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An end of season philosophical gather



By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive

British farming is suffering from an absence of any clear direction, affecting confidence and preventing investment.

On one hand it's surprising given the plethora of organisations involved in policy development, advocacy and research, plus those generally making a noise over how our food should be produced and our land managed. With all that firepower we should be romping away. Maybe that is one of the problems.

So many people and so many organisations, regularly pulling in different directions combined with an absence of leadership to make decisions and move forward. I had a lot of time for our last Defra Farming Minister, Daniel Zeichner. He was keen to engage, interested and wanted to hear about solutions.

Another past Minister, and one time Secretary of State, George Eustice, was not dissimilar in some ways, but he was and still is quite influential in the architecture we are working in. One of his ambitions was to give lots of organisations a voice – something he consciously did, aiming to find an acceptable way forward.

Setting policy

I remember Mr Eustice saying he knew he wouldn't be in his role forever and his Government wouldn't always be in power. He wanted to set a food and farming policy that would be continued irrespective of political party, avoiding the pendulum swings farmers find frustrating. Covid contributed with everything being done online and all organisations, wealthy and not so wealthy, able to play. To some extent this worked and wider stakeholder engagement was the order of the day in our devolved nations too.

I won't go into where it went wrong, but more recently implementation has led to a divided farming community. For those who 'have' it has worked well, but for the 'have nots' its proving disastrous, leading to plenty of livestock owners considering disengaging altogether. With market prices where they are, for some who have costs under control at least the choice might be possible.

But back to present day and no one has a clue where we are going. Maybe by the time you read this we will have learnt a little about our new lady in charge Angela Eagle, but I fear it will still be short term and not offer long-term direction.

Statistics show, numerically, our industry is in decline and you don't need to look far to see why. At a national scale there is no reason why our flock should reduce. Market and sheep farming opportunities exist, and we have the skills on farm and at a processor/exporter level to be sustainable domestically while contributing to global food production and our national economy.

Balancing act

It's a legitimate choice for individuals to reduce flock numbers if it suits and it can take the pressure out of the system and increase productivity and sustainability. In the uplands many farmers are still having reductions forced on them in the mistaken belief that sheep and upland environments don't go together. We continue to challenge and find solutions, but the opportunity to be grasped is more sheep into our arable areas, to support an expansion of resilient mixed farming that brings so many benefits from the golden hoof.

A mention of the impressive and sometimes irritating array of architecture surrounding and living off farming is made by Baroness Minette Batters in her farming profitability review, which she presented at the NSA Sheep Farmers' Conference (event report on page 6). As well as better recognition for the broad and deep value of food production she makes a strong case for streamlining our many service providers in a way that prioritises the industry and avoids duplication, contradiction and confusion.

In the meantime, most of our breeding flock is raddle marked and well in lamb, and thankfully, after a challenging summer, grass growth has continued well into the winter hopefully easing a few of the concerns over winter keep.

Have a peaceful Christmas when it comes and here's to a prosperous and interesting 2026.

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NSA Regions look forward to welcoming members to ARMMs

It is a busy few months ahead with all NSA Regions holding their annual members' meetings early in 2025.


Be sure to register for your Annual Regional Members' Meeting.

All meetings are open to members and non-members, although only members can vote with many of the meetings including interesting speakers from the sector joining them.

- **Eastern.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Eastern Region will be held on Tuesday 13th January, 6pm, Heath Court Hotel (Best Western), Moulton Road, Newmarket, Suffolk, CB8 8DY.
- **Marches.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Marches Region will be held on Tuesday 20th January, 7pm, Ludlow Rugby Club, The Orchard Linney, Ludlow, Shropshire, SY8 1EE.
- **South East.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA South East Region will be held on Monday 2nd February, 6.30pm, 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 Wednesday 4th February, 7.30pm, Cafre Greenmount Campus, 45 Tirgracy Roda, Antrim, BT41 4PS.
- **Northern.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Northern Region will be held on Thursday 5th February, 7pm, Hexham and Northern Marts, Tyne Green, Hexham, NE46 3SG.
- **Wales.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Cymru/Wales Region will be held on Monday 9th February, 11am in the International Pavilion, Royal Welsh Showground, Builth Wells, LD2 3WY.
- **South West.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA South West Region will be held on Tuesday 10th February, 7pm, Exe Valley Farm Shop, Nr, Thorverton, Exeter, Devon, EX5 5LZ.
- **Central.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Central Region will be held on Thursday 19th February, 7pm, Cavendish Hall, Edensor, DE45 1PJ.
- **Scotland.** Notice is hereby given that the Annual Regional Members' Meeting for NSA Scottish Region will be held on Wednesday 25th February, 11am, Scotland's Rural College Sunnybrae Farm, Aberdeen, AB21 9TS.

NSA George Hedley Memorial Award winner

Northern Ireland sheep farmer Edward Adamson has been named as the recipient of the 2025 NSA George Hedley Memorial Award, recognising his outstanding contribution to the UK sheep industry.


Edward is proud to receive the award.

Edward farms with his family near Carrickfergus, County Antrim, and has been a respected representative for the sector for many years. He has been involved with NSA for more than 30 years, having served as NSA Northern Ireland Development Officer, Regional Treasurer and Regional Chair. His dedication was previously recognised with the NSA Bob Payne Memorial Award in 2010, and in 2024 he was awarded an MBE in the King's Birthday Honours List for services to agriculture. He is also a long-time supporter of breed development, having close involvement with several breed societies.

Reflecting on the award, Edward says: "I am surprised but delighted to receive the NSA George Hedley Memorial Award. When I look at the calibre of previous winners and this year's nominees, I still find it hard to believe. I have always enjoyed being involved in the sheep industry and have particularly appreciated the role of NSA in supporting the sector."


Euan's dedication is honoured through the NSA award.

Deserving industry figure recognised

The NSA Bob Payne Memorial Award for an Unsung Hero is awarded posthumously to Euan Emslie.

Euan sadly passed away suddenly this summer. His name was synonymous with the popular NSA Scot Sheep and NSA Highland Sheep events having organised both with much success for many years. Euan put his heart and soul into making the events key dates in Scotland's sheep farming calendar.

In addition to organising Scottish events Euan was a great support to other NSA event organisers, whether that meant lending a hand on show days or providing useful contacts from his network of industry friends. Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, comments: "It is hard to put into words just how helpful, supportive and committed Euan was – a true unsung hero. While I am pleased he has been honoured by this award it is with sadness that he is no longer here to accept it."

Last chance to win with NSA and Rurtec



There is now just one last chance to win a fantastic cordless shearing handpiece, the last of 12 kits, each worth more than £450. Simply scan the QR code on page 29 for your chance to be our last winner of the year.

Sincere thanks go to Rurtec for its generous support with this year's prize draw that has helped to ease shearing stock tasks for farmers across the whole of the UK. Our 2026 competition will be announced in the next *Sheep Farmer* magazine.

Not too late to place lambing help 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.

A sheep farming voice

Get the headlines here on current NSA policy activities.

International relations offer huge potential for UK sheep farming

UK sheep genetics and technology are being increasingly admired and desired by international markets and could provide an important market for UK sheep farmers.


NSA works hard to bolster international links.

NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker has been in several meetings in London over the past few months meeting high commissioners and trade attachés from other countries, and hearing about how their future plans feature sheep and agricultural innovation.

At the invitation of the UK Technology for Agriculture and Genetics (UKTAG) Group, Phil met representatives from the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Embassy of Turkmenistan, Embassy of Kazakhstan and the High Commissioner of Mauritius.

"Agriculture is a big part of their economy and they are all looking for technology, livestock and genetics from the UK," says Phil. "UKTAG incorporates all agriculture and is doing promotional work with other countries to elevate our own innovation in these areas. This work could create prime opportunities for sheep in these countries."

Phil also met with US agricultural leaders in London to discuss an overview of the red meat sector, at the invitation of Will Surman (pictured), British trade attaché for the US along with other UK companies. Phil says: "It was great to see UK companies, many of them long supporters of NSA, engaging with developing trade.

"NSA hosts a delegation of international visitors at our biennial Sheep Event in Malvern, Worcestershire, and this will continue at our 2026 event, showcasing the best that UK sheep farming has to offer."

Extra shepherding cuts sea eagle losses

An enhanced shepherding programme with the aim of minimising lamb losses to predators, backed by a Scottish Government agency, has yielded positive weaning figures in its inaugural trial year.


Can traditional shepherding protect against predation?

Plans are to extend the initiative across the whole hill flock of one farm in Argyll in 2026 following an encouraging comparison of different management on two hefts.

The enhanced sheep husbandry mimics an approach undertaken in Scotland in the past and still practiced in Europe. The smaller heft (337ha) hosted the enhanced husbandry approach and yielded a weaning figure of 88%, with the larger heft (485ha) acting as a control and weaning at 52%.

Enhanced shepherding took 6-9 hours each day, including up to two hours for one or two people to mob up ewes and lambs. The extra shepherding ran from early June to mid-August and cost about £12,700 for labour and two dogs, covered by additional Sea Eagle Management Scheme funding.

NSA sees this as a positive step, and while the economic challenges of upland sheep farming mean such management will need taxpayer backing, the project represents a potential route to another tool in the toolbox of predatory management.


Humane slaughter is an area often overlooked by the public.

Halal export accreditation scheme in progress

NSA has been asked by the British Veterinary Association (BVA) to assist in the building of a Halal Export Accreditation scheme to provide higher welfare assurance and potentially create an additional lucrative market for UK sheep meat.

Following initial discussions, a meeting has been held between NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker, Assistant to the Chief Executive Andrea Calvesbert and Ben O'Halloran of the BVA to discuss how this might look and how it will work in practice.

The plans are in a very early stage, but build on work already conducted. The BVA, Sheep Vet Society and Goat Vet Society alongside halal experts are undergoing research to give a demonstration of life following post cut stunning to improve welfare standards and still meet religious requirements. NSA will keep members updated as the scheme takes shape.

Sheep welfare strategy report due next year

Two years ago, the industry launched the Sheep Welfare Strategy outlining the main goals for improving welfare standards for UK sheep farming.


Improving welfare can positively impact your flock.

NSA played a key part in writing the original strategy and is now tasked, alongside other key industry stakeholders, with establishing measurable targets for each of the six welfare goals.

NSA Chief Executive and Chair of the Sheep Welfare Strategy Group Phil Stocker says: "As is often the case, hard data is nearly impossible to come by but significant progress has been made through schemes like Pathway and the Sustainable Farming Scheme. As sheep values have increased, it has offered further financial incentives to improve welfare options for their stock. What is clear is tracking progress on welfare is a shared responsibility, and the Food Standards Agency and relevant Defra teams need to share the responsibility."

The group plans to produce a report in spring 2026 to document the change and progress since the launch.

NSA Regions



Central

Chair: **Ed Brant**

Manager: **Situation vacant**
Contact Head Office for further information.



Cymru/Wales

Chair: **Caryl Hughes**



Development Officer: **Helen Roberts**
07976 803066
helen@nationalsheep.org.uk



Eastern

Chair: **Robert Spink**



Manager: **Nerys Wright**
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Marches

Chair: **Anthony Warmington**



Manager: **Katie James**
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Northern

Chair: **Ted Ogden**



Manager: **Chris Adamson**
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Northern Ireland

Chair: **Edward Adamson**



Coordinator: **Ellen Moorehead**
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Scotland

Chair: **Peter Myles**



Activities Officer: **Julia Bell**
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scotland@nationalsheep.org.uk



South East

Chair: **Susie Parish**



Manager: **Sarah Blake**
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southeast@nationalsheep.org.uk



South West

Chair: **Rich Rossiter**



Manager: **Ian May**
07913 043234
ian@nationalsheep.org.uk

NSA Ram Sales



Wales & Border: **Situation now filled**
Contact NSA Head Office for further information.



South West: **Sue Martyn**
01409 271385 / 07967 512660
suem@nationalsheep.org.uk

HQ

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.

NSA regional reports

NSA Cymru/Wales Region

By Helen Roberts, Development Officer



Welsh NSA Ambassadors enjoyed a two-day reunion with more learning.

In October the NSA Wales/Cymru Region Next Generation Ambassadors alumni group enjoyed an inspiring programme of visits.

The two-day event contained tours of Kepac, Wales Veterinary Science Centre, AberInnovation and the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS). Alongside the ambassador activities, the region has participated in a series of farm visits, hosted by Farming Connect, which all provided valuable opportunities to connect with members.

The region took a stand at the Welsh Winter Fair at the end of November sponsoring some of the classes. The winner of the John Gittins award was Kevin Parry a past Chair of the Welsh Mules Sheep Breeders Association who sits on the regional committee.

