

# LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry

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A comprehensive guide to

## Physical working conditions

*Why they matter and how to improve them*

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# Physical working conditions – why do they matter?

Farm work is hard work and, by its very nature, infinite. It can be physically and emotionally demanding and is often perceived by outsiders to consist of long hours, low pay and a lack of working rights – even though that is not always the case.

Many roles within the agricultural industry also remain renowned for the physicality required and some of the conditions on farm can make life more challenging for those with less physical strength or who are living with a disability or pre-existing medical condition.

Typical activities such as lifting heavy items, operating different machinery, repetitive picking motions, being exposed to excessive noise and chemicals, working at height or bending over for hours at a time all come with their own risks. And then there is the weather; its extremities are now faced more frequently in farming as temperatures plummet and soar.

It's easy for employers and even farmworkers who are short on time and accustomed to daily challenges to overlook what could be done to make life easier. This is particularly so for those born on farms or those who have worked on them all their lives.

However, some farming businesses are finding ways to adapt so that they can make themselves attractive to a wider pool of potential employees or retain older



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members of their workforce for longer. One of the primary deterrents for people entering or staying in the industry is poor working conditions, says Paul Harris, managing director at Real Success. “More and more farms are looking to those who currently work in retail, construction or service industries for their staffing requirements,” notes Paul.

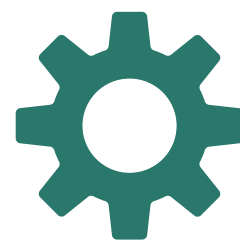
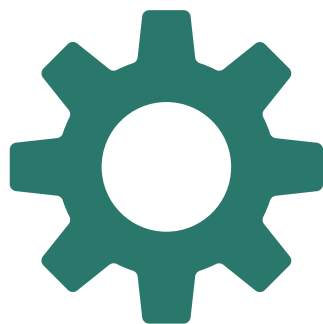
“Our working conditions, despite the nature of the work, need to compete with the world outside of farming. We must offer safe places to work, pleasant areas to take breaks and the right tools for the job. Don’t expect people to choose our industry if it’s unsafe, unclean and unable to offer the basics that other industries provide as standard.”

At present, many farms lack basic amenities, such as a working toilet suitable for all staff. The absence of these essential facilities affects daily comfort and sends a clear message about a lack of consideration for diverse needs within the industry.

Women in particular face their own set of unique challenges. According to *Farmers Weekly’s research on the role of women in farming*, some roles, like those involving machinery or arable field operations, are more likely to be carried out by men than women.

Just under half of the women surveyed said they experienced difficulties in using the machinery and equipment in their workplace (43%), compared with just 15% of men. The female respondents cited multiple reasons why this was the case, including a lack of training and interest in using it, as well as the challenges faced in using equipment “designed for men”. Difficulties in accessing appropriate work clothing and PPE were also detailed.

But there is some good news. Reviewing and improving the physical working conditions on your farm can not only help attract new people, but also make a big difference to the comfort and wellbeing of your existing team.



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# The business case for improving physical working conditions

Improving physical workplace conditions is not just a matter affecting employees. It also plays a significant factor in a business's success, thanks to enhanced productivity.

Employees who are regularly briefed and involved in on-farm health and safety planning have much more "buy in" to the concept, which is likely to lead to a culture shift, says Katie Hilton, director at Cheffins. "Best practice farm management is vital for the success of any agricultural operation, and this starts with promoting a culture of safety," she adds.

"A healthy industry that takes care of its staff is more likely to be successful and take on new ideas. If farm employees can see their safety and wellbeing is taken seriously, they feel as though they are respected and valued, which – in our experience having an insight into many farm businesses – makes for a much happier environment."

## Where to start?

An understanding of what contributes to a positive physical working environment can be as easy as taking a walk round the farm and considering the following:

**First impressions** What do workers, potential and existing, first see when they arrive at your farm? Is there clear signage of where they are and where to go, or is it absent or hidden behind overgrown trees and bushes? Is there a designated, safe area where they can park and, in the dark, bleaker mornings and evenings, is it well-lit?

