



RSPCA standards justification

Sheep

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Introduction

This document provides the rationale underpinning the setting of certain, key standards within the RSPCA Welfare Standards for Sheep. As such, this document provides the justification behind the setting of such standards.

Not all standards are covered within this document, as either further explanation is not required, e.g. the justification is clear within the standard itself, or the standard is based on a legal requirement. However, those standards that go above legal minimum requirements and could be set at a range of levels are generally included.

Justifications are not exhaustive, but are typically representative of the evidence base (where this exists) for that issue.

In some cases, a summary of the full standard wording has been provided. Therefore, please refer to the RSPCA Welfare Standards for Sheep for the full standard wording.

References to legal requirements relate to domestic legislation.

Food and Water

Food

- **Trough space:** When being fed supplementary concentrates from troughs, all sheep must be able to eat at the same time. The minimum feeder space allowances set out in the full standards must be adhered to.

<u>Type of sheep</u>	<u>cm/head</u>
Growing sheep (<50 kg)	35
Small ewes (50-70 kg)	45
Large ewes (>70 kg)	50
Rams/wethers	50

Space allowances for feeding concentrates were first introduced in the 2006 version of the standards and, at that time, an allowance of 45cm per sheep was recommended when feeding concentrates from a trough. In 2020 this recommendation became a standard and additional categories of sheep were included, based on the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board's (AHDB) Better Returns Programme *Feeding the Ewe*, which was written in consultation with farmers, industry leaders and veterinary surgeons. These feeding space allowances aim to reduce competition so subordinate animals have better access to feed, as well as ensuring ewes receive adequate nutrition during vital stages of production such as lactation.

Water

- **Water access:** Sheep, including lambs, must have continuous access to an adequate supply of clean, fresh drinking water.

Introduced in the first version of the standards in 1996, this requirement was updated in 2020 to emphasise that sheep on all diets and at all life stages, including unweaned lambs, must have a continuous supply of clean, fresh drinking water. This ensures that sheep which are more susceptible to dehydration such as lactating ewes and lambs will always have reliable access to drinking water. Some farming practices provide sheep at certain life stages with buckets for water, this standard ensures that those caring for the sheep must ensure that such buckets contain water at all times and are not allowed to become empty. Legally, sheep can be left without water for extended periods of time so long as they are provided with adequate amounts of water to meet their needs at some point.

Environment

Lying area / space allowance

- **Space allowances:** The minimum space allowances set out in the full standards must be adhered to where sheep are housed.

Type and weight (kg)	Bedded lying area (m ² per animal)	Total area (m ² per animal)
Ewes		
<45 to 60	1.1 to 1.2	1.65 to 1.8
61 to >90	1.2 to 1.4	1.8 to 2.1
Lambing pens	2	2
Ewes with lambs up to 2 weeks		
<45 to 60	1.3 to 1.7	1.95 to 2.55
61 to >90	1.4 to 1.8	2.45 to 2.7
Ewes with lambs up to 6 weeks		
<45 to 60	1.8 to 2.0	2.7 to 3.0
61 to >90	2.0 to 2.2	3.0 to 3.3
Creep area		
2 weeks	0.15	0.15
4 weeks	0.4	0.4
Hoggets		
< 30	0.7	1.05
31 to 40	0.8	1.2
40 to >50	1.0	1.5
Rams	1.5 to 2.0	2.25 to 3.0

This standard was included in the first version of the standards published in 1996, with minor amendments being made in 2020. These space allowances are based on historical figures from previous versions of the standards as well as industry practice. In comparison to Defra's *Code of Recommendations for the welfare of livestock - sheep*, which is used as the minimum welfare recommendations in the industry, the RSPCA bedded lying area is similar to the total floor area set out in the code. As a higher welfare scheme, the RSPCA space allowances go into greater detail, for example they stipulate allowances for ewes with lambs up to two weeks as well as six weeks, whereas the code does not.

- **Slatted flooring:** Fully slatted housing is not permitted

Introduced in the 2020 version of the standards as a result of the increased use of such housing systems both domestically and internationally. Extensive research shows sheep prefer to stand and rest on solid floors rather than slatted flooring when given the choice. Slatted floors are also associated with heat loss, difficulty in providing adequate bedding and general lying discomfort (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2017).

