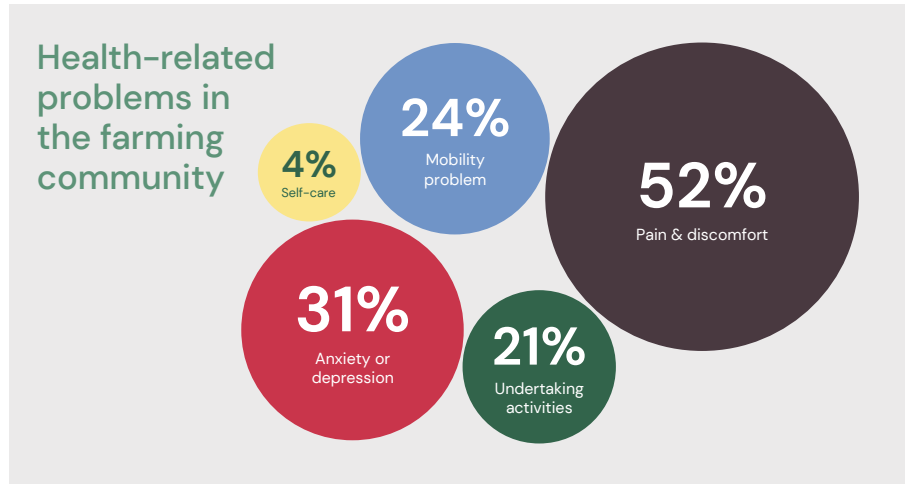
## ...and on the health of their farming businesses

For the people who run farming businesses, there is a strong association between the health of their business and their mental wellbeing and anxiety. Those who believe the prospects for their farming business are poor are more likely to be suffering from poor mental wellbeing and anxiety. Those who perceive the external environment to be more challenging for their farming business are more likely to be probably depressed.

# The farming community: physical health

## What do we mean by physical health?

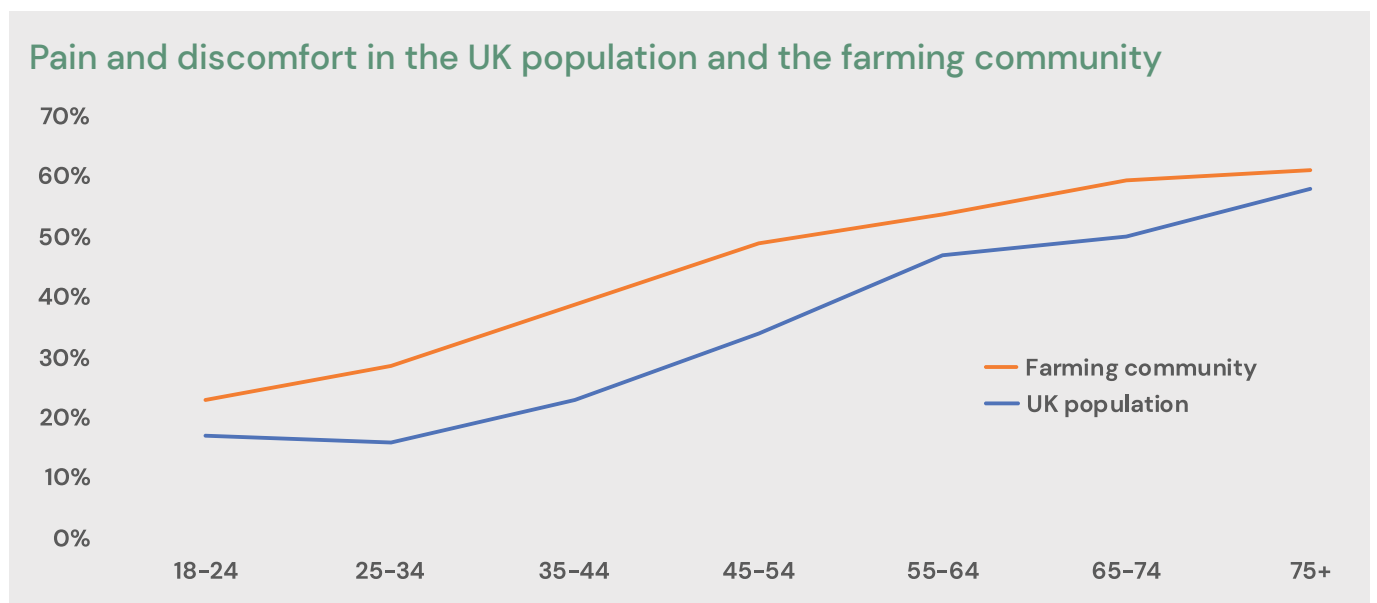
The World Health Organisation describes health as the basis for everyday life, a state that is more than the absence of disease or infirmity. Good physical health involves pursuing a healthy lifestyle, including minimising hazards in the workplace – an important issue for the farming community.



