

# Investigation into the RSPCA Assured scheme reveals widespread animal suffering

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Animal lovers across the UK are unwittingly supporting cruelty every time they choose RSPCA Assured products. This is the conclusion of a groundbreaking investigation by Animal Rising that reveals a hidden world of suffering that contradicts everything the scheme promises.

Detailed in their report, [RSPCA ‘Assured’: Covering up cruelty on an industrial scale](#), Animal Rising conducted the most extensive farm investigation in UK history, scrutinising the RSPCA Assured scheme, which is touted as the pinnacle of animal welfare in British farming.

The report was released on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2024, exactly one week before the RSPCA’s 200th anniversary, and reveals a grim reality.

Over four months (January to May this year), more than 50 investigators assessed 45 RSPCA Assured farms during 60 investigations, uncovering **widespread suffering and factory farming conditions**. Their findings, which include over 280 breaches of basic welfare requirements and 94 violations of DEFRA codes of practice, challenge the scheme’s claims of high welfare standards and expose systemic cruelty.

Despite its 30-year history and rebranding efforts, **the RSPCA Assured scheme is revealed to be a facade, misleading consumers who believe they are making humane choices.**

It’s our view at Ethical Globe that this investigation should be a wake-up call to all that there is no kind or humane way to farm our fellow animals as food.

## What is the RSPCA Assured scheme?

In 1994, the RSPCA launched its Freedom Food scheme. It was the first programme of its kind “to focus solely on farm animal welfare” (Source: [RSPCA Assured](#)) and required welfare standards that were set by the RSPCA, the world’s oldest animal welfare organisation.

Twenty-one years after its launch, the Freedom Food scheme rebranded as RSPCA Assured, officially adding the RSPCA stamp of approval. Today, the scheme has more than 4,000 members, which include farms, hauliers, and abattoirs. According to the [Charity Commission for England and Wales](#), the scheme generated approximately £5.2 million in income in 2022. For many, it is seen as the “gold standard” of animal agriculture.

A number of major supermarket and fast food brands (including Aldi, Lidl, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, Tesco, Co-op, M&S, Waitrose, McDonald’s UK) sell flesh and secretions from animals reared on RSPCA Assured farms.

As we can see from the [RSPCA Assured YouTube channel](#), the scheme presents an almost-fairytale image of life for the animals on its member farms – [turkeys wandering through fairy light-bedecked woodland](#) or [pigs foraging on lush, sprawling hills](#).

**Consumers see these images and believe that the flesh on their plates comes from animals who lived full and enriched lives until they trotted happily to their “humane” slaughter, any fear or pain fleeing and over in seconds.**

**But Animal Rising’s report reveals a horrific existence for hundreds of thousands of animals in RSPCA Assured farms, which is far from the fairytale marketing images.**

### The findings of the RSPCA ‘Assured’ investigation

As we highlighted above, Animal Rising conducted more than 60 investigations into 45 RSPCA Assured farms over a period of four months earlier this year. The investigators used the RSPCA Assured Standards to assess the sites they visited.

The farms investigated keep hens for laying eggs, broilers (i.e. chickens raised for their flesh), pigs, or salmon or trout.

All footage, pictures, and reports from the investigation were reviewed by:

- Professor Andrew Knight, a world-renowned Professor of Animal Welfare and author
- Ayesha Smart, a specialist barrister in animal welfare law and a Crown Court judge
- Dr Alice Brough, an ex-commercial pig vet with extensive experience on RSPCA Assured farms
- Mark Borthwick, a doctoral fellow studying behaviour and behaviour change on salmon farms

Ayesha Smart concluded that Animal Rising’s investigation showed 280 breaches of the law and a further 94 breaches of DEFRA codes of practice.

In her summary of her findings, Smart said, “*Some of these RSPCA Assured farms do not even comply with basic legal requirements even though they hold themselves out to the public as being a ‘higher*

welfare' supplier. This is effectively fraud, particularly when a welfare-conscious consumer selects a product based on that sense of higher welfare and ethical treatment of sentient beings”.

