

INCREASED LEVELS OF PRIME CATTLE MEETING AGE SPECIFICATIONS

Prime cattle producers in NI are continually encouraged to present cattle for slaughter which meet current market specifications. Beef from cattle that fulfil these requirements will generate the greatest returns for the farm gate as they can be used to service the widest range of customer orders from both the retail and food service sectors.

While most processing groups each have individual requirements and cattle of preference, the majority of market specifications applicable to NI processors currently require heifers and steers less than 30 months of age and young bulls less than 16 months of age. There are however some cases where there is an upper age limit of 36 months for steers and heifers but it should be noted these often bring about a lower price. **Tables 1-3** outline the age distribution of the NI price reported prime cattle kill during 2018-2022.

Steers

The average age of slaughter for steers in Northern Ireland during 2022 was 25.3 months. While this is up slightly from 2021 when the average age of slaughter was 25.2 months. However, during 2022 steers were on average younger at point of slaughter than those slaughtered during 2018, 2019

and 2020.

During 2022, 36.2 per cent of price reported steers were under 24 months of age. This is an increased proportion from the previous four year period and is a positive result reflecting the improved efficiency of the beef industry. This brings the proportion of price reported steers meeting the under 30 months of age specification during 2022 to 88.4 per cent. This is up slightly from 2019 and 2020 levels however it is a decline from 2018 and 2021 levels.

Heifers

The average age of slaughter for heifers during 2022 was 25.4 months, down marginally from 2021 levels. The average age of slaughter for heifers has remained fairly steady over the last five years as outlined in **Table 2**.

The proportion of price reported heifers under 24 months during 2022 was 37.4 per cent, up 1.1 per cent from 2021 levels. The trend seen in steer slaughtering was consistent with heifers, with the proportion of heifers in the 24-30 month age category decreasing slightly from the year previous, to account for 49 per cent in 2022. This brings the proportion of heifers killed under 30 months during 2022 to 86.4 per cent, a small decline

from 2021 levels when the proportion was 86.6 per cent.

Young Bulls

The proportion of young bulls killed under 16 months of age during 2022 was 69.7 per cent, this is a decline from 2021 levels when 74.6 per cent of young bulls were slaughtered under 16 months. The proportion of young bulls in the 16-24 month age category reported an increase from 2021 levels to 28.7 per cent.

This increase of young bulls in the respective over 16 month age categories during 2022, has seen the average age at slaughter of young bulls increase to 16.3 months. This is a slight increase in the average age at slaughter compared to the previous four years as outlined in **Table 3**.

From a producer's perspective, one reason for retaining cattle to older ages may be put them into heavier weights or a better state of finish. It is important to liaise with the cattle procurement staff of the individual plants to assess the impact of age penalties on carcass value. While this analysis focuses on age specification, producers are encouraged to meet all current market specifications for beef.

Table 1. Breakdown of steers by age at slaughter 2018-2022.
Source: LMC Deadweight Cattle Price Reporting

Year	Under 24 months	24-30 months	Over 30 months	Average age (months)
2018	32.3%	56.6%	11.1%	25.6
2019	30.1%	57.1%	12.9%	25.9
2020	34.8%	53.3%	11.9%	25.4
2021	36.0%	53.4%	10.5%	25.2
2022	36.2%	52.2%	11.6%	25.3

Table 2. Breakdown of heifers by age at slaughter 2018-2022.
Source: LMC Deadweight Cattle Price Reporting

Year	Under 24 months	24-30 months	Over 30 months	Average age (months)
2018	35.1%	51.6%	13.3%	25.7
2019	32.3%	53.8%	14.0%	25.9
2020	34.4%	51.4%	14.2%	25.7
2021	36.3%	50.3%	13.4%	25.6
2022	37.4%	49.0%	13.7%	25.4

Table 3. Breakdown of young bulls by age at slaughter 2018-2022.
Source: LMC Deadweight Cattle Price Reporting

Year	Under 16 months	16-24 months	Over 24 months	Average age (months)
2018	77.1%	22.2%	0.7%	16.0
2019	77.1%	21.9%	1.0%	16.0
2020	77.3%	21.6%	1.2%	16.0
2021	74.6%	24.6%	0.8%	16.1
2022	69.7%	28.7%	1.6%	16.3

HOW MANY PRIME CATTLE ARE MEETING WEIGHT SPECIFICATION?

