

Conversion Guide – Cattle & Sheep

The conversion process and planning when to start

The conversion period for land is normally two years. Conversion can start once we receive a completed application form. Once conversion begins, the land and crops must be managed to full organic standards.

It is possible to convert only part of a farm and in some circumstances Defra can give permission for the conversion period to be reduced, but please contact us to discuss the requirements for this.

There are two options for livestock conversion;

- 1) *Standard* - Livestock conversion begins towards the end of the land conversion or when the land becomes fully organic. Before this the stock can be fed non-organic non-GM feed.
- 2) *Simultaneous* - The livestock converts at the same time as the land over two years. All land and livestock are kept to full organic standards during that time so that any livestock produced during the conversion period can be sold as organic once the conversion period is complete.

To achieve organic status;

- Calves must be born to a dam which has been managed to full organic standards for at least twelve weeks.
- Lambs must be born to a dam which has been managed to full organic standards since tupping.
- Milk must be from stock that has been managed to organic health and welfare standards and organic feed standards for 6 months.

Because of this, non-organic animals will never achieve organic status. Breeding stock can produce organic offspring and/or milk but not organic meat. Any non-organic store animals remaining once livestock conversion has started must be managed organically but sold as non-organic.

Feed

When livestock conversion begins, ruminants must only be given organic feed. At least sixty percent of the diet must be from forage or fodder (calculated on a dry matter basis). Minerals and feed licks that are approved by us can be used if there is a demonstrated deficiency.



Grassland and forage

60% of organic ruminant diets must come from the farm so careful planning and management of grass and forage, cereals and fodder crops is critical. To this end, the sward's composition should:

- be suited to your soil and environmental conditions,
- provide a balanced nutrition for the health of your stock and
- help manage soil fertility (with the use of clover and other legumes).

Organic seed must be used where available but approval can be given for untreated, non-organic seed if there are no organic varieties available that meet your needs. Herbicides are prohibited which means that organic weed control is based on the sward's health: avoiding overgrazing or poaching, encouraging good grass growth by maintaining soil fertility and preventing weed spread by careful grazing and topping. There is a list of fertilisers and supplementary nutrients that can be used by organic farmers where there is a known deficiency (this can be found in sections 2.5 of the [Soil Association Standards](#)).

Housing

Organic animals can be housed when weather and ground conditions require it but they must have access to organic pasture at all other times during the grazing season. When animals are housed there are maximum stocking densities allowed for each species (these are listed in the Soil Association standards). A sufficient quantity of natural dry, clean bedding (such as straw or sawdust from untreated wood) must be provided at all times for housed livestock.

Organic livestock management plan

Organic systems use high levels of welfare, management and biosecurity measures to prevent health problems. These should be detailed in a management plan. As well as outlining the feed and housing, the plan also covers any known health issues on farm: how they are prevented, monitored and what would trigger a veterinary treatment. The plan also outlines how reliance on veterinary treatments will be reduced using general management practices. We have guidance notes to help write the plan and recommend that farmers also seek veterinary advice, though this is not a requirement.

Veterinary treatments

Vaccines can be permitted in the management plan where there is a known risk on the farm or in the area.

To safeguard animal welfare, where an animal is ill, prompt treatment should be given and this can include licensed veterinary medicines. Organic withdrawal periods for veterinary medicines are longer than statutory withdrawal periods.

The use of antibiotics is allowed for treatment of individual animals; certain classes of antibiotics are restricted.

Bringing in livestock after the stock have begun conversion

If sourcing female breeding replacements they should preferably be organic, however a limited number of non-organic maiden female breeding stock can be bought if suitable organic stock is not available, permission needs to be obtained from your Certification Officer or DEFRA before purchase.

Males bought for breeding purposes do not need to be organic but brought-in store animals must always be organic.

Organic markets and grant schemes

Before converting, it is wise to identify a potential market and plan the business model and conversion plan accordingly. We publish details of prices and routes to market on our website, and can give you contact details of potential buyers.

In most of the UK, [organic payments](#) are available annually from devolved governments.



The certification process and inspections

Organic certification includes a physical inspection every year to look at land, crops, livestock and records to verify that all organic production rules have been met. We may take samples for testing and can carry out more than one inspection per year. A new organic certificate is issued every year after successful inspection and certification.

Every farm is unique, contact the Go Organic team on 0117 914 2406

We're happy to discuss the certification process, organic standards, grant payments, organic market support and how it all could apply to your farm.

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