



**Fun, Learning  
and Achievement**

 **RoseRegeneration**



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

# Covid-19 and a Post-Brexit Rural Future

Survey and telephone interview findings





“If you are a young person living or working in a rural environment, do you have access to the essential opportunities, skills and services you need both now and in the future? These are important questions I’m proud that YFC AGRI is playing a key role in, giving rural young people the opportunity to have their say at such a critical time in all our lives.”

**YFC AGRI Chairman 2020-21 George Baxter**

# Summary



In June 2020, the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYFC) launched a survey, 'Your Post-Brexit Rural Future'. Funded by Defra and led by the NFYFC and Rose Regeneration, the survey provided young people living and working in rural areas, next generation farmers and land managers with an

opportunity to share their views on living and working in the countryside, now and into the future.

528 young people responded to the survey, offering their views on housing, services, farming, skills, COVID-19 and the future:

Housing	Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 69% of respondents live in a farming family.</li><li>● 65% feel there is not enough housing for young people.</li><li>● 97% want to live in a rural area over the next 5 years.</li><li>● 73% want to move over the next 5 years.</li><li>● While 15% already own a property, 64% do not have the resources to buy a property.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Young people highlighted a lack of recreational facilities, youth clubs and schemes such as Wheels to Work.</li><li>● The most important facilities they wanted to be available in their community included a community centre/village hall, youth club/youth service, Wheels to Work and church.</li><li>● Over 70% have sought advice about training, employment, farming, money and health.</li><li>● Housing and activities for young people were identified as areas with a lack of information.</li></ul>
Farming	Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 74% want to work in farming/land management - with 38% wanting to work on the family farm.</li><li>● 61% are optimistic that farming productivity can be increased and 50% that farm profitability can be achieved.</li><li>● Challenges around starting a farm business, technology, and attracting staff and contractors were all highlighted.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 88% recognized the need for ongoing skills development in farming.</li><li>● Higher level (degree/HND) skills identified as the most important qualifications going forward.</li><li>● 68% believed they would need to undertake skills training - and stated they would prefer to use a training provider to do this and that the private sector would need to be the principal funder.</li></ul>
The Future	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 81% think it will be harder for people to live in a rural setting over the next 5 years.</li><li>● 56% think it will be harder to work in a rural area over the next five years.</li><li>● 63% feel it will be harder for new entrants to get a start in farming.</li><li>● 78% think it will not be possible to run a farming business without some form of diversification on or off farm income.</li></ul>	



# Summary



To build on the survey findings Rose Regeneration carried out 40 follow-up telephone interviews with young farmers to find out how they have been impacted by and adapted to COVID-19 and to identify any support needs going forward.

During the lockdown period, young farmers highlighted the following impacts on their farm businesses:

- Labour – recruiting and/or retaining workers.
- Produce – meeting (changing) supermarket and consumer demands.
- The closure of (some) auction marts.
- The cancellation of agricultural shows.
- More people walking in the countryside and not closing gates / keeping to designated footpaths.
- Reduced or no income from farm diversification activities (e.g. café/restaurant, holiday lets, wedding venue).
- The cancellation of agricultural training.

*“For fruit farmers and people in horticulture more widely labour has been a challenge...Larger scale operators have been most significantly impacted.”*

*“Supply to Supermarkets at the start of lockdown was worth £1 million but our produce was unsold because the market disappeared overnight and most of the produce went to waste.”*

Young farmers provided some examples of how they have adapted to COVID-19 and mitigated some of its effects. These included:

- Creating ‘farming bubbles’ by keeping the same staff together on shifts to work as a protective measure to help reduce the potential risk of transmission. Providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensuring social distancing.
- Ensuring vehicles are not shared by staff – and ensuring vehicle cleaning before and after each journey.
- Increasing online and/or direct sales to consumers (e.g. farm shop, box schemes, roadside sales).
- Piloting new diversification ideas (e.g. pick-your-own, mazes, feed the animals).
- Purchasing equipment and supplies online rather than visiting premises.
- Taking a mortgage payment holiday and/or supporting tenants under financial strain.
- Furloughing staff involved in non-farm activities (e.g. hospitality, weddings/events).

*“Initially when in lockdown as we live next to a public right of way at one point, we had 500 walkers a day who were leaving their rubbish on our land near where the cows are. So, we decided to try and educate the public, so we had barley for them to feed the animals if they wanted to and sold them eggs.”*



# Summary



Young farmers were considering the following options in recovering from COVID-19:

- How to further increase online sales and/or direct buying and selling – digital marketing.
- Pop up visitor facilities and attractions (e.g. café, food stand, outdoor/countryside classroom, get close to the animals).
- Farm stays – converting agricultural buildings into visitor accommodation.
- Accessing online learning and training opportunities.

