

BETTER farms

Taking the challenge

BETTER farm programme enters its third stage

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The BETTER farm programme began its third phase in February this year. The first two phases of the programme have shown great levels of success with monitor farms in the programme increasing profit levels and streamlining workloads by incorporating improved grassland management, breeding policies and financial management.

The previous phases of the programme attracted a lot of attention with large crowds at open days, sometimes exceeding 1,000 people. What proved a major strength of the programme was the fact that all the farms involved were commercial farms facing everyday struggles with weather, prices, cashflow and disease issues that all farmers have to live with.

Another strength of the programme was the geographical spread. With almost every county having its own BETTER farm, all farmers could find one nearby with a similar soil type, suckler system or climate that they could relate to.

Social media coverage of the programme will be increased in phase three. Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook and the *Irish Farmers Journal* online will provide regular updates on farm developments along with weekly updates in the print version of the *Irish Farmers Journal*.

Phase three of the programme has been named the BETTER farm challenge. Two new programme advisors were recruited in early 2017. John Greaney will cover western counties and Tommy Cox will cover eastern counties. The programme will have at least one new farmer per county with 27 new farms recruited at the end of 2016. Farms range in size from 18ha to 122 ha, with soil types from free-draining loam to heavy peat land in

need of reclamation.

A variety of systems are incorporated in the programme from suckling-to-weanling, suckler-to-store and all the major suckler-to-finishing systems including farms finishing bulls and steers. While no open days are planned for the new farms in 2017, as they are under development, it is hoped that the farms will see visits from discussion groups, as well as hosting open days and smaller technical workshops over the course of the programme.

As part of a new revamped phase three, the participating farms will have to partake in a number of challenges. Three of the challenges will be mandatory and farmers will pick three more from the remaining seven.

Mandatory challenges

The two-tonne grass growth challenge

The challenge

To get extra performance from existing swards and grow two tonnes more grass dry matter per hectare over the course of the programme. Where possible, the aim is to turn the two-tonne extra dry matter growth into extending the grazing season by two weeks in spring and two weeks in winter to reduce winter feed costs and improve animal performance. For farmers at a more advanced stage, the aim is to break the 10t DM/ha challenge.

Challenge criteria

- Grass measured weekly and updated on Pasturebase.
- Increasing number of paddocks, water troughs and reseeding.
- Farm mapped online.
- Nutrient management plans completed and updated annually.
- Silage quality analysed annually.

The farm finance challenge

The challenge

Keep 100% of the farm's direct payment and increase the farm's return into a positive gross margin each year of the programme. Follow the programme's cashflow planner and



be in a position to plan ahead and better manage finances. Farmers must complete an annual Teagasc eProfit Monitor.

Challenge criteria

- Complete eProfit Monitor annually.
- Cost control planner updated monthly.
- Six-year business plan completed by end of year one.
- Cashflow monitored over the course of the programme.

Farm safety challenge

The challenge

Complete a farm safety risk assessment on an annual basis and implement two positive changes annually.

Challenge criteria

- Two positive safety improvements made every year.
- Health and safety assessment updated annually.

Additional challenges

In addition to the mandatory challenges, farmers must pick three from the following list of challenges:

The breeding challenge

The challenge

Increase the average replacement value of your herd by €20 over the three years of the programme. There is an opportunity to help farms develop as specialist producers of high health



BETTER farm challenge participant Shane Gleeson from Cappamore in Co Limerick, with Alan Dillon, Teagasc cattle specialist.

into 10% of grassland.
 • Fertiliser bill on these farms looked at nitrogen usage in relation to stocking rate.
 • Management practices ensuring persistency of clover in the sward to be reported.

Meet the markets challenge

The challenge

• Hitting optimum specs all the time.

Challenge criteria

- All farms Quality Assured by 30 June.
- All farmers to visit the factory by the end of year one.
- All farmers to have received a supermarket multiple briefing by year two.
- Percentage of animals killed under 400kg dead.
- Fat class: percentage in fat class 3 in steers and heifers.
- Grades: R and U percentage.
- Liveweight gain measured a minimum of three times annually and targets set.

The mixed grazing challenge

For farms with both sheep and cattle enterprises the target is to establish a blueprint for operating a mixed grazing system. This will include autumn closing dates, for example, to allow for early spring turnout, low-cost fencing options for mixed grazing in rotation and housing/winter feeding options.

Challenge criteria

- Cashflow differences to be reported.
- Blueprint for managing autumn and spring grass on mixed farms to be developed.

The partnership/labour challenge

The challenge

This is a challenge to the programme to show that successful family and non-family partnerships can become established businesses that, with planning and structure, can provide a viable future for young farmers; and to examine labour usage on farms.

Challenge criteria

Five farms to monitor labour usage – two part-time and three full-time with weekly recording of time sheets during different times of the year.
 Partnership arrangements to be reported on between families and non-family arrangements.

Why not take the challenge yourself? The programme farmers will choose their challenges. But there's nothing stopping any farmer from taking these challenges too.

status – high genetic merit replacement heifers/cows.

Challenge criteria

- Data recorded in ICBF.
- Achieve ICBF breeding targets.
- Target a 365-day calving interval.
- Calving spread to be shortened to 10 weeks.
- Calving at two years old at the end of the programme.
- Calving rate: minimum of 0.92 calves/cow/year.

The herd health challenge

The challenge

The herd health challenge will look to establish what the main offenders requiring antibiotic use at farm level are typical usage rates across different enterprises; reduce the usage of antibiotics by putting a robust herd health plan in place. Farmers will develop blueprints that favour the targeted use of vaccines and optimum herd/flock management and husbandry practices. This will reduce high-risk diseases hence reducing inputs by 20%.

Challenge criteria

- Herd health plan to be completed with vet.
- More detailed analysis in Teagasc eProfit Monitor of antibiotic v vaccine usage.
- Ventilation improvements in sheds recorded.
- Vet call-outs: number of visits recorded each year.

The soil health challenge

The challenge

Get more farmers identifying the soil fertility status of their soils and then embarking on a programme, in tandem with a core group of BETTER beef farm participants on varying soil types (mineral and peat soils). The target is that each paddock receives a soil application during the first three years to drive improvement in soil pH levels and subsequently P and K indexes and grass production.

Challenge criteria

- Soil sampling all farms in year one.
- N and P programme is being filled out by each farmer.
- 70% index Index 3 in year four.
- pH target 6.1 in year four.
- Peat soils target 5.7 in year four.

The green farming challenge

The challenge

Demonstrate practical ways of incorporating clover into 20% of the farm's grassland swards and disseminate best-practice advice on how to manage swards to ensure high establishment rates and grazing practices to avoid issues such as bloat.

Challenge criteria

- Minimum of 20% clover incorporated in swards.
- 50% clover incorporated in year one into 10% of grassland.
- 50% clover incorporated in year two