

P-05-816 Pheasant shooting on NRW land

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 5 Mefefin 2018

Petitions Committee | 5 June 2018

Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-816

Petition title: [Say 'NO' to pheasant shooting on Welsh public land](#)

Text of petition: We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to ensure that Natural Resources Wales, as the Welsh Government-Sponsored Body responsible, stops leasing out public land to commercial shooting operations. NRW's key constitutional function is to act as an environmental steward of the land that it manages on behalf of the Welsh Government and citizens. But leasing this land to shooting operations negatively impacts on conservation, biodiversity and animal welfare. Shooting also pollutes the land with toxic lead shot which is responsible for poisoning and killing many animals. NRW's shooting leases facilitate an activity that is abhorrent to many Welsh citizens: the killing of animals for 'sport'. The leases also mean that public access to land that is owned by Welsh citizens can be restricted.

Background

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) manages the 128,000 hectare Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) on behalf of the Welsh Ministers, as well as 54 National Nature Reserves (NNRs), and land associated with flood risk management assets. In January 2018, NRW launched a [consultation on proposals about the use of firearms on the land it manages](#). The consultation is part of a wider review process looking at firearms and shooting activity related to its land manager role and remit. The process to date is set out below:

- Stage 1: [Call for evidence](#) (closed 30 April 2017);
- Stage 2: [Synthesis of evidence](#) (September 2017). The synthesis summarises the key points of the evidence received;
- Stage 3: [Independent assurance of the Synthesis of Evidence](#) (November 2017);
- **Stage 4: [Consultation on proposals](#) (launched January 2018);**
- Analysis of consultation responses (was expected April 2018); and
- Stage 6: Publication of a position statement (expected Spring 2018).

The consultation is concerned with the use of firearms for three broad purposes on NRW managed land:

- NRW's use of firearms for managing wild species which impact on its objectives;
- Other people's use of firearms for managing wild species that impact on neighbouring land management objectives; and
- NRW's leasing of land for game shooting and other pursuits.

This petition is only concerned with point three, the leasing of land for game shooting and other pursuits.

NRW Consultation

NRW's current approach

The consultation says:

We want communities and social enterprises to get the greatest possible benefit from the land we manage. We consider applications for a variety of events, activities, projects and enterprise initiatives to make it possible for the people of Wales to make the most of the land that we manage. **This currently involves the shooting of gamebirds on a very limited basis** [Research Service emphasis].

[...] We also have a small number of requests for other pursuits involving firearms such as target shooting, practice ranges and clay pigeon shooting. These are assessed on a case by case basis.

It outlines that NRW currently leases four areas of forest land on the WGWE, covering 440 hectares, to third parties for the purpose of pheasant shooting. The leases are usually for three to five years, but are currently running on an annual renewal basis pending the outcome of the review. NRW says that in 2016 it earned around £6000 of income from the leases.

NRW states that it requires all shooting activity to be managed to best practice standards with an agreed management plan, including public safety measures. This includes compliance with the [UK Woodland Assurance Standard \(2013\)](#). NRW says that none of the leases inhibit public access or its own interests in managing the land, for example timber production. NRW allows lease-holders to keep pheasants in pens at agreed locations prior to release. Management of birds in pens must follow the [Welsh Government Code of Practice for the Rearing of Gamebirds for Sporting Purposes \(2010\)](#). NRW approximates that, in 2016, 6500 pheasants were released.

The consultation says there are areas of land that NRW manages where there is an expectation or condition associated with the original grant of the lease that the shooting rights would continue to be let. Eight of these sites are currently let, covering 4881 hectares. NRW reports that the rights are exercised on all eight sites, but shooting is not permitted on approximately 1120 hectares of this area due to nature conservation interests.

In the consultation NRW says that shooting activities are of economic benefit to Wales. However, it also says it is expensive and complex to assess the contribution of shooting activities to the cohesiveness and well-being of the communities likely to benefit or be affected by such activity.