## The farming community is in relatively poor physical health...

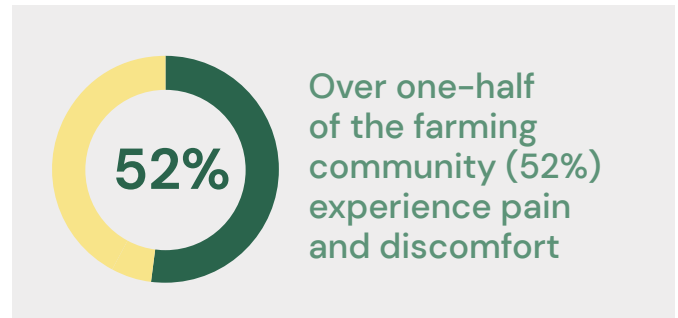
Using the internationally recognised EQ-5D family of measures, we can describe and rate physical health across five dimensions: mobility, self-care, usual activities, pain/discomfort, and anxiety/depression<sup>6</sup>. These measures indicate that the farming community is in relatively poor physical health. The farming community is older relative to the UK population, so physical ill-health is unsurprising. However, the prevalence of ill-health is unsettling, as is its effect on the lives of farming people.

Over one-half of the farming community (52%) experience pain and discomfort. One in four farming people (24%) have a mobility problem, such as walking about, while one in five (21%) experience some form of problem undertaking their usual activities. A small proportion of the farming community (4%) experience problems washing or dressing. This measure of health corroborates concerns around the extent of anxiety and depression amongst the farming community.



## ...with pain and discomfort widespread amongst working-age farming people

Farming people of all ages are likely to report pain and discomfort compared to the general population. This gap is widest during working age: there is a 16-percentage point gap between the farming community and the national average for those in the 35-44 age group.



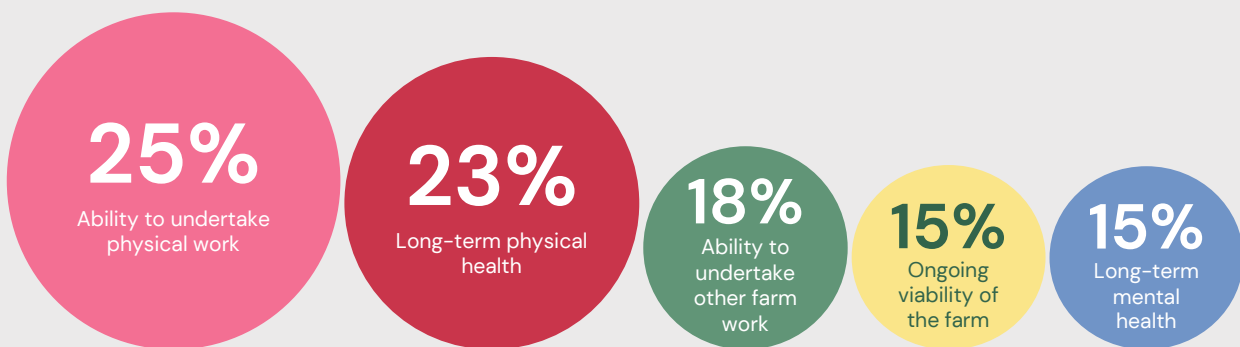
## Farm work has an impact on physical and mental health

