

Results from the Teagasc Labour Survey on Irish Sheep farms

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Teagasc National Sheep Conference 2026
Interim findings from Teagasc Labour on sheep farms survey
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Overview of presentation

- Background
- Methodology
- Look at some key indicators and trends from analysis to date
- Take home messages



Background

- Previous study on labour on sheep farms carried out in 1999/2000 (Connolly, L)
- Capture profile of Irish sheep farmers
- Look at the infrastructure on farms and where improvements are needed
- Identify areas where farmers need support to become more labour efficient to help future proof the industry

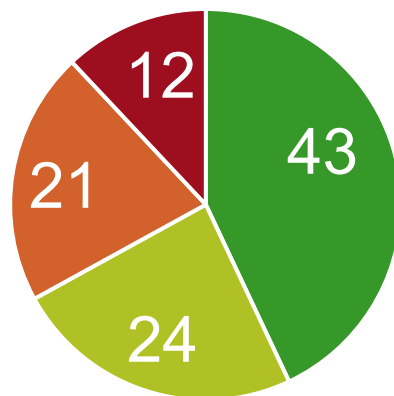
Methodology of data collection

- Respondents self reported anonymously
 - Online (survey monkey) link
 - Paper version, subsequently entered manually
 - » Discussion groups, public events, sheep conferences etc.
 - Promoted through media and Teagasc adviser network
 - Collected August 24 to June 25
- Preliminary analysis only – work in progress
 - 446 useable responses having removed outliers and flocks under 10 ewes with no store lamb enterprise



Representative of Irish sheep industry

Responses by province (%)



■ Connacht ■ Leinster ■ Munster ■ Ulster

- All counties represented and good spread across main sheep areas

Age category

| Age category | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|
| Under 35 | 101 | 21.4% |
| 35 - 49 | 131 | 27.8% |
| 50 - 65 | 168 | 35.7% |
| Over 65 | 104 | 15.1% |

- Good representation across age categories

Representative of Irish sheep industry

Flock size distribution

| Flock size | Frequency | Percent |
|------------|-----------|---------|
| 10 - 50 | 67 | 15.0% |
| 51 - 100 | 128 | 28.7% |
| 101 - 150 | 96 | 21.5% |
| 151 - 300 | 104 | 23.3% |
| ➤ 300 | 51 | 11.4% |

Main sheep system



77% mainly lowland



23% mainly hill

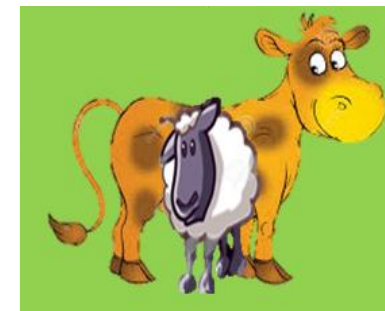
Average flock size

- Average 168 ewes – suggests larger flocks more likely to complete survey
- 44% respondents less than 100 ewes
- Broad coverage across small to large flocks

Enterprises on farm



37% sheep only



63% sheep + other

Off farm employment

- Breakdown into three categories:
 - 39% respondents farm full time
 - 45% work full time off farm (5 day week)
 - 16% part time off farm (1 – 4 day week)

Working off farm by age category (%)

| Age category | Age | Yes | No |
|--------------|-------------------|-----|-----|
| 1 | Under 35 | 84% | 16% |
| 2 | Between 35 and 49 | 73% | 27% |
| 3 | Between 50 and 65 | 55% | 45% |
| 4 | Over 65 | 24% | 76% |



Trend indicates sheep farmers of the future will be predominantly part time

Part time sheep farming

- Among the challenges identified:
- Work/life balance
 - 70% complete most sheep tasks on a Saturday
 - 17 days per year annual leave for farm work
- Assistance to complete sheep work
 - Only 6% hire paid labour
 - 62% rely on family members for help
 - 32% complete most sheep tasks on their own

