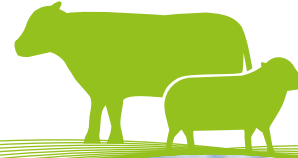


# The BULLETIN

THE NEWSLETTER FOR BEEF AND LAMB FARMERS



Winter/Spring  
19/20

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## AHDB showcases red meat at Anuga

In October, AHDB exhibited at Anuga in Cologne, the world's largest trade fair for food and beverages.

The show provides a fantastic opportunity for AHDB to showcase the high quality beef, lamb and pork produced in the UK. Last year marked its 100th anniversary, hosting more than 7,400 exhibitors from more than 100 countries and attracting around 170,000 visitors.

Sixteen exporters plus farmers from across the UK joined AHDB on its stand in the Meat Hall. This visit highlighted the value of exporting and looked into the different requirements each country has for red meat.



Sue Bishop from the Department for International Trade and Phil Hadley, International Market Development Director

## Prices, products and predictions from Market Intelligence

GB prime cattle prices were on a downward trend from September 2018 until the time of writing (autumn 2019). During that period prices fell by approximately 50p/kg. While declines early in the year are not uncommon, it's unusual for prices to fall as far and for as long as they have done. Prices across the EU and the world have been under pressure. In its simplest terms, supply and demand have been out of balance, meaning too much beef on the market.

Domestic retail demand has moved towards cheaper cuts. Therefore sales of steaks, which are so important for carcase value, have been lower. Also production has been up which has been driven by an increase in carcase weights. This, combined with declining demand, has tipped the market into a state of oversupply.

Reduced imports and higher exports are helping to balance the situation to an extent, but the price of exports have

been at a significantly lower level than previously. Exports of cattle hides have also reduced in volume, with those being exported achieving a much lower price.

However, there are positives to be found. Looking ahead, the number of prime cattle coming forwards should ease off and the numbers on the ground are down considerably. Despite there being fewer cattle on the ground at the start of quarter three, kill levels were up. Combining the population data with

the increase in kill, does suggest that numbers coming forwards really should decline at some point.

To keep up to date on how the GB cattle price trend develops and what is influencing it, visit [ahdb.org.uk/gb-cattle-prices](https://ahdb.org.uk/gb-cattle-prices) You can also subscribe to Cattle and Sheep Weekly – our email newsletter by visiting [ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch](https://ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch)

## You said, we did

Industry feedback said you wanted more regular updates on pricing. Our Market Intelligence team is now adding another daily pricing update at 8.20pm. This increases the number of markets included in the later price, allowing you to make more informed decisions.





## Brexit, the future of farming and our new strategy

**As we move into another new year, we'll all be looking at what is going to change and what changes we can make.**

Brexit remains one of the biggest challenges we face but we need to make sure it isn't our only focus. Whatever happens, we have up to date information, tools and resources for you on our website at [ahdb.org.uk/brexit](http://ahdb.org.uk/brexit) In the event of a no deal, we will hold meetings where you can talk to the experts to get advice about what it means for your business.

At AHDB we recognise that the landscape has changed and will keep changing. And this has been at the forefront of our minds as we develop our new five year strategy which will launch in 2020. We've been having conversations across the industry to inform our plans over the past 12 months. We know that the reputation

of the beef and lamb industry is a huge area of concern for many of you, with a particular focus on environmental impact. We will put more focus on these areas and help to tell the story of how British agriculture is among the most sustainable in the world, as well as looking at ways to help the industry to improve further.

We will continue to focus on exports, opening up new markets and increasing volume going into current markets. We will also make sure that our consumers at home appreciate the unique taste of locally sourced beef and lamb, and know how to make the most of each cut.

We know that many of you have attended our events over the past few years and have made, sometimes substantial, changes to your farm businesses as a result. We will continue to deliver more of what you want,

based on your feedback, building our Strategic Farm network and providing you with opportunities to meet and talk to other farmers.

We are aiming to help promote and protect the reputation of the sector, while offering knowledge, insight and evidence to support informed business decisions.



