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trading standards law explained

Contingency planning for livestock diseases

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Key legislation

Although the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2021, certain pieces of legislation (known as 'assimilated law') continue to apply until such time as they are replaced by new UK legislation, revoked or permitted to expire. This means that our guidance still contains references to legislation that originated from the EU.

This guidance is for England

A 'disaster' is an event that exceeds local capacity to deal with it, whilst an 'emergency' is an unforeseen or sudden occurrence that demands immediate action. An outbreak of a serious animal disease such as foot-and-mouth disease, avian influenza or rabies may fit into the definitions of both a disaster and an emergency.

The effects of an outbreak can have serious implications in terms of movement restrictions and the killing of a large number of animals. There are also human impacts resulting from potential zoonotic diseases (for example, rabies) in terms of post-exposure management and supportive medical treatment.

The greater the likelihood and/or impact of a disaster or emergency, the greater the need for contingency planning.

What is contingency planning?

Contingency planning may be defined as a mechanism for anticipating, and thereby proposing responses to, unexpected and unintended events and emergencies. It is founded upon the risk and anticipation of possible scenarios, the expected consequences (perhaps based upon experience), preparation to mitigate these consequences, and post-event reconstruction and restitution. Effective contingency planning has to balance the costs of planning for possible scenarios against the likelihood of those events occurring and the severity of impact.

The law

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 reflects the role of local authorities (and central Government) in providing civil protection at a local level, and places a statutory duty on them to maintain emergency plans for events or situations likely to cause serious damage to human welfare and the environment - for example, animal diseases.

The Animal Health Act 1981 places statutory duties on local authorities in relation to animal disease outbreaks. This role is focused on preventing the spread of notifiable livestock disease and so limiting the effect of the disease on humans, animals and the environment.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 makes owners and keepers of animals responsible for ensuring that their welfare needs are met and creates an offence for a responsible person to cause or allow an animal to suffer unnecessarily.

Some legislation affecting livestock keepers refers explicitly to contingency planning. For example, the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 require provisions to be made in the case of failure of automated or mechanical equipment essential for the health and well-being of animals. Assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 *on the protection of animals during transport and related operations* requires those applying for long-journey transport authorisation to submit contingency plans in the event of emergencies.

More information on the legal responsibilities of livestock keepers during disease or non-disease emergencies are laid out in the on-farm welfare codes of practice available on the GOV.UK website.

What happens in a disease-outbreak situation?

In a disease outbreak or emergency, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has well-documented contingency plans for how it and its agencies (within central Government), its operational partners (including local authorities) and the farming community are expected to respond. The plans detail arrangements for dealing with, controlling and eradicating disease. The plans aim to:

- Cause the least possible disruption to all industries and the public as a whole
- Minimise the number of animals that need to be slaughtered for any reason
- Minimise the damage to the environment and protect public health
- Minimise the burden on taxpayers and the public

The latest version of the contingency plan is now generic, meaning that it is a single, simplified document, providing a clear overview of the response to disease outbreaks and incidents, and detailing the preparations for an operational response.

In an animal disease outbreak, Defra is likely to be the Lead Government Department (LGD), but it is not

limited to Defra. Defra and the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) are directly responsible for both local and national disease control, and the animal health and welfare response.

The tactical response is coordinated through a National Disease Control Centre (NDCC), appropriate to the level required to handle the outbreak or incident. The NDCC brings together policy functions provided by the LGD, with operational functions provided by APHA and other operational partners, such as local authorities.

At the operational level, APHA establishes a Central Disease Control Centre (CDCC). The CDCC is a virtual structure; it will be located across multiple sites and include functions delivered across the agency. The CDCC coordinates operational activities taking place at the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and permanently operating Customer Service Centres (CSCs). The CDCC follows tactical direction and policy guidance set out in the relevant disease control strategies, contingency plans and operational instructions.

The FOB implements the disease control operation, ensuring that local operational partners and stakeholders are appropriately engaged. The FOB follows tactical direction and policy guidance set out in the relevant disease control strategies, contingency plans and operational instructions. A FOB will be established close to the outbreak or incident location, providing an operational base for those teams that are predominantly involved in field-based activities. Dependent on the nature of an outbreak, further FOBs may be established.

