Local abattoirs: Why they are closing and how we can save them

The renaissance of short, local food chains has been an important development in recent years. These have flourished in the UK and elsewhere as increasing numbers of consumers have sought greater choice and bought meat from farm shops and other local outlets linked to farms with less intensive production systems. The benefits include positive impacts for animal welfare and the environment, due to shorter journeys, and enhanced farm incomes, employment, and rural economies.

Key to the continuance of local meat supplies and the viability of many traditional livestock farms is the existence of smaller local abattoirs. Most small abattoirs will undertake ‘private kill’, i.e. they will slaughter animals for individual producers and return the carcasses and offal to them or other designated local outlets. In general, larger abattoirs are either not willing or, in many cases, not able to provide this service.

Many smaller abattoirs also offer butchery, packing and other services which ensure that farmers without their own butchering facility can still legally sell their own meat at farmers’ markets, farm shops, local pubs and restaurants, or via mail order. A vibrant high-quality local food sector attracts more tourists, further adding to the economic benefits. Many consumers appreciate the additional assurance they get from being able to link the meat they buy directly to the farm where it was produced and there is growing interest in meat from pasture-fed, organic, free-range and rare and local heritage breed animals.

The decline in abattoirs

The national network of small local abattoirs is rapidly declining. There are now only around 100 small red meat abattoirs (those slaughtering no more than 1,000 livestock units annually) left in the UK, having lost 33 between 2007 and 2017. We have seen further losses over the past two years, with 4 abattoirs closing in 2019 and others struggling on the brink of closure.

As each additional local abattoir closes, farmers have to travel further to the next nearest facility. However, there comes a point when the cost of transporting live animals in one direction and carcasses in the other becomes prohibitive, and the farmer is forced to close or sell to a large retail outlet instead. Already, several areas of the country are without local abattoirs, and these black spots are likely to increase in size and number without urgent help for the existing abattoirs, and for new enterprises to replace those that have closed. If the decline is allowed to continue, the supply of fully traceable local meat will dry up. There is some evidence that illegal on-farm slaughtering also increases in areas that lose their local abattoir.

Reasons for the closure of small abattoirs

There is no single reason why so many small abattoirs are being forced to close but some of the main problems include:
**Infrastructure costs**

Many small abattoirs currently face significant infrastructure costs to install things like head restraints and stunning boxes, upgrade electrical stunning equipment, install CCTV cameras and keep facility structures, including floors and roofs, up-to-date. The relative cost of all these improvements are significantly higher per animal for small abattoirs because they only slaughter one or two days a week, whereas large abattoirs slaughter 5 days a week and for longer hours using shifts. In relation to CCTV there are additional costs because the buildings are generally older with thicker walls, making them less suitable for WIFI transmission, the number of animals slaughtered is very much smaller and lairage pens, which must each have a camera, are much smaller. In addition, the administrative costs of labelling and storing disks and maintaining the equipment will be as high for small abattoirs as for large ones. While the initial cost of installing CCTV is typically no more than £6,000 per small abattoir, this on top of other capital expenditure, rising costs and falling income has contributed to some recent closures.

The Welsh Government made £1.1 million available for infrastructure grants for its 15 small abattoirs. In the rest of the UK, however, there is no grant funding tailored to the small abattoir sector.

**Bureaucracy**

All abattoirs have to complete a large amount of paperwork. This includes significant duplication for multiple agencies, which could be reduced. This burden falls more heavily on small abattoirs than large ones because the number of animals in each consignment is very much smaller, meaning that on average there are a lot more forms to complete per animal.

**Regulations**

EU slaughtering regulations were essentially drafted with large abattoirs in mind and are rule, rather than risk based. However, they include a significant number of derogations that have not been taken up in the UK. These could help small abattoirs to reduce costs while still ensuring high, or even higher, hygiene and welfare standards.

**Waste disposal**

There has been a considerable consolidation in the abattoir waste sector in recent years and there is no longer any competition between animal by-product collectors in many areas. This has resulted in dramatic increases in the costs of waste disposal for some small abattoirs. Small abattoirs have been at an additional disadvantage in relation to waste disposal since the start of the BSE crisis in 1996, because different charges apply to different categories of waste, but there are also minimum collection charges, meaning that the least expensive option is often to put all waste in the same container and pay the highest rate. The problem of declining competition in this sector has not been investigated since 2007.

