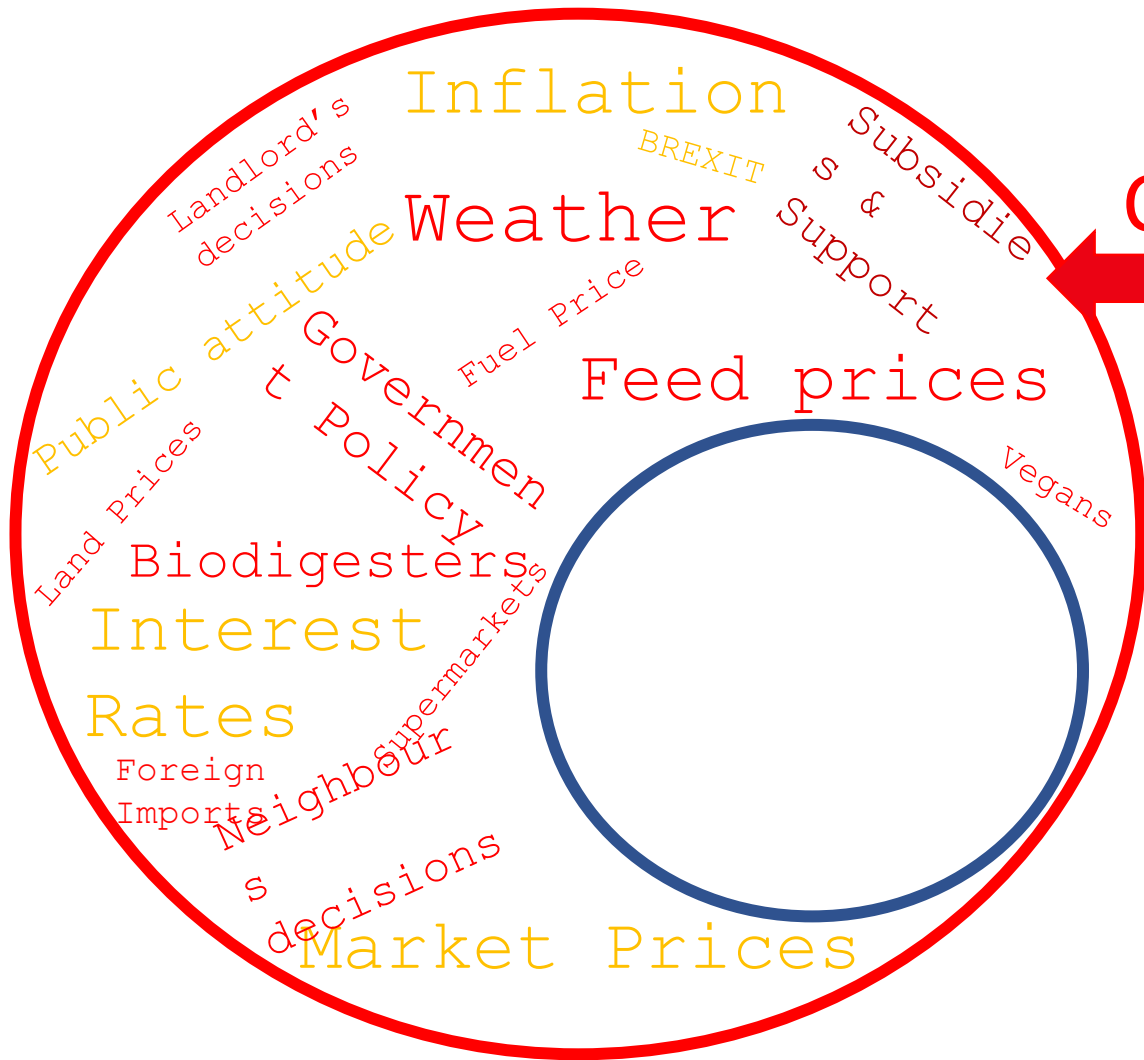


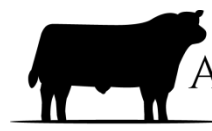
# **The Sustainable Suckler Cow**

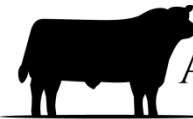
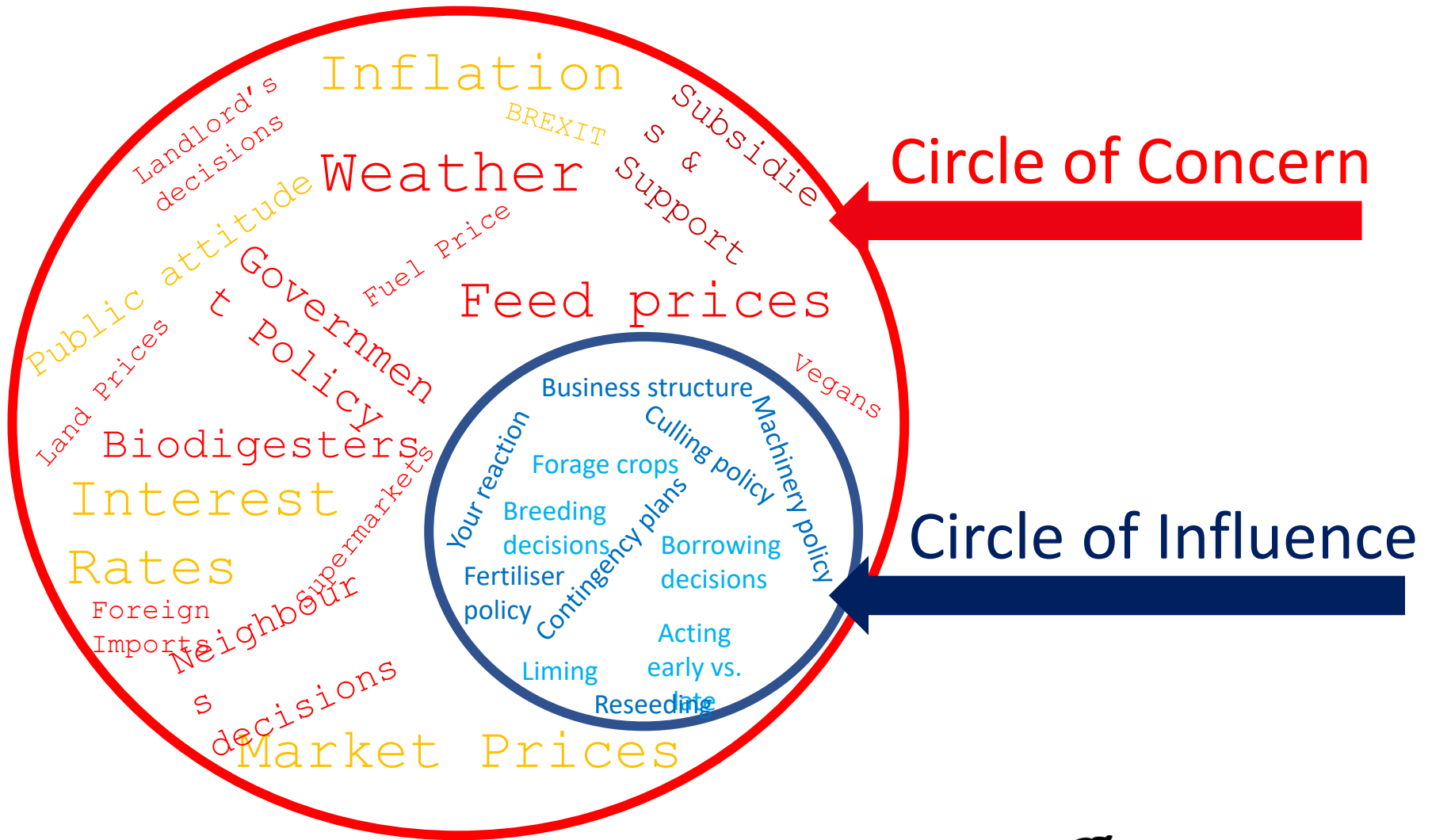
**Robert Gilchrist**





Circle of Concern





*“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change”*

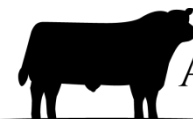
*Charles Darwin*



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# Increase Price v Output

- Herd 100 cows @ 82% calves weaned
- Selling 67 animals annually (15 replacement heifers)
- Increase beef price by 20p/kg on average 350kg carcass (480p/kg to 500p/kg)
- Extra output
- $350\text{kg} \times 67 \times 20\text{p/kg} = \underline{\underline{\text{£4,690}}}$



# Price v Increased Output

- Improve weaning % to 94%
- Weaning 94 calves from 100 cows
- Selling 79 animals (11 extra)
- 11 cattle @ 350kg @ 480p/kg
- Extra output - **£15,785**



