



Centre of
Expertise on
Animal Disease
Outbreaks

Report

Exploring livestock disease control for Lewis and Harris during a visit to the Shetland Isles

26th March 2024

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EPIC_202324_REP_009v3

Key Messages

- Effective biosecurity measures are essential to reduce the risk of disease incursion and transmission in livestock on Lewis and Harris.
- There is a core group that are keen to improve biosecurity on Lewis and Harris.
- Coordination and buy-in from the local council and those involved in importing and keeping livestock is crucial for effective disease control.
- Improved animal health can increase pride in island produce and lead to higher premiums in the marketplace.
- While the three points of entry to Lewis and Harris may be a challenge to controlling disease incursions via animal movements, effective disease control at these sites is achievable.
- Maintaining and building further links with Shetland is important.
- Bringing young enthusiastic people on board will aid the process going forward.

Executive Summary

In February (2024) a group of six stakeholders from Lewis and Harris and a retired vet currently involved with the National Animal Disease Information Service (NADIS), were invited to join a working group to visit Shetland and view the current Shetland Animal Health Scheme (SAHS). The main objective of the visit was to see the scheme in situ and explore possibilities of implementing a process to control sheep scab and other significant diseases in Lewis and Harris.

Following a tour of the facilities and in-depth discussions with relevant SAHS personnel and local farmers, the stakeholders were invited to deliberate on the experience and share their thoughts in a facilitated focus group, the key outcomes of which are highlighted in the key message section.

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Introduction

Effective biosecurity measures are essential to reduce the risk of disease incursion and transmission in livestock. Whilst larger commercial sheep producers routinely adopt robust biosecurity measures, such measures are more difficult to adopt on isolated Scottish islands.

Lewis and Harris is a Scottish island in the Outer Hebrides, around 24 miles (39 km) from the Scottish mainland, predominantly made up of crofting communities. Sheep movements occur within the island and between the island and mainland UK, primarily involving the importation of rams and the transfer of lambs for overwintering on the mainland. Despite the risk for disease incursion posed by these animal movements, disease control or coordinated biosecurity measures on the island are limited. In contrast, the Shetland Isles developed the Shetland Animal Health Scheme (SAHS) which focuses on protecting and enhancing the health of cattle and sheep on Shetland and tackles a wide variety of diseases.

Following an invitation from researchers funded by EPIC, a group of six stakeholders from Lewis and Harris and a retired veterinarian from an Angus practice, currently involved with the National Animal Disease Information Service (NADIS) joined a working group to visit Shetland. The main objective of the visit was to see the implementation of SAHS in situ and explore the possibility of developing a similar scheme to control sheep scab and other significant diseases on Lewis and Harris.

The scheme provides a screening service for a range of specific livestock diseases including sheep scab, Maedi Visna (MV), Caseous lymphadenitis (CLA), Johne's disease, Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD), and Ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma (OPE), at the point of entry into Shetland. On-farm monitoring of herds and flocks further ensures the validity of the diagnostics conducted on entry. The scheme is provided as a service for the agricultural community at large and makes no charge nor levy for testing of imported stock. By testing imported livestock for disease, the principle aim of SAHS is to sustain the high health status of Shetland's sheep and cattle. SAHS provides information on disease occurrence which can then be acted upon in an appropriate manner by the farmer after consultation with their veterinary surgeon. The Shetland Livestock Management Group (SLMG) has recently set up a plunge dipper at the mart facility to enable the treatment of incoming sheep to reduce the chances of sheep scab being introduced to Shetland. Last year, blood testing of rams imported to Shetland confirmed that 10% were positive for sheep scab. With the increasing prevalence of sheep scab mites resistant to injectable treatments, dipping sheep is the most effective method to ensure Shetland remains free of sheep scab. Sheep imported to Shetland are tested and treated by the Shetland Vet Practice at the pier then the owner/importer transports the animals to the community dipping facility at Staney Hill mart before they are transported to the final holding.

The Visit

The group of stakeholders from Lewis and Harris travelled to Lerwick harbour for an initial meeting at the pier where they met Hilary Burgess, Shetland Island Council Veterinary Adviser, who told them about the scheme and how it works. They were shown the infrastructure at the port and talked to the people implementing the SAHS disease control process for livestock entering the island (Figure 1). Members of the visiting group were particularly interested in the livestock containers used to transport animals to Shetland on the ferry. Animals are loaded onto the containers at the port of departure before making the long sea journey to Shetland. This system differs from that used to transport livestock the shorter distance to Lewis and Harris, where all livestock transported to the islands arrive in standard trailers or are consigned to commercial animal carriers. They can arrive via one of three ports servicing the islands. As there are no records kept of animals arriving on the islands, disease control during an outbreak can be challenging.

The group then moved to view the Stanley Hill mart dipping facility to meet people involved in implementing the dipping process and maintaining the facilities. The Shetland stakeholders shared their passion for keeping their animals safe and managing disease control on Shetland. The visitors chatted to farmers using the scheme and learnt how the scheme has developed over the years. They heard how challenges had been overcome and were interested in plans for the future.

Following lunch, the group visited Bigton farm where their host, Aimee Budge, welcomed them to Shetland and to her family's farm Aimee talked about farming on Shetland, embracing SAHS and the benefits of disease control to the Shetland islanders (Figure 2).

That evening at dinner, the group were joined by Hilary Burgess and several Shetland farmers to continue discussions in a social setting.



Figure 1 Lewis and Harris stakeholders at Lerwick livestock pens



Figure 2 Visit to Bigton farm

The Focus Group

The following morning, a facilitated focus group was held with the Lewis and Harris stakeholders to reflect on the visit, collect take home messages, and plan next steps to build on the momentum the visit had achieved (Figure 3).

