

# SHEEPFARMER

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## LAMBING PROVISIONS

SIX PAGE SPECIAL ON PRE-LAMBING PREP

## EVENTS ROUND-UP

SUMMARY OF NSA ACTIVITY THIS YEAR

## NSA NEXT GENERATION

PLANS FOR ANOTHER BUSY YEAR



*Seasons greetings*

TO ALL OUR MEMBERS



your business your future



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1. Clements et al (2014). *Veterinary Record* 10.1136/vr.102161  
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## Appropriate assurance needed for New Year



By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive

How sad to feel I should begin this issue of *Sheep Farmer*, in the season of cheer and goodwill, on the topic of Red Tractor Assurance.

It's certainly not a subject that has shown much goodwill of late and this latest pantomime has brought to a head what has been bubbling away, like a Christmas pudding, under the surface for a long time. But enough of the seasonal quips.

Assurance is a way to gain trust and, in a world where short supply chains where trust is upheld through seeing and believing is long gone, that's the simple rationale behind farm assurance. It's about an open gate declaration and checking things are being done right. It sounds easy but gets more complicated when decisions are made on what is right and wrong, or good enough and not good enough. That is where I believe things have gone wrong for Red Tractor Assurance and the sheep farming sector.

Long may our sheep market stay highly diverse with options of supermarkets, exports, halal, hospitality, direct sales and independent butchers and farm shops, plus the choice of selling store lambs or finishing them. The only market outlet requiring general farm assurance (like Red Tractor) is the supermarkets and, contrary to the initial aims of Red Tractor, most of these retailers like 'bolt ons' that create a bit of differentiation. That shouldn't be a surprise to anyone because each has its own brand and image.

### Supermarkets

While supermarkets are happy for assurance to set a baseline, their strapline is unlikely to be 'come and buy from us – we are the same as next door' – hence the reason some rely on assurance but don't even use the Red Tractor logo. Consider too the government/Defra brand 'Britain is Great', used in trade missions and exhibitions to promote our regulations and controls as delivering great, trustworthy food.

That is why we need a straightforward assurance scheme, an open-door declaration of compliance to the British way. If this was available, like the

Kitemark on electrical goods, it would then be down to certain supply chains and outlets to seek out premium products and pay accordingly. It could be where Red Tractor standards have ended up after 20 years of its own development is one of those premium sub brands, in the same way organic products are placed in the market, and if people and retailers want it then they pay for it.

### Confusion

After 20 years of continual standards development, Red Tractor is left confused to whether it is an assurance scheme or a brand, and while there may be opportunity for a brand, what the sheep industry arguably needs is an assurance of what is meant by Britain is Great to underpin and provide trust to all our markets.

Years of new Red Tractor standards proposals have continually led to rumblings of discontent, but the greener farm commitment, developed and announced with no consultation with the farming sector expected to deliver it, was the final straw.

Having strongly made the case we need a review of the governance of Red Tractor, and a wider and deeper review of the assurance needs and opportunities for the farming sector, we now find ourselves fighting to ensure such reviews are delivered fully and done in an independent way that provides the trust we aspire to via assurance itself.

I started on the subject of cheer and goodwill and hope, by the time you read this, fears around the as yet single figure cases of bluetongue might have subsided to give us a peaceful Christmas and New Year.

But whatever happens we should use this as a wake-up call to remind us of the need to be vigilant and do all we can to keep exotic diseases away from our shores. They not only affect the health of our stock but they cause immense stress and disrupt trade – and our success is reliant on trade.

On behalf of all staff and officeholders at NSA, I wish you a happy Christmas and fulfilling 2024. Let's hope the cheer and goodwill can last well into the future.



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www.nationalsheep.org.uk  
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### NSA officeholders

-  **Lord Inglewood**  
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-  **Dan Phipps**  
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-  **David Gregory**  
Honorary Treasurer & Finance Scrutiny Committee Chair
-  **Eddie Eastham**  
UK Policy & Technical Chair
-  **Kevin Harrison**  
English Committee Chair

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Front page picture credit: NSA stock image - sheep in frost.

# NSA regions look forward to welcoming members to ARMMs

Eight of the nine NSA regions have their Annual Members' Meetings in early 2024.

All meetings are open to members and non-members, although only members can vote. Each meeting will be followed by additional speakers from the sector.

- **Marches.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Marches Region will be held on Tuesday 16th January, 7pm at the Chipping Campden Cricket Club, Station Road, Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, GL55 6LB.
- **Northern.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Northern Region will be held on Thursday 1st February, 7.30pm at the Darlington Farmers Auction Mart Co Ltd, Humbleton Park, Darlington, Durham, DL2 2XX.
- **Scotland.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' meeting for NSA Scottish Region will be held on Friday 2nd February, 2pm at Ettrick Riverside, Dunsdale Road, Selkirk, TD7 5EB.
- **South East.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' meeting for NSA South East Region will be held on Tuesday 6th February, 6.30pm at the Angel Hotel, Privett, Alton, Hampshire, GU34 3NN.
- **Northern Ireland.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' meeting for NSA Northern Ireland Region will be held on Tuesday 6th February, 7.30pm at the Dunsilly Hotel, 20 Dunsilly Road, Antrim, BT41 2JH.
- **Central.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Central Region will be held on Tuesday 6th February, 7pm at the Agricultural Business Centre (Bakewell Market), Agricultural Way, DE45 1AH.
- **South West.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' meeting for NSA South West Region will be held on Thursday 22nd February, 7.30pm at the Stockman's Restaurant, Exeter Livestock Centre, Matford Business Park, Exeter, EX2 8FD.
- **Wales.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' meeting for NSA Cymru/Wales Region will be held on Wednesday 28th February, 11.30am in the International Pavilion, Royal Welsh Showground, Builth Wells, LD2 3WY.

Full details and proxy vote information at [www.nationalsheep.org.uk/events](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/events).



Members are encouraged to attend ARMMs this winter.

## Early Ram Sale finds new home for 2024

The NSA Wales & Border Early Ram Sale on Monday 5th August 2024 will have a new home – Brecon Livestock Market in mid-Wales.

The NSA Wales & Border Ram Sale Committee says both its sales are in good shape but the move will help it 'gear up' for a stronger future. The main sale, held each September, will remain at the Royal Welsh Showground, Builth Wells, Powys. Brecon has a modern, purpose-built market with covered sheep pens and is an out-of-town spacious location with plenty of room to park.

Dates of all six NSA rams sales in 2024 on page 9.



The NSA Early Ram Sale will be in a new location.

## Last chance to win

It's not long now until the lucky winner of the NSA and Wise Agriculture prize giveaway will be announced.

Entries close on Sunday 31st December so, to be in with a chance of winning the 3.0m Porta-Yards sheep handling system (250 head capacity) from Wise Agriculture, worth more than £10,000, make sure you visit [www.nationalsheep.org.uk/draw](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/draw) before the end of year. Good luck!



Will you be the lucky winner of a new handling system?



Watch back all NSA webinars via the website.

## Keep up to date with NSA webinars

Recent weeks have seen NSA offer members the opportunity to ready their businesses for 2024 with advice from industry experts delivered via NSA webinars.

Two long standing NSA supporters, Roythornes Solicitors and Rathbones investment specialists, joined together to lead an interesting and valuable session to help kick start new year business planning, as well as discussing ways to protect capital long term and against inflation.

Depending on when you read this there may still be time to join the Register of Sheep Advisers (RoSA) webinar aimed at advisers but equally of value to sheep farmers seeking to gain an insight on what 2024 might bring for the UK sheep sector, 7pm on 12th December. Our last webinar is 12.30pm on Wednesday 13th December with Elanco on best practice use of orange (group 4-AD) wormers.

All NSA webinars from the past year and beyond are available to watch back, providing an incredible source of information on a wide range of topics. Visit [www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars) to browse the webinars on offer.

## Not too late to place Lambing List advert

A reminder the NSA Lambing List is live and open for members to advertise for lambing help this coming season. Find out more at [www.nationalsheep.org.uk/lambing-list](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/lambing-list).

## Welcome to new chair in NSA Eastern Region

At its Annual Members' Meeting in November, NSA Eastern Region bade farewell to longstanding Chair Dan Phipps and welcomed Robert Spink (pictured) to the position. NSA



Robert Spink

extends huge thanks to Dan, who did the role for many years, most recently at the same time as serving as NSA Chair. Meet Robert on pages 24-25.

# A sheep farming voice

Get the headlines here on current NSA policy activities.

## NSA advises vigilance for bluetongue symptoms

NSA recommends extreme vigilance and emphasises the need to follow restrictions on animal movements following further confirmed cases of bluetongue.

Bluetongue virus (BTV-3) was confirmed in one cow near Canterbury, Kent, on 11th November following routine Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) surveillance. The animal has been culled and a 10km temporary control zone set-up around the farm to reduce further risks of disease transmission.

A further four infected cattle have been identified and culled on two additional premises within the 10km control zone, which remains in place.

Bluetongue is a viral disease transmitted by biting midges but there is no evidence of circulating virus in the midge population. Clinical signs in sheep include ulcers or sores in the mouth/nose, discharge from the eyes or nose, and swelling of the lips, tongue, head and neck and the coronary band (where the leg skin meets the hoof). Other signs are red skin, fever, lameness, breathing problems, abortion and death.

With rapid spread in Europe and no current vaccine, NSA stresses the need to be aware when bringing in stock, take action to report signs, and always remain vigilant.

More at [www.ruminanthw.org.uk/bluetongue-virus](http://www.ruminanthw.org.uk/bluetongue-virus).



Look for signs like discharge from the nose and eyes.

## Potential ban on live exports for slaughter

NSA was disappointed not to see the Kept Animals Bill progress through parliament.

This decision made in June has suggested measures will be taken forward individually.

The section on banning live exports is being progressed in the shape of a private members bill, announced in the King's Speech. The ban will stop export for slaughter or further fattening of sheep, cattle, goats, pigs and horses, ensuring animals are instead slaughtered domestically in high welfare UK abattoirs. The bill does not propose banning exports for other purposes such as breeding, competition racing or scientific purposes, and does not include poultry.

The original bill offered legislation providing tighter control and further police powers to tackle sheep worrying by dogs. NSA is working to get this topic back on the political agenda.



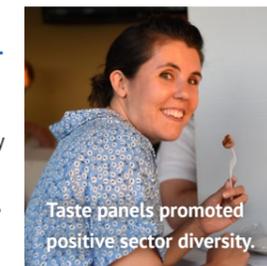
Ban proposed on live exports for slaughter/fattening.

## Project enhances reputation of Welsh Lamb

Having been involved in recruiting volunteers for a series of HCC lamb taste trials, NSA is pleased to see results published.

The trial explored on-farm and processing factors on the meat eating and nutritional quality of sheep meat. More than 13,400 samples were fed to 2,000 consumers, including many recruited by NSA from the area around its Worcestershire-based Head Office. The taste tests investigated breed, gender, muscle cut, finishing diet, meat ageing period, seasonality, hanging and packaging method.

Results demonstrated Welsh Lamb was healthy, nutritious and the eating quality was good, with lambs finished on grass and/or forage having higher levels of omega-3 and essential amino acids. Lamb finishing diet was shown not to affect sensory scores, intra-muscular fat or zinc content, but fatty acid and iron content were impacted.



Taste panels promoted positive sector diversity.

NSA continues to back upland and hill farmers.



## Dartmoor inquiry under independent review

NSA is pleased with Defra's commitment to review the Dartmoor situation following a number of heavy-handed decisions from Natural England.

David Fursdon, Lord Lieutenant of Devon and experienced local industry figure, has agreed to chair the review alongside a small panel of experts.

NSA has given both written and oral evidence to explain the uplands and commons of Britain are an integral part of the sheep industry, producing breeding stock for lowland enterprises, store lambs, finished lambs and wool, alongside delivery of a wide variety of public goods. The basis of the unique stratified sheep industry, and home to some of our hardest native breeds, farming in these areas is now recognised as a multifunctional activity, providing more than just agricultural outputs.

## VARSS report suggests wins and gains in sector

The latest Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance Sales and Surveillance (VARSS) report demonstrates positive developments for the sector.

All authorised neonatal antibiotics (such as Spectam) were removed from the market after the 2021 lambing season, cutting the sectors already low antibiotic use. The report highlighted

in 2022 the proportion of sheep vaccinated for clostridial diseases (65.2%) and for pasteurellosis (52.4%) were both above the 2012-2022 average, with the number of vaccine doses increasing by 3.8% and 2.7% respectively.

Unfortunately, abortion and footrot vaccine sales have decreased since 2021 – likely as a result of supply issues, which continue to be a problem being highlighted by NSA.



Vaccine use is on the rise.

## NSA Regions

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For NSA Eastern Region (Rugby/Melton) and NSA South East Region (Thame) ram sales enquiries, please contact NSA Head Office using the details on page 1.

HQ

## NSA regional reports

## NSA Cymru/Wales Region

By Helen Roberts, Development Officer

The region enjoyed its annual presence at the Royal Welsh Winter Fair in November, sponsoring the pure hill and upland sheep and young handlers classes.

The region congratulates Moss Jones of Llandre, Aberystwyth, on winning the John Gittins Memorial Award for outstanding contribution to the Welsh Sheep Industry. Don't forget our Annual Region Members' Meeting on Wednesday 28th February will be followed by lunch, an NSA update and a talk by Richard Irvine, Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales.



The region sponsored the young handlers at Welsh Winter Fair.

## NSA Northern Ireland Region

By Edward Adamson, Development Officer

NSA Northern Ireland Region was pleased to meet with Professors Julie Fitzpatrick and Lee Innes from Moredun.

We discussed Moredun's NI regional groups resulting in the formation of a local group involving Dr Simon Doherty of Queen's University Belfast, Dr Steven Johnston of Daera and myself and Campbell Tweed as sheep farmers, plus several other key players within the animal health sector still to be approached. The region looks forward to its Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Tuesday 6th February.



