

Bee Health Advisory Forum (BHAf)
46th Meeting – Thursday, 7 December 2024
10:30 – 12:45

Attendance

Belinda Phillipson - Chair (BP)	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) – Bee Health Policy
Louise Mount (LM)	
Shaun Cook	
Tim Andrews	Defra
Rebekah Clarkson - minutes (RC)	National Bee Unit (NBU) – Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA)
Cristina Ruiz Martin (CRM)	
Kate Wilson (KW)	
Kirsty Stainton	
Kathleen Carroll (KC)	Welsh Government – Bee Health Policy
Ben Jones (BJ)	Fera Science Ltd.
Linsey Watt	Scottish Government
Claire Gill	
Rob Nickless	Bee Farmers' Association (BFA)
Paul Barton	
Wally Shaw	Welsh Beekeepers' Association (WBKA)
John Bowles	
Jane Medwell (JM)	British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA)
Anne Rowberry (AR)	
Giles Budge	Science Adviser
Norman Carreck (NC)	Science Adviser
John Haycock	Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD)
Adam Leitch	National Diploma in Beekeeping (NDB)
Chris Hartfield (CH)	National Farmers' Union
Martin Smith (MS)	Bee Disease Insurance
Paul Houston	DAERA, Northern Ireland Executive
Clare Roulston	

Apologies received from:

Tim Andrews	Defra
Nicola Kerr	Scottish Government

1 Welcome

BP welcomed attendees to the online meeting and apologised for not holding a face-to-face meeting because of train strikes. The minutes for the last meeting had been agreed over email and would be published when the Welsh translation is ready.

The Chair reminded everyone of the Chatham house rule¹. Participants are free to use information but the identity of the speakers or their affiliation should not be shared.

Feedback had been given that some members would prefer Forum information to be sent via the secretariat, either beehealth@defra.gov.uk or via rebekah.clarkson@apha.gov.uk. Separately, the BHAF is due to review the Terms of reference in 2024, RC has been asked to draft a paragraph regarding the circulation of documentation in line with GDPR.

RC updated the Forum on outstanding actions.

Meeting and action number	Action	Update	Status
40-1	CH to update the leaflet with the feedback received and bring back to the Forum.	CH covering today	Closed
41-2	send out a bespoke table of actions for each Forum member which they can then update ready for review at the next meeting.	Sent draft update for members to review	Closed
43 -1	RC to send links to the SharePoint folder allowing forum members to update their progress on actions.		Closed
43-2	Investigate with the NBU about moving the link to the VMD 'Product Information Database' to a more prominent area on BeeBase so that it is easier for people to find.		Ongoing
43-3	Enquire about any changes to imports and exports of honey following the TOM and Windsor agreement from the appropriate Defra policy teams.		Ongoing
44-1	Publish the mentoring Framework on BeeBase before the next meeting (RC).3	Welsh translation requested	Ongoing
44-2	Forum members to present an update on their training programmes at the face-to-face meeting in October.	Deferred to Spring-updates have been sent by BFA, BBKA and WBKA	Ongoing
45-1	Forum to advise of any comments to the June Minutes by 3rd November.	No comments received	Closed
45-2	RC to circulate a list of events and stakeholders to edit as required.		Closed
45-3	CH and MS to discuss the effectiveness of Bee Connected (a communication tool to connect beekeepers (BK) and neighbouring farmers to be alerted to the timing of insecticide applications). CH extended an open invitation to Forum members.		Ongoing
45-4	RC to organise a face-to-face meeting for December.	Cancelled because of train strikes	Closed

2 HBP2030 Implementation Plan Update

RC had circulated an updated implementation action update for stakeholder review with the agenda and invited the Forum's views and information on the status and comments.

¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>

MS asked regarding surveillance, 'Have we taken our eye off the ball regarding European Foulbrood (EFB)?' (Are inspections sufficient to manage EFB risk during 2023 when resource has been focussed on Asian hornet incursions?) RC described how FB inspections are covered by action 1: 'Continue statutory risk-based inspections using revised RAG (Red/Amber/Green) rules to target inspector resources effectively', which is currently recorded as 'on-track'. KP said whilst the action is on track as NBU continues to deliver a risk-based programme, it is a fair challenge to suggest that EFB inspections have been impacted in 2023 and this could be reflected in the review.

