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Reaping the rewards from UK leadership in farm animal welfare: time for a national strategy

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Research led by the University of Bristol and partners provides the evidence to show that current support for improved animal welfare policy is sustainable and achievable.

Where are we now?

Historically, UK farm animal welfare policy was dominated by Government measures including world-leading animal protection legislation. In some sectors, EU legislation has also improved animal husbandry systems and aligned standards with our major trading partners.

However, in recent years the market – a complex interaction between retailers, industry groups and animal welfare charities - has become the major driver. This has resulted in sector-specific animal welfare strategies and world-leading independently certified assurance schemes such as Red Tractor Assurance and RSPCA Assured.

This combination of government and industry initiatives means that the UK has a recognised reputation: "UK farmers and producers are rightly proud of their high animal welfare standards.[1]"

However, maintaining this reputation should not be taken for granted. Given future trading arrangements, and the investment in animal welfare by competitors such as New Zealand and Australia, further action is needed.

Where are we going?

The development of a post-Brexit UK agriculture policy is an opportunity to establish an ambitious animal welfare strategy that delivers a continuous improvement approach at a national level.

A similar national level initiative is Origin Green[2] in Ireland which demonstrates the potential for a national approach.

This will require a new era in animal welfare leadership: a genuine collaboration between Government, industry and civil society organisations[3].

Policy recommendations

What could a successful strategy include?

• Clear, consistent labelling across all sectors that combine simple consumer messages (such as method of production descriptors, i.e. the type of farm) and how animal welfare is measured (outcome safeguards, as delivered currently by independent farm assurance schemes).

• A national animal welfare database that collates information on the good life opportunities and welfare outcome results of UK farms. This could be used to recognise and reward continuous improvement, and justify animal welfare marketing claims.

• Financial support for local, national and international initiatives that market animal welfare as a quality criterion for UK livestock products.

• A national animal welfare strategy that is focussed on animal welfare should be recognised as a business opportunity to promote UK-produced livestock products at home and abroad.

Image credit: Jessica Stokes

The University of Bristol is actively involved in farm assurance schemes and welfare assessment research projects, considering the dairy, pig, sheep and laying hen sectors, and consumer products and pricing.
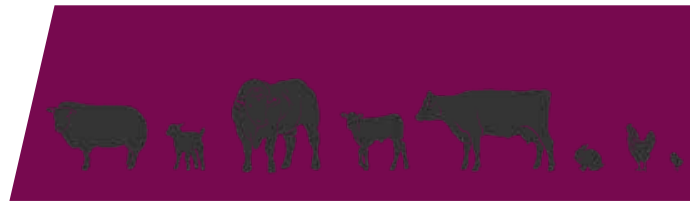
Project summaries	Key findings
Supporting farm certification schemes to deliver robust welfare assurance: AssureWel[4] **Funding: Tubney Charitable Trust**	
Most welfare standards for farm animals are based on 'inputs': what must be provided to the animals, and not the 'outcomes': the impact of these inputs on the health, physical condition and behaviour of the animals themselves. Working with RSPCA, Soil Association and Red Tractor Assurance, the AssureWel project has developed and embedded welfare outcome assessment into UK schemes covering laying hens, pigs and dairy cattle. An international network of schemes has also been established. Robust outcome safeguard processes have been developed by UK certification schemes to improve the assurance associated with scheme membership.	Including observations of animal behaviour and physical condition in the assessment process for farm assurance schemes has been associated with significant welfare improvement in laying hens[5] and pigs[6]. This "outcome safeguard" process – assessing a scheme's requirements by impact on the animal - has an important role in ensuring consumer expectations of higher welfare are delivered in practice.
Consumer price and labelling of pork sausages	
University of Bristol veterinary students, that were interested in the link between farm assurance schemes and consumer choice, surveyed the price and labelling on 229 fresh pork sausages from seven UK retailers.	Logos (Red Tractor, RSPCA Assured and Organic) and husbandry system descriptors (outdoor-bred and free-range) were widely used. Whilst the average price of sausages was higher for those using system descriptions, logos were not associated with a clear price premium, except on organic meat. Price paid by consumers do not necessarily reflect the costs associated with membership of assurance schemes.

