

Review and evaluation of
Animal Health and Welfare
Board for England
Interim report

March 2013

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1 Executive summary

Introduction

The Animal Health and Welfare Board of England ('the Board' hereafter) was established in 2011. Its role is to advise Ministers on strategic animal health and welfare issues, drawing upon information and support from industry. It is also tasked with delivering policy measures more efficiently and effectively, in partnership with industry.

The Board comprises an external (i.e. non-Defra) chair, six external members and four senior officials from Defra and the Defra network, who sit together as part of the internal structure of Defra. The Board's operations are supported by a Secretariat, which is made up of a team of Defra officials.

Evaluation of the Board

The Board's terms of reference state a requirement to evaluate its performance two years after it was established, in particular to assess its progress against the following expected impacts:

- Improved openness in policy making
- Collaborative decision making
- Greater responsibility for animal health and welfare among industry
- Value for money in policy development and delivery

A secondary objective of the evaluation is to assess the Board's processes as a new way of working in the Civil Service.

Brook Lyndhurst was commissioned to conduct a two-phased evaluation; this report is the interim report following the first phase of data gathering. The evaluation comprises three elements:

- Interviews with stakeholders to inform an initial assessment of the Board's impacts
- On-going monitoring of the Board's activities during the second year of its operation
- A further programme of interviews late in 2013 to fully assess its performance

Confidential, qualitative interviews were used to assess the Board's early impacts. In all, forty-six individuals who have interacted with the Board were engaged by the research team. They included the Board members themselves, internal stakeholders (i.e. Defra officials) and external stakeholders (such as representatives of industry organisations, non-governmental organisations, devolved administrations and other government departments).

The provisional findings from the initial interviews were presented to the Board in November, before further analysis was carried out. Results from this first phase, presented in this report, focus on the Board's relationships and its early impacts. The report also outlines a series of recommendations intended to inform the Board's development over the next year, in preparation for a more detailed evaluation of its performance in the autumn of 2013.

Relationships

The interview process revealed a spectrum of relationships between the Board and those with whom it has interacted. Given the Board's role as a conduit between government and industry, understanding these relationships is essential when assessing its progress and identifying areas for improvement.

On the basis of the interviews, the research team was able to cluster the relationships into six groups. These groups are indicative only, and boundaries between the clusters are not clear cut. In addition, the interviewees disproportionately included Board members/Secretariat and excluded those not so far involved with the Board. Assessing the size of the groups with precision is therefore not possible¹. Nevertheless, the character of the groups provides a useful perspective on the Board's progress to date:

- **'The Core'** - At the core is the chair and all other members of the Board. Together they report that they relate well to one another and feel they have collectively made solid progress since the Board was established.
- **'The Close'** - Those who are very close to the Board fully endorse its purpose and appreciate the challenges it faces. They tend to feel a sense of ownership over it, having been involved in the Board's early development. They tend to offer insightful suggestions for improvement and appreciate the need for demonstrable impact.
- **'The Concerned'** - Some interviewees support the Board but are worried about its form and/or function. This tends to stem from a concern about the Board's willingness or ability to listen to their interests, or an anxiety that the Board is not as transparent as it should be. In all cases this group is keen to work more closely with the Board.
- **'The Frustrated'** - Further away, some interviewees are angered by the Board's composition or actions. External stakeholders in this group have a high level of interest in the Board's performance. They are suspicious about its relationship with Defra and the openness of its decision-making processes. Defra stakeholders in this group is yet to see the value of the Board to policy development.
- **'The Distant'** - There are some interviewees are detached from the Board and feel it has little relevance to them. They tend to have had minimal engagement with it, although they keep an eye on how it progresses. They tend to express mild irritation about some of the issues raised by other interviewees, but by and large they feel the Board has had a benign impact.
- **'Other'** - There are many other organisations and individuals who were not interviewed as part of the evaluation, but who may or may not have interacted with the Board and who may or may not be aware of its existence. Nevertheless the Board may need to reach out and engage these parties on specific issues in the future.

Impacts to-date

Early impacts of the Board, reported by interviewees and interpreted by the research team are summarised below. They will provide a baseline for comparison with the detailed assessment of impacts in the final phase of the evaluation:

¹ The numbers of interviewees categorised according to each group is broadly even for the Core, Close, Concerned and Frustrated. As may be expected given the remit to interview those who are key stakeholders and therefore able to comment on the Board, a much smaller proportion was in the 'Distant' group.

