Animal welfare in a world full of priorities:
Navigating the ethical standpoints of business, government, citizens and consumers

A report of the Business Forum meeting on 20\textsuperscript{th} November 2012
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About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. The Business Forum is a seminar series intended to help senior executives learn about these issues. Membership is by invitation only and numbers are strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a London restaurant.

To read reports of previous meetings, visit foodethicscouncil.org/businessforum.

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Introduction

The debate surrounding the (postponed) badger cull put the welfare of animals back in the public consciousness for a time, but also raised difficult ethical questions about one animal's welfare versus another. Nevertheless, with Government and industry having to confront major issues relating to climate change, rising food and energy prices, population growth, and pressure for sustainable development, animal welfare seems to have fallen behind in a list of priorities for the food system. Animal welfare is noticeably absent from recent documents, such as the Foresight report\(^1\) and the Defra Green Food initiative\(^2\).

The November 2012 meeting of the Food Ethics Council Business Forum considered how the welfare of farmed animals can be kept high on the agenda amidst competing priorities; explored current and emerging issues in animal welfare; and discussed whether there was conflict between ethically reared meat and dairy products and the interests of low income consumers at a time of rising food prices.

We are grateful to our speakers, Marian Dawkins, Professor of Animal Behaviour at Oxford University; Dick Sibley, Principal Vet and Director of West Ridge Veterinary Practice; and Kate Rawles, Senior Lecturer in Outdoor Studies at the University of Cumbria. The meeting was chaired by Helen Browning, Chair of the Food Ethics Council and Chief Executive of the Soil Association.

The report was prepared by Chris Ritson and Dan Crossley and outlines points raised during the meeting. The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum, or their members.

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\(^{2}\) http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/2012/07/10/pb13794-green-food-project/
What do animals want?

We need a clear definition of animal welfare. Arguably, having healthy farm animals is at the heart of welfare, but health and welfare are not necessarily the same thing. We need more research into the kinds of environment that animals would choose. There is a danger of equating 'natural' with welfare. Few 'free range' chickens choose to exploit their freedom to leave indoor accommodation. Well cared for dairy cows in large herds may have higher welfare standards than those sent out to graze, particular bearing in mind the wet summer. They may not want to be exposed to the elements. Whilst “natural” may sound desirable, for many animals, 'natural' behaviour includes being chased by predators; hardly a viable option for farmed animals.

'And' animal welfare; not 'either/or'

Producers are irritated by single issue lobbyists. There is confusion between intensity and efficiency. Animal welfare specialists need to work with producers and promote the interrelationship between animal health, animal welfare, and efficient production. Modern technology can help to monitor animal behaviour and predict mortality in the interest of both efficient production and animal welfare.

The role of vets

Vets used to think they were there to ‘cure’ sick animals. Increasingly, though, they see their role as one of predicting and preventing disease. They seek to give animals a ‘good life’ keep them healthy – paradoxically, so they can then be killed for food.

Animal health, human health, and consumers

The World Health Organisation has estimated that 75% of new human diseases originate in animals. To the extent that we can equate animal health with animal welfare, then the consumer interest in animal welfare is self-evident. Farm assurance has helped but there is a lack of skilled labour to ensure animal health. There is increasing concern over the impact of high food prices on low-income consumer diets. If, for example, large efficient dairy herds can sustain animal health, do we have a right to insist on production systems which would imply higher prices?

We heard that the more a meat is processed, the less likely consumers are to be interested in animal welfare credentials – hence they are more likely to care about a whole chicken (for example for roasting) than about the sandwich filling in a chicken sandwich.

Badgers: Animal welfare vs Animal welfare

The incidence of TB in dairy herds is about 5%. The causes of TB are well known: transfer of animals between farms; outdoor cattle becoming infected from neighbouring farms; and infection from wildlife. Although it can be argued that badgers are not the principal cause, the other sources are under control and failure to control badgers makes the control programme incomplete and runs the risk of negating the benefits of other control measures. But is the argument incorrectly dominated by cost/benefit analysis, rather than the rights of animals? People are willing to take an altruistic view and allow other values to transcend economic considerations.
The role of large companies

Incorporating an animal welfare ethos into company policy used to be a huge problem but that has changed radically over the last few years. It is now central to the behaviour of many large food manufacturers and retailers. This is partly a consequence of a growth of corporate social responsibility. But it is perhaps dominated by brand protection, given the economic cost to companies if they become associated with the supply of food linked to food poisoning, or products sourced from a supplier accused of poor animal welfare practice.