The impacts of physical ill-health on the farming community are wide-ranging and a cause for concern beyond those living with poor physical health. Farm work appears to be a significant cause: 16% report the experience of a non-fatal injury at work. Men in the 25-34 age group appear particularly at risk, with 25% reporting injury at work. In addition, two-thirds of farming people (64%) have experienced work or farm-related pain in their

muscles or joints over the last five years. Other farming work-related problems include respiratory problems (13%) and general ill-health (9%).

Large numbers of farming people are likely to know others who have experienced an injury. Distressingly, almost one in five in the farming community (19%) report that they know someone who has attempted to take their own life.

### The impact of health issues experienced in the last five years



## Poor recent physical health has a longer-term impact

One in four people (25%) believe that ill health has affected their ability to undertake physical farming work, either somewhat, quite a lot, or to a large extent, in the last five years. A fifth of farming people

(18%) believe ill health has impacted their ability to undertake other farming work either somewhat, quite a lot, or to a large extent, in the last five years.

# The future of farming businesses

## An uncertain future for household incomes...

Many farming people are worried about the future of farming, and for some, that uncertain future is a source of stress and anxiety. Some of this relates to uncertainty around the sustainability of their farming business and their livelihoods. Farming

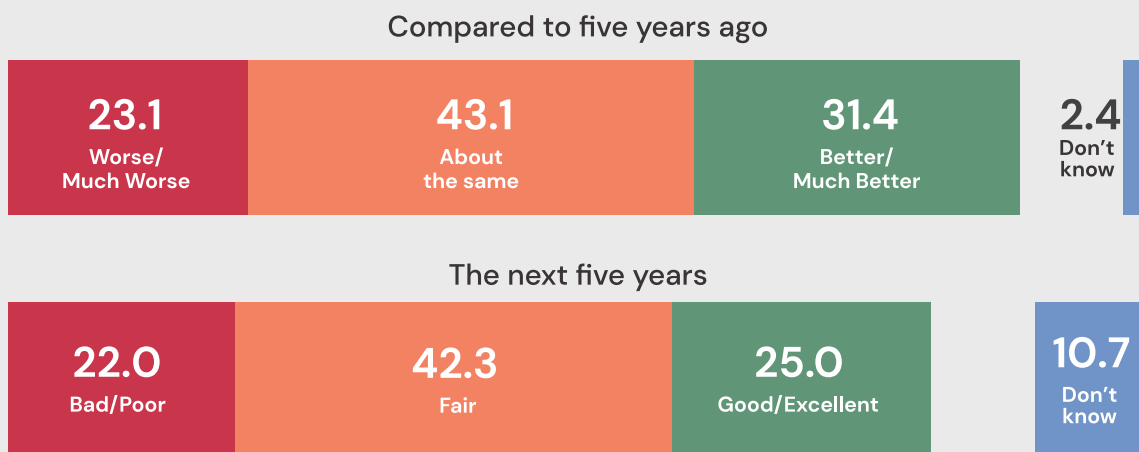
people remain heavily dependent upon income from agriculture. Almost one-half of farming people are in a household where 75–100% of their income is from agriculture, including Basic Payment Scheme and environmental scheme payments.

## ...though a substantial minority remain optimistic about their farming business

The perceptions of people working in the farming business as to whether things have got better, worse, or stayed the same are mixed. These perceptions of past performance appear to shape sentiment about the future. The biggest group of farming people (43%) think the performance of their farm business is about the same as five years ago. A similar proportion (42%) believe that prospects are fair for the next five years.

