



Broiler chickens and poultrymeat

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- This note covers some issues relating to the broiler chickens, which are kept for poultrymeat. Another note, [Battery hens](#) (SN/SC/1367) covers battery hens, which are kept for eggs, including the delay to the ban on beak trimming. More information is available on a Defra webpage, [Poultry welfare](#).
- Before 2007 there were no specific EU animal welfare rules relating to boiler chickens.
- The 2007 EU Directive actually allowed the possibility of higher stocking density than those allowed in the UK. After consultation, Defra rejected the option of increasing stocking density.
- Opinions are sharply divided on the feasibility of satisfying demand for chicken meat by increasing the production of free range chickens.
- [The Welfare of Farmed Animals \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2010](#) (SI 2010 No3033) implemented the 2007 Directive in December 2010.

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1 Welfare issues and the 2007 EU Directive

Broiler chickens, which provide meat rather than eggs, have different welfare problems from those of battery hens. They live in a large shed, running loose. As chicks they have plenty of space, but as they grow they become more cramped. After around 40 days they are taken out by forklift truck to an abattoir and slaughtered. Because the hens grow so quickly, they often find that their legs cannot support them and they have pain in their legs. It is not really feasible for broiler hens in crowded sheds to receive veterinary attention. Defra does not hold information on the mortality rate of broiler chickens.¹

The law covering their welfare is general animal welfare law, rather than the specific legislation covering cage size for battery hens. There is a [DEFRA Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Meat Chickens and Breeding Chickens](#), dated July 2002, which is under review. [Interim guidance](#) is available. Failure to keep to the Code of Practice is not, in itself, an offence, but it can be quoted as evidence in a prosecution for animal cruelty.

On 8 May 2007 Ben Bradshaw announced that the EU had reached agreement on welfare of broiler hens, after a long period of disagreement.² The Directive, EU directive 2007/43/EC, came into force on 30 June 2010.

On 26 January 2009 Defra published a [Consultation on New Regulations and Code for Meat Chicken Welfare](#). Stocking density was of particular importance:

21. A maximum stocking density of 33kg/m² is permitted in the Regulations. However, we intend to take advantage of the provision in the Directive which allows Member States to stock above 33kg/m² up to a maximum of 39kg/m² providing certain additional requirements are met. These relate to maintaining particular technical details of the house and its equipment which will be available for inspection by Animal Health. In addition, parameters are set for ammonia levels, temperatures in hot conditions and the average relative humidity.

22. In addition, we have included the Directive's provision within the draft Regulations for producers to stock above 39kg/m² up to a maximum of 42kg/m² provided that they are able to meet additional requirements in relation to monitoring of the holding by Animal Health and the cumulative daily mortality rate. However, we believe that very few producers will in practice wish to make use of this provision to stock meat chickens up to 42kg/m².

Question: Should the Statutory Instrument provide the option for producers to stock up to a maximum of 42kg/ m²?

In April 2009, Compassion in World Farming argued that the EU measures would worsen poultry welfare because of the option of dense stocking.³

[The Government response](#) was published in December 2009, including a decision on stocking:

Maximum stocking density

¹ HC Deb 9 December 2008 c40W

² Defra Press Release, *Bradshaw hails new EU chicken welfare rules*, 8 May 2007

³ Compassion in World Farming Press Release, *UK Government turns its back on chickens*, 14 April 2009

4. There is currently no legal maximum stocking density limit for conventionally reared meat chickens in domestic legislation. It is therefore possible for producers to operate at any stocking density providing bird welfare is maintained. Given that there is evidence to suggest that meat chicken welfare can be compromised at higher densities and that few producers (less than 10% volume of UK meat chicken production) currently operate at stocking densities higher than 38kg/m², we plan to introduce a maximum stocking density figure of 39 kg/m² in English implementing legislation.

The World Society for the Protection of Animals considered that a distinct improvement on the 42 kg/m² option but remained concerned:

What does this decision mean?

While Defra has rejected industry pressure to be allowed to use exceptionally high stocking densities for chickens reared for meat, we feel these new regulations allow the factory farming of chickens to continue practically unchecked.

