

ON FEIRM GROUND 2

EVALUATION REPORT

Supporting Farmer
Mental Health in Ireland

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Foreword

Supporting the health and wellbeing of Ireland's farming community is essential to ensuring a sustainable, resilient and thriving agricultural sector. Farming is more than an occupation; it is a way of life that underpins our rural economy and the social fabric of communities throughout the country. Yet, as this report reminds us, farming also presents unique challenges that can place considerable strain on physical and mental health.

Recognising these challenges, the Government has committed to strengthening supports that promote positive mental health and wellbeing in farming and rural communities, including through funding initiatives such as On Feirm Ground 2. Central to this commitment is the understanding that improving mental health requires a whole-of-community approach, in which individuals and organisations who have regular contact with farmers are equipped to recognise signs of distress, respond appropriately and encourage timely access to support services.

The On Feirm Ground programme is an important example of this approach in practice. By enhancing the knowledge, confidence and communication skills of agricultural professionals, the programme strengthens the capacity of those already working alongside farmers to identify concerns, engage in supportive conversations and signpost individuals to appropriate services. Building on the successful implementation of the original programme for agricultural advisers, On Feirm Ground 2 has broadened its reach to include veterinarians, veterinary nurses, inspectors, technical staff, staff of non-governmental organisations and other frontline professionals who play an important role within the agricultural community.

The evaluation shows that these developments have been highly successful. Participants reported increased knowledge of farmer health and wellbeing, greater confidence in recognising signs of distress and improved awareness of the supports available to farmers.

Encouragingly, the programme also helped to normalise conversations about mental health within agricultural settings, enabling participants to feel more comfortable initiating discussions that many may previously have found difficult. Importantly, responses six months after the training remained positive, pointing to the potential for lasting impact on professional practice.

The report also highlights the value of practical, strengths-based learning. Interactive workshops, realistic case studies, role-play exercises and opportunities for shared reflection created psychologically safe learning environments where participants could build confidence while learning from one another's experiences. Equally significant was the emphasis on helping participants understand that their role is not to solve complex mental health problems, but to listen, respond with empathy and guide farmers towards appropriate sources of support.

The recommendations provide a clear roadmap for the future, including expanding the reach of the programme across rural communities, strengthening networks of trained professionals, embedding farmer wellbeing within agricultural education, enhancing referral pathways and continuing to build the evidence base on farmer and rural mental health. They also recognise the importance of ensuring that future initiatives respond to the needs of groups who may face additional barriers to accessing support, including women in farming and older farmers.

We would like to acknowledge the commitment of our funders, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Health and the HSE, and everyone involved in the development, delivery and evaluation of the On Feirm Ground programme. This includes the programme facilitators, researchers and partner organisations and, most importantly, the agricultural professionals who participated and generously shared their

experiences. Their collective contribution has strengthened an initiative that has the potential to make a meaningful difference to the lives of farmers and their families across Ireland.

This evaluation demonstrates that On Feirm Ground 2 has moved beyond proof of concept to become a scalable, evidence-informed and implementation-ready programme. It provides a strong foundation on which we can continue to build a coordinated, compassionate and sustainable approach to supporting farmer mental health and wellbeing. By working together across government, the agricultural sector, health services and rural communities, we can ensure that those who dedicate their lives to feeding our nation receive the support they need to live healthy, fulfilling and resilient lives.



Sean Cooke

Chief Executive Officer, Men's Development Network

Executive Summary

Introduction

In Ireland, farmers face significantly poorer physical and mental health compared to the general population, due to a variety of factors such as financial pressures, climate change, rising regulation, succession planning, workload, isolation, injury, family conflict, and lack of access to targeted health services (Cox et al., 2025; Hammersley et al., 2022). These stressors are often intertwined, making it more likely that the person will experience psychological distress and less likely that they will seek help. Access to and trust in informal social support networks also contribute to the wellbeing of farmers. Agricultural professionals are therefore in a unique position to be able to hear and identify the early signs of distress, to start conversations that are supportive and can encourage the farmer to seek out the appropriate service.

The On Feirm Ground (OFG) programme has been designed to enhance the capacity of agricultural professionals to respond effectively to a farmer in distress. Following successful evaluation of OFG1, which focused on agricultural advisers, the programme was adapted and refined for roll-out to a wider cohort of agricultural professionals (OFG2).

Transition from OFG1 to OFG2

Evaluation of OFG1 showed that while the programme was acceptable and effective in enhancing participants' knowledge and confidence in how to engage and signpost a farmer in distress, it recommended a number of key refinements to enhance programme implementation and learning outcomes.

The key adjustments were (i) to include a preparatory learning online module which focused more on background information, with the face-to-face sessions dedicated to discussion, practical application and skills development; (ii) to include an additional 'EARS' de-

escalation training video to build confidence in engaging with farmers in distress. The programme also extended the target reach beyond agricultural advisers to other agricultural professionals such as veterinarians, veterinary nurses and inspectors, NGO workers, and technical staff. Further enhancements were the provision of practical programme resources, better programme coordination with the use of dedicated facilitators, and CVE accreditation for veterinary participants. These advances enhanced the programme's capacity to be implemented nationally, while also being faithful to the programme model.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data before training (T1), after training (T2), and six months after the programme completion (T3). The questionnaires assessed participants' knowledge, confidence, willingness, and perceived abilities to promote farmer mental health and wellbeing and to signpost a farmer in distress to appropriate support services.

Participant and facilitator focus groups were used to gather qualitative data. These explored participants' experiences of the training, changes in professional practice, confidence in engaging with farmers, strengths of the programme, implementation challenges, and recommendations for future development.

Key Quantitative Findings

There were 560 participants who filled out the pre-training questionnaire and 434 who completed the immediate post-training questionnaire. The evaluation showed statistically significant improvements in a number of important outcomes after completing OFG2.

Participants indicated that their knowledge of farmer health and wellbeing increased, and they felt more confident in identifying signs of physical and mental stress and in reaching out to farmers who are experiencing problems. Participants' knowledge of available supports and their level of confidence in signposting farmers to available supports showed the largest gains. Participants also said they were more likely to talk about farmer health and wellbeing in their practice, indicating that the programme helped to "normalise" conversations around mental health in agricultural contexts.

There were 72 respondents at the six-month follow-up, equivalent to approximately 17% of the 434 participants who completed the post-training questionnaire. Responses at six months remained generally positive, suggesting that gains in knowledge, confidence and perceived capability may have been sustained; however, these results should be interpreted with caution given the low response rate and differences in the T3 measures. The translation of learning into specific signposting behaviours was somewhat limited; this appeared to reflect contextual factors (e.g. limited opportunities to meet distressed farmers, lack of referral pathways).

Key Qualitative Findings

The key drivers of farmer distress included financial pressures, workload, farm debt, reputational issues, and changing agricultural demands. Many participants indicated that the farmers who were the most socially isolated tended to be those who were the least likely to access support services.

The training increased participants' willingness to move beyond observing farmer distress to offering active yet professionally boundaried support. Participants reported increased awareness of their own responsibility for recognising distress, starting conversations to seek help, and taking on a role of support without crossing boundaries.

The programme also enabled participants to listen, empathise and signpost, not ‘solve’ complex mental health issues. This clarification of professional boundaries helped raise participants’ confidence while at the same time lowering concerns about stepping outside their role.

Participants consistently noted that the programme was highly practical. Role plays, video demonstrations, practical communication tools, and time for reflection and learning from other professionals in various agricultural disciplines were especially appreciated by participants. Mixed professional groups helped to build receptivity to other views and to strengthen collaboration in supporting farmer wellbeing.

The quality of the facilitators was one of the most salient themes in the evaluation process. Participants repeatedly reported facilitators as being authentic, knowledgeable, supportive, flexible, and highly skilled in facilitating psychologically safe learning environments. This allowed participants to discuss difficult situations openly, share their own professional experiences, and learn from each other’s experiences without judgement.

Participants also expressed their appreciation for the strengths-based approach that was used throughout the programme. The training not only highlighted the problems that farmers face, but participants were also made aware of the skills they already have and how they could challenge their professional practice and practise their skills in a more effective manner with farmers in distress.

Conclusions

The findings show that OFG2 is a step forward from OFG1: the training model has moved beyond proof of concept and is implementation-ready, interdisciplinary and ready for national roll-out.

Overall, three interrelated factors seem to have contributed to the successful implementation of OFG2. First, the reflective, conversational and peer-learning approach fostered a safe space for people to share difficult experiences, learn from peers and grow in confidence by reflecting together. Second, programme facilitators' knowledge, credibility, and experience were found to be vital in sustaining psychologically safe learning environments to ensure meaningful engagement during the training. Third, the strengths-based learning materials, practical communication resources, and reflective exercises allowed participants to identify their current skills, to reflect on their current practice, and to integrate the new knowledge and communication skills in real farming situations.

These factors helped the participants to increase their confidence and communication skills, as well as their readiness to help distressed farmers within the appropriate limits of their profession. The programme continues to be delivered as a blended learning model with the online preparatory module, thus enhancing its sustainability and future scalability.

Recommendations

Map and broaden the reach and impact of the OFG programme in rural communities

- a. Develop a five-year implementation plan that maps out the scale-up of OFG2 in the context of a community of practice approach to farmer mental health and suicide prevention.
- b. Integrate OFG2 training into agriculture-related third-level programmes.
- c. Continue to position OFG2 as a part of a broader continuum of care for those in farming and rural communities.
- d. Develop buy-in from the wider agricultural sector and rural agencies to ensure that those on the frontline dealing with farmers in distress are fully supported to do so.

- e. Extend the programme reach to key gatekeepers in rural communities.
- f. Promote the programme and increase its visibility in agricultural spaces such as livestock marts, agricultural shows, discussion groups and local farming events.

