Maurice Hearne is one of the few farmers with an autumn-calving herd in the BETTER farm beef programme. He farms 118ha near Dunmore East in Waterford, running 85 sucklers, 21 dairy-beef calves, finishing store bulls, 160 ewes and 30ha of tillage. This year, he calved 85 cows in 12 weeks from early August.

“We had three losses—one set of twins that presented awkwardly, one calf that did not bond with its mother and one deformity. Thankfully, I was able to get foster calves on to all of these mothers from a local dairy farm,” Maurice said.

While in the BETTER farm programme, Maurice is grasping the opportunity to drive on his beef enterprise. Forty heifers were bought in and bred this year and poor-performing cows were culled.

“They are Simmentals and Limousins from British Friesian cows and came in at 350kg to 380kg. Average price was €2.10/kg to €2.15/kg. We did six weeks feeding with new BETTER balancer. We have already fed 12 weeks from early August.

At the moment, the calves are eating 20% soya bean meal, 7% molasses, 5% minerals.

“Specifications (dry matter): 14% crude protein, 0.95 UFL, 42% starch/sugar. Progeny are brought through to beef on Maurice’s farm, with males killed as bulls. To drive output, 15 additional bulls were purchased for finishing alongside his own this year. On 17 November, there were 54 bulls in Maurice’s finishing group, weighing 614kg at an average age of 14.2 months. This translates into a weight gain from birth of 1.34kg—continuing on from these calves’ excellent performance on the cow.

Maurice plans to take in more bulls in the coming weeks.

Before the onset of calving, Maurice’s cows would have been running on bare paddocks during the day and brought indoors at night for silage in order to manage condition.

Winter calf grazing
Maurice has sown four acres of rape, redstart, stubble turnip mixture beside the yard for his suckler calves. “I’ll send them to this each morning from the end of December and they’ll get back to the cows for a suck in the evening. Obviously if the weather sours they’ll stay indoors. This is my first year trying this out. To be honest, it’s part of a strategy to reduce pneumonia in my calves—I’ve had a problem with it in recent years. We’ve started vaccinating at a couple of weeks of age and have made some structural adaptations to our sheds too.”

At the moment, the calves are eating 2.5kg of supplement. This will be pulled back gradually and completely removed in the spring when these animals get to grass. It is offered with good-quality grass silage and is high in molasses to encourage intake. The formulation is as follows: 50% barley, 20% rolled oats.