

Pilgrim's UK: Improving mental health in the UK meat industry



Pilgrim's UK is Britain's largest producer of higher welfare pork and a major supplier of British lamb. The business employs more than 4,500 people and has eleven production sites, five fresh processing facilities, and six added value processing facilities across the UK.

Summary

Following a Human Rights Impact Assessment of their lamb and pork supply chains in the UK, in collaboration with their customers Co-op and Waitrose, one of the areas for improvement identified was mental health. Pilgrim's UK have taken this finding seriously and have implemented a number of measures to tackle this including training 'mental health first aiders' at production sites, and connecting with partners to raise awareness of mental health in farming communities. Pilgrim's UK is working in partnership with their customers and other multi-stakeholder initiatives to drive improvements in other areas highlighted by the assessment, where those need industry-wide collaboration.

The assessment was unique and a first in the industry, giving them not only a new level of transparency of the supply chain, but also an in-depth, honest picture of the issues faced every day within the industry, led by the voices of workers and farmers themselves. Having this detailed picture, which hasn't been explored, documented and shared publicly in such depth before, is not only beneficial to Pilgrim's and their customers as they work together to tackle the issues raised, but also to the wider industry as it sheds light on topics that need all industry stakeholders to be aware of and to work on together.

As this was a first of its kind assessment in the UK, and since such assessments are often carried out in the supply chains of high-risk commodities in developing nations, the methodology had to be carefully adapted to the market and the higher ethical standards benchmarks in the UK. Pilgrim's UK provided training sessions for the consultant carrying out the assessment to cover the nuances of the industry and the cultural and regulatory differences in the UK agricultural supply chain, to ensure the interviewees were put at ease and able to give honest responses.



This case study has been developed with the support of Co-op as part of Co-op's 2024 'Treating People Fairly Awards' at which Pilgrim's UK was Highly Commended. The awards celebrate excellence in human rights practice, encourage suppliers to learn from each other and inspire new ways of mitigating current or future risks to worker welfare. Supplier entries were assessed by an independent, expert panel and awards were presented at a Co-op supplier event in May 2024. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about Co-op's approach to human rights.

Understanding the issues

Pilgrim's UK conducted a [Human Rights Impact Assessment \(HRIA\)](#), in collaboration with [Co-op](#) and [Waitrose](#), undertaken by [Impactt Ltd](#), to gain a deeper understanding of the issues faced by farmers and other workers in their UK pig and lamb supply chains, and the actions they could take to mitigate, prevent or remediate any identified impacts. This assessment was the first of its kind and focused on Pilgrim's UK's integrated, outdoor-bred pig farms, its lamb supplying farms, and its processing and abattoir sites in the UK. The assessment helped to map the human rights challenges and risks throughout its supply chain, where visibility can often be limited due to the fact that a significant proportion of farm holdings in the UK are independent, small, family run operations.

A representative sample total of 127 people were engaged from across the supply chain, from workers and farmers to site management teams, retailers and NGOs. On-site assessments were carried out across abattoirs, processing sites and independent pig and lamb producers. These were worker-centric, prioritising worker interviews, to reflect their lived experience. The business also held internal cross-functional sessions on the process, procedure and why the HRIA research was important.

The assessment showed that many of the controls Pilgrim's UK already had in place to protect human rights, which are over and above legal requirements, had worked well. However, there were also opportunities for improvement identified. Most of the issues raised are sectoral issues that require a collaborative approach to solve.

On farms, it was found that partnership with Pilgrim's UK offers a steady income and long-term stability to farmers. However, it also found that workers on farms were often working excessive hours (10 hours or more per day) with no weekly rest day; wages varied across farms and some workers were not paid overtime; many workers on the farms were family members and worked without contracts. There was also a variance in working conditions and the nature of the work often impacted the mental health of workers.

The abattoirs and processing sites are reliant on a lot of migrant workers, with the related risks of workers paying recruitment fees and related costs on their journey to work at Pilgrim's and a lack of awareness of grievance mechanisms.

An [action plan](#) has been developed which Pilgrim's UK, Co-op and Waitrose will report publicly against as they make changes.

Taking action

Following the assessment and understanding that mental health was a key challenge within its supply chain, Pilgrims has been focusing on improving mental health in their production sites and on contributing to increased awareness in the wider industry. The Executive team have signed a mental health charter to prioritise the issue in the business.

'Mental Health First Aiders' have been trained by an external consultant (95 people across 13 sites) with a thorough 3-4 day course. The groups that train together gather quarterly to feedback and support each other. Some of those trained are multi-lingual, so most of the languages of the workforce are covered. The individuals are retrained every 2 years and new people added to the group if some have left the business.

All employees and temporary workers are informed about this at their induction (which is re-done every 2 years). Posters showing the names and faces of the Mental Health First Aiders are displayed at the sites, they wear different coloured lanyards to identify themselves and it is mentioned in their email footer with useful links.

In the abattoirs, staff rotate jobs every hour or less, so people aren't doing the same repetitive task for long. 4-5 people have the same skill/training level, to make this possible. This helps with mental health but also safety, so workers' brains are kept alert and focused.