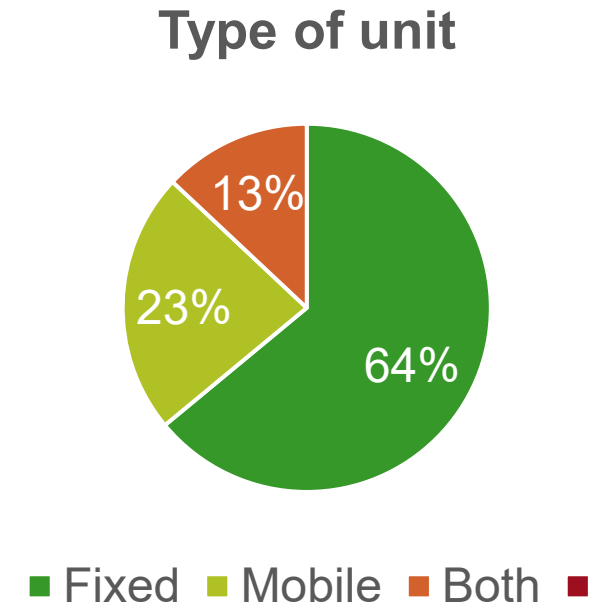
Sheep handling facilities

- 23% do not have a designated sheep handling unit (not used for cattle also)
- 85% said improved handling facilities would reduce labour
- What were the top three features on the wish list?
 - Clamp/auto systems 25%
 - Handling race 11%
 - Mobile handling unit 7%
- Sheep handling, sheep fencing and sheep housing were ranked as the top three priorities for labour saving infrastructure



Fragmentation and sheep handling

- 68% farms require trailer transport of sheep between land blocks
 - Despite this, of those with designated handling facilities 64% are fixed only
 - Remaining 36% have either:
 - Mobile unit only (23%)
 - Both fixed & mobile units (13%)
- Is there a lot of time being spent transporting sheep to the fixed handling unit?
- Are people making do with poor facilities on out blocks?



What handling facilities are on farms?

- What components do people have?

- Scales/weigh crate 88%
- Collecting pen 87%
- Footbath (all types) 77%
- Race 69%
- Sorting gate 52%

Almost half don't have a sorting gate

- If we take above five components as the minimum required

Only 34% indicated they had all of these

Automated and more expensive systems rare



Use of footbath facilities

- Footbath use
 - Yes (77%), No (23%)
- Footbath type
 - In race 68%
 - Batch unroofed 17%
 - **Batch roofed 9%**
- Average 7 ewes fit at one time in footbath
 - Slow throughput
 - Unlikely to be effective
 - Will it be done at all?



TAMS funding for Irish sheep farms

- TAMS I, TAMSII, TAMS III – DAFM funding available since 2008
- Initially sheep handling equipment – fixed and mobile + sheep fencing
- More recently (TAMS III) includes funding for EID and management software package
- Funding has been 40% general or 60% for some categories including Young Trained Farmer (YTF) based on lesser of DAFM costings or actual cost of investment

TAMS III provides 60% funding to all under Farm Safety Capital Investment Scheme on fixed and mobile sheep handling facilities and equipment

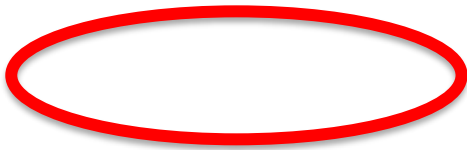
TAMS uptake and barriers

- Despite handling/fencing/housing being identified as labour saving infrastructure, did sheep farmers apply for TAMS funding?
 - Yes 40%
 - No 60%
- Main reasons identified for not applying
 - Application procedure
 - Reference costs
 - Overall investment cost
- Highest uptake in 35 to 49 age group and part timers
- Larger flocks twice as likely to apply compared to smaller flocks



