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WEEKLY

LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry



JUNE 2026

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A comprehensive guide to

Adapting farms for physical health conditions

*How practical changes, technology and
smarter systems can reduce strain*

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LESSONS LEARNED BY
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The business case for making adaptations to protect health

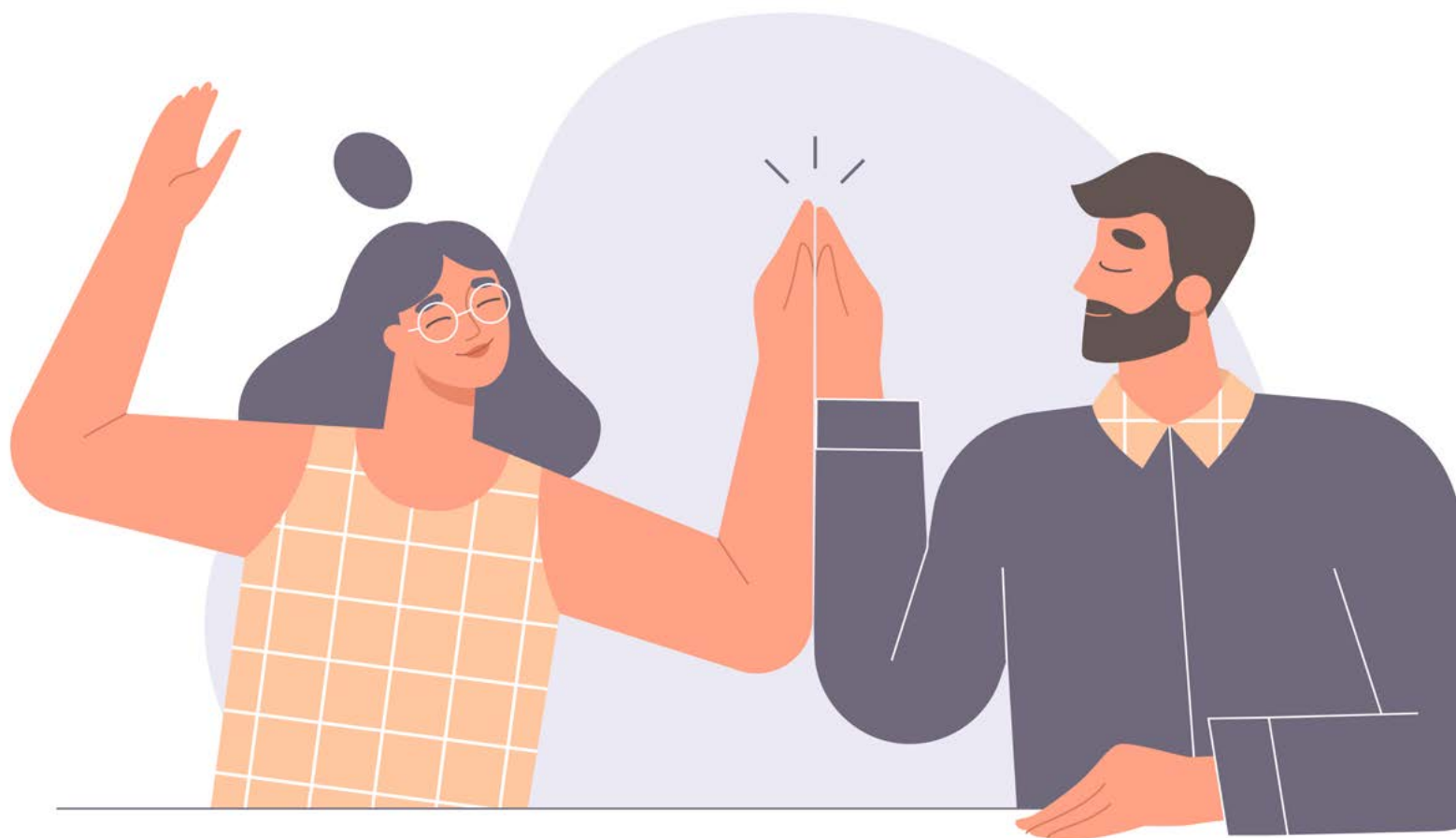
Farming has never been an easy job. Long hours, awkward lifting, climbing in and out of machinery, handling livestock and working in all weather conditions take their toll on the body over time.

