

GB Ferret Stakeholder Consultation Meeting Minutes	
Date	16 March 2021
Time	18:00 – 19:00
Dial in Details	MS Teams (by invitation)
Contact	Elizabeth Tidy animal.health@gov.scot
Papers	SARS-Cov-2 in mammals ppt. presentation
Attendees	<p>Scottish Government - Sheila Voas, Alastair Douglas (chair & minutes), Vivienne Mackinnon, Elizabeth Tidy</p> <p>Welsh Government - Emily Lay, Richard Griffiths, Laura Kennedy</p> <p>Defra - Gordon Hickman</p> <p>Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) - Carmen Marco Castillo</p> <p>British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) - Andy Hall</p> <p>BSAVA - Adrienne Conroy and Carl Gorman</p> <p>Fluffyretreat - Pam Weaver</p> <p>Frisky Business Ferretry - Candy Johnston</p> <p>The Guild of Calamitous Intent Ferrets - Laura McKenzie-Hawkins</p> <p>Little Paws Ferret Rescue - Michelle Brunton</p> <p>Mischief Maker Ferrets - Vicki Moxon</p> <p>National Ferret Welfare Society - Michael Quelch, Derek Harding</p> <p>National Gamekeepers Organisation - Charles Nodder</p> <p>Naturescot - Peter Moore</p> <p>Royal Angora Ferrets UK - Bobbie Bass</p> <p>RSPCA - Hannah Allen-Western</p> <p>Scottish Ferret Club - Madonna Livingston, Fiona Kemp, Rebecca Turner, Claire Brown, Amanda Stead, Jody Macdonald, Carole Hendry</p> <p>Scottish Local Authorities - David Kerr</p> <p>SSPCA - Mike Flynn</p> <p>Welsh Ferret club - Leanne Lowes</p>
Apologies	<p>Fairoak Ferrets - Anouska Thompson</p> <p>National Farm Attraction Network - Anita Waddell</p>

Purpose of meeting

1. To discuss proposals for the introduction of a GB Ferret Register

Background to SARS-COV-2 in animals

2. Carmen Marco from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) provided a background on SARS-CoV-2 (the virus which causes Covid-19 in humans), a summary of cases found in animals, susceptibility by species, and information on research on the disease in ferrets and other Mustelinae and how to prevent infection. A summary of the conclusions are found in her power point presentation attached.

3. It was questioned why Government were not looking to introduce a register for other animal / mammal species where SARS-CoV-2 had been identified. This was because ferrets and other Mustelinae are highly susceptible to infection, can transmit infection within their own species, mutations can arise and in very limited circumstances in farmed mink, to re-infect humans. Industry asked about the availability of vaccines for ferrets and if there were any, whether they were effective. We are aware that vaccines are being developed for use in farmed mink and pets, but as yet none are available for use.
4. Government does not offer a diagnostic service for SARS-CoV-2 infection in animals but there are private laboratories offering testing in GB. If keepers wish to consider private testing this should only be undertaken where it is in the interest of the health and welfare of the animal. Official Veterinarian guidance has been published on APHA's Gateway covering case definition, testing and international reporting obligations (see links in communications section below).
5. There is no legal requirement to test ferrets but if anyone is planning to test privately it was recommended keepers discuss with their private vet where samples are to be sent and timescales for expect results. Note: see para below re positive results which are, however, required to be reported to APHA.

SARS-COV-2 reportable in mammals

6. Attendees were informed that legislation has now been introduced across each UK administration¹ creating powers that allows Ministers to make SARS-CoV-2 reportable in mammals (except man). Making the disease reportable in effect requires any positive results from mammals to be reported to Government. This is to enable mutations of the disease, which may have the potential to infect humans and interfere with a vaccine induced immune response, to be detected and followed up promptly. If there are then public health precautions that need to be put in place it can be done.
7. It makes other provisions for powers to investigate, including isolation and movement restrictions. However, such control measures would only be taken as a last resort.

Ferret Register

8. Industry representatives were informed what information Government believed would be needed in order to make a GB ferret register effective for its intended purpose. Views were sought on what information should be captured, the terminology used to request the information and on how that information should be captured:
9. Scope: Governments' intention is for the register to capture all Mustelinae including ferrets, pole cats, hybrids, mink. This decision was based on current available scientific evidence of transmission in mink other closely related species kept in captivity. It was questioned why Government needed a

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2021/83/introduction/made>

register as ferret societies had good communication links with its members already. The idea of the register would allow Government to understand the ferret population, ensure all keepers of Mustelinae would receive timely, up to date and accurate advice such as measures to help prevent spread of infection and facilitate surveillance. There are currently no plans to carry out any surveillance but in the future, should that be needed, the database could help here.

