SUMMARY WITH A FOCUS ON THE ROLE OF FREEDOM FOOD
FARM ANIMAL WELFARE
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Summary with a focus on the role of Freedom Food

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As the new Chief Executive of Freedom Food, I am delighted to introduce this summary of a special research report to mark a key milestone in our history: our 20th anniversary.

Freedom Food was set up by the RSPCA in 1994. We commissioned this report as we wanted an independent assessment of how farming generally and farm animal welfare have developed, particularly in the UK, in our first twenty years. The report also refers to the roles played by the RSPCA and Freedom Food in the development of farm animal welfare overseas.

The report, compiled and written by the Food Ethics Council and independent farm animal welfare specialist Heather Pickett, shows that Freedom Food has played a key role in driving higher welfare standards for a large number of farm animals.

Ten different livestock sectors are now covered by the scheme and nearly 40 million terrestrial farm animals, having started with less than 100,000 animals in 1994. One of the scheme’s greatest successes is farmed salmon where over 70% of UK production meets RSPCA welfare standards, having launched as recently as 2002. Eggs and pork are other major areas of success. There are, of course, many remaining challenges, notably chicken, where the Freedom Food production accounts for only a small proportion of the total birds produced.

The overall message from the report is very positive, with the RSPCA’s and Freedom Food’s achievements over the last twenty years being highlighted by experts in the field.

Looking ahead to the next twenty years, the report foresees considerable changes in the livestock sector: pressure on the agriculture industry to satisfy ever-increasing demands from the fast-growing global population (projected to rise by 1.4 billion by 2034) to produce more, cheap food will be complicated by the need for the sector to reduce its contribution to, and adapt to the impact of, climate change. This presents a challenge for further improvements in farm animal welfare as there will be increasing pressure to develop faster growing and higher yielding farm animals.

I agree with the experts interviewed that Freedom Food has an important role to play in driving animal welfare improvements, both in the UK and overseas. The full report is available on our website at: www.freedomfood.co.uk/anniversaryreport.

Jez Cooper
Chief Executive of Freedom Food
September 2014

The RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme was launched in 1994 against the backdrop of a very different ‘landscape’ in the farming and food industries from the one that exists today. I joined the RSPCA the same year and, as this report ably illustrates, have seen substantial changes in farming practices, food retailing and consumer behaviour since then. There has also been a notable positive shift in approach and attitude towards the welfare of farm animals.

Progress in scientific research has substantially increased our knowledge of the physical and behavioural needs of different farmed species. Research and practical innovation have also enabled at least some of those new learnings to be implemented in practice, including through the RSPCA welfare standards for farm animals applied by Freedom Food members.

The launch of Freedom Food heralded a significant change of approach by the RSPCA. The Society was founded in 1824 specifically to improve the treatment of cattle and other livestock, and farm animal welfare has remained an important area of focus for the organisation throughout the following 190 years. However, along with other farm assurance schemes and similar initiatives, Freedom Food forged a new and increasingly constructive and collective approach towards improving animal welfare in farming.

As the report outlines, over the past 20 years progress has been made in many areas, often through the power of the marketplace rather than via legislation. Nevertheless, the importance of the latter in abolishing some of the most restrictive and inadequate farming systems has been vital. The report does, however, also illustrate that there is still a very great deal to be done before all farm animals are provided with the potential to have a good life.

If we are to tackle the many future challenges highlighted in this report, whilst still striving to improve the welfare of farm animals, cooperation between all interested parties will be essential. Against such a backdrop, perhaps the biggest challenge of all for those who value and understand the overarching societal importance of humane treatment of sentient animals, will be ensuring that farm animal welfare is included as an integral and important part of future food production policy.

The Freedom Food scheme, the RSPCA and many others mentioned in this report have the potential to contribute hugely to progressing this goal over the next two decades and beyond.

Dr Julia Wrathall
Head of Farm Animals, RSPCA
September 2014
Looking back over the past 20 years

In some ways, 1994 represented the peak of a shift to intensive farming that began in the Second World War. The drive for cheap food led to animal welfare issues related to widespread adoption of confinement systems, genetic selection for growth rate and yield, and huge numbers of live animal exports to Europe. Farm animals were considered in law to be ‘goods’ with no recognition of their capacity for sentience and little protection of their welfare.

In the twenty years that followed, the report has found significant changes in the number of animals farmed and the structure of the industry. There has been growth in the aquaculture (fish farming) and chicken meat sectors, a decline in the red meat sector, and consolidation across all sectors.

Breeding for increased growth rate and yield has continued apace, with associated health and welfare issues remaining largely unaddressed. However, there has been significant progress in moving away from the most intensive confinement systems such as battery cages and sow stalls.