NSA NI Region is pleased to be working with Moredun.

## NSA South East Region

Sarah Blake, Manager

The region is pleased to report a highly successful Sheep Health, Welfare and Production online conference held during NSA Sheep Health Week. See page 8 for details.

NSA South East Region members joined forces with NFU West Sussex at Patching, Worthing, for an evening's roundtable discussion on the progress of the Isle of Wight sea eagle introduction project. Earlier this autumn the region hosted a farm walk in conjunction with the NSA Marches Region. More detail in the Marches report.

Our Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Tuesday 6th February will include a round-up from NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker and, courtesy of sponsors Farm and Country Supplies, presentations on lamb nutrition and on-farm productivity/efficiency as well as a hot meal.

## NSA Scottish Region

By Grace Reid, Regional Coordinator

NSA Scottish Region held a regional Field Day, kindly hosted by the Scott family on the Easter Ross Peninsula, in the Scottish Highlands in late October.

It was important to cater for members in the north with the absence of NSA Highland Sheep so the Field Day was a great opportunity. Thanks to the hosts, the speakers, attendees, sponsors Elanco and to Charlie Munro of Dingwall and QMS for donating a lamb carcass for the butchery demonstrations.

As this edition arrives with you the region will have just celebrated its Lamb for St Andrew's Day dinner, and is now looking forward to the Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Friday 2nd February.

Full details including dates, time and venues of all Annual Regional Members' Meetings are on page 2.



Scottish members enjoyed an informative Field Day

## NSA Northern Region

By Chris Adamson, Manager

The NSA Northern Region committee held a successful meeting with Janet Huges, Defra Programme Director for the Future Farming and Countryside Programme, at Westmorland Show, Cumbria, in September.



NSA Northern Region met with Defra.

At our Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Thursday 1st February, Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, will update on NSA activity and AHDB will talk about its work with lamb exports. The region is also considering potential hosts for NSA North Sheep 2025.

## NSA Central Region

By Lizzy Wells, Manager

Since the last report the weather hasn't calmed itself, causing the regional Field Day to be postponed to next year.

Join us for our Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Tuesday 6th February for the formal business and some informative guest speakers.

## NSA South West Region

By Ian May, Manager

Many thanks to those who made it to the region's event on halal and exports held in North Molton, Devon.

The evening, organised in collaboration with AHDB, Exmoor Hill Farming Network and the Sheep Group, saw AHDB's Dr Awal Fuseini and Dr Phil Hadley give two exceptional presentations highlighting the importance of the halal sector.

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, will join the NSA South West Region Annual Members' Meeting on Thursday 22nd February.

## NSA Marches Region

By Katie James, Manager

The region welcomed members to an insightful farm walk courtesy of NSA Next Generation Ambassador Rich Taylor with NSA South East Region in October.

As wet weather put plans for further autumn farm walks on hold, it was great to view the sheep enterprise Rich is now leading.

We are looking forward to our Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Tuesday 16th January. Guest speakers will follow official business.

## NSA Eastern Region

By Josh Brock, Manager

NSA Eastern Region held its Annual Regional Members' Meeting in November, as well as a committee meeting preparing for 2024.

One of the key objectives is to continue to grow our regional Next Generation shepherds' group, providing a local support network, and to increase attendance to regional events. If you are interested in joining contact me.

A huge thanks to Dan Phipps who stood down as Regional Chair with Robert Spink stepping up and Lisa Adams taking Vice Chair. Thanks to any committee members who have stood down, and a warm welcome to new ones.

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# Round-up of NSA's diverse range of activities offered over the past year

As a membership organisation, NSA works tirelessly to ensure ample opportunity for members and non-members to get together, gain new knowledge and engage with like-minded sheep keepers.

With most of the activities offered free of charge to members, it's no surprise NSA events are well attended and highly regarded as an enjoyable and informative day out. NSA regions and Head Office have proudly held 53 different events in 2023 alone, including events, field days, farm walks, members meetings, ram sales and Next Generation to name a few.

NSA's yearly highlight is its regional shows. NSA Sheep South West, NSA Welsh Sheep, NSA North Sheep and NSA Sheep Northern Ireland were all delivered successfully this year, even when the cold, wet weather tried to dampen spirits. These events give attendees a chance to hear from top industry experts, join interactive practical workshops, browse the latest products and innovations on sector specific tradestands,

and partake in the always popular and insightful farm tours.

In addition to regional shows, regional farm walks remain popular for a good feed, chinwag and nosy over the neighbours' fence.

A number of NSA regions have also introduced Field Days to members this year. These workshop based events are growing in popularity, so watch out for one coming to your region soon! NSA Scottish Region embraced the Field Day concept successfully this year welcoming interested parties to workshops including a post mortem day and butchery demonstrations.

## Next Generation

NSA Next Generation activity – supporting the future of the sheep industry through young people – increased this year with a wider range of events focused on gaining the skills and knowledge to succeed in agricultural careers.

From introductions to shearing, showing and the sustainable future of the sector these sessions will now form part of the biennial calendar alongside the firmly established NSA Next Generation activity such as the

Ambassador programme and the NSA Samuel Wharry Memorial Award Travel Bursary.

Sheep Health, Welfare and Production (SHWAP) Online, organised by NSA South East Region, enhanced knowledge exchange opportunities again this October – and was joined in a new NSA Sheep Health Week by the inaugural NSA Sheep Farmers' Conference.

## Ram Sales

NSA Ram Sales were well attended as always and remain the go to sale for many seeking quality, inspected stock from well-known breeders.

To top off NSA activity, webinars have grown in popularity, allowing easier access to real-time knowledge. NSA is already planning 2024 topics, so do get in touch if you have any suggestions.

Finally, NSA continues to offer valuable services to members as part of their annual subscriptions. The NSA Lambing List, prize draws and campaigns to raise awareness with the general public such as Sheep Worrying Week, Love Lamb Week and Wool Week are important areas of work supporting the UK sheep sector.

*Details of NSA 2024 events on page 9.*



## 2023 NSA webinars

NSA has hosted a wide variety of webinars this year providing a fantastic resource to sheep farmers. Titles were:

### Technical webinars

- Best practice at lambing time.
- Protecting your capital from inflation and inheritance tax.
- Looking after worms to help lambs grow and manage anthelmintic resistance.
- Autumn problems with worms.
- Legalities of sheep worrying by dogs.
- COP 27 – Breed for CH4nges.

### NSA SHWAP Online

- Improving flock efficiency.
- Measure to manage.
- Annual feed budgeting.

### Register of Sheep Advisers (RoSA)

- Business benchmarking.
- What will 2024 bring for the sheep sector?

### NSA Breakfast Club webinars

- Environment and Land Management Scheme, what to expect and where next – with Defra Director Janet Hughes.
- SFI, uplands and the future of farming – with Mark Spencer, Defra.
- Vaccines, why we can't get them and how to manage the implications.

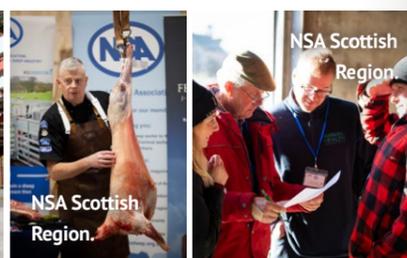
### NSA and Moredun joint webinar series

- Seeking a balance between effective sheep parasite control and environmental impact.
- The future of sheep scab.
- Vaccines – what's current and what's coming.
- Tick control and louping ill.

### NSA and SCOPS joint webinar

- How to check if a worming treatment has been effective.

*All NSA webinars are available to watch back online at [www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars).*



## Move to digital membership renewals

NSA will move to online processing of as many membership renewals as possible from early 2024.

This means the paperwork you receive reminding you to renew your annual NSA subscription will be sent by email rather than post, unless we do not hold an email address for you. This will reduce the number of trees sacrificed for NSA membership paperwork and maximise NSA income spent on policy and technical matters rather than administration.

You will be given the opportunity to opt out of digital renewals and remain paper-based, but bearing in mind the cost and time of sending things in the post, we hope members will embrace this change and make sure NSA has your email address.

All members will continue to receive the letter containing their membership card in the post.

[go.nationalsheep.org.uk/update-details](http://go.nationalsheep.org.uk/update-details)

Email [membership@nationalsheep.org.uk](mailto:membership@nationalsheep.org.uk) to update the information we hold for you.

# Inaugural NSA campaign makes healthy animals the focal point

A weeklong campaign showcasing the UK's leading animal health and welfare standards saw farmers and industry come together to promote sustainability in our sector.

NSA's first ever Sheep Health Week took place from Monday 23rd October. As well as incorporating two successful NSA events, its activity reached many thousands of followers via social media channels.

The well-established Sheep Health, Wealth and Production (SHWAP) online conference kick started the week with evening webinars held on the Monday, followed by further engaging sessions on Tuesday and Thursday evening.

With highly respected speakers leading discussion on topics including flock efficiency, data and technology, and feed budgeting, audiences were able to gain valuable practical advice to implement in their businesses.

Yann Le Du, NSA South East Chair and SHWAP organiser, reflected: "We are delighted with the interest generated by each evening of this year's programme. The subject matter and speakers attracted attendees not just from the home nations but also from Europe and even Canada, demonstrating the capability of the online format to enhance knowledge sharing."

Delegates at the inaugural NSA Sheep Farmers' Conference that took place on the Wednesday of Sheep Health Week were enthused for the vigorous future of the sector as leading industry

names and highly respected farmers discussed methods to measure, promote and improve flock health at the National Conference Centre, Birmingham, West Midlands.

NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker said: "Sheep health, underpinned by quality genetics, nutrition, and effective management is fundamental to improving the performance of the UK sheep sector, without the need to change the nature of how we go about our business. The conference considered ways to fine tune businesses to increase productivity profitability, reduce our environmental footprint, and lead to greater satisfaction and pride."

## One nation

Charles Sercombe, NSA Trustee and Animal Health & Welfare Board for England member, opened the event by reminding the audience disease does not respect borders, reinforcing the need for a joined up approach as a panel of government officials from the four UK nations updated on ongoing changes to farm policy.

The first seminar of the conference left attendees in agreement healthy animals are the cornerstone to sustainable livestock production and measurements of welfare were to become an increasingly important tool in the future.

Introducing a new event format, the conference then allowed delegates time to join modern, interactive workshops. Varied tradestands provided further engagement for attendees before the next session of the day was underway.

Bringing delegates back together for a highly



interactive discussion, AHDB acted as facilitator for the second session with a panel of farmers speaking openly on their encounters tackling health issues on farm.

All farmers shared their experiences in screening their flocks for disease with varied discoveries made including for some, devastating cases of iceberg disease. Discussion revealed a need for improved openness among farmers to effectively face critical issues to remove stigma around on-farm disease and to encourage those in denial to stand up and take action.

## Knowledge

The third and final seminar of the day welcomed well-known names discussing where best to invest to improve health, welfare and productivity. With the experienced panel of sheep vet Fiona Lovatt, geneticist Janet Roden and consultant Emily Grant passing on their vast knowledge, delegates were able to leave with key take home messages from which to build their flock's health.

NSA Chair Dan Phipps drew the conference to a close. Looking back on a successful event he commented: "It was a fantastic day with everyone interacting well to bring the best out of our engaging speakers. We look forward to building on the success of the event for future years as the conference is brought into the NSA biennial calendar. See you there in October 2025".

Thanks go to SHWAP sponsors AgriWebb, Elanco, MSD Animal Health, Rappa, British Wool and Cotswold Seeds. The NSA Sheep Farmers' Conference was sponsored by Shearwell Data, with session sponsors Bonanza Calf Nutrition, Kepak and MSD.



Interactive workshops were a huge success at the conference.



By Katie James, NSA

# Worthy winners named as recipients of prestigious NSA awards

Respected sheep vet Dr Fiona Lovatt receives this year's NSA George Hedley Memorial Award for outstanding contribution to the UK sheep industry, while the NSA Bob Payne Memorial Award for Unsung Hero goes to long-serving NSA Honorary Treasurer Dave Gregory.

Fiona was nominated to receive the award for her work in promoting and improving the health of sheep flocks in the UK and beyond. She is a recognised specialist in sheep health and production by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and a diplomate of the European College of Small Ruminant Health Management. She holds the part-time position of Clinical Associate Professor in sheep production medicine at Nottingham University and is the clinical lead for the RCVS knowledge initiative Farm Vet Champions.

As a past president of the Sheep Veterinary Society, Fiona currently chairs the UK Sheep Antibiotic Guardian Group and is a member of the Responsible Use of Medicine in Agriculture Target Task Force, with responsibility for setting and delivering responsible use targets for the sheep industry.

Fiona is well known as a founder of the Flock Health Club concept, a simple idea that has revolutionised two-way vet/farmer engagement.

Yann Le Du, NSA South East Chair, was a nominee of Fiona for the award and says: "The Flock Health Club concept entuses vets to engage with

sheep farmers, in turn encouraging them to adopt best practice preventative measures and responsible medicine use. Fiona is held in high esteem in the sheep industry and therefore is fully justified in being awarded with this impressive title."

## Unsung Hero

This year's recipient of the NSA Bob Payne Memorial Award, Dave Gregory, has been an integral part of the NSA Senior Management Team for approaching 10 years, taking on the role in 2014. Previous to this, he was NSA South West Region Chair for six years and is still heavily involved in organising NSA Sheep South West. He contributes his time on a voluntary basis on top of running a beef and sheep farm in North Devon with his family.

NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker comments: "Dave is a much-valued member of the NSA team and very deserving of this award. He is unassuming and always places the work and future of NSA at the heart of all decisions made within the association."

