

# Chicken Keeping

A guide to caring for chickens in schools



Guide produced for Food for Life



October 2020

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# 1. Welcome

*'In a society where everything comes in ready-made boxes it's great for children to see where their food actually comes from, in nature's finest form.'*

**Ben Keegan, teacher.**

Over the past few years, keeping chickens has enjoyed a resurgence and many schools are now taking up this 'eggs'citing pastime. Caring for chickens can help children to make connections with the natural world and animals. The work involved with keeping them can also be linked in with a wide-range of curriculum units. Additionally, it reconnects pupils with where their food comes from and allows them to make informed food choices of their own. This handy guide will help you to decide whether you want to keep up chicken keeping.

## **About Food for Life**

Soil Association Food for Life is all about transforming food culture – making healthy, tasty and sustainable meals the norm, reconnecting people with where their food comes from, teaching them how it's grown and cooked, and championing the importance of well-sourced ingredients. We work with thousands of schools, nurseries, hospitals and care homes, helping them build knowledge and skills through a 'whole setting approach'. This engages pupils and parents, teachers and doctors, caterers and carers, and the wider community to create a powerful voice for long-term change. Food for Life school awards supports schools to take a whole school approach that sees them grow their own food; organise trips to farms; source food from local producers; set up school farmers' markets; hold community food events; provide cooking and growing clubs for pupils and their families; serve freshly prepared, well-sourced meals and provide an attractive dining environment so lunchtimes are a positive feature of the school day.

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## 2. Here come the girls

*'Chickens are gloriously easy to keep, far simpler and less demanding than most domestic pets'*

National Trust - Henkeeping<sup>1</sup>

So you've 'hatched' your plan? But before taking the plunge into the world of poultry keeping, it is important to plan well for the arrival of your new friends. You won't need that many things to help your girls feel at home, but there are a few essentials that you will need to 'chick' out before progressing any further:



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<sup>1</sup> Eastoe, J (2007) *Henkeeping – Inspiration and practical advice for would-be smallholders*. National Trust & Collins and Brown, London.

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## ✓ COOP + RUN

The chicken coop and run come in a multitude of designs and price ranges. It is the space where your girls will pass the time of day, shelter from the elements, roost at night, lay their eggs, as well as offering protection from 'he who must not be named' - Mr F...O...X ! The coop is the house where your girls lay their eggs and sleep at night. The run is where they will spend their days. Your hens will be 'coming home to roost' as long as their living space includes the essentials:



- ✓ **Accessible nest box** – for laying eggs
- ✓ **Air vent** – To allow good air circulation in the coop
- ✓ **Roosting bars** – Better than a four poster bed in the poultry world
- ✓ **Easy access** – For cleaning and getting hold of the chickens
- ✓ **Pop hole** – Doorway for chickens to get in and out of their house
- ✓ **Secure door catches** – Keeps them safe from unwanted visitors
- ✓ **Grass** – Scratching for insects is so much fun
- ✓ **Soil / Dust** – Who needs showers or bubble bath?



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Coops and runs may come as single, combined units (as in the picture on the previous page), or they may be bought separately and need to be assembled. They can be bought from a multitude of suppliers or designed and built in the school. Allow for 30sq cm per bird in the coop and a minimum of 1sq m per bird in the run. Chickens love to scabble for insects and bathe in the dust and there should always be access to fresh grass and soil so they can satisfy their natural dustbathing and foraging behaviours.

**A-Frame:** A cheap and light structure, incorporating the run and coop in one, but will only house a couple of birds.

**Wooden Coops:** The traditional hen house is larger than the A-Frame design, but may not come with a run, in which case you will need to build one separately.

**The Eglu:** Very popular, trendy design manufactured by Omlet. Costs are higher, but they combine all of the important features and are made from energy efficient materials. Run sizes may be too small for bigger birds. We suggest building an additional outside run.



