



Join a flock health club and get fit for the future

Flock health clubs are springing up all over the country and the sheep producers joining up and engaging with like-minded farmers are reaping positive benefits.

A flock health club is a vet-facilitated sheep farmer business group that allows members access to cost effective vet advice and technical information. Quite apart from the valuable vet input received and fostering an improved relationship between vet and farmer, participants often comment positively on how much they get from comparing their basic flock data with industry standards and other sheep producers in the group.

The collaborative process invariably ends up highlighting a number of areas where business improvements can be made.

One such flock health club example is the North Yorkshire group facilitated by vet Nikki Cree from the Kebir House Vet Practice, Northallerton. Ms Cree graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2015 and takes a keen interest in sheep vet work.

"My sheep interest stemmed from five years lambing at a farm near Thirsk where I

experienced the challenges of trying to cope with disease outbreaks around lambing time. And, conversely, the proud feeling of a 'good' year with plenty of healthy lambs out at grass," she says.

Ms Cree launched the Kebir House flock health club last year with the support of her colleague Hilary Vayro and is delighted at how well it is going. "Our main aim was to promote the immense value of preventative medicine to help our sheep farmer clients improve the productivity of their sheep flocks.

"We do this by providing quarterly meetings and convening discussion groups on topics selected by group members. Members also gain access to our flock health planning services at a discounted price for a monthly fee. There are three tiers to the scheme:

Bronze (@ £10/month), which includes five faecal worm egg counts or five blood

samples and a 45 minute annual flock health visit followed up with a written plan.

Silver (@£20/month), which includes 10 faecal worm egg counts or 10 blood samples and a 90 minute annual flock health visit followed up with a written plan.

Gold (@£30/month), which includes 10 faecal worm egg counts or 10 blood samples and a 90 minute annual flock health visit followed up with a written plan, plus a single tup fertility test carried out at the practice.

The club's first meeting focused on the infectious causes of sheep abortion, specifically toxoplasmosis and enzootic abortion. "We had 23 local farmers attend this meeting and 20 expressed interest in joining the flock health club. The three that weren't interested were actually getting out of sheep farming."

The club's 'reducing lambing losses'

meeting, held in February, has been the most successful so far, where all attendees were given tally sheets and work books to record any losses on their farm during the 2017 lambing season.

"We subsequently met to discuss the data recorded and this catalysed some excellent discussion. For example, one farmer said he had previously thought his losses were typical for the area, but now realises that people with similar land and weather are doing better. It's great because the level of trust is building and everyone is

starting to open up with each other, which can only help to improve flock health on all the farms.

"I really feel that we are now building the sort of proactive, mutually-beneficial business relationship that we have with our dairy farmer clients. There's more of a focus on disease prevention and maintaining sound flock health plans. That's got to be a great step forward because treating disease is invariably more expensive and labour intensive than preventing problems in the first place," says Ms Cree.



Flock health club organiser and sheep vet Nikki Cree

CASE STUDY

It wasn't until they attended the first Kebir House flock health club meeting that Di Whiteley and her partner Jim Courts became fully aware of the significant threat of toxoplasmosis to the annual productivity of their Texel x Beltex flock.



Vet Nikki Cree (right) discusses flock health management with producers Jim Courts and Di Whiteley (centre).

The couple run 350 April lambing ewes and 20 suckler cows at 150-acre Pond House Farm in the village of Scawton, Thirsk. The couple consistently produce 1.5 lambs a ewe a year from a hardy flock that spends most of the year on exposed high ground on the edge of the North York Moors National Park. They rarely buy sheep in – bar the occasional tup, which they now recognise does present a biosecurity threat – and rear between 70 and 80 of their own flock replacements each year.

"We actually only started scanning in 2014, but since then have consistently forecasted a lambing percentage of 165-170% in each of the last three years. Unfortunately, though, we did lose a few lambs to unknown causes at lambing in 2015 and 2016," says Mr Court.

"At the first meeting of the Kebir House sheep group we discussed the different infections that can cause abortions and sickly lambs in sheep at lambing time and particularly the threat of toxoplasmosis, which vets say is now widespread. We were

concerned enough to ask Nikki to blood test some of our ewes and, sure enough, all of them showed up exposure to the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite, which causes the disease."

According to Ms Cree, scientists now think more than 90% of sheep flocks in England, Scotland and Wales are exposed to this parasite.

"Consequently, our advice now is that if you are not already vaccinating against toxoplasmosis you should seriously consider doing so because it's probably only a matter of time before previously unexposed older ewes or new replacements succumb to an infection. Sheep are vulnerable to picking up the toxoplasma parasite from the environment, so normal biosecurity measures are not enough to control the disease," she says.

Mr Courts and Ms Whiteley decided to vaccinate the whole flock based on the blood test results and did this in early October last year about four weeks before the tups went in. "I don't see how you can keep this disease out of your flock, particularly as cats are known to spread the infection from farm to farm, so it makes sense to vaccinate even if you are a relatively closed flock.

"We have always believed that disease prevention is the right way forward, rather than trying to fire-fight when any problems surface. We feel better if we try to prevent disease issues and have always been committed vaccinators against clostridial pathogens and the threat of pasteurellosis – in both the ewes and lambs," says Ms Whiteley.

Fortunately, the 2017 lambing season went well and Mr Courts says they definitely had fewer dead lambs than in 2016 and 2015. "The lambs are now growing well on the hill and we like to get them away between December and March, finishing them on some concentrate if necessary. Lambs are sold live at Thirsk auction market, which suits our quality-focused system," he adds.

Key Task

To protect breeding ewes against a potential toxoplasmosis infection during their pregnancy they need to have been vaccinated between four months and three weeks prior to tupping. Ewe lambs must be aged over five months for their first vaccination. Correct pre-tupping vaccination is known to protect ewes for at least two breeding seasons.