

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 10th September 2021

Replacement heifer weight targets

Now is a great time to look at the weight of our replacement heifers. Failing to hit heifer target weights will lead to reduced milk yields and lower survival rates.

New born Friesian calves typically weigh around 40 kg at birth. The aim is to achieve a live weight gain of 0.7 kg per day in the first year or 20 kg of growth per month. This would mean that by the 1st of September Friesian heifer calves would be on average 170-175 kg, whereas Jersey crossbred heifers will be around 10 - 15 kg lighter. If the group average is below these targets the farmer would have to evaluate their heifer rearing programme and ask?

- Is grass quality adequate?
- Is there a disease or health issue?
- Is there a large range in the age of my heifer calves?
- Are calves achieving the target weaning weights and eating 1-1.5 kg of meal per day at weaning?

Heifers that are below the target weight now should be separated from the main group and put on 1-2 kg of meal per day. They should also be put on the best quality grass available such as after grass and be moved in front of older stock. It is essential that these calves are separated now while at grass as often it can be very difficult to separate stock at housing and will be much more challenging and costly to put the extra weight with silage and meals.

Ideally weights should be recorded using a weighing scales. It may be worth 2-3 farmers coming together to purchase a weighing scales. At the very least stock should be examined by looking at the individual animal at stock height in the field and not from the roadway. However the preferred option is the weighing scales as it will tell us exactly where our replacement heifers are at. It is important to weigh calves now, separate accordingly and then re weigh again in a few weeks to monitor the calf's weight. Another important target is to have heifers at 220 kg at housing or 40 % of the weight of the mature herd. Table 1 below shows the target weights for different stages of a replacement heifer from birth to calving at 24 months.

Target Weights for Dairy Replacement Heifers

	% of mature weight	Maintenance sub index	
		€10	€20
6-month weight	30%	177 kg	162 kg
Pre-breeding weight	60%	354 kg	324 kg
Pre-calving weight	90%	531 kg	486 kg
	'Mature weight'	590 kg	540 kg

Year 2

The aim in year 2 is to have heifers at the correct weight for breeding in Early May. Holstein Friesian heifers should be 330 kg of weight or 60 % of the mature herd in early May. To achieve this target, good quality silage of 72 + DMD needs to be fed over the winter period with 1-2 kg of

meals, along with getting heifers out to grass early next spring. Some planning should take place over the next few months to have paddocks suitable for heifers next February. Dry, well sheltered paddocks would be ideal for starting weanling heifers to grazing again next spring. These paddocks should be grazed a week either side of the 1st of November so they would have a cover of 700- 1000 kg DM/ha next February. The September target for second year replacement heifers is 450 kg. Again if heifers are below this target it would be worthwhile separating these from the main group and feeding them 1-2 kg of meal with quality grass. These heifers should also be kept out on grass later than the main group to increase their live weight gain before Christmas.

