



Converting your farm – dairy, beef and sheep

Converting your farm to organic is a bold and courageous move. Here are some key aspects to consider for dairy, beef and sheep.

How do I become organic?

First of all, your holding must go through a conversion period in order for the land, crops and livestock to achieve organic status. During the conversion, you must manage the holding according to the organic standards. You can convert the whole holding in one block, convert the whole holding in stages, or just convert a part of the holding. However, you cannot grow the same crop or keep the same type of livestock on organic land and non-organic land at the same time, because of the risk of mixing up the two products.

Do the livestock convert at the same time?

You can convert your livestock at the same time as the land in a 'simultaneous' conversion, or you can start the livestock conversion during, or at the end of, the land conversion, in a 'non-simultaneous' conversion.

In a simultaneous conversion the livestock are managed to the full organic standards from day one of the conversion. A simultaneous conversion may be simpler to keep track of, and usually means your livestock will achieve organic status sooner. Almost all of our licensees choose a simultaneous conversion.

In a non-simultaneous conversion the livestock do not initially have to be managed according to the standards, but they must be on GM-free feed. A non-simultaneous conversion is a more staged and flexible approach but will usually mean it takes longer for the livestock to achieve organic status.

How long does it take until I can sell my stock as organic?

It depends on whether you're doing a simultaneous conversion or a non-simultaneous conversion!

Most land conversions take two years. Pasture and grazing obtain organic status as soon as the land has completed organic conversion. Hay or silage harvested after the end of the conversion has full organic status. Other crops have full organic status if they are sown after the end of the conversion period.

Where there is evidence that no prohibited inputs have been used on the land prior to the start of conversion, it may be possible to reduce the overall conversion time by 4 months, or, with approval from Defra, by up to 12 months.

Strategically timing the start of your conversion, for example by starting conversion three months before your main calving block, will enable you to have organic products as soon as possible.

Conversion times in a simultaneous conversion

- livestock on the farm before the start of the conversion can never have full organic status, but their milk and wool have full organic status once the land has completed organic conversion
- calves born on the farm at least 12 weeks after the start of conversion have full organic status once the land has completed conversion
- lambs conceived on the farm after the start of conversion have full organic status once the land has completed conversion

Conversion times in a non-simultaneous conversion

- livestock on the farm before the start of the conversion can never have full organic status, but their milk, wool and future offspring can become organic
- dairy cows must be managed to the organic standards for 6 months before their milk can be organic. The 6 month milk conversion can start immediately the land conversion is completed, or earlier, but the milk cannot be organic before the land is fully organic.
- beef calves can have organic status if their mother has been managed to organic standards since at least 12 weeks before their birth.
- lambs can have organic status if their mother has been managed to organic standards since their conception.

Do I have to use organic feed?

Once conversion of the livestock starts, all feed for cattle and sheep must be certified organic. You can use feed from your own holding, from other certified holdings, and from certified feed mills. It is possible to use a proportion of feed from first year and second year conversion. If you are doing a simultaneous conversion, the grazing, forage and feed crops from your own in-conversion land count as if they were organic when you feed them to your own livestock (but not if you want to sell them off the farm).

At least 50% of the feed must come from your own holding, or from holdings in your region.

Cattle and sheep must have at least 60% roughage in their daily diet, with the exception of dairy animals in the first three months of lactation; here the proportion of roughage can be reduced to 50%.

It is possible to use organic approved mineral licks. Calves and lambs must be fed on real organic milk.

What about grazing and forage?

The rules about use of organic feed apply just the same to grazing and forage.

Good sward management is essential in an organic system. Diverse sward, including nitrogen fixing legumes, will contribute to the health of both soil and livestock. Herbicides are prohibited under the organic standards, so weeds must be managed through careful grazing and topping, use of suitable seed mixes, and avoidance of poaching, erosion and compaction.

You must use organic seed whenever it is available, but it is possible to request permission to use untreated non-organic seed if there is no suitable organic seed available. Due to shortage of supply, you will often see grass and forage seed mixes labelled 70% organic, with the remainder of the seed non-organic. For a list of available organic seed, check out the official database at www.organicxseeds.co.uk.

What are the requirements on livestock housing?

All livestock must be free ranging, with access to pasture as a default. However, it is fine to house your livestock when weather or ground conditions make this necessary. Livestock housing must be well ventilated and well bedded, with sufficient space for animals to express their natural behavior. There are minimum space requirements for each species and age group detailed in Appendix 5 of our standards. It is okay to use non-organic straw or non-organic woodchip for bedding.

Under the organic standards you can keep a maximum of two livestock units per hectare; most organic holdings operate significantly below this rate. One livestock unit is equivalent to one cow. Further details of livestock units can be found in Appendix 3 of our standards.

Can I still use vet treatments?

The health of animals in organic systems is based on choice of suitable breeds, good management practices, and suitable housing and feed. Prophylactic use of antibiotics and synthetic veterinary treatments is prohibited, but vaccines are permitted where there is a demonstrated need. Some organic farmers find that homeopathic and herbal remedies can support the immune system, especially at stress points such as calving and weaning.

Whilst prevention and natural treatments are preferred, animals must be treated immediately if they are sick or injured. Most licensed veterinary treatments are acceptable, but each individual animal can have a maximum of three courses of treatment in one year. The organic withdrawal period is double the standard withdrawal period.

As an organic farmer you have to write a livestock management plan detailing all your good practice, any ongoing health issues and any predictable treatments or interventions. We have a template and a guide to help you put this document together.

What if I need to restock?

If you need to restock after the livestock conversion has begun, you must try to find organic animals. However, there is some limited provision in the standards to request permission to bring in non-organic breeding stock where there is no suitable organic stock available. Animals bought in for fattening must have organic status – it is not possible to turn a non-organic animal in to organic meat!

It is acceptable to bring in non-organic bulls for breeding. AI is also permitted.

How is slaughter and butchery dealt with?

If you want to sell your meat as organic, you will need to use a certified organic abattoir and butcher. If you have your own abattoir or butchery on the farm we can certify these, but they would need a separate license from the farm.

Do bear in mind that if you are carrying out any other packing, labelling, or processing on the farm, or if anyone else is doing this for you off site, these activities will need to be certified. This could include milk bottling, yoghurt making, processing of wool or sheepskins, and even storage of hay or silage off site. Depending on the type or scale of the activity we may be able to include it on your production license, or it may need separate certification.

What are the rules on labelling?

You can only sell or label your stock, and any other produce, as organic once you have completed conversion, and we have given you the go ahead.

You will need to submit all retail labels to us for approval before you use them so that we can all be confident they are compliant with the regulations. We have separate guidance with detailed labelling requirements explained.

What is the inspection like?

All organic operators have an annual inspection, and occasionally an additional unannounced inspection. Our inspectors are professional, but friendly and totally human. At the annual inspection the inspector will want to walk your land, see your crops and livestock, understand your farming systems, and check your record keeping. The inspection can usually be carried out within half a day, but might be longer for a large or complex operation.

Is there a lot of paperwork?

It's important that you keep full records of all your purchases and inputs, production and sales, births and deaths, and vet treatments. Much of this record keeping will be in line with wider government requirements or general good practice, but there is likely to be a small increase in paperwork to enable your organic certification. We may also be looking at your records from a different perspective than any other bodies – for example, we need to see that you are using organic seed and observing twice the legal withdrawal period for vet medicines.

If you have any questions about the conversion process, the organic standards, or certification, please do get in touch with our small friendly team and we will do our best to help.

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