

# **Pig in the middle: farmers and the delivery of farm animal welfare standards**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This paper examines the attitude of UK pig farmers to the delivery of improved farm animal welfare standards and investigates how they contribute to this objective through their membership of a range of different farm assurance schemes.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

The analysis focuses on three main groups of pig farmers: (i) farmers engaged in conventional farm assurance schemes; (ii) farmers participating in specific animal welfare schemes and (iii) certified organic farmers. Fifty four farmers were interviewed about their participation in farm assurance schemes and their attitudes to animal welfare and towards the retailers and consumers they supply. Each answer was analysed individually and a list of themes identified for each type of scheme. These were compared and synthesised in an overall analysis.

### **Findings**

The analysis identified how differently or similarly the different groups of farmers viewed the issues related to animal welfare. The findings revealed that while farmers shared some attitudes regardless of the schemes they participated in, there were differences between schemes in certain key areas such as farmers' motives for participation.

### **Research limitations/implications**

Although the sample was limited to England (the main focus of pig production in the UK) and was not random, farmers were selected to reflect the geographical distribution of production and the range of relevant schemes.

### **Originality/value of paper**

This study adds to this limited literature that focuses on farmers' views, attitudes and perceptions with regard to animal welfare. The paper is of value to stakeholders involved in the food chain who have an interest in animal welfare such as farmers, retailers, consumers and policy-makers.

**Keywords:** animal welfare, farm assurance schemes, British pig farmers

**Paper type:** Research paper

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## Introduction

Consumers' awareness of and concern for food safety and quality has grown considerably in the UK since the early 1990s, leading processors, retailers and politicians to pay greater attention to the animal welfare and environmental issues associated with the production and supply of food. This has led to the development of new approaches, standards and regulations designed to ensure particular welfare levels for farm animals. At the centre of these developments have been the producers engaged in a range of livestock enterprises faced by a bewildering array of new demands relating to animal welfare. In order to remain in business many of these farmers have little choice but to comply with the twin demands of government and market. Such compliance generally offers little in the way of additional incentives and may be viewed by the farmer as something of a 'necessary evil'.

This paper explores the attitudes of farmers to animal welfare and in particular the delivery of enhanced welfare standards through farm assurance schemes. Animal welfare is an abstract and complex concept related to the well-being of animals (e.g. Fraser and Weary, 2004; Scott *et al.*, 2001; Lund and Röcklinsberg, 2001; and Duncan and Fraser, 1997) which is highly challenging and controversial from both moral and scientific perspectives (Buller and Morris, 2003). At present there is no precise definition of this concept, even amongst animal welfare scientists (e.g. Duncan, 2005; Sandøe *et al.*, 2003, Fraser, 1999, and Fraser *et al.*, 1997). Thus, answers to questions such as: what is good animal welfare? what are the needs/feelings of animals? should animals be treated with respect? and is there an appropriate balance between animal and human interests? are still contested. Webster (2001) argues that the welfare of 'sentient' animals is good if the animals "stay fit and happy", implying both physical (e.g. freedom from disease, injury and incapacity) and mental (e.g. emotional distress) welfare (p.232). Simonsen's definition (1996) of animal welfare refers to animal's positive and negative experiences. However, these definitions rely upon the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of assessing the mental well-being as perceived by the animals themselves.

In addition to the physical and mental aspects other scientists add to animal welfare definition a third element, i.e. natural-behaviour (Hewson, 2003). Given the complexity of the concept, Duncan (2005) argues that two schools of thought have emerged within the animal welfare community, i.e. the 'biological functioning' school which embraces the idea that welfare "is mainly to do with the animal's physical health and well-being", and the 'feelings' school which concentrates more on psychological health and animals' feelings.

Focusing on farm animal welfare, Sørensen *et al.* (2001) point out that "what is good for animal welfare ... is not always economical" (p.11) and that "failure of viewing animal welfare in the context of other goals can ultimately have a negative effect on the animals" (p.12). Following the same idea, Scott *et al.* (2001) stress that the well-being of livestock is "inexorably linked with the economic well-being of the farmers and the health of consumers of food animal products".

