



Butterworth, A. (2017). *Opinion on the links between the health and wellbeing of farmers and farm animal welfare: Farm Animal Welfare Committee* . Defra.

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# Opinion on the links between the health and wellbeing of farmers and farm animal welfare

2016

Farm Animal Welfare Committee  
Nobel House  
17 Smith Square  
London SW1P 3JR

The Farm Animal Welfare Committee is an expert committee of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales. Information about the Committee can be found at:

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<sup>1</sup> Where we refer to “Government” we are addressing the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England, the Scottish and the Welsh Governments, and other responsible Government Departments and Agencies.

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## Scope

1. The wellbeing of the farming population has in recent times become an issue of increasing concern and interest. This Opinion explores the interactions between this and farm animal welfare. Where we refer to a “farmer”, we mean the person who cares for the livestock on a day-to-day basis; this might be the farmer or a member of their family, or a stockperson employed on an occasional, temporary or full-time basis.
2. The objectives of the study are:
  - to explore the links between the health and wellbeing of farmers and the welfare of the farm animals for which they are responsible;
  - to investigate the mechanisms that currently exist to identify problems and support farmers with regard to their health and wellbeing, including their relationship with the welfare of their livestock; and
  - to identify any changes to the existing mechanisms or organisational arrangements that would help identify problems and support farmers.
3. FAWC has considered published literature, industry information and approaches in other countries. In addition to carrying out a written consultation, the Committee held a stakeholder workshop with a broad range of participants.
4. The Opinion covers all farm species in the UK livestock industry, on farm and, where relevant, during transport, at markets and at slaughter. It does not cover instances where specific disease outbreaks in farm animals have a negative impact on the wellbeing of farm personnel, as these have been documented<sup>2</sup> previously.
5. For the purposes of this Opinion, health and wellbeing are considered to be distinct, but linked, terms. In a strict and limited sense, health is the state of freedom from physical or psychological illness or injury. Wellbeing encompasses health as well as wider positive and negative aspects, including a person’s subjective impression of their life, and objective factors, such as financial security and family support. Some health problems, especially mental conditions, are sometimes described in terms of wellbeing because this avoids potential difficulties in attributing a clinical diagnosis in what may be a complex situation.
6. To provide examples of the complex, and often multi-faceted, issues which can be present in cases where farmer wellbeing and animal welfare interact, a number of illustrative scenarios are described within this Opinion. These cannot be actual cases, due to issues of confidentiality, but are derived from them. Names and some characteristics have been changed to avoid recognition.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include (i) Stress and loss, a report on the impact of bovine TB on farming families. FCN. (2009) and (ii) Deaville, J., Kenkre, J., Ameen, J., Davies, P., Hughes, H., Bennett, G., Mansell, I., Jones, L.

(Institute of Rural Health and University of Glamorgan). The impact of the foot and mouth outbreak on mental health and wellbeing in Wales. Welsh Assembly Government. (2003)

## Background

7. This Opinion considers the relationship between a farmer's physical and mental wellbeing and the care and welfare of their livestock. In a recent study, Devitt *et al*<sup>3</sup> argue that "farm animal welfare standards are often underpinned by social and human-health related factors amongst farmers". As FAWC notes in an earlier report<sup>4</sup>, the farmer or stockperson has a unique role in ensuring high standards of animal welfare. Caring for livestock is, for a great many farmers, a very positive experience, and positive human contacts between farmer and animal have been shown to have a beneficial effect upon the welfare of both<sup>5</sup>.

8. Whilst this Opinion is concerned primarily with how the health and wellbeing of farm personnel can affect farm animal welfare, the converse causal relationship should also be noted. In all cases, farm animals have some impact on the health and wellbeing of the farmers who keep them. In most cases this impact is positive, with a physically active occupation bringing health benefits, and bonds with animals contributing to mental wellbeing. Hobby, care and therapy farming are expanding activities, as increasing numbers of people seek to enjoy these benefits.

9. Where issues of physical and mental wellbeing reduce the ability of farmers to provide for the health and welfare of the animals in their care, those standards might decline<sup>6</sup>. In cases where a farmer's ability to care for their animals is compromised to such a degree that standards fall below the legal requirements and this cannot be rectified, the farming activity should be reduced or should stop. Conversely, issues of poor animal health and welfare might be revealing of physical and mental pressures or distress in a farmer.

## Evidence

### The nature and scale of the problem

10. Although there is little formal and empirical evidence of causal links between farmer wellbeing and animal welfare, this Opinion draws upon existing data, research and case studies to highlight how these links may operate.

11. Livestock farming, like many other intensive economic activities, can be both physically challenging and mentally stressful. Shifting economic, climatic and environmental conditions can combine with unpredictable animal health and behaviour,

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<sup>3</sup> Devitt et al. (2014) An investigation into the human element of On-farm animal welfare incidents in Ireland. *Sociologia Ruralis* (on line: 20<sup>th</sup> November 2014: available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soru.12069/abstract>)

<sup>4</sup> FAWC (2007) *Report on Stockmanship and Animal Welfare*, FAWC, London.

<sup>5</sup> Boivin, X. et al. (2003) Stockmanship and farm animal welfare. *Animal Welfare* 12, 479-492; Hemsworth P H and Coleman G J (1998). *Human-Livestock Interactions: The Stockperson and the Productivity and Welfare of Intensively Farmed Animals*, CAB International: Wallingford, UK

<sup>6</sup> Rural Policy Centre (2014) *Consultation on the link between the health and wellbeing of farm personnel and farm animal welfare*, SRUC, Edinburgh

long working hours, and the sheer physicality of much farm work, to create a context where both farmer injury and stress are not uncommon.

12. Farming is an unusual occupation in that the farm business and family life are often inextricably linked, creating a complex mix of responsibilities and relationships. Many farmers both live and work on the farm which can reduce the opportunity for relief, greatly increasing the overall level of stress.

13. The table below describes some of the challenges and potential stressors for farmers which can be identified on a livestock farm (the list is not exhaustive):

*Table 1: Potential issues associated with farmer stress on a livestock farm*

<b>Animal issues</b>	<b>Farming environment issues</b>	<b>Farm and family issues</b>
Disease challenges	Weather	Personal health
Movement and other restrictions	Commodity prices	Mental wellbeing
Capacity to spend “stockmanship” time with animals	Capacity to respond to uncertainty of market and regulatory environment	Ageing
Capacity to invest in animal housing	Relationship with retailer or processor	Farm ownership
Availability and quality of feed	Relationship with landlord	Succession issues
Degree of vet involvement (cost vs benefit)	Relationship with bank	Job status
Decisions on whether to treat or cull animals (cost vs benefit)	Bureaucracy, inspections and regulation	Keeping pace with new developments
		Support (or lack of) from the wider farming community
		Support from, or conflict with, neighbours
		Relationship with family
		Friendships (or lack of)
		Amount of leisure time

14. Such is the nature of farming that most farming families are used to dealing with set-backs and adversity themselves. However, where several issues are causing concern at the same time, as is frequently the case, the compounding of conflicting stress may

