



Agriculture Bill must help ensure the survival of small local abattoirs

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 others 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 just over 250 red meat abattoirs in the UK, but excluding Halal slaughterhouses and those in the Channel Islands, less than 106 abattoirs now serve the local food sector. Between 2007 and 2017 33 (34%) of the smallest abattoirs – those slaughtering no more than 1,000 livestock unit (LSUs) annually – closing during this period, leaving just 63. Six more have closed this year, taking the number to 57. There are another 49 abattoirs slaughtering up to 5,000 LSUs p.a. most of which will also undertake private kill.

As each local additional abattoir closes, farmers supplying local meal outlets have to travel further to the next nearest facility. However, there comes a point, with relatively small numbers of animals on each journey, when the cost of transporting live animal in one direction and carcasses in the other becomes prohibitive, and the farmer is forced to close his or her meat business and sell to a large retail outlet instead, thereby reducing income and sometimes making the farm non-viable. Already,

several areas of the country are without local abattoirs, and these black-spots are likely to increase in size and number without some 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 and meat marketing 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 and therefore no simple solution to the problem. Both Defra and the Food Standards Agency have recently shown a welcome willingness to engage with some of the issues. The Secretary of State, Michael Gove MP has made a number of supportive public statements, including during the Second Reading of the Agriculture Bill, and Lord Gardiner has asked officials to look into some of the problem areas. But, the involvement of MPs and Peers is also needed, in particular, to ensure that the Agriculture Bill creates an economic and regulatory climate where small abattoirs are not driven out of businesses and the burgeoning local meat sector is able to survive and prosper. Key issues include:

Infrastructure grants

Many small abattoirs currently face significant infrastructure costs to install head restraints and stunning boxes, upgrade electrical stunning equipment, and install CCTV cameras. 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 more thick 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 is expected to trigger a further batch of closures if help is not provided soon.

The Welsh Government has made [£1.1 million available](#) for infrastructure grants for its 15 small abattoirs. In the rest of the UK there is no grant funding tailored to the small abattoir sector. LEADER funding could potentially provide assistance, but this is conditional upon new new jobs being created and most small abattoirs are not currently able to expand and create additional jobs. In addition, many Local Action Groups have allocated all their currently available funding while some parts of the UK are not covered by the programme. The RDPE Countryside Productivity Scheme does not cover small projects.

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 collector 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 are currently being paid only 20p per sheep skin (c/w £6 a few years ago) and sometimes charged to have them taken away. Cattle hide prices have fallen to £14 each, with some as low as £4.50. In the 1980s abattoirs received £20 per hide and in 2014 they were paid over £30. 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 given the recent evidence showing how microfibres from clothes made from synthetic fabrics are ending up in the oceans and the fish we consume. University of California researchers [found](#) for example, that washing a synthetic fleece jacket releases about one million microfibres weighing 1.7 grams, 40% of which end up in the rivers and oceans with potential negative impacts from the environment and human health.

The Campaign

The Sustainable Food Trust set up the Campaign for Local Abattoirs (CFLA - www.localabattoirs.com) 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 with the report '[A Good Life and a Good Death – Relocalising farm animal slaughter](#)'.