



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR THE
ENVIRONMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

18 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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ENVIRONMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Dolores Kelly (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Jonathan Bell
Mr John Dallat
Mr David Ford
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Mr Colum Delaney |) | |
| Ms Claire Ferry |) | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds |
| Ms Anne-Marie McDevitt |) | |
| Professor Ian Montgomery |) | Queen's University of Belfast |
| Mr D J Histon |) | |
| Mr Lyall Plant |) | Countryside Alliance Ireland |

The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):

I welcome you all to this morning's Committee meeting. As you know, we have four briefings today. You have provided a summary of the key issues and a fairly extensive overall briefing. I ask you to highlight the main points in five or 10 minutes, and the Committee members will then ask questions and make comments.

Mr Colum Delaney (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds):

Thank you for giving the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) the opportunity to address the Committee on what we consider to be a key piece of legislation. We have been calling for a review of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 for a number of years. I shall pass you to our two experts: Anne-Marie McDevitt is our conservation manager, and Claire Ferry is our senior conservation officer.

The Chairperson:

Members have been provided with a separate folder on the Bill.

Ms Anne-Marie McDevitt (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds):

The RSPB has been involved with the Bill for a long time, probably around 10 years. We have been strongly involved in the pre-consultation and consultation stages. We welcome the Bill, which we see as an opportunity to bring the legislation in Northern Ireland up to date and in line with other parts of the UK. It will also help Northern Ireland to meet its requirements under the birds and habitats directives. We have met quite a few bodies to discuss the Bill. We met the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and the Minister of the Environment and his officials.

We strongly welcome the Bill. We welcome the inclusion of a biodiversity duty for public bodies and the introduction of custodial sentences and increased fines for wildlife crime. However, it will come as no surprise to hear that we want some amendments and some additional clauses.

I will go through the main aspects of the Bill that relate to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Afterwards, Claire Ferry will go through those that relate to the Environment

(Northern Ireland) Order 2002. We will be happy to take any questions that you have.

The Chairperson:

Thank you.

Ms A McDevitt:

The first thing that I want to talk about is the removal of the curlew from schedule 2 to schedule 1 of the 1985 Order. We strongly recommend that. The species is threatened globally. It is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list of threatened species. In Northern Ireland, its numbers have declined by two thirds. Between 1987 and 1999, the curlew declined by 60%. In 1999, it was estimated that around only 2,000 pairs were left. We do not have any more recent figures, but we know that the decline continues because we have carried out surveys on key sites, which are the best sites for curlew. If the decline has continued at the rate seen between 1987 and 1999, there may be only a few hundred pairs left in Northern Ireland.

The reasons for the decline in the curlew population are well documented. Agricultural

intensification is the main reason. Now that the curlew population is at such a low level, we are really concerned about anything else that affects it in Northern Ireland. There is evidence that some of the breeding population over-winters in Northern Ireland, and is, therefore, susceptible to being shot. Given the curlew's perilous conservation status, we strongly recommend that it be moved from schedule 2 to schedule 1

Maintenance of the curlew on schedule 2 is at odds with a lot of positive work that is being done for the species. Under agri-environment schemes, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is paying for around 5,500 hectares of land to be managed for breeding curlew. At around £100 per hectare, that amounts to around £500,000 each year that is spent on curlew conservation.

It should be noted that RSPB has worked strongly with BASC and the Department of the Environment (DOE) for the past two years to try to set up a voluntary moratorium on curlew shooting. That has not been possible because we have not received agreement from all of the shooting clubs in Northern Ireland. The time is now right for the curlew to be given the

protection that it deserves.

As regards additions to the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, we want to see the inclusion of a statutory duty to report on licences in line with article 9 of the birds directive. We would like to see a review of licensing procedures, particularly with regard to general licences. For example, with respect to general licences, we would like to see a requirement whereby an individual who operates under a licence is required to show that circumstances require such action, that lethal control is effective and that no other solution is available.

We also want the appropriateness of certain species that are currently on the general licence to be considered. Some are UK priority species and are of conservation concern in Northern Ireland. It seems inappropriate that they are still on the general licence. They include species such as the house sparrow and the starling.