See links to more information on page 21

**Mrs Bok Bok's Top Chick Tip**

If you're planning on designing and building the coop and run, get the children and parents involved too. Designing could be incorporated into a range of curriculum units such as art and mathematics. Put out a call to parents to donate timber and other materials for the project - and there's always a handy dad or mum who would be happy to help out with the DIY work

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## ✓ Bedding

This goes in the nest box and on the floor of the coop. It is good to put down a layer of newspaper first as this makes the task of 'poop scooping' easier when it comes to cleaning time. Recommended types of bedding include straw or dust-free sawdust – both of which can be bought from the local Pet Store.

## ✓ Drinker

The average laying hen can drink up to 500ml per day. Purpose made drinkers can be easily bought these days – Either on the internet or in-store, with many selling a range of products for small-scale keepers. Certain birds (especially ex-battery hens) may not be used to this style of drinker, so observe them closely during the first few days and provide a temporary deep dish if there are any problems.

## ✓ Feeder

As with drinkers, feeders can be easily bought these days. Consider hanging or raising your feeder on a couple of bricks so that the girls don't accidentally get their food messy!



## ✓ Feed

Chicken feed is widely available from pet and country Stores. As chicks, they will eat **chick crumb**. As the birds get older, they will progress onto **growers mash or pellets**. From Point of Lay onwards (the chicken equivalent of adolescence at around 16 – 20 weeks), they will be eating **layers mash or pellets** which includes all of the essential nutrients. Most people will buy birds on / around Point of Lay and this being the case, you will only need to purchase layers mash or pellets. Whether you buy mash or pellets is entirely up to you and your birds. It's all the same – just in a different format. If you plan to change from one type of feed to another, try to make a smooth transition by mixing the feeds for a few days. Sudden changes can act as stressors on chickens, so make any changes as seamless as possible. This maybe more relevant if you are re-homing enriched



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cage or adult chickens who may have been used to different feeding regimes in their previous lives.

Feather pecking sometimes occurs between chickens and is their way of developing hierarchies within the flock – hence the term ‘pecking order’. Sometimes this can get out of hand, especially if birds are bored and this may lead to bullied birds and wider health issues. It has been suggested that in such circumstances, mashed feed could be better than pellets, as pecking for the smaller pieces of mash occupies the birds and reduces boredom.

**Grit** is another key requirement in the feeding regime. These are small pieces of crushed flint (sometimes with crushed oyster shells added). Because hens don’t have teeth, they are unable to chew their food. Instead, they will eat some grit as and when they need it and store it in their gizzards. This will then grind their food up, in much the same way that a millstone grinds grain. Oyster shell grit contains calcium that is great for bones and egg development. Try storing grit in an old flowerpot, secured to the floor of the run by a wire loop inserted through the drain holes and pushed into the ground. As with the feeds, bags of grit can be easily bought from all good suppliers.

**Grain and seeds** are not essential, but many people give them as treats. Give the jar of their favourite morsel a shake and your girls will be ‘flocking’ to you in seconds. If you are giving grains as treats, it is recommended that you do it later in the day so that the birds get all of their essential nutrients from their mash / pellets beforehand. Scattering grain and seed can help to satisfy their natural desire to range and forage, as well as keeping your birds occupied.

**Greens** are an important part of a chicken’s diet and access to vegetation is important to keep them entertained and satisfy their natural foraging behaviour (but make sure you protect your garden plants or they’ll eat them too). Suitable vegetable matter includes berries, cabbage, spinach, chickweed, dandelion, apples and pears etc.

**Protein** is ingested by eating insects and the children will love watching the girls scabbling around in the dirt for a tasty morsel or two.

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PLEASE NOTE: Many chicken keepers have been known to feed mealworms to their flock as a tasty snack. The Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSE) and Animal By-Product (ABP) legislation have been created to ensure that only safe products of animal origin are used in farm animal feed. This means that there is a ban within the legislation on the feeding to poultry of most proteins of animal origin, including terrestrial invertebrates such as dried mealworms. This is because dried mealworms are usually imported from countries outside the EU for use mainly in feed for wild birds. The feed materials that the mealworms are fed on may include manure and / or animal carcasses. If these feed materials contain pathogenic diseases, there is a slight risk of cross contamination from the mealworms to poultry.

