



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

# New thinking in Castlefinn

**Ciarán Lenehan** visited the Grieve farm in Donegal, where big change is afoot

The Grieves farm 35ha near Castlefinn in Co Donegal. The farm is fragmented, but prevailing soil type is a heavy one. Gerard and his son John farm as a partnership, with Gerard Jnr also involved.

There will be 36 cows calving down in the spring of 2018, alongside 140 ewes lambing. The Grieves traditionally sold animals as weanlings or light stores, but were eager to push margins and take more animals closer to or all the way to finish.

Indeed, there were 50 cows calved on the farm in 2017, but in order to tighten up and drive individual animal output, the BETTER Farm team along with local B&T adviser Tommy Doherty identified poor-performing genetics within the suckler cow herd for culling. Fourteen cows were weaned and immediately sold (average price €780).

The typical Grieve cow at present is a medium-sized first- or second-cross (from the dairy herd) white-head. They will look to move towards a more continental-type cow or potentially introduce Saler females if they can be sourced.

"We'll be going shopping for three or four in-calf heifers in the coming months. The plan is to be putting 40 to the bull next May," John told me.

### The grass

Normally, the winter months on the Grieve farm saw the ewe flock given free

rein to mop up any remaining grass in advance of lambing.

This typically led to a grass famine in the spring when there was potential for young stock to get out to drier areas of the farm. However, this autumn, a 20-acre portion of the farm was grazed and closed from the first week of October. This will be earmarked for 17 heifer yearlings to go out as soon as ground conditions allow.

There is already a cover of 900kg on the paddocks closed in early October, but the urge to turn sheep in here will be resisted. Instead, the flock has been put to work grazing the wettest parts of the farm.

They will come in very handy too should a moist spring prevent the Grieves from getting cattle on to their silage ground in March. The sheep will be able to graze it off and ensure that quality is maximised come the target cutting date in late May or early June.

### The change

Having normally calved from the turn of the year, the move toward selling forward stores and finishing will allow for more pressure to come off the Grieves' grassland in the spring.

They can now afford to calve somewhat later – while weaning weight is still an important KPI, it is not the be all and end all.

That said, the 10 strongest 2017-born bulls have been penned and selected for an under 16-month finish. In seven weeks to 22 October, these bulls grew at a rate of 1.08kg daily (Table 1). They were being offered 68% DMD silage and 5kg of a 16% weanling concentrate daily.

The target for top bull beef systems is



**John and Gerard Grieve (Snr) inspect their stock**



**VIDEO ONLINE**  
watch the video on [farmersjournal.tv](http://farmersjournal.tv)



**Above left: Weanling bulls from Table 1. Above right: This paddock (pictured last week) was grazed and closed in early October**

to have animals weighing 500kg on their birthday or as close as possible. At current growth rates, the Grieves will achieve a respectable 475kg average with the group.

However, this seven-week weaning period will have included the transition from a grass to a silage-straw concentrate diet – these calves were not creep fed prior to housing. Also, the Grieves are now going to use a pit of 73% DMD silage for these bulls and pull back on straw as the dung has hardened up. This 5% DMD increase is the equivalent to 1.5kg of extra concentrate feed going into these animals.

There is no doubt that the combination of a fully transitioned digestive system and the better silage will lift growth

rates and get the Grieves' bulls closer to the 500kg birthday mark.

For the first time, the Grieves will bring all of their progeny through a first winter. While it will put pressure on cashflow, the big sale of cull cows will help this year until the systems settle into place. As mentioned, the 10 strongest bulls have been selected for under 16-month beef. Their younger comrades will be targeted for sale at turnout time, with the idea being to capitalise on big demand from grass-buyers.

Their heifer yearlings will be earmarked for an early-turnout and a long grazing season, with the aim being to sell live as forward stores towards the end of August, having achieved a significant amount of liveweight gain at grass.

**Table 1: Grieves' weanlings for under 16 month finishing**

calf tag	DOB	Weight on 04/09/2017	Weight on 22/10/2017	ADG	projected 1yo weight (26/12/17)
776	17/12/2016	332kg	365kg	0.69kg	410kg
769	14/12/2016	281kg	350kg	1.44kg	443kg
782	13/01/2017	302kg	363kg	1.27kg	446kg
771	16/12/2016	365kg	402kg	0.77kg	452kg
787	28/01/2017	340kg	390kg	1.04kg	458kg
781	19/01/2017	375kg	425kg	1.04kg	493kg
777	27/12/2016	366kg	420kg	1.13kg	493kg
768	14/12/2016	382kg	430kg	1.00kg	495kg
767	08/12/2016	394kg	450kg	1.17kg	526kg
772	16/12/2016	394kg	453kg	1.23kg	533kg
<b>Average</b>	<b>26/12/2016</b>	<b>353kg</b>	<b>405kg</b>	<b>1.08kg</b>	<b>475kg</b>

**Gerard and John Grieve, Co Donegal**

**Fixed costs** ●

€550/ha

**€/hr labour** ●

€5/hr

**Cashflow** ●

>€5/hr

<b>Calving pattern</b>	Spring
<b>Farm system</b>	Suckler to weanling
<b>Farm size</b>	34.6ha
<b>2016 gross margin</b>	-€37/ha
<b>Land type</b>	Heavy

### 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

## Adviser comment

**John Greaney**

The Grieves have a lot of work to do in a bid to double the output on the farm and increase the gross margin, but they have made a solid start to the programme. Although they will be carrying less cows in 2018, a group of heifer weanlings will be kept on to increase the stocking rate at grass. These heifers will facilitate early grazing next spring and, at lighter weights in comparison with cows, will give more flexibility when attempting to clip off silage ground prior to closing.

