

Growing and finishing lambs for Better Returns



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**Better Returns
Programme**

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Over 12 million lambs are slaughtered in the UK every year, producing more than 230,000 tonnes of meat.

There are two main challenges for the lamb sector; the first is to maintain the production of high-quality meat and the second is to ensure sheep farming is financially viable.

Most of the costs involved are spent supporting the lamb from birth to weaning. Post-weaning management also needs careful planning to maximise the financial returns. Minimising mortality and maximising growth rates are crucial.

The starting point, ironically is the end-point. Farmers should ask themselves: Who will be buying the lambs? How will they be marketed? When do they need to be ready by? What type of lamb is required?

Once an answer to all these questions is known, a plan can be put in place to achieve the target growth rates needed to meet the customers' needs, using feeds that are most appropriate and readily on hand.

This manual presents a range of options and ideas for growing and finishing lambs to achieve better returns.



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When to wean

Figures from the AHDB Beef & lamb Stocktake Survey suggest lambs are usually weaned between 12 and 14 weeks of age.

The decision on when to wean should be determined by ewe body condition, feed availability and lamb growth rates. These factors change every year, so the ideal weaning date cannot be set in stone.

Assess at eight weeks

Assessing ewes and weighing lambs at around eight weeks of age (from midpoint of lambing) can give an indication of the ewe's milk supply, the health status of the group and forage supply. It also allows a weaning date to be decided, as ewe condition and lamb performance can be assessed.

Table 1: Target Body Condition Score (BCS) for ewes in different situations

	Hill ewes	Upland ewes	Lowland ewes
At weaning	2	2	2.5
At tupping	2.5	3	3.5

Aim to have 90% of the ewes at the target BCS

If ewes at eight weeks post-lambing are falling below the weaning BCS targets, the lambs may need to be taken away earlier to allow sufficient time for the ewes to gain condition to reach the target BCS by tupping. Ewes in the right condition at tupping tend to have more lambs the following year. It takes six to eight weeks for a ewe to gain one BCS on unrestricted grazing.

Target growth rates for lambs up to eight weeks of age should be greater than 250g per day

If a lamb (with a 4kg birthweight) gained an average of 250g per day from birth to eight weeks (56 days) it would weigh 18kg, or 21kg if it gained at 300g per day.

If lamb growth rate is lower, it may be due to parasites, ewe condition affecting milk production or forage supply and is worth investigating.



Up to weaning

From eight weeks of age a lamb's energy intake is greater from grass than from milk, so competition for high-quality grass between ewes and lambs reaches a critical point. The time this happens will change each year depending on grazing management and grass growth.

If the grass is growing well and ewes are in good condition, weaning can be delayed without reducing lamb liveweight gain. However, if forage availability is low, lamb growth rates will suffer, as ewes and lambs compete for the same grass.

If lamb growth rates are lower than 200g per day, this should trigger weaning and lambs should be moved onto better quality forage

If creep feed is being fed, liveweight gain may not decline after eight weeks. So weaning decisions will be based on how long the lambs have until they are finished as well as ewe condition. The target for systems with high creep use is to sell over 60% of lambs before weaning.



Transition period

Research shows that animals that experience novel feeds, such as red clover, chicory or cereals, when with their mothers perform better once they are exposed to the feed when weaned. It is therefore important to think about a transition period if the lambs are being weaned onto different feeds.

It can take up to three weeks for the rumen to adapt to a new feed and care is needed to prevent a weaning check

