

# GENERAL LICENCING (GAMEBIRDS)

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS v2 18.08.2023

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### CHANGE TO THE GENERAL LICENCE (GL43) FOR 2023

#### Background

It has been decided, against the background of the current global outbreak of avian influenza and concerns about the risk to wild bird populations that GL43, issued on 31st May 2023, should authorise the release of common pheasant and red-legged partridge collectively referred to as 'gamebirds' in or around Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) only.

#### How will the Gamebird General Licence (GL43) for 2023 – 2025 work?

The General Licence 43 (GL43) which was reissued on the 31 May 2023 authorised the release of specified number of pheasants and red-legged partridges in an area which is designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or within their 500 metre buffer zones. Licence users must comply with the conditions of the licence.

#### Will you keep this change to GL43 under review?

It is Defra's intention to keep the change to the reissued GL43 under close review and Defra may decide to modify the General Licence as necessary, should the level of risk of avian influenza transmission to protected wild bird populations reduce to acceptable levels. Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser is leading this work.

#### Why didn't you give the shooting community more notice of the decision to rescind the GL43 for SPAs and their buffer zones?

GL43 was always due to expire on 31 May 2023 and there should not have been any expectation that GL43 would be reissued on the same terms.

The decision to issue the new GL43 had to be made in circumstances where the UK and Europe is experiencing one of the worst outbreaks of avian influenza in history, which has presented unique circumstances.

### **Is this an attack on the shooting community?**

The Government recognise the value of gamebird shooting for all the benefits it brings to individuals, the environment and the rural economy. We want to see a vibrant working countryside that is enhanced by a biodiverse environment.

### **Will compensation be available for businesses or individuals that have lost money because of the changes to GL43?**

No. Defra has been in touch with individuals and organisations to discuss how the industry can work together to mitigate the impact on people, birds and businesses.

## **WHO IS AFFECTED BY THE CHANGE**

### **Background**

Anyone wishing to release gamebirds in or within the buffer zone of an SPA will need to apply to Natural England for an individual licence. We are working closely with affected shoots and will support them through the licencing process.

### **I'm conducting activity outside of the Special Protection Area (SPA) + 500m zone, and not within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and its buffer zone, am I covered by the General Licence (GL43), or do I need to apply for an individual licence?**

Releases outside of SPAs and SACs and their buffer zones do not require a licence.

If your activity would take place within a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) that is not within a SPA or SAC, you are likely to need a SSSI consent from Natural England if you don't already have one. See this guidance if you need to apply for consent [Give notice and get consent for a planned activity on a SSSI - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/give-notice-and-get-consent-for-a-planned-activity-on-a-sssi).

### **I'm conducting activity outside of the Special Protection Area (SPA) + 500m zone, but within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Do I need to apply for an individual licence?**

No, your release is already permitted by the General Licence (GL43). But if you are unable to comply with the conditions set out in GL43 and wish to release more birds within a SAC than it permits, you will need to apply for an individual licence from Natural England.

### **I'm conducting activity outside of the Special Protection Area (SPA) + 500m zone, but within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Are conditions in the GL43 dependent on the number of birds I want to release?**

Yes, there are a number of [conditions that have to be met in GL43](#) including the number/density of birds that can be released: this is up to 700 birds per hectare within the SAC (or lower if stipulated by your SSSI consent), and up to 1000 per hectare in the 500m buffer zone.

Guidance is available for operations that require NE consent on SSSIs, see guidance on [how to apply for consent](#).

**I'm conducting activity within a Special Protection Area (SPA) + 500m zone, will I need to apply for an individual licence?**

Yes, you will need to apply for an individual licence. Details about the application process can be found here: [online advice service](#)

**Will the individual licence be dependent on the number of birds I want to release?**

No, if you intend to release **any** gamebirds on a Special Protection Area, you need to apply for an individual licence from Natural England and indicate how many birds you wish to release. The total number of birds you can release will be set out in the licence.

**If I need an individual licence, will I also need to get a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA)?**

Yes, once you have applied for an individual licence, Defra must carry out a Habitats Regulation Assessment of the application to inform its decision. Defra is the competent authority for HRAs and must have regard to the advice of Natural England as the statutory nature conservation body.

