

Freedom farrowing – the issues

Jane Jordan reports

Part 1 – pressures
and politics

Setting the scene



Confining sows during farrowing and lactation has become a controversial issue and one the UK government is keen to resolve. Germany's decision to phase out farrowing crates within the next 15 years will undoubtedly act as a lever to push for a similar ban here and the pig industry is acutely aware it must be prepared. But setting sow's free is not simple, as the pressures to maintain efficiency, while safeguarding the welfare and safety of all pigs and the people in an indoor production environment, makes this a complex and expensive endeavour.

Although farrowing crates do unequivocally improve piglet survival rates, the commercial success of the outdoor pig production, and to some extent the industry's positive promotion of this sector, has strengthened public interest in pig welfare. The ethics of confining sows while they give birth and rear their young is becoming quite difficult to defend and lobby groups, such as Compassion in World Farming and the RSPCA, say there is clear evidence that an increasing number of consumers would prefer nursing sows to have a 'more natural' farrowing experience.

CIWF leader Nick Palmer believes crates could be phased out successfully in the UK if the pig industry is given adequate time to develop viable alternatives and learn new skills. In a report published in October 2020*, he advocated a five to eight-year transition period and said that Defra's 'public money for public goods' agenda could potentially offer farmers some financial incentives/grant aided support to phase out farrowing crates and invest in new, unrestrained accommodation.

Government, industry and the supply chain must, he said, work together to ensure best practice and that any investment made to improve sow welfare was not undermined at the retail shelf. This collaborative approach would also have to be backed by clear labelling and legislative measures to protect UK farmers and prevent cheaper, sub-standard pork products infiltrating the market place.

Like industry, CIWF and RSPCA want to see more research on freedom farrowing as currently there is little scientific-based data available and most commercial evidence is anecdotal. Kate Parkes, RSPCA Pig Sector Manager, says a much wider discussion between industry, government and NGOs is needed on how crates might be replaced and how producers can be encouraged to invest in accommodation that allows sows complete freedom throughout their lives.

"The UK can make improvements to sow welfare, and although temporary crating is a step forward, it's not a system we endorse. Our standards are for 100% freedom farrowing and that won't change. We do support the gradual phasing out crates, but also appreciate that pig producers will need some financial support and a level of assurance in terms of price and fair trade," she said.

No form of crate is permitted by the RSPCA Assured pig scheme. Certified breeding herds must only use farrowing systems that allow complete freedom before, during and after parturition and throughout the suckling period. Sows must also have access to bedding and nesting material. Currently very few indoor breeding units meet these rigorous standards and so almost all of the pork marketed under the RSPCA assured label is sourced from outdoor herds.

However, the organisation strongly believes there are opportunities for indoor units as consumer demand for its higher welfare pork continues to grow year-on-year. The RSPCA's scheme now accounts for 23% of UK pork production and some 600 different retail/food service pork products carry the brand label. However, the outdoor sector is facing challenges, such as land availability and tougher environmental regulations, and this might limit expansion.

Having the option to freedom farrow could be a shrewd move for some indoor herds. The capital cost of a freedom farrowing system is estimated at between £550 to £1500 per sow place, depending on flooring and fixtures. However, the investment could add significant value to a business and provide some means of 'future proofing' it against prospective welfare legislation.

Future value

Glyn Baker, Director of Quality Equipment, says those looking to invest in new farrowing accommodation are wise to consider a future without crates.

"We are working with a number of pig businesses that are taking the freedom farrowing route, but with no defined specifications for this type of system it's often quite difficult to decide which system offers longevity and profit potential. Currently, most design briefs tend to be based on what each farm's supply chain demands, and they can be very different," he explains.

Some contracts are seeking a six sq.m allowance per pen; others require less space and might also permit some temporary restraint at farrowing, while some specify complete freedom throughout. As Glyn says, there's much to consider in terms of design, construction and budget and how the new facilities might satisfy business targets for pig-flow and throughput.