10. Format: It is proposed that the register would be made available in a number of different formats to enable access to all users. Work is underway to develop an online register to allow details to be entered using a unique user identification and password. This would allow users to update information online at any point by mobile phone, tablet or computer. Users will also be able to call a helpline number and register by telephone, or download a registration form and post their registration details.
11. Voluntary vs compulsory: All three administrations in Scotland, England and Wales are looking at introducing a compulsory ferret register later in 2021 but initially it will be set up as a voluntary register. All keepers of Mustelinae will be encouraged to register their animals. The current planned implementation date for this voluntary register is 1 May 2021. Initially Scottish Government had intended, for administrative reasons, to introduce the register on a compulsory basis from 1 May, however, this will now begin on a voluntary basis, in line with proposals in England and Wales.
12. Proposed details of register: When the register becomes compulsory it is proposed that keepers of 5 or more Mustelinae (at any point) would be required to register their animals within one month. The register will be open on a voluntary basis to register ferrets numbers of less than 5. The reason for selecting 5 or more was because research has shown the virus didn't have to pass through a large group of ferrets for a mutation to arise. It was also based on number of kits in a litter, as this might involve more handling and moving animals on to new homes. Industry highlighted that this would capture most keepers given the ferrets reproduction rate of up to 14-15 kits in a litter. A suggestion was put forward that new born ferrets should be discounted from this number and should count towards the total only once weaned; if the number of Mustelinae on one premises then exceeded 5 including weaned kits then keepers would have a month to register.

Action 1: Government to review initial threshold number for compulsory registration.

13. It is proposed the key information that would be necessary to be captured by a compulsory register include:
 - the person's name and address, and if different, the name and address of—
 - the owner of the ferrets;
 - the occupier of the premises(the keeper);
 - the number of ferrets kept at the premises.

14. Industry views were sought on how frequently this information should be updated, including one off registration, de-registering if numbers fell below 5, or if contact details changed. Views were also sought on the impact this may have on boarding establishments and rehabilitation/rescue centres. Requiring both the owner and keeper details could impact disproportionately on those groups. Although one or two participants suggested it should not be too onerous for such organisations to update information, if there was an online platform, aligning the register more closely with the requirements of the GB poultry register regarding the capture of contact information, would still meet the needs of what was intended by the register's purpose. It was suggested that it is unlikely pet owners would want to register every year. If online, however, if reminders were issued as part of an annual inventory functionality could be added, perhaps a check box to say no change, or users amend only certain variables that had changed.

Action 2: Government to consider aligning the keeper variables more closely with the requirements of the GB poultry register

Action 3: Government to consider simplifying annual inventory reminders through addition of a check box to say no change.

15. Another proposed compulsory variable is the "Purpose" of keeping the ferrets. Gathering this information would enable Government to understand which ferret groups have more contact with the general public or where large numbers of ferrets are likely to have contact with workers, which would help if any targeted messaging was required in the future. The suggested variables in the "Purpose" category are:

- Pet
- Working (e.g. vermin, cable laying)
- Public entertainment /education/therapy (includes petting zoos)
- Exhibition (zoos)
- Rehoming centre
- Pet shop
- Wildlife centre
- Other Commercial
- Breeding

16. It was noted by several group members that many keepers would keep ferrets for more than just one purpose, therefore, to have the ability to select multiple categories would avoid confusion. It was recommended that the word "vermin" is replaced with "pest control" as vermin are perceived to be only rodents and ferrets can be used to control other species such as rabbits. Industry asked for category of zoo to be simplified as having a purpose of either entertainment animal or conservation animal can lead to confusion. An industry member found the term wildlife centre unclear (was this a rehabilitation wildlife centre)? It was also suggested that a category is included to cover agricultural shows/fairs.

Action 4: Government will revisit categories in light of the comments and recirculate revised list.