*Both awards will be formally presented at NSA Sheep 2024.*



## Join us at an NSA event in 2024



### NSA Sheep Events

#### NSA Scot Sheep

Wednesday 5th June 2024, Aikengall Farm, Innerwick, Dunbar, East Lothian, EH42 1SG

#### NSA Sheep Event

Tuesday 30th July 2024, Three Counties Showground, Malvern, Worcestershire, WR13 6NW

### NSA Ram Sales

#### NSA Wales & Border Early Ram Sale NEW LOCATION

Monday 5th August 2024, Brecon Livestock Market, Warren Road, Brecon, Powys, LD3 8EX

#### NSA South West Ram Sale

Wednesday 14th August 2024, Exeter Livestock Centre, Matford Business Park, Exeter, EX2 8FD

#### NSA Eastern Region Rugby Ram Sale

Friday 30th August 2024, Rugby Farmers Mart, National Agricultural Centre, Warwickshire CV8 2RG

#### NSA South East Region Ram Sale as part of Thame Farmers Market Breeding Ewe Sale

Friday 6th September 2024, Thame Farmers Market, North Street, Thame, Oxfordshire, OX9 3FP

#### NSA Eastern Region Melton Mowbray Ram Sale

Friday 20th September 2024, Melton Mowbray Market, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, LE13 1JY

#### NSA Wales & Border Main Ram Sale

Monday 23rd September 2024, Royal Welsh Showground, Builth Wells, Powys, LD2 3SY



Is assurance essential when high UK standards are globally recognised?

NSA POLICY

# Concerns over Red Tractor and its environmental add-on continue to fester

By Emma Bradbury, NSA

NSA is maintaining its strong position on Red Tractor assurance and waits with bated breath for a resolution.

During the early part of October, Red Tractor launched its vision for a greener farms commitment, presented as a voluntary 'bolt on' to the existing assurance scheme. This met with serious criticism due to an absence of consultation with industry or its representatives and was launched into a cold atmosphere.

NSA openly criticised Red Tractor regarding, yet again, its disregard for farming opinion, the disconnect from government environmental schemes, and the impact proposals could have on the wider supply chain and producers. The greener farms commitment takes Red Tractor into the realm of setting environmental policy in isolation, rather than getting behind the key environmental and sustainable farming schemes being introduced by Defra and gives no confidence it would lead to premiumisation.

NSA called an extraordinary NSA English Committee meeting to discuss the repercussions

of the proposals and issued a statement indicating the appetite for a review of Red Tractor governance. NSA made it clear it continues to support the concept of farm assurance as an open gate declaration of good practice – but NSA has long been frustrated the scheme is losing its way and has become less relevant to sheep farmers with little acceptance of the unique nature of our sector.

NSA recognises most UK sheep farms are not big business with layers of management, but are family farms and single operators, many with little land of their own, and our sector still offers a valuable first step on the farming ladder for new entrants. NSA makes the case becoming Red Tractor assured presents a huge hurdle for many sheep farms, and for most of our routes to market it adds no value.

## U-turn

In the last days of October, Red Tractor capitulated and announced there would be a pause on development of the greener farm commitment or any standards until the review on Red Tractor governance is complete.

NSA is openly asking, and will feed into the forthcoming review, the question of what assurance should deliver for sheep farmers and to what extent would it support wider supply chains beyond our domestic multiple retailers.

The Red Tractor scheme was launched by the NFU in the wake of the BSE and salmonella disasters now over two decades ago. After so much time, NSA states it is important to ask what assurance has achieved and what the sheep sector needs.

The initial aim of Red Tractor was to provide assurance at every stage of the production process – from farm to pack – and to make it clear buying with the Red Tractor logo provided confidence

you were buying British. But is that still the case? More than 70% of consumers recognise Red Tractor is trusted to deliver safe and traceable food, compared to the NFU survey when Red Tractor was founded indicating 70% of consumers didn't know where their food came from or what local farms produced.

## Assurance

Assurance was developed after a period of turmoil within industry to develop trust in consumers and safeguard markets. The aim of securing a premium has never really been achieved, and Red Tractor has become an expectation among supermarkets rather than a means to give producers a premium for the products they produce. Red Tractor now covers a plethora of aspects of a farming business: basic food safety, animal health and welfare, traceability, environment, housing, shelter, vermin control and personnel.

Feeling from our industry in recent years has been resounding in questioning whether we benefit from assurance and whether it's relevant for sheep farming in its current form.

For many years there has been little if any financial benefit to being assured but complying with ever exacting standards has incurred cost to the product. British producers are held to high regulatory standards across industry with many saying assurance in the sheep industry comes at excessive cost, unfair competition from imports and a lack of any premium.

Although there are significant benefits to assurance, perhaps in this instance we can learn from the New Zealand model – a free scheme providing export assurance a product is of high, safe and traceable value. The result would surely be successful uptake and a quality product with good reputation.

NSA says there is a need for an independent review of Red Tractor governance.



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# Four-nation approach to food production and delivering for the environment

By Emma Bradbury, NSA

Each of the UK nations is rolling out its future farm policy at different rates, with seemingly similar principles for farming and the environment but very different strategies.

**Northern Ireland.** A new programme of farm development designed in consultation with the NI agricultural industry is underway and will be phased in over the next few years. It focusses on priority areas including productivity, environment, sustainability, resilience and an integrated and effective supply chain.

Implementation is planned next year with the Basic Payment Scheme set to come to an end. The Ruminant Genetic Programme, the Livestock Dietary Emission Challenge Fund, Carbon Benchmarking Programme and the Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme will also come into play in early 2024. Like with the other nations, programme detail is yet to be realised and it is difficult for producers to plan long term.

A Farm Sustainability Transition Payment with some new conditionalities will be introduced in 2025, with a full payment going live in 2026. This will include changes to land eligibility and farm sustainability standards that will be communicated well in advance. All land-based agriculture that meet eligibility requirements can apply.

NSA continues to be vocal around the upland farming industry and stresses the need for a sheep equivalent to the beef sustainability package.

**Scotland.** Current Scottish policy is to maintain the status quo of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), until at least 2024. During this

transition period, the government is working on developing a new policy for the rural economy. It has taken a slightly different approach to the other devolved nations, taking longer to develop and publish concrete policy intentions.

In 2021 came the Vision for Scottish Agriculture. Since then we've seen the development of the Agricultural Bill, the agriculture reform implementation oversight board, co-development with industry and rural partners, and the first step towards a new national policy.

The national test programme is in full swing and in 2026, the report framework legislation should be in place for implementation despite no detail being available yet.

In the future, Scottish Government expects conditionality to apply to key, core themes including: greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity audits, soil testing, nutrient and forage plans and animal health and welfare plans. The government has committed to encourage actions that cut emissions, enhance biodiversity and produce food more sustainably.

**Wales.** Significant progress is being made in the policy development sphere with the first version of the Sustainable Farming Scheme out for co-design and the final scheme consultation expected by the end of this year.

Financial support will be provided to meet the challenges of the climate and nature emergencies alongside sustainable food production. The actions in the scheme are set out under five characteristics that show the variety of ways Welsh Government wants to support the



delivery of a wide range of outcomes alongside sustainable food production.

These include working with producers to aid adaptation to changes in the environment or market, helping make the best use of resources and supporting businesses to become more efficient, lower greenhouse gas emissions and enhance existing carbon stocks through sequestration.

A baseline payment will be made to those undertaking a set of universal actions that go above and beyond legislative requirements.

**England.** Defra has been particularly busy creating the suite of schemes replacing CAP, with most of what's coming in 2024 already being available for uptake. Defra has taken the approach to get things rolled out then adapt them accordingly. Although there is a long way to go for some, it seems to be a formula making significant progress.

Defra set out at the start of the transition saying food is still the primary purpose of farming and always will be. The Food Strategy also includes plans to offer support to boost homegrown fruit and vegetable production, and encourage people to buy more locally sourced, high-welfare food.

Support has been made available through Environmental Land Management Schemes and the Sustainable Farming Incentive, along with the Farming Investment Fund and support for capital items.

**Summary.** There is still work to be done. NSA has been significantly involved in the co-design and creation of new farming schemes across the UK and will continue to ensure the effective delivery, communication and support for all involved - in particular new entrants, uplands, commons and tenants. Now is the time for a cohesive approach that supports those producing food and delivering for the environment.

Similarities across policies include lowering emissions and increasing biodiversity.



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# Welsh policy impedes efforts to farm harmoniously with the environment

By Helen Roberts, Regional Development Officer



October kicked off with applications opening for the new Habitat Scheme, a replacement for the environmental scheme Glastir.

In 2025 the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) will be funded by money removed from the Basic Payment Scheme, with the Habitat Scheme intended to bridge the gap between the two.

NSA Cymru/Wales Region is concerned the Habitat Scheme will get absorbed into SFS with a complete loss of a specific environmental

budget. This risks undervaluing the environment, landscape and rural communities, and ignoring the positive impact farming and land management has for the health and wellbeing of society.

The final SFS consultation should be announced shortly with a three-month response period. NSA Cymru/Wales Region has been involved in significant discussions throughout the co-design period and is looking forward to seeing if recommendations have been adopted at the consultation stage. NSA encourages all those farming in Wales to consider the consultation document when published and make their views known to NSA Cymru/Wales Region.

## Tree planting

The region held an event at the Royal Welsh Show ground in mid-November discussing trees and biodiversity on farm. Andrew Bronwin, Bronwin and Abbey Foresters and Surveyors, gave a presentation focusing on the commercial advantages tree planting can bring to farmers - advocating it should be farming and forestry, not farming or forestry. He suggested foresters are as

concerned as farmers about the lack of joined up thinking across the policy arena, with many missed opportunities due to poor communication.

## Environment

Arfon Williams, RSPB Cymru, also joined the event, outlining how continued positive efforts for the environment are critical. Mr Williams highlighted the loss of almost half of farmland birds, mammals, amphibians and insects, with much of this attributed to significant changes in management practices over the generations, such as moving from less intensive haymaking to more intensive methods of ensiled feeds.

He concluded saying farming has an extensive and beneficial role to play in the biodiversity crisis, and livestock is crucial in habitat creation and favourable conditions for other species. Myself and others came away thinking, although progress has been made, the biggest impediment to increasing biodiversity on farms is government policy and the disconnect between advisory systems.



More work is needed to bridge the gap between Welsh policy areas.

# English bluetongue case affects limited livestock trade in Northern Ireland

By Edward Adamson, Regional Development Officer



With the confirmed bluetongue case in England, Daera has temporarily suspended moves of all ruminants and germinal products from Great Britain to Northern Ireland.

Daera is no longer permitted to create and validate operators from EU member states. ROI operators must have previously informed the ROI Department of Agriculture they intend importing stock from outside EU at [traces@agriculture.gov.ie](mailto:traces@agriculture.gov.ie).

## Inspectors

After a spate of farm accidents, several involving quadbikes, the NI Health & Safety Executive has announced a farming transport inspection scheme on farms until March 2024 to increase awareness and highlight issues. Inspectors will be checking farm vehicles are adequately maintained, and users have the correct training and certificates for use.

There is still limited policy progression due to the political stalemate over the

Stormont Executive. The challenges facing NI agriculture is growing significantly and it is important devolved government returns to allow a more stable footing.



An increase in farm accidents in NI has triggered safety inspections.

# Scottish agricultural framework looks promising but still lacks legislative detail

By Grace Reid, Regional Coordinator



The published Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is currently making its lengthy process through parliament, with Royal Assent expected by the end of 2024.

Four overarching objectives of policy have been identified by Scottish policymakers:

- The adoption and use of sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices.
- The production of high quality food.
- The facilitation of on-farm nature restoration, climate mitigation and adaptation.
- Enabling rural communities to thrive.

The powers sought in this Bill also deliver on the objectives of the Vision for Agriculture and elements of current agricultural policy via a rural support plan covered by a five-year timescale and sustainable and regenerative code of practice.

Scheme development in 2025 will see more conditional elements added and the introduction

of a whole farm plan and peatland initiatives. In 2026 the enhanced mechanism (tier 2) will come in, with other schemes and regional reviews in 2027 and 2028. Announcements on how the budget will be split are expected in February 2024. NSA members are reminded this is a framework bill and policy detail will follow in secondary legislation.

## Liver fluke

The animal welfare interventions launched under Preparing for Sustainable Farming have seen a steady stream of successful claims made via the online platform. Recognising the complexity of liver fluke detection and control, these options have been reviewed and significant changes made for sheep and cattle so both liver fluke and roundworm interventions now reflect SCOPS principles.

NSA Scottish Region is pleased Scottish Government is keen to support investigations into flukicide efficacy, and that the change now means

all types of routine and non-routine investigations into liver fluke attract a standard payment of £250.

The wider initiative is set to run until the end of 2024, with one claim submitted per calendar year covering a maximum of two different interventions. The total funding per claimant is £1,250 over two years and it's worth noting an additional £250 will be automatically added to the claim to support any learning or development activity. Industry has been assured claims for animal health and welfare interventions will not trigger farm inspections.



Liver fluke investigations are now higher up the Scottish animal health agenda.

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# Change on the horizon for price reporting

Many NSA members will be familiar with the AHDB market reports for both liveweight and deadweight sheep prices – but changes are on the horizon.

From 1st January 2024, instead of making its market reports available to AHDB, the Livestock Auctioneers Association will launch a free-to-use, online platform providing access to up-to-date livestock market sale prices.

LAA is inviting people to register online now to get access from next year, when prices will no longer be available on the AHDB website. LAA suggests the new system will enable more informed decisions and maximise profits.

AHDB will continue to report deadweight prices based on reports from abattoirs that choose to supply this information. NSA understands this will be done using a coefficient to address different cutting specifications in order to enable a wider range of cohorts to be included. This is in advance of Defra mandating deadweight price reporting and carcass classification reporting for sheep – something NSA has been calling for from some time and is expected soon.



