Explanatory note

The current version of the RSPCA welfare standards for meat chickens that RSPCA Assured members are required to implement is dated July 2017. As part of the on-going process of reviewing the welfare standards, they have now been amended and updates, 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 meat chickens, to be issued in September 2025.

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

RSPCA Assured scheme members have three months from the date of this letter to fully implement these changes (i.e. by 29th September 2025), unless otherwise stated by the standard.

Please note:

All standards in the July 2017 edition that are not shown below or are shown but do not have a with 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

29th June 2025

Chicks

Specific provisions for chicks

NEW The RSPCA is aware of recent developments with regards to the in-house hatching of chicks.

Whilst there are advantages to this practice, including no longer needing to transport day old chicks, some potential concerns remain, such as the practicalities of ensuring thorough inspection and timely removal of non-viable chicks post-hatching.

The RSPCA will continue to monitor developments in this area and review the practice for future inclusion within the standards.

Meanwhile, if any producers are considering hatching chicks in-house, please contact the RSPCA Farm Animals Department.

C 2.11.1 REVISED Where it is permitted to move birds from one building to another during the rearing cycle (see standard C 2.11), the following standards must be met:

a) birds must only be moved once

b) feeders and drinkers used on the finishing unit must be included within the initial rearing stages

c) for birds weighing up to 1kg, a minimum of 17mm of linear (single sided) or 10.5mm of circular feeding space must be provided and accessible for each bird (standard FW 1.8 applies for birds weighing over 1kg)

d) any changes to the diet must be managed to prevent any digestive-related issues arising

e) birds must be caught and transported in accordance with relevant standards within the transport section, with the exception that:

   i. stocking density must be reduced by at least 30%, and

   ii. for birds weighing up to 1kg, only carriers of the tray type with completely open tops and with a depth of not less than 200mm must be used (standards T 2.17.1 and T 2.17.2 apply for birds weighing over 1kg)

f) the rearing site and finishing site must each be managed as ‘all-in / all-out.’

Food and water

Water

FW 2.7 REVISED The minimum number of drinkers which must be provided are as follows:

Bell	1 per 100 chickens
Cup	1 per 28 chickens

FW 2.7.1 NEW For nipple drinkers, the minimum number of drinkers that must be provided are as follows:

Nipple type (see information box below)	**Bird weight**	**Ratio**
high flow-rate	up to 2.3kg	1 per 15 chickens
high flow-rate	2.3kg and over	1 per 10 chickens
low flow-rate	-	1 per 10 chickens

NEW High flow rate nipple drinkers are defined as those with a vertical flow rate of 70 cm^3/min (ml/min) and above and a sideways flow rate of 30 cm^3/min (ml/min) and above.

Nipple drinkers with lower flow rates are classed as low flow-rate nipple drinkers.

FW 2.7.2 NEW To ensure all nipple drinkers are operational at the required flow rate (see information box above), the nipple drinkers must be:

a) calibrated according to the manufacturer's recommendations

b) tested manually, daily.

NEW High flow-rate systems are more complex to manage, as there is greater variability in the water delivery (depending on local water pressure), source of water (mains or standpipe), manufacturer design and house conditions (i.e. house floor declines/inclines). It is therefore important that these systems are calibrated and tested appropriately to ensure they are operating at the correct flow rate.

Flow-rate should be checked on the nipple lines at the front and back of the house, and at both ends of the line. Ideally, the mains water should enter the middle line so that the flow rate is more even across all the drinkers, as the further away from the mains a nipple line is, the lower the water pressure will be in that line.

Environment

E 1.2 REVISED Prior to changes being made to existing buildings, and/or new equipment being installed that has not previously been assessed, managers must inform the certification scheme responsible for assessing against these standards.

Buildings

E 2.13 NEW All buildings, equipment (including livestock fencing) and facilities must be:

a) fit for purpose

b) well maintained.

The range

R 1.8 REVISED A written Housing Confinement Contingency Plan must be:

a) developed:

   i. with advice from your vet

   ii. to safeguard the welfare and behavioural needs of the birds during periods of confinement

b) included in the VHWP.