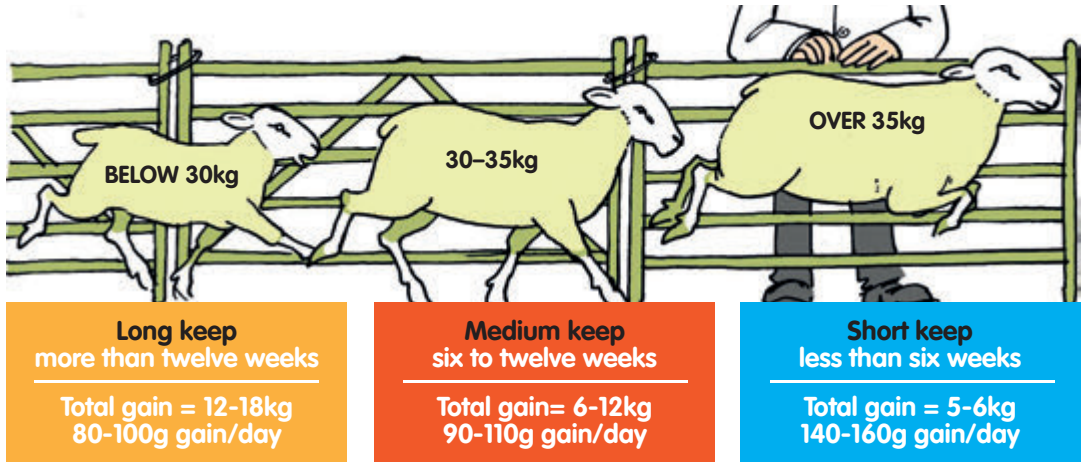
Any treatments, such as vaccines or wormers, should be given before weaning as stress can affect the immune response, especially to vaccines, making lambs more susceptible to disease.

Ideally, lambs should be weaned onto a pasture they know but out of sight and sound of the ewes. Once they have settled, they can be moved to pasture with a known low worm burden or onto a forage crop.

Use faecal egg counts to confirm the level of parasite challenge in recently weaned lambs

Fitting lambs to systems

When dealing with home-produced lambs or bought-in lambs, batch according to weight so that their feed can be targeted more efficiently.



Tips for selling store lambs

- Batch lambs by weight, breed, sex or level of finish
- Healthy lambs grow quicker and generally sell better. Follow a flock health plan
- Keep a close eye on store lamb prices and feed supply when deciding to sell

Tips for buying store lambs

- Handle the animals and assess condition. If possible, weigh before purchase
- Buy lambs according to feed availability
- Inspect all lambs for signs of ill-health
- Source from as few farms as possible to minimise the risk of buying-in disease

Priority to lambs or ewes?

On farms with breeding ewes, it is important that ewes have enough time on unrestricted grazing to regain body condition and to be on a rising plan of nutrition for tupping. If extra winter feed needs to be bought-in to replace the feed eaten by the weaned lambs, it may be more cost effective to sell the lambs earlier. A store lamb will eat nearly the same amount as a dry ewe.

Target for grass-based systems = >70% of lambs to be sold (finished or as stores) by tupping

See page 13 for how to use a partial budget to compare decisions.

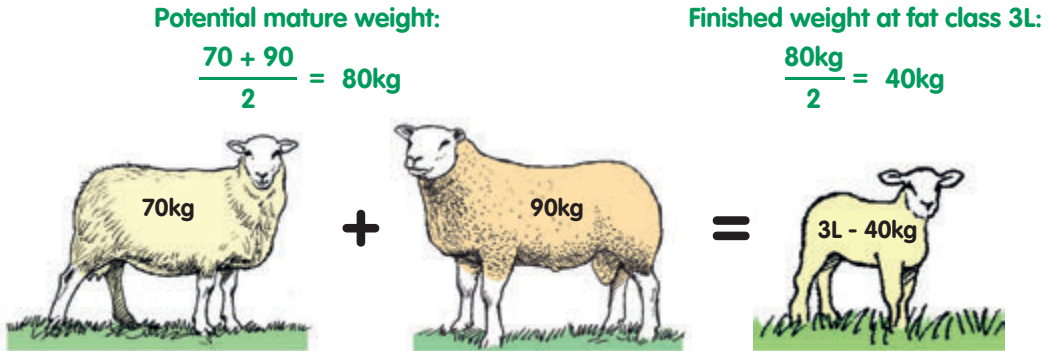
Estimating finishing weights

When thinking about target growth rates, it is worth checking finishing weights.