We should recognise the pride that many farmers take in looking after their animals – and through their relationships with farmers – large food companies can play a part in supporting farmers by giving them the tools, the long-term investment and the education/training.

The risk of consuming infected chicken is closely linked to the prevention of stress in the animals and so there is a clear link between the welfare of the animals and the risks to human health. Animal welfare is important to consumers and they recognise the relationship between animal health and food safety. However, they want to be able to rely on food manufacturers and retailers to guarantee that the meat and dairy products they buy has come from welfare friendly production systems.

The world

Only about 1% of the world’s animal production occurs in the UK; some 47% of pig production takes place in China and Asia produces 58% of the world’s chicken eggs. Less rigorous animal welfare laws, an increase in meat consumption and a drive towards intensive animal production systems in the developing world means that, arguably, the most pressing issues of animal welfare are overseas.

Modern intensive animal production technology is globally transferable and it becomes the responsibility of the global company to maintain standards. (It is said that a branch of KFC opens every 18 hours in China.) On an international scale, there is no longer a major issue in the transport of live animals; but massive amounts of animal feed moves around the world. From a domestic perspective, it is the threat of human disease spreading from countries with poor animal production standards that should be a concern for us in the UK.

Animal welfare and the environment

As with production efficiency, this should be ‘and’ rather than ‘either/or’. There is currently tension between animal welfare and environmental issues, with the latter having pushed animal welfare into the second division. But we should see this as a shared problem, and emphasise the link with biodiversity and the importance of promoting a food system which recognises other values apart from economic growth.

It should be recognised that there are dangers from over-use of antibiotics in large scale production units. A pragmatic approach is to study welfare outcomes and judge what is working and what is not. Organic production can sometimes provide a win/win in terms of food safety, animal welfare and environmental impact.

There is much attention devoted to the inefficiency of consumption of animal rather than vegetable protein (though conversion ratios for poultry are narrowing the gap) as a means of feeding the growing world population. But we should remember that the only way in which

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4 http://www.foodethicscouncil.org
grass can be converted into human food is via cattle and sheep.

**Emerging/ future issues**

Upcoming issues include:

- The risk of further outbreaks of infectious disease such as Schmallenberg Virus.

- Lack of skilled labour and training – although farm assurance schemes in the UK have helped drive out farmers who had poor animal welfare standards.

- Urban animal welfare – potential issues associated with the rise of Grow your own and keep your own (for example chickens) in urban areas often by people inexperienced in looking after farmed animals. However, epidemiologically, such flocks are unlikely to be large enough to spread disease.

- What role for biotechnology in efforts to advance animal welfare?

**Postscript: Do not forget fish**

Some of the most serious problems of environmental pollution and incidence of animal disease in intensive production occur in fish farming. This is another example of the merits of seeing animal welfare and environmental issues as a shared problem.
Helen Browning runs a 1,350 acre organic livestock and arable farm in Wiltshire which supplies organic meat to multiple retailers. Helen has worked with many food and farming organisations over the last twenty years. She is currently Director of the Soil Association. She was chair of the England Animal Health and Welfare Implementation Group throughout its life (2005-09), a member of the Government’s Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food ("the Curry Commission"), a member of the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBBC) until it disbanded in April 2005, and a member of the Meat and Livestock Commission until its end. She was awarded an OBE in 1998 for services to organic farming.

Dick Sibley is a principle of West Ridge Veterinary Practice, a mixed practice in rural Mid Devon, comprising fourteen vets and 20 support staff. His primary interest is cattle health: he provides a health care service to the large variety of cattle farms in the local area, and is a founding director of myhealthyherd.com, a web based cattle management system used by veterinary surgeons and farmers nationwide. He also has a long-held enthusiasm for national disease management, and was involved with BSE, Foot and Mouth and TB at a national level whilst secretary and president of the BCVA. That enthusiasm has latterly been channelled through the England Implementation Group before its demise in 2009.

Kate Rawles is Senior lecturer in Outdoor Studies at The University of Cumbria. She also works freelance, including running Outdoor philosophy courses that aim to inspire a commitment to more sustainable ways of living. She was previously a lecturer in the philosophy department at Lancaster University, specialising in ethics, environmental ethics, sustainable development and animal welfare issues. Kate has a long-standing interest in figuring out what academia has to say about ethics and values, and how to communicate that to professionals in other fields. She lectures on ethics and values in sustainable development, conservation and animal welfare, and has published a range of articles in these areas. She is academic director of Forum for the Future’s innovative Reconnections course, and has been an independent consultant for Nirex UK on ethical issues in radioactive waste management.
