Supporting Generational Renewal in the Irish Sheep Sector: Building Viable, Modern and Resilient Farming Pathways

A report for

NUFFIELD IRELAND

Farming Scholarships

by Seamus McMenamin

2025 Nuffield Scholar

September 2026

Disclaimer

This publication has been prepared in good faith on the basis of information available at the date of publication without any independent verification. Nuffield Ireland does not guarantee or warrant the accuracy, reliability, completeness or currency of the information in this publication nor its usefulness in achieving any purpose.

Readers are responsible for assessing the relevance and accuracy of the content of this publication. Nuffield Ireland will not be liable for any loss, damage, cost or expense incurred or arising by reason of any person using or relying on the information in this publication.

Products may be identified by proprietary or trade names to help readers identify particular types of products, but this is not, and is not intended to be, an endorsement or recommendation of any product or manufacturer referred to. Other products may perform as well or better than those specifically referred to.

This publication is copyright. However, Nuffield Ireland encourages wide dissemination of its research, providing the organisation is clearly acknowledged. For any enquiries concerning reproduction or acknowledgement contact the Executive Secretary.

© 2026 Nuffield Ireland.

All rights reserved.

Scholar Contact Details

Seamus McMenamin

E-mail: seamus.mcmenamin@bordbia.ie

In submitting this report, the Scholar has agreed to Nuffield Ireland publishing this material in its edited form.

NUFFIELD IRELAND Contact Details

Catherine Lascurettes

Executive, Nuffield Ireland

Phone: +353-86-2691197

Email: exec@nuffield.ie

Executive Summary

Grass-based production systems, a diverse green landscape and a family-farm model are synonymous with Irish agriculture at a global level. These attributes have been central to positioning Irish food and drink exports at the premium end of international supply chains, particularly in some of the world's highest-value markets. This strong export positioning has, in

turn, helped support farm incomes across the primary production sector. With approximately 90% of agricultural output on the island of Ireland destined for export markets, Irish agriculture is fundamentally outward-looking and export-driven. (Bord Bia, 2025)

Ireland is well placed to meet growing global demand for sustainably produced food. Our grass-based systems offer strong environmental credentials and contribute to addressing increasing concerns around global food security. However, while farmers provide the essential foundation of both Irish and global food systems, significant challenges have emerged in recent years in attracting and retaining people in primary production. These challenges are heightened by growing uncertainty around future policy supports. There are no guarantees that current levels of support from European funds will continue, particularly in the context of ongoing EU discussions regarding the definition of an "active farmer" and the implications of increasing non-farm income for subsidy eligibility. This uncertainty risks undermining income stability for many family farms and may further weaken the attractiveness of farming as a long-term career choice.

These challenges are particularly evident in the Irish sheep sector. Volatility in on-farm incomes, high labour requirements and increasingly competitive income opportunities off-farm have contributed to a more fragmented supply base and growing difficulty in attracting and retaining labour and new entrants. This comes at a time when the sheep sector plays an important role in maintaining agricultural activity in marginal areas and supporting the wider rural economy.

This report examines the current structure of the Irish sheepmeat sector and explores alternative income streams and farm-level adaptations that could help maintain current levels of sheepmeat production, while improving the attractiveness of the sector for future generations. Volatile farm incomes, labour intensity and the relative attractiveness of other production systems, most notably dairy and, to a lesser extent, beef, have all contributed to a decline in both sheep producer numbers and the national sheep flock. At the same time, wider societal changes have seen younger generations place greater emphasis on work-life balance, income stability and quality of life. Combined with the increasing prevalence of part-time farming, this has implications for the type of enterprises most likely to succeed in the future, with efficiency, time management and flexibility becoming central considerations.

In seeking solutions to these challenges, the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust provided a unique opportunity to examine how similar issues are being addressed internationally across a range of agricultural systems, enterprises and regions. While generational renewal is often discussed as a sheep-sector issue, international experience demonstrates that many primary industries face comparable challenges, suggesting there are valuable lessons to be learned beyond sheep production alone.

In Morocco, for example, beef production has been in long-term decline as economic growth and expanding urban employment opportunities have made agriculture less attractive as both a career and a lifestyle choice. A similar challenge is evident in the seafood sector, where an education system focused on non-agricultural career paths has left established industries struggling to attract skilled labour. In response, these sectors have adopted apprenticeship-style models and shared-profit approaches to attract and retain new entrants.

In New Zealand and Australia, farming tends to be approached more explicitly as a business activity, with less emotional attachment to land or existing production systems than is often found in Ireland. This may reflect larger farm scale, a more recent agricultural history and a

stronger emphasis on work-life balance within farming communities. Open discussion around generational renewal, land mobility and farm transfer is more advanced, supported by the absence of direct subsidies, which has encouraged greater adaptability, innovation and diversification at farm level.

The study also identified significant opportunities to create additional value within sheep production itself. Examples from Ireland and overseas demonstrated how sheep milk production, wool innovation and direct-to-consumer marketing can improve farm profitability by capturing a greater share of the value generated from existing sheep enterprises. While these opportunities are unlikely to be suitable for all farms, they illustrate the importance of collaboration, innovation, provenance and market differentiation in building more resilient sheep businesses. Importantly, they also provide examples of the entrepreneurial and value-added opportunities that may help attract and retain younger farmers within the sector.

Across these domestic and international examples, a clear pattern emerges. Challenges around generational renewal and attracting talent are neither new nor unique to Ireland or the sheep sector. Regardless of production system or geography, younger people are more likely to pursue careers that offer a combination of financial sustainability, personal fulfilment and work-life balance. This highlights the importance of improving both the profitability and attractiveness of sheep farming if the sector is to secure its future workforce.

Ultimately, this study explores options capable of stabilising incomes within the Irish sheep sector while maintaining sheep numbers at levels that support the entire supply chain and contribute to the wider rural economy. Only by addressing these structural, economic and social challenges can sheep farming be repositioned as a sustainable, attractive and viable option for the next generation of Irish farmers.

A key recommendation of this study is the need for a stronger and more coordinated role for educational institutions, advisory services and industry stakeholders in repositioning sheep farming as a viable, skilled and innovative enterprise. Greater alignment across the supply chain is required to support long-term value creation, while practical, case-study-based learning and the use of relatable farmer ambassadors can help demonstrate viable pathways into the sector. By showcasing successful examples of diversification, value-added production and business innovation, the industry can help build confidence among existing and prospective farmers and make sheep farming a more attractive career choice for the next generation.

Ultimately, the future sustainability of Irish sheep farming will depend on creating a sector that is profitable, innovative and attractive to the next generation. This will require action across education, skills development, value creation, diversification, succession planning and rural development. While there is no single solution, the examples observed throughout this study demonstrate that meaningful progress can be achieved when industry, government, educational institutions and farming families work together towards a shared vision for the future of the sector.

Contents

Abbreviations 6
Acknowledgements 7
Foreword 8
Travel Overview 9
Contemporary Scholars Conference and Global Focus Programme 9
Personal Travel 11
Rationale for Research 15
Aims and Objectives 17
Supporting Generational Renewal in Irish Sheep Production 18
Reframing Sheep Farming in Education 18
Diversification Opportunities 22
Creating Additional Value from Sheep Production 26
Land Mobility and Succession 29
Farmer Ambassadors and Role Models 32
Rural Infrastructure and Quality of Life 35
Industry Narrative and Media Discourse 39
Conclusion 42
Recommendations 43
References 45

Abbreviations

- **ABP** – ABP Food Group
- **BISS** – Basic Income Support for Sustainability
- **CAP** – Common Agricultural Policy
- **CISYF** – Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers
- **COPA** – Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations (EU)
- **COPAG** – Cooperative Agricole de Produits Agricoles de Gharb (Morocco)
- **CSC** – Contemporary Scholars Conference
- **CSO** – Central Statistics Office (Ireland)
- **DEFRA** – Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (UK)
- **EID** – Electronic Identification
- **EU** – European Union
- **EPRS** – European Parliament Research Service
- **GAA** – Gaelic Athletic Association
- **GDP** – Gross Domestic Product
- **GFP** – Global Focus Programme
- **NAJK** – Nederlandse Agrarische Jongeren Kontakt (Dutch Young Farmers Association)
- **NDC** – National Dairy Council
- **NI**- Northern Ireland
- **SCIS** – Solar Capital Investment Scheme
- **SBLAS** – Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme
- **TAMS** – Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme
- **YSFF** – Young Sheep Farmer Forum

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Nuffield Ireland for the opportunity they have afforded to me through awarding me a place on this programme. While I have had previous opportunities to travel during my career this programme has allowed me to build invaluable networks, gain a much greater understanding of global food production and gain a greater appreciation of Ireland's role in the global agri-food system. I have met, and become good friends with, some fascinating, ambitious and driven people from across the world and have had experiences that will last a lifetime.

I would like to thank Catherine Lascurettes (who has shown endless patience with the 2025 scholars), Mike Brady, Joe Leonard, Grainne Dwyer and the wider Nuffield team for their support and guidance through this programme. I also want to thank my mentor Owen Brodie, who has been a source of direction throughout.

To my employers Bord Bia and the wider Bord Bia staff, your support and flexibility have been instrumental in allowing me to avail of this opportunity. I'd like to particularly thank Joe Burke who encouraged me to apply for this programme and to former scholars Gillian Willis and Aoife Feeney for being good sounding boards and fountains of useful information regarding international travels!

To my fellow 2025 scholars Zoe McKay, Majella McCaffrey and Marina Conway, it has been a pleasure to be on this journey with you all. Thank you also to those who travelled with me on my Global Focus Programme (GFP) and those who assisted and supported my individual travels over the last 18 months.

And finally, but perhaps most importantly, I want to say thank you to my wife Charlotte and our four children Daithí, Séimí, Aoife and Ada who have been hugely supportive of my studies and have welcomed Nuffield visitors into our home. A special thank you must also go to my mother-in-law Cheedie Brady who stepped in and was a huge support to Charlotte during my prolonged absences from home.

Foreword

I have always had a keen interest in agriculture from a young age, an interest that has shaped my education and career choices to date. Growing up on a mixed suckler and sheep farm, I experienced first-hand both the challenges and the benefits of living and working in rural Ireland. I have always particularly enjoyed working with sheep, despite the volatility of market returns. At the same time, I am acutely aware of the workload demands associated with sheep production, especially when balancing responsibilities both on and off the farm.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to gain experience across all stages of the sheep industry—from primary production through to processing, farm auditing, trade analysis and the promotion of lamb in both domestic and international markets. This exposure has allowed me to view sheep production from multiple perspectives and to develop a strong appreciation of how tight margins and price volatility affect decision-making at every level of the supply chain, but particularly at farm level.

As my career progressed, I moved into a role with Bord Bia in late 2020 as Sheepmeat and Livestock Sector Manager. My flexible and adaptable approach to managing workloads has allowed me to engage in a range of supplementary projects including organic production, exploration of market opportunities for sheep milk products and conducting analysis of the growing influence of halal requirements on global sourcing policies for sheepmeat These projects, alongside my core responsibilities, highlighted the increasing complexity of sheep production and marketing in Ireland and internationally, and how these pressures ultimately feedback to primary producers. More recently, my transition into a Farm Engagement role has brought me into closer contact with farmers and industry stakeholders, providing valuable insight into the challenges facing the sheep sector in attracting, developing and retaining talented young people.