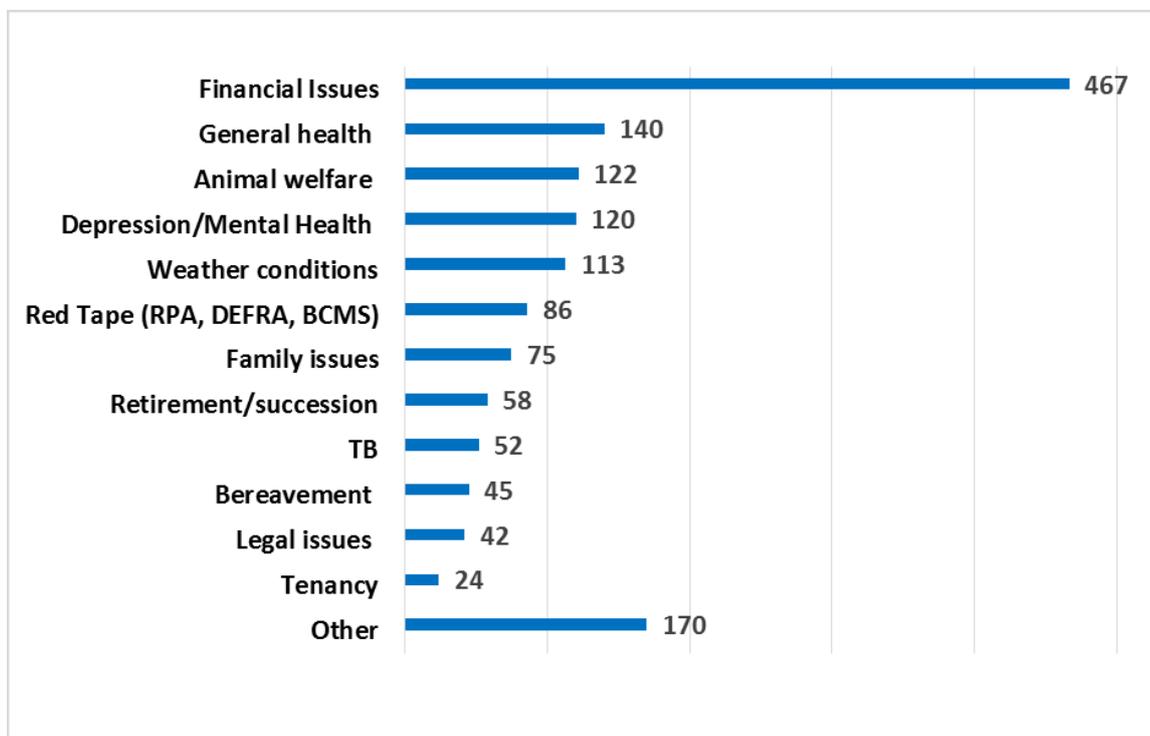
exacerbate the effect by lessening the opportunity for relief. The resulting pressure can lead to serious long term health issues and a significant decline in wellbeing.

15. The Farming Community Network (FCN)<sup>7</sup> telephone Helpline received 1,082 calls during 2013. (This represents approximately 60% of all new FCN casework for the year, the balance being the result of direct referrals to FCN county groups.) The following graphs have been created from information collected during the initial conversation between a farmer or their family members and FCN Helpline Volunteers. As those conversations are often very stressful for the caller, the factual information derived can vary from one case to another. It is, however, considered to be representative of the general incidence of calls.

16. Figure 1 shows the main topics of concern raised in these calls, with many callers experiencing a number of simultaneous difficulties. “Other” issues included machinery breakdown, job loss, problems with neighbours, thefts, paperwork, accidents and isolation. It is striking that, out of 170 people who specified “other” issues, 72 (42%) mentioned “dead animals”, the vast majority of whom also highlighted issues with snow: an indication of the significant impact on livestock farmers of the bad weather during the winter of 2013.

*Figure 1: Farming Community Network Helpline calls, by primary topic of concern, as categorized by FCN, 2013.*

*Note: RPA is the Rural Payments Agency; BCMS is the British Cattle Movement Service*



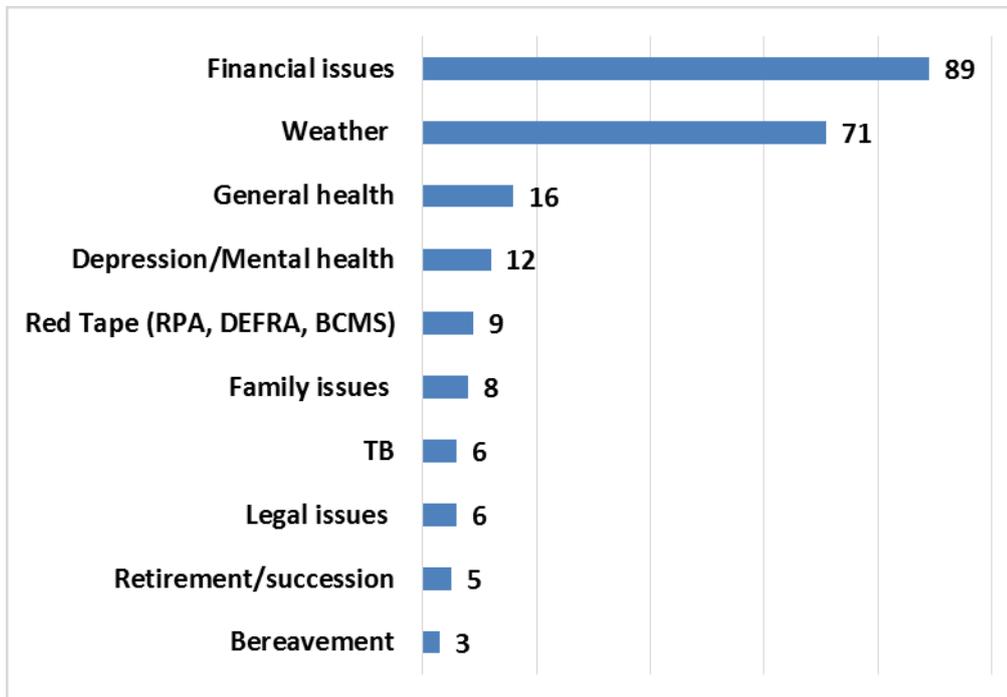
<sup>7</sup> The role of support agencies including FCN is described in paragraph 48 onwards

*Source: FCN data*

17. Clearly, depression and mental health are very important issues, and these were mentioned in 120 of the calls, including some in which suicidal thoughts were expressed.

18. Specific animal welfare issues were mentioned in 122 calls, accounting for 11% of call topics, but other co-existing pressures are also likely to have an impact on farmers' ability to maintain the health and welfare levels of their animals, as presented in Figure 2.

