

BEEF FARMING Tools for success

- Exclusive survey reveals positive outlook despite barriers to growth
- Top tips from beef farmers and industry experts on building resilience



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A close-up, black and white profile of a cow's head, showing its eye, ear, and nose. The cow is looking towards the left of the frame.

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Beef farmers reveal growth plans in industry survey

What are the barriers to business growth in the beef industry? This was the big question behind *Farmers Weekly's* producer survey, which ran in February and March this year. As well over 800 beef farmers across the UK and Ireland participated in the survey, finished prices remained strong, at more than £6/kg, helped by tight supplies.

Many of those responding to our questions reported being confident and positive in their outlook, with 50% having increased cattle numbers in the past five years – up from 33% in our 2024 survey – and 42% planning to expand their beef enterprises in the next two years. Even as the national suckler herd (and dairy herd) continues to decline, according

to Defra livestock figures, these farmers are hungry for expansion opportunities – and for the business skills to make the most of them.

Read the full survey results and analysis, plus feedback and action points (including ideas for the one in four respondents feeling less confident about their future in beef) from a roundtable discussion between farmers and industry experts, on the following pages.

Judith Tooth
Livestock editor, *Farmers Weekly*, and chairman of the roundtable meeting



Thanks to our project partners National Beef Association, Dunbia and KW Feeds. *Farmers Weekly* had full editorial control of this report.

SURVEY RESULTS P4

LIVESTOCK BEEF

Cattle numbers up on 50% of beef farms, survey reveals

Producers want better business skills to benefit fully from improved and growing opportunities, farmers working latest range of tools. **Sally Macmillan reports**

More than 800 beef farmers across the UK and Ireland have responded to *Farmers Weekly's* survey, revealing a strong outlook for the industry. The survey shows that 50% of respondents have increased their cattle numbers in the past five years, up from 33% in our 2024 survey. Additionally, 42% of farmers plan to expand their beef enterprises in the next two years.

Key findings from the survey include:

- Business, Costs and Investment are Biggest Barriers to Growth:** The top three barriers to business growth are business skills, investment, and costs.
- Most Respondents Record Healthy Returns:** 70% of respondents reported healthy returns, with 30% reporting excellent returns.
- Almost Two-Thirds Have Underaken Environmental Activities in the Past Five Years:** 65% of respondents have undertaken environmental activities, with 35% reporting excellent results.
- Health was the Biggest Health Issue:** Health issues were the most significant concern, with 45% of respondents reporting health problems.
- Producers Ranked the Most Want to Develop:** The most desired areas for development are business skills, investment, and costs.

WHO TOOK PART?

Region	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
North East	150	18.8%
North West	180	22.5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	120	15.0%
East of England	100	12.5%
West Midlands	90	11.3%
East Midlands	80	10.0%
West of England	70	8.8%
South West	60	7.5%
South East	50	6.3%
London	40	5.0%
Other	30	3.8%

LIVESTOCK BEEF

Health was the biggest health issue

Health issues were the most significant concern, with 45% of respondents reporting health problems. The most common health issues reported were:

- Respiratory issues (35%)
- Digestive issues (25%)
- Joint issues (15%)
- Reproductive issues (10%)
- Other (15%)

Producers Ranked the Most Want to Develop

Area	Percentage of Respondents
Business Skills	45%
Investment	35%
Costs	30%
Marketing	20%
Technology	15%
Other	10%

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION P8



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The National Beef Association is the main voice for all UK cattle producers and finishers and aims to serve as the beef industry leader.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MAG/JUDITH TOOTH; PHIL WEEDEON; COVER: MAG/JUDITH TOOTH



Cattle numbers up on 50% of beef farms, survey reveals

Producers want better business skills to benefit fully from technical and grazing improvements, *Farmers Weekly's* latest survey shows. **Shirley Macmillan** reports

Diseases such as TB rank alongside costs, rent, and finance as the biggest barriers to growing a sustainable and profitable beef business, closely followed by investment needed to meet legislation or infrastructure requirements.

