

Revealed: Results from our Farmer Insights Survey 2023

Here at SUM-IT, we carried out a nationwide survey of 242 British farmers to get their opinions and future plans for their farm. Being a farm management software company, we wanted to get an idea of how farmers viewed their farm admin and what they found most challenging and time consuming.

We also thought it would be interesting to build a picture of how farmers were feeling about the future of their farm alongside their current views on farm technology. Thank you to everyone who took the time to complete our survey.

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Who was included in the survey?

Of the 242 British farmers who responded to our survey, we accessed a wide range of age groups, from young farmers aged 18 to those in their 80s. The largest age group was those aged 55-64 which is not surprising given the average age of a farmer in the UK is 59 years old.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/bespoke/follow-the-food/the-ageing-crisis-threatening-farming/#:~:text=In%20the%20UK%2C%20the%20average,a%20farmer%2C%20it%20is%2067.>

The majority of respondents (62%) were farm owners themselves whilst other roles included farm secretary (16%) and family member (7%).

There was a fairly even spread of arable, beef, dairy and mixed farms with a few sheep farmers (7%) and contractors (4%). In terms of size of farm, again we achieved a fairly even representation of British farms, from those with <100 head of livestock/ <500 acres, to those with over 300 head of livestock /1500+ acres.

FARM ADMINISTRATION

The true admin burden for farmers today

The vast majority of admin on a farm appears to be carried out by the farm owner themselves (53%) or a family member such as spouse or offspring (17%). This is followed by 16% of farmers who report using a farm secretary to do the majority of their admin. This compares to 46% of other small business owners who report using external administrators to help with the burden of completing administrative tasks

<https://www.fsb.org.uk/resources-page/small-firms-spend-four-days-per-month-battling-red-tape.html>

Nearly half of all respondents (48%), report spending 5-10 hours every week on farm admin, this equates to up to 40 hours every month. There is also a substantial group of farmers (18%) who spend over 15 hours every week doing farm admin which includes accounts and all record keeping. That is the equivalent to a permanent part-time member of staff solely carrying out admin tasks for the farm.

‘How much time does your business spend on admin per week?’

- Less than 5 hours / week =19%
- 5-10 hours / week = 48%
- 10-15 hours /week = 15%
- 15+ hours / week =18%

Those that reported a substantial 15+ hours per week admin time weren't just the larger farms, with nearly half of these respondents falling into the small or medium size farm category. Indeed a third of beef farmers who reported 15+hrs/ week have less than 100 head of cattle.

SUM-IT Computer Systems Ltd., Samuel House, Chinnor Road, Thame, Oxon OX9 3NU
Tel: 01844 213003 Email: info@sum-it.co.uk Website: www.sum-it.co.uk

Of those spending this significant time on admin each week, 43% were arable farmers. This may be due to the every-increasing need for keeping extensive records regarding the crop production, as demanded by Assurance Schemes and Product Buyers. It could also possibly be that given the cost of inputs for arable farmers is increasing, they are spending longer in the office trying to source inputs and their best prices.

22% of those reporting spending 15+ hours on admin every week, are using a farm secretary, which is just slightly more than the average of 16% of all respondents.

Is this admin burden for farmers increasing or decreasing?

When asked whether they feel the amount of time spent on farm admin has increased or decreased in the past 3 years, the overwhelming majority said it had increased (74%) with only 4% reporting a decrease and the remainder (22%) reporting no real changes.

This may be unsurprising given the increasing pressure to report on all aspects of their farm for legislative compliance and milk buyers etc. Also, with the replacement of the Basic Payment system, qualifying for the new multiple stewardship schemes requires yet further paperwork.

Dairy farmers seem to be the hardest hit with 86% reporting an increase in farm admin over the past 3 years. This may be due to the increased demands from milk buyers, assurance schemes or regulatory bodies. This is supported by another area of our research below, which suggests dairy farmers find the admin requirements of assurance schemes particularly burdensome.

Additionally, there is believed to be an increasing shortage of agricultural secretaries. As the number of these specialist administrators decreases and accountants are only able to cover the gap on the accounts side, the loss of specialist admin support may be pinching farmers here as they themselves need to pick up the admin burden on the livestock side.

What areas are causing farmers the most hassle?

Farmers were asked what area of farm admin they find the most time consuming. The main areas which came out were assurance scheme compliance (e.g. Red Tractor, Organic) (52%) and regulatory compliance (e.g. HMRC, BCMS) (48%).

Other areas reported as the most time consuming include invoicing (17%), creditor/debtor management (15%), financial planning (budgeting, bank meetings etc) (13%) and payroll (6%). 'Other' areas cited include end of month accounts, milk buyer info, researching stewardship options and planning applications.

When you take assurance schemes alone, it appears to be dairy farmers that are finding this area of farm admin the most time consuming (63%). Red tractor standard, RSPCA –assured and organic standards are the most common ones dairy farmers may be a part of.