For some people, that might mean arthritis, chronic pain or reduced mobility, while others could be dealing with recovery after surgery or a long-term health condition.

Many farmers continue working successfully with a physical health condition by adapting how jobs are done. But this is not just about individual wellbeing.

When somebody starts struggling physically, the effects rarely stop with that person. Jobs take longer, pressure shifts elsewhere within the team or family, and valuable knowledge can be lost if experienced people are forced to step away from the business.

This guide looks at the practical adaptations already being used on working farms, what difference they can make and where to start. Whether you're managing your own condition, supporting someone within the business or trying to futureproof a physically demanding workload, we have advice to help.



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Quick wins that could help straight away

Before spending money on equipment or infrastructure, it's worth looking at the little frustrations that occur every day.

Often, the biggest gains come from reducing repeated effort rather than making dramatic changes. Many of these suggestions improve efficiency for everyone on the farm, regardless of age or physical ability.

CHANGE	COST	WHY IT HELPS
Store commonly used tools between knee and shoulder height	Low	Reduces bending and reaching
Keep medicines, tagging equipment and treatment records close to handling facilities	Low	Cuts unnecessary walking and searching
Improve lighting in workshops, livestock buildings and machinery sheds	Low	Reduces fatigue and improves safety
Fit additional grab handles around steps and access points	Low	Makes moving around the farm easier and safer
Create dedicated storage locations for regularly used equipment	Low	Saves time and reduces frustration
Use voice-to-text apps for notes and reminders	Low	Reduces paperwork and mental load
Install cameras in lambing or calving sheds	Medium	Cuts unnecessary checks, especially at night
Use spring-assisted or remote-operated gates in high-use locations	Medium	Reduces repeated gate handling
Create level access points where machinery is regularly parked	Medium	Makes getting in and out safer and easier

Start with the problem, not the product

One of the biggest mistakes people make is jumping straight to equipment without first identifying where the strain is actually coming from.

Before spending money, ask:

- Which jobs leave people most physically exhausted?
- Where is unnecessary walking happening?
- Which tasks involve repeated lifting?
- Which jobs are regularly avoided because they are awkward?
- Where are people climbing in and out of machinery repeatedly?
- Which areas become difficult to access during winter?
- Are there jobs that could be reorganised rather than mechanised?

The most successful adaptations often involve redesigning a system rather than buying something new.



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Ways to reduce walking, climbing and carrying

Some of the biggest physical demands on farms come from constantly moving from place to place.

A few extra minutes here and there may not sound significant, but over the course of a year those journeys add up.

Start by looking at the layout

Many farms have evolved over decades. Buildings have changed purpose, enterprises have expanded and machinery has become larger. As a result, people often spend time and energy moving between places simply because that is how the farm has always operated.

Ask yourself:

- Are there jobs that currently require multiple journeys when one would do? Reducing those distances is often one of the cheapest ways to reduce physical strain.

Simple changes might include:

- Storing medicines and treatment records at handling facilities
- Keeping tagging equipment permanently with the handling system
- Positioning feed and bedding closer to livestock housing
- Using wheeled bins or trolleys rather than carrying equipment by hand

- Keeping commonly used tools and parts close to machinery sheds
- Reducing the distance between workshops and machinery parking areas
- Organising chemical and seed stores to minimise lifting and carrying.

Reduce climbing where possible

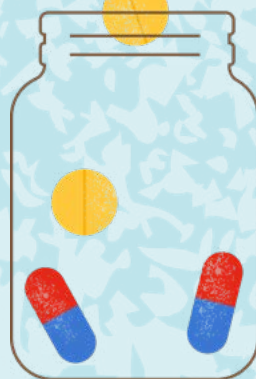
Climbing becomes more difficult long before many people consider themselves disabled.

Particular pressure points include:

- Tractor and telehandler access
- Grain store ladders
- Trailer access
- Workshop platforms.

Low-cost solutions may include:

- Additional grab handles
 - Improved handrails
 - Non-slip surfaces
 - Fixed mounting blocks
 - Better access platforms.
- The aim is to make climbing safer and less physically demanding.



