





**Subject:** 12 Oct Agenda - SSBSS Calving Interval Reform Discussion (+ Minutes, & Slides from 28th)

Dear All,

Please find attached the agenda for our next meeting on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> on the reform of the SSBSS.

In addition, both last week's minute and the slides from [redacted]'s presentation are attached.

Any questions please get in touch.

Many thanks,

[redacted]

[redacted]

Livestock Production Policy



**From:** [redacted]

**Sent:** Thursday, October 19, 2023 12:51 PM

**Cc:** [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>

**Subject:** 25 Oct Agenda - SSBSS Calving Interval Reform Discussion (+ Minutes, & Slides from 12th)

Dear All,

Please find attached the agenda for our next meeting on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> on the reform of the SSBSS.

Last week's meeting minute and the slides from [redacted]'s presentation are attached.

I have also included the amended meeting minutes from the 28<sup>th</sup> September which should now more accurately reflect the views of the group.

Any questions please get in touch.

Many thanks,

[redacted]

[redacted]

Livestock Production Policy



**From:** [redacted]

**Sent:** Monday, October 30, 2023 4:23 PM

**Cc:** [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>

**Subject:** RE: 8th Nov Agenda - SSBSS Calving Interval Reform Discussion (+ Minutes from 25th)

All

To avoid confusion, below there is a typo, just to confirm we are meeting on Wednesday the 8<sup>th</sup>

[redacted]

Livestock Production Policy



**From:** [redacted]

**Sent:** Monday, October 30, 2023 4:18 PM

**Cc:** [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>

**Subject:** 8th Nov Agenda - SSBSS Calving Interval Reform Discussion (+ Minutes from 25th)

Good Afternoon,

Please find attached the agenda for our next meeting on Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> on the reform of the SSBSS. Last week's meeting minute is also attached.

Many thanks,

[redacted]

[redacted]

Livestock Production Policy



**From:** [redacted]

**Sent:** Wednesday, November 15, 2023 9:42 AM

**Cc:** [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>

<[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>

**Subject:** 8th Nov Minutes - SSBSS Calving Interval Reform Discussion

Good Morning,

Attached are the minutes from our final SSBSS reform discussion on November 8<sup>th</sup>. I would welcome any feedback you may have.

Although this was our final group meeting, we may consult you in the near future if there are any issues or questions that arise in the policy making process going forward.

Many thanks,

[redacted]

[redacted]

Livestock Production Policy



**From:** [redacted]

**Sent:** Monday, August 28, 2023 4:40 PM

**Cc:** [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>; [redacted] <[redacted]@gov.scot>

**Subject:** SSBSS reform discussion follow up

Good afternoon,

Thank you for your input at our discussion of the policy to reform the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme. We have not yet finalised the next steps on a more formal approach to a stakeholder group and will make you aware of any relevant developments.

At the meeting we discussed the need to be mindful of the current legislation of the SSBSS and the desire to ensure any future policy is deliverable, please find below links to relevant legislation:

- The Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc.) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk))
- The Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc.) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2017 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk))

If you have any questions in the meantime please get in touch.

Kind regards,

[redacted] | [redacted]



Please see attached summarising our position throughout the stakeholder discussion. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to give me a call.

Thanks,  
[redacted]

[redacted] | [redacted]

**NFU Scotland | Rural Centre, West Mains, Ingliston, Newbridge, EH28 8LT**

**Tel:** [redacted] | **Mobile:** [redacted] | **Email:** [redacted]@nfus.org.uk | **Website:**

<http://www.nfus.org.uk/>



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**From:** [redacted]

**Sent:** Tuesday, March 26, 2024 2:00 PM

**Subject:** 2025 Changes to Agricultural Support - Updated Agricultural Reform Route Map

Good afternoon,

[Sent to SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group Members]

Today, the Scottish Government published an updated [Agricultural Reform Route Map](#) including the changes which will come into effect from 2025. We have outlined below what these changes will mean to farmers and crofters.

For particular interest to you will be the changes to the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS). I want to thank you personally for your engagement with the Scottish Government via the Reform Stakeholder Group in meeting which took place late last year. If you have any questions regarding the SSBSS reform policy, please don't hesitate in contacting me directly.

## **Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS)**

From 2025 onwards, calves will only be eligible for a SSBSS payment if their dam has a calving interval threshold of 410 days or less. This condition is designed to help balance productivity and profitability with the opportunity to address climate impact of emissions.

The new condition will be measured on an individual animal basis not on herd averages. Offspring of cattle with an established calving interval of more than 410 days will not receive a payment. The first calves registered to any dam will be exempt from the calving interval threshold and will remain eligible for payment, provided that all other scheme conditions are met.

Calving intervals will be established based on ScotEID calf registrations. As currently envisaged, an administrative penalty will not be applied to calves which fail to meet the calving interval condition and these animals will be deducted from a claim without penalty. This will be confirmed via the distribution of guidance later in 2024.

## **Cross Compliance**

New conditions will be introduced to Cross Compliance in 2025. These are new peatland and wetland standards which will be added to GAEC 6 - Maintenance of soil organic matter. These standards will prohibit a range of activities from being carried out on peatland and wetland areas and include:

- Ploughing and cultivation
- New drainage and maintenance of existing drainage systems that causes further drying out of the peatland
- Application of fertiliser, herbicides and pesticides
- Activities that cause damage to the vegetation cover exposing the soil
- Additionally for wetlands – disruption of connections between rivers/water courses and wetlands (that will lead to the drying of the wetland)

This will apply to land with peat soils more than 50 cm in depth with a near natural vegetative cover and also to wetland habitats.

## **Whole Farm Plans**

The more farmers, crofters and growers understand about their farm or croft, the more productive and profitable their business can be, and the more they can contribute to Scotland's climate, biodiversity and emissions targets. This is the foundation of the Whole Farm Plan. It will be a condition of future support that farmers, crofters and growers have one in place and are acting upon what their plan says they will do.

In 2025, in return for basic payments; farmers, crofters and growers will be expected to have started carrying out plans and audits that are relevant to their business. Farmers, crofters and growers will be asked to confirm on their SAF that they have done at least two of these activities. It is up to them to choose which of these options currently suit their business:

Carbon audit	all conducted within the five year period before May 2025
Biodiversity audit	
Soil analysis	
Animal health and welfare plan	which will be renewed annually
Integrated pest management plan	

Farmers, crofters and growers may already have some of these plans and audits in place – through quality assurance or supply chain contracts, or as part of normal business planning. If so, and if these meet minimum standards, they can simply confirm this activity on next year’s SAF. If farmers, crofters and growers haven’t done at least two of these activities yet, grants are still available, through Preparing for Sustainable Farming, to do carbon audits and soil analysis.

These changes are designed to help all our farmers, crofters and growers do more to produce food sustainably, to cut emissions and to farm more for nature. And we need everyone to get involved and start preparing now for change.

You can find out more in the updated Agricultural Support Route Map on the Rural Payments website by visiting <https://www.ruralpayments.org/topics/agricultural-reform-programme/arp-route-map/>. Detailed guidance on all of these changes will be produced in Summer 2024.

Please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions.

Kind regards,

[redacted] | [redacted]

Agriculture Policy Division | Directorate ARE | Email: [redacted]@gov.scot | Scottish Government Mobile: [redacted]



[redacted]

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**Subject:** SG Livestock Production + NFUS Catch up  
**Location:** The Rural Centre, West Mains, Ingliston, Newbridge, Edinburgh, EH28 8NZ

**Start:** Thu 25/05/2023 11:00  
**End:** Thu 25/05/2023 12:00  
**Show Time As:** Tentative

**Recurrence:** (none)

**Meeting Status:** Not yet responded

**Organiser:** [redacted]  
**Required Attendees:** [redacted]  
**Optional Attendees:** [redacted] ; [redacted] ; [redacted]

Agenda:

NFU Scotland

- Introduction
- Introduction to policy committees – livestock, milk, pigs and poultry etc
- Overview of NFUS policy development process.
- Overview of key NFUS policy issues.
- Overview of other functions of NFUS HQ – communications, political affairs, member services, regional structures.

SG livestock Production Policy

- Introduction
- Discussion of Tier 2 measures announced in February.
- Discussion of MyHerdStats
- Discussion on other areas of work – methane inhibitors, VCS reform etc.

**Note of record of meeting between Scottish Government, NFU Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation – 23 January 2024**

On 23 January 2024 Scottish Government officials met with stakeholders, including NFU Scotland, to discuss the proposed increase to hire charges for the Crofting Cattle Improvement Scheme (Bull Hire Scheme). A general reference was made to reform of the SSBSS, and a follow-up e-mail was sent from NFU Scotland.

**Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS)  
Reform Stakeholder Group**

**Terms of Reference**

## Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme Stakeholder Group – Terms of Reference

### Remit

The stakeholder advisory group is comprised of the following members and will be supported and chaired by Scottish Government officials.

Member	Affiliation
[redacted]	NFU Scotland
[redacted]	Farmer and Quality Meat Scotland Board Member
[redacted]	ARIOB member
[redacted]	Scottish Beef Association
[redacted]	Livestock Health Scotland
[redacted]	Scottish Crofting Federation
[redacted]	SAOS
[redacted]	ARIOB member

Scottish Government officials:

- [redacted] ([redacted], APD)
- [redacted] ([redacted], RPID)
- [redacted] ([redacted], APD)
- [redacted] ([redacted], APD)

The group will also be regularly supported by external advice from:

- [redacted] (SRUC)
- [redacted] ([redacted])
- [redacted] (SAOS)

If a member of the stakeholder group cannot attend a meeting of the group they can nominate an alternative attendee, though this must be agreed in advance with the chair of the meeting.

The function of the stakeholder group is:

1. To support Scottish Government officials in producing the final policy advice on the calving interval condition reform.

Scottish Government will chair the group and provide policy and secretariat support to this process and schedule business in an efficient way. The SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group members will also be kept appropriately sighted on minutes and developments from the meetings.

### **Governance and accountability**

The SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group will be chaired by [redacted] ([redacted], APD), with chairing being delegated to other appropriate Scottish Government officials where necessary.

### **Remuneration**

Membership of the SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group is on a voluntary basis. Members will not receive any remuneration for participation.

### **Timescales, frequency and location of meetings**

The SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group Terms of Reference and membership will be reviewed every month to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

Meetings will take place on a fortnightly basis. In light of the geographical spread of the membership, the SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group will meet virtually.

## **SSBSS reform policy stakeholder discussion – 14/09/2023 at 15:00**

### Agenda

1. **Introduction** – [redacted] (Scottish Government) (Chair)
2. **Discussion of questions:**
  - a. Should the SSBSS calf retention period should change from 30 days to 60 days?
  - b. Should it be a priority to find a solution for pre-registration mortalities?
  - c. Should an exception be made for cows which give birth to twins/multiples
3. **AOCB** - all
4. **Next steps** – [redacted]

### **SSBSS Reform Stakeholder Group**

**Date:** Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> September 2023

**Time:** 15:00pm - 16:30pm

**Location:** Microsoft Teams

#### **Attendees:**

[redacted], Farmer & QMS Board Member

[redacted], NFU Scotland

[redacted], SBA

[redacted], SAOS

[redacted], [redacted] (advisory)

[redacted], ScotEID (advisory)

[redacted], SRUC (advisory)

#### **Scottish Government Officials:**

[redacted] (Chair), [redacted], [redacted], [redacted]

#### **Apologies:**

[redacted], ARIOB Member

[redacted], ARIOB Member

[redacted], Scottish Crofting Federation

[redacted], Livestock Health Scotland

[redacted], Scottish Government

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#### **Introduction:**

- [redacted] opened the first formal meeting of the stakeholder group and provided a background on our commitment as part of the Agricultural Reform Route Map update published in June 2023 to work towards implementing a new condition of SSBSS linked to calving interval.

