

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 10 December 2025
19th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner Ian Boyles

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to no longer grant protected status to gulls, in order to facilitate the reduction of seagull numbers in populated areas and ensure the safety of residents from attacks.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2189>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 2 October 2025.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 20 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received a submission from the Scottish Government, which is set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
December 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

Ian Boyles

Date Lodged

2 October 2025

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to no longer grant protected status to gulls, in order to facilitate the reduction of seagull numbers in populated areas and ensure the safety of residents from attacks.

Background information

In recent years the population of seagulls in our area has grown substantially in number. Gulls are now causing damage to property, cars, and especially attacks on residents.

If this was a dog or a physical attack by a person, action would soon be taken by the police and authorities. Seagulls should not have protected species status.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2189

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2189: Remove legal protected status for gulls to help reduce their numbers in residential areas, lodged by Ian Boyles.

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Often referred to simply as seagulls, there are in fact several individual species of gull in Scotland. The five most encountered are the great black-backed, lesser black-backed, common, black-headed and the herring gull. A recent [BBC News article](#) highlights Inverness, Eyemouth and Aberdeen as having experienced “gull-related incidents”.

Urban areas may have become more attractive to gulls due to food availability, lack of predators, availability of nesting sites and reducing traditional habitats. However, the most recent [Seabirds Count](#) (2023) shows that all five species of commonly encountered gull that breed in Scotland are in serious decline, with [numbers down by between 44% and 75% depending on the species](#). Common gull, great black-backed gull and herring gull are now all red listed [Species of Conservation Concern](#) in the UK, while lesser black-backed gull and black-headed gull are amber listed.

NatureScot’s blog on [Understanding urban gulls](#) provides useful context, and notes that whilst:

[...] we might be seeing more gulls in our day-to-day lives, this does not mean that there has been an increase in the population as a whole. In fact, we know the opposite to be the case. Gulls are struggling in their coastal habitats and numbers are down overall, so any move inland or to urban areas, especially where urban areas are coastal, has to be seen in that context.

The 2023 Seabirds Count did however show that herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls now appear to have a higher proportion of their UK breeding population nesting in urban and inland nest sites.

Like all wild birds, gulls, along with their nests and eggs are protected by the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) as amended by the [Nature Conservation \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#). It is therefore illegal to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, or take any gull, and an offence to take, damage, or destroy an active nest, or its contents. In Scotland it is also illegal to also obstruct or prevent gulls from using their nest.

Whilst all wild birds have these core protections under the 1981 Act, NatureScot has powers under the Act to license activities – for defined legal purposes – that may otherwise be an offence. Those purposes include, for example, “preserving public health or public or air safety”. Importantly, NatureScot must be satisfied that, as regards that purpose, there is “no other satisfactory solution”.

In 2019 NatureScot (then using its statutory name Scottish Natural Heritage) strengthened the licensing regime for control of gull species, and [guidance was updated in 2024](#) which sought to “reduce the number of licences that are issued to control gulls in towns and cities each breeding season, following new evidence on the extent to which populations are struggling”. NatureScot’s [Gull Management Guidance](#) states:

Whilst many actions can be undertaken to help prevent or minimise problems caused by gulls without contravening the law, sometimes it may be necessary e.g. by removing nests or eggs where problems are evident or expected. In these instances NatureScot is able to licence such activities as a last resort in order to preserve public health or safety.

Actions to help prevent or minimise problems (that do not require a licence) could include physically preventing establishing a nest, removing potential nesting materials, human disturbance, or automated scaring devices. Actions requiring a licence include nest removal, egg removal, or pricking eggs.

On 23 September 2025 the Scottish Government held a summit in Inverness on [tackling urban gull problems](#). This brought together local councillors, housing associations, business representatives, waste management organisations and community groups, scientific experts and NatureScot. It was announced that £100,000 would be invested in local authorities “to support efforts to limit the damage caused by gulls, ahead of next year’s breeding season. Deterrents can include measures such as the use of [lasers](#), [noise](#), roof spikes and netting to prevent nesting”.

Alasdair Reid

Senior Researcher

31 October 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C: Written submission

Scottish Government written submission, 29 October 2025

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

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