



— COLLABORATION DAY REPORT

Building resilience into UK beef and sheep farming

Findings and actions from a Ruminant Revival
Collaboration Day

Cairns Farm, West Lothian
8 July 2026

ruminant *
revival

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On 8 July 2026, farmers, vets, researchers, processors and policymakers spent a day at Cairns Farm working through the pressures facing beef and sheep production. Prices and input costs are outside their control; disease is moving north with the climate; wormers are failing; grass needs to be managed differently; and the people breeding the stock rarely hear what the people finishing and processing it actually want. This report sets out what was agreed on the day and who needs to act on it: farmers, the wider industry, the four UK governments and Ruminant Revival itself.

Six areas, one recurring theme: producers are managing volatility they do not control, with policy that does not join up.

The Ruminant Revival Collaboration Day brought farmers, vets, researchers, processors and policymakers together at Cairns Farm, West Lothian, on 8 July 2026 to examine the challenges facing the beef and sheep sectors and identify practical next steps. The presentations, discussion notes and suggestions have been drawn together to form this report, which sets out key themes and action plans across six areas: the challenges facing the sectors and agricultural policy, meat eating quality and the beef supply chain, mindset and farmer wellbeing, sustainable parasite control, resilient grazing systems and financial sustainability.

Beef and sheep producers are being asked to manage significant market and input volatility largely on their own, while policy on food security, climate and the environment remains poorly joined up. Progress depends on stronger industry input into policy development, better-coordinated animal health and biosecurity measures, protection of the genetic diversity and hefted flocks that underpin the sheep sector, and a clearer, better-evidenced plan for balancing food security with climate and environmental goals.

Across the beef supply chain, communication between breeders, finishers and processors is largely informal, on-farm data recording is inconsistent, and there is no market mechanism that rewards eating quality. Loss of local processing facilities is a major constraint. Progress depends on formalising communication, improving data recording, supporting new and existing processing infrastructure, and developing market mechanisms that reward eating quality and stronger provenance-based marketing.

On parasite control, treatment alone is no longer a sustainable long-term strategy. Progress depends on combining better on-farm monitoring and grazing management with improved access to advice, wider uptake of existing diagnostic tools, continued investment in new technology and research, and stronger data-sharing and funding support at the industry and government levels.

Grazing management is one of the most powerful and underused tools available to farmers, with direct benefits for animal health, input costs, soil health and business resilience. Progress depends on defining resilience at the level of the individual farm, investing in the infrastructure and technology that supports flexible grazing, and accepting the short-term conflicts and compromises that come with long-term system change.

There is a growing awareness of the need for change around farmer wellbeing, including peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, and a one-stop shop that brings existing support bodies together could make a big difference. On financial sustainability, there is a clear distinction between economics and finance; a case for treating land and livestock as separate businesses; and three levers to increase profit (reducing overheads, increasing turnover from existing resources before adding new ones and raising gross margin per unit, which was described as the most powerful diagnostic tool of the three).

Since the event, bluetongue has spread into Scotland, drought has taken hold across England and eastern Scotland, the conflict in the Middle East has pushed up input costs, and the UK's only lungworm vaccine is to be withdrawn. Each of these makes the animal health, grazing and parasite control actions in this report more urgent. The background section sets out the position at the end of August 2026.

The full action plans in each section set out what farmers, the wider industry, government and Ruminant Revival should do. The recommendations that recur across this report are these:

FOR GOVERNMENTS

- Make food security, climate and environmental policy together, with the Westminster Government bringing forward a Food Security Act to set minimum domestic production levels, and every UK administration putting a resourced delivery plan behind its net-zero targets.
- Coordinate animal health across the four UK administrations, including consistent vaccine availability, stronger border biosecurity, a resourced sheep scab eradication strategy and investment in electronic traceability.
- Build national surveillance for anthelmintic resistance and make testing data from farm payment schemes usable by farmers and vets.

FOR GOVERNMENTS, CONTINUED

- Fund the water, handling, fencing and habitat infrastructure that resilient grazing systems depend on, and account for the short-term production trade-offs associated with long-term land-use change.
- Focus on access to abattoir infrastructure, which is a growing barrier to food production. This might mean developing new, smaller, or mobile abattoirs, or encouraging larger abattoirs to be more accommodating of private kills. Local processing and data systems also flow carcass and disease information back to producers.

