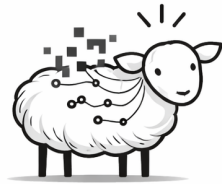


CARAS

The Council for Awards of Royal Agricultural Societies
Agricultural & Rural Research Scholarship



From Fleece to Future

UK Wool Innovation & Skills

A feasibility study for a UK Digital Wool Innovation and Skills Platform

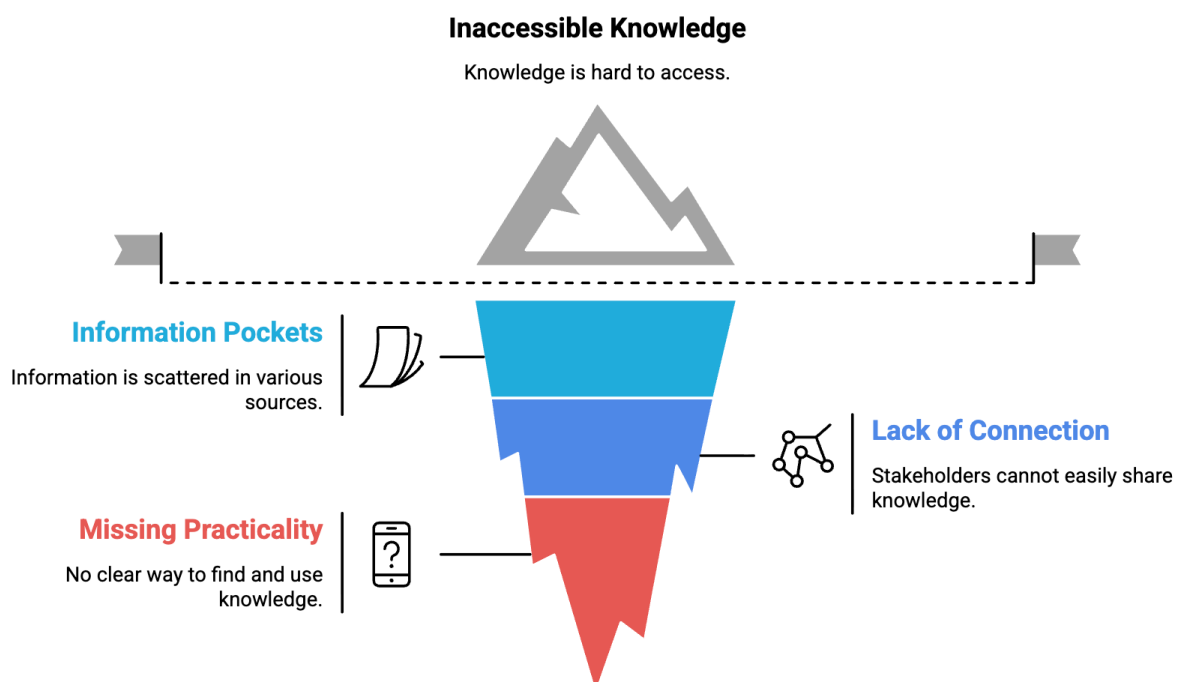
Jayne Harkness (Bones) MSc BA (Hons) ARAGs
Doctoral Researcher in Wool and Rural Development
Ulster University / Northern Ireland

Introduction

UK wool sits at a crossroads: facing rising costs, market volatility, and environmental pressures. Yet, its role in rural sustainability, carbon cycles, and circular economies is gaining new importance.

This feasibility study explores how knowledge, skills, and innovation across the UK wool supply chain can be better connected, made more accessible, and made actionable. The project asks how a dedicated digital platform could unify currently fragmented resources, improve collaboration, and enhance value creation from fleece to final product.

Fragmented Knowledge Hinders Wool Industry Growth.

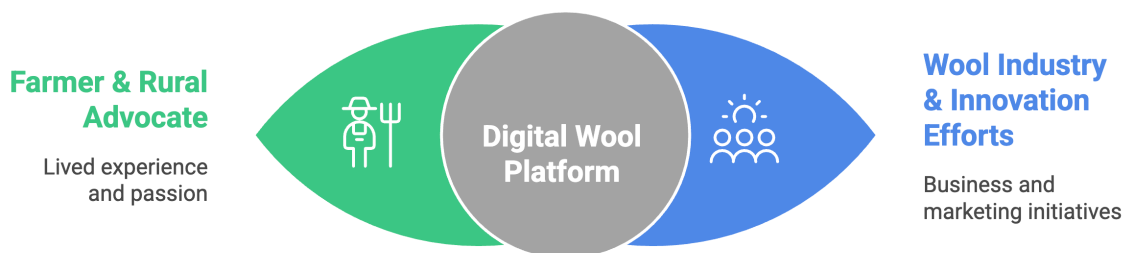


Personal and professional context

I approach this work as a sheep farmer, wool researcher, and rural advocate—someone who understands both the potential and the challenges of UK wool at farm and industry level.