A FOB manager is appointed, responsible for managing the local accommodation, facilities and resources (including staff), and arranging for the provision of arrival, induction, training and departure processes.

In line with their responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, local authorities will also prepare contingency plans to take account of local conditions and resources. This is usually undertaken by the emergency planning service within your local authority, and individual plans are made available to the public.

The latest national generic contingency plan for animal diseases can be found on the GOV.UK website, which also contains more information on contingency planning for animal keepers.

Contingency planning for farmers

One way to protect your livestock, business and income is to plan ahead and make contingency plans. In a disease-outbreak situation or incident, local authority personnel and other officials will advise you on the situation, but you may find that putting your own plans in place (in accordance with any current legal constraints) is essential. It is advised that you take the following steps:

- Make yourself aware of and familiarise yourself with both the national generic contingency plan and the local contingency plan held by your local authority
- Consider your response and the measures you would take to protect, amongst other things, your livestock, income and family in a disease-outbreak situation. This may include speaking to neighbouring farmers, for example. You and your farming neighbours know your livestock and land best; contingency planning may help you and your community avoid a disease outbreak and the possible associated welfare problems
- Consider how you and your community will address biosecurity issues in a disease situation. Discussing it now (at local farming groups, for example) may allow you to develop an informal action plan and allay any fears should it happen for real
- Keep your livestock records safe. These will be essential and a legal requirement, whether paper-based or computerised, to allow the effective tracing of disease by the authorities and will be needed if movement restrictions and licensing come into effect

- Talk to your veterinary surgeon about preventative health strategies (for example, the pros and cons of vaccination)
- Other points to consider:
    - Fodder requirements if movement restrictions are in place
    - Any restrictions on human movement from infected premises (both family and workers)
    - Beware of zoonoses (some animal diseases can infect humans and these are likely to be more prevalent in a disease situation)
- Keep your plans updated, as things that may affect them are constantly changing

Advice to livestock keepers during a disease-outbreak situation or incident

There are a number of things you can do in a disease situation, and whilst many of these things will depend on the type of disease and local factors, the following are some key points to follow regardless of the disease:

- Keep up to date with the latest disease situation by listening to national and local updates. This may be in the form of news programmes or updates from central and local government
- Be vigilant for signs of the disease, no matter how near or far away the last outbreak was. Report any signs of disease without delay
- If certain types of movements are not allowed, it is because they pose a risk. Please observe these movement restrictions. Do not take chances
- Livestock keepers have a vital frontline role in detecting disease and in helping to control and eradicate it. Take your responsibility for ensuring compliance with stringent biosecurity and movement restrictions seriously
- Do not place the wider farming industry at risk; we all have a common interest in getting farming back to business-as-usual as soon as possible
- Ask others to observe biosecurity and follow the rules. Minimise the number of visitors on your farm, and ensure they clean and disinfect on and off your premises. Protect your livestock and your business
- If you are in doubt about anything or have any questions, then contact your local Trading Standards Service

Guidance on animal diseases

For more information on specific diseases, please see our individual animal disease guides:

- 'African horse sickness'
- 'African swine fever'
- 'Anthrax'
- 'Avian influenza (bird flu)'
- 'Bluetongue'
- 'Bovine tuberculosis'
- 'Classical swine fever'
- 'Foot-and-mouth disease'
- 'Rabies'
- 'Schmallenberg virus'
- 'Sheep scab'

For information on diseases that are notifiable, please see 'Notifiable diseases'. Most of the above diseases are notifiable; it means there is a legal requirement to report cases and suspected cases to APHA.

Disease alerts

Livestock keepers can stay up to date with the latest developments via the APHA alert subscription service.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards Services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

No major changes

Last reviewed / updated: June 2026

Key legislation

- Animal Health Act 1981
- Civil Contingencies Act 2004
- Assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 *on the protection of animals during transport and related operations*
- Animal Welfare Act 2006
- Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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