

## FOCUS ON HEIFER REARING



Nigel  
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At 2.75 ppl in the March 2018 national Farm Business Accounts (FBA) sample, Herd Replacement Cost (HRC) is the second largest variable cost in dairy farming, commonly accounting for 20% of total variable costs. It is typically greater than vet costs, greater than bedding, greater than semen and AI costs, and greater than forage costs. A small percentage saving in this cost can be much more significant than a larger swing in those other items, making replacement costs an area worthy of greater focus.

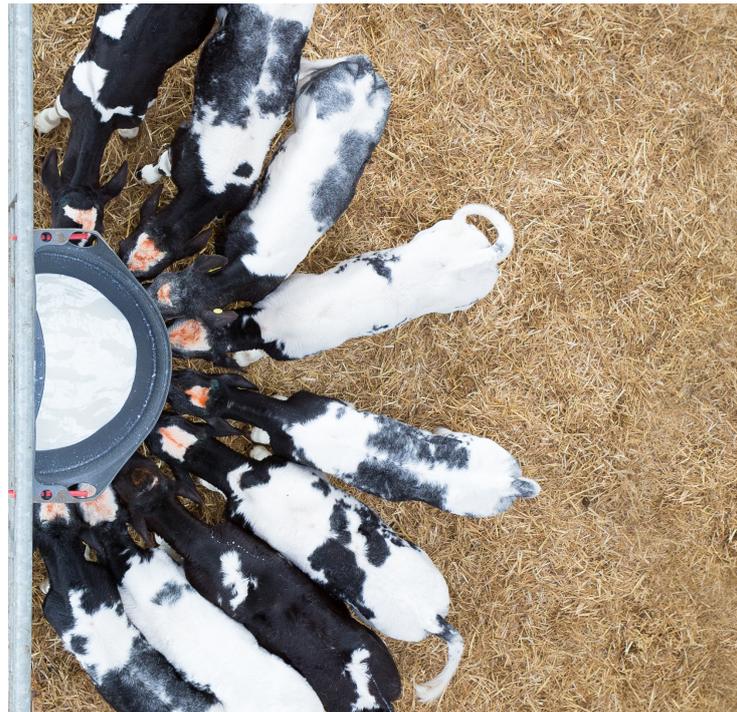
HRC is influenced by how many heifers you need, how many you actually rear, how efficiently they are reared and the value achieved for cull cows. AHDB data shows that the average cost to rear a heifer to calving at the national average of 27 months old is over £1,800, so there are two important questions to address.

### Do you need to rear all the heifers that you do?

Do you plan how many heifers to keep? Rearing fewer will reduce total costs and also potentially allow more beef calves to be sold. Cutting the number of heifers required by reducing replacement rate will help reduce overall replacement costs. This is illustrated by the top 25% producers in the FBA sample by operating profit, who thanks to marginal improvements in fertility (calvings per 100 cows) and in herd health (deaths as a percentage of herd size) achieved a 0.28ppl efficiency gain in HRC, worth £5,011 for the average herd.

### Can you rear them more effectively?

In our FBA national sample, the variable costs associated with rearing heifers to the point of calving, increased by over 17% in 2018 by comparison to 2017



as feed costs per head, vet costs per head and bedding costs per head of youngstock all increased. Costs can be reduced by calving heifers down sooner by achieving higher growth rates. Key to this is attention to detail and actions such as those highlighted overleaf.

There is much producers can do to focus on the performance of their youngstock and replacements to continue to achieve efficiencies in this significant cost area.

We would be happy to discuss how we can help you increase efficiency of the heifer enterprise to reduce herd replacement cost.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

**COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP SCHEME OPENS:** The mid-tier CSS grant in England is now open for applications. Promar Consultants are available to discuss how your business might benefit from additional funding opportunities. The deadline to apply for a pack is 31st May 2019. Many of our clients averaged support in excess of £60,000 per holding last year.

**WATER CONCERN:** In March, the Head of the Environment Agency in the UK warned that within 25 years, many parts of England will not have enough water to meet public demand. What does this mean for long term investment in milk production?



