



**Farm  
Advisory  
Service**

## Case study

# One-to-one mentoring for a new entrant to farming

Support provided by the Farm Advisory Service: subsidised funding for one-to-one consultancy time with a personal mentor



Name & business: **Billy Matheson, The Croft**

For many years, Billy Matheson worked on offshore oil rigs as an engineer. Weary of the work and keen to try something new, Billy decided to move back home to the Isle of Lewis and try his hand at crofting. New to the industry and in need of animals and advice, Billy sought the help of Paul Rowlston, a local livestock farmer, to be his mentor through FAS.

Now managing a small sheep croft, Billy reflects on his mentoring experience and what he got out of it.

### How did you get started in crofting?

'I knew I wanted to do something different, but I didn't really start off with the intention of wanting sheep. I had bought a croft and knew I wanted to draw on the experience of others to grow my business, so I went with the most popular business type for the area I am in – which is sheep keeping.

'I only have 10 ewes now, but the goal is to grow the flock over the next few years.

'Animal welfare is very important to me. I didn't want to start off with too many animals without knowing how to care for them properly, so have started small.'

### How did you find your mentor?

'Through a neighbouring crofter. He suggested I ask Paul to be my mentor as he wouldn't mind answering my questions.

'I was interested in Hebridean sheep in particular and Paul is well known on the island for being very experienced with that breed.'

### How did you find the process of applying for mentoring?

'Very easy. The [application] forms are all online. You just download it and fill it out. There's nothing to it.'

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### What did your mentor help you with?

'I honestly think he did over and above what is required. He helped me with absolutely everything. I really can't thank him enough. He broke things down like nutrition and body scoring – so I would know how to categorise the sheep and judge if they're healthy.

'He helped me with practical skills like how to check teeth, eyes and the general physical condition of the sheep. He showed me how to



trim the hooves and do drenching, which involves administering medicine to protect against things like liver fluke, ticks – which we get a lot of in the Hebrides – and worming.

‘He really covered all aspects of animal husbandry. I even learned how to put a splint on a broken leg.’

### **How often did you meet up with your mentor?**

‘We mixed and matched depending on what we were doing. Sometimes I went to his farm and sometimes he came to the croft.’

‘Paul has a proper shearing stand so, when we were shearing, I went to his farm to learn. I think I ended up almost shearing myself by the end of the day!’

‘I think he spent roughly five full days with me in total. You’re allocated four full days with your mentor, but Paul was always happy to help and definitely went over the allotted time. If I needed help or advice with something, it was great knowing I could just ring him or if he had time, he would come to see me.’



I know I’ll be prepared to deal with whatever problems arise.



### **What benefits do you anticipate for your business as a result of mentoring?**

‘Longevity, I think. It has enabled me to forward plan. Buying sheep is easy – anyone can do it – but without the knowledge of how to care for them properly, the business won’t last. It [mentoring] gives you a foundation to build from, to form a proper business plan.’

‘I’m not going to be put off now. Having sheep doesn’t scare me because I know I’ll be prepared to deal with whatever problems arise.’

‘Paul knows how to run a successful business. He doesn’t keep livestock for fun. It’s his livelihood so learning from him means I know what I need to do to be successful. That’s the ideal he’s instilled in me.’



I would make it compulsory to have mentoring.



### **Would you recommend mentoring to other farmers?**

‘Yes, absolutely. I would make it compulsory to have mentoring. In my opinion, people shouldn’t be allowed to keep livestock without proper training.’

‘But even if you don’t have animals, if you’re doing some kind of crop farming – I couldn’t not recommend it. Why would you say ‘no’ to 4 days of free learning with someone who has knowledge and experience in the area you want to work in? It’s a no-brainer.’

### **Would you recommend FAS support services to other farmers?**

‘Yes, definitely. All the people I’ve come into contact with [from FAS] have been great.’

‘I would encourage others to apply to the scheme.’

‘The information on the website is a good first point-of-call.’