

Marketing prime lamb



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Introduction

UK sheep farmers produce 275,000–300,000 tonnes of lamb and mutton annually. In 2024, the UK exported about 86,000 tonnes of fresh, frozen and processed sheep meat and offal, valued at about £599m.

The way to maximise financial returns is to produce and sell the type of sheep buyers really want and are willing to pay the most money for.

It is far better to identify a potential market/s first and then produce animals to suit their specific requirements rather than producing a batch of lambs and then trying to find a customer.

The key is to sell lambs when they are ready. Do not wait for that ‘special’ date when, historically, the first draw was made. Improvements in breeding and grassland management have led to animals being ready earlier than in the past.

While there are many market specifications for lamb, including maximum and minimum weight bands, the majority of meat buyers are looking for animals that classify as R3L.

While weight is obviously important, sending animals of the right conformation and fat score is just as vital. Frequent, careful handling of the lambs is essential to ensure each animal has reached its full potential and target specification.

The key issues producers face when marketing prime lambs are covered in this manual. Those that can embrace and act on all these areas will be rewarded with good returns.

Who are the customers?

The consumer

Market research shows that consumers want lean and tender meat which is safe to eat and from a trusted source. Above all, they are looking for a consistent product that gives them the same satisfying experience every time they buy, cook and eat it. Research shows that, while consumers perceive lamb as being tasty, they also believe it can be expensive and fatty. The industry must work hard to provide consumers with a product that meets their needs.

The retailer

Consumers buy their lamb from a range of retail and foodservice outlets. Supermarkets now sell over two thirds of the sheep meat sold in Britain. While not covered within our data, there are other key areas of demand including public sector catering. Each outlet knows exactly the type of meat it requires to satisfy its customers' needs, based on detailed knowledge of their previous buying behaviour.



The meat processor

The sheep farmer's direct customer is the lamb buyer, based either at a livestock market or at an abattoir, if selling deadweight.

Each buyer will have different specifications for the lambs they want in terms of weight, conformation and fat class. The prices offered by different abattoirs may vary for the same animals and will depend on the requirements of their customers further down the supply chain.

Abattoirs are looking for animals that:

- Are quick and easy to process
- Arrive at the right time, on the right day
- Are clean
- Hit the correct weight specification
- Meet the correct carcass and fat specification

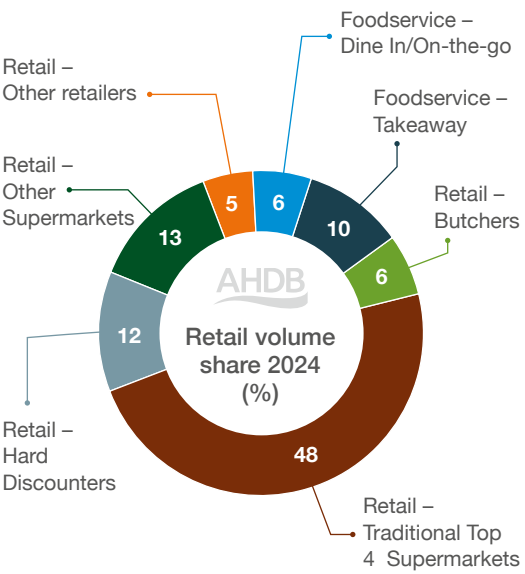


Figure 1. Lamb volume sales by channel percentage in Great Britain

Traditional top 4: Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, Morrisons
Hard Discounters: Aldi, Lidl

Source: AHDB estimates of Kantar data, Lamb volume share, 52 w/e 29 December 2024

Typical specifications

Each market has different requirements and sheep farmers should target those that are looking for the type of carcase they can produce consistently and at a profit.

Do not produce a batch of finished lambs and then try to find a market for them. It is far better to identify a potential market/s or customer/s first and then produce animals to suit their specific needs.

These typical specifications are subject to seasonal and regional variations. Most deadweight markets pay up to 21 kg.

