

Are farm households different? Some evidence from Wales

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Background

Farming contributes significantly to the economy and shapes the natural environment in Wales, accounting for 88% of land use¹, and 4.1% of employment - higher than the UK national average of 1.4%².

The sector is currently facing a range of challenges linked to social, economic, and environmental sustainability, as it establishes a new direction after UK withdrawal from the EU. The debate on new policy measures is already informed by a wealth of agricultural statistics about farm business activities: what farmers do and how they do it. However, farms are not only places of work. In most cases, they are also the place where farmers and their households reside. In this respect, the agricultural industry in Wales (more so than other sectors) is characterised by a close relationship between business and family life.

Existing statistics indicate that farming is a male-dominated industry, with the majority of principle farmers (83%) being male³. However, a recent survey of UK farms found that female household or family members played an important role in farm businesses, contributing to decision-making, providing labour, and generating off-farm income⁴. There is, however, little in the existing literature or statistics describing the structure of farming households, or commenting on the significance of farming household structure for social coherence and economic development. To fill this evidence gap, the Administrative Data | Agricultural Research Collection (AD|ARC) was launched in 2020, creating the first UK-wide data platform focused on agriculture.

This Data Insight presents data on the structure of farming households in Wales and compares them to other non-farming rural households. The work was carried out by the AD|ARC (Administrative Data | Agricultural Research Collection) team, an ADR UK- funded project. The project that aims to integrate the human dimension with data on farming activities. This enables us, to better understand the demographic, health, education, and economic characteristics of farm households associated with different types and sizes of farm businesses. AD|ARC aims to provide the insights needed for decision makers to improve future policies and enhance the wellbeing of farmers and their households.

What we did

In broad terms, we linked information about individuals receiving farm subsidy payments with socio-economic information about their households, then compared their characteristics with those of a control group of non-farming rural households.

De-identified records of all farms in Wales that received subsidies through the Welsh Government Single Payment Scheme⁵ were designated as being of interest. By receiving payments, individuals in this cohort were known to (i) have a financial interest in a farm business and (ii) live at a unique and known residential address associated with the farm business.

The records contained information relating to the role of the applicant. This allowed the team to exclude agents and administrators that were acting on behalf of farm business owners but who were not farmers themselves. The farm subsidy data was then linked to the most recent census available at the time of writing, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Population 2011 Census. The team included information about all individuals residing in the farming household. The majority of the households selected in this way contained one or more adult members who reported farming as their main occupation in the 2011 Census. A minority of the households did not contain a member who reported farming as their main occupation. However, these were retained, since all farm subsidy applications are subject to checks and audit⁶, and part-time farmers are a recognised group within the agricultural sector.

A control group of rural households was created by matching each farming household with up to three households from the 2011 Census that did not contain a farmer or receive subsidies but did have the same contiguous built up area classification⁷.

Variables derived by the ONS census team relating to household and family structure were used to compare the structure of farming households with that of non-farming rural households in Wales. The analysis reported below compares data for 18,135 farming households with data for a control group of 53,365 non-farming rural households.

What we found

When looking at the individual level data, no great disparity was found in age (an average of 43.1 vs 43.3 years) or gender (53% female vs 49% male) between members of farming households and non-farming rural households.

The data was then analysed at the household level using the ONS 2011 Census household type classifications. All the findings reported below are statistically significant unless stated otherwise. Comparing the type and structure of farming and non-farming rural households, the team found the following differences in household characteristics.

