January 2026

NEWSLETTER

Black Sheep Farm Health
Dedicated farm vets

Happy New Year!

With the turn of the new year, Black Sheep Farm Health turns EIGHT!

Thank you for your continued support, and we wish you all the best for 2026.

Our Next Client Meeting

Our next client meeting will be held on:

Tuesday 3rd February, 6:30pm for 7pm start

Longframlington Memorial Hall, NE65 8AH

The meeting will cover a BTV update, use of fixed time AI and Joe's take aways from his trip to Australia! **Please RSVP to the practice.**

BVD Check Test

BVD is recognised as one of the most economically important diseases of cattle; it causes immunosuppression thus **increasing prevalence of other diseases**, in addition to reproductive problems such as **infertility, abortion and birth defects**.

As spring born calves approach nine months of age, this is the perfect opportunity for BVD surveillance.

The BVD check test requires five animals aged 9-18 months from each management group to be blood sampled for BVD antibody.

The **Animal Health & Welfare Pathway (AHWP)** for cattle is focused on BVD control, and any keeper with 11 or more cattle is eligible to apply for the funding towards their BVD check test.

This funding is increasing from 22nd January and can be claimed for multiple herds on one farm, ie autumns and springs.

Please speak to Emili or Claire if you need help applying for pathway funding.

Johne's Testing Geld Sheep After Scanning?

Ovine Johne's disease (OJD), is a bacterial disease of the small intestine. It is caused by Mycobacterium avium spp. paratuberculosis, which causes chronic inflammation, poor absorption of nutrients and reduced metabolic efficiency. This leads to reduced fertility and progressive weight loss.

Life expectancy of breeding ewes within flocks with Johne's positive samples is significantly shorter than those in flocks where no bacteria were detected.

Once a flock is infected with Johne's, eradication is almost impossible, so the aim is to control the disease by reducing the build-up of bacteria on the pasture therefore transmission.

Although there is no licensed vaccine for Johne's in cattle, there is a licensed vaccine for Johne's in sheep. As there can be cross-over of Johne's from sheep to cattle, controlling OJD in sheep flocks, can help protect cattle herds on mixed farms.

Gudair is a one-shot lifetime vaccine and whilst vaccination won't eliminate the bacteria nor remove all an infected flock's problems overnight, it has been shown to be a very effective way of controlling Johne's and significantly reducing the impact of the disease in infected flocks.

As reproductive failure is one of the first signs associated with Johne's, a pooled dung sample for Johne's PCR from geld ewes is a simple and cost effective way of screening your flock for OJD.

We can also screen geld ewes for other diseases; there is subsidised testing available for EAE and toxo in unvaccinated flocks.

Energy Balance in Beef Cows

As calving approaches, we often have (somewhat angsty) conversations around **beef cow condition versus calving difficulty**. It is commonly held that 'playing it safe' is to keep cows slightly lean at calving; or at least, not to feed them generously and so generate big calves. There are well-established links, nutrition → calf birthweight → calving difficulties.

So far, so simple. But when you get into the detail, it becomes clear that there is still a lot we don't understand. For example, is there a stage of pregnancy (first vs second vs third trimesters) when nutrition is particularly important; can underfeeding cause a more vascular placenta and paradoxically a bigger calf; what are the relative roles of energy versus protein?

We should also consider the unintended consequences of hungering cows in late pregnancy: how does this affect colostrum quality and quantity; does reduced nutrition affect a cow's ability to calve unassisted, or her calf's vigour; how does undernutrition in pregnancy affect the next pregnancy?

<u>So, what can we be confident about?</u>

- **You need to know what you are feeding:** forage (especially silage) is incredibly variable. Testing it is a no-brainer.
- Nutritional requirements in early to mid-pregnancy are modest for dry suckler cows but **increase dramatically in late pregnancy**. Therefore, at a flat feeding rate on average silage, many of the cows in the practice are likely **overfed in mid-pregnancy, then underfed in late pregnancy**.
- Body condition scoring is a tool that is free, doesn't require any specialised kit, and allows fine tuning of feeding i.e. feed lean cows preferentially.
- By **shortening the calving period (take the bull out), you can feed cows according stage of pregnancy and requirements**.
- A major – and much more predictable - determinant of birthweight is genetics. **Using low-moderate birthweight bulls will reduce birthweight.** Just beware if keeping replacements that these calves do not have small frame/pelvises themselves – 'calving ease daughters' is a handy EBV to check alongside birthweight.
- An increase in birthweight due to adequate nutrition does not appear to be linked to increased calving difficulty – suggesting it is more complicated than simply birthweight = calving difficulty.
- **Underfeeding in late pregnancy is very common** – an AHDB study (which some of you contributed to) found ~1/3 of suckler cows had low energy, while ~2/3 had low protein.
- Underfeeding in late pregnancy **compromises calf immunity**.
- BCS reflects long-term energy balance, not short term. Cows can simultaneously be fat AND lacking energy. **Attempting to rapidly change BCS in either direction is a bad idea.**
- Cows calving at **below-target BCS are more likely to require assistance at calving** than those at target – and perhaps even above-target. They are also **less likely to get back in-calf** and, if they are, take longer to do so.
- Many other factors affect calving difficulty, including trace element status, calcium/magnesium status, cow fitness, pelvic area, and so on.

Cow type is an underappreciated factor – there are probably too many cows hardwired for growth and therefore which require a degree of undernutrition to be able to calve naturally.
Is this a sustainable situation? We don't think so.

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