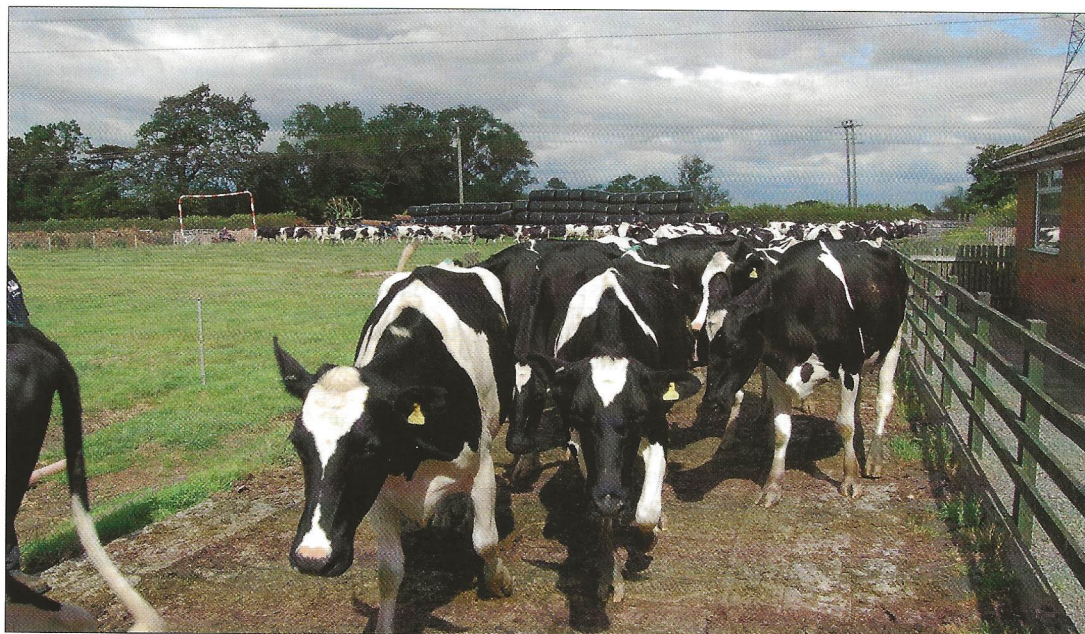


Why are lameness levels still so difficult to bring down?

Lameness remains a persistent issue on many dairy farms, but a new survey hopes to identify new approaches to tackle the problem. British Dairying reports.

Poor mobility and foot health problems are present on all dairy farms, with the national average incidence around 30%. This means a third of all cows will have compromised mobility to a lesser or greater extent every year. Each of these cows will incur higher costs and have reduced production, making lameness a significant drain on profitability.

Despite the financial consequences and the profound advances made in the ability to prevent, detect and treat foot health problems, lameness levels in the UK remain stubbornly high, and higher than in many other countries. Poor mobility costs the dairy sector an estimated £250m/year through impaired fertility, reduced production, premature culls, and treatment costs.



Tackling lameness starts with prevention, clear planning and consistent, proactive herd management

“The best starting place is to look at prevention.”

Stride’s second National Mobility Survey, which runs until the end of April, seeks to try and understand more about why mobility remains such a stubborn nut to crack. What are the reasons it is not given a higher priority, where are the pinchpoints and what needs to be done to increase the focus on mobility and hoof health?

“While we have seen reductions in mastitis rates and improvements in dairy cow fertility over the past 10 years, lameness levels remain high,” says Matt Dobbs, Chairman of the Stride technical board. “A major global review published in the Veterinary Journal in 2023 reported that across major dairying countries, the incidence of lameness is around 22 cases/100 cows with seven cows/100 cows suffering severe lameness.

“Results for the UK were 30-50% higher on both counts and have been closer to 30% lameness and nine percent for severe lameness

for over 20 years. This prompts the question why, when we know far more about what to do to improve mobility and foot health and so reduce the incidence and consequences of lameness?”