## Understand reports

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, comments: "Time will tell whether these changes will improve things or confuse people more. The best advice we can give members is to think hard and speak to others to get to the bottom of what reported prices used for price comparisons really mean."

"Abattoirs have different cutting specs and usually weigh after basic dressing has been done. The result is one abattoir can report a high price per kilo but, if it trims hard, the actual return per lamb may be better from another abattoir that pays less per kilo but leaves more weight on the carcass. Understanding this before selling lambs makes sense."

"Similarly with live markets, the kilograms knocked off after half weight is shown mean some markets are at the top in terms of price per kilo, while the best price per lamb (the total return) may be better from a market reporting lower prices but knocking less weight off the half live weight."

*NSA will provide more information once the new formats are launched.*



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# Next Generation activity throughout winter and into next year

By Katie James, NSA



Rhug Estate, Denbighshire, North Wales provided the ideal location for those interested in the sustainable future of sheep farming.

The day long NSA Next Generation workshop attracted those wanting to gain a fascinating insight to the running of the estate, by Farm Manager Emyr Owen, detailing how different elements work in balance and continue to progress.

An action plan for the farm included the introduction of rotational and conservation grazing next year to improve soil health, improving efficiency and animal performance, as well as looking at other elements such as feed additives and reducing waste.

Mared Williams leads the estate's carbon and sustainability work. She told the group an extensive carbon audit had been carried out at Rhug, demonstrating the agri-environmental schemes already implemented had resulted in the land being carbon negative. These initial findings are now in the process of being verified.

Following this, the group heard how the sheep enterprise has been run over the last 30 years, including the move towards a closed stock.

It was also an opportunity to see the performance recorded stock.

Mark Young of the Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Livestock joined the event to discuss tackling the challenges for livestock production in the future. Elizabeth Swancott of HCC spoke on the current Welsh lamb market with insights into current and future predicted trends.

Thanks goes to all the speakers and to the Rhug Estate for hosting a thought-provoking day.

## 2024 events

Rolling into 2024, NSA Next Generation is excited to invite enthusiastic young farmers to a fantastic workshop at Harper Adams University, Newport, Shropshire, on Wednesday 14th February providing advice on how to communicate effectively to your chosen audience. Every day farmers are increasingly sharing their farming lives, whether that be on social media, with face-to-face events or as farming 'celebrities' on popular prime time television programmes. For many this is a daunting prospect. This workshop



Visitors to Rhug Estate enjoyed an insightful farm tour.

featuring several top names from the media and communications sector will provide advice on how to communicate effectively, with plentiful opportunity to share experiences.

The workshop is aimed at 16- to 35-year-olds and, as always with NSA Next Generation events, is free to attend and a great chance to meet with fellow sheep enthusiasts. A full line up of speakers will be announced on the NSA website and via NSA's social media channels soon.

To register your interest in attending please contact [enquiries@nationalsheep.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nationalsheep.org.uk).

## New Love Lamb Ambassador takes on campaign promotion

Rosie Bloor from Somerset was the obvious choice to take on the role of Love Lamb Ambassador following a call for Next Generation applicants earlier this year.

Running 300 ewes extensively across the Mendip Hills and Somerset Levels, Rosie knows firsthand the value and importance of sharing positive farming messages. Using social media she's established a following with stories from her life shepherding and selling produce direct.

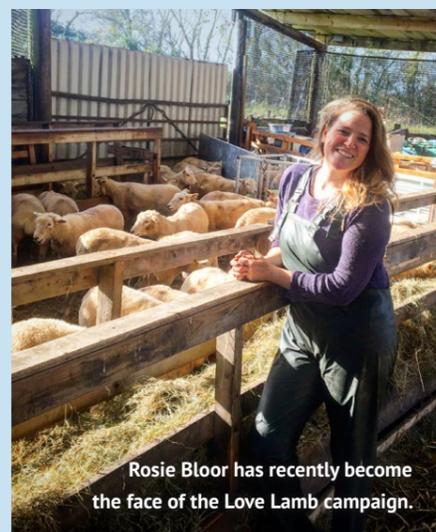
Alongside husband James and baby daughter Annabelle, Rosie leads on-farm operations with their commercial flock of Lley, Texel and, more recently, Exlana ewes.

Rosie says: "I already share my daily farm life on social media via Instagram so thought this would be a good opportunity to reach a new audience. I do this to show friends and family what I get up to and to educate them on British farming. We are always trying new and initiative ways to improve efficiency and productivity. I enjoy sharing stories to show sheep farming is not just chucking some sheep in a field!"

## Direct sales

The farm also sells a small percentage of lambs direct to customers via meat boxes, another reason Rosie applied for the role of Love Lamb Ambassador.

She adds: "I'm passionate about British farming and helping the public make the link from farm



Rosie Bloor has recently become the face of the Love Lamb campaign.

to what ends up on their plate. I believe it is important to educate everyone on where their food comes from, dispel myths about farming and help drive home the message British lamb is a healthy, sustainable, affordable and delicious choice for everyone."

## 2024 NSA Ambassador programme imminent

As *Sheep Farmer* magazine arrives with members, NSA is excited to begin the process of reviewing applications received for the highly respected NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme.

The programme gives sheep farming enthusiasts aged 18-34 the opportunity to become part of NSA activity that supports the future of the UK sheep sector and a scheme that signals the start of a lifelong journey with NSA.

The NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme – now in its eighth year – delivers a series of technical and personal development sessions aimed to further individuals' experience and understanding of the UK sheep industry.

## Engagement

As well as providing the chance to visit varied sheep farming systems and parts of the sheep farming supply chain, the programme delivers an abundance of networking links. From the chance to be part of a group of likeminded young sheep farmers to

meeting with industry experts and leaders, the scheme can open doors to many new and exciting opportunities.

NSA has received a huge amount of interest in joining the programme from a variety of first generation farmers, those established on family farms and contract shepherds, both experienced and those just starting out in their careers.

Katie James, NSA Communications Manager, comments: "We really are excited to see what those interested in the programme can offer as an NSA Next Generation Ambassador. In return the scheme offers Ambassadors support, opportunity and enjoyment like few other activities can provide."

Applications will be shortlisted by NSA regional representatives before online interviews in early January 2024. The programme will commence in February and will require successful applicants to commit to spending approximately 10 nights away from home during the year.



Ambassadors visit a range of sheep farming enterprises.



Who will be part of the 2024 NSA Next Generation Ambassador group?

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# NSA Next Generation Ambassador strides to success with family business



Coming from an established farming family business, Rich Rossiter from Kingsbridge, South Devon, could be forgiven if he'd chosen to make little change since being an NSA Next Generation Ambassador.

But in contrast, Rich, alongside his father David, wife Alice and young family of three daughters, continues to make further improvements to existing enterprises as well as looking to new innovations and opportunities.

The farm currently runs 600 Poll Dorset, 200 Aberblack and 400 Exlana ewes. Rich considers all three of the breeds complimentary in running the business. He says: "Our combination of sheep mean we lamb three times a year and can meet market demand all year round."

## Reputation

The contrasting but complimentary breeds have helped the farm secure a good reputation for breeding stock but have also meant a successful direct meat sales business could be started. "Customers know we can supply new season lamb throughout the year, which is appealing," he comments.

Having performance recorded all stock for many years, focus areas can be identified for improvement. Most recently, Rich imported Poll Dorset semen from Australia for the second time. "It's brought length and an improved carcass to the flock," he explains.

## Where are they now?

The NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme has supported almost 100 young sheep enthusiasts since its 2014 launch, proving to be a highly influential experience for those who take part.

Throughout 2023, NSA is catching up with various ambassadors from different intake years, to see what they're up to now. In this edition it's Rich Rossiter, who joined the programme in 2018.

The family has much experience importing genetics to complement their flock, so it is not surprising to hear of the next farm addition planned by Rich.

He explains: "I travelled to Australia at the start of 2020 with the intention of learning more about the Australian White breed and we are now in the process of bringing the breed to the UK, importing embryos from the breeder who first developed the composite breed from White Dorper, Van Rooy, Poll Dorset and Texel genetics. As far as we are aware they will form the first commercial flock of the breed in Europe."

The breed will fit well into the Rossiter's current enterprise, also lambing out of season. Rich continues: "They will be lambed in the autumn which gives us further flexibility of grazing and will fit into arable rotations."

The breed's distinctive meat quality could also prove a further selling point once a commercial



The family business now has another generation to provide for.

flock has been established. "On this lamb the fat has a very low melting point and offers a unique eating experience," explains Rich.

## New breed

Introducing a breed suitable for arable rotations was an important factor for Rich, as the business has lost some access to traditional permanent pasture following reduction in previously available National Trust grazing and entry into a mid-tier stewardship agreement. The farm had been forced to reduce its Exlana numbers slightly as a result of this lost grazing but now hopes to restock having secured other parcels of more productive land.

"The Exlana is growing in popularity all the time so it's important to keep ewe numbers at a good level," says Rich. "Demand for the Aberblack is also increasing, so these two breeds are a crucial part of the farm business."

Not limited to improving the livestock enterprises on farm, Rich and Alice are now involved in developing a seasonal campsite. "The new rules allowing a site to be set up for 60 days without planning permission make it an obvious choice for us, as we are in a very popular tourist area," Rich explains.

Since Rich joined the NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme, he has also become NSA South West Region Vice Chair, supporting the organisation of the NSA South West Ram Sale and NSA Sheep South West events.

Rich comments: "I'm glad I became involved with NSA through the NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme. It's great to be able to support NSA myself and be involved in the NSA South West Committee. I enjoy playing a role in regional events and I look forward to taking on the role of Chair soon."



Rich's flock is fully performance recorded.

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# No regrets for NSA officeholder who followed husband into farming

By Anne Payne, former NSA Central Region Secretary



Ours was far from a conventional route into farming, with neither of us having a farming background.

I was a true townie but Bob, having grown up in a rural area, went to Harper Adams to complete a national diploma in agriculture, followed by two years working with the Pig Improvement Company (PIC).

'Itchy feet' soon led Bob to global travels, landing first in New York, where he learned first-hand about poverty and racial tensions. On returning home 12 months later, with the issues witnessed still in his mind, he applied for a social work course, which was where we met, both training at the same time. I've said many times that I thought I'd married a social worker, which just goes to show how wrong you can be. I married a reinvented farmer!

Over the years I saw Bob come full circle and eventually, after some initial resistance on my part – after all I was a Brummie and a townie at heart – we made the decision to move to Carr Head Farm on the edge of the Peak District, Derbyshire, with our three young lads in 1982.

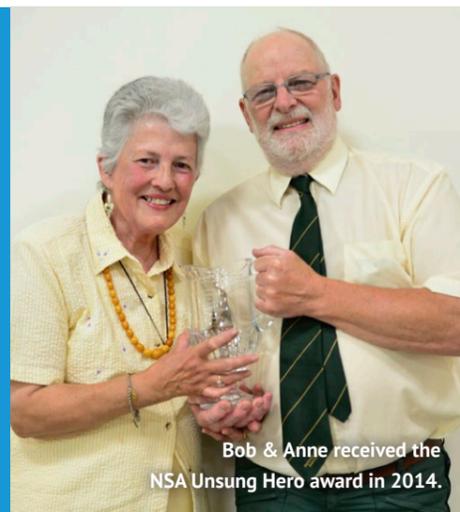
## Overcoming fears

It was a run-down farm in every way and quite a challenge. I had been fearful of moving to the country, and though it was true some old established farmers were suspicious of us as 'comers-in', there were enough folk who were welcoming. Even the frosty ones gradually thawed when they saw we were serious about farming, and especially when opportunities arose

## Letter to my younger self



NSA Next Generation thrives because of the enthusiasm of older NSA officeholders to share their time, expertise and advice. Through 2023, NSA has been embracing this by asking people to pen a letter to their younger selves – sharing what they wish they'd known when they were starting out. Here Anne Payne, former NSA Central Region Secretary, talks about being a sheep farming new entrant in the 1980s.



Bob & Anne received the NSA Unsung Hero award in 2014.

for Bob to help them with subsidy applications.

I would tell my younger self not to be so anxious about moving to a rural area, or even to a farm. I surprised myself at how much I enjoyed working with the animals. On a small acreage we were under no illusions about both the financial commitment and the returns, and continued to work part-time in social work, mainly in child protection. To quote an old Yorkshire saying: "If you have a big farm it keeps you; if you have a small farm you keep it." Although they didn't know it, Sheffield social services kept the farm going.

This was a lifestyle choice, but we had to find ways of adding value, and like most people, made our mistakes on the way. Gradually, we built up our Texel flock and quickly decided to get involved in recording systems – Bob's enthusiasm for this came from his time with

PIC – and this consolidated our reputation for genetic improvements. We sold rams and semen into Europe and the US, and enjoyed significant success in carcase competitions.

## Suckler addition

We also started to build up a small suckler herd of South Devons but were alarmed to find most of them not in calf the first year. Blood tests revealed they were low in copper and susceptible for this, but what we didn't know was that all the copper in the soil around us was locked up due to pollution from the nearby steelworks. I would tell my younger self to research everything carefully before making decisions. Eventually, we sold beef and lamb direct to friends and colleagues and they trusted us as producers.

NSA became a very important part of our development, both in learning opportunities and in becoming officeholders. Bob was NSA Central Region Chair for many years, until his death in 2015 where the Unsung Hero award was renamed in Bob's honour. I was Central Region Secretary for 16 years which I thoroughly enjoyed. I would tell my younger self not to expect members to reply immediately to invitations, but always canvass their opinions. People have busy lives and sometimes need reminders and encouragement to take part, but if they are kept informed they feel valued and often respond.

It's been quite a journey and I wouldn't have missed it for the world, but I would encourage my younger self to have a better work/life balance. However much you enjoy what you are doing it is good to take a break to avoid burnout.



