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AKIS actors as 'accidental counsellors' in the landscape of support for farmer mental health: a critical framework

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To evaluate the opportunities and risks of widening the landscapes of support for farmers' mental health by educating non-expert actors in agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS).

Methods: A survey (n = 162) of AKIS actors, including agronomists, contractors, health and safety consultants, and landlords' agents. Mental health training was offered to 30 landlords' agents and two contractors, with a pre-training survey (n = 26), a post-training survey (n = 15), and seven follow-up interviews of those trained.

Findings: Our paper shows that AKIS actors are not experts in mental health but may act as 'accidental counsellors', which, in turn, causes secondary trauma. The ability of AKIS actors to support farmers' mental health is influenced by knowledge, relationships, and personal norms, community embeddedness, experience and seniority, and sometimes, conflicts of interest. AKIS actors also need support themselves.

Practical implications: Our paper illustrates the value of educating AKIS actors to support farmers' mental health, as well as the support and guidelines these actors need to feel supported themselves. We provide evidence to policy-makers on the limitations of relying on non-experts to support farmers' mental health.

Theoretical implications: Constructs an extensive critical framework that explores the role, opportunities, and risks of AKIS actors performing a support role for farmers' mental health.

Originality/value: Our critical framework brings to the fore previously unidentified issues, such as conflicts of interest and the need to critically evaluate the role of so-called 'accidental counsellors'.

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Accidental counsellor; AKIS; education; extension; mental health; wellbeing

1. Introduction

The concept of 'Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems' (AKIS) is most commonly used to describe the mix of different actors and institutions, which includes agricultural

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extensionists/advisors, that support farmers in making decisions (see Knierim et al. 2015; Sutherland and Labarthe 2022). This paper critically considers the potential role of different actors in agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS) within the support landscape for farmers' mental health. It builds on early work, which has highlighted the potential role of agricultural advisors in supporting the mental health of farmers (e.g. Gunn and Hughes-Barton 2022; Hammersley et al. 2025; Skaczkowski et al. 2025) and has started to identify their training needs and the burdens such a role may place on them (Aka and Enticott 2025; Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025).

The mental health of some farmers around the world is poor, as they deal with a combination of pressures (Becot, Kohlbeck, and Ruszkowski 2023; Daghagh Yazd, Wheeler, and Zuo 2019; Rose et al. 2023; Younker and Radunovich 2022). In England and Wales, over a third of farmers are probably or possibly depressed (RABI 2021), with similarly alarming statistics elsewhere, including potentially a quarter of farmers at risk of suicide in Ireland (Russell et al. 2023) and a higher rate of suicide amongst farmers and ranchers in the US compared to other occupations (Miller and Rudolphi 2022). Mental health challenges faced can vary depending on characteristics like age (Rose et al. 2024), gender (Budge and Shortall 2023; Hammersley et al. 2023; Roy et al. 2025), sexuality (Billington et al. 2025; Cuthbertson et al. 2024; Hoffelmeyer, Wypler, and Sohn 2023), and race (Smolski and Schulman 2024), with intersectionality creating different combinations of pressure.

The literature has examined the 'landscapes of support' for farmer mental health (Shortland et al. 2023). Though support landscapes vary across countries and regions, research has generally found that farmers, at least in principle, can seek help from various support sources. This can include professional healthcare (state- or privately funded), mental health charities, faith groups, peers, family, and friends, as well as other people in rural communities and agricultural organisations. There is increasing interest in digital support (Gunn et al. 2023), including interventions delivered by virtual reality (FarmingUK 2025) and the potential role of animals[1]. There are also efforts to understand if and how generative AI (through chatbots) should or might play a role in landscapes of support for mental health, although concerns have been raised (American Psychological Association 2025).

The potentially important role that actors within pluralistic AKIS arrangements (Nettle et al. 2017) could play in supporting the mental health of farmers has been recognised (Becot et al. 2025; Perceval et al. 2018; Robertson et al. 2021). These actors include a range of individuals who regularly come into contact with farmers, either in an advisory, regulatory, or technical capacity[2]. Early research suggested these individuals could play an important 'accidental counsellor' role (Perceval et al. 2018) because they regularly interact with farmers who may otherwise be isolated. This term relates to the fact that these individuals are not trained counsellors but are often thrust into situations with distressed farmers, in which they are seen as a trusted individual to help.

Their role in the landscapes of support could be important in light of known barriers to farmer help-seeking. These include stoicism and stigma in traditional agricultural communities (Hammersley et al. 2023), an optimism bias which leads to some farmers downplaying problems (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2024, 2026), poor availability and long wait times of healthcare in rural areas (Hull et al. 2022; Ruszkowski et al. 2026), and limited accessibility due to lack of time (Healthwatch North Yorkshire 2025), isolation, and poor

public transport links in declining rural communities (Healthwatch North Yorkshire 2025; Shortland et al. 2023). Therefore, barriers to farmers gaining help from professional sources of support, such as primary healthcare providers, are multi-faceted. Even if a farmer did not suffer from stigma and wanted to take steps to gain support, the lack of availability of healthcare services in rural areas (Ruszkowski et al. 2026), particularly of healthcare professionals who understand the complexities of farming life (Hull et al. 2022; Shortland et al. 2023), could prevent help from being received. Given it is challenging for farmers to access healthcare services in rural areas, attention is being placed on providing mental health support in places where farmers already are (Cole and Bondy 2020), including in auction marts (Field Nurse,[3] Nye, Winter, and Lobley, 2022, 2023), agricultural colleges and universities (Winder et al. 2024), as well as training advisors who go out onto farm (Hammersley et al. 2022). If AKIS actors, who travel down the farm track or interact with farmers in various agricultural settings, can be equipped with the skills and confidence to spot signs of distress and know how to support farmers, the safety net for farmers could be widened, particularly for 'harder to reach' individuals (Robertson et al. 2021).

Thus far, there has been limited critical analysis of the potential role and effects of AKIS actors supporting farmer mental health. Existing research often focuses solely on extension agents or has relied on small or homogeneous samples, which are unlikely to account for the heterogeneity of roles and effects between different types of AKIS actors. In Australia, several papers have explored how rural financial counsellors and extension agents can support the mental health of farmers, finding that they can play a key role as a first point of contact, particularly with good training (e.g. Fuller and Broadbent 2006; Gunn and Hughes-Barton 2022; Hossain et al. 2010; Skaczkowski et al. 2025). Hammersley et al. (2025) found that training of public and private farm advisors in Ireland increased knowledge, capacity, and willingness to help farmers with their mental health. One of the main worries of the advisors who had taken the training was the ability to fit such a role into their existing workloads (also Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025), as listening and reacting to farmers' worries would involve staying longer at appointments Similarly, in Canada (Hagen et al. 2020) and New Zealand (Morgaine et al. 2017), it was found that mental health training for people who work with farmers improved knowledge and confidence to support farmers in need. Also in New Zealand, Knook et al. (2023) highlighted a role for participatory extension programmes in supporting farmer wellbeing.

Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley (2025) specifically looked at how different AKIS actors, or 'accidental counsellors', support farmers with their mental health. Based on a small sample of 14 from South-West England (veterinarians, lawyers, mortgage brokers, accountants, and other farm advisors), Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley (2025) found that these individuals are witnesses to the worries of farmers, build trusted relationships with them, and deliver care by listening and providing emotional support and extra time. However, 'accidental counsellors' also reported that encounters with distressed farmers stayed with them. This is consistent with other research that has explored the secondary trauma faced by veterinarians (Campbell et al. 2023; Purc-Stephenson and Doctor 2025), extension agents (Benge and Beattie 2021; Benge, Harder, and Goodwin 2015; Russell et al. 2019; Strong and Harder 2009), and rural financial counsellors (Gunn and Hughes-Barton 2022), who regularly encounter farmers in distress.

Secondary trauma faced by agricultural mental health charity workers has been explored by Aka and Enticott (2025), who identified various coping mechanisms used by individuals. Each of these papers highlights the need to support the supporters. Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley (2025) suggested that various interventions could help 'accidental counsellors', such as training to improve confidence and knowledge to signpost farmers towards support, and arrangements to support their own wellbeing. This phenomenon is noted commonly outside of agriculture in job roles that involve encountering people in distress. Termed variously as 'secondary traumatic stress' or 'vicarious trauma' (May et al. 2024), a substantial body of literature explores how roles such as social workers or healthcare workers experience negative impacts from the nature of their work, such as burnout or compassion fatigue (e.g. Bercier and Maynard 2015; May et al. 2024; Newell et al. 2010). Some research suggests that secondary trauma can be enhanced if individuals also encounter personal trauma in their own lives away from the workplace (Leung, Schmidt, and Mushquash 2023). This can lead to high turnover in the workplace, which, in turn, means that those needing support suffer from a lack of care (Canfield 2005; Sova 2021; Whitton 2018). This body of literature outside of agriculture has explored ways of allowing these individuals to cope or build resilience to secondary trauma and is a skill that is often the focus of training among professional mental health workers. Resilience may be considered to be 'the antidote to burnout; the ability to persevere despite seriously difficult life experiences' (Sova 2021, 5). Possible interventions include peer support (Pascoe and Stanley-Clarke 2025), increased training, education, boosting awareness of the risks (Sova 2021), and behavioural therapies (May et al. 2024).

Outside of the academic literature, there are examples of programmes that provide (or have provided) support for members of agricultural and rural communities to help farmers with their wellbeing. These include (but are not limited to), the Accidental Counsellors Support Hub[4] in the south-west of England and training offered in the region by the Imagine If partnership[5], AgriBalance in Australia[6], the COMET Training programme[7] in Colorado State (USA), GoodYarn in New Zealand (Morgaine et al. 2017), In The Know in Canada (Hagen et al. 2020), and On Feirm Ground[8] in Ireland.

Though nascent research has begun to explore if and how different AKIS actors perform accidental counselling roles, further studies are needed. Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley (2025) note that their limited sample may have missed nuance and breadth, whilst Hammersley et al. (2025) focused only on a specific type of AKIS actor (extension agents acting solely on the farmer's behalf). Both a lack of breadth and depth of investigation into the role of different AKIS actors have limitations for three reasons. Firstly, different AKIS actors have varying professional relationships with farmers. Some may be acting specifically for the farmer if hired to do so; others may be visiting the farm to act on the instruction, or in the interests, of others. Some may have dual roles, sometimes acting solely for the farmer, whilst at other times acting in the interest of another party. These differing professional relationships, and in some cases conflict of interest, are likely to affect if and how some AKIS actors can support farmers' mental health, as well as how doing so affects the AKIS actors. Secondly, the focus on just a few AKIS actors or small samples of other actors is unlikely to account for heterogeneity within and across different professional roles, including experience. Thirdly, whilst existing research has partially explored how some AKIS actors respond to farmers' worries as 'accidental

counsellors', there is limited examination of the factors affecting how individuals respond.

Our study builds on initial work by constructing a critical framework that can be further developed and validated to guide future research and policy efforts to optimise the use of 'accidental counsellors' in landscapes of support for farmer mental health. Utilising a more extensive sample than previous studies, we focus on three research questions.

(1) How do AKIS actors currently support farmers with their mental health?
(2) What impact does the accidental counselling role have on those supporting farmers, and what, if any, support mechanisms do they have to cope?
(3) What accidental counselling role, if any, should different types of AKIS actors play in the landscape of support, and what support may they need?

The latter question is of particular focus, since there is no existing research that has critically examined it. As a result, the opportunities and risks of relying on different AKIS actors to support farmers' mental health have not received enough critical attention, which could be especially risk-prone in light of the inadequate provision of professional mental healthcare in rural areas. Though our study was conducted in the UK, we argue that our framework can be used to guide critical research in other geographic regions, accounting for the different landscapes of support for farmer mental health and AKIS arrangements in each place.

2. Context of case study and methodology

2.1. Case study context: the Agri-Wellbeing Alliance (UK)

Our research questions were examined in the context of a new programme aimed at addressing wellbeing among farmers. The UK is comprised of four constituent nations and, as a result of devolution, each pursues its own agricultural and health policy. Therefore, the landscapes of support for rural mental health differ between nations. Generally, however, each nation has a pluralistic AKIS. In January 2025, the Agri-Wellbeing Alliance was formed. Initially, this was an alliance brought together by a major landowner organisation alongside a mental health charity, a chartered body for occupational health and safety, an agronomy company, and an organisation representing contractors. This expanded to include additional charities focused on farm safety and mental health. The Agri-Wellbeing Alliance initially focused on better equipping AKIS actors with the skills needed to support farmers with their mental health, as well as understanding if and how these individuals already acted as 'accidental counsellors'. The authors of this paper were asked to evaluate the Alliance's early activities.

The Alliance's aim followed calls in the literature to widen the safety net for farmers by making sure the people with whom they regularly interact in the AKIS have good mental health literacy. It is worth noting, however, that these individuals are not, and will likely never be, thoroughly trained mental healthcare professionals. In the UK, mental healthcare is provided by individuals with varying levels of training, such as clinical psychologists, who are the most highly trained, have protected titles and deal with the most

serious cases; social workers, who similarly have protected titles and are mental health practitioners, and counsellors, which is not a protected title and can be associated with different training levels (NHS[9]). Highly trained mental healthcare professionals would be expected to have their own support network to support them and not treat patients over whom they hold power or have a conflict of interest with (BACP 2026; UKCP 2019).

The initial activities of the Alliance to focus on upskilling AKIS actors in mental health literacy were not new; several farming mental health charities across the UK, for example, already provide mental health first aid training to individuals who regularly come into contact with farmers, as well as to farming families themselves. Evaluations of mental health training for AKIS actors to spot signs of distress, have supportive conversations, and signpost farmers towards resources have been undertaken. These include studies in the USA (e.g. Brown et al. 2023; Iwinski et al. 2025; Robertson et al. 2021), Australia (e.g. Bond et al. 2016; Hossain et al. 2010; Skaczkowski et al. 2025), Canada (Hagen et al. 2020), New Zealand (Morgaine et al. 2017) and Ireland (Hammersley et al. 2025). Interestingly, Skaczkowski et al. (2025) reported that the training for rural financial counsellors and other AKIS actors did not significantly change stress or quality of life for these actors.

In the UK, whilst the nature of training days differs between charities, further information from three such charities (many other examples), RABI, FCN, and the DPJ Foundation, is illustrative. RABI's[10] training, for example, aims to ensure those working in farming have the 'confidence to start conversations about mental health with family, friends, colleagues, customers or clients'. FCN[11] training covers 'stressors in farming, what constitutes good mental health and mental ill-health, how to spot the signs and symptoms of mental ill-health, challenging stigma, and support available'. The DPJ Foundation[12] focuses on equipping people in farming 'to understand how to support those with poor mental health and look after yourself'. These charities have trained a variety of AKIS actors, including veterinarians, agronomists, and government inspectors.