Consolidate the impact and efficacy of the current OFG training for agricultural professionals

Within the community of trained personnel

- a. Provide opportunities for ongoing networking and knowledge sharing post-training with a view to strengthening local networks to support and connect trained personnel and sustain confidence and practice learning.
- b. Strengthen the availability of supports for those who wish to debrief after intervening.
- c. Embed role boundaries and referral pathways to ensure that participants feel confident in supporting farmers without being ultimately responsible for mental health matters.

Within the programme content and delivery

- a. Continue using effective interactive learning approaches: case studies, videos, group discussions, peer learning activities.
- b. Continue with small, workable groups to allow for meaningful contributions from all group participants.
- c. Update and broaden the scope of subjects (succession, family relationships), characters and contexts in case histories and videos, to provide a cache of resources.
- d. Increase the emphasis on navigating boundaries between personal and professional lives.
- e. Improve management of cancellations and re-enrolment protocols.

- f. Explore the possibility of shorter delivery time to some groups.

Expand evidence-based research on rural and farmer mental health in Ireland

- a. Commission an analysis of the mental health needs of women in farming, in line with the Government's Women in Agriculture objectives (DAFM, 2025).
- b. Develop and evaluate specific approaches to reach and engage older farmers and other underserved groups, who may be reluctant to seek support.

1. Introduction

Good mental health is integral to the wellbeing of any population. In Ireland, farmers are a sizeable population who experience elevated levels of physical and mental health challenges (Cox et al., 2025; Rose et al., 2024). Research indicates that contemporary farming combines occupational, economic, social, and cultural pressures in ways that intensify risk while constraining help-seeking (Hammersley et al., 2025; Miller and Rudolphi, 2022). Farmer distress arises from the intersectional impact of external and internal pressures, including financial precarity, compliance demands, climate exposure, succession, heavy workloads, isolation, injury, family strain, and limited access to targeted health supports, rather than single-cause explanations (Daghagh Yazd, Wheeler and Zuo, 2019). Rose et al. (2023) argue that farmer wellbeing must be understood within wider “landscapes of support”, where stress is mediated not only by hardship itself but by whether support is available, trusted, and culturally acceptable. The challenge for intervention design in these contexts is to develop supports that are accessible, culturally relevant, sustainable, and most importantly, effective in supporting physical and mental health for farmers and other farm personnel. The adoption of more targeted, evidence-based support for Irish farmers has been identified as a critical issue by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM, 2023; Brennan et al., 2023).

Farming remains a strongly gendered occupation, with men holding roughly 86% of farm holdings (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Research shows that farmer health behaviours are shaped not only by geographical access to services, but by other socio-cultural determinants, including those aligned with more traditional masculine role identities such as self-reliance, stigma around mental health, and isolation (Firnhaber et al., 2024; Hammersley et al., 2021, 2023). Hammersley et al. (2021) show that the construction of ‘masculinities’ in Irish farming is closely tied to competence, land stewardship, and the capacity to keep going under pressure. Hammersley et al. (2023) extend this idea by showing that the ideals of a “good farmer” and

“good man” remain immersed within expectations of toughness, emotional restraint, and continued performance under strain. Within such settings, physical and emotional distress may be concealed, minimised, or reframed as routine ‘normal’ burdens. In these contexts, help-seeking may carry symbolic and cultural risk for farmers, and this helps us to understand and respond to patterns of resistance to support. Help-seeking among farmers is also impacted by other factors, including stigma (O’Connor et al., 2024), privacy concerns, fear of judgement, and reluctance to be seen as struggling to cope (Firnhaber et al., 2024). Malone et al. (2025) concluded that existing services lack “rural empathy” by being culturally distant, difficult to access, and poorly aligned with farming life. Evidence shows that intervention design must be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the specific challenges of farming contexts rather than assume generic service models will transfer (Roberts et al., 2024). Deegan and Dunne (2022) similarly show that social support is closely related to psychological wellbeing in farming populations, reinforcing the importance of trusted relationships and informal support pathways as enabling factors for farmer wellbeing.

These findings reflect international literature on rural health. A systematic review by Younker and Radunovich (2022) found farmer mental health interventions remain limited in number, methodologically uneven, and often weakly embedded in the reality of farming contexts. The evidence base is expanding but still lacks robust evaluation of what works, for whom, and through which mechanisms (Younker and Radunovich, 2022). Studies of tailored interventions suggest gains are possible when programmes are context-sensitive and role-appropriate. For example, Hagen et al. (2020) reported improved knowledge and confidence following mental health literacy training with Canadian farmers; Gunn et al. (2025) found brief training for non-clinical rural support workers improved confidence in recognising and managing distress; O’Connor et al. (2025) demonstrated that evidence-based educational intervention can strengthen mental health literacy and help-seeking intentions among farmers.

These studies indicate that improvement in mental health outcomes is possible when the content, delivery, and facilitation of interventions are sensitive to the occupational and cultural contexts of farmers.

These approaches are critical in agricultural settings because many farmers may be reluctant to disclose distress to formal mental health services (O'Connor et al., 2025). However, discussions about health issues may surface indirectly in routine encounters with agricultural professionals: advisers, veterinarians, department inspectors, and other rural organisation personnel who regularly interact with farmers through routine work-related practices. Although not ostensibly therapeutic, these roles can be relationally significant in terms of supporting farmer health. Previous research (Rose et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2024) has shown that the development of health supports, particularly regarding a sensitive area like mental health, works well when it is integrated into pre-existing social networks. Hammersley et al. (2022) show that agricultural advisers occupy particularly trusted positions, making them plausible first-line actors for engaging and signposting farmers to seek support. Purc-Stephenson et al. (2024) argue more broadly that effective support in farming communities is rooted in everyday intermediaries, local trust, and context-informed communication, rather than relying solely on specialist services. Strengthening the skills and confidence of non-clinical agricultural professionals, although not a substitute for formal services, is a potentially important complement to health promotion in rural settings.

This interactional space is critical as farmer distress often remains hidden until it adversely affects their lives, their decision-making, relationships, or capacity to cope. Agricultural professionals agree they have unique opportunities to notice changes, open up conversations, acknowledge farmers' concerns, and direct them towards appropriate support (Hammersley et al., 2022). Targeted training can help agri-personnel to learn how to recognise signs of strain, use language that encourages engagement and reduces defensiveness, and promote signposting

to support as credible and actionable for farmers. In Ireland, evaluations of ENGAGE, the national men's health training programme, showed that targeted training can improve practitioner confidence, communication, and translation of learning into practice in men's health contexts (Osborne et al., 2018; Lefkowich et al., 2018), providing a foundation on which to build an intervention tailored specifically to farming.

2. On Feirm Ground

2.1. On Feirm Ground 1

Within this landscape, 'On Feirm Ground, phase 1' (OFG1) was developed as a bespoke response to farmer wellbeing in Ireland. A formative evaluation (Hammersley et al., 2020) established a strong case for a programme designed around farming identities, occupational realities, help-seeking barriers, and practical interaction points between farmers and agricultural professionals. An evaluation of OFG1 showed that tailored training improved self-reported knowledge, confidence, and willingness to engage with farmers in distress among agricultural advisers (Hammersley et al., 2025). It showed that advisers and related agricultural professionals occupy a credible and trusted position within farmers' everyday support environment, making them potentially important actors in supportive engagement, early recognition of distress, and signposting to appropriate services. This critical finding pointed to the need for further development and expansion of the OFG1 training, to equip other agri-personnel who regularly interact with farmers to engage and signpost them to health supports. The challenge was to implement the programme on a larger scale, while retaining the practical and culturally specific aspects of the training.

OFG1 therefore provided proof of concept. Extending the reach of the programme to a broader group of agri-personnel was designed to expand the network of support for farming

wellbeing, ultimately reinforcing social sustainability within farming and mainstreaming a health promotion focus more generally into rural contexts.

2.1.1. Development from OFG1 to OFG2

OFG2 should be understood as the next programme phase: not a new conceptual departure, but a refinement and extension of an evidence-informed intervention (OFG1). OFG2 represented programme consolidation, adaptation, and scaled implementation. The core rationale remained intact. The programme continued to rest on a simple but important proposition: improving farmer wellbeing cannot depend on service availability alone; it also requires strengthening the capacity of trusted non-clinical actors who already interact with farmers in routine professional settings. That proposition is strongly supported by Irish evidence showing that many farmers remain reluctant to seek formal help because of stigma, stoicism, privacy concerns, reputational risk, and perceived lack of cultural fit between farming life and formal services (Firnhaber et al., 2024; O'Connor et al., 2024; Malone et al., 2025). International evidence likewise indicates that mental health literacy training and context-sensitive workforce interventions can improve confidence and readiness to respond appropriately in farming settings (Younker and Radunovich, 2022; Hagen et al., 2020).

OFG1 established effectiveness and acceptability. OFG2 sought to build on that foundation through broader participant inclusion, stronger practice orientation, enhanced learning resources, and structural changes intended to support delivery quality and national roll-out. This marked movement from proof of concept to implementation refinement. OFG2 was therefore designed not simply to raise awareness, but to strengthen what participants could do in real encounters with farmers: initiate conversations, recognise signs of strain or distress, respond within professional boundaries, de-escalate appropriately, and signpost effectively. OFG2 can therefore be understood as a more operational, system-aware, and professionally embedded iteration of the original programme model.

2.2. Key programme adaptations

Documented changes from OFG1 to OFG2 are best understood by programme domain rather than as isolated amendments. This approach makes adaptation logic clearer and shows how refinements were aligned with programme purpose. Table 1 summarises the principal documented adaptations identified for this evaluation.

