

2025-26 midpoint review of progress report:

Ruminant Health & Welfare UK Sheep Welfare Strategy 2023-2028



Supporters

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Running order

- ▶ Foreword
- ▶ Sheep comfort
- ▶ Appropriate body condition
- ▶ Healthy feet
- ▶ Thriving lambs
- ▶ Collaborative flock management
- ▶ Positive welfare



As we reach the midpoint of the Sheep Welfare Strategy 2023–2028, this review provides an important opportunity to take stock of current progress and refocus our efforts for the remaining two years.

With our six strategic goals already set out and good progress being made against them, this timely review allows us to pinpoint where momentum is building, what challenges remain and where greater attention is now required.

Thankfully, there are clear areas of progress, supported by strong initiatives and growing collaboration across the sector, and these demonstrate what can be achieved when farmers, industry bodies and stakeholders work towards a shared vision. At the same time, there are other issues that underline the need for renewed focus and practical solutions.

Good sheep welfare remains a foundational pillar for the industry and one that is brought into stark focus at a time when a warming climate is changing the disease and welfare threats faced by the national flock, and proposed legislation may put greater onus on farmers around practices such as tail docking and castration of lambs.

However, measuring progress in a way that doesn't overburden farmers, and is meaningful, is not without its challenges. Important evidence gaps remain and while we can identify the types of data needed, accessing it is not always straightforward. Both quantitative and qualitative insights are essential, yet we are mindful of avoiding unnecessary burdens on farmers.

Robust, meaningful data will be critical if we are to demonstrate progress and build trust in our systems and that means the task ahead is to develop smarter, more practical ways of gathering and using this information.

This review sets out clear recommendations and next steps for the remainder of the strategy period. If we get this right, we can provide strong leadership, enhance our international reputation and secure a sustainable future for the sheep sector.

Thank you to all the stakeholders involved up to this point and I look forward to seeing the full results in two years' time.



Gwyn Jones

Chair, Ruminant
Health & Welfare



Goal: Sheep comfort

Aim

“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.”

Current practices and pain management

Pain management is an important and developing area of sheep welfare, with farmers and vets increasingly working together to include analgesia and local anaesthesia within treatment protocols for painful diseases, conditions and procedures. While there are currently no analgesics authorised specifically for use in sheep in the UK, flock vets can prescribe appropriate products under the veterinary prescribing cascade, a legal framework that allows vets to prescribe medications ‘off-label’ to sheep when no suitable, species-specific product is authorised in the UK.

This can be suitable in some individual cases, but not all situations, particularly where widespread use in young animals is being considered and evidence for safe use remains limited. Regular flock health discussions between vets and farmers provide a valuable opportunity to review pain management protocols, assess previous changes and adapt treatments or procedures year by year. This gives farmers confidence to make informed changes and helps demonstrate the benefits within individual flock systems.

Research suggests sheep farmer attitudes towards analgesic use have moved in a positive direction compared with 10-15 years ago, although the lack of an authorised product, associated guidance and industry promotion may still limit veterinary confidence in prescribing pain relief.

Since the Sheep Welfare Strategy launched in 2023, this positive shift has continued. With the Animal Welfare Strategy consultation launched in January 2026, there is now an opportunity to set out a clear roadmap for further welfare improvement, helping the UK sheep sector build on its globally recognised health and welfare standards.



Benchmarking progress and alignment

Sales data on analgesics is difficult to access through the Medicine Hub and is only available for vet-farmer engagement. Future Medicine Hub data may help demonstrate an increase in use in the sector. However, there is currently a low proportion of each ruminant sector captured within the Medicine Hub compared to other livestock sectors (VARSS '24 report).

Legislative proposals for tailing and castration in lambs

Defra launched a consultation in early January, which closed in March 2026, asking farmers, vets, industry and wider sectors to comment on the use of analgesics during tailing and castration in lambs. An NSA webinar on this subject saw over 900 interested parties register with 500+ joining live, demonstrating a keen interest in best practice.

The AHDB commissioned a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA), published in 2024, to evaluate the existing evidence-base of lamb castration techniques on lamb productivity and welfare and how these techniques could be replaced, reduced or refined (the 3 Rs) on farms in England. This report gave insights into the overall picture of the evidence landscape for practices applicable to castration in lambs across hill, upland and lowland systems. Its outputs enable farmers to evaluate their on-farm practices and support informed decision making on lamb castration techniques that may improve welfare, productivity and profitability and minimise environmental impacts.

The REA indicated that while castration helps with managing ram lambs, it generally reduces productivity and has a negative impact on welfare compared to leaving lambs entire. Findings suggest surgical methods cause the most distress, whereas the castration clip method and application of a rubber ring with anaesthetic for young lambs shows lower pain responses when operators are fully trained in the procedure.

Further evidence around the recommendation of the clip castration method technique is needed, but farmers are investigating methods to reduce, refine and replace castration where possible.



Table 1. Taken from NSA Sheep Farmer magazine article discussing castration and tail docking in lambs – Feb/Mar 26 edition.

Unintended consequences of Defra consultation on above techniques - closed March 2026.

