

Number: WG38544



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Welsh Government

Consultation – Summary of Responses

Code of Practice for the Welfare of Livestock:

Laying Hens

Meat Chickens and Meat Breeding Chickens

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

Introduction

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (“the Act”), if you own or are responsible for an animal you have a legal duty to take reasonable steps to ensure its welfare needs are met. The Codes of Practice explain what you need to do to meet the standard of care the law requires.

The existing Codes of Practice reflected the science and legislation in force at that time and was made under The Animal Welfare Act 2006. A review was required to capture any changes in these areas and to ensure the standards being advised are still appropriate. Welsh Government officials worked with Animal Welfare Network Wales to review and update the Code for consultation. The Welsh Government is grateful to the Network for their time and expert recommendations.

The Consultation

The aim of the 12 week public consultation was to give enforcement agencies, specialist interest groups and the general public the opportunity to consider and comment on the updated Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Livestock: Laying Hens and Meat Chickens and Meat Breeding Chickens.

We asked one question:

“This consultation seeks views on the style, layout and content of the code and the information, advice and guidance it contains. We are particularly interested in your comments on the identification section and the advice relating to microchipping. It is important that you give as much information and evidence as possible to support your opinion. This will help us improve the accuracy and quality of the code. Comments are welcome on any part of the code”.

There were 6 responses to the consultation. A list of respondents, which includes a mixture of key organisations and individuals, is provided at Appendix 1. Examples of the suggested amendments and additions to the Code recommended by respondents are provided below, according to the section to which they apply, but it should be emphasised that not everything will be taken on board in the final version:

Laying Hens

The term ‘laying hens’ excludes chicks, pullets and cockerels although these are part of the egg production and should be included in advisory codes. Could this be mentioned here? Or could another categories of birds be listed? This is problematic throughout. In other places in the document they are referred to as poultry. **(CIWF)**

Stockmanship and Staffing

12. Rearing of Hens.

“The RSPCA have standards for pullets which may have some useful information to add to this. <https://science.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/farmanimals/standards/pullets>

Key priorities include measures which prepare pullets to the laying environment from an early age including access to litter, raised platforms and perches, matching or rear to lay environments as far as possible.

There is also useful info in the featherwel guide to 'Improving Feather Cover' e.g. get the pullets used to low-level disturb access and noise, perform at least 3 inspections per day, ensure adequate protein and fibre in the diet". **(CIWF)**

13. Laying hens in rear should be given, where possible, appropriate experience of management practices e.g. natural light, perches, litter, range, enrichment items) to enable them to adapt to the husbandry systems which they will encounter later in life. Liaison between rearers and producers during the rearing phase can help to ensure conditions in rear and lay are as closely matched as possible.

Natural light to be removed as it's not applicable in all systems and at all points in the chain **(British Egg Industry Council)**

18. Injured, sick or distressed hens must be treated without delay and if necessary separated from the rest of the flock in suitable accommodation available for this purpose, or killed in accordance with the legislation The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (Wales) Regulations 2014. Dead hens must be removed promptly.

Dead hens must be removed promptly – "appropriately and/or disposed of" **(RSPCA)**

Feed and Water

21. Feed and water must be readily accessible to all hens.

"On reflection, I think it may be important to include the previous working regarding access by subordinate hens and those with difficulty feeding/drinking. The legislation makes specific reference to minimising competition for feed and water – the guidance should highlight the flock keepers the possibility of excluding birds. **(RSPCA)**

25. Systems which call for the complete withholding of feed and water on any day must not be adopted. In no circumstances may hens be induced to moult by withholding feed and water. However, feed, but not water, may be withheld for up to 12 hours prior to slaughter. This period of 12 hours must be an inclusive period to include catching, loading, and transport, lair-aging and unloading time prior to slaughter.

"Clarity on this paragraph is sought" **(British Egg Industry Council)**

Freedom of Movement

31. If disease or evidence of a behavioural problem becomes apparent, by observation, expert qualified advice should be sought promptly to deal with the problem. Stocking and ventilation rates should also be checked and variations should be considered in order to minimise the likelihood of recurrence of the problem.

"Obligations should not be deflected to packing stations" **(British Egg Industry council)**

Housing 1 – General

35. Where laying hens are housed, floors, perches and platforms should be of a suitable design and material and not cause discomfort, distress or injury to the hens.

They must provide sufficient support, particularly for the forward facing claws of each foot, moreover, perches should be of sufficient length to allow all hens to roost at the same time. Floors, perches and platforms should be kept sufficiently dry and clean.

“To include a line that states that the slated areas can be considered as perching space”
(British Egg Industry Council)

Housing 2 – Non-Cage Systems

This section states that you should also refer to the Egg Marketing Standards regarding “free range”, “barn” and organic eggs.