Will Jackson  
Beef & Lamb Sector Strategy Director

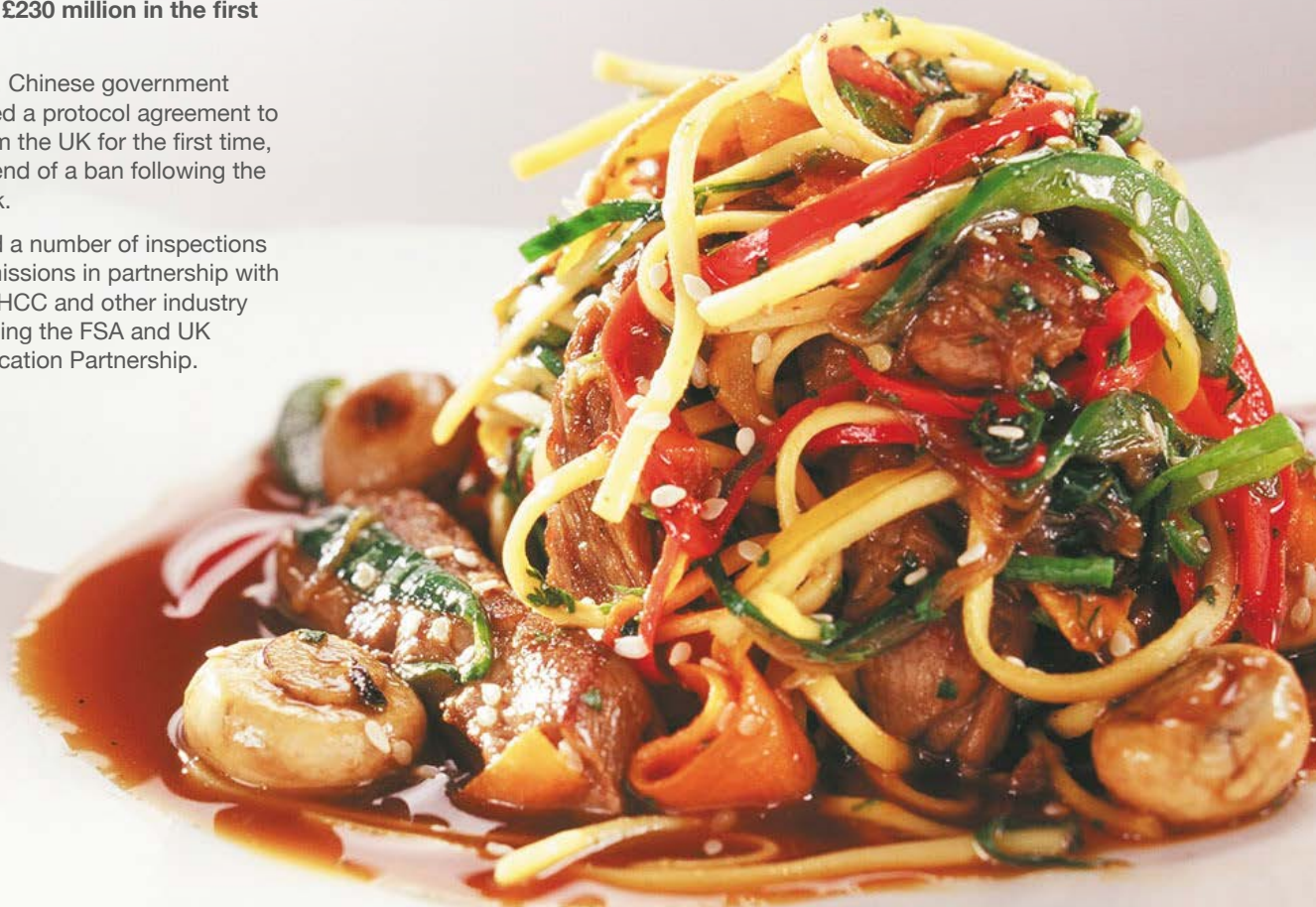
## Brilliant news for beef as China approves UK

**For the first time in 20 years, the UK will be allowed to export beef to China. The two countries recently finalised details of an export approval agreement estimated to be worth about £230 million in the first five years.**

In June 2019, Chinese government officials signed a protocol agreement to ship beef from the UK for the first time, marking the end of a ban following the BSE outbreak.

AHDB hosted a number of inspections and inward missions in partnership with Defra, QMS, HCC and other industry bodies including the FSA and UK Export Certification Partnership.

This project forms part of the work the AHDB exports team undertakes. To find out more about the worldwide opportunities the team is working on, visit [ahdb.org.uk/exports](http://ahdb.org.uk/exports)





# Strategic Farms plot projects

The 2019 Strategic Farms project is well underway. Here's a round up of action plans, top tips for sheep farming and quick how to guides from the launch meetings.

Thanks to the hundreds of people who attended the launch events last October and discussion groups in November – they were a great success because of your support.

**Steven Lawson,**  
**Newcastle, Northumberland –**  
Sam Charlton, KEM

## Main priorities

1. Improve grazing strategy to enhance forage utilisation.
2. Set up rotational grazing.
3. Reduce the use of concentrates and fertiliser to save costs.
4. Focus on reducing days to slaughter.
5. Improve the cost of production by increasing output and decreasing costs.

