

Empowering ‘accidental counsellors’ to support the health and well-being of farmers in Cornwall and Devon

Summary Report

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University
of Exeter

Introduction

This project was a partnership between researchers at the University of Exeter (Dr Lucy Szaboova, Dr Rebecca Wheeler and Prof. Matt Lobley) and support professionals from the Farming Health Hub (Nikki Kelly) and its umbrella organisation Imagine If (Kevin Feaviour), which is a social enterprise focusing on solutions for health, well-being and happiness. The project was funded by the University of Exeter’s Open Innovation Platform.

The project built on existing research that has highlighted i) the widespread nature of poor physical and mental health outcomes among farmers and a frequent reluctance to seek help; and ii) the important role that family, community members and agricultural service providers play in providing informal support to farmers and facilitating access to healthcare and well-being services. These people, who we refer collectively to as ‘accidental counsellors’, often find themselves lending a listening ear to farmers who are stressed, worried or struggling with mental health issues, but they are not necessarily trained in providing such support and may be unsure how best to help.



Aims and objectives

Our principle aim was to empower ‘accidental counsellors’ within the agricultural sector to provide informed, effective and coordinated support to farmers with accessing healthcare and well-being services in Cornwall and Devon. Our specific objectives were to:

1. Explore the extent to which diverse professionals and individuals already provide support, the nature of support and the challenges and opportunities that they perceive, to understand their role and the support they may need going forward.
2. Strengthen capacity and confidence among “accidental counsellors” in providing support to farmers with accessing healthcare and well-being services.
3. Create a peer support network and platform for dialogue and coordination between “accidental counsellors” to enable ongoing and effective support.

Methods

A face-to-face focus group and a series of online semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 14 'accidental counsellors' during the summer of 2023. Participants included individuals from: veterinary practices; a law firm; an agricultural mortgage provider; an accountancy practice; a dairy consultancy; and other farm/business advisors. These conversations allowed us to better understand the experiences and needs of professionals already providing ad hoc support to farmers around health and well-being issues.

The findings from the focus group and interviews were then used to inform the development of four training workshops, an online resource hub and a LinkedIn group. These are described under 'project outputs' on page 4 of this report.

Key findings

Our participants each had unique experiences of encountering and providing support to farmers in distress, but there were a number of common themes that emerged from the stories they shared with us. These included:

- Agricultural professionals often find themselves providing a listening ear to farmers and farming families who are facing stressful situations. This may include a variety of financial, business or health-related problems that may or may not be linked to the issue the professional is providing expertise on. Some professionals, such as solicitors and accountants, may find that the explicitly confidential nature of their relationship with clients especially emboldens farmers to 'open-up' about sensitive matters.
- Many farmers experience loneliness and are grateful for the opportunity to talk to trusted individuals. For some, a visit to the farm from an agricultural professional may be the only human contact they have that day, or even that week.
- 'Just listening' to someone's worries can often be enough to help them feel better, but some people naturally find this easier to do than others. Knowing 'what to say' can be difficult, especially in response to, or in the context of, mental health concerns. Some participants also told us that they lacked confidence around having tricky conversations and dealing with strong-willed individuals who may resist advice on well-being or business related issues.
- However good at providing informal support 'accidental counsellors' may be, they are not trained mental health professionals and are often unsure 'where to draw the line' in terms of the time and support they offer. Knowing when and where to turn for professional healthcare advice is important for giving people confidence that they are helping most effectively.

"I turned up on a farm and this guy was basically bust, and I said to him he was bust and he looked absolutely shocked to the core. So after my next client in the afternoon, I thought I better go and see him. He said, 'I'm not going to top myself', but it was it was really interesting because he obviously knew I was going back because I was worried about him." (Accountant)

"The family received some really bad news on Christmas Eve and I finished work, but I had to explain to my children that I need to take this call because this lady might not be having such a good Christmas as we are. So we need to talk to her and it's really hard. I think it's just being there to listen is most of the time." (Agricultural mortgage advisor)

- It can be difficult to maintain professional boundaries in situations where farmers are sharing personal problems. Our participants expressed strong empathy for the people they worked with and some reported instances where they have given up considerable amounts of personal time in order to provide additional practical or emotional support to their clients. Accidental counsellors may be happy to do this, but it can also create tensions with their professional roles.
- Being an accidental counsellor can have an emotional impact on the individual providing support. Our participants reported finding it hard not to 'take things home with them' and would sometimes lose sleep worrying about a particular client. Feeling confident about when and where to signpost farmers for further support helps to relieve some of this concern and sense of responsibility. Self-care is also important in order to manage this personal impact.
- Most of our participants were aware of the larger farming charities (i.e. the Farming Community Network (FCN) and Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institute) but did not necessarily think this awareness was shared by all of their colleagues. They were also often unclear about the type of support that the various organisations can offer. They expressed a need for signposting to a variety of sources of support, including local and regional mental health charities, business-related advice, and help on wider welfare issues (e.g. finance, housing).
- Farming-specific sources of support are particularly valued, as farmers can find it easier to talk to people who they feel understand the specific challenges of farming. Mental health training for accidental counsellors should also ideally be specifically tailored to the agricultural context.

"There's a lot of farmers that don't say anything, but you know that something's going on because you feel their frustration, like although they don't intend to direct it you, you're quite often the only person that they've seen a lot of the time."
(Farm vet technician)

Obviously we are time limited. So the frustration with it, I guess, is that our role has to stop at a certain point, because we charge for our time and, you know, we're not cheap." (Solicitor)

"I do worry about my team and how much it it's on them. When you were sending them out to do a job, which is a straight forward job, which they're trained to do. and they come back and say these things. You know its affecting them. I wish I could have the tools to deal with it better."
(Farm vet)



Project Outputs

Online resource hub

A new website has been created to act as a hub for useful resources to assist accidental counsellors in supporting farmers. The hub includes: i) links to a number of health and well-being services (including farming-specific support providers) that people can signpost farmers towards; ii) tips and techniques for having tricky conversations and practicing self-care; iii) information for providing support in a crisis; and iv) details of relevant training available. Access the website here:

www.accidentalcounsellors.co.uk

"We become their link to the services that they need to support them. So from my point of view, it would be really good to have better education about what those services are and what is available and who I should be putting them in touch with if I have concerns."

(Solicitor)



Accidental Counsellors Resource Hub

LinkedIn group

Supporting people through challenging times is difficult and can involve distressing conversations that have a lasting personal impact on those providing the support. To accompany the resource hub, we have therefore created a LinkedIn group as a dedicated space for accidental counsellors in agriculture to share their concerns, queries and experiences with other people in similar situations. It is hoped that, as membership of the group grows, this will enable agricultural professionals to connect with each other and help relieve some of the emotional pressure arising from their role as accidental counsellors. All posts on the group are moderated by the project team to ensure that references to specific people and farms are anonymised and that the space remains respectful and supportive.



If you are an accidental counsellor within the farming world, you can join the LinkedIn group here: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12939257/>

Bespoke training materials

Improved understanding of the experiences of accidental counsellors has informed the design of bespoke materials for four training workshops, which were initially delivered to 10 end-users in Devon and Cornwall during July and August 2023 by Imagine If. The workshops provided tools and techniques for accidental counsellors to enhance their confidence and capacity to support farmers with health and well-being issues. The Farming Health Hub and Imagine If will use and build on these materials to deliver further training workshops in the future.

"A group of like minded professionals [would be helpful], and not necessarily accountants. I think it would actually be more useful if you had a mixture of professionals"
(Accountant)

"I think if I had had training, I probably would be able to support them a lot more than I could now"
(Agricultural consultant)

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