- He reminded the group that the Terms of Reference had now been circulated and encouraged members to get in touch with any queries on this.

## Discussion of questions:

### 5. Should the SSBSS calf retention period should change from 30 days to 60 days?

- [redacted] provided background to this question, citing the data available on this in [redacted]'s report ([Calving Intervals in Scotland's Cattle Population: Conditionality Options](#)).
- The group discussed this data (for context, the number of calves that die on beef holdings or are moved off holding within 30 days of registration and therefore currently ineligible for SSBSS ranges from 0.98% to 1.22% (combined) of calves born in any given year, in comparison to 2.9% to 3.2% (combined) if the retention period was increased to 60 days).
- [redacted] said the unintended consequence of increasing the retention period is the effect it would have on those selling cows with calf at foot.
- [redacted] said increasing the retention period from 30 to 60 days is not improving efficiency, and that this may only result a spike in mortalities moving from 31 days to 61 days.
- [redacted] asked why 60 days in particular. [redacted] said simply because it was doubling the current 30 day requirement (interesting to see difference in how many animals would be affected for example between one and two months), and that he had also looked at 90 days and 120 days.
- [redacted] said there seems to be a split in opinion on this issue – some see the increase as a negative e.g. those who sell cows with calf at foot, whereas others would be less affected.
- [redacted] shared the viewpoint of [redacted], questioning how increasing to 60 days is improving efficiencies on farm if that is the overall aim.
- [redacted] said if there are a number of calves being recoded at dying on day 31, there could be an argument that an increase in the retention period would result in less calves being paid that then die therefore targeting more efficient animals.
- [redacted] said this may only shift the spike in mortalities from 31/32 days to 61/62 days instead. [redacted] added that if we increased it to 120 days, it would likely remove this risk due to the higher chance of inspection during this period.
- [redacted] said at 30 days you essentially are paying for successful birth, whereas increasing this changes the intervention logic to supporting successful weaning.
- [redacted] shared [redacted]'s view in her absence (with her permission), who said she believes it should be increased even further in order to target payments towards calves that become a useful output via sale or retention. She also highlighted that there must be justification for whatever retention period we choose.
- [redacted] agreed with [redacted]'s point that any change would have to be clearly justified (winners and losers on both sides whether it is changed or remains the same).
- [redacted] agreed with [redacted] and it would be difficult to have everyone agree on the number of days. He reiterated his view increasing number of days will not improve efficiency – the majority of farmers are doing all they can to keep calves alive. He also raised the point that increasing the retention period is irrelevant to calving interval conditionality.
- [redacted] agreed that the commitment is on calving interval, but we should also think to the long term future of VCS.
- [redacted] suggested that the retention period of 30 days remains, but there is a requirement for the reason of death.
- [redacted] summarised the groups viewpoint on this discussion point, saying while this is something some may believe should be explored and could help reduce mortalities and ensure a greater focus on getting calves to weaning, it shouldn't be a priority at this stage nor complicate the work of driving forward the calving interval reform.

## 6. Should it be a priority to find a solution for pre-registration mortalities?

- [redacted] provided background to this question. He asked stakeholders if we were to add a calving interval condition, how would we ensure that if a dam has a calf that dies prior to registration, that her calf the following is eligible for SSBSS payment? How much of a priority is it that we find a solution that a calf was born but not registered in order to unlock the eligibility of her subsequent calf?
- [redacted] raised the point of the previous suckler cow premium scheme where there used to be functionality within BCMS CTS Online (the traceability system at the time which has since been replaced in Scotland by ScotEID) to allow keepers to register a dead calf from a heifer, in order for it to be eligible for the suckler cow payment. He thinks it is necessary to have a mechanism in the system to allow farmers to record this (cow may be productive and through no fault of her own the subsequent calf wouldn't be eligible following year).
- [redacted] said rather the register the dead calf, the farmer could record the birth date and reason for death (as done under the Beef Efficiency Scheme) against the dam ID. [redacted] said it does give the opportunity to manipulate the data, for example if the calf is born dead then farmer might forge that the dam calved a month earlier than she did etc as there's no way of checking this. This would require new functionality.
- [redacted] said those in the fallen stock derogation zone felt this was essential for cows to keep them in the 'loop' the following year despite having a dead calf. [redacted] added that what [redacted] was referring to was that one of the potential solutions could be a fallen stock invoice, however this would not be applicable for farmers in derogation zones if they choose to bury.
- [redacted] referred back to [redacted]'s earlier point on BES, saying the number one reason for death was "unknown", while the second pneumonia. He said that any derogation is open to exploitation. [redacted] also asked if this will drive farmers to get rid of cows for the sake of £100-£150.
- [redacted] explained that the figures show profitability on beef farms is not a lot and that those on the islands receiving £100-£150 per calf would see this payment as a valued contributor to their profit.
- [redacted] said realistically delivering a solution for pre-registration mortalities by 2025 would be challenging, however this may come further down the line. He raised the point that this may also mask poor management.
- [redacted] said most farm management software has ability to insert data on dead calves for keeping accurate records. He also added that the vast majority have to use a fallen stock company which would be a simple way to verify (where applicable).
- [redacted] referred back to [redacted]'s point around the payment, saying those selling cows with calf at foot will likely be unhappy if the retention period was moved as they will no longer receive the payment, however they are making a profit in what they are doing in their current system so maybe this is a purely commercial decision. [redacted] also added that farmers will evolve and that if there are less calves claimed and payment rates are higher they will maybe change their minds but it was hard to say without knowing what is coming down the line.
- [redacted] asked if there was data on how many herds qualify for fallen stock exemption.
- [redacted] shared [redacted]'s view in her absence, which was that finding a solution must be a priority as this information must be captured regardless of whether the calf lives to registration or not, to restart her calving interval count to allow her calf the following year to be eligible for payment. The cow should not be penalised as the death may have nothing to do with cow efficiency or productivity. [redacted] said however logging pre-registration calf mortalities should not be mandatory if farmer does not wish to share that information.

- [redacted] said that it shouldn't necessarily be thought that every cow that has a dead calf is unproductive for the rest of the year - quite often there will be a cow with twins within the herd or a cow with no milk due to mastitis, and therefore there is a spare calf that can be put onto said cow.
- [redacted] summarised the groups viewpoint on this discussion point, saying that the majority of stakeholders on the call think that finding a solution for pre-registration mortalities must be a priority, taking into account the delivery challenges for implementing new conditionality to the scheme in 2025.

## **7. Should an exception be made for cows which give birth to twins/multiples?**

- [redacted] provided background to this question, explaining that this was a point that was highlighted by the ARIOB that it sometimes takes longer to get a cow which had twins/multiples back in-calf therefore they may have longer calving intervals. He said a possible exception/solution would be to have the following calf automatically eligible for payment regardless of calving interval but that the simpler option may be that to not implement a special exception for dams which have had twins/multiples.
- [redacted] said that the general consensus was that there should be exemption in this situation to recognise this and to again keep cow in the 'loop'.
- [redacted] emphasised that we must keep things simple from a delivery aspect – how much complexity do we want to layer into this?
- [redacted] asked for clarification if the payment is on the cow (one payment) or if it is on the calf (for example if twins, two payments). He said if it is paid on the calf and the farmer receives two payments one year, then if unsuccessful in getting back in-calf within the required time, they have at least received the two payments the previous year. [redacted] confirmed the payment is made on the calf, depending on the dam meeting the calving interval criteria. [redacted] said if we want simplicity then we need as few 'quirks' as possible – leave it at a set calving interval threshold criteria for all to keep things consistent rather than differentiating.
- [redacted] said ideally he would agree with the point [redacted] made, but appreciates that this could add complication to payment system and that it may be easier to accept that you receive two payments one year for twins but may be ineligible the following year. [redacted] acknowledged that there is an element of simplicity being beneficial.
- [redacted] shared [redacted]'s view in her absence, saying that she is unsure as any farmers she has spoken to do not want to have multiples in their herd for many different reasons and perhaps we do not want to put steps in place to encourage this. [redacted] said she would probably not differentiate between singles and multiples.
- [redacted] said that from a software point of view, there is no issue with adding this functionality – if twins are registered to a cow, there is just a 'switch' that goes off on the cow. [redacted] asked [redacted] if he was saying this was easy to implement, for example setting a 400 day threshold for a cow with a single calf and 425 day threshold for a cow with multiples. [redacted] said yes and that he doesn't see this as being an issue, saying he wouldn't use the complexity as an argument from a software point of view. However this does not mean that it is a simple delivery consideration for SG RPID (rural payments and inspections division).
- [redacted] said if you have a derogation for a dam who has twins, can it have a calf in 800 days and still get a payment next time round. He said there has to be an upper limit and have to remember the intervention logic is changing here. This was agreed by [redacted] who said without this upper limit, you then have an open-ended commitment to paying on that cow which goes against the principle on any other cow – policy then becomes unclear.
- [redacted] summarised the groups viewpoint on this, saying that there appears to be more of a split here between stakeholders than previous questions with some believing we need to come

up with a solution to this, while others feeling that for the sake of simplicity that not having an exemption in place helps us to deliver the reform in a way that can be easily communicated and understood.

### **Any other business:**

- [redacted] asked what the timing objective is to this work and when it will be introduced. [redacted] said we have committed to this being introduced in the 2025 scheme year (claim deadline December 2025). [redacted] reminded that farmers must have prior notification of this in the very near future to allow them to make management decisions in advance.
- [redacted] said that from a ScotEID perspective it would be fairly straightforward to add on a tab that when a farmer registers a calf, it will tell them how many days since the dam calved previously to provide them with the data in preparation for this change. [redacted] said this was a good point on how we are getting this information across to farmers early on to warm them up to the concept. [redacted] also suggested that how we are going to get this messaging out should be a discussion point at a future meeting.
- [redacted] also asked that we try to decide on the calving interval threshold requirement (number of days) sooner rather than later as this is a question farmers will begin to ask.
- [redacted] referred back to [redacted]'s point on signalling, saying it would be helpful to display to farmers the proportion of the animals in their herd meeting a certain threshold because the herd average can be skewed very negatively by a few animals with long calving intervals.
- [redacted] and [redacted] agreed with [redacted]'s point, with [redacted] going on to say that farmers seem to be concerned about herd averages, not understanding that it is on an individual basis so that would definitely be welcomed.
- [redacted] added that currently the calving interval data on MyHerdStats is based around a threshold of 400 days but this can be changed to any number. [redacted] suggested setting it to the median of 371 days so that farmers can focus on how many animals in their herd are not having a calf every year. [redacted] added if we think 400 days is the norm, we will lose the argument of driving efficiency. [redacted] agreed on this point but said farmers are less likely to take action if they see a long list of animals, whereas setting it at 400 days may target the tail-enders. [redacted] said it should be set where it will have the most impact, which he thinks is at the median. [redacted] said it could be a possibility to display both the median and the mean.
- [redacted] made a request for discussion questions to be circulated with as much notice as possible to allow for a fully informed discussion. [redacted] said that the list of questions is evolving, and that we would like to provide the group with a 'straw-man' proposal of what this policy could look like for discussion, but that he will ensure agenda points are circulated in a timely manner going forward to allow stakeholders the opportunity to consult where necessary prior to meetings.