Pros	Cons
- Removing/reducing pain from a lamb's life is higher welfare and one of the few management tasks we are criticised over. - Higher welfare claims on UK lamb brings us in line with some other EU countries. - Reducing pain and keeping rams entire can improve growth rates. - Moving away from blanket castration and tail docking saves money and time. - AWC called for professional oversight and training, meaning improved outcomes for lambs. - Other higher welfare methods exist and anaesthetic is available on the cascade. - Creates the potential for harmonised UK standards, which is an AWC recommendation. - Incentives and support have been suggested for adapting practices. - Keep farming moving in line with evolving societal expectations.	- Efforts to keep lambs entire could lead to greater welfare challenges because of unwanted pregnancies. - Flystrike issues could threaten welfare more than rubber rings. - If anaesthetic is injected it creates a potential source of infection. - Confusion on farm and with vets exists on which methods should be adopted. - Treating castration and tail docking in the same consultation is too simplistic – they are different with different consequences. - Evidence is sketchy on ram taint, but it remains a concern for some. - Alternative methods are more costly and fiddly – clips: 30–50p and anaesthetic: 15–20p/lamb. - Higher costs and labour requirements make UK farms less competitive than countries with fewer welfare constraints. - Chemical use increases with a greater need for products to manage flystrike.

Sheep vet and SVS president Phillippa Page says: “Anecdotal evidence from speaking with sheep vets suggests that more farmers are using analgesics to treat painful conditions, disease and during painful procedures and this is demonstrated by the number of analgesics prescribed on the cascade and recorded in flock health plans.

“This stems from a proactive attitude of sheep vets encouraging better pain management strategies with their clients.”

Abattoir data on the number of castrated lambs processed would also be an indicator of whether ‘routine’ castration was occurring, and whether reduction and refinement of this technique is being adopted. But data access at an industry level has proved challenging.

SVS committee member Tom Green adds: “We now have good uptake of analgesia use when treating lameness, mastitis, respiratory disease and when managing obstetrical issues and education of farmers regarding benefits has increased uptake.

“Lack of licensed products does present issues. For example, we are unable to include it in a written treatment protocols as it can only be prescribed to individuals on cascade.”

What's happening on farm?

Case study one: Removal of routine lamb tailing and castration through collaboration with Flock Health Ltd

A 2,000-ewe outdoor lambing flock had historically docked and castrated lambs using a rubber ring on lambs less than seven days old during the lambing period. Adverse weather conditions and a lack of labour just before the onset of lambing prompted a discussion between Phillipa Page, their sheep vet, and the farmer about how to manage neonatal lambs and how to reduce the likelihood of lamb deaths due to the poor weather.

The decision was made not to tail dock and castrate lambs during lambing time, with a view to increase labour efforts and management before and round weaning. Further discussions were had after lambing to ensure a robust parasite control plan was in order to reduce the number of dirty back ends.

Lameness in the flock was under control following previous management changes and a major emphasis was put on the management of ram lambs. These were weaned, weighed and grouped slightly earlier than usual. They were also placed on better grazing to promote earlier finishing and then managed as stores once the optimum time to draw fat has passed.

This flock has not returned to castrating and tail docking and now manages lambs successfully without using those procedures.

Case study two: Breeding for short tails to avoid tail docking and reduce flystrike

At High Country Romneys (HCR), lambing records are being used to explore whether breeding decisions could help reduce reliance on tail docking and, therefore, minimise the risk of flystrike.

Alongside routine recording of lamb weight, vigour, parentage, ewe mothering ability and teat placement, the team has started scoring stud lambs for tail length using a simple 1-5 system.

The work was prompted by visible differences between breeds, with RomTex lambs tending to have shorter tails than Romneys. As tail length is a highly heritable trait, HCR is now assessing whether shorter tails can be selected for without compromising other breeding goals.

The aim is not to remove tails altogether, but to breed sheep with tails short enough to stay clean, helping reduce flystrike risk while limiting the need for docking, associated pain relief and preventative fly treatments.

Vet comment: Joe Henry, Black Sheep Farm Health

Joe Henry, a farm vet working in one of the most densely sheep-populated parts of the country, identifies the increased use of pain relief in sheep as a clear marker of progress in welfare and disease management. Over his 29 years in practice, he has seen a significant shift in the treatment of painful conditions, particularly with meloxicam being used more for individual cases on the prescribing cascade.

Pain relief is now viewed by an increasing number of farmers as a normal and important part of responsible flock health management. Meloxicam is routinely used by the majority of sheep farm clients supported by Black Sheep Farm Health, particularly for painful conditions such as mastitis. Its use is also increasing in cases such as difficult lambings and twin lamb disease.

Where treatment may once have relied mainly on long-acting antibiotics, farmers are now more likely to include meloxicam at the start of treatment to support recovery and reduce pain. Affordability has also helped drive this change, with Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) becoming more accessible and therefore more likely to be used as a first-line treatment rather than reserved for only the most critically ill sheep. This shift towards routine use is reflected in practice data, with 95% of sheep farms registered with the practice ordering meloxicam in the year to June 2026.

Next steps Goals between now and 2028

Reducing castration and tail docking in lambs eliminates or decreases the pain and stress caused by these procedures. It removes the risk of infection, allows lambs to exhibit natural behaviours, grow efficiently and maintain normal physiological functions without pain-induced setbacks, improving sheep comfort. These case studies show that farmers are working to improve welfare by mitigating the traditional management issues these procedures were designed to solve, by increasingly adopting proactive, preventative methods.

Next steps:

- Offer farmers solutions to reduce, refine and replace techniques that can cause pain.
- Where legislative barriers prevent proactive pain relief (licensing of analgesics in lambs), pressure is applied to manufacturers for safety data on the use of NSAIDs in lambs under two weeks. steps are put in place to overcome this.
- Research and development into reducing, refining and replacing current techniques, where possible in that farming system.



Goal:

Appropriate body condition

Aim

“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 colostrum and milk and increase her ability to rear thriving lambs.”

Body condition scoring (BCS) in sheep is not a new concept. There are clear benefits to having breeding sheep at their optimal body condition score at the appropriate time in the sheep calendar and is vital for ewe performance and productivity.

