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Convener of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural
Environment Committee

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23 November 2022

Dear Finlay

Thank you for your letter of 17 November in which you refer to concerns expressed by the Scottish poultry sector over the Scottish Government's decision not to impose mandatory housing for all poultry and other captive birds. These are concerns I am aware of and I understand just how worried poultry keepers are, given the number of challenges they are facing.

I note the Committee has asked for the following information -

- an update on the number of cases detected in Scotland since the end of August 2022;
- the reasons for the Scottish Government's decision not to impose mandatory housing;
- further information about the number of cases or point at which the Scottish Government would consider similar restrictions necessary; and
- what support measures the Scottish Government currently has in place to support farmers/keepers of affected flocks.

Since the end of August 2022 there have been eight infected premises confirmed in Scotland with highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 (one on Lewis, two in Orkney, four in Aberdeenshire and one East Ayrshire). Of these, five cases have been in commercial flocks, all but one of which were housed at the time of infection. Over the same period there were fourteen findings of HPAI H5N1 in wild birds in seven locations in Scotland. In contrast, in England alone from 1st October 2022, HPAI H5N1 has been confirmed (as of 21st November 2022) in 117 premises, with the majority of these cases within East Anglia. I have attached maps at Annex 1 and 2 showing the locations of infected premises and results of our dead wild bird findings (showing birds that have tested positive and negative).

The reasons for the Scottish Government's decision not to impose mandatory housing measures, as I outlined in topical questions on Tuesday 8th of November, is that we take our decisions on the basis of the best available scientific advice and expertise available to us. Any decision to introduce mandatory housing of birds, whether at a regional or national level,

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has to be based on risk and required to improve animal health and welfare concerns, and must be balanced against the negative impacts that housing otherwise free range birds might have. The situation is being kept under constant review and the decision on whether a housing order is introduced is a matter for Scotland's Chief Veterinary Officer to advise upon.

Producers who are concerned about the increased risk of avian influenza due to individual circumstances in their specific situation already have the option to voluntarily house their birds. However, in this instance, free range status would also cease to apply, and the eggs produced would be classed as Barn Eggs. The scientific opinion from EFSA concludes that housing birds gives a two-fold reduction in risk, but this is only effective if other good biosecurity practices are being adopted. In contrast, excellent biosecurity gives a predicted 44 fold reduction in cases. The permanent housing of birds, that are normally kept in a free-range system, does have negative consequences for the welfare of the birds.

The committee has also asked for further information about the number of cases or the point at which the Scottish Government would consider similar restrictions necessary. This information includes numbers and geographical distribution of poultry cases, epidemiological reports on risk pathways, risk assessments on disease risk level, alongside case numbers and geographical distribution of wild bird findings. This is balanced with published data on the risk reduction of biosecurity measures, compared to risk reduction from housing, alongside welfare problems following housing. In addition, this is augmented by disease monitoring of the situation in other countries, including across Great Britain, and monitoring of wild bird migration and meteorological information which predicts likely spread of the virus.

We expect the high risk HPAI season in Scotland to start later than in England, and expect the disease to be in circulation longer, with cases well into the Spring and Summer (previous expectations were that cases would tail off by mid-February).

Lastly, a judgment is made from a veterinary perspective on the expected benefits of introducing a housing order against any potential welfare consequences.

The committee also asked what support measures the Scottish Government currently has in place to support farmers/keepers of affected flocks. Advice and guidance is provided to owners of keepers affected by disease by the Animal and Plant Health Agency to guide them whilst premises are under movement restriction. When animals are culled as part of Scottish Government's response to controlling HPAI outbreaks on affected farms, compensation, as set out in the Animal Health Act 1981, is payable for healthy birds only. There is no compensation available for sick birds or birds that have died. The amount of compensation is established by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) using the relevant valuation rate card (or for specialist stock by a specialist valuer). The valuation rate cards are updated by APHA five times per year (in November, January, March, June and September) to ensure rates are in line with average market values for the types of birds covered. In this outbreak, APHA makes its assessment of the disease status of the birds based on clinical inspection and veterinary judgment at the point Government takes control of the affected farm.



