



Lewis and Harris Sheep Producers Association – Options for the continuation of sheep scab control

March 2025

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Introduction

Background to Lewis and Harris Sheep Producers Association (LHSPA)

LHSPA was formed in 1998 with the following aims and objectives:

- Produce premium quality stock to add value to livestock
- Explore relevant new husbandry techniques to improve sheep management
- Exploit the benefits of group marketing and purchasing
- Promote the training and development of producers, assess training needs and arrange appropriate courses and training

The membership currently sits at 307 sheep producers and is open to anyone interested in furthering the aims and objectives of the group. Annual membership is currently £15 and is set at each Annual General Meeting. All members joining the group must accept the terms of this Constitution (Annex 1) and any Bylaws published from time to time by the group.

The affairs of the group are conducted by a Management Committee which consists of Officers of the group plus seven further committee members.

During the last 25 years the focus of the group has largely been targeted at ensuring that a sheep pregnancy scanning service has been available to members. Previously it had been problematic for crofters to secure the services of a sheep scanner due to the low numbers of stock belonging to individual crofters and the remote location of the Western Isles. In this period the LHSPA has managed to secure the services of a sheep scanner by coordinating crofters to batch numbers of sheep into cost effective scanning days, collecting payments from crofters and liaising with and paying the scanner. This coordination task has largely been undertaken by the LHSPA Secretary.

The Association also organises social events (stockjudging), educational talks (with vets/experts etc) and training (shearing/sheep dressing etc).

Background to the Lewis and Harris sheep scab pilot control project

Scientists at the Moredun Research Institute (MRI) have led an initiative on Lewis and Harris to tackle sheep scab. The Project Team, funded by the Scottish Government, has worked closely with the Lewis and Harris Sheep Producers Association and local crofters to co-design methods for sustainable, best practice control of sheep scab on the islands.

MRI's ELISA sheep scab blood test was offered during pregnancy scanning in February 2023. Local vets collected 1,260 blood samples (12 sheep per flock) for sheep scab blood testing, with 105 crofters participating. For those flocks that tested positive, the Project Team provided treatment advice and covered reasonable treatment costs to ensure that animals were treated in a timely and coordinated manner. In this case, the Macrocytic Lactone (ML) injectable treatment, Cydectin LA 2% (Moxidectin) was used as it was too close to lambing for dipping in Organophosphate (OP).

Due to the high degree of connectivity between properties and the use of common grazing, it became apparent that a broader control strategy was required to achieve lasting control of scab on Lewis and Harris. This resulted in a far more ambitious plan for an island-wide plunge-dipping campaign. The expansion of the proposed dipping campaign to cover flocks across Lewis and Harris was instigated by

the LHSPA and gathered huge interest from crofters. The scheme was opened to all crofters, offering support with the gathering of the animals and access to a mobile dipping contractor. This was completed in the autumn of 2023 for 28,500 sheep and again in the autumn of 2024 for 29,807 sheep.

This initiative was coordinated locally on the ground by the LHSPA Secretary utilising the experience gained in coordinating the pregnancy scanning scheme. The team from MRI noted the high degree of professionalism of the LHSPA approach.

Supported stages of the dipping operation in the sheep scab pilot project

The pilot project has offered significant support to crofters in the costs and logistics of the sheep scab dipping operation. The main cost that crofters have had to cover has been that of the dipping chemical @50p/head (50p in 2023 and 80p in 2024) collected through the LHSPA. The LHSPA has also contributed significant volunteer time to the coordination effort estimated to be 50 days work. Due to the time lag since dipping operations last took place and the desire to ensure as high an uptake as possible the pilot project made a significant contribution in a number of areas. These included payment for -

- sheep gathering workers in some areas
- transportation of sheep to collective dipping points as and when required
- hire and management of mobile yards to accompany the sheep dipping unit
- management and delivery of fresh water/removal of spent sheep dip at each dip stop
- hire of the main contractor for the mobile dipping service
- provision of injectable ML treatments for those who could not access dipping services

These additional services indicate that the true cost per sheep for the pilot project was approximately £4/5/head (minus coordination). The LHSPA has identified that a number of these costs that while understandable to get the project “off the ground” in the pilot phase, cannot be borne by any future project. They do not wish the price per head to be so expensive for crofters to then cease dipping and in turn let sheep scab again become an issue.

