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Addressing Suicide in Agriculture:

Supporting and Preventing the Biggest Hidden Danger Today

Written by:

Lucia Slack NSch

November 2026

A NUFFIELD FARMING SCHOLARSHIPS REPORT

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Date of report: September 2026

NUFFIELD Farming Scholarships

"Leading positive change in agriculture.
Inspiring passion and potential in people."

Title	Addressing Suicide in Agriculture: Supporting and Preventing the Biggest Hidden Danger Today
Scholar	Lucia Slack
Sponsor	Yorkshire Agricultural Society
Objectives of Study Tour	• Showcase and promote rural support agencies across the UK • Explore global, creative strategies to engage hard-to-reach agricultural communities • Apply insights from international travel to inform and support outreach in ancillary agricultural industries
Countries Visited	New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Chile, Canada, Switzerland, Scotland, Ireland.
Messages	• Suicide prevention must start before crisis - recognise distress earlier and reach in, rather than waiting for farmers to reach out. • Support must be visible, accessible and relevant to farming life. Available does not always mean accessible. • Trusted agricultural relationships matter. Equip and protect the 'accidental counsellors' already supporting farmers. • Bring farmers, agriculture and mental health expertise together. Co-design solutions and get research off the page and onto the farm. • Challenge 'unconscious stigma'. Assumptions about strength, self-reliance and who 'looks' at risk can prevent distress being recognised and support being accessed. • Language matters – and so does the story we tell about farming. • Suicide prevention is a shared responsibility. **Do not be afraid to talk about suicide. Open conversations can encourage help-seeking. Ask and Ask again.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Suicide remains one of the most significant yet under-recognised dangers facing agricultural communities worldwide, with farming consistently identified as an occupation associated with increased suicide risk (Klingelschmidt et al., 2018).

As a Mental Health Nurse, conversations about suicide are familiar to me. Yet I recognised that choosing suicide prevention as the focus of my Nuffield Farming Scholarship might raise a few eyebrows. Suicide remains surrounded by stigma and misconceptions, including fears that talking openly about it could increase risk. However, evidence demonstrates that asking about suicide does not increase suicidal thoughts or behaviours (Dazzi et al., 2014).

I was motivated to use the Nuffield platform to bring greater attention to this often-overlooked issue. I am grateful to the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust and my sponsor, the Yorkshire Agricultural Society, for supporting this work.

My research draws on my experience as a Clinical Lead in a rural Community Mental Health Team, a trustee of the Farming Community Network and, importantly, a farmer's wife living on a dairy farm. Through international travel and engagement with farmers, rural professionals and support organisations, I explored the pressures facing agricultural communities and approaches to suicide prevention.

My findings highlight how financial, environmental and structural pressures interact with cultural expectations of stoicism and self-reliance. While examples of good practice exist internationally, significant gaps remain between research, available support and what reaches the farm.

Initially, I believed connection was the missing piece of the puzzle. However, my research revealed a deeper barrier: 'unconscious stigma', where deeply embedded beliefs around strength, independence and 'getting on with it' can prevent individuals from recognising their own struggles or accessing support.

This research reinforces the importance of positive, relatable language, safe storytelling and suicide prevention strategies co-produced with agricultural communities, rather than simply delivered to them.

I have brought my learning together through a psychosocial continuum spanning prevention, early intervention, intervention, recovery, postvention and sustainable outcomes, recognising suicide prevention as a shared responsibility across individuals, communities and wider systems.

My hope is that this work contributes to a shift in how we understand, talk about and respond to suicide in agriculture, ensuring support is both relevant and accessible to those who need it.

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DISCLAIMER

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Nuffield Farming Scholars are available to speak to NFU Branches, agricultural discussion groups and similar organisations.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My first experience of farm life came around 15 years ago when my now husband Jonny and I moved to New Zealand. Jonny had farmed all his life growing up on his uncle's farms. I was an Essex-born townie who cried as we drove out of town, across dirt tracks and away from civilisation. Thankfully, I soon had a change of heart.

I fell in love with farming and eventually reared calves on a neighbouring dairy farm, where I began learning about the practical realities of farming. One of my first memories of learning the ropes was Jonny drawing me a diagram showing how to hitch a trailer - a piece of paper I still have today.

After returning to England, we eventually settled in Cumbria, where Jonny began working at Dolphenby Farm and I trained as a Mental Health Nurse following personal experiences that had led me towards the profession.



Figure 1: Author on their tenanted dairy farm in Cumbria. Source: Author's own.

Fast forward ten years, Jonny was fortunate enough to go into business with Robert Craig 2012 NSch who has given our family an opportunity that we could only have dreamed of and a shared partnership in Dolphenby Farm. It was during a Nuffield Farm Visit (in which Robert was trying to persuade Jonny to apply) I decided I wanted to apply for a Nuffield Scholarship. A year earlier I had heard of this opportunity and wondered what the catch was - I am yet to find out! We now live on the farm alongside our daughter Neave.

I continue to work as a Mental Health Nurse fulltime in my role as a Clinical Lead for the Community Mental Health Team in Cumbria. A role that I am passionate and dedicated to. I am also a Trustee for the Farming Community Network - a role I take great pride and honour in representing the charity and sharing my experience for the good of our rural community.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO MY STUDY SUBJECT

My interest in this subject was strengthened through my work as a mental health nurse, where I had been involved in the cases of people who have died by suicide that were also farmers. I was also aware of people in our community who had died by suicide. Living and working within a rural community means that I understand first hand some of the pressures and responsibilities farming can place on individuals and families. But what is even more evident, is how strongly farming communities could rally around people during difficult times.

What concerned me was how few farmers I was seeing accessing secondary care, such as the mental health service I worked for. It appeared that when support was accessed, it was often at the point of crisis, when opportunities for earlier intervention had already been missed. Discussions with colleagues suggested their experiences were similar. Despite working in an area surrounded by agriculture, farmers rarely seemed to be reaching our services for support. This is not unique to farming. Nationally, around three-quarters of people who die by suicide have not been in contact with mental health services in the previous 12 months, highlighting the importance of suicide prevention extending beyond specialist services (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023).

It left me questioning what was happening before people reached crisis, and what were the barriers. Were farmers reluctant to reach out? Did they recognise when they needed support? Or were our systems and services simply not reaching them?

