

Youngstock

At a recent open day at Buitelaar's Long Lane Development Farm, attendees heard how the company achieves industry-leading calf rearing results. **Phil Christopher** reports.

No secrets to exceptional calf rearing

Industry sources estimate calf mortality from birth to four months at 8% (AHDB) and as high as 13% (NADIS).

However, at Long Lane Development Farm in Somerset, operated by Buitelaar Group, calf survival stands at 98% for the 8,000 calves reared a year.

These calves are sourced from more than 60 dairy farms in five counties.

At a recent open day at the farm, the company's owner Adam Buitelaar, told the farmer delegates, vets and industry professionals, that

rearing calves from multiple farms did present an inherent health risk.

He said: "It is not unlike the well-known 'chicken pox party' analogy. Without good protocols, the results can be disastrous."

Mr Buitelaar explained the results at Long Lane were down to attention to detail and 'doing the same thing every day. He added there were 'no shortcuts'.

What makes this possible are two critical things, according to Mr Buitelaar – clear protocols and training to implement them.

At Long Lane, calf sheds have

evolved over more than 10 years of trials and refinement.

He said: "We are constantly chasing every extra gramme of calf growth possible."

There are currently seven shed designs on site, three of which are newly built since last year.

With insulated roofs and cavity walls regulating temperature, easy-to-clean and hygienic walls, and roofs designed to maximise ventilation, while preventing draughts and rain ingress, the focus is clearly on health, comfort and performance.

"All shed designs are trialled using the same staff, feed and genetics, isolating the shed environment as the only variable, a UK-unique approach," said Mr Buitelaar.

"The result is that calves in the newest sheds grew 187g/day faster than those in the original ones."

"That is an extra 16kg of live-weight over 12 weeks with no additional feed, purely from superior environment and air quality."

Committee

The unit is also home to Buitelaar's research and development committee, which includes vets (Synergy Farm Health), animal nutrition experts (Duffields) along with the company's own data and livestock specialists.

The Development Farm has conducted a range of calf health and



Calf survival rates at Long Lane Development Farm are at 98%.

MAIN POINTS FOR SUCCESSFUL REARING AT LONG LANE DEVELOPMENT FARM

■ **Before arrival:** Supplying dairy farms are given training and guidance, especially around colostrum management

■ **Arrival day:** Each calf is weighed, assessed and batched. Close observation for early signs of illness.

Calves are not fed milk on arrival. Lateral flow test for colostrum absorption with the results fed back to supplying farms

■ **Day two:** First milk feed, with staff training calves to drink from troughs (80-90% success by day three, 100% in next two days.)

■ **Day three:** First intranasal respiratory vaccine administered

■ **Feeding protocols:** Milk fed twice-a-day in easy-clean troughs at 150g/litre of powder (13% milk solids).

Three litres per feed for three weeks; then two litres per feed for one week and one more week at one litre per day.

This uses 25kg of milk powder in total per calf. Scrupulous twice-daily cleaning of milk feeding equipment. Calf pellets and fresh water are available from day one

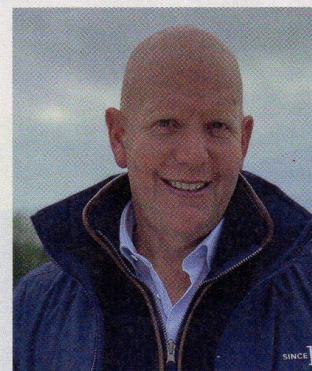
■ **Daily:** Close visual inspection of every pen for calves showing early signs of illness, with

temperature monitoring

■ **Three weeks in:** Anti-coccidiosis preventative and second respiratory vaccine on day 21 exactly. Calves re-batched on visual assessment

■ **Six weeks in:** Second anti-coccidiosis preventative, top lines clipped, pour-on fly control. Calves weighed, significant outliers moved accordingly to matching slower or faster growing groups

■ **10 weeks in:** IBR vaccine, TB test, topline clipped again and repeat fly control pour-on. Weighed again



Adam Buitelaar

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calves, which saw minimal impact during rearing, but a £40-£50/head benefit at slaughter.

Another was a lung scanning trial which found 30% of calves had undetectable lesions on arrival. This led to early treatment, improved growth rates and reduced medication use.

"We do not trade in opinions here, it is evidence-based facts that drive every decision" said Mr Buitelaar.

Buying about 70,000 calves a year from more than 400 dairy farms, the company has contract rearing units throughout the UK and Ireland and provides farmers with full support for both calf supply and grower-finisher contracts.

Calves leave the rearing units after 12 weeks at a minimum 140kg and are transferred to finisher farms across the company network.

These include some run on a bed-and-breakfast model where the farmer is paid for liveweight gain while Buitelaar retains ownership – reducing the working capital requirement and



Above, arrival day at the farm for the new calves. Below right, the farm uses easy-clean milk troughs to feed the calves.

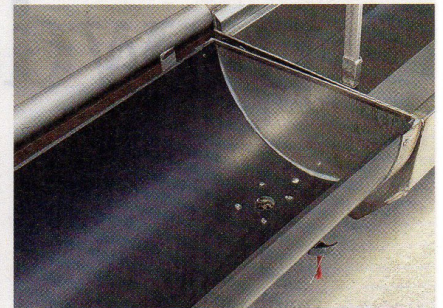
welfare trials, including 10 feed trials – one of which demonstrated a 20% improvement in growth from specific milk or formula combinations.

Specific calf health trials include pneumonia vaccination across 1,500

financial risk for farmers.

Mr Buitelaar said: "From milk powders to calf buildings, our philosophy is the same: evidence-based facts, not marketing claims.

"Every building, feed and protocol is stress-tested, with only proven outcomes adopted and we certainly do not keep results behind closed doors."



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