SRUC

Evaluation Report – Hill Sheep Health North Project

Contents

This report was commissioned by the Yorkshire Agricultural Society and was delivered to H. Jones – email: HollyJ@yas.co.uk on their behalf on 28/07/2021.

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Summary

Background

Hill Sheep Health North was a project funded by the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-Agri). It was awarded to an Operational group – "Farmer Scientist Network - Hill Sheep Farming Diseases" – co-ordinated by the Yorkshire Agricultural Society for the period 01/04/2017 to 31/12/2020. An external evaluation of the project was required. The findings of this external evaluation are presented in this report.

Evaluation Methods

The original request was to:

- Review the project documents and data
- Interview some of the participating farmers and vets
- Analyse and write up their findings

This was to be a predominantly desk-based exercise, given the resources available and COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The project, its background, aims and objectives, execution and current status, were discussed at an initial meeting between the evaluator and two members of the project delivery team - the lead scientific co-ordinator (AC) and participatory epidemiology specialist (BJ) in mid-March 2021. The range and types of evidence (documentation and data) available were identified, as was the scope of the evaluation.

It was agreed that:

- the timeline be amended to start in mid-April
- the evaluation would start by provision of a framework of evaluation questions to outline the scope of the evaluation, to be approved by the project delivery team members
- evaluation of the initial evidence could lead to further questions, request for evidence and/or discussions

It was noted that:

- there had already been interviews with farmers and that the transcripts might provide sufficient evidence, without needing to conduct additional interviews
- if additional interviews were required then they would need to be (i) virtual due to pandemic restrictions and (ii) delayed until after the lambing
- that some data analysis, KE activities and reports were on-going, or planned, and would emerge during the timeline of the evaluation

Existing documentation was provided. The evaluation framework was developed and the evaluation questions agreed. These questions cover: outcomes in the context of the requirements of the funder; project process – implementation & outputs, and project outcomes, but not financial aspects. The evidence was evaluated, assessed and synthesised. Additional outputs were provided as they emerged and further clarification was sought where necessary. It was not considered necessary to conduct any additional participant interviews.

Key Findings:

The conclusion from this evaluation is that despite a number of barriers to implementation, which necessitated changes to be made and alternative approaches to be used, this project has fulfilled the funding requirements.

An operational group (Hill Sheep Health – North) has taken outputs from academic research (information on how to control disease) and through the use of new and innovative methods (participatory epidemiology methods and data collection via an App) enabled the application of this information to address a recognised problem (how can disease control information be effectively applied within the context of hill sheep flock management practices). The recognised industry problem came from the industry sector participants and was developed by them to address a specific challenge (that of the control of liver fluke infection, associated disease (fasciolosis), loss of productivity and responsible and appropriate use of relevant veterinary medicinal products). The disease control information has been turned into knowledge and thus actions have been taken that have the potential to improve the productivity and sustainability of their hill sheep enterprises. In doing so, collaborative links between research and industry have been developed and existing links strengthened, while initial evidence demonstrates that the potential for improved productivity and sustainability is being realised.

The challenge will be to continue to maintain this momentum.

Detail of evaluation findings

The overall requirements of the funder:

The European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-Agri) funds projects of up to three years, as part of the Countryside Productivity Scheme, which is part of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)[1].

The stated aim of EIP-Agri[2] is "to develop academic research into a solution for a recognised industry problem" that reduces "the productivity or sustainability" of the sector "in a new and innovative way." It provides funds to operational groups for applied research (i.e. "real-world trials of solutions already identified by research"). The recognised industry problems should come from, and be developed by, the industry sector participants. In addition, the project should encourage greater collaboration between research and industry.

Evaluation questions (EQ) and findings:

EQ1. Did the project address a recognised industry problem that was identified and/or developed by the industry sector participants?

