Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Risk assessment on the likelihood of spread of avian notifiable disease associated with bird fairs, shows, markets, sales and other gatherings

Qualitative Risk Assessment

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Summary

The previous licence for bird gatherings was supported by a risk assessment, published in 2010 which considered the general risk of avian influenza or Newcastle disease to be very low, and which was based on an unidentified, albeit very low level of circulation in wild birds on a year-round basis.

Recent events in Europe have shown wide circulation in wild birds and spill over into domestic poultry and captive birds of a Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza H5N8, which has been associated with migratory wild birds. The recent report of an outbreak in England means the risk levels are now increased. As a result, expert opinion considered the risk assessment was no longer applicable for the licence available for bird gatherings and that both should be updated.

This new assessment concludes that, bearing in mind the current **high level of risk for GB for an incursion** of H5N8 HPAI and the **medium risk** with geographic variation of subsequent spill over into resident domestic poultry, wild or captive birds, and the **medium risk of spread** should disease be introduced in a gathering, there are options around the licensing of gatherings which include: to ban for the period of the AI prevention zone; to allow but only for certain species of birds; to allow but with improved requirements for biosecurity or; to allow but only on a regional basis.

If the available biosecurity measures are considered to be insufficient to mitigate the risks identified, or if there is insufficient assurance that they will be complied with, then a ban on some or all categories of gathering would be justified.

Background

Prior to 2005, bird gatherings were not regulated in the UK, in contrast to those of other livestock. However, as a consequence of repeated introduction of avian influenza into several Member States of the European Union at that time, the EU introduced a general ban of all bird gatherings, unless permitted under licence by the individual Member States[i]. These requirements are implemented in England under Regulation 6 of the Avian Influenza (Preventive Measures) (England) Regulations 2006[ii]. Separate legislation applies in Wales[iii] and Scotland[iv] imposing the same requirements.

Initially, licences were issued for each gathering based on a standard assessment of whether a gathering was high, medium or low risk. However, this quickly proved unworkable with a massive administrative burden on Animal Health and Defra due to an estimated 10,000 bird gatherings a year across Great Britain.

In December 2005, it was decided to move to a single general licence which allowed all gatherings to take place (apart from gatherings for international pigeon races) providing that organisers adhered to the conditions in the licence. However, these types of gatherings are a concern as there is not always complete information on where the birds are coming from and there is no longer a requirement for a veterinary inspector or animal health officer to be present at the event.

The consequence of avian influenza being detected in birds either at or having attended a gathering during the risk period is a serious matter for not only industry but also for the competent authorities. This could lead to a multi-focal outbreak in birds which have moved to different parts of the country and which are difficult to trace. This is the reasonable worst case scenario for avian influenza, as defined in the National Risk Assessment. ["An outbreak lasting at least 12 months from day zero to disease freedom declared by the OIE. 80 to 90 infected premises geographically spread across the UK. All infected premises are assumed to cover the manufacture of chicken and chicken products. Multiple outbreaks across the EU restrict multilateral trade across the region."]

Hazard identification

The hazards identified are the avian influenza viruses, in particular HPAI H5N8 subtype, or others (H5 or H7) which are readily spread by wild birds, and the Newcastle Disease viruses, avian paramyxovirus (APMV-1) strains of higher pathogenicity. The HPAI H5N8 virus has been isolated from outbreaks and wild birds in the EU during the current epizootic and has been sequenced by the International Reference Laboratory at APHA Weybridge. Results show the virus is similar to those reported in Russia, Kazakhstan, Israel, Iraq in the summer of 2020 and more recently in Germany, Netherlands and Denmark.

The current epizootic is spreading rapidly in a wide range of migratory and non-migratory wild waterfowl in Europe causing mortalities in these birds and spill over into domestic poultry. This is similar to the previous epizootic in 2016/2017. What is unknown at present, and very hard to ascertain, is whether there are species of wild waterfowl which do not show clinical signs of infection, or whether the virus can circulate in non-migratory, wild birds.

