The recent EU Commission report on the welfare of laying hens in various production systems has recommended that no changes be made to the EU-wide ban on the use of conventional ‘battery’ (i.e. barren) cages for egg laying hens, to be applied from 1 January 2012 (laid down in Directive 99/74/EC).

Defra supports the 2012 deadline for the EU-wide phasing out of conventional cage systems, and public bodies will wish to consider the implications for their future buying of eggs and products containing eggs. An objective of the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI) is to promote animal welfare.

The Commission report recognises the welfare benefits of alternative production systems compared with conventional, barren cages. Enriched cages are supported in the report. These are cages which provide an increased space allowance, claw shortening devices, perches, nest boxes and litter. Brief descriptions of the different methods of production are given on the British Egg Information Service’s web site - http://www.britegg.co.uk/ukeggs05/ukeggs2.html.

The report recognises that conversion to alternative systems of production incur higher production costs; and notes evidence from two surveys that EU consumers attach particular importance to the welfare of laying hens with the majority being willing to pay more for higher standards of welfare. It therefore expects that the extra cost should, with proper promotion and consumer information, be sustained by the market.

The report also notes that member states generally have a considerable way to go to replace all conventional cage systems by 2012. In the UK these systems still account for over half egg production.

However if, as a consequence of the EU ban, home production were to be replaced by imports of eggs and egg products derived from chickens in barren cage systems then animal welfare will not benefit - and consumer wishes will not be met. The UK is currently about 87% self-sufficient in eggs.

The Commission report recommends running a number of campaigns between now and 2012 to promote public awareness of the ways in which laying hens are kept.

The biggest outlet for non-caged eggs produced in the UK is currently the shell egg retail sector, and welfare attributes are promoted and marketed. Fewer at present go to catering establishments and for use in prepared foods. Imported eggs – usually in the form of liquid egg or powdered egg – are also used for catering and processing.

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3 Eurobarometer surveys
The Commission report notes that egg products including liquid and powdered egg do not need to carry ‘welfare’ information on the production method.

The NFU are prepared to accept the battery cage ban as long as it does not lead to the export of the egg industry to countries with lower standards of chicken welfare. Its Poultry Board Chairman, Charles Bourns, said:

"The fact that the EU has said it is not going to extend the deadline for outlawing the present generation of battery cages does at least remove any uncertainty".

"But it will be pointless and counter-productive if we do not extend the same level of welfare to all of the chickens involved in supplying eggs to the European market, not just those chickens that happen to be housed in the EU".

“Government departments are still sourcing over 40 per cent of their food from imports, including products like chicken, eggs, pork and bacon from countries which are still using systems that would either be illegal in this country or which would be unacceptable under our farm assurance protocols.”

Defra’s Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, has expressed support for the maintenance of an EU-wide ban on conventional cages from 2012. He said:

"There have been some people who have been arguing that there should be a delay on the implementation of that ban. It is not a view that I share, it's long overdue."

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4 Public bodies are allowed to specify methods of production and processing under the policy and legal framework governing public procurement, but cannot give greater weight to locally produced food and drink when awarding contracts. That’s because the rules require public bodies to ensure their procurement is fair, transparent and not used to discriminate by setting up barriers to free trade. However, they do provide public bodies with plenty of flexibility to be innovative in their procurement, e.g. to increase tendering opportunities for small and local producers which can help increase competition and value for money. This is explained in advice on the PSFPI web site, including the guide “Putting it into practice” - http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/guidance.htm.