

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 21 January 2026
2nd Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

PE2202: Stop the Guga Hunt

Introduction

Petitioner Rachel Bigsby

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2202>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 3 November 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, 51,275 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 submissions from the Scottish Government, Petitioner and OneKind which are 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
January 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2202: Stop the Guga Hunt

Petitioner

Rachel Bigsby

Date Lodged

3 November 2025

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

Background information

I have devoted my life to Scotland's seabirds; photographing for National Geographic as avian influenza devastated colonies, winning Wildlife Photographer of the Year (Natural Artistry) and Bird Photographer of the Year (Portfolio). I have spent years volunteering on seabird islands across Scotland, including with the Scottish Seabird Centre, working hands-on to protect these birds I love so dearly. The annual Guga Hunt is no longer tradition — it is blood sport. This abhorrent cruelty dates back centuries, when island communities relied on seabirds for food, but today it is not a necessity. Despite catastrophic losses from avian influenza and unimaginable daily threats, the hunt continues.

After surviving a winter at sea, Gannets return to our shores to raise one precious chick with a lifelong partner. After months of devotion, that chick is snatched, clubbed, and strangled in its prime.

I beg the Scottish Government: end this cruelty, protect Gannets, and let them recover.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2202



The petitioner is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

What is the guga hunt?

A guga is the Gaelic name for a young [northern gannet](#) - a large seabird native to the coasts of the North Atlantic, and which breeds in a number of coastal colonies in Scotland.

The guga hunt is a tradition in the community of Ness in North Lewis, and is [thought to date back to at least the 16th century](#). Traditionally, a group of men from Ness travel annually, in August, to the remote, small uninhabited island of Sula Sgeir ('gannet rock'), around 65 km from the Butt of Lewis, where gannets breed. Young gannets are taken with a pole and noose, culled and salted and brought back to Lewis where they may be used or sold for human consumption.

Licensing of the guga hunt by Nature Scot

The guga hunt can only take place legally under a special licence issued by NatureScot under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA 1981), which also determines how many birds may be taken under licence.

Generally, it is an offence to (intentionally or recklessly) kill, injure or take any wild bird under section 1 of the WCA 1981. This protection dates back to [the Protection of Wild Birds Act 1954](#). An Order was introduced under this Act, the [Gannets on Sula Sgeir Order 1955](#), which allowed the guga hunt to continue. This exemption was subsequently included in the WCA 1981 (and the 1954 Act and 1955 Order repealed).

Section 16(2) of the WCA 1981 provides that section 1 does not apply to anything done for the purpose of providing food for human consumption in relation to a gannet on the island of Sula Sgeir, if it is done under and in accordance with the terms of a licence granted by the appropriate authority.

NatureScot [issued a statement on the guga hunt on 29 September 2025](#):

"We understand there are very strong feelings about the guga hunt, and that some people will disagree with it taking place. The cultural significance of the hunt is recognised in law under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. This is why a licence exists for the activity. To be clear, our role is to implement legislation in a balanced and reasonable way. We must assess any application against the licensing tests set out under the legislation, and crucially whether the guga

hunt can take place with the long-term Sula Sgeir gannet population remaining stable.

This is the first year we received a licence application from the Men of Ness since 2021. We carefully assessed the application and significantly reduced the number of birds that could be taken from 2,000 to 500 this year. This figure is based on scientific evidence which shows the Sula Sgeir gannet population will remain viable in the long-term with this limit. This is based on the most recent survey data collected from Sula Sgeir in 2024, post-bird flu.

We are also aware of the concerns about animal welfare and want to stress that it is a condition of our licence that birds should be killed humanely.

We have been informed that the guga hunt has taken place this year.”

As set out above, licence applications were not received by NatureScot in 2022, 2023 or 2024, as a result of concerns about the presence of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in seabird colonies in Scotland.