2.2. Methodology

Figure 1 illustrates the different strands of data collection used in this study.

2.2.1. Initial survey

We conducted an online survey using JISC Online Surveys (December 2024-January 2025), which focused on whether and how AKIS actors already supported farmers with their mental health, as well as asking about training and support needs through a mixture of open and closed questions to capture both quantitative and qualitative data (Appendix 1a). The survey was piloted with 3 people (academics) outside of the target population, and feedback on functionality, wording, and structure was actioned before wider circulation. Simple random sampling was employed. The survey was distributed privately by original members of the Agri-Wellbeing Alliance. It was sent by email to 300 agronomists working in England and Scotland and 50 other farm advisors (e.g. environmental or input advisors, UK-wide). These 350 people represented all relevant staff members of a major agronomy company in the UK; 400 UK contractors, who represented all contractor members of a major representative organisation in the UK; 64 UK

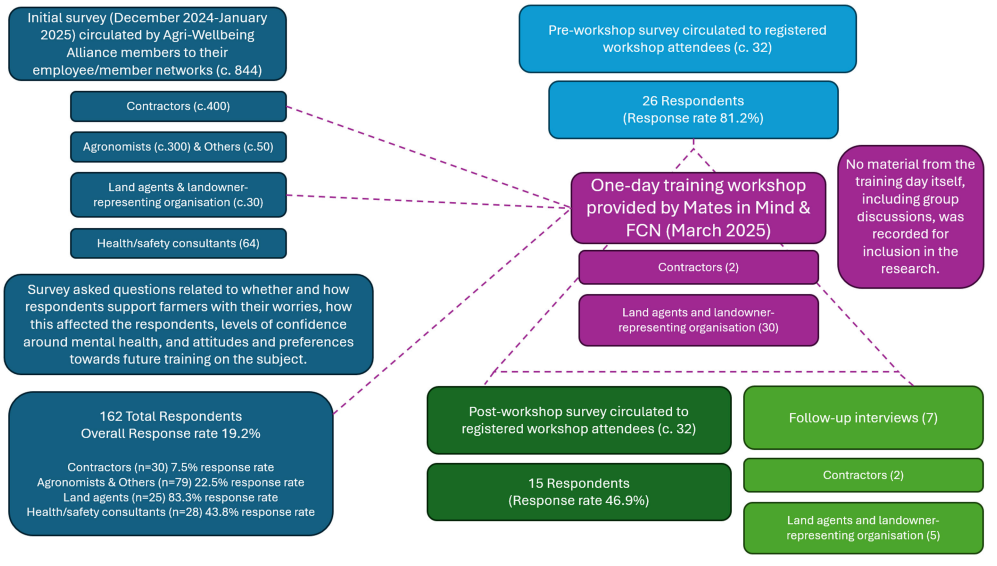


Figure 1. Methodology for study.

health and safety consultants, who were all staff members of a major company in the UK; and 30 landlords' agents, which was a complete list of current agents employed or used by a major landowning body in the UK (7 from the landowner organisation, 23 land agents representing that organisation, England and Wales). It was filled in by 162 people (53 agronomists and 26 other advisors such as environmental and input advisors, 30 contractors, 28 health and safety consultants, and 25 landlords' agents). Because these job categories only form part of the many roles performed across the AKIS, our sample cannot be considered representative of AKIS actors as a whole, which would require further research and inclusion of more groups. Figure 1 illustrates the types of questions asked. Overall, we achieved a sample rate of 19.2% with variations per group (see Figure 1). For those unfamiliar with these AKIS roles, agronomists advise on crop health and protection, contractors perform specific roles for a farmer (91% of farmers in the UK use a contractor), health and safety consultants help farmers manage risks on farms, and land agents are responsible for the management, valuation, and development of rural land and estates (helping with tax, sales, leases etc.). Land agents can act for the farmer or the landlord; in the case of our study, the 30 individuals whom we hereafter refer to as 'landlords' agents' acted for the landowner.

2.2.2. Mental health training for landlords' agents and contractors with pre-/post-surveys

As one of the Alliance's first official activities, a mental health literacy training session was offered to 30 landlords' agents and two contractors (March 2025), all of whom had been sent the initial survey. This training consisted of a full-day workshop focusing on issues related to having difficult conversations, suicide prevention, and resources available to 'accidental counsellors' and farmers surrounding mental health. None of the conversations from the day were recorded for the purposes of this study. A pre-training

(n = 26, response rate 81.2%) and post-workshop (n = 15, response rate 46.9%) survey was distributed to the 32 attendees, focusing on evaluating impacts of the training (Appendices 1b and 1c). Based on the pre-training survey (n = 26), 81% of attendees had never received mental health training before, whilst the remaining 19% had never received agriculture-specific mental health training. Whilst we acknowledge the drop-off in response rate after the training session and caveat findings appropriately, there is no evidence to suggest the attrition rate biased the results.

2.2.3. In-depth interviews with those trained

Following the training session, in-depth interviews were conducted between April and August 2025 with five landlords' agents and two contractors who attended the training, with questions focusing on this paper's research questions, particularly the impact of the training (Appendix 1d). These were conducted online, recorded, and transcribed in full.

2.2.4. Analysis

Analysis of the quantitative questions in all surveys was undertaken using SPSS. Responses to closed questions were downloaded into SPSS and the data cleaned in preparation for analysis. The data were noted to be not normally distributed, and so non-parametric statistical tests were employed based upon the scales of measurement of the data.

Analysis of the qualitative data in the initial larger survey was done inductively via thematic coding. Answers were read and re-read and grouped into descriptive categories. For the question relating to how 'accidental counsellors' helped farmers with their worries, two of the authors (LP/JH) grouped and counted references to active versus passive helping methods. Where responses spanned different groupings (e.g. make time to listen), it was counted in both listen and generally make time to help (see Figure 2). For the pre- and post-training survey, qualitative responses were read and re-read and inductively grouped into descriptive categories (by LP). Qualitative answers in the interviews were thematically analysed through inductive coding using NVivo (by LP, in discussion with DCR) and drawing on stages identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). LP checked transcripts (familiarisation) and conducted two rounds of descriptive coding with discussion after the first round, merging themes identified in round one (generating codes [inductive, descriptive]) into larger categories in round two (searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes).

