

New Entrants to Farming Programme



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Case Study Ellie May Bovill



Ellie May likes to be hands on with her sheep

“Helping out local, more experienced, farmers is a great way to gain practical knowledge and experience”

“Forest Enterprise Scotland have been very supportive”

Forest Enterprise Scotland’s release of land gives New Entrants a start in farming

A move to the country fuels a burning desire to farm

With her obvious love for the industry, it is a surprise to find that, unlike most new entrants to farming, Ellie May Bovill does not come from a farming family. It wasn’t until her parents moved to a tiny rural hamlet on the shores of Loch Awe in North Argyll that the passion for livestock was ignited.

Living in an area dominated by forestry and farming, a young Ellie May began to chat to local farmers and offering help which was gladly received. “The local farmers have been great. They have been more than happy to share their experiences with me and have encouraged me to start out on my own”

“All through High School I knew I wanted to work with animals. I thought about becoming a vet but the qualifications are really tough, so having already been involved in working with my local farming community, agriculture seemed

like an obvious choice to me” said Ellie May.

Despite the fact that there seemed to be little opportunity for someone like her to get her own land and livestock, on leaving school Ellie May looked to the local college to give her access to agriculture. “To start with all I could find was a course in horticulture so I signed up for that” commented Ellie May “and a year later I completed an NC in horticulture”. However the college in Oban began to offer HNC in Agriculture and Ellie May seized the opportunity to study the subject she was so keen to pursue.

Whilst studying Ellie May was taking work wherever she could find it in local hotels and restaurants that could work round her college timetable. During this time Ellie May got word of some land that may be available for rent and she approached the owner who agreed to lease her the grazing on his fields.

The Ups and Downs of Starting Out

With the lease newly signed Ellie May purchased some sheep from a couple of local farmers. There were 12 Cheviot and 6 Shetland ewes. “I chose the Shetland breed because they were reputed to be hardy and would stand up to the sometimes harsh climate in this part of the world and I had worked with them whilst helping out the seller” said Ellie May “ however I did not take into account that this lot had been a bit ‘spoilt’ and were not quite as hardy as I thought. The Cheviots turned out to be better suited to the conditions”.

It was a difficult first winter for Ellie May with poor weather and losing a number of Shetlands despite extra feeding. The land was 10 miles from where Ellie May lived and this added to costs as well with often difficult travel conditions on untreated roads. On top of all this it became clear that Ellie May and the landlord had differing expectations making her question if this had been a good move.

All through these testing times Ellie May never doubted that she wanted to be a farmer. “The local farmers were a great help at this time with advice on feeding, handling etc.” said Ellie May “and more importantly the reassurance that I was doing nothing wrong - that all farms have tough times”

A Light on the Horizon

Then Ellie May spotted an advert by Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) with pockets of land for lease around Argyll and she was delighted to see there was an area just yards from her home. The land was advertised as a five year short limited duration tenancy. Which Ellie May applied for and was notified she was the favoured applicant.

This meant Ellie May had sixty acres of rough grazing with some woodland areas offering good shelter for her burgeoning flock and a timescale that allowed her to make plans.

So Ellie May with her Cheviots and remaining Shetlands moved onto the newly leased land and she started planning the expansion of her flock.



Ellie May set about improving the land which consisted of two distinct areas. One was a relatively flat field running from the public road down to the shores of Loch Awe and the other was on the other side of the road with a more hilly and wooded aspect. The lower area was covered in rushes with a tendency to be boggy. The landlord improved the fencing making it stock proof and advised on other improvements. Ellie May organised a local contractor to come in and mow the rushes and FES has given her advice on how to improve the drainage.

Planning for the Future

After a difficult first winter things were finally looking up for Ellie May. She purchased some Scottish Mules and Blackface cast ewes to join her Cheviots and remaining Shetlands.

Although Ellie May intends to send some store lambs to market she is also looking to finish and sell direct to retailers and caterers. As she already works in the catering industry Ellie May has used her contacts to build up a small client list she can sell direct to. As part of this plan Ellie May has purchased five Suffolk lambs in the spring and has fattened them up over the summer. They have already been bought by local caterers. “Restaurants can use ‘local produce’ as a selling point” said Ellie May “ It can benefit both sides - the chef gets to source local meat and I get a bit more than I would going to market”.



Ellie May and her sheep dog Maude

A major barrier in pursuing a direct selling business model is the lack of a local abattoir. The two closest are Isle of Mull which is 45 miles but includes a costly ferry journey or Stirling with no ferry but at 110 miles which also incurs significant costs. "I can still make some profit but obviously the transport costs make a significant impact on the amount of money I can make" says Ellie May "it is however, much more satisfying to see my own lamb served in a local restaurant than simply taking them to market".

