Contract finishing offers a way into pigs

An open day in Suffolk in early August attracted more than 100 people to see a new finishing unit and to hear about the opportunities that exist for those looking to get into pig production.

Finishing weaners still offers a route for new entrants to get into the pig sector, and no one has done more than BQP to bring newcomers into the industry. It offers a proven contract that not only provides the opportunity for good financial returns, but is accepted by many lenders to support lending to build specialist finishing accommodation to operate the enterprise.

One of the latest crop of new entrants is Ben Luxford, from near Stowmarket, who’s invested in two acres of land and a brand new 1,000 pig straw-based finishing house. The 500-acre family farm couldn’t support Mr Luxford, who’s been working as a self-employed carpenter, but now pig production could get him back into farming.

He has signed a five year contract-finishing agreement with British Quality Pigs (BQP) that will give him a steady, low-risk income, and has bought the land from his father-at the going market rate. Finally, on the advice of BQP, he approached local company Quality Equipment...
to erect the steel portal-framed 200ft x 50ft building that will house the new operation.

“QE has had many years’ experience with this type of building and could work to the time-scale needed”, Mr Luxford said. In fact, the whole job, including kitting it out, was completed within six weeks.

The Suffolk-style pig building, which has been developed by BQP, has 22 pens with Paneltim plastic divisions – down the centre and push-through dunging passages against the outer walls. Feed is supplied to ad-lib hoppers via chain-and-flight conveyors from an exterior bulk feed hopper, and a bank of nipple drinkers is provided over a water trough, to help young piglets.

An interesting feature is the use of a roll of tough, damp-proof membrane to form a false-ceiling over the pens to keep in heat when the piglets are young. This is height-adjustable, cheap and effective. Natural, fresh-air ventilation is controlled by automatically adjusted curtains positioned above the outer walls.

The use of straw is important as the pigs are reared under a high-welfare Freedom Food contract. Mr Luxford has a straw-for-muck arrangement with his father and reckons he’ll use about 85-acres worth of straw annually. A catwalk above the pens provides a platform to feed out the straw bedding into the pens, as well as excellent visibility to monitor the pigs.

The solid-floored dung passages will be pushed through with a tractor-mounted scraper every one or two days, depending on the age of the pigs, and the muck is stored on a walled pad at the end of the house.
BQP supplies the pigs, feed and veterinary services, while Mr Luxford will provide the housing, straw, water, labour and day-to-day management, for which he’s paid a gross annual income approaching £40/pig place. This is made up of a weekly management fee, performance-related bonuses and an 11-batch new-build payment. The pigs are delivered at four weeks of age when they weigh about 7kg and leave for slaughter between 15 and 20 weeks when they reach 108kg. The system should allow a throughput of 2.2 batches annually, producing 2,200 finished pigs. The pig house cost is £200,000 and the land £20,000, but Mr Luxford says the BQP contract offers a secure way back into farming since he won’t have to worry about the fluctuating price of feed or weaners – the main input costs. He reckons daily management will take about two hours. And he’s obviously confident about the enterprise as he is planning to put up a second, similar house in the next six months!

Despite having a semi-intensive unit on just two acres, there were no planning problems. Natural England raised the issue of nitrogen and ammonia emissions, but investigation showed these to be minimal since straw is used and the feed is formulated to avoid excessive nitrogen excretion by the pigs. Mr Luxford even got planning permission to site a temporary timber-framed house – that he built himself – on the site so he can live near the pigs.