

Animal Health and Welfare farm case study - pigs

Investment has immediate impact on Lancashire pig farm...



It was evident to Lancashire pig farmer David Goodier (pictured above) that better housing was the solution to reducing pre-weaning piglet mortality on his farm. David, who runs a 3,000 pig rearing business in partnership with his father near Kirkham, Lancs, had already made the decision to invest in a new farrowing house. But by getting involved with the RDPE Livestock Northwest's animal health and welfare project, David was able to build a housing unit that met the very latest thinking in pig welfare standards.

"We knew that pre-weaning mortality was an issue for us, but the outdated buildings and facilities were hindering us from making any real headway in this area," explained David. "We made the decision to build a new farrowing house, but as is often the case, the level of investment required was prohibiting us from making the most of the latest technology that was available."

It was David's vet, Guy West of Garth Veterinary Partnership, that suggested David got involved in the health and welfare programme and find out if funding was available. "We were already having quarterly health visits with our vet as routine," said David, "but when he suggested the programme to us, we were keen to get involved and see what other support was out there."

Technical advisor, Ian Cairns of SAC, first visited David's farm in February 2010 to conduct a health planning assessment.

During this visit they identified three key health planning priorities – to reduce the pre-weaning piglet mortality rate, improve sow fertility and breeding performance, and finally to monitor and improve the growth rate of growing pigs. "The findings from the visit weren't really a surprise," commented David, "but developing an action plan to address each issue made us focus on what needed doing and where we could get help."

The first priority was to reduce the piglet mortality rate by improving accommodation on the farm. Through funding from the RDPE NW Livestock Programme David made some key changes to the farrowing house he had already been planning. "We were able to invest in new technology including an air sourced heat pump system that manages the air flow in the farrowing house, David explained, "and under floor heating mats in the piglet lying areas."

The new building also has a number of specialist high welfare features including wider farrowing crates and sow lying areas that are an inch higher than the piglet floor area and are made of cast iron slats. This makes milk more accessible to the piglets and keeps the sows comfortable and cool. Piglets lie on plastic slats which are again, more comfortable and hygienic.

These additions represented a step up in the level of sow and piglet welfare afforded by the new housing unit, and as David

described it; “the gold standard in pig accommodation.” “Overall the new building is much more energy efficient, hygienic and labour-friendly, and we are seeing significant health and welfare benefits to the piglets and sows,” explained David. “On average an extra piglet per sow is surviving.” This represents a significant performance improvement for the farm, bringing down the pre-weaning mortality rate from between 17 and 18 per cent, to between 10 and 11 percent, and David hopes to bring it down further. In addition to funding for the higher welfare farrowing house, RDPE NW Livestock Programme also funded a training day with David’s veterinary practice to help with better management of farrowing sows. “It was a good refresher exercise for us,” said David, “we have made some changes to our management routine, such as maintaining a consistent batch size of 32, and are seeing the benefits of these changes both in terms of higher survival rate, and labour saving.” In terms of the other priorities identified in the health planning assessment, David, along with his vet Guy, and technical advisor Ian, identified that too many sows were being returned for servicing, and improvements to sow fertility and breeding performance would improve sow welfare.

So a series of actions were agreed including keeping a consistent, smaller batch size of 32 sows to help prevent any bullying and stress which can affect breeding performance, and a closer feeding management regime to maintain optimal body conditioning during farrowing, lactation and service. “We were also advised to carry on with some of the practices we had already established on the farm,” commented David, “such as the six-monthly calibration of electronic sow feeders, to ensure the correct weight of feed is allocated to sows, and our APP vaccination programme.”



These actions, combined with the improved sow welfare in the new farrowing accommodation, have resulted in an improvement to sow fertility rates. Increasing the information on growth data was another area which has been a focus for David. Previously little information was available about the performance of the pigs at different



stages and ages of growth. A batch weighing platform was identified as a solution to this issue, so that batch weights could be electronically recorded as the pigs are moved between groups and pens. “Batch weighing is something we now do as part of our normal management routine,” explained David. “We can manage our performance much more efficiently and pay closer attention to different batches where required.”

Summarising the impact of the improvements, David said, “The changes we’ve made, especially in the area of accommodation, have made a big difference to our business.” “Although it is too early to comment on the impact to long term health, overall the herd is performing much more efficiently the most recent batches of weaners have been excellent and litter size is improving, all of which is having a positive impact on our bottom line.”

Key improvements

- Reduction in pre-weaning mortality rate
- Industry leading health and welfare standards
- Increasing litter size
- Energy savings and better efficiency

The RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme is a four-year business support package that aims to improve farm competitiveness, animal health and welfare and the efficient use of main farm resources. There are six key areas to the programme:

1. Animal Health and Welfare Planning
(To apply contact: SAC Consulting on 08456 040 535)
2. Nutrient / Manure Management Planning
(To apply contact: Promar International on 08708 707 380)
3. Resource Efficiency Auditing
(To apply contact: Promar International on 08708 707 380)
4. Performance Grants
(only available if you have had a plan or audit conducted)
5. Farmer Groups, Demonstration Events and Monitor Farms
6. Livestock NW website

For more information then please visit livestocknw.co.uk