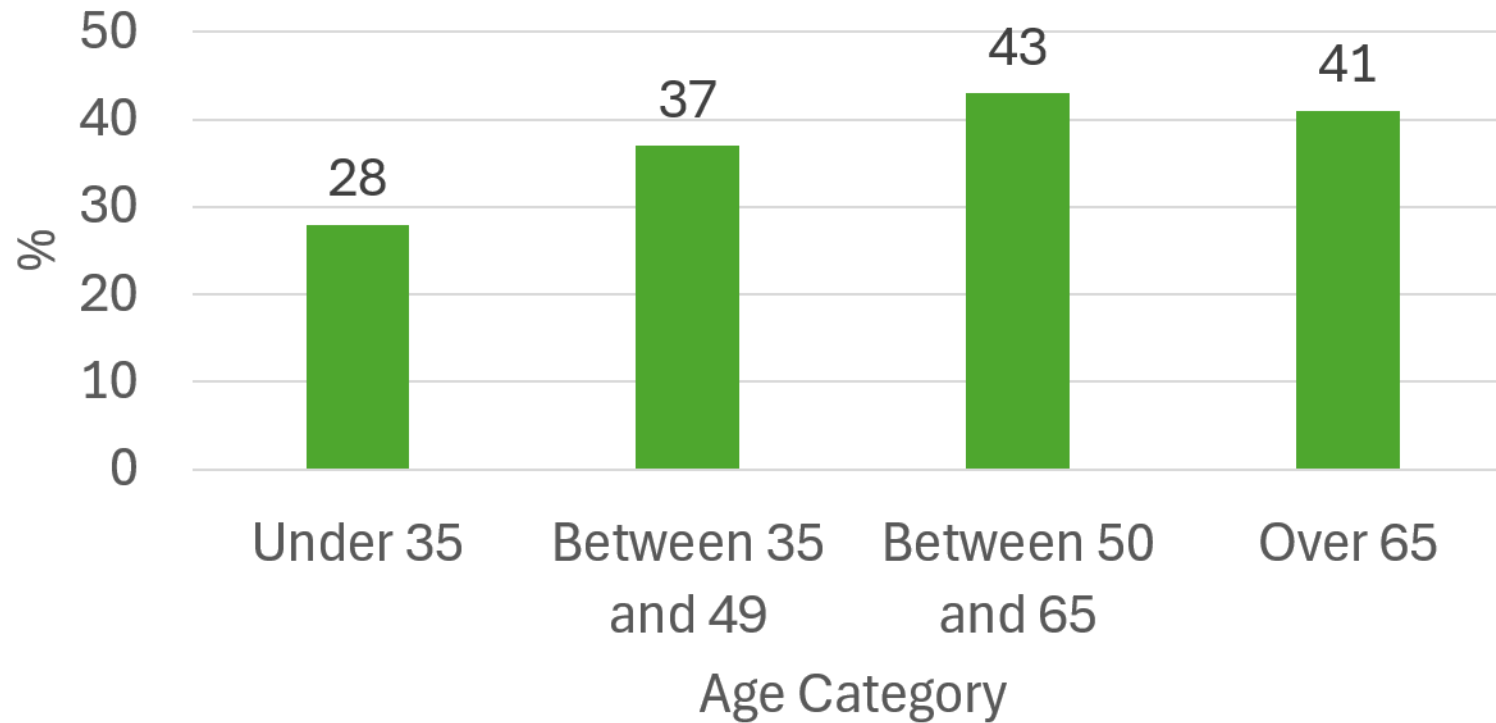
Intention to reduce sheep numbers

62% have no plans to reduce sheep numbers



Who is reducing numbers?