Table 1. *Key documented adaptations from OFG1 to OFG2*

Domain	Change or adaptation	Rationale
Delivery structure	Introduced an online pre-training module on the need for a farmer health focus, farming masculinities, and factors that influence farmer wellbeing	To shift foundational conceptual content outside face-to-face delivery and protect in-person time for applied discussion, practical exercises, and skills development
Content	Renamed ‘Mainstreaming Farmers’ Health within Extension’ to ‘Normalising conversations on Farmers’ Health’	To reflect a broader participant base beyond advisers and reposition health conversations as legitimate, manageable, and relevant across diverse agricultural roles
Content	Added a training video on how to de-escalate with the EARS approach (Engage, Acknowledge, Reassure, Signpost)	To strengthen applied learning through scenario-based modelling and translate abstract principles into observable communication practice
Materials	Developed the EARS Toolkit as a supporting programme resource	To consolidate core learning, reinforce the communication sequence, and provide a practical signposting resource for post-training use
Participant scope	Introduced large-scale participation of non-adviser agricultural professionals, such as veterinarians, veterinary nurses, inspectors, technical staff, NGO staff and other agricultural workers	To reflect the plural support environment around farmers, within which multiple trusted professionals may notice distress and provide first-line support or signposting
Resourcing and coordination	Appointed experienced national coordinators for programme delivery and implementation	To strengthen delivery consistency, quality assurance, programme administration, and national roll-out capacity
Professional recognition	Veterinary participants can earn Continuing Veterinary Education (CVE) credits	To enhance programme legitimacy, professional value, and recruitment within the veterinary cohort

These adaptations are analytically significant because they indicate substantive programme development rather than simple repeat delivery. OFG2 sought to be more applied, more

interdisciplinary, and more implementation-ready. Arguably, the most important changes were the online preparatory module and the addition of the second EARS de-escalation video. The online preparatory module featured a blended approach to learning as an integral part of the future development of the programme, whereas the second EARS video enhanced the engagement of those agricultural professionals who are more regularly confronted with difficult interactions with farmers. This was not merely a format adjustment. It represented andragogical redesign intended to relocate explanatory content to the pre-training stage and reserve in-person time for rehearsal, discussion, judgement, and skill formation. For a programme whose effectiveness depends on what participants can do in field settings rather than on what they can recall in principle, this represents a stronger training architecture. Other adaptations point in the same direction. Reframing content around normalising conversations, adding a second EARS video and a toolkit, expansion of the programme to the wider agri-sector, and strengthening delivery infrastructure all indicate movement towards a more practice-oriented and system-level model. In that sense, OFG2 should be regarded as a more mature programme version designed to support credible action across the broader agricultural workforce.

3. Aim and Objectives

Aim

To assess the impact of the **On Feirm Ground 2 (OFG2)** delivery on agricultural professionals' reported confidence and practice in supporting farmers' mental health.

Objectives

- i. To examine the impact of the OFG2 training programme on agricultural professionals' self-reported knowledge, capacity, and willingness to support farmer mental health at pre-training, post-training and at six-month follow-up.

- ii. To explore agricultural professionals' experiences of the programme and its influence on their confidence and professional practice when engaging farmers on mental health issues.
- iii. To explore facilitators' experiences of having delivered the programme with a view to informing any changes to the programme.

4. Methods

4.1. Ethics and consent

The quantitative component of the evaluation formed part of the wider OFG evaluation framework and built directly on the measurement approach previously used in the evaluation of OFG1 (Hammersley et al., 2025). The qualitative component formed part of a broader programme of doctoral research approved by the South East Technological University Ethics Committee. Participation across all components was voluntary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the evaluation, the anonymous and confidential handling of data, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage prior to analysis. Completion of the questionnaires was taken as informed consent for inclusion in the survey analysis. Written or recorded informed consent was obtained for the agricultural professional and facilitator focus groups.

4.2. Research participants

The evaluation involved two types of research methodology: quantitative surveys (including open-ended questions), and participant and facilitator focus groups.

OFG2 participants were invited to complete questionnaires at three stages: pre-training, immediately post-training, and six-month follow-up, to provide data for the quantitative aspect of the evaluation.

Qualitative participants were recruited purposively. Agricultural professionals who had completed OFG2 were invited to attend an online focus group by a member of the national

OFG2 administration team. Facilitators were recruited from the pool of OFG2 trainers and invited to an in-person focus group. In keeping with the evaluation purpose, sampling prioritised information-rich participants who could speak directly to programme delivery, programme use in practice, and perceived effects.

4.3. Data collection

4.3.1. Questionnaire study

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered at three time points. The pre-training questionnaire captured baseline demographic information and participants' self-reported knowledge, confidence, and willingness in relation to farmer health and mental health support. The post-training questionnaire repeated the core outcome measures to assess short-term change associated with programme participation. The six-month follow-up questionnaire examined sustained perceptions of training value, continued confidence and willingness, self-reported application in practice, and perceived influence of the training on work practices.

Questionnaire design followed the broad structure used in earlier OFG and ENGAGE evaluations and drew on established training-evaluation approaches used in related mental health literacy work with non-clinical or agricultural populations (Osborne et al., 2018; Hagen et al., 2020; Hammersley et al., 2025). Across the three survey points, the instrument focused on three substantive domains. The first was knowledge of farmer health and mental health. The second was perceived capacity to identify, respond to, and support farmers who may be experiencing poor physical or mental wellbeing, including the ability to signpost appropriately. The third was willingness to raise awareness of farmer health and mental health within local, regional, and broader professional networks. The T3 questionnaire additionally included items on satisfaction with the programme, self-reported behavioural application over the previous six months, influence on work practice, and suggestions for future programme development.

Open-ended items were included to capture participants' reflections in their own words and to inform the qualitative strand of the evaluation.

In practical terms, pre-training and follow-up questionnaires were administered online, while post-training questionnaires were completed in hard copy at the end of programme delivery and returned anonymously. This protected respondent anonymity but meant that individual participants could not be matched across time points.

4.3.2. Focus groups

The qualitative strand comprised focus groups with agricultural professionals and facilitators. Agricultural professionals who had participated in OFG2 were invited to participate in a focus group to offer their reflections as recipients of the programme. Facilitators who delivered OFG2 were also invited to participate in a focus group examining their experience of delivering the programme. In both instances, participants were encouraged to share their reflections on programme content, delivery process, pedagogy, perceived strengths, and areas for further refinement. This section also incorporates survey participants' responses to open-ended questions. This component was designed to capture implementation insight alongside outcome evidence.

4.4. Data analysis

4.4.1. Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data were analysed in IBM SPSS. Analysis proceeded in a staged manner, beginning with data cleaning and descriptive summarisation, followed by reliability testing and inferential analysis. Initial screening involved reviewing frequencies for all variables, checking value labels, identifying missingness, and detecting isolated anomalous or out-of-range responses. A small number of invalid entries were recoded to system missing before further

analysis. For the T1 and T2 comparison, only cases coded as pre-training and immediate post-training were retained.

Descriptive statistics were produced first. These included frequencies and valid percentages for categorical variables and means and standard deviations for scale variables. Demographic summaries covered age, gender, department or professional role, working area, and level of farmer interaction where relevant. For the T1 and T2 dataset, item-level outcomes covered knowledge of farmers' health, ability to support farmers proactively, ability to identify poor physical wellbeing, ability to identify poor mental wellbeing, ability to signpost farmers to support services, and willingness to promote farmer health in local and wider networks.

Two composite measures were then assessed and retained for analysis. The first was a farmer-support capability composite, labelled 'FST', derived from the knowledge and support-capacity items. The second was a two-item 'Willingness' composite, derived from local and regional or national willingness items after cleaning an isolated miscoded response. Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's alpha. The FST scale demonstrated good reliability, while the willingness scale showed acceptable reliability for a short two-item measure. These checks supported the use of both composite measures in subsequent analyses.

Because the T1 and T2 responses were anonymous and could not be linked at respondent level, change between pre-training and post-training was analysed as an unmatched repeated cross-sectional comparison rather than as a paired design. Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare T1 and T2 means for all key outcomes. Levene's tests were examined for equality of variances. Where the homogeneity assumption was violated, the Welch results from the "equal variances not assumed" row were used for reporting. Cohen's *d* was calculated to estimate effect size. To test the robustness of findings given the ordinal nature of the questionnaire items, Mann-Whitney U tests were also conducted for the principal item-level

outcomes. Demographic comparability between the T1 and T2 groups was examined using chi-square tests for age, gender, and professional role.

To assess whether the observed T1 to T2 differences remained after accounting for demographic composition, adjusted univariate general linear models were estimated for the two composite outcomes, FST and Willingness. In these models, time point was entered as the main fixed factor and age group, professional role, and gender were included as adjustment variables. Estimated marginal means, mean differences, 95 per cent confidence intervals, *p* values, and partial eta squared were examined. HC3 robust standard errors were also inspected to assess the stability of the findings under heteroscedasticity.

The T3 dataset was analysed primarily descriptively because of the substantially smaller follow-up sample and the absence of a matched design. Frequencies were calculated for the original follow-up items, particularly the direct behavioural questions relating to active support, identification of physical and mental wellbeing concerns, signposting, influence on work practices, and suggestions for future content. These individual items were retained as substantive findings rather than being absorbed entirely into composite scores. In addition, selected T3 variables were reverse coded where required so that higher scores consistently indicated more positive evaluations. Composite indices were then created for satisfaction with training, perceived ability, willingness to promote farmer health, and applied practice. Reliability analysis was conducted for the satisfaction, ability, and promotion composites. Finally, Spearman's rho correlations were calculated to examine associations between perceived training influence on work practices and the T3 composite measures. A two-tailed significance level of $p < .05$ was used throughout.

A key methodological limitation was the inability to match participants across T1, T2, and T3 because of anonymous data collection procedures. This means that changes over time

should be interpreted as differences between survey waves rather than confirmed within-person change. The comparatively small T3 sample also requires caution in interpreting longer-term follow-up patterns.