Bob and Anne became renowned Texel breeders. (Picture by Yorkshire Post)

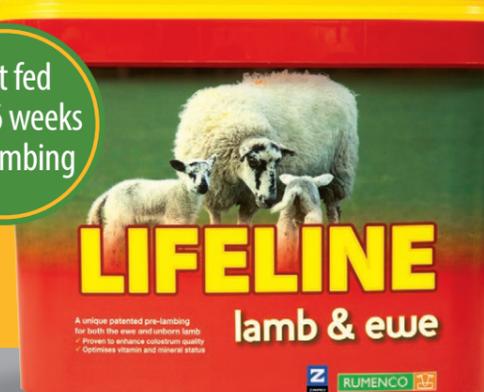
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Building local relations has increased grazing options, allowing Robert's store lamb business to grow.



# A willingness to ask and learn ensures success for NSA Eastern Region Chair

By Katie James, NSA

Robert Spink, newly-appointed NSA Eastern Region Chair, has come a long way from his initial starter flock of a handful of sheep grazing four acres.

Growing up at Dunhill Farm near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, a small, family arable farm of 70 acres (28ha), livestock was never part of the enterprise. A chance encounter with a local shepherd helped lay the foundations to what is now a substantial flock and successful business. "That shepherd, Jim Cresswell, became a mentor to me. I've learnt so much from him about sheep and to take opportunities when they are presented," Robert explains. These opportunities have led to Robert's establishment of a 600-ewe New Zealand Romney flock as well as a store lamb finishing business of

2,000-3,000 lambs per year, and a pig enterprise finishing 1,900 pigs on a two-stage system. Despite significant pig numbers, Robert remains a shepherd at heart. "I would call myself a sheep farmer first. A lot of decisions are out of my hands with the pigs but the sheep present a new challenge every day requiring management. I find that fulfilling and exciting," he adds. Robert's personable nature has allowed him to build a network of local landowners happy to work with him enabling sheep numbers to grow as the breeding flock and store lambs are rotated around permanent grazing, turnips and cover crops belonging to 15 different local landlords. He comments: "Through the winter we can have more than 3,500 sheep behind electric fences so it's a lot of work covering the ground. Luckily most of our landlords are within 20 minutes of the farm. It can be tight but ok."

## System change

Previously Robert combined the shepherding of his own flock with that of another respected local farmer, John Pawsey. "At that time, I had a Mule flock lambing indoors, but I could see the merits of his Romneys. I was keen to transition to a lower input but reasonably high output flock at home," he explains. "I was also tiring of indoor lambing – it was a lot of work to make it pay. The system was wrong. We were lambing in March without feeding creep, so would run out of quality grazing and be still running on lambs until the next January/February. "It's hard enough to make the Romneys pay when increased costs, especially fuel, are taken into consideration but now we have the saving from concentrates, haylage, labour, bedding etc. It was crippling before."



A switch to outdoor lambing has improved business efficiency.



Robert has a strong network of support on farm.

Robert's flock is now lambing outdoors in April, managed by himself and shepherd George Costello. Further support comes from wife Becca with both the day to day and more major business decisions made alongside Robert's mum Sally and taking into account young children Florence and Henry. Robert has also taken on a young shepherd on a college placement two days a week. "We like lambing Romneys," he says. "We don't feed anything apart from an energy bucket for triplets if leys are not there. The ewes come off cover crops in good condition and will carry themselves and their lambs through lambing." **Purebred** Ewes are kept pure with EBV recorded Romney rams providing quality lambs for breeding and sale. "For me the most important value in a ram is lamb survivability. If I can get the lambs alive on the ground I can do something with them," he comments. The flock typically achieves a scanning percentage of 165 -185% depending on the year although Robert always looks to rear over 150%. Once on the ground Robert will intervene as little as possible. Ewe and lamb welfare is his

priority so, providing the lambs have had sufficient colostrum, they are undisturbed. He believes the opportunity to allow the maternal bond quietly is a key advantage of outdoor lambing. He explains: "A sheep's natural place to lamb is under a hedge. Get the right sheep on the right grass and she will pop her twins out and that's where they will stay, creating the strongest bond never replicated in a pen." Practicality does mean he will castrate and tail lambs as early as he can. All replacement ewes are homebred with ewe lambs going to the ram unless conditions create a challenge.

"The drought in 2022 meant we didn't lamb ewe lambs this year but they have gone to the ram for lambing in 2024," Robert explains. Lambs are regularly weighed. "I'm a big fan of daily liveweight gain to assess the performance of stock and health of the lambs," says Robert. Lambs are mostly finished on turnips after Christmas. "We'd like to get them away sooner. We do sell some straight off the ewes and shortly after weaning but for us it's mostly a waiting game until early cover crops are ready or we find alternative grazing. We don't have the grass quality from our permanent pasture, although we have planted a GS4 mix as part of the mid-tier stewardship on farm."

## Deadweight

All lambs are finished and sold through a marketing group deadweight. He explains: "For the Romneys it makes more sense to sell in this way as they are always behind at the liveweight market. It's frustrating as I see the grading sheet so I know the quality is there." The store lamb enterprise provides a regular income to the farm and Robert considers that an important aspect of the business. He says: "We have established a good relationship with a farmer in the North of England who brings down large quantities of



Robert feels outdoor lambing encourages the maternal bond.

lambs to us. We run them on separate farms, all stock is dipped prior to arrival, and we ensure all equipment is thoroughly cleaned to maintain biosecurity. It's quite straight forward. We fence train the lambs, give them their second vaccination and off they go." The demand for finishers for store lambs combined with the resurgence in the use of sheep in arable rotations, and environmental based support schemes rewarding this, is creating opportunity for sheep farmers in his area. Robert says: "It's a great opportunity for the sector and the people involved. It makes sense to include sheep on arable, especially on sandy land here. The land hugely benefits from cover and the sheep on it over winter." But Robert does approach new grazing opportunities with some caution. He says: "At our last regional committee meeting it was raised by another local farmer some mixes of cover crops are not suitable for sheep but are still being drilled with the intention of them being grazed – We all agreed it has to work for both parties." He has clearly learnt a lot from his 10 years of building the business, but credits mistakes made with helping him develop. He says: "One of the key things with sheep farming is you can always

build on your experience and move forward. We've tried things and made mistakes but my message from doing this is to take it on the chin and learn from it. I'm confident we are now doing a good job with a progressive business."

## NSA Ambassador

As he now steps into the role of NSA Eastern Region Chair, he acknowledges the NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme he was part of in 2016 in helping him. "I gained so much from my year as an ambassador. It came at an important time for me and helped me make my enterprise more commercially viable. There is no obligation but personally it feels important for me to give something back," he says. "I owe a lot to previous Chair Dan Phipps with my business and with NSA. I'm now honoured to take the role from him. It's an exciting region to be part of with lots of sheep and good people working hard. Our NSA committee is strong with everyone looking forward to delivering for members."

## Farm facts

- The mixed enterprise covers land from 15 different landlords from its 70-acre (30ha) base.
- 600 New Zealand Romney ewe flock plus a store lamb finishing business.
- Low input business managed to produce high outputs wherever possible.
- 4,400 pigs finished annually as part of the combined business.
- Grazing cover crops, stubbles and permanent pasture in rotation is key to success.



In the region of 3,000 store lambs will be finished this year.

“We've tried things and made mistakes but my message from doing this is to take it on the chin and learn from it.” Robert Spink

# RoSA links farmers with advisers for business and environmental gains



By Katie James, NSA

Sheep farmers using the Register of Sheep Advisers (RoSA) to find professional help will now find a varied list of sheep consultants, veterinary professionals, animal medicine advisors and more.

For some who already have an established career in the sector the register can offer a fantastic opportunity for continued personal development and indeed allow for specialisation in an area of work. This was the case for experienced vet Matt Raine from the North Pennines.

Matt joined RoSA shortly after its launch in 2021. "I joined to gain further knowledge in the areas of the sector not covered by my day-to-day veterinary work and also to bolster my credentials as an adviser to sheep farmers," Matt comments.

## Holistic review

"It also worked well alongside my certificate of advanced veterinary practice I was studying for at the time. Combining RoSA with this meant I could offer my clients a more rounded service, covering wider aspects of their business as well as the veterinary input. I find being able to explore all aspects of the business rather than just an animal health perspective means I have more meaningful discussions with my clients and this is the part of my work I particularly enjoy."

Abby Cook, a farm business consultant from Gloucestershire, joined the register just over a year ago. As she is in the process of expanding her business to offer bespoke consultancy to sheep farming clients, she felt being part of RoSA would be of benefit.

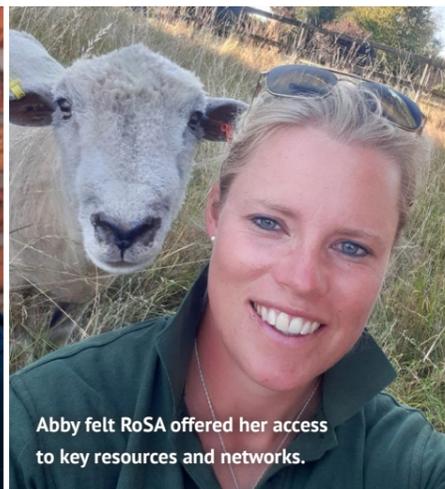


Matt joined RoSA to increase the breadth of his expertise.

She says: "I believe by joining I have improved access to a range of resources and a network of experts as well as being more visible to potential clients. As someone who is passionate about making our industry accessible to all, I think it is important to present a professional image. I believe RoSA will give clients the confidence in the services I offer and the knowledge I have as an accredited member."

## Opportunity

Matt continues: "RoSA offers farmers a chance to get in touch with a range of professionals, covering all aspects of their business or indeed future aspirations. It provides a great opportunity, particularly given the challenges being faced in our ever-changing industry. Whether it's from a productivity, economic or environmental perspective, using a RoSA adviser gives the chance to get input on all aspects of your business from those 'in the know' who also have in-depth sector knowledge."



Abby felt RoSA offered her access to key resources and networks.

Abby also believes RoSA is helping the sector to become more professional, something required to run viable, sustainable and profitable agricultural businesses.

She says: "One step towards this is to work more with advisers who can provide practical and pragmatic advice, and who are serious about continued development and knowledge exchange. A successful business needs to be professional and utilising advisers such as those on the register is a step towards futureproofing your business."

"In our industry, reputation and credibility count for a lot when you are looking to engage with professionals to support your business. I think RoSA offers the assurance the professionals who are members of RoSA are able to deliver high quality business advice and expertise. You can engage with professionals on the register feeling confident they are experts in their field."

Find out more about RoSA membership or how to find an adviser at [www.sheepadvisers.co.uk](http://www.sheepadvisers.co.uk).

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# Preparing for Lambing: Hypothermia and Hypoglycaemia in Young Lambs

Starvation, hypothermia, and hypoglycaemia are among the highest causes of mortality in newborn lambs – in wet and cold conditions as well as warm and sunny.

Adequate colostrum and brown fat (a type of fat that the lamb is born with) help the lamb through this period by increasing heat production. Difficult or premature births can cause weak lambs which contributes to hypothermia. Newborn lambs are fragile creatures and extremely susceptible to disease and infections. They are born with an almost sterile gut microbiome, and an exceptionally low inherent immunity. Good quality colostrum is of critical importance. In addition, lambs are born with low levels of crucial vitamins especially Vitamin E & A.

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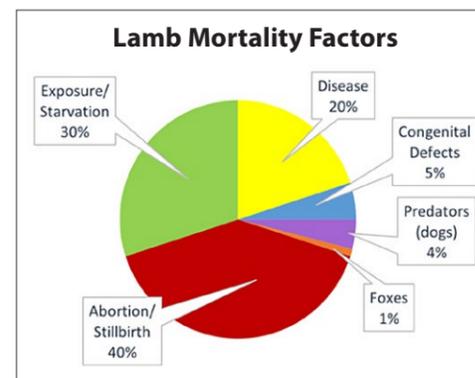
- Unique egg powder which help to combat E.coli infection.
- Selenium and vitamin E to help stimulate the immune system.
- Cobalt and vitamin B12 which accelerate the formation of greater numbers of red blood cells.

## Boosting immunity

**Provita Lamb Response** is a beneficial bacteria based oral formulation which acts preventatively to augment the gut commensal population of the newborn lamb with protective bacteria, thereby generating gut health, and helping to prevent the establishment of E. coli by boosting local immunity.

The product also supplies protective egg powder and Vitamins B & E to further enhance gut protection and stimulate early protection against E.coli, and to stimulate metabolism and growth. Readily available energy is also provided in the product. It contains:

- Beneficial bacteria which naturally diminishes E.coli bacteria, enhances immunity, and seals the newborn gut.
- Egg powder which provides high



concentrations of unique proteins which are more potent against E.coli than usual colostrum antibodies.

- High levels of vitamins necessary for the young animal's metabolism and supplies especially vitamin E, which stimulates the lymphocytes in the underdeveloped immune system, thus adding a further layer of protection.
- High energy to stimulate appetite, help prevent hypothermia and to stimulate blood flow through vital organs.

By Dr T.B Barragry, Provita

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# Protect your business and your home during the long winter nights

By Hannah Binns, NFU Mutual  **NFU Mutual**

With scanning on the horizon, thoughts on the farm have turned to getting those seasonal pre-lambing time jobs boxed off.

But one task farmers must not neglect is their farmyard security, especially as the winter months set in and thieves look to cash in using the cover of darkness.

Growing up on an upland sheep farm in Downham, Lancashire, I've seen my fair share of rural crime incidents over the years and know first-hand the additional pressure these can have on top of an already full plate, creating additional work at often extra cost.

They can also have an emotional toll, from second guessing and blaming yourself when targeted, to hearing unusual noises and being unable to sleep at night for fear the thieves may be back. Shockingly, our survey found that 70% of NFU reps knew farmers who had been repeat victims of rural crime, with many often feeling vulnerable in what is not only their workplace, but their family home.

