RUMINANT HEALTH & WELFARE

UK Sheep Welfare Strategy

2023-2028

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Supporting organisations

Chief Veterinary Officers support the RH&W Sheep Welfare Strategy

For many years, the UK has been renowned for high standards of animal welfare, but we must continue to strive for the highest level of health and welfare across our nations' sheep flocks if we are to remain leaders.

Across the four devolved nations, we are in full support of the RH&W sheep welfare strategy – which is the first of its kind for the sector – and the six strategic goals identified within it.

Sheep welfare is currently overseen by legislation, our moral senses, and a commercial interest. This is further supplemented by multiple assurance schemes which provide provenance to consumers. This strategy is designed to support the above through additional refinements in the care of the national flock.

It's heartening to see such support for this five-year strategy across the whole sheep sector and the ambition to push for implementing action through collaboration.

To be able to evidence the progress made as an industry towards achieving the six welfare goals, data and reporting is vitally important. For the strategy to succeed, engagement across all stakeholder groups will be needed, as will the development of infrastructure to measure and record progress.

Higher welfare standards mean healthier sheep, which leads to a reduced need for antibiotic usage, increased efficiency, and lower environmental impacts. All these factors will help to ensure the UK sheep sector has a sustainable future.

Signed:

Dr Christine Middlemiss,
UK Chief Veterinary Officer

Dr Richard Irvine,
Wales Chief Veterinary Officer

Dr Sheila Voas,
Scotland Chief Veterinary Officer

Dr Robert Huey,
Northern Ireland Chief Veterinary Officer

- ABP Food Group
- AgriSearch
- Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)
- Animal Health Distributors Association (AHDA)
- The Agricultural Industry Confederation (AIC)
- Aldi UK & Ireland
- Animal Health NI
- Animal Health and Welfare Board England (AHWBE)
- Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA)
- ASDA
- Badger Face Texel Sheep Society
- Beltex Sheep Society
- The Bleu du Maine Sheep Society
- Bluefaced Leicester Sheep Breeders Association
- Blue Texel Sheep Society
- British Cattle Breeders Club (BCBC)
- British Cattle Veterinary Association (BCVA)
- British Meat Processors Association (BMPA)
- British Retail Consortium (BRC)
- British Rouge Sheep Society
- British Veterinary Association (BVA)
- British Wool Board
- Buitelaar Group
- Castlemilk Moorit Sheep Society
- CHeCS
- Cheviot Sheep Society
- Co-op Food
- CVS Farm
- Devon Closewool Sheep Breeders' Society
- Dorset Downs Sheep Breeders
- Dunbia
- Dutch Spotted Sheep society
- Easycare Sheep Society and FECPAK
- Exlana Sheep Breeders
- Exmoor Horn Sheep Breeder's Society
- Farmers Union of Wales (FUW)
- Flock Health Ltd
- Food Standards Agency (FSA)
- Food Standards Scotland (FSS)
- Goat Veterinary Society
- Hampshire Downs Sheep Breeders' Association
- Hebridean Sheep Society
- Hybu Cig Cymru (HCC)
- Innovation for Agriculture
- Lidl Ltd
- Livestock Auctioneers' Association (LAA)
- Lleyn Sheep Society
- Manx Loaghtan Sheep Breed Society
- Market Vets Centre
- Marks & Spencer
- Moredun Research Institute
- Morrisons
- MSD Animal Health
- National Beef Association (NBA)
- National Farmers Union (NFU)
- National Farmers Union Cymru (NFU Cymru)
- National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS)
- National Sheep Association (NSA)
- National Office of Animal Health (NOAH)
- Norfolk Horn Breeders Group
- North of England Mule Sheep Association
- North Ronaldsay Sheep Fellowship
- Portland Sheep Breeders Group
- Quality Milk Management Services (QMMS)
- Quality Meat Scotland (QMS)
- Rare Breed Survivial Trunt (RBST)
- Red Tractor Assurance
- Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE)
- Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RABDF)
- Royal Society for the Prevention for Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)
- Responsible Use Of Medicines In Agriculture Alliance (RUMA)
- Sainsbury's
- Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society (SAOS)
- Sheep antibiotic guardian group (SAGG)
- Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS)
- The Soay and Boreray Sheep Society
- The Southdown Sheep Society
- Suffolk Sheep Society
- Sustainable control of parasites in Sheep (SCOPS)
- Synergy Farm Health
- Scottish Government
- Tesco
- Texel Sheep Society
- Ulster farmers Union
- Valais Blacknose Society
- University of Nottingham
- VetPartners
- Waitrose
- Welsh Government
- Welsh Lamb and Beef Producers
- Whitefaced Woodland Sheep Society
- XL Vets

