

Animal Welfare Reports

Companion Animals

Report on Companion Animal Welfare Assessment

The Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) launched the *Companion Animal Welfare Assessment* in the House of Commons on 3 February 2009. This Report is directed at animal health and welfare professionals, professional animal carers and all those involved in the implementation of the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy. In its preparation of the Report, CAWC sought the views of the animal welfare sector and asked three questions of it, namely, (1) should companion animal welfare be assessed to enable welfare interventions to be targeted towards specific issues and should welfare programmes be evaluated? (2) what measures are taken at present by your organisation to assess welfare?

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...scientific evidence
show that current
systems of inversion and
shackling raise significant
welfare concerns
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and (3) what information do you have available to inform animal

owners and carers about animal welfare? The Council received 22 responses which all agreed that animal welfare should be assessed and provided varying responses to questions (2) and (3).

Ultimately, the Report produced four recommendations which are as follows:

- Welfare assessment indices for the companion animal species are incomplete. Identification of the additional work needed to develop and establish the animal welfare assessment protocols would be useful;
- Further development of companion animal welfare assessment protocols should be undertaken by the private sector. Government and DEFRA should facilitate it;
- A supervisory body should be established which would be tasked to ensure the proper development and application of welfare assessment protocols for each species. It should be appointed by the companion animal sector to ensure the consistent development of welfare assessment protocols for all species to acceptable standards;
- Species working groups should be established under

the auspices of the supervisory body to identify gaps in knowledge, bring forward suggestions for research and to develop protocols for welfare assessment.

The starting point of the Report is the five freedoms (of FAWC) and an acknowledgement of the obligations that follow from them, namely, to provide for animals' needs for comfort, good nutrition, good health, avoidance of injury and pain and to ensure an environment that avoids ongoing fear and distress.

The Report notes that although there is a general presumption that companion animal welfare should be improved, to date, the equine health and welfare strategy is the only species-specific document to have been produced. Yet the *Animal Welfare Act 2006* enables the regulation of companion animal activities including the keeping of animals in companion animal welfare establishments such as sanctuaries, animal homes, rehoming centres, boarding establishments, horse livery yards and quarantine facilities; the retail of animals through commercial outlets such as pet shops and pet fairs; animal training and performance in circuses and film; tethering of horses and some

aspects of pet ownership at home. There have been a number of instances of poor welfare and indeed, cruelty associated with some or all of these activities (see case-law below). Although the number of instances is relatively small, the severity of the welfare concerns and animal numbers affected serve to raise general concerns for animal welfare in these establishments. The Council made its recommendations in this Report with a view to reducing the risk of cruelty and poor welfare.

The Report also notes that the *Animal Welfare Act 2006* imposes a general duty of care on owners or keepers of animals. In order to understand the responsibility imposed by this duty, it is necessary for an animal owner to fully appreciate the needs and wants of the animals in question and to be equipped with the knowledge of how to determine if those needs and wants are being met.

The Report notes that welfare assessment is currently used as a research tool to evaluate farm animal husbandry systems and their impact on welfare. The Report indicates that it could similarly be used to investigate and evaluate the ways of keeping companion animals.

The *Animal Welfare Act 2006* does not contain a generic regulation setting out the obligations of owners or carers. The Report asserts that a code should be promulgated and should give an indication of what care should achieve in terms of animal-based outcomes. For example, it may state that effective nutrition should result in optimum body condition, and may also provide guidance for when an owner should seek advice from a veterinary

surgeon. However, the Report argues that in the absence of a generic regulation, any codes of practice that aim to inform owners how to meet the duty of care are merely advisory. The Report suggests that a generic regulation along similar lines to schedule 1 of the *Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulation 2000* would have brought tangible benefits for companion animal welfare. In addition, the Report suggests that, as codes are important in interpreting legislation, their drafting should

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draw upon welfare science and be informed by welfare assessment. Further, all statutory welfare codes should contain legal requirements, recommendations and best practice indicators and should be divided into sections which deal with the specific needs of animals in the context of the obligations created by the Five Freedoms.

The Report notes that few scientifically validated, field-based welfare assessment protocols have been developed for companion animals. However, it refers to a number of indicators of animal welfare, providing examples of the indicator in the behaviour of particular animals and exploring its likely utility as a field-based tool for companion animal welfare assessment. These indicators include

abnormal repetitive behaviours ('ARBs' - such as stereotypical behaviour, escape behaviour, self-injurious behaviour), aggressive behaviour, fearful behaviour, vocalisations, posture, activity, play, allogrooming/allopreening, separation-related behaviour, other 'problem' behaviour, self-medication and psychological indicators of welfare including the presence of glucocorticoid, heart rate, immune measures, chromodacryorrhoea (bloody tears), clinical and pathological indicators, health and husbandry records and 'societal' indicators such as RSPCA statistics.

A practical national scheme to establish the prevalence of companion animal welfare issues of significance would require the identification of indices of welfare that could be consistently and easily measured, that would be both activity- and species- specific, and that would be readily assessable by the smallest possible number of observers. In this regard, appropriately trained staff in certain veterinary practices could be designated as sentinels. The Report expresses the view that reliable data using a wide range of measures could be obtained by evaluating the present standards of animal care in specific activities as defined, using trained assessors, thereby providing a 'snapshot' of welfare. Provided that sample sizes are statistically significant, this research-based approach would give an overview of companion animal welfare, categorised by activity. From this research, sentinel measures could be developed for surveillance.