Farmers Weekly's second survey of beef farmers again attracted more than 800 respondents from across the UK and Ireland, who told us what they thought were the issues holding them back – and also what changes they have been making to drive their businesses forward.

Respondents cited diseases (41%) and cost

issues (40%), with investment a close third (38%), as their greatest stumbling blocks. Extreme weather events (28%) were also high on the list, while public perception of beef farming was cited by just 10% as hindering progress. Other reasons given ranged from access to local abattoirs, farmer age (some were close to retirement) and government policy, to environmental restrictions, unhelpful landlords and inheritance tax.

Cattle numbers up for many

Despite this, 50% of respondents had grown

their herd over the past five years – up from 33% in *Farmers Weekly's* 2024 survey. Some 28% had increased cattle numbers by between 10% and 50%. A further 21% of people said there had been “no change” to herd size. Allowing for all decreases and those exiting beef, the net result was a 31% increase in herd size.

Further growth was planned within the next two years by 42% of respondents, while 45% said their businesses would stay the same. Confidence in farm potential over the coming five years was felt by 40%; there were those who were neutral (31%) and a smaller proportion said they were “not very confident” (19%) or “not at all confident” (7%).

The older generation (65 years and over) tended to be maintaining current size (54%), whereas expansion was on the agenda for those under 44 years (61%), and farms with more than 300 cattle (54%).

Who is benchmarking performance?

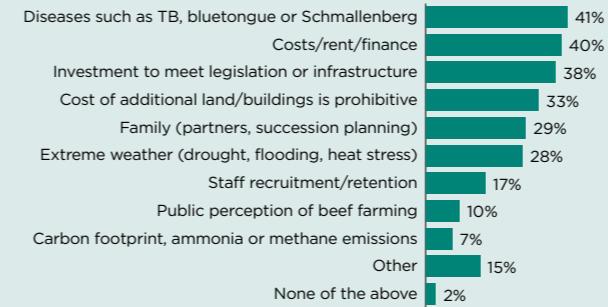
As well as confidence, beef farmers have picked up business skills – or would like to develop them. Regularly benchmarking their business (monthly or annually) or reviewing performance was carried out by 67% of respondents, though it was more common on farms with 300-plus cattle (33% of farmers in this group were measuring performance), 100-plus suck-



Extreme weather events were the biggest barrier to growth for 28%

DISEASES, COSTS AND INVESTMENT ARE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO GROWTH

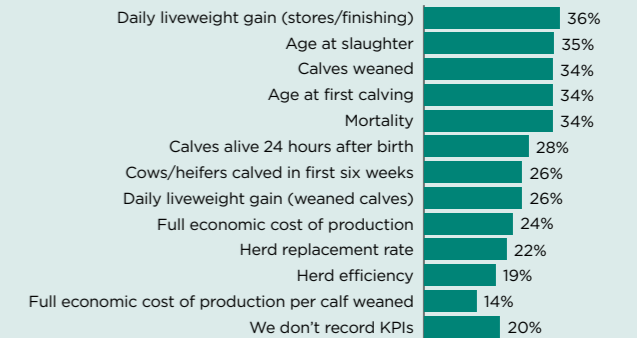
Which of the following do you see as the three biggest barriers to growing your beef enterprise?



Base: All respondents answering (754). Source: *Farmers Weekly* Beef Survey 2026

MOST RESPONDENTS RECORD MULTIPLE KPIS

Which financial key performance indicators (KPIs) do you record?



Base: All respondents answering (740). Source: *Farmers Weekly* Beef Survey 2026

ler cows in their herd (29%), and on farms that had measured carbon footprint (25%). Most respondents were recording multiple KPIs, however, just 14% said they were looking at the full economic cost of production.