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Things that make everyday jobs easier



Every farm has a handful of jobs that seem to absorb more time and energy than they should.

These are often the jobs that become most difficult when someone is managing arthritis, reduced mobility, chronic pain or recovering from injury.

Before investing in new equipment, ask:

- Can the task be done less often?
- Can it be done in a different way?
- Can the system be redesigned?

The answers are often simpler than expected.

Livestock farms

Handling systems need to work for people as well as livestock. Many were designed years ago and have evolved gradually over time.

While they may still work for the livestock, they do not always work efficiently for the people using them.

Signs that a handling system may need rethinking include:

- Frequent bending over gates
- Repeated climbing in and out of pens
- Poor visibility of stock movement
- Constant gate opening and closing
- Animals regularly baulking or turning back
- Jobs requiring more people than they should

Small improvements can often make a significant difference. For example:

- Better gate placement
- Easier-opening gates
- Spring-assisted gates
- Improved race layouts
- Better lighting around handling areas
- Additional escape routes
- Clearer livestock flow

In some cases, improving working height can help too. Higher walkways alongside races and better-positioned controls can reduce bending and awkward movements during routine handling.

Reduce repeated handling

Some livestock tasks become difficult because they involve the same movement hundreds of times.

Examples include:

- Weighing stock
- Sorting animals into groups
- Identifying individual animals.

Where budgets allow, technology can help:

- Auto-weighing systems
- Electronic drafting systems.

These systems can reduce handling time and allow fewer people to carry out routine jobs. However, they should be viewed as a way of improving an already efficient system, not a substitute for one.

Think about daily routines

Many physical demands come from jobs that happen every day. Examples include:

- Carrying feed
- Transporting equipment between buildings
- Repeated gate handling.

Often the biggest gains come from asking why things are being carried so far.

Reduce night-time pressure

Lambing and calving place huge physical demands on farmers.

Cameras, sensors and remote monitoring systems can reduce unnecessary checks and help focus attention where it is genuinely needed.

They will never replace stockmanship, but they can help reduce fatigue during some of the busiest periods of the year.

Arable farms

The physical challenges on arable farms are very different, with the pressure points tending to be machinery, workshops, grain stores and moving inputs around the farm.



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Reduce crop walking

Walking crops remains an important part of decision-making, but it's not always necessary to walk every field in full. Tools can help identify areas that need attention and reduce unnecessary walking.

For example:

- Drones
- Satellite imagery
- Remote crop monitoring platforms.

For farmers managing mobility issues, pain or fatigue, this can help focus effort where it adds the most value.

Make grain stores easier to manage

Grain stores often involve repeated climbing, inspections and monitoring.

Potential improvements include:

- Better access platforms
- Improved handrails
- Safer ladders and stairways
- Grain temperature monitoring systems
- Moisture monitoring systems.

Reducing the need for routine climbing can improve safety and make grain management less physically demanding.

Reduce lifting and carrying

Seed, fertiliser, wearing metal, oils and spare parts all have to be moved around the farm. The question is whether they need to be moved as often as they are. The objective is to reduce unnecessary effort.

Simple changes might include:

- Storing consumables closer to machinery sheds

- Improving workshop organisation
- Using pallet forks and lifting equipment rather than manual handling
- Keeping frequently used parts close to maintenance areas.

Make maintenance more manageable

Many arable farmers spend significant time maintaining machinery. As mobility and strength change, workshop jobs often become more difficult than field work.

Practical improvements may include:

- Better lighting
- Adjustable-height workbenches
- Lifting equipment for heavy components
- Improved storage
- Wheeled toolchests
- Clearer workshop layouts.

Reducing bending, lifting and awkward working positions can make maintenance safer and more sustainable over the long term.

Don't underestimate the value of small changes

It is easy to focus on major adaptations, but many farmers continue working because they have made dozens of small adjustments rather than one dramatic change.

Individually, they may not seem significant. But together, they can remove a surprising amount of physical strain and help people remain productive for much longer.



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How to make farm machinery easier to use

For many farmers, machinery is what allows them to keep working when other jobs become more difficult.

At the same time, getting in and out of cabs, carrying out maintenance and working long hours in machinery can create their own physical challenges.