Natural England have made a strategic assessment of lower-risk sites, from which they will draw to provide advice as fast as possible.

## **APPLICATION PROCESS FOR AN INDIVIDUAL LICENCE**

**The Natural England online screening tool told me that I am unlikely to get a licence. What should I do now?**

The online service provides an [automated triage service](#), which aims to help users understand whether they are impacted by the change in licencing arrangements or not. It is an initial guide for users, not a decision. **We encourage anyone who would like to release gamebirds within an SPA and its 500m buffer zone to apply for an individual licence.**

**The Natural England screening tool is confusing. I thought I had applied for a licence, but I had only completed the initial screening form.**

The Natural England online service is being updated to incorporate clearer messaging and to include the application form at the end of the screening tool.

**What information is needed for the licence application?**

The licence application form is straightforward and requires the following information to complete it:

- A 6-figure grid reference \*for the centre of each release pen or partridge release area. \*This is important to get correct as it is vital to the application process link to online help: [grid reference](#)
- The size in m<sup>2</sup> of the release pen or area. (10,000m<sup>2</sup> is one hectare)
- The number of birds in each release

- The date of planned release
- A brief explanation of the shoot's management technique to allow a better understanding of how the operation works and how it might impact the SPA features.

### **Can I apply for a licence offline?**

We would encourage everyone who thinks they may need to apply for a licence to use the tool to find out whether this is the case. If you need an offline copy of the application form, you can contact Natural England:

[Gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk)

### **How can I tell if you have received my licence application?**

Once you have submitted an application to Natural England, you should receive a confirmation email with a unique reference number. If you have applied and haven't received this confirmation email and reference number, contact:

[Gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk)

Please provide up to date contact information including email and telephone numbers with your application so that Natural England and Defra can contact you.

### **I need a licence now**

We recognise the urgency of this situation and Defra is working with Natural England to ensure that applications are assessed as quickly as possible.

We have brought in more officials who are working at pace to process applications and ensure that all relevant evidence is collected and considered before a final decision is made.

### **How can I contact you to find out what is happening with my application?**

The route for you to make contact if you have a query or concern is to email Defra:

[GLEnquiries@defra.gov.uk](mailto:GLEnquiries@defra.gov.uk)

## **DEFRA DECISION MAKING**

### **Who will decide on my application?**

The legislation provides for Secretary of State to make the decision. The Secretary of State will consider Natural England advice in accordance with the legal framework.

When Defra receives the recommendation from Natural England, they will contact you to acknowledge receipt of the recommendation.

### **Why are these decisions being made in Whitehall, they do not understand the countryside?**

Defra has brought the process in-house to expedite decision making and review licence applications promptly and appropriately.

Ministers are deciding on each application on a case-by-case basis and are drawing on range of evidence and expertise, including those external to Natural England, to make sure that the knowledge and experience of the shooting community are

considered. This further insight may allow us to issue a licence in more complex environments, some with targeted and proportionate conditions.

### **On what basis will decisions be made?**

Decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis and each individual licence application will undergo a rigorous assessment process in accordance with the legal framework. This includes taking into account expert advice from Natural England.

### **What factors are considered when making a decision?**

The Defra licence team considers applications against the below checklist of tests working with in-house experts and input from Defra lawyers:

- the most up to date AI outbreak data
- the most up to date kept bird management recommendations.
- Sufficient consideration of conditions to conservation management and breeding profiles of the SPA species susceptible to AI.

### **How will I find out about the decision?**

Defra will inform you of the decision in writing. This will be via email where a contact email address has been provided.

### **Will the outcome of my application be made public?**

Licence decisions will not be publicised.

## **DECISION OUTCOMES AND PROVIDING ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

### **My application has been granted, what do I do next?**

If your application has been granted, and you have received your licence document you are then able to release the birds, subject to the conditions set out in the licence.

### **I've already made an application for an individual licence. Why is Defra asking me to share additional information?**

Having reviewed the information submitted with licence applications, officials may request additional site-specific information that would help to assess the potential impacts of proposed releases, including mitigating factors. This additional information may be considered alongside the original application submission in determining the licence application.

