From the Chairman of the Committee

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Defra
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

10 July 2019

General and individual licences for controlling wild birds

I am writing to thank you and Dr Alexandra Cran-McGreehin for giving evidence before the Committee on 2 July.

Your evidence was much appreciated. However, it raised a number of questions about the overall licensing regime and how it has been operated by Natural England, and now Defra. In particular, you stated that you were reviewing the circumstances and outcome of the 2014 consultation on general licences undertaken by Natural England. Given that a further comprehensive review of the general licences will be led by Defra later this year, the Committee requests that you share with us the findings of your exercise and the lessons that can be learnt from what occurred in 2014.

During the course of questioning on the situation in which Natural England found itself, you stated that Natural England is “absolutely independent”. Nevertheless, Natural England receives grant-in-aid from Defra and you are responsible for appointing its Board. As its annual report states, it is an arm’s-length body accountable to you, and you are accountable to Parliament for its activities and performance. We therefore feel it is appropriate and pertinent to ask for further detail on your assessment of Natural England’s position, the challenges it has faced and continues to face, the reasons several of its former responsibilities have been transferred elsewhere and what you see as its role going forward.

Finally, the Committee requests clarification on the information you provided about individual licences. Farmers, conservationists and land managers in many cases continue to rely on these licences, particularly given that the three new general licences issued by Defra do not permit activities on, or within 300 metres of, European protected sites. For the benefit of land managers and other members of the public who will have listened to your evidence, we therefore seek clarity on the scope and applicability of individual licences, at what point an
application can and should be made and in what circumstances they may expire or require review or renewal.

I would be grateful if you could reply by 25 July. I would expect that your reply, along with this letter, will be published on the Committee’s website.

Neil Parish
Chairman of the Committee