Sheep gathering and transportation will in future need to be covered by crofters in each sheep dipping station. The pilot project has helped crofters re-engage with “neighbouring” to help each other gather and this is likely to be accepted. MRI has worked closely with each crofting township to ensure they have up-to-date licenses for the disposal of spent sheep dip. The future costs that need to constitute the £/head price will be -

- sheep dip (OP) concentrate
- provision of clean water and removal and safe disposal of spent sheep dip (at licensed sites)
- use of mobile yards (hired or owned)
- use of a mobile dipper (contractor full service/ owned unit - contracted)

LHSPA believe that a cost of £2.50/3/head is at an acceptable top end level and one where they do not anticipate a significant drop off in uptake from crofters.

Opportunity

The identification of the presence of sheep scab in the Lewis and Harris sheep flock led to an all-island sheep dipping programme in 2023 and 2024 coordinated between LHSPA and MRI. This programme

proved to be well coordinated, well received and successful in dipping large numbers of island sheep and enhanced the control of sheep scab. This project is now seeking a route to self-finance to continue this activity.

LHSPA now has the opportunity of potential grant support to purchase its own mobile sheep dipper, which potentially could be very useful to the Association in ensuring that the positive impacts of the 2023 and 2024 treatments are maintained and built upon.

However, owning and managing equipment is not an element of LHSPA's current role, and the Committee are cautious about expanding this role beyond coordination to owning and managing equipment and machinery. This report identifies, analyses and costs the various options for the LHSPA to continue to maintain a dipping programme in future years for Lewis and Harris.

Aims and Objectives of this Review

Aim: To explore options for the continuation of mobile sheep dipping to LHSPA members.

Objectives:

- Analyse different models of managing an owned sheep dipper asset
- Produce a cost benefit analysis of owned dipper, contracted dipper service and hybrid approaches
- Demonstrate example tenders and contracts that could be of use

Evaluation of Options

Current capacity of LHSPA as an organisation and opportunities

The constitution of the LHSPA (Annex 1) is a suitable structure for the organisation's current focus which is largely coordination and payment of/for annual sheep pregnancy scanning and autumn sheep scab dipping.

The organisation holds a bank account and basic insurance but is not in a position to, and does not desire to, take on employees. A contract or number of contracts with providers with its own insurance would be preferable.

The LHSPA is also currently in the process of merging with its equivalent cattle producers association, who undertake similar activities such as cattle pregnancy diagnosis. There is a significant crossover of membership and both associations see merit in sharing resources. The cattle producers currently own two mobile crushes and cattle yards that are shared between producers in Lewis and Harris.

With the potential of funds from the Island Growth Deal the local authority are also exploring the potential of a "food hub" whereby a pool of small scale horticultural machinery could be utilised by those wishing to grow. A key challenge for this is how the machinery could be hosted, hired and managed.

Strengths	Weaknesses
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated team • Proven track record of professional coordination • Local knowledge • Trusted by members • Simple legal administrative burden of the association structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No experience of “owning” machinery • Constitution not suitable for role of employer • Over-reliance on volunteer time to administer collective approaches to scanning and dipping
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To take a more commercial approach with dipping contractors to seek best value • Potential of grant aid for a dipper resource 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on significant volunteer time (50 days) to administer the sheep dipping programme, largely focussed on one person

Continuation of existing contractor model developed over the last two years

The MRI secured the services of a professional contractor for the two trial years based on knowledge of the contractors professionalism, service and system. This was not a competitive process and the contractor was paid above the market rate as an incentive to work for an extended period in this remote location, helping to ensure that the pilot project was a success.

Going forward the LHSPA would need to achieve a more realistic commercial rate for this service to ensure that the operation does not become unviable for the crofters. A known commercial rate for contractors operating on the mainland is between £1.30 for a small scale towable plunge dipper (1,200 litres) and £1.50/head for a larger lorry platform dipper (4,000 litres) inclusive of dip chemicals. There can also be additional set up fees for smaller numbers below 300 sheep, which poses a particular problem in crofting areas where flock sizes are often smaller.

