Meat chicken standards comparison

STANDARDS	RSPCA INDOOR	RSPCA FREE-RANGE	UK LEGAL MINIMUM	RED TRACTOR INDOOR	RED TRACTOR ENHANCED WELFARE	RED TRACTOR FREE-RANGE	SOIL ASSOCIATION ORGANIC	WELFARE IMPACT
YEAR OF PUBLICATION	2025			ON-FARM STANDARDS: 2025 CATCHING & TRANSPORT: 2017 PROCESSING (SLAUGHTER/KILLING): 2023			2024	
ENVIRONMENT								
SPACE REQUIREMENTS	Maximum 30kg/m² and 19 birds per m².	Follows minimum legal requirements related to free-range production (see relevant column).	Maximum 39kg/m² for indoor production. For birds labelled 'free-range', maximum 27.5kg/m² and 13 birds per m². For organic production, fixed housing, maximum 21kg/m² and 10 birds per m². For organic production, mobile housing, maximum 30kg/m² and 16 birds/m².	Maximum 38kg/m². No requirement for the number of birds placed.	Maximum 30kg/m². No requirement for the number of birds placed.	Follows minimum legal requirements related to free-range production (see relevant column).	Follows minimum legal requirements related to organic production (see relevant column).	Sufficient space is required to enable birds to perform a wide range of important natural behaviours. More space also allows subordinate birds to move away from aggressors more easily and enables resting birds to rest without being disturbed.
LITTER PROVISION	The floor of all houses must be completely covered in litter. Litter must at least 5cm deep.		All chickens must have permanent access to litter that is dry and friable on the surface. No minimum litter depth requirement.	Flocks are provided with clean, fresh bedding to a minimum of 2cm deep.			The solid floor area must be covered with a litter material. No minimum litter depth requirement.	Litter provides several functions for poultry: a comfortable resting area, and opportunities for dustbathing, foraging and exploratory behaviours.
ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT	For every 1,000 birds: • 1.5 standard-sized, long, chopped straw bales • 1 pecking object, e.g. peck-a-blocks, brassicas (e.g. cabbage, cauliflower, sprouts, broccoli), hanging wooden blocks.		Not specified.	For every 1,000 birds: • at least 1 shavings/straw bale used throughout the bird's life (bales are wrapped or treated) • 1 pecking object.			No less than 2 enrichment items per 500 birds. Destructible enrichment must be provided, including forage.	Chickens are naturally inquisitive and explore their environment by pecking to investigate objects. Suitable environmental enrichment can encourage increased activity levels, improve leg health and promote good health overall.
PERCHES	For every 1,000 birds, 2m of aerial perch space.		No requirement.	For every 1,000 birds: • 2 linear metres of perches or • 0.3m² of platform.			Where possible, perches should be provided. The perch space provided must be aerial perch space.	Providing perches allows birds to express their natural behaviour, allowing them to rest, preen and observe the activity of other birds below. When provided with the correct type of perch, birds will use them, especially during the night period. The provision of perches has also been shown to help improve bird health e.g. birds with access to perches have been shown to have fewer foot pad burns.
LIGHTING	No area of the house must be lit at less than 20 lux. Minimum of 2 continuous hours of darkness for birds up to a maximum of 7 days of age and 3 days prior to slaughter, otherwise a minimum of 6 continuous hours of darkness. Natural daylight must be provided at all times during the natural daylight period. The natural light openings (windows) in the house must correspond to at least 3% of the total floor area of the house. Birds are provided with a natural or artificial dawn/dusk period.		All houses must have lighting with an intensity of at least 20 lux during the lighting periods, measured at bird's-eye level and illuminating at least 80% of the usable area. No minimum period of darkness for birds up to 6 days of age and 3 days prior to slaughter, otherwise a minimum of four continuous hours of darkness and six hours of darkness in total.	Light intensity and dark period requirements as legislation. From 5 days of age, natural daylight in the form of windows must be provided, which equate to a minimum of 3% of the floor area.		Housing must permit plentiful natural light to enter. 8 hours of continuous 'nocturnal rest' must be given every day. Birds are provided with a natural or artificial dawn/dusk period.	Chickens' eyes can be damaged by ongoing exposure to very dimly lit conditions, or prolonged lighting. They are also less active and unable to investigate their environment when the light intensity is kept too low. Birds can see a wider range of wavelengths than humans, including UV light. Standard artificial lights do not include these wavelengths. Providing natural daylight enables birds to use their full visual spectrum. This is thought to increase activity and enrich the birds' environment. Providing a dawn/dusk period enables birds to prepare for the change in lighting, for example, by finding a nighttime roosting position.