There has been an increase in the numbers of animals reared in systems with higher welfare potential, including outdoor and enriched indoor systems. Farm assurance schemes, animal welfare NGOs and scientists, retailers, legislation, consumers, celebrity chefs and farmers have all played their part in driving these changes.

Looking forward over the next 20 years

The overwhelming consensus from expert interviewees was that, alongside other farm assurance schemes, the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme has an important role to play in driving animal welfare improvements in the future, both in the UK and internationally. Critically though, the message was that it must not rest on its laurels – it should pursue high quality and then should try to use its influence to even greater effect.

The report predicts that the next twenty years will herald a period of considerable change for the livestock sector, with substantial challenges to overcome, as well as opportunities to drive improvements in farm animal welfare and for a greater proportion of farm animals to be able to live a ‘good life’.
Conclusions
Pressure on the agricultural sector to satisfy continuing societal demands for cheap food will be exacerbated by a range of economic, social and environmental factors.
Most expert interviewees felt that farm assurance schemes and food company standards have helped, and are likely to help in the future, to deliver improved farm animal welfare. Experts agreed that the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme has played, and continues to play, an important role in driving up standards, whilst the RSPCA standards have also influenced other assurance standards, codes and legislation, both in the UK and abroad.
The recent focus has been to shift somewhat away from farming systems and input standards towards also measuring and seeking to improve welfare outcomes for the animals. This trend is expected to continue and accelerate. The development and adoption of outcomes-based approaches to welfare is likely to be supported by the development of new automated technologies for assessing animal health and wellbeing.

Recommendations
• A co-ordinated approach is needed to drive and monitor progress in farm animal welfare and consumer awareness.
• We need to move towards a shared vision of fair, healthy, humane and environmentally sustainable food and farming systems.
• The UK should seek to drive further improvements in animal welfare standards and encourage others to follow, so that the global trading environment is harnessed as an opportunity for a ‘race to the top’ rather than allowed to degenerate into a ‘race to the bottom’.
• Farm assurance schemes – including the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme – should seek to set a challenging benchmark for farm animal welfare and work with partners across the food system to ensure their standards are translated into good (and improving) welfare outcomes in practice, both in the UK and internationally.
Changes to livestock farming and farm animal welfare since 1994

This section summarises some of the key changes in UK livestock farming over the past 20 years, with a particular focus on the sectors where the Freedom Food scheme has the greatest coverage or has exerted significant influence.

There has been growth in the aquaculture (fish farming) and chicken meat sectors, a decline in the red meat sector, and consolidation across all sectors. The number of livestock holdings has decreased considerably since 1994, as the diagram top right shows. Average herd and flock sizes are larger and the proportion of animals kept in the largest herd and flock sizes has particularly increased (see diagram bottom right). Three quarters of dairy cows are now kept in herds of 100 or more, compared with less than half 20 years ago; 70% of meat chickens are now kept in flocks of 100,000 or more, up from 50% in 1994; 80% of fattening pigs are now kept in herds of 1,000 or more, up from 60% in 1994.

Larger herd, flock and group sizes may present both challenges and opportunities for animal welfare. The most important question is whether the welfare of each individual animal is properly catered for, rather than how large or small the herd or flock is.

There have been some significant changes to farming systems and husbandry conditions over the past 20 years. A number of confinement systems have been phased out, largely as a result of pressure from welfare groups armed with scientific evidence of poor welfare in these systems and practical information demonstrating the feasibility of implementing more extensive conditions in practice. Developments in animal welfare science have allowed us to ‘ask’ animals which resources are important to them, how important they are (in terms of how much they are willing to work for access to them) and which conditions they prefer when given a choice. As one interviewee explained:

"Over the past 20 years there have been genuine advances in animal welfare science and our understanding of the welfare needs of animals. We have greater understanding of sentience and animal cognition and through schemes such as Welfare Quality and other initiatives to develop protocols for measuring or at least auditing animal welfare."

1. Recognising the ‘sentience’ of animals means recognising that they are aware of how they feel and it matters to them.
Looking back over the past 20 years

FARM ANIMALS ARE NOW RECOGNISED AS SENTIENT BEINGS IN EU LAW

The legal recognition of animals as sentient beings in the EU in 1997 was a major victory for animal welfare and established a foundation on which future animal protection legislation could be built. Another landmark moment was the introduction of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which overhauled animal welfare legislation in the UK and introduced a ‘duty of care’, making owners and keepers responsible for ensuring the welfare needs of their animals are met.

MEAT POULTRY

The proportion of meat poultry reared in systems with higher welfare potential has increased but levels of lameness in conventionally reared birds do not appear to have improved.

Pigs

Sow stalls have been banned and more pigs are being reared in systems with higher welfare potential.