Our Annual Regional Members' Meeting meeting will have speakers from NSA, British Wool and Plaid Cymru. *Full details on page 2.*

NSA South East Region

By Sarah Blake, Manager

Don't miss the Annual Regional Members' Meeting in February – full details on page 2.

Following the usual business and a delicious shepherd's pie supper, our guest speaker Dr Awal Fuseini, AHDB, will be discussing the Halal market opportunities, myth-busting and answering any questions in this area. NSA Project Manager Nicola Noble will also be providing an update from NSA Head Office. For catering purposes please register with me by Monday 26th January 2026. *Contact details in column on left of this page.*

NSA Central Region

By Ed Brant, Regional Chair


The region has delivered a number of successful events this autumn.

It's been a busy and exciting few months in the NSA Central Region.

Two NSA Field Days in October – one held at Reaseheath College and the other in the Epic Centre, on the Lincolnshire Showground – shared the theme of healthy flock, healthy finances, offering attendees a series of insightful workshops.

In November attention turned to the hills for a fascinating farm walk at Hardenclough Farm, a 350-acre (142ha) National Trust Farm set on the side of Mam Tor in the Edale Valley, Derbyshire. The farm places a strong emphasis on environmental stewardship and is home to a flock of 450 pedigree North Country Cheviot ewes.

NSA Eastern Region

By Nerys Wright, Manager

We're pleased to confirm full details of the NSA Eastern Region Annual Members' Meeting on page 2.

Speakers include a talk from British Wool and NSA Policy Manager Michael Priestley, offering valuable insights for members.

We'd love to see strong attendance from across the region so please save the date and encourage others to join us – your presence really does make a difference.

NSA Northern Region

By Chris Adamson, Manager

At the start of October the Region held its 'Sustainability in action' event at Colt Park Farm, Morpeth, Northumberland.

The day included expert talks on production efficiency, vaccination strategies and low-input rotational grazing, followed by a farm tour. Thanks to MSD Animal Health for sponsoring the event and Rich and Jen Oglesby for kindly opening their farm to visitors. As well as sheep farmers we welcomed 35 students from Northumberland College as part of the region's investment in the next generation.

Plans are underway for the Annual Regional Members' Meeting. *More details on page 2, with speaker confirmation added to the NSA website soon.*

NSA Scottish Region

Julia Bell, Activities Officer


The NSA Lamb for St Andrew's Day Dinner was a triumph.

The Region enjoyed a busy November with several key events attended including Livescot, Agriscot and the NSA Lamb for St Andrew's Day Dinner held this year at the Huntingtower Hotel, Perth.

It was good to see so many members join the dinner for an enjoyable evening celebrating our national day with a delicious meal of Scotch Lamb.

As this edition arrives with you, the region will be hosting an NSA Next Generation workshop on Wednesday 10th December at Scotland's Rural College Hill and Mountain Research Centre, based at Kirkton and Auchtertyre Farms – a 5,435-acre (2,200ha) estate near Crianlarich in the west Highlands of Scotland. Giving young shepherds advice on best practice at lambing time, the centre's team of systems-scale researchers and NSA representatives delivered an informative and engaging event for future sheep farmers.

NSA Northern Ireland Region

By Ellen Moorehead, Coordinator

The Region remains focused on safeguarding our sector's health and future.

NSA NI Region is actively working alongside the Ulster Farmers Union and the Sheep Taskforce to find a sustainable, industry-led solution to protect our maedi visna status. This collaborative approach is essential for maintaining NI's high health and trading standards in the coming year.

The region strongly welcomes applications from passionate young farmers for the next intake of the NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme.

Details of the NSA NI Region Annual Members' Meeting can be found on page 2.

On behalf of myself and the committee, I will you all a very happy Christmas and a successful early lambing season ahead.


The regional sheepdog event was a huge success.

NSA Marches Region

By Katie James, Manager

The Region enjoyed a very successful event in October, welcoming many new faces as well as our faithful supporters to a sheepdog training day near Bromyard, Herefordshire.

The day gave attendees the opportunity to learn tailored training techniques for three of the most popular sheepdog breeds in the UK – the Border Collie, the Kelpie and the Huntaway.

We now hope to see many of you at the 2026 Annual Regional Members' Meeting where we will be joined by NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker for an enjoyable evening of open discussion.

NSA South West Region

By Ian May, Manager


Many joined the regional event on environmental baselining.

In September, attendees were treated to talks and a farm walk courtesy of committee member Chris McWhirter.

The McWhirter family are one of the participating farmers in AHDB's environmental baselining project. A key part of this work is to better understand how UK farms maintain and improve their carbon stocks, critical for combating climate change and defending our industry in the debate.

Next year we will be hosting our Annual Regional Members' Meeting. Full details on page 2 with speakers to be announced shortly.

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Speak to Helen Roberts.
See page 2 for contact details.

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Sheep Farmers' Conference highlights sector's resilience and optimism

By Katie James, NSA

NSA SHEEP FARMERS' CONFERENCE 2025

The NSA Sheep Farmers' Conference, held in North Yorkshire, brought together delegates for a day centred on resilience, profitability and the future of the sector.

NSA Chair Peter Delbridge described the UK sheep industry as being at a crossroads. Despite strong prices the national flock continues to decline and he urged farmers to focus on what they can control. The conference theme – strive and thrive – shaped a programme of practical advice and inspirational talks. Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, welcomed attendees, noting the energy and enthusiasm.

The morning session, led by Emily Symonds, AHDB, featured Northumberland farmers Matt Jordon and Rich Oglesby, alumni of the AHDB Roots to Resilience programme. Matt explained how the programme clarified which areas of his 700-ewe and beef enterprises were profitable, helping him streamline operations and link performance with long-term goals.

Rich, who contract farms alongside his wife Jen, shared a similar story. As new entrants with limited capital they exited a less profitable red deer enterprise to focus on a simpler forage-based system for their sheep and beef. Support from the Henry Plumb Foundation and NSA Next Generation were key to their progress.

Both farmers stressed the importance of making time for planning and office work alongside practical farm duties.


Attendees heard the latest finding from Baroness Minnette Batters.

Profitability review

After lunch, Phil introduced Baroness Minette Batters, who outlined early findings from her government-commissioned profitability review. Drawing on more than 400 submissions, it highlights the vulnerability of mid-performing farms and the need for long-term consistency. She proposed a national food, agriculture and rural matters plan, improved use of the UK's 16 agricultural attachés to aid market expansion, better alignment across devolved governments and a restored economic focus within Defra.

The afternoon continued with business insights from adviser Grace Kempthorne, innovation from wool entrepreneur Kate Drury and encouragement from North Devon farmer Liz Griffiths to identify opportunities that align with goals.

Phil closed by noting attendee optimism and the strong potential of UK sheep farming.

EVENT SPONSORS

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Online conference promotes healthier, productive flocks

SHWAP
SHEEP HEALTH, WEALTH AND PRODUCTION CONFERENCE
NSA South East Region

The Sheep Health, Wealth and Production (SHWAP) online conference, organised by NSA South East Region, returned for three evenings of expert-led discussions designed to help attendees boost flock health, productivity and profitability in October.

EVENT SPONSORS

75 YEARS BRITISH WOOL 1950-2025 · Bimeda · Elanco · iLivestock · MSD Animal Health · NoBACZ Healthcare · RAPPA

The first evening focused on neonatal lamb care with Dr Emily Collins-Winsgate, NoBACZ, with discussion on best practice for navel management and tagging at lambing, then parasite control with Nuffield Scholar Bruce Thompson.

The second evening welcomed Dr Claire Morgan-Davies, SRUC, who displayed innovative technologies for small ruminant welfare, then Fiona Hutchings, Elanco, discussing parasites. Fiona highlighted a project following the Stanbury family, hosts of NSA Sheep South West 2025, as they tackle data collection and parasite management.

The conference concluded with Dr Janet Roden, Innovis, outlining the Breed for CH4nge project and the importance of ewe efficiency, before Zoe Lloyd, AHDB, shared insights from the Challenge Sheep project.

Combining research, industry expertise and practical advice, the event delivered clear take-home messages on flock health, technology adoption, parasite control and breeding for efficiency. Its value was reflected in the record-breaking viewing numbers, with more than 500 participants from the UK and overseas watching the webinars live.

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NSA Events 2025

NSA is dedicated to providing valuable chances for both members and non-members alike to meet, learn and connect with others who share a passion for the sheep industry. Across 2025, NSA hosted a total of 47 events across the UK. Here are some of the highlights:


NSA Marches Region passed on sheepdog training advice at their workshop.


The sun shone in May on visitors enjoying the farm tour at NSA Welsh Sheep.


NSA Wales & Border Main Ram Sale drew large crowds once again.


NSA Next Generation went behind the scenes with a insightful visit to Westminster in January.


A new and improved NSA stand welcomed members at NSA Sheep South West.


NSA Sheep NI saw huge talent in the NSA Next Generation competition.


The NSA AGM was held in the impressive surroundings of Chatsworth House this year.



Baroness Minette Batters spoke at the NSA Sheep Farmers' Conference.


It was standing room only to watch the speed shear at NSA North Sheep in June.


NSA South East Region enjoyed several farm tours this summer.


NSA Highland Sheep offered a learning opportunity for school children in June.


A post mortem discussion with NSA Central Region attracted many members.


Sales were good at the NSA Eastern Region Melton Mowbray Ram Sale.

Grassroots farmers key to progress and success of NSA South West Region

By Katie James, NSA

Sheep Farmer magazine is back touring the NSA Regions introducing some key committee members who help to ensure the representation of sheep farmers from a grassroots level at NSA meetings and events.

The NSA South West Region is home to a large number of sheep farms in the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset. Here are some familiar faces explaining why they value being part of a regional commitee.

Voices heard

All NSA members are encouraged to attend regional commitee meetings to share their views and to have their voices heard. It is also a great way of meeting new, likeminded people. Members can also get involved with volunteering at regional events like NSA Sheep South West that the region organised this year.

Rich Rossiter
Regional Chair


Rich values his role as regional chair.

I farm Poll Dorsets, Exlanas and Aberblacks in South Devon supported by my family. My father was involved with NSA for many years before me. I became more involved when I applied to become an NSA Next Generation Ambassador back in 2018.

Since then, I have been an active member of the NSA South West Committee, firstly becoming Vice Chair, and then for the past two years I have been Chair of the region.

I'm glad I got involved with NSA, joining the NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme that I took an awful lot from. It has been great to be able to give something back to the association since then, including being part of the NSA English Committee.

Fact file

- Rich farms three separate flocks over a total of 1,000 acres (405ha) comprising of a third of owned land and two thirds rented from six different landlords, including the National Trust.
- All stock on Rich's farm is performance recorded.

Ian May
Regional Manager


Ian is thankful for volunteers at NSA events.

I have been the NSA South West Regional Manager for seven years and really enjoy having the opportunity to engage with people from across the industry. Being part of a small but nimble organisation means there are huge opportunities to get involved in a variety of issues.

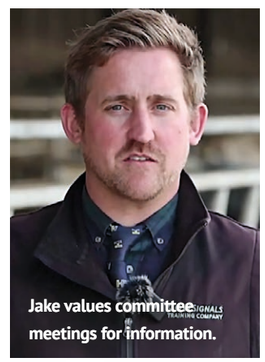
My day-to-day role involves supporting our dynamic regional committee, arranging events, getting involved in the biennial NSA Sheep South West event and responding to queries from members. But, being part of the wider NSA team exposes me to far more. Since joining I have also helped deliver an on-the-ground sheep scab project and been involved in discussions with Defra on the rollout of the Sustainable Farming Incentive.

My NSA role also compliments and enhances my day job as a beef and sheep farmer in North Devon. Combining knowledge of issues I've been exposed to as part of NSA and my practical farming experience means I can better deliver on both fronts.

Fact file

- Ian farms North Country and Suffolk Mules on the south east edge of Exmoor National Park.
- He is also Chair of the Exmoor Hill Farming Network.

Jake Chisholm
Committee member


Jake values committee meetings for information.

I was born into a sheep farming family near South Molton in North Devon where we used to run 300 ewes and followers before moving to Hatherley, Devon.

Having finished university I fell into working in the feed industry and ultimately that led to my involvement with NSA.

Our feed company was represented on the National Beef Association regional group, but not with NSA and so I was invited to go along to some committee meetings and the rest, as they say, is history.

Being a part of the NSA South West Regional Committee provides me with valuable opportunity to hear more about what is going on with policy decision makers.

It benefits both me and my customers at work as I can pass on much more valuable information to them about the state of the industry – more than just nutritional advice – thanks to the networking opportunities my committee role allows me.

Fact file

- Jake was offered a job after meeting his boss when he refereed a rugby match that Jake played in.
- Has been a member of the NSA South West committee for 12 years.

Food security is quietly returning to the forefront of the government's agenda

By Michael Priestley, NSA

Domestic food production has moved up the government agenda, which should be good news for sheep farming as a versatile, adaptable and grass-based industry.

