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.

Introduction

Farm assurance schemes conduct welfare assessment for a variety of reasons (Johnsen et al 2001), most commonly to provide assurance to consumers that farms have met minimum standards of welfare and comply with legislation (Main et al 2003). Several schemes also use welfare assessment to promote improvement of animal welfare (Johnsen et al 2001). However, a number of studies have shown that assurance schemes influence, but do not guarantee, higher welfare outcomes (Langford et al 2009; Main 2009; Sherwin et al 2010). The Farm Animal Welfare Council (2005) recommended that to increase their potential impact on animal welfare, assurance schemes should include outcome-based measures of animal health and behaviour as part of their monitoring procedures. Outcome-based measures can be measured in conjunction with the provision of resources in order to assess the impacts of such inputs on the animals themselves and provide a basis for any improvements to be made (Main et al 2012a, 2014). In 2010, the AssureWel project, a collaborative project between the University of Bristol, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), and the Soil Association (SA) was initiated. One of the objectives was to promote the uptake of outcome-based measures within UK farm assurance schemes, so the project also worked closely with the Red Tractor Assurance Scheme (RTA), the largest UK farm assurance scheme. As part of AssureWel, robust protocols for assessment of important welfare outcomes have been developed and incorporated into the routine certification visits of UK non-cage laying hens (Main et al 2012b) and UK dairy farms (Main et al 2012a); with AssureWel working closely with the RTA to determine core measures in dairy cow welfare assessment. Data collected as part of the routine assessment in laying hens have already shown a significant reduction in feather loss after implementation of routine assessment of feather loss during the assessment visit (Mullan et al 2016).

The three schemes involved provide certification for the majority of UK dairy and non-cage egg production, with variable degrees of overlap in membership between schemes with some farms being members of one, two or all three schemes. The Freedom Food (FF) scheme is the RSPCA’s farm animal welfare assurance scheme which focuses specifically on improving the welfare of farm animals, aiming for