# CALF REARING – WHAT DO SURVIVORS, DOERS, MANAGERS AND LEADERS DO DIFFERENTLY?

Sue Bryan



**Management of pre-weaned calves is a key stage in ensuring heifers enter the herd no older than 24 months. Sue Bryan, Promar Consultant, considers how different approaches to management during this crucial period can impact on successful rearing.**

The pre-weaned calf has considerable potential to grow quickly and has the highest feed conversion efficiency the animal will see in its life. At the same time it will be developing the organs and tissues essential for efficient milk production. So it makes real business sense to get heifer calves off to the best possible start.

But all too often we see calves failing to grow as efficiently as they can and in all cases, this is down to how these valuable animals are managed from birth. Adopting a new management approach can have a significant payback.

**Three key areas which demonstrate the different management approaches are:**

**Colostrum** - All dairy farmers understand the importance of giving calves sufficient colostrum. Calves should receive at least 10% of their bodyweight in colostrum within six hours of birth. The amount of management variance in colostrum feeding is considerable, so step back and consider how you can improve the delivery of better colostrum to your calves.

**What milk is fed?** There are still farms who feed calves waste and antibiotic treated milk because they have it available and so it is 'free'. To give heifers the best start in life without antibiotic resistance, waste milk should never be fed.

Some feed milk from the bulk tank, believing it is more cost effective than a milk replacer. Milk replacer costing £1,600/t, fed at 150g/litre, costs 24p/litre. How does this compare to your milk price?

Some farmers who use milk replacer will buy on price, not formulation, changing between brands. Cheaper milk powders tend to use lower quality ingredients and growth rates are lower. These farms will also not weigh powder accurately or mix consistently.

The final group of farmers research milk powder formulations and assess which supplier has the best product to allow high growth rates and is nutritionally closest to milk. They will then pay close attention to how the powder is fed to hit high growth rates.

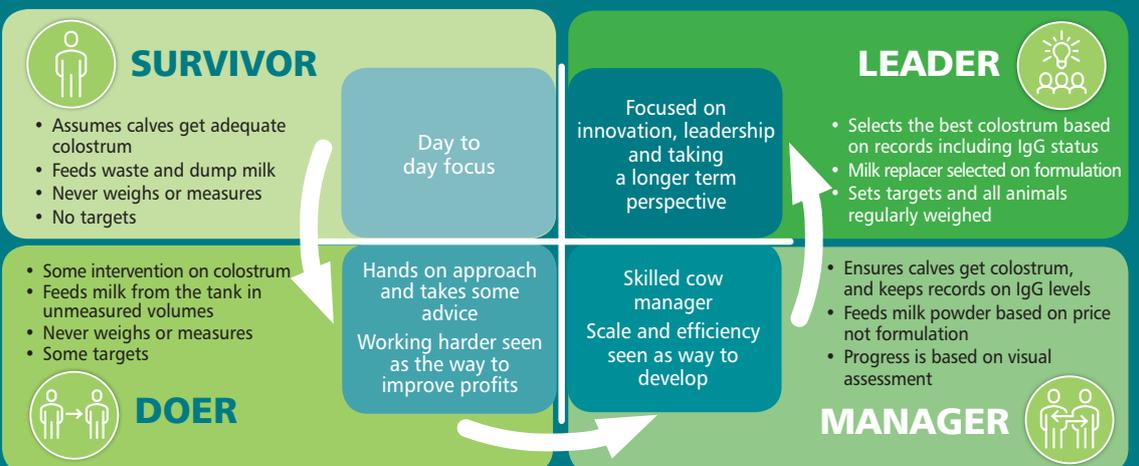
**Targets and monitoring** - Pre-weaned calves can achieve high daily growth rates, often around 1kg/day, and are capable of doubling birthweight by weaning. What growth rates are you targeting and actually achieving? Setting targets and monitoring performance are key to ensuring heifers achieve the key milestones of 30% of mature weight at 6 months old and 55-60% of mature weight at service. Not achieving these goals will mean heifers will not enter the herd at the targeted 24 months old, will take longer to payback their rearing costs, and have a lower than anticipated lifetime yield.

By regular weighing of heifers you will pinpoint problems sooner, giving more opportunity to get growth back on track. The sooner you can react, the more cost effective it will be.

The diagram shows how we find different types of managers approach these key areas of calf rearing. Where does your approach sit and where are the opportunities to improve?



## Where does your calf rearing lie?



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