



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Consultation on remote veterinary inspections

Proposals to permit use of remote veterinary inspections in avian disease control zones, in England.

October 2023

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We're responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



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Introduction

Avian influenza (AI), also known as bird flu, is a serious highly contagious disease that affects both domestic and wild birds, caused by different types of influenza viruses. The disease occurs worldwide but different subtypes are more prevalent in certain regions than others. Although AI causes disease in birds, it can (albeit rarely) be transmitted to humans.

Avian influenza viruses are classified as either high or low pathogenicity viruses depending on the ability of the virus to cause disease. Highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses (HPAI) can cause severe disease in susceptible birds and low pathogenic avian influenza viruses (LPAI) generally cause mild disease or no disease at all in poultry. Avian influenza viruses of the subtype H5 and H7 have shown potential to mutate to high pathogenicity strains.

Outbreaks of these diseases carry significant costs for national and local government and for industry. If an outbreak occurs, government intervention is essential to control and eradicate the disease. The UK is currently in the midst of an unprecedented outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza, H5N1. This outbreak has placed considerable pressure on both government veterinary services and private veterinary practices, particularly in areas of the country subject to the highest volume of cases in England.

[The Avian Influenza and Influenza of Avian Origin in Mammals \(England\) \(No.2\) Order 2006¹](#) ("The Order") sets out specific measures for the control of avian influenza virus in England to ensure the protection of animal and public health. These measures are also outlined in the [GB Notifiable Avian Control Strategy](#).

To reduce the likelihood of onward spread of disease following an outbreak of HPAI, disease control measures may be introduced, including:

- applying certain rules to the movement, to or from infected premises of people, animals, products, vehicles or any other material or other substances that may be contaminated;
- the culling of poultry and other captive birds on the premises and biosecure disposal in accordance with Animal- By- Products regulations² off site where disease is confirmed;
- tracing and destroying products of animal origin, originating from premises where disease is confirmed;

¹ S.I.2006/2702

² Regulation (EC) No 1069/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 October 2009 laying down health rules as regards animal by-products and derived products not intended for human consumption and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1774/2002 (Animal by-products Regulation)

- declaring disease control zones around the premises where disease is confirmed and imposing movement restrictions of poultry, poultry meat, other captive birds and eggs, etc.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) advises that, based on scientific evidence, avian influenza poses a very low food safety risk for consumers. Properly cooked poultry and poultry products remain safe to eat. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) advise that bird flu is primarily a disease of birds and the risk to the general public's health is very low.

Purpose of this consultation

The purpose of this informal consultation is to seek stakeholders' views on government proposals to permit the use of remote video inspection in avian influenza disease control zones, in England.

This is an **England only** consultation. The specific amendments proposed in this consultation will have effect only in England.

Geographical extent

Animal Health is a devolved matter. This informal consultation is being undertaken by the UK Government in England. This document and descriptions of existing law therefore relate to England. Unless otherwise stated, references to 'government' are references to the UK Government.

Audience

This informal consultation is directed at veterinarians and veterinary organisations who have a role in inspecting poultry as per licencing requirements during disease outbreaks. The consultation is also aimed at bodies that may work with the government or industry as part of animal disease control.

Responding to this consultation

This consultation will run for 4 weeks. The consultation opens on 3rd October 2023 and will close on 31st October 2023. Unfortunately, any responses received after this date will not be analysed. Please respond to this consultation via our survey on Citizen Space.

If you are unable to use Citizen Space, please contact us at:

EDC.outbreak.comms@defra.gov.uk

Confidentiality and data protection information

A summary of the responses to this consultation will be published on the Government website at: www.gov.uk/defra. An annex to the consultation summary will list all organisations that responded but will not include personal names, addresses or other contact details.

Defra may publish the content of your response to this consultation to make it available to the public without your personal name and private contact details (for example home address, email address, etc).

If you click on 'Yes' in response to the question asking if you would like anything in your response to be kept confidential, you are asked to state clearly what information you would like to be kept as confidential and explain your reasons for confidentiality. The reason for this is that information in responses to this consultation may be subject to release to the public or other parties in accordance with the access to information laws (these are primarily the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIRs), the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Data Protection Act (DPA). We have obligations, mainly under the EIRs, FOIA and DPA, to disclose information to particular recipients or to the public in certain circumstances. In view of this, your explanation of your reasons for requesting confidentiality for all or part of your response would help us balance these obligations for disclosure against any obligation of confidentiality. If we receive a request for the information that you have provided in your response to this consultation, we will take full account of your reasons for requesting confidentiality of your response, but we cannot guarantee that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances.

