



**Rural
Support**

The Farm Support Charity for Northern Ireland

Supporting Northern Ireland Farmers

Aoibheann Walsh

**Social Farming and Innovation
Programme Manager**

29th October 2025



**Rural
Support**

Established in 2002

Our Vision – a vibrant, healthy and resilient farming community

Our Mission – to provide professional and practical business and wellbeing support to farmers and farm families

We listen, understand, and value **every** conversation



Rural
Support

- We have a team of 19 employed staff, 21 self-employed business mentors, 15 mental health counsellors, and 8 Support Line volunteers
- Working regionally across Northern Ireland supporting farmers and farm families
- Our foundations are built on offering hope, bringing positivity, empowering people, and **confidentiality**

Northern Ireland Agriculture

- 26,190 farms with approximately one million hectares of land farmed
- 79% of farms are very small
- 69.7% farms in Less Favoured Areas
- Predominant activity is cattle and sheep
- Farmer and farm family main labour input

DAERA Agricultural Census, 2024

ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL IMPORTANCE

- Mean age of farmers is 59
- Male-dominated industry

DAERA Equality Indictors for Farmers, 2018



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

2023 survey – Supporting NI Farmers in Times of Rapid Change

- Launched at the Balmoral Show and publicised widely across the sector. Survey appeared in farming publications, social media platforms, and hard copies located within NFU offices
- Small prize draw for participants
- Rural Support strategy 2024-2027
- **n = 460, 70% male**
- Highest proportion were aged 45-54 (25%) and the majority were married/in a civil partnership (72%)
- 76% identified as either the main farmer or as a farming member of the family farm
- 67% farmed full-time
- Majority (25%) farm 51-100 acres



Rural
Support



NFU Mutual
Charitable Trust

2023 survey – Supporting NI Farmers in Times of Rapid Change

- Main enterprise types: Beef, Dairy, Sheep
- Hours worked per week (FT farmers):
 - 78% work in excess of 41 hours per week
 - 45% work in excess of 61 hours per week
 - 22% work in excess of 81 hours per week
- 61% work alone most of the time on farm
- Respondents were provided with this list of issues and asked to rate them as a concern on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being highest rank.
Top 4 concerns all linked to finance:
 1. Rising Costs
 2. Financial Pressures
 3. Produce Price Volatility
 4. Changes to Farm Subsidies



Rural
Support



NFU Mutual
Charitable Trust

2023 survey – Supporting NI Farmers in Times of Rapid Change

- Top 3 concerns farmers have for their farm family now and in the next 18 months:

1. Physical Health
2. Rising Costs
3. Workload

‘Over-working and tiredness putting a strain on relationships’

‘Insufficient income to encourage the next generation to stay on farm’

‘Physical and mental exhaustion’

- The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale was applied to measure the mental health of participants with the results indicating that 67% of participants scored below the population average
- 55% do not have a successor in mind



**Rural
Support**



NFU Mutual
Charitable Trust

Rural Support's Services 2021-2025



Support provided to **1988** callers to the **Support Line**



732 individuals received **on-farm mentoring support**



85% of clients reported an improvement in their **wellbeing**



5179 Volunteer Hours contributed



Bereavement support provided to **108** farming families through **Life Beyond**



681 counselling sessions provided to farm families



464 older farmers joined as members of our **Plough On** project



125 farm businesses completed the Royal Countryside Fund **Farm Resilience Programme**



19 Social Farms supporting **99** participants per week



15 farms achieved **Social Farming Standards**



Over **73,000** users engaged with our **Farm Support Hub**



4 health campaigns delivered by the Forum and partners



Mental Health Awareness Training gained **CPD Accreditation**



1118 calls made to **Across the Hedgerow** clients



Launch of **PEACEPLUS** project, Growing Together: Social Farming for Peace and Inclusion

Need & Demand – Rural Support Response

- 2024 – 13% increase in calls to our Support Line and 55% increase in demand for our counselling services
- Tailored response from Rural Support
- **ALL** our services are free of any charge
- Tailored to meet need
- We will meet clients in their homes or a venue of their choice
- Bespoke agri-sector knowledge
- Industry-wide recognition as the only farm support charity for Northern Ireland
- No limit on the number of business meetings or counselling sessions required



