

Beyond sick cows: how strategic vet partnerships drive performance

Sarah Bolt, Technical Knowledge Exchange Manager at Kingshay provides some insight.

Modern dairy farming is a team effort. Dairying is a complex business where margins are tight and efficiency is everything. To thrive, farmers need a strong team, built on collaboration between everyone involved in the dairy herd management. Placing a forward-thinking vet at the heart of your team means that you have a trained professional when animals are sick, and a proactive consultant to prevent sick animals before they arise.

Mindset change: from firefighting to forward planning

Traditionally, many farmers have called out their vet only when an animal is sick or for calving issues. This reactive approach can be costly; whether that is actual costs of the vet's time whilst on farm, the medicines prescribed or indirect costs such as lost milk, or on-going poor fertility, not to mention the additional labour costs associated.

In recent years, scheduled fertility visits have become a standard part of a vet's role; however, today's best-performing farms take a different view: they see their vet as a trusted herd health adviser. By involving them in regular planning and decision-making, you move from firefighting to forward thinking.

Proactive consultancy means setting clear herd health goals and co-designing an action plan to achieve them with the entire farm team. Today, that team extends well beyond the farm gate, including the farm consultant, the nutritionist, foot-trimmer, and other advisers alongside the vet, all vital cogs in the 'farm wheel'. For any farming business, it is essential that every adviser is aligned with the farm strategy, so everyone is driving in the same direction.

Regular meetings with this wider team create a joined-up approach, ensuring decisions are based on accurate information and long-term objectives, not firefighting.

Vets play a crucial role in making this cohesion work.

Modern vets drive the use of data; milk records, fertility figures, mobility scores, etc., to spot trends early and act before issues escalate. Tools like Kingshay's Dairy Manager health



DIY AI Training in small groups

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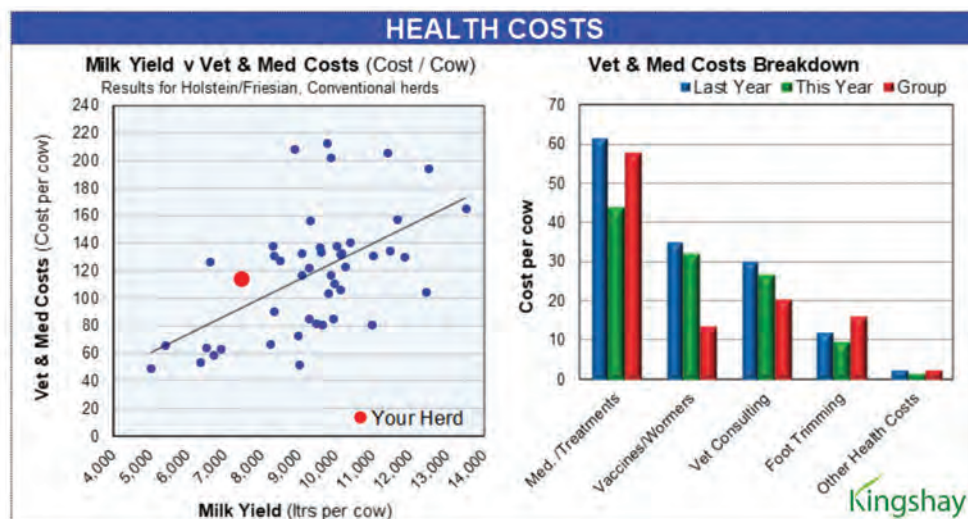
manager services make this easier by breaking down vet and medicine costs into categories such as treatments, consultancy, and preventative care like vaccines and wormers (see chart).

Kingshay's data shows that farms investing more time in vet consultancy often achieve lower overall 'vet and med' costs. Understanding where your money goes helps focus attention on prevention rather than cure. This approach doesn't just improve animal health; it boosts productivity and profitability.

Consistency counts

Even the best plan fails without consistent execution. That's where Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) come in. Clear, practical SOPs for tasks like calving, milking hygiene, and dry cow therapy ensure everyone follows the same steps every time.

Your vet, or a trained facilitator can help you and your team design these protocols based on best practice and



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your farm-specific needs. SOPs reduce mistakes, improves attention to detail, and makes training new staff easier.

Training: Building skills and confidence

When everyone on the farm understands not just what to do, but why it matters, they are far more likely to get it right. Training staff alongside vets builds confidence and practical skills, which in turn strengthens team morale and helps retain valuable people on the farm.

Well-trained teams work more effectively, reducing mistakes and improving consistency. Investing in training pays back through healthier cows, fewer treatments, and better overall performance, for both staff and herd.

Bringing in specialist expertise

There are times when it makes sense to bring in a specialist adviser for a specific project, whether that is building design, yard layout, or improving cow flow. These areas often require highly focused knowledge, and using the right expert for a fixed task means you can access the best advice when it matters most. This isn’t about replacing your vet or suggesting they don’t have the answers; it’s about complementing the skills already within your team.

By working together, vets and other specialists can ensure that every decision supports herd health, efficiency, and long-term farm success.

The bottom line

Proactive planning, regular reviews of data, and clear protocols reduce disease, improve fertility, and protect margins. Treat your vet as part of your management team, and you will see the benefits in healthier cows and a more profitable business. Working with your vet as a consultant is not an extra cost, it is an investment in your farm’s future.

FARMER CASE STUDY: BUILDING A TEAM FOR SUCCESS

Phil Kent, a dairy farmer near Wadebridge in Cornwall, started dairying in 2021 and runs an autumn block-calving, grass-based system.

From the outset, Phil recognised that success depended on teamwork. He worked closely with his vet, Michael Head (known to many as Spike), who acted as a herd health adviser working closely with the farm’s nutritionist. Regular team meetings focused on long-term goals, from infectious disease control to maintaining milk quality, and improving diet efficiency through better nutrition and mineral balance.

Phil was passionate about bringing his staff along on the journey. “If the team understands the ‘why’ behind what we do, they take pride in getting it right, and that makes all the difference,” he explains. Spike supported this by delivering practical training: a 3-day AI course enabled the team to carry out inseminations themselves, saving the cost of an external technician.

He also trained three key staff members in emergency first-aid hoof trimming, reducing reliance on outside help and improving response times.

Although Spike no longer provides routine veterinary services, he continues to work with Phil and other farmers in his new role as Lead Training Consultant for Kingshay, helping train the next generation of dairy professionals.

When proactive planning, regular meetings with your wider farm team, and targeted training come together, they don’t just improve herd health – they transform farm efficiency and future profitability.



Emergency Foot First Aid Training Course