Yes: the recognised industry problem that was identified was that the way in which disease control strategies are developed and/or methods used for the dissemination and exchange of scientific advice and knowledge do not always lead to realistic achievable actions. A new approach – the use of participatory epidemiological methods – was to be trialled. Using this approach, a specific recognised industry problem (the challenge of controlling the impact of liver fluke in hill sheep enterprises) was identified by the industry sector participants. They then developed control strategies that were appropriate to their individual

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594930/EIP_handbook_v3.pdf#:~:text=The%20European%20Innovation%20Partnership%20for%20Agricultural%20Productivity%20and,projects%20that%20aim%20to%20improve%20productivity%20and%20sustainability.

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/european-innovation-partnership-agricultural

situations, through peer support, exchange of ideas, experiences, in conjunction with input from scientists and experts from the research, science, surveillance and industry sector communities.

EQ2: Was academic research used in a new and innovative way to develop a solution for the problem?

Yes: use of the academic research concept, the participatory approach, enabled the provision of information and scientific knowledge in a new way that facilitated development of appropriate solutions. Much of the information and scientific knowledge used was originally derived from academic research. In addition, information and knowledge from the industry sector participants (the field) was fed-back into academic research to help guide development of a fluke forecasting tool and academic research to develop a pen-side test.

EQ3: Did the solution improve productivity and sustainability?

In the short-term, the solutions developed have anecdotally improved productivity resulting in participant satisfaction [1], although it is not possible to conclude that this is a direct causal effect. One consequence of the solutions developed are that they have helped participants to save money by more strategic use of pharmaceutical treatments, although further scope for improvement still exists [2]. This strategic usage should reduce costs, increase productivity and, in the medium to longer term, improve sustainability by enabling the participants to co-exist with resistance, and/or reduce the rate at which resistance develops. To determine whether this is the case would require re-evaluation after a suitable time period has elapsed.

EQ4: Did the project encourage greater collaboration between research and industry?

Yes: a substantial amount of interaction and collaboration between the research community and the industry sector is documented throughout the materials provided for evaluation. These included: bringing in specialists from the research community for events in response to industry requests for further information in areas of interest; involvement of early career researchers (MSc students) in the qualitative semi-structured interviews; analysis and reporting of the quantitative data collected by the industry participants via the project-specific App, and the aforementioned feedback into on-going research (fluke forecasting tool and pen-side test development).

EQ5: Were the process requirements for an EIP-Agri funded project met?

Yes: as far as this could be assessed most process requirements have been met, with the production of a few final required outputs ongoing at the time of evaluation (see EQ8, Table 1). Note: evaluation of financial aspects of the project and any process requirements of the funder in this area was out-with the remit of this evaluation report.

Project level evaluation:

The stated aim of the project was to use and test application of the concept of participatory epidemiology (the innovative idea), in the context of the development of disease control strategies for hill sheep farming enterprises, in two areas of the North of England (Cumbria and Yorkshire).

This would be achieved by using participatory methods to support the design and implementation of a participatory approach. This approach would involve livestock keepers in both the analysis of animal diseases that were of relevance to them and in the design, implementation and evaluation of appropriate disease control programmes.

The objectives of the project [3] were to:

1. Identify appropriate groups of livestock keepers and establish how the groups will operate, work together and share knowledge
2. Identify disease(s) of concern
3. Develop a structured, strategic approach to evidencing the extent of the issue that was identified
4. Utilise the skills and knowledge of the groups to find solutions to the issue of concern
5. Implement any data collection required and trial any solution(s) identified
6. Analyse the effectiveness of the approach, including measurements of improvements to animal health, biosecurity, sustainable farming, productivity, and to the relationships between farmers and authority
7. Disseminate, share and transfer knowledge, gained from adoption of the participatory approach to develop disease control strategies for these types of enterprises, to other farmers and stakeholders

Evaluation questions (EQ) and findings:

Area evaluated: Process – implementation and outputs

EQ6: Did the project reach the target group?

The target groups were hill sheep farmers in two areas of the North of England, Yorkshire and Cumbria, that were drawn from the membership of the Farmer Networks by invitation [3].

Two farmer discussion groups were established, one in Cumbria and the other in the Yorkshire Dales. The listed participants comprise a range of hill sheep enterprises [4].

Numbers in attendance at each meeting varied, depending on availability, however, it appears that participation levels were at a similar level throughout.