With the additional travel and accommodation costs it is realistic to expect that this rate could increase to £2 plus VAT, but it should also be noted that two weeks of well-coordinated solid work with support staff and equipment creates a significant saving and opportunity to the contractor.

LHSPA should have no concerns in seeking a competitive price from a number of operators (SAOS can assist LHSPA with this process if needed).

Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proven approach • Speed of throughput due to size of equipment and mode of operation • Animal welfare of system and timed dipping to ensure correct dosage • Known entity for LHSPA to manage on its own beyond MRI support • Whole island approach • No insurance costs 	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-week window creates a viable batch for external contractor, but “fixed” nature of this timing can be problematic for crofters in arranging time off from their main work • “Waiting around” time for set up can be long for crofters, even with good coordination • Larger dipper requires more ancillary support in terms of large volumes (4 cubic metres) water provision and water disposal
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Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential to go to competitive tender for the service to ensure best price from contractors. SAOS can provide a tender example 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service is too expensive for crofters to “buy-in” to. £2.50-£3 a head is thought to be the upper limit. This may be a “put off” to larger sheep producers as they would have to pay a larger amount i.e. 50 sheep could be £100, £500 or up to £1000
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LHSPA own equipment and use an on island contractor to manage

This model has the potential to be more cost effective as the contractor would be based locally and be utilising LHSPA equipment. However, this is reliant on a suitable contractor being found locally, discussion with stakeholders has cast doubt on how likely this would be. This will remain an unknown until a procurement exercise is undertaken.

Similarly the external contractor previously used for MRI work operated with large scale lorry based equipment. The equipment available to purchase (links to examples in Annex 2) would be of a lesser throughput capacity which would have an unknown (as yet) impact on throughput of sheep and could potentially be less effective at controlling parasites as the dipping window is less regulated. This would likely impact the timing and overall cost of the operation.

Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility to go when is suitable for more crofters and their work schedules, rather than being dictated by contractor schedule • Being able to dip at more times of the year than just the autumn, which would help with dipping hogs returning from overwintering on the mainland and also treating tups purchased at sales. These two activities are the most high-risk in terms of biosecurity for the island 	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any bought equipment will still be a lesser service than that achieved by the large external contractor service • All stakeholders agree there is no obvious contractor or organisation who would take on the dipping operation and maintenance of the dipper • Most crofters already have a full-time job and croft part-time, with no capacity
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for young crofter to generate additional work • Has the potential to be cheaper than an external contractor • Purchase of mobile yards alongside could be helpful for other crofting activities in townships 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A longer time period to dip will be less effective for sheep scab control • No island contractor comes forward • Machinery is poorly maintained and fails when needed • Machinery is not used often enough and breaks down quickly in the salty environment • Potential for the cost of LHSPA insurance to increase

LHSPA still uses an external contractor for the main autumn dipping, but own a small dipper for returning hogs and tups and incidents

This route would continue with the external contractor model and therefore would have no impact on cost per sheep.

Potential benefits include allowing dipping to take place at other times of the year for returning hogs from the mainland in the spring and for bought in tups in September/October.

This option would rely on volunteers with dipping licences to utilise a small scale centrally held dipper when needed. This model has the potential to be problematic with the challenges of multiple users of different experience levels and the increased likelihood of breakages etc.

Similarly mobile yards could be held centrally and operated on a volunteer use basis. These would have uses beyond the dipping period and could be beneficial to producers. Their management may also prove a useful test to assess the potential of holding and letting out equipment.

Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Takes pressure off the main autumn dipping for LHSPA and can still have the high-capacity external contractor• A smaller pick-up towable unit could be appropriate and “handy” for some areas	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paying for two activities, albeit complementary• Still need to maintain equipment
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Purchase of mobile yards alongside could be helpful for other crofting activities in townships• LHSPA are not then looking for an on-island contractor but would hire out (on a basic maintenance rate/unit) to townships as needed.• SAOS can provide examples of hire/loan checklist (simple model Annex 3)	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Service could still be too expensive• Equipment is not utilised fully• Equipment suffers breakages and costs

Financial Evaluation of Options

Based on previous two trial years, two weeks work with the average number of sheep dipped each day being 1,250 with three stops per day in September and two stops per day in November.

