



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Regulation and bureaucracy – *a significant source of farmers' stress*

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Introduction

Farmers and their spouses have also been shown to suffer more anxiety and depression than non-farmers

Suicide is the second most common cause of death after accidents in young farmers.

Suicide is also a significant cause of mortality in older and retired farmers and amongst farmers' wives

Literature review - causes of occupational stress affecting farmers

- Competition
- Regulation
- Disease
- Adverse weather
- Family
- Financial worries

Aim of study

An investigation into causes of occupational stress affecting male, Northern Irish farmers and their perceptions on how support should be provided



Methodology

- Three stranded study
- Participants were recruited through farming related public events and from purposive sampling
- Quantitative and qualitative methods utilised
- Analysis involved:
 - Statistical analysis
 - SPSS - descriptive and inferential statistics were computed to investigate relationship between variables.
 - The focus group discourse was recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed

Results

Data was collected from 94 farmers using:

- face to face questionnaires at a social/recreational event, farmers markets
- a focus group

The analysis found a clear agreement on the major sources of stress and how support should be provided.

The results indicated that the major issues, contributing to farmers' work-related stress, included the burden of regulation /administration and financial issues



Financial issues

Finance was a major stressor across all strands

- Strand A - 19 of 40 respondents (48%) reported that money was their number one issue of concern.
- Strand B - when asked about factors which cause stress to farmers (1=not stressful 5=very stressful), on average farmers scored financial issues 3.98/5
- Strand C - focus group identified it as the most important source of stress for them.

Bureaucracy

The burden of paperwork was identified as a key stressor

- Strand A found that more than half (21/ 40) of respondents stated they had some degree of stress relating to paperwork
- Strand B found that when asked about factors which cause stress to farmers (1=not stressful 5=very stressful), on average farmers scored paperwork issues 4.2/5

Bureaucracy – what farmers said:

"I can never get the time to fill in all the necessary forms and then I fall behind and can't remember what I have to fill in- it's all very complicated!" (Strand A, farmer 2)

"The volume of paperwork expected from farmers is ridiculous and unnecessary! The paperwork required is constantly changing and it's difficult for farmers to keep up to date with what's required" (Strand C)

"Farmers are constantly being watched if we make a mistake or are late with forms they will punish us by withholding our single farm payment" (Strand C)

"When I ring (the regulator) for assistance I'm forced to listen to silly music for half an hour until someone answers, I don't have that sort of time to waste!" (Strand C)



Support

Strand A found that:

- less than a third (11 of 40 respondents) believed that they were adequately informed about the management of occupational stress
- Of those that did feel informed, many reported that the information that they valued the most was from the National Farmers Union (NFU)
- With respect to how information and support about occupational stress was accessed
 - 20 of 40 respondents stated that it came from vets or other agricultural inspectors,
 - 14 of the 40 respondents reported accessing information at social events



Support

62% of Strand B respondents said that they would feel comfortable approaching a vet

"I think perhaps if vets were to give farmers advice and guidance on stress it would be helpful...farmers generally respect their vet as a well-educated person who knows what they are talking about!" (Strand C)

It was largely agreed that fewer rules and regulations and a more helpful approach from the regulators would reduce stress amongst farmers.

One farmer suggested that on-farm help would be welcome: *"practical assistance with paperwork where the help comes directly to the farmers...us farmers don't have time to trek to head office or sit on the phone for hours to get help."* (Strand C)



Conclusions

The burden of paperwork was identified as a key stressor from all strands, either by the complexity of forms or the amount of paperwork involved.

These results concur with those of the NFU who stated that several actions still needed to be taken to further reduce the burden of bureaucracy

This is despite

- a UK government task force reporting in 2014 that the government had made significant progress in its better regulation agenda in relation to farming
- the UK Government's Better Regulation Delivery Office stating that regulators should 'avoid imposing unnecessary regulatory burdens through their regulatory activities' and should assess whether there are less burdensome means to achieve outcomes and supporting those who are regulated.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this research and the recent NFU survey, it is recommended that a comprehensive and probing overhaul of the administrative burdens required of farmers be undertaken in order to create more accessible, user-friendly and less weighty administrative procedures.



Recommendations

This study also highlights that although not always well utilised, support networks are valued and in particular, vets are seen as an important source of advice and help

On this basis, it is recommended that further work is undertaken to explore how the role that vets play, could be acknowledged and how they could be supported enable them to provide further signposting and information to farmers

This study was undertaken in 2014 and 2015 and therefore before the Brexit vote took place.

It therefore does not take account of the affect that the uncertainty surrounding the prospect of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union may be having on farmers



Finally

Is society benefitting from the labours of farmers whilst failing to acknowledge and reduce the associated stress?



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