

Farm Assurance Review (FAR)

ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS – VIEWS FROM SQC

The Farm Assurance Review identified 9 key strategic recommendations for all farm assurance bodies across the UK. SQC already had some of this work underway and is working to address other aspects where appropriate for crop assurance in Scotland.

Below, SQC broadly offers its view on each strategic recommendation in order to better define where SQC can implement and deliver these in line with the expectations of our Co-op members, Board of Directors and agreed 5-Year Strategy.

The success of making these changes relies on working in partnership with our Certification Body, our SQC Co-op partners and our assured growers..

FAR STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION	SQC RESPONSE
1. On-farm audits must be reduced, simplified and delivered more consistently	<p>SQC welcomes and supports this recommendation – already seeing it as an ongoing priority.</p> <p>We have been working on systems to help ease the feeling of ‘assessment burden’ and make the journey simpler for all. For example, SQC and our Certification Body, FIA, recognise the efficiencies that dual audits can offer for members and agree that work must continue to maximise this.</p> <p>We have also moved from a 9-month to a 12-month audit period to ensure that all members can be audited in a timely manner across the year which aids consistent delivery; and SQC is moving towards a more digital-based system to reduce time on paperwork.</p> <p>An advantage of our Co-op model and structure is that it allows us to work better across the industry to identify opportunities for improving processes and we have a very strong working relationship with our Certification Body. We aim to work together to bring about improvements to farm audits that benefit everyone.</p> <p>SQC regularly engages with assured growers but to continuously improve audit processes, including simplification and consistency, we need their direct feedback and encourage sharing this through conversations during audits, meeting us at events and contacting us directly.</p> <p>However, expectations must be managed around ‘reduction’ and ‘simplification’ as the scheme needs to ensure that as change is implemented, there is no reduction in the integrity of standards which are fundamental to accessing markets.</p>

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2. There must be a transformational step forward in embracing technology and managing data to deliver more effective farm assurance with greater added value for all	<p>SQC welcomes and supports this recommendation – already seeing it as an ongoing priority.</p> <p>The appetite to embrace technology from both SQC and the majority of its members is vast, with audit methodologies used during the Covid period demonstrating how this can be successful in managing compliance.</p> <p>SQC has invested in efficient technologies with the introduction of auditee portals, remote monitoring, sharing of data following single input, electronic document libraries and self-submission by members all forming part of the solution.</p> <p>SQC has also recently launched a new Industry Checker allowing buyers instant access to validate grower assurance.</p> <p>This investment in new technology will help reduce duplication and administrative burden and increase real time information, in turn delivering more effective farm assurance and adding value for all along the supply chain. It also aligns with the requirements in Recommendation 1.</p> <p>To be effective, it will require ALL stakeholders to engage and promote the benefits using collaborative strength to overcome challenges such as connectivity, training and support for farmers to embrace what will be the future of compliance management.</p> <p>However, those making these recommendations need to recognise that all farmers are not confident using new technology. While SQC provides instruction for systems as they are introduced, there should be an industry-wide training initiative to support farmers to adopt technology and new digital systems with confidence.</p> <p>Finally, improved technology requires investment. For SQC our sole income is via our assured growers paying for their assessment and certification service through their annual renewal. So, we have to plan and manage change to minimise cost increases to our farmers – especially at a time when their income is reducing and costs are increasing. If the wider supply chain is demanding change, can it help deliver funding for this? Many industry bodies are looking at data co-ops to deliver value back to the farmer and the work required for this goes beyond just the assurance schemes – how is this funded to ensure value for all?</p>

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3. Farm assurance schemes need to reset and/or restate their decision-making structures to establish farmers as the driving voice in standards development	<p>SQC welcomes and supports this recommendation – seeing it as an ongoing priority. The growers’ perspective has always been at the core of SQC.</p> <p>Through our Co-op model and associated Board of Directors, Scottish Crops Supply Chain Hub (established by SQC) and Standards Setting Committee and process, not only have we established ‘farmers as the driving voice in standards development’ but we have gone further to ensure linkage across the supply chain. A farmer is always ‘at the helm’ of the SQC board.</p>
4. A new industry-led initiative must set out the future environmental ambitions for farm assurance, establishing this as an area of competitive advantage for UK farming	<p>SQC has long since recognised the environmental ambitions for farm assurance. We welcome being involved in any initiative which looks at progress in this topic to ensure a ‘joined up’ approach that is welcomed by all - without placing additional ‘burden’ on farmers whilst also ensuring a competitive advantage for UK farming. This could be built on an existing model. A prime example of a similar group working well together is the Scottish Crops Supply Chain Hub which SQC established.</p>
5. The inclusion of regulatory requirements within farm assurance standards and audits should be conditional on government and regulators agreeing a form of ‘earned recognition’	<p>SQC welcomes and supports this recommendation and hopes to see through this, a simpler approach determined to provide ‘earned recognition’ where appropriate.</p> <p>This could also provide an opportunity to use shared data via data pools (data co-ops) but it’s vital to remain cautious in what is seen as ‘voluntary assurance’ versus ‘legislative inspection’. It’s also important to recognise that it is not the role of an Assurance Scheme or Certification Body to be undertaking the job of regulatory compliance.</p>
6. There must be greater coordination in the way in which farm assurance operates across the UK nations	<p>SQC works well with other UK farm assurance schemes and is committed to ongoing coordination with all key partners and supports this recommendation.</p> <p>Recognition needs to be given by the Farm Assurance Review, however, to the fact that there are devolved differences which form part of brand identity; and devolved policy and devolved issues which may not be conducive to a fully coordinated approach. It must also be appreciated that there are different Standard requirements within each of the sectors of farm assurance given the differing products, markets and environments.</p>

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7. Farm assurance schemes must better position the UK farming industry in world food markets and in competition with imported food	<p>SQC sees this as an important area to ensure access to both domestic and export markets but this recommendation is not relevant to all farm assurance schemes.</p> <p>SQC is solely an assurance body, not like some other organisations who also undertake marketing or lobbying efforts. Its focus is on providing quality assurance for buyers so they have the confidence in the quality, food safety and sustainable source of the grain they are buying.</p> <p>SQC is generally complimented for its streamlined structure and the fact that we focus on crop assurance in Scotland. We do not see it as our role to go beyond this under our current business model.</p> <p>SQC would however call for this recommendation to be extended to create greater transparency in the requirements for imported produce – and to highlight the differences between import requirements and UK farm assurance standards.</p>
8. All farm assurance schemes must review, and, where necessary, improve their methods of communication with the farming industry	<p>SQC welcomes and supports this recommendation as communication with our members is critical to the nature of our business and must be recognised as an ongoing priority always under review.</p> <p>We use various channels to communicate with members and stakeholders, including e-newsletters, technical updates, LinkedIn, events and the Scottish Crops Supply Chain Hub and will continue to build on this.</p> <p>SQC believes more could be achieved with greater collaboration between stakeholders to assist in the delivery of communications. SQC wants to build a ‘trust and transparency’ culture through farm assurance communications. And, we must embrace greater functionality via different methods – written, social media and face-to-face. Identification of target audiences and best methods of communication must be realised.</p>
9. The Red Tractor scheme must complete the implementation of recommendations in the Campbell Tickell report	<p>This is not applicable to SQC.</p>