

David Venables and his vet Jenny Marmion are delighted with how implementation of the five-point plan has improved the lameness situation at Holly Tree Farm.



# Proactive approach stamps out lameness

Sheep industry stakeholders have endorsed the five-point plan as a highly practical on-farm strategy for managing lameness. Many sheep farmers are now reaping the benefits.

When Cheshire flockmaster David Venables hosted an AHDB Beef and Lamb organised sheep lameness meeting in the summer of 2014 he was already starting to appreciate the significant benefits of a more proactive approach to managing foot issues.

Now, more than a year on, he's absolutely convinced of the effectiveness of the five-point plan in stamping out any lameness problems.

"Last summer about 60% of our early lambs were lame and taking about three weeks longer to finish because they simply

weren't eating and performing as well as they should have been. At the time the delay was probably costing us 70p/lamb a day in added treatment costs and the fact that the price was coming off its early season peak. This year, now that everything is under control, our 2015 lambs are growing that fast we can hardly keep up with slaughtering them," he says.

The fact that Mr Venables and his son, Richard, were struggling to cope with about 200 lame early lambs from their 350 ewe Texel cross Beltex flock at Holly Tree Farm,

Macclesfield, last year prompted them to seek advice from their vet Jenny Marmion from Wright and Morten Vets, in conjunction with AHDB Beef and Lamb.

"Jenny's advice was to diagnose and treat every affected lamb as quickly as possible. So within a two-week period we examined the entire group every three to four days and treated any lame lambs. It was hard work, but effective. In addition, she advised implementing the other four points in the five-point lameness reduction plan and to stick with it in the long-term. That's exactly

what we have done and we will continue with the lameness reduction strategy; there's no way we want to go back to where we were before," says Mr Venables.

Ms Marmion prescribed an appropriate antibiotic treatment for clinical cases and anything that wasn't lame was also run through a 3% formalin footbath, accurately calibrated, to try and prevent them from getting infected.

"The biggest problem in the lambs was scald, but some had progressed to suffering from footrot," explains Ms Marmion. "But because there were so many lame lambs I was worried about the potential infection challenge on the unit. Consequently, we vaccinated all the later season lambs to boost their immunity. This worked well and there were very few lameness cases in this group. Subsequently we also vaccinated all the breeding stock after shearing in late summer and this will be repeated annually; ideally about a month pre-tupping.

"We also looked at the quarantine practice and culling policy on the farm to try and improve longer term disease control. We've also stopped foot trimming damaged or infected feet because this can reduce healing times."

Mr Venables now culls any lame ewes that need more than two antibiotic treatments. He has also implemented a more stringent quarantine policy, allocating a separate paddock for any incoming animals. Any bought-in rams also have their foot history checked before purchase. Ewes are also footbathed pre-housing for lambing and if any lame cases do get picked up these animals are separated from the main flock for treatment.

The results have been pretty spectacular, says Mr Venables. "The whole flock looks a lot better this year. There might be the odd ewe with a problem and perhaps a couple of lambs, but it's hard to spot anything with any sort of lameness issue.

"By mid June this year we had sold 60 lambs – last year we hadn't sold any at all and it was mid July before the first batch went to the local butcher. In fact we were still selling lambs right up until February/March 2015, but this year's crop will all be gone by the autumn. The growth rates really have been phenomenal – up to 5kg a week in some cases during May when grass growth was at its peak."

So confident are the Venables in their flock management now that expansion plans are afoot. "We're looking to increase the flock to 400 ewes and will extend the lambing shed to accommodate the extra stock. But one thing we are extremely pleased about is that we won't have to bear the costs and hassle of coping with an extremely challenging sheep lameness problem," says Mr Venables. ◀

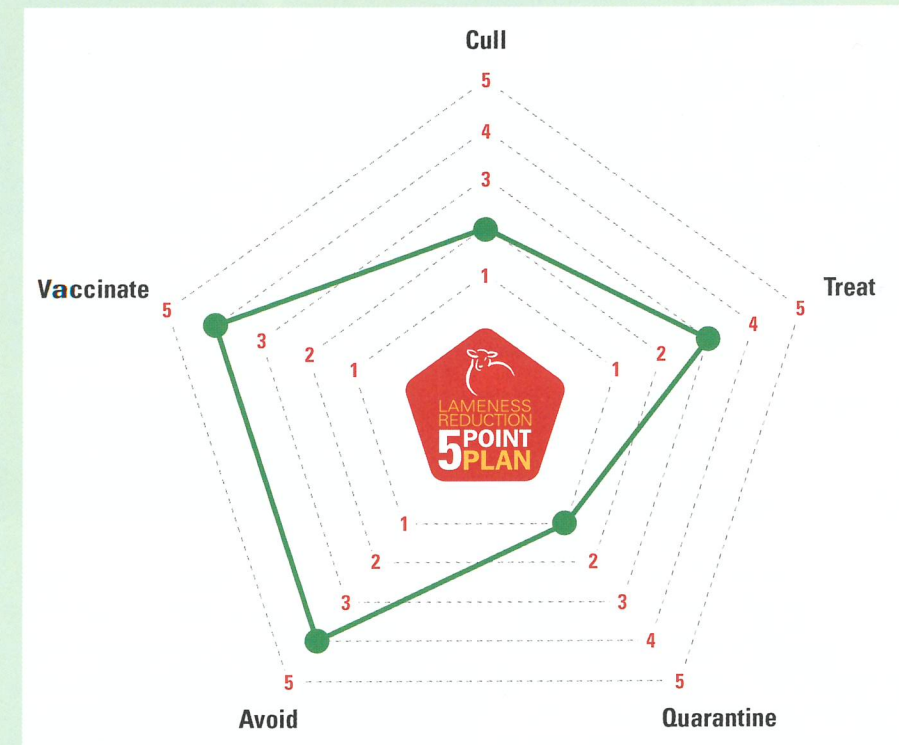


David Venables' lambs are now finishing more quickly following implementation of the five-point lameness reduction plan.

## HOW GOOD IS YOUR LAMENESS CONTROL PLAN?

Thanks to a new lameness control management tool, sheep producers now have a simple way of assessing the effectiveness of their disease management strategy.

This simple, yet practical 'where are you now' flock assessment can help sheep producers identify whether their lameness management protocol is unbalanced in any way across the five key points.



Higher scores show you are doing well in those areas of the five-point plan. Lower scores highlight the weaknesses and the areas you should focus on in future. In the example shown above, two out of the five action points have been carried out correctly, but the lameness issue has not been reduced as much as was hoped, causing frustration. This 'Outcome' pentagon helps explain why, as it demonstrates the plan is unbalanced in other areas. Focusing on 'Cull' and 'Quarantine' with a bit of extra effort on 'Treat' should improve the lameness on this farm significantly.

Producers interested in finding out more should contact their vet or local animal health adviser, who can take them through the flock assessment.

Alternatively call 01694 731777 for further details.