“These are not covered by the Egg Marketing Regs but by separate legislation: Council Regulation (EEC) No2092/91. **(RSPCA)**

“Organic eggs are not covered by the EU egg marketing regs. Will Organic eggs be covered in this code? **(British Egg Industry Council)**

38. Usable area may be made up of the ground surface of the building where accessible to the hens and any additional raised areas or platforms at least 30cm wide, including perforated floors provided that arrangements are in place to prevent fouling of hens below.
“Are next boxes measured?” **(British Egg Industry Council)**

Environment

Ventilation, Temperature

51. The ventilation system, and facilities for storing and handling litter and manure should be designed, maintained and managed to prevent the exposure of hens to gases such as ammonia, carbon dioxide and concentrations which cause discomfort to the hens or which are detrimental to their health.

With reference to ammonia and carbon dioxide “is it useful to suggest guidelines here? <25ppm ammonia <3000ppm CO2” **(RSPCA)**

Light

52. In normal conditions, in all systems, light intensity should be at least 5 lux, and preferably not less than 10 lux, measured at any feed trough level; in non-cage systems, light intensity in the perching, walking and feeding areas should be at least 10 lux measured at hen eye height. However, a reduction in lighting level may assist in addressing behavioural problems such as injurious feather pecking or cannibalism.

“RSPCA welfare standards have a minimum of 20 lux in activity areas (litter/feed troughs) in order that light levels can be reduced in the event of a pecking outbreak, without going to levels so low that they compromise welfare (i.e. <10 lux)”. **(RSPCA)**

“Paragraph is very broad and could be misinterpreted so the method is not abused” **(British Egg Industry Council)**

Litter

55. In non-caged systems, all hens should have access to a littered area, which should be maintained in a friable condition and at an adequate depth for dust bathing, approximately 10 cm. To ensure good litter management, this depth of litter may be made up over the first two months of use. Hens should have access to good quality substrate for dust bathing and to prevent health problems, in particular foot, leg and breast lesions.

Suggested to change the last sentence to read “Hens should have access to good quality substrate to allow expression of natural behaviours, including dustbathing and scratching, and to prevent health and welfare problems.” as this is more of an issue in broilers than laying hens. **(RSPCA)**

Hens with access to open runs

61. Laying hens should be encouraged to use the outdoor area by the provision of adequate suitable, properly managed vegetation, outdoor scratch and overhead cover, all sufficiently far from the house to encourage hens to range.

“shelters/natural covers should be well distributed, including some close to the house to encourage birds out of the popholes; as well as far away to encourage full use of the range” **(RSPCA)**

“To attract the birds onto the range, they should be able to see the range and cover (trees etc) from the popholes” **(CIWF)**

Catching and Transport

The British Egg Industry Council were due to publish the Joint Industry Welfare Guide to the Handling of End of Lay Hens and Transport **(BEIC)**

76. In all systems, laying hens should be lifted directly into the transport module.

“Best practice would be to carry hens upright, supported by the body. This would be practical for smaller units. A sentence should be added to this effect” **(BEIC)**

Meat Chickens and Meat Breeding Chickens

Definitions

8. The relevant animal welfare legislation applies to owners as well as only person looking after the chickens on their behalf, wherever the chickens are located. A written contract can be of value in ensuring that all parties are clear about their responsibilities in respect of welfare. However, the obligations imposed by the law will still apply.

Where the paragraph refers to contract it was suggested that this is changed to “protocol as its better in this context” **(British Poultry Council)**

9. Welfare and Health considerations, in addition to productivity, should be taken into account when choosing a strain for a particular purpose or production system. Broilers should stem from broad breeding programmes, which balance health, welfare and productivity. Management decisions and the production system should be optimised to promote broiler health, welfare and productivity.

“If not quoted elsewhere, perhaps the legislation this relates to should be included i.e. WFAR, Schedule 1, para. 29. Animals may only be kept for farming purposes if it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of their genotype or phenotype that they can be kept without any detrimental effect on their health and welfare” **(RSPCA)**

Feed and Water

24. For meat chickens, feed should not be withheld for more than 12 hours before the birds are slaughtered or delivered to a new farm. This period of 12 hours must be an inclusive period to include the catching, loading, transport lairaging and unloading time prior to slaughter.

“Previously this included the sentence: Prior to transport water should be provided up to that start of the loading procedure. It would be beneficial to retain this somewhere in this section.” **(RSPCA)**

Disease Control and Biosecurity

43. Used litter from conventionally reared meat chickens must be removed from the house and should be removed from the site before re-stocking so as to reduce the risk of carryover of disease.

This paragraph has been removed from paragraph 44 and inserted here to avoid repetition. **(State Hall Veterinary Services)**

Leg Health

46. Lameness and leg disorders can be a key cause of poor welfare in meat chickens. In the standard commercial broiler reared up to 6 weeks of age this has been associated with selection for rapid growth and can be less of a problem in the slower grower strains.

“Prefer to retain the previous wording: are a major cause of poor welfare. Whilst poor welfare could have any number of causes where leg problems and lameness issues arise they do result in poor welfare.” **(RSPCA)**

51. Certain management practices can limit or reduce the level of lameness in flock, and should be taken having regard to previous experience on the farm and recognised best practice. Increasing the activity of the broiler in the day and encouraging proper rest at night, for example through manipulation of the lighting patterns (increasing light intensity during light periods combined with a longer uninterrupted dark period) can reduce lameness. Increased activity can also be achieved by enriching the environment and reducing stocking density.

