

SUCKLER HERD PERFORMANCE CHECKLIST



FARMER OBJECTIVES/CONCERNS:

FARM:

VET:

DATE:

USING THE CHECKLIST

This checklist was developed by Martin Tomlinson, Ellie Button, Kat Hart, Ewan Jamieson and Alistair McClelland in association with MSD Animal Health to help vets and farmers work more closely to improve suckler herd performance and calf health.



INTRODUCTION

This checklist will focus on key processes and time periods combined with a veterinary clinician's expertise to create a practical action plan for improved calf health and herd productivity on the farm.

Improved calf health will lead to improved growth rates and reduced losses which in turn can improve overall farm profitability, time management and job satisfaction.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING THE SUCKLER HERD PERFORMANCE CHECKLIST

- Complete all five sections of this checklist to identify strengths and weaknesses of herd management and calf rearing processes. Use data from the most recent calving period.
- Spring and Autumn calving herds should be assessed separately.
- For each question, choose the most appropriate statement for the situation on farm by circling the score adjacent to the answer chosen.
- Add up the scores in each section to give you a total section score out of 20.
- Once all the sections are completed, on the back page plot the total section scores on the graph and sum all the section scores to give your overall score out of 100.
- Discuss the results with the farmer and come up with an action plan for improvement with them.



SCAN TO VIEW AND DOWNLOAD THE INFORMATION PACK



FERTILITY AND PREGNANCY

1

QUESTION	ANSWER	SCORE
FERTILITY		
1 Are all bulls fertility tested?	No	0
	Yes, at purchase	1
	Yes, prior to each breeding season	2
2 Are cows pregnancy tested?	No	0
	Yes, over 60 days after bulls removed	1
3 How many weeks between the birth of the first and last calf?	Yes, between 30 days after the first cycle and 60 days after bulls removed	2
	>16 weeks or don't know	0
	12-16 weeks	1
4 Do you select dams and bulls for calving ease?	<12 weeks	2
	No	0
	Yes, using records of previous history	1
	Yes, using EBVs	2
NUTRITIONAL MANAGEMENT		
5 Do you assess and record body condition score?	No	0
	Visually assess and group accordingly	1
	Yes, with manual palpation and manage cows accordingly	2
6 Are cows separated into management groups after weaning e.g. thin cows, twins, second calving heifers?	No	0
	Yes, sometimes	1
	Yes, always	2
7 What is the time between weaning and calving?	Less than a month or don't know	0
	Over a month (but not based on other factors)	1
	More than a month (determined by factors such as dam condition score and forage availability)	2
HERD HEALTH & BIOSECURITY		
8 How many of the following infectious diseases does the farm test for exposure to: • BVD • IBR • Leptospirosis • Salmonella • Johne's disease?	Not testing for infectious disease exposure	0
	Testing for 1-3 of these diseases	1
	CHeCS accredited for 1-3 of these diseases, or aware of status for all	2
9 Are cows vaccinated for the following infectious diseases: • BVD • IBR • Leptospirosis • Salmonella • Clostridial diseases	Not vaccinating against any of these diseases	0
	CHeCS accredited and/or vaccinating for 1-2 of these diseases	1
	CHeCS accredited and/or vaccinating for >2 of these diseases	2
10 Are replacement breeding cattle (including bulls) purchased?	Yes, infectious disease status of herd of origin unknown	0
	Yes, from accredited or vaccinated herds	1
	No, or individuals quarantined and tested for infectious disease on arrival	2
TOTAL SCORE FOR THIS SECTION		/20

If the farmer doesn't have exact dates use BCMS data.

Sire EBVs relating to calving ease include:
• Low birth weight
• Short gestation length
• Direct calving ease

Recording of BCS is vital to see trends which might reflect individual animal status or herd nutritional status.

Effective management of the dry period is good practice for optimising colostrum production (quantity and quality), and cow condition at calving.

Where herd health diseases are present ensure there is a management plan in place.

Ensure vaccines are stored and administered in accordance with their package instructions.



