Introduction
Choice of replacement strategy centres on breed selection, whether to breed your own replacements from within the herd or purchase them in, and at what age heifers should first calve down.

1. How important is it to set targets for a suckler herd?
2. How do I decide my replacement strategy?
3. What are the benefits of rearing replacements from within the suckler herd?
4. How should bulling heifers be managed?
5. How important is heifer weight at weaning, bulling and calving?
1. How important is it to set targets for a suckler herd?

There is a worrying trend in the national herd in recent years: fertility performance defined as calves/cow/year appears to be declining and calving interval increasing.

Efficient suckler herds will:

- Rear as many calves as possible in relation to the number of cows put to the bull
- Have good quality calves at weaning time that have achieved good weight for age
- Use grass efficiently to help control production costs.

2. How do I decide my replacement strategy?

The long term success of a suckler system will depend on regular replacement of breeding stock.

Checklist

Things to consider when choosing a replacement strategy:

- **Herd size.** Average herd size in Ireland is small, so breeding replacements from within the herd can complicate the system, create more stock groupings and may not be feasible where a terminal stock bull is used.

- **Existing cow base.** Milk production and fertility are key traits in replacements. Look critically at your existing cow base. Have you a good proportion of milky cows which, with correct sire selection, will breed good replacements. Have your cows gone too ‘pure’ in terms of breeding and are you losing out on hybrid vigour?

3. What are the benefits of rearing replacements from within the suckler herd?

Rearing replacements from within the suckler herd will allow you to:

- **Farm facilities.** Have you sufficient feed and housing on farm to rear heifers through to calving?

- **Ability to source replacements.** Have you a reliable source of replacements you can buy from?

- **Use of AI.** If you are using AI you have the opportunity to select good maternal sires to put on your best cows to breed your replacement stock even in smaller herds.

- **Implications for cashflow.** If you intend to breed all your own replacements, 40-50% of your cows will need to be bred to a maternal sire. Can the business withstand the decline in cashflow as a result of not selling these heifers as weanlings or stores? Equally, can you afford to go out, year-on-year, and buy in replacements?

- **Interest in maternal breeding.** A keen interest in improving the maternal traits within your herd together with attention to detail will yield results. The least valuable weanlings or stores should not, by default, become your replacements.

Key facts

Replacement rate in the national herd is 14%. Some 60% of replacements are homebred; 40% are bought in. Seventy five per cent of replacements are ¾ bred beef crosses with the remaining 25% being 1st crosses from the dairy herd.
How should bulling heifers be managed?

**Key Fact**
The average age of suckler heifers calving down in Ireland is just over 32 months according to ICBF data. Heifers calving at three years of age have a lower lifetime economic efficiency compared to those calving at two years of age.

**Checklist**
Heifers that are to calf down at two years of age should:

- Come from the best cows in the herd and be sired by bulls with strong maternal traits,
- Be born early in the calving season to allow them to be heavier at bulling,
- Achieve a daily liveweight gain of 1.1-1.3 kg/day up to weaning,
- Be fed to achieve 60-80 kg liveweight over the first winter so they will need good quality silage plus 1-2 kg of concentrates,
- Be turned out early in spring to grass,
- Have reached 60% of their mature weight by bulling,
- Be bred to a known easy calving sire,
- Have reached up to 80% of their mature weight by the time they calve down,
- Receive preferential treatment as first and second calvers.

How important is heifer weight at weaning, bulling and calving?

**Checklist**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target % of Mature Wt.</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>600 kg</td>
<td>260-280 kg</td>
<td>360 kg</td>
<td>480 kg</td>
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<tr>
<td>700 kg</td>
<td>300-320 kg</td>
<td>420 kg</td>
<td>560 kg</td>
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Achieving at least 60% of their mature weight at bulling will ensure that there is a strong likelihood that heifers will be cycling at 15 months. Puberty in heifers is more related to weight than age so a good plane of nutrition is important. Traditional breeds and crossbred heifers reach puberty earlier than purebreds.

Particular attention needs to be paid to the weanling heifer at housing. She needs to be dosed for fluke and worms. Concentrate feeding should be front loaded at the start of the winter where they are offered up to 2 kg/hd/day depending on silage quality.

**Key Risks**
Heifers that are bulled too light may well go in-calf but they are likely to struggle thereafter as 1st and 2nd calvers because they will have difficulty reaching the correct body condition score for mating.

Heifers are generally a very fertile group and should be bred for eight weeks. This will allow each animal two services. Heifers that are not in calf after this are less fertile and may become problem breeders in the future.

Reaching 60% of their mature weight at bulling means that heifers need to achieve a steady gain of around 0.85 kg/day from birth. By the time they calve down at 80% of their mature weight their required daily gain has dropped to 0.7 kg/day.

Heifers should be calved down in fit condition but not fat. Once calved, they require preferential treatment, particularly if they are to remain indoors for a period.

**Key Risk**
Heifers are shy feeders if mixed with mature cows and can lose condition quickly. Heifers can be fed as a group and given 1.5-2 kg of concentrates/day after calving until turnout, to maintain body condition. This is vital if they are to remain in the herd and calve down as second calvers.