MAIRI GOUGEON

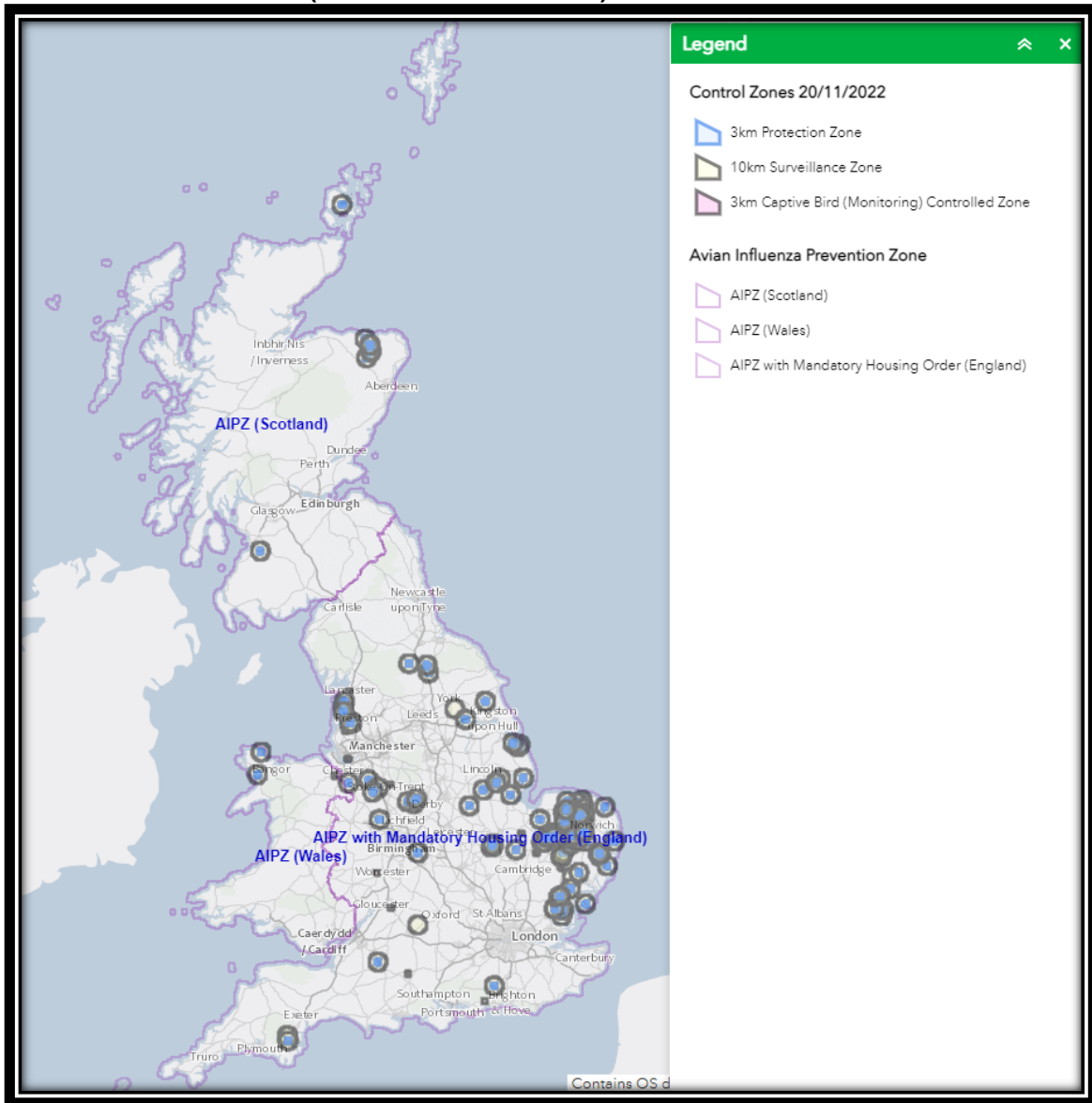
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Annex 1: Geographic locations of confirmed cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 in domestic birds in GB (as at 21 November 2022)



Note: This information is available on APHAs [interactive map](#) that allows keepers to check where disease control zones are currently located and if they are in a zone.