The cost estimates below are based on known figures from the MRI trial and a known number of sheep. Going forward some drop off is anticipated in numbers as the approach becomes more costly for

producers. Estimates are therefore based on 25,000 sheep as opposed to 28,000. As these numbers are less it is anticipated that the ancillary support costs in yardsman and water management would drop proportionately.

The option to own a smaller scale mobile dipper and operate it on a volunteer basis for the returning hogs, tups and other times does little to the finances when still continuing a external contractor autumn dipping.

Option	LHSPA Coordinat ion (50 days potentiall y £7500)	Gathering and trailering of sheep	Water collection & disposal operator (2 weeks full time plus fuel)	Mobile yards hire/mainten ance of own	Mobile yards operator (2 weeks full time plus fuel)	Dipper hire – external or owned	Dip	Total cost estimate per sheep
MRI Pilot Model (based on 28k sheep)	0	?	£7000 £0.25/sheep	£2000 £0.10/sheep	£7000 £0.25/sheep	£3	£0.8/ sheep	£4.5-6/ sheep
External Contractor (based on 25k sheep)	0	0	£0.25/ sheep	£0.10/ sheep	£0.25/sheep	£1.50-2.18 /sheep	Included in dipper hire	£2.10-2.78/ sheep
Owned dipper and local contractor (based on 25k sheep)	0	0	£0.25/ sheep	£0.10/ sheep	£0.25/sheep	£1-1.50/ sheep	£0.8/ sheep	£2.40-2.90/ sheep
External Contractor Plus owned small dipper	0	0	£0.25/ sheep	£0.10/ sheep	£0.25/sheep	£1.50-2.15 /sheep	Included in dipper hire	£2.10-2.75/ sheep

Analysis

The MRI/LHSPA project has been remarkably successful in terms of disease control but also as a pan island community activity that has reignited more neighbouring activity in different townships. All stakeholders consulted in this exercise were unanimously supportive of the previous project and demonstrated a desire for the project to find a route to continue. As an action research project led by an academic institution to kick start a lapsed activity, the costs have been high. The initiative will need to take on a slimmed down, more commercial approach now that the initial phase has finished.

Cost per head is a critical factor to address to ensure there is enough uptake for the scheme to continue. Many crofters have other options in terms of static dippers, which although less efficient and requiring more labour, have the potential to be cheaper options for some operators. Others could choose not to dip, therefore it is important to keep the cost per head at an affordable level to ensure that the progress made in disease control is not lost. An additional challenge for bigger producers is that they could face large total invoices, which would lead to them considering other options.

For 10-20% of producers who are VAT registered there is an ongoing challenge as it is not possible for them to reclaim the VAT from non VAT invoices from LHSPA. This challenge is unlikely to change unless a non VAT registered contractor takes on the operation.

In some instances common grazing committees have been able to access township funds to subsidise the cost of dipping, but this would not be an option for all. Some townships have managed to secure collective environmental scheme and other income, but other areas do not have access to an income source. It should be noted that if this route is chosen then it should be undertaken democratically and approved by the township as a whole. This approach to payment of costs would sit outside the influence of the LHSPA.

The move from a well-supported MRI pilot project to a more commercial LHSPA initiative is the biggest short term challenge to the ongoing operation of successful scab control. Small steps in making this transition may be necessary to ensure that the change from one to another is gradual and the majority of producers are able and willing to continue with the approach.

