

Annual Animal Welfare Report 2023/24

FSA 24/09/08 - Report by Junior Johnson and Kevin Maher

1. Summary

1.1 This paper provides an update on FSA animal welfare delivery in 2023/24 with the objective of making ongoing improvements to animal welfare in England and Wales. The paper highlights an 11.8% reduction in animals that experienced an impact on their welfare at slaughter and an 8% reduction in animal welfare farm and transport non-compliance cases that we refer to other enforcement bodies.

1.2 The Board is asked to:

1.3 Consider, discuss, and comment on:

- Work and progress since the 2022/23 update to the Board.

1.4 Put on record its support for:

- Accomplishments and ongoing work to improve animal welfare at slaughter, on farm, and during transport.
- The FSA position on taking proportionate enforcement action towards breaches of animal welfare and working collaboratively with other animal welfare enforcement bodies.

2. Introduction

2.1 This paper provides the annual report to the Board on the FSA's animal welfare delivery on behalf of the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Welsh Government as policy holders in England and Wales, respectively.

2.2 The paper covers:

- Section 3 – Background and context.
- Section 4 – Summary of data on animal welfare compliance in slaughterhouses, on farm and in transport.
- Section 5 – Progress of in year activities.
- Section 6 – Consumer and stakeholder interest in animal welfare.

- Section 7 – Policy activity and forward look.
- Section 8 – Conclusions.

3. Background and Context

3.1 Defra and Welsh Government have policy responsibility for animal welfare controls within approved slaughterhouses. Application of the controls and enforcement of animal welfare breaches are carried out by the FSA in England and Wales under a Service Level Agreement with funding provided by Defra and Welsh Government. In Northern Ireland, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has the policy and delivery responsibility for animal welfare. The FSA animal welfare team regularly liaise with DAERA on animal welfare related matters.

3.2 In September 2016, the FSA Board approved the FSA animal welfare Deter, Prevent, Detect, Enforce programme to deliver improvements to animal welfare standards in slaughterhouses in England and Wales. The programme is managed under a dedicated Animal Welfare Action Plan which complements the official controls in ensuring slaughterhouse Food Business Operators (FBOs) responsibility in producing safe food and animal welfare standards. The Animal Welfare Action Plan supports other FSA, government, and industry governance on animal welfare through oversight of a dedicated Animal Welfare Steering Group. Progress of activities delivered under the Animal Welfare Action Plan is detailed at section 5.

3.3 Animal welfare in the FSA is monitored by Official Veterinarians (OVs) that are based in approved slaughterhouses and supported by the Welfare Assurance Team (WAT) who are a specifically trained team of Meat Hygiene Inspectors that conduct additional annual animal welfare assurance visits. They ensure that businesses are compliant with requirements in animal welfare legislation and animals are spared avoidable suffering, distress, or pain during the slaughter process. FSA staff are instructed to take prompt and proportionate enforcement in response to animal welfare breaches. We apply an enforcement hierarchy that allows us to take informal enforcement where breaches are minor, and we believe it will be effective in avoiding future non-compliance. We also take formal action such as serving of notices, suspending or revoking Certificates of Competence, or referring a matter for formal investigation in cases where non-compliance falls into the most severe categories which may have caused pain or suffering or where informal enforcement has not resulted in subsequent compliance by the business.

3.4 Full responsibility for animal welfare and food safety in slaughterhouses rests with slaughterhouse FBOs who must meet legislative requirements in terms of slaughterhouse design, layout, equipment, and operation.

3.5 Defra and Welsh Government have policy responsibility for animal welfare controls on farm or during transportation. The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and Local Authorities (LAs) animal welfare teams are responsible for enforcement. Where checks by the OV at the slaughterhouse identify breaches, they are referred to APHA and the LA to investigate.

