

19 February 2024

Dear Convener,

I appreciated the opportunity to give oral evidence for the committee's scrutiny of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, as part of the roundtable on sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

During that session I was asked about welfare concerns for farmed animals. Both Professor Cathy Dwyer and I replied briefly; here I would like to expand by putting down OneKind's key concerns in writing, and reiterate our main recommendations, ahead of the committee taking evidence from the Cabinet Secretary and writing its stage one report.

Recommended changes to the Bill and associated policy

- Maintaining and improving animal welfare should be added to the list of overarching objectives of agricultural policy in section 1 of the Bill.
- Animal welfare should be embedded as a core priority in the code of practice for sustainable and regenerative agriculture.
- Agricultural and Good Food Nation policies should work in tandem to raise animal welfare standards across the board, including in sectors that have not historically received financial assistance. For example, some of the most urgent welfare concerns are for pigs and poultry in intensive systems; policy levers must be found to bring change to those sectors.
- A modern, holistic definition of animal welfare must be used, focusing on the mental state and lived experience of the animals.
- Where animal welfare is seen to come at a cost to, or in conflict with, other priorities, that points to the need for more transformational change in food and farming. The wellbeing of humans, other animals and the natural world are inextricably linked.
- There should be a Just Transition for the systems change that is needed.

Definition of animal welfare

It is crucial that a modern, holistic definition of animal welfare is uppermost in the minds of those developing the new rural support scheme. Consensus amongst experts is that mental and emotional state are the most salient aspects of welfare, that animals having agency is crucial, and that positive experiences should outweigh negative. Policies should aim to bring improvements in the lived experience of the animals raised for food.

Animal welfare concerns

It is often said that the UK has some of the highest standards of farmed animal welfare in the world. It is not always the case that we have the highest standards – for example several other countries have already banned farrowing crates – but even when it is, that does not mean the standards are high enough. Farmed animals suffer in ways that would be considered reprehensible for companion animals.

A recent study that achieved expert consensus on the most important welfare issues for farmed animal species in the UK (beef cattle, sheep, pigs, dairy cows and goats, 'broilers', and egg laying hens) found that: *"Overall, there were a number of common issues that arose in all or nearly all species including: inadequate or inappropriate nutrition; inability of stockpeople to recognize and/or treat welfare issues (such as pain or behavioural problems); foot and leg health resulting in lameness; chronic or endemic health issues; euthanasia delay and methods (particularly those used on farm for killing surplus or unwanted male animals), and neonatal mortality and morbidity. A number of specific welfare issues were identified including abnormal or damaging behaviours in pigs, poultry, and dairy animals; inadequate or poor housing and environments for pigs and poultry; consequence of breeding decisions and genetic selection strategies in pigs and poultry; lack of access to veterinary care for beef and sheep, and issues with handling and transport in sheep, beef and poultry."*¹

Pigs, poultry and dairy cows kept in more intensive systems often do not have their behavioural needs met. Additionally, there are various production diseases directly stemming from how these species are bred and kept. Laying hens in cages, laying hens or meat chickens in high density barns, pigs in pens or farrowing crates, and dairy cows in zero grazing systems, generally lead constricted lives, often with much suffering. They have little ability to make choices, engage with a complex environment, perform highly motivated behaviours, or ensure positive social relationships. Many of them live in small spaces and/or at high densities and never spend time outdoors. Sows in farrowing crates cannot even turn around. Intensive systems do not meet the physical or psychological needs of animals.

Furthermore, the animals in these systems have been selectively bred for production traits, leading to grave health and welfare concerns. These include chickens bred for high meat yield who cannot bear their own weight², laying hens who have osteoporosis and frequent fractures as their high egg production absorbs all available calcium³, and dairy cows who are metabolically starving due to the high energy demands of excessive milk production⁴.

Mutilations, including beak trimming, tail docking, castration, tooth clipping, disbudding, and dehorning, are another serious concern. These are painful procedures frequently carried out without anaesthesia or pain relief. The reasons for performing such mutilations usually relate either to efficiency and convenience or to limiting behaviours that are coping mechanisms due to stressful living conditions. Thus, their use should be carefully scrutinised, and part of agricultural transition should be a shift towards systems where such mutations are not necessary, which many in Scotland are doing successfully.

There are high incidents of lameness in all commonly farmed species. Other concerns include high lamb mortality with multifactorial causes which are not always

¹ [Frontiers | Prioritization of Farm Animal Welfare Issues Using Expert Consensus \(frontiersin.org\)](https://www.frontiersin.org/journal/10.3389/fvets.2019.00011)

² [Genetic selection of broilers and welfare consequences: a review \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00036819.2019.1644444)

³ [Frontiers | The Influence of Keel Bone Damage on Welfare of Laying Hens \(frontiersin.org\)](https://www.frontiersin.org/journal/10.3389/fvets.2019.00011)

⁴ Oltenacu, Pascal A., and Donald M. Broom. "The impact of genetic selection for increased milk yield on the welfare of dairy cows." *Animal welfare* 19.1 (2010): 39-49.

addressed⁵, and handling and transport related stress. In the dairy industry, separating day old calves from their mothers is another practice that causes harm and should be phased out.

Sustainable and Regenerative agriculture

Organisations representing those working in sustainable and regenerative agriculture, such as Pasture for Life and Vet Sustain, recognise the benefits such practices can bring for the lives of animals. Possible benefits include fewer health problems (including production diseases and lameness), more agency, more scope for behavioural needs to be met, more complex environments, provision of shade and shelter, a focus on low stress handling methods, fewer mutilations, enhanced nutrition, and breeding for health, welfare and genetic diversity rather than production.

However, it cannot be assumed that regenerative practices automatically lead to better animal welfare, and welfare outcomes in any system will depend on specifics. Thus, it is important that animal welfare is embedded in the code of practice.

It is also important to include all farmed species in the transition to regenerative agriculture. There can be a tendency for the focus to be on sheep and cattle, but pigs and poultry can also thrive in these systems, and should be permitted to, with associated human and environmental benefits. For example, Fosse Meadows farm in Leicestershire have a profitable business with thousands of chickens and turkeys who are slow-reared to full maturity, roaming with full access to wildflower pasture and hedgerows and mobile units for shelter, a dog to deter foxes, and on site slaughter so that they do not have to endure transport⁶.

We remain at your disposal to further advise on how animal welfare can be protected and prioritised as farming and food system reform progresses.

Yours sincerely,

Kirsty Jenkins, Policy Officer

⁵ [Invited review: Improving neonatal survival in small ruminants: science into practice - ScienceDirect](#)

⁶ [Chickens rule the roost at business meeting – Pasture for Life – Certified 100% grass-fed meat, milk and dairy](#)