



An EIP-Agri Pilot Programme for Farmer Health & Wellbeing

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
2023



**Men's
Development
Network**

Better Lives for Men, Better Lives for All

FOREWORD

On behalf of the Board and Staff of Men's Development Network, we wish to congratulate the Operational Group and the Co-Ordinator on the tremendous work completed on FarmConnect. The quality of the work in this pilot initiative funded under the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) in addressing the significant issue of farmer health, safety, and wellbeing (FHSWB) paves the way towards ensuring it remains at the foremost of our thoughts as a nation. The consultative approach amongst the partners and the creativity of the programme design and implementation portray the innovation established on engaging farmers in relation to FHSWB. The feedback from farmers attending the programme highlighted the relational approach to engaging farmers is a critical component to effect long-lasting behavioural change around their health and wellbeing and we are delighted by the positive response of farmers to the programme. The report gives considerable detail to the items mentioned above, which should have a major impact on policy and programme development in this area. We would also like to thank the European Union and the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine for their support to the programme.

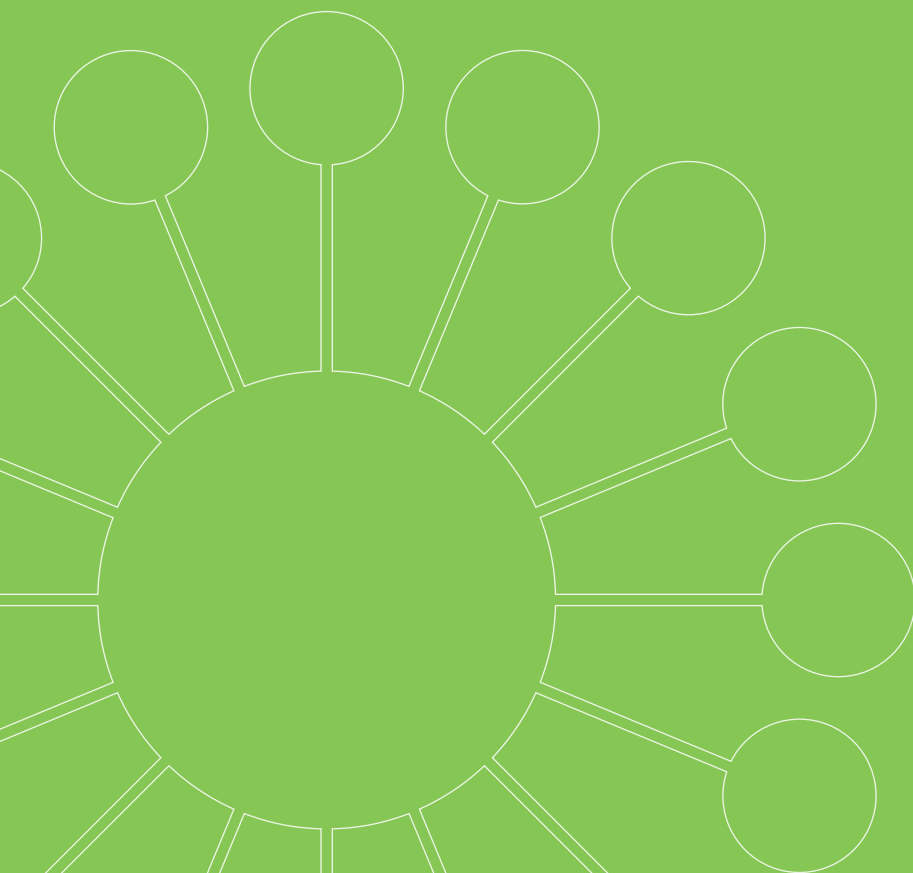
Noel Synnott

Chairperson



Sean Cooke

CEO



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

The FarmConnect programme is a European Innovation Partnership (EIP-Agri) project, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, that aims to support Irish farmers in addressing some of the challenges that adversely affect their health and wellbeing and thereby impact on overall farm safety. Its aim is to promote and invite positive incremental behavioural change through a bespoke health and wellbeing training programme. The overall goal is to develop a sustainable, coherent, replicable and nationwide programme by focusing on farm safety through the lens of farmer health and wellbeing, and within an overall Knowledge Transfer (KT) model. This pilot programme was overseen by an Operational Group and was piloted in two counties in 2022/2023: County Roscommon and County Waterford.

