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Meg Hillier MP
House of Commons
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Your ref: MH58319
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Dear Meg,

Thank you for your email of 18 August on behalf of your constituents about the illegal killing of hen harriers and other birds of prey, and management practices associated with driven grouse shooting. I apologise for the delay in responding. Defra is currently dealing with high volumes of correspondence due to COVID-19. Thank you for your understanding during this challenging time.

Wildlife crime is a priority for the Government; consequently Defra and the Home Office have committed £300,000 a year to fund the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) until 2020/21. The NWCU helps prevent and detect wildlife crime by obtaining and disseminating intelligence and undertaking analysis which highlights local or national threats, and directly assisting law enforcers in their investigations. Decisions on the future funding of the NWCU will be taken as part of the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

All wild birds are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. There are strong penalties in place for offences committed against birds of prey and other wildlife, with significant sanctions available to judges to hand down to those convicted of wildlife crimes. Most wildlife crimes carry up to an unlimited fine and/or a six-month custodial sentence and there are no plans to review or amend these penalties. It is important to remember that the enforcement of all offences, including wildlife offences, is an operational matter for the police. The police monitor and gather intelligence on online activity relating to crimes against birds and other wildlife to inform their investigations.

To address concerns about illegal killing of birds of prey, senior Government and enforcement officers have identified raptor persecution as a national wildlife crime priority. Priority areas are those which are assessed as posing the greatest current threat to either the conservation status of a species or which show the highest volume of crime and therefore they are assessed as requiring an immediate UK-wide tactical response. Each priority area has an implementation plan with plan owners and leads identified for the prevention of crimes and enforcement.

Defra sits on the police-led Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group, which takes forward activities to raise awareness and facilitate intelligence and incident reporting, leading to increased prevention and enforcement activity. The group focuses on the golden eagle, goshawk, hen harrier, peregrine, red kite and white-tailed eagle. The Government also supports Operation OWL, which is led by police forces across England and Wales and aims to raise awareness of raptor persecution amongst the wider public and police officers.

We are committed to securing the long-term future of the hen harrier as a breeding bird in England and this year Natural England has recorded the best year for hen harrier breeding in England since its hen harrier recovery project was established in 2002. The Hen Harrier Action Plan sets out what will be done to increase hen harrier populations in England, including measures to address illegal persecution. The long-term plan was published in January 2016 and we believe that it remains the best way to safeguard the hen harrier in England. A copy of the plan is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/increasing-hen-harrier-populations-in-england-action-plan>

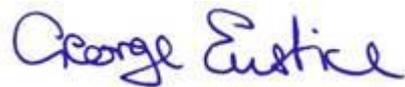
The Government recognises the conservation and economic benefits that shooting sports bring to rural communities. There is evidence that sustainable control of predators on shooting estates can play a role in the recovery of rare or declining species; in particular ground-nesting birds. A 2010 study by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust showed that predator control resulted in significant increases in the breeding success of ground-nesting birds such as curlew, golden plover and lapwing.

The Government's approach is that individuals should be free to manage wildlife within the law, and the Government should intervene only when there is good reason to do so. Mountain hares, foxes, stoats and weasels are not protected for conservation purposes in England and therefore landowners are free to manage these species providing they do so in compliance with legislation to protect animal welfare.

The Government has always been clear of the need to phase out rotational burning of protected blanket bog to conserve these vulnerable habitats. Real progress is being made in promoting sustainable alternatives and we are looking at how legislation could achieve this and considering next steps. Similarly, good management of peat moorland can provide for better sphagnum moss cover and retention rates of water to help with flood mitigation. We have urged landowners to adopt these sustainable options and continue to work with them constructively. We will be publishing the England Peat Strategy later this year which will detail further how we intend to protect, restore and reduce damage to our peatlands.

As mentioned, the Government recognises the conservation and economic benefits that shooting sports bring to rural communities. This was also recognised by the Werritty Report, submitted to the Scottish Government from the independent Grouse Moor Management Group. The report examined the environmental impact of grouse moor management practices and advises on the option of licensing grouse shooting businesses. The report, which made a number of recommendations still being considered by the Scottish Government, can be found at: <http://www.gov.scot/ISBN/9781839604348>. We are watching closely to see how the Scottish Government responds and we do not rule out the possibility of a wider review into grouse moor management in the future. Once Scotland has announced its plans for implementation, we can consider the benefits, or otherwise, of regulatory alignments between the two jurisdictions. Whilst the Government has no current plans to carry out a review of the management of grouse moors, we recognise that it is vital that wildlife and habitats are respected and protected, and that the law is observed. We will continue to work to ensure a sustainable, mutually beneficial relationship between shooting and conservation.

The Government is putting a green recovery at the heart of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as investing in green measures can offer wide societal and wellbeing benefits. We have announced significant funding for tree planting, peatland and wider ecosystem restoration, which will support the mitigation of climate change and the recovery and connectivity of wildlife-rich habitats, including the Nature for Climate and Nature Recovery Funds announced in the spring 2020 Budget. In response to the challenges facing the environmental sector as a result of COVID-19, the Green Recovery Challenge Fund will bring forward £40 million of these funds to kick-start a programme of nature-based projects to address the twin challenges of halting biodiversity loss and tackling climate change, while creating and retaining jobs in the conservation sector, as part of a green recovery.



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