Over eight years working within the wool industry, I've listened to farmers striving for *viable* value chains, and manufacturers *designing* with little awareness of the growing and grading processes. This project aims to build a bridge between these worlds—serving the wool community and promoting knowledge exchange across all four nations of the UK.

Bridging the Gap for UK Wool

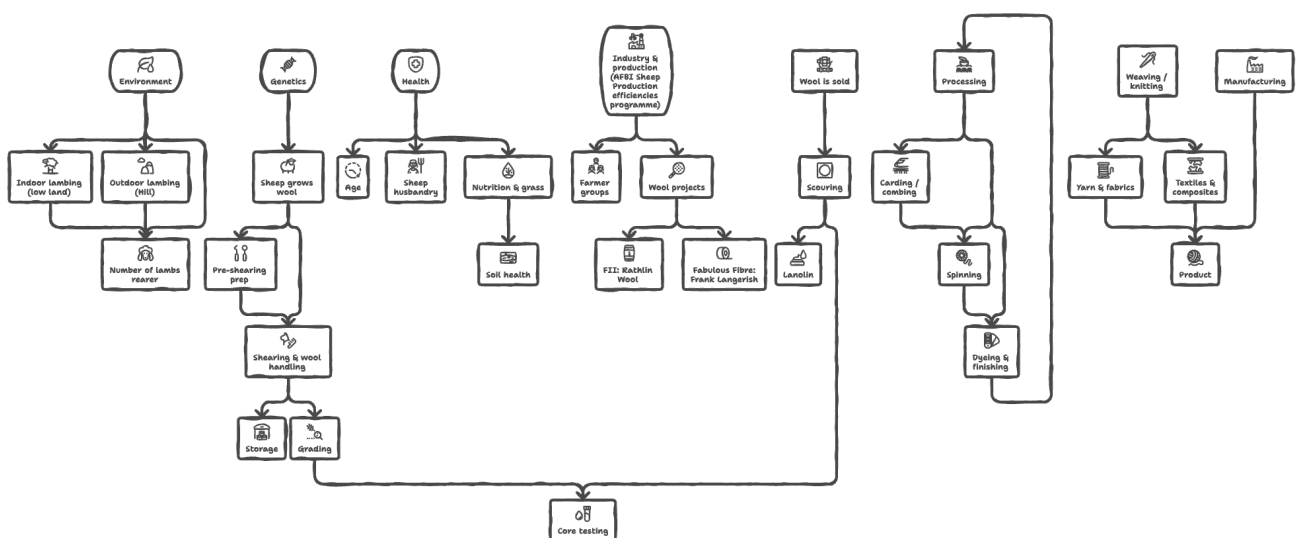


Beyond shearing and processing, factors such as the environment, genetics, and animal health are vital to fibre quality. These elements deserve greater attention from industry leaders and form a core part of this study's focus.

Why this project matters

There are numerous types, grades, and qualities of UK wool, yet this complexity is poorly represented. Current knowledge systems are fragmented: information lives in isolated pockets—within research papers, farm trials, design studios, and individual expertise.

Wool Production and Processing Flowchart



By designing a digital platform, we can provide a clear, unified way for farmers, processors, educators, policymakers, and rural businesses to find, share, and build on shared knowledge and skills.

Navigating the Crossroads of UK Wool



Connecting the dots

This feasibility study asks key questions:

- How can we connect the dots and make disconnected knowledge unified?
- How can specialised silos contribute to focused solutions?

