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How well do Defra's new farm support policies promote animal welfare?*

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Overview

Defra's Sustainable Farming Incentive directs farm support payments towards public goods which include healthier, higher welfare animals.

This policy briefing looks at the likely animal welfare impact of two current elements

- 1) The Annual Health and Welfare Review
- 2) Animal Health and Welfare capital grants under the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF)

Main Findings

A policy analysis was conducted on two elements of Defra's Sustainable Farming Incentive funding which are intended to enhance animal welfare. Defra is also developing policy on improved enforcement, payment by results, and standardised welfare labelling for food.

- **Annual health and welfare reviews are an inexpensive way to provide farm-specific health planning and contribute to national herd health.**
- **Capital grants can improve welfare. The list of items in FETF - includes basic farm equipment for handling, feeding, weighing, housing and fencing through to sensor and ID technologies.**
- **FETF capital items are prioritised based on health and welfare, productivity, environment and innovation.**
 - Welfare is not the sole criterion
- **Welfare improvement from FETF grants is difficult to quantify as it may depend on:**
 - What equipment (if any) is being replaced
 - How (and how often) the equipment is used
 - Replenishment of consumables (e.g., enrichment blocks)
 - Equipment design (e.g., handling systems do not require best practice elements)



Cattle brushes funded under capital grants provide enrichment
(Image Credit: Ernie Buts, [File:Lely Luna.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lely_Luna.jpg) - Wikimedia Commons)

- **Capital grants could be criticised for improving 'status quo' systems rather than a transition to higher welfare systems.**

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Introduction

Following the UK's exit from the EU, the CAP subsidies have been replaced¹. In England, Defra is phasing out direct payments² and instead the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) supports a variety of public goods, primarily for environmental sustainability, soils, wildlife, biodiversity and climate mitigation³.

Defra's Animal Health and Welfare Pathway (AHWP)⁴ has three elements: 1) Paying farmers for delivery of public goods (healthier, higher welfare animals), 2) Stimulating market demand for higher welfare products (including improvements to labelling) and 3) Strengthening the regulatory baseline.

Under the first element, four funding schemes are planned: 1) The Annual Health and Welfare Review⁵ (part of the SFI); 2) Animal Health and Welfare capital grants including a) smaller grants for equipment and technology⁶ and b) larger infrastructure grants for housing and improved pasture; 3) Disease eradication and control programmes and 4) Payment by results.

This report looks in more detail at the already launched schemes: 1 and 2a.

Sustainable Farming Initiative Annual Health and Welfare Review⁵

How it works: For cattle, sheep or pigs, a vet or 'team appointed by a vet' visit the farm to advise on health and welfare. The review requires disease testing and assessments such as body condition or mobility (lameness) scoring; and a written report is produced with recommended actions which may include changes to vaccines and medicines, biosecurity, management, diet, hygiene etc. Payment varies by species between £372 for dairy and £684 for pigs. Scotland has a similar scheme paying £1250 over 2 years for cattle and sheep farmers⁷.

Pros:

- Tailored to suit each specific farm needs to improve health (and therefore welfare).
- Use of trusted farm vet.
- Remains current, so possibility of iterative improvements and response to current disease threats.
- Farm production will likely also benefit, further incentivising farmers.
- Benefits of disease reduction (and brings eradication closer) for neighbouring farms/regional/national herd health.

Cons:

- Recommendations for improvements but no requirement to act.
- No financial support for recommended actions which may be costly (e.g. vaccines, biosecurity measures).
- Might mean diminishing returns over time at any given farm (would require research to confirm)



Sheep grazing on a hill (Image Credit: SRUC)

¹ https://pure.sruc.ac.uk/files/48081877/June_2022_Policy_Spotlight_Farm_Support_Payments.pdf;

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/sustainable-farming-incentive-guidance>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/sfi-annual-health-and-welfare-review>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farming-equipment-and-technology-fund-fetf-2023>

⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/news/improving-animal-health-and-welfare/> <https://www.ruralpayments.org/topics/all-schemes/preparing-for-sustainable-farming--psf/>

Farming equipment and technology fund (FETF) Animal health and welfare theme⁶

How it works: Includes 101 listed items⁸ from £17 (hanging enrichment toy) to £35,467 (Robot pen cleaner). Grants total between £1,000-25,000. Defra scores each item combining benefits to animal health and welfare, productivity, environmental benefit and innovation. Funding priority is given to highest average scores. Grant is 40, 50 or 60% of the item value, varying by item but unrelated to the score.



Graphic created using the free online software 'Canva'

What are the potential animal welfare benefits of these items?

Provisos- actual funded items are not yet known, actual health and welfare benefits have not been directly assessed.

