



# Gainsborough

## TOWN COUNCIL

### Keeping Hens On Our Allotments

The RSPCA advises that the following guidelines are followed:

Anyone with any number of hens, even two or three, registers with the Great Britain Poultry Register in order to receive any disease alerts and guidance.

#### **Water**

- Hens must have access to clean and fresh water at all times. In cold weather, care should be taken to prevent drinking water from icing-up. Ice should be broken manually, chemicals should **never** be used.
- Drinkers should be cleaned regularly and water should not be allowed to remain in a contaminated or stale condition.
- Drinkers that prevent young chicks climbing in and drowning should be used. As the birds become older and require more water, alternative drinkers can be introduced and those drinkers used previously should be removed gradually over a number of days.
- If new chickens are introduced to the allotment, they must be provided with facilities to which they are already accustomed, as chickens do not like to drink from unfamiliar drinkers.

#### **Food**

Chickens spend much of their day scratching and foraging for small seeds, roots and insects. However, they will need additional food, which is suitable for their age and breed, to provide a balanced diet. If feed is provided outside, it should be sheltered to keep it clean and dry. Feed dispensers should be cleaned regularly and precautions taken to prevent infestation and contamination of the feed. Avoid attracting rodents and wild birds by, for example, cleaning up any spilt feed.

Chickens must also always have access to insoluble grit (e.g. hard flint grit) to aid digestion. If the birds are kept on a grassed area, the grass should not be allowed to become too long, as, if eaten, long strands can become impacted in the crop, making it difficult for the birds to digest food.

#### **Laying hens**

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

#### **Housing**

Chickens should be provided with warm, dry and well-ventilated housing. Adequate ventilation is very important, and while it is important to keep the birds warm, there must also be good air circulation inside the housing. The floor should be covered with a suitable flooring, such as wood shavings or straw, which must be kept dry and friable and therefore topped-up or replaced when necessary. Chickens like to dustbathe and preen their feathers, therefore a suitable material, such as wood shavings, should also be supplied for this activity. Feed and water facilities should be provided within the house.

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

Chickens will naturally seek a raised position to roost at dusk, which is an anti-predator behaviour, and should therefore be provided with perching facilities. Perches should be wooden and approximately 3-5cm in width with rounded edges, to enable the birds to grip them properly.

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

In smaller houses, a greater proportion of birds tend to go out onto the range area during the day and only use the housing at night. The entrance to the housing should be wide enough to allow chickens to pass through without difficulty and high enough so that they do not have to crouch down. The accommodation should be cleaned out frequently and disinfected to ensure that there are no harmful parasites that could compromise the birds' health.

## **Pasture**

The outdoor area will require careful management and should be given periods of rest, to allow the ground and grass to recover. It is important that the area is sufficiently large enough to be divided (unless there are alternative grass areas nearby to use) in order to allow the chickens to roam on good pasture every day while other parts are allowed to recover. Again, the birds should have plenty of space to move around easily and perform their natural behaviours, this will depend on the size and number of chickens and the layout of facilities.

Overhead cover should be provided on the range area such as small trees, shrubs and purpose built shelters, to provide the chickens with protection from the sun, bad weather and other animals. It will also help to encourage birds to utilise the full outside area. They should also have access to dry soil where they can dust-bathe and forage.

Where outside conditions and/or the vegetation is poor or limited, consideration should be given to providing alternative areas for enrichment. The provision of straw will keep birds occupied and encourage them to carry out food searching behaviours. Raised perches on the range area should be considered, as they provide a way for individuals to escape from one another, and birds often use them as a place to preen during the day.

## **Fencing**

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

## **Company**

We recommend that people keep at least three hens (female chickens) which get on well together.

## **Introducing new stock to an existing flock**

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

## **Health**

Signs of poor health may include a hunched posture, erect feathers and a reluctance to move. Birds may also be found hiding, for example in corners or amongst housing equipment, and may tuck their head under their wing. Healthy birds appear alert and interested in their environment, and look 'bright eyed' and well hydrated. Chickens can be susceptible to lice and red mites. Lice, which are 2-3mm in size, can be found all over the body with their eggs being deposited around the shaft of the feather. Red mites are smaller and are more likely to be found on the fixtures within the shed. However, where a more serious infestation exists, they may be seen on birds at the base of the feathers, particularly under the wing.

## **Worming**

Poultry need regular worming, particularly if they are kept on the same ground for a prolonged period (more than a month).

## **Feather Pecking**

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

More information can be found in the 'Laying hen feather cover advice guide' which can be downloaded from the RSPCA website.