Digital Wool Platform



The proposed platform will deliver:

- Research case studies translated into farm-friendly language
- Innovation stories and lessons learned along the wool value chain

- Skills and training opportunities across the UK in shearing, grading, processing, design, and business development
- Expert resources that are practical, current, and evidence-based
- A collaborative space linking farmers, processors, educators, researchers, and industry bodies



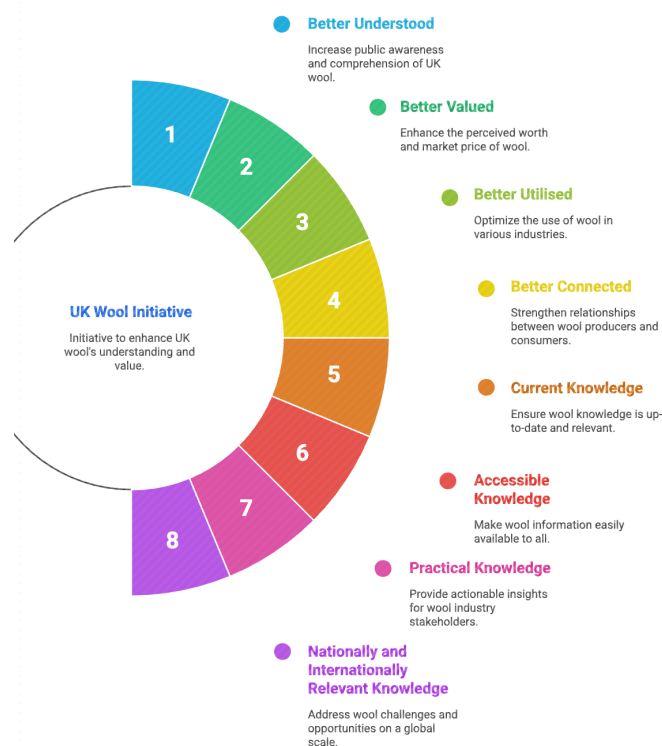
The purpose is to make UK wool:

- Better understood - Better valued - Better used - Better connected

And knowledge itself:

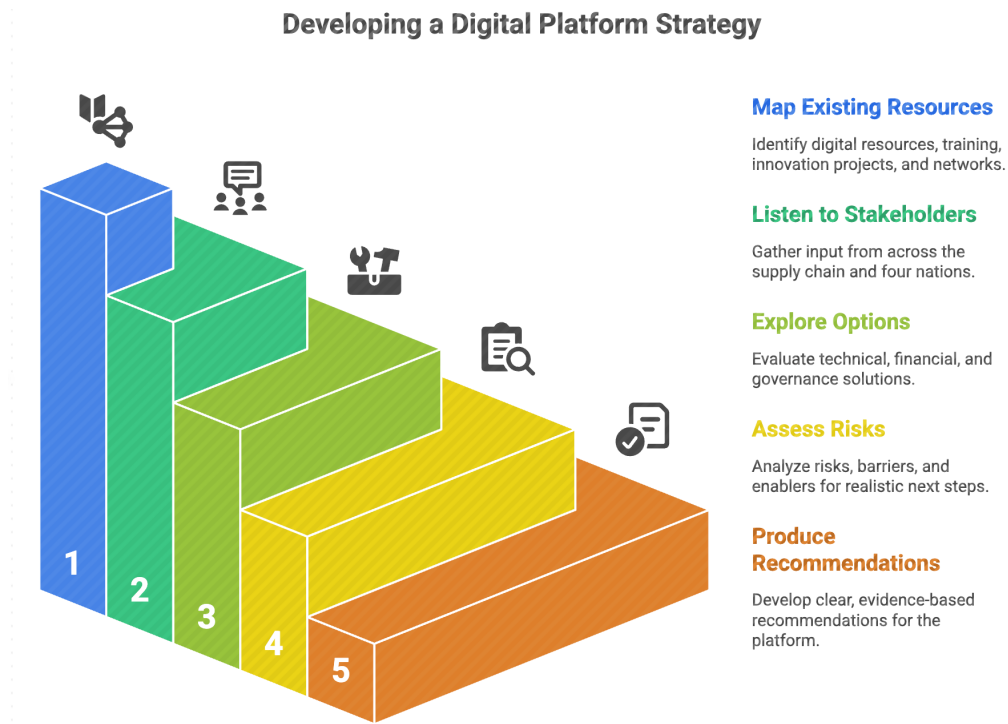
- Current - Accessible - Practical - Relevant nationally and internationally

The goal is to ensure this project is led by need, not assumptions, grounded in integrity about both opportunities and limits.