Current market specifications require beef carcass weights within the range of 280-380kg. However weight penalties for overweight cattle are not usually imposed until carcasses exceed 415-420kg at which point increased levels of carcass processing is needed.

During 2022 the average carcass weight of prime cattle slaughtered in local plants was 344.5kg, outlined in **Table 4**. This was back 3kg from 2021 and 1.2kg from 2020 when the average prime carcass weights were 347.5kg and 345.7kg respectively. The average carcass weight of steers and heifers declined during 2022 compared to the previous year with a decline in suckler bred animals slaughtered and increased levels of

beef cross and dairy cattle. The average carcass weight of young bulls increased year on year during 2021 however declined to 344.1kg last year with a decline in the levels of suckler origin young bulls slaughtered.

Weight Ranges by Category

Analysis of the deadweight cattle price reporting data has indicated that 57 per cent of steers in Northern Ireland met the desired weight specification of 280-380kg during 2022. A small proportion of steers produced carcasses below 280kg during this period as outlined in **Figure 1**. Meanwhile 13.2 per cent of steers produced carcasses between 380-400kg. A further 19.4 per cent of carcasses were between 400-450kg

while 3.9 per cent were above 450kg. A greater proportion of heifers met current weight specifications during 2022, with 72.8 per cent producing carcasses within the weight range of 280-380kg. A further six per cent of heifers were between 380-400kg while 7.1 per cent were below 260kg.

During 2022 53 per cent of young bulls produced carcasses within the 280-380kg weight range and 19.2 per cent of young bulls produced carcasses below 280kg during this period. Meanwhile, 9.3 per cent of young bulls produced carcasses between 380-400kg with a further 14 per cent of carcasses weighing between 400-450kg and 4.6 per cent very heavy weighing above 450kg.

fertiliser. It appears this is partly the case however, increased dairy influence in the slaughter mix explains the lighter carcass weights of steers and heifers.

The improvements in efficiency that can be got from finishing animals as young bulls is well known however producers are encouraged to keep tight control of their finishing systems to help avoid penalties for age and weight at point of slaughter.

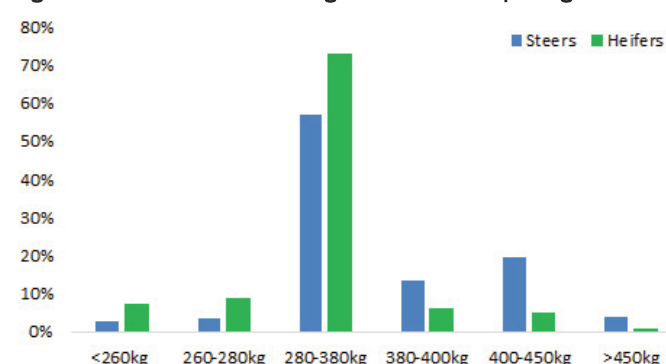
For help and advice on producing cattle to meet current market specifications producers should contact their local CAFRE advisor through the DAERA direct line on 0300 200 7840. Importantly, producers are encouraged to liaise with the procurement staff of individual plants before finishing cattle to help ensure the cattle they present for slaughter meet current market specifications which will maximise returns across the beef supply chain.

Table 4: Average carcass weights of prime cattle slaughtered in NI during 2020-2022 by category. Source: DAERA.

Year	Average carcass weight Steers (kg)	Average carcass weight Heifers (kg)	Average carcass weight Young Bulls (kg)	Average carcass weight Prime Cattle (kg)
2020	361.6	326.5	342.7	345.7
2021	363.1	327.4	348.4	347.5
2022	361.0	324.4	344.1	344.5

Considering the high prime cattle kill recorded in NI during 2022 resulting from the record kill during the first half of the year, it is interesting to analyse the market and assess whether cattle were killed early in response to the high deadweight prices seen early in the year which were followed by sharp increases in inputs, notably grains and

