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Dr Heather Dowlman
Exotic Disease Policy Team
Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
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Dear Dr Dowlman,

Bird Gatherings Licensing Regime in England – Constructive Engagement Ahead of 25 February Meeting

I am writing as Chairman of the National Council for Aviculture in advance of our meeting on Wednesday 25 February, to address Defra's decision of 8 December 2025 on the licensing regime governing bird gatherings in England. The purpose of this letter is to explain why that decision has caused significant concern within the cage bird community and to set out the constructive outcomes the cage bird community is seeking, which we would welcome the opportunity to discuss at our upcoming meeting.

Despite our significant concerns with Defra's decision of 8 December 2025, our preference is to engage positively and constructively with Defra to identify a workable solution. In that spirit, this letter outlines why the current arrangements have proved unworkable in practice – particularly for gatherings involving Passeriformes– and invites Defra to reconsider whether a different approach, such as extending the General Licence to include Passeriformes, could meet the shared objective of disease prevention while also allowing long-established bird shows and events to continue.

Background

On 8 December 2025, Defra amended and reissued the general licence governing bird gatherings in England in order to prevent the spread of avian influenza. Under the revised regime, gatherings may proceed under a general licence only where they involve racing pigeons, Psittaciformes (including parrots) or birds of prey. Gatherings involving other categories of birds, including Passeriformes such as canaries and finches, now fall outside the scope of the General Licence and instead require organisers to apply for a Specific Licence from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). This change was introduced without a specific consultation with cage bird organisations.

On 23 December 2025, a Freedom of Information Act request was submitted by a member of the cage bird community seeking information on avian influenza outbreaks in canaries, including whether any such cases had been linked to attendance at bird shows or to housing arrangements in designated bird rooms. This

request was taken in an effort to understand the evidential basis for Defra's decision of 8 December 2025. The response confirmed that APHA holds no records linking avian influenza cases in canaries to attendance at bird shows or to specific housing arrangements. In light of that response, and notwithstanding the publication of a qualitative risk assessment in November 2025, the NCA is at a loss to understand the basis on which the risk level for Passeriformes (including canaries and finches) was assessed as having increased from low to medium, leading to their removal from the general licence on 8 December 2025.

The NCA was invited to a meeting with Defra on 9 February 2026. During that meeting, it was stated that engagement with certain stakeholders had taken place in the summer of 2025; however, it was also acknowledged that representatives from Passeriformes organisations had not been part of that engagement. The NCA remains concerned that changes to the bird gatherings licensing regime were made without meaningful input from those directly affected within the Passerine cage community.

The NCA has welcomed Defra's recent communications of 13 February and the invitation to a meeting on 25 February. The NCA is also aware that despite a hiatus, Defra has now begun to grant licences again for certain cage bird events and is grateful for this development. The NCA is keen to continue to collaborate with Defra so that more cage bird shows can proceed, while remaining mindful of the risk of avian influenza.

Concerns about Defra's decision

The rationale for the decision

The NCA remains concerned about the reassessment of the risk associated with Passeriformes which led to their removal from the General Licence. In correspondence shared with members, it has been stated that the assessed risk of introduction of avian influenza into bird gatherings is **low** for Psittaciformes and racing pigeons, but **medium** for Passeriformes and other Columbiformes. The NCA is struggling to understand the basis on which those distinctions have been drawn, and in particular why Passeriformes have been treated differently from Psittaciformes, given that Passeriformes are typically kept indoors or in enclosed aviaries with no contact with wild birds and no outdoor flight opportunities. The NCA understands these conditions to be effectively the same as those in which Psittaciformes are generally kept, yet Psittaciformes continue to be assessed as presenting low risk.

It is also unclear why certain categories of Columbiformes are treated differently within the licensing framework. Defra has indicated that racing pigeons were not included in the most recent qualitative risk assessment because they were the subject of a separate assessment. The NCA would welcome clarity on why racing pigeons were assessed separately (and on what basis), and why this has resulted in what appears to be an illogical outcome of racing pigeons remaining within the general licence while other Columbiformes are subject to the Specific Licence regime.

