

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Who Defines Good Welfare? Identity, Legitimacy and Discourse in Positive Animal Welfare

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Received: 12 June 2026 | **Revised:** 6 August 2026 | **Accepted:** 2 September 2026

Keywords: animal welfare | discourse | epistemic authority | identity | knowledge | legitimacy | positive animal welfare

ABSTRACT

Positive animal welfare has gained prominence in discussions across animal welfare science, policy and industry. Yet debates surrounding the concept are often interpreted as disagreements about the concept itself. Drawing on insights from previous empirical research, this paper contends that the central tension concerns who gets to define positive animal welfare, whose language becomes legitimate and whose expertise is recognised. It offers a conceptual argument, illustrated through empirical examples from the Great Britain (GB) sheep sector, that positive animal welfare should be understood as a discursive space through which meanings of welfare, identities and claims to epistemic authority are constructed and negotiated. It uses discourse as a sensitising theoretical lens to analyse how actors mobilise different forms of knowledge, including scientific, institutional and experiential knowledge, to legitimise particular interpretations of positive animal welfare while contesting others. These negotiations revealed that disagreements arise not only from differing interpretations but also from struggles over language, legitimacy and the authority to define. Understanding positive animal welfare as a discursive space therefore helps explain why misalignment can persist even where there is broad agreement on the importance of positive animal welfare.

1 | Introduction

Animal welfare science has long focused on preventing and reducing negative experiences like pain, fear, disease and distress. More recently, research in animal behaviour, neuroscience and welfare has shown that a good life for animals means more than just avoiding suffering. As a result, the concept of positive animal welfare has become important in scientific, policy, assurance programmes and industry discussions. The rationale for welfare improvement is therefore not only based on what animals suffer from or lack but also on the welfare benefits associated with providing opportunities for positive experiences and a good quality of life (Lawrence et al. 2019; Mellor 2016; Rault et al. 2023).

As the academic and policy field continues to mature, efforts continue to be made to establish a common understanding of positive animal welfare. Early work focused on recognising animals' positive affective experiences (Boissy et al. 2007; Fraser and Duncan 1998), before expanding through frameworks such as the Good Life Framework and Five Domains Model, which sought to operationalise opportunities for animals to experience positive states (Edgar et al. 2013; Mellor et al. 2020; Mellor and Beausoleil 2015). Positive animal welfare is now increasingly understood as a state in which animals experience predominantly positive mental states while developing competence, resilience and opportunities to flourish (Rault et al. 2025). Such developments reflect the growing scientific acceptance of positive animal

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welfare as a legitimate aspect for improving animal welfare. Despite this, however, much of the literature has remained focused on conceptual refinement, assessment frameworks and biological indicators. Consequently, less attention has been paid to how positive animal welfare is interpreted, negotiated and legitimised among those expected to implement it, creating a gap between scientific and policy development and everyday livestock practice.

Farmers, veterinarians, advisors, certification bodies, retailers, scientists and advocacy groups frequently support the principle of improving animal welfare yet often differ in how they think welfare should be defined, measured, communicated and rewarded. Terms such as happiness or health are often used interchangeably but may carry different meanings, values and expectations for different actors (Vigors et al. 2021). Similar observations have been made in other areas of agricultural and environmental governance. Hajer (1995), for example, argues that concepts such as sustainable development often generate broad agreement at the level of principle while remaining contested in practice because different actors attach different meanings, values and priorities to them. Positive animal welfare may exhibit similar characteristics, reflecting broader agreement between scientists and the public on the need for animals to have positive experiences, even as differences remain over how to achieve it. Indeed, Jacobs et al. (2026) demonstrate this in their work on wool supply chains, where stakeholders align on the principle of ‘good’ wool production yet diverge on the practices needed to deliver it.

Drawing on previous empirical research with Great Britain (GB) sheep farmers and industry actors, this paper argues that the central tension is not necessarily only about what good welfare means but also about who gets to define what it means, whose language becomes legitimised and whose expertise is recognised. Positive animal welfare is therefore examined not as a scientific concept but as a boundary object (Caccamo et al. 2023), where meanings, identities and legitimacy are negotiated within livestock systems. The aim is to generate actionable insights at farm level (Manning and Grant 2026), contributing to broader discussions concerning agricultural change, farmer identity, knowledge legitimacy and the role of discourse in shaping transitions within food and farming systems.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 is the introduction, and Section 2 considers positive animal welfare in the context of framing, communication and discourse. Section 3 provides the methodological underpinnings. Sections 4 and 5 present the findings and discussion, respectively. Section 6 concludes and makes policy implications.

2 | From Framing to Discourse

2.1 | Framing and Communication

The emergence of positive animal welfare has drawn attention to how welfare concepts are framed within and across stakeholder groups. Research on framing suggests that how information is presented influences how individuals interpret issues, assign meaning and respond to proposed actions (Flusberg et al. 2024). This process was illustrated by Stevens et al.

(2019), who showed how the terms ‘booster-broiler’ and ‘mega-stable’ became dominant framing devices in Dutch livestock debates. These terms described production systems, highlighted context-specific problems and influenced public understanding. ‘Booster-broiler’ drew attention to animal welfare while ‘mega-stable’ broadened the discussion to all livestock sectors and wider industrial farming. In the context of positive animal welfare, Vigors’s (2019) work on citizens’ and farmers’ framing of positive animal welfare also shows how positive animal welfare became framed as involving both increased positive experiences and reduced negative ones. Therefore, while framing provides useful insights into how animal welfare concepts are interpreted and communicated, it offers a less comprehensive explanation for why disagreements, protestations and counter-narratives (see Carretero and Bermudez 2021) persist despite apparent agreement on the intended animal welfare outcomes.

