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Farmer perspectives on welfare outcome assessment: learnings from four farm assurance scheme consultation exercises

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Abstract

Recently, several farm assurance schemes in the United Kingdom have been adopting innovative approaches, such as welfare outcome assessment, into their routine procedures. In this paper, we present the findings of four consultation exercises, undertaken as part of a review process that examined farmer perspectives on planned or implemented changes to their current certification visits as members of UK-based dairy and laying hen schemes. The changes included the introduction of welfare outcome assessment by assessors, joint-scoring of welfare-outcome measures by farmers and assessors and self-assessment of welfare outcome measures by farmers between assessor visits. This study also explores the challenges that arise when schemes are aiming to adopt a scheme-level continuous improvement approach to promote welfare improvement on participating farms. The key challenges fall under three themes: the purpose and value for the farmer of the assessment of welfare outcomes as part of a farm assurance assessment process; the potential conflict rather than concordance with the role of the farmer in caring for their animals; and finally the technicalities of the assessment process, such as sample sizes for assessment being calibrated for gauging welfare prevalence at a scheme rather than farm level and the role of the farm assurance assessors both to assess impartially compliance against the standards and to provide welfare advice to support improvement. This study highlights that the involvement of farmers at all stages in the development and in the evaluation of outcome assessment initiatives is likely to be beneficial for welfare improvement on-farm.

Keywords: animal welfare, dairy, farm assurance schemes, farmer perspectives, laying hens, outcome-based measures