#Calfmatters survey 2019 – Building a resilient calf

Protect Monitor Treat

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Boehringer Ingelheim

#Calfmatters survey 2019
Building a resilient calf

This is the third year that the #Calfmatters survey has been run by Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health, with over 400 farmers responding this year. This gives us an up to date snap shot of calf diseases such as bovine respiratory disease (BRD) and calf scour, plus an insight into the management practices currently being used on farm to reduce the impacts of these costly diseases.

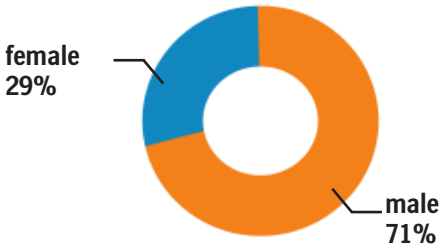
Regardless of whether calves are been reared for the beef sector or if they are destined to join your dairy or suckler herd, all farms have some common goals for calf rearing. Minimising disease and meeting target growth rates are essential for a profitable calf rearing system. The impact of calf diseases such as BRD is a balance between the calves' immunity and stresses they are put under, such as exposure to pathogens or weather conditions. Immunity can be boosted by factors such as colostrum management, nutrition and vaccination. If we take steps to ensure that calves have optimised resilience and immunity, they will be better able to cope with the inevitable challenges they face, minimising the impact of calf diseases.

Agriculture is also under increasing scrutiny from consumers and the wider industry to demonstrate top quality animal welfare and reduce the use of antibiotics. The #Calfmatters survey has also given some insight into these areas relating to BRD in particular.

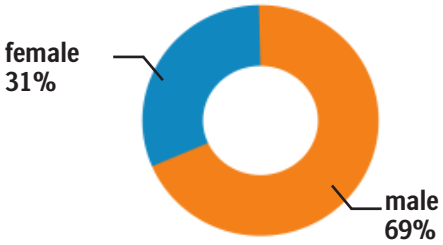
The average herd size of the farmers who completed the survey was 199 adult cows for the dairy herds and 71 adult cows for the beef herds. The average UK dairy herd was 148 in 2018 (AHDB, 2019) and the average UK beef herd is somewhere between 25-50 (AHDB, 2019), so the farmers that responded to our questionnaire were from larger than average farms.

Whilst UK agriculture typically has an ageing and male dominated population (around a third of all farmers are over the typical retirement age of 65 (from Office for National Statistics and Defra, 2019), according to the ONS Labour Force Survey, women now make up one third of the agricultural sector's traditionally male-dominated workforce, having increased by 7% over the last decade. This increase is reflected in both years of our survey, where around 30% of our respondents were female.

Respondents 2018



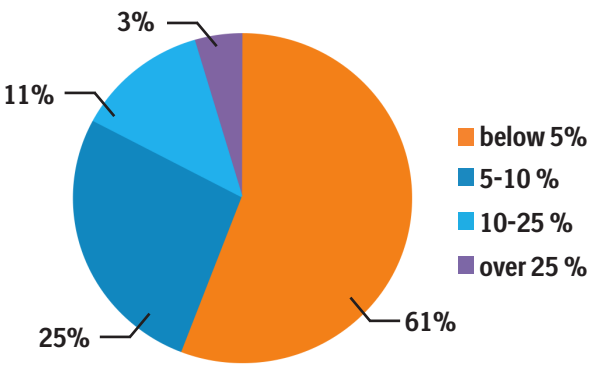
Respondents 2019



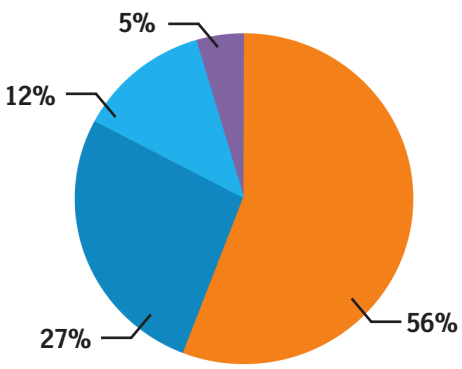
Q1. How many calves did you treat for BRD on your farm in the last year?

Comparing the responses to this question over the last two years it would appear that 2019 was a slightly 'healthier' year than 2018 with 87% of the respondents saying they had a less than 10% incidence of BRD compared to 83% in 2018.

% calves treated 2018/19

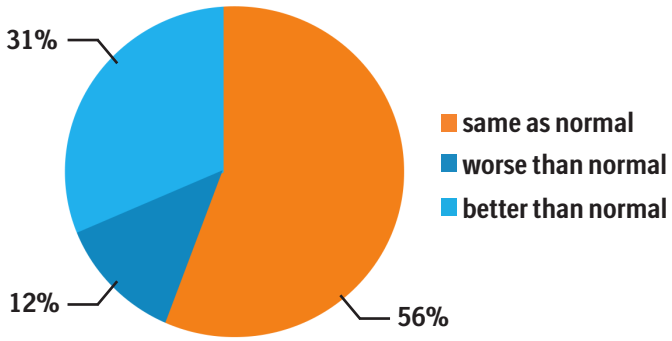


% calves treated 2017/18

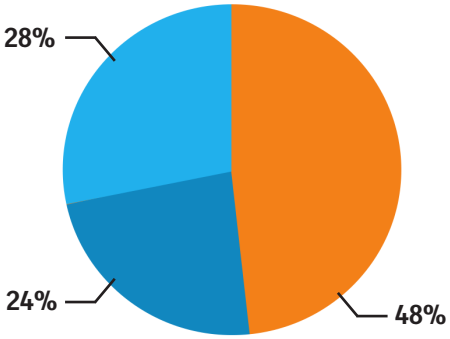


Q2. a. Comparing respiratory disease cases to previous winters the overall number of BRD cases on my farm was the same as normal, worse than normal or better than normal

BRD cases on farm 2018/19



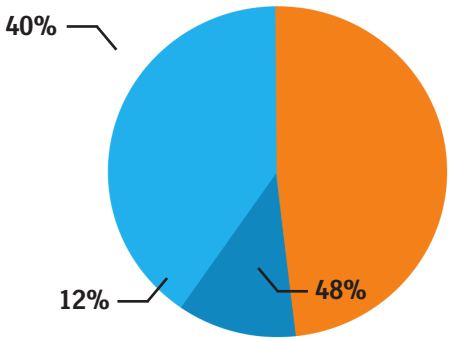
Respiratory disease 2017/18



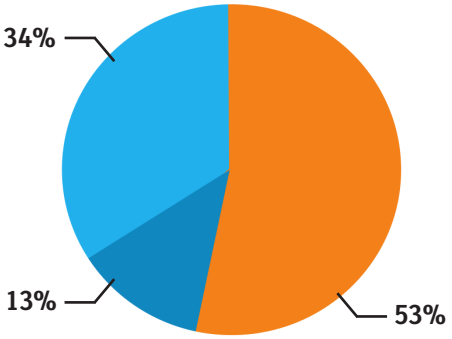
87% of farmers said their respiratory disease was the same or better than previous years in the winter of 2018/19, this compares to 77% in the 2018 survey. Again this suggests that winter 2018/19 was more 'healthy' than the year before.

