



Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal
**BETTER FARM
BEEF CHALLENGE**

Superb thrive and smart farm safety

Tom Bolger's 2017 weight gains have been impressive and his emphasis on safety should be lauded, writes Ciarán Lenehan

Tom Bolger will calve 48 sucklers in spring 2018. His 39ha farm straddles a main road on the outskirts of Borris in Co Carlow. The land here is largely free-draining, though there are pockets of heavy ground. In the shoulders of the year, these are earmarked for Tom's sheep flock, which has gradually been reduced to 90 ewes. These will lamb alongside the sucklers next spring.

Tom's cow is a big, square continental. Indeed, he boasts the heaviest cows in phase three of the BETTER farm beef programme at 730kg (mid-season weight).

"I was surprised when I saw that we had the biggest cows here. Our progeny performance was good (200 day weight: 263kg), but when you divide this into the cow's weight we came out bottom of the pile at 36%.

"You can also look at it another way though. These cows are so easy to maintain – I find it very hard to keep the condition off them. The ground here can

take them too. For instance, we have our dry cows outside now and our weaned calves and beef stock in. There's better power in silage and meal at the moment than in November grass," Tom told me.

Boost

In 2016, the farm's beef output and gross margin figures were 643kg/ha and €522/ha. Both of these need to be pushed via more stock, better animal performance and improved efficiency. However, Tom is reluctant to go beyond the 50-cow mark. His son Ian has an active involvement in running the farm, but also holds a full-time job as an engineer. While the sheep flock is reducing, the prospect of lambing 90 ewes during their suckler calving period cannot be taken lightly.

"On the advice of the BETTER farm team and my local adviser Hugh Mahon, we're going from a store-selling system, with some heifer beef, to an across-the-board finishing farm. That'll help with our output. Earlier this year I got seven of my own steers away at 406kg of carcass weight. They graded R+3= on average and were 26 months of age. There is scope to bring the age back, I think, with better feeding. We definitely have the breeding and I'd hope to get closer to 24 months with this year's (2016-born) batch.



VIDEO ONLINE
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Dry cows at grass on Tom Bolger's farm in Carlow this week.

Table 1: Tom Bolger animal performance based on 30 October 2017 weighing

	Own breeding			Bought in		
	Weight	Current growth rate	Growth from birth	Weight	Current growth rate	Growth from birth
Spring 2016-born	571	1.19	0.86	531	0.96	0.80
Spring 2017-born	303	1.10	1.08	283	1.00	1.00

Tom is also buying in stock to complement his own. Most of these are dairy-beef crosses with some reared on farm and some coming in as stores. A number of suckler-bred animals have been bought in as well.

This year, Tom has managed to get all of his beef cattle out in March and worked in two-day grazing allocations. Performance during the 2017 grazing season was exceptional.

Tom's home-bred 2016-born steers weighed 571kg coming into the shed for



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fattening on 30 October (Table 1), having achieved weight gains of 1.19kg since late-summer.

Their bought-in counterparts (spring-2016 born) weighed 531kg. Of these 30 purchased cattle, 18 are first-cross beef animals from the dairy herd.

His 2017-born animals tipped the scales at 303kg on 30 October. Average age at that point was 7.8 months. Male calves, which were castrated in July, had grown at a rate of 1.16kg (341kg) and females 1.02kg (274kg) daily, from birth.

Silage quality

Samples from Tom's first-cut returned 75% and 77% DMD, with 12.8% and 14% crude protein. Good silage is imperative on any beef farm growing or finishing stock. Too often we concern ourselves with concentrate rations and forget that silage will form 50% or more of feed inputs during a typical steer or heifer finishing period. While we can generally bank on the quality and feeding value of the concentrates that we feed, silage is the most variable feedstuff out there.



Bonnet-mounted mirrors.

Adviser comment Tommy Cox

Tom is well aware that maximising production from grass will be important to boosting output from the farm. Tom has invested heavily in soil fertility over the last number of years, and this year to complement the improved soil fertility a lot of work has taken in improving the grazing infrastructure along with reseeding of lower performing swards.

Engineering safety

Tom and Ian have introduced a number of clever farm safety measures on their holding. These include bonnet-mounted mirrors on their tractor for pulling out on to a road with no grassy verge or hard shoulder and bad cab visibility, home-made calving gates and a home-made dehorning crate. Read about these and other adaptations in more detail in this week's online BETTER farm set-piece on farmersjournal.ie.

**Thomas Bolger,
Co Carlow**

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

● ●

● ●

● ●

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to store (some heifer beef)
Farm size	39.4ha
2016 gross margin	€522/ha
Land type	Free-draining

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- €350-550/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

Clean off fields now while we still can

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As the good spell of weather continues, some farmers on drier ground have reported that they were able to hit their target of having 60% of the farm grazed and closed by last weekend. Others on free-draining ground who got the worst of the rainfall in October will miss the target by a week or more, though in truth they are thankful to be grazing at all.

