

From concern to choice: Growing the demand for higher-welfare chicken

Introduction

Over the last decade, the global farmed animal population has grown by 14%, with the meat (broiler) chicken population rising by a quarter¹. Broiler chickens are the most widely farmed land animal in the UK. More than a billion broiler chickens are reared and slaughtered in the UK each year – the equivalent of 35 chickens being killed every second of the day. Around 95% of these chickens are reared in intensive, lower-welfare systems, and they account for approximately 77% of all animals kept in intensive farming systems².

The majority of these chickens are fast-growing breeds, taking just 35 days to reach their target weight of 2.2kg for slaughter. This is the equivalent of a child weighing 28 stone at three years old³. These birds have been genetically selected to grow rapidly and beyond their natural size to meet demand for cheap chicken while maximising production efficiency and reducing costs. Their rapid growth rate often leads to significant health and welfare problems, including heart defects, foot lesions, weakened immune systems and lameness, making it difficult for them to display natural behaviours, such as foraging⁴. Many birds struggle to support their own weight, causing them to spend over three quarters of their time sitting down. As a result of this sedentary lifestyle, it's been reported that over 27% of any flock have an irregular heartbeat, with sudden death syndrome also

¹ smf.co.uk/publications/fair-or-fowl-uk-animal-welfare/

² smf.co.uk/publications/fair-or-fowl-uk-animal-welfare/

³ Illustrative comparison based on weight gain intended to demonstrate the unusually rapid growth of modern broiler chickens rather than provide a direct biological comparison. A modern broiler chicken typically grows from around 40g at hatch to about 2.2kg in just 35 days, an increase of around 55 times their body weight. If a human baby grew at the same rate, an average birth weight of 3.4kg would increase to around 187kg (29 stone). This is the basis for comparisons describing a three-year-old child weighing around 28 stone.

⁴ betterchicken.org.uk/take-action/

common⁵. More than 1.5 million chickens (mainly fast-growing) die prematurely on UK farms every week⁶. It's therefore urgent that the welfare of fast-growing breeds of chicken is addressed, and that producers and retailers move to rearing and stocking slower-grown chicken breeds.

Chicken is one of the most consumed meats in the UK, with poultry accounting for over 50% of meat consumption⁷. This stems from its affordability and versatility in everyday meals. The average UK consumer eats around 30.5kg of chicken per year⁸, which, depending on the size of the chicken, is around 15–20 chickens per year. Despite the popularity of chicken products, there's a lack of public understanding and awareness around how these animals are farmed, and the associated welfare issues, as well as intensive low-welfare farming in general.

Polling has highlighted that the British public doesn't know enough about the realities of meat production, identifying a need for better information and greater transparency to help them make informed decisions about what they choose to eat⁹. Although 84% of shoppers say animal welfare is important when making purchasing decisions¹⁰, and 66% report that it influences the food they buy¹¹, welfare considerations often take a back seat to factors such as price and perceived quality at the point of purchase¹².

However, most shoppers also associate higher-welfare products with other desirable attributes, believing they're healthier (68%), taste better (64%) and are better for the environment (73%)¹³. This suggests that meat, including chicken, is frequently purchased as a routine, habitual product, highlighting a persistent gap between consumers' welfare concerns and their purchasing behaviour. This has led the RSPCA to ask the question: how can we grow consumer demand for higher-welfare chicken? By increasing demand for slower-growing chicken breeds, we can help transform broiler production and deliver meaningful welfare improvements for more than a billion chickens.

What we've already done

Commissioned research on chicken welfare

For a fast-growing, lower-welfare farmed chicken, there's a constant risk of experiencing significant suffering throughout their life¹⁴. The RSPCA has previously highlighted these welfare harms through research in 'Eat. Sit. Suffer. Repeat. The life of a typical meat chicken'¹⁵. This outlined how chickens bred to reach slaughter weight in just five weeks are prone to lameness, heart defects and painful skin lesions, often spending much of their short lives unable to move comfortably or express natural

⁵ <https://science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/eatsitsufferrepeat>

⁶ thehumaneleague.org.uk/Who-is-selling-you-Franken chickens

⁷ eating-better.org/uploads/Documents/2020/EB_WeNeedToTalkAboutChicken_Feb20_A4_Final.pdf

⁸ thehumaneleague.org.uk/article/how-many-chickens-live-in-the-uk

⁹ smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Fair-or-fowl-May-2023.pdf

¹⁰ ahdb.org.uk/news/consumer-insight-animal-welfare-seen-as-important-by-84-of-shoppers

¹¹ reading.ac.uk/news/2026/Research-News/Higher-animal-welfare-will-boost-income-for-UK-farmers

¹²

[researchgate.net/publication/390133911_Is_animal_welfare_of_great_importance_when_purchasing_poultry_meat - Results from cross-national focus groups with consumers -](https://researchgate.net/publication/390133911_Is_animal_welfare_of_great_importance_when_purchasing_poultry_meat_-_Results_from_cross-national_focus_groups_with_consumers_-_)

¹³

reading.ac.uk/news/2026/Research-News/Higher-animal-welfare-will-boost-income-for-UK-farmers#:~:text=Healthy%2C%20tasty%20and%20sustainable,for%20the%20environment%20%2873%25%29

¹⁴ science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/eatsitsufferrepeat

¹⁵ science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/eatsitsufferrepeat

behaviours. The research, which was conducted by Scotland's Rural College, found that due to being bred to reach slaughter weight unnaturally fast, these chickens experience immense physical pain and suffering, and are highly susceptible to lameness, heart defects, and severe leg sores from sitting in their own waste¹⁶. In contrast, slower-growing breeds mature at a more natural pace, typically taking between seven and 12 weeks to reach market weight, and are therefore less likely to die or need to be culled, or experience these health issues.

