



National Bee Unit

Mentoring for Better Bee Health

December 2023

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn” (Benjamin Franklin).

Mentoring is a powerful tool which is used in many learning and development environments. It can improve the experience of beekeepers, especially in their first few years. A mentor can help by:

- being a sounding board for the new beekeeper – listening to their experiences and providing a sense check for concerns and treatment options
- signposting contacts for reporting notifiable disease, useful information available online and on social media, books on beekeeping and pointing the beekeeper towards useful training opportunities
- providing advice on husbandry and apiculture matters
- providing opportunities for the new beekeeper to gain new husbandry skills and gain confidence in their abilities to use these skills in their own apiary
- encouraging good practice and gently challenging poor practice, explaining the issues that this practice might cause
- bridging the skills gap to help the newer beekeeper make good progress towards the level that years of experience brings

All beekeeping associations are unique. Some will have a number of experienced beekeepers with time available, others will have larger numbers of beginners than the association can support with one-to-one mentoring. This document aims to provide a range of mentoring and support options that beekeeping groups can use to develop a mentoring/support programme or options that could be added to an existing programme. This framework provides options for groups even where there is a shortage of experienced beekeepers with time available to act as a mentor.

Developments in technology have broadened the options available for mentoring over the last decade. The use of social media for education and support is now embedded in our culture. It can be harnessed by associations to encourage and inform new beekeepers and offer an option for support where a traditional mentoring programme is beyond the reach of

the association or is not suitable for the new beekeeper. Social media has brought many benefits, but a drawback is that it also gives new beekeepers access to dubious advice and opinion or information which is not relevant to UK beekeepers.

Social Science Project

In 2021, a social science project was commissioned to support the development of the new Healthy Bees Plan 2030. The report covered beekeepers' experience and wish for support in their early years. More than a third of respondents to the project's survey said that they had not attended a taster day or worked with a mentor. Of those who had, 75% felt that the experience gave them a more realistic understanding of the demands and challenges of beekeeping.

The project also found that beekeepers who had been mentored felt that they had received invaluable advice from their mentor and were more likely to continue to keep bees. In the interviews supporting the project, the importance of mentorship was also a key finding. Most beekeepers interviewed did not feel they had achieved their goals but a mentoring programme or apprenticeship might have helped them fulfil their goals.

A beekeeping network was also a key source of advice for those responding to the survey – contacts at the local beekeeping association was the top network used and many noted that they had received substantial support from their local association.

Mentors were seen as particularly valuable for offering technical and personal support and technical advice on bee husbandry.

Explanation

Successful mentoring is about the relationship – not all mentor partnerships will work and a single failure should not be seen as an indicator of future outcomes.

Beekeeping groups have different ratios of new and experienced beekeepers so one framework will not work for all. Just because the group is not able to offer an "ideal" option should not stop them attempting a scaled back programme.

New beekeepers and potential mentors may have differing levels of time available so no one solution will work even within the same group. However, it is important that both parties have a shared expectation of time commitment expected.

Specially designed mentor software or applications are available to help connect mentors with mentees and can help co-ordinate, monitor engagement and aid evaluation of schemes.

This document mainly focusses on new beekeepers but mentoring could be used by more experienced beekeepers to tackle a specific challenge. Some of the information here could be useful for this situation too.

Tips for mentoring

- be open-minded regarding your partner – research shows that the most productive mentoring relationships tend to be between people with different backgrounds and personalities
- have a goal – make sure there is a reason you are both putting your time towards this
- set some ground rules – outline how often you will meet/communicate, what sorts of things you will discuss, how long you see the relationship lasting for
- take each other's time seriously – prepare for your meetings and do any tasks you agreed to complete before the next meeting; avoid lateness and rearranging meetings
- challenge each other – neither of you will benefit if the session doesn't push your perceptions and ideas; be ready to have some frank, honest and productive discussions
- listen – active listening is the most useful tool for both the mentor and mentee, in making sure that the sessions are meaningful and effective
- reflect on the process – evaluate what you have gained from the relationship so far, and whether some new aims need to be introduced to the partnership, for it to continue to be useful
- end well – at some point, your partnership will need to come to a close; make sure this is planned for in advance and managed openly and positively

There are points to consider when starting mentoring arrangement in the Annex which you may find helpful to work through together.

Examples

This section provides some mentoring models – the activity under each section is not exclusive to that model and groups can cherry-pick elements for their mentoring programme. Each association/group is unique, as are the individual mentoring partnerships, so no one model will suit all groups.

