RSPCA standards justification

Pigs

Contents

Introduction

This document provides the rationale underpinning the setting of certain, key standards within the RSPCA Welfare Standards for Pigs. 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 Pigs for the full standard wording.

References to legal requirements relate to domestic legislation.

Food and Water

Food

- **Feeder space: For ration feeding pigs in a trough, there must be enough space for all pigs to feed simultaneously.**

  This standard was developed in 1994 and was based on a combination of practical experience and observation at the time of developing the first set of standards for pigs.

- **Feed places must have a minimum width of:**

  a) 15cm for pigs weighing up to 35kg

  b) 20cm for pigs weighing 35kg and up to 50kg

  c) 30cm for pigs weighing 50kg and above.

  Pigs are much bigger than they used to be and many feeders are no longer fit for purpose. It is important that pigs have enough space when feeding. The shoulder width of a finisher (~ 100kg) is around 30cm (average). For circular feed spaces, calculations are to be based on the overall circumference of the feeder. Where feeders have been installed prior to December 2020, a minimum feeder width of 25cm is permitted for pigs weighing 50kg and above, provided that additional feed places are provided at a specified ratio to provide extra space.

- **The use of equipment that is designed to rear surplus piglets, such as rescue decks, is prohibited.**

  Studies such as Schmitt et al., 2019, have found that artificial rearing of piglets has detrimental effects on their behaviour, welfare and growth. We have prohibited their use except in emergency situations to protect the welfare of sick piglets.

Water

- **Drinker space: There must be one drinking place per 10 pigs. Or, where water is provided in troughs, the space allowances (pigs/m of trough space), which is based on pig weight, must be provided.**

  This standard was developed in 1994 and was based on a combination of practical experience and observation at the time of developing the first set of standards for pigs. This standard has been working well in practice over the years. This requirement is also in line with Defra's (2020) *Code of practice for the welfare of pigs*, which recommends 10 pigs to a drinker for ration fed pigs and 15 pigs per drinker for unrestricted (*ad lib*) feeding.

Environment

Lying area/floors

- **Floor type: Pigs must be kept on, or have access at all times to, a dry, bedded lying area of solid construction.**

  Requirements relating to floor type have been specified in the standards since the first edition was published in 1994, with the current wording introduced in the 1998 version.

  Slatted flooring is not permitted in the lying area due to the lack of comfort it provides and the difficulty in providing bedding, such as straw, on this type of flooring. Slatted floors allow manure to drop through the slats where it is then removed through drainage type systems. However, any bedding provided can also fall through slats and clog up manure removal systems.

  The provision of bedding is important for physical as well thermal comfort. Pigs housed in unbedded slatted accommodation have a much greater likelihood of developing pressure bursae on their legs and joints (European Food Safety Authority [EFSA], 2005). Pigs can struggle to thermoregulate and are susceptible to the cold - particularly draughts - which are more prevalent in slatted systems.

  Bedding material is only effective if dry. Wet bedding does not have the same thermal properties or rootable characteristics.

- **Bedding material: Bedding must be comfortable, absorbent, provide thermal comfort and not compromise pig health and welfare.**

  This standard was included in the 2012 version of the standards. There are various options for bedding materials that can be used. This standard provides clarification that bedding does not have to be straw, but does need to have certain properties for it to be considered appropriate. Suitable materials include sawdust and straw, although fine sawdust may be too dusty for use. Shredded paper is not permitted, as it tends to absorb liquid, but does not dry out very well and has a tendency to clump, which can make it difficult to work with when mucking out or cleaning. It can also reduce pen hygiene. Bedding can be a source of pathogens, but in a well managed system this should not be a problem (European Food Safety Authority [EFSA], 2005).

  Please also see ‘Floor type’ above.

Space allowances

- **Growing pigs: The minimum space allowances for indoor (Scrape-through and partly slatted) growing pigs are as follows:**

Live weight (kg)	Bedded lying area (m^2)	Total area (m^2)
10	0.10	0.15
20	0.15	0.225
30	0.20	0.30
40	0.26	0.40
50	0.31	0.47
60	0.36	0.55
70	0.41	0.61
80	0.45	0.675
90	0.475	0.715
100	0.50	0.75
110	0.53	0.80

These space allowances took their current form in the 2003 version of the standards. The weight-based requirements were formulated using both the research available at the time of their development and also on-farm knowledge of what was working well in practice, at that time.

