

Sheep

Explanation of measures

Lameness

With an estimated national incidence of 10%, lameness is one of the greatest economic and welfare challenges currently facing the sheep sector. It is estimated that the losses from footrot alone equate to around £10 a year for every ewe in Great Britain and if the other causes of lameness were included this figure would be much higher. Whilst there are other non-contagious causes of lameness, the majority of sheep lameness in the UK is due to infection (footrot, scald or CODD). Lameness is not only in considerable discomfort and pain, but is also a predisposing factor to further disease challenges (e.g. metabolic imbalances, mastitis), reduced fertility, weight loss and are a risk of infection to the rest of the flock. Early recognition, investigation and treatment of any lame animal is essential to limit pain, aid recovery and minimise the spread of disease. It is important for farmers to identify the causes of lameness present in order that appropriate treatment protocols and future prevention strategies can be developed.

Body Condition

Body condition scoring is a technique for assessing the condition of livestock and should be carried out at regular intervals. Its purpose is to achieve a balance between economic feeding, good production and good welfare. Whilst body condition will vary throughout a lambing year, ensuring ewes and rams are at the correct score for the system and the time of year has a positive impact on fertility and health (e.g. reducing metabolic and other disease incidence) and lamb performance. Ewes and rams should be palpated manually in order to body condition score throughout the year so that target scores can be achieved for tugging, lambing, mid lactation and weaning. Visually assessing body condition score (as carried out in the AssureWel protocol) is unlikely to reflect as accurate a score (particularly when animals are fully fleeced) when compared to manual palpation. However body condition is so fundamental to sheep welfare that it needed be included within the protocol despite the limitations of an assessor being unable to manually palpate the sheep during a farm visit. Instead it has been accepted there whilst there will be significant underscoring of this measure it will help identify some very thin animals.

Dirtiness

In general sheep, given the choice, will choose to lie in clean dry areas. Dirtiness (faeces/mud) on the fleece can provide optimal conditions for ectoparasites (particularly blow fly), increase the risk of disease and cause issues at or prior to slaughter. Areas of dirt on different regions of the sheep's body are as a result of different causes and can affect welfare in different ways. Dirtiness around the hind quarter is most likely to be caused by loose faeces which can result from dietary change, parasites, illness or nutritional imbalances. Dirtiness on the belly or legs maybe more linked with environmental issues, such as wet ground, poached areas, stubble grazing, dirty bedding (if sheep housed) and this can lead to thermo-discomfort and an increased risk of lameness and mastitis.

Fleece loss

Areas of fleece loss can be the result of several causes. Some breeds of sheep (e.g. Easy-care) naturally shed their fleece as the weather warms and therefore at certain times of year these sheep may show fleece loss. In other breeds and at other times of year fleece loss can be caused by: a period of stress (serious illness, parasite burden, malnutrition etc.) which may cause wool slip, injury, external parasites, skin infections (e.g. lumpy wool), poor handling or be a result of environmental hazards such as gateways, feeders or housing. Whilst fleece loss could potentially have an effect on thermoregulation it is the cause that is likely to compromise sheep welfare. This measure is therefore an indicator for issues.

Sheep needing further care

Any animal that is sick or injured must be provided with the necessary treatment and care regardless of whether it is a cull animal or not. This is a legislative requirement under the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2007. Sheep that are sick/injured and not receiving adequate care are suffering pain, discomfort and/or distress. This not only compromises their welfare but also reduces their likelihood/speed of recovery, increases the risk of disease spreading and reduces their productivity. 'Treatments' may not always constitute medication but will depend upon the cause of the illness/injury. Management changes such as separation from the flock, provision of soft bedding, easy access to feed and water etc. may be included.

Castration, tail docking, ear notching

Castration, tail docking and ear notching are permitted under the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures)(England) Regulations 2007 but, are painful procedures, that are strictly regulated. They may only be carried out using certain techniques, when the animals are of a specific age and for tail docking sufficient tail must remain to cover the anus of male sheep and the vulva of female sheep. The law specifies that if castration occurs after 3 months of age or after the first week of life if a rubber ring is used, an anesthetic must be used. However these procedures should only be carried out when absolutely necessary and, the use of anaesthetics and longer-acting analgesia should be strongly considered if they are carried out at any age. Timing of castration and tail docking is also important as if carried out too early it can interfere with colostrum intake. Many farmers are moving away from both tail docking and castration, realising that they can manage their flocks without the need for either. Ear notching is required by some common land graziers and by some pedigree societies however the new requirements for ewes to have individual ear tags may eventually replace this requirement.

Mortality

Mortality rates vary between different age groups of sheep and also between different farming systems. For example estimates of lamb pre-weaning mortality in the UK vary considerably between 10 and 30% with most of these mortalities occurring within the first 3 days of postnatal life. Annual ewe mortality rates in the UK are estimated at around 5-7%. High levels of mortality are not only often associated with suffering but also represent a significant economic loss to the farmer. It is calculated that neonatal lamb deaths cost between £20-25 per lamb, whilst ewe and ram deaths cost significantly more. It is possible to reduce deaths through good hygiene, nutrition, management, breed selection, vaccination, parasite monitoring etc. Post mortem examination has been shown to be a valuable tool in not only determining the cause of the individual death but also highlighting issues that may be affecting others in the flock (e.g. internal parasites, infectious diseases, metabolic diseases, injury) and thereby preventing further deaths.