### **Next steps:**

- [redacted] to circulate agenda for next meeting (proposed for Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> September at 15:00pm-16:30pm)

Meeting closed by [redacted] at 16:05pm.

## **SSBSS reform policy stakeholder discussion – 28/09/2023 at 15:00**

### Agenda

1. **Introduction** – [redacted] (Scottish Government) (Chair)
2. **Discussion of questions:**
  - a. Should payments be delivered via yes/no eligibility, or via the introduction of split payments; initial payment for meeting existing conditions (pre-2025) and additional payment for meeting a new calving interval condition?
  - b. Should there be an exemption from calving interval conditions for small herds?
  - c. Bought in cows - should a calving interval condition apply to the next calf born to a cow which has been bought in to the herd?
3. **AOCB** - all
4. **Next steps** – [redacted]

### **Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme Reform Stakeholder Group**

28<sup>th</sup> September 2023, 3pm-4.30pm

Location – Microsoft Teams

### **Attendees and Apologies**

#### Present

- [redacted], SRUC
- [redacted], [redacted]
- [redacted], NFU Scotland
- [redacted], Scottish Crofting Federation
- [redacted], Livestock Health Scotland
- [redacted], ScotEID
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted], ARIOB member

#### Scottish Government Officials:

[redacted] (Chair), [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted]  
(Secretariat)

#### Apologies

- [redacted], Farmer & QMS Board Member
- [redacted], SAOS
- [redacted], Scottish Government

### **Welcome**

The chair welcomed the group and gave a round-up of the previous meeting. The group then agreed the minutes.

### **Discussion**

## 1. Payment delivery

*'Should payments be delivered via yes/no eligibility, or via the introduction of split payments; initial payment for meeting existing conditions (pre-2025) and additional payment for meeting a new calving interval condition?'*

The chair emphasised that simplicity would impact on scheme deliverability. The group were also reminded that Voluntary Coupled Support has not been committed to beyond 2026.

[redacted] gave an update on a meeting he had with DAERA on Northern Ireland's suckler cow scheme. It was noted DAERA do not endorse split payments or derogations, instead opting for a simple approach driven by carbon savings. The group highlighted that like-for-like comparisons could not be made between DAERA's suckler cow scheme and the SSBSS on account of DAERA's starting point being different, as they have no previous beef scheme to build on in Northern Ireland.

[redacted] emphasised that beef producers need to be given sufficient time in order to prepare for implementation of new conditionality. It was highlighted that making it difficult for producers to meet the eligibility criteria could risk acceleration of a decline in cattle numbers across Scotland.

[redacted] put forward the suggestion of extending the retention period of calves beyond the current 30 day requirement, arguing that calf mortality as a metric is an invaluable efficiency measure and should be included in the eligibility criteria.

[redacted] raised producers' concerns over IT system failure similar to that experienced by the Beef Efficiency Scheme (BES).

[redacted] raised concerns over the risk of the SSBSS being discontinued, informing the group that a number of stakeholders are not in support of maintaining future Voluntary Coupled Support (VCS).

[redacted] suggested knowledge exchange should be included alongside a top-up payment, outlining that changing the payment structure is not enough to drive change.

The group agreed that a soft transition into changes to eligibility criteria would be the most appropriate approach to support a just transition. It was also agreed that a top-up payment would ensure a safety net for producers whilst also acting as a driver for strong and ambitious efficiency targets.

[redacted] questioned how a calving interval conditionality greater than 365 days would affect budgets for split payments on the basis that payment cycles run annually.

The group went on to consider the ratio split for base/top-up payments. The group agreed that the ratio would be dependent on a number of factors. A number of views were put forward including;

- A low percentage for base (20-30%).([redacted])
- A 50:50 split to begin with ([redacted])
- In the first year a base should have the higher percentage ([redacted])
- The ratio would depend on the requirements of the top-up and how equitable that would be for large/small herds as well as location. ([redacted])

- Requirement for discussion around specific systems where thresholds or exemptions should apply. ([redacted])
- The top-up payment could be reduced as a percentage year-on-year, to drive progressive change, e.g. 50% in year 1, 40% in year 2. ([redacted])

## 2. Small herd derogations

*'Should there be an exemption from calving interval conditions for small herds?'*

[redacted] then presented some statistics on the SSBSS and calving intervals.

**Action** – [redacted]'s statistics presentation to be shared with the group by Secretariat.

Consideration was given to the requirement for a definition of a 'small herd' for legislative purposes and what that definition should be.

[redacted] reminded the group that while there is nothing preventing smaller producers being highly efficient, they may have less focus on efficiency alone. [redacted] then raised the question 'how best can the Government directly support these producers which deliver other outcomes?'

[redacted] agreed, pointing out cattle producers running smaller herds have issues wider than efficiencies to consider when keeping cows, drawing attention to less favoured areas (LFAs) and the grazing rules included in the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) management options.

[redacted] questioned whether the majority of small herds are run across LFAs. [redacted] disputed a derogation for smaller herds, explaining that there are no real reasons for small herds to have lengthy calving intervals. [redacted] then went on to discuss concerns over the potential impact changes to eligibility of the SSBSS could have on the rural communities and number of herds in the North-West of Scotland. [redacted] explained that the smaller herds in the North-West actually produce a large number of store cattle that are purchased throughout the rest of the country.

[redacted] gave the view that any exemption would be dependent on the number of days of the calving interval condition.

[redacted] put forward the example of Animal and Plant Health Agency's (APHA) use of a 'small herd' definition for TB testing cattle. [redacted] then proposed that there should be derogation or at least reduced calving interval targets for cattle grazing poorer land areas for example LFAs.

[redacted] informed the group that the concept of front loading support payments currently exists to recognise and support small scale producers. Following on from this point, [redacted] mentioned additional uplift payments for Island producers, raising some concern around adding derogations or reduced targets whilst a lot of payments are already based on the same thing.

## **AOB**

Due to time constraints, the final question\* from this meeting's agenda is to be discussed at the following meeting.

**Proposed date of next meeting : Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2023 from 3-4.30pm.**

\*Bought in cows - should a calving interval condition apply to the next calf born to a cow which has been bought in to the herd?

In addition, [redacted] emailed in the following points alongside his apologies:

1. *'Should payment be made via a yes/no eligibility - In my view things should be made as simple as possible and so a yes/no eligibility would seem sensible as long as this was to be paid at the same time as there option ion the early split payment.*
  
2. *Should there be exemption for small herds - if we are trying to improve on farm efficiency and reduce emissions then there should not be an exemption - where do you draw the line if someone has say 10 cows and deemed a small herd but the neighbour has 11 and exemption to me seems wrong. For me simplicity is key and therefore there should not be an exemption for small herds.*
  
3. *Bought in cows - again as above simplicity is key and as few quirk as possible so the producers knows what is expected of them and it is easy to understand. Would it be bought in cows from the auction mart - how do privately purchased cows work?'*

**Action – Minutes and next meeting agenda to be circulated to group by secretariat.**

Close

## **SSBSS reform policy stakeholder discussion – 12/10/2023 at 15:00**

### Agenda

1. **Introduction** – [redacted] (Scottish Government) (Chair)
2. **Bought in cows discussion:**
  - a. Should a calving interval condition apply to the next calf born to a cow which has been bought in to the herd?
3. **Breed variation** – [redacted] will provide an overview on the relationship between breed and caving interval.
  - a. **Discussion** – should it be a priority for a reform to the SSBSS to take in to account the variation in breed type? If so, what possible solutions are there?
4. **Second calvers/younger cows** – [redacted] will provide an overview on the relationship between second calvers, mature cows and caving interval. Discussion to follow.
  - a. **Discussion** – should it be a priority for a reform to the SSBSS to take in to account the variation between young cows and the average calving interval? If so, what possible solutions are there?
5. **AOCB** - all
6. **Next steps** – [redacted]

### **Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme Reform Stakeholder Group**

12<sup>th</sup> October 2023, 3pm-4.30pm

Location – Microsoft Teams

### **Attendees and Apologies**

#### Present

- [redacted], SRUC
- [redacted], [redacted]
- [redacted], NFU Scotland
- [redacted], Scottish Crofting Federation
- [redacted], ScotEID
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted], SAOS
- [redacted], SBA [redacted]
- [redacted], Farmer & QMS Board Member

#### Scottish Government Officials:

[redacted] (Chair), [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted]  
(Secretariat)

#### Apologies

- [redacted], Livestock Health Scotland

- [redacted], Scottish Government

## Welcome

The chair welcomed the group, followed by a summarisation of the requested additions to the previous meeting's minutes.

[redacted] updated the group on his viewpoints on the questions from the previous meeting's agenda. He expressed his view that simplicity will be vital to a reform of the SSBSS; noting that the less complex the changes to conditionality are, the easier the changes will be to communicate with the industry. [redacted] also went on to say that there should be no derogations put in place for small herds when calving interval conditionality is added.

[redacted] brought forward the SBA's view, who are in agreement that changes to conditionality of the scheme need to be kept simple, explaining that it is in no one's interest to encourage a decline in the number of beef herds in Scotland.

[redacted] outlined that land type has an influence on efficiency, citing that in harsher areas lower efficiency is not due to producers having less skill but rather is a reflection of the impact of environment and weather conditions. [redacted] warned that there is a risk that store producers in the West of Scotland will be lost if new conditionality is too difficult to meet.

*Action – Secretariat to add [redacted]'s emailed points to the previous meeting minutes.*

## Discussion

### 1. Bought-in cows

*'Should a calving interval condition apply to the next calf born to a cow which has been bought in to the herd'?*

The chair questioned the group on their thoughts surrounding responsibility of calving interval of bought-in cows; should this issue be handled by the Scottish Government or is it for the market to handle?

[redacted]'s view was that the calving interval condition should apply, outlining that it's the buyers responsibility to undertake due diligence at any purchase, and to have the conversation with the seller around calving intervals. It was noted that excluding bought-in cattle from the conditionality will risk a high number of animals being sold and purchased to avoid meeting the calving interval condition. [redacted] then went on to suggest again a possibility to allow exemption requests for producers whose calving date does not fall within the businesses calving system – e.g. buying from an early spring calving herd, but running a late spring calving herd.

[redacted] echoed [redacted]'s views, expressing that buyers are responsible for their management choices, and that simplicity is key. It was mentioned that there is a risk that applying this condition to purchased animals could alienate the market, however this could be managed through strong communication from the Scottish Government.

[redacted] was in support of the points raised by both [redacted] and [redacted].

[redacted] questioned if there was really a need for a derogation for only 13.5k cows out of the total 1.2m cows in Scotland, given that half of those are already performing well. It was noted that a derogation for less than 7k cows would not be a sensible approach.

[redacted] was in agreement, mentioning that dispersal sales would be responsible for the 13.5k animals, and suggested that there is no real reason to believe that these cows are not being productive.

Broadly, the group agreed that there was no need for a policy consideration to be built into the reform to cater for bought-in cows.

## 2. Breed Variation

*'should it be a priority for a reform to the SSBSS to take in to account the variation in breed type? If so, what possible solutions are there?'*

[redacted] provided an overview of the relationship between breed & calving interval, which was then followed by group discussion.

**Action** – [redacted]'s *presentation to be shared with the group by Secretariat.*

[redacted] outlined that management is more influential than breed on calving interval, and that it is important to take into consideration that policy should not be tailored to poor management. [redacted] made it clear that fertility is a key indicator of profitability.