Overwhelming evidence that confinement in narrow individual stalls is detrimental to the physical and psychological well-being of sows led to the prohibition of sow stalls in the UK from 1999. In 2001, the EU passed a Directive to phase out sow stalls across Europe by 2013 (except for the period from weaning the previous litter to four weeks after service).

The proportion of breeding sows kept outdoors in England increased from less than a third in 2006 to more than 40% in 2009. This trend has contributed to a decline in the proportion of sows confined in a farrowing crate to give birth and nurse their piglets.

Surveys of housing systems for pigs reared for slaughter in the late 1990s and in 2009 suggest that the proportion of pigs kept in systems with higher welfare potential, including indoor straw-based and outdoor systems, has increased from around a third to around two thirds, whilst the proportion kept in intensive fully-slatted systems has decreased from more than a third to around a quarter.

Breeding for increased litter size has resulted in an increase in the number of piglets born alive per litter from 10.8 in 1994 to 11.8 in 2013. Larger litter size is associated with lower piglet birth weight and higher piglet mortality.

Meat poultry

There has been a substantial increase in the proportion of meat poultry reared in systems with higher welfare potential in recent years. The British Poultry Council estimates that, in 2012, 18% of the UK meat chicken market was indoor systems operating to standards above industry baseline, 8% was free-range and 2% was organic. The proportion reared in standard intensive systems has therefore fallen to around 72%. Reliable data on the proportion of meat poultry reared in systems with higher welfare potential in the early 1990s are not readily available but it is generally considered to be less than 5%.

Research has confirmed that enriching the environment of chickens with straw bales and natural light can increase activity levels and improve leg health in the birds. The RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme was instrumental in developing the concept of enriched indoor systems for meat poultry. The growth of the higher-welfare poultry market has been driven by celebrity-chef fronted campaigns and the policies of several major retailers.

Selection for increased growth rate, breast meat yield and feed conversion efficiency has contributed to an increase in health and welfare problems in meat chickens, including high levels of lameness. Surveys of lameness in commercial intensively-reared meat chickens in the UK, published in 1992 and 2008, suggest that most birds had a detectable gait abnormality (90% and 98% respectively) and many were severely lame (26% and 28% respectively). So this evidence suggests that the situation hasn’t improved, and may even have deteriorated, over the past twenty years.
Looking back over the past 20 years

For laying hens, uniquely, comprehensive data on production systems are available going back many years. The proportion of eggs passing through UK packing stations that are produced in cage systems has declined from 88% in 1996 to 51% in 2013. A number of factors have contributed to this, including the introduction of compulsory method of production labelling for shell eggs in 2004 and policy decisions by several major retailers.

Conventional battery cages for laying hens were prohibited throughout the EU from 2012. Welfare groups were instrumental in pushing for this legislation. ‘Furnished’ cages (which incorporate a nest, perches and a small amount of additional space) are still permitted. Although they are not able to fully satisfy the behavioural needs of hens, the move to requiring furnished cages as a minimum standard is a step forward for welfare.

Genetic selection of commercial layers for increased egg production has resulted in much weaker bones compared with traditional breeds. Comparing survey data from 1990 with more recent research suggests that the proportion of birds suffering bone fractures has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, from 26-36% (depending on the system) in 1990 to 36-86% in 2008.

There has been a substantial decline in the number of animals exported live from the UK since the early 1990s. Live calf exports from the UK were suspended by the EU in 1996 due to BSE. Since the restrictions were lifted in 2006, the number of calves exported has never reached the levels of the early 1990s.

Concerns over bovine TB have contributed to limiting numbers. Another key contributor is the work of Compassion in World Farming and the RSPCA in convening the Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum in 2006. The Forum brought together leading stakeholders from the farming and food industry to find realistic and economically viable solutions that would result in a greater number of male dairy calves being reared for beef in the UK. Over the seven years of the Forum’s work, the number of calves going abroad has declined by 90%, the number of dairy calves being retained for rearing in Britain has increased by 58% and the number of calves being killed at birth on farm has declined by 36%.

EU legislation on animal transport has been revised several times over the years but animals are still subject to free-trade rules and can still be transported across Europe and beyond on journeys of unlimited length, albeit with requirements for stops at various intervals.

Although live exports have reduced, within the UK it is likely that many animals have to travel further to slaughter than previously because there has been a significant reduction in the number of slaughterhouses. For example, the number of red meat abattoirs in Britain has fallen from more than 480 in 1995 to fewer than 270 in 2013.

In recent years there has been some progress in developing new systems for animal killing, particularly gas stun/kill systems for poultry and pigs, which can potentially benefit welfare by reducing pre-slaughter handling. There have been changes in the methods used to kill farmed fish over the past 20 years, which would be expected to result in an improvement in welfare.