17. Data Protection: The data on the register is likely to be held by the Animal and Plant Health Agency or in Scotland by ScotEID (the Data Processor). Both organisations already hold personal data on livestock identification and movement traceability in compliance with GDPR. In Scotland the Data Controller will be Scottish Government's Chief Veterinary Officer (on behalf of Scottish Minister).
18. Government attendees agreed to explain the permitted uses of the information as per data protection requirements so it can only be used for the stated purposes. Government will also explain the benefits, such as getting direct messaging about relevant information e.g. cases of disease in the area.

Communications

19. The group were asked if stakeholders participating in this call reflected a good cross section of ferret stakeholders. It was suggested that the Vincent Trust was not represented. They should be included on any future correspondence on this matter.
20. There was speculation and concern expressed within the ferret community following the invitation for representatives to attend this stakeholder meeting that registering as a ferret keeper may leave you open to have these animals culled. As such there may not be a lot of uptake without reassurance that this is not the case. Members of the group noted that Government would need to clearly define and limit the use and purpose of the register. Such an approach will be essential to building confidence and encourage compliance.
21. Government explained that ferrets are only likely to get the disease from humans, and even if the disease gets into ferrets and mutates, it needs to get back into humans, so the most that is every likely to happen is a period of isolation until the disease has passed. There is no current scientific justification for culling ferrets based on the evidence we have.
22. Some members were unsighted on a number of guidance documents as news articles, guidance for vets or advice for owners in the public domain such as the APHA Gateway, BSAVA website, respective GB administrations' websites ([GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk), [GOV.WALES](https://www.gov.wales) and [GOV.SCOT](https://www.gov.scot)).
23. In order to dispel rumours, prevent any unintended consequences such as pet abandonment and allow ferret industry bodies to provide accurate and supportive guidance industry asked Government to prepare some guidance, particularly for wildlife & ferret rescue centres. This would enable industry representative organisations on this call to provide their members with relevant information.
24. Clear documentation will be produced for rescue centres and breeders on what they should do, how they will be able to open centres to begin rehoming ferrets if they have had the virus identified on site. Guidance would also be needed for those attending public events and putting on ferret shows for public to pet (to protect both the health and welfare of ferrets and those

handling the animals). As it is developed this group will be invited to comment.

Action 5: Government to produce guidance for:

- **rescue centres and breeders for rehoming ferrets if they have had the virus identified on site.**
- **those attending public events and putting on ferret shows for public to pet.**

25. It was agreed that links attendees may find useful will be provided accompanying the minutes of the meeting. These are provided below:

- OIE technical factsheet on PPE etc., [A WHSG and OIE COVID-19 Guidelines.pdf](#)
- OV briefing note re. when to test
- Govt websites for each administration re. isolation period
- BSAVA web links.

BSAVA COVID-19 website

- **Advice for owners** <https://www.bsava.com/adviceforpetowners> See sections on '**Current UK Status for COVID-19 & Pets**' and also '**Government Advice for Pet Owners**' (scroll down to 'Ferrets')
- **Advice for vets** <https://www.bsava.com/veterinaryadvice> [Scroll down to **BSAVA Resources** and within that 'Testing pets for SARS-CoV-2 & International & Legal Reporting Obligation'. Within the section there are links to APHA etc. and also detailed BSAVA Guidance available at the end of the third para. Scroll down to **UK Veterinary Resources and Information** and within that 'Companion Animals' and 'COVID-19 and Ferrets'.]
- News articles
 - Feb 2021 <https://www.bsava.com/News/ArticleID/2843/COVID-19-B-canis-Salmonella-Legislative-Reporting-Requirements>
 - Oct 2020 <https://www.bsava.com/News/ArticleID/2825/COVID-19-Updated-Government-Advice-on-Pets-Ferrets>

Government

- **APHA:** [APHA Vet Gateway SARS-CoV-2 in Animals – Case Definition, Testing and International Reporting Obligations](#)
- **Scottish Government:** [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - Government Advice for pet owners in self-isolation](#)
- **Defra:** <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-people-with-animals>
- **Welsh Government:** <https://gov.wales/advice-pet-owners-coronavirus-covid-19>