- **Growing/finishing pigs in groups in straw yards: Growing/finishing pigs in groups in straw yards must be provided with at least the following space allowances:**

Weight (kg)	Total minimum space (m^2) required if mucked out at least monthly	Total minimum space (m^2) required if bedding topped up regularly but not mucked out
Weaners to 35	0.45	0.5
36 - 50	0.17	1.3
51 - 75	0.35	1.5
76 - 95	0.50	1.67
96 - 110	0.54	1.72

Prior to becoming a standard in the 2003 version of the standards, these space allowances were recommended in an information box. Whilst the *RSPCA welfare standards for pigs* do not place a limit on group size, straw yards tend to house more pigs per pen. This, combined with less frequent manure removal, means that more space is required per pig, in these systems.

Lack of space can lead to aggression and increase the risk of tail biting occuring. A lack of space can also make it difficult for pigs to adequately control their temperature: too many pigs in a small area can generate heat very quickly, making it very warm, and pigs can struggle to cool themselves down, especially as they are

unable to sweat. In addition to this, high stocking densities can also make management more challenging. Further, reduced space can blur the line between lying areas and dunging areas and can result in pigs dunging in the lying area leading to soiled pigs.

- **Where pigs are taken to a live weight of 110kg or more, they must be reared in split-sex groups.**

  This standard was first introduced in 2016 amid concerns about the welfare implications of raising heavier boars. Increased riding behaviour and aggression can have an effect on the welfare of all pigs in a pen. In addition, there is an increased risk of pregnant gilts being sent to slaughter where pigs are finished in mixed sex groups. Therefore, split sex groups can help to ameliorate these concerns. As the potential benefits to split sex rearing extend to younger (lighter) pigs, this requirement was planned to be reviewed in relation to other ages/weights of pig.

  This standard will be updated in the 2025 version of the pig standards which requires pigs to be split sexed earlier, by the time they reach an average of 50kg liveweight. However, this standard will remain in effect during the implementation period, until March 2026, after which this standard will no longer be accepted.

- **From March 2026, pigs must be split sexed by the time they reach an average live weight of 50kg.**

  This standard has been introduced in the 2025 version of the standards, with an appropriate lead in time of 12 months, due to the welfare implications of raising heavier boars. Increased riding behaviour and aggression can have an effect on the welfare of all pigs in a pen. In addition, there is an increased risk of pregnant gilts being sent to slaughter where pigs are finished in mixed sex groups (European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), 2017). Therefore, split sex groups can help to ameliorate these concerns. There is evidence suggesting there are welfare benefits to split sex rearing, e.g. Björklund and Boyle, 2006; Rydhmer et al., 2006; Boyle and Bjorklund, 2007; Hartnett et al., 2020

  50kg was chosen as the cut-off weight to ensure sexual activity does not occur prior to this. It is also common for pigs to be moved/mixed at around three months old (~50kg). Producers may choose to split sex from weaning.

  Where it is not possible to evenly split sex all the pigs whilst still meeting the space allowance requirements of these standards, then up to 5% of the herd can be put into mixed sex pens. For example, on a unit with 200 pigs, up to 10 pigs could be kept in a mixed sex pen. We acknowledge that the sex ratio is rarely 50:50 and therefore the need for a 5% tolerance limit to allow the mixing of pigs under such circumstances. Any ‘smalls’ (smaller pigs that are less robust and need separating from other pigs in the main herd) can be put into mixed sex pens, but these must not make up more than 10% of the herd. The hospital pen can contain both sexes at the same time.

Farrowing systems

- **Farrowing accommodation must allow the sow to turn around easily at all times without any hindrance from fixtures and fittings present in the farrowing pen.**

  This standard was introduced in December 2015, which was the final stage of a gradual move in the standards over time towards free farrowing accommodation. From 2010, the standards stated that any new members accepted onto the RSPCA Assured scheme must provide free farrowing accommodation, but permitted existing members to continue using temporary crates for a five year period.