A comprehensive independent evaluation was commissioned as part of the FarmConnect pilot programme with a view to capturing key learnings that would inform the roll-out of a scalable, national, capacity-building health and wellbeing programme for farmers throughout Ireland. This independent evaluation comprised three phases; (i) the development, design and roll-out of the Train the Trainer programme; (ii) the roll-out of the FarmConnect programme; and (iii) implications/recommendations for future roll-out and scale-up of FarmConnect programme.

The increasing focus on farmers' health in Ireland in recent years, is underpinned by a growing body of evidence relating to the excess burden of physical and mental ill-health experienced by Irish farmers, by the knock-on effects of ill-health on injury and farm safety, as well as by the negative impact that ill-health has on farm productivity, farm business and farm income. There have been significant changes to agricultural policy and the governance of farming practices in order to deliver on increasingly specific regulations related to societal issues such as climate, biodiversity, animal welfare, and air and water quality. These changes have posed significant challenges to farmers' identity, with ripple effects on their mental health.

SECTION 2. METHODOLOGY

This evaluation was carried out by an independent evaluation team comprising Dr Noel Richardson, Dr Shane O'Donnell and Dr Diana van Doorn (National Centre for Men's Health, South East Technological University) and Allison Holmes (University of Limerick). The evaluation was conducted using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the experiences of a variety of project stakeholder groups with the FarmConnect programme. The evaluation was conducted in four discrete phases:

Phase/Objective 1. To understand the key momentum factors, principles and philosophical approaches that informed the design and development of the FarmConnect Programme.

Phase/Objective 2. To explore facilitators' lived experiences of participating in the Train the Trainer programme and its impact on their capacity to deliver the programme to farmers.

Phase/Objective 3. To explore farmers' lived experience of engaging with the FarmConnect programme and its impact on their health and health-related knowledge.

Phase/Objective 4. To identify strategies that supported or hindered recruitment and engagement with the FarmConnect programme.

Four different stakeholder groups participated in the FarmConnect evaluation which included: (i) the Operational Group – those with an oversight role for Train the Trainer (TtT) and FarmConnect programmes; (ii) the Programme Development team – those who were responsible for the development and implementation of the TtT and FarmConnect programmes; (iii) Facilitators – those who were responsible for delivering FarmConnect; and (iv) Farmers – those who participated in FarmConnect. Focus groups and interviews were conducted during Phases 1-4 to explore participants' lived experiences, and thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. Surveys were also administered (i) after the TtT (Phase 2) and (ii) before and after delivery of FarmConnect (Phase 3) to determine the respective impact and acceptability of both programmes (e.g., how well they were received and how they met the needs of the respective target group). All data collected were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Statistical analysis included presenting frequencies and Wilcoxon signed-rank test to examine the mean difference on matched pre- and post-data.

SECTION 3. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS, PRINCIPLES AND PHILOSOPHIES UNDERPINNING PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

A number of important contextual factors or 'solid foundations' supported the successful development of FarmConnect. This included the rising visibility of farmers' health, its prioritisation at government level and increased funding for associated programmes; the reframing of farm safety to include health and wellbeing and the upsurge of farmers' health initiatives which created a lineage of best-practice and evidence-based approaches from which to draw; strategic alignment, shared commitment to farmers' health, and an independent lead partner which facilitated an effective working partnership; and an emerging need for social connection and health education among farmers in a post-Covid world. There was also a clear sense that the programme methods and farmer focused approach were novel and breaking new ground. This method consisted of the blending of traditional knowledge translation (KT) approaches with experiential, developmental and strength-based methodologies underpinned by national and international best-practice. This resulted in an evidence-based programme with clear and tangible processes/outcomes, an experiential learning process that demystified conversations around health and facilitated reciprocal peer support, and where participants felt valued and not judged on perceived deficits. Indeed, in the context of utilising evidence-based approaches, the programme development team felt it best re-calibrate some features and content of the original application to align with best-practice. More specifically, the duration and scope of the application was reduced; co-design methods were used with key stakeholders to enhance the relevance and relatability of the content and programme implementation; and the programme outcomes, processes and resources were refined. Investing time in this pre-development stage was felt vital to ensuring the successful delivery of FarmConnect.