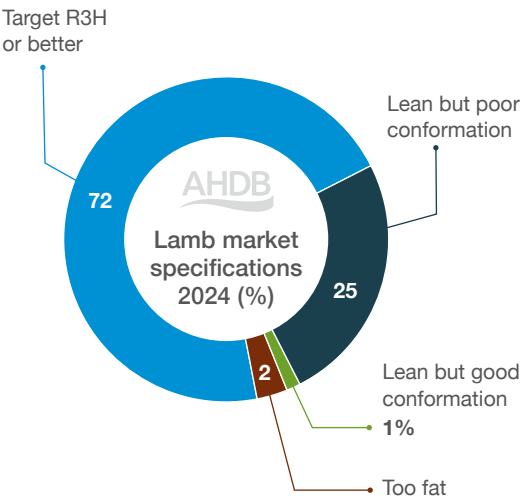


Figure 2. Percentage of GB lambs falling within and outside target specifications 2024

Source: AHDB

Table 1. Typical target requirements for different markets

Main market	Carcase weight (kg)	Classification	
		Conformation	Fat
Supermarket	16–21	E, U, R	2, 3L, possibly 3H
Butchers	16–25	E, U, R	2, 3L, 3H
Exports	9–21	E, U, R	2, 3L

Note: there is very limited demand for conformation P, fat class 4H and 5. Animals of these classifications will be traded at discount prices.

Farm assurance

All lamb carrying an assurance logo can be traced back to the farm the livestock came from. Assured beef and lamb gives consumers confidence that farmers have met comprehensive standards covering

hygiene, safety, environmental protection and animal welfare. Compliance with these strict standards is regularly checked by independent auditors.

Lamb carcass classification

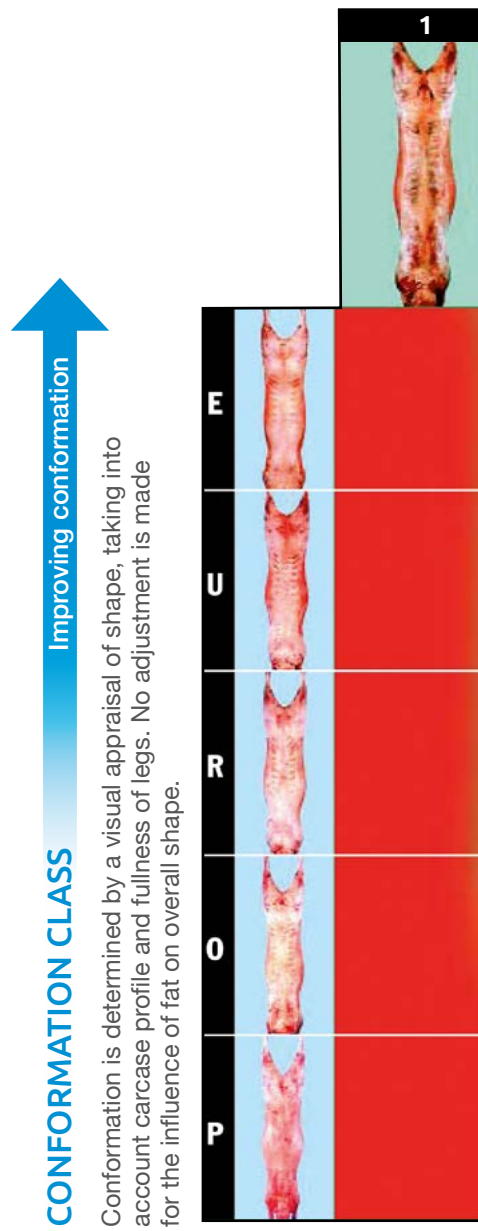
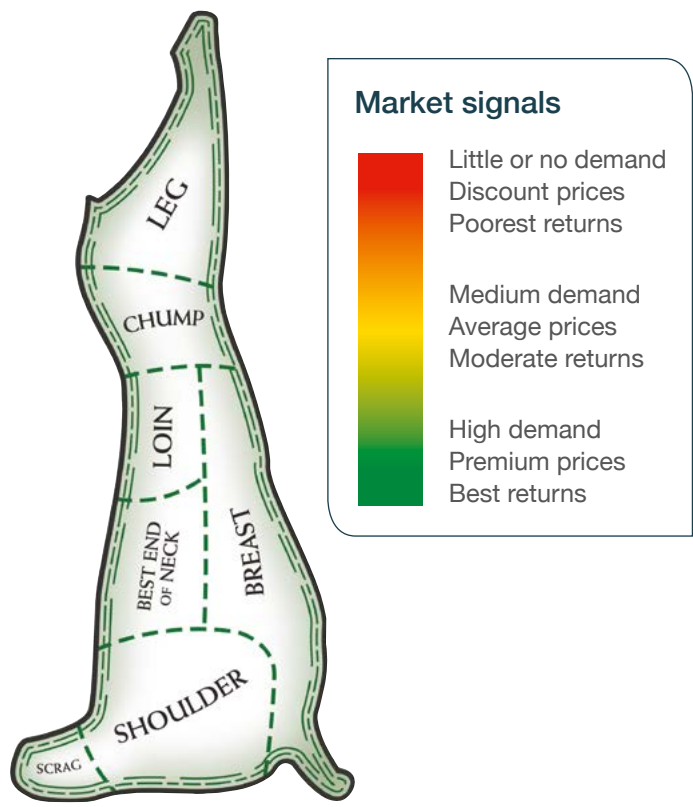
The current system for classifying carcasses in the UK and Europe uses the EUROP grid for conformation and a numeric assessment for fatness (classes 1–5).