### **What do you mean by 'additional information'?**

Where you are invited to submit additional information, this request should normally specify what type of information to provide. Relevant material could include local information about the features of the Special Protection Area (SPA), management measures to keep gamebirds away from SPA features, and management measures beneficial for SPA features.

### **My licence has been refused or has a late release date. Can I submit additional information and have my application reconsidered?**

Where invited to do so, you may submit additional information by the deadline stated in your letter. We cannot guarantee that licence applications will be reconsidered or

granted based on additional information submitted. You will be informed of the outcome.

**Who will review the additional information within Defra?**

The additional information will initially be reviewed by officials as part of making a recommendation to ministers. Ministers will also be able to review all information submitted in determining the application.

**Will my information be confidential and stored securely?**

All information provided by applicants will be securely stored and managed in accordance with data protection regulations and best practice, our [Personal Information Charter](#), and the Defra privacy notice which sets out how Defra will handle personal data.

**Where should I send additional information?**

Send all additional information to Defra by email to: [GLEnquiries@defra.gov.uk](mailto:GLEnquiries@defra.gov.uk)

**Once I have sent additional information, how much longer will I have to wait for an outcome?**

The information will be reviewed as soon as it is received. Ministers are meeting daily to discuss applications and review additional information. Due to the changing levels of demand on our systems, we cannot provide any guarantee how long it will take for applicants to be notified of an outcome.

**How will I be informed that additional information has/has not been taken into consideration?**

If we have invited you to submit additional information this will be reviewed as part of the decision-making process if it is received within the time stipulated. This is an integral part of the decision-making process and separate notification will not be sent. Applicants will be informed by email of the decision on their licence once the process is complete.

If you have previously been issued with a decision, you will be informed whether the additional information has changed the outcome of your licencing decision or your licence conditions.

**LICENCE CONDITIONS**

**Where can I see if there are conditions as part of my licence being agreed?**

All conditions with which you must comply and advice notes which we recommend you implement are written on the face of your licence instrument.

### **How has Defra come to the decision on release dates?**

We have carefully considered individual applications alongside the features of the relevant SPA. Careful consideration of the timings of gamebird release is required to prevent AI risk, particularly to breeding populations. Any decision to delay release has been taken to protect the wild bird features of that site.

### **Why is the start date written on the licence earlier than the permitted release date?**

The start date on your licence is the date the licence was signed by Defra Ministers. If there is a condition to your licence, i.e., that you cannot release gamebirds until a later date, this will need to be adhered to and is the earliest release date irrespective of the date the licence was signed.

### **My licence conditions state that gamebirds must not be released before a specific date and must not be kept on the SPA prior to this date, with or without pens (including temporary pens). Where am I meant to store birds that are being delivered before the release date or have already been delivered to the site?**

Where possible, you should consider whether it is possible to delay delivery of the birds until the release date. If they have will be delivered before the release date you may need to store them securely outside of the SPA until the release date. When considering options to store birds that cannot be released, please refer to our welfare guidance note.

### **If I can contain gamebirds in the pen on the SPA using a roof or net, or for larger pens known management techniques such as location of the feeding/gritting stations or dogging them back into the pen, is this acceptable?**

You cannot release the birds within 500m of the SPA unless it is in line with the conditions of your licence. There is no definition of 'release' set out in the Wildlife and Countryside Act, however this is a question of fact and by way of illustrative example, release may occur when the pheasants are able to escape from their open top release pen.

### **Can I keep gamebirds in pens within the buffer zone prior to release?**

Please check the wording of your licence. Unless it explicitly prohibits you from doing so you can hold the birds in pens within the buffer zone prior to release. You must not release them or allow them to escape before the permitted release date.