## Grass, grass, grass

Steven aims to make the most from his grass. To do this, he'll be monitoring the performance of old and new grass leys and looking at the difference in performance of direct drilled pasture. Steven's using AHDB's sward stick to measure growth rates.

## Five points to put plans into practice

1. Implement a new grazing strategy using rotational grazing, with particular focus on overwinter feed requirements.
2. Measure grass growth and record results going forward.

3. Calculate feed demand and value and undertake a new nutrient management plan.
4. Use Farmbench and work with an accountant to improve cost of production and net margin.
5. Include cost breakdown throughout the system, e.g. tugging to rearing, rearing to finishing etc.

Check out our Recommended Grass and Clover Lists and other monitoring tools at: [ahdb.org.uk/tools](http://ahdb.org.uk/tools)



Steven and Alan





Lyn, Adrian and Peter

### Adrian and Lyn Coombe, Callington, Cornwall –

Leah Shanks, KEM

#### Main priorities

1. Improve grassland management and utilisation.
2. Set up a rotational grazing system to include cattle.
3. Improve the quality of grazing and look into reseeding with herbal leys.
4. Improve the management of ewe lambs to regain condition after lambing.
5. Benchmark to inform business decisions identifying the cost attributed to the tame lambs to quantify the non cost benefits.

#### Top tip – how to beat resistance

Adrian has experienced problems with Caseous Lymphadenitis (CLA) and Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma (OPA). The farm has triple resistance which was diagnosed over 10 years ago. Lambs are now wormed dependent on forecast and results of September FEC. All bought in stock are wormed on arrival and quarantined which has reduced cases. A vet advises on all health protocol decisions.

#### Ask the audience

Getting access to water in all paddocks is acknowledged as a challenge. Attendees suggested Adrian should apply to the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) to fund additional water supply.

#### Dear diary

Our farmers will be hosting their next meetings soon, so make sure you get the date in your diary today.

The events are open to all and you don't need to have attended previously to join us. Check out our events page for locations and booking information at [ahdb.org.uk/events](http://ahdb.org.uk/events)

- 24 January, Callington, Cornwall
- 28 January, Grantham, Lincolnshire
- 12 February, Ludlow, Shropshire
- 18 February, Penrith, Cumbria
- 19 February, Newcastle, Northumberland

Check out our 2017 beef Strategic Farms and find out more about other sectors at: [ahdb.org.uk/farm-excellence](http://ahdb.org.uk/farm-excellence)





**Chris and Louise Elkington,  
Grantham, Lincolnshire –  
Sarah Pick, KEM**



Chris and Louise

**Main priorities**

1. Increase scanning percentage.
2. Improve grassland management to reduce creep feed costs.
3. Implement rotational grazing and carry out some reseeding.
4. Reduce reliance on nitrogen fertiliser.
5. Reduce overall cost of production.

**The benefits of faecal egg count (FEC)**

Chris and Louise are focusing on worm control and have seen improvements since using FEC. FEC indicates the number of adult worms in the gut and is measured as eggs per gram of faeces. They can be used to:

- Help determine the need to treat
- Test the efficacy of treatment (drench test)
- Give information on contamination going onto pasture

FEC is a monitoring tool and the results need to be interpreted with other information such as age of lambs, stocking density, time of year and performance levels.

**How to FEC in six simple steps**

1. Work with your vet to develop a worm control strategy within a flock health plan.
2. Make sure the correct dose is given and that it's administered accurately.
3. Leave fit, healthy ewes untreated.
4. Aim for at least 10% of the flock, but more if possible.
5. Use drench tests to assess whether treatments are working on farm.
6. Check for worm eggs 14 days after treatment with white 1-BZ or a clear 3-ML and 7 seven days after treatment with a yellow 2-LV.

**Richard and Laila Carruthers,  
Penrith, Cumbria –  
Nicola Renison, KEM**

**Main priorities**

1. Improve rotational grazing strategy and focus on improving utilisation of electric fencing.
2. Use a consultant specialising in wet areas for expert advice.
3. Monitor grass rates growth using AHDB's sward stick plus start to analyse using plate meter for improved accuracy.
4. BCS regularly – especially at tupping.
5. Look at EBVs for breeding purposes.

**Don't be afraid of change**

In 2015 Richard and Laila decided to move away from having a flock of horned ewes. They bought some recorded Highlanders and have since been crossing these onto the hill ewes; keeping replacements and slowly breeding out the horned ewes. Changing breed has resulted in sheep capable of living on higher ground with no supplements or hay during the winter months, improving efficiencies and reducing their overall costs.

Putting it into practice – order your own free sward stick by emailing [brp@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:brp@ahdb.org.uk) or phoning 024 7647 8834.