The title of this report was influenced by research from the Farm Safety Foundation (Yellow Wellies), in which young farmers described mental health as the biggest 'hidden danger' facing the industry (Farm Safety Foundation, 2024). This stayed with me. For me, suicide itself felt like agriculture's biggest hidden danger - devastating when it occurs, yet the distress and circumstances preceding it can remain unseen or unspoken about until somebody reaches crisis.

I became determined to understand what might help us recognise distress earlier, make conversations about suicide easier and ultimately prevent people reaching crisis. This became the starting point for my Nuffield study.

Suicide was only decriminalised in England and Wales in 1961, following the introduction of the Suicide Act 1961. I use the term 'died by suicide' rather than 'committed suicide', which is increasingly considered outdated and can reinforce historical associations between suicide and criminality.

People shared deeply personal experiences with me throughout my travels; identifying details have therefore been withheld or changed where appropriate to protect their privacy.

CHAPTER 3: MY STUDY TOUR



Figure 2: The author on a farm in New Zealand overlooking the reported first Māori settlement. Source: Author's own.

As part of my study tour, I have spoken with a diverse range of people, including farmers and their families, mental health professionals, agricultural organisations, charities, researchers and those with lived experience of mental health difficulties. These conversations have provided a range of perspectives on the challenges faced within agriculture, as well as the barriers and opportunities for improving mental health and suicide prevention.

I managed to cover 12 countries over 4 continents, including England, Ireland, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Chile, Canada and Switzerland. Each of these countries although different in many ways, faced similar challenges within their agricultural communities. Yet offered different approaches to mental health, suicide prevention, peer support and reducing stigma.

CHAPTER 4: FARMING TODAY, PEOPLE, PRESSURE AND HEALTH

4.1 The Changing Farming Family

In the UK the 'traditional farming family' stereotype of a husband-and-wife partnership has evolved. It is increasingly common for women in farming families to seek their own career off farm creating additional demands on balancing employment, family life and farming. Yet traditional expectations remain. I have met with many people who have been surprised that I have my own career and aspirations outside the farm gate.

In countries such as Iceland, Norway and Finland, I saw farms that relied on employment off farm to support their farming business. Across the countries I visited, balancing caring responsibilities, family life and farm work was a recurring source of tension. In Iceland, one farming family described the 'third shift' - the additional effort required to maintain family life and relationships alongside farming and other employment. This term stayed with me throughout my Nuffield journey, as something I can certainly relate to.



Figure 3: The author on a dairy farm in Iceland. Source: Author's own.

It also made me reflect on how outdated the traditional image of farming centred around a husband-wife partnership can be. Farming families are increasingly diverse, including unmarried couples, single people, LGBTQ+ farmers, blended and multi-generational families, and those farming outside traditional family structures. The role of women in farming has also evolved significantly, with women increasingly recognised as farmers, business owners and decision-makers, rather than simply as the 'farmer's wife' or a supporting member of the farm business.

I also observed the generational shift. Some of the younger farmers I met often appearing more adaptable, embracing new technologies and diversification opportunities, while some older farmers appeared more influenced by traditional expectations of how a farm and farming family should operate. Yet, younger farmers could still be influenced by decisions made by previous generations, particularly where bold or risky decisions had previously failed.

4.2 The Reality of Modern-day Farming

The trials and tribulations are well known to those working and living in rural communities. Whether it is contending with the weather, ever increasing farming costs or physical and mental health challenges - I had an incredible number of

conversations in which people described the difficult scenarios they were or had experienced which contributed to poor physical and mental wellbeing.

Many of those I met were honest with their experiences, while others didn't even recognise the challenges that they were and had faced as they just saw it as a part of farming. Although not limited to the below table, there are many themes that arose when meeting with those working and living in agricultural communities and affiliated industries.

Static – Enduring Factors	Dynamic – Accumulating pressures	Acute – Immediate events
Isolation	Financial pressures	Sudden financial loss/changes
Male dominated industry	Policy/regulatory changes	Animal disease/crop failure
Generational Pressures	Paperwork and admin burden	Relationship breakdowns
Identity tied to farming	Weather and climate volatility	Bereavements
Aging workforce	Market instability	Injury or physical illness'
Access to lethal means	Workload and fatigue	Farm accidents/injury
Exposure to death, injury, loss	Loneliness/relationship strain	Sudden loss of workforce
Generational trauma	Succession planning	Major rural crime incidents
Generational history	Soil/land management pressures	Severe weather events
Rural infrastructure/access to services	Perceived lack of support from the government	Unexpected business failure
Geographical/Social Isolation	Taxation/inheritance pressures	Witnessing accidents/incidents on farm
Farming as a family business	Access to healthcare	Sudden threat to farm ownership/tenancy
Home is the workplace	Workforce/staffing shortages	Legal/regulatory crisis
Responsibility for livestock/ difficulty stepping away.	Rural crime	Significant family conflict
Seasonal nature of farming	Activism/conflict	Public criticism/ humiliation
Occupational culture of self-reliance	Internet and digital connectivity	Suicide or attempted suicide within the community.
Fear of breaking the generational cycle	Domestic violence/ family conflict	
	Food Security/production pressures	

Figure 4: Static, dynamic and acute psychosocial pressures affecting farmers observed globally across Nuffield travels. Source: Author's own.

It is important when discussing suicide and mental health within agriculture that we do not lose sight of what makes farming such a rewarding way of life. Throughout my travels, I met people who were immensely proud to be farmers and who spoke about the freedom, purpose, connection to land and animals, family and community that farming gave them. I see this in my own life too. Farming can be one of the best jobs in the world. The purpose of highlighting the pressures within agriculture is not to portray farming negatively, but to understand where those pressures can become difficult and how we can better support people when they do.

4.3 The Impact of Stress on Physical Functioning

While many of the pressures I encountered were familiar to me, some were thankfully far removed from my own experience. On a dairy farm in Chile, the level of rural crime was something I had never witnessed before. Despite increased security and changing milking times to between midnight and 6am to reduce risk,

cattle were still being stolen and lives endangered. Farmers described being unable to sleep or relax and feeling continuously on edge.

What I see evidenced in my nursing practice is the impact that prolonged stress can have on the physical body, something that is well recognised within the wider literature (Guidi et al., 2021). Yet throughout my travels, I became increasingly aware that this connection was not always recognised within agriculture. Physical problems such as back pain, arthritis or raised blood pressure were often viewed simply as 'part of the trade'/ Furthermore, symptoms such as poor sleep, fatigue or difficulty concentrating were not necessarily associated with stress or mental wellbeing.