  The increasing amount of practical experience in indoor farrowing accommodation meant there were successful systems in operation that had demonstrated comparable production figures to farrowing crate systems. These successful systems include design features that promote good maternal behaviour and piglet protection measures, without restraining the sow. It was therefore no longer justifiable to allow sows to be confined in crates, as there was no additional welfare benefit to her or her piglets.

Farrowing pens must have no means of confining the sow for farrowing. The lack of confinement means that sows can freely perform nesting behaviour and prepare for birth. Further, the standards require a specified amount of straw to be provided prior to farrowing in order to satisfy the sows' nest building behaviour.

Environmental enrichment

- **Materials: Pigs must have access to effective environmental enrichment materials in sufficient quantities to allow and encourage proper expression of rooting, pawing and chewing behaviours.**

Pigs are highly motivated to perform rooting behaviour. The provision of suitable environmental enrichment enables pigs to perform this behaviour and can prevent this behaviour being directed elsewhere. Additional straw or similar material is more effective than novel objects or toys, as these can lose their novelty relatively quickly and can also lead to aggression if there are not enough objects for the number of pigs in the pen.

In 2016, the words "effective environmental enrichment" were added to this standard, which stresses the need that the enrichment provided is both suitable and fit for the purpose for which it has been provided. The best forms of enrichment are those that are deformable, investigable, chewable and clean.

Outdoor and free-range production

- **Space allowance: The minimum space allowances for growing pigs in outdoor systems are as follows:**

Live weight (kg)	Bedded lying area (m^2)	Total area (m^2)
10	**0.10**	**0.5**
20	**0.15**	**0.5**
30	**0.20**	**0.5**
35	**0.23**	**0.5**
40	**0.26**	**0.73**
50	**0.31**	**1.3**
60	**0.36**	**1.5**
70	**0.41**	**1.5**
75	**0.43**	**1.5**
80	**0.45**	**1.67**
90	**0.475**	**1.67**
95	**0.49**	**1.67**
100	**0.50**	**1.72**
110	**0.53**	**1.72**

These space allowances are in line with the requirements of the UK industry's *Code of Practice for the Labelling of Pork and Pork Products*, which were based on the RSPCA's minimum space allowances for pigs in indoor straw yards. However, some of the weight bands specified in the RSPCA standards are not included in the industry code.

Health

Casualty animals

- **There must be someone on site who is trained and competent to carry out euthanasia within 60 minutes, at the latest, of a pig being identified as requiring euthanasia.**

  This standard was introduced in 2025 to avoid any misinterpretation of the term ‘without delay’. It was agreed that euthanasia must be carried within 60 minutes of the pig being identified in order to prevent any further suffering.

- **An emergency procedures action plan must be detailed in the Veterinary Health and Welfare Plan to address situations where mass culling may be required, for example in response to a major disease outbreak.**

  Where mass culling is required, for example in response to a major disease outbreak, prompt identification and action can prevent considerable suffering. Producers need to outline measures to ensure this is achieved as part of an Emergency Procedures Action Plan. It is particularly important that due attention is paid to welfare in such circumstances as advised by the attending veterinary surgeon.

Mutilations

- **Teeth clipping: Removing the points of needle teeth of new born piglets must not be carried out routinely, and can only be conducted where permission has been granted and for pigs less than 48h old.**

  Teeth clipping is a mutilation and has the potential to cause pain. Teeth clipping is difficult to carry out correctly as it involves holding the pliers steady and cutting at a precise angle. Shattering/splintering of the teeth can occur. Handling and restraint of the piglet is also involved, which can cause some stress.

  Until the 2003 edition of the pig standards, teeth clipping was permitted on the scheme without the need for permission, although there was a requirement for the teeth to be trimmed as early as possible and, in any case, within the first 48 hours of life (or in the case of weak or sick piglets, within three days of birth).

