

# Beef standards comparison

| STANDARDS                          |  RSPCA                                                                                                           | UK LEGAL MINIMUM                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |  RED TRACTOR                                                                |  SOIL ASSOCIATION ORGANIC                                                                                          | WELFARE IMPACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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| YEAR OF PUBLICATION                | 2026                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 2025                                                                                                                                                           | 2025                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| ENVIRONMENT                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| SPACE REQUIREMENTS (ADULTS)        | Required space by weight:<br>400–499kg: 8m²<br>500–599kg: 8.5m²<br>600–699kg: 9m²<br>700–799kg: 10m²<br>800+kg: 11m²<br>For cubicle-housed cattle, it's 6m² loafing space per animal.             | The freedom of movement of animals, having regard to their species and in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge, shall not be restricted in such a way as to cause them unnecessary suffering or injury.                                                                                                                                                                  | Recommended space by weight – loose housing and fully-slatted:<br>400–499kg: 4.9/1.8m²<br>500–599kg: 5.85/2.1m²<br>600–699kg: 6.8/2.3m²                        | Required space by weight:<br>350–500kg: 8.7m²<br>500–599kg: 8.75m²<br>600–699kg: 10.5m²<br>700–799kg: 12.25m²<br>800–899kg: 14m²                                                                      | Sufficient space is required to enable cattle to perform a wide range of important natural behaviours, such as walking, self-grooming and socially interacting. Increasing space allows cattle to avoid aggressive herd-mates.                                                                                                                                                   |
| INDIVIDUAL BULL PENS               | Individual pens for bulls have a space requirement of 16m². If the bull is very large, the requirement is 1m² per 60kg. Plus all need an additional exercise area of 25m².                        | Not mentioned.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Not mentioned.                                                                                                                                                 | Individual pens for bulls have a space requirement of 10m² indoor space. Plus an additional exercise area of 30m².                                                                                    | Bulls are sometimes kept in 'bull pens' on farms where they are not mixed with the herd. As large animals, space to move around and exercise is important, and minimum space allowances ensure this is provided.                                                                                                                                                                 |
| SLATTED FLOORS                     | Fully-slatted floors are prohibited.                                                                                                                                                              | Not mentioned.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Permitted. Artificially reared calves must have a non-slatted, bedded lying area.                                                                              | Fully-slatted floors are prohibited.                                                                                                                                                                  | Slatted floors are less comfortable for lying down, whereas bedding allows cattle to rest more comfortably. Slatted floors require high stocking densities to work for 'treading' manure through the slats, with the low space per animal causing further welfare issues.                                                                                                        |
| ACCESS TO PASTURE                  | Required by 5 months of age, with permanent access during the grass-growing season. Can be housed for 3 months before slaughter.                                                                  | Not mentioned.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Not required.                                                                                                                                                  | Permanent access to pasture. Housing permitted over winter. Can be housed for 3 months before slaughter.                                                                                              | Cattle are motivated to access pasture, and grazing is a natural feeding behaviour. The space available at pasture allows cattle to exercise, space out, and lie down in whatever position they choose.                                                                                                                                                                          |
| HUSBANDRY                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| FEED                               | Rationed and ad-lib feed space by weight:<br>400kg: 60/25cm<br>500kg: 70/30cm<br>600kg+: 75/35cm<br>Diet must include enough fibre to prevent health issues.                                      | Harmful effects of competition must be minimised.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Rationed and ad-lib feed space by weight:<br>400–500kg: 55/19cm<br>500–600kg: 60/24cm<br>600–700kg: 67/28cm<br>700–800kg: 70/32cm<br>800kg+: 75/32cm           | No trough space specified – must have 'easy access' to feed. Feed must be at least 60% forage.                                                                                                        | Feed space impacts on welfare through competition; especially when feed is supplied in a ration rather than ad-lib. 'Displacements', where individuals are pushed off food, can reduce or delay intake, and cause hunger.                                                                                                                                                        |