EQ7: Where and when did the project activities take place?

Project activities took place between the first farmer discussion meetings in January 2018 and final analyses, reporting and knowledge dissemination in the first half of 2021. They occurred at a variety of locations. It should be noted that the participatory approach that was being piloted in this project does not, by its very nature, follow a rigid timetable. It is flexible and led by the participants' requirements, requests and ideas.

As evidenced by the website [5], minutes from meetings and/or associated reports and output [6-14], the following project activities took place:

- Small group – farmer discussion group meetings, approximately every six-months, in both areas, in person and later virtually (Zoom); co-operative learning experiences
- Additional meetings and workshops that expanded on areas of interest identified by the farmers' groups, brought in external specialists, or demonstrated relevant techniques e.g. post-mortem workshop.
- Development, provision, training and then use of a mobile phone App for data collection.
- Analysis of the data collected via the App.
- Provision of diagnostic tests (including FECRT- faecal egg count reduction test, Coproantigen and ELISA antibody tests) - these were made available to the farmers free of charge, to promote strategic use of flukicides.

- Other data collection – baseline questionnaire; semi-structured interviews investigating the farmer experience
- Development and dissemination of knowledge exchange materials and the website.

EQ7: Did all project activities reach all parts of the target groups?

Numbers in attendance at each meeting varied, with lack of availability as one factor cited in a number of evidence-documents; however, it appears that participation levels were sufficient to achieve the aims and objectives throughout.

EQ8: Were all activities implemented as intended?

The general project activities were planned to occur over a period of 30 months, starting in April 2017 with completion by the end of June 2020 [3]. A number of milestones were provided for claims management purposes [3].

The majority of activities were implemented as intended, albeit to a different timetable, which was due to a delay in the start date. This led to an extension of the project end date to December 2020 [3]. One exception was that it had been planned to engage volunteer veterinary students to assist with data collection on participating farms [3]. While conceptually this would have strengthened collaboration between research and industry, plus benefited the students, it was not logistically feasible (AC pers.com.) to put in practice. In addition, if it had been possible, it would have been compromised by COVID-19 restrictions in 2020.

Semi-structured interviews were planned to be completed at in person. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions this was not possible; these had to be completed by phone [15].

Not all farmers inputted data into the App within the time period (January 2017 through to April 2020) [15].

At the time of this evaluation some project activities; KE activities, analyses and drafting of the final project report are on-going and being completed, or finalised.

A range of activities were originally planned for the dissemination of information and knowledge sharing during 2019 (Table 1). Where planned activity/outputs were, for a variety of reasons, not feasible alternative activities have achieved the

required aim of dissemination to relevant audiences. These are detailed in the relevant Appendix of the project final report [16].

Table 1: Planned activity/output as per Hill Sheep Farming EIP-Agri application form [3] and status as evidenced July 2021.

Planned activity/output	Status (July 2021)
An App for data collection	Completed
A cadre of co-ordinators, farmers and vet volunteer students trained in the use of the App	Co-ordinators and farmers – completed Vet students – not feasible
First year report and dissemination via newsletters (operational group, sheep breed societies, farming press etc)	No first year report was produced due to delay in project start Dissemination activities are documented on the project website [5]
Analyses of data collected	MSc report [15] from semi-structured interviews and App data analysis [2] - completed
Panel session/technical seminar at the Oxford Farming Conference 2019	Unable to secure space at these functions; alternatives as per project website [5] and project final report Appendix [16].
Mini Conference at the Great Yorkshire Show in July 2019	
Seminar session at NSA North 2019	
Full Day Conference at Yorkshire Agricultural Society	A casualty of pandemic restrictions
PR campaign using regional and farming press	Completed
Promotional campaign	On-going

Planned activity/output	Status (July 2021)
Case studies	Alternative dissemination methods used, e.g. farmers talking about their personal experiences in the webinars on the website [5]
A5 4-page summary leaflet	Alternative: poster produced
Full project report (A4-4 pages)	On-going

EQ9: What if any changes have been made to intended activities?