4.4.2. Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses, agricultural professionals' focus groups, and the facilitator focus group were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022). Analysis was iterative and inductive in orientation. The process involved repeated familiarisation with the data, initial coding, the development of candidate themes, and subsequent review and refinement of those themes in relation to the aims of the evaluation. Coding moved from more semantic description towards more interpretive reading where appropriate, while remaining grounded in participants' accounts. For the open-ended survey questions, analysis focused particularly on how participants described the influence of OFG2 on their confidence, advisory practice, communication style, and perceived ability to engage with farmers on health and mental health issues. The agricultural professionals' and facilitators' focus groups were analysed with attention to delivery experience, pedagogical reflections, programme strengths, and opportunities for improvement.

5. Results

Quantitative Analysis

5.1. Sample Profile and Comparability

The dataset includes pre-training (T1) and post-training (T2) responses. In order to follow GDPR-compliant anonymous data collection protocols, individual respondents could not be matched across time points; T1 and T2 are therefore treated as independent samples throughout. Table 2 presents the full demographic breakdown. The two groups were broadly

comparable across gender and professional role variables, with a small difference observed in relation to age.

Table 2. *Respondent Characteristics by Time Point*

Characteristic	Category	T1 n (%)	T2 n (%)
Gender	Female	300 (53.7)	230 (53.5)
	Male	257 (46.0)	199 (46.3)
	Other	2 (0.4)	1 (0.2)
Age group	18–24	41 (7.3)	55 (12.7)
	25–34	144 (25.7)	115 (26.6)
	35–44	110 (19.6)	80 (18.5)
	45–54	162 (28.9)	108 (24.9)
	55–64	76 (13.6)	63 (14.5)
	65 and over	27 (4.8)	12 (2.8)
Professional role	Adviser	98 (17.5)	60 (13.9)
	Private Vet	31 (5.5)	25 (5.8)
	Dept. Vet	61 (10.9)	54 (12.5)
	Inspector	83 (14.8)	60 (13.9)
	Dept. Tech. Staff	108 (19.3)	74 (17.1)
	Other	179 (32.0)	160 (37.0)

Note. Values are n (valid %). In total, 560 pre-training (T1) and 434 post-training (T2) questionnaires were returned; totals vary by characteristic because of missing responses (gender: T1 n = 559, T2 n = 430; age group and professional role: T1 n = 560, T2 n = 433).

5.2. Scale Reliability

Prior to hypothesis testing, internal consistency was assessed for both composite measures using pooled T1 and T2 data. As shown in Table 3, the five-item farmer-support capability scale (FST) demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .869$), with corrected item–total correlations ranging from .572 to .758; deletion of any single item did not meaningfully improve alpha. The two-item willingness composite yielded acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .729$; inter-item $r = .574$). These results supported the use of composite scores in subsequent analyses.

Table 3. *Internal Consistency of Composite Scales (Pooled T1 and T2)*

Scale	Items	n	M	SD	α	Item–total r range
Farmer-support capability (FST)	5	952	12.33	3.27	.869	.572 – .758
Willingness composite	2	974	5.06	0.96	.729	.574

Note. $\alpha \geq .70$ = acceptable; $\geq .80$ = good. Item–total r = corrected item–total correlation range.

5.3. Pre-Training Versus Post-Training Outcomes

5.3.1. Independent-samples t-tests

Independent-samples t-tests with Welch’s correction (applied throughout, as all Levene’s tests were significant at $p < .05$) revealed statistically significant improvements from T1 to T2 across all seven item-level outcomes and both composite scores, all at $p < .001$ (Table 4).

The largest item-level effect was observed for signposting ability, which increased by 0.97 points ($d = 1.22$). Substantial gains were also evident for active farmer support ($d = 1.11$), identifying poor mental wellbeing ($d = 1.05$), identifying poor physical wellbeing ($d = 0.96$), and knowledge of farmers’ health ($d = 0.89$). At the composite level, the farmer-support score rose from 10.75 to 14.46 ($d = 1.37$), representing the strongest overall effect in the analysis (see Figure 1).

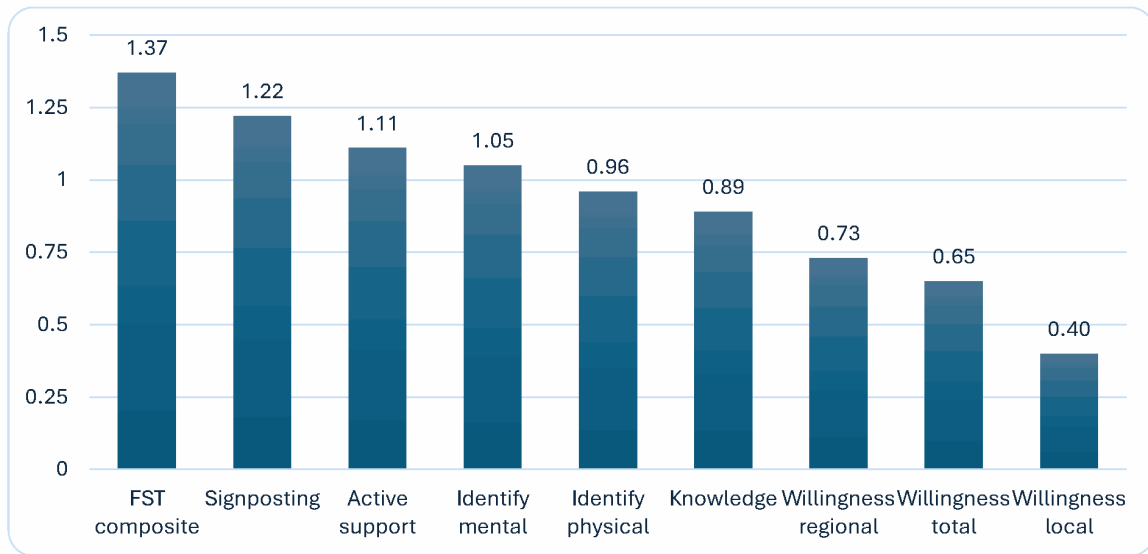


Figure 1. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for changes from T1 to T2

Bars show Cohen's *d* for each outcome; larger values indicate greater improvement from T1 to T2.

Willingness to promote farmers' health also improved significantly, though with smaller effect sizes: local willingness ($d = 0.40$), regional/national willingness ($d = 0.73$), and the willingness composite ($d = 0.65$). This pattern, whereby capability gains exceeded willingness gains, is plausible, as training typically shifts knowledge and task confidence more rapidly than broader advocacy disposition.

Table 4. Independent-Samples *t*-Test Results: T1 Versus T2 on All Outcome Variables

Outcome	n ₁	T1 M (SD)	n ₂	T2 M (SD)	T2-T1	Welch t	p	d	Effect
Knowledge of farmers' health	553	2.25 (0.70)	410	2.87 (0.68)	0.62	13.65	<.001	0.89	Large
Actively support farmers	557	2.02 (0.68)	426	2.81 (0.76)	0.79	16.95	<.001	1.11	Large
Identify poor physical wellbeing	558	2.39 (0.70)	427	3.05 (0.66)	0.66	15.09	<.001	0.96	Large
Identify poor mental wellbeing	558	2.22 (0.69)	427	2.95 (0.69)	0.73	16.37	<.001	1.05	Large
Signpost to support services	555	1.86 (0.71)	424	2.83 (0.88)	0.97	18.45	<.001	1.22	Very large

Outcome	n ₁	T1 M (SD)	n ₂	T2 M (SD)	T2–T1	Welch t	p	d	Effect
Promote health locally	560	2.45 (0.53)	422	2.66 (0.50)	0.21	6.21	<.001	0.40	Small to moderate
Promote health regionally	558	2.35 (0.57)	422	2.74 (0.47)	0.39	11.55	<.001	0.73	Moderate to large
Composite Scores									
FST composite	546	10.75 (2.48)	406	14.46 (2.98)	3.71	20.42	<.001	1.37	Very large
Willingness composite	558	4.80 (0.98)	416	5.40 (0.83)	0.60	10.24	<.001	0.65	Moderate

Note. T2 – T1 = positive values indicate T2 improvement. d = Cohen’s d (pooled SD). FS items: 4-point scale (1 = Poor to 4 = Excellent). WILL items: 3-point scale (1 = Not at all willing to 3 = Very willing). Welch’s correction applied throughout.

5.3.2. Non-parametric sensitivity analysis

Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted to verify the parametric findings given the ordinal nature of the scales. As shown in Table 5, the post-training group achieved significantly higher mean ranks on every item (all $p < .001$), confirming that the pre-to-post pattern is robust and not dependent on distributional assumptions.

Table 5. Mann–Whitney U Sensitivity Tests for T1 Versus T2 Item Differences

Outcome	T1 Mean Rank	T2 Mean Rank	U	Z	p
Knowledge of farmers’ health	393.08	601.93	64,194	–12.49	<.001
Actively support farmers	379.62	638.94	56,043	–15.21	<.001
Identify poor physical wellbeing	393.60	622.90	63,666	–13.64	<.001
Identify poor mental wellbeing	385.90	632.95	59,374	–14.57	<.001
Signpost to support services	368.78	648.67	50,383	–16.14	<.001
Promote health locally	449.18	547.66	94,459	–6.22	<.001
Promote health regionally	416.23	588.71	76,295	–10.84	<.001

Note. Higher mean rank = more favourable outcome. All comparisons significant at $p < .001$.

5.3.3. Adjusted analysis (ANCOVA)

Univariate ANCOVA models were fitted for both composite outcomes, with age group, professional role, and gender entered as fixed factors, to account for the observed age

imbalance. As shown in Table 6, the post-training advantage remained highly significant for the farmer-support composite ($F = 429.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .315$) and the willingness composite ($F = 93.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .089$). In both models, age, professional role, and gender were non-significant covariates. Levene's tests were non-significant (FST: $p = .156$; willingness: $p = .633$), and HC3 robust standard errors confirmed identical conclusions. These results demonstrate that the observed T1-to-T2 improvements were not attributable to demographic composition differences between survey waves.

