



# Weighing up store lamb performance

Preparing a budget, targeting weight gain from grass, and deciding on an estimated slaughter date should be the main autumn priorities for store lamb producers

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**F**armers who run a breeding ewe flock are assessing their options for lambs remaining on the farm. With a reasonable store lamb trade many will be considering whether to sell stores or finish.

Factors to take into account include the number and weight of your lambs, estimated time to finish, availability of grass, availability of suitable housing if needed to finish indoors. Your cash flow/credit situation is also key.

On the purchasing side, farms that run a store lamb finishing enterprise are figuring out what they can afford to pay for stores and still allow for a decent margin.

The two main factors that determine profit margin in finishing lambs are:

- Current price of store lambs vs expected price for lamb carcass.
- Cost efficiency of carcass gain during the finishing period.

## Prepare a budget

Whether finishing homebred lambs or buying in lowland or hill lambs to finish the first important step is to have a plan. While the price received is largely outside of your control, the cost of getting the lamb to the point of sale can be.

A useful tool to estimate the cost of finishing store lambs on a grassland only farm is the Teagasc Store Lamb Calculator. It also gives a good estimate of when lambs will be fit for market. This programme allows you to input figures such as the weight and price of lambs, concentrate price per tonne as well as standard costs for veterinary, transport etc.

The estimated finish date, along with total concentrate required, will be calculated with slaughter value of lamb being based on historic prices paid in previous years on the predicted slaughter date.

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## What are the dietary options?

The main options are grazed grass, ad-lib concentrates and forage crops. No single option will suit every farm/system and sometimes a combination of some or all the options will work best.

Key considerations for each of the three main diet options are outlined below.

### Grazed grass

If we assume grass availability is not an issue, the most economic system to finish lambs is to achieve as much gain as possible from top quality grazed grass followed by a period of meal supplementation, either indoors or at grass.

The aim should be to have lambs going into covers of 1,500 to 2,000 kg dry matter per ha (grass height 8 – 10cm). Studies have shown a positive impact on performance from moving lambs on when grass height reaches 6cm. In other words you shouldn't force lambs to fully graze out swards.

Temporary fencing optimises utilisation and allows fresh grass to be offered to lambs every three to four days. It is also important that any flock health issues such as parasite burden, lameness etc are properly addressed and are not allowed to reduce lamb performance at grass.

As outlined in Table 1, with excellent management there is potential for lambs to gain 1kg per week live weight during this period on a grass only diet.

For example light lambs weighing

25 to 30 kg in August should be approaching 40kg after 12 to 14 weeks of good grass and ready to start the finishing period.

### Ad-lib concentrates

Concentrate supplementation is the biggest cost in any lamb finishing system. Aim for high quality ingredients and ensure the feed is specifically intended for intensive finishing of lambs. It should be balanced for minerals and include 0.5% ammonium chloride to help avoid issues with urinary calculi.

Most finishers will look for a good value for money commercial ration in pelleted form. The pelleted feed is less attractive to birds. It also prevents lambs sorting and selectively leaving behind certain ingredients as can happen with a coarse ration.

There is an opportunity for significant savings per tonne where buying in bulk is an option. Where lambs are to be finished on ad-lib concentrates, it is important that they gradually build up to ad-lib feeding levels.

Increase the amount offered by 200g/day every three days until lambs are ad-lib feeding. Where lambs are housed indoors ensure that the sheep house is well ventilated and adequately bedded where necessary.

Performance will vary by breed and sex but, on average, lambs will be growing in excess of 200g/hd/day or putting on 1.5-1.8kg live weight per week.

Regular weighing will ensure lambs are drafted at the correct weight and assessed for muscle and fat cover prior to being drafted for slaughter.

**Table 1:** Typical performance of lowland terminal sired lambs on good quality pasture

Time Period	ADG (g/day)	Kg gain per week
Aug/Sept	160	1.1
Oct/Nov	115	0.8

The programme has recently been updated and is available on the Teagasc website by following the QR code link, or from your local Teagasc advisor.



When calculating a budget it is important to accurately assess what lambs are left on the farm by weighing remaining lambs (or at least a representative proportion) and dividing them up into weight categories i.e. <30kg, 30-35kg, >35kg.

Subdividing the lamb flock will allow you to assess how much time and feed it is going to take to finish the lambs. Equally, when purchasing lambs it is important to consider that with lighter lambs vs heavier lambs you will have to adjust the number purchased to allow different residency periods on the farm.



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## Forage crops

Lambs grazing on forage crops such as forage rape and hybrid brassica won't perform as well as lambs housed indoors on ad-lib concentrates. But they can perform satisfactorily and finish on these crops where properly managed.

Hill cross lambs will grow at approximately 140g/hd/day once adapted onto the crop and kill out around 44-45% depending on breed and the sex of the lamb.

Grazing forage crops in the winter for lamb finishing requires careful management and lambs need to be weighed regularly once approaching target weights.

Fields should be divided into blocks to allow lambs access to fresh forage every 2-4 days. Ensure that lambs are not forced to overgraze

the stalks of the crops as this will reduce animal performance.

Check the correct guidelines for grazing these crops in terms of lie back space and buffer margins for compliance purposes. Where lambs are grazing forage brassica crops the following guidelines are essential to maximise performance:

- Introduce lambs slowly, over 7-10 days, to brassica crops to avoid digestive upsets. It will take three to four weeks for gut fill changes to take effect in the lambs.
- Measure crop yield and allocate grazing area accordingly, average utilisation will be approx. 60% but this will vary with weather and pre-grazing yield.
- If running short on forage consider feeding concentrates with the crop to boost performance.

## Estimated date of slaughter

The aim is to reach the maximum carcass weight that meat processors are paying on at the time of slaugh-

ter. Regular drafting, as lambs come fit, is essential to ensure the target carcass weight is not being exceeded. This is particularly important where high levels of concentrates are being fed.

In terms of adding value through a carcass price rise, late February to April has been a good time to slaughter hoggets in recent years. In the case of lighter store lambs in September this is a good period to aim for in terms of a finish date to avail of the higher carcass price.

Some producer groups have arrangements with factories to finish smaller framed hill breeds at lighter carcass weights.

An information booklet on Store Lamb Finishing is available for download from this QR Code link.



## Growing resilient organic farming systems

A new Teagasc-led organic farming research project is currently underway in conjunction with University College Dublin. The project is funded by the Department of Agriculture Food and Marine and aims to address the current research gaps in organic farming while demonstrating to farmers technically efficient organic systems of beef and lamb production.

A key part of this work will be building on previous work investigating options for lamb finishing using both forages and cereal based diets. This work will take into account effects on animal performance, environmental impact and economic returns.

Starting this year lowland lambs are being finished in Teagasc Athenry under organic management using either:

- A high legume based system incorporating white and red clover to provide high quality grazing and silage for lamb finishing.
- A high legume plus forage crop system incorporating white and red clover and forage crops sown to finish lambs.

### Hill lamb finishing systems

Hill lamb finishing systems will also be looked at with lambs finished under organic management indoors or outdoors.

Outdoors, lambs will be offered either forage rape or hybrid brassica crops which have been grown under organic management and will be grazed during autumn/winter months by hill lambs purchased from hill farms and brought to Teagasc Athenry.

Indoors, hill lambs will be offered one of the following three diets with all components grown under organic management:

- High quality grass silage and concentrates
- High quality red clover silage and concentrates
- Barley/Oats/Peas combination whole crop forage

A store lamb finishing enterprise properly planned and well managed with attention to detail has the potential to leave a good margin as well as providing an injection of cash flow in the early part of the year.



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