Over recent years, the RSPCA has published evidence on the issue, campaigned for improved broiler welfare, supported legal challenges, and championed initiatives such as the Better Chicken Commitment and RSPCA Assured, which only uses slower-growing breeds. Additional polling undertaken by the RSPCA showed that 87% of the public said they expect supermarkets to ensure all the chicken they sell is farmed to higher welfare standards¹⁷. But despite these efforts, demand continues to grow and around a billion broiler chickens endure these conditions in the UK every year. This raises an important question around whether increasing public awareness and consumer demand for higher-welfare chicken will help to grow the demand for higher-welfare, slower-growing chickens and drive meaningful welfare improvements for billions of chickens.

[Challenged the legality of fast-growing chicken breeds via a Judicial Review](#)

In May 2023, using the evidence presented in 'Eat. Sit. Suffer. Repeat.', the RSPCA acted as an expert witness to support a Judicial Review into the legality of fast-growing chickens. It was brought forward by the Humane League UK. Although the review, and the subsequent appeal held in October 2024, were lost, the Court of Appeal judges ruled that the law was clear, and keeping animals for farming "is prohibited unless it can be reasonably expected... that they can be kept without any detrimental effect on their health and welfare."¹⁸

Despite dismissing the challenge on a technicality, the Court of Appeal's clarification of the law could still have seismic implications for more than a billion chickens slaughtered for meat in the UK every year. The judgment clearly stated that it's unlawful to farm animals who suffer because of their genes. While it wasn't within the court's remit to rule on whether fast-growing breeds of chickens are unlawful, there's a large and ever-growing body of evidence demonstrating that a significant proportion of these animals suffer, often for prolonged periods, as a result of their breed.

[Campaigned to improve transparency on food products](#)

Clear labelling can be particularly effective in helping consumers align their purchasing decisions with their values. Higher-welfare labels, such as RSPCA Assured, provide assurance that products have been produced to standards that go beyond the legal minimum. However, they only appear on participating products. Mandatory Method of Production Labelling (MOPL) would complement these schemes by ensuring all consumers can see how products were produced, regardless of whether they carry a higher-welfare certification. The introduction of mandatory egg production labelling in the UK in 2004 shows this, contributing to a substantial increase in demand for free-range eggs and encouraging retailers to move away from cage-produced eggs. Over the past decade, demand for

¹⁶ science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/eatsitsufferrepeat

¹⁷ rspca.org.uk/documents/d/rspca/better_chicken_commitment_2023

¹⁸ rspca.org.uk/w/whatwedo/latest/our-view/articles/chicken-fowl-of-the-law

free-range eggs has increased by almost 75%, with spending rising from £419 million in 2010 to £1.1 billion in 2020¹⁹.

We've actively advocated and campaigned for mandatory MOPL through submissions to government consultations, drawing on evidence from the UK egg sector and international examples to demonstrate how clearer information can drive consumer behaviour change. MOPL is a mandatory system that provides shoppers with clear details on exactly how a food product was made or farmed. By making production systems visible, MOPL seeks to drive welfare improvements and provide fairer market recognition for farmers using higher standards, while also providing transparent and meaningful information at the point of purchase, allowing consumers to make informed choices based on animal welfare.

In 2024, Defra held an eight-week consultation on fairer food labelling for England, and in June 2025 published a summary of the responses received. The findings highlighted strong support for mandatory labelling, with 99% of individuals and 69% of organisations in favour of mandatory method of production labelling reform²⁰. The Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare, part of the RSPCA's Animal Futures Project, set out a clear vision and roadmap for change. As part of this, the assembly members called for clear animal welfare labelling at the point of purchase²¹, recognising that consumers often lack the information needed to distinguish between products with different welfare standards. Assembly members identified mandatory welfare labelling as a key mechanism for improving transparency, increasing awareness, and enabling consumers to make more informed choices that support higher-welfare farming systems.

Championed higher welfare through RSPCA Assured and the Better Chicken Commitment

Consumers are increasingly concerned about where their food comes from and how animals are treated. This growing awareness, alongside pressure from animal welfare organisations and media scrutiny, has encouraged many retailers and food providers to improve their welfare standards. The RSPCA has long championed higher-welfare farming through the RSPCA Assured certification scheme. This scheme enables consumers to identify products produced to standards that go beyond legal requirements and supports farmers committed to delivering higher levels of animal welfare. The Better Chicken Commitment (BCC) was developed by leading animal welfare organisations as a science-based framework to address the most pressing welfare issues affecting broiler chickens, including fast-growing breeds, housing conditions, stocking densities and slaughter practices²².

As an organisation, we champion both RSPCA Assured and the BCC as approaches to improving broiler chicken welfare across the food industry. While RSPCA Assured provides independent certification and assurance that higher welfare standards have been met on farms, the BCC sets out a clear roadmap for retailers and food service businesses to transition towards higher-welfare chicken production. Together, they provide a practical and credible pathway for improving welfare standards while helping businesses meet rising consumer expectations.