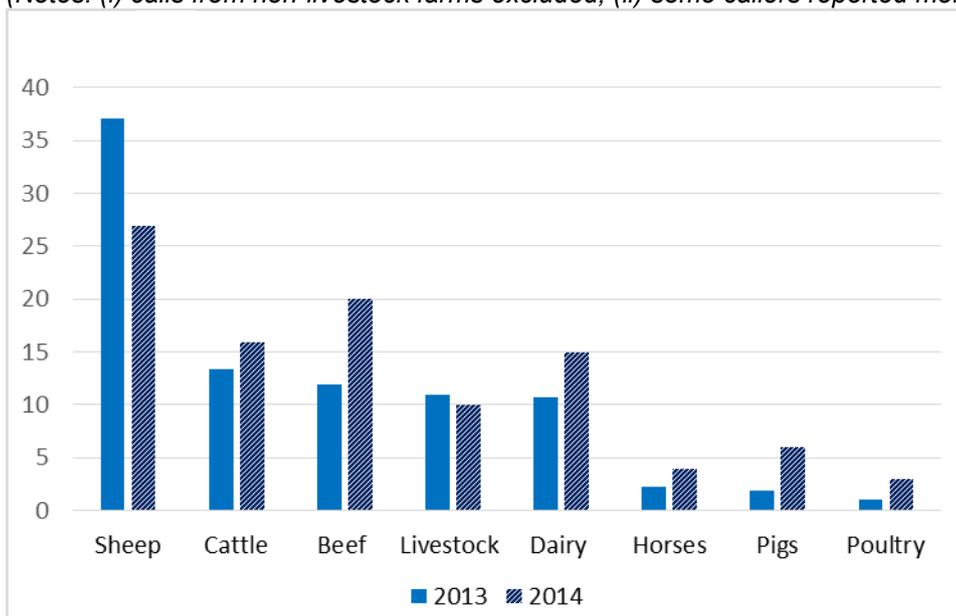
Figure 2: FCN Helpline calls: topics of concern raised in combination with animal welfare issues, 2013



Source: FCN data

Figure 3: Percentage of FCN Helpline calls by enterprise type, when identified by caller, 2013 and 2014

(Notes: (i) calls from non-livestock farms excluded; (ii) some callers reported more than one enterprise type.)



Source: FCN data

19. Problems are likely to escalate more quickly on a livestock farm than an arable farm; this is borne out by the experience of FCN which has noted that livestock farms are predominant in its casework. A significant number of calls also come from tenant and contracting farms. Figures are likely to vary from year to year because other influencing factors, such as the weather, are variable. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of FCN Helpline calls by enterprise type, in 2013 and 2014, where this was mentioned by the caller.

20. While other industries may well offer many similar challenges, livestock farming is arguably characterised by a number of factors that specifically exacerbate the potential impact of farmer injury or stress. These include a farmer's age, the geographical isolation of many farms, and the predominance of family farm structures, with attendant issues of succession and replacement labour availability. Isolated geographical location may compromise access to healthcare, and the current economic climate of farming may influence the relative difficulty that farmers experience in achieving 'retirement' (in the sense of deriving a suitable retirement pension allowing them to cease or reduce professional activity).

21. Other than livestock farming, there are few, if any, economic sectors in which individuals, responsible for the care of other lives, continue to work well beyond what would normally be considered retirement age. Many farmers work well past the age of 65 in conditions that, in other economic and employment sectors, would be likely to be considered unacceptably burdensome. The majority of farmers do not retire, in the formal sense. A Defra report<sup>8</sup> cites evidence<sup>9</sup> suggesting that only around one third of UK farmers intend to retire completely, while amongst farmers currently over 65, a large majority (86%) of those polled stated that they did not want to retire.

22. For an agricultural population with a median age of 59 years<sup>10</sup>, this has considerable implications. An increasingly ageing agricultural population is, potentially, an increasingly fragile one. Current government figures<sup>11</sup> show that, in 2010, almost a third (32%) of farmers (defined as farm holders) were aged over 65. This proportion is growing, and compares with a figure of 25% in 2000. However, it is important to note that, in many cases, whilst an older member of the family might remain registered as the farm holder, the day-to-day running of the farm is undertaken by younger family members. The UK farming industry has a declining workforce (recording a 3.6% drop between 2012 and 2013<sup>12</sup>). Its strong emphasis on family farms (84% of UK farms have been passed down through family members at least once) means that, even when formally retired, older family members often still play an active role in farm management and activities, including the care of livestock. This Opinion is concerned with the consequences of professional longevity and limited retirement opportunities on both farmer wellbeing and animal welfare, rather than their underlying causes.

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<sup>8</sup> Defra (2003) *Future of Farming Report*, Defra, London

<sup>9</sup> ADAS et al. (2004) *Entry to and Exit from Farming in the UK*.

<sup>10</sup> Defra (2012) *Agriculture in the United Kingdom*, Defra, London

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Defra (2013) *Farming statistics*. Published 19 December 2013, Defra/National Statistics.

23. Age related physical difficulties can reduce a farmer's capacity to carry out both routine and emergency animal care tasks. Back pain and arthritis are common issues<sup>13</sup>, as are injuries from which recovery is not yet complete<sup>14</sup>. In their recent review, Devitt *et al.*<sup>15</sup> document a number of cases in which elderly farmers found it physically impossible to care for animals in difficulty. Where assistance is unavailable, the consequences for animal welfare can be significant.

24. It is widely accepted that there are significant risks of injury in farming and that such injuries are disproportionately severe amongst older farmers. Figures from the USA suggest that the work-related fatality rate amongst farmers is over five times higher than amongst workers in other industrial sectors<sup>16</sup>. The handling of livestock is a major source of work-related injury and death<sup>17</sup>. In 2014/15 there were 33 fatal injuries to workers in agriculture in Great Britain<sup>18</sup>.

25. In case of farmer injury, alternative provisions need to be made for the care of animals. This is often difficult, because of the physical isolation of many farms, and dependence upon very limited sources of family labour, or because neighbouring farmers may be similarly aged or constrained in their ability to offer regular and systematic help. The inability of farmers suffering from physical health problems to meet the needs of their animals can be a major source of farmer stress. Recent years have seen growing attention, and concern, for farmer mental wellbeing. This concern has paralleled a rising incidence of farmer suicide - itself partly explained by what is perceived as increasing financial insecurity, and partly as a result of new awareness of farmer stress - initially prompted by the 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease, and more recently by bovine tuberculosis<sup>19</sup>.

26. Farming has one of the highest rates of suicide of any industry. Between 1993 and 2008, the rate of suicide amongst UK farmers was 1.5 to 2.5 times higher than amongst non-farmers<sup>20</sup>. In 2010, there were 31 recorded suicides amongst farm owners and seven amongst farm workers<sup>21</sup>. In 2013, the total for both categories was 43. Such rates might mask an even greater, although largely unacknowledged, occurrence of farmer stress and poor mental wellbeing<sup>22</sup>. Although proximity to and care for animals might, in other

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<sup>13</sup> Hawton, K. *et al.* (1998) *Suicide and Stress in Farmers*. London, The Stationary Office.

<sup>14</sup> Solomon C. Accidental injuries in agriculture in the UK. *Occup Med* 2002; **52**: 461-466.

