



Olivia Lowry pictured on the family farm near Tuam, Co Galway. \ Ray Ryan

# How to source the right calf

## Starting well is half the battle when buying and rearing calves for beef

**Tommy Cox**  
Teagasc DairyBeef500



**F**arming 37ha of dry, sandy, land outside Tuam in north Galway, Olivia and Keith Lowry joined the Dairybeef 500 programme in the summer of 2022. "Our aim is to improve the efficiency of our calf to beef enterprise," says Olivia.

Over the coming years, they will follow a plan in line with the Dairy-Beef 500 Campaign to improve animal performance, increase farm output, and reduce costs per kilogram of beef sold. This strategy will enhance the profitability of the business.

"One area that we will pay particular attention to is our calf sourcing policy," adds Olivia. "Buying a healthy animal with genetic potential to perform well from birth right through to slaughter is fundamental to the success of any dairy calf to beef enterprise."

The Lowrys first ventured into calf rearing back in 2015 when a small number of calves were purchased and reared alongside the suckler and sheep enterprises that were in place

on the farm at that time.

In recent years a full transition has been made to calf to beef. This year saw 65 calves: 55 spring and 10 autumn born reared on the farm. The aim is to increase this number to over 80 with approximately 55-60 reared in the spring and the remainder in the autumn.

Rearing calves at the back end of the year reduces some of the workload in the spring as both Olivia and Keith work off farm. "It also provides a split in the slaughter dates which is excellent from a cash flow point of view," says Olivia. It also optimises use of available housing

### Genetics

The calves that are purchased are predominately of early maturing genetics with over 90% of the calves on the farm from Angus and Hereford sires with the remainder being made up of Continental and Holstein Friesian genetics.

Traditionally, the majority of animals were sold in marts as stores but now the plan is to take them all right through to finishing maximising output. The plan is to slaughter the heaviest of them at 20-21 months of age following the second grazing season with the rest going on to be killed at 24 months of age out of the shed.

"During the transition phase we had

a number of teething problems," says Olivia. Calf genetics, calf quality and the number of sources from which calves were purchased created some issues on the farm but in recent year we have taken steps to help overcome these challenges."

### Sourcing locally

All calves are now bought locally, direct from farmers with whom the Lowrys have established a relationship since they set up their dairy calf to beef system. Keith and Olivia believe that sourcing the calves locally minimises stress for the young animals, reducing the potential for disease outbreaks.

"Before we buy animals we ask for information on the herd's health, vaccination programme, any current or previous disease issues and feed management to ensure calves received adequate levels of colostrum," says Olivia. "Ideally calves should be at least three weeks old by which stage a calf's immunity has increased and they are less vulnerable to diseases and scour."

### Desirable calf traits

Prior to purchase all calves are thoroughly examined to ensure they are healthy. "When I enter a shed I like to see calves that are alert with a clean, damp nose and bright eyes," adds Olivia. "We avoid any calves with visible signs of disease such as diar-

rhoea, discharge (mouth/eyes/nose), deformity, or anything that looks like it might cause an issue.”

Given their suckler farming background, a good quality animal is what Keith and Olivia want. A good square calf with good length is what is preferable but they are well aware that appearance alone, particularly at that young age, can be a poor predictor of beef potential.

“This spring we will use the commercial beef value (CBV) when selecting calves,” says Keith. “Our goal is to bring the average CBV of animals sourced to a minimum of four stars which will put them into the top 80% of the breed category.”

While quality is important for the Lowrys, so too is price. They mention the old saying: ‘you can buy gold too dear’. Keith and Olivia say they feel that paying over the odds on day one will result in a lot of ground having to be made given the high costs associated with calf rearing and uncertainty in markets.

#### Maintaining performance

On arrival to the farm at approximately three weeks of age calves are fed on single teat feeders until they reach their targeted weaning weight of 85-90kg generally by 55-60 days.

When questioned about the extra labour involved with the single teat feeder Olivia says she feels it is justified as she has the assurance that each calf will have received its required volume of milk replacer.

On arrival calves are offered a highly palatable calf nut as well as straw to assist in rumen development. Generally at weaning calves should be consuming over 2kg of concentrates per day to prevent any growth check as they transition from milk to solid feed and move from the pre-ruminant to ruminant phase.

Generally they are kept on this level until turnout. When calves are let out to grass first they are put out to stronger covers in a paddock close to the farmyard, just to have an extra bit of fibre which helps avoid summer scour syndrome.



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#### Keeping calves healthy

The farm's scour policy ensures the best possible chance of securing a healthy calf, but in a bid to ensure the calf health is maintained a herd health plan is followed.

The plan includes a two-shot bo-vipast programme. The first is administered a few days after arrival with a follow up been administered after four weeks. An intranasal vaccine to protect against IBR is also administered as well as an oral drench against coccidiosis.

“Sourcing quality calves, keeping them healthy and feeding them well sounds straightforward,” concludes Olivia. “Doing it consistently is the challenge.”

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