Vet comment: Phillipa Page

“Ewe body condition score (BCS) is an essential management tool for assessing the adequacy of the flock’s diet at key stages in the production cycle. It should be carried out regularly and changes made to flock management based on the results. This allows animals that are not at target condition to be managed according to their specific needs.”

BCS should be encouraged through collaborative flock health planning, with regular scoring used to inform nutrition, health and welfare decisions. Alongside regular BCS, baseline recommendations for all farmers could include collecting ewe mortality rates, lamb losses and replacement rates. These could then be building with this to gather further metrics, such as live weight gain, to increase the data available to make evidenced-based management decisions.

A seven-year AHDB funded project, Challenge Sheep, ran from 2017-2024, collecting data on approximately 6,000 ewes bred for the first time as ewe lambs or shearlings across 11 farms with various farming systems in England.

Data included:

- ▶ Ewe body weight and body condition score at tupping, scanning (mid pregnancy), lambing, eight-weeks after lambing, and weaning.
- ▶ Litter size at lambing, whether lambs were dead or alive, and the sex of lambs.
- ▶ Lamb weights at birth (estimate), at approximately eight-weeks after lambing and at weaning.
- ▶ Whether the ewe had died (including cause of death where known), was culled, was sold or was still alive.

A key result was the positive relationship observed between increased body condition scores from 2.5 to 4.0 and improved lifetime survival and productivity of ewes (measured by litter size and lamb growth), illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of the relationship between ewe body condition score (BCS), survival and productivity (Laura Green).



The risk of dying on farm and being culled reduced, and litter size increased as BCS increased from 2.5 to 4.0.

It is difficult to establish how many UK sheep farms undertake regular BCS in their ewes by handling sheep and feeling over the backbone and loin, rather than assessing condition by eye. The AHDB Sheep Key Performance Indicator (KPI) validation project (2013 and 2017) showed that maintaining target BCS at tupping - 3.5 for lowland flocks, 3.0 for upland flocks and 2.5 for hill flocks - with no more than one unit of condition loss during the production year, had a direct impact on ewe fertility at scanning, lamb numbers born, and lamb weights at both eight weeks post-lambing and weaning.

The projects showed that regular assessment of ewe BCS and liveweight throughout the year, particularly at key production points - mating, scanning, lambing, eight weeks post-lambing and weaning - can highlight ewes falling below target condition, allowing management to be adjusted accordingly.



There are several key areas where BCS can be used to improve flock performance:

- Early identification of BCS change: Regular scoring helps farmers identify ewes falling below target condition, prompting investigation of potential causes such as nutritional shortfalls, parasitism or underlying disease, and allowing management to be adjusted accordingly.
- Metabolic health: Managing BCS reduces the risk of metabolic diseases like twin lamb disease (Pregnancy Toxaemia)
- Lamb viability: Target BCS at lambing improves lamb survival rates and ensures better colostrum quality and milk supply, directly impacting the welfare of the newborn lambs.
- Reduced mortality: Ewes in good body condition have stronger immunity to cope better with the demands of the production cycle, while thin ewes are far more vulnerable to disease – often resulting in premature culling and avoidable losses.
- Breeding group management: Results suggest managing shearlings and ewe lambs separately from mature ewes to ensure they reach appropriate target weights by tupping - around 80% of their mature weight for shearlings and at least 60% for ewe lambs. This helps prevent welfare compromises during their own growth and development and supports better long-term performance.

BCS is a simple and very effective tool to improve the productivity of a ewe flock and minimises animal welfare problems. By scoring regularly, the skill of identifying lean animals will be improved which will also ensure compliance with the Welfare Codes relating to sheep.

More recent data from AHDB's Challenge Sheep project demonstrates the value of BCS for flock management, whether that be nutritional requirements, health indicators and even genetics.

Pre-lambing and pre-tupping targets are a useful indicator of whether your stock are achieving their full potential through optimal body condition scores and allow for positive intervention to animals who need it.

Since 2024 - when the Sheep Welfare Strategy was launched - until April 2026, there have been 2,883 visits to AHDB webpages that detail information on management of BCS for ewes, and an additional 1,365 visits to the Challenge Sheep Project webpages. Further, there were 1,699 downloads of the AHDB Managing Breeding Ewes publication, which covers information on using ewe BCS, which can also be printed for use at shows.



What's happening on farm?

Case study one: Using data to monitor body condition, improve ewe welfare and flock resilience

Sam Jones, a sheep farmer in Worcestershire, has used findings from participating in AHDB's Challenge Sheep project to make more informed management decisions and improve welfare outcomes across his flock. By collecting and interpreting data on liveweight, BCS and individual ewe performance, Sam has refined how he manages nutrition, health and breeding decisions.

A key change has been the management of incoming ewe lambs. These are now kept separate from mature ewes for 18 months, allowing nutrition and growth to be tailored without competition from older animals. This supports a smoother transition into the breeding flock and contributes to improved lifetime performance.

The project also changed Sam's approach to body condition scoring. Rather than allowing ewes to lose condition after lambing and regain it before tupping, the farm now aims to maintain a more consistent body condition throughout the year. This reduces nutritional stress, improves feed planning and supports ewe survival, litter size and lamb growth.

Data has also strengthened culling decisions. Ewes that are repeatedly lame, struggle to maintain condition or underperform are removed, helping create a healthier, more resilient flock requiring less intervention. Combined with veterinary input and knowledge exchange, this data-led approach provides a clear proof point of progress in improving sheep welfare.

Appropriate body condition

Next steps

Body condition scoring is a low-cost, quick and effective welfare and production monitoring tool. By regularly assessing condition, by placing a hand on ewes, farmers can make informed decisions that improve health, productivity and overall sheep welfare.

But there is a need to encourage more farmers to adopt BCS as a management tool. Industry can and will continue to promote its use and highlight the wider farm benefits.

