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YOUNG sheep farmer FORUM

Securing the Future of Irish Sheep Farming: Challenges, Opportunities & Policy Recommendations

The Young Sheep Farmers Forum

Executive Summary

The Young Sheep Farmer Forum, a collaborative initiative led by Kepak in partnership with Bord Bia and Mountbellew Agricultural College, was established to give a voice to the next generation of sheep farmers in Ireland. This forum brings together young, progressive farmers to identify the structural, financial and policy barriers impacting the viability and sustainability of sheep farming as a career.

Following extensive consultation and engagement, the Forum has developed fifteen strategic recommendations across five key pillars: generational renewal, rural infrastructure, policy development, sheep sector support, and digital reform. These aim to support succession, improve access to land and capital, modernise support schemes and enhance the visibility and value of Irish lamb.

Some recommendations build on recent positive budget developments, including updates to TAMS and the Agfood portal. These proposals aim to extend and enhance these measures to better support young farmers.

The recommendations call for targeted Government and EU action across retirement planning, taxation, land mobility, education, planning reform and digital infrastructure, alongside industry-led initiatives to incentivise young farmer participation, introduce price bonuses and promote lamb consumption through school-based initiatives.

The recommendations reflect the lived experience of young sheep farmers and are designed to ensure that future agricultural policy is inclusive, practical and responsive to the needs of those entering the sector. The Forum urges policymakers and industry stakeholders to act decisively to secure the future of sheep farming in Ireland.

Context & Rationale

Irish agriculture is at a critical juncture, particularly within the sheep sector. The following challenges underscore the urgency for targeted policy intervention:

Ageing Farming Population: According to the CSO, over 30% of farm holders are aged 65 or older, with fewer than 6% under the age of 35. This demographic imbalance threatens the long-term sustainability of farming communities.

Barriers to Land Access and Succession: Land mobility remains limited, with many farms lacking clear succession plans. Teagasc reports that only 8% of farms have a formal succession strategy, and young farmers often face legal, financial, and emotional hurdles in accessing land.

Financial and Infrastructural Constraints: Young farmers typically operate with limited credit histories and reduced access to capital.

Declining Sheep Sector Viability: The sheep sector faces volatility in market prices, rising input costs, and labour shortages all of which make it difficult to attract and retain new entrants.

These challenges are compounded by the need to align with climate action goals, including biodiversity protection, carbon reduction, and sustainable land use. The Forum's recommendations are designed to address these issues holistically, ensuring that young farmers are supported not only as economic contributors but also as stewards of rural Ireland's environmental and cultural heritage.

Strategic Recommendations:

Generational Renewal & Land Mobility

Recommendation 1: 7-year Farm Retirement Scheme.
Recommendation 2: Tax relief extension for intra-family land rental.
Recommendation 3: Statutory Land Mobility Body.

Rural Planning & Infrastructure

Recommendation 4: Consistent rural planning policy.
Recommendation 5: Funding review for private ag colleges.
Recommendation 6: Green Cert course content update.

Policy Development & Farmer Engagement

Recommendation 7: Farmer panels for scheme design.
Recommendation 8: Include Online learning in Knowledge Transfer.

Sheep Sector Support

Recommendation 9: Flexibility in Sheep Improvement Scheme.
Recommendation 10: 5-year commitment to Sheep Welfare Scheme.
Recommendation 11: TAMS updates and grant enhancements.
Recommendation 12: Price bonus for young farmers.
Recommendation 13: Lamb in schools initiative.
Recommendation 14: PGI status for Irish lamb.

Digital & Administrative Reform

Recommendation 15: Agfood portal overhaul.

Recommendation 1:
Farm Retirement Scheme

Objective:

Introduce a phased retirement scheme to support older farmers in transferring land to younger, trained successors, while securing financial stability during retirement.

Why It Matters:

Over 30% of Irish farmers are over 65. Succession is often delayed by financial and emotional barriers, limiting land mobility. This scheme promotes generational renewal, supports young entrants, and ensures the long-term sustainability of sheep farming.

