

Animal Health and Welfare Planning. Identifying key principles and approaches

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Background

During the presentations and discussions at the 1st ANIPLAN workshop it became apparent that there are many different approaches to disease prevention and treatment planning. These exist in a variety of structured forms, and also involve different approaches to the dialogue between farmer and advisor. The distinction between ‘an animal health plan’ and ‘animal health planning’ has also become evident (see Atkinson & Neale, 2008 in these proceedings). Whereas a plan refers to documentation, planning is understood as a process which actively involves the farmer, is based on an assessment and evaluation of a real situation and includes an explicit formulation of the farmer’s goals regarding animal health and welfare.

In order to develop a single yet adaptable approach to health planning that can be tested under diverse conditions, there is a necessity to identify key principles. This report describes workshop discussions and the consensus reached with regard to the identification of such principles.

Workshop Approach

A half workshop day was dedicated to group discussions on the development of principles for animal health and welfare planning across countries. This was undertaken in a semi-structured manner following the format described in Figure 1 below. The groups were formed so as many nationalities as possible were presented in each group. A general discussion between all participants was conducted in order to form consensus on these principles.

Task

Brain storming session

Topic: Animal health and welfare planning

Structured Discussion

- What do you see as the role of health and welfare planning?
- From what we heard this morning, what are the key themes running through existing health and welfare plans?
- What extra, if anything, is required in an organic animal health and welfare plan?

Key principles

- Each participant to define 2 key principles that they think should be in an AH&W plan
- Write on card and place on pin board

Key principles discussion

- Critically discuss principles proposed
- Consolidate any principles that are the same (re-write on new card if necessary)
- Identify any conflicts or contradictions between principles

Plenary

- Working groups to present their principles to plenary group for discussion
- Group to reach consensus on the key principles to take forward (maximum of 10 principles)

Figure 1. Plan for discussion groups on identifying key principles for animal health and welfare planning.

Results

There was strong consensus in the plenary session before the group work that animal health and welfare planning is a process which should be continuous and based on data and observation in the herd, and the effect of every improvement should be evaluated, as illustrated in Figure 1. This enabled a strong focus on the animal health and welfare planning process rather than what an animal health and welfare plan should contain.

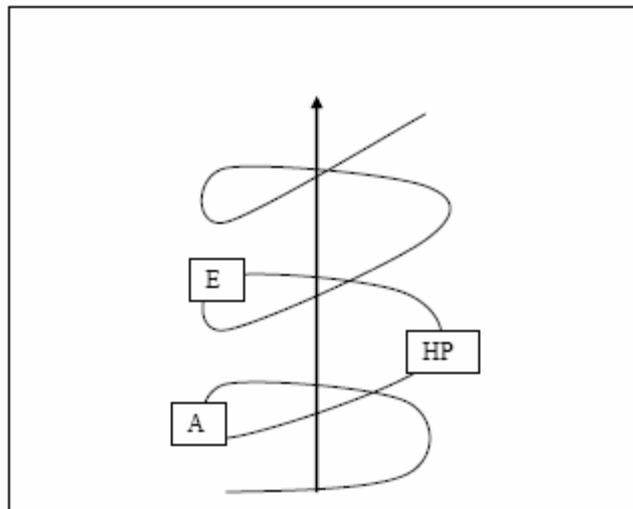


Figure 1. Representation of animal health and welfare planning as a continuous process based on assessment (A), planning (HP) and evaluation (E).

Key principles of health and welfare planning

Eight key principles of animal health and welfare planning were identified and are described in Figure 2.

- A health planning process should aim at continuous development and improvement, and should incorporate health promotion and disease handling, based on a strategy including
 - o current status + risks (animal based + resource based parameters)
 - o evaluation
 - o action
 - o review
- Farm specific
- Farmer ownership
- External person(s) should be involved
- External knowledge
- Organic principles framework (systems approach)
- Written
- Acknowledge good aspects

Figure 2 Eight principles of the animal health planning process that this project will be based on. These are keywords written during the common development based on group work. Further inputs to the discussion of the points are below.