*“I would like to think more opportunities will arise around local supply chains and local provenance – the pandemic has emerged from a faulty global supply chain...people are in a “staycation” mode and through local exercising have rediscovered what the countryside looks like and this is a great opportunity to emphasise that it is only like this because of farmers.”*

Overall, the research suggests:

- 1. Young people want to have a stake in the countryside:** they care about the community where they live and many take an active part in local organisations and activities (e.g. church, parish council, school, pub). Often growing up and spending many hours working on a farm means they already have a wealth of skills and experiences at a young age compared to their peers not growing up on a farm.
- 2. Young people are a vital part of the social fabric of rural communities:** this has become even more apparent during COVID-19 with many young farmers delivering medicines or groceries and phoning or visiting vulnerable residents for example.
- 3. But they are pessimistic about the future:** while many young people want to continue to live and work in the countryside, this research suggest they will only be able to do so if they remain on their family farm. Similarly, many young farmers believe that if they are to have a future in farming, they will need an off-farm income to supplement and sustain them.
- 4. COVID-19 restrictions have had a big impact on young farmers and clubs:** not being able to meet face-to-face and socialise has had a significant effect on young farmers health and wellbeing. Clubs are taking stock in looking at how they deliver activities virtually and in person and the support they need to do this.
- 5. Young people are seeking information and advice – and some want more...**they are more likely to talk about their mental health than their parents or grandparents. They want more information on housing and activities available for young people. Given the need to undertake further training and skills development [particularly higher-level courses/qualifications] accessing this information will also become increasingly important.
- 6. Policy and decision makers need to ensure the voices of young farmers are heard:** as future farming schemes are developed and introduced, listening and responding to feedback from young farmers will continue to be important. Defra also has a strategic role as rural champion across Government and can ensure some of the themes emerging from the research (e.g. housing, youth services and activities) are picked up by relevant departments.

*“Young farmers are resilient, and innovative and that’s why we’ll make the best of the situation.”*



# Survey – your post-Brexit rural future



To ensure that young people who live, study or work in rural areas are given an opportunity to share key concerns about their rural future a survey was circulated by the NFYFC, YFCs and other bodies (e.g. national rural and farming support groups, agricultural societies, Cereals). Students, next generation farmers, land managers and those working within allied industries were encouraged to share their views.

The survey contained 41 questions and covered the following themes:

- 1. Housing**
- 2. Services**
- 3. Farming**
- 4. Skills**
- 5. COVID-19**
- 6. The Future**

The survey closed on 31 August 2020 and 528 responses were received.

## Key findings

### Sample Characteristics

- 528 responses
- Average age: 24 years
- 78% of the sample are Young Farmers' Club (YFC) members
- Respondents are from a wide geography, including 10% from Wales
- 61% work in farming
- 55% live in a farming household
- 79% live in a rural area
- 20% are students

### 1. Housing

- 69% live in a farming family
- 15% own a property (possibly higher than the national average for this demographic)
- 65% feel there is not enough housing for young people
- 97% want to live in a rural area over the next 5 years
- 73% want to move over the next 5 years
- 59% want to do this to become more independent
- 64% don't have the resources to buy a property

### 2. Services

- The lowest availability of services are those for young people: recreation facilities, youth clubs/services, wheels to work
- The most important facilities: community centre/village hall, youth club/youth service, wheels to work, church
- Most important missing services: community centre/village hall, youth club, wheels to work, church, entertainment, school, parish council

# Survey – your post-Brexit rural future



- Over 70% have sought advice about: training, employment, farming and money
- Housing and activities for young people identified as the areas where there is least information
- Majority of respondents have sought advice around physical and mental health
- A small majority (52%) prefer to get their advice online

## 3. Farming

- 62% have not heard of ELMs
- 61% are optimistic that farming productivity can be increased
- 50% think that farming profitability can be achieved
- 74% want to work in farming/land management
- 38% (highest choice by a significant margin) want to work on the family farm
- Top challenges related to working in farming are: starting a farm business, technology, attracting staff and contractors

## 4. Skills

- 88% recognized the need for ongoing skills development in farming
- Higher level (degree/HND) skills identified as the most important qualifications going forward
- 68% identify they need to undertake skills training directly and would prefer to use a training provider
- Succession planning marginally identified as the biggest challenge to achieving employment in the sector
- The private sector is identified as needing to be the principal source of funding for training

## 5. COVID-19

- COVID-19 has been easier to manage in rural settings, it had however clearly driven enhanced feelings of social isolation
- 58% of respondents feel isolated in the context of covid-19
- 85% think the impact of the pandemic will continue to affect them in the long term

## 6. The Future

- 81% think it will be harder for people to live in a rural setting over the next 5 years
- 56% think it will be harder to work in a rural area over the next five years
- 63% feel it will be harder for new entrants to get a start in farming
- 66% feel it will be more difficult going forward for next generation farmers
- 78% think it will not be possible to run a farming business without some form of diversification or off farm income

# Overarching findings



## 1. Young people want to have a stake in the countryside

They care about the community where they live and many take an active part in local organisations and activities (e.g. church, parish council, school, pub). There is a clear relationship between a young person's stake and their family/farm status. Often growing up and spending many hours working on a farm means they already have a wealth of skills and experiences at a young age compared to their peers not growing up on a farm. This means they often join in with local clubs and activities as their parents, grandparents and other family members have participated in them and they want to sustain them for future generations.