Q2. b. Comparing mortality due to BRD to previous winters the overall number of BRD cases on my farm was the same as normal, worse than normal or better than normal

Mortality 2018/19

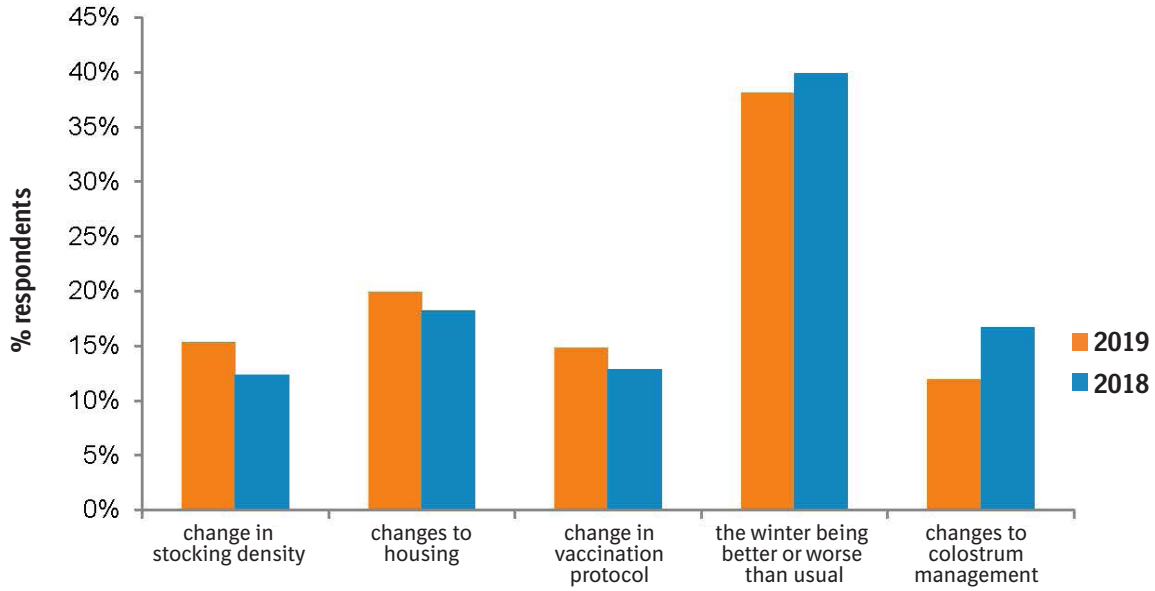


Mortality 2017/18

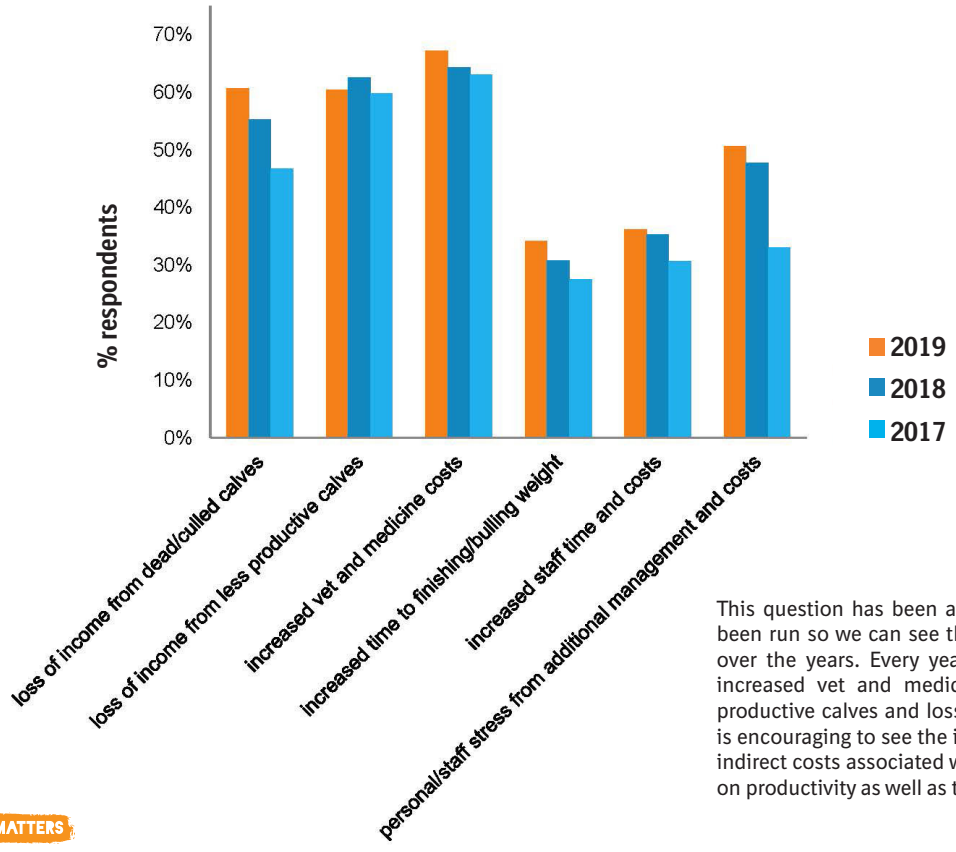


Q2. c. What do you think was the main reason for this?

In both years that we have asked this question the most common answer was that the winter had been better or worse than previous years. This shows the importance of ensuring that we control as many of the factors that influence the resilience of calves by maximising immunity and minimising stress so they can cope with whatever the weather throws at them.



Q3. What is the biggest impact of BRD on your farm business?

