

Policy Case-Study: Laying Hens: Transition away from colony cages

<p>1. Description of policy change</p>	<p>Transition away from colony cages for laying hens to alternative housing.</p> <p>The panel are asked to provide welfare assessment scores for the following three scenarios:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current colony cage egg production in the UK. 2. Current barn egg production in the UK. 3. Current free-range production in the UK (not including organic free range).
<p>2. UK animal populations affected (species, systems, numbers)</p>	<p>Poultry – laying hens (<i>Gallus gallus</i>)</p>
<p>3. Current main systems of production for that species (for example, Defra view on the named systems which currently exist for laying hens)</p>	<p>Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 (WOFAR) The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 (legislation.gov.uk) (Mutilations (Permitted Procedures)(England) Regulations 2007 - beak trimming to prevent injurious pecking) The Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 (legislation.gov.uk)</p> <p>Enriched/colony cages: Sched 1, Sched 4 (specific) Shed 5. Typically most new colony cages house between 60 – 80 birds. In addition to feeders/drinkers per bird, colony cages are required to provide a secluded nest area (curtains and nest mat,) perches, scratching area. Details are in the relevant schedule of WOFAR.</p> <p>Alternative – non-cage systems: Sched. 1, Sched 2 (specific) Shed 5.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barn (including aviary). Provide platforms for perching etc. • Free range • Organic production with separate additional legal requirements under organic legislation and depending on farm assurance requirements. <p>Stockmanship is key - regardless of system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues which can impact birds in these different methods of production: Red mite (indoor housing)

	<p>Feather pecking and cannibalism (indoor and outdoor)</p> <p>Avian influenza. Housing order.</p> <p>Predation</p> <p>See information on management and different systems in the Code of Practice: Code of practice for the welfare of laying hens and pullets (publishing.service.gov.uk)</p>
4. Systems	See above
5. Likely impacts foreseen as a result of the policy change	Non-caged birds able to exhibit a fuller range of normal behaviours, more freedom of movement.
6. Any linked recent policy changes (are there any other policy changes or policy directions which may also impact this same area?)	x
7. Legal basis for current systems (of the system(s) under consideration) - e.g. if policy is for a change in stocking density, a statement of current regulation around stocking density	WOFAR sets the requirements for laying hen production methods. Mutilations legislation sets requirements for procedures that may be performed on farmed birds.
8. Animal 'lifecycle' information specific to the system(s) under consideration – e.g. relevant information on common management practices for the system(s) under discussion	Further information is provided in the Statutory welfare codes of practice. Their aim is to offer guidance on existing legislation and are drafted with involvement from those with species sector knowledge. Following full public consultation, working groups were established to progress codes with APHA, Defra policy, members across the specific sector (including veterinary bodies and AHDB), and farm assurance groups. Codes are also quality assured by the Animal Welfare Committee. The codes include information to help farmers comply with the law and include aspects which are specific to the English sector (comparable codes have been produced in Scotland, Wales and NI).

Brief description of systems being scored

Colony cage production

Conventional 'battery' cages have been banned and replaced by larger, 'enriched' colony cages.

The new colony cages provide 750cm² per bird along with a nest box for the birds to lay their eggs in, perching space for the birds to sleep on and a scratching area to perform natural behaviours. In the UK, most of the new enriched colony cages are designed to contain between 40 and 80 birds, enabling better use of the space and giving them more room to move around the colony.

Egg producers are finding that the birds make good use of the enhancements of the new system, with almost all of the hens choosing to sleep on the perches and 95% of eggs laid in the nest box area. When the eggs are laid they roll onto a conveyor belt out of reach of the birds to await collection.

Food is supplied in troughs fitted to the cages and an automatic water supply is provided. The units are kept at an even temperature and ventilated. Lighting provides an optimum day length throughout the year.

Barn egg production

In the barn system hens are able to move freely around the house (most eggs produced from multi-tiered houses). The EU Welfare of Laying Hens Directive stipulates a maximum stocking density of 9 hens per square metre of useable area. Perches for the hens must be installed to allow 15 centimetres of perch per hen. Litter must account for one third of the ground surface. This is used for scratching and dust bathing.

One nest box per five hens or communal nests, at the rate of 120 birds/m² of floor area, is provided. Linear feeders provide at least 10 cm per hen, or circular feeders provide at least 4 cm per hen. There is also required drinking space per hen. Water and feeding troughs are raised so that the specially prepared food is not scattered. Electric lighting is provided to give an optimum day length throughout the year. At the end of the laying period the house is completely cleaned and disinfected.

Additional requirements of the Lion code

In consultation with retailers and animal welfare groups, a new higher hen welfare standard for British Lion barn eggs was introduced in November 2019.

The new Lion standard prohibits the use of highly intensive systems, such as the combination system, and consists of a raft of measures which are above those legally required. These include a maximum floor stocking density of 16.5 birds per m², two enrichments per 1,000 birds, a maximum colony size of 6,000 birds and superior nest boxes to encourage nesting.

The new standards apply to all converted and newly built barn units, with a derogation for existing units until 31st December 2025. For more information see <https://www.egginfo.co.uk/sites/default/files/LionBarnStd-table-011119.pdf>.

Free-range egg production

For eggs to be termed 'free range', hens must have continuous daytime access to runs which are mainly covered with vegetation and a maximum stocking density of 2,500 birds per hectare. The hen house conditions for free range hens must comply with a maximum stocking density of 9 hens per square metre of useable area.

Adequate perches, providing 15 centimetres of perch per hen, must also be provided. Most hen houses are thought to be multi-tiered. Litter must be provided, accounting for one-third of the ground surface - this is used for scratching and dust bathing. One nest box per five hens or communal nests, at the rate of 120 birds/m² of floor area, is provided. Linear feeders provide at least 10 cm per hen, or circular feeders provide at least 4 cm per hen. There is also plenty of drinking space per hen. Water and feeding troughs are raised so that food is not scattered. Electric lighting gives optimum day length throughout the year. At the end of the laying period the house is completely cleaned and disinfected.

The Lion Quality Code of Practice covers over 90% of UK egg output, and stipulates the provision of outdoor shading in absence of a veranda and one pop-hole per 600 birds open for 8 hours daily to allow access to the outside; maximum flock size of 16,000 birds divided into colonies of 4,000 where flock size is over 6,000 birds in total; a maximum stocking density of 2,000 birds per hectare. The width and height of the pop holes is greater than required by legislation.