This highlighted an important gap. While physical health and mental health are closely connected, they can still be viewed separately within agriculture. Recognising the physical manifestations of stress may provide another opportunity to identify when somebody is struggling, particularly where they may be less likely to describe their experience in terms of their mental health.

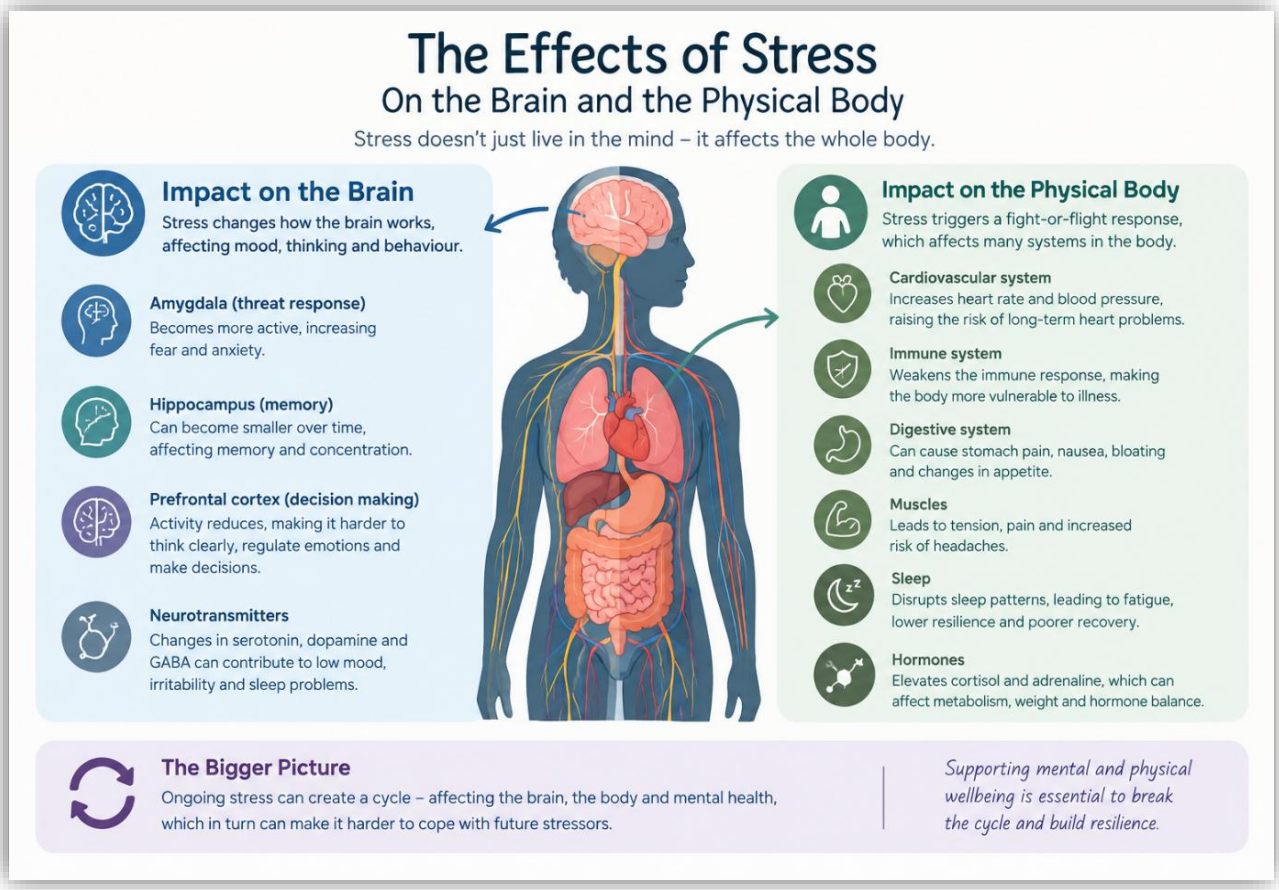


Figure 5. Image to highlight the impact of stress on the physical body. Source: AI created image by the Author.

CHAPTER 5: MORE THAN WORDS

5.1 The Power of Language

People can often find it easier to talk about their physical health than their mental health. The Field Nurses in the UK provide a great example of using this as an opportunity for engagement. Something as simple as taking a farmer's blood pressure at an auction mart can provide a non-threatening opportunity to start a wider conversation about how they are doing.



Figure 6. Meeting with Gerald (far left) and Nigel (second from left) from Farmstrong in New Zealand. Alongside Clare Catford (2025 Australian Scholar) and Author (far right). Source: Author's own.

Another fantastic wellbeing programme I encountered was Farmstrong in New Zealand, where I had the pleasure of staying with its Chief Executive, Gerard Vaughan. Farmstrong uses farmer-to-farmer tips, backed by wellbeing science, but deliberately moves away from traditional mental health messaging. Gerard described it as a 'human potential programme', focused on strengths and helping farmers perform at their best.

Farmstrong recognised that farmers are continually looking for ways to become better farmers and improve their businesses. Applying this same principle to personal wellbeing creates a very different conversation. Rather than focusing on weakness, mental ill health or becoming more 'resilient' - a term which can be overused - the emphasis is on looking after yourself in order to live and farm well.

Throughout my travels, I also realised that the power of language works both ways. It is not only about the language we use to engage farmers but recognising the language they use when they are struggling.

A farmer may talk about not sleeping, falling behind with work, losing interest in the farm or simply that things are 'getting on top of them'. If we wait for somebody to explicitly say they are struggling with their mental health, we may miss what they are already telling us.

Sometimes the first conversation about someone's mental health may not sound like a conversation about mental health at all.



Figure 7. Staying with Lauren Van Ewyk from the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance in a hut in rural Canada. Here I learnt about Ag-Informed Therapy™ and the importance of professionals understanding farming language, culture and context. Source: Author's own.

5.2 The Importance of Safe Story Telling

Something else that stood out to me at Farmstrong was their approach to the people they chose to promote their wellbeing messages. Although they recognised the value of influential people sharing their experiences, Gerard was clear that if their message did not align with Farmstrong's values, they would politely decline the offer.