R 1.9 NEW The Housing Confinement Contingency Plan must be implemented for free-range birds during periods of confinement, for example when there is a high risk of spread of a contagious disease and the government requires birds to be housed.

R 1.10 NEW The Housing Confinement Contingency Plan must detail:

a) the additional biosecurity measures that will be implemented to protect the birds, where there's a high risk of spread of a contagious disease

b) the additional/novel enrichment items that will be provided to promote activity and interest, including the:

   i. type of items

   ii. number of items

   iii. management of the items

c) how the litter will be managed to prevent heavily worn or poached areas forming

d) dustbathing provisions, including the:

   i. type of provision

   ii. material/s used

   iii. management of the provisions

e) the actions to be taken if high levels of aggression and feather pecking occur (barriers, enrichment, lighting).

Verandas

NEW **It is recommended that verandas are installed on free-range chicken units.**

The RSPCA are currently considering a requirement for verandas in future editions of the standards.

Verandas provide many benefits for bird welfare by encouraging ranging, improving litter quality in the main house, reducing stocking density, providing additional natural light, and providing 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.

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

Any producers considering installing a veranda should contact the RSPCA Farm Animals Department.

Shade and shelter

Below R 4.2

REVISED **Research and experience has shown the potential of natural cover to help encourage birds to use the range more fully. The requirements of standard R 4.2 differ to those of standard R 4.1 in that 'natural cover' focuses on enrichment of the range, while 'shade and shelter' must offer actual overhead protection at all times. For any newly planted natural cover, the area that the vegetation is expected to cover when mature will be taken into account for calculating compliance.**

Deciduous trees do not, by their nature, provide full cover throughout the year and therefore the full canopy area cannot be used in calculations of shade and shelter.

When planting trees, consideration should be given to the amount of cover they will provide at different times of the year when mature, as well as to the effect on the surrounding area. For example, whilst deciduous trees do not provide as much natural cover as conifers year-round, they encourage more biodiversity underneath and surrounding them, including providing a more preferable habitat for insects.

Management

M 2.1 REVISED Managers must:

a) ensure all stock-keepers have completed relevant and adequate training and can satisfy the certification scheme assessor of their competence in practical circumstances

b) develop and implement contingency plans and preventative measures for the following emergency situations, to help ensure the welfare of the animals can be safeguarded:

   i. fire

   ii. flood

   iii. interruption of supplies to the farm, e.g. feed

   iv. notifiable disease outbreaks

   v. mass on-farm culling, e.g. due to an outbreak of avian influenza where all birds in a house/on the farm need to be culled (see information box below)

   vi. periods where the animals are required to remain on the farm for longer than planned, e.g. where there is a significant delay in animals being taken to the abattoir

c) provide an emergency action board sited in a prominent position that is visible to all farm staff and emergency services, which must include:

   i. the procedures to be followed by those discovering an emergency

   ii. the location of water sources for use by the fire services

   iii. the what3words address and postcode for location of the unit

d) maintain records of production data for each house, which include documentation on:

   i. the breed/s of chicken being reared

   ii. details of the number of birds placed

   iii. incoming and outgoing stock

   iv. LEGAL the daily mortality (the cause of death must be stated where this can be identified)

   v. the number culled (including reasons for culling)

   vi. details of the number of birds removed for slaughter

   vii. the average weight of birds removed for slaughter

   viii. feed consumption

   ix. daily water consumption (see standard FW 2.10)

   x. maximum and minimum temperatures

   xi. relative humidity

   xii. ventilation (including settings and any necessary changes)

   xiii. any medication provided.

e) develop and implement a transport plan to certified abattoirs which minimises the waiting time for
the birds.