FOR THE WIDER INDUSTRY

- Formalise communication between breeders, finishers and processors so that market signals reach the people breeding the stock, and establish mechanisms that reward eating quality.
- Commission peer-reviewed research into how regenerative practices affect parasite risk, and promote existing diagnostic tools so they are not withdrawn for low uptake.
- Put the evidence on the ecological and economic value of hefted hill flocks and sheep genetic diversity at the forefront of land-use decisions.

FOR FARMERS

- Concentrate on the controllable side of the business including cost structure, data-driven breeding decisions, consistent on-farm recording and benchmarking against other farms.
- Treat grazing management, sward diversity and nutrition as the first line of parasite control, with treatment decisions based on monitoring rather than routine schedules.

What happened on the day

Ruminant Revival held its Collaboration Day at Cairns Farm, West Lothian, on 8 July 2026. Farmers, vets, researchers, processors and policymakers from across the beef and sheep sectors took part in presentations, roundtable discussions and networking sessions over the course of the day.

Representatives from the UK National Beef Association and National Sheep Association gave their views on the key challenges facing their respective sectors, with farmers providing input on how they have responded to some of these issues. Follow-up roundtable discussions considered the key priorities for agricultural policy across the UK nations and regions. Both sessions covered market volatility, disease and biosecurity risk, the value of genetic diversity in sheep, farm business resilience strategies and the disconnect between food security, climate and environmental policy.

A session entitled “Meat Eating Quality, considering the whole supply chain and the end product” and a follow-up discussion group on barriers to improving availability of meat processing looked at how communication, infrastructure, data and market structure across the supply chain affect eating quality, consistency and the viability of local and national meat production.

A networking session addressed mindset change and mental health challenges within the farming community. The discussion centred on identifying barriers to mental health awareness among farmers and developing strategies to encourage community support and knowledge sharing, including the need for agricultural ambassadors, peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, changing public perceptions of agriculture and a centralised approach to coordinate existing agricultural support organisations and frameworks.

The “Responding to Parasite Challenge” session covered the growing impact of climate change and anthelmintic resistance on sheep and cattle parasite control, and identified practical steps for farmers, consultancies, the wider industry and government.

The “Resilient Grazing Systems” discussion explored how grazing management is one of the most powerful tools available to improve animal and soil health, business resilience and environmental outcomes, and looked at practical examples, including rotational and mob grazing, dietary diversity, mixed-species grazing and virtual fencing technology.

The financial sustainability session was delivered by Sam Charlton, founder and facilitator of Planning for Profit in the UK, a programme inspired by the internationally recognised Ranching for Profit model. The session was highly interactive, with Sam “building” a livestock business from scratch with the audience, working through the choice between renting and buying land, the cost of labour and the purchase of breeding stock to demonstrate the core financial and economic concepts behind the Planning for Profit approach.

The summaries and recommendations that follow reflect the views, opinions and debate of those who attended. Each section sets out the key themes identified in the session and, where applicable, actions for each responsible party. A follow-up webinar for the wider industry will be held later in the year.

Since the day

The summer that followed the Collaboration Day has underlined many of the concerns raised on 8 July. Bluetongue serotype 3 has spread through the 2026 to 2027 season, with 684 cases confirmed across the UK by 28 August 2026, the first cases in Scotland, a control zone in Dumfries and Galloway, and pressure on vaccine supply as demand rose.

England recorded its driest July in 190 years and almost three-quarters of the country was in drought by mid-August; grass growth at the end of July was 46 per cent below the recent average, farmers were feeding winter forage in August, and water scarcity spread across eastern and southern Scotland. The conflict in the Middle East has pushed up fertiliser and red diesel costs. In July, MSD Animal Health confirmed that the UK’s only licensed lungworm vaccine will be withdrawn after the 2027 season.

None of this changes the recommended actions set out in this report. It does make several of them more pressing: coordinated animal health measures and consistent vaccine availability across the UK; grazing systems and infrastructure that can carry stock through a dry summer; a national picture of parasite resistance; and alternatives to chemical parasite control that do not depend on a single manufacturer.



