

A BRITISH PANDEMIC

THE CRUELTY AND DANGER OF SUPERMARKET CHICKEN



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ABOUT OPEN CAGES

Established in the UK in 2018 as a member of Anima International, Open Cages is an animal protection organisation working towards a future free from animal suffering. Open Cages is a registered charity with charity number 1190484. Our work includes:

Undercover Investigations

Publishing evidence of animal cruelty in the UK farming industries.

Awareness

Educating the public about animal cruelty through campaigns and public engagement, in collaboration with scientists, academics and specialists.

Advocacy

Working with law and corporate policy makers to protect farmed animals from harm.

Movement Building

Empowering and uniting animal advocates to develop the skills, knowledge and opportunities to create positive change for animals.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

[See the full report for citations]

This report examines the UK's ever increasing appetite for cheap chicken, its link with deadly disease, and the role that supermarkets play in this cruel and dangerous system.

COVID-19

COVID-19 has shaken the world. With the major loss of life, profound upheavals to everyday life of lockdown and a recession creeping ever closer, the UK has been given a bitter taste of how destructive a pandemic can be.

In the midst of this pandemic, the coronavirus has ignited a long-overdue conversation from scientists across the globe. The message is that something far more deadly lies dormant right in our own backyard: intensive farming.

Intensive chicken farming: a cycle of suffering

The vast majority of meat that people in the UK eat comes from intensive farms here in the UK. 70% of the UK's farmed animals are reared in these types of facilities. Additionally, most intensive farms in the UK are poultry farms. They make up 86% of the total numbers of permit-holding farms.

With nearly one billion broiler (meat) chickens reared in the UK annually their numbers make up most of the UK's farmed land animals. The staggering number of chickens we rear reflects our nation's ever increasing appetite for cheap chicken, with chicken producers, retailers and food businesses choosing intensive practices to keep prices as competitive as possible.

The vast majority of broiler chickens are subjected to practices that maximise productivity at the cost of the animals' welfare, and as will be shown, human health.

- **Rapid growth**

Intensively farmed broiler chickens are selectively bred to gain weight rapidly

- In the past 50 years, broiler growth rates have increased by over 300% (from 25g per day to 100g per day) – resulting in modern meat chickens being slaughtered at only 5-6 weeks old.
- Rapid growth rates can significantly contribute to the development of severe welfare problems, such as chronic leg disorders, ascites and sudden death syndrome.
- If numbers from a University of Bristol study of broiler welfare are applied to the UK broiler chicken industry as a whole, nearly 300 million chickens may be suffering from poor locomotion every year - and 30 million would be almost unable to walk.

- **Filthy, overcrowded conditions**

- On these intensive chicken farms, the animals are kept inside in overcrowded conditions – with less than an A4 sheet of paper in space per animal on average in their last weeks of life.
- The animals literally live on their own waste, and the waste of others, often resulting in chemical burns to the animals' skin.
- Subsequently, they are unable to exhibit many basic natural behaviours. These factors collectively result in high levels of stress for social animals like chickens.

- **Death is expected**

Mortality on these farms is high: many of the chickens die early or are culled by the farm workers.

- Applying broiler mortality rates published by Red Tractor – a standard British farming certification scheme – to the whole UK industry, around 40 million birds will die per year before being sent to slaughter.
- Health issues and death are so common, that the UK Government says farm workers should perform multiple daily checks where they ‘remove dead birds’, and ‘humanely’ kill those who are sick, injured or weak - usually resulting in the breaking of their necks.

The final weeks/days of a typical meat chicken can involve severe levels of suffering. The evidence – both from research and undercover footage – is clear.

Fast-growing breeds and high stocking densities are practices which are the two main factors affecting broiler chicken welfare as a whole. And consequently, these practices significantly contribute to providing an ideal environment for diseases to emerge and spread.

Breeding grounds for disease

The conditions of intensive chicken farms are uniquely placed to encourage the emergence and spread of human-threatening disease.

- The animals are exposed to high levels of stress throughout their lives, causing a weakened immune system, otherwise known as immunosuppression.
- Because they gain weight so rapidly, the growth of bones and internal organs cannot keep pace, so heart failure and respiratory insufficiency regularly occur.
- The intense proximity of the animals permits rapid transfer of diseases. This is exacerbated by the fact that these chickens spend a lot of their lives sitting in their own excrement since there is not enough space for them to avoid it.
- The vast amount of biological matter that is produced by intensive farming includes excrement, food, animal bodies and bodily fluids, and there is the potential for human contact with these throughout the animals’ lives, as well as during transport and slaughter.
- The procedures in place to tackle this issue – biosecurity, antibiotics, mass culling – do not address the root causes of these diseases. The fundamental causes are the intensive practices like breeding for rapid growth and high stocking densities.

Real world precedent shows that this is far from a paranoid threat. Intensive conditions of huge numbers of chickens on intensive farms have provided a fertile ground for the development of an ever-increasing supply of new pathogens.

Bird flu was once a very rare disease among chickens, but today there are outbreaks occurring every year. Transmission of these diseases from chickens to humans was almost nonexistent 25 years ago; now serious outbreaks are occurring regularly – more in the past 15 years than in the entire 20th century.

The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 151,700 - 575,400 people worldwide died from 2009 Swine Flu (H1N1) virus infection during the first year the virus circulated⁷³ – a virus traced back to an intensive pig farm. If these diseases develop even higher pathogenicity, like the 2002-3 SARS epidemic which had around 10% case mortality rate, the consequences could be even more devastating. The H5N1 bird flu strain, although possessing low transmissibility, caused the deaths of more than half the people infected with it.

A post-antibiotic era

We are losing precious antibiotics: over 70% of antibiotics sold around the world are used on animals in intensive farming systems. However, these antibiotics become ineffective if bacteria become resistant. According to the WHO, “the world is heading towards a post-antibiotic era in which common infections could once again kill”.

In 2014, the UK Government commissioned a major review on antimicrobial resistance to analyse existing evidence on the problem of rising drug resistance. Of the 139 academic studies the review found, the overwhelm-



ing majority reported evidence of a link between antibiotic consumption in animals and resistance in humans.

A global health threat

A bird flu pandemic on the scale of Covid-19 would be devastating, not only in taking lives but also in disrupting the economy to a life-altering degree. For perspective, the deadliest pandemic in human history - the 1918 Spanish flu - caused the deaths of around 50 million people of the estimated 500 million who got infected, with an estimated mortality rate of only 2.5% – as many more are likely to have died from economic harms rather than just from the disease itself.

Alarmingly, it has even been suggested that if the H7N9 virus achieves sustained human-to-human transmission, it **'could well be worse, perhaps far worse than the Great Pandemic of 1918.'**

How many more deadly pandemics will it take before we finally address the cruelty and danger of intensive farming? And more imminently, who is responsible for allowing this system to continue as it is?

The inaction of supermarkets & Government

Insufficient laws

The minimal legal standards for the conditions meat chickens are kept in, set by the UK Government, are grossly insufficient.

- By law, chickens raised for meat can be kept at very high stocking densities. These conditions are so crowded, that in the last weeks of their lives an individual chicken will have, on average, less space than occupied by an A4 sheet of paper.
- There is no law that sets a maximum on how fast chickens can be bred to grow. Given the damaging consequences of this method of chicken farming, both for animals and humans, one would expect the UK Government to be setting much stricter laws to stem the irresponsible engineering of broiler breeds. At the time of writing, this issue appears to be non-existent on the Government's agenda.
- Broadly, the widespread suffering of broiler chickens has been largely tolerated for decades. Their poor quality of life should be unacceptable due to the gross amount of unnecessary suffering - but the practices continue and the industry continues to grow.

However, these legal standards are set as a bare minimum. And although the government could and should do more, the responsibility does not stop there. Companies must be held accountable for the consequences of their supply chain.

Supermarkets could change the industry overnight, but refuse

As the market leaders in chicken sales with the most power to move the industry, most UK supermarkets have failed to introduce higher welfare chicken policies to tackle these issues – falling far behind retail sectors in neighbouring European countries like France and Denmark.

The vast majority of supermarket chicken is still intensively farmed, because it's a cheap method of chicken production.

The producers who rear the chickens are effectively providing whatever the companies ask for. Far from having their hands tied, supermarkets have the freedom and power to influence the industry through welfare commitments, where a company publicly commits to meeting better conditions by a certain year. Supermarkets have demonstrated this power with the cage-free egg movement of the last decade, practically condemning caged-egg farming to the history books – acting much faster than the UK Government on the issue.

And what about broiler chickens? In moving away from intensive chicken farming, a realistic solution exists in the Better Chicken Commitment (BCC). The BCC is an international initiative – most notably adopted in the UK by companies like KFC, Waitrose, Nando's and Marks & Spencer – which requires a company to commit 100% of their chicken to meet certain higher welfare requirements by 2026, such as slower growing animals and less crowded conditions.

Unfortunately, as of September 2020: **Tesco, Aldi, Lidl GB, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Asda, Iceland, Ocado and Co-op** have all failed to sign up.

With this report we aim to highlight the very real danger laying dormant in the chicken industry, and make realistic recommendations for how to tackle it. Both to give broiler chickens a chance at living a life worth living, and to protect humanity from suffering a pandemic that would make COVID-19 look mild in comparison.

