

2017 WINNER:
CHARLOTTE CUNNINGHAM



Farm24 bridges the rural isolation gap

Social media is providing farmers with an invaluable lifeline at a time when rural isolation and mental health issues are reaching devastating levels.

Thousands of farmers recently came together in the UK's largest agricultural social media event, Farm24, in a bid to tell their stories and celebrate everything in agriculture.

However, behind the celebrations, there was a much more powerful message to be taken from the event. The #Farm24 hashtag allowed farmers from across the UK to make crucial connections with other like-minded people, sharing mutual challenges and providing a platform for discussion in times of need.

According to Will Evans, a mixed beef and arable farmer in Wales, social media has become an instrumental tool in combating rural isolation - and with many farms running as single-person operations, loneliness is an increasingly worrying issue. "If it were not for my wife and children, I would go for weeks without seeing anyone," he explained. "When you are on your own, you can sit and over-think and worry - it can soon get on top of you."

Failure to deal with isolation issues could often lead to further problems, warned Steve Dennis, south west regional director at the Farming Community Network. "When challenges arise and you don't know what to do, there is a tendency just to bottle things up," he said. "Not dealing with problems often leads to mental health issues - but there is a wealth of experience and knowledge out there to help."

Although neighbours were often on hand, talking face-to-face could be difficult so the indirect nature of social media offered a great support mechanism for farmers, added Mr Dennis. "We have certainly seen an increase in farmers turning to social media, especially the younger generation. It is not quite so confrontational, so a lot of people find it a bit easier to reach out."

With a twitter reach of more than 100 million, farmers across the UK certainly made the most of the Farm24 event. Rural isolation and mental health were high on the agenda, with the hashtags #YouAreNotAlone and #ItsGoodToTalk featuring heavily in discussions - backed by organisations including the Yorkshire Agricultural Society, the YANA Project and Farming Forum.

"Social media connects people by a single common bond and just knowing there are other people going through the same thing can really help," said Mr Evans. "It is easy to forget what a big industry agriculture is and Farm24 is a good expression of that. It is great to see a very positive event - reminding us all that we're not alone and are a part of something much bigger."

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