



# **Farmers, Farm Workers and Work-Related Stress**

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## **RESEARCH REPORT 362**



# Farmers, Farm Workers and Work-Related Stress

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This research explores the ways in which stress affects farming communities, how this has changed in recent years, and the degree to which work-related aspects of stress may be assuaged by support interventions. A qualitative case study research approach was employed to address these issues, involving 60 interviews in five locations across England and Wales.

In examining farming stress, a distinction is made between its intrinsic, extrinsic and workrelated dimensions. While interviewees tended to associate day-to-day worries and acute stress with farming's intrinsic demands (such as disease and adverse weather conditions), external causes of tension (such as competition and regulation), together with worries about finances and family, were associated with more sustained anxieties. By contrast, work-related aspects of farming stress, such as workload issues and farming practices, involved a combination of physical and mental health effects. Notably, work-related and extrinsic dimensions of stress have increased in recent years in relation to organisational and policy shifts, price fluctuations, mounting paperwork demands, workload intensification, and changes in agricultural regulation. These have prompted an escalation in the aspects of their work that farming communities feel powerless to control, and represent a major area for policy intervention.

Principal farmers displayed the most visible manifestations of stress, linked at once to the intrinsic, extrinsic and work-related dimensions of their work. By contrast, family farm workers and labourers often lacked autonomy over the way they worked, and work-related aspects of stress concerning workload and organisation made up a greater part of their experience. Increased paperwork demands emerged as a major cause of stress among interviewees, particularly for farmers and their wives, who struggled to balance these with traditional farming priorities. Differences between farms were also influential in explaining stress. Livestock farming embodied intrinsic pressures relating to stock crises and the unpredictability of animals, but more recently has come under intense economic pressure, prompting a rationalisation of working practices. Arable farmers found the organisation of activities, such as harvesting and planting, in a context of reduced and increasingly contractual workforces particularly challenging. Mixed farmers faced the dual stresses of balancing work activities with conflicting timetables, and the paperwork demands of a complex portfolio of farming. Smaller farms were struggled with intensified workloads, while larger enterprises had to comply with the demands of more inspection regimes.

Support agencies need to overcome the stigma attached to asking for help among farming communities and offer a range of responsive and proactive services. Locally based support was more likely to be used and trusted, although concerns about client confidentiality might deter those most in need from seeking help. Where existing local networks were established, there was a strong argument for providers to plug into these and work towards publicising their efforts to ensure that support is provided most effectively. Critically, support must be multidimensional, reflecting the wide range of stressors and their impacts among farming communities.

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: FARMERS, FARM WORKERS AND WORK-RELATED STRESS**

## **INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This report presents findings from qualitative research undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) during 2004 on behalf of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). This research was commissioned to explore the ways in which stress affects farming communities, how this has changed in recent years, and the extent to which work-related aspects of stress can be disaggregated from broader characteristics of the farming experience, in assessing the kinds of support interventions likely to be most useful. Farmers, their spouses and farm workers have been documented as having high suicide rates, and the variety of ways in which stress may be manifested and supported is of obvious interest from a health perspective. Research to date, however, has focused largely on farmers' experiences, and has concentrated less on how stress affects farming communities more widely, or on the relationship between work-related and more extrinsic causes of stress. The holistic perspective taken by this research has enabled it to examine the effects of stress in relation to people's different roles on farms.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative case study research approach was employed to address these issues. Interviews were conducted with 60 key informants and members of farming communities in five locations across England and Wales: Devon, Hampshire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire and Powys. These interviews captured key differences in geographical location, types of farming and size of farming enterprises, and included people who worked on farms in a variety of roles.

## **FARMING WORK**

Interviewees confirmed that a farming occupational identity consisted of various inter-twined skills, at the centre of which was adaptability. Farmers' attachment to farms was often intense, particularly when these had been in families for generations, and they were committed to sustaining them through hard times. Interviewees emphasised that occupational satisfaction was tied up with a love of the work. Farming tended to be conceptualised as a lifestyle rather than a job, with family and housing linked to the work. Self-employment was a highly valued aspect, in terms of the autonomy it gave farmers to organise their own work, although with this came the burden of worrying about the future. Interviewees emphasised the unique work ethic and long hours culture of those who farmed. This had implications for working conditions, such as sick and annual leave, and thus potentially for health.

The farm women interviewed mainly identified as 'farmers' wives' rather than 'farmers', regardless of their involvement in farm labour. This raised an important contrast between 'farmers' wives', who were regarded as having a distinctive occupational identity supporting farmers' work, and 'the wives of farmers', who worked in alternative professions. The extent of farmers' wives work was often underplayed, and included domestic and childcare responsibilities, traditional farm labour, managing paperwork, and running diversification businesses. Gendered expectations extended into acquisition patterns, with family farms largely passed down along male lines: this created tensions where generational outlooks clashed.

## CHANGES IN FARMING EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

In recent years, farming has undergone changes that have transformed its day-to-day work. A common perception was that larger farms had been more successful in adapting than smaller family-run farms. Certain *types* of farming (such as dairy farming) have become less profitable, leading to changes in the composition of farms. Interviewees repeatedly spoke of an intensification of farming practices in response to falling returns, and the diminished sense of control they exercised over their work. Partly in response to farming's reduced profitability, a number of the farms studied had expanded into diversification activities. Mechanisation has qualitatively transformed farmers' day-to-day work, as has the growing regulation of the industry. Agricultural crises such as the BSE and FMD outbreaks have had acute regionalised effects as well as longer-term implications for livestock farming.

The biggest change in farming has been the fall in the use and availability of farm labour, as traditional labourers have found greater recompense in other sectors, and as farms have rationalised their labour forces. Migrant labour has made up some of this shortfall, together with contract labour. Other strategies have included farmers combining working on their own farms with seasonal contract work, and informal systems of labour exchange. Other farms have intensified their workload, while others again have been forced out of business. The ways in which farms adapted was linked to their size and flexibility. The farmers that had responded most effectively were those with a business perspective, who were able to adapt and continually reassess farming practices in relation to economic pressures. For many, this represented an uncomfortable culture shift in the way that they farmed.

One of the most tangible ways in which interviewees' work had changed was in terms of a heightened administrative workload, prompted by increased regulation and an expansion of subsidy payment systems. This highlighted disparities between farmers, disadvantaging those with fewer resources to invest in IT equipment and those with literacy issues. The research also uncovered significant evidence that young people are deterred from following their parents into agriculture, which increases the pressures upon remaining farming communities.

## STRESS

The stresses of farming work had a number of effects upon interviewees' physical and mental well-being. The most common of these were a lack of sleep, back problems, worrying about work, irritability and feeling down. Despite considerable evidence of occupationally-related illness, little sick leave was taken and stigma was attached to talking about mental health. Workload intensity, the non-controllability of certain aspects of farming (such as disease and seasonality), and insecure futures were major factors in these symptoms, which were raised throughout farming communities, although principal farmers worried most about the future and finances.

Stress was not always framed in health terms, and was sometimes regarded as a positive or constant force, motivating people to devise solutions to problems and providing stimulation. Nor did stress have a universal meaning; some avoided the term altogether, or preferred to talk about frustration, anxiety or worry. In terms of how farming embodies a number of stressors, the report makes a three-fold analytical distinction, considering these in terms of aspects that are intrinsic to the work of farming, more extrinsic features, and directly work-related characteristics of stress. Less directly linked to the work of farming, but tied up in farming lifestyles, were stresses involving family tensions and financial problems.

**Intrinsic aspects of farming stress** were sometimes intensely worrying but were also part of interviewees' traditional expectations about the challenges inherent in farming. They included:

seasonality and the difficulties presented by adverse weather conditions; and stock crises and disease, including the BSE and FMD outbreaks.

Pressures relating to **extrinsic dimensions of agricultural stress** were mainly an issue for principal farmers who took more strategic and managerial roles. These stressors included: the current legislative and political framework; the media and public perceptions of farmers; and competitive forces and the prices that could be achieved for produce.

**Work-related aspects of stress in farming** emerged as important, and applied to interviewees in a range of roles. These included: potentially dangerous farming practices; workload and organisation; the work activities related to particular types of farming and their busy periods (such as lambing and silage-making); rising paperwork demands; and tensions associated with family farms and acquisition. Of these, psychosocial hazards assumed particular significance: the aspects of work concerned with its organisation or management that were potentially harmful to farming communities; paperwork was the most commonly-cited cause of stress.

While interviewees tended to associate day-to-day worries and acute periods of stress with intrinsic aspects of farming, external causes of tension, together with worries about finances and family, were associated with more sustained anxiety. By contrast, work-related aspects of farming stress involved a combination of physical and mental health effects, and consequently had measurable impacts, such as exhaustion and workplace injuries.

## **COPING STRATEGIES AND SUPPORT**

Interviewees utilised a variety of personal resources, formal and informal sources of support, and styles of coping in responding to the stresses associated with their farming work. Having time for relaxation, to pursue leisure activities and see friends socially, provided an important counter to the pressures of work. The latter also often encompassed an important source of emotional support and information. Preferences for more formal sources of support included local agricultural groups, the NFU and TFA, and trusted local vets and doctors. A strong emphasis was placed upon having a supportive family, who were uniquely placed to understand the demands of farming lifestyles, and farmers' wives played an important role in emotional caretaking. However, there was also evidence of farm women lacking normative support routes, and the intensive support demands placed upon families could provide a cause of strain. Notwithstanding this, farmers lacking close families or who are geographically isolated may be more vulnerable in coping with stress.

One coping style particularly well-placed to adapt to the stresses of modern farming was a problem-solving disposition, an orientation that emphasised time management and forward planning. Notably, while these interviewees emphasised the business side of farming and concentrated on such aspects, others focused on the intrinsic work of farming, which they threw themselves into to divert from protracted worrying. For the latter group, who were more averse to talking about their problems, there was a danger that their health would suffer if stresses persisted. While personal dispositions and resources played an important role in how interviewees responded to difficulties, often coping styles were passed on through families.

Contact with governmental representatives of farming, such as the HSE and DEFRA, was generally infrequent and linked to specific issues, such as paperwork submissions or inspections. Interviewees tended to regard these in terms of enforcement rather than support. Most expressed a preference for support organisations or individuals who were known to them locally, and who were felt to be very familiar with farming, such as the old agricultural advisory service. There was little evidence of knowledge of the stress-based agricultural support organisations operating at a local level, and the stigma attached to not coping with pressure

emerged as a major reason why support may not be sought until difficulties have become quite entrenched.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Recent changes in farming have often clashed with communities' expectations, and have increased their stress levels in measurable ways. This has been particularly the case for work-related and extrinsic dimensions of stress, including price fluctuations, mounting paperwork demands, workload intensification, and changes in agricultural regulation. These have caused a qualitative escalation in the aspects of their work which farming communities feel powerless to control or influence, and represent a major area for policy intervention.

Principal farmers displayed both the most prolonged and acute manifestations of stress, linked at once to the intrinsic, extrinsic and work-related dimensions of their work (though extrinsic and financial factors were particular sources of concern). By contrast, family farm workers and labourers tended to lack autonomy over the way they worked, and work-related aspects of stress concerning workload and organisation made up a greater part of their experience. Intrinsic characteristics, such as stock crises, were a particular issue for farm women, second generation farmers and farm workers, who often established a strong bond with their stock. Farm women also took on the emotional stress of worrying about their families' welfare, and were increasingly managing paperwork burdens. Meanwhile, acquisition issues could be a major source of stress for younger farmers, where they lacked a voice in decision making and experienced prolonged economic dependency. Work-related aspects of farming stress thus provide a vital focal point for policy, because they affect everyone working on farms, have measurable impacts upon health, and, being organisationally-based, offer particular potential for stress management interventions.

Differences between farms were influential in explaining stress. Livestock farming embodied intrinsic pressures relating to stock crises and the unpredictability of animals. However, recent changes have impacted strongly upon its work-related and extrinsic dimensions, putting livestock farmers under intense economic pressure and forcing them to rationalise and transform their working practices. Arable farmers, by contrast, were finding the organisation of activities, such as harvesting and planting, within a context of reduced and increasingly contractual workforces particularly challenging. Mixed farmers faced the dual stresses of balancing work activities with potentially conflicting timetables, and wrestling with the paperwork demands of a complex portfolio of farming. Smaller farms were struggled with intensified workloads, while larger enterprises had to comply with the demands of more inspection regimes.

Support agencies need to overcome the stigma attached to asking for help among farming communities and offer a range of responsive and proactive services. Locally based support was more likely to be used and trusted, although this raised issues about client confidentiality which might deter those most in need from seeking help. Where existing local networks were established, there was a strong argument for providers to plug into these and work towards publicising their efforts to ensure that support is provided most effectively. The variability in farming communities' preferences for support also suggests that partnership approaches, that enable access to a range of services through a single point of contact, are likely to be most successful.

Critically, support must be multi-dimensional, reflecting the wide range of stressors and their impacts among farming communities. This research has identified a number of important roles and challenges for key players, some of which are already under way.

For the HSE these include:

- working through its image and role with farming communities, balancing its enforcement role with publicity for its free advice;
- enhancing its educative role, for example, in terms of providing life-long, business-focused, and stress management training, in flexible formats and with participation incentives; and
- developing its guidance role. This might include developing accessible health and safety information to support farmers, building advisory services to help farmers develop alternative working structures, and expanding awareness and accessibility of existing initiatives.

Government more broadly was felt to have an important role to play in:

- streamlining the multiple agencies that regulate farming;
- providing political leadership during times of agricultural crisis;
- taking action on price regulation;
- simplifying, coordinating, and improving the quality of administrative systems and their supporting helplines;
- providing robust information on impending policy changes to enable farming communities to respond to these;
- enhancing its educative role in terms of public information campaigns and promoting careers advice to the next generation of farmers; and
- offering retirement advice and support to people who have worked in non traditional organisational environments throughout their lives.



# 1. THE FARMING AND STRESS PROJECT

## 1.1 POLICY CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION

In late 2003, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) commissioned the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) to conduct qualitative research exploring the ways in which stress affects farmers, farmers' families and farm workers. Research on farmers and stress to date has largely consisted of quantitative surveys focusing on farmers' experiences, and relatively little attention had been devoted to farm workers and family members. Whilst it has highlighted the range of stressors that farmers are exposed to, these have not been disaggregated from other non-work related factors.

In order that the HSE is able to better identify and respond to causes of stress in the agricultural industry, PSI has conducted qualitative research with key informants and farming communities in five contrasting locations across England and Wales. These have captured key differences in terms of geographical location and types of farming, and included part-time farm workers and family members as well as owners and managers of farms. A key objective of the research has been to explore the potential value of interventions for reducing work-related stress within the farming industry.

This issue is of particular interest to the HSE, which has identified stress as one of its priority programmes. Agriculture is an industry with a high incidence of accidents and ill health, a characteristic that may be related to workplace stress. One of the more extreme consequences of stress, suicide, has also been identified by the World Health Organisation and the UK's Department of Health as a priority issue (Department of Health, 1999).

The Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis and more recent outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) have drawn public attention to some causes of stress for farmers and those working in the agricultural industry. These events have added to ongoing problems of financial insecurity, and a context of rapidly changing legislative requirements and government and European Union (EU) guidelines and policies. While research has drawn attention to a high suicide rate among the farming profession, there is a need for an increased focus on less acute and longer-term experiences of stress, in terms of both prevention and supporting a *range* of needs. The research described in this report takes up these issues and looks at various sources of stress, drawing out differences between types and sizes of farming enterprise.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND

It is not the purpose of this report to provide a comprehensive literature review on farming and stress (which would replicate work specially commissioned for this purpose), rather to present empirical findings. This chapter sets the context for our research findings by providing an overview of the key texts covering this field and identifies critical gaps in the knowledge base.

### 1.2.1 Occupational stress and definitions and measurements of stress

The HSE defines stress as '*the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them*' (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm>), and ranks it as the UK's second biggest occupational health problem. Smith *et al.*'s (2000) Bristol Stress and Health at Work Study, conducted for the HSE, found that one in five of its respondents were suffering from high levels of occupational stress, the effects of which were manifest in terms of



health complaints, disrupted family life, and elevated levels of sick leave and workplace accidents.

However, stress is a slippery concept and one that has tended to be employed within the context of occupational health, although it is simultaneously used in more popular terminology, where it encompasses a range of both positive and negative effects. It is notoriously difficult to measure the effects of stress, since these vary enormously at an individual level, being affected by material and social resources, personality factors, the chronic versus acute nature of potential stressors, and ranging from low-level dissatisfaction and anomie to acute mental illness, violence and suicide. Stress may also be presented differently, or intentionally concealed, and cultural factors may be important in this.

Nevertheless, a number of medical, and in particular psychological, models have been developed to provide comparative baselines, which have been applied to a variety of occupations. Reflecting their development of these within particular organisational environments, these have tended to relate most directly to an office-based working experience. The average number of sick days recorded by individuals working for an organisation is often taken to be a proxy measure of occupational stress; for instance, Rees estimated that 270,000 people are absent from work every day in the UK due to stress-related problems (1997). However, sick leave provides less comparability for occupations where self-employment and contracting are common practice. Palmer (1989) has suggested that the balance tips from stress being a positive to a damaging force when low or high levels of stress are experienced over a sustained period, and that the capacity of individuals to cope with stress is highly variable.

Stress has also been researched from the perspective of a number of different disciplines (medical sciences, geography, sociology), but to date there has been little attempt to draw findings together synthetically.

## **1.2.2 Farming, rurality and change**

Farming lifestyles and practices, together with the nature of rural life, have undergone dramatic change in recent decades, transformations that are explored in more detail in chapter four. The proportion of the workforce employed in farming has shrunk by a quarter in just the past ten years.<sup>1</sup> The main studies on farming stress have concentrated on the period from the mid 1990s through to the aftermath of the Foot and Mouth outbreak of 2001, a time of particularly consequential economic and social change for UK farming (Lobley *et al.*, 2004). These changes have a number of implications for the day-to-day experience of farming, which potentially make it more stressful.

The operation of individual farms has also been influenced by farm women's increased tendency to take on jobs in outside industries (Whatmore, 1991). The rising use of migrant workers to substitute for shortfalls in traditional agricultural labour markets, has been described by the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) in its recent research as "*a modern-day slave trade*" (CAB, 2004).

While many of the people interviewed spoke of the 'long hours culture' of farming (see later chapters), it is likely that this has been intensified by the restructuring of farming, particularly for smaller enterprises which have attempted to absorb inflationary costs with a reduced or static workforce. This is likely to have health and safety implications, and to have an effect upon farmers' relationships with their families. Another major change in farming has been the regulatory process, which has required a shift in farmers' emphasis towards administration and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/quick/agri.asp>

financial management. High-profile recent crises in farming, such as BSE and FMD have had lasting consequences on the industry, reducing the workforce as some farmers bowed out, and transforming subsequent farming practices. However, these effects have been heavily regionalised (see section 4.8) and have principally impacted upon livestock farmers.

### 1.2.3 Stress in the agricultural industry

Stress in the agricultural sector has posed a particular challenge for researchers and policy makers, since farming operates in an unusual organisational context: one that lacks the frameworks (such as personnel departments and hierarchies of line management) within which traditional stress management techniques have operated.

A key text in this area is Lobley *et al.*'s (2004) recent review of the rural stress literature, which was commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs's (DEFRA) Rural Stress Action Plan Working Group and the Rural Stress Information Network (RSIN) to provide a comprehensive picture of the work in the field over the past 15 years. The distinction between rural and farming stress is a crucial one. While Lobley *et al.*'s review found a paucity of rural stress literature, and that most of the research body consisted of occupational studies of farming, it does not follow that studies of farming stress will also cover issues of rural stress: farming has a range of geographic contexts in the UK, some of which are more accurately described as semi-rural or urban fringe.

There are a number of factors that the literature has consistently identified as making farming a distinctively stressful occupation. Causes of agricultural stress include: mounting paperwork and regulation demands; diminishing returns and financial problems; the political climate; workload and time pressures; disease and acute crises; seasonality and adverse weather conditions; mechanical failures; family problems; health problems; acquisition and transferral issues; security; isolation; and negative press coverage. Prioritising these, Simkin *et al.* (1998) identified problems with record-keeping and paperwork, difficulty understanding forms, and problems arising from the effects of new legislation and regulations as the main causes of stress for farmers (measured through a survey of National Farmers' Union (NFU) and Farmers' Union of Wales (FUW) members). They also found that about a quarter of farmers were experiencing financial problems, almost 80 percent worried about money, and that susceptibility to financial problems was particularly linked to smaller and mixed farming enterprises, and to Welsh farmers. Some of these stressors may be exacerbated by farmers' traditionally long working hours (Simkin *et al.* (1998) found that 70% worked more than ten hours' a day), practices that are exaggerated in particular kinds of farms. Similarly, Phelps's (2001) survey of the HSE's Safety Awareness Day attendees found that farmers' main stressors were government policy and legislation (including paperwork demands), financial problems, and time pressures.

Other studies have suggested that financial issues provide the greatest stressor for farmers, but that hazardous working conditions and geographical isolation are also significant concerns (Eberhardt and Pooyan, 1990; McGregor *et al.*, 1995). Similarly Hawton *et al.*'s (1998) survey of NFU and FUW members found that the majority of respondents worried about money (arable and larger farmers less so), and about the changing demands of record-keeping and paperwork (particularly mixed farmers, for whom these were potentially more complex). They also suggested that the blurred boundaries between farmers' home and working lives made it difficult to escape from occupational problems. Hawton *et al.*'s research found that particular risk groups included smaller farms, and those that did not benefit from subsidies, such as pig farmers and horticultural enterprises. One of the rarer qualitative studies of agricultural stress (research conducted in North Yorkshire), found that farmers perceived the occupation as becoming ever more stressful, and that key factors in this were paperwork, finances and the

BSE scare (Raine, 1999). Less attention has been devoted to the nuances of how these factors affect farming communities, and may impact on farmers, farm workers, and farmers' families in different and distinctive ways.

Occupational studies of stress have repeatedly identified farmers as a high risk group. Hawton *et al.* (1998) found that farmers were the fourth highest occupational group<sup>2</sup> in terms of mortality ratios for suicide and open verdicts (particularly smaller farmers), and that 20 per cent had visited their GP over the previous month. Farmers' wives and farm workers also have a higher than average suicide risk (Kelly *et al.*, 1995), a finding that is backed up by psychological autopsy studies (Malmberg *et al.*, 1997). In fact, farmers' wives had the highest suicide rate of any occupational group (Kelly *et al.*, 1995) and Walker and Walker (1987) found that farm women consistently reported higher levels of stress than farm men. While robust social support is positively linked to mental health (Cobb, 1976), farming may nevertheless be a particularly stressful occupation for couples. The boundaries between work and family are often blurred for couples who farm together (Melberg, 2003; Weigel and Weigel, 1987), leading to potential role conflict and a lack of distinguishable leisure time. Relatedly, studies of two-generational farms found that younger farmers scored particularly highly on family stress scales and pointed to unmet support issues (Weigel *et al.*, 1987; Wilson *et al.*, 1991), issues which are taken up in chapter five.

It has been inferred that the high suicide rates associated with farming are indicative of the stress currently faced within the occupation (Dillner, 1994). Additionally, Thomas *et al.*'s (2003) research with farmers using the Revised Clinical Interview Schedule found that farmers had a lower than average level of psychiatric problems, but raised levels of suicidal thoughts, and that this was particularly the case amongst rural and semi-rural households. Given Eisner *et al.*'s (1998) reported raised levels of anxiety and depression among male farmers, Thomas *et al.*'s former finding may be linked to the stigma attached to depression and asking for help amongst these communities (Simkin *et al.*, 1998). Corroborating this, a Canadian survey (Walker and Walker, 1987) found that farmers scored higher than non-farmers on a range of stress-related symptoms, including chronic tiredness, difficulty relaxing, forgetfulness, loss of temper, problems concentrating, back pain and sleep disruption. A further finding of their research was that mixed and dairy farmers scored higher on these symptoms than arable ones. While their findings should be considered in the context of national characteristics, McGregor *et al.*'s (1995) UK survey of farmers attending various agricultural shows similarly found that livestock farmers suffered higher levels of stress than arable farmers, with dairy farmers having particularly raised levels.

Booth and Lloyd's (1999) survey of farmers' occupational stress, conducted in the South West of England, uncovered a relatively high score on the General Health Questionnaire<sup>3</sup>, which notably was raised among women farmers; that is, occupational stress was even higher among farming women than farming men. Furthermore, a significant proportion of their respondents scored highly on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale, and the authors uncovered a link between psychological distress and ill-health and family problems. The main stressors for farmers identified in Booth and Lloyd's work were new legislation, paperwork and media criticism of agricultural communities. Similarly, Deary *et al.*'s (1997) research, one of the larger-scale surveys of UK farmers, found that stress was linked to government legislation and increased bureaucracy.

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<sup>2</sup> Ranking only below vets, pharmacists and dentists, all groups who have access to potentially lethal drugs, and notably like farmers, occupations that have a strong link to self-employment (see chapter three).

<sup>3</sup> A 12-item standardised indicator of psychiatric morbidity used in many national and international population surveys.

Studies of acute stress have included the effects of BSE in the mid 1990s and the FMD outbreak of 2001, and their resultant legislation and financial consequences. Peck *et al.* (2002) found that farmers affected by FMD scored higher on psychological morbidity, and were more likely to turn to their own communities and to local vets than conventional sources of support, and that they desired further social and health support in anonymised formats. Hawton *et al.*'s (1998) psychological autopsy study uncovered reluctance among farmers to come forward to discuss their support needs, linked to a fear that personal problems could become known locally. However, suicides had also tended to talk about their intention before committing the act, suggesting a possibility for intervention. Hawton *et al.* pointed to the cumulative effect of problems in predicting farmers' risk of suicide.

In recognition of the particular stresses faced by rural communities, in 1990 the Samaritans launched their Rural Initiative, the profile of which has been raised by a number of County Rural Initiatives. The support services and representation available specifically to farming communities have also subtly, and more radically, shifted in recent years. The old Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) has become the Farming and Rural Conversation Agency. In 1993 the Rural Stress Working Group was established following a Department of Health approach to the National Farmers' Union (NFU), as was the Rural Stress Information Network (RSIN) in 1996. Rural Minds constitutes a partnership between the Department of Health and Mind, designed to improve the mental health of people living in isolated areas. At a strategic level, the collective Rural Stress Working Group involves representatives from a number of member organisations<sup>4</sup>, and is active in policy action planning, publicity-raising, promoting networking between relevant organisations, as well as in funding local initiatives and demonstration projects with rural aims.

### 1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Our research has sought to explore whether those working in the agricultural industry have experienced qualitatively more stress in recent years, in what ways, and to identify key differences in terms of occupational roles and types of farming. A key policy objective has been to explore the potential value of interventions for reducing the risk of work related stress.

The project has thus set out to address three broad issues:

- to provide a more in-depth study of the stress-related experiences of this group of workers than has previously been attempted: one that draws out some of the key differences between farmers and farm workers in different regions of the UK, and those working on a range of different sizes and types of farm.
- to identify areas of farming and agricultural work where stress is caused by the nature of the work being performed, and to highlight the flash points where stress occurs and the factors that contribute to it. It looks at all the work that is carried out on a particular farm, including diversification businesses, domestic and emotional labour.
- to explore with farmers and farm workers a number of interventions that may be used to tackle work-related stress in the industry and to look at ways that stress might be reduced through the promotion of health and safety strategies that seek to reduce the risk of work-related stress.

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<sup>4</sup> The Rural Stress Working Group includes representation from DEFRA, RSIN, Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institute, NFU, the Arthur Rank Centre, ARC Addington Fund, Country Land and Business Association, Farm Crisis Network, Tenant Farmers' Association, Transport and General Workers' Union, Mind, the Samaritans, Citizens' Advice, Institute of Rural Health, Government Offices, Rural Development Service, and Department for Health (Wooller, 2004).

## 1.4 METHODOLOGY

These issues have been addressed through a qualitative case study research approach. Much of the existing literature in the field has relied upon survey evidence to develop baseline measurements of agricultural stress. A qualitative perspective enables us to focus upon key emergent issues identified in existing research, and to explore these in greater depth, looking at the processes and reasons behind particular attitudes and expectations. Qualitative research is also particularly well-suited to exploring areas of future policy development, which can be tested and retested in subsequent stages of the research process.

In order to identify and explore stressors within the agricultural industry, sixty qualitative interviews were conducted with both key informants (see section 1.4.1 below) and farmers in five locations in England and Wales. These areas were strategically chosen in consultation with the HSE to represent differences in terms of geographical areas and type of farming, and to include farm workers and family members as well as owners and managers.

In terms of key differences between the five case study areas, which made them interesting contrasts for the research, DEFRA statistics indicated that they typically represented distinctive types of farming:

- Powys: cattle and sheep
- Devon: dairy
- Lincolnshire: arable
- Lancashire: dairy, cattle and sheep, pigs and poultry
- Hampshire: arable and mixed farming

Interviews with key informants<sup>5</sup> at the outset of the research provided the research team with a more detailed overview of the range of agricultural features associated with each of these areas, knowledge which informed the subsequent sampling strategy. Further details of the characteristics of the areas where research was conducted are provided in chapter two.

### 1.4.1 Key informant interviews

Thirteen interviews were conducted with a range of key informants, in addition to less formal consultation via email and short telephone conversations. The interviews with key informants were necessarily wide-ranging in scope, covering personnel working in a wide variety of organisations with very different briefs. In broad terms these covered: background information on organisations and stress remit; reflections upon stress in the agricultural industry; and policy issues. A pro-forma topic guide used in these interviews is provided in Appendix 1.

We spoke to representatives from a wide variety of organisations dealing with agricultural communities, and to staff at both national and regional levels. These included the Rural Stress Information Network (RSIN), National Farmers' Union (NFU), Farm Crisis Network (FCN), the principal of an agricultural college, vets, community support workers, clergy, and academics.

It became immediately apparent through our area-based research approach that the ways in which organisations worked together on stress varied locally, with different organisations taking the lead in ways that reflected their establishment and reputation in the area. There was a distinction to be made in the way that support was targeted between organisations, such as

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<sup>5</sup> Key informants were individuals who worked with, provided support to and/or represented farming communities in some way, through a range of national and local organisations and partnerships.

RSIN, that worked with rural communities more broadly, and those, such as NFU and FCN, that focused upon people working in agriculture. Reflecting these different arrangements, the lead organisation and the relative profile of RSIN within partnerships, there tended to be a greater or lesser use of stress terminology.

#### **1.4.2 Sampling for interviews with farming communities**

While our original intention had been that once suitable farms were identified, that letters introducing the research and inviting participation would be sent out, consultation with key informants suggested that such a strategy was not appropriate for the research communities being investigated. Firstly, key informants emphasised that a key stress issue for farming communities was an abundance of paperwork, and that additional written demands would be likely add to these (presenting an ethical issue) and, furthermore, go unanswered. Suspicion of the HSE was likely to exacerbate this tension. Secondly, the significant issue of literacy amongst farming communities meant that a written approach would automatically exclude a proportion of the research sample: one that was likely to have important support needs.

We consequently decided on a sampling strategy whereby following interviews with key informants, we drew up an overview of the kind of farm characteristics that reflected each area. These were presented to key informants for verification, who then acted as facilitators in providing introductions to examples of such farms. Farms' details were passed to us where farmers had indicated that they were willing for such action to take place (thus dealing with data confidentiality issues), and we then approached farming communities directly (through the phone), introducing the research and, where they were willing to be interviewed, setting up mutually convenient appointments. In order to ensure that we avoided the issue of simply interviewing the membership or users of a particular organisation, different approaches were used in each area: via Farm Crisis Network, an agricultural support group, a local Rural Stress group, the National Farmers' Union, and in one area, through personal contacts. In all cases, key informants were briefed that we were looking to interview not only the range of different types of farmers in their area, but also both farmers who had experienced problems in the past and those who appeared to be coping with potential stress without significant difficulties.

This sampling process necessarily took some time since it involved a large amount of trust-building with local support organisations and farming communities, but it enabled us to ensure that the interview sample we developed was broadly representative of the range of issues likely to be found within local farming communities, and that issues raised in earlier interviews could be picked up in later ones. We aimed for three case study farms in each area, with an average of three interviews conducted on each of these, although this varied to reflect the availability of personnel for meetings and differences in the ways that individual farms were staffed.

The case study element to this approach has involved taking a holistic perspective on farms, studying the labour that goes on within and across them from the perspective of all those who work on farms, to explore how agricultural labour may encompass qualitatively different types of stressors, and reflecting the multitude of ways in which farm labour is organised within the industry. For example then, a case studied farm might include interviews with the main farmer, his father or son who also farms, his wife, and with any additional farm labourers employed by the farm.