Our recommendations to tackle this issue:

Supermarkets should:

- Publicly commit to meet the requirements of the Better Chicken Commitment by 2026 or earlier
- Reduce or stop all marketing of intensively farmed chicken
- Implement a long term plan to move to 100% organic and pasture-raised chicken
- Implement a long term plan to increase the availability of plant-based food, and decrease the amount of animal products on shelves

Government should:

- Ban the use of broiler breeds that do not meet the RSPCA Broiler Breed Welfare Assessment Protocol, and set a legal maximum on breed daily growth rate in collaboration with the RSPCA
- Reduce maximum broiler stocking density to 30kg/m² or lower
- Implement a long term plan to phase out intensive chicken farming, with the goal of british chicken being 100% organic and pasture-raised

Consumers should:

- Eliminate intensively farmed animal products from their diets
- Minimise consumption of animal products in general, choosing plant based food instead



2. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19: a wake up call

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity has begun a new era of respect for the danger of deadly disease. At the time of writing, tens of thousands of people in the UK have lost their lives¹ to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus - thought to have transferred from animals to humans on a wet market in Wuhan, China². This, along with the national shock of a lockdown, has forced the often ignored danger of a pandemic to become very real in the minds of the global population.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) observes that “3 in every 4 new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals”.³ Calls for the closure of all live animal markets are rightly justified, for the sake of animal and human wellbeing. However, this report will show that there is a far more serious outbreak lurking in the shadows: a pandemic from intensive farming. Unknown to many, the cruel conditions that animals are kept in on intensive farms not only cause daily suffering to the animals, but are also shaping up to be one of the biggest threats to humans as a species.

Poultry is the UK’s most consumed group of land animals by kilograms per capita.⁴ And for the last decade, the United Kingdom’s grocery landscape has been dominated by the ‘big four’ supermarket chains: Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury’s and Morrisons⁵. Lastly, most intensive farms in the UK are poultry farms. They make up 86% of the total numbers of permit-holding farms.⁶ Therefore, this report will explore the role supermarkets play in one of the most urgent threats to public health: cheap chicken sourced from intensive farms and animal-borne disease.

“If you want to create catastrophic pandemics, then build factory farms” - Dr Michael Greger, author of New York Times best-seller *How to Survive a Pandemic*.







3. CHICKEN CONSUMPTION & SUPERMARKETS

The vast majority of meat that people in the UK eat comes from intensive farms right here in the UK⁷. This is a fact worth repeating: the vast majority of meat that we eat comes from 'US style' mega farms, where the traditional farmyard scene is long gone in favour of what is effectively an industrial mass production process - more akin to a factory. An estimated 70% of the UK's farmed animals are reared in these types of facilities⁸.

With nearly one billion chickens raised for meat in the UK annually, their numbers make up most of the UK's farmed land animals.⁹ Due to their vast numbers, we will focus this report on chicken - however, other intensive farming systems like pig farming are subject to similar issues in terms of animal suffering and danger to human health (e.g. Swine Flu).

The staggering number of chickens we rear reflects our nation's ever increasing appetite for cheap chicken, with chicken producers and supermarkets choosing intensive practices to keep prices as competitive as possible. To illustrate, two conventional chicken breasts from Tesco cost around £1.80¹⁰. Unfortunately, as we shall see, both humans and animals pay the price for this apparent cheapness.



4. CHICKEN & INTENSIVE FARMING

British chicken farming

Large companies like Tesco buy their chicken from a variety of suppliers¹¹. The 'big 3' UK chicken suppliers are 2 Sisters Food Group, Moy Park and Avara (a merger of Cargill and Faccenda)⁶ – companies that most consumers probably haven't heard of. Large producers like these also slaughter and process the chickens themselves at slaughterhouses.

The producers rear chicken at different welfare levels according to demand from companies. This may be on conventional intensive indoor farms, higher welfare indoor farms, or free range systems, to name a few. As stated previously, the vast majority are conventional intensive farms.

Since welfare standards are set by companies purchasing the chicken, they can require significantly improved conditions, or demand smaller improvements like requiring windows for natural daylight. However, most of the major supermarkets in the UK have not made significant improvements. Rather, they have chosen to support the barest minimum standards. The information below represents the majority of chicken production for the UK's leading supermarkets.



What happens on a British intensive chicken farm?

On a typical UK chicken farm, tens of thousands of broiler (meat) chicks will be confined to a totally indoor environment for the entirety of their lives. They will have five to six weeks to go from chick to 'full size' - meaning they are heavy enough for slaughter¹². A single barn on the site is often populated by around 25,000-50,000 animals at any one time.¹³ Some of these barns have windows for natural daylight, and some may have minimal 'enrichment' like hay bails.¹⁴

The animals are kept in near constant lighting which reduces activity and rest, and are usually fed and provided water automatically, with high protein feeding systems designed to encourage rapid growth.¹⁵

Living on excrement

The chickens are reared on a littered floor (often composed of straw, wood shavings, peat, or paper) intended to absorb the chickens' manure.¹⁶ However, despite the littered floor, the urine and faeces they drop is not removed until after slaughter¹⁷— meaning that the animals often live on the combined waste of the thousands of other animals - not to mention their own. The brown appearance of the farm floors may be assumed to be soil, but the colour is actually a result of the animals' waste mixed with the litter. It is common to see chickens in these facilities with painful rashes - effectively chemical burns - on their skin, as a result of the ammonia in their urine¹⁴.



Rapid growth, weak bodies

Broiler chickens have been subjected to intense genetic selection. In the past 50 years, broiler growth rates have increased by over 300% (from 25g per day to 100g per day)¹⁸. Getting a chicken to slaughter weight in under six weeks requires selective breeding. It is only possible because conventional chickens have been bred to grow at an alarming speed. The modern broiler chicken breeds can reach an average slaughter weight of 2.2kg in just 37 days¹⁹). This practice increases productivity in the time needed to get chickens to slaughter weight, and increases the size of the chickens' breast muscles.

The resultant chickens have been termed '*FrankenChickens*', because the animals have been essentially *engineered* to yield as much meat as possible, causing a host of health issues. These rapidly growing *FrankenChickens* are used all over the world.¹⁸ To imagine such a growth rate: if a human grew this fast, a five year old child would weigh approximately 140kg.

Rapid growth rates (e.g. 57g per bird per day) can significantly contribute to the development of severe welfare problems, such as chronic leg disorders,^{20 21 22} ascites²⁰ and sudden death syndrome.^{23 24 25} Research has shown that by the time chickens are ready for slaughter many may show abnormalities in the way they walk,²⁶ with one bird in four having a leg problem severe enough to affect its welfare and ability to move around.²⁶ As lame birds are less active,^{27 28} and spend more time in contact with the litter, they are more likely to also suffer from hock and foot pad burns.²⁹

The weight of scientific opinion arguing against these practices is significant. Fifty one animal welfare experts have signed an open letter to the CEO of Tesco, criticising their intensive chicken rearing practices as '*painful*' and how they '*do not achieve reasonable and practical standards of health and welfare for broiler chickens.*'



The list includes practicing vets, broiler welfare researchers and animal welfare specialists, such as: Andrew Knight, who is a Veterinary Professor of Animal Welfare and Ethics at the University of Winchester, and Founding Director of the University's Centre for Animal Welfare, former UK Government deputy chief veterinary officer Dr Alick Simmons, Senior Lecturer of the Institute of Biodiversity Animal Health & Comparative Medicine at The University of Glasgow Dr Dorothy McKeegan – who amongst other accomplishments is a member of the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) – and the esteemed John Webster who first proposed, and later developed, the concept of the 'Five Freedoms.'

“A significant proportion of broilers reared in intensive conditions routinely suffer from poor leg health, painful lameness, cardiovascular disease and premature death”, write the signatories. “These issues are primarily attributed to the use of fast growing strains, high stocking densities and other management factors”.

Crucially, these issues are not novel to intensive chicken farming. In fact, the health issues this fast growth causes are so common that the UK Government frequently refers to them in their code of practice for meat chickens.³⁰ However, rather than focusing on how these health issues could be eliminated, the authorities include strategies of reducing them in their codes or practices.³⁰ This approach shows that industry and government accept these issues as part of chicken farming.

