



Companion Animal Welfare Council

Companion Animal Welfare Surveillance

A Scoping Report Published by the Companion Animal Welfare Council

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Scoping Report on Companion Animal Welfare Surveillance

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Contents

Introduction and background

1. Why is there a need to survey welfare?
2. What are the main difficulties foreseen?
3. Could types of welfare problem be grouped or categorised in some way that might facilitate surveillance?
4. Should surveillance be initially targeted at specific, carefully chosen, problems that can be used to provide an index of the status of companion animal welfare?
5. What elements of welfare surveillance already exist?
6. Who should be involved? Who should be responsible? Should there be a central information repository?
7. Conclusions and recommendations

Appendix 1 Members of the CAWC Working Party on welfare surveillance in companion animals

Appendix 2. Participants at the Workshop Meeting on Companion Animal Welfare Surveillance held at the House of Lords on Tuesday 9th October 2007

Appendix 3 Other acknowledgements

CAWC Scoping Report on Companion Animal Welfare Surveillance

Introduction and Background

Knowledge of the status of animal welfare – of the nature of the main problems and of their prevalence – is crucial to any serious endeavours to focus efforts where they are most needed for major improvements. Recognising this, and having the impression that there is very little formal monitoring of the welfare of companion animals in the UK, the Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) established a working group in late 2006 (Appendix 1) to undertake preliminary thinking on this subject, with the following aims:

- To define more clearly the task (of welfare surveillance) and its potential benefits.
- To estimating the scale of this task
- To consider approaches and whether these are (a) possible and (b) practically and economically feasible
- To producing a brief review (hopefully to be published during 2007) with recommendations regarding the way forward, and to
- initiate debate on the subject.

Modus operandi of the scoping study

The Working Group's deliberations led to the production during the first half of 2007 of a preliminary draft of this Report. The Working Group then organised a meeting to share its thoughts with other interested parties and to seek views: particularly regarding the importance of welfare surveillance and how an initiative might be designed, developed and taken forward. This meeting was held on Tuesday 9th October 2007 at the House of Lords (the participants are listed at Appendix 2). The key points of this scoping study on companion animal welfare surveillance are presented below under the following headings:

1. Why is there a need for welfare surveillance?
2. What are the main difficulties foreseen?
3. Could types of welfare problems be categorised in some way that might facilitate surveillance?
4. Should surveillance be initially targeted at specific, carefully chosen, problems that can be used to provide an index of the status of companion animal welfare?
5. What elements of welfare surveillance already exist?
6. Are there any models of approaches in other fields that might be helpful in developing a strategy for welfare surveillance?
7. A way in which a scheme for surveying the welfare of companion animals might be begun.
8. Who should be involved? Who should be responsible? Should there be a central information repository?
9. Conclusions and recommendations

1. Why is there a need to survey welfare?

There are various reasons why a system for surveying the welfare of companion animals would be of value. These include:

- To provide the necessary information for a review of the extent and scale of the problems, assessment of their relative importance, and prioritisation of resources for welfare improvements
- To provide baseline data from which to assess future changes, positive or negative
- To provide baseline data for comparisons with other animal sectors (eg farm, laboratory, zoo and wild) both to inform society and for use in decisions regarding apportionment of resources for welfare improvements
- As part of procedures to monitor new and emerging problems (eg arising from environmental or societal changes)
- The new Animal Welfare Act introduces the ‘duty of care’. If the effectiveness of this measure is to be assessed, surveillance will be needed.

In short, surveillance is needed because it is likely to lead to very significant animal welfare advances.

Participants at the meeting held at the House of Lords on 9th October (hereafter called the stakeholder meeting) to discuss the subject, expressed very strong support for the idea of developing a welfare surveillance system.

2. What are the main difficulties foreseen?

It is clear that developing a comprehensive welfare surveillance system would be a major undertaking. Several categories of problems can be foreseen, as listed below.

- Challenges associated with the great diversity of species bred and kept as companion animals (>1000 species in UK: fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals).
- Challenges relating to dealing with the large number and diversity of specific welfare problems for each species, and for each breed within species
- Challenges relating to the fact that welfare assessment involves subjective judgement
- Challenges relating to lack of consensus about welfare assessment (and the priority problems)
- Challenges associated with establishing systems for detection and monitoring
- A variety of approaches to detection and monitoring may be necessary depending on species/breed
- There is no compelling economic, or other societal, driver for establishment of a welfare surveillance scheme (in contrast, for example, with establishment of surveillance for serious livestock epidemics).
- Challenges in raising funds for initiatives in this field.