NEW **A contingency plan is a course of action designed to help a business respond effectively to a significant future possible event/situation.**

For each event/situation, the plan includes the potential impacts on the animals and the actions that can be taken to address the issues identified. For example, in the event of an abattoir breakdown that results in the animals having to remain on farm for longer than planned, contingency plans will detail:

- **the potential issues caused by this event and the implications to the welfare of the animals**
- **the actions that can be taken to safeguard the animals' welfare.**

NEW **With regards to standard M 2.3 b) v), avian influenza has become more prevalent in recent years, resulting in an increased incidence in the mass on-farm culling of poultry. Contingency plans are required to ensure that mass culling can be carried out without delay, effectively and humanely. Contingency plans are to include:**

- **details of the on-farm mass culling method/s that can be used**
- **access routes for specialist vehicles and equipment to the poultry buildings**
- **any additional biosecurity measures required**
- **actions to be taken to ensure bird welfare is protected up to the point of death (e.g. feed and water provision, lighting schedule and ventilation and climate checks)**
- **the building preparations required for instances where whole house gas killing may be required**

The RSPCA strongly recommends that all poultry buildings are designed to deliver effective and humane whole house gas killing as a last resort, to prevent the need to use less humane culling methods.

The RSPCA will be developing future standards in this area to ensure on farm mass culling is effective and humane.

Protection from other animals

Below M 7.18

REVISED **Producers are strongly encouraged to complete at least one of the free, self-study training courses on rodent control, available at: https://www.thinkwildlife.org/training-certification/ . The courses are approved by the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU).**

Further information and access to the CRRU Code of Best Practice is available on the AHDB website, here: https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/rodent-control-on-farms .

Health

Health and welfare

Below H 2.7

NEW The RSPCA is reviewing the role of artificial intelligence and the wide-ranging benefits it can bring to chicken welfare, particularly in the area of health and welfare monitoring. It is strongly recommended that producers investigate the feasibility of such technology to further safeguard animal welfare. Where such technology is being considered, please contact the RSPCA Farm Animals Department.

Antibiotics

NEW Prevention is better than cure, and it is the implementation of prevention strategies alongside the adoption of farming practices that prioritise and promote animal welfare that are key to reducing antibiotic use.

For more information on this issue, please see our information sheet available on our website www.rspca.org.uk.

H(A) 1.1 NEW Antibiotics must only be used when necessary, and always used responsibly.

H(A) 1.2 NEW The prophylactic use of antibiotics is not permitted.

NEW Prophylactic treatment is intended to prevent sickness or disease developing in a group of healthy animals where a veterinary surgeon has identified that there could be a high risk of bacterial infection. We believe that there should be no need for the prophylactic use of antibiotics when following these standards. However, we acknowledge there may be very exceptional circumstances where a veterinary surgeon may feel it is in the best interests of the affected animal's welfare for antibiotics to be given preventatively. We would expect these occasions to be extremely rare and limited to only a few animals.

Metaphylactic treatment is intended to control disease spreading in groups of animals where some are already showing clinical signs of disease and is not covered by standard H(A) 1.2.

H(A) 1.3 NEW The use of antibiotics on-farm must be reviewed annually and this review must form part of the VHWP.

H(A) 1.4 NEW In light of the findings of the antibiotic use review (see standard H(A) 1.3), an action plan must
be drawn up aimed at reducing the use of antibiotics on the farm through improvements in animal husbandry.

H(A) 1.5 NEW When reviewing the use of antibiotics on-farm, the following must be included in the plan (see standard H(A) 1.4):

a) the different classes of antibiotic drug used

b) which group/s* of animals were treated, and for which condition/s

c) the number of animals treated per occasion

d) the total amount of each individual drug within a class that was used (in mg/kg or mg/pcu) per occasion

e) a specific section covering all the above for 'Critically Important Antibiotics' (CIAs).

*A group of animals refers to animals of a similar age and/or stage of production.

NEW **This review is intended to highlight which groups of animals are suffering from particular diseases and therefore aid the development and implementation of targeted prevention strategies.**

Transport

Catching

Below T 2.14

REVISED The RSPCA is considering alternative handling methods for meat chickens at depopulation.

Poultry do not have a diaphragm and inversion can result in respiratory distress (birds having difficulty breathing).

It is strongly encouraged that birds be both caught and carried individually by the body using both hands to hold the wings against the body so that the birds are not inverted.

An upright catching and carrying method has been used successfully under commercial conditions in the laying hen sector in some European countries.

T 2.17 REVISED Only carriers of the drawer type with completely open tops must be used.