| BREEDING TECHNOLOGIES              | Artificial insemination only allowed by a vet or skilled and trained person with a recognised standard. Embryo transfer only permitted in exceptional circumstances, with proven welfare benefit. | Natural or artificial breeding, or breeding procedures which cause, or are likely to cause, suffering or injury to any of the animals concerned, must not be practised. This does not preclude the use of natural or artificial breeding procedures that are likely to cause minimal or momentary suffering or injury or that might necessitate interventions which would not cause lasting injury. | Must be satisfied that any contractors used for artificial insemination are competent.                                                                         | No use of breeding hormones. Any person carrying out artificial insemination should be trained and competent. Embryo transfer prohibited.                                                             | The use of some breeding techniques can cause discomfort or pain for cattle, require extended handling, and must be considered against any welfare gain. Standards requiring training or skills to carry out these procedures, and restricting which methods are used, helps protect welfare.                                                                                    |
| VET CARE                           | Must have a detailed Veterinary Health and Welfare Plan, reviewed annually. Must have a vet visit once a year for cattle for slaughter, and twice a year for breeding herds.                      | No vet inspection frequency set.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Must have a Livestock Health Plan. Vet visits at least once a year, sees all animals, and undertakes a written annual livestock health and performance review. | Must have a health plan. Strongly recommends consultation with a vet, and a review of where any improvements can be made annually.                                                                    | Routine vet visits and a written health plan allow proactive health management of a herd, where farmers and vets can focus on health conditions specific to the farm. These can help prevent frequency of health issues, and therefore poor welfare for cattle.                                                                                                                  |
| CALF WELFARE                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| SPACE ALLOWANCES                   | Fully-bedded housing – required space by weight:<br><100kg: 2m²<br>100–200kg: 3.5m²<br>200–250kg: 4m²<br>250–300kg: 4.5m²<br>300–350kg: 5.5m²                                                     | Required space by weight:<br><150kg: 1.5m²<br>150–200kg: 2m²<br>200kg+: 3m²<br>They must also be able to turn around, groom, stand up, lie down and rest without hindrance.                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Required space by weight:<br>50–85kg: 1.5m²<br>85–150kg: 1.8m²<br>150–200kg: 2.4m²<br>200–300kg: 3m²<br>300–400kg: 3.95m²                                      | Required space by weight:<br><100kg: 2.6m²<br>100–199kg: 4.4m²<br>200–350kg: 7m²                                                                                                                      | Calves show play behaviour, which includes running, and develop by exploring their environment. Space allowances can give room for them to be mobile and active, and be close to or distant from pen-mates.                                                                                                                                                                      |
| FEEDING AND WEANING                | At least 3 litres of colostrum within first 6 hours of life. Milk feeds to provide good nutrition for healthy growth rates (0.7–0.8kg/day). Weaning from 8 weeks of age.                          | Milk feeds at least twice daily for the first month of life.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Colostrum within 6 hours. No milk volume specified. Legal requirements for feeding twice daily for first month. Weaning from 5 weeks of age.                   | Natural, organic milk, and colostrum, of 'sufficient' quantity. Weaning from 12 weeks of age.                                                                                                         | Colostrum is vital for health, as this provides early immunity to calves. Calves are often underfed milk; having requirements for growth rates or milk volume promotes good health and development. Weaning at an appropriate age impacts growth, and reduces stress in calves.                                                                                                  |
| GROUP HOUSING                      | Calves must be paired or grouped by 7 days of age.                                                                                                                                                | Calves must be paired or grouped by 8 weeks of age.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Calves must be paired or grouped by 8 weeks of age.                                                                                                            | Calves must be paired or grouped by 7 days of age.                                                                                                                                                    | Calves are social animals who engage in social play, cope better with stressful events in groups, and are motivated to be with other calves. Group housing promotes welfare on these points, but can make individual monitoring more difficult – so may not always be ideal from birth.                                                                                          |