“Should this paragraph be in the document? It’s true that increasing bird activity can reduce lameness, but over activity can actually increase lameness due to back scratching, I think it is already covered by previous paragraphs outlining that management practices may need to be reviewed if lameness occurs.” **(Slate Hall Veterinary Services)**

Beak Trimming

56. Beak trimming of meat chickens should not be necessary because they are normally slaughtered before reaching sexual maturity. Consideration should be given to environmental enrichment as a means of avoiding the necessity to beak trim. Possible methods of environmental enrichment should be risk assessed against introduction of pathogens and include the provision of straw bales or brassicas or scattering of whole grain. Nutritional deficiencies in feed should be investigated as a possible cause of any incident of injurious pecking.

“This is good advice. However, environmental enrichment deserves a section of its own which I have added later under housing. If it is added there it may be that it needs simplifying to avoid repetition (though it should still be mentioned here, though father pecking is less common in broilers).” **(CIWF)**

Ventilation and Temperature

62. Birds on restricted feed are more susceptible to low temperatures but less so to high temperatures. If the temperature is allowed to fall there may be a need to increase feed or provide heaters.

It has been suggested that this paragraph is more suited to breeders and would it be better placed in that section? **(RSPCA)**

Stocking Density and Freedom of Movement

76. The decision to stock at a particular density should be made on a house basis and should take account of house-specific management factors. There are several management factors that should influence the keeper’s decision to stock at a particular density. These include the health and welfare measures of previous flocks, such as reports from the slaughterhouse, and the limitations of the environmental controls within a house, which may vary by season and weather conditions. In order to stock conventionally reared meat chickens above 33kg/m² there must be compliance with the additional factors set out in legislation.

The **(RSPCA)** would urge the retention of the previous wording that ‘Higher stocking densities can be associated with poor locomotion and gait’. There is ample evidence to demonstrate this and this section is concerned with stocking densities so it seems appropriate to include here (accepting there are other causes of poor locomotion and gait – which could be referenced in other sections). Also, the word ‘can’ is being used not ‘is’, which again acknowledges there are other causes.

78. If problems occur specialist advice should be sought and stocking density may need to be reviewed. If thinning (partial depopulation) is undertaken, it should be carried out with care to maintain biosecurity and to ensure minimal disturbance to birds whose feed and water have been temporarily withdrawn. A written protocol should specify procedures to minimise the effect on birds and the biosecurity risk, including the risk of introducing zoonotic diseases into the flock, and procedures to minimise feed and water withdrawal. “The **(RSPCA)** would welcome the retention of previous suggested wording to accompany this paragraph: “Thinning is stressful for the birds and should be avoided.” And the previous paragraph: “Deliberately placing a high number of chicks and routinely “thinning” or depleting should be avoided as this causes unnecessary distress to the birds and may result in stocking densities that are too high. In addition this practice is more likely to be associated with poor litter management, associated conditions such as pododermatitis and with increased levels of lameness.”

It has been suggested by **(British Poultry Council)** that a few paragraphs are needed in this section regarding contingency planning.

Environmental Enrichment

Much of this area is referred to elsewhere in the code of practice but it has been suggested that it needs a section of its own. The following has been added as a suggestion **(CIWF)**: The provision of enrichment such as perches, windows allowing in natural light, unopened bales of shavings, good quality straw, scattering of bio-secure wholegrain can encourage activity including normal scratching and pecking behaviour. This is good for leg health and may help to prevent or reduce injurious and aggressive pecking in the rearing period which adversely affects the welfare of the birds. In free-range systems, access to outdoors is also a valuable enrichment.

Additional recommendations for breeding and grandparent chickens.

“Most of this section is concerned with feed control, which is the method heavily promoted as the recommended way to tackle the issue. Perhaps more weighting could be given to longer term solutions, which can only be achieved through breeding.” **(RSPCA)**

93. The nutritional quality of breeding chicken feed must be carefully monitored and controlled, especially with regard to micronutrients and protein.

Suggested to remove the last sentence as all aspects of nutrition are important and not just micronutrients and protein **(Slate Hall Veterinary Services)**

Aggression, injurious pecking and environmental enrichment

The **(RSPCA)** supports the inclusion of the text in this section. However, it would also be beneficial to include such text in the main section of the code, not just in relation to parent/grandparent stock.

Next Steps

Comments and suggested amendments will, where appropriate, be incorporated in to the Code. A final draft will be laid before the National Assembly for Wales for 40 days. If within the 40 day period, the Assembly does not resolve to annul the draft, the Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs will issue the Code in the form of the draft laid before the Assembly.

RSPCA

British Poultry Council

British Veterinary Association (BVA)

Farmers Union Wales (FUW)

National Farmers Union (NFU)

Compassion in World Farming (CIWF)

University of Bristol

Slate Hall Veterinary Services

British Egg Industry Council

Animal Aid

RSPB

Welsh Lamb and Beef Producers Ltd (WLBP)