2.2.5. Ethical considerations

All data collection instruments were approved through the Harper Adams Research Ethics Committee. Because some of our participants attended the same training session, some of whom were subsequently interviewed, there is a genuine risk that labelling quotes in a detailed manner could lead to identification. At no time, therefore, for any respondent group, do we specify whether the quote comes from a survey or interview, which both gave opportunities for qualitative answers of any length. The reason for this

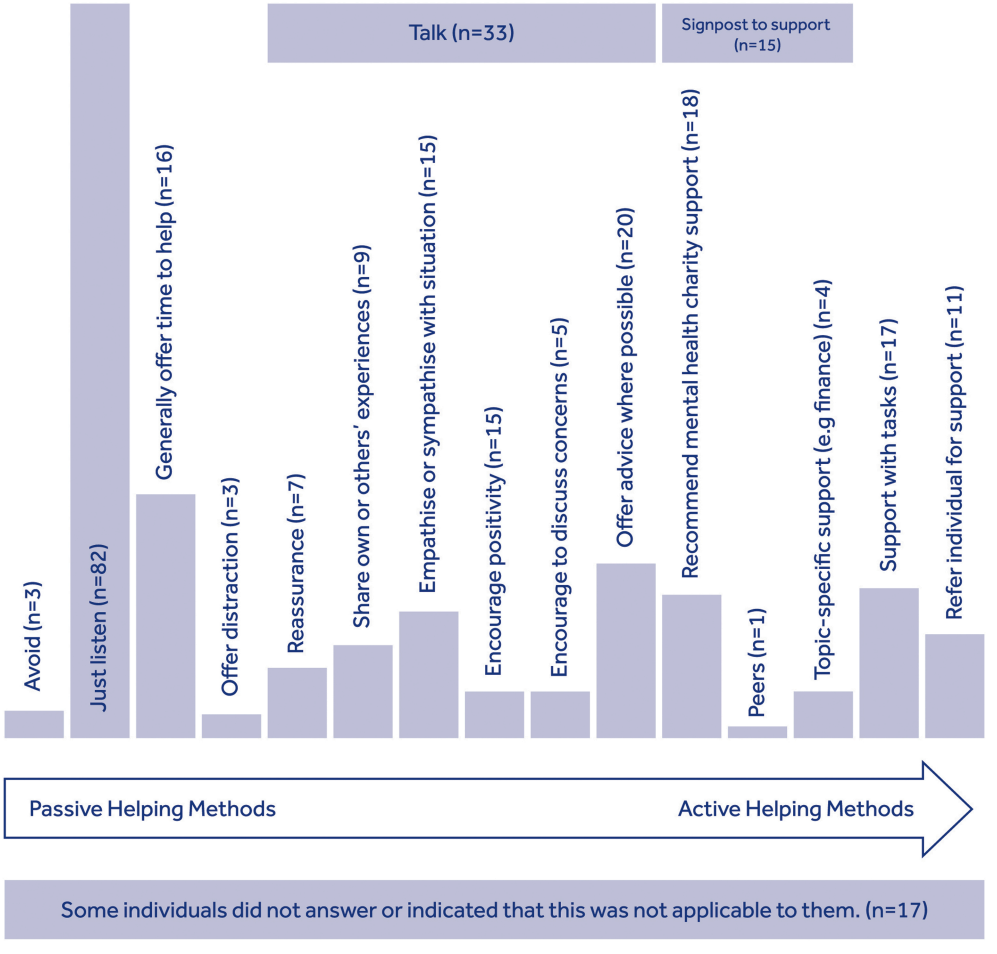


Figure 2. Helping methods used by 'accidental counsellors'.

is that whilst 30 agricultural contractors anonymously filled in the survey, two contractors took part in the training and post-training interviews. This means that if we were to label quotes as 'contractor – survey' vs. 'contractor – interview', it would be possible for several people who attended the training day to identify those interviewees. Likewise, out of the 30 land agents and staff members of a landowner-representing organisation who were contacted about the survey and invited to the training workshop, there are relatively few in different positions of seniority and much fewer in the category of landowner-representing organisation, particularly in subsequent interviews. To minimise the risk of identification, we categorise any respondent from this group, which refers to both land agents of companies used by the landowner-representative organisation and members of staff at that organisation, as a 'landlord's agent'. All quotes are verbatim, except for the removal of words synonymous with pauses and written speech over typed answers (may indicate that a quote was more likely to come from an interview vs. survey).

3. Results and discussion

To further minimise the risk of respondent identification, we do not label quotes with unique identifiers for each person. We use 53 quotes below taken from 18 unique respondents[13].

3.1. Spaces of interaction

3.1.1. AKIS actors as (un)trusted 'accidental counsellors'

In the main survey (n = 162), 99% of AKIS actors said that farmers shared worries with them, indicating that they routinely act as 'accidental counsellors' as illustrated in current literature. A contractor in our study recognised the importance of their interactions:

> … some of my customers don't see many people from day to day, so an hour chatting can lift their spirits provided it's done sympathetically.

This quote supports Robertson et al. (2021), who suggested these individuals could be a vital part of a widened safety net because they came into regular contact with farmers. AKIS actors in our study reported that they would encounter farmers in many different places – on the farm, on the telephone, at agricultural shows or events, and in spaces of rural community. A landlord's agent said:

> It's an industry where you just talk, you have chit chats and conversation, you're in someone's kitchen, and you're talking about a whole variety of topics and whatever really comes up. I think it'll be a very poor agent who goes in, only talks about the one thing that they're there to talk about, and then leaves again.

The trusted, long-lasting relationship that some AKIS actors were able to build with farmers was seen as the bedrock of being able to exchange worrisome conversations. A landlord's agent said:

> [a colleague] has the approachability of a cuddly teddy bear and the farmers adore him because he knows every wife, he knows every child, he knows all their interests and likes … that leads to that accidental counselling because you've built that trust, that humility, that relationship.

Having a long-lasting relationship with a farmer and getting to know their personality was a part of being able to spot problems:

> When we meet up, we'll always shake hands, something that we've always done. So, when it doesn't happen, you think, oh, is everything all right? And you then listen to them when you're talking to them and see if everything comes out right. (Contractor)

The unique ability of a trusted advisor, peer, or friend to spot signs of distress when a farmer might not overtly raise a problem themselves is a crucial asset within the landscapes of support for farmer mental health. When asked to comment on whether the term 'accidental counsellor' accurately described the role AKIS actors sometimes play, most were in general agreement, though they pointed out that there was nothing 'accidental' about the cultivation of a trusted relationship over many years. Alternative suggestions in line with this argument included 'trusted counsellor' (Landlords' agent) or 'a friend to talk to' (Contractor). Again, this finding is in line with the thrust of the AKIS literature, which argues that advisors can be trusted individuals (e.g. Ingram 2008).

However, our study found evidence that the professional role of AKIS actors could determine the extent to which farmers would trust them with worries. A common theme throughout the results section relates to the power imbalance and conflict of interest inherent in interactions between some AKIS actors and farmers. Due to the nature of the training offered by the Agri-Wellbeing Alliance, we focused particularly on the role of landlords' agents; in other words, a land agent acting on behalf of a landowner, rather than on behalf of a farmer (who they sometimes represent). As furthered in the following sections, an agent acting on behalf of a landlord can sometimes be the messenger of bad news and hold power over the farmer, which could potentially cause worries. In the UK, where tenanted land is commonplace[14], landlords through land agents negotiate lease agreements, conduct rent reviews, and hold power over the future. Such a power imbalance between landlord and tenant farmer could mean that some farmers are reluctant to share certain challenges with any AKIS actor acting on behalf of the landlord. Two landlords' agents noted this in our study, particularly if it was a worry related to finances or mental health, which could affect ability to pay rent:

> If I were a tenant farmer, in the back of my mind would be, well, I don't want them to go and tell the landlord because I don't want them to start any process. (Landlords' agent)

> No, they definitely don't share everything with us. Being the landlord's agent, they don't want to let me know things that might jeopardise a tenancy agreement. (Landlord's agent)

A contractor, who also actively farms, spoke about the relative ease of speaking to a farmer as an 'equal' to them, in contrast to a landlords' agent who may be representing others:

> I'm viewed as an equal, whereas the land agents generally only come when they want something and they can be quite challenging to deal with as a tenant or a farmer.