¹⁹

thescottishfarmer.co.uk/news/19892720.demand-free-range-eggs-soars-75-past-decade/#:~:text=Demand%20for%20free%20range%20eggs%20has%20soared,%C2%A3419m%20in%202010%20to%20%C2%A31.1bn%20in%202020

²⁰ gov.uk/government/consultations/fairer-food-labelling/outcome/summary-of-responses-and-government-response

²¹ rspca.org.uk/documents/d/rspca/2323_animal_futures_project_report_digital-1

²² betterchickencommitment.com/uk/

However, despite growing industry adoption and increasing consumer support, progress faced a setback in February 2026 when 18 major hospitality brands, including Burger King UK and Nando's UK and Ireland, withdrew from the BCC to establish the Sustainable Chicken Forum²³. In a joint open letter with Compassion in World Farming and the Humane League UK²⁴, we criticised this decision, arguing that the new forum lacks meaningful welfare standards and risks prioritising cost savings over animal wellbeing. The letter highlighted that many businesses are already successfully balancing welfare, sustainability and commercial objectives through the BCC, and called on companies that have withdrawn to show leadership by supporting a transition to chicken production that delivers both higher welfare and long-term sustainability.

Why improving meat chicken welfare matters

Impacts on the health and wellbeing of chickens

Approximately 85% of UK farms are considered lower-welfare 'factory farms' where animals are confined to cramped cages or sheds, unable to perform natural behaviours. These animals suffer from incredibly poor welfare, solidifying low-welfare farming as the single biggest animal welfare issue globally²⁵. Poultry accounting for over 50% of meat consumption²⁶ raises worrying concerns around the welfare of broiler chickens, particularly fast-growing breeds. The majority are reared to welfare standards that we don't believe are good enough, including insufficient space, lighting and environmental enrichment.

Most broiler chickens, including those reared to higher welfare standards, are kept in large, closed buildings, where temperature, artificial lighting, ventilation, food and water are carefully controlled. This includes the majority of chickens produced to RSPCA Assured and Better Chicken Commitment (BCC) standards. They're given food and water in lines along the length of the building and wood shavings cover the floor²⁷. On lower-welfare farms specifically, each building typically houses around 25,000 birds together, but some can hold as many as 50,000, and birds can be reared at a stocking density (amount of space per bird) of 38kg per square metre²⁸. This amounts to around 19 birds (weighing 2kg) for each square metre of floor space²⁹. Periods of darkness can be kept low to encourage the birds to eat more to maximise their growth rate. Higher-welfare, slower-growing chickens have more space, enrichment and natural light, and are bred to grow more slowly.

Birds kept in overcrowded conditions have lower levels of wellbeing, as their ability to move around and exercise properly is limited, making it difficult for them to perform many of their natural behaviours, including perching and investigation. In contrast, a stimulated and enriched environment (for example, containing straw bales, perches and objects to peck at), encourages birds to be more active, helping to keep them healthy.

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compassioninfoodbusiness.com/latest-news/our-news/ngos-call-out-companies-for-backtracking-on-better-chicken-commitments/

²⁴ ciwf.org/media/zxtpvfqb/open-letter-to-hospitality-companies-that-have-withdrawn-from-bcc.pdf

²⁵ rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/food-and-farming

²⁶ eating-better.org/uploads/Documents/2020/EB_WeNeedToTalkAboutChicken_Feb20_A4_Final.pdf

²⁷ rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/meatchickens

²⁸ rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/meatchickens

²⁹ rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/meatchickens

The welfare benefits of slower-growing breeds are well evidenced. The RSPCA commissioned a trial to assess the production and welfare characteristics of the broiler chicken breeds that are used most extensively worldwide. This research, conducted by Scotland's Rural College, found that up to 49% of faster-growing chickens either died or required culling due to welfare issues such as lameness, compared with 16% of slower-growing chickens. The study also found that up to 78% of faster-growing birds exhibited white striping, compared with just 10% of slower-growing birds. White striping is a disease of the breast muscle, which is caused by fat depositing in the breast muscle during the bird's growth and development. It affects the functioning of the muscle fibres, resulting in muscular weakness. Similarly, up to 23% of faster-growing birds were affected by wooden breast, compared with only 1% of slower-growing birds³⁰. Wooden breast is also a disease that affects breast muscle in broiler chickens. It is caused by fat muscle growth, where the muscle cells become enlarged and the space between fibres reduces. This condition restricts blood and oxygen supply to the muscles, resulting in cell death and muscular weakness, causing the affected muscle tissue to harden³¹. Diseases such as these lead to tough, chewy and even rubbery meat quality, as well as a lower nutritional value³². As well as poorer health compared to the slower-growing breed, the trial also found that conventional breeds were less active, spending less time walking and standing, and less engaged in enrichment type behaviours, such as foraging, perching and dust bathing³³.

As the demand for poultry continues to grow, the government's proposed Poultry Sector Growth Plan³⁴ seeks to increase domestic poultry production and remove planning barriers to sector growth. Although the government has not explicitly committed to expanding intensive poultry production, given that the vast majority of UK broiler chickens are already produced in intensive indoor systems, these measures are likely to facilitate further expansion of intensive production unless accompanied by policies that actively support higher-welfare production systems.