This 60% figure is important in that it will form the bulk of our animals' diet in the springtime. On a farm operating a proper autumn rotation planner and pushing for early turnout in the springtime, two-thirds of their spring grass is now grown. While the weather was atrocious for much of October, growth remained largely on par with 10-year averages.

Grass growth on the farms left grazing and measuring this week was 19kg DM/ha/day. However, as the first countrywide frosts of the year hit, growth will fall off a cliff.

I have yet to talk to a farmer who wasn't forced to house significant numbers of stock during October, but many have been able to turn some animals back out in recent weeks. From now on, it is a case of keeping animals out for as long as possible on dry farms and potentially turning some lighter stock back out on heavy farms that have all of their animals housed.

However, if turning young stock back to grass, we should be supplementing with concentrates at similar rates to what they were receiving indoors. If this is unrealistic or

seems like hassle, weaned dry cows can go back to grass but take into account the pressure they will put on your land relative to their lighter progeny.

While we may have been avoiding higher covers in order to hit our 60% closing target, now is the time to get into these. Conditions are lending themselves to decent clean-outs. Ideally, cows should be in these. They are more seasoned grazers than younger animals and where animals are being supplemented they will be less inclined to graze tight and likely become unsettled quicker.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	783
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	27
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	26

Using the autumn grazing planner, our target was to have 60% of the farm grazed and closed by the end of the first week of November. As the week comes to an end, we have exceeded this target. A high closing farm cover last autumn, a mild winter and a weather-related delayed turnout resulted in an excess grass supply and subsequently, pre-grazing covers >2,500 kgDM/ha, last spring. The completion of our first rotation was delayed and didn't finish until late April and grass utilisation was poor. While not in control of the weather, closing too much of the farm too early may result in a high closing cover and potentially lead to the same issue experienced last spring. Therefore, while maintaining 60% of the farm closed, we are going to re-graze any paddocks that have experienced good growth since early October or may not have been grazed-out appropriately during the periods of heavy rainfall. We will be looking to graze around 8% of the farm again.



Glen McDermott
Co Sligo

System	suckler to weanling
Soil type	free-draining loam
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

The rain earlier in the week has hampered my plans to leave autumn-calving cows outdoors with calves until the end of the month. They were beginning to poach ground. I have some lovely calves by Fiston, Elite Ice Cream, and Clonagh Frosty King on the ground.

I managed to get 90t of lime out last week and I've put a heavy emphasis on correcting soil fertility since joining the BETTER farm programme earlier this year. My finishing bulls have settled indoors. I'm thankful for the cold weather as cattle were beginning to sweat in the shed. All animals' backs were shaved and everything was treated for fluke and worms along with lice last week. Weanling heifers are on a 16% crude protein nut, getting 1.5kg/day. Normally, I sell all my weanlings but going forward I hope to increase output on the farm bringing more cattle to finish. My silage tested well, coming back at 73% DMD with a crude protein level just shy of 14% so I can afford to feed much less concentrates this winter.



Wesley Browne
Co Monaghan

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	heavy drumlin
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

All stock are in now, with the last group of in-calf heifers being housed yesterday. The wet back end has led to earlier housing than in a normal year, but thankfully I should be OK for silage. All cows are weaned at this stage and last week all calves had their backs and tails clipped. They also got a parasite dose and a vaccine against pneumonia.

I have separated and grouped all calves. Bull calves are on 3kg of ration and 75% DMD silage. I have a group of December-born bulls which have been housed for a few weeks at this stage and are doing very well.

They are currently on 5kg of meal and the same silage since birth and have grown at a rate of 1.35kg daily.

If ground conditions allow over the next few weeks, I hope to go out with 2t of lime/acre on any ground that requires it.

I scanned over half of the cows last week and I hope to scan the remainder this week.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd, Co Galway

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	dry to heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	614
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	8
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	20

All of the housed weanlings (52) are being fed 2kg of ration. Their tails and backs were clipped last week to reduce sweating in the shed. We are also leaving shed doors open day and night to try and prevent pneumonia. The remaining 55 weanlings are still at grass and they are also being fed 2kg of meals on the roadways to prevent poaching.

The replacement heifer weanlings on the contract-rearing farm were weighed on 24 October. All of the 26 weanlings are on target for their weight - 258kg at approximately 8.5 months, which equates to a daily liveweight gain from birth of 0.87kg. Their next target is to hit 288kg by 1 March 2018.

All weanlings were treated for worms on 10 October. Depending on weather conditions, it is hoped that the weanlings will stay at grass until at least 11 November. Our next big task is a herd test in November. We are also keeping a close eye for any mastitis in the dry cows.

10-year average grass growth
kg DM/ha/day

