Measuring welfare

THE Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) has published some useful reports of late. Topics addressed in recent documents include tackling genetic welfare problems in companion animals, regulation of services in relation to training and behaviour modification in companion animals, and companion animal welfare surveillance. Its latest report, on welfare assessment in companion animals, which was launched this week, is no less pertinent.

The report looks at the assessment of companion animal welfare in the context of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy and makes the point that reliable means of assessment need to be developed if companion animal welfare is to be improved: ‘If we cannot “measure” welfare, how can we know if it is good or bad? How can we evaluate the success of programmes that aim to change animal welfare? Thirdly, how can we identify threats to animal welfare?’ However, it points out, as things stand, baseline information is lacking as, indeed, are the structures and systems that will be needed for the necessary data to be obtained.

Ensuring good welfare means more than providing the basic resources for life. ‘Most companion animals,’ the CAWC points out, ‘are sentient and have feelings’, and the aim must also be to provide for ‘the things they reasonably want for a good quality of life’. The Five Freedoms, which are used to define animals’ basic needs, are, it says, ‘a starting point, but not an endpoint in defining animal welfare’, and its report explores what is meant by ‘good welfare’ and what can be done to determine whether animals’ needs and reasonable wants are being met.

It discusses behavioural, physiological, clinical and pathological and other indices that can be used to assess animal welfare, noting that some of the most useful measures are those which are outcome based. It argues that indices need to be developed further and protocols for assessing welfare in different species agreed. The CAWC acknowledges that welfare assessment will always involve a degree of judgement. However, decisions need to be evidence based and, it points out, the more such indices are developed and used, the more reliable judgements should be.

Despite calling for a better evidence base and being ‘convinced of the need to challenge some of the assumptions about how companion animals should be cared for’, the council believes that there is currently sufficient knowledge of good husbandry practice for companion animal species to allow for the development of codes of practice on their welfare, although it emphasises that these would need to be amended as more information becomes available. Such codes, it says, should make clear what owners must do for their animals to meet legal requirements, recommend what they should do, and also advise what they could do in terms of best practice. It expresses disappointment that the Animal Welfare Act does not include a regulation that would have clarified what owners must do for their animals, describing this as ‘a missed opportunity’.

Meanwhile, a strategic aim of the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy is the promotion and, where necessary, improvement of animal welfare through partnership. This is described by the CAWC as a ‘deceptively simple statement’. As well as discussing issues surrounding the assessment and measurement of improvements in welfare, its report notes that, to work in partnership, you first need to find your partners. This, it points out, is problematic in the companion animal sector because most advocacy for companion animal welfare is through animal welfare organisations which, while having an important role in providing evidence, do not fulfil the role of ‘partners’ as seems to be required by the strategy. Partners in this context, it says, would be associations representing ‘activity groups’ such as pet retailers, boarding establishments, animal sanctuaries and so on – but, it says, ‘generally they do not exist’. It believes that developing partners based around certain areas of activity could be ‘a very necessary’ step in implementing the strategy.

Among the CAWC’s recommendations is that companion animal welfare protocols should be developed by species interest groups, animal welfare organisations and bodies representing specific activities. It sees this as a private sector initiative, facilitated by the Government and Defra. It further recommends the establishment of a supervisory body, appointed by the companion animal sector, to ensure a consistent approach.

In discussing the whole range of companion animals and different types of ownership, the CAWC’s report (available at www.cawc.org.uk) is both thought-provoking and thoughtful: it gives a useful indication of what could be achieved, while not underestimating the scale of the task ahead.

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