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Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Seacole Building, 2 Marsham Street  
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4 September 2026

**Subject: Delivering on the End the Cage Age commitment – The case for free farrowing for mother pigs (sows)**

Dear Minister,

As the Government has indicated in its Animal Welfare Strategy that it will phase out farrowing crates, we are writing to urge Defra to commit to a full ban on any routine crating of mother pigs and move directly to a requirement for well-designed free farrowing systems. There is widespread industry acceptance that farrowing crates must be phased out. But temporary (or “adaptive” or “flexible”) crating cannot be treated as part of the solution because these crates still fail to meet sows’, and piglets’, core welfare needs. They do not achieve lower piglet mortality levels than well-designed and well-managed free farrowing systems, and fall short of ever-growing public and market expectations for genuinely cage-free farming.

The Animal Welfare Strategy rightly recognises the urgency of ending farrowing crate use, as these cages represent the most severe form of confinement used for any farmed animal in the UK or EU.

When crated, a mother pig is unable to turn around, walk, nest build, leave the nest site to defaecate or urinate, or develop a normal maternal bond with her piglets. Confining a sow before, during and after farrowing – whether for a few days or several weeks – imposes extreme and unacceptable behavioural restrictions. The inability to perform nest-building behaviour is particularly harmful: it frustrates a highly motivated, hormonally driven behaviour in the period before giving birth and is associated with heightened stress, disrupted maternal hormones, prolonged farrowing, more stillborn piglets and poorer maternal responsiveness.

Even short-term confinement therefore has profound welfare impacts and is incompatible with modern expectations around animal welfare.

It is often claimed that free farrowing inevitably leads to higher piglet mortality, and that temporary crating is therefore a necessary compromise. However, this is not supported by the weight of scientific evidence nor by commercial experience in countries that have adopted free farrowing successfully. In well-functioning free farrowing systems, piglet mortality can be comparable to that seen in crated systems, without imposing the severe behavioural restrictions inherent in any confinement-based model.

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), through its 2022 review carried out by a panel of 20 leading animal health and welfare scientists, concluded that both mother pig and piglet welfare are better in well-functioning free farrowing systems than in temporary crates.[1] Importantly, the report found that when free farrowing pens are appropriately sized and designed, piglet mortality can be comparable to that seen in crated systems.

UK-specific data supports this conclusion. Analysis from AHDB (2010–2023) shows that total piglet mortality was lower in outdoor systems – where all mother pigs are free farrowing without any confinement – than in indoor crated systems in 10 of the 13 years examined. Outdoor systems also consistently recorded up to half the number of stillborn piglets compared with indoor, crated sows. [2]

International evidence points in the same direction. Countries that have mandated zero confinement free farrowing, such as Switzerland[3] and Norway,[4] report piglet mortality rates that are comparable to, or lower than, those in countries that rely on crates. Switzerland began phasing out farrowing crates in 1997, with complete elimination by 2007. Data covering over 60,000 litters during the transition period, and later over 330,000 litters after the ban, found no increase in total piglet mortality once confinement was removed. [5] [6]

While crates may reduce some crushing incidents, they are associated with significantly higher piglet mortality from other causes, including stillbirths, starvation or diarrhoea. [7] In particular, the inability of crated sows to perform highly motivated nest-building behaviours is associated with reduced milk released by the sow,[9] [10] and increased aggression toward piglets [11] [12] – factors strongly linked to poorer piglet outcomes.

Temporary crating may be presented as a stepping stone away from conventional crates, but the systems currently on the market are not a credible bridge to truly cage-free farrowing. Most commercially available temporary crate systems in the UK have an overall footprint of between 4.3m<sup>2</sup> - 6.5m<sup>2</sup>, whereas EFSA has advised that a well-functioning free farrowing system should provide at least 7.8m<sup>2</sup> (6.6m<sup>2</sup> for the sow and 1.2m<sup>2</sup> for the piglets). In practice, that means temporary crate systems being installed today are too small ever to function as free farrowing pens.

The public mood is clear. Humane World for Animals polling published last year found that 69% of the British public reject the use of farrowing crates and believe pigs should be confined for no more than a few hours, such as for veterinary procedures. This highlights very limited

public tolerance for systems based on routine confinement, even where the period is shorter than in conventional crates.

From an economic perspective, temporary crates are also an unwise investment, even in the short term. In recent Defra-commissioned research conducted by the University of Reading, an expert panel gave indoor pig farming using farrowing crates a score of just 27 out of 100 for welfare. By contrast, whilst just shortening the period of confinement (using temporary crates) only raised the score slightly (to 34), indoor free farrowing was given a score of 47. Crucially, the public places a far higher economic value on a full move away from cages than they do on simply reducing confinement length: UK households were estimated to value eliminating crates at £1.4 billion per year, equivalent to an extra £2.52 per kg of pork, while a move to temporary crating was valued at only 90p extra per kg. This shows that consumers are willing to pay materially more for genuinely crate-free pork than for pork from temporary crates.

Yet consumers would not need to pay anywhere near that amount extra. Recent economic research in the Netherlands identified that transitioning from farrowing crates to 7.5m<sup>2</sup> free farrowing pens would cost 0.04 - 0.08 Eur per kg pork.[13] This amounts to around 0.02 Eur on a pack of 14 bacon rashers. Additionally, piglets from free farrowing sows are often heavier at weaning - a further production benefit.

A move to temporary crates creates a serious stranded-asset risk. Because the vast majority of temporary crates currently commercially available in the UK cannot be adapted into well-functioning free farrowing pens, farmers who invest in them now are likely to have to remove and replace those systems well before their intended lifespan is met. In many cases, they may also need to seek planning permission to extend or reconfigure buildings in order to achieve the space required for genuine free farrowing. Given that farrowing accommodation is typically expected to last for decades, this would amount to a costly two-step transition rather than a sensible pathway to future-proofed housing.

Industry must be encouraged to pause a voluntary transition to temporary crating that risks locking in the wrong infrastructure and instead start fitting well-designed free farrowing pens. Such pens exist and could be installed at scale, including, amongst others, the PigSAFE pen developed in the UK by researchers at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and Newcastle University. Only by committing to free farrowing can the UK credibly claim to have ended the cage age for mother pigs, aligned its farming systems with scientifically evidenced good practice, and delivered the genuinely higher-welfare outcomes that the Animal Welfare Strategy aims to achieve for UK pigs.

Yours sincerely,

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- [1] <https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.2903/j.efsa.2022.7421>
- [2] AHDB <https://ahdb.org.uk/pig-performance-trends-and-cop-sensitivity-for-feed-and-performance> Latest data available from <https://ahdb.org.uk/pork-costings-and-herd-performance> see Key Performance Indicators.
- [3] Weber, R., Burla, J.B., Jossen, M. and Wechsler, B., 2020. Piglet losses in free-farrowing pens: influence of litter size. *Agrarforschung Schweiz*, 11, pp.53-8
- [4] Ingris, 2022. Annual Statistics 2022. *arsstatistikk-2022.pdf* (relevant figure is on p7, titled Utvikling i tap fram til avvenning)
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