

Avian Influenza – Separating domestic birds from wild birds



Uywodaeth Cynullid Cymru
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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE



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- Wild birds may help to spread avian influenza viruses.
- Bird keepers need to plan how they will protect their birds against this disease.

One way by which the disease may spread to domestic birds is through contact with infected wild birds. Contact may be direct through mingling or indirect through faecal contamination of anything that may then come into contact with domestic birds such as feed, water, utensils or clothing. Therefore the risk of disease spread can be reduced by minimising contact with wild birds.

Domestic birds may be required by law to be housed (either on a national, regional or area basis) or otherwise separated from wild birds if the risk becomes significant. Where housing is not possible, you will be required to take all reasonable steps to minimise contact between your birds and wild birds. You must also ensure that your birds do not have any direct or indirect contact with poultry or captive birds on other holdings.

These are important disease control requirements. In the event of an outbreak, if you cannot meet them, you may have to reduce stock numbers through culling. In addition, failure to comply with disease control requirements could lead the relevant enforcement authority to bring action against you.

This leaflet gives guidance on practical ways to meet your legal obligations. You should read it if you keep birds for commercial, hobby purposes or other purposes.

Your responsibilities as a bird keeper

As a bird keeper, you are responsible for the welfare of your birds both now and during an outbreak. The Government has already asked you to minimise the possibility of wild birds contaminating the feed or drinking water of domestic birds and to remain vigilant for signs of disease.

What does the law require?

If there is a case of highly pathogenic avian influenza in poultry, wild birds or other captive birds, all poultry or other birds within at least 3km of the infected holding are **immediately** required to be housed or otherwise kept separate from wild birds while the outbreak is brought under control. The requirement could remain in force for **several weeks**.

Even if you are not close to an outbreak, but the risk of introduction of HPAI is high the Government may issue an immediate **temporary legal order for birds to be housed indoors as far as is practicable. This order may be on a nationwide, regional or area basis depending on an assessment of risk and the epidemiology of the spread of the disease.** This wider requirement would be issued to reduce the risk of spread of the disease while the source of the virus is identified and immediate action is taken to control the outbreak.

The Government may also issue a temporary nationwide housing order as a preventive measure if there is deemed to be a significant risk of an outbreak of HPAI within the country.

Impact on organic and free range status

A requirement to keep your birds separate from wild birds will also apply to free range and organic poultry producers. The organic status of poultry flocks would not be affected by any requirement to house or restrict access to open-air runs, provided that all other requirements of the Compendium of UK Organic Standards¹ continued to be met. This will be reviewed in the light of discussions at EU level.

If free range flocks (including those which also have organic status) are required to be housed, their products will retain their free-range status provided the housed period does not exceed 12 weeks.

If you have longer term concerns about possible loss of status, for example, organic or free range, we recommend that you refer to the responsible sector body.

¹ Set out at www.defra.gov.uk/farm/organic

Ways to protect your birds from wild birds

Highly pathogenic avian influenza can be spread through faecal droppings from infected birds. Control of disease spread by wild birds involves minimising contact between potentially infected wild birds and domestic birds. Housing your birds indoors whilst maintaining strict biosecurity measures is the best way to achieve this. For most keepers, prior planning should make it easier to house birds.

If you are unable to house all your birds indoors, the aim should be to minimise the risk of contact with wild birds. Remember, this contact may be direct; or indirect through contamination of feed and water. Feed must be stored and kept free from wild birds and other poultry. Other ways of separating your flock from wild birds are detailed in this guidance.

Housing

The most effective way to minimise direct contact is to house your birds. If your birds are normally housed indoors this should not present major problems. Keep your birds inside their existing houses. Ensure that wild birds are prevented from gaining access to your birds by covering any openings with netting. This should have sufficiently small holes to exclude wild birds from passing through the openings.

If your birds spend time outside you will have to plan alternative housing. There are different housing options which can be considered including:

- Making use of existing buildings (such as barns, farm sheds, outbuildings, garages, garden sheds) adapted for your birds. Ensure that any openings are netted to prevent wild birds gaining access.
- Erecting a solid lean-to on the side of existing houses.
- Erecting a new temporary structure with solid walls and roof or a polytunnel. A polytunnel will be suitable only in cooler weather.