Generational renewal is now one of the biggest issues facing the Irish sheep sector, with the number of both breeding ewes and farmer numbers on a downward trajectory in recent years While I have always held an ambition to return home and farm full-time, I have personally experienced the practical questions surrounding succession planning, the need for income security when raising a young family, and the growing pressure created by rising costs of living.

It was this personal experience, combined with my professional work within the sheepmeat sector, that motivated me to apply for a Nuffield Scholarship focused on generational renewal in Irish sheep farming. In recent decades, sheep production has increasingly played a secondary role to beef and dairy systems, largely driven by differences in on-farm profitability. However, I believe sheep farming offers a unique opportunity for farmers to remain engaged in primary production while retaining the flexibility to explore complementary and alternative income streams.

This scholarship has provided me with the opportunity to explore key barriers to entry into farming in general, and sheep farming in particular. By examining income-diversification initiatives and generational-renewal approaches adopted by sheep farmers internationally, and applying these learnings in an Irish context, this study seeks to support the long-term sustainability of one of Ireland's most indigenous and internationally recognised agricultural sectors.

Travel Overview

The below is a brief synopsis of travels undertaken as part of the Nuffield programme during 2025 and 2026, a journey that stretched across five continents and 12 countries, providing me with the opportunity to engage and learn from a hugely diverse network of enthusiastic and ambitious people, farms and businesses.

Contemporary Scholars Conference and Global Focus Programme

The Contemporary Scholars Conference (CSC) was a week long programme that provided an opportunity to engage with and discuss key issues shaping global agriculture. The conference explored a wide range of topics, including food security, climate change, mental health and wellbeing, and the role of innovation and technology in agriculture. This dynamic environment also enabled the development of meaningful connections with over 90 scholars from across the world, laying the foundations for long-term professional relationships and collaboration.

The diverse programme placed a strong emphasis on leadership development and global engagement, aimed at supporting future agricultural leaders. This was delivered through a combination of expert guest speakers, interactive workshops, team-building activities and farm visits within one of the world's most progressive agricultural nations. Together, these experiences provided valuable insight into how global challenges are being addressed at both farm and policy level, while strengthening personal leadership skills and providing an international perspective on agriculture.



2025 Nuffield Scholars at the end of the Contemporary Scholars Conference in Auckland, New Zealand March 2025

March-May 2025: Global Focus Programme: New Zealand, Australia, Kenya, Netherlands, America (Texas) and Japan

All Irish scholars participate in a six-week Global Focus Programme (GFP) designed to build understanding of global agriculture, broaden perspectives and provide exposure to progressive businesses, organisations and governments across the world. This element of the Nuffield

journey offers an invaluable opportunity to develop international networks, explore sectors and systems previously unfamiliar, and gain insight into the shared and emerging challenges facing agriculture globally.

The first leg of GFP took place in the North Island of New Zealand, where visits spanned a diverse range of enterprises including beef, sheep, dairy and horticultural production. New Zealand presented an interesting model of farm management, characterised by a strong focus on profitability, efficiency and business performance, while also placing emphasis on maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Farmers in general were very open and honest when talking about succession, labour challenges and the importance of prioritising time off farm.

The second stage of the programme covered Australia, with visits across Queensland and New South Wales. A recurring theme throughout engagements with farmers, processors and industry representatives was the long-term futureproofing of the agri-food sector through the attraction and retention of young, educated and ambitious talent. Discussions consistently focused on two key priorities: first, raising public awareness and understanding of agriculture among non-farming communities to maintain social licence to operate; and second, engaging directly with young people to highlight the breadth of career opportunities available across the agri-food value chain.

Kenya was the third and longest stop on the programme and proved to be one of the most surprising. The level of innovation, ambition and technological adoption aimed at improving agricultural efficiency and output far exceeded expectations. Kenya has a young, well-educated and highly motivated population with the potential to act as a major economic driver in both agriculture and agri-technology. However, this potential is significantly constrained by political instability and structural governance challenges.

The Netherlands was the next destination, where discussions were dominated by the impact of government regulation and land-use conflict on agricultural productivity. Population growth, environmental regulation and competition for land are pushing farmers towards increased intensity, set against a backdrop of growing public opposition to farming and a widening disconnect between primary producers and society.

The penultimate stop was Texas, where the sheer scale of agricultural production offered a sharp contrast to other systems observed. While scale delivers efficiencies, agriculture in the United States is facing significant uncertainty due to political instability, market volatility and increasing pressures from climate change—factors that are influencing both productivity and the attractiveness of farming for future generations.

The final leg of the programme took place in Japan, where agriculture is characterised by high-value, small-scale production. Many Japanese farms face uncertain futures due to an ageing farmer population, limited succession planning and a lack of successors. Similar to Ireland, a strong cultural attachment to land ownership has created barriers to land transfer. However, as older farmers retire and land becomes leased or consolidated, there is potential for more efficient and technologically enabled farming structures to emerge, helping to address existing inefficiencies within the sector

Personal Travel

May 2025: Morocco

Agriculture is hugely important to the Moroccan economy, with more than half of the population either directly or indirectly dependent on the sector for their livelihoods. Agricultural production is heavily focused on high-value fruit and vegetable exports, particularly citrus and avocados, which are primarily destined for international markets. As standards of living increase and consumer preferences evolve, there is also growing interest in expanding domestic dairy and beef production to meet a rising protein demand.

A defining constraint on Moroccan agriculture is water scarcity. Drought poses a major challenge to productivity, particularly for small-scale farms that remain highly dependent on rainfall rather than irrigation infrastructure. In contrast, a growing number of larger, more integrated enterprises are shaping the future direction of the sector.

One notable example is COPAG, a leading Moroccan agricultural cooperative established in 1987 in the Souss-Massa region. Originally focused on dairy, juice and citrus production, COPAG has diversified in recent years into beef production, demonstrating a cooperative-led approach to scale, supply-chain integration and investment. The co-operative attracts and supports new entrants by minimising the financial, technical, and market barriers that traditionally discourage young people from entering the agricultural sector. This cooperative model is increasingly being replicated at smaller scales across other sectors, with a strong emphasis on diversification, value addition and market access at farm level.

June 2025: Czech Republic

Agriculture in the Czech Republic is a well-developed and export-oriented sector, with production focused primarily on cereals, oilseeds, hops and intensive livestock systems. Historically, Czech agriculture has been dominated by large-scale corporate farming entities, which currently manage approximately 75% of agricultural land.

However, demographic pressures—particularly an ageing farmer population—are driving a shift in policy direction. Increasing support is being directed towards smaller family farms, encouraging young farmer entry and gradually reducing reliance on large-scale corporate dominance. Under the CAP Strategic Plan for 2023–2027, the Czech Republic is actively incentivising new entrants through start-up grants, targeted investment supports and a focus on digital innovation, with the aim of strengthening domestic food production and sector resilience.

A growing disconnect between the general population and agricultural production is evident, particularly around larger urban centres, leading to social and political friction. During the visit, I met with Jan Doležal, Vice-President of Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations (COPA) and an active farmer since 2004. His farm provides a strong example of enterprise diversification, incorporating hospitality, direct sales of beef, pork and dairy products, and more recently, on-farm biogas production. This integrated approach has helped stabilise income, strengthen public engagement and future-proof the business.

June 2025: United Kingdom (UK) / Northern Ireland (NI)

UK agricultural production is facing significant challenges, with some projections suggesting up to a quarter of farmland could be lost to non-food uses by 2050, potentially causing a significant

drop in output due to land-use policies related to housing, biodiversity, and net zero objectives. Despite having a highly professional farming sector, UK agricultural productivity growth has stalled, driven by fragmented policy frameworks and regulatory inconsistency—issues that have been exacerbated in the post-Brexit environment.

Public understanding of agriculture is in decline with a growing proportion of the population now several generations removed from farming. This has contributed to increasing concern about agriculture's social licence to operate. In 2024, agriculture accounted for less than 1% of the UK economy (approximately 0.56%, or £14.5bn of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)) and provided direct employment to around 1.3% of the workforce (Defra, 2025).

Farm incomes in the UK remain highly volatile, government support has declined, and reliance on food imports continues to increase. Together, these factors are directly impacting the sector's ability to attract new entrants and retain skilled labour. The experience highlighted how policy uncertainty, land competition and public perception can combine to undermine confidence in agriculture as a long-term career option, despite its strategic importance.

October 2025: Germany

Agriculture in Germany is focused on efficiency, technology and scale, with significant production of cereals such as wheat, alongside sugar beet and oilseeds. The farming landscape is dominated by medium- and large-scale family farms, although there is considerable regional variation in production systems. Certain areas are highly specialised in intensive livestock production, particularly dairy and pig farming, while other regions focus almost exclusively on arable crops.

While efficiency is a defining feature of German agriculture, as it is in many parts of Europe, this exists alongside an increasingly strong policy and societal focus on environmental sustainability. Considerable pressure is being placed on the sector to reduce environmental emissions, with policy debates increasingly centred on livestock numbers and nutrient management. Germany is also a European leader in organic conversion, with ambitious targets to reach 30% of agricultural land under organic farming by 2030. Despite this, discussions with farmers highlighted ongoing concerns around consumer willingness to pay a price premium for organic products and the long-term commercial viability of widespread conversion.

One particularly insightful visit was to a highly stocked 100-hectare dairy farm operated by a young farmer, Marcus Drisson, located just outside Düsseldorf. Marcus spoke openly about the importance of how farming is positioned within wider society, emphasising that maintaining social licence is now central to both public support for agriculture and to securing generational renewal. German farmers, particularly younger operators, are highly active on social media platforms, which has increased transparency and consumer engagement. This visibility has helped build support for agriculture within rural communities and has strengthened direct farm-to-consumer sales models, offering farmers greater control over pricing and market relationships.

Despite high levels of technical competence and infrastructure, one of the most significant challenges facing German agriculture is attracting new entrants. Negative perceptions of farming careers, often reinforced by parents, alongside late land transfer and rigid ownership structures, were consistently highlighted as major barriers to generational renewal



Marcus Drisson, along with his family, operates an intensive dairy and arable operation on the outskirts of Dusseldorf and feels openness and transparency is required to educate the next generation of consumers and future farmers.

October 2025: France

France is Europe's leading agricultural powerhouse, accounting for approximately one-fifth of total EU agricultural production, with output approaching €73 billion in 2025. Despite this scale, the sector is undergoing significant structural change, driven by an ageing farming population, a growing disconnect between farmers and the general-public, and the increasing costs associated with regulatory and sustainability demands.

A widening gap between government ambition and on-farm reality has created rising tension within the sector. These pressures were particularly evident in 2025–2026, as farmers faced the combined impacts of multiple livestock disease outbreaks—including bluetongue, avian influenza, African swine fever and contagious nodular dermatitis—alongside major climate challenges such as drought, flooding and late spring frosts that severely affected wine and horticultural production. These difficulties, coupled with greater consumer acceptance of cheaper imported food, have undermined confidence within the farming community and reduced agriculture's attractiveness as a career. Although highly productive, agriculture employs only around 3% of the French workforce and contributes approximately 2% of GDP (INSEE, 2024).

In response, France has placed increased emphasis on early agricultural education as a tool to support generational renewal. A visit to the Lycée Agricole du Bourbonnais highlighted this approach, with the school operating a fully functional mixed farm that provides students with real-world exposure to agricultural production and farm business management. This practice-based model reflects a wider recognition that improving awareness, skills and confidence among young people is essential to the long-term resilience of French agriculture.