### ✓ *Cleaning materials*

A tidy home is a happy home. Always have a dustpan, brush and poultry friendly cleanser to hand for all those important cleansing duties.

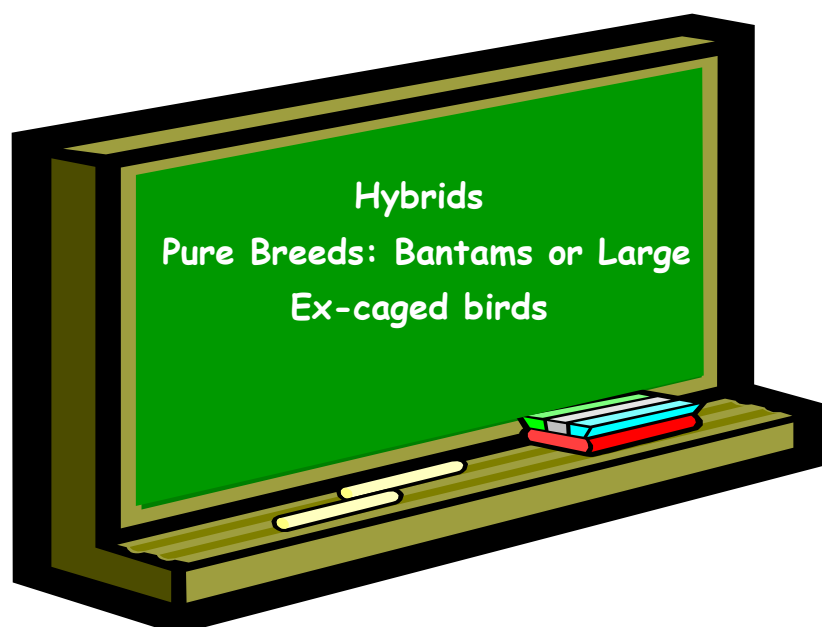
Pecky Necky says - 'Remember that the feeding to farmed animals of catering waste, kitchen scraps, raw, partially cooked and cooked meat products is prohibited under Animal By-Products legislation. See the Government [website](#) for more information'



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### 3. Pick a chick

When choosing your chickens, take time to think about what you want from them. Chickens come in a wide range of shapes and sizes, with each type having being bred for different reasons. Breed types fall into a few broad categories and picking the correct birds will depend upon the room you have available and what your requirements are. So 'don't get caught with egg on your face' and make sure you do that all important research before making your purchase. Lists of breeders can be found on the internet.



**Hybrids** are those birds which have been bred for laying. The best traits for egg laying have been selected to produce good layers. A good hybrid chicken can produce 300+ eggs per year. My Mrs Bok Bok is a Syston Gold Tip hybrid. Although she eats like there's no tomorrow, she's a skinny little thing as her breeding has selected towards egg production rather than meat for eating. Hybrids cost less to buy (around £15 for a point of lay bird), are hardy and widely available.

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**Pure breeds** come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes and have been bred for a range of purposes such as egg laying, meat production and showing. Some are docile, whilst others can be broody or even aggressive. **Bantams** are smaller birds which lay smaller and fewer eggs. Some can be very docile and make good pets in limited spaces. **Large** pure breeds can be divided into two categories – Heavy, which have been bred as dual-purpose birds for meat and eggs; as well as light, which have been bred for egg laying. There are far too many breeds to go into detail in this guide, but a few of the most popular ones are listed below. For further information on breeds, see page 21.

**Ex-caged** are birds which have spent their laying life (about 18 months) in commercial caged systems. Once the productivity of these birds drops they will be disposed of. Some of these birds are rescued by organisations such as the British Hen Welfare Trust who then re-home them through their network of regional centres. If you feel that you would like to give one of these birds a second chance in life, go to the British Hen Welfare Trust’s website for further information - [www.bhwt.org.uk](http://www.bhwt.org.uk)

<b>Hybrids</b>	<b>Bluebell, Speckledy and Rhode rock</b>
<b>Bantam Pure breed</b>	<b>Dutch bantam, Sebright and Pekin</b>
<b>Large Pure breed – Heavy</b>	<b>Cochin, Orpington and Rhode Island Red</b>
<b>Large Pure breed – Light</b>	<b>Welsummer, Silkie and Cream legbar</b>