The chair highlighted that there is variation in gestation periods across breeds, asking the group if that is something the Scottish Government should take into account in the scheme reform?

[redacted] was of the opinion that there should not be derogation on breeds, pointing out that many native breeds of cattle are kept by 'lifestyle' breeders which is an explanation for their longer calving intervals. [redacted] went on to say that the calving interval conditionality will have to be a sufficient number of days to encompass longer gestation periods.

[redacted] said that the threshold level would have to be sensible. Rather than looking at derogations for specific breeds, the number of days could be decreased as time goes on. [redacted] suggested a calving interval threshold of more than 400 days as a starting point to give those struggling to meet that threshold time to adjust. He highlighted the huge consequences which could result if breed types are changed too quickly. He went on to say that a split payment is essential for a just transition, and that additional money would be beneficial to incentivise efficacy improvements in suckler herds.

As a breeder of bulls, [redacted] noted that reducing gestation length in all cattle breeds can be achieved through selective breeding. He outlined that a derogation for one breed and not others would cause upset between breed societies.

[redacted] highlighted the need for the ringfenced island SSBSS budget to be retained.

[redacted] stated that it was essential to get the industry engaged with their own performance data.

[redacted] went over the limitations of a one size fits all approach. [redacted] was in agreement that exempting specific breeds would not be appropriate, but warned against losing sight of the geographical impact on calving interval and animal performance. It was made clear that there is a requirement to safeguard and support suckler producers affected by geographical restrictions otherwise breed types may be lost.

[redacted] highlighted communication issues; there is confusion in the industry on Calving Interval conditionality - whether it is a herd average or an individual basis.

[redacted] said that a simple approach would make it fair to small herds, suggesting having one main scheme for SSBSS and then tailor some of the environmental schemes to compensate producers who are restricted by the environmental factors.

[redacted] suggested an uplift payment. If policy design was taking all things into account then future Tier 2 conditions should be reflecting hill breeds and biodiversity provisioning elements. He stressed the importance to consider that some of these producers will also be getting payment through AECS. He mentioned there would be use in the Cabinet Secretary clarifying to industry that the reform is about individual animal's Calving Interval and not averages.

Generally, stakeholders favoured simplicity to the calving interval reform in this area but it was suggested that the final calving interval threshold would have a bearing on the impact on different breeds.

### 3. **Second Calvers/Young Cows**

*'should it be a priority for a reform to the SSBSS to take in to account the variation between young cows and the average calving interval? If so, what possible solutions are there?'*

[redacted] provided an overview of the relationship between second calvers, mature cows and calving interval. Discussion followed.

**Action** – [redacted]'s *presentation to be shared with the group by Secretariat.*

[redacted] questioned how much information and data is available on the management decisions made by producers. [redacted] suggested including questions in the agricultural census to gather this information.

[redacted] noted that pregnancy diagnosis of heifers is used on many beef farms, leading producers to retain the animals that are going to calve in the first 3 weeks and sell on the animals that are less efficient - Farmers are selling on their problems. [redacted] warned against incentivising producers to sell on their problem animals. He went on to say that this scheme could be a great win to show we are tackling inefficiencies and also GHG emissions.

[redacted] warned against encouraging those who don't have proper heifer management and rearing systems to access full payments. [redacted] explained that a number of producers on the west coast do not have the labour availability and therefore have to manage 1<sup>st</sup> calvers separately; this also allows the heifers more time to recover to come back into calve the next year. [redacted] was of the view that there needs to be something within the SSBSS to acknowledge that management decisions such as this are due to infrastructure constraints. [redacted] was in agreement with [redacted], and went on to suggest a solution

would be to treat 2<sup>nd</sup> calvers as heifers but did acknowledge this may just prolong the problem. She noted that management systems that work in the East do not work in the West, and that NFUS' preference would be a split payment.

[redacted] outlined that allowing 2<sup>nd</sup> calvers the same exemption from Calving Interval as heifers would mean that a very high proportion of the national herd would have no calving interval condition to meet. He warned that the views of some members of ARIOB and in policy may negatively impact on VCS.

[redacted] asked if there had been any research into the difference in calving interval between calving heifers at 2 years old and calving heifers at 3.

**Action** - [redacted] to follow up.

[redacted] was not in favour of treating 2<sup>nd</sup> calvers as heifers, stating that they should not be excluded from any conditionality.

[redacted] was of the opinion that the Scottish Government needs to be seen to be driving change otherwise there is a risk to any future support via SSBSS, and that allowing 25% of cattle to not have to meet conditionality would not be seen as a driver for this change.

[redacted] raised NFUS' members concerns over Ireland's scheme paying on age at first calving.

[redacted] emphasised the need for simplicity in reform and that this may lead to the need for a 'one size fits all' approach.

[redacted] suggested a derogation for those who choose to calve heifers at 2 years old but not be allowed a derogation for those calving heifers at an older age.

[redacted] disagreed with [redacted], stating that the age of first calving should not be looked at in order to protect diversity within the industry. [redacted] emphasised the importance of allowing cattle to calve in a system that fits with their environment, and this was echoed by [redacted]. The Chair then confirmed that calving age was not the focus of the proposed reform but that all views are welcome to inform how the reform could be delivered.

Generally, there was a range of views from the group on how 2<sup>nd</sup> calvers should be addressed in the reform but the majority of the group were of the view that there shouldn't be a blanket exemption of second calvers from the new eligibility.

## **AOB**

[redacted] questioned the output of this stakeholder group. [redacted] confirmed that these views would be reflected in advice provided to the Cabinet Secretary on the reform, which ARIOB will also have sight of in the future. [redacted] then also highlighted the usefulness of MyHerdStats on ScotEID with regards to herd performance.

[redacted] asked if there was any way that MyHerdStats could be used to pinpoint individual animals that fall outwith the Calving Interval threshold. [redacted] explained that the programme was still a work-in-progress and that

this functionality will be built into the programme in time. [redacted] warned that MyHerdStats is focused on herd averages and not on individual cows, raising the point that this needs to be communicated otherwise it will fuel confusion with the new calving interval conditionality.

**Proposed date of next meeting : Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> October 3pm-4.30pm.**

In addition, [redacted] emailed in the following points alongside his apologies;

'Agenda item 1] On bought-in cattle I would have thought they would just roll on into the herd at the next calving based on previous calving date.

Items 2] and 3] are both recognised factors which can contribute to levels of reproductive efficiency and both can create management challenges. They are some of the reasons why I favour the split payment to allow producers a period of time to respond to the challenges and change management or genetics if they felt it was useful.

On that basis making further provision for these particular factors seems strange and as the introduction of incentivising calving intervals is about behaviour change both managing genetics and second calvers to achieve reproductive efficiency looks like part of the deal. If the SSBSS scheme is to survive its got to drive change and we all have to be prepared to change, In short The plan must drive positive change which improves carbon and financial efficiency and producers should not be sheltered from the impact of key management factors.

That approach means that I feel split payments and an achievable calving interval are the key components of the support scheme and already recognise reduced fertility of second calvers and genetic traits that don't favour short calving intervals. It may be that the calving interval is introduced at a soft level and gradually reduced?

The only factor which perhaps should be recognised and gain a degree of flexibility is extreme disadvantage at holding level as that goes beyond cow management.'

***Action – Minutes and next meeting agenda to be circulated to group by secretariat.***

Close

## **SSBSS reform policy stakeholder discussion – 25/10/2023 at 15:00**

Location – Microsoft Teams

### Agenda

1. **Introduction** – [redacted] (Scottish Government) (Chair)
2. **Presentation of simple reform proposal** (which does not incorporate split, small herd exemption, or recording of pre-registration mortalities) – Scottish Government
  - a. Discussion- all
3. **Presentation of complex reform proposal** (which does incorporate split payments, small herd exemption, or recording of pre-registration mortalities) – Scottish Government
  - a. Discussion- all
4. **Next steps discussion** – all
5. **AOCB** - all
6. **Next steps summary** – [redacted]

## **Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme Reform Stakeholder Group**

25<sup>th</sup> October 2023, 3pm-4.30pm

Location – Microsoft Teams

### **Attendees and Apologies**

#### Present

- [redacted], SRUC
- [redacted], [redacted]
- [redacted], NFU Scotland
- [redacted], Livestock Health Scotland
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted]
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted], SAOS

#### Scottish Government Officials:

[redacted] (Chair), [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted] (Secretariat)

#### Apologies

- [redacted], Scottish Government
- [redacted], Scottish Government
- [redacted], Scottish Crofting Federation
- [redacted], ScotEID
- [redacted], Farmer & QMS Board Member

### **Welcome**

The chair welcomed the group, thanking them for their contributions so far. The group then agreed the minutes.

**Action – Secretariat to amend previous meeting minutes to reflect [redacted]'s point on breed variation.**

### **Presentation of reform proposals**

The chair presented 2 potential options to reform the SSBSS which included a simple and a more complex approach. He emphasised that the proposals were not final agreed policy positions but were instead being presented to the group to develop discussion and policy thinking. The chair went on to remind the group of the importance of maintaining simplicity in reforming the SSBSS to assist with scheme deliverability.

#### **4. Discussion of proposed simple approach**

[redacted] queried whether ScotEID included information on cattle purchased out with Scotland, questioning how eligibility of these animals would be addressed in their first year. [redacted] advised that ScotEID do not have access to automatic data on the calving history of imported cows from UK, but it is on ScotEID's wish list.

[redacted] provided some industry feedback, explaining that producers are in favour a split payment, comprised of a base payment with a top-up premium for the calves that are born within a 400 day calving interval. [redacted] then outlined that reducing the threshold below 400 days would be very challenging, advising that many holdings would struggle to achieve this target. [redacted] also raised the negative impact an all or nothing payment for a 400 day calving interval threshold would have on businesses calving breeds that have longer gestation lengths.

The chair explained that a split payment would add complexity to deliverability hence was included in the complex proposal instead of the simple proposal.

[redacted] agreed that the calving interval threshold had to be low to meet emissions reduction targets, but highlighted the difficulties surrounding this from a herd efficiency viewpoint. He explained that the cows that calve at the start of the calving period are the most fertile, however the likelihood of these animals achieving a 365 calving interval is low due to the oestrus cycle and bulling. [redacted] went on to flag the importance recording reasons for calf mortalities, explaining that it is as important as improving herd fertility. He went on to say that recording the reasons for deaths pre-registration would be very beneficial to improving overall herd health.

[redacted] warned against building in complexity in the form of recording mortality reasons without any certainty of the future of the scheme beyond 2026. He stressed that the scheme needs to be simple.

[redacted] reminded that some stakeholders would like to see an end to coupled support for livestock. [redacted] expressed that this opportunity for SSBSS redesign is important and it must be recognised that stricter conditions are necessary to reflect the reality of the sector. [redacted] offered her opinion that a simple option with no small herd exception is an attractive one. [redacted] then went on to say that loopholes for poor breeding decisions and management should not be legislated, otherwise the future of SSBSS could be

undermined. [redacted] also advised that the scheme needs to go alongside a programme of knowledge exchange support for farmers.