In addition to the key informant interviews, 42 qualitative interviews were conducted with members of farming communities, identified in the ways outlined above. Some of this group's key characteristics are outlined below:

**Table 1** Age profile of interview sample

<i>Under 30</i>	<i>31-45</i>	<i>46-65</i>	<i>66+</i>	<i>Total</i>
7	12	19	4	42

**Table 2** Gender profile of interview sample

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
31	11

**Table 3** Marital status of interview sample

<i>Married/ cohabiting</i>	<i>Non-married</i>
33	9

**Table 4** Type of interviewees

<i>Farmers</i>	<i>Farmers' families/secondary farmers (wives and adult children working on the farm)</i>	<i>Farm workers (employees/contracted staff, not family)</i>	<i>Total</i>
18	22	2	42

### 1.4.3 Interviews with farming communities

A flexible topic guide was developed which included a mixture of structured, semi-structured and more open-ended questions, with routing to enable the format of individual interviews to be tailored to reflect interviewees' different experiences (see Appendix 2). For example, signposting was designed to make it possible to adapt interviews to probe the rather different experiences of farmers, farmers' wives and farm workers. The interview schedule covered background material on individual farms, interviewees' farming histories, their feelings about farming as an occupation, information on finances and relationships, health and physical effects of farming, future expectations, and policy suggestions

In order to engage with the range of meanings associated with 'stress', the topic guide was designed to capture occupational health based definitions of stress, in addition to the more subjective associations that people may make with it, and to explore alternative terminology. To provide comparability, a subsample of relevant questions (that is, questions appropriate to the organisational context of farming) were included from Jones *et al.*'s (1999) report for the HSE on self-reported work-related illness.

Issues explored in the interviews included:

- why and how particular situations are experienced as stressful;
- how stress affects individuals and their families;
- what kinds of factors can reduce or exacerbate stress;
- how people respond to and cope with stress;
- the kinds of support that individuals and communities would find most helpful.

A team of five qualitative interviewers worked on the project, each taking responsibility for interviewing in one geographical area, in order to build up an in-depth knowledge of the particular issues associated with that region. For each interview that took place, the researcher

responsible for conducting that interview also produced fieldwork notes, which covered the kind of contextual and visual information which was unlikely to be produced through the interview transcript. For example, fieldwork notes described any unusual features of the interview, provided a brief biographical summary of the interviewee's experiences and attitudes, and included notes on where the interview took place, any pertinent off-tape discussions, and feelings about how particular questions did or did not work.

Interviews ranged in length from about three-quarters of an hour to three hours, depending on interviewees' interests and time demands, and averaged an hour and a half. All interviews were tape-recorded, with interviewees' consent, and transcribed verbatim. All interviews took place either in individuals' homes, or (for farm workers) at a suitably private location at the farm where they worked. They were organised at interviewees' convenience, which necessarily meant that the research team had to fit in with seasonal demands, and a significant proportion were held in the evening. A £20 gift was provided in recognition of the time that interviewees had devoted to speaking to us.

#### **1.4.4 Ethical issues**

In consultation with the HSE's ethics committee, we developed a research protocol which involved providing research participants with both written and verbal explanations of what the research was about and what the research process entailed (see Appendix 3 for documentation). Participants were assured of anonymity, and it was explained that they were under no obligation to answer any questions, and were free to request the tape be stopped at any time if they wished to disclose particularly sensitive information.

Reflecting the fact that considering stress might be likely to prompt interviewees to assess their own experiences and whether they required additional support, following the interviews with key informants, an area summary was developed for each of the five areas. This included details of local community and agricultural support organisations and officers, information which could then be passed onto interviewees at researchers' discretion. This strategy was deployed in several circumstances.

#### **1.4.5 Analysis**

All transcripts, fieldwork notes and other relevant electronic documentation was imported into NVivo, a software package designed to analyse qualitative material. A coding framework was developed which consisted of both 'free nodes' (codes which reflected conceptual themes) and 'tree nodes' (codes reflecting the structure of the topic guide), which were used to categorise and sort individual transcripts (see Appendix 4). Each transcript was then analysed both individually, and as part of a case study farm, as well as in comparison to similar kinds of interviews (such as farmers' wives, or dairy farmers, or Devon interviewees, or small farmers).

#### **1.4.6 Anonymity**

Interviewees were all assigned a multi-digit unique identifier, which was used on their associated research documentation, including tapes, transcripts and fieldwork notes. This label was then converted into a pseudonym for the purposes of the report, each of which was checked against interviewees' real names to ensure that no names were duplicated. Both first and second-level pseudonyms were thus assigned, in order to highlight family relationships between interviewees. Any resemblance to living individuals is therefore purely coincidental.



Key informants are described in broad terms, since references to local organisations would make them identifiable, and it was important that they felt able to speak frankly about the issues and policy development without fear of repercussions.

Throughout the report, case studies presenting the material from interviewees working on individual farms are used to illustrate key differences and similarities in farming communities' experiences. This material is presented anonymously, with identifying characteristics removed or disguised. Quotations are used to illustrate our findings, and where these are presented they are representative of a theme or viewpoint that characterised the research (and any isolated cases are identified as such).

## **1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

This report considers the findings of our research with key informants and members of farming communities in the five areas where research was conducted. The report is divided into the following sections, and is supplemented by a number of appendices providing additional research information:

- Chapter two introduces the case study dimension of this research, providing an outline of the five distinctive areas that were studied, and building a profile of the different types of farms where research was carried out.
- Chapter three starts to present the material from the interviews with farming communities, by looking at what it has meant to people to work in farming and their expectations for the lifestyle.
- Chapter four explores the various ways in which farming has changed in recent years, qualitatively transforming interviewees' experience of work on both a day-to-day basis and over the longer term.
- Chapter five explores the concept of stress, relating it to various intrinsic, extrinsic and work-related aspects of farming, to different types of farming practice, and different occupational roles. The chapter looks at the health implications of stress, as well as broader individual and social consequences.
- Chapter six examines interviewees' coping strategies and the kinds of support that farming communities have mobilised in response to stress, drawing out strategies that have been more or less successful, and scrutinising issues around asking for help and personal resources.
- Chapter seven develops the findings presented in preceding chapters, identifying the main themes to emerge from the research in terms of farming and occupational stress, and analysing these in terms of the policy context, and the potential for future intervention and plugging into existing networks to provide holistic support to farming communities.

## 2. THE CASE STUDIES

### 2.1 INTRODUCING THE AREAS

Key informants provided a central resource in introducing us to the dynamics of local areas that were less visible from official statistics. Below we present a brief overview of the main features of farming in the five areas where we conducted research, which provides a context for the differences explored in the interviews with members of these farming communities. Within each area we focused in on a particular small area in order to facilitate sampling, although for reasons of interviewee anonymity these are not identified.

#### 2.1.1 Devon

This area was selected on the basis of representing dairy, cattle and sheep farming. Local farmland and seasonal rainfall patterns mean that the land is not particularly suited to arable farming. Farming tends to be concentrated around the middle and west of the county. Beef and sheep farms in Devon overwhelmingly tend to be small-scale family-run operations, although with fewer farmers' sons going into farming this trend may be reversed in future years. A key informant put the average farm at 200-250 acres. As a consequence of its farming's character, Devon was particularly badly hit by the Foot and Mouth outbreak of 2001. One of the farms case studied had lost all its stock, and many local farmers had left the industry or scaled down their efforts following the crisis. In addition there have been outbreaks of BSE in the area. Respondents stated that there was currently a tuberculosis (TB) crisis in the area, to which they were losing stock. A notable recent pattern is that farm workers have largely disappeared from the local farming scene, and that where external help is used this tends to be in the form of contractors.

Diversification was felt to be fairly widespread in Devon, with the area's well-established tourist character lending itself to enterprises such as running Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs) from farm houses, and ventures selling farm produce. Much of Devon, however, is relatively isolated, particularly in terms of some of its coastal areas, and the main urban centre is Exeter. Farmers' wives have increasingly taken up part-time jobs outside the farm to support the household, and more farmers were looking for second jobs, although these options were somewhat limited by local labour market opportunities.

Farmers, farmers' wives and adult children, and farm workers in Devon were distinctive in being recruited through snowballing via an initial personal contact, which had the advantage of providing insight into the nature of farming social networks. This technique was felt to be appropriate since interviews with key informants had highlighted the relatively isolated nature of farming in the area and its domination by family farming, and introduction through key informants had met with less success than in other areas, suggesting that the potential sample represented a particularly 'closed' group, and/or that farmers had particular reasons to be suspicious of research in this area.

Hawton *et al.*'s (1998) thirteen-year psychological autopsy study found that the South West had the highest rate of suicide among farmers, and that this was particularly raised in Devon. The proximity of the research area to Exeter University's Centre for Rural Research, where academics are working on agricultural research, has also meant that a number of local studies have been conducted in recent years (for example, Reed *et al.*, 2002), although none of our interviewees had taken part in these.

### **2.1.2 Hampshire**

Hampshire was selected on the basis of its representation of cropping and mixed farming. It embodies a distinctive agricultural area with a relatively prosperous (and tight) labour market with plentiful alternative/second-job employment options, and a comparatively urban-fringe experience of farming, being close to a number of major cities. Farming on the urban fringe has implications in terms of raised levels of crime, trespassing and fly-tipping, and provides a captive, relatively affluent, market in terms of diversification activities.

The small area upon which the research focused ranged from smaller-scale arable farming (the more typical end of the market) to larger arable enterprises and horticultural units. Horticulture, more than traditional agriculture, operates as an employer in the area using a combination of seasonal, agency and migrant labour. Some indication of the degree to which diversification is an issue for Hampshire farming was provided by a key informant who estimated that 80 per cent of local farmers were involved in some form of diversification activity.

Rural stress networks were less well developed in this area than in the other research areas, an aspect which may reflect a lesser need, but which may also have implications for local agricultural integration and intensify problems of agricultural stress where it occurs.

### **2.1.3 Lancashire**

This area is almost entirely cattle, sheep and dairy farming, and formerly had the highest number of dairy farms in the country, although these have been reduced in recent years, reflecting national trends, the impact of FMD, and dairy farming's diminished financial viability. Over the past twenty years, the profile of the area has shifted from this predominance of dairy farming, to cattle, sheep and suckling cows. The research area included a number of particularly remote farming locations.

Key informants reported a limited use of farm workers in the county, due to their having become too expensive and to increased regulation, which complicated employers' responsibilities. This has meant that families and extended families were often performing all aspects of farm work, representing an intensification of their labour, combined with paying contractors to perform the work that they could not manage. One key informant suggested that Lancashire had a higher than average proportion of non-economic farms.

Although local scope for diversification was somewhat limited, there was evidence of farms expanding into farm shops, B&Bs and caravan parks. Local employment varied geographically, but within the area the research focused on it was relatively easy for farmers and their families to find work outside farming. Key informants regarded local rural stress networks as being comparatively strong.

### **2.1.4 Lincolnshire**

Lincolnshire has a well established arable farming profile, and was selected for this reason. One key informant described its agricultural environment as '*an industrial landscape*', and contrasted it with the images of rural idyll often associated with farming. Another felt that the geography of local farming was rather mixed, ranging from rolling hills, to flat fenlands, and a marshy coastline. Several key informants emphasised Lincolnshire's changing farming profile in recent years, in which enterprises that expanded exponentially have prospered, while smaller farmers have suffered particular hardship. However, local farming continues to be diverse, ranging from the '*big world farming estates*' to smaller family-run farms. There is a fairly high

degree of tenancy among local farmers. It was suggested that that local farmers tended to be younger than the national average, in part because of the attractiveness of subsidised cereal farming to farmers with young families, but also because the Nuffield scholarships available through the Lincolnshire Agricultural Society have encouraged entrepreneurial activity.

Lincolnshire is of particular interest for its relatively large-scale use of migrant workers within its agricultural labour force, and the gangmaster system remains strong in the area. A recent estimation of the extent of this issue put the county as having 75,000 active migrant workers.<sup>6</sup> These were distinguishable into two broad groupings. The first consists of seasonal agricultural workers, largely younger people, whose labour is organised largely through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme, who tend to live in camps over the duration of their visit and are legal migrants. The second, and greater portion of the migrant workforce are those employed by gangmasters (labour providers) and other, less legalised, operations, who are more vulnerable to abuse and poor conditions. A key informant with a great deal of knowledge of this aspect of the agricultural workforce, explained that migrant labour had increasingly become a bedrock of the local economy, since the indigenous population had become less willing to accept low-paid seasonal farming work: *'The whole food chain would collapse, the supermarket shelves would be empty in a week if it wasn't for the migrant worker.'*

There has been less diversification in Lincolnshire than in many other farming areas, in part because its agricultural landscape lends itself less easily to the tourist trade. However, this varies across the region, with farms around the coastal resorts being more amenable to capitalising upon tourism.

One key informant emphasised that the area's population was relatively stable, with few people moving away and a local character of resilience and self-sufficiency, to the point of being inward-looking at times. He felt that Lincolnshire had a history of hardship, and that strong class-based divisions continued to predominate (for example, following historical distinctions between squires, tenants and workers). Several larger towns offered alternative employment, as did the coastal resorts, although these were less typical of the area's rurality. A key informant explained that basic skills and lack of qualifications were a significant local issue, and that agriculture continued to be a major local employer, albeit largely providing low-skilled, low-paid work.

### **2.1.5 Powys**

Respondents from an organisation representing local rural communities described the types of farming in the Powys area as largely lowland and upland livestock farming. The land tends not to be suitable for arable farming, although there is some degree of mixed farming. Livestock farms tend to consist of sheep, beef and dairy cattle. Upland farming, because of the nature of the land, is less intensive with less stock per acre than lowland farming. Small farms predominated, many of which were no longer financially viable, prompting farmers to develop strategies of taking second jobs, and wives working outside the farm, in order to survive. There was some evidence of diversification in the area, such as B&Bs, but lacking high levels of tourism such opportunities were limited.

Interviews with key informants and farming communities pointed to evidence of an informal exchange system between farms that was used to substitute for more permanent sources of additional labour. Powys' relative remoteness, covering a huge geographical area, may also mean that isolation or lack of peer relationships is an issue for local farmers, an aspect reinforced by sparse public transport links. Key informants raised the issues of literacy and

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<sup>6</sup> *Personal communication by key informant.*

‘bachelor farmers’ struggling to cope on their own more in this than in other areas, which may be related to its remoteness. Language was also an issue in Powys, which is a mixed Welsh and English-speaking area, and in order to ensure maximum inclusiveness of the research we took measures to ensure that interviews were offered, and where necessary conducted, in Welsh (and subsequently translated into English for analysis).

Several of the key informants in Powys noted that a significant degree of existing research has focused on the local area, a body that includes the work of the locally-based Institute of Rural Health, and Price and Evan’s work on gender and agricultural stress (2005). Again, our research was felt to be distinctive from both of these in terms of its scope and fieldwork coverage, and to add something new to the body of knowledge in the area.

The FMD and BSE outbreaks both affected the Powys district, and, according to local key informants, had had a major effect on some farmers. One indirect effect of these diseases has been the closing down of markets in rural districts like Powys, exacerbating issues of isolation.

An additional aspect of Powys’ inclusion which has made for an important contrast is its distinctive structural location and the policy framework within which it has operated since Welsh devolution. Since the Welsh Assembly’s establishment in May 1999, it arguably looks towards the former more than to DEFRA, and has its own representatives, such as the FUW. This may foster a sense of distinctiveness from other farming communities.

## 2.2 BUILDING A PROFILE OF INDIVIDUAL FARMS

Our research involved case studying 18 farms across the five areas, constituting a total of 42 people working on these farms. These farms covered a range of farming characteristics, described below. These reflected local circumstances that were highlighted in the interviews with key informants, and the differences between interviewees enabled us to explore the impact of particular characteristics upon overall experiences of farming.

In terms of types of farming, the case study farms in Devon and Lancashire were livestock-based, while areas like Hampshire and Lincolnshire tended to include a significant element of arable farming. Powys was particularly distinctive in its coverage of hill farming, particularly in terms of sheep.

**Table 1** Types of farms case studied by area

<i>Area</i>	<i>Dairy</i>	<i>Livestock</i>	<i>Mixed (arable + livestock)</i>	<i>Horticulture</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Devon</i>	2	3	-	-	<b>5</b>
<i>Hampshire</i>	-	-	2	1	<b>3</b>
<i>Lancashire</i>	-	3	-	-	<b>3</b>
<i>Lincolnshire</i>	2	-	2	-	<b>4</b>
<i>Powys</i>	-	2	1	-	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>

Notably a number of farms also involved diversification activities in addition to traditional farming (see section 4.4), and this was highly variable by area. All the farms case studied in Devon had diversified in some way, while none had done so in Lincolnshire.

**Table 2** Diversification activities by area

<i>Area</i>	<i>Farms with diversification activities</i>
<i>Devon</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Hampshire</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Lancashire</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Lincolnshire</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>Powys</i>	<i>1</i>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>9</i></b>

There was considerable variation in the size of the farms studied, and by implication in the way they were run (see chapter four). In particular, the farms in Hampshire tended to be larger, and those in Powys to be smaller.

**Table 3** Size of farms case studied by area

<i>Area</i>	<i>Small (up to 150 acres)</i>	<i>Medium (151-799 acres)</i>	<i>Large (over 800 acres)</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Devon</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Hampshire</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Lancashire</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Lincolnshire</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Powys</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>5</i></b>	<b><i>7</i></b>	<b><i>6</i></b>	<b><i>18</i></b>

Farm ownership also varied by area, which has a number of implications for farmers' financial situations, future planning and for the ways in which stress was experienced (see chapter 5). For example, tenancy was the predominant pattern amongst the Lancashire farmers we interviewed, while all the Welsh farmers interviewed owned the land they farmed.

**Table 4** Farm ownership by area

<i>Area</i>	<i>Owner-occupied</i>	<i>Mixed ownership</i>	<i>Tenanted</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Devon</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Hampshire</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Lancashire</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Lincolnshire</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Powys</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>3</i>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>8</i></b>	<b><i>7</i></b>	<b><i>3</i></b>	<b><i>18</i></b>

### 3. FARMING WORK

This chapter considers the character of interviewees' attachment to farming work, asking what occupational identity has entailed for different types of people working on farms. It also examines why self-employment has been so important to farmers, and explores farming communities' expectations for their lifestyle and the future. This provides important context for the subsequent chapter, which examines the changes that agricultural communities have lived through in recent years.

#### 3.1 OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY

Overwhelmingly, the people we interviewed from farming communities emphasised the strength of their farming occupational identity, which generally increased the longer they had been farming. What farming meant to interviewees was more complicated than a simple reflection of the different forms of labour they performed, which varied between different types of farming, and in accordance with the size of farms and how labour was organised on these. Indeed, some of the farmers interviewed actually spent little or no time performing farming activities, and might be more accurately conceptualised as managers; nevertheless farming continued to form a central part of their occupational attachment. As Derek Morris, a Devon dairy farmer, explained, farming was about administering multiple occupational skills, and had at its centre adaptability, requiring a certain resolve if one was to become successful in the industry:

*“you’ve got to juggle so many balls all the time, you’re fighting the weather, which most business don’t have to fight the weather, you’re fighting disease because with stock there’s all sorts of disease, and you’ve got, sort of, the pressures.”*

Donald Lloyd, a livestock farmer from Powys, put this more explicitly, listing some of the cross-occupational skills he felt farmers needed to maintain:

*“you have to learn to be pretty proficient at being a vet ... You can’t rely on calling the vets all of the time if you’ve got a problem, because you can’t afford it, so you’ve got to learn those skills. You’ve also got to develop skills as an accountant, you have to do VAT [Value Added Tax] and returns, you have to understand about accountancy to stay in business. You have to be a bit of a mechanic ... you’ve got to learn to repair things, weld them up.”*

Daniel Grant, a Hampshire mixed farmer, commented that *“farmers are a very resilient breed,”* whom he felt were likely to persevere during times of financial difficulty, when other small businessmen might decide to close down ventures.

Farming was felt to be somewhat unusual among occupations in that many farmers were deeply attached to the material basis of their occupation, their farm, which had often been in their family for generations, and which consequently embodied a particular emotional value. This was true both for owner-occupying and tenant farmers. The majority of the farmers we interviewed had grown up on farms, and it had been a virtually unquestioned assumption that they would follow their (notably) fathers into farming. Larry Black, a Devon dairy farmer, explained that, *“it’s the expected and done thing.”* This partly explains the *“loyalty”* that farmers often spoke of, that their farm had been the object of ongoing investment over the years, and they experienced an unusually strong motivation to keep it going even when its economic

viability was in question. This fostered a linkage between occupation and family. Victor Adams, a Hampshire mixed farmer, described farming as being “*in your blood*”, and for many farmers this was true in that their occupation represented the continuation of a family dynasty. Indeed, Victor contrasted farmers’ commitment to their work with what he regarded as a broader labour market trend to “*flit*” between jobs in order to promote personal advancement, and he regarded someone who had dedicated himself (sic) to farming for a lengthy period of time as “*obviously a good chap*.” Similarly, Malcolm Potter, a farmer’s son in his 30s who worked full-time on his parents’ Lancashire livestock farm, emphasised the moral resonance of the occupation, describing it as “*proper and decent work*.” However, while dynastic expectations could provide a source of strength, in some cases they also acted to intensify stress and limit individual choice (see section 5.5.5).

Sian Jenkins, a Welsh farmer’s wife, who was somewhat unusual in not having been brought up in a farming family, explained that farming’s occupational distinctiveness was in part was the consequence of a lack of contact with alternative professions:

*“they’ve never done anything, they never considered doing anything else. Okay, they might have left home and gone and done a few other bits and pieces, but most of them come back to it ... And you don’t necessarily get that degree of involvement in other professions, because you’re not exposed to them from such an early age.”*

A common refrain, and linked to the fact that farmers’ housing was often tied to their occupation, was that farming was more than simply a job, but was also “*a lifestyle*” or “*a way of life*.” While this connected farmers strongly to their occupation, it also meant that they lacked the distance that most businessmen or employees had from their work. This had a far-reaching effect on their well being when work was going less than smoothly (see chapter five). Derek Morris, a Devon dairy farmer, reflected that:

*“I’ve always felt that because farming is so, you’re so engrossed in it, it’s a hundred and fifty percent business really farming, and generally you’re bombarded by it morning, day and night, there’s no let up in farming.”*

There was also an important sense in which farming offered “*an outdoor life*”, something that was connected to nature and which was deeply valued for that, and several interviewees commented that they could not imagine adapting to what they regarded as the alternative: “*office life*.” Farming then, was a holistic identity, and Rhys Lloyd, a farmer’s son from Powys, commented that: “*I couldn’t explain myself in any other way really*.” His mother, Mair Lloyd, agreed that this kind of occupational dedication was a fundamental part of the role: “*you’ve got to live and breathe your farming to be a real good farmer*.”

However, not all the farmers we interviewed displayed such immutable occupational identities, a phenomenon that was related to their work life biographies. For example, although Arthur Read and his wife Laura had both grown up in farming families, they had both worked as teachers before buying the farm off her father and taking it on as their own. While they had farmed for longer than many of the younger farmers we interviewed, Arthur continued to largely see himself in terms of his former occupation: “*I’m not really a farmer. I’m a retired schoolteacher*.” He felt that his less closed occupational attachment had some advantages, as he regarded farmers generally to be “*a bit tunnel vision*,” which contrasted with his more positive and pragmatic approach to work. He felt that he had chosen his occupation, had other labour market options, and did not feel compelled to stay in the industry for fear of the alternative. Neil Shaw, a Hampshire farmer, had taken over his father’s farm at an unusually young age and completely restructured it, making a diversification enterprise the centre of its activity, and building it up into a large-scale organisation. As a consequence of these changes, his work had



become overwhelmingly managerial. He had taken on this role as a matter of course, and distanced himself from farmers more broadly. He regarded this identity as having a lot to do with his people contact, and related this both to his substantial labour force and to the location of the farm on the urban-fringe, a very different experience from what he considered to be more traditional farming enterprises, “*down some track, and they might see the postman once a day or something, that’s it.*” Similarly, since returning to his family farm after agricultural college, Daniel Grant, another younger Hampshire farmer, had implemented a number of changes, including a series of diversification enterprises. He questioned whether ‘farming’ could adequately cover the range of work in which farmers like himself were now involved:

*“I don’t think you can term it farming, I think you’ve got to term it rural business and I think that the best farmers would be [al]most the same as the best businessman, and they look at the pros and cons of that particular business and they find ways of either reducing cost and increasing output either by diversification or by other means.”*

Critically, these three farmers regarded farming less as a way of life and more in terms of a business venture, an attitude which enabled them to take a relatively flexible approach to their work.

Where there was not a sense of farming having been chosen, it could be a more problematic identity. Larry Black had felt pushed into farming as a young man by dint of his family having been farmers, but spoke about having actively disliked the work all his life: “*Did a job I didn’t like for thirty-five years!*” In later life, an acute crisis on the farm had prompted him to become involved in teaching at an agricultural college, and he increasingly came to see himself more in terms of this aspect of his work, and found it a much more fulfilling occupation than farming.

For some farmers, the long hours of labour required by their businesses meant that they had little time to invest in leisure activities or to socialise with people from outside farming, which added to their sense of uniqueness. Derek Morris explained: “*most farmers are workers as a hobby and that’s not good, it really isn’t.*” This was partly related to location, with agriculture continuing to dominate some local labour markets, which consequently fostered a sense of occupational distinctiveness. Occupational attachment was also reinforced by membership of farmers’ representative groups (such as the NFU and Tenant Farmers’ Association (TFA)) and pressure groups (including Farmers for Action and Farm).

### **3.1.1 Work ethic**

Interviewees overwhelmingly felt that farmers had a unique work ethic, working particularly long hours. This was tied to the pressures of self-employment, to farmers’ commitment to their stock, and to the nature of farming, in that it can be unpredictable with an ongoing and sometimes cumulative set of labour demands. Several interviewees painted a picture of themselves as dedicated to their work above all else. Derek Morris explained:

*“from when I was seventeen, you know, I worked all the hours there was really and I didn’t have any social life, I didn’t go anywhere really, I managed to find my wife somewhere on the way.”*

It was not unusual for interviewees, particularly during busy times, such as lambing and harvesting, to be on call around the farm for an 18-hour stretch. Interviewees emphasised farming’s difference from other occupations in that they had to work until a particular job was finished, and could not put it off until the next day, since their stock depended on them. Most of

the farmers we interviewed only took a day off a week, and in many cases this 'free' day was a case of their farm labour being scaled down rather than curtailed altogether. This kind of commitment was tied to farming being the kind of lifestyle occupation outlined above.

Being self-employed, and farming being work which required constant labour, meant that working conditions such as sick leave and annual leave could be problematic for interviewees (see chapter five). This was particularly true if farm labour was not organised in such a way that workers could easily fill in for one another (particularly the case on smaller family-run farms). This could have detrimental effects upon interviewees' health, in both physical and mental respects. Connected to this work ethic, Daniel Grant, a Hampshire farmer who ran a mixed farming enterprise, explained that farming demanded a great deal of "*work for nothing*", that is, the kind of necessary but often invisible maintenance work that was necessary to preserve your future investment. This distinguished it from most other occupations, although to some degree such traits are shared with other types of family businesses.

This work ethic, and farming's accompanying intensive work demands, could at times be a source of stress (see chapter five), but was also an important aspect of occupational satisfaction, and was sometimes even used as a coping strategy (see chapter six). It was particularly notable that some of the younger farmers (farmers' sons) we interviewed were wrestling with their fathers' expectations that they devote long hours to their work, at a time in their lives when their peers were not subject to such restrictions and were more visibly enjoying their leisure time. Oscar Morris, the son of a dairy farmer, spoke about how angry his father became if he complained about his workload, and how "*guilty*" this made him feel. He was starting to rebel against these expectations, which he and several other younger farmers felt were unreasonable in proportion to the rewards that farming offered. They either refused to work beyond certain limits (for example, when they felt ill) or were exploring alternative labour market options. Oscar's attitude contrasted sharply with his father's:

*"what do you work for? You work to . . . at the end of the day you work to enjoy life, don't you?"*

By contrast, Nigel Adams, a young farmer who had worked on his father's farm for about ten years, explained that he had come to accept that the work demands of farming inevitably interfered with personal relationships, particularly with women from non-farming backgrounds who failed to understand that sometimes he would have to "*let them down*" at the last minute to tend to his cattle. In response he had developed a strategy of being upfront about these demands at the start of new relationships.

It was notable that a significant proportion of those interviewed identified the winter months as a low point in their motivation. Leaving aside the question of whether farmers are affected by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), it is clear that the nature of the work means that the seasons have a marked effect upon their mood. Conversely, many positive examples were provided about working during the spring and summer.

### **3.1.2 Gender and occupational identity**

Most of the farmers' spouses interviewed identified themselves as "*farmers' wives*" rather than farmers in their own right, although implicit in this terminology was a specific occupational identity of its own. In fact two women went as far as to differentiate between "*farmers' wives*", by whom they meant farmers' spouses who played an active role supporting farmers' work, and the "*wives of farmers*", women who went out to work in other professions and who were more loosely connected to the economics of the farm. Farmers often talked about the importance of

the farmer's wife role to the farming enterprise, providing a vital source of support to the farmer. Only one woman, Mair Lloyd, considered herself to be a farmer in her own right, describing her work in terms of "*my farming career,*" and even she had a tendency to dilute her occupational skills with comments such as, "*I'm a general dogsbody I think.*" Notably farmers' wives careers tended not to have such a clear demarcation as farmers, that is, in leaving school and moving straight into farming sometimes intercepted by a period at agricultural college. While some women's occupational trajectories matched men's, particularly if they had grown up in a farming environment, more often they had spent a period in alternative labour market sectors, before marrying (marriage rather than cohabitation was very much the farming norm), and moving into the role of a farmer's wife, either coinciding with this domestic transition or after having had children.

Many of the farm women interviewed underplayed their workload, explaining that they "*just*" did various tasks, and it was not until their work was unpacked on a daily basis that it became clear that the work of a farmer's wife comprised a very substantial degree of occupational capability. For example, typically a farmer's wife would: raise the children; run the large farmhouse; do the farm's paperwork and accounts; fill in around the farm, often taking responsibility for particular tasks; and sometimes also run a diversification business. This was in addition to the unseen and difficult to measure work she performed in looking after her families' emotional and physical health, a task which was often particularly demanding within farming families (see chapter five).

Linked to the sense that farming occupational identity was passed down from generation to generation, many of the farming families we interviewed expressed a preference for their sons to marry into farming families, because women from these were more likely to understand the demands of farming and to make "*good farmers' wives.*" Conversely, several instances were observed where sons had been strongly discouraged from marrying "*outside*", sometimes at the expense of their family formation (such as Llewellyn Davies, who had been encouraged to remain "*a bachelor farmer*"). In such cases, non-farming women were viewed with suspicion as having the potential to break up farming dynasties. Vernon Chester, an older Lincolnshire farmer, described what he saw as being the practical difficulties of breaching such normative rules:

*"if anybody that's farming gets a wrong wife, well it's a disaster, because they're just going to sell out straight away. If they get an expensive wife that doesn't understand the hours that you're going to be out working at certain times of the year, and isn't prepared to listen ... but if he's got an understanding good wife, he's, and he's prepared to work, he always has in the past had a good chance of making a living."*

### **3.1.3 Acquisition and gender**

It was striking that farmers' ideas about the acquisition of family farms were gendered along masculine lines, with (male) farmers seeking to pass their farms onto their sons. This brought with it problems for the next generation if farming clashed with their ideas about suitable occupations, and some of the stresses of enforced acquisition are explored in chapter five. We came across several examples of daughters who were strongly attached to farming and who seemed to be the most capable beneficiary, who were excluded from inheritance in favour of sons. Indeed, even cases such as Angela Read, who had bought her father's farm with her husband and who at face value appeared to be bucking this trend, were rather different when the circumstances of her transition were explored. Her husband, Arthur, explained:

*“the first thing we knew was that there was a letter from, I’m not sure whether it was his accountant or solicitor to say that he wanted to, you know that the farm was going on the market. Well of course we were just horrified. He hadn’t even told his daughter, never mind me!”*

The idea that farms would be “*kept in the family*” was often a major motivator for farmers, the idea of farms being passed onto their sons getting them through difficult times. For example, Derek Morris, a Devon dairy farmer, explained that:

*“all the time when I started I just felt well my two sons will carry on with this one day, you know, I’m doing all this ... at the end of the day they would have two cracking business that they could start up on their own and I’d be able to retire in the sunset and watch them farm and be real proud of what they’ve done, which my father did because he was real proud of what I did.”*

That one of his sons had already rejected this lifestyle, and the other’s acquisition looked tenuous was obviously a source of discontent. The farmer mentioned that his daughter and her husband wanted to take on the farm, but dismissed this as the last unwanted alternative if his sons let him down, and was more seriously considering selling it on the open market.

### **3.2 FARMING AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT**

Being one’s own boss, and being able to decide (within limits) the ordering of one’s workload priorities was highly valued aspect of farming, and interviewees repeatedly spoke of “*the freedom*” of working in this way. Cecilia Butler, the wife of a Lincolnshire dairy farmer, described this aspect of farming:

*“I like the independence of working for ourselves, I like not having to be fixed to having to go to work at 9 o’clock. Those hours, I work the hours I choose to work, or I work round what suits me. I think I’d find that very difficult to go back to now, [a] rigid working timetable.”*

As many farmers pointed out, self-employment provides for a unique kind of occupational attachment, in that for people running their own businesses the idea of set working hours and other terms and conditions are less meaningful than for those in employment (which may have implications for health and safety). Farmers often spoke of the value of being one’s own boss, and not having to take orders from others, although with self-employment came the burden of worrying about the future and how to respond to it (see chapter five). This perspective partly explains why farmers, who traditionally operated relatively independently, have found the intensification of governmental regulation and administrative demands so problematic, disrupting as it has their sense of autonomy and self-determination (see chapter five). Eric Watson, a Devon livestock farmer, explained the lack of control that farmers increasingly felt they had over the product of their labour:

*“an electrician, he can seem to charge what he wants for the service he’s providing, whereas we’ve got to accept what we can get from the market or from the government, and you’ve got to try and work within that.”*

For some farmers, the pull of self-employment limited their alternative labour market options and kept them in farming. Arthur Read explained: “*I think once you’ve been your own boss you know I think it would be very difficult to go back working for someone.*” Others spent their farming careers combining running their own farm with offering their labour to other farmers on

a contractual basis, and saw certain advantages to employment, one of which was that income was somewhat more reliable and emotional investment in work was reduced.

