



Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal

## BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE

# Lots to do for enthusiastic Shane

**Ciarán Lenehan** talks to Limerick farmer Shane Gleeson, who starts from a low base but has huge potential

Judging by the results of the annual National Farm Survey, there are many beef producers out there who will identify with the predicament of new Limerick BETTER farm beef challenge farmer Shane Gleeson.

"It has taken two full-time jobs to keep the farm going here," he said.

In 2016, Shane calved 40 suckler cows, producing weanlings for sale. However, in the same year there were calvings in no less than 10 months of the year on the farm, animal performance was poor and a gross margin of just €124/ha (not including subsidy) was achieved across his 40ha holding. This meant that the farm recorded a loss when overheads were accounted for.

Both Shane and his wife Niamh work full-time and he had in recent years become caught in a catch-22 situation. Having spent €250,000 on 42 acres at the turn of the decade, there was around €14,000 of annual repayments to come out of the farm. However, his full-time work meant he had limited time to put into the farm. And, as the farm was not making any real profit, he couldn't afford to reduce his off-farm work commitments even slightly.

"I had seen what the BETTER farm programme had done for other farmers in the county like Donal Scully and Donie Ahern and my local adviser Pat Blackwell put me forward to join BETTER farm phase 3 last summer," Shane said.

To Shane's credit, he got to work even before meeting with the BETTER farm team, splitting the 70 acres around his home yard into 17 permanent divisions, all of which are split again with temporary reels for grazing. He also managed paddocks on his outfarm in such a way that there are now 15 divisions.

This meant Shane was ahead of the curve when beginning his stint in the programme in early 2017. His two key areas to address related to soil fertility and stock. The first involved a straightforward nutrient management plan. The second would be much more complicated.

### Stock

Shane needed more stock on the farm. His 2016 stocking rate of 1.45LU/ha was low. Profit is driven primarily by output which, in turn, is largely influenced by stocking rate. More heads were needed, but this wouldn't be simple. As with many Irish drystock farms, cash was an issue. Given that the farm was generating



Bull calf on Shane Gleeson's farm in Capamore, Co Limerick

### Guide to traffic lights

#### Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

#### €/hr worked:

- (as prop of net profit)
- >€12.50/hr
  - <€12.50/hr
  - <€5/hr

#### Cashflow: (consecutive months without sales- inc. sheep)

- <5
- <7
- >7



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### Shane Gleeson, Co Limerick



Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	39.6ha
2016 gross margin	€124/ha
Land type	Highly variable

no profit, Shane needed to look elsewhere.

In order to get decent numbers on the ground relatively cheaply, dairy-bred calves were deemed the best option. Shane took €10,000 from his savings and purchased 27 five-week-old Angus and Hereford-cross calves. They came semi-reared, with six bags of milk replacer enough to complete the job. Post-weaning, they moved from a calf starter ration to a simpler, cheaper beef mix and have been on 1kg daily since at grass. The have grown at a rate of 0.65kg daily since birth and currently weigh 145kg, which is slightly behind target.

"Hindsight is great, but next year I'll try to buy a more uniform group, ide-



### \*To-do list\*

- ➔ Scan cows and replace empties/poor performers with proceeds from stocking loan.
- ➔ Implement autumn rotation planner: Aim to have 60% of farm closed by early-November.
- ➔ Graze off paddocks closest to yard in early October and close.
- ➔ Graze off spring slurry paddocks last.

### What next for Shane

Shane will scan his suckler herd in the coming weeks and cull any empty cows. In an effort to reel in his calving spread, his stock bull went out in mid-April of this year and came in at the end of July. He expects to have empty cows and is ready to replace them. He has secured an overdraft and €10,000 of a stocking loan and will look to buy good-quality cows and heifers in-calf, from credible sources.

With the help of his BETTER farm adviser Alan Dillon, Shane will design and implement an autumn rotation planner. He will aim to close 15% of his grazing ground weekly from early-October. He will identify which fields he needs for grazing with young calves and cows early on in the spring and close these first. Potential slurry fields will be closed last and a good roadway system on his home block gives him options here. The fact that he is low-stocked means that he may have to go into lighter covers first to ensure that he meets his target of 60% closed by early-November. A successful autumn rotation plan will ensure there is enough grass in the spring to get grazing early. While parts of Shane's farm can be wet, the dairy-bred calves or his own heifer yearlings will be perfect for getting out early to take advantage of high-quality spring swards. Shane is planning to join a local dairy discussion group to hone his grassland management skills.