In terms of the independent farms, most of the field workers from Pilgrim's UK who visit the farms are also trained as Mental Health First Aiders. Pilgrim's UK also partners with 'Yellow Wellies', a charity which focuses on awareness raising and tackling the shame of mental health issues in farming communities, providing practical guidance for farmers on health and safety and mental health. Signposting to this organisation is added to newsletters that go out to the farmers and at the Royal Agricultural Show, Pilgrim's UK invites Yellow Wellies to join them at their stall, to engage with farmers. In 2023, Co-op sponsored a Mental Health seminar for farmers and Pilgrim's UK invited all their farmers.

Actions that have been taken and are planned for the future, to address other issues raised by the HRIA are covered in the 'Moving Forward' section.

Making an impact

The feedback from the trained Mental Health First Aiders has been that people are approaching them and are finding it helpful to have someone to talk to, or to signpost them to another organisation to help them with what they are facing. The mental health first aiders meet regularly as a group to assess trends and support each other.

The impact of this first of its kind assessment of the meat industry in the UK is having a wider impact beyond Pilgrim's UK's business, as they share the learnings with other businesses in the industry, and work together with others in multi-stakeholder initiatives to tackle the industry wide issues collaboratively. The assessment has given depth of understanding to these issues, and put them on the agenda for the industry, raising awareness and prompting action.

"I was pleasantly surprised how the training has enabled me to help my fellow colleagues on site. It has given me confidence to approach a difficult subject with people and support as much as I can. It has opened up the topic on site and raised awareness, to make sure people don't have to suffer in silence anymore."

– Mental Health First Aider at a Pilgrim's UK production site



Partners

Pilgrims worked with '[Insight2 Mental Health](#)', an external consultant/training provider to upskill the mental health First Aiders and with '[Yellow Wellies](#)' to raise awareness on mental health in farming communities. [Farmers Community Network](#) sponsored mental health first aid kits for Pilgrim's UK field teams and vets and also raised awareness at various events.



Moving forward

Another area of feedback in the Human Rights Impact Assessment was around English language levels, as Pilgrim's UK has a multi-lingual workforce, with around 20-30 languages spoken across all the sites. To make sure everyone is able to understand the key information needed to work there, they have created a 'contract explainer' and also a 'payslip explainer' in 15 languages. A gap analysis is being carried out on training needs required at sites and at farms and they are also updating their employee handbooks into "Plain English", which will then be translated into multiple languages to support migrant workers.

To progress some of the agreed actions that require industry wide collaboration, Pilgrim's UK is partnering with other producers and processors and multi-stakeholder initiatives such as 'National Farming Union (NFU) and Food Network for Ethical Trade (FNET). One such industry wide issue is the working hours on farms. It's difficult to collect accurate data on this because at the independent farms, these individuals aren't direct employees of Pilgrim's UK and often involve family members in busy seasons. In general, farmers often see seasonal long hours, for example in lambing season, as part of their job and don't see it as an issue.

A next step on farm working hours is to understand from the farmers whether there is anything that Pilgrim's UK or Co-op are requesting (e.g. animal welfare or environmental standards) that is contributing to the hours, and understanding more about the issue e.g. whether it's more in arable or mixed farming. The plan is to discuss this with other protein companies in FNET and also gain feedback at their farmer conferences. They hope to encourage farmers to take more rest time when they are in less busy seasons. It seems that the long relationships and the fair 'cost of production' pricing model that Pilgrim's UK uses, means that the issue is less than if they were selling on the open market. However, it is an area of focus moving forward, together with others in the industry.

Lessons learnt

- The findings and learnings of this unique assessment and the actions taken can be used by other businesses with similar supply chains and the wider livestock sector in the UK and Europe, to increase awareness and prompt appropriate action, both individually as businesses and also collaboratively as an industry.
- Pilgrim's UK knew that they needed to bring in the expertise of other specialist organisations in order to tackle the issues and meet the needs identified.
- A significant impact can be made by one company taking the initiative to upskill and empower employees on an issue that many might think was too big to tackle.
- It is essential for businesses across the industry to work together to take action and shift some of the more systemic issues. Pilgrim's UK is keen to collaborate with other businesses and organisations to make positive change.



This is a leadership* approach because:

Proactivity

Once mental health had been identified as an issue, Pilgrim's UK was proactive in initiating a number of actions to practically make a difference in this area.

Ownership

Although many of the issues raised are industry wide, Pilgrim's have taken ownership of making positive changes in their own sites and supply chains.

Partnership

Pilgrim's UK partnered with Co-op, Waitrose and Impactt for the assessment, with external organisations for the mental health training and outreach, and is continuing to work in collaboration with the wider industry to find solutions to sectoral issues, through the NFU and FNET.

*Key behaviours that Co-op champion in its supply chain are proactivity, ownership and partnership. Click [here](#) to learn more about Co-op's supplier engagement programme. Co-op's 'Supplier's Guide to Ethical Trade' sets out the standards suppliers are expected to meet.