3.6 The FSA animal welfare team have established and lead a regular Animal Welfare Referral Working Group with Defra, Welsh Government, APHA, and LA representatives with the aim of improving animal welfare standards on farm and during transport by providing the best possible evidence to enable APHA and LAs to take appropriate action. The decision on subsequent enforcement is made by APHA and LAs.

4. Summary of Data on Animal Welfare Compliance in Slaughterhouses, On Farm and in Transport

4.1 In 2023/24 there were over 1 billion animals (1,009,052,611) processed in approved slaughterhouses in England and Wales. For 99.99% of animals no breaches of animal welfare standards were detected. 44,015 animals experienced an impact to their welfare, which equates to 0.0044% of all animals processed. When compared with 2022/23 (49,898 animals), this is an 11.8% reduction.

4.2 The number of slaughterhouse non-compliance cases increased from 354 cases in 2022/23 to 362 in 2023/24 (2% increase). Appropriate rectification through enforcement action was taken in all cases. Over the last three years, slaughterhouse non-compliances have averaged 363 cases per year, which indicates that 2023/24 cases (362) are broadly in line with the three-year average.

4.3 Enforcement data indicates that 87% of major and critical slaughterhouse non-compliances were identified by our officials in person, with 13% identified either by live or retrospective CCTV viewing in 2023/24 (this was 85% and 15% respectively in 2022/23). CCTV is routinely used as evidence to support enforcement action. CCTV also plays an important role in the suspension and revocation of Certificates of Competence (CoCs) in appropriate circumstances. There were 12 CoCs revoked and 27 CoCs suspended in 2023/24 (7 and 43 respectively in 2022/23). 90% (35 of 39) of all suspensions and revocations were supported by CCTV evidence (84% in 2022/23). The suspensions and revocations in 2023/24 equate to fewer than 0.3% of all CoCs held.

4.4 Compared to 2022/23 transport non-compliances reduced in 2023/24 by 16% (from 3344 to 2822), farm non-compliances increased by 36% (from 538 to 734). Part of the increase is due to several lameness non-compliances being registered in FSA systems as farm non-compliances. The evidence confirmed that the lameness had occurred prior to transportation. Prior to 2023/24 these cases would have been registered as transport non-compliances. This makes it difficult to make direct yearly comparisons for each category.

4.5 There were 3556 combined farm and transport non-compliance cases in 2023/24 and 3882 cases in 2022/23, which equates to an 8% reduction. We have continued to increase engagement and data sharing with APHA and LAs through our Animal Welfare Referrals Working Group and subgroups to improve the quality of referrals we make, to highlight repeat offences and offenders, and to secure improved enforcement outcomes, with the aim of improving animal welfare standards and reducing the number of non-compliances that occur.

5. Progress of In Year Activities

5.1 The Animal Welfare Action Plan is managed by the FSA and is monitored and approved by the Animal Welfare Steering Group comprised of representatives from FSA, Defra, Welsh Government, and other government departments. The Animal Welfare Action Plan seeks to improve and strengthen animal welfare controls through enhancing:

- verification and compliance.
- accountability and collaboration.
- education and instructions.

- the quality of our analysis and reporting.

5.2 In 2023/24 the FSA worked closely with Welsh Government to prepare for the implementation of **Mandatory CCTV in Slaughterhouses in Wales Regulations**, which came into force on 1 June 2024. The Regulations include a six-month period where the FSA will work with slaughterhouse FBOs to ensure they are compliant with the requirements, ahead of the Regulations being enforced from 1 December 2024. During 2023/24 the FSA conducted field surveys to assess the status of CCTV facilities in all 22 slaughterhouses in Wales. We communicated with industry representatives and slaughterhouse FBOs about the forthcoming new regulations, and we provided advice to Welsh Government during their production of Guidance for Operators which was published in May 2024.

