Political action that is needed to end the overuse of antibiotics in animal farming

Alliance approach to getting manifesto commitments

In June 2023, we wrote to over 25 MPs and asked them to "ask your party manifesto policy writers to include a robust and specific commitment to address antibiotic resistance and the contribution animal agriculture makes to that resistance or let us know who we should contact directly to raise this".

We wrote to this number of MPs to maximise the chance of ensuring the message reached the policy writers, as it was often difficult to find clear and direct routes for making manifesto recommendations.

We chose:

- a cross party sample of MPs
- MPs who have spoken out about the need to address antibiotic resistance and the part that animal agriculture plays
- representatives of relevant departments – Defra (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs), the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Business and Trade
- shadow representatives of these departments
- relevant spokespeople

We attached the following information, so that policy writers had all the background they might need, including a list of the commitments we felt were the most important.

ALLIANCE TO SAVE OUR ANTIBIOTICS

Action that is needed to end the overuse of antibiotics in UK farming – a summary

The current Government has published proposals for action against the overuse of antibiotics in farming. However, it is unclear at this stage if all of them will be adopted or when this will occur. Furthermore, the proposals do not go far enough in several key areas.

To reduce antibiotic use in animal agriculture, without reducing animal welfare, a future government should aim to:

- End using antibiotics to "to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry or lack of care or to compensate for poor farm management"
- Introduce key improvements to animal-husbandry standards to achieve higher levels of animal health and welfare, so that the need for antibiotics is minimised

- End all forms of routine farm antibiotic use
- End all preventative group treatments with antibiotics
- Restrict individual preventative treatments to exceptional circumstances, where the risk of infection is high, and where the consequences of not using antibiotics is likely to be severe
- Ensure that most farm antibiotic use is in individual sick animals, rather than for group treatments
- Ban the importation of animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters
- Introduce statutory antibiotic-use data collection by animal species and farming system (e.g. indoor, free-range, organic, pasture-fed)

Background information

Antimicrobial resistance – the scale of the problem

According to World Health Organization (WHO), antibiotic resistance* "is one of the biggest threats to global health, food security, and development which "threatens to unwind a century of medical progress".

A study published in the Lancet, a leading medical journal, estimated that, in 2019, antimicrobial resistance* was the cause of 1.27 million deaths globally. This includes 7,600 in the UK with an estimated to cost the NHS of £95 million per year. Globally 4.95 million deaths are associated with AMR.

A growing number of infections – such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, and salmonellosis – are becoming harder to treat as the antibiotics used to treat them become less effective.

A 2015 review, commissioned by the UK government, found that, unless effective action is taken, 10 million people a year could be dying of antimicrobial resistance by 2050, and the cumulative cost to the global economy would be $100 trillion by 2050. The cost of each superbug outbreak in an NHS hospital is estimated to be about £1 million.

Antimicrobial resistance occurs naturally, but the WHO says the misuse of antibiotics in humans and animals is accelerating the process. Urgent action is therefore needed against the overuse of antibiotics.

Reductions in UK farm antibiotic use, but more action is needed

Fortunately, British farmers have already voluntarily reduced their antibiotic use by 55% since 2014. This is very welcome and has helped control some types of antibiotic resistance. However, much larger reductions in antibiotic use are still achievable and needed.

At present, about 75% of UK farm antibiotic use is for group treatments: antibiotics are often added to animal feed or drinking water to treat or prevent infections at a flock or herd level.

The excessive use of group treatments is unfortunately common around the world, but in some European countries, like Sweden, Norway or Iceland, 80–90% of farm antibiotic use is for individual treatments. Most UK farm antibiotic use should also be targeted in this way and be for the treatment of individual sick animals. Achieving this will require new rules on antibiotic use and further major reductions in total use.

Proposals for Government action

In February 2023, the Government put out to consultation its proposals for new Veterinary Medicines Regulations which, if adopted, would introduce stricter rules for farm antibiotic use. The proposals include some rules that were introduced in the EU in January 2022, but also deviate from the new EU rules in some areas. The government had previously said that it would implement the EU rules in full, subject to consultation, but this has not happened.

The Government's proposals include:

- A ban on routine farm antibiotic use.
- A restriction on preventative antibiotic use to exceptional circumstances, where the risk of infection is high, and where the consequences of not using antibiotics is likely to be severe.
- A ban on using antibiotics "to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry or lack of care or to compensate for poor farm management".

If implemented, these new rules would be very welcome, and would help achieve more responsible farm antibiotic use.

Unfortunately, despite being a step forward, major loopholes are present in these legislative proposals, which are weaker than the rules already implemented in the EU.

The Government is not proposing to ban preventative group treatments. This means that, in certain circumstances, it will remain legal to feed antibiotics to groups of healthy animals. This practice, which is a major cause of antibiotic overuse in farming, was banned in the EU in January 2022.

The Government has not produced any proposals to end the importation of animal foods produced with routine and irresponsible farm antibiotic use. The EU will be banning the importation of animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters once secondary legislation has been implemented. Unfortunately, the UK Government has no plans for ending the importation of foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters, even though UK farmers have not been allowed to use antibiotic growth promoters since 2006.

There are no proposals for gathering antibiotic-use data by species. The EU will begin collecting this data in 2023, but the Government is planning to rely on voluntary, industry data collection. It is very unlikely that all farmers will be willing to voluntarily provide such data. Statutory collection of antibiotic-use data would provide more comprehensive and reliable data.

A final weakness in the Government's proposals is that it does not yet include action on animal husbandry. If animals are kept in unhygienic and stressful conditions, then illness becomes much more common. The need

for antibiotics in farming should be minimised by improving farming systems, animal health and welfare and thus reduce the reliance on routine antibiotic use.

For further information please contact the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics:

Cóilín Nunan cnunan@saveourantibiotics.eu
Jane Tredgett jtredgett@saveourantibiotics.eu

www.saveourantibiotics.org

Our vision is a world in which human and animal health and well-being are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely on routine antibiotic use.

[*] Antimicrobials – including antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals and antiparasitics – are medicines used to prevent and treat infections in humans, animals and plants. Antibiotics are medicines used to prevent and treat bacterial infections. Antimicrobial resistance is a natural process of microbes evolving to be able to resist the action of drugs, making them ineffective. Antibiotic resistance is a subset of AMR but the two terms are often used when the actual issue being discussed is antibiotic resistance.