2.2 | Beyond Framing

The historical evolution of animal welfare terminology, from a focus on avoiding suffering to promoting positive experiences, illustrates how the same concept can carry different meanings for different audiences (Rault et al. 2022). What scientists may frame as a novel conceptual development may be interpreted by farmers as either self-evident or as a challenge to existing practices. This aligns with Manning’s (2018) distinction between primary and secondary dialogue. Primary dialogue refers to the visible content of communication—what is explicitly said—while secondary dialogue refers to the meanings, assumptions and implications that remain unspoken but are nevertheless conveyed. For example, a statement such as ‘this flock has a high level of lameness’ may be interpreted as a technical welfare observation. Equally, it may imply criticism of management practices and be interpreted as ‘you are a bad farmer’. The same message can therefore carry very different meanings depending on how it is received and interpreted.

This differentiation highlights an important limitation of framing approaches. Stakeholder responses are not always reactions to information itself but to what that information is perceived to imply about competence, responsibility, identity or legitimacy. Stevens et al. (2019) illustrate this clearly in their analysis of Dutch livestock debates, showing how activists, farmers, industry actors and policymakers contested the meanings of dominant terms not by accepting or rejecting particular frames but through avoidance, redefinition and the introduction of counter-terms. Some counter-terms inadvertently reinforced the dominant frame, while certain contested labels were later operationalised within policy. This demonstrates how livestock terminology becomes a site of struggle over which meanings acquire public and institutional authority. As Fairclough (2023) argues, discourse is both ‘constituted’ and ‘constituting’, meaning it is shaped by existing social structures while also actively shaping them. In the context of positive animal welfare, this implies that the struggle for legitimacy occurs because different actors seek to define what it means, and these definitions subsequently shape which practices are seen as legitimate.

2.3 | Discourse

Discourse provides a broader framework for understanding how meanings are constructed, negotiated and contested within society. It examines how language actively constructs social realities, shapes relationships between actors and produces social practices (Cap 2019). Unlike framing, which focuses primarily on the presentation of information, discourse draws attention to how language legitimises particular forms of knowledge and structures relationships of power (Hook 2001).

Burman (1996, 4) argues that discourses ‘mark out positions’ for individuals and explains that discourse is concerned with the ‘social construction and constitution of the categories of experience, or subjectivities’ (5). She emphasises that psychological and institutional practices do not simply describe social reality but actively produce it—including the categories of identity through which welfare is understood and contested. Burman explained that regulation and resistance are not simply opposed; the same technologies that subordinate can also be used to promote resistance (Burman 1996, 10). This is particularly significant in agricultural contexts, where discourses can normalise particular farming practices while rendering alternatives invisible or illegitimate. Discourses enact power not only by legitimising certain knowledges but also by designating who can participate in defining legitimate knowledge (Burman 1996; Hook 2001). Further, particular stakeholders can use their power to legitimise, delegitimise or invalidate specific viewpoints, arguments or the thinking of other stakeholders (Reyes 2011), a process that has been observed in the delegitimation of farmers in particular (Raj et al. 2026).

From this perspective, positive animal welfare is not simply a scientific concept but a discourse through which competing actors negotiate what welfare means, whose knowledge counts and who has the authority to define good welfare. These negotiations constitute a politics of definition, as actors seek to legitimise particular interpretations and claims to authority, grounded variously in scientific evidence, institutional position or moral responsibility. Consequently, positive animal welfare discourse does not simply reflect animal welfare-related framings but actively shapes the terms through which change becomes possible and legitimate. This understanding aligns with Hook’s (2001) emphasis that discourses are systems that produce subject positions—ways of being, speaking and acting that individuals may inhabit or resist. The concept of competing rural discourses is not new. Similar contest among rural discourses have long been identified within agricultural governance, including debates over rural policy in the Netherlands (Frouws 1998), and, more recently, pesticide use and governance (Frelih-Larsen et al. 2023).

The following section outlines the empirical foundations for this discursive analysis.

3 | Empirical Foundations and Methodological Positioning

This paper develops a conceptual argument concerning discourse, legitimacy and the politics of defining positive animal welfare, grounded in a wider programme of qualitative research

examining how GB sheep farmers and industry stakeholders understand, negotiate and communicate positive animal welfare. Rather than presenting a standalone empirical analysis, the paper draws on two complementary qualitative datasets: semi-structured interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022 and a subsequent facilitated multi-stakeholder workshop. The workshop was informed by the principles of the multi-actor approach, using facilitated co-learning to explore how different forms of expertise collectively negotiated the emerging themes identified through the interview phase (Klerkx et al. 2012; Moschitz et al. 2015). The purpose of combining these datasets was not to validate interview findings per se but instead to develop and interrogate emerging themes captured through dialogue between participants occupying different socio-economic positions within the sheep livestock sector.

3.1 | First Phase

The initial phase of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews with 25 GB sheep farmers and 11 industry stakeholders. Farmers were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling across England, Scotland and Wales, while industry participants were purposively selected to represent key organisations involved in livestock production and animal welfare. Industry participants included veterinarians, agricultural advisors, researchers, representatives of certification schemes, trade organisations and livestock supply chains. Together, these interviews explored participants’ understandings of positive animal welfare, their experiences of livestock management and their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing positive welfare within contemporary sheep farming. The diversity of participants provided rich qualitative accounts from multiple perspectives across the GB sheep sector, consistent with recommendations for achieving information-rich sampling in qualitative research (Bryman 2016).

Initial coding of the interview data identified recurring themes that individual interviews alone could not fully explain. While participants frequently discussed positive animal welfare in relation to husbandry practices, they also raised broader questions concerning welfare language, competing forms of expertise, occupational identity, legitimacy and responsibility. These emerging issues pointed towards the need to examine how such understandings were negotiated collectively rather than individually. Consequently, a facilitated stakeholder workshop was designed as a second phase of the research to explore these emerging themes through interaction and dialogue between different stakeholder groups rather than simply collecting additional individual opinions. Inviting interview participants to the workshop ensured continuity between the two stages of the research and enabled them to collectively interrogate themes that had first emerged in individual interviews.

3.2 | Second Phase

The workshop was conducted online in March 2022 and involved 24 participants, the majority of whom had participated in the interview phase, together with three additional stakeholders invited to broaden discussion across key sectors. Table 1, included

TABLE 1 | Breakout room for group discussion in the facilitated workshop.