If you click on 'No' in response to the question asking if you would like anything in your response to be kept confidential, we will be able to release the content of your response to the public, but we won't make your personal name and private contact details publicly available.

There may be occasions when Defra will share the information you provide in response to the consultation, including any personal data, with external analysts. This is for the purposes of consultation response analysis and provision of a report of the summary of responses only.

This consultation is being conducted in line with the Cabinet Office "[Consultation Principles](#)".

Please find our latest privacy notice uploaded as a related document alongside our consultation document.

If you have any comments or complaints about the consultation process, please address them to Consultation Coordinator at: consultation.coordinator@defra.gov.uk

About You

1. Would you like your response to be kept confidential? (Select one option only)

- Yes
- No

If you answered Yes to this question, please give your reason

2. What is your name?

3. What is your email address?

This is optional, but if you enter your email address you will be able to return to edit your consultation response in Citizen Space at any time until you submit it. You will also receive an acknowledgement email when you submit a completed response.

4. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation or business?

- Individual- You are responding with your personal views, rather than as an official representative of a business / business association / other organisation
- Organisation or business

Please only answer questions 5, 6 and 8 if you are responding on behalf of an organisation or business.

5. What type of organisation or business are you responding on behalf of?

- Sector trade body or membership organisation - In an official capacity of representing the trade body
- Veterinary organisation
- Other (please specify below)

6. Please provide the name of the organisation or business you represent.

7. Where are you or your organisation or business based? (select all that apply):

- England
- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland
- Other (please specify below)

8. Where is your organisation or business in operation? (select all that apply):

- England
- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland
- Other (please specify below)

Background and proposal

Veterinary inspection for movement of poultry from disease control zones

The issue to be addressed

The ongoing avian influenza outbreak led to considerable pressures on private veterinary resources. This was in part due to the current legislative requirement for visits by veterinarians to premises to confirm the health of the birds at that premises, prior to the authorisation of movement of birds from the premises.

These checks are necessary to reduce the risk of spread of avian influenza and some are mandatory under the Order.

The Order was temporarily amended in November 2022 to explicitly permit the use of remote inspections. The temporary measure expired on the 16th of April 2023.

During the period of the temporary derogation, in order to attempt to alleviate the pressure on veterinary resource, a trial was conducted to assess the feasibility of undertaking inspections remotely by video / live streaming prior to the movement of birds to slaughter. This approach was intended to ensure that veterinary oversight of the health of the flock was maintained.

This consultation asks for views on making this a permanent change to the Order to include a power to permit remote video inspection under specific circumstances and with the appropriate safeguards in place to ensure mitigation of the risk of disease spread.

Background

When an outbreak of HPAI in poultry or other captive birds occurs, disease control zones are declared around the infected premises. The Order restricts the movement of poultry, other captive birds, poultry products, and other things liable to spread disease, from and to premises located within disease control zones, or under other premises-based restrictions. Anyone wishing to move something that is restricted can seek permission from APHA and if this movement is approved it is authorised by the granting of a licence. That licence may also be subject to additional conditions applicable to the movement.

A movement licence sets out what may be moved and the conditions applicable to that movement, such as biosecurity measures and record keeping. A movement licence may cover a series of movements. For example, depopulating a shed or entire holding by allowing movements of birds to slaughter to take a few days or weeks, which may require multiple loads.

The licence conditions, instructions for issuing the licence or the Order itself may require an inspection of things prior to the commencement of each movement. In the case of

movement of live birds and hatching eggs this inspection must be completed by a suitably qualified and approved veterinarian.

The inspection includes a clinical inspection of the birds or other animals, a review of records, and consideration of other disease risks. These disease risks may include the condition of the buildings, the procedures and practices in place and any recent movements on or off the premises. The inspection may include the taking and testing of diagnostic samples where relevant.