- **Foster methods :** Close restraint of ewes (involving “yoking”) for the purpose of lamb fostering is prohibited.

This standard was introduced in the 2010 version of the standards as a result of concerns for both ewe and lamb welfare in this widely used practice. Restriction of behavioural freedom can lead to an increase in frustration and boredom for the ewe, as well as an increase in stress, causing both short term and long term welfare consequences and disrupting the ewe-lamb bond. Furthermore, this fostering technique is less successful than “rubbing-on” methods and therefore may present welfare challenges for the lamb once

the ewe is released, including the ewe preventing the lamb from accessing milk and physical injury from head butting (Eales *et al.*, 2004).

Fencing

- **Virtual fencing: Invisible ‘virtual’ fencing and associated electric shock collars are prohibited.**

This standard was first introduced in the 2022 version of the standards due to increased interest in ‘virtual fencing’ in ruminant farming. Virtual fences use computer software paired with electric shock collars to keep animals within an invisible, movable boundary, thereby reducing the need for physical barriers such as wire fences or hedging. However, the RSPCA has significant concerns over the use of this technology, in part due to there being no visible cue for sheep to know when boundaries have been moved, the ability to move pasture virtually leading to reduced inspection of livestock, the risk of sheep receiving multiple shocks if the equipment malfunctions or due to slow learning, and the potential distress caused by the learned association between the noise signal and the electric shock as well as the impact of the noise signal on a prey animal with acute hearing.

Climate change and animal welfare

- **Heat stress: Producers must be able to recognise signs of heat stress in sheep.**

This standard was first included in the 2022 version of the standards due to concerns regarding rising temperatures and the impact of this on the welfare of farmed sheep. Shorn sheep have an upper critical temperature of between 29°C to 30°C, depending on humidity levels (EFSA, 2021). At these temperatures, sheep will begin to show signs of heat stress such as panting, increased drinking, weakness and collapse. With the number of days reaching these temperatures expected to rise in parts of the UK, it is vital that stock-keepers are able to recognise the signs of heat stress and take remedial action.

Management

Stock-keepers

- **Training: Prior to being given responsibility for the welfare of livestock, stock-keepers must have received appropriate training for their specific areas of responsibility.**

The requirement for having appropriately trained farm staff has been a requirement since the first version of the standards were published in 199, which stated that; “*Managers must take into account the level of training and abilities of the stock-keepers when deciding on husbandry methods and number of sheep under the care of a person*”. This was amended in the 2006 version to ensure that all staff receive adequate training before being responsible for animal welfare. Further amendments were made in the 2020 version in order to emphasise that all staff, including temporary staff, must have received training before being given any responsibility for the health and welfare of all livestock, as per the guidance in Defra’s *Code of Recommendations for the welfare of livestock - sheep*.

Agricultural shows

- **Agricultural shows: Practices and procedures which may be detrimental to welfare and have no purpose other than cosmetic enhancement are prohibited.**

This requirement was introduced in the 2020 version of the standards in order to protect the welfare of sheep being exhibited at agricultural shows, due to concerns raised during discussions at the RSPCA Sheep Standards Technical Advisory Group (STAG) over the incidence of cosmetic procedures, such as delaying shearing, being performed to increase ring success.

Health and welfare planning

- **Humane endpoints: Treatment plans must include humane endpoints.**

The requirement to include humane end points in treatment plans for lameness and body condition was first introduced in the 2022 version of the standards. “Humane end point” is a widely used term in animal research and is increasingly being used in reference to veterinary treatment. It aims to reduce animal suffering by identifying criteria which indicate that an animal should be humanely euthanised due to, for example, unmanageable pain or distress, because they are not responding to treatment, or because future treatments are unlikely to be effective.