The pattern of geographical distribution follows that seen for the epizootic of H5N8 HPAI in 2016/2017 in Europe, when spread occurred along a similar route of migratory wild waterfowl causing wild bird die-offs in North and Central Europe. Therefore, this new AI season is following a similar pattern of transmission in wild birds and spill-over into domestic poultry and it can be expected that outbreaks will continue to cause issues with the poultry sector for several months to come, particularly if the virus continues to circulate in non-migratory waterfowl in Europe.

Poultry and other captive birds are moved legally between Member States of the European Union between areas not under disease control restrictions. This continuous activity poses the inherent risk that birds may be moved from areas where disease is present but not yet detected. Such undisclosed disease may be the consequence of the incubation period or a subclinical form of avian notifiable disease.

Gatherings of birds involve the coming together and subsequent dissemination of live birds (as well as people, vehicles and equipment) by definition and for this reason can facilitate the introduction and spread of avian notifiable disease. The magnitude of this risk is influenced by the number of different groups of birds brought together and the likelihood of them becoming infected at their point of origin. Movements out of an SZ or PZ around a confirmed case are not permitted but other than this, traceability of poultry is lightly regulated so most moves outside a restriction zone are of uncertain origin and status.

Birds with undisclosed infection may be potentially infectious to other birds at gatherings due to the possibility of virus shedding. This may be a risk to poultry and other captive birds kept elsewhere if the virus is introduced to a bird gathering and subsequently brought to premises where the participating birds are returned to as birds may be returned to different premises after the event. Also, if infection is introduced to a gathering, it can be passed on to other susceptible birds to a variable degree depending on a number of factors such as the nature / size / layout of the event and the biosecurity measures applied. Infection can also be spread through bird gatherings by contamination of animals and things such as cages, feed, litter, vehicles, personal clothing, footwear, etc. This route is directly influenced by the extent of biosecurity applied.

The outbreak in Cheshire in broiler breeder rearers reported on the 2nd November is most likely due to direct or indirect contact with infected wild birds. The subsequent detection of HPAI H5N8 in wild geese and swans in Gloucestershire and Devon suggests there is wider circulation of virus. Therefore, the risk of infected wild birds present in the UK is now **HIGH** and the risk to poultry has increased, from **LOW to MEDIUM**, depending on the proximity of the premises to wild bird assemblages and the biosecurity level.

Risk Question

1) *What is the risk of the introduction of avian notifiable disease onto bird fairs, shows, markets, sales and other gatherings?*

2) *What, if any, management options are available to reduce the likelihood and the impact of introduction and subsequent spread of avian notifiable disease through the abovementioned gatherings?*

Scope

This qualitative risk assessment covers the risk of introduction and subsequent spread of avian notifiable disease to and from bird gatherings organised in Great Britain that were legally moved to the event from within the UK or a disease-free area of another Member State of the European Union.

This risk assessment does not assess the risk related to illegal movements, negligence to report clinical disease, false certification, breaches in biosecurity etc. Any risks potentially presented by (or to) wild birds are also not assessed here.

Terminology related to the assessed level of risk

For the purpose of the risk assessment, the following terminology will apply (OIE, 2004):

Negligible	So rare that it does not merit to be considered
Very low	Very rare but cannot be excluded
Low	Rare but does occur
Medium	Occurs regularly
High	Occurs often
Very high	Event occurs almost certainly

Entry assessment

This section deals with the risk that avian influenza will enter the UK with consequent exposure of kept birds to the risk of infection. There are multiple pathways for the exposure of poultry or captive birds to notifiable avian diseases.

These include:

- Contact with infected poultry such as live birds, hatching eggs and day-old chicks of poultry
- Contact with live infected wild birds, particularly waterfowl
- Contact with poultry products and by-products of infected poultry,
- Contact with contaminated feed, water, bedding, equipment, vermin or clothing / footwear of people in contact with infected birds or contaminated environment.

Biosecurity advice which keepers should practice at all times of the year are focussed on these pathways as there is a constant low risk of incursion from any notifiable avian disease being introduced into kept birds, given LPAI viruses circulate constantly in wild birds. There is no published evidence available to give a semi-quantitative risk score for

each of these pathways and to elicit one with expert knowledge is beyond the scope of this rapid risk assessment, therefore each pathway will be weighted equally.