There are challenges as there are limited national BCS datasets and potential inconsistency in the scoring standards occurs.

Industry targets are available but it's difficult to know how much these are being utilised nationally, due to a lack of national data.

Goal: Healthy Feet

Aim

“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.”

Lameness remains one of the biggest challenges for the UK sheep sector.

Fortunately, the UK sheep industry has been working hard on prevention and control of sheep lameness through by using the Five Point Plan (5PP) - a useful framework for farmers and their vets to work through together.

Ten years on, the 5PP remains a strong example of industry-led welfare improvement. Its success has been built on collaboration between farmers, vets, researchers, levy bodies, supply companies and farming organisations.

The 5PP focuses on five key areas: vaccinate, avoid, treat, quarantine and cull. The assessments highlighted opportunities for further progress, including more consistent vaccination ahead of high-risk periods, improved use of lime in high-traffic areas, faster treatment of lame sheep, better recording and stronger quarantine for incoming stock.

It helps get sheep lameness under control, maintain control and avoid bringing in new causes of lameness to your farm.



What's happening on farm?

Five Point Plan delivers measurable reductions in sheep lameness

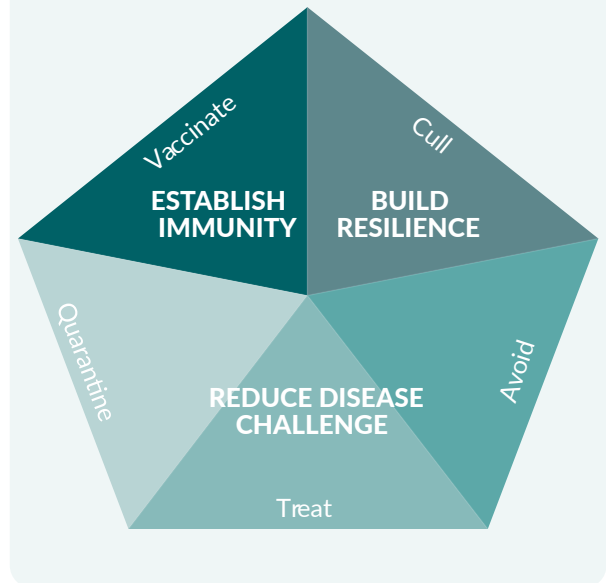
First published in 2014 by Dr Ruth Clements, then at FAI Farms, recent data from MSD Animal Health has shown that full implementation of the 5PP can reduce sheep lameness by more than two-thirds in affected flocks, providing a strong proof point for progress in the Healthy Feet strategy.

The findings are based on 83 on-farm assessments across 24 farms, covering more than 21,000 sheep between 2021 and 2024. Farms using the 5PP On-Farm Planner to identify and act on key improvements recorded an average 63% reduction in lameness, with reductions ranging from 57% to 67% where all five elements were followed.

Improved use of EID was also identified as an important opportunity, helping farmers track repeat cases, strengthen culling decisions and support future breeding choices for greater resilience.

This update shows how structured assessment, consistent implementation and better recording can help flocks move closer to the target of 2% lameness or less.

Figure 1. The five-point plan.



Case study two: Reducing lameness and antibiotic use through 5PP

David Thomas, a sheep farmer from Llanspryddid, Powys, has demonstrated how consistent use of the five-point lameness plan can deliver measurable improvements in sheep welfare, flock health and responsible medicine use. Working with Pilgrim Europe, MSD Animal Health, his vet and a trained lameness adviser, David introduced a structured approach to tackling footrot and CODD in his 400-ewe flock.

At the start of the project, lameness was a persistent challenge, requiring frequent treatment and significant labour. The farm baselined lameness at 3.6% and set a target of 2%, supported by six-monthly reviews and a whole-flock action plan. Key changes included vaccinating all sheep against footrot, prompt treatment of lame animals, culling chronic cases, isolating lame sheep, maintaining quarantine for bought-in stock and stopping routine foot-trimming to reduce disease spread.

The results have been significant. Lameness has reduced by one-third, fewer sheep require treatment, and lambs are facing lower disease pressure. The farm has not needed to footbath lambs for three years. Antibiotic use also fell sharply from 9.8mg/kg of lamb to 2.2mg/kg by the end of the project.

The five-point plan is a good example of what can be achieved by collaboration and the delivery of consistent information around common goals.

What's happening in the industry?

#stampoutlameness

This annual campaign led by MSD Animal Health, providing farmers with resources to tackle lameness and support wider adoption of 5PP.

The campaign encourages farmers, vets and advisers to work together to reduce sheep lameness on farm through practical prevention, early identification and prompt treatment. By promoting consistent best practice, #stampoutlameness supports improved sheep welfare, reduced disease pressure and more responsible use of antibiotics.

#HealthyfeetHappySheep

An industry wide collaboration aimed at educating and informing vets and farmers on all aspects of sheep foot health as well as some of the latest resources available on the Flockhealth website.

New technology

While innovations in technology in the dairy sector are very advanced, they are limited in the sheep sector. Research and development in monitoring and improving sheep lameness are underway, but not currently widely available or adopted by farmers.

However, vets at the University of Nottingham are developing a new, wearable device that can identify the early signs of lameness in sheep.

Nottingham Vet School researcher Dr Jasmeet Kaler says: "Our new system is a smart device – a wearable technology that we hope will be a game-changing investment for sheep farmers and a first for the industry."

Data

A key challenge is access to available data to monitor trends in foot health. These are recorded at the farm level in some cases. There are huge benefits to recording lameness on farm and being able to demonstrate the impact of management changes and lameness treatment interventions. This enables progress to be monitored, risk periods to be identified and preventative strategies to be applied.