<sup>15</sup> Devitt *et al* (2014) *Op Cit*

<sup>16</sup> Amshoff, S.K. and Reed, D.B. (2005) Health, work and safety of farmers ages 50 or older. *Geriatric Nursing* 26 (5) 304-308

<sup>17</sup> Hard, D.L., Myers, J.R. and Gerberich, S.G. (2002) Traumatic Injuries in Agriculture. *Journal of Agricultural Safety and Health* 8 (1) pp. 51-65 ; Browning, S.R. *et al* (1998) Agricultural injuries among older Kentucky farmers: The family farm health and hazard surveillance study. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 33 (4) 341-353 ; Dogan, K.H. and Demirci, S. (2012) Livestock-Handling related injuries and deaths. In Javed, K. (Ed) *Livestock Production* ; May, J. (1990). Issues in agriculture health and safety. *Am J Ind Med*, 18, pp. 121-131

<sup>18</sup> HSE (2015) *Statistics on fatal injuries in the workplace in Great Britain 2015*

<sup>19</sup> Farming Community Network (2009) *Stress and Loss*, FCN, Northampton

<sup>20</sup> Booth, N. *et al* (2000) Suicide in the farming community: methods used and contact with health services. *Occupational Environmental Medicine* 57, 642-644

<sup>21</sup> Office for National Statistics.

<sup>22</sup> Hounscome *et al.* (2012) Psychological morbidity of farmers and non-farming population: results from a UK survey. *Community Mental Health*, 48, 503-510.

contexts, be an acknowledged mechanism for therapeutic responses to individual stress, surveys undertaken in Norway<sup>23</sup> found that farmers (and particularly male farmers) experienced significantly higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety than non-farmers. This finding is supported by other research from the UK<sup>24</sup>. A study of farmers attending agricultural shows in England and Wales found that 35% of those undertaking an evaluative test had scores above the indicator level for psychological disorders, compared to 27% of non-farmers<sup>25</sup>.

27. A number of reasons have been identified for farmer stress and farmer suicide. These include financial difficulties, a sense of personal failure, isolation, lack of social or family support and, in many recorded cases, a stoicism coupled with a cultural or professional aversion to seeking appropriate help (especially among males). Although some observers have suggested that farmers are more reluctant than other groups to seek professional help and support for stress and issues of mental wellbeing<sup>26</sup>, others maintain that there is no consistent evidence that farmers are less likely to seek help from their doctor or mental health services<sup>27</sup>.

28. If farmers are suffering from physical injury or illness or from psychological stress, their capacity to care for their animals may be compromised and limited. This may be coupled with a very real reluctance to seek help or to acknowledge difficulties, out of fear of prosecution or of losing rights and status following inspection. Although there are limited data regarding the direct impact of poor farmer health and wellbeing on animal health and welfare, recent work in Denmark<sup>28</sup> and Ireland<sup>29</sup> demonstrates clear associations between instances of animal neglect and the inability of farmers to cope with the day-to-day management of their livestock, as a result of either physical or psychological difficulties.

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<sup>23</sup> Sanne, B. et al. (2004) Farmers are at risk for anxiety and depression: the Hordaland Health Study. *Occupational Medicine*, 54, 92-100

<sup>24</sup> Simkin, S. et al. (1998) Stress in farmers: a survey of farmers in England and Wales. *Occupational Environmental Medicine*, 55, 729-734; Fraser et al. (2005) Farming and mental health problems and mental illness. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 51 (4), 340-347; Thomas et al. (2003), Mental Health of British Farmers, *Occupational Environmental Medicine*, 60, 181-186. Lobley, M. ((2005) Exploring the dark side: stress in rural Britain. Centre for Rural Research Report, University of Exeter; Eisner et al. (1998) Depression and anxiety in farmers, *Primary Care Psychiatry*, 4, 101-105; Parry et al (2005) Farmers, farm workers and work-related stress, HMSO, London

<sup>25</sup> Hounsome et al (2012) Op cit.

<sup>26</sup> Fraser et al (2005) Op cit

<sup>27</sup> Booth et al. (2000) Op cit,

<sup>28</sup> Andrade, S. and Anneberg, I. (2014) Farmers under pressure. Analysis of the social conditions of animal neglect. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 27, 103-126.

<sup>29</sup> Devitt et al. (2014) Op cit.

## Identifying problems

### (i) The farmer

29. Farmers' reluctance to recognise symptoms of poor wellbeing in themselves or to admit they are having difficulty coping might be lessened by measures to increase self-awareness and prior understanding of potential problems. Some such initiatives already exist; for example, the Derbyshire Farming Life Centre has published a "Haynes guide" to farmers' health<sup>30</sup>. FCN is working with agricultural colleges to develop a module to educate young farmers about the potential health and wellbeing problems they might encounter during their working life.

30. In addition, access to care services (both in terms of time and distance as well as the need for replacement labour) can be problematic for many farmers, while the structure of care service provision is not always well suited to their particular occupational group. Some initiatives already exist which make it easier for farmers to access health services, such as drop-in clinics run by the Lincolnshire Rural Support Network at local livestock markets.

31. Trust is vital in enabling farmers to voice their concerns or anxieties about their mental health, and it plays a major role in a person's wellbeing. At least two aspects are important when considering trust: confidentiality and reliability. The medical practitioner has the duty to inform the responsible authorities if they believe that the farmer's life or others are at risk, but not before informing their patient that this will take place. Building farmers' confidence in institutions and organisations that offer support with mental health problems is essential.

#### **Scenario 1 - Infrastructure and gambling problems lead to overstocking and disease on a tenanted cattle farm**

Aled and Myfanwy were dairy farmers with two young children on a tenanted farm. When their landlord refused to invest in new infrastructure to help them meet Nitrate Vulnerable Zone requirements, they decided to sell their dairy herd and start a beef enterprise. At the same time Aled began a full time job whilst Myfanwy managed the changeover. Unfortunately, Myfanwy had a gambling problem and ran up large debts. Her farm administration started to suffer and they were unable to pay the rent.

Because Myfanwy did not keep the cattle passports up to date, they were unable to sell any cattle, resulting in overstocking and inadequate housing which led to disease. Following a conversation at a livestock market, FCN was asked to help and its Volunteer worked with the

<sup>30</sup> "Fit for farming": <http://thefarminglifecentre.org.uk/index.asp?ID=229>

British Cattle Movement Service to issue passports and allow the sale of some cattle. This released cash to pay the rent, thereby securing the family home and business. Help was also found for Myfanwy's gambling problem.

This scenario illustrates the importance of farmers being aware of the support services available to them. (See recommendations 69 and 74.)

## **(ii) Visitors to farms**

32. Visitors to farms may be in the front line when it comes to recognising and drawing attention to developing problems. Those most able to recognise animal welfare problems include:

- veterinary surgeons (private practice or government vets) carrying out routine farm visits, statutory examinations or health plan visits
- farm assurance scheme assessors
- collectors of fallen stock
- fieldsmen from auction marts, abattoirs and marketing groups
- neighbouring farmers.

33. These visits may be infrequent, with the potential not to have been visited, other than briefly, by outside bodies with the capacity to detect problems and assist if problems do exist, for considerable periods. Changes in personnel are also likely to make deteriorating welfare more difficult to identify.

