

Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture



Advice and Information on Pigeon Control

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Introduction

This reference document is designed for local authorities, government Departments, statutory boards and other organisations that have a responsibility for area-wide pigeon control in an urban environment in our towns and villages or possibly for a large site such as a school, hospital or large commercial premises.

The pigeon or rock dove is probably the most common urban species of bird that lives and breeds in close association with man. The pigeon of today is superbly adapted to living in areas of human habitation where buildings that replicate cliff faces provide extensive predator-free roosting and breeding facilities. There is also a ready food supply in the form of fast food refuse and large quantities of seed and other foodstuffs deliberately fed to pigeons by those who encourage their presence.

The Pigeon or Rock Dove (*Columba livia*)



Breeding period: All year round
Nest: Rough nest made with twigs usual on or in buildings and never in trees
Number of eggs: 2 white eggs
Incubation period: 16/19 days
Fledging period: 35/37 days (up to 45 days in winter)
Food: Seed eater that will exploit multiple food sources including waste food in urban areas and deliberate feeding by the public.
Multiple broods may be reared in a year.

This close association between pigeons and humans has led to problems particularly in our town centres where they can cause significant damage and staining to buildings and foot paths. **However, pigeons do not pose a significant threat to human health.**

“The whole rats with wings thing is just emotive nonsense. There is no evidence to show pigeons spread disease” – **Mike Everett RSPB 2001**

“In 50 years of professional work as a veterinary surgeon I cannot recall one case of zoonosis in a human that was related to pigeons. On the other hand I know of, and have seen examples of human disease related to contact with dogs, cats, cattle, monkeys, sheep, camels, budgies, parrots, cockatoos, aquarium fish and even dolphins on many occasions” - **David Taylor BVMS FRCVS FZS**

The problems pigeons have caused has resulted in many and varied control methods being applied over the years, including proofing, applying deterrents and culling.

Summary of Actions for Pigeon Control

1. Public Education programme and information, media awareness
2. Compile and agree an Area – Wide Pigeon Control Plan –
3. Installation of Deterrents by Local Authorities, Private property owners
4. Artificial Breeding Facility provided by local authorities
5. Designated Feeding Areas provided by local authority
6. Deter Persistent Feeders in the area supported by a public awareness campaign and ttrict Local Authority enforcement of the Litter Acts to reinforce.
7. Egg removal by local authority (subject to appropriate legal requirements)
8. Cleaning of affected areas and removal of excess food in the designated feeding areas.
9. Fast Food Outlets high standards of hygiene and displays of posters encouraging responsible disposal of waste

Pigeon Control Problems

Proofing-Pigeons are commonly found roosting and breeding in roof voids and attic spaces with property owners often needing to exclude them and block up the entry/exit holes. It is legal to exclude entry whilst the birds are absent so long as they are not nesting inside. However, it is important to be aware that because the pigeon breeds all-year round there is never a safe time to exclude birds when you can be confident that there will not be pigeon squabs (chicks) or flightless juvenile birds in situ. Blocking access holes may result in adult and flightless birds becoming trapped. You must therefore check for activity or signs of breeding. Apart from the obvious humanitarian implications there are serious health and safety implications for the property owner concerned. If birds die as a result of having been sealed inside a void of any description the decomposing carcasses will become maggot-infested within a matter of days, particularly in summer months. There are also legal implications in respect of trapping live birds where property owners can be prosecuted for causing unnecessary suffering. In the winter there is a lower likelihood of coming across nesting pigeons, than in the spring. Schedule to provide an area free of nesting birds at the time of the work.

Culling-pigeon control using conventional means has failed completely as a result of the methods employed. Lethal controls as a means of reducing pigeon flock size has only had the effect of **increasing** pigeon numbers and entrenching problems for property owners. This is because killing adult pigeons in a feeding flock increases the survival rate of the remaining birds so it is a waste of effort. **The size of a pigeon flock is dictated by the extent of food available to it and cold winters** – if birds are physically removed from the flock, by culling for example, this not only increases the food supply for the remainder of the flock but creates a void into which surviving members of the flock breed. **Culling or physical removal of pigeons by whatever means does not usually reduce pigeon flock size.**

Feeding Pigeons adds to the problem



The only effective method of controlling pigeon populations by using non-lethal and holistic methods of control that deal with the source of the problem as well as the problem itself (**Area-Wide Pigeon Control**). We will never succeed in wiping out the species altogether and we would not wish to remove the rock dove as a native Manx bird, therefore tolerance and good working practices are the only means available to ensure that man and the pigeon can live alongside each other in relative harmony. This involves a combination of the provision of artificial breeding facilities and the provision of new roosts (away from the problem areas), deterrents and proofing (in the problem area) and education of the public to make them aware of the problem e.g. where and what the problem is, what is being done to address it and to discourage/prevent uncontrolled feeding.