[redacted] agreed with [redacted]'s earlier point, explaining that in a batch calving system - unless the batches are tight - by the time early calvers are serviced they could easily miss the 400 day threshold. [redacted] highlighted that in the long term, achieving a 70% conception rate at each service is statistically as high an average as is usually achieved, regardless of whether natural service or artificial insemination is used and this is the reality. [redacted] also said that a simple option needs a soft landing to allow producers to adjust their herds and their mindsets to meet the calving interval targets. [redacted] then explained that he would favour a threshold longer than 400 days in year 1 with a target of 400 days in year 2 or beyond for an all or nothing payment. He alternately offered the suggestion of a split payment option with 400 days considered in year 1. [redacted] informed the group that the diagnostic rates in vet labs are relatively low for stillbirths, warning against the dangers of recording data based on guess work which is misleading.

[redacted] agreed that 400 days was a sensible threshold and would help to keep the scheme simple, however recognised that this interval could be too tight for some producers. [redacted] said her preference would be having a threshold of 400 days as an end target, starting out with for example 450 days, dropping to 430 and then 400 for example. [redacted] offered the issue of split payment allowing a lot of much scope for producers to manage their way through the threshold.

[redacted] backed [redacted] and [redacted]'s points on how easy it is for cows to slip if they calve at the beginning of a calving period. [redacted] agreed that the threshold should be extended beyond 400 days to allow for a just transition in the first year, with the intention to reduce the threshold to 400 days in the following years, emphasising that changes to calving interval takes time. [redacted] was also in agreement that split payments would be the best approach to reform the SSBSS.

[redacted] agreed that a soft landing with a just transition approach would be the best approach. [redacted] raised concern over difficulties in deciding on the exact calving interval threshold without knowing the payment mechanism, but went on to highlight that 400 days as a blunt figure seems like a harsh starting point.

[redacted] raised the impact weather can have on calving intervals, outlining that in some springs cattle are 2 weeks later going out to grass and not all producers are able to run the bull with them inside. [redacted] said that in circumstances such as this, achieving the 400 day target would be affected and so there is a real requirement for a just transition in reform of the SSBSS. [redacted] also cautioned against the unintended consequences which could come from the threshold being too ambitious, warning that a large decrease in the number of livestock could result.

##### **5. Discussion of proposed complex approach**

[redacted] was of the opinion that 370 days as a threshold would be a tall order, suggesting that if this challenging threshold was selected then a split option would be the best approach to support it, with appreciation of the added complexity this would bring to delivery. [redacted] highlighted that an ambitious threshold would be a strong driver for change.

[redacted] agreed that a more ambitious threshold would require a split payment.

[redacted] thought that the idea of a new ScotEID module to allow for pre-registration of deaths to reset the calving interval was interesting, and questioned how reasoning for deaths would be evidenced.

The chair advised the group that more work needed to be done on this information on ScotEID.

[redacted] said there was a requirement for a new module on ScotEID to record pre-registration mortalities, warning that some producers might cheat the system. [redacted] raised that a small herd exemption shouldn't need a split payment because the business income is coming from elsewhere.

[redacted] was not in favour of a small herd exemption, warning that we need to be careful not to reinforce that small herds are not efficient. [redacted] agreed that a threshold of 370 days is very ambitious and would require a split payment. [redacted] questioned what the ratio would be for a split payment. [redacted] went on to raise concerns over accuracies of registrations with a split payment option. [redacted] said that although the complex option is less favourable it would be dependent on what the split payment percentage would be.

[redacted] thought that there was not a need for split payments, advising that it could be a dangerous approach as would potentially encourage government facilitating fraud through producers lying about calves being born dead. [redacted] was in agreement that a split payment has less need for the complexity of a small herd exemption.

[redacted] agreed that having split payments would mitigate the need for a small herd exemption.

[redacted] said that having a pre-registration module would not be helpful, explaining that it is complexity we can do without. [redacted]'s opinion was that the split payment should be split 50:50, with a threshold of 370 days being too ambitious, favouring instead a calving interval of 385 days as the better option. [redacted] advised that we have to trust farmers won't cheat the system.

[redacted] was also in favour of a split payment if a higher calving interval was chosen. [redacted] urged that the island uplift should be continued. The Chair confirmed no intention to change the budgets for islands.

[redacted] agreed that the island budgets are essential to protect producers in these areas, and said that 380 days calving interval was far too ambitious, offering instead 400 days as the minimum threshold even for a split payment.

[redacted] questioned whether it would be worthwhile to allow producers to reset the calving interval for animals in circumstances where a cow has lost a calf pre-registration.

[redacted] said that resetting the calving interval in such circumstances would only maintain the status quo, and this would not work in a split payment scheme.

[redacted] was also not in favour of resetting the clock on calving intervals. [redacted] said that this scheme should focus producers' minds on getting rid of unproductive cows, and that the government should not be paying producers to keep unproductive cows. [redacted]

stressed the importance of paying on live calves, suggesting that the current retention period condition could be lengthened beyond a 30 days for eligible calves.

[redacted] reminded the group that there are other reasons for calf mortalities that is not the mothers fault, for example dead twins or injuries from other cows. [redacted] questioned the fairness in these situations of considering the next calf of a cow ineligible the following year. [redacted] warned that this would encourage culling of cows unnecessarily, because these animals were not in fact barren.

[redacted] said that the easiest approach would be to continue to pay on calves that have been registered and retained for 30 days. [redacted] was in favour of encouraging producers to record the reasons for pre-registration mortalities, however acknowledging time constraints suggested that this could be reviewed further down the line to further improve the scheme.

## **AOB**

**Proposed date of next meeting : Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2023 from 3-4.30pm.  
(Authors' note: SG officials confirmed that this date was not possible for them and are instead proposing 8 November 2023 9-4.30pm)**

**Action – Minutes and next meeting agenda to be circulated to group by secretariat.**

Close

## **SSBSS reform policy stakeholder discussion – 08/11/2023 at 15:00**

Location – Microsoft Teams

### Agenda

1. **Introduction** – [redacted] (Scottish Government) (Chair)
2. **Presentation of evolved complex proposal** – Scottish Government
  - a. Discussion- all
3. **Presentation of evolved simple proposal** – Scottish Government
  - a. Discussion- all
4. **Presentation of proposals' modelling** – Scottish Government
  - a. Discussion- all
5. **Next steps discussion** – all
6. **AOCB** - all
7. **Next steps summary** – [redacted]

## **Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme Reform Stakeholder Group**

8<sup>th</sup> November 2023, 3pm-4.30pm

Location – Microsoft Teams

### **Attendees and Apologies**

#### **Present**

- [redacted], SRUC
- [redacted], [redacted]
- [redacted], ScotEID
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted], ARIOB member
- [redacted], SAOS
- [redacted], Farmer & QMS Board Member
- [redacted], NFU Scotland

#### **Scottish Government Officials:**

[redacted] (Chair), [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted] (Secretariat)

#### **Apologies**

- [redacted], Livestock Health Scotland
- [redacted], Scottish Government
- [redacted], Scottish Government
- [redacted], Scottish Crofting Federation
- [redacted], NFU Scotland
- [redacted], SBA Chair

### **Welcome**

The chair welcomed the group and gave a round-up of the previous meeting of the group. He emphasised that the SSBSS reform models shared with the group were to aid discussion and would not necessarily be used in their current form in advice provided to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands.

### **Discussion**

#### **6. Presentation of evolved complex proposals**

The chair presented an updated complex proposal to the group, which included an increase to the calving interval threshold from the previously proposed 370 days to 390 days. He explained that under this proposal the payment would be split to incorporate a base payment for calves meeting historic eligibility criteria alongside a top-up payment for all calves meeting the 390 day calving interval threshold.

[redacted] questioned whether the chosen model would impact on the overall SSBSS budget. The chair confirmed that neither proposals incorporated a changes to the SSBSS budget and referred the group to statements made by the Cabinet Secretary on the SSBSS budget at the NFU Scotland Autumn Conference in October.

[redacted] was of the opinion that increasing the calving interval threshold to 390 days would be a sensible approach.

[redacted] asked whether the 390 day threshold would be the start point or the end point for the scheme. The chair outlined that 390 days would be the threshold from year 1. The chair went on to remind the group that the Scottish Government has made no commitment to continue coupled support beyond 2026, reiterating that a 390 day threshold would come into play in 2025.

Reflecting on both [redacted] and [redacted]'s points raised during the previous meeting on cows slipping in block calving systems, [redacted] said that the figure of 390 days would leave too small a buffer and would therefore be too tight a target for those operating block calving systems. [redacted] emphasised that it is unjust to penalise calves from early calving cows in block calving systems. [redacted] explained that these animals are actually some of the most efficient in the herd but due to the management system their calving intervals may be lengthened only due to their oestrous cycle not aligning with block mating.

[redacted] highlighted the importance of being upfront with producers in communicating the future final target calving interval, to ensure farmers are clear on the direction of travel and have adequate time to prepare to meet the calving interval target. [redacted] then went on to say that based on his own block calving system, 390 days would be a sensible threshold to begin with.

[redacted] reminded the group to be mindful that there is no government commitment for future voluntary coupled support beyond 2026. [redacted] went on to explain that the budget is cyclical and ring fenced, and that the redistribution of funding has a big impact on those who are already meeting the criteria wherever the threshold lies.

[redacted] said that it is key to communicate with the industry that the overall budget for SSBSS will not diminish with the introduction of new conditionality. [redacted] explained that producers need clarity, for example if 90% of calves claimed are eligible for the top-up payment then the payment will be higher per calf than if 100% of calves were eligible. [redacted] said it was also important to communicate that the government will not hold back money just because less calves have been claimed overall, rather, the budget would be divided based on number of claims.

[redacted] agreed that there is a lack of understanding amidst producers of how the current budget operates, and that there is a communications requirement to promote this understanding as the scheme is reformed. [redacted] went on to say that although she had previously been in favour of a simple option to reform SSBSS, she would now be more encouraged by the more complex reform option in order to safeguard those producers who would lose out if the payment in full was dependant on meeting the calving interval threshold.

The chair reiterated that although the split payment approach would be favourable to some, there may be deliverability issues surrounding this as a reform option for 2025.

In summary, a calving interval threshold of 390 days was considered by the group to be a sensible starting point, however there were some concerns that this figure could risk too small a buffer to protect early calvers slipping in block calving systems. The group were in agreement that the Scottish Government must clearly communicate how the SSBSS budget will operate under new conditionality and must also be transparent on the final calving interval threshold.

## **7. Presentation of evolved simple proposal**

The chair presented an updated simple proposal to the group, which included an increase to the calving interval threshold from 400 days previously proposed up to 420 days. He explained that the payment would be based on a simple pass/fail system with regards to meeting the calving interval threshold.

[redacted] said he would be in favour of the simple option, stressing that it is important that the scheme should demonstrate efficiency gains across both Carbon emissions and on farm efficiency gains. [redacted] then went on to outline that some pain was required to incentivise change to achieve these goals. [redacted] thought that a 420 day threshold would be a very achievable target and would be a sensible option.

[redacted] agreed with [redacted]'s points, outlining both 400 and 420 days would be achievable and that there has to be some pain to reach the desired outcomes. [redacted] warned that this may not happen if the threshold is too easy at the start.

[redacted] cautioned that a threshold of 420 days would not be incentive enough to reach efficiency targets, explaining that the threshold would need to be reduced quickly over the years to achieve change. He encouraged the group to remember the policy intervention logic; to encourage efficiency gains to drive GHGs down. [redacted] highlighted that if there is no pain anywhere then that Scottish Government outcome fails.

[redacted] put forward the importance of introducing a calving interval that has an achievable threshold in year 1 to support a just transition. [redacted] reminded the group that producers have to be informed that the threshold will be continually reduced if further funding beyond 2 years is confirmed. [redacted] emphasised the importance of simplicity to support producers' understanding of what they are expected to achieve.

