

Bristol Welfare Assurance Programme:

Animal based assessment tool for farm animal welfare certification

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Overview

The Bristol Welfare Assurance Programme (BWAP) is an assessment tool that aims to generate credible (repeatable, valid & feasible) evidence for assessment of compliance with animal welfare standards in organic and conventional farming systems.

This system is designed to assist in the assessment of farms for compliance with animal welfare-related requirements in certification schemes (e.g. farm assurance or organic). The system is applicable when welfare legislation and / or other welfare relevant standards are being assessed. The assessment tool should also enable certification bodies and relevant third parties to monitor the ability of schemes to deliver good welfare outcomes. Finally it should provide a mechanism for assessing the farm's own management of health and welfare parameters with their health planning systems. This is now a requirement or recommendation of many welfare standards.

The format of the assessment system has been carefully designed so that it is easy to use on a farm, can be consistently applied and that the assessment can integrate with various certification systems. The operation of the assessment system is outlined below and summarised in the [flow charts](#).

The key steps are that inspectors operating within a certification scheme conduct an assessment of animal-based parameters (observation of animals and records) and an evaluation of the farm's management (health plan). Both of these assessments can be conducted alongside a normal initial or surveillance visit. If potential problems are identified (i.e. if parameters are above pre-defined intervention guidelines) then the assessor is instructed to further investigate the farm's management of the problem and compliance with the related specific scheme requirements.

The following examples are available without prior registration from this web site:

- [Definition, assessment procedures, farmer significance, intervention guidelines and compliance checklist for skin injuries & flight distance in dairy cattle](#)
- [Completed evaluation of lameness component of health plan](#)
- [Completed animal observation form for one group of dairy cattle](#)
- [Completed records form for a dairy cattle farm](#)

Completed [species-specific versions](#) of the assessor manual, data collection forms, farmer significance and compliance checklist are available free to those individuals that register on this web site.

Animal-based welfare parameters

The animal-based parameters include observations of physical conditions, animal behaviour observations and examination of the farm's recording to identify the incidence of conditions and their treatments. The parameters were developed through evaluating and, where appropriate, incorporating protocols that had been used in previous scientific investigations (Whay et al., 2003). Protocols were developed for dairy and beef cattle, pigs and laying hens. This approach has some limitations as it relies upon a subjective interpretation using existing (and often limited) knowledge. However, it is important to recognise that this need not be the definitive list of parameters. The measures will be added to or amended as new knowledge becomes available. It is important to recognise that animal-based parameters should not

replace precisely defined and valid resource standards, such as minimum space allowance requirements.

The animal-based parameters used in the final assessment protocol were identified and developed under the guidance of a steering group. The criteria used were as follows :

- a) *Relevance to welfare (validity)*
- b) *Prevalence of the condition*
- c) *Reliability of the measure*
- d) *Relevance to organic standards or legal requirements*
- e) *Feasibility of using the measure during a certification visit*
- f) *Importance of a parameter to a farm's profitability*

Each selected parameter was included on either the animal observation or record data collection forms. The forms are formatted so they each print onto a single A4 page that can easily be used on a farm. An assessor manual has been produced for each species (cattle, pigs and laying hens). The manual contains an appropriate definition of the parameter with pictures as required and a description of how to assess the parameter. Guidance notes also give an indication of the appropriate number of animals to be examined. The assessment forms include a conversion of the observations and records into standard units, i.e. prevalence % observed and incidence no of cases / 100 animals / year. A "farmer significance" report included within the assessor manual gives a short explanation of the significance (both welfare and profitability) of each parameter measured.

Further investigation

The data collection form also includes proposed intervention guidelines that can be modified by each scheme. If a welfare parameter exceeds the pre-defined guideline, the assessor is encouraged to investigate further. Exceeding an intervention guideline would not necessarily mean the farm was non-compliant with organic, farm assurance or legal standards, however, it would provide evidence that certain resources provided to the animal might not be adequate. Hence further investigations would include both a detailed assessment of compliance with the relevant "performance" based standard and an assessment of the management action being taken by the farm.

Compliance with specific standards is particularly important for welfare measures that are associated with specific outcomes (e.g. body condition with diet or injuries with damaged fittings). For measures above the intervention guideline, the assessor would be encouraged to re-examine specific resources defined within a "compliance checklist". This checklist gives a series of questions for each parameter that relate to a specific organic or legal requirement. If the assessor then identifies non-compliance with the specific standard then a non-compliance report in line with existing procedures will be made. The results of the animal-based assessment can be included as part of the certification body's normal reporting systems.

