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Rural Mental Health Conference:
Tackling Isolation and Fostering
Connections

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Leading the way in Agriculture and Rural Research, Education and Consulting

The impacts of disease outbreak in beef cattle on the mental wellbeing of livestock farmers and connectedness in the farming community.

(Stephen, K. & Gunn, G.J., 2019)

BACKGROUND	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Challenges of farming (beef)• Livestock disease
METHODS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews
RESULTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental wellbeing• Connectedness
DISCUSSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ... and next steps



The challenges of farming: Unique occupational stressors

(Gregoire, 2002, p. 472)



Long hours

Time and money pressures

Few holidays

Isolation

Living on farms

Unpredictable forces of weather and disease

The challenges of farming: regulatory demands decoupled from animal care (Escobar, M.P. and Demeritt, D., 2017)



“Burdensome” Poor compliance



Falling prices, increasing costs, falling demand & changes in public perception



Mental health of farmers



“Farming is associated with a unique set of characteristics that is potentially hazardous to mental health”

(Fraser et al, 2005, p.340)

Farming “is associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression”

(Sanne et al, 2004, p.2016)

Higher psychological morbidity among farmer families than general population

(Hounscome et al, 2012)

- Farmers were “were more likely to report thinking that life is not worth living when compared to the British household population”
- “the relation between depression and suicidal ideation seems to be quite different among farmers and the general population”
- “access to lethal methods”

(Thomas et al., 2003, p.184-185)

Social support



Farmers in Scotland: suicide is more likely by farmers in areas in which there is a lower density of farming

- Social support and social networks are a protective factor

(Stark et al, 2006)

Social factors and unique community characteristics can have a mediating role in mental health - subgroup of farmers is different to other remote, rural residents.

(Stain et al, 2008, p.843)

Nuances of connectedness



Nuances and complexities in (rural) social networks: “close and strong for some, while being judgemental and parochial for others”

(Skerratt, 2017)

Social networks in agriculture characterised by;

- distrust
- disagreement
- exclusion

(Fisher, 2013)

Lack of connectedness



Behavioural norms work against sharing of knowledge & experience

- compounded by geographic isolation

(Tregear & Cooper, 2016, p.108)

... increasingly socially and culturally isolated ... compounded by growing regulatory burden, financial volatility and **consequences of animal disease**

(Lobley et al, 2018)

A little about livestock disease ...



- * harms the welfare of animals;
- * disrupts farming and rural businesses;
- * costs livestock owners' money;
- * prevents produce going to market in peak condition;
- * can cause disease in humans, such as Salmonella;
- * can lead to the loss of export markets;
- * causes stress and anxiety to animal owners and others;**
- * has the potential to affect the quality of the environment as a consequence of the disposal of wastes.

Thinking about how some livestock diseases are spread ...

*** direct or indirect contact with infected animals**

*** eating or drinking contaminated food or water**

*** animals to humans and/or their vehicles that then spread infection to other animals.**



Interviews with 12 livestock farmers were conducted in Scotland between Jan-Feb 2018.

Transcripts were analysed using nVivo12 to identify impacts of livestock disease experiences on mental wellbeing and to identify supportive community connections (Jan-Mar 2019).

Results: dealing with the challenges



we've just had our annual test last month and that came back with initially, 6 positives. You think why, they're all young cows, first time, basically heifers in calf for the first time and you think "Why? why?" and then you do start thinking why do you bother?

(F08)

Results: dealing with the challenges



Well, we've fenced off now open ponds to keep the cattle out of any stagnant water that we do have, but unfortunately ... we have a lot of rain. Doesn't matter how good or how well we drain our fields we do seem to get puddles and of course they do stand in the puddles and drink from them rather than going to the troughs

(F11)

disease causes work, it's time (F10)

... the work involved looking after a sick animal compared with a healthy animal (F05B)

the stress that it gives you ... you spend a lot of time looking after an ill animal (F05A)

Results: impact of seeing sick animals



Farmers describe their experiences of livestock disease in emotive terms:

- *catastrophic* (F07)
- *awful* (F05B)
- *a nightmare* (F05A)
- *the most unsatisfying, disheartening thing in the world* (F09)

Results: culling sick animals



you can't really attach too much emotion to cows (F04)

you have to be absolutely brutal in the culling - no point in saying, 'that cow looks alright, we'll leave her be' (F06)

we're both really quite sentimental, we really care about our cows - we know them individually, we know who their parents are, you know, so if we had to go and cull them ... but at the end of the day it is a business too and we need to think for the health of the herd, what's the best for them (F09)

