

PET TRAVEL REFORM UK

A Controlled Arrival Model for In-Cabin Pet Travel into Great Britain

Policy submission following Defra response FOI2026/16492

20 August 2026

KEY GOVERNMENT CONFIRMATION

“There is no specific legislative requirement that stipulates pets must travel as manifest cargo on scheduled flights.”

— Defra, FOI2026/16492, 20 August 2026

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Executive Summary

Pet Travel Reform UK is asking the Government to examine a regulated pathway that would allow eligible companion animals to travel in the passenger cabin on participating scheduled commercial flights into Great Britain, while retaining the existing health, identification, documentary and border-control safeguards.

Defra's response of 20 August 2026 materially clarifies the issue. Defra confirms that there is no specific legislative requirement stipulating that pets must travel as manifest cargo on scheduled flights. It explains instead that manifest cargo is the arrangement used in practice because scheduled-flight pets can be transferred directly to a pet checking facility and kept out of the main terminal, while providing a documentary record of arrival to customs and other border officials. Defra also acknowledges that chartered flights may operate under different arrival arrangements.

This means the central policy question is no longer simply whether Parliament has prohibited in-cabin pet travel. The question is whether the same biosecurity outcome can be achieved through a different, controlled operational pathway.

The proposal in one sentence

Permit an eligible pet to remain securely contained in an airline-approved carrier, under the control of its accompanying passenger and participating carrier, and route the passenger and pet to an authorised arrival check before release from the controlled border environment.

What this submission does not seek

- No removal or weakening of rabies, microchip, health, documentary or parasite-treatment requirements.
- No automatic right to bring any animal into an aircraft cabin.
- No requirement that every airline or airport participate.
- No release of a pet into Great Britain before the required arrival process has been completed.
- No assumption that existing airport procedures can simply be bypassed.

What this submission asks Government to do

- Identify the specific operational barriers that currently make manifest cargo the default on scheduled flights.
- Assess whether each barrier can be addressed through a controlled in-cabin arrival pathway.
- Clarify which APHA carrier-approval conditions would need to be met or amended.
- Consider a limited pilot with willing carriers, airports and border agencies.

1. What Defra Has Now Confirmed

In FOI2026/16492, Defra states that a carrier moving a pet animal into Great Britain must be approved by APHA under Article 11 of the Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals Order 2011. Defra explains that APHA grants approval where the carrier can demonstrate processes ensuring compliance with health, identification and documentary requirements before the animal is permitted to enter Great Britain.

Defra then explains that, in practice, most pets arriving on scheduled flights travel as manifest cargo so that they can be transferred directly to a pet checking facility rather than through the main airport terminal. Defra describes this as accounting for wider operational arrangements and ensuring a documentary record of arrival is available to customs and other border-control officials.

The response therefore distinguishes between the legal framework governing entry and the operational model used to deliver compliance. It also confirms that chartered flights may have different operational arrangements at their arrival airport.

The resulting policy issue

If manifest cargo is not specifically required by legislation, the relevant test should be whether an alternative model can deliver an equivalent or better level of control. Pet Travel Reform UK therefore asks Defra and APHA to identify the operational requirement, approval condition or border-control process that makes carriage as cargo necessary, rather than merely describing cargo as the current practice.

2. Existing Safeguards Already Operate Before and During Travel

A reform model would sit on top of, rather than replace, the existing pet-travel framework. The following are practical features that should be examined when assessing whether the mode of carriage itself is essential to biosecurity:

Pre-travel eligibility: Eligible pets already have to satisfy the applicable identification, vaccination, documentary and other entry requirements before travel.

Carrier acceptance: Airlines already operate pet-acceptance procedures and may refuse carriage where documentation, carrier dimensions, weight or other requirements are not satisfied.

Capacity controls: Airlines can cap the number of pets accepted on an individual flight.

Physical containment: In-cabin policies commonly require a small pet to remain in an approved carrier. Pet Travel Reform UK proposes that containment remain mandatory throughout the controlled journey and arrival process.

Operational suitability: Cargo carriage itself depends on aircraft and hold capability and can be affected by operational or temperature restrictions. A cabin model would be available only on participating services meeting defined requirements.

Campaign experience also indicates that passengers may encounter and interact with animals in airport environments before boarding. A secure-carrier rule during flight therefore deserves to be assessed on actual exposure and control rather than on an assumption that cabin carriage necessarily creates uncontrolled contact.

3. The Controlled Arrival Model

Pet Travel Reform UK proposes that Government test a controlled-arrival model rather than treating the passenger terminal and manifest-cargo facility as the only two possible operational choices.