CALVING AND NEONATAL MANAGEMENT

2

QUESTION	ANSWER	SCORE
NUTRITIONAL MANAGEMENT		
1 Do you feed dams according to energy requirements and life stage during pregnancy?	Flat rate feeding or grouped according to other factors	0
	Grouped and fed according to BCS and life stage	1
	Grouped and fed according to BCS and life stage with forage analysis and ration formulation	2
2 Are heifers fed separately to allow for different nutritional requirements?	No	0
	Yes, before OR after calving	1
	Yes, before AND after calving	2
3 Is metabolic profiling carried out to identify cows in negative energy balance pre- or post-calving?	No	0
	Sometimes	1
	Yes	2
CALVING ENVIRONMENT & ASSISTANCE		
4 Do you have an area that you can safely restrain a cow to aid calving?	No separate area	0
	Calving gate but no separate pen	1
	Yes, separate pen with calving gate	2
5 Using the following calving ease scores, what proportion of calvings required assistance? 1 = calve unaided 2 = easy pull 3 = hard pull 4 = vet assistance 5 = caesarean	No records or don't know	0
	Estimated >90% score 1	1
	>95% score 1 and recorded	2
6 Where are dams and calves grouped after calving?	Dams calve with dry cows and stay in original group	0
	Separated into new group after 24 hours	1
	Separated into new group within first 24 hours	2
7 What is the stillbirth rate (include calves born dead and those which die within 24 hours of birth)?	Greater than 5% or not known	0
	3-5%	1
	Less than 3%	2
COLOSTRUM MANAGEMENT		
8 How is adequacy of colostrum intake monitored?	No way of monitoring adequacy	0
	Blood samples collected from calves 1-7 days old, FPT >20%	1
	Blood samples collected from calves 1-7 days old, FPT <20%	2
9 Do you have a farm-specific plan to identify and manage calves at high risk of FPT e.g. dystocia, poor vigour, slow calving?	No	0
	Yes, but not comprehensive, reviewed or not all team members aware	1
	Yes, regularly reviewed and all team members aware	2
10 Are cows and heifers vaccinated against rotavirus, coronavirus and E. coli prior to calving?	Never, and evidence of these pathogens on farm	0
	Sporadically, and clinical evidence of scour associated with these pathogens	1
	Always, or no scour associated with these pathogens observed	2
TOTAL SCORE FOR THIS SECTION		/20

Dry cow protein (ERDP) nutrition is also important in maximising colostrum quality.

If a crush is used, discuss whether it is the most appropriate solution for safely assisting calving on that particular farm.

Good hygiene is essential when assisting calving. Ensure appropriate staff training is in place.

A selection of representative calves aged 1-7 days should be sampled. Total Protein levels assessed and recorded. FPT = Failure of Passive Transfer.

Reviewing neonatal disease rates and dry cow nutrition should take place as part of herd health planning.

Remember to consider other causes of scour on farm, Salmonella is not detected in calf-side scour tests.



YOUNG CALVES - 24 HR TO 42 DAYS

3

QUESTION	ANSWER	SCORE
ENVIRONMENT		
1 What is the age range of calves sharing the same airspace or field?	0-12 months	0
	0-6 months	1
	0-3 months	2
HOUSED CALVES: Is the environment of the calf housing adequate in terms of inlet, outlet, dry bedding and freedom from draughts?	Inlet/outlet insufficient, draughts at calf level or inadequate bedding	0
	Inlet/outlet sufficient but draughts at calf level or wet bedding	1
	Yes, inlet/outlet sufficient, well bedded and free from draughts at calf level	2
2 OR OUTDOOR CALVES: Is the environment suitable in terms of shelter and dry lying areas?	No, shelter inadequate and few/no dry lying areas	0
	Shelter available or dry lying areas	1
	Yes, good shelter and dry lying areas available for all calves	2
INFECTIOUS PRESSURE & BIOSECURITY		
3 Using the Calf Health Score card, what proportion of calves show signs of respiratory disease?	>20%	0
	5-20%	1
	<5%	2
4 Using the Calf Health Score card, what proportion of calves show signs of scour?	>20%	0
	5-20%	1
	<5%	2
5 What proportion of calves show signs of navel or joint infection?	More than 5%	0
	2-5%	1
	Under 2%	2
	6 Are sick calves isolated with their dams?	No
Yes, but adjacent to other calves		1
Yes, separated from other cows and calves		2
7 Is there diagnostic testing for pathogens causing scour and pneumonia on farm?	No, and evidence of clinical disease	0
	During an outbreak	1
	Routinely, or no evidence of clinical disease	2
8 Do you ever buy in young calves or in-calf dams?	Yes	0
	No	2
CALF RESISTANCE		
9 Are pneumonia vaccines used in calves <42 days of age?	Never, and evidence of clinical disease	0
	Sporadically, and evidence of clinical disease in this age group	1
	Always, or no evidence of clinical disease in this age group	2
10 What is farm policy on BVD control?	PIs not removed or no control policy	0
	Tissue testing at birth or check testing, PIs removed ASAP	1
	CHeCS accredited free	2
TOTAL SCORE FOR THIS SECTION		/20

ONLY ASSIGN ONE SCORE FOR THIS QUESTION

Nesting score reflects adequacy of bedding - aim for ≥ 2. Score when calves laying down: 1 = all legs visible; scant bedding 2 = legs half visible; reasonable bedding 3 = legs totally covered with straw.