## CASE STUDY: MERRYN GILLBARD

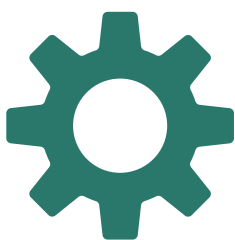
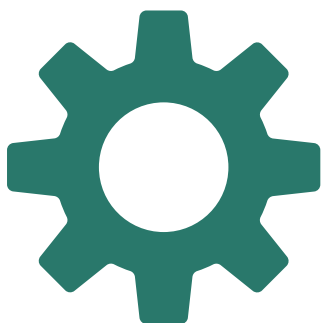
Merryn Gillbard is proof that, with a little creative thinking, improvements to the physical working environment can be simple but highly effective.

Blackadon Farm, near Liskeard, Cornwall, is a mixed farm comprising 150 breeding sheep, growing a range of cereal crops and haylage. Although a toilet was available for use in the farmhouse, there was an increasing need to have a closer facility in the yard and upgrade facilities for female workers.

Originally, Merryn installed an outdoor camping toilet for her own benefit after suffering from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a painful condition affecting the stomach that can cause sudden changes in bowel movements. She bought an unused, new toilet from Facebook for £40 and a sink from Amazon for £90 and built a space, complete with a door, under the office mezzanine. A small battery-powered light to aid visibility if required is also to hand. The facility was soon used by everyone.

"We have auditors, reps, people who come and help at lambing time, our contractor, all who now happily use the facility," she says. "Frankly, everyone is grateful for a toilet they can use if they get caught short."

Elsewhere on farm, Merryn, who is a partner on the family-run enterprise, has instigated





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## CASE STUDY CONTINUED: MERRYNN GILLARD

similar improvements, and introduced kitchen facilities and a seating area inside the container-style office. Staff can use a fridge, microwave, kettle and crockery, and a mezzanine area is now furnished with table and chairs and a sofa.

“I initially used the space for teaching smallholders about sheep husbandry, but now it doubles up as an area we can all use for eating and a bit of rest time if needed,” she says. “It is also a great place to look down on our sheep lambing and keep an eye on them without interfering and stirring them up.”

Hot water has also been installed inside and outside of the yard, a move which has been facilitated by her father, who is a trained gas engineer, and particularly well received by her family. “As with anything new, my family were initially so sceptical of the changes, but now that I have proved it all works, they wish we had done it years ago. We can now wash our hands in warm soapy water after lambing and not be in pain from using cold.”

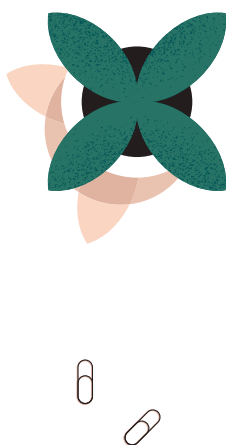
**Heating and ventilation** The provision of a sheltered, warm area and strategically placed heaters can significantly boost mood and productivity in winter. Similarly, on warmer days, encourage regular, brief, cooling-down breaks in a shaded area with easy access to water. Fans provide instant, welcome relief. These facilities can range from a simple corner of a farm workshop to the more sophisticated welfare cabins used by larger horticultural firms.

**Toilets and washing facilities** Worryingly, the most basic requirements can be overlooked and this often comes at the expense of female workers. Where access to a dwelling is not available, a fully functioning, private and clean toilet should be non-negotiable, as should a sanitary bin. For added comfort, consider offering feminine products such as tampons and sanitary pads. Access to hot water and towels can be a gamechanger for staff who work long days or to address any accidents or exposure to elements like chemicals and slurry.

**Staff room** Consider offering a separate space for staff to sit and have a drink or some food, away from the noise, dust and dirt. Providing a table and some chairs and access to a fridge, microwave and clean crockery costs very little in exchange for additional comfort on much-needed breaks during long days.

## Top tips at a glance

- Take a walk round the farm and review whether it is welcoming, practical and caters for a diverse workforce.
- Share your health and safety policies with staff to encourage transparency and buy-in; don't apologise for doing so.



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# Workwear and personal protective equipment (PPE)

**When doing a physical job, having appropriate workwear or PPE is essential.**

But for many women, and men who are not the average “70kg build”, finding gear that fits can be a real challenge – from suitable trousers to steel toe-cap boots to calving gloves. Employers must provide all staff with suitable PPE free of charge if they are working in potentially hazardous situations.

