

WELFARE WASHING

How Supermarkets Market Suffering

THE HUMANE LEAGUE
UNITED KINGDOM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report finds that UK Supermarkets are exploiting gaps in consumer protection regulations to market standard, fast-growing chicken products as "higher welfare".

- Our investigation across major supermarket suppliers reveals widespread suffering in spite of stocking density reductions, driven by the continued use of fast-growing breeds.

- Scientific studies clearly show that a 20% increase in floor space provides minimal welfare benefits to fast-growing breeds compared to slower-growing breeds under identical conditions.

- Supermarkets are leveraging their stocking density reductions to market standard chicken products from fast-growing breeds with emotive packaging claims like "room to thrive", "happier" and "healthier", masking the on-farm reality.

- Polling has found that less than 10% of consumers could identify the welfare standards behind six major supermarkets' labels.

To protect consumers and achieve meaningful animal welfare reform, we must Rethink British Chicken.

Supermarkets must move to healthier, slower-growing breeds.

The UK Government must support the industry transition, implement mandatory method-of-production labelling, and lead the way through public procurement standards.



THE INVESTIGATION:

On-Farm Reality for Chickens

In recent years, most major UK supermarkets have changed their sourcing requirements to reduce the maximum stocking density across their standard fresh chicken ranges from 38kg/m2 to 30kg/m2. Retailers have used this shift to market their standard-tier products with claims such as "higher welfare", "happier and healthier" and "room to thrive".

To determine whether the UK supermarkets' stocking density reduction truly warrants such claims, The Humane League UK carried out multiple on-farm investigations across the UK, documenting conditions on the supermarkets' major chicken suppliers: 2 Sisters Food Group, Avara Foods, and Moy Park.

Visual evidence from six farms shows a convergence of acute welfare challenges and on-farm management lapses.

While our investigation provides only observational snapshots, the recurrence of conditions such as skeletal deformities, ascites, hock burns, and acute respiratory or metabolic distress highlights systemic vulnerabilities directly linked to fast-growing broiler production.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the stark gap between on-packet welfare claims and the daily on-the-ground welfare realities experienced by the hundreds of millions of chickens in supermarkets' supply chains.

This investigation, carried out from June to August 2026, found the following:



Mobility Issues

Our investigation found multiple instances of chickens suffering from suspected leg disorders, including Tibial Dyschondroplasia (painful cartilage lesions that cause lameness) and Valgus/Varus Deformity (twisted or bowed legs). Research shows that these conditions are significantly more prevalent in faster-growing breeds than slower-growing breeds.[1]



Hock Burns and Footpad Dermatitis

Hock burns and Footpad Dermatitis result from multiple factors, including breed and environment. Prolonged contact with ammonia in soiled litter leads to burns, most commonly on the footpads and hocks of chickens. Examples of both conditions, from red inflammation to full burns, can be seen within the investigation footage.



Pulmonary Hypertension Syndrome - Ascites

Ascites, also known as water belly, is the accumulation of fluid within the abdominal cavity. This often develops over time, leading to prolonged suffering before death.[2] **Susceptibility to ascites is strongly related to high metabolic rates**.[3]

Sudden Death Syndrome (SDS)

SDS, also known as flip over disease, can be characterised by a short period of wing convulsions, shortly followed by death. This often results in the birds dying on their backs. While the underlying mechanisms are not completely understood, **SDS is strongly linked with growth rate due to cardiac and pulmonary development being insufficient to meet the increased oxygen demands** of the increased rate.[4]



IT IS LIKELY THAT THIS DECEASED BIRD WAS FEEDING JUST BEFORE THE OCCURRENCE OF SDS.

Management and Biosecurity Lapses

Our investigation identified some environmental hazards, **including birds interacting with choking hazards in the form of shredded plastic; birds resting on heavily decomposed carcasses,** and fallen stock improperly stored in open bags inside the barn.



While these snapshots capture only a fraction of what birds endure throughout their lives, they **expose the deep welfare crisis built into intensive chicken farming's reliance on fast-growing breeds.** The widespread lameness, organ failure, and ammonia burns seen in this investigation prove that giving these chickens more space does little to improve their welfare without addressing the breed itself.

