

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Inquiry into suicide prevention – discussion with Tir Dewi, 21 June 2018

Discussions with representatives of Tir Dewi – Gareth Davies (co-ordinator); Eileen Davies (founder); Rita Jones; Gill Gibson

Dai Lloyd AM (Chair); Angela Burns

Background

- Tir Dewi was formed in 2015 with the aim of providing a listening services for farmers to work through their problems and improve their welfare;
- There are currently 19 trained volunteers working with Tir Dewi who assist with casework and answering the helpline, there is 1 part-time employee who co-ordinates the organisation's work;
- It covers the areas of Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion;
- All volunteers are from a farming background;
- Tir Dewi is funded through 2 grants from the Diocese of St David's and the Prince of Wales countryside fund and charitable contributions – funding from both grants is due to cease shortly.

Pressures on farmers

- Farmers are faced with regulatory and administrative pressures from numerous directions, including bovine TB, animal welfare regulations, the various payment schemes and farm inspections – all can cause fear for farmers and impact on their mental wellbeing;
- The combination of several pressures in addition to the normal burdens of workload and financial pressure can lead farmers to consider a suicide attempt;
- One of the representatives referred to a completed suicide where the farmer had incorrectly completed a form to receive a grant, the loss of the grant had been the final straw;
- The loneliness of working alone can also be a contributing factor in poor mental health;
- When farmers suffer a bereavement or adverse experience, the work of the farm must still continue, in practical terms any loss means one less pair of hands to milk the cows or tend to the animals;



- Farmers often deal with numerous departments across the Welsh Government and local government, communication between departments can be poor and lead to frustration;
- Farm inspections are particularly stressful times for farmers, inspectors often aren't trained to recognise signs of poor mental health in farmers;
- Cuts to animal welfare and inspection budgets have led to those teams focussing solely on enforcement work and having less time to build relationships with farmers.

Suicide among farmers

- Representatives said that all farmers knew a farmer who'd taken their own life;
- Tir Dewi has worked on over 100 cases since its formation, many of which have felt desperate enough to lead to discussions on suicide;
- Tir Dewi sometimes receives calls for assistance to work alongside the mental health crisis team in cases where an understanding of farming and agriculture is needed, but this doesn't happen often enough;
- No specific stats available on the number of farmers who complete suicide;
- Representatives were unaware of the Welsh Government's Talk to Me 2 strategy;
- A specific mental health strategy for farmers is needed, produced with input by those who understand the pressures faced by farmers.

Stigma

- People don't realise that mental health is an illness;
- Although there is more awareness of mental health issues now, people don't know what to say, so often don't say anything;
- It can be difficult to get farmers to talk or to ask for help

Training for those working with farmers

- Representatives were aware that farm inspection teams from the local authority areas covered by Tir Dewi would be receiving mental health training organised by the DPJ Foundation, mental health training should be undertaken by staff of all those organisations who interact with farmers;
- Representatives valued the work of the Welsh Government's farm liaison service, but felt that communication with and across other departments could be improved.
- It was felt that farm inspectors should have a duty of care to farmers.



Annex

An answer for Angela Burns AM following a meeting in Carmarthen on 21st June 2018

WHY DO ISSUES SUCH AS SUICIDE, BEREAVEMENT AND ILLNESS IMPACT FARMERS MORE THAN OTHER PARTS OF OUR COMMUNITY?

Issues such as these have a serious impact on all parts of society, particularly bereavement and suicide, but the way in which it impacts a farm is often not thought through – it is easier to treat it in the same way as everyone else. We would like to point out a number of differences which make the impact much worse for a farmer and, then to give a real and current example to illustrate this.

I will use the example of bereavement but the points which I will make are equally applicable to suicide or serious illness. When a death occurs in a farming family it can have all of the impacts that it does elsewhere, plus the following:

- It may seem callous to regard a family death in this way but, when a member of a farming family dies it means that there is one less pair of hands to do the work on the farm. This is a very serious issue in the modern farming world as employed labour has been replaced with more automation and larger equipment. This means that a farm might be run entirely by the family with no external support. It also means that farms are leveraged to a greater degree with finance or leasing arrangements on the equipment needed to 'keep up' with the increasing move towards industrialisation of farming. It is not an exaggeration to say that farmers might be working 16 hours a day, 7 days a week already so how can they cope with this loss? The answer is too often that they can't... jobs get missed, the welfare on the farm drops, income reduces and the farmer becomes stressed; all of this on top of the fact that a family member just died.
- In other parts of our society, when a family member dies we might get compassionate leave from work, support from management, colleagues, HR and even friends, all of which helps. Some seek counselling to help them overcome the loss. When a death occurs on a farm, the cows still need to be milked this morning, and this evening and tomorrow.... There is no compassionate leave. Funerals are most often arranged for the middle of the day so that the farmer can do the milking before it and get home in time to milk again afterwards. Farmers work in isolation so there is no management from which to seek support, there are no colleagues and there isn't an HR department to provide support. Also, far too often, farmers don't have many friends as they work such long

hours that there is not time for them. Finally, farmers are notoriously 'proud' and the idea of seeking counselling wouldn't sit well, even if they could find the time!

- It is often the case that fathers run the farm and the sons take over either when the father becomes too old or dies. Planned succession isn't always given much consideration. This means that the son might never have made decisions on the farm, never had financial responsibility, never have bought or sold livestock. There are so many aspects to farming that need to be dealt with that, particularly in the case of sudden death, the impact is completely overwhelming. The effect on mental health can be devastating. And it's not limited to the father, mothers are often the ones who do the accounts or ordering of supplies or the online animal movements and passport registrations. The same can apply in the case of a mother's death.
- A farm will have a Holding Number against which all of its registrations are held. This is needed for stock movements, purchases, sales and for the purposes of grant applications including the Farm Basic Payment. While different cases can differ, often a death can require a change in the registered holding. This is a complex process which can involve many steps including remeasuring the farm... If this process is ongoing when the Basic Payment is due then it can sometimes not be approved. The payment can make up a huge proportion of overall farm income so, at this difficult time for all of the above reasons a far could also find itself with 20, 30 or even 40% of its turnover missing!

I'm sure there are more ways in which impacts are felt but let me provide a brief, real and current example as an illustration. I will not mention the name or the area but this is still an unresolved case:

A farmer died in 2016 after a short, unexpected illness. Unfortunately, he died without a will. The family was complicated including two sons who each had farmed in partnership with their father on different holdings. There had also been a divorce and a subsequent long-term relationship. All of the above suddenly applied! Because probate was not granted, the basic payment was not made in 2017. As the estate was so complex, it was still ongoing 12 months later and the 2018 basic payment was also withheld. At last probate was granted but then a claim was made against the estate sending it back into a legal process.

OK, we could all say that it was the farmer's fault for not making a will, that they should have had a better lawyer... all sorts of judgements. But the impact on one of the sons has been enormous! He owes money to every supplier possible to an extent that people will only deal with him on a cash basis. He is working ridiculous hours to try to keep afloat and, all in isolation as his farming partner (his father) has died and he can't afford to pay wages. His mental health has suffered enormously but he doesn't have time to go to the doctor 'only to be told to rest'. In this case, suicide is a very real part of almost every discussion that we have with family members.

Forgive me for such a long answer; we encounter elements of this on such a frequent basis and it can all contribute to consideration of or even the action of suicide. Indeed, when my next-door neighbour, a dairy farmer died some years ago, his son committed suicide within days!

If you require any other information or elaboration, please do get in touch. We are only too happy to contribute to this important process.

Gareth Davies