SECTION 01

Key challenges facing the beef and sheep sectors, and agricultural policy

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED

- Beef and sheep producers face significant income, price and input cost (feed, fuel, fertiliser) volatility over which they have limited control. Policy support has diverged across the UK nations, creating an uneven playing field.
- Disease risk is increasing, driven by climate change (e.g. vector-borne diseases such as Bluetongue) and biosecurity gaps at the border; there are concerns that UK biosecurity and traceability systems (including the case for electronic ID in sheep) are not ready for increased disease incursion.
- The genetic diversity of UK sheep breeds and the stratified hill-upland-lowland sheep system built over 150 years are a major asset. Some breeds carry genetic disease resistance (for example to maedi visna) that could be bred into wider use. Other examples of this resistance will be identified as our understanding of genetic diversity and how to apply it practically grows. This genetic base in hefted hill flocks risks irreversible loss if hill sheep numbers are reduced because of environmental policy decisions.
- There is a clear gap between on-the-ground practices and how they feed into policy; the industry feels it lacks an effective way to provide evidence-based input into decisions that affect it, and decisions are sometimes made with limited input from the people managing the land.
- Farm businesses are responding to volatility by focusing on the controllable factors: cost structure, data-driven breeding decisions, benchmarking against and visiting other successful farm systems. Examples of adaptation include adopting practices such as bale grazing, outwintering on forage crops and contract finishing to reduce fixed costs.
- Animal health policy priorities include better industry-led control of endemic disease (for example, Sheep Scab nationally and BVD in England) and keeping antimicrobial resistance (AMR) reduction in the mainstream agenda alongside reduced anthelmintic use.
- Food security, climate and environmental policy currently sit in silos and are poorly coordinated, sometimes leading to conflicting decisions and allowing the loudest voices to dominate rather than a balanced debate.
- There are calls for a Food Security Act with minimum self-sufficiency targets, for consumption-based (not production-based) carbon accounting, for climate metrics that include phosphorus as well as carbon, and for a credible delivery plan behind net zero pledges.

Recommended actions by responsible party

FARMER

- Engage with and support industry disease-control initiatives, such as sheep scab and BVD eradication schemes, and improve uptake of endemic disease-control advice.
- Look to reduce antibiotic and anthelmintic use where possible, supporting the wider push to keep antimicrobial resistance under control.
- Consider genetic resistance testing where available, and factor disease-resistance traits into breeding decisions alongside production traits.
- Focus on the controllable side of business resilience: cost structure, data-driven breeding and management decisions and benchmarking practices against other successful farms.
- Consider practical changes used elsewhere to reduce fixed costs, for example bale grazing, outwintering on forage crops or using contract finishing services.
- Participate in whole farm carbon baselining projects to strengthen the industry's evidence base for policy discussions.
- Support the case for improved traceability, including electronic identification.

WIDER AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY

- Push for a clear, resourced sheep scab eradication strategy and clarify the best delivery vehicle for it, for example the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway.
- Keep antimicrobial resistance reduction firmly on the mainstream agenda alongside broader efforts to control endemic diseases.
- Build a stronger, better-coordinated evidence base (e.g. AHDB and QMS whole-farm carbon baselining work) to inform food security, climate and environmental policy development.
- Advocate for consumption-based carbon accounting so that food-associated emissions are allocated to where food is consumed rather than where it is produced.
- Support research, development and promotion of genetic disease-resistance marker testing as a practical industry tool when the evidence base supports this.
- Push for improved, UK-wide coordination on biosecurity and animal health measures, including consistent vaccine availability across the devolved administrations (e.g. Bluetongue) and stronger border biosecurity.
- Support the case for electronic traceability systems.
- Ensure that industry evidence on the ecological and economic value of hefted hill flocks and sheep genetic diversity is put forward to complement land-use proposals.