Finally, with regard to the 1985 Order, we would like to see a review of the legislation on non-native species. We understand that there may be forthcoming EU directives on non-native

species. However, they are unlikely to be brought forward in the short to medium term. Given the importance of controlling non-native species, we would like to ensure that the legislation is reviewed now. The RSPB has been involved strongly in the review of legislation on non-native species in England and Wales and, most recently, in Scotland. We would be happy to assist in the drawing up of robust legislation for non-native species within the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill.

Ms Claire Ferry (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds):

As you know, the Bill makes a few changes to the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002. We are quite happy with clauses 27 to 30, which make those changes to the Order, but we have some minor recommendations. We also recommend some additional changes to the 2002 Order to close a number of loopholes and to bring Northern Ireland's legislation into line with that of the rest of the UK. Scotland, England and Wales have separate legislation. They have already made changes in the past few years that have brought their legislation further up to date than that of Northern Ireland.

I will not go into all of those changes. They are quite technical. I have included them in our full response, but if you have any questions, I will take them. I would like to draw your attention to a couple of particular issues. One is temporary stop notices and reinstatement notices, which was brought up during consultation but not followed up in the Bill. Reinstatement notices would allow the Department an intermediate route to reinstate the quality of an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) after any damage has occurred. Currently, the Department can use a voluntary mechanism with the landowner, which is excellent. We encourage that. However, if that does not work, the only alternative at present is, effectively, to take a criminal prosecution. That is expensive and time-consuming, whereas a reinstatement notice would provide a halfway house. It has certainly been proposed in similar changes to Scotland's draft wildlife and natural environment Bill, which is under consultation at present.

The temporary stop notice would be something very similar to the temporary stop notice that is used in planning, so that if the Department became aware that damage was being done it could put a stop to it straight away and then deal with the consequences. If there was a consent procedure that was required, that could be gone through before the damage has actually taken place. Obviously it is harder to put something right than to prevent it in the first place.

The second issue concerns the protection afforded to our most important wildlife sites; the internationally designated sites under the birds and habitats directives, special protection areas (SPAs) and special areas of conservation (SACs). Those are protected to a certain extent under the conservation regulations, but there are two particular examples in Northern Ireland where those SPAs are not underpinned by ASSI designation: the glens of Antrim and the Slieve Beagh SPAs for hen harriers do not have that ASSI underpinning. That means that the Department has no way of controlling certain aspects of work that could be undertaken on those sites that could damage the reasons for their being designated.

One easy way to solve that is to allow the provisions of protection that are given to ASSIs under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to apply to SPAs and SACs under the conservation regulations. It would be possible to do that by making an amendment to the 2002 Order. That has happened, in fact, in a case at Glenwhirry, where we are looking to do some work with the Department of Agriculture at Greenmount Hill Farm and Antrim estates. Consideration is being given to management of upland heathland as part of the SPA.

The only reason that that went through the correct processes to check that it would not cause damage is because there was a government Department involved, and because the RSPB was pushing for it. If there had been no public body involved, someone could have gone ahead and changed the land management, with a detrimental effect on the species for which the SPA is designated. That does not seem to make any sense: international sites effectively have less protection than national sites.

We believe that that is contradictory to the birds and habitats directives; article 6(2) of the habitats directive and article 4(4) of the birds directive put the onus on member states to take positive action to prevent pollution and deterioration of sites. We think that Northern Ireland is leaving itself open in not being compliant with those directives. Those are the two main issues that I want to raise; everything else is contained in our briefing. I am happy to take any questions.

Mr Weir:

Some of us are struggling a little bit on this, because clearly there is a broad consensus on the general thrust of the legislation. The issues — I am not denying that they are important — seem to be in relation to the detail of ensuring that those things are got right. I have a couple of questions. Presumably, reinstatement — which, as you indicate, is a sort of halfway house — would involve an order compelling the landowner to make good any damage that was done and bring the land back to its previous state; is that correct?

Ms Ferry:

Yes, but without the requirement of a criminal finding of evidence. I imagine something along the lines of farmers having their single farm payment withdrawn if they are not in compliance. However, that is not a criminal activity.