Assess this as best as possible if you are visiting away from calving time.

Assess the answers for questions 3, 4 and 5 against farm treatment and medicine records.

Not all pathogens appear on all tests, e.g. Salmonella does not appear on in-house faecal testing kits and Pasteurella are not detected on routine serology.

If calves are showing signs of respiratory disease vaccination should be reviewed as part of herd health planning.

Assess vs. CHeCS rules if the farm is accredited.



OLDER CALVES - 42 DAYS TO WEANING 4

QUESTION	ANSWER	SCORE
INFECTIOUS PRESSURE & BIOSECURITY		
1 Do you see evidence of coccidiosis or gastrointestinal worms in this age group?	Frequent problems with scouring or batch treatment required	0
	Evidence on faecal sampling, occasional scouring and spot treatment of calves	1
	No evidence on faecal sampling	2
2 Do you ensure post-mortem examinations of fallen stock are performed to establish cause of death?	Never	0
	Sometimes	1
	Always	2
3 During the last winter housing period what proportion of weaned calves showed signs of respiratory disease?	>20%	0
	5-20%	1
	<5%	2
CALF RESISTANCE		
4 What is the protocol for clostridial vaccination?	No fixed policy and history of unexplained sudden deaths	0
	Sometimes use vaccine	1
	Always use vaccine or no history of unexplained sudden deaths	2
5 At what age is castration and dehorning carried out (if carried out at different times use the timing of the latest)?	Around the time of weaning	0
	At least a month after weaning	1
	At least a month prior to weaning	2
6 What is the pneumonia vaccination protocol for calves greater than 42 days old?	No vaccination used or no fixed policy, with clinical disease	0
	Vaccinated at or after housing/weaning	1
	Full course completed at least 2 weeks prior to stressful event, or no evidence of clinical disease	2
7 How do you approach weaning and housing?	Wean and house calves at the same time	0
	Sometimes separate these 2 events	1
	Always separate these 2 events by at least 2 weeks to minimise stress	2
NUTRITION & GROWTH RATES		
8 How are dams grouped and managed to meet energy requirements for milk production to drive calf growth?	Diet not altered according to condition score or life stage	0
	Set stocked but grouped according to condition score or life stage	1
	Grouped according to condition score, life stage and forage availability	2
9 How do you approach the diet transition for calves at weaning? Diet may include creep, silage, grass availability, rotational grazing, TMR etc.	Diets not managed pre- and post-weaning	0
	Diet planned and managed for energy and protein requirements pre-weaning only	1
	Diet transition planned and managed for energy and protein requirements pre- and post-weaning	2
10 What is the average growth rate up to weaning?	<0.75kg/day or don't weigh them	0
	0.75-1.0kg/day	1
	>1kg/day	2
TOTAL SCORE FOR THIS SECTION		/20

Faecal egg count monitoring is an important tool to inform decisions for parasite control planning.

Evaluate against treatment records. Remember the importance of lungworm in spring calves and assess vs. vaccination.

Presence of clostridial spores is ubiquitous. Responses can be assessed against antibiotic use.

Check use of analgesia against treatment records and discuss as required.

Assess risk from Q3.

Planning is the key to ensuring smooth transition.