Facilitators	Groups	Members
Primary researcher	Farmer Group 3	Sheep farmer 7_grp Sheep farmer 10_grp Sheep farmer 12_grp Sheep farmer 4_grp Sheep farmer 20_grp
Co-facilitator 1	Farmer Group 2	Sheep farmer 15_grp Sheep farmer 14_grp Sheep farmer 16_grp Sheep farmer 22_grp
Co-facilitator 2	Farmer Group 1	Sheep farmer 8_grp Sheep farmer 1_grp Sheep farmer 13_grp Guest farmer 26_grp Sheep farmer 23_grp Guest participant
Co-facilitator 3	Industry Actor Group 2	Actor4_grp Actor1_grp Researcher1_grp Supply chain 1*_grp
Co-facilitator 4	Industry Actor Group 1	Actor3_grp Veterinarian_grp Actor1*_grp Supply chain 1_grp Certification scheme 1_grp

as supplementary material, details the workshop participants and provides context for interpreting the data. The workshop lasted approximately 90 min and combined facilitated breakout group discussions with a plenary session. To encourage open dialogue while ensuring representation across different forms of expertise, participants were organised into five relatively homogeneous discussion groups based on their professional backgrounds, comprising three farmer groups and two industry stakeholder groups. Each group was facilitated by an experienced member of the research team (M.M, J.E.S., L.C.M., L.M), whose role was to guide discussion, encourage participation and ensure that emerging themes were explored consistently across groups while allowing conversations to develop organically.

The workshop design reflects principles of boundary object theory and the related concepts of ‘trading zones’ or ‘boundary spaces’, collaborative spaces in which different forms of expertise could interact, share knowledge and develop shared understandings without necessarily adopting one another’s conceptual frameworks (Austin et al. 2012; Caccamo et al. 2023). Discussion was facilitated using a design fiction-style approach (Blythe 2014; Craigon et al. 2023; Jacobs et al. 2026) including a short, pre-recorded video and illustrated scenarios depicting different understandings and applications of positive animal welfare. These materials were designed to be ‘plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites’ (Star and Griesemer cited in Caccamo et al. 2023). They allowed farmers, scientists and industry stakeholders to discuss the same concept while drawing on their own discursive positions

and forms of expertise. This means that participants not only expressed individual opinions but also questioned, negotiated and reflected on competing perspectives, allowing areas of agreement, disagreement and shared understanding to emerge through dialogue.

3.3 | Third Phase

The analysis combined inductive and deductive elements (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). It proceeded iteratively across the interview and workshop datasets. Interview transcripts were first coded inductively to allow recurring themes to emerge from participants’ own accounts rather than imposing a predetermined analytical framework. These initial themes informed the design of the workshop and guided subsequent analysis. Analysis then moved iteratively between the interview and workshop datasets, examining how participants constructed, challenged and negotiated welfare language, expertise, legitimacy and occupational identity through both individual accounts and collective dialogue.

Although discourse, legitimacy and competing interpretations are analytically distinct, their boundaries can appear blurred, reflecting a wider ‘fog of words’ surrounding concepts that are frequently used interchangeably in discourse-related research (Coticchia and Catanzaro 2022). For this paper, discourse refers to the broader meaning-making system through which positive animal welfare, stakeholder positions and legitimate forms of knowledge are constructed. Competing interpretations refer

to the empirically observable meanings that different actors attach to positive animal welfare, while legitimacy concerns whether particular actors, interpretations and knowledge claims are recognised as authoritative or appropriate. Legitimation and delegitimation describe the processes through which that authority is established, justified or contested. The paper does not seek to resolve the deeper theoretical ambiguities surrounding these concepts or to provide a full Foucauldian discourse analysis. While the empirical material provides rich illustrations, a full discourse analysis would require additional methodological procedures (e.g., systematic analysis of textual strategies, intertextuality or discursive formations) which were beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, the study establishes conceptual boundaries sufficient to explain how the politics of defining positive animal welfare operates through interactions among farmers and other stakeholders.

Accordingly, this paper should be understood as a conceptual contribution grounded in qualitative research rather than as a conventional empirical analysis of stakeholder attitudes. The empirical material provides the foundation for developing a broader theoretical argument concerning discourse, legitimacy and the politics of defining positive animal welfare. While the analysis draws on the GB sheep sector, it does not seek to generalise to all farming systems or suggest that disagreements surrounding positive animal welfare reduce to discourse alone. Using the PRICE model, particularly the criterion of reflective edification, evidence saturation was considered to have been reached when no new themes or thematic connections emerged, and the findings achieved sufficient clarity (Naeem et al. 2024). Scientific work concerning the measurement and assessment of welfare inputs and outcomes remains important, but that is not the key focus of this work. Rather, by exploring individual, collaborative and negotiated collective narratives and also aligned and competing elements of the discourse, this research provides an additional analytical lens for understanding why elements of misalignment and disagreement may persist even where there is broad agreement on the importance of improving animal welfare and achieving specific welfare outcomes.

4 | Results

The findings show that positive animal welfare functions as a contested discursive space in which competing claims were made over language, knowledge and authority. Within these discussions, legitimacy referred to the perception that the authority exercised by an individual or organisation is appropriate, whereas legitimisation and delegitimation concerned the processes of contestation and justification through which particular actors, forms of language and knowledge claims gain or lose authority within this discursive space (Tallberg and Zürn 2019). The process of legitimisation provides an analytical focus that allows actors to explain and justify via authorisation, mythopoesis, rationalisation and moral evaluation either ‘why things are the way they are’, ‘why actors act the way they do’ or ‘why actors believe they can make a change’ (Olsson and Johansson 2025; Van Leeuwen 2007). The following sections trace these negotiations from language, through institutional and occupational claims to authority, to the ongoing negotiation of welfare legitimacy across livestock systems.