Impacts on people and the planet

Broiler chicken production has a significant environmental impact, driven in part by the UK's high demand for chicken products. Chicken production accounts for around 10% of total livestock-sector greenhouse gas emissions³⁵, including carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane. The majority of these emissions are linked to feed production and land use.

The vast quantities of soy grown to feed millions of chickens have contributed to deforestation, habitat loss and climate change. Research has found that chicken feed is responsible for at least 78% of the industry's environmental pressures, while more than 55% of greenhouse gas emissions from broiler production arise from feed-related activities. In addition, broiler farming requires substantially more land than some alternative forms of animal protein production, placing further

³⁰ thepoultrysite.com/news/2020/03/higher-welfare-chicken-could-reduce-waste-and-improve-sustainability

³¹ science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/eatsitsufferrepeat

³²

animalsaotearoa.org/2023/08/23/woody-breast-chicken-meat/#:~:text=What%20is%20woody%20breast%20syndrome,the%20hard%20consistency%20after%20death.

³³ <https://science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/eatsitsufferrepeat>

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farming-roadmap-2050/farming-roadmap-2050-growing-englands-future-a-ccessible-version>

³⁵

businesswales.gov.wales/farmingconnect/sites/farmingconnect/files/documents/Part%201%20-%20Greenhouse%20gas%20emissions%2026%20environmental%20impacts%20of%20the%20poultry%20industry.pdf

pressure on natural ecosystems³⁶. Each year, around three million tonnes of soya are imported into the UK, the majority of which is used in chicken feed. This gives the UK an overseas soya footprint of approximately 1.7 million hectares – an area roughly the size of Wales. Much of this soya is sourced from ecologically vulnerable regions of South America, where its production contributes to deforestation and land-use change, threatening habitats that support iconic wildlife such as jaguars, giant anteaters and spider monkeys³⁷.

Poultry farming also has a significant environmental footprint beyond greenhouse gas emissions. Waste products, such as poultry litter and manure, can pose risks to both environmental and human health³⁸. Poultry production is associated with emissions of ammonia, nitrous oxide and methane, all of which contribute to air pollution and climate change. Poultry waste can also contain pesticide residues, pathogens, antibiotics, hormones, metals and excess nutrients, which can contaminate soil and water systems if not managed effectively. Dust, odours and waste generated by poultry houses and slaughter facilities can further affect workers, local communities and surrounding ecosystems, including nearby land and waterways³⁹.

Campylobacter, the leading bacterial cause of food poisoning, is responsible for more cases of bacterial diarrhoea in the UK than all other monitored foodborne bacteria combined, with around 80% of infections linked to poultry meat⁴⁰. New research conducted by the University of Oxford suggests that the industrial-scale production systems in which fast-growing chickens are typically reared create ideal conditions for Campylobacter to spread and evolve, increasing risks to both animal and human health.

The cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on people's livelihoods and the cost of food, preventing many consumers from making higher-welfare choices. Due to a number of factors, including increased feed, packaging and transport costs, chicken prices have increased by almost 15% on average⁴¹. Studies have found that higher-welfare chicken farming isn't as expensive as previously believed: shifting from factory farming to higher-welfare indoor farming increased costs by 6.4–13.4%⁴². Yet UK supermarkets charge, on average, around 30% more for higher-welfare chicken than standard chicken⁴³. Research from the Institute of Grocery Distribution highlights that farm production costs make up only one part of the final supermarket price, alongside costs such as processing, packaging, transport and retail⁴⁴. This suggests that the retail price premium for higher-welfare chicken is considerably greater than would be expected of the additional cost of production alone.

³⁶ [cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(23\)00071-4](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(23)00071-4)

³⁷ soilassociation.org/support-us/take-action/peak-poultry/#section-1

³⁸ [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969722071145](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969722071145)

³⁹ peta.org.uk/blog/chicken-flesh-destroying-planet/

⁴⁰ ineosoxford.ox.ac.uk/news/new-study-reveals-rising-antibiotic-resistance-diarrhoeal-disease

⁴¹ deliciousmagazine.co.uk/would-you-pay-25-for-a-chicken/

⁴²

[worldanimalprotection.org/latest/blogs/higher-welfare-chicken-farming-not-expensive-you-thought/#:~:text=Higher%20welfare%20chicken%20farming%20not,Elanco%20Animal%20Health%20\(2015\).](https://worldanimalprotection.org/latest/blogs/higher-welfare-chicken-farming-not-expensive-you-thought/#:~:text=Higher%20welfare%20chicken%20farming%20not,Elanco%20Animal%20Health%20(2015).)

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theguardian.com/food/2021/nov/24/the-3-chicken-how-much-should-we-actually-be-paying-for-the-nations-favourite-meat

⁴⁴ igd.com/social-impact/economics/reports/viewpoint-special-where-does-your-food-pound-go-part-2/72773

Overview of Behaviour Change's real-world testing

Despite growing public concern about farmed animal welfare, lower-welfare chicken continues to dominate the market. To better understand how consumer demand for higher-welfare chicken could be increased, and what barriers and opportunities exist for retailers seeking to improve welfare standards in their supply chains, we commissioned the social enterprise Behaviour Change to undertake a comprehensive research project.