GOVERNMENTS

- Bring forward a Food Security Act that sets minimum levels of food production needed to maintain a self-sufficient supply for the UK population, accounting for imports and exports.
- Ensure climate and food security policies are developed together rather than in silos, with a clear, resourced delivery plan to back net-zero targets.
- Broaden climate change metrics to include phosphorus alongside carbon and improve the accuracy of the methodologies used to measure emissions.
- Review agri-environment legislation to ensure it genuinely supports biodiversity and carbon-reduction outcomes, informed by industry and ecological evidence, while balancing the need for more local and sustainable food production.
- Integrate whole-farm carbon data (e.g. from AHDB and QMS baselining projects) into policy development.
- Improve cross-border coordination between devolved administrations on animal health measures, including vaccine availability, and strengthen UK border biosecurity to reduce the risk of exotic disease incursion.
- Support investment in electronic traceability systems.
- Consider incorporating genetic disease-resistance testing where evidence exists into future single farm payment or support scheme options.

RUMINANT REVIVAL

- Support farmers with cost-structure benchmarking and facilitate farm visits and peer learning networks to spread proven practical changes more widely.
- Advise on genetic resistance testing and breeding strategies for endemic diseases such as Maedi Visna.
- Support farmers in reducing antibiotic and anthelmintic use.
- Build an anthelmintic calculator to track and record anthelmintic usage in the UK.
- Help farmers engage effectively with knowledge exchange and endemic disease control programmes.
- Support farmers in collecting and interpreting whole-farm carbon and performance data so it can be used to inform wider policy evidence.

SUMMARY

The overriding message here is that beef and sheep producers are being asked to manage significant market and input volatility largely on their own, while policy on food security, climate and the environment remains poorly joined up. Progress depends on stronger industry input into policy development, better-coordinated animal health and biosecurity measures, protection of the genetic diversity and hefted flocks that underpin the sheep sector, and a clearer, better-evidenced plan for balancing food security with climate and environmental goals.



SECTION 02

Meat eating quality and the beef supply chain

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED

- There is a persistent communication gap between breeders, finishers, processors and consumers. Communication that does occur is largely informal (auction marts, pubs, dinner conversations) rather than structured, which contributes to a mismatch between what breeders select for (maternal traits) and what finishers and the supply chain want (carcass and eating-quality traits).
- On-farm data recording is inconsistent, often on paper or not done at all, and there is a general mistrust or lack of understanding of estimated breeding values (EBVs). Better data flow needs incentivisation to happen reliably.
- Low margins in abattoirs limit the feedback on disease reporting (via offal ID) to farmers.
- The beef market is volatile, with farmgate and retail prices moving at different times, rising non-EU imports competing directly on high-value cuts, and carcass balance (what to do with less valuable cuts) a constant challenge.
- Consumer behaviour is shifting: greater interest in health, protein and provenance; some influence from weight-loss drugs increasing protein demand; but a persistent gap between what consumers say they value (welfare, local, quality) and what they actually buy (price-driven).
- Eating quality is inconsistent due to the scale of breed diversity (73 breeds in the UK) and management practices such as compensatory growth, which can reduce muscle glycogen and tenderness. There is currently no market mechanism to reward genuine eating quality or to properly market lower-grade products rather than discounting them.
- UK product packaging, marketing and traceability lag behind those of competitors such as New Zealand and Australia, limiting the ability to differentiate and compete on value rather than just price.
- Local food systems face bottlenecks throughout the chain (processing, distribution, routes to market), and the loss of local processing facilities is a major constraint, but promising models are emerging (mobile abattoirs, food hubs, incubator kitchens, producer clusters).
- Access to abattoir infrastructure is a growing barrier, particularly in remote areas (e.g. Orkney). Larger abattoirs should be more accommodating of private kills.

Recommended actions by responsible party

FARMER

- Move on-farm data recording (weights, identification, treatments, breeding decisions) onto a more consistent, ideally digital, system rather than paper or memory.
- Engage directly and regularly with finishers, processors or abattoirs to understand carcass and eating-quality requirements, rather than relying solely on informal conversations.
- Seek out education on EBVs and how to apply them alongside on-farm data to make more informed breeding decisions.
- Manage the first winter and growth periods carefully to protect muscle glycogen and avoid compensatory growth strategies that damage eating quality.
- Consider diversifying routes to market (direct sale, collective marketing groups, local processing) rather than relying on a single outlet.
- Where relevant, get involved in local food system initiatives such as collector groups, food hubs or moveable abattoir trials to improve access to processing and distribution.

