



AWC Second Opinion on the Animal Welfare Issues related to Covid-19 – medium to longer term

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Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) Opinions AWC Opinions are short reports to government¹ on contemporary topics relating to animal welfare. They are based on evidence and consultation with interested parties. They highlight particular concerns and indicate issues for further consideration by governments and others.

AWC is an expert committee of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England and the governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. More information about the Committee is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/animal-welfare-committee-awc>

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Welfare of Farmed Fish, 2014 Welfare of Farmed and Park Deer, 2013
Welfare Implications of Breeding and Breeding Technologies in Commercial Livestock Agriculture, 2012
Contingency Planning for Farm Animal Welfare in Disasters and Emergencies, 2012

¹ Where we refer to “government” we are addressing the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England, the Scottish and Welsh Governments, the Northern Ireland Assembly and other responsible government Departments and Agencies.

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AWC SECOND STRATEGIC REVIEW OF ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES RELATED TO COVID-19 – MEDIUM TO LONGER TERM

Introduction

1. The Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) is an expert committee of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Scottish and Welsh Governments. AWC advises the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales on the welfare of animals. This includes farmed, companion and wild animals kept by people.

AWC's philosophy of approach

2. In 1965, the Brambell Committee, led by Professor Roger Brambell began the development of the 'Five Freedoms'. These Five Freedoms were designed to avoid unnecessary suffering and to promote good welfare for farm animals. The Five Freedoms remain an important tool as they still allow UK governments to make improvements to existing legislation to ensure the welfare of animals remains to the highest standards.

- **Freedom from hunger and thirst**, by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
- **Freedom from discomfort**, by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
- **Freedom from pain, injury and disease**, by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
- **Freedom to express normal behaviour**, by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
- **Freedom from fear and distress**, by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

3. The Five Freedoms have been the cornerstone of government and industry policy and are enshrined in the Codes of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock. In addition to the Five Freedoms, The Animal Welfare Act 2006 also ensures that the welfare needs of animals are met and that the owner or keeper are responsible.

The five welfare needs are:

- Need for a suitable environment (place to live).
- Need for a suitable diet.
- Need to exhibit normal behaviour patterns.
- Need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals (if applicable).
- Need to be protected from pain, injury, suffering and disease.

4. All animals are recognised as sentient beings within the EU Treaty of Amsterdam 1999. In addition, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (England and Wales) and the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2006 (Scotland) include a duty of care to

provide for the needs of protected animals for which humans have permanent or temporary responsibility.

5. AWC believe that its obligations include identifying and ensuring that certain serious harms never occur to any animal, and where possible to minimise any harm which might occur and endeavour to balance any harms to the animals affected against the benefits to humans and/or other animals. At a minimum, each individual animal should have a life that is worth living, and a growing proportion should have a good life.

6. There have been many attempts to define animal welfare. In AWC's view, welfare encompasses both physical and mental health, and for all animals good welfare is largely determined on a daily basis by the skills of the stock people, owners, the system of husbandry, and the suitability of the animal genotype for the environment. From time to time, external factors can have an impact on welfare, for example; infectious disease epidemics, adverse weather conditions, global economics and geo-political influences. These circumstances often affect animal welfare in the short term and contingencies are necessary to minimise the severity and duration of poorer welfare.

7. Some pain and distress are unavoidable in all animal sectors even with current knowledge, husbandry and farming practises, but the goal should be to minimise their occurrence. Difficult ethical and practical decisions have to be made when dealing with suffering, sometimes by imposing a lesser act that may still cause short-term pain or distress but provide long-term relief for the individual or group. The goal should be to eliminate the source of the problem through improved disease control, husbandry and breeding to avoid the lesser act.

8. When assessing any welfare problem, it is necessary to consider the extent of poor welfare, the intensity and duration of suffering, the number of animals involved, the alternatives available and the opportunities to promote wellbeing. Equally important is the ability to improve welfare immediately through existing sound husbandry and good stockmanship. Some day-to-day welfare challenges are seen across a range of species and farming systems, although some may be intrinsic to certain specific production systems.

9. To offer appropriate advice about the welfare of all animals, AWC takes account of knowledge and the practical experience from scientists, veterinarians, farmers, non-government organisations, charities and representatives. A broad-ranging approach is used in AWC's advice, drawing on relevant views and attempting to take account of human interests with a concern to ensure that the animal's interests remain to the fore. When the knowledge base is poor, or when the application of evidence is inconclusive, the animal should be given the benefit of the doubt.

10. AWC is made up of independent experts who rely on the latest scientific evidence from peer review publications, stakeholder engagements, industry input, related work within the field of animal welfare and speaking with experts within the area. AWC have advised government by providing reports and opinions.

11. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments have issued substantial social distancing restrictions and have limited the movement of people and the contact they can have with others. Guidance has been produced by governments and many national bodies on the care of companion animals, livestock and kept wild animals.

12. This opinion is an assessment of the immediate actual and/or possible risks to animal welfare occurring as a result of Covid-19 controls as it affects the UK farmed animal, companion animal and kept wild animal sectors in the medium term through to and potentially beyond the start of 2021. The document will discuss the impacts of these risks and the actions that might be taken.

13. The format of this second opinion has been influenced by the need for a quick response. For this second strategic review there was time to undertake a targeted call for evidence. We are most grateful to those who have responded to our request for opinion and evidence.

14. When compiling this opinion, AWC called upon the knowledge and expertise of its members, with their diverse range of backgrounds, to cover as wide a range of animal welfare issues as possible. In addition, members of AWC have, through personal contacts, obtained the views of many organisations and individuals involved with the keeping of, or oversight of, the keeping of animals. However, there are limitations to this opinion given the short timespan for contributions and the pace of change across all sectors, as well as the changing nature of Covid-19 control measures within the different administrations. This second opinion has benefitted from a longer period of time since the start of the Covid -19 restrictions and impact and has allowed for greater representation from certain sectors that were under-represented previously. It has shown that changes in animal keeping and the related welfare concerns are continuing and changing. Neither the disease pandemic nor its impact is over at the time of writing.

This opinion should be read in conjunction with our first opinion on the short-term animal welfare issues related to Covid-19 and deals with changes to issues and concerns previously raised or to ones newly emerging. Where there are no changes or no further evidence has been forthcoming, the first opinion should be considered as having continuing relevance.

Summary

Up to now

15. All reports received highlighted the difficulties being experienced by the various animal welfare charities involved with regard to exposure to the public in order to raise funds, maintain workforce and volunteers and being able to cope with existing welfare enquiries, inspections, rehoming and care services.

16. Until there is more normal exposure of the animal population to the usual regulatory surveillance and public gaze the effect of the lockdown and reduction in movement is generally difficult to judge. The RSPCA reported a 50% reduction in the reporting of 'cruelty cases' but at the same time, there are reported increased

concerns about animal abuse in households. This data has not yet been exposed to official scrutiny or public view.

17. Generally farming has coped well with the outbreak and livestock have been little affected. Some difficulties with slaughter access, for some species, notably poultry, with reported delays then being seen resulting in some overcrowding on farms.

18. Equids have been affected by cancellation of events, shows, racing etc. Reported concerns about lack of exercise and of thereby storing up health issues. Concerns about a drop in vaccination levels for equine influenza.

19. Concerns about companion animals have come from the reported cessation or marked reduction in vaccinations, neutering, microchipping and regarding breeding and increased importation of dogs.

20. Single biggest effect on any animal related business, e.g. veterinary practice, welfare charity, laboratory, etc, is the drop in income and thereby the ability to provide the usual breadth of service cover.

21. Concern expressed regarding the mental wellbeing of people and animals, and the monitoring of it, given the prolonged periods of social isolation and the impact on the duty of care of owners/keepers for those animals under their care.

Future

22. Concern strongly expressed by welfare charities about the loss of fundraising and the heavy call on their reserves both monetarily and in terms of volunteers and personnel and this then giving rise to concerns about their future ability to deal with potentially increased autumn and winter demands.

23. Concerns about abandonment, relinquishment and social isolation of animals bought or obtained during the lockdown and confinement period.

24. Seasonal effects normally seen may be exaggerated due to loss of jobs and income, e.g. more horses and dogs and cats needing new homes or abandoned and due to the risk of the closure of refuges and charity homes. Additional concerns for horses because of the increasing price and availability of bedding, i.e. straw, because of a reduced harvest.

25. Fears of animal disease outbreaks raised, particularly in horses, e.g. equine flu, and companion animals, e.g. parvovirus, due to failure to maintain vaccination levels.

26. Failure to detect and identify mistreatment cases because of a reduction in home/farm/livery visits by all regulatory and charity inspection bodies.

27. Concerns about the resourcing for policing of 'animal rescue centres and refuges' and of their abilities to cater for the wider variety of species reported as being abandoned or relinquished, e.g. pigs.