But whether this means there will be money directly targeted at supporting food production remains highly doubtful.

The old saying it's a long time since they stopped making land, feels more apt each passing year, as the country's population grows, the demands on the environment increase and farming is incentivised to deliver for the environment, rather than just produce food.

NSA remains optimistic, because food production is just one of a suite of goods and services that sheep, and ruminants in general, can deliver for the nation. Already a net exporter of sheep meat, the UK can see sheep farming as a net earner that can help deliver on climate, water, energy, nutrition, carbon and biodiversity targets. For example, UK studies have found 250 species of insects living in livestock dung.

Stock reduction

So why does the UK national flock continue to contract? Hopefully it will soon stabilise and potentially grow again. Given the increasing range of services the population requires from the land, NSA says that sheep will play a more important role as more is asked of the UK's land base.

As a term, food security is open to interpretation. An economist may equate food security to food inflation and Gross Domestic Product, while in the farming world we might think of butter mountains, headage payments and dig for victory campaigns.

Either way, the complex equation of domestic food production, food imports, exports and population growth is on more people's lips around Whitehall than it was in the recent past. Clearly, Covid-19, Red Sea shipping disruptions, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and climate change are among the events that made this so.

Cynically, many in farming believe policymakers only care about the price of food and inflation in the economy, not agricultural output. The bulk of publicly visible concern and action since lockdown has been focused on rising food prices.


NSA stresses the need to acknowledge food production as a public good.

More could be being said and done about reducing reliance on imports from countries increasingly challenged by climate change or with more volatile geopolitics and economics.

One thing to consider is that food inflation was negative for several years. This happened between 2014 and late 2016, then again in 2021. What happened for the following two years after lockdown was massive inflation (peaking at 18%). This caused headlines and became challenging as costs rose elsewhere.

Great Britain has not been self-sufficient in food since the industrial revolution and has hovered around the 60% mark this century.

Necessity was the mother of invention during the war, when food imports fell from 22m to 12m tons. Today, experts forecast another 8m people in the UK by 2047, so growth in food production is essential if food security is to be merely maintained. This is while England's government targets are giving 9% of farmland (1878,000 acres or 760,000ha) to nature.

Food strategy

Where do sheep come into this? What NSA is striving for is a broad and comprehensive food strategy based around resilient farming systems producing high-quality food so public goods can be delivered. Rather than focusing on water, or biodiversity, or carbon in silo, NSA stresses everyone would benefit from a multi-faceted approach, seeking to optimise land use by a multifunctional approach also.

A thriving, attractive and biodiverse countryside with functional soils, mosaics of farmed and unfarmed habitat, profitable farms, diverse businesses and a marketplace that means meat is profitable to produce and affordable to buy is the aim. In some cases, this is already happening.

Food production cannot be the sole driver, because we lose sight of other targets, such as water quality, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions and soil health. Targets are numerous in these areas, but there are none for food security. Currently, the only numerical target our government has is to publish a food security report every three years.

For NSA, one side of the coin is being politically minded, to highlight the adaptability of sheep farming for meat and fibre production. The other side is being business minded and helping members develop a system that suits the ground, operator and marketplace.

The way forward might be to devise a resilient, profitable, farming system first, then see how the support system can reward you.

Governments need to recognise the multiple benefits sheep farming delivers.

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Farm support is changing across the UK.

An era to prioritise farm system before support systems suggests NSA

By Michael Priestley, NSA

Developing a sound farming system must come before considering government support systems in the new era of scaled back subsidy and treasury discipline.

This is true for all members across the UK, where the flow of public money to farm bank accounts is changing, probably forever. Therefore, resilient farming enterprises optimising the human, land and capital resources available look like the ones who will thrive.

In Scotland and Wales, where they still essentially have the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and historic payments, the pace of change is slower. But English farmers have seen the biggest change, with BPS set to be phased out completely by the end of the 2027 scheme year. Many of those without Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) money may be left in a difficult place in terms of cashflow and longer-term prospects.



Adequate payments for the delivery of public goods are essential, says NSA.

New schemes

We should already have the details of the new SFI actions, but these are now expected in the new year. Meanwhile, sheep farmers in Northern Ireland feel left out while the beef sector is set to be a greater beneficiary of targeted support.

Subsidy is a hot topic. The recent Agri Expo event at Harrison and Hetherington's Borderway market, Carlisle, Cumbria, in October had a split vote after a debate entitled 'this house believes farm subsidies do more harm than good'.

While subsidy undoubtedly has positive impacts on economy and countryside, the marketplace is seen by many as the most efficient regulator of business activity and market prices. Some NSA members have never had a penny of state support and you increasingly hear, "let's crack on and do without subsidy".

But as well-intentioned as it can be, public money tends to have unintended consequences, be it market distortion, system abuse or a stymying effect on industry development.

Price guarantees of the post war years led to increasing bureaucracy in the form of headage payments and quotas. But the country was different. Most industries were state owned back then and food rationing was fresh in the memory.

Intensification

A 1964 survey of Wiltshire farmland found that two-thirds of scheduled field monuments had been destroyed by state-funded agricultural intensification and historic features, such as ridge and furrow, water meadow systems and hedgerows, had disappeared.

NSA says farm support remains justified for a variety of reasons. Primarily, support is valid for public goods, for which there is no market reward. There is also an argument to support an industry that is so fundamental to the countryside, wider agri-food industry and allied industries. Remember, other industries are subsidised to spur projects, such as efficiency drives, training and renewable energy uptake, so why not farming?

There is no reason to be embarrassed about support. State support comes in many guises – some is more obvious than others. And when it's delivered to farm bank accounts directly in cash form it is usually spent or invested quickly.

Many believe BPS helped keep food cheap, some would say too cheap. In the event of subsidy support diminishing, there is a clear need for the market to reward farmers with a lamb price that is profitable for them and affordable for consumers. It is also worth considering the hospitality, tourism, clothing and travel industries that thrive because less household income goes on food, allowing for luxuries.

History shows how fundamental and variable farm support is to society, as it's at least as old as the Roman Empire. A grain payment to heads of households called *cura annonae* stabilised bread affordability for almost 500 years. The Corn Laws (1815-1846) protected Britain's landowning farmers for decades. Only later in the century was trade liberalisation fully felt, when sail and steamboats filled British grain stores with corn produced by Russian peasant labour and sparsely populated, sun-kissed US prairies.



Sheep farming can aid environmental gains.

Best return

There are many ways to aid farmers and in an era of shrinking public finances it is worth asking what the best return on investment might be.

In 2024 the US government spent 30.5% of federal farm subsidy on corn (maize) production (£2.45bn), about £27/acre across the 90m acres grown each year. Over the years, subsidising arable crops has helped cattle feeders, which in turn has helped the beef burger industry.

Europe's farms remain heavily subsidised, while in Japan and South Korea rice and dairy are under heavy tariff protection. India does the same for rice and wheat.

African countries (Kenya and Nigeria) subsidise fertiliser and many parts of the Middle East and Asia ensure agriculture runs on cheaper diesel. Irrigation subsidies are paid in India and Pakistan, while China and Vietnam see heavy investment in market infrastructure. Brazil has a state-funded extension programme and farms across Asia, Africa, Cananda and the US have state-funded insurance schemes.

UK flockmasters with rents and grazing licences to pay could be at risk if support was to stop completely. Landowners will want a rental income even if the funds that helped set the rent (BPS, stewardship and SFI) are changing. Farmers risk being priced out of the land market.



NSA wants your view on future farm support.

NSA's view

NSA is pushing for a three-prong approach to farm supports, which will hopefully yield a payment scheme that takes the industry forward and with money that the most deserving businesses can access for improvements.

1) **Capital investment.** Money directed into essential technology and infrastructure.
2) **Support efficiency schemes.** Industry and on-farm projects looking at vet partnerships, soil sampling, disease screening, genetics, benchmarking and the strategic use of levy bodies.
3) **Public good reward.** Direct payments for the maintenance and improvement of landscapes, with specific focus on habitat creation, water quality, soil health, biodiversity, public engagement and local food chains. Could private finance be harnessed?

Such a strategy could be used to help you maintain a sustainable level of output while stripping out cost and labour, insulating your business from the vagaries of world markets and rampant inflation.

NSA is seeking member input – please email directly. Contact details on page 1.

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Positive changes on the horizon for tackling sheep worrying by dogs

By Nicola Noble, NSA

Sheep worrying by dogs continues to be a disastrous battle for sheep farmers across the UK with many feeling there's no respite from this blight on our industry.

One of NSA's key priorities is awareness raising on this distressing act among policymakers and the public. It also offers advice to members and non-members who have sadly experienced an attack on their flock, helping overcome the situation providing guidance on ways to reduce the risk on their farm.

Over the years NSA has attended a range of action days jointly coordinated with councils, community groups, National Parks and rural crime teams. The most recent was on the doorstep of NSA Head Office on the Malvern Hills, Worcestershire, where myself and Andrea Calvesbert, NSA Assistant to the Chief Executive, joined two events in different dog walking hot spots to speak directly with dog owners and dog walkers about responsible dog ownership. The local sheep farmer who grazes the area also joined the events highlighting the emotional impact of dog attacks on his flock.

Action days

Andrea comments: "Action days are the ideal opportunity to bring together organisations with a shared interest in promoting responsible dog ownership and allow us to highlight the importance of protecting livestock and the livelihoods of local farmers. They demonstrate the value of community engagement and the essential need to educate dog owners about livestock worrying."



Next year should see changes to the outdated law on sheep worrying.

Another one of NSA's main roles in this area is an active seat on the National Police Chief's Council Livestock Attack Group. Led by Rob Taylor, Wales Rural & Wildlife Police Crime Coordinator, the group brings together rural crime teams, NFU, Government departments and wider dog focused organisations, such as the Kennel Club, RSPCA and the National Trust.

Working collaboratively, the group meets online regularly to discuss the number of attacks being experienced by the different rural crime teams, industry actions to deter and prevent sheep attacks and progress on the Private Members Bill currently going through parliament.

New legislation

The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill has already been through three readings in the House of Commons and is currently in it's third reading in the House of Lords. The group has worked tirelessly to get this Bill passed and is confident it should achieve final approval of the third reading in the next few weeks with the final stages, including Royal Ascent, to occur in time for early 2026.

This isn't the first time NSA alongside the working group have submitted the critical amendments to legislation in front of policymakers with events out of our control, such as Brexit, Covid, conflict and political turnover, taking priority over previous submissions.

NSA welcomes the proposals, which would grant police enhanced powers to seize dogs after serious incidents, expand police authority to enter premises and allow them to collect evidence samples from both livestock and dogs to support investigations. The Bill will also enable species not covered by current law – for example alpacas and llamas – the same rights as sheep and cattle when worried by dogs. In addition, the Bill will overcome 'grey areas' within current legislation around where sheep worrying incidents can occur as some areas are not included.

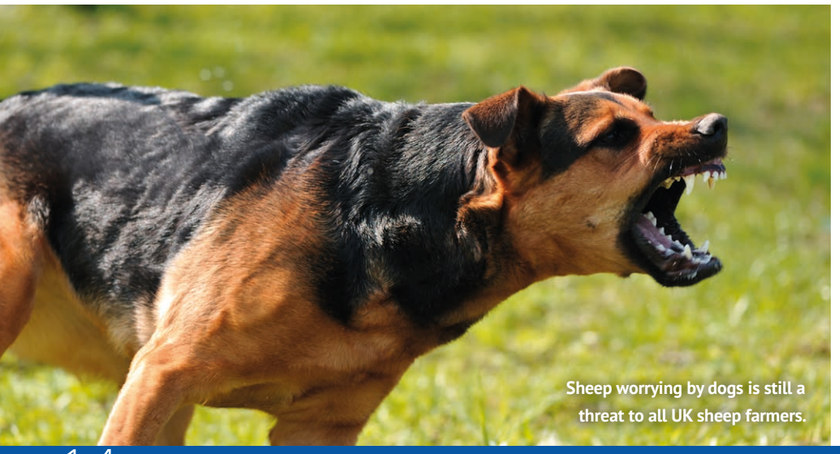
Combined with new technology to improve dog DNA sampling techniques and novel research to establish the accuracy of new on-farm test kits, we could see a positive change on the horizon.

DNA evidence

These on-farm kits could be a game changer allowing farmers to take their own DNA samples from wounded livestock, which not only improves animal welfare, but empowers farmers to be able to act immediately, without the need to wait for police forensics to arrive.

NSA has also increased activity in building stronger relationships with dog-facing industry bodies, with collaborative activity on the cards for 2026 and beyond. NSA has always worked closely with these groups but has put steps in place to actively engage in joint activity where shared messages can be delivered across more platforms by using a combined voice. NSA is hoping to be at a few more high-profile dog audience events to educate dog owners directly on what effect their dogs have on sheep.