Risk assessments of key tasks are important before issuing any PPE. Doing this determines whether a risk can be eliminated or reduced through other methods. For example, it could be expected to provide staff with a hard hat, gloves and goggles before cleaning a glasshouse roof, but it might be possible to perform that task using a drone instead, thereby reducing the risks involved and lessening the need for PPE.

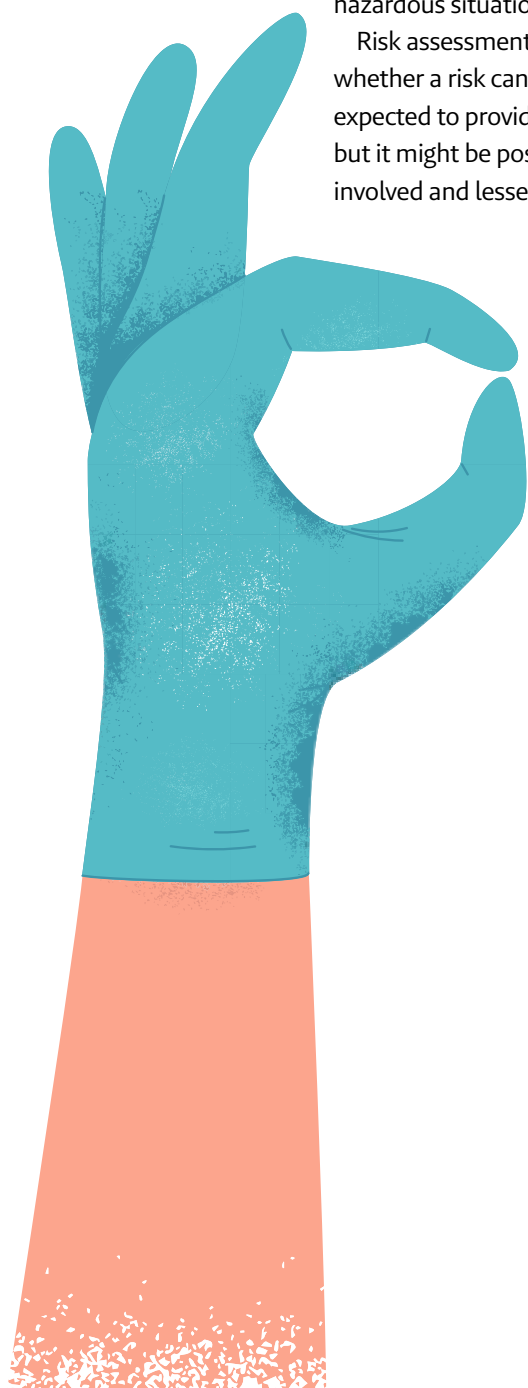
Identifying hazards and considering how they can be controlled is an essential part of risk management and a vital step in improving the safety of everyone on the farm. For those areas where PPE is required, farm owners and managers should consider the needs of their staff and visitors. For example, do the dust masks you provide fit all faces? Or is the provision of one set of wellies for visitors in a size 10 the right approach?

Ami Sarwan, a farm vet from the VetPartners group, says: “Appropriate sizing is important as it’s dangerous for me to be flipping around in large wellies. It’s about creating more of an open dialogue - why would a farmer think to have smaller shoes or smaller workwear when most of the people are big strapping lads whose foot size is anything from a seven upwards? But feedback helps address it.”

Similar problems can be encountered with other pieces of clothing, such as hi-vis jackets or vests, which can drown anyone with a smaller frame. There is no need for workwear to flatter different figures, but wearing kit that falls below the knees can make staff feel uncomfortable and incompetent, as well as posing its own health and safety risks.

## Tips at a glance

- Seek feedback from staff and visitors about their needs and whether the facilities you offer meet them
- Look for appropriately sized workwear and PPE for your staff and visitors
- Consider providing advice to staff on where they can find appropriate workwear – there are companies that cater for specific needs



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## CASE STUDY: ADM MILLING

Alistair Cross, managing director at UK Milling/ADM UK, says it is important to be open-minded to the needs of your workers and ask questions.