"We welcome Defra's decision not to allow the very high stocking densities under the new EU Directive of 42kg/m² (up to 21 chickens/m²). However, the new regulation continues to permit severe overcrowding in UK broiler sheds," says Eloise Shavelar, Chicken Out! campaigner for animal welfare charity, CIWF.

The new regulation almost completely ignores high profile calls for raised standards by MPs, consumers and animal welfare groups, such as the recommendation of the EU Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare which concluded that "above 30kg/m² [up to 15 chickens/m²], even with very good environmental control systems, there is a steep rise in the frequency of serious problems."

The RSPCA Freedom Food scheme follows the advice of the EU Committee and sets a maximum density of 30kg/m². The Parliamentary motion signed by 278 MPs calls for the Defra regulation to be based on the Freedom Food standards, a call that has been comprehensively rejected by Defra.

Päivi Vahvelainen, WSPA UK's Programmes Manager says: "It is disappointing that the UK government fails to set high standards of animal welfare for meat chickens, especially in the face of an increasing number of consumers and MPs calling for higher animal welfare. With our reputation as a nation of animal lovers, we should be setting the standard, not following the EU." ⁴

Regulations were passed in December 2010 to implement the Directive and are dealt with in Section 6 below

2 Broilers in 2008

A PQ in February 2008 dealt with the proportion of free range broilers:

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many chickens were reared for meat in England in the last five years; and what percentage of those were reared free range in each year.

Jonathan Shaw: The following table shows the number of chickens and hens slaughtered in England and Wales in the last five years.

⁴ WSPA News Release, *Defra decision on chicken welfare*, 16 December 2009

<i>Slaughtering of chickens and hens in England and Wales</i>			
<i>Million birds</i>			
	<i>Broilers (chickens)</i>	<i>Boilers (culled hens)</i>	<i>Total</i>
2003	657.5	33.6	691.1
2004	647.9	32.3	680.1
2005	666.4	34.0	700.4
2006	654.9	32.3	687.2
2007	646.2	33.0	679.2

Notes:

1. The figures from the Great Britain Poultry Register are from an extract of data taken on 30 January 2008. The figures represent the number of chickens usually present at a premises, and as such they should be taken as approximate.

2. It is mandatory for all premises with 50 or more poultry to register on Great Britain Poultry Register. Registration for smaller premises is voluntary so these premises are under-represented here.

Source:
DEFRA

According to the Great Britain Poultry Register there were 101.3 million chickens registered as being reared for meat production on premises in England as at 30 January 2008. Of these chickens, 3.5 million (3.4 per cent.) were registered as free range. Estimates of the proportion which are free range are not available for earlier years.

It should be noted that as free range birds are on farms for longer than other broilers, the proportion of production which is free range will [be] lower than the proportion of population on farm. However, this will be offset by the fact that the Great Britain Poultry Register is only voluntary for flocks of less than 50 birds, a higher proportion of which would be free range.⁵

The RSPCA is campaigning for people to buy welfare friendly chicken. Its website describes some background:

Here are some of the key issues affecting chickens bred for meat.

Space allowance

Around 90 per cent of chickens are reared for their meat to minimum welfare standards, which allow each chicken less space than a sheet of A4 paper - that's less space than is allowed for egg laying hens which are kept in cages.

Fast growth

They are bred to grow very quickly. The time from when they hatch to appearing as packaged meat in the supermarket can be only 35 days. This rapid growth can cause them a variety of health problems such as heart failure and lameness.

Lighting to maximise growth rate

⁵ HC Deb 7 February 2008 cc1344-5W

They are kept in near constant dim light. This discourages activity to maximise their growth and they are only given a few hours of complete darkness each day to rest properly. It encourages the birds to eat more and therefore grow more quickly.

