



# BWRC Advice on Wildlife Rehabilitation Protocols in case of Human Disease Epidemic.

This advice is specifically for those working in wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in the UK and is based on experiences of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic to date (31<sup>st</sup> March 2020). It may be updated as more information is available and is also intended to act as a reference for planning mitigation measures for potential future human disease epidemics which cause similar societal disruption.

## General advice regarding COVID-19

COVID-19 is caused by a coronavirus called Sars-CoV-2 and spread from person to person (direct transmission) in droplets produced by a cough or sneeze which are inhaled by a nearby person. Studies of other coronaviruses have shown that they can survive in the environment, and recent tests have shown that "SARS-CoV-2 was more stable on plastic and stainless steel than on copper and cardboard, and viable virus was detected up to 72 hours after application to these surfaces" (van Doremalen *et al.*, 2020). Touching a surface with virus particles on it and then touching one's face is not thought to be the main route of transmission but is possible. It is thought that some infected people without (or with very mild) symptoms can still shed the virus into the environment.

In order to reduce the rate of transmission of COVID-19 and prevent the number of cases overwhelming the UK National Health Service (NHS) UK Government introduced "social distancing" measures on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 requiring the general public to stay at home where possible. These measures were reinforced from 1pm on 26<sup>th</sup> March by the introduction of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020. An offence under this regulation is punishable on summary conviction by a fine.

The exceptions to this are to collect food, medicines or for essential medical appointments or work which cannot be done from home. Those who do go out should always stay 2m (6ft) away from other people and wash their hands immediately on returning home.

Certain businesses are required to close. Veterinary surgeries and pet shops are listed as exceptions (not required to close). Animal sanctuaries and rescue centres are not mentioned on the list at all. (Gov.uk, 2020 - 270320\_Revised\_Guidance.pdf)

## Staff and volunteer management

- 1. Any staff member or volunteer who exhibits symptoms of the disease as described in Government or NHS guidance should remain at home (self-isolate) for the recommended period of time. Similarly, any staff member or volunteer observed to exhibit symptoms should be sent home immediately.** In the case of COVID-19 and other coronaviruses the key symptoms are:
  - a high temperature – you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature)
  - a new, continuous cough – coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual) (NHS.UK)
- 2. In the case of COVID-19 certain people have been identified as "extremely vulnerable" and are advised to self-isolate (also termed follow shielding measures) for their own protection for 12 weeks. Details of conditions which qualify people as extremely vulnerable are listed in detail in government guidance, but in summary these include anyone who is immunocompromised or affected by a serious medical condition (Public Health England, 2020).**

**Any staff member or volunteer who is considered extremely vulnerable should self-isolate at home, and anyone who lives with someone in that category should not continue to work or volunteer but stay at home (social distancing).**

3. People who are considered at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 also include anyone over 70 years of age, and those under 70 with a chronic (long-term) underlying health condition or weakened immune system, the seriously overweight and those who are pregnant. **Any staff member or volunteer who is considered vulnerable should not continue to work or volunteer and stay at home (social distancing).**
4. If possible, staff that routinely work together should be kept together – mixing with as few other members of staff as possible and avoiding switching workdays and encountering staff they do not usually meet.
5. Routine hygiene measures which are normally advisable in an animal rescue situation, but which would also be beneficial in these conditions, include:
  - Handwashing\* and immediately after entering and before leaving the premises and between different activities for at least 20 seconds, followed by moisturizing hands to help maintain skin integrity.
  - Wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as overalls and gloves while working in animal areas. These should be removed before entering communal staff areas or leaving the premises, and if not disposable washed regularly at a minimum 40°C (ideally hotter, or with a disinfectant product).
  - Animal and human food preparation should be carried out in separate facilities, which should be kept clean and surfaces (including door, cupboard and drawer handles) disinfected at the end of the day/ shift.
  - Disinfectants should be used within expiration dates and diluted according to the manufacturer's instructions for the appropriate level of risk.

\*Advice on correct handwashing procedure including printable/poster versions are available from sources such as NHS.UK and GOV.UK [instructions on handwashing techniques](#) (PDF, 130KB).