NSA will continue to put sheep worrying at the forefront of its public facing activity because there are still major gaps in dog owner education on how to ensure their pet doesn't attack your flock and your livelihood.


Sheep worrying by dogs is still a threat to all UK sheep farmers.

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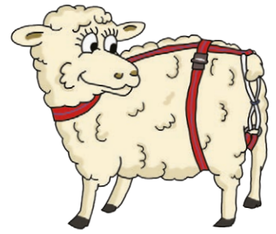
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Crisis Point – Daera proposals threaten NI's MV status and sector viability



By Ellen Moorehead, Regional Coordinator

The Northern Ireland sheep sector is once again facing an unprecedented challenge following concerning proposals put forward by Daera that threaten the region's vital maedi visna (MV) disease-free status.

These proposals, specifically the intended withdrawal of Daera funding for MV testing, with minimal industry consultation, represent yet another damaging blow the majority of our small farming enterprises cannot withstand financially.

Disease control

Maintaining NI's MV-free status is fundamental to the profitability and sustainability of every sheep farmer here. The absence of this debilitating disease allows favourable trading conditions with accredited flocks in Great Britain and parts of Europe and protects the productivity of our national flock.

Daera's proposal to withdraw funding and instead ask the industry to implement a self-funded accreditation scheme is deeply flawed. It effectively removes essential border control measures, risking the influx of infection from regions where MV incidence is rising.



Concerns over maintaining maedi visna free status in NI.

Alongside the Ulster Farmers' Union and the wider Sheep Taskforce, the region has pushed back asking Daera to halt any final decision-making process and engage in an industry consultation to develop a workable solution.

This MV crisis is compounded by the persistent and unacceptable lack of a dedicated support scheme for NI sheep farmers. Our members are already struggling with a range of challenges while Daera continues to prioritise other sectors, leaving sheep farmers feeling neglected and undervalued.

Sheep scheme

The Sheep Taskforce, in which NSA plays a central role, is actively pursuing the establishment of a dedicated co-design group with Daera to develop a fit-for-purpose sheep scheme. This scheme must focus on genetic improvements, animal health and welfare, and capital investment to build a more resilient sector.

I urge sheep breeders to engage with their political representatives to ensure our voice is heard as we fight to protect our MV status and secure the long-overdue, essential support our industry deserves.

Sheep farming must be at the heart of Scotland's future land use



By Faye Bryce, Regional Policy Officer

As Scotland charts its course toward net zero and nature recovery, NSA has been working hard to ensure that sheep farming is recognised not just as compatible with these goals – but essential to achieving them.

In September, NSA Scottish Region met with government and industry to discuss key issues including sheep movement regulations, future welfare legislation and the practicalities of electronic reporting. These conversations reinforced a clear message – policy must be grounded in the realities of farming life and shaped with those who work the land.



NSA continues to ensure sheep farming remains high on the policy agenda.

Recent consultations on land use, environment and the just transition have shown encouraging ambition. But they've also highlighted a risk that small-scale, upland and low-input systems could be overlooked in favour of more visible or centralised solutions. NSA Scottish Region has responded robustly to these consultations, making the case for sheep farming as a multifunctional land use delivering far more than food.

Integrated landscapes

The Fourth Land Use Strategy (LUS4) rightly promotes integrated landscapes, but this must include sheep farming. NSA has called for better mapping tools, inclusive indicators and recognition of the sector's contribution to climate and nature goals. Many upland farms already deliver biodiversity, carbon storage and rural jobs on the same land. That's integration in action.

The just transition consultation echoed similar themes. While the vision is welcome – fair, inclusive, and sustainable – it needs to go further in recognising the environmental value already delivered by grass-based livestock systems.

NSA also emphasised the importance of education, local decision-making and communication. Programmes like NSA Next Generation and the Land-based Pre-apprenticeship Scheme are helping to bring new entrants into the sector, but more investment is needed to build rural skills and resilience.

Meanwhile, the issue of lynx reintroduction has resurfaced. NSA has reaffirmed its position – It does not support the release of predators that pose a threat to livestock and rural livelihoods.

Across all these areas, sheep farming must not be treated as an afterthought. It is a cornerstone of Scotland's rural economy and a key player in delivering national climate and biodiversity targets. But to thrive, it needs fair funding, clear guidance and policies that reflect its full value.

Producers reminded to remain watchful for signs of bluetongue



By Helen Roberts, Regional Development Officer

Over a month has passed since the Welsh Government updated the rules on bluetongue virus (BTV).

Wales is now part of the restricted zone, allowing animal movement between Wales and England without pre- or post-movement testing. NSA Wales/Cymru Region welcomes this change, but the industry must remain vigilant. Any signs of disease should be reported. Vaccination remains the most effective defence – please consult your vet and plan ahead.

Welsh Government is putting efforts into bluetongue monitoring and surveillance this winter, both to track any movement of serotypes and to support future efforts to retain disease-free status.

NSA Wales/Cymru Region attended a Land Use Net Zero workshop in October. The climate crisis, alongside biodiversity loss and pollution, poses serious threats to UK livelihoods. But food production and security are equally critical. A balanced approach is essential. The workshop highlighted the need for standardised carbon assessments to accurately reflect the positive environmental contributions of sheep farming.

Holding changes

An independent review of Wales's County Parish Holdings (CPH) system by ALMA Economics has proposed several improvements to livestock traceability. Key recommendations include removing the requirement for common land to be adjacent to a primary production location, allowing recurring temporary CPHs, streamlining the process for issuing temporary CPH numbers and introducing a one-year transition period with a support package.

The Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) remains a key topic for producers. As more details emerge, farmers will be better equipped to decide whether the scheme suits their business needs.

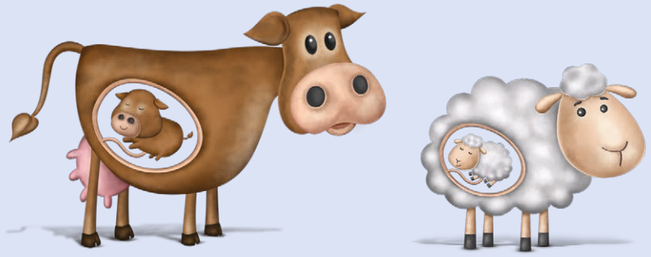
Very soon abattoirs killing more than 2,000 sheep per week will have to report fat, conformation and price to a national standard for carcases from sheep under 12 months of age. Mandatory classification for cattle and pigs has been in force since the days of UK membership of the EU, but the Sheep Carcase (Classification and Price Reporting) (Wales) Regulations 2025 will bring this in for Wales, aligning with similar bills in various stages of drafting and laying across the UK.

The region welcomes the announcement and the transparency it will bring to price reporting and abattoir differences.



New abattoir regulations offer fairer prices in Wales.

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The ninth cohort of ambassadors will explore the UK's leading farming enterprises.

Next generation given travel and career development opportunities for 2026

Young sheep farmers will have two fantastic opportunities to progress their own personal development and careers thanks to exciting initiatives that are part of the NSA Next Generation scheme next year.

The NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme and an exciting second award giving two young people the chance to join a global gathering of next generation sheep farmers on the other side of the world both return in 2026.

For many years NSA Next Generation has given young sheep farming enthusiasts the opportunity to become part of NSA activity supporting the future of the UK sheep sector through young people and a scheme that signals the start of a lifelong journey with NSA.

A well-known and highly respected part of the initiative, the NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme, will bring together its ninth cohort in 2026 to take part in a series of technical and personal development sessions aimed to further their experience and understanding of the UK sheep industry.

Opportunities

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 opportunities, 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.

Excitingly NSA Next Generation is offering a further chance to young shepherds next year for career development with the relaunch of the NSA Samuel Wharry Travel Award.

This memorial award was first presented in 2019 in memory of Samuel Wharry who sadly passed away in 2017 while Chair of NSA. It has previously offered two travel bursaries to be used for research into the industry and personal development, but next year, following NSA's recent involvement with the Global Sheep Producers Forum, the award will take a slightly altered but equally exciting format.



Young shepherds come together for the Global Sheep Producers Forum.

The new Samuel Wharry Memorial Award, presented thanks to kind support from the Company of Merchants of the Staple of England (the Staple), will fund two young sheep farmers aged between 21 and 35 to join a gathering of fellow young sheep farmers from other sheep producing nations including Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada.

The Next Generation Global Sheep Producers Forum will meet in July 2026 in Australia before travelling to New Zealand for a series of farm and industry visits. The group will also take part in the LambEx event held near Adelaide, Australia, one of the world's largest sheep, lamb and wool forums.

Global connections

NSA Communications manager Katie James comments: "This opportunity will allow two young sheep farmers to be part of a very special event. Funding from NSA and the Staple will cover all expenses during the trip and will also pay £500 towards flight cost. NSA will support and encourage the two lucky recipients to raise further sponsorship money to cover any additional costs."

Those wishing to apply to be part of the Next Generation Global Sheep Producers Forum can apply online now by answering a few short questions. Your application is required to be accompanied by the name of a referee that is already involved with NSA. Examples of this involvement could be as an NSA Committee member (regional, national or Ram Sale Committee), an NSA staff member or an individual that has had an involvement with NSA events.

Applications to be considered for the NSA Samuel Wharry Award are still open on the NSA Next Generation website and will close on Monday 5th January. Applications will then be shortlisted by NSA Head Office and regional representatives before online interviews take place in January 2026.

Interactive workshops to inspire and motivate the Next Generation

Across the UK this autumn, the NSA Next Generation programme set the stage for a new wave of confident, skilled and future-focused young farmers.

The season kicked off at Cowley Hill Farm in Rugeley, where host Will Roobottom welcomed participants to the first workshop, Next Generation Ready: Sustainable Parasite Management in a Changing Climate. The session brought together science and on-farm experience, led by independent sheep consultant and parasite specialist Nerys Wright.

Far from a traditional lecture, the workshop invited attendees to dissect the real challenges hitting their farms, from shifting weather patterns to increasing resistance issues. Nerys' clear message resonated with everyone. As the climate changes, so must our strategies. Practical, sustainable parasite control will be essential for long-term flock health and resilience.

Next, NSA teamed up with British Wool for two introductory shearing days, designed to dismantle the intimidation that often surrounds picking up the handpiece for the first time.

Tailored tuition

At Home Farm in Richmond, host Anna Pennell set the scene before British Wool instructor Richard Schofield stepped in with a live demonstration. Soon, attendees were shearing themselves, supported through every step. The session rounded off with British Wool's Ian Brooksbank explaining how fleeces are graded and why every detail affects value.

The second shearing workshop was held at the Grey Sheep Company in Hampshire, hosted by Susie Parish by permission of Neil and Emma Boyles. After covering shearing foundations and biosecurity, participants were guided through the farm's on-site processing facility, an artisan-scale mill where fleece is transformed into luxurious yarn.

"This is a purely wool-producing farm and it shows the real value in wool," says NSA Technical Communications Officer Anna Wilson. "Susie walked us through each machine and factory process. Although smaller than a commercial mill, it gave attendees a complete overview of how stunning yarn is produced and sold worldwide."

As the year drew to a close, two pre-lambing workshops wrapped up the programme. One at Scotland's Rural College Hill and Mountain Research Centre in Scotland, the other in Northern Ireland. These sessions focused on ewe nutrition, neonatal hygiene and early-life disease prevention.



Interactive workshops allow attendees to implement changes on their farms.

Held in early December, the timing was intentional. Participants now have crucial weeks to reflect on their learning, review their systems and make adjustments before lambing begins.



The shearing workshops enabled one-to-one tuition.

Inspiration

"NSA strives to deliver workshops that not only provide valuable information from industry experts but keep each session interactive and tailored to individuals," says Anna. "This enables each attendee to take away something they can implement on their own farms."

The NSA Next Generation workshops proved that learning doesn't have to happen in lecture halls. It is often best in barns, fields, shearing sheds and around shared challenges. By giving aspiring shepherds the tools, confidence and inspiration to adapt and innovate, the programme is planting the seeds for a more sustainable and resilient sheep sector.

And if this year's enthusiasm is anything to go by, the next generation is more than ready.



Next generation farmers selected for mentoring programme

By Katie James, NSA

Young UK sheep farmers will be given the guidance to progress their sheep farming enterprises thanks to the return of the NSA Next Generation and Register of Sheep Advisers (RoSA) competition.

Having received many deserving applications from young sheep farmers aged 18 to 35, NSA and RoSA were able to make connections between six lucky next generation sheep farmers and experienced sheep farming advisers this autumn.

The winners from the competition all highlighted key areas of their sheep farming businesses they would like to make improvements to, enabling mentors to be matched carefully considering their areas of specialism and their location geographically.