26. If group members think of other questions or concerns after the meeting feel free to raise these

**Animal Health and Welfare Division: Disease Control branch
Scottish Government**

1 April 2021

Questions and Answers

- 1. What is the register of ferrets?**
 - The Ferret Register is a voluntary register of ferrets and other *Mustelinae* kept in captivity in GB
- 2. Why is it necessary?**
 - It will enable information on SARS-COV-2 to be sent to keepers quickly and easily
 - Where there are concerns that ferrets are suspected of being infected with a strain of concern to Public Health colleagues it will enable keepers to be contacted and encouraged to take measures to prevent spread of infection
- 3. Who has to register?**
 - The register will initially be on a voluntary basis for any keeper of ferrets or other Mustelinae.
- 4. What information will I be required to provide?**
 - Keeper name, address incl. postcode,
 - Owner name & address if different (tbc)
 - Name of occupier & address where kept if different,
 - Preferred method of communication.
 - Number kept
 - Species
 - Purpose: Pet, Breeder, Handling- (e.g. education, therapy, petting zoo), Working (e.g. vermin, cable laying), Research, Zoo (observation only), Rehoming centre, Wildlife rehab/sanctuary, Other.
- 5. How do I register?**
 - Details to follow
- 6. When can I register?**
 - The register is planned to open on 1 May 2021
- 7. What about data protection?**
 - The register will be fully compliant with GDPR
- 8. Will my data be shared with 3rd parties?**
 - Your data will be held securely, and only shared with govt. depts. for specified public/animal health reasons
 - Your data will not be used for marketing purposes
- 9. When do I need to update my details?**

- You should notify any changes in
 - Contact details,
 - If you stop keeping ferrets altogether.
 - You do **not** need to notify of other changes in numbers.

10. Will my ferrets automatically be tested if I register?

- No. Statutory testing will only take place where there are concerns that your ferrets are suspected of being infected with a strain of concern to Public Health colleagues
- You may also arrange for private testing by your vet (OV briefing note case definition)

11. Do I have to pay for testing?

- Private testing- is undertaken at the owners expense. Any confirmatory testing required would be undertaken free of charge
- Statutory testing – sampling & testing is undertaken free of charge

12. How are ferrets tested for SARS-COV-2?

- Swabs can be taken to test for virus. In some circumstances blood samples may be required to test for antibodies (previous exposure)

13. Who would carry out testing?

- Private testing- is undertaken by your private vet.
- Statutory testing – sampling & testing may be carried out by either APHA vets or your private vet under supervision of APHA.

14. What happens if my ferrets have a positive test result?

- Positive results are reported to APHA. Confirmatory testing may be required if disclosed by private testing.
- APHA will carry out an investigation and advise on biosecurity measures. You may receive a formal notice restricting movement of ferrets on/off the premises and requiring positive animals to be isolated to prevent spread of infection.

15. Will I be tested if my ferrets have a positive test result?

- Your local Health Protection Team (HPT) will assess if any further action is necessary.

16. Will my ferrets be tested if I get COVID?

- Not necessarily. If you get COVID and have been in close contact with ferrets in the previous 14 days you should advise your local Health Protection Team (HPT) who will assess if any further action is necessary.

17. What measures are in place to stop imported ferrets bringing SARS-COV-2 into GB?

- Pet passport- accompanied by owner. Dependent on human movement restrictions
- Commercial import- health certification is required and applications are approved on a risk basis subject to requirements.

18. What happens if a keeper does not register their ferrets?

- No action will be taken as registration will be on a voluntary basis to begin with

19. If cats are susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 why are we not asking for a cat register?

- Cats are not known to be able to pass infection back to humans. The disease is spread from humans TO cats i.e. a reverse zoonosis.

20. What is the mortality of ferrets who are positive for SARS-CoV-2?

- Animal cases and mortality does not appear to be a significant outcome. There are occasions when small numbers of animals had to be euthanised on welfare grounds. This would have been the outcome regardless of the presence of SARS-CoV-2 rather than as a consequence of it.

21. Is there an approved SARS-Cov-2 vaccine for ferrets?

- No vaccines are currently available for ferrets in the UK

22. Can I get my ferret tested for SARS-CoV-2? If so, how long does the test take?

- IF your ferret is ill and your vet suspects SARS-Cov-2 is a possible cause they can arrange for testing. The timing of results will depend on which laboratory is used to carry out the testing

23. Is the reason Government are wanting to have a ferret register to cull ferrets?

- NO. There is no scientific evidence to justify such action

24. Is the need for a register not gold plating in place of a basic mailing list through groups, clubs and vets?

- Not all ferret keepers are members of clubs, or registered with a vet so a register provides an additional means of direct communication with groups who might not otherwise be known about.

END