Signs of suffering

RSPCA research revealed 80 per cent of 'standard' supermarket chickens have hock burn. These leg sores are caused by prolonged contact with wood shavings on the floors of the sheds, which contain high levels of ammonia from excrement.⁶

An announcement by Tesco shows a different view:

Supermarket doubles amount of Free Range chicken available – Price of Standard whole chicken slashed for budget conscious shoppers. Tesco today announced it has doubled its order for premium chicken – which means there will be far more Free Range, Willow Farm*, Finest and organic chicken available for shoppers. This will bring the proportion of higher welfare chicken Tesco sells up to around 30 per cent of total chicken sales, an increase of 70 per cent compared to this time last year.

Tesco is also cutting the price of standard whole birds from £3.30 to £1.99 to ensure shoppers on a budget also benefit. This lower price will mean families can sit down to roast chicken and all the trimmings for less than £1.00 per person.⁷

3 A sceptical note on free range poultry

Some celebrity chefs have been supporting the RSPCA's campaign against poultry reared in the normal conditions. However, an article in the *Times* argued that replacement by free range poultry would not be feasible:

And all we would need is an area the size of the Lake District and we could do just that. Approximately 885 square miles just for chickens, to comply with the EU Poultry and Meat Market regulations. No people and, obviously, no predatory wildlife. A further vast area for feed, of course, because the availability of food is key to the free range existence, as chickens are not grazing animals. Thinking on it, the Lake District may be out, as chickens are happiest on free-draining south-facing pasture, which minimises the build-up of worms and coccidial oocyst parasites. Maybe North Devon would be happy to move.⁸

4 The nutritional value of chicken

A letter to the *Independent* by two professors from London Metropolitan University challenged the conventional view of chickenmeat as low fat:

For decades, nutritionists have been advising people to avoid fatty meats, and eat more chicken because it was lean. So it was. But chickens reared in modern intensive conditions, with energy-dense feeds, are no longer a lean choice. For the past 38 years, we have been measuring the fat content of British supermarket chickens in our laboratory. In our latest study of 52 chickens from various supermarkets, we found that there were about three times the calories coming from fat as from protein. And organic birds were just as fat as battery birds. Consumers, and many nutritionists too, still think chicken is a protein-rich product. But now it is a fat-rich product. (...)

Professor M A Crawford, Institute of Brain Chemistry and Human Nutrition

⁶ RSPCA webpage [Chickens - The true cost of cheap chicken](#) [on 8 June 2012]

⁷ Tesco Press Release, *Chicken to suit every customer*, 6 February 2008

⁸ "Where are we going to put 1,726,400,000 free-range birds?" *Times*, 29 February 2008

5 A wide-ranging Adjournment Debate, March 2008

On 4 March 2008 Mark Oaten had a Westminster Hall Debate on Free-range Produce (Animal Welfare). Chickens were the main topic. He noted the basic problem:

I should give some of the background statistics. I was staggered when my researchers told me that 850 million meat chickens are slaughtered every year in the UK, which is an enormous amount of chicken consumption. Around 98 per cent. of those are broilers, which are intensively reared in large, closed buildings, in which the temperature, lighting, ventilation and nutrition are controlled to ensure the highest and quickest growth possible. The chickens are designed and bred to put on weight rapidly and many of them have severe health problems as a result of the way in which they are farmed. In some cases, they are crammed in; the lack of space can limit their ability to move around and increase prolonged contact with soiled litter, which gives rise to painful ammonia burns to their feet, legs and breasts. That was graphically illustrated in the television programmes, which showed how the animals were treated. The light is kept deliberately low to discourage activity, but it is kept on all the time to encourage the birds to increase their weight as quickly as possible. However, the chickens simply do not get adequate rest. Many of the birds are kept in brown sheds with no opportunity to express natural behaviour such as perching, ground pecking and foraging.

Research shows that the consequence is poor animal welfare. In 2000, the EU carried out a groundbreaking study that looked at the link between breeding practice and welfare. More recently, as a result of a study by Bristol University, which was sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we have more detailed information about the impact that production methods have on welfare. For those who were sceptical of the television programmes, that study, independently sponsored, sets out some alarming findings. For example, at a mean age of 40 days, more than 27 per cent. of birds showed poor locomotion, and 3 per cent. were almost unable to walk. The study's conclusion said that

“a debate on the sustainability of current practice in the production of this important food source”

is needed. Will the Minister say whether the Department has had a chance to look at the study, as I would hope, and what it plans to do next? Does the Minister feel that the Bristol study should result in any particular activities? Both anecdotal and detailed research by universities show that we have a problem.