The delayed project start meant that the first meetings of the farmer discussion groups occurred in January 2018. This was partially mitigated by retrospective collection of data from 2017.

Instead of student data collection, increased diagnostic testing was implemented.

There was a move from in-person to the virtual environment (Zoom) for meetings in 2020 due to Sars-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. These also resulted in the semi-structured interviews in 2020 being moved from in-person to by phone.

EQ10: Are participants and other key stakeholders satisfied with all aspects of the project?

From the evidence available, participants and other key stakeholders are satisfied, or very satisfied with most of the aspects of the project that have been assessed.

EQ11: What were the barriers/facilitators to implementation

An initial barrier to implementation was the delay in approval of the grant application and thus the project start. This led to a delay in data collection by a year. This delay in data collection was due to the seasonality of occurrence the priority disease of importance (liver fluke) that was identified by the farmer group i.e. because of the delay to the start date of the project, the appropriate season for data collection (through diagnostic testing) was missed.

A major barrier to implementation as planned in the final stages was the Sars-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. Lockdown, restrictions on travel, person-to-person contact, furlough, cancelled events etc. affected activities due to occur in 2020. Adaptation and mitigation measures had to be taken with some activities moving to the virtual environment.

This move to a virtual platform facilitated the involvement of vets (B.J. pers. Comm. 19/03/21), making it easier for them to attend without having to travel, or negotiate on-duty commitments. It also facilitated some farmer participation, again due to the reduction in time required [5]. This may have reduced the difficulties encountered in being able to find mutually available times that would suit the majority of participants [1]. Conversely, the move to a virtual platform was mentioned as a barrier to implementation by a few, due to issues with lack of rural connectivity, such as suitable internet connections and bandwidth, plus a lack of familiarity with the technology [1] i.e. computer literacy.

Time constraints are a recurring theme as a barrier, whether that be in the context of using the App to record data, the ability to arrange semi-structured interview, or in finding the space to reflect and consider doing something different from the routine [1, 15] i.e. to implement a change.

Not all participants used the App [15, 16]. Lack of available time to do so was mentioned [1] as a barrier and may be a factor behind the comments that were made about forgetting to update the data and needing to be reminded to do so [10-13], as was the occasional preference for non-electronic record-keeping [1]. However, for those who did use the App, this was facilitated by its simplicity [1, 16].

The lack of a face-to-face interviews was perceived by the investigator as a barrier to development of a rapport and discourse, from which additional detail may have emerged [15].

Implementation was also facilitated by the local nature of groups, administration by an established network, and the industry sector's recognition of the expertise of the project lead, facilitators and specialists that were identified.

Area evaluated: Project Outcomes

EQ12: How well has the project achieved its objectives/sub-objectives?

Objective 1 – met well: within the project, appropriate groups of livestock keepers were identified, the way the groups would operate was established to work together and share knowledge. The farmer discussion groups were established and led the development of activities, with engagement throughout the project lifespan.

Objective 2 –met well: the minutes of the first discussion group meetings of both groups in early 2018 [6, 7] record a breadth of discussion about diseases of concern with consensus achieved in both groups that the one of most concern i.e. immediate priority to take further was liver fluke.

Objective 3 – met well: the App was developed. in addition to the initial baseline questionnaire [4], the App enabled data collection that provided a structured, strategic approach to evidencing the extent of the issue that had been identified. A significant proportion of participants contributed data [2, 16].

Objective 4 – met well: the participatory approach adopted utilises the skills and knowledge of the groups to find solutions to the issue of concern. The minutes of the meetings [6-14] record suggestions made, statements about what others had done that had, or had not worked for them. These discussions were highly valued by participants [1, 15].

Objective 5 –met well: the data collection required was implemented via the App (see Objective 3). The farmers reported that the ideas (potential solutions) that had been shared were being applied on their own farms i.e. trialled [1, 15].

