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Food Business

M&S leads the way on higher welfare chicken in the UK



M&S
— FOOD —



M&S - Company Background

Marks & Spencer (M&S) was established in 1884 as a British value for money retailer. It specialises in high-quality, own-brand products and serves 100 international markets with 1,604 stores and has a £11.93 billion group revenue.

M&S sells 5,000 food lines and owns 3.6% of the UK food market, with 316 M&S Simply Food stores and over 40 renewed Foodhalls. Its 'Remarkable' value range is key to delivering value for customers, with over 100 products in the range benchmarked against key competitors while maintaining M&S' quality standards.

Focused on its investors and customers, M&S has committed to deliver trusted value products that never compromise on quality, sourcing or animal welfare standards. It offers more RSPCA Assured products than any other UK retailer, and research has shown that animal welfare and meat quality are of the utmost importance to its customers.

M&S has a long history of driving animal welfare standards across the industry. Twenty-five years ago, it was the first UK retailer to move to 100% free-range whole eggs. And since April 2021, all fresh and ingredient pork has been 100% outdoor bred and non-confinement farrowed. Following its Good Chicken Award in 2010, M&S determined there was more work to be done to improve the welfare of chickens reared for meat (broiler chickens) in its supply, and in 2018 signed up to the Better Chicken Commitment (BCC), also known as the [European Chicken Commitment \(ECC\)](#).



Committing to broiler chicken welfare

M&S was the first UK retailer to sign up to the [Better Chicken Commitment](#), a science-based policy with five criteria that address the most pressing welfare issues for chickens that are reared for meat. It was developed by a group of European NGOs to produce a unified ask for food companies to commit to across all the broiler chickens in their supply by 2026.

The Better Chicken Commitment requires the following:

- ✓ Use of breeds of chickens with higher welfare outcomes - typically slower growing strains
- ✓ More space for the chickens to live – a maximum stocking density of 30kg/m²
- ✓ Natural light, perches and pecking substrates such as grain and straw
- ✓ More humane slaughter practices
- ✓ Compliance with third-party animal welfare auditing and annual reporting of progress

M&S was also the first UK retailer to start on its transition, successfully working with suppliers Hubbard, PD Hook, Hook2Sisters and 2 Sisters Food Group. This enabled the laying down of the slower growing breeding flocks necessary to convert all its fresh chicken to be BCC compliant.

M&S already had its Oakham™ brand of chicken which inspired customer loyalty and focused on continuous improvement of the conditions the chickens were reared in. However, with the roll-out of its new Oakham Gold™ label in September 2022, all its fresh chicken now comes from slower growing breeds that have better welfare attributes. **Oakham Gold™ meets all the Better Chicken Commitment criteria and is RSPCA Assured – raising the baseline for all its fresh chicken and making M&S the first UK retailer to achieve this.** It is also on track to convert its processed and ingredient chicken to meet the 2026 BCC deadline.



Oakham Gold™ meets all the Better Chicken Commitment criteria and is RSPCA Assured

Getting the job done

M&S knew that if it was to be successful in delivering on its Better Chicken Commitment within its ambitious timescales, everyone in the business - Commercial, Technical, Agricultural and Marketing colleagues - had to work as one cross-functional team. Initially M&S focused on getting Board approval which turned out to be straightforward as the BCC so clearly aligned with M&S' animal welfare values. They continued to hold weekly cross-functional discussions as the project progressed.

Working closely with suppliers was critical from the outset – from initial discussions right through to the in-store launch. Parent flocks had to be laid down at the right time and there had to be enough shed space to deliver the required number of chickens. Slower growing breeds live longer and therefore more shed space is required for flocks per year.

Contracts were signed and product offerings examined to see if changes were needed. It was important to look at product development to get the right products on the shelf, while improving product utilisation as much as possible to provide cost-effective offerings and avoid waste. Customers also needed to be brought on board through a marketing and communications campaign that explained the benefits of supporting higher welfare chicken as a baseline standard, and what this meant for the evolution of the Oakham™ brand.