How often do these fast growing chickens develop health issues? A study from the University of Bristol revealed alarming suggestions:

“We assessed the walking ability of 51,000 birds, representing 4.8 million birds within 176 flocks. We also obtained information on approximately 150 different management factors associated with each flock. At a mean age of 40 days, over 27.6% of birds in our study showed poor locomotion and 3.3% were almost unable to walk.”¹⁸

If these numbers are applied to the UK broiler chicken industry as a whole, nearly 300 million chickens may be suffering from poor locomotion every year - and 30 million would be almost unable to walk. When suffering some form of lameness, on top of the pain and stress the animals would be experiencing, it can result in the animals often being unable to stand up on the faeces covered floor or move away from their flockmates. The authors of the study addressed the questions of the key causes of these health issues, whether better stockmanship and welfare measurements would tackle this:

“The high prevalence of poor locomotion occurred despite culling policies designed to remove severely lame birds from flocks. We show that the primary risk factors associated with impaired locomotion and poor leg health are those specifically associated with rate of growth.”¹⁸

According to Professor Knight, the final days of a typical meat chicken can involve severe levels of suffering.³¹



Death is expected

As one would expect, the mortality rate is high on a typical chicken intensive farm. In fact the UK Government says farm workers should perform multiple daily checks where they ‘remove dead birds’, and ‘humanely’ kill those who are sick³⁰, injured or weak - usually resulting in the breaking of their necks. If one billion broiler chickens are killed annually for food in the UK, assuming a broiler mortality rate of 4% (the apparent average for standard certification scheme Red Tractor³²), this means that around 40 million birds will die per year before being sent to slaughter - carcasses that must be disposed of. Caring for sick chickens is also recommended as a strategy by the government, but it does not appear to generally be implemented, due to the low monetary value each animal represents - and this mass culling is consistently documented by surveillance on intensive chicken farms. A 2019 undercover investigation by Animal Equality UK found that on a single broiler farm linked with Tesco, over 500 young chicks died or were culled in 24 hours in a single barn.³³



Photo: Animal Equality International

Killing a sick or struggling animal on a farm is unfortunately not a novel event, however the sheer level of mortality and health issues on intensive chicken farms is staggering. Alarmingly, *there does not appear to be a UK law which stops chicken producers from breeding chickens that grow even faster than they currently do* - which would likely lead to even more suffering, infection and death.

Overcrowding

In the last weeks of their lives when they are larger, an individual chicken will have access to a space smaller than an A4 sheet of paper - barely allowing them room to spread their wings. This overcrowding is known to be highly stressful for social animals like chickens, who cannot escape interacting with hundreds of other chickens. The crowded conditions restrict the animals' abilities to exhibit natural behaviours³⁴ like stretching, walking and exercising - exacerbating the levels of lameness³⁵. The reduced activity and build up of faeces also increases the prevalence of the painful ammonia burns²⁵. And the vast numbers increase the build up of fecal matter in the air.

The economic benefit of such overcrowded flocks is that producers can use as little land as possible to process more animals at once. As a result, they are able to produce chicken as cheaply as possible.





Industry claims

There has been much debate surrounding the claims of animal advocacy organisations that the suffering broiler chickens face on intensive farms is the norm. The broiler chicken industry, and supermarkets themselves, often claim that any evidence of suffering represents an anomaly or poor stockmanship, rather than problems inherent to these farming systems. This is evidenced by the statements from major British supermarkets, following the publishing of undercover footage of their chicken supply chains:

Commenting in an article from *The Independent* 'Suffering of chickens at farms supplying major supermarkets revealed in undercover footage' 10 Aug. 2019



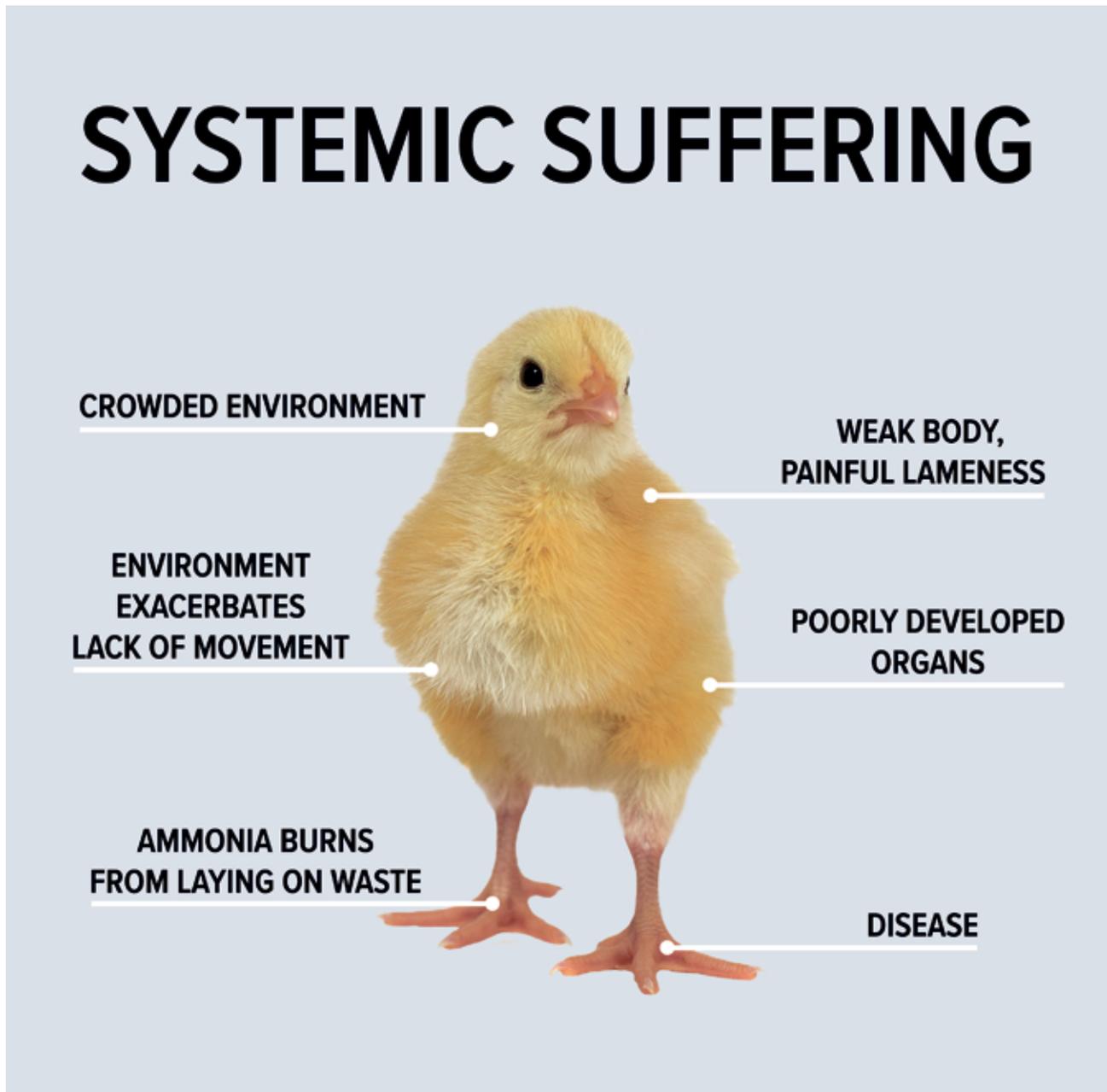
*“Any claims that our standards have not been met are always fully investigated and we are currently working with Moy Park to review this situation”
- a Tesco spokesperson*

“The way we work with our farmers is different, and has been for years. We’ve created a cycle of measuring, managing and continuously improving the health and welfare of our animals, and we believe the results speak for themselves” - a Sainsbury’s spokesperson

*“We have strict welfare standards in place that we expect all of our suppliers to uphold and we are currently investigating these allegations”
- an ALDI spokesperson*

Quality stockmanship is important to animal welfare. Farms differ in how they deal with health problems experienced by the animals in their care – for example, some farms cull more sick animals than others in attempts to reduce suffering. And other factors such as training, stockperson attitude, environmental enrichment, and improved cleanliness can all lead to some improved animal well-being. However, for supermarkets to claim standards have not been met is misleading. **Fast growing breeds and high stocking densities are allowed** as part of these supermarkets' policies (as these represent industry norms), and as previously shown, **these are the primary causes of the concerning animal suffering that is often caught on film.**

This is why time and time again the same scenes are exposed through undercover footage not just in the UK, but all over the world. In 2019 alone, nine separate undercover investigations into UK broiler chicken farms showed almost identical problems - investigations spanning all three of the UK's largest chicken suppliers^{31,36-38}. This, coupled with the backing of animal welfare experts and independent scientific research, suggests that the UK broiler chicken industry is filled with highly stressed and suffering animals in overcrowded conditions.



A cocktail of infection

On a typical British intensive chicken farm, tens of thousands of sick, lame and severely stressed animals are forced together side by side. They will have no choice but to live on their waste day in, day out, as many of their flock-mates struggle, slowly die, and even decompose beside them. Not only is this a cruel business; **this system is a near perfect breeding ground for disease.**



5. THE THREAT OF DISEASE ON INTENSIVE FARMS

Primed for infection

The conditions of intensive chicken farms are uniquely placed to encourage the spread of disease.

Throughout their lives, the animals are exposed to high levels of stress causing a weakened immune system, otherwise known as immunosuppression^{39,40}. Like humans, animals can succumb to disease more easily when living under prolonged stress⁴¹. That is why in periods of stress we are more prone to respiratory infections⁴². Wounds also take longer to heal⁴³.

As shown in the previous section, the levels of stress broiler chickens face can be severe: unnaturally rapid growth, an inability to remain clean, the interaction with thousands of other social animals, a constantly loud and often well-lit environment, little access to fresh air, and no means to escape this environment, are all sources of stress for the animals. And because they gain weight so rapidly, the growth of bones and internal organs cannot keep pace, so heart failure and respiratory insufficiency regularly occur.