The good news is some of the most effective adaptations are often relatively simple. As with other areas of the farm, it makes sense to start with low-cost improvements before considering more specialist solutions.

Getting in and out of the cab

Climbing into tractors, telehandlers and combines can become more difficult earlier than people think.

Knee pain, hip replacements, reduced balance and arthritis can all make machinery access challenging.

Before looking at specialist adaptations, consider:

- Parking regularly used machinery on level ground
- Improving access around machinery sheds and parking areas

- Fitting additional grab handles
- Improving step surfaces
- Adding non-slip strips
- Using fixed mounting blocks where machinery is routinely parked.

These changes are relatively inexpensive and can make a significant difference.

Where mobility is more severely affected, specialist access systems and cab lifts may also be available.

Reducing fatigue during long days

Long periods in machinery place strain on the back, neck, shoulders and hips.

This can be particularly noticeable during harvest, drilling and other busy periods when operators may spend long days in the cab.

The cumulative effects of vibration, poor posture and repeatedly twisting to monitor implements or look behind the machine can all cause problems.

Simple changes can sometimes help. These might include adjusting seating position, improving visibility around the machine or using camera systems to reduce the need for repeated twisting and stretching.

When replacing machinery or upgrading equipment, it is also worth considering how



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cab layout, visibility and operator comfort will affect fatigue over the course of a long working day.

Make implementing changes easier

Changing implements can be one of the most physically demanding routine jobs on a farm.

Practical options include:

- Hydraulic top links
- Powered couplers
- Auto-hitch systems
- Better storage of frequently used implements
- Improving surfaces around machinery yards.

Reducing the amount of lifting, pulling and manoeuvring involved in implement changes can improve both safety and efficiency.

Workshop adaptations

Lifting heavy parts, bending repeatedly and working in awkward positions can all be challenging for someone managing pain, reduced mobility or injury recovery.

Useful improvements may include:

- Adjustable-height workbenches
- Lifting tables
- Engine hoists
- Workshop gantries
- Wheeled storage systems.

Many of these improvements benefit everyone who uses the workshop, not just the person with a health condition.

Specialist adaptations

Some farmers continue operating machinery after serious injury or while managing significant mobility limitations.

In these situations, more specialised adaptations may be appropriate.

Examples include:

- Hand controls
- Modified pedals
- Swivel seats
- Tractor access lifts
- Custom control systems.

These solutions are often developed with the help of specialist engineers and adaptation providers.

While they involve greater investment, they can allow people to remain actively involved in farm businesses for many years.

Think about the person, not just the machine

When machinery becomes difficult to use, the answer is not always a new piece of equipment.

Sometimes the biggest gains come from changing how machinery is accessed, where it is parked or how routine jobs are carried out.

The key question is what part of this job is creating the strain? Once that is understood, the solution is often simpler and cheaper than first expected.



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Tips to reduce fatigue and repetitive strain

Not every physical challenge on a farm is the result of an injury or illness. For many people, the biggest issue is cumulative wear and tear.

Years of climbing, lifting, driving and handling livestock gradually take their toll. Conditions such as arthritis, chronic pain and reduced mobility are increasingly common across the industry, with [Farmers Weekly's latest Level The Field survey](#) finding half of farmers have a physical health condition that affects their ability to work.

Make everyday tools easier to use

For farmers managing conditions such as arthritis, reduced grip strength or joint pain, small changes to everyday tools can make routine jobs more comfortable and sustainable.

Examples include:

- Long-handled scrapers, forks and rakes that reduce bending in yards and livestock buildings
- Lightweight versions of commonly used tools
- Reduced-force tagging applicators
- Drenching and dosing equipment that is easier to operate for long periods
- Tools with larger or cushioned handles that are easier to grip
- Simple modifications such as fitting grip sleeves or pipe insulation to widen tool handles.

The aim is to reduce the force needed through the hands, wrists, shoulders and back during repetitive tasks.

Plan around energy levels

Many farmers know there are times of day when they move more easily and work more comfortably.

Where possible:

- Schedule physically demanding jobs for those periods
- Break larger tasks into stages
- Avoid unnecessary journeys

- Use machinery and labour strategically during busy periods.

Reduce vibration

Long hours on rough ground can worsen pain and fatigue, particularly for those managing back problems or joint conditions.