Combining scores for conformation and fat determines the market most suited for each type of carcase. Aim for most animals to fall within the green shaded area, where there is greatest demand and highest prices.

Video Image Analysis (VIA)

VIA is an automated alternative to the manual classification practised in most abattoirs currently.

- Interpretation of video images by computer programme
- Systems require approval by EU
- Already used in some parts of New Zealand
- Used in Republic of Ireland on beef cattle from 2004
- Has potential to measure meat yield

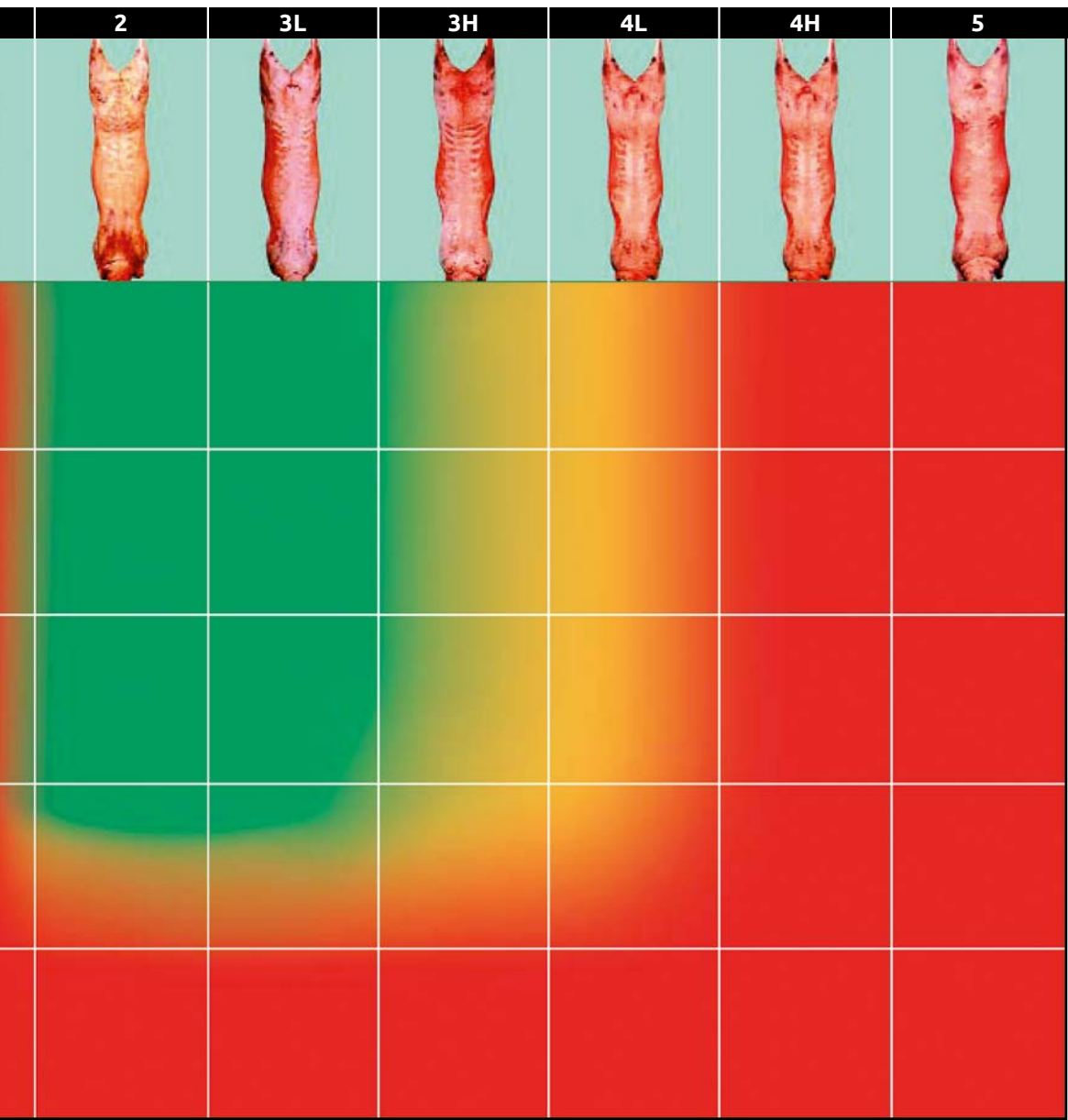


Conformation is determined by a visual appraisal of shape, taking into account carcass profile and fullness of legs. No adjustment is made for the influence of fat on overall shape.

FAT CLASS

Increasing fatness

Fat is determined by visual assessment of external fat cover. There are five main classes. Classes 4 and 5 are subdivided into L (leaner) and H (fatter)



Markets and exports

Liveweight or deadweight?

Around 55% of finished lambs in Great Britain are sold through livestock markets, while the other 45% are sold on a deadweight basis to abattoirs. Some producers prefer the competitive nature of selling live animals through an auction ring. There are advantages and disadvantages to both and some prefer selling through a marketing group that can offer independent advice on the best outlets.

Exports

In 2024, the UK exported 72,600 tonnes of fresh and frozen sheep meat to Europe and beyond, including countries in South East Asia and the Far East.

