

## Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2020

### Good Accommodation Gives Calves a Great Start

With tighter calving patterns and growing herds there is an ever greater need for calf accommodation.

#### Colin Brennan, Teagasc Dairy Advisor, Mullinavat.

Calf housing is often forgotten about, virtually until calving starts. And in a couple of months calves will be coming thick and fast. Not enough time to build a new shed maybe, but it's worth considering the principles of good calf housing to ensure you make the most of what you have.

Shed space allowance is critical. Each calf requires between 1.8m<sup>2</sup> to 2.3m<sup>2</sup>. This space provides calves with the freedom to grow and develop comfortably. Covid 19 virus has given us an unwelcome reminder that disease causing agents love to build up in buildings.

While calves don't get Covid, air space is crucial in calf accommodation to avoid the build-up of a range of infectious bugs and bacteria. Each calf requires 7m<sup>3</sup> of air space within the shed increasing to 10m<sup>3</sup> by two months of age. To assess your own shed measure (length x width x average height, m) / 7. For more information on calf housing specification please view "SI124 Minimum Specification for Calf Housing July 2016" on DAFM website.

#### The benefits of a purpose-built calf shed.

Barry Grace runs a 140 cow spring calving dairy herd in south Kilkenny alongside his agricultural contracting business. "I've been tightening my six week calving rate and this has put pressure on the calf housing".

"Pre 2019 our housing consisted of calf hutches and smaller group pens in multiple houses. There was no issue with disease in the calves but the labour involved in hauling milk and straw to multiple locations in the yard was very time consuming with a contracting business to run too."

In 2018 Barry constructed a new calf shed that would cater for all his calf housing needs under one roof. Barry needed accommodation for a maximum of 100 calves, as he sells any surplus.

The shed is made up of five pens on either side of a central passage, the passage way at the rear of the shed can double as a bedded area when numbers increase, to make a larger group pen. Each pen divider can be opened making larger group pens possible. This suits the three station automatic feeder which was also installed.

"The shed has three sliding doors in the front which helps greatly when cleaning out. The four pen dividers are hinged so they can be opened back against the walls and cleaning out is very quick. The calves are moved to the central passage during cleaning and are back to a fresh bed within minutes."

There is a small door at the rear of the shed leading onto a paddock if Barry wants to allow calves out during the day. "The floors in all pens have a slope of 1 in 20 out from the side walls, the concrete contractor thought I was mad but I wouldn't change it for the world, the calves bed stay dryer for longer and less additional bedding required."

All effluent from the pens is directed into a channel in the central passage. A slope of 1:80 in the floor from the rear to the front of the shed ensures quick movement of effluent outside the shed to an adjacent slurry tank. When the shed is not occupied it is used to store machinery and straw.

### *Feeding routine*

Barry feeds calves on whole milk for 14 days as he is vaccinating against rotavirus, coronavirus and e.Coli and wants to ensure full immunity is transferred. They are then moved on to the automatic feeder.

“Calves transfer to the automatic feeder with little hassle and the information the feeder provides a lot of information on feeding, letting me know if a calf hasn’t consumed their daily allowance,” adds Barry.

### **Calf rearing tips**

- Calves spend 80% of their time lying down so dry comfortable bedding is essential
- Keep your clothes as clean as possible when near the young animals as you may be transferring harmful bugs and bacteria from other areas of the farm to the calf shed
- Check ventilation in pens by kneeling down, if there is a smell of ammonia, there is a ventilation problem, also if you get wet knees off the bedding – there is not adequate straw
- The longer the calf shed is empty of calves and bedding between groups, the fewer disease causing organisms will be present when it fills up again.
- Use smoke pellets to test airflow in your calf shed and address any issues

### **Upcoming Events**

#### *The Teagasc National Beef Conference*

The Teagasc Virtual Beef Conference will take place as a virtual event this year at 8pm each evening on Tuesday 1st, Wednesday 2nd and Thursday 3rd December. The latest beef research from Teagasc Grange and the best technical advice for beef farmers will be presented as part of a live, hour-long, interactive webinar each evening over the three days.

The online Teagasc beef conference is free to join, but registration is required beforehand. All three sessions are live, with the opportunity for viewers to post their questions for the panellists. Further details and registration are available at [www.teagasc.ie/beefcon20](http://www.teagasc.ie/beefcon20)