### **My conditions are unworkable how can I appeal?**

The conditions are set to balance the need to protect species for which the Special Protected Area is designated and to support gamebird businesses. In order to allow the release of gamebirds on European sites (SACs and SPAs), the Secretary of State for the Environment must be able to conclude there will be no adverse effect on the integrity of the site, i.e. be able to conclude beyond all reasonable scientific

doubt there will be no adverse effect on site integrity' [Further information is available in Defra guidance on Habitats Regulations Assessments: protecting a European site.](#)

There is no statutory right to appeal against licence conditions. Where invited to do so, you may submit additional information by the deadline stated in your letter, indicating which specific conditions you would like to have reconsidered and why you cannot practically implement them. We can consider a suitable alternative that would have an equal or higher level of mitigation, but we cannot guarantee that licence conditions will be reconsidered or amended based on additional information submitted. You will be informed of the outcome.

## ADVISORY NOTES

### What is the purpose of an advisory note?

The advisory notes in the Individual Licence set out advice for minimising risks associated with the release of gamebirds. In many cases this is focused on steps that can be taken to further reduce the risk of Avian Influenza transmission, and thus impact on birds, businesses and people.

Such notes can also provide advice as to how to meet licence conditions and signpost to separate existing but related legal requirements. In addition, the licence may include additional notes that can help reduce other types of risk and boost conservation efforts.

## AVIAN INFLUENZA

### Avian Influenza Key Facts and Statistics

#### Wild game birds

For the 2021/22 outbreak season there were 32 findings of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in wild pheasants.

For the 2022/23 outbreak season (1 October – 18 August 23) there have been 44 findings HPAI in wild pheasants in 11 counties in 15 different locations. There has also been 1 finding in Red Legged Partridges

#### Captive game birds

For the 2021/22 season there were 5 infected premises (IPs) with more than 2,500 pheasants (one also had partridges) there were a further 9 IPs with small numbers of pheasants (mainly ornamental)

For the 2022/23 season there have been 2 IPs with more than 2500 pheasants and a further 3 IPs with small numbers of pheasants (mainly ornamental) plus a further



1 x IP that had rearing mallards and red legged partridges. There have also been a further 5 infected premises in Scotland involving up to 2,000 pheasants in release pens.

### **What evidence is there that releasing birds in SPAs increases risk?**

The H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza has been detected in 61 different species of wild bird since 1 October 2022 and it is thought that all birds are susceptible to infection.

Mortality rates in some species are high, while others may not show clinical signs.

APHA's [Qualitative Risk Assessment \(QRA\)](#) finds that large numbers of released naive pheasants, once infected, could serve as an ongoing source of avian influenza with the risk of onward transmission to other wild birds.

Avian influenza continues to have population level impacts, yet unquantified, on a wide range of some of the world's most important colonies of breeding seabirds including the roseate tern, northern gannet, great skua and kittiwake.

### **The QRA was published in October 2022. Have you reviewed the risk since?**

Yes, Defra commissioned an updated assessment in June 2023, which is currently being finalised.

It does indicate that the release of large numbers of captive pheasants in July and August is likely to result in a very high likelihood of one or more wild birds being infected in the vicinity of release sites.

### **There have been few AI cases in pheasants so why is the risk 'very high'?**

The risk level is for an aggregated risk, where the probability of one released pheasant being infected is aggregated to account for the very high number of all pheasants released. "Very high" means we are as certain as we can be that at least one pheasant will be infected and will act as a source of infection to another wild bird. These susceptible pheasant populations act by increasing the effective population size for disease transmission and could result in maintenance of HPAI H5N1 both in other released pheasants and in the other in contact wild bird populations. This will lead to increased infection pressure to resident wild birds over the late summer and early autumn, in effect maintaining the virus in the wild bird population before the migratory waterfowl species arrive in Great Britain in late autumn.

### **How certain is Natural England of these risks?**

The uncertainty for the high to very high risks predicted in the assessment for various bird groups and habitats is low, which is drawn from the 2022 risk assessment. This is because there are better data available on transmission and susceptibility of pheasants to the current virus strains. It is accepted that there is still some uncertainty around the pheasant numbers and release site locations, the wild bird abundance at release sites, susceptibility of some wild bird families and, importantly, contact rates between released pheasants and wild birds. However, it is felt that this uncertainty would not be sufficient to substantially reduce our confidence in the predicted high or very high risks.

