

AN INTRODUCTION TO PIG KEEPING

CALU FACTSHEET

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INTRODUCTION

UK commercial pig production is based on large herds with around 80% kept in herds of over 1,000 head. The UK breeding herd has contracted over the years to around 300,000 sows. In Wales, pig meat production has never been a major agricultural output and there are relatively few specialist herds in Wales compared to the rest of the UK. In the 10 years up to 2009, the recorded number of breeding sows in Wales dropped from 10,800 to 3,700. The Welsh pig herd of around 20,000 pigs now represents around 0.5% of the UK pig population. There is, however, a resurgence of interest in keeping pigs not only from small-holders and part time farmers but also to fill the usually profitable niche markets demanding specialist pig meat products from older and rare breeds reared less intensively.

LEGISLATION

Whether you wish to keep a commercial herd or even one pig as a pet you still need to be registered. The details are well covered in the publication - 'Guide for New Pig keepers'. (Details are given in 'further information'). This covers registering, movement, record keeping, identification, feed advice and notifiable diseases along with some useful contacts and website links that explain about registering and movement licences

INFORMATION AND TRAINING

At least a basic knowledge of pig husbandry and welfare should be gained before venturing into pig keeping. There's plenty of information available from books and the internet, but getting some 'hands on' experience is invaluable.

MARKETING & PROCESSING

This should be considered from the outset. Even if your intention is to keep a few weaners for your own consumption, you still need to sort out arrangements for slaughtering and butchering and the associated transport.

BREEDS

There is a wide range of breeds to choose from, ranging from highly developed commercial strains through to the several rare breeds. There are 13 established pedigree breeds in the UK herd. Commercial strains are bred to produce efficient high yields of pig meat. By crossing well established commercial breeds such as the Landrace and Large White, hybrid vigour is introduced which results in increased numbers of faster growing piglets. In contrast older traditional and rarer breeds take longer to finish, have poorer feed conversion and produce fatter, but arguably tastier, meat. Decide which breed would suit your intended system and environment and whether weaners or breeding stock is readily available from a reputable supplier. A visit to an agricultural show for a discussion with breeders is invaluable.



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HEALTH AND WELFARE

All producers, whether new or experienced, should get a copy of the 'bible' – The Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pigs. (Details are given in 'further information'). As well as covering the legal requirements as a pig producer, it contains much valuable and practical advice on many areas of management, husbandry and production. Pigs are inherently healthy livestock and may require little veterinary input. However it is important to get to know the local veterinary practice, familiarise yourself with common pig ailments and signs of disease, and be happy to administer wormers and vaccinations.

PRODUCTION

In commercial production the average litter size is just under 12 piglets, although numbers reared are on average just below 10 due to losses. On average, sows will rear around 21 piglets per year. Typical weight for age figures are as follows:-

Table 1: Approximate age and weights of pigs at slaughter

	Typical Live weight (kg)	Typical Deadweight (kg)	Approx. Age (days)
Weaner/Store	-	35	84
Porker	53	72	135
Cutter	64	86	150
Baconer	72	95	180
Heavy Pig	85	110	200

In commercial production, piglets will be weaned around 4 weeks of age, this is typically double that in extensive systems. Piglets should have access to a nutritious creep feed from an early age. This enables them to meet their growth potential as the sow's milk output declines and to accustom them to weaning. The majority of male pigs for commercial pork production are not castrated. Less intensive systems leading to much longer days to slaughter will require the male pigs to be castrated to avoid behavioural problems and 'boar' tainted meat.

FEED

Feed is a major cost accounting for up to 80% of the cost of production. Pigs are omnivorous animals and whilst outdoor pigs will graze grass, it is insufficient to fulfill their nutritional requirements. Pig rations are usually based on cereals, a protein supplement plus minerals and vitamins. Pigs need a balanced diet and this is most easily sourced from a local compounder. Small quantities bought in bags are expensive. A typical target in a commercial situation is a live weight of 100kg at five months. As a rough guide, a feed conversion rate of 2.5:1 can be used, meaning 2.5kg feed results in 1kg live weight gain. Typically, from weaning to slaughter, growing pigs will consume 1.8kg - 2 kg feed per day on average with about 5 litres of water. Water should be freely available and it is usual to offer feed ad libitum until the pig weighs around 50-60kg. After this weight it will need to be restricted or a lower density diet to avoid too much carcass fat. As pigs get older the amount of

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protein offered in relation to energy can be reduced. This later stage of finishing offers opportunities for cost saving by 'home-mixed' rations or supplementing with vegetables (it is illegal to feed any meat or scraps containing meat products and for this reason kitchen scraps should not be fed). Whilst the feed requirements of a pregnant sow are relatively modest, the sow suckling a full litter of piglets will need 8-10 kg of an energy and protein rich diet and drink over 20 litres of water.

HOUSING

Highly developed commercial strains are best suited to intensive indoor production systems. Pigs are very sociable animals and prefer to live in small groups. They like to 'nest'; they are clean animals and will not dung or urinate in the areas where they sleep. Their strong smelling manure may not be appreciated by neighbours and they can be very noisy at feeding time. Where they are kept and the type of housing needs to be considered even if the intention is to keep only a few weaners. Free range pigs are happiest when they can fulfill their natural desire to wallow and dig up the ground, they will forage and eat a wide range of food. They prefer scrub or light woodland. Pigs are sensitive to extremes of climate and rely on fat cover for insulation against cold. White pigs can get badly sunburned so shade is essential. If adopting a free range system, purpose built or home made wooden pig arks work well. Fencing can be electric or post and rail with netting. Electric fencing has the benefit that it is easily moved for strip grazing.

ECONOMICS

Even if keeping pigs on a small scale, you should prepare a budget and keep full details of all costs so that the margin can be worked out. At its simplest this could be cost of weaners, feed, straw and slaughter costs.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Guide for New Pig keepers-

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/farmanimaltracing/pigkeeperguidance/pigkeepersguidance/?lang=en>

- The Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pigs-

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/livestockwelfare/codesofrecommendation/pigcode/?lang=en>

- BPEX

<http://www.bpex.org.uk/>

- National Pig Association

<http://www.npa-uk.net/>

- British Pig Association

<http://www.britishpigs.org.uk/>



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