FREE-RANGE ACCESS	Not applicable	Access to a range area for at least 8 hours each day. Overhead shade/shelter at 8m² for every 1,000 birds. Natural cover (e.g. trees, shrubs) over at least 5% of the range. Additional facilities, or designated existing natural elements, must be provided for dustbathing and exploration in at least 1 area per 2,000 birds and in at least 2 areas overall.	Not required. For birds labelled 'free-range', there must be continuous daytime access to open-air runs mainly covered in vegetation, of at least 1m² per chicken, for at least half their life. For birds labelled 'traditional free-range', the range must be at least 2m² per turkey, with continuous daytime access from 6 weeks of age.	Not applicable.	Access to a range area for at least 8 hours each day.		Access to a range area of at least 4m²/bird from at least 12 weeks of age. Shelter/cover provided on the range. Natural cover (e.g. trees, shrubs) over at least 5% of the range.	A well-managed range can enhance bird welfare because the range provides an enriching environment with opportunities to exercise and express many natural behaviours. The outside area needs to be large enough to keep the ground in good condition, provide sufficient foraging opportunities, and protect animal health by limiting parasite build-up. Shade and shelter facilities are needed to protect animals from inclement weather. Chickens are also prey animals and are wary of overhead predators. Providing shade, shelter and natural cover encourages birds to use the range.
FLOCK SIZE	Not specified.		Not specified for indoor or standard free-range birds. For birds labelled 'traditional free-range', a maximum 4,800 chickens per house.	Not specified.			Maximum 1,000 chickens per house.	Limiting the maximum flock size may help facilitate good stockmanship and flock checks by restricting the number of birds who need to be inspected.
HUSBANDRY								
FEED	Chickens must not have to travel more than 4 metres anywhere in the house to reach food. Track feeders prohibited.		Feed containing mammalian or avian-derived protein is not permitted. Antibiotic and hormonal growth promoters are not permitted.	Chickens must not have to travel more than 4 metres anywhere in the house to reach food.			Organic feed must be used. At least 20% of the feed must be grown on the farm, or other farms in the same region if this is not possible.	Mammalian and avian proteins are not permitted in feed due to potential animal health risks. Antibiotic and hormonal growth promoters are not permitted due to potential animal and human health risks. Unnecessary use of antibiotics also risks increasing levels of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Track feeders pose a risk to bird welfare, especially chicks, as birds can become trapped or injured. These feeders can also impede bird movement.
THINNING	Not permitted.		Permitted.	Permitted.	Limited to one thin per flock.	Permitted.	Not mentioned.	Thinning involves removing a proportion of the birds on one or more occasions from the building at planned times to ensure the maximum stocking density is not exceeded. As such, the maximum stocking density is achieved on more than one occasion prior to depopulation. Thinning is stressful for the birds and has been shown to increase the risk of lameness and disease incidence.
FREQUENCY OF WELFARE CHECKS BY FARMER	Three times a day.		Twice a day.	Twice a day.			Regularly.	Multiple inspections of the flock helps ensure that all birds are checked. If there are any welfare issues, these can be addressed quickly.