Initial online meetings have now taken place between many of the partnerships with visits planned on farm for the start of 2026.

Winner profiles

Two of the lucky young sheep farmers to have been given this mentoring opportunity are Georgie Cooper from Devon and James Madeley from Monmouthshire.

Georgie is in the second year of a farm tenancy. Currently she has a flock of Herdwick and Cheviot cross ewes, selling hogget boxes directly to the public and hosting on farm events serving meat from her sheep and cattle. She says: "I applied to be part of the scheme as I want to make my business more financially stable. I would like to grow my stock numbers and ultimately build a sustainable business to help me secure a longer term farm tenancy in the future."


James is keen to learn more about managing worm burdens


Georgie is focusing on long-term sustainability.

Georgie has been paired with adviser Lauren David who works as an Agricultural and Business Consultant for Cymru Agricultural & Rural Advice. Laura is well placed to support Georgie with extensive technical and business experience.

Multiple flocks

James farms two separate flocks – a pedigree North Country Cheviot flock producing female breeding stock for sale and a second flock of Brecknock Hill Cheviot ewes that are crossed to produce Cheviot cross ewes, also for breeding sales. "My vision is to improve my stock to boost lambing percentage, health and grass conversion. I would also like to overcome the worm burden I have inherited on my grazing ground," he says.

James will receive advice from South West farm vet Tim Bebbington. As a past president of the Sheep Veterinary Society Tim is well placed to give useful mentoring to James.

Nicola Noble, NSA Project Manager, comments: "Building confidence and strengthening skillsets in the next generation is critical to the future sustainability of UK sheep farming. We need to foster the enthusiasm we've seen in all the winners of the competition, channelling it in a positive direction. I'm excited to see how these mentoring partnerships blossom and look forward to seeing the on-farm results delivered by the competition."

Guidance

As the pairs continue to build their relationships over the coming months, NSA and RoSA look forward to observing the progress these ambitious young farmers will make with tailored guidance behind them. By investing in skills, confidence and long-term resilience, the programme aims not only to strengthen individual businesses but also to secure a vibrant future for the UK sheep sector as a whole.

NSA will be sure to share the progress with members via NSA communications.

Winner	Wanting advice on	RoSA member
Hamish Beaton, Essex	Improving flock profitability while maintaining high health.	James Royce
Georgie Cooper, Devon	Building a financially sustainable flock.	Lauren David
Emily Elnaugh, Suffolk	Business benchmarking and pasture management.	Sarah Gillimore
James Madeley, Monmouthshire	Parasite control and flock genetic improvement.	Tim Bebbington
Sophie Walton, Durham	Flock health, in particular lameness, common illnesses and nutritional deficiencies.	Debby Brown
Kieran Wheatcroft, Gloucestershire	Flock health and management of the ewe at lambing time.	Rachel Forster






Ellen's pedigree Suffolk flock is building steadily.

Balancing flocks, family and the future of the Northern Ireland sheep sector

By Katie James, NSA

From helping on neighbouring farms as a child to representing Northern Ireland's sheep producers, Regional Coordinator Ellen Moorehead has shaped a career balancing work, family and ambition.

Growing up on a mixed beef and sheep farm near Annalong, County Down, farming has always been central to Ellen's life. As children, she and her sister Amy began helping neighbours with sheep work, often being paid not in cash, but in lambs. "We were so young we couldn't really be paid properly," Ellen jokes, "so instead we were given sheep and that's really where it all started."

Those early experiences sparked an enduring love of livestock and led Ellen to take on lambing jobs in her teens before deciding to study agricultural technology at university despite initially planning a career as a PE teacher.


Ellen has found Texel Mules to be more popular currently.

"I loved the practical side of it," she says. "My placements were mainly on sheep farms, confirming this was what I wanted to do.

"Farming in Northern Ireland is quite unique. Most farms are small and income is often supported by work off-farm so me and my siblings have now moved onto careers as well as helping on the farm. My dad's also a stone mason, so he's been able to combine both farming and another vocation over the years."

Growing numbers

As the family grew, so did the sheep flock, initially with a commercial focus. Amy's growing interest in genetics and reproductive technology, through her animal breeding job, inspired a new direction.

Ellen says. "Amy bought my husband Joseph and I two Suffolk ewe lambs as an engagement present and that's how our Suffolk flock began."

While the pedigree Suffolk side remains small for now, Ellen sees it as an important part of the farm's future. "It's more of a hobby, but it's where my drive lies. We'd love to build it into something more serious when the time is right," she adds.

The commercial flock of around 50 ewes, produces finished lambs and some store lambs, as well as breeding Suffolk and Texel Mule ewes, all of which are sold through local livestock markets.

Like many farmers juggling multiple roles, Ellen has recently reduced numbers following the birth of her third child. "I've sold a few ewes this year," she admits. "My husband said we shouldn't lamb next spring as we have enough to keep us busy, but I'll definitely be looking to build numbers again the following year.

"Although the way sheep prices are at the moment, I'm a bit nervous about buying too many back in."


Ellen's family is at the heart of everything she does.

Ewes are lambed indoors from late February, although Ellen is increasingly drawn to outdoor lambing. "When our daughter Ava was born, we pushed lambing back to April so I could help once she'd arrived," Ellen explains. "We lambed outdoors and it gave me a lot of food for thought. The costs were lower and hygiene was better leading to fewer joint ill cases. When we lamb again in 2027, I'll seriously consider outdoor lambing."

Forage fed

All lambs are completely grass-fed, with no creep offered and ewes receive only minimal concentrates at lambing time. The flock is vaccinated against clostridial diseases and pasteurella, with additional orf vaccination to counteract challenges exaggerated by lambs catching themselves in the farm's dense gorse hedgerows. Ellen adds: "We used to vaccinate against toxoplasmosis too, but thankfully we've had very few abortions recently. And despite our region being badly affected by Schmallenberg last year we were lucky to avoid it as we lambed later."

Ellen's sheep enterprise complements the family's small suckler herd of around 20 Salers.

Having tried several crosses the cows have this year been crossed with a Beef Shorthorn, chosen for easier calving. "Dad's on his own more now, so we need something easy calving with calves that are up and thriving quickly," Ellen explains. "We've always liked the Salers for that reason – they've a great pelvic size and lively calves."

All calves are sold at weaning and replacements are homebred to maintain herd health. "We've been TB-free for more than 10 years, so we don't want to risk bringing anything in," she says.

Ellen's enthusiasm for sheep farming has carried through into her professional life. As part of her studies at Queen's University Belfast and Cafre, she spent her placement year on McDonald's Progressive Young Farmers Programme, gaining valuable insight into the beef supply chain.

That experience led to a career in agritech with a Northern Ireland trade technology company, where she managed projects centred on traceability and post-Brexit livestock movements. "The company provided the technology backbone of the Windsor Framework, the agreement between the UK and EU on trade and governance in Northern Ireland after Brexit," she says. "It was fascinating work, but I always knew I wanted to return to something more grassroots."

NSA role

That opportunity came when Ellen became NSA's Northern Ireland Regional Coordinator in 2024. "I'd always been a member and admired the work NSA does," she says. "When the role came up, it fitted perfectly with my life and family."

Since joining, Ellen has helped deliver a successful NSA Sheep NI event and has been heavily involved in the Northern Ireland Sheep Taskforce working to secure support for Northern Irish sheep farmers all making for a busy first year.

Ellen explains that while the beef sector in Northern Ireland currently benefits from several support schemes, sheep farmers risk losing out. "If you're solely a sheep farmer, you're looking at a 17% reduction in your Basic Payment Scheme with no way to recoup costs unless you're part of another scheme," she says. "We're trying to make sure sheep producers aren't forgotten in future policy decisions."


Ellen is considering a move to outdoor lambing for ease and hygiene.

She has also been working alongside NSA Northern Ireland Region Trustee and Chair Edward Adamson to protest against Daera's plans to remove Northern Ireland's maedi visna-free disease status. "It's proving to be a big piece of work for NSA as the impact this would have on the sector here is significant," adds Ellen.

Alongside her NSA role, Ellen now runs her own consultancy business and helps local farmers with compliance paperwork, while raising three young children. "It's a juggling act," she admits, "but I've learned it's ok to step back when you need to."

Pressure balance

Ellen is candid about the pressures women in agriculture can feel to do it all. "Sometimes there's this sense that women have to keep going no matter what to prove we can manage it all," she reflects. "But it's ok to slow down if that's what's needed. You don't have to do everything right now."

For Ellen, family and farming are deeply connected. "We're at a stage in life where our three children are young and they are our priority. But it's absolutely our intention to build back up again as they get older. I want them to grow up surrounded by the farm – it's such a special way to live."

She finds encouragement and solidarity through her involvement with the Ulster Farmers' Union Next Generation Group, where she's one of several young women combining agriculture with family life. "We jokingly call ourselves the real housewives of agriculture," Ellen laughs. "We talk farming, kids, dinner plans – it's been such a support network. It makes you realise so many others are in the same situation."

Ellen's story mirrors the resilience and adaptability of many Northern Ireland family farms. While numbers may ebb and flow with life's demands, her passion for the sheep sector remains constant. "Farming is a family business," she says. "We sometimes get caught up in the commercial side and forget the personal commitment that goes into it. But that's what makes it so rewarding."

Farm facts

- Mixed beef suckler and commercial sheep enterprise near Annalong, County Down.
- Farm work is balanced with work for NSA NI Region and other farming companies.
- Successfully organised NSA Sheep NI in 2025.

> We're trying to make sure sheep producers aren't forgotten in future policy decisions.
>
> Ellen Moorehead


Family farms are the backbone of the NI sheep sector.

Short and long-term strategies for future-proofing your business

By James Bush, GSC Grays

In a year marked by extreme weather and economic uncertainty, livestock farmers are once again being tested on their ability to adapt, plan and persevere.

While the challenges are all too familiar with volatile prices, rising input costs and unpredictable weather patterns, the potential solutions are evolving. For many, collaboration is not just beneficial, it is a necessity.

This summer was the hottest on record. While some regions benefited from favourable conditions, others faced severe pressure on forage supply and quality. These regional disparities highlight a key opportunity, where one area struggles, another may thrive. For livestock farmers, this opens the door to collaborative approaches reducing risk and improving profitability.

Forage sharing is one example. Surpluses in one region could be traded or sold to producers facing shortages elsewhere, maintaining supply continuity and strengthening relationships across the farming community. In a sector with tight margins, such partnerships can make a real difference.

There are many other ways collaboration can deliver value. Joint machinery ownership, shared labour and coordinated logistics can all reduce costs. During seasonal peaks, pooling labour or equipment with neighbouring farms can ease pressure and improve efficiency.

Marketing is another area working together can yield results. Group selling or cooperative marketing can help secure better prices and reduce exposure to market fluctuations. By presenting a united front, producers gain more negotiating power and access to new markets.


Regular business plan reviews will help avoid nasty suprises.

Planning ahead

Perhaps most importantly, collaboration fosters shared learning. Peer-to-peer benchmarking, discussion groups and joint ventures can aid decision making and drive innovations. This can be trialling new grazing systems, exploring alternative breeds or investing in infrastructure.

While collaboration offers long-term strategic benefits, short-term financial resilience remains critical. Cash flow pressures affect livestock enterprises as much as arable ones, particularly when feed costs rise or market prices dip unexpectedly.

Proactive financial planning is key. Early discussions with banks, backed by realistic budgets and business plans can secure working capital and prevent issues escalating. Openness with lenders allows time to consider options, such as securing additional lending, restructuring existing borrowing or managing an overdraft facility.

It is far better to act early than to wait for a crisis. Planning ahead enables clearer, more strategic decisions, rather than reactive ones during stress. That is why understanding your breakeven point is essential. With farming margins so narrow, even small cost increases can threaten viability. Understanding production costs per lamb or per ewe, reviewing inputs, assessing machinery use and managing overheads all contribute to a stronger business model.

Now is also the time to think about the future. Diversification, environmental schemes or complementary enterprises could offer new revenue streams and greater resilience. These opportunities require careful planning, but they reward those willing to adapt.