WIDER AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY

- Where relevant, advise farm businesses on opportunities in local food systems, including direct marketing, incubator kitchens and diversification into further processing.
- Support small producers exploring new processing models (e.g. moveable abattoirs) to navigate regulatory requirements.
- Where relevant, support businesses to develop stronger packaging, marketing and traceability propositions that differentiate their product and support consumer choice.
- Develop a standardised, formal communication and data-sharing platform that links breeders, finishers, abattoirs and consumer feedback, so market signals actually reach store producers.
- Research and address the reluctance of some finishers and processors to share carcass and performance data back down the supply chain.
- Establish mechanisms to reward genuine eating-quality traits and to properly market and value lower-grade carcasses (e.g. as mince) rather than discounting the whole product.
- Improve carcass balance management across the industry and address the impact of non-EU imports competing directly on high-value cuts.
- Invest in stronger, more compelling product marketing, packaging and provenance credentials to compete with international producers on value, not just price.
- Broaden consumer research data sources beyond single retailer loyalty schemes (e.g. Kantar/Tesco Clubcard) to build a fuller picture of consumer behaviour across all retail channels, including butchers and farm shops.

GOVERNMENTS

- Support funding and regulatory pathways for small-scale and moveable abattoir pilots (such as the tiny trailer abattoir) and wider local processing infrastructure investment: food hubs, aggregation centres, incubator kitchens and collective marketing networks.
- Continue and expand small-producer pilot funds and business start-up support to diversify the local food system.
- Support the development of national traceability and data systems (building on existing schemes such as ScotEID) that can flow information back to store producers and finishers, including regulatory requirements for offal-based disease reporting and feedback to farmers.
- Consider consumer-facing labelling and education policies to support value-based purchasing choices and provide clearer provenance information.

RUMINANT REVIVAL

- Support farmers with practical education on EBVs, carcass traits and data recording, with built-in incentives to encourage uptake.
- Support farmers in achieving their marketing objectives, such as '100% grass reared' or no antibiotic meat/milk, while maintaining high health and welfare standards.

SUMMARY

Progress depends on formalising communication between breeders, finishers and processors, improving on-farm data recording, supporting new and existing processing infrastructure, and developing market mechanisms that genuinely reward eating quality and stronger provenance-based marketing.

Mindset

KEY STATEMENTS

- There is increasing awareness of the need to change how farmers' wellbeing is prioritised and mental health is addressed.
- The individuals who are engaged are not usually the ones who need the change.
- Social media only shows the best and may lead to a negative mindset among farmers.
- The general public and consumers may hold certain views of agriculture that need to be addressed to ensure appropriate education.
- Agricultural course closures are a problem.
- Televised programmes detailing agricultural roles are often inaccurate and may paint an inappropriate picture for the general public.

SOLUTIONS

- Reflect on the phenomenal and extensive work already carried out to improve farmers' wellbeing, be attentive to feedback, and build practices that honour this.
- Identify ambassadors and create a sense of community to encourage farmers to openly discuss mental health issues.
- Use peer-to-peer knowledge transfer to build sustainable solutions.
- Think about the need for a mindset shift among people in the middle of the supply chain, such as vets and agri-merchants, to support sustainability goals.
- Promote people leaving farms and meeting others, encouraging knowledge transfer.
- Recognise that community is important to promote good wellbeing practices, and research ways to support existing communities and build other sustainable relationships.
- Create a one-stop shop to bring together all existing bodies for knowledge exchange, such as Young Farmers, FCN and the local Farmer Networks.



