

Stop, look and listen

What are your cows telling you about the standard of their winter housing?

There's no better way to evaluate cow housing and ensure it meets the needs of your herd than to look at the cows themselves – their health, behaviour and 'flow'. We spoke to two 'cow signals' specialists to find out how time spent looking at your cows can pay dividends.

When it comes to housing cows, think 'cow' and then 'housing' – turn it on its head. And then look at the cows – not the building – and ask yourself, what are they telling me? "The cows themselves are the best judges of the suitability of their housing," says Dairy Co's extension office Richard Davies.

"They speak to us in how they behave, how they move and how they perform with 'cow signals'."

Mr Davies says that there are six key areas that should be observed: feed, water, air, space, light and rest. "All are important to cow health and welfare and are relevant to evaluating cow housing."

Take feed, for example. Producers should ask, is there enough feed in front of the animals, is there enough space at the feed fence, are there dead ends or narrow passage ways that prevent timid cows from gaining access to feed? And

what about the design of the feed fence – can cows eat with ease and in comfort?

"Neck calluses or shiny areas along the feed fence where it's been rubbed clean can be indicators that the fence itself is not adequate, although more often than not it's simply a case of the feed not being pushed up to the barrier frequently enough," says Mr Davies.

Queuing up

"And what about the length of the feed fence? Are there cows queuing up to feed because there isn't enough space at the barrier? The cows standing back are probably the more timid ones."

"Watching your cows behaviour may tell you more about how they feed and why yields, for example, may be falling short of those predicted than anything else. It may be a tip-top ration, but if there's not enough space at the fence then the herd won't perform."



Richard Davies: "Get in there and see what's going on"

"You may have the most comfortable cow cubicles in your county, but if the passageway leading to them is too narrow and blocked by a bully cow, younger and more timid cows are never going to lie in them. You have to get in there and see what's going on."

Solihull-based vet and cow signals specialist Steve Borsberry agrees: "It sounds simple, but so many producers just don't make the time to stop and really look at the animals in front of them and for any signs of any problems."

He says that producers should walk around their unit, watching the cows' behaviour, cow flow and any physical signs on the cows themselves, such as skin lesions. "Just go out and stand there with an open mind. Ask yourself: what is the cow doing?"

It may be that a 'bully' cow is standing guard over a water trough, preventing the more timid cows from drinking. Or that there's a cow flow 'bottle neck' as large cows struggle through passage ways that are too narrow.

"At this point just make a note of what you're seeing – don't analyse it. Just observe. The next step is to interpret what's going on. Most cow housing problems result in either groups or individual cows not getting access to enough feed and water and this has a serious impact on productivity, as well as welfare implications."

No cost?

"So problems need to be addressed – producers must act on what they see – and in most instances, if not all, this is relatively straight forward and usually low cost, or even 'no cost'."

During this exercise, producers should spend up to two hours during the course of the day observing their herd. "And it shouldn't be a one off thing. Watching your cows should be done regularly – and not just for signs of heat."

This is the ideal time of year – just prior to turn out – to spend time observing your cows and looking for 'cow signals'.

"If there are any problems and, for example, you need to take out some cubicles to widen a passageway or additional water troughs need to be installed, then you've the summer to tackle that job, while the cows are outside. But it might be just a small detail that's required."

Mr Borsberry refers to sores that can be seen on cows' necks – usually the result of rubbing against the neck rail of a feed barrier while straining to reach food. "The feed fence could be poorly designed, but more often than not it's just that feed isn't being pushed up to the cows frequently enough. This means a small amend to routines."

"And producers should also remember that 'straining' can also push additional pressure on the cows' fore



Check to see that passageways are truly wide enough and that there are no dead ends

feet, which may result in solar ulcers and lameness."

Cow housing issues are generally straight forward to solve: "And even where there is a cost involved, any investment will soon pay for itself," says Mr Borsberry.

"Something like pushing up the feed, for example, has so many positive knock-on effects, aside from reducing skin and solar lesions. Ensuring good gut fill could help to reduce the number of LDAs and push up milk yields, for example."

"And ensuring that cows have access to enough water has been shown in trials to push milk yields up by between 200 and 400 litres per cow."

Ideal environment

One of Mr Borsberry's clients, who manages a 300-cow herd on a straw yard system, was having a serious mastitis problem. "Observation and spending time in the cow house revealed that there simply wasn't enough ventilation and the humidity in the straw yard was providing the mastitis causing bacteria

with an ideal environment to thrive – but not the cows."

"But by simply cutting a few holes in the roof air flow as vastly improved, humidity levels dropped, the bedding was much drier and the number of mastitis cases rapidly started to fall."

"The producer was amazed by the difference that increasing ventilation made and that it was such a low-cost and simply solution to what had been an expensive problem," says Mr Borsberry.

"We build housing for conditions we see for one month of the year here in the UK, when we should be building it for the other 11 months. We should be putting up buildings that suit the cow and adapting those that are already in place to better suit her needs."

"And the only way to truly know what her needs are is to spend some time watching her going about her daily business, noting any obstacles or difficulties and tackling them head on."

Rachael Porter

Skin lesions and sores are visual clues to problems with cow housing. Watch your cows to see how they might be occurring