The project combined evidence reviews, stakeholder interviews, quantitative and qualitative consumer research as well as real-world testing of 11 potential interventions, spanning labelling, communications, social media, behavioural insights and retail environments. These included: testing standardised welfare labels; reframing fast-growing chicken through social media and documentary-style content; using trusted voices and influencers to promote higher-welfare chicken; strengthening consumer connections with farming; challenging misleading supermarket messaging; and encouraging consumers to align their chicken purchasing with their existing higher-welfare choices, such as buying free-range eggs. The findings suggest that no single intervention is sufficient to result in wholesale behaviour change, but that targeted interventions, such as method of production labelling and increasing consumers' knowledge of chicken welfare (interventions tested in this research), can help 'nudge' individuals into making more informed purchasing choices. However, more fundamental change in chicken buying habits will require coordinated action across retailers, government and consumer communications.

Prior to real-world testing, Behaviour Change undertook exploratory research through desk-based research, quantitative surveys, focus groups, and accompanied shopping trips. Stakeholder interviews were conducted with representatives from retailers, NGOs and the wider food industry to understand perspectives on the factors influencing chicken purchasing decisions. These insights helped identify key themes and develop hypotheses, which were then tested and explored further through primary consumer research to better understand what drives consumer choices when purchasing chicken products. The consumer research included a quantitative survey with 1,637 UK adults who purchase fresh chicken⁴⁵. The survey explored: consumers' buying behaviour; awareness of welfare signals; barriers and drivers of buying premium; purchase influence; and willingness to pay for higher welfare. It also included qualitative research with 28 individuals, which explored what they currently do, think, know and feel about chicken purchasing, and investigated what could play a role in shifting their behaviour towards higher-welfare purchasing.

The research⁴⁶ highlighted a number of behavioural and structural barriers that limit consumer demand for higher-welfare chicken, including the following:

- **Chicken purchasing is habitual.** Consumers don't think about chicken or production methods when they're buying it, and only pause to check practical factors such as price, pack size and expiry date.
- **Welfare concerns exist, but aren't front of mind for consumers.** Although many consumers say they care about animal welfare, these concerns rarely influence purchasing decisions. Many see little difference between standard and higher-welfare chicken, reducing their willingness to pay more for higher-welfare options

⁴⁵ We define fresh chicken as raw chicken products sold in supermarket chilled cabinets. This excludes frozen, cooked and pre-prepared chicken products.

⁴⁶ New research conducted by Behaviour Change, commissioned by the RSPCA

- **Consumers lack a clear understanding of welfare differences.** The range of chicken products available in supermarkets is complex, making it difficult for shoppers to distinguish between different production systems and welfare standards. This leads consumers to compare products by price rather than welfare. Multiple assurance labels and certifications do little to help shoppers distinguish between products, often adding to the confusion.
- **People are largely unaware of the key welfare difference of breed.** Most consumers are unaware that the majority of chickens are fast-growing breeds. When they learn about these practices and their welfare impacts, many say they would choose higher-welfare options.
- **The retail environment reinforces lower-welfare choices.** Standard chicken is more visible and accessible than higher-welfare options. Misleading packaging, labels and marketing claims can also give consumers a false impression that lower-welfare products meet higher welfare standards.

Most notably, the research found that behaviours are driven by a disconnect between attitudes and action. This is something that we see in our annual UK-wide investigation into the public's attitudes towards animal welfare: the Kindness Index. The Kindness Index⁴⁷ reveals a persistent gap between attitudes and behaviour. For example, 64% of UK adults find selectively breeding fast-growing chicken breeds unacceptable. Yet, 68% still identify as meat eaters, up from 62% in 2022. At the same time, although 70% report always, or sometimes, buying higher-welfare animal products and 61% state that they always, or sometimes, check welfare labels, only 37% always, or sometimes, purchase plant-based alternatives. Together, these findings suggest that concern about animal welfare doesn't always translate into purchasing and consumption habits. This is particularly significant given that the vast majority of chicken sold in the UK comes from lower-welfare production systems. The findings therefore indicate a disconnect between consumers' intentions and the reality of their purchasing decisions, likely driven by confusion around production systems, limited availability and visibility of higher-welfare options, as well as difficulty identifying genuinely higher-welfare products. With more people identifying as meat eaters and fewer looking to reduce their consumption of animal products, there's a risk that demand for chicken produced under lower-welfare conditions will continue unless meaningful action is taken by government, retailers and industry.

This reluctance to pay for higher-welfare products, despite shoppers showing some level of concerns about animal welfare, was reflected in the focus groups facilitated by Behaviour Change. Many consumers expressed concerns about animal welfare. However, it didn't influence their decisions at the point of purchase. Shoppers were most likely to rationalise what they buy by justifying that it isn't 'the cheap chicken', so were already choosing a product with better welfare standards. However, when asked about switching to higher-welfare or more premium chicken products, many saw no benefit and were discouraged by higher prices, forming the belief that 'chicken is chicken'⁴⁸. The availability of cheap, fresh chicken is closely linked to low-welfare systems, which are designed to maximise efficiency and minimise costs. Fast-growing breeds, shorter production cycles and higher stocking densities reduce the cost of producing each bird, helping to keep prices low for consumers. However, these practices are associated with poorer welfare outcomes, including overcrowding, mobility problems and other health issues. This highlighted that consumers lack a clear understanding of the welfare differences in farmed chicken production methods. This isn't consumers' fault, as chicken categories are complex and there are multiple chicken product types that aren't clearly differentiated. This leads shoppers to see chicken products on a price scale rather

⁴⁷ rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/kindnessindex/2026

⁴⁸ New research conducted by Behaviour Change, commissioned by the RSPCA

than through a welfare scale. Certifications and logos on chicken packaging can create choice overload, and don't currently help the majority of consumers to compare products.