Amongst those expressing more robust views, almost a quarter (23%) think things have got worse. A similar proportion (22%) are worried that prospects for their farming business are poor or bad. At the other end of the spectrum, 31% think performance has improved, while 25% are optimistic about the future. These figures indicate a small, positive net sentiment about the future of farming, though one in ten are uncertain enough to say that they don't know.

### Business sentiment: comparing now with five years ago and five years ahead (%)



## A large majority of farming people think their business is viable

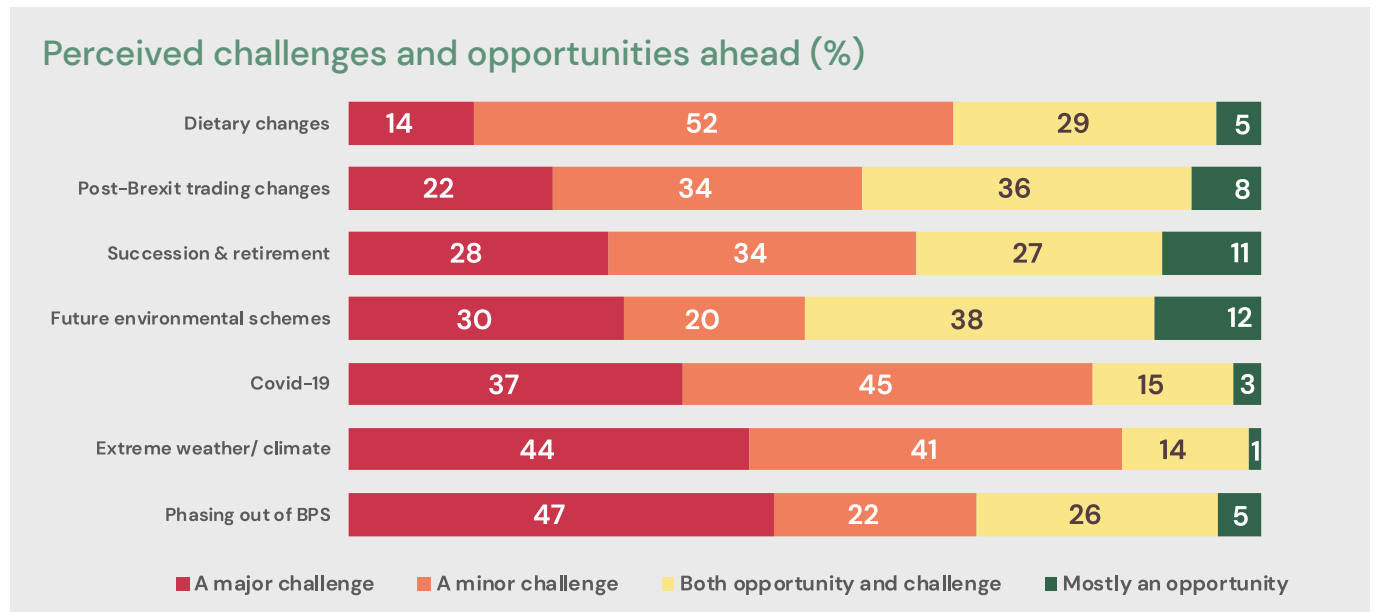
Many farming people are optimistic about the future. This optimism is corroborated by a widespread (59%) belief that their business is sustainable over the next five years. However, a substantial minority remain hesitant. Echoing broader uncertainties, over a third

(34%) are unsure whether their farming business is viable. Almost one in ten (8%) think their business is not viable. Those involved in smaller farms are more likely to feel their business is not sustainable.

## Farming people foresee complex challenges for their businesses...

Despite the optimism of farming communities, it is clear that this is not an absence of realism. Many see challenges in the external environment: the phasing out of the Basic Payment Scheme (47%) and the rise of extreme weather (44%)

are significant worries. Others see opportunities in a changing world, including the introduction of new environmental schemes and planning around succession and retirement.