The clinical inspection looks at the overall health and presentation of the flock and is not intended to be an individual inspection of each bird. The inspection includes all populated sheds on site to verify that there is no indication of avian influenza virus being present in any part of the premises.

The inspection of records includes a review of mortality records, feed and water consumption, and other production data (such as laying records).

These inspections are required within 24 hours of the commencement of the movement, with sampling and testing, when this is required, within 48 hours of the movement.

Temporary measures

Due to the unprecedented scale of the HPAI H5N1 outbreak over the period 2022/23, a significant volume of inspections were required, placing pressure on the private veterinarians acting as official veterinarians required for these inspections. The veterinary sector asked Defra to consider permitting these veterinary inspections to be undertaken remotely from the premises by video. The primary purpose was to reduce the need for travel time ahead of attending poultry premises for inspections. By fewer physical visits to poultry premises, the veterinarians were able to attend those premises where a physical inspection was essential.

On 21 November 2022, the government amended the Order to include temporary provisions to permit limited use of remote video inspections and established a trial to assess this approach. The temporary provisions expired on 16 April 2023.

The pilot focused on those areas of England under greatest pressure due to the number of AI infected premises. The trial started in East Anglia and was later extended incrementally to areas of England where there were a large number of poultry premises affected by disease control zones.

The pilot was successful in reducing veterinary pressures and provided useful lessons on how the system could be improved if adopted as a long-term change. The key points noted at the end of the trial were:

- Saved travel time and costs for private vets to and from premises.
- Some keepers preferred a physical veterinarian visit because a remote inspection required keeper time to perform the video inspection and was therefore an increased burden on them.

- Some keepers preferred to reduce the frequency of veterinarian visits to the site from a biosecurity perspective so were in favour of remote video inspections as a method to comply with the licence condition for inspecting flocks within 24 hours of each movement.
- Specific requests for remote inspections for highly biosecure premises such as Specific Pathogen Free (SPF) and Vaccine egg production, which were not part of the trial.
- The requirement of the trial for at least one physical inspection to be undertaken for each licence and the time needed by the camera operator to complete remote inspection meant industry has not seen the level of benefit of the measures and resultant uptake.
- A more flexible application of the physical inspection requirement could increase take-up. For example, industry suggests allowing a physical inspection that has taken place for a bird movement under a licence to be used by the veterinary practice as the basis for permitting a remote inspection for the purposes of a subsequent licence. Defra is supportive of such innovative solutions provided there are sufficient administrative processes in place to record and link visits undertaken on different licences.

Proposed options

This consultation invites your views on proposals to amend the Order to permit remote inspections for movements licenced under the Order, as set out in the options below:

- **Baseline** - Do not change the current legislation for movement licence inspections.
- **Option 1** - Amend the Order to permit remote inspections prior to movement of birds to slaughter only.
- **Option 2 - (preferred option)** Amend the Order to permit remote inspections in support of licensed movements under the Order.

Baseline – Do not change the current legislation for movement licence inspections.

Under this option, no changes will be made to the current requirement for physical inspections. Veterinarians will continue to visit premises whenever a veterinary inspection is required, in some cases daily. For example, daily inspections may be required when a poultry premises is being depopulated by moving stock off each day. In small scale outbreaks this is a manageable position. However, larger scale outbreaks may lead to a high number of premises in control zones requiring inspection, leading to increased pressures on veterinary resource.

This option will not address issues raised in 2022 by the veterinary sector in response to the large scale HPAI outbreak concerning resource pressures and their ability to fully deliver on a high demand for inspection of poultry prior to licenced movements.

Option 1 – Amend the Order to permit remote inspections prior to movement of birds to slaughter only.

This reflects the structure of the trial undertaken in November 2022 to April 2023. This permits the use of remote inspection prior to the movement of birds to slaughter.

The proposed legislative change would permit government to allow remote inspections where it considers remote inspections are appropriate to circumstances of the outbreak. This change does not make remote inspection compulsory. The veterinarian conducting the inspections will exercise their professional veterinary judgment as to whether a remote inspection is appropriate in the circumstances, on the understanding that it provides the same level of assurance that a movement may be authorised as would be the case following a physical inspection.

