



## Rare Breed Briefing – Abattoirs

### Christopher Price

One of the biggest challenges for native breed farmers is finding an appropriate abattoir for their animals. Most keepers of rare and native breeds find they have to market their products outside the conventional supply chain if they are to have financially viable businesses. They need to add value and find their own markets, generally direct selling to the end consumer.

A local abattoir network is therefore essential if these producers are going to transport their livestock to slaughter at a reasonable cost and maintain the high welfare standards expected by their customer base.

This is not just a matter of the number of abattoirs. The first problem is their uneven distribution across the country. Although Devon has six small abattoirs, there are almost none in the north of England – a strong livestock area. There are none either on the Isle of Wight, the Scilly Isles, the Isle of Skye, nor on most other Scottish Islands, with the exception of mainland Shetland - meaning farmers must face the additional costs, and animals the additional stress, of loading and transport by boat. Even in mainland Scotland, small-scale businesses are faced with long road journeys to abattoirs that will accept their stock for private kills.

But even if there is an abattoir, many of the larger scale ones are single-species, whereas producers with rare and native breeds often rely on a mixed farming system with several farmed species to make their farming business viable.

Moreover, larger abattoirs often do not accept small numbers or carry out "private kills" where the customer gets their own product back. Many will not kill cattle over thirty

months (OTM), making it more difficult for farmers rearing slow-growing animals in a low-input system to maintain a viable business model

Some of those abattoirs which are available use non-stun methods of slaughter, which many rare and native breed farmers and their customers find unacceptable. Also, native breed farmers often make use of their animals "fifth quarter" - the hides, horn and offal - to add value to their product. Accessing this part of the animal requires a supportive and local abattoir network

Horned cattle and large pigs are also regularly banned from large scale abattoirs. Other large-scale abattoirs will not scald and remove hair from outdoor-reared pigs, which tend to have a thicker coat than indoor-reared animals - instead they insist on skinning the animals, reducing their saleable value. In addition, not all have organic certification. So even if there is a large abattoir in the locality, it may not be of benefit to local producers.

There are also the welfare aspects to consider. Its sometimes said the size of the abattoir does not affect the welfare of the animals as long as handling and lairage are of a high standard, and that's largely true so long the journey is limited to the use of larger trailers on the main road network. But the growing distances required to access an appropriate abattoir, often in smaller vehicles on more rural road networks, make distance an increasingly important issue.

Rare breed farmers overwhelmingly want to use abattoirs that operate to the highest welfare standards. And those standards need to be enforced if they are to have any credibility; no one should object to that. But its vital to keep the cost of compliance to the absolute minimum consistent with maintaining standards if the abattoir network is to survive. That means ensuring enforcement is proportionate and efficient, and that means making the best use of the available technology.

An improvement in the network of smaller abattoirs is not just a matter for farmers though, it would also benefit the wider rural economy. Large scale abattoirs require workers to carry out highly specific, often highly mechanised, procedures as part of the slaughtering process and employ relatively large numbers of narrower skilled, lower paid people in one location. More local and smaller abattoirs, where each worker is required to be more highly and multi-skilled, with the flexibility for part-time work, would benefit rural areas where local employment is less accessible.

In addition, smaller locally based abattoirs would facilitate the creation of new premium markets for distinctive meat products from local breeds and the expansion of related businesses such as butchers and farm shops.

So how do we revive the network? As with most issues in agriculture, it requires a partnership between farmers and government. This is not about government subsidising the abattoir network; its about farmers working for the long term and government offering one off investment, as part of its general investment in production, to prepare the sector to thrive in a more market facing world.

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Farmers

1. Farmers need to take ownership of the issue. If there is a local abattoir willing to take your stock, then use it, even if its more expensive. It wont last otherwise.
2. Wherever possible, farmers should collaborate to ensure the local abattoir can benefit from consistency of supply. Inconsistency is a major problem for many of them.

## Government

1. As part of its new post Brexit agriculture policy, government should invest in ensuring that the existing network is able to meet the changing demands on it. In particular, more abattoirs need to be able of take small numbers of nonstandard animals and returning the fifth quarter.
2. Where possible, this investment should extend to enabling abattoirs to provide related services such as butchery, processing and packing.
3. Where there is no abattoir, government needs to invest in the role out use of mobile and pop up abattoirs. There may be challenges with ensuring there's enough water and with disposing of the by-products, but other countries have overcome them.
4. Increase the use of technology. Many inspections can be carried out remotely, by video, without compromising welfare.