THE SCIENCE:

Why More Space Alone Isn't Enough

While lower stocking densities can provide welfare benefits, studies show that providing more space alone fails to deliver meaningful welfare improvements when not coupled with a shift to slower-growing breeds.

For example, activity levels of conventional faster-growing breeds dramatically reduce as the birds become larger, with the relative distance of movement of larger birds becoming shorter.[5] Giving more space to a breed that cannot sufficiently utilise it does not provide any significant welfare benefits. A study involving three different conventional faster-growing breeds, stocked at only 8 kg/m^2 (the current industry standard is 30 - 38 kg/m^2), showed that even with the extremely low stocking density, the fast-growing breeds spent less time performing natural behaviours and spent more time sitting as compared to slower-growing breeds.[6] The same study also showed that the fast-growing breeds demonstrated worse gait scores, a numerical rating used to evaluate a bird's walking ability and leg health, and higher mortality rates.

While "happiness" is a subjective measure, broiler stress levels can offer a reliable proxy for overall wellbeing. Interestingly, a study evaluating physiological indicators of stress across a broad spectrum of stocking densities, ranging from 20 to 55 kg/m^2, demonstrated that stocking density alone had no significant impact on the physiological parameters associated with stress levels.[7] Another study showed that, while high stocking densities did impact parameters associated with stress levels, there was no difference between birds in low and standard stocking densities.[8] In contrast, a recent study showed that not only do slower-growing breeds have lower stress and anxiety levels, regardless of environmental influences, but conventional faster-growing breeds are genetically predisposed to greater anxiety levels.[9]



To provide commercial context, **Table 1 shows the commercial welfare outcomes of a conventional fast-growing breed, stocked at 30 kg/m², the same as current retailer systems, compared to a slower-growing breed under the same commercial conditions.**[10]

TABLE 1:

Welfare outcomes in conventional fast-growing vs. slower-growing breeds under identical commercial conditions of 30 kg/m² stocking density

Welfare Outcome	Difference in fast-growing breeds (Relative to slower-growing breeds)
Mortality	66.4% higher
Culls	87.8% higher
Dead on Arrival (DOA)	11.1% higher
Total Mortality	72.5% higher
Hockburn	3.0% lower
Pododermatitis	30.5% higher

While this particular study shows a negligible 3% improvement in hockburn for the faster-growing breed, an analysis of 10 independent studies shows an absolute increase in both hock burns and pododermatitis in faster-growing breeds, compared to slower-growing breeds, with an average of 15% (FPD) more birds suffering from footpad dermatitis and 25% more birds suffering from hockburns to some degree.[11]

True animal welfare cannot be achieved through superficial adjustments to floor space alone.

While reducing stocking densities is a welcome step, marketing marginal spatial tweaks as "higher welfare" is fundamentally misleading so long as the underlying genetics of fast-growing birds remain unchanged.

When physiological limitations, such as musculoskeletal issues, cardiovascular strain, and ingrained behavioural restriction, prevent a bird from utilising extra space, physical room ceases to be a meaningful welfare driver.



WELFARE WASHING:

Supermarkets' Chicken Cruelty Cover-Up

The science is clear: supermarkets' modest move to give chickens in their supply chain more space still leaves chickens suffering immensely, and **the primary cause of their suffering untouched: the use of fast-growing breeds.**

Despite this, the supermarkets have taken this opportunity to market their standard fresh chicken products to consumers **using claims that fundamentally misrepresent the lived reality of the birds in their supply chain,** as evidenced by this investigation.

In the UK, there is no statutory definition of the term "higher welfare", nor any standardised Method of Production labelling, leaving retailers able to exploit subjective and emotive language to welfare-wash their chicken products. With government figures showing that roughly half a million chickens die on UK farms every week, alongside extensive scientific evidence proving that **fast-growing chicken breeds suffer because of their genetics**, the use of these terms actively misleads the public:

"HIGHER WELFARE"

Used to market anything above the statutory minimum welfare requirements, including products from cruel, fast-growing breeds.

