



Shane Moore has made a substantial investment in sheep housing and handling facilities on his farm in Co Roscommon. Read more on page 16.

Investing in farmyard infrastructure will boost flock health and profits

Sheep farmers need to look at making full use of TAMS grants to develop housing and handling facilities that will pay for themselves in a short period of time

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Knowledge Transfer



If we compare the investment in farm infrastructure, in particular housing and handling facilities, on sheep farms with those on cattle farms we see vast differences. This is not news to anyone. Suboptimal facilities have been identified as a limiting factor, which is hindering animal performance and negatively influencing labour requirements on sheep farms for decades.

A reason put forward for the stark difference between sheep and cattle infrastructure facilities on farms is that farmers need a basic level of handling/housing facilities to deal with cattle due to the sheer size and power of the animals.

Sheep on the other hand are much smaller and can be restrained and treated by humans without any handling facilities and this is where the challenge lies.

The ability to treat sheep without

handling infrastructure and because sheep are much lighter and can stay outdoors, potentially all year without housing, means that many farmers have for years managed sheep without any investment in handling/housing infrastructure.

What lessons have we learned from spring of 2024?

Extremes in weather conditions are becoming more frequent. This spring certainly demonstrated the importance of having facilities to keep ewes and newborn lambs indoors during periods of harsh weather.

However, the housing facilities are only one part of the equation. Prior to the spring, we identified a huge range in body condition score (BCS) in ewes at mating time. Up to 40% of the ewes in some of the flocks that we are monitoring were in suboptimal body condition for mating. By lambing time the num-

ber of ewes in suboptimal body condition had increased across virtually all flocks. In the worst cases, around half of all ewes were in less than ideal body condition at lambing.

What does poor body condition in ewes have to do with sheep facilities?

Ewes that are in ideal body condition have higher levels of fertility, produce lambs with optimal birth weight, and produce good quality colostrum and milk off their backs to ensure excellent lamb thrive and survival.

Ensuring that the majority of the ewes in the flock achieve target body condition depends not just on providing the sheep with sufficient nutrients, but also having facilities to promptly and effectively treat conditions such as lameness and parasites and housing ewes when grass runs out in the winter.

In short, on farms where there are poor handling facilities we see much higher levels of lameness which has a huge impact on animal performance. Farms that are short of housing facilities will often stagger or delay housing. Feeding ewes outside will result in poorer outcomes in terms of maintaining body condition.

Investing in sheep facilities costs lots of money?

Yes developing a labour efficient sheep handling and housing facility will require time, planning and finance. It is not something that should be designed and put up on the spur of the moment.

Farmers looking to develop these facilities should plan a year in advance so as to make full use of TAMS grants and develop a facility that will pay for itself over a relatively short period of time.

Lamb mortality levels

This year we looked at lamb mortality levels on farms participating in the Teagasc Sheep BETTER Farm Programme. We looked at the number of embryos that were scanned and compared that to the number of lambs that were presented for weighing at seven weeks of age.

The results show a huge variation in lamb mortality across the flocks. Table 1 on the next page shows the huge differences in lamb mortality. The greatest losses occurred after lambing. On farms with poor facilities these losses were primarily due to the excess number of ewes in poor body condition leading to a lack of milk/exposure.

Also, some farms had significant outbreaks of joint ill in lambs as a result of poor colostrum and insufficient hygiene due to poor housing/lambing facilities.

There is a strong correlation between lamb mortality and the quality of the housing and handling infrastructure



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ELITE €UROSTAR RAM SALE

Saturday 24th August 2024
Tullamore Mart



- 500+ Rams
- All 5 stars
- 10+ Breeds
- Sale starts 11:30
- All Rams DNA Parentage Verified
- SIS eligible
- All with Genomic Evaluation and Physically inspected



Trait	★	★★★★★	Diff
40-Day weight (kg)	19.6	20.6	1kg
100-Day weight (kg)	32.8	34.4	1.6kg
150-Day weight (kg)	40	42.2	2.2kg
Age at Slaughter (Days)	187	173	-14 Days

How do stars work?

These results shows how progeny from 5-Star Terminal rams outperforms their 1-Star counterparts

Sheep Improvement Scheme (SIS): Ram task

Lowland Flocks

- 4/5 Stars on the Rep or Ter Index
- Genomic Evaluation
- Scrapie Type 1/2/3

Hill Flocks

- DNA Sire Verified
- Hill Ram (Blackface Mountain or Cheviot Type)
- Scrapie Type 1/2/3



Finding SIS eligible Rams?



RamSearch

Go to www.ramsearch.ie
Rams by Breed, Age, Star rating, Location, SIS Eligibility and much more. You can also search the Tag number of any SIS ram



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on the farms. In years where we have had a mild spring and ewes and lambs can be turned out to grass after 24 hours the differences in mortality between flocks is much lower.

However, in years like 2024 the importance of having adequate and good-quality labour-efficient facilities really comes to the fore.

Table 1: Estimated lamb mortality figures across a cohort of BETTER Sheep Programme Participants

Flock	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
Dead born (%)	3	8	1	4	10	2	14	12	5
Died after birth (%)	5	13	3	7	20	6	22	8	11
Total (%)	8	21	13	11	31	8	36	20	16

Farmer case study: Shane Moore, Athleague, Roscommon

'I wouldn't be at sheep if I didn't have the shed and the handling facility'

Shane joined the BETTER Sheep farm programme a number of years ago. At the time he had a split lambing flock, early and mid-season, as he had limited housing for sheep.

"I wanted to increase ewe numbers while at the same time reducing my workload as I work off-farm," says Shane. In 2020, Shane started construction on a new five bay partly slatted sheep house that can accommodate 160 ewes.

It took almost 12 months to get planning permission and TAMS grant approval. The house also incorporated a batch footbath and handling facility.

"I was asked at a recent farm walk by some farmers whether I was happy that I had built the shed and handling facility," says Shane. "My answer was simple: I wouldn't be at sheep if I didn't have it!"

Net cost versus true cost

The net cost of the shed after grant and vat was almost €53,000 or €330 per ewe space. However the true cost of the shed is much less when we factor in the following savings:

- The cost of the shed is tax deductible – there is a potential tax saving of €10,600 to €21,200 depending on income tax rate.
- Labour saving due to having an efficient handling and housing system ~ 300 hours per year. Approximately €4,800 (@ €16/hr).
- Reduced lamb mortality in a spring like 2024. Shane's flock recorded 8% which was half the average lamb mortality recorded across the other flocks.
- That is a potential 22 lambs saved compared to the average flock. Conservatively valuing these lambs at €100/hd the benefit in a bad year adds up to approximately €2,200.
- Taking all factors on board, it is easy to see that the net cost of approximately €53,000 will be soon recouped in terms of income tax savings, reduced labour requirement and higher levels of animal performance.

Summary: the essential facilities needed for efficient lowland sheep production

This year, sheep farmers should take stock of their situation. The essential infrastructure requirements for efficient lowland sheep production systems are:

- Fencing to be able to control where the sheep are grazing.
- A handling facility with at a minimum a race, drafting facility and a batch footbath.
- Housing to hold ewes for a two month period.
- One lambing pen per eight ewes due to lamb.
- A number of group pens to enable ewes and lambs to be retained indoors during periods of extreme weather.
- For more information on how to reduce labour and increase animal performance, contact your local Teagasc advisor.



Shane writes notes on a white board to keep track of what animals are where.



A good footbath and area to dry off eases flock management.