28. Increasing prices for puppies and kittens will tempt more unscrupulous breeding and breeders and increase importation under commercial rules or smuggling.
29. Provision of veterinary services, including official veterinarian services, hampered by lack of veterinary surgeons available. Reduction in EU graduates coming to UK. Additional pressures on all points where veterinary staff required in meat hygiene, import/export certification and port checks.
30. As a result of reduced or suspended training and examining there is a reported lack of training for the Certificates of Competence for abattoir and slaughter staff. Similar training deficits being suggested in all other areas where practical training has had to be suspended as not all training can move to an on-line format.
31. The effect of 'track and trace' outcome requirement, on all businesses with specialised or licence holding personnel, has been to reduce staff in all sectors.
32. There are concerns about other country Covid-19 controls affecting supplies of medicines and vaccines.
33. Concerns if animal vaccine plants switch to human Covid-19 vaccine production.
34. Similar concerns if animal pathology laboratories switch to Covid-19 testing.
35. Concern around any Covid related, inspection staff quarantine, etc, may cause delays on movement of live animals at ports.
36. Concern about the impact on driver's hours and welfare of animals in transit because of delays and increased journey times.
37. Concerns about the impact on knowledge transfer especially in regions where there is no or poor broadband coverage.
38. Processing blockages or failures if shutdowns or requirement for extensive staff self-isolation or quarantine occur at abattoirs, cutting plants, cold stores etc and feeding back to farms giving rise to overstocking.
39. Aviation cutbacks affecting supply and time in transit for ornamental fish, poultry breeding stock and germplasm.
40. PPE has risen in price and availability of all specific types has fallen.

Businesses

Charities

41. Charities are businesses and all charities have suffered reduced income and resource as a result of the effects of the Covid pandemic and those engaged with

animal welfare are no exception. The loss of the summer for fund raising has caused and will continue to create problems for staffing and managing rescue centres, rehoming programmes, neutering programmes and inspectorates. The charities also undertake a considerable amount of education and dissemination of husbandry and welfare information. The final figure for the general loss has not yet emerged but the seven major charities have budgeted for a 33% drop in income and a survey by institute of Fundraising and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations has predicted in 2020 a reduction in income for all UK charities of 31%. The effect of furloughing staff (e.g. the RSPCA reportedly furloughed 23% of its staff) has meant a cessation of 24-hour cover and a marked reduction in routine calls and educational visits. Most major charities also have shops and these ceased opening or did so on reduced hours because of the concerns for volunteer staff. Whilst the major rescue organisations continue to have funding reserves and have given some grants to the smaller charities and rescue centres, there remains a major concern about their ability to function at the level they have been doing in the past because of reduced income, reduction in staff numbers either temporarily or permanently and the loss of, unavailability of or inability to use volunteers because of Covid-19 infection prevention of spread measures.

42. Failure to be able to function at the same level will mean, if the predicted downturn in personal finances gives rise to a similar outcome as seen post the 2008 financial crash, a marked rise in relinquished and/or abandoned pets. In the three years after the 2008 financial crash there was a 30% rise in stray dog intake by local authorities. If this does occur again, there will be a greater call on local authorities to cope with the increased numbers of stray and abandoned animals.

43. There remain considerable concerns about the viability of many of the smaller animal welfare charities and also for the extent of the work that the larger ones will be able to carry out in the coming months and into the next year. This will have a knock-on effect on the work of local authorities.

Recommendation: Local authorities will need to review contingency plans to deal with any increase in welfare cases, abandoned or relinquished animals.

Farming

44. Overall farming appears to have adapted well to the difficulties of self-isolation, lockdown and social distancing. The initial sudden onset problems experienced by the dairy industry did require government assistance. Livestock markets, which were initially closed, were rapidly able to open having developed ways of working that reduced risk of Covid-19 spread by sellers dropping off livestock and not staying with them in the market and letting the market staff sort the animals for sale. Later ewe and lamb sales able to open but the major ram sales remain cancelled because of the number of buyers that would want to be present, the distances travelled and the mixing that would occur. Failure to acquire new genetic stock has a potential impact on the breeding programmes on farms. Approximately 60% of annual livestock sales are in the months of August, September and October. Animals not sold as usual at the autumn sales will still have to be found new farms to go to, e.g. rams or breeding ewes and also breeding

cattle. This may for example increase the numbers of journeys that individual animals undertake rather than the usual single one to the large well-known autumn ram sales, e.g. Builth Wells and Kelso.

45. Concern about mental health of those in farming has continued to be raised by the farming charities as the loss of the market interaction with colleagues added another aspect to the isolation of the working environment. The interaction between livestock owner mental wellbeing and the welfare of livestock being the subject of a previous FAWC report². Farming charities, like all other charities, had a marked reduction in income as the predominant place for raising funds has been the agricultural shows and events, all of which were cancelled.

Recommendation: Our previous Covid-19 report recommendation on the importance of paying attention to farmers, and all animal carers, wellbeing continues to be emphasised as being crucial to the welfare of both themselves and the animals under their care.

