

I took on the role of Chairperson of FAWAC at the request of the Minister for Agriculture, Martin Heydon, T.D., in February 2025 and it was my privilege to chair three meetings of the Council over the course of the year. Looking back at the minutes of those meetings, it is clear that the Council was active across a number of important areas of animal welfare policy in that period.

The first meeting, in February, was an opportunity for me, as the incoming Chairperson, to take stock of members' views as to what they would like to see on the Council's work programme in the years ahead. While priorities will of course change over time, I will continue to refer back to the initial guidance provided by members to try to ensure that space is given to address these important issues in 2026 and beyond.

The development of a Code of Practice on calf welfare was mooted by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine at the February meeting of the Council, and proposals in this regard were further developed in subsequent meetings. Although the legal basis for the creation of Codes of Practice has been established since 2010, the proposed CoP on calf welfare will be the first in the area of animal welfare to be introduced under the terms of the Animal Health and Welfare Act (2013). A Chairperson has been appointed to lead the sub-group which will develop the CoP, and Terms of Reference are currently being prepared. It is hoped that the sub-group can complete its work over the course of 2026, allowing the CoP to be finalised and published before the end of next year.

The Council meetings in February and March dealt with changes to the EU animal transport regulations. The European Commission has adopted a proposal to amend Regulation 1255/97 and to repeal Regulation 1/2005, with a view to changing the rules relating to issues such as journey time, space allowance and conditions of transport. These new regulations will be informed by the scientific opinions of EFSA and the Commission's impact assessment. FAWAC members were briefed by DAFM on the progress of the legislative proposals and also had the opportunity to hear from Teagasc in relation to some very timely and relevant research on the transport of calves. This is an area to which FAWAC will undoubtedly return next year, as the draft Regulation makes its way through the legislative process. Calf welfare was also on the agenda in the October meeting of the Council, when we had a presentation from a representative of the Buitelaar Group on its calf to beef system. The presentation referenced the development in Great Britain of a calf strategy for the period 2025-2030 as well as academic papers on the health and production effects of painful procedures such as disbudding and castration.

At our May meeting, Professor Patrick Wall made a presentation on this subject of equine welfare, emphasising the animal welfare aspects of the report 'Reforms to strengthen equine identification, traceability and welfare' which he had authored at the request of

the Secretary General of DAFM. This was in response to an investigative report, aired by RTÉ in June 2024, which brought to public attention gross welfare abuses of horses destined for slaughter in Ireland. Responsibility for implementing the action plan associated with Professor Wall's report has been assigned by DAFM to the Division responsible for animal identification and movement. Equine welfare is an important aspect of the work of FAWAC, and I expect that this is a theme which the Council will continue to address in 2026.

FAWAC has a relatively broad membership, and provides a forum in which a wide range of perspectives relevant to the welfare of farm animals can be heard. Notwithstanding this, the Council keeps the representativeness of its membership under review, and during the course of 2025 made a proposal to the Minister for a further, limited expansion in membership. The Minister has indicated agreement to this proposal, and I look forward to welcoming new member organisations to the Council in 2026. We are also mindful of our remit to consider ways of increasing public awareness and of disseminating information on farm animal welfare to the public, and in this regard we expect to be making some improvements to the Council's website and social media presence in the coming year.

FAWAC receives regular updates on various initiatives, aimed at supporting the welfare of farm animals and of those who care for them. One of these is the On Farm Ground (OFG) programme, which is a training programme for agricultural professionals to assist with the recognition of farmers who may be struggling with mental health and wellbeing, and to equip them to direct these farmers to relevant support services. The link between wellbeing of farmers and the welfare of the animals under their care is an established principle within the One Health One Welfare concept, and FAWAC is supportive of initiatives, such as OFG, which provide practical supports to farmers within this framework. In the same vein, FAWAC receives regular updates on the Farmer and Animal Welfare Network (FAWN), an initiative that came about (initially as the Early Warning System) as a result of the work of the Council. FAWN seeks to proactively identify and resolve farm animal welfare issues through a collective stakeholder-led approach to supporting farmers and safeguarding animal welfare.

2026 will be a very important year for animal welfare policy in Ireland, with the publication by DAFM of a revised animal welfare strategy to replace the current strategy, which expires at the end of 2025. The Department is currently in a stakeholder consultation phase in relation to the new strategy, and I expect that FAWAC will devote significant time, particularly in the first half of 2026, to interacting with the consultation process and the subsequent formulation of the strategy.

Finally, I would like to commend the nominees of the Council's representative organisations for the strong commitment they have shown over the past year to advancing the welfare of farm animals in Ireland. I am quite sure that this commitment

and energy will be on display again in 2026, when I hope to convene the Council on four occasions to continue the work on the topics referenced above, and undoubtedly also on new topics that will come to prominence over time. It has been a privilege to chair the deliberations of the Council over the past year, and I look forward to further constructive engagement with members in the months and years ahead.

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