MSD Animal Health advise that the number of Footvax® doses delivered to market between 2019- 2025 reached over 250k, representing a 10% overall increase in sales during this period.



What's happening on farm?

Case study one: Veterinary-led planning improves sheep lameness insight in Welsh flocks

A veterinary-led pilot project from Flockhealth Ltd in Wales has demonstrated the value of proactive animal health planning in improving sheep lameness control, farmer confidence and responsible antibiotic use.

The project worked with 43 Welsh sheep flocks between August 2022 and March 2023, using entry and exit surveys, farmer meetings, and phone and text support to collect flock data and track progress.

Over the project period, reported lameness prevalence fell significantly, from 4.9% to 2.0% in ewes, 4.9% to 2.2% in lambs and 15.6% to 6.1% in rams.

Farmer confidence also increased. Before taking part, just 8% of participants were very satisfied with their ability to control lameness. By the end of the project, this had risen to 54%.

The project also supported more targeted treatment decisions, helping reduce reliance on antibiotics while improving welfare outcomes.

Resources developed through the work, including farmer guidance, vet toolkits, flock meeting materials and short films, have helped extend the learning beyond the participating farms.

Case study two: Core vaccination and the five-point plan improve flock foot health

A 24-month collaborative project between NSA and MSD Animal Health has demonstrated the welfare, health and productivity benefits of a consistent core vaccination programme alongside rigorous implementation of the 5PP.

The project involved four NSA Next Generation Ambassadors managing 2,500 ewes and focused on key disease threats including lameness, infectious abortion, clostridial diseases and pasteurellosis.

At the start, assessments showed all farms were only implementing parts of the five-point plan, with vaccination scoring lowest. Through the project, participants were supported to adopt the plan more fully, including prompt treatment of lame sheep, culling repeat offenders, reducing disease spread at handling, quarantining bought-in stock and whole-flock vaccination against footrot.

The results provide a strong proof point for the Healthy Feet Strategy. Across the four flocks, average lameness prevalence fell by 66%, from 6.6% to 2.2%, with every flock reducing lameness by at least half. Moderately lame animals reduced by 30% and severely lame animals by 50%, demonstrating clear welfare gains. Reduced disease levels also led to lower intervention, with antibiotic use falling by an average of 33% compared with the 2020 baseline and footbathing reduced by up to half on some farms.

One participating flock, managed by Ernie Richards near Hay-on-Wye, achieved a 70% reduction in lameness, from 5.65% to 1.71%. Whole-flock vaccination, including replacements, ewe lambs and tups, was identified as a turning point.

The project also delivered economic benefits, with estimated savings of £6,125 across the four farms and potential longer-term savings of more than £5 per ewe per year. It highlights how sustained prevention, vaccination and full implementation of 5PP can improve welfare while supporting responsible antibiotic use.

Case study three: Preventative healthcare to tackle footrot on challenging terrain

Dan Pritchard, who farms at Weobley Castle Farm on the Gower Peninsula, has shown how preventative healthcare and adoption of the five-point plan can deliver clear improvements in sheep foot health. Managing around 1,000 ewes across salt marsh grazing and a 250-acre home farm presents specific challenges, with wet conditions increasing the risk of bacteria associated with footrot and lameness.

In December 2020, Dan began recording lameness prevalence to establish a baseline before introducing a more structured prevention and treatment plan. At that point, flock lameness was just under 7%. Although this was already below some industry levels, Dan recognised there was further room for improvement and began implementing the five-point plan: cull, quarantine, vaccinate, avoid and treat.

Key changes included introducing a footrot vaccination programme, using lime around high-traffic areas such as handling points and water troughs, and routinely scoring lameness on a 1–3 scale. This helped ensure lame sheep were identified quickly and treated within three days, reducing infection risk and limiting spread through the flock. Treated animals are now clearly marked, making repeat cases easier to identify and enabling persistent offenders to be culled.

Quarantine measures have also been strengthened, with incoming stock sourced, where possible, from known low-lameness flocks and inspected for chronically misshapen feet.

By December 2021, lameness had fallen to just over 4%, and by July 2022 it had reduced to just above 2%.

Case study four: Health planning and medicine recording support responsible flock management

Ceredigion sheep farmer Rhun Williams, who keeps 650 ewes near Tregaron, has shown how flock health planning, lameness control and accurate medicine recording can work together to improve sheep welfare and demonstrate responsible antibiotic use.

Working closely with his vet, Jim Hopkins, Rhun used the five-point lameness reduction plan to identify when lameness was most problematic and introduce targeted changes. Lameness was worst during housing, with lame ewes being turned out after lambing and contributing to further spread at pasture. In 2018, Rhun installed plastic slats in the lambing shed, which reduced lame ewes during housing by 80%. This also helped improve lamb performance by lowering the lameness challenge during the grazing period.

Alongside practical flock health improvements, Rhun uses the Welsh Lamb and Beef Producers app to record antibiotic and medicine use accurately at the point of treatment. Scanning product QR codes captures key information such as batch number and expiry date, simplifying records and reducing errors.

This case study demonstrates the value of combining veterinary input, health planning and digital medicine recording. Better data supports responsible prescribing, helps farmers evidence good welfare standards and gives the sheep sector stronger proof of low and responsible antibiotic use.



Next steps: Goals between now and 2028

The UK ruminant sector has strong evidence of responsible antibiotic stewardship, but comprehensive farm-level antibiotic use data remains limited. This reflects the practical challenges of collecting data, as well as the need for greater coordination around shared industry objectives.

Progress is being made as trust, confidence and vet-farmer engagement continue to grow. At farm level, antibiotic data has real value when it supports flock health planning, informs treatment decisions and helps improve welfare outcomes.