In terms of housed birds, they will in theory, have reduced direct contact with wild waterfowl. Housing will not prevent any of the other pathways through which disease may enter a poultry premises. Other biosecurity measures will be more important. The likelihood of contact with wild waterfowl will be dependent on the number of such species in the near environment and how attractive the site is to such birds. The presence within the premises of a pond or open feed bins are two well-known factors which make direct contact with wild waterfowl more likely for birds with access to the outside environment. Birds kept in pens with roofing or sheds with mesh and netting will have less contact with wild waterfowl themselves, but indirect contact cannot be ruled out.

For the other pathways, contact with other live birds (poultry, hatching eggs, day old chicks) will be dependent on the business itself and the commercial activities. The contact with products or by-products from infected birds will be dependent on the activities of people entering the premises and bringing such products with them and it should be noted that swill feeding is not legal. Contamination of feed, bedding and water can be reduced to a negligible level by sourcing such products from safe sources and keeping such items in containers which no wild birds can access. The site can be made less attractive to wild waterfowl by excluding them from any ponds on site and making sure feeding areas are protected. Contact with contaminated equipment, footwear and clothing can be prevented by making sure all personnel in contact with the birds use disinfectants appropriately. This will be particularly important where birds are housed, as contact with the birds is more frequent, as feed, bedding and water must be brought into the houses and birds must be checked for welfare issues or eggs collected from inside the houses. Therefore, biosecurity at the boundary of a bird house is an important control point. Visitors to the farm should also be recorded for security and adhere to good biosecurity practices.

Captive birds

Captive birds, such as those held in collections, zoos or approved bodies are already semi-housed and should be kept separate from wild waterfowl. For some, it will be difficult to prevent access to their water environment (penguins, pelicans, flamingos etc) and it is unlikely that it will be possible to house indoors, so every effort should be made to prevent wild waterfowl access.

Game birds

The majority of game birds have already been released for the shooting season and therefore are considered wild birds and outside the scope of a prevention order around housing. Some will still be kept in pens and could not be housed due to welfare issues, therefore the pens themselves would need to be netted as the birds will often be able to fly out of the pens and forage locally.

It is illegal to release by hand captive birds for the purpose of being shot immediately after their liberation, under Part 1, Section 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Captive birds used as decoys would be at risk of increased contact with wild waterfowl. If they remain at one place for the duration of the fowling season, then they will not come into contact with domestic poultry; however, if the birds are moved around to other sites or spend any time at a premises where domestic poultry are kept, this is an increased risk for the poultry.

Game birds will be collected in at the end of the season for further breeding. However, the current advice is that most species of game bird are susceptible to H5N8 HPAI and rapidly show clinical signs (although this is variable and depends on the species) so it is likely they would have been predated by foxes etc before they could be re-caught. The birds once gathered are kept by the same owner for breeding (or are slaughtered as some keepers would not want the “intelligent” ones which have evaded being shot all season, passing on ‘knowledge’ to others). They are not generally resold.

Birds of prey

Following the detection of H5N8 HPAI in a wild peregrine falcon, the issue of gatherings of such birds was discussed. Birds of prey may be brought together to take part in flying events. It is considered that these birds will show clinical signs if infected with the current circulating H5N8 HPAI virus. Most captive birds of prey will be fed on commercial feed (such as day-old chicks, small rodents) but some may be fed shot game. It is also possible that while flying, they catch and consume wild birds, but considering the main way for the handler to catch the bird is on the promise of food, this is thought to less likely. Current advice is to continue to fly birds for exercise and to keep them clean and feed them on commercial feed only. The risk of these birds having undetected disease is very low.

The risk of exposure of any kept poultry bird or captive bird across the whole of the UK is dependent on them having contact with wild birds - either live birds or bird secretions, or indirect contact. The level is generally considered to be low but as there will be some regions which are at a higher risk, namely those near the areas of high wild waterfowl aggregations, and the risk level is medium for these situations, given the current outbreak in the UK. The likelihood of disease being undetected is low for certain types of birds, but for other species, it is unknown.