## Highest costs

With farm theft costs at their highest in the autumn and early winter months – according to new analysis of our claims figures from the past two years – it is a real concern thieves will use the combination of darker nights and fewer people out and about in the next few months to target farmyards and rural residencies.

Determined criminals will often stop at nothing to get what they want. Smaller higher value machinery and equipment, such as quad bikes, all-terrain vehicles and trailers are being stolen in high numbers. These thieves are also using new technologies, such as online mapping systems, to scope out farms and work out routes to break in without being detected or disturbed.

My message to fellow farmers is simple: make sure your farm security is as tight as possible.

## Deter thieves

While no two farms or rural businesses are the same, and there is no silver bullet solution, there are some tried and tested measures proven to deter determined rural criminals.

Look at your farmyard from the perspective of a thief to identify security gaps. Ask yourself, are the entrance and exit points secure? Is there expensive equipment on display? Could you use multiple layers of security to protect anything of value?

Thieves hate being seen or heard, so measures such as alarms, security lighting and systems that send notifications and CCTV images to mobile phones can help alert you to an intruder's presence.

Fighting rural crime is also a collaborative effort, so it's essential to report all suspicious activities and crimes to the police, as well as to use groups such as Farm Watch and Rural Watch to share local intel and alert others within your community.

## Tips for fortifying farm businesses

- Close and lock yard gates.
- Park farm machinery and farm vehicles out of sight, preferably in a locked building.
- Remove GPS units where possible and lock them in a secure place overnight.
- Keep records of the makes, models and serial numbers of farm kit.
- Ensure security lighting, intruder alarms and cameras cover all entrance points and are working correctly.
- CESAR-mark, etch or mark the farm name and postcode onto kit.
- Add tracking devices and immobilisers onto vehicles. Use mechanical immobilisers such as steering wheel locks or pedal locks on vehicles.
- Keep fuel tanks in secure compounds and consider using locks and sensors.
- Remove keys from vehicles and store them in a safe, secure place.
- Join a local farm watch group or WhatsApp network to keep updated about local rural crime trends and suspicious sightings.

# Finding a better balance between food, energy and environmental security

By George Dunn, Tenant Farmers Association  **tenant Farmers Association**

Although the islands of the UK cover a relatively small geographical area, they contain an immense amount of diversity.

There is great variation between the four countries of the UK and in England alone there is a huge variety of landscapes from the flat acres of the arable east through to the rugged terrain of the south west moors or the rolling hills of the Peak District and the iconic hills and mountains of the Lake District. However, one common thing across all of these landscapes is they have been managed, maintained and worked by generations of farmers. Of course, the primary focus of that activity has been producing food. Yet in addition, we have seen the provision of a panoply of public goods from these farmed landscapes.

## Demands

But we are now experiencing a heightened level of competing demands on our farmland, between the needs of food, environmental and energy security. For such a geographically constrained nation, it is alarming we lack anything like a credible land-use strategy that considers how to hold those necessary but competing objectives in balance. To some extent, the planning system has attempted to regulate the extent to which agricultural land should be sacrificed for the greater economic or social good, but there is not the same approach for land-use change into forests and woodland, rewilding, nature rich environments, nutrient balancing or biodiversity offsetting.

Equally, there seems to be an unhealthy assumption in many circles that the only way in

which the objectives of environmental and energy security can be confirmed is through the abandonment of traditional agriculture – a so-called land sparing approach. This of course is nonsense. Take woodland planting as a case in point. We will achieve much more for landscape, biodiversity and carbon outcomes by taking an approach that sees tree planting on farmland in hedges and edges, in scrubby, difficult to farm areas, as shelter belts or as screening, rather than the broadacre tree planting schemes that appear to be the norm.

## Tenancies

Within the tenanted sector of agriculture there is a huge concern about the extent to which tenant farmers are losing access to land because their landlords are being lured into lucrative woodland planting schemes. Landlords should not be rewarded with public money for removing land from the tenanted sector of agriculture.

The land within the tenanted sector provides necessary liquidity to the most fixed factor of production in agriculture, gives opportunities for new entrants and allows progressive farmers to acquire bigger acreages without having to tie up working capital in the process.

In England, Defra wishes to maintain the current area of land within the let sector of agriculture. Instead, we need a new approach that reimagines the landlord tenant system in agriculture.

Landlords and tenants should be able to jointly apply for land management schemes in which both parties draw benefits and accept liabilities.

The necessary drive for renewable energy is another area which needs some creative thought. Large swathes of farmland have given way to solar schemes which, in some circumstances,



Buildings should be utilised for solar panels, says Mr Dunn.

has also displaced tenant farmers who have lost viable businesses as a result. However, some brave local authority planning departments have turned down applications for solar schemes where there has been concern about the impact on the personal circumstances of tenant farmers, loss of habitat, loss of best and most versatile agricultural land and a lack of analysis of alternative sites.

## Renewable energy

Of course, the most obvious alternative site for solar energy schemes should be the acres of rooftops available on farm buildings, commercial property and domestic residences. The limiting factor however is easy access to a grid connection.

This is where the Government needs to be stepping up its investment if it is serious about seeing the massive expansion in renewable energy we will definitely need. We should not be sacrificing prime agricultural land and the businesses of tenant farmers for this. We should be making it easier for rooftop solar schemes to succeed on the basis of investing in the necessary infrastructure in the grid to make this a reality.

Policymakers also need a broader and better understanding about the environmental benefits of livestock farming. Whether it be from the perspective of net zero or biodiversity, the vilification of the sort of grass-based livestock farming systems practiced across the UK is at best ill-informed and at worst deliberately misleading.

Livestock farmers are the primary custodians of carbon already locked up under grass fields while also managing the daily sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere. Through their dung and grazing practices their livestock are doing much to enhance the biodiversity net gain of our nation while contributing to our food security. Balance in everything is key.



Farmland provides natural carbon stores and delivers biodiversity while producing food.

# Bureaucracy, complexity and costs – do we need to reassess EU trade?

By Nan Jones, BMPA   
British Meat Processors Association

The UK sheep sector exports about a third of its production and, of that, around 98% of fresh lamb goes to the EU.

For this reason, the UK sheep sector is heavily dependent on EU exports and it is vital trade is as frictionless as possible. Many promises were made when the UK decided to leave the EU in 2016, one of which was how we could develop better regulation to relieve the burden for businesses. EU membership required the UK to adhere to EU rules and regulations, limiting the ability of the UK to diverge.

The irony is that despite leaving the EU, the UK is still required to comply with EU rules but now must provide fully qualified vets to inspect and sign off all products of animal origin that leave UK shores. This also comes with other requirements such as additional paperwork, record keeping and systems to support the issuing of export health certificates (EHCs), port charges, customs agents' fees.. the list goes on. All of this adds cost and complexity to the system, which our government promised to reduce.

## Processors

BMPA is often asked why do we need the EU? Can't we simply sell more of our products on the domestic market? To answer, it's important to remember the meat industry works differently to most other industries. It's not buying specific parts to build a product such as a car or ingredients to make a cake. Meat processors start

with the whole animal and must find a market for each part.

BMPA argues the income received for the cuts of meat eaten by UK consumers does not cover the cost of the animal and processing. This is why a healthy export market is crucial for meat processors, especially for items with little or no demand on the domestic market, such as offal and animal by-products. Currently most hides and skins, 80% of fifth quarter and 50% of red offal are exported to the EU, as there is no UK market.

In 2022 the value of sheep offal exported from the UK equated to £6.5m, with 95% of that value coming from products exported to the EU. Exports are also key to balancing the UK market at times of peak production, without which domestic livestock prices would fall as the UK market comes at risk of being overwhelmed with product.

## Red tape

With very few exceptions, some part of every animal produced for slaughter in the UK will be exported to the EU. For this to be allowed, every part of the supply chain must comply with EU public and animal health rules, meaning the UK is already aligning with the EU. But, because we are not legally aligned, we now must undergo additional paperwork and checks, costing UK businesses more. This extra cost must be absorbed somewhere in the supply chain, either through lower margins or higher prices, driving food price inflation.

An example of how the supply chain continues to adhere to EU rules is the recent change the EU made to its animal health regulations to include



Fifth quarter, offal, skins and hides are exported to the EU.

the need for farms to receive regular animal health visits by a vet to allow the meat from those animals to be exported to the EU.

The EU does not stipulate the frequency of the visits or the method by which a farm must prove a visit has taken place, yet the UK authorities have decided to interpret this as an annual vet visit evidenced by a vet attestation signed by the vet. BMPA accepts the general principle of regular vet visits, but feels this adds yet another layer of bureaucracy and cost.

Currently the UK is predominantly aligned with the EU and this example shows how we must remain so if we want to export to that market. However, as the UK starts to change its import regulations with the new border target operating model, BMPA suggests divergences that may affect our export status will emerge.

## Alignment

BMPA believes most of this would fall away if the UK were to formally align with the EU. This would remove the need for vets to certify things we are already doing, the need to provide EHCs and the need for animal and public health border checks at EU border control posts. Currently, certification alone is costing the industry more than £60m per annum and, given we are already complying but still having to jump through all the certification and sanitary and phytosanitary control hoops to prove it with no added value, BMPA argues alignment would save hundreds of millions of pounds.

While this change cannot happen overnight it should be considered. BMPA is lobbying for UK policymakers to have a more in-depth understanding of the food supply chain and the cost implications that affect farmers, processors and ultimately the final consumer.



EU red tape is still putting demands on UK producers and processors.

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# Knowledge exchange programme challenges farmer thinking for a resilient future



Highlighting a 'one size fits all' approach as outdated and not always successful, AHDB has launched a new knowledge exchange platform that recognises every farmer and business as an individual.

In mid-October, AHDB unveiled its new systems-based knowledge exchange programme - called Roots to Resilience - challenging farming businesses to stop thinking in black and white and unlock their full potential. This systems-based approach recognises that agriculture is not just about individual people, crops or livestock but involves a multitude of factors, relationships and feedback loops that influence each other and the entire system.

Samantha Charlton of AHDB comments: "Our levy payers are at the heart of AHDB activities and

Roots to Resilience is about shining a light on the people in farming. It can be challenging to focus on the future and invest in yourself when your time and headspace is filled with daily tasks and problem solving. AHDB wants to challenge this thinking and help businesses reach their long-term goals by looking at the entire system instead of focussing on technical application alone."

## Aims

The new programme was kicked off with a three-day workshop in the West Midlands for farmers and a two-day workshop for industry, focussing on developing understanding of the new systems-based approach and discussing how they will work with the involved farmers and AHDB to motivate positive change.

Key industry topics identified and discussed at these workshops will inform AHDB Beef & Lamb's knowledge exchange programme activity



throughout 2024 - open to all levy payers. It will provide more targeted support for levy payers in areas that will make a difference to individuals and their businesses.

## Workshops

Mrs Charlton said: "The programme is designed to give the opportunity to step away from practical farming and focus on long-term planning. It is very much about focussing on people and what they want to achieve - not just in their businesses, but in their lives, as we know how intrinsically linked the two are.

"The initial workshop will play a pivotal role in not only providing those attending with bespoke action plans for their businesses, but in equipping us at AHDB with greater insight into the topics you as levy payers want and need more help with, so AHDB can deliver the best value for money in terms of the support services offered."

More at [www.ahdb.org.uk/roots-to-resilience](http://www.ahdb.org.uk/roots-to-resilience).



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SCOPS updates and resources can help with parasite control now and into next year.

# SCOPS activities demonstrate another busy year of parasite control

By Lesley Stubbings, independent sheep consultant



Looking at the highlights of Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep (SCOPS) work over the past year, it not only provides us with up to date advice but also helps us to understand what to look out for in 2024.

**Sheep scab.** SCOPS has been heavily involved in promoting best practice scab control since the news broke in 2018 of resistance to the injectable (group 3-ML) treatments, as injectables and organophosphate (OP) plunge dips (containing diazinon) are the only two effective scab treatments.



In the last couple of years this has come to fruition, with a huge increase in sheep scab control activities in all the devolved nations. In England, the RDPE-funded 'For Flocks Sake' programme saw 300 sheep farmers in three regions come together, using the Elisa blood test and coordinated treatments. Preliminary results show that after just one full season, the prevalence of scab in these areas has fallen dramatically. In Scotland, there are projects running on Lewis and Harris and other groups are coming together. In Northern Ireland a blood testing programme has uncovered the true level of scab, and in Wales an eradication project began earlier this year.

SCOPS is now working with other groups to develop a scab control plan to take us to 2030, which builds on the lessons learned in recent years and encompasses the whole of the UK.

### Mobile dipper code of practice.

With the various scab initiatives, SCOPS has also had to ensure safe and effective use of OP dip. With resistance to the MLs confirmed, its vital we guard against OP resistance and preserve our only line of defence. More OP dip is being used, and it's important this is done safely from both a human and environmental perspective. The code of practice outlines what you should expect from a mobile contractor so you can dip safely and effectively. Don't accept anything less than a professional service and remember it is illegal to use an OP in a jetter or a shower.



### Worming treatment check (WTC).

This test is an integral part of the English Animal Health & Welfare Pathway vet review launched earlier this year. In Scotland similar testing is now available.

The WTC is designed to check how effective a worming treatment has been, which means it also covers a discussion with your vet about dosing accuracy and the use of faecal egg counts (FECs). If carried out correctly and at the right time, it can give an indication if resistance is present, prompting further investigation.



As expected there have been some teething problems. Common problems include faecal samples that are not fresh, samples from ewes rather than lambs and too few or too many days between treatment. A poor test will result in inaccurate results and lead to making the wrong decision regarding wormer choices. SCOPS advice on maximising funding to complete a WTC can be found in the April/May edition of *Sheep Farmer* magazine.

