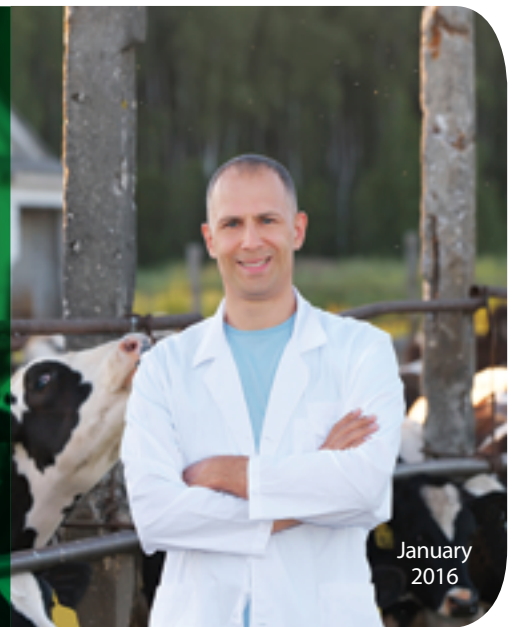


Health and Safety of Vets Visiting Farms

Information Sheet



Vets depend on the provision of safe animal handling facilities on a farm. Vets are obliged to ensure they use safe systems of work based on their professional training and experience. This guidance focuses on the vet's obligations when carrying out work on a farm (excluding equine establishments). The content is also relevant to other professionals handling animals on farms, for example, livestock scanners, AI staff and weight recording staff.

Twenty-six people were killed while working with animals in the agricultural sector in Ireland between 2006 and 2015. However, these figures do not include fatal accidents to veterinary surgeons because they are not regarded as being agricultural workers. For the purposes of National and European statistics vets are regarded as providing a professional service as their primary occupation. Two vets have been killed at work in the last five years. No vet should have to die while working with animals.

The real number of serious injuries caused by animal handling on farms is unknown as the vast majority go unreported. However, it is understood the non-fatal accident level involving animals is significant for both vets and farmers. There are serious health and safety responsibilities on both the vet (as the professional) and the farmer in regard to providing a safe working environment. The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 sets out the legal duties of employers and the self-employed for all work activities.

Cattle handling facilities

The visit of the vet, whether for testing, treatment of sick animals or other work, can be stressful for animals due to the non-familiar interactions between animals and humans. The provision of good animal handling facilities is essential to reducing the stress levels and providing a safe work environment.



The Department of Agriculture has set out the Minimum Specification for Cattle crush, Race and Enclosure (S137).

The Race

- Animals should be able to readily enter the race, which should have a funnel end.
- Make sure there is enough room in the collecting pen for animals to feed into the funnel easily.
- A circular collecting pen means the vet or farmer can stand safely behind a forcing gate as they move animals into the race, and keep the animals moving.
- Animals need to see clearly into the crush and beyond, so that they will readily move along the race.
- The race may be curved, but should not include tight turns.
- Animals are more prepared to move towards a light area than into the dark.
- The sides of the race should be high enough to prevent animals from jumping over them, and the handling facilities should be properly secured to the ground and to each other for maximum strength.
- Sheet the sides of the race to help keep cattle moving by reducing visual disturbances such as shadows and other animals.
- Contain the lead animal in the race while it waits its turn in the crush.
- Hinged or sliding doors are suitable, but be sure they are operated from the working side of the race so the operator does not have to reach across the race to close the gate.
- Never work on an animal in the crush with an unsecured animal waiting in the race behind.

The Crush

A crush should allow you to do most straightforward tasks safely (including oral treatments, ear tagging and work from the rear end). It should:

- have a locking front gate and yoke (ideally self-locking) to allow the animal's head to be firmly held. Additional head bars will prevent the animal tossing its head up and injuring people;
- have a secured rump rail or bar to minimise forward and backward movement of the animal. Make sure this is always used;
- be secured to the ground or, if mobile, to a vehicle;
- be positioned to allow you to work safely around it, without the risk of contact with other animals, and have good natural or artificial lighting;
- allow gates to open smoothly with the minimum of effort and noise. Regular greasing and maintenance will help; and
- have a slip-resistant floor or base.