Farmers' experience of self-employment, however, was distinctive from many other small businesses because of the strong link between occupation and family, which meant that occupational autonomy was often constrained by the sense that farmers needed to make decisions that would benefit the next generation. Arthur Read explained that:

*“with a farm it's slightly different because I feel in farming the family have a responsibility, that they don't probably appreciate, but the family has a responsibility to look to the future as to how things are going to pan out.”*

To some extent, tenant farmers were not under the same kind of pressure to protect the asset of the farm, and were able to farm more in their own interests without unduly damaging their children's prospects.

Of the farm workers interviewed (and those others working for farmers), there were two notable types: farm labourers who were employed by farms on a full- or part-time basis, who consequently developed an attachment to those farms (the more traditional model of farm workers); and contractors who were self-employed, who tended to have very specialised skills, and who worked on a larger number of farms (sometimes in addition to their own farm). Self-employment of this latter type was obviously rather different to the self-employment attached to owning one's own farm, and provided for distinctive occupational experiences. However, there were also certain similarities in terms of autonomy over organising one's own labour, and conversely, a common lack of employment rights.

### **3.3 FARMING COMMUNITIES AND EXPECTATIONS**

The rewards of farming were largely not felt to lie in financial recompense. Nathan Turner, a Lincolnshire mixed farmer was typical in explaining:

*“you don't become a farmer to be rich; you're a fool if you think you're going to be. You become a farmer because you want to, I suppose a love of the job really.”*

Owner-occupying farmers in particular, frequently pointed out that while their income was relatively low, their property and land assets held significant material value, and provided for a style of living that could not have been realised through similar incomes in other labour market sectors (in terms of the size and location of their accommodation). However, while farmers tended to have fairly realistic expectations about their financial circumstances, recent squeezes on these often brought into relief what was felt to be a fundamental inequality between how hard they worked and what they received in return for their efforts:

*“But I mean at the same time you do want some financial reward because we all need to live we all need to run motor cars, we all want televisions we want holidays occasionally. You know, our wants are the same as most other people really.”* (Nathan Turner)

Daniel Grant, a younger farmer, commented that farmers' reduced earning power was having an important impact upon the way in which labour was organised within family farms:

*“my wife’s got to go out to work so I can’t support her, however, that isn’t unusual in today’s society. Say twenty years ago when my mother was in that situation, no, she didn’t have to.”*

A transformation of women’s role was likely to have social as well as practical implications for farming communities.

One key informant commented that a degree of hard work was a taken-for-granted aspect of farming: *“they don’t mind the work. You don’t go into farming if you are lazy.”* Victor Adams concurred that farmers were *“very proud people”*, who placed a great deal of importance upon being self-sufficient, which partly explained the intense psychological difficulties that many of those interviewed experienced reconciling this image of themselves with the receipt of (and dependency upon) subsidies.

A view expressed by many was that farmers had lost status within their communities in recent years, and that this was linked to the political climate and media portrayals of farmers as financially and morally unscrupulous. This was obviously acutely painful for many farmers, who had taken great pride in maintaining a reputation as honest and trustworthy businessmen working for as well as in the countryside (see section 5.4.2), and broadened the perceptual gap between farming communities and broader society.

### **3.4 SUMMARY**

- Farming occupational identity is very strong and distinctive. It intertwines a number of diverse occupational skills around an ethos of adaptability.
- Farmers were often intensely attached to their farms, particularly when these had been in families for some time, and were strongly committed to steering their businesses through economic difficulties, often at considerable personal cost.
- People tended to view farming as a lifestyle rather than a job, a feature that was related to links between occupation, family and housing. This could make it difficult for farming communities to make the kind of temporal and spatial demarcations between their home and work lives common in other occupations.
- Farmers who felt that they had chosen their work and had alternative options, and who looked upon it more as a business venture than a way of life, reported higher levels of occupation satisfaction than those who felt pushed into it because of family pressures.
- Self-employment was a highly valued aspect of farming, particularly in terms of the autonomy it gave farmers to organise their own workload, although this was countered by the necessity to worry about the future. Partly linked to self-employment, farmers reported a unique work ethic, emphasising the long hours it was necessary to devote to their stock, and that emphasising the often unpredictable nature of farming.
- Farm women rarely identified as ‘farmers’, but raised an important contrast between the roles of ‘farmers’ wives’, which was regarded as having a distinctive occupational involvement on farms, and ‘the wives of farmers’ who worked outside in alternative professions. The work of ‘farmers’ wives included traditional farming work, domestic and childcare responsibilities, bookwork and administration duties, and running diversification businesses. However, with the reduced earning power of many farms in recent years, farmers’ wives were under increasing pressure to bring in additional income from outside.
- Gendered expectations continued to predominate in acquisition patterns, with family farms tending to be, and apparently preferably, passed down along male lines. This sometimes created tensions between generations who had clashing occupational outlooks.

- Farming communities largely felt that financial rewards were a relatively minor aspect of their occupational motivations, which tended to be driven by intrinsic satisfactions.

## 4. CHANGES IN FARMING EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

Amongst those interviewed, it was universally accepted that the organisation and experience of farming had undergone a series of dramatic changes in recent years, and that this has had both negative and positive consequences for those remaining in the occupation. How these changes have affected individual farms is examined below through the use of case studies. For the older farmers we interviewed, who had lived through this restructuring of the occupation, the contrast was particularly stark. Occasionally interviewees recognised that this was part of a broader process of occupational transformation in the UK shared by others, although more generally farmers focused upon their specific occupational experience. Arthur Read, who had been a teacher before a farmer and spoke from a dual perspective, explained the difficulty for many farmers in accepting these changes, since they were often relatively isolated from broader labour markets:

*“Now the farmers are finding that [changes] very difficult to cope with, but what they don’t realise, it’s not just farming that changing, it’s everything. I mean I wouldn’t, friends of mine that are teaching now all they can think about is just getting out and retiring, they’ve had enough.”*

While the specifics of how some of these changes in farming practice have increased farmers’ stress levels are explored in chapter five, more broadly organisational change may be expected to have profound psychological effects upon people. Arthur summed this up: *“generally people don’t like change and as we go through life there is change and we have to accept it.”*

### 4.1 FARMING ACTIVITIES

A point made by a number of interviewees was that over the past few decades, as the farming sector had reorganised itself and many farmers have left the industry, the remaining farms have grown in size, with implications for the organisation of activities within these enterprises (section 4.2). Barry Phillips, who was employed as the manager of a Devon dairy farm, explained how overall growth tended to be at the expense of the smaller-scale family ventures:

*“Everything’s getting bigger, obviously. There used to be a lot of small little farms here, which were coping quite well. But they’ve all gone to the wall financially because, you know, if you don’t get bigger, you get out I’m afraid.”*

Many interviewees commented on the way that supermarkets had come to dominate the food sector (sometimes also owning local slaughterhouses). This had the effect of reducing local sales of produce and supermarkets gaining monopoly power. Thus British farmers found themselves competing in a global market against much cheaper overseas labour, and supermarkets were able to force down the prices farmers could expect to achieve for their product. Partly in consequence of these pressures, the price of produce such as milk, beef and lamb has failed to increase with the rise in cost of living. The impact of static prices alongside an increase in costs has meant that farmers have needed to intensify the way that they farm in order to equalise their income – producing more stock, constructing more buildings for housing stock during the winter months and milking, using less hired help, increasing mechanisation, and working longer hours. Eric Watson commented: *“There’s more pressure now, for what reason I don’t know, there’s never enough time to do anything.”* Another



common refrain was “*I’m having to work longer and harder to stay the same.*” Edward Hills, a farmer’s son, felt that the effect of these changes was that:

*“farming now seems to be a lot more of a tighter game. You can’t make a loss too many years in a row without being in serious trouble, and if you do make a loss you’ve either got to know why you’ve made a loss or do something about it.”*

All of these pressures added to a sense that farmers were increasingly driven by market forces, and had diminished control over the process of food production.

Several farmers commented that livestock farming, and dairy farming in particular, had become less profitable and consequently more farmers had changed the composition of their farms or had diversified (although this had implications for their administrative workload: see chapter five). A number of farmers attributed the reversal in dairy farming’s fortunes to the demise of the Milk Marketing Board.

Concurrent with these changes, mechanisation has qualitatively transformed the nature of farming, with particular tasks becoming less physically demanding for farmers (although with this, several interviewees raised the issue of Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI)), and overall labour demands on individual farms being reduced. With mechanisation, however, came the accompanying need for reinvestment and maintenance of equipment, creating another layer of labour tasks.

Farming activities have also been transformed by growing regulation. While a great deal of this was seen in negative terms (sections 5.4.1 and 5.5.4) as placing an increased burden of compliance upon farmers and making tasks which they had mastered for years unnecessarily complicated, there were also more positive side-effects and evidence of some regulations having their intended effect. Bernard Young and Nigel Adams both talked of the benefit of wearing dust masks when applying chemical treatments to their stock, and contrasted this to earlier experiences when they felt their health had been at risk. On the other hand, one key informant felt that changes in the intensification of farming meant that overworked farmers were more likely to have accidents, and thought that farming had moved into pole position in the league of dangerous industries, overtaking the building sector. Changes were also related to the broader relationship between government and farmers and the growing influence that government has had on farming at all levels, from self-employment, labour process, and administration, to its handling of agricultural crises.

## **4.2 LABOUR PROCESS**

One of the biggest transformations in agriculture over the past twenty years has been what Victor Adams described as “*an exodus of labour from the farms.*” The reasons for this are complex, reflecting not only growing mechanisation, work intensification, and farmers and younger people leaving the industry, but a diminished labour force as former labourers have looked elsewhere to achieve maximum return for their labour. One by-product of this has been an increased use of migrant (particularly by the larger-scale farms) and contractual labour, with all the implications these have for employment protection for farm labourers.

*“you can’t get English people to pick potatoes, you have to rely on imported labour from the eastern bloc, or the eastern countries and they’re all led by gang masters and that now.”* (Victor Adams)

In areas where contract labour was particularly difficult to acquire, farmers and particularly farmers' sons often combined working on their own farm with seasonal contract work. Another strategy was to operate more informal systems of labour exchange with neighbouring farms; amongst the farms case studied, this was a more common practice in Powys.

A second by-product of agricultural labour trends has been that family-run farms have increasingly absorbed the kind of labour they might formerly have employed a labourer to do. This has reflected difficulties securing reliable labour (particularly when farms are all vying for labour at busy times), and financial pressures to maximise profits in a context where returns have become increasingly insecure. Several interviewees also mentioned concerns over health and safety liability as a deterrent to employing permanent staff and a motivation to rely upon family labour. This kind of arrangement, however, could be problematic when farms had simultaneously increased their stock sizes, increasing the potential workload, and as farming families got older and their health became more vulnerable. It also increased the pressure upon farmers to retain mastery of a variety of farming skills, some of which they may dislike or feel ill at ease performing. It may also have health and safety implications, and restrict farmers' ability to take time off for holidays, rest days and to spend time with their families. Of the farms we case studied, this kind of response was fairly typical among the small- to medium-sized family farms. Notably there was a crucial difference in terms of how well a movement towards a more compact labour force worked depending upon the degree to which this process had been managed or was more responsive and uncoordinated.

#### **Farm D: a managed rationalisation**

Farm D was a medium sized mixed farm in Hampshire, which combined arable and poultry farming with a number of diversification activities. An owner-occupied enterprise, the majority of the day-to-day farming was conducted by Daniel Grant, the younger farmer, while his parents, Alice and Harold, performed the farm administration, management, and filled in around the farm. Alice was also largely responsible for running the diversification businesses. Due to financial pressures over the past ten years, the Grants had taken the decision that they needed to "*cut everything back*" to a level that was more or less manageable between them. This process had been prompted by Daniel's return to the family farm following his agricultural training, at a time in his life when he had benefited from business training and was open-minded about the way the farm should look. Harold, who had always maintained an active role in the community outside the farm, which had included some paid work, had been supportive of these suggestions and recognised the need to change and adapt in order to survive.

Daniel and Harold organised their labour around the farm so that each could have a day off a week. Farm D employed a contractor during the busy harvest season, and also employed an agricultural student over the summer months. This set-up was a big change from ten years ago, when five additional labourers had been employed on the farm. However, the farmers did not feel that they worked overly intensive hours because the farm had been reorganised to reflect a reduced workforce while maximising profit, mainly through moving away from livestock farming. Unlike Alice, who had given up her work when she married and taken on the role of a traditional farmer's wife, doing the farm accounts and working on the farm, Daniel's wife had always worked outside the farm. The younger couple felt that the income she earned this way was necessary to maintain their standard of living, which was no longer sustainable simply through farming.

**Farm L: getting by**

Farm L was a medium-sized dairy farm in Lincolnshire owned by Adam and Cecilia Butler, a couple in their 40s. In response to a recent financial crisis during which time they had come close to losing the farm, the couple had taken professional advice and had relinquished the arable side of their farm, which had become unviable. Farm L had been in the family for several generations.

Adam now performed the majority of the farm labour on his own, with some help from his father, since the couple had a young family who took up most of Cecilia's time. Although he employed a part-time milker and a labourer over the summer to take the pressure off his father, the set-up was becoming increasingly strained as Adam suffered from back problems, but they could not afford to employ additional labour. The use of contractors was more necessary than desirable, since the farm could not afford to invest in new machinery and contractors used their own equipment. Cecilia was responsible for most of the farm administration and occasionally filled in with milking and tractor work. She was very worried that their current capacity was not stretching to meet the farm's labour demands, and that the pressure was taking its toll on her husband's health as well as on their homelife. Much as they loved farming, they were pessimistic about whether they would be able to maintain Farm L long enough to pass it on to their children.

Intensification of everyone's workload around the farm is likely to have an important knock-on effect in terms of local community relations. As Theresa Turner, a Lincolnshire farmer's wife, who had always maintained a strong network of contacts in outside organisations, pointed out, the demands for women to take on more and more work around the farm would inevitably mean they had less time for the important but unseen work maintaining the fabric of local social relations (a point taken up in chapter six). This could, in turn, increase farmers' sense of isolation and reduce the support networks available to them during times of need.

One issue that arose where family farms adopted a pattern of individuals having particular responsibilities was that certain skills were not routinely transmitted to the younger generation. For example, we came across a number of examples of enterprises where the older farmer took complete responsibility for claiming subsidies, which worked very well in the short-term, but which engendered a growing sense of tension for farmers' sons who were aware that they were not developing skills which would be vital in the future.

Within the larger-scale farms where we conducted interviews, there was greater flexibility over the labour process, since workforces tended to be larger. These comprised a rather different occupational experience, in which workload and workplace relations were more varied. In a less tangible way, interviewees attached less emotional intensity to these larger farms, an aspect which had both benefits and disadvantages.

**Farm I: reinventing a family dynasty**

Farm I was an agricultural business based in Lancashire, which comprised a number of farms owned by the same family. It covered a range of livestock farming, about half of which was organic, and combined a mixture of owner-occupied and tenanted land. At the centre of this enterprise was Max Park, a farmer in his 70s who had brought the farm as a young man, and who was unusual amongst the farmers interviewed in that he had married into a farming family, and consequently his farm had lacked the kind of family legacy common to family farms. Max had four sons, who had been variously involved in the farm and its diversification over the years. However, his son Christopher had taken on the role of successor, and Max described him as "*the kingpin now*".

The farm had undergone many changes over the years in response to market demands, and the family had added to it and experimented with a variety of farming methods. Christopher, even more than his father, displayed an entrepreneurial narrative in talking about the farm, which he regarded in terms of enterprise and was open to new diversification activities. A secondary farm was removed from the main farm site, which the Parks employed a farm manager to run. Farm I also used contractors on a daily basis, who brought with them a variety of specialist skills, and this tactic had proved increasingly useful since Max's sons had left home. The entire farm's mechanical work was contracted out, and contract staff were used to cover Christopher's work during the time he devoted to his voluntary work. Neither farmer felt that they were overworked. Christopher regarded himself more as a manager than a farmer in their current set-up, and the arrangement had enabled Max to scale down his work on the farm as he got older, although he continued to be responsible for the accounts, marketing work, and filling in round the farm during busy periods. He regarded this as "*winding it down a bit quietly.*" Christopher's wife worked outside the farm, and Max's helped out with light farm duties.

Farm I's mixed labour force was clearly an important aspect of Christopher's occupational satisfaction. He felt that it would be de-motivating to work on your own, as many of the farmers we interviewed did, and he thrived on his constant involvement in personnel issues.

### **4.3 ADMINISTRATION**

Farmers' administrative workload has undergone an exponential growth in recent years, with heightened regulation and the expansion of the subsidy system, and for many interviewees this was the most tangible change to their experiences in recent years. An increase in administrative expectations clearly has implications for the way that other farming activities will be organised.

Understanding who does what, relating to the administration of the case study farms has been difficult to unpack. The administration of a farm may be broad and wide-ranging. Respondents described such diverse tasks as: ordering in equipment, feed and stock; paying for this; reporting financial expenditure; invoicing for produce sold on; negotiating price for produce; reporting on financial turnover; tax returns; PAYE (Pay As You Earn); claiming for subsidies; claiming for milk quotas; applying for passports; keeping up to date with legislative and policy changes; dealing with paperwork for inspectors; accounting for stock; claiming for compensation for culled animals; liaising with vets and keeping track of animal vaccinations. The point of concern in these for most farmers was not issues relating to accounts and self-assessment, but rather increased levels of paperwork generated by DEFRA and HSE interventions (see section 5.5.4).

In addition, the administration required by changes in the implementation of legal and policy processes does not fit into neat categories of responsibility. It requires farmers to juggle a range of administrative tasks - reporting to a number of bodies, and keeping account of a range of practices in the day-to-day running of farms. Complicating this, administrative tasks were generally split between members of a farming enterprise, an arrangement which made sense in practical terms, although farms consequently sometimes lacked a holistic perspective of the administrative process. This raised the question of how much knowledge of administrative processes was shared by workers and family members; often this was limited. This may pose problems if a family member or worker is sick or unable to work on administration, in terms of how difficult would it be for someone else to pick up these individual tasks. The burden of responsibility, alongside the fear of getting legal paperwork wrong (and being criminalised) came across as a considerable pressure during interviews, which is taken up in more detail in chapter five.

The heightened administrative load of farming has meant that it has become increasingly important that farming communities are able to use computers, to ensure that this work can become automated, and particularly in a context where submission forms are often provided in electronic format. Amongst those interviewed, there was huge diversity in interviewees' willingness to learn new Information Technology (IT) skills and the ease with which they have been able to acquire these. As with administrative tasks more broadly, very often one person on a farm took responsibility for computerised activities. To some extent there was an age and gendered effect, with older (male) farmers displaying the greatest aversion to learning IT skills, and feeling that they would be able to avoid doing so for the remainder of their careers. However, we also came across examples of older farmers who were highly computer literate and who had made use of IT training at local colleges, and of younger farmers who did their best to avoid getting involved in this aspect of the administrative work of farms. To some extent, IT aversion was an issue about lacking confidence in one's ability to develop new skills, although farm women tended to be less vulnerable to this fear, perhaps because of traditional expectations that they would deploy a flexible range of skills around the farm. Computerised administration also raised issues of basic skills and affordability of IT equipment, aspects that were undoubtedly relevant to some of those interviewed. Farmers with basic skills needs clearly have support needs with respect to computerised administration. Very often we conducted interviews in farm offices, and the quality of IT equipment, as well as the range of administrative systems in operation, was hugely variable in character, and related to personal resources.

#### **4.4 DIVERSIFICATION**

As indicated in chapter two, nine of the farms where interviews were conducted had become involved in one or more kinds of diversification activity. The nature of these varied dramatically, reflecting local labour market opportunities, personal interests and resources. The capacity of these activities and how long they had been going on was very different between farms. What was interesting about diversification was not only how and why farms became involved in supplementary activities, and how these interacted with their existing portfolios, but also why other farms were more constrained or unwilling to enact this kind of involvement. Subsidies were available in some areas (for example, those that qualified for Objective 1 status, or under the Rural Development Scheme) to help farms set up diversification businesses, and several interviewees talked about advisory services they had made use of. One key informant qualified his support for diversification, explaining that many farmers needed to acquire better business skills, and that farmers whose farms were performing badly were unlikely to run successful alternative businesses unless they first enhanced these skills.

Some of the diversification activities on case study farms included holiday accommodation, landfill, paintballing, campsites, car hire, wedding receptions, a farm restaurant, equestrian pursuits, property development, environmental activities, and farm shops selling seasonal produce (such as vegetables, Christmas trees and logs). Alice Grant described the process of deciding what kind of diversification activities might be suitable for their farm:

*“You just look around your farm, and we’ve got these assets. How can we utilise the assets that we’ve got, and where we are? And that’s what you do.”*

However, with the best will in the world, this was not always possible and sometimes farmers came to the conclusion that they were best advised to stick to agriculture, where their expertise and established market lay. Cecilia Butler, a farmer's wife from a dairy farm located in an isolated part of Lincolnshire, explained that:

*“we haven’t been able to diversify, we’re not in an area where diversification has been an option. Although you know, we’ve looked, we’ve tried to think, well what else could we do to bring in income?”*

Theresa Turner, a Lincolnshire farmer’s wife in her mid 50s, also reflected on the risk element of diversification and whether at this point in their lives this was the most rational course of action for them to be taking:

*“I mean yes people say you can diversify, but you’ve got to diversify at our age into something that we would be good at.”*

Notably, the more tourist-focused diversification tended to be associated with the Devon farms, where there was a more clearly defined market for such, although here too interviewees noted that these could take time to build up, particularly as farmers were competing with specialist and established providers. The seclusion of several farms could also preclude this type of activity, since tourists were seen as desiring the convenience of local facilities combined with a rural location. As Eric Watson explained, although they had run holiday accommodation for a long time, in some respects demand for this was less reliable than might be expected:

*“It’s got more difficult, and the tourism varies from year to year. This year has not been particularly good again, it’s been hard work getting people, especially in this area ... people look on a map and they want to go to Cornwall or South Devon, they don’t want to come into the middle stuff.”*

This situation was intensified as more and more farmers set up diversification businesses that were effectively operating in competition with one another. Advertising for these kinds of businesses tended to be through word-of-mouth or specialist agencies, and although a few had websites, these tended to be at a rudimentary stage.

Alice Grant, a Hampshire farmer’s wife, explained why location had been critical in their decision to use some of their farmland for paintballing, emphasising the specificity of farmers’ diversification options:

*“We’re in quite a good area, we’re not far from the motorway and we had the woodland which was suitable for it. You have to do the diversification according to your, the situation of your farm, where your clientele are coming from.”*

Reflecting this, farms in regions such as Lincolnshire were felt to be ill-suited to branching out into the tourist trade, and the diversification ideas farmers there had drew upon rather different kinds of markets.

One of the advantages of selling directly to the customer, as offered by farm shops and outposts, was felt to be that customers would be able to develop a greater knowledge of and confidence in local produce. Additionally, this type of arrangement by-passed the problems raised by so many interviewees associated with supermarkets and price wars (see section 5.4.3), and farmers were able to achieve a “*fairer*” price for their produce.

Often interviewees explained that it was easier to realise a profit through their diversification activities than through farming, and it was clear that their farms would not have survived without cross-subsidisation from these other activities. Daniel Grant described the diversification businesses that his farm had branched out into in recent years as providing “*a financial lifeline to the business*”. One of the reasons why diversification activities worked for

so many farmers was because they drew upon their entrepreneurial ethos, and enabled farming families to maintain autonomy in the work that they did. As Arthur Read put it:

*“I think once you’ve been your own boss, you know, I think it would be very difficult to go back working for someone.”*

In an important sense then, diversification activities promoted farms’ stability.

A number of interviewees explained that they had set up diversification business in direct response to a crisis, which had made them rethink the viability of continuing to rely upon farming for their income. In this context several people mentioned the Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak of 2001 as a trigger to rethinking the structure of their businesses. Derek Morris, a dairy farmer, explained, *“diversification yeah, after foot and mouth it really made us sit and think what do want to do from now on, it was a real turning point.”* However, some diversification businesses associated with the tourist trade had been adversely affected by FMD. Hugh Jenkins, a Powys farmer, had received a modest income from a youth group that camped on his land every year. However, the farm had been forced to close the campsite during the FMD outbreak, and subsequently the group had made other arrangements and had not returned to the farmland.

The ways in which diversification activities were organised within farming families is also of interest, and was highly gendered, women more often setting out to acquire a new set of occupational skills. One of the reasons for this was men’s stronger occupational attachment to farming and unwillingness to relinquish this identity. A second and more practical reason was that farmers tended to have their time more closely structured by the demands of the farm than their wives, who were used to performing a variety of different kinds of work (domestic work, farm work, childcare, accounting, and so on). Consequently women found it less problematic to be flexible and to demarcate time to devote to a new venture.

Diversification frequently reflected interviewees’ previous experiences of work. So for example, male farmers tended more towards the kinds of businesses that drew upon their manual labour skills, such as building and working with animals, while the kinds of diversification business women ran represented a professionalisation of their domestic and administrative skills, including catering, running holiday accommodation, and work which involved more interaction with the public. One key informant explained that women’s involvement in this kind of capacity was relatively unproblematic, since running sidelines in B&Bs had long been regarded in farming communities as *‘women’s work’* which fitted in with farming, an attitude which often belied the fact that these businesses could be more profitable than farming. The same informant noted that there may be a perverse incentive for farmers to keep diversification activities low-key, in order to avoid making the kind of profit margin that would take families into a higher tax bracket.

Clearly the pressures of running diversification ventures could be the same as those of running any other business, and these were intensified when people felt over-worked and under-supported. Conversely, for some interviewees (particularly women) they were a source of great fulfilment, an opportunity to exercise their creative skills and to prove that they were capable of running a successful enterprise. For example, Barbara Watson combined running holiday accommodation at the farmhouse with a small farm restaurant, and explained that: *“I just love doing different things,”* although at the same time, *“it’s darned hard work.”*

## 4.5 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As self-employed persons, farmers lacked the kind of organisational framework within which training and professional development are traditionally pursued, and the onus has been on them to ensure that they keep up to date with developments in farming. In a context where demands upon farmers' time have become increasingly intensive, this may have negative implications for their opportunities for these kinds of activities, for some types of farmers more than others. However, in an increasingly competitive market, there is a strong incentive to ensure that farmers do not miss out on developments that might improve their farms' performance. The issue then was less that it was difficult for farmers to find out what was available to them in professional development terms, and more that many lacked the time to keep on top of these aspects of their work.

At one level, farmers emphasised that the most important way of keeping up to date with farming was by talking to other farmers, either informally or at local agricultural shows. Edward Hills, a farmer's son, explained:

*“You talk among yourselves, as soon as something new comes out everybody seems to know, you’ll talk about it, it’s the new in thing, or it’s a new thing to talk about. It’s very much a social thing.”*

However, time pressures and the closure of local venues, such as markets, have to some extent restricted farmers' opportunities for doing this. At another level, farmers explained that they received a great deal of written information in the post, advertising courses and consultants, as well as various kinds of publicity drives from organisations such as DEFRA. This type of communication, of course, will disadvantage farmers with basic skills needs. The volume of these was commonly felt to be so great that farmers tended not to invest heavily in sorting out the good from the bad, and we heard numerous accounts of literature simply being “*chucked in the bin*.” Several interviewees mentioned the Internet as a resource that they were aware would provide this kind of information, although it too tended not to be heavily used.

By contrast, some of the larger-scale farmers, who had organised their work in a way that gave them flexibility, felt they had more opportunity to engage in professional development. Christopher Park commented that, “*I feel I’m at the cutting edge of change*,” and made time to regularly get involved in trade events. Likewise, Harold Grant, who had always invested heavily in maintaining a presence in outside networks, explained about keeping up to date with farming that, “*you make it your job*,” and these farmers clearly felt there were major advantages to their approach.

Industry periodicals, such as *The Farmers’ Weekly* and *The Farmers’ Guardian*, were commonly felt to be a useful way of keeping up to date with new developments, although several farmers commented that they no longer had time to sit and read these, and some had stopped their subscriptions in recent years. However, bought publications were often regarded as more reliable and unbiased than free literature. One farmer spoke of an organisation called Agricultural Business Information Point, whose newsletters he found useful, and which gave details of relevant workshops. Another farmer's son referred to having found out about courses through the Agricultural Training Board<sup>7</sup>. A few interviewees identified the radio, including local radio, as a valuable communications tool, particularly in terms of farming programmes. The NFU was raised several times as an organisation that was good at publicising relevant farming events, for example, in terms of learning about new regulation. Bernard Young, a

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<sup>7</sup> *In the past; this organisation no longer exists.*



Lincolnshire-based farmer, belonged to a local farmers' training group, which provided a wealth of opportunities for participation in courses and seminars, although as a dairy farmer in a largely arable area, he felt that these tended not to reflect his interests. Other farmers, such as Adam Butler, relied upon trusted consultants whom they had used in the past, to pass on this kind of information.

Farmer's wives tended to focus upon their role sifting the literature their farms received for useful professional development information. A second major role for farm women was in developing the farm's IT literacy, which they often acquired through their administrative work, and which they tended to feel made this work more efficient. This was often self-taught, although several farmers' wives had attended formal computer classes at local colleges and had found these very useful.

Particularly for the younger farmers interviewed, agricultural training had become a normative part of their expected trajectory into farming, which provided an essential stage at which they might be awakened to the diversity of skills that they would need to maintain as farmers. There was some evidence that younger farmers who acquired these kinds of accredited courses were more enthusiastic about continuing to attend relevant agricultural courses, such as health and safety training.

#### **4.6 FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**

The intensification of farming has had a number of effects upon farmers' financial planning. Interviewees frequently talked about the price of their produce being kept down, the effect this had upon the financial viability of their farms, and the fact that they had to work harder and for longer hours for less profit. Some talked almost casually about the amount of debt they placed themselves in, in order to broaden and intensify their business, and regarded this as a necessary evil in farming, while for others this was a source of immense stress (see chapter five). Owner-occupiers were extremely reliant on the value of land to underpin the strength of their assets. Conversely, the high cost of land was pricing some smaller farms out of business, and preventing younger farmers from starting up in business.

Most of the smaller- to medium-sized farmers interviewed felt that their standard of living had dropped in recent years, and that it had become more difficult to pay bills. Very often, farms were cited as having made tiny annual profits, and being very close to the brink of extinction. This was viewed as the result of the combination of the reduced prices that farmers could achieve for produce, and the mounting reinvestment costs that were necessary if they were to stay in business. Adam Butler, a farmer who had recently been through a period of severe financial crisis, commented that, "*it's easier to spend yourself out of a problem than what it is to save some money to get the thing,*" and had taken financial advice to gain perspective on how his finances could be better organised. Victor Adams, a mixed farmer, made the point that reinvestment in farming had become much more expensive, due to the necessity to comply with Health and Safety regulation, "*whereas then we did it on a shoe string.*" Some felt that this change in their fortunes had been a gradual process, while others attributed it to specific events, such as the FMD outbreak (although this had both positive and negative financial outcomes, as discussed later). Most of the farmers we interviewed were also reliant upon some kind of subsidy, without which they would have been unable to continue farming, although for many receipt of these sat uneasily with their perception of themselves as self-reliant.

Several interviewees mentioned the seasonal fortunes of farming, and that farms needed to ensure that they were able to tide themselves over through difficult times, and until a market had

been secured for their produce. Interviewees often commented that farming had always been characterised by a degree of financial uncertainty, and that farmers needed a longer-term perspective to carry them through difficult times. To some extent, such seasonal fluctuations in finances have been exacerbated by the timetables of subsidy allocation, and many interviewees commented on the element of financial insecurity in waiting to hear whether and how much subsidies they would be allocated. There was a considerable degree of apprehension about the impending CAP reform and the single payment scheme, in terms of a lack of detail on how this would affect farmers, and a concern that particular types of farms would be penalised, uncertainties that made financial planning difficult.

A large proportion of the farmers interviewed had changed the character of their farms in some way over the past few decades, in response to financial pressures and the recognition that previous ways of farming were no longer able to provide a living. However, this sometimes meant that farmers had to sacrifice aspects of their work that were particularly valued. Oliver Lee felt that smaller farms had become less viable, and that farming's future lay with larger conglomerated farms; he had reflected this perspective in his style of farm management over the years. As outlined in section 4.4, a number of interviewees had also become involved in diversification activities to supplement their household incomes, and farmers' wives in particular played a leading role in initiating this kind of work. Families also frequently enacted strategies between them to reduce their costs, such as taking pay cuts from the farm and taking on outside (and generally more profitable) work. This was a particularly necessary tactic when farms were supporting multi-generational families.

Some of the larger farmers made routine use of accountants, although more generally doing the farm accounts was a task that farmer's wives were traditionally responsible for. In a couple of instances, farmers had made use of external financial consultants to help them devise a survival plan for the future, and where these services were used they were agreed to have been useful and worthwhile.