In addition to the practical, logistical problems of welfare surveillance, as indicated in the list above, there are the difficulties associated with the unavoidable element of

subjectivity in assessing welfare. In previous reports (eg CAWC, 2006), CAWC has supported the approach of taking the following into account in assessing welfare:

- number of animals affected
- duration of the period for which they are affected, and
- severity or intensity of the welfare challenge.

The subjectivity involved in assessing the third of these – the severity or intensity of the welfare challenge – cannot be avoided but this difficulty can to some extent be managed by making the basis for welfare inferences as clear as possible. For example, by describing the nature of clinical or pathological lesions and /or behavioural or other indicators so that the basis of inferring, say, severe pain, is made apparent (and open to scrutiny and debate).

In selecting suitable indices for use in welfare surveillance – that is, suitable welfare problems whose prevalence to monitor, it makes sense also to take into account the tractability of the problem – the extent to which making an improvement may be possible.

3. Could types of welfare problem be grouped or categorised in some way that might facilitate surveillance?

Given the potential scale of the challenge, as outlined above, it does not appear feasible to establish from scratch a comprehensive scheme for surveillance of welfare of all species, let alone breeds, of companion animals. One way forward might be to focus on particular problems in particular taxa (breeds, species, or in some cases, higher level groups eg genera), at least in the first instance, and ideally, if possible, on problems that might provide some kind of meaningful index of overall welfare (but see first para in Point 4 below).

In this context, it may be helpful to attempt some categorisation of the kinds of welfare problems, to help in identifying those that might be included in a welfare surveillance scheme. The following categories might be helpful in this context.

- Deliberate harming of animals
- Non-deliberate failures of stewardship or duty of care
- Welfare problems arising through selective breeding
- Welfare problems associated with suboptimal housing /environment
- Welfare problems associated with suboptimal nutrition (eg overfeeding in dogs and cats, nutritional imbalances in non-domesticated species)
- Welfare problems associated with infectious diseases
- Welfare problems associated with non-infectious diseases (eg metabolic, toxic, dental, lameness)
- Welfare problems associated with failure to meet behavioural needs

Potential sources of data can be envisaged, at least for some of the above categories as indicated in the section below.

At the stakeholder meeting on 9th October there was a strong view that welfare surveillance should be done on a taxa by taxa basis rather than by looking across taxa

at various potential welfare problems (such as nutritional, behavioural, infectious etc). But that is not to say that there will not be merit in looking at cross species issues where relevant to do so.

4. Should surveillance be initially targeted at specific, carefully chosen, problems that can be used to provide an index of the status of companion animal welfare?

As mentioned above, it is hard to see how data could be collected methodically on a very wide variety of welfare problems in a very wide range of species. The task would be intractably large. Targetting selected problems would reduce the task to a more manageable scale for a start. However, it is doubtful that any such ‘indices’ chosen would provide an index of anything but themselves (except in unusual cases where there would be reason to expect that the prevalence of one problem would correlate significantly with the prevalence of another).

If this approach was to be pursued what kinds of welfare problems might be chosen to include in the list to generate the welfare index? Possibilities might include:

- Nutritional status: – overweight/underweight. It seems likely that there may be some data on prevalence of this already, at least in dogs, and that it would be feasible to undertake surveillance for obesity and/or inanition. One feature of these conditions, of relevance to their use as indices of welfare, is that they tend to be associated with suites of related problems.
- Prevalence of nutritional bone disease in non-domesticated species. This would be a useful indicator but, in practice, it would be likely to be difficult to undertake surveillance.
- Number of cases of deliberate harm to animals per annum. Some such data are available from animal welfare groups (eg RSPCA, SSPCA). However, they may not provide a robust basis for drawing conclusions about prevalence of changes over time because variation in detection effort is a major confounding variable.
- Prevalence of some specific diseases, infectious or non-infectious (that impact on welfare). Such data are scarce – even where data have been collected on the number of cases of a specific disease detected (eg at veterinary practices), it can be very hard to get reliable estimates of population size so estimates of prevalence may be very unreliable. There is a new initiative (Cicada) being run by Intervet looking at prevalence, through survey data from veterinary practices, of some infectious diseases in dogs, cats and rabbits. This may be a valuable source of data in the future. The Kennel Club has been undertaking a pedigree dog health survey (see <http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/item/570>) and this may provide information relevant to welfare surveillance. Chronic renal disease is of considerable welfare significance that could be a suitable candidate for surveillance.

- Prevalence of genetic welfare problems of the sort described in the CAWC Welfare and Breeding Report (CAWC, 2006). Here again, some data may be available for some breeds of some species (notably pedigree dogs). However, for the vast majority of animals no such data are collected systematically as far as we know.
- Prevalence of specific behavioural welfare problems. Here again, there are few readily available relevant data. But it might be feasible to undertake surveillance for some behavioural problems that are likely to be of relatively major welfare significance, eg: separation anxiety in dogs, noise phobias, and stresses in cats resulting from high population densities in some urban environments.