# Crucial weeks for suckler cows

**CIARÁN LENEHAN**

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There are few drystock farmers with stock still out this week. Persistent rain last week was the nail in the 2017 grazing coffin for most farmers that were still managing to keep stock out. The exception are those on the most free-draining soils who have turned back out weanlings or cows to try and shorten the wintering period.

November grass will not support any significant weight

gain in growing or finishing cattle. Weanlings or finishing cattle that remain outdoors now should be receiving supplements of both good-quality silage and concentrates. Dry suckler cows in good condition and on-target springing heifers are the only stock I would be happy to have outside on grass only at this point. In the case of the heifer, it would be important she's on target (~530kg) from a weight point of view and will be going on to a decent plane of nutrition when she hits the house (70% DMD grass silage).

On most beef farms there will be a number of different stock classes in sheds at this point and it's important that we get the diets right for all of them. Fertility is one of the most important traits in a suckler cow, but management has a huge effect on it.

The most important target for driving cow fertility is body condition score at calving and it is in the next six to eight weeks that we need to correct body condition – not a month before the cow is due to calve. Separate out your very fat cows, on-track cows and thin cows.

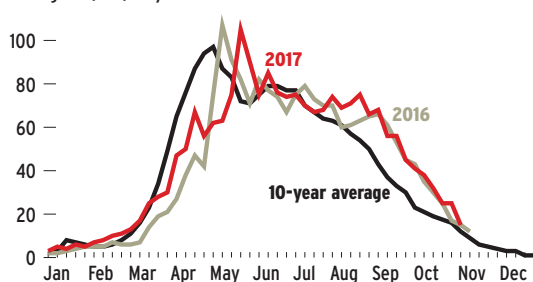
The fattest cows should receive straw and 64% to 68% DMD silage.

The on-target cows – at a BCS of 3 to 3.25 – should have full-time access to 64-68% DMD silage and thin cows should be housed along with your springing heifers and fed whatever silage (70% DMD+) your weanlings are on, to appetite. Body condition should be corrected as soon as possible, with animals then going on to a maintenance diet of moderate quality (64-68% DMD) for four to six weeks prior to calving.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

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



**John Heslin**  
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System:	suckler to beef
Soil type:	mixed
Average cover (kg DM/ha):	740
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	32
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	24

There were 104 weanlings at grass until yesterday and the farm is now closed for the winter. Ground conditions, although improved compared with four weeks ago, stayed sticky. However, weanlings were grazing the area of the farm not closed (~30%) and caused little or no damage. Grazing was being managed by offering 12-24 hour allocations, paddock depending.

Last week, soil temperatures to a 10cm depth were 8°C, providing the foundations for grass growth to exceed demand by 11kg. This week, a couple of frosty nights have reduced this temperature below that required for growth and has seen grass growth decline below demand. My next farm cover will tell whether we achieved our target average cover at the point of closing of circa 550kg DM/ha – I am optimistic. The cover above is on the ground being grazed. This week, the last of the suckler-bred replacement heifers arrived to Grange. These animals are Limousin- and Simmental-sired. All were blood sampled, vaccinated against respiratory diseases, treated for parasites and quarantined upon arrival.



**Nigel O'Kane**  
Co Galway

System:	suckler to store
Soil type :	free-draining loam
Average cover (kg DM/ha):	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	n/a

The weather has improved but the rain over the weekend has finished any hopes of leaving weanlings out until December. Surprisingly, I will be tight enough on silage as I've housed cows earlier than usual. Coupled with this I had intended to finish Friesian steers off grass in October but the bad back end affected thrive and grazing conditions. Subsequently, these bullocks had to be housed last month and I have since made the decision to feed them on hoping for a lift in beef price. They will be slaughtered in the next week or 10 days.

I spread a bag of super P on the ground around the yard prior to the closing deadline and grass has greened up considerably. Lime isn't an issue here, thankfully. The shed I erected earlier in 2017 has taken me out of a real dilemma, particularly with the added stock numbers I'm keeping this winter. The majority of cows are in great condition and will get the second-cut silage, with first-calvers and cows in poorer condition getting first cut which tested 72 DMD.



**John McSweeney**  
Co Cork

System:	suckler/calf to bull beef
Soil type:	relatively dry
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha):	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	n/a

I have all stock housed since late October and have nice covers of grass to carry into the spring for early grazing. I have weanlings housed on 73% DMD silage along with 1kg of 19% protein ration and 1kg of a molasses-based liquid feed.

My suckler bulls will be built up to 4kg ration before moving to the ad-lib ration for the last 100 days.

I have decided against finishing any dairy bulls under 16 months and will castrate all males with a view to finishing late next year or selling live off grass.

I will dose all stock for fluke and worms over the next few weeks. All have been clipped and a pour-on for lice has been administered.

I may be slightly short of fodder this year so I am going to purchase 40 bales to tide me over.

My main aim once Christmas is over is to get nitrogen out in mid-January with a view to turning stock out as soon after as possible.

This should help alleviate any fodder issues.



**Tom Bolger**  
Co Carlow

System:	suckler to store
Soil type:	free-draining
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 at this stage with the exception of the cows. They are being supplemented outside with silage and straw, as they are cleaning off the last few paddocks. All the steers, heifers and weanlings have been housed over the last few weeks and they are doing well. A group of steers that I plan to finish before Christmas are doing 1.4kg of daily gain. They are currently being fed 77% DMD silage and 6kg of ration. I also have a group of heifers and cows that I hope to slaughter next week. They are on similar feed to the steers and they have been doing around 1kg a day since the last weighing. Weanlings are currently on the same silage as the steers and heifers and they are also getting 1.5kg of a 16% protein ration. Last week I clipped the backs of all the stock housed to help keep them cool with the mild weather conditions. I noticed a few bought-in steers very loose in dung so I treated them for fluke.