

Gamebird Licensing Bulletin

How to Apply for an Individual Licence



22nd April 2025

Contents

1. [Aim of this Bulletin](#)
2. [When you need a licence](#)
3. [Check the location of your release site](#)
4. [Calculate your release density](#)
5. [Releases on Special Areas of Conservation \(SACs\) and their buffer zones](#)
6. [Releases on Special Protection Areas \(SPAs\) and their buffer zones](#)
7. [Releases on Sites of Special Scientific Interest \(SSSIs\)](#)
8. [The need for an individual licence](#)
9. [Simple decision tree for deciding whether to apply for an individual licence](#)
10. [How to apply for an individual licence](#)
11. [Before you apply to release gamebirds on a SAC or SPA or its buffer zone](#)
12. [Getting a decision on your application](#)
13. [Get help](#)

NB This bulletin uses 'gamebirds' to refer to common pheasants and red-legged partridges.

Aim of this Bulletin

This Bulletin is being emailed to potential customers to provide guidance on gamebird release licensing arrangements for 2025, and enables potential customers to start to apply for individual licences. It follows our previous Bulletin, dated 14th April 2025.

NB This guidance will be published as an update to [Gamebirds: licences to release them - GOV.UK](#) in due course (likely with slightly amended wording and format for accessibility and clarity), but it is being shared now because the Natural England gamebird licensing team are ready to receive and process applications.

You are receiving this bulletin as you are a Gamebird Licence holder or stakeholder, or you have asked to be added to our mailing list. If you wish to stop receiving these bulletins, please contact us at gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk to unsubscribe.

When you need a licence

You need a licence to release gamebirds within:

- a special area of conservation (SAC) in England
- a special protection area (SPA) in England
- the 500-metre 'buffer zone' around an English SAC or SPA boundary

If your proposed release is also on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), you may also need separate consent from Natural England.

A site can be located within multiple boundaries. For example, it could be within both a SAC and a SSSI.

You do not need a licence to release gamebirds in other areas. You should avoid releasing gamebirds wherever possible on any SPA, SAC or SSSI in England.

Check the location of your release site

To check if your release site is in a SPA, SAC or SSSI:

1. Open [MAGIC maps](#).
2. Drag and zoom the map to the location of your planned release site.
3. Under 'Map Layers', select 'Designations', then 'Land-Based Designations' and 'Marine Based Designations'.
4. For both designations, select 'Statutory'.
5. To see the boundaries of:
 - SPAs, select 'Special Protection Areas (England)' and 'Potential Special Protection Areas (England)' from the 'Land-Based Designations > Statutory' category and 'Special Protection Areas (Marine Components GB)' from the 'Marine Based Designations > Statutory' list
 - SACs, select 'Special Areas of Conservation (England)' and 'Possible Special Areas of Conservation (England)' from the 'Land-Based Designations > Statutory' category and 'Special Areas of Conservation (Marine Components GB)' from the 'Marine Based Designations > Statutory' list
 - SSSIs, select 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest (England)'

Or follow this link to have all these layers pre-selected: [MAGIC maps application](#)

To check if your release site is in the 500-metre buffer zone of a SAC or SPA, use the [Common Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge releases \(arcgis.com\) map](#). Blue sections show the buffer zones.

Your site may be within the boundaries of more than one of these sites.

Calculate your release density

The maximum density of gamebirds you can release under general licence GL43 is:

- within a SAC, 700 birds per hectare of release pen or release area
- in a SAC buffer zone, 1,000 birds per hectare of release pen or release area

It is unlikely you will be able to release a higher density of gamebirds under an individual licence. In some limited and specific cases, you may need to release a lower density.

If any gamebirds are shot or killed, you must not release more birds if this will exceed the allowed limit.

To calculate how many common pheasants you can release, multiply the size of your release pen in hectares by the maximum permitted release density for your site.

For example, for a 2-hectare release pen within a SAC boundary, multiply 2 (hectares) by 700 (the maximum release density permitted by GL43). This would result in a maximum of 1,400 gamebirds you can release from the pen under GL43.