Table 6. *ANCOVA Adjusted Means for Composite Outcomes, Controlling for Age, Professional Role, and Gender*

Outcome	Adj. T1 (95% CI)	Adj. T2 (95% CI)	Diff.	F	p	η^2p
FST composite	11.36 [10.30, 12.41]	15.06 [13.99, 16.12]	3.70	429.45	<.001	.315
Willingness composite	4.70 [4.34, 5.06]	5.29 [4.92, 5.65]	0.59	93.70	<.001	.089

Note. Diff. = $T2 - T1$ adjusted. η^2p = partial eta squared. Age, professional role, and gender were non-significant in both models. HC3 robust estimates confirmed the same pattern.

5.4. Six-Month Follow-Up (T3)

A total of 72 respondents completed the six-month follow-up questionnaire. Because the T3 instrument used different scale anchors and a different number of response options than the T1/T2 questionnaires, direct mean comparisons across time points are not appropriate. The T3 findings are therefore reported descriptively.

5.4.1. Satisfaction with training

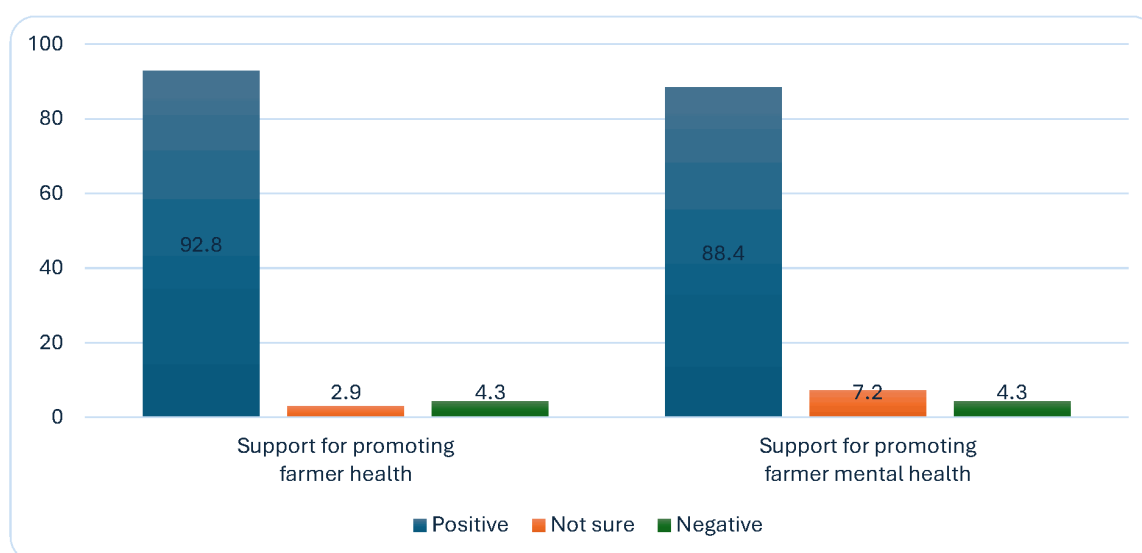
Among 69 valid respondents, satisfaction with OFG2 remained high at six months: 92.8% reported being very satisfied or somewhat satisfied that the training supported them in promoting farmers' health, and 88.4% gave equivalent positive ratings for mental health promotion specifically (Table 7). Dissatisfaction was rare on both items.

Table 7. *Participant Satisfaction with OFG2 at Six-Month Follow-Up (n = 69)*

Satisfaction Item	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not Sure	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	n
Promoting farmers' health	45 (65.2)	19 (27.5)	2 (2.9)	1 (1.4)	2 (2.9)	69
Promoting mental health	39 (56.5)	22 (31.9)	5 (7.2)	2 (2.9)	1 (1.4)	69

Note. Values are n (valid %). Three respondents did not answer.

Satisfaction remained high at six-month follow-up as shown in Figure 2, with positive ratings above 88% for both farmer-health and mental-health support. This indicates that favourable appraisal of OFG2 persisted beyond the immediate post-training response.

**Figure 2.** Satisfaction ratings at six-month follow-up

Stacked valid percentages for T3 satisfaction items.

5.4.2. Self-rated ability and promotion behaviour

As shown in Table 8, the majority of respondents rated favourably their ability to identify poor physical wellbeing (70.8% Good/Very Good), identify poor mental wellbeing (82.9%), and signpost farmers to services (81.9%). Self-rated ability to actively support farmers was more mixed, with 47.2% rating this Good or Very Good and 37.5% selecting Not Sure.

This pattern suggests greater confidence in recognising distress and directing referrals than in influencing proactive health behaviour change.

Table 8. *Self-Rated Ability at Six-Month Follow-Up*

Self-Rated Ability	Very Good	Good	Not Sure	Poor	Very Poor	n
Actively support farmers	8 (11.1)	26 (36.1)	27 (37.5)	8 (11.1)	3 (4.2)	72
Identify poor physical wellbeing	16 (22.2)	35 (48.6)	19 (26.4)	2 (2.8)	—	72
Identify poor mental wellbeing	10 (14.3)	48 (68.6)	12 (17.1)	—	—	70
Signpost to support services	18 (25.0)	41 (56.9)	10 (13.9)	2 (2.8)	1 (1.4)	72

Note. T3 scale: 5-point (Very Good to Very Poor), differing from T1/T2's 4-point scale. Values are n (valid %).

Retained capability at T3 was strongest in recognising poor wellbeing and signposting support, as shown in Figure 3, while confidence in proactively changing farmer health behaviour remained more tentative. This suggests stronger consolidation of recognition and response functions than of direct behaviour-change influence.

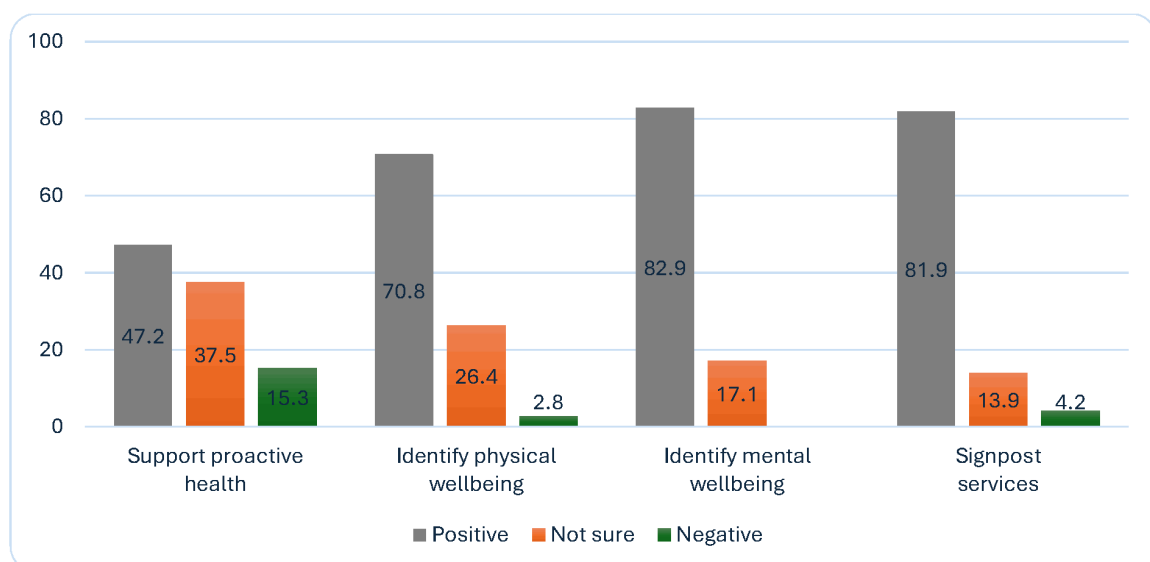


Figure 3. Retained capability at six-month follow-up

Just over half of respondents reported having promoted farmers' health at least once within their local (52.8%) and regional/national (54.2%) networks, with approximately one in ten reporting frequent promotion at both levels (Table 9).

Table 9. *Health Promotion Activity at Six-Month Follow-Up (n = 72)*

Promotion Activity	Yes, Frequently	Yes, Once/Twice	Not Sure	No	n
Local network	8 (11.1)	30 (41.7)	13 (18.1)	21 (29.2)	72
Regional/national network	10 (13.9)	29 (40.3)	21 (29.2)	12 (16.7)	72

Note. Values are n (valid %).

5.4.3. Behavioural application of training

Table 10 presents the self-reported behavioural application of OFG2 at six months. The strongest finding was that 79.1% of valid respondents reported that the training had influenced their work practices, and 69.6% reported actively supporting farmers to be more proactive about their health. However, the more specific clinical-adjacent behaviours were less commonly reported: 30.6% had identified and acted on poor physical wellbeing, 25.9% on poor mental wellbeing, and 31.6% had signposted farmers to support services. The asymmetry may reflect limited opportunities to encounter farmers in distress and access to referral pathways, rather than necessarily indicating a failure of training transfer.

Table 10. *Behavioural Application of OFG2 Training at Six-Month Follow-Up*

Behavioural Item	Yes	No	n	% Yes	Missing
Actively supported farmers' health	48	21	69	69.6	3
Identified/acted on poor physical wellbeing	19	43	62	30.6	10
Identified/acted on poor mental wellbeing	15	43	58	25.9	14
Signposted to support services	18	39	57	31.6	15
Training influenced work practices	53	14	67	79.1	5
Suggested additional topics for future	11	38	49	22.4	23

Note. Valid percentages reported. Missing data varied by item due to questionnaire routing. The item on training influence on work practices excludes five cases with ambiguous coding.

