

Animal Health and Welfare Pathway

We are co-designing an Animal Health and Welfare Pathway with industry, to promote the production of healthier, higher-welfare animals at a level beyond compliance with current regulations, underpinning our high international reputation for health and welfare and future increases to regulatory standards.

Pathway description

The Pathway maps out how livestock farmers and government will work together to deliver incremental and continual improvement. As we announced in 'Farming for the Future' in February 2020, we will:

- strengthen the regulatory baseline making sure we maintain our current high standards and continue to raise them, with details subject to consultation
- support livestock farmers financially by using public funds to deliver public goods and to pay for health and welfare enhancements that are valued by the public and not currently delivered sufficiently by the market or through existing regulatory standards
- improve consumer transparency to tap into consumer willingness to pay for welfare enhancements. This includes a government commitment to consult in 2021 on how labelling can promote high standards and high welfare across the UK market

As we start the agricultural transition, we will pilot and launch a targeted and time-limited set of publicly funded financial incentives for improving health and welfare. This support, alongside improved consumer transparency, will prepare livestock farmers for making these higher standards the basic legal minimum in the future. The Pathway will continue beyond transition.

Health and disease support

This will initially focus on controlling or eradicating endemic diseases, amongst cattle, pigs and sheep. As well as improving the welfare of farmed animals, this will contribute to other government commitments on the responsible use of antimicrobials as set out in the UK

Anti-Microbial Resistance 5-year National Action Plan and our commitment to enhance biosecurity in the 25 Year Environment Plan.

The Pathway will deliver a better understanding of antibiotic use in sectors where data is limited, one of the actions identified in the National Action Plan. We will strengthen stewardship for responsible use of antibiotics, applying learning from case-studies on communications for change; targeted medications; and the electronic medicine books already used successfully within the pig sector.

Improving biosecurity on-farm and delivering better veterinary advice will help protect farmed animals from diseases, including zoonotic diseases which put human health at risk. This is part of the government's sustained effort to take 'One-Health' approaches across humans, animals, the environment and food.

Emerging priorities from co-design with industry are:

Cattle:

- Bovine Viral Diarrhoea is estimated to cost the industry around £35 million per annum and raises greenhouse gas emissions from cattle. We will support action to identify and eliminate the disease in herds.

- Lameness and mastitis affect the health and welfare of cattle, are a significant drag on productivity and increase the environmental impacts of farming. Help to buy equipment to improve living conditions for livestock and advice on additional actions will reduce incidence of these conditions.

Pigs:

- Improved biosecurity has been identified as necessary to control endemic pig diseases and would help prevent the introduction of exotic disease threats too.
- To eradicate endemic disease, our initial focus will be on Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome virus, which is estimated to cost the industry around £26 million per annum. The approach would then be applied to other endemic diseases such as Swine Dysentery.

Sheep:

- There is need to address a range of endemic diseases, which are estimated to cost the sector around £85 million per annum. This is best managed through programmes tailored to each farm, developed in conjunction with a local vet.
- Priority areas for focus include internal and external parasites (and associated resistance to anthelmintics), lameness, mastitis, iceberg diseases (those that may be more widespread than they appear) and abortion

While the approach may vary between sectors, evidence suggests vets are critical to unlocking health and welfare improvements. We are looking to financially support vet visits, so livestock farmers can create better farm health and welfare management plans through diagnostic testing, farm-specific preventative advice and increased peer learning. These plans will provide data and structural knowledge of the sectors, creating benchmarking and evaluation opportunities at national as well as local level.

Capital grants

Small and large grants will be used to co-fund investment in measures that will increase animal welfare over the statutory baseline. Items to be included for grants will be subject to consultation with industry and other experts. Examples of what the grants could include are:

- cattle handling facilities, to reduce the stress of animals when handled as well as increasing productivity and the safety of livestock farmers.
- equipment to improve biosecurity (improving the health and welfare of animals) or to allow animals to show their natural behaviour.
- rubber walkways for cattle to reduce lameness.

Payment-by-results

We are continuing to explore the concept of payment-by-results for animal welfare. We are currently running a research project that will assess whether there are enhancements to livestock management that could be suitable to pay livestock farmers for if improved to animal welfare can continue to be demonstrated, i.e. payment-by-results. This research will primarily focus on the economic impact of including the enhancements as part of livestock management, to determine what payment would be sufficient and whether this would deliver good value for the taxpayer. This will inform our proposed pilot in 2023, which, subject to the research outcomes, will study how this programme could be implemented in practice.

Eligibility

Health and disease support

All livestock farmers in England will be eligible to apply for health and disease support as part of the Pathway. In particular, we want to reach those animal keepers who have not joined previous voluntary government or industry initiatives. Our initial focus will be on pigs, cattle and sheep, but we are open to other sectors bringing forward proposals and joining the Pathway. These areas have been identified by industry as priority sectors where the most significant impact on animal welfare; greenhouse gas emissions; anti-microbial resistance; farm productivity; and international trade can be made. Where a farm is made up of mixed species, we want to make sure that each farm has a bespoke approach to health management that works for them.

Capital grants

We propose that all livestock farmers in England would be eligible to apply for small or large grants. A vet visit may be required as part of the application process. This would ensure that livestock farmers are applying for items that will provide the expected benefits on their farm.

Payment-by-results

Our research will confirm whether there are appropriate and economically-viable payment-by-results interventions for in-scope species. Our current assumption is that livestock farmers in England may be eligible for the payment-by-results scheme if they keep dairy cattle, beef cattle, pigs, sheep, laying hens and meat chickens.

Payments

Health and disease support

This will offer a progressive programme of improvement on every farm. We anticipate using grant aid and match funding to support a variety of different activities including:

- diagnostic testing
- better on farm health planning/management
- increased advice from vets and other advisors
- increased opportunities for peer to peer learning

Capital grants

For small and large grants, we will fund a percentage of the investment, with minimum and maximum grant values. The percentage, minimum and maximum amounts of grants will be agreed through discussion with stakeholders, experts and an assessment of value for money.

Small grants will provide one-off payments, while large grants will provide multiple payments at different stages of the investment.

Payment-by-results

Our ongoing research will inform what welfare outcomes could be targeted through a payment-by-results approach. For example, these could relate to improving animal welfare in relation to confinement (e.g. the use of cages and crates), to the provision of enrichments, to mutilations (e.g. beak trimming and tail docking), and to animals' ability to exhibit natural behaviours.

Timings and process

Health and disease support will start in late 2022 or early 2023 – specific dates for application are to be confirmed. In 2022, we plan to launch applications for both small and large capital grants with the first payments being made in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

Subject to the outcomes of our research, we will start piloting payments-by-results in 2023.