SETTING GOALS AND MEASURES 5

QUESTION	ANSWER	SCORE
FERTILITY & PREGNANCY		
1 What is the average age at first calving?	Over 30 months	0
	26-30 months	1
	Under 26 months	2
2 How many dams calve in the first 3 weeks of the breeding season?	<50% of cows and heifers	0
	50-65% of cows and heifers	1
	>65% of cows and heifers	2
3 How many of the following transition cow diseases do you record and discuss as part of your herd health plan? • Milk fever • Retained Foetal Membranes • Hypomagnesaemia • Metritis • Mastitis	Don't record and/or don't discuss incidence as part of health planning	0
	Record sporadically or only keep treatment records	1
	Record all and consider for culling decisions	2
CALF PERFORMANCE		
4 What is the calf mortality rate for liveborn calves (24h) to weaning?	>5%	0
	3-5%	1
	<3%	2
5 Do you measure and record weights at birth and at weaning?	No, or estimate weights	0
	Yes, using weighing tapes or group figures	1
	Yes, measured using weighing scales and individual weights recorded	2
6 Are on farm protocols in place for treatment of specific calf diseases (e.g. scour, pneumonia etc.) and are these available to all staff?	No specific protocols in place	0
	Yes, but not widely accessible or well utilised	1
	Yes	2
HERD PERFORMANCE		
7 What level of annual losses occur due to forced culling or deaths in the female breeding herd?	>15%	0
	5-15%	1
	<5%	2
8 Do you record reasons for culling cows?	No	0
	Yes, sometimes	1
	Yes, always	2
9 Do you monitor the growth rate of replacement maiden heifers to ensure target weight of at least 65% mature bodyweight at service?	No	0
	Yes, on a group basis or estimated	1
	Yes, measured individually using weighing scales and known adult bodyweight on farm	2
10 What is the % calves weaned per 100 cows and heifers mated?	<85%	0
	85-94%	1
	>94%	2
TOTAL SCORE FOR THIS SECTION		/20

Aim for all heifers to calve in the first 3 weeks.

Assess and compare this result against the stillbirth rate from Q7 Calving section (page 4).

Monitoring response to treatment is also important and should be assessed as part of health planning.

Discuss reasons and records for:
• Selective culling
• Forced culling
• Deaths

This level may be higher if disease control measures in place e.g. TB, John's.

If calving at a different age than 2 years; heifers may have different service target weights.

Number of calves weaned + number of cows and heifers mated x 100 = %

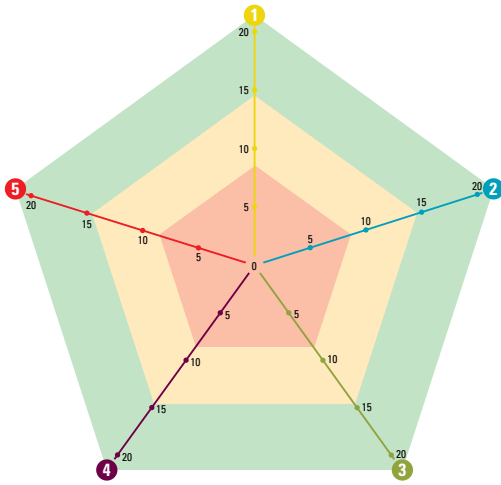
HERD SIZE:

HERD DISEASE STATUS:

BVD

IBR

LEPTOSPIROSIS

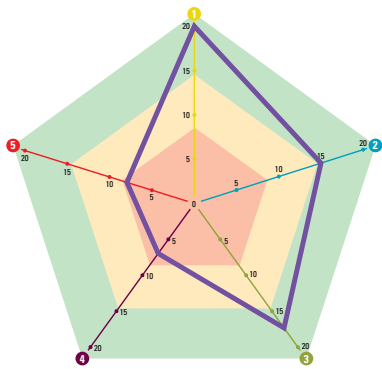


OVERALL SCORE

Mark on the graph the score for each section. Join the points on each axis together to make a pentagon as shown in the below example.

The overall size of the pentagon highlights the overall score and the shape indicates where further attention to herd or calf health would be most useful – the higher the score for each section the better.

You can benchmark your farms by assessing overall score and then the scores for the 5 sections. This can be really useful to share insights between your farms for optimal suckler herd and calf health management.



OVERALL CHECKLIST SCORE

/100

In the example (left) the outcome of the graph highlights that the farmer is doing well with **fertility and pregnancy** management, **calving** and **young calf** management, and should now focus on **older calf** health and **recording** to improve performance on their farm.

ACTION PLAN

Work with the farmer to come up with the action plan focusing on 5 key areas which have been highlighted by this checklist. This action plan should focus on what is to be achieved by whom and on what timescale.

ACTION	BY WHOM	BY WHEN
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Review actions which arise from this checklist at least every 6 months to keep on track and check progress. Repeating the checklist every 12 months will help to track progress and benchmark performance from one year to another.

Review date: / /