What's Proposed:

A 7-year retirement scheme, supported by the next CAP programme (2028-2034), that provides annual pension payments to farmers who transfer their land to young, trained farmers.

Who Benefits:

- Older farmers: 60+ or 55+ where health issues exist which prevent the farmer continuing to farm.
- Young farmers : under 40, trained, primarily engaged in breeding Sheep and/or Cattle.

Key Conditions to Qualify:

- Retiring farmer must have actively farmed for at least 15 years.
- Must have a documented succession plan.

Land transfer may occur by:

- **Phased transfer:** Flexible schedule agreed between parties, but must meet the following minimum milestones:

  - 50% within 2 years
  - 75% within 5 years
  - 100% within 7 years

- **Or full transfer:** All land transferred at once at scheme entry.
- Successor must be a trained farmer under 40 at the time of entering the scheme who will primarily engage in breeding sheep and/or cattle for the full duration of the scheme.

Financial Support:

- Payment range: €500–€625 per hectare transferred, applied on a sliding scale based on farm size on entering the scheme.
- Maximum payment: €625 per hectare transferred, capped at €25,000 per year (based on 40 hectares).
- Minimum payment: €500 per hectare transferred for farms ≤10 ha.
- Farms between 10 and 40 hectares: Per hectare payment to be made on a pro-rata basis, ensuring fair support relative to land area and scale of transfer.

Flexibility for Retiring Farmers:

Retiring farmers can continue to advise and contribute on the farm, allowing knowledge transfer and ongoing involvement without hindering succession.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Strategic Plan Generational Renewal objective under Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 2 (Viable & Resilient Primary Producers), and reinforces Minister's Commission priorities on Pensions and Land Access.

Recommendation 2.
Intra-Family Land Rental Tax Relief

Objective:

Enable farming families to rent land to their children with the same tax benefits as renting to non-family members.

Why It Matters:

Succession planning is often delayed due to emotional, financial, or legal concerns. Allowing families to rent land to children/ grand-children/ nephews or nieces with tax relief creates a low-risk way to trial succession, helping young farmers gain experience and easing the transition of farm ownership.

What's Proposed:

Extend existing tax reliefs on land rental currently only available when renting to non-family members to also apply when parents rent land to their children/ grandchildren/ nephews or nieces at market value.

Who Benefits:

- Farming families planning succession.
- Young farmers who want to build experience before taking full ownership.

Key Conditions to Qualify:

- Rent must be set at market value.
- Used as a "road test" for future land transfer or ownership.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Generational Renewal objective under Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 2 (Rural Viability), and complements Commission priorities on Taxation and Succession Planning.

Recommendation 3. Statutory Land Mobility Body

Objective:

Establish a dedicated national body to support land mobility and succession, making it easier for young farmers to access land and for older farmers to plan transitions.

Why It Matters:

Only 8% of Irish farms have a formal succession plan, and land access remains one of the biggest barriers for young farmers. A centralised support service would simplify legal, financial, and scheme-related processes, helping families navigate succession and enabling new entrants to enter farming.

What's Proposed:

Create or repurpose a statutory body to act as a "one-stop shop" for land mobility and succession support, offering affordable, professional advice and facilitating land transfers.

Who Benefits:

- Farming families planning succession.
- Young farmers seeking land access.
- Individuals/families with no successor but willing to partner with young farmers.

Key Functions of the Body:

- Provide legal, tax, and scheme advice via qualified professionals.
- Assign dedicated case workers to support families through succession.
- Operate a national network similar to Citizens Information.
- Facilitate land transfers to young farmers where no family successor exists.
- Implement a farm purchase programme for holdings over 20 hectares, enabling rent-to-buy or favourable mortgage schemes for young farmers.

Policy Link: Reinforces CAP Generational Renewal and Collaborative Farming measures, and complements the Succession Farm Partnership Tax Credit. Also aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 2, and addresses Commission priorities on Access to Land and Advisory Services.