4.1 | The Politics of Language and Defining Good Welfare

Workshop discussions revealed minimal disagreement about the importance of improving animal welfare. Across stakeholder and farmer groups, participants broadly agreed that livestock should have lives that extend beyond merely avoiding pain and disease. The first point of contention concerned language itself. Participants questioned whether the term *positive animal welfare* accurately reflected everyday farming practice, or whether alternative language, such as *good welfare*, *high welfare*, or *positive animal wellbeing*, better captured their understanding. Both farmers and stakeholders reported that the term positive animal welfare was rarely used in routine farming conversations, with *good welfare*, *health*, and *wellbeing* considered more familiar and meaningful. Farmers’ linguistic preferences were not merely semantic choices but strategic claims about what forms of knowledge should count as legitimate. When Farmer 5 rejected ‘happy sheep’ in favour of ‘contentment’, she was not simply choosing a more precise term; she was asserting that welfare language should be grounded in practical recognisability rather than abstract ideals. Similarly, Farmer 6’s preference for ‘high welfare’ invoked the legitimacy of farm assurance—a system of verifiable standards, inspections and market accountability. As Van Leeuwen (2007) would describe it, these linguistic choices deployed different legitimising strategies: Farmer 5 appealed to rationalisation (scientific precision and defensibility), while Farmer 6 invoked authorisation (institutional standards and verification). The contestation over language thus revealed competing claims about whose criteria—scientific, institutional or experiential—should define legitimate welfare.

Competing narratives extended beyond terminology to the interpretation of animal welfare practices themselves. This interpretive conflict illustrates a fundamental feature of discursive contestation: Observable behaviours do not carry self-evident meanings but require interpretation within frameworks of prior experience and expertise. An industry participant’s reading of the sheep as ‘institutionalised’ rather than ‘contented’ was not merely a different opinion; it was a claim that her experiential knowledge of housed sheep during lambing equipped her to recognise habituation where others might see positive affect. This moment exemplifies what Burman (1996) describes as discourse ‘marking out positions’—the same behavioural event became a site for competing claims about whose experiential framework should be regarded as authoritative. The disagreement was therefore not empirical (what was the sheep doing?) but epistemic (who is qualified to interpret what it is doing?).

Across the actors and farmers breakout groups, participants similarly questioned whether positive animal welfare could be defined through universal standards. While existing frameworks such as the Five Freedoms were widely acknowledged as an important baseline, several participants argued that positive animal welfare cannot be reduced to a single framework or indicator, as different farming systems present distinct welfare opportunities and challenges. During plenary discussions, the actors and the farmers reflected that different landscapes, management systems and production contexts can give rise to different understandings of what constitutes good welfare, making any universal authoritative definition difficult to sustain.

Taken together, these discussions reveal that debates surrounding positive animal welfare were not primarily disagreements about whether welfare matters. Rather, they centred on the language through which welfare should be described, the meanings attached to that language and claims as to who had the authority to determine which interpretations became legitimate. Competing terms such as *good welfare*, *high welfare* and *wellbeing* did more than describe welfare differently; they revealed different forms of evidence, different understandings of care and different claims to expertise. In this way, negotiations over language shaped whose knowledge was recognised as authoritative, rational or relatable in defining what constituted ‘good’ animal welfare.

4.2 | Scientific and Institutional Authority

Following negotiations over language and terminology, workshop discussions shifted towards a more fundamental question: who possesses the authority to determine what constitutes positive animal welfare? Rather than revealing fixed stakeholder positions, participants drew on multiple, sometimes competing, discourses as they negotiated how positive animal welfare should be understood, assessed and governed. Scientific evidence, practical experience, communication and public legitimacy were themes invoked alongside one another, with participants moving between these different elements to rationalise and justify competing claims about what constituted ‘good’ animal welfare.

4.2.1 | Positive Animal Welfare as Scientific Evidence

One dominant discourse defined positive welfare as grounded in scientific evidence and the animal’s own experiences. A research participant articulated this discourse by arguing that positive welfare should be inferred from measurable behavioural and physiological indicators:

For me, as an animal welfare scientist, positive animal welfare is about what the animal experiences... Because scientifically, I can’t measure what you do. But I can measure the behaviour of the animal, the physiology of the animal, and try and derive some inference about how the animal is experiencing things.

This statement performs a classic scientific legitimising move: It locates welfare authority in what is measurable, and it justifies through methodological necessity (I cannot measure what you do). This deploys rationalisation (Manning and Grant 2026), where legitimacy comes from the scientific method’s capacity to produce objective, verifiable knowledge. However, this rationalisation also performs exclusion, as it implicitly delegitimises other forms of welfare knowledge (practical judgement, embodied perception) by positioning them as unmeasurable and therefore unscientific. The scientist’s discursive position thereby constructs positive animal welfare as an object of scientific inquiry—something that belongs to the domain of researchers who possess the methodological tools to infer affective states from behavioural and physiological indicators.

Responding to the discussion, Actor 1 shifted attention away from the animal’s measurable experiences towards the intentions and motivations of the stockperson, suggesting that positive welfare also reflected how farmers understood and approached their care of animals:

...I wondered to what extent positive welfare was a state of mind of the sheep farmers or shepherds. If we were thinking positively about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it, then we are perhaps more likely to be delivering positive welfare.

He illustrated this distinction through the example of sheep shearing, arguing that two farmers might perform the same husbandry practice but for very different reasons. One might shear sheep simply because ‘that’s what we do in June’, whereas another approached the same activity consciously as an opportunity to improve the animals’ welfare. In this account, legitimacy derived not solely from measurable animal outcomes but also from the intentional and reflective practices through which farmers sought to create positive experiences for their animals. Rather than representing opposing positions, these discussions revealed competing ways of locating positive animal welfare. For some participants, positive welfare resided primarily in the animal’s measurable experiences (legitimation); for others, it also encompassed the knowledge, judgement and intentions guiding everyday husbandry (relativisation, participation and operationalisation). Discussions therefore moved repeatedly between aspects of the animal’s experiences and the farmer’s practices, illustrating that the same language was often used to describe different objects of concern.

