

PE2189/A: Remove legal protected status for gulls to help reduce their numbers in residential areas

Scottish Government written submission, 29 October 2025

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable? If not, please explain why.

The Scottish Government fully recognises the increase of the significant impact of urban gull populations being felt in some of our towns and cities, especially in the North-East of Scotland.

All birds are afforded protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004. NatureScot can, and do, issue licences to undertake actions to manage gulls for the purpose of protecting public health and safety under Section 16(1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

The Scottish Government has, however, made it clear that killing large numbers of gulls year on year cannot be the answer. Gull populations are in decline and it is not the case that communities are unanimously in support of this approach. While gulls can have a negative impact, they are also an important part of our ecosystem.

NatureScot, in light of declining gull populations, recently commissioned independent experts at the British Trust for Ornithology to carry out research to better understand how licensed control of gulls could be impacting wider populations.

The research found that the maximum level of licenced control authorised between 2020 and 2023 could have led to declines, shown in the modelled populations of all five breeding gull species.

While most licence holders do not reach the maximum levels of control authorised, these findings demonstrate why the recent change in NatureScot's approach was needed. Since 2024 there has been much more emphasis on non-lethal and preventative approaches, with fewer licences issued. The research found that these changes to the licensing regime greatly decreased the likely impacts on all species compared to previous years. A copy of the research report can be found on NatureScot's website at [Population modelling of five UK-breeding gull species to inform NatureScot licensing assessments | NatureScot](#).

What, if any, action the Scottish Government is currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition, and is any further action being considered that will achieve the ask[s] of this petition?

During portfolio question time on 24 April 2025, in response to PQ S6O-04560, the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity announced that he would chair a Gull Summit to discuss with members and the people, who are raising those issues, how we can control the birds in the way that we need to, without damaging the population.

The issue of the Summit was also raised during the Parliamentary Debate of Motion S6M-17969: Action to Address the Impact of Gulls in Scotland, on Thursday 26 June 2025.

The Minister chaired a Gull Summit on Tuesday 23 September 2025 in Great Glen House, Inverness. The aim of the Summit was to focus on bringing together those who are managing gulls effectively with those who are facing the most negative impacts of gulls to address the question of how we can mitigate the negative impacts going forward and the actions we need to take ahead of next year.

Further details of the Gull Summit, including recommended actions following the summit, can be found on NatureScot's website at [People and Gulls Summit Event - Summary | NatureScot](#).

During the Summit, it was evident that current efforts to mitigate gull impacts are fragmented and often ineffective, so the approach to gull management needs to be aligned. To help achieve this, over the coming months, the focus will be on five key areas as follows:

1. On local engagement, NatureScot will lead a series of regional round-table events in areas most affected by gull-related issues. They will bring together local stakeholders to agree on collaborative action ahead of the next breeding season. NatureScot will be listening to and working with local people. On best practice, the Minister recently announced an initial £100,000 from NatureScot to support local authorities to develop proactive and collaborative management of gulls. NatureScot will work with local authorities to develop a co-ordinated gull management plan. That will sit alongside work on the Highland Council project. Highland Council and NatureScot have jointly committed to the development and delivery of pilot gull management for the city of Inverness. We will then draw on successful examples, such as the work in Inverness, to inform national best practice.
2. The Summit also highlighted a significant gap in our understanding of gull behaviour and ecology. The Scottish Government will work with stakeholders to fill such gaps through research and data collection, ensuring that our interventions are informed and effective.
3. Alongside short-term deterrents, we must also consider long-term design solutions. Making our buildings less attractive to gulls through thoughtful planning, restoration and retrofitting will be key. There are good pieces of work that we can look to, from roof structures on new builds and refurbishments to minimise the attraction to nesting gulls, to planning conditions for commercial businesses and food outlets that require effective waste management.
4. There must also be public awareness. Access to food is one of the biggest drivers of gull presence in urban areas. We heard at the Summit about successful efforts in Inverness to remove commercial bins from streets, which was effective both in reducing food sources and in improving the city centre experience. We will work with local authorities to develop public awareness campaigns that encourage responsible waste disposal and discourage the feeding of gulls. We also heard at the Summit about the ways in which we can deter gulls from swooping, using creative but effective methods of putting

them off takeaway boxes and building confidence among the public when people are out and about. We will be working with local communities to raise awareness of that.

5. Licensing is an essential part of managing the problem. The licensing regime that is administered by NatureScot was discussed at the Summit. The Minister recognises the frustrations that have been voiced by communities and elected members about its complexity and inconsistency. He has raised those concerns directly with NatureScot, and we expect to see improvements in clarity, responsiveness and practical guidance. Licences for gull control will be issued where there is a demonstrable risk to public health and safety, where they can be issued within the legislation and with the practicality that we expect from a public body working on behalf of the Government and, ultimately, our constituents. NatureScot will be working to support licence applications earlier in the year, with a focus on licensing in the areas where health and safety needs are highest.

Is there any further information the Scottish Government wish to bring to the Committee's attention, which would assist it in considering this petition?

Given that the majority of gull populations are in decline, and there is sufficient measures that can be undertaken by those being impacted by gulls, including applying for a licence from NatureScot for public health and safety reasons, the Scottish Government does not agree that legal protected status for gulls should be removed to help reduce their numbers in residential areas.

The outcomes of the five key measures provided in Section 4 above should be assessed before offering any recommendations, recognising that further actions may depend on a range of emerging factors.

Wildlife Management Team

Environment and Forestry