Scope to improve business skills

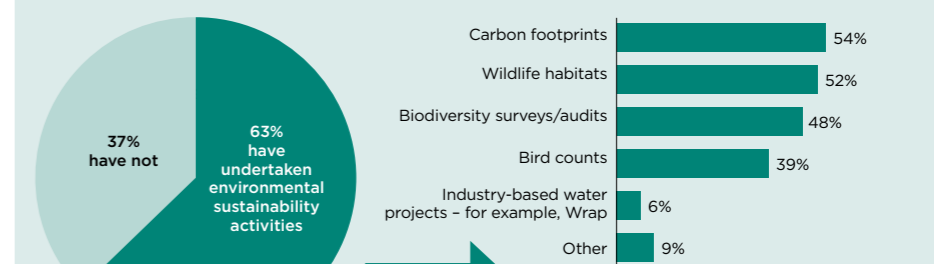
When asked if they had done some business management training, 73% said “yes”. But of those, the majority (56%) revealed this had been more than five years ago – only 22% had been upskilling themselves within the past year.

When asked what gaps in their knowledge they would like to address, by far the biggest demand was for business skills (33%) such as finance, budgeting or cashflows, and management including benchmarking. One farmer wrote: “As our business grows, managing cashflows and so on, along with managing staff, is becoming more important.” Another admitted: “I’m still working on fully understanding finances. Sometimes I probably miss opportunities where I would need to involve >

ALMOST TWO-THIRDS HAVE UNDERTAKEN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES IN THE PAST TWO YEARS

Carbon footprinting was most common among dairy-beef calf rearers (67%), businesses with 300-plus cattle (70%), 100-plus suckler cows (71%) and those confident in their prospects (64%). Farms of 500ha-plus counted birds (65%) while 64% of over-65s favoured supplying wildlife habitats. Solar and rainwater harvesting, hedge establishment and pond maintenance were also noted.

Are you currently (or have in the past two years) undertaken environmental sustainability activities?



Base: All respondents answering (766 / 479) Source: *Farmers Weekly* Beef Survey 2026

WHO TOOK PART?

Most respondents had suckler herds (54%), followed by breeder finishers (34%), then store growers (29%) and specialist finishers (16%). More dairy-beef calf rearers took part (22%) this time compared with the 2024 survey (17%). The mean number of suckler cows was 79, with farms having a mean of 240 cattle and farming 275ha.

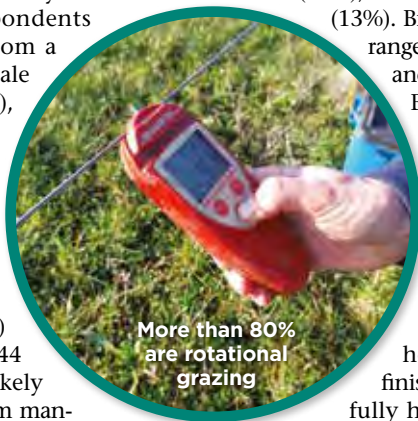
Number of suckler cows		Number of beef animals		Type of farm		Age		Enterprise on farm	
None	5%	None	1%	Mixed farm lowland	40%	Under 24	2%	Beef is our main enterprise	52%
1-49	45%	1-49	18%	Productive grassland farm	25%	25-34	10%	Arable	15%
50-99	27%	50-99	22%	Productive grassland in arable area	10%	35-44	14%	Sheep	13%
100-149	13%	100-299	38%	Lowland conservation grazing	8%	45-54	17%	Dairy	7%
150-199	3%	300-599	15%	Upland in-bye farm	6%	55-64	29%	Poultry	1%
200-399	5%	600-999	4%	Mixed farm upland	5%	65 or over	28%	Pigs	1%
400+	2%	1,000+	2%	Extensive upland farm	3%			Renewables	1%
Mean: 79		Mean: 240		Mountain/hill farm	3%			Other	10%
Base: All answering (573)		Base: All answering (823)		Base: All answering (830)		Base: All answering (711)		Base: All answering (678)	

< some borrowing to grow the business.” A third was straightforward: “Need to be more business-minded.”

