

Spring can come around quickly so there are a number of preparations that, if made well in advance, will help when calving start

1. Are all the cows in calf?

With limited fodder supplies on many farms more farmers than usual have scanned their cows to ensure they are carrying a calf and when it is due. If you haven't done this already, get the herd pregnancy diagnosed – to ensure you don't waste fodder on empty cows and to determine an estimated calving date which will allow you to plan the following measures.

2. Cow condition

Cows should calve down fit but not fat (Condition Score 3 – 3.5). Assess the condition of cows now and group cows of similar condition to feed accordingly. Cows in poor condition should be fed better fodder or supplemented with concentrates. Allow at least three months before calving as increased feeding levels in the last month before calving may result in a bigger calf and calving difficulties rather than improving cow condition. Similarly dramatically reducing feed levels close to calving will not significantly reduce condition but may reduce milk production after calving. Early action is the key!

3. Veterinary treatments

Fluke control – high levels of fluke this year mean that effective control is necessary. Consult your veterinary surgeon to discuss if a later treatment is required.

Vaccination to reduce calf scour needs to be carried out well in advance. Consult with your vet to discuss especially if you had scour problems last year. You may want to just target later calving cows if this is where the problem normally arises.

Mineral supplementation is often an issue for suckler cows but especially if some of your fodder supplies were cut late or in poor weather conditions. There may be an increased need to supplement cows this year – your vet will be able to advise, but this needs to be dealt with well in advance of calving.

4. Calving facilities and Health and Safety

For most herds at least one calving pen for every 20 cows will be needed; this figure can be increased or decreased depending on how tight you expect your calving spread to be and how long you wish the cow and calf to remain in the pen. At a minimum the pens should be 3.6m x 3.6m but ideally above 4m x 4m. The pens should be cleaned intensively and disinfected beforehand to minimise the spread of disease. When calving commences, straw bedding should be used in abundance and have the following equipment in place; long arm gloves, calving and head ropes, iodine solution, veterinary lubricant and calving aid. If you are considering alternative bedding materials plan now – see the material before purchase and ensure it complies with Quality Assurance standards if applicable.

Safety at calving time is paramount; cows can be more aggressive at calving and are the most common cause of injury/death from livestock. Make sure gates and barriers are strong enough, and have no sharp protruding edges. In addition it is essential to have appropriate handling facilities if a cow has to be restrained to calve or suckle the calf. Have an escape route planned and consider pen design to allow a quick escape.

Preparation in the months before calving starts will improve calving performance, calf health, reduce levels of disease and risk of injury to farmer and stock!