



# Maintain, mend, and modify

Spring and summer can offer a window to assess cow housing and carry out any necessary repairs to help prevent minor issues escalating into costly emergencies. So what should producers look out for?

**TEXT** LUCY HICKS

**W**ith many herds now out at grazing, spring is an ideal time to assess housing conditions while any issues seen during the winter are still fresh in producers' minds. "It's a good time to reflect on what worked well and what changes need to be made before the next season," says Kingshay's Sarah Bolt. "Start by making lists: one for obtaining quotes for necessary upgrades; another for routine summer maintenance tasks, and a third for cleaning jobs, to be carried out before the housing-period begins"

Housing assessments should start outside buildings. "Look for broken or leaking gutters and downpipes," says Ms Bolt. "Excess water entering the shed can make bedding damp, reducing cow comfort and increasing the risk of mastitis-causing bacteria multiplying. "Cleaning blocked gutters and drains is essential, and ensure cladding is securely attached to prevent water ingress and reduce noise disturbances that could unsettle cows in windy conditions."

Roofing should also be checked for broken sheets, rust, or missing fasteners. "But remember, if working at height, take extreme care because most roofs are not designed to bear a person's weight."

She adds that one of her 'pet hates' when visiting farms is struggling to open doors or gates. "Checking hinges and latches is one of those 'take time to make time' jobs. Think of the lost minutes every day wrestling with a gate that only takes minutes to fix."

Inside buildings, lighting and electrical fixtures should be inspected for damaged wiring or broken bulbs. Adequate lighting, that offers 200 lux for at least 16 hours, can positively impact milk yield and fertility.

"Dust accumulation on light units can reduce intensity, but a thorough clean can restore brightness. And upgrading to modern LED lighting with timers can also improve energy efficiency and reduce costs," says Ms Bolt.

## Good ventilation

Check ventilation systems, including fans and windbreak netting, to ensure proper airflow. Blocked netting or dirty fans can impede ventilation, leading to poor air quality, which impact cow health.

Water availability and cleanliness are also crucial. "Water constitutes approximately 87% of milk and between 60% and 70% of a cow's body. High-yielding dairy cows may consume up to 160 litres each day, making water accessibility and cleanliness paramount," she says. ▶



Sarah Bolt:  
**"Check for neck calluses and shiny shed rails"**

◀ Kingshay work has shown that contaminated troughs significantly reduce water intakes, even when meeting the required 10cm per cow space recommendation. “Tipping or drainable troughs make for easier cleaning, and ensure that fresh water is available at all times. Positioning troughs at least 85cm high also helps to maintain cleanliness while allowing cows to drink comfortably.

### Feed barriers

Producers should also assess feed barriers. If well designed they should allow cows unrestricted access to feed without causing injuries. The minimum recommended space per adult dairy cow is 0.7 metres, but larger cows may require more.

“Indications that a barrier is restricting access include: ‘herringbone’ standing, where cows stand at an angle due to limited space; neck calluses, caused by excessive pressure from low-positioned rails; excessive stretching to reach food, evidenced by altered foot placement; cows waiting to feed, suggesting inadequate feeding space; and displacements at the barrier, signalling that there is competition for access to feed,” says Ms Bolt.

“Simple adjustments, such as raising the neck rail or increasing the height of the feed table by 0.2 metres, can allow cows to reach 0.6 metres further forward,” she adds. “And worn concrete on feed ‘tables’ can be resurfaced with coatings, tiles, or rubber to promote higher feed intake and improve cow comfort.”

A frequently overlooked post-housing task is cleaning dirty bedding, passageways, and surfaces such as cow brushes. A thorough clean, followed by a rest period, helps to eliminate bacteria that can cause mastitis or digital dermatitis.

Cubicle assessment is also essential. Whether recently installed or decades old, cubicles should be evaluated

for effectiveness. Poorly designed cubicles can lead to: poor mobility, caused by standing on concrete for prolonged periods; injuries resulting from inadequate cubicle dimensions; and mastitis from dirty or uncomfortable beds.

Many older cubicles are too small for modern dairy cows, while newer ones may have been installed incorrectly. Small adjustments, such as modifying rail positions or adding stanchions, can significantly improve cow comfort, cubicle acceptance, and cleanliness. Properly set-up cubicles encourage optimal lying times, minimise injuries, and contribute to cleaner cows and beds.

### Check necks

“For every neck rub or callus seen on the cows, there is likely a shiny piece of galvanised rail in the shed,” says Ms Bolt. “These highlight areas where modifications are needed.”

While eliminating all cubicle-related issues is challenging due to cow-size variations, good setup and bedding can minimise occurrences. “Many cubicles are adjustable with minor modifications. Using additional brackets, ratchet straps, or stanchions can help make simple yet effective adjustments that enhance cow behaviour, health, and productivity.”

She stresses that improving cow housing can be low- or no-cost. And where significant investment is required, it’s important to consider that failing to address even the smallest issues can lead to major problems.

“Simple adjustments can enhance cow comfort, reduce mastitis and lameness, leading to better welfare and increased productivity,” says Ms Bolt. “Taking the time now to maintain, mend, and modify housing will pay dividends later this year, ensuring a stress-free environment for both cows and producers. |

## What are your cows trying to tell you?

behaviour	the problem	typical causes
<b>perching:</b> cows stand with their front feet in the cubicle, and their back feet in the passageway	increased standing time puts excessive pressure on the back feet, leading to lameness and stress on the cow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● incorrectly located neck rail – too near the kerb and/or too low</li> <li>● uncomfortable bed, so cows do not want to lie down</li> </ul>
<b>diagonal standing:</b> cows stand all four feet in the cubicle, but stand diagonally across it	muck gets deposited in the back corners of the bed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● incorrectly located neck rail – too near the kerb and/or too low</li> <li>● lack of lunging space</li> <li>● excessively wide cubicles</li> </ul>
<b>diagonal lying:</b> cows lie diagonally in the beds	muck gets deposited in the back corners of the bed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● lack of lunging space</li> <li>● lunging blocked by rails across the front of the cubicles</li> <li>● excessively wide cubicles or cubicles with flexible dividers</li> </ul>
<b>standing too far forward in the cubicle</b>	muck seen in the middle or at the back of the bed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● neck rail positioned too far forward</li> </ul>
<b>lying too far forward in the cubicle</b>	muck seen in the middle or at the back of the bed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● incorrectly located or missing brisket board</li> </ul>
<b>dog sitting:</b> cows stand up front feet first or sit in the cubicle with front feet extended	places strain on the cow by forcing her to stand up in an unnatural way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● lack of lunging space</li> <li>● damaged knee</li> </ul>
<b>lying backwards in the cubicle</b>	muck in the cubicles and risk of cows getting stuck	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● wide or broken cubicles</li> </ul>