Mr Weir:

I understand that. Presumably, if there was any dispute over it, it would be proven on the balance of probabilities. I appreciate the reasons that have been given for moving the curlew from

schedule 2 to schedule 1. What additional protections of advantage to the curlew will be provided by schedule 1 compared with the provision that is contained in schedule 2 at present?

Ms A McDevitt:

Clearly, it would not be able to be shot. *[Laughter.]* That is the main thing that we are talking about. It is a species that has priority conservation status in Northern Ireland, and is threatened globally, but it is still on the shooting list as a quarry species.

Mr Weir:

If I understand correctly, there was broad support from the representative organisations for a voluntary moratorium, but the problem was that they were not able not able to get all of the clubs on board. A minority of clubs were recalcitrant. I appreciate that a voluntary moratorium must be uniform.

Ms A McDevitt:

It is not that we did not work on that for a long time. That has failed, so we must move towards

statutory protection.

Mr Weir:

The overall detail behind it —

The Chairperson:

A number of other members wish to speak.

Mr Weir:

I understand that, but I wish to clarify the process. The legislation contains an awful lot of detail, and you have suggested changes to it. Whoever is drafting the Bill on behalf of the Department may make an initial first cut that contains deficiencies. The RSPB is the lead organisation from the point of view of conservation and protection of wildlife, so have you had ongoing discussions with the Department on the elements of detail? Most of what you said is common sense, and, after discussion, the Department could accommodate that through amendments.

Ms A McDevitt:

Yes, as I said earlier, we are working closely with the Department. We have sent through data and had meetings. The Department made it clear that it had considered the 1985 Order but did not have as much time to spend on the 2002 Order. Claire has kindly drafted information that could be of great help to the Department, and we would like to continue with it.

Mr Weir:

Are you getting a reasonably positive response? When the Bill was discussed at Second Stage, I said that a degree of open-mindedness and flexibility from the Department would help to sort out many of the problems. Have you encountered a level of flexibility from the Department to accommodate common-sense changes?

Ms Ferry:

Yes, I am due to hear back from the Department later this week or next week about specific recent changes in relation to the 2002 Order. We will see what happens, but we will keep

working with the Department, and it is aware of what we think.

Mr Ford:

I congratulate Anne-Marie on her new post. You said that changes were needed on non-native species, but, in your paper and in your comments, you have not spelt out in great detail what those changes should be. I appreciate that you have produced an incredibly long paper, but can you add anything more at this point?

Ms A McDevitt:

No, most of our general statements are included in the paper. Although the comments are general, they show that a big overhaul of the legislation is needed.

Mr Ford:

Is that ongoing in the Department?

Ms A McDevitt:

We have been speaking to the Department, which has told us that new EU directives will be introduced. The problem is with the timescale. Once non-natives are established, they are costly to remove. We want this opportunity to review the legislation to be taken. We understand that it is a big area, but, as we mentioned, we could give assistance with it, since we have gone through this process elsewhere.

Mr Ford:

If you had anything supplementary to add, it would be helpful. As usual, Peter got his neck in first on the other point that I want to raise. Claire talked about the issue of temporary stop notices and planning terms. Given the way that DOE tends to adopt new legislation proposals, can you cite a precedent from England, Wales or Scotland on the concept of stop notices? You referred to the fact that reinstatement notices were going ahead in Scotland, but is anything already in existence in England and Wales?

Ms Ferry:

The systems in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are all slightly different in the way that the Departments work with landowners and with third parties, both in how they require management and how they deal with damage. None of them are completely comparable. There is no such thing as a reinstatement notice anywhere else, exactly, but that is because England and Wales have a separate system of management agreements, management schemes and management orders. Scotland has nature conservation orders, which are above and beyond anything that we have here. That means that temporary stop notices as such would not apply in England and Wales. In Scotland, it is thought that reinstatement notices would be useful. In England, there are more mechanisms to ensure that that damage does not occur in the first place.

Nobody else has temporary stop notices, but they do have nature conservation orders, through which a Minister can specify a number of operations that might take place that are proscribed or that require consent. It is a bit like notifiable operations in ASSIs, but these can be other operations for which anyone, even landowners, would have to seek consent. In Scotland, for example, it is used to stop people from Liverpool cockling on Scottish mudflats. Normally, a notifiable operation would apply only to a landowner, but this order applies to that operation, no

matter who does it. They have more options to stop that.

