

Case study

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

Support provided by FAS: daily honorarium for one-to-one consultancy time with a farming mentee



Name & business: **Paul Rowlston, Livestock Farm**

Paul Rowlston is a livestock farmer with over 13 years' experience. He specialises in breeding, rearing and showing cattle and sheep. Well known for his practical experience and knowledge, Paul was approached by a new crofter in his community who was looking for advice and practical support. Keen to help, but with limited time and resources – Paul applied for 'mentor' status via FAS to cover his time while providing support to new business owner, Billy Matheson.

Here, Paul shares his thoughts on being an FAS mentor.

How did you become a mentor?

'The first person I mentored worked at the local Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). He had wanted help with keeping livestock and asked if I would be interested in becoming a mentor through FAS.'

'He also recommended me to Billy Matheson, my second mentee, who was looking to buy sheep.'

What tasks did you help Billy with?

'When caring for sheep, the practical tasks are seasonal, so I could only show him things at certain times. I think the best way to learn is to have a go so I let him practise different things.'

'One time Billy came over to the farm to help me with shearing. He'd never done it before and couldn't walk straight by the end of the day. It's a full day of shearing a whole flock, so it's quite tiring.'

'Another time, I went over to his croft to carry out a home visit before delivering the sheep he'd bought. I wanted to check the land and fences were adequate and ended up helping him design a new pen.'

'I also showed him how we do drenching, which is when we give the sheep medicine for things like worming. It has to be administered through the mouth so it's a hands-on task. Then, in the afternoon, we did hoof trimming.'

'I think he found it all useful, but the shearing day nearly killed him. It was a real eye-opener.'

Did you need any special qualifications to receive 'mentor' status from FAS?

'You don't need formal qualifications. All you need is experience. Everyone makes mistakes, so if you've done something before, you can tell people who are new to it what to be wary of.'

'Most of the time, people just want someone they can check with. It gives them the confidence to get on with it.'

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How long did it take to process your application for mentor status?

‘Not very long. I was already on the system from the first mentorship, but in terms of applying, it doesn’t take very long. It’s all very quick and simple.’

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What does mentoring involve?

‘You just answer questions and then let them have a go.’

‘The way I see it, I’d be doing the same work, whether they’re there or not. It’s nice to have the help. I see it as free labour.’

Do you think mentoring is beneficial to new farmers?

‘It was for mine, very much so. Neither of them had had animals before. The first guy had worked in a city job so was completely new to farming and the countryside. It was all completely alien to him.’

How did you structure your time with Billy?

‘We structured it around day-to-day routines. There’s no restrictions on how you manage your time, so we just did whatever was right for the season and if we had to wait a month or two to practise something, then we waited.’

‘I’d normally give Billy a week’s notice – “I’m doing this on this day. Do you want to come over and have a go at it?”

‘I tried to fit it in with my schedule.’

Do you feel you got anything out of the experience professionally or personally?

‘Well, on a personal level – I’ve made two good friends. And, professionally, it’s meant I’ve been able to sell some sheep.’

‘It’s also given me confidence that I’m doing things right. If you show someone how to do something and they do it, and their animals don’t die, you must be doing something right.’

‘Obviously, there’s also the honorarium too – which covers me for my time. And that’s more than adequate per hour.’

Would you mentor again if you had the opportunity?

‘Yes, I don’t have any more lined up right now, but I would definitely be interested in doing it again in the future.’

What advice would you give to someone interested in applying to become a mentor?

‘I’d tell them to sign up for it and not to be scared. There’s no cost involved for them.’

‘It’s 4 days of learning and training, but you’re not committed to a timescale so there’s no pressure.’

‘You can structure it in a way that works for both parties so that it’s beneficial to everyone.’

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