Larry Black commented that farming had become less "*a way of life*" and more "*a business*" over the years, which for him meant focusing upon his cattle's productivity and extremely careful stock management. Daniel Black agreed that successful farmers needed to constantly reassess their business to see what adjustments could be made to make it more profitable. Edward Hills, a farmer's son, commented that farming had become "*a much tighter game*" in recent years, and that farmers needed to watch their profit margin very carefully and adapt their farming practices if they were to survive. This represented a significant culture shift, which sat uneasily with the priorities of many farmers, who often commented that a more business-focused approach was better suited to larger enterprises. Eric Watson, a small livestock farmer, felt that in order to sustain a successful farm now, farmers needed to be "*on top of every scenario that is thrown your way.*" For him, this simply wasn't possible, and he readily admitted that the actual work of farming rather than business skills was his strength.

One side effect of farmers' management of their finances was that their personal pensions could be used as buffers to help them through difficult times. This meant that they lacked standardised retirement expectations, and typically needed to work significantly after state pension age in order to be assured of a reasonable pension income. This could be extremely problematic when their health was compromised in later life. Financial management was also an issue in terms of planning for the future and children's succession. There was a certain amount of pressure upon farmers, particularly when farms had been in families for generations, to pass on a financially viable business to their children. There was consequently some difficulty letting go when farmers did not feel this had been achieved under their stewardship. By contrast, a number of farmers explained that they had deliberately discouraged their children

from staying in farming, much as they would have enjoyed seeing the family tradition continued, because they did not want to see them struggle financially as they had done. For example, Malcolm Potter said of his son, *“I think he can do better for himself, and make more money and have a better life doing other things. I hope so anyway.”*

One way in which the financial management of farms has changed rather dramatically over the course of a single generation was in terms of the relationships that farmers had with bank managers. While many older farmers talked about having had long-standing and trusted relationships with their local bank manager, whom they would visit each week to talk frankly about their concerns and plans, in recent years this relationship had become more distant. Amongst those interviewed, it was rare that farmers could identify their bank manager and rarer still that they got together to discuss financial planning. Since many farmers lacked the resources to invest in private financial consultants, and many also lacked business training, the demise of this relationship may have severe implications for some farmers.

#### **4.7 CHANGES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE**

Eric Watson commented that as farmers were finding particular types of livestock farming less profitable, the character of the countryside was changing: *“driving around ... there isn’t very much livestock around in the fields which to me, it didn’t used to be like that.”* In areas such as Hampshire and Devon, the visibility of diversification businesses attached to farms also drew comment. Connected to the decline in the overall number of people working in agriculture (section 4.2), interviewees pointed to a change in the character of rural communities, with fewer of their neighbours working in farming, and more people moving into rural areas, often upgrading farmhouses or converting them into holiday accommodation (with its implications for the seasonal population of the area). Vernon Chester, a farmer running a medium-sized mixed farm in Lincolnshire, explained his concerns in terms of the rural demographic shifts that inevitably accompanied changes in the way farms were organised:

*“It’s very sad when farms ... get amalgamated with great big concerns ... great big tractors come and they do it all in about two days and all the work, and they disappear. Because it does away with the local community and health of the local churches, chapels, village halls, and all that sort of thing.”*

The loss of local services reduced the quality of life for the communities remaining in the countryside, and caused particular deprivation to non-drivers, who were more likely to be older. This sense of shortfall was reflected in the local social institutions of agriculture, such as markets, many of which had closed down around the time of the FMD outbreak, and farmers commented that those remaining were less well attended and consequently less vibrant:

*“when I used to go to market 20 years ago the place was absolutely thriving with hundreds of little small producers and a lot of them have gone now. So there’s only, there’s fewer and fewer producers and I suppose each one of them’s a little bit bigger.”*  
(Nathan Turner)

Harold Grant, an older Hampshire farmer, reflected that incomers to rural areas tended not to be as involved in local communities, and that if this trend continued it would have negative long-term effects:

*“they’re not a bit interested in the countryside. All they want to do is, come down for a jolly weekend and go back again. They put little into it.”*

Interviewees in Lincolnshire, in particular, talked about an influx of commuters into rural areas, whose time for local interaction was limited, and whose absence during the working week exacerbated this sense of depopulation. In an environment where neighbours were less known, several interviewees also raised the issue of an increased fear of crime, a sense of not knowing whether people they saw in the countryside had any “*business being there*,” though this seemed to be more about anomie than any real increase in the risk of crime.

Hunting was a complex issue. Most of the farmers interviewed were not involved in local hunts, and the 2005 ban on hunting did not emerge as a significant issue. However, several farmers either partook in hunting themselves, earned additional income through allowing local hunts onto their land, or donated dead livestock to the hounds, and consequently regarded such activities as an important part of “*the fabric of the countryside*.”

A number of interviewees raised a concern that government policy generally, and in particular the Mid Term Review, was imposing all kinds of restrictions on environmental management, turning farmers into “*park-keepers*” and deskilling them, and that it was in danger of homogenising the landscape. Changes in the physical landscape were also in part the by-product of mechanisation, as Victor Adams explained:

*“with all this big equipment we have needed the bigger fields, but where fields are awkward there’s replanting being done, not just on hedgerows but whole corners of fields are taken out now to make them squarer, and so easier to work, and new hedgerows are being put down.”*

Not all farmers were averse to government’s environmental concerns, and some saw conservation as providing important opportunities which farmers would be ideally placed to respond to. Christopher Park, who ran a large mixed farming enterprise in Lancashire, commented that: “*I think we’ve got a bright future, but it’s tinged with green.*”

Two livestock farmers lamented the opening up of the countryside to uneducated “*outsiders*”, via the Countryside Rights of Way Act, explaining that loud and disorganised rambles could upset their livestock. This was a matter of particular concern at certain times of the year, for example, during calving season.

#### **4.8 AGRICULTURAL CRISES**

In one sense, crises of various kinds have been an ongoing part of farming communities’ experience, and they have needed to develop a range of strategies in response to these in order to survive. Indeed, several interviewees commented that this aspect of farmers’ experience was part of what made them so “*resilient*”. In recent years, however, several agricultural crises have acquired particular visibility and depth of coverage, and have been unusual in their long-term impact. Notably, these have been focused upon livestock farming, and have included the BSE outbreak of the mid 1990s and the FMD crisis of 2001. The issue about these is their non-predictability, an aspect of farmers’ experience which is unique among self-employed businesses, and which can catch unaware the most organised and forward-looking farmers. As Barry Phillips, a farm worker on a farm hit by FMD, explained:

*“It was just a shot out of a thunderbolt at the time. Because I’ve got to admit, we thought we’d probably all got away with it because we didn’t get it ‘til a very late stage. And I expect we were beginning to think it was all right. And wham, it’s here, all the animals are dead within about a few hours.”*

FMD and BSE had acutely regional impacts, reflecting agricultural patterns and the movement of livestock across the country. Of the areas case studied in this research, the outbreaks had particular impacts upon Devon, Powys and Lancashire, and affected whole communities at a time. Some of the more acute stress effects of these kinds of stock crises are explored in section 5.3.2. Longer-term effects have included: reducing the market price of produce; the closure of local markets; a reduction in the size of the agricultural workforce as some farmers subsequently left the industry; and a decline in public confidence in farming. As Nathan Turner put it, “*all these crises that we’ve been through have had their casualties along the way.*”

Both stricken and disease-free local farms were affected during FMD, when whole counties virtually “*closed down*”. Interviewees also repeatedly referred to the welfare scheme offered to culled farmers in the aftermath of the outbreak, and many felt that this had inadvertently penalised “*careful*” farmers who received no compensation, but who nevertheless had borne the brunt of the financial effects of FMD. Many interviewees were extremely critical of the way both crises had been handled by the government, and felt that more decisive and science-led action could have minimised the spread of disease at an earlier stage. Perceptions of how the government had acted at the time had a lasting effect upon interviewees’ regard and trust for DEFRA. Even in FMD-free areas perceptions of the crisis created a climate of suspicion, which made farms quite insular places to be for the duration of the outbreak. BSE appeared to have had a more measured short-term effect, since it was often possible to isolate individual cases of livestock disease, but it too had more serious and widespread long-term effects. A common theme was of “*waste*”, something that was contrary to farmers’ values.

On a more individual level, several interviewees had suffered pollution crises, which had affected them badly, both in terms of the financial reparations that had been necessary, but more long-lastingly in terms of the loss of reputation they felt had been associated with environmental accidents.

#### **4.9 FARMING AND THE NEXT GENERATION**

The younger people interviewed, being still involved in farming, represented those with a certain degree of engagement in agriculture. One indication of how young people more broadly are responding to changes in the sector is their participation in agricultural training. We interviewed a principal of a well-established agricultural college who explained that enrolments in agriculture courses were falling year on year, and that the college’s response to this had been to diversify into a broader range of “*countryside leisure pursuits*”, including, equine studies, game-keeping and wildlife management, fish farming, horticulture, automobile engineering, forestry, and the animal care industry.

Both older and younger farmers made the point that farmers’ anti-social working hours were off-putting to younger people, who were bound to have other priorities at this point in their life. Likewise, the income that a young farmer could expect to achieve compared unfavourably with their peers, who lacked responsibilities and were enjoying relatively high disposable incomes. One key informant gave the example of a friend’s son who worked in a box factory, work which he found dull, but for which “*he earns far more than he ever could in farming,*” an outcome that was unsatisfactory to both father and son.

One effect of young people’s disengagement in farming has been to increase labour pressures upon the remaining farmers. Derek Morris, a Devon dairy farmer, explained:

*“we’re having a real problem trying to find someone to do the work and come into farming. I couldn’t sack a cowman if I wanted to because there’s nobody there that would take his place, so that’s a big change.”*

A community worker in a stress-based organisation explained that young people were increasingly rejecting what they regarded as their fathers’ subservient positions in family farms, and were moving away from farming. This was a difficult perspective in the sense that it often conflicted with parents’ expectations for the future, and created worries in terms of succession and housing issues.

Adrian Hills, a Devon livestock farmer, explained that changes in the nature of farming meant that it had become more difficult for young people to establish themselves in farming than it had been for their parents, and that this acted as a disincentive to an agricultural career.

An important issue for policy, raised by many of those interviewed, is that within farming families there was often an unspoken (or sometimes more explicit assumption) that children would work on the farm and eventually move into farming themselves. While the current economic context of farming was increasingly prompting older farmers to encourage their children to take a broader labour market perspective, it remains true that a number of younger people would have benefited from more targeted careers advice about their options at this stage. Larry Black, who had regretted the choices he had made about farming, explained about how the education system had been complicit in reinforcing his parents’ desires:

*“if you were a farmer’s son ... you were more or less expected to come home and work on the farm, or at least get into the farming community, you weren’t really given the option. I remember going to ... a careers interview ... [they] looked down at your notes: “Oh your Dad’s a farmer isn’t it? So you’ll be going on your Mum and Dad’s farm, won’t you?””*

One key informant commented that the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs (NFYFC) had played a valuable role in combating rural isolation, but that since FMD many local branches had been forced to close, depriving young people of vital social networks and support from other young farmers. The same informant noted that the NFYFC had a secondary, equally important educative role, and that farming as a whole was likely to suffer unless the trend was reversed. Rural isolation was particularly acute in certain areas. Rhys Lloyd, a young farmer from Powys, commented that:

*“Where there would’ve been lots of farmers, young farmers in this valley there’s only myself, I’m the youngest for miles away really.”*

By contrast, a growing movement towards agricultural training and credentialisation amongst those remaining in the industry, has led to a position in some areas where a relatively small group of younger farmers with highly developed business skills have performed well in the agricultural sector, finding their skills well matched to current market demands.

Farming then, has seen a fundamental shake-up over recent decades, a process that has important implications for both occupational satisfaction and workplace stress.

#### 4.10 SUMMARY

Recent years have seen major organisational and policy changes in the agricultural sector, which have transformed the character of the work performed by farming communities. These have included:

- Changes in the sizes of farms, with smaller family-run farms finding it increasingly difficult to compete, and farms overall tending to grow in order to position themselves as more adaptable. One off-shoot of this has been that the landscape of agriculture has changed, in terms of the appearance of farms, the population of the countryside, and the availability of local facilities.
- An intensification of farming practices in response to falling returns for agricultural produce in a global market, and with this a reduced sense of control over the work of farming.
- Farmers reassessing the ways in which they farm as certain types of farming have become less profitable. Managed changes have tended to be more successful and stable over the long-term than more responsive ones. However, these were often associated with a business perspective, which sometimes represented an uncomfortable culture shift for farmers.
- High-profile stock crises with acute regional effects and longer-term impacts upon the stability of livestock farming.
- An increase in diversification activities as, for many, farming has become a less reliable source of income.
- A fall in the use and availability of farm labour, leading to alternative strategies including the use of migrant and contractual labour, informal and more formal systems of labour exchange between farms, an intensification of farms' workloads, and some farmers leaving agriculture altogether.
- A heightened administrative burden upon farmers, prompted by increased regulation and an expansion of subsidy payment systems.
- Young people increasingly being deterred from following their parents into farming by perceptions that it has become much more difficult to make a living. As a consequence, the pressures resting upon remaining farming communities in terms of workload, succession issues and housing have become more intense.

## 5. STRESS

The research task at the heart of this project has been to analyse the various aspects of stress experienced by farming communities, in order to assess the suitability of support interventions in a non-organisational environment. This chapter starts out by considering stress from a health standpoint, and moves on to explore how concepts such as stress are used by, or are applicable to farming communities. It distinguishes between intrinsic, extrinsic and work-related aspects of farming stress, factors likely to be amenable to different types of policy solutions, and separates these from financial and familial causes for farming communities. These aspects are distinguished in terms of critical differences in terms of the type and size of farms, and by interviewees' position in the agricultural workforce.

### 5.1 FARMING AND HEALTH

In this research, our sampling strategy set out to deliberately identify farmers with a range of circumstances, from those going through (or who had in the past experienced) difficult times, to those who had apparently coped very well with farming's changes over the past few decades. Consequently, we interviewed people whose health has been affected by farming in a wide variety of ways, and although we have not intentionally interviewed people at the acute end of stress-related illness (whom there would be ethical issues in targeting), the research included a number of people who had been through such crises in the past, or whose close friends had experienced these (in extreme circumstances, culminating in suicide), and one who appeared to be in a recovery stage following an acute condition.

A number of questions were used in the topic guide to contextualise our research within the traditional health-based model of stress (see Appendix 2, section six of topic guide). These drew upon the survey of work-related illness conducted by Jones *et al.* (1998) for the HSE. They included: asking interviewees whether they had suffered from any of a series of common stress-related symptoms (physical and mental); whether they felt their work had influenced their experience of these; and the extent to which their job involved particular workload and organisational characteristics which may be associated with stress (selecting ones which might feasibly be relevant to the environment of agriculture). However, reflecting our perspective that a health-related model restricts the scope of occupational studies of stress, interviewees' responses to these questions only provided one part of the jigsaw in terms of how, and the ways in which, their work has become more stressful in recent years. Stress, it seems, is framed by farming communities in terms that broach the boundaries of health, although this undoubtedly provides one important aspect of their experiences.

#### 5.1.1 Physical health

Interviewees were presented with a checklist of physical symptoms, which were explored with them in relation to their work. These included: lack of sleep; intense tiredness; headaches; back problems; problems relaxing; low energy; and arthritis. Notably, these potentially physical effects of stress tended to be raised infrequently by interviewees when talking about stress in broad terms, so it was necessary to examine them both where they emerged in the context of stress, in addition to on their own. While all of these symptoms were expressed by at least some interviewees as aspects of their health that they felt suffered as a result of farming, lack of sleep, physical exhaustion and back problems were the most commonly experienced problems.



Lack of sleep and, relatedly (but not *necessarily* linked to it), intense tiredness, were common complaints and were very much associated with farmers' intensive working patterns, which often followed seasonal trends in agriculture. For example, as one dairy farmer explained, he fairly typically started work at four in the morning and gave his herd a final check at eleven at night. This long hours culture often meant that farmers had little time to relax and recuperate. A lack of sleep was sometimes exacerbated by worrying about some aspect of their work, about the farm's future, or about how other family members were coping.

Many farmers (and a number of farmers' wives) explicitly linked long-standing back problems to the manual demands of farming. Such problems tended to affect their capabilities in lasting ways, and were often compounded by working through warning signs. One farmer had injured his back through an accident on the farm, and had never fully recovered. Perhaps surprisingly, the younger farmers interviewed mentioned back complaints as often as the older farmers, suggesting that back problems were not so much an age-related phenomenon, but a risk associated with manual labour over the life course in farming.

A number of interviewees, mainly farmers and their sons, complained of getting regular headaches. They variously linked these to: being overworked; working in confined spaces for extended periods (such as working in a tractor); work pressure (such as difficulty making a decision about a farming matter); and lack of sleep. A few of the older farmers and one younger farmer also suffered from arthritis, which they felt was exacerbated or caused by their work - performing repetitive tasks, working in damp and/or cold conditions, and machinery vibrations. Linked to worrying about work and lack of sleep, several of the farmers also felt that they suffered from low energy. A handful also complained of having problems relaxing, attributing this to overwork and being too "*wound up*" from work to sleep.

An interesting aspect of interviewees' responses was that even when they listed an extensive range of ways in which they felt farming negatively affected their health, they often also emphasised they were "*healthier*" for having been in the occupation. By this they meant that they were generally fitter and had more stamina than people in office jobs. Interviewees sometimes talked about the inherent "*healthiness*" of outdoor work, and of the relative lack of pollution in rural areas. Wives in particular commented on the benefits for their children of a rural lifestyle. Notably wives often took on a caretaker role in terms of their families' health, sometimes providing quite contrasting accounts of farmers' problems, and taking responsibility for managing husbands' health (for example, through providing a balanced diet, making sure partners took breaks, and booking doctors' appointments for them). This role brought it its own stresses and strains. Perhaps as a by-product of this caretaking work, wives tended to talk more extensively and concernedly about their families' health than their own.

In addition to the kinds of health complaints we questioned on, a number of interviewees had longer-standing health conditions, many of which had no obvious link to their farming biographies. Others, such as Derek Morris, felt that his intrinsically stressful and to some degree risk-taking occupation had taken a long-term toll upon his health, weakening his immune system. He said about his cancer: "*It's self-inflicted because I was ambitious and I took all these gambles and drove the business forward.*" Others spoke about accidents or conditions exacerbated by working long hours and failing to take time off for recovery. Over the long-term, these conditions sometimes came to constitute physical disabilities. Chest problems were fairly common, and were linked to damp housing conditions, working with animals and crop dust. A couple of interviewees also reported flu-like symptoms after having used sheep dips. Some of these health problems have since been averted by health and safety regulation and the communication of health risks. A number of farmers also linked the accumulation of health problems to age, that their bodies simply were not as robust as they had been.

However, despite this quite considerable degree of physical health problems, few interviewees had taken much, if any, sick leave over the past year. Indeed, a common pattern was for those who worked on farms (particularly the smaller ones) to feel unable to justify taking time off unless they were bed-ridden, and they were usually able to find a way of working around their health so that others on the farm, or their stock, did not suffer. Working through illness, of course, may have considerable health and safety repercussions.

### **5.1.2 Mental health**

Linked to the stigma of mental illness, many of those interviewed were reluctant to discuss ways in which farming affected their mental health, and preferred to talk about its physical impacts. Having anticipated this problem, we initially probed on mental health by framing it within more commonplace terminology, such as 'feeling down' or 'worrying', states of mind which interviewees were generally happy to talk about and to relate to particular experiences. Of the mental symptoms checklist that we probed upon, the most commonly reported conditions in association with interviewees' work were losing one's temper or becoming irritable, feeling down, and worrying.

The most common of these, worrying, was linked to farmers' concern about things going wrong on their farms, in particular, the less controllable aspects of their work. Others worried about the future of their business, and commented that this was likely to be a characteristic common to many self-employed business people, rather than being specific to farming, and that worrying had positive as well as negative features. Another major worry was finances and whether the farm would be able to continue to support families. One farmer's son worried considerably about his parents, who he felt were taking on too much work.

Often linked to worrying, a significant proportion of interviewees admitted to sometimes, and occasionally more often, feeling down. Again, this was linked to thinking about agriculture's future, or the survival of individual farms, and to not being able to find a solution to a particular work problem. Extended periods of hard work with little time to recover could also lead to interviewees feeling down, as could acute crises, such as the FMD outbreak. Notably, there was some overlap between feeling down in response to particular events, and the development of clinical depression and an extended sense of despair. These kinds of feelings crossed the range of people working on farms, although the main farmer on individual farms, who often took the more overall strategic view, tended to feel them more acutely.

A third aspect of mental health, and one which may have a more measurable impact upon interviewees' families, was losing one's temper or becoming irritable. Interviewees, and notably mainly farmers, linked this to the pressure of farming and overwork, a lack of sleep, worrying about the future, and the unpredictability of stock and equipment. One farmer's son explained that for him these emotions were prompted by a feeling that his views on farming were not listened to by his parents, in particular his father, and that he consequently expressed his frustration in terms of anger. Another farmer's son commented that he had learnt to control his temper over the years and felt that this was an important part of becoming a good farmer, and contrasted this with his younger brother, whom he felt was still going through this process. There were several examples of conflictual and possibly damaging relationships between fathers and sons, which stemmed from farmers' negative moods, and it is also likely that these will negatively affect the quality of marriages.

Less common problems included a couple of farmers who complained of forgetfulness. While this was linked mainly to age, they also felt that when they were under pressure at work, that their memory deteriorated, an aspect with potentially severe health and safety implications.

Another issue was experiencing problems concentrating, which interviewees linked to having too much work to do, getting distracted, and generally worrying about their workload.

The interviews also revealed a number of cases of diagnosed clinical depression. Derek Morris, a Devon dairy farmer, had experienced several periods of depression. The latest of these had been triggered by business pressures, which he felt he had lost control of. Llewellyn Davies, a Powys farmer, had been through a time about ten years ago when the pressure of work, combined with his growing responsibility for his elderly parents had triggered a bout of depression. Two interviewees also talked about post-traumatic stress triggered by FMD. One key informant, who worked closely with farmers, commented that depression was a great equaliser in that there was no particular type of farmer who was more likely to be affected, and that it was usually a conglomeration of issues that prompted these difficulties rather than one aspect of work which policy could easily target. Another key informant, who had been a farmer before moving into support work, commented very lucidly that such had been the pressures of farming that had he not left when he did, he predicted he would have ended up divorced, depressed and possibly even suicidal.

Farmers' depression had lasting impacts upon their partners, particularly in terms of the emotional welfare work that farmers' wives so frequently took on for their families. One farmer's wife commented that it had been like living with "*a completely different person*" during her husband's depression, and it had clearly had negative repercussions upon their marriage, as well as causing her great emotional distress. Another talked openly about her husband's depression, although this had not been made explicit in his interview. It was not only the principal farmer on farms that felt the pressure of work to the point of depression. Several farmers' wives and one farmer's son had also experienced clinical depression, all of which were linked to the pressure created by farms' workloads. In many of these cases of depression, there was an issue of interviewees putting off approaching their doctor for support and treatment, because of a feeling that they 'should' be able to cope with whatever the lifestyle threw at them. This was related to issues of pride and farming occupational identity.

### **5.1.3 Farming and suicide**

A number of farmers had come into contact with, and some had been good friends with, farmers who had committed suicide. In these cases, the suicides had come as a surprise to those around these farmers. Larry Black explained that part of the problem was that farmers have traditionally been "*proud people*" who were reluctant to ask for help, and it could therefore be very difficult for problems to be anticipated. This was a theme repeated by several interviewees and it represents a characteristic that support organisations will need to engage with if they are to reach the people who most need their help.

Another farmer, who had been close friends with a fellow farmer who committed suicide, felt that the complex inter-family dynamics of farm ownership and succession (see section 5.5.5) played a large role in creating an unbearably stressful situation, which was exacerbated by feelings of isolation and lack of control. Several interviewees commented on family pressures as having been a part of the problem in local suicide cases, and the blurred boundaries between home and work in farming may exert unusually intensive pressure upon families. More broadly, personality factors interacted with the pressures of agriculture in a complex way, since clearly not everyone who was exposed to particular stresses experienced suicidal impulses.

Some farmers also admitted to having felt suicidal themselves in the past.<sup>8</sup> One farmer described these feelings in terms of not being able to see a way forward through a financial crisis, and for a short time he had regarded suicide as the only way in which he could relieve these pressures. One aspect of these anxieties was the importance he attached to his position in the community and within his family, and a fear that he was going to let people down. Another younger farmer more clearly linked his suicidal impulses to depression, which had a number of causes, including the stress of FMD and family pressures.

## 5.2 THE MEANING TO STRESS TO FARMING COMMUNITIES

One of the many difficulties for measuring stress is that it is a highly subjective concept. Undoubtedly, certain kinds of stress may serve as a motivating force, and numerous farmers spoke of the “*challenge*” of farming and the satisfaction they derived from being able to solve problems effectively. In this context stress was not something that was new to them, or that should necessarily be avoided. As Adam Butler explained, the *context* of stress was often crucial in whether it was perceived as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ stress; he associated unmanageable stress with uncontrollable circumstances:

*“But the trouble is, a challenge is also a stress. So today’s challenge is tomorrow’s stress.”*

Rhys Lloyd, a farmer’s son, concurred that the work of farming was to a large degree intrinsically stress provoking,

*“it’s always a challenge, there’s always something around the corner that makes you think it’s not [a] straight forward sort of job, I don’t think you ever crack farming most probably. You think you’ve got things right one year and it will throw you completely different the next year.”*

Rhys explained that it was the effect of stress that distinguished it:

*“I don’t think stress is too bad a thing as long as it doesn’t get you down. I mean the stress sharpens you up all the time, if you didn’t have any stress it wouldn’t ... waken you to some of the problems. It depends on how much you can cope with really, sometimes it’s just too much for you.”*

The word stress had variable resonance to farming communities, as we suspected it might, emanating from studies of white-collar professions. However, there was a second reason why stress did not have the same qualitative meaning for everyone within farming communities. While some regarded it as shorthand for frustration, anxiety or worry, others associated it with failure and not being able to cope, and distanced themselves from the label regardless of the difficulties of their circumstances. A theme that came out strongly in the research was the importance of pride and reputation amongst farming communities, and it may be inferred from this that an admission that one is coping less than well is difficult for farmers to make. Questions were therefore asked in multiple forms, using and drawing upon the alternative stress terminologies used by interviewees. We also looked for and probed on stressful experiences throughout the interview, not only in the section of the topic guide devoted specifically to stress. This approach enabled us to circumnavigate the suspicions that some interviewees initially had about the research, and allowed us to get to the heart of the concept of stress and for farming

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<sup>8</sup> *In light of the particularly sensitive nature of this material and the distress it might cause to family members who might be able to infer from the report as a whole (linking stories and styles of speaking) who their loved ones were, no aliases are used in describing these cases.*

communities to talk about it with confidence and impunity. As the chapter illustrates, stress has qualitatively different forms and effects, from its more acute and devastating impacts, to those of a longer-term, more chronic nature, which may be amenable to different types of intervention.

Interviewees used a variety of terminology to describe their experiences of the kinds of stress the research was concerned with, and we consequently probed on these where necessary. These included ‘hassle’, ‘worry’, ‘aggravation’, ‘depression’, ‘anger’, ‘pressure’, being ‘pissed off’, having ‘had enough’ and ‘frustration’. Some of this language was simply a reflection of the way that farmers talked. However, it also sometimes reflected the stigma attached to stress within farming communities, and the kind of reception interviewees felt they would receive from friends if they framed problems in these terms. In particular, stress was often associated with mental illness or instability and might be disassociated from on these grounds, a perspective backed up by a representative of the mental health service who was interviewed. By contrast, a higher than anticipated proportion of interviewees were comfortable using the term stress, although generally not early on in the interview. When they had settled into talking about these issues, however, ‘stress’ often became a useful shorthand for a whole range of emotions and difficulties that they were facing. These difficulties with terminology, however, pose a challenge for the various rural stress organisations in terms of identifying themselves to the people who most need their help.

Key informants were able to take a relatively holistic perspective on stress, and by observing farming communities’ evolving day-to-day and more acute support needs had been able to develop a complex picture of how stressors fit together and change over time. For example, while farming interviewees were more likely to talk about the apparently individual problems they were facing, key informants were able to observe broader structural issues and their potential for becoming stressors.

Distinguishing between physical and mental health as a way into understanding stress, as we have did above, it became clear that while interviewees tended to associate day-to-day worries and acute periods of stress with intrinsic aspects of farming, extrinsic aspect of agricultural work, together with worries about finances and family, tended to be more associated with anxiety on a more sustained basis. By contrast, more directly work-related aspects of farming stress involved a combination of physical and mental health effects, and consequently had particular measurable effects, such as workplace injuries. These distinctions are crucial in terms of policy and are explored in detail below. Interspersed with the following sections, which take the various aspects of the stress experienced by farming communities one by one, case studies are used to illustrate how the individuals working on particular farms experience these. This provides for a more holistic overview of farming stress, demonstrating how different forms of stress relate to one another, and to interviewees’ positions on farms.

### **5.3 INTRINSIC ASPECTS OF STRESS**

People’s ability to cope with stress was very personal, linked to their unique biographies and the constellation of events within these, to particular triggers, and to their individual resources. These did not always follow a logical pattern. For example, Derek Morris, who had suffered depressive episodes related to his work, observed that during FMD, in some respects the most obvious stressor in his farming biography, he had felt able to cope and take control of things: *“I had colossal pressures and I never cracked.”*

In this section, we look at aspects of stress that are intrinsically related to the work of farming, disaggregating these from more extrinsic, or externally produced, causes of stress (discussed in

section 5.4), and again from work-related dimensions of stress (section 5.5). These differences are important because, while all of these aspects may be amenable to support interventions, it is the specifically work-related dimensions of agricultural stressors that have been of particular concern to the HSE. Some of the stress management approaches being developed in other industries may be adaptable in some form to farming.

The first of these, intrinsic aspects of farming stress, are examined below, and forming a fundamental part of farming communities' work, concerned seasonality and stock crises.

### **5.3.1 Seasonality**

Issues around seasonality and adverse weather conditions were of particular concern to arable farmers. This was an aspect of farming that was out of interviewees' control, yet which had very practical impacts upon their profit margins and work experience, and for which they therefore needed to plan. One of the issues around seasonality raised by a number of farmers and key informants was that the effects of 'good' and 'bad' years in farming were quite variable around the country. Of the areas we studied, Hampshire was regarded as having a particularly favourable climate for arable farming. It should also be noted that the year this research was conducted, 2004, had seen a particularly wet summer, which made harvest difficult for arable farmers.

As Vernon Chester, a Lincolnshire farmer who combined arable farming with a stock of beef cattle, commented, the issue with bad weather conditions for arable farmers were that these disrupted the anticipated flow of their workload, and had knock-on effect upon other aspects of farming:

*“you get a wet week or a wet fortnight in harvest time and you don't do anything and then all the work's piling up.”*

Balancing these kinds of demands could be particularly challenging for mixed farmers. As a key informant in Hampshire (the other big arable area) explained, delayed harvesting and replanting were stressful for farmers because they disrupted their plans for the following year, effectively putting them in a position of playing catch-up, with very little they could do to allay this problem.

### **5.3.2 Stock crises**

The main stock crises which had affected interviewees were the BSE, FMD and, at the time of the interviews, tuberculosis (TB) outbreaks, although on a smaller scale farmers were continually on the lookout for viral infections in their stock, and this was a long-standing feature of farming. These were issues largely relevant to livestock farming, and we did not interview any arable farmers who had experienced significant disease problems with their crops, although these too will be an issue. The larger outbreaks were regionalised; for example FMD had missed Hampshire, but had hit Devon and Powys very hard. Outbreaks had implications not only for the infected farms, but also for farms in the immediate region, which had to take precautionary measures and which were often extremely fearful of being closed down. Major stock crises also had acute economic effects, which were shared by entire farming communities.

Notably, stock crises were a source of stress for the whole of farms' workforces, and in particular for farmers' spouses, adult children working on the farm, and farm workers. Often this was because their work on the farm involved developing a tighter bond with the animals, having frequently raised them from birth. Laura Black, a farmer's wife who worked on a small-

scale dairy and beef farm in Devon, described this attachment: “*I get more steamed up about the animals than anything.*” Barbara Watson, another farmer’s wife, explained that the early death of an animal personally tended and invested in for years could be profoundly depressing, and represented a kind of failure for farmers.

Stock crises provided perhaps the most acute, and definitely the most visible, causes of stress. A key informant in Lancashire explained: “*Right at the top of the strata come big crises like BSE and Foot and Mouth.*” For those who had been hit by stock crises, the effects could be very severe. Derek Morris, the principal farmer on a farm closed by FMD, described the sense of loss involved:

Interviewer: *Was all your livestock destroyed?*

Derek: ... *Every single one ... it’s been a very difficult time, I don’t think anybody who had Foot and Mouth like will fully recover, not emotionally because ... dairy animals are families, their families go on and on and on, and you know we could trace it back to my father when he bought the first five cows in 1950. Of course you can never get that back, it’s gone forever.*

This crisis had affected the whole family. Derek’s wife, Wendy, had experienced a nervous breakdown soon afterwards, and his son was clearly still suffering from his experience of working with the carcasses of his family’s cows.

On the other hand, while more high-profile stock crises such as FMD could be devastating for individual farmers, and prompted many to leave the industry, they were supported by a compensation scheme which gave affected farmers a degree of choice in their future, which the rest of the farming community was often lacking. FMD also restricted the movements of farming communities over the time of the outbreak, isolating people from information, sources of support, and sometimes keeping families apart, an aspect which could cause a great deal of personal distress. For those working on the support side it was also a difficult time. We interviewed two vets who had worked for the Ministry of Agriculture over the course of the FMD outbreak, both of whom found these experiences extremely traumatic, so much so that one subsequently left the industry. Barry Phillips, a farm worker on a farm hit by FMD, had also seen his wage cut during the crisis as his employer struggled to survive, and he had feared for his job.

