

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 11 March 2026
6th 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. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 21 January 2026](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to consider the petition as part of an upcoming work programme item about the Committee's ongoing work.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Petitioner, Protect the Wild, and Bonnie McKay which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 1 December 2025](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 95,932 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

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

Clerks to the Committee
March 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: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2202 on 21 January 2026

The Convener: PE2202, which was lodged by Rachel Bigsby, calls 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. The guga hunt can take place legally only under a special licence issued by NatureScot—our old friends in NatureScot, which is the least effective organisation in the western world. That is a personal observation.

The Scottish Government's response to the petition states that it truly appreciates the petitioner's concerns over the protection of this important species. In considering an application for a licence, NatureScot considers two main issues: sustainability and animal welfare legislation.

A licence was granted in 2025 with a limit of 500 birds, which is significantly fewer than in previous years, when the licence granted the taking of up to 2,000 birds. The limit aims to safeguard the sustainability of guga and support its continued recovery following the avian flu. 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.

The petitioner has provided a written submission, which states that the central question is whether the continued licensed killing of gannet chicks is compatible with conservation science, animal welfare standards and the Scottish statutory obligations. The submission highlights the avian flu outbreak, which many of us will have seen visual evidence of, and coverage of subsequently, and which caused mortality in northern gannets.

The petitioner states that the population modelling used by NatureScot shows that the limit of 500 birds is not a recovery level but a maximum level that avoids immediate population decline. She is also concerned that no independent observer is present during the hunt, stating that there is no independent verification that licence conditions relating to humane killing are being complied with.

10:30

The committee has received a written submission from OneKind, a charity working to protect and improve the lives of animals in Scotland, which highlights a number of concerns and states that tradition does not justify the killing of young gannets. It also states that manual killing depends on the skill of the operator and the conditions that they are working under, so it can vary widely in terms of efficacy and welfare impact.

The committee has also received a late submission against the petition from a resident of the Isle of Lewis, who believes that many of the comments that have

been made in respect of the petition are abusive and offensive, that the petition is ignorant of the ways of island life and that there is no merit in its being progressed.

Do colleagues have any comments or suggestions for action, bearing in mind our position and the issue of timing with regard to the parliamentary session? Members know my views on NatureScot, but I am not sure where we can go in the time that is available to us.

Maurice Golden: The issue warrants further consideration, but, unfortunately, the committee will not be able to give it that consideration at this point in the parliamentary session. We come back, again, to the term “sustainability”, this time in respect of the gannet population, but, ultimately, the committee has to close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, principally because the Scottish Government has made it clear that it 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 this particular island, whose name I struggle to pronounce.

The Convener: I am uncomfortable, because the petition raises issues that the committee, in other circumstances, would have been happy to interrogate further. Certainly, we have interrogated NatureScot positions previously. Irrespective of that, though, we would have wanted to take the views of those on the island into consideration, too.

The petition has attracted more than 80,000 signatures, but, as we said at the start of the meeting, the committee has only a handful of meetings left in this parliamentary session. In closing the petition, which I think is what colleagues might be minded to do, I very much urge the petitioner to submit the petition again as soon as the new Parliament assembles. That will not require gathering the number of signatures that have already been gathered; one signature is all it takes for the petition to have the opportunity to be properly heard. However, there would be an opportunity for our successor parliamentary committee to tease out and interrogate in more detail some of the issues raised by the petition.

It is with some reluctance that I suggest that, given that we have only a handful of meetings left and given that, if we make any inquiries now, we will simply not get any responses back in time to take anything further forward, we close the petition at this point.

Fergus Ewing: I agree with what you and Mr Golden have said, convener, but I note in passing that it is our understanding that the Scottish Government does not intend to amend the 1981 act to remove the power to grant licences, so it is not doing anything—it is just allowing things to go ahead. NatureScot has indicated that it is bound by the 1981 act, although I have to say that I do not quite understand that, because I think that it gives it some discretion.