**Remember - Hens are sociable birds and should never be kept on their own. It is possible to keep two, but three is better - If you lose one, then those that remain are not left alone.**

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**The name game**



— Now here’s the fun bit. Every self-respecting chicken deserves a suitable name. How about running a ‘name the chicken’ competition in school and get the children to vote for the best name? Other Food for Life Partnership schools have come up with some ‘eggcellent’ names - how about Princess Layer or Hen solo? Maybe Sam and Ella? You could try matching the name to your chicken’s personality. This is Squeaky Beak, my Rhode Island Red – She suits her name! How about Feral Feathers as a name? She was quite wild! And where else would such pampered poultry live but...wait for it...Peckingham Palace! We would love to hear the names that you come up with. Please get in touch and let us know your suggestions. The ‘corn’ier the better!

## Name the Chicken Competition

What would you like to call our new chickens?

Please write your suggested chicken name and your own name below.  
Place this slip in the box provided. We will all vote for the best names.

My chicken name is: \_\_\_\_\_

My name is: \_\_\_\_\_

Example of naming competition activity

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## 4. Care for your chickens

Caring for your birds can be broadly split into three categories – Daily care, weekly care and seasonal care. Schools will often draw up a work rota for term time, with each year group having responsibility for duties such as feeding, cleaning and egg collecting on certain weeks.

It is important that you think about who will let the girls in and out each day? It may be that the school caretaker is happy to take on this responsibility? Chickens can be let out when you get into work, although they will prefer to rise earlier as long as it is light. The same goes for bed time – they will happily



see themselves off to bed as dusk settles, but someone will need to close and lock the pop hole to keep them safe from Mr Fox overnight. Obviously, the specific timings for these responsibilities will change during the year. During the winter working week when nights are long I rarely see my girls, as I'm off to work before they rise and back home after they have turned in for the night. Conversely, during the summer months they can still be scrabbling for worms whilst I'm eager to get myself to bed!

You will also need to think about care arrangements for the school holidays. You may want to speak to local parents and draw up a rota. One of the staff may live locally and be more than happy to act as a surrogate carer. Just remember that there are loads of options and people are often more than happy to help out for the promise of a few free eggs!

To help you, feel free to print out the 'henny chicklists' on the next few pages:



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### Daily 'chicklist'

- Let the chickens out
- Wash drinkers and refill water
- Wipe feeders and top up with food
- Check grit and top up if required
- Remove any chicken droppings from coop – these can be put on the school compost heap
- Check fence for any holes
- Morning check for eggs
- Afternoon check for eggs
- Feed afternoon treats to chickens
- Spend time with chickens – Watch for illness or bullying and have fun with the birds
- Lock up the chickens in the evening

**Observations / notes:**

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A clipboard with a brown border and a grey clip at the top. The text is centered on a white background.

### **Weekly 'chicklist'**

- Empty bedding from coop and nesting box**
- Clean out coop and put in fresh bedding**
- Wash feeders**
- Check for lice on birds and in coop. Treat with powder if required**
- Check stocks of bedding, food, cleaning materials and first aid supplies**

**Observations / notes:**

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A clipboard with a grey clip at the top and a white sheet of paper. The paper has a brown border and contains a checklist and a section for observations.

### **Seasonal 'chicklist'**

- Carry our repairs on coop and run
- Move housing / run to a new area if the existing grass has been worn away
- Worm the birds during the spring and autumn
- Provide protection from the seasonal elements – shade in summer / wind & rain protection in autumn and winter
- De-ice drinkers during icy conditions

**Observations / notes:**

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**Chicken health**- As with all pets, chickens can sometimes get sick. Usually, this will be nothing worse than a runny nose (yes – chickens can catch colds) or a spot of diarrhoea, but it pays to be aware of signs of possible illness.