Area-Wide Pigeon Control

Artificial Breeding Facilities

The Pigeon Control Advisory Service (PiCAS) www.picasuk.com has found that by providing artificial breeding facilities for pigeons and by encouraging the birds to use the facilities for the purpose of roosting and breeding, pigeon flock size can be reduced by as much as 50% in as little as 4 years and potentially up to 95% after 5 years. This reduction is achieved by removing eggs, as laid, from these facilities and replacing them with dummy eggs. The simple removal of eggs will cause a pigeon to lay a new clutch if the conditions are suitable. This reduction is only possible if an action plan for each site is drawn up identifying the problems and providing suitable and sufficient breeding and roosting facilities backed up with the installation of appropriate deterrents fitted at the problem site.

Artificial breeding facilities can be almost any shape or size ranging from wall mounted nesting boxes costing as little as £20-£30, pigeon lofts costing £200-£300 through to large ornamental dovecotes costing several thousand pounds. These facilities can be tailored to suit both the available budget and the aesthetics of the building, site or area where they are erected. Where the root cause of the problem is deliberate and persistent public feeding of pigeons a dovecote facility combined with a designated feeding area may be the most effective system. Wall-mounted nesting boxes and pigeon lofts are often provided as a complimentary control where a dovecote/feeding area system is provided. Pigeon Lofts and nesting boxes mounted on or in buildings can be used as a standalone control, however, many German towns and cities have provided loft-based area-wide systems with extremely high rates of success.

Loft-based systems are more commonly used for resolving roosting and breeding-related problems on individual sites or buildings and as a result must be tailored to suit the specific requirements of the site or building concerned.



A wall-mounted pigeon nesting box

When providing an area-wide system involving the use of dovecotes and public feeding areas it is always important to try and identify a site where pigeons are already present and, if possible, where pigeons are already being fed. There is little point in providing a site for a dovecote/feeding area facility that fits all the other criteria such as accessibility, aesthetics, permission from the owner etc. if there are no pigeons present. An ideal site would be a green area, owned by the local authority (or by the site concerned) and close to a town or city centre where the public is already feeding pigeons. A dovecote should always be designed with the needs of the pigeon in mind but it should also be a pleasant and attractive feature for the public to enjoy and appreciate. Pigeons will quickly be drawn away from existing daytime feeding perches, assuming that the artificial breeding facility is complemented by a designated feeding area where members of the public can legitimately feed the birds. Once a public information/education campaign is in place, directing the public to feed pigeons only on the designated site, pigeon-related problems associated with the exploitation of food in other areas of the town or city will reduce dramatically. Persuading pigeons to leave their existing roosting and breeding sites, however, is more complex and uptake of a dovecote for this purpose of roosting and breeding will be more successful if existing roosting and breeding sites throughout the town or city are closed down.

Once pigeons have been excluded from their breeding sites displaced breeding flocks will start to consider roosting and breeding within the dovecote facility based on the fact that it is provided immediately beside their feeding area. Once pigeons are using the facility for the purpose of breeding eggs can be removed once a week and replaced with dummy eggs; this will cause no distress to adult birds and the population will quickly decline – this method of birth control is 100% effective. Egg removal from a standard dovecote or loft will take 10 minutes per week. Cleansing, assuming that the cote is well designed, would normally only need to be carried out once every 6 months. This method of control is not only scientifically

proven to be extremely effective in the long-term control of pigeons, but is also popular with the general public and property owners alike.