Lycée Agricole du Bourbonnais is an example of an agriculture focused secondary education facility in France that exposes students to practical Agriculture at a young age

February 2026: Poland

The agri-food sector in Poland is of significant economic, social and environmental importance and plays a much larger role in the national economy than in many other EU countries. Since joining the EU in 2004, Polish agriculture has undergone major structural change, driven largely by CAP-funded modernisation. Farms have transitioned from subsistence or mixed systems towards more specialised commercial production, with land increasingly concentrated in fewer, larger and more efficient units.

While this transformation has delivered clear gains in productivity and competitiveness, it has also led to a steady reduction in direct agricultural employment, creating challenges for generational renewal and talent attraction in all areas of agri-food production, as highlighted on our visit to Anglo Beef Producers (ABP) Poland in Pniewy. More recently, opposition to large-scale farming has emerged, highlighted by visits to Top Farms Group operations where land previously held under long-term government lease is now being broken into smaller parcels. This shift reflects growing political and social pressure around land ownership but may undermine long-term efficiency and productivity of Polish agriculture, illustrating the increasing influence of non-economic considerations in agricultural policy across Europe.




Lucasz Mleczak from ABP Poland and Krystian Jelak from Top Farms provided valuable insights into the changing role of agriculture in Poland and how these changes have impacted the sector's ability to attract and retain talent.

Rationale for Research

Ireland has a long-standing tradition and strong association with sheep production, and livestock farming more broadly. However, farming in Ireland has always been about more than food production alone. There is a deep cultural and emotional connection to farming, closely linked to land ownership that has been passed down through generations and has shaped rural populations, identities and ways of life. This multi-generational family-farm model underpins agricultural production in Ireland and forms a central part of the story used to position Irish lamb, beef and dairy products at the premium end of global markets.

Historically, generational renewal and succession were largely implicit rather than planned within Irish agriculture. There was an expectation that the eldest son would inherit the farm to keep it within the family name and preserve it as a single, viable operational unit. This societal obligation meant that limited consideration was given to attracting or retaining future generations; succession was assumed rather than actively managed. Today, succession has evolved into a more practical decision focused on ensuring the long-term productivity of the farm by transferring it to the individual most interested in and capable of farming, regardless of gender or birth order. Despite this progress, succession remains a complex and often emotionally charged process.

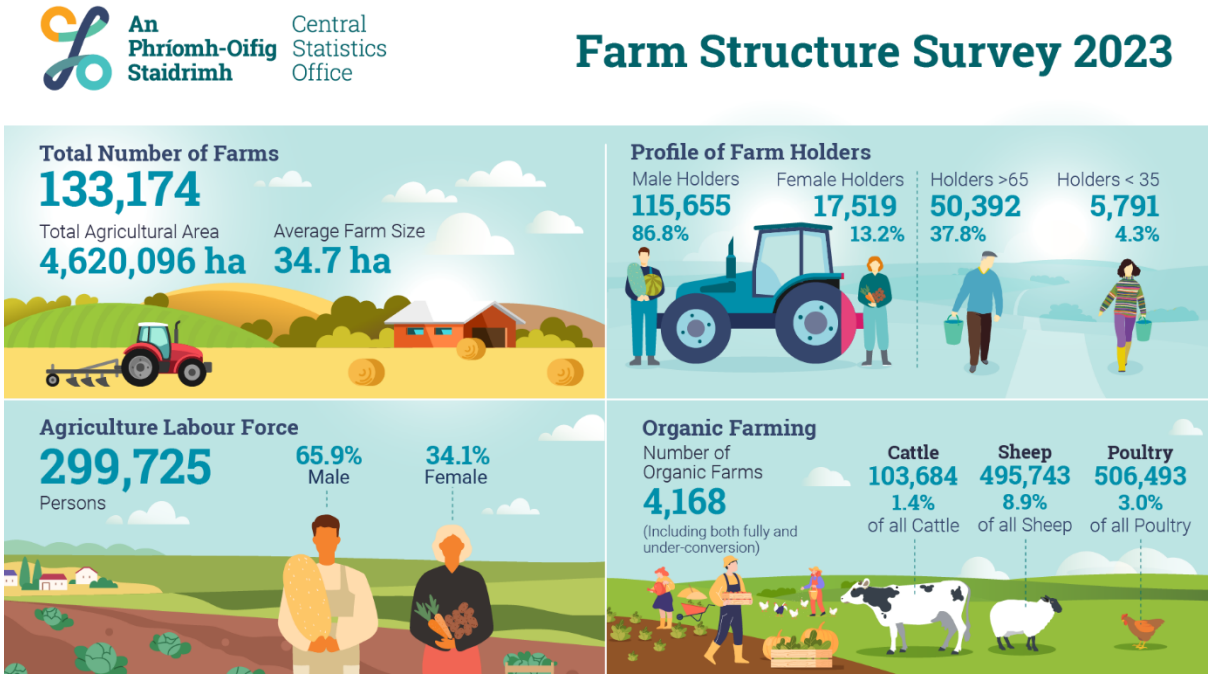
When succession is not planned effectively, it can result in uncertainty, family conflict or even the loss of the farm itself. Succession is not solely a financial or legal exercise; it requires careful consideration of family relationships, farm viability and the future role of the retiring farmer. Early planning and professional advice are therefore essential to successful outcomes (McGriskin, 2025).

While farmer numbers in Ireland have declined gradually in recent years, some sectors have been more resilient than others. Improved market prospects in the poultry, dairy and beef sectors have helped maintain interest from younger generations. In contrast, the sheep sector has struggled disproportionately to attract new entrants and retain existing producers.

Challenges in attracting young farmers are not unique to Ireland and are increasingly evident across global agricultural systems. Changing societal expectations around income security, work-life balance and access to services have reduced the attractiveness of farming as a full-time career. Investment in modern infrastructure and service provision is therefore critical if rural areas are to compete with urban opportunities.

Ireland has adopted an increasingly proactive approach to generational renewal, recognising that the long-term sustainability of the agricultural sector depends on supporting succession, improving land mobility and reducing barriers for new entrants. In recent years, policy development has focused on encouraging earlier succession planning, promoting collaborative farming structures and strengthening access to education, training and financial supports. Ireland has also played an active role in wider EU discussions on farm renewal, contributing to policy development around land access, knowledge transfer and young farmer supports within the CAP and through the European Commission's Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture which was launched in September 2025. At EU level, the strategy seeks to support vibrant and connected rural communities, with the objective of doubling the share of young and new farmers by 2040. These developments reflect a growing recognition that attracting and retaining the next generation will require a coordinated approach encompassing farm viability, access to capital, skills development, rural infrastructure and structural reform.

The importance of this challenge is reflected in the demographic profile of Irish agriculture. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Farm Structure Survey (2023), Ireland had 133,174 farm holdings, with almost 40% operated by farmers aged over 65. The average age of Irish farmers was 59.4 years, fewer than 5% were under 35, and less than half had a succession plan in place. These figures highlight the scale of the challenge facing the sector and reinforce the need to view generational renewal not simply as a succession issue, but as a strategic priority for maintaining agricultural productivity, sustaining rural communities and strengthening the long-term resilience of Ireland's agrifood sector.



(CSO Farm Structure Survey, 2023)

Within this context, the sheep sector remains particularly vulnerable. The industry has repeatedly highlighted the failure to attract young farmers as a critical risk to maintaining a viable breeding ewe flock and maintaining a critical mass of production. According to the December 2025 Sheep Census, Ireland recorded 34,167 sheep farms, with total sheep numbers increasing marginally to 3.7 million head, largely due to higher carry-over stock into early 2026. Breeding ewe numbers stabilised at approximately 2.5 million head following several years of significant decline. Prior to this contraction, ewe numbers had shown steady growth between 2015 and 2023, peaking at just over 3 million head, supported by favourable market prices.

The barriers to generational renewal in the sheepmeat sector can be broadly grouped into seven pillars, each of which is explored in detail in this report:

- Reframing Sheep Farming in Education
- Diversification Opportunities
- Creating Additional Value from Sheep Production
- Land Mobility and Succession
- Farmer Ambassadors and Role Models
- Rural Infrastructure and Quality of Life
- Industry Narrative and Media Discourse

Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to examine how structural, educational, economic and societal interventions can support generational renewal in the Irish sheep sector, and to identify practical actions that can stabilise and strengthen sheep farming into the future. This analysis is informed by a combination of research, stakeholder engagement, and insights gained from both Irish and international experience.

Key Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- Reframe sheep farming as a modern, skilled and flexible career, through education pathways that reflect hybrid livelihoods, diversification and business-led farming.
- Assess diversification and income-resilience options that strengthen sheep enterprises while keeping land in active production.
- Evaluate land mobility and succession models—including partnerships and phased transitions—that enable earlier entry and reduce barriers for new entrants.
- Examine the role of farmer ambassadors and peer leadership in improving visibility, confidence and aspiration within the sheep sector.
- Analyse the influence of rural infrastructure, quality of life and industry narrative on the sector's ability to attract and retain the next generation.
- Deliver clear, actionable recommendations for industry, education providers and policymakers to stabilise and grow sheep farmer numbers and the national flock

Supporting Generational Renewal in Irish Sheep Production

Reframing Sheep Farming in Education

Ireland has a long tradition of sheep farming, and the sector plays an important role in supporting the rural economy while also helping to manage and maintain rural landscapes. Despite this strong heritage, sheep production is often perceived as one of the least attractive farming sectors. This perception is shaped by relatively low margins, views that sheep systems are labour-intensive, and the fragmented nature of land ownership. To encourage new entrants, these perceptions must be challenged and sheep farming repositioned not as a traditional livelihood, but as a modern, flexible and skilled career path, supported by education and offering opportunities to diversify into complementary income streams, both on and off farm.

Demand for agricultural education in Ireland remains strong across all levels. However, a recent *Irish Farmers Journal* survey found that only 13% of agricultural science graduates plan to enter farming immediately after college, with many of those intending to farm part-time alongside off-farm employment. An even smaller proportion consider sheep farming specifically. Key barriers identified include income insecurity, limited access to land, and the perception that sheep farming offers limited career progression. Addressing these challenges requires better alignment between education—at both second and third level—and clear, realistic pathways into viable sheep enterprises.

Younger generations considering careers in agriculture, both in Ireland and internationally, are far more informed on sustainability, animal welfare and environmental management than previous cohorts. They also place greater emphasis on achieving a healthy work–life balance. Irish sheep production is primarily based on extensive, grass-based outdoor systems that utilise grazed grass as the primary and lowest-cost feed source, while managing stocking rates to protect water quality and promote biodiversity. These systems deliver significant public benefits, including biodiversity enhancement, carbon sequestration on marginal land, and strong alignment with agri-environment and climate policy objectives. Despite this, these strengths are often under-communicated in educational and advisory settings and should be central to how sheep farming is promoted.

Modern sheep enterprises are also far more technology- and data-driven than is commonly recognised. Electronic identification (EID), performance recording, grass measurement, integrated parasite management and digital compliance systems all require technical competence and informed decision-making. Positioning sheep farming as a production system where innovation, precision and professionalism matter is critical to changing perceptions.