The flour milling industry is seen as very traditional and it is hugely male-dominated, so Alistair was curious to understand more about the experiences of females working in the business. Following a survey that was sent out to their in-house female team working in the labs, it was revealed the conventional “bakers’ whites” uniform they all wore was, in fact, disliked.

“There were a mixture of reasons why,” says Alistair. “Some felt it too tight and unnecessarily figure-hugging. Others felt it inappropriate when in warmer temperatures it became more see-through. There was also the period element in there too, and the practicality of the colour.”

For Alistair, the exercise of asking open-ended questions and not assuming what people want is an even greater lesson and applicable to many areas of a business. “I never would have thought those findings would come back,” he says. “We deliberately didn’t sway the questions and we discovered an area our female workers were unhappy with, which we could change with ease. The point is, until you ask, you won’t find out.”

Another area highlighted was a need to improve female assertiveness. A training course was subsequently established to facilitate this, and was welcomed by respondents.



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# Using machinery and tools



Using different machinery, equipment and tools is part of the job when working on a farm. But for some women, and anyone with illnesses or disabilities, performing certain tasks can be difficult.

Although the women **surveyed by Farmers Weekly** as part of the Level the Field campaign believed practical work was one of their key strengths, 43% said they could not use the machinery in their workplace with ease, compared with just 15% of men.

In many cases, women said the tools they were required to use were “designed for men”. That could include taggers, equipment needed to put up electric netting or seat settings in certain pieces of kit, to name just a few. Other tasks women said they routinely found difficult were handling pto shafts, hooking implements up to tractors or rolling back sheets on corn trailers.

In some cases, it may be possible to adapt or replace certain tools with ergonomic ones at relatively low cost, to reduce strain and improve comfort. Lighter, smaller tools will be easier for many women and men to handle.

Providing training on proper lifting techniques and posture can also help to improve comfort and reduce the risk of injury. Likewise, having certain pieces of low-cost equipment such as kick-steps on hand can make life easier for both staff and visitors who are shorter. Offering a kick-step when appropriate to everyone, routinely, can remove height stigma and be useful for people with joint aches and pains.

Other issues with machinery and equipment are not easily resolved with training, modification or replacement, but fostering a culture where staff feel able to speak up about the jobs they struggle to do can go a long way. There are often workarounds to the way a job has

## CASE STUDY: LEVEL THE FIELD FOCUS GROUP

As part of the **Level the Field campaign**, *Farmers Weekly* put together a small focus group of women who said they struggle to use the equipment and machinery in their workplace.

All participants were able to relay stories of times where they had been forced to wait alone in the farmyard for extended periods, unable to work, because they needed help with one specific task before getting started.

One participant said: “The buttons or the carlers that you get on pto shafts, sometimes you just haven’t got the hand strength to pull it back and release it to go on the shaft on the spline. I’ve always made it quite obvious how I’ve never been able to do pto shafts, but they always seem to forget it. And they say: ‘We just thought you could do it because the lads do’. So you do feel really awkward and you do feel like a problem.”

Another agreed: “That’s definitely true. Sometimes you feel like a problem when you ring up and say ‘I need help with this’. It is a recurring issue.”

The participants said they spoke to other women openly about the struggles they faced performing different tasks, and would share “workarounds” with each other, which may be dangerous. These could include using a quad bike to pull open a heavy door, for example.

All participants agreed they had engaged in more risky behaviour than they would do ordinarily in a bid to avoid calling someone for help with a task they found difficult. They said they were keen to remind farm owners and managers that women want to be independent in the work they do, but they would value the opportunity to flag up areas where they need help or support without judgment.