| CASTRATION AND DISBUDDING          | Castration: short- and long-acting pain relief required for all methods. Disbudding: caustic paste not permitted; short- and long-acting pain relief required.                                    | Castration: rubber ring permitted up to 1 week of age, no pain relief required; other methods, pain relief required over 2 months of age. Disbudding: caustic paste permitted up to 1 week of age; anaesthetic; for other methods, no long-acting pain relief required.                                                                                                                             | Castration: no pain relief required for rubber ring method. Disbudding: caustic paste permitted; no requirement for pain relief with this method.              | Castration and disbudding must not be routine but are permitted. Adequate pain relief is required for all types (though short- or long-acting is not specified).                                      | Castration and disbudding are painful procedures; both at the time of the event and after it (as the tissue dies off). Where these are carried out, pain relief can reduce the welfare impact.                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| TRANSPORT                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| TRANSPORT REQUIREMENTS             | Under 8-hour journeys only. Vehicles must have bedding. Electric goads prohibited. Legal minimum space per animal. Loading ramp no more than 20%.                                                 | Space allowance of 0.3–1.6m² per animal, and maximum transport times of 28 hours with a one-hour rest break halfway. Loading ramp no more than 50%.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Legal maximum stocking densities, ramp angle, and journey length. Electric goads prohibited.                                                                   | Journey duration must be kept to a minimum; journeys over 8 hours must be justified. Legal maximum stocking densities. Electric goads prohibited. No mention of ramp incline.                         | Transport is a stressful event for cattle, with fatigue increasing with length of journey. This makes maximum journey times important for protecting welfare. Other factors, such as angles of loading ramps, affect the risk of falls, injury and comfort.                                                                                                                      |
| MARKETS AND COLLECTION CENTRES     | Prohibits sales at markets and passing through collection centres.                                                                                                                                | Legislation covering welfare at markets.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Permitted. Detailed standards for both livestock markets and collection centres.                                                                               | Markets are discouraged but allowed. Specifies that when at market, the handling, care and welfare of the animals is the responsibility of the livestock owner. Collection centres should be avoided. | Markets and collection centres pose a number of welfare challenges to cattle. Animals are transported and loaded/unloaded twice, may be mixed with other animals, and put through the ring – all stressful events. There are disease spread risks between cattle. Markets are noisy, with lots of people and often dogs present, conditions cattle are likely to find stressful. |
| SLAUGHTER/KILLING METHOD           |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| PRE-STUN SLAUGHTER                 | Compulsory that all animals are stunned prior to slaughter.                                                                                                                                       | Exceptions for religious slaughter, which can be not-stunned prior to slaughter.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Compulsory that all animals are stunned prior to slaughter.                                                                                                    | Compulsory that all animals are stunned prior to slaughter.                                                                                                                                           | Pre-stunning ensures that an animal is unconscious and cannot feel pain before slaughter up until the point of death.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| SLAUGHTER OF HEAVILY PREGNANT COWS | Not permitted at more than 27 weeks pregnant (except for emergency disease control). At <27 weeks pregnant, recommend identifying animals to slaughterhouse.                                      | Not permitted at more than 90% gestation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Not permitted at more than 90% gestation.                                                                                                                      | Recommends to avoid transportation when over 65% gestation (6 months).                                                                                                                                | Transport to slaughter places heavily pregnant cows under significant stress. The welfare of the foetus can also be affected.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| AUDITING                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| WELFARE OUTCOME MONITORING         | On-farm annual welfare outcome assessment carried out, using the AssureWel protocol for 10 measures of welfare.                                                                                   | Not required.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Not required.                                                                                                                                                  | On-farm welfare outcome assessment may be carried out, using 8 measures of welfare.                                                                                                                   | Welfare outcome measures are animal-based metrics that reflect aspects of their welfare. They include body condition, cleanliness, mortality rates, and levels of castration and disbudding on-farm.                                                                                                                                                                             |