**Did you know?**

Target body condition score (BCS) for ewes at tupping is 2.5 for hill, 3 for uplands and 3.5 for lowland ewes



Richard and Laila





**Neil Brown,**  
**Ludlow, Shropshire –**  
**Emma Steele, KEM**

#### Main priorities

1. Make better use of EID and weigh kit to monitor lamb performance.
2. Improve grassland management to reduce hard feed use and finish lambs sooner – reducing costs.
3. Analyse the suckler herd performance and review selling stores vs finishing.
4. Collect more physical performance data so KPIs can be accurately

calculated and measured against financial performance.

5. Benchmark to improve quality of data and use to inform business decisions.

#### Attendees' advice

Neil wants to improve his grazing management and the audience suggested he starts rotational grazing. The audience advised that getting started is simple: split fields down into smaller paddocks and move stock more regularly. The group discussed the benefits of reseedling because much of the farm is permanent pasture and

could do with improvement. Neil will be investigating this and the potential use of herbal leys, updating on progress at his next event.

#### Calling time

When reviewing performance, the audience queried the profitability of the suckler herd. Neil will be analysing his Farmbench figures and will feed back at the next meeting with the big decision.

Understand your own business costs with AHDB's benchmarking tool Farmbench at: [ahdb.org.uk/farmbench](http://ahdb.org.uk/farmbench)

### Got a question? Ask the experts!

Your regional Beef & Lamb Knowledge Exchange Managers (KEMs) are on hand to answer any questions you may have about the range of activities we undertake using your levy.

Our KEM team is available to help, so don't hesitate to get in touch for more information.



**National – Sarah Pick**  
Sarah.Pick@ahdb.org.uk  
07779 455407



**North West – Nicola Renison**  
Nicola.Renison@ahdb.org.uk  
07990 441679



**South West – Leah Shanks**  
Leah.Shanks@ahdb.org.uk  
07979 943392



**North East – Sam Charlton**  
Samantha.Charlton@ahdb.org.uk  
07717 501564



**Midlands – Emma Steele**  
Emma.Steele@ahdb.org.uk  
07392 319813



**South East and East Anglia – Nerys Wright**  
Nerys.Wright@ahdb.org.uk  
07891 187643





## Simple changes make big differences

**In autumn 2019 we held our final meeting of the two year supply chain programme with ABP Food Group and a group of Sainsbury's Taste the Difference suppliers. The project focused on getting finished cattle into a targeted retail specification for both carcass classification and carcass weight as efficiently and cost effectively as possible.**

Over the course of the programme, the parties worked with a dedicated supplier farm, looking at the system in operation to fine tune elements to make improvements in returns and in-spec percentages. A group of Taste the Difference producers also took part, with regular meetings at the farm to look at changes and discuss progress. The group also visited other units. The meetings covered a range of subjects from rationing and proactive herd health to making the most from grassland and cattle housing design. To find out more about the consumer side, the group visited the Ellesmere site and took a trip to a Sainsbury's store – unfamiliar territory to some of us farmers!

On the project farm, the most significant factor in making change was having the ability to collect and record data to inform decision making and most importantly, monitor the impact of these changes. The farm installed an EID system which linked to its IT programme. This gave them the

ability to input data, but more importantly, recall key data such as DLWG, days on farm and farm assurance status at the weigh scales.

While we looked across the whole finishing system, the key element of focus was the ration and if it was achieving the target DLWG. On closer examination, using the DLWG data at weighing, it was clear the diet wasn't performing as well as it should be and so a few tweaks were made. Buying policy was also considered and some changes to breed and purchase weight were trialled.

By making these relatively simple changes, approximately 100 days were shaved off the finishing period, largely due to a better liveweight gain of 1.5 kg/day compared with the 1.3 kg/day previously. In turn, this reduced feed costs by approximately 10% per day. The shorter finishing periods also meant reduced labour hours per animal and a decrease in bedding costs.

### Key findings

- 100 days reduction on finishing period
- Increase of 0.2 kg/per day liveweight gain
- 10% reduction in feed costs
- Reduced labour hours per animal
- Decrease in bedding costs

Overall changes to the system have seen a reduction in variable costs of £46/head, which when considering the decline in the prime cattle price, has had a significant impact on the business. In terms of meeting retailer specification, the farm increased the proportion of stock in a tighter target weight spec by nearly 67% over the two years. And when combined with a tighter carcass specification, the improvement was over 28%.

Regularly tracking costs, looking for opportunities to reduce feed costs and having the resource to accurately monitor performance using EID allows the farm to continue to look at areas of efficiency to improve.

