



Removing barriers to the uptake of electronic recording of sheep flocks

Report on findings September 2015

Executive Summary

This pilot project aimed to work with up to 1500 eligible sheep farming businesses to better understand their concerns about the use of EID technologies and to provide them with access to information, training and support relating to the practical benefits of electronic recording. The project utilised a combination of online training and provided a financial incentive of £500 for participation and to encourage the use of technologies that would ultimately lead to increased operational efficiencies and improved performance. Participating sheep farmers provided a range of information with data obtained online via the online registration process, on completion of the web-based training and via follow-on surveys. The timing of the project (November 2014 – August 2015) meant that the information gathered focussed entirely on collecting on participants previous attitudes and experiences of recording (electronically or manually), on their experiences in using EID equipment and software to date as part of this project and what they would hope to achieve through the continued use EID recording on their flock. Their feedback is provided within this project report. The project did not attempt to gather flock performance data.

The project was announced in September 2014 and ran from November 2014 to August 2015. It attracted considerable interest from sheep farmers and reached the target number of participants within three weeks. The rapid uptake and demand for the project enabled funding that had been allocated for awareness raising and encouraging engagement to be redeployed in order to allow more businesses to participate. A total of 1966 businesses registered to participate and 1716 businesses completed the project.

Project participants represented a wide cross section of sheep producers from across Wales. The average flock size of the participants was 700 breeding ewes and the majority of the participants ran commercial flocks (72%), with 26% running both pedigree and commercial flocks and just 2% of participants running pedigree only flocks. Of the participants, only 103 (6%) had some previous experience in using EID

therefore for the majority of participants using EID equipment was a completely new experience.

The reported use of IT generally amongst all participants was high, with 90% of all participants using computers, the internet and email. The use of newer technologies (smart phones and tablets) was also relatively high with almost half using smart phones and tablets. Participants also had relatively high levels of use of online services with more than 70% using sites that are linked directly to their business activity. Farmers are therefore clearly moving towards the use of similar technologies as part of their day to day life. The high number of participants who also ran a cattle enterprise meant that those farms had also been exposed already to online recording through BCMS/CTS online. There is an opportunity therefore to build upon this increasing capability and to encourage the further adoption of computerised EID recording.

In terms of the perceived barriers to the uptake of EID recording in sheep flocks, the cost and complexity of equipment was, not surprisingly, the main barrier reported by sheep farmers with many sceptical that they understood enough about EID recording to justify the investment. The provision of a financial incentive in return for participation as part of this project stimulated considerable interest from the outset and helped to successfully overcome that first barrier to uptake to date. More than 70% of participants said that they were unlikely to have started using EID without the support that the project had provided.

By August 2015, the majority of the participants had used EID for tag reading and recording movements and, whilst was still early days for many with respect to the opportunities they had had to use it as part of routine sheep management, participants had used EID to record a wide range of flock management tasks. Around 35% of participants had used it to record all of the sheep on their holding in order to set up their EID records. Recording all the sheep on their holding forms the basis of more detailed flock recording and so this, together with the information that was gathered on farmer's future plans for the use of EID to record their flock going forwards presents a small but very positive step towards the more widespread use of EID as a tool to support flock management.

The project successfully created a significant cohort of sheep farmers who had taken the first steps towards EID recording. However, there is still work to do to support the continuing development of their use of EID recording so that efficiency gains can be fully realised. Feedback indicated that more information about what the EID readers and software could be used for and how to maximise the benefit from it would be most useful. Continuing and further support from their EID equipment suppliers was also identified as well as training opportunities and practical on-farm events and participation in discussion groups in order to exchange information and ideas. Many of the suppliers provided on farm training and events throughout the duration of the project and these have continued since the project finished, providing the opportunity

for farmers to receive specific training related to the particular equipment/software that they are using. There is therefore a clear appetite for further training and knowledge transfer and an opportunity for this to be met via the services available through the programmes such as Farming Connect. Data collected on the person who tends to use/analyse flock data on the computer also provided an interesting insight into the roles within the sheep enterprise and presents an opportunity to extend knowledge transfer and exchange on EID recording to younger family members and to the farmer's partner/spouse.

The duration of the project meant that a formal quantification of the benefits of EID recording was not possible, nor anticipated. Nevertheless, many of the participants reported some early stage benefits from using EID recording in terms of time saving, the ease of data collection and the accuracy of the data. The ability to record animal IDs without needing to handle the animals would also have yielded intangible benefits in terms of improvements in on farm health and safety.

The ability/need to quantify benefit also presents opportunities going forwards both in terms of the ability to quantify impact of the introduction of EID Recording or any new technology in real terms (time saved / value of data / improved flock performance) when it can take considerable time for those benefits to become apparent and secondly, for the benefit to be quantified financially in terms of their business performance. Consideration of activities or interventions that support much longer term activity to enable ongoing data to be gathered and true assessments to be made of the impact of changes made over time would therefore be valuable.

In summary, this project facilitated the opportunity for more than 1700 sheep farmers in Wales to take the first step towards utilising EID recording as part of their flock management and to enhance their IT capabilities. It successfully removed one of the main [financial] barriers to uptake and helped them to better understand how EID can be used to help them to record flock management information. The experiences and insight gained during the project provide clear opportunities for further, follow on work to be undertaken that can build upon the growing EID / IT capability amongst this particular cohort of farmers and to disseminate their experiences more widely to encourage and support the more widespread uptake of EID recording as part of flock management. This pilot project has therefore provided a platform upon which future initiatives can be built so that the sector can move towards developing skills and capabilities that will support improvements in on farm efficiency.

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