The importance of how we treat the pig in the first seven days post weaning is often underestimated. This is one of the most traumatic times in a young pig’s life. Up until this point, the piglet has lived exclusively within a small group of around 10 to 14, fed on mother’s milk and hopefully has had provided to it a quantity of quality creep feed. Weaning day brings about many changes including the move to a different building, larger housing groups and for the first time, no mother to provide any nutrition or psychological support.

By beginning to creep feed in the farrowing crate we have started the process of conditioning the young pig’s digestive system to accommodate solid foods and this process must continue post weaning to ensure the best potential performance and health. Quality nutrition is paramount at this point, with price per tonne becoming less relevant when you consider that most pigs will only consume 1-2kg of first stage starter feed. However, accessibility to feed is equally important as the quality of that feed. A significant percentage of freshly weaned pigs do not take to ad libitum-type feeders in the early post weaning period, so it is essential to provide ancillary feeding opportunities in the first five to seven days.

At this point in a young pig’s life, stimulation to feed at regular intervals and in groups (reminiscent of suckling as a litter) is also critical to achieve best possible intakes. Pre weaning, the piglet has been on a fundamentally liquid diet, so the importance of adequate availability of fresh water cannot be understated. Providing water with the correct pH level is also essential to suppressing the post-weaning spike in gut pathogen load, optimising protein utilisation and thereby maximising performance. In this regard, the correct pH is just at or slightly below four. Dosing with an appropriate blend of organic acids with algaeidal action needs to be accurate and may require a powered doser to be used, with routine pH checks carried out using a pH meter.

Remember there will be a variation in size of pigs you have weaned, with the difference between the largest pigs and the smallest often being as much as 4kg. This means freshly weaned pigs should be ‘sized up’ so they can be fed the appropriate diet and can compete with their peers more effectively. Sizing piglets at this age will, without doubt, result in improved performance and reduced mortality. It will also lead to more even growth throughout the rest of the growing period, which in turn will result in better utilisation of finishing pens and due to the reduction in variability, will increase total kilogrammes of meat sold off the unit.

Harbro’s pig specialists have demonstrated on a number of customer farms, that improved attention to detail in this critical period has a significantly beneficial effect on lifetime performance, in particular reducing slaughter age and/or increasing average weights. We have a range of specialist ‘young pig’ products, which, coupled with the correct management at the most critical time in a pig’s life, will enhance your unit’s performance and profitability.

If you would like to discuss how Harbro can help further enhance your unit’s performance come along and visit us on stand 75 at the Pig and Poultry Fair, where you can speak with one of our pig specialists.

Don’t forget to visit us on stand number 75 at the Pig & Poultry Fair 2016!
The farrow to finish indoor unit is the main focus for Rick, who in 2015 won the National Pig Awards Producer of the Year. The herd is split over the two farms with all the sows and 40% of the progeny housed at Southfield Farm and the remaining 60% being kept at West Farm. “Splitting the herd over the two farms makes the feeding process more efficient as they are all fed on home grown cereals and the cereals produced at each farm match the feed consumption of the pig herd,” says Rick.

The dry sows are fed by trickle feeders, but using special units designed for feeding meal and housed in the dry sow house, that has 60 pens, each holding six sows. All rearing stock are accommodated on slats and split into three sections.

Creep/Link/Weaner- 8-40kg
Grower - 40-75kg
Finisher - 75-118kg

Home-mixing

Four years ago Rick moved from compound feeds to home-mixing which has proved to be a smart move. They now have their own mixing plant with around 8,000 tonnes of feed being processed each year. The mixing unit produces all the rations, which are formulated by pig specialist Harvey May and Dr Kevin Stickney from the Harbro pig team.

For the breeding herd a gilt rearing ration, sow gestation ration as well as a lactating sow and a lactating gilt ration are all formulated. The lactating gilts also have their feed top dressed with Lacto Boost, a high energy ration which was introduced at the beginning of the year with the advice from specialist Harvey May. “We have seen numerous benefits since changing to home-mixing four years ago. Instantly we saw a reduced cost on transport as we do not have to buy in compound feeds,” says Rick. With a large proportion of the cereals being produced on farm used in the rations, Rick and Rob have also found this has reduced the risk of selling cereals as they have less to sell off the farm.

However, the benefit is not only the reduced transport cost; Rick has seen improvements in performance from his herd since moving to meal. “I have found that although the rations have become more basic with fewer raw materials, but a higher quality raw material, the herd has benefited from consistency in the rations.” The grit size within the ration is now larger, which Rick feels is better for the sows. “Harbro have a key focus on the physical structure of the diet and the nutritional balance. One without the other can reduce performance. The correct grit can double the level of lactic acid in the stomach.” says Harvey.

Weaning takes place at around 24 days with the piglets moving onto bought in creep before quickly moving onto the first link ration until they reach 40kg. There are huge savings and performance benefits to be had in this early stage by creating bespoke creep and link diets on farm. There is a five week batch farrowing system in place which Rick finds works well within the unit as it keeps the process consistent, as well as helping overall herd health. All gilts are bought in through JSR genetics along with all the boar semen used on farm.

Pigs are finished at 118kg liveweight and sent just 15 miles down the road to Cranswick Country Foods. This is another real benefit to the business as the pigs do not have to travel a large distance to go to slaughter and kill out well. “We have a current average deadweight of 93kg with our target being around 90kg,” says Rick. The wean to finish feed conversion is 2.25:1, with the meat per tonne of feed (MTF) being 350kg.

Seven full time staff work within the pig unit, which includes one member of staff who mixes all the feed rations. Over the past six months Rick and his team have been putting a lot of time into the breeding herd, particularly focusing on the farrow unit and pre/post service of the herd. Harbro pig specialist, Harvey May meets with Rick every six weeks to walk round the pigs, where they try and focus on specific areas. “Lately we have been focusing on the farrowing unit – an area that Rick has put a lot of time into over the past six months,” comments Harvey.

Rick is consistently looking to improve farrowing rate, born alive and piglets reared throughout the year. The main focus for Rick now and into the future is to continue to reduce his cost of production. “Getting the finishers to the required weight for slaughter at a lower cost is something we are always looking to improve,” says Rick.

“Achieving the National Pig Awards Producer of the Year in 2015 was a great achievement for the whole team. It gave us all a real boost to continue to focus on improving and keeping up to date with all the current market requirements.”