

Scotland's Rural College

Options for farm support payments for animal welfare in Scotland - Policy Spotlight

D'Eath, RB

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Options for farm support payments for animal welfare in Scotland



Summary

- EU Exit means farm support payments are controlled by UK devolved nations. The EU itself and UK devolved nations are increasingly prioritising net zero, habitat and sustainability goals, while also exploring options to support animal welfare improvements. On animal welfare, Defra is looking at four options for England – 1) Annual reviews/ health and welfare planning advice, 2) Grants for initial capital costs of high welfare systems, 3) Standardising consumer labelling, 4) Payment by results. The Welsh government is considering (1), while Northern Ireland have no proposals on welfare.
- In the EU, plans for the latest CAP (2023–9) include provision for animal welfare under a new mechanism called ‘ecoschemes’, the detail of which is left up to member states (and regions), which outlined their approaches to this at the end of 2021. Broadly, they allow (1) and (2), as well as payments for conversion to organic, and on-going payments for meeting higher welfare standards (measured by inputs).
- The EU is also undergoing various reviews of animal welfare policy effectiveness and enforcement.

Planning for post-CAP in the UK nations

The UK leaving the EU means an end to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) arrangements for farm support. Following a consultation in 2018, the Scottish Government committed to maintaining the existing CAP arrangements for the immediate future to ensure 'Stability and Simplicity'¹. Recently, a consultation for what should come next for agricultural policy in Scotland has been launched². The focus of this policy will be a just transition to net zero to address the climate and biodiversity crises. Animal welfare is mentioned in the context of 'animal health and welfare'.

The UK government has commissioned a 'National Food Strategy' report for England³. In this report, recommendation 8 (Appendix 8) says farm support should stay at the same level but be redirected towards farm management for carbon sequestration (e.g. agroforestry, peatland restoration). Animal welfare is mentioned in this report in the context of encouraging businesses to monitor standards and requiring minimum standards in trade deals.

Although the specifics have not been consulted on or decided, Defra policy staff are currently exploring various options to incentivise animal welfare in future farm support.

1) Annual review farm visit to assess and advise on health and welfare. Scotland had a similar system (health and welfare planning) for a while, since discontinued.

2) Grants – for initial capital costs of welfare improvements. This could include replacing equipment (e.g. farrowing crates for sows) and housing systems (laying hen cages).

3) Consumer labelling – looking at whether a government scheme could assist consumers with understanding the welfare (and other?) meaning of existing labels such as red tractor, organic and RSPCA assured.

4) Payment by results (an approach used before for agri-environmental schemes⁴) – identification of welfare KPIs for each species with payment contingent on a particular result, or possibly an action which is strongly linked with a result. Examples could include animal-based measures identified at slaughter such as uninjured and undocked pig tails, or poultry with entire beaks, healthy feet, bones and good feather cover. A recent study in Germany of payment by results for dairy cow welfare recommended a hybrid approach with action (input) measures to improve behaviour and welfare (such as the amount of cubicle and feeder space per animal, access to drinkers and to pasture), with outcome (results) measures to be used to assess health⁵ (such as mastitis, ketosis, lesions and swellings, lameness and mortality).



"Although the specifics have not been consulted on or decided, Defra policy staff are currently exploring various options to incentivise animal welfare in future farm support."

The Welsh Government carried out a consultation in 2020 on the future of farm support⁶ which, alongside support for sustainability, soils and habitats, includes a “proposal for improved action-based health planning and biosecurity on farm”. Detailed proposals have yet to emerge.

Northern Ireland has provision for environmental farming⁷, which does not include an animal welfare element.



Animal welfare support via the CAP in the EU

Under the EU CAP, cross compliance with most animal welfare regulations is a condition for receiving direct farm support (although 40 per cent of EU farmers are ‘small’ and thus exempt from this requirement¹⁰). In addition, since 2013, the agricultural fund for rural development has allowed member states to fund improved animal welfare above the EU standards (Article 33)⁸. The amount of money spent, and the number of farms and animals affected by this measure have been growing each year since it was introduced⁵.

A review of EU spending on the Rural Development programme to support animal welfare (measure 14)⁹ suggested that policies have been developed and applied quite differently across countries and regions, with Romania, Finland and Austria spending the most. Schemes for cattle and pigs were the most common. For cattle, measures include aspects of housing conditions (stocking density, strawed lying areas, group housing of calves), food and water (nutritional planning, mycotoxin and bacterial testing), outdoor access for a defined period, measures to improve health (provision of hospital pens, health testing, vaccines, extermination of pests) and to reduce the impact of painful procedures (analgesia for horn disbudding). For pigs, measures include reduced stocking density, enrichment, improved heating and ventilation, farrowing space, hygiene, record keeping, weaning age, feeder and drinker access, nutritional planning and health measures. A similar variety of options have been funded for sheep, goats and poultry.

The EU’s goals for the next phase of Common Agricultural Policy support (2023–9)¹⁰ were agreed in June 2021. It will reflect the ‘Farm to Fork strategy’¹¹, and the European Green Deal¹². Nine key policy objectives are identified, one of which: ‘Health, food and antimicrobial resistance’, includes a mention of societal demands for safe, sustainable food production which incorporates animal welfare, but also links the improvement of animal housing and management (and thus welfare) to a reduced need for antimicrobials¹³.

The new CAP is intended to be more flexible for member states to design their own systems to meet EU targets under local conditions (they had until the end of 2021 to do so). Funding for animal welfare improvement is covered under the umbrella of a new instrument known as ‘Ecoschemes’, which must include at least 25 per cent of each member state’s income support schemes¹⁴. Animal welfare measures suggested to be eligible include payment for specialist advice and planning (for health/nutrition and measures to reduce AMR), grant funding for infrastructure, payments for conversion to organic and management payments for certain practices which are above the legal minimum (e.g. enrichment, outdoor access)^{15,16}.

EU efforts to improve animal welfare policy effectiveness

Not specifically related to subsidy but of relevance here, are processes within the EU to address policy failings. In 2018, a report from the European Court of Auditors¹⁷ highlighted gaps between policy goals and real-world improvements in animal welfare in the EU. They noted that member states were making little use of the CAP provisions to improve animal welfare, and that enforcement of existing regulations was variable. In response, the European Commission released a working document¹⁸ and then carried out a wider review of EU strategy¹⁹ and legislation for the protection and welfare of animals. They have initiated a 'fitness check' of EU animal welfare policy effectiveness due to report by Summer 2022¹⁶. These efforts are likely to affect the future balance between regulation, enforcement and farm support payments in the improvement of animal welfare.

Recommendations

- Policy makers in the Scottish Government have a variety of options for supporting animal welfare through subsidy as part of the agricultural sector's transitions to net zero.
- Direct grants would be the simplest to implement and administer, payment by results could be the most effective, assuming valid indicators could be found, but this would require new monitoring to be put in place.
- Harmonisation of labelling is best agreed at the widest level (at least UK or ideally EU level) to avoid confusion with multiple schemes.
- Implementation and enforcement of existing laws and best practice guidance remain an important concern.
- The growing flexibility in the EU system means that whatever scheme Scotland adopts is unlikely to be a barrier to (re-) joining the single market or EU.

Author

Dr Rick D'Eath, Reader in Animal Behaviour and Welfare, Animal and Veterinary Science Research Group, SRUC

Rick.DEath@sruc.ac.uk



rpc@sruc.ac.uk



www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre



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