

Owning chickens is great fun and very rewarding, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment.
Did you know chickens live on average 6-8 years?

Providing for all your chicken's needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in a long, healthy life. Here are some guidelines for offering your chicken the best care:



Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



Our housing requirements aim to ensure the best welfare standards for chickens. Our team are happy to offer advice in purchasing or adapting your set-up to provide the best home before adopting.

Chickens need a secure and well-ventilated nesting area with natural light. You may wish to purchase an already made hen house or alternatively you can convert an ordinary shed. The enclosure should have nesting/sleeping areas and roosting perches inside. Required space depends on how many you have in your flock. But nesting space should be **30cm² or 1ft²** per chicken. Suitable substrate such as straw or wood shavings should be used to provide nesting material and promote nesting/foraging behaviour.



Chickens spend much of their time foraging so require a large outside area to keep themselves occupied. This can be provided by attaching it to their housing or allowing them to free roam. However, free roaming should only be allowed under supervision in a secure space to protect from risk of predators. Outside space should be at least **2m² or 21ft²** per chicken in the flock, to ensure they have plenty of room for exercise. Trees and plants within their outside area are a good source of shelter and enrichment. Chickens also enjoy sunbathing and dustbathing so their enclosure should include access to natural sunlight and either an area of naturally dry ground or adding a mixture of light soil and fine sand.

The enclosure should be secure and safe from risk of predators, with all areas fully secure. Strong mesh should be used to surround the enclosure (ideally 12-16g galvanised welded wire mesh), particularly around the bottom few feet of the enclosure if not for all sides. This should be dug into the ground for outside areas or secured to a concrete base. Chicken wire is unsuitable as it isn't predator-proof. High electric fencing can also be used for open outside areas to prevent predators entering.



Preserve their health by protecting them from pain, injury and disease



Check your chickens for signs of injury or illness every day and seek veterinary advice if necessary.

It is important to carry out routine health checks to keep an eye out for any health problems. For chickens, visual health checks should be carried out daily, but it is also important to handle them on a regular basis to check for any issues.

If your chickens become ill, a specialist vet would be required. Do you know where your nearest exotic/ farm vet practice is located?

Health checks are to look at their body condition such as:

- **Eyes & Comb:** Eyes should be bright and clear, comb should be usual size and shape with no swelling, injuries can occur on the comb due to fighting.
- **Beak & Crop:** Upper and lower beak should align; also, foul-smelling breath can be an indication of digestive problems. Feeling the crop is important to check for signs of health problems such as sour crop. The crop should be full and rounded if the chicken has eaten, it should not feel flat or hard.
- **Feathers, skin & wings:** Skin should be checked for any wounds that could be a result of fighting within the flock, and any signs of mites or other parasites. They should move freely with no sign of pain. Please bear in mind that ex-commercial hens may initially be quite weak from being kept in large numbers, they may also be missing feathers, but these should grow back after a few weeks.
- **Feet:** Chickens can be susceptible to foot problems, such as bumblefoot. Limping or swelling may be an indication. As prevention, indoor areas should be kept clean and dry with no areas where their feet could get caught.
- **Behaviour:** Behaviour should be observed to understand what is normal for each chicken. Lethargy or loss of appetite could be a sign of a health issue. Hunched posture and laboured breathing can also be signs that something is wrong.



Please note, poultry should be wormed at least twice a year, and regularly treated for lice and mites.



Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



Chicken diet should include:

- **Layers pellets with fresh foods** including corn and grit to aid digestion and small amounts of healthy treats such as fresh green vegetables and cooked rice/pasta.
- **Fresh water** available at all times, as birds can drink a lot throughout the day. They can also receive an apple cider vinegar supplement in their drinking water to promote general health and improve plumage.



Promote natural behaviour and provide appropriate companionship



Chickens should be kept in flocks/small groups, they are social animals so need companionship to keep them happy and healthy. Ideally hens should be kept in a group of at least three that get on well together, with or without a cockerel.

When introducing new individuals to the flock, most chickens will get on well once they have established a dominance hierarchy. If unsure, to begin with new birds can be kept separate from your existing birds, they should still be able to see each other before introductions as this will make it easier to establish hierarchy when they are put together. When introducing plenty of treats should be given to act as a distraction and birds should be supervised at first in case of any fighting. It is perfectly normal if some individuals square up to each other and some pecking occurs while they are asserting their dominance. To minimise bullying within the flock there should be plenty of feeding areas and space. If bullying does occur, Vaseline can be rubbed onto the comb of the individual being picked on so the dominant bird cannot do much harm. If the problem persists you may need to consider separating the bully from the flock and slowly reintroducing them.

Cockerels shouldn't be kept together unless they have grown up together and get on well. Introducing non-related cockerels to each other can be tricky and often leads to fighting. You should never try to restrict a cockerel's movement to prevent the natural noise of them crowing.





DEFRA Mandatory Registration Process



All captive birds must be registered with DEFRA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). Since 2021, the UK has had its largest outbreak of avian influenza which is often fatal to birds. By registering your birds with your information, you will help provide a picture of where at-risk birds are in the UK. It will also mean that APHA will be able to contact you and let you know of any outbreaks.

For more information visit the government website: [New mandatory bird registration: what do keepers need to know – Government Vets \(blog.gov.uk\)](#).

It is a legal requirement that **all** captive birds must be registered with DEFRA. By registering:

- the APHA will contact you with updates and guidance if there's a disease outbreak (such as bird flu) in your area
- You will help prevent the spread of disease and protect all kept birds, including back-yard flocks

If you own birds, or are adopting birds, you must complete a [DEFRA bird registration form.pdf](#) to register them. You can either complete the form and send it via post or email, or you can follow this link <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/register-as-a-keeper-of-less-than-50-poultry-or-other-captive-birds> to register them online. If you have 50 or more birds, you must fill out the corresponding form: [IRA90 Kept bird registration form - Keeper of 50 or more other captive birds \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#). If you have any queries or would like to discuss the process further with a member of the Small Animals Team, please contact us by email at smallanimals@raystede.org by phone on 01825 880467.