SECTION 4. FARMCONNECT TRAIN THE TRAINER

Twelve facilitators participated in the Train the Trainer (TtT) programme for FarmConnect. The range of participants' previous experience in facilitation and professional backgrounds significantly contributed to the peer learning experience. All facilitators participated in the TtT evaluation process which was conducted using both quantitative survey and qualitative focus group methodology. Facilitator experience of the TtT programme was reported as overwhelmingly positive, with 91% (n=11) of respondents strongly agreeing that they found the training worthwhile and would participate again. Ninety one percent of respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that they found the standard of training provided satisfactory and would recommend this training to others. When asked if participation had aided their professional development and impacted positively on their professional practice, more than 75% (n=8) strongly agreed with a further 18% agreeing that it had.

Overall, facilitators reported this to be a very worthwhile training programme both in terms of their experience as participants and its relevance in terms of preparing them to deliver the FarmConnect programme to farmers. They identified a strong need for programmes such as FarmConnect to engage marginal groups and were very enthusiastic and positive about the prospect of being involved in its roll-out.

The majority reported finding the element of peer learning and support and opportunity for application of learning in practical scenarios the most useful elements of the TtT programme, with many suggesting that there could have been further opportunity included for this throughout the programme with an increase in in-person training contact time. Suggestions in regards to elements of the programme that could be improved in future roll outs included hosting the information webinar series later in the programme to allow for improved contextualisation of same, the hosting of training weekends in a more central location to allow for improved access logistically, and the inclusion of further testimony and experiences of farmers and those currently working with farmer groups in this context.

SECTION 5. FARMCONNECT PROGRAMME DELIVERY AND OUTCOMES

Survey Findings

The pilot programme attracted a predominantly older (mean age 59.7 years), male (79.8%), mixed educational attainment cohort of farmers', who farmed full-time (55.7%), with specialist cattle farmers (57.5%) being the predominant farm enterprise, and a mixture of participants from smaller to larger farm holdings. Whilst the programme reached a diverse sample of farmers', it is acknowledged that not all farming subgroups were engaged.

Participants' hopes and expectations about taking part in the FarmConnect programme included learning more about 'coping strategies for personal mental health and wellbeing issues (including stress, anxiety and grief'; 30.9%; n=26), 'mental health and wellbeing' more generally (30.9%; n=26), 'work-life balance' (17.8%; n=15), 'improving health awareness' (14.3%; n=12), 'connecting with other farmers' (13.1%; n=11), and 'learning about farm safety, farm organisation and/or changes in farming' (13.1%; n=11).

"It made me think about my lifestyle and I said to myself I'm going to put this into practice. I used to drink a lot of coffee but I have reduced that 50%. I went off the sweets, I don't take any salt now and I go for a walk in the evening. I find it absolutely wonderful; I can see a huge change in myself. I feel great!"
Ronan, Farmer.

After completing the programme, there were significant ($p < 0.001$) improvements in levels of (i) importance (ii) knowledge and (iii) confidence that participants attributed to a range of health statements including; 'understanding how wellbeing and mental health are interlinked', 'being physically active for health and wellbeing', 'managing stress to stay healthy', 'eating well for good health', 'getting enough sleep to stay healthy', 'being aware of how thought processes affect wellbeing', and 'having the resilience to cope with challenging situations'. These are important changes in the context of making and sustaining health behaviour change.

Four out of five participants (81.1%; $n=90$) rated as an eight out of ten or higher the importance of the statement 'minding my health can lead to better farm safety. Pre-evaluation, most participants (87.3%; $n=82$) 'agreed/strongly agreed' with the statement 'I believe that the decisions I make about my health impact my farming safety practices', and this significantly ($p < 0.001$) increased post-evaluation.

These findings are important in the context of established links between poor general health and increased risk of farming injury and suggest that improving awareness of such links can prompt a change in attitudes and behaviours towards farm safety.