I am struck by NatureScot's determination to allow the guga hunt to proceed while preventing the control of seagulls in my constituency, which is causing huge problems as well as lacerations and injuries to people. However, that is really for NatureScot to explain. Given the number of signatures that the petition has received, I think that the issue needs to be explored further, but that is probably for the next Parliament.

Finally, I would note the written submission that we have received from an islander. I am sure that any committee will want to ensure that the voice of the islanders is heard. They are making the case that this is part of their tradition and heritage. They want to be heard, and they are entitled to be heard, but I think that some of them feel a little bit browbeaten by the tone of some of the criticisms that have been made of them. I hope that the debate can be conducted in a civilised and rational way, even if people have very strong emotions about the matter.

The Convener: I suppose that the one other option that is open to us would be to consider whether this is a petition that we should leave open for the next parliamentary session.

Fergus Ewing: I suppose that the number of signatories would, in itself, justify taking that somewhat unusual step.

The Convener: I suggest to the clerks that we add this to the list of petitions that we will give further consideration to. We will leave just a handful of petitions open for the new Parliament to consider, and we will have a further meeting in which we will have to decide which petitions, from a shortlist, we would recommend that action for. I am minded to add the petition to that list.

Davy Russell: Keeping the petition open for the next parliamentary session will allow us to hear evidence from both sides.

The Convener: Yes, it will allow that. Are colleagues agreed that we will defer a final decision on the petition, on the basis that we will add it to the list of petitions that we will consider leaving open for the next parliamentary session?

Fergus Ewing: We would need to also stress to the signatories of the petition that its not being closed does not mean—

The Convener: Yes, any final recommendation would do that.

Fergus Ewing: —it is defeat; it is simply a deferral of probable consideration.

The Convener: We will be considering which petitions are likely to be kept open in the committee's next couple of meetings, so I am content on this occasion to hold the petition open while we consider whether that would be the appropriate action. If it has to close, it will be for the reasons that we have suggested.

Fergus Ewing: The members of the next Parliament, including those of us who are not ourselves culled, can give it consideration.

The Convener: Well, we could have a petition on banning that culling as well.

Are colleagues agreed that we will keep the petition open and add it to the small list of petitions that we will consider referring to the next committee, so that it has a working agenda when it first meets?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Petitioner written submission, 19 February 2026

PE2202/E: Stop the Guga Hunt

1. Engagement with NatureScot since last consideration

Since the Committee's previous consideration, I have been in direct correspondence with Nick Halfhide, Chief Executive of NatureScot. His response clarified NatureScot's legal position and restated the basis on which licences are issued. However, several substantive conservation and welfare concerns remain unanswered, particularly regarding monitoring, verification, and cumulative risk.

2. Absence of on-site monitoring and verification

The most significant unresolved issue is that **the hunt itself on Sula Sgeir is unmonitored**. Licences are granted on trust, with no NatureScot staff, independent observer or third-party present on the island to verify compliance with licence conditions.

Compliance is inferred, not demonstrated. This is a critical weakness in any regulatory system, particularly where lethal activity is authorised within a protected site.

3. Intensity of killing in 2025 and operator fatigue

In 2025, the hunt took place over one day, rather than over a longer period as in some previous years. During that single day, **500 birds were killed by approximately 10 men**, equating to an average of **50 birds per person**.

It is not credible to assume that the 50th bird can be killed with the same speed and effectiveness as the first, particularly as physical fatigue accumulates. This raises legitimate concerns about **consistency of welfare outcomes**, which cannot be assessed without independent observation or post-kill verification.

4. Reliance on self-reporting of disease and mortality

Licence conditions require licence holders to report any sick or dead birds of any species observed during the harvest, where entanglement is not the cause of death. However, this relies entirely on **self-reporting** by those conducting the hunt.