Traditional model

One new beekeeper to one experienced beekeeper. They will meet at an apiary (mentor's, mentee's or association). The mentor will spend time explaining different aspects of the craft. The mentee will in time assist and then take on some of the husbandry during a visit. This model could include purchase of a colony of bees or rearing a new queen.

Pros – flexible and can be most easily adapted to the needs of the new beekeeper. Likely to provide the most responsive and hands-on approach from the mentor.

Cons – can be time consuming and resource intensive; more prone to breakdown if either party's expectations are not met (an informal agreement can mitigate this (see checklist)).

Virtual model

The mentor uses social media/text/group messaging app to support and encourage new beekeeper(s). The mentor can provide advice on husbandry and health issues from video or photographs. The mentor can be a sounding board for concerns and can signpost other information and provide assurance and emotional support. If all involved are local, this could include some practical experience, as opportunities to observe or help another beekeeper could be advertised within the group.

Pros – more adaptable to time constraints and question/responses can be fitted in around other commitments. One experienced beekeeper could provide support to an individual or small group of new beekeepers. In a group, the new beekeepers could benefit from peer support as well as support from the mentor. Distance is no barrier so this approach may suit an association serving a large geographic area.

Cons – although some practical support can be built in, it lacks the hands-on experience that hive-side mentoring can provide. A less bespoke experience for the new beekeeper.

Mutual support model

If the number of new beekeepers outstrip the number of available mentors, a mutual support group could be formed by the association for a new tranche of beekeepers (probably cohorts from a new keepers' course). These new beekeepers can discuss issues they face, carry out inspections together, discuss treatment options. An experienced beekeeper could be available to provide support to the group.

Pros – addresses the need for emotional support when experiencing challenges. Everyone is on the same place in their beekeeping journey. Could provide long term support (intermediate beekeepers were felt to be lacking support in the social science study so this could address this issue).

Cons – without support of an experienced beekeeper, the group may be left without a solution to an issue and become dispirited or adopt an unsuitable practice.

Pyramid model

A small number of new beekeepers could be supported by an intermediate beekeeper who in turn could have a more experienced beekeeper to seek advice from for more complex problems. This provides a development track for potential new mentors.

Pros – opportunity to develop new mentors for the association; Ideal for an association which has a small number of experienced beekeepers with time available and more people who have kept bees for a couple of years.

Cons – the supporting experienced beekeeper would need to balance the demands of the groups. The relationship between the intermediate beekeeper and experienced beekeeper could become strained if it is not clear when intervention is required.

Tea and Tips model

A “question time” type of support which could be run physically or virtually. Questions can be asked in advance or in real time at the event (or a mix). Drop-in sessions could also work well. A panel of experienced beekeepers would answer the questions posed by new beekeepers and signpost to helpful resources, e.g. the NBU YouTube channel. As intermediate beekeepers gain confidence over time, they may join the panel to develop skills which could enable them to become future mentors. The panel could change so experienced beekeepers could choose the amount of time they can give.

Pros – would require limited and defined time commitment from each experienced beekeeper. Has an element of bespoke support as questions would be posed by the new beekeepers on the issues they are facing. Builds new beekeepers’ network. Could be an easy add-on to other support programmes.

Cons – requires logistical support (room booking) if physical, or technical ability if virtual. May lack the element of hive-side support if not held at an apiary.

Annex

Points to consider at the outset of a mentoring relationship:

- Where will you meet?
 - o Mentee’s apiary
 - o Mentor’s apiary
 - o Association apiary
 - o Virtually
 - o Other
- What time can the mentor provide? Hours per week/month/season
- What time can the mentee provide? Hours per week/month/season
- Are there any days/times to avoid? Any extended period of time, e.g. holidays, when it would not be possible to meet?
- Is the mentor happy to be contacted at short notice if there is an issue with the mentee’s hive? (are there any days/times to avoid?)

- Goals and topics of interest to the mentee (i.e. are there particular skills that the mentee wishes to develop – such as queen rearing or spotting disease)
- Expected duration of the mentoring
- Any other expectations/ limitations/reasonable adjustments? (mobility, transport)
- Agree what to do if either party feels the mentoring relationship is not working

National Bee Unit

APHA, Room 11G03, York Biotech Campus,

Sand Hutton, York YO41 1LZ

Telephone: 03003030094 email: nbu@apha.gov.uk

Web site: www.nationalbeeunit.com

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