To measure the size of your release pen, you can:

1. Open [MAGIC maps](#).
2. Drag and zoom the map to the location of your release pen.
3. Select the 'Measure' button (the ruler icon).
4. In the pop-up window, choose the 'Area & Perimeter' button.
5. On the map, select points along the boundary of your pen.
6. When you select the final point of your boundary, double-click. The area of the pen in square metres will appear in the pop-up. Use the drop-down to change the unit to 'Hectares'.

Releases on Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and their buffer zones

If you propose to release gamebirds on or within 500 metres of a SAC in England, you should check if you can be authorised under the [GL43 general licence](#).

If you cannot use or meet the conditions of the GL43 general licence, you must be authorised to release by an individual licence.

Releases on Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and their buffer zones

THERE IS NO GENERAL LICENCE FOR RELEASES ON SPAs IN 2025. If you propose to release gamebirds on a SPA in England or within its 500-metre buffer zone, you must be authorised to release by an individual licence.

The following table identifies the likely individual licensing outcomes for proposed gamebird releases on or within 500m of SPAs in 2025. There are three categories:

- a) SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with standard mitigation;
- b) SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with delayed release;
- c) SPAs where gamebird release is highly unlikely to be permitted for the coming season

SPAs that fall into categories a and b are listed in the table below

SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with standard mitigation	
Falmouth Bay to St Austell Bay	
SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with delayed release	
SPA name	Likely delayed release date (may vary)
Ashdown Forest	1st September
Breckland	1st October
East Devon Heaths	1st September
Great Yarmouth North Denes	1st October
Greater Wash	1st October
North York Moors	1st September
Northumberland Marine	1st October
Outer Thames Estuary	1st October
Peak District Moors (South Pennine Moors Phase 1)	1st September
Porton Down	1st October
Sandlings	1st September
Solent and Dorset Coast	1st October
South Pennine Moors Phase 2	1st September
Thames Basin Heaths	1st October
Thorne and Hatfield Moors	1st September
Thursley, Hankley and Frensham Commons (Wealden Heaths Phase 1)	1st September
Wealden Heaths Phase 2	1st September
SPAs where gamebird release is highly unlikely to be permitted for the coming season unless there are exceptional circumstances that could reduce or avoid the risk of HPAI transmission.	
All SPAs not listed above	
Important Notes:	
<p>a) This table indicates the likely outcome of a licence application made for a particular SPA. It does not prejudice Natural England's decision, and any application will be assessed on its merits.</p> <p>b) Where a licence is issued for an SPA, the 'delayed release' column indicates the likely date after which gamebirds can be released (where applicable). The delayed release approach is designed to limit the interaction between gamebirds and breeding SPA birds; by ensuring releases only take place once these SPA birds have left the site. This helps to minimise the potential for significant avian influenza transmission to SPA bird populations.</p> <p>c) It is recognised that delayed release dates may not be practical for all gamebird managers. Where it is not possible to adhere to a specified delayed release date, it is likely that an application will be refused.</p>	

Natural England encourages shoots to make suitable adjustments to their business arrangements depending on the likely licensing outcome. Anyone ordering gamebirds for release on European sites or their buffer zone before they have licensed authority to release, does so at their own risk.

Natural England's approach and likely licensing outcomes have been significantly influenced by the avian influenza outbreak, which is currently categorised at the highest level of risk in GB. The table above is the product of a detailed 'appropriate assessment' that has considered a range of potential measures for each SPA to mitigate the transmission of avian influenza between gamebirds and wild bird populations.

Releases on Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

If your planned release site is on a SSSI, you are likely to need consent from Natural England to:

- release gamebirds
- put up and maintain gamebird release pens
- feed gamebirds
- drive vehicles on the site

You must follow the conditions of that consent.

You need to:

- [check if your release site is within a SSSI](#)
- [check if you need SSSI consent from Natural England](#)
- [apply for SSSI consent](#) (if needed)

If your proposed release is also on or within 500 metres of a SAC or SPA in England, you will also need to be authorised by a separate licence.

