Close shepherded grazing at South Stack Cliffs
The RSPB’s South Stack Cliffs nature reserve covers 359 hectares on the north west coast of Anglesey, the majority leased from the Isle of Anglesey County Council (IOACC). The principal habitats are maritime heathland and grassland, dry heath, improved and semi-improved grassland, and coastal cliffs.

Much of the reserve is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Special Protection Area (SPA). As well as the important habitats on the reserve, key species include breeding choughs and seabirds, and silver-studded blue butterflies. The area also has red list vascular and lower plants including spotted rock-rose, spatulate fleawort and ciliate strap-lichen.

The problem
In 2008, a statutory condition assessment of the heathland and the vegetated coastal cliffs concluded that the habitats were in unfavourable condition, at least in part due to the lack of appropriate grazing. At the time, local circumstances meant that our ability to graze large areas...
of the reserve was very limited, and management on the heathland was restricted to targeted burning and cutting which could be problematic.

The solution
In 2009, an agreement was set up between the RSPB, the IOACC, and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to instigate a trial close-shepherded grazing project for five years. It focused on the area around Holyhead Mountain in the northern part of the reserve, amounting to just over 190 hectares. In the autumn of 2009, 50 Hebridean sheep were leased from PONT, a Welsh organisation that supports grazing projects to benefit wildlife. They were put onto the mountain for 40 days, with close-shepherding taking them up onto the mountain in the morning and bringing them back to overnight pens in the evening. The first season went well, and in subsequent years the flock was increased to 100 in 2010, and then gradually up to 200 in 2013, usually starting each grazing period with lower numbers and increasing slightly in the second half. Additional breeds were introduced, including Scotch blackface, Welsh mountain, torwen, torddu, and Manx loaghtan. By the end of the project the majority of the sheep

The heathland and vegetated coastal cliffs at South Stack were classed as being in unfavourable condition. At least in part, this was due to the lack of appropriate grazing. We’re working to put that right.
were owned by the shepherd, with some leased from PONT and one other livestock owner.

In principle, the shepherd allowed the sheep to roam and choose where they wished to graze, while generally keeping the flock together. The different breeds used the habitat in different ways, with the Scotch blackfaces readily going into tall, rank heather. The torddu would also do this but to a lesser extent, and the Hebrideans were least likely to do this. General observations indicated that on the heathland the sheep preferred grazing around recently managed, regenerating heather areas. In each year a small GPS unit was attached to the horn of one of the sheep and the data downloaded at the end of each day.

Analysis of the data showed that the sheep had a preference for three main areas, two of maritime grassland and one of dry heathland. In 2013, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) followed up some baseline monitoring from 2009 and concluded that the level of grazing wasn’t sufficient to make a significant change to the vegetation. At the end of 2012, the original agreement was relinquished so that the RSPB could enter Glastir Entry and subsequently Glastir Advanced, and through this agri-environment scheme we are aiming to increase the grazing period to 80 days close-shepherding with about 200 sheep. We will try to target where the sheep are grazing a little more, to increase their impacts on the vegetation.

Conclusions
Although the benefits to the habitat have been limited so far, we consider the project to have been a success. Grazing livestock on Holyhead Mountain has historically been difficult, but we have successfully established the principle of having animals on the land, and it has generally been well received. Furthermore, the project established a good working partnership between ourselves, the IOACC, CCW/NRW, PONT, the Anglesey Grazing Animal Partnership, and neighbouring landowners, with each party helping to facilitate the project, and all benefitting from being involved. Together we have set up a basis to better manage the habitats and bring them towards favourable condition.