Estimated costs of free farrowing installations (excluding flooring).

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Standard farrowing pen | £580.00 |
| New QE freedom farrowing pen | £850.00 |
| Midland Pig Producers 360 FF freedom crate | £985.00 |
| Newcastle University "Pig Safe" model | £1,450.00 |

Source: *Quality Equipment*.

*Ref. A future without farrowing crates, *Pig World*, October 2020

Part 2 – producer view

Free house - an evolutionary experience

Fergus Howie began a journey with freedom farrowing around seven years ago. His family's Wicks Manor herd, the cornerstone of a mixed farm business and own brand pork production and retail enterprise, currently farrows 40% of sows in unrestricted pens, while the rest are managed in conventional crates.

"We started to freedom farrow because our pig business is all about high quality pork produced in the most welfare friendly way we can. We are a fully integrated niche market supply chain and have learned how to add value to our offering by listening to our customers," he explains.

Wicks Manor is the largest, family-owned, fully-integrated, field-to-fork pork processing operation in the UK. It breeds, finishes, and processes all of the pigs it produces – some 110 a week – and also operates an onsite cutting plant and butchery producing a range of sausages, bacon, hams and fresh pork cuts. The business employs 46 staff, most of whom work in the pork production enterprise.

“We use our fertile soil to grow crops, which feed our pigs and produce safe, good quality, fully traceable wholesome pork for people to enjoy,” says Fergus, proudly.

The pig unit is predominantly straw-based, with all piglets weaned at around four weeks of age and reared to slaughter at 110kgs liveweight. The herd is fed using home-grown cereals – the Howie’s also farm 4400 acres of arable land. When demand requires, the business bolsters their own farm production by sourcing Red Tractor assured British pigs that match their exacting standards. The 220-sow herd moved away from mainstream pork production following the stall and tether ban as the pig business needed to earn a fair price for the meat it was producing if it was to survive.

“The price we received had to be one that reflected the quality of our product and the enormous investment we were making in our high-welfare, quality-assured production process,” Fergus explains.



Two decades on, Wicks Manor has a varied customer base. It supplies food service outlets and has key contracts with numerous sports stadia and local authorities (mainly school meals); it produces premium standard/ regional preferred producer lines for high-end grocery stores and multiple retailers, including the Co-Op; has its own farm/online shop and has attracted valuable export markets in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

“Product quality is paramount, but our high-welfare production ethic is a valuable USP and we do require an element of freedom farrowing in our system,” Fergus explains.

The farm farrows 60% of sows in crates and the rest in free farrowing pens, which satisfies the numerous markets it’s currently supplying.

“The 60/40 split is a good balance. We can’t free farrow every sow because litter quality out of these pens is too inconsistent and that would affect throughput and compromise our production efficiency. But this might change if demand increases and/or the law changes,” Fergus adds.

Sows do perform well in the freedom pens, with good appetites and high milk yields, but weaning weights are more variable and mortality rates are higher. Injuries seen in both sows and piglets are also more apparent and the manhours required to keep productivity on track is considerably higher – easily 200% more labour intensive than conventional crates.

“We get reasonable results from our free farrowing pens. Sows wean around ten pigs a litter on average, but at the moment this system can’t offer the consistency in terms of numbers weaned or piglet quality we need. Our freedom system is necessary, but economically we can only really sustain the higher running costs because the results from our conventional crated system are much more efficient,” Fergus adds.

Learning curve

The Howie's seven-year learning curve with freedom farrowing has seen many developments. It began with a simple, traditional-style straw-bedded 2m x 2m pen with rails positioned along the walls and a protective creep area that gave piglets a safe zone and reduced the risk of crushing/overlay. This evolved into something more technical, with a purpose-built set of pens housed inside a tent-like structure (similar to a polytunnel) designed in conjunction with Quality Equipment. This temporary building had solid walls and featured a push through muck passage and was eventually fitted with ventilation to improve temperature control and sow comfort as heat was a problem.