Training appears to have shifted everyday practice more strongly than specific action opportunities such as signposting or direct identification of distress. The strongest follow-up transfer lay in perceived influence on work practice and active support, whereas specific behaviours such as signposting or identifying distress were reported by smaller minorities. This pattern points to uneven behavioural realisation rather than an absence of training effect, as shown in Figure 4.

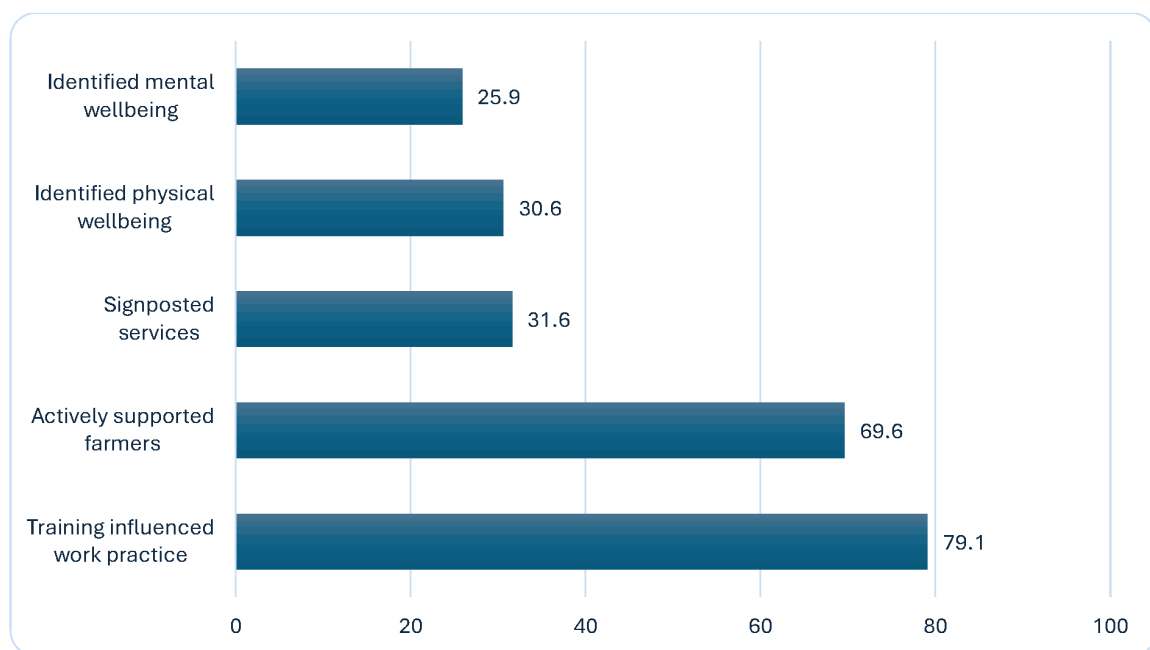


Figure 4. Impact on work practices at six-month follow-up

5.4.4. Composite summaries and inter-construct associations

Table 11 presents composite descriptive statistics for the T3 constructs. Mean satisfaction was high ($M = 4.45/5$), self-rated ability was moderately positive ($M = 3.82/5$), promotion activity was moderate ($M = 2.43/4$), and the average behavioural application count was 1.45 out of a possible 4 actions (actively supporting farmers to be more proactive about their own health; identifying and acting on signs of poor physical wellbeing; identifying and acting on signs of poor mental wellbeing; and signposting farmers to support services). The satisfaction composite demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .777$), while the ability and promotion composites showed more modest internal consistency ($\alpha = .620$ and $.668$,

respectively)—adequate for short exploratory follow-up scales but warranting caution in interpretation.

Table 11. *Composite Descriptives for T3 Constructs*

Composite	n	Range	M	SD	α	Items	Composition
Satisfaction	69	1–5	4.45	0.78	.777	2	Both items in Table 7
Ability	72	2.5–5	3.82	0.53	.620	4	All four items in Table 8
Promotion	72	1–4	2.43	0.85	.668	2	Both items in Table 9
Application	69	0–4	1.45	1.21	—	4	‘Yes’ count: first four items in Table 10

Note. All composites use reverse-scored items (higher = better). The application composite is a count index; no α is reported.

Spearman correlations (Table 12) indicated coherent but non-redundant relationships among T3 constructs. Self-rated ability was most strongly correlated with promotion behaviour ($r = .500$, $p < .01$). Perceived work-practice influence was positively associated with satisfaction ($r = .359$), ability ($r = .427$), and promotion ($r = .399$), all $p < .01$. A notable finding was the near-zero correlation between perceived work-practice influence and the behavioural application count ($r = -.018$, ns), indicating that perceiving the training as influential does not equate to reporting more specific follow-up actions—a distinction with implications for how programme impact is conceptualised and measured.

Table 12. *Spearman Correlations Among T3 Key Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Work practice influence	—				
2. Satisfaction	.359**	—			
3. Ability	.427**	.301*	—		
4. Promotion	.399**	.288*	.500**	—	
5. Application count	-.018	.246*	.314**	.262*	—

Note. Pairwise $n = 64$ – 72 . * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

5.5. Summary of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative evaluation of OFG2 produced a coherent and consistent set of findings. All pre-to-post comparisons were statistically significant at $p < .001$, with large-to-very-large effect sizes for knowledge and capability outcomes and small-to-moderate effects for willingness. These results were robust to non-parametric testing and remained significant after adjusting for demographic covariates. At six-month follow-up, respondents reported high satisfaction with the training and strong perceived influence on work practices. Self-rated ability was favourable, and over half had engaged in health promotion activity. However, the translation of training into concrete identification and signposting behaviours was reported by a smaller subset, suggesting that while OFG2 effectively built capability and confidence, the realisation of specific behaviours is mediated by contextual factors including opportunity, access to referral pathways, and the incidence of farmer distress encountered in practice. The comparatively small T3 sample also requires caution in interpreting longer-term follow-up patterns.

5.6. Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative study was undertaken comprising seven sessions (focus groups and individual interviews) with 18 agricultural professionals who had taken part in the OFG2 programme. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

5.6.1. Context of farmer distress

There was broad consensus around the issues impacting most on farmer distress and contexts influencing farmers' stress, intersecting at individual, cultural and wider societal levels. Social disconnection for farmers is on the increase, and participants attributed isolation to structural and cultural issues, for example, greater use of technology and mechanisation, decreased social interaction, increased online paperwork, and migration of younger generations to urban areas.

“People are more isolated than ever now, even though there’s more information.”

Agricultural Adviser (FG4)

Isolation was seen as compounding farmers’ capacity to seek help, as at an individual level they simply were not used to opening up and talking about challenges that they may be facing.

“You know, when you work in isolation, and like it’s back to what we said, you know, the male masculinity, they might not want to vent to their neighbour, be seen as weak or not on top of things...” Veterinary Inspector (FG2)

These changes have an ongoing compounding impact on already isolated groups of farmers. Participants perceived older farmers as more vulnerable, describing them as having had fewer educational opportunities, being more likely to endorse restrictive masculinity norms, being less familiar with technology, and having fewer opportunities for socialisation or less inclination to join knowledge transfer groups.

“You know, farmers, I suppose they do work in isolation. They’re their own boss. An awful lot of what they’ve learned was passed down to them traditionally, especially with the older cohort.” Veterinary Inspector (FG2)

Participants reflected on the paradox that the more socially connected farmers in rural areas were more likely to benefit from a health intervention, while more isolated farmers were ‘underserved’ and missed out on the benefits of services, even targeted services that could support them.

Other prominent sources of distress among farmers were financial and reputational. Volatility in farm incomes and long-term debt featured prominently as concerns. Even among so-called ‘big farmers’, the reality for many was that scale came at a price in the form of large-scale borrowing:

“You could have a very nice-looking farm, a lot of investment going in, and the biggest stress is coming from the financial end of it, from the bank.” Dairy Adviser (FG3)

Participants also reflected that as agricultural professionals, they were in a unique position to understand and empathise with farmer distress linked to reputational damage or intergenerational responsibility. For example, unlike the general public, they understood the vocational aspects of farming and how emotionally invested farmers were in their livelihoods. This distress was exacerbated by fears of losing their farms or land, letting their family/heritage down, and the potential reputational impact of not meeting their financial obligations.

“Farms and even that whole succession thing, you could have, you know, a daughter that is the main farmer, but you know, maybe the son is seen as the heir to the throne as such...” Dairy Adviser (FG3)

“Whereas the pressure on a 35-year-old farmer who is after investing a million, you know. I can only imagine the mental health, the pressures of a thirty-five year old, who inherited three hundred acres, but feels he has to buy another two, it is pressure, like.” Facilitator 2 (FG7)

Participants asserted that societal attitudes impacted farmers’ mental health. Farmers were increasingly being held to account and unfairly or disproportionately blamed for animal welfare issues, environmental issues, and climate change. They referred to what they regarded as unfair media coverage around these issues, which further compounded farmer distress and left farmers feeling defensive in asserting that this was not the case.

“From a business sense, it doesn’t make sense to be cruel to animals because productivity is lower if they’re not happy. So, like in the dairy industry, if the cow isn’t happy, she’s going to produce less milk, which means less money.” Agricultural Inspector (FG5)

“As a farmer, you could name every single one of your cows and know all their personalities... what’s really hurtful is when people think farmers don’t care.”

Agricultural Inspector (FG5)

The emotional attachment to the land and their livestock resulted in some farmers being willing to farm at a loss, choosing to seek out supplementary work to address shortfalls in income, just to be able to hold onto the farm and to retain a sense of pride and role identity as a farmer. However, issues with succession and holding on to family farms are a source of ongoing stress or anxiety in rural communities.