(...)

As ever, the EU has legislated in the area of animal welfare. An EU Council directive—EU Council directive 2007/43/EC—gained political agreement in May 2007. That new EU directive will come into force on 30 June 2010. It sets out minimum standards for the protection of chickens reared for meat production. Now, that is obviously welcome in relation to most of Europe, where those standards needed to rise. The directive itself allows 42 kg of birds per square metre. However, the difficulty with the directive, and it is why I seek some reassurance from the Minister, is that British standards run way ahead of that standard already. Our standard is for 38 kg of birds per square metre. The perverse side of this EU directive is that it could allow a lowering of standards in this country if farmers were to comply with it. I seek some reassurance from the Minister that the Government will make it very clear to farmers that they need to stick

by the British standard and not revert to an EU standard that would make animal welfare worse. (...).⁹

Kerry McCarthy noted the importance of WTO standards:

The issue is particularly important given the rising levels of meat and dairy consumption in the developing world, particularly in places such as China. China's meat consumption has gone from an average of 4 kg per person 40 years ago to nearly 60 kg per person today. It is estimated that China will reach US meat consumption levels of 125 kg per person by 2031, which, I am told, amounts to four-fifths of current world meat production. I would like to know what we can do internationally to ensure that such meat production meets the standards that we expect in the EU. Even India, where meat consumption is traditionally low, is massively increasing its consumption of meat, and poultry production is one of the fastest-growing segments of its agricultural sector.

Finally, the environmental consequences of increased meat production and consumption are just beginning to be recognised, and the Minister has probably come across that issue in his day job. It takes 9 kg of cereal to produce 1 kg of beef, so there is a real issue about the amount of agricultural land that we would have to use to produce animal feed if we moved towards the patterns of meat consumption that I have outlined. Together with the move towards biofuels, that is something that we really need to address.

In that respect, there is also the issue of water use. On average, I am told, it takes about 180 litres of water to produce a battery egg, whereas the poorest people in India use an average of only 10 litres a day. A slaughterhouse in Brazil uses 10,000 cu m of water each working day, but 25 per cent. of the country does not have access to safe drinking water. There is a real question about how we address such issues internationally and require countries to meet our standards. On that note, however, I will finish.¹⁰

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Phil Woolas) replied:

My hon. Friend also asked whether higher welfare standards in EU policy would not simply open us up to cheaper competition from third countries, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) intervened to mention the World Trade Organisation. The Government and this country operate under WTO rules, which do not allow member countries to ban imports of like products—those that are essentially the same as domestic products except for the method by which they have been produced. Discrimination against like products is a restriction on trade not allowed under agreed exceptions to WTO rules unless the lower welfare standards practised in the exporting country gave rise to safety concerns under the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. That relates directly to the point made by both my hon. Friends. Of course, that is not to say that the UK Government do not promote changes in those areas, but there is a balance between consumer expectations and the Government actions that reflect them and the effect of protectionism on the needs of the developing world. (...)

David Taylor: The supermarkets have outsourced much of their poultry meat production to Brazil, Thailand and elsewhere. Will the Minister tell us what responsibility he believes they have to ensure that welfare standards, even the lowish ones set by the WTO, are observed by the countries concerned? When the Select Committee that I chair reported on that area of industry, I was astonished by the

⁹ HC Deb 4 March 2008 cc353-9WH

¹⁰ HC Deb 4 March 2008 cc362-3WH

negligent and blasé way in which supermarkets said that they visited their production units in Brazil from time to time after giving notice and being told which units to go to: namely, those with the highest standards. The supermarkets are useless in that regard.

Mr. Woolas: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. We have had various discussions with supermarkets and the National Farmers Union on that issue. As I shall discuss in a few moments, labelling and consumer information are extremely important and are at the heart of our policy. We believe, and there is consensus on this in the House, that informed consumer choice is the modern way. If there is an advantage to having large supermarkets that control large percentages of the marketplace, it is that such policy levers can be made more easily available. I say that because it is a fact rather than because I welcome it. (...).¹¹

6 Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2010.

