

sheep

# Seven steps to maximise lamb performance on grass

Finishing lambs when concentrates are costly.

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**T**he outlook for lamb prices and demand is positive for the rest of 2022. One of the challenges facing farmers, however, is the dramatic rise in input costs.

Fertiliser, feed, veterinary medicines and fuel prices have all risen dramatically.

It is more important than ever for sheep farmers to reduce their reliance on concentrate feed when finishing lambs in the main growing season (April – October).

Let's look at the factors affecting lamb performance from grazed grass.

## 1 Nutrition

Leafy grass drives performance. From June onwards, it becomes more difficult to manage grass. Ideal grazing heights are between 6cm and 10cm. Long or stemmy grass will reduce performance.

It is important that paddocks/fields are fully grazed out (by dry ewes or suckler cows) or topped down to 4cm after each grazing. This will ensure good-quality grass in subsequent rotations.

## 2 Fertiliser

Fertiliser is really expensive this year, but is still good value when compared to replacing grazed grass with concentrates.

It is important to use sufficient fertiliser to grow enough grass to

feed livestock and to maintain grass quality.

'Little and often' applications of fertiliser nitrogen will help to keep grass leafy. Protected urea fertiliser offers the best value per kilogram of nitrogen.

## 3 Internal parasite control

Stomach worms are the main parasite causing ill thrift in lambs. However, most sheep farmers do not know which anthelmintics (wormers) are still effective on their farms.

Where the anthelmintic used is no longer effective, animal performance will be poor, as the lambs will still have a parasite burden after treatment. Make sure the product you are using is effective against the worms in your sheep.

The only way that to do this is by taking a faecal sample after treatment to ensure that all the worms have been killed.

The time frame for taking a faecal sample post-treatment is seven days for a yellow drench and 14 days for a white or clear drench.

A positive egg count indicates that the treatment has not worked and demands further investigation.

## 4 Lameness

Lame sheep are too common. Lame sheep don't perform, lose body condition, and are in great discomfort.

No amount of feed is going to prop up the performance of lambs suffering from scald or foot rot.

Segregate lame sheep, identify the cause of their lameness and treat it. They should only re-join the flock once the disease has cleared.

Routine footbathing of the flock will help prevent healthy sheep from going lame.



## 5 Mineral deficiency

Cobalt deficiency is the mineral deficiency that most commonly affects lamb thrive on Irish sheep farms. Cobalt is an important mineral used by the bacteria in the rumen to synthesise vitamin B12. On cobalt-deficient farms, lambs will need a continuous supply to ensure optimum thrive.

Oral cobalt supplementation with 10-15ml of cobalt sulphate solution (six heaped teaspoons to a gallon of water) every two to three weeks post-weaning should rectify any such deficiency.

There is also the option of using boluses, but these are much more expensive and in some cases, have not undergone verification of their effectiveness in rectifying cobalt deficiency in sheep.

## 6 External parasite

Pour-on insect growth regulator gives excellent control against blowfly strike.

If biting lice or sheep scab are af-



Enda Finnegan farms sheep and cattle at Ballyeasin just outside Templeboy in Co Sligo. *By Brian Farrell*

fecting sheep, then plunge dipping with an approved product is the best option.

Different products will have different withdrawal periods, so it is important to bear that in mind when

choosing a particular product, especially for 'short keep' lambs.

**7 Creep-feeding concentrates**  
Concentrates play an important role in helping to finish lambs.

However, concentrate supplementation carries a high cost and should be used judiciously and targeted at finishing groups, or used in October when performance off grass is naturally restricted.

## Case Study – Enda Finnegan

Enda Finnegan farms sheep and cattle at Ballyeasin, just outside Templeboy in Co Sligo. This year, 150 ewes and 25 ewe lambs lambed in mid-March and will all be weaned in late June at a weaning rate of 1.6 lambs per ewe joined, including ewe lambs.

The farm is laid out in a paddock system at a stocking rate of 10 ewes per hectare, which means that each hectare is carrying the equivalent of 10 ewes and 16 lambs (four ewes and 6.4 lambs per acre).

The ewes and lambs graze in paddocks. The sheep are moved every three days and paddocks are removed as baled silage when they become too

strong for grazing. After weaning, the lambs graze ahead of the ewes.

This means that the lambs have access to the best grass and the ewes clean up the grass left behind.

"This makes it easier to have good-quality grass ahead of the lambs at all times," says Enda.

Some concentrate feed is offered to help finish lambs and ensure that there is sufficient grass for the ewes at mating in October.

After weaning, lambs are weighed and a finishing group is set up (lambs greater than 38kg). These lambs are offered 0.4kg/head per day to improve performance and fat cover.

"As we draft lambs, more are selected from the grass-fed group (over 38kg) and put into the finishing group," says Enda. "We plan to have all lambs sold to the factory by late October."

Enda uses faecal egg counts to determine when lambs need to be treated for stomach worms. Lambs are sampled every two to three weeks and treated when the egg count is seen to be rising rapidly or exceeds 500 eggs per gram.

"After treatment, we take faecal samples to ensure that the treatment has worked," says Enda.

"Throughout the grazing season, all sheep are routinely footbathed to keep on top of lameness. Lambs get a cobalt drench every two weeks post-weaning, which normally coincides with collecting for drafting."