

QMS Quarterly Cattle Supply Update

Q1 2026

Purpose:

To provide an update on cattle supply in Scotland based on the latest cattle population data from January 2026.

Prepared By:

Iain Macdonald, Market Intelligence Manager

Contact: imacdonald@qmscotland.co.uk

Date: 02/04/2026



Quality Meat Scotland is a Non-Departmental Public Body. This advice is freely available and further information can be provided by the designated contact above.



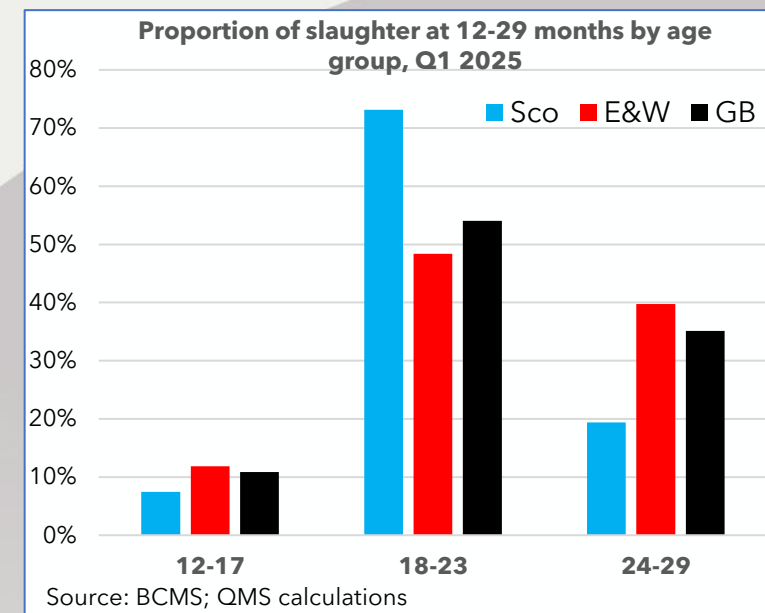
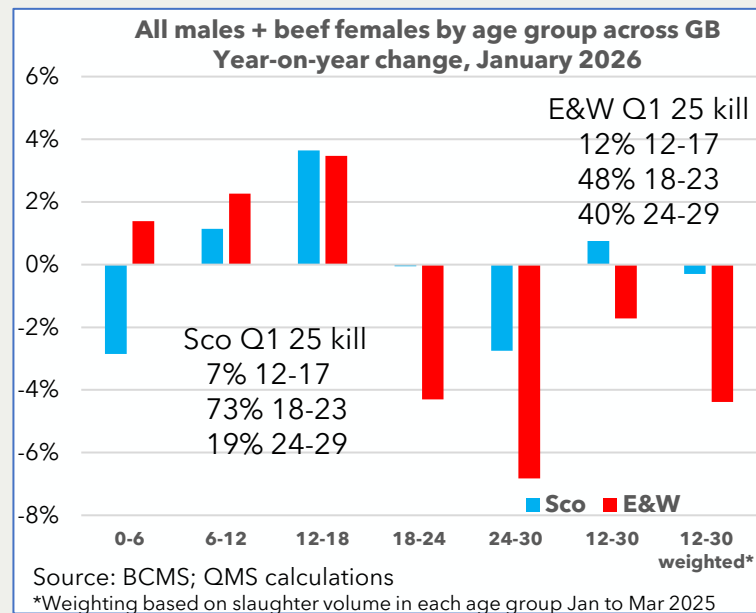
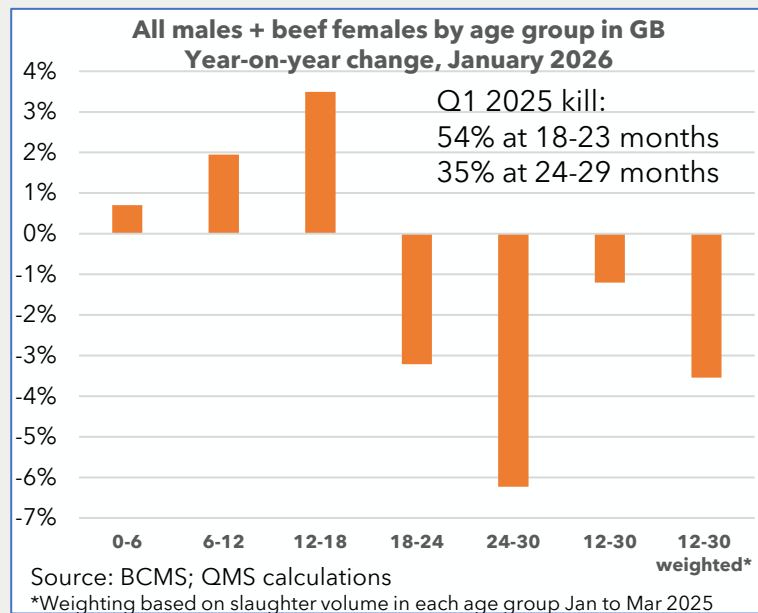
Summary of Key Points



- Continuing low slaughter in Q4 2025 supported prime cattle availability in Scotland at the start of 2026, with the number of males and beef-sired females aged 12-30 months lifting slightly from a year earlier, up 0.8%. This was the first quarter to show an increase since July 2024. Older prime cattle remained tight, but down at a slower rate of 2.7%, while numbers in the key demographic of 18-24 months were effectively stable for a second quarter (-0.1%), and there was a 3.6% jump at 12-18 months, which should support availability in the second half of the year.
- At GB level, the year-on-year decline in numbers aged 12 to 30 months softened further, but the short-term market impact was much tighter, with a 3% reduction at 18-24 months and a 6% reduction at 24-30 months, reflecting significant declines in England & Wales. However, a 3.5% uplift at 12-18 months will eventually provide offsetting support.
- A stronger calf crop across GB, supported by lower mortality in spring 2025 should feed into an improved supply-side picture by summer 2026. Meanwhile, increased calf numbers in England & Wales could result in softer competition for stores at spring sales from English buyers. Then again, store prices have made a strong start to 2026 at Scottish auctions, and numbers of longer keep stores could be very tight in Scotland at spring sales due to a 2.8% reduction at under six months in January*.
- Under-30 month slaughter fell much faster than expected based on population data in 2025, signalling lower slaughter rates across GB, though to a lesser extent in England than in Wales or Scotland. If slaughter rates were to partially rebound in 2026, there could be a small increase in kill, modelled at under 1% in Scotland. A reduced heifer kill, potentially as producers look to stabilise herds, is sustaining downwards pressure on the slaughter rate, limiting the recovery.
- In 2025, a further small reduction in the net outflow of cattle born in Scotland limited the overall decline in kill at Scottish abattoirs. However, the outflow remained elevated well above pre-2022 levels. Lower moves to English farms and auctions in the second half of 2025 suggest that the net outflow is unlikely to widen again in the first half of 2026.
- In January 2026, there were 395,000 beef-sired females aged 30 months and over on Scottish holdings. This was a 1.7% decline from a year earlier, which was the smallest reduction seen since October 2022. ScotEID cattle population data for early-March 2026 suggests that the rate of decline has softened further.
- In the second half of 2025, the quarterly seasonal increases in the beef herd were above the five-year average, but to result in a more significant move towards herd stability, stronger momentum will be required in 2026. One limiting factor to a slowdown in herd decline in the short-term has been a reduced population of beef-sired females aged 24-30 months – they were down 5.2% year-on-year in October, softening to -3.1% in January 2026.
- While also softening, the year-on-year decline in the suckler herd in England & Wales has continued to outpace the decline in Scotland, with 2.6% reduction in beef-sired females over 30 months in January.
- Reflecting a market downturn, Scotland's dairy herd moved into contraction at the start of 2026 after two years of growth, slipping 0.4% lower than at the start of 2025, while a period of stability came to an end for the dairy herd in England & Wales, with numbers falling 1.3% behind year-earlier levels. A renewed contraction in the dairy sector is likely to begin having an impact on prime cattle supplies in 2028.
- Non-EU import penetration appears to have steadied at close to 30% of UK beef imports, averaging 5,800t per month between July 2025 and January 2026. Non-EU imports reached 50,800t in 2025, up from 20,100t in 2024 and 12,200t in 2023, but effectively displaced EU beef rather than adding to overall imports. Despite this substantial increase, the Irish Republic remained the dominant supplier, accounting for 67% of deliveries, although this was down from 77% in 2024 and 73% in 2023. There has been an interesting reduction in the average price of non-EU imports as volumes have increased, potentially signalling a shift in the balance of cuts/ market outlets. Non-EU beef imports are now significantly cheaper on average than EU beef, having been significantly dearer up until spring 2025.
- Looking at the key Meating Our Potential metrics, on a red, amber, green scale, beef cow numbers have been rated as red, while productivity has been rated green, and the outflow has been rated as amber. All three metrics did however show some improvement in 2025.

* Based on males and beef-sired females

Prime Cattle Availability - Scottish availability flat year-on-year while E&W remains tight



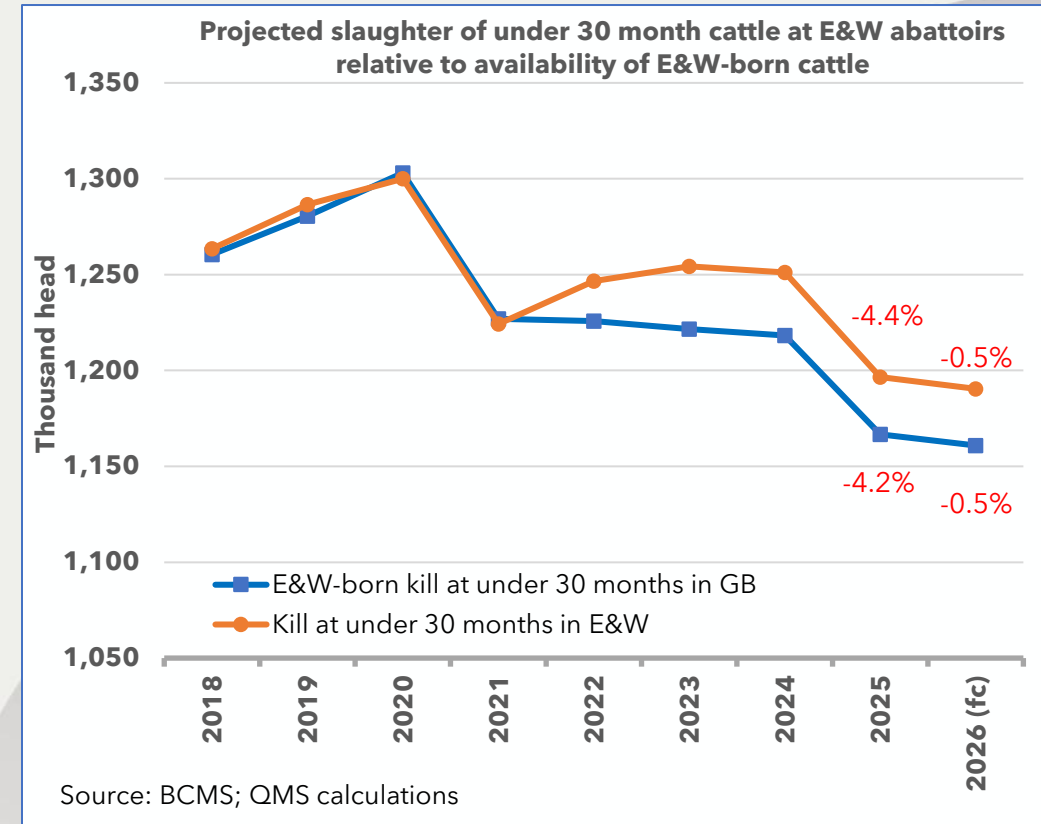
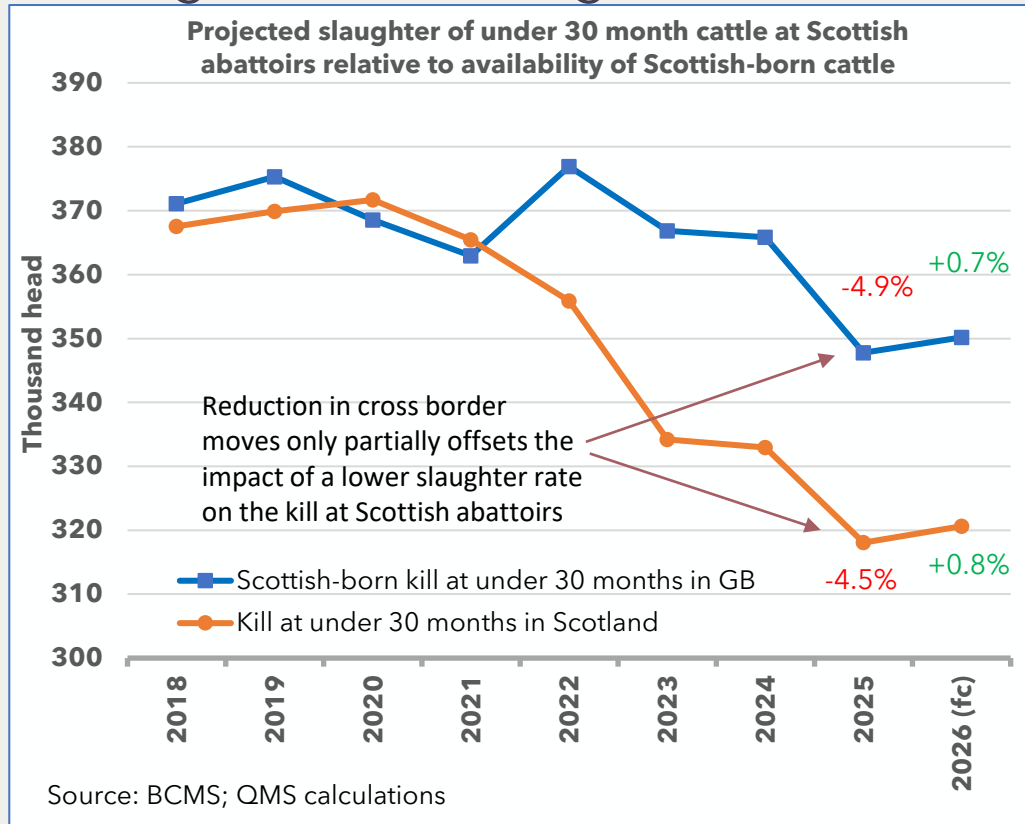
Continuing low slaughter in Q4 2025 supported prime cattle availability in Scotland at the start of 2026, with the number of cattle aged 12-30 months lifting slightly from a year earlier, up 0.8%. This was the first quarter to show an increase since July 2024. Older prime cattle remained tight, but the rate of decline halved to 2.7%. Meanwhile, numbers in the key demographic of 18-24 months were effectively stable for a second quarter (-0.1%), and there was a jump at 12-18 months of 3.6%, which should support availability in the second half of the year. Weighted for slaughter in Q1, the overall prime cattle population was still down marginally.