A futuristic dovecote and designated feeding area, provided by Kortrijk City Council in Belgium

It is not enough, however, simply to provide an artificial breeding facility and do nothing more. To affect a sustainable control system that will continue reducing pigeon numbers indefinitely a local authority will need to focus **on public education and information** combined with the **installation of deterrents** in sensitive areas. Cleansing services will also need to be upgraded to reduce public perception of the problem. The local authority concerned will also need to actively persuade property owners to protect their properties with deterrents such as spikes and gel repellent and take a proactive approach in respect of closing down existing large-scale roosting and breeding sites. DEFA have been in contact with PiCAS who have indicated they are happy to work with local authorities and other organisations to give specific and detailed advice on sites, problems and design of dovebots etc. It would be for each organisation to make arrangements with PiCAS directly through their web site at www.picasuk.com .

The public (including commercial property owners) need be made aware of what the authority is trying to achieve and why. Their support and cooperation is critical to the success of any holistic pigeon control programme. Members of the public need to reduce food to pigeons and those that insist on feeding, irrespective of requests not to do so, must be directed to feed only in the designated feeding areas provided. In some cases it may be prudent to appoint a pigeon control officer or designate the duties to an enforcement officer to enforce the Litter Act to prevent unauthorised feeding. Fast food outlets and food shops need to maintain high standards of hygiene outside their premises (DEFA EHOs can assist

with problem premises) and must assist the local authority by displaying posters and handing out leaflets to customers explaining why the council is taking the action it is. Cleansing managers need to re-assess key areas of high pigeon occupancy and upgrade cleansing services.

Designated Feeding Areas

The provision of a designated feeding area where members of the public can legitimately feed pigeons is an important element of any area-wide pigeon control programme where the persistent and deliberate feeding of pigeons is seen to be the root cause of the problem. In any town there will be a hardcore of deliberate and persistent pigeon feeders that go out each day and feed pigeons in a variety of different areas. Many of these feeders are elderly people who will often feed at the same time each day and in exactly the same place. Pigeons are quick to recognise the routine and learn to wait at each of the different feeding sites to exploit the food provided. This inevitably means that the birds will use a perch on the same building each day to await the feeder with resultant soiling problems for the property owner concerned. However, if a central feeding site is provided where persistent feeders can be directed to feed pigeons, and if the random feeding of pigeons is banned outside this area, pigeons will gather at this site and random perching elsewhere will reduce dramatically. If an artificial breeding facility is also provided on the site, pigeons will quickly learn to adopt this as their regular perch and roost.

Local Authorities often claim that there are no persistent feeders in the area; this is rarely if ever the case. In every town worldwide there are deliberate and persistent feeders. One individual that provides food on a daily basis can sustain a sizeable flock of birds in his or her own right. If designated feeding sites are provided where persistent feeders can legitimately feed pigeons not only will the pigeon population be contained in one localised area but excess food can be removed by local authority cleansing operatives. Persistent feeders will normally be happy to use designated sites if for no other reason than that they can feed without being verbally abused by those that do not share their passion for pigeons.

If a designated feeding site is to be considered it is vital that this facility is highlighted in any **public education and information programme**. The public should be made aware that if they do feed pigeons they should do so only on the designated site provided and if they continue to feed pigeons elsewhere they will be fined (enforcement of this can be achieved through local authority byelaws). It should also be made clear that the public are not being encouraged to feed pigeons, they are simply being told that if they insist on doing so they are restricted to feeding solely on the designated site/s. Good signage should be erected on the site explaining what the authority is trying to achieve

Deterrents and Proofing

Town and city centres are favoured roosting and perching places for urban pigeons. This is

because the feral pigeon is descended from a cliff-dwelling bird that roosted and nested on small ledges on coastal cliffs. Pigeons then started to move inland to exploit easily available food sources in town and city centres and use buildings that simulate cliff faces for the purposes of roosting and breeding. Pigeons are completely at home in this type of environment. Commercial property owners and leaseholders are the most vociferous complainants where pigeon-related problems are concerned yet most are reluctant to spend money to protect their properties in order to resolve the problem. This is because many commercially available deterrents degrade and fail extremely rapidly and the products themselves are extremely expensive to purchase and install, in some cases costing tens of thousands of pounds to install.

When providing a comprehensive town centre pigeon control programme it is important to encourage commercial property owners to install deterrents on their properties in an effort to reduce pigeon occupancy and resultant soiling in key areas. If property owners are faced with massive estimates for installing deterrents many will simply put all thoughts of protecting their property aside. PiCAS will offer expert and independent advice on the most appropriate products and controls required to resolve a specific problem, often recommending complimentary control options that cost a fraction of their industry standard counterparts. PiCAS will normally recommend a mix of non-standard and commercially available products which in most cases can be installed by a builder or even a window cleaner negating the need to use the services of a specialist contractor.