Where possible, look at the source of the problem:

- Are there particularly rough tracks or gateways that could be improved?
- Are some routes round the farm significantly harsher than others?
- Could jobs be planned to reduce unnecessary travel?
- Is machinery being operated for long periods on rough ground when an alternative approach might be possible?

For those already managing pain or mobility issues, reducing exposure to repeated jolts and vibration can make a noticeable difference over the course of a busy season.

Accept that systems need to change

One of the biggest barriers to adaptation is the belief that the farm should continue operating exactly as it always has. But farms are constantly evolving, and the way work is organised can change too. If a task leaves someone exhausted, in pain or unable to do the next job properly, ask some key questions.

For example:

- Can it be done less often?
- Can it be done closer to where it is needed?
- Can the system be redesigned?
- Can technology remove part of the workload?
- Is there a safer or easier way to achieve the same result?

The answer is often simply a matter of looking at familiar jobs with fresh eyes.



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Technology that saves journeys, paperwork and worry

Technology is often discussed in terms of productivity, but the biggest benefits can be felt when it reduces the number of things farmers need to remember, check or worry about.

The best systems are the ones that remove a repetitive task from the working day.

Reduce paperwork and administration

Remembering treatments, maintenance schedules, crop records and compliance requirements can become increasingly difficult when dealing with fatigue, injury or illness – especially during busy periods.

Simple tools that may help include:

- Voice-to-text apps for notes and reminders
- Digital medicine records
- Shared task-management systems
- Digital maintenance schedules
- Calendar reminders for recurring jobs.

The objective is to reduce the amount of information that has to be stored in someone's head.

Working safely when alone

Many farmers spend long periods working alone. For someone managing a health condition, being able to raise the alarm quickly can be important.

Options include:

- Lone-worker alarms
- Fall-detection watches
- GPS-enabled emergency devices.

These systems can provide reassurance both for the individual and for family members or colleagues.

As with any technology, the most useful solution is usually the one that fits easily into everyday routines and is actually used.

Returning to work after injury or illness

Not every adaptation needs to be permanent. The challenge is often finding a way to remain involved in the business while recovering.

Many farmers need temporary changes following:

- Joint replacement surgery
- Broken bones



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- Shoulder injuries
- Back injuries
- Stroke recovery
- Serious illness.

Start with the job, not the injury

Rather than thinking: “I can’t do my job anymore”, it can be more useful to ask: “Which parts of the job are creating the problem?”

For example:

- Is it climbing into machinery?
- Is it carrying equipment?
- Is it walking long distances?
- Is it handling livestock?
- Is it working for long periods without a break?

Understanding the specific challenge makes it easier to identify practical solutions.

Temporary adaptations

Examples might include:

- Reallocating certain tasks during recovery
- Using additional labour during busy periods
- Reducing climbing and manual handling

- Making greater use of machinery and handling systems
- Using remote monitoring to reduce journeys
- Adjusting work schedules to allow for fatigue and recovery.