Lewis and Harris Stakeholder Reflections

Cooperation on the Shetland Isles

The group were surprised and pleased at how open and willing the islanders were to share their experiences. They clearly wanted the Lewis and Harris stakeholders to succeed in forming their own system. A key element of SAHS is the coordination and support from producers involved in importing livestock to Shetland. The process has been developed over a period of 20 years and enables SAHS to respond to events and to develop further to mitigate potential risks in the future.

The group noticed a great deal of cooperation between the ferry company (North Link), the mart, the local council, the abattoir and the livestock producers. In addition, they were impressed with the system and infrastructure at the port, the livestock containers that enable safe and stress-free transport of the animals on the ferries and the make do attitude of the islanders to getting things done. E.g., *“The dipper may not be the best, but it works”*.

It was noted that unlike the situation on Lewis and Harris, the Shetland Island producers have a history of support from the local council. There is funding in place from the Shetland local authority, who are also backing

the Shetland group and engaging in supporting agriculture on the island.



Figure 3 The focus group

Local support and by-laws

The Shetland Island Health scheme can be enforced due to The Shetland Sheep Scab Order 2003. This by-law makes it a legal requirement for incoming sheep to be assessed and, if necessary, treated by the local veterinary surgeon. Currently, Shetland does not have an order to support dipping, hence farmers need embrace the ethos of the system to protect the island flocks. However, a consultation is in progress that would enable the veterinary surgeon to authorise the Shetland Livestock Management Group (SLMG) as a third party to dip imported sheep.

The veterinary surgeon would continue to check the health of sheep at the pier and have the discretion to make arrangements with the owner regarding testing and isolation requirements for animals which cannot be dipped immediately if required.

It is anticipated that all sheep coming into Shetland will continue to be injected with Cydectin at the pier,

as this has benefits as a quarantine treatment for anthelmintic resistant worms.

Treating livestock for worms then carrying out faecal egg counts ensures the treatment has been effective in reducing the worm burden and therefore lessening resistance to anthelmintic treatments in future.

Pride in the system and stock

The Shetland stakeholders that joined the visiting group were clearly proud of what they have achieved. Not only have they improved animal health and welfare, but they are now building a reputation for producing premium stock. Recognising and valuing the importance of what they have is part of what drives them forward to succeed. Although not all the islanders are on board with the system, and a bit of "*arm twisting*" is still required, the potential introduction of a by-law to further encourage people to dip and treat incoming sheep may well increase uptake in the scheme. The phrase "*do the right thing*" was used repeatedly to describe managing animal health and the reputation of the island's sheep as one flock.

Challenges for Lewis and Harris

Points of entry

The number of entry points onto the islands of Lewis and Harris was initially seen as an insurmountable challenge. On a positive note, it was agreed that, although not as simple as the single point of entry on Shetland, it is still manageable if islanders worked together, as there are only three ports, unlike the multiple entry points to the mainland.

Coordination

On Lewis and Harris, which lacks a supporting order or regulation, preventive treatments and testing for scab and other diseases is voluntary, which represents a challenge for a disease control scheme. Currently, the flocks on Lewis and Harris are managed largely on an individual basis. Occasionally, decisions are taken at the community or township level but rarely, if ever, does the island come together and manage the health of their livestock as a single unit. However, a recent sheep scab

intervention project¹, which involved careful planning and cooperation from the stakeholder group, almost achieved an island-wide approach to scab treatment.

Solutions

Coordination and collaboration

To take forward any island-wide livestock disease control, many stakeholders need to come together to achieve a combined and coordinated process. Crucial to this process is the ability to collect animal movement data from the ferry company that services the islands. Despite a previously negative response to collaboration, it is hoped that another request may meet with a more positive result.

While many crofters work independently, it is common for the same few individuals to attend the ram sales on the mainland. These individuals are often asked to transport animals back to the island for other keepers. By coordinating their movements and agreeing that any rams brought onto the island must be dipped before offloading at their holding, one of the main potential sources of infection could be controlled.

Maintaining the links made with Shetland during this visit was perceived to be a way forward to building lasting relations and collaboration between Shetland and Lewis and Harris, and possibly, in time, other islands.

Young people

It has been recorded that crofters are an aging population. Scottish ministers commissioned Research Resource to carry out a study of the economic conditions of crofting: survey 2019 to 2022. Of the crofters that responded, 42% were over 65. However, the stakeholders from Lewis and Harris have noticed an increase in enthusiasm for crofting amongst the younger generation. The mart has recognised that the youngsters on the islands are keen to get involved in the buying and selling of stock. The enthusiasm of young people to be involved with livestock management is good to see and action could be taken to help promote and support youth activities.

Funding

It was recognised that capital funding will be necessary to take this initiative forward, to enable several of the processes. Initially however, the goal should be to find ways of making the process financially sustainable. This could be achieved by building the reputation of the island flock as disease free and increasing the islands internal markets.

¹ <https://www.thescottishfarmer.co.uk/news/24004193.moredun-institute-unites-islanders-combat-sheep-scab/>

Next Steps

The stakeholders from Lewis and Harris were enthused by their experience on Shetland and determined to work towards achieving a similar scheme. By maintaining links with contacts made in Shetland, building on the success of the scab project, and incorporating members of the sheep producers' group, they are hopeful that before long they will have a similar process working successfully on their island.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the people of Shetland for willingly sharing their knowledge and experiences and the stakeholders of Lewis and Harris for their interest and enthusiasm in the Shetland Animal Health Scheme.

This work is funded by the Rural & Environment Science & Analytical Services Division of the Scottish Government and EPIC.