Mr Ford:

How quickly are those orders implemented in Scotland?

Ms Ferry:

Nature conservation orders are implemented proactively. One has to have foresight, know what the threat is and have the nature conservation order in place beforehand. Once you have it in place, as soon as someone starts doing that harmful action, you can take an action against them.

Mr Dallat:

Thank you for the presentation; it was very interesting. You constantly referred to the need to harmonise legislation with neighbouring jurisdictions in England, Scotland and Wales. Has there been any discussion as to how we might harmonise legislation with our neighbours south of the border? Birds and other animals do not have passports.

Mr Bell:

They manage to smuggle across.

Ms A McDevitt:

That is a good question.

Mr Ford:

John wants to bring the Republic up to our standards.

Mr Dallat:

Think of all the cockfighting and badger-baiting and everything else that conveniently happens close to the border and on either side of it.

Ms A McDevitt:

We tend to concentrate on the UK because the RSPB is a UK organisation, and therefore, we

have expertise available in other parts of the UK. In my experience, we have not had that much contact with the South of Ireland.

Ms Ferry:

With regard to the application of the EU birds and habitats directives, the reasons why we believe that Northern Ireland is not meeting its requirements stem from a case taken against Ireland, where the issue of a member state taking proactive steps to ensure that there is no pollution and no deterioration of the quality of habitats was to the forefront of a judge's decision in the European Court. I have gone through that judgement with a fine-tooth comb and I have found examples of where that would equally apply in Northern Ireland. We work with our birdlife partner in the South as well.

Mr Dallat:

I remember that, in the distant past, the tourist board in the South promoted the shooting of birds in Mayo. Not only did it wipe out all the birds, but all the tree branches as well.

Mr Bell:

There has obviously been an advance in telescopic sights.

Thank you for the presentation and the briefing; both were extremely good. Did you say that there had been a 60% decline in the curlew?

Ms A McDevitt:

There was a 60% decline between 1987 and 1999.

Mr Bell:

If that continues, and the change is not made, can you extrapolate, or even make an educated guess, as to where we may be this time next year?

Ms A McDevitt:

That is what I have tried to do. If there were 2,000 pairs in the late 1990s, and they undergo

another two-thirds decline over a 10-year period, we could be talking about only a few hundred pairs. We have evidence from surveys taken between 2002 and 2008 on key sites, which are the best sites for that species, and even in those sites there is a decline, though it is not as sharp a decline as in the wider countryside. The decline continues.

Mr Bell:

How far does it go? When we are down to 200 pairs, might the bird become extinct in Northern Ireland?

Ms A McDevitt:

That is a difficult question to answer. There has not been another breeding wader survey in Northern Ireland. There is a very insufficient level of monitoring of the curlew and other breeding waders. We have no accurate figure.

Mr Bell:

I am trying to get a timeline in my head, to understand what type of action is required to address

this.

Ms A McDevitt:

It is important that we have a more accurate figure, but we know that if the decline continues on key sites, given what we had in the late 1990s, we could be talking about something like 700 pairs now, if not a lot less.

Mr Bell:

My council constituency takes in the Copeland Islands and the birdlife there. We have had major concerns there. You said that you are looking for the introduction of strong custodial sentences and increased fines. In one sense, I am against custodial sentences because there is already overpopulation in our prison service compared with many parts of Europe. I presume that you have put that in to try to make a stronger deterrent effect. Should we, as a Committee, keep the deterrent effect as strong but go after the assets of the people to replace —

The Chairperson:

The Clerk said that the Committee has already indicated its strong support for custodial sentences.

Mr Bell:

I have just come on to the Committee. *[Laughter.]* The point has to be made. We are advocating putting people in prison at a cost of £80,000 a year. Through no fault of their own, taxpayers have to fund that out of their own pockets. I stand by the point: it is time to be creative and go after people's assets and force them to repair the damage that they have done to wildlife. That will hurt them far more. Taxpayers' money should not be used for something that they are not responsible for. We should hit people where it hurts most — their pocket — and make them repair the damage that they have done. A magistrate could choose a custodial sentence from a menu of options.

