The uptake of Animal Health Planning in Scotland: Barriers and Potential Solutions

Md. Mofakkarul Islam, Chrysa Lamprinopoulou¹ and Andrew Barnes²

Key Message: There are a number of barriers to the uptake of animal health planning in Scotland, including a lack of clarity about the purpose and poor coordination between the stakeholders involved. Solutions to these challenges include simplifying health planning systems, improving collaboration and communication between the actors involved, and increasing and standardising data recording.

Key Findings

- As part of a project investigating innovation in Scottish agriculture³, a case study was undertaken to identify the barriers to the uptake of animal health planning in Scotland and some potential solutions. This brief reports the findings of this case study.
- Maintaining the health of farm animals remains a serious challenge in modern livestock farming and a failure to achieve this can lead to significant costs (including financial) for the industry. Targeting the root causes of animal health problems through preventative measures and improved planning and management practices is essential for improving the profitability and sustainability of the livestock industry.
- This case study has identified a number of barriers to health planning uptake, including:
  - Lack of clarity about the definition and purpose of health planning. In some instances health planning is being used as a simple tick-box exercise rather than a means to increase productivity.
  - Lack of coordination and collective action. There are diverse stakeholders involved with animal health-related activities in Scotland, including vets, farmers, Government and industry, with little coordination between them. This leads to diverse motives, many different opinions about health improvement, and too many inconsistent messages reaching farmers.
  - Good relationships between vets and farmers are crucial for the uptake of health planning. However, the existing nature of vet practices (e.g. a greater reliance on vaccine and drug sales than on consultancy services) may not create positive incentives for either vets or farmers to be involved in health planning.
  - Dealing with the complexity of current planning systems requires considerable time and effort for farmers. For instance, according to some of the respondents in the workshop, the current online system, supported by the Scottish Government and SRUC, is seen as possibly “overly complex”.
  - There is a lack of reliable data on farm animal disease and production.
- The study has identified a number of solutions to the barriers identified, including:
  - Precisely define health planning and clearly indicate its ultimate goals and benefits.
  - Provide tangible evidence that health planning is beneficial. Targeting a few attainable objectives could help to achieve this.
  - Improve coordination and collective action among farmers, vets, researchers, and supply chain actors (e.g. retailers) through periodic meetings and the formation of working groups.

¹ Researchers, Land Economy and Environment Research Group (LEERG), SRUC (Scotland’s Rural College), Mofakkarul.Islam@sruc.ac.uk and Chrysa.Lamprinopoulou@sruc.ac.uk
² Team leader, Innovation & Behavioural Change, SRUC, Andrew.Barnes@sruc.ac.uk
³ For more information, see the Innovation Programme webpage. SRUC receives support for knowledge transfer and exchange from the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government Rural Affairs and the Environment Portfolio Strategic Research Programme 2011-2016.
- Simplify health planning systems, whilst recognising that the creation of yet another new system would be challenging. Simplification may be done by including only a few key performance indicators (e.g. number of calves born alive, number of lame animals, etc.) which need improvement, and by making health planning reports short (e.g. a one page report on liver fluke should be more convenient for farmers). All relevant stakeholders should participate in this simplification process. Again, the creation of working groups could be beneficial.

- Improve communication through such actions as: emphasising the risks and the benefits of animal health planning; providing consistent messages to farmers through improved stakeholder coordination; creating Health Planning groups (similar to the Business Improvement Groups under the Monitor Farm Programme).

- Increase and incentivise on-farm data recording and standardise data to improve its usefulness to farmers and researchers.

**Background**

A failure to achieve good levels of health amongst farm animals can cause the industry millions of pounds domestically and in international markets as was evidenced in recent times, such as the BSE crisis and the Foot & Mouth Disease outbreak. R&D activities over the past 50 to 60 years have identified and characterised many important diseases, including toxoplasmosis and enzootic abortion in sheep, and liver fluke, BVD and BSE in cattle. Spectacular successes have also been achieved in finding cures for these diseases through the development of new pharmaceutical products. However, such curative measures are often very expensive for farmers and provide only temporary solutions to animal health problems. Targeting the root causes of animal health problems through preventive measures and the use of improved planning and management practices, are therefore essential for the profitability and sustainability of the livestock industry.

Since 2005-06 the Scottish Government has provided support to improve the uptake of animal health planning within Scottish agriculture, including supporting SRUC to develop an online health planning system – SAHPS. In addition, some private companies provide health planning services but uptake of all these systems is low. Improvement in the uptake of these planning activities is considered vital for Scotland, and for this to happen, it is necessary to identify the barriers, if any, these current activities face and how these could be addressed.

**Research Methods**

This case study is part of a wider programme of work on innovation in Scottish agriculture, which is using an ‘innovation systems’ approach that regards innovation as a process involving complex interactions between many different stakeholders, including researchers, advisory service providers, non-governmental organisations, policy makers, and the actors within the supply chain, including farmers, processors and retailers. Data for this case study was collected through a stakeholder workshop held in December 2012 in the Kings Buildings campus of SRUC. The workshop was attended by some 20 participants from academic institutions (e.g. SRUC, University of Glasgow), industry (e.g. farmers, supermarket retailers), agricultural farm advisers (e.g. consultants, vets), industry regulators (e.g. Amtra), farmers’ representatives (e.g. NFU Scotland), and Scottish Government representatives. The researchers are grateful for participants’ time and commitment to this process.

Further work will be undertaken on this case study, including interviews with key stakeholders, and additional outputs which will be published in due course. Ongoing work in the wider innovation programme includes studies on different sectors and uptake of technologies for resource use efficiency and mitigation of environmental harm. A number of briefings have already been published from the innovation programme, including on barriers to the uptake of EBVs in the Scottish sheep sector.

For more information on the work of SRUC’s Rural Policy Centre, please contact: Dr Jane Atterton, Policy Researcher, Rural Policy Centre, SRUC, T: 0131 535 4256; E: jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk; W: www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre

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4 For more information, see the Scotland’s Monitor Farms Programme webpage. There is now a network of 15 monitor farms across Scotland. A number of organisations are involved in the Programme including QMS, the Scottish Government, SAC Consulting, HGCA and NFU Scotland.

5 Currently, the programme is in its second phase. For details please see the Scottish Government website: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/farmingrural/Agriculture/grants/Schemes/LMCMS/Options/AHWManagement/Intro

6 For details, please visit the SAHPS website at: https://www.sahps.co.uk/