An assessment of action taken by the farmer in response to a particular concern is detailed on the "health plan form". Again for measures that are above the intervention guideline the assessor will be asked to conduct further investigation. In particular the assessor will examine the farmer's awareness of the issue and whether appropriate investigations and actions have been taken. The health plan form also allows the assessor to record information about the normal management system for common welfare concerns. So for issues like lameness in dairy cows the assessor can examine the prevention and treatment protocols present on the farm and examine the farm's monitoring / recording systems. The assessor will also be encouraged to examine general aspects of farm management, such as use of advice and the regular review of management practices. If the assessor identified concerns with the routine management or a farm's response to a particular welfare concern, the evidence collated in the health plan form can also be used to generate an appropriate non-compliance. As with standards compliance this evidence could then be included with the assessors normal reporting systems.

Reporting system

An optional but potentially valuable component of the system is bench-marking of assessment results between farms. Providing information to the farmer of their own performance with respect to their peers is a powerful motivational tool that is an important benefit from welfare assessment (Huxley et al, 2003). The bench-marking system operates via a web-linked database of assessment results enabling establishment of “norms” for systems being examined. For each farm assessed a report would be generated in printable, web page or email version. The report would give the summary of the results and provide information on their performance with respect to their peers.

Repeatability exercise

Some degree of assessment error is inevitable in these parameters. However, it is important to recognise that parameters found to be above the intervention guideline should not constitute a non-compliance in itself rather it would instigate further investigation. The authors would advocate (and have developed) a monitoring exercise for all assessors. This should be instigated at training (until a consistent standard is achieved) and at regular (e.g. annual) intervals.

Incorporation into certification system

This system has the potential to generate three key benefits as part of a certification system : certification of individual farms, monitoring the effectiveness of certification bodies and providing benchmarking information to individual farmers. The relative extent to which these are achieved depends upon the number and type of farms assessed. If all farms are assessed at initial and surveillance visits then the full benefits would be received. If members were assessed on their initial visit prior to joining a scheme then the results would not be useful for monitoring the “welfare performance” of members within a scheme. However, the certification and benchmarking benefits would still be useful to the new members. If farms were assessed after some form of risk assessment (e.g. after a history of certification problems) then the assessment would be useful for certification and benchmarking but of limited value for monitoring performance of the scheme. However, a random sample would generate information about the scheme “welfare performance” but it may not be equitable for it to be used as a certification tool as only sampled farms would be monitored in this way. The following table gives a subjective evaluation of the likely benefits different sampling strategies could achieve :

Visit type	Potential benefits (- minimal, + some, ++ medium, +++ maximum)		
	Certification tool Results used to inform certification decisions	Monitoring tool Results used to monitor (internally or externally) performance of certification body	Benchmarking tool Report identifying strengths and weaknesses given to farmer
All farms at initial & surveillance visit	++ Complement existing + assessment	+++ Complete assessment of performance	+++ All farms receive report
All farms at initial visit only	++ Additional threshold for new members	- Results do not reflect farms in the scheme	+ Limited to first visit only
Farms identified as higher risk e.g. history of previous problems	++ Useful for higher risk population	- Only data from high risk farms	++ Useful for higher risk population
Sample of farms in scheme	- Not usable as only sample	++ Useful assessment of performance	+ Only sampled farms

Schemes wishing to use this system will need to produce (with the help of the University of Bristol, if necessary) their own scheme-specific compliance checklist. The compliance checklist included in the web version has been generated for UK welfare legislation and UK organic

standards as of 2003. This checklist links the observations made with existing welfare requirements. It is important to recognise that assessors working within an accredited certification body which complies with the European standard, EN 45011, must not provide “prescriptive advice or consultancy as part of an evaluation” (EA, 1999). The BWAP assessment does not constitute advice as it aims to identify problems (e.g. failure to comply with standards) rather than provide advice on potential farm specific husbandry solutions. This could and should be provided by existing advisory systems such as the attending veterinary surgeon.

Updates of the system

The parameters and assessment system will be updated regularly. A user club is being set up to manage this process. Furthermore, the University of Bristol is one of many partners working on WELFARE QUALITY, which is an EU funded integrated project (www.welfarequality.net) that aims to deliver a European standard for welfare assessment systems. The assessment methodology included within this system is likely to be updated in accordance with the findings of this European initiative.

Further reading / References

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