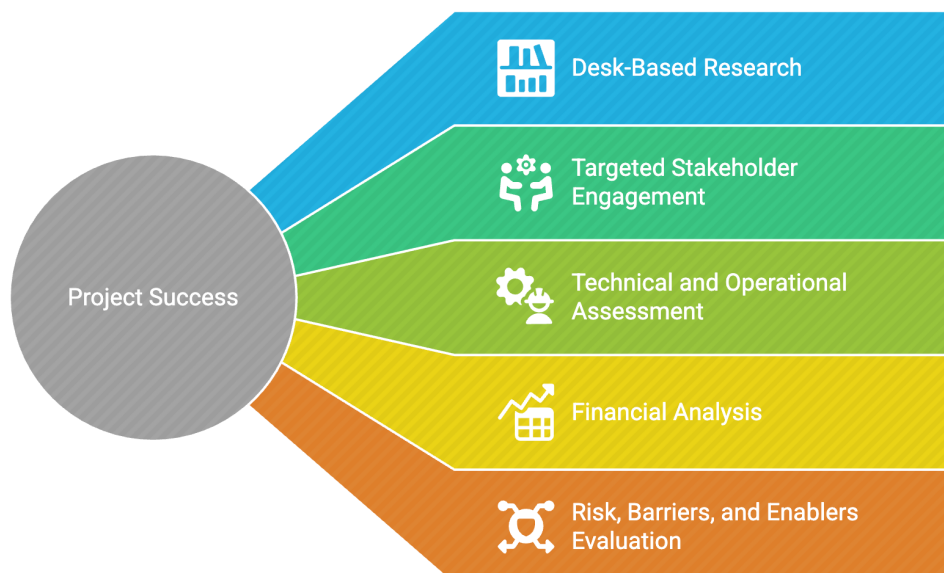
Research aims & methodology

The feasibility study employs five methodological strands, feeding into a final synthesis that will produce a feasibility framework and evidence-based recommendations for an eventual peer-reviewed publication.



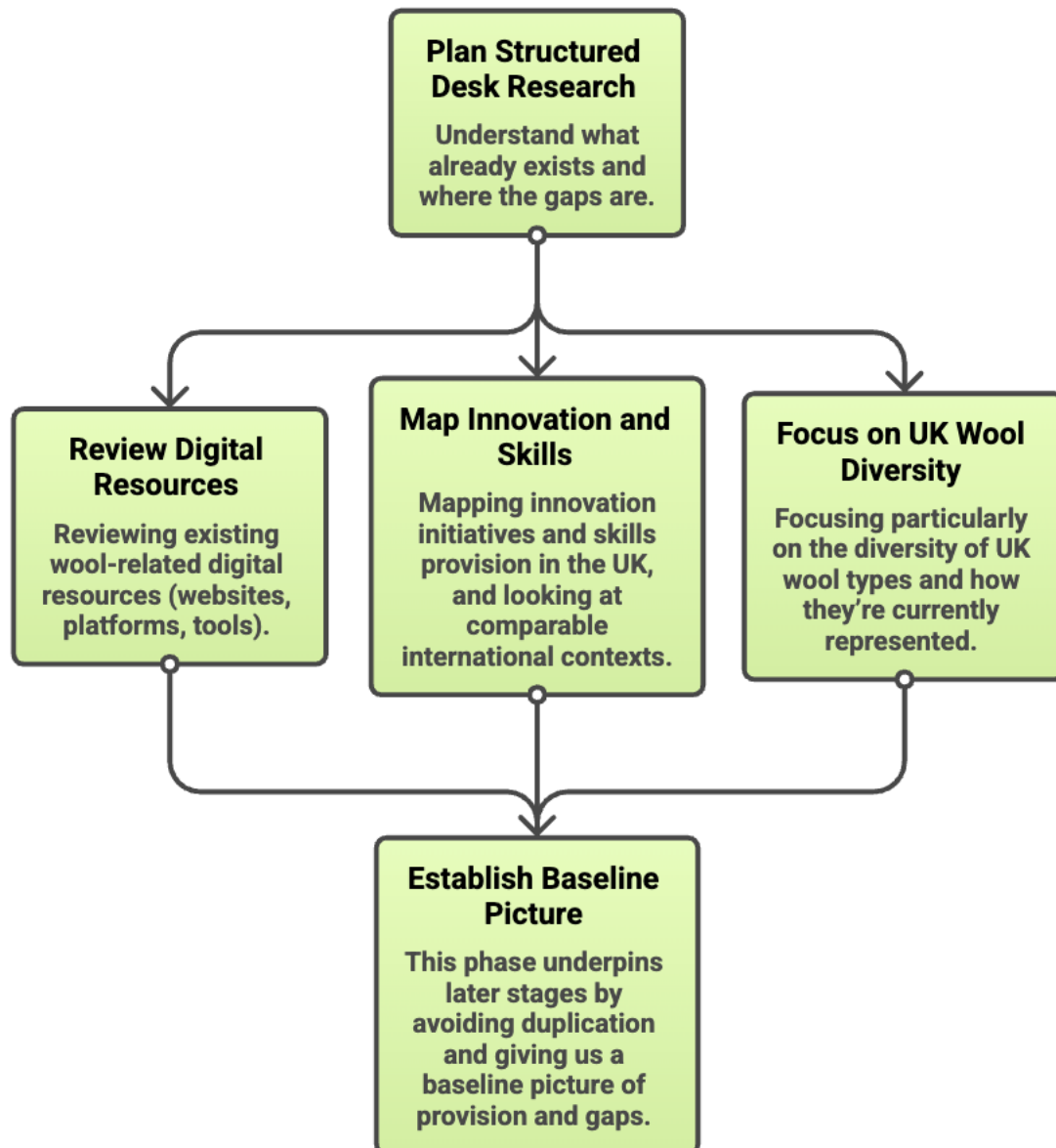
Core methodological elements:

- Desk-based research
- Targeted stakeholder engagement
- Technical and operational assessment
- Financial analysis
- Risk, barriers and enablers evaluation



Desk-based research plan:

- Understand what exists and where the gaps lie
- Review wool-related digital resources (websites, platforms, tools)
- Map innovation, initiatives, and skills across UK wool and compare with international contexts (e.g. AWI – Australian Wool Innovation)
- Analyse the diversity of UK wool types and their current representation
- Establish a baseline to avoid duplication and identify existing provision and gaps



Project timeline

- **Phase 1: Project initiation & planning** — Mid-April to June 2026 (≈10 days, post-lambing)
- **Phase 2: Stakeholder engagement & consultation** — July to October 2026 (≈14 days)
- **Phase 3: Analysis & feasibility assessment** — November 2026 to February 2027 (≈14 days)
- **Lambing break** — March to mid-April 2027
- **Phase 4: Final report & dissemination** — May 2027 (≈4 days for final draft)

The key aim is to have the findings ready for the CARAS event at the 2027 Balmoral Show, launching the dissemination phase and encouraging sector-wide engagement. *(This will now be in time for the CARAS AGM in mid-April 2027)*

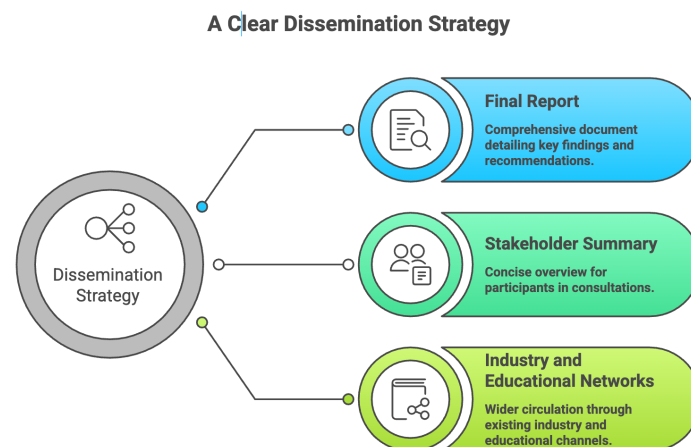
Dissemination

There is a clear, fit-for-purpose dissemination strategy:

A final report will be produced, setting out key findings and evidence-based recommendations on the feasibility of a UK digital wool innovation and skills platform.

A concise summary of key findings and recommendations will be shared with the stakeholders who participated in the consultations.

The summary will also be circulated through existing industry and educational networks, so it reaches farmers, rural businesses, educators and industry bodies beyond the immediate project team.