**Liver fluke.** It's going to be another roller coaster ride this season for liver fluke following the extremes of weather over the summer and autumn, coupled with huge variations across the country. Testing is key to deciding if and when to treat livestock for liver fluke. It's expected the main risk period will be much later in some areas this year, so it's very important to keep testing. Don't get caught out relying on one negative test. Download a copy of the SCOPS testing poster and visit the SCOPS website for regular updates.



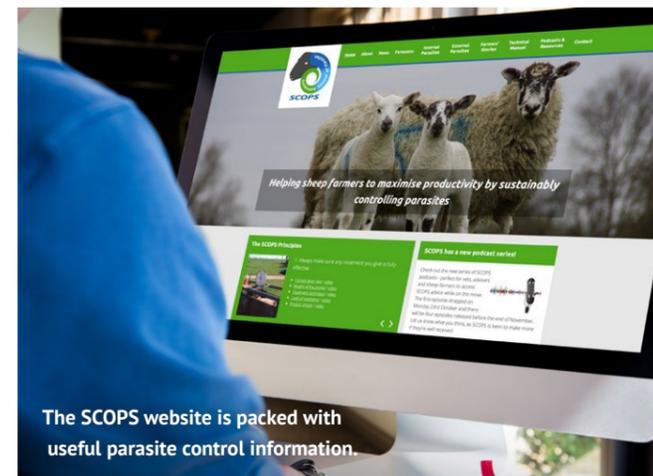
**Monitoring medicines in the environment.** Interest in the impact of veterinary medicines on the environment has been growing in recent years. Recently SCOPS met with the COWS group (the cattle equivalent of SCOPS) to look at how it can promote sustainable parasite control as the route to protect both animal health and welfare and minimise environmental risks. Watch out for more on this in 2024.



**SCOPS podcasts.** SCOPS launched the first series of four podcasts in late October. These feature a host and two guests discussing topics such as SCOPS principles in practice, the use of FECs, and controlling sheep scab and liver fluke. Running at only 30-40 minutes, it's hoped they are a good listen when you have a quieter period, or even on the tractor. Feedback on future topic ideas is welcomed.



For further information on all topics discussed in this article, along with access to webinars and podcasts, visit [www.scops.org.uk](http://www.scops.org.uk).



The SCOPS website is packed with useful parasite control information.

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# Are you getting ewe nutrition right in the critical late pregnancy period?

By Fiona Crowden and Lorna Shaw, SRUC



Assuming ewes have reached optimal body condition pre-tupping and maintained condition through winter, the next key nutritional period is the eight weeks prior to lambing.

Correct nutrition in late pregnancy has huge benefits to the flock. For example, better quality and quantity of colostrum, improved maternal bonding, better lamb survival and reduced worm egg outputs by ewes after lambing, as well as reduced incidence of twin lamb disease, mastitis and hypocalcaemia (staggers).

Poor nutrition will have lasting effects on the lamb crop with lower birth weights, lower growth rates and increased incidence of disease. Ultimately, getting late pregnancy nutrition right will increase the profitability of the flock and decrease the work in the lambing shed fighting against those diseases associated with poor nutrition.

## Requirements

It's essential the energy and protein requirements of the ewe are met in late pregnancy. As the lambs grow in the uterus, there is less room for the rumen and the energy density of the diet needs to increase. This is achieved by offering better quality forage, such as spring grass, or concentrate if the available forage quality is insufficient.

Protein is essential for optimal lamb birth weights, and the production of good quality colostrum and milk. Therefore insufficient dietary protein is associated with more disease in both ewes and their lambs.

The ration offered in late pregnancy will depend on the individual farm, but will likely comprise a forage, concentrate and perhaps root crops. On most farms, forage forms the basis of the pre-lambing ration and analysis of conserved forage is essential as the nutritional quality can vary considerably. A nutritionist can then help advise on a concentrate and feeding rate that complements the available forage.

## Concentrates

It is important to remember sudden introduction of concentrate or feeding more than 0.5kg/head can lead to ruminal acidosis, which will decrease rumen efficiency. Where a group of animals requires more than 0.5kg/head concentrate, this should be split into two feed sessions.

Energy buckets, blocks and liquids are designed to complement grass products and vary in formulation. Intakes of individual sheep can be variable, therefore there is a risk relying on these products will result in failure to meet the ewes' requirements.

Having taken the time to analyse forage and formulate a ration, it is important to ensure all ewes are able to eat the intended ration. A perfect ration is no good if some of the ewes can't access it. Ensure there is adequate trough space for concentrate feeding – 45cm/head for larger lowland or horned ewes – and forage provided indoors requires 15cm/head if provided ad lib, increasing to 25cm/head if access is restricted.

If feeding bales outdoors, one ring feeder is required for every 24 ewes to ensure bullying does not decrease intakes. Easy access to clean water is also important when considering rations.



Since concentrate contents can legally vary by a significant amount from the label declaration, and forage can vary from the analysed sample, it is worthwhile checking whether your calculated ration is sufficient for your ewes. This is usually done three to four weeks prior to the start of lambing, late enough in pregnancy to test the ration but also allowing time to make small changes if necessary.

Ewe nutrition profiling is done via blood testing, costing around £45 for 10 animals, and tests for deficiency in protein or energy in the ration by measuring urea and beta-hydroxybutyrate respectively. Additional biochemical parameters to look at longer term protein status can be added if needed. Note that non-esterified fatty acids, which is commonly checked in dairy cows, is not useful in sheep.

## Nutrition profiling

If undertaking nutrition profile blood tests you should ideally sample 10 ewes per group. Sampling twin and triplet bearing ewes will help ensure their needs are being met. Sampling single bearing ewes may help determine if the level of feeding can be safely reduced. If you do not scan, sample 10 representative ewes from the group, avoiding ewe lambs and/or shearlings as they are more likely to be bearing singles. When arranging the vet visit, make sure to avoid sampling ewes within four hours of feeding concentrate, as this will affect the results.

Monitoring and managing ewe body condition from tupping through the winter to lambing provides a solid base for a good lambing. Making sure energy and protein needs are met by analysing forage, formulating a tailored ration and checking a nutrition profile will help to ensure a problem free lambing and a more profitable lamb crop.



Providing the correct nutrition reduces the risk of disease.



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Maximising home-grown feed will help rations meet ewes requirements.

# The importance of ration planning and metabolic profiles pre-lambing



By J.P. Crilly, ECSRHM

Good ewe nutrition around lambing will help prevent many problems and is the basis of a good start to lactation.

Planning your ration well can also help ensure you are not spending money unnecessarily.

The energy requirements of the ewe throughout early and mid-pregnancy are not much more than maintenance, so meeting them is easy. This all changes in late pregnancy, as the lamb undergoes its most rapid period of growth at this time, so energy demand increases dramatically, especially for twin and triplet-bearing ewes.

At the same time, the potential feed intake drops, as the enlarging uterus limits the size of the rumen. Planning nutrition appropriately helps avoid complications such as twin lamb disease, hypocalcaemia, mastitis in ewes by ensuring good milk production, and all manner of infectious diseases in lambs by ensuring colostrum is both ample and good quality. Our aim with a ration is to meet the ewe's requirements at this critical time, in a way that maximises rumen health and utilisation of home-grown forages and feed.

## Forage

Forage should form the basis of your ration. It is both the cheapest feed and the safest. Money spent on forage analysis is well worth it. Remember to analyse silage from different clamps or hay from different fields or cuts separately, as they can vary considerably. Better quality silage can be prioritised for later pregnancy, and twin and triplet ewes. This will help avoid problems like twin lamb disease, and will also allow concentrate feed to be used in a more targeted fashion, keeping costs down.

The other pieces of information you need to apply your ration planning to your flock is a rough estimate of your average ewe weight, the scanning result and the body condition scores, as these influence what the energy requirements of the ewes are.

Ewes will eat about 2% of their bodyweight in dry matter (DM) per day. They will manage more if the feed is digestible – for example, clamp silage based total mixed rations – and less if it is poorly digestible, such as low-quality hay or straw.

## Available energy

Work out the energy provided by forage alone. A working example: if the big-bale silage is 10.1MJ ME/kgDM, and the ewes are 70kg on average, then the daily energy intake on silage alone is  $70 \times 0.02 \times 10.1 = 14.14\text{MJ}$ . This can then be compared to a chart of ewe energy requirements.

Where the energy provided falls short of requirements then this indicates a need for supplementary feeding. By and large, the provision of concentrate feed results in substitution of forage by concentrate in terms of dry matter intake (DMI). For example, if the DMI of silage alone is  $70 \times 0.02 = 1.4\text{kg/day}$ , and the ewe is then given 0.2kgDM of concentrate feed, the DMI of silage will then be  $1.4 - 0.2 = 1.2\text{kg/day}$ . The exception to this is when the forage is relatively poor quality and limited digestibility. Then providing additional energy and protein from the concentrate feed increases the speed of digestion, and so the DMI increases, but this process is only likely to increase dry matter intakes from 1.6% or 1.8% bodyweight to 2%.

Continued overleaf.



Higher quality silage is better for twin and triplet bearing ewes.

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The new energy provision can then be calculated from the energy content of the concentrate and the forage, and the respective amounts now eaten. For example, to the silage above, 0.2kgDM of 12MJ ME concentrate is added. Energy now provides =  $(0.2 \times 12) + (1.2 \times 10.1) = 14.52\text{MJ}$ .

Over-provision of concentrates will reduce the energy actually available to the ewe as this will result in ruminal acidosis, which decreases the efficiency of digestion. As a rule of thumb, the maximum concentrate provision to a ewe is 50% of her DMI. For a 70kg ewe, DMI = 1.4 kg, so maximum concentrate given per day should be 0.7kgDM. At these higher levels of concentrate feeding this should be split into two feeds per day, so 0.35kg twice a day. The energy provision of this level of concentrate feed in our example =  $(0.7 \times 12) + (0.7 \times 10.1) = 15.47\text{MJ}$ .

### Condition

Where ewes are above a body condition score of 2.5, we can afford for them to slowly lose weight in the run up to lambing. Controlled weight loss will allow about 2MJ of energy a day

to the ewe, so this can be subtracted from the tabulated amount to work out what the energy required from the diet is. Thinner ewes do not have the reserves for this, so we need to try to meet all of their requirements.

If this has whetted your appetite for doing your own ration calculations, literature is available on the AHDB knowledge hub. If not, then consider speaking to your sheep vet, nutritionist or adviser, as they should all be happy to help you calculate a ration for your sheep. It is helpful if you have forage analysis and breakdowns of the concentrate feed you plan to use, but if you don't, do not worry, there are estimate values that can be used in the first instance.

### Monitoring

It is important to remember there is the ration on paper and then there is the ration fed to the sheep. It is important to keep monitoring the quality of the forage as you feed it out, and if it looks like it has changed substantially, submit more for analysis to allow the ration to be recalculated. It is also important to ensure



Energy demands change in the lead up to lambing.

all those involved in feeding the sheep are clear about what the ration is.

The best ration in the world will do no good if the sheep can't get to it. Check feed space for ewes. You should aim for 20cm/ewe for continuously available feed and 45cm/ewe for discontinuous feeding (and 60cm/ewe for triplet-bearing ewes) for standard commercial ewes. If your sheep are much larger or smaller, adjust accordingly.

Also consider access to the feed space, and remember that lameness, quite as much as it is a painful condition and a welfare issue, will reduce the ewes capacity to get to the feed, just as missing teeth or jaw problems will also limit intakes.

Finally, don't forget it is possible to ask the sheep what they think of the diet by blood sampling them for a metabolic profile 3-4 weeks prior to lambing. This can help identify if things are going wrong with ewe nutrition before major problems develop, and with enough time to implement changes before lambing.

For more on ration calculations search for 'Improving ewe nutrition for Better Returns' and 'Feeding the ewe' at [www.ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library](http://www.ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library).

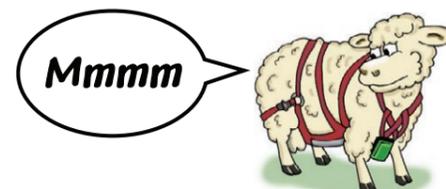


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There's always work to be done at lambing time.



## Preparing for lambing – a guide for taking on student help

### vetPartners

With the lambing season for some upon us and for others approaching, it's worth planning ahead for external lambing assistance.

It is no secret veterinary and agriculture students can be invaluable help during lambing, with many required to carry out on-farm placements as part of their studies.

Sharminda Lockwood, veterinary surgeon at Westpoint Farm Vets says: "Engaging student help provides additional assistance for a variety of tasks, freeing you up to oversee lambing and continue with other day-to-day farm tasks. During busy times an extra pair of hands can help ensure

all lambs receive optimal colostrum for example, enhancing the likelihood of lamb survival."

Mrs Lockwood says even individuals with limited experience can be valuable at lambing, as they can be assigned straightforward but labour-intensive sheep husbandry tasks such as feeding orphan lambs and topping up water buckets.

"More experienced students can help with monitoring the lambing yards, assisting with difficult births, colostrum management and fostering," she explains.

### Work experience

For students, a lambing season provides essential hands-on experience and an insight into the hard work of the livestock industry, something not always available in a typical lecture setting.

"For vet students specifically, they can build confidence and relationship skills by understanding farm operations and their challenges, positioning them well for future careers as farm vets," says Mrs Lockwood.

Beyond the immediate benefits, assisting during a lambing season can also help encourage young people to continue their journeys into the farming sector by establishing and strengthening bonds between work experience students and the farming community.

Mrs Lockwood says an increasing urban-rural divide has created difficulty for getting on-farm experience.

"Lambing placements can bring city-based vet students closer to rural life and exposure to the farming sector," she explains.

By offering lambing placements, you can help students develop a deeper appreciation for farming and hopefully consider a career as livestock vets or shepherds.