## 2. Young people are a vital part of the social fabric of rural communities

They make positive contributions to their local communities and build everyday relationships and broad social connections with people around them. This has become more apparent during COVID-19 with many young farmers delivering medicines or groceries and phoning or visiting vulnerable residents for example.

## 3...But they are pessimistic about the future

While many young people want to continue to live and work in the countryside, this research suggests they will only be able to do so if they remain on their family farm. While 15% of survey respondents own a property, 65% said they wanted to move out of their family home in the next 5-years but would be unable to do so because they cannot afford to buy or rent. Similarly, many young farmers believe that if they are to have a future in farming, they will need an off-farm income to supplement and sustain them. Many are looking to build on some of the changes they made during COVID-19 (e.g. local food) and are looking for more certainty around what the new agricultural system post-Brexit means for them.

## 4. COVID-19 restrictions have had a big impact on young farmers and clubs

Young farmers have had to adjust to changes in their routine, home life, education or employment and activities off-farm. While we know the pandemic is having a big impact on young people and those that support them, the perception is that farmers are used to self-isolation and distancing. In fact, the research shows not being able to meet face-to-face and socialise has had a significant impact on young farmers' health and wellbeing. It has led to an increasing need to get off the farm as they have found themselves stuck on the farm during lockdown. Young farmers are also concerned about the length of time COVID has gone on and what might happen if restrictions tighten again and/or there is a second peak or another national lockdown. Clubs are taking stock in looking at how they deliver activities virtually and in person and want support now (to restart, to look at their income/funding) and in the longer term (strategic/business planning – preparing for the future and not being reactive). This could lead to a better understanding of the relationships between clubs, counties, regions and the national federation.

## 5. Young people are seeking information and advice – and some want more...

They are more likely to talk about their mental health than their parents or grandparents. Many have looked for information about mental health (mainly online). And as more young people speak out, the stigma surrounding mental illness amongst their friends and peers has reduced – though the research suggests more needs to be done at family and community levels so young people can discuss mental health with older people who feel comfortable with them doing so. They wanted more information to be available on housing and activities available for young people. Given young farmers recognise they will need to undertake further training and skills development [particularly higher-level courses/qualifications] accessing this information will become increasingly important.



# Overarching findings



## 6. Policy and decision makers need to ensure the voices of young farmers are heard

They are passionate about farming and want to see a future for them in the industry, but farming is changing. How to bring forward the next generation of farmers, the move towards a high-tech future, succession planning, climate change. As future Government schemes are developed and introduced listening and responding to feedback from young farmers will continue to be important. Defra has a strategic role as rural champion across Government and can ensure some of the themes emerging from the research (e.g. housing, youth services and activities) are picked up by relevant departments.

*“Young farmers are resilient, and innovative and that’s why we’ll make the best of the situation.”*

### Comments:

“If we [young farmers] are going to start to introduce more virtual meetings and increase communication through the internet then we need there to be connectivity in rural areas for people to be able to join them. My dad had to turn every device off at the farm to give him enough bandwidth to connect to an NFU meeting.”

“The connectivity issue is massive in rural areas and we need better connectivity. It has really been highlighted as an important issue during COVID. We need more of a commitment from Government to the rollout as if you struggle to get broadband or a phone signal, you are becoming even more isolated. Farmers also need it to do direct sales and we’re moving to people using less cash.”

“The challenge is for clubs to plan how to move to face to face meetings and to make the best of their virtual networking. There will be delays to the normal process for the changeover of office holders.”

“A lot of farmers don’t get out anyway. Unfortunately [in some counties] auctions not being held so this has not helped but we have made it known to our members there is someone here at the end of the phone if they need us [the club].”

“Farming is an unsociable job anyway and you mainly work on your own. The weekly meetings have been missed and a few people I know have been struggling and have found it hard to put on a brave face.”

“YFC is all about socialising face-to-face and getting together because this has not been allowed has been difficult for some, but farmers work does tend to be done in isolation, so they have just been getting on with their jobs.”

“Since lockdown there has been a huge increase in walkers/ramblers around our farm making social distancing nearly impossible. Gates have been left open and different sheep and cattle groups mixed up.”

“Its hard to start a farm from nothing. We work in farming and bought a house instead because you can’t get a tenancy”

“I don’t think any degree, training or experience can prepare us for what’s to come. The consumer pressure is downwards on farming with inputs increasing”

“[I want] less new builds. All new builds being put up in my area are at least 4 bedrooms and older properties are either already large, or have been extended to a point where they are not affordable by young people.”