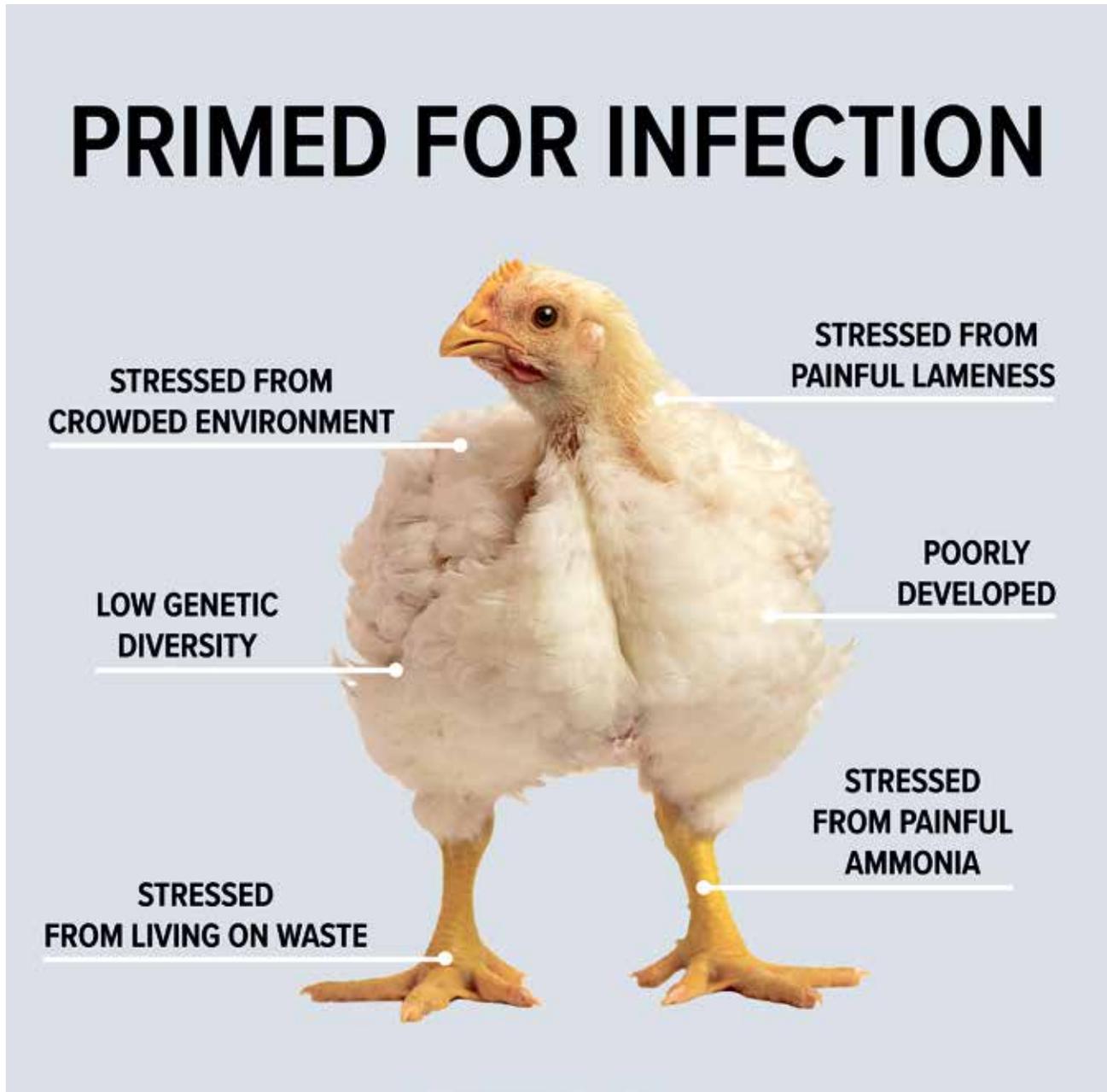
The outcome of stress on their immune system mostly weakens the defenses against external threats like viruses and bacteria^{40,44}. In the case of viruses, an impoverished immune function not only facilitates viral replication, but also increases the likelihood that vaccines used to prevent important diseases will not work properly.⁴⁴

In addition, the reliance of the industry on just a few breeds of chickens mean that the flocks tend to have low genetic diversity. A study from Purdue University examining broilers found that “commercial birds are missing more than half of the genetic diversity native to the species, possibly leaving them vulnerable to new diseases and raising questions about their long-term sustainability”⁴⁵. The study’s author Professor Bill Muir argues that “*when it comes to trying to find resistance to new disease or trying to make a better product, genetics works on diversity.*”⁴⁶



These factors combined result in immune systems that are practically unable to ward off infection when it strikes, with the infamous H5N1 bird flu as a particular deadly example. As summarised by researchers Cynthia Schuck and Wladimir J. Alonso in *Pandemics, Global Health and Consumer Choices*:

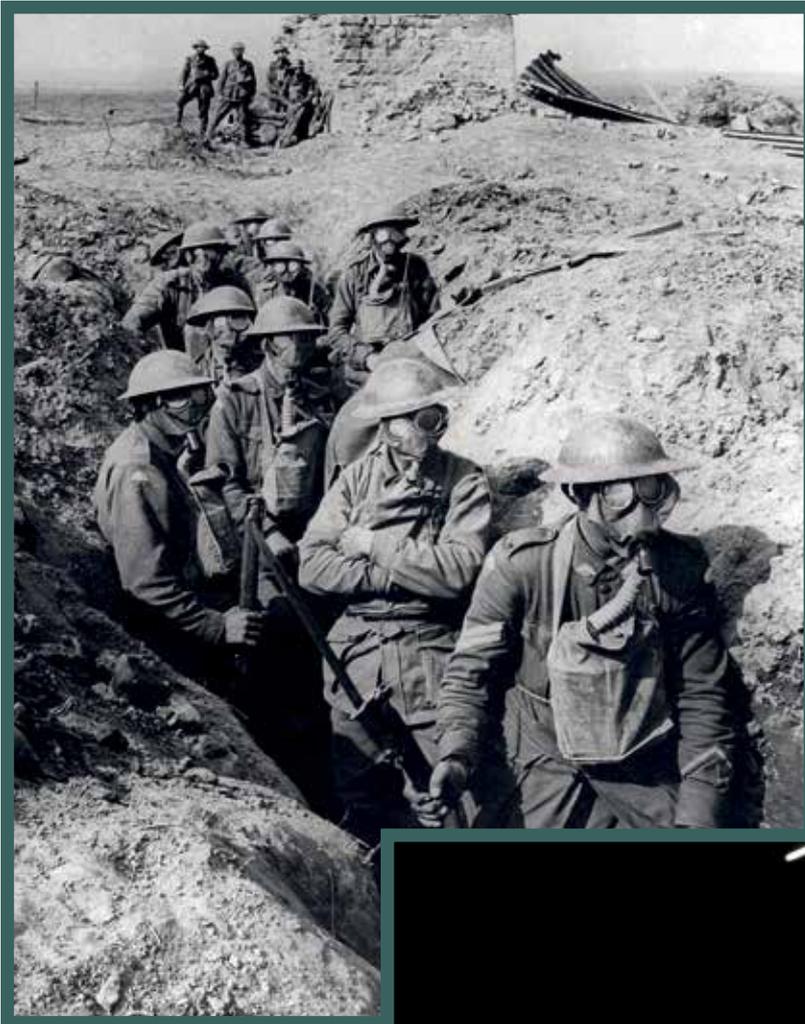
“Over-selection for productivity, poor welfare and both chronic and acute stresses have made factory farmed animals incredibly susceptible to infection.”⁴⁷