98% of the exported sheep meat was to the EU.

Demand varies from country to country in terms of carcase selection (conformation, fat class and weight), choice of cuts and Halal slaughter.

Extra care has to be taken when targeting export markets, as adverse currency fluctuations outside the farmer's control can quickly erode any potential financial advantages over selling into domestic markets.

Plan ahead

As prices fluctuate depending on the season, it is important to plan ahead. Target an ideal time for selling, based on expected feed, labour availability and market prices, then work backwards to decide the best time to lamb.

Regular handling and weighing, flock monitoring and good feed management will bring lambs forward to the standard that will suit buyers' needs more precisely.

Do not keep lambs any longer than is necessary, as each day they stay on the farm costs money but may not yield any greater financial return. Latest evidence suggests it costs four times as much energy to put on fat than lean meat.

Have a look at the volume and value of sheep meat and offal that the UK has imported and exported. Recent activity can indicate the impact on the domestic market. Visit ahdb.org.uk/lamb/sheep-meat-trade

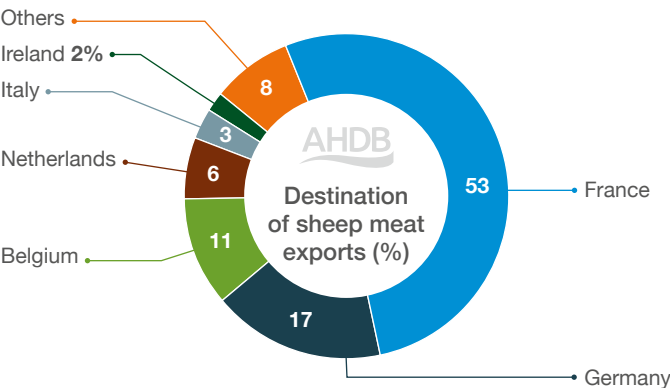


Figure 3. UK total sheep meat exports by destination
UK HMRC via Trade Data Monitor LLC

Present clean animals

Lambs in a dirty condition will not be accepted for slaughter due to strict food safety and hygiene regulations. A dirty fleece is worth less than a clean one and it can contaminate the carcase.

