

**Welsh Assembly Government consultation on:**  
**Outline of an animal health and welfare strategy for Great Britain**

**Response on behalf of:**

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In general, we agree with the principles and scope of the strategy and welcome a strategic approach to improving animal health and welfare in Great Britain. Detailed below are several specific comments about the contents of the outline strategy.

In sections 3.1 and 3.2 where the key players in the strategy are identified, the role of keepers of animals for farming (food and fibre production) needs to be distinguished from the role of those that keep animals as pets or for sport. The strategy in its present state clearly focuses on farmed livestock, and whilst pets and animals for sporting use/entertainment are mentioned, their place in the strategy is unclear. The present focus on farmed animals is essential as this is where the real gains through improved health and welfare can be achieved in Great Britain and it may in fact be more appropriate to develop a separate strategy in parallel for the health and welfare of these other categories of kept animals (pets/recreational/entertainment animals).

Another group that should be on the list of key stakeholders are farm consultants and advisors, especially in Wales with the advent of Farming Connect. Visits by farm advisors and provision of government funded (WAG) technical advice under Farming Connect could play a crucial role in developing animal health plans at the farm level. Farm advisors may also be able to provide useful information on regional health/ disease problems to the Regional or Sectoral stakeholder groups because they are visiting farms and talking to farmers frequently. Whilst farm

advisors will not be able to take over the role of vets in developing animal health plans, their reasonably in depth understanding of the farmers systems may throw up efficient solutions to animal health and welfare problems. The role of farm advisors on farms in New Zealand could be looked upon as an example of how farmers, farm advisors and other professionals such as vets and researchers work together as a team.

Section 3.15 discusses disease priorities in Great Britain. There seems to be a strong emphasis throughout the strategy on exotic diseases/zoonoses/highly contagious diseases, but not so much emphasis on endemic health problems on farms in Great Britain. Placing a greater emphasis on endemic health problems (e.g. lameness and mastitis), may result in significant cost savings and animal health improvements throughout Great Britain. The incidence of endemic diseases is likely to be reduced considerably with the introduction of animal health and welfare plans which focus on disease prevention through better management in addition to the bio-security measures required to prevent the outbreak of more highly contagious or exotic diseases or zoonoses.

Very little attention is paid to animal welfare in the document other than in relation to disease and how this can influence welfare. There is no reference to the behavioural and psychological aspects of welfare and in particular, the effects that husbandry systems, including housing and stockmanship have on this. This is something that is addressed in organic systems and management practices to ensure high levels of welfare should be easily transferable to conventional livestock systems.

As part of the Baseline (section 4.1) it is necessary to not only identify current levels of disease incidence in Great Britain but also to ascertain animal health costs on various farm types (e.g. different livestock industries, small vs. large farms, conventional vs. organic management). This will not only allow health problems for specific farm types to be identified but will also allow farmers to benchmark their own systems against industry averages to identify where improvement to can be made. An example would be to identify the use of antibiotics under various systems and look at ways of reducing usage both to save costs and to reduce the potential for microbial resistance.

The role of the veterinary professional (section 5.1) needs to shift away from treating disease problems already occurring on the farm to providing advice and helping develop animal health plans to prevent ill health occurring in the first instance. Developing a state of positive animal health on the farm (providing suitable

conditions for the animal so that it can fight disease challenges itself rather than relying on drug usage) should be one of the main objectives of any animal health plan, and veterinary advice is necessary to do so successfully. Farmers need to be prepared to pay for this professional advice to ensure the sustainability of large animal practices. Investment by the farmer in developing an animal health plan should result in improved animal health and welfare on the farm, and in turn, increased or more sustainable production levels and reduced animal health costs. This however needs to be proven through research to gain buy-in by farmers and to get them to make that initial and ongoing investment in veterinary advice.

Demonstration farms (section 5.3) will be an essential part of the strategy. Physically demonstrating animal health and welfare best practice on a local farm will provide farmers with the information and confidence to make improvements on their own farms. Discussion groups associated with the demonstration farms will also provide farmers with a forum for problem solving. The demonstration farms need to be spread throughout Great Britain and cover a wide range of farm sizes and farm types. Demonstration farms can potentially be a focus for regional strategy development. Local problems can be discussed and addressed and information gaps identified. These can then be taken from the regional level up to the national level for wider discussion.

Farm health planning (section 5.4) is going to be the backbone for improving health and welfare in Great Britain. It is something that can be implemented relatively easily at the farm level as long as the right level of training and information are available for both the farmer and the vet. Setting minimum standards and providing benchmark data will enable farmers to set specific health and welfare improvement targets. To get buy-in to health planning, research needs to be able to indicate to farmers that there are associated economic/productivity benefits as there will be costs involved for the farmer in developing animal health plans that need to be offset in some way. Health plans need to improve general health and welfare on the farm rather than just deal with disease management and bio-security. Animal welfare should also be given high priority in farm planning. Housing conditions and management practices need to be monitored and if necessary improved to minimise and behavioural and psychological abnormalities, hence ensuring good welfare standards. Farm health planning should also focus on reducing the routine use of

veterinary medicines on farms. Reducing the use of antibiotics in both feeds and dry cow therapy for example is important to help prevent further anti-microbial resistance.

Quality assurance programs based on health and welfare need to be developed both to ensure high levels of health and welfare on farms and to provide consumers with information about how their food is produced. Consumers may be prepared to pay more for products if they know they are produced in an ethical way. If this increased price is passed back to the farmer, it will go some way to alleviating the costs of implementing health and welfare plans. Reducing the number of quality assurance programmes to a few that are nationally recognisable will avoid consumer confusion and maintain consistency throughout Great Britain. Organic certification can be held up as an example of a very successful quality assurance program that has a key focus on high levels of animal health and welfare - particularly with its requirement for an animal health and welfare plan. Any new system that is put in place in Great Britain should not undermine any successful systems, such as organic certification, which have already been developed.

The milestones outlined in Annex D need further development by prioritising those that need to be completed first and allocating time frames in which they should be completed. This needs to be done as soon as possible as some of the milestones, for example the research to back up the claim that improved health and welfare results in increased productivity, will be essential for the uptake of the strategy by farmers and may take some time to complete.

With regard to the indicators listed in section 6.4, under the partnership indicators, it may be useful to measure the number of farmers involving veterinary professionals in developing health plans. This provides information in addition to the “number of routine veterinary visits” as it indicates whether there is indeed a partnership between vets and farmers, which is one of the desired outcomes of the strategy. Also, there are no indicators of animal welfare to indicate improvements in welfare, nor are there specific animal health indicators. Surely, if this is an animal health and welfare strategy for Great Britain, then indicators of health and welfare status and improvement are important to show progress.