Participants' experiences of the FarmConnect programme were overwhelmingly positive with 91.2% ($n=104$) of participants rating it as an eight out of ten or higher; 100% ($n=110$) agreeing that they would recommend the programme to other farmers'; and the vast majority (>80%) expressing satisfaction with various aspects of the content and delivery of the programme. The vast majority of participants (>85%) 'agreed/strongly agreed' that, as a result of taking part in the FarmConnect programme, they contemplated making changes to the way that they take care of their mental health and wellbeing; that they felt more at ease in discussing their health and wellbeing with others; and that they knew where to look for other supports and services. In response to an open question, the top six key learnings from the programme were; 'mental health and wellbeing, including mindfulness' (38.3%; $n=36$); the 'importance of connecting with others' (36.2%; $n=34$); the 'importance of positive thinking' (34.0%; $n=32$); 'life-work balance' (including taking time for myself; 29.8%; $n=28$), 'diet' (26.6%; $n=25$), and 'health awareness' (23.4%; $n=22$). The high programme rating, satisfaction with delivery and impact, as well as improvements in levels of importance, confidence and knowledge, are important in the context of well-established links with behaviour change; namely programme relevance, satisfying a need, and being culturally competent and engaging.

In response to an open question, suggestions for future programme roll-out included; 'having follow-up sessions' (19.3%; $n=11$); 'selecting better and clearer recruitment strategies' (14.8%; $n=8$); 'targeting those farmers most in need of courses like this' (11.1%; $n=6$); 'providing more information about farm issues such as safety, independence, CAP' (11.1%; $n=6$); 'having a nationwide roll-out' (11.1%; $n=6$), and 'bringing in external speakers such as peer mentors, advisors' (11.1%; $n=6$).

Table 5.6 Key learnings from the programme? ($n=94$) *

Learning themes	n (%)
Mental health and wellbeing (incl. mindfulness)	36 (38.3)
Importance of connecting with others	34 (36.2)
Importance of positive thinking	32 (34.0)
Life-work balance (incl. taking time for yourself)	28 (29.8)
Diet	25 (26.6)
Health awareness	22 (23.4)
Importance of sleep	16 (17.0)
Asking for help	13 (13.8)
Physical activity	13 (13.8)
Stress management	13 (13.8)
Others have similar issues	12 (12.8)
Importance of community	10 (10.6)
Farm safety	4 (4.2)
Other	18 (19.1)

Qualitative Findings: Key Programme Outcomes and Behaviour Change

A pragmatic approach was seen as being warranted in terms of expectations regarding programme outcomes and behaviour change, given the duration and pilot nature of the material. A key aim of FarmConnect was to promote a positive, incremental approach to improving personal health and wellbeing and participants were encouraged to 'make one small change' based on the various weekly topics. A range of 'small' but significant behaviour changes were reported among farmers which included daily walks; counting steps; reducing caffeine, sugar, salt and fatty food intake; getting a new mattress to improve sleep; drinking more water; and eating more fruit. As a result of these changes, farmers reported feeling 'better in themselves' and had a sense of improved physical health more generally. Almost all farmers reported that the programme had a positive impact on their mental health. Specifically, it was felt that participation in FarmConnect addressed social isolation; reduced stigma; normalised mental health difficulties through the reciprocal sharing of life difficulties and coping strategies; acted as a 'safe space' to address sensitive issues such as suicide and the impact of bereavement; and enhanced self-efficacy to recognise mental-ill health symptoms, seek timely support and signpost others to available services. Enhanced health literacy, self-efficacy and the habitual practice of healthy lifestyle behaviours increased farmers overall confidence to make good decisions about their health. This resulted in many attending their GP for check-ups, continuing their engagement in healthy behaviours beyond the programme and taking up new health promoting activities with family. A key learning outcome for many farmers was the need to slow down to look after their health which they felt would, in the long run, enable them to more effectively look after their farm. This unique approach of reframing a 'healthy lifestyle' within the context of a 'healthy farm' seemed to particularly resonate with farmers. Perhaps more importantly, they felt that slowing down and prioritising their health would also reduce incidences of accidents on the farm by being more present and conscious during mundane tasks whilst also having a greater awareness of high-risk or dangerous activities.