Veterinary practices and personnel

46. Initial lockdown gave rise to concerns about emergency cover but advice from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the British Veterinary Association helped to develop ways of working that could ensure provision of emergency care. There are, however, concerns about the backlog of elective surgery, notably breeding control procedures, i.e. neutering, but also disease prevention programmes, e.g. vaccinations.

47. The use of video or telemedicine for consultations has proved useful for the simple case and transmission of advice but remains subject to further evaluation about its more general long-term usage from a welfare point of view.

48. There is also a concern about the provision for care given the risk that individuals become virus positive and unable to work or following track and trace required isolation and this gives rise to the potential for whole practices having to shut down. Practices that are large enough in terms of personnel, have developed ways of working as smaller teams to try to avoid total shutdown if one team has an infected member. Similar concerns have been expressed regarding Official Veterinarians and their staff in regulatory positions, e.g. within the slaughter and meat processing industry, and therefore responsible for animal welfare within abattoirs.

49. There still remains a concern about the adequacy of available manpower given the number of veterinary surgeons trained and/or native of other countries that would normally come to the UK to work but who are now prevented from travelling by their own countries or by the UK controls. There is evidence of a reduction in the numbers of new registrants from within the EU. This has a specific impact on the numbers of the members of the veterinary profession working in government employment, e.g. in the Food Standard Agency, particularly as Official Veterinarians

² [FAWC Opinion on the links between the health and wellbeing of farmers and farm animal welfare 2017](#)

in meat hygiene related work, and for the Animal and Plant Health Agency, Defra and equivalent departments within the devolved administrations.

50. Client debt has continued to rise as reported previously. Concerns continue to be expressed about the potential for delay in seeking advice and treatment for sick or injured animals and the consequent welfare effects of such delays both in the short term and the rest of that animal's life.

51. Medicine availability has remained good but there are concerns about the effect of Covid-19 controls in other countries affecting export to the UK of certain medicines where the sole manufacturing plant is in that country. There is a concern that animal vaccine manufacturing plants may move over to making human Covid-19 vaccines leading to a shortage or non-availability of certain animal vaccines.

52. A similar concern has been expressed regarding laboratories currently engaged in animal pathological work moving to Covid-19 testing and reducing the availability or timeliness of animal tests. Any contingency plans held by government departments and associated agencies e.g. APHA and FSA, for loss of manpower due to the required isolation or quarantine of staff should be kept under review.

Other businesses

53. Whilst farriers were designated key workers the drop in the number of horses being used because of the cancellation of equine events, e.g., racing, pony clubs, eventing, showing, etc. meant marked reduction in the requirement for being shod. Many horses are being turned out rather than kept ready for work.

54. Many riding schools and trekking centres are closed with approx. 10% suggesting they would not open again.

55. Many racing yards have seen a reduction in the number of horses kept for racing as syndicates and individuals have sold them off. This is likely to continue if there is a financial downturn. Livery owners expressed concerns about horse owners being unable to afford to keep their horses/ponies and equine rescue organisations are equally expressing the same concern about the welfare of horses and ponies this autumn/winter.

56. Many equine rescue centres are already full or nearly so and with reduced staffing and volunteers, are concerned about their ability to take in more animals in the coming months.

Slaughter

57. Abattoirs and cutting plants have been the focus of some of the Covid-19 localised outbreaks both nationally and internationally. Concern that if there is a second wave of infection with Covid-19 that closing these abattoirs and cutting plants down to control spread of Covid-19 is likely to give rise to particularly slaughter poultry having to either:

- a) have a delayed slaughter date with consequent overcrowding and knock on effect on shed cleaning and restocking, i.e. the whole 'just in time' breeding/production line; or
- b) endure much longer journeys to more distant slaughter facilities; or
- c) be subject to welfare culling on farm.

58. Increased holding times in sheds can lead to increased incidence of pododermatitis and leg musculoskeletal issues as the birds become heavier.

59. In some slaughter plants the need for spacing of staff and prevention of Covid-19 spread has resulted in slower line speeds again leading to some difficulties in the removal of birds from farms and also to increased time in lairages.

60. There have been concerns expressed about the continuity of supplies of carbon dioxide (CO₂) for slaughterhouses given a worldwide demand and limited production; subject to country of production working practices under prevailing local Covid-19 situation.

61. Similarly, there are risks to the supply of ammunition required for captive bolt weapons as a primary supplier is China.

62. The Fallen Stock Scheme has continued throughout the Covid-19 period and has reported only a slight decrease in pick-ups. In the event of a local or regional failure of the operative companies within the scheme is there a contingency for dealing with emergency or urgent on-farm slaughter and removal of carcasses?