Looking at the size of farm, it appeared that for the larger farms, it was actually creditor/debtor management that came out as the most time-consuming admin task (50%). This shows how the tasks vary as a farm increases in size with larger farms perhaps having to spend more time chasing up late payments.

A slightly different question was then asked, 'What area of farm admin do you find the most **challenging**?' The answers to this question were fairly similar to the above with the majority of people reporting either regulatory compliance or assurance schemes.

Unlike invoicing that came out 3rd most *time consuming* admin job, when it came to most *challenging*, the 3rd most popular response was financial planning which includes the dreaded budgeting and bank meetings! 'Other' challenging areas included carbon audit reporting and communicating with organisations who have employees working from home.

21% of larger farms told us that they found creditor/debtor management the most challenging vs. just 6% of all farms on average.

Does everyone understand the legal requirements for running their farm?

When it came to understanding the legal requirements of running the farm, it was shown that only 36% said "yes, I pretty much get it!", 16% admitted "not as much as I should" and 1% said "to be honest, not really!".

- Yes, I pretty much get it! = 36%
- Largely, some areas of confusion = 47%
- Not as much as I should! =16%
- To be honest, not really! = 1%

It appears to be increasingly difficult for farmers to keep up as there is an increasing amount of new legislation around several areas including exporting to the EU, Environmental Stewardship and employment of migrant workers.

There doesn't seem to be a significant difference in understanding between different types of farm enterprises, but a slightly higher level of understanding amongst larger farm owners.

What percentage of your farm admin is digitalised?

When it comes to digitalisation, it appears farm admin is like most other areas of business nowadays in that it is becoming increasingly reliant on computers and technology. In response to the question 'What percentage of your farm admin is digitalised?' The most frequent response was '90% or more' showing how far farmers record keeping has come from the days of a scrappy notebook in their overall pocket.

What percentage of your farm admin is digitalised?

- Less than 50% = 7% respondents
- 50-74% - 19% respondents
- 75-89% - 31% respondents
- 90% or more – 43% respondents

When analysing the results of this question by age, there doesn't seem to be a big difference between farmers of different ages with the younger age groups reportedly having the same level of digitalisation as their older counterparts.

The current high levels of digitalisation in farming may be partly down to HMRCs MTD initiative launched in April 2022, which now makes it compulsory for all VAT registered businesses to submit their VAT returns digitally and subsequently led farmers to investigating farm software.

Do farmers see the value in admin?

All respondents were asked about their feelings towards farm admin and record keeping and it appears that although it is time consuming, and occasionally challenging, most farmers appreciate the benefits it offers.

54% said they like to keep on top of it and feel in control. A further 38% said it was 'absolutely crucial to know exactly what was going on'.

Only 7% said it was 'pretty inconvenient and annoying!' Of this group, the overwhelming majority noted assurance schemes as the most challenging area of farm admin and they were less likely to have 90% or more of their records digitalised.

This goes to show that although farmers may be spending over 15 hours a week on farm admin, the majority do acknowledge the need of having up-to-date, accurate insights into exactly how each area of their farm is performing.

FUTURE OF FARMING

Farmers' 5-year plans

As well as the admin side, we wanted to broaden out the questions to get an insight into how farmers were viewing their future on the farm.

The first question they were asked regarding the future of their farm was what their plans were for the next 5 years. Although it may have been assumed most farm owners would be looking to grow their business this applied to just 34% with nearly half (48%) reported they were just looking to maintain the farm at the same level with 5% looking to downsize and 2% looking to sell-up.

This may be indicative of uncertainty in the market at the moment, volatile input costs and selling markets, the discontinuation of the Basic Payments System, Brexit worries and overall, the appeal of diversification.

The remaining 11% said they are focusing on diversification with things such as holiday lets, solar farms, glamping, farm shops and commercial swimming cited as some of the areas people were looking to diversify into.

Results showed that a higher percentage of those looking to diversify owned farms that fell into the 'small farm' category.

The survey then went on to ask what the main things they are most excited for in the future for their farm:

- Embracing more technology = 36%
- Moving towards more autonomous farming = 13%
- Continuing as I am = 35%
- Scaling back = 8%
- Diversifying = 19%

Results looked slightly different when they were filtered by dairy farmers with >300 cows, with 83% looking forward to embracing more technology and 25% excited about moving towards more autonomous farming.

Technology on the farm

The survey went on to probe a bit deeper into the use of technology, both current and future.

‘What current technology do you use on your farm?’