"HAPPIER"

Employs an unquantifiable, subjective emotional state to project an image of animal wellbeing.

"HEALTHIER"

Contradicts the reality of fast-growing breeds, which predispose birds to higher incidences of painful health conditions and higher mortality rates.

"ROAM"

Implies freedom of movement, yet fast-growing breeds suffer from severe mobility issues and leg abnormalities due to their abnormally fast growth.

"THRIVE"

Carries connotations of excellent health and wellbeing, at odds with the high mortality rates of fast-growing breeds.



The following table shows on-pack animal welfare claims on standard fresh chicken products across the major UK supermarkets that have reduced, or committed to reduce, stocking densities while continuing to rear conventional, fast-growing breeds*:

TESCO



Sainsbury's





ASDA



ALDI



LIDL



co op



Morrisons
Since 1899

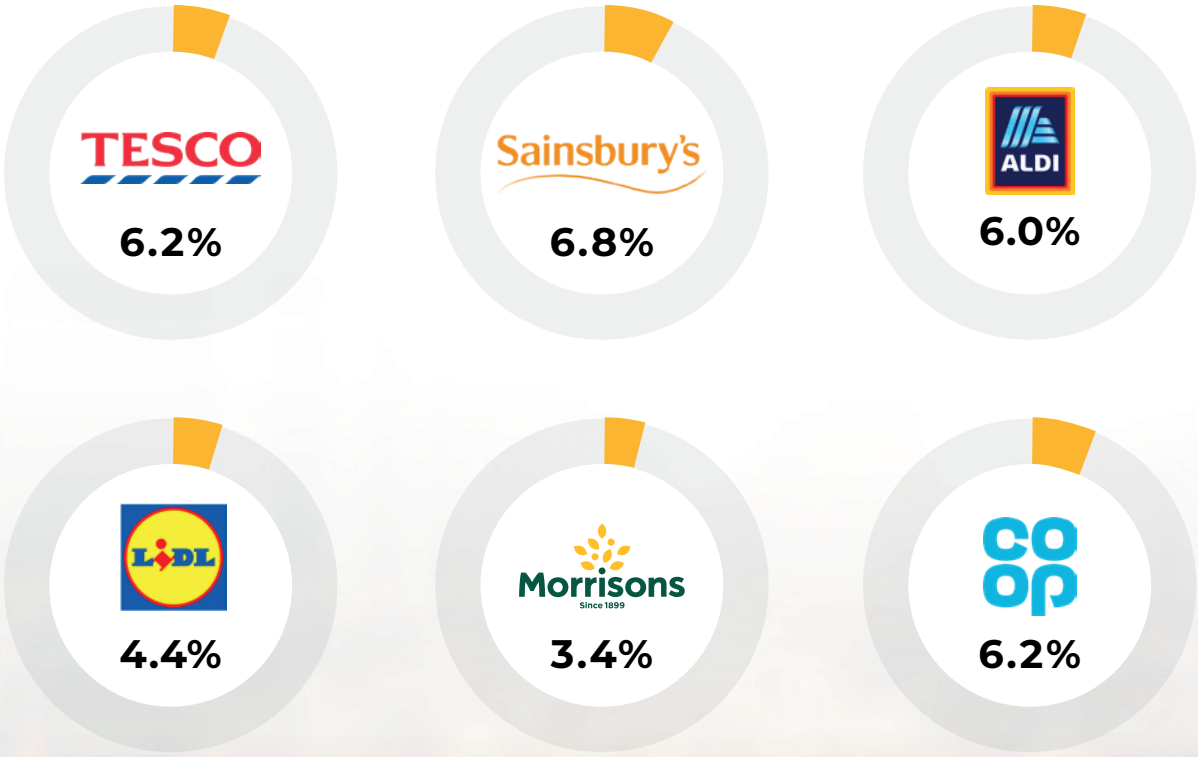


*Waitrose and M&S have been excluded from this table because they have implemented the BCC and no longer source fast-growing chicken breeds. Iceland has been excluded because it has not committed to giving its chickens more space and does not market its chicken products as 'higher welfare'. Iceland has lower welfare standards than the companies listed.

