

Report on the provision of small red meat abattoirs

The number of abattoirs in the UK has fallen considerably since the mid-twentieth century. In the 1930s it is reported that there were 30,000 working abattoirs in the UK, but in 2020 that figure has dropped to 250. The closure of these premises has occurred at a time when the UK population, and thus our demand for meat, has increased substantially. The impact of these closures has been felt by numerous groups and the environment. To varying degrees, farmers, consumers and the animals entering the food chain have all been affected by the changes in slaughter practices over the past 90 years.

In June 2020, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APPGAW) published its Report entitled, 'The Future for Small Abattoirs in the UK: A Report on An Enquiry into Small Red Meat Abattoir Provision.' Although agriculture is a devolved matter, the Report covers the situation in England, Scotland and Wales. The work was prompted by concerns raised regarding the decline of abattoirs, particularly those operating on a small scale. The authors note that when assessing the situation, it is important to be mindful of the wider circumstances. The future of British agriculture is being reshaped as the country faces political challenges (eg Brexit), environmental issues and the shift in the public's perception of animal-based products. It is stated within the Report that this is an 'ideal time' to examine the status of small abattoirs and their contribution to the agricultural industry within the UK. An introductory chapter gives the reader relevant background to the situation and describes the geographical distribution of red meat abattoirs in the UK, how they fit with the transport networks, and summarises the current slaughter business models.

In the Report, the authors raise and address four key questions:

- What evidence is there that the closure of many small-scale abattoirs has a negative impact on animal welfare and the rural economy?
- Why have abattoirs closed and what impact have regulation and wider policy matters had on the decline of abattoirs?
- Is there a need for a network of small-scale abattoirs, do they provide a different business model and, if so, how can they be viable and sustainable?
- What is the role of Government in shaping the end of life process?

To address these questions, pertinent information is presented in the Report's three main chapters. Within these chapters, data are reported along with stakeholder views and case studies, reminding us of the reality of the situation. As well as raising views and concerns, solutions and recommendations are also provided in the relevant sections of the Report.

The chapter entitled 'Small abattoirs and animal welfare' addresses welfare during transport, the welfare of animals in abattoirs, the role of Animal Welfare Officers (AWOs), illegal slaughter, emergency slaughter on-farm and the slaughter of equids. The following chapter, 'Small abattoirs, the rural economy and wider food, farming and environmental strategies' tackles the financial importance of local abattoirs on the local economy, the need for specialist equipment when handling and slaughtering some native and rare breeds of livestock, and the potential environmental benefits local abattoirs can offer. The chapter, 'Challenges for small abattoirs: issues involved with closures and possible solutions' puts forward business strategy, economics and the challenges faced by smaller businesses when regulations demand the procurement of expensive equipment and highly qualified staff.

Although the welfare of animals in low-throughput abattoirs is not necessarily higher than those in high-throughput plants, the authors of the Report believed the availability of small-scale abattoirs in the UK offers additional advantages relating to animal welfare; for example, they may prevent illegal slaughter, cope with the specific physical demands of some native breeds or less commonly slaughtered species, and they may be more able to meet the needs of farmers who are required to perform emergency slaughter.

Additionally, in the Report, farmers raised their concerns that a lack of adequate local facilities may lead to livestock travelling longer distances which can be detrimental to animal welfare and meat quality. The authors addressed these concerns and made a number of recommendations including the provision of facilities that enable shorter journey times from point of rearing to slaughter, eg a network of small abattoirs or mobile slaughter units. Other recommendations for improving animal welfare include consideration as to how small abattoirs could be supported to access training and development of skills that enable them to have AWOs and offer a wider range of services, such as rare breed or equine slaughter.

The authors "hope this Report helps in some way to bring Government together with stakeholders to support small abattoirs." The delivery of this Report is timely. As the world changes around us and we rise to meet the challenges on the horizon, the welfare of food animals must remain a priority. If developing and maintaining a network of small-scale or mobile abattoirs aids us in safeguarding and improving their welfare, it should be supported.

The Future for Small Abattoirs in the UK: A Report on An Enquiry into Small Red Meat Abattoir Provision (June 2020). A4, 51 pages. Report available at <https://www.nfu-cymru.org.uk/nfu-cymru/documents/the-future-for-small-abattoirs-2020/>.

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