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Delivering and evaluating a behaviour change communication training programme for farm advisors

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Farm advisors provide knowledge and support to farmers, to help them change their on-farm practices or behaviours, with a view to improving the farm's overall sustainability and competitiveness^(1,2). In this way, advisors can be viewed as agents of change⁽³⁾. In order to fulfil their role as agents of change, advisors must possess sufficient knowledge of human psychology and behavioural science, which is the discipline involved with understanding, predicting and changing behaviour^(4,5). Despite this, within advisory education and professional development, it is considered that greater emphasis is given to advisory technical knowledge acquisition, than how to work effectively with others to support learning and change⁽⁶⁾. Accordingly, this study aims to implement a behaviour change communication training programme for farm advisors and evaluate its efficacy. As much work within the health and social care field has been undertaken to support health related behaviour change, this study aims to adapt a behaviour change communication training programme originally developed for use within this field to the advisory setting^(7,8).

A mixed-methods case study under the pragmatic worldview was conducted. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. The programme was adapted from the 'MAP of Health Behaviour Change Learning Programme' (MAP) created by NHS Education for Scotland⁽⁹⁾. Eight farm advisors completed the programme delivered by health psychologists, which involved the completion of a 40-minute online module and a one-day in-person workshop about the principles of person-centred communication and behaviour change techniques. The Brinkerhoff training evaluation model guided the evaluation⁽¹⁰⁾. Quantitative questionnaire data, including perceived knowledge and confidence, was descriptively analysed. Qualitative data including surveys, logs and focus group/interview data was thematically analysed.

Descriptive analysis found advisors scored highly in perceived knowledge (mean: 5.5) and confidence (mean: 5.5) post-training (measured on 6-point Likert scale). Thematic analysis determined three themes: valuable activities, takeaways, and programme evolution. Advisors valued open discussions and role-playing activities. A key takeaway was how to structure conversations about change; firstly, identifying a person's stage of change, then delivering behaviour change techniques tailored to that stage. Further training on how to support individuals to explore and build motivation towards change was deemed beneficial.

MAP was shown to be an effective training programme with applications in agriculture. This study offers insights for those involved in advisory education. Incorporating behaviour change communication courses into advisory programmes helps advisors develop knowledge surrounding the psychology behind behaviour change and additional competencies in supporting behaviour change at the farm level.

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