  Legally, teeth clipping cannot be carried out routinely, only when there is evidence of injury to the sow’s teats or other piglets face or ears. Further, it is a legal requirement to do this within the first seven days of the piglet's life.

- **Nose ringing: Nose rings are not permitted except in exceptional circumstances and where permission has been granted. Where ringing is permitted, pigs must weigh at least 100kg and must only be ringed once, which includes not replacing the ring if it falls out.**

  Nose ringing is a painful procedure, and the primary objective of a nose ring is to cause discomfort to the pig to reduce rooting behaviour. Although ringing does not completely prevent the pig from rooting it does reduce rooting behaviour, which is a natural behaviour for a pig. It would be preferable not to permit nose ringing at all. However, if there are valid welfare-related reasons for a request, then permission can be given. For example, some producers try to reduce the amount of rooting in the bedding provided in the farrowing arc/hut as it can cause draughts, which can lead to piglet chilling, as well as causing an uneven surface and increased risk of crushing.

  The standard was amended in 2000 to include the minimum weight and to specify that each individual can only be rung once. The weight restriction means only adult pigs can be ringed, reducing the number of individuals affected. Legally, only outdoor adult gilts/sows can be rung.

- **Tail docking: Tail docking is not permitted except in exceptional circumstances and where permission has been granted and, even then, only the minimum amount of tail necessary may be removed. Where permission is granted, at least 6cm of the tail must be left when docking.**

  Permission has always been required for farms on the scheme to tail dock. Legally, tail docking must not be carried out routinely. Tail docking is carried out in order to reduce the risk of tail biting occurring as the pig gets older. Tail biting is one of the most significant factors affecting pig welfare and can be very severe and cause significant pain and distress to the animals affected. It can be sporadic, unpredictable and may have no obvious cause, which can make outbreaks difficult to deal with. Many producers will therefore turn to tail docking for a solution. However, docking just treats the symptom. It will not reduce the motivation or the underlying cause. It also does not prevent tail biting; tail biting still occurs in docked pigs.

  Where permission to dock is granted to members, a longer tail must be left as research has shown that the formation of neuroma tissue is increased in shorter tails (Herskin *et al.*, 2010). As Spoolder *et al.* (2011) state "*...this relationship may directly relate to an increased number of nerve fibres cut when docking tails shorter, and suggests that levels of pain associated with tail docking may increase when a larger part of the tail is removed.*"

  Around 72% of pigs in the UK are tail docked (AHDB, 2021) . Currently, it would not be realistic to prohibit tail docking within the RSPCA welfare standards, as it is not possible to reliably reduce the risk of tail biting to a manageable level on every farm. However, we are working towards this aim.

- **Castration: Surgical castration of pigs is not permitted.**

  Surgical Castration has been restricted in the standards since they were first developed. Up until 1998, castration was not permitted for pigs being reared to less than 90 kg. In 1998, the standard changed to prohibit surgical castration entirely, as the previous standard made it unlikely that any pigs were being castrated anyway.

  Surgical castration is usually carried out without anaesthesia or analgesia, which is legal under UK law within the first seven days of a piglet's life. However, in the UK surgical castration is relatively uncommon, primarily due to the historically lower slaughter weights in the UK. This has meant that, traditionally, it was felt that the problems associated with keeping entire males (e.g. aggression, riding behaviour) were less.

  Immunocastration (through the use of Improvac ©) has been permitted within the standards since January 2010, but permission from the RSPCA Farm Animals Department is required for its use and is only granted for welfare-related reasons. There are benefits to using the product, such as reduced aggression in treated herds. Also, the use of this Improvac © reduces the risk of any female pigs (sows) being pregnant when slaughtered.

- **Antibiotics must only be used responsibly and when necessary, and the prophylactic use of antibiotics is not permitted.**

  Prophylactic treatment is intended to prevent sickness or disease developing in a group of healthy animals where a veterinary surgeon has identified that there could be a high risk of bacterial infection. We believe that there should be no need for the prophylactic use of antibiotics when following these standards. However, we acknowledge there may be very exceptional circumstances, e.g. in the case of an emergency, such as a transport accident, where a veterinary surgeon may feel it is in the best interests of the affected animal's welfare for antibiotics to be given preventatively. We would expect these occasions to be extremely rare and limited to only a few animals.