1. Pre-authorisation — Only eligible routes, carriers, airports and animals would participate. Required pet-travel documentation would be checked before boarding.

2. Secure cabin carriage — The pet would remain in an airline-approved carrier in accordance with the participating airline's rules, subject to narrowly defined exceptions required for safety or official inspection.

3. Controlled disembarkation — On arrival, the pet would remain contained. The passenger would follow a designated route or escort process rather than simply entering the ordinary uncontrolled arrivals flow.

4. Pet-entry verification — The pet and documentation would be presented at an authorised checking point before release into Great Britain.

5. Border record — The carrier/airport process would create or transmit the documentary arrival record required by customs and other border authorities.

6. Release only after clearance — The passenger and pet would leave the controlled process only when the applicable entry requirements had been satisfied.

Why this addresses Defra's stated concerns

Defra concern / requirement	Controlled-arrival response
Health, ID and documentary compliance	Pre-travel acceptance plus authorised verification before release.
Direct control after landing	Pet remains contained and passenger follows a designated controlled route.
Pet checking facility / authorised check	Use an authorised checking point or an approved equivalent process at participating airports.
Documentary record of arrival	Carrier/airport transmits the required arrival record to border officials.
Biosecurity	No release into Great Britain until compliance is confirmed.
Complex airport operations	Pilot only at airports and with carriers capable of implementing the agreed process.

4. Questions Defra and APHA Should Now Answer

1. What specific check or control currently performed because a pet is manifest cargo cannot be performed for a securely contained in-cabin pet?
2. Which required checks take place before departure, which take place after landing, and which require the animal to have travelled as cargo?
3. Is there an APHA carrier-approval condition that expressly prevents a scheduled commercial carrier from proposing an in-cabin process for ordinary pets? If so, please identify it.
4. If no such condition exists, what would a scheduled carrier and arrival airport have to demonstrate to obtain approval for a controlled in-cabin route?
5. Why can different operational arrangements be accepted for chartered flights but not designed for participating scheduled services?
6. Could a documentary arrival record be generated electronically or through carrier manifests without classifying the animal as manifest cargo?
7. Could an airport designate an escorted or controlled route from aircraft to an authorised pet checking point?
8. What quantified biosecurity risk is created by a pet remaining securely inside an approved carrier compared with the existing approved alternatives?
9. What welfare assessment has been undertaken comparing cabin carriage with hold/cargo carriage, including disruption, temperature-related restrictions and emergency scenarios?
10. Would Defra support a time-limited pilot involving one or more willing airports and scheduled carriers?

5. Why a Pilot Is the Proportionate Next Step

The absence of a specific statutory manifest-cargo requirement does not by itself prove that every scheduled service can safely accommodate pets in cabin. Equally, the existence of current operational arrangements does

not demonstrate that those arrangements are the only means of meeting the statutory and biosecurity objectives.

A limited pilot would allow Government to test the issue empirically. Participation could be restricted by route, airport, airline, species, size, carrier specification and number of pets per flight. Compliance, processing time, border-control impact, incidents and welfare outcomes could then be measured before any wider decision.

Suggested pilot safeguards

- Participating APHA-approved carrier and approved arrival airport only.
- Advance booking and pre-notification of the pet.
- Strict eligibility and documentation requirements.
- Approved leak-resistant/secure carrier and defined size/weight limits.
- Maximum number of in-cabin pets per flight.
- Mandatory containment through disembarkation and until authorised clearance.
- Designated arrival route and checking point.
- Electronic arrival record accessible to the relevant border authorities.
- Clear contingency procedure for non-compliance, illness, damaged carriers or other exceptional events.
- Formal review of biosecurity, operational and animal-welfare outcomes.

6. Requested Government Action

Pet Travel Reform UK respectfully asks Defra to move the discussion from the proposition that manifest cargo is the current practice to an assessment of whether it is operationally indispensable.

Defra has now confirmed the key starting point: there is no specific legislative requirement stipulating that pets must travel as manifest cargo on scheduled flights.

The next step should therefore be a transparent identification of the operational barriers, followed by an assessment of whether those barriers can be addressed while preserving every necessary health, identification, documentary, customs and biosecurity safeguard.

Pet Travel Reform UK requests engagement with the relevant Defra policy team, APHA and willing aviation stakeholders to consider the controlled-arrival model and the feasibility of a limited pilot.

Source note

Primary government source: Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, FOI2026/16492, “In-cabin pet travel on private charter flights versus commercial airlines”, 20 August 2026. This submission distinguishes Defra’s confirmed position from campaign proposals and operational questions that require further Government assessment.