The next development was to convert a 30-place Porta Pig farrowing room, which is still in use.

This solid floor system performs well, but there are plans to incorporate a 'Comfort' slatted flooring, with bedding for enrichment, to improve hygiene and reduce labour costs.

"For us freedom farrowing has proved an evolutionary process, and that will probably continue. I think we have now arrived at a decent design spec, one that ticks the sow welfare box, but is more practical to manage and counters some of the higher labour requirements and additional cost issues. Consistency and litter quality might still be a challenge, but our brand needs to move in this direction as an increasing proportion of our customers want us to produce pigs in this way," says Fergus.



Part 3 – comment and analysis Production perspectives – Welfare highs, environmental woes?

Freedom farrowing does have potential and during the past five years I have seen numerous systems in both research and commercial situations in Europe – mainly Denmark and the Netherlands. All were linked to premium priced contracts and/ or a niche market retail outlet and in most cases would not be economically viable without this guaranteed market support.

Production costs are higher and maintaining productivity (numbers weaned, weaning weights, litter quality etc) relies on diligent, dedicated management and confident, skilled stockmen – and more so when managing highly prolific genotypes.

I've also deduced how continental and British perspectives differ. Here in the UK consumers tend to regard freedom as free-range, rather than free movement and although sows are unrestrained convincing consumers that certain free farrow systems are high-welfare could still prove challenging. The aesthetics of the pens do still appear quite industrial, and the amount of metal work and hi-tech equipment that is involved in a freedom farrowing set up is equal, if not more than that used in a conventional crate system. Also, on the European units I've visited a high level of noise, lack of cleanliness and poor air quality were common, factors that can influence sometimes compromise pig health and young naive immune systems.

Unrestricted sows actively move around their pens interacting with their litter; they rub, scratch and generally root around their pens, 'stirring up' their immediate environment. Although pens are slatted,

with a solid creep area, muck/manure does still migrate around the pen, and hygiene was an issue with some pen designs. Another key observation was the level of dust, both airborne and on surfaces, which again is probably due to increased sow activity (rubbing/scratching), creating more particulate debris from skin-sloughing (rubbing/scratching), bedding/dung disturbance and rooting behaviour etc. Odour was also more intense in the freedom farrow systems I have visited and I wonder if managing ventilation rates is more difficult. Is a warmer environment beneficial, does it make sows more lethargic and so more inclined to lay still, thus reducing the potential risk of overlays? Or does the ability to move freely during lactation, generate warmth at levels that require rooms to be ventilated at faster fan speeds that might compromise piglet comfort?

Stockmen safety is another a key factor and staff working in a free farrow environment do need to be confident and have sound skills. Any interactions/interventions require careful management and most free farrowing systems do have restraining bars and barriers to confine /reduce sow movements during farrowing and while routine tasks were performed. However, stockmen can still be exposed to injury risk in what is an enclosed environment containing many obstacles and equipment that might impede escape.

Committed journey

There is still a great deal to be considered, and discovered, before freedom farrowing can be regarded as a reliable and economically worthwhile option for indoor breeding units. The pig sector and legislators must establish if it truly does offer welfare advantages and whether the UK pig sector will be able to secure market share and remain globally competitive if it chooses to outlaw confined farrowing systems.

As yet, there are many unanswered questions concerning stockman safety, production hygiene, piglet health/survival and animal comfort, but by far the greatest challenges will be securing retail/consumer commitment and steadfast assurance from government that it will not allow our domestic pig industry to be undermined by imported pigmeat produced using methods that are illegal in the UK. Technology and innovation can and will produce safe and effective alternatives to the farrowing crate and I'm confident producers will adapt. But the road to freedom must only be travelled if UK pig farmers are awarded some protection from meaningful legislation that pledges fair trade and stops cheap, inferior pork products infiltrating the domestic market.



Free farrowing room on a Danish farm