Easily spread

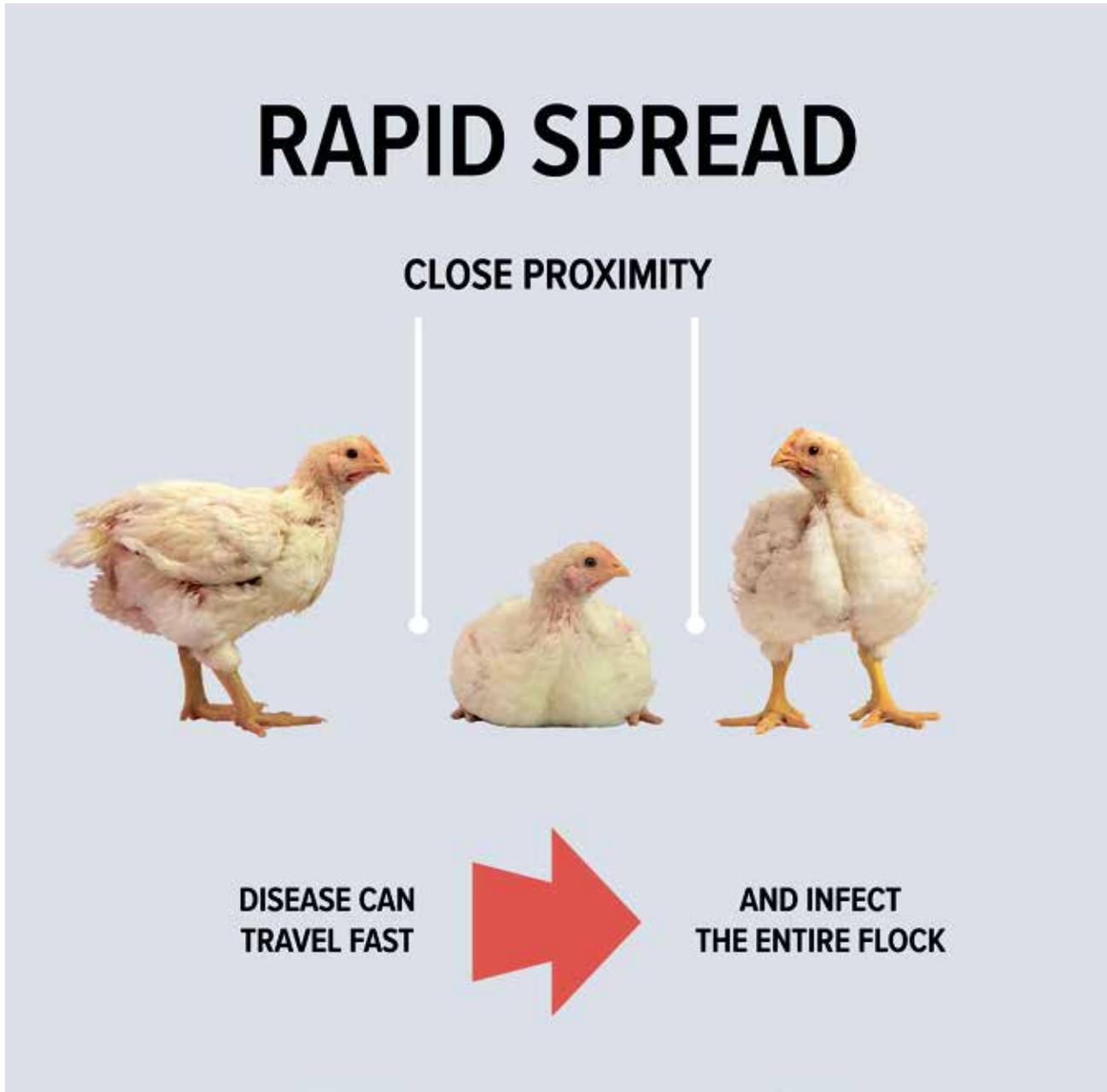
The intensive proximity of the animals also permits rapid transfer of diseases, meaning that when a disease strikes, it can rapidly infect the entire group simply because they are so close together. The opportunities for disease transfer are near constant.

This is exacerbated by the fact that these chickens spend a lot of their lives sitting in their own excrement since there is not enough space for them to avoid it. Schuck and Alonso describe this situation as eerily akin to what is said to have caused the Spanish Flu:



“Interestingly, it has been hypothesised that it was in fact the concentration of a high number of stressed and immunosuppressed soldiers of the First World War under the filthy conditions experienced in the war camps and trenches (i.e. conditions to a large extent akin to those experienced by animals raised in intensive production systems) that provided the breeding ground for the emergence of the 1918 Spanish Flu.”⁴⁸

Importantly, unlike pathogens found in wild animals, in intensive farming systems, viruses that become pathogenic to the point of quickly killing their hosts can still spread: given the high density of animals, the transmission from severely sick or dead animals to live animals is possible. In contrast, under extensive, outdoor conditions, high virulence has a cost to the virus, which may stop spreading as soon as its host dies.⁴⁹ This adaptation makes a zoonotic disease from intensively farmed animals particularly concerning. Not only are the animals susceptible, but once a highly virulent infection strikes it can strike the whole group - who are confined to the same building - rapidly.



The danger to humans

Whilst intensive farms provide the ideal conditions for disease to spread to other animals, they also present ample opportunity for diseases to infect humans.

The vast amount of biological matter that is produced by intensive farming includes excrement, food, animal bodies and bodily fluids, and there is the potential for human contact with these throughout the animals' lives, as well as during transport⁵⁰ and slaughter. A major source of contamination of meat is through the process of evisceration at the slaughter plants, through which internal organs, especially those in the abdominal cavity, are removed. It has not proved easy to ensure that fecal matter does not contaminate the animal carcass (internally or externally.)^{51,52}



Photo: Animal Equality International

There are regulations in place to direct the safe disposal of these by-products, but it is practically impossible to cover every potential instance for contamination. Whenever surveyed, flaws in biosecurity practices are found to be widespread, even in countries where compliance is expected to be higher, such as Sweden, Canada, the United States and Australia.^{53,54} Furthermore, not every farm will have adequate means of ensuring that dead carcasses are disposed of following the proper biosecurity standards - especially considering the sheer numbers involved. Alarming, in 2019 an undercover investigation published by Open Cages found that on a large UK broiler farm which supplied Tesco months before, workers were handling chickens without gloves, throwing dead chickens around the barn at other animals, checking their phones, and swinging dead chickens by their feet.³⁶ Even if this behaviour were highly novel and training were provided, with nearly one billion broiler chickens farmed every year in the UK, the scale and rate of output suggests that human contamination is improbable to avoid completely.

Moreover, these systems are particularly compromised when hit by a disease. An industry standard is to cull animals to prevent the spread.⁵⁵ However, killing such a high number of animals can easily overwhelm the systems in place for safe disposal of their remains – for example, one study found that a genome of an avian virus was present in air samples 50-110 miles from the infected farm after ‘depopulating’ the site.⁵⁶





In the case of viruses, for example, an impoverished immune function not only facilitates their replication, but also increases the likelihood that vaccines used to prevent important diseases will not work properly.⁵⁷ Similarly, addressing diseases with vaccination campaigns may increase the selection pressure to a higher pathogenicity virus since ‘escape mutants’ may convert into a highly pathogenic strain and re-infect the animals.⁵⁸

A post-antibiotic era

We are losing precious antibiotics: over 70%⁵⁹ of antibiotics sold around the world are used on animals in intensive farming systems. However, these antibiotics become ineffective if bacteria become resistant.^{60,61-63} Animal resistance to antibiotics can then transfer to humans through various routes. According to the NHS, this occurs in a few ways:

- Drug-resistant strains could be passed on through direct contact between humans and animals (particularly farmers)
- Drug-resistant strains could be passed to humans more generally when they prepare or eat the meat
- The drug-resistant strains and the antimicrobials are excreted by the animals and therefore pass into the environment⁶⁴

The public can also eat contaminated produce or consume contaminated water including recreational water.

Most notably with broiler chickens, data collected by the Dutch broiler industry demonstrates that chickens from fast-growing breed types require more than three times more antibiotics than slower growing chickens.⁶⁵

According to the WHO, “the world is heading towards a post-antibiotic era in which common infections could once again kill”.⁶¹ Interestingly, in 2014, the UK Government commissioned a major review on antimicrobial resistance to analyse existing evidence on the problem of rising drug resistance. Of the 139 academic studies the review found, the overwhelming majority reported evidence of a link between antibiotic consumption in animals and resistance in humans⁶⁶.

Getting to the root issue

Even with the most advanced surveillance measures possible, it still would not be achievable to identify all potential infections: some bird flu viruses like the H7N9 do not kill poultry and don’t always cause clear symptoms, which makes surveillance much more difficult. More importantly, **it is difficult to see how better surveillance and security will solve the root problem:** intensive farms are near perfect breeding grounds for disease because of practices like selecting for fast growth and overcrowding. This is not a surveillance problem, it is a problem of the system itself.

It is the intensive conditions that are the major culprits in the emergence and spread of disease. Studies have found that with the increase of productive performance, some physiological functions are severely limited, such as adaptability and disease resistance.⁶⁷ Dr. Christine Nicols, a leading expert on poultry research, from the University of Bristol, says:

“Highly selected strains of chickens seem to have compromised immune function, with the most productive strains showing the greatest decline in humoral immune capacity (Bridle et al. , 2006). This strongly suggests that selective breeding has reduced resistance to infectious disease (Zekarias et al. , 2002)”⁶⁸

A paper published in the journal from the British Ecological Society clearly demonstrates through a meta-analysis involving 14 studies on three different poultry lines, that selection for accelerated growth in poultry had a large and significant negative effect on immune function.⁶⁹ The researchers even argued that “This has implications for the agricultural industry, because our findings suggest that breeding animals for accelerated growth may unintentionally have resulted in poor immune function.”

A 2019 study⁷⁰ from The European Food Safety Authority found that there is conclusive evidence that an increased stocking density, larger farms and stress-inducing conditions result in increased occurrence, persistence and spread of Salmonella in laying hen flocks.

For broiler flocks, the limited evidence available shows that stress, stocking density and increasing the number of flocks per farm increases Salmonella susceptibility or infection rate.