'Just in time' production

63. As outlined above the issue of delay is most keenly felt with large scale poultry and egg production. Contingency plans appear to have dealt with the main concerns but there remain concerns about the risk of sudden closure of abattoirs and cutting plants.

64. The stopping of the export of carcasses of cull sows for further processing to Germany, where a major cutting plant was the site of a Covid-19 outbreak leading to its temporary closure, had the effect of reducing the abattoir slaughter of cull sows. The resultant retention on farms led to many being put back to the boar for a further litter, thereby altering the age profile of the herd and the breeding and replacement programme as well as placing a strain on the housing or husbandry related facilities for the whole herd.

Recommendation: Industry and Government need to ensure there is adequate slaughter capacity in the event of regional closure of abattoirs.

Specific issues

65. Prices for livestock did not fall as was feared and have remained high and this, matched to the livestock markets adapting, removed concerns about overstocking. All farming respondents have expressed concerns about the future regarding the mix of Covid-19 issues and trade issues when the UK finally leaves the

EU and the risks for livestock in terms of stock numbers and over stocking if there are further restrictions on sales and export.

66. Although sheep shearers from the antipodes were unable to come this year there was not the anticipated problem with getting the national flock shorn although there was a worldwide drop in the price for wool.

67. There was reported an increase in the sale of small hen houses for domestic egg production. It was suggested that hens are being kept by people who have not kept them before which raised concerns about the health and welfare of the poultry.

68. Concern about the reduced harvest as a consequence of the extremes of weather this year, e.g. the floods and later long dry period, leading to a marked reduction in straw for animal bedding particularly for horses and cattle. More wood shavings have been imported, with concerns about quality and the ability to ensure continuing uninterrupted supply. Increased use of shavings for bedding for horses. Non-screened shavings carry an increased risk of disease. Shredded paper has been used to replace wood shavings for litter for poultry with some concerns expressed about health-related issues and also about disposal.

69. As predicted in the first report the supply of the smaller companion animals, e.g. rabbits, guinea pigs, gerbils, mice, etc., have been affected and the rapid breeding cycles mean that approximately 8k of these animals are produced per week for sale (PFMA figure). Concern has been expressed about the numbers of bred animals that could not be sold and about their fate. Given the short breeding cycle breeding can be relatively easily stopped or recommenced as demand alters but any sudden change in demand does create a problem of overstocking or oversupply in the short term.

**Recommendation: Further work needs to be undertaken to answer the following questions related to small companion animals:
How were these numbers of small companion animals dealt with during lockdown? How was euthanasia undertaken of stock that was in excess, if this was required? What contingency plans are there for this if it happens again?**

70. The ornamental fish trade relies heavily on the aviation industry to import live fish and other aquatic species, most often using scheduled passenger flights as flight times are more predictable according to the industry. Reduction in the number of planes flying from the countries that can be used for import and competition for space on those planes has increased freight costs and meant a movement to the less reliable freight only flights with a prolongation of flight times and particularly airport clearance times. This can impact on welfare of fish as transport time is critical.

71. High stocks of trout held on fish farms through the summer had to be placed on maintenance diets with concerns that such fish may suffer more disease incidents in the autumn winter months as a consequence. Holding fish back on farms leads to increased water pathogen and ectoparasite levels which take time to restore to

normal. The effect on the fish will also be indicated by increased rejections by processors in terms of quality and colour indicating previous exposure to disease and welfare stress.

Personnel

72. Slaughterhouse staff training and undergoing examination for certificates of competence were given extended temporary certificates for three months. The risk of further lockdowns, local or national, and concerns in the case of illness or as a consequence of contact tracing may require an increase in numbers holding the certificates to ensure that abattoir and on-farm emergency culling can take place as required.

73. The slaughter industry is reliant on an overseas derived workforce and thus susceptible to individual country Covid-19 positions and any UK restrictions on entry. Some evidence has been reported of a reluctance from workers to come to the UK and this may have an effect on the availability and working times of slaughterhouses with a knock-on effect on the livestock having to be kept longer on farm.

74. As noted, earlier concerns about the availability of adequate numbers of sheep shearers did not materialise.

75. Veterinary student training suffered from a restricted access to extramural studies as practices had to manage staff safe distancing. Similar effect was seen on pre-clinical students' extramural studies.

76. Farm assurance schemes switched to video and online based assessments with visits to the premises only just starting again in August. The full effect on the schemes and on the farms that should have been subject to visits are not yet evaluated although all assurance schemes have expressed satisfaction with the way the system worked in the short term, but these results should be shared with all partners and be subject to critical independent review. The effect on animal welfare will only become apparent when more widespread visits and inspections are undertaken, and their evaluation has been completed.