34. Other visitors to farms who will have at least a partial view of the operation include land agents, feed, fertiliser, chemical and sundries representatives, milk tanker, feed and livestock truck drivers, GPs and postmen. There are, however, fewer visitors to farms than there used to be, as many sales representatives and officials now conduct transactions by email or phone instead.

35. An increased turnover of medical and veterinary practitioners, linked to recruitment and deployment problems in rural areas, can result in reduced liaison between them and consequently a lesser tendency to observe and act upon early warning signs (whether human or animal) by informal mechanisms.

36. There is likely to be reluctance on the part of those who are not qualified in human health to “diagnose” problems as a result of noticing changes in the farmer’s behaviour or identifying poor animal welfare. Research<sup>31</sup> has identified the challenges facing vets in responding to the human elements of farm animal welfare incidents, including client confidentiality and a fear of losing clients. However, it may be worth considering a quotation from one of the FAWC workshop participants, that “contrary to long-held belief, people rarely make matters worse by offering help, and might actually improve matters significantly”. FCN is currently working with farm suppliers, educating their representatives about how to identify signs of poor health and wellbeing and encouraging them to carry FCN contact cards which they can pass on to the farmer.

37. The Government announced in July 2015 that by Summer 2016 there will be a Single Farm Inspection Taskforce for England and Wales, which will combine farm visits with mandatory checks, resulting in 20,000 fewer farm inspections. A reduction in the number of farm visits might have the inadvertent result of reducing the early detection of poor wellbeing in farmers and linked animal welfare issues.

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<sup>31</sup> Devitt et al. (2013) Veterinarian challenges to providing a multi-agency response to farm animal welfare problems in Ireland: responding to the human factor

## **Scenario 2 – Depression and administrative failings result in a ban on the sale of animals**

Stephen and Jill were beef and sheep farmers who ran into financial difficulties and were under pressure from the bank. Stephen's mental wellbeing started to suffer and, as a result of depression, he was unable to manage the farm effectively. A bTB test ran overdue, preventing any animals being sold.

A neighbouring farmer became aware of Stephen's situation and contacted FCN. An FCN Volunteer arranged a new date for the bTB test and helped on the test days. The Volunteer also visited the bank manager with the clients and agreed changes to the business plan to help with cash flow. FCN also directed Stephen to support for his mental wellbeing issues. After some time Stephen and Jill were better able to manage their animals and their business and were much happier.

This scenario emphasizes the importance of support from the farming community and agency flexibility. (See recommendations 69, 70, 71 and 74.)

### **(iii) Animal indicators**

38. For each animal species there are both common and uncommon possible consequences of a farmer's reduced capacity to care. Some examples are given, but trends are not always predictable; one farmer may remain very diligent and show undiminished stockmanship despite enormous personal pressures, whilst another may start to neglect animal care at an early stage.

It is worth noting that modern methods of husbandry can result in many farms being indoor operations. With members of the public or outside bodies less likely to see animals regularly, changes in conditions may go undetected for a period of time.

39. In cattle, inadequate feeding can result in emaciated animals or reduced milk output. Poor attention to foot care can lead to an increased incidence of lameness. Reduced attention to the milking routine, and to the care and treatment of clinical cases, can result in an increase in the number of cases of mastitis. For all stock, reduced attention to the scraping of yards, the bedding of pens and cubicles, or pasture conditions, may result in dirty animals, or in animals standing in overgrazed and muddy fields with no dry lying area. Increased incidence of poor health and condition in young stock may result from poor attention to bedding, ventilation or housing conditions. Indicators include increased or unusually high numbers of emaciated young stock, lameness, respiratory disease, calf scour (diarrhoea) and pneumonia, and in some cases increased mortality rates.

### **Scenario 3 - Mental ill health leads to calving problems and mastitis**

Angus, 54, was a dairy farmer with a history of bipolar disorder, which was well controlled by medication. After a family argument, he stopped taking medication and his condition slowly relapsed. This showed gradually, firstly in excessive spending, but as his illness developed, the animals began to suffer too. Milking became erratic, causing an increased incidence of cases of mastitis. Several calvings resulted in the loss of both cow and calf. The farm current account rapidly deteriorated.

Angus's son realised that his father had become seriously ill. After his GP arranged a Mental Health Act Assessment, Angus was admitted to hospital and, following treatment, his health was gradually restored. The farm finances, however, showed a large deficit, necessitating recapitalization, and half the herd, including the prize bull, had to be sold.

In this scenario there might have been the opportunity for a number of agencies, such as the dairy or the knackerman, to have identified problems before they escalated. (See recommendations 70, 71 and 75.)

40. In sheep, the same general risks of 'neglect' exist as for cattle. Inadequate feeding results in thin animals and reduced attention to pasture management leads to dirty sheep with increased incidence of foot problems, lameness and coat conditions, including untreated sheep scab. Failure to follow a parasite control programme or a programme derived from a health plan may result in poor body condition and increased mortality. Failure to remove carcasses immediately is a clear sign of failing management. Upland farmers might be particularly at risk.

### **Scenario 4 - Weak lambs and high mortality on an upland farm follow bereavement and social isolation**

George was a 63 year old sheep farmer who became clinically depressed after his wife's sudden death. His two grown-up daughters, who were not interested in the farm tenancy, rarely visited. George became much less inclined to go out, his social circle became progressively smaller and he felt increasingly isolated. After the local livestock mart closed, which had been a weekly meeting point with fellow farmers and friends for the past 40 years, George did not see

many of his farming contacts. His wife had previously been responsible for the farm's administration, and George was unwilling to seek help with the farm accounts or the livestock movement records. He received a final demand for overdue taxes.

George sought medical help, but found it difficult to access psychiatric help in the remote rural area in which he lived, and he frequently forgot to take his medication. He needed extra help with lambing, but there was no local help available, and he did not feel that he could cope with someone unfamiliar staying in the farmhouse. George felt he had less time to spend with the animals and his depression left him less interested in what was happening on the farm. Failure to manage the feeding of the ewes in late pregnancy led to problems with pregnancy toxæmia, resulting in weak lambs being born, and high lamb mortality. A member of the public noticed unburied carcasses in the more remote areas of the farm and reported this to the local authority.

This scenario illustrates problems of rural isolation such as access to health services and availability of emergency labour support. (See recommendations 74 and 76.)

41. For meat poultry, the integrated nature of the business and the relatively rapid turnover and monitoring of birds provide potential indicators of poor care and flock failure. These include on-farm mortality, skin conditions (feet, hock), reduced bird cleanliness, and post-mortem conditions such as emaciation and ascites. The conditions in which birds are housed can very rapidly deteriorate if a farmer fails to make daily checks or to maintain the automated equipment required for feeding, watering, ventilation and temperature control. It is, therefore, possible for catastrophic failure to occur when a poultry producer simply 'takes their eye off the ball' as a result of external pressures. Mechanisms within integrated companies could and would in many cases provide support or replace a producer or stockperson who is no longer able to provide sufficient care to the flock.

#### **Scenario 5 - Injury, pressure of work and a lack of business support result in broiler disease**

Jan was a broiler farm manager. His birds were underperforming compared to the target weight for the age, and his litter conditions had deteriorated enormously following a ration change. Attempts to improve these conditions with additional heating and ventilation were not successful.