This was particularly important to me because, both clinically and throughout my Nuffield travels, I have observed the influence others can have on an individual's willingness to seek support. Publicly dismissing a particular form of support - such as visiting a doctor, engaging in therapy, taking medication or in the UK; accessing support from the NHS - may unintentionally discourage somebody from accessing an intervention that could be right for them.

There is an important distinction between sharing a personal experience of support and presenting that experience as universally applicable. It is entirely reasonable for someone to say that a particular treatment or service did not work for them. However, this does not mean that it will not work for somebody else. This becomes particularly important when the person speaking has a platform, trusted position or influence within a community.

Safe storytelling should therefore consider not only what story is being told, but what it leaves someone able to do afterwards. Stories should leave routes to support and promote hope, rather than unintentionally suggesting that one person's experience will be the same for everyone.

The same consideration should apply to the wider narrative we create around mental health and suicide in agriculture. While raising awareness of increased risk is important, we must consider how these messages are received and the narratives they reinforce. Shared experiences of struggle can be incredibly powerful in reducing stigma and encouraging conversations, but they should sit alongside stories of recovery, resilience and people thriving within agriculture. We need to acknowledge suicide risk without allowing it to define the industry.

CHAPTER 6: KNOWING WHERE TO TURN

6.1 From Awareness to Access

Throughout my travels and back in the UK, something that was evident was the lack of awareness those working and living in rural areas have around the specific support available to them such as FCN or RABI. What was equally concerning was that many of my colleagues in the UK were also unaware of the third-sector services available to people working in agriculture.

One organisation I visited told me that it was 'really difficult' to get leaflets into GP surgeries. Yet relying on information being available in a GP waiting room still requires the farmer to enter that space in the first place.



Figure 8: Native Finncattle observed on a beef farm in Finland. Source: Author's own.

Finland provided an interesting example. I learned about the MELA holiday relief scheme, which provides trained relief workers to enable livestock farmers to take time away from the farm. Yet some farmers I met had either not heard of the scheme or had chosen not to use it. For some, larger businesses had enough staff to cover holidays, for others, there was a reluctance to trust somebody unfamiliar with their farm.

In contrast, one farmer I met described the MELA support as something they 'could not live without'. After fleeing a domestically abusive marriage and taking responsibility for the farm alone, they had used not only the relief service but also business and financial advice. They described this support as key to 'making farming work for you' and enabling them to balance their farm with their personal life.

This highlighted an important distinction for me: making support available is not the same as making it accessible. Awareness is the first step, but accessibility also requires trust, relevance and a service that fits with the realities of farming life.

6.2 Taking Support Through the Farm Gate

Another great example of rural support came from my time in New Zealand, where I met with Sam Owen and Sarah Donaldson, who were both working alongside the Rural Support Trust. Following Cyclone Gabrielle in 2023 they described how, rather than waiting for farmers to ask for help, support was taken directly onto farms.

This allowed those involved to understand what was needed on an individual basis. Support ranged from responding to immediate workload pressures and coordinating practical help, to accessing financial assistance and subsidies, helping with applications and sourcing casual labour.

Some farmers were understandably less forthcoming about how they were coping or what support they needed. In these circumstances, the team found other ways to get through the farm gate. Donated fence posts provided a reason to visit farms, creating an opportunity to check in and better understand how farmers were managing.

This demonstrated an important principle I encountered repeatedly throughout my travels - support does not always need to begin with somebody asking for help. In agriculture, practical assistance can provide the doorway to a wider conversation. Turning up with something useful or helping with an immediate problem can build trust and identify needs that may otherwise remain hidden.

Putting this into practice, however, is not straightforward. Within NHS services, individuals must consent to assessment and treatment, meaning this type of proactive outreach cannot simply be replicated in the same way. Charitable organisations may have greater flexibility to reach into farming communities, but this approach also relies on sufficient funding, time and people to make it sustainable. The challenge is therefore not simply recognising the value of reaching in- but finding realistic and sustainable ways of doing so within different services and organisations.



Figure 8. Meeting Sam Own (left) and Sarah Donaldson (right) from Rural Support Trust in New Zealand. Source: Author's own.

6.3 The 'Accidental Counsellor'

The New Zealand example showed that engagement does not always have to begin with a conversation about mental health. Sometimes finding a reason to get through the farm gate can create the opportunity for a much more important conversation

Throughout my travels, I repeatedly encountered people who, through their everyday work, had developed trusted relationships with farmers. Vets, agricultural advisers, auctioneers, feed representatives and others may find conversations extending far beyond the original reason for their contact. These individuals can become what has been termed in other research as 'accidental counsellors' (Wheeler *et al*., 2025).

Their role is not to become mental health professionals, but to recognise when somebody may be struggling, respond appropriately and know where to turn next.

Their existing relationship may create an opportunity for a conversation that would never begin with a formal service.

However, we must also consider the impact these conversations have on the person receiving them. Hearing distress, trauma or suicidal thoughts can carry an emotional burden, particularly when this is not part of someone's professional training. Those we encourage to notice, ask and listen therefore also need clear boundaries, opportunities to debrief and permission to look after their own



Figure 9. Meeting Birger Bull at Slakterlet Bull, Norway. Alongside Sharon May (far left, 2025 UK Nuffield Scholar) and Author (far right). Birger reflected on his previous work in agricultural machinery sales, when noticing farmers struggling could leave him carrying concern for them beyond the working day. Source: Author's own.



Figure 10. Meeting Andrew, Managing Director of a contracting company in New Zealand. Having sadly lost a colleague to suicide, Andrew spoke about the importance of staff wellbeing and ensuring his team were 'filling their cups'. He also recognised the importance of postvention, ensuring support was available to colleagues following the death. Source: Author's own.

CHAPTER 7: COLLABORATION IS KEY

7.1 From Research to Farm

Throughout my studies, I have been fortunate to attend and speak at conferences, sharing findings from my Nuffield Scholarship while also hearing about work taking place in countries I was unable to visit, including Estonia, the USA, Lithuania, Slovenia and Germany. What became increasingly apparent was the considerable amount of research being undertaken into farmer mental health and wellbeing - without the presence of farmers. At one international conference focused on the wellbeing of farmers - there wasn't one farmer in the room. What made me reflect was how involved farmers themselves were in the research.

Researchers do not need to be farmers to understand the challenges facing agriculture, but those living and working within the industry bring a different

perspective. I felt it was important that they had a voice in what was being researched, the questions being asked and, importantly, what happened with the findings afterwards.