Animal Rising decided not to name and shame the investigated farms in the report. They believe the focus should be on the collective failure of the Assured scheme and the extent to which the RSPCA has drifted from its mission to protect *all* animals.

**You can view Animal Rising's video summary of their findings on**

**YouTube: [https://youtu.be/OfM5VRMI7wk?si=f24jVs1MZIL\\_7HhU](https://youtu.be/OfM5VRMI7wk?si=f24jVs1MZIL_7HhU) (Trigger warning: this video includes harrowing investigation footage).**

### **The plight of pigs**

The RSPCA Assured scheme says that “RSPCA Assured pigs must be provided with plenty of space, comfortable bedding and materials to root in and manipulate, to ensure they are comfortable and able to carry out natural rooting behaviours”.

On the issue of tail docking, the scheme says, “the RSPCA standards never allow the routine use of mutilations”, [a practice that can cause acute and chronic pain](#).

This is not what the investigators found.

Animal Rising conducted 18 investigations on 12 RSPCA Assured Farms. The report provides an in-depth analysis of these investigations. In some cases, the investigators returned two or three times because they were so concerned by what they found on site.

These findings included:

- Widespread disease, including viral and bacterial infections
- A dying pig, convulsing in a pool of excrement with no veterinary care
- Pigs with no enrichment or opportunities to exercise natural behaviours
- Individuals who were so stressed, bored or in pain that they would fight and cannibalise each other
- Overcrowding leading to poor social dynamics, fighting and a high number of injuries
- Numerous pigs with docked tails to prevent other pigs from biting them ([against RSPCA standards](#))
- Vocalisations of pigs showing their distress
- A dead, decaying pig between two enclosures
- Boars living in isolation with minimal space for movement or stimulation
- Dying pigs who had not received veterinary care in time to prevent prolonged and unnecessary suffering

Dr Alice Brough, the ex-commercial pig vet who reviewed the footage, concluded, “*The pig industry and the RSPCA are failing to provide anything close to a life worth living for pigs*”.

Seven of the 12 pig farms investigated would be what DEFRA classifies as “intensive” farms (i.e. factory farms) that contain more than 2,000 pigs weighing over 30kg. [This contradicts the RSPCA's claim that it doesn't support intensive farming](#).

## Chickens in horrendous conditions

Animal Rising conducted 22 investigations on 18 RSPCA Assured chicken farms. It found that the chickens were living in “horrendous but commonplace conditions” that fall short of *any* welfare standards, not least the RSPCA Assured’s requirements.

The investigation footage showed:

- Hens with insufficient space to stand fully upright
- Chickens forced to roost on faeces-covered floors due to lack of space (this goes against the natural instinct to perch away from predators)
- Hens unable to carry out natural behaviours
- Farm workers picking up hens and swinging them by the legs, often resulting in fractures (many chickens arrive at slaughter with leg fractures caused by human handling)
- Severe feather loss due to stress
- Beak trimming to stop feather plucking and pecking at selves and each other (another procedure that causes acute and chronic pain, and that also impedes the bird’s ability to eat and drink)
- On one farm, there were 64,000 hens in one shed
- 22 hours of light in some sheds to increase egg laying, but reduce the hens’ ability to rest and sleep
- Hens trapped under cages without access to food or water
- Numerous dead and dying individuals (some decomposing)
- Corpses piled high in a wheelbarrow and open to rodents
- Live electrical wires and exposed motors, presenting risks to individual chickens or a widespread fire
- Dead chicks stuck in feeders
- Ill and injured birds with diarrhoea or broken wings
- Chickens unable to walk due to their body weight
- Chemical irritation on the skin due to urine and faeces on every surface
- In one shed, the temperature was 30.5c with no water available

After reviewing the footage from 16 of the 18 chicken farms investigated, Professor Andrew Knight concluded, “*All of the chickens crowded into these barren sheds, with minimal opportunities to exercise highly motivated natural behaviours, experience chronic stress. These birds are highly sentient, and such treatment of them is not ethical*”.