The Chairperson:

We might be able to sort that out after the devolution of policing and justice.

Mr Bell:

We are doing our best.

Ms A McDevitt:

There has been support for this. We want to put a large deterrent in place to show that Northern Ireland takes wildlife crime seriously and to put us on a par with other parts of the UK. It is sometimes not as simple as restoring wildlife. If someone shoots a couple of red kites, how do we make them restore that wildlife?

Mr Bell:

Sorry to labour the point. I was involved with youth crime in the Youth Service a long time ago before coming here —

The Chairperson:

Not personally, of course. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Bell:

I appreciate your motherly instinct. We should tell young people that if they do criminal damage to society, they will undergo a restorative programme to pay that back, some of which will involve a deduction from pocket money. However, in a bigger way, what is the cost of reintroducing red kite that have been removed? If people go after rare eggs, they should bear the cost of replacement if they are found guilty.

The Chairperson:

There is some food for thought.

Mr Beggs:

There is a degree of logic in what Jonathan says. However, ultimately, we need very severe punishments for serial offenders, and we want people to be aware of severe penalties, such as the

criminal justice system.

You talked about temporary stop notices. I am seeking clarification of the sort of thing that you want to use those notices for. Somebody who uses a bulldozer or a digger to excavate land could be in breach of planning regulations, and the planning stop notice could be used. For what type of activity do you need the special environmental temporary stop notice?

Ms Ferry:

It could be other kinds of habitat damage, like somebody burning a habitat to manage it without consent. Perhaps it is not listed as a notifiable operation and they thought that they would do it anyway. That could happen on SPAs that are not underpinned by ASSIs.

Mr Beggs:

You are asking for a temporary stop notice and for a reinstatement notice. Would a reinstatement notice give you enough power and authority so that you do not need the other notice? If you gave someone a requirement for significant replanting, a huge financial sign would be given with that.

I am sure that people would stop their activities straight away. Do we need both notices? If so, why?

Ms Ferry:

They are used in two different circumstances. The stop notice would be to stop straight away something that is happening. A reinstatement notice would be used when we have proved that damage has taken place and that restoration is required. Those are two slightly different circumstances. The articles in the habitats and birds directives state that we must take proactive action to prevent pollution and deterioration. If we wait for damage to happen and just ask for reinstatement, we are not taking the steps to prevent it in the first place, whereas a temporary stop notice would be aimed at stopping actions as soon as we become aware of them. I am not saying that that would be used frequently. However, it would be good to have among the pile of options that are available to the Department, so that the sites are looked after as well as they can be.

Mr Beggs:

I did not quite pick up what you said about the glens of Antrim. You said that, presently, there is

no ASSI there. I do not know what, if anything, is coming in the future. What specifically do you want to introduce there? What is the area's current designation, and what additional powers do you want?

Ms Ferry:

Under the birds directive, the glens of Antrim and Slieve Beagh, on the Tyrone/Fermanagh/Monaghan border, are SPAs for hen harriers, and, in the glens of Antrim, for merlin. They do not have ASSIs underneath them. The 2002 Order gives a layer of protection to ASSIs around what operations can take place on that land, and, for certain operations, landowners or others have to apply for consent. As there is no ASSI underneath the SPA status, there is no way to control things such as notifiable operations. Therefore, there is no way to control what happens on that land. Such a thing does not exist for SPAs that do not have an ASSI underneath them.

Mr Beggs:

Thank you for clearing that up.

Mr Boylan:

I suppose that one way to protect wildlife would be underground high-voltage cables such as the interconnector. *[Laughter.]* I must get that in because Hansard is recording the meeting.

Mr Bell:

What about the worms? You would fry the worms.

Mr Beggs:

Glow-worms.

Mr Boylan:

All of the good questions have been asked. I want to talk about what happens outside designated areas. Have you clearly identified sites over a period of time? Obviously, it is the responsibility of the landowner to co-operate, and public buy-in is necessary. Who is fully responsible for that?

Beyond farm activities, for example, rambling on the land, how do we ensure that that is clearly identified? There could be problems with that. I am sure that landowners are concerned.