GENETICS AND BREEDING								
BREED	Any chicken breed/s used must be accepted for use by the RSPCA.		Animals may only be kept for farming purposes if it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of their genetics or physical characteristics, that they can be kept without any detrimental effect on their health or welfare.	Not specified.	Acceptable breeds are: • Hubbard: JA757; JA787; JA957; JA987; Redbro (indoor use only); Norfolk Black; JACY57 • Aviagen: Rambler Ranger; Ranger Classic; Ranger Gold.	Acceptable breeds are: • Hubbard: JA757; JA787; JA957; JA987; Norfolk Black; JACY57 • Aviagen: Rambler Ranger; Ranger Classic; Ranger Gold.	The breed used must either: • meet Defra's definition of slow-growing (no more than 45g per day), or • be on the RSPCA's list of welfare-approved free-range broiler breeds.	Selection for fast growth, weight gain, and heavy finishing weights (with particularly large breast muscle) can compromise other aspects of bird health, particularly leg health. Slower-growing strains are healthier and better able to express natural behaviours and achieve good welfare.
WELFARE STANDARDS FOR BREEDING ANIMALS	Standards do not include requirements for parent flocks.		General farmed-animal welfare legislation applies to the parent stock (broiler breeders). Natural or artificial breeding procedures that cause, or are likely to cause, suffering or injury to the animals concerned, must not be practised. This does not include procedures that are likely to cause minimal or momentary suffering or injury, or that might necessitate interventions that would not cause lasting injury.	Standards include requirements for breeding flocks. Chickens must be sourced from Red Tractor breeding flocks.			Standards apply to breeding flocks. Chickens must be sourced from organic breeding flocks if possible. Chickens from non-organic breeding flocks can be used if sourced straight after hatching and organic chickens are not available.	Ideally, the welfare of parent flocks would also be included in welfare schemes. This can be challenging for smaller schemes because breeding flocks may produce chickens for a range of farms, not just those that are part of a particular scheme. Parent flocks have similar needs to chickens reared for meat, but there are also welfare challenges associated with these birds, particularly for fast-growing breeds.
TRANSPORT								
TRANSPORT DURATION	Maximum 8 hours from start of loading to end of slaughter. Maximum 4 hours from leaving farm to arriving at slaughter facility. Maximum 10 hours feed withdrawal prior to slaughter.		Food and water must be provided after 12 hours (excluding loading and unloading time). Food and water cannot easily be provided in poultry transport crates, so this restricts the maximum transport duration.	Maximum 12 hours from start of loading to end of unloading at a slaughter facility. Maximum 9 hours feed withdrawal prior to catching.			Journey times kept to a minimum. Journeys over 8 hours from start of loading to end of unloading must be justified.	Longer transport times are associated with higher mortality levels and increased stress for the birds, due to reduced comfort and increased potential for thermal stress. Long feed and water withdrawal times will cause birds to experience severe hunger and thirst. Long transport times also increase the risk of severe hunger and thirst, as food and water cannot be provided in transport crates.
SLAUGHTER/KILLING METHOD								
PRE-STUN SLAUGHTER	Animals must be stunned before bleeding.		Animals must be stunned before slaughter (bleeding) unless slaughtered in accordance with a religious method.	Animals must be stunned before bleeding.			Animals must be stunned before bleeding.	Pre-stunning ensures that an animal is unconscious and cannot feel pain before slaughter up until the point of death.
ELECTRICAL STUNNING/ KILLING	Permitted electrical stunning/killing methods: • electrical waterbath killing (parameters intended to only stun birds not permitted) • dry electrical stunning. Inverting and shackling conscious birds is only permitted for birds slaughtered on-farm where no commercially/practically viable alternative is available.		Permitted electrical stunning/ killing methods: • electrical waterbath stunning/killing • dry electrical stunning. Electrical methods may only stun the animal – bleeding must follow to ensure death.	Permitted electrical stunning/killing methods: • electrical waterbath stunning/killing • dry electrical stunning. Inverting and shackling conscious birds is only permitted for birds weighing up to 15kg.			All methods permitted by law (see relevant column) are allowed, with the exception of waterbath stunning, for which frequencies greater than 800Hz must not be used.	Electrical waterbath stunning used to be the conventional method of killing poultry. However, this method has many disadvantages. It requires live birds to be handled, inverted and hung into shackles while conscious, which causes stress and discomfort. It can also be difficult to ensure all birds are stunned correctly without damaging the meat produced.