Results: the benefits of farmer-farmer connection



it is good to talk as well and to understand where other people are at (F04)

- *we've certainly learnt something new*
- *farmers out of the area that you wouldn't normally speak to*
- *farmers need to get more social circles (F05A)*

Results: the value of farmer-farmer co-operation



we're lucky too – having good neighbours (F11)

it's good with the neighbours... those neighbours are fenced across the glen and the other neighbours have been very easy to work with – it's been a two way thing with them - yeah your own little part of the world, if you can exercise control on that little part of the world it's a huge help. (F09)

A group of farmer led, XXX livestock association ... we were ahead of the game ... quite a success story (F07)

Results: lack of trust



We were clean of (name of disease) but now I think we probably have (disease) probably from the neighbour. (F10)

Occasionally, some people are happy to openly say "... we've had trouble with A B or C - Have you had a problem?"

But most people will just keep it buttoned and not tell you anything about what's going on on their farm ...

you can ask people about their animals and the status of them but sadly they just basically they just tell you what they think you want to hear (F08)

Results: lack of trust



I think farmers should speak more and be a bit more honest about their, any of their experiences. They're better off being honest with each other (F05A)

Results: farmer-vet connection

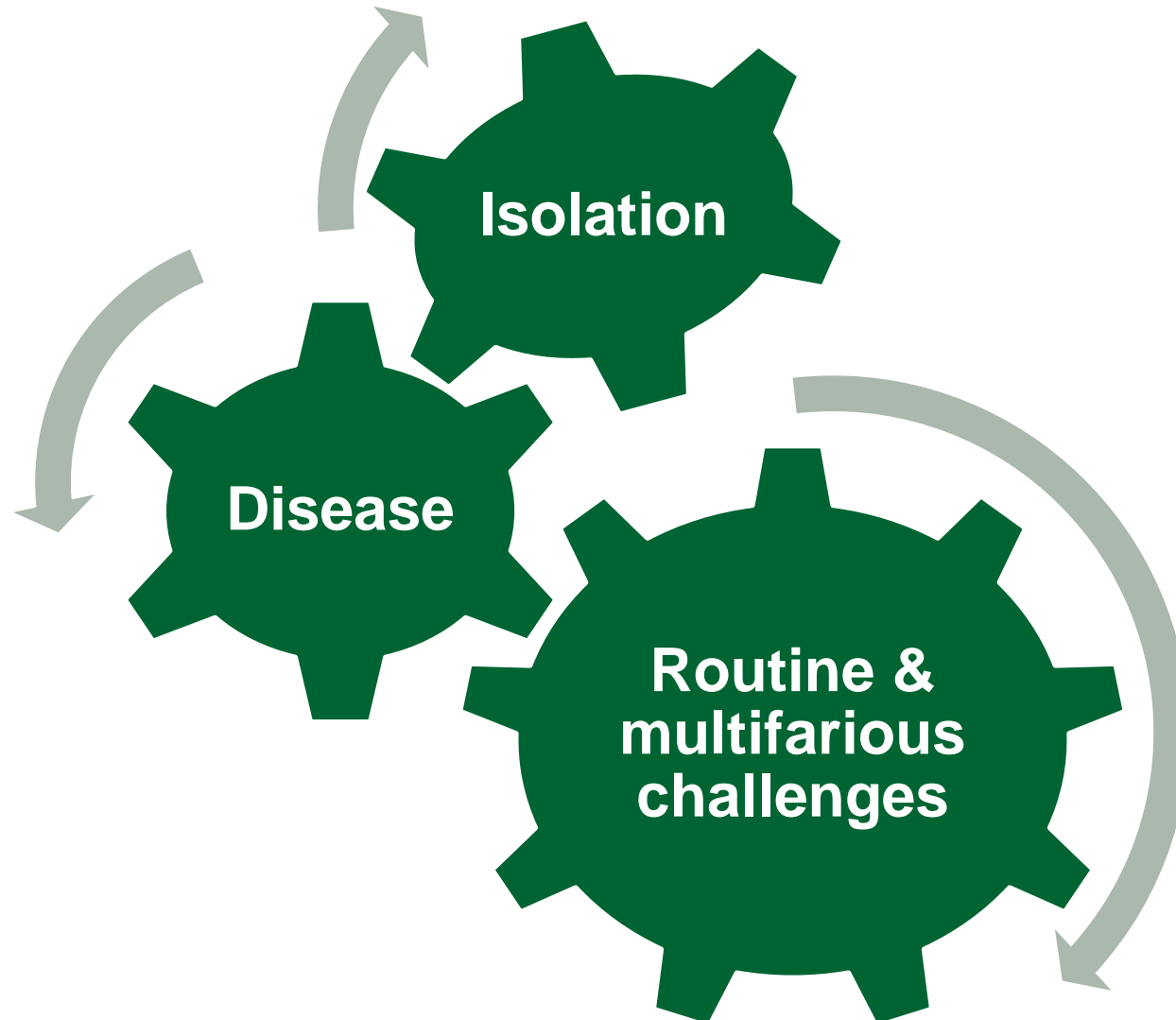


it's more like a friendship more than just a business (F05B)

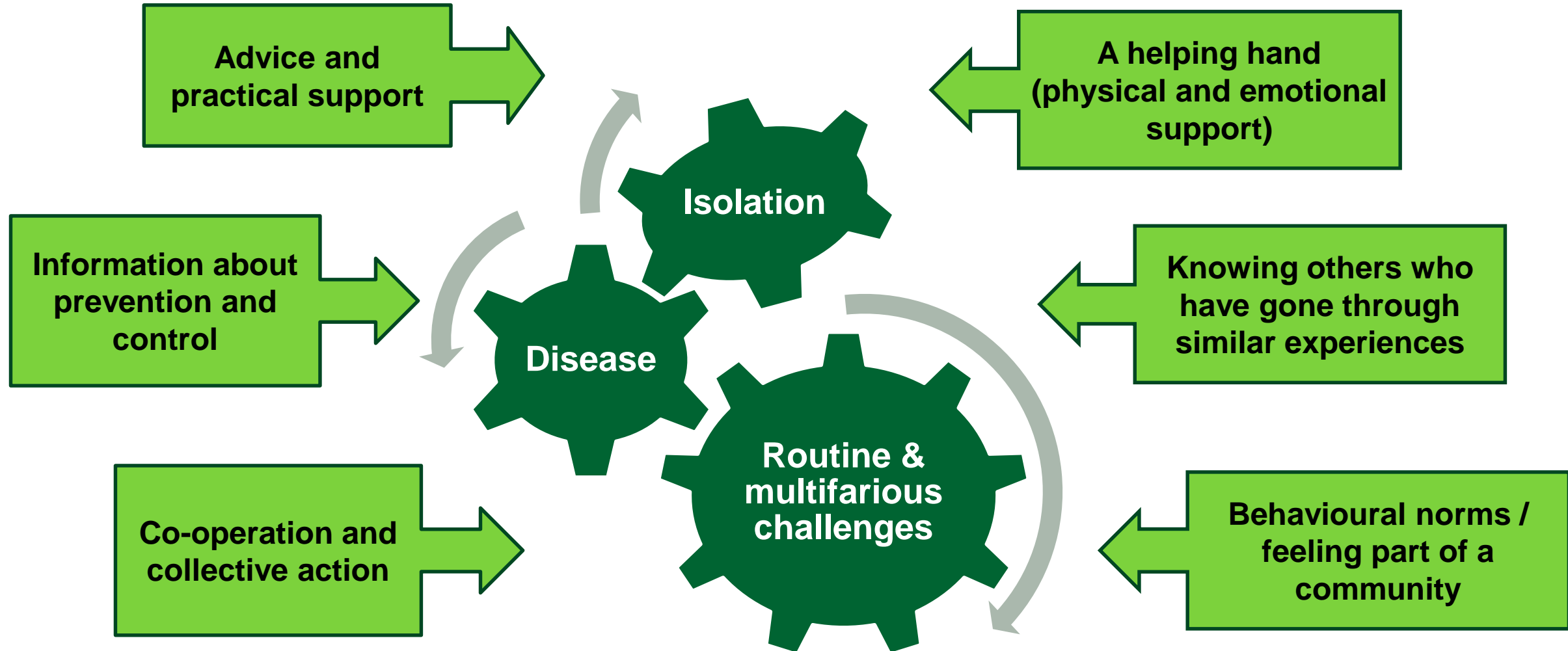
I'd like to think that they're looking out for us (F08)

if I hadn't had a good working relationship with my vets and my vets weren't understanding and weren't prepared to go the extra mile, I probably wouldn't be farming cattle now (F04)