Farmed fish

There have been developments in our understanding of farmed fish welfare and changes to fish husbandry conditions over the past twenty years. FAWC published opinions on farmed fish welfare in 1996 and again in 2014. Changes over this period include:

- more automation of feeding, which tends to reduce competition and aggression, although there may still be a minority of fish that get less feed than they require;
- improvement in the design and management of many husbandry operations, such as smolting (the change necessary for salmon to move from freshwater to seawater) and grading (sorting fish by size), although some problems still occur;
- although injuries and physical abnormalities are still sometimes common, methods of avoiding them are improving;
- improved survival of salmon from egg to smolt (when they are transferred to seawater), which has increased from less than a quarter in the late 1980s to around two thirds in 2011 (survival from smolt to harvest has remained relatively steady);
- widespread adoption of assurance standards and codes of practice, with around 70% of UK salmon production now reared to RSPCA standards.

In 2011, the Farm Animal Welfare Council was replaced by the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, which fulfils the same role of advising the UK Government on farm animal welfare matters. The abbreviation FAWC is used throughout this report to refer variously to the Council or the Committee.
A number of key drivers led to the development and growth of farm assurance schemes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including:

- a desire to restore consumer confidence following a number of high profile food scares;
- a requirement for retailers to show due diligence following the introduction of the Food Safety Act in 1990;
- a desire to promote environmentally responsible farming and farm animal welfare.

Key developments in the history of farm assurance in the UK are summarised in the timeline on page 11.

### The RSPCA's Freedom Food scheme

The RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme is unique in the UK in placing its primary focus on animal welfare. The standards are, as far as possible, informed by science.

According to FAWC:

“They’ve done is look at how we can improve welfare but do that in a commercially sustainable way, so actually farmers can afford to do this. And by doing that, I truly believe, they’ve managed to drive welfare throughout the country, because they’ve come up with solutions.”

The Freedom Food scheme offers significant potential welfare benefits in terms of additional space and a more complex and stimulating environment, as well as a range of other additional standards covering husbandry, animal handling, transport and slaughter.

For salmon, the proportion of the industry certified under the Freedom Food scheme is currently around 70% and continues to increase. Demand from retailers is seen as one of the key drivers for this trend.

The vast majority of the non-cage egg production sector is now covered by the Freedom Food scheme. There remain a number of serious welfare concerns in non-cage systems for laying hens, including high levels of bone fractures and reliance on beak trimming to reduce the potential for serious damage due to outbreaks of harmful pecking behaviour. The high level of coverage of the Freedom Food scheme places the RSPCA in a strong position to attempt to tackle these issues. The scheme is working towards phasing out beak trimming. Addressing the level of bone fractures may be even more challenging, as this is likely to require a change in genetics. However, experience from meat chickens suggests that assurance schemes may be able to play a role in encouraging breeding companies to make the necessary changes.

Around a third of the UK pig industry is covered by Freedom Food. The scheme is making progress in moving its members away from reliance on tail docking and tooth clipping of pigs. Around 30% of Freedom Food producers currently request permission to dock tails, so the majority is managing without docking.

RSPCA standards have also had wider influence beyond those animals reared under the Freedom Food scheme. For example, RSPCA standards were the first to introduce a requirement for veterinary health planning – a requirement that has now been adopted by all of the major UK assurance schemes. Aspects of the RSPCA standards have been directly incorporated into, or used as a basis for, several assurance standards, pieces of legislation and codes, both in the UK and internationally.
TIMELINE OF UK FARM ASSURANCE

1973  Soil Association began certifying members to organic standards

1984  Government-led Food From Britain certification scheme launched

1986  First recorded case of BSE in cattle in the UK

1987  First Scottish livestock assurance schemes launched

1988  Edwina Currie announced in a TV interview that Britain’s egg production was infected with Salmonella; egg sales fell 60% almost overnight.

1990  Food Safety Act introduces a requirement for due diligence  • Tartan Quality Mark for farmed salmon launched

1991  Quality Meat Scotland launched  • Linking Environment & Farming (LEAF) launched

1992  BSE in cattle peaked at over 37,000 reported cases per year  • Farm Assured British Beef & Lamb launched  • Northern Ireland Farm Quality Assured launched

1993  Government-led Food From Britain certification scheme ended

1994  Freedom Food scheme launched, applying RSPCA standards for laying hens and pigs  • Farm Assured Welsh Livestock launched

1995  RSPCA standards launched for dairy cattle and sheep, and adopted by Freedom Food

1996  RSPCA standards launched for beef cattle, and adopted by Freedom Food  • Farm Assured British Pigs launched  • Link established between BSE in cattle and a new variant of the human condition CJD; beef consumption fell by one fifth compared with 1995; farmer membership of beef and lamb assurance schemes increased rapidly  • 500 people are infected with E coli 0157:H7 and 20 die, following consumption of infected pies in Scotland

