

## RSPCA Assured offers welfare advice as 'flockdown' is lifted for poultry

*The bird flu housing order will be lifted allowing birds back outside*

Friday 14 April 2023

**RSPCA Assured welcomes the news that free-range poultry producers can now let their birds outside and offers its advice for helping them out of 'flockdown'.**

Next week (Tuesday 18 April) the current housing order will be lifted in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as the Republic of Ireland, as the risk of bird flu, whilst still in circulation, has now reduced. This means free-range poultry farmers can let their birds back outside after five months of being housed indoors to protect them from the disease.

In response [RSPCA Assured](#) - the RSPCA's ethical food label and farm assurance scheme - has issued important advice to farmers to encourage their birds outside on the range and help minimise any potential stress for the birds.



Dr Kate Norman, the RSPCA's poultry expert, said: "Providing birds with outdoor access gives them the freedom to express a greater range of natural behaviours. However, given birds have been kept indoors for the last five months, and therefore haven't been used to going outside, they may initially express signs of fear and stress when the popholes are first opened. This could, for example, lead to issues such as feather pecking or the birds may not choose to go outside at all.

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“Our advice is to ensure that measures are put in place on the range to help minimise any fear and stress and to encourage the birds outside.”

Farmers can do this in a number of ways, for example, by providing;

- Shelters and structures around popholes to create a ‘corridor’ acting as a transition to the outside (*for example trailers or fences covered in windbreak netting or brushings from trees*)
- Areas to dustbathe
- Plenty of natural cover and enrichment close to the popholes which will encourage the birds outside (*for example covered areas with suitable dustbathing material and perching structures*)
- Creating windbreaks for any exposed areas
- Ensure any wet areas of land or standing water are fenced off
- Creating key resource areas outside the popholes such as dry dustbathing locations and perching structures
- Providing a good surface outside the popholes to prevent poaching and maintain clean dry litter inside
- Still practising excellent litter management and enrichment inside



Whilst the lifting of the housing order is positive news, there may understandably still be concerns about the risk of bird flu as the disease is still circulating and sadly there have been recent outbreaks.

Kate added: “We’d like to reassure farmers that the risk level for bird flu has reduced significantly and we’re pleased that the current housing order has now been lifted, so free range birds can get back outside and fully enjoy exhibiting their natural behaviours. However, we understand this is a big change for both birds and farmers, and there may still be some concerns about the risk. However, strict biosecurity measures will remain firmly in place to help protect birds from the disease.”

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Some areas across England and Wales will still be under [surveillance zones](#) and this means different rules may apply to the farms within these areas. There are also still strict AIPZ biosecurity measures in place across the UK so all farmers will need to make sure that they're following the latest government advice to ensure their birds are protected.

For more RSPCA Assured advice see [here](#).

**Ends**

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