Next on the list was to improve knowledge in technical skills such as nutrition and grazing management (11%), people management (specified by 10% and more of a concern for larger farms), with apps/technology and the use of artificial intelligence also mentioned by 10%. Surprisingly, only 2% of people were interested in learning about time management to help their wellbeing and create a work-life balance that allowed more time off farm.

Top technical innovations

However, there was interest in making some jobs on the farm faster, better or easier. Weigh scales (electronic or manual) and farm management phone apps were the most popular technical innovations adopted in the past five years, chosen by 42% and 32% respectively. Respondents were asked to select from a list that also included bale grazing (chosen by 14%), auto identification (7%), genomics/sexed semen (14%) and multicut silage (12%). Observation cameras and GPS collars/virtual fencing were also mentioned. Larger farms (200-499ha) and those in the under-44 age group were more likely to have weigh scales, farm management phone apps, and desktop management software.



More than 80% are rotational grazing

Progress in grassland management

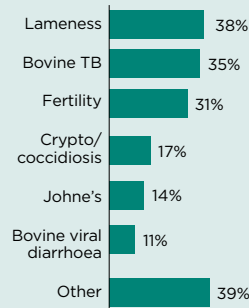
As would be expected for the UK and Ireland, grass was a major crop for beef cattle. Some 85% of farms had permanent pasture, and 62% said they had grass leys, with a further

LAMENESS WAS THE BIGGEST HEALTH ISSUE

Animal Health and Welfare Pathway vet funding had been used by 37% of respondents. And although diseases such as TB, bluetongue and Schmallenberg were cited in barriers to progress, the latter two were listed in the “other” category when it came to specifying actual health issues on farm.

Additional problems experienced by beef cattle (but not statistically significant) were pneumonia, eye problems, blackleg, leptospirosis and neospora, fluke, worms, and mycoplasma. Some farms reported “no health issues” at all.

Which are the biggest health issues in your cattle?



Base: All respondents answering (663). Source: *Farmers Weekly* Beef Survey 2026

34% growing herbal leys. Maize featured on 15% of farms, alongside wholecrop cereals (15%), and fodder crops such as kale (13%). Bigger herds grew a greater range of crops, with herbal leys and maize more common in England, and permanent pasture in Scotland.

In terms of grazing, 72% said cattle were out at grass for 26 weeks or more in a year (this dropped to 42% for respondents in Scotland); just 7% were fully housed (21% of specialist finishers said their stock were fully housed). However, when asked whether they were set stocking cattle at grass, 37% said they were, while 41% were operating a mixture of grazing methods. Suckler cow producers were more likely (53%) to be set stocking.

Questioned about adopting alternative grazing systems, 70% said they had done so, with 82% of respondents rotationally grazing,

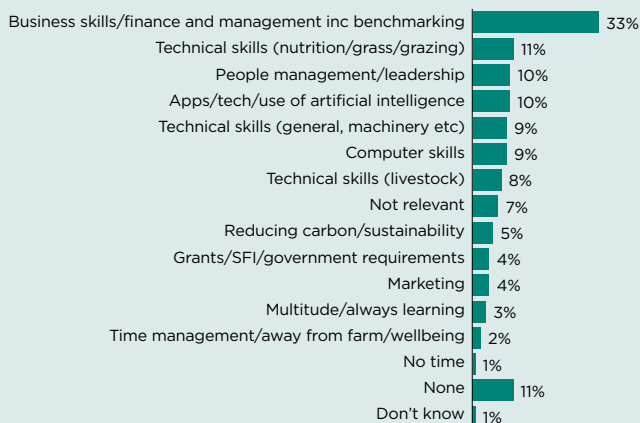
26% strip grazing and 22% block grazing. Mob grazing (17%), adaptive multipaddock grazing (5%) and techno grazing (1%) also featured. Those with confidence in their farm's future, and farmers who had undertaken sustainability practices, were more likely to have moved away from set stocking.