The role of animal health and welfare plans

Animal health and welfare planning should be a continuous process aiming for constant improvement. Animal health and welfare plans should raise the awareness of farmers and stimulate them to continuous development and improvements in farm animal health and welfare. They should also act as tools for farmers, so that the ideas and targets of the farmer are made explicit and the organic production methods are integrated in the daily practice of the farm. Animal health plans exist in various forms but can often be ineffective at delivering effective health planning.

The process of planning involves knowledge, documentation, setting targets and follow-up

The most important characteristics of animal health and welfare planning is to see it as a process where the areas in focus are carefully monitored (so that the changes can be well-documented when following up) and the farmer's plans for improvements are based on farm-specific knowledge. Record keeping and monitoring and surveillance should therefore be important elements of the plan. When setting targets, a way of measuring whether these targets are reached or not should also be identified. There should be a review process, and in situations where targets are not met, new plans should be made and implemented in the process. The plan and review process should be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to changing conditions, opinions and perceptions.

Farm specific and based on knowledge about the herd in focus

The process of animal health and welfare planning is based on assessment, planning and evaluation. The assessment and evaluation comprise farm specific and real data as well as systematic observations in the herd. Plans should always be based on actual knowledge of the current health status of the herd and use estimates of disease status and welfare, including epidemiological monitoring and welfare outputs. The plans should also be farm specific in the sense that the wishes, needs and priorities should be guided by the farmer and responsible persons on that farm. *Note that based on information from the participating countries in this project, we conclude that there are huge differences in the type and quality of the records between countries.*

The farmer must have ownership over the plan and planning

The farmer's perception/opinion/knowledge of the current problems in the herd has to guide the process, because if the farmer does not see a problem, then the health planning process is unlikely to be implemented effectively. Farmer discussion groups, Stable Schools or similar might be a means of assisting the farmer to identify health problems.

An external person must be involved

Although the farmer has to be the driving force in the process, external advice (e.g. veterinarian, advisor or other farmers) offers an objective view which may improve the process, particularly with regard to identification of problems and solutions as well as providing inspiration.

Organic elements

Making a plan based on specific farm knowledge and specific recommendations for improvements is relevant for health planning in both organic and non-organic herds. However, given the explicit goals for organic herds of good animal health and welfare, based on disease prevention and health promotion, there may be a need for a different emphasis to organic health plans.

From the onset, organic principles and legislation provide an initial framework for guidance. It may be argued that thresholds for evaluating health and welfare status should be higher in organic farming systems, particularly with regard to welfare targets as high welfare is a stated aspiration and consumers expect high standards of welfare. An organic plan needs to have a very definite preventive and health promoting focus, as well as a focus on naturalness in terms of allowing maximum natural behaviour and species-specific conditions, including feeding and other management elements. It was emphasised in the discussion that the holistic whole-farm view should be included in the health planning process so as to account for the integrated nature of organic animal production, the inter-relationship between various farm elements and the multiple objectives of organic farming.

Acknowledge good aspects

It was agreed that the success cases and positive developments in a herd or a farm should also be systematically evaluated. This will be something to learn from, and an appropriate 'closure of a case' which the farmer and perhaps others have been working on for a longer period. These good stories are believed to be motivating for everybody, and focus, therefore will not only be on problem areas.

Future perspectives

Consensus on basic principles for an animal health and welfare plan was reached between participants from seven different European countries, and these principles will be included in the research initiatives in the participating countries during the course of the project. The approach to the implementation of these principles in practice is an objective of the project and the success in achieving this will be evaluated as an output. These will use empirical data and qualitative approaches. The final principles emerging from this process of discussion, testing and evaluating will be formulated as recommendations for the development of animal health planning in the future.