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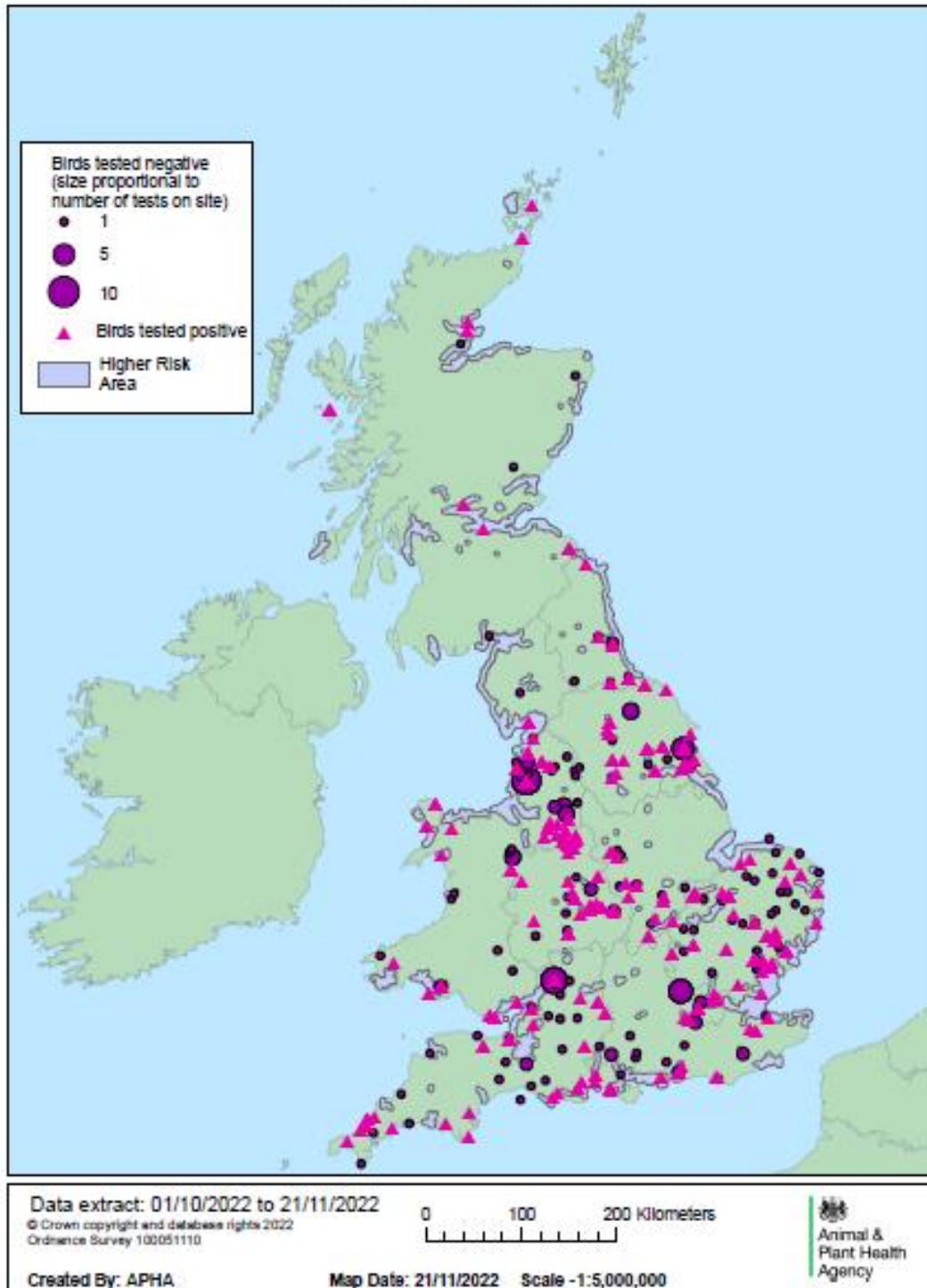
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Annex 2 Geographic locations of positive and negative results of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 reported to the GB avian influenza dead wild birds helpline.

Wild bird submissions and cases positive for HPAI H5N1 From October 2022



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