The next step is to ensure farmers can clearly see the benefit of recording and sharing this information, both for their own business and for the wider sector.

Farmers and vets are encouraged to contribute data to the Medicine Hub, or devolved equivalents, so national trends can be captured and used to target education, advice and awareness where it is most needed.

RUMA Task Force 3 will be an important part of this process. Its ruminant antibiotic stewardship roadmap, due in August 2026, will help define what antibiotic use data is needed at farm and national level, how it should be collected, how value can be delivered back to farms and veterinary practices, and how data can be shared appropriately and transparently.



Goal: Thriving Lambs

Aim

“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.”

Industry led campaigns such as Colostrum Is Gold are helping raise awareness on management practices that can reduce lamb mortality. The campaign stresses the importance of ensuring all lambs receive adequate high-quality colostrum quickly after birth to improve lamb survival and reduce the use of antibiotics in the livestock sector.

There is limited national data on lamb survival rates that can ascertain whether any improvements are evidenced or anecdotal.

Expert comment: Fiona Lovatt, Flockhealth Ltd

“Lambing time is key to the success of sheep farms as every lamb counts in terms of productivity and profitability. Challenges such as bad weather or Schmallenberg can have a devastating effect on the bottom line.

“Over the past few years, the University of Nottingham Lambing Survey has been invaluable in measuring lamb survivability on a subset of farms and this is starting to give us a baseline against which to measure how we are doing nationally to draw on datasets which enable a picture to be established around this area.”

Expert view: Tom Green, SVS

“We have seen encouraging reductions in the use of antimicrobials for preventing watery mouth in lambs, which is a positive step for responsible medicine use and lamb welfare.

“This season has also brought some challenges, with anecdotal reports of poorer scanning results over winter and fewer lambs on the ground this spring. It is difficult to know how much of this is linked to the dry summer in 2025, bluetongue virus, or the lack of reporting and testing.

“Vaccine availability has also been a concern, particularly around orf this spring, alongside the recurring challenges with clostridial vaccine supply.”

The sheep sector is committed to monitoring the estimated uptake of vaccines, including the uptake of enzootic abortion vaccine to provide evidence of responsible medicine stewardship for the RUMA Target Task Force.

By promoting the responsible control of enzootic abortion by vaccination, rather than by treatment with antibiotics, such vaccination programmes are an important part of a flock health control strategy. However, they are not a substitute for good management practices, such as appropriate attention to biosecurity and animal husbandry.

What's happening on farm?

Case study: Improving colostrum management

Martin and Pauhla Whitaker, tenants at Overtown Farm, Gloucestershire, have used proactive health planning, hygiene management and improved colostrum testing to support lamb health and reduce reliance on antibiotics.

The 560-acre organic National Trust farm runs around 380 cross-bred ewes, lambing indoors in April.

The farm has had a livestock health and management plan since converting to organic production in 1999, with regular reviews used to identify risks and agree practical improvements with their vet. One persistent challenge has been watery mouth in newborn lambs.

As the lambing shed is also used for cattle housing, ewes can sometimes enter the building within 72 hours of cattle leaving, creating an unavoidable background disease challenge despite thorough cleaning and disinfection.

Historically, watery mouth affected around 9% of lambs, or about 60 lambs each year, with mortality around 2% due to close monitoring and agreed treatment protocols. However, the Whitakers wanted to avoid prophylactic antibiotic use and focus instead on prevention.

They introduced better recording of ewe body condition, selected ewes able to maintain condition, and invested in an EZ milker and BRIX refractometer to test colostrum quality quickly at lambing. Colostrum scoring is now recorded alongside ewe data using EID, helping identify lambs at risk and ewes with poor colostrum quality.

This practical, low-cost approach enables targeted supplementation, better culling decisions and improved lamb resilience. It demonstrates how colostrum management can support thriving lambs, reduce disease pressure and protect antibiotics for when they are genuinely needed.

What's happening on farm?

A new initiative led by Nottingham University and sheep vet Fiona Lovatt from Flock Health Ltd has been launched: the National Lambing survey. It aims to establish and deliver a UK-wide lambing survey to include an assessment of current practices and attitudes with respect to responsible antibiotic use at lambing time.

It should help build a clearer picture of the challenges facing the sector, from vaccine supply issues and disease threats to unpredictable weather and other emerging pressures. The ongoing aim will be to deliver and report on an annual national lambing survey with a target of 600 respondents from across the UK. Data will be used to inform the sheep section of future RUMA Task Force reports.

Next steps: Goals between now and 2028

Ensuring lambs receive adequate colostrum immediately after birth is a critical factor to ensure they thrive. It directly improves sheep welfare and comfort by preventing fatal hypothermia, conferring vital disease immunity, and enabling healthy digestion.

The goals are to build on the vet farmer engagement, with an emphasis on the start in life such as birth weights, colostrum intake and minimal disease challenge, followed by good nutrition and management of parasite challenge. The pathway and other funding helps to forge the relationships which in turn lead to better productivity and thriving lambs.

Collaborative Flock Management

Aim

“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.”

Collaboration is increasingly recognised as central to improving health, welfare and responsible medicine use in the UK sheep sector. Industry strategy places strong emphasis on coordinated working between farmers, veterinarians and advisers, reflected in the growing uptake of formal flock health and welfare plans.

The launch of the Government funded Animal Health and Welfare Pathway (AHWP) in England, and similar health focused initiatives across the devolved nations (Preparing for Sustainable Farming programme in Scotland and the Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales and Advancing Animal Welfare in Northern Ireland), show policy support for improved, annual animal health and welfare reviews, highlighting it as a government priority within the sector.