## The unimaginable suffering of farmed salmon and trout

The third part of Animal Rising’s report centres on 14 RSPCA Assured fish farms, where a total of 18 investigations were carried out. [Fishes such as salmon and trout are sentient beings with feelings](#) and able to experience pain and fear, and yet they are often left out of conversations about animal rights and freedom.

When free living, species such as salmon cover a vast amount of distance during their lifetimes, but in a farmed environment, their whole existence occurs within a small, overcrowded space. Organisations such as [Compassion in World Farming](#) have called for a ban on salmon farming due to the extreme level of suffering it causes.

Animal Rising’s report presents a horrific reality – its findings included:

- A significant number of diseased, injured, dying or dead salmon or trout
- Individuals with missing noses, eyes, or fins
- Widespread evidence of lice
- One salmon with their upper jaw missing
- Spinal damage and swim bladder problems
- Scoliosis
- Ruptured ulcers
- Fungal infections
- Malnutrition
- Living fishes being thrown over 6ft fences by workers
- Dead birds floating in the water
- Contamination in the lochs where the farms are situated

In addition, the RSPCA says that salmon should spend a maximum of 15 seconds out of water before they're killed for distribution. Animal Rising's investigators saw salmon left for many minutes with a significant number dying before they could be killed.

The RSPCA Assured scheme also allows live salmon to spend up to eight hours in transit on a boat, but one investigator found salmon spending over 54 hours in cramped, overcrowded and extremely stressful conditions.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency warned that salmon farms are infecting endangered wild salmon in Scottish lochs with sea lice.

Doctoral fellow Mark Borthwick is a renowned expert in salmon behaviour, aquaculture policy, and animal welfare. After reviewing the footage obtained by Animal Rising, he stated, *"This suffering is not caused by a single lapse in standards and practice, but rather, a farming system that is fundamentally not fit for purpose. I question the factual basis on which the RSPCA is certifying these animals, as the RSPCA's own standards are not being met, and these animals are clearly being kept in cruel conditions"*.

### **The RSPCA has broken public trust**

[Sixty-nine percent of British people define themselves as animal lovers](#) according to the RSPCA's own Animal Kindness Index, and 32% say that animal welfare is one of the top three most important social and environmental issues we face today.

However, there is a disconnect. Seventy-two percent of people "believe that chickens have physical and emotional experiences" (Source: RSPCA Animal Kindness Index) but only 38% think a move away from intensive (i.e. factory) farming needs to be a priority.

The RSPCA Assured brand appeals to this mindset. It reassures people that they can continue to eat farmed animals with a clear conscience. The animals, consumers are told, are able to have good physical and emotional experiences while they live.

People are prepared to pay more for a 'higher welfare' kilogram of flesh. According to the [article in \*The Times\* that broke the Animal Rising report story](#) on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June, prices for RSPCA Assured products "are often higher – for example, Sainsbury's sells an ordinary British fresh medium whole chicken (1.6kg) for £4.95, while the closest RSPCA Assured equivalent, a corn-fed whole British chicken (1.55kg), costs £8.85".

In reality, both chickens may have suffered equally.

### **Not the first time**

Sadly, this is not the first time that the RSPCA has come under scrutiny. Animal Rising says that there have been at least 33 investigations by other organisations over the last 16 years, each of which found similar examples of widespread suffering.

The Animal Rising report reminds us that, in 2011, [Animal Aid found workers stubbing out cigarettes on live pigs](#) and committing other horrific acts of abuse at a Freedom Food-approved slaughterhouse.

In 2022, [Animal Justice Project recorded footage](#) of workers hitting, kicking, and otherwise abusing pigs at a RSPCA Assured farm and during transportation.

