

POLICY BRIEF: Second Pan-island meeting: animal disease control, peer-to-peer exchanges and collaboration

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Overview

- The second Pan-island meeting on animal disease control with a focus on Johnes, sheep scab and roundworm, hosted at the JHI 'Hutton Hub', Aberdeen, was well received by the participants.
- Peer-to-peer experiences were an important part of building the collaborative nature of the discussions and the aligned TRUST.
- There was a noted change in the tone of the meeting with island representatives being more open to share observations, especially around issues and challenges that have been encountered over the previous year, and more willing to take learnings back to their islands in order to effect positive change.
- The group was aware that it was a safe, non-judgemental place, and island representatives were coming together to discuss solutions. Several people were seen to be coming to the discussions with many 'hats' on, and, where positions might have formed biases, these were 'left at the door' to allow people to share freely and 'trust' the environment.

Objectives

- The overall aim of this research is to co-design long-lasting and sustainable farm animal (sheep and cattle) disease control/management strategies for the Scottish islands with island-based animal keepers.
- The objective of this meeting was to bring representatives from the three island groups (Lewis and Harris, Orkney, and Shetland) together through the collective framework of the Pan-island Network, in a 'neutral' space to discuss progress, challenges, and changes over the past year, share knowledge and information, and plan future network activities.

Major Findings

- All island representatives shared challenges openly and engaged with discussions around potential solutions.
- The sharing of 'lived' experiences was inspiring and prompted rich, in-depth discussions e.g., around practices that were working well, for example, the new dipping byelaw adopted in Shetland.
- The lack of lairage around ports continues to be a problem. For instance, in Aberdeen postponed/cancelled sailings mean emergency holdings need to be sourced and there was a feeling that animals could be transported in batches if lairage could be made available. For Lewis and Harris, a similar situation was seen regularly at Stornoway and other ports.
- The importance of the 'Stockman eye' was recognized, which is local knowledge that can be passed on and taught, and which requires sustained mentoring of youngsters by experienced stock people.

- Invited expert speakers Tim Geraghty and Susan Duthie gave presentations on Johne's disease. Many of the islanders commented that this had been '*super useful and informative*'. The talks prompted a discussion around symptoms, diagnostic testing and how to manage the disease.
- There was discussion around how information on animal disease control could be provided. Participants identified podcasts as a useful format for knowledge exchange, especially if backed by local regional experience. YouTube/FAS, peer-to-peer sessions, vet events, young farmer groups, templates, podcasts, monitor farms, online talks, animations and virtual experiences were also mentioned as useful.
- Ongoing and practical bite size training on diagnostics and monitoring tools and how parasite disease patterns are changing were discussed as well as developing simple, multi-format on-farm record keeping tools to help farmers/crofter/small holders to translate observational knowledge ('Stockman eye') into usable records.
- Island participants identified a loss of expertise for specific activities. For example, people that had been trained for OPA scanning had left the islands. This drain of various fields of expertise was identified as a key island issue that impacted sectors beyond agriculture.
- The involvement of youth groups in sharing experiences, activities and training, was highlighted as important for all islands. There is the potential for inter-island youth exchanges/events to be explored.
- The value of meeting face to face was acknowledged. There was recognition that the interaction during the downtime sessions was important to the cohesion of the group.
- In Orkney, there is less focus on animal disease control as a whole island issue requiring concerted and coordinated effort. Challenges identified included: lack of local Council funding; loss of the link with Biobest Laboratories Ltd, who provided staffing for the HiHealth Cattle Scheme, and the lack of an island-based individual responsible to drive local engagement. Although Biobest ceased trading in February 2026, resulting in the closure of the HiHealth cattle scheme, SAC are now looking to take this on, providing continuity for the Orkney farmers.
- The future of the Inter-island legacy was discussed. The group explored different options and agreed that online expert talks on animal disease would be welcomed. Islanders offered to identify venues on their respective islands where people could gather and join these events collectively. James Hutton Institute and Moredun staff would identify and invite expert speakers. An in-person event will also be hosted in Edinburgh, at the Moredun Research Institute, in February 2027.
- During 2025, SAC and the Shetlands Vets practice worked together to develop a tailored whole farm plan for use by the islands' crofters. Through the pan-island network, the Shetland group offered to share this plan for use by the other island groups, and Lewis & Harris have now taken this on to be tailored for their own crofters and to be rolled out with assistance from the local vet and the new Scottish Government-funded animal health and welfare project officer during 2026.

Relevance to Policy

This research is directly related to the **Scottish Government's Livestock health and welfare strategy (2025 to 2030)**.

It also has links with the **Scottish Government National Islands Plan** – ensuring island-based livelihoods, creating new business opportunities around traditional industries on the islands, and engaging with the need to include younger generations of islanders in conversations about island futures.

Intra- and Inter-island collaborations

- Orkney needs funding for an island-based coordinator that facilitates collective engagement for animal disease control.
- Continued opportunities for islanders to come together and share their experiences around animal disease control need to be funded and promoted.
- Support and funding are required to host online and in-person events that encourage the sharing of experiences in animal disease control and collaboration within the pan-island network.

Island infrastructure

- Lairage at all ports (including both mainland and island ports) is needed to accommodate postponed or cancelled sailings and to facilitate testing and treatment of animals imported to the islands. The lack of suitable lairage can significantly impact animal welfare when sailings are cancelled at short notice.

Supporting young islanders

- Funding could be provided to promote activities for the youth groups on the islands, e.g. help in setting up young farmer/crofter groups. There is the potential for inter-island youth exchanges/events that could be explored in the future.
- Mentoring of youngsters on the islands needs to be promoted to pass on practical skills around how to handle livestock, assess animal weight, conduct body condition scoring, etc.

Training and skills

- Training for expert skills needs to be made more accessible to islanders. Additionally, a process for 'sharing' skilled experts between islands could be promoted or facilitated. Key skills required include conducting and interpreting FECs, correctly administering drench for new animals entering smallholdings/crofting, implementing equipment checks and calibration, and implementing SCOPS guidance across different farm types.
- An accessible framework for animal health support that is suitable for different systems (smallholders, crofters, larger farms) could be developed. The framework could include a registry of free or paid training, including optional vet led discussion sessions.

Important Assumptions and Limitations

There was limited engagement from Orkney this time. This could be due in part to the recent loss of Biobest as a key organiser/facilitator of coordinated animal health activities on the island.

The members of the Pan-Island network, while some of the key representatives and 'agents of change' on the islands, are still only a very small proportion of the total number of animal keepers on the three island groups.