

**RSPCA Dairy Cattle Standards Technical Advisory Group meeting
on Friday 3rd December 2021.**

Meeting Summary Notes.

What has been happening to the standards since the last meeting?

Action points and changes to the proposed standard amendments in light of STAG feedback were recapped and the STAG members were made aware that the new standards (dated June 2021 due to COVID delays) were now available online.

Standards for fully housed systems

This area was discussed regarding the availability of scientific studies regarding access to pasture and the quality and limitations of those studies as well as the trend in the UK towards either fully housed systems or systems providing access to pasture with an apparent split to extremes on both sides. Fully housed systems account for a significant percentage of the milk pool (estimated at about 20%) and are usually much larger farms thus impacting a large number of dairy cattle. The RSPCA currently holds the position that cattle are highly motivated to access pasture and thus higher welfare systems are those which offer cattle the option to access pasture. Ideally we'd like to see a free choice system for cattle but acknowledge the difficulties at present with implementing this on farm.

Markets and Collection Centres

The group were informed that information gathering exercises in this area are ongoing and visits to both markets and collection centres have been carried out and are planned in the near future.

Welfare outcome assessment data use

The group is keen to see welfare outcome data use as part of the standard setting and assessment. They were updated on the progress being made in this area including how the data being collected is being cleaned, verified and analysed to ensure that any such application of such data in the future is fair and accurate. This is an area being very proactively worked on by RSPCA Assured and it is hoped a meeting with the STAG specifically on this area will be possible in the near future.

Discussions around calf management

The standards around calf management were discussed including milk volume offered, method of feeding (teat vs bucket feeding) and method of weaning (gradual vs abrupt). The age at pairing/grouping calves was also discussed including the speed at which calves are grouped from individual housing to larger groups.

Options for keeping bulls on-farm

This is an area recently flagged by the Animal Welfare Committee as an area of concern on dairy farms. It is a complex area due to health and safety issues for farm staff as well as the welfare of bulls kept in isolation. The group discussed how widely this was happening in practice and this is an area which will continue to be worked on in future standards development.

Pasture management

Mob grazing and out-wintering were both discussed with the group concluding that current standards in this area are adequate and being well implemented on-farm. Concerns were raised regarding intensive grazing and access to shade, standard E 8.4 d) covers this within the standards and internal assessor guidance gives assessors further notes on what to look for when assessing that producers meet this standard.

End of life dairy cows

The group discussed the current standards relating to end of life dairy cows, and discussed areas for advancement.

Other areas discussed

The group also discussed other topic areas including antimicrobial use and the standards relating to this, virtual fencing and its potential welfare implications, Johne's disease control on farm, trough space in relation to round feeders vs straight feed faces and how the standards can reflect the variation in space needed, and recent studies looking at the provision of "living space" for cattle and whether it might be appropriate to incorporate findings into the standards.