I also became increasingly aware of the gap that can exist between publishing research and creating meaningful change. Building the evidence base and improving our understanding of mental health and suicide within agriculture is undoubtedly important, but publication cannot be the end point. If findings remain within academic journals and conference rooms, without being translated into something meaningful for farming communities, their potential impact is limited. It left me questioning how we get research off the page and onto the farm?



Figure 11. The Author presenting Nuffield findings at the ISWA conference in Switzerland. Source: Author's own.

7.2 Co-produced by Farmers, for Farmers

When I was in Western Australia, I met Jo Drayton, who was raised on a farming enterprise and has worked in primary mental health and suicide prevention for over two decades. Jo worked alongside Holyoake to develop AgriBalance, a programme created in consultation with the agricultural sector.

I attended the one-day course, which aims to upskill client-facing agribusiness professionals to communicate more effectively with clients experiencing situational distress. What stood out was how relevant the training felt to agriculture. It used positive, non-stigmatising and relatable language and explored the relationship between stress, physical health, decision-making and our ability to think clearly. Importantly, it moved beyond awareness by providing practical skills in recognising distress, communicating effectively, responding to concerns and knowing when further support may be needed.



Figure 12. Jo Drayton on the Agribalance course in Western Australia . Source: Author's own.

AgriBalance demonstrated how we could better equip the 'accidental counsellors' already present within agriculture. Rather than expecting agribusiness professionals to become mental health practitioners, it gave them skills appropriate to their existing role and relationships.

One of its strengths was that it had been developed with the agricultural sector, rather than simply for it. I met one of the farmers involved in its development, who

spoke positively about the programme. For me, this showed the value of bringing together mental health knowledge/research/evidence with the lived and practical experience of farming, so that the language, examples and advice actually reflect the realities of the industry.

Similar approaches were evident elsewhere, including 'Back on Track' in Australia and 'On Feirm Ground' in Ireland. On Feirm Ground also considers boundaries and 'minding the minders', recognising the impact these conversations can have on those providing informal support.

7.3 Bridging Research and Practice

The UK does not currently have a single agricultural extension system which allows research and knowledge to be routinely translated and taken directly into farming communities. Instead, knowledge exchange is delivered through a range of public, private and third-sector organisations. While this brings considerable expertise, it can also make it more difficult to ensure that research and information consistently reach farmers.

In Norway, I met with NLR - Norway's Agricultural Advisory Service, which following the amalgamation of regional services became a single national cooperative in 2024. What struck me was not only the range of advice provided, but how it was delivered. NLR provides information, guidance and podcasts, demonstrating the value of using multiple routes to reach farmers rather than relying on them to seek out support themselves. Advisers emphasised meeting farmers where they are and building relationships based on trust and respect. They needed to be relatable, understand their audience and, as they described it, 'get the pitch right'. Research and new ideas were often introduced through small-scale trials, reducing the perceived risk for farmers.



Figure 12. Meeting farmers in Norway during their potato harvest. Source: Author's own.

I saw this first-hand when I joined NLR advisers on a farm visit, where we helped sort potatoes while talking with the farmers. They spoke highly of both the support and the relationships they had developed with their advisers. This resonated with my experience as a mental health nurse; doing something alongside someone can make conversation feel less formal and develop more naturally.

NLR's role extended beyond traditional agricultural advice, with farm visits and occupational risk assessments incorporating health, safety and mental wellbeing.

Through Trygg Bonde (Safe Farmer), farmers facing personal or professional challenges can also be connected with appropriate practical, financial, agricultural or health support, rather than being expected to navigate services alone. This demonstrated the value of using an existing and trusted agricultural network as a route into wider support.

The UK has a growing number of organisations working to support mental health and wellbeing within agriculture. While this provides valuable choice and expertise, it also raises questions around duplication, sustainability and how limited funding is used. Greater collaboration could allow organisations to build on each other's strengths, share learning and reduce duplication, rather than developing similar resources independently.

My travels made me question whether success should always mean creating something new. With limited funding available, there may be greater value in collaboration, evaluating and sharing what already works.

CHAPTER 8: CONNECTION: MORE THAN JUST BEING CONNECTED

8.1 The Importance of Connection

Social isolation and loneliness are recognised risk factors for poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023; McClelland et al., 2020). Making connection particularly relevant when considering suicide prevention in agriculture.

Up until I reached Canada, much of what I had seen reinforced how easily farming could create isolation or make meaningful connection more difficult. In Australia, the sheer scale created geographical isolation; across Scandinavia, rurality made maintaining connections and accessing support harder; in Chile, concerns around crime and personal safety could restrict rural life; while in New Zealand, the familiar ‘she’ll be right’ attitude reflected a culture of self-reliance and carrying on, even when things were difficult. By the time I reached Canada, I had begun to think that strengthening connection might be part of the answer.

Canada challenged that assumption.

Many of the people I met appeared incredibly well connected. They were involved in churches, curling clubs, municipality boards, agricultural organisations and their wider communities. They knew their neighbours, volunteered and held positions of responsibility. Yet people were still struggling to reach out for support, and I heard many anecdotal stories of deaths by suicide. It made me recognise an important distinction: being connected does not necessarily mean feeling able to talk.

8.2 Unconscious Stigma

I lost count of the number of conversations I had with farmers and people working in agriculture who initially told me they had little or no personal experience of severe mental ill health, suicide attempts or suicide. Yet, as conversations deepened, stories would emerge: a family member living with severe mental illness, a friend who had attempted suicide, or someone they knew who had died by suicide. What struck me was that these experiences had often not been connected to their initial response. It did not feel as though people were deliberately withholding them; rather, they had not immediately recognised these experiences as being part of the conversation.

I also noticed how people sometimes tried to make sense of what had happened. They would emphasise that the person was loved, financially secure or had everything going for them. At other times, a diagnosed mental illness was offered as an explanation. I began to wonder whether, consciously or not, there was a need to explain why this had happened to someone they cared about - perhaps distancing them from the stereotypes we still associate with suicide.

My experience as a mental health nurse has repeatedly shown me that someone's circumstances on paper do not always reflect what is happening internally. People can be loved, connected and financially secure and still experience significant mental distress.

These conversations made me think more about what I came to view as 'unconscious stigma' - the assumptions and biases we may hold about mental illness and suicide without even realising they are there. These can shape how we understand distress in ourselves and others, including who we believe is at risk.