The first Stride survey carried out in 2024 confirmed that the major causes of mobility issues remain digital dermatitis, foul, sole ulcers and bruising, white line disease and overgrown claws. Matt says these problems have always been the cause and considerable effort has gone into developing prevention and treatment approaches - but they still persist.

“Possibly the biggest single issue is the fact that mobility is a multi-factorial problem, meaning there is no single solution - all farms are different. The cows’ environment, breeding, nutrition and management all interact to determine the level of lameness in a herd. And it is in recognition of the breadth of the issue that the Stride Initiative was established in 2024.”

Stride is a not-for-profit initiative established to challenge the status quo on lameness. Its objectives are to increase understanding of the issues surrounding dairy cow mobility, to contribute to industry knowledge,

and help develop clear management strategies that deliver sustained improvements in foot health.

Most farms could start to improve foot health by making more integrated use of new information and technologies to help tackle the component parts of poor mobility, says Matt. But having so many tools available can make it difficult to decide on the best approach.

Developing a plan

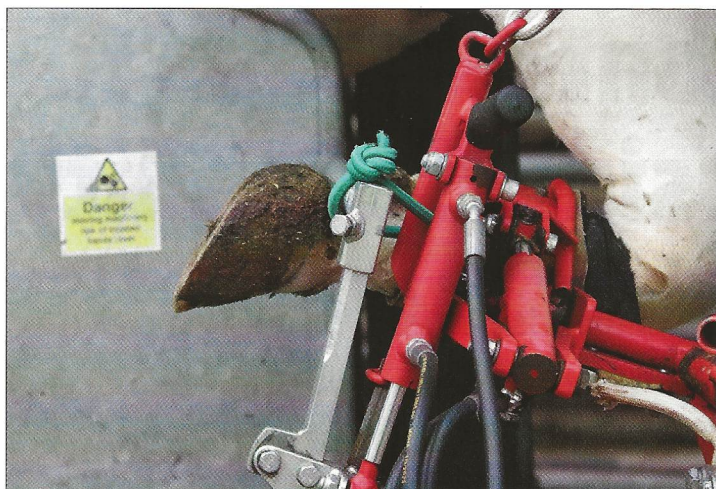
“Sometimes the hardest thing is developing a plan and getting started. One of the starkest findings of our 2024 survey was that on a significant proportion of units there is no clear allocation of responsibility within the farm team for tackling the issue,” says Matt.

“In many cases the best starting place is to look at prevention and what you can do to reduce the risk of problems occurring so frequently. Given the huge environmental and management effects on cows’ mobility, it would be naïve to think it will ever be possible to breed cows that will never go lame. But it is certainly possible to use genomics and indices like LamenessAdvantage to breed more robust and resilient

cows.” Prevention should also include assessing the cow environment, ensuring cubicles are well designed to encourage cows to lie down and so spend less time on their feet. “Evaluations of the environment should also consider the surface on walkways to minimise hoof damage and how efficiently slurry is removed to keep hooves cleaner.”

While footbathing has long been recognised as an important tool to help treat foot conditions, it is a rapidly developing area and a vital part of routine care. A better understanding of footbath design has helped increase the effectiveness of individual hoof dipping, while new formulations mean footbath chemicals are more efficient and safer to handle. In addition, new advances in automatic footbaths offer tremendous potential to improve the total process.

As it is still inevitable that some problems may occur, early detection is important to catch them quickly. “I would like to see all herds adopting the policy of early diagnosis, prompt effective treatment (EDPET).” The introduction of mobility scoring schemes provides an objective way to identify lameness cases sooner,



Healthy hooves are key to productive, resilient dairy cows

allowing prompter treatment to reduce severity and costs. But to be most effective, cows need to be scored at least weekly to pick up trends and the early indicators of problems.

In recent years, the development of camera-based systems has allowed the frequency and consistency of mobility scoring to be increased, and the use of data to be greatly improved. "Using a camera system will not only spot cases sooner but can also highlight the causes of problems," notes Matt. "Are there more cases in a specific building, in a particular group or at a certain stage of lactation?"

