



# Pig welfare in the UK

AHDB





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The UK has for nearly two centuries been at the forefront of pig welfare developments and has been the model for systems adopted worldwide. With new developments such as the Real Welfare scheme, British pig production is still ahead of other countries and uniquely placed to ensure that consumers eat guilt-free pork.

## 1. Key facts on the UK's pig sector

The total number of pigs on UK agricultural holdings is 5 million. The number of breeding sows is 409,000, with the great majority held in large farms. Uniquely, about 42% of the commercial pig breeding herd is kept outdoors in free-range conditions and 20% of weaning pigs are reared outdoors. Over 90% of growers and finishers are reared indoors, but 60–70% of them are reared on straw rather than slats.

## 2. Natural behaviour

Before domestication, pigs were forest animals, feeding on a variety of plants, insects and even small animals. A sow would produce one litter of three or four piglets a year and form a small social group with other sows. She would wean her piglets at around 12 weeks of age. Much of the day would be spent foraging or rooting for food and generally exploring the environment. Although the modern pig is very different in appearance, it still shares most of its wild relative's instincts and behaviours. One key aspect of pig welfare is ensuring that pigs are allowed to express their normal behaviour.

## 3. Animal welfare law in the UK

The United Kingdom is the first country in the world to implement laws protecting animals. In 1835, an act to 'Prevent the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Animals' was passed by Parliament. This was followed by the first general animal protection law, the Protection of Animals Act, in 1911. The establishment of the Brambell Committee in 1965 addressed the general concept of the welfare of farm animals and how it might be affected in intensive husbandry systems, introducing for the first time in a Government publication the concepts of sentience and welfare. The Agriculture Act 1968 made it an offence to cause or permit livestock on agriculture land to suffer unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress. These principles have now been extended to all kept animals in the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Good practice in livestock farming is covered by the Code of

Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock, which has the approval of Parliament. In recent years, one of the most contentious issues has been the keeping of dry sows in individual, narrow stalls or tethered by a short chain throughout their pregnancy, thus restricting their movements as the sow cannot turn around. Legislation banning the use of the sow stall and tether system and allowing a more natural group housing of sows was introduced in the UK from the end of 1998, eight years before the EU ban on the use of tethers in 2006 and fifteen years before the partial ban of stalls in the EU in 2013.

The UK government is committed to the highest possible standards of pig welfare and has funded research and farm studies for many decades to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of welfare and behavioural science as well as its most up-to-date application. This work is supported by the Pig Health and Welfare Council (PHWC) which was created in 2003 to provide a single forum for industry representatives and government stakeholders in pig health and welfare related activities and policy developments.

#### 4. The Red Tractor Scheme



The Red Tractor farm assurance scheme is the largest food scheme in the UK to have strict standards that cover the whole supply chain, from feed ingredients, to pig production, transport, slaughter, processing and retailing. This includes pig welfare, food safety, traceability and environmental protection requirements.

#### 5. The AHDB Pork Real Welfare scheme for pigs

The scheme was launched as a requirement of Red Tractor farm assurance on 1 April 2013, following rigorous large-scale testing. It is a unique and pan-industry initiative. Real Welfare involves independent on-farm assessment by veterinarians of pig welfare using a set of five objective and repeatable measures. These measures are known as 'welfare outcomes', which are animal-based, meaning that they are obtained from the animal themselves, rather than from their environment.

Real Welfare was developed in response to the pig industry's need for strong, science-based evidence to demonstrate its husbandry standards to retailers, animal-welfare lobby groups, policymakers and consumers.



The large-scale research and testing programme undertaken over several years ensures the system is robust, and the scale of implementation of Real Welfare places British pork production well ahead of other sectors and countries.

#### 6. Standards for animal health, welfare and husbandry

These cover a comprehensive set of guidelines for housing, shelter, handling, ventilation, feed composition, feeding, access to water, emergencies, animal diseases and injuries. These must apply to the whole life cycle of the pig, from farrowing to weaning and fattening. In particular:

- Stockmen/women must demonstrate their pig welfare competence by being a member of a recognised scheme such as the Pig Industry Professional Register (PIPR)
- All stockmen/women that handle and restrain pigs must be shown the correct techniques relevant for the size/age of the pig to reduce the risk of injury and stress
- A Veterinary Health Plan (VHP) to proactively manage and improve health and welfare of livestock must be established and implemented
- Records of the health and performance of all livestock must be maintained and reviewed regularly
- The health and welfare of livestock must be met at all times, checked regularly and actions must be taken to rectify all issues raised by veterinarians.





Appropriate group housing, has the potential to provide a high-quality environment, giving freedom to move and allowing social contact. Pigs are social, playful, protective animals who bond with each other, make nests, relax in the sun and cool off in the mud. Pigs communicate constantly with one another. More than 20 of their oinks, grunts and squeals have been identified for different situations. Pigs can be aggressive, particularly associated with feeding. Inadequate stimulation, barren environments and lack of space can lead to behaviours such as tail biting and aggression.

For these reasons, UK standards allow ample space for growing pigs and impose the use of manipulable material such as straw and toys. Lameness issues from inappropriate flooring or stony grounds must be avoided. The UK has a strong record in avoiding mutilations. Tail docking and teeth clipping are exceptional and no male pig is castrated.

Pigs are notoriously poor travellers, can suffer from travel sickness and have problems regulating their body temperature. Pigs are fasted for a limited period prior to travel. Livestock must be transported by a trained person holding a Certificate of Competence. Welfare standards in British pig abattoirs are very high and the compulsory welfare training of slaughtermen is recognised internationally.

Outdoor pigs have more space, can explore their environment, forage, and hence express their natural behaviour. However, if land or climatic conditions are unfavourable, welfare problems can result. Standards of management must be high to ensure adequate welfare standards are maintained. Arcs or equivalent accommodation bedded with straw that provides thermal comfort and protection from the wind must be available. Stocking density must not exceed 30 sows per hectare and a training area must be available and used to allow new gilts, sows and boars to become accustomed to electric fences. Facilities such as wallowing areas must be provided in order to allow pigs to keep cool during warm weather.

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