



Gabriel Trayers and Shane Keaveney.

# Better beef, cleaner water

High beef production and environmental targets go hand-in-hand on Shane Keaveney's farm in Roscommon.

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**S**hane Keaveney farms full-time, with help from his wife Grainne and three children in Granlahan, Ballinlough, Co. Roscommon. After working in construction Shane took over the farm in 2014.

"At that time, the children were young and one of us needed to be around," says Shane. "The building industry slowed down and Grainne had a permanent job as a nurse, so we decided that I would stay at home full-time. We also decided the farm needed to become profitable!"

Shane started full-time in 2017 with just five Saler in-calf heifers. He has since grown the suckler cow herd to 37. The farm comprises 35 hectares, including eight ha rented, and it is fragmented into four blocks.

The main grassland block of 18ha is approximately half a kilometre from the farmyard. Most of the soil on the

farm is a mixture of clay and peat, and is classed as 'heavy'. The farm is stocked at 140kg organic nitrogen/ha.

"The production system is simple," says Shane: "It's a spring calving herd with males finished as bulls and heifers sold or slaughtered before the second winter."

The cows are mainly Limousin x Saler, and a terminal Charolais bull is now used on the mature cows. All cows are calved in February and March.

"I used to calve over five to six months and found it tiring as I had multiple groups of stock which meant there was no proper system for the farm," says Shane.

In the early years, he used a Saler stock bull to breed functional replacements that had plenty of milk. The downside was that Shane found it difficult to sell the males to the live trade.

"Nobody wanted weanling Saler bulls so I looked at the option to finish them as under-16 month-old bulls and it worked out." Shane has continued with the bull system as it has consistently delivered profit.

Since switching to a Charolais bull, Shane has had to re-think the replacement policy. He is now using AI and sexed semen to breed heifers from within the herd.

The main grazing block is in paddocks and he measures grass weekly

on PastureBase. In terms of grassland management, the overall aim is to make high quality silage and to maintain high-quality grass swards in front of the herd over a long grazing season.

## Breeding performance

Shane's cow type can be described as 'very functional' with plenty of milk and the ability to rear a heavy calf. The herd has an average Replacement Index of €110. In 2023, the male calves weighed 307kg at 200 days of age while the heifers weighed 280kg.

The breeding performance of the herd underpins the overall profitability of the farm. Shane is hitting all of the key performance indicators (KPI's) and is in the top 10% of herds nationally.

## Bull management

A key driver of any profitable system is kilograms sold off the farm. Shane aims to sell 20 bulls annually. The target carcass weight is 380-400kg, 2+ fat cover at u 16 months of age.

"Once the cow has her job completed by rearing the bull to 280kg, it is my responsibility to manage them to reach 700kg as efficiently as possible," says Shane.

"To reduce stress, the bulls are weaned outdoors using easy-wean nose pads – I have moved away from

weaning in the shed. I also vaccinate for IBR and pneumonia in autumn as I have had issues in the past.”

He introduces meal for four weeks before weaning and the bulls will get 2.5kg before housing. In the event of a poor back-end, the bulls are the first group housed as they perform better in a settled environment. They are straw-bedded for the winter and have plenty of lying space.

### Red clover silage

The bulls are offered a high quality red clover silage plus three kg of meal until Christmas. “I sowed 4.5 acres of red clover last year,” says Shane. “I need a high quality feed to push liveweight gain.”

Last winter was Shane’s first experience feeding a red clover silage. “I got it tested and it came back at 76%DMD and 16% crude protein and I was very happy with that. The red clover silage was fed until the bulls went ad-lib plus straw.” He has sowed another 1.5 acres this year.

Improving the performance of the bulls from weaning until the finishing period has reduced the slaughter age from 15.9 months to 15.5 months in 2024. “It just required some small tweaks, better weanling management,” says Shane. “The red clover silage has definitely helped.”

## ‘The ACRES measures are protecting water quality and adding biodiversity on the farm – and I get paid to do it.’

“I am aiming to reduce the overall emissions of the farm and I have adopted most of the actions like using protected urea and reducing the overall chemical fertiliser usage by sowing clover,” says Shane (pictured) who has put in measures to protect water quality.

“Kieran Kenny, Teagasc ASSAP advisor, drew up a plan to prevent losses from vulnerable areas of the farm. The dungstead was upgraded and I was advised to plant a hedge beside a main drain to act as a buffer or trap for any losses.

“Charlie Devaney my local Teagasc advisor put me into Acres and a lot of the actions like fencing watercourses and riparian margins help protect water and also add to the biodiversity of the farm. And I get paid to do it.”

In the last few months a new Farming for Water EIP (European Innovation Partnership) scheme was launched

which will provide €50 million to some 15,000 farmers up to the end of 2027.

Farmers in specific water catchments will get paid to implement a range of measures designed to help improve water quality. It provides funding for measures such as stream fencing, alternative water supply, nose pumps, solar pumps, fenced margins, riparian buffer zones, hedge and tree planting etc., for farms within Priority Areas for Action.

There are over 40 measures to choose from which include completing a rainwater management plan, a farmer training course and a Nutrient Management Plan.

Shane’s farm is located in the Islands river catchment which qualifies under the scheme and he is hoping to join. “To make money out of the farm, I have to have both an efficient farming system and capitalise on relevant schemes,” he says.



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