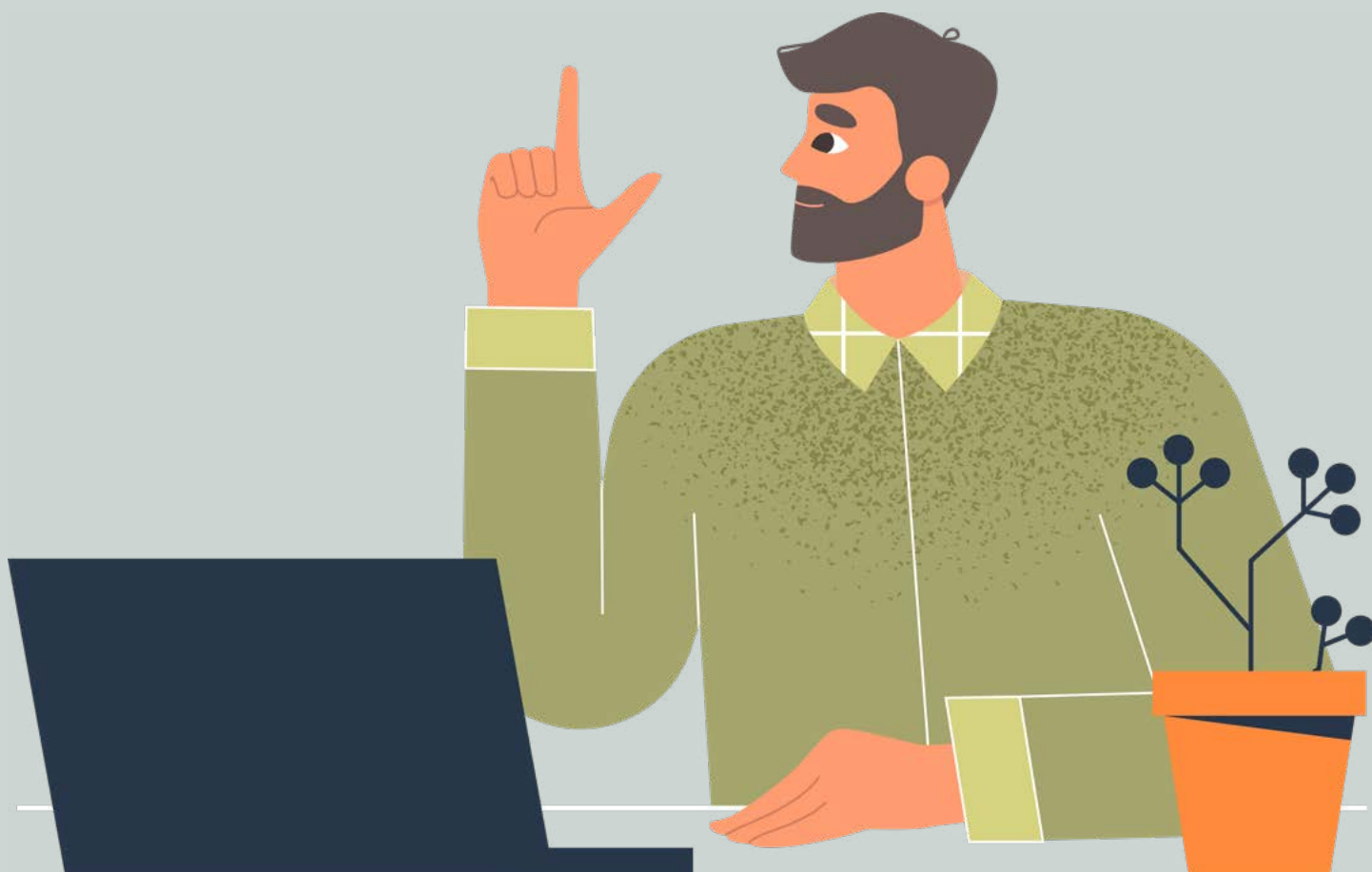
Many adaptations introduced during recovery remain useful long after the original injury has healed.

Don’t wait until there is a crisis

One of the strongest messages from farmers who have experienced serious injury is that adaptation is easier when conversations happen early.

Waiting until someone can no longer do a job safely often leaves fewer options. Making gradual improvements over time is usually easier, cheaper and less disruptive than making major changes under pressure.

For more tips on how to plan for a crisis, see our previous guide [Managing physical strain on farm.](#)



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Lessons learned by farmers who adapted

MATTHEW EVANS: REDESIGNING THE SYSTEM

Denbighshire farmer and contractor Mathew Evans was paralysed following a life-changing farm accident.

Rather than focusing on what he could no longer do, he began looking for ways to adapt the business around his new circumstances. Working with engineer Andrew Stubbs, he developed a hydraulic lift system that transfers him from his wheelchair directly into a tractor cab.

However, the machinery adaptation was only part of the story. The farm itself also changed. Livestock systems were redesigned, smoother concrete surfaces improved access and a low-access buggy replaced a quad bike. The business moved away from suckler cows towards a bed-and-breakfast cattle system and sheep

enterprise that reduced some of the physical demands associated with calving.

What helped most:

- Adapting machinery to suit his needs
- Redesigning livestock systems
- Improving access around the farm
- Using a low-access buggy to move around the farm
- Being willing to rethink how the business operated.

Key lesson:

The biggest gains often come from redesigning systems rather than trying to continue working exactly as before.



