

Factsheet



Avian Influenza: Guidance on coping with housing orders & maintaining good flock welfare

BACKGROUND

Avian Influenza (AI) is highly infectious and creates big challenges for producers. We are now much more well informed about how it spreads meaning we can tackle it in flocks with diligent measures in place.

Part of the government's approach to tackling AI is imposing housing orders, which creates many challenges for poultry keepers and if not managed correctly can also have implications on bird welfare.

Rigorous biosecurity management can be your best defence against transmission of the virus to housed birds. Key risk areas are – transmission from bird to bird through direct contact, through contaminated body fluids and faeces, contaminated feed and water, dirty vehicles, clothing and footwear.

BIRD WELFARE

While there are many species of birds kept by producers, each species will cope differently with housing restrictions and their needs will need to be adapted to. Fundamentally however, when birds are housed, the key aspects of maintaining welfare are:

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



Regular checks

Birds will need to be regularly checked and any signs of feather pecking, aggression or smothering promptly addressed. Any birds that are either not coping (being pecked or pecking others) should be removed from the flock. Housing restriction could 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.



Enrichment

You should always consider ways to enrich the birds' environment but in times of restricted housing, the need for novelty is more important. 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). The key to welfare is rotating your enrichment, swapping ideas in and out to keep things interesting for the birds.

Enrichment ideas include –

- Straw or hay bales
- Novel substrates in pens such as woodchip which encourages birds to scratch around and exhibit natural behaviours
- Netted bags filled with organic hay, lucerne or vegetables, cut vegetation
- Stuffed coloured footballs or egg boxes
- Hanging objects i.e. plastic watering cans, organic cabbages
- Placing organic kale/sprout stalks in the ground or stamping on organic squashes/pumpkins to reveal flesh and seeds
- Additional dust baths i.e. purpose built or within tractor tyres
- For water birds, mobile paddling pools provide access to water but will need to be managed to make sure surrounding substrate isn't sodden

For more information on dust baths and enrichment provision, visit the Featherwel website <https://www.featherwel.org/featherwel/>

Stocking rates

Stocking densities should be reduced where possible by making use of any suitable existing buildings 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 any species-specific requirements (pools or perches) and lighting are available.

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MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Biosecurity

Biosecurity is vital in ensuring the health of a flock and limiting the opportunity for birds to become infected.



- Housing or netting all poultry and captive birds – important to note netting range areas to allow birds outdoor access is an accepted option
- Cleansing and disinfecting clothing, footwear, equipment and vehicles before and after contact with poultry and captive birds – if practical, use disposable protective clothing
- Reducing the movement of people, vehicles or equipment to and from areas where poultry and captive birds are kept, to minimise contamination from manure, slurry and other products, and using effective vermin control
- Thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting housing at the end of a production cycle
- Keeping fresh disinfectant at the right concentration at all points where people should use it, such as farm entrances and before entering poultry and captive bird housing or enclosures
- Minimising direct and indirect contact between poultry and captive birds and wild birds, including making sure all feed and water is not accessible to wild birds

Litter management

Fresh, clean, dry litter should be added to the scratch area frequently and topped up as necessary. Novel forms of litter such as wood chip or sand can also be used as enrichment and encouraging natural behaviours. The pressure of the higher stocking rate during the day will be a major risk factor to litter quality, so careful management is critical, including consideration of perch positioning. Again, different species will provide different challenges, for example water from duck pools soaking litter and being walked into bedding areas. Trialling ideas and what works for your set up will lead to less work and expense over time. For more info, see the factsheet called 'Poultry Litter Management' on the Technical Guides page of our website.



Housing options

With careful planning, birds can be given access to an outside space whilst limiting contact with wild birds and their droppings, fitting a range of budgets.



- Outside areas should be covered with net as they are required to be secure from wild birds. DEFRA states a maximum mesh size of 25mm, however 50mm mesh may be more appropriate in areas which have heavy snowfall
- Spike strips on posts, flutter tape, flashing lights, kites and scarecrows can all be effective deterrents for wild birds, the aim is to prevent them defecating through the net
- Temporary outdoor pens using straw bales, tarpaulin for the roof and bird-proof netted gaps to provide light and ventilation can be a more budget friendly option, if constructed safely
- 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
- Provide only mains or treated water, or ensure that 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 bird behaviour while they are using the run can also help you eliminate areas that could be hazardous.

Forward planning

With the high likelihood that AI and housing orders will feature heavily in years to come, poultry keepers are being encouraged to think proactively and invest in future proofing their systems. If feasible, it's worth thinking about investing in housing designs that are more compatible with keeping birds inside, whilst also meeting their ethological needs.

- Polytunnels can provide a good covered and sheltered areas
- Robust netted structures or 'winter gardens' are a cost-effective option
- A veranda (see above picture) added to existing house can provide excellent access to light and additional space for the birds year-round

Other useful links

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/bird-flu-avian-influenza-housing-your-birds-safely>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/avian-influenza-bird-flu-cases-and-disease-control-zones-in-england>

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