



## NSA vision for the UK sheep sector

As we embark on the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the planet is facing massive environmental and resource challenges in the form of climate change and loss of the natural world, and potential economic and social challenges too. It is difficult to see much future NSA policy work or business development work progress without a consideration of sustainability, although this will bring conflicts with national economic ambitions.

The UK has left the European Union and survived the global covid-19 pandemic. Recognition of the vulnerability of food supply and the importance of food security has grown, although there are opposing views on what forms food production might take in future. Future farm support programmes will be critical in determining the direction taken by many farm businesses and need careful consideration to find an appropriate balance between sustainable productivity and the delivery of a wide range of public goods, with sensitivity to the diversity within the UK and its devolved nations.

Livestock farming is constantly in the spotlight in terms of its impact on global warming, nutrient enrichment, nature loss, and welfare and ethics, and there is inadequate distinction made between different approaches to livestock farming, globally but nationally too. Like all other business sectors, sheep farming has no choice but to consider environmental and social issues, and reputations will be strengthened if we are seen to 'own' these challenges and take steps to improve practice and evidence what we are doing. NSA believes the UK approach to sheep farming provides a sound platform for a broad interpretation of sustainability and an efficient and multifunctional use of land, but that there are areas where we need more evidence, and areas where our performance can improve. Sheep are increasingly accepted as being 'good' in terms of environmental management, soil management, the ability to turn grass (often grown in places not suitable for crops) into high quality food; being kept in good welfare conditions, low in reliance on vet medicines and antibiotics, and remaining as an achievable step to get onto the farming ladder. But there are detractors from this view with the rewilding, vegan and animal rights movements giving opposing views.

The foundation of the National Sheep Association was established in 1892 and it has worked to support sheep and sheep farming in the UK for well over a century. This period has seen the main drivers of the sheep industry changed dramatically from wool to meat, with our industry today being based on meat production with wool as by-product for most. However, there is renewed interest in wool as a sustainable fibre and a growing number of successful businesses have emerged. Sheep dairying too is showing interest.

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National Sheep Association is an organisation which represents the views and interests of sheep producers throughout the UK.  
NSA is funded by its membership of sheep farmers and its activities involve it in every aspect of the sheep industry.



“ NSA believes in an optimum and resilient UK sheep population that is inherently healthy and able to cope with disease and parasite challenges. Diverse in its structure, contributing to feeding and providing fibre for an increasing global population, while adapting to the effects of and responding to the challenges of climate change and sustainable land management. We see our reputation being enhanced by working in harmony with areas of public interest – playing our part in mitigating global warming, improving our environment and ecology, enhancing landscapes, wise and responsible resource use, and protecting and creating culture and rural employment.

“Our vision is one of the people involved in keeping sheep being enthusiastic, knowledgeable and aspiring to best practice – and those not keeping sheep increasingly aware of the core aspects of sheep farming and appreciative of the contribution sheep make to society.”

Given NSA’s strong belief that sheep should be recognised for their holistic contribution to society – providing meat, milk, fibre, economic activity, delivering to high health and welfare standards, delivering vital environmental, land management and ecological outcomes, and underpinning cultural ideals and thriving rural economies – the NSA vision can be brought to life under the heading of economics, health, environment and society.

**Economics.** Enthusiastic, knowledgeable sheep farmers who aspire to best practice make, and will continue to make, a meaningful contribution to the national economy. Therefore, NSA believes in these principles for the national sheep flock.

- To continue to improve the vitality and productivity of sheep through management and breeding.
- To maintain, further understand and build genetic improvement and diversity of sheep and to strive to improve productivity, marketing and health attributes within breeds while maintaining unique traits.
- Sheep meat to be a core part of UK diets, recognised for its important nutritious attributes and grass-based nature, with UK sourcing being important to consumers.
- Stable export markets for UK lamb and sheep products that support our objectives of quality, and high health status and welfare.
- Market returns that provide fair reward and allow investment, therefore ensuring it is a attractive to existing and future flock keepers.

**Health.** Acknowledging the principle of ‘one health’, that animal health, human health and environmental health are intrinsically intertwined, NSA believes in the importance of healthy flocks, healthy businesses and healthy flock-keepers.

- To recognise the value, and increase understanding, of veterinary and other inputs, and to use these wisely to ensure long term efficacy and optimum sheep health.
- To increase understanding and practical approaches to the knowledge that healthy sheep – at an individual and flock level – bring production efficiencies and reduced environmental impact.
- To gain recognition that health and welfare go hand-in-hand and that the UK is a world leader in welfare standards, both in terms of legislation and intrinsically within sheep farming culture.

- Given that sheep as a species carry many zoonotic diseases with the potential to pose a human health risk, ongoing awareness and a risk-based approach is appropriate.
- Responsible medicine use, particularly antibiotics and anthelmintics, is essential for a sustainable future for sheep and humans. Ongoing knowledge exchange is a priority in this area.
- Sheep farming is often a sole occupation, leading to the risk of injury and accident. It can also be lonely and stressful – and so it is important that individuals are aware of and can access appropriate support services and industry best practice advice, to ensure flock keepers are healthy in body and mind.

**Environment.** NSA strongly believes sheep farming is part of the solution when it comes to the environment, not the villain that it is so frequently painted to be. These are the core pillars of NSA's position on the environment.

- Sheep farming that is, and is recognised as being, essential to upland and lowland environments and ecosystems – supporting nature recovery within a farmed landscape.
- Sheep and their grazed environments becoming net zero, through more accurate carbon assessments, greater production efficiency and more carbon capture – and therefore recognised as having a beneficial impact on climate change and carbon balance.
- Sheep farming contributing to the health of natural capital – soils, air and water quality.
- Sheep in lowland and cropping areas being central to resource management, rotations and soil fertility.
- Sheep farming that is celebrated for its role in maintaining farmed landscapes that are enjoyed locally, nationally and by international tourists, making them essential to national wellbeing, public health and tourism.

**Society.** Sheep farming is all about the individuals who own and manage sheep, the ancillary services and wider rural community. Therefore, NSA believes in these principles.

- Sheep farming seen as an attractive and rewarding career and business option.
- An industry that is keen to adopt appropriate technology that improves performance without undermining the foundations of the sector.
- Sheep keeping recognised as part of our culture, contributing to an appreciation of and respect for livestock-based communities and their role in underpinning rural infrastructure and economies and (as above) supporting national wellbeing, public health and tourism.
- Those not involved in keeping sheep having a positive attitude to sheep and sheep farming, as far as possible with a positive interest so that they understand and support the interests of sheep farming.

NSA is the only organisation that is entirely focussed on the success of the UK sheep industry in its widest sense. It has a long and rich history and is recognised and respected by policy and opinion makers and sheep farmers. It is seen as an industry leader in supporting younger sheep farmers through its NSA Next Generation programme. NSA is unusual amongst agricultural organisations in having members from every part of the UK, with a structure that recognises and responds to the immense diversity between the four UK nations, while also ensuring regular dialogue about similarities and differences in approaches and structures. NSA is well placed to continue its work when the world is at a point of immense change. In order to do its work, NSA has to look not only outwards, but inwards too, to optimise resources to be most effective in safeguarding our industry.