Ms Ferry:

On designated sites, mechanisms are already in place for landowner damage and management of the site. However, the Bill introduces a secondary offence of reckless damage, which is for third parties. That is because, previously, people could only be prosecuted for damaging an ASSI if it could be shown that they knew it was one. That was the issue around the ploughing of Strangford Lough a couple of years ago. In the first instance of damage, the offender was able to say that they did not know that the area was an ASSI.

We cannot necessarily have the Department putting up signs all over the countryside, but now damage caused recklessly by somebody who has not taken due consideration of what they are doing and where they are doing it is covered. In that case, the person could be guilty of an offence. However, it would not be as great an offence as if they had walked straight past a sign that said, for example, “no quad biking”.

Mr Kinahan:

I have difficulty with how we achieve balance. From what has been said, I cannot see how your recommendations to educate everybody will work. Although I would welcome temporary stop notices, reinstatement notices and getting more control, most of it is down to ignorance. When I spoke on the issue in the Chamber, I pushed for stakeholder groups in every area so that people would be constantly talking. However, it comes down to education and to people knowing about different species and biodiversity. How will you educate people softly, softly so that we know that they have got it wrong on purpose rather than committing an offence through ignorance?

Ms Ferry:

To a large extent, the Department does that already. It always looks for a voluntary agreement and an explanation. For example, if there is an instance of peat cutting, the Department talks to those involved first, and that is excellent. The Department is doing more work, including a new DVD about ASSIs, and is going out and talking to people. You will be aware that we put on a photographic exhibition here about the value of ASSIs. We run campaigns and talk to our members, and that is very much what we are about.

Mr Kinahan:

Do you target all farms and owners so that you get to everyone, rather than a small number of people?

Ms Ferry:

The RSPB can play a role, but the Government also have a role. We have asked that there be a requirement to educate on the importance of biodiversity. The habitats directive contains a clause requiring member states to promote public education on wildlife and biodiversity, and we support that.

Mr McKay:

Clause 10, which deals with snares, has been discussed at length and will be discussed later with the Countryside Alliance. The RSPB supports the proposals, but do you think that they go far enough, or should there be an outright ban on snares?

Ms A McDevitt:

During the consultation, we supported the original proposals to make it an offence to use self-locking snares and to introduce a requirement to inspect snares. Our position has not changed.

The Chairperson:

Members have taken a comprehensive interest in the submission. You said that not all of the EU directives were being adhered to; if you have any further clarification or information for the Committee on the areas that are currently neglected, we will be interested to hear it. Thank you for your attendance.

Our next briefing is from the Countryside Alliance Ireland on the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill. I welcome Lyall Plant, the chief executive of Countryside Alliance Ireland, D J Histon, the chief executive secretary of the Irish Coursing Club, and Professor Ian Montgomery, professor of animal ecology and head of school at Queen's University Belfast. Gentlemen, you are welcome. As with other witnesses, we are grateful for your written briefing. If you take five or 10 minutes to highlight some of the key issues, it will allow members more

time to probe and ask questions.

Mr Lyall Plant (Countryside Alliance):

I thank the Committee for allowing us to address it. We will address some of the concerns that members of the Committee for the Environment raised in relation to the Irish hare, the curlew and the use of snares during the Second Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill.

Countryside Alliance Ireland is an expert and informed organisation that campaigns for the countryside, country sports and the rural way of life. We represent over 10,000 people throughout the island of Ireland, and we have a combined membership of over 90,000 people throughout the United Kingdom, the majority of whom participate in a form of responsible country sport. We work closely with like-minded organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Irish Coursing Club and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. Our organisation is a proactive member of the Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime in Northern Ireland, and we work closely with the PSNI and other regulatory bodies to ensure that wildlife crime is wiped out in Northern Ireland.

The Department's synopsis of the consultation responses on the issue of the Irish hare shows that 83.78% of the respondents who commented favoured the Department's stance. The respondents believed that the biggest threat to hare conservation comes as a result of lost habitat and agricultural practice, and that appropriate management practices are the most effective way of enhancing and supporting the Irish hare population. We are fully aware that agricultural schemes play an important role in delivering hare conservation, but we also believe that inclusion of the country sports communities is the way forward.