Transport

Transport

- **Transport times: Pigs must not be transported for more than 8 hours – the time being calculated from first animal loaded to last unloaded.**

  Under UK legislation, pigs can be transported for up to 24 hours. During the journey they must be offered water at appropriate intervals and afforded an adequate opportunity to drink. If, after this time, they have not reached their destination then they must be unloaded, fed, watered and rested for a minimum of 24 hours at an EU-approved control post before being transported again. However, transport is considered a stressor and therefore should be reduced as far as possible.

  The eight hour maximum journey time is considered sufficient to enable pigs from RSPCA Assured farms to reach an RSPCA Assured abattoir. A shortened journey time would likely be commercially unviable for some producers. There is currently insufficient evidence to justify changing the maximum eight hour transport time limit.

Transport space allowance

- **Stocking rates and densities: Maximum stocking rates and minimum space allowances for pigs during transport are:**

Weight of pig (kg)	Stocking rate (kg/m^2)	Space allowance (m^2/pig)
7 - 10	**137**	**0.05**
30	**200**	**0.15**
35	**218**	**0.16**
40	**222**	**0.18**
100	**235**	**0.43**
110	**245**	**0.45**
sows	**316**	**0.79**

The legal UK maximum stocking density for transporting pigs weighing 100kg is 235 kg/m^2, but the legislation acknowledges that more space may be required to take account of actual circumstances, such as variations in temperature and humidity. The space allowances developed for the standards used extrapolations from this density as well as guidance from the RSPCA's Pig Standards Technical Advisory Group members. Pigs must, at a minimum, always have sufficient space to be able to lie down and stand up. The stocking density for cull sows is based on the same allometric equation as used for finishers.

- **From March 2026, all cull sows and boars must be: (a) transported according to the RSPCA transport standards and (b) transported by a haulier that has been approved by the certification scheme assessing against these standards as being compliant with the RSPCA welfare standards for pigs.**

  Cull sows and boars from RSPCA Assured farms must be transported by RSPCA Assured hauliers to ensure that these animals are transported to higher welfare standards.

Slaughter/killing

Slaughter/killing methods

- **Permissible gases: Pigs must only be slaughtered/killed using one of the permitted methods listed, which includes carbon dioxide gas at 90%, carbon dioxide with inert gases, and inert gases.**

  Regarding carbon dioxide gas (CO_2), the standards require that a minimum concentration of 90% CO_2 is used. The high concentration required reduces the period of consciousness and therefore the period of aversion. The 90% figure reflects the recommendations of the European Food Safety Authority Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (EFSA, 2004).

  Whilst gas killing systems can offer some welfare advantages over alternative methods, such as calmer handling due to the automated nature of the system, the use of carbon dioxide gas, especially at high concentrations, is aversive to pigs. As such, exposure to high concentrations of carbon dioxide gas causes pain and distress to pigs prior to them losing consciousness. The RSPCA wants to see a rapid phaseout of the legal use of carbon dioxide gas killing systems in their current form, which is long overdue, and humane alternatives developed.

  From January 2013, legislation permitted the use of inert gases as a method of stunning pigs, either as a single gas or as a combination of inert gas and CO_2. To date there has been some research into the use of argon or argon mixes for stunning, and argon is considered a more welfare friendly gas -particularly as pigs display significantly less aversion to it compared with CO_2. However, there are still some welfare challenges and limitations with the research into CO_2 alternatives on a commercial scale. The RSPCA is continuing to monitor and encourage the progress of alternative stunning/killing systems with a view to producing standards in light of further information, technical developments and recommendations from scientific research.

- **From March 2026, all cull sows and boars must be slaughtered/killed: (a) according to the RSPCA slaughter standards (b) in an abattoir that has been approved by the certification scheme assessing against these standards as being compliant with the RSPCA welfare standards for pigs.**

  Cull sows and boars from RSPCA Assured farms must now be slaughtered at RSPCA Assured abattoirs to ensure that these animals are slaughtered to higher welfare standards.