Any proposed building must take into account the welfare requirements of the birds. See the advice on welfare later in this leaflet.

Netted structures

If after considering the above options they do not prove to be practical, other steps you could take include:

- Erecting a net structure to avoid contact with wild birds.
- When using a netted structure special attention needs to be paid to keeping wild birds from perching on the roof and defecating through it.
- Constructing temporary outdoor pens using straw bales and a tarpaulin roof with bird-proof netted gaps for light and ventilation.
- If bad weather is likely to be a problem it may be necessary to erect a windbreak around your bird-proof structure.

We recommend that you refer to commercial suppliers of anti-bird netting for advice and further information on equipment.

Feeding and watering

There are certain species of bird – such as ostrich, captive wildfowl or geese which are not normally housed during day or night – for which even the minimum housing steps outlined above may not be practicable. In such cases the very minimum you should do is isolate their food and water from wild birds. Available feed and water will attract wild birds; by feeding and watering your birds under cover, the possibility of mingling is reduced. The steps you can take include:

- Provide extra protection to feed and water stations to avoid attracting wild birds.
- Rotate feeding times. Many wild birds learn when captive birds are fed and congregate at these times.
- Prevent your birds from accessing open water that may be contaminated. Ensure that your birds receive only mains or treated water or ensure that reservoirs or storage tanks are covered. Sealed nipple systems can be considered.

Additional deterrents

When designing any protective structure, if posts are necessary, think about incorporating spike strips to deter perching. In all cases you should also consider making use of wild bird deterrents such as flutter tape, flashing lights, scarecrows and auditory scarers.

Agricultural bird scarers are not suitable for domestic circumstances and must always be used responsibly, within the relevant legal controls. If considering using bird scare systems specialist advice should be sought and the welfare of the domestic birds should be considered.

Pheasants, partridges and other game birds

Birds should be housed whenever possible and, as a minimum, all feeding should take place under cover. However, where game birds are being raised for release it may be that these measures cannot be effectively implemented. Bird scarer systems should be considered. If the disease risk is high, careful consideration may have to be given to culling birds. Specialist advice is available from representative organisations and the State Veterinary Service.

Geese

Where small numbers of geese are kept, it may be possible to house them in the event of a disease outbreak. However, if that is not possible temporary netted structures could be used which can cover large areas. Feeding and watering under cover and using wild bird deterrents will reduce geese contact with wild birds.

Captive wildfowl and waterfowl

Where possible, birds should be housed and as a minimum all feeding and watering should take place under cover or in some form of structure to exclude wild birds as far as possible. Separation of your birds from wild birds by netting their enclosures and the sensible use of deterrents to reduce their contact with wild birds if practical. You should consider moving your birds away from large bodies of water that attract wildfowl.

Where separation is not possible e.g. there are large numbers of waterfowl, every effort should be made to discourage wild birds and keep feed separate.

Backyard flocks

In addition to the measures described in this leaflet, give careful consideration to alternative measures to reduce contact with wild birds. For example, if you keep your birds near your home, consider housing them in alternative accommodation such as a garden building, a garage or existing redundant buildings that could be adapted to house your birds temporarily.

Where large numbers of birds are kept it may not be possible to bring them all indoors and you should consider all of the alternative methods described in this leaflet.

Zoological and other Collections of birds

Zoological collections and sites with rare birds are recognised to have possible particular characteristics relative to other categories of birds above. Examples include:

- Enclosure design that allows mixing with wild birds
- Possible contact with members of the public for educational purposes,
- The need to move birds across long distances to other sites for the purposes of breeding programmes etc
- Unique welfare and housing difficulties.

The biosecurity guidance in this document applies to such birds where practicable. However, to help site managers deliver effective biosecurity, there is further guidance 'Avian Influenza – Biosecurity for Zoological and other Collections of birds' available on the Defra web-site at www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/disease/ai/keptbirds/zoos.htm

Welfare Surveillance

Housing birds that are not used to being housed for a sustained period may create welfare and behavioural problems. You should be vigilant for signs such as feather pecking, cannibalism and any other signs of poor welfare such as loss of condition.