NC asked BHP about Action 34, 'Reviewing Pest Risk Assessments' (PRA) could they be reviewed, as so much new science is now available? BP confirmed that risk of AH is well understood, and we have a published contingency plan. PRAs are written to understand the risk of an incursion to inform if a contingency plan is needed. Asian hornet is an invasive non-native species (INNS) so any PRA, or updates are owned by the INNS Policy Team. The existing PRA does not prevent making plans or change what we need to do next.

NC had raised his concern to update PRAs in previous meetings and continued to be frustrated by the PRA process. 'It needs to be in someone's plan to update. I can think of no other risk assessment process that is updated as infrequently.' AR agreed with NC about risk assessments, 'Government should say when they (PRAs) are going to be reviewed. If you are not communicating, you are not interested. We understand you are under huge pressure relating to Asian hornet, and it is a worry to BKs'.

GB enquired if action 2, 'Formal review of Red Amber Green (RAG) rules to determine whether effectiveness can be improved – first review complete March 24' is delayed? RC confirmed this was delayed.

AR explained that there's disquiet in the south west regarding a perceived time-lag for 'callouts' during 2023 (when BK call for an inspection). KW believed all COBs were responded to and asked for examples and reminded the forum that if BK's suspect EFB they have an obligation to put themselves on voluntary standstill. AR asked if BK's should test how quickly Inspectors respond and report back to NBU? AR stated how education is important and the more education that can be made available, the better.

KW: NBU is reviewing inspection and disease data and planning where to prioritise resource during the 2024 season.

AR asked, 'Is there anything further that BBKA can do? BBKA have written to Ministers. Cages need to be rattled to ensure the correct resource is in place.' BP clarified 'the Ministerial correspondence process², that queries sent to Ministers regarding the Asian hornet response (and honey bees) are drafted by BHP, which takes time.

JB stated how the review of the PRA and the response to the review does not need to be instant. It may be worthwhile increasing the risk because it has not been reviewed so it becomes more of a priority. This makes it clear about what we are and are not doing. BP confirmed the PRAs were overdue being reviewed, and that the management of the risks is a separate issue.

2

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6109aed3e90e0703aee75966/Guide_to_Handling_Correspondence_-_July_2021.pdf

RC asked if the SharePoint folder was useful to share and edit documents and MS said he found emails easier than logging on.

Action 1: Forum to review the draft update of the 2023 implementation plan highlights/review and send to RC for 2/1/2024.

3 NBU Technical Content

KS updated the Forum regarding her new role as NBU Technical Manager, to update NBU technical documentation including webpages, leaflets, and presentations. This delivers HBP 2030 implementation actions, 9, 30 and 39.

KS has reviewed current content and developed a prioritized list of what needs to be updated. Developing new content will come later. A matrix is being used to prioritize the order of material to be edited e.g., the frequency and significance of edits together with the popularity and format of content is considered e.g., AH pages received three times the views of honey bee virus pages. Dead links are also flagged as high priority.

KS has just completed a first draft of the 'Managing *Varroa*' leaflet. Review and changes include:

- professional tone,
- scientifically reference key points consistently,
- connect related content,
- update and refresh images,
- digital content accessible to screen readers.

KS asked the Forum for feedback. AR thanked KS for her work and sharing how the updates had been prioritised. JM asked about the varroa calculator; KS suggested a separate discussion.

GB reflected this role is a mammoth task and to remember the audience (i.e., not all BK's are scientists). GB's recent surveys on BK's beliefs showed that even those in areas with high levels of statutory disease do not change their biosecurity or hygiene behaviour. KS confirmed KW had shared this research and she was already thinking about how this could link to related NBU literature e.g., the hive sterilisation leaflet. BP thanked Giles and said she understood people do not always stop swarm collecting behaviours in areas where there is foulbrood. Do they check if there's Foulbrood? It is a complicated set of risks and behaviours to unpick. BJ said the husbandry survey showed a similar behaviour, 50% BK's responding to Varroa treat inappropriately, e.g., in the wrong month.

JM asked if a list of questions from BBKA AHT and members could be discussed in AOB. BP agreed.

Farming for Bees Leaflet

CH gave an update on the NFU actions 48 - Farming for bees update and 49 – BeeConnected.

CH gave a presentation in September 2023 on Protecting and increasing pollinators on farmland, the knowns, and unknowns of what works at the AABs event: Shaping the

Future for Pollinators – Innovations in Farmed Landscapes³. Leading researchers gave presentations from across the world. His presentation started with the farming for bees leaflet⁴ which was published 9 years ago. What do we know now that we can talk about, what actions, supported by evidence that will have a measurable benefit to pollinators from a UK perspective. One of the main purposes is to signpost to more detailed information. CH invited attendees at the conference to feed into the leaflet. CH also encouraged the Forum to provide feedback on the leaflet.