Recommendation: This evaluation is critical if this system for assurance is to be adopted more widely in the future.

77. Concerns about the availability of foot trimmers and mobility scoring do not seem to have materialised but again this will only really become clearer when full assurance visits are reinstated.

78. Education and practical training for animal owners whether farming, equine or companion animal has been markedly reduced although the main animal charities have provided considerable online welfare, health and husbandry advice. Farming and farm related organisations have also been keen to provide advice to their members but the availability of broadband and/or the demands in households for multiple users, notably on-line child education, has shown up the current limitations on the roll out of this means of communication, particularly in the rural areas.

79. The equine charities and rescue centres are reporting that they are reaching capacity and/or are having financial problems in maintaining their staff numbers. Given the concerns about the coming usual seasonal rise in numbers of equines needing rescue and given the predicted and already evident rise in the costs of bedding on the back of a reduced harvest, the charities are concerned that there is likely to be an increased call on their services which they may not be able to meet.

Recommendation: DEFRA/APHA should consider facilitating a discussion with all parties concerned including charities, horse organisations and local authorities to consider euthanasia and disposal options. The Fallen Stock Scheme could be approached to ensure that where welfare is likely to be compromised and there is no alternative accommodation for the horses under threat, a cost-effective euthanasia solution could be rapidly put in place.

80. The 'dumping of animals' is not limited to the usual companion animals and horses and there are reports of pet pigs being taken to rescue centres and also one report of a number being let loose in a forested area of the country. Concern has been raised about the quality of care that such animals receive in rescue centres and sanctuaries not used to those species and about the sources of any guidance provided and formal inspection procedures that take place.

Behaviour (animals and man)

81. The most noticeable effect of the Covid-19 period has been on the companion animal sector with a marked increase in the keeping of dogs and cats and a reported doubling of the prices of puppies and a 50% increase in the price of kittens.

82. Concerns have been expressed by charities, working particularly with dogs, of an increase in cases, during the later lockdown period, of animal harming and abuse in the domestic setting. Additional concern being raised given the linkage between human and animal abuse. In the early lockdown period, the case figures were lower, but this is thought to have been due to the limited and difficult options for those suffering or observing abuse.

83. The increase in home working, with the suggestion that this may continue for many people, has given rise to the prospect that companion animal ownership may stay at an increased level from that seen before Covid-19. However, there are concerns about the welfare of many of the animals taken into homes during the Covid-19 period when there is a return to work and school and also if there is a rise in unemployment and/or reduction in household incomes. There is a seasonal pattern to abandonment of companion animals with greater numbers being seen during the holiday season in the summer and the animal welfare charities are concerned that the additional animals being kept will give rise to greater numbers being abandoned later in the year or even next year.

84. Many local authorities no longer have dog wardens; the posts having been subject to cutbacks in local authority expenditure.

Recommendation: If there are to be increased numbers of stray or abandoned animals and charities with their rescue centres are under pressure, DEFRA needs to consider how this matter could be dealt with in a timely and welfare conscious manner.

85. Concerns have been raised that the return to work will also see a rise in companion animal negative mental welfare traits notably antisocial behaviour and separation anxiety. The close confinement experienced by companion animals during the lockdown and later social distancing period has resulted in many animals, particularly young ones, experiencing for the first time, continual human/owner presence. The sudden withdrawal of a familiar human presence can and will in some cases elicit anti-social behaviour patterns, for example, in dogs, continual barking or chewing, destruction of household structure, items of furniture. In addition, socialising of puppies, having not been possible, greater care will have to be taken when exposing them to a wider public, other dogs and other companion animals. There is an early indication from animal behaviourists that such issues are already showing in an increased case load. Additionally, there was one report from a behaviourist of an increase in cases of attempted or actual dog bites on children.

86. The increased access and usage of the countryside for public exercise gave rise to reports of an increase in dogs worrying sheep and disturbing cattle. The incidence is dependent on the farm and countryside access locations. A secondary concern was regarding increased levels of litter and the consequences of farm animal access to it.

Recommendation: Continuing public advice about the elements of the countryside code notably about litter and dogs on leads.

Nutrition

87. There continues to be volatility in the feed products, ingredients markets and traded supplies. However, the earlier concerns about supply have not materialised into any major concerns. One non-Covid-19 matter is that the outlook and early indications, for the UK harvest are for markedly reduced yields and this also extends to the supply of straw. This will give rise to a greater reliance on imported feedstuffs and the volatility and availability as earlier noted, will affect costs and supply, with an on cost to welfare if compromises have to be made or shortages are encountered.

