

Open Cages

Stand With Chickens
broiler welfare campaign

White Paper



Summary

- Half of the meat consumed in the UK is chickens and the consumption tends to increase every year. [\[1\]](#) , [\[2\]](#)
- One billion chickens are bred and slaughtered every year in the UK. UK is approximately 75 % self-sufficient in poultry meat. [\[3\]](#) They are most widely bred land animals with 95 % living on intensive UK farms. [\[4\]](#)
- In a conventional farm each chicken has space less than a size of A4 format paper. [\[5\]](#)
- After years of selective breeding chickens now grow at 300 % faster rate than they did 50 years ago. [\[6\]](#)
- Rapid weight growth lead to serious health issues, like leg disorders, ascites and even death. [\[7\]](#) ,[\[8\]](#)
- Environmental enrichment is important in allowing chickens to exhibit natural behaviours. [\[9\]](#)
- The conventional electric stunning methods for chicken slaughter have been proven highly ineffective. Last year 180 mln chickens might been fully aware during slaughter. [\[10\]](#)
- 25 European animal protection organisations agreed on [European Chicken Commitment](#), which asks companies to commit to a list of minimum standards for broiler welfare by incorporating them to their corporate responsibility policies.

The situation

The UK is a world leader in animal welfare and has been successfully setting precedents for other countries to follow, like banning fur farms in 2002 or joining cage-free campaigns. With more than one billion broilers, i.e. chickens that are raised for meat, slaughtered every year in the UK alone, broilers are the most widely bred land animals in the country. [11] Of the one billion animals, 95% are kept in intensive farms. [12] However, the UK is only around 75% self-sufficient to meet its country's demand. [13] Hence, the broiler welfare is among the biggest animal welfare concerns in the UK.

A recent study suggests, that chickens have the ability to reason, make logical inferences and have a sense for numbers, like ordering and counting. They also have unique personalities, are capable of empathizing and communicating with their peers in a complex way, demonstrate self-control and self-assessment. The research shows they experience a variety of both positive and negative emotions, like excitement or fear in anticipation of certain result. This means chickens have a similar level of intelligence and cognitive abilities like most other birds or mammals. [14]

However, the current investigations to the UK farms do not at all show even a satisfiable level of bird welfare. Current UK welfare policies allow intensive farms to have about 15 (can be up to 19) of 2 kg chickens per square metre, or an area about the size of an A4 sheet of paper for each bird. [15] In a typical chicken mega-farm, there can be few hundred thousands of birds in one shed and more than a million birds in one farm. Apart from stocking density, breed is one of the most important aspects for broiler well being, with many current fast-growing breeds resulting in many health issues for the birds and even death.

Unfortunately, though many customers are not aware of the exact conditions in a conventional broiler farms, most agree that they should be improved, even at the cost of an increased price. [16]

Problems

Breeding

For decades the main driver in broiler industry was the economic benefit, which led to selective breeding of chickens in order to optimize their growth, lower feed conversion and lower cost feed ratios. [17] In the past 50 years, broiler growth rates have increased by over 300% (from 25 g per day to 100 g per day). [18] Thus, most intensive farms today use fast-growing breeds that are characterized by rapid weight gain, large breast muscle and are slaughtered at around 5-7 weeks of age. As the daily growth of a fast-growing chicken can be up to 100 g per day, if a 5 year-old human grew this fast, the child would weigh 150 kg. [19] Such growth leads to a variety of health conditions as birds tend to not walk/run, perch or scratch as much. [20] Most often as chicken legs are underdeveloped to hold such weight, birds start suffering from leg disorders, such as lameness or broken legs. A 2007 UK study ordered by The Department of Environmental and Rural Affairs showed that almost 30 % of broilers suffer from leg disorders, with more than 3 % are completely unable to walk. [21] It can also cause ascites (heart condition), foot pad/hock burns and sudden death syndrome. [22]

Stocking density

Current stocking density regulations in the UK allow for up to 33 kg or 39 kg per square metre, but there are special requirements. [23] This is 16 or 19 x 2 kg chickens in a square metre (625 cm² or 526 cm²), which is similar or less than a size of A4 page (623,7 cm²). The lack of space and hindrance of other birds deprives chickens of an ability to walk and run around, reach feeding systems and exhibit natural behaviours, like stretching or flapping wings. Lack of exercise results in weakened legs and lameness. Furthermore, decreased mobility increases the risk of foot pad and hock burns from ammonia fumes.

Natural behaviours

The ability to exhibit natural behaviours, such as pecking, foraging or percking is also a very important factor in broiler welfare. Studies show that birds that live in an enriched

environment are less likely to suffer from breast blisters, hock burns and foot pad burns. Perhaps even more surprisingly, chickens were found to be more active, walking and running more than chickens in a non-enriched environment. [\[24\]](#)

Furthermore, dim lighting can lead to decreased activity and the problems associated with that and in some cases eye abnormalities. [\[25\]](#) Researchers at Cambridge found that lighting below 50 lux, chickens have more breast blisters and higher mortality and are more fearful. However, when lighting was above 50 lux, no welfare problems were found. [\[26\]](#)

Slaughter

Usually animals in the sixth week of life are transported to the slaughterhouse. Handling broilers causes a lot of anxiety to the animals and their wings or legs can get entangled and painfully locked in the plastic baskets. Then they are hung upside down by their legs on hooks on a moving processing line. This process is called live inversion. Birds tend to flap their wings a lot, which can get entangled in the hooks and lead to a more painful electric prestun causing seizures, while fully conscious. [\[27\]](#) Before slaughter, animals should be effectively stunned to lose consciousness. However, the conventional method of electric stunning has been proven to be very ineffective. It is estimated that last year up to 180 million animals might have been fully aware during slaughter. [\[28\]](#) Death should occur through exsanguination after the carotid artery is cut. Some chickens regain consciousness while bleeding or even miss the stunning entirely and as a result are painfully boiled alive. [\[29\]](#)

What we ask of companies?

25 biggest animal protection organisations in Europe, including Open Cages, have agreed on the baseline broiler welfare policies in [European Chicken Commitment](#). The Commitment asks to use only the breeds with higher welfare outcomes, like slower growing breeds. It also aims to reduce stocking density allowing up to 30 kg/m². The environment should be enriched with pecking substrates, perching space, better lighting and air quality. In slaughterhouses, we ask to implement a more humane and less painful Controlled Atmospheric Stunning (CAS), which involves transferring the birds to a controlled atmosphere chamber with gases or gas mixtures. In this case birds do not need to be handled in plastic boxes, which makes it easier for both workers and chickens. Alternatively, effective electric stunning methods without live inversion can be adopted. See the detailed ask here: <http://welfarecommitments.com/europeletter/>

These measures together significantly improve lives of most widely populated land animals. As the animals are much more likely to be more active, it decreases the risk of leg disorders, hock and pads burns from ammonia fumes, breast blisters, ascites, sudden death syndrome and many other diseases. Improving overall chicken health also means lower farm mortality rate and less slaughterhouse rejects (birds unfit for human consumption), which in return optimises production costs. [30]

Analogous campaign in North America has already achieved great success, with more than 90 companies committing to ECC, including the biggest food groups in the world, like Unilever, Kraft-Heinz and Nestle. In the UK, the welfare campaign is also getting a lot of momentum with Marks & Spencer supermarket chain, Zizi, Pret, Prezzo restaurant groups and many others also joining the world's leading animal welfare companies.

Chicken is half the meat eaten in the UK, which is a great responsibility for the retailers not only to meet the demand, but also ensure that it is not done at the cost of suffering of one billion birds every year.