Many consumers are unaware of the significant welfare differences associated with different chicken breeds, and few realise that the vast majority of chicken products come from fast-growing breeds, especially those found in ready meals. When consumers were provided with this information and shown the reality of what a fast-growing chicken looks like, they reacted strongly and immediately implied they would seek higher-welfare options. This suggests that making welfare more visible can strengthen intentions to choose higher-welfare products. This lack of consumer awareness may partly stem from the way supermarkets present chicken products. Standard chicken typically dominates shelf space and is positioned at consumers' eye level, while higher-welfare options are often less visible, not offered in the same range of products or pack types, and more difficult to compare on price than standard chicken. As a result, the retail environment can reinforce lower-welfare purchasing habits and make higher-welfare choices less accessible. Retailers' use of packaging and labelling can also create a false sense of reassurance among consumers, with misleading language such as 'Room to thrive' and 'Happier and healthier', as well as colour and imagery on lower-welfare standard chicken, suggesting to consumers that they're purchasing higher-welfare products⁴⁹.

The research enabled Behaviour Change to identify 11 opportunities for real-world intervention. Following an assessment of their potential, two were selected for small-scale pilots to test their feasibility and effectiveness, and to generate learning for future implementation. The first focused on introducing a standardised animal welfare labelling system for chicken products. This was based on the insight that consumers often struggle to understand and compare welfare standards when shopping. A four-tier 'farming method' label was developed to help consumers compare products more easily and address misleading perceptions created by existing packaging. The label categorised products as Basic Indoor, Better Indoor, Free Range, or Organic, using a clear, tiered scale with star ratings as visual cues to indicate the relative welfare level. The concept was tested online only using quantitative consumer research to assess its impact on understanding and purchasing decisions.

The second pilot aimed to increase public awareness of fast-growing chicken breeds. Building on evidence that consumers are often shocked by the realities of fast-growing breeds, two social media campaigns were tested through paid Instagram advertising. One used more distinctive and attention-grabbing content focused on the realities of production, while the other used more traditional welfare messaging. Their effectiveness was measured through engagement metrics, including video views, click-through rates, and visits to a dedicated information page.

Option 1: Create and implement a standardised labelling system to make it easier for customers to know what they're buying relative to other choices

Behaviour Change's pilot test on standardised labelling helped consumers more accurately identify higher-welfare products and reduce confusion between options. This was tested through the Max-Diff methodology, which measures preferences by asking people to choose the most and least important option from a series of small groups of items. It was also received positively by 81% of respondents, with only 2% feeling negative about its introduction. Additionally, it showed potential to

⁴⁹ New research conducted by Behaviour Change, commissioned by the RSPCA

change behaviour, with over 50% of respondents saying they definitely wouldn't buy chicken with the one-star rating (i.e. the current 'standard' level chicken). However, its effectiveness in practice depends on consistent use across all products and retailers (to allow for easy comparison), and on being clearly visible to shoppers (on the pack and through communication and a 'launch moment')⁵⁰. The pilot demonstrated potential, especially around helping consumers make better and more informed choices, but also highlighted the limits of singular interventions and translating these into real-world behaviours.

The standardised labelling system consisted of a simple and clear tiered scale, with star ratings as visual cues helping shoppers compare the welfare of chicken products at a glance. The label was applied consistently across chicken products and categorised them into four farming methods:

- Basic Indoor (standard indoor production)
- Better Indoor (enhanced indoor welfare standards)
- Free Range (birds with outdoor access)
- Organic (meeting the highest welfare and organic production standards)

This intervention was chosen to pilot following successful roll-out in other countries, including Germany, France and Denmark, as well as a similar concept rolled out by Waitrose in the UK. For example, France's voluntary animal welfare label, *Étiquette Bien-être Animal*, introduced and made available in supermarkets in 2018, uses an A–E scoring system, assessing more than 230 criteria, to inform consumers about the living, transport and slaughter conditions of animals. The label was launched by the Casino supermarket chain in partnership with Compassion in World Farming France and two animal welfare organisations, LFDA and OABA⁵¹. Since its implementation, the welfare label has been highly successful. It's brought greater transparency and consumer trust to supermarket shelves, and has led to notable changes in consumer purchasing habits and industry farming standards, with other supermarkets also adopting the labelling scheme⁵².

Across UK supermarkets today, there's very little visual signalling or consistency between welfare tiers of chicken, contributing to the limited understanding of why some chicken products cost more than others. By introducing a mandatory, tiered welfare label this would give shoppers clarity on what they're buying and allow them to make better, informed decisions. The label system would also convey the message that 'standard level' chicken isn't higher welfare, and would have a low welfare rating on a tiered label.

