

Reports and Comments

Codes of Practice for companion animals in Wales: dogs, cats and equines; a case for less is more

In November 2008, the Welsh Regional Assembly published Codes of Practice for cats, dogs and equines, the first such codes for companion animals produced in Britain. Under the UK Animal Welfare Act 2006 there is a legal duty for owners and keepers to take reasonable steps to ensure their animal's welfare needs are met and these codes seek to give practical advice and legal guidance on how to achieve this.

The Codes use a framework based upon the 'Five Freedoms', with sections that give advice on 'Environment', 'Diet', 'Behaviour', 'Company' and 'Health and Welfare'. Furthermore, the information is split into two parts: Part 1 being a summary of the more extensive guidance and advice provided in Part 2. In the drafting of any such codes, there is always a compromise to be reached between including only that which has been scientifically proven to be necessary to ensure and maintain the welfare and health of an animal and that which expert opinion considers to be desirable, even though objective evidence to support this view may be lacking. It is in finding a balance between these two that the ultimate worth of such codes depends.

In that the information contained within Part 1 is a summary, it tends to be brief and to the point. In the Dog Code, for example, the summary section on 'Environment' requires owners to "make sure your dog has a suitable place to live" by providing it with "a comfortable, dry, draught-free resting area to which it has constant access and where it feels safe" and that it is "kept away from potentially harmful substances". Under 'Diet' we are told that dogs "must be fed at least once a day" and generally it is advised to feed "twice a day" and that dogs "should not be too fat or too thin". The Code's use of the 'Five Freedom' framework also means that behaviour, so long the 'ugly duckling' with respect to legislation, takes its rightful place alongside that of health as an area of welfare concern. One consequence of this is that the importance of adequately socialising young animals is highlighted; failure of which results each year in animals being abandoned, given up for rehoming or, in the most extreme cases, euthanised. The role of the breeder in ensuring both the physical and behavioural well-being of the animal to be purchased is also raised; currently a very topical area of concern. So far, so good and indeed a strong case could be made that if the Codes had only included the information contained in Part 1 then that would have been sufficient.

It is when the Codes seek to expand the guidance, as occurs in Part 2 of the Codes, that some difficulties in striking a balance between objective and subjective advice arise. For, taken as a whole, rather too much of the advice in Part 2 is based upon opinion perceived or on some wished-for ideal other than that necessary to ensure the welfare of the animal. As such, the worry is that elements of this subjective (over) guidance risks attracting public criticism that could detract from the other advice contained within the Codes. Two notable examples include the advice that you

should avoid feeding your dog from the table or your plate as this can encourage your dog to beg and bark, and that as part of providing cats with opportunities to climb and jump, that they should be given safe access to shelves and the tops of cupboards. Whilst possibly desirable, on reflection perhaps both could have been omitted; in the first instance because the advice addresses a relatively benign activity that many owners and their pets enjoy and for the second because it encourages something many owners would not wish to occur and that can be better addressed by allowing cats access to the outdoors. Of the Codes, it is the Dog Code which would have benefited most from a more rigorous approach to drafting and the Equine Code which is the strongest, perhaps because it has the most uniform group of stakeholders it seeks to engage with.

Further Codes are to follow for both Scotland and England and it will be of interest to see how these compare to the Welsh Codes and what, if any, changes are made.

The Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Cats, Dogs and Equines (2008). A4, 50 pages (cat), 56 (dog), 64 (equines). National Assembly for Wales. Copies of these documents can be obtained from: The Publications Centre, Welsh Assembly Government, Crown Buildings, Cathays Park, Cardiff CF10 3NQ, UK. Email: assembly-publications@wales.gsi.gov.uk. Also available for download from: <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/environment-country/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/codesofpractice>.

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Companion animal welfare assessment: outlining a possible future for UK pets

As an oft-repeated cliché highlights, the British like to view themselves as 'a nation of animal lovers' and of these animals it is those species kept as companions that attract the greatest affection. Given this it is perhaps surprising that, and as detailed in this report from the UK's Companion Animal Welfare Council, formal mechanisms to assess and monitor the welfare of companion animals are incomplete and fragmentary. Rather than relying on objective assessments, as has become increasingly the practice with regard to farmed animals or those used in scientific experiments, judgements about welfare in companion animals in the UK are based on experience, tradition and (common sense) opinion. Whilst the report finds nothing wrong in this, it explores the more objective assessments that are available and the impact that a more formal monitoring of welfare through the use of these, may have for companion animals. In particular, the report considers how they would enable the identification of priorities for improvement, which could then be incorporated into codes of practice, and the assessment of the effectiveness of any change. As such, and as stated in its introduction, this report is directed at animal health and welfare professionals, professional animal carers and all those involved in the implementation of the Animal