Figure 13. Inspired by the Japanese Wind Phone. A place to call someone you can no longer reach and say everything you wish you could have. Source: Author's own.



Figure 14. Meeting with Merle Massie from Do More Agriculture foundation in Canada. It was founded by farmers for farmers to break the historical culture of silence and stigma. Source: Author's own.

8.3 Why Are We Still Not Talking?

These unconscious attitudes have not developed in isolation. The stigma surrounding suicide has deep historical roots, shaped by centuries of moral, religious and legal beliefs. Suicidal behaviour was historically criminalised in many countries and astonishingly remains so in some parts of the world today. Although understanding and legislation have changed considerably, the shame and stigma surrounding suicide have not necessarily disappeared at the same pace.

Throughout my travels, several themes continued to emerge as to why people may not speak openly about their mental health or reach out for support. While these varied between individuals and countries, there were some common themes.

Barrier to speaking out	What this might look like
Privacy and confidentiality	Worry that people within close rural communities will know their business
Fear of Judgement	Concern about being viewed or treated differently after speaking up
Fear of Failure	Asking for help may feel like admitting that you are not coping with the farm, business or responsibilities expected of you.
'It will be better when'	Holding on until calving, lambing or harvest is over, expecting things to improve after the next farming season
'My problems aren't bad enough'	Minimising distress or feeling that others have great problems and are more deserving of support
Self-Reliance	Feeling that problems should be managed independently or simply carried on through
Succession and legacy	Pressure not to be the generation that loses, changes or fails to pass on a farm built over generations
Farming Identity	Expectations around resilience, capacity and being able to cope with adversity
Unconscious stigma and stereotypes	Assumptions about what mental illness or suicidal distress 'looks like' can affect whether we recognise it in others or ourselves.
'I should be okay'	Being loved, financially secure or successful can make it difficult to understand or acknowledge why you are struggling.
Protecting others	Not wanting to worry, burden or upset family and friends.
Trust	Not knowing who is safe to speak to or what might happen after a disclosure
Practical barriers	Workload, time, distance and the ongoing demands of the farm.
Recognising suicidal distress	Limited understanding of how suicidal thoughts can develop or present may mean distress is not recognised until it becomes more severe.

Figure 15. Common themes identified throughout travels as to why speaking out continues to be difficult. Source: Author's own.

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

When I began my Nuffield Scholarship, I expected isolation and a lack of connection to be central to understanding suicide risk within agriculture. While both remain important, my travels challenged me to think much more broadly about what prevents people from accessing support. There was no single barrier and therefore there can be no single solution.

Agriculture itself is changing. Farming families are increasingly diverse, roles within them are evolving and previous generations can continue to influence attitudes towards responsibility, risk and expectations of what farming life should look like. This raises the question of whether the language, research and support surrounding mental health have evolved at the same pace, and whether they truly reflect the people working within agriculture today.

One of my biggest reflections was around the commonly held view that farmers are reluctant to seek help. I began to question whether we place too much responsibility on the individual to recognise they are struggling, find the right support and then ask for help. Support can exist without being accessible. Some of the strongest examples I saw involved taking support to farmers through existing agricultural relationships and networks, rather than expecting them to navigate services alone.



Figure 15. The author (right) with Diane Bergsma (left), who established Three Oaks Cabin in Ontario, Canada, in memory of her son Dalles, who died by suicide. The cabin provides respite for farmers and first responders, working in partnership with the National Farmers Mental Health Alliance to offer mental health programmes and therapeutic follow-up support. Source: Author's own.

Trust and relatability were also important. Farmers often valued speaking to and hearing from other farmers who understood their experience, while vets, advisers and others working alongside farmers could build trusted relationships that created opportunities for conversations. For me, understanding needs to work both ways - farmers should not have to become fluent in the language of mental health before professionals learn the language of farming.

Canada particularly challenged my thinking. I met people who were incredibly well connected to their families and communities yet still struggled to talk. Connection creates the opportunity and trust creates the conversation. Even where trust exists, unconscious stigma may still influence whether distress is recognised. We can hold assumptions about what mental illness and suicidal distress look like without even realising they are there. If our image of somebody at risk does not include someone who is loved, financially secure, successful or well connected, we may miss distress in others and potentially ourselves.

My study also made me consider whether suicide prevention within agriculture focuses enough attention on what happens before crisis. Distress may first appear through poor sleep, physical symptoms, becoming overwhelmed, changes in decision-making or struggling to keep on top of the farm, rather than through the

language of mental health. If we only recognise suicidal distress when somebody is in immediate danger, opportunities to respond earlier may already have been missed.

Across my travels, I found considerable research, expertise and examples of good practice - but farmers didn't appear to be present. What I continued to question was how we make sure that the research actually reaches the farm. It isn't enough to simply repackage mental health interventions for farmers; agricultural knowledge and mental health expertise need to come together from the beginning with Farmers part of that process.

Suicide prevention in agriculture therefore needs to be viewed much more broadly than preventing a suicide at the point of crisis. It spans wellbeing, early recognition and intervention, crisis support, recovery and postvention, with responsibility shared across farming communities, agricultural organisations and health service. I have summarised this in a graphic on page 27 of the appendix.

My Nuffield made me rethink the question I started with. Rather than continuing to ask why farmers do not reach out, perhaps we also need to ask how we create systems, services and communities that are better able to reach in.

CHAPTER 10: RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Build on existing agriculture-specific suicide prevention through co-design.**
   Existing suicide prevention work within agriculture provides an important foundation to build upon. Future approaches should be co-designed with farmers to ensure they reflect the language, culture, diversity and realities of farming, and should span prevention and early recognition through to intervention, recovery and postvention - ensuring families, friends and farming communities are appropriately supported following a suicide. Consideration should also be given to how suicide prevention training is delivered. While online training can increase accessibility and reach, further evaluation within agricultural communities is needed to understand the relative value of online, face-to-face and refresher training, and which approaches farmers are most likely to engage with.

2. **Get research off the page and onto the farm.**
   Farmers should be meaningfully involved in deciding what is researched, how findings are interpreted and what happens as a result. Research should also be designed with its eventual reach in mind, considering from the outset how findings will be communicated in ways that are relevant and accessible to farming communities. Researchers, levy bodies and agricultural organisations should take greater responsibility for ensuring that both new and existing evidence moves beyond academic journals and conferences and reaches the farm in a form that can inform practical action.

