

Consultation response: laying hens

9th March 2026

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#))

8. Do you consider there to be positive welfare outcomes from banning the use of cages for laying hens (including pullets and breeder layers)? If so, what are they?

- Improved physical wellbeing
- Improved expression of natural behaviours
- Improved choice over movement and environment
- Improved mental wellbeing

Other – please specify below

Yes, to all the above.

Wildlife and Countryside Link strongly support the ban on cages for laying hens (including pullets and breeder layers) for the welfare benefits that this change will bring. The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 recognises that animals are sentient beings that can feel pain, suffering and deserve a quality of life and requires policy makers to consider animal sentience when creating or changing laws.

Even ‘enhanced’ colony cages deprive sentient animals of natural behaviours so that they are unable to forage in the dirt, dustbathe, see the light of day or fully stretch their wings. This causes extreme physical and mental suffering.¹ Laying hens are highly motivated to perform these behaviours, and the inability to do so is associated with measurable negative welfare outcomes. Moving to a well-managed cage-free system increases the freedom of movement and ability to express natural behaviours and contribute to better fitness and musculoskeletal health. The European Food Standards Agency evidence assessment supports this statement and recommends “housing all birds in non-cage systems with easily accessible, elevated platforms and provision of dry and friable litter and access to a covered veranda.”²

¹ [ciwf-position-note-on-enriched-cages-2024.pdf](#)

² EFSA <https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7789>

9. Do you consider there to be negative welfare outcomes from banning the use of cages for laying hens (including pullets and breeder layers)? If so, what are they?

- Increased risk of smothering
- Increased risk of injury
- Increased risk of sickness and disease
- Increased risk of mortality

Other

The above risks are able to be mitigated by proper design and management of non-cage systems and stockmanship to maintain higher welfare outcomes. For example, the RSPCA's welfare standards for laying hens and pullets already includes a ban on cages and a requirement for harm minimisation through these methods.³

When they are well-managed, non-cage systems deliver significant positive welfare outcomes for hens. Implementation of a cage ban should be accompanied by a review of the Defra Code of Practice for welfare of laying hens and pullets to support producers to transition away from cages and to mitigate any potential welfare risks.⁴ This review should include clear minimum and enforceable standards for design and management of cage-free systems to maintain consistent high welfare across the sector.

Policy proposals

11a. On 1 January 2027, there should be a ban on the installation of new enriched 'colony' cages and any other caged systems used for pullets and breeder layers across the laying hen sector (laying hens, pullets and breeder layers).

Agree

11b Explain your answer

Wildlife and Countryside Link fully support a ban on the installation of new enriched 'colony' cages and other caged systems for pullets and breeder layers across the laying hen sector. This essential step will reduce the number of UK hens in cages in preparation for a full phase-out of the use of cages for laying hens.

³ [RSPCA-welfare-standards-for-laying-hens](#)

⁴ Defra Code of Practice for welfare of laying hens and pullets (stockmanship)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/poultry-on-farm-welfare/poultry-welfare-recommendations>

This regulatory change is unlikely to cause disruption to industry as the use of enriched colony cages has already declined substantially and the switch to barn or free-range systems has skyrocketed over the last 5 years. In 2020 colony cages contributed 40% of total shell eggs but by Q4 in 2025 less than 16% of eggs were produced in enriched cage systems – a 4% decline from the end of 2024.⁵ In that time, free range production of shell eggs has increased from 54% to 71%, and barn egg production from 2% to 8%.

The majority of the public also do not want to purchase eggs from caged systems. Polling reveals 84% of the public oppose the use of cages for laying hens.⁶ All major UK supermarkets recognised this and have already committed to selling only free range and barn fresh shell eggs which further disincentives producers to use enriched colony cage systems.

The short transition period is justified by the need to pre-plan for a total phase-out of use of caged systems. Setting the deadline for installation of new cages at the soonest possible date will guide producers' decisions before a formal phase-out is decided. To avoid excess costs and waste producers should be advised that if they must replace any existing caged systems for laying hens before 2027 that they should move to well managed free range or barn systems in preparation for the ban.

12a. A 5-year transition period, beginning with a ban on the installation of new enriched 'colony' cages and any other caged systems used for pullets and breeder layers on 1 January 2027 and followed by a complete ban on enriched 'colony' cages and any other caged systems used for pullets and breeder layers on 1 January 2032, is appropriate.

