

# Viewpoint

## Guarding the welfare of farm animals

Who should be the guardian of farm animal welfare? **Christopher Wathes**, chairman of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, argues that guardianship is a duty of Government, acting on behalf of British citizens.

OVER 900 million farm animals are 'used' in Great Britain each year; the great majority are broiler chickens. This number of individual animals is almost impossible to imagine: if they all marched past at two per second, it would take over 14 years from the first to the last. The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) argues that, at the very least, each and every farm animal should have a life worth living (Wathes 2010).

Powerful economic forces influence nearly all the decisions made by farmers about their animals' welfare; in 2009, the value of livestock and their products in Great Britain was £9.4 billion. There are also many vested interests; all organisations working actively in this area have an aim or goal, be it to increase profits, protect commercial interests or end certain husbandry systems or practices. Given these potential conflicts, the FAWC has recently proposed that guardianship is needed to safeguard the welfare of farm animals (FAWC 2009).

Guardianship is distinct from responsibility, and must be independent of economic forces and vested interests if it is to be effective. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales, and similar legislation in Scotland, the owner has responsibility for the welfare of animals in his or her care. Usually this is the farmer or stockman. This responsibility seeks to avoid unnecessary suffering by various means, such as the provision of basic needs.

But who should set the standards in the first place and then check that all is well? Clearly, it can't be the animal's owner, trade bodies or welfare charities, however well meaning, because of the conflicts of interest that may arise. It would be like asking a parent to set and mark his or her child's exams. The FAWC argues that guardianship of the welfare of farm animals is a duty of the Government, acting on behalf of British citizens. The Government has the necessary (mandated) authority, but it also has to deal



with political and resource issues that may hinder its guardianship.

If not the Government, then who? Many will put themselves forward, but all will find it difficult to set aside their self-interests. Even so, there is a real risk that political issues may complicate and compromise the Government's guardianship of farm animal welfare. There is an interesting parallel with the Government's other guardianship roles of sustainability, competition and public health, for example.

Guardianship covers policy and its implementation, welfare surveillance and provision of information to citizens. Set against expectations in each of these areas (indicated in *italics* below), and taking Brambell's landmark report of 1965 as the starting point (Brambell 1965), how does the Government fare as the guardian of farm animal welfare?

### Policy development

*Sound government policy on farm animal welfare that is based on evidence, supported by independent advice.*

In FAWC's opinion, government policy on farm animal welfare has generally been soundly based on scientific evidence and practical experience, and proportionate to the issues at hand. However, it evolved in an era when the economic, agricultural and political issues were much simpler than they are today. In 1973, the UK joined the

European Union, which drives so much of national policy nowadays, especially that relating to the minimal requirements of farm animal welfare. Clearly, the UK can show leadership on farm animal welfare,

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given our traditional strengths in agriculture, science and campaigns. FAWC foresees that government policy will have to take account of many more issues than those faced by previous administrations, for example, in relation to food security, environmental pollution and consumer choice. These nuances suggest that further improvements in the standard of farm animal welfare that are desired by many will be slow.

### Implementation

*Effective implementation of government policy through efficient procedures and processes, including regular monitoring of performance.*

In terms of the implementation, much progress has been made since 1965. Sound primary legislation has been passed, good secondary legislation has been devised, the Welfare Codes are now widely available (although in need of revision in some cases), informative advisory campaigns have been carried out, and farmers and stockmen give explicit recognition to the importance of welfare in profitable livestock farming. Occasionally, a Parliamentary select committee may investigate the state of an agricultural sector (for example, the pig industries in England and Scotland). These inquiries are informative but understandably infrequent: consideration of welfare is secondary to the main focus on economic performance. Furthermore, the Eves report (2006) was critical of the mechanisms by which government policy on animal health and welfare in England is delivered. Although Eves was more concerned with the control of (notifiable) diseases of animals

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than their welfare, there are lessons to be learned about the implementation of public policy on farm animal welfare.

### Surveillance and audits

*Public surveillance of standards of welfare of farm animals using scientific methods with independent audit.*

Surveillance of animal welfare is vital: if standards of farm animal welfare are not measured, how then can progress be assessed? Many years ago, the Government introduced welfare surveillance throughout Great Britain on a substantial scale that allows it to check compliance with the law, inform policy and substantiate claims. Surveillance is undertaken by Animal Health, local authorities and the Food Standards Agency wherever animals are kept, using established methods. Although these are tried and tested, they should be kept under review to take account of new understanding about welfare and to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

The available evidence from surveillance indicates that government policy and commercial practice have met many of Brambell's goals, particularly those relating to permissible systems of livestock husbandry.

However, progress appears to have slowed recently: for example, the percentage of (targeted) farms that are classified as causing 'unnecessary pain or distress' in on-farm surveillance has altered only slightly over the past decade. This evidence of poor welfare, the lingering problems of endemic disease, and a continued reliance on mutilations and behavioural restrictions suggest that the standard of welfare of farm animals has yet to reach a satisfactory level. In this sense, and despite the considerable progress that has been made since 1965, some would argue that the Government has not fully discharged its responsibilities as the guardian of farm animal welfare.

### Provision of information

*Availability of accurate, impartial information about farm animal welfare, including approval and verification of marketing claims about higher welfare standards.*

This fourth requirement of guardianship has not been met. Some might argue that farm assurance provides this information, although it is apparent that its providers have vested interests. This deficiency disadvantages citizens and consumers who wish to be morally responsible and expect

accurate, impartial information about farm animal welfare. Labelling and other information would allow the concerned consumer to make informed choices about his or her purchases according to welfare provenance.

### Who will guard the guardians?

Even the best intentioned and performing Government should be watched. In Great Britain, this function is carried out by the Parliaments in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Westminster. As an independent advisory body, perhaps the most important responsibility of the FAWC is to guard the guardians.

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