Foot trimming

Foot trimming can be both prevention and cure. Structured programmes of preventative trimming help maintain the hoof in good shape. Should a treatment trim be required, new techniques have improved how well hooves are trimmed, while advances in crush design make the process less stressful for the cow and easier and safer for the trimmer.

"Perhaps it will pay to invest in a new crush and to train more team members in how to foot-trim and offer refresher training as required."

Further advances can speed up the effectiveness of treatment and get cows back on their feet quicker. The use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs is now widely accepted as an integral part of treating foot problems to help reduce pain. The use of blocks is also known to be an important tactic to aid recovery in cases where one claw is affected.

The development of topical protection products with a physical protective coating combined with a durable microbial barrier offers a more effective covering than a traditional bandage and can help reduce antibiotic use. This could be both an antimicrobial alternative

and a biodegradable alternative to a bandage. "Some of the new approaches require planning and investment, while others just require changes to protocols and training," says Matt.

"What they have in common is that they all offer proven ways to reduce mobility issues. Yet many are not being adopted as widely as they could."

Practical solutions

"On all farms, the crucial question is what can be done differently or better to help reduce mobility problems? In the 2026 Stride survey, we want to understand more about why mobility remains such a stubborn nut to crack."

"Our goal is to help define effective approaches to improve mobility and give real, practical solutions and options. The more farmers who are prepared to spend just a few minutes completing the online survey, the more comprehensive a picture of UK dairy cow mobility we can develop. This, in turn, will help guide the creation of meaningful actions to raise mobility levels across the national herd."

The survey will run until April 30. To complete the survey, scan the QR code or go to: www.stridemobility.co.uk. All respondents will be entered in a draw to win one of five pairs of Apple AirPods.

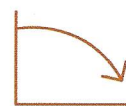


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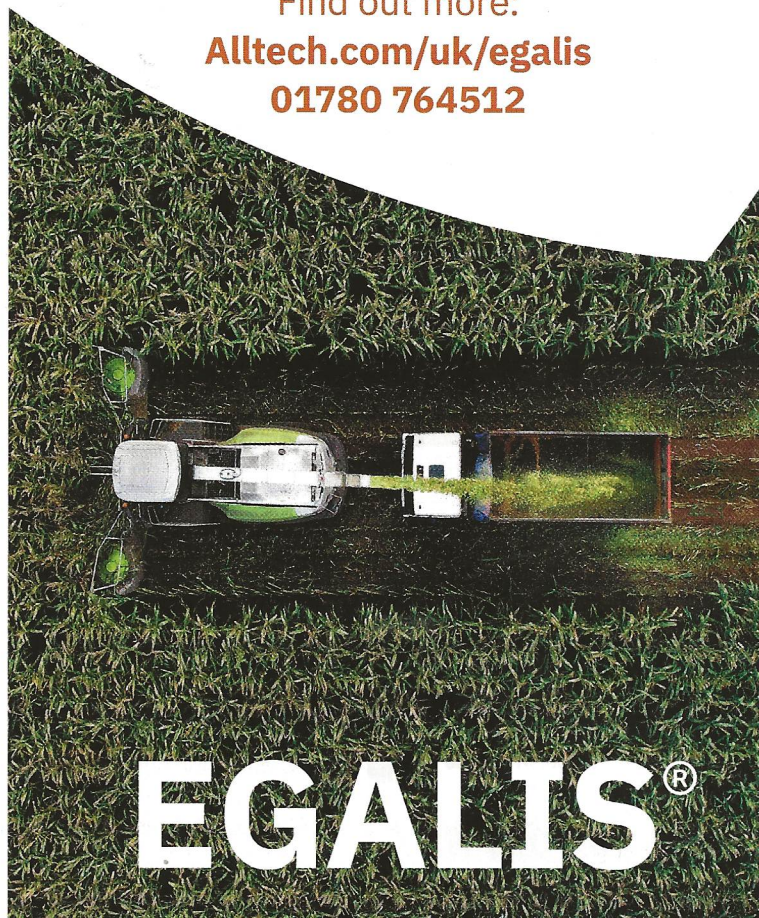
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