

A photograph of sheep grazing in a green field with trees in the background. The sheep are the central focus, with one in the foreground and another slightly behind it. The background is a soft-focus landscape with green grass and dark trees.

A vision for stimulus packages to support the development of the Northern Ireland sheep industry

**The Northern Ireland Sheep Industry Taskforce
January 2023**



A stimulus programme to encourage capital investment and adoption of best practice to drive resilience, animal productivity, skills development and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

To encourage actions to build resilience and animal productivity requires on farm infrastructure to allow the collection of on farm data and to simplify the handling of sheep to improve animal health and welfare. Examples of such infrastructure include mobile dippers and sheep handling pens as well as the integration of information technology to measure and record key performance indicators into equipment like weigh crates and sheep handling equipment. These investments can take many years to deliver cost savings or productivity gains to cover the initial investment. Access to capital grants would provide a stimulus for infrastructure investment.

Skills development and attendance at knowledge exchange events, either in person or virtually, would encourage the adoption of best practice and new technologies. In person attendance would have additional health and wellbeing benefits for those attending through the social interaction that would occur. Skills updating could be introduced as a condition of access to targeted sheep enterprise development support.

Improving animal health and welfare has been identified as a key component of improving productivity. A starting point to this is the development of sheep health plans with the assistance of the farmers veterinary surgeon. For some businesses, the professional fees associated with the preparation and monitoring of annual health plans can be significant when compared to the annual gains in income they facilitate. The preparation of an annual health plan should be a condition of access to targeted sheep enterprise development support.

Liver fluke and parasitic worms have been recognised as having significant negative impacts on animal productivity through slowing down growth rates and in extreme cases, mortality. Monitoring can be achieved through the use of faecal egg counts (FEC sampling) and abattoir feedback. The introduction of a FEC monitoring programme should be a condition of access to a targeted sheep enterprise development support.

A number of other debilitating animal health issues have been identified as impacting on sheep productivity, including lameness and neonatal losses. The use of sheep health plans could provide the basis for multiyear actions to minimise the incidence of disease. Targeted sheep enterprise support should include an option to support multiyear animal health plans that identify prevalence of key disease and deliver an action plan to reduce or eradicate the disease. For example, prevent footrot or Contagious Ovine Digital Dermatitis.

Further resilience for the industry will come from the increased use of improved genetics within the flock. This action is currently constrained by a lack of availability of performance recorded ewes and rams within Northern Ireland (NI). Targeted sheep enterprise support should include provision of a stimulus to increase the genetic merit of the NI sheep flock.

An example of how a stimulus programme could be structured is shown in the following framework.

Core and data collection

Objective	Element	Action	Auditable	Support profile	
A stimulus programme to encourage capital investment and adoption of best practice to drive resilience, animal productivity, skills development and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.	Core (Annual requirement)	Annual sheep health plan.	Yes		
		Farm carbon audit.			
	Attend two business development events per year.	Yes			
	Record number of ewes, ewe hoggets and ewe lambs to tup, total lambs born. Start and finish of lambing and lambs born alive.				
	Encourage commercial farmers to improve performance recording and supply national database (only possible if national database available)	Year one: Record individual lambing dates for 20% of flock and record through EID on to APHIS.	Yes		Meet core requirement in year one £1 per ewe. Meet additional flock recording £1 per ewe.
		Year two: Record individual lambing dates for 30% of flock through EID on to APHIS.	Yes		Meet core requirement in year two £1 per ewe. Meet year one additional recording £0.50 per ewe meet year two additional recording 0.50 per ewe.
Year three: Record individual lambing dates for 40% of flock through EID on to APHIS.		Yes	Meet core requirement in year two £1 per ewe. Meet year one additional recording £0.50 per ewe meet year two additional recording £0.50 per ewe.		

Health and welfare option

Objective	Element	Action	Auditable	Support profile
A stimulus programme to encourage capital investment and adoption of best practice to drive resilience, animal productivity, skills development and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.	Improve animal performance through improvements in health and welfare.	Year one: Take veterinary action for at least three of seven options: 1. Facial egg count use 2. Enzootic abortion vaccine 3. Toxoplasmosis vaccine 4. Footrot vaccine 5. Pregnancy scan 6. OPA scan 7. Scab treatment	Yes	Each action worth £1 per ewe.
		Year two: Take veterinary action for at least three of seven options: 1. Facial egg count use 2. Enzootic abortion vaccine 3. Toxoplasmosis vaccine 4. Footrot vaccine 5. Pregnancy scan 6. OPA scan 7. Scab treatment		
		Year three: Take veterinary action for at least three of seven options: 1. Facial egg count use 2. Enzootic abortion vaccine 3. Toxoplasmosis vaccine 4. Footrot vaccine 5. Pregnancy scan 6. OPA scan 7. Scab treatment		

Please note: This is not an exhausted list of disease options.

Animal genetics option

Objective	Element	Action	Auditable	Support profile
A stimulus programme to encourage capital investment and adoption of best practice to drive resilience, animal productivity, skills development and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.	Increase availability of performance recorded breeding sheep.	Performance recording pedigree flock through a specified recording scheme. For example: Signet or Sheep Ireland.	Yes	Meet requirement £8 per lamb recorded for each year.
	Encourage use of performance recorded rams in commercial flocks.	Provide evidence of purchase/ use of performance record rams in non-pedigree flock.	Yes	£1 per ewe in flock annually.