5. What elements of welfare surveillance already exist?

Although various aspects of the welfare of companion animals have been investigated for various purposes, there has been very little if any attempt at formal overview of the welfare status of companion animals at present. There is no central repository of information.

There is no overall surveillance or policy about this in the UK. There is nothing at EU level either as far as we are aware.

Publication of reports of new diseases/ problems and of specific surveys of disease incidence in the veterinary and related scientific literature can provide relevant information but, for the most part, this does not, and could not be used to derive an overview of welfare status that could be tracked over time. One of the problems is the lack of data on population sizes.

The following sources or initiatives could be seen as possible elements of welfare surveillance or could perhaps become elements of welfare surveillance:

- Drug companies have funded some studies eg on the prevalence of specific diseases, eg infectious (including parasitic) diseases.
- The Kennel Club's pedigree dog health survey (see <http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/item/570>)
- Data from pet insurance companies on claims for treatment of particular diseases or injuries
- Data collected by veterinary clinical pathology laboratories might be a source of information. There has been a recent collaborative initiative among these to collect data on MRSA cases in pets
- Data from pet food manufacturers on prevalence of diet-related conditions and diseases

- Data from animal protection organisations (eg SSPCA, RSPCA Welfare Indicators Report) on the numbers of cases of deliberate harm to animals.
- The ‘Cicada’ initiative looking at prevalence, through survey data from veterinary practices, of some infectious diseases in dogs, cats and rabbits.
- Umbrella organisations for various sectors of the companion animal ‘industry’ (fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds etc) might be sources of some information.
- We understand that the PDSA may be going to start collecting data from its practices and hospitals
- Under the Animal Welfare Act Local Authorities will be investigating/pursuing animal welfare problems and these may, in future, be a source of information of relevance to welfare surveillance.

6. Are there any models of approaches in other fields that might be helpful in developing a strategy for welfare surveillance?

It is intended, we gather, that Defra’s RADAR system may, in the fullness of time be relevant to companion animal welfare surveillance but it is a long-term project which is focusing primarily on diseases of farmed livestock in the first instance. In prioritising diseases for surveillance efforts, the RADAR scheme takes account of their potential impact on human health, livestock health and economics, biodiversity and other societal interests and on animal welfare. Approaches to assessing welfare impacts are in line with those outlined above (taking into account the numbers of animals affected, and the duration and severity/intensity of unpleasant feelings caused to them).

We note that the Farm Animal Welfare Council recently undertook a review and consultation exercise to try to determine the most important current welfare problems that need to be addressed.

A similar exercise might be valuable here, to seek views and consensus about companion animal welfare surveillance and, in particular, what indices might be the most suitable for surveillance.

These matters received considerable attention at the stakeholder meeting held at the House of Lords on 9th October and, from this, with the strong support of the participants, the approach outlined below emerged.

7. A way in which a scheme for surveying the welfare of companion animals might be begun

It is proposed that a feasible, practical, and relatively inexpensive way to begin surveying the welfare of companion animals would be (in very brief outline form) to:

- (i) identify a lead/umbrella organisation for each taxa (which could be a breed, a species or, a higher level group) and,

- (ii) ask this body to identify the most important welfare problems of the animals in their taxa (taking account of numbers affected, severity, duration and tractability – see Section 2 above).
- (iii) Depending on the nature of these problems, decide – in liaison with the lead body – how their prevalence could be measured.
- (iv) Ask the lead body to assess prevalence using these methods
- (v) In this way, collect data on prevalence of the perceived major welfare problems for (in due course) a wide range of taxa.
- (vi) Develop and put into practice steps to control the problem
- (vii) Continue to survey welfare so that the efficacy of these measures can be checked and monitored.

This is in line with approaches being encouraged and monitored by the England Implementation Group for welfare surveillance and improvement schemes in other sectors eg farmed livestock. Although such an approach has much to recommend it and it may indeed be the best way forward, there is no doubt that each of the steps would present a number of challenges. For example (using numbers corresponding to the steps listed above):

- (i) It may not be straightforward identifying suitable lead/umbrella organisations with the capacity to play a constructive role.
- (ii) It would be necessary to devise and present clear protocols for all involved so that, as far as possible, the welfare problems identified properly reflect the most important welfare problems for the animals (given that human perceptions, assumptions, knowledge and skills relating to this often vary widely).
- (iii) It may not be straightforward to devise surveying methods – ie to devise methods for diagnosis/detection of the problem (eg nutritional bone disease – which is common in some species - may not be apparent to pet owners until it has reached a very serious stage).
- (iv) Even if consensus is reached about which are the most important welfare problems, it may be very difficult to collect information on their prevalence. Often this might be because the size of the national population is not known and cannot be easily assessed, but there would be likely to be difficulties also associated with the animals being kept privately, and in some cases because detection of the problem requires specialist diagnostic methods.