As a local authority is the main body acting as catalyst for a town wide pigeon control system it is important to make it as easy as possible for commercial property owners to play their part and protect their own properties. Once one property owner has successfully proofed a property it will be in the best interests of their immediate neighbours to protect their properties otherwise excluded pigeons will quickly take up residence. It may also be helpful for local authority officers to contact commercial property owners directly, particularly those in key areas where pigeon occupancy is high, to offer help and advice.

Local authorities should take the initiative wherever possible and protect their own properties against pigeon occupancy in an effort to set an example for commercial property owners. Many council-owned properties suffer from high levels of pigeon occupancy, particularly older Victorian style buildings, and it is vital that these properties are effectively protected. It will be almost impossible to convince a commercial property owner to carry out extensive proofing works if local authority-owned buildings are not adequately protected.

It must be understood that irrespective of how much pigeon-proofing work is carried out pigeons will merely move from one building to the next. For a comprehensive pigeon-

proofing strategy to be effective other measures must be put in place by the local authority to draw pigeons away from key areas and reduce pigeon numbers at the same time. These measures include the provision of a designated feeding area and artificial breeding facilities where egg removal schemes can be operated. Public information/education campaigns are also vital to the success of any town centre pigeon control system.

Public Education Campaigns

Any strategy designed to reduce pigeon numbers in a given area must include coordinated action to encourage the proofing of buildings in key areas as well as providing alternative nesting and roosting sites as well as a comprehensive public education/information campaign to reduce public feeding and Commercial waste from fast food outlets which are a growing problem. However, the deliberate and persistent feeding by members of the public is the real source of the problem. A single individual that regularly feeds pigeon flocks each day can sustain a sizeable flock in his/her own right and therefore it is vital to seek public cooperation in an effort to reduce pigeon numbers.

A well-designed and well-executed public information campaign will focus on the fact that a reduction in available food will not result in large numbers of pigeons starving to death but will simply mean that pigeons slow down or stop breeding altogether. It is a common misconception amongst those that regularly feed pigeons that if they reduce their daily pigeon feeds mass starvation will result. Pigeons will not breed if there is insufficient food available to them to feed their young and this fact must be communicated to persistent feeders. A reduction in feeding must be seen to be a natural way to control pigeon numbers and as an alternative to other more invasive forms of pigeon management such as culling. It may also be helpful to make it clear to pigeon feeders that the authority is working to PICAS guidelines, an organisation that is seen to be looking after the best interests of the both the pigeon and the public alike.

Another method of getting the message across to the general public is to consider employing a Pigeon Warden. The job of a Pigeon Warden is to act as an intermediary between property owners and the local authority itself. The Warden will also interact with persistent and deliberate pigeon feeders in an effort to get the message across that continuing to feed pigeons large quantities of food will simply result in more pigeons being killed by pest control contractors. Most persistent feeders believe that they are being kind by feeding pigeons and that if they stop their daily feeds the birds will die of starvation. This is of course untrue, but the message will be far more palatable to the feeder coming from a Pigeon Warden than from a Pest Control Officer Contractor.

Media involvement in any public education campaign is essential - the media is an excellent

source of free publicity for any initiative put forward by a local authority. The media will respond to well-designed press releases and particularly to publicity-rich events such as a 'Pigeon Awareness Day'. The greater the public debate on the issue of pigeon control the more successful the public information campaign will inevitably be.

A vast majority of pigeon-related complaints received by local authorities are from commercial property owners, particularly retailers. Apart from protecting their own properties commercial property owners can also assist the authority to get the message across to the public to reduce feeding. This can be achieved by providing space in shop windows for posters and possibly by handing out leaflets to shoppers when paying for goods. There is also a need to educate shopkeepers and service providers (particularly fast food establishments) to play their part by ensuring that there is a minimum of commercial refuse left lying in the streets. A leaflet should be designed for the commercial sector explaining the need for hygiene outside their premises and the need to ensure that their customers create a minimum of litter.

Government Assistance

The Government's Regeneration Committee has indicated that it would consider applications for funding from the Regeneration Fund by Local Authorities who wish to apply for capital funding for an alternative artificial breeding facility as part of their area wide pigeon control plan.

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