Farmers have a duty of care to vets working on their farm, but how many farms meet the basic requirements listed above? While good facilities may be provided in the main farmyard, vets often find themselves having to cope with very poor and even unsafe facilities on out-farms.

The calving cow

Most farms have safe handling facilities for dealing with cows that are in the late stages of labour. However, these facilities do not take into account the unpredictable nature of the expectant cow in the late stages of the birth. The recently calved cow can be overwhelming and extremely dangerous. Neither the vet nor the farmer should come between a freshly calved cow and her calf. It is in the moments and days immediately after calving that a cow is at her most dangerous.

Even normally quiet cows can become aggressive in and around the time of calving. The casual approach by many farmers of entering pens with freshly calved cows without any means of protection or escape must cease. No chances or shortcuts should be taken with the calving cow.

Occasionally, a calving cow may require a delivery by Caesarean section. The cow needs to be restrained, either with a head collar or preferably in a sculling gate. The bars should go all the way to the floor so that if the cow goes down during calving (a regular occurrence), there will be no danger of the cow choking. The gate should also be easily openable to allow the easy release of a cow that goes down.

A nose tongs and a halter may also be required for additional restraint. Calving gates which have an openable inner gate can reduce the risks during this task. The recent farm safety scheme offered by the Department of Agriculture (specification S138) sets out the Minimum Specification for Grant-aided Calving Gates and Mobile Cattle Crushes. A strong light source is also important in these facilities to ensure that an operation can be carried out safely.

Health issues

Vets are trained to be familiar with the human health risks arising from working in close contact with animals. It is vital that the necessary personal protective equipment is used and every precaution is taken to prevent transmission of any biological agents which could have serious health effects. The farmer should provide adequate washing and drying facilities for the vet.



Health and safety responsibilities

The employer has a legal duty to have a Safety Statement. For a veterinary practice or self-employed vet this should include risk assessments covering the risks to the veterinary surgeon or other employees involved in handling animals on the farm.

While the client or farmer should provide a safe place of work, there is a legal obligation on vets to ensure the work can be carried out safely. Vets must report any accident which causes their absence from work for more than three days to the Health and Safety Authority. Failure to report such accidents is an offence under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. You can report an accident using form IR1 or online at www.hsa.ie.

Where handling facilities or conditions are inadequate and potentially dangerous, the vet should raise their concerns with the farmer. If an adequate degree of safety cannot be provided the work should not continue until some remedy is put in place.

Where vets have encountered circumstances where they have been at risk of serious injury and no remedy is foreseeable, they can report such a matter to the Health and Safety Authority. Details of the farm owner, location and any other specific information should be provided. If possible a photo would also be helpful. Confidentiality is assured: the source of the complaint will not be revealed and the matter can be dealt with in the course of a routine farm safety visit.

You can contact the HSA on 1890 289 389 or email wcu@hsa.ie.



Further information

The following publications on animal handling can be found on the HSA website at

http://www.hsa.ie/eng/Publications_and_Forms/Publications/Agriculture_and_Forestry

Safe Handling of Cattle on Farms

Safe Handling of Cattle on Farms Information Sheet

Guidance on the Safe Handling of Livestock at Marts and Lairages

Cattle Handling at Marts and Lairages Information Sheet

DVD - Guidance on the Safe Handling of Cattle on Farms

Code of Practice for Preventing Injury and Occupational Ill health in Agriculture

Further information from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine may accessed at

<http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/farmbuildings/farmbuildingandstructureesspecificationspdfformat/>

Including:

[Minimum specification for cattle crush, race and enclosure \(S137\)](#)

[Minimum specification for grant-aided calving gates and mobile cattle crushes \(S138\)](#)