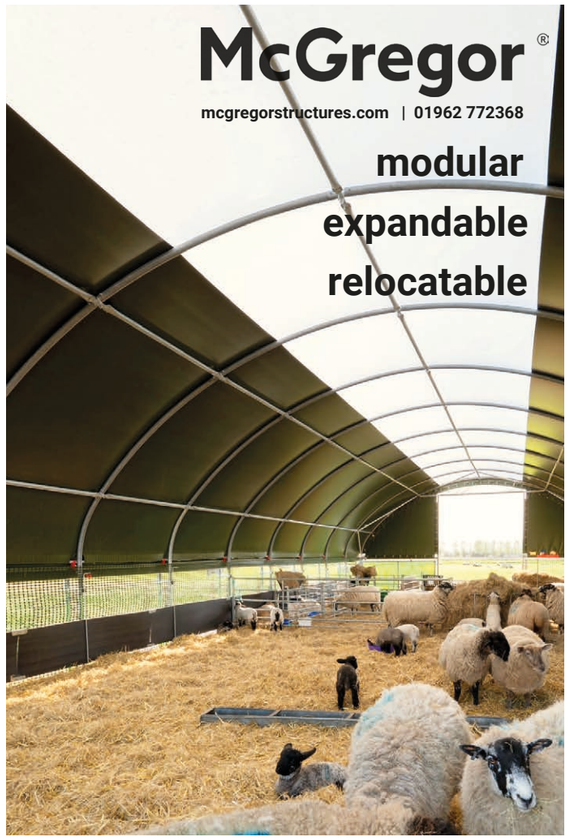

Speak to neighbours about how to pull resources together.

Seek advice

In uncertain times, professional advice is invaluable. Whether identifying risks, optimising cash flow, facilitating partnerships, or supporting succession and restructuring finances, expert guidance strengthens long-term viability.

Seeking advice is not a sign of weakness but a sign of good business sense. The most resilient farmers are those who plan ahead, adapt quickly and ensure they have the right support.

With livestock prices currently strong, now is the time to invest in resilience. The challenges in the sector may persist, but so do the opportunities. By working together, sharing resources and planning strategically, you can build a business that is both resilient and financially sustainable.



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Taking the focus away from yield can bring profit to your business

By Abby Cook, Register of Sheep Advisers

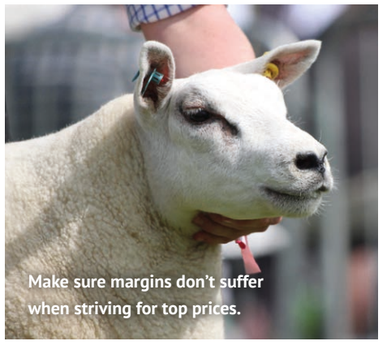
For years the belief has been that yield is the answer and that it is the key driver to profit – produce more to earn more.

But, if you dive deeper into successful businesses, this often isn't the case. With challenging times ahead for farming, the need for management decisions based on data analysis and improved efficiency will be more crucial than ever. So is now the time to be prioritising margin and move away from higher yields?

Revenue

For many, achieving the top price at market or consistently sending lambs to the abattoir at 22kg dead weight is heralded as a success. But you should be questioning these successes and asking what the cost was to achieve it. Just because you are achieving top prices, doesn't necessarily mean you are making top margins.

This is where a sound understanding of your enterprise and overall business costs is important, to drive business profit. Looking at yield versus margin can help understand the best strategy for your business going forwards.



Make sure margins don't suffer when striving for top prices.

Most will be familiar with yield – how much of a product is produced. When we are considering sheep enterprises, yield can be linked to the number of lambs per ewe, total lambs for the flock or it can be linked to the kg of meat produced per lamb or kg meat sold per ewe. The higher the yield the more of something we have.



Keep reviewing input costs to keep your business on track.

Yield is a useful indicator of the efficiency with which resources are converted into produce. With no yield, we have no produce to sell and therefore profit is not achievable.

But yield maximisation can also lead to inefficient resource use and long-term damage to farming ecosystems. Increased yields will often rely more heavily on inputs, such as inorganic fertilisers, sprays, processed feeds, and greater reliance on vet advice and products for disease control.

Increase margins

Instead, the key is to focus on farm technical efficiency, for example the ability to maximise output while aiming to minimise inputs. Commonly referred to as gross margin at an enterprise level, or net margin at a business level, margin looks at the money left from the revenue – all your sales linked to that business, once you have taken away all associated costs.

By utilising financial data, we can identify the income less the associated costs for that enterprise and this will help analyse whether the top price at market or the extra 2kg per lamb that isn't being paid for by the abattoir, is actually worth it financially. Driving business profit using margin analysis will help identify those enterprises where the costs outweigh the financial benefit.

Take this example. Farmer A and farmer B both sell their lambs at market. Farmer A sells his lambs for £152/head while farmer B sells his lambs for £130/head. At first glance, farmer A appears more successful, but the real question lies in profit margin rather than price alone.

Farmer A finished his lambs on concentrates, whereas farmer B reared lambs solely on grass. When the additional feed, labour and fuel costs were considered, the extra £22/head farmer A gained was largely offset. In the end, both farmers achieved broadly similar margins

This example shows that a higher selling price does not always translate to higher profitability. Lower input systems can often deliver better efficiency, reduce stress and improve work-life balance. Understanding true costs and business objectives is key before striving for that top price.

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Ewes may need additional feed to maintain condition especially in poor weather.

Key areas for consideration in your ewe flock when preparing them for lambing

By Joseph Angell, ECSRHM

EUROPEAN COLLEGE OF Small Ruminant HEALTH MANAGEMENT

Lambing is a key point in the calendar, and for many, is where much of the income is set that year.

Having the ewe optimally prepared for lambing can weight things in favour of success, reducing risk and minimising stress. The backbone of optimal production at lambing time are ewes that are in peak nutritional state. These ewes can lamb well and rear healthy energetic lambs, as well as being more resistant to disease.

Body condition scoring (BCS) is a simple yet powerful tool to estimate whether the ewe is managing on the diet offered to her. Optimal scores differ between breeds and production systems but as a rule of thumb lowland ewes should be in BCS 3.0-3.5 on a five-point scoring scale, and upland/hill ewes BCS 2.5-3.0. This ensures the ewe has sufficient energy for her own needs, but also to give birth and produce sufficient colostrum and milk to rear the lamb.



Milking singles can provide colostrum for lambs needing supplementation.

Management

Once condition is lost it is difficult to regain while pregnant. Therefore, managing the ewe prior to pregnancy and then maintaining her throughout pregnancy requires close attention and an ability to adapt and change the system if it is not matching the needs of the ewe. Rescoring the ewes at scanning and then again closer to lambing can allow further fine tuning of forage availability and any other inputs to manage body condition up to the point of birth.

Blood testing via your vet can be used at around three to four weeks before lambing to look for nutritional markers that can help investigate subtle changes not detected by BCS and allow further adjustment to the diet.

Sufficient energy and protein, and sheer availability of enough dry matter, are critical. It is not enough to have a good diet but also the sheep needs to be able to access it. Insufficient feeding space is surprisingly common and will limit access for some ewes resulting in them not consuming what is expected, with consequent nutritional issues.

Key minerals, such as magnesium, calcium and phosphorus, are required to support lamb growth and milk production. Trace minerals, including copper, selenium, and iodine, should also be optimised, to ensure ewe health, but also lamb health, vigour and resistance to disease. Trace minerals need careful testing and management as overdosing can be just as damaging as under supply, with fatalities sometimes reported.

A key feature of lamb survival after birth is the rapid delivery of a sufficient quantity of quality colostrum from the ewe. It is energy dense helping a lamb keep warm as well as supplying the energy needed for movement and growth. Colostrum contains immunoglobulins from the ewe helping it fight off infectious diseases, such as watery mouth disease.

Quality colostrum

Ewes in optimal condition with ready access to good quality food should be able to produce good quality colostrum of sufficient volume. Following birth, lambs need to receive around 50ml per kg bodyweight of good quality colostrum as soon as possible and at least within the first two hours of life.

Quality can be assessed easily using a Brix refractometer with a small quantity of colostrum squirted onto the device and read instantly. The reading should be 26% or higher for good quality colostrum. I'd suggest milky ewes rearing a single lamb with a Brix reading of more than 26% can be milked out after feeding their own lamb with this excess colostrum used to supplement ewes with poor quality colostrum or insufficient volume for the number of lambs – for example triplet bearing ewes.

If at the start of lambing a large proportion of ewes have suboptimal colostrum density, a Brix value less than 26%, this could indicate insufficient energy or protein in the diet allowing you to adjust the feeding for the ewes yet to lamb.

Parasite management can impact ewe performance and welfare, as well as lamb production. Ewes in optimal body condition with sufficient good quality food available should have low gastrointestinal nematodes (worms), managed by the ewe's own immune system. Towards the end of pregnancy, thinner twin bearing ewes and triplet bearing ewes may not be able to eat enough to produce sufficient antibodies to keep their parasites at bay and so these may require worming, to reduce the amount of worm eggs they then shed onto the pasture to be later ingested by the lambs.

Use faecal testing to confirm the need for treatment and provide evidence for specific wormer treatments. For fit twins and single bearing ewes worming is likely to be unnecessary, but testing can confirm the need to treat individuals avoiding unnecessary drug use.

For many parts of the UK, liver fluke and rumen fluke may be present. Liver fluke should be treated if present, as the presence of flukes within the liver can result in protein loss leading to weight loss, an increased need for nutrients, and reduced colostrum volume and quality. Rumen fluke is more confusing and suspicion of infection should lead to a discussion with your vet as to how best to approach this.

Health

Infectious disease can wreak havoc at lambing time, with ewes managed together in close proximity allowing rapid transfer of contagious organisms. Key diseases include enzootic abortion, footrot, contagious ovine digital dermatitis and eye infections, but some iceberg diseases, such as ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma and Johne's disease may be more readily transmitted between sheep at lambing time.

Active infectious diseases, for example infectious lameness, can rapidly result in reduced body condition in the ewes with consequential impacts on lambing ability, and colostrum quantity and volume, as well as posing an onward risk to newborn lambs.

Having a plan to manage these diseases and risks is essential to avoid them spreading rapidly and becoming difficult to manage. Ensure the plan is worked out well in advance of lambing enabling you to successfully manage the ewes and prepare them for lambing. To do so will help safeguard lambing and increase the opportunity for success.



Ewes should have their condition monitored regularly.





Check lambs for signs of lameness and swollen joints.

Important measures to take to prevent joint ill from damaging your flock

By Dawn Bowness, Clevedale Veterinary Practice

vetPartners

The infectious arthritis known as joint ill is a serious issue in lambs, but correct prevention and treatment can minimise the potential long-term economic and welfare impacts of the disease on your flock.

Protecting against joint ill and treating it quickly is essential to keep your flock healthy and productive. No level of joint ill should be accepted as normal.

Most farms will have the odd case of joint ill, but it's important to seek veterinary advice if there is a high prevalence as we should be aiming for the lowest possible incidences in any flock.

The disease is predominantly caused by a specific and tenacious bacterial strain, *Streptococcus dysgalactiae*, and it's very difficult to treat unless you catch it early.

It can be picked up and spread through multiple forms, such as saliva, faeces and birthing fluids, and can survive on straw for up to 14 days and in soil for up to 21 days.

Infection

While this bacteria is the most common cause, there are other ways for joint ill to occur.

Older lambs can sometimes be affected by erysipelas, which can gain entry through minor wounds, such as those caused by thistles or gorse. You can also get joint ill caused by tick pyaemia, where ticks inject bacteria into the bloodstream as they feed.

Joint ill is a challenging disease to treat due to it having several potential causes and multiple forms of entry into the lamb.

From navel infection and oral transmission during feeding, to wounds from early ear tagging and contact with leftover birth products, there are so many ways the bacteria can get into the lamb. But, the symptoms are the same – lameness and swollen joints.



Tagging wounds can be a source of infection.

If it impacts spinal joints the swelling may be less visible, but the lamb will be unable to stand or walk at all.

Spotting joint ill early is vital because untreated cases can lead to permanent joint damage and affected lambs will experience significant pain.

Fortunately, there are steps that can be taken to help prevent the onset of infection.

Good environmental hygiene is really important both before and after lambing. Clean bedding pre-lambing will keep the ewe's udder clean, which reduces the risks of oral transmission when lambs are feeding.

Powdered lime will kill streptococcus in bedding and switching to pine wood shavings, where streptococcus can't survive, can also help.

Environment

Pre-lambing nutrition is also important as high-quality colostrum can help eliminate bacteria in the bloodstream, as long as good feeding hygiene is followed.

Keeping feeding equipment clean is essential. Feeding tubes should be disinfected between every lamb to prevent bacterial spread.

To prevent navel infections, wet navels should be dried up quickly using a navel spray and ear tag wounds also need to be kept clean. The wound from early ear tagging is a big source of infection but disinfecting the tag itself and spraying the ear with a disinfectant, such as surgical spirit, before tagging can make a difference.

For joint ill caused by tick pyaemia, proper tick control is the best form of control to prevent it.

The presence of joint ill on your farm does not necessarily mean your farm is not clean enough. We see cases in very clean farms, in very good environments.

Hygiene is not the only factor contributing to cases of joint ill, which is why it should always be treated on an individual basis.

In all instances the key to effective treatment is catching it early. We need to eradicate the bacterial infection as quickly as possible to prevent long-term damage to the joints. Once the damage is done, it's irreversible.

Medication

Treatment for joint ill involves two aspects – antibiotics and pain relief.