The practical difficulties

The NCA is concerned that Defra's decision to amend and re-issue the General Licence governing bird gatherings in England has led to wide-ranging negative consequences for cage bird shows attended by its members. As a result of Passeriformes now falling within the specific licence regime, organisers are subject to substantially more onerous conditions.

In particular, organisers now face (among other things): (i) mandatory veterinary involvement (presence or on-call, and approval of contingency planning); (ii) a 14-day isolation requirement; (iii) restrictions on sales/exchanges; (iv) a minimum 20-day application window; (v) additional administrative requirements around advance biosecurity communications; and (vi) uncertainty arising from APHA's practice of reassessing risk shortly before the event and only granting the Specific Licence at that stage. The NCA is concerned that the

cumulative effect of these requirements, and/or the practical impact this would have, has not been accounted for in the decision-making. In practice, these requirements are already causing organisers to consider excluding canaries and finches from events altogether. Taken together, the onerous conditions amount to a de facto prohibition on gatherings involving Passeriformes.

Specific Licence Condition	Difficulties faced
<p>Veterinary surgeon to be present or on call (depending on risk level assigned to the event) at bird gathering events and to sign off contingency plans</p>	<p>Limited availability of veterinary surgeons willing or able to undertake this role. By way of an example, an auction scheduled to take place in North Duffield on Sunday 1 March is at risk of proceeding without canaries and finches altogether, as the organiser has been unable to secure the required veterinary support.</p> <p>Where veterinary support can be secured, the associated costs are often prohibitive which will likely deter organisers from including Passeriformes.</p>
<p>14-day isolation period for birds between shows</p>	<p>Creates practical difficulties for keepers of multiple cage bird species falling under different regimes (e.g., 7-day isolation for birds covered by the General Licence and 14-day isolation for Passeriformes), making compliance during the show season challenging. The longer isolation period also limits the number of shows canaries and finches can attend, reducing participation and undermining viability.</p>
<p>Ban on bird sales/exchanges at gatherings held under the Specific Licence</p>	<p>For many established shows and auctions, responsible sales are a core feature of the event. The restriction is leading organisers to consider excluding Passeriformes rather than operating under conditions that materially change the nature of long-standing events.</p>
<p>Minimum 20-day application period for Specific Licence</p>	<p>This removes flexibility for organisers (entries/species lists often finalise closer to the event) and makes it difficult to respond to short-notice changes, increasing the risk that shows involving Passeriformes will be cancelled or proceed without them.</p>
<p>Organisers must circulate detailed biosecurity advice to all participants in advance, including isolation recommendations and movement controls</p>	<p>While the NCA supports proportionate biosecurity, the administrative burden of preparing and issuing tailored advice – particularly where different species at the same event are subject to different rules – adds complexity and increases the risk of inadvertent non-compliance. This is</p>

	especially challenging for volunteer-run societies.
APHA reassess risk shortly before the event (in practice often around a week beforehand) and may only grant the licence at that stage (following any "agreement in principle")	This creates significant uncertainty and undermines event planning: organisers must commit to venues, staffing and exhibitor arrangements without knowing until close to the event whether a licence will be granted (or whether further conditions will be imposed. The risk of late refusal or late changes discourages organisers from including Passeriformes and contributes to the regime operating, in practice, as a barrier to viable events.

The division between Psittaciformes and Passeriformes also creates significant organisational challenges for established all-variety shows, including flagship events such as the National Exhibition. These events may be forced to operate effectively under two regimes in parallel, and some organisers may conclude that including Passeriformes is no longer viable in practice.

The NCA is also concerned that the revised licensing regime places new and significant obligations on the veterinary profession, yet the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) has confirmed that it was not consulted in relation to Defra's decision of 8 December 2025. Given that compliance with the Specific Licence regime depends in part on the availability and involvement of veterinary surgeons, the NCA considers it problematic that no engagement took place with the regulator of the profession to assess whether these requirements were workable in practice. In the NCA's view, this lack of engagement has contributed directly to the difficulties now being experienced by organisers in securing veterinary support and complying with the licensing conditions.

Legal issues with Defra's decision

The NCA has instructed Fieldfisher LLP as our solicitors and taken legal advice in these matters. While the NCA's clear preference is to resolve these issues through constructive engagement rather than litigation, it considers that there are a number of serious legal concerns arising from the way in which the decisions were made and implemented.