[redacted] echoed [redacted]'s point, stating that the policy signalling has to be very clear and transparent that the threshold number will be reduced over time.

[redacted] questioned the logic of an all or nothing approach to payments based on the Calving Interval condition using a fixed budget. [redacted] explained that he thought this approach would be no incentive for change. [redacted] warned that this approach would only incentivise inefficient producers from the start of the project instead of pushing them to make changes from the start.

[redacted] said that the challenge comes with communication, bringing the group's attention to the fact that many in the industry still believe that the introduction of a calving interval conditionality will be based on herd averages. Elaborating on this, [redacted] said that current messaging has informed producers that the support from SSBSS is being taken away. [redacted] suggested 410 as a midway threshold to start with, before going on to say that it has to be clearly communicated that the threshold will be driven down quickly as the scheme progresses.

[redacted] said that if the simple model is chosen it has to be progressed to encourage producers to change in order to improve overall herd efficiency and also to protect the future of voluntary coupled support.

[redacted] said that the simple option would lead to producers running efficient herds losing out because they will effectively be subsidising those who are less efficient. [redacted] suggested an alternative solution to pay a premium for cows calving within 365 days.

[redacted] questioned how [redacted]'s suggestion would be communicated with industry, coming back to the point raised earlier regarding cows calving early in a block which then slip and come back into calf later through no fault of their own.

[redacted] highlighted that there are other efficiencies that come from the system and explained that a loss of a single payment for an efficient animal in the circumstances described by [redacted] can be gained elsewhere.

[redacted] suggested a target of 365 days as an end point for the calving interval threshold, but that having a starting point of 420 days would be too high. [redacted] went on to state that a policy that everyone is happy with is the wrong policy [redacted] also said that it is important to start at a manageable threshold which to ensure an easy sell, so long as it is reduced over time, and this has to be communicated.

[redacted] mentioned the confusion and fear surrounding this reform throughout the industry, emphasising the importance of retaining cow numbers. [redacted] said that simplicity is essential both for producers and for RPID. He outlined the asks from members of NFUS, which included avoiding too low a calving interval threshold and that a split payment would be essential. [redacted] went on to say that the benefits of reducing calving interval had to be clearly communicated to producers. [redacted] warned that too much complexity should be avoided, and that the calving interval threshold for a starting point should be achievable, suggesting 420 days as a start for a split payment.

[redacted] raised the importance of making a change to the scheme in order to protect the future of voluntary coupled support, which will in turn protect cattle numbers. He highlighted that subsidising beef production to reduce Carbon emissions will enable consumers to enjoy eating beef without guilt.

On the whole, the group agreed that a 420 day threshold would be a manageable starting point. The group generally viewed a threshold of 400 days as the more ambitious starting number. All were in favour of the number being reduced over time, but that intent should be clearly communicated to producers in addition to the benefits of the scheme.

#### **8. Presentation of proposals' modelling of payment rates**

The Chair gave a presentation on modelling of payment rates, giving a sense of how many eligible animals there would be under both the simple and the complex reform options.

[redacted] said that the quickest way to incentivise change is to offer producers an increase in payment. [redacted] agreed with this, going on to explain that the communication would have to clearly state that those producers meeting a low calving interval threshold would have their payment protected and in addition as a reward receive an uplift to their SSBSS payment. [redacted] suggested the justification for continuing to pay a base rate on live calves would be in line with the historical SSBSS aims, which will remain valid.

[redacted] thought that a 420 day threshold was not challenging enough, and to incentivise change this number should be reduced to 400 days which would be a more sensible target to start with.

[redacted] explained that the gestation period of a cow is on average 286 days and the oestrous cycle is on average 21 days. [redacted] suggested a calving interval threshold figure based on the cow's oestrus cycle instead of using an arbitrary figure of 400 days. [redacted] agreed that this would give a real justification for the scheme.

[redacted] emphasised that no matter how good the communication is, there is a risk that industry may misinterpret the ambition of the reformed scheme is to reduce cattle numbers.

[redacted] added that not every cow cycles at the same time so there is no logic in justifying the calving interval conditionality for this scheme.

[redacted] said that the reason for the reform of SSBSS is to drive efficiency of the beef sector and at the same time reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For this reason, [redacted] warned against using oestrus cycles as justification for the calving interval threshold as it will only add complication; reiterating that producers require a clear and simple message.

## 9. Questions

- a) *'If there is a split payment model, does the group believe the base payment should be around 50% of the historic payment rates?'*

[redacted] was of the opinion that the proposals presented are not ambitious enough to incentivise change. [redacted] suggested that the 390 threshold should be lowered for a split, or the present conditionality needs lowered. [redacted] went on to say that if the ambition is to make producers more efficient and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, then the split for the base payment should be around 50% of the historic payment, or alternatively the simple reform should be selected.

[redacted] recommended that having a split payment where the base was lower than 50% would not be sensible, suggesting instead that the payment split should be at 70:30.

[redacted] put forward an alternative suggestion of changing proportions, where in year 1 the split where base could be 50 or 70, which is then reduced in year 2, with the scheme progressing beyond 2026 with the end goal being to get rid of the base payment completely. [redacted] cautioned that to adhere to a just transition the base percentage couldn't drop below 50% in order to give people a fair chance to adapt.

[redacted] was in favour of a 50:50 split, suggesting also that the base payment could be lowered down to 30 to act as a driver for change and give greater benefit to those under the threshold.

[redacted] said that the future of voluntary coupled support is reliant on the reform of this scheme being serious, warning that a 70:30 split would not be serious enough to incentivise any real change in the industry.

[redacted] said that the simple model with a 420 threshold would provide on average the producer with around the same payment as they have been historically receiving, which would be a good starting point to drive change as the threshold is dropped over the years.

b) *'If there is a simple yes/no reform should the threshold reduce each year, if so by what amount? 10 days? When should the end point be?'*

- [redacted] suggested 1 year plus 1 cycle should be the end goal, which [redacted] agreed with.
- [redacted] suggested 370 should be an end target.
- [redacted] reminded the group that Northern Ireland's scheme aims for 385 after 4 years.
- [redacted] suggested 390.

c) *'Should the threshold for the split model also reduce each year?'*

[redacted] said that if the group are in agreement that reducing the simple model is the right thing to do, then the split model should be reduced too.

[redacted], [redacted], and [redacted] all agreed that a sensible approach would be to set the target threshold from the start and incorporate a percentage base/top-up payment split which would be reduced over time, looking forward with the view to get rid of base completely.

### **AOB**

Thanked the group for their time taken to engage with the reform of the SSBSS and explained that this would be the final meeting, however the group may be consulted for advice during the policy making process in the near future.

***Action – Minutes to be circulated to group by secretariat.***

Close

## **SSBSS Reform Discussion - Introductory Stakeholder Meeting 17<sup>th</sup> August 2023.**

### **Attendees:**

[redacted], NFU Scotland  
[redacted] Farmer & QMS Board Member  
[redacted], ARIOB Member  
[redacted], SBA [redacted]  
[redacted], Scottish Crofting Federation  
[redacted], ScotEID  
[redacted], SAOS  
[redacted], [redacted]  
[redacted], SRUC  
[redacted], ScotEID

**Scottish Government Officials:** [redacted] (chair), [redacted], [redacted],  
[redacted],

Secretariat – SG Officials – [redacted]

### **Introduction**

1. [redacted] welcomed the group, opening the floor to a round of introductions.

### **Calving Intervals in Scotland's Cattle Population: Conditionality Options Report**

2. [redacted] presented an overview of [Calving Intervals in Scotland's Cattle Population: Conditionality Options](#) produced by SRUC, published in June. The potential to reform the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS) was set out, proposing the scheme could include further conditionality in the form of a calving interval threshold. [redacted] explained this conditionality would apply to individual dams of calves currently eligible for the scheme. Threshold selection was then discussed, alongside the impact breed, geographical location, and herd size variation have on calving intervals.

### **Discussion**

3. The group discussed the on-farm practicalities of introducing a calving interval conditionality to the SSBSS..
4. [redacted] highlighted issues surrounding unregistered calf deaths, and suggested the incorporation of a pre-registration of calf deaths. He went on to ask the group to consider that farms which have the highest calving indexes also have the highest replacement rates, which are carbon costly.
5. The success in reducing calving intervals through the use of stabiliser cattle was discussed by the group, noting that although the reduced interval may be desirable, the finishing periods can also be longer.
6. [redacted] explained to the group that the governments assumption at this stage is that a heifers calf will be eligible for payment regardless of age at first calving. [redacted] highlighted fertility issues of calving down at 3 years old; questioning the possibility of getting these cattle back in calf within 400 days.

Action – [redacted] to provide an assessment on this.

7. [redacted] & [redacted] raised dual systems, discussing second calvers moving from spring to autumn for example, and questioning whether it would realistically be more efficient to let the cow slip rather than to cull and replace.
8. [redacted] asked whether there were any differences in the data between housed cattle in comparison with outdoor calving systems, and what effect system type has on the carbon footprint and rearing rates of calves, however this data is not currently available from the report.
9. [redacted] went onto mention the importance of recognising the influence geography can have on calving intervals, with [redacted] adding that other land management factors including for example AECS grazing management plans could also impact on calving interval.

**Discussion of policy**

10. The Scottish Government have no commitment beyond 2026 to reform SSBSS, and that the Calving Interval conditionality has already been committed to.
11. In addition to a calving interval threshold, increasing retention periods beyond 30 days was suggested by [redacted]; there is no justification for claiming payment on a calf dying 32 days after birth.
12. The group raised some concern that a one size fits all approach might not be appropriate, and some would favour the idea of a split payment – e.g. a basic payment with an additional top-up for reduced Calving Interval.
13. [redacted] questioned how the money from those not meeting the calving interval threshold would be fed back into the budget.
14. [redacted] stated that is a requirement for longevity of the SSBSS beyond 2025 in order to ensure buy in from industry.
15. [redacted] discussed the legality surrounding conditionality and allocation of funding.
16. There was a discussion around deliverability of conditions with regards to geographical (highlands & Islands) location.

**Any Other Business**

17. [redacted] outlined that going forward the group would be expected to meet on a fortnightly basis, however noted that today's meeting was informal and that formation of the group was still subject to ministerial decision.

Action – [redacted] to send legal links to the group regarding the SSBSS

## **SSBSS reform policy stakeholder discussion – 17/08/2023 at 15:00**

### **Agenda**

1. **Introduction** – [redacted] (Scottish Government) (Chair) 15:00 – 15:05
2. **Calving Intervals in Scottish Cattle report overview** – [redacted] (SRUC)  
15:05 – 15:20
3. **Q&A on report** – all 15:20 – 15:40
4. **Discussion of policy** – all 15:40 – 16:00
5. **Next steps** – [redacted] 16:00 – END



# Briefing

Date : 13 December 2023  
To : [redacted]  
From : [redacted]  
Direct dial : [redacted]  
E-mail address : [redacted]@nfus.org.uk

## **SSBSS REFORM – NFUS LIVESTOCK COMMITTEE POSITION**

- We have been engaging with Scottish Government as part of the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS) reform stakeholder group to compliment Cabinet Secretary Mairi Gougeon’s commitment to retain this support until 2026, with the introduction of calving interval conditionality.
  - The Livestock Committee understand the importance of this reform to future proof Voluntary Coupled Support (VCS) in the future; however, it is important that this reform is delivered in a way which recognises the importance of retaining the viability of a suckler herd. It cannot also create an unfair disadvantage across the breadth of the suckler herd in Scotland.
  - For avoidance of doubt this paper underlines what we feel the priority areas should be for this reform.
- 1. The budget should be retained and continue to be delivered in the same cyclical manner.**
- We expect that Scottish Government will make no changes to how the budget is spent. It is incredibly important that it continues to be spent in full each year based on the number of applicants. The Cabinet Secretary assured that this is not a cost saving exercise to reduce the budget at our Autumn Conference.
  - We would expect that the budget is retained at its current level of £40 million (£34 million for mainland and £6 million for islands). We would also be keen to discuss the opportunity of increasing the budget as additional conditionality or targets are integrated into the scheme.