A lamb finishing at fat class 3L will typically have a weight that is half of its potential mature weight. Add 5% for medium/long keep lambs and entire males.

To make sure lambs are on target to finish when expected, monitor progress by weighing all lambs or 10-20% of the group every one or two weeks.

Example



Finishing entire males

Keeping and finishing entire male lambs can be beneficial due to higher growth rates and better feed conversion. However, this needs careful management after weaning.

- Separate from ewe lambs by five months of age at the latest
- Plan finishing carefully, avoiding long store periods
- Feed a high-quality ration in the later stages of finishing and bear in mind that meat quality will be affected if they are not finished by eight months of age

Shearing store lambs

Shearing lambs can increase growth rates if they are being finished indoors on an *ad-lib* feeding system. It may be worth doing an on-farm trial to make sure the benefits of faster growth rates outweigh the total cost of shearing.

Table 2: The pros and cons of shearing store lambs

Pros	Cons
Lambs eat more and can finish quicker, reducing days to slaughter	Will need to be housed for over a month to see cost benefit of shearing
Reduces lying area required per lamb	Does not reduce feeding space requirements per lamb
Reduced risk of heat stress, which can be a problem when lambs are housed and fed a high cereal diet	Check with the abattoir, as some will penalise for shorn lambs

Feed planning

Knowing how much feed is available and how much is needed to feed the lambs simplifies management decisions and improves production efficiency. Whatever crop the lambs are eating, the principles of planning feed allocation remain the same.

Calculating demand

Growing lambs generally eat around 4% of their bodyweight as dry matter (DM) per day. For example, a 30kg lamb that is growing well on high-quality forage will eat around 1.2kg DM per day.

A feed budget can be used to take into consideration changes in lamb numbers and weight to estimate how much feed is required. This can be used to allocate crops to certain groups or to help make decisions about whether to keep lambs to finish or sell as stores.

Table 3: Calculations of monthly feed demand

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Number of lambs [A]	300	300	300	250	150	100	50
Average weight (kg) [B]	30	33	36	39	42	42	42
% of bodyweight* [C]	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Daily requirement (kg DM) [D = B x (C/100)]	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.7
Group requirement (kg DM per day) [E = D x A]	360	390	420	400	255	170	85
Monthly requirement (t DM) [F = (E x 30)/1000]	11.2	11.7	12.6	12.0	7.7	5.1	2.6

* 4% will cover some utilisation losses but if grazing crops in wet conditions, a greater allocation may be needed

Calculating supply

Alternatively if a fixed area or tonnage of forage crop or feed is available, the number of lambs that this could feed needs to be calculated. For example: 3ha crop of stubble turnips with a yield of 5t DM/ha = 15t DM.

According to the feed budget, around 110 lambs would be supported on that crop for three months.

Table 4: Calculations of monthly feed supply

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
Crop available (area) [G]		1	1	1	
Yield (t DM/ha) [H]		4 [^]	5 [^]	6 [^]	
Feed available (t DM/ha) [I = G x H]		4	5	6	
Daily requirement (kg DM) [D]		1.3	1.4	1.6	
Total grazing days [J = (I x 1000)/D]		3,076	3,571	3,750	
Number of lambs per month [J/30]		103	119	125	

[^] Some plant growth will occur so the available feed will change

The same principle can be applied to grass – see Beef and Sheep BRP Manual 8 – **Planning grazing strategies for Better Returns** for more details, or Manual 6 – **Using brassicas for Better Returns** on guidance on how to estimate yields of forage crops.

Making the best use of grass

Grass can be used for all batches of lambs but needs careful management to ensure quality and quantity is maintained. Be aware that weaned lambs can readily eat into the reserves kept for flushing and over-wintering ewes, which may affect ewe performance and bought-in feed requirements.

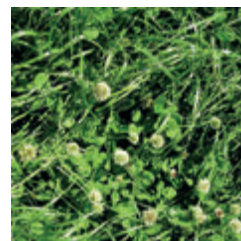
Some monitoring of the grass is required to optimise the performance of the stock and the grass. Sward heights are the simplest way – see Table 5 for targets.

