

Explanatory note

The current version of the *RSPCA welfare standards for laying hens* that RSPCA Assured members are required to implement is dated August 2017. As part of the on-going process of reviewing the welfare standards, they have now been amended and updated, which includes the addition of a number of new standards and guidance (information boxes).

The review process, which is undertaken in consultation with the farming industry, veterinary profession and welfare research sector, is necessary to ensure that the standards take proper account of the latest scientific research, veterinary knowledge and practical developments, and therefore continue to represent 'good practice' in farm animal care.

These changes will be incorporated into a revised edition of the *RSPCA welfare standards for laying hens*, to be issued in May 2024.

All the amendments made to the August 2017 version of the standards are listed below and have been marked with **NEW** or **REVISED**.

RSPCA Assured scheme members have until 1st May 2024 to fully implement these changes, unless otherwise stated by the standard.

Please note:

All standards in the August 2017 edition that are not shown below or are shown but do not have a **NEW** or **REVISED** next to them remain unchanged in the new edition. Due to the amendment process, some existing standards have been re-ordered and therefore re-numbered.

RSPCA Farm Animals Department

22nd January 2024

Verandas



NEW Verandas provide many benefits for bird welfare by encouraging ranging (in free-range systems), improving litter quality in the main house, providing more space, providing natural light, and providing free-range birds with a more biosecure semi-outdoor area during periods of mandatory confined housing (e.g. during Avian Influenza housing orders). These factors can have indirect positive welfare impacts on flocks, such as reducing injurious pecking.

Exposure to direct natural levels of UVB wavelengths can ensure the production of vitamin D3. This promotes absorption of calcium, which may help improve bone strength.

E 4.1

NEW Verandas must be installed on all **barn buildings** by no later than 1st January 2030.



NEW Due to the welfare benefits verandas provide to birds, the RSPCA strongly encourages verandas to be installed on barn buildings as soon as is practically possible.



NEW The RSPCA strongly encourages verandas to be installed on all free-range buildings. The RSPCA Farm Animals Department is currently undertaking an in-depth review of this. Depending on the conclusion of this review, a phase in date for the installation of verandas on all buildings may be set.

E 4.2

NEW Verandas must:

- a) have a total floor area of at least 20% of the usable area of the main house
- b) be a minimum of two metres in width and height
- c) not be used in the calculated floor area for stocking density
- d) provide natural air circulation and natural light to achieve an outdoor climate through openings that represent 70% of the external side wall
- e) protect birds from adverse weather conditions (see information box below)
- f) have a solid concrete floor, in the case of static buildings (see information box below)
- g) have fully littered flooring (see E 3.3 and E 3.5)
- h) be available to hens by no later than one week after placement
- i) have popholes to enable full separation from the main building for climate control (see E 3.6)
- j) be available to the hens according to the standard R 3.1 and R 3.1.1
- k) have popholes that meet standard R 3.7 and R 3.8
- l) have adequate provisions to prevent the area surrounding the veranda from flooding during wet weather
- m) have an insulated roof (see information box below)
- n) have an entirely waterproof roof
- o) be designed to prevent access by other animals (excluding the popholes).



NEW In relation to E 4.2 e), adverse weather includes rain, snow, high wind speeds, and high temperatures.

For buildings in particularly exposed positions, the use of solid material on the sides of the veranda up to the top of the popholes can be an effective way of protecting the birds from adverse weather.

In relation to E 4.2 f), including a solid concrete floor in a veranda will help to ensure litter quality can be well maintained. In the case of mobile units where a concrete floor cannot be included, further litter management or other interventions are likely to be required to ensure litter quality is maintained.

In relation to E 4.2 m), insulated roofs help provide a more preferable thermal environment for the birds and minimise condensation build-up, which will also help with litter maintenance.



NEW In order to comply with E 4.2 k), a veranda may be required on each side of the building to ensure the hens do not have to travel more than 20m to reach a pophole. Where verandas are required on each side of a building the total floor area of the verandas can be combined to meet E 4.2 a).

The RSPCA strongly encourages verandas to be provided on both sides of a building.

Natural daylight



NEW Natural light encourages a range of activities, such as foraging and dustbathing. Providing an environment with more natural light also enables birds to utilise their full visual light spectrum.

In free-range systems, the addition of more natural light inside the house reduces the variation in light intensity between the inside and the outside, which encourages range use.

Practical experience suggests that it is still important to be able to manage all lighting within the house. Housing birds at greater light intensities allows more flexibility when a reduction in light levels is required as a management tool to reduce injurious pecking (see E 5.4 b)).

