

Smallholders and Animal Health and Welfare: a summary for Focus Group participants.

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Defra commissioned Lewis Holloway from the Department of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences at the University of Hull to run a small project talking to smallholders with livestock in the UK, based around a series of focus groups in different locations during Spring 2016.

This report provides a brief summary of the key issues emerging from the focus groups, and there is a summary of the main points at the end.

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1. Introduction

The aim of the project was to examine how smallholders deal with the key issues of animal health and welfare. It explored the following issues:

- Smallholders' motivations for having livestock;
- Smallholders' attitudes to animal health and disease, and their relationships with their vets;
- How smallholders managed livestock health and welfare, including feeding practices;
- How smallholders obtain information, training and experience;
- The contacts smallholders have with each other and with other organisations, and the networks they are part of.

Focus group discussions were structured around these key themes.

Four focus groups were held between February and April 2016, run by Lewis Holloway, along with Alice Hamilton-Webb and Emily Edwards (Royal Agricultural University) and Merewyn Loder and Paula Cani (Defra). The focus groups were held in:

- York (10th February 2016). The group was recruited by Defra and consisted of 9 participants from the North of England and North Wales.
- Belper (Derbyshire) (17th March 2016). The group was recruited from members of the Derbyshire Smallholders Association. It consisted of 9 participants.
- Exeter (23rd March 2016). The group was recruited initially by Defra, and consisted of 6 participants from South West England.
- Reaseheath College, Cheshire (25th April 2016). The group was recruited from members of the Cheshire Smallholders Association, and consisted of 7 participants.

The following section summarise the main areas of focus group discussion. Some caution is needed in reading these results as the focus groups were self-selecting and may not represent all smallholders and all views and opinions.

2. Attitudes and Motivations Towards Smallholding.

- Smallholders have a range of motivations for participation. Most of these revolve around an enjoyment of outdoor and country life, involvement with animals and the land, a desire to make a contribution to the countryside and to grow some of the food they eat.
- Some smallholders farm commercially, for others the focus is on providing food for domestic consumption. Awareness of increasing levels of regulation and the complexity of managing livestock commercially encourages many smallholders to shift to predominantly domestic production, although other participants were clear that they farmed commercially on a small scale.
- Most smallholders care deeply about welfare, and see prevention and management of illness/disease as closely related to high welfare standards. Although animals aren't pets they are not simply livestock, they are cared for and related to closely; smallholders argue that they know their animals well as individuals. In terms of what motivates smallholders to keep livestock there is a balance between lifestyle/hobby motivations and animals contributing economically

3. Prevention and Control of Disease

- Most participants were confident in knowing when an animal is ill. They know their animals well and spend a lot of time watching them; there were many mentions of the importance of close observation of animals and how that contributed to an in-depth knowledge of their livestock. Through this process, they argued, they become experienced and confident in treating some issues, and know where to go for information, advice and treatment for those they cannot deal with themselves. Close

observation allows immediate identification of potential problems that can then be dealt with.