**Posture** – A bird that appears hunched and separate from the rest of the flock is feeling unwell.

If you find a bird like this, make sure you look out for other signs of ill health. Chickens are very good at hiding signs of illness so if one of your birds is showing these signs, you should take it seriously. If a hen is also making repeated trips to the nest box, straining or hunched close to the ground, she could be egg bound and may need a trip to the vets.



**Eye and nostril health** – Any discharge from nostrils or eyes is worth a visit to the vets as this may indicate a respiratory infection that will require a course of antibiotics. Head shaking, coughing and sneezing are also signs of possible respiratory infections.

**Wattle and comb** – A pale comb may indicate an infection of red mites, so check for other signs of infection (see *External parasites* below). Any wounds or scabs on the comb could indicate a problem with aggression and bullying amongst your birds. A bit of pecking is common in a new flock, but ensure that there is plenty of space as well as extra food and water around the run in order to alleviate the problem. Applying Vaseline to combs can help to prevent the problem.

**Plumage condition** – Feather loss can occur for a number of reasons. If hens are moulting, they will lose a lot of feathers in the early autumn. You will see feathers around the house and your hens will stop laying. Make sure there is

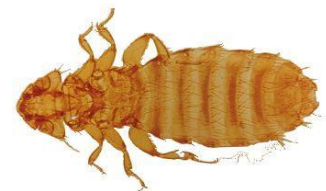
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plenty of access to shelter during this time as birds will be more susceptible to heat and cold.

**Foot and leg health** – Chicken’s feet should be clean and smooth. Any redness or raising of scales will need further attention. Raised scales and crusting suggests scaly leg mite. This can be very uncomfortable for birds, so a trip to the vet is recommended to get some drops to treat the bird with. Soreness and redness can occur if feet aren’t kept dry, so make sure that the house and run is kept dry. Consider adding a roof to your run, as the ground can get very muddy in wet weather. Bumblefoot is a bacterial and inflammatory infection on the feet of birds that will also require a visit to the vet. It is characterised by a hard callous on the base of the feet.

**Digestive Health** – Droppings should be firm and brown with a white top. You may also find the occasional smaller, brown, runny or light pink droppings. Anything that deviates from this for an extended length of time could indicate a problem with worms, infection or feed. If droppings are abnormal with no other symptoms, cut back on treats and ensure that your worming programme is up to date. Please note that if your birds also appear dull and withdrawn.

**External parasites** – You should check your birds and their housing regularly for mites and lice. Run a gloved hand under perches where they meet the wall. Red spots of blood in these areas are a sign of red mites. Regularly check your birds under the base of their feathers, under their wings and around their vent. Lice are 1-3mm long and beige in colour.



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There are a range of products available that can help your friends start feeling like themselves again. **Poultry tonic** which includes vitamins, can be added to drinking water. As a more natural remedy, **apple cider vinegar** is widely recommended as a quick fix for any birds that are feeling slightly sorry for themselves.

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**Red mite powder** can be purchase to treat those irritating little critters that like to hide between cracks in wood within the hen coop. Look for signs of Red mites on and underneath perches where the birds sit. Powder is dusted onto birds as required and concentrate can be used in the coop to kill off any infestation.

**Diatom powder** is used to treat lice and other mites. Part the bird's feathers to check for lice. They tend to like warm areas around the vent and under the wings. Dust the bird down with the powder if you find any lice. The powder can also be dusted onto the soil where the birds take their dustbaths. Diatom powder is 100% natural, but care should be taken not to inhale the fine particles when dusting and spreading.

Your birds should be wormed at least twice a year. This can be done using **Flubenvet Poultry wormer**. This can be bought as powder or ready mixed with layers pellets. Always follow the instructions carefully when worming your birds.

If you are concerned that one of your chickens may have a more serious illness, we recommend that you consult a chicken specialist vet immediately. The British Hen Welfare Trust's website ([www.bhwt.org.uk](http://www.bhwt.org.uk)) has details of specialist vets in your area. Most good poultry books will also include sections on chicken health.