There is an inherent conflict of interest: reporting sick or dead birds could have implications for future licence applications. Without independent verification, there is no way to assess whether observations are complete or selective. Given the ongoing presence of avian influenza in seabird populations, this is a significant biosecurity and conservation concern.

5. Disturbance, stress and sentience

NatureScot's own licence documentation acknowledges that the proposed activities are expected to cause disturbance and disrupt breeding activities of non-target birds,

with impacts of stress and disturbance. Licence conditions attempt to minimise this through restrictions on lighting, movement, storage of equipment, and avoidance of other species' nesting sites.

These conditions implicitly recognise that seabirds are sentient animals whose behaviour and breeding success are affected by human presence. This acknowledgement sits uneasily alongside the authorisation of lethal force within the same colony. The conditions themselves demonstrate awareness of disturbance-related stress, yet there is no mechanism to assess how prolonged human presence (up to ten people on the island) affects adult behaviour, chick provisioning rates, or breeding success.

6. Post-HPAI recovery and emerging science

NatureScot has stated that its 2026 Population Viability Analysis will include scenarios for one-off mortality events and cumulative anthropogenic pressures. While this is welcome, the absence of such considerations in current decision-making remains problematic.

NatureScot has also stated that there is no data indicating that populations may decline in subsequent breeding seasons as a result of the 2022 HPAI outbreak. However, peer-reviewed research published in 2025 (<https://www.scotsman.com/news/environment/bird-flu-concerning-finding-among-scotland-seabirds-that-have-survived-avian-flu-after-bass-rock-studies-5332712>), led by Dr Sue Lewis of Edinburgh Napier University, demonstrates that breeding success at Bass Rock in Scotland remains significantly below historical averages, with elevated nest failure rates linked to disrupted pair bonds and colony structure following HPAI.

Bass Rock was the world's largest gannet colony prior to HPAI and provides the most robust post-HPAI dataset available. There is no scientific basis to assume that Sula Sgeir will not experience similar delayed demographic effects, particularly given that full recruitment of birds affected as chicks in 2022 will not occur for five to six years.

7. Conservation risk in the context of changing pressures

Sula Sgeir is now the only Gannet Special Protection Area in Scotland below its citation level. The colony faces cumulative pressures from disease, climate change, prey availability and offshore development. Authorising additional mortality at this stage increases risk during a period of unresolved demographic instability.

8. Closing consideration

Finally, I ask the Committee to consider this issue not only in technical terms, but in ethical and conservation terms. The guga hunt was historically associated with food security and survival. That context no longer applies. The cultural and communal aspects of the tradition can be acknowledged and preserved without continuing to kill the young of a species facing unprecedented pressure.

Nearly 100,000 people have signed this petition, reflecting a widespread desire to see Scotland lead in science-based conservation and biodiversity protection. I respectfully ask the Committee to consider whether continued licensing of the guga hunt is compatible with that responsibility.

Annex Summary – Petition PE2202

Scientific and Conservation Concerns Regarding the Licensing of the Guga Hunt

1. Conservation Status

- Northern Gannets in Scotland have declined by approximately 22% nationally following Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).
- Sula Sgeir is now the only Gannet Special Protection Area in Scotland below its official citation level, despite a three-year pause in hunting.
- Full demographic impacts of HPAI will not be known until affected cohorts either return to breed (or fail to do so), 5–6 years post-outbreak.

2. Population Modelling Limitations

- NatureScot’s Population Viability Analysis shows that the current quota of 500 chicks is not a recovery level, but the maximum level that avoids immediate decline.
- Even under this quota, the population is predicted to remain suppressed and not return to pre-2013 levels.
- Current modelling does not account for future disease outbreaks, climate-driven prey changes, offshore wind impacts, or cumulative pressures.