T 2.17.1 NEW The amount of vertical space available to the birds, measured from the bottom of the drawer to the drawer above it (or top of the module in the case of the top drawer) when the drawer is closed, must be at least 220mm.

T 2.17.2 NEW Where the design of the carrier incorporates a bar (or any other physical barrier) that reduces the headroom of the birds to less than 220mm as the drawer is being closed (measured from the bottom of the drawer to the bar), the drawer must have a depth of not less than 220mm.

T 2.18 REVISED Transport modules must be loaded from the top drawer downwards, i.e. the top drawer loaded first and the bottom drawer loaded last, unless the manufacturer's instructions state otherwise and bird welfare is not compromised.

T 2.21 Stocking densities relating to standard T 2.20 must be reduced when birds are being transported during hot (>25°C) weather.

REVISED Mechanical harvesting (catching) systems have been shown to offer some welfare advantages to the birds compared with manual catching. Please liaise with the RSPCA Farm Animals Department if you are considering using such a system, as these systems are not currently covered for use under these standards.

Slaughter/killing

Below S 1.3

NEW The RSPCA is reviewing Intelligent Camera Surveillance systems for use in slaughter plants. These systems can alert relevant slaughter plant staff to potential welfare concerns in real time, allowing situations to be dealt with quickly and efficiently. They can also be used to identify areas where staff require additional training or where staff safety is at risk. It is strongly recommended that slaughter plants adopt such technologies to help further safeguard animal welfare in their plant. Where such technology is being considered, please contact the RSPCA Farm Animals Department for further information.

Management

S 2.1 REVISED Contingency plans and suitable back up procedures and systems must be in place to:

a) deal with occasions when unavoidable delays may occur, such as a mechanical breakdown, and it is not possible to process the birds as planned

b) ensure the continued killing of animals in the event of an emergency that threatens the ongoing use of the main system, such as a disruption to the supply of gas in the case of gas killing systems.

S 2.1.1 NEW Where the primary slaughter/killing method cannot be used (e.g. due to a system failure or lack of supply of carbon dioxide in the case of gas killing):

a) a reserve (back-up) method of slaughter/killing that is different to the primary method of slaughter/killing must:

   i. be available and ready for use at all times, and

   ii. be capable of dealing with any birds awaiting killing and

b) where the permitted back-up method is used, the following must be recorded:

   i. the date and time

   ii. the reason/s for its use

   xiv. the time taken to evacuate the birds from the system, in the case of gas killing (where required).

S 2.5 REVISED Managers, in conjunction with the PWO, must:

a) develop and implement a training programme for all staff handling and slaughtering/killing birds

b) ensure that all staff are properly trained to carry out their duties

c) only record staff training as completed once a self-declaration of competence has been signed by both the trainee and management staff.

REVISED **For staff undertaking the following operations, a certificate of competence in accordance with Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009[1] can be used to demonstrate compliance with standard S 2.5 b):**

a) the handling and care of animals before they are restrained

b) the restraint of animals for the purpose of stunning or killing

c) the stunning of animals

d) the assessment of effective stunning

e) the shackling or hoisting of live animals

f) the bleeding of live animals.

[1]*Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing*, Article 7, Paragraph 2.

S 2.5.1 **NEW** When developing the staff training programme (standard S 2.5 a)) the following areas must be included, as appropriate:

a) bird welfare

b) bird behaviour

c) handling and movement of birds

d) lairage, including lairage conditions and care of birds during lairage

e) restraint of birds

f) slaughter/killing method/s, including emergency back-up methods

g) assessment of an effective stun/kill

h) bleeding.

NEW **In relation to standard S 5.1, The Humane Slaughter Association (HSA) *Poultry Welfare - Taking Responsibility* training package can be used to help inform the content of the training programme.**

S 2.6 **REVISED** PWOs must:

a) be familiar with the content of the current Humane Slaughter Association's *Best Practice Guidelines for the Welfare of Broilers and Hens in Processing Plants*

b) convey the relevant content of the publication listed in a) to other members of the slaughter team

c) ensure that the recommendations given in the publication listed in a) are applied where appropriate.

REVISED **Where possible all members of the slaughter team should be familiar with the content of the publications listed in standard S 2.6 a).**