These annual health and welfare plans provide a structured framework for improvement and decision-making, but their effectiveness depends on shared input and consistent engagement across the supply chain.

Though yet to be finalised, in England Defra is planning to mandate annual vet advisory visits which gives the potential for significant gains to be made in vet/farmer collaboration in planning, reflection and decision making.

The AHWP in particular illustrates a collaborative approach to policy design, having been co-developed with input from farmers, veterinarians and industry bodies. Government sought sector advice on which measures to include, ensuring the scheme reflected practical on-farm needs. This co-creation has improved its relevance, alignment with existing initiatives and likely uptake across the industry.



Collaborative research and innovation projects further strengthen this landscape. Regular updates and contributions from research institutes like Moredun Research Institute, support the development and dissemination of practical resources, including updated fact sheets and technical guidance. These efforts are complemented by regionally coordinated disease control programmes, for example tackling sheep scab.

The RDPE sheep scab project 'For Flocks' Ssake' and devolved nation initiatives like the Gwaredu scab project, coordinated efforts on the island of Lewis and Harris, and Sheep scab breaking the cycle in Northern Ireland demonstrate how collective action can address endemic challenges at scale.

Training and knowledge transfer are also supported by collaboration between government and industry bodies. Programmes delivered via Defra, alongside platforms such as Farming Connect and The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH), help ensure consistent messaging and broad access to best practice.



Meanwhile, cross-sector working groups - including Ruminant Health and Welfare Group (RHWG), Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA), National Sheep Association (NSA), Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS), and levy bodies - play a key role in aligning priorities, sharing evidence and coordinating action.

Well-attended industry knowledge exchange activities highlight both the demand for and reach of coordinated education efforts.

A number of cross-industry initiatives demonstrate how collaboration can translate into practical outcomes.

Guidance from organisations such as National Office of Animal Health (NOAH) and Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep (SCOPS) has helped align messaging on responsible medicine use and parasite control.

Together, these examples illustrate that progress in sheep health, welfare and antimicrobial stewardship is not driven by isolated efforts, but by sustained collaboration across research, advisory, veterinary and farming communities.

Industry opinion: National Sheep Association

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, has repeatedly stressed that 'meaningful' progress in the sheep sector relies on coordinated action across farmers, vets, advisers, the supply chain, industry bodies and policymakers, noting that we only make real progress when everyone is working together. Collaboration is essential not just for improving animal health and welfare, but also for tackling wider challenges such as antimicrobial stewardship, environmental pressures and market demands.

He adds: "But achieving this level of alignment is not straightforward. The UK sheep sector is highly diverse, spanning extensive upland flocks to more intensive lowland systems, with varying priorities, resources and levels of access to advice. This diversity can make it difficult to ensure consistent messaging, widespread engagement and coordinated action. As a result, while collaboration is widely recognised as critical, it requires ongoing effort, clear communication and strong leadership to bring together the many parts of the industry around shared goals."



What's happening on farm?

Case study: Careful product choice and biosecurity to manage fluke risk

Bryan and Liz Griffiths, who farm 800 sheep and finishing cattle on 320 acres in Burrington, Devon, have shown how targeted treatment, testing and strong biosecurity can help manage liver fluke while protecting flock health and welfare.

The farm has a known fluke challenge, with wet and rushy areas providing ideal conditions for mud snails. In 2012, Bryan and Liz discovered triclabendazole-resistant fluke in ewe lambs after animals continued to deteriorate despite treatment. Post-mortem findings confirmed heavy adult fluke burdens, showing that the product being used was no longer effective on their farm.

In response, they adapted their control strategy. As sheep are housed for six to eight weeks before lambing, they use this period to reduce fluke risk. Ewes are now treated with closantel as they leave the lambing shed, helping remove remaining fluke and reduce pasture contamination at turnout. The approach has been checked through coproantigen testing, giving confidence that treatment decisions are based on evidence rather than routine.

Biosecurity is also central to their system. Although most sheep are homebred, a small number of ewe lambs and rams are bought in. New stock are sourced carefully through catalogue sales and treated at market using a quarantine protocol that includes worm and fluke control, reflecting SCOPS guidance and the farm's known resistance status.

This case study demonstrates how understanding farm-specific disease risk, choosing products carefully and using robust quarantine can reduce losses, support sheep comfort and protect the health status of the home flock.



Progress through collaboration, evidence and prevention

1.

Improving sheep scab control through diagnosis and resistance surveillance

Work led by Moredun, Glasgow University and Scotland's Rural College is strengthening national understanding of sheep scab and macrocyclic lactone resistance. By collecting mite samples and supporting accurate diagnosis, the project helps protect sheep comfort, reduce prolonged suffering and preserve effective treatments.

2.

Flock Health Clubs strengthening vet-farmer relationships

Flock Health Clubs show how shared veterinary expertise and peer learning can help farmers move from reactive treatment to proactive flock health planning. The model has improved farmer confidence, increased veterinary engagement and supported management changes in areas such as lameness, parasites and lambing.

3.

Medicine Hub supporting responsible antibiotic use

The Medicine Hub demonstrates how collaboration between farmers, vets and industry can build robust evidence of responsible antibiotic use. By giving farmers control of secure medicine data, while allowing vets to support recording where agreed, it helps the sheep sector evidence progress transparently.

4.

Farm Vet Champions encouraging practical change

Farm Vet Champions supports vets and farmers to work together on antimicrobial stewardship through training, SMART goals and preventative health planning. Its practical 'plan, prevent, protect' approach has helped farms reduce avoidable antibiotic use while maintaining strong lamb health outcomes.

5.