3. Lack of On-Site Monitoring

- There is no independent monitoring of the hunt on Sula Sgeir.
- Compliance with licence conditions is based entirely on trust and self-reporting.
- No NatureScot staff or third-party observers are present to verify:
 - Killing methods
 - Compliance with welfare conditions
 - Reporting of sick or dead birds

4. Intensity of Killing in 2025

- In 2025, 500 birds were killed in a single day by approximately 10 people.
- Manual killing methods depend on operator skill and physical condition.
- There is no evidence that killing effectiveness remains consistent as fatigue increases.
- No post-kill verification or photographic evidence is required.

5. Welfare and Disturbance Concerns

- Licence conditions acknowledge that activities will cause disturbance and stress to breeding seabirds.
- Conditions aim to minimise disturbance through lighting and movement restrictions.
- This recognition of disturbance conflicts with the authorisation of lethal force within the same colony.
- Effects of prolonged human presence on:
 - Adult behaviour
 - Chick provisioning
 - Breeding success

are not monitored or assessed.

6. Emerging Scientific Evidence

- Peer-reviewed research published in 2025 (Edinburgh Napier University) shows significantly reduced breeding success at Bass Rock following HPAI.
- Elevated nest failure linked to disrupted pair bonds and colony structure.
- There is no scientific basis to assume Sula Sgeir will not experience similar delayed effects.

7. Key Policy Question

Given:

- A declining and suppressed SPA population
- Absence of independent monitoring
- Known modelling limitations
- Emerging post-HPAI evidence

Is continued licensed killing compatible with:

- The precautionary principle?
- Scotland's biodiversity commitments?
- Public confidence in conservation governance?

Protect the Wild written submission, 23 February 2026

PE2202/F: Stop the Guga Hunt

This submission is made in support of petition PE2202, Stop the Guga Hunt, remaining open into the next parliamentary session. It provides additional evidence and points of consideration to demonstrate why continued parliamentary scrutiny of this issue is both necessary and justified.

Conservation

We believe the conservation argument and the vulnerable status of the gannet colony has been sufficiently addressed by the petitioner, so we will not go into any depth here. But we do wish to highlight that the North Rona and Sula Sgeir Special

Protection Area (SPA) is home to an array of other protected seabird species whose conservation status is already severely compromised.

As of the most recent assessments provided by NatureScot, fulmar, Leach's petrel, razorbill, great black-backed gull, guillemot, kittiwake and puffin populations are all classed as being in unfavourable condition in the SPA - the latter four of which are not merely below target but in active decline.

NatureScot's own advice states the proposed Guga hunt activities are expected to cause disturbance to a number of these species in the breeding season - their most sensitive and biologically critical period. Disturbance at this stage is highly stressful and can lead to nest abandonment and chick mortality, pushing already unfavourable populations further from recovery. We wish to emphasise that these disturbances are predicted even where mitigation measures are applied.

The SPA's conservation objectives require qualifying species to be maintained in, or restored to, favourable condition and for significant disturbance to be avoided. Where populations are already assessed as unfavourable, and where disturbance is predicted and unavoidable, continued licensing is fundamentally at odds with those objectives.

We therefore contend that the Guga hunt poses an unacceptable and unavoidable risk to a number of protected species at a time when recovery should be the overriding priority.

Welfare

Likewise, we believe the issue of the birds' welfare has been sufficiently addressed by previous submissions, but we do wish to highlight that this refers not only to their welfare at the moment of killing, but also to the stress, handling and prolonged disturbance experienced beforehand - as well as the likely distress caused to other birds in the densely packed colony.

The process takes place in remote and difficult terrain, without oversight, nor any verifiable record of training, accreditation or competency assessment for those tasked with carrying out such a consequential task. This creates a structural gap between the licence condition requiring "humane killing" and the evidence available to confirm compliance.

Public opinion

A recent survey by FindOutNow showed that, among Scots with a view, 69% support removing the legal exemption allowing the Guga hunt on Sula Sgeir.

72% do not feel the Guga hunt is of cultural importance.

To reiterate, polling shows:

- Most Scots want the Wildlife and Countryside Act to be amended, removing the exemption that allows the Guga hunt.
- Most Scots do not see the Guga hunt as culturally important.