### **There has always been bird flu, what level does it need to be for these controls not to be in place?**

In previous years, the risk level over the summer for the detection of new wild bird findings of any notifiable avian disease was low and it is only in the past two years when the risk levels have remained at medium or high following the winter peak. The requirement for an Individual Licence to release gamebirds on or near SPAs is in response to this summer risk. We continue to see many thousands of birds affected, most recently along the coast near SPAs, but also inland in gull populations. This poses a potential threat to protected bird species that are already under pressure which is why we have taken this decision based on scientific advice. We are keeping this situation under close review and will listen carefully to Natural England's assessment of future risk.

### **How many gamebirds have been infected with Avian Influenza?**

It is not possible to provide robust numbers. Gamebirds that are captive and have been reared under good or stringent biosecurity are not expected to become infected. It is once they are released that we anticipate some are likely to become infected and then act as a source of infection for other birds. That is why some Individual Licence conditions require clinical inspections or testing prior to release and why it is essential to report any dead wild birds - including gamebirds - around the site of release. We will have more information as the season progresses.

### **Which bird species are affected by Avian Influenza?**

All bird species are susceptible to Avian Influenza. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has published a [list of which birds have been affected globally](#) by avian influenza.

Using this list, we can confirm that peregrines, hen harriers, bitterns, curlews, warblers, merlins, whooper swans, Bewick (Tundra) swans, various dabbling and diving ducks, Brent geese and plovers have all tested positive during this latest epizootic. All these birds are features of different SPAs.

### **Which Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have been affected by Avian Influenza?**

Every 1a, 1b and 2 level SPA in England has been affected by Avian Influenza, with a wild bird testing positive either within or near (<5km) the boundary of the SPA over the last two years.

To note: as wild birds fly, we cannot be 100% confident that where they are found is where they were infected, unless they are nesting and were found in situ.

### **What is the current outlook for Avian Influenza? Is the situation improving or deteriorating?**

It is too early to say whether the current situation will continue into the late summer, after which the wild bird breeding season will be over. We should remember that around September onward, the wild waterfowl migration season will start again which may bring more naïve birds to the UK. At present, the situation appears to be following what happened last year and we should be prepared for circulation to continue in the coming months in wild birds with spill-over into domestic poultry.

### **What are mass mortality events and how might they affect gamebirds?**

A mass mortality event (MME) is where a number of animals die due to exposure to a common source. That is, within a small geographic area and within a defined or short time period.

Wild birds are susceptible to a range of diseases and injuries and not all dead birds will have been infected with avian influenza and not all MMEs are caused by avian influenza. However, in those cases that are associated with avian influenza, factors that influence the scale of the mortality include the species, the density of birds, their flight coverage and natural mortality rate.

### **Which bird species have been most affected and where?**

Since mid-June the following mass mortality events (at least 20 birds) have been reported - Guillemots near Silecroft Beach, Cumbria; Guillemots on Silecroft Beach, Cumbria; Guillemot, Razorbill & Kittiwake at Blakeney Point, Blakeney National Nature Reserve; Herring gulls, Lesser black backed gulls on Havergate Island; Kittiwakes near Filey, Filey Bay, Yorkshire; Puffins, Common Terns, Sandwich Terns, Arctic Terns and Roseate Terns on Coquet Island, Northumberland; Kittiwakes at RSPB reserve Minsmere, Suffolk; Guillemots, Herring gulls and Kittiwakes at Goswick Sands, Lindisfarne; Common terns, Canada Geese, Herring Gulls, Black headed gulls and Sandwich terns at Seaforth Nature Reserve, Merseyside; Arctic Terns, Kittiwakes, Herring Gulls and Sandwich Terns at the National Trust Long Nanny reserve in Northumberland; Common Terns near Saltholme Pools, Stockton on Tees; Black headed gulls near Portsmouth, Hampshire; Black Headed Gulls at Hardendale Quarry, Cumbria; Black Headed Gulls at Cresswell Pond, Cresswell, Northumberland; Black Headed Gulls at Snettisham Reserve, King's Lynn, Norfolk; Black Headed Gulls at Boulmer Alnwick; Black Headed Gulls at Leighton Moss Carnworth Lancashire; Sandwich Terns, Herring Gulls and Black Headed Gulls at Brownsea Island, Dorset; Sandwich Tern, Black-headed Gull, Kittiwake & Great Black-backed Gull at Scolt Head Island, Norfolk; Black-headed gull, Arctic Tern and Sandwich terns at Farne and Coquet Islands, Northumberland and Black Headed Gulls and Common Terns on Hayling Island.