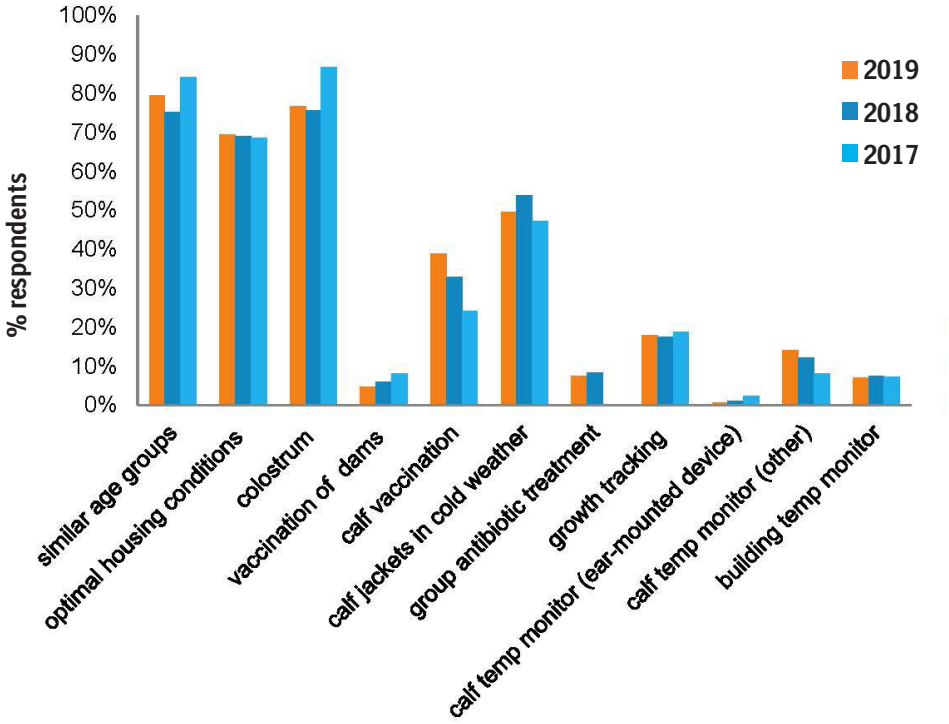


This question has been asked for all three years the survey has been run so we can see that the responses are pretty consistent over the years. Every year the top three responses have been increased vet and medicine costs, loss of income from less productive calves and loss of income from dead/culled calves. It is encouraging to see the industry is becoming more aware of the indirect costs associated with BRD due to the subclinical impacts on productivity as well as the direct costs such as treatment costs.

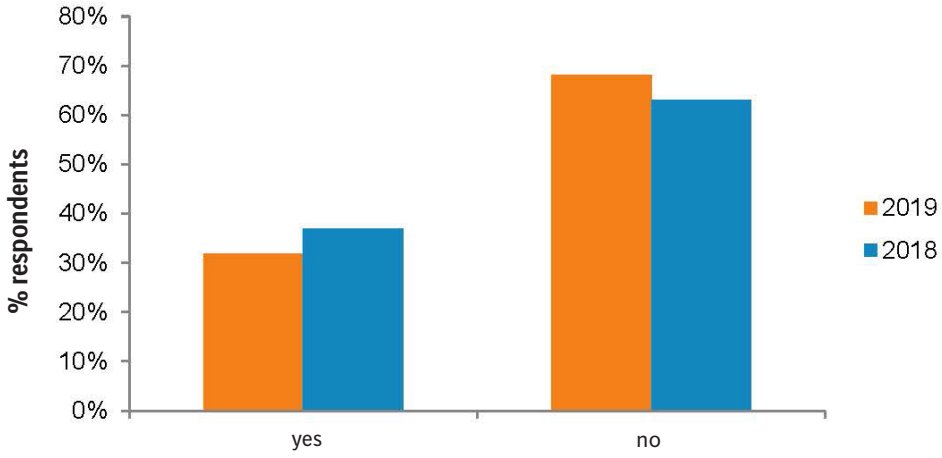
Q4. Which of the following management methods do you currently implement against BRD?

Top measures relate to optimal housing including grouping calves with similar age groups plus focusing on colostrum management. Calf jackets are consistently used by around 50% of farmers in cold weather.

It is great to see calf vaccination rising year on year to 39% in 2019, from 33% and 24% (2018 and 2017 respectively), increasing vaccination is one of the RUMA (Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance) recommendations for reducing antibiotic use. But still less than 40% of farmers are using calf vaccination so there are still plenty of calves that may benefit from vaccination.



Q5. If you give colostrum, do you routinely test its quality?



There are several colostrum quality measuring devices; a Brix refractometer or a colostrometer being the two most frequently used, and it is known that colostrum can vary significantly in terms of quality, so many vets now recommend it is regularly checked.

While colostrum intake may be ensured by over 75% of respondents, its quality is only measured in around 30% of cases, something that we will hopefully see improve year-on-year as the technique becomes more widely used.

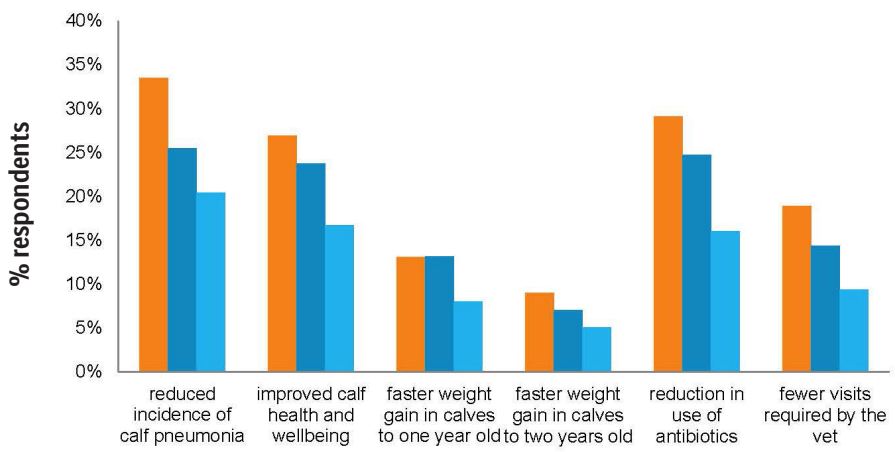
In addition, colostrum quality can be enhanced with the addition of products such as Locatim®, capable of helping the calf withstand E. coli challenge, but the overall message remains to measure colostrum quality as well as ensuring adequate intake for the best start to life.

Q6. Regarding vaccination, please indicate whether you:

	2019		2018	
	Number	%	Number	%
Vaccinate all calves retained/brought onto the farm under three months of age	119	29%	80	20%
Vaccinate all calves retained/brought onto the farm under 9 months of age	35	8%	29	7%
Vaccinate some of the calves retained/brought onto the farm	39	9%	31	8%
Don't vaccinate	219	53%	256	65%

It is encouraging to see an increase in farms that are using some calf vaccination from 35% in 2018 to 47% in 2019. There are still lots of calves that could benefit from a boost in their immunity from vaccination against respiratory disease. Hopefully we will see vaccination rates continue to rise which fits well with the industry wide drive to reduce the use of antibiotics by focusing on such preventative measures.