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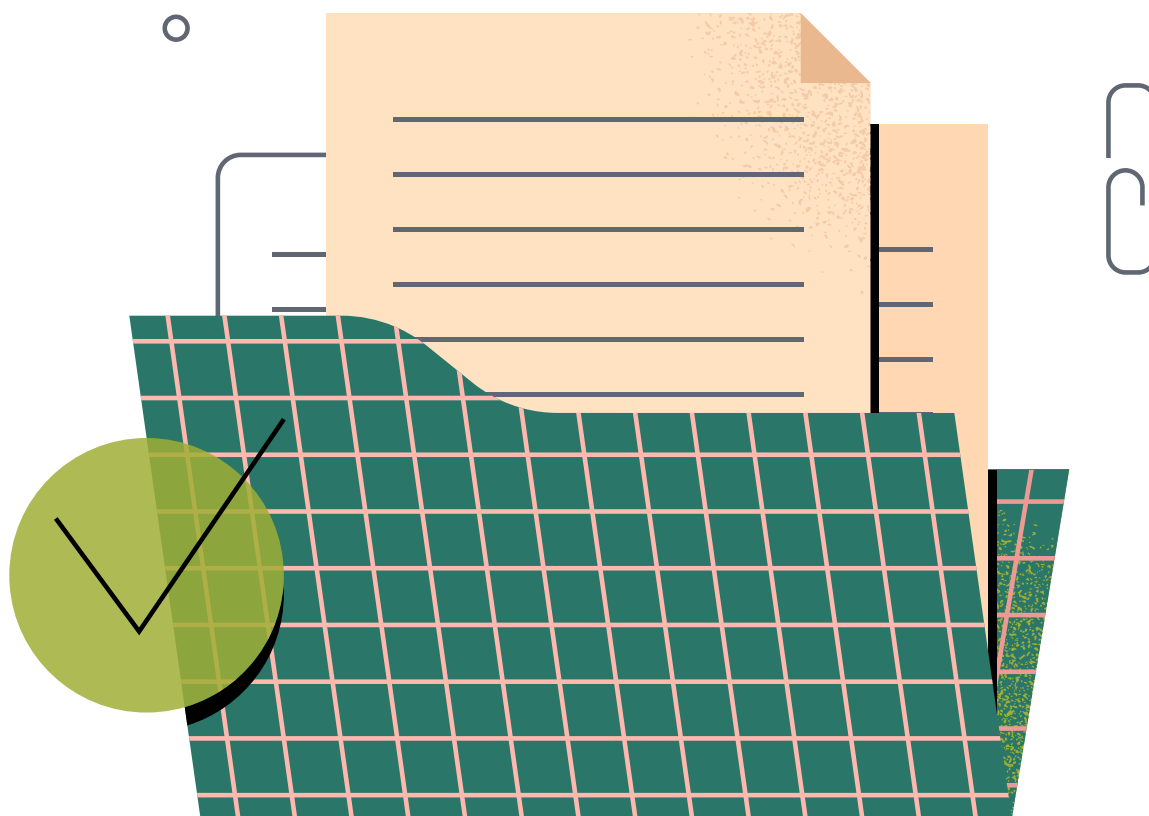
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been routinely carried out which make it less physically demanding but still get the job done. Do not expect all women to match the physical strength of your average man and consider how having smaller hands and feet may make certain tasks harder.

### Tips at a glance

- Adapt or replace tools with ergonomic ones where appropriate/affordable
- Provide training on proper lifting techniques and posture
- Offer low-cost equipment such as kick-steps as routine where necessary
- Talk to staff individually to find out if they struggle with any specific tasks, and always forward-plan to ensure they have the right support
- Make sure the physical abilities of your staff are taken into account as part of health and safety policy



## GRANT FUNDING

Although there are no specific grants associated with improving physical working conditions, there are elements in the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF) which could be of help.

While the fund is primarily aimed at improving productivity on farms, it can certainly provide better working conditions in some cases – for example, with the availability of funding for sheep and cattle handling systems.

These systems come in mobile or fixed format

and provide a safe holding area for jobs such as dosing. Smaller livestock units may not have previously invested in this type of kit, instead using more basic setups to try to hold livestock effectively, which can pose a danger to handlers and be physically harder work.

Access to these FETF grants, which are based on a contribution rate of 50-60%, can be a gamechanger for improving safety and physical working conditions on farm.



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# Protecting female health and hygiene

The need to protect female health and hygiene on farm has rarely been addressed in public and many farm owners and managers remain uneducated on the needs of their female workers.

Farming culture perpetuates a taboo-like approach to topics related to menstruation and female health, making open discussion and provision of appropriate facilities more difficult.

Addressing female health and hygiene issues openly can help break down the stigma associated with menstruation and other women's health issues. Doing so can bring multiple benefits to workers and the workplace, including:

## Health and wellbeing

**Prevent infections** Proper hygiene practices and access to products such as sanitary towels and tampons avoids discomfort and embarrassment and helps prevent infections, which can be more common in environments with dirt, animals and exposure to various elements.