The change is intended to allow remote inspections only where a veterinarian has good knowledge of the layout and structure of the premises, the operational practices in place and the personnel conducting and managing the operations. The poultry keeper must retain and share with the veterinarian good records of productivity and feed and water intake. The veterinarian must check records before conducting a remote inspection. Remote inspection will only be permitted where the veterinarian has visited the premises recently. Recently will be determined according to the circumstances and is likely to be within the last 2 or 3 weeks. The process must be open and auditable by APHA on request.

Good production records are an important tool in detecting signs of AI at an early stage and can indicate the presence of AI before clinical signs are visible. These are important and must be considered whether a physical or remote inspection is undertaken. Understanding the biosecurity at the premises, including the physical structure of the building, the operating processes in place and the attitude and compliance of staff and management with these processes is an important indicator of the likelihood of disease entering, and poor standards would steer towards a physical inspection.

For this disease, whilst clinical inspection is important, the availability of the other information provides strong evidence of whether disease is likely to be present. Whilst remote inspection of birds inevitably removes the ability of the veterinarian to use all senses (peripheral vision, scent) by following well-documented procedures remote inspections can provide a good indication of the health of the flock.

For non-indicator species, where clinical signs are lacking or indistinct, good records are important. Pre-movement testing for non-indicator species will continue to be required within 48 hours of the movement, whether a physical or remote inspection takes place within 24 hours of the movement.

Option 1 was trialled successfully between November 2022 and April 2023

Option 2 (preferred option) – Amend the Order to permit remote inspections in support of licensed movements under the Order.

This option would extend the scope of remote inspections beyond inspection of birds prior to movement to slaughter but it is intended to work within a similar framework. In particular, it would allow:

- a) Inspections of birds prior to movement to slaughter
- b) Pre-movement inspections of ready to lay and brood to move birds, which is required under paragraph 22 to Schedule 4 of the Order
- c) Pre-movement inspections required as a pre-requisite to issuing a licence or as a condition of licence.

Other than extending the scope, the proposal is the same as option 1 but allows the application of these measures to the full range of licenses issued. This may benefit those businesses operating with very high standards of biosecurity, such as those producing Specific pathogen free (SPF) eggs, or eggs for vaccine production, to allow the reduction infrequency of veterinary inspections required before moving eggs from premises.

When moving birds for purposes other than slaughter (option 1), a bird which is infected with disease which is undetected, risks the introduction and spread of AI to a new location. Therefore, the potential impact of failure in the process is higher than for birds which are slaughtered. However, the likelihood that remote inspections instead of physical inspection will miss active disease is the same as for option 1. Before extending the use of remote inspections beyond slaughter for an outbreak, government will need to balance the level of additional risk, if any, perceived to arise from a remote inspection against the scale of impact on the sector caused by the outbreak control measures.

Consultation questions

9. To what extent do you agree (Option 1 or Option 2) or disagree (Baseline) that the Order should be amended to provide powers to permit remote inspections?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

10. If a change is made, do you consider the change should be limited to: Option 1 (slaughter only) or Option 2 (all types of pre-movement licence inspections)?

- Option 1 (slaughter only)
- Option 2 (all types of pre-movement licence inspections)
- I don't know

11. To what extent do you agree or disagree to the following statement?

“Before permitting remote inspections to be used during a specific outbreak,

government should consider the evidence for how the disease virus is behaving”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“Before permitting remote inspections, government should consider the scale of outbreak and the consequential pressure on veterinary resources”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“Before permitting remote inspections, government should be satisfied that such inspections do not significantly increase the risk of spread of disease”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

14. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“Government should be able to permit remote inspection during an outbreak”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“If remote inspection is permitted by government, the inspecting veterinarian who is required to make the attestation that disease is unlikely to be present should be able to decline a remote inspection in favour of a physical inspection”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree

- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

16. “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

If remote inspection is permitted by government, the keeper who is appointing a veterinary practice to undertake the visit should be able to decline a remote inspection in favour of a physical inspection”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

17. To what extent do you agree or disagree to the following statement?

“If remote inspection is permitted by government, that remote inspection should be mandatory (no discretion)”

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

18. To what extent do you agree or disagree to the following statement?

“The conducting veterinarian should have good recent knowledge of the business, including the premises, procedures, personnel and stock before conducting any remote inspection”.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

19. Do you have any further comments on the proposal to permit remote inspections?