Recent polling by Research Without Barriers highlights the real-world impact of these ambiguous claims across standard chicken products. The survey presented consumers with the packaging claims and asked them to identify the specific animal welfare standards associated with each label. The findings reveal a major lack of clarity: **more than 90% of consumers couldn't identify the welfare standards behind each supermarket's label.**

It is therefore unsurprising that **82% of respondents would support mandatory method-of-production labelling** on food packaging that clearly states how an animal was bred and raised.

PROPORTION OF PEOPLE WHO CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED EACH LABEL:





RED TRACTOR:

Misleading and Misunderstood

In the absence of government-mandated universal Method of Production labelling, private assurance schemes such as Red Tractor fill the gap. Red Tractor certified more than 90% of British broiler chickens, while still permitting fast-growing breeds. Despite being the most well-known assurance scheme in the UK, **DEFRA's own call for evidence on animal welfare labelling found that 64% of consumers do not understand Red Tractor.**[12]

Consumers' understanding of Red Tractor assurance is particularly poor for chicken products. YouGov polling published in The Humane League UK's State of the Chicken Industry Report 2024 revealed that **only 14.6% of consumers could correctly identify the actual animal welfare standards behind the Red Tractor label on fresh chicken.**

In practice, the Red Tractor logo is serving as another welfare-washing tool for supermarkets.



CONCLUSION:

A Systemic Cycle of Suffering

Across farms operated by the supermarkets' largest suppliers, our investigation found birds trapped in a systemic cycle of suffering. Our investigators documented chickens scarcely able to move, experiencing agonising leg deformities and painful chemical burns. Many didn't survive at all. It is clear that more space isn't enough without a shift away from fast-growing breeds.

The investigation starkly contrasts with supermarkets' on-packet claims. Marketing standard chicken as "higher welfare", "happier and healthier" and "room to thrive" based solely on a 20% stocking density reduction while refusing to transition away from fast-growing breeds is blatant welfare washing: a clear attempt to make consumers believe supermarkets are doing more to protect animal welfare than they actually are.

While UK consumer protection regulations protect shoppers from deceptive environmental claims, **consumers are left largely unprotected by laws that would prevent them from falling victim to welfare washing.** This gap allows retailers to exploit subjective and emotive terminology to obscure the primary driver of chicken suffering and present a misleading picture to the public.

Ultimately, this system is failing animals who remain trapped in overbred bodies, confusing consumers who lack transparent information, and putting companies committed to higher standards at a disadvantage.



We Must Rethink British Chicken

The evidence shows that space isn't enough: We call on all UK supermarkets to commit to eliminating fast-growing breeds, with a plan to transition to healthier, slower-growing breeds.

We call on the UK government to protect consumers, support farmers and reform chicken welfare through direct policy intervention:

IMPLEMENT MANDATORY METHOD OF PRODUCTION LABELLING:

Enforce a standardised, mandatory method of production labelling to allow consumers to make fully informed purchasing decisions, **support the industry through the transition, and incentivise a move to slower-growing breeds.** Defra's own impact assessment predicted that a mandatory production labelling scheme would boost profits for farmers by an estimated £40 million per year and provide a net gain to British society of £140 million over ten years.

LEAD THROUGH PUBLIC PROCUREMENT:

Update Government Buying Standard for Food and Catering Services to **include a commitment to source slower-growing chicken breeds** through government contracts covered by the GBS. A commitment to slower-growing chicken breeds in government contracts would create a guaranteed and immediate demand for higher-welfare production and complement the market incentives created by labelling.

