

Small Lambs – A Problem or an Opportunity for Crofters and Smallholders?



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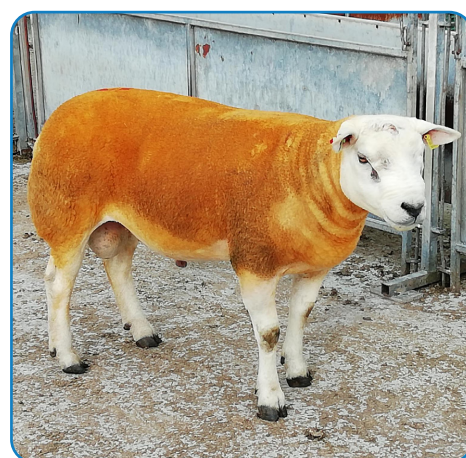
Practical Guide

In nearly all sheep flocks it is difficult to avoid having small lambs. However, there are ways to reduce the number of small lambs you have in your flock. We will also look at opportunities for small lambs.

When thinking of how to avoid having small hill lambs, we must look at the main elements that affect lamb performance:

1) Genetics

- a. Choose the best rams that you can afford for your flock if breeding your own replacements, as you will have his daughters in the flock for the next 4-5 years
- b. Choose rams with good EBV's for growth



2) Nutrition

- a. When lambs are young their feed conversion is at its highest so maximise this with the best nutrition e.g., colostrum and milk
- b. Monitoring lamb weights when in for routine handling can let you see if performance is right. If not, you can change management to arrest the decline
If a percentage are not performing then investigate why such as faecal egg counts, blood sampling, fluke or even an “iceberg” disease such as OPA or MV
- c. Identify poor doing mothers and ensure they or their progeny don't remain in the flock. These lambs could be weaned early and reared in byre with creep to ensure survivability and a marketable lamb.

3) Management

- a. Weaning earlier could allow lamb performance to continue and not be challenged due to poor nutrition or competition from their mothers for grass.
- b. Weaning early also allows the ewe time to regain condition score before the next breeding cycle starts at tupping
- c. Keep the tupping period short to avoid tail enders. Scan and remove empties from flock.

Finishing Small Lambs

To finish these smaller lambs there are two options: indoor or outdoor. Which choice you take will depend on infrastructure available to you, land type and fodder availability.

Indoor considerations:

- **Suitable building to house lambs**
- **Cost of bedding**
- **Fodder availability and quality**
- **Costs of purchased concentrates**

Outdoor considerations:

- **Grass quality and availability**
- **Supplementary feeding at grass; creep whilst still with mothers and/or after weaning**
- **Forage crops – swedes or stubble turnips**



Table 1: Number of lambs per ½ acre forage crop to finish lamb

Crop	Average DM Yield ton/½acre	Number of lambs per ½ acre over 90 days
Kale	1.82	24
Rape & Hybrids	0.71	9
Stubble Turnips	0.81	10
Swedes	1.82	24
Fodder Beet	3.44	45

Opportunities to market small lambs

There are various ways crofters and small holders can add value to small lambs. Options include:

- **Sell Store**
The traditional method for most crofters and small holders is to sell lambs store, including the smaller tail end of the lamb crop. They inevitably will command a lower price. One potential way to reduce this price loss is to batch the lambs with a group of producers, as a larger batch will be more attractive to buyers.
- **Box scheme**
Boxed produce, also referred to as box schemes, allows producers to market all their produce to consumers. Boxes often comprise whole or half lambs, as different joints, often vacuum packed ready for freezing. Size is less important than it would be to a butcher or supermarket buyer.
- **Croft vending**
Refrigerated locker style vending machines allow products to be sold in small amounts. Compared to honesty boxes customers cannot touch the produce before buying. Vending machines are open 24/7 allowing customers to buy goods at any time. Producers might cooperate to offer a larger range of produce and attract more customers.
- **Restaurant/farm shop**
This could be an outlet in your local area whereby you could receive a premium for these smaller finished lambs which may fall out with normal market specifications. This could also reduce food miles and popularity is rising with consumers for local provenance.