Ensure sheep are clean before marketing.

Does weight pay?

Feed lambs to reach the desired weights for the target market and no more. Driving for heavier weights is counter-productive as lambs weighing more than 21 kg will usually attract a penalty when sold liveweight or deadweight. The carcasses can become overfat, which consumers do not like. Taking sheep to higher weights is also inefficient as feed costs increase per kilogram produced. They may also be eating feed that other lighter lambs may need, to reach their ideal finishing weight.

Healthy lambs produce

Underlying health issues affect lamb growth rates and influence returns, as it takes longer for animals to be marketable.

Worms are a major threat to the performance and health of lambs and controlling them is vital. Anthelmintics currently give good control in most areas, but wormer resistance is growing across England.

Use risk assessment strategies and tools such as faecal egg counts before treating and follow good drenching practice.



Acceptable (A) and unacceptable (B)

Liver fluke

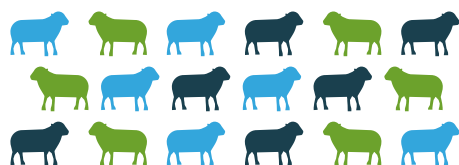
Liver fluke (*Fasciola hepatica*) not only affects the live animal, it also damages the end product. At certain times of year, up to 50% of livers can be condemned in abattoirs due to liver fluke damage and these cannot be sold for human consumption. This, ultimately, has a knock-on effect to the whole supply chain.

For more information, see **Worm control in sheep** and **Liver fluke control in grazing livestock**.

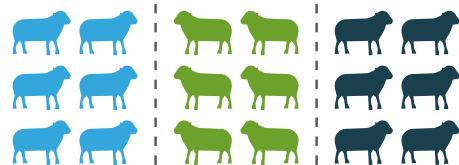
Maximising financial returns

Sorting lambs does pay

Present even lots of lambs that are matched to specific market needs, in terms of weight, conformation and fat. Mixed lots, where not all lambs meet a buyer's requirements, will not achieve the best potential prices for all the lambs offered for sale. AHDB trials at markets showed sorting lambs into groups of equal merit can attract a significant premium per lamb. Treat lambs as individuals as they are growing, but place them into even lots to sell them.



Sold as a mixed lot = average return



Sold in matched lots = premium return

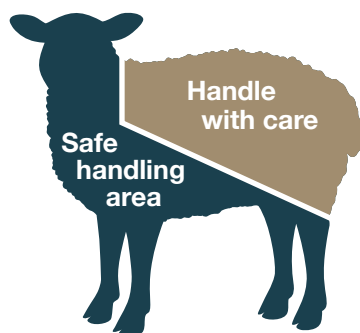
Handle with care

Sensitive handling is vital for animal welfare and avoids damage that shows up after slaughter.

Sheep bruise easily, particularly young lambs. Bruising and abscesses lead to wasteful trimming and even partial condemnation of the carcass. This in turn reduces saleability and the amount paid to the producer.

Avoid potential losses by:

- Not handling sheep by grabbing wool which can cause bruising
- Not allowing sheep to trample over each other in races during handling or selection
- Not overcrowding sheep in vehicles and by using internal partitions to restrict movement while travelling
- Not leaving any sharp objects in races, trailers or gates, etc.
- Using clean injection needles and correct injection techniques to avoid infection
- Choosing injection site with care. Producers should inject animals in the neck and avoid the rump



Abscess removed (A) and bruising (B)

Understanding how each abattoir works

Different processing plants operate different payment systems. When comparing deadweight prices, it is important to understand the pricing basis and be aware of any potential weight or out-of-specification penalties.

Example pricing grid for an abattoir, with premiums and penalties shown in pence per kg

	1	2	3	3H	4L	4H	5
E	Base price	+15	+15	Base price	-25	-45	-80
U	Base price	+8	+8	Base price	-25	-45	-80
R	-5	Base price	Base price	-5	-25	-45	-80
O	-20	-5	-5	-15	-30	-55	-80
P	-70/-100	-70/-100	-70/-100	-70/-100	-70/-100	-70/-100	-70/-100

Beware! All abattoirs have an upper and lower weight limit. Lambs are usually only paid up to 21kg deadweight. Any falling out of the weight range will usually attract a penalty. Sometimes, this can be severe so check before sale.