As set out in the NatureScot quote above, the licence issued this year was for a lower number of birds (500) than previous years (generally 2000). NatureScot has also [published some further details about licences issued for the guga hunt between 2016 and 2025](#) on its website. NatureScot has also published a [redacted copy of the licence issued in 2025](#) which sets out details of the basis for the issuance of the licence which includes:

- Recognition that the collection of guga forms part of a traditional way of life which is culturally important to the community
- Reference to a [population viability analysis report](#) by NatureScot, which suggested that a harvest level of 500 guga annually would allow the breeding population to remain stable over a 25-year period.

North Rona and Sula Sgeir Special Protection Area (SPA)

Sula Sgeir forms part of the [North Rona and Sula Sgeir Special Protection Area \(SPA\)](#) – a ‘European protected site’ which is designated to protect a number of seabirds, including the gannet. The [latest assessed condition of gannets within this SPA](#) found their status to be ‘favourable maintained’ (in 2023), which means that conservation objectives for gannets within this SPA were being met at the previous assessment, and are still being met.

[Conservation and management advice published by Nature Scot in December 2024](#) for the North Rona and Sula Sgeir SPA identifies the hunting of gannets as an activity “considered capable of affecting the protected features” of the site and identified that there is existing management in place to manage pressures associated with the guga hunt, stating the “annual guga hunt at Sula Sgeir is subject to limits under license (currently a 2000 chick limit, unless exceptional circumstances arise such as an avian flu outbreak)”.

However it also states that “Research is required on the potential impact of the annual guga hunt at Sula Sgeir on the gannet population and whether limits require review”.

NatureScot has advised SPICe that it recently awarded a contract for an updated population viability analysis of the Sula Sgeir gannet population. This work will produce population models over a 25-year period and include scenarios for differing levels of juvenile gannet harvest, periodic mortality events (such as HPAI), and consider cumulative effects from other anthropogenic pressures. It is anticipated that this work will be complete prior to the 2026 seabird breeding season and inform NatureScot’s licensing.

Alexa Morrison, Senior Researcher

10 December 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 that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C: Written submissions

Scottish Government written submission, 1 December 2025

PE2202/A: Stop the Guga Hunt

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable?

The Scottish Government fully appreciates the Petitioner's concerns over the protection of this important species. Section 16(2)(a) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes specific provision for the granting of a licence for the traditional hunting of gannets on the Island of Sula Sgeir to provide food for human consumption on the Isle of Lewis.

The guga (or gannet chick) hunt, which takes place in August each year, is a traditional activity which goes back hundreds of years and is of considerable cultural significance to the people of Ness on the Isle of Lewis. It is not uncommon for guga to be served at public events on Lewis.

In considering an application for a licence, NatureScot gave consideration to two main issues. The first is whether the hunt is sustainable, and by that the focus of the consideration is whether the activity would have an adverse effect on the conservation status of the species concerned, namely gannets. The second issue is whether the practices of the hunt are consistent with animal welfare legislation, namely section 19 the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 ("the 2006 Act").

For 2025, it is the first time an application has been received since 2021. The people of Ness did not apply in 2020 due to Covid-19, and in 2022, 2023 and 2024 in light of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. NatureScot thoroughly assessed the application, taking into account survey data and population analysis, and granted a licence with a limit of 500 birds.

This is significantly fewer than in previous years where licences for up to 2,000 birds have been granted. This revised limit for 2025 is aimed at safeguarding the sustainability of the Sula Sgeir gannet population and to support its continued recovery following avian flu. The limit is considered on an annual basis based on the most up to date information.

NatureScot count the guga ashore to ensure compliance with the bag limit specified in the license issued. The actual number of guga taken in 2025 was 485. It should also be noted that the guga are almost fully grown when they are taken.