88. Overstocking does not seem to have been a problem as livestock markets and sales of farm livestock products have continued and grass growth has, for most of the country, not failed. The interruption in pig slaughter and processing did give rise to some retention on farms and with it the risk of overstocking.

89. One area for concern has been the supply of some mineral and vitamin ingredients for feedstuffs that are single country of origin dependent. Lockdown in that country can be a problem if there has not been contingent stockpiling. This may not always be possible if the ingredient is time dependent on usage.

Recommendation: As a contingency, it is important where there is a single source of ingredient for a necessary foodstuff that alternative sources are identified.

90. Where there has been a problem of slaughter or marked reduction in demand, e.g. milk, the reduction in the nutritional value of the feedstuff has been one way of managing the effects on the production animals.

Recommendations: Further evaluation will be necessary on any long-term effects on the welfare and health of those animals subject to dietary manipulation (see earlier comment about trout).

Breeding

91. The marked increase in the demand and prices for puppies and kittens has led to reports of an increase in illegal or un-controlled breeding and also the importation of animals bred outside of the UK. Paradoxically responsible breeders of companion animals were limited by movement restrictions about when or if their animals could breed and about whether or how the outcome of that breeding could be delivered to future owners.

92. There is a problem of supply more generally, in that demand for puppies cannot be met currently by licenced and/or responsible breeders in the UK. This would seem to provide encouragement for the importation of puppies to the UK for sale with resultant prolonged journey times.

Recommendation: The subject of illegal breeding and of supply/demand for puppies and kittens requires further consideration from a welfare perspective.

93. Companion animal neutering, of both sexes, was markedly reduced, as veterinary surgeons reduced their operation lists to emergency ones only and charity clinics stopped their neutering programmes.

94. It is expected the result of this reduction in neutering will be an increase in the number of puppies and kittens needing homes in the coming months. Breeding not being controlled, does suggest many of the litters will be of cross bred or genetically inappropriate parentage with the potential for a greater need for intervention at the time of birth.

95. Equine castrations were also curtailed, and the BEVA/BHS castration clinics have not taken place, which would imply at least approximately 50 colts or stallions remain entire based on that scheme's previous year's statistics.

96. The smaller companion animals having a shorter gestational length had given rise to concerns about oversupply. However, the shorter gestational length does mean that breeding can be adjusted and a brief survey of pet shops in Scotland did not show any particular problems. What is not clear is about the sources of that supply and about how the usual UK market requirement of 8000 (PFMA figure) per week of those small companion animals, has been managed.

Recommendation: There is a need for a greater understanding and transparency of the breeding and supply chain for small companion animals.

97. It is suggested from responses to our call for evidence that in the non-thoroughbred horses, where AI is allowed, many owners, having found that competitions were cancelled, opted to put mares in foal. It is suggested, therefore, that there may be an increase in foals being born next year.

Transport

98. The additional journey times when abattoirs are closed or working to reduced staffing levels has been subject of comment but not evaluated in terms of actual numbers of animals affected. This is particularly important where there is either a limitation in the number of abattoirs dealing with a high number of animals, e.g. poultry, or where there are very few dealing with a particular class of livestock, e.g. cull sows or end of lay hens.

99. The closure of a processing plant in the EU fed back to the UK in that the slaughter of pigs was affected. Similarly, the closure of certain poultry abattoirs in parts of the UK related to where the predominant number of birds were being reared, required a rapid response to manage the welfare implications of delayed slaughter and increased journey times to another suitable plant able to cope with the numbers of birds.

Recommendation: Such contingencies do need to be part of all farm and livestock production plans even if outside of the livestock owner's direct control.

100. Many equine events were cancelled and the movement of horses throughout the country were stopped. The effect of the removal or loosening of restrictions will require many horses to be re-familiarised with being transported.

Health

101. The requirement for veterinary practices and charity clinics to manage social distancing led to a much-reduced service and in some cases an abandonment of routine surgical procedures with emergency surgery only being undertaken.

102. Currently the backlog in routine surgery is being addressed although the risk of 'test and trace' to surgical teams may give rise to further local problems.

103. Microchipping of companion animals was markedly reduced and will require a catch-up period to ensure that the legal requirement, in puppies of being chipped, is fulfilled. There is the consequent welfare benefit for all animals of all ages of being identifiable and thereby ensuring the return of straying, injured or stolen animals to their rightful owners.

104. The incidence of road traffic related casualties was reduced.

105. The numbers of animals vaccinated was also reduced in companion animals and equids although farm animal vaccination continued. There were concerns raised about the availability of some vaccines and medicines where the manufacturer was outside of this country. This continues to be a concern as countries where they are manufactured continue to have their own Covid-19 related problems.