5.3 In quarter 4 of 2023/24 the FSA animal welfare team led our sixth **animal welfare themed audit**. 30 slaughterhouses were audited during the period, 19 producing red meat and 11 producing poultry meat. The audit found that slaughterhouse FBO systems are broadly implemented in compliance with the legislation and provide a good level of assurance that the animal welfare legislative requirements are fulfilled. The audit was categorised into the following themes (with recommendations):

- Theme: CCTV (requirements, maintenance, and access).
 - Recommendation: Slaughterhouse FBOs to be reminded of their legal obligations under CCTV regulations, namely the installation and operation of the CCTV system, including the retention of images and information.
 - Recommendation: FSA to work with our veterinary service delivery partner to ensure that OV's understand their enforcement obligations when there has been a breach of CCTV legislation.
- Theme: Operation and maintenance of back up stunning equipment.
 - Recommendation: Slaughterhouse FBOs to be reminded to retain records of maintenance and calibration of back-up stunning equipment.
- Theme: Lairage (including water and feed provision).
 - Recommendation: Slaughterhouse FBOs and OV's should review all Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure the content includes comprehensive detail of the provision of water, feed, and bedding, including out of hours where appropriate.
- Theme: Prioritising killing of animals unfit upon arrival.
 - Recommendation: Slaughterhouse FBOs to ensure that their SOP procedures for prioritising and killing unfit animals reflects the legislative requirements of Assimilated Regulation No (EC) 1099/2009, Annex 3, 1.5.

- Theme: Handling and restraint.
 - No recommendations.
- Theme: Stun to stick time (duration from stunning to bleeding of animals).
 - Recommendation (best practice): Slaughterhouse FBOs to be reminded that their SOP should specify time limits from bleeding to dressing.
- Theme: Monitoring of unconsciousness/death.
 - Recommendation: Slaughterhouse FBOs to be reminded that their SOP should set out the frequency of their routine checks for signs of unconsciousness between stunning and death.

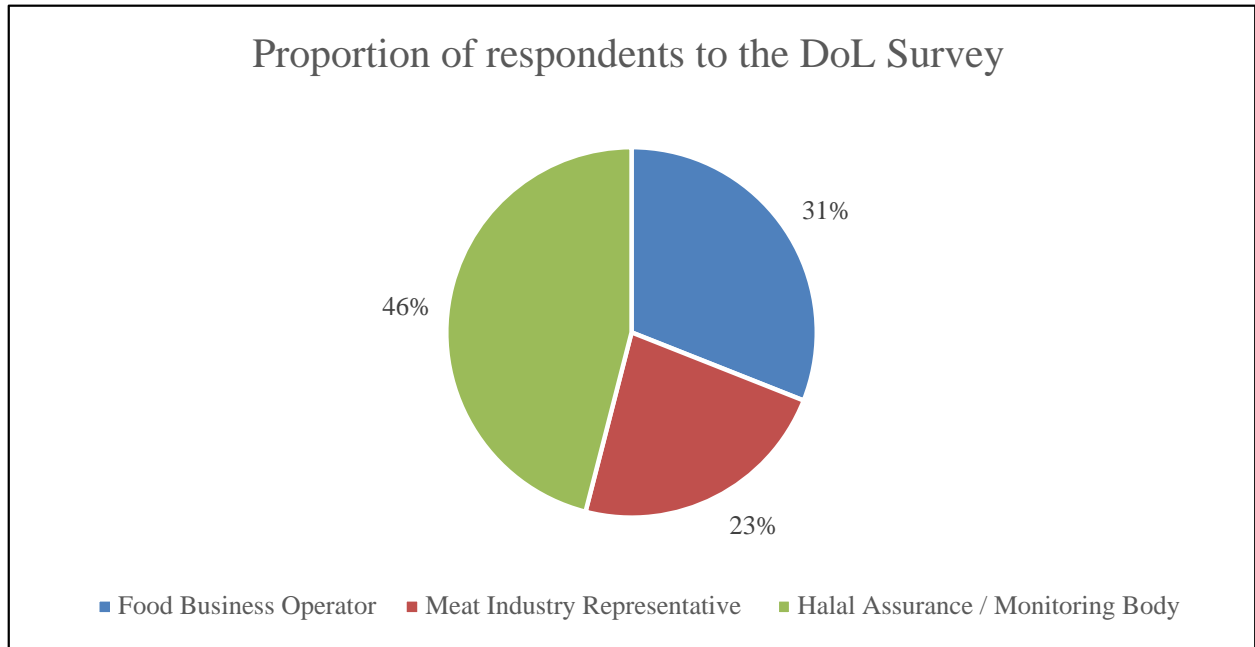
5.4 The FSA animal welfare team wrote to operational staff, slaughterhouse FBOs and industry representatives to advise them of the findings and to remind them of their responsibility to implement the recommendations. We will validate whether the recommendations are having the desired impact through reviews of slaughterhouse FBO inspection data, non-compliance data, and by conducting follow-up audits in 2024/2025.