However, for those who said they had not tried an alternative, the top three reasons they gave for not doing so related to resources and space: time/labour/cost/knowledge (28%), lack of space/grazing/land layout (26%), and unsuitable land/landlord (23%). Only 11% said they were not interested in different grazing techniques and were happy with their current system.

One farmer answered: “Conservation grazing and logistics preclude more complex grazing management strategies.” Others were dealing with traffic issues: “Live by busy road, so not easy to move cattle around.” People problems also featured: “Locality of urban conurbation, the public can be difficult.” And one beef farmer said: “Landlord is Ministry of Defence – the soldiers don't like electric fences!” ■

BUSINESS SKILLS IS THE AREA MOST WANT TO DEVELOP

What gaps in your own skills/knowledge would you like to address?



Base: All respondents answering (414). Source: *Farmers Weekly* Beef Survey 2026

2026 HEADLINE FINDINGS

- Disease, costs and investment to meet legislation deemed the biggest barriers to growth of beef enterprises
- More than half have grown cattle numbers over the past five years; a quarter has seen a decrease and one in five has a stable herd size
- Two-thirds of beef respondents have been involved in environmental sustainability activities, mostly carbon footprints, wildlife habitats and biodiversity surveys or audits
- Two in five are looking to increase their beef enterprise over the next two years
- About three-quarters have done business management training – but for half it was over five years ago



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How to share confidence 40% of beef farmers have for future

Farmers and industry experts gathered at Melton Mowbray livestock market to discuss the results of *FW's* 2026 beef survey. **Shirley Macmillan** reports

Beef farmers with a positive outlook and newly acquired business skills are confident in their future and seem set to lead cultural change within the industry. Barriers to business growth are not seen as restrictive for those with the right mindset, but rather an opportunity, a challenge or something that drives change.

These farmers must be supported with the correct tools and grants to continue progressing their businesses. Meanwhile, those lacking faith in their future – despite positive market conditions – need to get off-farm and mix with other farmers. They must be “brave enough” to ask for help and guidance because “a lack of confidence is driven by fear and lack of knowledge”.

This feedback comes from a group of farmers and industry experts who examined the results of *Farmers Weekly's* latest survey of beef producers. National Beef Association (NBA) chief executive Neil Shand said that overall, farmers' answers were more positive than in 2024's survey. He suggested small herds that had been propped up by the Basic Payment Scheme had exited the industry.

Dunbia's head of agriculture, Sarah Haire, thought the positivity in the industry revealed by the survey was “encouraging”. However, she said farmers still needed to focus on controlling what was within their farm gate, particularly in the areas of data and grassland management.

Confidence to grasp opportunities

Some 40% of survey respondents were “confident” in their farm's growth prospects over the next five years, while 31% were neutral and 26% were “not confident”. Roughly equal numbers were looking to increase their beef enterprise (42%) or planning to stay the same (45%). But there was an age divide: respondents aged over 65 were most likely to make no changes (54%), whereas those under 44 were planning to expand (61%).



SAC Consulting's senior beef specialist, Gavin Hill, pointed out that some farmers do not know who will succeed them. “We are trying to push joint ventures; we have to give these opportunities – and banks are keen to support them,” he said.

KW Feeds nutritionist Stuart Duff said he was seeing an increase in new beef enterprises where milk contracts had been withdrawn in the Midlands and east of England. Former dairy farmers had the infrastructure and expertise to go in at scale rearing dairy beef calves, he said.

Cotswolds-based coach, consultant and beef producer Silas Hedley-Lawrence warned progressive beef farmers not to get “sucked into your bubble”. “Use artificial intelligence to take you to another level, not just the usual farming circles, to push things in new, differ-

ent and exciting ways,” he said.

The advice for farmers with less confidence in the industry was universally supportive and encouraging. “Everyone has things they are good/not so good at,” said Ben Harman, Buckinghamshire beef farmer and NBA chairman. “It needs a bit of self-awareness and going to groups to find out what you could know. Get out among your peers and see what might interest you – a two-way exchange of information grows your confidence.”