The [Pignorant](#) documentary film shows the extreme suffering of pigs being slaughtered in a gas chamber, as well as a pig being beaten to death with a metal bar by a worker, both at a RSPCA Assured farm.

In late March, Animal Rising reported one particular farm to the RSPCA. However, it is not aware if any action was taken as the farm was still operational and RSPCA Assured as of 31<sup>st</sup> May 2024.

Sadly, there seems to be a pattern of the RSPCA suspending farms from its Assured scheme and then quietly reinstating them. Animal Rising says this has been the case following other investigations.

### **The RSPCA's response**

Activist and television presenter Chris Packham has worked with the RSPCA since 1990 and was appointed the charity's honorary president in May 2023.

After seeing Animal Rising's investigation, he told *The Times*, *"I think the footage is utterly indefensible. I know you are going to ask me whether [these RSPCA Assured schemes] are deliberately misleading or defrauding the public because they come with a brand which implies that there is a standard of welfare that the public would expect. What we've seen in that footage is not a standard of welfare that any member of the public would accept. It's not acceptable."*

Packham immediately called for the RSPCA to suspend the Assured label, and to permanently withdraw the certification of salmon farms. The RSPCA told *The Times* that it would investigate the allegations in the Animal Rising report but would not be willing to suspend or end the Assured scheme because that would "risk leaving millions of farm animals with even less protection" (interesting phrasing that suggests an awareness that farmed animals are minimally protected under the scheme!)

It's notable that just 24 hours after the RSPCA 'Assured' report by Animal Rising hit the news, the RSPCA sent out an email to its mailing list urging people to petition their parliamentary candidates about prioritising welfare for farmed animals.

It seems the charity is doubling down on its public image as a benevolent protector of farmed animals. Note the image they have used on the email. It's a clear message – this is what we represent, what we offer, what we make happen, an idyllic life before slaughter.

The pictures and live footage from the report tell a far different and darker story.

## **The RSPCA Assured scheme must end**

In 2021, the RSPCA announced that its priority is to [see more than 50% of farmed animals reared within RSPCA welfare standards by 2030](#). However, Animal Rising's report demonstrates that these standards provide **a veneer of respectability to untold levels of pain and suffering for far too many animals**.

If the RSPCA had a scheme that enabled dogs and cats to be treated in the same way as farmed animals, people would be appalled and would mobilise to shut the scheme down.

Yet again, [speciesism](#) creates this disconnect. Farmed animals sit at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In his [powerful article about Animal Rising's investigation](#), former lawyer and activist [Wayne Hsiung](#) reminds us that **the RSPCA should be “rescuing animals, not certifying their slaughter”** and, indeed, that the RSPCA shouldn't be who we need to rescue animals from.

Animal Rising's video about the investigation highlights this.

Some of the investigators rescued a young pig, now named Charlie, who needed emergency medical treatment but had not received it. The video shows Charlie now, happy and free, outside of the agricultural industry that was set to destroy her. She's lively, curious, engaged with the world, and expressive.

It's a stark contrast, a reminder that **every pig or hen locked in dark, dank, overcrowded sheds have the same drive to live and be social and explore their environment. Salmon should be travelling the oceans, not trapped in a circle of living hell for their entire existence**.

***This is what the RSPCA is meant to stand for.***

As Hsiung says, the RSPCA Assured scheme is a failure in accountability. It needs to end. The charity needs to stop pretending that it protects farmed animals, or it needs to halt the scheme and use its age, size and public trust to create actual change, including a ban on factory farms and slaughterhouses.

The RSPCA Assured message muddies the waters. It makes slaughter more palatable to the majority of the public, the people who call themselves animal lovers. People are being sold a lie, while the farmed animals are paying the ultimate price.

**You can learn more about the Animal Rising investigation and sign their petition to for the RSPCA to drop its Assured scheme at: <https://www.animalrising.org/>**