"For those wanting to proactively contact agricultural and veterinary universities for lambing assistance, I'd advise making a start in the autumn or early winter. This will give you plenty of time to source suitable students," she says.

"Farms that have previously hosted vet students for a lambing season are likely to be registered on the vet schools list, allowing students to reach out directly."

Don't forget, as NSA members you can advertise your lambing placement and search for potential students through the NSA Lambing List.

"Once in contact with students, you should arrange an informal in-person or telephone interview, to better understand the student's experience and expectation but also ensure the placement is a match to the farm requirements," advises Mrs Lockwood.

### Expectations

After finding suitable students, set clear expectations from the start. Mrs Lockwood explains it is important to agree on terms and hours beforehand. "For example, common hours are 7am-5pm, with the option to experience night-lambing should a student wish," she says.

When bed and board are provided or multiple students are on-farm, dividing day, as well as night shifts, between yourself and the students might be preferable. "This offers experience of

night lambing without exhausting the students and evenly distributing demands and intensities of lambing," she says.

When hosting multiple students, it is also important to assign them specific roles to ensure effective task distribution and prevent them working as a group and missing problems.

"For instance, designate one student to monitor the lambing yards, while another covers pen management and ensures newborn lambs receive optimal colostrum and young lambs are topped up," she explains.

Mrs Lockwood emphasises the need for provision of tailored support to students, acknowledging the varied levels of experience they bring, and assigning tasks appropriately based on their skill set and familiarity with the work.

### Guidance

Mrs Lockwood continues: "Regularly offering guidance, supervision and constructive feedback is important, as is creating an environment where students feel at ease asking questions and seeking clarity, thereby deepening their grasp of farming practices. This will set all parties up for a good experience. Before students start, it's useful to share a kit list, including items such as wellies and waterproofs."

To further prepare students for the lambing season, Mrs Lockwood recommends contacting your local vet to see if there are lambing courses suitable for students to attend.

"Sponsoring students for lambing courses is particularly useful if you know you don't have the time to train them during the placement. Online courses are also available and a great option, allowing students to prepare themselves for a successful lambing season and learn alongside their course, at a relatively low cost," says Mrs Lockwood.

In terms of best practice, students should be encouraged to follow protocols, like wearing gloves for all interventions, and adhering to strict hygiene and biosecurity for both their own health and that of the flock. Ensure you have appropriate public liability and employment insurance and provide a health and safety induction.

"Engaging students and providing a positive lambing season experience benefits students and can influence their career choices by encouraging a future in the farming industry. It also significantly aids you with your business by ensuring greater attention can be given to ewe and lamb welfare," Mrs Lockwood concludes.

Members wishing to advertise a lambing placement can visit the NSA Lambing List at [www.nationalsheep.org.uk/lambing-list](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/lambing-list).



Placements can help inspire students into an agricultural career.

## Interview questions for students

1. What is your motivation for wanting to do a lambing season?
2. Are you comfortable around sheep?
3. Do you have any lambing experience and, if so, what?
4. What skills do you have already?
5. What would you like to learn/gain more experience in?
6. Do you require accommodation?

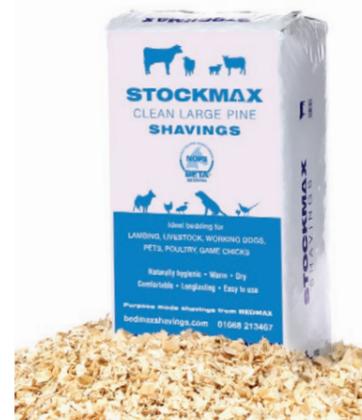


Students offer an extra pair of hands during a busy lambing.

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# Looking out for the small wins and marginal gains this lambing season



Learnings from the 450 Welsh sheep and beef farms involved in HCC's five-year Red Meat Development Stock+ project have highlighted proactive, on-farm flock and herd health planning as key to boosting businesses.

The Stoc+ sheep farms, which each received three annual health planning sessions with their chosen vets over a three-year period, revealed worm control, lameness and fertility as the top three health priorities.

While proactive flock health management is important all-year round, it is no more so pronounced and prominent as it is during both the run up to lambing and the period itself.

Lameness can be prevalent and problematic during the lambing season, more so when sheep are housed. Lameness is also costly because it is painful and expensive to treat and impacts negatively on sheep welfare and productivity.

John Richards managed Stoc+ for HCC. He says: "Knowing the issues caused by lameness, we sought to undertake a pilot project focusing solely on lameness and interventions that could help."

In 2022, 45 individuals took part with specialist vets Fiona Lovatt and Phillippa Page leading on veterinary advice. The participants followed the five-point plan of avoid, treat, quarantine, vaccinate, cull – and utilised best practice management techniques such as footbathing and not regularly foot trimming.



## Consequences

The consequences of these production losses for flock economics eclipse the costs of either treatment or control measures, suggesting loss of productivity alone might be as much as £14/ewe/year for a flock with 10% lame ewes. Expert opinion suggests ewe lameness causes a 15% reduction in body condition, 15% reduction in conception rate, 2-5% reduction in ewe survival depending on time of year, 15% reduction in lambing percentage and numbers of finished lambs, and a 12% reduction in lamb survival.

Mr Richards continues: "Those who took part in the lameness pilot project recorded successful results. Between the first and second year of the project, farmers saw a reduction from 4.3% of lameness in the flock to 2.8%. If we extrapolate these percentage figures to the 4.8m ewes in Wales in 2021, an improvement of lameness prevalence from 4.3% to 2.8% would amount to 72,000 fewer lame ewes across Wales.

"In addition to the implications for improved welfare and taking a conservative £3.90/ewe, the overall cost saving would be £280,800."

The results also demonstrated for every flock

that did not improve there were 2.7 flocks that did improve. Lameness in lambs also fell from 4.6% to 3.8%, and 60.5% of those involved reduced the time they spent treating lame sheep. "That has got to be an important bonus, especially during the busy lambing period," says Mr Richards

## Lambs reared

Independent analysis of the Stoc+ project also highlighted lambs reared increased from 125% to 127%, with more than half of farms improving on their baseline data.

Mr Richards explains: "While a 2% point increase may not seem particularly high, on average this would mean an extra 10 lambs reared from 500 ewes. Across the whole Welsh breeding flock of 4.8m breeding ewes, this could mean an extra 96,000 lambs to sell at a potential value of £80 per lamb or £7.68m, undeniably a significant boost to the sector.

"It's also important to note that the drought in the summer of 2022 impacted on scanning percentages at a national level, and had there been more typical weather, an even higher improvement may have been recorded.

"These results are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the benefits and improvements achieved thanks to the Stoc+ project. One thing that is abundantly clear to us is that these marginal gains – tackling lameness or improving lambs reared – are important, particularly when they can be stacked on other marginal gains and built on year on year."

For more on the Stoc+ Project and to access project resources visit [www.meatpromotion.wales](http://www.meatpromotion.wales).



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# Nutrient deficiencies in forage addressed through prescription nutrition

Improved lamb weight gains and forage quality increases can be achieved through tailored grassland nutrition says Abby Kellet of Origin Fertilisers.

"Prescription fertiliser is becoming a key part of many grassland nutrition strategies. As you look to maximise the efficiency of each application by applying more of what the crop and soil require, using data from a broad-spectrum soil analysis to target nutrient deficiencies and influence decision making allows a better insight into the health of your soil," she says.

Miss Kellet refers to a recent trial in Northumberland that compared a typical nitrogen grassland fertiliser with a blended product including nutrients highlighted as deficient in the soil analysis.

Miss Kellett comments: "It's easy to resort to applying straight nitrogen or spreading the same product as last year, but in this trial a balanced fertiliser resulted better quality forage."

## Split field

The prescription fertiliser applied to one half of the field was specifically developed for the trial based on the deficiencies in the soil's profile. The other part of the field had straight ammonium nitrate applied. Measurements included weighing lambs at three stages – birth, eight weeks and 16 weeks – along with soil and forage samples.

The whole field was deficient in several nutrients including selenium, sodium, zinc and manganese and the prescribed fertiliser included seven additional nutrients compared with the

straight ammonium nitrate application and a 15% reduction in nitrogen applied.

Miss Kellett explains how using less nitrogen and increasing other nutrients can result in plants using nitrogen more efficiently.

"Considering the nitrogen was reduced across the prescription treatment, the samples revealed more than 30% more nitrogen in the forage as the synergy of nutrients in the profile had improved. The increased presence of sulphur helped nitrogen conversion," she says.

The trial also demonstrated increases in early lamb weight gains and forage quality when compared with a traditional nitrogen application.

"The early liveweight gains are key to reduce days to slaughter which may also translate into bigger, healthier and better-quality ewe lambs for mating," continues Miss Kellett.

## Soil health

With many farms in England entering government-funded schemes focused on soil health, many will be conducting soil samples. Miss Kellett suggests using this information to highlight and address mineral deficiencies at the source to improve forage before consumption, rather than acting retrospectively.

"Those using a lot of nitrogen to maximise grass output could benefit from prescription matching, as reducing nitrogen spend considerably, and targeting deficiencies in the soil profile with secondary nutrients, will have both environmental and financial benefits," she adds.

During the first eight weeks, lambs grazing the ammonium nitrate treated area gained on average 330g/head/day, which led to an eight-week average of 23.5kg per head. The blended



Matching fertiliser to soil requirements can increase its efficacy.

treated pasture registered 358g/head/day, which translated to 25.3kg per head. She says despite the added cost of micronutrients in the prescription blend, paybacks such as nitrogen reduction, increased forage quality and higher lamb weight gains, meant the tailored application offered a greater return over straight ammonium nitrate.

"For every £1 invested in the prescription grade, there was the potential to achieve a 4.5:1 return based on the extra weight gains achieved by the end of the 16-week period. The blended fertiliser produced 13.19kg/ha which translated into 50% more than the ammonium nitrate area," comments Miss Kellett.

Forage nutrient profiling showed the additional nutrients were available to lambs at the key eight-week growth stage, when they are weaning.

Miss Kellett concludes: "Forage sodium levels improved by more than 35% which would have raised the palatability of the sward, meaning the lambs grazing the prescription side were not only consuming better-quality grass, but more of it."

"By matching nutrition to the needs of the soil there is potential to improve key business metrics."

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# Following the flock

We visit County Fermanagh, Gloucestershire and Powys to catch up with NSA officeholders.

## Kate Hovers

NSA Cymru/Wales Region Chair, Powys



We're now in the slightly quieter period of the sheep calendar, as rams out with the ewes and we leave them as undisturbed as possible.

The ewes all had a trace element bolus and vaccine for footrot prevention six weeks before tupping but no need for worming as a worm count showed minimal eggs. I sent blood samples from three lambs for fluke antibodies last week and they were still negative.

We live on a high fluke risk farm but, like last year, the season will be late and our ewes do not need treating yet. The lambs have been grazing the same fields as the ewes in rotation so I'm confident they will have been exposed to the same risk and act as good markers for when liver fluke is becoming a hazard.

Our two new tups are looking smart and both have been active with their respective groups.

We breed our own females but I broke my rule of not buying in and bid enthusiastically for a ewe being sold with all proceeds going to the Macmillan charity. Many others at the sale also gave donations raising a substantial sum and proving again how generous the farming community is.



Kate broke her own rules buying a ewe lamb sold for charity.

## Kevin Harrison

NSA English Committee Chair, Gloucestershire



The last time I wrote, I spoke about the start of our transition from North Country Mules in a high input/high output system to a lower output grazing system with wool shedding sheep.

I also questioned whether it would be my last year lambing Mules. Well, we have been very pleased with the performance and traits of the wool shedders. There is so much more to them than simply shedding wool. The Mules did what they always do and delivered well. It was nice to see both systems working on farm at the same time but also slightly challenging keeping them apart for biosecurity.

Once weaning was out of the way it was satisfying to look at our homebred Exlana ewe lambs – our future sheep flock. We've kept all the ewe lambs back for now and we've also purchased more to up numbers this year. Hopefully we can then become a closed flock from next year.

We've been lucky with grass growth all summer and autumn which has helped both flocks. We left the Exlana male lambs entire and they haven't been a problem – with half of them finished so far. They've started to bother each other now but hopefully that won't affect their growth rates.

Mule lambs have all gone with 60% sold finished mostly off grass and the rest sold as strong stores.

What about the Mules for next year? We still have 165 mules and the youngest would be 2018 born. They are all tupped and will lamb late February/early March. While I am still very fond of the Mule it will definitely be the last year for them. The Exlana rams went in early November, so lambing starts at the beginning of April. I will sign out by wishing you a kind winter and an early spring.



Kevin's tups are in, ready for 2024 lambing.

## Alastair Armstrong

NSA Northern Ireland Chair, Co. Fermanagh



It's been a busy autumn with breeding sales taking up a lot of my time.

Most of our sales are direct off farm with stock continuing to join flocks throughout the UK and Ireland. There was also a consignment of six North Country Cheviot rams and 20 North Country Cheviot females exported to Germany.

Commercial trade has been difficult with many still recovering from extremely high input costs in 2022. Our Scotch Halfbred ewe lambs met a steady demand, down on 2022 but still averaged £133. In the North Country Cheviot NI Club sale we picked up first with an exceptional ewe lamb and she also went on to be reserve champion at the sale selling for 1,050gns with our rams topping at 1,700gns. We managed to pick up a stylish new stock ram for 2024 at the Lockerbie tup sale, Dumfries and Galloway, in September – but due to struggles with importing sheep to Northern Ireland from Great Britain, this new purchase will not be added to the flock until May when he has carried out his six month isolation requirement.

With difficulties getting in new blood to the flock we have decided to open our artificial insemination flasks and use frozen semen from rams back in the mid 1990s. We are hoping these proven sires will add a bit of something new but old to our flocks.



Alastair has enjoyed a successful selling season.

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