CHICKENS

Anyone keeping 50 or more birds is required by Defra to register with the Great Britain Poultry Register, in order to help the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency get in touch in the event of any disease outbreaks. The RSPCA highly recommends that anyone with any number of birds, even two or three, registers in order to receive any disease alerts and guidance.

Water: Chickens 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. Should this occur, the ice should be broken manually; chemicals that prevent the build-up of ice or break it up once formed 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 will 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 substrate, 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.

From RSPCA Doc Welfare of Animals on Allotments – Page 7