Looking ahead to Q2 2026, numbers should, in theory, remain relatively stable overall in Scotland with the reduced 24-30-month group accounting for a higher share of slaughter but being offset by increased numbers of younger cattle reaching slaughter age.

At GB level, the year-on-year decline in numbers aged 12 to 30 months slowed further in January, to just over 1% from around 2% in October and 3% in April and July 2025. However, numbers were tight in the key slaughter age groups, with 18-24 months down 3% and 24-30 months down by more than 6%, with a 3.5% uplift at 12-18 months likely to eventually provide some offsetting support.

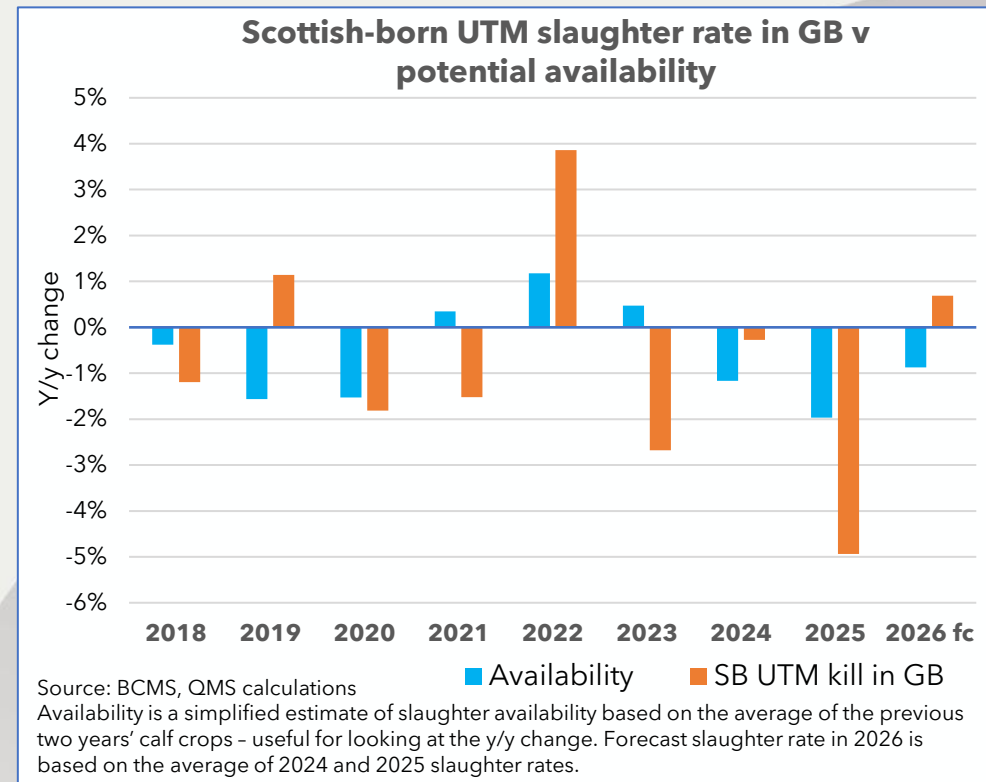
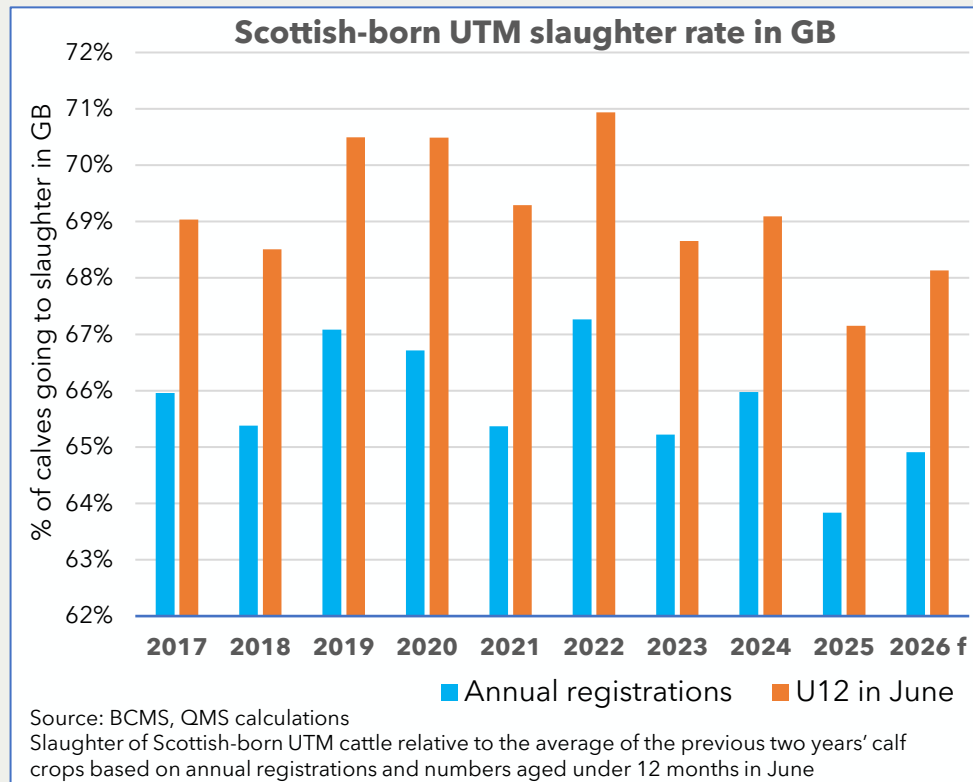
A stronger calf crop across GB, supported by lower mortality in spring 2025 should feed into an improved supply-side picture by summer 2026. Meanwhile, increased calf numbers in England & Wales could result in softer competition for stores at spring sales from English buyers. The again, store prices have made a strong start to 2026 at Scottish auctions, and numbers of longer keep stores could be very tight in Scotland at spring sales due to a 2.8% reduction at under six months in January.

Projected slaughter of cattle aged under 30 months at Scottish abattoirs in 2025 and 2026



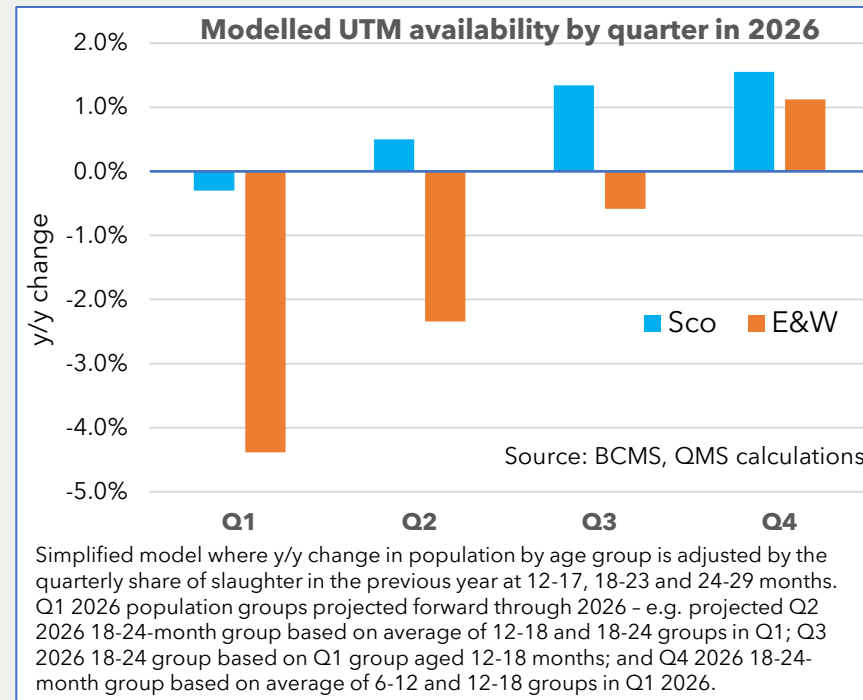
- Starting point: average of previous two years' calf crops
- Slaughter rates fell back sharply in Scotland and Wales in 2025, and more modestly in England. The general reduction was influenced by the reduction in the volume of demand following the surge in consumer prices, plus there had been increased slaughter rates in 2024.
- For 2026, a partial rebound in slaughter rates has been factored in, as the volume of demand begins to slowly recover but farmers move towards stabilising herds
- To estimate the kill at Scottish abattoirs, cross-border slaughter rates relative to calf crops in Scotland, England and Wales have been adjusted following changes in moves during 2025, and are assumed to stabilise in 2026.
- In 2026, a modelled partial rebound in the slaughter rate (average of 2024 and 2025, placing it slightly below the 2023-25 avg) and a steadying of cross border moves supports a slight lift in kill of 0.8% in Scotland.
- In England & Wales, aligning slaughter rates with their 2023-25 averages results in a slight reduction in kill if cross border moves stabilise.