The exact antibiotic should be discussed with your vet, as resistance and different strains of bacteria mean that one size does not fit all. In some situations, we will take samples from the joint and culture the bacteria, to tell us exactly what antibiotic is going to work best on that particular farm.

A prolonged course of antibiotic treatment is usually required, typically lasting between seven and 10 days. Something that sometimes presents an obstacle for farmers. You can catch the lambs for the first few days because they're still lame, but when they start feeling better, it gets harder.

It can be frustrating if treatment isn't completed, because the lambs can relapse and joint damage becomes more likely. Joint ill is a very painful condition for affected lambs so treating them with effective pain relief is crucial.



Use plenty of fresh bedding to reduce bacteria build-up on udders.

Early intervention

If treated early enough, most lambs will recover well provided no joint damage has occurred, but in some cases the outcome is not so positive. You will sometimes get lambs that don't respond to treatment and I would always recommend speaking to your vet at this point.

Lack of response to treatment, or no treatment at all, will lead to chronic arthritis and permanent joint damage. It is not acceptable to leave lambs like this, so euthanasia on welfare grounds is the most common outcome in these situations.

Joint ill poses significant long-term impacts, not only in terms of animal welfare but also economically due to treatment costs, lamb mortality and the labour-intensive nature of managing treatment programmes, particularly in large flocks.

It is a multi-faceted problem from cause to entry point, to treatment and outlook. Prevention is better than cure and quick intervention is key.




Multiple weak or stillborn lambs may indicate a widespread problem in your flock.

Investigating the causes of neurological conditions in neonatal lambs

By Heather Stevenson, SRUC

Brain development and function in the unborn lamb can be impacted by both infectious and non-infectious challenges leading to stillbirths or lambs that appear weak and slow.

Others may show more obvious signs of brain damage and may be unable to stand or unsteady on their feet. Tremors, blindness and flickering eyes can also be seen. Diagnosis can be difficult as a range of conditions can produce similar signs.

If the unborn lamb is not receiving enough energy via the placenta, then some brain cells can die. Ewe energy deficiency can therefore lead to the birth of weak lambs. They may have a head tremor and twin/triplet lambs are at greater risk than singles.

Investigate

Blood samples collected from the ewe within 24 hours of lambing can confirm energy deficiency. Affected lambs can recover over a few days with careful nursing. Checking ewe energy levels by collecting blood samples three weeks before lambing is due to start gives enough time to adjust the ration if necessary.

Ewe copper deficiency in mid-pregnancy can affect normal brain development leading to the birth of lambs with swayback. It is most common in hill flocks but can also be seen in other management systems. Grazing improved upland pasture or reduced supplementary feeding during mild winters can increase the risk. Lambs can be stillborn or weak and unable to sit or stand. They may have poor coordination and a head tremor.


Ewes may need supplementary feeding to support nutrition and energy levels.

Low lamb/ewe blood copper results or lamb liver copper results confirm the diagnosis. But, increased hard feed in the run up to lambing can boost both ewe and lamb copper levels after the damage is done and mask an earlier deficiency. Once recognised swayback is straightforward to prevent in future years by ensuring ewe copper status is good.

A difficult or slow lambing (dystocia) can reduce the supply of oxygen to the lamb's brain leading to cell damage. Bleeding can occur between the brain and the bone of the skull. Lambs that survive are slow to stand and suck.

Nursing is needed as they are less able to produce heat for the first few days, putting them at risk of hypothermia. Colostrum intake can be too little, too late and they are not as good at absorbing the antibodies making them prone to infection. Overlarge lambs, ringwomb and malpresentations can all lead to dystocia.

Genetics

There are number of inherited, breed specific conditions that can affect the brain of unborn lambs. Other cases can be due to one-off issues during brain development. Further investigation is warranted if several cases are seen, particularly if they have a common sire.

Viral infections can cross the placenta and infect the unborn lamb. This can be devastating for the developing brain, but the effects will vary depending on the stage of pregnancy.

Border disease (BD) virus has been recognised in the UK for more than 60 years and is very similar to bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) in cattle. In fact, both viruses can infect sheep. Persistently infected sheep or cattle that often look perfectly healthy, are the usual source of virus. Close contact between cattle and pregnant sheep carries a risk if you do not know the BVD status of the herd.

Neighbouring cattle and sheep make good boundary biosecurity essential. Outbreaks of disease can often be traced to the purchase of one or more persistently infected carrier animals. Accurate tests are available to screen brought in animals and managing them as a separate group until after lambing is good practice.

Lamb death is a common outcome when ewes become infected with BD/BVD for the first time during early to mid-pregnancy. If the lamb survives, the virus impairs the production of specialised brain tissue (myelin) essential for the speedy transmission of signals between brain cells.

The lamb's immune system develops between days 60 and 85 of pregnancy and infection during this period can lead to the destruction of important areas of the brain. Any lambs carried to term will have obvious nervous signs.

Iceberg diseases

A low scanning percentage, abortions, stillbirths and weak lambs can all result from BD/BVD infection. The birth of lambs with a tremor and unusually hairy fleeces should raise suspicions of BD/BVD infection. Domed heads and limb deformities, including fixed joints, may occasionally be seen.


Check the health status of your ewes with your vet.

In recent years many flocks have seen similar deformed lambs due to Schmallenberg virus infection. This virus is transmitted by midges and the unborn lamb is at risk if the ewe becomes infected for the first time during the second month of pregnancy.

This is most likely to occur in early lambing flocks. The bent legs, fixed joints and twisted spines that cause difficulties at lambing are a consequence of viral damage to the brain and spinal cord. Large parts of the brain can be destroyed and replaced by fluid filled cavities. Lambs that are blind, weak or unable to suck have also been described.

Bluetongue virus (BTV) is also transmitted by midges and is a notifiable disease. Many different strains of BTV exist with BTV-3 and more recently BTV-8 currently present in the UK. BTV can damage the brain of unborn calves but evidence so far indicates that this is not usually an issue in sheep. For any concerns on animal health, speak to your vet and farm advisers.


Brain development can be affected by poor nutrition, slow lambing or viral infections.



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Friday 18th September, Melton Mowbray Market.

NSA Wales & Border Ram Sales Main Sale
Monday 21st September, Royal Welsh Showground.



Liver fluke infection is being seen later due to warmer winters.

Why your usual approach to liver fluke may not be enough this winter

By Nerys Wright, SCOPS

After experiencing liver fluke losses on farm and wanting to avoid it happening again, it's easy to understand why many opt for doing what they've always done.

Changing routines can feel risky and the fear of not treating and losing sheep often outweighs concerns about resistance building up over time.

The threat of liver fluke varies significantly, from year to year, farm to farm, and even field to field. One of the biggest factors is the weather and we all know how unpredictable that's been lately. Warmer winters, wetter springs and hotter summers all affect how fluke behaves. If we don't adapt, we risk being caught out.

It's not easy to replace a familiar routine of treating ewes with product A on date X, then product B six weeks later, with a test, and if positive treat with A, but if negative, test again in X weeks. For change to happen, you need confidence in your advice and be able to see the benefits. The key to this change is encouragement to assess the liver fluke risk to the flock and to use testing to determine if and then when treatment is needed.

Adaptation

For change to happen, the new approach needs to be simpler or visibly better and with fluke that's not always obvious. Speaking with your SQP, adviser or vet can play a key role in helping assess your farm's risk.

Routine early autumn treatments, such as pre-tupping doses, were historically used when the risk of liver fluke was concentrated in the autumn, with immature fluke typically picked up from infected pastures in September and October. But in recent years, there has been considerable variability in both the severity and timing of infections, with many now occurring much later in the autumn and into the winter.

This means treating with a flukicide too early can leave livestock vulnerable to reinfection. Flukicides don't have any residual action, so an early treatment offers no protection if the stock goes back onto infected pastures. Early autumn treatments often miss the mark, wasting time and money, contributing to resistance. Repeat testing every few weeks can guide both the timing and choice of flukicide, improving control and reducing unnecessary use.

Diagnostics

All the tests will likely require external intervention. SQPs, advisers and vets can offer advice on which test to do and when is the best time to do it. Unfortunately, no single test gives a clear yes/no answer for all sheep, so timing and context matter.

Blood antibody elisa can be done in a lab or on-farm using a lateral flow device for same-day results. It shows exposure from two weeks after infection, so it's great for spotting early fluke. It's best used on lambs in their first grazing season as sentinels but not older sheep, as it may pick up past infections.

The coproantigen elisa is a faecal test that detects mid to late-stage infection, earlier than egg counts. It works best on individual samples but ask for advice if using it for the first time.

Faecal fluke egg counts can only detect adult fluke, that take 10–12 weeks to mature. They are not useful for detecting immature fluke infections.

I'd also say don't waste a dead sheep. Post mortems can reveal a lot, especially about the liver. Abattoir feedback is also valuable, helping you understand what's going on in the flock and whether your control plan is working.

Choosing the right product is crucial. The various flukicide products available vary in their effectiveness according to the maturity of the liver fluke in the animal. Testing allows you to target the stage of the liver fluke in your animals and your vet, SQP or adviser can help you choose the most appropriate product for effective treatment. *More information at www.scops.org.uk.*



Testing identifies the liver fluke lifecycle stage, enabling accurate treatment.

On-farm assessment

- Farm history – have you had fluke before?
- Topography and location – are there wet, marshy areas where mud snails might live?
- Weather patterns – has it been mild, wet or unpredictable?
- NADIS forecasts – what's the fluke risk in your region this year?

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A novel route to commercialisation for a critical vaccine against louping ill

By Beth Wells, Moredun Research Institute

Moredun

Many upland sheep farmers across the UK have been hit hard by the tick-borne louping ill virus (LIV), which has been spreading to new areas since the previous vaccine was withdrawn from market in 2017.

In the absence of a vaccine against LIV, reported cases in sheep and red grouse have increased, as well as the disease being diagnosed more frequently in cattle, horses and dogs that are known to be less susceptible to the virus.

Increased risk

Disease in these animals is likely due to increasing viral loading on upland areas as sheep remain unvaccinated. As louping ill (LI) has occasionally been reported in humans, we may also be at increasing risk.

Many farmers, in the absence of a LI vaccine, have turned to increasingly frequent applications of acaricidal treatments, including pour-ons and dip, as the only tools available to control LI. These treatments remain effective, but our use of them is becoming increasingly unsustainable due to the rising frequency of application, which will result in resistance developing to these products in time.



Infected sheep may exhibit symptoms, such as fever, trembling and seizures.

There is also increasing evidence and policy focus on the detrimental environmental effect these treatments have, particularly on invertebrates, which are critical for upland biodiversity.



Tick infestations are increasing due to milder winters.

A vaccine against LI would reduce the pressure on these treatments and give sheep farmers an important tool in the fight against this tick-borne disease.

Vital research

Moredun has developed a vaccine, which has proved to be highly effective against LI in research trials. But, as LI is primarily a UK disease of upland areas, the market was deemed too small for pharmaceutical companies to invest in developing this vaccine for commercial use.

Moredun, working with sheep farmers and gamekeepers, understands the importance of this vaccine to our upland sheep farmers and in response has undertaken to develop the first commercial vaccine for sheep through fundraising.

As LI mainly affects sheep and red grouse, Moredun is targeting the livestock and moorland industries in a crowdfunder to get this vaccine to market. For the sheep campaign, we are delighted that our long-standing partner National Sheep Association is fully supporting us in raising awareness and donations.

You can help us by donating to our crowdfunder if you can. No amount is too small and each one is hugely appreciated.

It is a tall order as we need to raise £2.2m in donations for the first two phases of vaccine development but working together we can and must do it to support our upland sheep farmers. At time of going to press, the fundometer is showing that we have £250,000 donated not including £100K being drawn down from the Scottish Government in support of the Scottish upland sheep industry.

This is the last shot at getting the vaccine available to sheep farmers and we are very keen for everyone to get involved. If you are interested in helping raise awareness or running a funding campaign, please contact me on beth.wells@moredun.ac.uk.

NSA has set up a donate page at nationalsheep.org.uk/support-us/donate/louping-ill-vaccine.

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On-farm research helping navigate a path to sustainability in Wales

To achieve the target of net zero emissions by 2050, every industry and sector will need to deliver and demonstrate improvements in emission reduction and decarbonisation – red meat production is no exception.


The Welsh landscape is a perfect environment for sheep farming.

Wales is well suited to produce red meat, with its non-intensive farming systems and a landscape largely unsuited for growing crops. It also offers valuable habitats that are embedded in Welsh livestock farming systems.

But there's more that can be done and HCC continues to invest in several industry-led projects to assist with the challenge.