## Productivity and efficiency

**Reduced sick days** Healthy female workers are less likely to take sick days, leading to improved productivity and efficiency on the farm.

**Enhanced performance** Women who feel well and are comfortable can perform their tasks more effectively and with higher morale.

**Retention** Providing a supportive environment for female health and hygiene can improve job satisfaction and reduce turnover rates.



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### Inclusivity

**Equality** Addressing female health and hygiene ensures that women can participate fully in all farm activities without facing additional barriers.

**Workplace inclusivity** Creating an inclusive workplace that meets the needs of all employees fosters a positive and supportive work environment.

**Empowerment** Ensuring that women's health needs are met empowers them to take on leadership roles and contribute more significantly to the farm's operations.

### Legal considerations

**Compliance with regulations** Providing proper facilities and addressing health and hygiene needs can help farms comply with health and safety regulations.

**Ethical responsibility** Employers have a moral obligation to create a safe and healthy work environment for all employees, including addressing specific needs related to female health.

### Practical steps

**Provide sanitary facilities** Ensure there is a clean, private bathroom with access to running water, soap, a sanitary bin and feminine hygiene products.

**Support health education** Consider educating staff on topics such as menstrual health and general hygiene practices. There are many leaflets and videos which can be accessed through the NHS website.

**Create a supportive environment** Foster a workplace culture that supports and respects female health needs, encouraging open communication and support.

### CASE STUDY: KAREN HALTON

Dairy farmer Karen and her husband Tom rent 223ha close to Congleton, Cheshire, and run 500 cross-bred cows. Karen has created specific toilets for her workforce and addressed their health and hygiene needs.

A difference in toilet behaviours between her male and female staff prompted Karen to renovate a derelict building to be used by the male workers and upgrade a room in the farmhouse porch. "I don't think it is the nature of male workers to think about cleaning up after using the toilet, other than a token flush," she says.

"So, we renovated a derelict unit we had, boarded it out in plastic, and made it really nice for the male workers. They can come in with their overalls, wellies, and are often covered in muck, but it's all easy to clean down."

For her female workers, Karen supplies tampons, sanitary pads, facewipes and deodorant to help ease situations where they get caught out, and they can also use the shower room in the spare bathroom.

"When I was 18, I worked on a racing yard, and I got caught short when I came on my period. I'd been out riding a horse for four hours and then had nothing in the car and it's a horrible thing. You might wake up with tummy ache and know you are going to start your period, but you might not physically bleed for hours into the day. By that time, you might



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CASE STUDY CONTINUED: KAREN HALTON

be busy on farm or running around looking after a cow and be nowhere near a toilet,” she explains.

“Having these facilities in place means they can clean up if they want to and be confident of their own privacy. It makes them feel included. We had one female worker who suffered so badly she would need to keep spare underwear in there.”

A drawer in the kitchen provides all the workers with paracetamol, ibuprofen and antihistamines if needed. Cost is minimal and Karen will often bulk buy when visiting her local wholesalers for ease. “These little things combined can be the difference between a person doing a really good job and not having to worry about pain or feeling uncomfortable,” she says. “In an industry where we struggle to find good workers, offering something as basic as this can be the difference in them staying with you or moving elsewhere.”

Karen is open and honest when speaking with fellow farmers around the issues and just recently shared advice during a farm walk which she hosted for a group of 20 Derbyshire farmers. “They were asking loads of questions and we got on to the toilet thing and how many women they have. I said: ‘I’ll give you a tip, if you start to employ women or if any of you already do, please put some Tampax in the toilet downstairs, like I’ve got here.’

“Some of them looked at me like I came from another planet because I dared say the word Tampax. It’s a natural process and we can’t change it – we’ve just got to deal with it.”



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COMMENTS  
WELCOME**

“

**REGISTER FOR FUTURE  
LEVEL THE FIELD GUIDES**

**GIVE FEEDBACK  
ON THE  
CAMPAIGN**

**EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY:**

- **Alistair Cross**, managing director, UK milling/ADM UK
- **Ami Sarwan**, Westpoint Farm Vets, VetPartners Group
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