



South Swindon Parish Council

Guidelines for Keeping Hens on Your Plot

Background Information

Under the 1950 Allotment Act, the keeping of hens is permitted on allotments and viewed as an allotment holder's right, so long as they are for the tenant's own use and not for business or profit. Allotment tenants are required to register the hens with the Great Britain Poultry Register, to help the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency get in touch in the event of any disease outbreaks, to receive any disease alerts and guidance.

Contact details of the owner of the hens must be supplied and kept up-to-date. The contact details must also be displayed on the coop used to house the hens. When referring to hens, the law means the female of the species and excludes cockerels. Often cockerels are covered by local by-laws, excluding them from allotments because of the noise they make.

Animal Welfare

If any animal on an allotment is deemed a nuisance, health hazard or their well-being is affected then they can be removed. All livestock is subject to strict welfare codes enforced by the RSPCA and DEFRA and covered by the Animal Welfare Act. The Act states that all animals have basic needs that must be fulfilled by their owner or keeper. Failure to register hens and meet the minimum standards in this guide may result in termination of the Tenancy. It is a requirement that all hens are vaccinated prior to arrival or at 6 weeks old.

A tenant may be subject to inspection by the South Swindon Parish Councils Environmental Health Officer and any Animal Welfare Officer employed by any other recognised organisation.

We would recommend any tenant who is considering keeping hens, keeps no more than is needed for their own personal use. As a guide, a point-of-lay hen might lay up to five eggs in any week, so the average family would require no more than 2 or 3 hens and no more than 5 at any one time to be kept on the allotment plot.

Water

Hens must always have access to clean and fresh water. In cold weather, care should be taken to prevent drinking water from icing-up. Should this occur, the ice should be broken manually; chemicals that prevent the build-up of ice or break it up once formed should never be used. Drinkers should be cleaned regularly, and water should not be allowed to remain in a contaminated or stale condition. Drinkers that prevent young chicks climbing in and drowning should be used. As the birds become older and require more water, alternative drinkers can be introduced, and those drinkers used previously should be removed gradually over a number

of days. If new hens are introduced to the allotment, they must be provided with facilities to which they are already accustomed, as hens do not like to drink from unfamiliar drinkers.

The Tenant must make their own provision for water between October and March when the water on the site is turned off.

Food

Hens will spend much of their day scratching and foraging for small seeds, roots and insects. However, they will need additional food, which is suitable for their age and breed, to provide a balanced diet. If feed is provided outside, it should be sheltered to keep it clean and dry. Feed dispensers should be cleaned regularly, and precautions taken to prevent infestation and contamination of the feed. Avoid attracting rodents and wild birds by, for example, cleaning up any spilt feed. Hens must also always have access to insoluble grit (e.g. hard flint grit) to aid digestion. If the birds are kept on a grassed area, the grass should not be allowed to become too long, as, if eaten, long strands can become impacted in the crop, making it difficult for the birds to digest food.

Laying hens

As hens mature they will begin to lay eggs and a layers' mash or pellet feed should be provided to ensure a balanced diet. Calcium supplements, such as oyster shell, can also be included in the diet. Hens will naturally prefer to find a quiet, secluded place to lay their eggs. Therefore, hens should be provided with individual, enclosed nest boxes. The boxes should be draught-free and lined with plenty of clean, dry and comfortable nesting material, such as straw or wood shavings.

Housing

In addition to effective containment, housing is also key in ensuring the welfare of hens and should allow expression of natural behaviours.

Hens should be provided with warm, dry and well-ventilated housing, 15 inches above the ground that provides a minimum size of 2sq feet (0.2m²) per hen is required. The maximum permitted size is 6feet x 8feet and only one coop is permitted on the plot. The hen-house must be fully enclosed to protect from predators.

Adequate ventilation is very important, and while it is important to keep the birds warm, there must also be good air circulation inside the housing. The hen-house should provide warmth during the colder months and shade during the summer. The hen-house must be draft free.

The floor should be covered with a suitable substrate, such as wood shavings or straw, which must be kept dry and friable and therefore topped-up or replaced when necessary. Hens like to dustbathe and preen their feathers, therefore a suitable material, such as wood shavings, should also be supplied for this activity. Feed and water facilities should be provided within the house.

Owners must ensure that there is plenty of space for the birds to move around easily and perform their natural behaviours within the house, this will depend on the size and number of hens and the layout of facilities. It is important not to overstock birds as doing so may increase aggression and the potential for conflict.

Hens will naturally seek a raised position to roost at dusk, which is an anti-predator behaviour, and should therefore be provided with perching facilities. Perches should be wooden and approximately 3-5cm in width with rounded edges, to enable the birds to grip them properly. They should provide enough perching space for all the hens to roost at the same time.