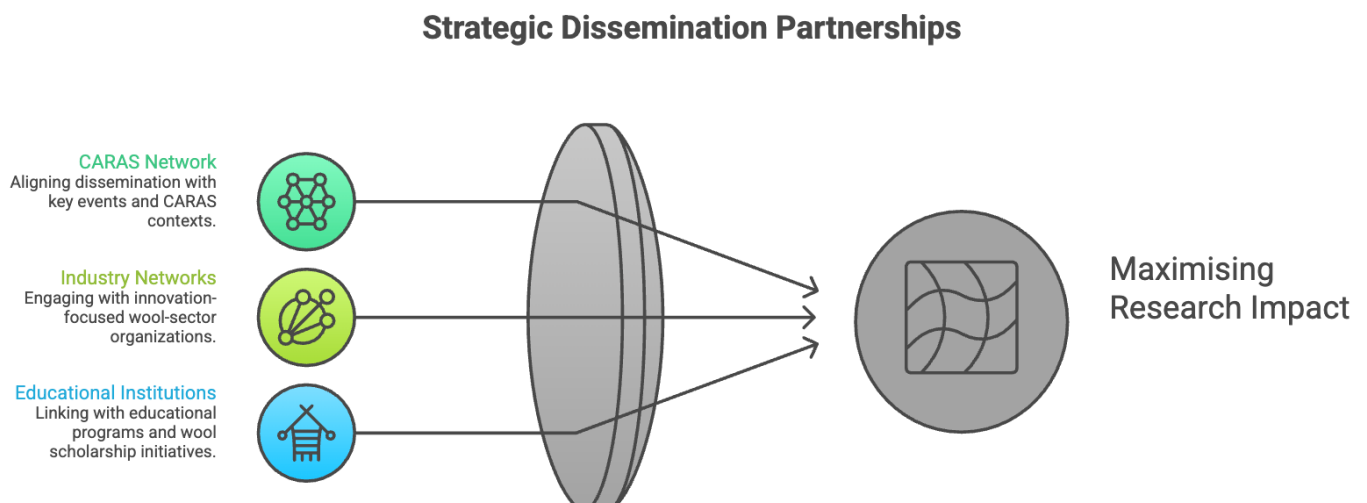


The dissemination strategy will be implemented by:

1) sharing the findings through CARAS and our wider network, with an aspiration to align a 10-15 minute presentation with key events (e.g. our Royal Shows and CARAS contexts where appropriate).

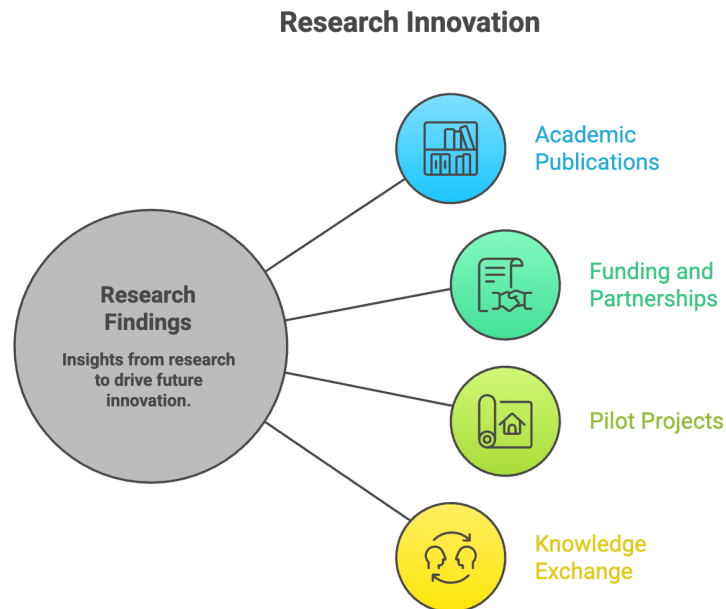
2) Tapping into our existing industry networks and wool-sector organisations already engaged in innovation and skills.

And 3) reaching out to our agricultural education institutions, and relevant agri-related programmes, including links to ongoing work with Wool Innovators, the CAFRE Wool Scholarship, and Nuffield Scholars.