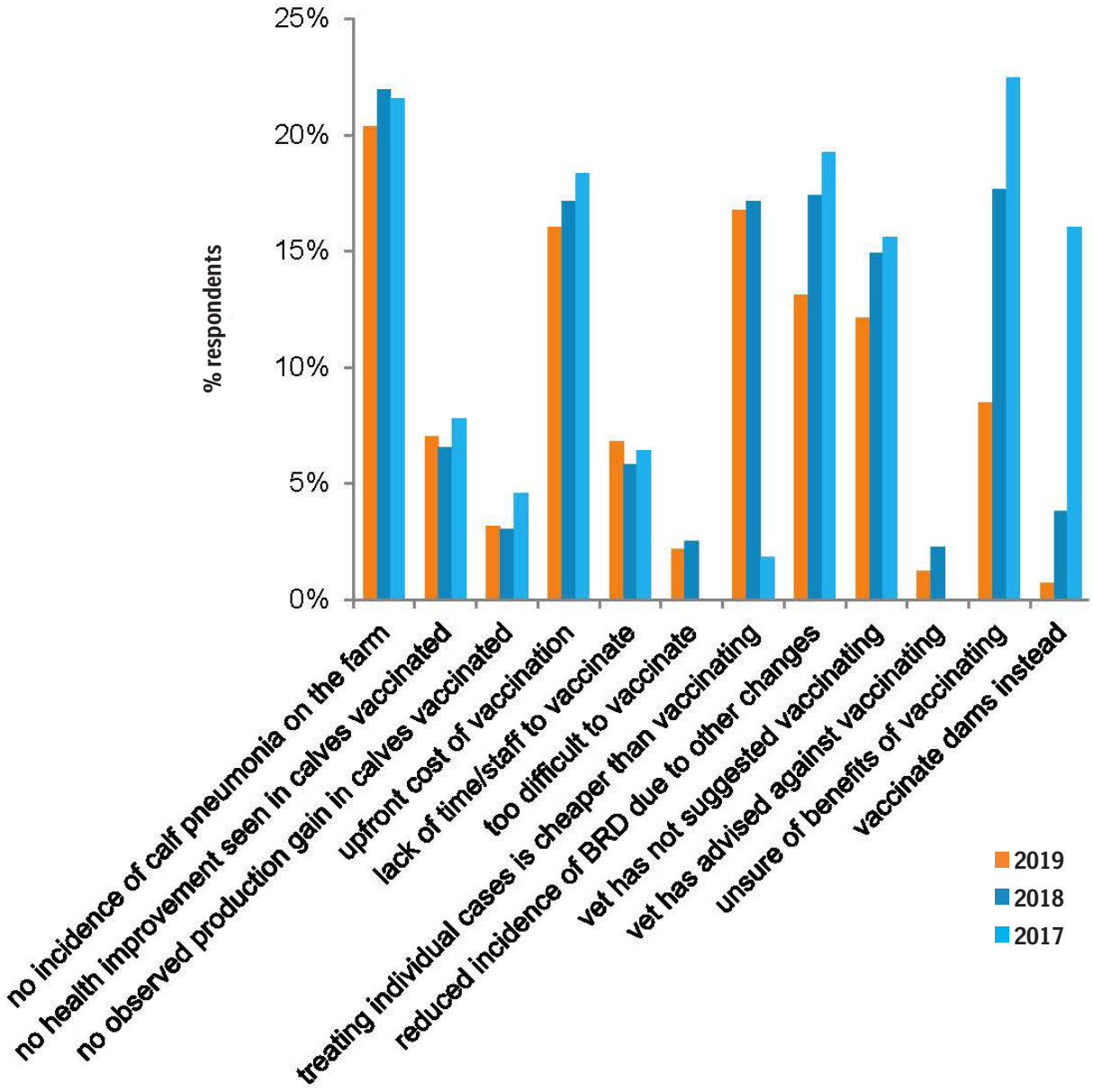
Q7. If you have vaccinated calves in the past three years please indicate whether you have observed differences, compared to unvaccinated calves.



Year on year we have seen stronger responses this question, which is possibly an indication farmers becoming more aware of the benefits vaccination.

The top three responses were reduced incidence of BRD, reduction in use of antibiotics and improved calf health and wellbeing. It is encouraging to see improved health and welfare and reduction of antibiotics in top three benefits, which is a very positive message to industry and consumers.

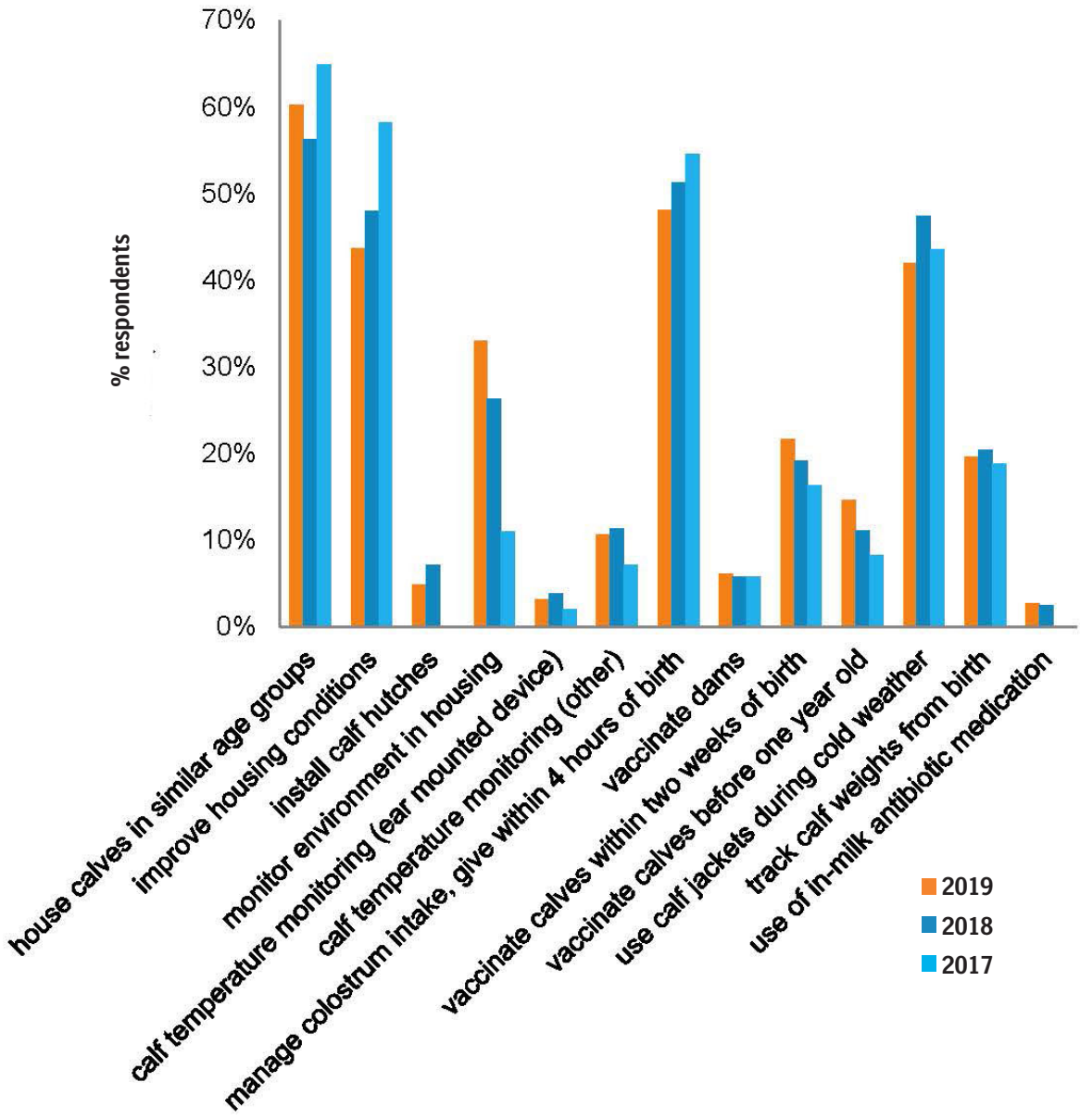
Q8. If you have not vaccinated or have stopped vaccinating calves against BRD in the past three years please indicate your reasons.