- Scores are derived from benefits other than 'animal health and welfare' (productivity, environment, innovation), which dilute the welfare focus. The logic behind the weighting is unclear - see table
- Many items are 'basic equipment' for animal management (handling, weighing, ventilation, feeding, drinking, housing, fencing).
- Well-designed handling/weighing equipment minimises stressful handling, improves safety and the human-animal relationship⁹. Handling systems enable interventions which benefit animal health and welfare such as vaccinations, veterinary treatments and hoof trimming. Specified items include *some good design elements* such as non-slip flooring, but *not others* recommended for welfare such as curved raceways and high solid sides¹⁰.

Table showing the number and types of FETF capital items and examples of the highest and lowest scoring

Type of item	Number	Highest scoring	Score	Lowest scoring	Score
Maternal/young	15	Handheld colostrum milking kit	97	Mobile calf milk pasteuriser and dispenser	42
Handling	20	Fixed handling system for pigs	93	Sheep conveyor	47
Weighing	9	Individual electronic weigh system	89	Automatic weighing and drafting crate for sheep	53
Enrichment	9	Block holder for pigs	96	Swinging brushes for calves	63
Comfort/thermal	16	Heat lamps for calves	98	Mobile livestock shade	43
Ventilation	7	Positive pressure tube ventilation system	83	Blinds for livestock housing	54
Feeding/drinking	19	Vermin proof feed storage (portable)	98	Electronic sow feeder	44
Housing/flooring/fixtures	18	Freestanding ramps/platforms for poultry	96	Plastic slat flooring for sheep	43
Fencing	3	Electric fencing package	74	Perimeter fencing for cattle	50
Health/hygiene	18	Vaccine refrigerator with external monitor	97	Hand-held automatic teat washing system	43
Technology	29	Temp and humidity sensor for livestock buildings	94	Robot pen cleaner (pigs)	48

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farming-equipment-and-technology-fund-fetf-2023/annex-4-fetf-2023-animal-health-and-welfare-eligible-items>

⁹ Titterton et al 2022 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12060776>

¹⁰ Grandin 1997 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0301-6226\(97\)00008-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0301-6226(97)00008-0)

Consequences of funding only equipment

Realised welfare benefits of equipment are difficult to quantify since they:

- Depend on the extent of improvement over what is being replaced (e.g., pair or group housing for calves would benefit welfare more if replacing single housing).
- Are dependent on management actions (e.g. EID and electronic weighing could improve welfare through better management of animal condition or health recording; be neutral for welfare - e.g., used in production decisions on optimal slaughter weight, or they might not be used at all).

Health and welfare improvements that depend on consumables such as vaccines, medicines or bedding straw are not funded. 'Foraging tower for pigs' or 'Enrichment block holder', for example, have no welfare benefit if left empty.

Lack of ambition

Much of FETF supports current management practices and systems, not those which go beyond it¹¹. For example, the mobile calf handling crate specification states "The crush is intended for ... tasks such as disbudding, vaccination, identification and castration on calves." It would be more ambitious to encourage breeds, systems and management where painful mutilations are unnecessary.

Alternative approaches Defra is developing and piloting "payment by results"⁴ measuring animal-based welfare outcomes directly, allowing flexibility and innovation in how they are achieved. For example payments for animals in good physical condition and health at slaughter: pigs with intact tails, poultry with full feather cover and cattle without lameness.

Defra's 'Strengthening the regulatory baseline' could mean improved inspection and enforcement of legal standards at all farms, small-holdings and markets, and at transport and slaughter.

Another improvement would be to better align the payments and labelling elements of the AHWP by:

- Legislating for welfare information on food packaging¹² reducing variability and consumer confusion.
- Supporting producers transitioning to a higher welfare tier within a new labelling scheme (or existing Organic, RSPCA Assured), this could include capital equipment such as free-farrowing systems.
- Working with retailers to reward certain animal welfare practices 'item by item' allowing for gradual improvement and diversity of systems¹³.

Policy Implications

- Annual health and welfare reviews have potential for continuing improvement of animal health and represent good value.
- Equipment may improve welfare directly: e.g., enrichment, improved comfort or indirectly: e.g., facilitating better animal handling, or management decisions to improve welfare.
- Equipment grants could be more ambitious, supporting change to higher welfare systems e.g., by aligning with assurance scheme labelling, or with Defra's draft proposals for 'tiered' labelling schemes for systems.
- 'Payment by results' approach could be a more direct way to enhance animal welfare if a scheme can be well designed.

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¹¹ https://www.rspca.org.uk/webContent/staticimages/Campaigns/IntoTheFold_HelpForFarmersReport.pdf

¹² <https://www.bmel.de/EN/topics/animals/animal-welfare/state-run-animal-welfare-label-pigs.html>

¹³ German Initiative Animal Welfare <https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture10120609>