Turning now to the issue of animal welfare, and the potential for an activity to cause unnecessary suffering. Whilst it is the responsibility of those persons operating under the terms of the licence to make sure that they do so in compliance with any other legislation, including with respect to animal welfare considerations, it is a condition of NatureScot's licence that birds should be killed humanely. NatureScot assessed this part of the licence application as meeting animal welfare requirements. Most of the

gugas will be killed by a single blow to the head. Where a second blow is required, it is very likely that the first will have rendered the bird unconscious. In our view therefore the method used to kill the gugas does not involve unnecessary suffering.

Given the above and that the guga hunt is carried out in accordance with a licence issued by NatureScot, we are confident that the guga hunt is compatible with the requirements of the 2006 Act, which allows the killing of an animal in an appropriate and humane manner.

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?

NatureScot keep licensing matters under continual review and if there was any change in the circumstances of this traditional activity, they would be prepared to reconsider the issue of a licence under section 16(2) or the terms of any such licence.

On this basis, the Scottish Government does not intend to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

Directorate for Environment and Forestry

Petitioner written submission, 12 January 2026

PE2202/B: Stop the Guga Hunt

This submission provides new scientific and regulatory information relevant to Petition PE2202, which seeks to amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 so that Gannets on Sula Sgeir receive the same legal protection as Gannets elsewhere in Scotland.

The central question before the Committee is whether the continued licensed killing of Gannet chicks on Sula Sgeir is compatible with conservation science, animal welfare standards and Scotland's statutory obligations following the unprecedented decline of seabird populations.

1. Population status of Sula Sgeir

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has caused severe mortality in Northern Gannets across Scotland. New national data for 2024–2025 shows over 11,000 Gannets lost nationally and a 22 percent decline in Scotland's breeding population. The Sula Sgeir colony itself has declined by between 9 and 22 percent.

Sula Sgeir is now the only Special Protection Area for Gannets in Scotland that has fallen below its official citation level. This has occurred despite a three-year pause in hunting, indicating that the colony was already struggling prior to avian influenza and

is now failing to recover. This places Sula Sgeir in a significantly more vulnerable conservation position than in previous licensing periods.

2. NatureScot's population modelling

NatureScot's Population Viability Analysis (PVA) was used to justify the 2025 quota of chicks. However, the modelling shows that the quota is not a recovery level but the maximum level that avoids immediate decline. Even at a reduced quota, the predicted change over 25 years is only +0.67 percent, meaning the population remains suppressed and does not recover to pre-2013 levels.

Higher quota levels produce significant and major declines. Importantly, NatureScot's own technical notes state that the model cannot account for one-off catastrophic events such as further HPAI outbreaks, offshore wind impacts, or climate-driven prey shifts. This means the modelling underestimates risk and overstates sustainability.

Internal NatureScot statements further indicate that if the same projected population impacts were assessed in a marine energy context, they would be classified as an adverse effect on site integrity and rejected under conservation law. This demonstrates that the precautionary principle is not being applied consistently.

3. Regulatory and monitoring failures

Freedom of Information responses obtained during 2024 and 2025 show that NatureScot did not carry out compliance monitoring or enforce licence conditions in the years 2017, 2018 and 2019. During this period, licence holders were required to record killing methods, but no records were kept, no internal checks were carried out, and no enforcement action was taken. Despite this, licences continued to be issued.

The Licensing Compliance Monitoring Team was only established in 2023 after these failures became apparent. This means the Scottish Government's assertion that the hunt is legal only if carried out humanely under licence is not supported by verified historical evidence.

At present, no independent observer is present on Sula Sgeir during the hunt. There is therefore no independent verification that licence conditions relating to humane killing are being complied with.

4. Welfare and ethical concerns

Multiple animal welfare organisations have publicly raised serious concerns about the killing method used in the guga hunt. The authorised method involves striking chicks with a club, which is considered lawful if done under licence. However, there

is no independent monitoring to confirm that birds are rendered unconscious immediately or that suffering is avoided.

The absence of independent oversight combined with historic failures in enforcement means there is no credible basis to conclude that welfare standards are being reliably met.

