

FAQ for smallholder and backyard poultry keepers: Poultry and captive bird housing order

from 29 November 2021



Why are small-scale poultry keepers being asked to house their birds?

Against a backdrop of an increased risk that wild birds may be arriving in the UK carrying influenza, there are two main reasons for small-scale backyard keepers being asked to house their birds. Housing your birds minimises the risk of your birds coming into contact with infected wild birds or their faeces and so minimises the health risks to your birds. There is also a risk that if your birds become infected then the virus will multiply in your birds and, in the period before the disease is detected, you may unwittingly spread the disease to other domestic birds and in particular other, poultry flocks. So housing is a way to protect your birds and the birds owned by others.

Do wild birds contaminate domesticated poultry and which birds present the greater risks?

In the UK in recent years there have been a number of outbreaks of AI in commercial flocks associated with exposure to wild birds. Water fowl can carry the disease without showing clinical signs: these birds in particular migrate west from AI hotspots on mainland Europe and beyond, so the risk to birds in the UK increases. Wild birds in which AI has been detected include: Tufted Ducks, Common Pochards, mute swans and various gulls as well as other waterfowl, such as grebes, curlews, herons and coots and some raptor species.

Do I have to house my birds?

It is recognised that keepers of some small flocks may not be able to house their birds indoors without putting the health and welfare of their birds at risk. Under these circumstances there is a requirement to do what is practicable to minimise the risk to your birds and to those of others. You should consider if you can take steps to keep them separate from wild birds, such as: feeding and watering birds inside, making sure feed stores are protected against wild birds or vermin and removing any wild-bird attractants (removing feeders or filling in puddles) from the area around your birds.

Whether or not you are able to house your birds, you and anyone else in contact with your birds should avoid contact with all other poultry as far as possible.

If you house your birds, then what should you consider?

Poultry like a routine and backyard poultry are used to being able to scavenge for food. Being able to roam means that they can also control their environment, they can avoid, for example getting too hot by moving into shade. If you house your birds, you prevent them scavenging for food, limit their space and their ability to control their temperature. All of these changes can increase stress and lead to undesirable behaviours such as feather pecking and cannibalism. To minimise the risk of stress you need to:

- Provide your birds with sufficient food in a sheltered area to prevent attracting wild birds - they will probably eat more than you are used to because they will not be supplementing their diet with vegetation, insects, worms etc that they may eat normally;
- Ensure your birds have access to adequate supplies of clean water which cannot be accessed by wild birds- birds will drink up to twice what they will eat.
- Provide as much space as possible for your birds. A good way of doing this is to provide sufficient perch space for all of your birds. Properly designed perches enable subservient birds to get away from dominant birds during the day - when on a perch a bird's 'flock size' reduces to three, itself and up to two neighbours. At night birds will want to perch - their feet are designed to lock automatically onto a perch while they sleep - as this is deeply ingrained predator avoidance response. At night you will find the most dominant birds on the highest perches.
- Poultry are inquisitive - they need things to occupy them. Normally this need would be fulfilled by ranging around their territory but if your birds are constrained to a small run then you need to think of other things to keep them occupied. There are lots of ways that this can be done but giving the birds something to work at underpins most of them. So for example, put some of their food onto the litter that you should have on the floor of the house - this will encourage them to scavenge in the litter looking for food. Provide greens (cabbages suspended off the floor for example), for the birds to peck at. A full or part bale of straw or hay will give birds something to explore. Always check that anything you are introducing to your housed area hasn't been in contact with wild birds or their faeces.
- Dust bathing is important for the physiological and physiological health of your poultry - provide suitable space and material of dry material for this (e.g. wood shavings, sand or sawdust).
- The environment that your birds experience is crucial to their wellbeing. If housed then there is a risk from poor air quality and high temperatures, even in the winter months. Birds are warm blooded animals and produce a considerable amount of heat from the food they consume. In cold weather birds flock together - birds should not be kept on their own - and providing they are not exposed to draughts, even at sub-zero temperatures can keep each other warm. The biggest risk in the UK is overheating - birds are not able to lose heat very efficiently. If the housing is small and poorly ventilated then heat build-up can be a problem. An air temperature of 21oC or below is what you should aim for - an inexpensive maximum/minimum thermometer placed at bird level will enable you to monitor air temperature. You should not be unduly concerned about low temperatures, providing your birds are kept dry and draught free, but high temperatures can be lethal. Do not allow the ammonia concentration to build-up - more frequent than normal replacement of litter material may be required.
- If you are struggling to house your birds without a significant risk to their health and welfare, you should discuss this with your local veterinarian and agree preventative steps that you can take to keep them separate from wild birds.

Will I know if my birds have AI?

AI strains can be either low or high pathogenicity (ability to cause disease) with low pathogenicity strains having the ability to mutate into high pathogenicity strains. Birds infected by low pathogenicity strains may show no obvious signs of infection or may have mild breathing problems (although a number of conditions can cause this). In contrast high pathogenicity strains can cause sudden and widespread mortality. Birds that have not died may show signs that include: swollen head; blue discoloration of neck and throat; loss of appetite; respiratory distress such as gaping beak; coughing, sneezing or gurgling; diarrhoea and a drop in egg production.

It should be noted that some species of bird (such as ducks, geese and pigeons) display few or no clinical signs of avian influenza (AI).

If you are concerned about the health of your birds, contact your private veterinarian and if you suspect your birds have AI you must contact your local APHA Office.

Small Holders and Backyard Poultry Keepers

Poultry keepers with flocks of 50 or more birds are required to register their flock with the APHA. In the event of a disease outbreak neighbouring 'at risk' flocks can therefore be identified. These flocks would fall into a movement restriction or surveillance zone set up following the identification of an infected premise. All poultry keepers are encouraged to voluntarily register their flock, no matter how small, with the APHA to enable the tracing and monitoring of 'at risk' premises in the event of an outbreak.

Understanding Poultry Keepers Better

In collaboration with the RESAS strategic programme EPIC undertook research into backyard and small-holder poultry keepers. By speaking to individuals and exploring the reasons why people have poultry, their interactions with other poultry keepers and their concerns about disease risks researchers are developing a better understanding of poultry keepers attitudes to biosecurity. The 2018 report *Understanding Backyard Poultry Keepers and their Attitudes to Biosecurity: Final Report* highlights a breadth of attitudes and approaches to poultry keeping in Scotland.

[For more information visit our dedicated Bird Flu pages](#)