1997  RSPCA standards launched for meat chickens and turkeys, and adopted by Freedom Food

1998  British Lion Quality Code of Practice launched for eggs with compulsory vaccination against Salmonella

1999  National Dairy Farm Assurance Scheme launched  • Assured Chicken Production launched  • Quality British Turkey launched  • RSPCA standards for ducks and poultry egg hatcheries launched, and adopted by Freedom Food

2000  Farm Assured British Pigs rebranded as Assured British Pigs  • Assured Food Standards umbrella body launched with the Red Tractor logo

2002  RSPCA standards for farmed Atlantic salmon launched, and adopted by Freedom Food

2006  National Dairy Farm Assurance Scheme rebranded as Assured Dairy Farms  • Code of Good Practice for Scottish Finfish Aquaculture launched

2007  Quality British Turkey brought under the Red Tractor umbrella

2010  Assured British Pigs, Assured Chicken Production, Farm Assured British Beef & Lamb and Assured Dairy Farms rebranded as Red Tractor Pigs, Red Tractor Poultry, Red Tractor Beef & Lamb and Red Tractor Dairy respectively  • Duck Assurance Scheme launched

2012  Duck Assurance Scheme brought under the Red Tractor umbrella

2013  Horsemeat is found in beef products on sale in UK supermarkets Tesco, Asda, Iceland, Co-operative, Aldi and Lidl, and in Findus ready meals, Ikea meatballs, and some batches of school meals.

2014  RSPCA standards for farmed rainbow trout launched, and adopted by Freedom Food
Consumer awareness of Freedom Food

A 2012 YouGov survey found that around a quarter (24%) of shoppers recognise the Freedom Food logo. A research published by IGD in 2011 found that half (52%) of meat shoppers believe that Freedom Food guarantees higher standards of animal welfare, with three in ten (30%) believing it represents the highest standards of animal welfare. Amongst shoppers who are aware of the Freedom Food scheme, this rises to almost nine in ten (86%) who believe that it represents higher animal welfare standards and three quarters (74%) who associate it with the highest animal welfare standards. Almost two thirds (63%) of Freedom Food purchasers are attracted to the products because of the association with the RSPCA.

Some expert interviewees did express concern about how clear the Freedom Food label was and how much consumers understood its positioning versus other farm assurance schemes. As one said: "I also think there’s a little bit of confusion [amongst consumers] about what the Freedom Food label actually does mean."

Industry schemes

The large majority of UK livestock is assured by Red Tractor or an equivalent industry scheme, including nearly 100% of farmed salmon, 90% of pigs and poultry, over 80% of cattle and 65% of sheep. Red Tractor beef cattle and sheep must be reared on an assured farm for the last 90 and 60 days, respectively, so coverage for younger animals in these sectors is likely to be lower.

In relation to animal welfare, the standards of the industry schemes largely reflect legal requirements, although with some notable improvements in certain areas, particularly for some species. They also set out more detailed requirements for sectors that are not currently covered by species-specific legislation.

It should be noted that farm animal welfare is only one of a number of aspects that these schemes consider – hence they bring other benefits to farmers and consumers.

Organic schemes

UK organic schemes offer significant potential welfare benefits in terms of additional space and a more complex and stimulating environment, including outdoor access for all animals, as well as a range of other additional standards covering husbandry, animal handling, transport and slaughter.

However, organic standards restrict the use of veterinary medicines, which may give rise to potential welfare concerns. Organic standards also place restrictions on feed ingredients, which may potentially raise issues in terms of meeting the nutritional requirements of high-yielding livestock breeds. The use of such breeds is strongly discouraged, although not specifically prohibited, by organic standards and, in practice, highly productive breeds are widely used.

Animal welfare is just one component of organic standards, which offer a number of other benefits, including avoidance of non-therapeutic antibiotic use and a range of environmental and biodiversity benefits. For example, research at Oxford University has found that organic farms support, on average, 34% more plant, insect and animal species than conventional farms.
Retailer standards

The five largest multiple retailers account for more than 70% of retail meat purchases in the UK, with all of the multiples combined (including discounters) accounting for more than 80% of retail meat purchases. Major retailers have enormous power to specify the standards they require of their suppliers and to determine the range of products and standards from which consumers are able to choose. The major retailers vary greatly in the degree to which they are engaged in driving improvements in welfare standards and consumer awareness.

Some retailers are taking an increasingly proactive role in setting welfare standards above baseline industry/legal standards for some or all of their livestock product ranges. Market segmentation on the basis of animal welfare standards, and competition between retailers, has significant potential to generate welfare gains. This is particularly evident in the poultry sector, where the numbers of eggs produced in non-cage systems and meat chickens reared to standards above industry baseline have increased substantially in recent years.