Hot weight rebates

Hot weight rebates are used to establish ‘cold’ carcase weight, i.e. the abattoir weight. They are applied to carcasses weighed ‘hot’ within one hour of slaughter and are the basis on which producers are paid.

Table 2. Examples of different hot weight rebates used to establish ‘cold’ carcase weights

Scales calibrated to 0.2 kg		Scales calibrated to 0.5 kg	
Hot weight (kg)	Rebate (kg)	Hot weight (kg)	Rebate (kg)
25.4 and under	0.5	25.5 and under	0.5
25.6 and over	1.0	26 and over	1.0

Dressing specification

There are two specifications agreed by the industry:

- 1. MLC Standard Conditions (Fleece, head, fore and hind feet, genitalia, contents of abdominal and thoracic cavities removed. Kidneys, kidney fat, diaphragm and tail left on)
- 2. Tail removed – (as above but with the tail removed which equates to an average loss of 0.2 kg)

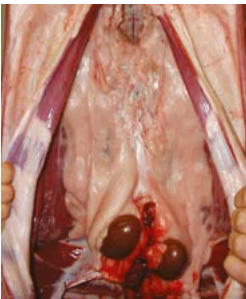


Tail on



Tail off

Dressing practices vary between abattoirs. Any dressing specification that falls outside of the two industry agreed specifications is recorded as ‘company spec’ and you should seek its definition from that company. One company specification being adopted is ‘Excluding Kidney Knob and Channel Fat’ (KKCF). This equates to an average reduction of 0.5 kg on final carcase weight.



Inclusive KKCF



Exclusive KKCF

Trimming neck and belly flaps also affects carcase weight and can be part of a company specification.

Table 3. Dressing spec impact on weight



Company spec. 1		Company spec. 2	
			
Ex KKCF	0.5 kg	Ex KKCF	0.5 kg
Ex tail	0.2 kg	Ex tail	0.2 kg
		Ex neck flesh	0.2 kg
		Ex breast/flaps	0.2 kg
Total 0.7 kg		Total 1.1 kg	

Table 3 shows the impact different dressing specifications can have on carcase weight. Company Spec 1 would result in a 0.7 kg deduction and Company Spec 2 would result in a 1.1 kg deduction from final carcase weight, which is higher than if an industry standard dressing specification was practised by either of these companies.

It is important to compare dressing specifications when deciding which outlet to target as they impact the final carcase weight and, therefore, the return to the producer

Virtual Selection Tool

For more information about lamb selection, see the AHDB Beef & Lamb Virtual Selection Tool, which shows how real and virtual animals look at different points in the classification grid.

Available at: ahdb.org.uk/virtual-beef-and-lamb-programmes

Killing out percentage

Killing out percentage is carcass weight as a percentage of liveweight.

Factors affecting KO% include:

- Breed and genetic performance of the sire and dam
- Stomach content at live weighing. An empty stomach gives a higher KO%
- Seasonal variation. Spring lambs tend to have a higher KO% than hoggets
- Milk-fed lambs have a higher KO% than weaned lambs
- Fatter lambs have a higher KO% than lean lambs
- Sex – females generally have a higher KO% than entire males
- Fleece length and type – heavier fleeces result in lower KO%
- Weather – dry lambs have higher KO%
- Lambs with long tails, testicles or horns have lower KO%

Meat yield

Meat yield is the total percentage of saleable meat from a carcass. Carcasses with better conformation yield a greater amount of saleable meat.

Fat level has the greatest influence – the fatter the carcass, the less meat is available for the processor to sell. See Table 4.

