

The Rt Hon Steve Reed, OBE MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

12th May 2025

Dear Secretary of State,

Natural England's Gamebird Release Licensing Regime: Urgent Need for Ministerial Intervention

I am writing to express serious concerns regarding Natural England's handling of individual gamebird release licences on and around Special Protection Areas (SPAs), and to urge you to intervene in a process that has become obstructive, economically damaging, and ecologically incoherent.

Following the decision not to issue General Licence 45 for gamebird releases on or near SPAs because of uncertainties surrounding avian influenza, Natural England announced that individual licences are unlikely to be granted across many SPAs, except in exceptional circumstances. They have refused to provide applicants with essential data which is necessary to demonstrate separation between gamebirds and key species – even though Natural England state that this is exactly what they should include in a licence application. It's the bureaucratic equivalent of playing a game where the rules change and only the referee knows what they are.

At the same time Natural England have excluded from licence assessments vital conservation practices such as habitat and predator management, central to the ecological success of many SPAs. This interpretation directly contradicts the evidence from sites across the UK, where species such as curlew, stone curlew, and other ground nesting birds have thrived due to land and predator management by shoots. For example, in the entire APHA dataset spanning 2020-2025 not a single stone curlew has ever been reported as having died of avian influenza, while peer reviewed evidence documents the clear benefits of fox control on the breeding outcome of this species.

The socio-economic consequences of Natural England's approach are equally severe. Many rural businesses, particularly in hospitality and tourism, are heavily reliant on income from the shooting season during the winter months. If shooting doesn't take place, jobs will be lost, family businesses may close, and rural economies will be damaged.

Best in the field

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation Limited

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President: The Lord Dear, QPM

Natural England's approach has now moved beyond precaution to obstruction. It undermines trust in environmental governance and delivers no clear benefit to wildlife.

We therefore urge you to take immediate and direct control of this issue. A clear, proportionate, and evidence-led licensing framework is urgently needed. A framework that protects wildlife without sacrificing rural livelihoods or the very conservation gains that justified SPA designation in the first place.

We remain ready to work constructively but continued inaction will only increase the damage to communities, to conservation, and the rural community's confidence in the government.

Yours sincerely,

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ian Bell', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ian Bell
Chief Executive