Table 5: Sward height targets for weaned finishing lambs

Class of stock	Rotational grazing		Set stocking (cm)
	Pre-graze (cm)	Post-graze (cm)	
Weaned finishing lambs	10-12	5-7	6-8

Grazing pasture at the right height ensures the lambs are eating high-quality grass. The leaf is the most nutritious part of a plant (>11.5 MJ ME/kg DM), so maximising the leaf and minimising the amount of stem (only 10.5 MJ ME/kg DM) in each bite increases the nutritional quality of the diet and lamb performance.

White clover in pastures can increase the rate of lamb liveweight gain from weaning to slaughter by 25% and counter the summer dip in grass growth and quality. Good grazing management in spring is key to achieving good clover levels from midsummer onwards.



Using a group of weaned lambs is a good way to start rotational grazing systems, as it is simpler to manage a group of animals of similar weight and feed requirements. Give them the priority in terms of feed quality, moving them through each paddock first, so they are able to select the best bits, with 'followers' such as replacement ewes or cows and calves, being used to tidy up behind them.

Grazing systems can be easier to plan if they are based on the kg DM requirements for the group and the available grass (kg DM per ha).

Beef and Sheep BRP Manual 8 – **Planning grazing strategies for Better Returns** demonstrates how to do this.

Reducing parasite risk in grazing systems

Grazing management can be used to reduce the dependence on wormers but requires significant planning. The elements that reduce parasite burdens are grazing with other classes of stock, eg grazing with sheep one year and cattle the next, using the fields for conservation for some or all of the year, or grazing new reseeds after a forage or arable crop.

In an ideal situation, finishing lambs should not be grazed on land which has had ewes and lambs on in the same season, as these are high risk fields. The challenge is when only high risk fields are available, as parasites are likely to have an impact and regular treatments may be needed. Use faecal egg counts to monitor. See Sustainable Worm Control Strategies for Sheep at www.scops.org.uk for more details.

Feed options

Lambs can be finished successfully on a variety of crops.

Table 6: Feed options for growing and finishing lambs

Crop	Sowing time	Period of use	Growing costs (£/ha/yr)	Potential lamb growth (g/day)	Yield (tonnes DM/ha)
Ryegrasses eg perennial and Italian	Apr-Sep	All year	300-450 (for 5 years)	250	1-11
		Or as silage			13-14
Red clover	Apr-Jul	Grazing: Aug-Nov	350-600 (for 5 years)	300	10-15
		Or as silage			
Lucerne	Apr-Jul	Grazing: Aug-Nov	600-800 (for 5 years)	Grazing : 250	10-12
		Or as silage		Silage : 210	
Chicory/plantain and clover	Apr-Jul	May-Sep	400-600 (for 3-5 years)	300	10-12
Stubble turnips/ forage rape	Mar-Aug	Jun-Dec	160-230	270	5-6
Rape/kale hybrid	Mar-Aug	May-Mar	200-300	250	6-8
Swedes	Feb-Jun	Oc-Apr	370-400	240	7-8
Kale	Apr-Aug	Jun-Apr	300-350	180	8-9

BRP has published manuals and online documents with more details of most of these crops.