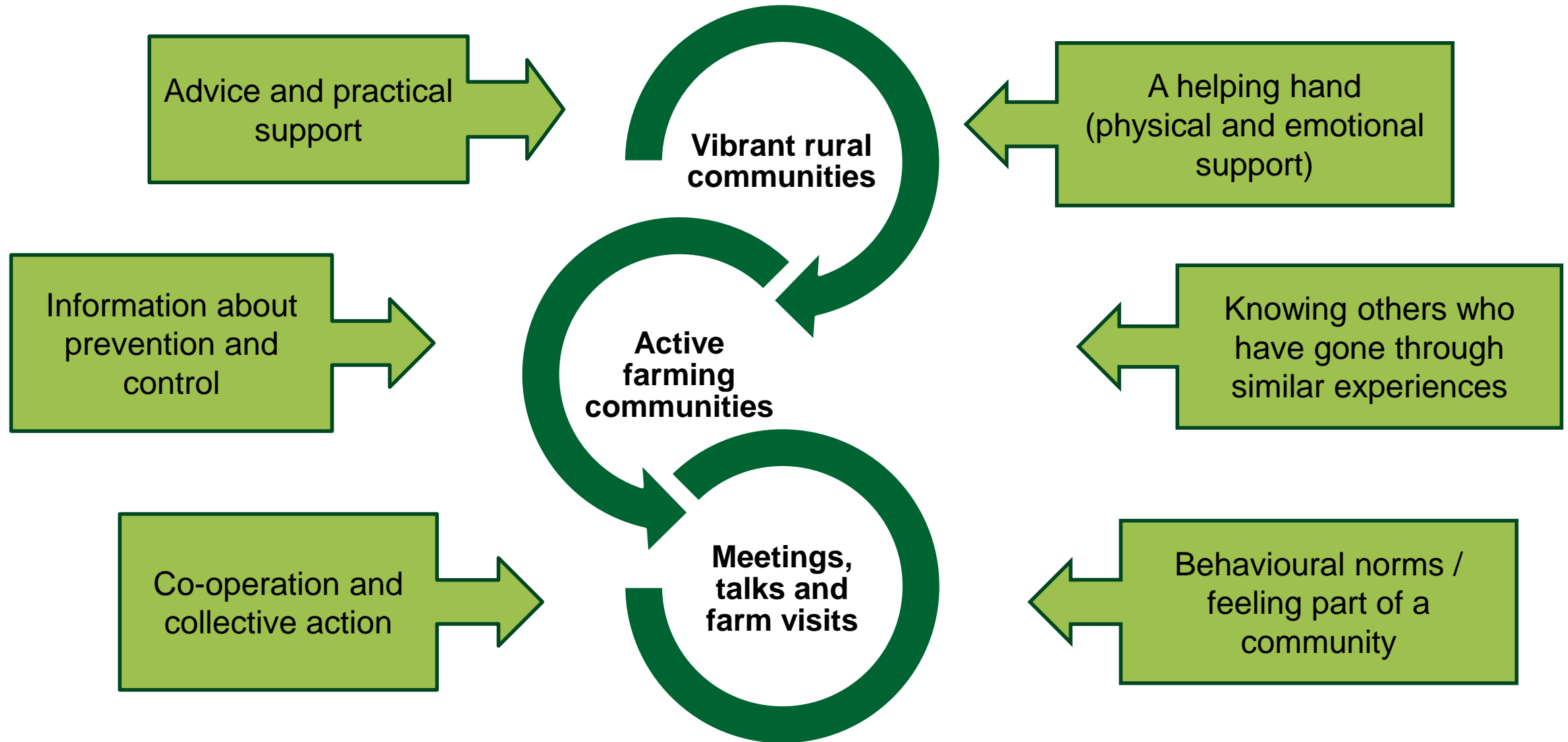
Conclusions: A 'perfect storm'



Conclusions: Tackling isolation and fostering connections



Conclusions: Tackling isolation and fostering connections



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Thank you.
Comments or questions
or time for a story?

Ozzie (not in photo)
Belted Galloway



http://www.bruehighlanders.co.uk/cattle_calumruadh.htm

<https://www.fginsight.com/vip/vip/royal-highland-show-2018-belted-galloway-herd-hoping-for-repeat-success-63767>

Calum Ruadh
Pedigree Highland





Ozzie & Calum Ruadh example



Hebrides
News

Bulls clashed as crofters argued over fence

23 March 2018

<http://www.hebrides-news.com/bulls-clashed-23318.html>

“good relations between both couples deteriorated due to rows over fences”.