While highlighting innovation through existing education channels can increase interest in sheep farming careers, training must extend beyond production skills alone. A successful sheep farmer today requires competence in:

- business and financial planning;
- environmental and regulatory compliance;
- grassland and upland management;

- animal health and welfare; and
- use of digital tools and technology

Third level agricultural courses should continue to incorporate structured on-farm sheep placements that combine practical experience with mentoring and progressive responsibility. Where possible, students should be exposed to the production system most relevant to their intended farming pathway, whether that be commercial lowland, hill, upland or mixed livestock enterprises. This allows young people to develop a realistic understanding of the opportunities and constraints associated with different sheep systems while building practical competence and confidence within a commercial farming environment.

Such placements should extend beyond animal husbandry and expose students to the wider business of sheep farming, including financial management, grassland utilisation, flock performance, animal health planning, environmental compliance and labour management. This is particularly important given the increasing prevalence of part-time farming and the growing requirement for sheep farmers to balance production efficiency with off-farm employment opportunities. Recent Teagasc research found that 61% of sheep farmers surveyed were engaged in some form of off-farm employment, rising to 84% amongst those under 35 years of age, reinforcing the importance of preparing future farmers for more flexible and diversified business models (Costello and McHugh, 2026)

Placements also provide an opportunity to establish mentoring relationships and professional networks that can support young farmers beyond formal education. Exposure to progressive sheep enterprises can help demonstrate how improvements in infrastructure, technology adoption and business management can enhance labour efficiency and enterprise performance. In this regard, practical placements can play an important role in helping students develop a more informed understanding of modern sheep farming and the range of potential pathways available within the sector.

A recurring theme throughout this study was the need for agricultural education to evolve alongside the changing demands of the industry. Whilst not specific to sheep one of the most interesting examples encountered was at Tarleton State University in Texas, where agricultural courses have been adapted to equip students with a broader range of skills than traditional production knowledge alone. Alongside technical agricultural training, students are exposed to business, communications, engineering and food science through a cross-disciplinary approach. Of particular interest was the inclusion of an animal ethics module within mainstream agricultural programmes, helping future farmers develop the confidence and communication skills needed to engage with public concerns around animal welfare and livestock production.

The university has also recognised the value of practical trade-based skills, encouraging students to develop competencies in areas such as electrical, mechanical and construction work that remain highly relevant to modern farm businesses. Faculty emphasised that agriculture now competes with a much wider range of career opportunities than in previous generations, meaning education must focus on developing critical thinkers who can solve problems, adapt to change and communicate effectively. The lessons from Tarleton highlight

the importance of preparing future farmers not only to manage livestock and land, but also to operate successfully within an increasingly complex and connected agri-food sector.



Visit to Tarleton State University, Texas, where discussions focused on preparing students for modern agricultural careers through cross-disciplinary education, practical skills development and effective engagement with society and consumers.

While also not sheep-specific, another relevant example comes from the Netherlands, where a campaign by the Proud Young Farmers Foundation (NAJK) encourages young people to take up part-time employment in agriculture. As noted by the organisation:

"Many young people are looking for a suitable part-time job, while many farmers are looking for weekend or holiday help. With a part-time job, young people can get acquainted with the agricultural sector... Nowadays there is a real gap between farmer and citizen" (Trotse Jonge Boeren, 2026).

Corrie van Leerzem, Chair of the Proud Young Farmers Foundation, highlights that early engagement often leads to long-term involvement, noting that once individuals become connected to agriculture, they are more likely to remain and progress within the sector.

The Irish sheep sector is particularly well suited to phased or part-time entry models. Lower livestock purchase costs compared to bovine systems, relatively modest capital requirements, and the ability to generate income within a short timeframe can make entry more accessible when properly supported. Viable pathways may include:

- combining sheep farming with off-farm employment in the early years;
- entering farm partnerships, share-farming or contract-grazing arrangements; and
- progressing towards full-time farming as land access, income and experience grow.

Normalising part-time and hybrid models is essential, particularly where farm scale or land quality limits the ability to support an immediate full-time income. These pathways should be recognised and actively supported within education, advisory services and policy frameworks.

As previously noted, research undertaken by Teagasc (Costello and McHugh 2026) provides further evidence of the changing structure of the Irish sheep sector and reinforces the growing importance of labour efficiency and flexible farming models. A national survey of 446 sheep farmers found that 61% of respondents were engaged in some form of off-farm employment, rising to 84% amongst those under 35 years of age. The findings suggest that the sheep farmers of the future are likely to be predominantly part-time operators, balancing sheep production alongside external employment. Labour availability emerged as a significant challenge, with

only 6% of respondents employing paid labour and 62% relying on family support to complete routine tasks.

At the same time, infrastructure deficits were identified across many farms, with only 34% possessing the five core handling components considered necessary for an efficient sheep enterprise, despite 85% acknowledging that improved facilities would reduce labour requirements. Perhaps most notably, 38% of respondents had either reduced, or planned to reduce, sheep numbers, with labour constraints, profitability and lifestyle considerations identified as the principal drivers. These findings highlight the need for future sheep enterprises to be designed around labour efficiency, infrastructure investment and flexible working arrangements if the sector is to remain attractive and sustainable for future generations.

Although sheep farming is often viewed as labour-intensive, well-structured systems can offer greater flexibility than many other enterprises. Advances in handling facilities, specialist contract services (such as shearing, scanning and foot bathing), and improved flock-management systems have significantly reduced peak labour pressure.

Mentoring and peer support are especially valuable in sheep systems, which are often geographically isolated. Structured networks, discussion groups and knowledge-exchange initiatives exist through the Teagasc Advisory network in Ireland. These programmes not only build technical skills but also reduce isolation and support farmer wellbeing. Online forums and social-media platforms also play an increasingly important role in normalising challenges and sharing solutions within the sector.

Sheep farming careers increasingly exist within diversified farm businesses, combining production with renewable energy, agri-environment schemes, agri-tourism or complementary enterprises such as contract grazing or calf rearing. Presenting sheep farming as part of a portfolio approach to income, rather than as a standalone activity, improves both its financial credibility and attractiveness to new entrants—particularly given the exposure of sheep markets to global price volatility.

Supply-chain initiatives that encourage transparency and cooperation, including participation in schemes such as the Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme (SBLAS), also allow sheep farmers to engage more directly with processors, retailers and consumers, strengthening trust and market alignment.

Overall interest in agriculture in Ireland remains strong, with the agri-food sector supporting over 230,000 jobs across the economy. However, translating this interest into long-term participation in sheep farming requires more than promotion or awareness-raising alone. For the sheep sector in particular, it demands closer alignment between education, land access, income security, diversification opportunities and structured, realistic career pathways.

By presenting sheep farming as a sustainable, skilled and flexible system, and by normalising phased entry models that allow people to combine sheep production with off-farm employment or diversification, the sector can better reflect the realities facing new entrants. The challenge for Irish sheep farming is not a lack of interest but converting that interest into confidence—confidence that a future in sheep farming is achievable, economically viable and compatible with modern expectations around work-life balance and quality of life.

Diversification Opportunities

One of the most consistent findings throughout this study was that successful sheep farms are increasingly built around multiple income streams rather than reliance on sheep production alone. In Ireland, New Zealand and elsewhere, diversification is not viewed as a sign of weakness or reduced commitment to farming. Instead, it is increasingly recognised as a practical way to improve resilience, manage risk and support generational renewal. For many farm families, the future of sheep farming may depend not on specialisation, but on the ability to combine sheep production with complementary enterprises and sources of income.

Sheep systems are particularly well suited to operating alongside off-farm work and diversification. Ireland's grass-based production model, fragmented land ownership structure and prevalence of marginal and upland land mean that sheep enterprises can integrate effectively with alternative income streams rather than compete with them. From a labour perspective, sheep farming fits well within diversified households: outside the lambing period, labour demands are generally more manageable, particularly where family labour is available. Sheep also demonstrate strong compatibility with multiple land uses, including agri-environment schemes, solar and wind developments, and extensive upland grazing, where they play a valuable land-management role by controlling vegetation and maintaining swards. This aligns closely with Irish planning requirements, environmental compliance obligations and biodiversity objectives under CAP supported schemes.

Economically, sheep farming aligns well with diversification strategies that focus on risk-spreading rather than maximising returns from a single activity. While margins from sheep production are often modest, the relatively low capital requirements, limited machinery needs and efficient use of permanent grassland allow sheep enterprises to contribute meaningfully to overall farm resilience when combined with direct supports such as the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS), agri-environment payments and complementary income streams. As a result, sheep farming frequently operates as a stabilising enterprise within a wider farm business, helping to maintain land in productive agricultural use while allowing households to adapt to market, environmental and policy change.

Renewable-energy diversification has become increasingly relevant for sheep farms, both as a cost-reduction measure and as a means of building long-term resilience. The installation of solar panels on farm sheds has grown steadily in Ireland, driven by rising electricity costs, strong solar performance on agricultural buildings and attractive grant supports. While sheep farms typically have lower electricity demand than more intensive enterprises, shed-mounted solar can still deliver significant benefits by reducing overheads, supplying on-farm energy needs and allowing surplus electricity to be exported to the grid under available tariffs. Importantly, this form of solar development does not remove productive land from agricultural use and involves minimal ongoing labour.

Renewable energy conversion is supported under Ireland's Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS 3), particularly through the Solar Capital Investment Scheme (SCIS). This scheme provides significant grant aid for the installation of on-farm solar technology, reducing upfront capital costs and helping farmers decrease reliance on fossil fuels. For sheep farmers, Solar Capital Investment Scheme (SCIS) supported solar installations offer a practical and low-risk entry point into renewable energy, delivering predictable payback periods while aligning with national climate objectives. By lowering fixed costs and improving energy security, these

investments can play a valuable role in stabilising farm businesses, particularly where margins are constrained.

At a larger scale, ground-mounted solar and wind developments have faced public concern around landscape impact, land use change and cumulative development pressure. In this context, the integration of sheep grazing within renewable-energy sites offers a constructive solution. Solar grazing allows land beneath panels to remain in active agricultural use while reducing vegetation management costs and maintaining a visible farming presence. International experience, particularly from the UK, demonstrates the potential of this model to provide secure grazing and additional income without land purchase. Similar arrangements are increasingly emerging in Ireland, where sheep grazing is incorporated into site-management plans and, in some cases, combined with long-term lease payments that improve income stability

Wind-energy developments are particularly compatible with sheep farming in upland and marginal areas. Wind turbines occupy a relatively small physical footprint, allowing sheep grazing to continue across the wider holding with minimal disruption. Long-term lease payments, often spanning 30 to 40 years, can provide predictable, non-volatile income that underpins sheep enterprises in areas characterised by lower productivity and higher exposure to weather risk. Sheep are commonly used to manage vegetation around turbine bases, access roads and cable routes, further reinforcing the synergy between upland sheep farming and wind energy.



Pictured with 2025 Nuffield Scholar from Australia Joe Druce on the farm of 1993 Nuffield Scholar Campbell Tweed from Antrim Northern Ireland

One particularly strong example encountered during this study was the farm business developed by Campbell Tweed in Northern Ireland. This enterprise provides an excellent example of successful on-farm diversification, with wind energy, hydroelectricity and hosting television productions complementing his 3,000-ewe Easy Care sheep enterprise. His business demonstrates that diversification is most effective when it supports, rather than replaces, the core sheep enterprise. Each additional activity contributes income, labour efficiency or business resilience, enabling sheep production to remain at the heart of a profitable and sustainable farming system.