There are a wide variety of approaches to assessing the well-being of farm animals and many of these focus on specific-species behaviour, animal health, nutrition, stockmanship practice and husbandry. In practice, however, it is difficult to fully assess the welfare of farm animals. Scott *et al.* (2001) argue that this often relates to

the latitude of human perceptions and reactions to husbandry conditions. Fraser (2004) highlights that the existence of a variety of animal welfare standards is due to the different views of animal welfare, often based on the biological functioning of the animal, its affective states or its ability of expressing natural behaviour. Thus, in order to avoid public confusion regarding welfare standards the author emphasises the need for transparency on the “interplay of the scientific and the value-related components of animal welfare” (p.122).

At the farm level, the evaluation and monitoring of animal welfare is even more complicated given the heterogeneity among farmed-species and the large number of welfare attributes/parameters to be considered, and which can not be simply summed into one precise welfare measure. Johnsen *et al.* (2001) grouped these parameters into two categories: (i) the environmental/management parameters (e.g. length of stalls, feeding, drinking facilities, space allowance, quality of litter and access to pasture); and (ii) animal-based parameters which refer to the behaviour, health and physiology of the animals (e.g. level of stress hormones, fear and abnormal behaviour, symptoms of acute disease and mortality). Given that the two categories are important indices of animal welfare, the authors consider that the best results in assessing animal welfare are obtained when parameters from the two groups are combined.

While a range of mechanisms are available to monitor and evaluate farm animal welfare, it is still important to understand how welfare standards are delivered. Various studies (e.g. RSPCA, 1999; Winter *et al.*, 1998; RSPCA, 1998) evaluate government and EU policies aimed at delivering farm animal welfare standards but relatively little attention has been paid to those who actually implement the associated measures and practices at farm level. Consequently, the literature regarding farmers’ perception of animal welfare is rather sparse<sup>[1]</sup>, with most relevant studies (e.g. FAWC, 2005; Fearn and Walters, 2004; Spriggs *et al.*, 2001; FAWC, 2001) focusing mainly on farmers’ attitudes to and experiences of farm assurance schemes. This paper adds to this limited literature by examining the beliefs, attitudes and views of British pig farmers towards animal welfare. It aims to identify whether or not producers from various farm assurance schemes hold similar views about issues related to animal welfare, and to ascertain the incentives and difficulties facing farmers who want to deliver higher standards of animal welfare.

### **Methodology**

To analyse British pig farmers’ views and attitudes towards animal welfare in depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted during the spring of 2005. As UK pig production is mainly concentrated in England (82 per cent of total pig numbers) the sampling strategy focused on English farmers. This approach assumed that farmers in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales would have similar attitudes to their English compatriots. This seems reasonable given that the welfare standards that pig farmers have to meet vary little across the different parts of the UK, reflecting the fact that UK farm assurance schemes either cover the whole country, or that country-specific schemes require very similar standards<sup>[2]</sup>. Farmers were sampled in accordance with the geographical distribution of pig production across England, particularly farms from East Anglia and Yorkshire/Humberside. The sample covered the three main farm types of pig producer (i.e. breeders, breeders and finishers, and finishers), a variety of enterprise sizes and the key farm assurance schemes (i.e. ABP, GQ and FF). Given that ABP covers about 90 per cent of all pig production (Fearn and Walters,

2004), the sample was constructed to ensure that the largest share of interviewed farmers were from conventional farm assurance schemes. Hence, most of the interviewed farmers in conventional schemes (23) are ABP members. Farmers from the Soil Association (SA), the UK leading organic organisation, were also included in the sample. Some may argue that organic farmers form a different category, and that SA certification is not equivalent a farm assurance scheme. However, Harper and Makatouni (2002) observe that although animal welfare represents a key component of organic agriculture, the standards do not necessarily far exceed the legal requirements for animal welfare. Therefore, for a comprehensive analysis of farmers' motivation of scheme membership and their beliefs and attitudes towards animal welfare, the inclusion of organic farmers was considered beneficial for this research.

The structure of the sample is as follows: 29 farmers from ABP and GQ<sup>[3]</sup>, 19 from FF and 6 from SA. The semi-structured interviews were divided up across the following broad topic areas: (i) participation in farm assurance schemes; (ii) the definition and importance of animal welfare; (iii) knowledge of animal welfare legislation and (iv) animal welfare and society.