106. The possible use of animal laboratories for the detection of Covid-19 virus presence or serology and of animal vaccine manufacturing plants turning to human Covid-19 vaccine production could result in shortages or non-availability of important animal vaccines.

107. While the use of video and on-line reporting for farm assurance schemes provided a temporary means of inspection, following the suspension of farm visits, some concerns were expressed about the effectiveness of this form of monitoring.

108. Specific disease control programmes will have suffered a setback, the extent of which will only be determined with the resumption of visits. Farm interest groups, often involving farm demonstration walks, some of which are dedicated to welfare, disease control or production stopped meeting, although some were able to continue using online or webinar-based means. The bovine Tb testing programme was modified and a protocol to manage social distancing rules enabled testing to continue.

Charities, Rescue centres and Educational Farms

109. The concerns expressed in the first opinion regarding funding and the ability for charities, etc. to stay open and fully functional continue. The loss of a summer season for the usual fund-raising events has impacted heavily on charity incomes and thereby the extent to which the charities are currently able, and will in the coming months be able, to provide welfare related care.

Recommendation: The repeated concerns about the potential for a rise in the numbers of abandoned animals when the return to work and school commences and the loss of many local authority posts to deal with such events will require the attention of national administrations.

110. The risk that charity based veterinary care will be curtailed because of the reduced charity income and continuing Covid-19 restrictions, e.g. social distancing, may well lead to welfare issues, and potentially more so if unemployment rises or households experience reduced incomes. The annual figures from the animal welfare charities, about the numbers of animal owners assisted and of animals whose welfare and health was aided by donations, demonstrates the national level to which animal welfare is maintained by charity input.

Recommendation: The relatively unregulated or inspected 'refuge and rescue centres' continue to be a concern especially if there are to be more animals in need of care. Such places require regular inspection and licencing.

Conclusions

111. The Covid-19 pandemic is not over and there are continuing effects on the welfare of animals. Some of the concerns raised in the previous opinion have not materialised and for others it remains too early to determine the full extent to which they may be finally found to be of importance.

112. The importance for all animal keepers to prepare and regularly review contingency plans has been borne out by the varying and often previously unforeseen effects that Covid-19 has had, or may still have, on certain aspects of husbandry and animal keeping and that, ultimately, will have an impact on both animal and human welfare.

113. The farm animal sector has, in the main, not suffered or shown any significant widespread welfare problems, although the issues regarding end of life processes and the risk of complete shut down of abattoirs or cutting plants, because of local lockdowns, poses a considerable potential threat to welfare in those farm production systems that are heavily time dependent. In addition, the operation of on-farm slaughter and the removal of fallen stock should be subject to review to ensure that both services can continue if there is a widespread failure or lockdown on movement.

114. The companion animal sector would seem to harbour the greatest risk to welfare given the rise in animal ownership during the period under review and the peculiar circumstances whereby animals have been taken into homes and the concomitant risk of future abandonment or relinquishment.

115. The reduction in vaccination in companion animals including horses will be a risk to their health and welfare until normal levels of population protection are reached and this risk needs to be attended to before there is a return to greater social (human and animal) mixing.

116. Given that at any time an animal owner can become ill with Covid-19 or subject to 'lockdown' or 'test and trace' restrictions, planning for such eventualities remains the responsibility of every animal owner. All animal owners and carers need to actively make and revise clear contingency plans lest they are the next person that require them to be enacted for the welfare of the animals under their care.

APPENDIX 1 - Membership of AWC 2020

Peter Jinman – Chairman
Martin Barker
Dr Andy Butterworth
Richard Cooper
Dr Jane Downes
Dr Troy Gibson
Dr David Grumett
Dr Carmen Hubbard
Richard Jennison
Richard Kempsey
Dr Dorothy McKeegan
Dr Romain Pizzi
Dr Pen Rashbass
Debbie Stanton
Mark White
Professor Sarah Wolfensohn
Dr James Yeates

Advisors

Dr Rebeca Garcia – Defra/APHA
Dr Lidovina Vecchiarelli - Defra/APHA

Secretariat

Dr Alexandra Tocu
Richard Aram

APPENDIX 2 - Those who gave evidence and assistance

Besides the following group or official body contributions many individuals also provided comments.

AHDB

Animal Health and Welfare Board England

Blue Cross

British Egg Council

British Poultry Council

British Trout Association

British Veterinary Association (BVA)

Canine and feline sector group (CFSG)

Dogs Trust

Food Standards Agency (FSA)

Livestock Auctioneers' Association Limited (LAA)

National Beef Association

National Farmers Union (NFU)

National Pig Association

National Sheep Association

National Trading Standards

Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA)

People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA)

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)

Scottish Independent Animal Welfare Commission



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