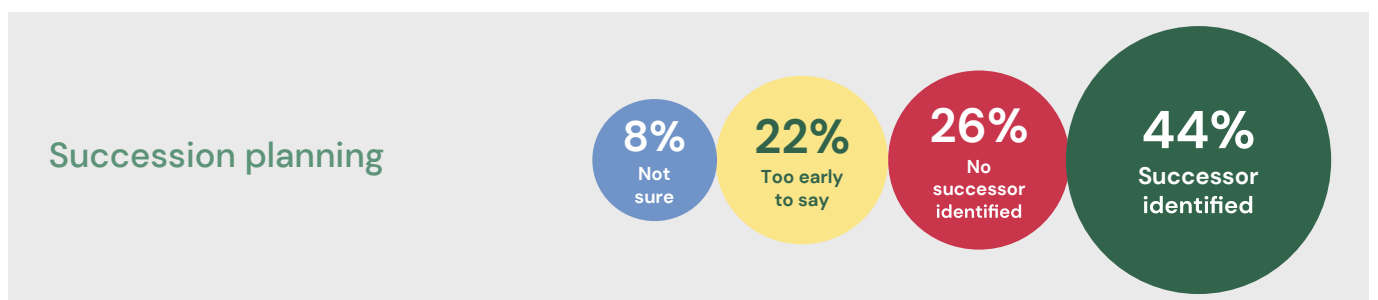


## ...but few are converting their awareness into plans or action

Despite an acute awareness of the challenges ahead around post-Brexit trading arrangements and the post-Brexit policy environment, indications are that few farming people are making substantive plans for their business: 12% are planning 'to a large extent' or 'quite a lot'. A further 23% are making plans 'somewhat'. Almost a third (29%) are making no plans at all; a similar proportion (31%) are planning 'a little'. Those involved in

small farms are less likely to have made plans.

More positive news relates to succession planning. Our analysis indicates this is directly related to how farming people perceive the viability of their business. People are more optimistic about business prospects when a successor has been identified to run the business. Just under one-half of people (44%) report that a successor has been recognised.

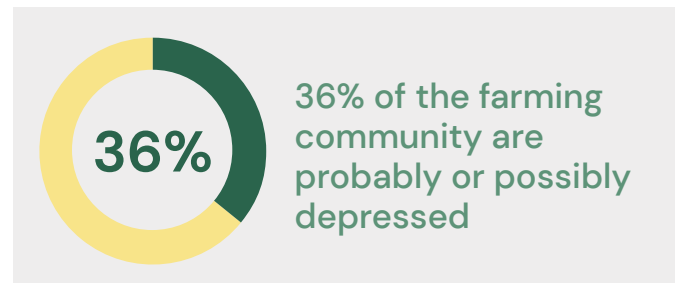


# What next: creating a better future for farming people

Everyone can contribute to a better future for farming people by addressing the issues and concerns raised in this report. No single organisation can do this. It will require the efforts of Government, support bodies and the community itself. There is much to build upon: the resilience and optimism evident in these findings suggest any priority actions should start with farming people, building on their strengths and assets. At RABI, we think the following issues and concerns are priorities for action for all stakeholders:

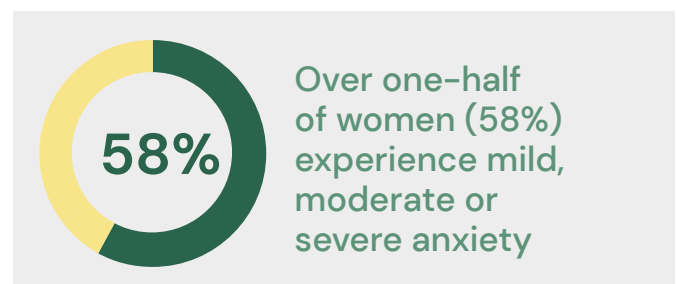
## Practical action to address mental health and wellbeing across the farming community

Over one-third of the farming community (36%) are probably or possibly depressed. We need to take action that ranges from prevention, through activities such as awareness-raising and making conversations around mental health an everyday norm, through to ensuring that services are available and accessible to farming people. Despite the widespread experience of depression, it remains a tough subject to talk about in the farming community: we need to tackle the stigma associated with mental health and the barriers to seeking help.



