

# Real Welfare Outcomes assessments – getting down and dirty, and chewed, and bruised

Plenty has already been written about the Real Welfare Outcomes (RWO) project. But with the brief that my articles should be relevant and topical, and with RWO consuming our thoughts, time and office chat within the practice over the last few weeks, it seemed to be a subject that could not be ignored.

There has been a significant amount of unrest at producer meetings run by BPEX prior to the RWO launch date of April 1. Attendees at the meetings expressed disappointment at how the RWO assessments were being imposed upon them, at short notice, at their own cost. And for what benefit?

It must be pointed out that the project has been led and driven by the industry itself (coordinated and administered by BPEX) and is the result of a significant body of research by teams at Newcastle and Bristol universities, which began back in 2004.

The potential benefits of the scheme seem attractive: to prove that UK pigs enjoy higher welfare than their counterparts around the globe thus giving the UK pig industry a marketing advantage; to fend off a possibly more onerous EU-wide scheme originating from Brussels in years to come; and to focus minds on welfare issues so that the welfare of farmed pigs is genuinely improved.

For those unaware of the five RWO assessments, in which case the following may make little sense, the procedure consists of all pigs in a pen being assessed for lameness, their use of enrichment (straw, toys etc.), and whether or not they should be hospitalised. A sample of pigs within that pen is then assessed for body marks (scratches and bites) and bitten tails.

So how is the scheme working in practice? It would be fair to say that some of the initial assessments have not gone well. During the training process a number of potential flaws

At the time of writing, on-farm RWO assessments have been part of the Red Tractor assurance scheme requirements for about two months. There was much wailing and gnashing of teeth on the subject prior to implementation, so how has the dust settled now the plans are being put into action? **Paul Pemberton** of Garth Partnership relates some early experiences

were identified and more have become apparent as we have visited different types of finisher pig accommodation. Vets have returned to the practice from the assessments disheartened by the whole process.

Aggression and vigour are two characteristics associated with the modern finisher pig and assessors basically have to count stuff while being battered and chewed by 100kg mammalian equivalents of piranha fish. Not only is this physically unpleasant, even potentially dangerous, but it becomes very hard to concentrate on identifying the specified lesions while you are concurrently trying to preserve your biped status!

When assessing a sample within a pen or yard the only way of ensuring that, for example, 100 different pigs out of a yard of 250 are inspected (rather than the same ones over and over again) is either to pen them up and release them slowly (impractical) or to mark each one as it is assessed. Chasing pigs round a yard with a marker is hardly conducive to their welfare, and neither are common methods of defence against persistent porcine.

## Flaws in data collection

Even if you accept the physical hardship to both pig and assessor, we have already found a

number of reasons for the data being erroneous or unrepresentative of the day-to-day life of the pigs and, therefore, of poor quality. Some of the problems encountered so far are as follows:

- ▶ **Hospital pens are not assessed.** These can be occupied by lame and tail-bitten pigs, but as long as there are none in the main pens the farm can score very well despite the presence of a potential welfare problem.
- ▶ **The assessor becomes the enrichment.** Pigs are often asleep en masse until the strange person known as “the vet” walks into their building. From that point on the majority of their attention is devoted to the interloper and the assessment of enrichment use becomes badly skewed.
- ▶ **Body marks are caused by the assessment.** Scuffles break out among the curious, disturbed and chased pigs. Scratch marks, indicators in this scheme of poor welfare, may appear on the pigs as a result of the assessment and subsequently be scored.
- ▶ **Pigs are sometimes dirty making it difficult to assess body lesions.** This will only get

worse as the weather warms up with the advent of summer. Tail tips very frequently have a thin layer of muck on them making the specified 1cm scratch impossible to spot, especially in the subdued lighting of a typical pig house with the subject matter swarming around the yard like a flock of starlings.

▶ **Large straw bales in yards provide an excellent visual and physical barrier to the assessor.** Although the bales provide shelter and enrichment, scoring the pigs’ enrichment use and ensuring every pig has been assessed becomes impossible.

▶ **Pigs are already wearing multiple spray marks of different colours to indicate treatments received on different days.** It would be difficult to introduce yet another mark for the assessment that could be clearly identified and would not interfere with the treatment system. Therefore, assessed pigs are unmarked and it is inevitable that several will get sampled more than once.

▶ **Final Thoughts**  
Welfare assessment is an admirable concept, but is this the best and most efficient way of

going about it? Given the limitations already detailed, can we be sure that the best scoring farms genuinely provide the highest level of welfare?

Even if all UK farms achieve perfect welfare conditions, given that the poorest scoring 25% are required to take action to improve welfare (under assurance scheme rules) a quarter would still be required to implement changes.

Our clients are asking “What’s the benefit to me?” Currently this a tricky question to answer. Measures to rectify problems supposedly identified by the scheme are likely to have a cost associated with them, in addition to the extra cost of the assessments, with no promise of an improved return.

With many farms already operating on tight margins, these are costs they could do without. If UK producers are forced to quit the pig industry as a result, retailers will be forced to buy from farms abroad that are not subject to welfare assessments, in which case RWO could defeat its own object. ☒



“Our clients are asking “What’s the benefit to me?” Currently this a tricky question to answer

▶ **Pigs are already wearing multiple spray marks of different colours to indicate treatments received on different days.** It would be difficult to introduce yet another mark for the assessment that could be clearly identified and would not interfere with the treatment system. Therefore, assessed pigs are unmarked and it is inevitable that several will get sampled more than once.

▶ **Final Thoughts**  
Welfare assessment is an admirable concept, but is this the best and most efficient way of

going about it? Given the limitations already detailed, can we be sure that the best scoring farms genuinely provide the highest level of welfare?

Even if all UK farms achieve perfect welfare conditions, given that the poorest scoring 25% are required to take action to improve welfare (under assurance scheme rules) a quarter would still be required to implement changes.

Our clients are asking “What’s the benefit to me?” Currently this a tricky question to answer. Measures to rectify problems supposedly identified by the scheme are likely to have a cost associated with them, in addition to the extra cost of the assessments, with no promise of an improved return.

With many farms already operating on tight margins, these are costs they could do without. If UK producers are forced to quit the pig industry as a result, retailers will be forced to buy from farms abroad that are not subject to welfare assessments, in which case RWO could defeat its own object. ☒



What’s new in the pig world?



Find out at [www.pig-world.co.uk](http://www.pig-world.co.uk)