

# Technical Leaflet

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## A Guide to Developing Animal Health Plans for Organic Livestock Units

### Introduction

One of the main aims of organic farming is to develop healthy livestock with as little recourse to veterinary medicines as possible.

An Animal Health Plan aims to reduce disease by preventive management - a positive health approach - and thus reduce the need for routine use of medicines.

An Animal Health Plan is a reference document for all personnel dealing with the farm's stock and should be kept updated. Each time an animal needs treatment, the incidence should be reviewed to see whether and how the need for treatment can be reduced or prevented.

As conversion progresses and the advantages of organic management start to take effect, there should be a reduction in medicine use and overall improvement in the health of the livestock.

OF&G Record Sheet 17, Animal Health Plan, in Appendix 1 of the OF&G Organic Standards and Certification Manual (OSCM) can help you get started. Either use the sheet as it is, or adapt it.

When writing your Plan please refer to Section 8.5 of the OSCM.

Disease prevention or positive health management is based on the following:

- The selection of appropriate breeds or strains of animal that can adapt well to local conditions, have good vitality and disease resistance;
- Good husbandry, appropriate to the requirements of each type of animal, that encourages strong resistance to disease and the prevention of infections;
- The use of high quality feed, access to pasturage and regular exercise to encourage the natural immunological defence of the animal;
- An appropriate stocking density, to avoid overstocking and reduce stress.

If, in spite of the above, animals become sick or injured, they must be treated immediately and in certain cases, veterinary treatments may be used. Vaccination is permitted in cases where there is a known disease risk, however the aim must be to reduce the use of vaccination as the organic unit becomes established. Section 8.5 of the OSCM gives details of permitted treatments and should be read in conjunction with this leaflet.

The Animal Health Plan should help the livestock keeper reduce, in a planned and careful way, the level of medicine used on the converting/organic livestock unit. Put simply, you may use the appropriate veterinary treatments, given the increased withdrawal time, to minimise the suffering of animals, but you must also look at how you can prevent the need for such treatments in the future.

Please be aware that the organic standards allow only a certain number of courses of treatment before an animal loses its organic status, re. OSCM Section 8.5.25. This greatly increases the need for thorough health planning, to reduce the use of treatments without increasing the risk of animals suffering or loss of organic status.

### Planning for Healthy Animals on an Organic Livestock Unit.

Planning should start when the decision to convert a holding is first made. What will the production level be? How will the livestock be sold? Are the conditions suitable for the breed/type of livestock chosen? Remember that organic production is essentially an extensive system and animals may well have to be smaller to mature from forage-based systems or able to last longer to finish under organic management. If a suitable breed or type of stock is chosen for the climate, housing available, pasturage and diet to be fed, there should be less likelihood of stress and therefore disease.

Ideally a breed developed locally or in similar conditions will be chosen and replacements reared on the unit. Both of these have advantages in that the animals will be suited to the conditions and more likely to be resistant to the indigenous diseases of the unit and area. There are many more considerations but these give a basis of how all decisions affect livestock health.

Farmers know they should keep new stock isolated for a period of time in order to reduce the level of disease or parasite transmission but staff are important as well. They are one of the major means of disease and parasite transmission within livestock units, so make sure their hygiene practices are good.

It is necessary to have the Plan established on the day organic management of the livestock commences. Ideally this will have been drawn up in discussion with your vet. The Plan will need to be reviewed at a minimum annually and be updated when any new health problem arises.

For farms in simultaneous conversion the Plan will need to be in place at the beginning of the conversion period.

## Writing the Health Plan

First find out what you are dealing with. Look through your medicine book for the previous year and ask your vet about locally-occurring diseases and conditions that are likely to affect your livestock. Faeces testing for your livestock can help to identify the level and type of internal parasite burden, which you must aim to reduce.

Your vet can help you to understand and monitor your livestock's health. The added bonus in obtaining your vet's assistance in drawing up an Animal Health Plan, is that he/she will become familiar with the organic standards which will be helpful when attending cases on your farm.