3. **Make support visible, accessible and relevant to farming life.**
   Greater awareness of existing support is needed among both farmers and professionals so that the information reaches the farm office or kitchen table. Information should be taken to farmers through the places and platforms they already use, including social media, agricultural events and publications, and through less traditional routes such as information included with insurance documents or other routine agricultural correspondence. Support should also be promoted through trusted agricultural networks and relationships, rather than relying on someone who may already be struggling to identify their needs, find the right service and navigate support alone.

4. **Equip and protect the 'accidental counsellor'.**
   Vets, advisers, auctioneers and others working alongside farmers are often well placed to notice changes, start conversations and provide a route into further support. Agriculture-specific training should equip them with practical skills to recognise and respond to distress without expecting them to become mental health professionals. This must also include clear boundaries, opportunities to debrief and recognition of the impact these conversations can have on those providing informal support.

5. **Help farmers recognise distress in themselves and others.**
   Agricultural organisations have an important role in improving understanding of how mental distress can present, including through sleep, physical health, behaviour, decision-making and the ability to manage the farm. This should include challenging unconscious stigma and assumptions about who may be at risk. Positive language and safe storytelling can help normalise conversations and help-seeking, but messages should promote hope, recognise that there are different routes to recovery and always leave people with a clear next step towards support.

CHAPTER 11: AFTER MY STUDY TOUR

My Nuffield Scholarship has strengthened my passion for improving mental health and suicide prevention within agriculture. Throughout my study, I have seen that there is a wealth of knowledge and experience within both agriculture and mental health, but there can still be a gap between the two. I want to use my experience of working in mental health, alongside my understanding of farming, to help bring these two worlds closer together.

Following my study, I intend to continue my role as a Trustee with The Farming Community Network (FCN), using the learning and connections I have gained through Nuffield to contribute to its work supporting farming communities. I also want to continue working alongside our rural community, building on the

connections I have made to raise awareness of suicide and encourage more open conversations.

Within my NHS role, I also plan to apply for a research internship, which I hope will give me the opportunity to develop an agriculture-specific mental health continuum. My hope is to create something that is useful both to those working in agriculture, helping people recognise when they may be struggling and when additional support might be needed, and to professionals, helping them better understand how distress may present within a farming context. Importantly, I want this to be developed alongside farmers and those working within agriculture, bringing together lived experience, agricultural understanding and clinical expertise.

I also intend to build on the national and international relationships developed through my Nuffield travels. I hope to continue conversations and collaboration around reducing stigma within farming communities and recognising, equipping and supporting the 'accidental counsellors' who often find themselves having important conversations with farmers.

CHAPTER 12: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND THANKS

It was incredibly difficult to put all that I had to say and highlight all the relevant experiences into such a short report. There are so many people who influenced and shaped this report that I have not been able to mention – it is also impossible to give thanks each and every person who I have met along this and I have not named people individually due to fear of missing a conversation or notable thought. The generosity and time of those who have shared a meal, a conversation or their home has given me so much joy and something that I will treasure forever. I give my sincere and honest thanks to every person who has given their time to me.

I would like to thank the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust and my incredible sponsors the Yorkshire Agricultural Society. Not only have they been generous enough to sponsor my travel, but they have given me a platform to speak and engage the farming community on many occasions. This is for me what will make the most difference to our community and save lives. I was very aware when I started my study, that the word 'suicide' might make some people feel uncomfortable. However, my sponsors have been so supportive and encouraged me to be open and honest and share that talking about suicide does not cause suicide, but talking about suicide can save lives.

I would also like to say thank you to First Milk who also donated towards my scholarship which allowed me to travel to Switzerland to share my findings.

I would not be truthful if I did not acknowledge that this journey has been hard. Trying to navigate a full-time job which has its demands, childcare, a social life, farm life and family life has been stressful at times, and I have had to 'practice what I preach' on several occasions and take time to look after myself. What has kept me motivated is the life stories and the inspirational people I have met along the way who have shared their homes, lives and kindness.

I must give my thanks to the people at home who supported me to be able to complete this scholarship:

To my Husband Jonny, who has supported and encouraged me throughout this whole journey. You are my inspiration and motivation every day.

To my incredible in laws who have been supportive and moved in every Nuffield travel so that the farm can continue to run, and our daughter's life can continue without too many changes.

To my friend Katie, who has helped me navigate childcare, supported me emotionally and been such an encouraging friend - thanks for being there and the voice of reason when I needed it most.

To my daughter Neave, for being patient while I go on yet another 'big trip'. I look forward to one day you read this and hearing all of what Mum got up to. I hope that I can inspire you to be brave, take opportunities and see where they lead you.

CHAPTER 13: APPENDIX

I have brought the findings and reflections from my Nuffield study together into a psychosocial continuum for mental health and suicide prevention in agriculture (Figure A). The continuum considers opportunities for action across prevention, early intervention, intervention, recovery and postvention, alongside the wider changes needed to create sustainable outcomes. It is not intended to be a validated model, but a starting point for the next stage of my work: developing and co-producing a farming-specific continuum with farmers, agricultural organisations, third-sector services and healthcare professionals.

My findings suggest that farmers may not always recognise when they, or those around them, are struggling, particularly when distress presents through changes in sleep, physical health, behaviour, decision-making or the ability to manage the farm. My hope is that, through co-production, a farming-specific continuum could help farmers recognise changes in themselves and others, understand when additional support may be needed and identify clear routes to appropriate help. It could also support professionals to better understand how distress may present within a farming context and what support may be most appropriate at different stages.

