



A verandah runs along the side of the main house giving the birds more room

Avian influenza housing order

How to cope with the latest avian influenza outbreak. Beth Kelsey and Megan Lee update readers on best practice for coping with housing restrictions and planning for future prevention orders

2022 saw the UK's largest outbreak of avian influenza to date, resulting in the death of around four million birds. Historically, the virus has decreased over the summer months, but cases in June to September 2022 were five times higher than the same period in 2021 (UK Health Security Agency Blog, 2022). Predictably, after establishing multiple surveillance zones, in November the government announced the second mandatory housing order of the year.

There are two broad categories of avian influenza, 'low pathogenicity avian influenza' (LPAI), which shows very few symptoms and 'high pathogenicity avian influenza' (HPAI) which has serious symptoms and is highly contagious. There are lots of strains and it is the HPAI H5N1 strain which is currently causing unprecedented levels of disease worldwide.

There's little doubt that avian influenza will likely feature heavily in years to come and it continues to be a challenge for all poultry producers. Vaccinations have pros and cons and while regularly discussed, they are not currently a permitted practice within legislation (Defra, 2022).

Therefore, keepers are being encouraged to think proactively and invest in future-proofing their systems to cope with enforced housing.

Biosecurity

Avian influenza is highly infectious, spreading from bird to bird through direct contact, contaminated body fluids and faeces, contaminated feed and water, dirty vehicles, clothing and footwear. These are the key risk areas, and when managed rigorously, can be your best defence against transmission of the virus to housed birds. Restrict access to the farm, clean footwear immediately before and after visiting birds, regularly disinfect hard surfaces and maintain effective vermin control.

Housing birds

When the birds are housed, the key issues to address are:

- ▶ Thorough and regular inspection
- ▶ Maintaining litter quality
- ▶ Provision of novel and varied enrichment
- ▶ When possible, lower stocking rates within the living area by either splitting flocks or providing additional covered space

Walk the birds

Walk the birds vigilantly to monitor for signs of feather pecking, aggression or smothering. Identify and remove individual birds that are not coping, identified by them either pecking others or being the victim of pecking.

Housing restriction can be particularly stressful for older birds, as it affects their immunity and ability to fight disease, therefore it is important to be conscious of any birds showing early warning signs of ill health, including parasites.

Maintain really good litter quality

Fresh, clean, dry litter should be added to the scratch area frequently and topped up as necessary. It was reported by many producers that housing the birds had benefited litter quality, as mud and damp were not being walked into the house.

However, the pressure of the higher stocking rates during the day will be a major risk factor for litter quality, so careful management is critical, including consideration of perch positioning. Lower stocking rates where possible and make use of any suitable existing buildings

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Protecting ranging birds

For most, it is not a desirable thought to permanently house birds, nor is it always possible. It can be particularly challenging with ducks, geese and poultry where smaller sheds have limited scratch area, natural light and ventilation.

Housing long term in these conditions can have huge implications for bird welfare, therefore steps need to be taken to allow access to the outdoors while limiting contact with wild birds and their droppings. There are approaches to fit a range of budgets and some may want to consider more permanent structures for longer term solutions.

Netted areas should be provided where possible and are required to be secure from wild birds with a maximum mesh size of 25mm. For exposed areas or where heavy snow falls, a larger 50mm mesh may be appropriate. Making these pens unattractive to wild birds is important in discouraging them from perching and increasing the likelihood of them defecating through the net. Spike strips on posts, flutter tape, flashing lights, kites and scarecrows can all be effective deterrents.

If constructed safely, a more budget friendly option is a temporary outdoor pen using straw bales, tarpaulin for the roof and bird-proof netted gaps to provide light and ventilation. In any set up, feed and water should be provided under cover or in specially designed stations that prevent access by wild birds. Never provide open troughs outdoors or scatter grain on the ground. Where possible, prevent birds from accessing open water that may be contaminated. Provide only reservoirs or storage tanks are covered. Regardless of your set up, areas need to be well maintained and checked daily for hazards that could cause injury. Observing

or structures, such as barns, farm sheds and polytunnels. Fresh litter should be provided in all temporary housing, and ensure that adequate feed, water, ventilation and lighting are available.

Provide diverse enrichment

Producers should always consider ways to enrich their birds' environment. Under SA Standards, when poultry are housed you must ensure they have access to roughage and other environmental enhancement to meet their ethological needs (Std 3.12.19). You can provide things like straw or hay bales, organic pecking blocks (check with your certification officer if you are unsure if they meet the organic standards) or pans, netted bags filled with organic hay, lucerne or vegetables, cut vegetation, and coloured footballs or egg boxes. Hanging objects, such as plastic watering cans, provide good interest. Variety and novelty are important. If possible, keep mixing it up and give the birds something new. Additional dust baths can also be provided in purpose-built boxes or tractor tyres placed to enrich the environment.

bird behavior while they are using the run can also help you eliminate areas that could be hazardous.

Planning for the future

These periods of mandatory housing are becoming more frequent, as avian influenza continues to affect wild and captive birds in the UK. The likelihood of the disease becoming endemic is now a real possibility, so it's important to keep in mind future disease risks. If feasible, it's worth thinking about investing in housing design which allows for future potential housing orders. Polytunnels can provide a good covered and sheltered area for the birds, and robust netted structures or 'winter gardens' are a cost effective option. The addition of a veranda to your existing house is a more permanent option and can provide an excellent additional environment for the birds year round. [GF](#)

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ Avian influenza: www.gov.uk/guidance/avian-influenza-bird-flu
- ▶ Defra guidance www.gov.uk/guidance/bird-flu-avian-influenza-housing-your-birds-safely
- ▶ Enrichment materials www.featherwel.org/featherwel/
- ▶ Defra's policy on vaccines <https://bit.ly/3GCQJUG>

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Case History: Organic Farm, Suffolk (1500 laying hens)

The farmer has built netted runs along the length of each of the five mobile sheds (300 birds per shed). Providing this additional area has reduced the overall stocking density from 6 birds/m² to 2.2 birds/m² and played a key role in reducing stress in the flocks. Using bright yellow netting on the pens has acted as a deterrent for wild birds, as it flaps slightly in the wind. In terms of enrichment and litter, the birds are regularly provided with

straw bales in the outside run to scratch around in (4 small bales per week per run). Straw bales have also been provided inside the house (1 per week), alongside organic vegetable waste including squashes (stamping on them first to reveal flesh and seeds). The combination of reduced stocking density and novel enrichment has resulted in no incidence of aggressive behaviour or feather pecking in the birds and they are using the runs daily.