However, there must be enough space either side of the perch for hens to get up and down from them without injuring themselves. As a guide, hens may require about 15cm of perching space each, but this will depend on the size of the birds. The height of the perches will have to be adjusted according to the age, size and breed of birds being kept.

In smaller houses, a greater proportion of birds tend to go out onto the range area during the day, and only use the housing at night. The entrance to the housing should be wide enough to allow hens to pass through without difficulty and high enough so that they do not have to crouch down.

The henhouse and run should be cleaned out a minimum of once a week and disinfected to ensure that there are no harmful parasites that could compromise the birds' health.

Pasture

The outdoor area will require careful management and should be given periods of rest, to allow the ground and grass to recover. It is important that the area is sufficiently large enough to be divided (unless there are alternative grass areas nearby to use) in order to allow the hens to roam on good pasture every day while other parts are allowed to recover. Again, the birds should have plenty of space to move around easily and perform their natural behaviours, this will depend on the size and number of hens and the layout of facilities. The minimum size of the fully enclosed caged run requires a minimum size of 4sq feet (0.4m²) per hen. The total area of the henhouse and run should not exceed more than 10% of the total plot area, the maximum permitted size is 10ft x 12ft, both should be regularly maintained to a good, tidy standard and free from obvious faults that may cause injury. To minimise potential nuisance to neighbours the henhouse and run should be sited a minimum of 3 metres (9ft 10in) from adjacent boundaries abutting residential properties.

Overhead cover should be provided on the range area such as small trees, shrubs and purpose-built shelters, to provide the hens with protection from the sun, bad weather and other animals. It will also help to encourage birds to utilise the full outside area. They should also have access to dry soil where they can dustbathe and forage. Where outside conditions and/or the vegetation is poor or limited, consideration should be given to providing alternative areas for enrichment. The provision of straw will keep birds occupied and encourage them to carry out food searching behaviours. Raised perches on the range area should be considered, as they provide a way for individuals to escape from one another, and birds often use them as a place to preen during the day. Hens must be locked up and dusk each evening and must not be released before 7a.m.

Fencing

Fences should be well maintained and provide appropriate protection against predators and the design should ensure that the birds cannot escape or become trapped or injured.

Company

We recommend that people keep at least two hens which get on well together.

Introducing new stock to an existing flock

Mixing of hens that are unfamiliar with each other should be done carefully. Avoid mixing breeds with substantially different body weights or individuals from the same breed of markedly different sizes as this may result in increased conflict and bullying of smaller birds.

Health

Signs of poor health may include a hunched posture, erect feathers and a reluctance to move. Birds may also be found hiding, for example in corners or amongst housing equipment, and may tuck their head under their wing. Healthy birds appear alert and interested in their environment and look 'bright eyed' and well hydrated.

Hens can be susceptible to lice and red mites. Lice, which are 2-3mm in size, can be found all over the body with their eggs being deposited around the shaft of the feather. Red mites are smaller and are more likely to be found on the fixtures within the shed. However, where a more serious infestation exists, they may be seen on birds at the base of the feathers, particularly under the wing.

Worming

Poultry need regular worming twice a year particularly if they are kept on the same ground for a prolonged period of more than a month.

Feather pecking

Feather pecking is where hens peck and pull at the feathers of other hens, sometimes leading to more serious injuries and even cannibalism. It can affect hens in any system, including commercial farming systems and hens kept as pets. Healthy hens, with plenty of space, dust-bathing facilities and opportunity to scratch and forage are less at risk, but outbreaks can suddenly occur.

Nuisance to Neighbours

Hens will attract the attention of rats, who are opportunist feeders, do not over feed the hens and ensure that the food is stored in secure containers. Don't put food out at dusk when the hens are getting ready to roost, consider the treadle-based feeder that will release pellets or grain when exposed to the weight of the chicken.

The Tenant will be liable for the extermination and removal of rodents and any cost incurred if it is proved that the basics to the keeping of hens has not been adhered to.

Further Information

The information on this sheet is by no means exhaustive. If you are new to keeping chickens it would be well worth looking for books on the subject and at the internet for more detailed information. If other people on site already have chickens it is worth talking to them to get their experiences as this may also help you.

Any tenant that currently keeps hens on the plot shall continue to have permission from the Parish Council, however, they must abide by the current rules of this guideline. Tenants that wish to keep new hens will require written permission from the Parish Council and complete both the 'Allotment Hen Agreement' and the 'Temporary Structure/Shed Application Form' filled out, available from our website <https://www.southwindon-pc.gov.uk/>