



Good news in the campaign to defend standards for lab animals - but it has been 'a battle simply to stand still' says RSPCA

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Lab animals won't lose hard-fought protections in the UK after the government appears to have listened to the outcry from members of the public and the concerns of the RSPCA, it was revealed today.

Last year, the Government ran a public consultation into how UK regulations on lab animal care and use should be updated to comply with a new European Directive.

The RSPCA was deeply concerned at initial suggestions that the Government could simply choose to replace our existing law with just the minimum requirements of the new Directive – but today the Government has indicated that this is unlikely to happen.

RSPCA Senior Scientist Barney Reed said: "We do need to put this into perspective. In many key areas the Government has avoided the temptation to lower standards, which the RSPCA welcomes.

"But all we've done here is fight a battle simply to stand still. Meanwhile the number of animals being used in research is going up year on year. Much more needs to be done if we're going to make faster progress with reducing lab animal use and suffering."

Last year when the EU Directive was announced, it looked as if the frequency of inspections of labs by Home Office officials could be significantly reduced, ethics committees at some research establishments weakened, and some animals subjected to smaller housing.

There has been much behind-the-scenes lobbying over the last 18 months, with those opposing the reductions in welfare standards including many people using and caring for lab animals.

Today's response suggests that overall 'watering down' of our controls won't happen, but the draft text of the actual law and vital 'guidance notes' are still to be released.

"Any weakening of our own standards would be a clear case of shamelessly putting economics before animal welfare. It would also make a mockery of all the statements we've heard from this government that they are committed to providing the 'best possible standards of animal welfare'," said Barney.

"We are pleased that the Government appears to have shut the door on weakening UK law in many key areas, but this now needs to be followed through with actions to ensure the new law operates effectively to minimise animal use and suffering in reality," said Barney.

The new UK legislation has to be agreed by November and will take effect on 1 January 2013.

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Notes to Editors

The Government response to the consultation provides an indication of how the final legislation may look but the draft text of the actual law is still to be released. There remain some significant questions regarding how it will be implemented in practice.

These include potential changes to the process of licensing animal experiments, (e.g. changes to the format of the 'project licence' and 'personal licence'), changes in the way some establishments may choose to operate their local ethics committees, the housing conditions for some animals and the number of official inspections of labs that the Home Office will carry out each year. Importantly, the 'Guidance' notes to accompany the new law are also yet to be finalised and these will be crucial in shaping standards in UK labs.

For more information and interviews, please contact Chris Pitt in the RSPCA press office on 0300 123 0244.

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