In view of these potential difficulties – all of which seem likely to be real, we suggest that there is a strong case for trying to establish a coordinated approach. There seems a very strong case for someone overseeing the development of this scheme. Standard protocols will need to be developed, explained and ‘sold’ to participants, and the development of a scheme is likely to be an iterative process involving trialling methods and making adjustments in the light of experience. This will need a variety of skills including scientific, organisational and diplomatic. At a later stage someone will have to collect, safely archive and analyse data, publish results and liaise with participants. Unless done in a coordinated way and using standard protocols, it will

not be possible to compare across taxa in order to identify the most important overall problems (eg nationally) for concerted efforts. It is hard to see how this could be done without it being under the close supervision of a committed individual and, ideally, with the guidance and assistance of a suitable constituted scientific advisory group.

If a way can be found to take these ideas forward, then it would seem sensible to pilot the work initially with a few taxa before rolling the programme out more widely.

The research aspects of such a programme (handling and analysing incoming data) might be tackled partly by PhD studentships, but this would not be a way of setting up the initial infrastructure.

7. Who should be involved? Who should be responsible? Should there be a central information repository?

At present no body attempts, or is responsible for, keeping an overview on companion animal welfare. If a start is to be made somebody (or some body) will have to make it. Who could this be? Would any of the veterinary schools be interested? This would be likely to depend, at least partly, on the availability of funding.

It was suggested at the Stakeholder meeting that the Pet Advisory Committee (PAC) might be a suitable body to coordinate such a programme of companion animal welfare surveillance. It is understood that discussions about this are underway. Whichever body takes responsibility for this will need to have the capacity and resources to host and support a committed individual to begin to develop this work and the capacity to liaise with and coordinate activities with many individual specific taxa groups.

There seems no reason for or advantage in such work being developed separately in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and we would hope that the regions would all work together in this area.

As regards who should be responsible for welfare surveillance, arguably this is the collective responsibility of all companion animal owners and others who benefit from the companion animal industry. As outlined above, welfare surveillance will not be possible without some funding to support it and ways need to be found for raising funds for it, at least partly from this community.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

1. CAWC concludes that there are very good reasons to try to develop a system for companion animal welfare surveillance – the most important point being that it is likely to help very greatly in improving companion animal welfare.
2. Although developing a scheme would present significant challenges, we have been encouraged by enthusiasm and support for the development of a scheme expressed by representatives of many of the key organisations that would be likely to be involved, and conclude that efforts should be made to begin a pilot scheme.
3. We recommend that organisations representing the keepers of various breeds or other taxa who believe that they may be able to help in starting and developing a welfare surveillance initiative should liaise and try to find a way, working with experts in epidemiology and both health and behavioural aspects of welfare assessment, to set up and initiate a programme along the lines of that sketched out in Section 7.

Appendix 1 Members of the CAWC Working Party on welfare surveillance in companion animals

Dr James Kirkwood	Chairman of the Working Party
Lord Soulsby of Swaffham Prior	CAWC Chairman
Professor Sir Colin Spedding	Advisor to CAWC
Dr Susan Shaw	University of Bristol
Mr Andrew Frost	Defra
Mr Alan Waldron	Secretary

Appendix 2. Participants at the Workshop Meeting on Companion Animal Welfare Surveillance held at the House of Lords on Tuesday 9th October 2007

The members of the CAWC Working Party listed above (in Appendix 1) and:

Dr Vicki Adams	Animal Health Trust
Dr Frances Barr	British Small Animal Veterinary Association
Claire Bessant	Feline Advisory Bureau
Professor John Bradshaw	University of Bristol Veterinary School
Helen Browning	Chair, England Implementation Group
Rebecca Evans	National Equine Welfare Council
Mark Evans	RSPCA
John Helps	Intervet
Richard Hooker	PDSA
Bill Lambert	Kennel Club
Chris Laurence	Dogs Trust
Janet Nunn	Pet Care Trust
Holly Lee	Kennel Club
Dick Sibley	England Implementation Group
Graham Thurlow	Defra

Appendix 3 Other acknowledgements

We are grateful to others also who have helped in discussions or in providing information for this review, including: Ms Caroline Kisko (Kennel Club), Ms Kay Driver (SSPCA), Ms Marilyn Rydström (PDSA) and Dr James Wood (Cambridge University).

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