Manual 4 – Managing clover for Better Returns

Manual 6 – Using brassicas for Better Returns

The Home-Grown Forages Directory

View at beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk or call

024 7647 8834 or email brp@ahdb.org.uk to request

a free copy



DM (%)	ME (MJ/kg DM)	CP (g/kg DM)	Pros	Cons
15-25 Grazing	10-12	15-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be available all year round • Range of species and varieties to meet system needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good management needed for high utilisation • Does not fix nitrogen
30-45 Silage	10-12	12-16		
12-18 Grazing	11-12	20-25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixes nitrogen • High yielding • High protein 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Susceptible to crown damage • Risk of bloat • Must be rotationally grazed
25-30 Silage	10-11	14-19		
12-18 Grazing	10	18-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High yielding • High protein • Has good drought tolerance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow to establish • Struggles in waterlogged soils • Must be rotationally grazed
30 Silage				
12-15	11-12	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High protein content • Deep tap root to draw up trace elements and minerals • Could reduce the use of anthelmintics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Susceptible to crown damage • Must be rotationally grazed • Difficult to ensile
10-12	10-11	17-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast growing • Suits arable rotations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yields are unpredictable • Utilisation rates are weather dependant • Not very frost hardy
10-13	10-11	18-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High yield potential • Winter hardy • Provides feed through spring • Cheap to grow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole season crop • Digestibility falls as crop ages
9-13	12-13	10-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frost hardy • Can be lifted and stored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run-back area is essential • Dirty lambs • Performance drops when lambs lose milk teeth in late winter
15-17	10-11	14-17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good yields • Winter hardy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run-back area is essential • Dirty lambs • Stems can get too woody

of the manuals and directory.

BRP+ online publications

Using chicory and plantain in beef and sheep systems

Growing and feeding lucerne

View at beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk.



More feed options

Silage

Good-quality grass silage costs more than grazed grass to produce and feed. However, it can match concentrate feeds in terms of energy and crude protein content and costs half as much per tonne of DM. This makes it one of the most viable feeds for finishing lambs indoors.

- Have silage analysed so that its nutritional content is known
- Lambs will not perform on poor-quality silage (digestibility of below 64% or 10 MJ ME/kg DM)
- Use supplements to balance the ration if the analysis reveals a shortfall in energy or protein
- A short forage chop-length encourages greater intakes, which increases growth rates and reduces the days taken to reach slaughter

Concentrates

Feeding concentrates to finish lambs can be financially rewarding in some cases, eg for specialist early lambing flocks which aim to market lambs in spring when prices are traditionally high.

Using concentrates strategically to hit performance targets or to release grazing for other classes of stock that need it more, can improve the cost benefit of supplementation. But purchased feeds should not be offered routinely, especially if good-quality grass is plentiful.

A good feed conversion efficiency (FCE) is essential to cover the cost of concentrates and can vary from 5:1 to 10:1. A sensitivity analysis can show how FCE and concentrate costs can affect the margin and whether feeding is viable.



Example

Table 7 assumes a lamb needs to gain 12kg which has a value of £22.80 (£1.90/kg LW), with additional variable costs of £3.50. For example, a concentrate price of £260/t and a FCE of 6:1 gives a margin of £0.58 per lamb. The impact of changing prices or FCE can be seen.

Table 7: Example sensitivity analysis comparing concentrate price and FCE on margin per lamb

		FCE (kg gain:kg concentrate)					
		5:1	6:1	7:1	8:1	9:1	10:1
Concentrate price (£/t)	220	£6.10	£3.46	£0.82	−£1.82	−£4.46	−£7.10
	260	£3.70	£0.58	−£2.54	−£5.66	−£8.78	−£11.90
	300	£1.30	−£2.30	−£5.90	−£9.50	−£13.10	−£16.70

Total Mixed Rations (TMRs)

A TMR is where forage and concentrates are mixed together and fed out from a feeder wagon to offer a complete diet.

- TMRs provide a constant diet throughout the day, reducing the risk of rumen upset and acidosis
- They can reduce labour and time taken to feed
- It is essential to have the forage analysed to produce an appropriate and cost effective TMR that will deliver target growth rates



Co-products

Co-products such as vegetable waste, citrus pulp or bread meal can reduce feed costs.

- Check feed value carefully, including moisture content and trace element and mineral levels. These can vary widely between batches and sources
- Calculate costs (including delivery) per kg DM. Moist products mean more money is spent transporting water
- Appropriate on-farm storage and handling is needed. Moist products can deteriorate rapidly



Feed requirements

The nutritional requirements of lambs vary depending on weight and target growth rate. Energy and protein requirements can differ between sex and breeds.

