



# RSPCA Farm Animals Department Position Statement

## Individual hutches for calves

### What are individual calf hutches and what are the legal requirements relating to these?

Individual calf hutches are used by some dairy farmers to house young calves in the first few weeks of life. In these systems, each calf has its own individual house, i.e. hutch, and is reared in it up until the age of 8 weeks, when they have to be removed and placed in groups. Whilst in the hutch, calves must be kept within sight, sound and touch of other calves, so that they are not socially isolated. The hutch must also provide sufficient space for the calf to lie down, stand up and turn around with ease. The law relating to the use of these hutches is set out under the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2000.

### Are individual calf hutches the same as veal crates?

Seeing calves housed individually in calf hutches may remind some of the appalling conditions that used to be associated with the rearing of individual calves in veal crates. However, the rearing of calves in veal crates is now prohibited by law and, if we consider the needs of calves in the very early stages of their lives, evidence shows that housing them in individual calf hutches for a short, initial period can be beneficial to their health<sup>1,2</sup>.

### Should housing calves in individual hutches be allowed?

Individual hutches were first introduced into the dairy industry to help improve calf health. Rearing calves in large groups – and in poorly ventilated barns – resulted in many disease challenges and high numbers of calves suffering from diarrhoea and pneumonia, which are significant causes of calf mortality. Rearing calves in individual hutches helped reduce the level of these conditions, as it does not involve the mixing of calves of different ages. As such, individual housing reduces social stress and

reduces exposure of younger calves to organisms causing disease.

Further, it is more difficult to closely assess and monitor the health and feed intake of individual calves when they are reared in large groups (NB. Monitoring feed intake can help provide an early indication of deteriorating calf health). Conversely, calves kept in individual hutches can be better monitored and, if required, calf-specific treatments can be applied to better safeguard individual calf welfare. However, we are aware that some scientific evidence has suggested that individual housing can have negative welfare implications on calves.



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Calves should be moved to group housing systems as soon as they are eating sufficient solid feed and their immune systems have developed adequately. Legally, calves must be removed from the hutches by no later than eight weeks of age. Group housing provides calves with the companions and promotes the development of social and play behaviour.

There is some emerging research to indicate calves housed in small, age-matched groups (2 – 5 calves) do not see the health problems that calves in larger groups saw historically. These small, group-housing systems appear to offer additional health and production benefits – particularly post-weaning – when mixed into larger groups compared to individually housed calves due to the increased level of social interaction pre-weaning<sup>3,4</sup>.

### The RSPCA's position

Housing calves for a short period in well managed individual hutches can promote improved calf health whilst still providing social contact and interaction with other calves. However, calves should only be housed in such accommodation for as long as is necessary to ensure they have a good immune system and, in any case, moved into a group housing system by no later than eight weeks of age.

The RSPCA welfare standards for dairy cattle currently permit the use of individual calf hutches. The size of the hutches must be appropriate for the breed and age of the calves being reared. Hutches are available in various sizes, for housing both individual animals as well as small groups, and can offer a healthy environment which gives the calves a good start in life.

It is acknowledged that there is some scientific evidence suggesting that individual housing can have negative welfare implications on calves, and that paired housing has no negative impact on health status. We will be reviewing this issue further and, as such, our position may change in light of new information.



### References

- <sup>1</sup>Svensson, C., Liberg, P. (2006) The effect of group size on health and growth rate of Swedish dairy calves housed in pens with automatic milk-feeders. *Prev. Vet. Med.* 73 (1): 43 – 53.
- <sup>2</sup>Gulliksen, S. M., Lie, K. I., Løken, T., Osterås, O. (2009) Calf mortality in Norwegian dairy herds. *J. Dairy Sci.* 92 (6): 2782-95.
- <sup>3</sup>De Paula Vieira, A., von Keyserlingk, M. A., Weary, D. M. (2010) Effects of pair versus single housing on performance and behaviour of dairy calves before and after weaning from milk. *J Dairy Sci.* 93 (7): 3079-85.
- <sup>4</sup>Bolt, S. L., Boyland, N. K., Mlynski, D. T., James, R., Croft, D. P. (2017) Pair Housing of Dairy Calves and Age at Pairing: Effects on Weaning Stress, Health, Production and Social Networks. *PLoS One* 12 (1): e0166926.