

Veterinary Vision for Post Brexit Agricultural Policy

Introduction

The veterinary profession is an integral part of the agricultural and food sectors. Veterinary surgeons provide preventive healthcare and treatment for livestock, as well as carry out surveillance, promote good biosecurity, promote high animal health and welfare and boost productivity. Official Veterinary Surgeons ensure food safety and enable trade in animals and animal products. The future of agricultural support is therefore of great interest to the veterinary profession.

The current Government has stated that it will continue to make payments to UK farmers on the same basis as now until 2020. After 2020, the UK will need to decide whether it wants to continue paying income support to farmers in line with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) or whether it is an opportunity to reinvent policy.

What is the Common Agricultural Policy?

CAP is the EU policy to provide financial support to farmers in member states. CAP payments are an important part of farm incomes in the UK: In the UK, EU farm subsidies currently make up around 50-60% of farm income.¹

There are two major strands to CAP payments: one for direct income support (pillar 1) and the second for rural development (pillar 2). Direct income support is a much larger programme than rural development.

Pillar 1 payments are based on the amount of land a farmer owns, not how much they produce. To qualify for payment, farmers must meet certain standards on environmental management, animal welfare standards and traceability – these conditions are known as ‘cross-compliance’. Member states can also apply market support measures in certain conditions.

Pillar 2 is rural development policy which supports rural areas of the EU to meet the wide range of economic, environmental and social challenges. This is intended to complement the system of direct payments to farmers. Pillar 2 is funded by the Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) which supports national Rural Development Programmes. Rural Development Programmes include projects and capital grants which support the wider rural economy e.g. farm business grant schemes, knowledge exchange programmes or rural broadband.

Objectives for new UK agricultural policy

BVA believes that the following objectives should be embedded within a new agricultural policy for the UK from 2020 onwards.

¹ House of Commons Library, EU Referendum: Impact on UK Agriculture Policy, 2016

Support animal health and welfare as public goods

The Government should utilise public money to incentivise and support animal health and welfare outcomes as public goods. Public goods by their very nature, are not market goods in the same way as livestock products such as meat or milk. Public goods have no explicit value in terms of market prices and so the market cannot efficiently allocate resources to them. Other means therefore must be used – such as the intervention of Government in the form of regulation or financial support.²

Incorporating animal health and welfare outcomes must be done in a meaningful way. An outcomes approach should be utilised as a tool to drive continuous improvement of animal management and husbandry practices, thereby promoting high animal health and welfare. The standardised assessment of health and welfare outcomes provides a practical and scientifically informed method of assessment that aims to provide a more objective, accurate and direct examination.

Delivering these public goods should be at the heart of a new post Brexit agricultural policy-benefiting producers, consumers and wider society. One means to achieve this would be a new animal welfare stewardship programme as proposed in the BVA report, [Brexit and the Veterinary Profession](#).³

Another way to support animal health and welfare would be to use agricultural policy to encourage uptake of farm assurance schemes to incentive animal health and welfare outcomes. Farm assurance schemes enable customers to make sustainable and ethically informed choices about the food products they buy and the impact of these products on animal health and welfare.

Maximise benefits

There is uncertainty as to the total quantum of support that will be made available after 2020.⁴ The UK Government will have different spending priorities than the collective EU and it is possible that the total budget for agricultural support will reduce post Brexit. It is therefore essential that a future agricultural policy maximises the impact of the associated budget.

At present, member states are allowed to transfer up to 15% of the Pillar 1 payments they receive from the EU to its Pillar 2 allocation. There will be greater freedom, after EU exit, to shift the balance between pillars one and two style support to stimulate benefits.

Balance central government and devolution

Agricultural policy in the UK is devolved. Devolved administrations have been able to shape agricultural policy within their respective jurisdictions. At the same time, the EU has ensured a degree of coherence to agricultural policy amongst all four administrations. Brexit presents an opportunity to tailor agricultural policy to suit the respective regions of the UK, however coordination and oversight on matters of animal health is crucial. There will therefore need to be consideration where decisions on agricultural policy are taken, and how best to coordinate efforts across the two nations of the UK.

² Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC), Economics and Farm Animal Welfare, 2011

³ British Veterinary Association, Brexit and the Veterinary Profession, 2017 https://www.bva.co.uk/uploadedFiles/Content/News,_campaigns_and_policies/Policies/Future_of_the_profession/brexit-and-veterinary-profession-v.1.0.pdf

⁴ House of Commons Library, EU Referendum: Impact on UK Agriculture Policy, 2016

To facilitate this, the UK governments should establish a body to oversee and coordinate animal health and welfare policy across the four administrations of the UK and facilitate partnership working between industry and government to tackle endemic disease and animal health challenges.

Comply with World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules

The UK consider how best to utilise agricultural support to incentivise animal health and welfare within the rules of the WTO. WTO rules on agriculture are not as developed as in other trade areas, but the [Agreement on Agriculture](#) provides a framework on payments.⁵ If the UK wants to reduce the likelihood of any challenge in the WTO to a new agricultural support regime, it may prefer to place them in the Green Box (in which payments are defined as minimal trade distorting and with a minimal impact on production) and so not subject to payment ceilings. To achieve this these payments must be through a government-funded scheme which does not provide price support to farmers.

Harmonise with cross-governmental strategic goals

A new agricultural policy offers an opportunity to harmonise support to farms with other key national and international strategies. As competence for future trade policy is transferred from the EU, this should be used to reinforce agricultural support, not undermine it. Furthermore, the role of agricultural support should also be considered as part of the new 5-year Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) strategy.

Veterinary Involvement

As animal health and welfare specialists and advocates the veterinary profession is well-placed to advise and influence sustainable animal husbandry practices at whole system levels, safeguarding animal health and welfare whilst at the same time facilitating production efficiency. Thus, the involvement of the veterinary profession within any system of agricultural support should be integral. Policy-makers should consider how best to engage veterinary expertise within a new agricultural policy.

⁵ World Trade Organisation, Agreement on Agriculture, 1995