Table 4. The percentage of saleable meat from carcasses of different fat class

Fat class	Saleable meat (%)	Fat trim (%)	Bone and waste (%)
1	94.87	3.91	1.22
2	92.95	5.92	1.12
3L	91.52	7.44	1.04
3H	90.56	8.46	0.98
4L	89.61	9.47	0.92
4H	88.65	10.49	0.86
5	87.22	12.02	0.77



A full stomach can weigh twice an empty one

Selecting lambs to market

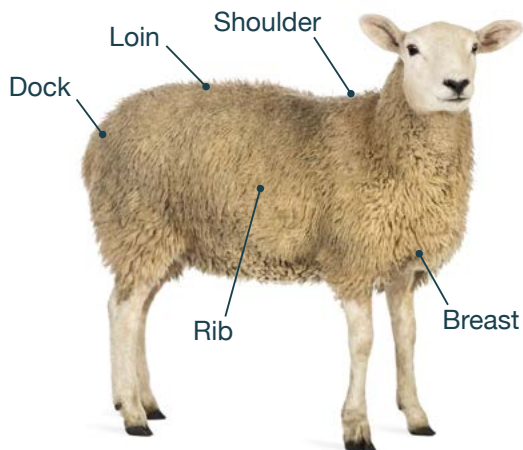
Weight and visual appraisal are general guides to an animal's readiness for market but, to ensure accurate selection, handling the live animal is essential.

Key handling points

These five key points give the best indication of level of finish and fat class.

To assess conformation, feel the animal at shoulder and loin.

To assess fat level, feel the animal at the dock, loin, ribs, shoulder and breast.

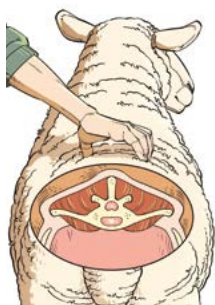


Assessing conformation

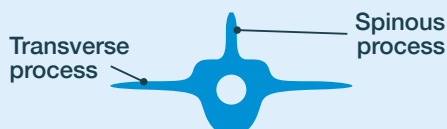
Shoulder



Loin



- E** Spinous processes undetectable, flesh creating a very convex profile, very broad shoulder area.
- U** Spinous processes just detectable, flesh beginning to create a convex profile.
- R** Spinous processes less prominent with flesh creating a straight profile under the hand.
- O** Spinous processes still prominent, less concave with some evidence of flesh beginning to fill the hand.
- P** Very prominent spinous processes evident. Very concave profile to the centre of the hand.



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Available at: ahdb.org.uk/virtual-beef-and-lamb-programmes

Assessing fatness

Dock

1. Individual bones very easy to detect
2. Individual bones easy to detect with light pressure
3. Moderate pressure to detect individual bones
4. Firm pressure to detect individual bones
5. Individual bones cannot be detected



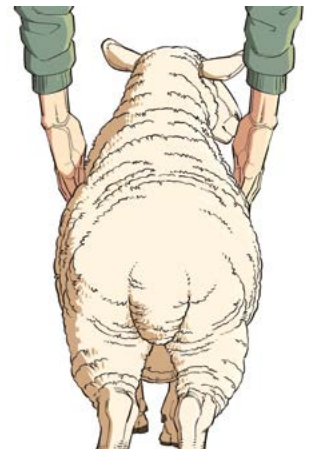
Loin

1. Very easy to feel between processes which are very prominent
2. Prominent spinous and transverse processes felt easily
3. Tips of processes rounded. Individual bones felt as corrugations with light pressure
4. Spinous processes felt with moderate pressure. Transverse processes felt with firm pressure
5. Individual processes cannot be felt



Rib

1. Individual ribs feel very bare, prominent and easy to detect
2. Individual ribs show slight cover but still easy to detect
3. Individual ribs have softer feel, with fat cover becoming more evident in between and over ribs, which are now less easy to detect
4. Individual ribs are only detectable with firm pressure
5. Individual ribs are undetectable, soft, rolling, spongy feel



Classification examples

O1 Classification example



Conformation

Profiles straight to concave;
average muscle development.

Legs

Profiles tending to be slightly concave.

Loin

Lacking width and fullness.

Shoulder

Tending to be narrow, lacking fullness.

Fat

None up to very low fat cover.

External

Traces of or no fat cover.

Internal

Abdominal: traces of or no fat visible
on the kidneys.

Thoracic: traces of or no fat visible
between the ribs.

O2 Classification example



Conformation

Profiles straight to concave;
average muscle development.

Legs

Profiles tending to be slightly concave.

Loin

Lacking width and fullness.

Shoulder

Tending to be narrow, lacking fullness.