Objective 6 – met well: the analysis of the App data [2] and the qualitative interviews [1, 15] provide evidence that the participatory approach has led to the adoption of more considered, individual approaches. These have provided participants with more confidence in their ability to address the challenge of fluke in their sheep, and so improve animal health and productivity. For some it has led to apparent improvements in productivity; however, whether this is a causal relationship cannot be established from the available evidence. For some it has led to reduced, amended, and more appropriate use of veterinary medicinal products that will facilitate more sustainable farming. The analysis of the App data [2], however, demonstrates that there is still considerable scope for improvement in this area, especially in low-risk fluke years as were experienced

during this project's life. There was no analysis of the relationship between farmers and authority.

Objective 7 – met well: there has been concerted effort, despite aforementioned barriers and constraints, to disseminate, share and transfer knowledge, gained from adoption of the participatory approach to develop disease control strategies for these types of enterprises, to other farmers and stakeholders. These are evidenced on the website [5]. In addition, the participating farmers reported that their experiences of the group, the knowledge and control ideas were benefiting others outside of the group, not just themselves [1, 15].

EQ13: How well have the desired short-term changes been achieved?

By using a participatory approach, the intention is to involve animal keepers and empower them to identify and solve their own problems by sharing in the control of the process. In this project this approach was to be in the context of the analysis of animal disease problems, and the design, implementation and evaluation of disease control programmes and policies.

The desired short-term change would therefore be the successful establishment of farmer groups that are actively engaged in these activities. This has been achieved well (see response to EQ12 Objectives 1-5).

Within these groups, the desired short-term change of improved knowledge about and implementation of effective control strategies for the identified industry problem on participating farms, liver fluke, has also been met well (see response to EQ12 Objective 5-6; and [10-15].

EQ14: Were any project specific success criteria/ways of measuring success been defined? Have they been met?

No specific success criteria or ways of measuring success of the project were defined in the application

Area evaluated: Project Impact

EQ15: Has the overall goal been achieved?

The overall goal at the project-level to use and test application of the concept of participatory epidemiology (the innovative idea), in the context of the development of disease control strategies for hill sheep farming enterprises, in

two areas of the North of England (Cumbria and Yorkshire), has been achieved successfully.

The overall goal at the funders' requirement level "to develop academic research into a solution for a recognised industry problem" that reduces "the productivity or sustainability" of the sector "in a new and innovative way." has also been achieved.

EQ16: What, if any, factors outside the project have contributed to, or hindered the desired change?

As described in the evaluation of the project process, the predominant factor outside of the project that has hindered the desired change has been the impact of the Sars-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. However, it may also be hypothesised that this could have contributed to encouraging the desired change, by introducing a wider necessity to engage with technological solutions for communication and also by providing an opportunity to 'meet-up' with like-minded people during 2020.

The timing of the project (i.e. the lower-risk nature of fluke challenge, related to environmental/weather conditions during the project life, after an earlier high-risk period of occurrence) may also have contributed to the desired change. This was unavoidable, being out-with the operational group's control.

EQ17: What, if any, unintended change has occurred as a result of the project?

The only unintended change that has been evidenced as having occurred as a result of the project also relates to the impact and experiences due to the Sars-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. This change is reflection on how any subsequent discussion groups could be held to optimise the benefits and minimise the disadvantages of the format used. i.e. the possibility of a hybrid series [5].

It is possible that the re-allocation of funds from the students to provision of additional testing may have further enhanced the participants perception of the value of diagnostic testing. However, it is difficult to evaluate whether this is the case or not.

Area evaluated: Summation

EQ18: Will any aspects of the project continue i.e. legacy/sustainability?

The aspects of the project that will continue i.e. be left as a legacy are:

- the project website
- the improved knowledge and awareness of project participants and the ripple-effect of dissemination to others via peer-to-peer conversations
- the wider peer-to-peer network of like-minded people in their communities that the participants have developed through getting involved in the discussion groups [1]
- increased engagement with their local veterinary practices – where these relationships have been strengthened it should encourage them to be maintained after the project end-point
- increased engagement and familiarity with non-pharmaceutical approaches e.g. diagnostic testing, on-farm post-mortem examinations

However, sustainability will mostly be dependent on good will and cost:benefit assessments made by each participant individually, as all of these will come at a resource cost.