Collaborative testing for iceberg disease control

NSA Wales and the Wales Veterinary Science Centre are helping make advanced disease screening more accessible through Enferplex testing. This supports earlier detection of hidden diseases such as maedi visna, Johne's Disease and CLA, helping protect welfare, resilience and long-term flock productivity.

Overall progress

Taken together, these examples show an industry increasingly using collaboration, diagnostics, data, veterinary advice and shared learning to improve sheep welfare. They demonstrate a shift towards earlier intervention, better evidence and prevention-led flock health management.

The sheep sector continues to focus on engagement, with initiatives such as Arwain DGC and Veterinary Prescribing Champions in Wales and the Farm Vet Champion network providing medicine training within veterinary practices across the rest of the UK.

Next steps: Goals looking ahead to 2028

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, shares his NSA position on animal health and welfare pathway becoming mandatory.

He says: “The sheep sector has to comply with EU Animal Health Law requirements in order to trade with the EU. This alignment will become more important as we move to agreements over SPS realignment and UK/EU reset.

“To have an annual vet visit is therefore essential and should be catered for within legislation. This should not be a shock for many farms given farmers generally need a vet to come out periodically to be given access to prescription medicines. An annual vet visit has become more routine now since the introduction of the VAN.

“NSA agrees that every sheep farm, irrespective of size of flock, should have a mandatory annual health and welfare vet visit. There should also be a flock health planning discussion and following the vet visit there should be a simple action plan that sets out where key improvements can be made, and how.

“However, there shouldn’t be one standard flock health plan, as this risks becoming a tick box exercise and it might undermine or duplicate existing flock health plans. NSA does not agree that keepers should provide key data to Defra as there is no structure to capture or make use of this data and no mechanism to ensure the information is ground-truthed and correctly interpreted.

“NSA can fully understand the value of such data but believe strongly this should be conducted via a voluntary initiative that could be incentivised by financial reward/ access to support schemes. Overall, demands on keepers have to be proportionate to the financial opportunities of the enterprise.”



Positive Welfare

Aim

Management actions should be considered to reduce stressful events and promote calm handling. They 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.

Positive welfare for sheep goes beyond minimising pain or stress to actively providing opportunities for the animals to express natural behaviours, optimising their environment and building positive relationships through proactive stockmanship and good handling.

The concept of positive welfare, although around for several decades, is an area which lacks research specific to different farming systems and context.

There is increasing interest in this area, including projects that aim to take this from academic research and into the arena of farm and industry application. This shows further progress in improving sheep welfare, and in future it is hoped that this will enable progress to be more substantially monitored.

Case study: How common is enrichment in UK sheep farming and is it necessary?

A pilot study at the Royal Vet College (RVC) has looked at enrichment of environments in the UK context.

This study indicates that some sheep holdings are implementing enrichment practices for their sheep in the UK and shows that there is scope to explore the use of enrichment further in sheep with a particular focus on housed environments.

A survey-based study looked at response from 127 sheep farmers and their responses to enrichment questions which included eight categories: physical, nutritional, social, visual, olfactory, auditory and tactile and cognitive.

The most implemented forms of environmental enrichment were nutritional, social and physical whilst the least provided forms of enrichment were cognitive and olfactory.

Forms of physical enrichment used included hedgerows, uneven pasture/mounds, and placement of bales for interaction.

Many farms offer enrichment opportunities either deliberate (more likely in orphan lamb groups) or less intentional by means of the farming system and utilisation of fields with natural shelter.

What's happening on farm?

Case study: Improving positive welfare through trees and shelter

(via farm vet *Lahra Harcourt-Brown* from *Ruminant [Revival](#)*)

Interest is growing in the role of trees, hedgerows and shelterbelts in supporting sheep welfare, particularly as weather patterns become more variable. In lambing fields, well-designed shelter gives ewes and newborn lambs greater choice and protection from wind, rain and heat stress, helping reduce hypothermia risk and supporting better early-life outcomes.

Evidence suggests sheep actively seek shelter before lambing, and provision of shelter has been associated with fewer shepherding interventions. This points to wider welfare benefits, including calmer behaviour, improved lamb survival and reduced handling or disturbance at a critical time.

Shelterbelts may also improve ground conditions by reducing surface water and poaching, with potential knock-on benefits for lameness, mastitis risk and overall ewe health, making shelter a positive welfare intervention, as well as an environmental one.

Next steps: 2026-2028

More focus needs to be made on not just avoiding and minimising negative states of welfare and encouraging the move to animals thriving positively, often referred to as 'a life worth living'.

Further research in this area is encouraged, along with transfer of this knowledge to farms and farming systems.



Conclusion

Welfare is a key indicator for our sector, closely linked to global trade and market access. It also connects directly to improvements in animal health, making it particularly important for the sheep sector. At the same time, we recognise that not all the necessary data currently exists and there is no desire to place additional burdens on farmers.

While we can identify the types of data that would be useful, it is not always easy to access. Both quantitative and qualitative information are needed to build a complete picture. However, having robust data is essential if we are to demonstrate progress and measure improvements over time.

If we get this right, it will help provide leadership and clear direction for farmers, strengthen the sector's reputation internationally, and support the development of stronger markets. The challenge is to find smart and practical ways to achieve this.

In the meantime, welfare at slaughter is a main concern of the SVS and BVA and will be discussed further in upcoming collaborations across the main stakeholders in this area. The focus is to achieve optimum animal welfare at the point of slaughter.

It's right that we are challenged and questioned on welfare and that collectively we don't see this as negative, it often means there is scope for improvement.



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Case studies

All have originated from NSA magazine with exception of Flockhealth, Ruminant Revival and below:

- ▶ *RUMA-TTF-3-Report-2025-updated-Jan-2026.pdf*
- ▶ *Welsh Lamb & Beef Producers (wlbp.co.uk)*

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

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