Fat

Slight fat cover, flesh visible almost
everywhere.

External

A slight layer of fat covers part of the
carcase but may be less evident on the
loin and shoulders. There may be a lack
of firmness in the flank area.

Internal

Abdominal: traces of fat or a slight layer
of fat envelops part of the kidneys.

Thoracic: muscle clearly visible between
the ribs.

R3L Classification example



Conformation

Profiles generally straight;
good muscle development.

Legs

Profiles mainly straight.

Loin

Full, but less width to the shoulder.

Shoulder

Good development, but less full.

Fat

Flesh, with the exception of the leg and shoulder, almost entirely covered with a thin fat cover; slight deposits in the thoracic cavity.

External

A layer of fat covering most or the entire carcass; slightly thickened fat zones at the base of the tail.

Internal

Abdominal: light layer of fat envelops the kidneys.

Thoracic: muscle still visible between the ribs.

R3H Classification example



Conformation

Profiles generally straight;
good muscle development.

Legs

Profiles mainly straight.

Loin

Full, but less width to the shoulder.

Shoulder

Good development, but less full.

Fat

Flesh, with the exception of the leg and shoulder, almost entirely covered with thickening fat cover; increasing deposits in the thoracic cavity.

External

A light layer of fat covering most or the entire carcass; thickened fat zones at the base of the tail, over the chump loin and shoulder.

Internal

Abdominal: thicker layer of fat envelops part or all of the kidneys.

Thoracic: slight fat deposits may be visible between the ribs.

R4L Classification example



Conformation

Profiles generally straight;
good muscle development.

Legs

Profiles mainly straight.

Loin

Full, but less width to the shoulder.

Shoulder

Good development, but less full.

Fat

Flesh covered with fat, but still partly visible
on the legs and shoulder; some distinctive
fat deposits in the thoracic cavity.

External

A thick layer of fat covering most or all of
the carcass, but may be thinner on limbs
and thickening on shoulders.

Internal

Abdominal: kidney is enveloped in fat.

Thoracic: muscle between the ribs
may be slightly infiltrated with fat;
deposits may be visible on the ribs.

R5 Classification example



Conformation

Profiles generally straight;
good muscle development.

Legs

Profiles mainly straight.

Loin

Full, but less width to the shoulder.

Shoulder

Good development, but less full.

Fat

Carcass thickly covered with fat; heavy
fat deposits in the thoracic cavity.

External

Very thick fat cover, patches of fat
sometimes visible. The flank will be very
thick, firm to the touch, with very heavy
flank fat deposits.

Internal

Abdominal: kidneys enveloped in thick
layer of fat.

Thoracic: muscle between the ribs
infiltrated with fat; deposits visible
on the ribs.

U3H Classification example



Conformation

Profiles generally convex;
very good muscle development.

Legs

Full, profiles convex.

Loin

Wide and full to the shoulder.

Shoulder

Convex and full.

Fat

Flesh, with the exception of the leg and shoulder, almost entirely covered with thickening fat cover; increasing deposits in the thoracic cavity.

External

A light layer of fat covering most or the entire carcass; thickened fat zones at the base of the tail, over the chump loin and shoulder.

Internal

Abdominal: thicker layer of fat envelops part or all of the kidneys.

Thoracic: slight fat deposits may be visible between the ribs.

U4H Classification example



Conformation

Profiles generally convex;
very good muscle development.

Legs

Full, profiles convex.

Loin

Wide and full to the shoulder.

Shoulder

Convex and full.

Fat

Flesh covered with fat; distinctive fat deposits in the thoracic cavity.

External

A thick layer of fat covering most or the entire carcass. The flank will be thick, firm to the touch, with heavy flank fat deposits.

Internal

Abdominal: kidneys enveloped in fat.

Thoracic: muscle between the ribs infiltrated with fat; deposits may be visible on the ribs.

Further information

Other publications from AHDB

- Growing and finishing lambs
- Understanding the Qurbani market
- Understanding lambs and carcasses

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Produced for you by:

AHDB Beef & Lamb

Middlemarch Business Park
Siskin Parkway East
Coventry
CV3 4PE

T 024 7647 8834

E comms@ahdb.org.uk

W ahdb.org.uk



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