



Step-by-step guide to selecting gilts

There are some simple guidelines for gilt selection at 80 to 100kg, to ensure good production and longevity.

Important areas include body condition, legs, feet, teats, vulva and temperament.

A gilt may not meet the optimum standard for all the criteria, but producers should aim to select for as many as possible.

Body Condition: ensure gilts are brought out to a well-lit area for optimal visibility. A suitable body condition is 3 to 3.5 (100kg at 22 weeks) and, when selecting a group of gilts, aim for animals of even size and body condition. Look for gilts with good overall conformation with a good top line and without dipped shoulders. Aim to avoid gilts with obvious problems such as abscesses, wounds, tail-biting, rashes or abdominal rupture. Action for Productivity sheet number 20 provides more information on condition scoring.

Legs and feet: bring gilts onto a hard surface when assessing legs and feet. Start by letting the gilt walk around freely and look for

laboured, stiff or lame paces. Selecting for good legs and feet helps to ensure sow longevity in loose-housed gestation systems. Avoid gilts with swollen joints or leg injuries. Toes should be even sized with a slight spread and feet free from cracks or injuries.

Teats: teat functionality affects how many piglets the gilt will be able to suckle and how easily piglets can access the udder. Aim for a minimum of 12 evenly-sized, functional teats, but select appropriately for unit litter size. If the average number born alive is 14, a minimum of 14 functional teats is required. Avoid blind or inverted teats and select for a good underline with them well-spaced.

Vulva: the vulva can be a limiting factor for future reproduction and inhibit the ease of mating. Look for a well-developed one with a good size and shape and avoid infantile vulva, as this may mean an underdeveloped reproductive tract. Also avoid tipped vulvas as they can cause problems with natural service and farrowing.



Temperament: moving and handling is much easier when gilts are calm, so a good temperament should be taken into consideration.

Gilt calmness can also be significantly improved through good stockmanship. Less stressed gilts are likely to be more productive.

Look out for the forthcoming 2TS Gilt Management Pack which contains an A3-sized poster on gilt selection.



Keep it clean!

Farm equipment, such as pregnancy scanners, should be thoroughly cleaned before sending to suppliers for service or repair.

It creates a biosecurity risk when suppliers are sent dirty equipment to work on.

Dick Openshaw of Rotech Livestock Equipment says: "To minimise the risk of disease transmission, it makes sense to

thoroughly clean and disinfect equipment before sending it back.

Also, dirty equipment is unpleasant for both farm staff and our staff to handle and it's worth keeping equipment in a clean condition anyway. There is no question whatsoever that cared-for equipment will last longer."

Benefits of staff swap

A number of pig units have started to swap staff between departments and have seen many benefits. Routine and experience are essential to provide high standards of care on a pig unit.

But new ideas and different ways of working have had a positive influence on pig performance for many of the units that have tried a staff swap.

Giving staff chance to try a different role can also mean:

- Staff feel more valued as they are given the opportunity to make suggestions and changes
- There is more respect for their colleagues' roles – a good stockman will make the job look easy when it is in fact very difficult
- Weekend, holiday and illness cover is improved as staff are more competent and confident.

Change can be difficult and should not be forced, but the challenge could also help pig units progress along the route to achieving the industry's 2TS target of two tonnes of pig meat per sow per year.

Farms already swapping staff could consider taking it a step further and exchange staff with other farms, either in the UK or abroad.

The opportunities are there – contact BPEX Knowledge Transfer for more information (details below).