"I think positive welfare is gonna be even more important as we approach Brexit and beyond."

Sheep farmer,
participant in in-depth interview

Image credit: Francoise Wemelsfelder

Project summaries	Key findings
Evidence-based framework for defining the Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC) good life concept: Resource levels for laying hens[7] Funding: Tubney Charitable Trust	
Farm animals can be said to have a 'good life' if their quality of life is substantially higher than the current legal minimum and includes positive experiences such as pleasure. Building upon the FAWC good life concept, a descriptive framework has been developed that defines 13 categories of resources exceeding legal requirements that are valued by animals, such as bedding or exercise areas. The framework has been tested on 49 laying hen farms.	Using the resource tier framework, we found over 60% of the 49 farms had resources above legal requirements and 28% were above relevant scheme (RSPCA or Soil Association) requirements. The assessment system was feasible and relatively efficient taking less than 30 minutes for each farm. Assessing positive welfare is feasible and relatively efficient using evidence-based frameworks Farmers often provide additional good life resources that exceed minimum legal or scheme requirements. However, this is not currently recognised by the market place.
Farmer focus groups developing market-relevant policy: Positive welfare assessment of dairy cattle and sheep[8] Funding: Scottish Government	
In collaboration with SRUC, the practicalities of assessing positive welfare were explored based on a review of existing scientific literature and the outcomes of four facilitated focus groups and 12 in-depth interviews involving 22 dairy and sheep farmers.	Farmers involved in the project valued positive welfare, proposed practical approaches to assessment and expressed interest in using positive welfare concepts within marketing campaigns and future UK Agriculture policy. Farmers were keen to share their experience of providing good life opportunities with other farmers and consumers.

"Animal welfare is what we are and who we are."

Sheep farmer,
participant in in-depth interview

Image credit: Susan Richmond

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Policy implications

- The distinctiveness of UK farm assurance schemes, and how they assess the animal's welfare, should be articulated more clearly to consumers and the wider public.

- The resource tier framework should be piloted across livestock sectors, to assess which sectors currently go above and beyond minimum legal or scheme requirements, so that focus can be targeted accordingly.

- Financial incentives to encourage and recognise good life resources provided by farmers, such as by updating existing schemes, should be considered.

- Opportunities for farmers to develop and maintain good practice networks in animal welfare standards should be explored.

- The food and animal produce network in the UK requires a holistic overview, from farm to food to plate, to unblock any unnecessary barriers to encouraging good animal welfare.

Further information

1 Brexit: farm animal welfare, 5th Report of Session 2017-19, House of Lords European Union Committee
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeucom/15/15.pdf

2 Origin Green, Ireland https://www.origingreen.ie/about/origin-green/

3 Main, D., Mullan, S. (2017) A new era of UK leadership in farm animal welfare Veterinary Record 181, 49-50.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/vr.j3273

4 AssureWel www.assurewel.org

5 Mullan, S., Szmaragd, C., Cooper, MD., Wrathall, JHM., Jamieson, J., Bond, A., Atkinson, C., & Main, DCJ. (2016) Animal welfare initiatives improve feather cover of cage-free laying hens in the UK. Animal Welfare, 25:2 243-253.
https://doi.org/10.7120/09627286.25.2.243

6 Pandolfi, F., Stoddart, K., Wainwright, N., Kyriazakis, I., & Edwards, S. (2017). The 'Real Welfare' scheme: Benchmarking welfare outcomes for commercially farmed pigs. Animal, 11(10), 1816-1824.
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1751731117000246

7 Edgar, J.L.; Mullan, S.M.; Pritchard, J.C.; McFarlane, U.J.C.; Main, D.C.J. Towards a 'Good Life' for Farm Animals: Development of a Resource Tier Framework to Achieve Positive Welfare for Laying Hens. Animals 2013, 3, 584-605.
http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ani3030584

8 Stokes, J.E., Main, DCJ., Mullan, S., Haskell, MJ., Wemelsfelder, F., & Dwyer, CM. (2017) Collaborative Development of Positive Welfare Indicators With Dairy Cattle And Sheep Farmers, Proceeding of UFAW International Symposium 27th-29th June 2017 Royal Holloway, University of London, Surrey, UK. Page 133 http://bit.ly/2t1QdgQ

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