Slaughter rates



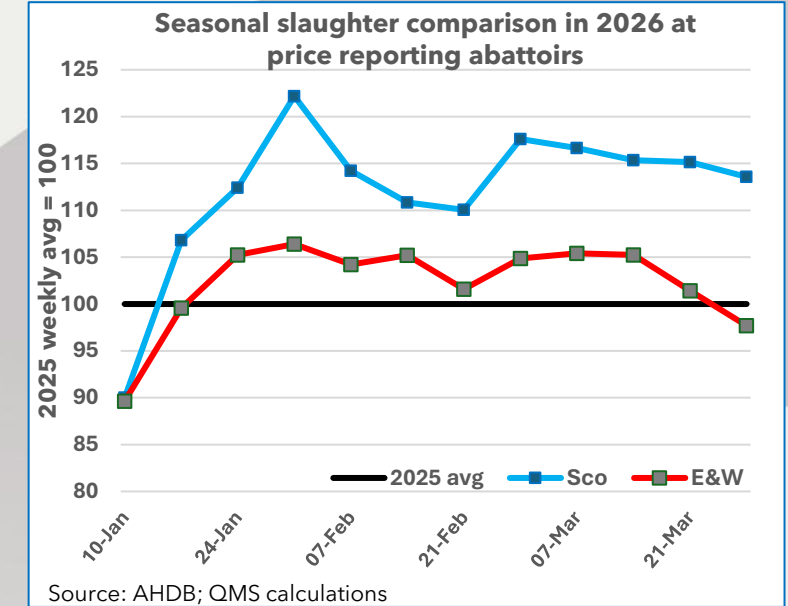
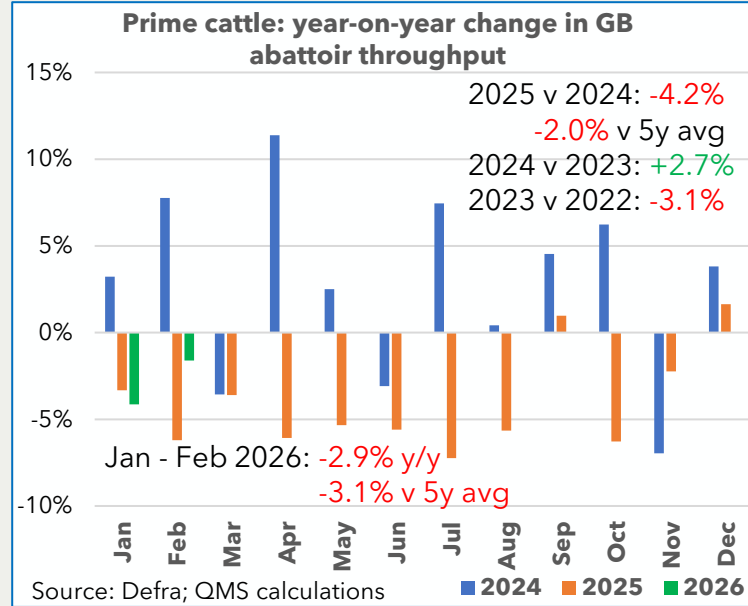
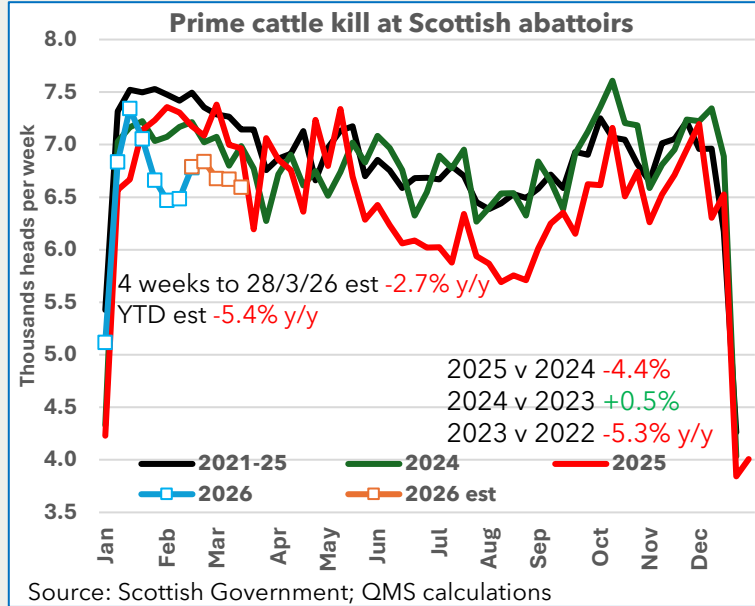
- Slaughter rates fell by around two percentage points in 2025
- If they were to return to a long-term average level in 2026, Scottish-born UTM slaughter could rise by 2.3%
- SB UTM slaughter in GB fell by 5% in 2025 compared to a 2% reduction in the modelled calf crop (note: modelled calf crop from which slaughter animals are drawn from in 2025 is the average of the 2023 and 2024 calf crops)
- In 2026, the modelled calf crop is 1% lower than in 2025
- A partial rebound in slaughter rate could support a small increase in kill of less than 1% in 2026, while an unchanged low slaughter rate could see a near-1% reduction.
- Offsetting a potential rebound in slaughter rate could be a move towards heifer retention – this has been signalled in the price reporting data with the heifer share consistently lower y/y in late-2025 and Q1 2026
- A change in cross-border movements could result in a variation between the Scottish-born kill and the kill in Scotland

Prime Cattle Slaughter in 2026 – modelled quarterly availability profile based on the January population data and quarterly slaughter by age group



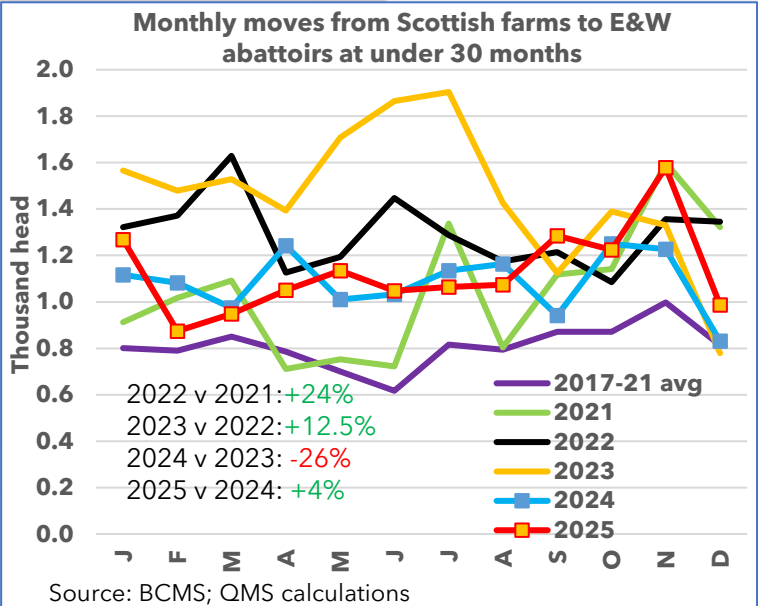
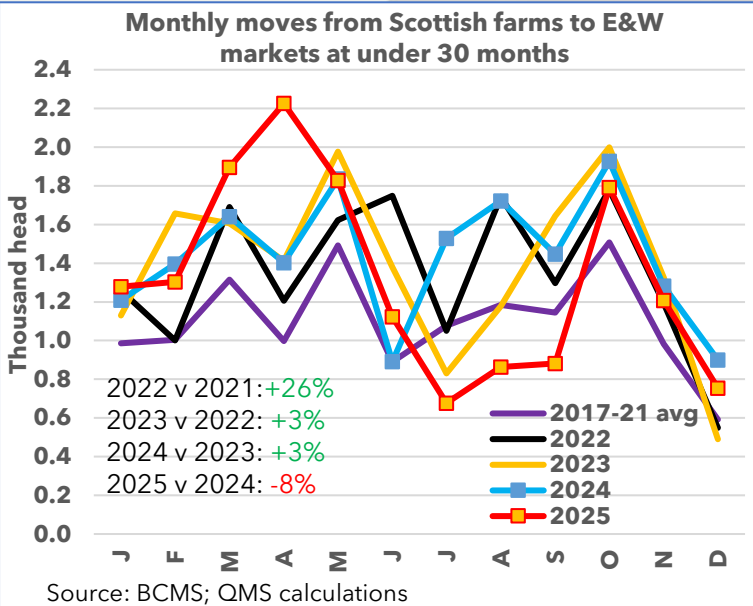
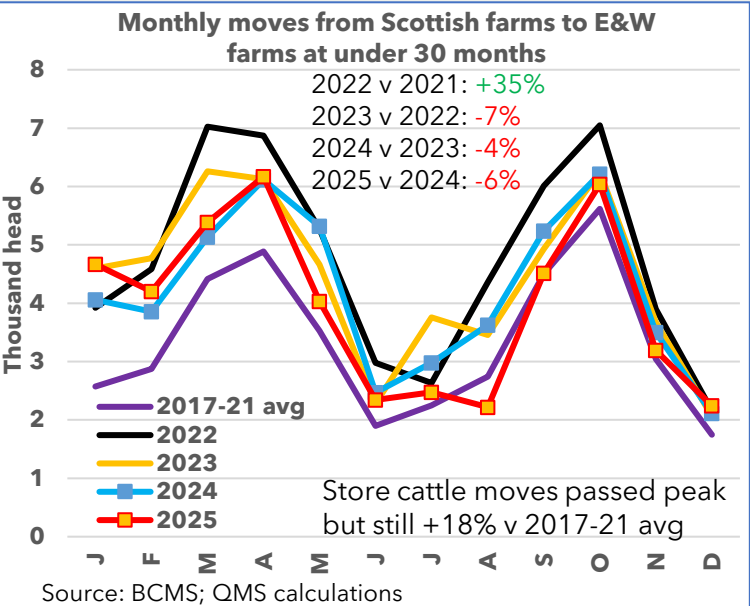
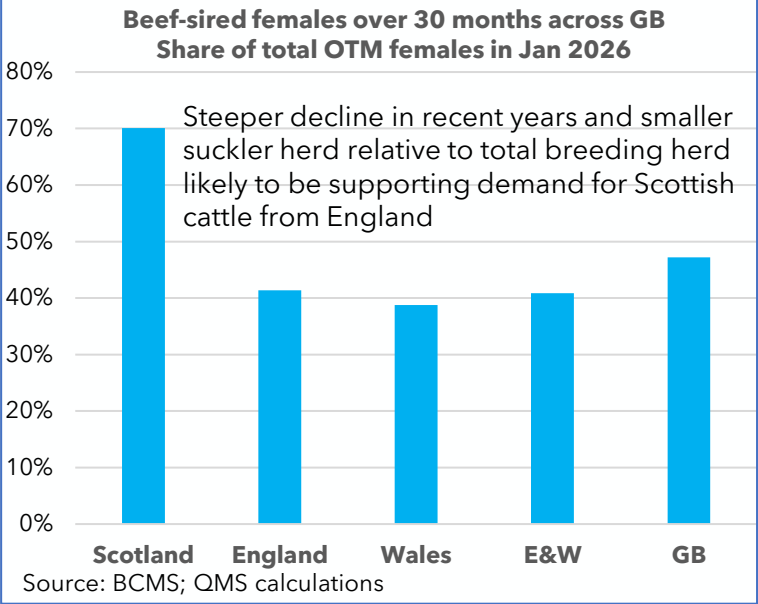
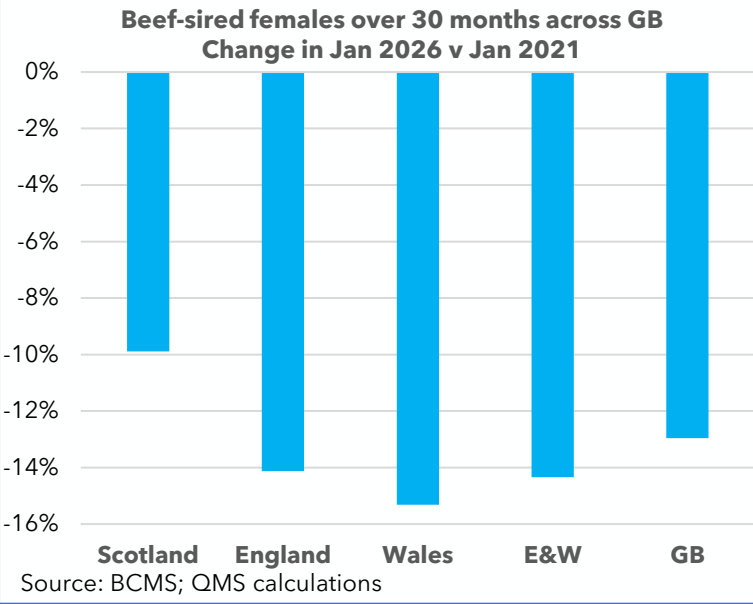
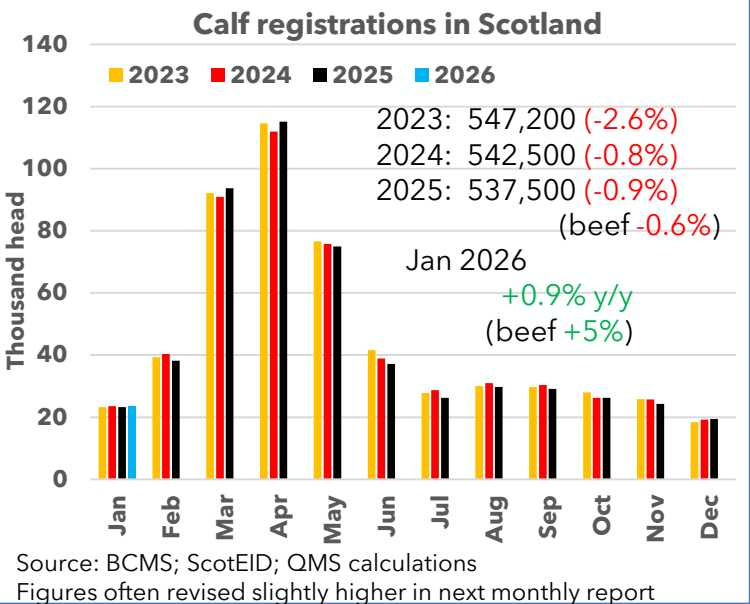
- As a guide to seasonal supplies in 2026, quarterly availability has been projected forward through 2026 from the January population by age group based on a simplified model using the main age groups and their share of slaughter at under 30 months by quarter in 2025. For example, in Q2 2026, the projected year-on-year change in the pool of cattle aged 18-24 months is based on the average of the year-on-year changes in those aged 12-18 and 18-24-months in January 2026, while the change in the 12-18-month pool in January becomes the change in the 18-24-month pool in July. Please note that this modelling does not account for fluctuations in cross-border movements or adjustments to slaughter rates.
- This simplified modelling points to a fairly stable level of availability in Scotland in the first half of 2026, followed by a small lift in the second half.
- By contrast, numbers look tight in the first half in England & Wales before steadying in Q3 and lifting towards the year-end.
- The relative tightness at the start of the year for England & Wales reflects the higher share of older prime cattle in the slaughter profile plus significant declines at over 18 months in January 2026. In Scotland, older prime cattle are also in short supply, but the key 18-24-month group was stable in January.