- Participants argued that they are diligent with regard to health and welfare issues, and many compared themselves favourably to commercial farmers in this regard. Welfare and disease are taken seriously, including in terms of preventative measures and taking precautions. They have systems for dealing with situations as they arise. At the same time they are aware of the limits of their knowledge and willingly seek help and advice beyond those limits. Many participants had attended training courses and/or discovered that membership of a smallholding society was a key way to learn how to be a good smallholder.
- Most smallholders have access to a wide range of official and unofficial information sources in relation to livestock illness, management and feeding. It seemed that for most, the information they could access was seen as useful and credible. In addition many received practical help and support from neighbouring farmers. However, some issues and divergent opinions were raised in relation to: a. accessibility and relevance of formal information, b. the credibility of informal information (both online and from neighbouring farmers) and c. the value attached to information from vets.
- Help from farmers also helps smallholders deal with the some of the scale disadvantages they can suffer from. For example, many are concerned about the costs of vet treatments for small numbers of animals when packs contain a lot more doses than needed, and there is commonly reliance on local farmers to help with this. In contrast, some smallholders are also a little sceptical of farmers' practices, feeling that the farmers don't always have up to date knowledge and follow established routines rather than investigating new or better practices.
- Smallholders are aware of agricultural biosecurity legislation that affects them (e.g. movement records; biosecurity measures (e.g. isolations); feeding waste) and most adhere to those as best they can, although they are pragmatic and as they become more experienced may be a little more selective in how they obey the rules. Participants were aware that their small scale disadvantages them in many ways (e.g. making the costs of maintaining adequate isolation facilities and the costs of acquiring vet treatments for small numbers of animals disproportionate).
- There is also awareness that even when smallholders themselves attempt to maintain biosecurity, commercial farmers and vets are also pragmatic, and sometimes threaten smallholders' efforts at biosecurity. In relation to farmers, several mentioned specific examples including: their neighbours' insecure fencing allowing contact between animals, and farmers moving machinery and equipment between holdings without disinfection when they were coming onto smallholdings to perform agricultural tasks.
- In addition, smallholders were also very concerned about threats to biosecurity from the actions of the public using their land, and called for more education of the public. Particular issues raised included the hazards of dog faeces and members of the public feeding waste food to their animals

4. Smallholders' Relationships with their Vets.

- Smallholders' relationships with their vets are crucial to management of health and welfare. They make extensive use of vets, but their use varies according to their experience (i.e. the more experienced they are the more they will try to deal with things themselves; and as they become more experienced they are willing to challenge vets' knowledge) and their attitudes towards their animals (i.e. there is acknowledgement that different species are treated differently by themselves and by vets due to their relative value – poultry especially are regarded as of low value and there is some reluctance to resort to expensive veterinary visits and/or treatment).
- Several participants had very positive attitudes towards smallholders' relationships with their vets, and discussed the practical support and advice they received alongside the formal visits, examinations and prescriptions they obtained. Other participants had more sceptical views towards the value of using veterinary services, and there was a pragmatic view in some cases of the costs not being worth it relative to the financial value of the animal concerned.
- Further, some smallholders were much more sceptical about the value of consulting vets, and there was some frustration concerning a. vets' lack of awareness of the species they have (especially where they are not dedicated large animal or agricultural vets) including pigs, poultry, goats and llamas, and b. a tendency for some vets to treat them more as pet-owners than farmers (and potentially charging them more as a result in the assumption that as smallholders they would pay for treatments that a commercial farmer would not consider financially worthwhile.)

5. Feeding Livestock

- Most smallholders have access to a wide range of information sources re. general issues of livestock nutrition and feeding practices. Mentioned were: feed suppliers; agricultural merchants; animal nutritionist; EBLEX (AHDB); Red Tractor assurance scheme. One group noted a lack of advice from Defra on this subject.
- On the specific issue of feeding waste to animals three points can be made. First, most participants were aware of the issues and regulations associated with feeding waste, for example speaking about how once food had been in the kitchen it should not be taken back out to feed to livestock. Second, some participants were unsure of the regulations and used the focus groups to clarify for themselves what they should and should not be doing. Third, some participants also mentioned that they thought or assumed that some other smallholders did feed waste. Some also questioned the need for regulations preventing the feeding of waste to livestock.

6. Buying, Selling and Moving animals.

- Participants tried to use regular and trusted sources of new animals where possible. This can include trusted dealers (who could also be smallholders) who would obtain new animals from them from designated sources. Some participants had long-standing relationships with such dealers. However for others, markets, where animals

from many locations mix, pose too many biosecurity threats and thus they are avoided.

- Smallholders were careful to ensure health of bought-in stock where possible (both prior to acquisition and by prophylactic treatment once on the holding).
- Smallholders were careful in relation to livestock movements, and were aware of the regulations surrounding animal movements (in terms of keeping records and isolating when possible). Many said that maintaining appropriate or approved isolation units is hard on smallholdings without suitable buildings. Some respondents admitted to being unsure about the rules regarding isolation facilities. Some participants argued that smallholders were a relatively low risk because of the relatively small number of movements on and off their holdings compared to commercial farmers.
- Some participants were involved in showing their animals. They understood and adhered to rules on the standstill of animals but were frustrated by this (especially where they didn't have isolation facilities allowing them to keep their show animals separately from non-show animals).

