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Conference puts Prople, Culture & Technology at the Heart of Farm Safety

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The Institution of Occupational Health (IOSH) Rural Growing Safely conference brought together engineers, safety professionals, mental health advocates and industry leaders to explore how culture, communication and technology can reshape safety in rural industries. Across the day, a clear message emerged: technology can enable safer farming, but people, attitudes and mental health ultimately determine outcomes.

Setting the Scene: "Don't Be Unlucky"

Opening the conference, Farm Safety Foundation Manager Stephanie Berkeley set a powerful tone. Using imagery from the charity's Farm Safety Week—yellow wellies becoming 'accident statistics' through work transport incidents, livestock handling or falls from height—she reinforced the 13th year of the campaign with a subliminal message: "don't be unlucky."

There is no easy way to talk about devastating incidents and their impact on families, but Stephanie's engaging style and the team's passion for cultural change across the industry made the uncomfortable subject unavoidable and necessary.

Stark Numbers, Human Stories

New IOSH president Richard Bate, delivering his first public address to the agricultural and rural industries community, underlined why change is urgent. Rural industries represent roughly 1% of the UK workforce but more than 20% of workplace deaths—a situation he described as "catastrophic".

Richard argued that the sector must move beyond merely quoting statistics and focus instead on changing behaviours, particularly through education. Drawing on his experience as both a paramedic and safety professional—and his own childhood on a Welsh sheep farm—he stressed the need to engage children early with farm safety.

He relayed an encounter with a farmer riding a quad bike with two children on the front. When challenged, the farmer's response— "mind your own business"—illustrated how ingrained cultural norms can undermine safety, even when risks are obvious.

Richard also highlighted how modern parenting can leave children with limited exposure to managed risk, denying them opportunities to develop judgement and resilience. The challenge, he said, is to strike a balance: protecting young people while still giving them the real-world experiences that teach them how to think and act safely.

Climate, Culture and Communication

Richard urged the sector to be brave in talking about environmental change. Whether framed as climate change or natural cycles, shifting weather patterns are already shaping output, work patterns, crop growth and, crucially, the risk landscape for engineers and operators.

He also emphasised the importance of speaking the language of your audience, both literally and figuratively. Recalling an IOSH event in North Wales that had to be delivered partly in Welsh to truly connect with attendees, he linked safety impact directly to cultural fit and communication style.

Technology: Long Journeys and Realistic Expectation

Technology featured strongly throughout the conference, not as a silver bullet but as a powerful enabler when embedded into systems of work and used with care.

Andy Newbold, Secretary General of the European Society of Agricultural Engineers, traced the long journey of agricultural automation. Delegates were reminded that the first rudimentary commercial autonomous system—a wire-guided kit controlling an orchard grass cutting tractor—dates back to 1970.

Today, multiple factors influence decisions about automation and advanced machinery: labour availability, climate pressures, legislative requirements and the realities of a competitive marketplace where manufacturers watch closely to see "who goes first" with new concepts.

One emerging approach is reconfiguring existing tractor designs to operate in fully autonomous mode while retaining a fully compliant, comfort-laden cab. This allows machines to run autonomously in the field, with operators resuming control for road travel. In parallel, fully robotic platforms are becoming more common across arable, livestock and horticultural sectors.

Effective communication between machines is vital. Hardware units must be able to communicate performance data and trigger safe shutdowns when necessary—especially with technologies such as high-voltage weed "zapping", where any malfunction could have serious consequences.

Predictive Maintenance and Reducing Risky Interventions

From a manufacturer's perspective, Iain Bond, Precision Ag Customer Support Specialist at John Deere UK, showed how telematics and remote monitoring can predict maintenance needs and prevent breakdowns.

By identifying issues before failure, operators can avoid unplanned and potentially hazardous interactions with complex systems, particularly during peak workloads when time pressure and weather windows can blur carefully planned safe working methods.

Many in the room recognised the familiar question: "When can we get going again?"*The answer, increasingly, lies in data-driven insights that align productivity with safety rather than pitting them against each other.

Drone Safety: "Not Just Pretty Pictures Anymore"

Taking the discussions airborne, Jonathan Trotter, Technology Trials Manager at Agrii, walked delegates through the rapidly evolving world of agricultural drones under the strapline "not just pretty pictures anymore."