Aligning with the farmers was also vital. Agricultural shows over the summer of 2022 helped facilitate discussions about what was happening from an agricultural perspective when moving from Oakham™ to Oakham Gold™. **The farmers learned more about the benefits of using slower growing breeds and the other welfare improvements from adopting the BCC.** M&S was also able to share with the farmers what the product was going to look like in store and the marketing they would use to promote it, which was very beneficial and inspirational for them to get on board.

In the Spring/Summer of 2021, M&S had carried out in-store marketing at some of its stores in the south-west of England which proved extremely valuable when ascertaining the strongest messaging for customers. M&S replaced its usual Oakham™ brand with the new Oakham Gold™ chicken and ran some in-store promotions. Customer interviews reported a high number of positive responses regarding the evolution of the brand and deemed it worth paying more for.

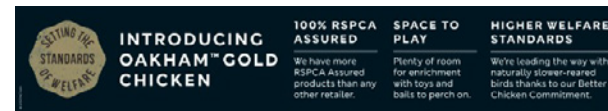
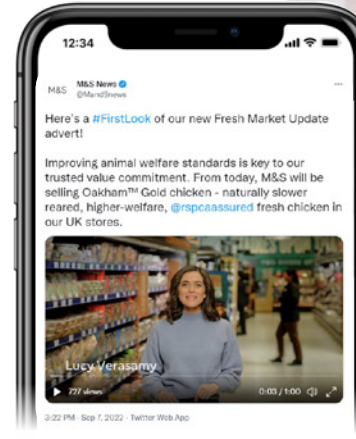
This trial gave the confidence needed for the continued roll-out of M&S's Oakham Gold™ chicken across its entire fresh supply. It also provided valuable consumer insight to inform marketing campaigns so that they could effectively communicate what **M&S aimed to achieve, what the offering was and what it meant – for the chickens, the farmers and the customers.**

Launching Oakham Gold™

On 7 September 2022, M&S launched Oakham Gold™ chicken in all its stores nationwide, with in-store marketing highlighting its higher welfare chicken on shelf barkers, shelf edge markers and in other in-store promotions.

M&S also began a TV advert campaign to promote its Oakham Gold™ chicken, starting with prime-time episodes of its 'Fresh Market Update' airing across ITV and Channel 4 in Autumn 2022. The ad showcased a farmer who rears the higher welfare Oakham Gold™ chicken and featured RSPCA Assured's Head of Farming, Joe Bailey, who said: "This is the biggest change to chicken rearing in a generation and we really hope it will encourage other retailers to do the same."

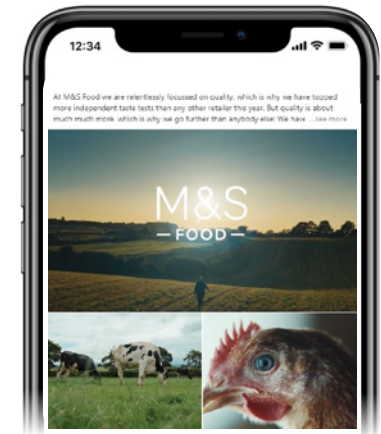
"The biggest change to chicken rearing in a generation... they're leading the way on welfare for chickens."
Joe Bailey, RSPCA Assured's Head of Farming





M&S followed up with two more TV adverts in May 2023, fronted by leading chef Tom Kerridge. The ads saw Tom visit a father and son who farm in Somerset. They took a closer look at how the chickens are reared, what this means for their welfare, and how this has positively affected the life of the farmers, who commented: "It is such a relief being able to grow this slower reared chicken."

In addition, Oakham Gold™ was featured in the M&S Fresh magazine, showcasing recipes and 'Meet the Farmer' articles so that consumers could find out more about who was producing the chickens and how. There was positive feedback from consumers, who commented that the flavour was amazing and it was how chicken used to taste.