Medications / vaccinations

- **Antibiotic use: Antibiotics must only be used when necessary and always used responsibly.**

This standard was introduced in the 2020 version of the standards in response to the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) initiative to reduce the use of antimicrobials used in agriculture. Whilst the RSPCA supports the responsible use of antibiotics and is concerned regarding the increase in antimicrobial resistance, the Society’s position remains that at certain times, the use of antibiotics are required to treat bacterial infections and prevent further deterioration of health in sick or injured animals. Additionally, not using antibiotics, reducing dosages, or reducing the length of treatment to use a lesser quantity to meet reduction targets are not considered responsible use. Such misuse could compromise animal health and welfare, as well as encourage the development of antibiotic resistance. Instead, as with all medicines, antibiotics should only be used when necessary, and always used responsibly under the discretion of a vet and for their prescribed purpose. For more information, please see the RSPCA information sheet “Antimicrobial resistance and farm animal welfare” available at www.rspca.org.uk

Body condition

- **Body condition scoring: Body condition scoring must be undertaken at least at the times outlined in the full standards and the results recorded.**

This standard was introduced in the 2020 version of the standards. Body condition scoring (BCS) is an invaluable tool for assessing the health and welfare of ewes, as it can highlight when lambs should be weaned in order to help the ewe regain condition before tupping, as well as identifying those ewes which need a high energy diet before tupping and which ewes have a too high body weight and may have difficulties during birth. The guidance given in the RSPCA standards is taken from the AHDB’s Better Return Programme *Managing ewes for Better Returns*, which was written in consultation with farmers, industry leaders and veterinary surgeons.

Breeding procedures

- **Artificial insemination: Transcervical and/or intrauterine (laparoscopic) artificial insemination must not be carried out.**

This standard was included in the first version of the standards, which were published in 1996. Laparoscopic insemination is a surgical technique and as such has associated welfare concerns such as increased stress from handling and restraint, possible complications during and following surgery, as well

as a degree of unavoidable pain. Furthermore, this method of artificial insemination raises further concerns of subjecting an animal to a veterinary procedure which is not for its own benefit.

Lamb management

- **Colostrum: Lambs must receive a sufficient amount of colostrum in the first 24 hours after birth, with the first feed occurring within 2 hours of birth.**

Standards relating to the delivery of colostrum have been included in the RSPCA Welfare Standards for Sheep since the first print in 1996, and has been regularly updated to follow the latest scientific research. This standard was last amended in the 2020 standards in line with the #ColostrumIsGold campaign. The time limit of 24 hours is to ensure lambs receive an adequate supply of colostrum before their gut/digestive tract loses the ability to absorb the antibodies carried in the milk. The first feed in 2 hours will ensure the lamb receives the first dose of colostrum as soon as possible since the closure of the gut occurs over time and so the earlier the lamb receives colostrum the more able the gut is to absorb the antibodies. This is particularly relevant for artificially reared lambs, multiples of more than two, those lambs whose mothers are short of milk, or have had a traumatic lambing.

- **Mutilations: Castration and tail docking is only permitted once permission has been granted from the RSPCA Farm Animals Department. Long acting pain relief is required for all tail docking and castration procedures.**

The provision of pain relief during castration and tail docking was introduced in the 2020 version of the standards due to concerns for lamb welfare. Extensive research has shown that castration and tail docking causes both acute and chronic pain, and that by administering appropriate analgesia, this pain can be mitigated (Mellor & Stafford, 2000). Furthermore, with carefully planned management, castration and tail docking is not always required, as male lambs will reach market weight before the onset of puberty and the risk of fly strike can be reduced by other methods including dagging (trimming the wool around the tail). The RSPCA is aware of the difficulties in providing effective analgesia for sheep, including the time taken for long acting pain relief to work (it takes 20 minutes to have an effect) and the lack of licensed products. However similar situations exist in other species - for example calves have few licenced medications, but anti-inflammatories are commonly used for them. In such circumstances the drugs can be prescribed and administered at a veterinary surgeon's discretion via the Cascade System; part of the veterinary legislation.

The current requirement was discussed extensively with members of the RSPCA Sheep STAG and reflects a compromise between reducing pain whilst also reducing the need for increased handling. Costs to the farmer were also considered. Due to the small amount required per lamb, the cost of providing NSAID is minimal at approximately 30 pence per dose. Whilst best practise would be to administer the NSAID around 20 minutes prior to castration or tail docking, this would be difficult to achieve in a practical setting and could increase the likelihood of mismothering. The requirement to administer pain relief at the time of the procedure is therefore a compromise to help farmers achieve this particular standard. The RSPCA hopes that by introducing this requirement, it will initiate positive discussion regarding pain relief management in livestock as well as encouraging other farm assurance schemes to do the same.