Unforeseen Financial Distress

1. Referral made
2. Business mentors assigned to facilitate and help clients with conversations with banks, financial lenders, insurance companies, and solicitors
3. Mental health counsellors assigned to provide counselling support for all farm family members impacted
4. Staff and volunteers of our Support Line are there to provide a listening service 9am to 9pm Monday to Friday

Plough On

- A five-year project funded through The National Lottery Community Fund, July 2021-June 2026
- Provides an 18-month programme of social engagement and activities through 17 groups for 463 older, male farmers who have become socially isolated
- Core purpose is to improve mental and emotional wellbeing through socialisation and participation in rural heritage/farming-based activities and excursions
- Delivered by Rural Support with local management through Group Leaders and volunteers



Rural
Support



Plough On – Member Experience

Making new friends



John Johnston © Rural Support

For 87-year-old retired dairy farmer John Johnston from Portaferry, County Down, being a member of the Kircubbin Plough On group since March 2023 has been a great help.

He wishes more people knew about it.

“It’s slow progress to get people out of a lonely state – more people should join Plough On. It has been a real lifeline for me,” says Mr Johnston.

The group, he says, has been fundamental in helping him make new friends and get to know people in his local area.

“We need to get off the farm and meet up in person. Farming, with all its technology, in a way has made us poorer.

“We don’t see people anymore and at my age, it’s difficult to make new friends.”

His call to action for people across the country is to get out there and visit their neighbours in person.

Farmers Weekly, 8 May 2025

Boots on the Ground

- Provides tailored mental health awareness training for agri-sector employees on:
 - Understanding mental health and the factors causing stress within the farming community
 - Recognising signs of poor mental health including anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies
 - Knowing how to engage supportively with someone experiencing stress
 - Knowing the sources of help available and how to access these
 - Increasing awareness of employee's wellbeing and being able to apply self-care tools
- Companies who have received the training:
 - Banks
 - Vets
 - Feed Merchants
 - Insurance Providers
 - CAFRE Advisors



Rural
Support



Farming for the Generations

Planning for Succession

- Mentoring to support the farm family in having discussions on farm succession. Financial support for consultations with a professional and restructuring the business or creating a will

Preparing the Successor

- Training and developing the competencies of the Successor in managing the farm business

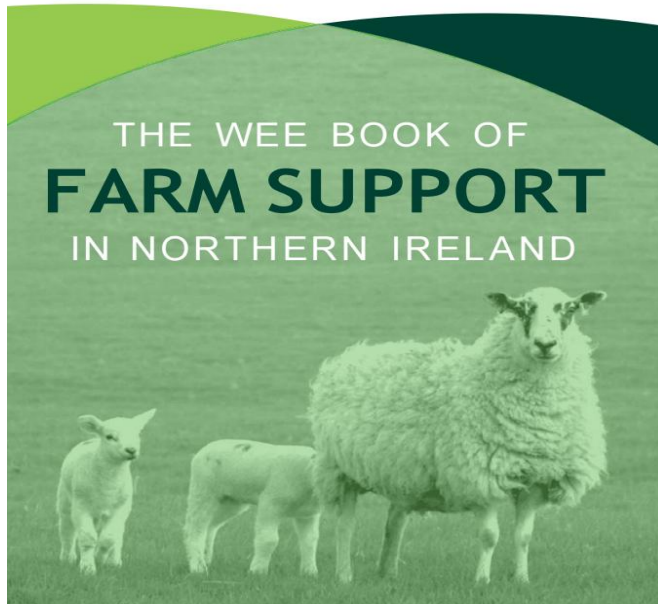
Leading Succession

- Support for the Lead Generation in implementing Succession within the farm business

Farming in Partnerships

- Mentoring and facilitation Support for those without a Successor looking at the future options of their farm business. This also supports new entrants who looking to establish themselves in agriculture

Resources





Rural Support

The Farm Support Charity for Northern Ireland

"Without Rural Support's intervention, neither I nor my farm would be here today!"

Any Questions/Follow-up:

info@ruralsupport.org.uk

028 86760040

www.ruralsupport.org.uk

aoibeann@ruralsupport.org.uk

<https://uk.linkedin.com/in/aoibeannwalsh>