Exposure assessment

This section deals with the risk that infection of kept birds with avian influenza will occur and specifically that infected birds will be present and spread disease at a bird gathering. Previous Defra risk assessments (Defra, 2010) were used as a basis for the general licence allowing bird gatherings to take place while minimising the risk of introduction of avian notifiable diseases to these events and mitigating the likelihood and impact of any subsequent spread. These assessments concluded that the overall risk of the introduction

of avian notifiable diseases to a bird gathering is related to the actual disease situation domestically and in Europe, both in domestic poultry and in wild birds. We now consider that there is a ***high*** risk of circulating avian influenza in wild birds in the UK. In a scenario where participating birds originate in disease free country(ies), the risk of introduction of these diseases to gatherings by these movements is equal to the baseline risk of an outbreak of these diseases happening which is currently assessed as ***low to medium (depending on the geographical origin of the birds)***. Previous VRAs have recommended that the general licence should be reviewed or withdrawn if the disease situation deteriorates in the UK or elsewhere in the European Union.

This updated assessment of the risk pathways for bird gatherings highlights the following main routes of disease spread where these events may play a role.

Introduction of disease to the gathering

Avian notifiable disease can be introduced to bird gatherings in a number of ways: by infected live birds and their products; contamination such as cages, feed, litter, water, clothing, footwear, vehicles etc; contact with infected wild birds. This likelihood would increase if a disease outbreak were reported from the country or region of origin of introduced birds or in the region of the gathering. Good biosecurity is necessary to mitigate this risk as far as practicable – this includes advice that only healthy birds are introduced (i.e. disease vigilance) and that clean cages, vehicles and other equipment used to transport birds should be used and that contact with wild birds should be minimised. Because birds can be infected but not show signs of disease during a variable incubation period or certain species can be susceptible to infection but not show signs of disease, there is a risk that apparently healthy birds may be infected. From an epidemiological point of view, the probability of a single bird being infected is defined as "*p"* and the expression for determining the overall probability of introduction of disease through multiple consignments is defined as "$1-(1-p)^n$", where "n" is the number of consignments. Therefore for a large gathering, the probability of disease being introduced can increase, according to the location from which birds are gathered, where there are mixed species (in particular mixing anseriforme poultry with galliforme poultry) and the biosecurity level at the establishment of origin.

Spread of disease within the gathering

If infection were to be introduced to a bird gathering, the likelihood of its spread depends on a number of factors such as the pathogenicity and transmissibility of the virus and the source of the infection (infectious live birds may be more effective in spreading disease than a contaminated piece of equipment), the nature and layout of the gathering such as the housing and proximity of the participating birds, whether the birds are mixing, access to common water sources and whether they are in direct contact with visitors etc. Therefore, the risk of disease spread, if already introduced to a gathering would be ***medium***. The possibility to implement risk mitigating measures would largely depend on the nature of the gathering and would include advice to make an informed choice of the place/venue/event layout, to practice good biosecurity during the event, to minimise potential contact between birds and to maintain vigilance for any clinical signs of avian notifiable disease.

Spread of disease from the gathering

If undisclosed avian notifiable disease were to be introduced to a bird gathering by live birds, there is a possibility that unless disease is confirmed during the event, it would remain undisclosed until after the gathering – and therefore there is a potential for further spread. The likelihood of this depends on the length of the event as with longer events the possibility that birds show signs of disease becomes greater, although it may also increase the number of potential contacts between birds at the gathering.

However, if the causative agents of the disease were to be introduced by mechanical spread (i.e. contamination), the likelihood that birds would become infected at the event would depend on the level of biosecurity practiced at the gathering.

The extent of onward geographical spread depends on the extent of contact and spread between birds at the gathering itself and also where the birds are transported to following the event. The most effective way of preventing such spread would be to detect suspicion of disease at the time of the gathering, while the birds are still together. However, if the source of infection is a (group of) birds with subclinical infection, this increases the risk of onward spread. The size of the gathering, levels of biosecurity and length of the gathering would directly affect the number of potential contacts between infected and susceptible birds. Therefore it is important to note that with certain avian influenza viruses, with high pathogenicity, there will be a higher likelihood of disease being reported. There is uncertainty around the detection of disease and this will depend on the species present at the gathering as some may not show clinical signs (ducks and geese) and some species will not represent a significant risk for onward spread (columbiformes, passerines and psittaciformes as well as birds of prey).