Each question was analysed individually across the interviews, following the structure of the sample, and a list of 'themes' was identified for each type of farm assurance scheme. The themes were then compared and synthesised in an overarching analysis. However, given that the number of farms included in the sample differs amongst the three types of schemes (i.e. conventional, specific and organic), the results should be cautiously interpreted. By grouping the qualitative data around the identifiable themes, the article ascertains and assesses how differently or similarly various groups of farmers view the issues related to animal welfare.

## **Results and discussion**

### Participation in farm assurance schemes and its impact on farm animal welfare

To understand whether or not farmers' participation in farm assurance schemes makes a difference to animal welfare, the study focused on several key issues concerning the impacts of membership. It is very difficult for a UK pig farmer not to belong to such a scheme, a fact which was reflected in the low representation of such individuals in the sample. Most farmers belong to conventional assurance schemes (ABP, GQ) and there is a distinction between farmers' motives for joining one of these schemes and their reasons for participating in schemes that could offer higher animal welfare or environmental benefits (e.g. FF). Whilst all organic farmers in the sample sought SA certification because they wished to farm organically, most farmers from ABP/GQ joined the schemes in order to ensure the selling of their products and remain in business. Indeed, most abattoirs and retailers (particularly the big supermarkets) in the UK require farmers to be members of a farm assurance scheme. Thus, though the schemes are voluntarily, the majority of farmers (especially those with large enterprises) have little choice but to join a scheme if they want to stay in business. By contrast, most of the organic farmers in the sample had a small-scale pig business and were taking advantage of the growing public interest in organic production and organic products. The enthusiasm for being an organic farmer contrasts with the pessimism of some of ABP/GQ farmers, as expressed below:

“ We started farming pigs organically, something we had aspired to do for some time ... It therefore went without saying that we needed to be Soil Association approved, and in fact given the choice I would not have wished to belong to any of the other organic bodies” or “ [I] liked the thought and the ethos of being organic” (Organic farmers).

“My arm was twisted”; “I had no choice”; “[Is the] only way to market produce”; “If I was not assured I wouldn’t be able to sell my pigs through the buyer I use now” (ABP farmers) or “We felt we had no option as we thought it might become more difficult to sell pigs” (GQ farmer).

The pragmatic approach taken by many farmers is reflected in the decision of some to join GQ because it allows them to assure several enterprises (e.g. beef and lamb, pig and combinable crops) in one inspection.

This is an example of how the nature of the farm business can play a role in the farmers’ decision to join a particular scheme. Many FF members were required by their contracts to join the scheme and animal welfare was sometimes of secondary importance. This can be explained by the observation that most of the FF farmers interviewed (17) were pig finishers and were required by their contractor, also an FF member, to join the scheme. A contract requirement was also recorded as the main motivation for about half of the breeder/finisher farmers in conventional schemes. Thus, working on a contract basis as a breeder or finisher often requires membership as a prerequisite of the contract. Nonetheless, the majority of FF farmers stated that they the animal welfare implications of their scheme were also important to them. Although there is no evidence within the sample that belonging to FF has changed farmers’ perceptions and understanding of farm animal well-being, most FF farmers shared the general feeling that when applying for membership they agreed to comply with the principles and high standards set up for farm animal welfare by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). It can be argued ([www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)) that there should be some specific economic benefits (e.g. a competitive advantage, an increase in margins and a niche market for FF products) that might attract these farmers to join this particular scheme, but this did not seem to be the case for FF pig farmers.

As mentioned in the introduction, price incentives did not appear to be a major reason for membership across the schemes. A few farmers who had joined ABP in its early days stated that that price incentives had been a motive when they joined the scheme, but that this was no longer the case. Moreover, none of the FF (nor the SA) farmers specified price premiums for their products as a motivation of membership, and most of them considered there is no specific financial return for being a FF member.

The importance of price incentives is clarified by the findings on farmers’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of scheme membership. A difference in the perception of membership advantages was identified between ABP/GQ and FF farmers and those in SA. The majority of farmers in conventional schemes (19) and FF (15) considered that the main benefit of membership was to ensure sales/market access for their products. By contrast, most organic farmers saw the main advantage as being the opportunity to get a higher price for their products, whilst only one FF farmer and six ABP/GQ farmers mentioned this option. The pessimism of conventional farmers might be explained by the current status of the declining British pig industry (where production has halved since 1998), with a large number of pig farmers forced by recent animal health or/and economic crises to leave the sector.