SECTION 04

Sustainable parasite control in sheep and cattle

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED

- Climate change is shifting parasite prevalence, seasonality and geographic spread (e.g. *Haemonchus contortus* emerging in the UK, changing liver fluke patterns and rising prevalence of tick-borne diseases).
- Anthelmintic resistance is widespread and costly (estimated at £1.7 billion a year globally), and cattle are increasingly at risk despite most attention historically focusing on sheep.
- Good tools already exist (FARMED-style frameworks in New Zealand, worm egg counts, growth rate monitoring and grazing management) but are often underused or poorly understood on-farm.
- New diagnostic technology (e.g. grazing-risk mapping apps, early-stage larval detection research) offers promise but needs to be user-friendly and field-tested in the UK.
- There is a lack of peer-reviewed evidence on how regenerative farming practices affect parasite risk.
- Messaging and training around testing needs to be more practical and hands-on, and farmers may respond better to seeing worst-case outcomes (such as the New Zealand resistance crisis) than to statistics alone.

Recommended actions by responsible party

FARMER

- Adopt a structured whole-farm approach to parasite control rather than relying on testing and treatment alone. For endoparasites, this includes managing grazing height (around 6-10 cm) to balance nutritional quality against parasite larval exposure, and using lower-risk pasture (e.g. silage aftermath, forage crops) at higher-risk times.
- Optimise nutrition, including protein and trace-element supplementation, to strengthen animals' immunity to parasite challenge.
- Use growth rate and condition monitoring alongside visual checks to judge whether treatment is genuinely required.
- Where up-to-date veterinary advice is not available, ask to be referred by your local vet to sources of up-to-date information.
- Implement quarantine and testing procedures for incoming cattle, not just sheep, to reduce the risk of importing resistant worms.

WIDER AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY

- Commission, fund or support peer-reviewed research into how regenerative farming practices (mob grazing, herbal leys, agroforestry, species-rich swards) affect parasite risk, to close the current evidence gap.
- Establish a UK-wide parasite surveillance and data-sharing system, similar to New Zealand's annual laboratory surveillance reports, so the wider industry knows the true resistance status of endoparasites in sheep and cattle. Investigate where data from AHWP testing is being stored and whether it is being utilised.
- Actively promote underused diagnostic tools to prevent further withdrawal from the market due to low uptake.
- Support the multi-agency collaboration (e.g. Lincoln University New Zealand and Queen's University Belfast) developing early larval detection diagnostics, and the UK rollout of grazing-risk technology.
- Support development of new vaccines (e.g. for tick-borne disease) as alternatives to chemical control.
- Ensure new technology and diagnostic tools are designed with user-friendliness as a central requirement.

GOVERNMENTS

- Expand and formalise support for animal health testing within farm payment schemes, ensuring testing data is captured and made available to those who can act on it.
- Fund the next phase of research into climate change, regenerative practices and parasite control (e.g. the upcoming five-year Scottish Government research programme).
- Support funding applications for cross-border diagnostic research collaborations (such as the L3Detect project) and UK field trials of new grazing-risk technology.
- Invest in national-level surveillance infrastructure so resistance and disease trend data is collected, published and accessible to farmers and vets.

RUMINANT REVIVAL

- Improve access to engaged, up-to-date veterinary advice, particularly in areas affected by current geographical gaps in provision, whether through veterinary CPD or a referral service.
- Demonstrate practical testing methods to farmers, for example via social media, to counter the perception that testing is complicated or time-consuming.
- Help clients build robust quarantine and resistance-monitoring protocols for cattle and sheep.
- Get involved in UK trials of emerging technology, such as the grazing-risk mapping app expected to be trialled on 40-50 UK farms, and provide feedback on usability.
- Support farmers and vets in interpreting existing monitoring data (egg counts, growth rates) in a way that is visible and usable, not just numbers on a report.
- Use clear, concrete examples such as the New Zealand resistance crisis to communicate the scale of the risk and drive faster behaviour change.
- Encourage and communicate the recommendations for the wider agricultural industry set out above.

SUMMARY

The overriding message is that treatment alone is no longer a sustainable long-term strategy. Progress depends on combining better on-farm monitoring and grazing management with improved access to advice, wider uptake of existing diagnostic tools, continued investment in new technology and research, and stronger data-sharing and funding support at the industry and government levels.