Disagree, it is too long

12b. Explain your answer

Wildlife and Countryside Link fully support a full ban on enriched colony cages and any other caged systems for pullets and breeder layers, however we also believe that the deadline of 2032 is too far away and should be brought forward to 1st January 2030.

Fewer than 17% of UK producers still use enriched colony cages, demonstrating both the feasibility and the widely shared support for higher welfare production systems. Government should support any remaining British farmers using low-welfare caged systems to transition

⁵ [Quarterly UK statistics about eggs – statistics notice \(data to Q4 2025\) - GOV.UK](#)

⁶ <https://politicalanimal.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/political-animal/rspca-mp-briefing-end-cages-for-farm-animals>

to higher welfare cage-free systems by 1st January 2030 through targeted financial incentives. Until the ban on cages comes into force the farmers who have already moved to cage-free systems are undermined by those who have not switched away from cages. Industry should move to the central position of banning cages sooner rather than later.

The UK is currently lagging behind many European countries who have succeeded in going cage free, such as Austria which eliminated caged systems in 2020, and others have commitments to do so. For example, Germany will be cage-free by 2026, and Czechia by 2027.⁷

13a. A ban on conventional ‘battery’ cages on 1 January 2027 for smaller scale commercial units or hobby-keepers with fewer than 350 laying hens is appropriate

Agree

13.b Explain your answer

Conventional battery cages carry the greatest welfare harms. The impact of these cages does not diminish with flock size. Even one animal suffering needlessly in a barren battery cage is one too many with the proven welfare issues that they cause. The total ban on these cruel cages must come into force as soon as possible, and definitely before 1st January 2027. Closing the current small-flock exemption would remove an avoidable welfare loophole and align expectations across the sector.

44a. Should there be an exemption for the multi-tier rearing aviaries where chicks are brooded in cage systems for the first 2 weeks only?

No

45a. Should there be any exemption for other purposes?

No

45b. Explain your answer

⁷ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/our-campaigns/end-the-cage-age/>

Wildlife and Countryside Link do not support exemptions for any purpose and support a complete ban on cages at every stage of egg production. Establishing clear and consistent rules for producers is the most effective way to ensure the intended welfare outcomes for laying hens, pullets, and breeder layers.

46a. Do you think that introducing a domestic ban on cages for laying hens, pullets and breeder layers would increase imports of shell eggs and egg products to the UK?

No

46b. Explain your answer

Wildlife and Countryside Link recommend that a domestic ban on cages for laying hens, pullets and breeder layers is accompanied by measures to prevent welfare offshoring and to protect UK farmers investing in higher welfare.

Government must support British farmers not to be undercut by overseas traders operating with lower welfare systems. One method of this is by banning the import of products produced to lower animal welfare standards than permitted in the UK. Products such as eggs from battery cages, pork from pigs kept in sow stalls, and foie gras are produced in methods that are illegal in the UK on animal welfare grounds but are permitted to be imported and sold to the UK market. Due to the methods of production these items are often cheaper than UK equivalents. This loophole means that British farmers are losing out to international suppliers and growing frustrated. Removing this double standard is non-controversial among farmers, as research shows 92% of livestock farmers and 85% arable farmers pledged support for policies to restrict low-welfare animal product imports into the UK.⁸

The decisions made in the UK-EU SPS Agreement negotiations will be important for determining trade on agrifood products. If Britain moves to banning cages for laying hens, there is no present indication that the EU will follow immediately. Under dynamic alignment in the SPS agreement the UK would have to respect EU standards and all imports of eggs produced under standards illegal in Britain from countries who still use battery cages, e.g. Ukraine. We believe that the UK should follow the example of the agreement between the EU and Switzerland to ‘carve out’ higher animal welfare standards.⁹ The EU – Switzerland Agreement allows Switzerland to continue to apply various provisions of Swiss law for the purposes of maintaining its animal welfare standards

⁸ [Everyone Agrees: It’s Time to End Low-Welfare Imports - Bryant Research](#)

⁹ [Link Briefing UK EU SPS Agreement Priorities.pdf](#)

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 94 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare, and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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The following organisations have inputted into this response and support a ban on cages for laying hens (including pullets and breeder layers).

FOUR PAWS UK

RSPCA

Compassion In World Farming UK

Humane World for Animals UK