6. Staff should try to stay 2m (6ft) away from other staff wherever possible. Other measures that may be appropriate within a rescue centre (in addition to routine hygiene practices) include:
  - Wearing (clean) surgical gloves (if you have plenty in stock) to carry out administrative tasks to avoid contaminating/picking up the virus from door, cupboard and drawer handles, telephones, computer keyboards, paperwork and office furniture used by multiple staff.
  - Wiping surfaces with disinfectant regularly, and telephone handsets/ headsets immediately after each use.
  - Avoiding sharing food (e.g. a packet of biscuits) or leaving food out in the open.
  - Placing disinfectant foot dips outside building entrances and disinfecting external door furniture regularly.
  - On arrival at home, as a minimum, hands should be washed immediately, but further measures such as removing clothing straight into the washing machine and taking a shower or bath could help prevent contamination of the home.
7. In line with government guidance, if possible, staff and volunteers should work from home. Obviously, there is a necessity for staff to be on site to carry out essential animal care tasks, but:
  - Consider whether telephone calls can be redirected, or administrative tasks can be carried out from home.
  - Can animals be collected and transported for essential journeys by staff/volunteers without them entering buildings? (See suggested procedures below for receipt of animal casualties and veterinary consultations).

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) provides more detailed advice on dealing with staffing issues on their website ([www.knowhow.ncvo.org.uk](http://www.knowhow.ncvo.org.uk)).

## Fundraising and public events

Government restrictions under conditions of human epidemic necessarily prevent congregations of people such as open days or fetes which are often used by charities to undertake fundraising activities. It is the responsibility of charity trustees and staff to assess potential risks to their organisation and implement measures to protect the organisation from financial shortfall, including measures such as a broad range of fundraising techniques (for example fundraising through social media and grant funding applications) the maintenance of a reserve for emergency situations or the redirection of funds intended for another purpose. In the latter case take care not to break the terms of trust fund awards and contact the source of funding to secure permission to redirect funds before following this course of action. For charities based in England and Wales the Charity Commission's [guidance on charity reserves](#) gives more information on writing a reserves policy. The Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) and The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland provide equivalent guidance for charities based in those locations.

The National Emergencies Trust have responded to the current Coronavirus crisis by offering emergency funding to small charities through local Community Foundations but may prioritise human causes over animal related charities.

## Stocking and sourcing of everyday supplies

'Panic-buying' is becoming an increasingly common public response to media reports of developing health, security or financial crises. Supermarkets were almost emptied in hours but took several days to impose 'rationing' rules, leaving many people struggling to source essential grocery and hygiene items. As the pandemic is proceeding there are also difficulties in supplying PPE such as surgical gloves, masks, aprons etc. to frontline NHS services, and this is likely to continue to affect the veterinary field as demand rises with the number of disease cases over a period of months.

As with funding, trustees and staff should have a plan to mitigate the risk of interrupted supplies of essential health and safety equipment as far as the shelf life of such items allows. Good hygiene practice needs to be balanced against the environmental consequences of single-use plastics, and (in times of emergency) drawing resources away from the NHS. In either case available resources should be used as efficiently as possible. Also consider cooperating with other centres – if you have any excess equipment offer to exchange for something you need.

Mechanisms for safe receipt of material donations should also be put in place – for example setting up collection boxes for donations of newspaper, bedding and animal food in a safe area of the driveway/car park of a centre. Journeys for this purpose may not be considered 'essential' by the police; appeals through social media could suggest that people wishing to make donations combine their journey with an essential journey for food shopping.

## Receipt of animal casualties from the public/ external bodies

If your organisation continues to receive casualties delivered by the public (or RSPCA inspectorate) then strict measures must be put in place to protect your staff and volunteers. Face-to-face contact with any member of the public must be avoided where possible, and they should not be allowed to enter buildings (a centre or a home) where staff or volunteers are present. The following measures are suggested:

- Public entrances are kept locked and all communication with the public, including collection of details such as the location in which the casualty was found, is carried out remotely (e.g. by e-mail, text message or phone).
- A notice outside your reception entrance shows the relevant telephone number(s) and directs anyone who arrives at the premises without calling ahead to use a mobile phone to communicate with you.
- If the casualty is expected, and if it is safe to transfer the animal without risk of injury or escape, an appropriate animal carrier box can be left outside your front door into which the casualty can be placed (reducing the risk of virus particles coming in on the box or cage). Staff should wait inside until the person delivering the casualty has withdrawn to a safe distance or returned to their vehicle.

- If a large casualty (such as a deer) cannot be transferred to a box or cage and needs to be retrieved from a vehicle, the person delivering the animal should withdraw to a safe distance while staff retrieve the casualty from the vehicle.

## Rescue/ collection of animal casualties

Under the COVID-19 regulations the police may stop and challenge drivers to deter the public from making unnecessary journeys or travelling to public places for exercise. It is therefore even more important to carry evidence of your identity and purpose/ show that you represent a *bona fide* organisation and are carrying out a valid job of work. The best ways to do this may be by driving a vehicle and or wearing clothes displaying the organisation's logo or carrying a membership/ID card or letter of authorisation from the organisation. Some rescue centres have been able to obtain a reference number from their local Trading Standards Office to support their case. Details of your local office can be found via [www.gov.uk/find-local-trading-standards-office](http://www.gov.uk/find-local-trading-standards-office).

