



BDA Certification



Converting your farm – pigs and poultry

Converting your farm to organic is a bold and courageous move. Here are some key aspects to consider for pigs and poultry.

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.

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 produce as organic?

First you have to consider how long it takes to convert your land. 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, in the case of land use exclusively by pigs and poultry, by up to 12 months.

Strategically timing the start of your conversion may help 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 offspring have full organic status once the land has completed organic conversion

- piglets conceived after the start of conversion have full organic status once the land has completed conversion
- eggs produced on the farm have full organic status once the land has completed conversion
- poultry for meat 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 future offspring can become organic
- piglets have organic status if their mother has been managed to organic standards since their conception, but cannot be organic before the land has completed conversion
- meat birds have organic status once they have been managed to the standards for 10 weeks, but cannot have organic status before the land completes conversion
- eggs have full organic status after the laying birds have been managed to the organic standards for 6 weeks, but cannot have organic status before the land completes conversion

Do I have to use organic feed?

Once conversion of the livestock starts, all feed 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).

For pigs and poultry there is currently a special exemption that means feed can include up to 5% non-organic protein, as there is a general shortage of suitable organic protein crops. So you will often see that organic certified feed from a feed mill contains a small amount of non-organic soya, for example.

Poultry must have access to insoluble grit.

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

How many pigs or birds can I keep on my land?

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 five sows or 300 laying hens. Livestock units are calculated as a total of all species, over the useable farm area. Further details of livestock units can be found in Appendix 3 of our standards. The number of livestock you can keep may also be restricted by housing requirements.

Is my livestock housing okay?

All livestock must be free ranging, with access to pasture as a default.

However, it is also fine to house your pigs 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 behaviours. Pigs must have access to an outdoor area for rooting, even when they are housed. It is okay to use non-organic straw or non-organic woodchip as bedding or as rooting substrate. Details on how much space you need to allow for your pigs at different ages are in Appendix 5 of our standards.

Poultry can be kept in mobile or static housing. You may need to reduce your stocking density to comply with the organic standards. As well as space requirements, there are also requirements for perch space,

pop holes, and (for layers) nest boxes. There are full details of poultry housing requirements in Appendix 5 of our standards.

How do I manage the range and pasture for my pigs or poultry?

Good management of pig and poultry range can be a challenge, especially in high traffic areas such as immediately around poultry houses. 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. Some producers integrate pigs or poultry in to their crop rotation, so that livestock forage in crop residues and/or help to prepare the land for cultivation.

You need to ensure that both pigs and poultry have access to natural or artificial shade and shelter. We are increasingly seeing use of woodland pasture, tree planting in the range, or integration of pigs and poultry with orchards and soft fruit.

You also need to make sure that waterfowl have access to suitable water sources, and that pigs have opportunities to create wallows.

If you are reseed, it is worth looking for seed mixes designed for pigs or poultry. 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.

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 farrowing or weaning.

Whilst prevention and natural treatments are preferred, livestock must be treated immediately if they are sick or injured. Most licensed veterinary treatments are acceptable. Each individual animal can have a maximum of three courses of treatment in one year, or for animals that have a productive life of less than a year (table birds, most layers and most fattening pigs) the limit is just one course of treatment in their lifetime. 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.

How do I restock?

If you need to restock after the livestock conversion has begun, you must try to find organic livestock.

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 pig in to organic pork!

It is acceptable to bring in non-organic boars for breeding.

As there is a widespread shortage of organic poultry, it is possible to buy in non-organic day old chicks to raise for meat, or as laying birds, if you request permission from us first. However, it is not possible to bring in non-organic birds older than 3 days. There has been a special exemption available for many years so that 'part organic' pullets can be used. These are birds that have been kept to the organic feed and vet requirements but are not fully certified. Their eggs can be fully organic, but they themselves never have full organic status, so they cannot be sold as organic meat at the end of their lives. This exemption for 'part-organic' pullets is currently due to expire at the end of 2020.

What about slaughter and egg packing?

Do bear in mind that if you carry out any packing, labelling or processing on the holding, or if you have any subcontractors doing this for you, these activities will also need to be certified. Depending on the type and scale of the activity, we may be able to include this under your production license, or you may need a separate license.

For example, if you pack your own eggs, you can do this under your production license. If you slaughter your poultry on site you will need a processing license to cover this activity. If your meat is slaughtered and butchered on your behalf, and you sell it under your own name, the abattoir and butcher must be organic certified.

There must be some rules on labelling?

You can only sell or label your produce as organic once you have completed conversion and we give you the go ahead to do this. 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 on detailed labelling requirements.

What's the inspection like?

All organic operators have an annual inspection, and occasionally an additional unannounced inspection. Our inspectors are all professional but also friendly and very human. Before the inspection we'll ask you to fill out an annual questionnaire, and a field activity record. Your inspector will want to walk your land, see your crops and livestock, and check through your paperwork.

Is there any extra record keeping needed?

It's important that you keep full records of all your purchases and inputs, births, deaths, production and sales, and veterinary treatments. Much of this will be in line with existing government requirements and 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 other bodies – for example, we need to see that you are using fully organic feed, and that you are respecting twice the organic withdrawal times for vet treatments. You'll also need to keep copies of any derogations granted.

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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