Use the energy and protein requirements in Table 8 to:

- Set realistic targets based on feed quality
- Help formulate rations

Table 8: Energy and protein requirements for growing castrated lambs on forage

Lamb weight (kg)	Growth rate (g/day)	Potential dry matter intake (kg DM/day) [^]	Metabolisable energy (ME) requirements (MJ/day)	Metabolisable protein (MP) (g/day)
20	150	0.8	6.8	80
	250		10.0	110
30	150	1.2	9.0	85
	250		13.0	114
40	150	1.6	11.1	91
	250		16.0	119

[^] Based on 4% of bodyweight

What are the costs?

Knowing the costs of the animals and feeds is essential when deciding to buy or sell stores or to finish home-produced lambs.

Use the tables on pages 6, 8 and 9 to calculate the amount of feed needed to obtain an understanding of the likely feed and forage costs before committing to any particular system.

Table 9: Calculation of feed cost per lamb

Number of animals	Weight (kg) [^]	Intake (kg DM) [*]	Cost per kg DM (p)	Feed cost per day (p)	Finishing period (days)	Feed cost for finishing period (£ per lamb)	Feed cost for group over finishing period
200	39	1.6	6	9.4	30	£2.82	£564
150	35	1.4	12	16.8	80	£13.44	£2,016

[^] Use weight in midpoint of finishing period, eg start weight of 36kg and finish weight of 42kg, means midpoint weight is 39kg

^{*} Assume 4% of bodyweight

Stocktake data can provide a guide to average costs for store finishing systems, which can be used to compare with actual costs.

Table 10: Average costs for store finishing from Stocktake data 2013

Variable costs	Stocktake 2013 average (£ per lamb)	Your system	
		Total	Per lamb
Total feed and forage	5.22		
Vet and medicine	0.65		
Bedding	0.35		
Other livestock expenses	3.72		
Total variable costs:	9.93		
Fixed costs			
Labour	6.41		
Power and machinery	2.13		
Depreciation	1.59		
Property and finance	4.43		
Other	3.10		
Total fixed costs:	17.68		

Comparing decisions

A partial budget is one way to compare the margins when making decisions, eg whether to sell lambs as stores, rear onto heavier weights or to finish. Table 11 shows an example comparing selling stores in November compared to feeding them to finish.

Example

Table 11: Example partial budget comparing selling options

	Sell as stores in November	Sell as finished lambs
Lamb weight	30kg LW	19kg DW
Price (after haulage/commission)	150p/kg LW	380p/kg DW
Value	£45.00	£72.20
Difference in value:		£27.20
<u>Additional feed costs</u>		
Swedes – approx. 90kg DM at 7p/kg DM (@ £70/t DM)		£6.30
Concentrates – approx. 15kg at 24p/kg (@ £240/t)		£3.60
Other variable costs (vet, medicines and bedding)		£4.72
Lamb mortality – 2% (of finished lamb value)		£1.44
Margin after additional costs (not including fixed costs)		£11.14

Use current and historical weight and price information to calculate the potential value of the finished lambs.

Sensitivity analysis

Sensitivity analysis can be used as a 'what if' tool to look at how changes in prices, costs or performance can affect margins.

Example

The example below investigates the effect of lamb mortality and lamb price of margin after variable costs, based on the numbers in Table 11. For example, a lamb price of 400p/kg DW and lamb mortality of 4% gives a margin of £13.34 per lamb.

Table 12: Example sensitivity analysis comparing lamb price and lamb mortality on margin per lamb

		Lamb price (p/kg DW)					
		340	360	380	400	420	440
Lamb mortality (%)	2	£3.69	£7.41	£11.14	£14.86	£18.58	£22.31
	4	£2.40	£6.04	£9.69	£13.34	£16.99	£20.64
	6	£1.10	£4.68	£8.25	£11.82	£15.39	£18.96

Biosecurity and health planning

Quarantine

Purchased store lambs pose a health risk to other stock on the farm. Always assume that bought-in animals are dirty until proven otherwise, irrespective of the source. Discuss treatments and checks to carry out with the vet.

Keep incoming stock separate for a minimum of three weeks in a shed or a field which has no contact with other stock. If possible, separate sheep bought from different sources for the quarantine period. This will reduce the damage if disease outbreaks do occur in one of the groups.



