

# Update: Disease Assurance Scheme for Honeybees

Keith Morgan, Sandra Gray and Julian Parker of the National Bee Unit (NBU) detail progress since launch of the scheme, in 2013

**B**y now, many readers will be aware of the Disease Assurance Scheme for Honeybees (DASH), which was set up by the National Bee Unit (NBU)

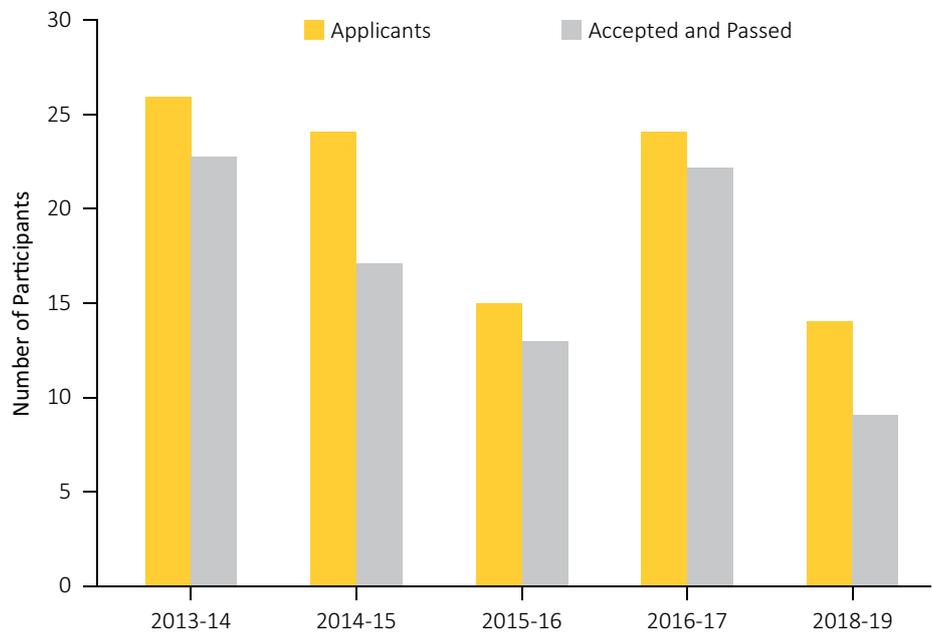
in collaboration with the Bee Farmers' Association (BFA), in 2013.

DASH is recognised within the *Farming Regulation Task Force Implementation: Earned Recognition Plan* published also in 2013 by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). This plan set out actions being taken to reduce unnecessary regulatory compliance and enforcement burdens on farmers, through increased data sharing, better coordination of on-farm inspections and implementing opportunities to allow farmers to earn recognition to reduce the burden of inspections – of which DASH is an example. Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) inspections in the pig and poultry sectors, and livestock welfare and dairy hygiene inspections, are further examples.

When DASH commenced, the NBU and the BFA hoped that the scheme would:

- reduce costs associated with disease within commercial beekeeping operations
- improve bee health and reduce disease prevalence
- reduce inspection burden and increase autonomy for participants.

Since the scheme's first year of operation, in 2014, some 84 BFA members have successfully joined the scheme and, in addition, a further 22 apprentices and bee farm employees have passed the DASH assessment. With



**Disease Assurance Scheme for Honeybees (DASH) takeup**

retirements from bee farming and other changes, the number retained on the scheme currently stands at circa 75 business entities.

## Audit

As with all assurance schemes, there is the question: 'How do you know that members are continuing to meet requirements?'. Bee farmers accepted onto DASH are audited every three years by a NBU bee inspector. At the first audit, a percentage of the bee farmer's colonies, or apiaries, depending on the size of his/her operation, are inspected. Smaller operations of around 40 colonies (usually equating to three or so sites) have all their colonies inspected, but for those bee farmers with larger numbers of stocks, around 20 per cent of colonies are inspected and, in all circumstances,

a minimum of three apiaries. The audit includes checking the bee farmer's veterinary medicines records, together with his/her biosecurity regime and hygiene practices.

For those DASH members who are now due second or subsequent audits, the percentage of colonies inspected will take into account a variety of risk factors.

If colonies are in an area of confirmed foulbrood, or moved for pollination, or the bee farmer imports bees, or BeeBase records and notifications maintained by the bee farmer are noticeably incomplete, then the audit requirements remain the same as those above. However, for those bee farmers having in excess of 250 colonies and not falling into one or more of those categories listed above, the audit sample size will be reduced from 20 per cent to 10 per cent



**What advantages does the Disease Assurance Scheme for Honeybees (DASH) provide? (Scale 0–5)**

of his/her colonies across a minimum of three apiaries.

In this way, DASH members with a lower risk profile will have a ‘lighter touch’ audit from their second audit onwards. Documentation, records and biosecurity will still be checked. The bee inspector will also inspect an apiary with the bee farmer present and use this as an opportunity to provide additional information such as details of the current European foul brood (EFB) strain types being seen by inspectors, Asian hornet and small hive beetle (SHB) updates, and any other pest and disease information that may be relevant.

**Self Inspection**

The NBU emphasises the importance of self inspection and ensuring that there is in place a routine inspection programme. This is advice not just for DASH members but to all bee farming businesses. Even at this very busy time of the year, it is important that you take time to go through colonies and shake the bees from brood combs to check for foulbrood.

This is especially important for those bee farmers who take their colonies to pollination sites in Kent, South East England. One of the strains of EFB that has been recently found in that area has an appearance resembling a cross

between sacbrood and chalkbrood, and is particularly prevalent in drone brood. Bee inspectors are alert to this, but it is also important that bee farmers are similarly aware and maintain vigilance.

