Planning amid uncertainty

Implementation plans do not normally make for riveting reading. However, the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework Implementation Plan for 2016/17, which was published last week (see pp 157-158 of this issue), should perhaps be regarded as an exception. The Welsh Government’s document is notable both for being quick off the mark in referring to the possible implications of Brexit for plans to safeguard animal health and welfare, and in highlighting the value of animal health and welfare to society. It provides an informative overview of animal health activity in Wales, as well as highlighting current concerns. It is also remarkably clear and well written, and makes for much better reading than most other documents of this kind.

Regarding the societal benefits of animal health and welfare, the implementation plan sets these firmly within the context of Wales’s Well-being of Future Generations Act, which was passed by the Welsh Assembly in 2015 and aims to improve ‘the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales’. In a foreword to the document, Lesley Griffiths, the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, points out that animal health and welfare make ‘a major contribution to sustainability of the livestock sector, to the wider food and farming industry and more broadly to the countryside, the environment, communities and the economy’. Reinforcing this message, a table in the document links the Animal Health and Welfare Framework to various goals of the Act. Discussing goals relating to prosperity, for example, it notes that healthy livestock kept to high standards of welfare ‘supports marketing and trade opportunities and helps farmers increase profit margins as well as sustaining and creating jobs’, while also pointing out that ‘an outbreak of animal disease incurs direct and indirect impacts which can lead to substantial cost and disruption’. Referring to human health, it notes, among other things, that ‘controlling and eliminating animal disease contributes towards safer food and improved public health’, and that ‘animals can also contribute to the well-being of people both mentally and physically’.

Similar principles apply to varying degrees, in other parts of the UK, but it is good to see them articulated so clearly.

On Brexit, the implementation plan highlights some of the uncertainties resulting from the outcome of the recent referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU while also making clear that life must go on in the meantime. Ms Griffiths notes in her foreword that it is too early at this stage to go into detail about what might happen while also stating that ‘there will be no immediate changes to regulatory requirements or to EU investments and funding’. That much may be true for the time being but, as with so much else in relation to Brexit, it’s uncertainty about what happens next that’s the problem. Emphasising the importance of partnership working and collaboration in efforts to improve animal health and welfare, Christianne Glossop, the Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales, points out in the document that this becomes even more important when faced with a period of significant change and says that the Welsh Government will continue to consult with all of its partners as it assesses the implications of the referendum result for animal health and welfare policy and its implementation. In the meantime, she says, ‘We must continue to press ahead with the implementation plan for 2016-17, and the principles of embedding high standards of animal health and welfare’.

The implementation plan sets out and discusses plans for the coming year in terms of the Welsh Government’s priorities as well as priorities for the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group. This group was set up in 2014 to reflect the views of livestock keepers, animal owners and vets and to support the implementation of framework policies. The emphasis throughout is on working in partnership, with activities being based on the principle that prevention is better than cure. Issues discussed in the plan include antimicrobial resistance, disease surveillance, biosecurity and contingency planning, and it also outlines plans for tackling specific diseases such as bovine viral diarrhoea and sheep scab. Equine and companion animals are not neglected, with discussion, for example, of plans to promote responsible pet ownership and to review and update codes of practice on welfare, and to consider including equine biosecurity in an overarching campaign on this topic. On bovine TB, it notes that the current Strategic Framework for the eradication of bovine TB in Wales comes to an end this year and draws attention to plans to review the strategy and take forward a ‘refreshed programme’ following ministerial agreement. Discussing animal welfare at slaughter, it refers to plans to assess the need for and possible implementation of CCTV in slaughterhouses, as well as to work with Trading Standards to develop and establish ‘a different way of delivering key animal welfare enforcement’ across all local authorities in Wales.

Activity relating to animal health in the UK has been devolved for many years now, which is one of the reasons why Wales introduced its Animal Health and Welfare Framework in 2014 and why, more recently, the Scottish Government announced a strategy ‘tailored to Scotland’s needs’ (VR, April 2, 2016, vol 178, pp 326, 327). There are clearly benefits in a devolved approach but, at the same time, disease does not respect administrative boundaries and activities need to be coordinated. Like the Scottish strategy document, the Welsh implementation plan also refers to devolution of budgets. Discussion around this issue seems likely to intensify in the light of the Brexit vote and, with so much else up in the air, it will be interesting to see how matters are resolved.


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