5.5 The FSA animal welfare team developed an online facility in partnership with Government Digital Service for individuals to apply for a **Temporary Certificate of Competence (TCoC)** to slaughter or kill animals in approved slaughterhouses. A TCoC is required by a training slaughterhouse operative prior to qualifying for a full CoC. The online system received support from industry and was implemented on 5th February 2024. The system allows individuals to apply online. It is more accurate than the paper-based system it replaced, which enables FSA to process applications more quickly and make more efficient use of resources. There were 258 TCoC applications processed between 5th February and 31st March 2024.

5.6 The **Demonstration of Life (DoL)** protocol is available to all slaughterhouses processing sheep and goats. DoL is a voluntary scheme which provides assurance to Muslim consumers that stunning is compatible with halal slaughter requirements through assessment of an approved stunning procedure prior to slaughter. The scheme has had limited take-up by industry, with 3 slaughterhouse FBOs (approximately 23% of those performing non-stun slaughter in the 2022 slaughter sector survey) having adopted the scheme. In 2023/24 the FSA animal welfare team ran a stakeholder survey to determine if there are any barriers to take-up and to improve scheme awareness. Following the survey a further 2 slaughterhouse FBOs expressed an interest in the scheme with a likelihood that they will take part from 2024/25. The survey was issued to 29 recipients, across businesses categorised as slaughterhouses performing non-stun, meat industry representatives, and halal assurance / monitoring bodies. The results of the survey are shown in graph 2 below.