During your inspections, if EFB is found then it is important to report this to the NBU. This remains a statutory requirement, irrespective of DASH. Relevant paperwork, together with the lateral flow devices (LFDs) and buffers should be sent in. This enables the NBU office to not only send out alerts to other beekeepers in the area, but also updates the local bee inspector’s BeeBase list to ensure he/she is targeting surrounding apiaries belonging to other beekeepers that may be harbouring the disease. If these other infected apiaries are missed, the disease will persist in the area, potentially re-infecting the bee farmer’s stocks. Sending LFD’s and buffer solutions to the NBU allows the laboratory to record the different strains of foulbrood and can assist in tracing the source, along with building up a pattern of disease movement. A recent example of this, in 2019, identified colonies confirmed with EFB were linked to pollination movements in Kent.

**Challenging Year**

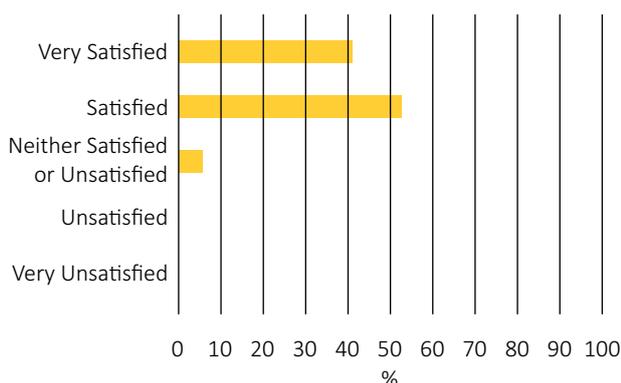
COVID-19 is making 2020 a challenging year for both beekeepers and the

inspectorate. The current situation has delayed recruitment and some inspectors are self-isolating, so the NBU is working with a reduced field force. Further, with social distancing guidelines and the prohibition of group gatherings, we have had to cancel all the events we would normally undertake, including bee health days, forums and bee safaris.

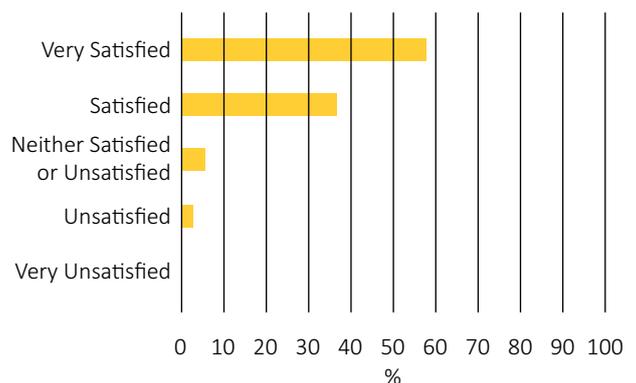
The two-day DASH training and assessment event and baseline inspections which follow for new scheme entrants are also unlikely to take place in 2020. DASH audits are also paused and may potentially be postponed until 2021, depending on reviews of the guidance.

Despite the immediate disruption, DASH is still proving a popular scheme for bee farmers and, at the time of writing, a further 26 BFA members have expressed an interest in joining the scheme. When it is possible to resume with organisation of events, a prequalification questionnaire will be sent out to all those who have signed up, to establish that they are eligible to join the scheme. Assuming so, they will be invited to a two-day event, which will have both practical and theoretical content. Apiary training will include demonstrations of NBU disease inspection methodology, shook swarms, the correct disposal of diseased comb and frames, and appropriate biosecurity procedures. There will be the opportunity

**Thinking back to your DASH training, how satisfied were you with content and quality?**



**Thinking about DASH baseline inspections, how satisfied were you with these inspections and checks?**



to examine diseased combs, along with presentations from regional bee inspectors and Fera Science scientists. The two-day programme ends with an assessment.

Those who pass the assessment will be contacted by their local seasonal bee inspector to arrange the baseline inspection of their colonies. Applicants successfully completing all stages will then receive DASH certification, a manual and a small kit of LFDs.

It is important to state that, although being a member of DASH means that

members have a reduced inspection burden, your local SBI or RBI is available to address any concerns or questions. Occasionally, ad hoc visits may still take place, should the need arise.

## Healthy Bees Plan Review

During 2019, as part of the Defra Policy Healthy Bees Plan review, a survey of DASH members was conducted. Online survey invitations were sent to all 70 DASH members active at that time and resulted in a high return rate of 48 per cent (34 respondents).

DASH members were asked to rank scheme advantages. The ability to quickly self-manage disease was most highly valued.

Training and baseline inspections received high satisfaction scores from survey respondents.

In excess of 80 per cent of respondents felt the frequency and scale of DASH audits to be 'about right'.

Over 90 per cent of DASH members completing the survey either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'I value the benefits that membership of DASH provides, when thinking about how I manage disease within my bee farming operation'; the remaining proportion mostly agreed with this statement.

The Healthy Bees Plan review, which includes a chapter on the DASH scheme, is nearing completion and will be published shortly. The full review of DASH and the complete survey results will be available to those interested.

Finally, in closing, a reminder to all to maintain and keep BeeBase records up-to-date in order to receive accurate BeeBase alerts, giving notification of areas where there is disease risk. This hopefully aids vigilance and provides you with useful and timely information when disease is near your apiaries. □

### To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'I value the benefits that membership of DASH provides, when thinking about how I manage disease in my bee farming operation'