7. Smallholders' Suggestions for Defra

- Smallholders had some criticisms of Defra and related agencies, and some constructive comments recommending specific changes they would like to see. Participants argued strongly that they deserved more recognition, alongside commercial farmers, of the importance of their activities to food production, farming and the countryside. They argued that because they register and attempt to obey the rules, they feel Defra should reciprocate more in terms of providing them with information and assistance.
- There was a general view that smallholders ought to be taken into account more than they seem to be at present. This was often presented in terms of a relationship of mutual obligation: if smallholders have a holding number and obey regulations, then they deserve to be taken account of by both Defra and non-government agencies (such as the National Animal Disease Information Service), in terms of both in terms of efforts being made to produce and supply more relevant information and in terms of smallholders being eligible for support (including financial support – for example there was a minimum acreage limit for SFP claims, and mention of being ineligible for certain grant schemes) that is available to commercial farmers.
- Broadly, participants suggested that Defra and other agencies could improve communications with them to be more effective for their specific needs: information needed to be clearer, more relevant, targeted, and more fine grained (e.g. more geographically specific, and more specific to their kinds of small-scale enterprises). They said that Defra produced a lot of material, but that there was too much of it and much was not relevant to them (e.g. some received material intended for large-scale arable farmers). There were also some worries about Defra's view of smallholders, and about being inspected by Defra in relation to agricultural rules and regulations. Smallholders can feel victimised – viewed as amateurs and harbouring disease and they can feel picked on in terms of inspections (i.e. they could feel there's an assumption they need more inspection and are more likely to be doing things wrong,

which they dispute). Participants questioned that perspective and presented an alternative view of smallholders and potentially having higher health and welfare standards than commercial farmers, based on their small size, stockmanship skills and ‘knowing’ their animals.

- Smallholders made several specific suggestions for Defra to consider. These include:
 - i. Several participants who kept bees noted that Defra’s information on bees and bee diseases was very good, and they saw that as a potential model for other kinds of information. Specifically, there was a mention of the photographic illustrations of bee diseases, and a suggestion that similarly helpful high quality images would assist with identifying and treating diseases in other kinds of livestock.
 - ii. There was a desire for clearer information on isolation units, and for rules which were more practicable for smallholders to follow.
 - iii. Smallholders (in common with many commercial farmers) would like to see greater traceability in the livestock chain. This was discussed in relation to both health/biosecurity issues, as in the comment below, and greater knowledge of things like carcase quality and feedback from abattoirs. The comment suggests a concern that smallholders might be blamed if a disease is identified in an animal once it has left their care, and that higher levels of monitoring and traceability would prevent them being wrongly accused.
 - iv. Some participants commented on problems they had had finding information on the Defra website, arguing that the site could be clearer and more accessible, with the possibility of restricting communications from Defra to those things which were specifically relevant to them. There was also some comment that the move towards internet-only modes of communication was problematic for some.
 - v. Some participants argued that Defra documentation was not always accessible to people with learning difficulties or other disabilities.
 - vi. Several participants asked that livestock movement documents could be made more easily available to them. Specifically, they dislike having to go to markets to get movement paperwork and other information when they tend to not use markets.

8. Summary: Key Points

1. Smallholders in the focus groups are generally aware of the biosecurity, health and welfare issues which affected their livestock-keeping.
2. Participants generally want to comply with rules and regulations associated with biosecurity, health and welfare.
3. Smallholders want more specific, targeted information to help them manage their livestock health and welfare.
4. Smallholders experience some difficulties because of their small scale of operation, for example in terms of maintaining appropriate facilities and equipment (such as isolation facilities) or the purchase and use of small amounts of medicines.

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