Figure 1: Breakdown of the price reported steer and heifer kill by weight range during 2022. Source: LMC Deadweight Cattle Price Reporting



FQAS Helpline

If you have had a recent inspection and need help and advice to rectify any non-conformances. Contact the FQAS helpline: 028 9263 3024

Answerphone Service

Factory base quotes & mart results Updated 5pm Daily Tel: 028 9263 3011

Text Service

Free weekly base quotes sent to your mobile phone Email: bulletin@lmconi.com Tel: 028 9263 3000

LMC UPDATE ON COORDINATED PLAN TO 'CARBON SURVEY' ALL FQAS MEMBERS

This week has seen the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) confirming that the Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) will be used as a platform to allow a complete carbon footprint determination of 11,600 farms across Northern Ireland. In essence, the work being undertaken will represent the collective outworking of a whole industry agreed approach for all the sectors that, when taken together, constitute agriculture in Northern Ireland: beef, lamb, dairy, pigs, poultry crops etc. Many industry businesses are already actively engaged in carbon measurement and mitigation activities at their own sectoral level and all of the key farming and processing representative groups are very supportive of a collaborative whole industry approach to this initiative which will bring both scale and consistency.

So why is the issue of carbon so important?

According to LMC Chief Executive Ian Stevenson, the carbon challenge will manifest itself at a number of levels for farmers in Northern Ireland. He further explained: "First-off, there is now climate change legislation in place that mandates all sectors, including the farming industry, to specifically reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emission levels. "Later this year, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will publish its first climate action plan. "This will go out for public consultation. But the bottom line is that the first tranche of specific climate change mitigation measures will be finalised on the back of this process. "Of equal importance is the fact that customers for our beef, lamb, dairy and other food products will want to see hard evidence of the local farming industry's progression towards carbon emissions reduction targets. "The days are over when we can simply say that agriculture in Northern Ireland is one of the most climate-friendly in the world. "We have to have the accredited data to back this up."

Industry Working Together in Partnership

The significance of this project was confirmed by LMC's Industry Development Manager, Colin Smith. He explained: "FQAS is unique in comprising a farm-membership that is active across all our agricultural sectors. "As a result, Northern Ireland Food Chain Certification staff, who are already on farm, are extremely well placed to facilitate the collection of additional data required to complete a carbon calculation for each farm."

Colin added: "The carbon survey will be a supplementary bolt-on carried out immediately after the FQAS inspection and will cover all the enterprises featured within the farming operation – not just the beef and lamb enterprises. "The information gathered will be used to determine a carbon footprint for each individual business. The Agrecalc model will be used in this determination. Agrecalc is a tried and tested whole farm carbon footprint tool that is currently being used by CAFRE for carbon benchmarking and by different sectors of the agrifood industry within their supply chains and is therefore the agreed tool of choice by all partners in this initiative. "It will deliver outcomes that are now widely recognised as industry standards. The initial assessments will

specifically provide a carbon baseline for each business that is surveyed.

"The results returned to each farmer: participant will be accompanied by a series of focal points where each business can target to reduce their emissions profile. Their implementation will help to mitigate the carbon footprint of the business in question."

This development will come as very welcome news for large numbers of farmers across Northern Ireland. They are aware of the importance that has been placed on carbon as an issue. But, up now, they have had no clear guidance on how to address it.

LMC's Sustainability Projects Manager Lauren Cairns is quick to point out that many farmers across Northern Ireland are becoming increasingly anxious about the potential impact of the 'carbon challenge' on their businesses. "The new survey has been specifically designed to address these concerns," she explained. "At a fundamental level it serves to secure relevant information from those farmers taking part. However, the process also acts to communicate the reasons why the initiative is so important for individual producers and agriculture as a whole."

A carbon survey – what is entailed?

Farmers will be asked to participate in a carbon survey every three years.

The carbon survey will be carried out on the same day as an FQAS inspection. However, these are two separate processes.

The carbon survey has no bearing on the outcome of an inspection and vice versa. There is no pass or fail criteria associated with the survey. Its purpose is to help generate a specific carbon footprint for individual farm businesses. The details of the actual questionnaires to be used on farm to capture the necessary data points have been fully agreed.