### **Have there been mass mortality events in gamebirds?**

Although there have been no recent reports of MMEs in gamebirds, there were a number of reports of increased mortality in wild pheasants during 2022 and 44 wild pheasants have tested positive in 15 different postcode areas. None of them were reported on Birdwatch or epicollect so we cannot substantiate the scale of the mortality.

### **What do I do if I find dead wild birds?**

Members of the public are encouraged to report findings of dead wild birds using the [online reporting system](#) or by calling the Defra helpline (03459 33 55 77) if they find one or more dead wild bird of prey, swan, goose, or duck, or five or more gulls or dead wild birds of any species. These are then triaged and where appropriate APHA arranges to collect birds for testing.

Ornithologists and Reserve managers also report dead birds using the Birdwatch App or through Epicollect, the outputs are used by Defra, BTO and JNCC to monitor

the impact on wild birds. The information is also used to inform the avian influenza risk as they are an indicator of possible progression of the disease within bird populations.

## **PRE-RELEASE AVIAN INFLUENZA (AI) CHECKS AND TESTING**

### **If I am granted an individual licence for release on a SPA site and/or in the buffer zone around the site, will I need to do any pre-release testing for pheasants?**

There is no current requirement to test pheasants prior to release. Pre-release vet checks will only be a requirement if specified as a condition in your licence. If it is a condition<sup>1</sup> of the licence, (in addition to the existing requirements to regularly monitor the health and welfare of pheasants) you will be required to arrange for a private veterinary surgeon visit during which the health of the birds is checked no more than 24 hours before release.

This vet check should include a check of production records and a clinical inspection of all birds on the premises. Following this check, you must ask the vet for a signed written statement that confirms that no signs of notifiable avian disease were observed by the vet during the inspection. You should retain the vet's written statement as you may be asked to demonstrate that you have complied with the licence condition. You must not release your checked gamebirds if the vet's written statement is more than 24 hours old **or** the inspected birds show clinical signs of disease in the professional opinion of the vet who checked them.

### **If I am granted an individual licence for release on a SPA site and/or in the buffer zone around the site, will I need to do any pre-release testing for partridges?**

Pre-release testing will only be a requirement if it is specified as a condition in your licence. If it is a condition<sup>2</sup> of the licence, (in addition to the existing requirements to regularly monitor the health and welfare of red legged partridges), you will need to test each group of partridges within 48 hours of their release.

You will need to ask your private vet to take samples for PCR<sup>3</sup> testing from each epidemiological group<sup>4</sup> that makes up the release. A total of 60 oropharyngeal (throat) swabs will be needed from a random sample of 60 birds from each epidemiological group.

These samples will need to be couriered to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) national reference laboratory at Weybridge. Testing is not available at weekends. There is a guaranteed 48-hour turnaround with most results available within 24 hours. You must wait for your vet to inform you that the results are negative before birds are released. You **must not** release your birds if they test positive or show clinical signs of disease.

### **Are vets up to speed on what tests qualify for Defra purposes and are these tests readily available?**

Defra are in contact with vets and industry organisations. A guidance note<sup>5</sup> is available which details the address of the laboratory, type of swabs and costs of

testing. We recommend that you speak to your private vet at the earliest opportunity to schedule sampling and book a slot with the lab.

**What happens if I cannot get a vet in time for my desired release date?**

Vets will have to work with their local shoots to agree a schedule of work, which takes account of the limited veterinary resource. If you cannot get a vet in time, then release will need to be delayed.