- Support for keeping it is a minority position.

In addition, this petition is by far the most signed petition of this session of parliament, and currently the fourth most signed in Scottish history overall. The exceptional public response to this issue makes the continuation of this petition both justified and necessary. Shutting it down at this stage without further scrutiny would undermine the integrity of a process designed to ensure public will is heard and acted upon.

Scotland's international reputation

The Guga hunt is now under sustained media scrutiny. This carries reputational implications for Scotland as a whole.

Scotland promotes itself globally as a leader in conservation, biodiversity restoration and sustainable wildlife tourism. The Hebrides in particular benefit from a thriving nature-based tourism sector built on its incredible wildlife and wild landscapes. The continuation of the Guga hunt risks undermining that reputation. It creates a contradiction between Scotland's conservation messaging and the reality of permitting the killing of protected native seabirds within an internationally important breeding site and Special Protection Area.

Many businesses operating in the wildlife and tourism sector do not support the hunt and are concerned about the long-term reputational and conservation impacts. Scotland's natural heritage is a national asset. It should not be compromised for the sake of maintaining a narrow exemption that benefits a very small number of individuals.

We have also been in contact with residents of the Isle of Lewis who want the Guga hunt to end. They are deeply concerned that the hunt is shaping perceptions of their island in ways that do not reflect the values of many who live there. Some have told us they do not feel comfortable speaking publicly about their opposition, fearing social repercussions within a small community, but nevertheless, their views must be considered.

This issue now extends beyond the hunt itself. It concerns how Scotland wishes to present itself to the world, and whether our laws reflect the values we claim to uphold.

Conclusion

NatureScot has acknowledged both the inherent risks associated with the Guga hunt and the scale of public opposition to it. Yet they maintain that the law obliges them to issue the licences. In light of all the evidence put before the Committee, the legal exemption allowing the Guga hunt is now clearly outdated.

Amending the Wildlife and Countryside Act would not only bring the law into alignment with modern conservation obligations, but free up an already overstretched nature agency to focus its limited resources on the urgent task of nature recovery.

Taken together, the conservation risk, welfare concerns, regulatory failures, reputational implications and clear public mandate for change present a compelling case for continued parliamentary scrutiny. We therefore respectfully urge the Committee to keep this petition open into the next parliamentary session, so that this issue can receive the full and considered examination it warrants.

Appendix

Latest assessed condition of North Rona and Sula Sgeir SPA qualifying features:
<https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8558>

Bonnie McKay written submission, 16 February 2026

PE2202/G: Stop the Guga Hunt

I am a resident of the Isle of Lewis. I am writing to support this petition because I feel it is important to make clear that there are members of the community who hold deep concerns about the guga hunt, but whose views are rarely reflected in public discussions.

I recognise that the guga hunt has deep historical roots on the island and was once an important source of sustenance during times of hardship. However, we no longer live in those conditions, and I believe it is reasonable - and necessary - to reassess traditions in light of modern conservation responsibilities and evolving public values.

Many people on Lewis do not feel safe or comfortable speaking out publicly against the hunt, for fear of social backlash or community division. But I want to assure you there are many residents here who do not support the continued killing of gannet chicks on Sula Sgeir, particularly given concerns about the humaneness of the hunt, the spread of avian influenza, biodiversity loss and the protected status of the site. Beyond the welfare concerns, I also worry about the way this issue places Lewis under negative national and international scrutiny, shaping perceptions of our island in ways that do not reflect the values of many who live here.

For these reasons, I support the petition and it remaining open so that the issue can be fully considered by the next Parliament. The level of public interest - now exceeding 90,000 signatures - demonstrates that this is not a fringe concern. It deserves proper scrutiny.

I respectfully ask the Committee to allow the petition to carry forward so that the question of reforming the current legal exemption can be debated transparently and thoughtfully.