Without clear price incentives about a quarter of the interviewed farmers (mostly ABP/GQ members) believed that scheme membership did not bring them any benefits, but only a few considered that membership has restricted their freedom to manage the farm in their own way.

While schemes may offer limited benefits and some costs, farmers did at least seem content with the way in which they were run. Most of the farmers were broadly satisfied (and organic farmers very satisfied) with their schemes which come out to be well run and endowed with skilful and helpful staff:

“FF is fine and [I] have no criticism. The people are well trained [and] practical”. (FF farmer)

“The Soil Association has been fantastic ... is the golden plated farm assurance” (Organic farmer)

“Generally happy, but [I am] not sure if all the paperwork is necessary” or “Scheme well run [and] not too arduous” (ABP farmers)

The schemes are also seen as important in maintaining high standards of animal welfare. However, there is a complaint that most farmers (particularly those from conventional schemes) expressed during their interviews. This is the volume of the paperwork generated by the various inspections, particularly by the audit inspection. Indeed, pig farmers are inspected by independent assessors once a year with quarterly veterinary inspections. Some spot checks are also performed in accordance with the standards of each scheme. These also imply high costs (as farmers have to pay for each visit), but only a few farmers mentioned of being particularly affected by this aspect. Although, in general, farmers welcome the inspection process and consider it helpful, a few of them pointed out that some (audit) inspectors concentrate less on animal welfare issues and more on process (e.g. ticking boxes). Such farmers see such inspections as evidence of “hopeless bureaucracy”, “autocratic” and “with some of the rules [having] little to do with animal welfare”.

Across the three types of schemes, farmers’ views and perceptions regarding their independence from farm assurance schemes and the future of such schemes are very similar. There is little doubt amongst farmers that, if they want to sell their products to ‘reasonable’ slaughterhouses or produce at a large-scale, then it is almost impossible to remain outside farm assurance schemes.

“It is possible for a small farmer who produces for local market to escape the need for such scheme, but not possible if you are a mass producer given that the retailers ask to be assured” (Organic farmer).

Most farmers agree that for small-scale producers, particularly those who are able to ensure a market for their products (e.g. by direct marketing to butchers or the public) (e.g. Yagi and Garrod, 2007) the situation is different. However, even in this case, farmers consider that such enterprises are high risk as markets are limited and it is likely that some of these outlets will have a limited lifespan.

Farmers’ thoughts about the future of their schemes are rather pessimistic. Most farmers from FF (17) and (all) ABP/GQ believe that the schemes are likely to change with stricter rules and regulations imposed on farmers either by the Government or supermarkets. Some farmers (11) feared that the volume of paperwork and bureaucracy would increase, and thus they would be asked to keep more records by a “government [which] seems fond of creating as much red tape as possible”. If regulations may become more restrictive, a number of farmers see the schemes

gradually merging into one major integrated national scheme, which will include all food chain stakeholders, from farmers to retailers. This outcome would be welcomed by some farmers as the large number of existing farm assurance schemes (i.e. farmers have to be assured for each farm enterprise) has created confusion amongst farmers.

#### Farmers' attitudes to animal welfare

Unsurprisingly, most farmers considered that animal welfare is a very important issue and that regulation was an appropriate mechanism to ensure the maintenance of acceptable standards. However, some differences exist across schemes in their members' perceptions of why the issue is important. Thus, while two thirds of FF farmers and all of the organic sample considered that animal welfare was primarily an ethical issue, over half of those in conventional schemes link welfare to the condition of their animals and the performance of their businesses. Overall, 23 farmers from various schemes agreed that there is a strong link between ethics and business, arguing that animals that are not treated well will ultimately be less valuable. Moreover, sixteen farmers (of whom ten were ABP/GQ members) linked farm animal welfare to public concerns. Undoubtedly, farmers are aware of the recent changes in consumer attitudes to animal welfare and farming practices, and recognise that can not afford lowering the standards of welfare, as the market will penalise them.