Consequence assessment

Any outbreak of notifiable avian disease has a significant impact on the UK poultry industry, through the trade and economic impacts on the producer. This is the same for any notifiable avian influenza virus. Average costs to government may be between £2 and £4 million per outbreak, depending on the number of birds involved and complexity of the investigation.

If disease is detected at a gathering before it concludes and before the birds are dispersed, Government would face a complex challenge relating to disease control at the gathering, including dealing with a large number of owners who may be resistant to the need to cull their birds.

Whilst spread from a gathering may not lead to widespread disease into the commercial sector and may be restricted to small producers, the case in 2007 in the UK involving a market showed that there is a potential scenario for this occurrence. While for the majority of shows and gatherings involve birds classified as not destined for the food chain (as

breeders or producers) it is important to note that multiple outbreaks in backyard premises would still lead to implementing disease control measures, as per the EU regulations.

A reasonable worst-case outcome for multiple outbreaks to occur would be for an infected but apparently healthy bird to be taken to a gathering where it infects some, but not all, of the other birds present, but disease is not detected. The birds at the gathering are then taken to widely distributed premises. One or more of the infected birds is then detected through passive surveillance leading to at least one outbreak being confirmed with consequent disease control zones, impacts on industry and a costly tracing exercise. There has been one comparable case in recent years but this involved LPAI so the consequences were limited and again, for certain species of birds this is less likely. The National Risk Assessment (NRA) has a reasonable worst case scenario for avian influenza which is defined as:

- Scenario: An outbreak lasting at least 12 months from day zero to diseased freedom declared by the OIE. 80 to 90 infected premises geographically spread across the UK. All infected premises are assumed to cover the manufacture of chicken and chicken products. Multiple outbreaks across the EU restrict multilateral trade across the region
- The total costs were estimated at **£90m-£360m**. This includes:
  - Staff (in-house or contracted) cost (Gvmt)
  - Compensation (Gvmt)
  - Wider impacts on UK society
  - Impact on export markets
  - Uncompensated losses
- This gives a rough cost per IP (Gvmt + industry + rest of society) of roughly £1m-£4m.

Although this scenario is based on multiple incursions into chicken premises, an outbreak associated with a large gathering could lead to a similar number of outbreaks, but with the added complication of this occurring over a shorter time period which puts considerable stress on resources, and that the types of owners may have more emotional attachment to their birds as these could be pedigree or show birds.

Mitigation measures

As the disease situation has changed, the risk level has changed, therefore the licence to hold a gathering should be re-assessed. If the licence is lifted then *legal* gatherings are prevented and therefore any risk of spread from such events is removed. If the overall risk, taking into account both likelihood of disease occurring at a show and the consequence, was considered acceptable then risk mitigation measures can be taken to reduce the likelihood of disease entering a gathering, but it could not guarantee reducing the risk to negligible. Both a total ban on gatherings or a requirement for heightened biosecurity may lead to enforcement issues.

Measures to mitigate the risk of disease entering a gathering and the potential impact include disease vigilance and prompt reporting of any suspicion, high levels of biosecurity

and accurate record keeping to assist in any possible tracing exercise following the event. A table is provided below of possible measures. The risk of further (cross) contamination and onward spread occurring at and beyond the gathering could be mitigated by maintaining high levels of biosecurity, including reducing the number of potential contacts between infected and susceptible birds and informing livestock keepers about the need for vigilance for clinical signs of avian notifiable disease.

