Healthy animals – healthy profits

Farm health planning is not new. Many farmers are already planning for the health of their livestock and reaping the benefits.

Proactive farm health planning can offer real benefits for you, both in terms of the health of your livestock and the profitability and sustainability of your business.

Farm health planning involves:

- Understanding how much disease costs your business each year
- Developing a health plan with your vet or adviser
- Regularly reviewing the progress of your plan
- Ensuring bought-in animals do not pose a disease risk to the existing animals

For more information on farm health planning visit: www.defra.gov.uk/fhp

To find out more or get involved in Farm Health Planning in your local area contact:
Health planning has many benefits in terms of improved animal performance and disease prevention. Leading large animal vet David Black starts this series of Academy articles on health planning, outlining those benefits.

The management of animal health on livestock holdings has never been more complex – nor has it come under greater scrutiny than it does today in an industry where skilled labour and time are precious commodities in the pursuit of high standards of animal health and welfare. Health plans and biosecurity are terms that have been foisted upon us over the past few years and, unfortunately, are often misunderstood. This article aims to dispel the myths and explain how both can have a huge positive benefit for your livestock enterprise.

What is farm health planning?
Initially health plans were seen as a necessary evil associated with various assurance schemes – focused on putting in place quickly and at least cost complex documents meriting an audit, with little attention paid to the impact on animal health. However, Health Planning is actually a concept and state of mind rather than a dusty unopened document on a shelf.

It is a dynamic process, using risk assessment and measurement of disease levels on your unit, while being forward thinking and innovative – a concept and state of mind rather than a dusty unopened document on a shelf.

Targeting efforts
It is important efforts are targeted to maximise effectiveness of input and resources. Agree with your vet which areas are going to yield the greatest return initially and concentrate on those – once those areas are mastered you can move on to other areas. Ask your vet about the likely cost benefits of various interventions. There are often a few areas that aren’t always the obvious ones. Ask your vet to dispel the myths and explain how both can have a huge positive benefit for your livestock enterprise.

Incoming stock policy
Inincoming stock policy is the pillar of any biosecurity plan and, therefore, of Health Planning. There are four key areas to consider:

1. Quarantine. You should have an agreed facility and timeframe in place, depending on the class of stock joining the unit and the risks involved. It is often advisable to test incoming animals, providing a broad spectrum of economic issues from an extensive hill-lambing flock of sheep.

2. Computer-based, and should be easy and convenient. Together you can then decide what the high risks are for your unit – a call-exam unit near a busy main road will have entirely different risks from an extensive hill-lambing flock of sheep.

3. SMART targets and SOPs. Agreeing objectives is key to any health planning initiative, and the best way to do this is by setting SMART targets.

Specific – “I want to reduce pneumonia incidence in my calves to less than five cases a year”
Measurable – “Currently we have 15 cases a year”
Achievable – “I will consult my vet, adapt my feeding and use appropriate vaccines”
Relevant – “This will increase my productivity by an estimated 3%”
Time-based – “I want to do this within 12 months”

4. Many livestock producers will already have SMART targets in their heads, but those will not always be formalised or followed through.

Standard operating procedures (SOPs) is another phrase borrowed from industry and simply means an agreed approach to a specific situation which usually requires a degree of training and competence. The SOP may relate to routines such as: castrating, lambing, worming, etc or may be an agreed response to a disease situation – for example, does everyone on your farm know what is the treatment protocol when a lamb is sick? Must you give the same treatment? Is it agreed in advance and the same for the first case as the sixth case?

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Summary
Embracing health planning as a concept is imperative for optimal performance of livestock units. Many aspects of health planning are already in place on units, so now is a good time to consolidate and formalise those plans. There have been notable successes which we can build on, such as the BWG eradication scheme in Orkney, as well as many other pilot schemes planned for other diseases. Disease is not inevitable. Invest in health, don't pay for disease.

Farm health planning 1

In association with

LEARNING FOR YOUR FARMING FUTURE

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Farm health planning 1

1 Targets you set in your Health Plan should be

a SMART
b Clever
c Bright
d Short

2 Important aspects of an incoming stock policy are

a To protect existing stock
b To prevent infection

c To prevent disease spread

d All of the above

3 When choosing which areas of disease control to target you should

a Tackle as many as possible
b Tackle those with the cheapest solutions first
c Agree with your team the most effective and tackle those first
d Do what your neighbour is doing

4 An incoming stock policy may include

a Testing the incoming animal(s)
b Quarantining the incoming animal(s)
c Vaccinating the incoming animal(s)
d All of the above

Test your knowledge

1. What is farm health planning?
   a. A proactive, preventative approach rather than a reactive one
   b. A reactive approach that is needed when a disease outbreak occurs
   c. A process that only involves veterinary professionals
   d. A process that is only needed in large livestock holdings

2. What role do SMART targets play in health planning?
   a. To outline specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based goals
   b. To ensure targets are kept secret and not shared with others
   c. To make targets more difficult to achieve
   d. To reduce the number of targets set

3. What is the significance of SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) in health planning?
   a. They are outdated and no longer relevant
   b. They are unnecessary and add complexity to the planning process
   c. They are essential for consistency and adherence to agreed protocols
   d. They are only applicable to large-scale operations

4. Why is cost-effectiveness important in health planning?
   a. To ensure all treatments are used
   b. To focus on the most expensive solutions
   c. To ensure that the most effective solutions are used
   d. To reduce the financial burden of health planning

5. How can biosecurity be truly catastrophic, and what is its importance at farm level?
   a. It can lead to the spread of diseases and tremendous losses
   b. It is only important for disease outbreaks
   c. It is not as important as health planning
   d. It is less important than other farm management practices

6. What is the role of vets in health planning?
   a. They are only involved in disease outbreaks
   b. They are not involved in routine health planning
   c. They are essential for advice and implementation of health plans
   d. They are only responsible for the health of specific animals

7. How does health planning contribute to the success of livestock units?
   a. By reducing the occurrence of diseases
   b. By increasing the financial burden
   c. By limiting the productivity of livestock
   d. By decreasing the effectiveness of treatments

8. How can vaccines be used in health planning?
   a. As a cure for diseases
   b. As a reactive approach to outbreaks
   c. As a preventative measure to reduce disease incidence
   d. As a way to increase the number of treatments

9. What is the difference between biosecurity and health planning?
   a. Biosecurity is only about disinfection, while health planning is about overall health
   b. Health planning is only about disease prevention, while biosecurity is about control
   c. Biosecurity is about preventing the entry of diseases, while health planning is about managing diseases on the farm
   d. Health planning is only about large-scale operations, while biosecurity is about all farm types

10. How can health planning contribute to the sustainability of livestock units?
    a. By reducing costs and improving productivity
    b. By increasing the use of antibiotics
    c. By limiting the biodiversity of livestock
    d. By decreasing the overall health of livestock