Prime cattle slaughter in 2026 - seasonally firm start to 2026, but numbers still trailing 2025 levels despite stable availability on farm



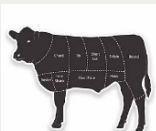
- Prime cattle slaughter has started 2026 generally running at a seasonally high level. However, the weekly kill has been more variable than usual, with an unusual slowdown in February followed by a lift into March. In theory, numbers could tighten in April before rising again in May after turnout. A cold, wet winter in Aberdeenshire could delay turnout this year and delay the seasonal uplift towards the end of May and into June.
- Based on seasonal trends, estimated slaughter in the first quarter has been consistent with an annual projected level around 2% lower than in 2024. This highlights the weakness in kill at the start of 2026 despite a more stable level of availability on farm, signalling that the slaughter rate has remained low. However, this projection is based on a five-year average trend, meaning there would be an expectation of a significant year-on-year increase through the summer when numbers were low in 2025.
- It should be highlighted that strength in the deadweight price reporting sample in 2026 has not been fully repeated in the QMS levy returns. The Scottish Government's slaughter data breakdown by category for January and February pointed towards it being a jump in the share of the prime kill that were price reported rather than cows. Any cattle bought at auctions, flat-rate purchases and contract kill are excluded from deadweight price reporting. At Scottish auctions, prime cattle marketings have remained low, averaging less than 300 head per week.
- South of the border, the deadweight price reported kill only fell marginally in 2025 against a significant reduction in the overall prime cattle kill reported by Defra (-3.7%), highlighting a further shift towards deadweight price reporting. However, deadweight numbers then fell similarly in January and February to the Defra data (-2%). Based on the deadweight reports, slaughter appears to have fallen more significantly in the second half of March in England & Wales than in Scotland.

Drivers of prime and store cattle availability and demand in Scotland



Please note that some of the moves to farms in England & Wales are effectively slaughter moves, with only a small number of days between move and slaughter

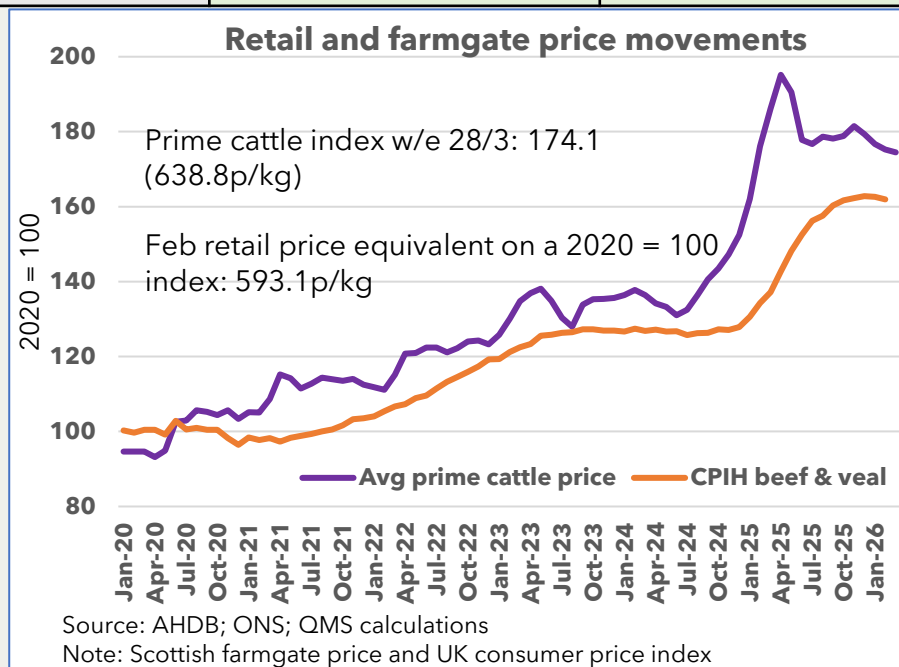
Drivers of prime cattle demand in Scotland



BEEF

12 weeks to 22 February 2026

| | GB | | Scotland | |
|-------------------------|--------|--------------|----------|--------------|
| | Actual | % change y/y | Actual | % change y/y |
| Value (£m) | 726.7 | 10.0% | 68.1 | 14.1% |
| Volume (t) | 59,126 | -8.5% | 5,343 | -4.1% |
| Avg price (£/kg) | 12.29 | 20.2% | 12.74 | 19.0% |
| Penetration* | 67.8% | -3.9% | 70.2% | -2.7% |
| Frequency** | 4.4 | -2.5% | 4.2 | -5.0% |

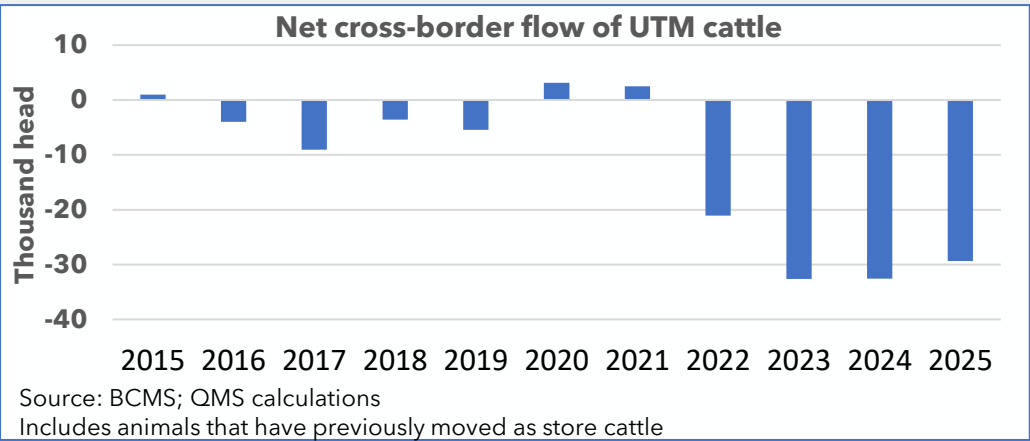
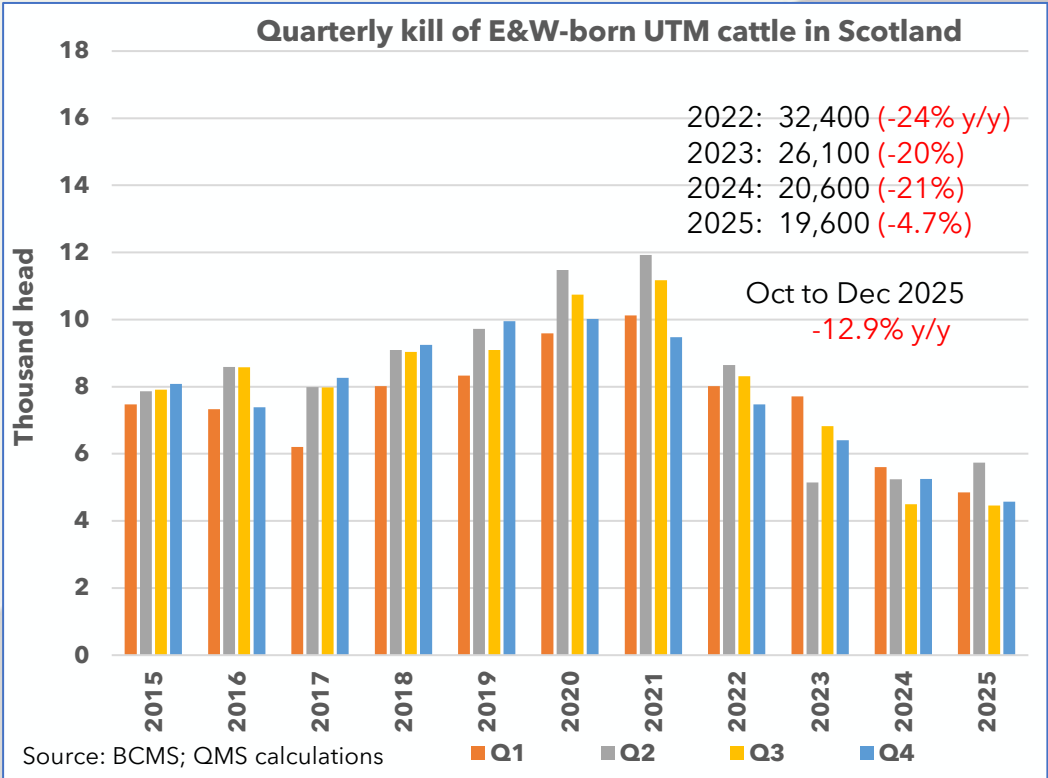
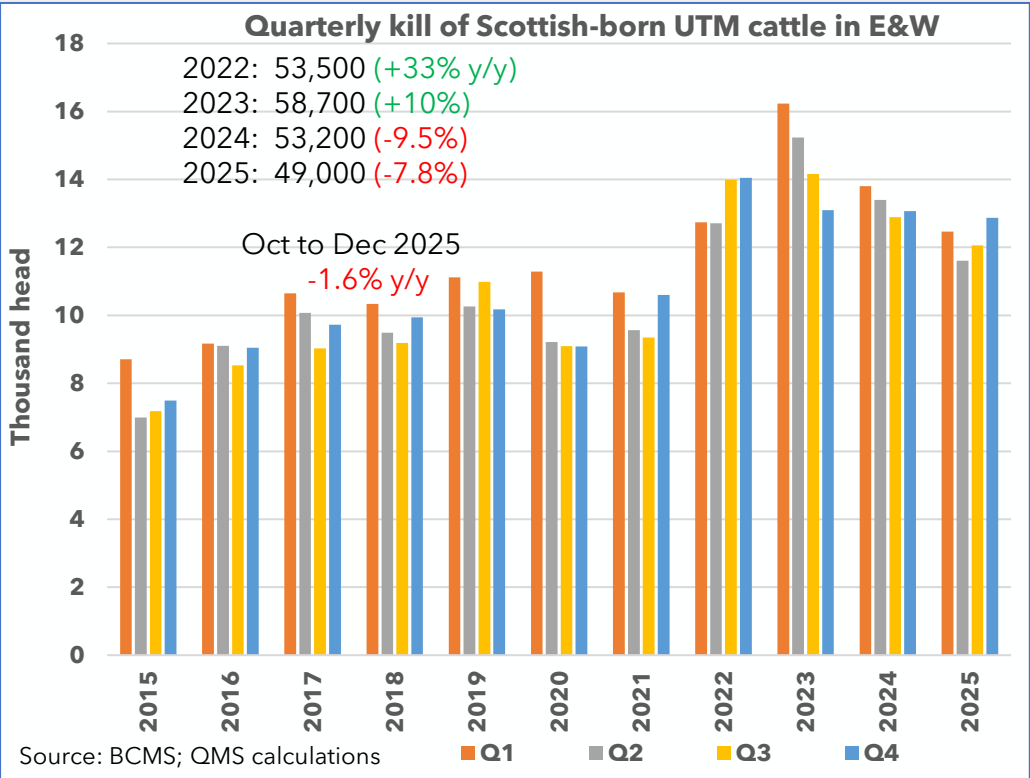


- Consumer demand remains firm, with spending continuing to grow sharply on beef, far out-pacing the rise in household incomes.
- However, sharply higher prices have squeezed the volume of demand, with a reduced share of shoppers buying beef (c 4 percentage points) and it has been bought less often.
- Over the long-term, farmgate prices have still moved faster than retail prices and, while the gap narrowed in the second half of 2025, month-to-month consumer price rises slowed towards the year-end and have dipped slightly in January and February, signalling expectations that cattle prices were not going to lift again.
- In March, prime cattle prices averaged 6.3% lower than in the same month of 2025, while the CPIH for beef and veal was 20.6% higher year-on-year in February.