This had not been picked up in some previous studies which, for example, either focused solely on advisor types hired by, and acting specifically for, the farmer, or relied on small sample sizes across the AKIS (e.g. Hammersley et al. 2025; Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025). Our more extensive sample has indicated that some AKIS professionals may be more or less trusted to act as 'accidental counsellors' depending on the relationship they have with the farmer. Whilst this relationship might affect how these individuals respond to farmers' worries (see next section), it may also prevent problems from being shared in the first place. This point is particularly pertinent because there is evidence from around the world that several different types of AKIS actors are being given mental health first aid or equivalent training, including those who act solely on behalf of the farmer and those who act on behalf of another party. This discussion is furthered in section 3.4 because the literature has tended to make uncritical, tacit assumptions that all AKIS actors can play an enhanced role in supporting farmer mental health.

Related to this point, some AKIS actors in our study also struggled to know whether the counselling part of being an 'accidental counsellor' accurately described the role they already perform. Many wanted to point out that they were not qualified as a counsellor:

> I am not a therapist, I'm not qualified to help anyone, really. I guess I am an 'accidental counsellor' in that way, but I'm not a counsellor. (Landlords' agent)

> We are not professionals, and there are several organisations who are better geared up to give advice. (Contractor)

Two landlords' agents spoke about the difficulty of knowing what their role should be in helping farmers with their worries, or not, speaking particularly about the risk of saying the wrong thing:

> You don't want to give anyone any wrong advice … you don't want to put anyone in harm or further harm.
> … let's say the conversation ends up going down a route where you end up having to discuss something that is quite personal … I don't think it's helpful to refuse to engage with that and to say, oh, that's not my place. We need to be equipped to engage with it up to a point, but [also think] that's not actually our role.

Further, in Section 3.4, these quotes show the value of critically considering the role of non-expert 'accidental counsellors' in the landscapes of support for farmer mental health, ensuring that expert support is also more available and accessible.

3.1.2. Examples of serious incidents

AKIS actors shared a plethora of examples of small and large worries that were shared by farmers. One example of a serious incident was reported by a landlord's agent:

> A fire in a farmhouse … The good thing is that nobody was hurt, but they lost their home and all of their possessions … I went quite early the next morning … They were in a lot of shock, as you would imagine, and so we did two things. One was to just really quickly try and provide some practical solutions … in the background without necessarily bothering them too much with it. But, for those few hours in the morning, actually, we just stood with them and didn't really say much. And that felt like that was the support that they needed at that moment, and then in the weeks afterwards, we switched into the more practical.

This quote supports the findings of previous literature, which argues that AKIS actors can sometimes be the first person to arrive on farm, often unexpectedly, after a serious incident (e.g. Fuller and Broadbent 2006; Gunn and Hughes-Barton 2022; Skaczkowski et al. 2025).

3.2. Responses of 'accidental counsellors'

Figure 2 shows that AKIS actors can respond to farmers' worries in many different passive or active ways, with a preference for listening, as well as offering time to help, empathising, checking in regularly post-meeting, and signposting farmers towards professional support.

These findings are broadly in line with the Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley (2025) study. Listening was viewed as particularly important:

> Listen! We were born with two ears, two eyes and one mouth. Just an ear and a cup of tea works wonders. (Input advisor)

> Most farmers just want to share their problems and look for a little advice. Talking it through with them quite often makes them feel a lot better. (Agronomist)

We found evidence that some AKIS actors go 'above and beyond'. An agronomist said that they 'provide a lot of administrative help for the burden of red tape free of charge', whilst a contractor said they would "happily delay [their] day, or delay starting a job to

spend time with a customer …to give them the opportunity …to chat about the things that are on their mind'.

Three respondents indicated that they would try to avoid responding to farmers' sharing worries, with one Health and Safety Consultant saying:

> I don't start discussions about such problems. If a client mentions something I am generally quiet and listening, but don't encourage dwelling on the matter as it is outside of the scope of visit and my competence, and I don't want to escalate the conversation.

The nascent literature on 'accidental counsellors' in agriculture has not yet assessed the range of factors influencing how individuals might respond to farmers sharing worries. Even with our limited range of professional roles in the AKIS, we discovered seven influential factors, some of which are linked:

(1) **Personal norms and confidence**: the response of an AKIS actor may be affected by their level of confidence and personal norms. In the main survey (n = 162), 19% of respondents said they were mostly or very confident in supporting farmers with their concerns, with the rest ranging from fairly confident (33%), a little bit confident (38%), to not at all confident (10%). Inferential statistical analysis using a Kruskal Wallis H test found that agronomists are more likely to feel confident in supporting farmers ($\bar{xR}$ = 96.98, n = 53), compared to Land Agents ($\bar{xR}$ = 69.36, n = 25), Ag Contractors ($\bar{xR}$ = 75.03, n = 30), H&S consultants ($\bar{xR}$ = 80.91, n = 29), and Other Advisors ($\bar{xR}$ = 69.26, n = 25); H (4, 162) = 10.74, p = 0.03. Qualitative comments also referred to the fact that some individuals might be 'better communicators' (Landlords' agent), have 'more natural empathy and humility' (Landlords' agent) or are a more 'patient person' (Landlords' agent). One agent remarked that to respond effectively to farmers who share worries, some need 'a lifetime of experience, others are born that way, and some people should never be let near anyone'.

(2) **Knowledge and skills**: Of the total respondents to the pre-training survey (n = 26), none reported that they felt they had all the knowledge needed to support farmers with their worries; 34.5% felt they had at least a fair amount of knowledge needed whilst 65.5% reported having little or none of the knowledge.

(3) **Type of worry** (**linked to 1 and 2):** AKIS actors generally expressed more interest in responding actively to farmers' worries if they were related to a problem within their professional skillset, or if they could empathise as a result of their farming or personal background. One landlords' agent said that they try to do 'anything that [they] can within [their] role as a landlord's agent …if they've mentioned something's not working. Well, I can fix that small part of it'.

(4) **Relationship with the farmer**: for some worries, particularly personal ones, the response of an AKIS actor may depend on the type of relationship that had been built, for example whether it was longstanding or newer. A landlords' agent said their response 'depends on how comfortable the relationship I have with them [is].'

(5) **Level of experience and seniority**: it was felt by many AKIS actors that their level of experience and the extent to which they had been in challenging situations before affected their response to farmers sharing worries. Younger or less experienced landlords' agents appeared to be more likely to be visiting and contacting farmers most frequently, but were perhaps less equipped to deal with what they encountered

because of a lack of experience. One landlords' agent said it was difficult 'being young …the more you do it, the more you practice, the easier it does get'. A contractor said:

> Probably just experience of doing it over the years more than anything else … you gain a bit of a skill in dealing with different people in different ways. Some people are quite pushy and want things done and are really picky; others are a bit more laid back. Some people will tell you more, some people will tell you less. And then when you get more challenging conversations coming along you've got more of an in-depth feel for people than somebody perhaps doesn't deal with people very often.

Although a quote from this landlord's agent is not presented due to confidentiality, there was also an example raised where their seniority had enabled them to enact discretion to give a farmer more leeway with missed rent payments, and they speculated that younger colleagues may not have had the power to do this.