Recommendation 4.
Rural Planning Reform

Objective:

Ensure consistent and fair rural planning policies across all local authorities to support farm families, particularly the next generation seeking to live and work on the family farm.

Why It Matters:

Planning restrictions are major barriers for young farmers who want to build homes on family land. Inconsistent rules across counties create delays, uncertainty, and frustration. A clear, nationwide approach would support rural vitality, encourage generational renewal, and reduce administrative burdens.

What's Proposed:

Implement a nationally consistent rural planning policy that guarantees planning permission for farm family members under defined conditions.

Who Benefits:

- Children of farmers seeking to live on the family farm.
- Farming families planning for succession.
- Local communities relying on rural population retention.

Key Conditions to Qualify for Planning Permission:

- The applicant or parent must have submitted a BISS (or equivalent) application for each of the past 10 years.
- The proposed site must be on the family farm and part of it for the previous 10 years.
- The dwelling must not exceed 210 square metres in size.
- Planning permission should be granted unless the proposed structure would dramatically impact the natural beauty of the site or its surroundings.

Process Improvements:

- Once a valid application is submitted, the planning official should meet the applicant on-site within 8 weeks to agree any additional conditions.
- This avoids delays caused by repeated requests for additional information via letters.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Rural Development measures, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 2 (Vibrant Rural Communities), and complements Commission priority on Attractiveness of the Sector.

Recommendation 5:
Private Agricultural Colleges Funding Review

Objective:

Ensure private Agricultural Colleges receive adequate funding to deliver high-quality education and facilities on par with Teagasc-run institutions.

Why It Matters:

Private agricultural colleges play a vital role in training the next generation of farmers, yet their facilities have fallen behind due to limited funding. This creates inequality in educational experience and undermines the sector's ability to attract and retain young talent.

What's Proposed:

Conduct a comprehensive review of the funding mechanisms for private agricultural colleges, with a view to:

- Addressing disparities in infrastructure and resources.
- Ensuring students receive equal access to quality training.
- Supporting the long-term viability of these institutions.

Who Benefits:

- Students attending private ag colleges.
- The wider farming sector through better-trained graduates.
- Educational institutions seeking parity and sustainability.

Recommendation 6:
Green Cert Course Content Update

Objective:

Ensure all Green Cert-accredited agricultural courses include practical modules on succession planning and accessing government/CAP support schemes.

Why It Matters:

Young farmers often enter the sector without a clear understanding of how to navigate succession or apply for available support. Embedding this knowledge into formal education ensures they are better prepared to manage farm transitions and engage with policy tools from the outset.

What's Proposed:

Make it a requirement that any higher education course awarding a Green Cert must include:

- A module on succession planning.
- A module on accessing CAP and government-funded support schemes relevant at the time of delivery.

Who Benefits:

- Students pursuing agricultural education.
- Young farmers preparing to take over family farms.
- The wider sector through more informed and proactive participants.

Policy Link: Aligns with CAP Knowledge Transfer and Education objectives, supports Food Vision 2030 Mission 4 (Innovation & Talent), and addresses Commission priority on Education & Training.

Recommendation 7:
Farmer Panels for Scheme Design

Objective:

Ensure future agricultural schemes are practical, inclusive, and responsive by involving farmers of all ages and profiles in the design and testing stages.

Why It Matters:

Current schemes often overlook the real-world challenges faced by young farmers. For example, rigid rules and financial penalties can discourage participation. Including farmers in scheme design helps avoid these pitfalls and ensures policies are workable on the ground.

What's Proposed:

Establish farmer panels to "road test" new CAP and government schemes before they are launched. These panels should represent:

- Young and older farmers.
- Different farm types and sizes.
- Aspiring new entrants to farming.

Who Benefits:

- Young farmers navigating complex schemes.
- Policymakers seeking practical feedback.
- The wider farming community through better-designed supports.

Key Features:

- Panels provide feedback during scheme development, not just after launch.
- Helps identify unintended consequences (e.g. one-time-only national reserve access, full repayment penalties on long-term schemes).
- Promotes trust and transparency between farmers and policymakers.