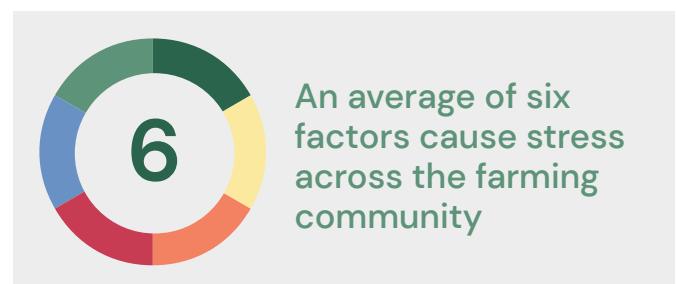
## Enhanced support for women in farming around their mental health and wellbeing

Over one-half of women (58%) experience mild, moderate or severe anxiety. On nearly all indicators around mental health and wellbeing, women fare worse than men. This is a serious public health issue that requires targeted interventions.



## Undertake policy and influencing work to address the causes of stress, not just the impact

On average, farming people cite six factors causing them stress to quite a lot or a large extent. Some of these factors – such as bad or unpredictable weather – are largely outside anyone’s control. However, some of the causes of stress can be solved or mitigated, mainly where uncertainty arises from delays in policy or the burden of regulation. Stress factors are most prominent in a small number of farming sectors, again suggesting that targeted action can address the issues that most affect farming people’s lives.

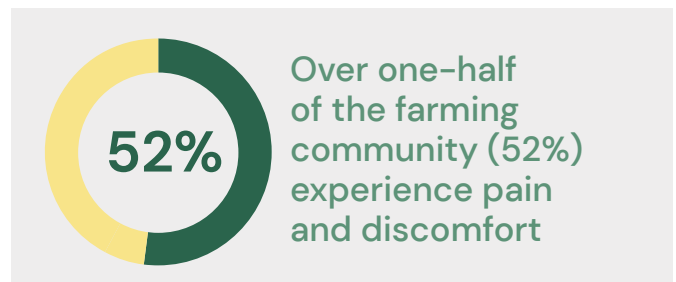




## Raise awareness about the long-term impact of physical ill-health – and take action on the causes

Farming is hard work – hardly a surprise, particularly to those currently of working age. A relatively high proportion of farming people experiencing ill health should concern us all, with over one-half of the farming community (52%) experiencing pain and discomfort. We need a particular focus on working-age farming people, who are much more likely to report poor health than the population as a whole. This has a long-term impact on farming people’s lives and their businesses: people in poor health can’t focus on their business health.

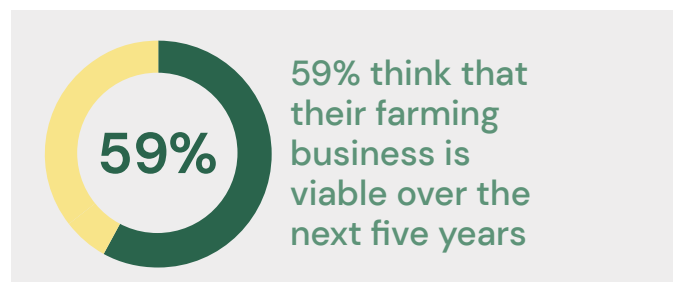
Again, this suggests we need to deal with the factors driving health, not least the large numbers reporting work and farm-related health problems.