Due to a longstanding back injury, Jan struggled with the increased workload involved in adding litter to the sheds. There was, though, no additional labour on the farm to assist. He was concerned the poor

litter might cause footpad dermatitis, which would be identified at the slaughterhouse and lead to an inspection under the Broiler Welfare Directive. Furthermore, his site was due an audit inspection and the business owner had already given him a verbal warning about the appearance and performance of the farm under his management.

In this scenario, the production company could have taken action on the weight data available to it and offered support at an earlier stage, promoting both Jan's wellbeing and the flock welfare, and reducing the likelihood of external intervention. (See recommendations 69, 75 and 76.)

42. The relatively long life of laying hens means that neglect or reduced care can result in chronic problems, the indicators of which include: emaciated birds, unexpectedly poor feather cover, increased feather pecking, reduced egg production (which a purchaser may notice) and increased mortality.

43. Indicators on pig farms include heavy faecal contamination as a result of poor hygiene, increased skin, foot and hock lesions resulting from dirty bedding, and increased respiratory disease due to reduced attention to dust and ventilation. Thin pigs and unexplained increases in mortality may be warning signs that a farmer is failing to cope. Indicators which might be detected by a purchaser or a slaughterhouse include increased rejections due to abscesses, lung pathology, greater variation in slaughter weight, reduced output, and an inability to meet a supplier contract. Specialist pig vets tend to have close contact with producers, and could have a very positive role in supporting pig farmers.

### **Scenario 6 – Outbreak of tail biting in pigs due to reduced straw input**

Nicola took over the 60ha farm upon the retirement of her father and decided to use the redundant cattle sheds to house pigs on contract with a large scale breeder. The breeder supplied 12 week old pigs every 3 weeks and paid for the feed and veterinary input. Nicola received a payment based on the number of pigs she kept per week, but the breeder got into financial difficulty when pig prices declined and his monthly payment to Nicola started to become irregular. Nicola's own finances subsequently suffered and, when she began to run out of straw, rather than buy more, she reduced the quantity. The cold nights gave rise to slower growth and a tail biting outbreak occurred in one yard of 300 pigs.

The vet called on a quarterly basis with a fieldsman from the breeding company and tension started to build between the two parties with the vet trying to mediate. Nicola started drinking due to the financial pressure; this began to affect her work and sometimes she would not feed the pigs until 11am. Growth deteriorated further, tail biting increased and abattoir reports showed high levels of abscesses on the spine. After being inspected by the assurance scheme, the farm temporarily lost its assurance status meaning the pigs could not be sold until the problem was rectified. The breeding company took action, supplying straw for the short term to rectify the assurance problem, but terminating the contract.

In this scenario insufficient support was available despite numerous contacts with outside agencies, and a mechanism for a coordinated response was lacking. (See recommendation 72.)

#### **(iv) Data indicators**

44. Data on animal disease are already collected through a number of channels, and could be better used to indicate deteriorating standards of animal welfare and possible issues of farmer wellbeing. There are, however, some restrictions to the use of data for a purpose other than that for which it was collected.

45. In broiler production there is a short growing cycle (38 days for standard birds), and there is often routine monitoring of performance to ensure that the birds grow along the anticipated growth curve and to satisfy retailer requirements. A measure of growth, such

as the European Production Efficiency Factor<sup>32</sup>, may also be used. In this way deviation from expectation may be detected in integrated broiler flocks. However, independent producers for processors who do not supply supermarkets or branded restaurants/fast food outlets are not usually monitored in this way.

46. Similarly, contract fatteners who house pigs which remain the property of others, will be closely monitored and deviation from normal figures will be apparent and lead to action. Slow growth or a failure to thrive will show at the end of the production cycle, but this can take up to 15 weeks, and so reduced welfare due to the poor, deteriorating health of the keeper could potentially remain undetected during that time.

47. Records from fallen stock collectors could be a source of relevant information, but use of these records in an appropriate way would require continuous monitoring by an outside agency to identify losses deviating from normal levels. Some instances of poor farm animal welfare are associated with unburied carcasses, but these are sometimes left in buildings, and might not therefore be observed by family, the public, or farm visitors.

## **Farmer support mechanisms in the UK**

48. A number of national charities exist to support, facilitate and signpost the farming community. The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI)<sup>33</sup>, the Addington Fund<sup>34</sup> and Farming Community Network (FCN)<sup>35</sup> work under the banner of “Farming Help”, a collaboration defined by a memorandum of understanding, which provides a one stop shop for help.

49. The RABI, founded in 1860, is a grant-making charity with paid staff. It supports farmers, farm workers, farm managers and their dependents, and especially retired people on low incomes, by providing one-off and recurring grants for a wide range of purposes, such as replacing essential household items, disability aids, care home fees, relief staff, training grants, retraining or retirement consultancy. RABI’s welfare officers help claimants to seek state benefits and the charity owns and runs two residential homes. Its annual income is approximately £6m and it distributes about £3m in grants annually, including to around 1,400 long-term beneficiaries.

50. The Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RSABI)<sup>36</sup>, founded in 1897, has a similar remit in Scotland, offering over £400k of financial support to more than 500 people. Amongst other things, it supports Gatepost, a confidential telephone helpline manned jointly by RSABI staff and FCN volunteers who can provide callers with links to specialist support and advice.

51. The Addington Fund, covering England and Wales, was set up in 2001. Its Strategic Rural Housing Scheme provides rental housing for farming families who have to leave their farm due to retirement or business failure and by so doing will lose their home. The Fund currently owns about 50 properties. At times of specific emergency (for

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<sup>32</sup> EPEF is an indicator that takes into account feed conversion, mortality and daily gain.

<sup>33</sup> [www.rabi.org.uk](http://www.rabi.org.uk)

<sup>34</sup> [www.addingtonfund.org.uk](http://www.addingtonfund.org.uk)

<sup>35</sup> [www.fcn.org.uk](http://www.fcn.org.uk)

<sup>36</sup> [www.rsabi.org.uk](http://www.rsabi.org.uk)

example, the flooding of the Somerset levels) the Trustees' Discretionary Fund awards some short-term grants to alleviate hardship. In some counties, the Fund's Affordable Rural Housing Scheme makes accommodation available for farm workers. Its annual income is about £900k and expenditure about £400k.

52. FCN was originally established in 1995 as "Farm Crisis Network", in response to the difficulties faced by the farming community in the late 1980's and early 1990's, due to falling farm incomes, the increasing globalisation of commodity markets and growing feelings of isolation and concern amongst the farming community. It was modelled on organisations established in Germany and the USA, which had faced similar issues some years earlier. Now a national group of over 350 locally-based Volunteers from the farming community and rural churches, the FCN covers England and Wales. Its six regions are headed by a director and each of its 35 counties has a coordinator. FCN operates the telephone Helpline on behalf of Farming Help. Via its visiting service, FCN offers pastoral and practical support to farmers for as long as these are needed. It handles around 2,500 cases per year involving around 6,000 individuals. It also engages in outreach activities such as providing a presence at livestock markets and agricultural shows. FCN's annual cash flow is approximately £500k, with around 15% of its recent income from the Defra TB unit (currently under review). Confidentiality in case work is of paramount importance to FCN's operation, and its Volunteers are required to respect client confidentiality as far as the law permits. The organisation requires a farmer's consent to contact them, or to talk to other organisations on their behalf, except in cases of child abuse or risk of suicide.

