SFT Responds to Animal Welfare Groups on CCTV cameras

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The Sustainable Food Trust recognises the potential benefits of CCTV in abattoirs in preventing welfare abuses but is calling on animal rights and animal welfare groups which have complained that some abattoirs have not yet installed CCTV, [1] to recognise the genuine problems currently faced by many smaller abattoirs.

Richard Young, SFT policy director said, “Animal welfare groups are not acting in the best interests of animal welfare in piling yet more pressure on the few remaining small abattoirs that have still to install CCTV. I fully understand their concern about the factory scale of the slaughtering industry and the abuses that have occurred, and it is clear that the Government is very sensitive to their demands. But they are actually helping to drive the last few small abattoirs out of business. These are small family-run businesses where animals are treated as individuals and do not have to endure long journeys.”

The UK’s smallest abattoirs are currently facing an unprecedented crisis. Many of them are losing money and find it hard to see how this will change. This means that a significant proportion of those that have not yet installed CCTV need Government assistance to prevent them being forced to close.

There are now only 56 small red meat abattoirs left in the UK, with a third having closed between 2007 and 2017 and a further seven closing this year. Small abattoirs slaughter very small numbers of animals, but provide an essential service to producers of high welfare local meat, for which public demand is growing. [2]

The crisis is due in part to a collapse in the value of hides and skins, with small abattoirs currently being paid as little as £4.50 for cattle hides and 10p for sheep skins, compared with £35 and £6.50 respectively a few years ago. [3] At the same time, waste disposal costs for most small abattoirs have increased significantly due to consolidation in the rendering industry and higher minimum charges for small quantities. Small abattoirs also face a range of other costs which make it difficult for them to compete economically with large slaughterhouses. [4]

This puts small abattoirs at a major disadvantage compared with the very large slaughterhouses which process animals for multiple retailers. Large slaughterhouses have received tens of millions of pounds of public money in grants and also benefit from economies of scale, but the animals they slaughter generally travel many hundreds of miles at the cost of their welfare and the environment. [5]
The Sustainable Food Trust is calling for small abattoirs to be recognised as a ‘public good’ and for grants to be made available to help with the cost of installing CCTV and additional structural improvements. At present, these are only available to the 15 smallest abattoirs in Wales, with the Welsh Government having provided £1.1 million in funding specifically for this purpose. [6] The cost of installing CCTV in small abattoirs is very much higher per animal than in large abattoirs. [7]

Richard Young added, “We’d really welcome it if animal rights and welfare organisations would meet with us and discuss these issues openly. They have done some good in shining a light on the abuses that have occurred, but if they really care about animal welfare they will come to understand that the smallest abattoirs desperately need public support at the moment, not further criticism just for cheap headlines.”

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Notes for Editors


[2] Only the smallest abattoirs, mostly those slaughtering less than 1,000 livestock units per year, but also some of the 48 abattoirs slaughtering between 1,000 and 5,000 livestock units per year, are able to slaughter cattle, sheep and pigs for producers and return the meat and offal to them for sale locally. This is partly because the lairage pens in large slaughterhouses are too large to make it economical to deal with small numbers of animals each week from individual producers and partly because the processing methods make it impossible to keep the offal separate, something which is vitally important for organic and pasture fed livestock producers and their customers.

[3] The reasons for the collapse in hides and skin prices are not entirely clear. It seems the UK has lost most if not all its major tanneries and fellmongers and has been exporting hides and skins to China which now no longer wants them. It is suspected that the increase in veganism and the trend away from natural fibres, essentially wool and leather, to synthetic oil-based material for shoes, clothes and other fabrics is contributing to falling demand.
[4] The very large amount of paperwork falls more heavily on small abattoirs because they deal with much smaller numbers of animals in each consignment and therefore each set of forms must be completed for different agencies. The EU regulations used in the UK were also drawn up with large export abattoirs in mind and are based on the strict implementation of rules rather than an actual assessment of risks. Many of the rules are unsuited or unnecessary in small abattoirs, where the owner is also often the principal slaughterman (or woman) as well as the person with the responsibility for butchering the meat for retail filling in all the forms and dealing with all other aspects of compliance.

[5] While small abattoirs could potentially apply for EU Leader funding, this is not available in all regions, many regions have spent their current allocation and the qualifying criteria of creating extra jobs would disqualify most small abattoirs at the present times since they have no potential to expand in the current climate.


[7] Some of the reasons why installing CCTV is more challenging for smaller abattoirs are because:
   a) small abattoirs only slaughter one or two days a week with single shifts whereas large abattoirs slaughter every day often with multiple shifts;
   b) while large abattoirs tend to be open plan, most small abattoirs were constructed many years ago and have a lot of solid stone walls which make it impossible to use WIFI transmission;
   c) each lairage pen must have its own camera, but small abattoirs generally have much smaller lairage pens so that individual or small groups of animals can be penned without stress. In contrast, large abattoirs have a small number of much larger lairage pens with a much higher throughput of animals per camera.