Policy Link: Aligns with CAP principle of bottom-up stakeholder engagement, supports Food Vision 2030 Mission 4 (Inclusive Policy Design), complements Commission priority on Advisory Services and the Minister's commitment to evidence-based policy.

Recommendation 8:
Include Online Learning in Knowledge Transfer

Objective:

Modernise Knowledge Transfer (KT) schemes by integrating verified online learning modules to improve accessibility, flexibility, and engagement for farmers.

Why It Matters:

Traditional KT formats can be time-consuming and difficult to attend, especially for young farmers balancing multiple responsibilities. Online learning offers flexibility and ensures consistent delivery of content, while verified assessments maintain quality and accountability.

What's Proposed:

Make it a requirement that future KT schemes include:

- 50% of content delivered online.
- Learning verified through online assessments, similar to the SCEP training model.

Who Benefits:

- Young farmers with limited time or geographic access.
- All participants seeking flexible learning options.
- Scheme administrators through streamlined delivery and tracking.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Digitalisation and Knowledge Transfer objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 4, and the SCEP online training model, and addresses Commission priority on Education & Advisory Services.

Recommendation 9:
Sheep Improvement Scheme Flexibility

Objective:

Introduce flexibility into the Sheep Improvement Scheme to better reflect the realities of flock management and support young farmers in maintaining scheme compliance.

Why It Matters:

The current requirement to maintain 100% of the reference number of breeding ewes throughout the scheme year is overly rigid. It doesn't account for normal farming practices like culling and replacing ewes. This creates unnecessary pressure and can lead to scheme non-compliance, especially for young farmers still building their flocks.

What's Proposed:

Amend the scheme requirement to allow farmers to maintain an average of 75% of their reference number of breeding ewes over the scheme year, rather than 100%.

Who Benefits:

- Young sheep farmers managing flock turnover.
- Farmers participating in the Sheep Improvement Scheme.
- Scheme administrators seeking practical compliance models.

Key Conditions:

- Farmers can sell cull ewes and replace them with ewe lambs.
- Compliance measured as an annual average, not a fixed number.

Policy Link: Enhances CAP Agri-Environmental and Climate Performance objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 1 (Climate-Smart Farming), and complements Commission priority on Scheme Design.

Recommendation 10:
Sheep Welfare Scheme Commitment

Objective:

Secure long-term support for sheep farmers by committing to a 5-year continuation of the Sheep Welfare Scheme and increasing the per-head payment.

Why It Matters:

The sheep sector faces rising costs and market volatility, making consistent support essential for viability. A multi-year commitment provides stability and confidence for farmers, especially younger entrants, while an increased payment better reflects the real cost of welfare practices.

What's Proposed:

- Extend the Sheep Welfare Scheme for a minimum of 5 years.
- Increase the payment from €13 to €20 per head.

Who Benefits:

- Sheep farmers relying on welfare scheme support.
- Young farmers planning long-term investment in sheep enterprises.
- The wider sector through improved animal welfare standards.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Animal Welfare and Farm Income objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 2, and addresses Commission priority on Sector Support.

Recommendation 11:
TAMS Updates & Grant Rate Increase

Objective:

Improve access to capital investment for young farmers by increasing grant support and reintroducing stage payments under the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS).

Why It Matters:

Young farmers often have limited credit histories and struggle to secure loans for large investments. In the absence of stage payments, farmers are required to cover the full cost of eligible investments upfront before grant support is issued. Enhancing TAMS makes it more accessible and practical for new entrants, supporting farm development and sector renewal.

What's Proposed:

- Reintroduce stage payments for capital grants under TAMS.
- Increase the grant rate from 60% to 75% for Young Farmers .
- Raise the investment ceiling from €90,000 to €150,000 under the Young Farmer Capital Investment Scheme.

Who Benefits:

- Young farmers with limited borrowing capacity.
- Farmers investing in infrastructure and equipment.
- The wider sector through improved productivity and innovation.