Our vision

Our vision for sheep welfare in the UK

The long-term vision for the welfare of the national flock is healthy, productive sheep, based on effective health and welfare planning.

This will be supported through a farmed environment that puts positive welfare at the heart of its management decisions for all farm types and locations.

Six unified goals will encompass the wide diversity that exists within the sheep sector.

The strategy aims to deliver high welfare and encourage the adoption of good practice, alongside a productive and viable business to suit individual farms across upland, hill, and lowland systems.

The six priority strategic goals are: appropriate ewe condition; collaborative flock management; healthy feet; positive welfare; sheep comfort; and thriving lambs.

Why this vision?

It is essential that animal health and welfare innovation and practice is at the centre of the UK sheep sector.

In many cases, optimising welfare is best tackled by improved health management practices and good husbandry skills, as well as farm infrastructure.

Improved health and reduced disease in the flock has a positive impact on a farm's carbon footprint, encourages responsible medicine use, and benefits the farmer directly through better working conditions and positive mental health.

Proactive welfare management cements further the positive reputation of the UK sheep sector and increases current and future overseas trade opportunities.

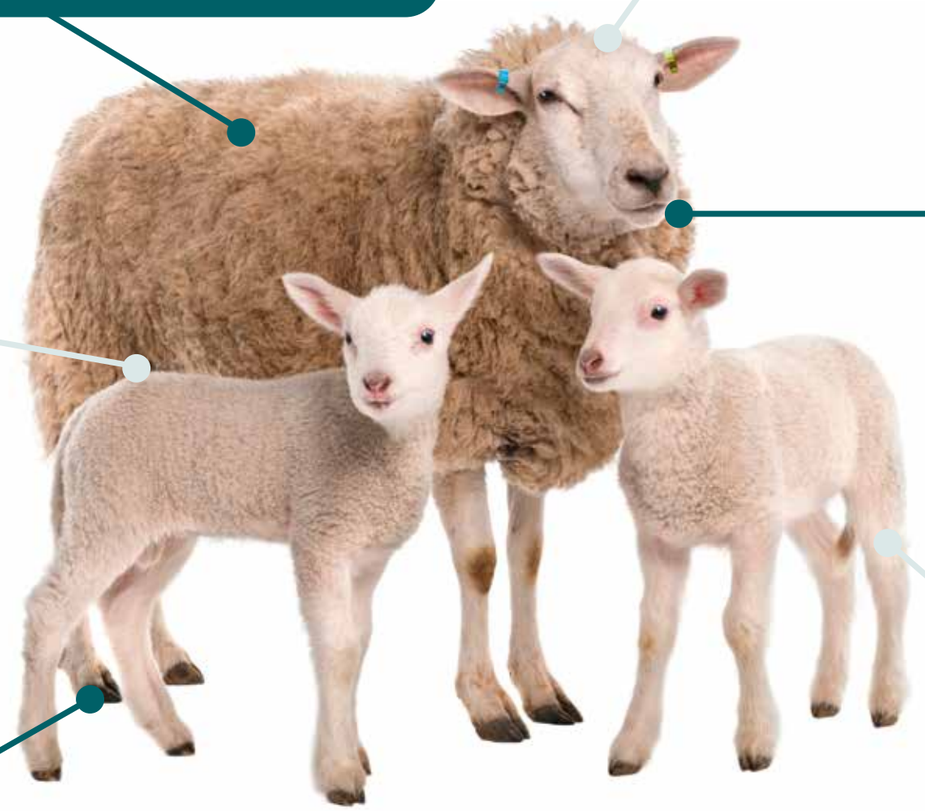
The six strategic goals for the UK Sheep Welfare Strategy 2023-2028

Sheep comfort

Ensuring every farm has a proactive pain management plan to optimise the comfort of sheep and aid their ability to prevent and overcome disease, illness and/or injury. On-farm plans should achieve rapid detection and treatment for illness/disease and have prompt effective decision-making for pain relief use and euthanasia where necessary, ensuring skill and appropriate methods are used to avoid unnecessary suffering. Stock-person skills and the animals' environment should be maintained to maximise sheep comfort. Taking responsibility to discuss 'reduce, refine and replace' in all flock management decisions for routine operations, and adopting interventions where appropriate to your system to ensure positive welfare experiences is essential.

