

Building Plans

Think before you build says Shropshire based buildings and waste management consultant **William Phillips of P&L Agriconsulting.**

Our farming practices are under constant under scrutiny and the way we plan and design our buildings must meet the highest welfare standards.

Spring is the time to review housing facilities and start the ball rolling with any plans for new facilities for next winter. Farmers need to have a clear idea of their objectives, however minor the proposed plans are.

I always start with a scale site plan of the unit to get a bird's eye view. Draw in your ideas and options to scale and include gates and handling. Also include the ideas that you don't think will work – it is surprising how often how these ideas generate a different perspective and create new ones.

Concentrate on cow flows and handling - These are the areas that will make the unit easy to operate. It is just as important at this stage to look ahead to any possible expansion possibilities and the knock on requirements for slurry handling and feeding.

Allow plenty of time for planning - Your own and the planning authority –they will take six weeks and it could be longer.

Most projects will require planning permission, but check with the planners. It is not their job to make you get permission if you do not need to. But if you proceed without permission, the consequences could be very expensive.

If you can make the building more interesting by incorporating bricks or stone so much the better. Again, bear in mind that planning authorities are familiar with agricultural projects and I have found that there are seldom problems with reasonable applications. In sensitive areas, most will require landscaping in varying degrees. This can act as valuable windbreaks and enhance the look of the unit.

Consider the Environment Agency and Highways departments as they will receive copies of your planning application. If pollution control is an issue, get the EA on your side by discussing your plans with them. It will be cheaper to do it at the start rather than have to make changes later. It is also worth bearing in mind that slurry and silage structures require you to notify the EA two weeks before you use them. It is illegal not to do so.

Work out your plans and get quotes - Get someone else to criticise them. Any building project runs into many thousands, if you have to compromise at least you will know why.

Above all, do your sums - Not many projects run under budget, but try not to compromise on the golden rules. We all know that happy animals perform better and are more profitable.

Golden rules on design for dairy cow housing

Give cows enough space. Cubicles should be at least 8ft long

Heelstones should not be more than 6 inches high

Dung passages should be at least 10ft wide preferably 12ft

Feed standing passages should be at least 12ft wide and 15ft with head to head cubicles and straw yards

If you are going for straw yards, make sure the building could convert easily to cubicles. For example 50ft to the feed fence allows scrape and feeding passages and three rows of cubicles. It is also ideal for the straw yard itself. Allow 35 ft of bedded area and a 15 ft passage to the feed fence.

Allow at least 16ft for central feed passages. Machinery is getting bigger.

Raise the feed passage by 4-6 ins above cow standing level

Incorporate an adjustable feed rail.

Use as few concrete blocks as possible. Walls are expensive and often unnecessary.

If you are likely to extend buildings in the future use concrete panels – you can move them. To reduce costs why not consider ply-wood.

Always allow for a handling area in the design if appropriate

Always try to scrape slurry in one direction only

Specify small gaps (10mm max) in the roof sheets to allow stale air to escape.

Incorporate 'windows' into the side cladding – then you can adjust depending on weather conditions

Consider 'Galebraeker' type products for flexible cladding options.

For aprons, allow plenty of space for turning circles (at least 30ft if possible)

Don't forget about summer access to the milking parlour.

Can you keep all your feeds together? There is nothing worse than having to move your forage box to go and pick up more ingredients at the other end of the farm.

Sometimes you have to compromise. Use a check sheet and mark important factors out of ten.

Above all plan with a view to what you might do in ten years time.

Will Phillips

For more detail and specific recommendations specific to your individual building project, just contact P&L to arrange a site consultation. Call us today on 01948 880261