53. There are also several independent county organisations, which support farmers, linked to FCN by a memorandum of understanding. This allows FCN to represent their interests at national level and refer clients to them from the Helpline. These include the Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Rural Support Group, Gloucestershire Farming Friends, the Lincolnshire Rural Support Network, Nottinghamshire Rural Support and Shropshire Rural Support. There is also a Gamekeepers Welfare Trust, founded in 1992.

54. Churches are also a major source of support for farmers. The Church of England, Church in Wales and Church of Scotland, due to their established status, maintain a comprehensive network of parishes across the country, and work increasingly closely with churches of other denominations. The Arthur Rank Centre, which has existed since 1972, has coordinated some of the churches' work and supported the founding of FCN and the Addington Fund, in addition to the creation of the Agricultural Chaplains' Association. FCN has a Christian ethos and is strongly supported by church members and clergy, with its services equally available to people of all faiths and none. The Addington Fund, described above, was set up as the Churches' response to Foot and Mouth disease.

**Scenario 7 - Pastoral support provided through local network following informal identification of poor welfare in beef herd and early stages of farmer dementia**

Michael was a 73 year old cattle farmer in the early stages of dementia. His wife worked in a local shop and had limited time to assist with farm tasks. Michael had become increasingly forgetful and often failed to feed his herd, believing that he had already done so.

Rachel, the Church of England priest covering the village, talked to Michael on several occasions at the agricultural market and had noted changes in his manner. Another parishioner mentioned that Michael's herd was unusually noisy and some animals appeared thin.

Rachel had previously worked with people living with dementia and recognised its early symptoms. She telephoned a Methodist Church Rural Life Officer, whom she had recently met at an Agricultural Chaplains' Association event, who in turn contacted the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution on behalf of Michael. The RABI's Regional Welfare Officer visited Michael and his wife and helped them claim additional state benefits, receive advice from a community mental health team and pay an unemployed local man to work as a part-time farmhand.

Because Rachel was responsible for seven parishes, she was unable to visit Michael frequently. However, at the suggestion of the RABI Regional Welfare Officer, she contacted the FCN and discovered that a member of her church's lay pastoral visiting group was one of its Volunteers. The Volunteer undertook to call on Michael and his wife to provide ongoing support and to help them feel more integrated into the community. Ongoing conversations helped them to make the decision that they needed to sell the farm and retire to a residential property in the area.

This scenario demonstrates the importance of effective support networks in identifying problems at an early stage. (See recommendations 69, 70 and 71.)

55. Support is provided to farmers through a number of government initiatives. The Farming Resilience Group, for example, was convened by Defra in 2013 and has brought together leading representatives from across the farming industry, the banking sector and Whitehall, on five occasions. These meetings have led to a number of positive outputs, including:

- Sector Dashboards: quarterly publications that enable ministers and industry to monitor emerging trends
- A charity-led mentoring scheme for struggling farmers
- An industry-led crisis scheme that has been launched in the Devolved Administrations, and is in development in England
- A successful workshop on farm business succession held in summer 2014.

56. The Welsh Government has an agricultural Contingency Management Plan to look after the interests of agricultural businesses and cover eventualities such as extreme weather events, or driver strikes which prevent milk collections from farms, or feed deliveries. The Plan makes use of Local Intelligence Gatherers to gather evidence of the situation at a local level and, if this is deemed to be sufficiently severe and affecting a geographical area, the information is disseminated and action might be taken at Welsh Government level to help alleviate the situation or event. The Welsh Government also funds a Farm Liaison Service<sup>37</sup> to provide Welsh farmers with confidential, one to one guidance and support on a wide range of topics, including agriculture related schemes and policy areas administered by the Welsh Government.

57. “Talk to me 2: a suicide and self-harm prevention strategy for Wales 2015-2020”<sup>38</sup>, was launched by the Welsh Government in 2015, identifying farmers as a high risk group and rural areas as priority places in which suicide prevention efforts should be focussed.

58. Although not a farmer support group, it is worth noting here the work of the Links Group<sup>39</sup>, which is a multi-agency interest group that aims to raise awareness of the ‘links’ between the abuse of children, vulnerable adults and animals to all professionals, in the hope that agencies will work together to help prevent related cases from going undetected. Amongst other things, the Group has produced advice for vets on recognising abuse in animals and humans.

## **Farmer support mechanisms in other countries**

59. There are a number of examples of early warning systems in other countries. For example, the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health<sup>40</sup> “champions proactive and preventative initiatives to advance mental health in rural and remote communities. The Centre does this by focusing on promotion and awareness-raising, early intervention, identifying problems on the horizon and preventing them where possible.” And the 2011 report ‘Breaking the Silence in Rural Areas’<sup>41</sup> discusses the importance of early warning of mental health problems in Ireland, with reference to good practice in the UK, USA, South Africa and Australasia.

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<sup>37</sup> <http://gov.wales/topics/environmentcountryside/farmingandcountryside/farming/farmliaisonservice/?lang=en>

<sup>38</sup> <http://gov.wales/topics/health/publications/health/reports/talk2/?lang=en>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk/index.htm>

<sup>40</sup> [www.acrmh.com.au](http://www.acrmh.com.au)

<sup>41</sup> Holywell Consultancy 2011 Breaking the Silence in Rural Areas. The Niamh Louise Foundation.

60. Two well-developed programmes particularly emphasise this aspect. In Ireland, the Early Warning/Intervention System<sup>42</sup> (EWS) was introduced in 2004 by the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council involving the Department of Agriculture & Food, the Irish Farmers' Association and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In New Zealand, the Early Response Service<sup>43</sup> was set up by industry body DairyNZ to offer dairy farmers support where animal welfare may be at risk through challenging times.

## Ethical analysis

61. In animal welfare, ethics frequently focuses on the application of moral principles to situations or problems. However, this Opinion is primarily concerned with the wider ethical context within which particular moral decisions are made. Animal welfare and farmer wellbeing go hand in hand. From this relational perspective, welfare, wellbeing and moral worth are not finite goods to be distributed between a farmer and their animals. Rather, a farmer's sense of themselves as a moral agent with moral responsibilities towards their animals is likely to increase as their own objective and subjective wellbeing increase.

62. It is extremely important that farmers and farm workers can participate in a network of support relationships that extend beyond their own farm. Neighbouring farmers, family members, friends, health professionals, agricultural associations, farming support workers, clergy and lay ministers may all have roles in providing support at times of specific difficulty. However, farming is a potentially isolating profession and communities of care need to be promoted on an ongoing basis. These contribute positively to farmers' wellbeing and thereby potentially to animal welfare.