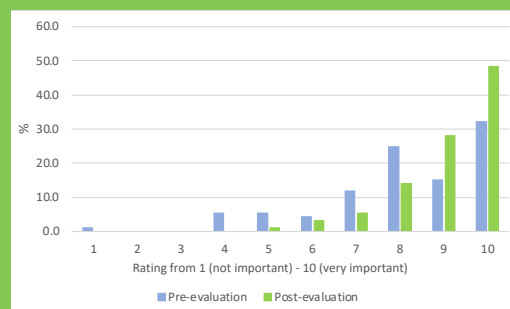
"I've started to keep on top of my diet a bit better, I'm eating more fruit and drinking water. I learned that its small things that make the difference, you don't have to go and change your whole life". **Conor, Farmer.**

"I started walking 2-3 nights a week and eating better food. I'm still doing it and I've nearly lost a stone weight which has done me the world of good". **James, Farmer.**

The importance of 'being physically active for health and wellbeing' was rated by n=93 participants (Figure 5.4; Table A8-4). Pre-evaluation, most participants (72.0%; n=67) rated this as an eight out of ten or higher, whereas 16.1% (n=15) rated it as a six or seven out of ten and 11.9% (n=11) rated it as five out of ten or lower.

After completing the programme, the proportion of participants rating this as an eight out of ten or higher had increased to 83.6% (n=77), which was significant ($p < 0.001$; Table A8-5). Post-evaluation showed that 9.7% (n=9) of participants rated it as seven out of ten or lower.

Figure 5.4 Self-rated importance of 'being physically active for health and wellbeing' (n=93)



SECTION 6. OPTIMISING AND SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT

A combination of local radio/newspapers ads and one-to-one contact by peer leaders within the agricultural community was the preferred recruitment strategy among farmers. It was acknowledged that more targeted one-to-one contact was needed to reach the most hard-to-reach (HTR) farmers. However, doubts were expressed by the programme development team regarding feasibility of the one-to-one approach as part of any planned scale-up. Integration and accreditation of the programme into standard KT requirements was seen as a more sustainable option coupled with testimonials and encouragement from past participants. A key strength of the programme was that the content was clear, concise and easy to understand. This was felt to promote inclusion, appeal to a wider range of farmers, and provide a smooth delivery process. Applying the developmental approach to the structure of the content gradually built farmers' confidence over time to discuss more sensitive topics (e.g. mental health). The wide range of methods to deliver the content was also felt to keep the energy and interest high. There were some concerns regarding the amount of content to be covered whilst also allowing to let important conversations flow. However, this was overcome by facilitators as they gained experience with the programme. Some concerns were raised regarding the content relating to resilience, with recommendations for more appropriate language. It was felt that there was a need for a consolidation of learnings from different programmes to overcome the current tendency to operate in silos, which was seen as stymieing the learning and potential growth in the field of farmers' health more broadly. There were also calls for policy makers to adopt more considered and sympathetic approaches in their dealings with advisors (and farmers) that took into consideration the potential consequences of their actions on stress levels within the farming community.

The co-facilitation methodology enabled facilitators to bring different life experiences and facilitation styles into the room. This supported engagement by reaching out to different demographics of farmers whilst also sharing the workload among facilitators. The importance of the 'winning over' farmers on the first night was flagged by many along with establishing trust and connection over a longer period of time to 'lower the guard'. To address this, facilitators adopted an informal and professional style; appropriately shared life experiences; used familiar language; removed power imbalances; engaged in casual conversations at the breaktimes; regularly checked-in with participants during the sessions and greeted everyone by name. The coordinator sent weekly personalised reminder text messages to all participants to ensure GDPR best practice and augment programme rapport with participants. This positively impacted farmers' perception of the programme who noted that the facilitators as extremely relatable and approachable and a primary reason for their sustained engagement. Other key strategies adopted within programme design and development included flexibility with participation, providing small action-orientated pieces of 'homework' to encourage incremental lifestyle behaviour changes; and utilizing peer-led approaches to build a sense of autonomy and ownership. Participants preferred the relatively small group numbers which they felt promoted a sense of collegiality and togetherness; community venues which were not aligned with any particular farming group; and that the programme was delivered in winter when farmwork was less busy. It was felt that future programme roll-out should remain as in-person rather than on-line delivery. Programme co-ordination was deemed to be a critical success factor; specifically, the key leadership and management role assumed by the co-ordinator, which fostered excellent working relationships with project partners and programme participants.