SECTION 05

Resilient grazing systems

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED

- Resilient grazing cannot be defined generically; it must be defined at farm or croft level, as businesses and objectives differ and resilience looks different for each system.
- Achieving resilient grazing often involves compromise, for example balancing short-term production costs against long-term benefits such as woodland planting for shade, shelter and biodiversity.
- Grazing management sits alongside genetics, husbandry and nutrition as one of the core levers vets and advisors can use to reduce disease, improve welfare and reduce reliance on medicines and other inputs.
- Rotational and diverse grazing has delivered large, measurable reductions in parasite burden and treatment costs in practice (one example saw wormer and product spend fall from around £3,800 to around £300 in a year).
- Diverse swards (herbal leys, legumes) improve the animal gut microbiome, immune resilience and mineral bioavailability (e.g. selenium and cobalt), and have been linked to substantial reductions in parasite burden compared with continuous ryegrass grazing.
- Virtual fencing (collar) technology is enabling farmers to graze previously inaccessible or marginal land, out-winter stock and manage sensitive habitats flexibly, though it requires a training period for animals and has some practical limitations (e.g. collar performance in winter, changing boundaries at short notice).
- Infrastructure and investment (water systems, handling facilities, fencing technology) are prerequisites for resilient grazing systems and require long-term thinking that may entail near-term costs and trade-offs.

Recommended actions by responsible party

FARMER

- Define what resilient grazing means for your own farm or croft, rather than applying a generic template, taking into account your specific land, stock and business objectives.
- Introduce or expand rotational or mob grazing to reduce parasite burden and reliance on wormers and other veterinary inputs.
- Trial sward diversification (herbal leys, legumes) where appropriate to improve mineral uptake, immune resilience and parasite control.
- Retain or plant hedges and habitat features to provide shelter, shade and biosecurity benefits (e.g. double fencing to reduce disease spread between neighbouring stock).
- Evaluate virtual fencing technology to access marginal, sensitive or previously unmanageable land, and allow sufficient training time for stock when introducing it or changing boundaries.
- Plan and budget for the infrastructure (water, handling facilities, fencing technology) that resilient grazing systems depend on, recognising this as a long-term investment.
- Ensure appropriate observation practices when adopting new grazing techniques; for instance, closely monitor animal condition, parasite burden and any adverse signs (e.g. hair loss, tick burden) when introducing new grazing systems.

WIDER AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY

- Continue to gather and share case studies and evidence on rotational, mob and diverse-sward grazing systems, including measurable outcomes for parasite burden, input costs and animal performance.
- Support further research into sward diversity, secondary plant compounds and their effects on animal resilience and health.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and farm visits, which were highlighted as key drivers of the practical adoption of new grazing approaches.
- Support trials and feedback loops on virtual fencing technology, including performance limitations (e.g. battery life in winter) so that the technology can be improved and adoption barriers reduced.
- Explore how conservation and biodiversity-focused grazing systems can support premium marketing and product differentiation for farm businesses.
- Consider lobbying for wider approval for virtual fencing aids across assurance schemes.

GOVERNMENTS

- Provide funding support for infrastructure that underpins resilient grazing systems, including water systems, handling facilities and virtual fencing technology.
- Support biosecurity-linked habitat investment, such as hedge planting and double fencing, through agri-environment payment schemes.
- Support long-term land use changes, such as woodland integration and habitat regeneration, with funding structures that account for the short-term production trade-offs involved.
- Fund further research into the risks and management of mixed-species grazing and grazing-based parasite control more broadly.

RUMINANT REVIVAL

- Support farmers in designing rotational, mob or diverse-sward grazing systems suited to their specific farm objectives and constraints.
- Support farmers introducing virtual fencing with practical guidance on animal training periods and system design to reduce stress and unintended incidents.

SUMMARY

The overriding message here is that grazing management is one of the most powerful and underused tools available to farmers, with direct benefits for animal health, input costs, soil health and business resilience. Progress depends on defining resilience at the level of the individual farm, investing in the infrastructure and technology that supports flexible grazing, and being willing to navigate the short-term conflicts and compromises that come with long-term system change.