It should also be recognised that the disease challenge may evolve over time. The continuation of a mobile contract dipper for the next couple of seasons is sensible at present. It may then evolve to a lesser need where bringing in a smaller, agile dipping trailer for dealing with outbreaks and treating tups in the autumn and hogs in the spring. Hopefully a time will come where whole island dipping is not necessary, especially as the level of scab infestation reduces year on year. This could be achieved by using the mobile dipper in a more targeted and strategic way, focussing on target areas, which could be informed through annual sheep scab blood testing at the township-level in the autumn. This has the advantage of only treating the flocks that need it and reduces the overall costs involved and the dipping window. It could be a better long-term system if combined with the strategic dipping/treatments for incoming stock. However, this is only a potential scenario at present.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Following the undoubted success of the MRI two year project there is appetite from all parties to continue the operation. However, the biggest question to emerge is not whether an owned dipper or an external dipping contractor is the best way forward, but what the uptake will be among crofters when they have to pay a commercial rate of £2-3/head as opposed to a subsidised rate of £0.5-0.8? Will crofters consider it of sufficient value to participate, revert to their own smaller static dippers, use alternate products or cease dipping altogether?

It would seem fool hardy to purchase a mobile dipper for the island without this demand being tested, and with an uncertain means of operating it locally. It would also be unlikely to generate any cost savings in the short term. An earlier and simpler step of contracting an external dipping contractor on a commercial rate for a further season would appear prudent, and would allow further scrutiny of the best long term solution.

1. For 2025 LHSPA should recruit an external dipping contractor to carry out the autumn dipping on a similar basis (but not rate) to the MRI trial. This will allow LHSPA to assess the level of demand for the service when the cost is commercial and not subsidised, without making a large purchase for a resource which may not be utilised as anticipated. The level of ancillary support for sheep handling and water management should be streamlined as much as possible. This will also keep a degree of continuity from previous years for the producers involved.

2. For 2025 LHSPA should consider purchasing some mobile yards (such as Rappa, Pratley etc, est. £10k) to hold as a central resource for use by crofters. This resource would be useful for the autumn dipping programme, but also at other times of the year for individuals to use. Low input best practice methodologies could be tested for letting out the yards, and its effectiveness evaluated after the first year of use. This will allow the LHSPA to assess whether they have the capabilities to manage an owned piece of equipment.
3. A review of the 2025 autumn dipping operation should take place in January/February 2026 to assess the success of the approach and whether a different methodology could be more appropriate. Linked to this a wider review of an “island machinery pool” should be explored to assess whether all current and future activities could be managed through LHSPA to generate an effective and sustainable route for management.
4. Consideration should be given to a scaled approach to different sizes of flocks, i.e. a cheaper price for greater numbers. Consideration should be given as to whether this could help retain the larger flocks in the process without upsetting smaller flock owners to an inequity of charging approach.
5. It is evident that the professional coordination of the dipping is a key success factor to the MRI project. This has involved a very considerable volunteer time commitment on which the whole operation depends, consideration should be given to seeking financial support for supporting this cost. There is potential for a new role as a dedicated animal health and welfare coordinator to be created for Lewis & Harris that could combine sheep and cattle activities. As detailed in the analysis, the challenge of animal health management will likely evolve and change, an on island management resource would be best placed to react nimbly to any changes and needs. Similarly a need could arise for a machinery pool coordinator in 2026, which could potentially sit with LHSPA.

Annex 1

LEWIS AND HARRIS SHEEP PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION CONSTITUTION

1. Name

The Group shall be called the Lewis and Harris Sheep Producers Association. (hereinafter referred to as the group)

2. Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the group shall be to:

- 2.1 Produce premium quality stock to add value to livestock
- 2.2 Explore relevant new husbandry techniques to improve sheep management.
- 2.3 Exploit the benefits of group marketing and purchasing.
- 2.4 Promote training and development of producers, assess training needs and arrange appropriate courses and training.

3. Membership

- 3.1 The membership shall be open to anyone interested in furthering the aims and objectives of the group.
- 3.2 Annual membership currently £15 shall be set at each Annual General Meeting.
- 3.3 All members joining the group shall be deemed to accept terms of this Constitution and any Bye-laws published from time to time by the group.

4. Management

- 4.1 The affairs of the group shall be conducted by a Management Committee which shall consist of Officers of the group plus seven further committee members.
- 4.2 The Officers of the group who shall be honorary shall consist of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary who shall be elected annually at the Annual General Meeting. If the post of any officer or other committee member should fall vacant after such an election, the Management Committee will have the power to co-opt up to two members.
- 4.3 The Management Committee members shall be members of the Group.