Source of retail data: Worldpanel by Numerator UK; data covers sales of fresh and frozen unprocessed red meat; please note that sales data for Scotland can be volatile due to the limited sample size

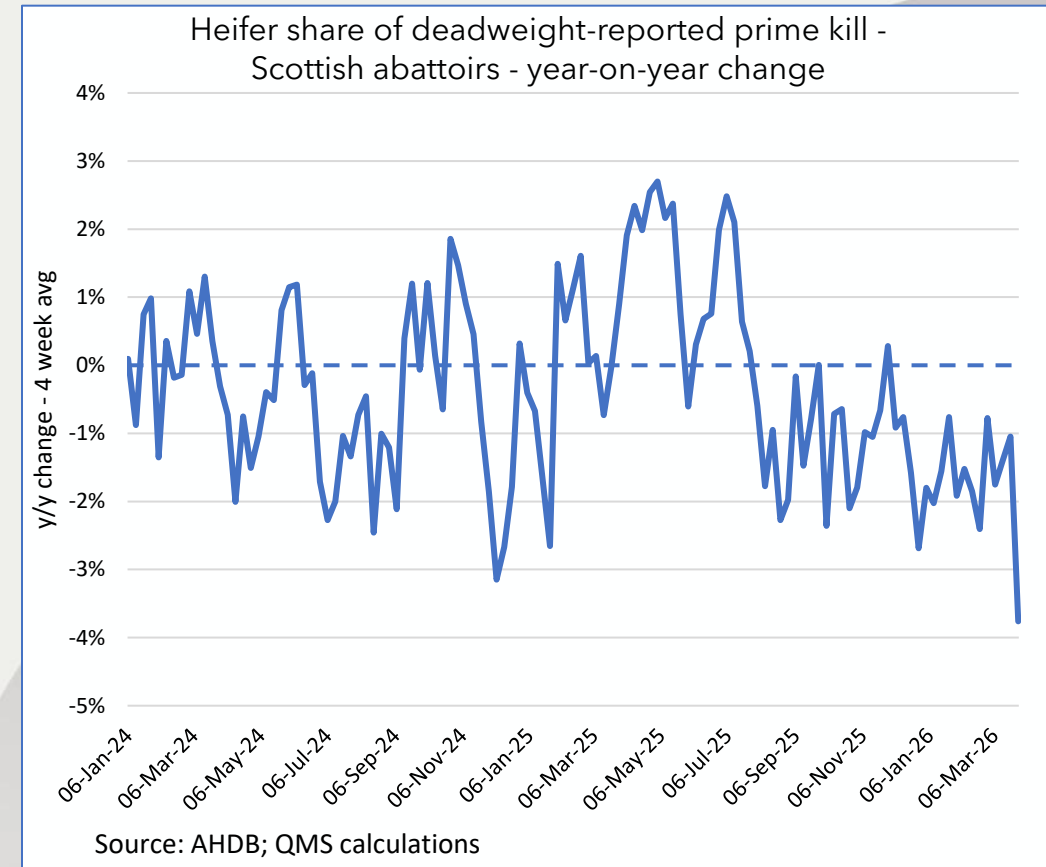
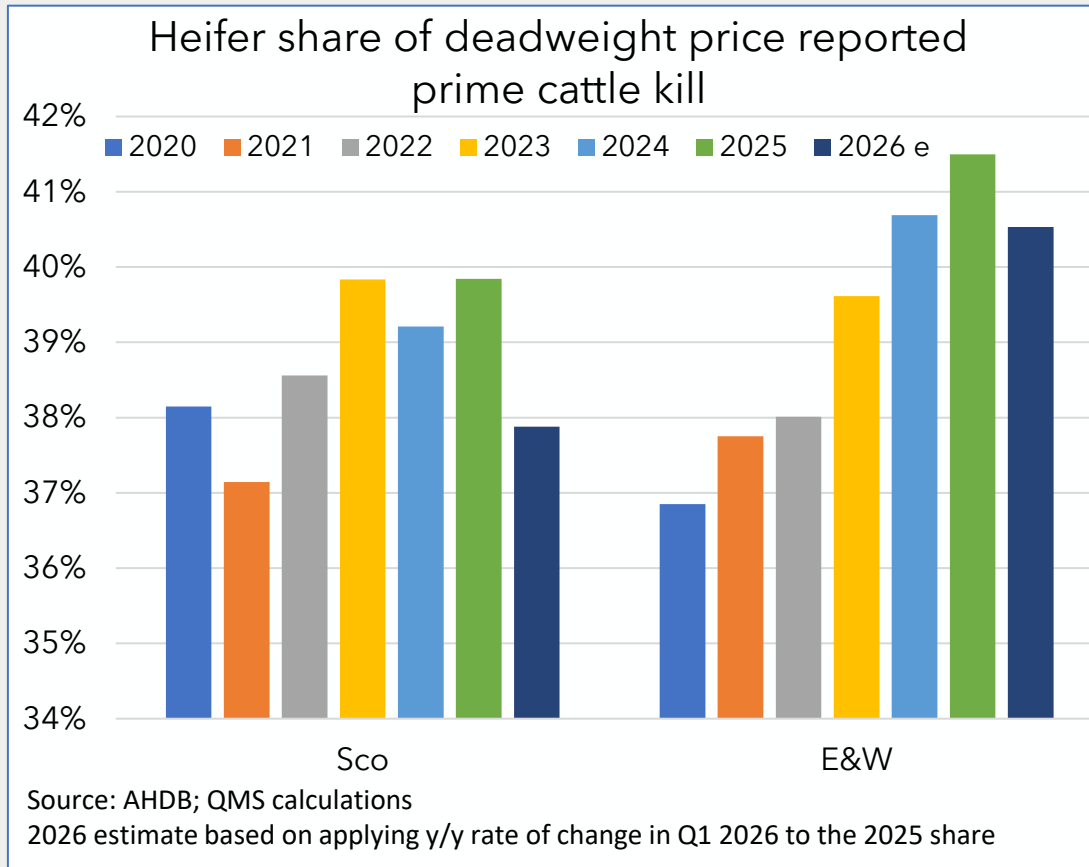
*Penetration % - Number of households/individuals that bought at least once in the time period as a percentage of total households/individuals.

**Frequency - Average number of purchase trips per buyer in the time period.



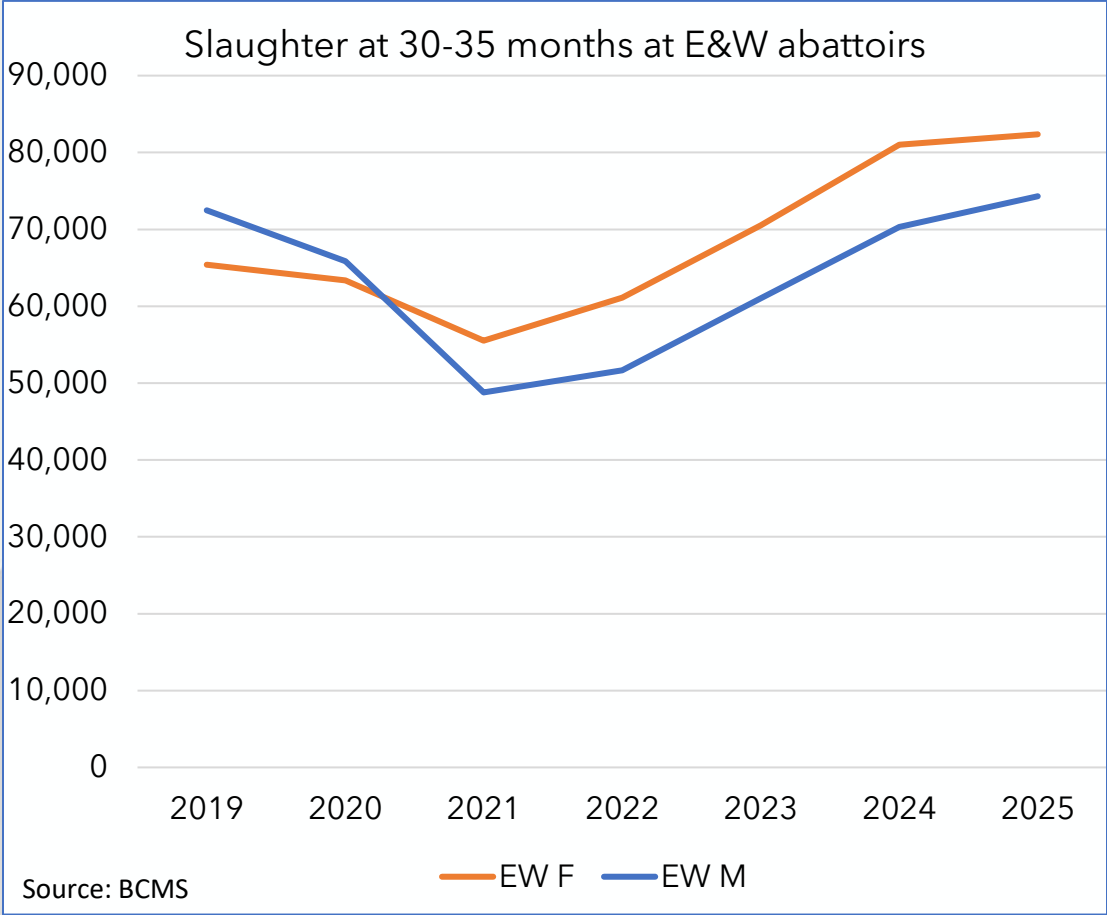
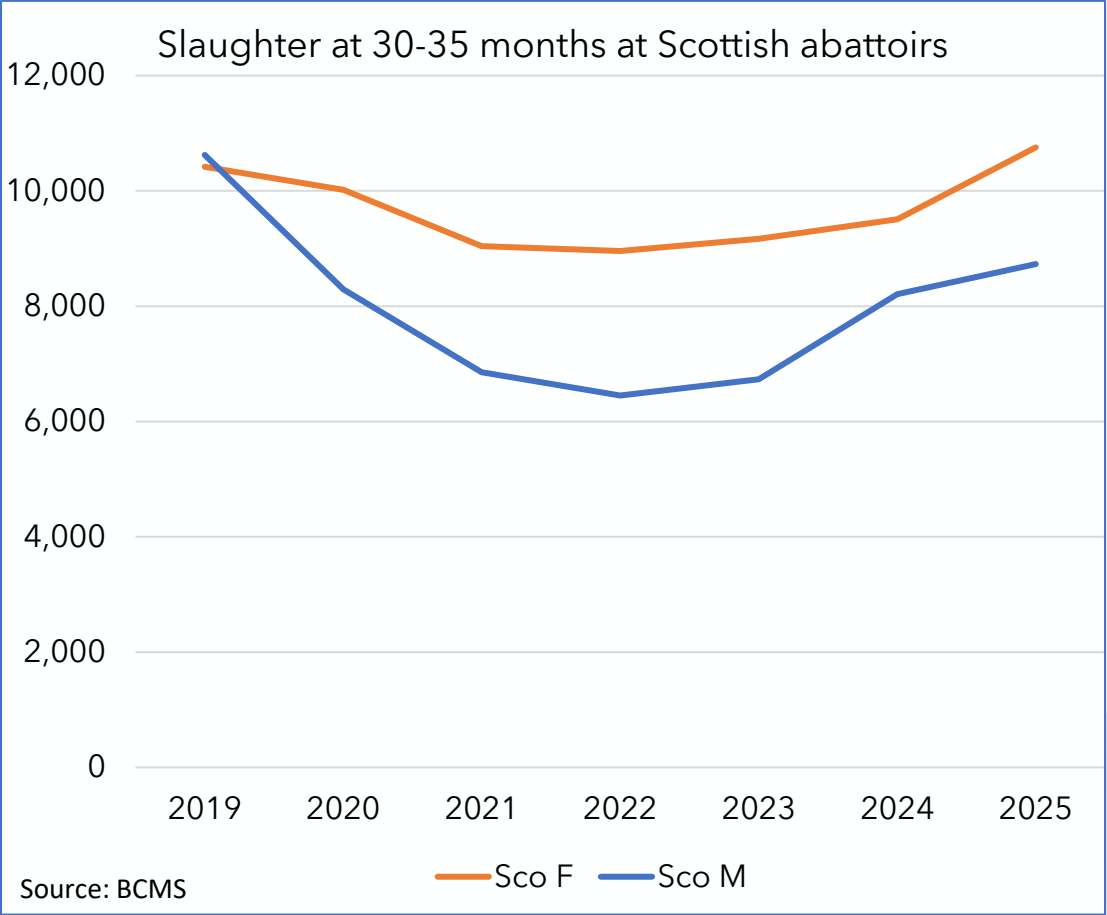
- While slaughter of Scottish-born cattle at under 30 months in England & Wales has fallen back from its peak, it remains elevated, with the 2025 level still 23% above the 2017-21 average.
- Slaughter of E&W-born cattle in Scotland had shown signs of steadying in 2025 after three years of considerable decline, but there was a stronger decline again in Q4.
- While the squeeze on prime cattle slaughter from cross-border trade has continued, the net outflow eased slightly in 2025. The net impact in 2025 was +3,200 head compared to slaughter in 2024, equivalent to 1% of the 2024 UTM kill in Scotland.
- Lower moves to English farms and auctions in the second half of 2025 signal that the net outflow is unlikely to widen again in the first half of 2026.

