

NSA webinar supports farmer completion of important industry consultation

Challenges and opportunities around making vet visits mandatory for sheep keepers in England was the subject of a National Sheep Association (NSA) webinar last week.

Attracting farmers and industry representatives the webinar included a detailed presentation from Defra Vet Naomi Bull before NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker, Sheep Veterinary Society President Phillipa Page and Devon sheep farmer and Co-chair of the Sheep Pathway Group, Liz Griffiths joined the discussion.

Known in the industry as 'Mandating Pathway', the consultation will evaluate whether the temporary subsidised vet visit farmers have had access to since 2023 and the subsequent endemic disease follow-up should be compulsory.

Farm businesses will continue to be able to access funding for a free annual review through the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway until 2027. Defra is now consulting on whether this visit should be made mandatory, meaning the funding claim (£639 for sheep farms) will cease.

Farmers' views are important to influence the route taken. What is decided must be practical and work on farm, which is why NSA arranged the webinar explaining what the consultation is about.

Why make vet visits the law?

Defra says there are several reasons why the Pathway should be made mandatory for all livestock keepers.

- **Capitalising on progress** Progress on developing vet/farmer relationships, understanding wormer efficacy and managing endemic disease has already been made through the Pathway scheme.
- **Ensuring a minimum standard is met** Every farm can be engaged to improve health and welfare, lifting the industry average.
- **Trading position** The UK is renegotiating terms with the EU to have sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) alignment. This will mean the EU's Animal Health Regulation 2016/429 would be applicable in Great Britain. The law requires farms to have risk-based veterinary involvement in their businesses, which for sheep farms will be interpreted as an annual visit.
- **Data collection** It is possible that national data sets can be developed around parasite management and drugs and vaccine use. This could help maintained the reputation of English product with foreign buyers.

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Does this mean more work?

For Red Tractor farmers it may save time and effort, as the Pathway visit could tick some boxes if reverse recognition is to be achieved in Red Tractor standards. For those with Veterinary Attestation Numbers it may mean a little more time spent discussing things with vets. Due to the benefits of regular engagement with a vet for flock health planning and the requirements of vet visits in the EU, most farms now have annual vet contact.

What could the scheme look like?

As a sheep farmer, the suggestion is that there would be a legal requirement to have a vet visit each year and for you to pay for it. Defra has suggested flock health plans and parasite control plans are part of this visit, to improve understanding of wormer efficacy trends.

Templates with advice and guidance for farmers and vets could be produced to aid discussion on key themes, such as biosecurity, infectious disease priorities, and flock health and performance. Defra stress that individual farm needs are paramount, and the scheme can be as flexible as needed.

The intention is for the process to have two parts – a review on past performance, and a flock health plan for the coming season.

What data will be collected?

Farmers views are sought to understand whether the following are reasonable and proportionate and beneficial to the sector.

- Antibiotic and vaccine use at flock level
- Mortality rates and lamb rearing percentage
- Parasite control information, such as treatments given, wormer resistance records and any pre- and post-worming checks

Two key topics

There is not consensus on how to approach this, and Defra acknowledges there is no perfect solution. There are two key areas Defra is seeking help with:

1. **Exemption thresholds** To alleviate burden on the smallest flocks, Defra has suggested people with less than 101 sheep have fewer or no requirements.
2. **Data sharing requirements** Pathway could be a means to unlock industry-level benefits of data collection around medicines and health. This requires an understanding of how the data will be recorded, stored, owned and distributed, without being burdensome on farmers.

Enforcement

Defra does not wish to be heavy handed on farms that miss their visit. Defra seeks to hear what actions are appropriate for a farm that does not have a vet visit, such as imposition of movement restrictions, penalty notices, or prosecution.

Difficulty with citizen space

Rather than clicking through the consultation online, there is an option to download a word document or a pdf, which can be worked on as an electronic file to be emailed to AHWP-Mandatory@defra.gov.uk or printed off and posted to Universal Participation Team, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Seacole Building 2nd Floor, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF.

Time left

The consultation is available for completion on the [Defra website here](#). It is open for 12 weeks, closing on Monday 18th May.