In addition to renewables, calf rearing is emerging as a relevant and complementary income stream for sheep farmers. Sheep farmers with appropriate grassland, fencing, housing and labour availability are well placed to rear dairy-bred calves, either independently for dairy-beef systems or under contract-rearing arrangements. This enterprise aligns closely with sheep

farming skills and infrastructure, provides valuable cashflow during the growing season and helps smooth income volatility associated with lamb price fluctuations.

Calf rearing also fits within wider policy pressures arising from Ireland's nitrates derogation, where progressive reductions in allowable stocking rates are increasing pressure on intensive dairy farms. Moving calves off dairy milking platforms reduces labour demand and stocking pressure, while creating diversification opportunities for sheep and mixed-livestock farms. In parallel, growing public and regulatory scrutiny of live calf exports may result in more calves remaining in Ireland post-weaning, presenting further opportunities for sheep farmers seeking alternative income sources.

An excellent international example of on-farm diversification was Clem and Mickey Trotter, who operate a livestock business across three farms totalling approximately 2,600 hectares in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand. Historically running around 7,000 breeding ewes, the business has adapted to low lamb and wool prices, rising labour demands and regulatory pressures by reducing sheep numbers and developing a more balanced 50:50 sheep-beef enterprise.

A key element of this transition is the contract rearing of Wagyu cattle for First Light Beef Processors, which improves margins, spreads market risk and delivers grazing benefits for the sheep enterprise. The business has also diversified through carbon forestry and agritourism, with Blackburn Ridge Homestead generating an additional income stream. This willingness to adapt production systems and explore new opportunities has reduced risk, strengthened business resilience and improved long-term viability while maintaining a significant sheep enterprise.

The Trotter business highlights the importance of adaptability in modern livestock farming. Rather than relying on a single enterprise, the family has responded to changing market conditions by developing multiple complementary income streams, creating a more resilient and sustainable farm business.



Clem and Mickey Trotter provide an excellent example of diversification measures implemented at farm level to maintain productivity while diversifying income streams.

Diversification also has an important role to play in making sheep farming more attractive to younger generations. Additional income streams can improve business viability, support work-life balance and create opportunities to develop skills in renewable energy, tourism, contracting, environmental management and livestock production. As younger farmers increasingly seek enterprises that combine financial sustainability with flexibility and innovation, diversification may become an increasingly important component of successful sheep farming businesses.

Experience from Ireland and internationally suggests that the most successful sheep farms are not necessarily those that maximise sheep numbers, but those that combine sheep production with complementary enterprises that improve resilience and profitability. Whether through off-farm employment, renewable energy, calf rearing, forestry or tourism, diversification can help spread risk, stabilise income and create more attractive career pathways for future generations. The key lesson is that diversification should not be viewed as a departure from sheep farming, but increasingly as an essential part of sustaining it.

Creating Additional Value from Sheep Production

While diversification can provide important additional income streams, some of the most interesting examples encountered during this study demonstrated that opportunities also exist within sheep production itself. Across a number of countries, farmers, processors and industry stakeholders are seeking to capture a greater share of the value generated from sheep through processing, branding, product innovation and direct engagement with consumers. These approaches provide important lessons for Ireland as the sector seeks to improve profitability, strengthen resilience and create more attractive opportunities for future generations of sheep farmers.

Sheep milk production remains a niche activity in Ireland, but it has attracted increasing interest in recent years as farmers explore alternatives to traditional lamb production. Globally, almost 260 million dairy sheep produce close to 11 billion litres of milk annually, with Europe dominating the formal processing sector and producing highly valued products such as Feta, Manchego, Pecorino and Roquefort cheeses (Bord Bia, 2021).

Despite strong consumer demand for premium sheep milk products, European production faces many of the same pressures affecting sheepmeat production, including ageing farmers, labour shortages and climate-related challenges. Bord Bia has identified the potential for an 8% decline in European sheep milk supply by 2030, creating opportunities for new producers to enter the market (O'Sullivan, 2025).

Ireland's grass-based production systems, strong livestock management expertise and international reputation for high-quality agricultural products provide a potentially strong foundation for future development. Sheep milk production also aligns closely with several themes explored throughout this report. It enables farmers to remain engaged in livestock production while diversifying income streams, creating opportunities for value-added processing, specialist products and direct sales (Bord Bia, 2021).

However, significant barriers remain. Ireland currently has approximately 1,000 milking ewes producing around 285,000 litres of milk annually, with the majority consumed through domestic artisan cheese production. Limited scale, specialist genetics, processing infrastructure, technical expertise and industry coordination continue to constrain expansion (O'Sullivan, 2025).

One of the most interesting examples encountered during this study was the development of the Dairy Sheep Wales Cluster. Supported by the Welsh Government, the initiative brings together farmers, processors, researchers and retailers to create a coordinated approach to industry development. Central to the project is a £4.7 million investment in a dedicated Sheep Milk Innovation and Processing Centre at Glynllifon. Significantly, the initiative is viewed not simply as an agricultural project but as a rural development strategy focused on diversification, skills development and attracting the next generation of farmers into the sector (Business Wales, 2026; Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, 2026).

The Welsh experience highlights the importance of collaboration, industry leadership and long-term investment if sheep milk production is to move beyond a niche sector. While sheep milk is unlikely to become a mainstream enterprise in Ireland, it demonstrates how coordinated supply chain development and value-added processing can create new opportunities within the sheep sector.

A similar challenge and opportunity exists within the Irish wool sector. For generations, wool represented an important secondary output from sheep production. Today, however, Ireland produces an estimated 7-10 million kilograms of wool annually, yet wool frequently generates insufficient income to cover shearing costs. For many producers, wool has become a cost centre rather than a profit centre (Irish Grown Wool Council, 2024).

Despite these challenges, growing consumer and policy interest in sustainability presents significant opportunities for natural fibres. Wool is biodegradable, renewable and versatile, making it suitable for a wide range of uses beyond traditional apparel markets. Increasing attention is being directed towards applications including home insulation, sustainable packaging, horticultural products, bedding, upholstery and other bio-based materials. As governments and consumers seek alternatives to synthetic fibres and plastic-based products, wool's environmental credentials are becoming increasingly valuable (European Commission, 2020).

One particularly encouraging development has been the emergence of the Galway Wool Co-operative. Built around the native Galway sheep breed, the co-operative seeks to reposition Irish wool as a premium, traceable and sustainable fibre. Rather than competing on commodity volume, the organisation focuses on provenance, authenticity and quality. This mirrors many of the approaches successfully adopted within Ireland's food industry, where traceability and strong branding have enabled producers to secure premium prices in international markets (Galway Wool Co-operative, 2025).





Bláthnaid Gallagher has become an ambassador for Irish wool, championing sustainability, heritage and innovation within the sector. Her recognition as one of the UN FAO's 100 Women Farmer Heroes for 2026 highlights the important role that female agricultural leaders can play in promoting Irish wool and supporting the future development of rural communities.

Further momentum has come from the establishment of the Irish Grown Wool Council and initiatives such as the REVEIRE project, which aim to strengthen supply chain coordination, improve traceability and identify new market opportunities. However, many of the challenges facing the wool sector mirror those identified in sheep milk production. Limited processing capacity, fragmented supply chains and insufficient market coordination continue to restrict the sector's ability to capture value domestically (Irish Grown Wool Council, 2024).

Another opportunity to create additional value within the sheep sector is direct-to-consumer marketing. While most Irish lamb is sold through conventional supply chains, a growing number of producers are securing premium prices through traceability, local provenance and strong farm stories. Examples such as Calvey's Achill Mountain Lamb, Cotter Organic Lamb and Kilmullen Farm demonstrate how branding, sustainability and direct consumer engagement can help farmers capture a greater share of the value generated from their product

Although each enterprise is different, their success highlights several important lessons for the wider sheep sector. Firstly, consumers increasingly value transparency and seek to understand where their food comes from and how it is produced. Secondly, digital platforms and home-delivery logistics have reduced many of the traditional barriers between farmers and consumers. Thirdly, provenance, authenticity and sustainability have become highly valuable marketing tools capable of generating price premiums.

Direct marketing will not be suitable for all sheep farmers. It requires investment in branding, customer relationships, marketing and logistics, while scale can be difficult to achieve. However, for producers located near large population centres or tourism destinations, it offers an opportunity to retain a greater proportion of the value generated from their livestock.

While not sheep-related, one of the strongest international examples of direct selling as a value-added enterprise was Beaty Cattle Company in Texas. The family has developed a successful business model based on selling premium grass-fed, grain-finished beef directly to consumers through online sales and bulk meat packages. By shortening the supply chain and retaining a greater share of the retail margin, the business demonstrates how branding, customer engagement and product differentiation can significantly increase returns from a primary production enterprise.



The Beaty Cattle Company demonstrates how direct-to-consumer sales, strong branding and supply chain control can add significant value to a livestock enterprise.

Throughout this study, a consistent finding was that the future success of sheep farming will depend not only on producing sheep efficiently, but on capturing a greater proportion of the value generated from them. The examples of sheep milk production, wool development and direct-to-consumer lamb marketing demonstrate different approaches to achieving this goal, but all share common characteristics. They are built on collaboration, innovation, strong market orientation and an ability to differentiate products through quality, provenance and authenticity.

Importantly, these opportunities do not require farmers to move away from sheep production. Instead, they demonstrate how existing enterprises can evolve to create additional income streams and improve business resilience. While not every approach will be suitable for every farm, they collectively illustrate how greater value can be extracted from the resources already available within the sector.

Perhaps most significantly, these examples offer a vision of sheep farming that extends beyond commodity production. They highlight opportunities for entrepreneurship, product development, marketing and business innovation alongside traditional livestock skills. As a result, they have the potential to make the sector more attractive to younger generations and support the long-term sustainability of Irish sheep farming.

Land Mobility and Succession

While improving profitability and creating new business opportunities are essential, they alone will not secure the future of the sector. The next challenge is ensuring that viable farms can be transferred to the next generation and that young people have realistic opportunities to enter sheep farming.

As discussed in more detail in a previous chapter participation in agricultural education in Ireland continues to grow. This reflects strong interest in the sector and recognition that modern farming requires significant technical, environmental and business skills. However, despite increasing numbers of graduates, the proportion who intend to return home and farm on a full-time basis is declining. This gap between education and entry into farming is most pronounced in sheep and other extensive livestock systems, where structural constraints and income challenges are greatest.

For young people seeking to enter sheep and livestock farming, the barriers are particularly high. Access to and the cost of land, combined with rising expenditure on machinery, buildings, inputs and regulatory compliance, makes it extremely difficult to establish a livestock enterprise independently. Sheep and dry stock systems typically operate on smaller land bases and generate lower margins than more intensive enterprises, limiting their capacity to support new entrants. Even where a young farmer returns to the family sheep farm, the business often cannot sustain two full-time household incomes, particularly in marginal or upland areas. This contrasts with other major sheep-producing regions, such as New Zealand and Australia, where farms are generally larger in scale and operate across extensive land areas. At the same time, off-farm employment offers more predictable income, regular working hours and clearer work-life balance, making the constant time commitment required by livestock farming less attractive to potential entrants.

These pressures are reflected in ongoing labour shortages and delayed succession across the sheep and livestock sectors. Land transfer remains one of the most significant structural challenges facing Irish agriculture, but it has a disproportionate impact on sheep and dry stock farms, which are typically land- and asset-rich but income-poor. Entry into these systems is extremely difficult without inheritance, as land is scarce, expensive and strongly retained within families. This has contributed to an ageing farmer population, postponed succession decisions and reduced opportunities for young livestock farmers.