4.2.2 | Positive Welfare as Practical and Deliverable

Alongside scientific understandings, participants repeatedly mobilised a discourse centred on implementation. Here, the concern was not whether positive animal welfare was desirable, but whether it could be translated into practices that could be delivered consistently across diverse farming systems. Veterinary participants argued that if positive animal welfare were to become meaningful for industry, it would require clear boundaries, achievable standards and recognition of the practical realities of livestock production. As Actor 4 argued:

If the positive welfare definition is to be of any value... it’s got to be put in boxes so that people know what they’ve got to deliver... otherwise it becomes almost impossible for industry to deliver on it.

This emphasis on implementation extended beyond the need for clear definitions to broader concerns about legitimacy being linked to measurement and consistency. During the workshop, stakeholders recognised that different farming systems and management contexts generated different understandings of successful animal welfare outcomes, making it difficult to establish a single framework that was both meaningful to farmers and intelligible to consumers. As Supply chain 1 reflected:

... this outcome-based framework... is quite difficult to get your head around... what's actually successful... and how do we measure it?... the farmers have different beliefs of what it is. So to actually measure it, and for it to make sense to a consumer is a challenge.

Rather than rejecting positive animal welfare, stakeholders questioned whether concepts lacking practical boundaries could meaningfully guide husbandry decisions or industry practice. The emphasis on implementation reveals a distinct legitimising discourse: one in which legitimacy flows not from scientific validity or moral aspiration but from operationalisability. This discourse constructs positive animal welfare as a governance problem—something that must be bounded, standardised and made auditable if it is to guide industry practice. Stakeholders' insistence that it must be 'put in boxes' (Actor 4) or made 'measurable' (Supply chain 1) did not merely express practical concerns; it performed a delegitimising function, rendering definitions that resisted operationalisation as impractical and therefore irrelevant to industry. This aligns with Hajer's (1995) observation that environmental concepts often achieve rhetorical acceptance while remaining fundamentally contested in practice where different actors' understanding of what counts collide.

4.2.3 | Positive Welfare as a Negotiated Legitimacy

Perhaps the most striking discussion concerned not the concept itself but the authority to define it. Participants repeatedly questioned who should determine welfare standards and whether externally imposed language and benchmarks could ever secure meaningful engagement from farmers. As Actor 4 reflected:

.... . say that there is a group of people who have the licence or integrity to define these things... you've got to involve the practitioners on the ground in that debate... it's not how we frame it, it's how we all together actually define it.

This shifted the discussion towards legitimacy as a communicative achievement. Rather than assuming that scientific or institutional definitions would simply diffuse into practice, participants argued that animal welfare concepts required co-creation and shared ownership. Participants repeatedly suggested that scientific and experiential knowledge should not be treated as competing sources of authority but as complementary forms of expertise that needed to be brought together. As Actor 1 observed, scientific understandings of positive welfare and farmers' practical reasoning often used the same language to describe different aspects of welfare, before concluding that 'you must get to a point where you need to connect the two'.

Discussions also extended beyond farming to wider society, where participants questioned whether legitimacy could ever be fully shared between producers (farmers) and the public. Reflecting on wider societal debates, one participant argued that there remained 'a real gulf between the way they [public] view it and the way it really is', while another suggested that differences lay

not simply in knowledge but in 'desirable outcomes'. Participants recognised that animal welfare increasingly operates within a broader social licence in which public expectations, market demands and political legitimacy shape acceptable farming practices. Some argued that technical standards should first be developed collaboratively within industry before being communicated externally, whereas others suggested that public values themselves inevitably become part of the process through which welfare standards are negotiated. These narrative themes suggest that the central issue was not simply how positive animal welfare should be defined, but rather who has the authority to define it. Legitimacy was claimed through multiple routes: achieving scientifically derived measurable outcomes, intentional and reflective practices, co-creation and operationalisability. Together, these represented competing claims to legitimacy, none of which proved sufficient on its own. The following section examines how farmers themselves asserted experiential and occupational expertise within these competing claims to authority.

4.3 | Occupational Identity as Experiential Authority

The competing claims to authority identified in the previous section were not accepted uncritically by farmers. Instead, they advanced an occupation-related discourse in which their perceptions of welfare expertise derived from stockmanship, tacit knowledge and moral responsibility rather than scientific measurement or institutional inspection. Farmers positioned themselves as uniquely qualified to recognise and interpret animal welfare because such knowledge was understood to emerge through sustained, embodied engagement with animals.

4.3.1 | Embodied Knowledge and Trained Perception

For farmers, legitimate knowledge of animal welfare emerged through prolonged engagement with animals rather than through formal education or scientific measurement. Farmer 13 articulated this most directly:

You only know a contented sheep after working with them day after day. (Farmer 13, Farmer Group 2)

This statement locates welfare expertise within everyday practice. Knowledge is accumulated gradually through repeated observation, interaction and experience rather than acquired through manuals, training courses or welfare protocols. Participants portrayed time spent with animals as enabling farmers to develop an intuitive understanding of what is normal, what has changed and when intervention is required. Participants repeatedly described this expertise as a form of trained perception. This is described as relativisation by Manning and Grant (2026). Farmer 14 explained:

Listen, look, see, assess, act, move on. We can do that by quietly walking into the shed, absorbing what's going on, and knowing in 10 s... It's a farmer thing; you just

know... It's something you can't quantify. (Farmer 14, Farmer Group 2)

This account constructs welfare knowledge as tacit, embodied and resistant to codification. Farmer 14's progression from 'listen' to 'act' is not merely a practical routine; it is an epistemic claim about how legitimate knowledge is produced. The sequence positions sensory perception (listening, looking) as primary, judgement (assessing) as immediate and intuitive and action as following almost seamlessly. Crucially, Farmer 14 describes this as 'something you can't quantify'—a direct challenge to the scientific discourse that privileges measurement and standardisation. By framing welfare assessment as 'a farmer thing', Farmer 14 also performs a boundary-marking function (Logstein and Bjørkhaug 2023): This is knowledge accessible only to those who have earned it through sustained engagement with animals, excluding outsiders who lack experiential credentials.

