

# Flock health clubs provide a new format for farmers and vets to engage

By NSA Contributors

Flock Health Clubs have been appearing across the country in recent years - and so NSA has taken the opportunity to assess their potential.

The idea was developed by sheep vet Dr Fiona Lovatt and is based on sharing the cost of veterinary flock health advice between participating farmers. One example is the Larkmead Veterinary Group club, run by vet JP Crilly in South East England.

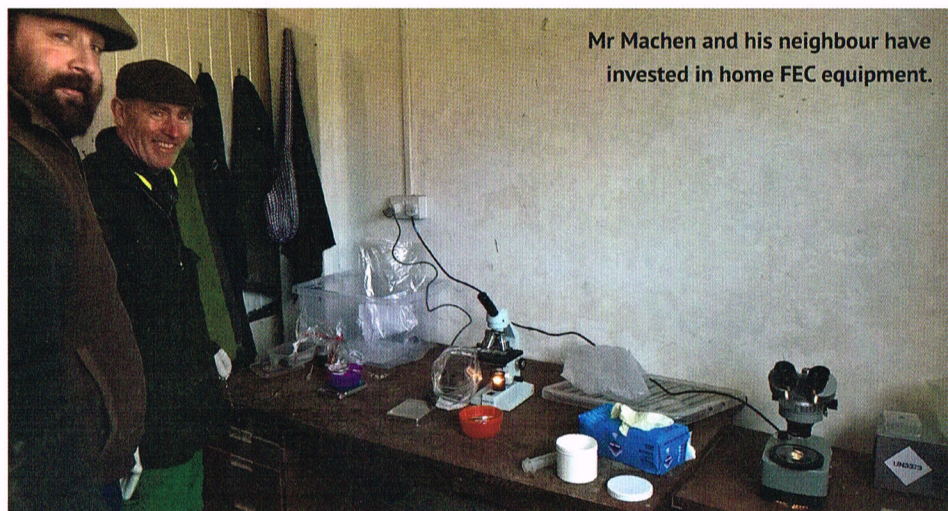
Dr Crilly comments: "The way our flock health club at Larkmead works is that members pay a monthly fee (divided into three bands depending on flock size) and in exchange they get three free visits a year with no vet fees and a 10% discount on all flock health related services such as worm egg counts, ram breeding soundness exams, blood sampling, written health plans and many more."

In addition there are three discussion group meetings a year, held on a member's farm, which are pre-lambing, post-lambing and pre-tupping. Dr Crilly adds: "We actually hold these meetings twice as we have members lambing from December through to the end of May, in order that at least one of the two is reasonably correctly timed for people's flocks. We also give members a 50% discount on any other sheep talks or workshops we run within the practice."

## Proactive

Dr Crilly set up the club following a meeting run by Dr Lovatt about flock health clubs and was keen to get involved with the sheep clients when he started at Larkmead.

He says: "The practice is generally very



Mr Machen and his neighbour have invested in home FEC equipment.

proactive with regards to flock and herd health in all the species it deals with, so they were very keen on the idea of our own flock health club. We currently have 28 members with flocks from six to 2,500 breeding ewes."

## Farmer involvement

Farmer Ben Machen, is the manager at Upper Horns Farm, a sheep and arable enterprise near Shalbourne on the edge of Wiltshire, and is one of the members of the Larkmead Flock Health Club. Mr Machen is the principle shepherd of the 340 ewe flock, which is Lley, put to Lley and Blue Texel tups to produce prime lambs off grass and cover crops.

He comments: "For me, the advantages of the flock health club are twofold. Firstly, there is the knowledge transfer from Dr Crilly and from the other members. The most recent discussion group meeting (which I hosted) was a great example of how it works. Members talk about what they are doing. For example: whether they

are shearing pre-lambing versus after lambing; not tail-docking or castrating lambs versus using the rubber rings; timings of flystrike pour-on application; and use of fly traps. Each person will provide the anecdotal evidence of how it works for them and then Dr Crilly provides any scientific background or technical information which is required to make an informed choice.

"Then there is the social aspect of it, which I can't really emphasise enough how important it is. This isn't a sheep-dense area and it can be quite an isolating job, so meeting other sheep farmers is good emotional support. The contacts you make are useful too; I have just recruited a new member of staff through it."

The discussion group meetings provide members the opportunity to get veterinary advice at a fraction of the cost of a one-to-one visit and allow members to get first-hand experiences and advice from other local sheep farmers.

However, flock health clubs don't have to

Mr Machen discussing his flock at the latest club meeting

stop there, and Dr Crilly says he is looking to create new services to offer his club.

He says: "I am always trying to expand the services offered to members, for example I have just set up an anonymous online benchmarking system for members, so they can compare their flock performance to others in the club."

Dr Crilly also says the flock health club has helped the practice and local farmers become more involved. He comments: "There is greater client involvement, especially with some that we perhaps weren't as involved with before."

Many new clients that have joined the practice have signed up to the club right away, where the greater level of communication and interaction they then have with the practice is hopefully beneficial in establishing the vet-

client bond."

Mr Machen agrees with this and says being a member has so far helped him make three progressive changes to his business.

He comments: "I have changed the timing of clostridial and pasteurilla vaccines to minimise any 'immunity gap', I have started using FAMACHA scoring to control haemonchosis in the ewes and, together with a neighbour (who is also a club member), we have bought the equipment to do on-farm worm egg counts. There are definitely other changes I am thinking of making in the future too."

All regions have different challenges, and every farm has its own challenges within that, but Dr Crilly believes different members will value different aspects of the group. He

says: "Some of ours come to virtually every discussion group meeting, whereas others value the discounted post-mortems and worm egg counts. We also have clients who don't want to join the club, and we still provide newsletters and information to those, just in a different way."

As a result of their experience, Dr Crilly and Mr Machen encourage other vets and farmers to create and get involved in flock health clubs. Mr Machen says: "I would recommend to anyone to join a club, if they have one in their area. It's definitely very good value for money here."

*Not got a flock health club in your area? Contact your vet and encourage them to find out more at [www.flockhealth.co.uk/flockhealthclubs](http://www.flockhealth.co.uk/flockhealthclubs).*

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1. The production costs of anthelmintic resistance in sheep managed within a monthly preventive drench program I.A. Sutherland, J. Shaw, R.J. Shaw Veterinary Parasitology 171 (2010) 300-304.

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