Conclusions

While we generally consider that there is a continual, albeit low, level of circulating avian viruses in the wild bird population and therefore an ongoing very low risk of introduction of avian notifiable disease to susceptible birds in the EU, the current situation with H5N8 HPAI in Europe has **raised this risk level to high for wild birds and an increased low to medium risk for incursion into poultry or captive birds of this virus (depending on the geographic location and the level of biosecurity on farm)**. Therefore, we consider that movements of live birds (poultry and other captive birds) from disease free areas of the European Union would also pose a low risk of introduction of avian notifiable disease to a bird gathering. Movements of such birds from an area under disease control restrictions are a high risk and are not permitted.

The **risk of entry into a gathering is low to medium**, taking into account the uncertainty – type and source of birds, biosecurity at source and at the gathering and duration of show. If such an incursion of disease into a bird gathering were to occur, there is a **medium risk** that it would lead to the spread of disease. This could rarely result in a multifocal disease outbreak with potentially high impact, as in the NRA reasonable worst case scenario. The risk level for an avian influenza outbreak has increased, and is not homogenous, but gatherings potentially increase the risk and the impact and the consequences of such are very high if not detected early.

Therefore, there are three possible options in order of increasing risk:

- Do not license any gatherings in the prevention zone (all GB) for the duration of the prevention zone;
- Gatherings may be allowed but only for certain species of birds which represent a lower risk such as columbiformes, passerines and psittaciformes subject to strict licensing and biosecurity;
- Allow all gatherings but increase the licensing requirements and / or regionalisation.

Therefore in response to the risk questions:

1) *What is the risk of the introduction of avian notifiable disease into bird fairs, shows, markets, sales and other gatherings?* ***The likelihood of introduction is greater than the likelihood of introduction through the general movement of poultry between premises outside disease control zones, because of the cumulative***

risk relating to multiple places of origin, and can be considered low but heightened. The impact of an introduction is potentially very severe.

2) *What, if any, management options are available to reduce the likelihood and the impact of introduction and subsequent spread of avian notifiable disease through the abovementioned gatherings?* ***Options are to ban, allow only certain species or allow everything with stricter controls and this is in order of increasing risk. A regionalisation option could also be considered.***

3) See table below but the key additional measures would be: a) vet in attendance; b) keeping records when birds change ownership; c) when birds change ownership, isolating for 7 days at destination.

Table 1. Comparison of measures available to regulate poultry gatherings and those applied in the current General Licence

Measure	In force 18 Dec 2016
General licence permitting gatherings	Yes
Specific licences	No
Withdraw licence (ie ban)	No
Notify APHA >7 days in advance including: Date the gathering will take place. b) Location of the gathering. c) Details of the licensee (including full name, contact address and telephone number). d) Anticipated numbers and type(s) of birds.	Yes
No sales allowed unless additional conditions are met (see below)	No
The licensee must make a record of all people who bring poultry or other captive birds to a gathering or take such birds from a gathering and keep the record for at least 3 months following the end of the gathering. The record must include at least the following information: a) Full name. b) Home address. c) Telephone number. d) Number and type(s) of birds exhibited, raced, bought or sold.	Yes
The licensee must not allow any cage, crate, basket or other container onto a gathering which is contaminated with bird droppings, bedding or other material of bird origin other than that from, or provided for, the birds brought to the	Yes

Measure	In force 18 Dec 2016
gathering and must make this requirement known to all those bringing birds to the gathering in advertising, on entry forms or by any other means	
The licensee must ensure that any cages, crates, baskets or other containers not removed from the premises by those attending the gathering are cleansed and disinfected as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of the gathering and in any case before they are used again.	Yes
i) ensure that any feed to which poultry or other captive birds had access, and all bedding, droppings, other material of bird origin and other contaminants derived from birds at the gathering and which are left on the premises when the gathering has ended are - a) destroyed; b) treated so as to remove the risk of transmission of disease; c) disposed of so that birds do not have access to them; or d) disposed of as Category 2 products under the Animal By-Products Regulations 2005. ii) where practicable, cleanse and disinfect those parts of the premises contaminated by such materials.	Yes
14 days notice to APHA	No
A named veterinary surgeon must be available on site during the whole time of the event for advice in case of suspect disease or a welfare problem. The veterinary surgeon should be responsible to ensuring that only clinically healthy birds in clean cages are entering the event.	No
Biosecurity advice must be distributed at the event.	No
Written contingencies, held by the nominated responsible person, must be available in the event of a disease incident at the event or nearby the event.	No
All cages used in the show must be cleansed and disinfected prior to and after the show.	Implicitly yes
• For sales: A record of all sales taking place at the event should be kept for at least 3 months, this should include: the name, address and telephone number of both the vendor and buyer and any identifying features or individual identification of the purchased bird(s).	No
• For sales: Buyers must isolate the purchased bird(s) from any other birds (except those purchased at the same event) for at least 1 week. • Any signs of ill health observed in the purchased bird(s) during this period must be reported to a veterinary surgeon and such birds must not be mixed with any other birds until the presence of an avian notifiable disease has been ruled out	No
• Restrict to birds of certain species – columbiformes, passerines and psittaciformes	No