Potential alternative approaches

The consultation presents two issues associated with NRW's current approach, and identifies potential alternatives. These are outlined below:

Revised criteria for assessing applications: This approach would involve developing criteria for assessing the suitability of proposals and lease renewals to ensure they complement the [Sustainable Management of Natural Resources \(SMNR\)](#) and that decisions support the achievement of the well-being goals under the [Well-being of Future Generations Act \(2015\) \(WBFG\)](#). In practice, this means NRW could re-appraise the areas of the WGWE that are leased, and that conditions could be included in the lease agreements to ensure that stock going into pens on NRW land is from suppliers that adhere to the NRW code of practice. NRW says that there are impacts on biodiversity from the release of pheasants, with benefits for some groups of species and disadvantages for others. The consultation says that the evidence does not suggest a clear conclusion on the impacts, but that it is clear that active woodland management and adherence to the recommendations of less than 700 birds per hectare of pen are necessary to ensure there is no overall negative impact on biodiversity.

Stopping the use of NRW land for commercial shooting activities by terminating leases where possible: In the consultation NRW suggests, based on the evidence it has received, that terminating or ceasing leases may:

- Result in a loss of income for communities, individuals and businesses, reducing the overall economic and social benefit to Wales;
- Reduce options for recreation for some people, which may affect their health and well-being;
- Result in shoots taking place on more sensitive sites elsewhere; and may
- Increase anti-social behaviours in woodlands where leases have been withdrawn.

Conclusions

The consultation says that the activities related to game shooting, mainly pheasant shoots and wildfowling, have the potential to impact upon the SMNR. Impacts of increased bird numbers in woodlands can affect native species and habitats through competition, predation and enrichment. It suggests that the management associated with pheasant releasing can have positive impacts for biodiversity, and that the application of SMNR principles can

balance impacts. It says that the overall balance of benefits versus negative impacts is not conclusive.

Draft proposal

The consultation sets out a draft proposal:

NRW should continue to consider leasing the land for pheasant shooting, wildfowling and other pursuits involving firearms [Research Service emphasis]. In considering applications, the impacts of the activity on SMNR and the Well-Being Goals should be assessed. The location and scale of activity should take account of the potential for negative impacts on the woodland ecosystem and local species of flora and fauna but also the beneficial social aspects of local community cohesion and potential economic benefits. Management plans should be developed and implemented and leaseholders required to demonstrate adherence to the relevant codes of practice. NRW will continue to assess compliance of permitted activities with the UK Woodland Assurance Standard.

NRW has assessed the draft proposal in terms of the contribution it would make to SMNR and the WBFG well-being goals. This assessment is summarised below:

- Third party shooting is linked to several of the well-being goals. It contributes to a Prosperous and Resilient Wales by providing direct employment for service providers and supporting associated businesses;
- The proposal will contribute to a Globally Responsible Wales as it will ensure that the populations of migratory birds are considered when engaging in shooting activities involving wild-birds;
- Various stakeholders have reported the importance of shooting to rural communities and shooting's role in the culture of Wales;
- There are potential positive health benefits for those taking part in the activities and the consumption of game, a low-fat meat, is also a positive;
- In relation to SMNR, the management plans of shoots should include monitoring, reporting and review requirements to enable changes in management action to help ensure populations are sustainable; and
- The scale of areas leased should also be carefully assessed and would be appropriate to the activity, location, habitat type and sensitivity.

Welsh Government action

The Welsh Government wrote to the Committee on 25 April, setting out its response to the petition. The letter states that the NRW review, call for evidence and consultation came about as a consequence of concerns raised with the Welsh Government and NRW over the ethical and welfare issues of pheasant shooting on public land.

The letter refers to the Welsh Government [Code of Practice for the Welfare of Gamebirds reared for sporting purposes](#), and says that any concerns about the health and welfare of animals should be reported to the [Animal and Plant Health Agency](#) (APHA) or Local Authority.

The Cabinet Secretary says that, following the close of the NRW consultation, and the analysis of responses either she or the Minister for the Environment will discuss the matter with the NRW Chair and Chief Executive.

National Assembly for Wales action

The National Assembly has not undertaken any work on pheasant shooting on land managed by NRW, and the consultation has not been discussed in Plenary, or written questions.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing 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.