### Efficiencies on farm result in carbon reduction

The carbon footprint of red meat is a hot topic. The subject is in the news regularly and it's something, rightly or wrongly, we're all being challenged about. However the project's outcomes give strong support to beef farmers. We found shorter finishing periods and selling animals at a younger age to capitalise on higher feed conversion efficiency, combined with a good health plan has a positive impact on carbon footprint.



# Great British Beef Week returns

**Great British Beef Week (GBBW) will be marking its 10th anniversary this April.**

The campaign has taken on a few different themes over the years in a bid to continue to secure press coverage. However, the message has always remained the same – to champion home grown beef.

Farmers from around the country use the week to champion their produce and to show how beef farming is more efficient and economical than ever before.

GBBW co-founder and the driving force behind Ladies in Beef, the organisation that runs the annual beef celebration, Jilly Greed, said: “The 10 year anniversary for Great British Beef Week is a fantastic achievement for our organisation – which started as a result of a few passionate beef farmers wanting to have our voices heard.

“We’re currently finalising plans for the anniversary and we’re working hard with other farming partners to ensure it’s the biggest celebration yet. We’ll be looking at different ways to champion our mission and creative solutions to ensure the message is received loud and clear!”

Along with showcasing local beef to consumers through PR and social media activities, this year will also focus on raising money for GBBW’s chosen charity, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (R.A.B.I.). Over the past nine years, the R.A.B.I. which supports farming communities, has received over £90,000 from GBBW, with the aim of reaching £100,000 in 2020.

To get involved, or for more details, visit [www.ladiesinbeef.org.uk](http://www.ladiesinbeef.org.uk)



Jilly Greed  
GBBW co-founder

## Great beef begins at home

**In the UK we have some of the most climate-friendly and sustainable methods in the world. But the picture that’s being painted doesn’t give credit to the work of UK farmers.**

### What are the facts?

The latest Committee on Climate Change figures show UK agriculture is responsible for 9% of total UK emissions, with cattle and sheep responsible for just 3%. That’s very different from global production figures.

And that doesn’t take into account that the majority of sheep and beef cows are managed on grassland, which absorbs carbon and locks it in the soil. Or that more than 60% of agricultural land in the UK is currently used for livestock, and a lot of this would be taken out of food production if it wasn’t grazed.

British farmers have never been more environmentally proactive. In recent years, they have planted 19,000 hectares of pollen plants and wildflowers, and planted or restored 280,000 km of farmland hedgerows and ditches, creating habitats for our native wildlife.

When it comes to tackling greenhouse gases, farmers are also taking action.

Almost 40% of farmers are rolling out innovative measures like using renewable energy, upgrading to more efficient machinery and modernising farming practices. A further 20% have said they will roll out climate-friendly initiatives within the next two years.

### Would cutting out meat benefit the environment?

Our unique climate is suited to livestock, with rainfall making up over 99% of water needed to breed cows and sheep. And with so much land less suitable for other crops, it would be taken out of food production if not used for livestock. How then would we provide a secure and affordable food supply in the UK? Would we just export our carbon emissions to other countries where it’s out of sight, out of mind and more difficult for us to affect the positive changes we need to make for the planet?

That’s why we, as an evidence-based organisation, are not only working with UK farmers to help them identify where they can improve and further reduce their environmental footprint, but also provide a balance to the mixed messages consumers hear. I recently took part in a number of interviews for national radio stations explaining how different our practices are to those on a documentary showing intensive farming in the US and South America. It’s fairly unlikely people here will be consuming beef from a farming system that depletes rainforests, as Brazilian beef imports made up just 1% of the total global beef imports in 2018.



Will Jackson,  
Beef & Lamb Sector Strategy Director

The climate crisis debate has highlighted that we need to consider the environmental impact of our diets and question the sourcing of all food. The environmental impact is also wider than just carbon and needs to take into account the loss of biodiversity and soil health, and pollution of air and water. Therefore, the question is not whether we should be eating meat or not; but asking where it’s produced, and to what environmental and animal welfare standards.

We also need to ask the same questions for all non-meat alternatives, considering both the local and wider global impacts. Only through assessing all of the potential impacts for meat and non-meat alternatives can we have a balanced debate that, hopefully, results in a balanced diet that is good for both us and the planet.







## Spring calvers: act now to improve future fertility

**It's that time of year when you're probably starting to think about this year's calving. But making sure your cows are at target body condition and fed to meet nutrient requirements now, can have a major impact on next year's performance.**

Now's the ideal time to check your spring calvers are on course to achieve body condition score 2.5–3 at calving. If some cows are below target, you may need to regroup cows or adjust rations. For most suckler cows, one body condition score unit relates to about 13% of liveweight. So, for a 650 kg cow, one BCS point would be 84 kg, so take action now if some of your cows are below target.

