

New kit and initiatives to help producers meet heifer growth targets

Maximise calf potential

With such a glut of products and programmes, all designed to improve the efficiency of calf and heifer rearing, realising a 24-month target calving age should be in reach for all producers.

We highlight a few of the latest innovations.

text **Rachael Porter**

Initiative keeps calf growth on track

XLVets has launched an initiative designed to help producers check that calf growth rates, during the first eight weeks of life, are on track to ensure that they calve down, as heifers, at the target age of between 22 and 24 months old.

Called Calf Tracker, it is based on measuring and monitoring five key performance indicators: growth rate to weaning, total mortality, pneumonia rate, scour rate, and total protein level in the blood.

“To maximise lifetime production, the optimum age for first calving is between 22 and 24 months. Calculating back, this means that heifer calves need to average growth rates of between 850g and 1kg per day, so that they can be served at between 13 and 15 months old. At this point they need to have reached 60% of their adult bodyweight,” explains Westmorland Veterinary Group’s Kirsty Ranson, heads up the XLVets steering group on the initiative.



“So a calf’s growth rate in the first eight weeks of life has a massive impact on its future performance.”

She adds that the aim of the initiative is to help producers to accelerate growth rates in young calves: “And to enjoy the benefits of getting heifers in-calf sooner. This not only reduces rearing costs, but also means financial returns will be gained sooner.” Producers can access the initiative through their local XLVets’ vet practice and they will receive a starter pack to support their monitoring activities. This

includes a weigh band for measuring calves and a guidance sheet on how to calculate weights.

“By monitoring growth rates, producers and their vets can see whether calf performance is on track or whether investigations are needed into aspects of health and management to improve it. Poor growth could be the result of underfeed milk powder, disease, or cold weather,” says Miss Ranson.

“Another aspect to be assessed is how well antibodies are being transferred from the colostrum and conferring immunity to the calf. Vets will be taking blood samples from calves in their first week of life and measuring the total protein level. They will look at the average as well as the variation, because these figures will flag up whether changes to colostrum management and feeding are needed.

“And with more than 40 XLVets practices offering the scheme, we will be compiling the data so that calf performance can be benchmarked within a practice, and also across our practices nationwide.”