Heifers underpinning slaughter in the short-term



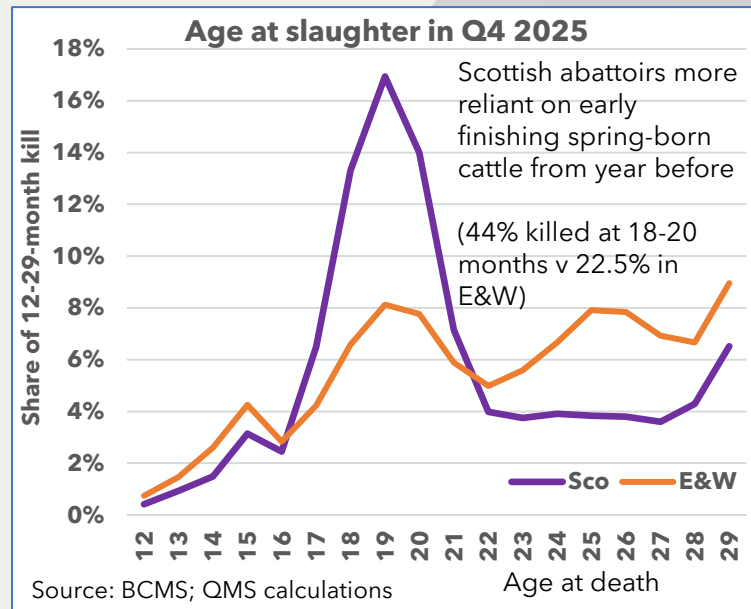
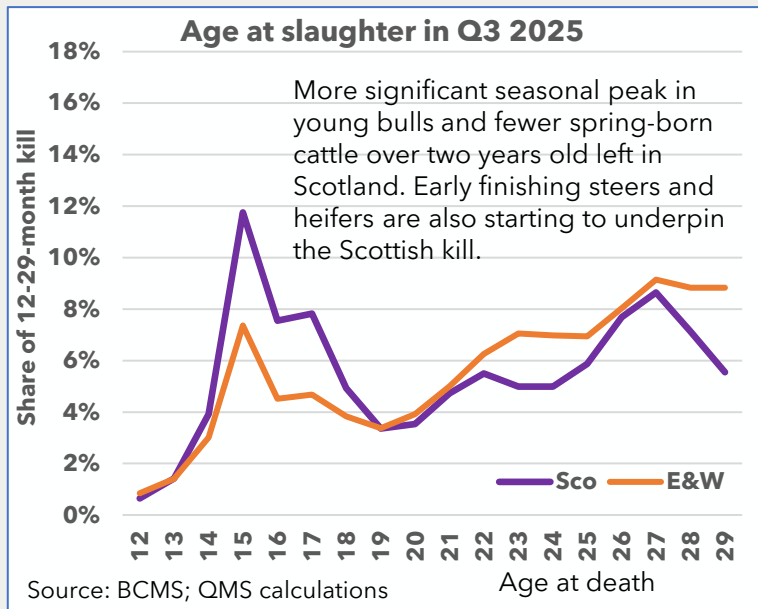
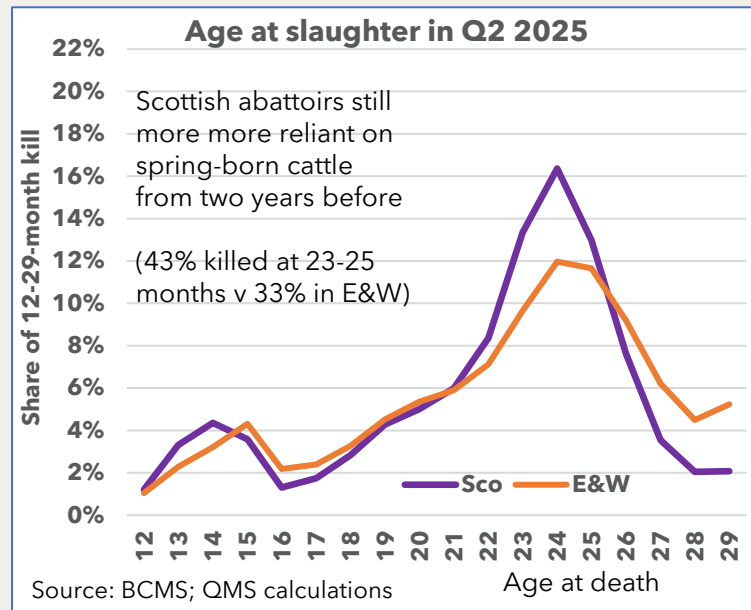
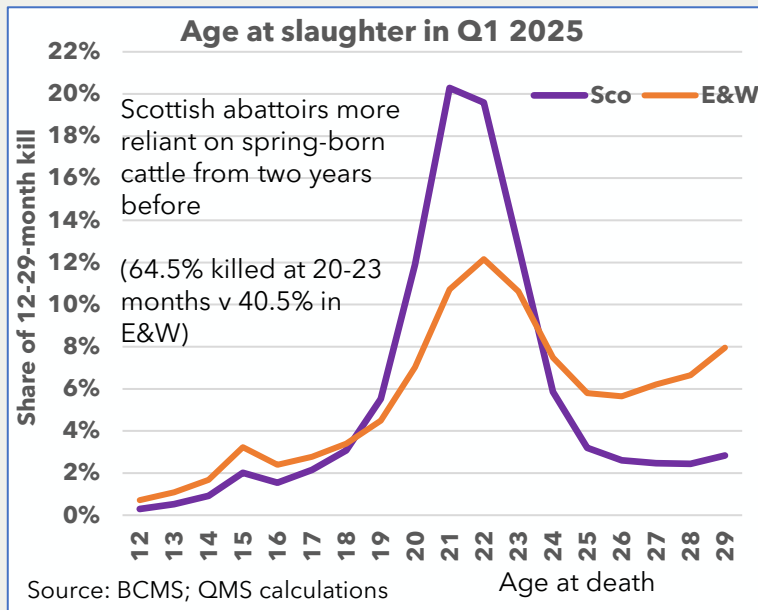
- Heifer share rose in the first half but fell in the second half of 2025
- Elevated heifer kills have been supporting slaughter in recent years but limiting herd size
- Is part of the upwards trend a reflection of more beef-sired dairy heifers in the system as a result of the increased uptake of sexed semen?
- Contradiction between elevated heifer kill and low overall slaughter rate in 2025 (also the case in 2023), but a low male kill in 2025 could translate into a higher male kill in 2026
- Consistently lower heifer share of slaughter in the price reporting sample since summer 2025, which has become almost every week between December and March, could signal a stronger move towards herd stability

Older prime cattle have supported slaughter since 2023



- The stronger rise in the male kill in this age group since 2022 indicates that the increase has been in prime cattle rather than down to slaughter of cows at younger ages, but there was a shift towards females in 2025.
- A further increase in 2025 reflected a higher population on farm at the start of the year in Scotland, although numbers did then tighten in the second half
- Slaughter has risen faster at 30-35 months than at 24-29 months

Seasonality of prime cattle production

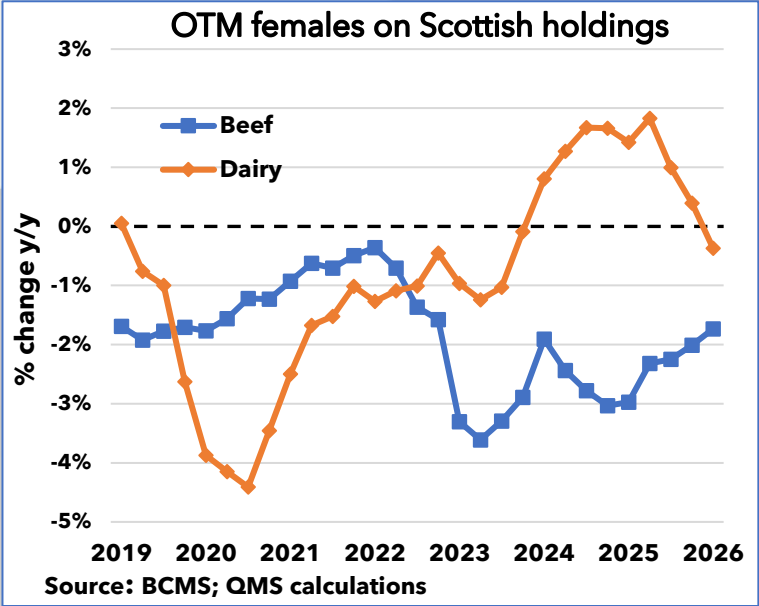
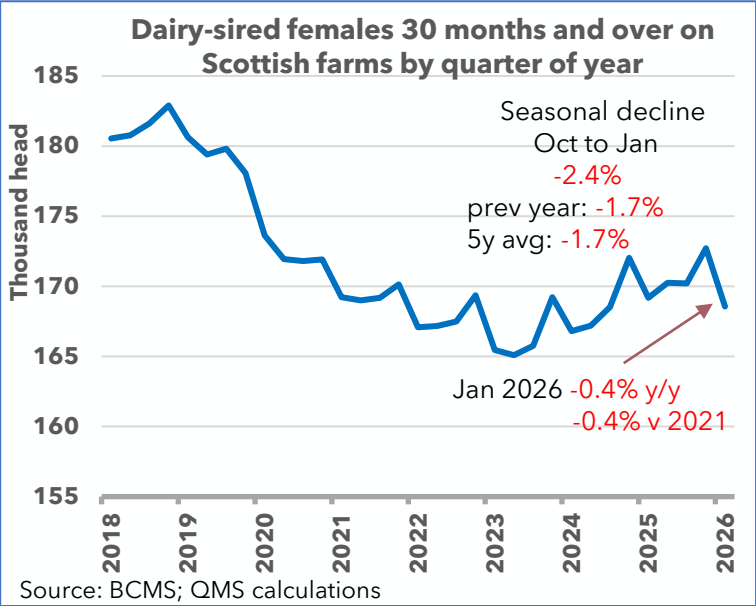
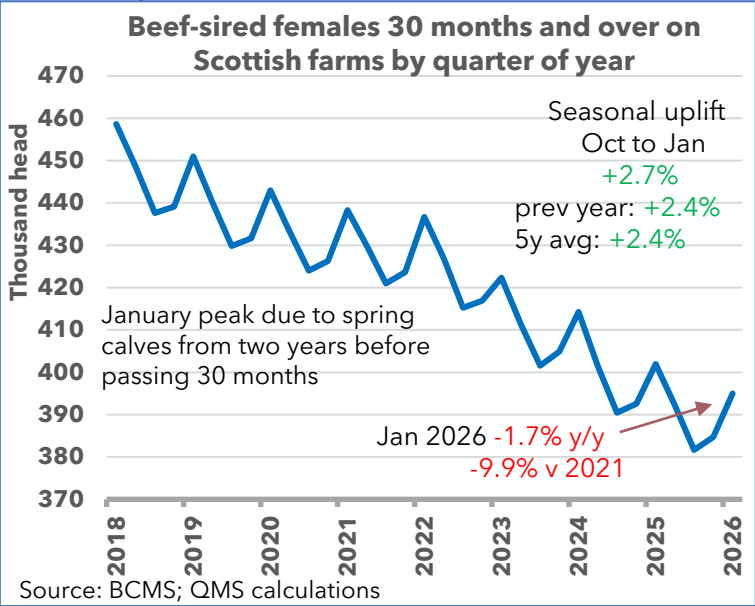


The dominance of spring calving in Scotland and a peak slaughter age at just under two years old means that availability of prime cattle is at its highest of the year in Scotland in the first half. A peak slaughter age of 21-22 months combined with an April high for calvings points to peak supply in January and February.

However, supply briefly rebounds in May and June following turnout, before slowing down in the summer, partially offset by the arrival of the young bulls from the previous year's spring calf crop.

After a weak third quarter, slaughter builds again towards the year-end as the early finishing spring-born cattle come on stream in more significant numbers at around 18 months of age.