"Farmers have the obligation to their animals to provide high welfare. The public now have a greater understanding of welfare issues, and ultimately they are our market" (ABP farmer).

Most FF and organic farmers confirmed that they had not encountered difficulties in the implementation of existing farm animal welfare regulations. The situation was different for farmers in conventional schemes. More than half of these farmers (19) criticised certain regulations which in their opinion failed to bring a benefit to animal welfare or to farmers. Amongst those mentioned were the restrictions on stock densities within pens, which some farmers argued causes problems in terms of heating and ventilation inside the buildings; regulations on tail docking; and the recent restrictions on certain commonly used medicines. Seven FF and two organic farmers also considered certain regulations to be unsuitable and that 'more common sense' should be used before regulations are implemented. This finding does not necessarily imply that these farmers are reluctant to implement welfare regulations or that animal welfare is less important for them, but these may diverge from their understanding of animal welfare and farm practice.

Only a quarter of farmers in the sample complained about the costs of implementing welfare regulations. In most of cases, farmers found the costs of new buildings and bringing old ones up to standards as being the main problem. This might be explained by the state of the British pig industry with costs not recovered by returns, and thus investing in capital assets is risky.

#### Farmers' attitudes to consumers and retailers

When asked to express their views on consumers, retailers, animal campaigners and their perception of animal welfare, farmers across all schemes shared similar opinions. Generally, farmers displayed an ambivalent attitude to the role played by consumers in improving welfare standards. Respondents recognised that consumers were entitled to have and express their concerns about farm animal welfare and argued that their worries were justifiable to a certain extent as "some farmers let the industry down". However, many farmers characterised public concerns about animal

welfare as shallow and argued that consumer behaviour still tends to be price-driven. Many believed that their efforts to improve welfare standards were very little appreciated by a public who were not yet prepared to share the additional costs involved in achieving the higher standards demanded.

The most common expression used by farmers in this context was that “consumers buy on price”. Thus, in the opinion of many farmers, when it comes to purchase decisions the majority of consumers “ignore” or “don’t remember” animal welfare and will buy “the cheapest product on offer”. One FF farmer suggested that a simple survey at the entrance to a supermarket would illustrate to what extent consumers are genuinely concerned about animal welfare.

“If you ask them [consumers] before they go in the supermarket about animal welfare, they will say it is very important ... but then when they come out, they come with cheap products”.

This statement is reinforced by the following made by an ABP farmer.

“The price is the king regardless the country or welfare. Only a few consumers who can afford to care buy on welfare grounds”.

Despite consumers being perceived as “well-intentioned” towards animal welfare, they are seen in the same time as being ill-informed with little understanding about farming and with a rather a sentimental view of farm animals: “consumers think they [farm animals] can be treated as pets” (ABP farmer). Some farmers were concerned that consumers tend to think about farm animal welfare issues only when some “horror stories” are presented by the media. They worry that the public sees these isolated cases of bad farming practice as typical and infer that they are widespread. In general, farmers think that consumers should be better informed about farm assurance schemes, animal welfare and farming, but at the same time should be prepared to pay for the extra costs involved when producing under high standards of welfare. Farmers also consider that agriculture should be more open towards public, and that agricultural organisations should make more of an effort in educating the public about modern farming.

Although most farmers in the sample agreed that retailers should have some role in implementing animal welfare standards, they argued that this interest in animal welfare was superficial and that schemes were used opportunistically. Animal welfare was perceived as being used as a marketing tool to promote the caring image of the retailer. For many respondents such an image bears little resemblance to their experience of the major supermarkets who are perceived to use their power to control producers in order to manipulate the price.

“Supermarkets are king” (ABP farmer)

“Their influence is far too high” (FF farmer)

Moreover, farmers believe that the supermarkets apply double standards, one set for British products and another one for imported goods. There was a unanimous belief in our sample that most retailers are not prepared to pay a higher price for British products when they can import cheaper equivalents from abroad, which farmers believe may be produced under lower standards of welfare than those in the UK. This represents the main argument that farmers bring when stating that retailers’ concerns

regarding animal welfare are not sincere. Some farmers also raised the issue of improper labelling, arguing that retailers could support the industry better by publicising the efforts made by UK farmers to produce welfare friendly products through a more appropriate system of labelling, which would help consumers to identify the origin of animal-based products (and not just where the product was packed or finished). In farmers' opinion retailers should assure a 'level playing field' for all suppliers and pay a realistic price to farmers for their products. Farmers feel that the 'acid test' failed by many consumers and retailers, is their unwillingness to pay for welfare friendly products which cost farmers more to produce.