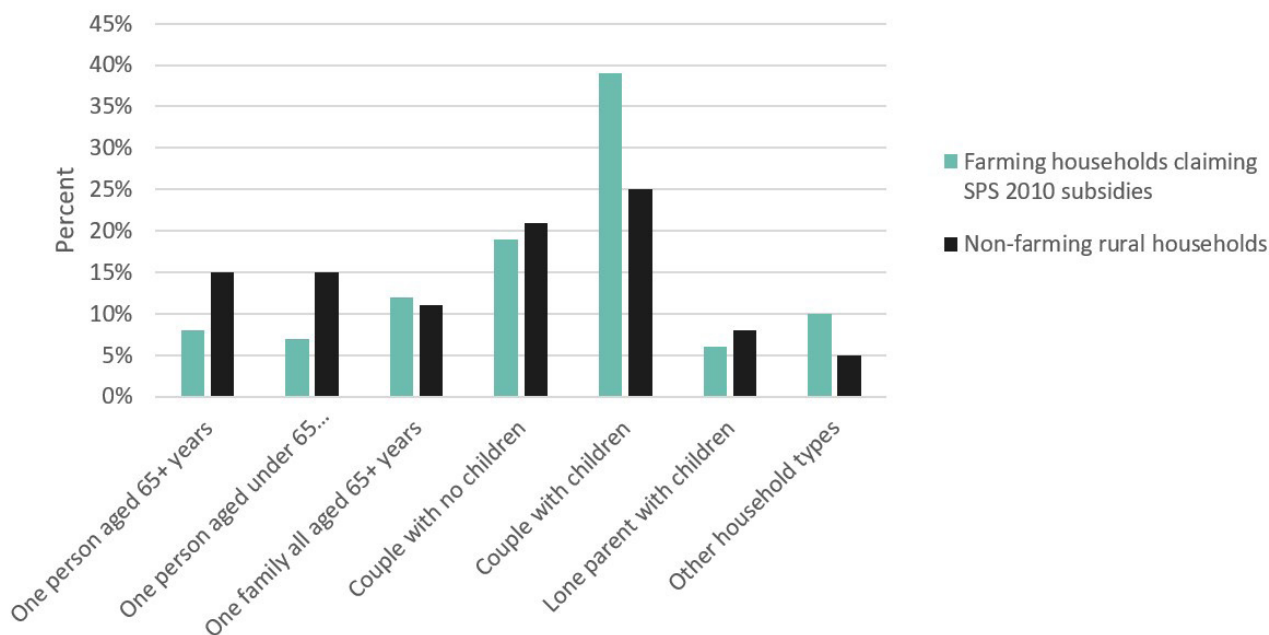
Farming households were larger and more likely to be composed of more than one family

Overall, farming households were composed of more members than non-farming rural households with an average of 2.8 members compared with 2.3 members.

Fewer farming households than non-farming rural households were single occupancy households (15% vs 30%). More farming households contained one couple with children (39% vs 25%) and more were classified as 'other household types' (10% vs 5%), when compared to non-farming rural households. The 'other household types' classification is a residual category used by ONS for a mixture of household characteristic. This includes, for example, student-only accommodation, households with more than one family, or a mixture of one or more families and other adults. (Figure 1)

Further investigation revealed that around half of both farming and non-farming rural households which classified as 'other' contained one family. Compared with non-farming rural households, a smaller proportion of farming households contained no families e.g. more than one unrelated adult (21% vs 33%) and a larger proportion of farming households contained two or more families (31% vs 19%).

Figure 1 - Household Structure - households claiming Single Payment Scheme (SPS) 2010 subsidy compared with non-farming rural households



Base: number of households claiming SPS 2010 (n=18,135) compared with non-farming rural households (n=53,365)

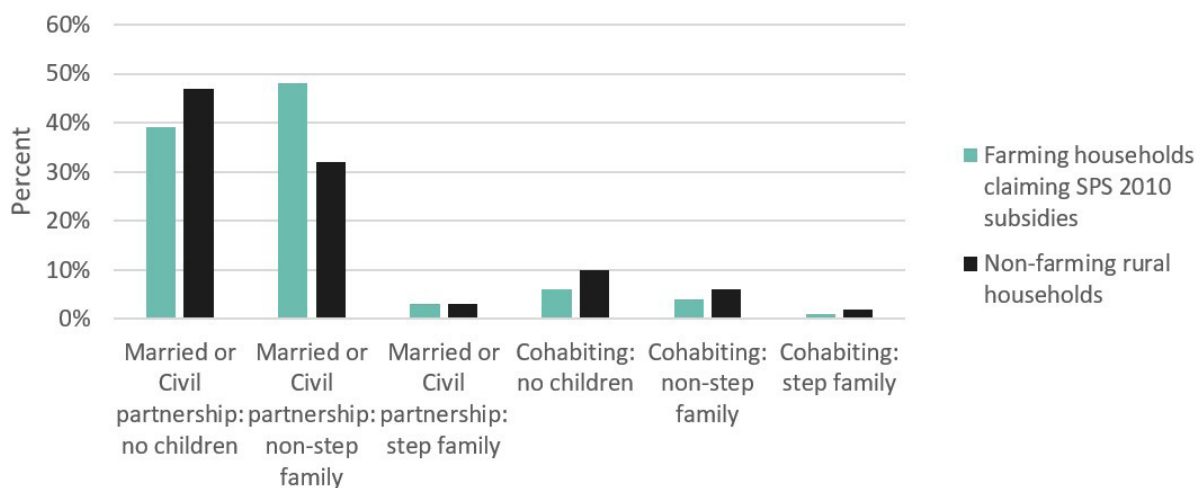
Single occupant farming households were predominantly male