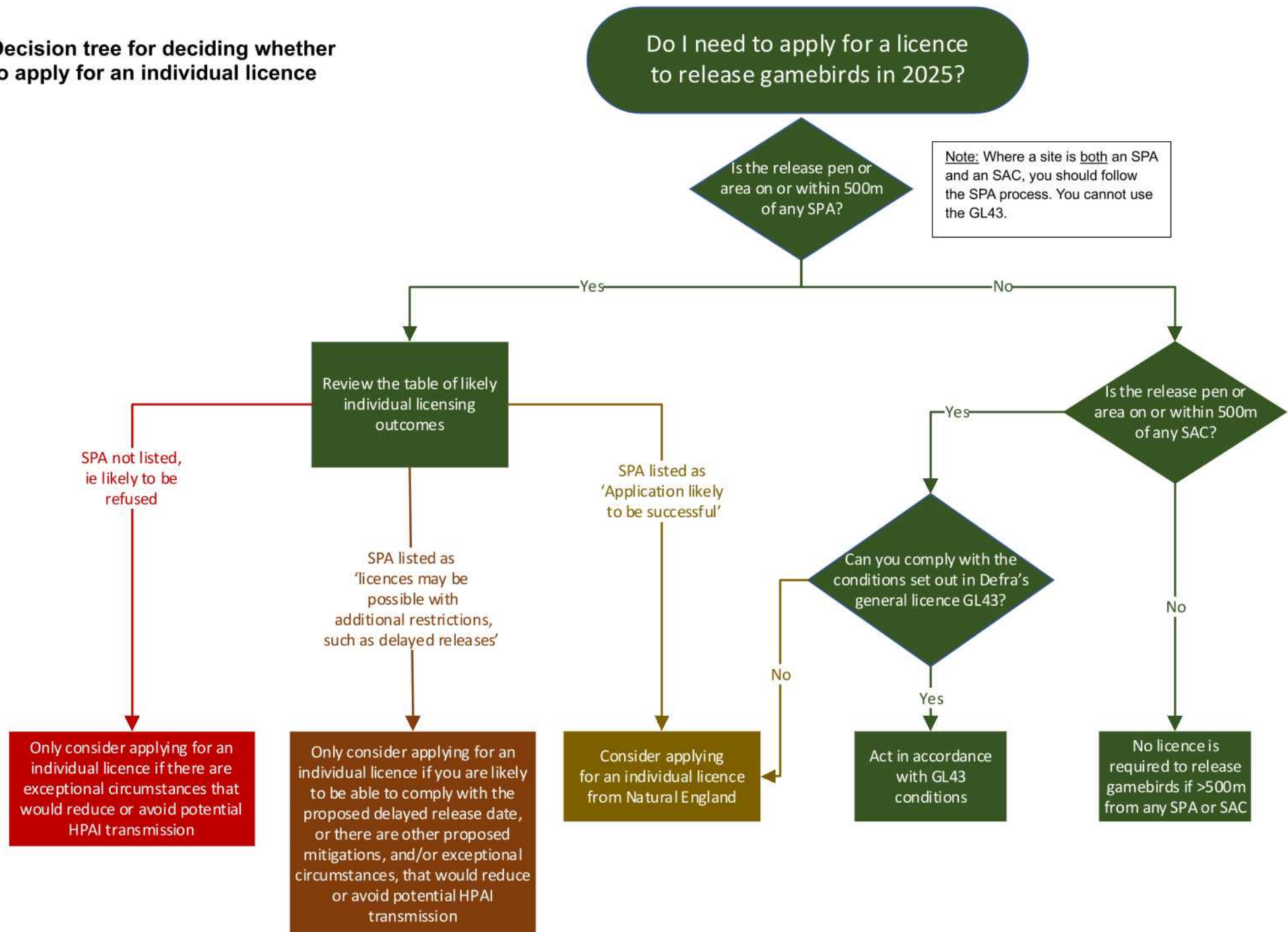
The need for an individual licence

If you cannot move your release site to another area outside a SAC or SPA in England or beyond their 500 metres buffer zone, you will need an individual licence if the following apply:

- you propose to release gamebirds on a SPA in England or within 500 metres of its boundary - please check, using the above table, the likely individual licensing outcome for your proposed gamebird release before applying
- you propose to release gamebirds on a SAC in England or within 500 metres of its boundary and cannot use general licence GL43 or comply with its conditions

Natural England may choose to include or amend conditions from the general licence in an individual licence. For example, they may require lower release densities or delayed releases.