5. General Meetings

5.1. Annual General Meetings

The Group shall hold an Annual General Meeting in December of each year at which the following agenda will be addressed:

- 5.1.1 Approve the minutes of the previous year's AGM.
- 5.1.2 Receive reports from the Chairman and the Honorary Secretary.
- 5.1.5 Receive reports from the Chairman and the Honorary Secretary.

5.1.6 Receive reports from the Chairman and the Honorary Secretary.
Receive a report from the Honorary Treasurer and approve the Annual Accounts.
Elect the Management Committee.
 Consider change to the Constitution.
 Deal with other relevant business.

5.2 Extraordinary General Meeting

An Extraordinary General Meeting shall be called by an application in writing to the Secretary supported by at least two-thirds of the group membership. The Management Committee shall also have the power to call an Extraordinary General Meeting by decision of a simple majority of its members.

5.3 Notices

At least 15 days notice shall be given to all voting members of any General Meeting.

5.4 Voting

5.4.1 With the exception of changes to the Constitution's decisions put to a vote shall be resolved by a simple majority at General Meetings of the members.

5.4.2 The Chairman of the group shall hold a deliberative as well as a casting vote.

5.5 Quora

The quorum of General Meetings shall be 15 members of the group and the quorum for the Committee Meetings shall be 6 members.

5.6 Changes to the Constitution

5.6.1 Any change to the Constitution shall require a two-thirds majority of those present and eligible to vote at a General Meeting.

5.6.2 Notice shall be given to all voting members of any General Meeting specified in 5.3 and then any proposal to change the Constitution shall be submitted in writing to the Secretary at least 7 days prior to the meeting.

5.6.3 All proposals for change to the Constitution shall be signed by two members eligible to vote at a General Meeting.

6. Finance and Accounts

6.1 The financial year shall run from 1st October to 30th September each year.

6.2 The Honorary Treasurer shall be responsible for the preparation of annual accounts of the group.

6.3 The accounts shall be verified by an independent person.

6.4 All cheques up to £50 drawn against the group's funds shall be signed by any two signatories of the group. Each member of the Management Committee shall be an authorised signatory of the group.

6.5 All members of the group shall be considered to be jointly responsible for the financial liabilities of the group.

7. Bylaws

The Management Committee shall have the power to publish and enforce such bye-laws as the membership feels necessary to govern the activities of the group.

8. Dissolution

Should the aims and objectives herein defined be frustrated and/or be incapable of being realised or should the objectives be obtained through some other agency the assets thereof shall not be distributed amongst the members of the group in any way whatsoever but to an organisation or organisations operating for the benefit of the crofting community.

Signature

Date.....

..... Chairman

..... Secretary

.....Treasurer

Annex 2

Mobile Dippers

Links to trailer towable mobile sheep dippers that are currently on the market.

<https://www.portequip.co.uk/mobile-sheep-dipper>

<https://www.sonshearingtrailers.co.uk/shearing-trailers/>

<https://www.mobile-sheep-dippers.co.uk/highland-mobile-sheep-dippers/>

Annex 3

Managing Owned Equipment

Many members of LHSPA are nervous about owning collective equipment and the potential for breakages to occur without being fixed, and for the equipment to soon fall into disrepair. The LHSPA also does not have a large administration resource to physically sign in and out equipment and needs to develop a low human resource requirement process. With the cattle and sheep associations merging this will soon become an issue as the cattle association owns

two sets of mobile cattle yards. Similarly it is likely that the LHSPA will try to acquire a mobile sheep yard to assist with the scanning and dipping programmes and also be available for hire to members.

A minimal maintenance fee will need to be charged for each hire/loan that is not too much for the user, but at a level that will pay for professional annual servicing.

A simple technological solution should be adopted for the use of equipment involving short mobile phone videos. A demonstration film clip will be provided to any user, that involves a “walk round” of the equipment plus commentary. It will become a requirement of any user to complete a 1 minute date recorded walk around video before and after use, where any problems and wear and tear issue can be noted. These videos can be posted on a members messaging hire group – utilising text, Whatsapp or similar platform. This will allow a basic low input process to be put in place to encourage responsible use and highlight any wear and tear issues.