New entrant beef farmer and KW Feeds nutritionist George Sturla advised: “Don't be scared to leave the farm and ask for help, even just a chat in the pub and discussing your problems helps.” Gavin added further encouragement: “If you go to groups, you will realise that your problems are everyone else's too.”

Not every farm needs to be in the premier league making a full management system makeover. The panel agreed that small changes, tweaks or “just optimising” are all a good start. Vet Mel Julian, of Cross Counties Vets in Northamptonshire, stressed the benefit of mentoring, pairing a farmer who is doing well with another who could learn from their experience and knowledge.

Support for business training

Some 73% of farmers revealed that they had had business management training – albeit more than five years ago for half of them. Neil said that was a far bigger proportion than he would have expected. There was all-round support for further upskilling, and business, grassland management and technical knowledge were key topics of discussion.

Leicestershire beef farmer James Herrick said it was important to have a clear plan and set clear goals. “I have a 10-year plan and review it every quarter – you know where you are trying to head. I then communicate it on farm, so everyone else knows,” he explained.



Beef farmers and industry professionals discuss results



Outwintering can reduce winter housing and feed costs for many

According to Neil, devolved governments had talked about continuing professional development in agriculture, relating investment to subsidies; Gavin confirmed this happens in other European countries. Sarah was concerned that of the devolved countries, only England does not have the infrastructure for skills and training: “The lack of support and training in the industry is a challenge,” she said.

George said he had taken advantage of training offered by Farming Connect in Wales and advised farmers to take any free training they could find. “Speak to a neighbour or someone who is doing it; go to an open day and learn,” he added.

Progress in grassland management

A key action suggested by the panel after the 2024 survey was for beef farmers to make more efficient use of grass. This year's cohort

of respondents were doing that: just 37% were exclusively set stocking. Of those who had adopted better grazing practices, 82% were rotationally grazing and 26% strip grazing.

Many dairy-beef rearing schemes now had grazing requirements in their contracts, pointed out Sarah, which may drive more efficient use of grazed grass. It was agreed that while all types of rotational grazing help to cut costs, there was also a perception that it was complicated and time-consuming.

Silas suggested farmers take “baby steps” by splitting one large field into two, and the next time into four. The resulting changes would build confidence – and for him, “good” is an extra one to two weeks grazing a year.



Dunbia's head of agriculture, Sarah Haire



More efficient grazing management makes money



From left: Peter Moyes, Mel Julian, Harriet Bunning, and George Sturla



Encouraging the next generation into beef farming is vital



Farm manager Peter Moyes

James agreed that getting started was not easy. “If you reduce your costs, it’s hard to see instantly – more like 12 months down the line on the balance sheet,” he said. The incentive for him to “take grazing seriously”, measuring grass weekly and allocating grass on daily moves, was seeing that it saved him money, and made money. His cattle are now out on grass and crops for 11 months of the year.

Northamptonshire farm manager Peter Moyes said his cattle were on a rotational system, but he wondered how bad weather and lack of environmental payments would affect ventures where cattle were grazing arable farms. “Arable farmers will panic and want livestock off the land in wet weather,” he suggested.

As winters become less severe, Neil reckoned some farms could look at outwintering to save costs and carry more stock. Gavin revealed that there has been a big push on the hills in Scotland to outwinter cows. “In north-west Scotland, there are now cattle with [virtual fencing] collars out for the first time ever. Cow types are now more suitable for outwintering, but you have got to do it right [without] run-off or cow welfare issues.” He said savings were farm specific, but

total costs for a cow and calf from in/out systems ranged from £150-£750. James said he saved £30 a head a week by keeping cattle out on bales and crops over winter – though it “requires planning and managing”.

Tools to improve decision-making

Another action recommended for beef farmers following *FW*’s 2024 survey was to do more recording and benchmarking. Given that costs, rent and finance were one of the three biggest barriers to business growth in 2026 (40%) alongside diseases such as bovine TB (41%) and investment to meet legislation or infrastructure (38%), this remains important.