“We have a very unique position in Ireland and we’re very emotional farmers. A lot of us aren’t business people and that’s probably quite evident in salaries and payments.”

Agricultural Inspector (FG5)

5.6.2. Stepping up to the plate

Participants were encouraged to take part in the training through word-of-mouth from colleagues and frequent exposure to farmers who were distressed. Participants explained their reasons for joining the programme were to enhance their knowledge of mental health and to better understand how to respond to farmers in distress.

“Yeah, it can be hard sometimes, you know, you’re nearly afraid to start it because the conversation...” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

“I am coming across more farmers each day that seem to be struggling with the challenges of farming and feeling fed up with the lifestyle.” Survey respondent

“Sometimes you’re talking to them, and they’re just kind of very down about it all, and sometimes it’s just nice to have a bit of information or something that you could help them along with it.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

As such, they wanted to progress from merely ‘standing in the gap’ to assuming a more proactive role in supporting farmer mental health. There was also a sense of not wanting to be caught off guard by being ready to respond should the need arise.

“We had a few different chats about finding ways to help some of our suppliers who were struggling mentally. And we knew that none of us were very well equipped to do that. So, we went and looked for the OFG2 programme to be better equipped to deal with issues that.” Quality Adviser (FG1)

“It’s one of those trainings where I suppose you don’t really realise you need it until you do need it. So, I feel it is important that anybody working with [farmers] in any aspect of their job, should probably have some sort of basic training in this.” Dairy Adviser (FG3)

Others were prompted to enrol in training because they noticed their colleagues were struggling with mental health issues, and they wanted to be equipped with basic knowledge and skills to support them. Participants indicated that they had an inherent moral responsibility and duty of care to ‘step up to the plate’ and do what they could to help someone in distress. Others noted that animal welfare was intrinsically linked to farmer wellbeing. They welcomed the opportunity to see the bigger picture, presented in the OFG2 training, to become empowered to identify indicators of distress/crisis, provide support, and refer individuals to services or resources.

“I actually had a discussion with a colleague about this recently and he was saying, ‘they’re really encouraging us to do it [OFG2] and it’s not our job, why is it falling on us? Yes, our job is to care for the animals, but the way that the animals are best cared for is if the person looking after them is okay. So, it might not be our job, but if we can

intervene and guide, then that's a pretty important thing to do so." Veterinary Inspector (FG1)

"And it's like it's everybody's business really, because if we meet a human being that's under pressure and because of attending a course, you're a little bit more aware and you're also, you're not wondering, what can I do? You just give a little signpost, and that can just make the difference." Welfare Adviser (FG1)

Playing their part by engaging and signposting farmers to support was also seen as contributing to a wider process of challenging stigma and normalising mental health discourses in rural contexts. The programme was seen as a welcome development in responding to the need for normalising mental health discourses in rural contexts by broadening awareness and understanding of the cumulative nature of the stressors farmers experience and how they deal with that stress. Whether they engaged with farmers in person or on the phone, participants felt the OFG2 training provided skills and confidence to respond sensitively to farmers (or colleagues) who were distressed, and to lift the lid on what was historically a taboo subject.

"I suppose the more it's talked about, the more normal it is, five years ago, it wasn't as openly talked about. Whereas as nowadays, it's everyone's responsibility to be willing to have that conversation, that it's not something embarrassing or awkward." Dairy Adviser (FG1)

In order to maximise the impact of the training, it was acknowledged that the wider agricultural sector and rural agencies needed to get behind the training to ensure that those on the frontline dealing with farmers in distress are fully supported in this.

5.6.3. Navigating boundaries

Participants expressed concerns about opening up discussions with farmers, finding the right language, and not biting off more than they could chew in terms of the support they could

provide. At the same time, they were also acutely aware of the potential cost of not acting at all, and this was the incentive to complete the OFG2 training.

“[OFG2] kind of gave us the confidence to have the conversation with suppliers. And I suppose, also that like you can only give the information or support number, or do your check-in, your kind of nearly have to leave it at that, you can’t really take it home after that, you kind of nearly need to leave it.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

Within this context, there were some concerns about navigating what could be regarded as conflicting roles.

“How do I wear my Inspector hat and/or human hat? This is a struggle...” Agricultural Inspector (FG4)

Participants recounted the challenges they face in striking the right balance between responding with empathy to a farmer in distress and managing the demands of their professional and personal boundaries.

“But it’s actually just great to have the reminder of like, this is where you draw the line and you can’t take on everyone else’s problems. And like, and it’s not your responsibility to do that to take on those problems.” Veterinary Inspector (FG1)

Some inspectors explained they were initially hesitant to apply for the training, fearing that their ‘Big Bad Wolf’ persona in rural discourses might impact on the welcome they received. In practice, this situation did not arise, and attendees repeatedly remarked on the warm welcome they received from facilitators and other participants. While it was acknowledged that farmers might not necessarily open up to inspectors, the training was still seen as relevant and beneficial for them, as it provided a better understanding of the accumulation of structural, cultural and personal challenges facing farmers and facilitated more empathic interactions and greater awareness of the potential mental health impact of their interactions.

“On the one hand, it’s a fine line between minding your own business and not getting involved and letting everybody else get on with theirs. And being able to spot the signs when, you know, when things aren’t right.” Welfare Adviser (FG1)

Participants welcomed the clarification the training brought about where to draw the line in terms of protective boundaries – staying within the confines of signposting, being aware of one’s limitations, recognising the ‘bigger picture’ and understanding that they are not ultimately responsible for the issues impacting on farmer mental health.

“And so our little bit in it is if we come across a situation, that we’re able to be a bit more informed and targeted, a little bit more than we were, without getting personally involved because I mean, we can’t carry everybody’s, drama or we wouldn’t be able to function. Which is what we do a lot of the time.” Animal Welfare Adviser (FG1)

These boundaries were seen as being particularly important for guiding and promoting engagement with farmers in distress. They provide a protective function, offering skills, knowledge, protocols and confidence to engage, acknowledge, reassure and signpost farmers to appropriate supports for their situation, drawing a clear line underneath the participants’ responsibilities to a farmer in distress.

“I mean, it was good in that line to kind of take away from it that it’s not your fault. Like you can only do so much and then refer them where they need to go. Because sometimes I would go away from calls and be really upset about it or whatever, because we’re only human.” Agricultural Inspector (FG1)

Participants discussed the necessity of a recalibration of their professional problem-solving role in supporting farmer mental health. The programme helped participants to realise that meaningful support does not necessarily come in the form of answers. Rather, it emphasised the need to listen, make time for discussion and direct people to the right resources for help.

The shift in attitude led participants to feel more at ease in initiating challenging conversations by recognising the boundaries of their professional practice.

“...from my perspective as a vet, generally our role when we go on to farm is to cure, to help, you know, in your traditional sense, you fix the problem. But what I took from this is, well, it’s not my job to fix...” Agricultural Inspector (FG2)

5.6.4. Expanding the tools of the trade

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the programme with many regarding it as the best training they had ever attended; it was seen as novel (particularly in its applied/interactive methodology and departure from ‘information trading’) and unique in its focus on men. Participants explained that the programme helped them expand their tools of the trade by making them feel more prepared to start difficult conversations and respond in a supportive and sensitive manner.

“How to actually approach it and how to start the conversation without offending them or maybe causing an argument, but that you were confident enough to go in and say something to them if you were worried.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

“I learned how to engage in scenarios where I am dealing with a client who may have mental health pressures. I learned some good tips on how to defuse situations and how I should engage and signpost.” Survey respondent

Active empathetic listening, the use of role plays and video, and opportunities for the sharing of personal experience, group discussion and peer learning were cited as being particularly useful in meeting the programme objectives and in bringing a more human/warm interaction rather than a business/scientific lens into difficult conversations with farmers.

“It was interactive... we were able to talk through the videos and give our own experiences.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

“The mix of videos and class participation, I think it worked well. And I think it stimulated thought and reflection.” Welfare Adviser (FG1)

“I think there’s still power within a short course like this, to go, let’s see who’s in the room, let’s learn within the room, but there’s no wrong or right.” Facilitator 1 (FG7)

A key learning was giving farmers space to speak their mind, respecting farmers’ position and expertise, and understanding that farmer wellbeing and the factors impacting farmer wellbeing were highly individualised.

“There’s no real definite(s) around it... Every encounter is unique.” Dairy Adviser (FG4)

For example, one participant remarked that not every farmer will want to open up in conversation and that this should be respected. Acknowledging that there were ‘horses for courses’ meant that all farmers should be afforded the same support irrespective of their willingness to talk openly about their mental health. In the same vein, participants learned about the complexities in reading ‘signs’ and the importance of avoiding generic or reductionist approaches to identifying farmers ‘at risk’.

“The main take-home point I found was letting the farmers know you listen to them and understand them. You’re not just saying, like, a tough one. Just letting them know and kind of understand that it is a bit of a worry for them, you know.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

“Maybe, he’s someone who talks to that farmer about 30 times a year, being able to pick up on, is he clean shaven or is he looking well. I find that learning, if you have people from admin, inspectors, Vets, mixed groups, it works quite well.” Facilitator 2 (FG7)

Practical resources, step-by-step guidance, and reflective exercises were seen as helpful in developing strong communication skills and in the application of the learning to real-life scenarios and farming contexts.

“The smaller group worked well because it was very easy to speak out.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

“if you’ve got 7, 8, 9, in a group, I’ve often found that you can really get the conversations going ... You’ve time to go through and work with the material. You’re not having to do crowd management.” Facilitator 3 (FG7)

“Where you’d a smaller group, nearly everyone in the room at some point, did talk and you could literally see the confidence grow.” Facilitator 2 (FG7)

Participants also welcomed the programme materials that provided clear signposting on accessing supports and the framing of these materials as ‘you are not a burden, this is their job, they would love to hear from you.’