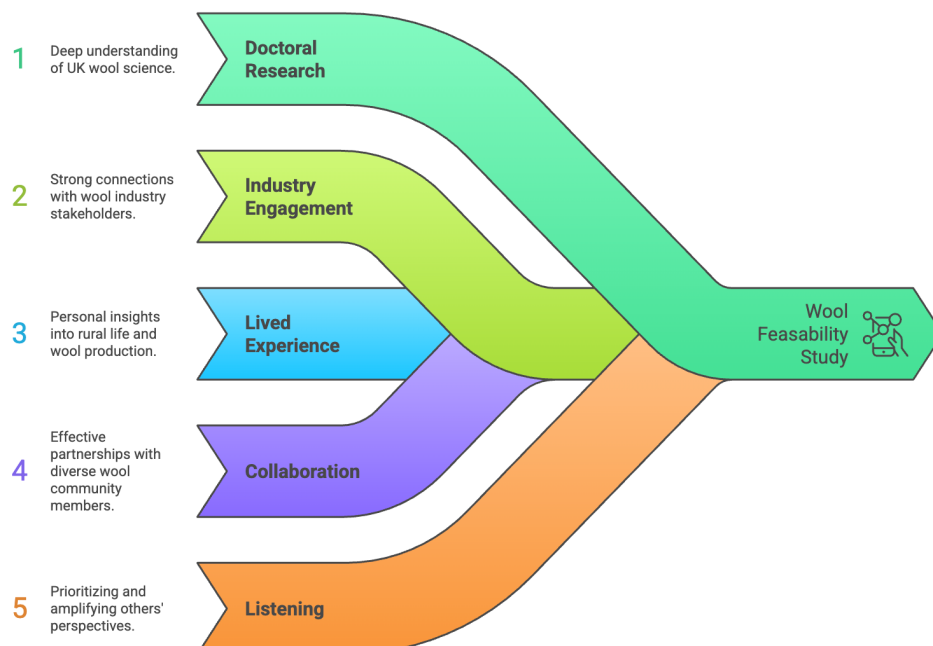
This is research innovation to:

- Provide a robust evidence base for future academic, peer-reviewed publications.
- To strengthen future funding applications and partnership development related to UK wool innovation, skills, and digital infrastructure.
- To inform potential pilot projects or further initiatives that may emerge from the feasibility study, helping to ensure they are grounded in real sector needs.
- To support wider knowledge exchange and discussion across the sector, by feeding insights into ongoing initiatives such as Wool Innovators and CAFRE-linked activity.



Why I'm Well Placed to Do This Research:

- I am already immersed in UK wool through my doctoral research, industry engagement & lived experience.
- My work sits at the crossroads of wool science, rural development, and practical innovation.
- I have experience collaborating with farmers, wool organisations, educators, and industry bodies, and I understand the pressures on time, costs, and energy in rural life.
- Above all, I know I am one voice among many, and I see this study as a way to listen, connect, and amplify others rather than to speak over them.



What Success Would Look Like:

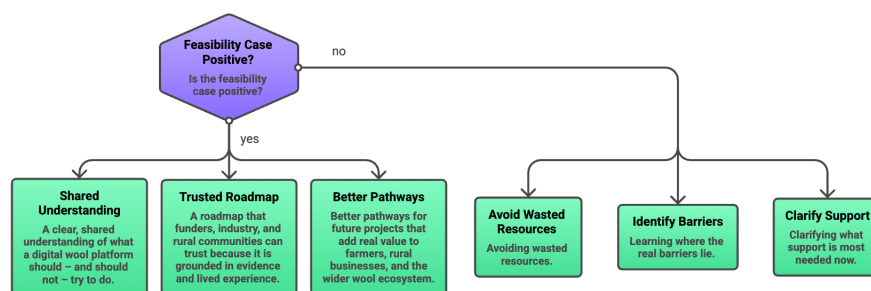
If the feasibility case is positive, success would mean:

- A clear, shared understanding of what a digital wool platform should – and should not – try to do.
- A roadmap that funders, industry, and rural communities can trust because it is grounded in evidence and lived experience.
- Better pathways for future projects that add real value to farmers, rural businesses, and the wider wool ecosystem.

If the feasibility case is negative or cautious, success is still:

- Avoiding wasted resources
- Learning where the real barriers lie
- Clarifying what support is most needed now

Feasibility Case Outcomes



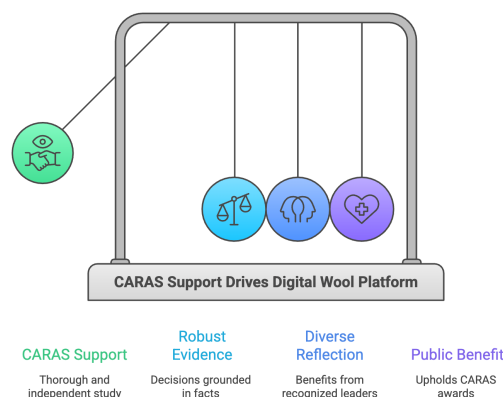
Recap:

In the spirit of CARAS's commitment to recognising and supporting leadership that advances UK agriculture and rural progress, I am seeking:

Support to carry out this feasibility study thoroughly and independently, so that any future decisions about a digital wool innovation and skills platform are grounded in robust evidence rather than assumptions.