"The time taken to complete the survey will depend on the number of individual enterprises that make up a specific farm business," said Cairns.

"It's important to point out that the survey will not simply be restricted to cattle and sheep. All enterprises will be included. Equally, the data generated by the survey will not be used for enforcement purposes.

Colin Smith confirmed that participation in the carbon survey will be mandatory on the part of all FQAS members. "Given the importance of the data that will be generated, this principle has been agreed by the FQAS Industry Board," he further explained. It is anticipated that the carbon surveys will commence later this year.



The industry is actively looking at what support can be put in place to help advise and guide farmers ahead of the carbon surveys being completed on farm to help make the process as smooth as possible for participants.

How will the carbon survey data be utilised?

The formal ownership of the data generated by the surveys and subsequent carbon footprint calculations will be retained by the respective farmers. However, the data sets will be collated in order to develop industry-wide assessments and trends. This means that a range of organisations will be interested in this information.

"A Carbon Steering Group has recently been established. Chaired by Ulster Farmers' Union president David Brown, it will decide on how the information generated by the farm surveys can be best used," explained Colin Smith.

"Individual farmers will be able to use their farm reports to work in partnership with their business advisers and company representatives to tailor mitigation measures best suited to their farm sustainability progression." He added: "The sharing of aggregate information will be critically important as agriculture in Northern Ireland responds to the challenge of climate change. "Sharing of information is also a principle that is well recognised within the industry. For example, FQAS data is made available to all the meat processors on a basis that is wholly accepted by the farmer members of the scheme."

Carbon surveys: the costs and who pays?

LMC is confirming that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is working on a business case to cover the costs associated with the carbon survey project.

"This specific commitment to fully funded whole farm carbon audits is contained within last year's climate change act," Ian Stevenson commented. "Apart from the time input incurred, there will be no financial costs levied on farmers." "And it's important that such is the case."

The role of LMC

Responding to climate change will require an active input on the part of everyone involved with the agri-food sector: farmers, processors, DAERA and the other stakeholder bodies making up the industry. "And this process has been ongoing for some time," confirmed Ian Stevenson.

"At an early stage in this process, the role of FQAS was identified as a critically important conduit

through which on-farm data, could be obtained across all commodities. All stakeholder bodies recognise the value of FQAS as a safe and established platform managed by LMC which can help industry meet the carbon challenge by facilitating the collection of on farm information by contracted certification body staff.

He continued: "This was the background. What followed was the development of the whole farm carbon survey model, which will be launched in the very near future. "What we have now is an agreed approach that fully complements the needs of the other industry stakeholder bodies.

This is a win: win scenario

The climate change debate has already identified a number of mitigating actions that farmers can take to reduce the carbon footprint of their businesses. And, no doubt, the development of new technologies over the coming years will play their role in allowing agriculture in Northern Ireland to become more sustainable.

Colin Smith commented: "The good news for farmers is that improving efficiency levels in all areas across their businesses is the fundamental building block to reducing carbon emissions moving forward. "And improving efficiency brings with it the reality of improved profitability. "This fundamental fact has, to a large extent, been overlooked within the climate change debate up to this point."

According to Ian Stevenson, the main details of the FQAS carbon survey have been agreed. "It has been test run on a small number of farms and we are confident that it can be done at scale," he added.

"LMC is fully aware of the fact that farmers want clear guidance on the climate change issue. Moreover, they need access to a structured means of responding to it." "The good news is that the new carbon survey delivers on both counts for industry as a whole.

The LMC's Chief Executive concluded: "As farming in Northern Ireland looks to the future it must have the data and evidence to prove that is one of the most efficient industries of its kind in the world. "Simply saying this is not good enough: we must have the information to verify our actual levels of performance. "The new carbon survey, linked to FQAS, makes all of this possible. It's an exciting start to 2023."



Contact us:

W: www.lmcni.com

T: 028 9263 3000

LMC does not guarantee the accuracy or completeness of any third party information provided in or included with this publication. LMC hereby disclaims any responsibility for error, omission or inaccuracy in the information, misinterpretation or any other loss, disappointment, negligence or damage caused by reliance on third party information.

Not for further publication or distribution without prior permission from LMC