Top Tips

- Inspect lambs for any signs of disease, such as external parasites, orf, footrot or contagious ovine digital dermatitis (CODD)
- Isolate any affected animals immediately
- As soon as possible, drench with 4-AD or 5-SI wormer and inject with Moxidectin (1%) which will also remove any threat from sheep scab. Dose to the heaviest lamb in the group. Keep the lambs off pasture for one to two days after treatment
- Consider whether worming can be done at the source or immediately before transport, eg at the auction market, on the trailer or at the seller's farm by the purchaser
- Consider treating for liver fluke if lambs are from an unknown source or a farm known to be susceptible to this parasite
- Start a clostridial vaccination programme for medium and long keep lambs

Disease risk

Having a health plan in place is essential for any lamb finishing system. It should include:

- Internal and external parasite control plans
- Vaccination programmes
- Lameness protocols
- Current level of disease and targets

The health plan should be updated regularly and altered quickly to reflect current problems or potential risks. It is worth seeking veterinary advice when setting-up and adapting the plan.



Internal parasites

Parasites and liver fluke levels vary from farm to farm and year to year, depending on a range of factors, some of which cannot be controlled. So treating with the same product at the same time every year, may not be effective and could be costly in the short and longer term.

Plan a series of faecal egg counts (FEC) for grazing lambs to identify worm numbers and wormer-resistant populations.

Discuss an effective liver fluke and wormer programme with the vet to reduce the number of drenches given, improve lamb performance and help prevent wormer resistance developing. This will reduce current and future input costs.

It is worth thinking about a grazing strategy that reduces the worm challenge to lambs, eg not grazing older lambs where ewes and lambs have grazed in the spring.



Sheep BRP Manual 8 – Worm control in sheep for Better Returns has more details.

External parasites

Blowfly can still be a problem in autumn, particularly in southern England. Store lambs are particularly susceptible, as a change in diet can lead to scouring which attracts the female flies.



Sheep BRP Manual 10 – Controlling external parasites for Better Returns has more advice and information.

The BRP Cattle and Sheep Parasite Control Guide has more information on products available with their withdrawal periods.

Clostridial diseases

It is a good idea to vaccinate bought-in lambs for clostridial diseases, as the colostrum they received from their mothers only provides protection until 12–14 weeks of age.

Sheep that have never been vaccinated need two injections four to six weeks apart. Vaccinated animals require a booster every 12 months. Use a combined vaccine where pasteurised pneumonias is a threat.

The Sheep diseases directory has more information and advice common health issues.

Lameness

Lameness reduces lamb growth rates and increases the time they take to finish. Lambs on forage crops and roots are particularly prone to getting clods of soil stuck in their feet.



Aim to deal with lame lambs quickly and identify the cause before treatment to save costs. Remember footbathing only helps to treat and prevent scald.

Sheep BRP Manual 7 – Reducing lameness for Better Returns covers all types of lameness and appropriate treatments.

Deficiencies

Trace element and mineral deficiencies can occur in sheep. If deficiencies are suspected, discuss taking blood samples with the vet to identify the cause and correct any problems identified. Ensure performance is monitored to ensure there is a production response to any supplements given.

For more information view the BRP+ document **Trace element supplementation of beef cattle and sheep** – available at beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk.



Selection for slaughter

Before buying-in stores or starting to home-finish lambs, farmers should ask themselves: Who will be buying the lambs? How will they be marketed? When do they need to be ready by? What type of lamb is required?

Once an answer to all these questions is known, a plan can be put in place to achieve the target growth rates needed to meet the customers' needs, using feeds that are most appropriate and readily available.

Know what buyers want

- Weight/classification. What are the penalties associated with not meeting the customers' specifications?
- Timing. Talk to the buyers and auctioneers to judge when the best time will be to sell the lambs to gain the best returns
- Monitor price trends at beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk

Handle and weigh lambs regularly

It is really important to handle lambs every one to two weeks to identify any health or nutritional problems early, so action can be taken to rectify the situation quickly.



