

Housing orders are brought into force by legislation during outbreaks of avian notifiable disease as an aid to controlling that disease.

They are enforced when the risk from disease exceeds the needs for free range egg production, and to protect the health and welfare of the birds. The housing order also aims to protect the economics of the industry as compulsory slaughter and cleansing and disinfection are very costly and can be very damaging to the image of free range egg production. Eggs can be marked as free range for up to 16 weeks whilst the birds are being kept inside. In newly placed flocks this starts from the time the pullets are placed on the laying site, not when first eggs appear.

During the time of a housing order it is a legal requirement to have good biosecurity measures in place and there should be no non-essential visitors coming onto site. Most recent cases in the UK have been attributed to either contact with wild birds or water ingress into the birds' housing.

There are a couple of strains of Avian Influenza known to be circulating in the UK at present. You should make yourself familiar with the clinical signs of bird flu which, in laying hens, tends to be increased mortality, ill looking birds and an egg drop. Speak to your veterinary surgeon if you have any concerns and they can advise on the best course of action if you suspect disease in your flock.

Further details can be found in the DEFRA booklet online which describes what is expected of the bird keeper.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/934684/ai-prevention-zone-201111.pdf

There are challenges to overcome when a flock that is accustomed to being let out a certain time and ranging freely is suddenly kept in. If a proposed housing order has been announced, and you have a few days to prepare, then varying the times that the pop-holes opened in that lead up period may give you an idea of how the birds will react and what you may have to do to mitigate against the effects.

Ventilation can be a problem in the winter months when the pop-holes are closed especially in naturally ventilated buildings and this can adversely affect litter quality. Ventilation systems can be adjusted in automatically vented buildings to prevent deterioration in litter quality and your ventilation consultant should be contacted for advice if required. Badly capped litter should be removed from the house and the bedding material replenished.

Injurious feather pecking can be a sequel to the stress of being kept in and, once this behaviour is established, it can be very difficult to control. Reducing the lux level of lighting within legal levels can be a useful tool in calming the birds and preventing bullying. Adequate enrichment should always be in place –especially of the destructible type such as alfalfa bales and pecking blocks. Grit given at 7g/bird/week sprinkled on the scratch area keeps the birds occupied and helps keep litter friable as they scratch about to find the particles.

Keeping the hens in increases infection

pressure for diseases such as Infectious Bronchitis (IB) and can exacerbate the clinical signs of this. IB is a coronavirus and we are all aware now of how coronavirus infection can spread more quickly indoors! The majority of flocks in the UK are vaccinated with live IB vaccines in lay and this should continue, if yours is a vaccinated flock, during any lockdown period by your usual method of application, either by spray application or via the drinking water.

During the last housing order we were all very concerned about the possible increase in smothering incidents as birds pile up against closed pop-holes. Fortunately, there wasn't as much incidence of this as expected. Flocks should be monitored around the usual times of pop-hole opening and crowds of birds broken up by walking the scratch area. The placement of ramps or other objects which stop hens crowding in areas can help stop deaths due to smothering. Electric fences should only be used as a last resort and after discussion with your veterinary surgeon who may have to write a letter to allow for a derogation for use depending on the age of the flock.

Using multivitamins in conventional flocks can help support the hens and there are also solutions available for organic production systems. These can help shore up eggshell quality issues especially if the birds are stressed about being kept in. Don't forget about worm testing and worming your flock during the housed period. Birds can still succumb to worm infestations even when indoors and 16 weeks without worming could allow several worm life cycles to occur, causing gut damage and affecting egg production.

Red mite is also another problem to keep an eye on as possible increases in house temperatures may occur when the pop-holes are closed encouraging more mite activity and reproduction than is usual in the winter months. Speak to your veterinary surgeon about the best way to use multivitamins and treatments for the above diseases and if you have any concerns about how your birds are reacting to being kept in.