

Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme Remote Assessment Options and Guidance

Background

On 18th March 2020 the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC) as owners of the Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) asked Northern Ireland Food Chain Certification (NIFCC), who carry out inspections and certification services for LMC, to defer physical on farm inspections.

The FQAS Board agreed to resume outdoor on farm inspections from 8th June 2020 provided both farmers and inspectors adhere to a protocol that must be followed whilst COVID-19 restrictions remain in place. In some exceptional circumstances, or if further COVID restrictions are introduced, FQAS participants may not be able to facilitate an outdoor on farm inspection. Therefore, an alternative inspection method has been introduced to allow participants to be recertified and not be suspended from the Scheme. The new inspection method is a 'Remote Assessment' and this document provides detail on how such an assessment will be completed and the options available to participants.

Remote Assessments

What is a remote assessment?

A remote assessment is one that is conducted off site when a physical assessment is not possible. A successfully completed inspection will replace a physical on farm assessment and therefore a member who completes a remote assessment will not be due a routine surveillance for 18 months subject to continued conformance with the NIBL FQAS Standard and Rules.

Members can choose a remote assessment to be conducted by one of the following ways:

1. Offline pre-assessment + Live stream partial assessment.
2. Live Stream full Assessment.
3. Telephone assessment using a landline telephone or mobile phone. ***(This assessment method should be chosen as a last resort and only when options one and two are not possible.)***

What is meant by "Live Stream"?

For remote assessment options one and two, the live stream element of the assessment will be conducted using technology such as WhatsApp Video and Zoom. The assessment will include all elements that are normally covered during a surveillance inspection but it is accepted that some activities may not be able to be observed during a remote assessment. These technical aspects may need to be assessed at a later date, but this will be discussed and agreed during the remote assessment.

What should members expect?

The structure of the assessment may be a little different to the usual on-site assessment, but the assessor will still carry out opening and closing meetings and will review information throughout the

assessment to ensure compliance to the NIBL FQAS standards. Should the assessor find evidence of a non-conformance, this will be discussed and agreed with the member at the time of discovery as per NIFCC's protocol.

Remote Assessment Options

Prior to a scheduled routine surveillance assessment members must choose and prepare for one of the following three assessment options:

1) Offline pre-assessment + Live stream partial assessment

- As part of the offline pre-assessment selected documents and information will need to be provided ahead of the mutually agreed date for the assessment to be reviewed by the assessor.
- The farmer must provide the specified documentation to the assessor at least 24 hours prior to the scheduled audit date and time (a checklist of the required documentation, for example: feed records, herd records, veterinary medicine book will be emailed to the farmer when the appointment is booked and the inspector will confirm details of how and where to send this documentation). This pre-assessment checklist is also available online at (<https://www.lmcni.com/farm-quality-assurance/documentation/>)
- The live stream assessment will take place on the day of assessment via a video call to review the documents and to complete any inspection elements.
- The assessor will conduct an opening meeting in the usual manner, including an explanation of the means of audit.
- The assessor will direct the farmer around the site – requesting to view the required areas / livestock etc., in order to verify compliance with the NIBL FQAS Standard. The usual range of open questions will be asked of the farmer during this process. Where a non-conformance is detected during this process – the farmer will be made aware of this.
- The assessor will discuss the review of the documentation with the farmer and explain any issues / seek clarification on any specific points.
- The closing meeting will then be conducted in the usual format and any non-conformances explained, the report will be forwarded by email to the farmer after the assessment. If the farmer has any concerns or objections to the findings, this will be noted on the report.

2) Live streamed full assessment

- The live stream assessment will take place on the day of assessment via a video call to review the documents and to complete any inspection elements. Please note- a strong and consistent internet connection will be required for this type of assessment.
- The assessor will conduct an opening meeting in the usual manner, including an explanation of the means of audit.
- All documents reviews and inspections will take place via a video call and therefore the farmer should have these ready for inspection.
- The assessor will direct the farmer around the site – requesting to view the required areas / livestock etc., in order to verify compliance with the NIBL FQAS Standard. The usual range of open questions will be asked of the farmer during this process. Where a non-conformance is detected during this process – the farmer will be made aware of this.

- The auditor will discuss the review of the documentation with the farmer, and explain any issues / seek clarification on any specific points.
- The closing meeting will then be conducted in the usual format and any non-conformances explained, the report will be forwarded by email to the farmer after the assessment. If the farmer has any concerns or objections to the findings, this will be noted on the report.

3) Telephone assessment using a landline telephone or mobile phone

- In some cases the member may not have the technology, IT ability or connectivity to complete a live stream assessment in part or in full. In these cases the member will be asked by the assessor to photograph key aspects of the farm business to demonstrate compliance with the scheme standards.
- The farmer must provide the specified documentation to the auditor at least 24 hours prior to the scheduled audit date and time.
- A checklist of the documentation, for example: feed records, herd records, veterinary medicine book and will be emailed to the farmer when the appointment is booked and the inspector will confirm details of how and where to send this documentation. If email is not a viable option to send or receive documentation then other options such as attaching to a SMS message or What's App message should be used.
- The assessment will be structured and completed as detailed for live stream assessment above except this will be using audio rather than video calling.

Compliance and Integrity of Assessment

Please note: If the effectiveness of the inspection is compromised by the remote assessment process participants should be aware that they may be selected for a spot check inspection when on farm inspections resume.

Next Steps

Following completion of the assessment NIFCC will follow up with a letter detailing the result of the assessment and outlining the steps to take.

Further Information

For clarification on the content of this document please contact NIFCC on 028 9263 3017 or LMC's Farm Liaison Officer on 028 9263 3024.