4.3.2 | Tacit and Relational Knowledge

This understanding was echoed during Farmer Group 1, where participants acknowledged that experienced shepherds routinely assessed whether sheep were 'happy and healthy', while also recognising that such judgements depended upon the individual stockperson, the flock and the particular farming context. Farmer 13, with over 70 years of experience, expressed this directly:

You go to the area, got a couple of dogs, and I had a report they have been in my sheep. To be honest, I didn't need that report; I could see something that had been in my sheep... I know how the sheep react as soon as I go in the field. And that's something I couldn't explain to a non-sheepkeeper, but most sheep farmers will know exactly what I'm talking about. (Farmer 13)

This is a powerful claim about the limits of codification. The farmer's knowledge is conceived as tacit; it cannot be fully articulated, written down or transmitted through formal education. It is situated and relativised in a specific context (this farm, this flock, this landscape) and embodied in the farmer's perceptual apparatus. In Farmer 13's words, it is something 'most sheep farmers will know exactly' but cannot be explained to an outsider. This claim has significant political implications. If farmers' knowledge is perceived as incommunicable to outsiders, then it suggests an attitudinal response that 'outsiders' cannot share that worldview and cannot legitimately judge animal welfare. In these accounts, outsiders were positioned as lacking the embodied experience and contextual understanding necessary to interpret what they observed in the same way as experienced farmers. The account positions the farmer not simply as an improver of animal welfare but as its primary experiential knower. Thus, legitimacy is co-aligned with custom and practice, place and context. Four Farmers, 1, 4, 6 and 10, also reinforced that experiential knowledge is socially inherited. These farmers did not describe animal welfare expertise as knowledge that individuals simply accumulate over time. Instead, it was portrayed as something familial, that is, transmitted through families:

My father was a policeman who worked on the family farm as a boy... he bought a small farm... I tried to build up the farm... I pass that on to my son. (Farmer 1)

I was helping my parents and my grandparents. But yeah, I started my own sheep when I was 14 years old.... .my parents and all the decisions on the farm with the sheep, I do jointly with my parents, who obviously are very experienced in sheep farming. (Farmer 10)

Or through occupational apprenticeship:

if you're not born into the farm, then you have to basically just try and work... I've been a shepherd on this farm for 20 years... I've learned on the job really, all those years of experience. (Farmer 4)

Practice-based authority therefore rests not only on the experience itself but also on socially recognised traditions of learning and accumulated stockmanship. Farmers' presentation of knowledge as tacit and socially inherited implies that their epistemic claims were not merely defensive but also drew boundaries around who was regarded as capable of recognising and judging animal welfare. Outsiders—particularly inspectors, regulators and consumer advocates—are positioned as lacking the experiential credentials to judge welfare. This may go some way to explaining farmers' resistance to authority and legitimacy being established through mythopoesis, that is, authority rests in prescribed legitimate actions such as farm assurance standards, which in GB would be Red Tractor assurance (see Manning and Grant 2026, for a wider explanation). Farmer 14 (Farmer Group 2) expressed this with characteristic bluntness:

People from outside our industry, who are stakeholders in our industry, but not at grassroots with the livestock level, can be critical to me putting in standards, putting criteria and putting another set, if you like, of have inspectors on our backs, which we do not need.

The phrase 'inspectors on our backs' evokes a relationship perceived as being surveillance and suspicion or of judgement and sanction. This participant presented external scrutiny as being exercised by actors perceived to lack the relativised knowledge to understand what they observed. The statement can therefore be read as contesting the epistemic legitimacy of inspection and assurance when these processes are perceived to be designed or implemented by actors without comparable farm-level experiences.

Taken together, these discourses construct an alternative regime of welfare-related authority. Farmers position good welfare as emerging from embodied practice, contextual judgement and moral responsibility. Their occupational identity, therefore, functions not simply as a social identity - 'I am a farmer', or 'I am a good farmer' - but as a claim to epistemic authority over the recognition, interpretation and evaluation of animal welfare. This alternative discourse does not reject science or institutional

expertise outright; rather, it contests their exclusive authority to define what constitutes good welfare or a bad farmer. The result is not a rejection of welfare governance per se, but an ongoing negotiation over whose knowledge is legitimised or delegitimised in a given context within livestock systems.

4.3.3 | Moral Authority and the Burden of Animal Welfare

Underlying these epistemic claims was a deeper moral argument: participants presented farmers' authority to contribute to defining good welfare as derived partly from the burden of care they bear. Farmer 5 expressed this most explicitly:

I know I go to bed and I can sleep at night knowing I've given the sheep I hope a good life, and when the time comes for them to go then they have a good death too because that's just as important. (Farmer 5)

This is a claim about moral legitimacy. In this account, the farmer's authority was presented as deriving from the responsibility associated with caring for animals throughout their lives and deaths. The phrase 'I can sleep at night' is not a casual idiom; it is a moral assertion: I have done what is right, and I know it. Farmer 8 also articulated the weight of this responsibility:

We are being forced, in a way you know, that the industry is leading us to being solely responsible for that animal's life, health and welfare, and so that's a huge responsibility... if I lose that animal, that's a complete judgement on my ability every single time. (Farmer 8)

Farmer 8 articulates a profound asymmetry: Farmers bear sole responsibility for welfare outcomes while simultaneously experiencing their authority to interpret those outcomes as constantly challenged by external actors. The phrase 'complete judgement on my ability' reveals that welfare failure is experienced not as a technical problem but as a moral judgement, a verdict on the farmer's competence and identity. This asymmetry constructs a double bind: Farmers are held accountable for welfare outcomes yet denied epistemic authority over their interpretation. As Reyes (2011) would describe it, this constitutes a delegitimising move: external actors (consumers, animal welfare lobby) are positioned as making confident declarations about welfare while bearing none of the practical or moral consequences of those declarations. Farmers' resistance to external definitions should therefore be understood not as defensiveness but as a response to this perceived asymmetry of accountability and authority.