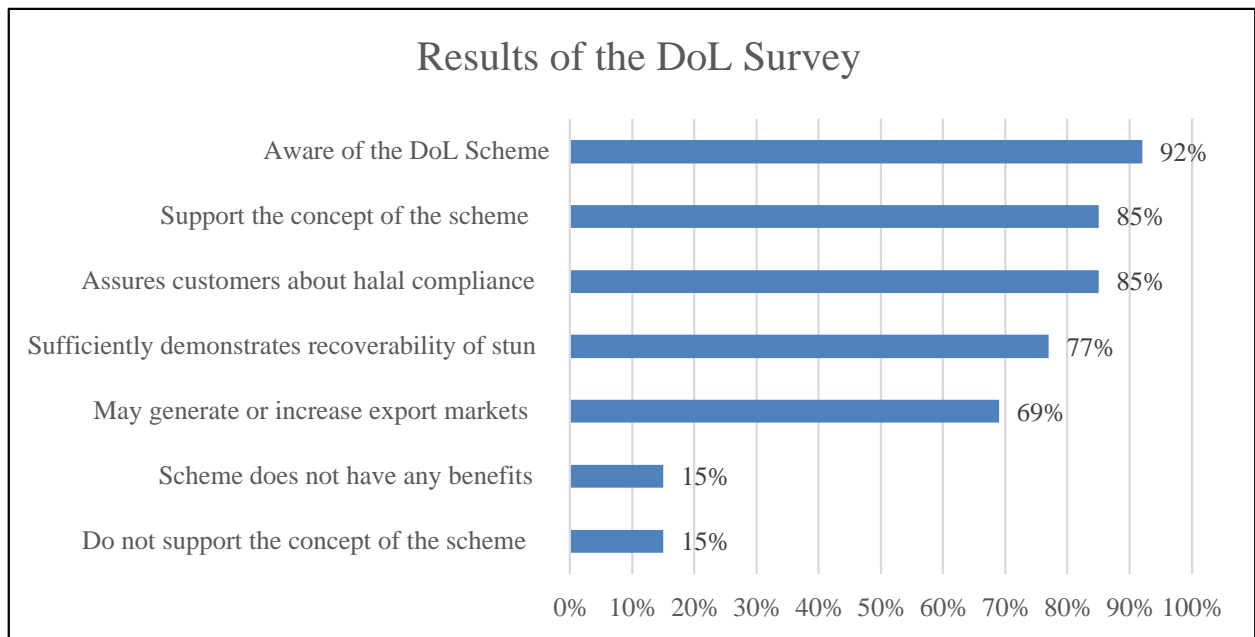
5.7

Proportion of respondents to the DoL Survey



5.8 Graph 1 – who responded to the DoL survey

5.9



5.10 Graph 2 – Summary of results of the DoL survey

Although 85% of respondents supported the concept of DoL, it is not reflected by the number of non-stun slaughterhouses that have adopted the scheme. Five recommendations were identified and have been completed based on the survey results:

- Provide more information about DoL to those surveyed.
- Encourage use of the scheme on the FSA website.

- Encourage use of the scheme at industry meetings.
- Encourage stakeholders to promote the scheme via their own channels.
- Temporarily remove the FSA fee.

5.11 A Slaughter Sector Survey was conducted by the FSA in March 2022 on behalf of Defra and Welsh Government and was published in August 2022.

5.12 [Farm animals: slaughter sector survey 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/farm-animals-slaughter-sector-survey-2022)

5.13 The survey found there was a 2% decrease in the levels of slaughter without stunning of sheep from the 2018 survey, from 25% to 23% (61,120 animals to 49,450 animals) but a large increase from 7.5% to 25% for goats (from 30 to 92). The FSA, whilst acknowledging that non-stun slaughter is legally permissible, will continue to work with slaughterhouses to promote the use of the DoL scheme. There is no mandatory requirement for meat to be labelled according to production method, for example stunned or non-stunned. We will continue to liaise closely with Defra and Welsh Government on this and any other work related to non-stun slaughter.

5.14 In February 2024 we conducted a **slaughter sector survey** in all slaughterhouses in England and Wales on behalf of Defra and Welsh Government and presented the draft findings to them in June 2024. The survey scope was the same as in 2022. Defra and Welsh Government are responsible for publishing the final report and we will use the data to make comparisons to previous surveys.

5.15 Following the extreme heat in July and August 2022, the FSA animal welfare team developed a new **extreme weather incident reporting** protocol, in which actions are triggered by amber or red weather alerts. During 2023/24 the team led on delivering enhancements such as a change of trigger system (automated UKHSA alerts for earlier notifications), improved reporting, and revised template letters for distribution to operational staff, transporters, and industry representatives. These translate into business operators being sooner and better informed so that they can adjust their operations to safeguard animal welfare. The extreme weather incident reporting protocol has not been invoked since the enhancements were made because there have been no triggering weather alerts.

5.16 The reporting year did not include any incidents of **undercover filming** in slaughterhouses; however, the FSA animal welfare team have continued to proactively monitor the social media content from known activist groups which has identified some content relating to farm welfare issues. We have engaged with other enforcement bodies and industry stakeholders to ensure they are aware of the content and can investigate any allegations.

5.17 The FSA supported a successful Local Authority **animal welfare prosecution** in March following evidence gathered in August 2023 under The Welfare of Animals (Transport) (England) order 2006. The plant OV identified inappropriate handling of pigs during unloading and provided exceptional evidence to the local authority who in turn investigated and took appropriate action. Evidence included CCTV footage and delivery documentation. The case led to two guilty pleas being entered on separate charges. The sentence included financial penalties and costs exceeding £800. All operational staff involved in the evidence collection received positive feedback in securing this result.