Lessons Learnt

Now her first year is complete Ellie May can look back and reflect on the choices she has made and decide what has worked for her and what was not the best path to follow.

"It is important not to assume that just because a breed has the potential to be hardy means that it is" said Ellie May "you need to look at where they have been bred. The Shetlands I bought had been reared on very good grazing with lots of shelter and ample feeding which meant they were unable to cope when put on to a rough hill grazing situation. The Cheviots on the other hand coped very well with the conditions and will definitely be kept as part of my breeding stock".

When Ellie May moved onto the FES land she also introduced Scottish Blackface, Mules and Suffolks to the flock and has decided she will not continue with the Suffolk. "The meat is very good quality" she said "however they are not hardy and are very good at escaping which is a real pain to deal with".

Another vital consideration with the different breeds has been handleability. This is particularly important for small solo enterprises like Ellie May's "I have found the Shetlands difficult to handle. They are flighty making them difficult to gather" she said "the Scottish Mule on the other hand can be gathered with a bucket of feed and can be handled fairly easily. The Blackface and the Cheviots are a bit more reticent but once they know you they can also be enticed with the feed bucket as well "

One of the most useful acquisitions has been Maude the sheep dog. Ellie May was given her by a school friend whose family run a local estate. She came fully trained and means Ellie May can gather her sheep by herself without having to ask for help. "She really has been a godsend" said Ellie May "I don't need to wait until someone is available to help"

Now settled on the FES land Ellie May realises the importance of making sure a prospective landlord fully understands what your plans are. "Don't be afraid to ask questions and be very clear about what you are planning" she says "I now realise the difference having a landlord as knowledgeable as FES can make to the setting out on a career in farming".

Ellie May's Top Tips

1. Good communications are essential in the Tenant / Landlord relationship. Make sure your intentions are clear and that you understand what the landlord expects from you.
2. Don't be afraid to ask. Farmers are usually happy to share their experiences and an offer to help can give you valuable experience.
3. Don't beat yourself up if something doesn't go to plan! Mistakes are how you learn and what suits one farmer may not work for another



Forest Enterprise Scotland

The Landlords Perspective

Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) is an agency of Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and manages the National Forest Estate (NFE). FES is a member of the Farming Opportunities for New Entrants (FONE) working group, set up by the Scottish Government with the aim of maximising the amount of publicly owned land used to help the farmers of the future. FES recognises that New Entrants drive innovation and best practice, improve efficiencies, contribute towards the economic vitality of the sector and generally are vital for the future of the industry in Scotland. FES has identified that it is well-placed to offer short-term vacant land opportunities on the NFE, where this fits with the organisations wider objectives.

These units are areas of land which generally have no house or buildings. They tend to be grazing land and the application system is weighted favourably towards New Entrants. FES uses a transparent scoring system that looks at a number of criteria including New Entrant status. However, in some cases New Entrants may not be able to deliver the desired outcomes therefore the scoring matrix does not exclude more established farmers. For instance, a land parcel may need to be grazed



with cattle for only a few months in late summer to meet environmental objectives – it would be unusual for New Entrants to have other land to move the cattle on to and many New Entrants do start out with sheep.

FES has no strict definition as to the size and type of these units and this will vary depending on the resources available. The basic remit is to provide a business opportunity to a new entrant while meeting wider land management objectives that FES may have.

Most starter units are let on Short Limited Duration Tenancies (SLDT's) of 5 years. There are occasions where the tenure is shorter due to medium term objectives for the land, or indeed longer where FES has identified that agricultural use is a long term objective.

FES has many decades of experience as a landlord to tenant farmers. They want to show how forestry and agriculture can complement each other in rural Scotland and that is one reason why they are pro-active in creating a good working relationship with their tenant farmers.

New Entrants to Farming “get with the” Programme

There is a network of new entrants across the country at various stages of developing their businesses. You can join in:

- www.facebook.com/NewEntrants
- www.fas.scot/new-entrants/
- Regional workshops

For more info contact Kirsten Williams, Consultant, SAC Consulting, Clifton Road, Turriff, 01888 563333, Kirsten.Williams@sac.co.uk

There are useful free resources on the website too:

- Case studies—learning from the experiences of other new entrants.
- Guidance notes—benefit from advice tailored to assist new entrants to farming.
- Also see www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Agriculture/NewEntrantsToFarming