It is interesting to note that 'no incidence of calf pneumonia on the farm' is the top answer nearly every year but the earlier responses in question 4 shows how few people are monitoring growth rates which can often be an indicator of subclinical BRD.

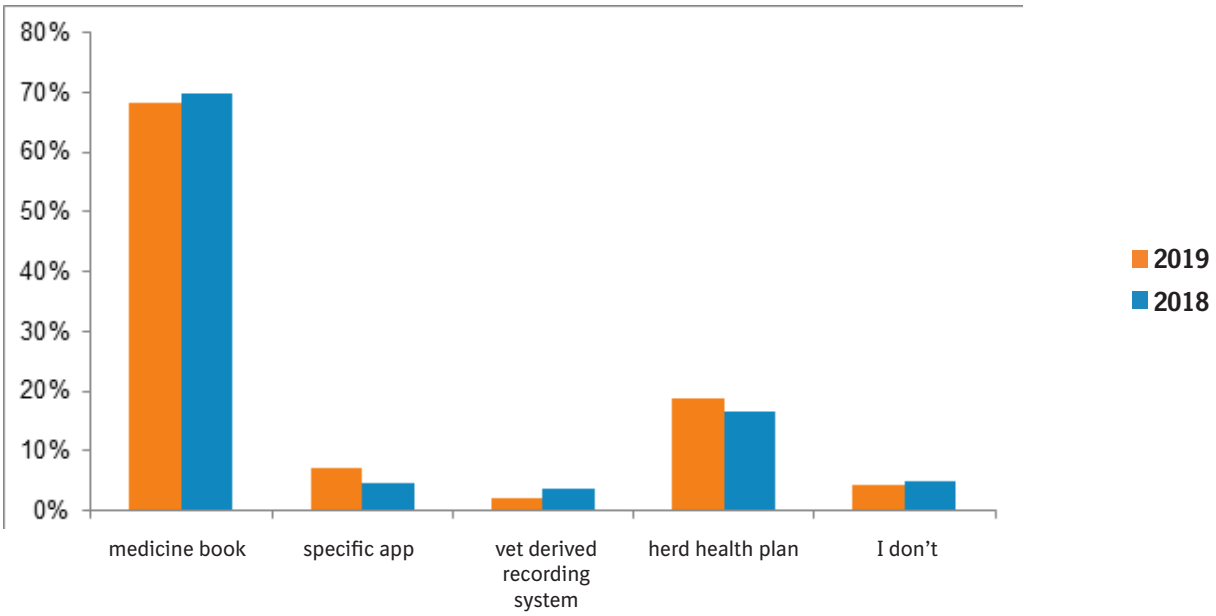
There has been quite a drastic decrease in the number of respondents that are unsure of benefits of vaccination. This is very encouraging and is possibly associated with industry awareness campaigns.

Q9. What measures do you plan to use to prevent or identify calf BRD in calves next winter?



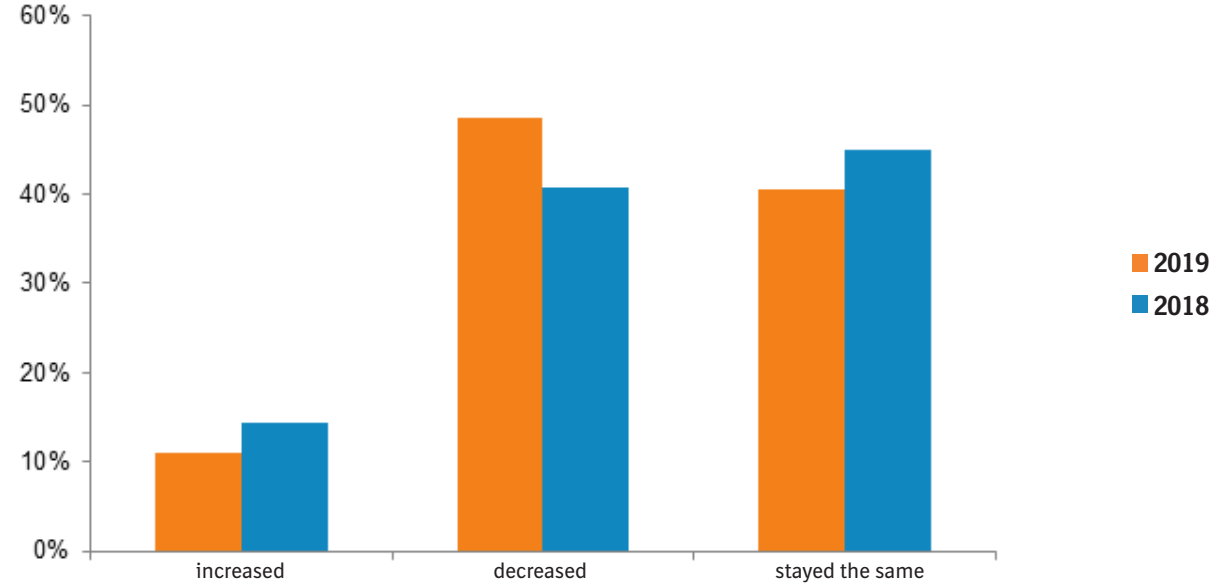
When asked what their plans were for the next winter, our survey indicates an increasing proportion of respondents planning to vaccinate calves and also monitor the housing environment.

Q10. How do you monitor use of antibiotics for cases of BRD?