E 6.1 **NEW** Natural daylight within the main laying house must be provided by no later than 1st January 2031.



NEW Due to the welfare benefits natural daylight provides to birds, the RSPCA strongly encourages natural daylight to be provided in buildings as soon as is practically possible.

E 6.1.1 **NEW** Natural daylight must be provided:

- a) to give a minimum of 8 hours continuous daylight per day, except where the natural daylight period is shorter
- b) by 21 weeks of age at the latest
- c) through all the required openings (see E 6.2).

E 6.2 **NEW** The natural daylight openings in the house must correspond to at least 3.0% of the total floor area of the house.

E 6.3 **NEW** Where popholes are used to meet the requirements of E 6.2:

- a) natural daylight must enter into the house through the popholes at all times during the required period (see E 6.1.1) (see information box below)
- b) during periods where the popholes may need to be closed during the day, and where windows are not installed in the pophole doors, the pophole openings must be covered with a solid material that allows natural daylight to enter the house, e.g. clear perspex (see information box below).



NEW To remain compliant with standard E 6.1.1 and E 6.2, natural daylight will need to enter the house through the popholes during periods where the pophole doors may need to be closed during the day, e.g. in the event of a compulsory housing order (when birds need to be housed). To achieve this, windows could be installed in the pophole doors. Alternatively, pophole doors can be opened to provide natural daylight into the house via the pophole opening. However, for the pophole door to remain open, it will be necessary to cover the pophole opening with a solid material that prevents birds accessing the range but allows natural daylight to enter the house, e.g. clear perspex.

- E 6.4** **NEW** To ensure that streams of daylight do not cause areas of bright light on the floor of the house, light openings must:
- be of a sufficient size,
 - be well distributed (see information box below).



NEW Natural daylight will help promote more bird activity. Therefore, ideally, the natural daylight openings should be positioned over the litter areas to encourage these positive active behaviours in these appropriate areas.

It is recognised that it may not be possible to include all light openings over the litter areas. In such cases, the positioning of the light opening should be carefully considered to ensure that the natural daylight openings are not positioned directly over areas where the birds have a preference to rest, such as where perches are provided.

If you are unsure where best to position windows, please contact the RSPCA Farm Animals Department for further advice and guidance.



NEW Patches of bright light on the floor of the house, for example, when windows are not evenly distributed around the house, when windows are not of a similar size or when windows are too small, can attract birds to these areas. An unequal distribution of birds around the house, with increased activity in localised areas, could adversely affect litter quality and bird welfare. To ensure compliance with E 6.4, observations should take place on bright days, at different times during the day.

- E 6.5** **NEW** Where there are areas of different light intensity across the floor of the house there must be a gradual change in light intensity between each area.



NEW Research has shown that chickens prefer different light intensities for the performance of different activities. Dimly lit areas provide the opportunity to rest, whilst brighter lit areas provide the opportunity to perform more active behaviours. Perches should be positioned in the dimly lit areas and it is recommended that windows providing natural daylight are positioned close to the litter areas.

- E 6.6** **NEW** It must be possible to readily control the amount of daylight entering the building to the extent that darkness can be achieved.



NEW Installing shutters, for example, can control the amount of light entering through the light opening. Shutters can be especially important to control the ingress of direct sunlight, which could increase the risk of heat stress. The shutters can be used to block light entering the house, which is useful during catching and also at night where events outside the house could cause birds to panic. To have the greatest amount of control over the light entering the house it should be possible to open/close the shutters by varying degrees, which could be achieved manually or mechanically.



NEW The provision of daylight – particularly via windows - can increase environmental temperature within the house. Therefore it is important to consider the capacity of the ventilation system and the positioning of the ventilation inlets so that good ventilation and correct house temperature can be achieved. In the event of excessive heat, shutters can be used to block out direct sunlight. The shutters, especially if insulated, can also help keep the building warm during cold weather.

E 6.7 **NEW** Where glass windows are used, these must be constructed of safety/toughened glass.



NEW Windows constructed from two sheets of 2-ply polycarbonate (the same material and specification as that used for home conservatory construction) have been shown to work well in practice. Polycarbonate windows also appear to be better at diffusing direct sunlight within the house, helping to avoid patches/streams of sunlight.

E 6.8 **NEW** Windows must be properly installed (e.g. sealed), so the correct environmental conditions (e.g. airflow) within the house can be maintained and draughts avoided.



NEW Natural light can be provided in various ways, including the use of skylights, windows and/or light wells. For advice on the different ways natural light can be provided please contact the RSPCA Farm Animals Department.