The [Welfare of Farmed Animals \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2010](#) (SI 2010 No3033) implemented the 2007 Directive in December 2010

Defra's explanatory memorandum states

Policy background

What is being done and why

7.1 The Regulations transpose Council Directive 2007/43/EU which aims to improve welfare conditions for meat chickens across the EU, whilst balancing economic, social and environmental impacts. The Directive takes into account the latest scientific evidence, veterinary advice, consumer concerns and industry practice, setting conditions for the keeping of meat chickens from the time chicks are brought to production sites until they leave for slaughter. It is unique in that it measures welfare outcomes and provides for a feedback mechanism between enforcement bodies and the producer, thus identifying those who are operating at unsatisfactory levels of stockmanship. These producers will have targeted inspections, verbal or written recommendations of improvements and ultimately prosecution as a final result.

7.2 General welfare legislation (Council Directive 98/58/EC transposed through the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007) applies to all farm animals. Additionally there are specific EU rules for pigs, calves and laying hens. Meat chickens are a major sector not to have their own rules and the Directive will fill that gap. Diverging legislation and quality assurance schemes (containing certain welfare related aspects) exist at national level throughout the EU.

7.3 The rationale for Government intervention relates to public concern about the welfare of meat chickens, the need for a level playing field for producers and the risk to the welfare of the birds themselves. Provision of chicken welfare is a case of market failure, as defined in the Treasury Green Book. Good chicken welfare provides an intrinsic benefit to people who care about animal welfare status. This means that if chicken welfare is improved, then such people will benefit, whether or not they make any commensurate payment to the supplying producers. This public benefit means that the returns to producers would be less than society as a whole would be willing to pay collectively for better animal welfare. Since producers cannot capture all the benefits of improved animal welfare in the price of their products, chicken welfare will typically be

¹¹ HC Deb 4 March 2008 cc369-74WH

undersupplied compared with what would be economically efficient. Meanwhile on the demand side those members of the public who care about the welfare of meat chickens typically cannot easily transact with numerous farmers for the supply of welfare they demand. This inefficient outcome provides the rationale for Government to intervene by defining Regulations that mandate a specific level of welfare related activities

7.4 These Regulations amend the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 (S.I. 2007/2078).

7.5 Regulation 3 provides definitions and interpretations including a definition of “conventionally reared meat chicken”. This defines the chickens kept for meat production which will be subject to the provisions of the Regulations. These are chickens other than those on holdings with fewer than 500 chickens or with only breeding stocks; which are on hatcheries, or which are barn reared, free range or organically-reared and marketed as such.

7.6 Schedule 1 (general conditions under which farmed animals must be kept) of the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 is amended to include provisions relating to conventionally reared meat chickens.

7.7 A new Schedule 5A is added to the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, which sets out additional conditions that relate to conventionally reared meat chickens (regulation 6).

7.8 The new Schedule 5A provides further interpretations and general additional conditions including the requirement for keepers of meat chicken to have undertaken some formal recognised training which covers specific areas, as well as providing for the recognition of prior experience. The Schedule also requires keepers to notify the Competent Authority (in this case Animal Health) if they wish to stock above 33kg/m.

7.9 Stocking density limits are set out with associated conditions for operating at these levels i.e. up to 33kg/m² or up to 39kg/m². These conditions cover aspects such as drinking and feed, litter, ventilation and heating, noise, light, inspection, cleaning and record keeping.

7.10 The Schedule also sets out the monitoring and follow up procedures at slaughterhouses. These procedures build upon the systems already in place to implement EU legislation on food and feed controls (854/2004 and 853/2004). Post mortem conditions and mortality will be monitored for potential signs of poor on-farm welfare. Any concerns will then be passed to the Competent Authority and the producer for appropriate action.¹²

¹² Defra, [Explanatory Memorandum to the Welfare of Farmed Animals \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2010](#)