Getting animals up to target BCS now will have a greater impact on time to first oestrus after calving, rather than waiting until after calving to make adjustments. Aim to maintain body condition particularly during the final pre-calving period. Ensure the ration contains sufficient rumen degradable protein, which is important for calf health.

Cows have about 80 days in which to recover from calving and become pregnant again, if they are to maintain a 365 day calving interval. Good nutrition through to six weeks after service is critical to prevent weight loss from calving to conception. This is because oocyte (egg) viability and embryo survival can be affected by excessive loss of body condition during this period.

For more advice on how to improve future fertility in your herd, see the recently updated ***Optimising suckler fertility for Better Returns***. Plus, make use of our ***Suckler records sheet*** or ***Herd notebook***

to record your performance this breeding season – both available to order from **[brp@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:brp@ahdb.org.uk)** or by phone on 024 7647 8834.

### Weight Watcher

If you need to reduce calf size, do not reduce feed for the cow. Beware, limiting feed to reduce calf weight during the last month of pregnancy can reduce cow fertility, stamina at calving and colostrum quality. The most reliable way to reduce calf size is through genetics.

If a cow has a low BCS, the calving interval will be longer than if she was at target BCS of 2.5–3.0.

BCS at calving	Calving interval (days)
1–1.5	418
2.0	382
2.5–3.0 (target)	364

“ In a 100 cow herd, increasing the number of calves reared per 100 cows put to the bull by just 2% could increase calf sales by £1,000–£1,200 per year ”



# Finding the most profitable rams just got easier

Trials have shown that selecting recorded rams using EBVs can increase profitability by £3–5 per lamb. This is through faster finishing and getting more lambs to hit market specifications. And producers keeping female replacements can benefit too by selecting rams with superior EBVs for maternal traits – attributes that can't be assessed visually.

AHDB has launched **signetdata.com** which helps make ram selection easier. The new website hosts the EBVs and indexes for all of the performance recording flocks serviced by Signet.

The site is free and easy to use, providing search tools to find:

- Individual sheep
- Individual breeders
- Sheep for sale
- Sheep for a given breeding objective – the EBV search

The EBV search allows commercial producers to select sheep within a given breed that meet their precise breeding requirements.

It's important to identify the strengths and weaknesses within the enterprise to get the most benefit when selecting using EBVs. For example, a farm with high conformation ewes may want to reduce days to slaughter and should use a ram with a high scan weight EBV. However a flock keeping female replacements will place more focus on sires with good EBVs for litter size and maternal ability.

Signet has recently relaunched the services provided to terminal sire breeds – with a 26 trait, monthly analysis. Breeding indexes have also been updated and all carcass traits are now expressed on a more commercially focused, weight adjusted basis. Plus, seven new EBVs

were added for traits derived from CT scanning such as spine length and intramuscular fat percentage. The new website makes it even easier to access this information directly from knowing a ram's ear tag and can be accessed via desktop, laptop or smart phone.

The new website also makes it easier for ram breeders to record their flocks. Easy access screens have been developed to capture lambing and weight records – and the latest reports are now accessible online. So if you've got a purebred flock, get involved and use Signet's services to find the most profitable breeding lines in your flock.

**Did you know?**

There are now carcass trait EBVs that will help you choose a bull based on the things you get paid for

**These EBVs can only be generated if you record the ear tag number of the sire when registering a calf with BCMS**

The more sires that are registered, the more accurate the EBVs will be

**SIRES OF DAIRY BRED CALVES MATTER TOO!**

**45%**

of all prime beef in England is a product of the dairy herd

**CURRENTLY, ONLY 23% OF SIRES ARE REGISTERED ON BCMS**





“ Pastures new  
saw profits rise ”

Gemma and Trevor Dobson

## New year, better business

**Need a nudge in writing your new year's resolutions? Then read on. We join three families who made some massive changes in 2019 to see how they've fared and what advice they can give on improving efficiencies and increasing profitability in 2020.**

### **Trevor and Gemma Dobson, Cumbria**

**We farm 200 acres on a 15 year farm business tenancy, running 400 ewes plus 100 followers. Lambs are sold liveweight or deadweight and dairy cross beef store cattle are bought in.**

In early 2018, we realised we were spending more than £10 a lamb on bought in feed. We had to rethink our business model – on a £60–£70 lamb it does not work. We were feeding lambs and calves hard to get them away quickly.

Despite receiving good prices for our stock, Farmbench showed our overhead costs were so high the system was not profitable. The suckler herd didn't offer us enough flexibility to move the business forward and left us lacking resilience to change but Farmbench helped us realise where our vulnerabilities lay.