Researchers from Purdue University and the USDA, in the United States, argue that environmental stress has been shown to be a factor that can lead to colonisation of farm animals by pathogens, increased fecal shedding and horizontal transmission, and consequently, increased contamination risk of animal products. They say that many recent studies have demonstrated that bacteria, such as Salmonella and Campylobacter, are capable of exploiting the physiology of the animals due to the stress response in the host to promote growth and pathogenicity.⁷¹

And the literature continues to mount. A 2020 editorial titled ‘What the COVID-19 pandemic is telling humanity’, published in the journal Neuroepidemiology, warns of the threats of intensive farms. Penned by David O. Wiebers, MD, Emeritus Professor of Neurology and Consultant Emeritus in Neurology and Health Sciences Research/Clinical Epidemiology at Mayo Clinic, and Valery Feigin, MD, Professor of Neurology and Epidemiology and Director of New Zealand’s National Institute for Stroke and Applied Neurosciences, the paper examines the current COVID-19 outbreak and says we should stop intensive farming for the “sake of animals, humans, and the environment.”⁷²

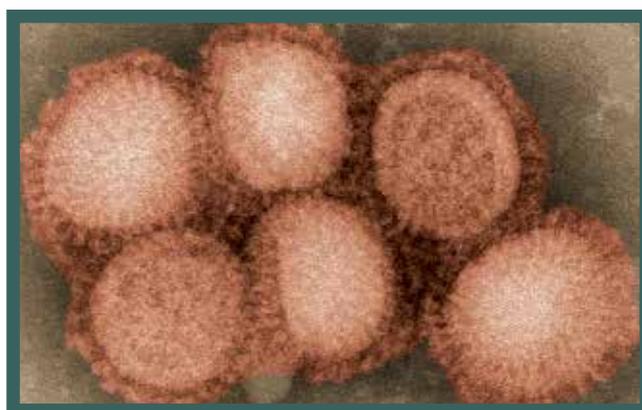
“Intensive confinement of unprecedented numbers of chickens in these facilities to lower cost has provided a fertile ground for the development of an ever-increasing supply of new pathogens. And while bird flu was once a very rare disease among chickens, today we see outbreaks occurring every year. Transmission of these diseases from chickens to humans was almost nonexistent 25 years ago; now serious outbreaks are occurring regularly – more in the past 15 years than in the entire 20th century.”⁷²

The paper also highlights that even proximity to intensive farms and applying manure from intensive farms to crop fields are both independently associated with the likelihood of humans acquiring antibiotic-resistant infections. Antibiotic resistance is a major and growing global health threat, with 700,000 deaths per year worldwide. But that’s unfortunately just one part of the puzzle.

The outbreaks have already begun

Far from being an imagined doomsday scenario, the risks posed by intensive farming already have devastating real-world precedent.

The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 151,700 - 575,400 people worldwide died from the 2009 Swine Flu (H1N1) virus infection during the first year the virus circulated⁷³ – a virus traced back to an intensive pig farm. If diseases such as this were to develop even higher pathogenicity, as was the case with the 2002-3 SARS epidemic



which had around 10% case mortality rate, the consequences could be even more devastating. The H5N1 bird flu strain, although possessing low transmissibility, caused the deaths of more than half the people infected with it.⁷⁴ This issue is particularly important in relation to chickens raised for meat in intensive systems, since it is from these animals that we have seen the highest number of conversion events from low pathogenic to highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses.⁷⁵

To make matters more tangible: by March 2020, 16 cases of bird flu had been confirmed on UK farms since Jan 01 2020⁷⁶ - although none yet were at a stage to harm humans.

How deadly could another pandemic be?

Recent attempts to curb the coronavirus have suggested how unprepared we may be to deal with a catastrophic pandemic.

Compared to other diseases such as SARS, Covid-19 has a much lower mortality rate - 3.4%. Yet, by July 2020 it had already caused the deaths of over 45,000 people in Britain and nearly 600,000 people worldwide.⁷⁷ Part of the danger of coronavirus is its transmissibility: it has an R0 rate (rate of spread) of roughly 2 to 2.5, meaning that each new person spreads the disease to about 2.2 people on average.⁷⁸

However, the virulence (morbidity and mortality) of Covid-19 is lower than numerous other potentially zoonotic diseases circulating in animal populations. What happens when the virulence is higher? According to the World Health Organisation, the H5N1 bird flu strain has a mortality rate in humans of around 60%.⁷⁹ Other figures suggest it has infected 861 people around the world and caused the deaths of 455 of them.⁷⁴ Schuck & Alonso warn:



“That’s why there are so many people worried about the pandemic potential of influenza viruses, such as bird flu, which so far has killed more than half of the people infected with it. One of the scenarios that takes the sleep of virologists and public health officials everywhere is the possibility of a combination of the genes of the H5N1 strain (or similar) with another that enables rapid and sustained human-to-human transmission.”^{47 (80-84)}



A bird flu pandemic on the scale of Covid-19 would be devastating, not only in taking lives but also in disrupting the economy to a life-altering degree. For perspective, the deadliest pandemic in human history - the 1918 Spanish flu - caused the deaths of around 50 million people of the estimated 500 million who got infected, with an estimated mortality rate of only 2.5%⁸⁵ – as many are likely to have died from economic harms rather than just from the disease itself. Alarmingly, it has even been suggested that if the H7N9 virus achieves sustained human-to-human transmission, it ‘could well be worse, perhaps far worse than the Great Pandemic of 1918.’⁷²

A serious threat to humanity is brewing on intensive farms, and very little is being done to change that.

6. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

In the introduction we quoted Dr Michael Greger:

“If you want to create catastrophic pandemics, then build factory farms”.

And this point is paramount. After learning of the clear dangers of intensive farming, it begs the question of how these systems have been allowed to operate without serious intervention. More fundamentally, why are these practices allowed in the first place? Given their continued existence, it is important to investigate who bears the responsibility.

Consumers?

Demand for meat increases year on year. The ever increasing appetite of consumers for cheap meat, particularly chicken, could be seen as one of the main drivers of the harmful practices of the broiler industry.

Reducing consumption of animal products

It is clear that animal product consumption must be reduced. Intensive farming routinely causes severe animal suffering, is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gases, and is now being linked to the risk of a catastrophic pandemic. A flexitarian or plant-based diet can be a healthy, and generally good diet for the planet – and these types of diets are as popular as ever. However, whilst cheap chicken remains an option, it is unreasonable to expect enough changes from individual consumers to sufficiently combat this global industry. Supermarkets could make strong commitments to replace certain percentages of animal products with plant based alternatives, and to take the marketing of these alternatives seriously. This is a win-win scenario since animal product free diets are as popular as ever. However, it would still be important that supermarkets guide customers to choose these safer food options, considering the implications of their production methods.

Supporting higher welfare

Aside from plant-based alternatives, meat is still the norm. In 2017 the UK was consuming 15% more meat than 1961.⁸⁶ For many meat eaters, there is often little choice but to buy cheap meat due to the vast price differences between the lower and higher welfare products. Furthermore, even when customers may be in a position to buy the more expensive option, the aggressive marketing of intensively farmed products gives little incentive.

The reality of how cheap chicken is produced appears to be deliberately hidden from customers by the corporations they look to for accurate information.

The UK's leading supermarket Tesco, for example, has been criticised⁸⁷ for their 'Willow Farm' brand of chicken. Willow Farm does not exist, and Tesco chicken aisles will often show images of free range birds rather than intensively farmed chickens: the type of farming that represent the vast majority of the chicken they sell. Shoppers therefore have little incentive to pay more for a free range chicken when cheap chicken is suggested to be responsibly sourced.

Greater transparency would be a welcomed step, however, it is improbable that a supermarket would ever give full disclosure about intensive farming due to its controversial nature. And due to the way market economies work, they will generally always need to market their cheapest options to consumers to ensure they stay competitive as a business.

Therefore, consumers need a middle ground where they can afford higher welfare animal products without a confusingly cheaper option.



The Government?

The minimal legal standards for the conditions meat chickens are kept in, set by the UK Government, are grossly insufficient. For example, chickens raised for meat can be kept at a flock density of up to 39kg/m.^{30,88} For an idea of how this looks in reality, see the accompanying photo from a British intensive chicken farm supplying Tesco which has a density of approximately 38kg/m². As previously mentioned: these conditions are so crowded, that in the last weeks of their lives an individual chicken will have, on average, less space than occupied by an A4 sheet of paper.¹³



Additionally, as noted previously, there is no law that sets a maximum on how fast chickens can be bred to grow. Given the damaging consequences of this method of chicken farming, both for animals and humans, one would expect the UK Government to be taking immediate action to phase out these intensive farming practices, setting much stricter laws. But at the time of writing, the intensive farming industries appear to be going strong, with the chicken industry growing by around 3% a year according to the National Farmers' Union.⁸⁹ Going further, with the UK Government's reluctance to ensure certain animal welfare standards are upheld in the highly contested UK/US trade deal,⁹⁰ it begs further questions about the extent to which the government is concerned about the dangers these farms present.

However, these standards are set as a bare minimum. So, although the government could do more, the responsibility does not stop there. Most importantly, companies must be held accountable for the consequences of their supply chain.

Retailers

They can improve policies overnight

Supermarkets and other retailers have leeway to set better policies for the conditions of the animals they sell. As the leading sellers of chicken, supermarkets are in the powerful position to be able to influ-

ence the animal agriculture industries. Exercising this influence is not new to supermarkets: without any legal obligation, most UK major supermarkets have committed to selling only cage-free eggs by 2025,⁹¹ demonstrating their ability to demand higher welfare standards when the law is insufficient. They can set an example.