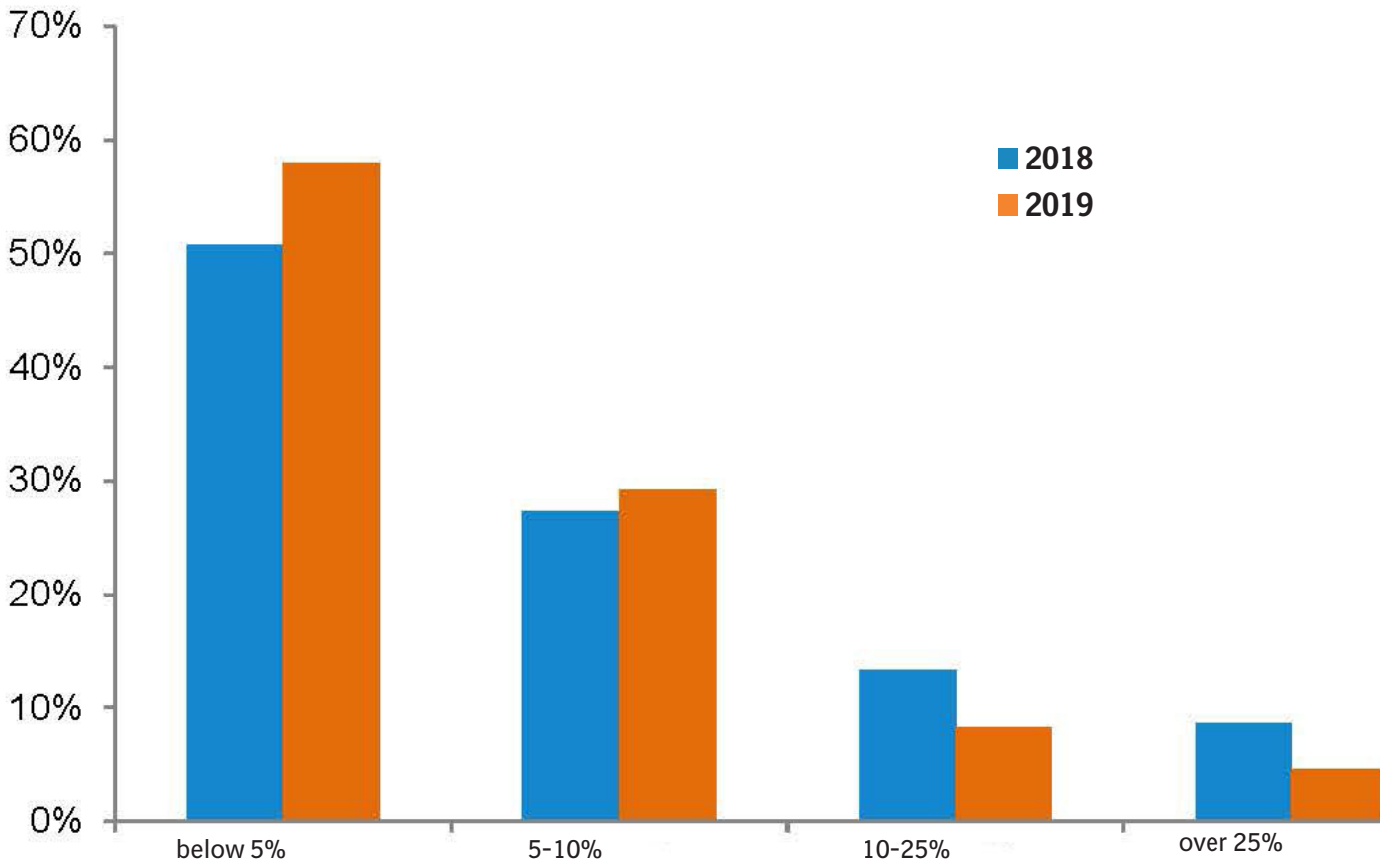
All medicine use must be recorded on farm but this question was asking specifically about recording of medicines used for BRD. This can be a worthwhile topic to review with your vet particularly if you can benchmark against similar farms and can often be a good way of monitoring the success of a disease control plan.

Q11. During the past three years has your use of antibiotics to treat/control BRD



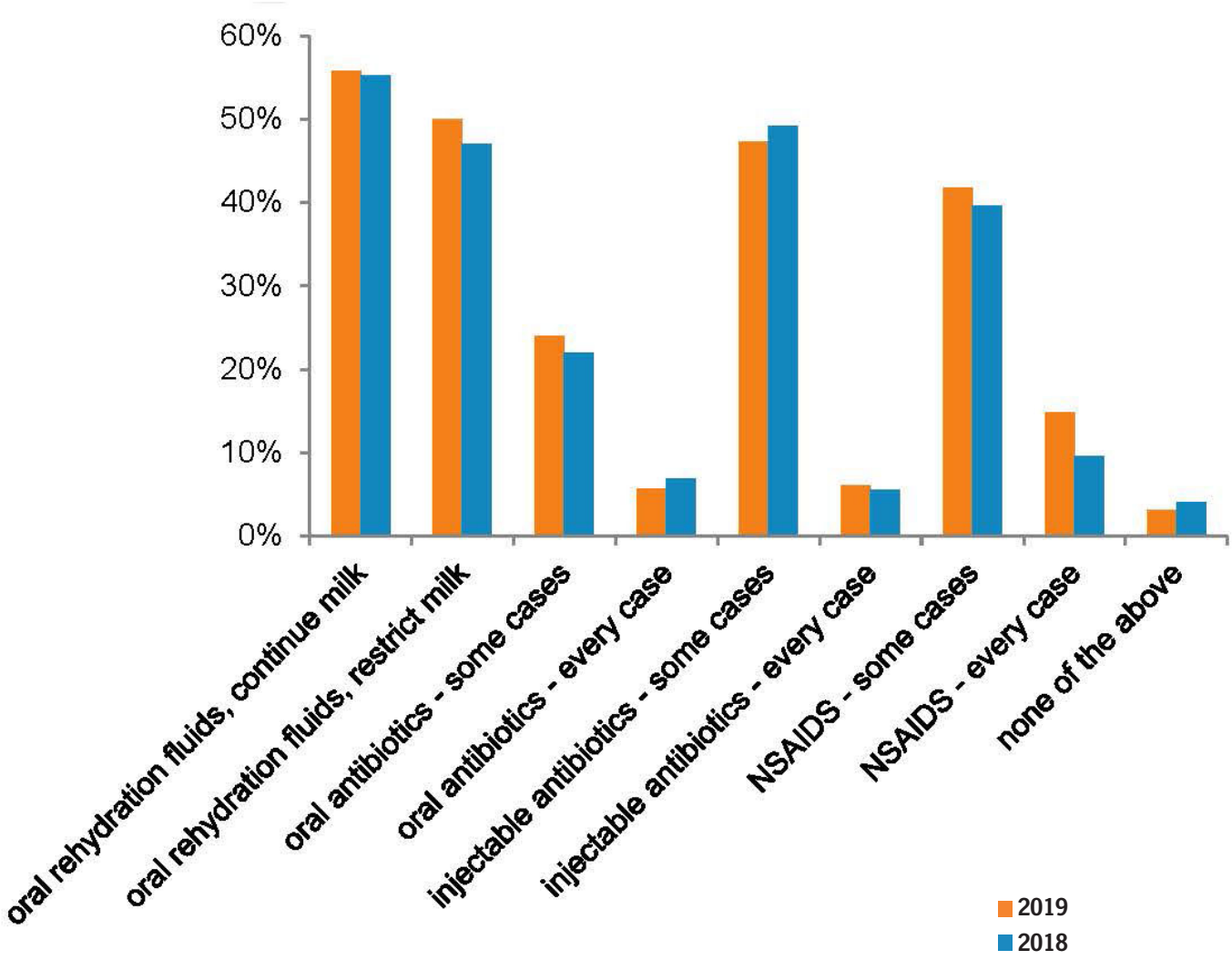
More people have said that their use has decreased but we know that they generally felt that the previous 12 months had been healthier than those before. Hopefully the decrease will continue year on year particularly as vaccination rates rise.