A more recent cause of stress for farmers, which has received less press attention, but which encompassed a very real fear for many interviewees, was TB. Shirley Hills, a farmer’s daughter who worked as a veterinary nurse in addition to on her parents’ farm, highlighted the issue:

*“I find it’s heavily ignored. Foot and Mouth is obviously much more dramatic, and yes, worse, everything is frying everywhere, but TB is killing hundreds and hundreds of cattle every month ... It’s awful, yes, it just drags on and on.”*

Barry Phillips pointed out that one of the most unsettling aspects of TB was its lack of symptoms to alert farmers at an early stage, and he found it extremely disheartening to lose an animal that he had tended for the best part of a decade.

### **Farm B: on the outskirts of FMD**

Farm B was a small Devon-based dairy farm. The farmers reared their own calves and made their own silage. It was owned by the farmer and his wife, Arthur and Angela Read, who ran it together with a farm worker, who worked on a number of farms. The couple had bought the farm from her parents about 20 years ago. Over the years they had made a concerted effort to increase the size of their herd, and had adopted a policy of using outside labour to provide flexibility.

Although the Reads felt that they were “*making a go of things*” and were running the farm relatively successfully, they suffered from periodic stress. They had lost some of their stock to BSE, and when their neighbouring farms had been hit by FMD this had been a very worrying time. Arthur described how he had emotionally broken down during this period, because it had brought home to him his concerns about whether they would survive. Their farm worker, Roger Bloom, had a more direct experience of FMD since a member of his family had come into contact with diseased stock, and he had subsequently not been able to return to Farm B for three weeks, causing a loss of income. Seeing neighbouring farms go bankrupt on an ongoing basis was also a source of worry for the Reads, and they knew of two farmers who had committed suicide – this had had a resounding impact on them since they regarded farmers as “*strong*” people, capable of coping with most circumstances.

Angela attended to all Farm B’s paperwork. While she felt she had developed a fairly organised system for doing this, she had never received any administrative training, and when she had first taken on the work it had triggered a certain amount of stress as she worried that she was doing it badly or wrong, and would get the farm into legal trouble. There was an obvious gap in support here, and it seemed likely that Reads were not claiming all the subsidies they were entitled to as they found these systems very difficult and complicated to negotiate.

Arthur felt that farmers were under-valued by both government and broader society, who had little understanding of how hard and diligently they worked. He explained that farming was becoming more difficult in itself, as overseas competition made it increasingly hard to secure a return on your produce. A repeated theme in the Reads’ interviews was the extent to which Farm B’s fortunes hinged on rises or falls in the price of milk, factors which were outside their control.

## **5.4 EXTRINSIC ASPECTS OF STRESS**

Certain aspects of the stresses which farming communities faced were less directly related to their agricultural work, and more the outcome of external pressures upon farming. These sorts of issues were raised most by principal farmers who took a strategic role on farms. They included: the legislative and political framework within farming had come to operate; the media and public perceptions of farmers; and competitive forces, which are examined in detail below.

### **5.4.1 Legislative and political framework**

The regulatory framework of farming was a theme returned to repeatedly by farmers, since at an intricate level this governed the ways in which they farmed, and overwhelmingly these pressures were considered restrictive rather than protective. Providing a broader context to the paperwork which farmers had to submit, the various administrative systems and regulation relating to agriculture were often felt to be ill conceived and making contradictory demands upon farmers. A common complaint was that systems were changed before farmers had time to adjust to them, and that new systems were not introduced with sufficient lead-in time. Farmers emphasised that the nature of their work was such that they needed to be able to plan ahead, but



that more commonly they were met with an information vacuum from the agricultural authorities, followed by a rapid demand for compliance. This issue was raised particularly in relation to the forthcoming Mid Term Review, a system ostensibly designed to simplify paperwork demands, but of which farmers lacked knowledge of how they could prepare. This degree of uncertainty about the future provided another cause of stress: *“no-one knows where they’re going to be in 12 months, 2 years, time.”*

DEFRA’s political leadership came under particular criticism with regard to crises, such as BSE and FMD, which many farmers felt had been dealt with heavy-handedly, and in a way which unduly penalised and demonised farming communities at a time when they would have benefited from transparency and external guidance. Arthur Read, a Devon dairy farmer, commented that the FMD outbreak had been a particularly fraught time for them because of the way the government had handled the crisis. He felt that this had done little to stem the rate of infection and had been scientifically questionable:

*“I mean the feedback we were getting was that ... the vets they were banging their heads against a brick wall because they could not do what they wanted to do. They couldn’t get on with their jobs because you’ve got the bureaucrats in London that didn’t really understand”*

Other forms of regulation which were raised as causing farmers worry and upset included the 6-day rule, milk quotas, and cattle movement passports. For example, Derek Morris, a large-scale Devon dairy farmer, explained that the 6-day rule was *“tearing the farming world to pieces,”* and that such were its restrictions that *“decent farmers”* could find themselves transgressing these by accident:

*“it’s a sledge hammer to crack a nut, and you know farmers are under a lot of pressure because they do everything themselves really, buy, sell, do the paperwork, do the whole lot.”*

Another farmer, Adrian Hills, commented that the climate of regulation made him feel uncomfortably scrutinised and ill at ease going about his normal business:

*“You go to market ... you’ve got the RSPCA stood watching you. You got the vet watching you and you’ve got ... DEFRA watching you. Marking his sheet, that sort of thing. When you’re struggling, you[‘re] doing about fifteen hours a day to earn your living, and you feel they’re stood just trying to catch you.”*

Complicating this, were circumstances where systems had changed to such a degree that farmers were unclear on the correct course of action. This point was made by several interviewees in relation to carcass disposal, an issue which has clear health and safety implications.

Victor Adams, a Hampshire farmer, agreed that the tone of the government’s dealings with farmers had qualitatively changed and become adversarial, and he found this upsetting:

*“the whole bureaucracy of the job now, it’s terrible, everything is a threat, everything that comes through from like DEFRA and that is accompanied by a threat, a threat that if you’re late ... you know that you’ll forgo a payment or you’re liable for an imprisonment ... they treat everybody as a crook.”*

Several farmers, particularly the larger-scale ones, talked about the ongoing worry of inspection, and that they would be found to have unintentionally slipped up, and subsequently heavily penalised. Donald Lloyd, a Powys livestock farmer, felt that the sheer volume of officials that

now routinely came onto his farm was becoming unmanageable and a provided constant source of unease:

*“I think it’s a depressing scenario, because it’s almost a sort of threat. You never know whether you’ve recorded everything completely right and done everything that you’re expected to do in terms of being inspected, you don’t know. So you’ve no way of testing.”*

A key informant commented that the style of inspections by the authorities was often unhelpful to farmers, and that there needed to be greater recognition that spot-checks could have serious implications for farmers’ daily routines. One farmer’s wife, Barbara Watson, made the point that it was the demands of inspection *combined* with declining farming incomes which made many farming families wonder if the benefits of farming continued to outweigh its burdens. A number of interviewees also questioned whether other European farmers were subject to the same degree of regulation as the UK, and felt unduly victimised, an issue that is inter-related to worries about competition (section 5.4.3). Notably, in the current policy climate, there has been a shift towards regular inspections being mainly applied to larger farmers, who have greater resources to respond to the demands of inspection regimes.

There were clear policy issues in these respects in terms of regulation being unduly complex, and a strong case for a streamlining of processes, with farmers having to deal with fewer organisations, and for deadlines to be co-ordinated and simplified so as not to penalise farmers whose businesses draw upon a mixed base of agricultural practices.

#### **Farm M: a division of concerns**

Farm M was a relatively large family-run livestock farm in Powys, which had been organic for the past few years. The farmers consisted of a husband and wife team, Donald and Mair Lloyd, and their son, Rhys. The farm sold its produce exclusively to one supermarket, which they regarded as more ethical and less focused on maximising profits than its competitors. While they saw themselves as running the farm efficiently and successfully and as having few stressful issues, a number became evident which were manifested in very individualised ways. Over the years, the farm had gained income by selling off some of its buildings, and investing this in expanding its acreage.

For Rhys, stress was an intrinsic part of farming. He was “*kept awake at night*” worrying about their animals’ welfare, and felt that there were more diseases to worry about than in the past. He found lambing a particularly stressful time: his first thought every day was whether any lambs had been lost during the night. However, he countered that these concerns were part and parcel of being a livestock farmer, “*I don’t think you ever crack farming.*” He felt that the farm had been very lucky to escape FMD, since part of their land was very close to an infected area. More broadly, he worried about correctly completing the paperwork relating to livestock movement. Recently, he had also become anxious about the price of meat and whether Farm M would remain economic in the future.

By contrast, Donald emphasised more extrinsic aspects of farming stress, and was critical of what he felt was a lack of communication between government and farmers; he felt that one of the most important stressors was a lack of information. He commented that new legislation was introduced through press releases and that there was no attempt on government’s part to understand farmers’ role or establish a dialogue with them. He particularly lamented the demise of the national agricultural advisory service, which he felt had steered an effective intermediary course and provided valuable advice on forms and

subsidies. Donald was very critical of the legal action that government sometimes took against farmers who had made genuine mistakes upon their forms, and felt that this pressure made paperwork completion a very stressful task. He also found the number of inspections his farm was subjected to quite stressful, as he always felt uncertain as to whether he had prepared for them adequately.

By contrast, Mair worried more about organisational issues, particularly succession and how their son would cope with the transfer of the farm's work. One of the issues was that with local boys going into farming less often, her son would have fewer support networks to draw upon during busy times like calving than her husband had. Mair explicitly used the term "*stressed*" to describe her worrying about her family. She took on an emotional caretaker role, admitting that if she saw Donald getting stressed, that this in turn made her stressed. She also found handling the cattle rather anxiety-laden. She worried that one of them might have an accident whilst on their own and would be unable to receive help sufficiently quickly; this was linked to changes made to the way they farmed over the years. In terms of farming, she explained that while she worried from time to time, that work was not an ongoing source of stress, and when she got anxious the feeling never lasted too long. Anyway, she felt that it was important for her to maintain "*an even keel*" and not to upset the rest of the family.

#### **5.4.2 The media and public perceptions**

An issue that caused some degree of personal distress for interviewees was the way they felt they had been represented by the media in recent years, and connectedly the declining public esteem in which they felt they were held. This had an importance effect upon their morale and sense of self, which was strongly tied to their occupational identity (see section 3.1). Victor Adams explained, "*there's been so much bad publicity for agriculture over the years I don't think we're held in the same light.*"

It was mainly principal farmers who felt most concerned about their public image and who reflected upon the sea change in status that had occurred over their lifetime. Nathan Turner described a situation in his youth where farmers had been regarded "*like pillars of the community*", but that there was now very little respect for the work which farmers did. He felt that this was partly because food was so cheap and readily available, and also because farmers had recently received such a bad press.

Derek Morris commented that:

*"you feel like farmers are not respected any more really, we've always been bashed around in the press for you know taking subsidies and sort of living off the tax payer ... We are honestly persecuted, we really are persecuted."*

Many farmers mentioned that they found this perceived media vilification of farmers, and subsequent shifts in public opinion towards farmers, very hard to bear. Dennis Potter described this as, "*Five or six notches below paedophiles I would think!*" Farmers spoke particularly of the tabloid or "*gutter press*" misrepresenting the situation during the BSE crises and blaming farmers for poor farming practices, and a fairly common view was that farmers were an easy enemy to attack, and made for good editorial copy. Similarly, Raine's (1999) research found that one cause of stress for farmers was what they felt to be media distortions in terms of their treatment of animals and their financial position.

### 5.4.3 Competition

A third aspect of the ways in which farming was extrinsically stressful was the mounting competitive forces which farmers often felt incapable of matching. There were two aspects to this: firstly, global forces, whereby farms were increasingly competing with overseas labour much cheaper than their own; and secondly, the dominance of a handful of supermarkets over the food market, which enabled them to control prices and steer farming practices. Both of these represent trends that have become more apparent in agriculture in recent decades, and again these were aspects that mainly concerned farmers taking a strategic role in farm management.

In terms of the former, farmers often felt that they lacked “*a level playing field*” with overseas producers, and questioned whether these farmers were subject to the same degree of regulation in terms of animal welfare and inspection regimes as them (the implication was generally that they were not). Some farmers felt that the government emphasised these issues only when it suited them.

For many farmers, particularly dairy farmers, the price that they were able to achieve for their produce was the single biggest source of their daily stress, and the issue most likely to drive them out of farming. An issue flagged up by virtually every dairy farmer interviewed was that the price which supermarkets were willing to provide for milk had fallen below the cost of production. The reason that farmers felt this had happened was that supermarkets treated milk as a loss-leading product to entice customers into stores, and were little concerned about equity issues or developing a long-term trusting relationship with their suppliers. A number of these farmers bemoaned the demise of the Milk Marketing Board, an organisation that they regarded as having made for greater parity.

Derek Morris, a large-scale dairy farmer, was fairly typical in his perspective: “*I mean the supermarkets are absolutely screwing us into the ground on milk price ... farmers don’t want to be rich and all, they just want a fair return for what they do.*” Many farmers could see no way out of this situation. Bernard Young commented: “*it makes you feel as if you’re banging your head against a brick wall. All they’re interested in is cheap, cheap, cheap.*”

A third aspect of competition, raised less frequently but which was nonetheless important, was a perspective from smaller-scale farmers. This was that the aggressive business tactics of corporate (non-local) farms, which included buying up land and pushing up prices, and dominating union and government policy, meant there was a poor prognosis for the future of smaller-scale farming and young farmers in the area.

## 5.5 WORK-RELATED ASPECTS OF STRESS

The final component of this analytical distinction are the work-related dimensions of the stresses experienced by farming communities. Work-related stress has been defined by Cox *et al.* (2000) in their report for the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work as the combination of physical and psychosocial hazards that people may experience in their work. Notably, these stood out as the major cause of stress among interviewees. They were distinguishable for farming in terms of the stressors associated with a number of key aspects: specific farming practices; issues relating to workload and organisation; features of the work relating to particular types of farming; paperwork demands; and issues concerning family farms and acquisition. Amongst these, psychosocial hazards stood out as having particular significance, that is, aspects of work concerned with its organisation or management that were potentially harmful to farming communities. These are likely to be of particular interest to

organisations working with farming communities, since they are open to a variety of support interventions aimed at tackling their more problematic features.

### 5.5.1 Farming practices

A small number of farmers identified features of their day-to-day farming lives that they found difficult or potentially dangerous. While some of these were more about personality and occupational mismatches, such as the farmer who hated the process of milking his cows and became increasingly demoralised with this task (although the depopulation of farms is likely to make such situations more common), others were more obviously related to physical hazards and amenable to intervention or support. For example, Nigel Adams, a farmer's son from Hampshire who worked on a mixed farm, worried about the longer-term effects of some of the pesticides they used. Nathan Turner and Mair Lloyd, a farmer and a farmer's wife who worked on (different) livestock farms, both admitted to finding the process of handling cattle stressful, and they worried about safety during such times. Both felt foolish admitting to such worries, which seemed to be a fundamental part of livestock farming, but decades of experience had not reduced their concerns, and indeed, in Mair's case, had exacerbated them, since she felt that as she and her husband got older they were more vulnerable to getting knocked over. One aspect of this problem was that with the pressure on farmers to cut back on labour and increase stock, these kinds of personal risks were intensified, a point taken up in the following section.

### 5.5.2 Workload and organisation

Together with paperwork (section 5.5.4), issues relating to workload and organisation – the psychosocial hazards - which stemmed from changing labour processes (see section 4.2), were raised most often by interviewees as elements of farming that could be stressful. Critically, this aspect of farming was raised right *across* farming communities, and in particular by spouses, adult children and workers, who had less control over these processes. It was also a particular concern of those working on small to medium farms, on which there was less scope for labour flexibility.

Reiterating the intensification theme, as Larry Black, a Devon livestock farmer, pointed out, the expansion of stock had practical implications for the workloads of those on family farms:

*“if you've got a building where [you] normally put in six animals ... and then you need to put it up... The pressure on that building becomes more. It needs to be mucked out more often, it needs to be bedded up more often, there's a higher risk of sickness within those animals because you put pressure on them. And that pressure ultimately comes back on you as the farmer.”*

Eric Watson, another Devon livestock farmer, who had virtually doubled his stock in recent years in an attempt to maintain a profit, explained how these changes had increased his perception of work-related stress:

*“It's purely workload and pressure that makes me think that way ... You can't switch off, there's always something in the back of your mind, whether it's what you need to be planning for next week, or what you need to be planning for tomorrow, or what you need to be planning for next year.”*

He had suffered from a bad back since an accident, which he attributed to workload pressures that had made him less attentive to dangers at work.

Several farmers commented on the detrimental effects of the longer hours they needed to work, and on their regret at having to lose valued members of staff because their farms could no longer sustain larger workforces. This had the effect of increasing farmers' sense of isolation, which was important in two senses: firstly, in terms of a qualitative decline in workplace camaraderie and occupational satisfaction; and secondly, in terms of the loss of support staff and increased risk to individuals taking on the workloads of multiple farm workers. This could be particularly detrimental in areas where farms were geographically remote, and when farms were small or run by one individual working alone, where loneliness and distance from support services may be issues of growing concern. Respondents talked about isolation, not as something necessarily directly causing stress, but as something that exacerbated stress when it arose, because there was not anyone to share this with. In many cases, such working arrangements contrasted with farmers' visions of the future, in which they had seen themselves taking a more managerial role in later life, instead of which they were continuing to perform the manual labour of farming at a time when their health might be less robust. In this sense, as a key informant in Hampshire pointed out, the larger farms which have prospered under the restructuring of agriculture are more likely to have the capacity to respond to this aspect of workload stress.

A number of interviewees spoke of a dragging sense of tiredness, resulting from these kinds of working arrangements. Wives often commented at the upset caused by seeing their husbands making themselves literally ill with work, and their frustration at being unable to coax them into taking a much-needed holiday, because they simply could not afford, or were unable to find, relief cover. Cecilia Butler talked about these worries, voicing her concerns that her husband and their young family were missing out by his working so hard:

*"I would like to see [husband] not having to work so hard. Because he just doesn't get a break ... it is too much really. That's the biggest stress at the moment I have to say. I mean for him it's like he's having to do a 60 hour week."*

This situation had its own stresses for Cecilia, since as she put it, she often felt like "a single mother," and lacked the day-to-day emotional and practical support that she needed from her husband.

Farmers' involvement in (or preoccupation) with diversification businesses could have an adverse effect upon the rest of the people who worked on the farm. Barry Phillips, a farm worker attached to a large dairy farm in Devon, explained how his employer was rarely to be found on the farm in recent years, preferring to spend time on his diversification business (although this was not the farmer's perspective). He commented that there were times when he would have benefited from talking to his boss about various issues. For example, sometimes he needed help resolving "staff friction", but as there was no output for this, he usually ended up "bringing it home." He also missed the opportunity for "a crack or a joke" with other workers, and now spent most of his time on his own: "You've got to be quite strong I think."

**Farm R: pressure on the family**

Farm R was a medium-sized mixed farm based in a remote part of Lincolnshire, which the farmer had purchased about ten years ago, before which the family had farmed in another part of the UK. The farm was run mainly by the husband and wife team, Nathan and Theresa Turner, together with their son. It had cut down its workforce considerably in recent years, which necessitated their working long hours to make up the shortfall, and they used contractors for some of the farm's arable work.

One of Nathan's main causes of stress was that the reorganisation of the farm's labour meant that he was doing more manual and less managerial work than he had anticipated at this point in his life. He felt that too many organisations had a say in farming, and that these kinds of outside pressures put him under more stress. He worried about the future and the fact that he had not been able to increase the farm's acreage for his son, something he felt he should have done. He commented that the family were working harder just to maintain their standard of living, and reflected that they probably would have left farming before now had his son not been interested in taking on the farm. At an intrinsic level, seasonality had a big effect of the farm's income, and disease was sometimes an acute source of stress, but Nathan considered that these were factors that any successful farmer needed to get used to. He was very critical of DEFRA paperwork, and worried about the new 2005 rules coming in, about which he felt completely in the dark.

Theresa felt that disease was the biggest stress in farming, because there was only so much farmers could do to protect their stock, and it was a largely invisible threat. The farm had suffered from a number of viruses over the years to which it had lost stock. She compared the loss of stock to a bereavement for farmers, and at such times she had taken on the role of comforter to her husband and son, "*because the men are like depressed, aren't they?*" She had found the time of BSE particularly stressful, because it was an unknown factor, and felt that the crisis had been badly handled by government. She explained, "*Every other week now we watch television and if you want to see a newspaper put a food scare in it and, but during the BSE crisis I felt, I really felt as if it was pointed at me.*" The crises had also caused prices to fall, placing the farm under further stress.

Theresa worried a great deal about her husband's health, partly because of the farm's isolation and the difficulty in getting urgent medical attention. She felt that a health condition of his had been exacerbated by stress of the farm purchase. The tightness of Farm R's working arrangements also made it difficult for the couple to organise times when they could go away together on holiday.

### 5.5.3 Type of farming

Partly linked to workload and organisation issues, were particular features of different types of farming that could make the work stressful. Many livestock farmers made the point that certain ways livestock farming made for a more intrinsically demanding and stressful type of farming. While some of these demands were constant, such as the daily demands of tending to dairy cattle, others were more seasonally based. Cecelia Butler explained that the responsibilities of farming animals were specific and ongoing:

*"I think livestock farming certainly, because you have such a huge responsibility for other live things ... You can't not milk the cows, you cannot not care for them, you cannot not feed them! You cannot not deal with them if they've got a medical emergency. And that does add stress, but you've got to have that responsibility."*

Two Devon dairy farmers also talked about the stress which they experienced in silage making, since the window of opportunity for this was slim and heavily weather dependent, and the health of their cattle depended upon getting it just right. This, in turn, affected their milk yield and quality, and by implication, farmers' profits and standard of living. Larry Black commented: "*it's always a challenge and it is a difficult time because if you get it right you feel good, if you get it wrong you feel pretty awful.*"

Lambing was another potentially stressful time for livestock farming, when everyone on the farm was expected to work extra long hours to ensure the maximum survival of their flock. Often one person on the farm invested more heavily in the lambs' welfare, and this person might find it hard to 'switch off' outside the long working day, because there was always an animal that they were worried about. Edward Hills, a farmer's son on a livestock farm, explained how he found the anticipation of lambing worse than the hard labour of the process itself:

*“one of the hardest parts of lambing I find is the run-up to lambing, before you're right there ... I'm somebody who starts worrying about something I shouldn't be, I know it's a bad thing but it's hard not to. I start worrying about how hard it's going to be ... the anxiety will drag me down.”*

Turkey slaughter was also a fraught time for farmers, because of the clearly defined deadline involved, as Christopher Park reflected:

*“we start plucking turkeys about the 13th December, and by the 18th the whole thing has got to be finished. And that makes me nervous, I'll tell you. Because I'm importing a lot of help, but if you get flu or something that week, nobody wants turkeys on 26th December.”*

One of the issues with livestock farming was that it involved a large element of unpredictability that farmers could not control, and in an already tight economy, this increased the pressure upon them. The stresses of livestock farming were also tied up with the relatively low price of meat, milk and wool (section 5.7) and the diseases that stock contracted (section 5.3.2).

#### **5.5.4 Paperwork**

Farmers have always been involved in a certain amount of paperwork. However, in recent years interviewees felt that this had increased exponentially, particularly in terms of the documentation that farmers had to produce to claim subsidies, account for stock, and comply with inspections. This work has become very much a part of the daily lives of farming communities, who sometimes felt that it had grown beyond the point of manageability, particularly at a time when farms had been forced to rationalise their workforces. Indeed, paperwork emerged as the main cause of stress raised by those interviewed, and crucially it took farmers away from the work of farming, and involved them in often quite complex administration for which they might be ill prepared. While section 5.4.1 explores some of the more macro effects of increased regulation and administrative load, this section looks at the practical impacts of the paperwork demands upon farmers.

One of farmers' main complaints was the “*shifting goalposts*”, which made it more difficult for them to keep up to date and comply with requirements. The terms “*red tape*” and “*bureaucracy*” were used a great deal, and one of the main problems for farmers was that there was often seemingly no obvious purpose to the increased paperwork burden placed upon them. As Daniel Grant, a farmer running a mixed enterprise in Hampshire, commented:

*“probably seventy-five percent doesn't actually benefit anybody, just giving jobs to people for the sake of it.”*

Individual farms divided up their administrative labour in a variety of different ways. However, a particularly common pattern was for the principal (usually older) farmer to perform the majority of the paperwork relating to subsidy claiming and regulation, and for his wife to do the



“*bookwork*”, that is, the farm’s business accounts and tax returns. This kind of pattern meant that farmers generally took on the larger burden of this more stressful type of paperwork. However, anxieties continued to infiltrate through to the rest of the family, both to spouses who bore the brunt of their husbands becoming increasingly stressed about the work, and to farmers’ sons who felt they were failing to acquire the necessary skills of a farmer, and who consequently worried about the future and how they would be able to cope without their fathers’ input.

Laura Black, a farmer’s wife who took responsibility for all the paperwork relating to cattle on their small farm, commented that she felt, “*the paperwork and all the rules and regulations ... is the biggest plague on farmers really.*” She elaborated that over the years she had got over her “*fear*” of the paperwork and managed to stay on top of it, but that this was only possible because of the size of their farm, and that for larger enterprises it would be necessary to employ someone specifically to manage this task.

One of the problems with the administrative load was the inflexible deadlines associated with particular initiatives. Interviewees commented that submissions were complicated and often took much longer than anticipated so could be difficult to plan for, and that this was complicated when helplines were unable to assist with queries or provided inaccurate advice. A second issue was that farming is highly influenced by weather conditions and responding to crises, such as problems with stock. These are notoriously difficult for farmers to predict, and their commitment to stock and crops is likely to be such that in a battle of priorities their farming work will win (indeed their animals’ lives may depend upon it). Therefore it was not always realistic for them to comply with rigid submission dates. Missing deadlines to claim for subsidies could have high financial costs for farmers, which then posed a secondary source of stress. Missing deadlines for regulation submissions could result in penalties, including legal proceedings. Dennis Potter, a Lancashire livestock farmer, explained that this knowledge made farmers more nervous completing paperwork and more likely to make mistakes, about which the authorities were relatively unsympathetic:

*I am on edge, all day before, you know, and getting cows in and looking at their numbers and making sure I filled [the] form in right, because if you make a mistake on form they will throw the bloody thing in... but yet they can, they can get things wrong and it doesn't matter. But you know if you haven't crossed the 't' and dotted the 'i' they wield a big stick all time.”*

Nathan Turner, a Lincolnshire livestock farmer, talked about his experience of mistakes made on paperwork being difficult to rectify, and of government helpline support having been inadequate or incompetent. He gave the example of when he had been summoned to attend the DEFRA offices in London to sort out a problem with his cow suckler forms on which he had apparently made 103 mistakes. As it turned out, 102 of these were having typed the letter ‘O’ rather than the digit ‘0’, an error which he suggested might have been dealt over the telephone, and he described this type of incidence as causing him “*a lot of stress sometimes.*”

Reflecting the level of stress which paperwork caused farmers, one key informant, who represented an agricultural support organisation in Devon, noted that “*the mountain of paperwork*” was the main reason people gave for approaching his support workers. Calls typically sharply increased in volume around the time when farmers had to apply for their cattle passports, and callers were fearful of sanctions being meted out for failing to submit paperwork on time. He felt there was an issue among farmers of putting things off until they were in serious trouble. A community worker from a similar organisation in Powys, indicated that the consequences of farmers’ mounting worries about paperwork could be extremely serious for those already under stress:

*“I had somebody ring me up from north Wales, and he attempted last year to commit suicide, had all these forms from the Ministry, in an absolute panic.”*

It was particularly galling to farmers when deadlines were compromised through inefficiencies in the system, which apparently happened fairly frequently when a new system was experiencing teething difficulties. Daniel Grant explained that one of the more frustrating aspects of paperwork compliance was that systems were often designed with little thought for the natural agricultural calendars of those required to make submissions:

*“It is a little bit annoying yeah, it’s like these single farm payment forms they send them out on the 1st August, farmers are combining [combine harvesting]. It’s just a little bit of thought wouldn’t have gone amiss, if they did [send them out] maybe the month before or the month afterwards it maybe wouldn’t be so bad.”*

Another support worker talked of the influx of “*brown envelopes*” that farmers were subjected to, and voiced his suspicions that under pressure many farmers would simply stop opening these, creating future problems for themselves. Indeed, many of those interviewed were keen to show researchers the volume of paperwork they were expected to deal with on a daily basis, to illustrate how their time was being eaten up in this way. A vet who lived with a farmer and who was very familiar with the farming paperchase, talked about how difficult her partner found the forms, “*and he is organised and educated.*” She was under the impression that a lot of agricultural forms were devised by people in offices with little idea of how farming worked, and that consequently the systems they devised were “*unworkable, stupid and seemingly pointless.*” For many interviewees, paperwork was an ongoing source of work and anxiety. Barbara Watson, a farmer’s wife, commented that, “*my mind feels like it’s working overtime all the time.*” Another, Mair Lloyd, observed that “*it’s the paperwork that gets you down,*” and noted that such were the demands on farmers’ time that many would often get around to their administration late at night (when it was dark and they were unable to farm), by which point they were tired, more likely to make mistakes, and therefore more likely to be penalised for miscompletion – a vicious circle of circumstances.

An issue relating to paperwork, which key informants emphasised, although it was clear that it also described the experience of several of those interviewed from farming communities, was the relatively high degree of basic skills needs among those working on farms, and the difficulty this posed in terms of an increased emphasis on written regulation. This made for a high degree of support needs, which it is far from clear were being met. A move towards computerisation and electronic submission has also disadvantaged farmers who are unable to afford the necessary IT equipment or who lack the relevant skills. Amongst those interviewed, there was a distinguishable group of older farmers who were averse to developing a new set of skills at this point in their life, whom this emphasis is likely to exclude (see section 4.3).

### **5.5.5 Family farms and acquisition**

While the organisation of family farms had a number of important strengths in terms of the trust and flexibility that often characterised these working relationships, their unique organisation also had the potential to act as the precipitator for a number of problems. One key informant commented on the potential for stress within generational farms, both in terms of adult children who worked on the farm, who may struggle to gain adult status and remain dependent late in life, and with regard to the parent generation of farmers, who often worked on beyond their capabilities and who may find it difficult to disengage from farming. Housing may be a source of constraint in the choices made by both these parties. Generational farming can also create

inheritance tensions, and farming ‘children’ sometimes lacked financial autonomy (no contracts, working on a cash-in-hand or ad hoc basis) and future security, but lacked the personal resources to negotiate any kind of an alternative. These factors can promote stress both individually and within families, which may be displayed in terms of conflict. We came across several examples of relationships between fathers and sons that were poor and characterised by bullying and compulsion, and the effects of enforced farm labour are likely to be highly negative. It seems likely that conversely elder abuse may be concealed within such family units. One younger farmer explained the difficulties of negotiating a working relationship with his father, who held unilateral power on the farm and had little motivation to concede this:

*“my working relationship with Dad is quite poor, as it is probably for many fathers and sons working in the business ... my Dad has always been his own boss. Always been the boss. Never had anyone to tell him what to do. Whereas I’m, you know, I’m basically employed by him and he is my boss. And it’s just difficult. When it comes down to working we just don’t get on very well at all.”*

The family farm also encompassed a raft of complicated obligations, and with the knowledge that it had been in the family for generations came a pressure that farmers would continue to farm, regardless of whether they enjoyed the work and whether the farm still represented a viable enterprise. Consequently, farmers sometimes felt compelled to remain in an occupation well beyond the point when it would have been rational to leave, with all the accompanying stresses of managing a flagging business. Theresa Turner, a farmer’s wife in Lincolnshire, commented that the mentality of family farming was to provide for a future for one’s children, and that failing to be able to leave a profitable legacy was a deeply troubling issue for farmers, *“I should think that’s about the hardest thing you could ever ask a farmer.”*

## **5.6 FAMILY AND PERSONAL ISSUES**

Family issues, sometimes on their own, and sometimes in combination with other experiences, were an important contributory factor in interviewees’ experiences of stress. Notably, family problems had a somewhat unusual impact upon farming families, who worked and lived together, and for whom any difficulties could therefore be intensified.

While there were obviously enormous advantages to working with family in terms of trust, respect and flexibility, we came across a number of cases where working together was more problematic, and possibly even damaging. For some younger farmers, it was clear that a degree of parental pressure had influenced their decision to work with their families (see section 5.5.5 above), and such relationships were sometimes characterised by conflict, bullying and frustrated ambitions. For others, while family working patterns were more chosen, the emotional intensity or knowledge between workmates who were also relatives, made for tensions in daily lives. Nigel Evans, who greatly respected his father and enjoyed working with him, nevertheless noted that their personalities often clashed, and having different ideas about what was best for the farm was a source of frustration for him since his father, who he semi-jokingly described as *“a slave driver”* had the final say. By contrast, several farmers talked about the *“disappointment”* or *“distress”* their children had caused by rejecting a farming life.