He charted the progression from simple field mapping to drones capable of applying agrochemicals and fertiliser, and even establishing cover crops. These high-capability commercial units can weigh up to 175 kg and travel at speeds of up to 45 mph, bringing significant benefits but also serious risks.

Statistics from 2024 recorded 55 drone accidents, including two serious incidents* Of these, 56% were attributed to loss of control in flight, followed by component failures. Jonathan stressed that assessing hazards correctly is critical, especially as the range of benefits grows—from counting high-density vegetable crops to avoiding operations on steep ground, reducing lone working, and inspecting roofs to eliminate uncontrolled and unsafe access.

Looking ahead, he predicted robust future legislation to ensure the safety of all stakeholders, including the public and those working alongside drone technologies.

Forestry, Slopes and Chainsaw Risks

Beyond fields and flight paths, the conference also shone a light on forestry. Chris Pike, Head of Safety & Assurance at Tilhill Forestry, explored the heightened risks of chainsaw and machine use on very steep slopes in the Scottish Borders.

In mechanical harvesting, traction control systems are essential to prevent slippage—but these systems are not tethers. Machines must still be able to "hold their own" and maintain a safe position on challenging terrain.

Where manual chainsaw work is unavoidable, the Forestry Industry Safety Accord (FISA) provides detailed guidance on the competencies required and how to maintain them. Chris's session underlined the economic importance of forestry production while emphasising the need to reduce incident rates in some of the most demanding working environments.

Mental Health and the "Accidental Counsellor"

Mental health ran as a strong and recurring thread throughout the day. Sam Downie, Managing Director of Mates in Mind and part of the Agri Wellbeing Alliance, focused on those who "go up the farm track"—vets, engineers, bank managers, inspectors, agronomists, feed and machinery reps, and other professionals who may be the only people a farmer or landowner speaks to all day.

These visitors often become "accidental counsellors" simply by being trusted, regular points of contact. Drawing on the Accidental Counsellor programme developed with input from Harper Adams University, Sam highlighted three key requirements for these professionals

1. Initiating conversations when they are worried about someone.
2. Understanding they don't have to fix the problem, that listening, in itself, is powerful.
3. Knowing how to signpost farmers and family members to appropriate support services.

She also reminded delegates that those in these roles must look after their own wellbeing, as they can end up carrying others' worries home with them. The principle of "one size fits one" was echoed throughout: each individual needs a tailored approach, and open questions are often the best way to start meaningful conversations.

Artificial Intelligence: Demystifying the Tools

Trudy Herniman, Insurance and Risk Management Advisor with Cornish Mutual, addressed the question many are quietly asking: “What is AI?” Her aim was to dispel fears that we are “sleepwalking” into a cyber world where human judgement and control are sidelined.

Instead, Trudy framed AI as another tool in the box—one that can be harnessed to support livestock management, tailor field operations to weather patterns, and support the safe use of automated equipment, rather than replace human oversight. Her session helped demystify AI and positioned it as a practical ally in safer, more efficient farming.

CPD, Collaboration and the Road Ahead

Delegates were able to top up their CPD through these and other sessions, reflecting the breadth of topics now recognised as central to farm safety: mental health, predictive maintenance, AI, robotics, drones and forestry practices.

With strong support from IOSH’s in-house events team and close collaboration with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) via principal inspector Wayne Owen, the Growing Safely conference demonstrated the value of bringing engineers, safety professionals and mental health advocates into the same room.

Throughout the day, conference chair Mike Whiting and speakers including Andy Newbold consistently cautioned against seeing technology as a standalone solution. Instead, they argued, technology should be viewed as an enabler: real gains come from how people interact with it, how it is embedded into systems of work, and how behaviours adapt on the ground.

The message for agricultural engineers and rural professionals was clear:

The future of safe, productive farming will be shaped as much by culture, communication and wellbeing as by the next generation of machinery and digital tools.

Incoming IOSH President Richard Bate

Andy Newbold HonFIAgrE

Sam Downie, Mates in Mind

IOSG Rural Industries Community Chair
Mike Whiting CEng MIAgrE

Stephanie Berkeley, Farm Safety Foundation Manager