We made the hard decision to sell the suckler herd to focus on two areas – improving flock performance and reducing feed costs. We began our system overhaul by splitting fields in half, which has allowed us to move stock quicker, improving grass growth compared with our set stocked system. Now, grass covers are assessed using a plate meter or sward stick and fields are rotationally grazed according to grass covers.

We then changed our lambing period to better coincide with grass growth, which

has helped to reduce bought in feed costs per lamb to zero in a good year. Bought in store cattle are outwintered on brassicas, which removes the need to plough before reseedling. It's about everything on farm having a job.

Attending numerous knowledge exchange events and joining an AHDB funded discussion group drove us to make these changes and compare ourselves against others. When you look at the figures on your own, you look at it, do not understand some of it and put it back in the drawer. When you're in a group, you look at the numbers, see how they compare and where opportunities lie for each other. Joining the discussion group has been so important. You have to remember your farm is a business selling a commodity – the same as a shop sells a commodity.



## Ian Norbury, Cheshire

**My father and I farm 120 suckler cows on 250 acres, with cattle finished off grass. We also have a pedigree herd, selling Mobberley Angus bulls.**

Over the past year, I've increased my herd from 70 to 120 cows, on the same acreage. I examine my calving records every year to select the most productive cows to breed replacement heifers. I record body condition score, calf vigour, milk availability and any calving problems. However, 2019's calving didn't go as well as previous years, achieving 90% calf survival, compared with 97% in 2018. Having these records for each cow allowed me to pinpoint down to the heifers – we calved nearly 50.

It's reassuring to know my mature cows' performance had not fallen. Without the records, I would've had no idea what had happened. You don't need anything fancy, just pen and paper. As numbers are increasing, I use this data to cull hard to achieve my goal of keeping a high performing, low input herd.

At first, I was sceptical about benchmarking, was it really going to be worth the time? I received my first report in 2017 and was surprised by our bought in feed costs. I realised we were spending £22/cow on mineral buckets. After doing some blood tests with my vet, I was advised to give all cows a bolus instead. Dad and I were nervous about this, having felt the mineral buckets were a good

insurance policy. I rang the vet again, took the plunge and calving went well. Total mineral cost is now £4.60/cow, with those outwintered on kale and bales receiving a high iodine bolus too. I'd have never questioned this if I'd not drilled down into our input costs.

I have learnt so much through benchmarking and I would advise everybody should get started. You need to know where you are now and find out what isn't working well. Go to farm meetings and be nosy, see what others are doing and ask plenty of questions. After all, I started rotational grazing after a trip to a farm in Devon – it was a long way but it was worth it!

“ I love recording data now I can see the benefits ”







“ Nutritionist costs proved priceless ”

### John Cross, Herefordshire

**My family and I farm 550 ewes extensively on 200 acres of Less Favourable Area land. We also rear 500 calves per year.**

This year will be interesting. Lately, we've made a few changes, which will hopefully have positive effects on flock performance in 2020.

For the first time, we've used the services of a nutritionist to formulate the ration for the ewes – feeding a home mix with cereals this year, instead of buying in ewe rolls. This should increase the quality of the protein supplied and we can now be certain of the metabolic energy in the ration, which is formulated to supply 12.5 MJ/kg dry matter.

The wet autumn and winter weather made it challenging to keep condition on thinner ewes. Regular body condition scoring meant I could identify struggling ewes early on and give them additional supplementary feed alongside the remaining lambs. These ewes soon caught up and I'll body condition score the flock again at scanning time.

Having scanned at 165% last year, with 148% sold, we'll be working to reduce our lamb losses this year while at the same time minimising antibiotic use. Hygiene improvements in the lambing shed, such as cleaning out individual pens and using disinfectant powder in pens and high traffic areas should help, as well as an improved vaccination policy.

I'm going to make more effort to check that newborn lambs have received enough colostrum too. Hopefully colostrum quality will be improved on the new ration.

To monitor our flock performance and costs, we write everything down – nothing fancy, but it does the job. At the moment, our costs are £50 per lamb. We can deal with this, but are seeking ways to reduce this figure through further utilising home-grown forage and improving the quality of our grass leys.

When we're happy with the changes we've made to our system this year, our next step will be to try benchmarking.



## Andy Crane, Devon

**I farm 900 acres in an organic system, lambing 750 ewes and calving 90 suckler cows. All lambs and calves are sold deadweight.**

I've always wanted the farm to be profitable without the Single Farm Payment, so it's essential I monitor performance and costs of production, particularly input costs. I record details throughout the year in my diary such as sales, lambing information and the cost and tonnage of bought in feed. It's easy to do a quick calculation if you record this information as you go along, for example, working out how much your ration is costing you per animal per day.

By keeping these notes and analysing our accounts, I realised I needed to reduce my purchased feed costs.