To prevent boredom amongst housed flocks, which can lead to feather pecking and increased noise, scratch feeds should be considered.

Overcrowding may become a problem and you must take steps to ensure that the stocking density within each house will not reach the point at which bird welfare is compromised – a particular risk in hot weather or cold wet weather.

For chickens and turkeys being reared for consumption, you should consider reducing their growth rate to prevent over-crowding. However you should seek expert advice before doing so as these measures may themselves cause welfare problems.

You should provide fresh litter in all temporary accommodation and ensure adequate feed and water, ventilation and lighting is available. You should consider how to enrich the birds' environment, such as using straw bales.

Always ensure that your birds have clean water – do not use standing water that may have become contaminated by wild birds.

To pick up problems before they lead to the deterioration of bird welfare you should ensure that stockmen inspect the birds more often.

Guidance on maintaining welfare after the release of free range hens from confinement due to statutory disease controls

Stock keepers will need to be aware that free range hens may exhibit increased levels of aggression or feather pecking after a period of confinement. The cause of these behavioural changes is not completely understood, but should be treated in a similar manner to any outbreak of these behaviours.

Inspection of livestock should be carried out more regularly than 1 per day to ensure that any injurious pecking resulting from confinement or post confinement is detected at the earliest opportunity and steps are taken to treat or cull injured birds.

Ideally, hens should be kept inside large naturally lit veranda type buildings. If this is not possible, light intensity should be maintained at 10 lux or above in the perching, feeding and walking areas during the housed period and post confinement unless injurious pecking occurs. Light intensities should only be decreased for the period where injurious pecking is a welfare problem.

During confinement and release, resources such as food sources, should be increased in availability to reduce competition.

Space allowances for free range hens are specified in legislation and codes of recommendations and should be maintained at these levels or more.

Re-introduction to the range should be carried out with minimal disturbance to the birds. Resources such as food and water should be kept outside with adequate bio security provisions, in addition to inside the house to encourage range use, but birds should be left to populate areas of their own accord.

Planning Issues

Planning permission is not always required if the work does not involve building, engineering or similar operations. Permitted Development Rights exist for erecting structures in certain circumstances. Simple structures such as posts and netting might not require permission. It is unlikely, for example, that you would need planning permission if the structure is temporary, mobile, or used for the purposes of agriculture.

However, regulations will differ between commercial and hobby poultry keepers. It is always advisable in the first instance to check with your local council who will be able to direct you or, for England and Wales, go to www.planningportal.gov.uk for contact details.

Remember Your Biosecurity Precautions

Regardless of the way in which domestic birds are housed, good biosecurity is also essential in preventing the introduction and spread of disease. This is even more important where birds may be more crowded than usual in accommodation that is unfamiliar to both birds and keepers. It is crucial that you also:

- Maintain good standards of hygiene
- Avoid or clean up feed spillages
- Keep areas around bird accommodation clean and tidy
- Use specific footwear and overalls when caring for your birds
- Use approved disinfectant procedures

Further guidance on biosecurity for bird keepers can be found in our leaflet 'Biosecurity and preventing disease'; this is available on the Defra website at

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/pdf/bio_poultrykeep.pdf

Further Help and Advice

Effective biosecurity is a primary concern even before any instruction to house birds is issued. Visit www.defra.gov.uk for general biosecurity advice and to order further copies of this leaflet; alternatively call the Helpline on **08459 33 55 77**.

Look out for signs of disease in your flock. Increased mortality, falling egg production and respiratory distress may be early signs of a disease problem. If you suspect disease, ask your vet for advice as soon as possible. Avian Influenza and Newcastle Disease are notifiable diseases. You must tell the Divisional Veterinary Manager (DVM) at the local Animal Health Divisional Office if you suspect these diseases.

Further guidance on planning is available in Appendix B to 'A Farmers Guide to the Planning System'. This Guide is available on the ODPM website under 'Planning, Planning Guidance and Advice' at: www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp

Information is also available on the following sites:

- www.countryside.wales.gov.uk
- www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Agriculture/animalwelfare/Diseases/SpecificDisease/AvianInfluenza/AllIntroduction
- www.dardni.gov.uk

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