

SCHEDULE FOUR

Rules and Guidance on Keeping Hens or Rabbits

It does not matter if you decide to keep them as pets or for a supply of fresh eggs, keeping chickens is a serious matter and should only be done if you have the time and resources to look after them properly. All hens or rabbits are not to be kept in a place or manner that is prejudicial to their health and welfare or likely to cause a health, safety, or nuisance problem to others. The hens or rabbits must be kept on a plot in such a manner that always complies with the UK Government animal welfare guidelines and strict welfare codes enforced by the **RSPCA** and **DEFRA** and covered by the **Animal Welfare Act**.

Despite their appearance and actions, hens are quite intelligent and naturally inquisitive, and like to look around, exploring their surroundings and scratching at the soil to see what they can unearth. They can get frustrated and bored if their surroundings are not well kept, which can lead to them fighting or becoming ill.

Hen Houses and Nesting Boxes

All hens must be able to stand, turn round and stretch their wings when inside. They also need enough space to perch or sit down without interference from other birds, when they are all together inside the hen hut or in their outside space.

The hen house must be warm, dry, well ventilated and above all, secure. Although enough fresh air should be provided by means of doors or other apertures, the birds should be protected from draughts, and it is recommended that the entry doors face due south wherever possible.

The floor inside the hut should be easy to keep clean, as the floor coverings (wood shavings or straw) will need to be topped-up or replaced when needed. This is especially important when it is wet, as the floor coverings are used for foraging and dust bathing.

Perches should be around 3 to 5 cm wide with rounded edges (like a brush handle), and at the right height to suit the size of the bird. Hens like to perch and sleep together at night, so there should be enough room inside the hen house for all the birds to roost at the same time. At least 15 cm should be allowed for each bird, with enough room between the perches so that they can get up and down without hurting themselves.

All birds need peace and quiet to lay their eggs, and they will look around and investigate several places before settling down to lay. The nest boxes themselves should be draught-free, quiet and enclosed with a good layer of clean dry nesting material of straw or wood shavings.

The huts require regular cleaning and disinfecting and all litter etc. needs to be disposed of in secure containers. Nest boxes, roosting areas and perches must be properly and securely located inside the huts.

Outside Areas

Hens must have continuous daytime access to open air runs, which should be moved regularly to avoid 'fowl sick' or muddy conditions that could lead to ill health or discomfort. This exercise area can be provided with wire fenced runs.

It is most important that all the birds have access to an outside exercise area during hot weather, or when it is warm and humid. There should be overhead cover, such as small

trees or a purpose-built shelter which will give the hens protection not only from the sun but also from bad weather and any possible predators.

The hens should be able to always access the shelter, except when the huts are being cleaned and disinfected. All exercise runs must be escape and predator proof.

Health

A healthy bird will be alert and interested in her surroundings, have clear bright eyes, a good posture and will move quickly if startled, while regular dust baths will help keep their skin, legs and feet clean and healthy. Hens must have access to a minimum of 8 hours daylight during any day which is adequate to inspect all birds on the site.

Parasites, lice and red mites can be frequent problems, and the hens should be checked regularly for infestations. The hut should be tall enough to let the keeper to stand and inspect the birds while inside.

As well as inspecting and treating the birds, the hen house and nest boxes should also be cleaned and disinfected regularly to remove parasites etc from crooks and crevices. Regular worming will also be needed, especially if the hens are not moved about onto fresh grass but are kept in the same runs for more than a month at a time.

The early signs of ill health may include changes in food and water intake, in preening, in 'chatter' and in activity. There may also be a drop in egg production and changes in egg quality such as shell defects.

Avian influenza (bird flu) is a notifiable animal disease. If you suspect any type of avian influenza in poultry or captive birds you must report it immediately by calling the Defra Rural Services Helpline on 03000 200 301. Failure to do so is an offence. (www.gov.uk/guidance/avian-influenza-bird-flu).

Feeding and Watering

Clean fresh water must be always available, and food and water containers should be kept clean and in good condition. Hen feed should be stored in vermin proof containers and must be properly balanced for the type hens kept. Enough food should be given to ensure the hens are properly fed but not too much, as uneaten food left on the ground will attract vermin. The hens should be visited at least twice a day, to ensure they have enough to eat and to make sure that drinking water does not freeze during winter months.

Fire Precautions

All inflammable materials such as straw, waste litter and empty bags must be stored well away from the hen huts and exercise areas and something for controlling small fires such as dry sand should be kept close by in case of emergencies.

Frequency of Inspection

All birds must be inspected at least twice daily. The Tenant must allow the Committee and/or an animal welfare representative to inspect the poultry at any time. Anyone who keeps hens on their allotment plot must make sure they can be contacted by the Committee in case of emergencies.

Disease Control

Rabbits need vaccinations to protect against myxomatosis, Rabbit (Viral) Haemorrhagic Disease (R(V)HD) and a new strain of R(V)HD - R(V)HD2 - all of which are often fatal and

cause intense suffering to rabbits. For further information see, www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rabbits/health/vaccinations

Any sick or injured birds must be removed immediately, and the correct and appropriate treatment provided. The cause of any disease or injury must be identified and remedial action taken. Any national disease prevention and/or control programmes must be adhered to.

Cleansing and Disinfection

The hen hut, runs and exercise area should be regularly cleaned and disinfected. If possible, it is advisable to move the hut and runs every couple of months onto fresh grass. Only clean, fresh good quality bedding materials should be used.

Improvement Notice

If the Association or the Council becomes aware of any concerns about the welfare of any hens kept on an allotment plot, the Tenant will be contacted and requested to take the appropriate steps to improve the welfare of the birds in question.

The Tenant must allow the Committee and/or an animal welfare representative to inspect the hens at any time. Anyone who keeps hens on their plot must make sure they can be contacted at any time by the Committee in case of emergencies.

Where it is thought necessary and is in the interest of any bird kept, notice will be served accordingly to order improvements to the accommodation or overall management of a site. In certain circumstances immediate rectification may be required.

Failure to keep any hens in safe and secure conditions with adequate food and/or water will result in the loss of your tenancy and possible prosecution.

Summary

To summarise if you keep hens or rabbits you agree to provide the following:

- the correct welfare of the animals themselves
- comfort and shelter
- readily accessible fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
- freedom of movement
- the opportunity to exercise normal behavioural patterns
- light during the hours of daylight and a means of inspecting the birds at any other time
- the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of lice, injury, parasitic infection and disease
- emergency arrangements in the event of fire, flood or other emergencies