



ON THE ROAD

with Assessor James Foad



Around 50 quality assurance assessors visit sheep, cattle and pig farms throughout Scotland to ensure they meet the standards required to be members of the Quality Meat Scotland assurance schemes.

The experienced team of assessors work on a self-employed basis for Acoura, the independent contractor for the QMS whole chain assurance programme. Many also visit markets, hauliers and processors as part of their remit.

Among them is James Foad who we caught up with during a recent farm visit to get an insight into what it is like to be out on the road doing this important role, which underpins the Scotch Beef PGI, Scotch Lamb PGI and Specially Selected Pork brands.

What exactly is your role with Acoura? I am a quality assurance assessor visiting cattle, sheep and pig farms in an area stretching from St Andrews to the Black Isle.

What training is required to be an assessor? Acoura provide training on general assessing skills and there is also scheme-specific training. For example, I have recently undertaken additional training on assessing pig farms.

Do you have a farming background? Yes, I was brought up on a farm – originally in the south of England before we moved to Aberdeenshire in the 80s and I went to agricultural college.

Are you still involved? Yes, my wife Jane and I bought a farm five years ago, and we grow malting barley and run 350 breeding ewes. My role as an assessor fits well with running the farm business at home.

Do you enjoy being an assessor? Very much so. It's a job with lots of variety – no two farms are the same and no two farmers are the same. My role is to assess farms but I am not trying to catch people out. I understand the practical realities involved, and it is a pleasure to visit farms which are clearly run with so much pride and commitment. It's also great to be part of such a supportive, diverse and experienced assessor team and I hope most farmers enjoy having us on their farms.

What do you encourage farmers to do before you visit? I call to arrange the visit and chat through what they should expect. I encourage them to refresh their minds on the current standards document and to go through the assessment check list. These are available online if they cannot find their printed document.

Any particular areas you flag up? The key areas I might mention include ensuring livestock movement and medicine records are up-to-date. QMS has produced handy templates which members can use – for example there is an Animal Health Plan template.

How do you ensure you maintain good biosecurity? As assessors it is very important we don't spread disease. My wellies are always clean and I disinfect between each farm. Before I visit a pig farm I always check how many pig-free days I need to have before arriving on-farm.

How many farms do you visit each day? That varies depending on the time of year. In the winter, lack of daylight means I might only manage one visit in the morning and one in the afternoon, but when the days are longer I can usually manage three. The visits typically last 2–2.5 hours.

The bigger the farm, the longer the visit? Not necessarily. The complexity of the farm business is usually what determines the length of time required.

How good is the animal welfare on most of the farms you visit? On most farms, animal welfare standards are very good. It is very rare to have animal welfare non-compliances and in fact, in many cases the farmers look after their animals better than themselves.

In what way? I think loneliness is a real problem in farming now – and we see a lot of farmers in their 70s, who have lost their spouses, for whom life is pretty isolated. Some farmers have very little support.

How often will you be joined by a Scottish SPCA inspector? I'll regularly do joint visits to pig farms with the Scottish SPCA, and I also do about six joint visits a year to sheep and cattle farms. In my experience farmers are happy to have the Scottish SPCA visit. In fact, my only challenge is that it can make the visit longer as farmers are generally very interested to hear from the inspectors about the valuable work of the Scottish SPCA and show off their stock!

What are the most common non-compliances you find? Farm appearance is one area where members can sometimes fail to meet the standards. If there are materials



lying around which could cause injury to people or animals, that will be a problem. However, when pointed out by an assessor with a fresh pair of eyes, the farmer generally agrees and it is simple to rectify. Medicine records, including antibiotic collation, can be another problem area – typically the farmer will have everything recorded somewhere but has just failed to update the main medicine record. Again, this is easily rectified.

What happens when a non-compliance is raised? Any action required is noted on the visit record and a document is left behind detailing the next steps. Members have 30 days to rectify their non-compliances or they risk being withdrawn from the scheme.



Any frustrations in the job? Something farmers really need to understand better is that it is essential they notify Acoura of the CPH numbers of any land or buildings they rent out with their core farm business. Failure to do that could result in their animals not being eligible for the Scotch brand. All that's involved is a couple of minutes to make that phone call, but getting this message over is proving a bit of a battle.

How useful are farmers finding the on-line Scotch Potential Eligibility Cattle Checker (SPECC)? The vast majority of cattle farmers I visit are using the SPECC checker and finding it a useful tool – particularly those who want to ensure the cattle they buy are eligible for the Scotch Beef label.

Around 25% of farmers are believed to have some degree of dyslexia – how much of a problem do you believe this is? We do see a lot of dyslexia, and it is something we look for ways to help with. From a personal perspective, several of my family members have dyslexia – so I am very aware of the challenges.

What do you think are the main benefits of being in the assurance schemes for cattle, sheep and pig farmers? Obviously the price differential is one benefit, but the assurance assessment process is also viewed by many farmers as a valuable farm "MOT" opportunity. There is also the potential for joint assessments to be carried out with other schemes for example, Scottish Quality Crops, saving members time and money.

There must be a lot of variety in the job? Yes, that is true. I meet so many different characters and I take a pride in the part I play as a brand ambassador for the whole-chain assurance programme. It is a privilege to gain an insight into the way many farmers run their businesses.+

For more information about the QMS Whole Chain Assurance programme, visit: www.qmscotland.co.uk/assurance-and-licensing