

On Monday April 1st the Scottish Government Guidance on the Welfare of Meat Chickens was published: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-welfare-meat-chickens-meat-breeding-chickens/>

In July last year The Humane League UK, Animal Aid and Eyes on Animals responded to a consultation for feedback on the guidance. The Animal Health and Welfare Division of the Scottish Government said they "would be grateful for any comments"

The guidelines are supposed to help producers understand the legislation, and provide additional information and context around the legislation. The additional guidance is not mandatory by law, but supposed to help provide guidance that will be good for animal welfare.

The organisations received notification about the meat chicken consultation just 2 weeks before the responses were due. Again they received just 1 weeks notice on guidelines currently being produced on Laying Hens (this April).

The three groups agreed to collaborate on feedback and all put the same suggestions forwards. However, not a single item of feedback was carried forward into the final published document.

**(in grey - the guidance as it stood, in yellow - our suggestions)**

In a section of guidance about catching birds to load them up for slaughter a simple request to advise that slow, calm movement is essential to avoid panic and stress in hens during catching was not included.

Catching and handling should be carried out quietly and confidently exercising care to avoid unnecessary struggling which could bruise or otherwise injure the birds. Panic among the birds should be avoided in order to minimise the risk of injury. **Chickens perceive movement differently to humans so slow, calm movement of the catchers is essential to avoid panic.** Catching should take place in low or blue light to minimise fear responses. The light should be returned to a minimum of 20 lux without delay if any birds remain in the house after thinning. A gradual increase in light intensity at this time, similar to a dawn or dusk period, could reduce the risk of back scratching. Where there is concern that returning the lights to 20 lux will result in compromised bird welfare, a temporary reduction in lighting level is permitted on a case by case basis, but only as a result of following veterinary advice on each occasion.

In a section regarding how to choose the breed of birds used we asked that the guidelines state that high welfare outcomes - ie, that their genetics don't cause bad welfare - should be proven before selecting a breed for use. Our request was not taken on board.

Welfare and health considerations, in addition to productivity, should be taken into account when choosing a strain for a particular purpose or production system. In line with this, meat chickens should stem from broad breeding programmes, which promote and protect health, welfare and productivity **and which have proven high health welfare outcomes**. Keeping birds in line with appropriate growth curves that optimise these criteria, particularly with regard to leg health, should be considered.

in a section about maintaining good litter quality, we requested the addition that a way to improve litter quality is to reduce stocking density - the number of chickens per m<sup>2</sup>. Hock burns, as referenced in the text, are usually caused by chickens sitting or laying in their own faeces. Broiler chicken sheds are not cleaned out at all during the chickens life-time and so the more chickens in a smaller space, the more that waste builds up. Multiple studies have shown that high stocking density leads to greater litter moisture, increased microbial activity, and increased temperature and ammonia concentration which can give rise to hock burn, foot-pad dermatitis and breast blisters. The suggestion to give animals more space as a way to reduce hock burns was not included in the final text.

Meat and breeding chickens spend their lives in contact with litter and their health and welfare are linked to its quality. Conditions such as hock burn, foot pad lesions and breast blisters are usually consequences of poor litter quality. Well-designed equipment, **lower stocking densities**, and high standards of management are important if good litter quality is to be maintained. The ventilation capacity should be sufficient to remove excess moisture. The feed composition should be well balanced to avoid problems with wet or sticky droppings. Specialist advice should be sought and acted on and stocking density should be reduced in subsequent flocks if poor litter quality cannot be rectified (see paragraph 101)

In a section about stocking density and space provision, we suggested that the text should recommend that stocking densities above 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> should be avoided. We didn't phrase this to suggest stocking densities above 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> could not be done as up to 33kg/m<sup>2</sup> is legal but we wanted the guidance to recognise that welfare increases when stocking density is below 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> and to encourage producers to take this into account. 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> is the allowance recognised by the RSPCA as the limit for allowing chickens to move around the shed. This addition was not included.

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. **Stocking birds at over 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> should be avoided.**

Irrespective of the type of system, all meat and breeding chickens should have sufficient freedom of movement to be able, without difficulty, to stand normally, turn around and stretch their wings.

They should also have sufficient space to be able to sit without interference from other birds. To provide sufficient space stocking should not exceed 30kg/m<sup>2</sup>.

In a section about chronic hunger (experienced by the breeding stock for meat chickens on account of their fast-growth genetics but the need to grow them slowly so that they can reach sexual maturity without their bodies failing) we requested an acknowledgement in the guidelines that chronic hunger is a very serious welfare issue not just 'hunger' as the guidelines suggest, which sounds very mild. We also suggested a practical solution to avoiding chronic hunger rather than the original guidelines only talking about balancing feed to allow for 'optimal transition into adulthood' (ie so that they survive long enough). These suggestions were not taken forwards.

However, if feed intake is restricted too much, the birds are likely to experience hunger. Chronic hunger is a serious welfare issue and can lead to increased competition around feeding time and in mis-directed foraging behaviour which may, in turn, result in injuries. The feeling of chronic hunger may be alleviated by using diets with a high proportion of insoluble fibre, or equivalent 'filler' resulting in a more positive welfare outcome. Breed selection of 'mini female' parent birds is another solution, as they have naturally a lower consumption level. Balancing the control of feed intake, with growth and feed type, is necessary to ensure the optimal transition of the birds into adulthood.

In a section about the provision of enrichment, we sought to add clarity to the guidelines, which gave no indication about how much enrichment is needed to make a meaningful difference to the chickens. Our suggestion of 2 pecking substrates per thousand birds was omitted as was our suggestion for 2m of perches per thousand birds.

The provision of enrichment such as unopened bales of shavings, good quality straw, scattering of bio-secure wholegrain or other enrichment to encourage normal scratching and pecking behaviour, may help to prevent or reduce injurious and aggressive pecking in the rearing period which adversely affects the welfare of the birds. At least two pecking substrates should be provided per 1,000 birds.

Suitable perches in the rearing house should be provided as may provide a form of enrichment to aid the birds in performing another of their natural behaviours. Perches will also aid the birds' adaptation from litter to raised, perforated floors when they move to the laying phase. A minimum of two metres of useable perch space should be provided per 1,000 birds.

With reference to transport to slaughter the only information in the guidelines given was that When birds are transferred to laying facilities, care should be taken when lifting them out of a crate or when tipping them out of an open-topped container. Birds should have immediate access to water on arrival, especially where slats are fitted.

We requested a section that addressed weather conditions during transport, which can be an extremely significant factor for the birds' welfare. No points from this section were included in the final guidelines.

Transporting birds in extreme weather conditions should be avoided. When humidity or temperature are high the legal stocking density should be adjusted down to allow air flow through the crates. It is also advisable to load some empty crates, particularly in the middle of the truck, to increase movement of air. Chickens should not be transported when external temperature exceeds 25C and 50% humidity. Precautions should also be taken during cold weather with hypothermia being a leading cause of poultry death during transport, especially in birds with low feather coverage. If the temperature during transport cannot be kept above 12C, or if there is snow or hail, chickens should not be transported. During cold, wind and rain chickens should be protected with appropriate covers which protect from wind chill but provide sufficient ventilation. Wet chickens should never be transported due to the increased risk of wind chill. Birds in the back and side of the truck are at the greatest risk in cold weather.