When it comes to those organisations that actively promote animal welfare, farmers' views are, unsurprisingly, rather negative. Although most farmers believe that animal welfare campaigners have the right to lobby and even agree with some of their views, most reject the way in which some activists behave. Farmers consider that campaigners should try to speak to farmers and understand their business, but also that they should respect farmers' views, protest legally and not promote more extremist views.

### **Conclusions**

UK farmers can reasonably be described as the 'pig in the middle' when it comes to the delivery of farm animal welfare standards. To one side are the regulators and assurance schemes, imposing a range of regulations and standards which farmers must adhere to if they are to remain in production. On the other side are the retailers and consumers, many of whom are perceived by farmers as paying only lip service to the goal of improved animal welfare and as being driven by the desire to achieve higher profits or lower prices. Farmers are therefore faced with an increasing burden of inspection and changed practices in order to comply with these enhanced standards, but are in turn offered little in the way of market or price enhancement as a reward for their efforts.

This lack of incentive is potentially important, as farmers are the key providers of animal welfare and their engagement with assurance schemes and other measures is critical in ensuring that farm animal welfare improves. Without such incentives schemes must hope to engage farmers at a more fundamental level and persuade them of the ethical necessity of improved welfare standards. Thus, farmers' understanding of welfare may need to shift to a position more similar to those setting welfare standards, in which case economic factors would cease to be the main trigger for their engagement in schemes promoting improved welfare standards. Even so, if the market fails to deliver the appropriate economic signals to farmers in terms of increased revenue there is a very real prospect of a further decline in the domestic pig industry and therefore in the number of pigs kept to UK assured standards.

The paper sheds light on farmers' attitudes to animal welfare and how this varies with their participation in various farm assurance schemes. For example, while farmers in conventional farm assurance schemes often have different motives for participating when compared to those in schemes with a greater focus on animal welfare or environment, nearly all farmers in our sample agreed that membership of a scheme was an economic necessity rather than a choice. The obligation to belong to a farm assurance scheme was perceived as a burden by some farmers but this reflected their dissatisfaction with either increased administration costs, frequent inspections or

particular restrictions rather than any fundamental disagreement with the need to maintain adequate welfare standards for their animals. Indeed, farmers in our sample associate good standards of animal welfare with their traditions of good husbandry and value the market advantages arising from the production of contented, well-fed, healthy animals.

Such market advantages are not always realised and many farmers are frustrated by the lack of support shown by other participants in the supply chain when it comes to promoting welfare friendly products. This has led some farmers to propose greater engagement by the large retailers in the support of welfare standards linked to the promotion and appropriate labelling of products meeting the standards of the various farm assurance schemes. Such support would only persist if consumers were willing to pay extra for meat produced under higher welfare standards and farmers suggest that greater awareness of these standards might be one means of achieving higher prices.

In principle, any policy related to animal welfare should work for every livestock supply chain member involved and, in particular, should support its members including farmers. Policies which penalise farmers by imposing additional costs and which do not deliver a compensating price premium can only contribute to the continuing decline of the UK pig industry. Such a decline opens the market to cheaper products that may not be produced to such high welfare standards and on a global scale could contribute to a net reduction in welfare standards.

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**Notes:**

[1] An exception is Te Velde *et al.*, 2002 who analysed farmers' (and consumers') perceptions of animal welfare in Dutch intensive farming.

[2] The main UK pig farm assurance schemes are: Assured British Pigs (ABP), Genesis Quality (GQ) and Freedom Food (FF). ABP is the largest scheme for pig producers in England and Wales and covers about 90 per cent of all pig production. A similar scheme, the Scottish Pig Industry Initiative (SPII) operates in Scotland. FF is the only scheme that focuses mainly on animal welfare.

[3] Throughout the paper ABP and GQ will be interpreted as conventional farm assurance schemes, whereas FF as a specific animal welfare scheme.