Q12. What proportion of your calves have shown evidence of calf scour in the past year?



When looking at calf scour, 87% of respondents had an incidence of calf scour below 10% in 2019 compared to 78% in 2018. Again this is probably a reflection on a slightly healthier year.

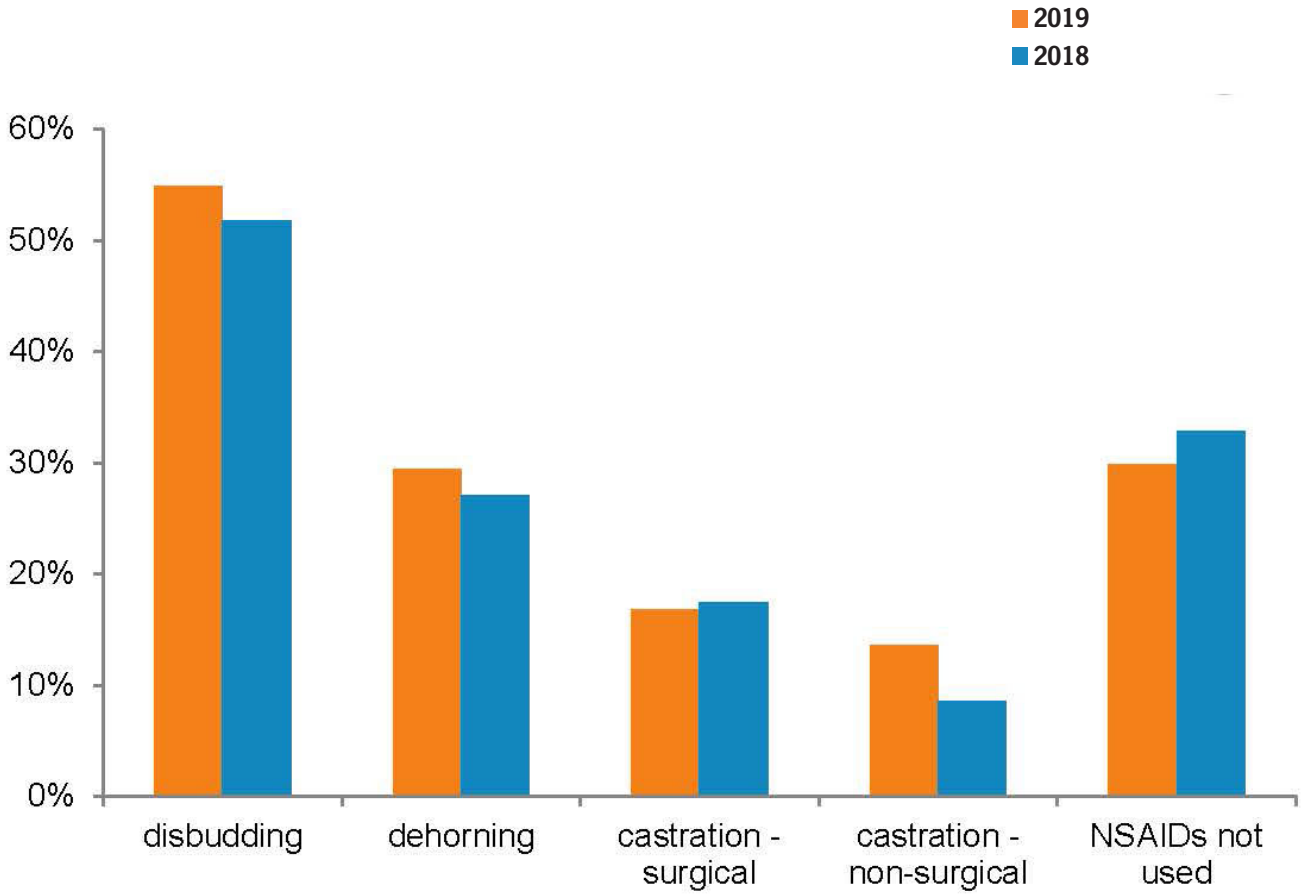
Q13. Which of the following do you use to treat cases of scour on your farm?



This question highlights how much variation there is in the treatment protocols used on farm and the importance or regularly reviewing these with your vet. Here we can see how many of our respondents still restrict milk as well as giving oral rehydration fluids. Whilst this was historically commonplace, it is now recommend that you continue to offer normal amounts of milk or milk replacer to scouring calves as long as they want to drink, and leave suckler calves with their dam so that they continue to nurse. Continuing to feed does not worsen or prolong scour, in fact nutrition of the small intestine is needed to help it to heal as well as absorb nutrients.