## Build on the farming community’s strengths – and give them greater certainty over policies that shape their lives and the support they deserve

We know that many farming businesses are losing money. We also know from this report that mental and physical health and wellbeing are related factors. But these challenges are not a reason to give up on farming people or assume that nothing can change for the better. They can. We need to build on the optimism and resilience in the community, where 59% believe that their business is sustainable over the next five years. For those who are less sure or more pessimistic, we need to address the issues and concerns undermining their confidence or sapping their health and wellbeing.

This might range from helping to find successors or giving them the tools, information and certainty that they are currently missing so that they can plan for a radically different world post-Brexit.



## Farming people want to be heard – and listened to. Help them shape their future.

The Big Farming Survey that underpins this report had over 15,000 responses: more than anyone anticipated. We are convinced that this is evidence that farming people want to be heard and listened to. We also believe that they want to be part of the solution to the problems and challenges raised in this report. So, we think it is more important than ever to think about how we solve these challenges, not just the relative urgency of different issues. Involving farming people in developing solutions has to be the start, whether designing services, identifying priorities for campaigns and influencing, or setting out practical solutions. Farming people have spoken. We need to keep listening and work with them to act. We hope others will join us in working out our next steps so that we can help to build a better future for farming people.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>DEFRA (2021) Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2020:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/agriculture-in-the-united-kingdom>

<sup>2</sup>HSE (2021) Fatal injuries in agriculture, forestry and fishing in Great Britain: 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/resources/fatal.htm>

<sup>3</sup>What is mental wellbeing?

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/wellbeing/wellbeing/>

<sup>4</sup>The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (WEMWBS): <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/> WEMWBS is © NHS Health Scotland, the

University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2006, all rights reserved.

<sup>5</sup>Generalised anxiety disorder in adults:

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/> For an

explanation of GAD-7, see <https://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/common-mental-health-disorders-in-primary-care/identifying-and-assessing-common-mental-health-disorders.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>For more on the EQ-5D, including the EQ-5D-3L and EQ-VAS tools used in this

study: <https://euroqol.org/eq-5d-instruments/> EQ-5DTM is a trade mark of

the EuroQol Research Foundation. © EuroQol Research Foundation.

## Methodology

This publication summarises the findings of research undertaken by Dr Rebecca Wheeler and Professor Matt Lobley from the Centre for Rural Policy Research, the University of Exeter, in 2020/21. The findings are based on analysis of a questionnaire survey completed by 15,296 respondents across England and Wales. The response is likely to be representative of the farming community across the two countries. The questionnaire uses established tools to

measure mental and physical wellbeing and bespoke questions on the farming business. The research team benefited from the support of an advisory group and the review and approval of the Ethics Committee of the College of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of Exeter. A detailed explanation of the methodology, together with the questionnaire, is contained within the full report.

## Acknowledgements

RABI would especially like to thank the thousands of farming people who took part in the Big Farming Survey that underpinned this publication.

Support from organisations across the sector was invaluable in helping us to reach the farming community and gain such a high response rate. Particular thanks go to the NFU, NFU Cymru, Worshipful Company of Farmers, Farmer Networks supported by the Prince's Countryside Fund, Farmers Guardian and Farmers Weekly.

We would also like to thank Dr Rebecca Wheeler and Professor Matt Lobley from the Centre for Rural Policy Research, University of Exeter, who designed and undertook the research and produced the findings upon which this publication summarises. An extended, more detailed version of the main study, including data tables, is available upon request from RABI.

“We now need to create a better future for farming people.”

Alicia Chivers,  
RABI chief executive officer





# The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution

Tel: 01865 724 931  
Email: [info@rabi.org.uk](mailto:info@rabi.org.uk)

RABI  
Shaw House  
27 West Way  
Oxford  
OX2 0QH

Registered charity number: 208858

[www.rabi.org.uk](http://www.rabi.org.uk)