## Conclusions

63. There is a need for a greater awareness and recognition of farmer wellbeing, the factors that might affect it, and the possible consequences for animal welfare. Improved awareness and recognition are likely to lead to earlier detection of difficulties and responses to them. Early identification of problems is often key to preventing them from escalating to more serious levels. As discussed earlier, such warnings might come from the identification of human issues or from indicators of problems with the welfare of the animals. These warnings could be notified by farmers themselves or by others who come into contact with them or their animals.

64. People who observe changes in the behaviour of others, which could suggest that there might be a problem, are often concerned that by saying something they may make matters worse. This is particularly the case where the observer has concerns about the mental wellbeing of the farmer or indeed is concerned that they might be contemplating suicide. It is the experience of FCN and those working in the mental health profession that these fears are unfounded. On the contrary, expressing concern for the individual most often has a very positive impact, demonstrating to the person that someone cares about

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<sup>42</sup> [www.fawac.ie/earlywarningsystemews](http://www.fawac.ie/earlywarningsystemews)

<sup>43</sup> [www.dairyatwork.co.nz/animals/early-response-service](http://www.dairyatwork.co.nz/animals/early-response-service)

their predicament. FCN advises that however difficult it may seem, if you have concerns about another's welfare, it is better to talk to them, ask them how they feel, and whether there is something you can do to help, rather than doing or saying nothing.

65. Programmes designed to address farmer wellbeing, and initiatives intended to safeguard animal welfare, may help both people and animals, as long as there is openness to both outcomes, and mechanisms (including resources) to achieve them. Indeed, early intervention may save resources. It may also be persuasive: for example, farmers may be persuaded to take action early if the risk of escalation, and the possibility of enforcement that could result if the problem is not resolved in its early stages, is pointed out to them.

66. Early warning systems need to be particularly sensitive to appropriate indicators, including those relevant to:

- the farm personnel - for example, age, fitness and bereavement
- the livestock - for example, an understanding of underlying increased animal disease levels
- management - for example, known shifts in the process for registration of animals
- external factors - for example, farm gate prices, influencing farmer behaviour

Other requirements would be common to any support programme: for example, the need to combine confidentiality with the gathering and reporting of information.

67. Many initiatives already exist to support farmers, but there is a need for a joined-up multi-agency approach and the dissemination of best practice. "Farming Help", the banner under which the three national farming charities work, may be well placed to act as the coordinator for communication between all the interested parties dealing with situations where animal welfare incidents are thought to have a strong link to farmer wellbeing concerns.

68. A new 'joint activity' such as this would require adequate and continuing funding. Additionally, in order to establish a close liaison between the agencies involved, funding would be required for advertising, promotional material and support and coordination meetings. In principle, organisations that support the marketing or sale of livestock production or products, including the levy boards, might contribute to the costs of such an initiative. Additionally, companies supplying farm businesses might support this programme as part of their corporate social responsibility.

## **Recommendations**

69. Farmers and others involved in rural communities and businesses should recognise the important interactions between farmer wellbeing and animal welfare. They should feel able to seek relevant support, through identifiable routes, where people are in difficulty and, as a result, are unable to care appropriately for livestock.

70. Government, supported by other agencies and industry stakeholders, should strengthen mechanisms for early warning, on a national basis, of poor or deteriorating farmer wellbeing and the associated possible impacts on farm animal welfare. This could be considered as an overall early warning system similar to those already established in Ireland and New Zealand.
71. Government and its agencies should work more closely with existing farm support networks and commercial and professional organisations, to facilitate early intervention in relation to problems of poor wellbeing of farm personnel which are having impacts on animal welfare. This could take the form of assisting such organisations to formulate protocols of working that might include signposting to other organisations.
72. Support networks should work more closely together, sharing information and best practice where possible and making joint decisions on which agency (or agencies) will take responsibility for each case.
73. Government should work with industry stakeholders and the levy boards to find funding for collaborative farming support networks.
74. Support networks should be given greater publicity so that farmers in all locations know how to seek help if they perceive themselves, other farmers or their animals to be at risk. Such networks might be publicised, for example, via links on government and other websites, in GP surgeries, in veterinary practices, at livestock markets, in farm supply shops, in local newspapers or in agricultural colleges.
75. Those who visit farms (such as farm assurance assessors, vets, feed representatives, rural GPs and government inspectors) should be encouraged and enabled to communicate with relevant organisations if they have concerns that there may be a problem. Education, training and information should be readily available. This could include training as part of agricultural college courses for young farmers. The training should cover the importance of self-care, possible future health problems associated with farming, and where to seek help. Similarly, training could be given as part of degree courses for veterinary students, on recognition of risk factors for client health, and on caring for themselves and their clients as part of their care for animals.
76. Farm assurance scheme standards should include a requirement for contingency planning for labour to care for livestock in the event that the farmer is unable to do so, and also to request evidence that this plan has been tested, to ensure that this is a 'real provision', rather than the listing of a theoretical (but in fact not practicable) back-up.
77. Government and other bodies should commission research to assess the scale of farm personnel wellbeing problems and their links to poor farm animal welfare. This could include a review of existing data sources and an examination of ways to optimise the value of relevant data.
78. Farming bodies should facilitate workshops to encourage farmers to undertake succession planning and to plan for their retirement.
79. Livestock markets should work with local authorities to establish drop-in health facilities.

80. The farming industry and responsible agencies should encourage and help farmers to assess their own ongoing ability to fulfil their duty of care for animals. Mechanisms also need to be considered to identify when a farmer's own self-assessment is insufficient, and to propose appropriate solutions to protect animal welfare, while acknowledging that this is a difficult and sensitive issue.

## **Appendix 1 – FAWC Membership, 2016**

Peter Jinman - Chairman  
Professor Michael Appleby  
Martin Barker  
Professor Henry Buller  
Dr Andy Butterworth  
Dr Joanne Conington  
Richard Cooper  
Huw Davies  
Mike Elliott  
Dr David Grumett  
Dr Maria Carmen Hubbard  
Richard Jennison  
Gwyn Jones  
Richard Kempsey  
Professor Richard Moody  
Mark White  
Steve Wotton

Former FAWC member Professor Richard Bennett, who retired at the end of 2014, was previously the Chairman of the subgroup that prepared this Opinion.

### **Co-opted Member**

Charles Smith – Chief Executive, Farming Community Network

### **FAWC Secretariat**

Richard Aram  
Louise Mulcahy

## **Appendix 2 – Those who gave evidence and assistance**

We would like to thank the following organisations for providing evidence and assistance:

Agricultural Chaplains Association  
Animal and Plant Health Agency  
British Poultry Council  
Countrywide Farmers  
DairyNZ, New Zealand  
Devon Partnership NHS Trust  
Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council, Ireland  
Farming Community Network  
Farming Life Centre  
Links Group  
NHS Somerset Suicide Prevention Advisory Group  
National Farmers Union  
National Sheep Association, Northern Ireland  
Niamh Louise Foundation, Ireland  
NSF International  
Office for National Statistics  
Protestant Farmers Association of Württemberg, Germany  
Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution  
Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution  
RSPCA  
Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)  
University College Dublin's School of Veterinary Medicine  
Veterinary Benevolent Fund



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