- Another benefit of the current scheme is that it recognises the challenges associated for those on the islands, in turn recognising the importance of beef enterprises to island communities. Therefore, the island uplift must be retained in future iterations of the scheme.

## **2. Split payments are essential.**

- While we recognise this may be complicated to deliver, split payments must be a priority for this reform. We would like to see a higher base payment complimented with a top up for achieving the calving interval (CI).
- Furthermore, given this reform is coming at farmers and crofters quickly, we are concerned that there is not sufficient time to make the essential management decisions required. A split payment would provide stability to cover proportion of the costs and risk associated, thereby mitigating some unintended consequences to some degree.
- This is essential in the interest of a just transition, while also to protect and support the industry. We know that we are already below critical mass, any blunt introduction on strict conditionality risks accelerating the loss of beef production in Scotland.

## **4. The calving interval must be ambitious yet achievable.**

- We represent a wide range of beef enterprises; it is important that all our members are able to continue to access this support. We would encourage a higher CI, circa 450 days, particularly for the first year.
- It is important to note that the CI is intrinsically linked to the possibility of a split payment, it is therefore incredibly difficult to comment on what the CI could be without knowing if other factors will be taken into consideration.
- We would either want to see a higher CI supported by a lower base payment (e.g., 450 days @ 50/50 split) or a lower CI with a higher base payment (e.g., 430 days @ a 70/30 split). It is important to note these figures are illustrative and not our final position.

## **5. Pre-registration of mortalities**

- We would be encouraged to see this integrated into the reform, it is important that the dam is not penalised in future years for not having a full-term pregnancy recognised.

- This was incorporated previously into the Beef Efficiency scheme therefore we feel it can be incorporated again. We would strongly advise against the solution which audits fallen stock receipts as this would miss those who are in a derogation zone.

## **6. A clear and simple system for force majeure must be incorporated.**

- We are clear that issues arising must not penalise a claimant in that year or in years to come. We are also clear that these force majeure must be genuine and not the result of bad management. We suggest that if a farmer or crofter is able to seek expert advice and testimony of the issue, e.g. a broken leg of a bull, then an exemption could be granted.
- We suggest that Scottish Government continue to offer support similar to the Animal Health and Welfare interventions<sup>1</sup> as a way of mitigating potential force majeure, e.g., bull fertility testing.
- As there are currently no exemptions in the scheme, we are happy to comply evidence for the initial list alongside other stakeholders to inform potential force majeure.

## **7. A variation in CI for young cows**

- It is important that the health and welfare, as well as longevity of a dam should be taken into consideration. This is why we feel it is important that there is some type of variation in the CI set for second calvers.
- It is common practise to either calf heifers earlier than the rest of the herd and give them a longer “break” before rejoining the rest of the herd. This would skew the calving interval. If this practise was alienated, in order to continue to access SSBSS, we would be concerned that either the welfare is compromised, or dams would have a shorter productive life (i.e. less calves in her lifetime). The latter is particularly acute for those who operate extensive units. The GHG emissions savings from having a tighter CI versus the emission expenditure from replacement rates must be considered.
- We recognise that treating second calvers as heifers would be a sizeable number therefore appreciate this might not be a viable solution. Therefore, having an achievable CI is vital.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ruralpayments.org/topics/all-schemes/preparing-for-sustainable-farming--psf-/preparing-for-sustainable-farming--psf--full-guidance/>

## **Conclusion**

- While the above outlines our absolute priorities, we would like to have a simple scheme for farmers and crofters to access. We would not want to see IT system failure or delays.
- Other items were discussed at length by the stakeholder group including an exemption for small herds, twins/multiples, increasing the retention period, breed variation, and an exemption for bought in cows. However, we feel these are not essential for the reform at this time.

Ends.

**Record of phone calls between NFU Scotland and the Scottish Government Livestock Production Policy Branch on 20 March 2024**

On Wednesday 20/03/24

- [redacted], Agriculture Policy Division at Scottish Government, called [redacted], NFU Scotland, to discuss at recent letter which NFU Scotland sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands to discuss a letter which had been received on SSBSS reform. NFU Scotland [redacted] revealed that a news release was planned.
- Following guidance from Scottish Government Agriculture Reform Programme colleagues to seek for NFU Scotland to delay communications a further was made by [redacted] (Scottish Government) to [redacted] (NFU Scotland) to ask if a delay was possible. [redacted] (NFU Scotland) indicated that any such decision would be made by another colleague or NFU Scotland representative.
- [redacted] (Scottish Government) then called NFU Scotland Livestock Committee Chairman [redacted] to discuss the issue and discuss a delay to NFU Scotland communications in light of forthcoming announcements from the Scottish Government. [redacted] (NFU Scotland) indicated that NFU Scotland would not delay communications activity.
- Following this, [redacted] (Scottish Government) then called NFU Scotland [redacted] to discuss the planned communications activity and whether a delay to NFU Scotland communications would be possible. in light of forthcoming announcements from the Scottish Government. [redacted] (NFU Scotland) indicated that NFU Scotland would not delay communications activity.
  
- Following the publication of an [NFU Scotland news release](#) on the issue Scottish Government officials believed that the reference to '2 December 2023' as being a relevant date to the announced reform was incorrect and had the potential to mislead. [redacted] (Scottish Government) called NFU Scotland President [redacted] and said that there was concern that this was misleading. [redacted] (NFU Scotland) did not agree.
- After another internal Scottish Government discussion and agreement the reference to '2 December 2023' could be misleading [redacted] (Scottish Government) telephoned [redacted] (NFU Scotland) to make him aware of the concern, [redacted] (NFU Scotland) did not agree.
- Following these calls [redacted] (Scottish Government) called [redacted] (NFU Scotland) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) to make them aware of discussion that had been had with other NFU Scotland representatives and to once again highlight Scottish Government concern about the potentially misleading text in the NFU Scotland news release.

**Record of phone calls between NFU Scotland and the Scottish Government Livestock Production Policy Branch on 22 March 2024**

On Friday 22/03/24

- [redacted] (Scottish Government) called [redacted] (NFU Scotland) to reiterate concern, expressed on 22/03/24 that a reference to 2 December 2023 as being relevant to future SSBSS conditionality was potentially misleading and discussed alternate wording that would allow NFU Scotland to make their point.

### **Record of whatsapp message between NFU Scotland and the Scottish Government Livestock Production Policy Branch on 22 March 2024**

On Friday 22/03/24

- Following a phone call earlier on 22/03/24 between [redacted] (Scottish Government) called [redacted] (NFU Scotland) to discuss potentially misleading wording in a NFU Scotland news release on SSBSS reform [redacted] (Scottish Government) sent a whatsapp to [redacted] (NFU Scotland) with potential alternate wording. This message said:
  - o ““Any eligible beef calf born in late 2023 has the potential to fall under the scheme reform, as NFU Scotland understands that the existing 30-day retention period will remain as part of the reform” a potential alternative line?”
- No acknowledgement or reply was received from [redacted] (NFU Scotland).

### **Record of phone calls between NFU Scotland and the Scottish Government Livestock Production Policy Branch between 12 December 2023 and 19 March 2024**

- On 19 March 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) during which SSBSS reform was discussed and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) said that NFU Scotland members were keen for details of the reform to be published as soon as possible. [redacted] (Scottish Government) noted that information was forthcoming.
- On 14 March 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) during which SSBSS reform was highlighted and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) said that NFU Scotland members were keen for details of the reform to be published as soon as possible. [redacted] (Scottish Government) said that information would be forthcoming.
- On 11 March 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) during which SSBSS reform was mentioned by NFU Scotland, highlighting concerns that additional detail on the reform had not yet been published. [redacted] (Scottish Government) said that work was ongoing to provide additional information on the reform.
- On 6 March 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland). The reform of the SSBSS was mentioned. [redacted] (NFU Scotland) referenced the NFU Scotland ask for more information on SSBSS reform.

- On 29 February 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland). The reform of the SSBSS was mentioned. [redacted] (NFU Scotland) reminded [redacted] (Scottish Government) of the NFU Scotland request for additional information on SSBSS reform.
- On 19 February 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland). The reform of the SSBSS was mentioned with NFU Scotland referring to a previous ask for additional information on SSBSS reform to be published.
- On 06 February 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland). This was prior to the NFU Scotland conference, at which the First Minister was due to speak, NFU Scotland enquired as to whether detail on SSBSS would be announced at the conference. [redacted] (Scottish Government) said he could not confirm or pre-empt the speech of the First Minister or the Cabinet Secretary at the conference.
- On 13 December 2023 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland). [redacted] said NFU Scotland would be publishing a news release on the deadline for the 2023 SSBSS scheme year, [redacted] provided an update on SSBSS reform to [redacted] informing them that Scottish Government officials were working on advice to the Cabinet Secretary following the meetings of the Reform Stakeholder Group which [redacted] (NFU Scotland) had attended.

**Record of phone calls between NFU Scotland and the Scottish Government Livestock Production Policy Branch between 23 March 2024 and 12 April 2024**

- On 26 March 2024 [redacted] (Scottish Government) called [redacted] (NFU Scotland) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) to make them aware of changes to the Agriculture Reform Route Map, which included detail on the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme reform.
- On 2 April 2024 there was a call between [redacted] (Scottish Government) and [redacted] (NFU Scotland) where the reform of the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme was discussed and [redacted] said the details announced in March has inspired intense discussion within the NFU Scotland membership.

**EIR 202400409101 annex d**

14 February 2024

Mairi Gougeon MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands  
Scottish Government  
St Andrews House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Sent by email: [redacted]@gov.scot

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I am writing to you regarding the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme Reform as announced at last year's Royal Highland Show. While we welcome the First Minister's commitment to retain direct support and his recognition of the importance of livestock at our AGM and Conference, we urge you to share the detail on the upcoming reform.

We have been actively engaged in the stakeholder group and believe that the reform must be ambitious yet achievable in the interest of a Just Transition. We would be strongly in favour of a split payment delivery of the scheme as well as the importance of retaining an island uplift as well as the current £40 million budget.

The value of this scheme to Scotland's iconic red meat sector cannot be underestimated. It ensures producers around the country are encouraged to keep producing beef calves to underpin the production of quality Scotch Beef. While trade has recently been strong, the years of turbulent market returns cannot be forgotten, our industry remains fragile. We need clarity on what the reform will look like to provide some form of stability for the suckler herd.

We ask you and your officials to communicate the finer details of the reform quickly with the industry so that farmers and crofters have as much time as possible to make the necessary management decisions.