Building trust and support - Overall there is recognition that it will take time to develop a sense of trust between industry and government. In general, there is appetite amongst industry to work more closely alongside the Board. Board members recognise that they need to manage the Board's perceived relationship with Defra. Nevertheless almost all external interviewees agree that the presence of industry representatives on the Board is a positive step in policy development processes.

Genuine partnership between industry and government - The Board is seeking advice and support from industry in shaping decisions, although the impacts of these activities upon policy decisions (and whether it has led to more efficient and effective outcomes) are not yet clear (and will be followed up in the second phase of this evaluation).

More effective engagement with industry - The Board's engagement activities have been effective in raising awareness about its development; all those interviewed are able to describe its broad purpose and composition. When probed, however, many explained that they are not exactly clear about the Board's remit or processes.

The perceived effectiveness of different modes of engagement was found to vary. For example, interviewees also note that the timing and regularity of the Board's engagement activities have been somewhat unpredictable. Inconsistencies are also perceived in the level of engagement with different sectors. Representatives from some sectors feel satisfied by the Board's efforts; whereas others believe they have not yet been included. For all external parties, uncertainty about how Defra policy teams and the Board relate to one another has led to confusion about with whom to engage.

Working as part of Defra – Officials' opinions differ about the part played by the Board in Defra's decision making processes. Officials question the Board's scope and exactly how it links into decision-making processes. Without this clarity, independent judgments are made by policy teams about which issues are presented to the Board. Officials are generally keen to avoid unduly influencing Board decisions and so they tend to be conservative in strategic overviews offered to the Board.

Openness in decision-making - Many interviewees recognise that the Board has taken positive steps in increasing transparency by publishing its meeting minutes and recommendations to Ministers. Nevertheless some raise concerns about whether the Board has been open enough in how it makes decisions. The political challenges related to this are recognised by those inside Defra but understandably these are not necessarily visible to external interviewees.

Tackling difficult issues - Board members and others in Defra tend to feel the Board has "shaken things up" in the Department. Externally, too, some can see the potential of the Board in influencing Defra on important issues. Nevertheless, on both sides, it is widely recognised that the Board's success depends on its ability to select a small number of key issues and to deliver on them over the year ahead.

Recommendations

On balance, many interviewees have a positive sense of the Board's progress to date and are hopeful about its impact over the year to come. In general there is:

- Broad support for the idea behind the Board
- An appreciation that it is difficult to establish a new governance mechanism
- A sense that a year is about the amount of time needed simply to get the basics in place

This initial review also reveals a number of challenges for the Board to consider:

- Relationships with those who feel threatened, excluded or unfairly represented
- Increased clarity about scope and demonstrable strategic oversight
- Further clarity on how the Board fits into Defra's processes
- Suitability of different communication tools used by the Board
- The need for systematic engagement with industry
- Scepticism and uncertainty about the value the Board adds to policy development
- Limited resources available to support operational activities

The research team proposes three key recommendations to address these challenges. It is understood that they will inform the Board's development over the coming year:

1. *Develop and deliver an engagement strategy*

Develop an engagement strategy that maximises the effectiveness and efficiency of the Board's communications activities across industry and government. The strategy should contain the following elements:

- a database of all parties with an interest in the Board or animal health and welfare
- a map of all parties according to their relationship with the Board and their interests
- a means of identifying when to engage different parties and for what purpose
- a review of communication tools available to the Board
- a process for vetting the appropriateness of tone and language used
- a plan to deliver the engagement strategy in conjunction with the Secretariat

2. *Scope and process for selecting key issues*

Delimit and transmit the Board's scope and prioritisation processes to ensure all parties fully understand what the Board is working on, how this is determined and why this is the case.

The research team recommends this should be achieved by mapping all animal health and welfare policy issues annually and systematically determining which areas the Board will be involved with, against resources available to it. Moreover, it is recommended that the Board develops a process for reviewing and resolving issues that arise from industry to avoid losing strategic focus.

3. *Demonstrate value in policy development process*

Produce a map or organogram to help explain where the Board sits within Defra, what its role and responsibilities are in relation to policy teams, and how it draws upon the advice and support of industry. The map could also be used as a basis for tracking progress alongside an activities log (currently under development by the Secretariat). It could be used as a reference guide when communicating how specific decisions have been made.