Starting out in farming is therefore particularly challenging for the next generation of sheep farmers, where lower margins, income volatility and smaller farm sizes mean that poorly timed succession decisions can be especially costly. Effective generational renewal in sheep farming depends on early, well-structured planning, open communication between generations and full use of available supports. Teagasc has highlighted that rushing succession arrangements to meet scheme deadlines can undermine long-term farm viability, while careful sequencing of land transfer, partnership structures and tax planning can significantly reduce financial risk and build confidence for incoming farmers.

A range of targeted supports exists to ease entry and support continuity in sheep systems, including the Succession Planning Advice Grant, Registered Farm Partnerships, Succession Farm Partnerships, capital and income tax reliefs, 100 per cent stock relief, and CAP supports for young farmers such as Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers (CISYF), National Reserve allocations and higher TAMS grant rates. When used strategically, these measures can

stabilise income, reduce exposure to financial risk and allow successors to build flock numbers and management responsibility gradually. In the context of sheep farming, where immediate full-time income is often unrealistic, aligning these supports with phased succession, partnership and part-time or diversified farming models is critical to converting interest into long-term participation.

In many cases, land transfer on sheep farms occurs very late, often when potential successors are already committed to off-farm careers or tied into mortgages. This limits their willingness and capacity to invest in flock improvement, infrastructure or environmental measures, resulting in stagnation during critical transition periods. In response, Irish policy has increasingly shifted towards land mobility rather than outright land sale as a means of supporting generational renewal. Programmes such as the Land Mobility Service and Succession Farm Partnerships are particularly well suited to sheep farming, as they promote shared management, long-term leasing and gradual transfer of responsibility rather than immediate ownership change. These approaches allow older farmers to remain involved, provide income security and support smoother generational transition.

Tax incentives for long term leasing and supports for registered farm partnerships are especially important in sheep and dry stock systems, where emotional attachment to land and concerns around retirement income can delay succession decisions. By reducing the perceived risk associated with making land available, these measures help ensure productive farms remain in productive agriculture rather than falling into under-use or abandonment.

A useful comparison can be made with Northern Ireland, where formal farm partnerships and business led succession planning are more widely adopted in sheep and beef systems. In many cases, ownership remains with the older generation while operational control and income are transferred gradually. Succession is treated as an ongoing business process rather than a single event, helping to normalise earlier planning and reduce prolonged periods of inactivity on livestock farms approaching transition.

For many farm families, an ageing farmer population increases the pressure to act. Rural Support are a Northern Ireland based organisation that provides confidential mentoring and business support services to farming families in Northern Ireland, helping farmers navigate challenges such as succession planning, financial pressures, business development and personal wellbeing. Rural Support Farm Business Mentor Charlie Kilpatrick highlights, reluctance to communicate often lies at the root of succession difficulties. Young family members may return from agricultural college eager to farm, but without meaningful discussion and responsibility they can become disillusioned, undermining motivation and retention. Parents may be hesitant to relinquish control due to strong family history associated with land ownership, as well as concerns around long-term farm security.

The challenge of an ageing farming population and the difficulty of attracting young people into agriculture is not unique to Ireland; it is a global issue. In Morocco, for example, young farmers also face significant barriers to entry, including low farm profitability, water scarcity, limited access to capital, and difficulties in securing land. These constraints have accelerated rural-to-urban migration, further exacerbating the ageing profile of the farming population.

In response to these pressures, some Moroccan producers across various sectors have begun adopting alternative succession and employment models. One emerging approach involves shared profit arrangements combined with gradual farm/business transfer. Rather than employing young people on a fixed wage alone, business operators offer them a stake in profits and a structured pathway towards ownership or long-term control of the enterprise. This model has shown promise in sustaining youth engagement in a range of agri food environments. By sharing financial risk and reward, it strengthens younger participants' sense of responsibility, commitment, and long-term interest in the business. As a result, shared profit and gradual transfer arrangements are increasingly viewed as a practical mechanism to retain young people within businesses and supports generational renewal in the sector



Marie Oulad Ghazouni, owner and operator of the successful Marche Central fish market in Casablanca and beef producer Ali Hazdo with some of his family members involved in the farm. Both businesses have faced issues with securing successors for their long-established businesses.

Irish land-mobility policy also aligns with a broader European policy context. The EU Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture recognises that land is increasingly concentrated among older farmers, while younger entrants—particularly in extensive livestock sectors—often operate on insecure or short-term rental arrangements. This discourages investment, reduces innovation and delays succession. The strategy places strong emphasis on earlier succession, long term leasing, partnerships and land-matching services, alongside improved access to finance, all of which closely reflect the requirements of sheep and livestock farming systems.

Crucially, the EU frames generational renewal as an important societal priority, not merely an agricultural issue. Sheep and livestock farming underpin employment in marginal regions, deliver significant environmental public goods and help to maintain the social fabric of upland and remote communities. Without renewal, risks include land abandonment, loss of grazing activity and further erosion of rural populations. In this context, Ireland's focus on land mobility, partnership-based succession and gradual transition is fundamental to the future of sheep and livestock farming, as well as the long-term resilience of rural Ireland.

Farmer Ambassadors and Role Models

Ambassadors play a critical and increasingly strategic role in modern Irish agriculture. Beyond promoting farming to the wider public, effective agricultural ambassadors help shape how farming is understood by young people, new entrants and rural communities themselves. At a time when agriculture faces challenges around generational renewal, labour availability and public scrutiny, ambassadors are no longer just about communicating key messages to target audiences, but also act as role models, advocates and bridges between the sector and society.

Much of the existing focus of ambassador programmes has been on public engagement. Initiatives such as the National Dairy Council (NDC) Farmer Ambassador Programme and Farming for Nature Ambassadors have successfully showcased Ireland's family-farm, grass-based systems, highlighting sustainability, biodiversity and high production standards. Ambassadors use storytelling—often through social media—to explain farming practices, humanise food production, and build trust with consumers.

This work is vital, particularly in addressing misconceptions about agriculture and responding to growing criticism in areas such as animal welfare and environmental stewardship. However, there is increasing recognition that ambassador programmes must also serve a strong internal purpose. Ambassadors have a key role to play in inspiring young people to see a future for themselves in farming and in agri-food careers. They also play a key role in countering negative narratives within agri-media and industry commentary that often focus on short-term, sensational or reactionary issues. In an environment shaped by fast-moving and highly emotive media cycles, visible, credible and relatable farming voices are essential to restoring balance and confidence within the sector.



Sheep farmers such as Annie McGuinness, Glyn Egan and Katie Shanahan play an important role in promoting the sector, showcasing modern sheep farming and inspiring future generations of farmers.

The principle is simple: you can't be what you can't see. If sheep and livestock farming is mainly represented by older farmers around marts, rings and sale yards, it becomes much harder for those who are under-represented—students, graduates, women and first-generation entrants—to see a future for themselves in these systems. Proactive ambassador programmes that visibly showcase younger sheep and livestock farmers, a range of enterprise scales, and modern career pathways can actively shape aspirations rather than simply reflect tradition. Ambassadors who are relatable and honest about the rewards and pressures of sheep and

livestock farming play a crucial role in showing that these sectors can offer viable, meaningful and achievable careers for the next generation.

Recent developments within the Irish sheep sector illustrate how ambassador-style leadership can complement policy and industry initiatives. Ireland's three major sheep processors—Kepak, ABP and Dawn Meats—have each invested in programmes aimed at encouraging potential new entrants into sheep farming. While these initiatives differ in structure and focus, they share a common objective: to build confidence in the sector, support generational renewal and future-proof supply for an export industry worth approximately €360 million to the Irish economy (Bord Bia, 2026). Critically, these programmes do more than provide financial or technical support; they also give visibility to young sheep farmers and create platforms where their voices and experiences can be heard.

The Young Sheep Farmer Forum (YSFF), supported by Kepak, Bord Bia and Mountbellew Agricultural College, is a strong example of this approach. The forum produced a farmer-led recommendations report addressing challenges such as succession, land access and income stability. Beyond its policy outputs, it also provides a platform where young sheep farmers can share experiences, voice concerns and act as ambassadors for their generation within the sector.

Similarly, processor-led initiatives such as Dawn Meats' Future Flocks Programme place a strong emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and leadership development. Open to sheep farmers aged 18-40, the programme connects participants with like-minded producers while providing insight into processing, market requirements and the wider supply chain. By combining technical advice with industry exposure, it helps young farmers build the confidence and credibility needed to become effective leaders and ambassadors.

The Flocks of the Future competition, delivered by Irish Country Meats in partnership with Bord Bia, Teagasc and Sheep Ireland, further demonstrates how ambassador-style initiatives can encourage new entrants. The competition supports young farmers under 25 through the provision of a starter flock, a high-genetic-merit ram, mentoring and technical support. By showcasing young farmers developing modern and efficient sheep enterprises, it highlights the opportunities that exist within the sector and promotes positive role models for future generations.



The Young Sheep Farmer Forum, Future Flocks and Flocks of the Future are examples of industry-led initiatives supporting generational renewal through leadership development, mentoring, knowledge transfer and new entrant support within the Irish sheep sector.

Importantly, schemes that actively involve farmers, processors and industry bodies help to strengthen communication and trust across the supply chain. Rather than reinforcing a "them and us" mentality, these programmes promote shared understanding and open dialogue, creating a more inclusive and resilient sector. In doing so, they highlight that effective

ambassadors are not just spokespeople, but participants whose lived experience gives credibility to the messages being communicated.

The success of these programmes demonstrates that generational renewal is not simply a policy challenge but also a visibility challenge. While financial supports, succession planning and education remain essential, young people are more likely to consider careers in sheep farming when they can see relatable examples of success. Ambassador programmes therefore have a dual role: improving public understanding of agriculture while also inspiring existing and prospective farmers. The key lesson is that sectors that actively promote positive role models are often better placed to attract and retain new entrants than those that rely on tradition alone.

Representation matters not only for age, but also for gender, scale and enterprise type. The appointment of Carina Rosenkranz as the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Woman Farmer Ambassador for the International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 is an important signal in this regard. Farming in partnership with her brother in County Clare, Carina's story reflects a modern farming reality of collaboration, diversification and balancing multiple roles. Her visibility challenges outdated perceptions and broadens the image of who farming is for.

For ambassador programmes to succeed, authenticity is essential. Ambassadors must be relatable in terms of farm scale, location and enterprise, and must reflect the diversity of modern agriculture—including part-time farmers, mixed enterprises and first-generation entrants. Nothing resonates more strongly with farmers, or with those considering farming, than hearing honest messages from other farmers who understand the realities of the job.

By placing ambassadors at the heart of agricultural communication—not only outward-facing but inward-looking—Ireland can strengthen trust, inspire participation and help ensure that farming remains a visible, viable and attractive choice for future generations.

Rural Infrastructure and Quality of Life

Attracting young people to become involved in sheep production, and indeed in all the livestock sectors, depends now on much more than potential farm level economics. Quality of life in rural areas and the availability of services has become increasingly important and is now one of the decisive factors influencing whether young people choose to enter, remain in, or build long term careers in the sector. While access to land, livestock and skills are essential, these alone cannot compensate for weak rural services, more limited options for off-farm work or more restricted opportunities for young families.