TIM PAPWORTH: ADAPTING AFTER TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY



Norfolk farmer Tim Papworth suffered a catastrophic fall that resulted in a traumatic brain injury, hearing loss and ongoing fatigue.

Returning to work required both physical and organisational changes. Some of the most important adaptations involved changing how he communicated, managed fatigue and approached daily work.

Support through [Access to Work](#) helped fund a driver after he lost his licence, allowing him to remain involved in industry events and business activities. Speech-to-text software and AI voice tools helped him continue managing administration when typing became difficult. Counselling

through [YANA](#) and support from family also played an important role in recovery.

Today, Tim carefully manages situations where hearing difficulties and fatigue are likely to have the greatest impact.

What helped most:

- Access to Work support for transport
- Speech-to-text and AI voice tools
- Rehabilitation and counselling
- Recognising and managing fatigue
- Adjusting working practices rather than trying to return to old routines
- Finding alternative ways to stay connected to the farm, including horse riding during recovery.

Key lesson:

Not all adaptations are physical. Sometimes changing routines, expectations and working patterns is just as important as adapting equipment.



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JIM PARTON: ACCEPTING THAT THINGS NEED TO CHANGE

Farmer and regenerative agriculture advocate Tim Parton experienced life-changing injuries after being crushed by a falling tree.

The accident resulted in the loss of his left leg below the knee, paralysis and multiple additional injuries.

Returning to the farm required significant changes, both physically and mentally.

Alongside practical adaptations, one of the biggest challenges was accepting that old ways of working were no longer possible.

Support from family, friends and the wider farming community played a key role. Friends raised funds to install an accessible bathroom after he returned home from hospital, while a buggy built by a friend allowed him to continue



accessing fields so that he could assess soils for his consultancy work.

Despite setbacks with funding and support, Tim remains convinced that most physical barriers can be overcome with the right equipment and determination.

What helped most:

- Practical support from family and friends
- An accessible bathroom and suitable home adaptations
- A buggy that enabled access round the farm
- Adaptive equipment and vehicle modifications
- Continuing to use his knowledge and experience through consultancy work
- Connecting with others who had faced similar challenges

Key lesson:

- Adaptation is not a sign of weakness. In many cases, it is what allows people to remain actively involved in farming for years longer than they otherwise could.

A common theme

Although their circumstances were very different, all three farmers reached a similar conclusion.

The goal was not to return to exactly the same way of working as before. Instead, they found ways to adapt their farms, machinery and routines so they could continue doing what mattered most.



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Funding and support

Cost is often one of the biggest barriers to making changes on the farm. Not every adaptation requires major investment, but where larger ones are needed, support may be available.

Government support

[Access to Work](#) is a scheme that can provide practical support for people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, including those who are self-employed.

Depending on individual circumstances, support may be available for:

- Specialist equipment
- Workplace adaptations
- Travel to and from work
- Practical solutions in the workplace.

Farmers who have experienced injury, illness or significant changes in mobility may find it worth exploring what assistance is available.