SECTION 06

Financial sustainability

KEY THEMES

- There is an important distinction between economics (what makes sense in principle) and finance (whether the cash is actually available). A decision can be sound economically, such as buying land for its long-term capital appreciation, and still be the wrong call financially if it ties up cash the business does not have.
- Every business starts from one of three positions: subsidising itself (through unpaid labour, off-farm income or capital), running at a loss or deliberately planning for profit.
- Land and livestock should be thought of as two separate businesses. Farms often merge land ownership and production decisions together, which can obscure how each part of the business is actually performing.
- Renting and buying land both have valid reasons behind them. Buying offers security, ownership, control and capital appreciation; renting offers flexibility, a lower up-front cash commitment and reduced risk. Neither is inherently better; the right choice depends on the business's cash position and objectives.
- All land and labour costs, including machinery, are treated as overheads. Overheads do not increase gradually with small increases in production; they tend to stay flat until a threshold is reached, then step up when a resource (a person, a piece of land) reaches capacity.
- Costs that scale directly with each additional unit of production, such as the interest cost of financing an animal, feed and veterinary treatments, are direct costs rather than overheads.
- Gross product is the total value generated by the business, including retained or unrealised value (such as a calf retained rather than sold), not just cash income or revenue.
- The break-even point is useful to know, but it should not be the target. The real focus should be on how to move beyond break-even into profit.
- There are three practical levers to increase profit: reduce overheads, increase turnover using existing resources rather than adding new ones and increase the gross margin per unit (gross product minus direct costs). Of the three, gross margin per unit was described as the most powerful diagnostic tool because it reveals the underlying economic efficiency of each enterprise.
- Chasing higher output per animal is not automatically profitable. Increasing production per head often raises direct costs (feed, inputs) and can also increase overhead costs, so any gains need to be weighed against the added costs.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR FARMERS

- Treat your land and your livestock (production) as two separate businesses when making decisions, rather than merging land ownership and production together.
- Make a deliberate, evidence-based choice between renting and buying land based on your business's cash flow position and risk appetite, rather than defaulting to tradition or assumptions about capital appreciation.
- Classify all land and labour costs, including machinery, as overheads, and plan for these to change in step increases rather than gradually as the business grows.
- Track direct costs (such as per-animal financing costs, feed and veterinary costs) separately from overheads, since these scale with each additional unit of production.
- Calculate your gross margin per unit (gross product minus direct costs, divided by the number of production units, e.g. per cow, per ewe, per acre) for each enterprise on the farm.
- Use gross margin per unit to compare the economic efficiency of different enterprises within your business.
- Set your sights beyond break-even; use break-even as a reference point, not a target.
- Apply the three profit levers in turn: look for ways to reduce overhead costs, look for ways to increase turnover using your current resources before investing in new ones and prioritise increasing gross margin per unit over simply increasing output per animal.
- Before investing in higher output per animal (e.g. higher weights), check whether the resulting rise in direct costs and potential rise in overheads still leave you better off.
- Include retained or unrealised value (such as breeding stock retained rather than sold) in your assessment of business performance, not just cash income.

Better data, better communication and what farmers can control

A wide variety of topics were covered during the day, leading to this report, but across them, several recurring themes emerged. Producers are managing price and input volatility with limited control over either, and are responding by concentrating on what they can control: cost structure, breeding decisions, grazing management and the data behind them. Better data and better communication came up in every session, whether as on-farm recording that reaches the supply chain, egg counts and growth rates interpreted to be usable, whole-farm carbon data that can inform policy or a national picture of anthelmintic resistance that the industry does not currently have.

Treatment alone is not a long-term strategy for parasite control. Grazing management, sward diversity and nutrition are the main tools for reducing reliance on wormers and other medicines, and the grazing session heard of wormer and product spend falling from around £3,800 to around £300 in a year on one farm. Peer-to-peer learning, farm visits and community were identified in the challenges, mindset and grazing sessions as the most effective means of spreading best practices. On policy, the sessions called for food security, climate and environmental policy to be developed together, informed by industry evidence, and for the genetic base and hefted flocks the sheep sector depends on to be protected in land use decisions.

ONE FARM'S WORMER SPEND

£3,800 → £300

Wormer and product spend in a single year, following a move to rotational and diverse grazing.

NEXT

A follow-up webinar for the wider industry will be held later in the year.

GET IN TOUCH

Thank you to all our speakers,
delegates and the team at
Cairns Farm for making the
Collaboration Day possible.

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