A number of interviewees talked about marital difficulties which had either been exacerbated by workplace difficulties (such as taking work frustrations home with them), or which had been caused by them (for example, working long hours and not having time for one another as a couple). While none of those interviewed had split up from their partners, this was partly an aspect of the research design (sampling), and even from the fairly superficial coverage given to family issues in the topic guide, evidence of affairs and marital unhappiness did emerge.

For close-knit extended families, who often lived together or very near one another, where one individual was experiencing particular problems, this could have acute reverberations for the rest of the family. For example, the whole Morris family was in a state of crisis over their son's depression when we interviewed them. The loss of parents was also raised as an emotionally distressing time for farming families, who were often heavily involved in care-giving in the later stages of parents' lives, which could be physically as well as mentally draining. For Llewellyn Davies, this had been a particularly tough time, since he had carried the full burden of caring for his parents at the same time as running the farm.

For farmers' wives, who so often regarded themselves as the caretakers of their family's welfare, issues that threatened this status could be difficult to cope with. For example, Barbara Watson had had to take on a great deal of farming work on her husband's behalf over the years, due to his suffering from a chronic condition. She explained that his health had become a constant source of worry for her, "*It just hangs over me that maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, next month he'll be ill and I'll have to go and do it all on my own again,*" and this arrangement limited her choices. More generally, tensions between father and sons, and worrying about their children's future, were common sources of anxiety for the farmers' wives we interviewed.

## 5.7 FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF STRESS

Interviewees commonly talked about financial aspects of stress, particularly the smaller- to medium-sized farmers who were more likely to be struggling to make a profit. Finances often presented the most stressful aspect of these farmers' work, which cross cut or lay at the heart of other farming problems. A key informant suggested that financial pressures played more heavily upon livestock farmers, whose businesses were often based upon smaller agricultural units. Notably, financial issues affected principal farmers more than the rest of farms' workforces, although they were often a matter of concern to everyone on a farm. While no farmers reflected on times when farming had been a particularly prosperous occupation, most felt that there had been a qualitative and substantive shift in agriculture's fortunes over the course of a generation, and that it was now mainly the larger scale businesses for whom financial rewards provided an occupational motivation. Larry Black explained that despite having attempted to respond to changing market forces and expand his stock, he was struggling to compete with the larger-scale businesses increasingly leading the sector: "*I was becoming a smaller farmer even though I was getting bigger.*"

Several farmers noted that they had seen neighbouring farmers close their businesses because of financial problems. Some interviewees commented that they lived "*in dread*" of bankruptcy, both because they feared losing their farms and being unable to support their families, and because of the "*shame*" that they felt would be associated with not being able to make a success of farming.

A number of interviewees specifically tied financial problems to the falling price of milk, something they found very frustrating as they were powerless to have an influence. Financial pressures were also exacerbated at particular times, for example, around and following the FMD outbreak. One key informant felt that the UK was currently undergoing a major agricultural recession, which was having intensive financial impacts for individual farmers.

Many interviewees commented that to be a successful farmer in the current economy, you needed to be a very good business manager: "*red hot*" as Larry Black put it. However, as preceding sections have shown, this kind of entrepreneurial ethos did not always sit well with a farming occupational identity, and many farmers found it difficult to respond to new financial

pressures, and harder still to make changes to the way they had farmed for years in order to make their farms more profitable. A number of farmers put off making changes, and consequently faced a position where their produce became increasingly unprofitable and their equipment urgently required reinvestment, which they could not afford. The financial pressures they faced became an overwhelming source of preoccupation, and it was difficult for them to retain hold of what they enjoyed about farming. Adrian Hills, another livestock farmer, commented that profit margins had become increasingly tight, so much so that he compared farming to gambling, and reflected: *“The financial stress is a lot worse than the work stress.”* While on a daily basis, financial pressures caused at least some degree of stress for a large proportion of interviewees, sustained problems over the long-term were associated with a more deep-rooted sense of unhappiness, and occasionally with clinical depression.

Christopher Park commented that the self-employment aspect of farming, combined with its lifestyle aspects with their deep emotional investments, could make it difficult for farmers to judge when financial pressures had become unsustainable, as might be possible in other occupations:

*“If you’re a farmer you don’t actually get kicked out of work. What it is, you’re haemorrhaging to death. And it’s very difficult to say, “Stop, we’ve had enough of this, we’ll change direction, we’ll sell up.” It’s very, very difficult. You’re just that bogged down with it, you can’t see it.”*

There were financial costs associated with complying with agricultural regulations, which provided an added source of pressure, and the time lag in waiting to see if subsidies had been awarded was highly detrimental to farmers already experiencing financial difficulties. Financial pressures influenced farmers’ consequent decisions in ways that had strong reverberations for the experiences of everyone working on their farms. For example, due to financial difficulties, farmers might cut back farms’ labour forces, necessitating that the rest of the staff absorb additional work, in turn raising workload issues and potentially increasing farm workers’ isolation. Financial difficulties also prompted farmers and their wives to take on additional work outside the farm, reducing farms’ workforces and sometimes creating role conflicts. One key informant suggested that financial pressures were likely to play a role in divorce amongst farming couples.

Other farmers had increased their borrowings to make changes to their farms, which had failed to give them the competitive edge they anticipated, and they now faced mounting and unsustainable debts. Derek Morris commented that *“the pressure was becoming intense really,”* and consequently sold one of his farms, reflecting that at his age he was no longer able to cope with the level of financial insecurity which he felt had come to characterise farming. Such pressures have undoubtedly been an influence in prompting many farmers to leave the occupation. Victor Adams similarly commented that he found financial pressures harder to bear as he got older, and that they conflicted with his normative expectations about farming and later life:

*“my boys now, I mean they don’t feel the stress like you do when you get older ... when you get to our age you think you should have finished with all of the need for the bank and the borrowings and that because you’ve been farming and you’ve made profits and things like that.”*

Financial pressures may also threaten farmers’ retirement plans. There was also an issue that tenant farmers were under more pressure to make a constant profit in order to meet their rental costs.

While farmers' wives were often responsible for farm accounts and were therefore very familiar with financial problems, there was less of a tendency amongst those interviewed than for farmers, to take financial problems personally and to worry about them intensively. Rather, farm women's causes of stress tended to lie elsewhere, for example, in the health and emotional welfare of their families. Wendy Morris commented that, "*I sort of tend to let it ride over me.*" It tended to be younger farm women who worried about money, and there seemed to be a process in the life cycle of farmers' wives of adjusting to an expectation that a certain amount of borrowing and uncertainty was a necessary part of farming. Likewise, the farm workers, and to some degree the younger (and more junior) farmers we interviewed, tended to be less concerned with finances than some of the other issues explored above. For example, Graham Adams was aware that the family farm was struggling, but did not take on this worry personally. He felt that his own income, while low, was fairly secure, and could at least be matched in the broader labour market: "*I haven't got the pressures that farmers, I'm just a worker, I ain't got nothing to worry about.*"

This chapter has illustrated how farming stress is made up of a complex web of factors that affect different types of farming enterprises and different types of farm workers differently. The following chapter looks at some of the key ways that interviewees set out to cope with such stresses on an ongoing basis.

## 5.8 SUMMARY

- The stresses associated with farming work had a number of effects upon interviewees' physical and mental well-being. The most common of these were a lack of sleep, back problems, worrying about work, irritability and feeling down. However, relatively little sick leave was taken for physical illnesses, and stigma was attached to discussing mental health issues. The intensity of workloads, the non-controllability of certain aspects of farming, and insecure futures were major factors in these symptoms, which were experienced throughout farming communities, although principal farmers worried most about the future.
- Stress is a complex term that was used with a wide range of meanings amongst our interviewees. It was rarely explicitly associated with health effects, some people avoided using it altogether and developed an alternative vocabulary (including concepts such as frustration, anxiety and worry), while others emphasised its positive qualities, long-standing association with farming, and motivational benefits.
- A three-fold analytical distinction is made between aspects of stress that relate to the intrinsic work of farming, to more external features, and to work-related characteristics. Recent changes in farming have affected these aspects in different ways, and have specific policy implications.
- Intrinsic aspects of farming stress included seasonality and the difficulties posed by adverse weather conditions, and stock crises and disease, which had in recent years have included BSE, the Foot and Mouth outbreak and TB.
- Extrinsic dimensions of agricultural stress were a greater worry for principal farmers, and included the current legislative and political framework, media and public perceptions of farmers, and competitive forces and their impact upon prices.
- Work-related aspects of stress in farming provided the most substantial cause of difficulties for interviewees as a whole. These included: potentially dangerous farming practices, workload and organisational features associated with intense and sometimes unmanageable working arrangements, the pressures of particular types of farming and their busy periods, rising paperwork demands, and tensions associated with family farms and acquisition. Of these, psychosocial hazards had particular significance, that

is, aspects of work concerned with its organisation or management that were potentially harmful to farming communities.

- Less directly linked to farming, but still tied up in farming lifestyles, were stresses involving family tensions and financial problems. Very often farm women took on a major burden of worrying about their families' welfare, which added to their own day-to-day stresses.
- While interviewees tended to associate day-to-day worries and acute periods of stress with intrinsic aspects of farming, external causes of tension, together with worries about finances and family, were associated with anxiety on a more sustained basis. By contrast, more directly work-related aspects of farming stress involved a combination of physical and mental health effects, and consequently had particular measurable effects, such as workplace injuries.

## 6. COPING STRATEGIES AND SUPPORT

This chapter looks at coping strategies and at the kinds of support that have been mobilised by farming communities in response to stress. It draws out strategies that have been more or less successful, and scrutinises issues around asking for help and personal resources. Case studies are used to illustrate the range of coping strategies adopted by individual farms.

### 6.1 OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES

Farmers are widely described as having few interests outside farming and little time or interest for hobbies. Many interviewees described themselves as falling into this category, and some greeted the concept of 'spare time' with considerable scepticism. Others described a range of leisure activities, interests and voluntary activities which provided variety in their lives and helped offset the stresses of their farming work.

The traditional mainstays of rural and farming social life – the pub, the church and markets – were noted as being in widespread decline, partly because of competing time pressures on farmers, and partly because of the changing nature of the rural population. This was seen as a factor that contributed to increased isolation and distance from support networks. However, individual accounts demonstrated that these institutions continued to fulfil their traditional social role for at least some people.

#### 6.1.1 Pubs and drinking

Overall, our sample did not give the impression of being heavy or frequent drinkers. Many did attend a local pub and some mentioned drinking and socialising as an enjoyable aspect of attending markets, auctions and agricultural shows. Farmers who were innately sociable were often seen as being more able to deal with stress and having more outlets, and pubs provided a popular venue for informal socialising and relaxing. George Watson, a farmer's son, talked about the mutual support he enjoyed with his friend, who was also a farmer:

*“it is nice too when he comes round or we're having a pint that we can just sit and have a good old moan about you know the rules and regulations usually, what's going on.”*

Dennis Potter, who liked to support his local football team when he had time, commented that, *“If we go to match we always have a drink after the game.”* Similarly, Nathan Turner, a Lincolnshire farmer who worked on a relatively isolated farm, enjoyed relaxing with his friends outside the industry over a few drinks and a game of snooker:

*“I find it very helpful, we all do, we all do because, I suppose we talk rubbish! I don't know what we talk about, I don't know, what's been on telly, what's in the papers, whatever.”*

Drinking, however, could also be associated with more problematic or dysfunctional coping strategies, and some farmers were wary of drinking for this reason. Harold Grant said of a farm worker he had employed in the past: *“He wouldn't go out and get worried about something, he'd go off drinking ... never any good, because he had to start again the following morning.”* Harold concluded that in a crisis, *“sitting down with a bottle of whisky doesn't help.”*



Oscar Morris, a young man who was clinically depressed, drank heavily to deal with stress issues, and was also using cannabis, although less intensively. He was concealing the extent of his drinking from his girlfriend, and described one recent week where he had drunk to excess on three evenings. He commented:

*“you know, I used to just go out and socially drink and, um you know, have a few pints with my mates. But now I tend to go out and decide before I go, to go out and I’m going to get absolutely hammered, so I can’t stand up.”*

Notably the work of farming – early starts, operating heavy machinery and working with hazardous chemicals – was not complemented by a late night drinking culture. While this appealed to some of the younger farmers interviewed, there was evidence that drinking occurred less in this context as they got older and assumed more responsibilities around farms.

### **6.1.2 Church**

For believers, church membership and personal spiritual practice were an important coping strategy, especially during times of crisis. Several respondents mentioned *“faith”* and *“prayer”* when asked what had helped them through a difficult period, such as the death of a close friend, or the FMD crisis, and wondered how those without such a framework coped in such situations. Larry Black described a crisis in his marriage, which had led to his becoming clinically depressed. His church, where he had previously held a prominent role, had been less sympathetic than he would have hoped during this time. Finding a new church, with a supportive congregation, had been an important factor in helping the couple rebuild their marriage.

The sense of community created by shared membership of a church was also supportive in a more general sense. Eric Watson commented of some of his fellow churchgoers that they *“don’t understand farming but they’re still good friends.”* For some respondents, church going was also perceived as a way to make a contribution to communities, or maintain a link with previous generations. Vernon Chester, an older Lincolnshire farmer who felt that he was *“blessed with a good family,”* said: *“We always try and support the local villages. Help the local church. Do everything we can in the local countryside.”* Llewellyn Davies had recently started attending chapel again, after a gap of many years, and commented, *“I think as I have lost my mother and father, I feel that they would be glad that I go.”*

As with membership of other organisations, having a position within the church could provide farmers with status and access to wider networks, such as regional or national committees and conferences. These were important to some of those interviewed.

### **6.1.3 Markets**

Livestock markets have traditionally been a source of both business and social networks for farmers and remained important to some interviewees, although these are unlikely to be situations where sensitive personal issues are discussed. Edith Hills saw her husband’s regular trips to market as an important form of social contact, since he had no hobbies or interests outside farming, and would otherwise see few people. This form of sociability could be a particularly important form of coping for those in more rural areas. Similarly, Derek Morris remembered the mutual support he had enjoyed with a friend. Sadly, despite their close relationship, which had enabled Derek to advise his friend to see a doctor when he was obviously depressed, this had not been enough to prevent him committing suicide:

*“Yeah we’d always chat, we’d always see each other at market and have a good old heart to heart and I’d say “I’ve got that”, and he’d say “Well, so have I, and this is what I did about it” and we shared it, did everything together, shared all the problems.”*

Markets were widely perceived as having declined in recent years, a trend further accelerated by the foot and mouth epidemic. Nathan Turner, a Lincolnshire farmer, said *“when you go to market nowadays there’s not the life there that there used to be,”* and these concerns were echoed by farmers from other areas. Donald Lloyd, from Powys, commented that, *“it’s hurried, it’s urgent and it’s not a pleasure. There’s no time to speak.”* Shirley Hills attributed this partly to the fact that there are now cheaper and more efficient alternatives for carrying out livestock sales, but lamented the loss of social contact associated with the market, which did not appear readily replaceable:

*“And to drag them into market where the buyers can’t actually really pick what they’re buying, they just get pens whether they like it or not, it’s just not viable really. But it used to be a fantastic social thing. Farmers got to talk to each other, they got out of the house, and I think it used to work really well.”*

Key informants in both Powys and Devon, two of the more isolated farming areas, observed that farmers had lost an opportunity to network, socialise and exchange information with the demise of the markets, and that this provided an important context to framing their experiences of stress and coping.

#### **6.1.4 Local networks**

Agricultural networks were an important source of support, and those working for such organisations acknowledged a pastoral role as part of the job. A key informant working for an agricultural organisation commented *“you are a bit like a priest.”* These kind of networks included the NFU, Women’s Farming Union (WFU) and local farmers’ groups. Notably these tended to be more important for older and more established farmers and seemed less attractive to younger people, who often described more confiding relationships with their friends. This, of course, may change once they become owners with heavier responsibilities and a greater sense of competition with other local farmers. Activities such as cattle societies and judging animals at agricultural shows could also be important for maintaining local networks with other farmers, as well as providing a source of enjoyment. Farming communities tended to regard their primary sources of support rather differently from the local stress networks that have developed. From a farming perspective, established local representatives like the NFU and TFA were felt to play a central role, backed up by local vets and doctors, organisations and individuals with a longer-standing reputation of support locally.

Longer-term support included setting up local farm groups, which provided an opportunity for farmers to get together in a context where structural opportunities for these had been reduced. These provided particular value in remote farming locations. They enabled farmers to become self-supporting in their sharing and discussion of common problems, and provided a venue where information could be targeted at farmers, for example, through guest speakers or health and safety presentations.

Alongside traditional sources of social contact and support were other activities and groups, often organised along leisure or family lines. Interviewees’ involvement in sporting activities included golf, cricket, football, canoeing, car racing, rugby, running and sailing, as well as activities such as shooting and hunting which are traditionally associated with the countryside.

Women's activities tended to be more privatised than men's, although some were active in voluntary organisations, community organisations and in church, and they mentioned activities such as baking, flower arranging, and visiting relatives and friends as ways in which they chose to relax.

## 6.2 FAMILIES

Those interviewed placed a strong emphasis upon the benefits of having a close and supportive family. Edward Hills' comment was typical: *"I think living with a close knit family, I think that helps. I think if you were on your own then things would start to get on top of you, I can imagine."* Adam Butler referred to his family as a motivating force, saying *"I think it's family that keeps you going really."* Respondents described with pleasure time spent going out with a partner or children and going away on holiday, but such outings were generally infrequent, partly because of finances, but also because of the demands of caring for livestock. Those able to go on regular holidays considered themselves very fortunate, in striking contrast to the normative expectations of most UK families; the lack of a regular holiday away from home is a widely accepted indicator of poverty. Those who were engaged in dairy farming were especially likely to comment on the restrictions this imposed on them, and those who had been able to stop milking, whether because they no longer kept dairy cattle or had been able to buy in paid help, spoke of the *"freedom"* this gave them.

Chapter four has discussed the way in which farms' administrative work was often delegated to a single family member. In addition to having practical benefits, maintaining a relatively strict division of labour within the family was also a strategy which helped 'compartmentalise' potential sources of stress, as seen in chapter five, where individuals on case study farms often took on quite different worries, reflecting their different occupational roles.

Adult sons and daughters, whether still involved in the farm or living away, were mentioned by many farmers and their wives as a valued source of support. However, many married farmers described their wives as the main, if not the only, person they would talk to in a stressful situation. Lorenz *et al.* (1993) uncovered evidence that spousal support helped to reduce the effects of stress among farmers. Daniel Grant's comment was typical:

*"I'd probably speak to my wife first of all, we have, you know we've got a good marriage, we've got a good relationship and I think providing you've got a strong marriage I think that goes an awful long way to supporting you in your business outlook, especially if you're somebody who tends to work alone."*

This kind of confidant role was part of the expectations traditionally associated with 'farmers' wives'. Christopher Park revealed the extent to which he relied on his wife when he said that he would really only contemplate using outside sources of support if he were divorced:

*I think if you were faced with something like a divorce, I think you'd have to float that with somebody, 'cause obviously if you were divorced from your wife you wouldn't be able to do that.*

It is then, somewhat unsurprising that as chapter five has shown, wives so often took on a role of emotional caretaker in terms of their husbands' worries.

However, some people admitted that they did not really confide in family, even in their wives, and a number of interviewees mentioned the fact that during the FMD outbreak people did not talk to their partners, suggesting some unmet needs for support, which might be better provided

by an outsider. Llewellyn Davies, a bachelor farmer, was unusual in expressing a preference for talking to someone outside his family or immediate social circle, saying he found it easier “*with someone who is a total stranger, better than someone who is a relative.*”

A number of interviewees referred to feeling angry, “*blowing a fuse,*” “*losing my temper,*” or being “*irritable*” in response to the stresses of farming life. Some of them described this as a coping strategy, although it would more conventionally be regarded as a symptom of stress, as discussed in chapter five. One man, who admitted that he tended to “*bottle up*” his feelings, commented that his wife often bore the brunt of this, and there was also evidence of frustrations being taken out on adult children (which could damage acquisition strategies). The extent of support provided by farming families was acknowledged as something that could place a strain on marriages, as could the constant togetherness, in cases where both members of a couple worked on the farm. Marriages in farming families were seen as sometimes continuing past the point where others would divorce because of practical and financial difficulties in separating. Compensation payments following the FMD crisis were noted by one key informant as having freed some estranged couples to separate.

### **6.3 FRIENDSHIP AND COMMUNITY**

While the majority of respondents described social circles consisting mainly of other farmers and people living locally and engaged in related industries, there was some divergence among interviewees about the extent to which they preferred to socialise with, and receive informal support from, people within or outside farming communities. The extent and diversity of social contact was partly determined by areas’ geographical and socio-economic characteristics, and interviewees’ responses to change in their locality were influenced by their social support preferences.

Many interviewees looked to others within farming communities as a natural source of mutual support. In addition to pragmatic reasons, such as shortage of time and proximity, these networks reflected an active desire to socialise with people who shared similar values, concerns and interests. Victor Adams commented that, “*The most genuine and honest people that you’ll ever come across are in agriculture,*” while Edith Hills said, “*It’s nice to be able to talk to other farmers, because they understand what you’re talking about.*” Her daughter Shirley, a vet, felt that there was a strong ethos of mutual help amongst agricultural communities, saying, “*I think farmers physically and, without realising it, emotionally support each other.*”

Local friendships, where the issues faced by farming communities were well understood, were often an important and valued source of day-to-day emotional support for farmers. Roger Bloom, a Devon farm contractor, commented that if he had a frustrating day, “*I just generally give one of me mates a bell on the mobile,*” and said that, “*I’d go mad if I didn’t actually.*”

In terms of practical support, there was a good deal of informal work carried out by extended family members and neighbours at busy times such as sheep shearing. Some respondents referred to “*bartering*”, and it was clear that in some cases informal work was substituting for farm labour that was either unavailable or unaffordable. Eric Watson, a Devon farmer, described taking friends out for a meal to thank them for caring for his livestock while he went on holiday, and commented that in the past he had hired help but that this was not currently an option:

*“there are relief agencies but normally we would use them when we plan a holiday, and at the moment there isn’t enough money to pay them to look after your stock whilst you’re having a good time.”*

For those who valued the mutual support of other farmers as a coping mechanism, changes such as the amalgamation of small farms into larger businesses, and movements of people from outside farming into the local area, were seen as reducing the size of social networks, and having the potential to dilute or diminish reciprocal bonds of understanding and self-help. Eric Watson commented on the increasing number of large farms in his area:

*“There’s less of us around, there used to be more small farmers, there’s big farmers around but you feel out of their league.”* Similar issues were faced by those involved in a minority type of farming for their area, such as dairy farming in a largely arable area, who felt they had little in common with other local farmers.

For other interviewees, having friends outside farming was described as a vital source of stimulus or escape from their day-to-day concerns, precisely because it allowed some respite. Cecilia Butler, who had previously worked outside the farm, made a point of meeting her former colleagues for a meal once a fortnight, to provide a complete change of scenery from the farm and her family. Harold Grant, a Hampshire farmer, also felt that he and his wife benefited from having a wider social circle, which gave them a break from thinking about the farm all the time: *“I think we’ve been lucky because we have, all our friends are not farmers. We have some farming friends but most of them are not.”*

Similarly, Barry Phillips, a farm worker, found a break from thinking about farming relaxing, and also felt that it stopped him from becoming *“insular”* and reminded him of *“the bigger picture”*:

*“If you live in a very rural area like this, most of your friends are in the rural sector. Which is why I do like the running club. I go into [local town] once or twice a week. And we’re from all different walks of life. And I know everyone there, so no one will talk about farming, which is great. I love my job and that. But I quite like to turn off at the end of the day.”*

Those with this outward-facing orientation were also more likely to welcome the diversity associated with incomers to an area, since it increased the possibility of building wider social networks.

## **6.4 PERSONAL RESOURCES**

Personal resources and individual dispositions emerged as important influences upon coping styles. The importance of sociability in generating and maintaining support networks has already been mentioned. However, some of those interviewed had effective self-sufficient coping responses, although not all of them were able to articulate clear strategies for dealing with stress. Some were unable to identify any particular ways in which they dealt with stress, other than going to sleep, watching television or going for a walk, but found that these activities were enough to help them relax, gain a sense of perspective and be ready to face a new day. For example, Nigel Adams, a farmer’s son, played a lot of sports, and explained that one of the benefits of this was that *“you just completely shut off from work.”*

### **Farm P: local networks and private activities**

Farm P was a small tenanted Devon livestock farm run by Eric and Barbara Watson. Their son, George, lived nearby and helped on the farm, although he also had a full-time job. Due to Eric’s health problems the farm’s focus had recently shifted away from dairy farming towards breeding. Barbara ran several diversification businesses from the farm, and often juggled responsibility for both the farm and for these ventures. The couple saw themselves as quite

stressed: he because of their precarious financial position and worrying about the future; and she because of growing concerns about her husband's health and due to her overwork. They had narrowly avoided being infected by FMD, and Eric described the time of the outbreak as like *"living on a knife edge."*

Eric placed a lot of emphasis on the need to cope with and confront difficult situations, and talked about the comfort he drew from his faith during difficult times. His family had provided an invaluable source of support during crises, although he regretted that he sometimes took his frustrations out on them and became very moody. Eric bemoaned the lack of local farmers to share his worries with – most of his friends were non-farmers, and farmers were becoming scarcer, with those surviving tending to be the larger-scale businesses with whom he did not feel he had much in common.

Barbara explained that her daughter was her main source of support, although she did not live locally. She found her husband and son less supportive. She had good friends, and although these were not from farming families, they were very important to her and she commented that being around others was vital for her sanity. Barbara noted that her church was a central source of support, *"in fact if it hadn't been for my faith I probably would have gone under years ago."* An issue for her was that the couple were never able to take a holiday; she felt that it was important to get away from the farm to be able to relax, but often they could not afford to take a day off a week.

By contrast, their son George, whose daily life was less tied up in the farm, felt like he coped with his busy working life well. He liked to go motor racing, and felt that it was important to make time to see friends, and usually met them for a quick drink even if he finished work very late. He felt that relaxing in this way enabled him to *"switch off"* from farming. Although he worked long hours, he felt that he maintained a good work-life balance, but acknowledged that things were very different for his parents who could not afford this luxury.

Others identified themselves as having a problem-solving orientation, which helped them to work through stress. This manifested itself in various ways, although in large part it was an issue about time management. Some people made a start on paperwork well in advance of deadlines and saw being *"organised"* in this way as the key to keeping stress levels manageable. Others enjoyed practical tasks, often those involving a level of skill or a fair amount of effort.

Angela Read, a farmer's wife, described a process of task prioritisation which led her to neglect household work when she needed to meet a deadline, such as for a VAT return, and said that this helped her to manage stress, saying

*"It's when you're out of control that... you feel bad."* Daniel Grant, who presented himself as very competent and in control, was implicitly critical of those less organised than himself, and argued that some farmers were their own worst enemies in terms of stress:

*"you don't leave it until the last week, you do it the month beforehand and if there's a problem you can then sort it out. So I think farmers or anybody can do an awful lot to prevent stress just by the way they work."*

George Watson described a similarly proactive approach to the physical maintenance of the farm, preferring to tackle everyday jobs as they arose rather than allowing them to build up over time:

*"I try and do the jobs before they get too big, I try and keep everything, like the general maintenance of the farm, try and keep it all up-to-date reasonably well to avoid working harder."*

Others took a particular pleasure in physical tasks, such as repairing machinery, which they found relaxing, as Eric Watson described:

*“I’m quite a hands on, I do a lot of repairs if something goes wrong like a, even an electric drill or something like that, if it won’t work I want to know why it won’t work and I take it to pieces.”*

This kind of approach pre-empted problems before they arose.

Some interviewees described a process of lateral thinking when faced with a problem and needing to identify the range of possible solutions. Harold Grant, an older farmer, who saw forward planning as an intrinsic part of the work, described how he had coped during a period when he had experienced financial pressures following diversification:

*“I think you’ve got to think about, um, there’s a problem, how are you going to get out of it. What can you do? Will that work? Will that work? Will something else work? You’ve got to go all through it and see. But I don’t think that’s any different to anybody else. Whether you work in an office or not.”*

Notably, attitudes to difficulties were often passed on through families, as can be seen in the similarities in Harold and Daniel Grant’s approaches. There was evidence of a whole range of outlooks, such as an entrepreneurial approach and by contrast a more reactive approach, being clustered around family groupings.

#### **Farm I: agricultural networks and solving problems**

Farm I, which was introduced in chapter four, was a large-scale and successful Lancashire agribusiness run by Christopher Park and his father Max. While the farmers agreed that there was much about farming that was intrinsically stressful, they were united in the satisfaction they drew from being able to rise to new challenges. Christopher, now the main farmer, found the extrinsic aspects of farming more difficult, in particular that *“the goal posts are always changing.”*

Maintaining a good work-life balance was very important to Christopher, and he made it a priority to ensure that family time was always earmarked. He had some good relationships with local farmers, with whom he felt able to solicit advice about farming problems, and whose opinions he valued. He was a member of a local farmers’ club and enjoyed this sociability. He noted that most of his friends were also farmers, *“we tend to move in agricultural circles.”* However, he felt that there were limits to how far farmers supported one another; while they were generally happy to discuss practical problems, they would *“never”* talk about personal issues. This was not a problem for him, however, as he had his wife and mother to confide in.

Christopher did a lot of local voluntary work, which was very useful in finding out information; he commented that this was important since as an organic farmer he might otherwise have felt rather isolated locally. He regarded himself as someone who looked for practical solutions and *“opportunities”* in the face of difficulties, and emphasised that he was continually thinking about how best to promote his family’s future through the farm.

His father, Max, also had a lot of support networks, and belonged to two farmers’ clubs where he could talk about farming problems, although he now left most of the strategic planning to Christopher. His wife and family were also on hand to discuss problems with. He felt strongly

that it was important to have holidays and time to relax away from the farm. Generally if something was bothering him, he preferred to tackle it head-on so that he could move on.

Those who adopted these kinds of problem-solving approaches tended to stress the common ground between farming and other occupations, rather than its uniqueness, whereas those who saw farming having unique demands and pressures tended to deal with stress by throwing themselves into the work with renewed vigour.

Derek Morris, who argued that constant work “*always helps in a crisis*”, said that he relied on:

*“physical work, yeah, constant work and I suppose generally positive attitude and saying, ‘Well I’m going to get through it, nobody’s going to help me, but I’m going to have to get through it.’”*

Shirley Hills described her father as dealing with an outbreak of FMD “*by constantly doing things,*” and explained how he had dug his own fire pits and cleaned out his livestock sheds as a way of coping with insomnia. For some interviewees this active problem-solving orientation was coupled with an aversion to talking about issues, as Thomas Young exemplified:

*“I don’t think talking about it any more would do any good at all. You’ve just got to get it right, you know if there’s a problem, talking about it’s no good, you’ve just got to get it sorted out.”*

While these may be effective strategies in the short-term, there is a danger that those adopting them may suffer physical and mental health problems if the stressful situation persists over an extended period. Cecilia Butler found that as she and her husband moved into middle age, she was concerned about the impact of his working patterns on his health, saying: “*I’m more increasingly beginning to think that, health-wise, it isn’t doing him any good. And he’s just driving himself into an early grave.*” Some farmers also conceded that they found stress less easy to deal with as they had grown older, as discussed in chapter five.

#### **Farm J: getting on with it**

Farm J was a medium-sized dairy farm in a mainly arable part of Lincolnshire, run by Bernard Young and his son Thomas. They used a combination of farm workers and outside contractors to staff the farm, a strategy that caused some tensions during the busy holiday seasons. Bernard’s main worry was the farm’s declining financial viability. He also had some fairly serious health problems, which may have been exacerbated by working late in life. Thomas was also becoming increasingly anxious about the farm’s future, although on a day-to-day basis was more concerned about workload issues.

Bernard’s main strategies for dealing with stress were sleeping and talking matters through with his family. He tended not to socialise with non-agricultural people, and felt that he did not get as much time to see his friends as he would like. Although he found it useful to talk problems through with other farmers, his ability to do this was limited by the fact that he lacked neighbouring dairy farmers, likely to share his concerns. Consequently he tended to make use of a paid consultant to obtain advice on specific farming issues. His attitude was that the best way of dealing with acute stress was to tackle its underlying causes straight on.

Thomas also received most of his support from the family, although he preferred to switch off rather than to talk about problems. He felt that his non-farming friends probably would not appreciate him “*whingeing*” about farming, and also felt that talking to other farmers could make you feel more depressed. He also felt that he tackled problems head-on.



Some key informants mentioned farmers keeping busy and using the demands of work as an avoidance strategy, rather than face up to problems. Adam and Cecilia Butler both became quite distressed when talking about their situation to the interviewer, but noted that normally they did not worry or talk about their problems overmuch, saying *“sometimes we’re too busy living too, but it’s not much of a life.”*

## 6.5 FORMAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Contact with DEFRA and HSE tended to be described as infrequent, largely unproblematic and generally occurring in relation to a specific issue, such as regarding an inspection or calling a DEFRA helpline about a paperwork query. On the other hand, these organisations were not actively viewed as potential sources of support, but in terms of their enforcement role (an issue taken up in chapter seven), and some respondents described DEFRA as *“unapproachable”*, not easy to talk to, and staffed by *“pen pushers”*. Previous formal organisations, such as ADAS, by contrast, were regarded as having had a close engagement with local farms and being very aware of their problems and issues. Mair Lloyd explained:

*“We knew those officers well, and they knew us, they knew the farms. And they’d come onto the farms and that was a good link, that was a good way of smoothing these processes.”*

Many felt that a gap had emerged in these terms. The National Assurance dairy scheme was one organisation that was seen as fostering these kinds of close links. While there was awareness of alternative organisations, such as the Welsh advisory service, Farming Connect, few of our respondents had had contact with them.

