

Creating a more comfortable and productive environment on a budget

Space – the final frontier

If overstocking or slightly cramped conditions are holding your herd back, there are some relatively quick, easy and inexpensive fixes that could boost herd comfort, welfare, health and efficiency. So, with many herds now outside for the summer, what are you waiting for?

text **Rachael Porter**

Space can be at a premium on many dairy units – particularly those that have expanded in recent years. And with milk price continuing to be under so much pressure, it can be difficult to justify investing in cow housing and equipment. But some modifications can be done at low- or no-cost and they can make all the difference when it comes to better health, welfare and efficiency.

So says Shropshire-based CowSignals vet Owen Atkinson, who says that he's visited many units where something as simple as removing or repositioning a cubicle head rail really can make a huge difference when it comes to increasing lying times. "And longer lying times not only help to reduce and prevent possible lameness problems, but they can also increase productivity.

More time spent lying down means that cows will spend longer cudding and this makes for more efficient utilisation of the ration. There's so much more to improving cow comfort than meets the eye."

Limited space

One producer who Owen has worked with, Cheshire-based Tom Halton, reconfigured his 180-cow herd's cubicle shed, which was originally built for 160 cows, a few years ago.

"The catalyst was a problem with lameness – there just wasn't enough space because milking cow numbers had increased slightly," says Tom. His solution was to remove the central feed passage from the shed and install an additional row of 80 cubicles in its place. An outdoor feed yard, with a covered feed trough at its centre, was then



Owen Atkinson: "Creating more space for your cows can be done on a tight budget"

installed next to the cow house. "We knocked down an old parlour next to the cow house and used this area to create the yard.

"The existing cubicles were too small and the passageways and feed passage were also too tight. Cows just didn't move around freely or easily – space was just too limited and lying times were poor," says Owen, who adds that Tom called him in to help him put his plan into action. "It was his idea to create an open but inviting feeding yard alongside the shed. He just wanted some help on how to go about it."

The same shed now comfortably accommodates 240 cows, but they're much more comfortable, according to Tom. The 4.5m wide central feed passage has gone: "It really was a waste of space and there's now an easy-to-access yard adjoining the shed that offers the cows

Lunging space: a sledge hammer was all that was needed to improve cow comfort in these cubicles





Feed yard: the cows like to leave the cubicle shed to eat from the covered feed trough

the ideal 60cm per head feed barrier space and plenty of space to move around freely. The more timid cows in the herd can also make a quick exit if they want to. There are no dead ends or tight corners and I think the cows really like to be outside while they eat.”

The trough is covered with a canopy, which keeps the feed and the cows dry in wet weather and offers shade during warmer, sunny days. And, most importantly, lameness has improved dramatically. Tom mobility scores the herd regularly and he’s seen a 10% reduction in lameness cases since he modified the shed three years ago. “And most of that improvement occurred shortly after the changes were made.”

Calmer cows

Milk production has also increased slightly, on the same ration, because intakes have improved. This is due to better access to the feed and also improved lying times. “The cows are a lot calmer in this shed now – there’s no ‘scrabbling’ about and I often walk in to find cows either lying down or in the feed yard eating. It’s not often I see cows just standing around,” he says.

“Best of all, the modifications cost five times less than building a brand-new shed. We were able to do quite a lot of the work ourselves, because it wasn’t too complicated. It was very much a case of working with what we had and moving

things around. It wasn’t a massive job and it wasn’t too expensive. The additional cubicles were second-hand and we installed them ourselves. We also built the feed trough and canopy.

“Besides, I’m sure we recouped the investment in reduced lameness cases alone during the first year. It’s more than paid for itself if you factor in the additional milk production from the same ration. And then there’s better fertility too, which is more difficult to put a cost on. But that has also improved because cows are better able to express their heats and bulling behaviour in a more spacious and cow-friendly shed.” Owen is also impressed with the new shed configuration and admits that he’s taken Tom’s idea and helped other producers to do the same to their cow houses to create more space. Other ‘easy fixes’ include taking out the front on cubicles and raising neck bars to create more ‘lunging space’. “If cows find it difficult to get in and out of cubicles, they won’t lie down. And this has lameness and lying time/cudding repercussions,” he explains.

Fresh eyes

Neck rails are often positioned too low in older cubicle houses, according to Owen. “So it’s well worth checking to see if you could have a ‘space’ issue here. Cows will adapt to their surroundings and you may not notice a problem with

cows refusing cubicles, so a fresh pair of eyes is often useful here.”

The good news is that this is a ‘cheap and cheerful’ modification that can, again, really help to improve cow comfort and lameness and, therefore, efficiency. “You will see the return on investing a little time to tinker with a neck rail – be it in a cubicle or a feed fence. It’s often time that’s needed here – not money.”

He cites another producer who had wooden kennel cubicles with solid fronts to separate them from the feed passage, but this was also creating a cow comfort issue for his larger cows. “Lying times were not great. The cows had outgrown the cubicles, which were quite old but still serviceable. All that was needed in this instance was a sledge hammer to knock the wooden fronts off them and, again, give the cows more lunging space, fresh air and light. And it worked a treat. Cows are lying down for longer, lameness has improved and milk yields have increased slightly,” says Owen.

A few sessions with a sledge hammer may be just the ticket for stress relief in the current tough economic climate too. “But before you get stuck in – be it knocking out or repositioning rails, bars or cubicles – take some advice on how to best go about it. That will ensure that the results of any space-making modifications are rewarding – for you, your cows and your business.” |