Policy Link: Reinforces CAP Young Farmer Investment Scheme objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 4 (Farm Modernisation), and complements Commission priority on Access to Finance.

Recommendation 12:
Price Bonus for Young Farmers

Objective:

Introduce a price bonus for lambs supplied by young farmers to incentivise their entry into and retention in the sheep sector.

Why It Matters:

Young farmers face significant financial pressure when starting out, and market volatility can make sheep farming unattractive. A price bonus would provide immediate financial recognition, improve cash flow, and signal industry support for generational renewal.

What's Proposed:

Processors should implement a price bonus for lambs at slaughter that are supplied by young farmers, defined by age and/or participation in recognised schemes.

Who Benefits:

- Young farmers entering or expanding in the sheep sector.
- Processors through stronger supply relationships.
- The wider industry by encouraging generational renewal.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Generational Renewal and Market Support objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 2, and addresses Commission priority on Attractiveness of the Sector.

Recommendation 13:
Lamb in Schools Initiative

Objective:

Promote lamb consumption and awareness among young people by introducing Irish lamb into secondary school Home Economics programmes.

Why It Matters:

Lamb consumption in Ireland is declining, particularly among younger generations. Early exposure to lamb through cooking and tasting in schools can help build familiarity, appreciation, and long-term demand. It also supports domestic producers and aligns with national food education goals.

There is a successful precedent in Northern Ireland, where the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) runs a popular education programme using independent cookery demonstrators in schools (LMC Education Programme). This model could inform the rollout in the Republic of Ireland.

Additionally, this initiative could fall under the remit of Agri Aware's "Our Food Connects" programme, creating opportunities for collaboration and leveraging existing networks.

What's Proposed:

Bord Bia to lead an annual one-week campaign with retailers and processors to:

- Highlight the quality of Irish Lamb.
- Provide reduced-price lamb cuts to secondary school Home Economics classes for cooking and tasting.
- If successful, explore expansion of the initiative at EU level.

Who Benefits:

- Students gaining exposure to Irish lamb.
- Domestic lamb producers through increased awareness and demand.
- Retailers and processors supporting educational outreach.

Policy Link: Promotes CAP Market Development objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 3 (Domestic Consumption), and complements Commission priority on Attractiveness of the Sector.

Recommendation 14:
PGI Status for Irish Lamb

Objective:

Explore opportunities to secure Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status for Irish lamb to enhance its market value, protect its identity, and promote its unique quality at home and abroad.

Why It Matters:

PGI status provides official recognition of the distinctiveness of Irish lamb, helping to differentiate it in competitive markets. It supports premium pricing, strengthens consumer trust, and protects the reputation of Irish sheep farming. It also aligns with EU goals for regional food identity and sustainability.

What's Proposed:

Bord Bia to work with relevant stakeholders to:

- Explore opportunities for PGI status for Irish lamb.
- Assess feasibility and market impact.
- Coordinate with producers, processors, and government bodies if viable.
- Promote Irish lamb as a regionally distinctive, high-quality product.

Who Benefits:

- Irish lamb producers through brand protection and premium positioning.
- Consumers through clearer product origin and quality assurance.
- The wider agri-food sector through enhanced reputation and export potential.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Quality Schemes objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 3 (Premium Branding), and addresses Commission priority on Attractiveness of the Sector.

Recommendation 15:
Agfood Portal Overhaul

Objective:

Improve the usability and accessibility of the Agfood portal to better support young farmers in navigating schemes and services relevant to their enterprise.

Why It Matters:

Digital tools are essential for scheme participation, but the current portal is difficult to navigate and not tailored to different farming types. This creates barriers for young farmers trying to engage with supports. A more intuitive, segmented platform would encourage uptake and reduce the administrative burden on farmers.

What's Proposed:

The Young Sheep Farmer Forum welcomes the recent introduction of MyAgFood.ie and recommends further improvements:

- Redesign the portal with a modern look and feel.
- Segment content by farming type (e.g. livestock, tillage) so users only see relevant schemes.
- Make scheme information easy to find and understand.
- Shift the tone of the portal to be encouraging and supportive, especially for young farmers.