Shane's target will be to achieve a gross margin in the region of €900/ha (not including subsidy) from a well-run weaning system. He currently works around 20 hours a week on the farm, mostly at the weekend and believes that his return per hour worked will be worthwhile at this figure.

### Adviser comment

Alan Dillon

Shane might have begun as one of the lowest farmers in the programme in terms of profitability but he also has the potential to make the biggest gains. His recent addition of a roadway and extra paddocks and water troughs has meant that grassland management is much easier. Without much extra fertiliser and by using a rotational grazing system, Shane has grown more grass than ever. A substantial amount will need to be invested in soil fertility on lowland and the outfarm, which are all index 1. Stock quality will have to be addressed given that weight gain is below target. Once these areas are addressed, Shane will be able to move on to the next stage of his plan which involves taking stock on to finish. The farm is capable of achieving in the region of €800-€900/ha gross margin once the system is fully up and running.

# What you can do to prevent ground damage

**CIARÁN LENEHAN**  
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**W**et weather has taken its toll on land across the country, with an increasing number of cattle forced indoors in the last seven days. While the next few days look more settled, land takes longer to dry out and recover at this time of the year.

We should not be as liberal now when it comes to poaching as in the springtime. The rate at which land recovers

from damage is related to growing conditions at the time and cooler nights and shorter days are not helping these.

In many parts of the country, land has become saturated to the extent that no amount of daily moves, roadways, access points or back fences is enough to stop real damage to ground. The rain has been relentless in the midlands, west and parts of the north for weeks at this stage.

Remember that we have more options at this time of the year than in the spring. Suckler cows have likely done their jobs at this point and can be weaned, locked into a

shed and fed straw for a couple of days to dry off.

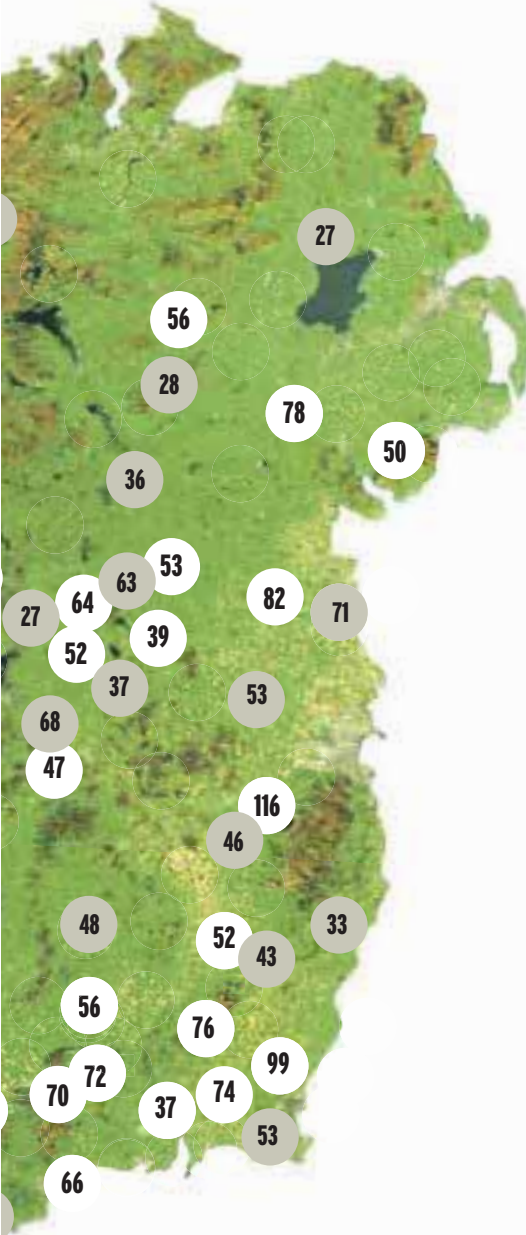
Offer weaned calves 2kg of meal to keep them warm and facilitate herding. Unfortunately, trying to finish cattle at grass while rain hops of their backs is an exercise in futility and a waste of money where lots of meal is being fed. They won't eat as much grass in the unsettled weather. What they do eat will have a reduced feed value. They'll burn more energy to keep themselves warm and they'll likely dig up your fields.

Cut your losses and give them a quick burst in the shed. They might still be gone off

the farm before lighter cattle have to come into the shed if you move quick.