GAS KILLING	Permitted gas killing methods – exposure to one of the following until death occurs: • carbon dioxide in two phases, from less than 33% to a higher concentration once animals have lost consciousness • carbon dioxide and inert gas mixture, maximum 30% carbon dioxide and less than 2% oxygen • inert gases, less than 2% oxygen.		Permitted gas killing methods – exposure to one of the following until death occurs: • carbon dioxide at over 40% concentration • carbon dioxide in two phases, from less than 40% to a higher concentration once animals have lost consciousness • carbon dioxide and inert gas mixture, maximum 40% carbon dioxide • inert gases.	Permitted gas killing methods – exposure to one of the following until death occurs: • carbon dioxide in two phases, from less than 33% to a higher concentration once animals have lost consciousness • carbon dioxide and inert gas mixture, maximum 30% carbon dioxide and less than 2% oxygen • inert gases, less than 2% oxygen.			All methods permitted by law (see relevant column) are allowed.	It is now more common to use gas killing methods. These don't require manual handling and shackling of conscious birds, which reduces stress and improves welfare at slaughter. Birds are also killed more consistently in the gas chamber. Carbon dioxide is aversive to birds. While currently uncommon, it's preferable to use inert gases such as argon and nitrogen, which are reportedly not aversive to poultry. This enables a more humane induction to unconsciousness compared to using carbon dioxide. Where carbon dioxide gas alone is being used, exposing birds to a controlled, gradually increasing concentration results in a smoother transition to unconsciousness.
AUDITING								
INSPECTION FREQUENCY	Annual audit of each farm, slaughter facility and catching/transporters by RSPCA Assured. An unannounced independent welfare audit at least twice a year on all houses where the standards are being implemented.		Local Authority Trading Standards enforces legislation covering farm animal health and welfare. Farms can be inspected by Trading Standards and/or the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) if a complaint is received. Slaughter facilities can be inspected by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and an FSA vet is also always present on site Birds marketed using protected terms (free-range, traditional free-range, barn reared, extensive indoor) are inspected by APHA once per flock.	Annual audit of each farm, slaughter facility, and catching/transporters by a third-party certification body. Spot checks, potentially unannounced, carried out based on risk of non-conformance.			Annual audit of each farm and slaughter facility by Soil Association Certification.	Frequent inspections help ensure that standards are complied with. Unannounced spot-checks help ensure that standards are complied with at all times, not just when an inspection is expected. Useful approaches may be random, where sites can receive a visit at any time, or risk-based, targeting sites with a higher risk of non-compliance.
WELFARE OUTCOME MONITORING	On-farm welfare outcome assessment carried out during the annual assessment. Measures include: • bird distribution • dirtiness • enrichment use • walking ability (lameness) • behaviour • hock burn • foot pad dermatitis • mortality. Post-slaughter information is also required to be fed back to the producer: • dead-on-arrivals • total slaughter rejects • breast blisters • wing damage • leg damage • hock burn • foot pad dermatitis.		Welfare outcomes are measured at the slaughterhouse as part of the 'trigger system' for flocks with a stocking density in excess of 33kg/m². Measures include: • ascites/oedema • cellulitis and dermatitis • dead-on-arrivals • emaciation • joint lesions • septicaemia/respiratory • total rejections • cumulative daily mortality rate • footpad dermatitis score.	Follows the legal requirement (see relevant column).			On-farm welfare outcome assessment carried out during the annual assessment. Measures include: • bird distribution • dirtiness • enrichment use • walking ability (lameness) • behaviour • hock burn • foot pad dermatitis • mortality. Post-slaughter information is also required to be fed back to the producer: • dead-on-arrivals • total slaughter rejects • breast blisters • wing damage • leg damage • hock burn • foot pad dermatitis.	Welfare outcome measures are animal-based metrics that reflect aspects of their welfare. They can include physical factors, such as the level of foot pad burn or other diseases, and behavioural factors, such as the level of aggressive behaviour seen.