

Out with the old and in with the new

Taking a fresh approach to calf rearing has seen calf mortality fall and maximised growth rates on one Cheshire-based unit. We spoke to the woman behind the changes that have been adopted by the calf rearing team and seen great results on the 530-cow unit.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Karen Halton's past career experience in legal recruitment, and her work with horses, has paid dividends in promoting top-class calf care at Halton Farms. When she joined husband Tom on the family farm, Karen brought her experience from a very different career and background and has applied it to many aspects of the dairy business and herd management – not least the calf rearing system at their 530-cow unit, based near Congleton in Cheshire.

Karen drew some comparisons with horse rearing, but was shocked when she saw how readily staff just 'accepted' calf mortality as 'part of dairying'.

"I thought, that can't be right. We rarely lost any foals, and horses are far less robust than cattle. So I started to take more of an interest in that aspect of dairy herd management," she says.

One of the benefits, she says, of coming from a non-farming background is that she began by researching on line and listening to advisers and vets. "I didn't have any pre-conceived ideas or habits when it came to calf rearing. So I started from scratch – and as I meant to go on – even if I did meet some resistance at first."

One of her first 'interventions', which she readily admits was probably seen as 'interference' at the time, was to muck out the calf sheds more regularly – every other week without fail, rather than once every three months. "I used to come home through the back porch, which had the calf housing just to the side of it, and the smell was always awful. So one weekend I decided to muck out the calves and the smell disappeared. And, since we've been regularly mucking out, it's never returned.

"It's become the norm – part of the routine. Change –

Fresh start: mucking out more regularly was just the start of the new calf-rearing regime



however small – can be difficult to adapt to. But once people see the benefits of making those changes they soon get on board and even begin to look for ways to improve husbandry and systems themselves. I'd say it took about six months for everyone to accept that more regular mucking out was worth the effort. The calves were healthier and looked better. And that helped to change mindsets. It's also a nice environment for us to work in."

Golden rules

Karen adds that they now actually clean out the calf shed every time a batch leaves, which is typically every 10 days. "No calf enters a dirty pen. That's just one of our many golden rules. As soon as a batch of calves go off to market or are picked up by the buyer, we go in with the Bobcat and get the job done. It's automatic."

Karen says that the previous system of calf management felt 'out of date' and 'unprofessional'. "It needed a fresh start and I believed that it was key to follow the very latest information and advice on calf rearing."

She says that Tom was supportive – even more so when he saw the results. Not only did calf mortality rates fall, but so did disease incidence and, consequently, vet and med bills. Eight years ago average age at first calving was 28 months. Today it's down to 23 months.

"New-born calves got off to a flying start, achieving daily liveweight gains for 1kg per day. Growth rates stay on track throughout the rearing period and, five years ago, we pushed average age at first calving down to 25 months. We were pleased with that, but then realised that it still needed to be lower. And we've continued to work at it and make further improvements.

"But my ideas, from more regular mucking out through to setting up a dedicated calving pen and drawing up strict calf rearing protocols, were pretty radical 10 years ago, when all this began. That was the norm in my previous work arena. Not so much on farm."

She says she's also instilled a great sense of pride in the calf rearing enterprise, which handles 560 calves each year from the three-way (Holstein/Scandinavian Red/Montbeliarde) cross-bred milking herd. "Everyone can see the results that we're achieving. The whole team, which comprises 10 staff, is proud of what we do."

Blood tests, to check immunoglobulin levels, are carried out on week-old calves to see how well they've been managed and colostrum-fed at calving. "Everything is written down and recorded. We know who managed each calving and each calf. And, each month, whoever has the 'worst' results, has to buy the person who achieved the best blood test results a present to the value of £5.00. It's usually a round of cream cakes on a Friday or a bottle of wine, but it's a bit of fun and surprisingly motivating.

"We've changed the dynamic, we have strict but easy-to-follow calving protocols – which are all written up and on display in the calving pen. All the equipment that's needed is at hand. The whole team has bought into it."

She says that, all in, it takes 60 minutes to calve a cow – from moving her to the calving pen through to colostrum feeding the calf and cleaning down and bedding up the calving box – ready for the next calving cow.

"We also have a WhatsApp group among the calf rearing team, which is dedicated to discussions about colostrum



qualities and quantities. We're sharing information, as well as supporting and motivating each other." Protocols are streamlined at Halton Farms and must be followed quickly, efficiently but properly – no short cuts.

Vital tools

"Preparation is key – it's vital the calving box is cleaned thoroughly and left ready for the next cow. And that all the vital tools and kit are also clean and in the correct place for the person calving the cow. They should be able to complete the whole job without having to leave the box." Calving 'protocols' revolve around the calving box. This has a rubber floor, bedded with wood shavings. And there's a 'calving trolley' to hand with everything required for the job, including lube and gloves, hand sanitiser and calving aids, through to a refractometer, colostrum feeding equipment, and a post-calving energy drink for the cow. There's also a calf barrow, for transporting the calf, and a list of phone numbers – particularly the vet – in case of emergency.

Writing it all down is important to Karen. "If I'm not here – or anyone else who is familiar with the routine – then someone else can step in. They'll know exactly what to do and how to do it and, most importantly, the calves won't notice any difference."

And that's vital: "Because the calves are the future of our herd and our business – they're just as important, if not more so, than the cows currently milking in the herd."

That's said, beef calves and replacement calves are all treated the same. Beef calves are 'money in the bank' and replacement heifers are 'milk in the tank'. The milkers are currently averaging 11,500 litres, at 3.80% butterfat and 3.40% protein. And the Haltons have just begun bottling some of their milk on farm, selling it direct from the farmgate and also through a local delivery round.

"My journey has evolved a long way from implementing more regular mucking out, and it's still evolving, with input and support from the team," says Karen.

"We recognise that things can always be done better and we're always striving for that." |

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Karen Halton: "The calves are much healthier and we're more motivated as a team"

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