Longer-term supplies outlook - beef herd decline softened further at the end of 2025, while the dairy herd returned to contraction



In January 2026, there were 395,000 beef-sired females aged 30 months and over on Scottish holdings. This was a 1.7% decline from a year earlier, which was the smallest reduction seen since October 2022. Nevertheless, numbers were still down nearly 10% on five years before and by nearly 14% on 2018. The total at the start of 2025 had been 401,900 head.

The seasonal uplift from the previous quarter was the strongest for the period in four years, exceeding the five-year average. This was the second consecutive quarter that the seasonal change had been above the five-year average, signalling a more positive move towards herd stability in the second half of 2025.

However, looking ahead, if seasonal changes were to continue exceeding their five-year average by 0.3 percentage points in 2026, the year-on-year rate of decline would settle at -1% in the second half. One limiting factor to a slowdown in herd decline has been a reduced population of beef-sired females aged 24-30 months – they were down 5.2% year-on-year in October 2025, softening to -3.1% in January 2026.

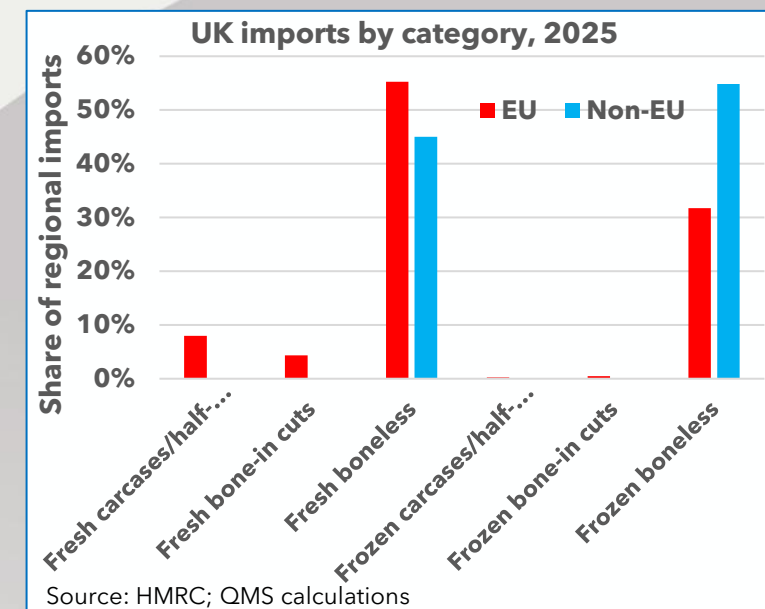
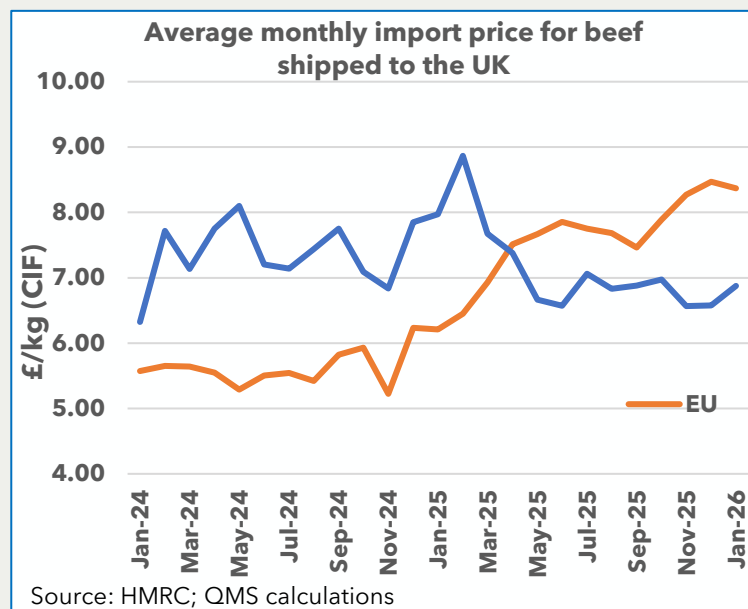
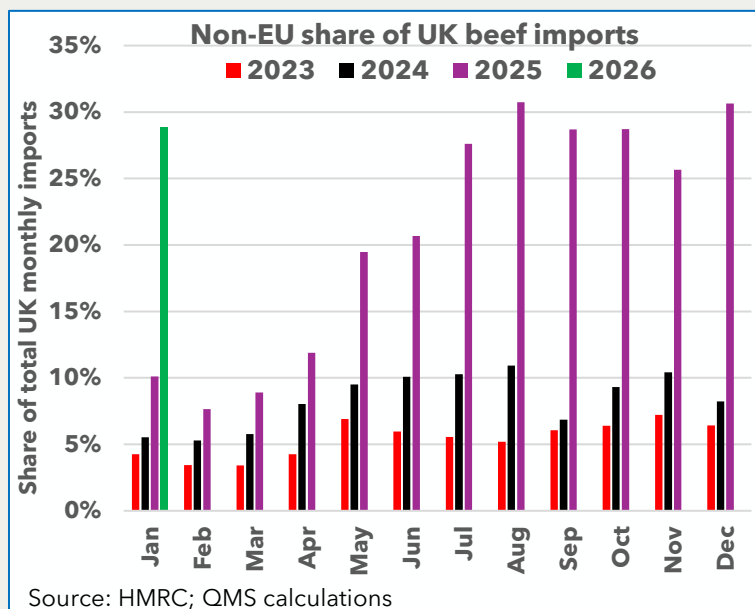
With the breeding herd continuing to contract, albeit at a slower rate, productivity gains are being required to prevent further falls in prime cattle production. These gains have been supported by the culling of the least productive cows and the additional beef-sired calves produced by growth in the dairy herd in 2024 and 2025. However, the dairy herd has now gone into reverse following a downwards shift in farmgate milk prices, and despite the rebalancing of store and finished cattle prices, the beef herd has continued to contract.

While also softening, the year-on-year decline in the suckler herd in England & Wales has continued to outpace the decline in Scotland, with 2.6% reduction in beef-sired females over 30 months in January. However, the dairy herd returned to contraction after a period of stability, and this may begin to squeeze supplies again once the higher calf crop of 2025 (due to lower mortality) has been worked through.

| Females aged 30 months+ on farms (y/y change in January 2026) | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| Month | Dairy | Beef | All |
| Sco | -0.4% | -1.7% | -1.3% |
| E&W | -1.3% | -2.6% | -1.8% |
| GB | -1.2% | -2.3% | -1.7% |
| Source: BCMS; QMS calculations | | | |
| Females over 2 years that have calved (y/y change, June 2025) | | | |
| | Dairy | Beef | All |
| Scotland | +1.5% | -2.5% | -1.2% |
| England | +0.2% | -4.3% | -1.4% |
| Wales | +1.1% | -5.0% | -1.1% |
| Source: Defra; Scottish Government; QMS calculations | | | |



Imports - switch towards highly price competitive non-EU beef



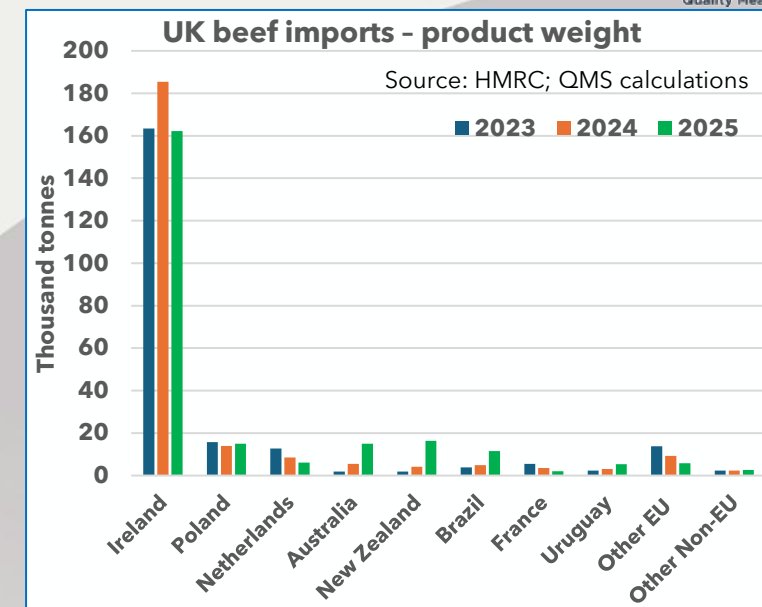
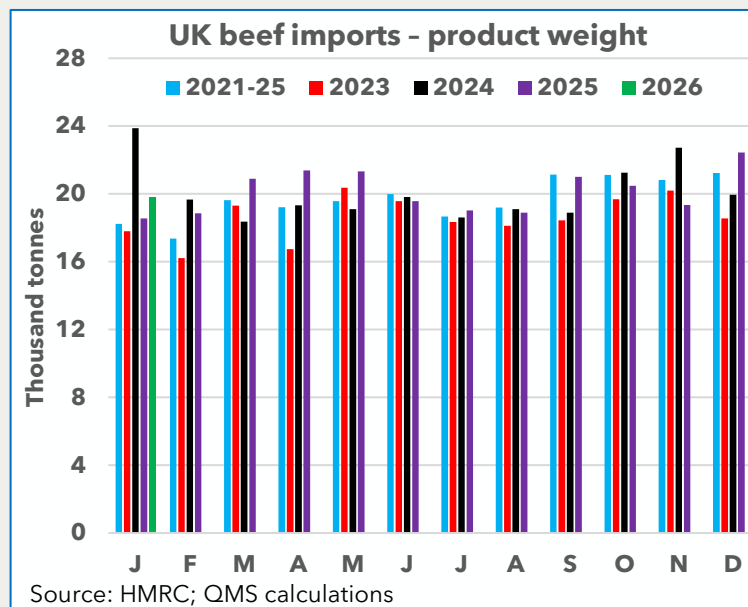
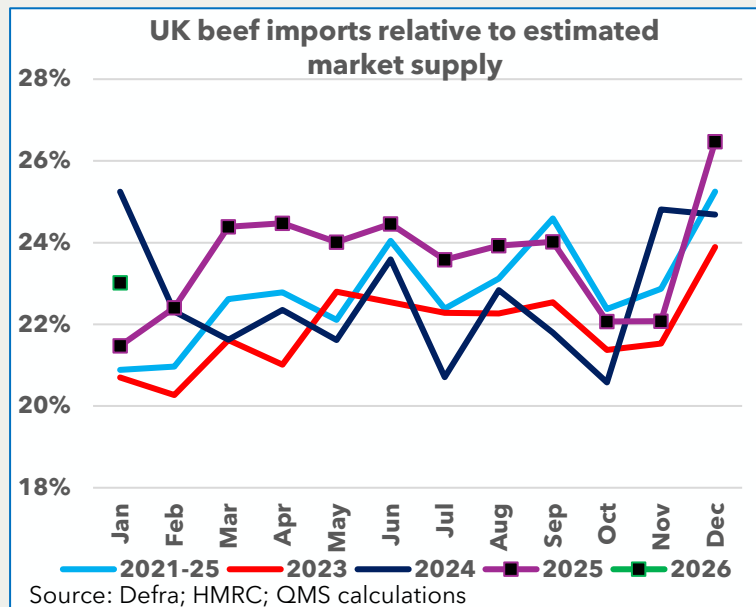
Non-EU imports have traditionally been higher value cuts for the foodservice sector at highly competitive prices, but there was some coverage in UK retail in 2025. The level of trade suggests that a significant quantity will have been imported having paid the full UK tariff (12% + £2.54/kg for boneless beef).

Non-EU import penetration appears to have steadied at close to 30% of UK beef imports, averaging 5,800t per month between July 2025 and January 2026. The monthly average import volume from non-EU markets in 2022 was only 800t, rising to 1,000t in 2023 and 1,700t in 2024.

Non-EU imports reached 50,800t in 2025, up from 20,100t in 2024 and 12,200t in 2023.

There has been an interesting reduction in the average price of non-EU imports as volumes have increased, potentially signalling a shift in the balance of cuts/ market outlets. A further widening of the EU: non-EU average price gap developed in late-2025. The UK trade data only goes down to the eight-digit HS code level, which doesn't split down boneless product any further.