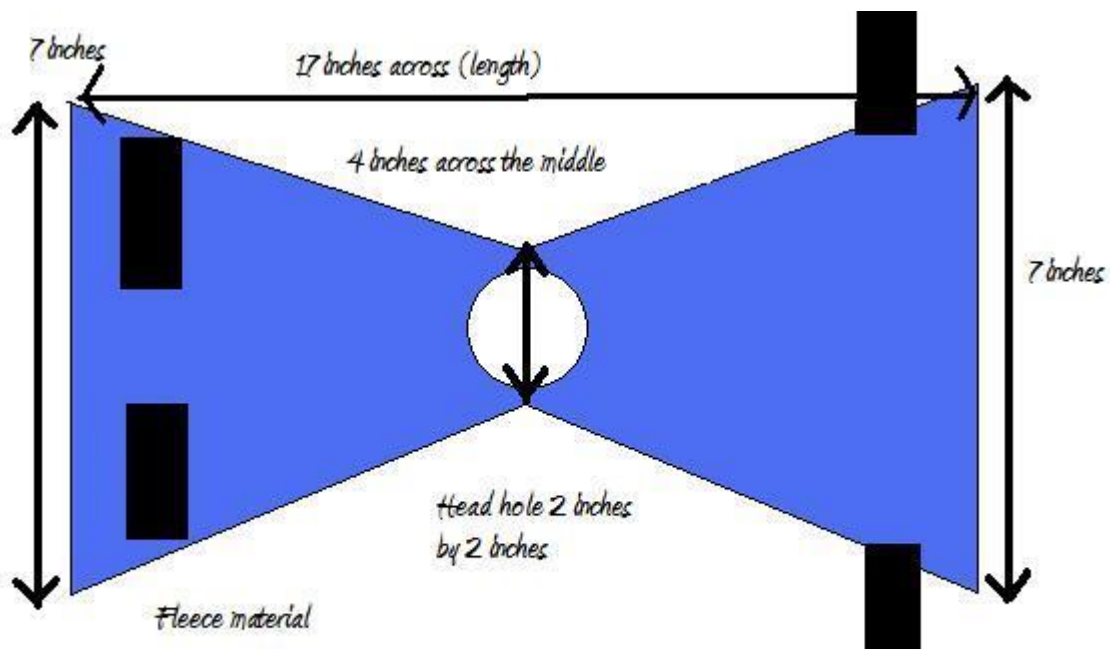


**Chicken fleeces** – Should you decide to adopt an ex-caged bird, chances are she may come to you in a bit of a state. Caged birds can get bored and may resort to unsavoury pastimes such as feather pecking their cage mates. Minus their feathers and unused to the outside world, re-homed birds can get cold quickly. They will undoubtedly appreciate a nice warm fleece coat



to protect them from the elements until their feathers grow back. Involve the children by running a **'design**

**a chicken fleece competition'** in your art class. Any spares will be graciously received by Little Hen Rescue ([www.littlehenrescue.co.uk](http://www.littlehenrescue.co.uk)) who posted the design below on their website.



*Black tags of velcro rough on outside and soft velcro on attached to fleece to be able to adjust the width*

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## 5. Health and Safety

On health and safety grounds, there is nothing that prohibits you from keeping chickens in your school grounds, though we do advise that you produce a risk assessment for keeping an animal in an educational establishment. If your school already has other animals, you may have done this already, but you will want to consider those hazards which are specific to chickens and their keeping. You are not required to register your birds with Defra, as long as you keep fewer than 50. Although not a requirement, Defra does recommend that you voluntarily register your birds so that you can be kept informed if any notifiable diseases break out. Should you keep more than 50 birds, you are legally obliged to register your flock.

**Hand washing** – As with all animals, good hygiene is important when handling them. Following any work with your girls (including handling, egg collecting and cleaning), hands should be washed with hot, soapy water.

On the next pages, you will find a sample risk assessment. This is only a sample document and it is important that you tailor your own assessment to your particular circumstances.