Appropriate body condition

Optimal body condition achieved for all sheep, throughout different stages of the year according to system and breed, is an indicator of good animal health and adequate nutrition. Achieving optimised body condition will improve fertility and resilience to disease. In addition, it predisposes good lamb health and welfare as the ewe will be able to produce better quality milk (colostrum) and increase her ability to rear thriving lambs.



Collaborative flock management

Active farmer, vet, and suitable qualified adviser collaboration to aid effective, proactive decision-making, and dynamic flock health and welfare planning. The intended outcome of this is the optimal flock health and welfare plan for your farming system and location. Flock health and welfare planning acts as a mechanism to improve health and welfare across the sheep industry by embracing change and encouraging responsible medicine and vaccine use.

Positive welfare

Management actions should be considered through the eyes of the flock. These should be done with a commitment to welfare, including positive social interactions with other sheep/lambs and humans, and an appreciation of sheep behaviour in all areas of flock management. This includes gathering, handling, housing/shelter, wider environments, transport, and routine flock care.

Healthy Feet

Healthy feet and reduced lameness for all sheep will improve overall health and welfare, by reducing pain/discomfort and increasing mobility, productivity, longevity, and the animal's ability to express normal behaviours such as grazing.

Thriving lambs

For lambs to be born strong and thrive throughout life, through providing good nutrition and protection against disease. Promotion of the maternal bond is critical – alongside management decisions to improve lamb survivability, continued growth, and performance – to ensuring every lamb counts. This leads to greater productivity and reduces the need for medicine use.

Defining animal welfare

Animal welfare relates to an animal's physical and mental wellbeing in relation to the conditions in which it lives.

This includes an animal's health and ability to show normal behaviours – this is largely influenced by the six key goals identified in this strategy.

Health is a pivotal part of overall welfare; however, it is also increasingly recognised that optimising sheep welfare involves other important factors such as welfare in transport, end-of-life care, and providing opportunities for positive welfare experiences.

Research shows that the public expects the delivery of good welfare to include far more than ensuring good health alone, and UK sheep farmers and the industry are in a good position to deliver on both.

The opportunities

The strategy will pave the way for the industry to make major progress in the six identified pivotal areas of sheep welfare but to evidence this, investment will be required in practical methods to report and evaluate progress and the collation of existing data to show any improvements.

The industry must also work together to ensure policy aligns and promotes positive welfare.

By collaborating and providing evidence of the continual improvements in sheep welfare across the four nations, the UK can differentiate – offering potential market advantages on the global trading platform.

The ambition is to position the UK sheep industry to continue to progress beyond 2028, applying some of the latest innovations in areas such as genetic advancements, improved breed selection, and technology.

A productive and viable sheep industry based on high welfare can support a one health approach where there is a balance between the health of animals, the environment, and people. This is all necessary if we are to take a positive step towards challenges including tackling climate change, while building a thriving rural economy.

Strategy delivery plan

The five-year strategy will be executed taking the following five step approach:

*SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound

Implementing action

Biennially, a Sheep Welfare Strategy progress report will be published with input from key industry stakeholders and working group to showcase action and progress towards achieving the six welfare goals.

In addition, they will be tasked with evidencing industry achievements and progress using existing data where available and uptake of actions, initiatives and information, so progress can be tracked.

The working group includes representatives from:
• Farm assurance
• Farmers
• Supply chains – processing, including markets and hauliers
• Supply chains – retail
• Research organisations
• Veterinary surgeons
• Commercial organisations

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HEALTH & WELFARE
Please contact Ruminant Health & Welfare for more information on the UK Sheep Welfare Strategy.
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