So why haven't supermarkets committed to better conditions for chickens?



Intensive practices = lower costs

Animal agriculture is a business. 20 million broiler chickens are slaughtered every week in the UK.⁹² In 2019 the National Farmers' Union chief poultry adviser Gary Ford claimed the total farmgate value of the UK broiler industry is roughly £1.8bn.⁸⁹

The industry exists to make profit, and intensive farming practices exist primarily to increase productivity and reduce cost. In contrast, higher welfare products are more expensive: they require more land, longer animal lives, smaller flocks and so on.

Consumers are increasingly interested in safeguarding animal welfare, with a 2018 YouGov poll finding that 81% of the public believe that farm animal cages are cruel, and over two thirds (67%) feeling that this method of farming is outdated.⁹³ But the high prices of high welfare products do little to encourage that interest. According to a YouGov survey, 70% of UK adults cited cost as a reason for not buying more high-welfare food such as Freedom Food, free-range and organic.⁹⁴

Unfortunately, supermarkets seem to have a strong incentive to use cruel and dangerous practices, despite the severe loss in trust when these intensive farms are exposed. A 2019 YouGov poll found that only 19% of Britons thought that supermarkets are honest about the welfare of the animals they sell. Clearly, supermarkets need to earn back the trust of the general public and start delivering on meaningful animal well-being.



The power lies with the supermarkets, and therefore they share the responsibility

Consumers want better for animals, but they are not responsible for the way a company produces their products.

Ultimately, as we saw with the cage-free egg movement of the last decade, it is the corporate sector which has the most freedom and power to influence how the industry progresses on animal rearing practices.

Government efforts to push such standards forward lag significantly behind public opinion. For example, while the majority of people in the UK support a ban on caged egg farming and its cruelty is widely acknowledged, a ban has still not been enacted. Additionally, politicians are in the position of needing to protect both the farming communities and the wellbeing of animals - which can create a conflict of interest when production is maximised at the expense of animal wellbeing. Retailers, who are the largest and most influential players, can set their own standards that go beyond the legal minimum standards when animal cruelty concerns are raised - and the companies can still thrive.

A company should be held accountable for the sourcing of their products

The primary reason that companies should be held responsible, however, is that they simply have a responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of the animals they sell and to not to endanger public health. Unfortunately, the intensive practices they generally choose to support are cruel and dangerous. The fact that certain practices are legal did not stop supermarkets from committing to cage-free egg systems.

The cruelty has been long known

For many years there have been nationwide campaigns from animal advocacy groups such as Compassion in World Farming, RSPCA, The Humane League UK, Animal Equality UK and Open Cages - informing both customers and companies of the severe animal welfare problems created by cheap chicken and intensive farming in general. As a result, major brands such as Marks & Spencer⁹⁵ Waitrose,⁹⁶ KFC⁹⁷ and Nando's⁹⁸ have all made strong public commitments to address the issues of intensive meat chicken farming by signing The Better Chicken Commitment.

Until this point the conversation about the Better Chicken Commitment has primarily been concerned with animal well-being. However, in light of Covid-19 and the growing body of evidence linking intensive farming and disease,^{39-54,56-60,62,63-74,74-77,79-85} it is clear that supermarkets will now need to answer the question: will they address the danger their inaction poses to the UK public?





7. A REALISTIC SOLUTION

Corporate commitments: systemic industry reform

The cruelty and danger created by intensive farming systems must be addressed immediately, but it cannot be done overnight. Whilst the UK Government could and should be phasing out intensive farming, this report focuses on the particular power that supermarkets have. The most meaningful and realistic solution that could address these issues in the next decade is the adoption of meaningful corporate commitments to better chicken rearing practices.

Public animal welfare commitments allow companies to move holistically to better practices over a series of many years with the support of industry, consumers and animal advocacy organisations. Most importantly, such a policy commits a company to a specific and permanent change by a specific year, rather than to a vague ideal of selling some of their products from better systems - ie, no tangible commitment to which they can be held accountable.

Additionally, companies must commit to ending these intensive practices holistically, because whilst intensive systems remain, animal and human well-being are at risk. Changing part of the supply chain would not be enough to tackle the cruelty or danger inherent to intensive chicken rearing.

Will consumers pay for high welfare?

Consumers are often shocked to discover the truth of how intensively farmed animals live.⁹⁹ And, despite fears from companies that customers will not buy the more expensive higher welfare options there is precedent for this. The cage-free commitments have shown that mass audiences will buy higher welfare products, with companies like Morrisons switching to 100% free range eggs five years earlier than their target – and Tesco being over 80% cage-free in 2020 when their original target was 2025. Similarly, budget retailers in Denmark like ALDI and LIDL have successfully switched to slower growing breeds of chickens as of 2020.

When companies switch to higher welfare products properly – without having heavily marketed cheaper alternatives confusing the message – consumers will buy those products.



Which commitments should supermarkets be adopting?

100% pasture-raised, free range & organic chicken

From a human and non-human animal perspective, the most meaningful chicken welfare commitment a supermarket could make would be to sell only 100% pasture raised & organic chicken, giving enough time to make the transition. It is clear that this is the direction in which the whole industry should be moving to begin addressing human and animal well-being.

However, in the meantime a more realistic option exists within the Better Chicken Commitment.



The Better Chicken Commitment

The Better Chicken Commitment is an international initiative - most notably adopted in the UK by companies like KFC, Waitrose, Nando's and Marks & Spencer.¹⁰⁰ 150 companies have signed up so far including over 99% of French supermarkets,¹⁰¹ and scandinavian supermarkets like LIDL Denmark¹⁰², ALDI Denmark¹⁰³ and Rema 1000¹⁰⁴ are already implementing some of these changes - by either switching to slower growing chickens completely or implementing the Better Chicken Commitment in 2020.

The Better Chicken Commitment requires a company to commit 100% of their chicken to meet certain higher welfare requirements by 2026, such as slower growing animals and less crowded conditions.¹⁰⁵ Crucially, it takes the most intensively farmed chicken off the shelves and provides an opportunity for consumers to demonstrate their willingness to pay more for higher welfare. This gives society a win-win option which supports the long term goal of moving away from intensive farming.

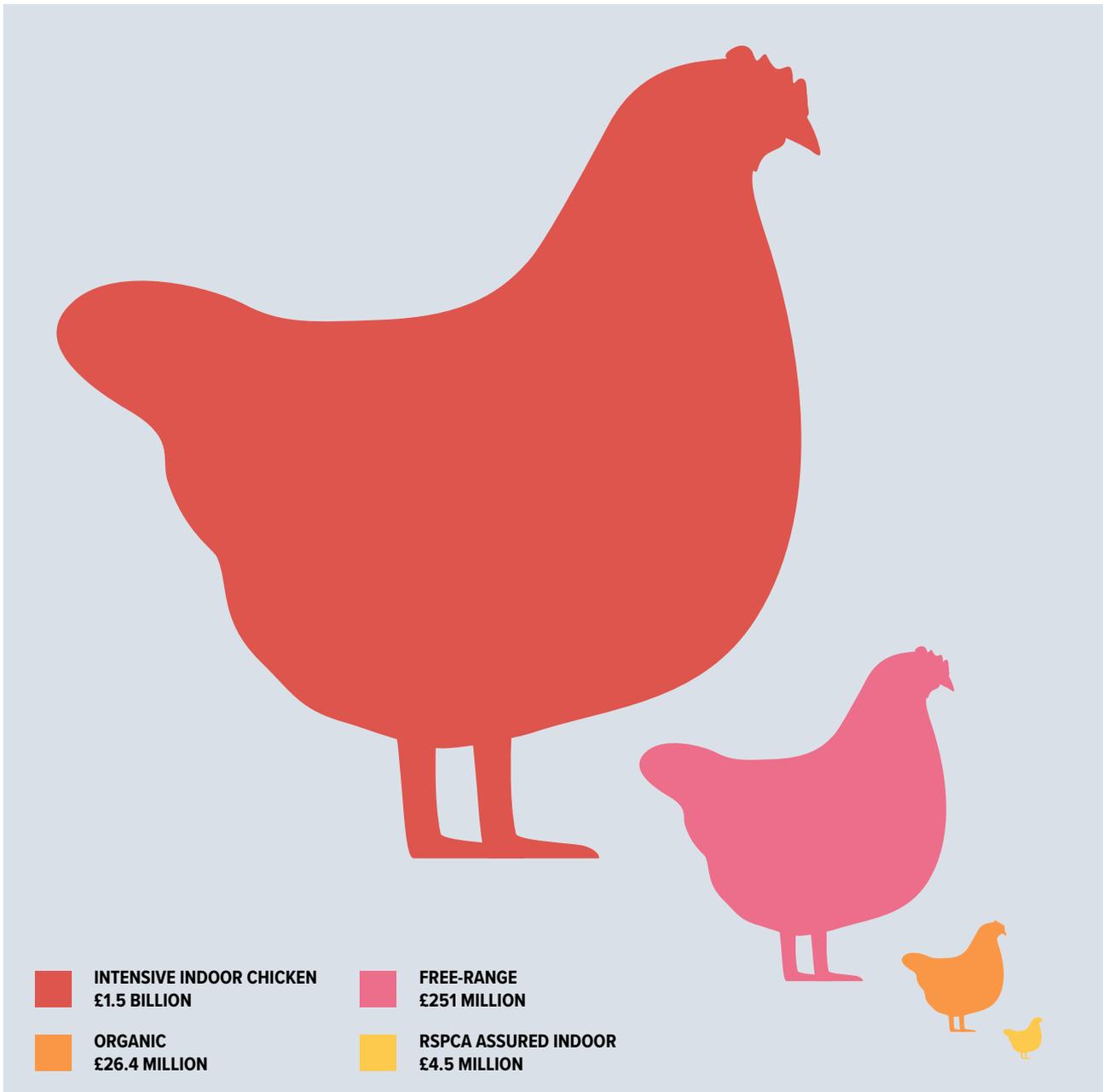
Which supermarkets have committed to Better Chicken?

