

RSPCA sheep Standards Technical Advisory Group meeting

at 9.30am on Wednesday 10th November 2021

Via Google Meet

Summary notes

Action points from previous meeting

The action points of the previous meeting on 25th September 2019 were recapped and it was advised that there were several standards in the latest version of the Sheep Standards (June 2020) which had been amended as a result.

Application of the sheep standards

It was discussed how new members could be encouraged to adopt the standards and what the financial benefits of being members were for farmers. There is currently a very small number of sheep farmers on the scheme, and due to a lack of assured abattoirs there are no lamb products being sold under the RSPCA Assured label. STAG members suggested organising discussion groups with current members to better understand the incentives of joining the scheme as well as where improvements could be made. It was also noted that farmers respond better to peer-to-peer recommendations, and there was a suggestion that current members could be used on social media advertising to promote the standards to other farmers. There is also increasing movement towards higher welfare practices within the industry (e.g. farmers discussions with vets, Red Tractor welfare standards, Defra payments) and the standards need to be ready for this.

Livestock markets and collection centres

The possibility of allowing livestock markets (LMs) and collection centres (CCs) under the standards was discussed. The group was updated on the Farm Animals Department's progress: including a visit to a LM in early March 2020, however future visits were put on hold due to the pandemic. Visits are now planned for early 2022 to both LMs and CCs, and there are a set of draft standards which can be used in early trial work. This topic was also discussed at the recent beef STAG and it has been decided that CCs will be the main focus to begin with. The majority of the group raised significant concerns with livestock markets and advised these should not be allowed on the scheme, and advised that instead there should be a trial of collection centres with increased RSPCA/RSPCA Assured presence.

Pain relief during castration and tail docking

The response to the new requirement to administer long acting pain relief during castration and tail docking has been positive overall, and has prompted some of our members to reconsider the need for carrying out these procedures on all their animals. The RSPCA's position is still that these procedures should be reduced as much as possible and that the 3Rs (Reduce, Replace, Refine) should be applied to any decision making taking place. It was also noted that the industry is starting to take this approach so it is good that the RSPCA is ahead of the curve.

Environmental impact on sheep welfare

Looking ahead at future changes to the industry, the group considered the environmental impact of the standards, but it was agreed that developing specific requirements would be beyond the expertise of the Farm Animals Department. However, it was suggested that information boxes could be used to prompt farmers to think about the impact of climate change on their animals. The group also agreed that the link between good animal health and welfare and lower environmental impact should be emphasised.

Lameness management

Lameness is a prominent issue for the sheep sector, with Contagious Ovine Digital Dermatitis in particular on the rise. The group agreed that more emphasis should be put on the lameness 5-Point Plan (5PP), for example by having stricter biosecurity standards, listing helpful advice when implementing the 5PP or by including the 5PP in the appendices. Farmers also need more support to spot early signs of lameness and to identify the cause, however they are increasingly using pain relief alongside antibiotics when treating lameness. Research is ongoing looking at the impact of footbathing on lameness, and the group will continue to monitor the developing scientific findings.

Emergency euthanasia of lambs

When considering the emergency euthanasia of lambs, the group agreed that if manual blunt force trauma is to be banned, there must be a viable alternative available to prevent lambs being left. Additionally, as the outcome of this method is highly dependent on staff competence, this procedure must be listed as high risk and require a demonstration of competence.

Meeting close

The next meeting will be held in the second quarter of 2022 prior to the publication of the new standards. Suggested amendments will be circulated to the group before the next meeting.