Failure to consult / procedural unfairness

The NCA is concerned that Defra did not engage with, or provide an opportunity to make representations from, those organisations and individuals who had benefited from the previous General Licence regime before its scope was materially restricted. The removal of Passeriformes from the General Licence represented the withdrawal of a long-standing benefit enjoyed by a clearly identifiable and limited group. In those circumstances, the NCA considers that principles of procedural fairness required Defra to engage with the affected sector before implementing the change.

The NCA notes that Defra has since acknowledged that engagement with affected organisations did not take place prior to the decision, and that discussions have only occurred after the revised regime was introduced. In the NCA's view, post-decision engagement cannot cure the absence of a fair opportunity to make representations before a decision of this significance was taken.

Rationality of the risk assessment

The NCA is also concerned that the decision to categorise Passeriformes as presenting a higher risk than Psittaciformes, and to regulate the two groups differently as a result, lacks a clear and coherent rationale. As set out above, the practical conditions in which Passeriformes are kept are materially similar to those applicable to Psittaciformes, yet the two groups have been assigned different risk classifications with materially different regulatory consequences.

While the NCA recognises that Defra is entitled to a margin of discretion in matters involving scientific and technical assessment, it remains concerned that the distinction drawn between Passeriformes and Psittaciformes has not been adequately explained, and that Defra's own reasoning appears internally inconsistent. This lack of clarity has contributed to the uncertainty and confusion experienced by organisers and participants seeking to comply with the regime.

Failure to take into account relevant considerations

In addition, the NCA is concerned that Defra failed to undertake sufficient inquiry into, or take into account, a number of obviously relevant considerations before implementing the Specific Licence regime. In particular:

- whether veterinary surgeons would be available, willing, and able to undertake the roles now required of them, and the costs associated with those requirements;
- the practical impact of requiring applications to be submitted at least 20 days in advance, with licences often granted only shortly before an event;
- the cumulative effect of the isolation, sales, veterinary and administrative requirements on the feasibility of holding Passeriformes gatherings at all; and
- the implications for mixed-species and all-variety shows, where organisers must now attempt to operate under two distinct licensing regimes simultaneously.

In the NCA's view, these matters were so obviously material to the feasibility of the Specific Licence regime that they ought to have been properly considered before the decision was taken. The fact that the regime has, in practice, proved extremely difficult—if not impossible—to operate for many events reinforces the concern that these considerations were not adequately addressed.

Next steps

The NCA's clear and preferred outcome is for Passeriformes to be brought back within the scope of the general licence, so that bird gatherings involving the various different species can proceed under a single, clear and workable licensing framework. The NCA considers this to be the most coherent and proportionate approach, reflecting both the low-risk husbandry conditions in which Passeriformes are typically kept, and the long-standing operation of mixed-species and all-variety shows. Amending the general licence in this way would address the underlying concerns set out above, remove unnecessary complexity, and avoid the current situation in which the regime operates in practice as a barrier to lawful gatherings involving canaries and finches.

If, however, Defra is not minded at this stage to amend the general licence, the NCA would welcome consideration of more limited adjustments to the current specific licence conditions as an interim measure. A more flexible approach—such as permitting a veterinary surgeon to be available on call, rather than requiring physical attendance or advance sign-off of contingency plans—would significantly reduce the practical and financial barriers to compliance, while still supporting Defra's disease-control objectives.

The NCA would also welcome a more structured approach to engagement on any future amendments to the bird gatherings licensing regime. The NCA values its existing constructive relationship with Defra, including

through regular engagement on CITES and CASC (the Companion Animal Sector Council) and on animal welfare matters. It would welcome an extension of that approach to bird gathering licensing, so that the expertise of the cage bird community can be taken into account at an earlier stage in any future policy development.

The NCA remains committed to working constructively with Defra to achieve an outcome that protects avian health while allowing long-established and responsible bird gatherings to continue in practice. We hope that the issues set out in this letter will assist discussions at the forthcoming meeting on Wednesday 25 February and provide a basis for identifying a proportionate and workable way forward.

Yours sincerely,

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National Council for Aviculture