

## **The evidence base for farm animal welfare:**

### **RSPCA Farm Animals Department's approach**

The RSPCA Farm Animals Department (FAD) believes that the most effective approach to ensuring that the RSPCA can have tangible positive impact on the welfare of farm animals is to develop the Society's policies, practices and welfare standards in this area using a robust and well-considered evidence base. Part of the Department's role, facilitated by the unique collective experience, knowledge and specialisms of its staff, is to gather, assess, analyse and effectively 'translate' a wide variety of evidence sources into a usable form that can be applied through a range of activities – including when progressing its farm animal welfare standards, in order to achieve improvement in the welfare of livestock.

#### **Sources of evidence**

The Department gathers information from many different evidence sources. Particular emphasis is placed on:

- Peer reviewed, published scientific research

The following sources are also considered:

- Validated welfare outcome assessment data
- Practical on-farm trial data (when conducted under sufficiently controlled conditions)
- Recommendations and advice from expert/specialist bodies and individuals within the farming industry, veterinary profession and academia
- Individual case studies and practical demonstrations
- Information from other specialist organisations
- Industry, government and NGO publications

#### **Evaluation of evidence**

In addition to considering the *nature* of the source, the *validity and robustness* of the 'evidence' is evaluated by considering, among other things, the following:

- Independence of the source (likelihood of intentional/unintentional bias)
- Number and variety of sources providing similar or the same information/advice (cumulative effect)
- Scale of the source(s) (amount of data available; sample size)
- Robustness of data collection process
- Robustness of any analysis (statistical; other)
- Reliability/value/robustness of the source(s), including from the opinion of others with relevant expertise

## **Application and use of evidence**

A number of areas of the RSPCA's farm animal welfare work are informed by evidence collected by and assessed for its validity (as described above) by the Farm Animals Department. These areas include the following areas/activities:

- Development of the RSPCA welfare standards for farm animals
- Development of welfare outcome assessment measures and protocol
- Development of the Society's policies and positions on a wide variety of livestock welfare issues
- Support for campaigns, external advocacy and lobbying
- Production of technical reports, other literature and information resources

Such information is also used to evaluate the impact on farm animal welfare of the activities undertaken by the Society, and can also allow effective prioritisation of those activities by judging them against the RSPCA's evaluation and prioritisation criteria, including scale of suffering; severity of suffering, duration/frequency of suffering; likelihood/degree of impact. Issues such as the impact of a change on other areas of welfare, economics, logistics, the degree of change needed, effective knowledge transfer/training issues and attitudes/culture all represent significant challenges to achieving effective implementation of 'knowledge' and 'evidence', often necessitating a stepwise, considered and patient approach to eliciting progress.

## **Lack of evidence: making decisions**

Despite significant and important advances in knowledge and understanding of farm animal welfare over the years, some key areas continue to present major challenges due to the lack of robust evidence as to the nature, severity and/or scale of the animal welfare problem.

Comparatively little evidence exists in the areas of mental/psychological welfare and emotional needs and states of farm animals, the level and impact on welfare of certain physiological states (e.g. chronic hunger in certain species/classes of livestock) or the variability in the needs of individuals within species/classes of animals. In the absence of robust evidence, the FAD bases its decisions and recommendations on a number of factors, including the following:

- Extrapolation from evidence, experience, knowledge of similar situations and/or species
- Reference to/comparison with current 'good practice'
- Use of own primary research/experience
- Application of reasonable/justifiable anthropomorphism (e.g. Qualitative Behavioural Assessment-type approach)
- Application of 'common sense'
- Consideration of ethical issues
- Application of the Precautionary Principle ('informed prudence')