"The most tender and tastiest chicken I have tasted in a long time"
M&S Consumer feedback



Results and benefits

M&S today remains the only retailer to have switched to 100% BCC-compliant fresh chicken and it has seen positive results since the change. The slower growing chickens are more active and engaged – using the enrichment and bales for pecking. They have 20% more space and perches to encourage natural behaviours. They are proving to be more resilient and robust and better able to deal with higher temperatures in the summer.

There have been clear benefits to moving to BCC-compliant birds. A reduction in antibiotics to 1.44 mg pcu, reduced mortality to less than 3%, hock marking down by 40% and a rejects reduction of 25%.

The farmers have provided encouraging feedback – they are enjoying seeing the birds interacting more with their environment. Daily tasks have been reduced, such as bedding provision because 40% less litter is required. **The positive effects of rearing more robust, healthier chickens have had a knock-on effect for the wellbeing of the farmers.**

Sales have been good since the launch, in line with initial expectations. Sales of legs, drumsticks and wings are helping to drive and improve better product utilisation – and they feature in the 'Remarksable' value range. There are also significantly fewer customer complaints.

“I’m really enjoying farming the M&S Oakham Gold™ chickens – they are much more inquisitive than other breeds, have more room to dust-bathe, perch and play with pecking objects. Seeing them exhibit natural behaviours makes me proud to farm these birds and I believe this translates into a more tasty eating bird – this is a real game changer.”

Martin Sweetland, an M&S Oakham Gold™ farmer



100% BCC-compliant
M&S today remains the only retailer to have switched to 100% BCC-compliant fresh chicken

Learnings and challenges

M&S made the decision to embark on the Better Chicken Commitment before the cost-of-living crisis and understands the importance of addressing this. **The 'Remarksable' value lines are one way of delivering cost-effective options to customers - without cutting corners on welfare.**

A key factor in the success of its transition to BCC-compliant fresh chicken was securing farming space at the beginning to house the slower growing birds for longer. So, when M&S moved to Oakham Gold™ production, it had the space required throughout the supply chain.

M&S had decided to have a 'hard launch' for Oakham Gold™, removing all Oakham™ products and replacing them with Oakham Gold™ overnight. It was vital that the volume of chickens required was delivered on 7 September 2022, and it had been quite a journey in the months leading up to that point – breeding the necessary birds, having the right number of eggs and eventually chickens on farm. Working closely with trusted partners, such as Hubbard, PD Hook, Hook2Sisters and 2 Sisters Food Group, was essential in ensuring the correct number of higher welfare products landed on shelves overnight.





Looking forward

M&S is committed to the BCC and delighted to be on the journey. It is focused on being a leader in animal welfare and understands that delivering higher welfare for all broiler chickens in its supply is a huge part of this.

It is currently focusing on the carbon emissions associated with slower growing breeds, and feed is a key aspect of this. M&S wants to move towards sustainable soy and have this in place by 2025, as well as further exploring alternatives to soy. Innovation and technology underpin these ambitions and it is important for M&S to be at the forefront of new developments.



“Being the first UK retailer to have 100% BCC-compliant fresh chicken on shelves is a landmark achievement for animal welfare, which we hope will set a leading example for others. It is testament to our ongoing commitment to improve the lives of all the chickens in our supply by using more robust breeds that lead healthier and more fulfilled lives. But we want to do more. We will keep raising the bar to improve welfare as it is an important part of our trusted value commitment.

A study we conducted with YouGov highlighted that 81% of UK adults think that it is important that food retailers focus on the better treatment of farmed animals. And our customers have responded well to Oakham Gold™ – they acknowledge the importance of better welfare for our chickens and also see the benefits of improved texture and flavour in the meat they buy.”

Vivienne Harris, Agriculture Manager – Poultry, M&S Food Department

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Want to know more?

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