Measure	In force 18 Dec 2016
• Restrict to regions only	No

Assumptions and Uncertainties

It is assumed that keepers of any birds participating at a gathering are doing so in full compliance with the legal requirements for movements of live birds, e.g. that birds are not coming from areas under disease control restrictions.

The level of awareness of avian notifiable diseases in the EU is thought to be generally high and suspicions of clinical disease in poultry and other captive birds would be reported reasonably quickly, generally within a few days. Movement restrictions for disease control purposes would be uniformly implemented based on Community legislation. Other Member States are kept informed through the regular meetings of the Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed (SCoPAFF) and by communications issued by the European Commission. In the event of a confirmed disease outbreak in a Member State, cross-border tracings are notified to the relevant Chief Veterinary Officers which trigger follow-up disease investigations and possible measures in the country(ies) affected.

The diseases relevant to this risk assessment are notifiable by law. Systematic active surveillance has been carried out across the European Union for notifiable avian influenza in domestic poultry and wild birds for a number of years. However, the true prevalence of notifiable avian disease cannot be established as it is not possible to test all categories of birds with the required precision and subclinical forms of disease may occur. Generally, we consider that avian influenza and Newcastle Disease viruses are circulating in the wild bird population and there is a continual low risk of introduction into the domestic poultry population. Vaccination against Newcastle disease in the EU is not prohibited and commercially available vaccines are being used to a variable extent in some Member States. In the UK, vaccination is voluntary for the domestic poultry industry.

The length of the virus incubation period as well as the possibility of virus shedding during this time is an important factor to be considered while assessing these risks. However, no official incubation period for avian influenzas is established for bird species other than poultry and the actual length of the incubation period is affected by numerous factors including the disease, the virus load, the actual virus strain, the species, immune status etc.

According to the World Animal Health Organisation (OIE), the maximum incubation period in poultry for notifiable avian influenza and Newcastle disease is 21 days (OIE[v], 2007; OIE, 2007a[vi]). Therefore, this risk assessment considers that susceptible birds may shed the virus during this period and act as potential sources of infection to other susceptible birds before showing clinical signs of the disease.

[i] Commission Decision of 19 October 2005 laying down biosecurity measures to reduce the risk of transmission of highly pathogenic avian influenza caused by Influenza virus A subtype H5N1 from birds living in the wild to poultry and other captive birds and providing for an early detection system in areas at particular risk (2005/734/EC) as amended by 2005/745/EC, 2005/855/EC, 2006/574/EC, and 2009/818/EC).

[ii] The Avian Influenza (Preventive Measures) England Regulations 2006

[iii] The Avian Influenza (Preventive Measures) (Wales) Regulations 2006

[iv] The Avian Influenza (Preventive Measures) (Scotland) Order 2007 and The Avian Influenza (Preventative Measures in Zoos) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (as amended)

[v] OIE, (2009). Terrestrial Animal Health Code. Chapter 10.4. Avian influenza. (http://www.oie.int/eng/normes/mcode/en_chapitre_1.10.4.htm). Accessed 19 July 2010.

[vi] OIE, (2009a). Terrestrial Animal Health Code. Chapter 10.13. Newcastle disease. (http://www.oie.int/eng/normes/mcode/en_chapitre_1.10.13.htm). Accessed 19 July 2010.