



# Turning things around in Cork

Passionate cattle-breeder Kieran Noonan has a rather long to-do list, writes Ciarán Lenehan

**K**ieran Noonan farms 105 acres near Charleville, Co Cork. He keeps 50 suckler cows, which calve in the autumn. An AI-technician by day, Kieran aims to sell his progeny live, as strong weanlings.

However, half of Kieran's cows are pedigree and he enjoys a degree of success selling breeding stock. This culminated in the sale of a Limousin bull (LM4302) by Wilodge Cerberus from one of his Castleview-bred cows to an AI company in late-2016.

As a business the farm's viability is questionable – unfortunately the case for many beef farms. In the last six years, Kieran's average gross margin has been just €233/ha.

So what now? How do we turn things around?

Having spent time with Kieran and on his farm, the BETTER team, led by programme manager and advisor to the southeastern group Alan Dillon, have identified a number of key areas for Kieran to work on.

## The war on rushes

Of Kieran's 105 acres, around 50 are overrun with rushes. The plan is to reseed and drain 15-20 acres per year from 2018 – Kieran is carrying out other important infrastructure works this year and thus the cash to do more work on his grassland is simply not there. Rushes will be sprayed with 5l/ha of MCPA, cut six weeks later and baled to remove them from the land. The following reseeding protocol will then apply:

1. Spray off with round-up (max allowable rate) leave for 10 days.
2. Clean boundary ditches and drains.
3. Address any major swampy areas with shallow boundary-to-boundary shore drains (no pipes used).
4. Plough to 5in if field is uneven and level with land leveller.
5. Apply lime – 2-3t/acre.
6. Disc and power harrow/seeding
7. Roll and fertilise using three bags of 10-10-20 per acre.
8. Post emergence spray after six weeks.
9. Graze after eight weeks with calves/light stock.
10. Continue to address soil fertility afterwards, with 18-6-12 being the main fertiliser. Top up with 2t of lime per acre after two years.



VIDEO ONLINE  
watch the video on  
farmersjournal.tv



Kieran Noonan works as an AI technician and uses 100% AI when breeding on his own herd.

**Kieran Noonan, Co Cork**

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	42.7ha
2016 gross margin	€768/ha
Land type	Heavy

## Silage quality

Making good quality silage is key in an autumn-calving herd. The most important period in a suckler cow's production cycle is that between calving and breeding. Keeping this short is paramount and driving energy intake is one of the keys to doing so. In an autumn-calving herd grass silage is usually the staple during this period and silage with sub-70% DMD is unacceptable. In such a scenario fertility will take a hit unless we intervene with meaningful amounts of expensive concentrates.

In 2016, Kieran fed 67-68% DMD silage and was forced to feed 1.5kg of meal to cows in addition. His herd-wide calving interval is 380 days and his spread has gotten away from him somewhat. In contrast, other BETTER beef autumn-calving herds are feeding 75% DMD silage to cows with no meals and have sub-365 day calving intervals.

Going forward, Kieran will aim to make his main first cut of silage in mid- to late-May, having grazed it tightly either late in the back end, or the spring prior to 1 April (weather permitting).

## Adviser comment

Kieran has a long way to travel to improve the profits on his farm. Half the farm is growing no grass at all and as a result there is a lot of pressure on the grazing ground that is kept in good order.

The priority here is to get grass growing without breaking the bank. The poor land is not overly wet so much of it will get away with only minor investments in drainage, along

with reseeding and soil fertility improvements. Grass varieties will be selected for heavy land.

Once this land is back in production Kieran will be in a position to cut costs dramatically and carry a more realistic whole farm stocking rate once this is completed. The whole job will take four years to complete.

- Alan Dillon

## Winter accommodation problems

Kieran is tight on shed space at present. His main shed was designed to accommodate around 100 animals, but when young autumn calves in the creep areas are taken into account that figure is closer to 140. Last winter, Kieran was hit hard with respiratory problems in his young calves. While he didn't lose any animals, thrive was severely hit.

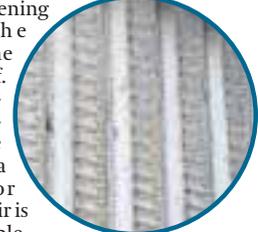
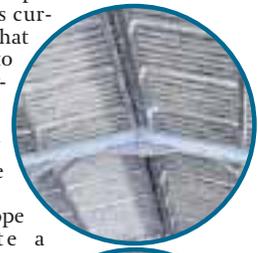
His birth to 200-day weight gain was 40-50% lower than what an autumn calver with his type of animal should be aiming for, at 0.57kg/day. Subsequent blood tests revealed *Mannheimia haemolytica* and *Pasturella multocida* pneumonia strains, which typically effect the upper respiratory tracts (tonsils) of animals before moving to the lungs.

Vaccinations are one part in the puzzle of disease prevention and simply help to tip the scales in our favour – the scales can also go the wrong way if other measures aren't taken. Indeed, there is no vaccination against *P. multocida* currently available. The first issue to be addressed is overcrowding. Kieran is erecting a lean-to on to the side of the existing shed that will work as both a calving area and a creep area for young calves.

The team has also identified some structural adaptations

to Kieran's current shed that will help to get air flowing:

1. While the roof sheets are spaced, there is scope to create a capped opening along the apex of the shed's roof.
2. The value of vented side sheets as a means for letting in air is questionable, such that it has now been removed from the TAMS spec list. Kieran will replace these with Yorkshire boarding before the winter.
3. Kieran will create some large square openings in the sheets above the shed doors. If needs be these can be easily covered with green mesh netting. He will also aim to leave doors at each end of the creep areas open, using round bales as shelter at ground level. The bales will be shut in extreme weather conditions.



