

Animal Health Planning and Animal Health Plans

Concepts, principles and practicalities

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Introduction: What is an animal health plan, and why have one?

In the United Kingdom it is mandatory for organic livestock farms to have an animal health plan as a document providing evidence of active management of disease and building positive health (Anon 2006). Many organisations, both organic and non organic, (e.g. BCVA, Defra Compendium of UK Organic Standards, Soil Association, RSPCA Freedom Food, NDFAS, FAWL) develop, describe and use animal health planning as a part of their strategy (see Box 1). Currently, it is the presence of a regularly updated health plan document that serves as evidence that this is in place.

The benefits of health plans, including animal welfare improvement, financial gain and increased farm efficacy have all been highlighted in various publications (Sibley 2000, Gray & Hovi 2001, Dobbs 2005, Lovatt 2004). It has frequently been suggested that, through good stockmanship and appropriate use of veterinary medicinal products, health planning can improve the smooth running of a farm.

An animal health plan should be an active tool for animal health and welfare planning. However, as organic certification and several farm assurance schemes require a health plan there is a danger that they become seen as something to be policed when in fact they should be used as a forum for advice. In order to fulfil this challenge a health plan must therefore be farm specific and relate to farm specific issues.

The stock-keeper should draw up a written health and welfare plan with the herd's veterinary surgeon and, where necessary, other technical advisors which should be reviewed and updated each year.....

Paragraph 7 Codes of Recommendations for the welfare of livestock: Cattle(Anon 2003)

- 10.3.1 - You must develop and agree with us a plan that addresses how you will meet the standards in each of the following areas.....
- 10.3.2 - You must review your livestock management plan regularly and keep it up to date.
- 10.3.3 - As part of your LMP you must draw up a health plan to show how you will build health and reduce disease. This must suit your own farm

Soil Association, Organic Standards (Anon 2007)

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) recommend that herd/flock health planning on organic farms should include a disease risk assessment for all classes of animals depending on the past history of the farm as well as disease incidence on neighbouring farms. These plans should be equivalent to the herd/flock health and welfare plans widely advocated in conventional livestock farming and should include an agreed programme to achieve full compliance with the target animal health and welfare standards.

FAWC 2005

Box 1. UK Welfare codes, UK Soil Association organic standards and FAWC recommendations

The animal health plan as individual farm management tool

An animal health plan needs to be a useful management tool that can identify and control the particular health problems of the individual farm, thus improving and maintaining animal welfare. This should be based on farm specific experiences and problems, as all farms are likely to be different. Based on literature on the implementation of the organic standards, consensus seems to exist that the organic standards form a very good background for giving the organic animals high standards of good health and welfare, but clearly the standards cannot guarantee or cover all issues and conditions on a farm (Main *et al.*, 2003, Roderick *et al.*, 2000, Sundrum and Lund 2003). An animal health and welfare plan can aid in this respect.

Key features of animal health plans

If animal health plans are to be of value to a farmer, then the following key features are proposed as essential elements:

- Specific to individual farm
- Practical and easy to use
 - Modern day farming has given rise to a lot of paperwork.
 - The health plan should be simple and practical
 - Large and complex documents are unlikely to be used.
- Regularly reviewed and updated
 - Should highlight problem areas
 - Specific farm issues are likely to change over time.
 - Current procedures should be changed in accordance with changing issues
 - Usual practices can be questioned and evaluated
- Formulated with agreed advice
 - It is very difficult to review health management issues in isolation
 - Competent, external advice is, therefore, important
 - Health plans remain responsibility of farmer
 - Farmers must agree to the content for it to be a meaningful document
- Reflect good farm management

Key stages of health planning

Health planning is the process in which a health plan is formulated, and it can be described as having four different stages:

- Protocols (current treatment and prevention policy)
- Records (typically disease incidence or number of treatments)
- Review (target and intervention levels)
- Action: the plan that is made based on the review.

Assessing animal health plans

Within a certification system a health plan should be assessed in terms of;

- its presence on a farm
- its adequacy in relation to the farm for which it is designed
- its adequacy in relation to organic standards
- its implementation on the farm.

Organic certification officers currently examine new animal health plans, and inspectors check the presence of plans on the farm. However, the implementation and adequacy of a health plan on an

individual farm must be included, ideally without additional work burden. In order to facilitate this process, a health plan chart has been formulated, which is designed to allow the certification and inspection process to work together to enable presence, implementation and adequacy all to be annually checked without additional work load (Box 2 below). It is proposed that this will be completed by certification officers and sent to the inspector prior to inspection. The inspector will then edit/delete/add relevant details during inspection, and send it back to certification officer for recording. Any derogations/informed changes would be added through out the year.

The proposed health plan chart is easy to overview, allows the content to be discussed with the farmer and encourages regular health plan updating.

Farm		Date
biosecurity		Yes/No/Comments
	isolation	
	incoming animals	
	closed herd	
	Other	
	NOT MENTIONED	
Internal parasites - gastro		
	pasture/species rotation/management	
	FEC	
	veterinary advice	
	Other	
	NOT MENTIONED	
Internal parasites - lung worm		
	species/pasture rotation/management	
	FLC	
	Medication	
	Vaccination	
	Other	
	NOT MENTIONED	

Box 2. A section of the animal health plan chart, which is used in the certification and inspection of the organic farm.

Summary: Animal health and welfare plans AND planning

In summary, an animal health plan aims at contributing to improvements on the farm and in the herd through active prevention and monitoring of health and welfare, and to find farm specific solutions to farm specific problem. However, at present the situation (as described variously by Burke 2005, Huxley 2005, Bell *et al.*, 2006) appears to be the following:

- Most farms have plans but often **not valued**
- Records are available but often **poor accuracy**
- Reviewing of plan or records is very **limited**
- Farmers **not aware** of problems
- There is a definite **need for good advice**

In order for an animal health plan to be effective it must become a dynamic document to be used as a tool in the management of the farm. As simply a static archived document, developed for a farm assurance scheme, the health plan has limited use. Ideally, a health plan should involve the use of

protocols and records, along with regular review and necessary actions. After action has been taken, follow-up should be conducted in order to determine whether the action is sufficient and seen to improve the farm situation. This should become a constant circle resulting in improving health and welfare. Whilst health plan development can benefit from competent external advice it is paramount that the farmer takes ownership of this process. To be meaningful, it is important that the farmer takes responsibility for the health plan and that there is full agreement with the content. As the animal, the farmer, the vet/advisor and the consumer all require higher welfare, the health plan should be benefiting all of these stakeholders. If it does not, then it is ineffective.

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