(6) **Conflict of interest/job role:** as stated previously, several landlords' agents commented on the conflict of interest associated with their role, which also affected their ability to respond in particular ways. One said that they feel 'very conflicted about it …quite often the cause of their worries are things that the landlord has caused, and then you do feel personally responsible … I've caused that stress at a rent review or something'.

(7) **Community embeddedness**: the extent to which the AKIS actor knew the rural community in and around farmers seemed to play a role in how some would respond. For example, two landlords' agents commented on how personal relationships helped them build a more informed picture of what might be going on:

> … then you go and see the farmer next door [who would say] Well, did you hear they got divorced or the dog had died. And then you're like, OK, that makes sense.

> I've rang up his agent, who I happened to know quite well and said, look, it's probably not my place to say this, but I'm worried about this guy.

Whilst some of the above factors may have implicitly been identified in previous literature, particularly how knowledge, skills, and life experience affect the ability of AKIS actors to respond (e.g. Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025), several are newly raised, including type of worry and conflict of interest.

3.3. Effects on 'accidental counsellors'

In our framework (Table 1), we suggest that the responses of 'accidental counsellors' to farmers' worries are likely to have a positive, neutral, or negative effect on the farmer (and family), accidental counsellor, and potentially other people connected to the issue. These other individuals could be the landowner, workers, or other people in the agricultural or rural community if they are brought into the issue. Due to the nature of the Agri-Wellbeing Alliance and the methodological constraints of this project, we did not sample roles beyond certain AKIS groups. This point of introspection was indeed noted by a landlord's agent in the project, who commented post-training; 'we haven't actually landed it with the farmers … we've launched this initiative, but we haven't spoken to

Table 1. Framework to understand, evaluate, and support AKIS actors as 'accidental counsellors'.

Framework component	Description of component	Influencing factors
1. Spaces of interaction	The relationships between AKIS actors and farmers and the spaces in which they interact. AKIS actors regularly encounter farmers, may build trusted relationships, and regularly hear farmers' worries. Farmers' decisions to share worries may be affected by various factors (right).	• Type of professional or personal relationship. • Experience and level of trust built.
2. Responses of 'accidental counsellors'	AKIS actors respond to farmers' worries in various passive (e.g. listening) or active (e.g. signposting towards support, helping with tasks) ways. Responses are affected by various factors (right).	• Personal norms and confidence. • Knowledge and skills. • Type of worry. • Relationship level with farmer. • Level of experience and seniority. • Conflict of interest/job role. • Community embeddedness.
3. Effects of responses	Responses of AKIS actors to farmers' worries has an effect – likely positive, negative, or neutral – on the farmer, themselves, and possibly others involved in the issue (e.g. landlords, other supporters brought into the issue). We focus particularly on the trauma faced by AKIS actors. Effects are influenced by coping mechanisms and support networks.	• (for AKIS actors) Coping mechanisms. • (for AKIS actors) Support networks available to an individual (e.g. through employer, family, friends, other networks). • Anticipated actions by third parties (e.g. signposted support organisation, landlord)
4. Supporting the supporters	Interventions to support AKIS actors to act as 'accidental counsellors' (where appropriate) and to ensure professional landscapes of support are properly supported (right).	• Setting clear guidelines/ boundaries for AKIS actors. • Educating AKIS actors. • Providing aftercare, supporting the supporters.

farmers [to find out] what they would say'. We did capture one quote which showed that responses of 'accidental counsellors' could influence people beyond farmers, with one landlords' agent arguing that informing a landlord of a farmer's problems had caused them to 'back off a little bit'. However, we have no evidence that this would always happen; rather, quotes in the previous section suggest there was a fear of negative responses from landlords to mental health difficulties. We focus below on the effect of accidental counselling on the AKIS actors who perform an accidental counselling role, suggesting that further research is needed on how their responses affect other people, particularly farmers.

Existing research has articulated how people who are thrust into accidental counselling positions, such as veterinarians and other AKIS actors, can experience secondary trauma, which may harm their own mental health (e.g. Aka and Enticott 2025; Purc-Stephenson and Doctor 2025; Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025). In contrast to professional mental health experts, who are required to have their own support network to help them cope with secondary trauma (Henderson et al. 2025), 'accidental counsellors' may not always have access to one (Aka and Enticott 2025; Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025). Our data support these previous studies. In our main survey (n = 162), 96% of respondents said that conversations with farmers continue to worry them after their visit, at least some of the time, showing that problems are taken home. One landlords' agent said they 'will be lying awake in the night worrying about particular things', whilst another said it 'chips away' at you over time. The secondary trauma faced in doing these roles prompted two landlord's agents to ask:

> …what support may be available to managing agents if a tenant informs us of something of concern? Or if we have had a difficult interaction with a tenant that may affect our mental health?
> … how involved we can be without risk to ourselves.

It is also worth noting that it is not uncommon for AKIS actors, such as contractors and other advisors, to be farmers themselves. Therefore, when they return 'home' to the farm after a day in their advisory or contracting role, they face the same pressures that are causing stress to their farmer clients. Two contractors in our study referred to this, saying that they

> [I] share their pain.

> … probably being a farmer myself, I'm under the same sort of struggles as them … we're all in the same boat if that makes sense … because we're all in the same situation, like we've got the same troubles with low yields, profitability, general enthusiasm for farming … The only difference is that in some places I'm providing a service to a farm rather than just doing the farming myself.

A landlords' agent also said that their partner was a tenant farmer and therefore separation between advisor and farming roles was difficult:

> My partner is a tenant farmer and so it's even more tricky, sort of going home and chatting about work at the end of the day...

This is an important finding given evidence from outside of agriculture that experiencing personal stress or trauma directly (in their own life) could enhance the negative effects of encountering secondary trauma in a support-giving role (Leung, Schmidt, and Mushquash 2023).

In terms of coping mechanisms for secondary trauma, several were raised – gaming, spending time in familiar places and with family, being strong-willed, and chatting through problems with partners who were trained medical professionals or from the agricultural industry who could empathise. There was evidence, though, that some struggled to cope. A landlords' agent said:

> I take everything horribly to heart and very much don't do very well at leaving work when I leave the office and spend far too much time stressing … I was feeling the same sort of stress and helplessness where you'd have a half hour drive into work in the morning … just getting yourself worked up because there's not really a solution or a way out of it.

Some spoke of support for their mental health within their own organisations, but this appeared to vary by line manager and organisation, and some advisors are self-employed. These findings reinforce some of the coping strategies for secondary trauma being used by mental health workers outside of agriculture (e.g. May et al. 2024; peer support) and within the sector (Aka and Enticott 2025; help from community and place). No one in our study mentioned specific behavioural therapies, wellness programmes or supervision from a trained professional, which may be useful strategies (May et al. 2024), and, as mentioned above, are required in some professional mental health clinical roles.

Several noted that they lacked support mechanisms for coping, including within their employing organisation. Post-training, respondents (n = 15) reported feeling that their own mental health was at least fairly protected when helping farmers with their worries (53.5%), whilst 46.5% felt only a little bit or not at all supported. Pre-training, 57.5% of respondents felt that their own mental health was at least fairly protected, with 42.5% feeling only a little bit or not at all supported. Thus, the training appeared to make little difference in trainees' sense of being supported themselves. This supports the work of Skaczkowski et al. (2025), who reported that training for rural financial counsellors and other AKIS actors did not significantly change their stress or quality of life.