The pilot⁵³ found that when consumers noticed and used the standardised tiered label, it improved their understanding of the welfare differences between chicken products. Participants who engaged with the label were:

- **more likely to correctly identify higher-welfare products**, with organic products the highest rated welfare option when the label was used. Those who didn't use the label, rated products

⁵⁰ New research conducted by Behaviour Change, commissioned by the RSPCA

⁵¹ ciwf.fr/nos-campagnes/pour-un-etiquetage-du-mode-delevage/letiquette-bien-etre-animal/

⁵²

foodnavigator.com/Article/2021/10/26/Etiquette-Bien-etre-Animal-What-can-Europe-learn-from-France-s-animal-welfare-labelling/

⁵³ New research conducted by Behaviour Change, commissioned by the RSPCA

such as M&S Better Indoor, followed by Asda Free Range and Sainsbury's Free Range, as offering the highest welfare.

- **better at recognising Basic Indoor products as the lowest welfare option**, assigning them significantly lower welfare ratings than participants who didn't use the label.
- **less confused about the differences between welfare tiers**, with clearer distinctions made between each level, indicating greater confidence and certainty when assessing product welfare.

Overall, the tiered label was viewed very positively: 81% felt very or fairly positive about its introduction, and only 2% felt very or fairly negative. This clearly demonstrates that there's potential for the label to change behaviour, with over 50% claiming they definitely wouldn't buy basic indoor chicken if the label was introduced. However, 16% of respondents didn't notice the label. To help mitigate this in a real-world scenario, we advise the following:

- **The label should be prominent.** It should be designed to be even more salient and stand out.
- **The packaging should be simplified.** Where possible, other on-pack elements that may be adding confusion or clutter should be removed or made smaller (e.g. through regulation).
- **A launch strategy should be created.** So that if/when it's brought in, a high level of media coverage raises awareness, enabling shoppers to know that it's coming and to look out for it.

Furthermore, the label alone doesn't overcome all barriers to behaviour change, including affordability and availability of higher-welfare options. So it should be considered as one piece of a larger puzzle.

This pilot supports our efforts in continuing to call on the government to consult on and implement mandatory MOPL labelling. While voluntary higher-welfare assurance schemes, such as RSPCA Assured, already help consumers identify products produced to higher-welfare standards, mandatory MOPL would ensure consistent and transparent information is available across all chicken products, enabling consumers to make informed comparisons at the point of purchase.

Learnings from the introduction of mandatory egg labelling in the UK in 2004 can be applied to a labelling system for broiler chickens. Demand for free-range eggs has increased by almost 75% since the introduction of labelling, with spending rising from £419 million in 2010 to £1.1 billion in 2020. As a result, all major UK retailers have committed to moving away from cage-produced eggs by 2025⁵⁴. This demonstrates that clear, standardised labelling can empower consumers to make choices aligned with higher animal welfare values. Following the success of mandatory egg labelling, we propose starting with chicken.

Option 2: Expose the reality of fast-growing chickens in the UK to evoke shock in the public

Behaviour Change's social media pilot included content that was designed to spread awareness of the reality of fast-growing chickens. The content was designed to shock social media users and make them feel uncomfortable, exposing the truth about fast-growing chickens that consumers aren't currently aware of. This was tested against more neutral messaging, which explained the benefits of higher-welfare farming for chickens.

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thescottishfarmer.co.uk/news/19892720.demand-free-range-eggs-soars-75-past-decade/#:~:text=Demand%20for%20free%20range%20eggs%20has%20soared.%C2%A3419m%20in%202010%20to%20%C2%A31.1bn%20in%202020

There's currently very little awareness of the use of fast-growing breeds in chicken farming. During Behaviour Change's quantitative research stage, only 16% recalled the phrase 'slower grown' or 'reared slowly'. This supports the argument that people don't find it easy to imagine what these phrases could mean, and many don't see 'slow growing' as a positive. However, when shown photos and videos of fast-growing chickens, they were shocked and expressed a desire to pay more attention to labels and look into how much more money they'd have to spend to avoid fast-growing chicken products.

Working with the creative agency Among Equals, Behaviour Change designed two different pieces of content for social media, and tested their engagement performance on Instagram. Content A was more distinctive and focused on the realities of fast-growing chickens, whereas Content B was simpler, more generic chicken-welfare content and focused on why higher-welfare chicken is better in a neutral and uncontroversial stance. The content directed users to a landing page to find out more information, and engagement between both pieces of content were measured through click-throughs to the landing page. Content A was more effective at breaking through in-feed attention and driving users to click through to the information landing page, which suggests that more emotionally engaging, novel and slightly discomforting content is more effective at prompting action than welfare messaging that's more positive and less controversial. There's concern that engaging with content online may not necessarily translate into in-store behaviour, so new, novel content on fast-growing chickens is a useful tool for driving awareness of the issue, but should be considered as one lever among a range of others (including those addressing in-store barriers)⁵⁵.