International Trade - UK import volumes



| UK beef imports - top-ten suppliers based on 2025 (t) | | | |
|---|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |
| Irish Republic | 163,414 | 185,371 | 162,227 |
| New Zealand | 1,828 | 4,111 | 16,357 |
| Australia | 1,905 | 5,516 | 15,010 |
| Poland | 15,759 | 13,952 | 14,961 |
| Brazil | 3,825 | 4,915 | 11,486 |
| Netherlands | 12,705 | 8,492 | 6,058 |
| Uruguay | 2,387 | 3,165 | 5,286 |
| Spain | 1,833 | 2,031 | 2,165 |
| France | 5,502 | 3,582 | 2,041 |
| Argentina | 373 | 776 | 1,308 |
| Others | 13,826 | 8,795 | 4,996 |
| Overall total | 223,355 | 240,705 | 241,897 |

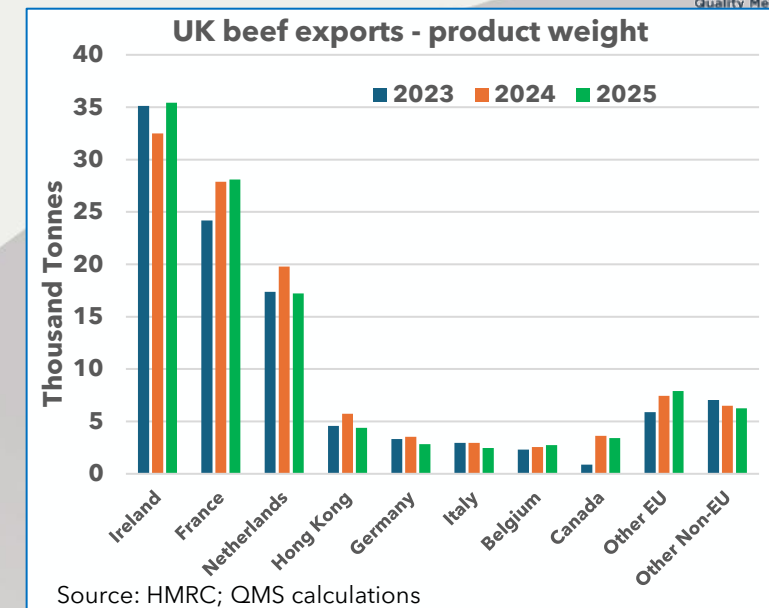
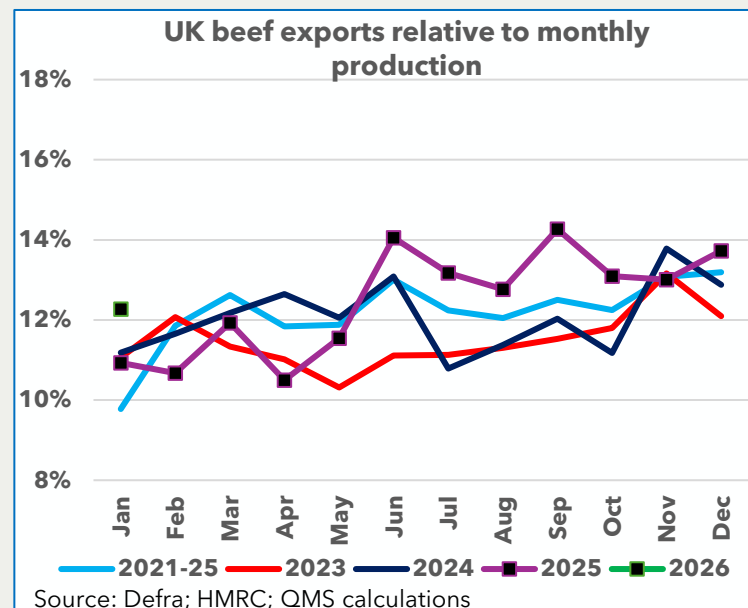
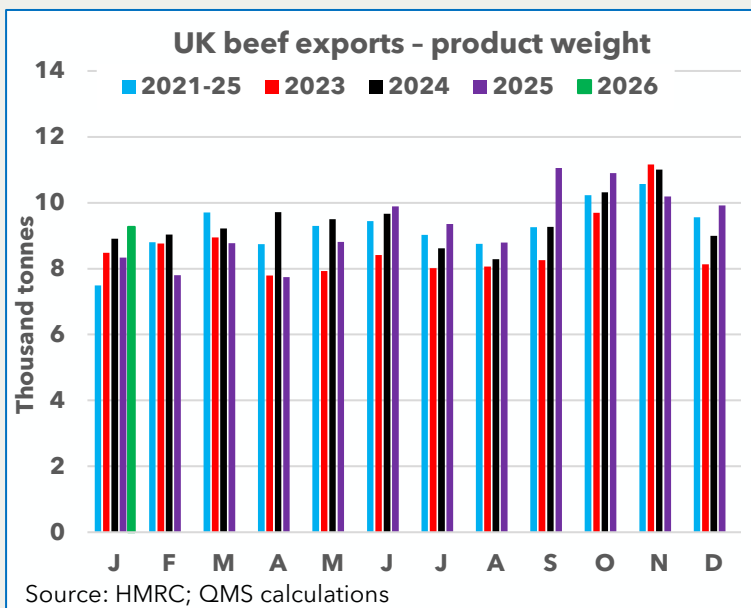
Source: HMRC; QMS calculations

Despite a substantial increase in non-EU beef imports in 2025, the Irish Republic remained by far the largest supplier, accounting for 67% of deliveries. This was down from 77% in 2024 and 73% in 2023.

New Zealand came close to 7%, up from less than 2% in 2024 and under 1% in 2023, while Australia passed 6%, up from 2% in 2024 and under 1% in 2023. Poland edged over the 6% mark in 2025 but remained below its 7% share from 2023. Brazil approached 5%, up from around 2% in 2023 and 2024.

Overall imports were relatively stable in 2025, lifting 0.5% after an 8% increase in 2024. The overall split by category was similar to 2023 and 2024, meaning that trade in carcase weight equivalent rose (boneless beef multiplied by 1.36) by 1% in 2025 after an 8% rise in 2024.

International Trade - UK export volumes



| UK beef exports - top-ten markets based on 2025 (t) | | | |
|---|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |
| Ireland | 35,120 | 32,510 | 35,429 |
| France | 24,188 | 27,882 | 28,102 |
| Netherlands | 17,387 | 19,801 | 17,227 |
| Hong Kong | 4,585 | 5,740 | 4,393 |
| Canada | 869 | 3,626 | 3,409 |
| Spain | 1,501 | 2,256 | 3,275 |
| Germany | 3,334 | 3,543 | 2,830 |
| Belgium | 2,313 | 2,569 | 2,744 |
| Italy | 2,938 | 2,940 | 2,459 |
| Sweden | 1,662 | 1,794 | 2,176 |
| Others | 9,750 | 9,891 | 9,513 |
| Overall total | 103,647 | 112,553 | 111,557 |

Source: HMRC; QMS calculations

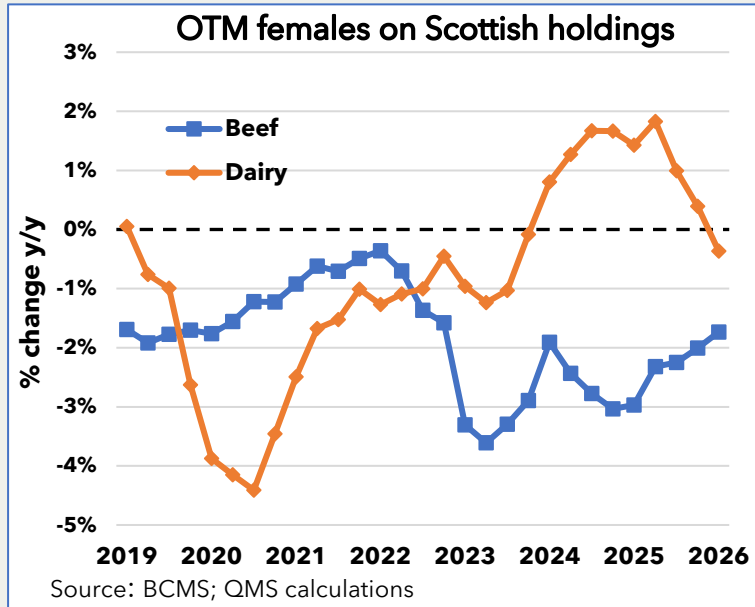
UK beef exports subtract supply from the domestic market and their monthly pattern in 2025 reflects the general strength of the market in reverse, being weak in the opening five months of the year, when the domestic market was extremely tight, before rebounding strongly as the volume of demand softened in the domestic market following the price surge.

Overall export volumes dipped by around 1% in 2025, after increasing more than 8.5% in 2024, but they held slightly above the five-year average. Exports have slightly overperformed in carcase weight terms in both 2024 and 2025 as the balance has moved further towards boneless beef, lifting by more than 9.5% in 2024 and then stabilising in 2025.

The Irish Republic increased its position as the main export destination, lifting to nearly 32% of the total compared to under 29% in 2024 as shipments rose by 9%. However, its share had been nearly 34% in 2023 on a marginally smaller volume than in 2025. There was also a slight increase of nearly 1% to France, ensuring its share edged above 25%, but the Netherlands fell by more than two percentage points to just under 15.5% as volumes declined by 13%. Other fallers included Hong Kong, Canada, Germany and Italy whereas there was strong growth into Spain and Sweden and more modest growth into Belgium.

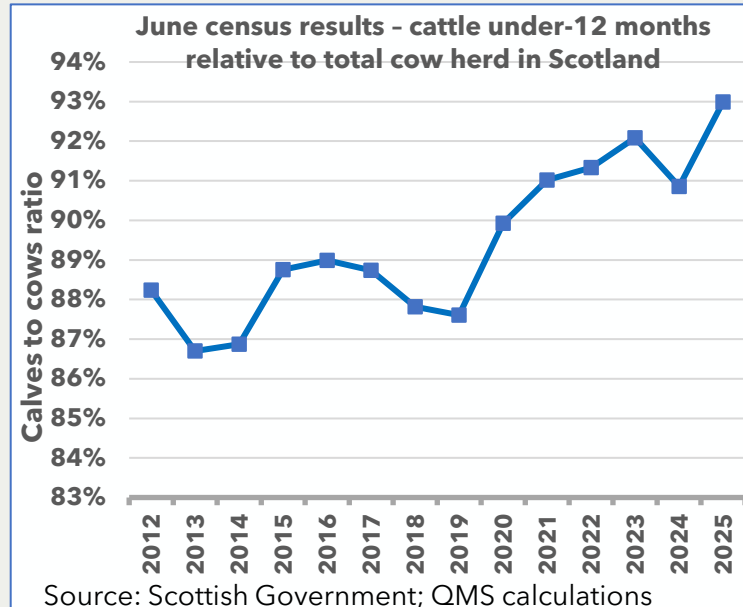
Meating Our Potential Indicators

Breeding Herd



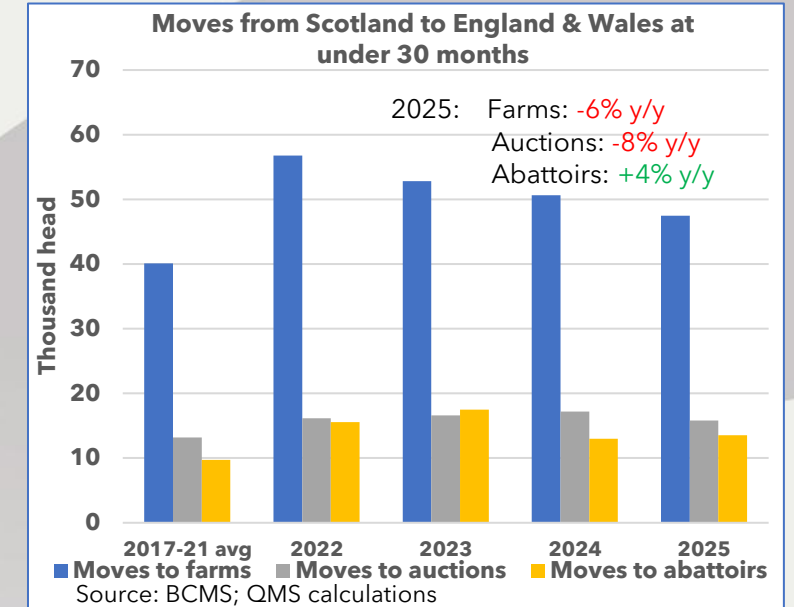
Beef herd decline has slowed, but numbers were still falling at a 1.7% annual rate in January. Signs of further improvement in ScotEID population data as of early-March (-1.3% y/y).

Productivity



Calf numbers relative to beef and dairy cows in the June census jumped higher in 2025, likely reflecting lower mortality due to good spring weather. Calf registrations relative to cows also rebounded, reaching a new high of 96.8% in 2025 (96.5% in 2024).

Outflow



Note: some moves to farms are effectively slaughter moves, with the cattle being processed shortly after arrival in England



The level of outflow to England & Wales has slowed further, although it does remain elevated above pre-2022 levels