In 2026, respondents said they were recording multiple KPIs, and 65% “regularly” benchmarked. However, AHDB geneticist Dr Harriet Bunning questioned whether KPIs were being used to make management decisions. Sarah added: “With so much data, the difficulty is in translating it into something meaningful and useful.” James termed this dilemma “analysis-paralysis”.

Mel suggested they get help in interpreting farm data and identify a starting point and areas for improvement. The advice from Stuart was to begin by measuring small things. “Test

it to see if benefits come. And adopt technology to drive efficiency, whether it’s a plate meter or ration tool,” he said.

Harriet added: “Don’t be scared to collect data and make it work for you to make the best decisions – you don’t suddenly have to become perfect.” She also said farmers should aim to be open minded and not become “pigeonholed” when making breeding and management decisions.

Future priorities for producers

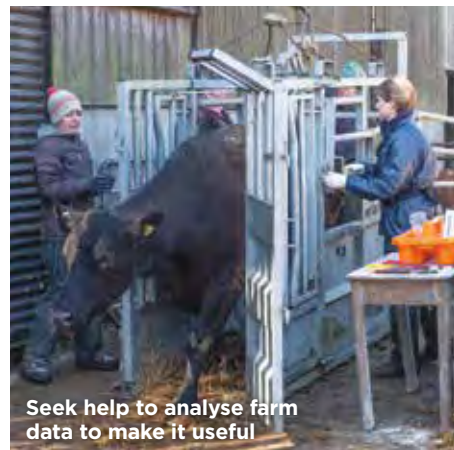
Future-proofing beef farms and the industry was also discussed. Peter stressed the importance of trying to encourage youngsters into the industry. “We need an influx of young, driven and enthusiastic people,” he said. James called for “real-life progression stories to show the pathway they have taken”.

For Neil, there remains a “massive communication void in the industry”. “We need to bring all the industry together to help the whole: lift the bottom 20% up to the next level, as they are the ones most likely to exit,” he said. He also pointed to the need for wider support: “The two biggest challenges to business growth [from the survey] that a farmer can’t control – disease and investment to meet legislation – relate to government, so we need more interaction with trade bodies and help with legislation.” ■

TOP TIPS FOR FARMERS

- Grow grass as a crop and you can get more out of it.
- Think of grass as a crop and soil as an asset – you can mitigate so many challenges by improving them.
- We are all producing great British beef, so keep moving on the road – don’t park. Take incremental steps to change.
- Reduce vulnerability to volatility by optimising what you do and be gross-margin focused to get business resilience.

- Have networks and attend meetings to provide the social aspect because farming is quite lonely.
- Measure, manage, maximise.
- Produce beef efficiently, but don’t be negative about other farmers on a different system.
- Have balanced breeding goals – don’t just focus on growth, but also look at longevity and maternal genetics, as these are also important to farm profitability. Then the next step is to look at feed efficiency.



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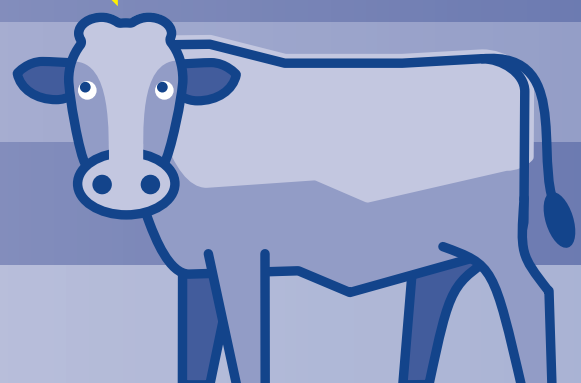
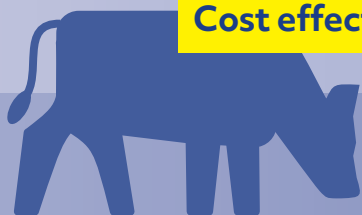


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