Action 2: Forum to review the Farming for bees leaflet.

CH also worked on a paper, a special issue on threats and opportunities to managed bee species⁵.

The next step is to look at reworking the farming for bees leaflet, which will be online content, rather than a leaflet. In summary, the information is top-level, about; food/forage, nesting, what makes a suitable apiary site and links to the best advice for guidance on pesticides and stewardship.

GB congratulated CH on a great update and enquired, as agriculture is moving at pace, whether the update include cover-crops and Agri-forestry. Cover-crops and Agri-forestry can provide excellent forage for bees. CH said yes, where cover crops were being covered by Sustainable Farming Incentive payments⁶.

WS explained in his area we have huge areas of improved pasture which when grazed/cut depletes forage. How widely is this practice increasing? CH offered to enquire with NFU dairy experts. KC shared outputs from a European project for organic farmers⁷ which includes a video and leaflets for farmers.

CH then started to discuss BeeConnected and explained it needs a critical mass of farmers and BK involved. BK and farmers are increasing and the NFU continue to promote online and over social media. The NFU is clear that the tool works, but it needs enough people using it for it to be valuable. BeeConnected continues to be shared at events and during continued professional development (CPD) events for spray operators. National register of spray operators continues to request spray operators use the tool in CPD. NFU also promoted Bees needs week.

This presentation shows the continued NFU commitment to BeeConnected. CH asked if there were questions. MS enquired about the percentage of farmer's that are signed up. CH suggested there may be 100k but did not know in terms of the area of production. MS suggested it is 5 % of farmers. MS suggested the scheme may appear to be growing because no one has ever been removed, so numbers slowly creep up. MS suggested that the data be cleansed e.g., BK's validate annually etc. BP agreed data cleaning requires thought and resource.

³ <https://www.aab.org.uk/event/shaping-the-future-for-pollinators-innovations-in-farmed-landscapes/>

⁴ <https://www.nfuonline.com/archive?treeid=15959>

⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-45279-w>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/payment-rates-from-january-2024-sustainable-farming-incentive/sfi-2023-and-sfi-pilot-payment-rate-changes-from-1-january-2024>

⁷ [Pasture for pollinators | Farming Connect \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales/farming-connect/pasture-for-pollinators)

JB described how there is lots of tree planting in Wales. There seems to be a trend for 'minimal till', where herbicide is used and seed is drilled directly into the soil. If all they are doing is planting ryegrass, this reduces forage availability. JB asked whether 'minimal till' is growing as a practice. CH confirmed that minimal till is seen as a better, environmentally friendly way of preserving soil structure and the ecology within the soil by not inverting it. Regarding spraying-off for pasture, CH was unsure if that's increasing. Whilst glyphosate is not specifically, damaging to bees, research shows many of the additives of products including surfactants can have an effect on pollinators.

PB: How do we ensure farmers are following best practice and maintain responsible stewardship, as this can have more impact than registering to BeeConnected. CH confirmed farmers may not be registered but spray operators are more likely to be registered. Additionally, farms that are part of farm assurance schemes may have to register as terms of their membership.

KC, in Wales some areas have more arable production than others e.g., Dee in NE. She suggested that promoting in these such areas may increase awareness of the scheme.

CH advised the Forum regarding discussions with PB (BFA) regarding action 50, Copa-Cogeca⁸ attendance.

MS asked if there was an appetite to invite BBKA members to BeeConnected? It could produce a step change in terms of the number of current BK's farmers can communicate with.

Action 3: CH to look at appetite and possibilities to link BeeConnected with ER2 and ways to cleanse the data.

RN asked how many hives have been killed by pesticides? MS said the Wildlife Investigation Scheme (WIS) recorded single digit figures annually⁹. JM commented in her experience there is a widespread perception that WIS is too complex and the same with BeeConnected.

AR remembered that BBKA promoted BeeConnected a few years ago but that there were gaps of take-up across the country. It would need a lot of publicity to get people involved voluntarily, people may not think it is worth the effort.

RN reflected that nothing beats good communication and bee farmers spend years building mutually beneficial relationships with farmers. Confusingly for BK's symptoms of pesticides are remarkably like CBPV. An app cannot replace a good relationship. I would like to consider the effort of the app, compared to the perceived benefits.

JM wondered if the increased use of contractors by farmers for spraying may mean the app has a particular value.