SECTION 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

Findings point towards what can unequivocally be described as a highly innovative, impactful and effective programme that was underpinned by (i) a rigorous and extensive pre-development phase involving meaningful consultation and partnership working with industry partners; (ii) investment in capacity-building and sustainability through the development and delivery of a robust Train-the Trainer component; (iii) the development of a comprehensive set of resources, including a highly impressive resource manual; and (iv) excellent programme co-ordination and programme management. The roll-out of the FarmConnect pilot programme was met with exceptionally high levels of participant satisfaction and was highly effective in meeting the core programme objectives of increasing levels of importance, knowledge and confidence among participating farmers in relation to making positive health behaviour changes.

7.2 Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy-Makers

- Maximise reach by mainstreaming FarmConnect within the existing knowledge translation (KT) model and/or integrating individual modules into existing agricultural education programmes.
- Use the findings from this evaluation as additional leverage to reposition and reframe 'farm safety' as being more inclusive of health and wellbeing.
- Explore opportunities to assign programme certification for FarmConnect to extend the reach and build the credibility of the programme and consider adapting the FarmConnect model for delivery with other occupational groups and in other sectors.

Recommendations for future Train the Trainer programmes

- Make provision for increased opportunities for in-person training throughout the TtT programme, with an emphasis on modelling, roleplaying, peer support and feedback.
- Host the information webinar series later in the programme to allow for improved contextualisation of same.
- Host the training weekends in a more central location to allow for improved access logistically and the inclusion of further testimony and experiences of farmers and those currently working with farmer groups in this context.

Recommendations for FarmConnect Coordination and Recruitment

- Capitalise and expand on the existing FarmConnect strategic partnerships to gain traction, momentum and buy-in from key stakeholders to support future roll-out and expansion of the programme.
- Ensure that future programme delivery continues to be underpinned by the same highly professional level of programme co-ordination, governance, and leadership, that can facilitate the development of excellent working relationships with programme participants and project partners.
- Maintain existing vigilance in ensuring programme delivery is in neutral community venues that have no formal ties to other organisations to avoid bias in local communities.
- Make provision for additional strategies to recruit younger farmers and 'hard-to-reach' farmers.
- Garner support from past participants (including testimonials for advertising purposes) to encourage participation among peers for future programmes.

Recommendations for FarmConnect Delivery

- Consider including more farm-oriented topics in the programme and/or more explicitly aligning current modules with farm related topics. Alignment with the 'KT' Programme would support implementation of this recommendation.
- Deliver future iterations of the programme during the winter months to maximise participation.
- Include clear notes in the programme manual on the core messages to be covered in each session to support facilitators who may have more limited experience of delivering FarmConnect.
- Consider reviewing the content relating to resilience to align with best-practice and appropriate use of language in this field.

Recommendations for practitioners engaging in other health and wellbeing programmes with farmers

- Align programme content and implementation plan with evidence-based and best practice approaches to increase the likelihood that it will be effective in meeting the learning objectives.

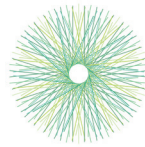
- Be realistic in terms of programme duration, scope and breadth for future proposals relating to farmers' health. Be pragmatic and realistic in terms of setting targets for behaviour change in the context of a hard-to-reach group.
- Make provision in the predevelopment stage for sufficient time to consult with facilitators and farmers in refinement of programme content and implementation plan to ensure that the programme is appropriate practical and realistic.
- Ensure processes, content and KT outcomes are clear and tangible. Adopt a modular approach where each session has a defined outcome which contributes to the overall learning objective.
- Utilise language in programme content and branding that fosters a sense of familiarity, community and support. Avoid technical, medical and/or stigmatising language.
- Consider using a blended approach of knowledge transfer and experiential learning methodologies to engage farmers around their individual health and wellbeing.
- Adopt strengths-based approaches that emphasise and focus on farmers' existing strengths, capacities, and emotions.
- Adopt an incremental and developmental approach to the structuring of content to build farmers' confidence to engage with more sensitive topics (i.e., mental health).
- Ensure that future recruitment strategies align a 'healthy farmer with a healthy farm' by making explicit links between wellbeing and farm productivity and farm safety.

AN EIP-AGRI PILOT PROGRAMME FOR FARMER HEALTH & WELLBEING



**Men's
Development
Network**

Better Lives for Men, Better Lives for All



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AGRICULTURE & INNOVATION



**An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara**
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



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