“The book that we got towards the end, [EARS], I just thought was a really good, nice summary of steps and options of where to go. It was nice to have something physical to refer back to afterwards.” Veterinary Inspector (FG1)

“The steps laid out in ‘EARS’ [Engage, Acknowledge, Reassure and Signpost], showing participants how to engage and signpost farmers in distress, both stays with the participants and encourages use of the training with farmers on the ground.” Veterinary Inspector (FG1)

Participants repeatedly referred to the quality of the facilitators and their facilitation skills. They were described as genuine, congruent, inclusive, focused on the group's experiences, and flexible.

“My top aspect of the training, first of all it was the presenters of the course. They were really good and they were talking with passion and you knew, they stood out, in the sense that they were appeared to be very genuine, skilled.” Animal Welfare Adviser (FG1)

Participants felt valued and respected in the room, while the creation of a safe space was regarded as the cornerstone on which the training was built. Facilitators modelled this approach in delivering the programme, which in turn permeated to how the group operated throughout the day. Participants praised the facilitators for being supportive, genuine, and non-pushy. They were adaptable and flexible in their approach and had the ability to tap into and integrate the expertise in the room into the learning throughout the day. As a result, participants felt comfortable speaking and sharing their experiences.

“It's a safe space and when nothing in the room is kind of going out of the room or anything, anything like that. I think then just allows everyone to open a bit more, up a bit more and the facilitator has been willing to share, I think as well, encourages everyone else to maybe share a bit more.” Veterinary Inspector (FG1)

The facilitators were experts at providing a respectful, collaborative and well-informed training that had a lasting impact. This, more than anything else, is what made OFG2 stand out from other training models/experiences participants had in the past.

“I experienced the training as being spoken with, and not spoken to.” Department Officer (FG6)

“So that’s really important, if you’re going to plan a programme like this, you have to go for a tone, we have to make sure it’s in there, because the tone it’s everything, in being a success.” Facilitator 5 (FG7)

A small minority raised concerns that some examples did not completely capture the reality of farming culture and that mental health discussions might, in reality, be more complex.

“For some participants, there could have been an element of, ‘this is very wishy-washy’... is this the real world? Is this the manner in which a farmer should talk to me?” Agricultural Inspector (FG5)

There was largely positive feedback about having mixed groups. This format enabled insight from a wider lens, helping participants to see the bigger picture and to consider multiple perspectives in approaching a problem.

“I was in a mixed group with some people from the department, some Teagasc people, there’s a couple of vets, there was maybe some co-op people there as well. It was a real mixed group. So seeing a different side as well, so, I thought the mixed group was really beneficial.” Veterinary Inspector (FG2)

Listening to other people’s thoughts and experiences through group discussions enabled participants to gain insight into how others with different professional backgrounds felt whilst simultaneously taking stock of their own perspectives on farmer mental health.

“We all saw the same video, but we came with different viewpoints and reflections afterwards and interpretations, so that was interesting.” Veterinary Inspector (FG2)

“I love the mix, there’s nothing as great as coming from the veterinary or the inspection side and...you’re listening to the community nurse, the people on the phones and you’re

going ‘Wow, they’re picking up on the tone and everything that’s going on, without even being on the farm.’ And seeing that transfer of learning.” Facilitator 2 (FG7)

This format also facilitated an atmosphere in which participants felt at ease in speaking freely and not having to mind their Ps and Qs. This process seemed to act as a catalyst for developing a more empathetic and non-judgemental approach in dealing with farmer mental health. It was also seen as showing agricultural professionals and farmers alike as human and simply ‘doing their job’.

A foundational aspect of the training was the emphasis on ‘self-care’. Participants described how the facilitators modelled the OFG2 approach in the room; they felt listened to and heard, and this support also opened conversations about their own mental health and wellbeing.

“I think [self-care] is hugely important, because they realise they are going to be minded today. We’re starting to build a trust and we’re also starting to build a self-care message.” Facilitator 1 (FG7)

Participants were encouraged to think about the sustainability of their work with farmers by reflecting on who or what was supporting them:

“OFG training made me cognisant of taking note of my mental health, checking-in with myself, not just looking after everyone else.” Assistant Agricultural Inspector (FG5)

The balance in this approach, the focus on ‘taking care of yourself’, was a significant contributor to the lasting impact of the OFG training for participants.

In summary, participants welcomed the strengths-based approach that underpinned the delivery of the training. While there was an explicit acknowledgement of the problems and challenges that needed to be addressed, participants were left to reflect on how to be part of the

solution to farmer mental health by applying their newly acquired knowledge and practical skills in their day-to-day interactions with farmers.

5.6.5. The bigger picture

There was overwhelming support for scaling up the programme across the range of occupations, with many participants saying they highly recommended it to colleagues. Skills and the confidence to speak to farmers and other rural workers, holding boundaries and self-care, were the main takeaways from the training. There was strong support for extending the reach of the programme within rural communities and for engaging with community platforms like marts for better engagement and accessibility. Adopting this community of practice approach was seen as the key to more holistically supporting farmer mental health. While the focus of the training was carefully and well targeted at farming and farmers, many participants spoke also of its wider application and relevance beyond the farming sector.

“The training is so good, we should promote it more widely and vigorously, as there are so many front-facing people in rural space who would benefit from it – farm planners, community guards, rural community nurses and paramedics.” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

Participants stressed the importance of creating a broad network of support within the wider agricultural sector and rural organisations for the OFG2 training. In particular, top-down support and increased visibility of the programme would encourage and enable people on the frontline dealing with farmers in distress to participate in the training.

“I don’t know much about OFG and where we are at, I would think talking to the professionals that deal with the rural farmers or whatever is important. I think you need to go out there into the heart of the communities and try and get people together using

whatever systems are in place - Marts. And, for people close to farmers, I think that could be effective!” Dairy Adviser (FG1)

One such example was where, as a result of the OFG2 training, a group of Department officials began meeting regularly to review their practice, which resulted in an OFG2-trained inspector being tasked with (i) conducting a follow-up call with clients who were in significant debt to ascertain if they were distressed or experiencing difficulties in coping, and (ii) checking in with colleagues to see how they were doing and if they had been impacted by the emotional toll of dealing with numerous hardship cases.

Some participants highlighted the crucial network of support created by family members, particularly women. It was noted that family members often detect changes in behaviour, broach challenging topics and facilitate referrals to mental health supports. Women were often referred to as the ‘backbone’ of farming families and are recognised as important facilitators of communication when issues of wellbeing arise, as well as providing emotional support.

“It’s your women, and we all know we’re the backbone. Let’s not pretend here... We’re all together.” Higher Executive Officer (FG6)

Participants indicated that often family members would like to be able to help one of their loved ones in distress, by opening up a conversation, but may feel uncertain as to what to say or how to start a discussion. This underlines the potential value of supporting and addressing family-based dynamics within the programme.

5.6.6. Summary

Overall, the qualitative results show that three interrelated strengths enabled the successful implementation of OFG2. First, the reflective, conversational, and peer-learning aspect of the programme provided a safe and supportive setting to discuss difficult experiences, gain insight

from others, and develop confidence in engaging with distressed farmers. Second, the importance of the skills, experience, and authenticity of the facilitators was continually emphasised as being key to the success of the programme, and participants appreciated the facilitators' capacity to create a learning environment that was inclusive for all, facilitated meaningful discussion, and integrated the expertise within the group. Third, the strengths-based learning materials, practical communication tools, and reflective exercises allowed participants to identify their current abilities, conceptualise their own professional practice, and determine feasible ways of integrating the knowledge and resources acquired into their professional realm to support farmers. Together, these helped increase participants' confidence, communication skills, and readiness to respond appropriately to farmers' distress, and supported the overall implementation and future development of the OFG2 programme.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Map and broaden the reach and impact of the OFG programme in rural communities

- a. Develop a five-year implementation plan that maps out the scale-up of OFG2 in the context of a community of practice approach to farmer mental health and suicide prevention.
- b. Integrate OFG2 training into agriculture-related third-level programmes.
- c. Continue to position OFG2 as a part of a broader continuum of care for those in farming and rural communities.
- d. Develop buy-in from the wider agricultural sector and rural agencies to ensure that those on the frontline dealing with farmers in distress are fully supported to do so.
- e. Extend the programme reach to key gatekeepers in rural communities.
- f. Promote the programme and increase its visibility in agricultural spaces such as livestock marts, agricultural shows, discussion groups and local farming events.

6.2. Consolidate the impact and efficacy of the current OFG training for agricultural professionals

6.2.1. Within the community of trained personnel

- a. Provide opportunities for ongoing networking and knowledge sharing post-training with a view to strengthening local networks to support and connect trained personnel and sustain confidence and practice learning.
- b. Strengthen the availability of supports for those who wish to debrief after intervening.

- c. Embed role boundaries and referral pathways to ensure that participants feel confident in supporting farmers without being ultimately responsible for mental health matters.

6.2.2. Within the programme content and delivery

- a. Continue using effective interactive learning approaches: case studies, videos, group discussions, peer learning activities.
- b. Continue with small, workable groups to allow for meaningful contributions from all group participants.
- c. Update and broaden the scope of subjects (succession, family relationships), characters and contexts in case histories and videos, to provide a cache of resources.
- d. Increase the emphasis on navigating boundaries between personal and professional lives.
- e. Improve management of cancellations and re-enrolment protocols.
- f. Explore the possibility of shorter delivery time to some groups.

6.3. Expand evidence-based research on rural and farmer mental health in Ireland

- a. Commission an analysis of the mental health needs of women in farming, in line with the Government's Women in Agriculture objectives (DAFM, 2025).
- b. Develop and evaluate specific approaches to reach and engage older farmers and other underserved groups, who may be reluctant to seek support.

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