Being part of the South Molton Sheep Group has proved invaluable in helping me to achieve this. I've gained a lot from spending time on other farms as it pushes you to try new things. A group member recommended that I should introduce home grown crimped barley to finish cattle, to replace bought in organic concentrates. I'm now successfully growing the crop and have halved my feed costs.

I've also increased the area of red clover on the farm over the past couple of years, which provides 11+ ME (MJ/kg DM) silage for the finishing cattle, which I feed with the crimped barley. Our analysis shows second and third cuts provide 15–20% crude protein, so I feed this to weaned calves and in-lamb ewes, which has reduced our concentrate use at lambing time. Lambs are finished on the aftermaths

in the autumn, then the leys rest after Christmas. Not only does red clover reduce our bought in feed costs, it's an essential crop for our organic system, due to its ability to improve soil structure and soil nitrogen status. This small change has made a big impact on the business. My top tip would be to choose just a couple of specific areas to focus on and this will drive the biggest change. The changes I've made over the years haven't always worked out first time but it's important to keep going through trial and error.

“ I've reduced my costs and increased my land and flock ”

### Extra reading

Check out some of the guides, manuals and tools which have helped our Strategic Farmers

- Get started with our 60 minute farm review [ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/60-minute-farm-review](https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/60-minute-farm-review)
- For understanding and comparing your full costs of production across multiple enterprises use [ahdb.org.uk/Farmbench](https://ahdb.org.uk/Farmbench)
- [ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/planning-grazing-strategies-for-better-returns](https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/planning-grazing-strategies-for-better-returns)
- [ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/rotational-grazing-systems-for-cattle](https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/rotational-grazing-systems-for-cattle)
- [ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/managing-clover-for-better-returns](https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/managing-clover-for-better-returns)
- Use our blend calculator to calculate the cost, energy and protein density of home blends [ahdb.org.uk/blend-calculator](https://ahdb.org.uk/blend-calculator)
- [ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/minimising-calving-difficulties](https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/minimising-calving-difficulties)

To order sward sticks, flock and herd notebooks, sheep and sucker records sheets or other resources, email [brp@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:brp@ahdb.org.uk) or phone 024 7647 8834



Share your plans by tweeting us [@AHDB\\_BeefLamb](https://twitter.com/AHDB_BeefLamb) using [#farmresolutions](https://twitter.com/hashtag/farmresolutions)



# News updates

## Record, monitor, perform

Did you know the industry target for lamb losses from scanning to weaning is 15%? And now's the perfect time to start recording.

Collecting, examining and acting on ewe performance records can help improve flock output by highlighting the strongest and weakest areas of your enterprise.

First, record your scanning percentage. If more than 2% of your flock scan empty, it may be worth investigating these ewes.

Why bother? Lambs that die in the neonatal period cost more than initially thought. It's calculated to be as much as £20–25 per lamb up to the point of lambing.

Throughout lambing, record the number of lambs born alive so you can compare this to your scanning performance. Also, be sure to record the number of lambs turned out, number weaned and importantly, the final number of lambs sold.

This means you'll be able to see where losses occur and put a plan in place to improve for next year.



## Would you like to receive weekly grass growth figures straight to your inbox?

Subscribe to Forage for Knowledge to receive the latest research and advice on grass, forage and soil management to help improve grassland productivity. Subscribe today by visiting [ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch](http://ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch)

## Weather warnings

For advice on how to plan or deal with weather incidents visit [ahdb.org.uk/weather](http://ahdb.org.uk/weather)

## Useful resources

We've updated the following Better Returns publications with new information:

- **Choosing bulls for Better Returns**
- **Assessing the business for Better Returns** (online only)
- **Improve beef housing for Better Returns**
- **Optimising suckler fertility for Better Returns**
- **Improving ewe nutrition for Better Returns**

We've also introduced some new online resources:

- **Getting started with sheep farming** (online manual)
- **Minimising calving difficulties**
- **Rotational grazing systems – beef**
- **Breeding from ewe lambs**
- **Growing and feeding lucerne**

Compared with our manuals, these series of web pages provide a higher level of technical information. There are more to come in the following months.

## Reducing waste and improving efficiencies

In the next few months we will stop sending event invitations by post. This is to help reduce costs so your levy can be spent on valuable projects, publications, research and marketing activities.

Please update your details and preferences so we can keep in touch with you.



Do this online by visiting: [ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch](http://ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch)



Call us on: **024 7647 8694**



Or write to us: **AHDB CRM team, Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 2TL**

## Top tip

Use our sheep records sheets or the handy flock notebook to record your performance this breeding season – both available to order from [brp@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:brp@ahdb.org.uk) or by phone on 024 7647 8834

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