Through supermarket leadership in phasing out fast-growing breeds, alongside decisive government action, we can build a **food system in which no chicken on a UK farm is condemned to suffer simply because of its breed.**

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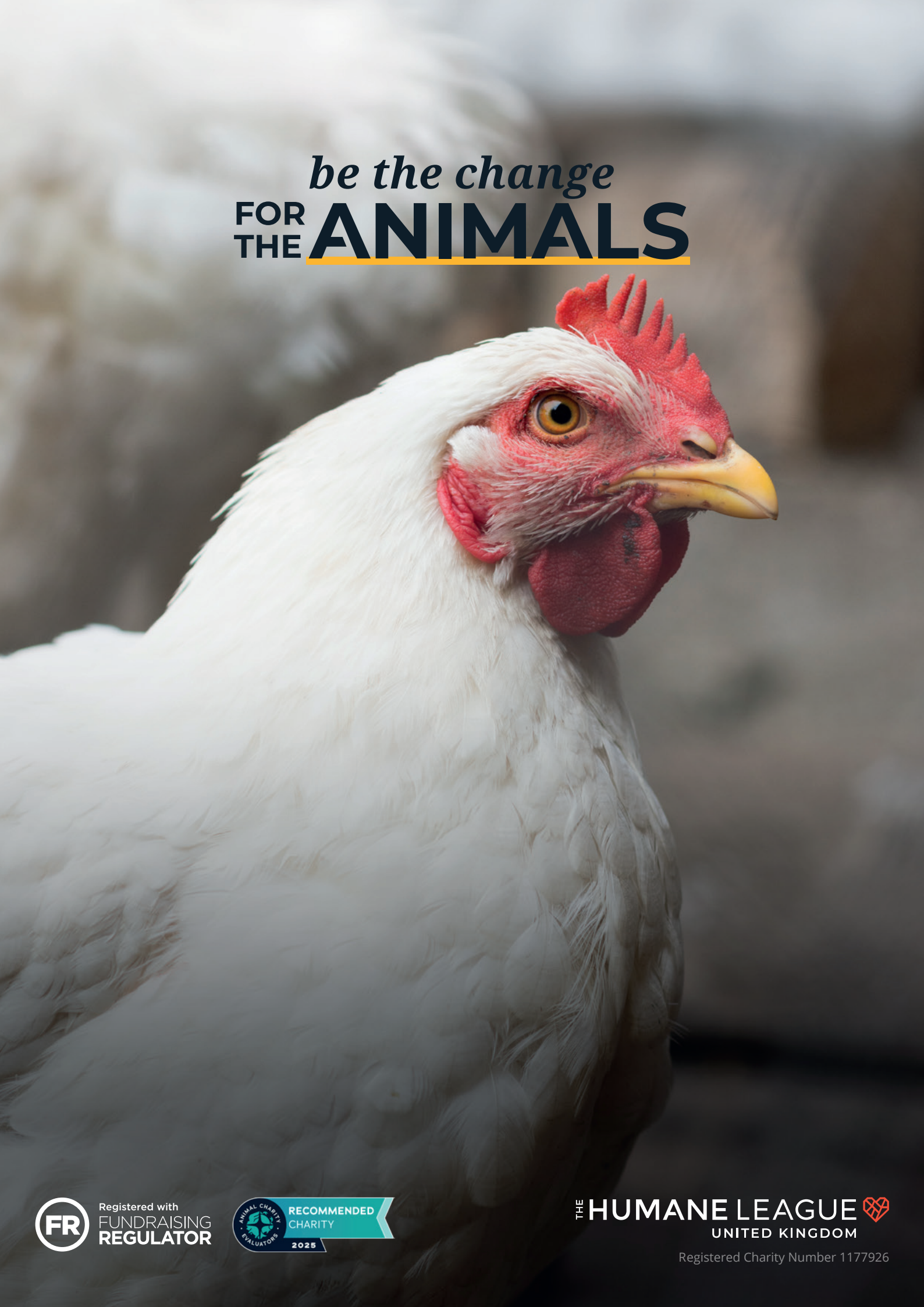
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Disclaimer
While we cannot confirm a direct contractual relationship between the specific farms investigated and the supermarkets named, the conditions documented are representative of standard, fast-growing chicken production across the supermarkets' supply chains.



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RECOMMENDED CHARITY 2025

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