Decision tree for deciding whether to apply for an individual licence



How to apply for an individual licence

As of 22nd April 2025 Natural England is open for applications and would encourage gamebird managers to submit licence applications with all required information as soon as possible, to allow for timely decisions to be made in advance of the release season. Natural England would like to issue most decisions by the end of May to help provide certainty to gamebird managers prior to the main release season.

Natural England discourages the submission of speculative applications for SPAs where licensing is highly unlikely. Delaying submission of applications in the hope that the avian influenza situation might improve is highly unlikely to make any difference to the licensing outcome. Avian influenza risk status is unusually 'very high' and it is unrealistic to speculate that this situation will improve when gamebirds are normally released.

If you need to apply for an individual licence to release gamebirds on a SAC or SPA or within its 500m buffer zone, email Natural England at gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk stating which site you are interested in, the number of release pens you are proposing, and whether you intend to also submit supplementary documents. Natural England will then send you either a link to an online application form, or a Microsoft Word version, along with supplementary guidance on the process and information required.

You should submit all necessary information in your application. In order to ensure timely decision making, Natural England will not be requesting further information from applicants.

Before you apply to release gamebirds on a SAC or SPA or its buffer zone

Before you apply for an individual licence for a SAC or SPA or its buffer zone, you should gather information and evidence to submit as 'supplementary information' in your application. If you intend to submit any photos, maps or documents, you will need to email these to Natural England at gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk.

- If you are submitting an application via the online application form, then once you have completed and submitted your online application Natural England will send you an acknowledgement email along with a Application Reference Number. You should reply to this email with your supplementary information and documents attached.
- If you are submitting your application as a Word document and sending to Natural England at the gamebirds mailbox, you can attach any supplementary information and documents to the same email.

You should submit any supplementary information via email as soon as possible after you have completed the application form. Any delay to submitting supplementary information after you apply could significantly increase the time it takes Natural England to process your application.

As stated above, Natural England discourages the submission of applications for release on or within 500m of SPAs where licensing is highly unlikely. If you are submitting an application for any of these SPAs and are relying on exceptional circumstances, you should clearly set these out in your application form in the relevant section. We will review any information provided as part of a release licence application, which should show how you plan to avoid adverse impacts on SPA bird features. In particular, you should show how you will reduce the risk of direct and indirect avian influenza transmission between gamebirds and protected feature species. Use [Site Search](#) to find the conservation objectives and protected features for your release site.

You must be able to comply with any actions you offer to take. If Natural England approves your application, they could become mandatory conditions of your licence and wildlife inspectors may carry out compliance checks.

Getting a decision on your application

Natural England will aim to determine applications within 15 working days. The assessment clock will stop where additional information is required from applicants.

Natural England will complete an initial review of your application to check that:

- you have applied for the correct licence
- all required information is included and readable
- pen location references meet the specifications in the application form
- release densities are consistent with the general licences
- you have accepted the declaration

They will confirm that they have received your application after reviewing it against these criteria. If you fail to meet these criteria, they will contact you by email and give you 5 working days to improve the application.

They will then fully review your application, assessing whether there is enough evidence that your release will not have an adverse effect on the SAC or SPA. To do this, they will review your application as a project and complete a [habitats regulations assessment \(HRA\)](#).

In making this assessment, Natural England consider the direct impacts of the activity, which is the proposed gamebird release, and mitigation measures directly aimed at avoiding or reducing harmful effects, such as enhanced biosecurity or delayed release.

Natural England recognise that there is some evidence of benefits from management activities associated with gamebirds, including predator and habitat management. However, the potential benefits of these associated activities, cannot be considered to directly reduce or avoid the risk from HPAI to the SPA features, and therefore cannot be considered within an HRA.

Natural England will send you a decision on your application by email. If it is:

- approved, they will send your licence by email
- refused, they will send you a letter explaining the decision by email

Get help

Contact gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk if you have any questions about:

- the individual licence for releases on SPAs and their buffer zones
- the individual licence for releases on SACs and their buffer zones
- all licences, such as which licence you can use

Contact glenquiries@defra.gov.uk if you have any questions about:

- the general licence for releases on SACs and their buffer zones (GL43)