When comparing the composition of single person households (n=18,465 for farming and non-farming rural households combined) there was a significantly higher proportion of male single person farming households when compared with non-farming rural households. For single person households in the 16-to-64-year age group, significantly more farming household residents were male when compared with non-farming household residents (78% compared with 57%). Similarly, for single person households where the resident was aged 65 years or older, 53% of farming household residents were male compared with 33% in non-farming rural households.

A higher proportion of couples in farming households were married or in a civil partnership than in non-farming rural households

For people residing together and self-identifying in the 2011 Census as a couple (n=46,325 for farming and non-farming households combined), 90% reported being married or in a civil partnership in farming households compared with 82% in non-farming rural households (see Figure 2). The average age of individuals living as a couple in farming households was 54.9 years compared with 53.8 years for individuals living as a couple in rural households.

Figure 2 - Marital status - households claiming SPS 2010 subsidy compared with non-farming rural households



Base: all individuals residing together and self-identifying in the Census as a couple, farming and non-farming rural households combined (n=46,325)

What we found

Rural households are not homogenous. When comparing households with at least one member who was receiving a farming subsidy with households containing no farming members, the average age and gender split were similar but several significant differences emerged. Namely, compared with non-farming rural households, farm households were, on average:

- just under 25% larger
- less likely to contain a single occupant...
- ...but when they did contain a single occupant, were more likely to consist of a single male
- more often multi-generational
- more often living as a married couple or in a civil partnership than co-habiting.

The farming cohort we examined represent a group with high policy relevance, as they constitute the majority of recipients for annual subsidies worth more than £200 million in 2022⁸. These payments are a legacy of the former EU Common Agricultural Policy regime so going forward these households will be directly impacted by policy reforms introduced in Wales.

Following UK withdrawal from the EU, the Common Agricultural Policy no longer applies in the UK. As a devolved matter, Wales can adapt and reform the previous regime to best meet local needs and address existing and emerging policy issues. In this context, a more complete understanding of the structure of farm households is useful to policy makers, and stakeholders more generally, as policies are reviewed and reformed.

A better understanding of household structures and characteristics can help inform decision makers where farm households are disadvantaged in comparison with other groups in society and interventions are needed to address particular problems, where farm households are well placed to achieve policy objectives and might be supported in that role, and where policies affecting farm households are changing and measures are required to assist with social or economic transition.

What next?

These findings are being reported at a relatively high level and represent a small fragment of the data available within the AD|ARC Project. Gaining a greater understanding of the household characteristics of farming households and the aspects in which they are similar or different to the general rural population will be an ongoing focus of the Project.

These findings are the first in a series of analyses. The evidence generated will inform policy considerations related to both existing programmes of financial support and mechanisms that may be developed to support farm households in the future, policies that will help the sector adapt to existing and emerging challenges and help mitigate any negative consequences. These consequences may be economic but equally may equally relate to health, well-being or business sustainability.

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About Administrative Data | Agricultural Research Collection (AD|ARC)

AD|ARC brings together data linkage researchers and experts in agricultural affairs with partner organisations including the [Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs \(DEFRA\)](#), the [Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(DAERA\)](#), Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and [Public Health Wales \(PHW\)](#). The programme also brings together the teams within the individual nations of the ADR UK investment, led by Dr Paul Caskie of the Agri-Food and Bioscience Institute, Northern Ireland, and principally supported by a team at [ADR Wales](#).

AD|ARC is now in its second phase after securing further investment through the ADR UK [research-ready data and access call](#) until 2025. AD|ARC phase two funding will be used to update and expand the data resources in England, Scotland, and Wales. The enhanced datasets will be used to carry out more ambitious research across the UK on changing farm demographics, farm household economic activities, and the links between household circumstances and land use patterns.

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