**What happens if the notification of test results to the keeper are delayed?**

If the samples are delayed in their journey to the lab for testing or notification of test results to the keeper are delayed through circumstances beyond the control of the keeper, e.g. the courier doesn't attend on time to collect the samples or there is a lab breakdown, please email the NE gamebird licensing team at: [Gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk) copying in: [GLEnquiries@defra.gov.uk](mailto:GLEnquiries@defra.gov.uk) and inform them of the delay and reasons for the delay. If you take this step, NE in consultation with Defra will be able to take these factors into consideration when considering what, if any, further action to take.

**How do you define an epi group?**

An epidemiological unit or group is one where all the birds in it are considered to be exposed to the same level of threat of disease via shared pathways. In other words, where there are no biosecurity measures in place to separate the groups, gamebirds are handled by the same keepers or exposed to the same feed and water sources they will be considered to be in the same epi group. See ([chapitre surveillance general.pdf](#) (woah.org)). Your vet will be able to make the assessment based on site specific circumstances.

**I am sending partridges from the same epi group to X different shoots/sites - do each group need to be tested?**

No. In the context of pre-release testing, it is the birds which are relevant to the issue not where they are released (the latter is addressed through the licence provisions). If all the gamebirds come from the same game farm/rearing field and are in a single epi group, a single set of 60 swabs will be sufficient to cover all X release locations, provided the samples were taken within 48 hours of release (and were all negative).

**Do I need to test partridges if they are in the same epi group as pheasants?**

No. Provided your vet is satisfied that the birds in question are part of the same epi group, are co-mingling or have direct beak to beak contact, testing will not be required. Red-legged partridges will however need a veterinary check no more than 24 hours before release.

**Does the 48-hour window refer to the start or end of release?**

The 48-hour window is taken from the time the last sample was taken from the epi group to the point of release for each bird in the group sampled.

**Do common pheasants need to be inspected at the release site?**

No. Common pheasants (CP) can be inspected anywhere provided they are inspected no more than 24 hours before release. One option is to inspect the CP as they are being crated for transport to an open topped release pen. Alternatively for

younger CPs or CPs in covered release pens the inspection could take place in the release pen.

**Do red-legged partridges (RLPs) need to be sampled at the release site?**

No. RLPs can be sampled anywhere provided the RLPs test negative for HPAI and the release takes place within 48 hours of the last sample being taken. To minimise impact on bird welfare, an ideal option would be to sample the birds at crating prior to transport. Given the results are expected to be negative, they could then be transported to the shoot and placed in covered pens pending receipt of lab results – birds must then be released within 48 hours of the last sample being taken.

**How can this work for trickle release systems?**

Unless samples are taken over several days it is acknowledged that trickle release systems are unlikely to be practical as repeat sampling and testing will be required. If gamebirds are mixed in the same holding pen, testing will not be required but it will however still be necessary for a vet to inspect all the gamebirds in the release pen no more than 24 hours before release.

**Will remote/video inspection of common pheasants by my vet 24 hours pre-release be considered adequate inspection?**

In principle Defra is prepared to consider live remote inspection by a private vet however this is subject to further consideration of relevant regulatory requirements.

**What is the definition of an experienced poultry or gamebird vet please?**

A qualified veterinary surgeon (MRCVS) who is satisfied that his own previous professional experience is sufficient to enable him to examine the birds and identify clinical signs of notifiable avian disease may undertake the inspection and sign the written statement.

**Why has it got to be an ‘experienced poultry or gamebird vet’? Any MRCVS should be able to complete this work and sign it off.**

A vet (MRCVS) working under the instruction / guidance of an experienced gamebird or poultry vet may also inspect the birds for clinical signs of notifiable avian disease and sign a written statement, provided that both vets are listed on the attestation.

**What is the definition of ‘release’ for red legged partridges?**

There is no statutory definition of ‘release’ set out in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, however this is a question of fact and by way of illustrative example, release may occur when the partridges are released or allow to escape from their enclosed pen into the wild.

**What is the definition of ‘release’ for common pheasants?**

There is no definition of ‘release’ set out in the Wildlife and Countryside Act, however this is a question of fact and by way of illustrative example, release may occur when the pheasants are able to escape from their open top release pen.