- GPS tractor systems =58%
- Farm management / data analysis tech = 50%
- Security tech = 32%
- Green energy generation (e.g. wind/solar) = 30%
- Livestock weighing systems =29%
- Heat detection systems = 16%
- None of the above 13%
- AI health management = 11%
- Automated feeding systems = 11%
- Drones =7%
- Parlour robots =5%
- Other (please specify) = 5% e.g., slurry robot
- Other AI =1%
- Field robots = 0%

Not surprisingly, it is larger farms who report having more widespread use of technology on their farm. All of the arable farms with 1,000+ acres surveyed currently use GPS tractor systems and 43% generate some sort of green energy. Similarly, when you look at larger dairy farms (300+ cows), 92% use heat detection systems and 83% use AI health management. This is compared to 49% of smaller (<150 milking cows) dairy farms using heat detection systems and 14% using AI health management.

Those that cited ‘none of the above’ in relation to current types of technology, were more likely to fall into the ‘other farm enterprise’ category which included pig, goat and stud farms.

Participants were asked ‘Do you plan to invest in farm technology in the next 3 years?’

- Yes = 71%
- No = 29%

This split was pretty even across all types of farm enterprise with slightly more dairy farmers (76%) saying they plan to invest in farm tech in the next 3 years. There was also a slight difference when it came to age, with our results showing that 81% of those below 45 years of age plan to invest in more tech, vs. 69% of those over 45 years old.

We wanted to explore the reasoning behind this and found that the main reasons for investing in technology was to boost efficiencies (46%) and to save staff time/costs (21%).

Other reasons included to increase productivity and output (19%), grow the business (8%) & 'other' (6%) which included comments such as 'to remain compliant' and 'make life easier'.

On the converse, the reasons for not wanting to invest in technology in the future were quite diverse.

- Initial purchase cost too high =24%
- Not worth return on investment =24%
- Prefer to do it myself using my own judgement / intuition =22%
- Current technology doesn't meet my exact needs = 19%
- Other (please specify) = 19% (comments included: rented farm, not needed currently, not sure what doing, son taking over)
- Plan to leave industry / retire in next 3 years =14%
- On-going / maintenance cost too high = 12%
- I don't really trust technology! = 7%

Are farmers worried or excited about their future?

To create an overall picture of the current sentiment amongst British farmers, we asked them what word best describes their feelings around the future of their farm.

- Excited= 23%
- Worried = 40%
- Indifferent =26%
- Other (please specify) =11%

Other comments included 'apprehensive' 'frustrated' 'challenging' 'mixed feelings' and 'relatively confident'

Many comments showed apprehension around government policy and a feeling of uncertainty along with frustrations around finding suitable employees.

It was nice to see that the younger generation completing the survey were slightly more optimistic with 44% saying they were excited about the future compare to just 20% of the older participants!

When the answers to this question were filtered by farm type, interestingly it appeared that both sheep and arable farmers were feeling the least hopeful about the future of their farm with 58% of

sheep farmers reporting that they were worried and 46% of arable farmers. This compares to 27% of dairy farmers who told us they were worried about the future of their farm and 39% of beef farmers.

To conclude our survey, we asked them whether there was anything else they would like to share around the future plans for their farm.

Lots of comments were around the need to diversify into areas such as farm shops as well as plans to pass the farm onto the next generation. Other comments were around the frustration around the amount of red tape, extra legislation and the seemingly unclear nature of government policies

“Government decisions hold the key to success or failure in our industry, if left unprotected from cheap poor quality products we will not survive. Net zero is a joke but a frightening one!”

IN CONCLUSION

Overall, our 2023 survey reflects the increasing commitment farmers are having to make to administration tasks to successfully run their farm. It does appear however that the majority of farmers appreciate record keeping can help them feel in control and offer invaluable insights.

There seems to be a bit of a divide when it comes to technology in farming, with some farmers citing tech as the area of most excitement, looking forward to creating efficiencies and cutting costs whilst others are more resistant and see technology as a large investment that doesn't always offer the necessary returns.

Unfortunately there does seem to be high levels of worry and frustration around the next few years amongst today's farmer which may be a reflection of the uncertain economic landscape.

Here at SUM-IT we are continuing to support British farmers in helping to improve farm management admin efficiencies. Our range of easy-to-use farm management programs are designed to make farm record-keeping as practical and seamless as possible, focusing on one-time info entry to update all relevant records. Our support team are also dedicated to answering any queries or issues farmers may have around their record keeping or accounts duties.

We are proud to say that we are helping to address many of the frustrations cited in the survey. For example, our new TOTAL2 farm management software range will be able to easily produce carbon audit reports for ELM which has shown to be a particular bugbear.

Assurance schemes were another area farmers seem to find particularly onerous. Our programs allow farmers to instantly create fully-compliant reports for all assurance schemes using the data they have already entered. This saves considerable time and stress when it comes to providing the abundance of necessary paperwork for assurance schemes.

If you would like to share our survey results, please get in touch with steph@sum-it.co.uk, we'd love to discuss this with you. [These](#) survey results cannot be reproduced without prior permission from SUM-IT.

