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Introduction to sheep production in UK

During the summer there are about 24 million sheep and lambs in the United Kingdom, of which 16 million are breeding ewes*. There are approximately 79,000 holdings with breeding ewes applying different systems of production to suit the local geography and climate. Approximately two-thirds are concentrated on hill and upland areas (over 300m above sea level) in the north and west of GB which are dominated by extensive grazing land and are usually not suitable for other types of agricultural production. A third are kept in lowland areas where the sheep enterprise is integrated with other agricultural production systems.

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Types of sheep and main breeds

There is an integrated system between hill and lowland breeds where breeding stock produced on the hills and uplands are sold to lowland farmers who concentrate on meat production. This cross breeding system maximises the use of hybrid vigour, with the longwool sires increasing the number of lambs and milk yield and lowland rams improving growth rates and carcase quality.

GB integrated sheep breeding system								
Hill flocks	Upland flocks		Lowland flocks					
Pure-bred ewes from hill flocks	X	Pure-bred longwool rams	=	Cross-bred ewes	X	Pure-bred lowland rams (terminal sires)	=	End product
Cheviot		Border Leicester		Scottish Half-bred		Suffolk, Charollais, Texel or other terminal sire		Fat lambs
Scottish Blackface		Border Leicester / Bluefaced Leicester		Mule				
Welsh Mountain				Greyface				
				Welsh Half-bred				
Swaledale		Teeswater		Masham				
		Bluefaced Leicester		Mule				

There are many native breeds of sheep in GB, about 70 recorded pure-breeds and more than 300 cross-bred types, most of which are named by their regional origin. Eight pure-breeds account for about half the total breeding flock, and cross breeds from these account for a further quarter.

[Click here for details on sheep breeds](#)

Hill flock rams (Beulah Speckleface)

Suffolk rams



Source: MLC



Source: Signet

Mating – Natural and AI

Mating in sheep flocks normally occurs naturally with the use of a ram. Artificial insemination (AI) is sometimes used in pedigree flocks to introduce new blood lines.

Ewes are generally mated during the autumn, with a gestation period of 21 weeks. Lambing is timed to coincide with the growth of new grass during the spring. However, to meet demand for the earlier Easter market some producers may choose to lamb during December/January by bringing the mating period forward to July/August.

The condition of the ewe at mating is very important as this will determine the number of eggs released and thus conception rates. Several rams are run with the ewes during the mating period, about 1 ram to 50 ewes in lowland systems and as high as 1 ram to 25 ewes in more difficult terrain. Rams may wear a harness or raddle on their chests, containing coloured dye to mark the ewe as she is mated. This allows the farmer to note if the ewe has been mated and by which ram. Rams, usually segregated from the ewes, are kept with the ewes for a period of five weeks over the mating period.

The sheep production cycle

In lowland systems ewes are usually scanned during pregnancy to determine the number of lambs carried. The flock is then split into groups determined by the scan results and fed accordingly, with those expecting triplets receiving additional care. Barren ewes can be separated from the flock. During the last six weeks of gestation extra feed is required by the ewe as the foetus puts on over 75 per cent of its growth during this period and ensures the ewe has adequate body reserves for milk production.

Most flocks as they get close to lambing are brought indoors or to some sheltered fields for management, monitoring and postnatal care. If lambing takes place in the spring, ewes and lambs are then turned out to grass within a day or two if weather conditions are favourable. Lactating ewes require a good supply of clean water and nutrition.

Ideal lambing rates are two lambs per ewe as the ewe has two teats, but this can be a lot lower for the hill flocks. On average a ewe raises 1.1 lambs each year.

Most male lambs are castrated soon after birth and with the exception of some hill situations rings are applied to all lamb tails to cause them to wither and drop off. Tails are removed for health reasons.

Weaning and finishing

At about 3-4 weeks old lambs supplement their milk diet with either grass or concentrates. About 50 per cent of lamb production is from lowland flocks born in early spring which are **finished** and sold before weaning from the ewe.

Strong single lambs from early lambing flocks can be weaned from two months, fed supplementary feed and finished for market at between 10 and 12 weeks old.

In an integrated system a farmer will have a breeding flock, rear his own lambs and keep them on the farm until they are ready for **slaughter**. In integrated lowland systems lambs are usually weaned at three to four months old and finished primarily on grass.

Lambs in upland flocks tend to be weaned later, from five months, and tend to be sold as **store lambs** at auction. These lambs are usually kept on lowland farms over the autumn and winter months and finished on grass, arable stubble, kale and feed. When they reach an appropriate weight they are sold at auction or directly to an **abattoir**, usually for sale between October and March.

Ewes and lambs



Source: MLC

One of the most important stages in lamb production is gaining the desired condition of animal as it is presented at slaughter. Since the value of the carcase depends on the leanness producers have to select their lambs with care. This means handling them to assess the amount of **fat** cover, which relates to total **lean meat** content.

Most lambs are sold between 36-42kg liveweight. Lambs destined for the early spring market and those from upland flocks tend to be finished at 28-30kg **liveweight**.

Lamb type	Method of feeding	Marketed in	Age at slaughter
Easter lamb	Concentrates	March/May	10-16 weeks
Summer	Grass	June/October	18-26 weeks
Autumn	Concentrates/Grass	November/December	32-42 weeks
Hoggett	Grass/Forage	January/April	40-50 weeks

For more information:

Services, publications and websites

Signet Sheep Breeder Service

Telephone: Sheep Section - 01908 844195

Facsimile: 01908 844236

E-mail: signet@mlc.org.uk

Defra - Codes of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock - Sheep

Eblex Sheep Better Returns Programme

Hybu Cig Cymru - Meat Promotion Wales (HCC)

National Sheep Association