# Return of rain and second-cut ground

## CIARÁN LENEHAN

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Our measuring beef farms grew 64kg DM/ha/day on average this week, in what has been an excellent period for grazing.

On many farms, second-cut silage ground is coming back into play and, while the after-grass will be welcome from a stock performance point of view, don't lose focus of the bigger picture that is the complete grazing block.

Aim to build to 15 days' worth of grass as it returns.

With much of the country receiving biblical levels of rainfall yesterday and the forecast being for more of the same in parts over the weekend, grass utilisation will inevitably suffer and silage making will grind to a halt.

If things get sticky, move cattle more regularly. Revert back to the mindset of someone who is trying to graze fields in February. At Tullamore Farm, our manager Ger is grazing in 48-hour blocks presently,

but will go to 24 hours if the sod begins to cut under cattle. Permanent paddocks are being split with polywire reels at present and he will simply introduce more if needs be. Centrally located drinkers give him options in this regard.

### Ferocious rain

Don't be afraid to stand cattle in a yard or on a roadway if the rain gets ferocious, until it subsides. Then, they can go back into paddocks.

On the silage end, paddocks stopped as surplus will prob-

ably have to wait now.

While we always encourage forage quality, consider what is being fed on the farm this winter.

Provided body condition is right at housing, spring-calving sucklers can be maintained on 62-65% DMD grass silage during the winter months.

If we are achieving three to five bales per acre from surplus paddocks, this is likely too good for these types of cows. With 25% dry matter bales, a suckler cow will eat around 2.1 bales a month.



**Ger O'Dwyer**  
Tullamore Farm

System:	suckler/calf to beef
Soil type:	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha):	669
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	57
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	62

Growth has been consistently strong in recent weeks and, as a result I was able to take surplus bales from paddocks last week in order to keep quality in the grass. My second-cut silage was mowed on Monday afternoon and picked up on Tuesday evening. It was a light crop but it looked to be top quality and should make good silage. Two weeks ago I sprayed a number of paddocks which had a heavy dock burden and it looks like I have achieved a good kill. Faecal samples were taken from yearling steers and heifers two weeks ago and liver fluke was detected, all stock were dosed with Tribex and they look to be doing well. I hope to get a weight on them by the end of the week to see their average daily gain since turnout. All dairy-bred calves are grazing in front of the main herd of cows to ensure they are getting the best-quality grass available. The bull was taken from the cows last week in order to keep the calving compact.

The team and I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday 25 July for our first open day on the farm.



**Ricky Milligan**  
Co Kildare

System:	suckler/calf to beef
Soil type:	free draining
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha):	770
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	39
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	69

Grass is holding up well, despite the fact that some of the fields cut for silage at the end of June would have benefited from a little more rain. I have enough grass to keep cattle going for another week and then I will put them back on silage ground. This is important to provide clean grazing in order to reduce the need for dosing which I try to keep to an absolute minimum in line with organic consumer demand. My cows are on very restricted grazing on the field which I am planning to plough next week for a crop of turnip, rape, and kale. This tight grazing is necessary as I can't spray off the field with chemicals before ploughing. I'm planning to weigh all the cattle next week. After this, I'll pick out those that are close to finishing and would benefit from a boost. These cattle will be put in a smaller paddock and will be fed with a pea/barley combi-crop when it is harvested in a few weeks' time.



**Ken Gill**  
Co Offaly

System:	suckler to organic beef
Soil type:	heavy clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha):	886
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	28
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	31

I am in the process of burning off seven acres of rough grazing with glyphosate. I intend to plough and reseed this ground in the coming week (see main BETTER farm page for protocol). Grass varieties selected will be suitable for wet land. Ground cover and persistency are very important traits when selecting grass for heavy land due to the constant threat of poaching. A post-emergence spray will be applied six weeks later. This is the most important part of any reseeding job. I am continually fertilising the grazing ground with 18-6-12 to try and build phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). I am applying it at a rate of 1.5 bags/acre. Silage was cut in early June and I am hoping for at least 70% DMD to cut meal bills. I plan to start reclaiming more rough grazing ground around 20 July. This will involve cleaning away scrub around the boundary followed by a few drains before addressing soil fertility and reseeding. IN the yard, work will begin soon on a lean-to type shed extension.



**Kieran Noonan**  
Co Cork

System:	suckler to store/weaning
Soil type:	heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha):	1,041
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	68
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	67

I am in the process of burning off seven acres of rough grazing with glyphosate. I intend to plough and reseed this ground in the coming week (see main BETTER farm page for protocol). Grass varieties selected will be suitable for wet land. Ground cover and persistency are very important traits when selecting grass for heavy land due to the constant threat of poaching. A post-emergence spray will be applied six weeks later. This is the most important part of any reseeding job. I am continually fertilising the grazing ground with 18-6-12 to try and build phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). I am applying it at a rate of 1.5 bags/acre. Silage was cut in early June and I am hoping for at least 70% DMD to cut meal bills. I plan to start reclaiming more rough grazing ground around 20 July. This will involve cleaning away scrub around the boundary followed by a few drains before addressing soil fertility and reseeding. IN the yard, work will begin soon on a lean-to type shed extension.

### 10-year average grass growth