5. Public support and cultural relevance

A new public poll commissioned in 2025 shows that only 16 percent of Scottish respondents regard the guga hunt as culturally important. Among those who express an opinion, 72 percent do not see it as culturally significant and 69 percent support a ban. This indicates that the hunt persists largely because of low public awareness rather than widespread support.

6. Purpose of the hunt in 2026

The key policy question is whether the continued killing of Gannet chicks on Sula Sgeir serves any necessary or proportionate purpose today. The hunt is no longer required for food security or subsistence. The colony is below its conservation threshold and still recovering from mass mortality. Removing young birds delays population recovery and increases extinction risk.

Cultural heritage can be acknowledged without requiring continued killing, as many traditions have evolved in response to modern environmental and ethical standards.

7. Relevance to the petition

The petition seeks to remove the legal exemption that denies the Sula Sgeir colony the protection given to all other Scottish Gannets. The scientific evidence shows that the population is suppressed, vulnerable and unable to recover under current quota levels. Regulatory failures show that the licensing system cannot reliably enforce welfare conditions. Public opinion does not support continuation.

Taken together, this means the current legal framework fails to meet the objectives of conservation law, the precautionary principle and animal welfare legislation.

For these reasons, Petition PE2202 is realistic, necessary and justified. Ending the exemption for Sula Sgeir would align Scottish wildlife law with science, ethics and public interest, while still allowing cultural recognition through non-lethal means.

OneKind written submission, 7 January 2026

PE2202/C: Stop the Guga Hunt

OneKind is a charity working to protect and improve the lives of all of Scotland's animals. We have a strong track record of working with the Scottish Parliament to

that end, providing reliable, evidence-based recommendations to members and committees. We submit this in support of petition PE2202 to end the guga hunt.

One of our concerns is ethical: tradition does not justify the killing of young gannets (or any other animal). Our other concern is that this practice negatively impacts the welfare of the guga, their parents, and other nearby birds.

The Scottish Government response to the petition states that: "Most of the gugas will be killed by a single blow to the head. Where a second blow is required, it is very likely that the first will have rendered the bird unconscious. In our view therefore the method used to kill the gugas does not involve unnecessary suffering."

However, this is based on assumption, not evidence. In practice, manual killing depends on the skill of the operator and the conditions they are working under, and so can vary widely in terms of its efficacy and welfare impact. This contrasts with far more controlled conditions required in slaughterhouses and laboratories, for example. Relying on a blow to the head as a manner of killing will always pose some level of animal welfare risk, as we have previously pointed out in relation to crow killing (following trapping), for example. In the case of men working precariously while roped up on cliffsides, the potential for ineffective stunning is likely to increase.

This Scottish Government response also ignores the suffering caused by the method of capture, which will cause fear and distress to the guga, their parents, and other nearby birds.

A range of egregious harms are currently permitted because they are not considered 'unnecessary suffering' under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. At almost twenty years old it is time to review this Act, including how the unnecessary suffering offence is understood and applied.

Wildlife legislation offers inconsistent protection to animals, because it developed piecemeal over more than a century, during times when animal sentience was less understood and wild animal welfare was not prioritised sufficiently. It is also inconsistent, fragmented, confusing and difficult to enforce.

So, modern legislation with precautionary, ethical, animal-centred provisions is needed to prevent anomalies like this and give more equitable protections to animals. In the short term, we agree with the petitioner that removing the relevant provision from the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 is necessary to prevent the guga hunt from continuing.

Unlike other licensable purposes under that Act, the provision permitting the guga hunt is not related to wildlife 'management'. Also, unlike for other licensable purposes, there is no provision in the law that a licence shall not be granted unless the licensing authority is satisfied that there is no other satisfactory solution. Effectively, this means that NatureScot will grant this licence if it is applied for, unless they have evidence it will risk the conservation status of the species. As such, legislative change is needed.

Thus, we urge the Committee to press the Scottish Government on this and keep this petition open so that the issue can be addressed fully in the next session of Parliament.