Capital expenditure option

Objective	Element	Action	Auditable	Support profile
A stimulus programme to encourage capital investment and adoption of best practice to drive resilience, animal productivity, skills development and reduced greenhouse gas emissions	Improve sheep handling facilities.	Sheep business development scheme.	Yes	Three-year development programme capital grants. (Handling pens, weigh crates, mobile dippers etc.)
	Integrated Information technology.	Sheep business development scheme.	Yes	Three-year development programme capital grants. (EID readers, upgrade weigh crates, handheld dataloggers etc.)
	Reducing carbon impact.	Sheep business development scheme.	Yes	Three-year development programme capital grants. (Animal feed delivery equipment, precision fertiliser equipment, winter forage storage upgrades, hedging and fencing maintenance and upgrades.)



A stimulus programme to encourage land management actions to maximise the integration of sheep production with biodiversity protection and enhancement.

Before changes can be made to benefit the environmental sustainability of the land used in sheep production, the base or starting point must be established. Consequently, any stimulus package must start with a number of environmental audits including:

- **A biodiversity audit**
- **A soil carbon audit**
- **Land capability audit**
- **A soil sampling programme to establish soil nutrient requirement**
- **Greenhouse gas emission audit**

Some actions to create this baseline have recently been introduced but will take some time to cover all sheep enterprises. Nevertheless, to measure change overtime these audits would need to be repeated; possibly every three or five years.

Building on the base audits will require integrated land management/land use plans to benefit environmental sustainability and biodiversity. These plans should include for example, nutrient budgeting, grazing management plans and hay and silage harvesting plans. Maximising the benefit of land capability audits and grazing management may require investment in permanent or temporary fencing, hedge renewal or wall repairs. Capital grants should be made available for such investments.

Biodiversity and greenhouse gas reduction can be enhanced at the same time as productivity improves through more active grassland management, including nutrient budgeting and grass yield monitoring, and incorporation of legumes into swards.

Turn to page 9 to view the stimulus programme framework in detail.



Sustainable land management and biodiversity option

Objective	Element	Action	Auditable	Support profile
A stimulus programme to encourage land management actions to maximise the integration of sheep production with biodiversity protection and enhancement	Establish base audit of farm biodiversity and land use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A biodiversity audit ▪ A soil carbon audit ▪ Land capability audit ▪ A soil sampling programme to establish soil nutrient requirement ▪ Greenhouse gas emission audit 	Yes	Business support grant reflecting co-funding of environmental audits to assess public goods delivered.
	Prepare multiyear action plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Soil sampling nutrient budget plan ▪ Incorporation of legumes into swards ▪ Grass growth evaluation and grazing management plan (Grasscheck NI) ▪ SDA and DA hay and silage harvesting profile ▪ Moorland grazing and stocking plan 	Yes	Area payment reflecting sustainability gains of for example, reduced inorganic fertiliser use and measures enhancing protection or increase in biodiversity.

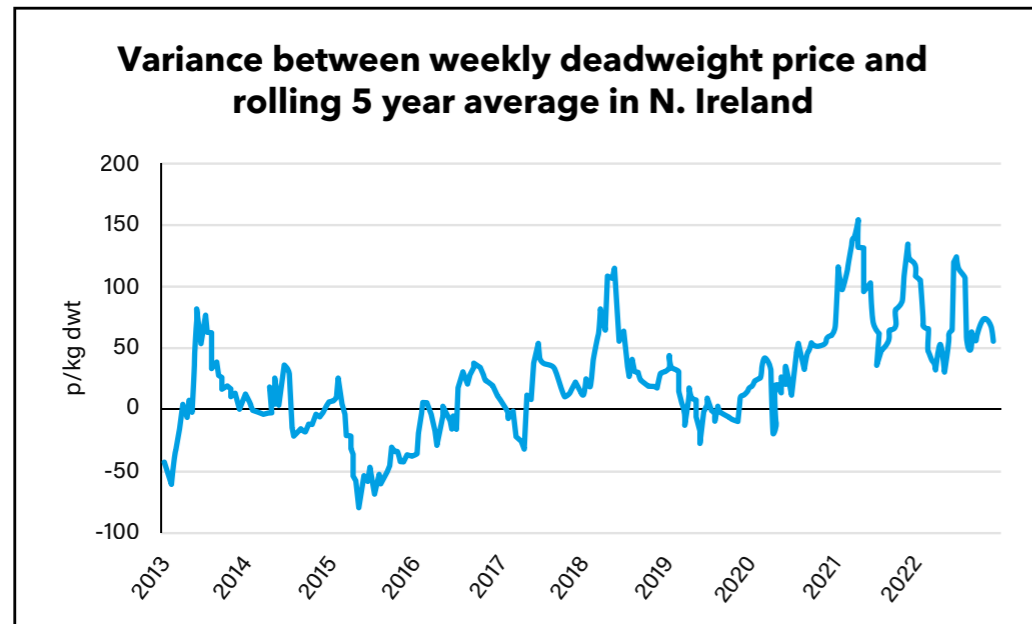
Crisis management package

Market prices can move very quickly as the result of circumstances outside the producer's control. Recent examples have included loss of export market opportunities as a result of a foot and mouth outbreak and associated control measures or uncertainty over the terms of trade. Markets have also been disrupted by limitations over abattoir capacity due to lack of key inputs or labour force.

One trigger for a crisis management programme could be a period of four weeks with the average market price below the five year average. The scheme would remain in place until market prices have been above the five year average for four weeks. If the market price is higher than the average, no support would be paid but the scheme would not end until four weeks of above the five year average price has been achieved. Support should be the value needed to achieve the five year average and paid to the owner of the prime lamb at the time of sale.

Using weekly deadweight prices supplied by the Livestock and Meat Commission, the above methodology would have triggered monitoring on 13 occasions since 2013, but the payment would only have triggered on seven occasions.

The scheme could be administered through the APHIS animal movement facility.





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