

## **Adapting the breeding plan to prepare for the future**

**By Dr Amey Brassington**

Farmers involved in AHDB's Challenge Sheep project have proved that consistently using EID data to identify and remove underperforming ewes from their flock is one way to improve overall performance and help make sheep production more profitable, sustainable and viable. The project set out to examine best practice for the management of replacement ewes and participants have been using EID to record regular weights and condition scores of both ewes and lambs.

Pete Webster, who farms at Matson Ground near Windemere, has radically changed his breeding policy since joining the project in 2017. With full buy-in from his stockwoman, Joanne Bentham, he has switched from a traditional stratified system on his organic upland unit in Cumbria and has introduced a number of composite breeds, in anticipation of the decline in farm support payments. Pete has a contract farming arrangement for 1,000 acres of land which rises to 850-feet above sea-level, commercially managed alongside a Higher-Level Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Pete is the first to admit that his new sheep breeding policy will not suit all farms. A shift in mindset has been needed to see the benefits in which the changes can bring. Many traditional hill and upland units successfully use standard native breeds to produce lambs, but he didn't feel it was working well at Matson Ground.

The 2017 figures from the organic holding highlighted significant room for improvement within the 800-ewe flock, which previously comprised two thirds Swaledales and the remainder North of England Mules. Over the past three years, Pete has aimed to produce a closed flock of white-faced ewes, bred to perform outdoors off grass, with an average mature weight of 60-65kg. Currently, maternal sires at Matson Ground include the Bluefaced Leicester/Texel, the Highlander and Logie composites.

Scanning and weaned lamb targets are 175% and 160% respectively. Pete says: "Aiming for a higher scanning percentage would lead to unwanted triplets and the need for additional concentrates. As an organic producer, concentrate feed is nearly double the price, compared with the standard." Lambing starts in mid-April, all outdoors, and despite the variety of breeds that have been utilised, ewe condition scores have already lifted by half a condition score and their lambs have considerably higher growth rates. Lambs are sold as stores or breeding ewe lambs by the end of August. Store lambs are all sold to one finisher as a single batch on one day, averaging 34-35kgs.

"Being involved in the Challenge Sheep project made me scrutinise flock performance," commented Pete. "It became apparent that putting condition onto ewes and lambs was very costly with the breeds we were working with. I needed a sheep to work for me, not me work for it."

When looking at ewe longevity, Pete found they were culling too many ewes for being too thin and having poor condition scores. “If we didn’t take the decision to cull these ewes at tupping we would pay for it later in the winter and through to spring.” Low condition ewes were scanning lower and weaning lighter lambs, as well as needing additional concentrates and veterinary treatments.

Along with the other Challenge Sheep farmers, Pete has been using the data collected at specific time points throughout the year to inform management decisions.

Managing shearlings and older ewes in separate groups right through to weaning, ensuring the best grass is available for them, can help keep ewes in good condition throughout lactation and improve their longevity.

Things to consider when making culling decisions:

<b>Factor to consider</b>	<b>Decisions made at Matson Ground</b>
Ewe age	Currently aiming for four productive cycles, but ideally will be aiming for five cycles with their new genetics.
BCS and weights	Regaining sufficient condition after weaning to achieve target BCS and weight by tupping is important for productivity. Pete aims for BCS of three throughout the season and a mature body weight of 60-65kg by the time a ewe lambs down with her second crop. Ewes that constantly perform below where their weight should be will drop to the ‘B’ flock and may even be culled if other factors are also in play.
Barren	Historically barren ewes are likely to be unproductive. At scanning, empty ewes other than shearlings are culled.
Mastitis	Ewes are checked at shearing and pre-tupping. Ewes are not kept if mastitis is present.
Lambing difficulties	Tups are selected for ease of lambing and so lambing difficulties are few and far between. Culling takes place for all prolapse ewes and any extremely difficult births that have resulted in tissue damage.
Feet and teeth	Years of selection for sound feet and teeth, culling anything that needs repeated foot treatment or have poor teeth alignment. Ewes who need treating for foot issues more than twice will be dropped to the ‘B’ flock or culled depending on what the issue is. Foot health culling can take place at any time of the year.
Mothering ability and lactation	Poor lactation can be monitored through lamb growth rates. Inability to rear lambs without one being taken off will result in dropping to the ‘B’ flock or ultimately culling.

	Poor mothering ability and detail on the problem will be recorded against the ewe's tag number. Depending on the issue the ewe may be dropped to the 'B' flock or culled.
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Previously, culling rates have been high at Matson Ground, but with the changes Pete has put in place, replacement rates have reduced from 25% to 20% over the past three years. It is worth interrogating culling and mortality records in combination to see if trends are developing or if there are common causes that could be avoided. When preparing for the breeding season, all ewes, regardless of age, should be assessed for suitability as breeding ewes.

“We are constantly reviewing our system and monitoring as to where we need to make changes to remain commercially profitable. We are currently entering a period of the greatest amount of unknown that farming has faced for decades. We need to remain a profitable system which can survive without support payments. It's not the strongest that survive nor the most intelligent, but the ones that adapt best to change. We need to be survivors and react to change - profit will follow suit,” Pete concludes.