MS repeated the concern that numbers will creep up but with minimal benefit if no data cleansing or validation occurs. BP wondered what the benefits would be.

⁸ <https://copa-cogeca.eu/>

⁹ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pesticides/assets/docs/wiis-quarterly.xlsx>

CH summarised that it is important to talk about, promote and get numbers signed up to BeeConnected. He agreed to look at data cleansing, fields no longer in agricultural production etc and to look at ways of incentivising the tool. Some people find it extremely valuable, and it's useful to understand the views of others.

BP thanked CH for his update and for a useful discussion.

4 Trade

LM updated the Forum on trade. BHP continue to ensure honey bee priorities are included in wider government trade activities. The Target Operating Model (TOM) was shared at the last meeting and guidance will be updated as and when changes are necessary.

LM reminded the Forum that the bee health certificate will change, and importers should check on-line to ensure they are using the up-to-date guidance. There is a 3-month grace period when old forms will be accepted to assist trade.

MS asked about bees coming via Northern Ireland? LM confirmed Defra is not aware that colonies are being brought via this route, but queens do continue to come in via this route.

5 AOB/comms/news

6.1 RC shared the new Asian hornet nest identification¹⁰ sheet which NS and NNSS has developed, which shows QR codes to encourage reports. RC asked if the Forum had any clearer images of median wasp nests that could be used.

6.2 NC asked about <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apha-alert-subscription-service> could the same system be used for Asian hornets? RC said she had fed the same observation into the 'lessons' learned' work following the 2023 contingency. KW confirmed this would be reviewed.

6.3 Asian Hornet

BBKA Members' list of AH related question received, BHP/NBU in the process of answering. Would the Forum like to be sent a list of the questions- BBKA content for these to be shared. JM said that there is an incredible thirst for (AH) knowledge. BP explained that answers will be drafted.

Action 4: Circulate BBKA AH questions.

JM, the questions are incredibly positive, they show AHT are mobilised. BBKA is slightly concerned about vigilante activity, some people wish to take matters into their own hands and track and trace.

BP reminded the forum of the constraints. Fera are still working on analysis of 2023 incursions. Any new plans need to be agreed by ministers.

AR is concerned the enthusiasm to monitor for AH is limited to the SE. We need to encourage the whole country to be on the alert. The sooner Defra can give (genetic) information the better, it is absolutely essential to engage with people. JM reported many

¹⁰ https://www.nonnativespecies.org/assets/Uploads/ID_Vespa_velutina_Asian_Hornet_nest_1.0.pdf

northern associations are planning monitoring activities in the spring, even if it means finding nothing. Quite a few BK's are depressed by the information timescale, that we are not going to find out about the 2023 genetics until May.

MS asked what the plan is for Asian hornet in 2024. Stressing that we need to understand if hornets are established. BJ explained Fera Science is working on the analysis. The type of analysis will determine the confidence of answers. BP confirmed some information will be sent out in the new year.

NC stated you do not need to know if (AH) is established in the UK to plan for it being established. The whole point of contingency planning is to plan ahead. Even when AH was spreading in other countries we showed a very insular approach, as if we are better at doing things than other people.

BP reiterated that a response was promised for Feb, and this is still the current aim. Any change to policy or new plan will need to have a consultation. MS, AR & JM were moderately reassured regarding a Feb deadline, available in 3 (working) weeks' time, but this still presents a vacuum (to concerned AHTs).

JM reflected on the situation and said from the BFA's point of view when you put the timescale in the context of the ongoing Covid enquiry it seems reasonable.

AR explained there is an expectation by everyone that BK's are going to be asked to do something, and they want to be prepared. AR believed Rebecca Powell said there would be a 5-year plan in their most recent meeting. BP was heartened by the level of AHT interest and support and confirmed a contingency plan is available.

BFA are running an Asian hornet day as a continued professional development for 100 members on 15 Feb 2024 to review the threat and discuss mitigations.

JM shared that BBKA has developed an online learning module for AHT including a specific identification unit.

6.4 BBKA Annual Spring convention.

BBKA asked for their thanks to be minuted. BBKA is grateful NBU has agreed to attend and present at the Spring Convention which is an important event in the hobbyist BK's calendar.

6 Forward Look

RC reminded the forum that the next meeting would be the Science Meeting on 14th February. Peter Kennedy is scheduled to update the Forum about Asian hornet and Giles Budge has agreed to discuss Chronic Bee Paralysis Virus (CBPV).

BP thanked everyone for a lively and stimulating meeting.

Meeting close 12:57