

Improving performance at grass

Sam Parrott, Staffordshire

Sam Parrott runs 110 spring calving suckler cows and followers on a mixed enterprise at Acton Hill Farm, Staffordshire. All the stock is reared through to finishing, along with store cattle bought-in to finish over winter.

Reducing days to slaughter

“The cows are out-wintered and only housed during calving,” Sam explains.

“This means the shed space can be used to finish more cattle over winter. However this also means we cannot afford delays in the time taken to finish them, as we need the space for calving.”



Sam has identified the grazing period for store cattle as an area that can be improved.

“In 2013, the steers and heifers gained 0.7-0.8kg per day at grass before housing and finishing. Increasing growth rates at grass will cut winter finishing costs and days to slaughter.”

Grazing strategies

“We try to implement rotational grazing where possible, but we have a large variation in field size so this is not always easy. Temporary fencing is an option, but labour availability for the beef side is almost non-existent when work on the arable enterprises picks up.

“So at the moment we use target pre-grazing and post-grazing sward heights for the store cattle.”

EBLEX target grazing heights for growing/finishing cattle are:

Pre-grazing (cm)	Post-grazing (cm)
12cm	7cm

Improving pasture

“Much of the grazing is permanent pasture, and we are currently weighing up the pros and cons of re-seeding.

“Difficult out-wintering conditions in the past two years have provided a good excuse to re-seed some permanent pasture. There seems to be no comparison in terms of early grass growth – the new reseeds far out-yeild the older grass. The next step is to monitor and compare animal growth rates to see if the re-seeds pay their way.”

Cow size, stocking rates and compaction

Sam is also looking at alternative ways of improving herd and field performance in the long-term.

“Another thing we are trying to achieve is to have smaller cows. I think this has a few advantages, including the potential to run more cows to the acre, increasing output from the same land area and potentially reducing ground damage, particularly over winter.”

Acton Hill farm targets

Sam has set targets to achieve without supplementing the cattle with concentrates at grass:

	Target	Sam's comments
Calf growth rates to weaning (per day)	1.25kg	We want to achieve this without creep. We know it is possible as we had some calves gaining 1.4kg per day last year
Store growth rates at pasture	0.9kg	Eventually we want to reach 1kg per day but this is a realistic target for now
Store weight at housing	550-600kg	Reducing the costly finishing period to reach a target weight of 700kg at slaughter