- **Pigs lairaged at abattoirs overnight must be provided with suitable bedding to ensure their physical and thermal comfort**

  This standard has been introduced in 2025 to reflect the legislation which requires an adequate supply of suitable bedding material for all animals kept in the lairage overnight on flooring other than slatted or mesh floor, i.e. solid flooring.

- **The use of off-site lairaging facilities must not be used as an extension of the on-site lairage and should the use of an off-site lairage be required, the scheme that is responsible for assessing against these standards must be notified within 24 hours of pigs being unloaded at the lairage.**

  Off-site lairages may only be used in emergency situations, due to the welfare concerns around the extra loading and unloading.

- **The use of restrainer conveyor systems, such as the 'v' restrainer and 'Midas' stunning system, are not permitted.**

  Moving pigs from a group into a single line and restraining them individually can be very stressful to pigs. The act of lifting the pigs makes the use of these restrainer conveyor systems even more stressful.

References

AHDB (2021) Real Welfare update report (2018 - 2020).

Björklund, L., and L. A. Boyle. 2006. Effects of finishing boars in mixed and single sex groups and split marketing on pig welfare. Acta Vet. Scand. 48:2. doi:10.1186/1751-0147-48-S1-P2

Boyle, L. A., and L. Bjorklund. 2007. Effects of fattening boars in mixed or single sex groups and split marketing on pig welfare. Anim. Welf. 16:259–262.

DEFRA, 2003. Code of recommendations for the welfare of livestock: pigs, Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69369/pb7950-pig-code-030228.pdf.

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), 2004. Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) on a request from the Commission related to welfare aspects of the main systems of stunning and killing the main commercial species of animals. EFSA Journal, 2(7). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2004.45.

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), 2005. Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) on a request from the Commission related to welfare of weaners and rearing pigs: effects of different space allowances and floor. EFSA Journal, 3(10). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2005.268.

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), 2017. Animal welfare aspects in respect of the slaughter or killing of pregnant livestock animals (cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses) Available at: https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2017.4782

Hartnett, P., Boyle, L, A., O'Driscoll, K. The effect of group composition and mineral supplementation during rearing on the behaviour and welfare of replacement gilts, Translational Animal Science, Volume 4, Issue 2, April 2020, Pages 1038–1050, https://doi.org/10.1093/tas/txaa002

Herskin, M.S. Thodberg,K., Jensen,H.E., 2010. Effects of pig tail docking and docking length on the formation of neuromas. Animal Volume 9, Issue 4, 2015, Pages 677-681

Rydhmer, L., G. Zamaratskaia, H. Andersson, B. Algers, R. Guillemet, and K. Lundström. 2006. Aggressive and sexual behaviour of growing and finishing pigs reared in groups, without castration. Acta Agric. Scand. A Anim. Sci. 56:109–119.

Schmitt, O., O'Driscoll, K., Boyle, L. A., Baxter E, M., 2019. Artificial rearing affects piglets pre-weaning behaviour, welfare and growth performance. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 210, pp. 16-25

Spoolder , H., Bracke, M., Mueller-Graf, C. and Edwards, S. (2001) Preparatory work for the future development of animal based measures for assessing the welfare of pigs. Report 2: Preparatory work for the future development of animal based measures for assessing the welfare of weaned, growing and fattening pigs including aspects related to space allowance, floor types, tail biting and need for docking. Technical Report submitted to EFSA.

Studnitz, M., Jensen, M.B. & Pedersen, L.J., 2007. Why do pigs root and in what will they root? Applied animal behaviour science, 107(3-4), pp.183–197.

RSPCA.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Parkside, Chart Way, Horsham RH12 1GY ■ 0300 1230 100
rspca.org.uk facebook.com/RSPCA twitter.com/RSPCA_official instagram.com/rspca_official
tiktok.com/@rspca_official linkedin.com/company/rspca
The RSPCA helps animals in England and Wales ■ Registered charity no. 219099
The RSPCA only exists with the support of public donations

Cover image: iStock.com ISBN: 978-0-901098-19-1