The Bat Conservation Trust have also issued "to whom it may concern" letters for some registered bat carers to carry explaining that advice from Defra allows bat carers to continue to collect bats with the following conditions:

- "Bats are only collected when absolutely necessary (i.e., there is no reasonable alternative such as advising the finder remotely).
- There is no direct contact with the bat finder and all the principles of social distancing are observed."

This is also in line with the joint statement from the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) statement issued on regarding the provision of emergency care for sick animals (BVA, 2020).

The following measures are recommended on arrival at a rescue:

- Remind any members of the public of the importance of maintaining a minimum 2m distance between people out of doors, and that they should not congregate to watch the rescue!
- Avoid entering houses or other buildings where there are people if possible – if the casualty has already been caught ask the member of public to leave the boxed animal outside, and retreat to a safe distance so that you can load the box into your vehicle.
- If the rescue absolutely requires entering a building it is essential to determine the infection status of the occupants. If anyone is currently displaying symptoms or is considered 'vulnerable' (see definitions above), entry to the property is not advisable. Similarly, if this is a household occupied by someone who leaves the house regularly to go to their own workplace then the risk to you is greater.
- Plan your approach so that you enter as few rooms as possible, and these rooms should not be occupied by other people apart from the individual who is directing you.
- If you decide to enter a house you should wear clean coveralls and disposable gloves which you should remove (inside out, coveralls first) after leaving the premises but before touching your keys or vehicle.
- You should also consider wearing a face mask and goggles or visor of the highest calibre available to you. There is little evidence in relation to COVID-19 at this time, but in general masks are more effective when used in conjunction with eye protection and may provide limited protection over short periods of time.

On returning to your centre remove wash/ disinfect your hands, overalls and any equipment used at the rescue site. Disinfection of your vehicle's door handles (inside and out) and controls (steering wheel etc) and keys, and building entrance door handles, doorbell and keys is also advisable.

## Capacity and release of casualties

Efforts should be made to release all healthy animals as soon as possible to reduce the pressure on staffing levels. If returned to the capture site or a new site away from the centre, any contact with the owners of the property should be remote (by phone etc.) and social distancing should be practiced in addition to following risk assessments and hygiene protocols.

Assessment of your animal capacity should be made frequently in response to decreasing staff/ volunteer availability. Particularly if you are a very small organisation or working alone, it is important to make emergency arrangements to provide care for your casualties in case you or other key staff become ill and cannot continue to work.

## Veterinary consultations

During the restriction period imposed by government veterinary professionals can continue to work but must only provide urgent treatment and emergency care where animal welfare would be compromised by delaying for this period of time. This may, however, need to be reviewed as the crisis continues. A joint statement from the RCVS and BVA recommends that vets adopt the following principles:

- Stop all unnecessary client contact & clarify their client's medical status with regard to Covid-19
- Use technology to obtain clinical histories, triage and consult wherever possible
- Consider remote prescribing in line with RCVS guidance & obtain payment over the phone
- Ensure contact-free collection of medication is in place, with a specific, secure collection time and place organised in advance
- Post medication if appropriate following Post Office guidance and, where applicable, following RCVS controlled drugs guidance

Wildlife rehabilitators that do not have in-house veterinary support may need to deliver animals to veterinary practices following similar procedures to those described above under 'Receipt of animal casualties from the public/ external bodies' and be involved in consultations via telephone. Under these difficult circumstances, where resources cannot be provided to support very ill or longer-term cases, it may be appropriate to consider euthanasia in order to prevent animal suffering.

## References and sources

Bat Conservation Trust (2020) Personal communication.

British Veterinary Association (2020) Guidance for veterinary practices in assessing emergency and urgent care during the Covid-19 pandemic. <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3399/bva-guidance-for-veterinary-practices-on-covid19-march-2020.pdf>

GOV.UK GUIDANCE - CLOSING CERTAIN BUSINESSES AND VENUES

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/876535/270320\\_Revised\\_Guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876535/270320_Revised_Guidance.pdf)

IWRC Wildlife Rehabilitators Operational Guidance for COVID-19. <https://theiwrc.org/archives/81513>

NCVO (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations) Knowhow – Protecting your staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. <https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/coronavirus/protecting-your-staff-volunteers-and-beneficiaries#section-1>

Public Health England, The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020.  
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Public Health England, Guidance on shielding and protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 (2020). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>.

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The National Emergencies Trust <https://nationalemergenciestrust.org.uk/>

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