Transport

- **Livestock markets/collection centres: Sheep must not be presented for sale at livestock markets or pass through collection centres.**

This standard has been in place since the first publication of the standards in 1996. The selling/auctioning of sheep at a livestock market is strictly prohibited. The presentation of livestock at markets poses various welfare concerns due to increased handling, withholding of food and water, novel environments and increased distance/duration between the farm and final destination. This requirement is under review, including the possibility of introducing new standards for collection centres to ensure animals continue to be covered from birth to death under the certification scheme assessing against these standards.

- **Live export: Sheep, including lambs, must not be exported live overseas, either directly from the farm of origin, or indirectly via a third party.**

Live export is an unnecessary part of the "farm to fork" chain, and export of sheep for fattening and slaughter was legally banned in the UK in 2024, with export for breeding continuing to be legal. The live export of animals overseas is prohibited for all species covered by RSPCA Assured welfare standards, and standards specifically prohibiting this for sheep have been present since 2020 (with permitted journey times within the standards effectively preventing this practice since 1996). The live export of animals has huge implications for animal welfare including thermal and locomotive discomfort, restrictive movement, aversive handling and increased risk of injury and disease. Additionally, live export journeys often exceed 8 hours, which is the maximum permitted journey time allowed by the RSPCA Welfare Standards. There are also concerns regarding the future welfare of those animals which travel outside of the UK to countries whose welfare standards may be weaker than our own.

- **Transport time: Sheep must not be transported for more than 8 hours from the first sheep loaded to the last sheep unloaded**

This standard was included in the first version of the standards published in 1996. A journey time of less than 8 hours is defined as a type 1 short journey according to UK law, with the maximum permitted journey time for sheep in the UK currently being 29 hours (including a one hour break). The transport of livestock has many risks to welfare such as injury, hunger and thirst, travel sickness and fatigue, and longer journeys are associated with increased welfare incidents. Therefore, sheep must not be transported for greater than 8 hours from the first animal loaded to the last unloaded, 21 hours less than the legal maximum.

- **Space allowances: The minimum space allowances as set out in the full standards must be provided during transport.**

Minimum space allowances for the transport of sheep have been included in the standards since the first version was published in 1996. This standard was last amended in the 2020 version to reflect the proposals of a 2010 study (Jones *et al.*, 2010) which found that increasing space allowances better protected the welfare of sheep by enabling them to balance, support and orient themselves to the movement of the truck, resulting in fewer slips and falls.

	<u>Weight</u>	<u>Area (m² per animal)</u>
Shorn	<54	0.3
	>55	0.45
Unshorn	<54	0.4
	>55	0.6
Pregnant ewes	<54	0.5
	>55	>0.5

Slaughter / killing

Lairage

- **Stocking densities:** Animals confined in lairage must have at least the minimum stocking densities as outlined in the full standards.

	<u>Type and weight (kg)</u>	<u>Straw bedded area (m² per animal)</u>
Ewes	<45 to 60	1.1 to 1.2
	61 to >90	1.2 to 1.4
Hoggets	<20 to 30	0.7
	31 to 40	0.8
	41 to >50	1.0
Rams	-	1.5 to 2.0

This standard was included in the first version of the sheep standards in 1996, and was based on a combination of experience and observation at the time. It had minor amendments in the 2020 version to ensure all sheep have the space to enable them to turn around and lie down comfortably.

Stunning

- **Stunning methods:** Only the stunning methods outlined in the full standard are permitted.

Stunning of animals prior to slaughter has been mandatory under the standards since they were first published in 1996. The RSPCA is concerned over the improper/ineffective stunning of sheep as well as non-stun slaughter which is currently permitted under UK law. Therefore, the accepted stunning methods are based on the recommendations made by the [Humane Slaughter Association](#) and effectively leave the animals insensible to pain until point of death.

Sticking

- **Stun-to-stick interval:** Sheep must only be stunned when they can be stuck immediately afterwards with a stun-to-stick interval of no more than 15 seconds.

This standard was introduced when the standards were first published in 1996. This 15 second interval is based on best practice recommendations from the [Humane Slaughter Association](#). This ensures sheep die before they are able to recover consciousness after being stunned.

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