

Be prepared for future milk buyer demands

Health and efficiency

Staying one step ahead of milk buyers' health and welfare standards will not only 'future proof' your herd, but also result in a more profitable dairy business. We spoke to a vet, a milk buyer and a producer to find out more.

text Rachael Porter

Are you and your business 'future proofed' when it comes to herd health and welfare? Could you meet and possibly even exceed any new standards that your buyer introduces as part of your milk contract?

Westpoint Vet's Rob Drysdale believes that producers should be asking themselves these questions – and more – if they're going to be prepared for the next wave of demands that milk buyers are likely to make of the industry.

His views come following Sainsbury's introduction of its new health and welfare standards for its milk suppliers. Some of the parameters and targets set by the multiple retailers are achievable – in many instances producers may already have exceeded the standard. But there are some areas that are cause for concern, according to Rob, such as left displaced abomasums (LDAs) and milk fever.

"A herd could go for six months with no LDAs and then see three in the space of a week – it's one of those conditions that can just come out of the blue and it's not always easy to pin point exactly why."

Reduce wastage

Rob believes that an LDA target has been set simply because it's listed as a reason for culling, and supermarkets want to reduce 'wastage' due to culling as part of their improved health and welfare and management packages.

That said, he also believes that

Sainsbury's is working with and listening to producers and helping them to achieve targets. But he'd like to see producers leading the way in terms of health and welfare – not the supermarkets or other milk buyers.

"Producers are following at the moment – not leading. This needs to change – producers, with the help of vets and other industry professionals, need to take the lead."

Rob says that Johne's disease is a good example of how producers can really take control and show they mean business when it comes to improving herd health and welfare. "We need to start down the eradication route. Being a Johne's monitored herd will become the norm for many contracts, but producers can take it a step further and consider eradication to 'future proof' their herd." Another area where there's a lot of 'wastage' on dairy units concerns calf health. And sorting out any problems here, such as high mortality rates, offers the producers huge benefits and a relatively fast payback for any additional investment. "In just two years producers could have more replacement heifers to sell and be calving and milking more productive heifers. And their milk buyer will be happier too.

"Such a move could also make a huge difference to the milk cheque too, particularly if the producer was being financially penalised for high calf mortality. Worst case scenario is that a producer could lose a contract if they fail to meet the standards stipulated by their buyer.

"Increased health and welfare standards

will, without a doubt, increase efficiency and productivity and, ultimately, profitability. But the targets set, as I've already stressed, must be realistic and achievable."

'Hands-on' approach

Sainsbury's launched its new standards for dairy suppliers earlier this year and says that its producers have nothing to fear as far as the future and herd health and welfare standards are concerned. Sainsbury's will support them every step of the way, where necessary, according to the company's head of agriculture and sustainability Annie Graham.

"We've been looking at a whole host of standards set around health and welfare. And our suppliers have welcomed the standards – they've been

very well received. We developed them on the back of three and half years of research and consultation. They're based on scientific facts and plenty of thought – we haven't rushed anything."

She adds that the targets set are stretching but also achievable. And they're gradually increased over a three-year period – producers are not expected to hit the final target over night.

"The targets are fair and our suppliers have welcomed them – they're moving in that direction anyway as the health and welfare standards benefit their herds and businesses too.

Sainsbury's suppliers have been consulted and involved in the decision making process along the way and the multiple says that its approach is very much 'hands on'. "We're working with

our suppliers. We're not simply setting targets and then standing back and expecting them to meet them," stresses Annie.

Achievable targets

"All our suppliers know what's expected of them in terms of lameness and mastitis, for example. There are no hidden surprises – the parameters that have been set are clear and broken down into achievable annual targets," she adds.

"We're assisting with milk recording, vet visits and training workshops. We have a whole swathe of measures to help them achieve the targets – we want our suppliers to succeed."

Sainsbury's supplier William Goodwin welcomed the standards when they were

introduced this year. He milks 650 Holsteins in partnership with his brother James. "The standards, based on data that's been collected since 2007, are producer-led – we've all had every opportunity to have our say and the Evidence Based Veterinary Consultancy, run by dairy vets Richard Vecqueray and James Husband, also had a lot of input too," says William.

"And the standards are outcome driven – not prescriptive. Producers have nothing to fear on that score."

If cows are lying down and 'comfortable' in their cubicles then that will satisfy the cow comfort standards – cubicle types, dimensions and bedding materials will not be 'dictated'. "Sainsbury's will leave producers to decide what's best for their cows and the cows will speak for



Happy cows: high health and welfare status herds are more productive

themselves at the end of the day. If there's an issue with cow comfort, it soon shows up in terms of increased health and fertility problems. Comfortable cows are content, healthy and fertile."

Lameness measures are set in a similar vein. Methods of locomotion scoring and targets are in place and independent vets will come out to visit farms to assess levels. And while advice is on offer to help producers reduce the incidence of lameness and lower locomotion scores, again there's nothing prescriptive in Sainsbury's approach.

"If a herd's lameness is extremely low, they're not insisting that using a footbath, for example, is mandatory or that every cow must have its feet lifted twice a year. And even where there's a problem, the producer can tackle it their way – so long as it works. It's about outcomes and meeting targets, not footbathing twice a day just because the milk buyer says you have to."

Speed is important too. So monitoring and identifying problems early is important, as is dealing with them.

"That's said, timescales for dealing with health and welfare problems are fair. LDAs, for example, are not something that can be dealt with overnight and Sainsbury's recognises this. It simply wants to see that a producer is taking immediate steps to rectify a problem and that they're on the right track."

Identify problems

In fact, William says that many of the standards are, indeed, measures to help producers identify problems early and deal with them. And help is on hand to tackle issues.

"Sainsbury's is paying for specialist consultant visits – up to two each per herd – to sort out any problems if producers need help. If there were more issues requiring more visits then I guess the producer would have to pay for those, but its early days yet and that theory hasn't been tested," says William.

And there's a cost, in terms of reduced efficiency and productivity, to poor health and welfare. So any money that producers do spend on improving health and welfare in their herds is money well spent.

"If you look at it like that, Sainsbury's is helping its suppliers to farm more efficiently and ultimately more profitably and sustainably. The producers supplying the group – around 340 of them via Arla, Dairy Crest and Wisemans – can demonstrate year-on-year that improvements in health and welfare do bring financial benefits to the business.

"The average calving interval for the group has, for example, fallen due to improved health, which has a positive effect on fertility."

And there should be more improvements in years to come. All the producers in the group have become more adept at spotting problems and dealing with them before they impact on the bottom line. "It really is a win:win:win situation – for Sainsbury's, for producers and ultimately for the cows," adds William.

Proactive approach: regular hoof trimming will help to keep herd locomotion scores on target

