

Organic Conversion Step by Step Guide



This guide aims to provide a step by step guide to farmers and crofters considering organic conversion

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1. List your reasons why you want to convert to organic farming
2. Use these reasons as a key focal point for your objectives of converting to organic
3. Research/gather information about:
 - What organic farming involves
 - What market demand is there for the produce you intend to grow/rear
 - What support is there available (e.g. grants)
 - How suitable is your land & buildings for conversion
4. Discuss your situation with a range of Organic certification bodies (e.g. Soil Association, SOPA, Organic Farmers & Growers, Biodynamic) to learn about them and how any differences between them may affect your future farming system. A discussion with an independent organic farming consultant may help here too.
5. Obtain & read a copy of chosen certification body standards
6. Assess own mindset & skills.
 - Organic farming can be rewarding, but challenging, due to restrictions on management practices and increased paperwork (e.g. annual audits).
 - Are you up for the challenge?
 - Do you have the skills, knowledge & desire to overcome the hurdles?
7. Decide which farm unit/area/fields are to be converted
8. Based on the suitability of your field/area/farm for conversion, and the demand for your produce develop a suitable enterprise mix for the converted land.
9. Decide on an ideal crop rotation to meet the demands
 - Ensure that there is a good balance between cash crops & fertility building crops
 - There may be more than one rotation covering fields based on land capability (e.g. arable cropping, occasional arable cropping & permanent grassland).
10. Assess each field individually
 - Review cropping histories & fertility
 - Use soil analyses & correct deficiencies of pH and P & K before conversion
 - If arable crops previously, a fertility building phase will be needed
 - What is clover content in grassland fields
 - How old are grass swards (and are sown species still there?)
 - Weed problems – Best to spray & control prior to conversion



11. Assess farm infrastructure for chosen enterprises & consider changes/investments that are required.
For example:

- Livestock housing & fencing (cattle/sheep/deer proof)
- Space requirements, feeding/trough space & lying areas
- Flooring (slats/cubicles/bedded court)
- Type of bedding (straw/sawdust/woodchips/sand)
- Manure storage capacity and handling facilities
- Machinery requirements (e.g. seed drills/ harrows/ manure spreaders)
- Crop/Feed handling requirements (e.g drier, dresser, storage space)

12. Assess existing Livestock systems

- Mix of enterprises (Cattle, Sheep, Pig, Poultry & Others)
- Breeding vs Finishing stock
- Breeds – Are they well adapted to environment?
Are they easy care?
Well adapted to forage/free range systems
- Sources of replacement stock (homebred or bought in)
- Calving/Lambing/Farrowing – Does it co-inside with spring
- Grassland management
Set stocked vs rotational vs mob grazed
Stocking rates & N Fertiliser use
Clean grazing strategies
Management for early bite
Forage Production – Silage/Hay/Haylage
- Feeding system
Proportion of forage to concentrates in rations
Proportion of bought in feeds
Prohibited feeds (e.g. urea)
- Health & Welfare
Closed herd/flock
Use of anthelmintics & other veterinary products
Current disease status and problems
Staffing/stockmanship skill set

13. Consider applying to Scottish Government for grant aid to convert to organics

- Applications for funding require to be approved prior to start of conversion so this needs to be factored into conversion timing.
- Ensure any conversion scheme contract is signed before starting conversion with your certification body

14. Prepare conversion plan including crop and livestock management plans

- Provide map with list of fields entering conversion (e.g. an up to date IACS map)
 - Timing for start of conversion
- Conversion of Land
- This is very important to enable crops to get premiums in third year
 - For winter/spring crops – can only grow 1st Organic crop 24mths after conversion
 - Conversion of Livestock – Standard or Simultaneous?
 - Simultaneous offers a faster method to sell organic livestock off the holding providing livestock managed organically during conversion (good for whole farm conversions)
 - Beef cows need to be managed organically 3mths prior to birth for progeny to qualify as organic under simultaneous conversion, otherwise stock need to be conceived on organic/in-conversion land.
 - Simultaneous conversion allows stock to be sold as organic after 24mth conversion
 - Also need to start conversion prior to cut of hay/silage for fodder

- Soil & Nutrient Management
 - Cultivation techniques (Ploughing vs Min till ?)
 - Crop history & forward plans (5yr crop history & 5yr forward)
 - Nutrient supply
 - Sources of allowable Phosphate & Potash to be used
 - Manure management – what crops intend to receive FYM/Slurry?
 - Whole farm nutrient budget
 - Livestock Management (for each enterprise)
 - Breeds of choice, Breeding plan & source of replacement stock
 - Housing & any changes to be implemented
 - Feeding regimes
 - Animal health plans – Ideally created in consultation with farm vet
 - Crop Management
 - Crop Rotations and explain why potential varieties of crops used
 - Weed, pest and disease control methods to be used
 - Grassland Management regime (e.g stocking rates, clean grazing)
 - Grass mixtures/species to be used & why
 - Environmental and conservation measures to maintain & encourage biodiversity
 - Highlight habitats on farm and how they are managed
 - Marketing plans
 - Detail how you intend to market your produce, and initial outlets of choice
- 15. Complete and return application form to Certification Body
 - Commence organic management
 - Expect Inspector's visit