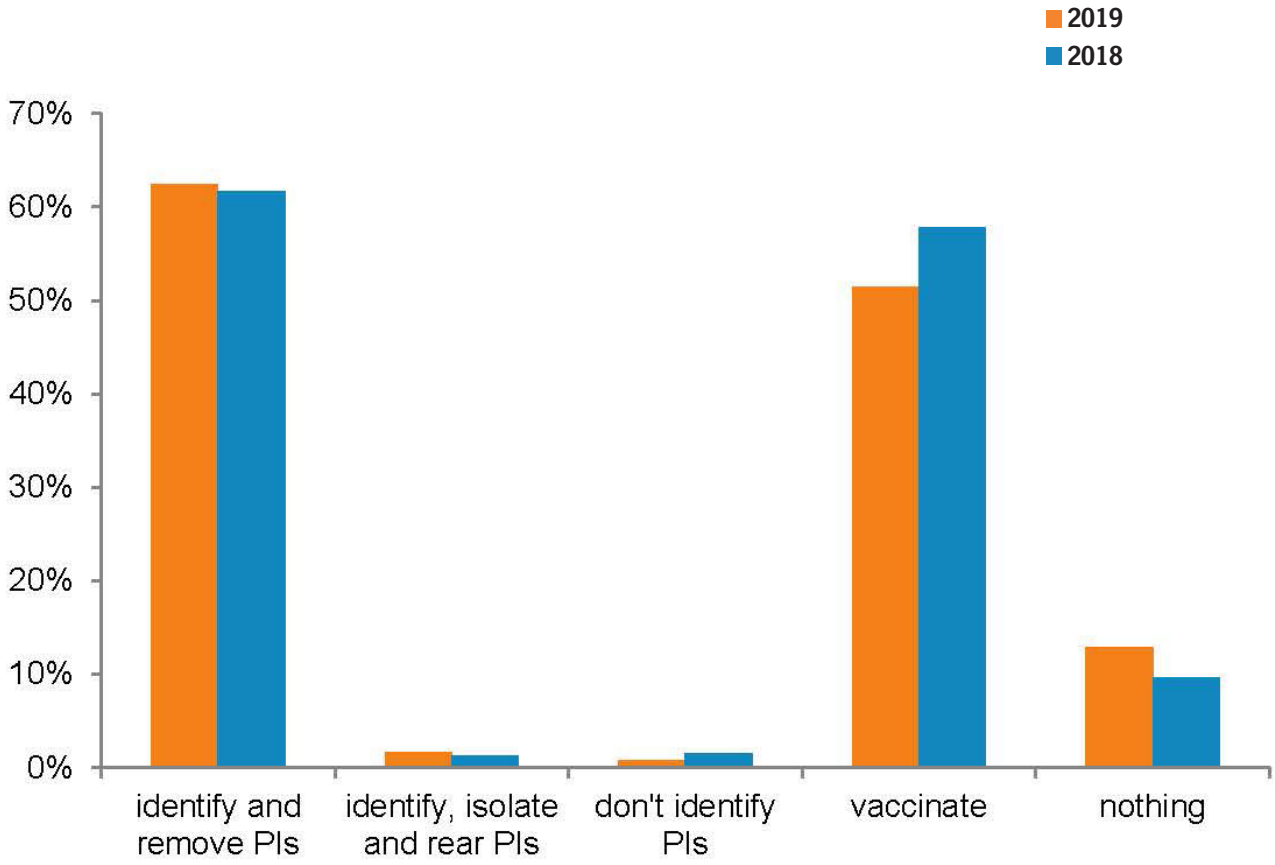
Injectable antibiotics are still being used for some or all cases of scour on around 50% of the farms that responded to the survey. Whilst this is a subject to be talked through with your individual vet, many causes of scour are not caused by bacteria and consequently do not respond to antibiotic treatment, so this is a possible area where antibiotic use could be decreased. We can see that almost 50% of the respondent farms will use an NSAID, such as Metacam®, which is licenced for this indication, for some or all scouring calves and can lead to more rapid recovery. Use of NSAIDs must however be used along with milk feeding and rehydration.

Q14. Are calves on your farm routinely given anti-inflammatory/pain relieving medicine (NSAIDs) as well as local anaesthetic at the time of the following procedures?



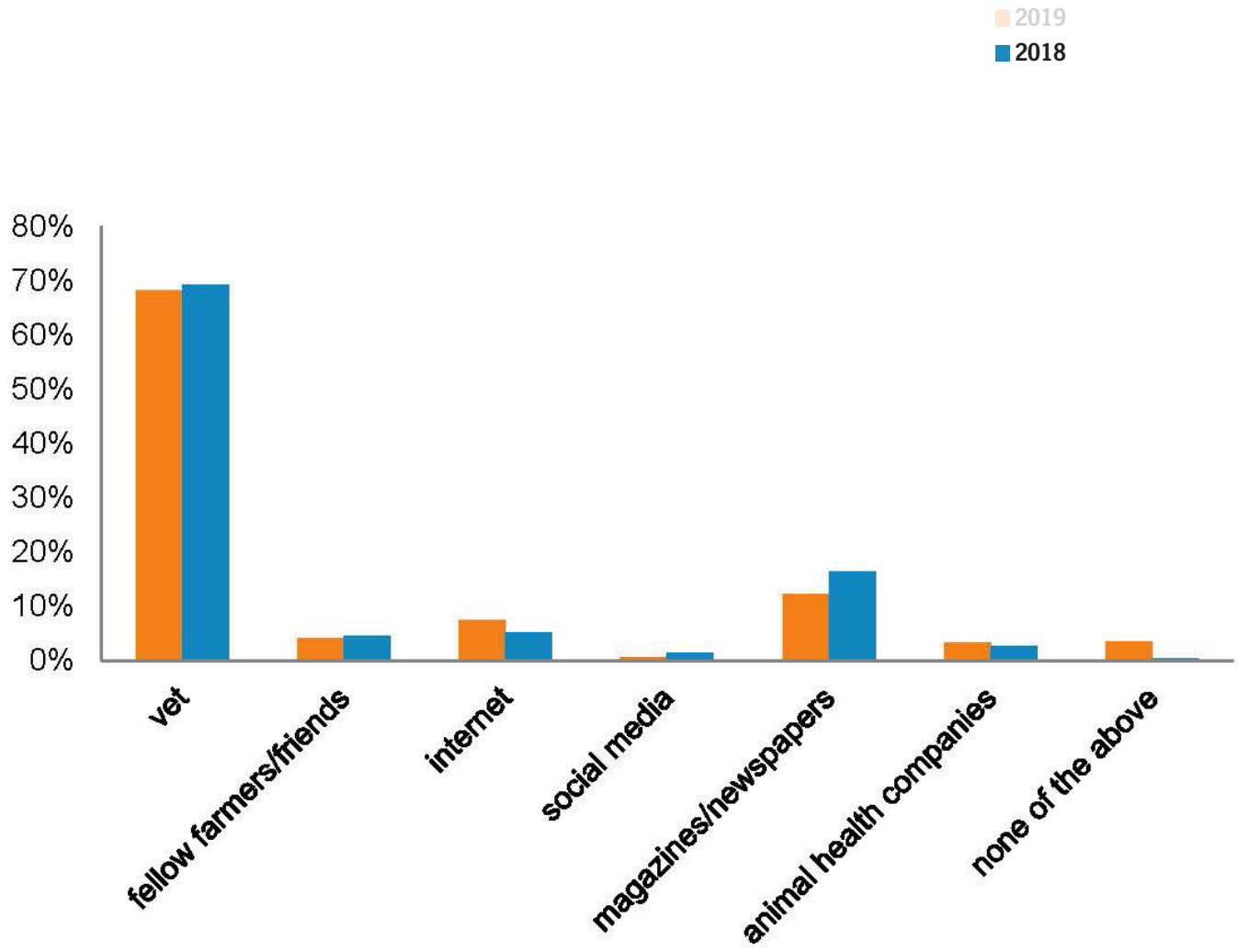
It's good to see that over 50% of respondents are using NSAIDs as well as local anaesthetic for disbudding and that the number of respondents not using NSAIDs is falling. As well as being good practice, the new Red Tractor standards state that farms should have a written policy on the provision of analgesia for painful procedures such as disbudding (Red Tractor, 2019).

Q15. What is your BVD control policy?



When looking at BVD, there is a slight fall in respondents who said they vaccinate which could be due to the progress made with regional eradication schemes. This flags that there may be an increasing number of herds leaving themselves vulnerable to a BVD outbreak if this very infectious virus finds its way onto farm.

Q16. What is your main source of information on calf health?



interesting to see that the next highest is traditional print media rather than online sources.

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