Covid-19 and the local abattoir sector

April 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of the UK’s small abattoir sector for local, traceable meat and resilient food systems. The demand for local meat has seen a sharp increase, with some farmers reporting their sales almost doubling. Some larger abattoirs have closed due to the loss of the catering industry and small abattoirs are now picking up their business. One small abattoir operator in North Wales said he has been inundated by people 50-70 miles away following the temporary closure of some larger plants. The loss of the hospitality market and schools has also forced a redirection of meat sales, leaving many farmers in need of a new route to market for their produce. Small abattoirs have always provided this vital private kill service, allowing farmers to sell their meat direct to consumer. Their ability to cater for niche markets and their flexibility in the services they provide, tailored to the customer’s individual needs, is a strength that this current crisis is bringing to the fore.

Unfortunately, a lack of investment has meant that some small abattoirs are struggling to cope with the added pressure created by the coronavirus pandemic and, due to the significant number of closures over the years, currently there aren’t enough small abattoirs across the UK to meet demand. Even before this crisis, many farmers were struggling to find a local abattoir, but this problem has drastically increased since the pandemic as some remaining small abattoirs have had to cease offering private kill services or are unable to accommodate the surge in demand, despite their best efforts.

We therefore recommend the following actions to support the small abattoir sector during this difficult time and to safeguard it for the future.

Regulatory

We understand that the FSA are already implementing or considering some flexibilities, including the suspension of auditing during the crisis and allowing Meat Hygiene Inspectors to carry out post-mortem inspections. We support such flexibilities, but also recommend the following:

1. A hold on the enforcement of the recent requirement for plants to record and maintain stunning records, in light of the problems with manufacture of replacement equipment from Freund or any other supplier or contractor until after the outbreak.
2. Reversion to cold inspection system for small plants with good records. Concentrate inspection on post-mortem.
3. Where practical, allow the FBO to connect via video call to a remote vet to do ante mortem inspections. In the NHS, doctors are using this for patients as standard during the outbreak.
4. Government must ensure the FSA are able to continue providing inspection services for small abattoirs and are able to introduce additional kill days or hours at short notice as necessary. This may require bringing staff temporarily out of retirement or considering other ways of increasing the workforce at this time.

Financial

5. The Government’s existing scheme to introduce a business rate holiday should be extended to small abattoirs slaughtering less than 5,000 LSUs per annum.
6. Abolish the processors’ part of the AHDB levy. They would still have to collect and pay in the farmers levy, but this would save small abattoirs up to £4,000 pa.
7. Introduce a Modernisation Fund to enable small abattoirs to run efficiently and economically. This should also include support for staff training and business advice that allows small abattoirs to modernise and adapt.

Staffing and Biosecurity

8. John Mettrick, small abattoir owner and representative from National Craft Butchers, continues to act as an unpaid ‘trouble-shooter’ for the small abattoir sector, with many abattoir owners coming to him for advice and support on a range of practical and regulatory issues. This is an important role that bridges the gap between regulators and businesses and is one that should be formalised and funded by Government.
One of the biggest risks of virus transmission is via paperwork changing hands. Every lot of animals will have at least one paper document which has been handled by at least one person prior to landing in the abattoir. This paper document could be retained by the producer (so to avoid any physical handing over of paper) and the following information could instead be recorded for each species on the kill sheet:

- Cattle – passport number, Lambs – holding number, Pigs – reference number generated by eam2 registration. Photos could also be taken of paperwork which the vet could then complete off-site or perhaps an online or email system could be put in place.

When tests for Covid-19 become available we would urge that they be provided to those in the food sector as a matter of priority (after the healthcare sector, of course), given the importance of the food supply chain and the need to sustain an active workforce.

**Information about the current situation**

The demand for local meat and the need for farmers to be able to slaughter locally and get their meat back to sell direct to consumers is absolutely essential to the business case of many livestock farmers, especially those in agri-environment schemes. Being able to slaughter animals and retail meat locally adds an additional guarantee of provenance which an increasing number of consumers are seeking due to the pandemic. It also helps to ensure a secure, resilient and sustainable food supply, both during the immediate crisis and as part of a longer-term food strategy.

It is difficult to get a clear picture at this time of how small abattoirs are faring because the situation continues to change day-by-day. However, we have spoken with several small abattoir owners and have received feedback from farmers and others regarding the impact of Covid-19 on slaughtering services.

A number of abattoirs appear to have stopped offering a **private kill service** (where the meat is returned to the farmer for them to sell direct). This is primarily for three reasons: 1) Biosecurity concerns mean the abattoir owner wants less people coming to the site. Private kill often involves many farmers bringing small numbers of animals to the abattoir. 2) A shortage of labour due to staff being ill or in isolation (an estimated 15-20% fewer staff are available to work in larger abattoirs, with an even higher percentage impacting smaller plants) combined with requirements for two metre distancing, means the abattoir is under pressure and cannot meet demand. 3) The rise in demand for local meat has meant that abattoirs which also have their own retail or wholesale business have switched their focus to slaughtering only for these businesses.

With the closure of more than a third of smaller abattoirs in the last ten years alone, the loss of a private kill service at remaining abattoirs leaves many farmers with much longer journeys to the next nearest plant, or in some cases nowhere to go. In one example reported to us, a farmer’s nearest abattoir had to stop private kill with immediate effect, cancelling all bookings. The next nearest abattoir is 103 miles from the farm and that abattoir does not deliver the carcasses back for processing, therefore the farmer also now needs to arrange refrigerated transport to get them back. There is concern that the local abattoir may stop private killing permanently after this current crisis is over which would make rearing animals for local meat in that region completely unviable. Another farmer contacted us with a similar situation as their local abattoir has suspended private kill until the end of April, when it will be reviewed. They have said, “This is potentially disastrous for our meat box business.” Several other farmers with their own farm shops have told us they have seen a significant increase in demand and therefore need to slaughter more animals than usual. But some are facing excessive delays before they can get animals slaughtered. One farmer who had 12 lambs booked in for the end of March has been told that the earliest they can now be slaughtered is 20 April.

Another issue facing the sector is the market for **by-products**. The value of hides and skins had already dropped dramatically prior to the coronavirus pandemic, with some abattoir operators having to pay to dispose of them, when in the past they had been an important source of income. Since the pandemic, the closure of the Italian leather industry has halted demand for hides even further and there are likely other similar impacts that are yet to be realised.

There are also implications for **animal welfare**, including concerns about the distances some animals may now be travelling to slaughter or about the ability of farms to keep and feed animals they hadn’t accounted for. There is also a significant risk that illegal slaughter may increase if private kill services are not adequately provided to farmers.

Nevertheless, abattoir owners and staff are working tirelessly to do what they can to keep up with demand, despite in many cases being short of staff. As some larger abattoirs close down due to the pandemic, farmers are
desperate to find an alternative and smaller plants are doing their best to accommodate them. Small abattoir operators often stand out by the pride they take in their work and the passion they bring to the trade as well as a sense of duty to the farming community. It is time for Government to acknowledge this hard work and provide the necessary support to enhance and build a thriving future sector.

For more information about the role of small abattoirs and why we need to safeguard them for the future, please see our website: https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/key-issues/campaign-for-local-abattoirs/

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