The decision by several major retailers to stop selling cage shell eggs and phase out the use of cage egg ingredient in their own brand products has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of the market for non-cage eggs.

Retailer standards vary in their requirements but are more likely to address aspects of welfare that are easier to communicate and are of greater concern to consumers. This may lead to other important aspects being neglected. For example, retailers are more likely to implement standards relating to the provision of additional space and environmental enrichment than those that address the problem of fast growth rate of meat chickens. Many consumers are not aware of the serious welfare issues associated with genetics so there is less incentive for retailers to address these.

Research by IGD found that four in ten (40%) chicken buyers say they would be prepared to pay a little bit extra to ensure chickens have enough space to display natural behaviour but fewer than half this number (17%) would be prepared to pay a little bit extra for a slower-growing breed that is less prone to illness and defects. Another concern is the lack of transparency on auditing procedures and the exact requirements of the retailer standards because they are often not available for public scrutiny in the same way as those of the independent farm assurance schemes usually are.

Whilst there is a growing trend for some retailers to apply their own welfare standards for their animal product ranges, some retailers have maintained a commitment to independently certified products. Sainsbury’s is the largest retailer of Freedom Food products reared to RSPCA standards, accounting for more than 60% of all UK Freedom Food sales, and has committed to sourcing all own-brand meat, poultry, eggs, game and dairy products from suppliers who adhere to independent higher welfare standards by 2020.

Food service and food manufacturers

Companies in other sectors of the food industry also have the potential to exert substantial influence on the welfare of animals in their supply chains. A significant proportion of animal products is consumed via further processed foods and meals eaten outside the home. For example, retail purchases of shell eggs account for around half (51%) of the UK egg market, with a quarter (25%) being used in the food service sector and around a fifth (21%) being used in food manufacturing.

In general, companies in the food service sector show lower levels of engagement in driving improvements in animal welfare standards compared with the retail and manufacturing sectors. Within the food service sector, companies that have a strong high street presence and trade under the corporate brand name are generally more likely to be engaged on animal welfare than those that have less proximity to the public and/or trade under multiple service brands. A growing number of food service companies, particularly in the former category, have taken the decision to use exclusively non-cage eggs across their UK operations. McDonald’s announced in 2013 that it would use exclusively Freedom Food-approved pork across its entire UK menu.

The timeline on page 14 summarises some of the key developments in farm assurance standards and food company policies affecting farm animal welfare over the past twenty years.
UK FARM ASSURANCE STANDARDS AND MARKET DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE


1997 Marks & Spencer ends sale of cage shell eggs.

1998 Castration prohibited for Freedom Food pigs.

1999 Marks & Spencer ends use of cage egg ingredient.


2001 Waitrose ends sale of cage shell eggs.

2004 Introduction of locomotion scoring and body condition scoring for Freedom Food dairy cows.

2005 Freedom Food sows must be free to turn around from five days after farrowing.

2006 Natural light required for Freedom Food ducks. Average genetic growth rate potential of Freedom Food chickens limited to 45g per day. Tesco launches “Willow Farm” chicken in June. Waitrose launches equivalent standard plus line in September.


2008 The Co-operative ends sale of cage shell eggs. Waitrose ends use of cage egg ingredient in own brand products. Foot pad dermatitis must be monitored and recorded for Freedom Food meat chickens.


2011 End of derogation in EU organic regulations that allowed pigs and sheep to be housed during the final fattening phase. Twice-yearly locomotion scoring required for Freedom Food dairy cows. The Co-operative launches “Elmwood” pork in April. CCTV required in slaughterhouses for all Freedom Food animals and all Co-operative primary own brand suppliers. The Co-operative Dairy Group created in August to provide a dedicated supply chain for milk. The Co-operative database of animal welfare indicators extended to include “Elmwood” turkey and pig farms and Co-operative Dairy Group farms. Introduction of welfare outcomes assessment on Freedom Food and Soil Association laying hen farms.

2012 Natural light required for Freedom Food turkeys. End of derogation in EU organic regulations that allowed piglets to be castrated without anaesthesia/salgesia (castration of pigs was already prohibited by most UK organic schemes). Sainsbury’s ends use of cage egg ingredient in own brand products.


PART TWO

LOOKING FORWARD OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS
The opportunities and challenges for farm animal welfare in the future

The combination of environmental challenges, population growth and increasing demand for food, energy, water and land that will face the world over the coming years were described in 2009 by John Beddington, then the Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK Government, as a “perfect storm”. He argued that these will lead to a 21st century Malthusian threat to the world’s food supply.

Adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change will add to the pressures already facing the agricultural sector in satisfying the seemingly insatiable demand for ‘cheap’ food.