Sometimes people sought out those in a trusted position, but at a slight distance from their immediate social circles, to confide in. Vernon Chester commented on how his own father had been in the habit of a weekly chat with his local bank manager, and this was a strategy that he had also adopted. Shirley Hills, a vet, commented that during the FMD crisis, farmers had sometimes confided in her when they felt unable to talk to other farmers or to their own families:

*“when I was in the practice farmers would come in to get drugs and start talking to you there, because they couldn’t talk to their wives because it would scare them, couldn’t talk to other farmers because they were just terrified.”*

A number of interviewees identified known and trusted vets as people they would feel confident approaching, in contrast to the apparently more obvious support organisations. Indeed, some of those interviewed expressed a strong antipathy to making use of organisations such as the Rural Stress Information Network and the Farm Crisis Network. Oliver Lee cited the names of these organisations as something which would contribute to his sense of failure if he had to use them, and he commented that he would be too embarrassed to use their services, in case anyone should find out, highlighting issues of stigma and confidentiality in close-knit communities. A similar response was displayed in terms of counselling. This issue of stigma was highlighted by several of the key informants interviewed, and they emphasised the importance of educating younger farmers still in college about stress, so that mental health issues may lose some of their negative associations over time.

From the support perspective, relationships or contact between farmers and support agencies might be proactive or reactive, and short-term, perhaps consisting of only one contact, or

longer-term, built upon and developing over many months or years. In the latter instances, personal knowledge of support workers and consistency of contact was a vital aspect of the quality of help provided. Reflecting the range of organisational remits of the key informants interviewed, so too these relationships might be entirely based around crisis situations or focused around practical issues, and sometimes only involved dealing with agricultural stress as a small part of their work (such as the farming unions and associations). Proactively offered support included establishing a presence at agricultural shows and in the farming press, and home visits, while reactively provided support included the use of helplines and practical assistance with form-filling. Organisations', and often individuals', reputations were crucial in how easily this help was accepted or sought, and many key informants emphasised the importance of maintaining a long-term presence in communities and drawing upon established trust in the way that local partnerships were organised. Local and agricultural knowledge were important factors in these relationships.

A common use of formal support, that is the help and advice that farmers needed with agricultural paperwork submissions, followed seasonal trends and reflected the deadlines imposed by the various systems. However, organisations often felt that farmers had put off asking for help for as long as possible, which was problematic in terms of their then being able to provide effective support. That farmers felt comfortable approaching organisations for this type of help was critical, since as several key informants explained this initial type of approach, if sympathetically met, often paved the way for farmers to discuss more delicate and deep-rooted problems.

Several organisations provided helplines with a fairly broad remit, which offered a confidential ear and practical advice which farmers could access on their own terms. These provided a valuable aspect of support, although they could not substitute for the longer-term relationships that were necessary to support farmers through more entrenched problems. Several key informants made a crucial distinction between the types of stress that were discussed in the contexts of approaches that farming communities made to support services (such as helplines, a large proportion of whose calls focused on paperwork issues), and more proactively-offered support, which often involved relationships built up over a long period of time with a gradual development of trust. There is an obvious tension here if these latter types of organisations are less well established in particular areas, in how effectively they can respond to hidden levels of need.

Key informants were also able to identify circumstances that were likely to be stressful for farming communities, and which they saw frequently in their work, though people might not actually come forward for support on these issues, including marital breakdown, bereavement, ill-health and financial problems. These frequently acted as triggers in their support work: points when proactively offered help was particularly appropriate and might be welcomed.

## **6.6 BARRIERS TO ASKING FOR SUPPORT AND HELP**

Many farmers were seen as both isolated and very busy, which creates practical problems in accessing support. In addition, key informants and farmers acknowledged that there was a self-sufficient ethos within farming that could make it difficult to acknowledge problems, even among friends and family, and could also act as a barrier to take-up of more formal sources of support. Larry Black, describing a reluctance to discuss issues relating to the success of the farm as a business, including financial problems caused by milk quality issues, referred to: *“this privacy that farmers carry. They carry this privacy, this privacy and pride, and also a sense of failure.”*

There was also a widespread recognition that emotional and personal issues were rarely discussed among farmers, outside of their immediate family circle, and many interviewees described stress as something which did not affect them, or which they felt well able to cope with. Vernon Chester was typical of these views, saying:

*“You have to get on and do it, if it wants doing basically. Ill health. That would, I mean, if you’ve got your health and strength, I’ve always said that if you wake up every morning with your health and strength there’s no bridge that you can’t cross.”*

This seemed to be linked to a particular style of masculinity associated with farming; however, it could mean that problems were not shared until they had reached a crisis point. The difficulty for support organisations was in creating a climate where farmers felt comfortable discussing worries and concerns with outside agencies at a point before they became unmanageable, and required more intensive support. Key informants also commonly felt that the culture of farming meant that farmers tended to immerse themselves in their work in order to defer tackling problems, and that farmers were facing very many difficulties which they never heard about.

A recent survey conducted by the Institute of Rural Health with rural Welsh farmers (Boulanger *et al.*, 1999) uncovered a reluctance to seek specialist help, reflecting the stigma these communities associated with mental illness, their worries about anonymity, and appearing not able to cope. Intervention therefore needs to be sensitive to the needs of the environment within which it is directed (Lobley *et al.*, 2004).

Some respondents had been forced to confront potentially tragic consequences if these kinds of attitudes were maintained in the face of increasing stress. Derek Morris, another dairy farmer, also depicted farmers as “*proud*”, and referred to “*peer pressure*” and a desire not to “*share your dirty washing with everybody*”, and shared these values himself. However, he had taken the initiative to organise talks on stress and mental health issues in his area following the suicide of a close friend: “*It was such a blow to us, all of us really, he was very well respected, lovely chap. I felt that we ought to put something together to try to prevent it.*”

Arthur Read described how, despite his misgivings about breaching privacy, he had contacted a friend’s wife to alert her to his concerns after her husband, a local vet, had broken down during a routine visit to the farm not long after another of his friends had committed suicide:

*“I explained exactly what had happened, and you know I think it was a release to her. It was a release to her because she said to me, “Well, at least he’s spoken to you about it”. And I think she felt then that that was, he was going to be okay.”*

The vet had subsequently, and much to the surprise of his friend, taken up the offer of counselling via his local GP, and had found this very helpful. A representative of a local farmers’ support group also noted that it was often wives or children who alerted him to problems on a farm, rather than this coming from principal farmers. Consequently, organisational approaches to farmers could be delicate and protracted.

This widespread reluctance to use outside sources of support can also place a heavy burden on those family members, often their wives, in whom farmers confide, since their role as a buffer exposes them to considerable stresses, for which they may have few outlets. Cecilia Butler, who was relatively isolated, described herself in these terms, explaining that:

*“for me to not cope with my stress, which is much more domestic-based, would, I don’t know, would probably push us under ... If there’s any non-coping of stress it has to be on the farming side rather than domestic side.”*

Barbara Watson, who felt there were a number of pressures on her, and seemed as if she might appreciate some additional support, went on to explain that she did not feel able to ask for this, partly because of her own attitudes, which had been influenced by her upbringing, and partly because of her husband's lack of understanding towards her feelings:

*"I suppose just never been brought up to think that I would need help...  
I guess if I'm really honest I guess it's tied up with Eric's attitude to it all, because he thinks I'm a big wimp and I should be able to cope."*

In this context, many farm women lacked a normative support route.

Another consequence of this tendency not to seek outside sources of assistance is that those without a close family member, and especially bachelor farmers, may lack ready access to support and be particularly vulnerable to stress. Key informants described such individuals as often isolated, and sometimes lacking conversational skills and general knowledge of modern life. Respondents gave examples of several unmarried farmers who had committed suicide in their local areas. Divorce was also seen as a common trigger to depression and problem drinking among farmers.

Several organisations spoke to us about the longer-term perspective needed in their work, particularly in light of the stigma issues attached to stress and coping within farming communities. This meant that farmers often found it easier to present themselves as needing help or advice on a particular issue (such as finances or paperwork), but that underlying factors were actually causing them more stress and worry (although this is not to discount the support needs associated with more practical issues). Consequently support organisations needed to build up a relationship with people over time if they were to unearth more deep-rooted problems, such as fear of losing one's farm or family problems.

Farming communities adopted a variety of coping mechanisms, both in everyday life, and in crisis situations, which reflected individual preferences, shared group norms, and differences in their material circumstances. However, notably some of these tactics, such as throwing themselves into their work, have been less successful in the current climate of farming than they were in the past. The final chapter draws these findings together to explore the challenges for policy makers and support providers posed by the various stresses associated with farming.

## **6.7 SUMMARY**

- Interviewees utilised a variety of personal resources, formal and informal sources of support, and styles of coping in responding to the stresses associated with their farming work. The pressures of work were variously countered by having time for relaxation, to pursue leisure activities, and to see friends (both farmers and non-farmers), who provided an important source of emotional support and information exchange. Preferences for more formal sources of support included the NFU and TFA, and known and trusted local vets and doctors.
- Close and supportive families were valued by interviewees as having the capacity to understand the unique demands of a farming lifestyle. In particular, farmers' wives played an important role in terms of emotional caretaking, but they also often lack their own normative support routes, and the intensive support demands placed upon families could itself provide a cause of strain. Farmers who lack close families, or who were geographically isolated may be more vulnerable in coping with stress.

- Social resources were combined with personal dispositions to form the basis of coping mechanisms. A critical difference was between more reactive individuals, who responded to crises by immersing themselves in their work, and longer-term planners, who emphasised problem-solving, time management and related to farming as a business enterprise. The latter group tended to deal better with farming stress over the longer-term. Others dealt with frustrations by getting angry, or by bottling their worries up.
- Interviewees were in contact with governmental representatives relatively infrequently and in relation to specific issues, such as paperwork submissions or inspections. A major reason for this was that DEFRA and the HSE were largely perceived in terms of enforcement rather than support. Most interviewees preferred to rely upon the kinds of support organisations or individuals who were known to them locally, and who were felt to be knowledgeable about the day-to-day problems of farming. Similarly, few interviewees were familiar with the work of the stress-based agricultural organisations operating at a local partnership level, and the stigma attached to not coping with pressure emerged as a major reason why support may not be sought until difficulties have become quite entrenched.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### 7.1 CONCLUSIONS

A degree of stress has long characterised farming, as an occupation that involves mastering the environment. However, there have been substantive changes and intensifications in the work and expectations placed upon farming communities in recent years, which have often clashed with their own ambitions and priorities. Transformations in farming have increased farming communities' stress levels in measurable ways, which have sometimes become unmanageable and culminated in outcomes such as depression, divorce and suicide. Stress can have very real impacts for the physical and mental health of all of those working in farming, as well as broader social effects.

Interviewees tended to find most stressful those aspects of their work that they felt unable to control. While this has long been an issue in farming, with its seasonal demands and diseases in stock, there has been an exponential increase in these kinds of factors in recent years, which have multiplied the pressures upon farmers. These have included price fluctuations, national stock crises, mounting paperwork demands, and change in agricultural policy and regulation. Furthermore, aspects like workload issues have become an issue because labour processes have been intensified as a result of rationalisation in response to the falling value of produce.

Financial issues provide a particular stress for farmers because, unlike other self-employed business people, they risk losing their home and family tradition if their work fails. A large proportion of farmers have also been in the same occupation all their life, and settled in locations relatively isolated from alternative labour markets. They consequently had limited options if their farms went bankrupt. A third factor, family stresses, interacts with farming and financial pressures for farming communities. These are a particularly pertinent issue for those working in farming, because of the blurred boundaries between home and work in the organisation of farms.

This final chapter draws together the main themes of the report for different groups in farming, exploring when and why farming communities have been at greater risk of stress, and the degree to which the pressures they are under are directly related to the work that they do. It also highlights successful coping strategies, and identifies the research's policy implications for different stakeholders.

#### 7.1.1 How does stress affect the different people working on farms?

While various sources of stress were interconnected, the ways in which labour was organised on individual farms provided an important influence upon the kinds of issues that interviewees worried about. Case studies have been used throughout the report to illustrate this kind of patterning. A number of broad similarities in farms' labour processes have also enabled trends to be distinguished in terms of how stress affects different kind of farm workers.

Farmers, in particular principal farmers, were often suffering from the most acute or prolonged kinds of stress, which had mental health implications, verbalised mainly in terms of 'worrying' or 'feeling down'. Their stress stemmed from a number of intrinsic, extrinsic and work-related factors. These ranged from stresses caused by farming's seasonality, to workload and planning issues, acute stock crises and mounting paperwork demands. However, farmers were particularly concerned by extrinsic factors, such as the increased regulation of farming,

competitive forces, and negative portrayals of farmers in the media. Farmers also took on the major burden in terms of worrying about finances and the future of farms, factors that could complicate their retirement decisions.

By contrast, family farm workers, including farmers' wives and farmers' adult sons (and occasionally daughters), often lacked autonomy in the way that they worked. Their workloads and patterns tended to be managed by the principal farmer, and most were financially dependent upon their husband or father. Consequently work-related aspects of farming, such as workload issues and lack of control over these, were more important aspects of family workers' farming stress. These had consequences for their physical health, including exhaustion and lack of sleep, back problems and headaches, as well as impinging upon their mental well being, in terms of losing their temper (particularly men) and, in extreme circumstances, depression. Stock crises could hit them particularly hard, since there was often an extended emotional bond between them and their animals, and interviewees frequently complained of "*feeling down*" following these events. Similar issues were matters of concern for employed farm workers.

More specifically, in recent years paperwork demands have increased for farmers' wives, who have largely been responsible for farm housekeeping, and this has provided a major cause of stress. Wives also took on a pressure that was less easy to articulate, that of emotional labour for their families: worrying about their husbands' and families' psychological welfare and broader health. These stresses had impacts for their own health in terms of anxiety, and sometimes also depression.

Issues relating to the transfer and ownership of family farms were of particular concern to younger farmers, who often had little control over this process and relied upon their fathers' goodwill. This could keep second generation farmers in a position of extended economic dependency, well beyond the point when they would have expected to be making important decisions about their work, and caused a great deal of worry among younger farmers, which was sometimes compounded by difficult or abusive relationships.

### **7.1.2 What are the differences in terms of different types of farms?**

Both the type and size of farming enterprises had an important impact on the nature of farming stresses that interviewees reported.

There was a strong sense in which livestock farming was inherently stressful, due to: the constant demands of tending to animals; busy and vulnerable times, such as lambing and calving; emotional attachment to stock that had been with the family for a long time; the threat of disease; and the unpredictability of the work. Interviewees often commented that livestock farming offered less opportunity to reschedule the ordering of tasks in ways that suited them better, since its demands were often non-negotiable. Recent crises like BSE and FMD had provided a particularly acute source of stress for livestock farmers, which had affected their longer-term financial welfare, as well as the shock of responding to the immediate outbreak. There was also evidence that particular types of farming, such as livestock farming, had been more vulnerable to market forces in recent years, and had become less financially viable.

Arable farming had its own causes of stress, including unpredictable weather conditions, and the short window of opportunity within which key activities had to be completed and labour organised in order to provide for the following year's fortunes. This could be particularly challenging when farmers relied upon contractors at key times, such as during harvesting, since multiple local farms often competed for the same labour force which they wanted to book simultaneously in order to ensure the best farming product.

By contrast, mixed farmers had the stress of balancing these different demands, possibly with conflicting timetables, at the same time as responding to unforeseen circumstances. Added to this, paperwork and regulatory demands were heightened for mixed farmers, who had to maintain dual systems, both of which might be complex and have conflicting deadlines. As more livestock-only farmers have moved towards mixed farming as a way of assuaging some of the uncertainties of stock prices, these kinds of stresses have increasingly become an issue.

In terms how farms' sizes affect the stress experienced within them, families working on smaller farms were more likely to be juggling roles and unable to afford to buy in external help, and for them workload stress was more of an issue. Complying with paperwork demands was also compromised for smaller farmers who were ruled on a day-to-day basis by demands of their farm, and had little labour flexibility to enable them to continue to meet administrative demands if faced with a farming crisis. Indeed administrative demands were often incompatible with their farming livelihoods. Conversely, larger enterprises were more likely to be on regular inspection lists, and consequently had to ensure that their more complex businesses complied meticulously with regulation. Farmers often commented on inspections being stressful times, because they feared being penalised for an oversight and because they felt the tone of these was often quite adversarial.

Those working in farms in areas hit by stock crises like BSE and FMD faced a rather different set of anxieties to those outside quarantined areas, and the FMD crisis in particular was often talked about as the single most stressful time that farming communities had been through. However, an important division was not so much between affected and non-affected farms, as between affected and neighbouring farms, since the latter missed out on subsequent welfare schemes, yet still bore the brunt of the economic downturn in local livestock farming's fortunes.

An issue of particular concern for family-run farms has been that those working as part of a family workforce often lack the employment rights of permanent employees, such as sick pay and leave entitlements. Aside from the work-life balance issues which this raises, there are also health and safety risks, particularly if family workers feel compelled to work excessively long hours, through exhaustion and possibly illness.

### **7.1.3 Farming and stress: a work-related issue?**

This research has highlighted a complicated web of factors that together make farming a particularly (or potentially) stressful occupation. In reality these may occur on their own, consecutively or simultaneously, although for analytic purposes they have been distinguished in terms of intrinsic, extrinsic and work-related factors, as well as broader pressures faced by farming communities, such as family problems and financial difficulties. Clearly, in terms of adapting stress management techniques, it is the work-related factors of farming stress concerning its organisation that are most important to understand. However, external agencies are also likely to have an influence over extrinsic factors, which have been a particular cause of stress for principal farmers, the major decision-makers on farms.

The stress experienced by farmers, farmers' families and other farm workers is directly related to their work to a very large extent, and has qualitatively changed for the worse in recent years. Furthermore, work-related aspects of farming stress affect everyone who works on farms, both the visible and more unseen farm workers, and must therefore be a matter of urgent policy priority. The linkages that interviewees particularly made between work-related aspects of farming work and physical problems (although these also encompassed mental strains) suggests that policy which addresses the more stressful aspects of farming work will have a measurable



impact upon health, for example, in terms of doctors' visits and industrial accidents. By contrast, stress that was manifested in terms of mental strain, more often stemmed from a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of farming work, and from the cumulative effects of work pressures, and requires a more integrated policy response.

In terms of the ways in which stress is directly related to the work of farming, as explored in chapter five, these include: particular farming practices; workload and organisation issues; pressures connected to different types of farming; mounting paperwork demands; and issues concerning family farms and acquisition. Of these, paperwork and workload issues emerged as the single greatest causes of stress, although many of these factors were also interrelated. Appendix 5 illustrates some of the key relationships between different types of farming and work-related stress factors. This table broadly ranks types of work-related stressors in order of significance, although notably it was the combination of problems at particular times which informed the intensity of stress experienced by interviewees. Furthermore, these factors are further mediated by individuals' role on farms, and by the type and size of farm enterprises.

#### **7.1.4 What are the main flashpoints and risk groups?**

While degrees of stress were distributed right across farming communities, the research identified a number of circumstances and groups of individuals who were particularly identified with farming stress. These included:

- Livestock farmers, who have H&S risks in terms of the long working hours required by the type of farming, and personal injuries associated with handling stock (particularly alone, as is increasingly the case).
- Isolated farmers who lack anyone to share concerns and workload with. Isolation entails both physical isolation, in terms of farming in remote locations, and social isolation, for example, among divorced, widowed or single farmers.
- Farmers working in a manual role late in life, when their health may be less robust, and which may be compromised by continued occupational demands.
- People working on small farms, who are more likely to have heavy workloads.

And circumstances:

- Agricultural crises like FMD, when particular farming communities are under acute stress and may lack support.
- Busy times of the farming calendar, when resources will be stretched to a maximum and there will be little room for flexibility, such as lambing, calving, silage making and harvesting.
- Paperwork deadlines, when farmers may be struggling to make submissions, while balancing these with agricultural demands.

Notably, however, it tended to an accumulation of issues that created the greatest degrees of pressure and occupational stress among farming communities.

#### **7.1.5 What coping strategies are most effective?**

A major aspect of the support that farming communities relied upon was having trusted people to talk to, including (ideally) their partner and broader family, other farmers, and a range of non-farming friends. Notably, talking to others did not have to consist of soul-baring to be useful in terms of dealing with stress and practical support, and might include socialising combined with other activities, such as going to market, church, the pub and getting involved in agricultural groups. The size of interviewees' networks was less important than the quality of the support

received through them, in terms of their value in enabling farming communities to cope with stressful situations.

It was the combination of social networks and individuals' personal resources – their response to difficulties – that formed the basis of their coping strategies. A broad distinction emerged between people who responded to problems more reactively by dedicating themselves to their work, hoping to work their way through stressful times, and those who planned ahead, prioritised and took a longer-term approach to problem solving. The latter were generally more successful in dealing with agricultural stress, and these differences were related to material resources, personality factors, and attitudes passed down through families (one aspect of their social capital). Key differences between the circumstances and strategies of interviewees who were more or less vulnerable to farming stress are illustrated in Appendix 6. Particular risk triggers occurred when individuals experienced factors in multiple dimensions (such as debt and geographical isolation), or had several factors (or a severe lack, such as no support) in a single dimension.

The research indicated that there was a major issue about stigma in farming communities in terms of asking for help, which was related to issues of pride and self-sufficiency. This works to the detriment of broadening the resources that farmers can access to help them through stressful times. Consequently a great deal of support is simply not reaching many of those most in need.

## **7.2 EXISTING PATTERNS OF SUPPORT SERVICE USE**

The non-standardised organisational context of farming poses a challenge in terms of the application of traditional stress management techniques. However, where farmers had sought advice through channels such as consultants or agricultural support groups, they had found value in learning new strategies that would help them to manage better. Consequently, if some of the barriers to seeking help can be overcome, then this might be one route through which stress management could be offered. There is likely to be an important role here for a range of colleges and community education facilities to maximise access to a diverse potential client group.

A very common theme among interviewees was that they felt there was little in practical terms that could be done to moderate their stress, and the suggestions that were made were often high-level and conceptual. However, this is not to say that the onus should rest upon farming communities to help themselves in accessing help and taking on stress management techniques. There are many ways in which a range of organisations could together develop a programme of support that would be likely to radically transform the quality of farming communities' occupational experiences and lessen their stress-related experiences. Some of these are discussed below.

**Local forms of support** that were being, or had in the past been, used by interviewees included: local bank managers; NFU secretaries; the TFA; local churches; local vets; local support and interest groups; local branches of the Farm Crisis Network; local GPs; Farming Connect; Farm (of which there was a particular presence in Devon); personal accountants or consultants; and solicitors. To some extent there was an issue about paid-for versus voluntary entitlement, with a sense that interviewees felt more comfortable asking for and had greater expectations of services that they had purchased. While locally based support organisations were more frequently used than national ones, local support sometimes raised the issue of confidentiality. There was also an issue about when are people were in 'enough' difficulty to warrant contacting an organisation. The research provided significant evidence that some interviewees were aware

of support being available, but of not feeling like their problems had got sufficiently bad (“*crunch time*”) to get in touch with relevant agencies. Support organisations are likely to have more success if people approach them before problems have become entrenched, so this strategy was to some extent self-defeating. A strong message that providers therefore need to be presenting is that people should not wait for a crisis before seeking advice.

**National support services** tended to be used less frequently, if at all by interviewees. However, a number of sources of potential support were identified as being the kind of organisations that could provide (or had provided) help with farming stress. These included: Farmers for Action; the Samaritans, ADAS; the Agricultural Training Board; the Milk Marketing Board; the Addington Fund (provided financial support to farming communities during FMD); DEFRA helplines, the Cereals Authority; the Milk Development Council; the Farming Wildlife Advisory Group; the RSPB; English Nature; the Countryside Landowners’ Association; the National Federation of Young Farmers’ Clubs; and the Rural Development Scheme.

Whilst effective networking will be an essential part of any stress management strategy that is applied to agriculture, it is possible to make broad intervention distinctions in terms of a number of roles. These are explored below in terms of HSE, government, and broader support functions. It is clear that a number of initiatives are already underway which are likely to address some of the stress factors identified in this report, some of which are highlighted here.

### **7.3 HSE’S ROLE**

It was often difficult for interviewees to identify a role that they wanted the HSE to be taking, mainly because it was felt that government agencies should be working together and building upon existing work in the field. Interviewees generally questioned whether one organisation could make the necessary difference on stress. Many failed to identify clear boundaries between the HSE and broader government, including DEFRA. This may work to the advantage of policy development in this field, particularly as the visibility of too many agencies was felt to add confusion over support roles. Notably, joined-up services with single points of contact/lead agencies, reflecting local characteristics, has also been found to be a popular model for other groups, such as in terms of older people’s support services (Parry *et al.*, 2004).

The HSE’s position at the start of this project was one of recognition of a level of suspicion from farming communities, and correspondingly it was open to the idea of delivering its messages via a multiplicity of channels, such as through healthcare trusts. One of the key challenges for the future is how it balances its enforcement and advisory roles within agricultural communities, and whether new strategy will be required to facilitate these responsibilities.

Credibility for the HSE’s work outside of its traditional regulatory role will rest upon word-of-mouth, so publicity of initiatives and their quality on the ground will be of crucial importance to their effectiveness and success. Some key challenges are set out below.

#### **7.3.1 Image and role:**

Notably, interviewees from farming communities overwhelmingly talked about HSE in terms of its regulatory role and the contact they had with officials through farm inspections, although this tended to be less of an issue for smaller family-run farms which operated more informal employment arrangements. A common theme among those interviewed was a call for routine HSE contact with farming communities to be ‘light’, as opposed to the ‘heaviness’ that was

currently felt to characterise inspection. Farmers talked a great deal about a culture of criminalisation: an assumption that farmers were cheating the system and were concealing poor farming practices. One farmer went as far as to suggest that inspectors might be considered to have failed if they did not identify any faults on farms during their inspections. These kinds of concerns made for stressful contact with the HSE. Interviewees called for a less confrontational approach, and for more understanding and tolerant relations to be established. These are also likely to be more conducive to a heightened educative and improvement role (see below). One key informant reflected that this kind of shift in emphasis might start by addressing the attitude of officers that came out to view farms: he wanted to see these being more sympathetic and less foreboding. He felt that this kind of attitude would be likely to make farmers more cooperative in inspections, a perspective that was shared by a number of key informants. Another key informant, who was involved in running a stress-related helpline, explained that calls were often prompted by an inspection. There was also a suggestion that the frequency of inspections had become unsustainable for some of the larger farms, and took farmers away from the work of farming. Linked to this, a key informant argued for greater sensitivity to agricultural calendars in the timing of inspections, pointing to a recent HSE campaign to check agricultural vehicles as having caused high levels of stress among local farming communities because it had coincided with harvest time. Countering this, however, the same key informant emphasised that more recently he had received less complaints about the HSE from his farming clients than in the past, and there was recognition that concentrating upon “*the worst offenders*” was a useful approach, and that recent safety campaigns in the farming press had been “*hard hitting*” and effective.

In terms of personnel, a number of farmers and farmers’ wives commented on the proliferation and lack of continuity in the officials who visited them, an aspect that they lamented since repeated contact in the past had enabled inspectors to build up knowledge of individual farms which streamlined the process. A secondary issue was that personnel (from both HSE and DEFRA) were increasingly perceived as lacking agricultural backgrounds, which reduced farmers’ confidence in them. A number of interviewees also commented that officials tended to be younger, and were perceived as “*doing time*” in the role as part of their career progression, rather than building up the kind of lifetime knowledge about farmers’ needs that they had in the past. Regardless of whether this is the case, it remains true that to build productive relations with farming communities it is important that officials have experience working with the industry, or alternatively that they receive training which provides for a good understanding of the problems faced by farmers, in order to be demonstrably knowledgeable on agricultural issues. One interviewee suggested that former farmers would make suitable candidates for this kind of role, and this might be an area in which alternative retirement strategies could be developed.

### **7.3.2 Regulation**

Several interviewees were concerned about the physical side-effects associated with using particular chemicals in their farming work, particularly when use was ongoing. One interviewee actually felt chemicals should be more tightly regulated and any chemical found to be problematic should be pulled off the market to maximise safety protection, particularly in terms of vulnerable farm workers.

### **7.3.3 Training**

It was suggested that the HSE could have an enhanced educative function. Many of the older farmers had by-passed the agricultural college route that has become more commonplace among younger farmers, and while a great many business skills were picked up on the job, there

remained a role for managerial-focused training. DEFRA's recent Learning Skills and Knowledge Review will provide a valuable source in identifying the scope of need for business skills among rural enterprises. With the emphasis increasingly upon farming as a business, there is undoubtedly a greater need for affordable and flexible business training for agricultural communities. This could help plug existing knowledge gaps, provide farmers with greater confidence in managing their administrative workload, and would be valuable in enabling farmers to rethink the organisation of labour on their farms. Training might include stress management techniques, although it is also likely that stress would be assuaged by directly tackling these organisational farming issues. There is also a role for ongoing advice and support with business planning post-training.

In more traditional terms, there remained confusion on some health and safety issues, and appeared to be a significant element of unmet need in this context among farming communities. Reflecting time demands upon farmers, it would be beneficial for training packages to be made available in flexible ways, for example, via distance-learning or trainers who could attend farms, as well as in traditional formats at local venues. In this latter context, the opportunity to mix with other farmers would undoubtedly have additional positive consequences in terms of exchanging ideas and minimising isolation. The Vocation Qualification currently being developed by the HSE working with the farming unions, which will provide H&S-based training for workers throughout the agricultural industry, provides an example of this kind of initiative. The HSE might also want to consider a range of incentives that could be attached to training, in order to counteract some of the stresses caused by time pressures in attending training for farmers.

#### **7.3.4 Guidance and Information**

In less formal terms, there was support for the HSE to develop its guidance role, and a perception that it had the established expertise to be a first port of call for farmers to contact to obtain information, for example, on safety regulation. There was evidence of some confusion over existing H&S regulation which this kind of role could address: for example, a number of interviewees were unclear on whether helmets were required to be worn on quad bikes, which are now used frequently, particularly on the larger farms. There is an issue in terms of how complex H&S information is best communicated to farming communities who may be very time-poor and unlikely to proactively seek it out. The provision of information also needs to take into account basic skills and ESOL needs amongst farming communities. Some interviewees commented that they wanted H&S information to be presented in a simplified format that was easily and quickly accessible. This would have identifiable benefits in terms of maximising farm safety.

In terms of workload issues, which this research has demonstrated have clear impacts upon farming stress and probably also in terms of accidents, the HSE would be well-positioned to develop resources and advisory services to help farmers develop alternative working structures within their current budgets. There was some evidence of farmers paying consultants to perform this kind of role, albeit perhaps later than would have been ideal. Any kind of free service would be likely to be well received and to have an important role in counteracting pressures relating to workplace organisation. It would also be well-placed to provide support and advice to vulnerable groups; for example, over a third of fatal farm injuries occur amongst those over age 65<sup>9</sup>. The HSE has already developed a series of management standards for work-related stress<sup>10</sup>, and the challenge for policy-makers now will be to develop ways in which these may be applied to less formalised organisations, such as the typical family farm.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/fatal05.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>

Current HSE policy initiatives have included Safety Awareness Days (whereby participating attendees are taken off inspection lists for a year). The few interviewees who seemed to be aware of, or who had participated in, these broadly welcomed them. A key informant, who had been involved in a local Safety Awareness Day, observed that attendance had been high, suggesting that there was a demand for them. The HSE had invited other local partners to take part in this event and to distribute information, which the key informant felt had been a good example of joined-up working. Such initiatives need to take into account the time issues pertinent to smaller farmers (who are likely to have the most intensive support needs), and the difficulty they may have attending one-off events. If these kinds of events are to engage farming communities they need to be held regularly and at multiple venues, with accompanying documentation to support farmers who have to cancel at the last minute.

The success of the HSE's guidance role will inevitably be linked to overall perceptions of it within farming communities, which this research has suggested remain strongly tied to its enforcement work. For example, a number of interviewees explained that they felt they had a 'good' relationship with the HSE if contact was minimal, interpreting this as evidence that they were complying with health and safety requirements and required little monitoring. Clearly, such a perception may preclude farmers from making use of the HSE's guidance services, which suggests that there is room to expand publicity in terms of what this role can offer agricultural communities.

## **7.4 GOVERNMENT'S ROLE**

### **7.4.1 Image and role**

In terms of its broader role, government was often felt to be in a position to take decisive action to streamline the number of agencies regulating agriculture. Many farmers found current arrangements confusing, creating too much work for farmers, and discouraging innovation. Part of this issue was about a need for joined-up government, and for cross-departmental contradictions to be identified and eliminated.

A common view was that DEFRA tended to be associated with red tape rather than political leadership, a role that sat in tension with the expectations that farming communities had for their Ministry. Political uncertainty could provide an added cause of stress for farming communities, and many wanted rapid and decision action from DEFRA on issues like BSE and FMD, and greater direction and support from government more broadly.

### **7.4.2 Regulation**

One of the most frequently cited policy recommendations, and certainly the one that was made with the most vigour, was that the situation with milk prices had become unsustainable for dairy farmers and that some form of price regulation was urgently required. As described in section 5.4.3 the monopoly of the food market by a small number of large supermarkets had enabled them to force down the price that farmers receive for milk, to such an extent that dairy farmers were often working at a loss. This was particularly frustrating for dairy farmers as they could do little to counteract this fundamental disadvantage. The point was made repeatedly that if farmers were able to achieve a fair price for their milk, that a lot of their other stress issues would be dissipated or reduced.