## Activity - Keeping Chickens in School

Hazard	Control Measure	Additional Measures
Spread of disease	Ensure birds are purchased from reputable supplier	
	Check with supplier that birds have been vaccinated	
	Instruct staff and pupils to wash hands before and after contact	
	Ensure arrangements are in place to clean and disinfect housing at regular intervals	
	Provide suitable PPE – eg: gloves and aprons	
Allergic reactions	Make note of any known allergies to birds, bedding etc that staff or pupils may have	
Pecks, cuts and scratches	Ensure first aid arrangements are in place to wash and treat any abrasions. Seek medical attention if in doubt	
Slips, trips and falls	Ensure areas around the coop and run are kept tidy and free of obstructions	
	Clear any liquid spillages as soon as they happen	
	Erect warning signs if spills occur	

## Activity - Keeping Chickens in School

Hazard	Control Measure	Additional Measures
Substance poisoning	Identify any cleaning substances that may be covered by COSHH. Store accordingly	
	Lock away any bird medicines eg: wormer	
Animal welfare issues	Ensure there is a designated person responsible for overall bird care – including weekends and holidays	
	Ensure that all staff have instruction in bird care	
	Identify a chicken specialist vet before purchasing birds	
Additional notes		

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## 5. Further information

We're only 'scratching the surface' with our information here, so for further hints and tips 'chick' out the following websites and literature:

### Here come the girls

[www.keeping-chickens.me.uk](http://www.keeping-chickens.me.uk) – Excellent home-made website by a chicken keeper of 20 years providing, information on all of the essentials required for chicken keeping.

### Pick a chick

[www.poultrykeeper.com/chicken-breeds](http://www.poultrykeeper.com/chicken-breeds) - Good website with information on pure breed and hybrids, including their appearance and temperaments.

[British Hen Welfare Trust](http://www.bhwt.org.uk) – Information on rehoming ex-caged birds.  
[www.bhwt.org.uk](http://www.bhwt.org.uk)

### Care for your chicken

[www.chickenvet.co.uk](http://www.chickenvet.co.uk) – In association with Countrywide Country Stores, this website aims to provide owners of pet chickens, fancy fowl and small flock keepers' advice on the care, health and well-being of their birds

### Health and Safety

[The Health and Safety Executive](http://www.hse.gov.uk) - Responsible for health and safety regulation in Great Britain. [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

[CLEAPSS](http://www.cleapps.co.uk) - Their services cover health & safety, risk assessments, sources and use of chemicals, living organisms and equipment in schools.  
[www.cleapps.co.uk](http://www.cleapps.co.uk)

[ROSPA](http://www.rosipa.com/safetyeducation/atschool/policy.htm) - The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents is a registered charity providing information, advice, resources and training.  
[www.rosipa.com/safetyeducation/atschool/policy.htm](http://www.rosipa.com/safetyeducation/atschool/policy.htm)

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**Defra: Animal Health** – Department of the Environment Farming and Rural Affairs webpages with information on keeping chickens and other animals.  
[www.animalhealth.defra.gov.uk](http://www.animalhealth.defra.gov.uk)

### **General information - Case Studies**

**Disraeli School** – Food for Life Partnership chicken keeping case study.  
<http://www.foodforlife.org.uk/Resources/Teachingresources/Resourceview/tabid/79/ArticleId/382/Keeping-chickens-in-school.aspx>

**Edmund Waller Primary School** – Chicken keeping case study.  
[www.schooljotter.com/showpage.php?id=89167](http://www.schooljotter.com/showpage.php?id=89167)

### **General information - Useful Books**

**Haynes Chicken Manual** – We can't recommend this book enough. An excellent introductory manual detailing all aspects of chicken keeping including choosing a breed, essential care and health problems.

Beeken, L (2010) *Haynes Chicken Manual: The complete step-by-step guide to keeping chickens*. Haynes Publishing, Yeovil.

**Henkeeping** – An accessible little book from the National Trust exploring everything you need to know about keeping chickens.

Eastoe, J (2007) *Henkeeping – Inspiration and practical advice for would-be smallholders*. National Trust & Collins and Brown, London.

### **General information - Useful Websites**

[www.omlet.co.uk/](http://www.omlet.co.uk/) - Pet housing, homeware and gifts including the award-winning Eglu Chicken Coop.