The chance to work with CARAS Fellows and Associates, and with industry partners, to ensure the work reflects the diversity of the UK wool sector and benefits from the experience and insight of recognised leaders across the four nations.

Not a promise of a platform at any cost, but a commitment to finding out, together, what would genuinely serve and support the sector – in a way that upholds the public benefit focus at the heart of CARAS.

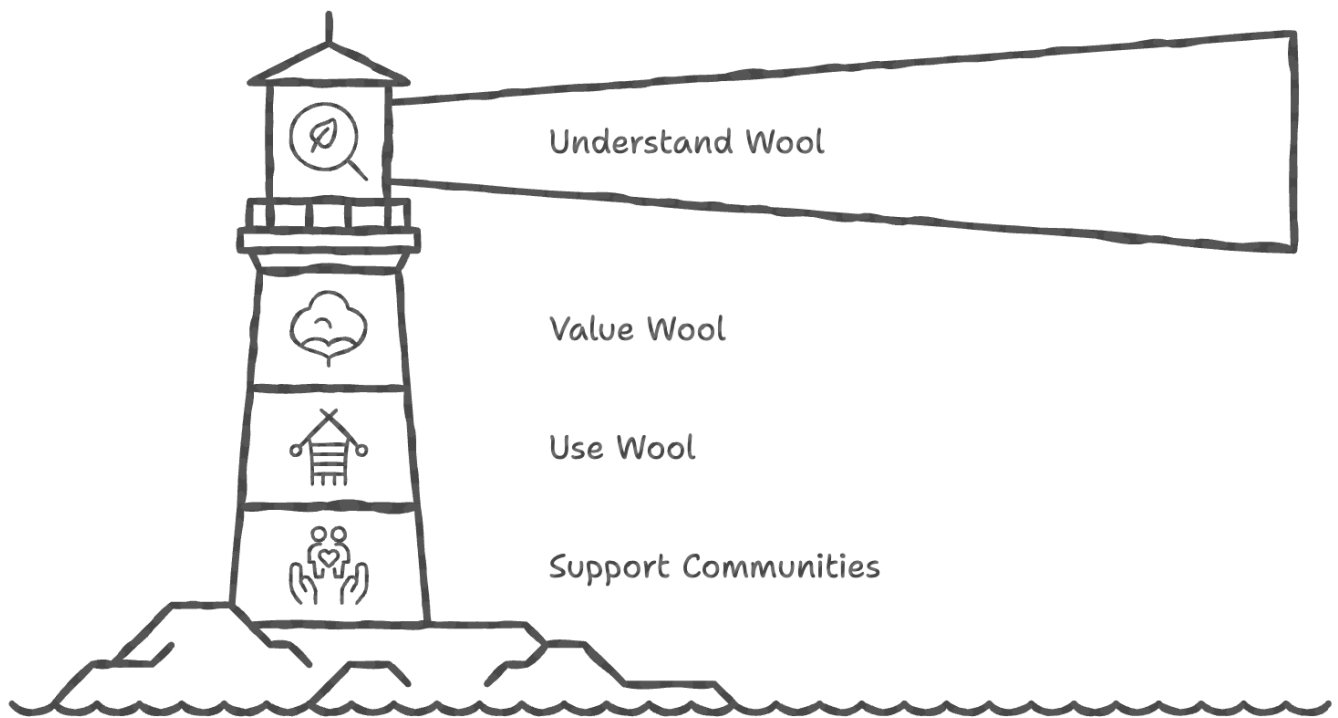


Closing:

We can't grow if we don't know...

- There are so many individual skills & innovations for our UK wool
- This fibre deserves to be seen not as a problem to be managed, but as a resource to be better understood, valued, and used.
- CARAS has a wonderful opportunity to be the lighthouse in this research
- This isn't about me or my success, it is about building trust, integrity & hope for wool communities across the 4 nations

Transforming UK Wool



Thank you

Jayne Harkness (Bones) MSc BA (Hons) ARAGs

jayneharkness@hotmail.com

1st April 2026