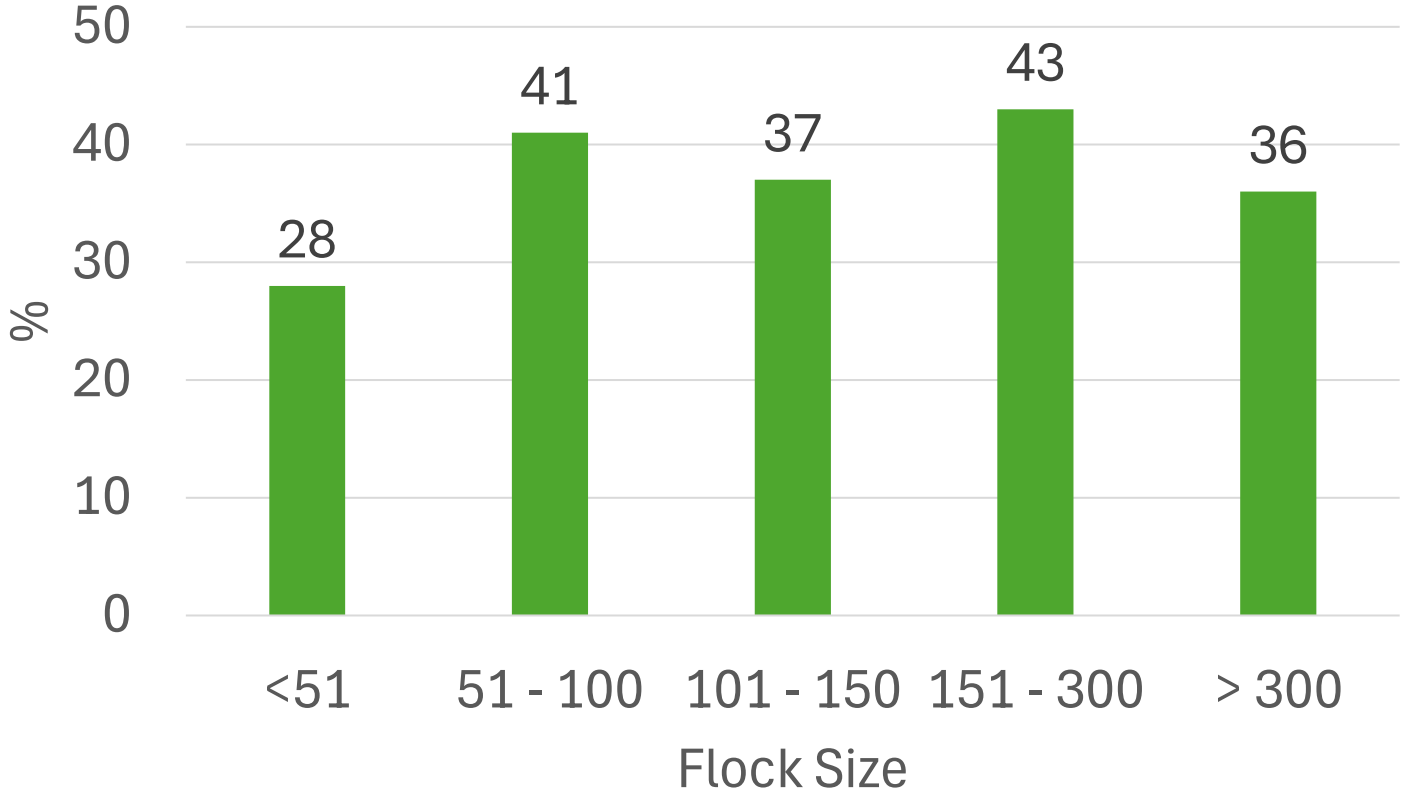
Proportion intending to reduce ewe numbers per age category



Inclination to reduce increases with age categories

Who is reducing numbers?

Proportion intending to reduce ewe numbers per flock size category



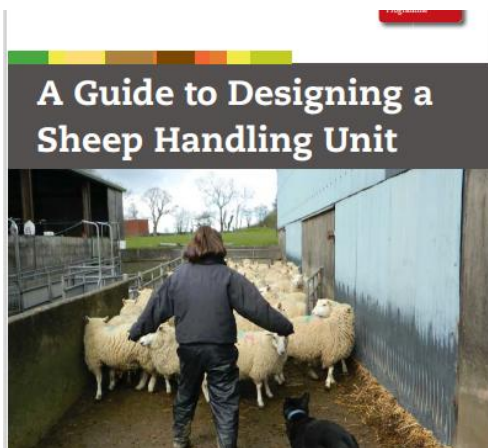
By flock size highest in 151 – 300 ewe category, lowest in 10 – 50 ewe category

Challenges and Opportunities

- Among the challenges to overcome:
 - Sheep farming will be predominantly part time
 - Only 34% of farms have the 5 basic handling components
 - 68% need to trailer transport sheep between land blocks
 - Only 40% uptake of TAMS grant
 - 38% have or are planning to reduce sheep numbers
- Of the 39% stating labour was the main reason they reduced/plan to reduce sheep numbers:
 - 70% do not have the 5 basic handling components
 - 62% did not avail of TAMS grant
 - 50% work off farm
- A labour efficient and profitable sheep enterprise can be achieved when the right infrastructure is in place

Take Home Messages

- Take stock of your facilities and infrastructure and seek advice on developing a plan for labour saving investments
- Your time is valuable and definite opportunities for improvement in particular with sheep handling facilities
- Continued support and guidance will be necessary for sheep farmers to become more labour efficient



Scan QR code below
for link to online copy



Acknowledgements

- Dr Noirin McHugh
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