Who Benefits:

- Young farmers engaging with digital services.
- All farmers seeking scheme information.
- Government departments aiming to improve digital service delivery.

Policy Link: Supports CAP Digitalisation and Accessibility objectives, aligns with Food Vision 2030 Mission 4 (Innovation & Technology), and complements Commission priority on Advisory Services.

Conclusion

The Young Sheep Farmer Forum calls on Government to take timely and decisive action in the upcoming negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy for 2028 to 2034 and in future domestic budgets. The structural challenges facing the sheep sector require targeted intervention to support the next generation of farmers.

The fifteen recommendations outlined in this report are practical, farmer-led and grounded in the lived experience of young sheep farmers. They are designed to strengthen succession pathways, improve access to land and capital, modernise support schemes and promote the value of Irish lamb.

These proposals directly support the goals of:

- Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming Report, published by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, September 2025.
- Food Vision 2030, which calls for a more resilient, sustainable and inclusive agri-food sector.
- The CAP Strategic Plan 2023 to 2027, particularly its focus on generational renewal, climate-smart farming, rural viability, Digitalisation and Knowledge Transfer.
- The European Commission's Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture (presented October 2025).

They also build on recent positive developments such as updates to TAMS and the Agfood portal, with the aim of extending and enhancing these measures to better support young farmers.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can ensure that young farmers are empowered to contribute meaningfully to Ireland's agricultural future, economically, socially and environmentally. The Forum will continue to engage with stakeholders to ensure that the voice of young farmers remains central to policy development and sectoral reform.

Young Sheep Farmer Forum

Michael Feely - Chair

Animal & Crop Production graduate from UCD, farming in Mantua, Co. Roscommon. Focused on producing high-quality, sustainable sheep meat and driving innovation in the sector.

Aoife Mahony - Vice-Chair

Teagasc PhD Walsh Scholar researching ewe longevity and actively involved in her family's sheep and suckler farm in Co. Galway. Passionate about sustainable farming and supporting the next generation of farmers.

Rachel McCormack

Ag Science student at University of Galway, from Co. Roscommon, helping run the family farm with pedigree and commercial ewes. Keen to continue farming after graduation.

Tom Larkin

Farms with his father near Trim, Co. Meath, managing 750 ewes and 100 suckler cows. A UCD Animal & Crop Production graduate, passionate about the future of the sheep sector and its role in Irish agriculture.

Darren McGuire

Sheep and suckler farmer from Aughagower, Co. Mayo. Studied Agriculture and Environmental Management at Mountbellew. Committed to sustaining sheep farming in the rural West of Ireland.

Ava Moffitt

Final-year Agricultural Science student at ATU Donegal. Works on her family farm with her brothers and helps run their mart in Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim.

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Paddy White

Full-time farmer and ag contractor from Co. Longford, farming sheep and sucklers. Dedicated to keeping Irish agriculture strong.

Morgan Neary

Sheep farmer from Co. Galway, working with his father. Passionate about the sector and eager to support its revival.

Nicola Kennedy

Farms sheep and sucklers in Co. Kildare with her partner. Focused on building a strong farm business and improving the livestock sector.

Billy Smyth

Ag Science student at UCD, from Co. Meath, farming 150 ewes and 40 sucklers at home. Passionate about strengthening the sheep sector for future generations.

Rachel Briody

Ag Science student at UCD from Co. Longford. Fourth-generation farmer, passionate about continuing her family's legacy in sheep, beef, and suckler farming.

Evan Walsh

Full-time farmer from Ballintra, Co. Donegal, running a mixed enterprise with his brother. Committed to keeping farming vibrant and encouraging young farmers.

Mark Norse

Sheep and tillage farmer from Co. Wicklow. Studied Food & Agri-Business Management at UCD and now works with Bank of Ireland's Agri Team. Passionate about food production from farm to consumer.

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MOUNTBELLEW AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

BORD BIA IRISH FOOD BOARD