Farming charities and support organisations

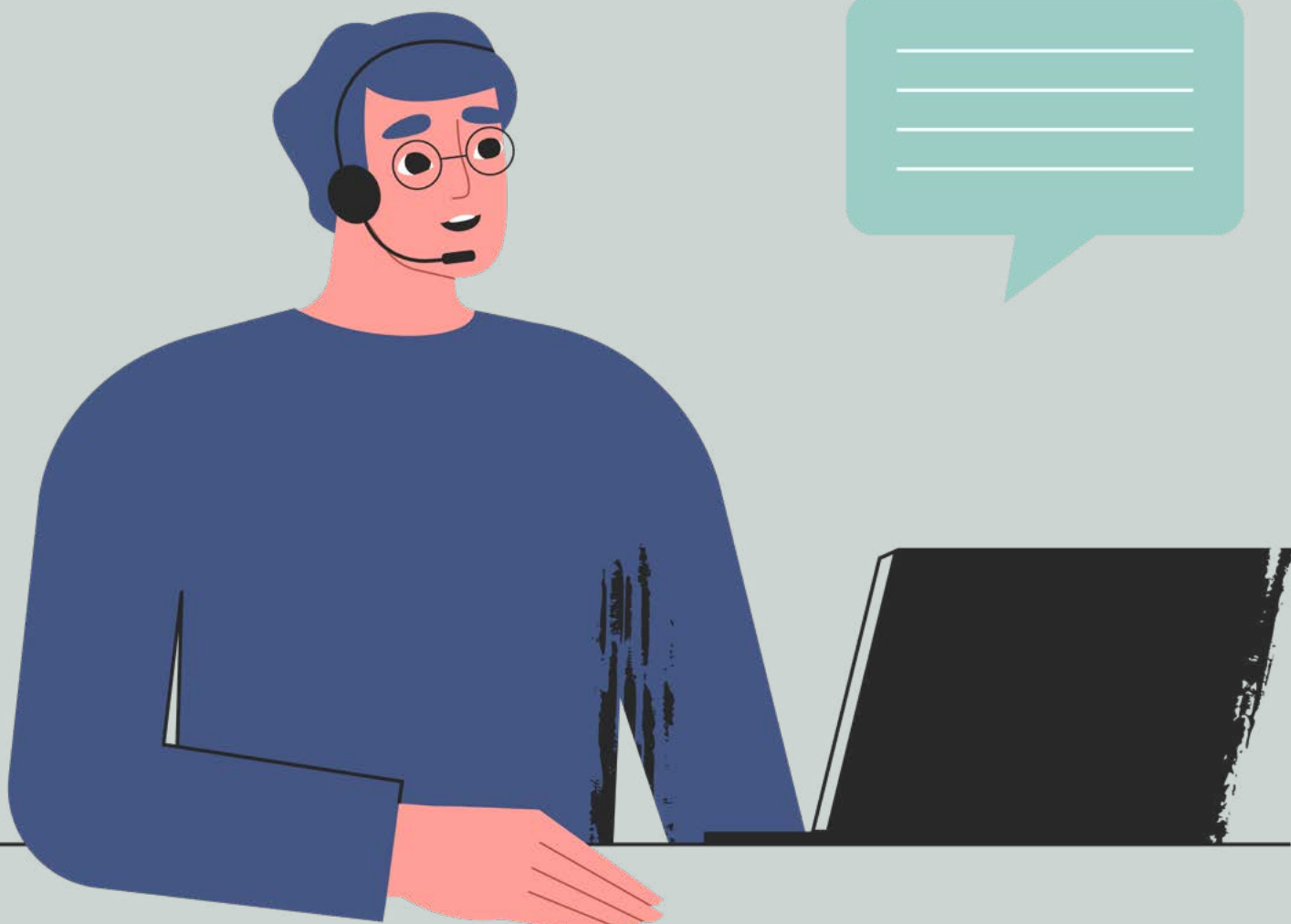
Several farming charities offer practical, financial and emotional support to people adapting to injury, illness or disability.

These include:

- [RABI](#)
- [RSABI](#)
- [The Farming Community Network \(FCN\)](#)
- [The Addington Fund](#).

Support varies between organisations but may include financial assistance, grants, practical guidance and signposting to specialist services.

Occupational therapists, agricultural engineers and machinery specialists can often identify practical ways to make jobs easier, safer and more efficient.



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Final takeaway

Every farm is different, and there is no single solution that works for everyone.

What works on a sheep farm may not work on an arable unit. What helps after a knee replacement may be very different from what helps someone managing arthritis or recovering from a serious injury.

The common thread is the willingness to look at a job and ask whether there is a better way of doing it. The earlier those conversations happen, the more options are available.

Good adaptations are about removing unnecessary effort, improving safety and helping people continue contributing their skills, experience and knowledge for as long as possible.

That is good not only for the individual, but for the business and the sector as a whole.

**YOUR
COMMENTS
WELCOME**

“

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**GIVE FEEDBACK
ON THE
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SOURCES AND EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY

- Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
- Versus Arthritis
- Arthritis Action
- Stroke Association
- Scope – [Access to Work](#) (Gov.uk)
- AHDB Dairy
- The Farming Community Network (FCN)
- RABI
- RSABI
- Addington Fund
- Ohio State University AgrAbility Programme – [Managing Arthritis When Farming](#)
- [NaviLens](#)
- NHS
- NFU
- [Disabled Facilities Grants](#)
- Age UK
- [FW Level The Field survey](#)

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