

## Decision Support Tools and information for biosecurity in the sheep sector; an island perspective

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### Objective

To gather crofters' reflections on DSTs and disease areas for future island/township collaborations.

### Overview

- Decision support tools (DSTs) that help sheep keepers manage and treat disease need to be specific, not only in terms of the disease being managed, but also for the geographical setting and farming practices.
- Engaging with end users as soon as possible, especially during the development phase, is crucial if farmer engagement with, and use of, DSTs is to be increased.

### Major Findings

Six workshops were held across Lewis and Harris to engage with crofters and gather participants' reflections on decision support tools (DSTs) and general disease control advice/information. These were the main findings:

- Very few livestock keepers in Lewis and Harris make use of the DSTs available to inform treatment and control of sheep disease.
- Most participants identified that initially 'they were unaware of even the high-profile tools' but recognised that DSTs would be useful for specific control measures.
- There was enthusiasm for a DST that could advise on tasks linked to a calendar, providing timely notifications for recommended measures and treatments. Implementation of these measures might be in response to climatic conditions and driven by environmental concerns.
- Participants noted that it is important for DSTs to be designed with the end users in mind, or better co- developed with the end users themselves.



- Advice and information need to be delivered in a concise and clear way and tailored to the specific geographical context.
- Consideration needs to be paid when highlighting a range of options as they can be interpreted differently and may not always be viewed as helpful when attempting to work collaboratively within, and between, communities.
- It was suggested bespoke and crofting-friendly training would be welcomed, particularly if accessible on the island without travelling to the mainland.
- There is a lack of up-to-date crofter knowledge and education on other diseases and best-practice disease management. For instance, some of the diseases listed in the figure below had to be introduced to a number of participants, indicating knowledge gaps that can be addressed with good-quality targeted messaging, resources and tools.
- Crofters want to use tools to help make consistent decisions for disease treatments.

## Relevance to Policy

This research identifies that DSTs are useful but need to be developed with specific end users in mind, advice being targeted and specific. DSTs could be useful to optimise management of animal disease, enhancing a more sustainable livestock production, reducing environmental impact and minimising carbon footprint.

DST tools, if developed with end-users could help with engagement and participation in particular schemes, help them find the appropriate sources of funding or information, as well as improving actions. For example, with policies such as the Preparing for Sustainable Farming initiative an easy-to-find and use DST that leads applicants to the correct areas of the scheme and supplies them with a range of materials/resources on what is required and when may help uptake.

## Important Assumptions and Limitations

These reflections on the use of DSTs refer to remote crofting communities operating with shared resources where the ability to work collaboratively is crucial. Their unique geographical context situated on an island with remote access to infrastructure, services and facilities is important to take into consideration.

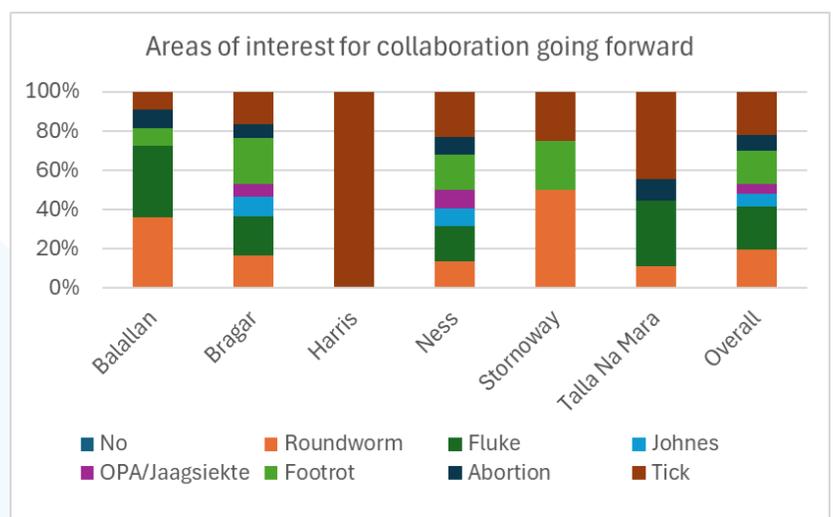


Fig.1 Disease areas that participants from different locations felt were of interest for potential future collaborations.

## Policy Comments/Response

A wide range of end users need be actively involved in the development of advice, recommendations, strategies and DSTs. A more participatory approach would lead to greater uptake by the intended users.

## Links to Existing Publications and Reports

**March 2024.** Decision Support Tools for biosecurity in the sheep sector: Findings from crofter workshops on Lewis and Harris. **Authors:** Claire Hardy<sup>1</sup>, Niamh Mahon<sup>1</sup>, Dave Bartley<sup>2</sup>, Stewart Burgess<sup>2</sup> and Lynsey Melville.<sup>2</sup> **Contact details:** <sup>1</sup>James Hutton Institute, <sup>2</sup>Moredun Research Institute.