There was also some support for tighter regulation on imports, which it was felt would creating a more level playing field for farmers, but which would also have health and safety benefits. A

specific suggestion was that import controls be tightened on meat, a domestic agricultural product which had received particular scrutiny in the context of recent stock crises.

In terms of issues such as environmental regulation, one suggestion was for a move from penalty culture to an incentive-driven one: for example, providing financial inducements for farmers to take a lead on innovation and good practice.

### **7.4.3 Paperwork**

Paperwork pressures provided one of the major sources of stress for farmers and farmers' wives, and there was substantial support for the government to take a proactive role in streamlining and simplifying administrative systems. In part this was a language issue, in that instructions needed to be clear and uncomplicated. Underpinning this were basic skills issues, but the point applies equally for farmers operating in time-poor workplaces, as for example, small farmers increasingly found themselves. Farmers commented that signposting on forms was often over-complex. Difficulties with paperwork were exacerbated by post-submission problems and mistakes made by administrators, and there was a strong feeling that DEFRA needed to lead by example in its return and quality of paperwork dealings with farmers.

There may be some scope for developing computer programmes that ease administrative burdens, for example in terms of Single Farm Payments. However, many farmers remain uncomfortable with IT and reliance upon computerised submission would be likely to increase their stress. Paperwork resources therefore need to be multi-dimensional. One alternative might be to offer an option of telephone completion, with documentation to be returned to farmers for checking and signing, in the way that motor insurance and many mortgage applications now operate.

While interviewees were in favour of telephone support for practical difficulties with paperwork completion, the helplines associated with particular administrative systems sometimes came in for criticism. In particular, it was frustrating not to be able to easily access someone who could answer queries, and farmers were strongly in favour of a single point of contact for administrative support, and for helplines to be easier to navigate. Greater resources directed at helplines, including resources invested in briefing staff and in identifying points of contact for specific issues, would be likely to support farmers' efforts to meet submission deadlines.

There was also strong support for government to take action to coordinate the various administrative systems so that farmers did not have to duplicate their efforts, a policy direction that is currently underway with the piloting of the Whole Farm Appraisal system. This would have particular benefits for mixed farmers, for whom the administrative burden could be particularly onerous. One major pressure on farmers was that submission deadlines sometimes clashed with natural agricultural calendars, and there was support for systems to be tailored to the seasonal demands of farming.

There was also a need for some degree of flexibility on deadlines, to take into account the unpredictable nature of farming, and the fact that small farmers in particular will have little leeway in terms of reconfiguring their labour supply to respond to crises, but that an imposition of automatic penalties is likely to heighten existing stress. Finally, support for farmers with literacy difficulties needs to be robust and easy to identify. This is in part a presentational issue, and now that departments are obliged to offer support for disabled people, there is greater scope to discreetly cover other needs under the general heading of 'special needs'.

Chapter six has shown that farmers' first contact with support agencies often involved practical issues (such as contacting helplines for support in completing forms), and the quality of the support received at this time informed their subsequent willingness to discuss broader problems and to trust outside agencies. Consequently it is vital that this first contact meets with a satisfactory outcome.

#### **7.4.4 Communication**

The research uncovered evidence of a feeling that communications had broken down between the government and farming communities. Common themes were that government spoke to agricultural communities only indirectly, were disdainful of their interests, and that there was a greater need for consultation on agricultural policy. One way of addressing this problem would be to develop an intermediary role between government and farmers, a role that ADAS was previously perceived as filling.

There was a strong feeling that farming communities wanted more information on the direction of future policy and regulation detail, particularly as farmers ideally needed to plan several years in advance. For example, more information was needed on CAP reform and Single Farm Payments, and farmers commented that if they were forewarned with this knowledge, they could be adapting their farming practices accordingly and allaying future stress.

#### **7.4.5 Education**

A popular suggestion in terms of combating farming's negative public image was an integrated series of education programmes, aimed at informing and empowering consumers. This was an aspect of government policy which was felt to have lapsed in recent years (the Milk Marketing Board was often referenced in this kind of role), and which was evident in other countries. Education programmes might include activities through the NFU, national curriculum, DEFRA, and supermarkets, and also be aimed at educating parents in terms of diet, and include school visits to farms. Farmers felt that such actions would have positive outcomes for British farming *per se*, but would also go some way towards tackling demoralisation within the agricultural industry.

The research uncovered evidence that a number of people had moved into farming following family pressures, a decision that they to some extent regretted. At the time of time critical career decisions young people had often lacked professional careers advice on alternative options. This is a clear area in which the government could have an impact, focusing on the quality of career advice in rural areas, perhaps combined with placement schemes to give young people a 'taster' of a range of occupations. This is likely also to have benefits for young women who want to farm, but who are prevented from taking on family farms by gendered transferral processes.

#### **7.4.6 Specific initiatives**

One issue that emerged was the difficulty of retirement for many older farmers, who lack the pension and housing security to leave work. While working after state pension age may be desirable on some levels (for example, in terms of maintaining the intrinsic satisfactions derived from paid work and in maximising occupational knowledge and transfer: Barnes *et al.*, 2004; Smeaton and McKay, 2003), there was also evidence of farmers working on beyond the point when they wanted to retire, with negative impacts for their health, farm safety, and for the career progression and financial security of the next generation of farmers. Government



schemes offering retirement support, such as the Age Positive campaign, would help address these issues.

## **7.5 BROADER SUPPORT FUNCTIONS**

### **7.5.1 The language of support**

A repeated theme of this research has been the stigma attached to not being able to cope, and the difficulties that some farmers had with asking for help and with labels like 'stress'. While longer-term educative work may provide one way around this, in the short-term if support is to be provided to the large proportion of farming communities who would currently benefit from it, agencies will need to address these terminology issues, avoiding labels like 'stress' and 'counselling' even when these provide the best description for what they do. One approach that has been successful in other sectors, is for organisations to provide multi-functional support, so that the purpose of access is not apparent to outsiders (for instance Surestart groups for children, which offer health and community resources alongside advice on issues such as domestic violence). It is also important that services' marketing messages emphasise the need for farming communities to be proactive and not to let problems build up before they come forward to access help.

In terms of the stigma that farming communities attached to mental illness, there is major work to be done educating younger generations about these issues, which will be fundamental to breaking down support access barriers.

### **7.5.2 Reaching farming communities**

Reflecting the large proportion of interviewees who were not accessing any form of formal support, due to both a lack of knowledge and to stigma issues, there is a need for support organisations to take a more proactive role in letting farming communities know about the help they offer. However, there has to be a recognition that trust-building is important in working with farming communities, and that very often deep-rooted or emotionally-based problems will only be discussed with people with whom there is an established relationship. Support then, may need to be offered on a repeated basis, and agencies that provide support on practical issues should also be equipped to signpost clients to broader resources.

In part, this is simply an issue about publicity; large amounts of appropriate support are already in existence (albeit under-funded). However, the research uncovered significant evidence that farming communities lacked knowledge of what kind of help was available to them, and how they could go about accessing it. Services, or publicity for services, need to be made available in the places that farmers go, which could include markets, agricultural shows, and village pubs.

An area for focus to emerge from the research is the potential for targeting women as gatekeepers to their families' health, but also in terms of a group who may at present be particularly isolated and unsupported.

### **7.5.3 Delivering support together**

A common view among key informants, who provided insight on higher-level strategy, was that the HSE would benefit from working alongside existing local organisations, in a sense riding on the back of their credibility: "*a joined-up approach*". It was felt that events could play a useful role, and to some extent you needed "*to chuck money at the problem.*" However, the HSE's credibility would depend upon word-of-mouth trust, and consequently it lacked the presence to

act alone in tackling stress. It would be vital to develop effective local networking with the leaders in particular areas, in particular, with the RSIN and local NFU group secretaries, as well as more proactively with healthcare trusts.

Another argument for effective networking is to minimise the risk of duplicating efforts, something which a number of key informants felt would inevitably happen if multiple agencies were approaching stress issues individually. One key informant spoke of “*a lot of reinventing the wheel*”, and felt that by working together and building on the support already available, vital public funds could be redirected in more useful ways. In part this may be an issue about a need for evaluation of support services or of some kind of agreed public standards.

As this report has demonstrated, farming stress has a range of impacts. Consequently a range of interventions will be appropriate to complement those already in existence.

## APPENDIX 1 KEY INFORMANT TOPIC GUIDE

Outline the research, including:

- Key questions (organisational, area issues, farming and stress, policy, reaching farming communities);
- 3 key groups covered;
- Areas and different types of farming;
- Time frame.

Housekeeping issues.

### **Background**

When established, by whom.

Organisation's aims

Remit in terms of stress (if it has one): how did this come about? When? In response to any particular series of events/demand?

Relationships/joint working with other organisations on stress

Funding

Representation

Activities

Support to farmers – practical resources, emotional support, etc. Targeting? Coverage of farmers/farm workers/farmers' families?

Local links

Specialist groups – e.g. women's stress network

### **Farmers & Stress**

Area questions – probing local labour market, presence of farming, local factors and recent change

What are the particular issues for farmers/farm workers/farmers' families here?

General stress questions

Tell me who you work with most – farmers/farm workers/families, etc.

Can you describe the sorts of day-to-day stress faced by farmers in recent years?

Has this changed over recent years? How and why

Do stress levels vary by type of farm? Region? Size? Farm owners vs. farm managers vs. farm workers vs family members?

Do farmers/farm workers/farmers' wives/husbands describe themselves as stressed? If they do not tell you they are stressed, what signals tell you that a farmer is stressed? What sorts of effects of stress do you see? (e.g. suicide, ill health, substance dependencies, domestic violence, bankruptcy, etc.)

Ideas on the ways stress should be measured stress.

What proportion of stressed farmers would you say make use of formal sources of support? Is it particular sorts of people that do this? Why?

Do support networks make a difference? (In what way? What about people on their own?)

Has the lifestyle become inherently stressful? (e.g. pressure to diversify) In what way?  
What about the work of farming itself? What kind of outside influences make it worse?

What are the kinds of things that can make farming stressful on an ongoing basis, as opposed to the more acute, high-profile sorts of stresses (e.g. Foot and Mouth outbreak)? Are particular times of year more stressful?

To what extent do you think the kinds of stress faced by farming communities is an occupational issue (rather than, say, an economic one)? Do you think it's appropriate to think about stress in these kinds of terms?

How do you think these sorts of issues are affecting younger people's decisions about whether to go into farming?

To what extent are these issues specific to the UK, as opposed to being common agricultural occupational experiences?

Examples of the sort of problems farmers talk to you about.

What kinds of support have farmers been telling you they want? (occupational? Social? Practical?)

### **Policy**

What kind of perceptions would you say the farming community have of the HSE?

What do you think the HSE can add in addressing these issues?

Do you think it is an appropriate organisation to be taking a lead? What kind of role would you like it to be playing?

What could other organisations do to support farming communities?

What about government more broadly? Do you think they should be doing more? What?

Reaching farming communities

Advice on presenting the research to them & enlisting trust.

Reaching individual farms in a specified area

Migrant and seasonal labour patterns – how can these be accessed? (basic skills, ESOL and lack of permanent residence issues?) Would these sorts of groups identify occupationally in terms of farming? Other hard to reach groups?

Advice on other representatives and organisations to be consulted.

Any other issues that you think the research needs to cover.

Thanks for time.

## APPENDIX 2 FARMING COMMUNITIES TOPIC GUIDE

### INTRODUCTION

1. My name is [ ] and I work for the Policy Studies Institute. This is an independent research institute and is not part of any government department. [show letter where necessary].
2. Refer to yellow information sheet. We are interviewing farmers about their working lives, what they have found difficult or stressful about farming and what things could be done to make life better for them. I'm going to cover a number of topics
  - a) The farm and what your farming work involves
  - b) Your background and how you feel about farming
  - c) Your health and the effects of farming
3. Talk through the green information sheet.

Anything you tell me is confidential and all views will be reported anonymously so no individual will be identified in our report.

Most of these questions are open-ended, so feel free to say as much or as little as you want on them.

Is it okay to tape our conversation? This is just because it's difficult to take the sorts of detailed notes I'd like, and it won't be heard by anyone outside the research team. All tapes are given an anonymous number and the HSE won't be told who we've spoken to at any point. [note interview can only go ahead once permission has been established for taping]

4. Ask interviewee to initial and sign consent form.

Do you have any questions before I begin?

First of all I need to ask you some quick background questions

Interviewers to record:

Name:

Label:

Date:

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Marital status:

### Note to interviewers

The questions that follow are generalised and the phrasing will need to be tailored depending if it is the farmer his wife, a worker or another family member being interviewed.

## Section 1: The farm

1. I want to start by asking you about the farm

*Tell me a bit about the farm*

Probe: *Size*

*Type of farming*

*Diversification?*

2. Do you (*does your father husband wife boss etc*) own this farm?

*Probe on how long? Generations in the family or new acquisition?*

*If interviewee a family member probe on whether they have part ownership*

Are you (husband/wife/boss, etc.) a tenant? For how long? Who owns the land? How does the tenancy relationship work?

*What are your conditions of employment?*

*If interviewee is a farm worker, probe on employment relationship*

3. *How long have you been working here?* [check re. family relationship]

4. *Has the farm changed in the past ten years?* [How?]

5. *Give me an example of the work that you do on the farm on a day-to-day basis.*

Probes:

*Seasonal variations*

*How many hours a week? Full/part time*

6. *How is the rest of the work on the farm divided up?*

Probe: *wife/partners/workers/family - division of labour*

7. What periods of the year do you enjoy it most? [Why?]

8. When are most difficult periods of the year for you? [Why?]

## Section 2: Farming history

1. Tell me a bit about your background

When did you start farming?

*Probes* How old were you when you first did farm work?

Were your parents farmers?

Did you grow up on a farm?

2. When you were at school did you think you would be a farmer?

*Probe* Length of time in education and qualifications GCSEs/O levels

Did you study farming at an agricultural college? [Where?]

### Note to interviewers:

**Need to know whether they dropped out of education early enough to have literacy issues. If so, it would be interesting to probe (tactfully) on these issues later in the interview, for example, when they talk about filling in forms.**

3. What about your husband/wife/partner  
Is she/he from a farming family?  
Does she/he work on the farm? [*probe*]
4. Have you worked on other farms? Tell me a bit about these  
*Probe on:* farm type, size and nature of work
5. Do you work on other farms in addition to this one?  
*Probe on what work they do (same or different)*  
*Probe on where they are in relation to each other – pick up on relative distance and significance of area issues*

**Note to interviewers: this is an important question for farm workers - we need to understand the degree of fragmentation of their working lives.**

### **Section 3: Feelings about farming as an occupation**

1. What do you enjoy most about farming? [*probe on extent to which intrinsic enjoyment is linked to the type of farming*]
2. What causes you the most problems? What do you find difficult?  
What makes your life difficult?
3. Do you think farmers (you) have a different attitude to their (your) work to people in other occupations you know about [e.g. shopkeepers, doctors, vets] Why do you think that is?

**Note to interviewers: this might be a little to abstract but its is trying to get at what aspects are specific to farming what might be true of other occupations particularly those who are self employed**

4. What has changed about farming since you first started?
5. How were you affected by crises like Foot and Mouth and BSE?  
Did these change the way you felt about farming?

**Note to interviewers: this may be a big issue in some areas, e.g. Devon, and you may need to spend some time discussing this.**

6. Have there been any other crises for you in terms of running the farm/ farming?  
How has the changing nature of the countryside affected you personally? [*probe on loss of farming neighbours, urban/rural shift, rural development of lack of, right to roam, loss of rural services – transport, shows, Pos, GPs' surgeries*].
7. What proportion of your time would you say you spent on the business/administration side of farming? [*probe for change over recent years*]
8. How do you find out about and keep up to date with changes in farming? (e.g. legislative changes, farming practices, developments in agricultural technology, learning new skills)  
Do you find it difficult in any way to do this? (probe) What would make it easier?  
Probe on whether they have access to a computer (or desire this), how they use it for their work, and IT skill deficits.

**Note to interviewers: the HSE are very interested in issues around continuous professional development, and these responses will be useful for them in terms of policy development and the kinds of support they provide to farming communities.**

#### **Section 4: Finances**

1. Can I ask you about the financial side of farming?

**Note to interviewers: we are less interested in specific incomes than in the meanings behind these, so tailor questions if you anticipate them being delicate.**

Are you (is your partner) able to make a living from the farm/farming work?

How viable would you say farming work is financially these days?

How much money do you make/earn a year from the farm?

**Note to interviewers: farmers and farm workers will have quite different perspectives here. With farm workers, we need to get a picture of how they make a living - this will probably involve juggling various seasonal jobs or supplementing a main job with farming work in peak season.**

2. Do you get any subsidies/benefits? [What are these? Who does the claiming? How satisfied are you with the amount you receive?]
3. Do you know if you are getting all the subsidies you are entitled to?  
How do you manage with the DEFRA paperwork? [*probe* on any support, who provides this support, and the pressure of deadlines]
4. Are you involved in any other businesses? e.g. B and B, selling farm produce, tourism, etc?  
[*diversification practices*] [*probe on how they cope with the business end of this*]
5. Have you needed to get other paid work off the farm to supplement your income from farming?  
What do you do and how often? *Probe on seasonal work, probe on hours worked, how long they've been doing it, how they feel about the work.*  
How does this work out? [*probe re implications for stress, work-life balance, health*]

**Note to interviewers: these may be important questions for farmers' partners, who may make a substantial (possibly the larger) contribution to the household income through outside work – may sure you leave time for them.**

6. Do you think you have enough to manage on, or is it a struggle paying bills?  
Has this changed over the years? *Probe* on when, how & why this has happened?
7. (How) did Foot and Mouth affect you financially? [*for those affected, probe on whether things have returned to the pre-Foot & Mouth situation – there's evidence that these kind of crises can prompt a withdrawal from farming*]

How (has) your standard of living changed? [In what way?]



8. If for any reason you had to stop being a farmer/doing farming work, is there employment available locally that you could do? [*probe on type of work*]

What sort of work do you see yourself as qualified for?  
Or would you retrain/do something completely different?  
Is this something that you can see happening in the future?

9. Do other family members work off the farm to contribute? [*probe*]

### **Section 5: Relationships**

1. What do you do in your spare time? [*Probe on hobbies, social life.*] Do your friends tend to be other farmers?
2. How often do you see friends and family not connected with the farm in an average week or month? Would like to see more of friends and family or do you feel you have the right balance

**Note to interviewers: try and get a sense for the quality and depth of relationships – are friends and family a good source of day-to-day support? Also probe on context in which relationships are played out – do traditional sociable environments like the pub, church, market, play a role? Any evidence of growing isolation?**

3. What about relationships with (do you have any contact with) the large organisations that regulate farming?  
*Probe on banks, DEFRA, HSE.*

Are they easy to talk to/supportive?  
How often to you come into contact with them?

### **Section 6: Health and physical effects of farming**

1. Do you think farming affects you in any the following kinds of ways?

Probes:  
Lack of sleep  
Headaches  
Loosing temper/irritability  
Feeling down  
Back problems  
Intense tiredness  
Problems relaxing  
Forgetfulness  
Problems concentrating  
Worrying  
Low energy  
Drinking more than usual  
Arthritis  
Smoking/smoking more than usual

Would you say that farming affects your general well-being in any other ways that I haven't mentioned?

2. How many days would you say you've taken off sick from work in the past year?

**Note to interviewers: people may not take sick leave when needed due to pressures of self-employment, lack of employment conditions, etc. Try & pick up on this in terms of the time when people felt ill but still went to work.**

3. *Probe* on when and where they experience these symptoms i.e. are there particular triggers?

What do you think causes them?

*Probe* on whether they are connected with aspects intrinsic to farming:

- Long hours
- Seasonal variation [adverse weather]
- Isolation
- Coping with disease & loss of stock
- Mechanisation

*Or connected to:*

- Recent crises
- Changes in regulation procedures
- Financial problems [*need to get an idea of the role which finances play in stressing people out compared to other factors; how finances are related to concept of self-sufficiency and autonomy, ideas about being able to provide for family*]
- Work intensification [having to work harder for less reward]

*Probe on broader aspects of farming that might be stressful:*

- Changing legal & political framework (record-keeping demands)
- Competition (e.g. from overseas; competing with large-scale producers)
- Media image of farmers and farming.

**Note to interviewers: These questions draw upon traditional measures of occupation stress, and will give us a benchmark against the quantitative studies. They are more geared to those who don't have any autonomy over their work so may be inappropriate for farmers particularly those running the farm, but we need to be able to make this point. Please ask all questions probing on how often informants feel like this [always/almost always; about three-quarters of the time; about half of the time; about a quarter of the time; less often]**

- Do you ever feel that you have too much work to do?
- Do you ever feel that you have too little work to do?
- Does your job ever involve working to tight deadlines?
- Can you ever choose or change the order of your tasks or your method of working?
- When you need it, do you get enough help and support from the people in charge at work?

4. Do you think of yourself as someone who feels 'stressed' by their work? Why do you say that?

**Note to interviewers, this question may not work as people may not see themselves in these terms. It may be worth reframing it in terms of frustration, anxiety or work. However, note that not everyone you interview will be stressed, so don't labour the point.**

5. What do you do when you feel stressed/tired/ etc [*refer back to previous answer*]

**Note to interviewers: we are getting at coping strategies here. This is going to be particularly important in terms of policy development, so worth spending some time on this issue with informants who appear to be coping well with the stresses of farming.**

Do you get together with other farmers and talk about the problems? [*probe on whether these are informal meetings, or in the context of more institutionalised settings/networks*]

Do you talk to anyone about these issues? [*partner/family/friends/other farmers/support organisations*] [If not, need to probe on why?]

Have you seen/talked to other farmers about their experiences of stress? [*particularly worth probing here, as it may be that it's easier to talk about other people's experiences of stress, depression & so on than it is your own*]

*Need to probe on whether stress of work(where mentioned) has had a negative effect on their relationships, particularly with partner.*

### **Section 7: The future**

1. Do you think about the future? [Have you ever thought about leaving farming? How likely is it that this might happen? What would conceivably cause you to leave farming?]
2. Do you plan for the future? [How much of a role does farming play in your plans?]
3. What do you think will happen to your farm?
4. When do you plan to retire? [*probe on plans & how feel about retiring*] [in terms of retirement} What will you miss about farming? What won't you miss?
5. [If appropriate] Do you think your children will go into farming? How do you feel about this?

### **Section 8: Policy suggestions**

1. Who do you see as being the main providers of support services to the farming community? [*probe on local and national, formal & informal sources of support, as well as on who they think is entitled to help from these places*]
2. Have you used any kind of formal support in the past? [What did this involve? How did you feel about asking for help? How did you find out about it? What prompted you to ask for help? How helpful were they/it?] [*Probe on doctor, helplines, Rural Stress Network local rural support organisations*]

*[If they haven't accessed anything, we need to probe on whether this is because they don't need any support, or whether there are issues or barriers around asking for help - and what these are]*

3. What could the government, the HSE, or any other bodies do to make your life less stressful/easier?
4. Is there any other kind of support you'd like that you're not receiving at the moment? Who would you like to receive this from? [why?] [*probe on preferred access patterns*]

**Thank interviewee for participating**

**Give incentive and get signed receipt**

## APPENDIX 3 ETHICS COMMITTEE INFORMATION SHEETS

### Information sheet:

#### Research on farmers, farm workers and work related stress

The Policy Studies Institute (PSI), an independent research institute, has been asked by the Health and Safety Executive to carry out research on the stressful nature of the farming industry. This research is important because it will explore the kinds of problems faced by those in farming and agriculture and look at ways of developing the kinds of support which those in the business would find useful.

The research is taking place on a small selection of farms in 5 different areas of England and Wales: Powys, Lancashire, Lincolnshire and Devon and Hampshire. The aim is to compare the experiences of those working on different sizes and types of farm, from family businesses with a small cattle herd, to large crop-based agribusinesses. We are very interested in the experiences of all those working on the farm, from the owners and managers of farms, through to family members, and permanent, casual or seasonal workers. We are also interested in speaking to farmers who have diversified into secondary businesses, such as running bed and breakfasts or selling home-produced goods.

The research will consist of interviews with two-four people on each farm (where appropriate). The interviews will be depth interviews where farmers are given the chance to talk about their experiences rather than ticking boxes for a survey questionnaire. The questions being asked will cover a number of areas such as:

- Length of time a person had been in farming
- Nature of the work that a person carries out on the farm
- Seasonal variations in the nature of the work and hours
- Positive and negative aspects of the work
- Individuals' general health and well-being
- Whether they identify themselves as suffering from stress now or in the past
- The sorts of support they feel would be useful for farmers in the future.

Everything said in these interviews will be confidential. No details will be passed on to any commercial organisation and no-one we speak to will be identifiable in our research report. Each person we interview will receive a £20 gift in recognition of their time. Being a gift, no one needs to declare this in terms of any tax they may be paying or benefits that they might be receiving.

## **Information sheet**

### **Taking part in the research**

We ask interviewees to sign a consent form to say they have understood the purpose of the research and are willing to take part. If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable or worried about any aspects of the research you may wish to ask the interviewer to stop recording for a few minutes to discuss these and if necessary the interview can be terminated. You are under no obligation to provide any particular information and some questions will be more relevant to others than to you. Likewise if you have any questions after the interview your interviewer will provide you with their contact details so you can phone them with any questions you have. You can speak to the project manager at PSI, or you may want to speak to our funder, The Health and Safety Executive. All these details are provided below.

### **What happens to the data?**

Each interview we conduct will be recorded. The tapes are labelled with an anonymised number, not the name of the interviewee. The interviews are then transcribed and the transcripts analysed using qualitative research software in order to draw out differences in situations in people's experiences and views.

Where quotes from transcripts are used in the final report to illustrate points, these are anonymised. People are given fictitious names and any characteristics which might make them identifiable are changed. Only the research team at PSI have access to the tapes and transcripts. The PSI conducts social research for a range of charitable and government organisations. No information about interviewees is ever passed on or sold to commercial organisations. All tapes are destroyed at the end of the project.

### **Contact details**

PSI:  
Jane Parry                   \*\*\*\*\*

HSE:  
Anne Darvill               \*\*\*\*\*

## APPENDIX 4 CODING FRAMEWORK

### Coding framework

#### Free nodes

Adaptability  
Age  
Anger  
Balance  
Bachelor farmers  
Bereavement  
Basic skills issues  
Bureaucracy  
Choice and constraint  
Class issues  
Community  
Computers  
Crime and criminalisation  
Depression  
Divorce  
ESOL issues  
Fear  
Frustration  
Gender issues  
Getting older  
Habitus  
Holidays  
Hurt  
Incentive  
Inspection regimes  
Isolation  
Interview tone & circumstances  
Health crisis  
Labour process  
Lonely  
Loss  
Life-changing/unexpected events  
Making the best of it  
Marriage  
Masculinity  
Media treatment and public perception of farmers  
Mid term review  
Migrant labour  
Nostalgia  
Penalties  
Personal qualities  
Pets  
Political climate  
Pride and reputation





	Work ethic
Finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Income</li> <li>Assets</li> <li>Financial viability of farming</li> <li>Reinvestment</li> <li>Receipt of subsidies &amp; benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Claiming</li> <li>Paperwork and support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problems</li> </ul> </li> <li>Satisfaction</li> <li>Non-claiming</li> </ul> </li> <li>Debt</li> <li>Income from other businesses</li> <li>Non-farming income <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How this works</li> <li>From other family members</li> </ul> </li> <li>Financial comfort <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recent change</li> <li>Feelings about financial position</li> <li>Specific problems</li> <li>Coping</li> </ul> </li> <li>Financial effects of Foot &amp; Mouth (include compensation)</li> <li>Viable alternative occupations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retraining</li> <li>Likelihood of pursuing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leisure activities</li> <li>Voluntary work</li> <li>Friendships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With other farmers</li> <li>Social activities</li> <li>Market</li> </ul> </li> <li>Family</li> <li>Support</li> <li>Reciprocity</li> <li>Organisations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approachability</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical effects of farming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Long-standing conditions</li> </ul> </li> <li>Other health problems</li> <li>Indicators of stress</li> <li>Sick leave</li> <li>Causes of stress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intrinsic aspects of farming</li> <li>Extrinsic factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changes in recent years</li> <li>Day to day</li> </ul> </li> <li>Acute stress</li> <li>Seasonality</li> <li>Stress &amp; size/type of farming</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- Family issues
- Specific events
- Measures of occupational stress
  - Too much work to do
  - Too little work to do
  - Working to tight deadlines
  - Autonomy over work schedule
  - Support from colleagues
- Self-perception as stressed
  - Alternative terminology
- Strategies for dealing with stress
  - Mutual support with other farmers
  - Talking about it with friends & family
  - Use of support organisations
  - Medical treatment
  - Spiritual
  - Stress management techniques
    - [add additional suggestions in parent 'strategies' node]
- Stress and stigma
- Effects on the family
- Friends' experiences of stress
  
- Future
  - Expectations
    - Personal
    - The farm
    - For children
  - Leaving farming
    - Possible prompts
  - Planning
    - Retirement
      - Things you'll miss about farming
      - Things you won't miss
  - Views on broader future of farming
  
- Policy
  - Main providers of support to farmers
    - Local
    - National
    - Perceptions of entitlement
  - Previous use of support services
    - Nature of support
    - Feelings about asking for help
    - Finding out about & accessing help
    - Satisfaction
    - Reasons for non-use
  - Perceptions of HSE
  - Perceptions of DEFRA
  - Suggestions for government/HSE
  - Support from other organisations
  - Support needed but not received
  
- Organisations (key informant interviews only)
  - Establishment
  - Aims

Stress remit  
Resources  
Activities  
    Practical support to farmers  
Joint working  
Local relationships  
Funding

Local factors   Labour market  
                  Presence of farming  
                  Recent change  
                  Local issues for farming

**Attributes**

Interviewer  
Area  
Age  
Gender  
Ethnicity  
Marital status  
Type of farming (main)  
Type of interviewee

## APPENDIX 5

**Table 1** Work-related stress factors table

<i>Stressor</i>	<i>All farms</i>	<i>Livestock</i>	<i>Arable</i>	<i>Mixed</i>	<i>Diversification</i>	<i>Family farms</i>
<b>Paperwork</b>	Shifting goalposts Duplicating information Lack of purpose Time pressures Subsidy claiming clashing with farming priorities IT compliance Missing deadlines Complicated forms Poor support and feedback	Compensation claims on culled stock  Animal movement documentation		Complicated administrative load	Business paperwork	Inequitable division of labour, leading to overload/ failure to develop skills
<b>Workload and organisation</b>	Pressure to work through illness  Increased isolation with shrinkage in farms' labour forces	Intensification of farming with increased stock sizes	Organising labour around peak times, and competition over contractors  Machinery breaking down	Clashes in priorities	Balancing work with farming demands	Younger farmers lacking control over workload or decision-making  Working late in life pressures  Conflicts relating to working with family
<b>Specific work activities</b>	N/A	Working hours at peak times, e.g. lambing, calving, silage-making, turkey slaughter	Working hours at peak times, e.g. harvesting, planting	Combination of livestock/ arable pressures	Finding and maintaining markets	Division of labour concerns
<b>Farming practices</b>	N/A	Handling stock  Health concerns about dipping	Health concerns about crop-spraying	Combination of livestock/ arable pressures	N/A	Lack of employment protection

## APPENDIX 6

**Table 2** Mapping support strategies table

<i><b>Low risk/successful strategies</b></i>	<i><b>High risk/vulnerable groups</b></i>
<i>Good family relationships, high level of disclosure of problems, established local networks</i>	<i>No proximate support – geographically or socially isolated</i>
<i>Multiple sources of support – partner, children, friends, other farmers, support organisations</i>	<i>Single source of support (vulnerability to loss/strain on provider)</i>
<i>Interests outside (or connected to) farming, and time to pursue these</i>	<i>Family problems – divorce, conflict, infidelity</i>
<i>Forward-planners</i>	<i>Little or no leisure time, or interests/social contacts outside farming</i>
<i>Willingness to approach service providers/ask for help</i>	<i>Debt/financial problems</i>
<i>Coping strategies of time management, business perspective and consideration of new ways of organising work</i>	<i>Non-planner</i>
	<i>Non help-seeking orientation/low contact with services</i>
	<i>Older/health problems</i>
	<i>Coping strategies of bottling problems up, ostrich-mentality or getting angry</i>

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## GLOSSARY

ADAS	Agricultural Development and Advisory Service
B&Bs	Bed and Breakfasts
BCMS	British Cattle Movement Service
BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CTS	Cattle Tracing System
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DH	Department of Health
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EU	European Union
FCN	Farm Crisis Network
FMD	Foot and Mouth Disease
FUW	Farmers' Union of Wales
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GP	General Practitioner
H&S	Health and Safety
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
IACS	Integrated Administration and Control System
IT	Information Technology
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NFYFC	National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs
PAYE	Pay As You Earn
PSI	Policy Studies Institute
RPA	Rural Payments Agency
RSI	Repetitive Strain Injury
RSIN	Rural Stress Information Network
SAD	Seasonal Affective Disorder
SAWS	Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme
TB	Tuberculosis
TFA	Tenant Farmers' Association
UK	United Kingdom
VAT	Value Added Tax
WFU	Women's Farming Union





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