Margins in lamb finishing enterprises are tight and it is easy to start losing money on stock without even realising it.

Weighing lambs before they go to slaughter will help farmers predict when lambs are ready for slaughter more accurately in the future.

Handle with care

Abattoirs will penalise carcasses that show signs of bruising. Avoid:

- Grabbing wool
- Lambs trampling over each other
- Sharp objects on gates, hurdles and trailers



Present clean lambs

Abattoirs will penalise or condemn dirty lambs. Do:

- Crutch and remove belly wool before grazing crops such as swedes, forage rape or kale
- Provide dry run-back areas
- Consider housing lambs to dry overnight before transporting to the abattoir

Feedback

Monitor the performance of lambs after sale or at slaughter. Keeping good records will help make informed management decisions.

Remember, 85% of the market is looking for lambs that weigh 21kg or less and that are grade R3L.

In November and December 2013, more than one in four lambs slaughtered in England were classified as having a fat score of 3H or above.

Measuring and monitoring performance

It can be very useful to analyse the data that can be easily collected from batches of growing and finishing lambs going through the system, such as weight gains, days on the feed, grazing days and proportion of carcasses hitting specification.

Growth rate targets

Once growth rate targets have been established for the system or crop (see pages 4, 8 and 11), regular monitoring will make sure the enterprise stays on track.

Weighing lambs every two to three weeks will help estimate growth rates, which can be used to:

- Check against targets
- Estimate days to finish
- Evaluate lamb and feed performance
- Identify whether changes in management practice are having an effect
- Identify if lambs from different sources (eg rams and farms) perform differently

If it is not possible to weigh all lambs, 10–20% of the group can be weighed to get an idea of performance.

Carcase targets

Information from abattoir records should be interrogated to understand if any improvement can be made, eg were there too many overfat or heavy lambs?

Table 13: Calculation of the proportion of carcasses hitting specification

			Example	Your system
Total number of lambs slaughtered		A	500	
Number of lambs hitting target	Conformation (E U R)	B	450	
	Fatness (2–3L)	C	430	
	Deadweight (19–21kg)	D	390	
% of lambs hitting target	Conformation (E U R)	$(B/A) \times 100$	90%	
	Fatness (2–3L)	$(C/A) \times 100$	86%	
	Deadweight (19–21kg)	$(D/A) \times 100$	78%	

Carcase and key performance indicator (KPI) calculators are available at beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk.

Other BRP publications available

Sheep BRP

- Manual 1 – Marketing prime lamb for Better Returns
- Manual 2 – Buying a recorded ram to generate Better Returns
- Manual 3 – Target lamb management for Better Returns
- Manual 4 – Managing ewes for Better Returns
- Manual 5 – Growing and finishing lambs for Better Returns
- Manual 6 – Target easier management for Better Returns
- Manual 7 – Reducing lameness for Better Returns
- Manual 8 – Worm control in sheep for Better Returns
- Manual 9 – Improving ewe breeding for Better Returns
- Manual 10 – Controlling external parasites for Better Returns
- Manual 11 – Target ewe fertility for Better Returns
- Manual 12 – Improving ewe nutrition for Better Returns
- Manual 13 – Improving sheep handling for Better Returns
- Manual 14 – Reducing lamb losses for Better Returns

Joint Beef and Sheep BRP

- Manual 1 – Improving pasture for Better Returns
- Manual 2 – Improved costings for Better Returns
- Manual 3 – Improving soils for Better Returns
- Manual 4 – Managing clover for Better Returns
- Manual 5 – Making grass silage for Better Returns
- Manual 6 – Using brassicas for Better Returns
- Manual 7 – Managing nutrients for Better Returns
- Manual 8 – Planning grazing strategies for Better Returns
- Manual 9 – Minimising carcass losses for Better Returns
- Manual 10 – Growing and feeding maize silage for Better Returns

See the AHDB Beef & Lamb website beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk for the full list of Better Returns Programme publications for beef and sheep producers.

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