3.4. Supporting 'accidental counsellors' and farmers

Existing literature focuses on providing recommendations for supporting the supporters. Whilst we now turn to this point, we also argue that more critical questions should be asked about whether helping AKIS actors be 'accidental counsellors' is always the optimal solution. Our framework calls for critical introspection, rather than assuming that AKIS actors always have an 'accidental counsellor' role to play. We also note below that many of the recommendations made for supporting 'accidental counsellors' come from our training surveys and follow-up interviews, which focused disproportionately on landlords' agents. However, we consider that many of their ideas hold relevance for other AKIS actors.

3.4.1. Setting guidelines and boundaries of accidental counselling

As seen in previous sections, there was a recognition that professional mental health experts were more trained to help farmers with worries outside of the competence of any other non-expert AKIS actor. It should be remembered that many farmers are suffering from serious and complex mental health problems. It is, therefore, important to recognise that 'accidental counsellors' are not a substitute for professional, available, and accessible support, particularly in the most serious cases of mental illness, which are not uncommon on farms. Without clear guidelines on the role that 'accidental counsellors' should play, particularly if undertaking training on the request of their employer, it may be confusing and place non-experts in a difficult position or potentially place a greater sense of obligation on non-experts. Non-experts might usefully play a signposting role to sources of support, but should not be expected to perform the role of an expert mental health expert.

Although guidance from the British Psychological Society speaks of power dynamics in relation to psychologists being in leadership positions, inferences can be drawn for the challenging position that some AKIS actors may be in when representing other parties. The guidance states that 'when psychologists are in a position of power/leadership with individuals, it is particularly important that they exercise caution and consider the possible issues which may arise' [15]. Like landlords' agents, there will be AKIS actors in similar conflict-of-interest positions, including government or assurance scheme inspectors, bank managers (etc.), who can hold the power to penalise and cause stress. Thus, before asking how an AKIS actor can receive training to be better 'accidental counsellors', a wider question of what role they could and should play in the landscapes of support

could be asked. This question may be particularly pertinent to policy-makers and others responsible for designing landscapes of support, ensuring that mental health experts are accessible, rather than putting non-experts into a position where they are the safety net caused by poor provision of professional support.

For organisations employing AKIS actors, or associations to which self-employed advisors might belong, it is important to set clear boundaries and expectations. In our study, two landlords' agents said:

> … how do you avoid putting yourself in a position of conflict of interest either professionally, personally, morally?.
> … where we, as landlord [or agent] are part of the cause of the worry, as rent will form a part of the overall financial challenges a farmer has, how do I deal with that where we cannot remove or reduce that worry?

Other AKIS actors may have similar questions, particularly those that potentially have a conflict of interest. For some AKIS actors, more guidance will be needed to support them in setting boundaries between supporting farmers and acting in their client's interest.

Focusing specifically on landlords' agents, there appears to be a need for set procedures/protocols from landowners to support agents with safeguarding tenant farmers, which could be initiated through formal education and qualifications. An industry standard might be required. One agent said:

> … there probably should be a bit more training now, and some very clear support or guidelines, on managing that relationship between professionalism and getting involved

Establishing formal procedures to advocate leniency for tenants experiencing hardship could enable positive interactions and actions to mitigate negative emotional impacts for all involved.

3.4.2. Educating AKIS actors to be better 'accidental counsellors'

From the session delivered to 30 landlords' agents and two contractors as part of the Agri-Wellbeing Alliance, there was some evidence that the training made a positive difference. Post-training, a greater proportion (93% [n = 15] vs. 35% pre-training [n = 26]) of respondents reported having at least a fair amount of the knowledge they needed to support farmers, though still no respondents reported having all the knowledge that they needed. A higher proportion of post-training respondents reported feeling at least fairly knowledgeable about where to find resources and where to signpost farmers towards (87% compared to 23% pre-training). Landlords' agents appreciated the knowledge gained from the training day about support services to improve their awareness of where to signpost farmers for support. One said that they *'didn't know that any of those support organisations existed'*.

Post-training, several attendees mentioned being more conscious of how they were planning their days to allow time to speak with farmers. Others also mentioned being more conscious of how they were communicating:

> It's made me think and just try and make sure that I am listening and asking again … but it's made me really think about how I'm doing it and making sure I've got time (Landlords' agent)

> A practical tool I took away was when you are having a difficult conversation is like when you repeat a little bit of it in the conversation. (Landlords' agent)

> One of the things I took away from that session was if somebody is telling you about how difficult they're finding harvest, what you shouldn't do is tell them that 'don't worry because everybody else is finding it really difficult as well' (Landlords' agent)

However, as reported earlier, training seemed not to make much difference in terms of attendees feeling supported themselves to perform an accidental counselling role. We cannot be definitive on the reason for this; perhaps the training session made some individuals reflect on the challenges of supporting farmers with their conflict of interest, or they had been made aware that there was a plethora of resources and experts in the landscape of support who could better help farmers. As one landlord's agent said:

> Before I did the training, I was thinking I would have naturally tried to get more involved and I'm not sure how helpful that is actually in my role and it's probably better to signpost them to professionals who actually know what they're talking about instead of you trying to make it up as you go along.

Suggestions were also made to embed mental health literacy education within the core training offered to AKIS actors as part of obtaining their qualifications. One landlord's agent reflected on their years of study and thought that 'nobody really teaches those skills in the profession'. Whilst the existing literature has made some suggestions about training needs (e.g. Hagen et al. 2020; Hammersley et al. 2025; Morgaine et al. 2017; Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025), there is less reflection on how needs might differ depending on each person. AKIS actors at different stages of their careers will likely encounter different scenarios as part of their daily work, have different levels of experience and confidence, and thus may require different levels and/or types of support. A training approach which is mindful of these differences could be beneficial, potentially with mixed levels of expertise in groups offering 'mentorship' opportunities, so more recently qualified agents can learn from those with more experience, as well as more homogeneous groups offering peer support for those in similar positions.

Some respondents indicated it would be useful to include greater focus on *how* to support farmers with accessing support:

> If we do notice that a farmer is struggling, or they've come to us, if rural support charities do have a certain process they would like us to follow. (Landlords' agent).

This could link to role-playing exercises which were suggested by two landlords' agents as a way to gain experience in dealing with difficult situations in a safe environment, rather than unexpectedly being put in the position for the first time in the field:

> I think role-playing or something like that would help. (Landlords' agent)

> Some of the most effective training that I've done on these type of soft skills is role play […] they bring actors in […] what it does is helps you to practice how you would put a particular message across, or how you would react to different emotions that are being directed back at you. (Landlords' agent)

3.4.3. Providing aftercare and supporting the supporters

A clear message from our research relates to the importance of supporting the supporters who are already helping farmers with their mental health, including providing help after any training that is received. This was highlighted in our study:

> We need that support as well. To look after ourselves and give the best advice and still doing our job … I don't think it's been very obvious for me to find out if there is training or support there. (Landlords' agent)

In the UK, RABI (farming mental health charity) provides an aftercare service[16] to people that it has trained to help them on the difficult journey of putting knowledge into practice. Employers should take note of this and consider what can be done to support their staff. For self-employed advisors, thought should be given to what their own landscape of support could look like. Opportunities for peer-to-peer support were also suggested and could be incorporated into agriculturally focused training sessions.