# Key learnings from the the FPP

## Whole farm learnings:

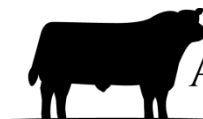
1. Planning, organisation and time management  
**Plans are worthless, but planning is everything**
2. Soil health and fertility  
**pH, P & K, Ca:Mg, compaction etc.**
3. Maximising use of grazed grass  
**Cheapest feed available - ↑ utilisation, ↔ grazing season**

## Cattle learnings:

1. Compact calving pattern  
**Longest 42 weeks. Small adjustments**
2. Control the costs of winter  
**Biggest burden on cattle systems**

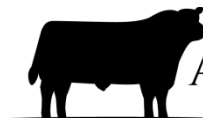
## Sheep learnings:

1. Ewe body condition management  
**Use the ewe timeline.**
2. Match lambing date to grass growth  
**And calving date!**



# FPP results

- Cow numbers ↑ 98 (15%)
- Calves reared ↑ 144 (27%)
- Kg output/cow ↑ 57kg (118%)
- Gross margin/cow ↑ £68 (19%)
- Calving spread ↓ 41% (worst was 42 wks)
- Farm net profit ↑ >£14k





# Best result

- Average 2014 – 2016 net profit = ~£19k
- 2023 year-end net profit = >£106k

# What do we want from a cow?

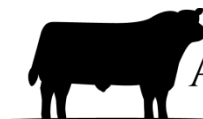
- How to get the right cow for your farm?
- What do we want from a suckler cow?
  - To produce her first live calf unassisted on her 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday and to rear that calf to 50% of her bodyweight in 210 days.
  - To produce another 7 – 9 calves unassisted on each subsequent birthday and rear them to 50% of her bodyweight.
  - To be structurally sound.
  - To perform on forage and gain condition when grass is good.
  - To have sufficient condition and resilience to be outwintered without making a mess



# What do we think is an achievable lifetime growth rate?

- Average of steers and heifers

Kg/day	Please mark choice
0.7	
0.8	
0.9	
1.0	
1.1	
1.2	
1.3	
1.4	
1.5	



# Calving @ 2 years old

	Mature cow	1 <sup>st</sup> calving	Bulling
Proportion of final weight	100%	85%	65%
Weight			
Age in days	>1825	730	450
	XXXXXXXX		

# So, what traits does that mean?

- Early puberty
- Moderate growth rate to a moderate frame
- Easy calving
- Pelvic capacity
- Easy fleshing



# Easy calving

- For every increase in the level of intervention at calving, one reproductive cycle is lost

Self-calved      →      Easy pull      →      Hard pull  
365 days                      386 days                      407 days

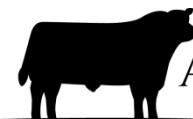
- £1+/day to keep a cow...
- Contact with the unborn calve during calving has been shown to reduce passive transfer >50%.



# Easy fleshing genetics



The energy available from losing 1 body condition score over winter is equivalent to the energy in one bale of silage...condition score has a £44 feed advantage!



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# Cow size - 800kg

- 54 x 800kg mature cows = 43,200kg

Or 43.2 tonnes of cow

- Daily intake of 2% = 0.86 tonnes dry matter
- 365 days at 0.81 tonnes = 315 tonnes DM
- Average price of £80/tonne (£50 for grazing and £100 for winter)
- **Cow annual feed cost - £25,229.00 or £467/cow**





# Cow size - 650kg

- 54 x 650kg mature cows = 35,100kg

Or 35.1 tonnes of cow

- Daily intake of 2% = 0.70 tonnes dry matter
- 365 days at 0.70 tonnes = 256 tonnes DM
- Average price of £80/tonne (£50 for grazing and £100 for winter)
- **Cow annual feed cost - £20,498.00 or £379/cow**



# Differences

- Annual intake – 315 vs 256 tonnes DM
- ~60 tonnes of dry matter
- **Cost difference – £25,229 vs £20,498**
- **Difference of £4,731 or £88 a cow**



# Options

- Use the data you have
  - MyHerdStats
  - Farm software
  - Calving diaries
  - Sale data
- Gather more data where possible
  - Scales?
  - Pelvic scoring?
  - Body condition scoring (don't just score, record!)



# Conclusions

- Decide on breeding objectives
- Fertility is key - ↓fertility = ↓chance of a calf
  - Genetics + body condition + calving stress
- Two pronged approach –
  - Breed from those cows that meet the objective
  - More importantly – cull those that don't meet the breeding objective. If many, over several seasons
- Aim over 90% rearing



*“Never underestimate the value of  
damn good cull”*

*“You get what you select for”*



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