Farmer 8 continued:

Who makes the judgement on time? How long should an animal be in pain? How do you make that decision? But I think people, the consumers and the animal welfare lobby, they seem to be confident to make those decisions and those declarations.

This is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of external definitions. External actors were portrayed as confident in making decisions about welfare without bearing the same immediate practical and moral consequences as farmers. Farmers who do bear those consequences have their judgement devalued. This is a claim about the ethics of epistemic authority, as the participants' accounts imply that those bearing the practical burden of implementation should have a major role in defining animal welfare.

5 | Discussion

5.1 | From Knowledge Exchange to Politics of Definition

Participants in the study rarely disagreed about the importance of improving animal welfare. Rather, disagreement centred on who possesses the legitimacy to define what constitutes good welfare, which forms of knowledge should be regarded as authoritative, and how welfare should ultimately be measured and governed. The findings therefore shift attention away from communication as the primary explanatory lens and towards the politics of definition itself.

This distinction is important because conventional knowledge exchange models tend to assume that improving scientific knowledge or communicating objective evidence more effectively will naturally lead to greater adoption and improved welfare outcomes. However, the findings presented here suggest that the prospects for achieving animal welfare improvements also depend on how different actors negotiate what constitutes good welfare and whose knowledge is regarded as legitimate (Hårstad 2023). Vaara et al. (2024) describe discursive legitimisation as a 'multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon', emphasising the negotiated co-construction of discourses, positions and strategies. From this perspective, legitimacy cannot be understood solely as a consequence of scientific expertise, professional status or institutional authority. Rather, it is continually negotiated through competing values, experiences, forms of expertise and discursive practices that shape how animal welfare is understood and justified (Vaara et al. 2024).

Within participants' accounts, positive animal welfare appeared primarily as a discursive space through which existing practices were interpreted, justified and communicated to wider society. Rather than emerging solely from scientific consensus, authority was negotiated in this research actively and simultaneously through language, scientific expertise, institutional standards and occupational experience. The critical question is not simply what positive animal welfare means or which indicators are suitable but also who possesses the authority to define them and how this epistemic authority is negotiated in practice.

5.2 | Discursive Authority and the Legitimation of Knowledge

Viewed through a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, the findings suggest that debates about positive animal welfare concern not only competing interpretations but also which forms of knowledge become legitimate and who possesses the authority

to define good welfare. For Foucault (cited in Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017), and as elaborated by Hook (2001), discourse is productive: It not only shapes what can be said but also produces the subjects authorised to speak, the objects of knowledge that become legitimate and the boundaries of acceptable practice. The findings make this process clear. Participants' accounts associated scientific and assurance bodies with institutional procedures that helped establish what counted as legitimate evidence, who is authorised to produce that knowledge and who is expected to receive it. In this sense, positive welfare can be interpreted as operating within what Foucault describes as a regime of truth: the system by which certain statements come as true while others are marginalised, not because they correspond more accurately to reality but because they are produced within authorised institutions and validated through accepted procedures.

Similar dynamics have recently been identified by Vik and Hårstad (2026), who demonstrate that Norwegian animal welfare policy is characterised by competing narratives that confer legitimacy on different forms of knowledge and actors. Mainstream agricultural organisations, research institutions and animal advocacy groups each construct distinct understandings of welfare, reflecting competing assumptions about what constitutes legitimate evidence and who should define welfare policy. Although situated within a different empirical context, our findings reveal remarkably similar dynamics within GB sheep farming systems. The negotiation observed during the workshops was therefore not simply disagreement over terminology but part of a broader politics of definition in which different discourses compete to establish authority.

Bock and Buller (2013) similarly argue that farm animal welfare should be understood as a changing repertoire of nature–society relations rather than as a fixed scientific category. Their work highlights how welfare concepts emerge through broader social negotiations concerning human–animal relationships rather than scientific evidence alone. Our findings extend this argument by suggesting that through discursive legitimisation these negotiations also involve competing claims over epistemic authority.

5.3 | Occupational Identity as a Counter-Discourse

The findings further suggest that farmers' occupational identity functions as a counter-discourse through which institutional claims to authority are actively challenged and renegotiated. Existing research has consistently shown that occupational identity shapes farmers' responses to policy interventions, environmental regulation and disease management. However, the present findings suggest that occupational identity performs an additional function. It is mobilised not simply to defend existing farming practices, but to establish farmers as legitimate producers of welfare knowledge.

This interpretation extends work on the 'good farmer' identity. The relationship between farming practice and occupational identity has been extensively theorised through the concept of the 'good farmer' (Burton 2004; Burton et al. 2020). This literature demonstrates that farmers' decisions are shaped not only by economic or technical considerations but by the desire

to be seen by peers and society as competent, responsible and morally legitimate custodians of animals and land. Naylor et al. (2018) describe the 'good farmer' as a context-dependent identity through which farmers negotiate changing institutional expectations while defending their competence and professional legitimacy. Their work identifies a defensive dimension to this identity, whereby farmers attribute constraints on being a 'good farmer' to external institutions, government failures or circumstances beyond their control. Similar dynamics emerged in the present study. However, rather than simply resisting external expectations, farmers in this study mobilised their occupational identity to claim epistemic authority over the definition of positive animal welfare.

This epistemic dimension of farmers' competing narratives can also be understood through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and *field*, which he used to understand practices as the combined effect of objective conditions, internal interpretations and social action (Raedeke et al. 2003). As Burton (2011) demonstrates, farmers 'read' agricultural landscapes for signs of skilled farming in ways that outsiders cannot because their perception is shaped by practical knowledge of the connection between efficient practices and visible outcomes. Similarly, farmers in our study 'read' their sheep for signs of welfare in ways that they regarded as difficult for scientists and regulators without comparable experience to reproduce.

Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) further develop this insight by showing that 'good farming' ideals are tied to cultural capital—symbols of competence and moral worth that are recognised and validated within farming communities. They argue that change requires the 'gradual devaluation of existing ways to achieve cultural capital'. Our findings extend this analysis by showing that farmers may resist positive welfare because it threatens their cultural capital: It introduces external criteria for evaluating good farming, judged not by the farming community but by outsiders who lack experiential credentials. The politics of definition, therefore, is also a politics of cultural capital.

This was evident in participants' repeated emphasis on stockmanship, embodied observation and practical judgement. Statements such as 'you only know a contented sheep after working with them day after day' (Farmer 13) or Farmer 14's description of welfare assessment as 'Listen, look, see, assess, act' are not merely descriptions of good husbandry. They are claims for authority and legitimacy. They are claims about who is qualified to recognise, interpret and judge animal welfare. Farmers consistently positioned experiential knowledge as legitimate in its own right rather than as a deficit awaiting scientific validation. Welfare expertise was therefore presented as something earned through continuous engagement with animals rather than acquired solely through scientific measurement or formal education or conferred by farm assurance certification.

This process is further illuminated by two complementary concepts. First, Logstein and Bjørkhaug (2023) demonstrate that Norwegian livestock farmers distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate welfare knowledge by privileging veterinarians and fellow farmers while dismissing external criticism as uninformed. The present findings reveal a parallel process but suggest that these symbolic boundaries are also epistemic boundaries: Farm-

ers did not simply distinguish between insiders and outsiders; they differentiated between forms of knowledge regarded as capable of recognising welfare and those viewed as detached from everyday husbandry. Second, Chiles and Loughheed's (2022) concept of 'legitimizing visions' shows that industrial and agrarian livestock systems employ different strategies to establish legitimacy following animal welfare controversies. Industrial systems privilege measurable outcomes, scientific evidence and institutional governance, whereas agrarian systems draw their legitimacy from husbandry, place-based practice and experiential expertise. The findings reported here reveal a comparable dynamic within debates surrounding positive animal welfare. Scientists, veterinarians, retailers and assurance schemes mobilised legitimacy through evidence, standards and market credibility, while farmers constructed legitimacy through practical wisdom, moral responsibility and long-term relationships with animals.

5.4 | Implications for Animal Welfare Governance

Understanding positive animal welfare as a politics of definition rather than simply a communication challenge has important implications for both research and governance. Existing approaches to knowledge exchange frequently assume that animal welfare improvements can be achieved by communicating scientific evidence more effectively or by translating technical concepts into language that farmers can more readily understand. The findings presented here suggest that this assumption is incomplete because disagreements surrounding positive animal welfare are not solely about understanding scientific evidence; they concern the legitimacy of those who produce, interpret and apply that knowledge. This interpretation supports the arguments of Bock and Buller (2013) that contemporary animal welfare should be regarded as a 'matter of concern' rather than simply a 'matter of fact'. Animal welfare is no longer solely a technical issue resolved through scientific evidence but a societal question involving competing values, identities and forms of expertise. The present findings reinforce this argument by demonstrating that disputes surrounding positive animal welfare can also involve disputes over who has the authority to define legitimate welfare knowledge.

Hårstad and Vik's (2022) analysis of political parties' framing of farm animal welfare in Norway reveals a parallel dynamic. Political parties 'generally understand societal claims as lacking or having an unclear factual basis, which has legitimised their nonaction as political parties'. This pattern offers a useful parallel with farmers' responses in the present study. In both contexts, actors positioned as knowledgeable insiders questioned the factual or experiential basis of external claims, thereby legitimising resistance to externally advanced interpretations or interventions.

Recognising this has important implications for governance. If animal welfare is understood primarily as a scientific problem, governance naturally focuses on improving measurement, developing better indicators and communicating evidence more effectively. However, if animal welfare is understood as a negotiated social and political process, governance must also address the legitimacy of different knowledge systems and the discourses associated with them. Scientific evidence remains indispensable, but it cannot operate in isolation from experiential

knowledge, veterinary expertise, market expectations or wider societal values. Governance of practice, therefore, becomes less about disseminating predetermined principles and definitions and more about creating institutional spaces in which different forms of expertise can contribute to the collective definition of welfare. For example, this might involve: (a) deliberative forums where farmers, scientists and assurance scheme representatives collectively develop welfare standards instead of having them imposed by one group; (b) recognising farmers' experiential knowledge as a legitimate input to welfare assessment alongside scientific indicators, not as a deficit to overcome; and (c) governance mechanisms that treat welfare definitions as provisional and revisable through ongoing dialogue rather than fixed and universal. The challenge is not to eliminate disagreement, which is unlikely and perhaps undesirable but to create institutional conditions where disagreement can be productively negotiated instead of producing entrenched resistance.

6 | Conclusion

This paper has argued that positive animal welfare is best understood not only as a scientific concept but also as an ongoing social and political process through which language, knowledge, identity and authority are continually negotiated within contemporary livestock systems. This does not diminish the importance of animal welfare science; rather, it recognises that scientific evidence operates alongside other forms of knowledge in shaping what counts as good welfare. The challenge for positive animal welfare, and by extension agricultural innovations, is therefore not simply to improve scientific measurement or communication but to engage with the politics of definition through which welfare becomes meaningful, legitimate, and actionable within livestock systems. Ultimately, the question is not only what good animal welfare is but who gets to decide what it means.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: M.M.; methodology: M.M.; formal analysis: M.M.; resources: M.M., J.E.S., L.C.M. and L.M.; data curation: M.M.; writing – original draft preparation: M.M.; writing – review and editing: M.M., J.E.S., L.C.M., L.M. and B.C.; visualisation: M.M.; research supervision: J.E.S. and L.C.M. and L.M.; project administration: J.E.S. and L.M.; workshop facilitation: M.M., J.E.S., L.C.M. and L.M.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

The Ethics Review reference number for this research is: 20213216-[Muhammad].

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data for this study are not stored in a public repository to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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