While not specific to agriculture a recent study completed the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) into the demographics of populations in rural Ireland identified some stark statistics which are impacting life in rural Ireland. While many of the challenges identified are specific to the GAA they provide a useful snapshot of demographic developments across rural Ireland that mirror what we are seeing in the agricultural/livestock sectors and will continue to impact the sector in the years ahead.

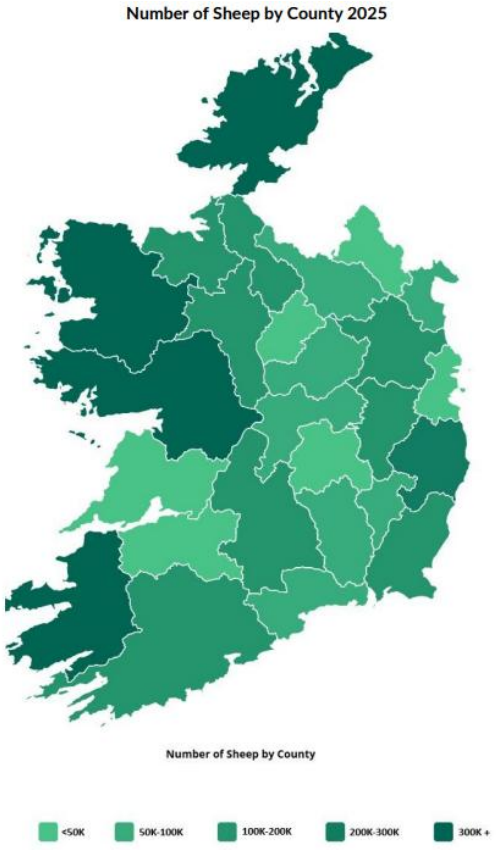
- There are one in three people living in Dublin or within one hour of Dublin in satellite towns. There are only 18 per cent of the GAA's clubs located in this area prompting the need for new clubs and the rejuvenation of existing units
- 25.5 per cent of all 0-5 year-olds in Ireland are concentrated across just 50 clubs
- 52 per cent of 0-5 year olds to be found in Dublin, Belfast, Down, Kildare, Galway and Cork
- 78 per cent of GAA clubs are in rural areas with declining populations
- Declining birth rates in Ireland since 2010 has accelerated rural decline and impacts participation numbers in rural clubs
- Urban clubs suffer overcrowding leading to stretched resources, limited access to facilities and a reduction in player retention
- The GAA risks losing potential players in growing urban areas if it does not provide accessible clubs and facilities

(Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), 2025)

Sheep and livestock systems tend to be in the more remote, upland and marginal regions of Ireland, where access to childcare, education, housing, transport and digital connectivity is often weaker in comparison to other parts of the country. The more limited access and availability of these services create significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of future generations into farming. Potential successors may have a strong interest in working with livestock and land but are now far less willing to compromise on access to these services or family wellbeing. As a result, labour shortages in sheep and livestock sectors increasingly reflect location linked limitations rather than a declining interest in livestock farming itself.

This trend is clearly visible in sheep-dominant regions such as the west and the northwest of Ireland, including counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Leitrim and parts of Sligo. These areas contain some of the highest concentrations of hill and lowland sheep farming, yet they also experience some of the weakest rural service provision.

Number of Sheep in Ireland by County December 2025.



(Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2025)

The demographic challenge facing the sector is particularly evident in these regions, where the average age of sheep farmers exceeds the national farming average and approaches 60 years. Combined with ongoing rural depopulation this raises concerns around succession and the long-term sustainability of sheep production. As younger generations increasingly prioritise income stability, work-life balance and access to services, many sheep-producing areas are struggling to retain and attract future farmers.

Farmers in these regions frequently report difficulties attracting and retaining labour, not because wages or working conditions are uncompetitive, but because livestock employment can be difficult to reconcile with modern family life. Many young people trained in agriculture or animal science would like to return to these areas yet often choose employment elsewhere due to better access to housing, childcare, transport and digital connectivity.

In response, many sheep farms have adapted by operating as hybrid or part-time enterprises, with farmers or their partners supplementing farm income through employment in education, healthcare, construction or the public sector. While this approach helps stabilise household income and keeps farms active, it can also mask underlying labour shortages within the sheep sector. As a result, recruitment is often informal, seasonal or short-term, reflecting the difficulty of offering full-time agricultural employment that aligns with modern lifestyle expectations.

For younger generations, livestock careers are increasingly assessed alongside broader quality-of-life considerations. Long working hours and seasonal demands are accepted as part of farming, but when combined with limited housing, childcare, transport and broadband services, they can become a significant deterrent. This is particularly true for those without inherited land or housing, who face additional barriers to establishing themselves in rural areas.

The result is a growing mismatch: the parts of the country most dependent on sheep farming are often the least able to attract the labour and new entrants needed to sustain it. This affects not only farm productivity, but also workload, farmer wellbeing and the long-term viability of the sector.

Difficulties in attracting the next generation into agriculture is not unique to Ireland and was a recurring theme in many countries across the globe. Engaging with young people to highlight the importance of agriculture to the wider economy while also highlighting the huge range of skills now required to produce food and fibre products is a particular focus for Sam Coulton, Managing Director of Goondiwindi Cotton in Queensland Australia.

'Attracting people to agriculture needs the full package- money is important but is not the be all and end all. The agri-food sector and our relevant government departments both have a huge role to play in helping to maintain the vibrancy of rural economies so that we can get young people and young families to stay in rural areas. Access to services, connectivity and a healthy work life balance are now an expectation rather than a consideration for younger generations'





Sam Coulton of Goondiwindi Cotton, Queensland Australia sees investment in infrastructure in rural areas as vital to meet the expectations of younger generations and help attract and retain talent into the agricultural sector.

The EU Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture recognises this relationship between rural services and agricultural participation. By linking farming renewal with the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and the Rural Pact, the Strategy acknowledges that livestock systems—particularly sheep farming—cannot be renewed without addressing the quality-of-life challenges in the regions where they operate. Strong rural services are framed as a precondition for attracting the next generation into livestock farming.

Better access to services and modern infrastructure are essential for young farmers to remain in rural areas. The EU strategy for generational renewal in agriculture places this objective at the

core of its vision, linking agricultural renewal with wider rural revitalisation efforts through the rural vision and the Rural Pact (European Commission, 2026)

This approach is especially relevant in sheep-farming regions where a greater proportion of farmers are part-time and rely on an off-farm income to support the household. Improved access to internet services may provide the farmer or spouse the flexibility to work remotely or locally off-farm, stabilising household income and making sheep farming more attractive as a career by meeting some of the expectations of modern living. Smart Village initiatives, rural broadband investment and transport solutions therefore have a direct impact on the attractiveness of more remote sheep producing regions to the next generation, despite not being agricultural specific policies.

The Smart Village initiative is a community-led development strategy that uses digital technology and innovation to enhance rural life, focusing on sustainability, connectivity, and economic opportunities. It aims to bridge the rural-urban divide, combating depopulation by enhancing local infrastructure, services, and energy solutions, often supported by European policies. (European Commission, 2019)

The Irish experience, particularly in the more remote sheep-dominant regions such as the west and north-west, highlights that encouraging younger generations of people to consider a career in the sheep and livestock sectors is inseparable from the quality of rural life. Labour shortages in the sector are a symptom of broader service deficits that make rural living difficult for modern households. Improving healthcare access, childcare availability, housing supply, transport and digital connectivity in sheep-farming regions is therefore not peripheral to agricultural policy—it is fundamental to the future of livestock farming itself. By investing in the places where sheep farming happens, Ireland can ensure that sheep and livestock careers remain not only viable, but genuinely attractive choices for the next generation.

Industry Narrative and Media Discourse

Across Ireland, and much of Europe, sheep farming is frequently discussed in agricultural media and industry commentary through a narrow financial lens, often emphasising short-term returns or periods of reduced profitability. This coverage is commonly driven by weekly price movements and annual income figures. While such information is valuable, it can sometimes overlook the longer-term strengths of sheep systems, including their resilience, adaptability and enduring role in rural landscapes.

Much of the commentary surrounding the sector focuses on challenges such as lamb prices, weather events, disease pressures, input costs and fodder availability. These issues are real and deserve attention. However, when discussed without wider context, there is a risk that short-term difficulties are interpreted as evidence of long-term decline rather than as part of the cyclical nature of an extensive livestock system.

Sheep farming in Ireland generally operates on lower margins than more intensive enterprises, but it also carries lower capital requirements and financial risk with many Irish sheep farm enterprises focussing on cost control, land stewardship and long-term income stability. This often creates resilience through manageable debt levels, asset retention and flexibility in household income sources.

Comparisons with dairy and beef systems are common and can be useful, but they do not always account for differences in land type, labour requirements, capital investment or long-term income variability. In many marginal and upland regions, sheep farming remains the most practical and environmentally appropriate land use. Providing this context helps position sheep farming as a strategically important sector rather than a weaker alternative to more intensive and profitable enterprises.

Media attention also tends to focus on periods of difficulty. Years of stability, successful adaptation and gradual improvement often receive less coverage. This can overlook the extent to which sheep farmers have adapted through part-time farming, off-farm employment, diversification, participation in agri-environment schemes and gradual succession planning. These developments demonstrate the capacity of the sector to respond to changing economic, environmental and social conditions.

One of the most striking observations during this study was the positive way farming was presented through initiatives such as the Kepak Young Sheep Farmer Forum, Dawn Meats' Future Flocks Programme, Irish Country Meats' Flocks of the Future competition and the Farming for Nature Ambassador programme. These initiatives showcase innovation, environmental stewardship, business development and successful young farmers, demonstrating how positive storytelling can influence perceptions, build confidence and create role models for future generations.

A further example of the value of positive storytelling can be seen in the experience of Rebecca O'Halleran, a young farmer from County Longford featured by CAP Network Ireland Rebecca combines a full-time role in the agri-food sector with active involvement in her family farm, representing a modern and increasingly common pathway into agriculture. Alongside her parents, she is helping develop a business that has evolved from a traditional beef and sheep enterprise into dairy production while also maintaining a successful direct-to-consumer egg enterprise.

Rebecca's story reflects many of the themes identified throughout this study. The business has embraced technology, utilised support schemes, diversified income streams and adopted a gradual succession pathway that allows responsibility to transfer between generations. Through social media, she also provides a realistic insight into the opportunities available within modern agriculture. While her enterprise differs from sheep production, her experience demonstrates how diversification, innovation, education and succession planning can create rewarding farming careers. Importantly, it highlights the value of visible and relatable role models in shaping perceptions of agriculture, reinforcing many of the findings discussed in the previous chapter on farmer ambassadors and role models.



Rebecca O'Halleran, Co Longford, represents a modern generation of farmers, combining a professional career with active farm involvement while embracing technology, diversification and a planned succession pathway.

There is also an opportunity to recognise more fully the wider value created by sheep farming. Sheep production delivers benefits that extend beyond farm income, including landscape management, biodiversity protection and the maintenance of agricultural activity in remote regions, while also supporting rural economies and communities (European Parliament Research Service, 2017). These contributions are increasingly aligned with policy objectives around climate resilience and environmental delivery and deserve greater visibility alongside traditional financial measures.

Similarly, environmental regulation and sustainability measures are often discussed solely as additional pressures on farmers. However, they also create opportunities through agri-environment schemes, results-based payments and growing recognition of the sector's role in managing semi-natural habitats. Framing sheep farming within this wider land-use context highlights its continuing relevance to future agricultural and rural policy.