For some farmers on exceptionally free-draining soils, it is still business as usual from a grazing point of view. This weekend, they should have at least 32 grazing days on the farm, as their annual farm cover peaks.

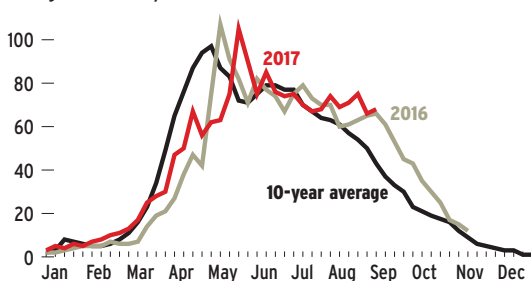
That equates to a farm cover of 1,500kg DM/ha on a farm with a stocking rate of 2.5LU/ha. Start thinking now about which paddocks are most important in the spring for getting stock out. We need to be grazing and closing these in the first week of October.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

## 10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



**Matthew Murphy**  
Newford Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	dry to heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,122
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	58
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	63

We are swimming down here this week and ground conditions are very difficult. There has been 61mm of rain so far here in September, on top of 103mm in August.

I weaned 25 calves on Monday and a further 35 yesterday. We are weaning indoors, separating calves and cows on day one and letting calves in to suck out cows two days later. It is working well so far. Cows are on slats covered in lime and on a straw diet while calves are on straw with ad-lib good-quality silage and 2kg of meal. I am keeping an eye on cows for mastitis. My plan is to let weanlings out again next week but if the weather doesn't improve I can't see that happening.

We have housed our 27 lightest (527kg) bullocks for finishing slightly early, which is a big release on ground. Our 20 heaviest (612kg) remain outdoors and we hope to have them gone within a month. We're feeding them in portable troughs on the roadways at the minute to save ground.



**Shane Gleeson**  
Co Limerick

System	suckler to weanling
Soil type	highly variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	858
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	21
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	28

I am managing OK with the current wet spell as my stocking rate is low. My dairy-bred calves are eating 1kg of ration daily and are moving through the wet land and doing no damage while suckler cows and calves are grazing my dry land. I took out my last few paddocks 10 days ago and spread 2,500 gallons of pig slurry followed by a half bag of urea per acre for the last round. Some of my land is very low for P and K and I will try to use slurry to increase indexes cheaply.

I have 530 bales of top-quality silage made this year. While this is well beyond my winter requirements, I am reluctant to sell good-quality silage at current prices and will have a higher requirement next year as my stocking rate increases.

I plan to start closing up paddocks from 10 October, with 15% of my farm closing each week until 10 November. My aim is to have grass on my dry land to turn out weanlings in late January.



**Brian Doran**  
Co Wicklow

System	suckler to steer
Soil type	free-draining clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,472
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	40
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	33

Grass is in good supply on the farm and even after the recent poor spell of weather ground conditions are still fairly good. Over 75% of the farm got 25 units of nitrogen in the last 10 days and the remainder will get 25 units before Thursday's deadline, as I continue to build covers.

Last week, I weaned 14 of my earlier spring-calving cows and I will wean a few more next week and these cows will be used to clean out paddocks after younger stock. Cows that still have calves sucking have access to hi-mag blocks as a precaution against grass tetany. I scanned last week and it went very well, with just one empty cow. I started to introduce meal to a group of steers and three cull cows at grass, which I hope to have slaughtered before Christmas. I reseeded a paddock about a month ago and in the last few days it has started to come on nicely. All weanlings were given a vaccine against clostridial disease and the will be given their booster in four weeks.



**Sean Hayes**  
Co Clare

System	suckler to store
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	748
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	22
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	71

Ground conditions are poor here and the level of rain that has fallen over the past week or 10 days has been phenomenal. I'm not tight for grass as my demand is very low at the minute but utilisation is poor. The out-block where my main bunch of spring-calving cows are kept is really beginning to cut up and I weaned another 10 cows this week. They will remain indoors on silage only until they dry up and weather conditions improve.

Thankfully, all the autumn herd has calved with no casualties to report. I'm watching close for tetany in the cows and pneumonia in the calves. I've all my finishing cattle housed, with the bulls on ad-lib now. They are all above 500kg at 12 months of age, so hopefully they'll continue to progress. Heifers are on roughly 8kg/head/day while bullocks are on 10kg/head/day.

I've lime to get out on some poorer-performing paddocks. I was hoping to spread fertiliser but with the weather I don't think it'll happen.