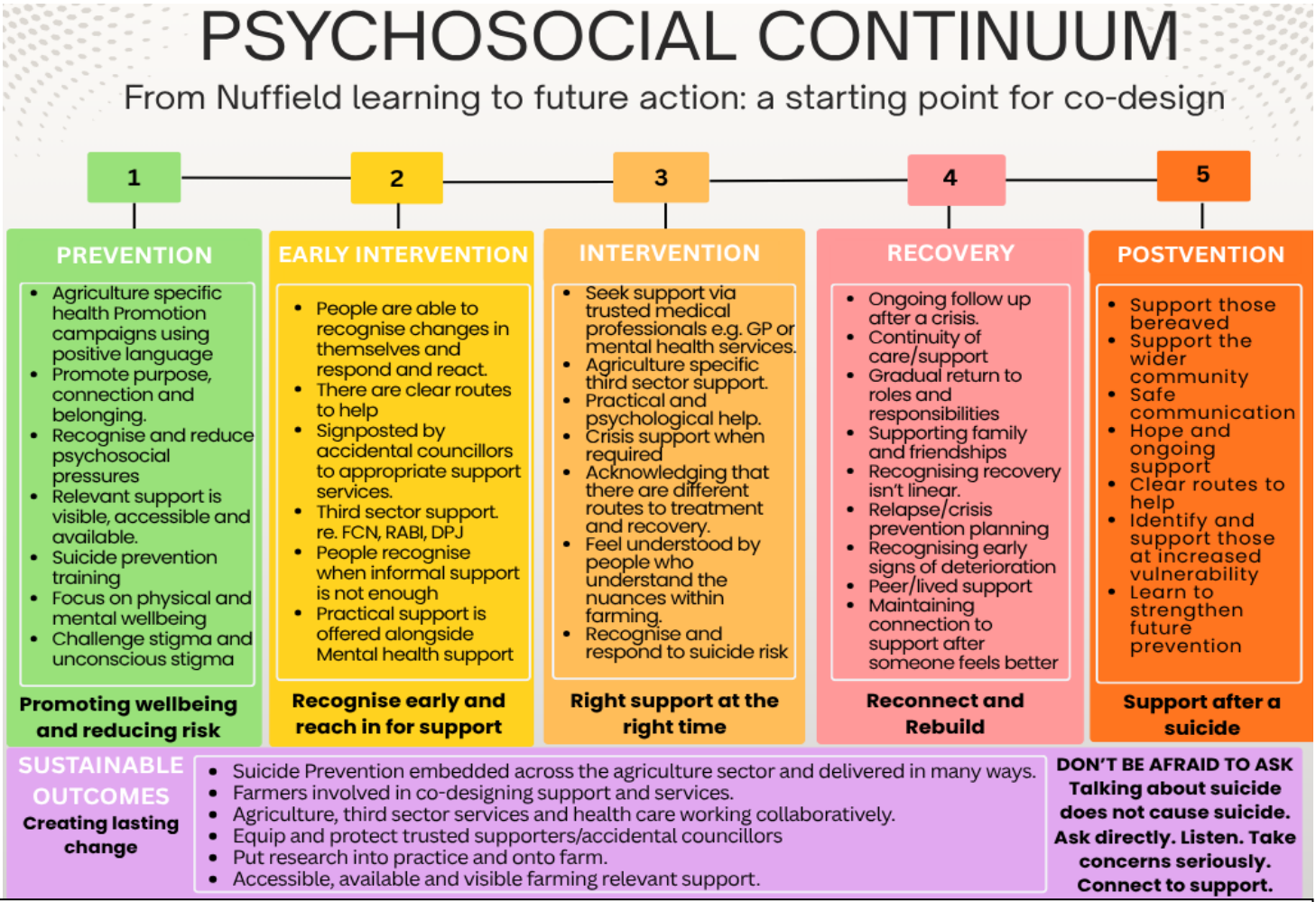


Figure A. Proposed psychosocial continuum for mental health and suicide prevention in farming. Concept and content developed by Lucia Slack, 2026. Reproduction or adaptation should acknowledge the author and original Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust report.



Figure B. Tractor dashboard used to illustrate the importance of recognising accumulating psychosocial pressures and responding to warning signs in ourselves as readily as we would those in farm machinery. Source: AI-generated image by Author.

I have used the AI-generated image in Figure B during presentations with farming communities to encourage a different way of thinking about psychosocial pressures. Farmers routinely monitor machinery and would be unlikely to ignore multiple warning lights appearing on a tractor dashboard. The image applies the same principle to wellbeing, presenting pressures such as workload, finances, paperwork, family, relationships, isolation and market instability as warning lights. It encourages farmers to consider whether they would respond as quickly to warning signs in themselves or those around them as they would to warning lights on their machinery. The aim is not to suggest that experiencing these pressures means someone is mentally unwell, but to encourage earlier recognition when pressures are accumulating and may be beginning to affect wellbeing.

I feel it important to highlight some of the support agencies in the UK that had a rural focus a suicide prevention focus which I did not have chance to mention in my report. I also urge anyone reading to reach out and contact me with any other organisations I am not aware of.

Yellow Wellies – Suicide Awareness and Prevention: Since the start of my Nuffield journey, Yellow Wellies, in partnership with Baton of Hope, has launched the farming pledge. At its heart, the Farming Pledge asks each one of us living and working in farming to learn how to recognise the signs of struggle, have the confidence to start an honest conversation and ensure those who need it can access timely help before a difficult moment becomes a crisis.

The DPJ Foundation – Mental Health Awareness Training: DPJ Foundation in Wales and its Mental Health Awareness Training, which includes suicide awareness and prevention alongside recognising poor mental health, starting conversations, signposting and supporting wellbeing. Its focus on agriculture helps ensure the training is relevant to the realities of farming life for those living in Wales.

PAPYRUS – SPEAK Suicide Prevention Training: At the time of writing, the previously available PAPYRUS SPEAK suicide prevention training for rural and farming communities is no longer available following PAPYRUS entering administration. This represents the loss of a specialist suicide prevention resource for the agricultural community.

Every Life Matters, Cumbria – Rural suicide prevention: A local approach to improving suicide prevention within rural communities. They have actively involved agricultural voices, including providing me with a platform to share my Nuffield learning at their suicide prevention conference and involving me in the co-design of suicide prevention information specifically for the farming community.

RSABI – Suicide Prevention Training: In Scotland, RSABI delivers free ASIST suicide prevention training to those involved in agriculture, providing practical skills to recognise and respond to someone who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts. Their work also extends into postvention through collaboration with The Canmore Trust. They also employed a suicide prevention lead.

Samaritans Cymru and Tir Dewi – Our Farming, Our Future: A Wales-based project specifically addressing suicide risk within farming, with a focus on understanding barriers to help-seeking, building resilience and equipping farmers to recognise when they or others may need support.

CHAPTER 14: REFERENCES

Although this is not intended to be an academic paper and due to the small word count, I have included references where I felt evidence was needed to support key points or statistics. Much of the report, however, reflects my own observations, conversations and learning throughout my Nuffield travels.

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