Yours Sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted],  
[redacted], NFU Scotland

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform  
and Islands

Rùnaire a' Chaibineit airson Chùisean Dùthchail, Ath-  
leasachadh Fearainn agus Eileanan  
Mairi Gougeon MSP/BPA



Scottish Government  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba  
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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Our Reference: 202400399353

Your Reference: NFU Scotland Suckler Beef Support Scheme Reform

8 March 2024

Dear [Redacted]

Thank you for your letter dated 14 February 2024 on reform to the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme.

Your engagement via the reform stakeholder group, which was established to support Scottish Government officials with the detail of SSBSS reform, has been invaluable and we are grateful for your time and that of your NFU Scotland colleagues.

In your letter you have asked that we communicate the finer details of the policy reform quickly to allow farmers and crofters to adapt. We are working at pace to finalise the details of SSBSS reform as well as the other changes which we will be making to agricultural support in Scotland. As more information becomes available we will endeavour to update the Agricultural Reform Route Map timeously as well as communicate directly with stakeholders such as NFU Scotland.

In your letter you note the SSBSS Islands budget. Rather than being an uplift for island producers this is a distinct £6 million budget for island producers, alongside the £34 million budget for mainland producers. The Scottish Government intends to continue to support island producers via a distinct SSBSS Islands budget.

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Tha Ministearanna h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh [www.lobbying.scot](http://www.lobbying.scot)

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Reform to the scheme will ensure continued support to beef producers for the years to come as we transition our agricultural support.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mairi Gougeon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**MAIRI GOUGEON**

Mairi Gougeon MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands  
Scottish Government  
St Andrews House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Sent by email: [redacted]@gov.scot

Reference: 202400399353

18 March 2024

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I write to thank you for your response dated 8 March 2024. I also thank you for your continued support for beef producers, most notably your assurance that the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS) Island budget will be retained moving forward.

As you are aware, we remain very concerned that the full details on the calf scheme reform are still unknown. This is particularly frustrating as significant time has passed since Scottish Government Officials concluded the final Stakeholder Group meeting in November.

Unlike other elements of the Agricultural Reform Programme (ARP) announced at the Royal Highland Show 2023, the SSBSS reform requires a necessary and significant lead in time given that individual animals need to establish the start of their measured calving interval.

The time sensitivity of this reform is crucial. For example, we need clarity on the process for the registration of stillborn calves. It is currently common practice that when a calf dies before the 27-day legal time limit for tagging and registration, it is often not registered, therefore no record of the dam's calving date will exist. This means that for any future calves she has, their eligibility for payment will be penalised.

As we now approach the peak spring calving period, there will already be a significant number of cows whose dead calves are not registered to trigger her next year's calving interval period.

While we recognise your announcement at our Autumn Conference on 26 October 2023 that the new scheme will be based on individual calving interval rather than herd average, there was not enough detail for farmers and crofters to implement actions, that record officially, the necessary data to ensure eligibility for future calves under the

scheme. It is unreasonable to expect farmers and crofters to make decisions when there is uncertainty on the finer details.

We have been clear that a split payment could mitigate some of the consequences of the current lack of information. If this is not an option Scottish Government is willing to consider, then, as calving is now well under way, the industry needs you to issue the full details of the new scheme. The opportunity to officially record dead calves is past for many cows, therefore absolute clarity and direction is urgently needed for farmers and crofters to fully understand what is needed from them to ensure their cattle meet the new scheme eligibility rules going forward.

Your sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands  
Mairi Gougeon MSP



Scottish Government  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba  
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[redacted]  
[redacted]  
NFU Scotland

Via email [redacted] [nfus.org.uk](mailto:info@nfus.org.uk)

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25 March 2024

Dear [redacted]

Thank you for your letter dated 18 March 2024 on reform to the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS).

I am aware that you may be unsure about the level of detail which had already been shared with the industry. I would like to now reiterate information which has already been published and which I would have expected industry leadership organisations such as NFU Scotland to have highlighted to your members:

- On 10 February 2023, during the NFU Scotland Conference and AGM, we published the [Agricultural Reform Route Map](#) which stated that “New conditions will be introduced to Voluntary Coupled Support in 2025”.
- On 22 June 2023, I confirmed that the calving interval reform will be implemented in the 2025 scheme year, which starts on 1 January 2025 and runs to 31 December 2025. Therefore, as a result of the scheme requirement for a calf to be kept on the holding of birth for 30 days, the scheme reform would apply to animals born on or after 2 December 2024 (accepting that there may be a small number of historic claims from previous years). This announcement was made 529 days prior to 2 December 2024.
- Also on 22 June 2023, SRUC published a Scottish Government commissioned [report](#) into calving intervals in Scotland and cited the report in an update to the Agricultural Reform Route Map. In the update to the Agricultural Reform Route Map, we stated that “the mean calving interval of suckler beef in Scotland is currently c.400 days”.
- In August 2023, Scottish Government officials initiated the establishment of a reform stakeholder group which included representation from NFU Scotland. The group met regularly to discuss the reform between August 2023 and November 2023.

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- On 26 October 2023, I [announced](#) at the NFU Scotland Autumn Conference that the calving interval condition will be based on each individual animal's calving performance, and not herd averages. This announcement was made 403 days before 2 December 2024.
- On 8 November 2023, Scottish Government officials held a meeting of the reform stakeholder group. At this meeting, Scottish Government officials referred the group to my statements on SSBSS reform at the NFU Scotland Autumn Conference. NFU Scotland [redacted] was present at this meeting.

It is disappointing that, following the confirmation that the new calving interval condition would be based on individual animals' calving performance, there appears to have been no attempt by NFU Scotland to highlight this to your members. However, I believe that cattle keepers in Scotland maintain a high level of accuracy in their recording of calf births and that they all seek to fully comply with their statutory traceability requirements.

In your letter, you suggest that the reform to the SSBSS requires a significant lead in time. However, if as outlined we will be using individual animals' calving performance, rather than the blunter approach of a herd average calving index, the support which will be provided to keepers for the 2025 scheme year should scale with cow performance as evidenced by calf registrations.

In the [NFU Scotland News Release on 20 March 2024](#), you suggest that keepers should be able to retrospectively alter the evidence which will inform future eligibility. The Scottish Government cannot accept an approach which would allow this.

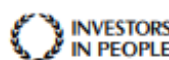
You refer to the examples of stillborn calves and the death of calves prior to registration as reasons why keepers should be allowed the opportunity to retrospectively alter their potential eligibility. However, you don't note that inaction to tackle production diseases, like Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD), can result in higher than average stillbirths and that stock management can strongly influence calf mortality rates.

As you have stated, all calf births must be recorded within 27 days of birth. I recognise that individual farmers and crofters may approach compliance with traceability requirements differently in situations where a calf has died following birth. However, I believe that the vast majority of business will endeavour to maintain accurate registrations to support compliance, and I hope that NFU Scotland agrees with this. If NFU Scotland believes that the traceability requirements need to be amended to further ensure disease control and the protection of public health, then we would be considerate of any proposals.

The ClimateXChange 'Scenarios for emissions reduction targets in Scottish agriculture' [report](#), which informed the policy to implement a calving interval condition to the SSBSS, states that one fifth of cows are unproductive. The report indicated that improving fertility and reducing calf mortality would both improve the emissions intensity of Scottish beef production. Given the significant threat of climate change to farmers and crofters, I hope that NFU Scotland agrees with the imperative to reduce pre-market mortality from the beef herd as well as improving calving performance. This imperative, for the sake of the calf as well as the climate, should be self-evident.

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11 April 2024

Mairi Gougeon MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands  
Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Dear Mairi,

Thank you for your letter (dated 25 March) in reply to that of [redacted] (dated 18 March) which set out legitimate concerns over the clarity and timing of the publication of vital and detailed information regarding the reforms to Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS).

Having read both letters, more than once, I am concerned and disappointed by some of the content and inferences in your reply.

You suggest we may be unsure about the level of detail which had already been shared with the industry and which you "would have expected industry leadership organisations such as NFU Scotland to have highlighted to your members."

This concerns me for two reasons.

First, some of the level of detail cited as having already been shared with the industry in fact contained little or no detail. For example, your statement at the QMS Breakfast at the Royal Highland Show in June 2023 said no more than "So from 2025, new conditions will be introduced to suckler beef support scheme linked to calving intervals to encourage livestock keepers to reduce the emissions intensity of their cattle production systems. We will work with the beef sector, including the SBA, QMS and others, on detailed proposals and how they will be implemented."

Second, I agree that NFU Scotland has an important function in informing our members about changing policy and its delivery – not least when scheme requirements are adjusted. However, our obligations are to the members of NFU Scotland and the wider agricultural industry in Scotland. We will always act in the best interest of our members and Scottish agriculture.

Overall, the letter implies that we have failed to communicate details of the SSBSS reforms. I fundamentally disagree.

A statement which I completely refute is "It is disappointing that, following the confirmation that the new calving interval condition would be based on individual animals' calving performance, there appears to have been no attempt by NFU Scotland to highlight this to your members."

We have continuously endeavoured to share as much detail as possible with our members and wider industry. However, we cannot share information based on commentary or hearsay but we will always play our part in relaying published information. To illustrate that, following the Scottish Government news release of 26 March, setting out changes to support from 2025, we issued a Business Guide Update on the published details of the SSBSS reforms to our members.

I also take exception to the statement “I would be disappointed if it appeared that NFU Scotland were advising farmers and crofters to find ways to manipulate their eligibility ahead of the 2025 scheme year”. We take our leadership responsibilities extremely seriously and would never condone, let alone ‘advise’, farmers and crofters to manipulate any scheme rules or eligibility requirements. The example given in our press release was to highlight potential unintended consequences from a delay to the publication of the SSBSS reforms detail.

Equally, the suggestion that NFU Scotland would endorse anything other than proactive disease prevention is disingenuous at best. We have consistently engaged with, promoted, and lead the BVD Eradication Scheme and related animal health policies at every opportunity.

Finally, I must refer to the closing comments of the letter which state “The nature of agricultural support is changing...However, I hope that NFU Scotland can support the need for reform”. The suggestion that we might not support change is totally unjustified.

One catalyst for change may have been the Brexit referendum of 2016. It certainly accelerated thinking around new agricultural policy to meet new objectives around food, climate and biodiversity. Since then, NFU Scotland has prioritised and driven the need for change within Scotland’s agricultural support system.

The publication of our *Steps to Change* future support proposals in March 2018 highlights the lead we took. Ever since, we’ve advocated a significant shift away from blunt area payments to a tiered approach centred around agricultural activity and management options to deliver on food, climate and biodiversity objectives - simultaneously.

Our intentions are clearly reflected in the Agricultural and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill and our approach is replicated in the Scottish Government’s Agricultural Reform Plan, not least through the four-tiered structure of future support. And we welcome that.

We continue to press for meaningful and effective change, putting farmers and crofters at the heart of the Scottish Government’s own Vision for Agriculture. But you know that’s not always easy and takes strong and determined leadership – not least through our commitment to ARIOB and the wider co-development process, despite the inevitable flak we receive from some.

Last week during the Bill’s Stage 1 debate, you said “Only our farmers, crofters and land managers can deliver those outcomes, so all of Scotland owes them a debt of support”. That sort of comment is hugely appreciated as it recognises and values what Scottish agriculture can and will deliver.

Nobody should doubt our commitment in return. A sustainable and profitable future for Scottish agriculture is the only means by which we’ll achieve the outcomes we’re all seeking.

Whilst it was absolutely necessary for me to respond and address these issues directly, I hope we can now draw a line under the matter and move forward.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] NFU Scotland