Environmental benefit

One example is the Land Use for Net Zero (LUNZ) Grassland Resilience project that looks to make the best use of grassland and evidence the wider environmental and social benefits of grassland-based beef and sheep systems, as well as other ruminant grazing systems across the UK. It also aims to make substantial savings for the industry – estimated to be worth up to £1.6bn, which will stem from efficient and nature friendly grassland management practices.

HCC is leading the Welsh beef and sheep cluster, just one of six clusters of commercial farms across the UK who are contributing data to the project. NSA is also leading a sheep in arable cluster, gathering on-farm data within this mixed farming system. Other leads include Scotland's Rural College, the Farmer Network, Agrisearch, Pasture for Life and Muller.


Projects are looking at the environmental impact of farms across the UK.

Each cluster has recruited up to ten farmers who have been involved in gathering information to assess the sustainability of their systems. Recruited for their interest in running profitable businesses alongside caring for the environment, they have been practicing agro-ecological management methods for at least five years. This includes mixed farming, rotational grazing, the use of legumes, reducing inputs and managing multispecies swards.

This is in parallel with scientific research across several universities exploring new farming methods and their impacts.

As part of the project, each farm has completed biodiversity audits, a carbon footprint and an on-farm sustainability tool called the Global Farm Metric. They have also sampled a selection of fields for soil and vegetation analysis.

Cluster workshops at the end of this year have allowed farmers to share their experiences, farm results and explore different elements of their farming systems with likeminded farmers from the same type of system. There are plans to host wider cluster meetings bringing together all farmers from across the different clusters in the new year.

Industry impact

LUNZ Grassland Resilience is one of five research programmes to address the challenge of net zero UK emissions by 2050, co-funded by UKRI, Defra and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

HCC is also involved in the Environment Baselining Project, another UK-wide sustainability project aiming to assess the environmental impact of farms across the UK. The collaborative initiative between HCC, AHDB and QMS is intended to redefine how farmers are recognised for delivering both food and environmental goods, as well as agriculture's impact and potential for environmental gain.

Gathering data

Eight farmers have recently been enlisted and will benefit from assessments, such as carbon stocks, run-off maps, carbon auditing and soil analysis on their farm. These will evidence how Welsh farms can be productive and, at the same time, be a carbon sink, offset green house gas emissions, enhance soil health and support biodiversity within their own farming system.

Other farms across the UK are also being assessed to gather sustainability data from the whole of the UK. In addition, the assessments will assist in future-proofing the sector and create up-to-date relevant data reducing the industry's reliance on historic national figures.

Soil sampling and light detection and ranging measurements are currently underway. This includes providing scientifically robust measurement of soil carbon stocks, soil nutrients, pH and texture.

Detailed soil sampling will be undertaken by taking 250 soil cores per farm with soil carbon analysed at different depths. The project aims to provide coverage across a diversity of farming systems and soil types.

Dr Heather McCalman, HCC, says: "Many farmers are already managing their grasslands in productive and environmentally friendly systems, producing high quality protein needed for human diets. But, there is always room for improvement.

"HCC is actively driving this by collaborating with industry partners to research how environmental impact in profitable livestock businesses can be reduced further."

More information about the projects at meatpromotion.wales.

Sector continues to show low antibiotic use

By Anna Wilson, NSA

The Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA) published it's latest report highlighting another positive year for antibiotic stewardship in the livestock sector.

As part of the targets task force and marking the conclusion of the second cycle, several sectors recorded their lowest antibiotic use to date, while others saw temporary increases due to disease outbreaks, underscoring the principle of the right medicine, at the right time when animal health is at risk.


Medicines should be used under veterinary guidance.

Leadership

Released alongside the Veterinary Medicines Directorate's (VMD) veterinary antimicrobial resistance and sales surveillance report, the findings confirm the UK's position as one of Europe's lowest antibiotic users and a leader in reducing antimicrobial resistance. Data from the Animal and Plant Health Agency and VMD also show a strong link between reduced antibiotic use and lower antimicrobial resistance levels in UK animals.

Despite challenges, such as bluetongue outbreaks and vaccine shortages, the sheep sector continues to achieve low and responsible antibiotic use. According to the conclusion of the newest report, average antibiotic use in sheep remains among the lowest of all livestock sectors.

Figures are consistently well below the UK average for food-producing animals. The use of highest priority critically important antibiotics in sheep is negligible, reinforcing the sector's commitment to protecting medicines vital for human health. Increased usage was noted in some flocks during disease outbreaks, but these were isolated and carried out under veterinary guidance, reflecting the principle of using as little as possible but as much as necessary.


It is important the sheep sector continues to use antibiotics responsibly.

Responsibility

Early data from the medicine hub also supports confidence in the sector's stewardship, showing low baseline usage and a strong compliance with best practice further demonstrating the sectors key commitment to responsible antibiotic use.

The recently reported new targets, build on lessons from previous cycles, focusing on innovation and refining stewardship practices to protect antibiotic efficacy for the future.

This continued progress matters not just for animal health, but for consumer confidence, trade and maintaining the UK's reputation for high welfare standards. Responsible antibiotic use is now a cornerstone of sustainable farming and a key driver in the global fight against antimicrobial resistance.

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Review your castration methods to ensure you are using the best method for your flock.

Is it time to rethink castration methods and improve animal welfare standards?

By Lis King, AHDB

For generations, castration has been a routine part of sheep farming. It's done early, done quickly and questioned far less than it deserves.

Reasons for this practice include welfare and behavioural management, such as preventing fighting between rams, and being able to keep male and female lambs together while mitigating the risk of unwanted pregnancies.

AHDB undertook a rapid evidence assessment to offer an opportunity to pause and think – are the old ways still the best ways?

The assessment looked at 10 different approaches to castration from the traditional rubber ring to surgical methods and even leaving lambs entire. Here's what stood out:

Leaving lambs entire. This option avoids pain and welfare concerns, lambs have leaner carcases, improved feed conversion efficiency and reach slaughter weight earlier potentially reducing flock emissions with a reduction in days to slaughter. But it brings challenges – like space and fencing to manage ram lambs separately to ewes and ewe lambs post weaning and ensuring marketing before sexual maturity.

Rubber rings. Cheap and quick, yes – but the evidence shows they cause severe pain and can slow growth. It must be carried out on lambs within seven days of birth, which may make the method unsuitable for many farm systems.



Combination clamps are less painful than rubber rings.

Clamp (such as the Burdizzo). Shorter duration of pain than rings, but still painful and needs skill to be done properly to ensure effective castration as no visual indication of effectiveness. Anaesthetic must be used on lambs older than seven days and restrictions vary between devolved nations. Check rules before use.

Rubber ring and clamp combined. Less painful than rings alone and reduces any potential risk of failed castration from clamp alone. Requires greater skill and labour. Must be carried out within seven days of birth.

Short-scrotum technique. Less painful with increased daily live weight gain and feed efficiency compared to other methods. No visual indication of effectiveness. Must be carried out within seven days of birth.

The review also highlighted that castration can reduce lamb suckling, impacting colostrum intake that increases the chances of disease and risk of mismothering. This raises an important question. Should we be prioritising welfare over tradition when evidence points to better outcomes?

Continued overleaf.

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Consider using pain relief when castrating lambs.

The UK Sheep Welfare Strategy, already in place for a couple of years, sets out six big goals including thriving lambs, positive welfare and collaborative flock management. Castration choices link directly to these goals. If we want lambs to thrive and welfare to improve, pain management must be part of the conversation.

Better welfare isn't just about doing the right thing, it can mean healthier lambs, better growth and stronger consumer trust. And with the strategy pushing for measurable progress, now's the time to review what happens on-farm.

Managing welfare

This isn't about telling farmers what to do, it's about starting a discussion. Each farm is different so it's about finding the management tools that work best for your farm system and keeping it under review as your business evolves.

The assessment highlights that leaving lambs entire often scores best for welfare and growth. But it's not a one-size-fits-all solution. Market requirements, flock size and management systems all play a role. For some, rubber rings remain the practical choice – but could pain relief make a difference? For others, trialling short-scrotum or clamp methods might be worth exploring.


Traditional rubber rings are cheap but can be painful.

This is where vets come in. The welfare strategy calls for collaborative flock management – farmers and vets working together to make informed decisions. That means reviewing health plans, considering pain relief options and weighing up the pros and cons of different techniques. It's also about looking ahead. How will consumer expectations and assurance schemes shape future practices? Welfare is becoming a key selling point and farms that adapt early may gain a competitive edge.

Review methods

It is important to review your system to see if alternative methods could reduce pain or improve survival. Speak to your vet and keep flock health plans up to date. Try to incorporate evidence-based methods of castration and introduce pain relief. Is it possible to do your own trials and track lamb outcomes through data collection? Good records will show how lamb welfare and growth rates compare. Network meetings are a great way of sharing experiences and discussing challenges.

Whatever you decide to do, it's clear that we really need to be talking about castration. It's not a mandate. It's an opportunity. The assessment gives us evidence and the welfare strategy gives us a framework. That should see farmers and vets working together to make informed choices.

So, what's your view? Are rubber rings still the best fit for your flock? Could leaving lambs entire work for you? Or is there a middle ground worth exploring?

More details on the assessment at ahdb.org.uk/rapid-evidence-assessment-castration-in-lambs.


Lamb welfare should be the most important factor in your decision making.

Suggested improvements

- Leave all or some of the ram lambs entire.
- Use a different method like short scrotum castration.
- Introduce pain relief, where possible.
- Check practices are fully aligned with assurance schemes and legislation.

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Following the flock

We visit Angus, North Yorkshire and Devon to catch up with NSA officeholders.

Peter Myles



NSA Scotland Regional Chair, Angus

The gavel, it has three ends – the seller, the buyer and more importantly the auctioneer.

Back in the last century, as a shy twenty-year-old I was handed a gavel and told to sell some hand tools at a farm sale. I had only just started at the market and hadn't had time to properly study the auctioneering art. In the end it was never meant for me.

Now after an autumn of attending ram sales I can't help but admire the skills we take for granted from those in the box. At Kelso Ram Sale, the cacophony of prices and descriptions of rams being sold from every direction takes one's breath away. One auctioneer I know has an almost musical tone, like a finely tuned engine he revs up then slows down, keeping the bidders following his every move.



Peter values the ram sales, highlighting the skill of the auctioneers.

When buying, one tries to catch their eye with a limit in mind but, good auctioneers can hypnotise you to almost scary levels if you really want that ram for your flock.

When it comes to selling my own rams, I'm always wracked with fear and anxious they make the price I want or even aspire to achieve. What will I tell the man in the box? On a good day the sale is easy but on a sticky day the auctioneer well and truly earns their commission, not necessarily getting the recognition they deserve.



Ted merits livestock markets for more than just quality stock.

Ted Ogden



NSA Northern Region, North Yorkshire

The Great British weather never fails to cause challenges to the farmers and growers across our nation.

With the dry summer forcing some sellers and buyers to alter their usual selling pattern – some looked to sell sheep earlier than normal while others were forced to delay buying due to lack of grass and forage.

In the breeding sales, it was pleasing to see buyers arriving early season to purchase shearlings and ewes at the main northern sales for replacement lowland breeding sheep.

The demand for North of England Mule ewe lambs together with Suffolk and Texel Mule ewe lambs also had a lift on the year and the confidence displayed is heartening to observe. Especially with a range of ages in the buyers where we are seeing a number of younger farmers looking to maintain and increase numbers, something that is needed for the long term of the UK sheep industry.

Store lamb sales have seen trade come stronger in response to the drought ending and winter grazing finally coming available. Noticeably more farmers looking for wintering/running lambs than in previous seasons.

The autumn sales are an important time, not only financially or to fulfil the basic need for replacement stock, but the renewal of friendships and the making of new ones is a priceless commodity for farming families and individuals alike. The trip to a mart, farm sale or an agricultural show to meet friends and chat is important, especially in an industry that has many pressures from external sources to the farm.



Peter's low input flock has enabled him to attend many NSA events this year.

Peter Delbridge



NSA Chair, Devon

Looking back at the year, it will remain in the memory of many, and for a variety of reasons.

A pretty dry lambing, cold nights that lasted well into May and stunted spring grass growth and a drought summer that affected many areas.

But, from a personal point of view, I will remember 2025 as an NSA regional event year. All the events were well attended, very informative, thought provoking and provided a chance to see old friends. It was great to meet all the hosts, and above all, inspiring to see teams of NSA members in each region rolling up their sleeves and getting behind the event organisers.

All this 'gadding about' would not have been possible without having the bulk of the sheep at home only requiring minimal inputs, especially labour. Although I did treat everything with a long acting fly treatment before we went. This meant the couple who farm sat for us only had to maintain water supplies for the stock.

We don't normally have to worry about water on Exmoor, where generally 70 inches of it falls out of the sky each year. But on our travels to Australia, where certain parts had not seen rain for two years, you quickly realise you can farm with too much water, but you cannot farm without it.

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