While the pilot highlighted potential, it also demonstrated that as a standalone intervention, reach and behaviour change will be limited. To effectively shift the market, and drive up demand for higher-welfare chicken, multiple interventions would need to operate in tandem. Increasing appeal shouldn't just be done through access and availability – language and marketing also has a significant impact on this. A study conducted by the Better Buying Lab has shown that descriptions focusing on flavour and texture, such as 'Rich, buttery roasted sweet corn' were 41% more likely to be chosen by consumers than 'healthy, restrictive' labels, such as 'low fat' or 'low calorie', and 25% more likely to be chosen than those with 'basic' labels⁵⁶. An online study conducted by the Behavioural Insights Team also found that renaming 'Chickpea and potato curry' to 'Mild and sweet chickpea and potato curry' increased sales by 108%⁵⁷. Applying these principles to higher-welfare chicken, such as by highlighting its flavour, quality and the farming and welfare standards it was reared in, could help make it more appealing to consumers, increasing demand beyond what welfare labelling alone is likely to achieve.

The Dutch 'Plofkip', meaning exploding chicken, campaign demonstrates how public-awareness campaigns can drive significant changes in consumer behaviour and industry practices. Led by animal welfare organisation Wakker Dier, the campaign used high-profile media content across television, newspapers and billboards to expose the welfare issues associated with fast-growing chicken breeds⁵⁸. By making a largely hidden issue visible to consumers, the campaign increased

⁵⁵ New research conducted by Behaviour Change, commissioned by the RSPCA

⁵⁶ wri.org/insights/its-all-name-how-boost-sales-plant-based-menu-items

⁵⁷ greenqueen.com.hk/language-matters-mainstream-consumers-prefer-term-field-grown-to-meat-free-vegetarian/#:~:text=Aside%20from%20provenance%2C%20analysts%20say,sales%20by%20a%20whopping%20108%25.

⁵⁸ ciwf.org.uk/research/species-meat-chickens/

public concern about chicken welfare and reduced demand for low-welfare chicken products. As a result, major companies and supermarkets committed to phasing out fast-growing chicken breeds, and sales of cheap chicken fell from 60% to 5% by 2017⁵⁹. The campaign ultimately contributed to a wider market shift towards higher-welfare, slower-growing breeds and helped support and encourage the uptake of the Better Life welfare labelling scheme across Dutch supermarkets.

Published in 2020, research from a study carried out by Cardiff University also demonstrated that targeted social media messaging can influence meat consumption behaviours. Participants who received twice-daily Facebook messages about the health and environmental impacts of meat consumption reduced their intake of red and processed meat from around seven to eight portions per week to four to five portions per week over a two-week period, with reductions largely maintained one month later⁶⁰. While the intervention focused on reducing meat consumption, it highlights the potential for targeted digital communications to shape consumer choices. Similar approaches could be used to increase awareness of and grow demand for higher-welfare chicken, communicating its animal welfare, quality and sustainability benefits to encourage consumers to choose higher-welfare products over standard alternatives. This suggests that digital campaigns could play an important role in growing demand for higher-welfare chicken when used alongside other interventions, such as improved availability, clearer labelling and effective in-store marketing.

Recommendations and calls for action

While as standalone interventions the scope and impact may be limited, the findings from both pilot studies suggest that increasing consumer awareness and improving welfare information at the point of purchase can help address some of the key barriers to higher-welfare chicken purchasing. A key takeaway from both pieces of work is that concern for animal welfare already exists among many consumers, but this concern doesn't consistently translate into purchasing behaviour. Efforts should therefore focus on **closing the attitude-behaviour gap through clearer information, greater transparency and improved visibility of welfare differences**, enabling consumers to act on their existing values. To build on these findings, the RSPCA calls for the following actions to be implemented.

By government

- **Introduce mandatory Method of Production Labelling (MOPL)** for all chicken products, including imported chicken, to provide consumers with clear and consistent information.
- **Extend labelling requirements to processed products and the food service sector and expand labelling requirements to include slaughter methods**, to ensure consumers can make informed choices across all purchasing contexts.
- **Test and standardise welfare terminology and labelling** to improve consumer understanding and reduce confusion.
- **Work with the government to explore mechanisms that support farmers** to transition away from lower-welfare chicken production and towards higher-welfare systems, building on the commitments made in Defra's Animal Welfare Strategy and the recent Farming Roadmap.

By retailers

⁵⁹ ciwf.org.uk/research/species-meat-chickens/

⁶⁰ cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2483002-social-media-messages-help-reduce-meat-consumption?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- **Improve visibility and accessibility of higher-welfare products** through better shelf placement, availability and pricing strategies.
- **Push for the introduction of mandatory, standardised welfare labelling** to help consumers make informed decisions when comparing products, while encouraging retailers to lead the way by implementing clear, consistent welfare labelling across their own ranges.
- **Review product labelling, imagery and marketing** to ensure they don't mislead consumers about the welfare standards under which chickens were reared.

By consumers

- **Seek out information about how chicken is produced**, including different production systems and breed types, and use assurance schemes and welfare labels to help inform purchasing decisions.
- **Choose higher-welfare chicken products where possible**, particularly when clear information is available, and support retailers and brands that demonstrate higher welfare standards.
- **Reduce overall chicken consumption**, and choose higher-welfare chicken to help align purchasing decisions with animal welfare concerns.

By charities and campaigners

- **Increase awareness of specific welfare issues**, particularly those with low public awareness, such as fast-growing chicken breeds.
- **Focus on simple, easily understood messages** that help consumers distinguish between welfare standards at the point of purchase.
- **Address practical barriers to behaviour change**, recognising that purchasing decisions are often habitual, low-engagement and driven by price.