5.18 Defra launched the **Smaller Abattoir Fund (SAF)** in December 2023, which is a grant scheme to support smaller businesses in England. Fund eligibility requires applicants to demonstrate improvements to animal health and welfare. FSA Operations teams ensured this

information reached all eligible slaughterhouse FBOs and engaged with them to support animal welfare improvement projects. Projects receiving financial support have included new stunning equipment and animal lairage facilities.

5.19 In 2023/24 we produced new **guidance** or enhanced existing guidance relating to:

- Processes for sharing evidence with APHA and LA.
- OV liaison with hauliers and slaughterhouse FBOs.
- Required OV actions when referring incidents to LA/PHA.
- Dead on arrival, lame, heavily pregnant animals, and foot pad dermatitis.
- Animals that are unfit for human consumption.
- Slaughterhouse FBO standard operating procedures.
- The movement of animals.
- Use of back-up stun devices, and the interpretation of stunner data records.
- Applications for certificates of competence (CoC) to slaughter animals.
- The scope of CoCs pertaining to non-stun religious slaughter.
- Enforcement of CoC holders.
- Clarification on the period of retention of CCTV, and on OV checks on the functionality of CCTV systems.

6. Consumer and Stakeholder Interest in Animal Welfare

6.1 Latest insights from [Wave 7](#) of FSA's **Food and You 2** survey (conducted Apr-Jul 2023) reveal the extent to which consumers are concerned about animal welfare in the food production process. A third of respondents (33%) reported that they were 'highly concerned' and 42% were 'somewhat concerned'. This is unchanged from the previous survey, conducted between October 2022 and January 2023 (32% and 42% respectively).

6.2 There were 15 Freedom of Information requests processed by the FSA animal welfare team during 2023/24. This figure represents 6.5% of the total received by the agency (231). The most common FOI themes were enquiries about slaughterhouse operations, FSA enforcement, and the death of animals during transport. We welcome the opportunity to respond and explain the information that we share.

7. Policy Activity and Forward Look

7.1 Defra published its Post Implementation Review of the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015 and the Mandatory Use of Closed-Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses (England) Regulations 2018, in 2021 and 2023, respectively. The FSA animal welfare team will continue to work closely with Defra and Welsh Government to consider the conclusions from these reviews.

7.2 The FSA animal welfare team has worked successfully with counterparts in Defra and Welsh Government by providing operational insight into delivery of animal welfare policy and associated controls. Following a change of UK Government, the FSA animal welfare team have contributed to communications with new Ministerial teams including offers to host field visits to demonstrate frontline delivery and controls.

7.3 The introduction of mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses in Wales is detailed at section 5.2. Future work will establish a consistent approach to application of the legislation in parallel with the English legislation. This will include gathering and acting on compliance data and supporting Field Operations teams with any necessary enforcement action.

7.4 We will work with Defra and Welsh Government to agree how the 2025/26 delivery of animal welfare controls will be funded and monitored and to consider the results from the Slaughter Sector Survey 2024.

8. Conclusions

8.1 This paper provides an update on animal welfare activities in England and Wales. The Board is asked to note:

- The progress made in delivering activities of the Animal Welfare Action Plan and to enhance delivery of animal welfare policy in slaughterhouses that has resulted in an 11.8% reduction in the number of animals that experienced an impact to their welfare.
- The progress made relating to farm and transport activity resulting in an 8% reduction in non-compliances.
- The ongoing activities by the FSA to improve animal welfare implementation and assurance in slaughterhouses in England and Wales, particularly in the areas of farm and transport referrals to APHA and LAs, and religious slaughter.
- The FSA position on taking proportionate enforcement action towards breaches of animal welfare and working collaboratively with other animal welfare regulators.