These options have been well known to supermarkets and other retailers for many years. So let's take a look at the big players and see where they currently stand on broiler chicken well-being.



8. SUPERMARKET COMPARISON

Total consumer spend on fresh chicken, whole and pieces, for all supermarkets:*



* Kantar Worldpanel 23 April 2017- 22 April 2018

Note that the figures are from 2017-2018. Some supermarkets have introduced or slightly increased higher welfare indoor chicken numbers since then, however more recent total spend figures are not available.

Better Chicken Commitment

Committed

**Waitrose
Marks & Spencer**

Not committed

**Tesco
ASDA
Morrisons
Sainsbury's
Co-op
ALDI
LIDL
Ocado
Iceland**

Committed to 100% organic and pasture-raised chicken

Committed

None

Not committed

**Tesco
ASDA
Morrisons
Sainsbury's
Co-op
ALDI
LIDL
Ocado
Waitrose
Marks & Spencer
Iceland**

Waitrose and Marks and Spencer have made a meaningful commitment to address the welfare of broiler chickens by signing up to the Better Chicken Commitment, and we applauded them for this.

As can unfortunately be seen, none of the other British supermarkets have committed to date - much to the disappointment of animal welfare organisations and disillusioned customers. Therefore, the majority of the UK's broiler chicken industry continues to perpetuate the cruelty and public health hazards highlighted by this report - despite the potential for our supermarkets to take the industry forward.



9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations to tackle this issue are as following:

Supermarkets should

Publicly commit to meet the requirements of the Better Chicken Commitment by 2026 or earlier

Reduce or stop all marketing of intensively farmed chicken

Implement a long term plan to move to 100% organic and pasture-raised chicken

Implement a long term plan to increase the availability of plant-based food, and decrease the amount of animal products on shelves

Government should

Ban the use of broiler breeds that do not meet the RSPCA Broiler Breed Welfare Assessment Protocol, and set a legal maximum on breed daily growth rate in collaboration with the RSPCA

Reduce maximum broiler stocking density to 30kg/m² or lower

Implement a long term plan to phase out intensive chicken farming, with the goal of british chicken being 100% organic and pasture-raised

Consumers should

Eliminate intensively farmed animal products from their diets

Minimise consumption of animal products in general, choosing plant based food instead

10. CONCLUSION

Intensive farming is a cruel and dangerous system

COVID-19 has been a wake up call for us all, making it clear that one of humanity's most urgent threats is animal-borne disease.

The animal agriculture industries often argue that smaller farms are not automatically better, and that other factors affecting animal welfare, such as improving stockmanship, environmental enrichment, and better welfare measurements.

Whilst this is true, the point of this report has been to show that intensive animal farming practices incur severe inherent welfare threats for animals. We can no longer ignore the comprehensive and established evidence that practices like breeding for such fast growth and overcrowded flocks are root causes of the most important welfare problems for animals on intensive farms.

And in light of the COVID-19 crisis we can no longer ignore the serious risks to public health, inherent to our current food production system. Not only is there a risk of a deadly pandemic emerging from intensive farms, but we have already had a stark reminder of the potential global consequences.^{73,74} The UK Government has a responsibility to protect both animals and the British public from harm, and we ask for a long term plan to phase these systems out.

Supermarkets: will they take responsibility for their actions?

The inaction of the UK supermarket industry fills many of us with deep concern. Continuation of the status quo with respect to intensive farming systems threatens not only animal welfare, but also public health. We hope this report will highlight these threats, so that appropriate action can be taken immediately.







11. APPENDIX

After finalising this report, in September 2020 we contacted all major British supermarkets yet to commit to the Better Chicken Commitment, asking three questions:

1. Are you aware / do you acknowledge that the conditions of intensive chicken farms are ideally placed to encourage the emergence and spread of human-threatening disease?
2. What steps are you taking to address this issue in your supply chain?
3. Do you plan to sign up to the Better Chicken Commitment?

See their responses below:

Aldi

“100% of the own-brand fresh chicken sold at Aldi is British and there is very limited peer-reviewed evidence to suggest that poultry farming in the UK is linked to the spread of disease.

Aldi works closely with its chicken suppliers to ensure biosecurity and hygiene procedures are in place and that antibiotics are used responsibly. As such, we are confident that, providing it is cooked properly, all the meat we sell is entirely safe to eat.

As mentioned above, our chicken suppliers follow extensive procedures to ensure high standards of hygiene in their farms and factories. This includes:

- *Farms are regularly audited by both internal and external bodies.*
- *Strict biosecurity procedures are in place for those entering farms and store houses.*
- *Only DEFRA-approved disinfectants and cleaning agents are used.*
- *Farms and store houses are regularly cleaned, disinfected & fumigated.*
- *Comprehensive pest control protocols are in place at all farms.*
- *Dedicated poultry vets are employed to monitor the health and welfare of animals.*
- *All flocks are vaccinated against disease.*

All our suppliers' production and processing methods also comply with Red Tractor, DEFRA and Food Safety Authority requirements.

We are trialling a new 'Ashvale' chicken brand which meets the requirements set out in the European Chicken Commitment, which the Better Chicken Commitment is based on, and we are reviewing the performance and customer feedback of this range.

We work closely with our suppliers and key industry stakeholders such as the RSPCA and Red Tractor. While we have not signed up to support the ECC at this time, we will continue to work with stakeholders and our suppliers to review and improve our animal welfare standards.” 24/09/2020

Asda

“ASDA recognises our role in prevention of zoonotic disease through the food chain and the humane treatment of animals used in our products. We believe that veterinary surveillance is crucial to maintaining high standards of both animal health and welfare. Accordingly, we maintain close dialogues with our suppliers including meeting with the appropriate veterinary professionals.

We endeavour to be open and transparent with supply chain data. The main poultry zoonosis is campylobacter and we, along with other retailers, publish our surveillance data in agreement with the Food Standards Agency guidelines.

We do have Better Chicken Commitment chicken ranges in trial stores and we are evaluating the consumer response to these products.” 22/09/2020

Co-op

“Food safety and animal welfare are an absolute priority for the Co-op and all own-brand chicken is 100% British. Within our supply chains we take stringent measures to ensure that the food we produce is safe for our customers and follows Food Standard Agency (FSA) guidelines and that chickens are reared in adherence to the high standards of the Red Tractor animal welfare scheme, or for our premium range chickens, that they meet RSPCA Assured standards. We also have our own strict welfare standards in place which are audited and monitored through the Co-op’s own dedicated Chicken Farming Group.

As mentioned above all Co-op own brand chicken is 100% British and reared in line with Red Tractor or RSPCA Assured animal welfare guidelines and is produced to strict FSA guidelines.

As part of our mission to be a responsible retailer, we are constantly reviewing how we source products and in response to the Better Chicken Commitment we have established a cross-functional working group which operates across the Co-op and our partners. Our research within this forum is ongoing as we work to understand what the implications of the commitment would mean for supply chains at the Co-op and across the industry as a whole. We continue to follow the progress on this very closely and will be in touch with you at a later date to discuss in more detail.” 23/09/2020

Iceland

Did not comment

Lidl GB

“We take the matter of animal welfare extremely seriously and are committed to maintaining high welfare and traceability standards throughout our supply chain. All of our chicken complies with nationally recognised standards, including Red Tractor Assurance, RSPCA certification and Soil Association Organic, whilst our free range RSPCA Assured chicken meets the requirements of the Better Chicken Commitment.

We are also working closely with our suppliers to ensure that we are continually making progress. You may be familiar with our move last year to introduce a method of production labelling across our fresh chicken range. The transparent label outlines clearly the conditions in which the animal was reared and we are still the only supermarket in the UK to do this.

Further information on our approach to animal welfare, including our animal welfare policy, can be viewed online <https://corporate.lidl.co.uk/sustainability/animal-welfare>.” 24/09/2020

Morrisons

“We continue to work hard with our suppliers on raising chicken welfare standards in the supply chain; it’s really important to us. We have also introduced additional welfare requirements including targets for in-house hatching and additional staff training measures this year for our supplying farms.” 23/09/2020

Ocado

Did not comment

Tesco

Did not comment

Sainsbury’s

Did not comment



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