A recurring theme throughout this study was the influence that narrative can have on both perceptions of sheep farming and the future direction of the sector. The way sheep farming is discussed within agricultural media, industry organisations and rural communities can shape confidence among existing farmers and influence how attractive the sector appears to potential new entrants. When the conversation focuses primarily on low incomes, volatility and challenges, there is a risk that sheep farming is seen as a sector with limited opportunities.

However, many of the examples observed throughout this study demonstrate that sheep farming continues to adapt and evolve. Farmers are increasingly combining sheep production with diversification, value-added enterprises and environmental schemes to build resilience and create new opportunities. Highlighting these developments presents a more balanced

picture of the sector and demonstrates that viable pathways continue to exist within sheep farming.

Ultimately, narrative alone will not secure the future of the sheep sector. However, the way sheep farming is portrayed influences confidence, investment decisions and career choices. While genuine challenges should not be ignored, greater emphasis should be placed on showcasing successful farmers, innovative enterprises and the wider environmental and social value of sheep production. A more balanced narrative can help position sheep farming not simply as a sector facing challenges, but as one that continues to adapt, innovate and provide meaningful opportunities for future generations.

Conclusion

Generational renewal in sheep farming is a complex challenge, but the evidence gathered throughout this study suggests that the issue is not a lack of interest in agriculture, nor a lack of commitment within the sector. Rather, it is the result of a series of interconnected barriers including restricted access to land, income volatility, weaker rural services, negative narratives and limited visibility of viable career pathways. When these challenges combine, they undermine confidence among potential entrants, even where genuine interest exists.

This study demonstrates that sheep farming can remain a relevant, resilient and attractive enterprise if it is framed and supported differently. Education must provide a balanced view of opportunities within the sheep sector, while land mobility measures must facilitate earlier and more gradual succession. Rural infrastructure must support the quality of life expected by modern households, and diversification and off-farm employment should be recognised as strengths rather than weaknesses within sheep systems. Industry narratives must move beyond short-term volatility to acknowledge the long-term value of sheep farming, while ambassadors and peer leaders have an important role to play in making real and achievable pathways visible to the next generation.

Equally important is the need to create greater value within the sheep sector. A consistent lesson throughout this study was that the most resilient farm businesses are often those that look beyond production alone and actively seek opportunities to strengthen profitability through innovation, collaboration and closer alignment with market demands. While no single approach will be suitable for all farms, the ability to identify and capture additional value will become increasingly important in building sustainable businesses and creating attractive opportunities for future generations of sheep farmers.

Ultimately, securing the future of the Irish sheep sector will require policy makers, industry stakeholders, educational institutions and farming families to work towards a shared vision of modern sheep farming. That vision must reflect how farm households operate today, recognising the importance of business resilience, multiple income streams, quality of life and continued adaptation to changing economic, environmental and social expectations.

By addressing these challenges in an integrated and practical manner, the sheep sector can convert existing interest into confidence, and confidence into participation. In doing so, it can help ensure that productive land remains actively managed, support vibrant rural communities, and sustain the economic, environmental and social contributions that sheep farming makes to Ireland. The future of Irish sheep farming will not be secured by any single intervention, but by creating a sector that is profitable, visible, innovative and attractive to the next generation.

Recommendations

Recommendation	Description	Lead Responsibility	Supporting Partners
Reframing Sheep Farming in Education	Ensure agricultural education pathways provide a balanced view of the opportunities available within sheep farming, while highlighting its role within wider pastoral farming systems, diversification strategies and rural employment opportunities. Education must reflect the realities of hybrid careers, part-time farming and business-led decision-making.	Teagasc & Agricultural Education Providers	Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Colleges, Universities, Bord Bia, Sheep Ireland, Industry Stakeholders
Diversification Opportunities	Actively support farm-specific diversification strategies that align with the strengths, scale and constraints of individual sheep farms. Emphasis should be placed on low-labour, land-sharing and resilience-building options, such as renewables, agri-environment schemes and complementary enterprises, that strengthen sheep systems rather than displacing them.	Teagasc	Department of Agriculture, Local Authorities, Renewable Energy Developers, LEADER Companies, Farm Organisations
Support Value Creation Within the Sheep Sector	Greater emphasis should be placed on helping sheep farmers capture more value from their production. Opportunities such as sheep milk, wool innovation, direct-to-consumer sales and premium branding can improve profitability, strengthen resilience and support generational renewal.	Industry Stakeholders Collectively	Processors, Sheep Ireland, Producer Groups, Irish Grown Wool Council, Research Bodies, Bord Bia (where appropriate)
Land Mobility and Succession	Prioritise partnership-based succession, shared farming and phased transition models as the default pathways for generational renewal in sheep and livestock systems. Policy must normalise early engagement, gradual transfer of responsibility and income sharing, rather than late ownership transfer that delays renewal and restricts entry.	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Teagasc, Land Mobility Service, Farm Organisations, Taxation and Legal Advisors
Farmer Ambassadors and Role Models	Use farmer ambassadors more strategically to build trust, inspire participation and increase visibility of sheep and livestock farming as a viable career. Ambassadors must be relatable, representative and honest, reflecting different ages, genders, scales and pathways into farming. By making real careers visible, ambassadors can help ensure agriculture remains a credible and attractive choice for future generations.	Bord Bia	Teagasc, Macra, Farm Organisations, Processors, Agricultural Colleges, Industry Champions

Rural Infrastructure and Quality of Life	Commit to sustained investment in rural infrastructure and essential services, including broadband, housing, healthcare, childcare and transport. Addressing real and perceived inequalities between rural and urban areas is critical if sheep-farming regions are to attract, retain and support the next generation of skilled farmers and workers.	National & Local Government	Department of Rural and Community Development, Local Authorities, Health, Housing and Education Agencies
Industry Narrative and Media Discourse	Shift the sector's narrative towards constructive, solution-focused discussion that addresses how sheep farming can be supported, strengthened and sustained over the long term. This includes challenging short-term, sensationalist or purely negative commentary and promoting a more balanced understanding of sheep farming's economic, environmental and social value.	Industry Stakeholders Collectively	Bord Bia, Farm Organisations, Agricultural Media, Processors, Teagasc, Farmer Ambassador

References

- Bord Bia (2021) *Sheep Milk: An Opportunity to Grow Irish Production?* Dublin: Bord Bia. Available at: https://www.bordbia.ie/industry/news/insightful-articles/2021/sheep-milk--an-opportunity-to-grow-irish-production/ (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- Bord Bia (2025) *Export Performance and Prospects 2025-2026*. Dublin: Bord Bia. Available at: https://www.bordbia.ie/globalassets/bordbia.ie/performance--prospects/bord-bia-export-performance-and-prospects-report-2025---2026.pdf (Accessed: 29 September 2026)
- Business Wales (2026) *New Dairy Sheep Cluster launched to support growth of Welsh sheep milk industry*. Available at: https://businesswales.gov.wales/foodanddrink/news-and-events/news/new-dairy-sheep-cluster-launched-support-growth-welsh-sheep-milk-industry (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- Calvey, H. (2026) *Achill Mountain Lamb*. Available at: https://www.achillmountainlamb.ie (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2023) *Farm Structure Survey 2023: Infographic*. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/visualisationtools/infographics/businesssectors/2023/0216001_Farm_Structure_Survey_2023_Infographic_ENG.png (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Costello, D. and McHugh, N. (2026) *Interim findings from Teagasc Labour on Sheep Farms Survey*. Presentation delivered at the Teagasc National Sheep Conference 2026, Ireland.
- Cotter Organic Lamb (2026) *Farm Story and Product Information*. Available at: https://cotterorganiclamb.ie (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) (2025) *Farming Evidence: Key Statistics (Accessible Version)*. London: UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farming-evidence-pack-a-high-level-overview-of-the-uk-agricultural-industry/farming-evidence-key-statistics-accessible-version (Accessed: 30 April 2026).
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2025) *National Sheep and Goat Census Report 2025*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/9ac79f09/National_Sheep_and_Goat_Census_Report_2025.pdf (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2026) *Minister Heydon Announces International Year of the Woman Farmer Ambassador 2026*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-agriculture-food-and-the-marine/press-releases/minister-heydon-announces-international-year-of-the-woman-farmer-ambassador-2026/ (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- European Commission (2019) *Supporting Smart Village Strategies*. Brussels: Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development. Available at: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/rural-development/supporting-smart-village-strategies_en (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- European Commission (2020) *A New Circular Economy Action Plan: For a Cleaner and More Competitive Europe*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission (2025) *Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions,

COM(2025) 872 final, 21 October. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0872 (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- European Commission (2026) *Strengthening Access to Services to Foster Generational Renewal in Rural Areas*. Rural Pact. Available at: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/news/strengthening-access-services-foster-generational-renewal-rural-areas_en (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) (2017) *Generational Renewal in EU Agriculture*. Briefing PE 608.663. Brussels: European Parliament. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608663/EPRS_BRI(2017)608663_EN.pdf (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Farming for Nature (2026) *Our Network of Ambassadors*. Available at: https://www.farmingfornature.ie/ambassadors/ (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) (2025) *No One Shouted Stop Until Now: The GAA's Response to Ireland's Demographic Shift*. Dublin: Gaelic Athletic Association. Available at: https://www.gaa.ie/api/images/image/upload/t_q-best/prd/tybwaepki8jz0sl8kq98.pdf (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Galway Wool Co-operative (2025) *Our Story*. Available at: https://www.galwaywool.com (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai (2026) *Dairy Sheep Wales: Shaping the Future of Welsh Dairy Sheep Farming*. Available at: https://www.gllm.ac.uk/news/dairy-sheep-wales-launch (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- INSEE (2024) *Un panorama de l'agriculture en France*. Paris: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. Available at: https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/7728901 (Accessed: 30 September 2026).
- Irish Farmers Journal (n.d.) *Survey Shows 13% of Ag Science Graduates Plan to Farm After College*. Available at: https://www.farmersjournal.ie/focus/agri-jobs/survey-shows-13-of-ag-science-graduates-plan-to-farm-after-college-855460 (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Irish Grown Wool Council (2024) *Irish Wool Sector Development and Market Positioning*. Dublin: Irish Grown Wool Council.
- Kilmullen Farm (2026) *Farm Shop and Direct Sales Information*. Available at: https://kilmullenfarm.com (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- McGriskin, K. (2025) *Handing the Farm Over to the Next Generation*. Teagasc. Available at: https://www.teagasc.ie/news--events/daily/handing-the-farm-over-to-the-next-generation/ (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- O'Sullivan, K. (2025) 'Potential EU sheep milk supply gap but Ireland has "limited" ability to fill it', *Agriland*, 30 July. Available at: https://www.agriland.ie/farming-news/potential-eu-sheep-milk-supply-gap-but-ireland-has-limited-ability-to-fill-it/ (Accessed: 29 September 2026).
- Rural Support (2025) *Lack of Communication the Key Issue with Succession Planning in Northern Ireland Farming*. Available at: https://www.ruralsupport.org.uk/lack-of-communication-the-key-issue-with-succession-planning-in-northern-ireland-farming/ (Accessed: 27 April 2026).
- Trotse Jonge Boeren (2026) *Bijbaan bij de boer [Part-time Job with a Farmer]*. Available at: https://www.trotsejongeboeren.nl/home/campagnes/bijbaan-bij-de-boer/ (Accessed: 27 April 2026).