Without additional resources, further discussion meetings are unlikely to continue due to lack of co-ordination; the website will be minimally maintained, rather than continue to develop, and the wider fate of the data collection App is uncertain. Additional resources will be required to take the App to a wider audience i.e. operationalise/commercialisation.

EQ19: Is it possible to implement the project in other settings?

Yes. It is possible to implement a participatory epidemiological approach to other settings. These might be farmer discussion groups in other locations and/or livestock sectors, as well as for the development of control strategies for different diseases within the same sector.

EQ20: What elements could have helped or hindered the project?

Please see responses in earlier sections that cover the same ground.

EQ21: What recommendations have evolved out of the project?

The following recommendations can be drawn from the conclusions made by the operational group [16]:

1. Mechanisms to enable a continuation of the existing The Farmer Network (Cumbria/Yorkshire), support to the current Cumbria and Dales farmer groups should be sought. Such support could include inviting new interested farmers to join and the formation of new local groups.
2. The participatory approach used could be implemented by other farmer-led operational groups in other areas, both disease and spatially/regionally. The Farmer Network (Cumbria/Yorkshire) could contribute their experience to facilitate development of other groups.
3. Support needs to be sought to enable further use and extension of the data collection App developed within this project
4. Fluke fore-casting tools need to have a sufficiently localised spatial resolution to be of value.
5. Sentinel testing with the serum ELISA at a farmer co-operative level would provide valuable, timely information for local decision-making about fluke control interventions, if implemented.

EQ22: What still needs to change if the problem is to be solved, and why?

The overarching problem that this project aimed to solve was difficulties with the way in which disease control strategies are developed and/or current methods of dissemination and exchange of scientific and other knowledge that do not always lead to realistic achievable action. By using a participatory epidemiology method, underpinned by quantitative data collection, realistic achievable actions could be developed by each participant that were tailored to their specific needs. i.e. a solution to the problem has been identified.

The things that need to change if the overarching problem is to be solved are two-fold. Firstly, such approaches need to be adopted more widely and secondly, ways need to be found to make them (the approaches) more sustainable in the long-term. Such changes will probably need additional resources to be achievable. It may be that a paradigm shift in the educational approach for those likely to be involved in the development of disease control strategies (i.e. veterinary, science and agriculture students) is required to increase adoption. Similar initiatives, but using slightly different methods, that

have been implemented in Scotland[3] [4] have ultimately found that additional funding is needed for long-term sustainability, especially when the industry concern that is being addressed is of an on-going nature.

[3] PARABAN and PARABAN RELOADED (2010-2015) – paratuberculosis (Johne's disease) control in cattle - https://www.sruc.ac.uk/research/facilities-capabilities/dairy-research-innovation-centre/projects/paraban/

[4] Rural Innovation Support Scheme https://www.innovativefarmers.org/welcometoriss

Evaluation evidence list

1. Transcripts of farmer interviews – nine from Cumbria group; nine from Yorkshire group and additional one from Cumbria group
2. App Data Analysis_Final_Report16.6.21
3. Hill Sheep Farming_EIP Agri application form VW
4. Farm Questionnaire Results
5. https://www.hillsheephealthnorth.co.uk/
6. 2018_01_23_ Hill_sheep_Cumbria_group_meeting Final
7. 2018_01_222_ Hill_sheep_Yorkshire_group_meeting Final
8. Hill Sheep Health North January 2019 Farmer meetings Summary
9. Short report of Liver Fluke workshops June 2019 v2
10. Cockermouth Farmer Meeting 19th February 2020 FINAL
11. Askrigg Farmer Meeting 20th February 2020 FINAL
12. Yorkshire Zoom meeting Monday 8th June 2020
13. Cumbria Zoom meeting Monday 15th June 2020
14. Zoom farmer meeting with Lesley Stubbings 4-11-2020
15. Warner 2020 liver fluke project report
16. Complete_Managing liver fluke in hill sheep_Final Report draft v5_clean
17. Teams meeting ST/BJ/AC Friday 19th March 2021
18. Access to the App for demonstration purposes https://app.hillsheephealthnorth.co.uk/app/

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