Once you have the information on what currently affects, and potentially may affect, your livestock then you can begin to write the Plan. The format suggested at the end of this leaflet is designed to be simple to use and extend as necessary. Please see page 3 of this leaflet for a completed example for biting flies. Writing the Health Plan is an on going process. Whenever an animal needs treating you must treat it, but do think about what could be done to avoid having to treat again in the future.

Conditions like mastitis, which have multiple causes, need to be investigated to help the stock person to identify the main cause on your particular farm. Talk to the vet about how management affects health and how to monitor conditions as well as how to treat clinical cases. The more objective stance of a vet or advisor can be useful in helping you to plan what is possible immediately and in the long term.

Keep the plan where anyone concerned with the livestock can consult or add to it. Ideally you should keep a copy of relevant Defra Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock with the Plan so that you fulfil the requirement of OSCM Sections 6.1.03 and 8.5.05 at the same time.

The Health Plan is not just a piece of paper for the OF&G inspector to see, but an on going part of the development of an organic system on your farm.

Establishing and maintaining an Animal Health Plan is a requirement of the EU Regulations - it is not optional.

## Practical steps to develop a Health Plan

1. It may be useful to ask your Vet to make a consultancy visit to discuss the establishment of the Plan;
2. Make a copy of OF&G Record Sheet 17, Animal Health Plan, for each disease or health problem, or provide one in a similar format;
3. Identify the disease organism or health problem;
4. Learn about the organism's life cycle and/or the health problem;
5. Identify the current veterinary or other treatments used;
6. Think about management/husbandry practices that could be used to break the organism's lifecycle or improve the animal's health, whilst reducing reliance on veterinary treatments;
7. Identify management/husbandry practices or alternative

therapies that could be used to minimise or reduce the problem;

8. Identify in advance the alternative veterinary medicines that can be used should the management practices not be successful;
9. Identify the specified withdrawal periods for the treatments and calculate the longer withdrawal periods required for organic management, please see OSCM Sections 8.5.23 and 8.5.24;
10. Include the personnel who manage the stock in the process and ensure that a copy of the Plan is made available to them;
11. Monitor the effectiveness of the Plan with the assistance of the vet and/or farm personnel and update them or create new plans where necessary.

## The use of Alternative Therapies

Organic management encourages the use of alternative therapies, such as homeopathy, which improve the animal's ability to resist disease rather than treating the disease specifically. It's important to remember that there is a danger of misuse of alternative therapies as much as with conventional (allopathic) medicines.

Contact the professional institute for the type of therapy you're considering (e.g. The British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons – see reference section below) to make sure your advisor is properly trained.

Remember to not violate the natural barriers that are there to protect the animal, namely the skin, gut and teat end sphincters. Administering any un-sterile product that has to be injected or pushed through these is dangerous. When in doubt, talk through the procedure and possible effects with a trained practitioner, before using any of these products.

Important Medicines and alternative remedies are licensed or approved to treat specific conditions. It may be a non-compliance to use them to treat conditions for which they are not licensed or approved, unless this is done under veterinary supervision.

## Some useful contacts:

British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons ([www.bahvs.com](http://www.bahvs.com)).

The BAHVS can recommend trained homeopathic vets in your area and their website is a good starting place for information on homeopathy.

Homeopathy at Wellie Level ([www.hawl.co.uk](http://www.hawl.co.uk) or telephone 01666 841213).

HAWL teach the responsible use of homeopathy on the farm.

A sample of the wide range of reference books available:

Complete Herbal Handbook for Farm and Stable by Juliette de Bairacli Levy, ISBN: 9780571161164.

The Herdsman's Introduction to Homeopathy by Hansford & Pinkus ([ainsworth.com](http://ainsworth.com))

## Organic requirements are in addition to other statutory requirements

Statutory information is for guidance only and is correct at time of going to print