Responses to the threat of climate change, such as further genetic selection for growth rate or yield, could potentially have negative impacts on animal welfare in the future. However, selection could also lead to healthier, more robust and disease resistant animals. Traits related to health and longevity are increasingly being included in selection indices, particularly for dairy cows. The message here is that investment in innovation can lead to positive changes across the livestock farming process from animal housing and feed to a reduction in the breeding of animals with no economic value because of their gender.

There are exciting developments in our understanding of farm animal behaviour, and the application of new outcomes-based animal welfare assessments. These innovations will help improve standards and guide assurance schemes. It is likely we will see automated technologies developing alongside these assessments which could objectively monitor the welfare of animals over a long period of time.

It is impossible to predict with any certainty how farming will evolve in the future. Some existing economic, social and environmental challenges are likely to become more acute and new challenges may emerge that few have anticipated. Farm assurance schemes will be vital in helping address these challenges. One such challenge, identified by many expert interviewees in this report, may well be the increasingly international market for meat. Working to ensure animal welfare standards in meat imports to the UK could provide an opportunity for assurance schemes to influence producers abroad.

With animal welfare now a mainstream issue for consumers and retailers alike, and new technologies providing innovative ways to improve and monitor farm animal welfare, what role will farm assurance schemes in general, and the Freedom Food scheme in particular, have in the future? The key messages were that, firstly, such schemes should continue to drive up standards and practice and, secondly, they should extend their influence internationally, where arguably many of the biggest opportunities – and challenges – exist for progress on farm animal welfare.
The role of farm assurance schemes

We asked our expert interviewees their opinion on the role that farm assurance schemes should play over the next 20 years. The most common response, perhaps unsurprisingly, referred to the role of farm assurance in ensuring high standards of farm animal welfare.

For one interviewee, farm assurance schemes could play a role in making high farm animal welfare standards an ‘explicit’ and ‘foundational’ part of what they do, something the respondent felt Freedom Food and Soil Association schemes were already doing, but which they thought was not currently true of all other assurance schemes.

For another industry specialist, assurance schemes are able to provide confidence that a certain standard is in place, and through their reach across the sector they have the opportunity to continually drive higher standards of welfare.

The role of assurance schemes in relation to the responsibilities of government was the subject of differing views. From one perspective, the responsibility for setting and ensuring a baseline level of animal welfare sits with the state. Assurance schemes have a complementary role, providing levels of welfare above the state minimum. A contrasting view from another interviewee was that, because the UK government is taking such a ‘hands off’ approach to animal welfare, assurance schemes already have the role of ensuring minimum standards. As a result of this, they will need to be stronger in addressing failures in farm animal welfare and work more closely with advisers and others to support improvement.

Several interviewees pointed to the development of welfare outcomes assessment and projects such as AssureWel having a big impact on the ability of assurance schemes to ensure high levels of welfare. As one expert stated:

“Farm assurance schemes are the perfect vehicle for ensuring that the husbandry and management on farm actually achieves the welfare potential of the systems being operated, through their audit processes and ensuring there are good outcome-based animal welfare measures.”
The ‘Virtuous Bicycle’: a vehicle designed to deliver improved animal welfare on-farm. The producer cycle illustrates a dynamic process of self-assessment, external monitoring, action and review, on-farm; the retailer cycle illustrates the process of quality assurance and quality control at the retailer level. The direction of the bicycle is towards increased awareness, trust and demand for high welfare food.

From Webster (2009). Copyright UFAW.

The role of the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme
Expert interviewees were asked for their comments on the role that Freedom Food might play in influencing farm animal welfare over the next two decades. They identified a number of challenges and opportunities for the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme to take on in the future.

- **Continually raising the (mainstream) bar and ensuring quality welfare outcomes** – In the words of one interviewee, Freedom Food should be “raising that baseline standard, encouraging more retailers to take that on board, and for shoppers to be buying with that as the baseline”.

- **Ensuring continuous improvement and high standards** expected of the RSPCA – including noting some species-specific concerns, for example beak trimming of hens and tail docking of pigs.

- **Striking an appropriate balance between improving ‘quality’ of animal welfare standards and increasing ‘quantity’** (i.e. growing its market size and number of members) whilst also keeping the scheme commercially viable for the farmer (“because without them we can’t do anything”). As one expert commented, it needs to be “keeping that higher welfare because that’s what they stand for, but continuing to ensure it can be applied on farm in a commercially sustainable way”.

- **Growing its influence**. Firstly, it should help drive up animal welfare standards internationally – particularly across Europe, where several experts felt there were opportunities (as there are no equivalent schemes in the rest of the EU, other than in Germany and the Netherlands). Secondly, it should continue to influence retailer standards. Thirdly, raising consumer awareness of welfare issues for species where the Freedom Food scheme currently has low coverage may facilitate expansion of the scheme in these sectors.