3.5. Role of 'accidental counsellors' in supporting farmer mental health: a critical framework

Based on our findings, we construct a critical framework to describe how AKIS actors perform (or do not perform) an accidental counselling role, as well as the effects it has (on them), and the interventions needed to support them, or to safeguard landscapes of support for farmers' mental health (Table 1). This table can be used as a starting point for further studies.

4. Concluding remarks

In a pluralistic AKIS, farmers receive advice and support from several individuals. For farmers facing barriers to mental health help-seeking, AKIS actors who regularly encounter them could widen the safety net. Their potential role in supporting farmer wellbeing has been noted in previous studies across the world (e.g. Fuller and Broadbent 2006; Gunn and Hughes-Barton 2022; Skaczkowski et al. 2025; Hammersley et al. 2025; Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025). Our study reinforces calls made by previous research to include AKIS actors in landscapes of support for farmer mental health and recognises that many such actors form valued, trusted relationships with farmers, which often leads to worries being shared with them. The secondary trauma faced by some AKIS actors is well documented in the literature, particularly for veterinarians (Campbell et al. 2023; Purc-Stephenson and Doctor 2025) and increasingly mental health charity volunteers (Aka and Enticott 2025), but for others, there is less acknowledgement of the pressures encountered as part of their professional role. Though the formation of these trusted relationships is not 'accidental', nor do all AKIS actors perceive themselves as performing 'counsellor' roles, many of these individuals do respond in a variety of passive or active ways to farmers' worries, as noted in a previous study (Wheeler, Šabóová, and Lobley 2025). An important contribution of our paper is the finding that responses of AKIS actors to farmers' worries are influenced by factors set out in our framework (Table 1) and these responses will have an impact both on the farmer and the 'accidental

counsellor', and other individuals involved in the issue. Further research could unpack these factors which have been brought to the fore in our study.

Our research notes an important area for caution not explicitly identified in existing research. Different types of AKIS actors have different professional relationships with the farmer, which vary regionally and culturally. Some may act solely in the interest of the farmer, whilst others act in the interests, or on the instruction of, others. Some may do both at different times. Some may explicitly hold power over the farmer, which can manifest as a professional action that causes stress. These differing relationships mediate the extent to which farmers may share worries, as well as how 'accidental counsellors' may feel able to respond and how stressful interactions affect them.

Interventions are required to support farmers and their 'accidental' supporters, specifically the AKIS actors who, by the very nature of performing their professional role, are thrust into stressful situations. Better support for 'accidental counsellors' both helps them with their own wellbeing, whilst also improving support for farmers, including by potentially reducing the problems of burnout and turnover which can reduce service provision. In agricultural advice and extension, the challenges of high turnover and burnout have been noted (Benge and Beattie 2021; Russell et al. 2019; Strong and Harder 2009), and therefore, it is an important problem to address. Support interventions should draw from knowledge of how mental health and social workers, and other roles that encounter secondary trauma, have been supported (e.g. May et al. 2024; Pascoe and Stanley-Clarke 2025; Sova 2021). These include improved support and training, peer support and supervision, and wellness programmes. Firstly, to maintain the integrity of professional landscapes of support for farmer mental health, which are inadequate in many places, there is an explicit need to set guidelines and boundaries for accidental counselling by AKIS actors. This involves acknowledging that farmers suffering from worries should have better access to mental health experts, who will be expected to have no conflicts of interest or hold no power over them. As well as supporting professional landscapes of support, industry and employer guidelines for AKIS actors should explicitly address how non-expert individuals should react when farmers share worries. Secondly, and linked to this latter point, education provided during training and throughout professional employment (or self-employment) should equip AKIS actors with enhanced mental health literacy and awareness of the risk of secondary trauma. This training needs to make resources available to these non-experts to help them direct farmers towards professional support. Lastly, supporters themselves need to be supported by their industry and their employer or associations. Whether AKIS actors are offered training in mental health literacy or not, they are likely to encounter farmers in stressful situations, and therefore need to be supported with aftercare and ideally wellness programmes, employer support, and peer support within their roles. On the second and third points, whilst some AKIS roles may receive training to help them support farmers in stressful situations and look after themselves, it appears that other AKIS roles are not currently receiving this.

Whilst our research involves a greater range of AKIS roles than existing studies and with higher sample sizes, we acknowledge limitations. These relate to the fact that we, ourselves, included only a small number of AKIS roles in our study (four main roles), and also did not include farmers to understand accidental counselling by AKIS actors from their perspective. We suggest that our framework (Table 1) can be used not only by

policy-makers and industry leaders to ensure that AKIS actors are supported to support farmers better, and to establish or maintain professional mental health expertise in the support landscape, but also to guide future research. The factors we identified as influencing interactions between AKIS actors and farmers about worries, as well as the responses of 'accidental counsellors' and their effects, may differ between professional roles. We therefore suggest that further research is needed to explore accidental counselling from the perspective of other types of AKIS actors not yet included in existing research, including in different cultural contexts and regions with differing AKIS arrangements. Furthermore, research from the perspective of farmers is needed, including whether mental health literacy training offered to AKIS actors has a positive impact on farmer mental health.

Notes

1. This topic is being examined by Jennifer Howse, a PhD student, at the Royal Agricultural University.
2. AKIS roles could, e.g., include accountants, agronomists, auctioneers, assurance scheme/government inspectors, bank managers, contractors, environmental advisors, hauliers, health/safety or insurance consultants, input representatives, land agents, nutritionists, solicitors, veterinarians, etc.
3. https://fieldnurse.co.uk/
4. https://www.accidentalcounsellors.co.uk/
5. https://www.imagineif.net/accidentalcounsellors-1
6. https://www.farmanco.com.au/agribalance?srsltid=AfmBOoqjpkIYycrLQeLVBl5TsKZf9UiNynoBoAwDKfL_KzyEgsGPKMEP
7. https://agrability.colostate.edu/comet/
8. https://engagetraining.ie/programmes/on-feirm-ground/
9. https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/working-in-mental-health/mental-health-practitioners/
10. https://rabi.org.uk/how-we-can-help/mental-health-training/
11. https://fcn.org.uk/training/#:~:text=Rural%2B%20training&text=The%20training%20helps%20young%20farmers, as%20agricultural%20colleges%20and%20universities
12. https://www.thedpjfoundation.co.uk/training-3/#:~:text=We%20all%20need%20to%20be, Officer%20Nia%20on%2007984%20169507
13. No respondent is quoted more than 11 times (one 11, one 10).
14. This means that farmers manage land owned by another landowner on a lease basis. In England, for example, 45% of holdings are either wholly tenanted or mixed tenure. A third of all agricultural land in England is tenanted.
15. https://www.bps.org.uk/faqs/does-bps-have-guidance-boundaries-relationships-clients
16. https://rabi.org.uk/how-we-can-help/mental-health-training/

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Data availability statement

Some of the data will be publicly available once the paper is published online. Quantitative survey data are archived at https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/858635/, but access is restricted, with details given at the given link. Open-ended survey answers were included if they could be satisfactorily anonymised. Qualitative data in the interviews are not publicly available. The topics covered are sensitive (mental health and interviewees make critical points about their job, clients, and employers), and the sample sizes, particularly for the interviews, are small. Data must be anonymous, including to the people involved in the training sessions as part of the study, and archived qualitative data cannot be satisfactorily anonymised to remove the risk of attribution of quotes to individuals who participants know were involved in the study.

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