



6 questions to consider before buying your hens

We believe that chickens make a fantastic addition to a school and will support learning, behaviour, motivation and your school's sustainability objectives. As you may be new to chicken-keeping we've put together this information sheet with a few key questions to help you decide whether chicken-keeping is right for your setting.

What is our budget?

When getting started you will need, as a minimum, a house, feeder and drinker, bedding, food and (of course) some chickens! You will also need cleaning equipment and a number of health care supplies. For three chickens and a basic set up you should expect to spend at least £400. When we source housing and equipment we aim to find the highest quality for the lowest possible price and we feel it is worth paying a little extra for good quality housing as very cheap housing will be wobbly, draughty and will warp the first time it rains. We also strongly recommend choosing the largest possible run for your space and budget in order to provide a high welfare environment for your hens.

The ongoing costs associated with keeping chickens are very low; their daily feed and bedding cost pence per day. However, you should be prepared to buy occasional healthcare and maintenance products or pay for trips to the vet. Chickens can get ill and injured and a vet visit and medication for three poorly hens can cost around £50. You may also have costs associated with care of the hens during holidays.

Once your hens are laying you can expect roughly a box of eggs per hen per week for most of the year so if you decide to sell these to parents then the chickens can help pay for themselves!

What will we do during weekends and holidays?

Chickens do need daily care and they can't be left over the weekend. Different schools find different solutions to this but the basic options are:

1. Establish a rota of staff and local parents who can access the school at weekends and over holidays to care for the hens. Everyone on this rota will need some basic training.
2. Board your hens or hire a hen-sitter during holidays. We offer on-site hen sitting and can recommend good hen boarding services in your area. Alternatively, Animal Aunts are a nation-wide company who will come to your site during holidays.
3. Choose a hen house that can be taken home at the weekends and holidays so a member of staff can keep the chickens in their own garden. This does limit you to a small plastic house such as an Eglu and these tend to be expensive.

How will we manage the day to day care of the hens?

On a day to day basis caring for the chickens is very easy. They will need to be let out into their run in the morning, provided with fresh food and water and their house and run tidied and 'poo-picked'. In the evening they will need to be shut away. Once a week their house will need to be cleaned out and periodically they will need health care such as nail clipping and de-worming and their house will need maintenance such as a coat of wood preservative or an application of ground sanitizer in their run. A strict routine of cleaning and health care is essential: many problems affecting chickens, particularly parasites, are much easier to prevent than they are to cure!

Some schools start a 'Farm Squad' of pupils and staff who care for the hens during lunch times or after school. Others make one class responsible for chicken care each week on a rotational basis.

How will we ensure buy-in from staff and parents?

It's best to avoid a situation where responsibility for the hens falls on just one or two members of staff. Here's a few ideas to get everyone involved and excited:

- Training: arrange some hands-on chicken care workshops before your hens arrive and invite all school staff, parents and older pupils; you could even invite people from the local community who may be interested in helping to care for the hens during holidays. A good training session will ensure everyone feels confident catching, handling, feeding and cleaning out the birds.

- Throw a party to welcome the new hens! This gives everyone a chance to meet the new arrivals and gets everyone excited. Ask us for ideas of chicken themed games, crafts, and party food.
- Keep a blog to share the latest news from the coop. The Paddington Academy Chicken Times is a great example (pachickens.blogspot.co.uk)

How will we ensure good hygiene?

As with all pets, as long as proper hygiene is observed then chickens do not pose a significant risk to human health. All children working with the hens should be supervised to ensure they are working safely, and some health products should be administered by staff.

One major consideration is chicken poo: if your chickens are going to free range then the area they use will be contaminated with chicken poo. If children also use this area then this can get on their shoes and be walked inside or onto their hands. The best solution is to restrict free-ranging to a garden or a fenced area or playing field where children can wear wellies (or even shoe covers) and will not be playing on the ground, or to keep the chickens permanently enclosed (see below). Small disinfectant footbaths and mats are available and it may be appropriate to place one at the exit of your chicken area.

Download our 'Chickens in Schools: Is it Safe?' factsheet for more information.

We will allow our hens to free range?

Free ranging means the chickens are able to explore outside of their run. In some settings this is suitable and in some it's not. Due to the threat of urban foxes chickens should only be let out to free range when there is someone nearby to keep an eye on them (for example during break time) and a couple of hours a day can be sufficient providing the chickens have a varied environment to explore. The less time the chickens are able to free range the larger your run needs to be. If you're not able to provide any free ranging then we recommend a large walk-in run to ensure the chickens have enough space and enrichment.

Providing a high quality space for the chickens is essential, with plenty of different heights, textures, toys and snacks for them to explore and we can help you make your run or garden a chicken paradise! In unsuitable environments chickens suffer

health and behavioural problems including feather pecking and cannibalism so providing the right space is an essential welfare requirement.

The final thing to be aware of if you plan to let your chickens free range is the potential for damage. If they spend a lot of time on the same patch of grass or earth they will scratch it bare and in wet weather it can become very muddy. There are easy solutions to this that we will talk through with you. Any plants or flowers will also need protection or the chickens will quickly devour them!

What kind of chickens do we want?

Deciding why you want to keep chickens will help you pick suitable breeds. Hybrid hens will lay you plenty of eggs all year round but may be less friendly and don't have much variety in their appearance. Pure breeds have plenty of variety in their appearance and are generally more docile. They come in all shapes, sizes and egg-laying abilities; we can help you choose and source one or more breeds that suit your needs. Finally, some schools want to keep chickens for meat. If this is you then you'll want to choose a slow-growing, dual purpose breed and have arrangements in place for slaughtering and processing the birds. If you want to sell meat you'll need the right paperwork in place too.