Health and Welfare Strategy published by the UK's Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

In addressing this area, the approach taken by the report is to categorise based upon areas of activity, eg distinguishing between commercial and voluntary sector services, such as boarding, livery animal homes, sanctuaries and quarantine facilities, between companion animal retail and private ownership, etc. This is because they believe that welfare is affected by risks and that similar areas of activity have similar risks. This, in turn, leads to a recommendation that areas of service activity need to develop organisational representation which can implement identified strategies for improving welfare. They also recognise that species-specific bodies have a role to play in helping these bodies to achieve this, as does the Government. Overarching this, they also recommend the establishment of a supervisory body which could be tasked to ensure the proper development and application of welfare assessment protocols for each species.

The report itself is split into several sections; the two largest being 'Companion Animal Welfare Assessment', and the 'Application of Welfare Assessment to Companion Animals'. The former considers why animal welfare is important, how it can be assessed and how these assessments can be used to support regulation and makes recommendations regarding the development of codes of practice. The latter section explores the range of behavioural and physiological indicators that can be used to assess welfare and how these might be used on a national basis to practically assess and monitor welfare and the responsibilities of service providers with regard to such activities.

For anyone interested in developing a more structured and objective approach to addressing welfare issues in companion animals in the UK, this report is to be welcomed. What is to be regretted is that the future vision and approach laid out in this report, and the advice regarding the development of Codes of Practice, has been overtaken by events with the consultation on, and recent or imminent publication of, species-specific codes of practice for dogs, cats and equines in Wales, Scotland and England already having occurred. The challenge to all is to ensure that the structures and actions envisaged in this report are implemented so that they stay abreast of events and can proactively guide all future developments in this area.

Companion Animal Welfare Assessment (February 2009). A4, 60 pages. Published by the Companion Animal Welfare Council, UK. Copies are available at www.cawc.org.uk/reports

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Welfare of meat chickens — EU and UK rules

In June 2010, the European Council Directive 2007/43/EC will come into force. The aim of this Directive is to protect the welfare of chickens raised for meat (commonly known as broilers) from the time they arrive at production sites until the time they leave for slaughter. The Directive is the

first piece of Community legislation to lay out baseline conditions specifically relating to the rearing of meat chickens and will apply to all holdings with 500 or more broilers, throughout the European Union. Holdings with fewer than 500 meat chickens, parent flocks, hatcheries, extensive indoor, free-range and organic chicken systems will all be excluded from the Directive.

In order to enact this Directive in England, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has drafted the Welfare of Farmed Animals and Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2009. These Regulations are currently undergoing consultation and, once finalised, will also come into effect in June 2010. The Welfare of Farmed Animals and Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2009, will be made under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and will amend the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 and also the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007.

These Regulations make provision for an outcome-based feedback mechanism (collecting data from slaughterhouses) for assessment of welfare on a more individual basis and also to help identify producers who are failing to operate at a suitable level of welfare. Additionally, it is proposed that special approval will be needed if birds are to be kept at the highest of the three stocking-density categories defined: 33 kg m⁻², 39 kg m⁻² and 42 kg m⁻². The issue of maximum permitted stocking density is controversial as the European Union's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare stated that behaviour and leg disorder studies have shown "that the stocking density must be 25 kg m⁻² or lower for major welfare problems to be largely avoided and that above 30 kg m⁻², even with very good environmental control systems, there is a steep rise in the frequency of problems". An encouraging inclusion in the draft Regulations is the recognition of the importance of stockmanship; it is proposed that a Level 2 NVQ in Livestock Production (Poultry) is the minimum qualification that stock-keepers working on broiler units should hold.

Along with the draft Regulations, a number of other documents associated with the welfare of meat chickens are also currently under review by Defra, including a Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Meat Chickens and Breeding Chickens.

Consultation: Welfare of Farmed Animals and Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2009 and Associated Documentation (26 January 2009 for comment by 20 April 2009). Available at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/broiler-welfare/index.htm>.

The Welfare of Chickens Kept for Meat Production (Broilers). Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare for the European Commission (2000). A4, 149 pages. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/food/fs/sc/scah/out39_en.pdf.

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