- **Being transparent, honest and clear about its positioning** – as one interviewee put it “to be clear with the public about what the different tiers [of standards] actually mean in the marketplace and where they sit within that.”

- **Focus** – being clear about whether its strategy should be to strive to influence welfare for all species or to focus on a few.

- **Demonstrating the broader benefits of good farm animal welfare** in terms of economics, ethics, human health, farm animal health and the environment. Freedom Food needs to assess how it can maximise these broader benefits (where they exist) and how it can avoid potential conflicts or trade-offs (for example with environmental issues such as carbon footprints of intensively reared chicken versus free-range chicken).

These findings largely mirror those of the McNair Report, published in May 2013, an independent inquiry and report commissioned by the RSPCA into the Freedom Food scheme.
Conclusions

- Pressure on the agricultural sector to satisfy continuing societal demands for cheap food will be exacerbated by population growth, dietary shifts, resource constraints and the need for the sector to reduce its contribution to, and to adapt to the impacts of, climate change. Initiatives aiming to address climate impact that are focused on selecting increasingly fast-growing or high-yielding animals are likely to be of concern to farm animal welfare advocates over the coming years, with farm animal health and wellbeing today already affected by genetic selection that prioritises production efficiency traits.

- Most expert interviewees felt that farm assurance schemes and food company standards have helped, and are likely to help in the future, to deliver improved farm animal welfare. Since it was introduced in 1994, the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme has played an important role in providing higher standards for a significant proportion of animals in several sectors, particularly farmed salmon, laying hens and pigs. Organic schemes also provide higher standards for a minority of animals across all sectors, whilst progressive food companies are taking an increasingly proactive role in setting standards above baseline.

- The overwhelming consensus from expert interviewees was that the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme does have an important role to play in driving animal welfare improvements in the future, both in the UK and internationally. Critically though, it must not rest on its laurels – it should pursue high quality and then should try to use its influence to even greater effect.

- Even as assurance schemes and leading food companies are driving standards forward, the genetics of the animal are often pushing in the opposite direction so that even better standards, management and nutrition are needed to achieve an equivalent level of welfare. Hence in some ways, we are working hard just to stand still. Some recent shifting of breeding goals in certain species (e.g. dairy cattle) away from production-related parameters to those focused on health and welfare gives some grounds for optimism.

- In recent years, the focus has shifted somewhat away from farming systems and input standards towards also measuring and seeking to improve welfare outcomes for the animals. This trend is expected to continue and accelerate. The development and adoption of outcomes-based approaches to welfare is likely to be supported by the development of new automated technologies for assessing animal health and wellbeing.
A co-ordinated approach is needed between the farming industry, assurance schemes, food companies, animal welfare organisations, government and research to drive and monitor progress in farm animal welfare and consumer awareness.

Farm animal welfare needs to be fully considered, not only as an important entity in itself, but also as part of an integrated view of the future. We need to move towards a shared vision of fair, healthy, humane and environmentally sustainable food and farming systems.

The UK should seek to maintain its historical position of playing a leadership role on farm animal welfare. Concerns about competitiveness must not be allowed to lead to the UK being left behind on welfare issues as other countries in Europe and beyond continue to make progress in improving standards. The UK should seek to drive further improvements in welfare standards and encourage others to follow so that the global trading environment is harnessed as an opportunity for a ‘race to the top’ rather than allowed to degenerate into a ‘race to the bottom’.

Farm assurance schemes should seek to set a challenging benchmark for farm animal welfare and work with partners across the food system to ensure their standards are translated into good (and improving) welfare outcomes in practice. Within that context, the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme should seek to use its influence to even greater effect, extending its reach internationally, setting the benchmark standard for retailer schemes domestically, and increasing its impact for those species where penetration rates are currently low.
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The contents of this report are the responsibility of the authors.
Public concern in the UK for farm animal welfare appears to be increasing in recent years. Despite this, farm animal welfare often does not get the attention it merits in many expert debates about achieving sustainable, fair and healthy food systems.

To mark the 20th anniversary of the RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme in 2014, independent researchers the Food Ethics Council and Heather Pickett were asked to undertake research into past and potential future changes in farm animal welfare in the UK. The work drew on views and information from a range of experts, including food and farming representatives, farm assurance schemes and leading academics.

The report looks at changes in farm animal welfare in the UK over the past 20 years and what are some of the factors driving change, including the role of farm assurance schemes and labels. It goes on to explore what might happen in the next 20 years and what key influencing factors might be – from climate change to genetics, from changes in global trade to growing demands for transparency and beyond.

This summary report draws on the full report and has a particular focus on the role of RSPCA’s Freedom Food scheme. The full report is available at www.freedomfood.co.uk/anniversaryreport.