**Hides and skins**

The price of hides and skins has plummeted in recent years. More research is needed to establish all the reasons for this. Small abattoirs were getting £45 for cattle hides and £6.50 for sheep skins twenty years ago. They now receive only £1 for a hide if it’s in perfect condition and nothing for skins. An investigation is needed to establish whether increased demand for clothes and shoes made
from oil-based materials could be a factor behind this. If so this requires investigation, particularly given recent evidence showing the environmental damage caused by synthetic fabric microfibres ending up in the oceans.

**Local abattoir policy proposals**

Action is urgently needed to address some of the issues facing abattoirs and to prevent any more from going out of business. We have welcomed the willingness of both Defra and the Food Standards Agency to engage with this. We now have a working group, convened by Defra, and attended by a range of relevant bodies, including the Sustainable Food Trust. But despite this, and despite supportive public statements by the previous Secretary of State for Defra, Michael Gove, MP, whilst in post, we are still losing small abattoirs at an alarming rate. We are therefore proposing the following policies to be considered by Government:

1. **Government Strategy** – A separate UK Government strategy for small abattoirs, which feeds into the wider work on UK agricultural policy, would ensure the role of local abattoirs is fully taken account of in future policy and that the specific issues they face are addressed. This is key to tying up all of the components of food production from farm to fork.

2. **Emergency Funding** – An emergency fund is needed to help prevent further closures until the range of problems currently facing small abattoirs can be addressed.

3. **Ongoing Funding** – In line with the Government’s policy of public money for public goods, small abattoirs should be included in future financial support for agriculture. Food production must not be seen in narrow terms; the entire chain and connecting infrastructure must be included if we are to create solutions that will result in better food with low food miles, high welfare and ecological benefits. This could also include support for related businesses, particularly the British tanning industry, as this would boost local economies and improve the value of hides and skins. Support for capital expenditure, for agricultural technology, equipment and methods that deliver public goods has already been proposed under the former Agriculture Bill. This should be expanded to include the provision of new technology and equipment for small abattoirs.

4. **Competition Inquiry** – As the use and disposal of animal by-products is a key element in sustainable food production, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) should look at the market for hides and skins and for waste collection to ensure it is fair and not weighted against small rural businesses and communities. It is vital that there is balance between the big food producers and the small food producers to enable these different methods of production and that small producers are not pushed out of the market or disadvantaged.

5. **Support for by-product industries** – Every element of an animal that can be used, should be used in order to strengthen the sustainability of our food production systems, avoid waste and increase the financial profitability for small businesses. For example, pet food created and used within the UK is another stream of income and utilisation of by-products that would mean less waste and environmental impact from our overall food industry. Government support, messaging and funding for such enterprises is therefore an important first step.

6. **Better Labelling** – More transparent and easily accessible food chain information would allow consumers to make better informed choices about their food purchases, ensuring products with greater sustainability credentials are properly valued. There is need for a clear definition and

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identification of local food which has been produced via small scale local businesses and slaughtered locally.

7. **Support for Trials** – Food Standards Agency trials are currently taking place to explore flexibilities in the current regulations that may help small abattoirs. Ongoing support for these trials should be a high priority and in particular should focus on:

- Reducing vet attendance for abattoirs which consistently demonstrate high quality standards of hygiene and biosecurity;
- Reducing bureaucracy and paperwork;
- Using more technology in abattoirs e.g. remote inspection.

**The Campaign**

The Sustainable Food Trust set up the Campaign for Local Abattoirs (CFLA - [https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/key-issues/campaign-for-local-abattoirs/](https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/key-issues/campaign-for-local-abattoirs/)) with National Craft Butchers (NCB), other groups and individuals concerned by the developing crisis in the smaller abattoir sector. The campaign was launched in February 2018 with the report ‘A Good Life and a Good Death – Relocalising farm animal slaughter’. Please visit our website, share our work, write to your MP and raise this issue with policy makers. Please get in touch if you would like to know more and join our mailing list for updates on our work (link on website).