The consultation shows that 16.21% of respondents favoured putting the Irish hare on the protected list. A further concern was the effects of predation on the Irish hare population, and we support fully the Department's proposals to move forward on the basis of the favoured option to rely on existing protection measures, which has the full support of the majority of respondents. We also fully support the Department's efforts and proactive conservation measures. As responsible country sports organisations, Countryside Alliance and the Irish Coursing Club hope to, and will, play a vital and fully participative role in achieving the Department's aim.

The Irish hare is subject to a special protection Order, which has been renewed annually since January 2004. The reason for its introduction was to increase Irish hare numbers in line with the all-Ireland species action plan. Both we and the Irish Coursing Club have made representations to all Ministers of the Environment on numerous occasions to offer our help and support to assist them in proactive conservation projects and thereby increase the numbers of Irish hare in Northern Ireland. Our most recent offer was tendered to the Minister on 12 August 2009.

Concern was also expressed within this Committee that Irish hare numbers are under threat from coursing. However, scientific evidence categorically states otherwise. We want to dispel those concerns with the following substantial data. Various research projects suggest that coursing positively benefits Irish hare numbers. Coursing clubs are scientifically recognised as an important local conservation force. They participate in important research, manage habitats sympathetically and control predation, which helps to conserve Irish hares. They counteract and inform on wildlife crime.

Professor Ian Montgomery is head of the school of biology and biochemistry at Queen's University Belfast. He is regarded as the leading expert in Irish hare ecology throughout Ireland. He is on record as saying that he believes that coursing and various forms of hare hunting make a positive contribution to Irish hare conservation through participation in important research, predator control and sympathetic habitat management.

Like Professor Montgomery, we believe that sporting activities, as practiced by Irish field-sports communities, are not only sustainable but make a positive contribution to the Irish hare. Our members are uniquely placed to deliver the type of conservation action that is required by the Department to increase Irish hare numbers and to deliver the Department's preferred option.

D J Histon is chief executive of the Irish Coursing Club, which was formed in 1916 and regulates the sport of coursing throughout Ireland. Under the organisation's guidance, clubs participate in research, manage habitat and promote conservation initiatives that are aimed at increasing the number of Irish hare in the countryside. They can do that only with buy-in from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the Irish Republic, with

which they work closely. They can conduct their activities only on the issue of a licence from the Department.

A report that was commissioned by and presented to the Environment and Heritage Service in 2003 states that:

“it is clear that hares can survive the experience of being netted and coursed before release and can resume activity to survive in the wild. ... there is no evidence that coursing at the current level affects population size or distribution of the Irish Hare in Northern Ireland.”

A lot of the details are included in the brief that we submitted to the Committee. Therefore, I will not go into it any further.

The second item that we want to discuss is the status of the curlew. Countryside Alliance Ireland is aware of the decline in curlew numbers in Northern Ireland. However, the loss and damage of its habitat is due to predation, the largest factor in the resident curlew's decline. Curlew nest on damp, brushy grassland. It has strongholds on the shores of Lough Neagh; Lough Erne; islands in lower Lough Erne; the south Sperrins; the Antrim hills and Fairy Water Bogs in

County Tyrone.

The total UK breeding population is estimated to be at least 99,500 breeding pairs, which is around 40% of the European population. The Irish population is estimated to be between 2,500 and 10,000 pairs, with 1,750 pairs in Northern Ireland in 2000. That figure, as mentioned by the RSPB, shows a decline of 60% from the previous estimate in 1987.

Outside the breeding season, the number of curlew in Ireland is swollen by the migration of birds from Britain and northern Europe. Wintering numbers vary, but, in general, a maximum of between 6,500 and 7,000 birds are there during the winter. Studies carried out in 1993 and 1995 indicated that predation accounted for 74% of the chick mortality of curlew in Northern Ireland. That has been strongly supported by the shooting community, delivered by the BASC, which participated in a six-year control programme in north Antrim, along with the RSPB and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which was completed in 2009. That study confirms that predation accounts for the main loss of curlew in Northern Ireland.

It is important to leave the curlew as it is and to encourage inclusive participation by all country sports and conservation organisations, so that they work together to employ proper predator control, habitat management and wardenship, rather than simply opting for a crude and unwieldy banning measure.

The Department's synopsis of responses to the consultation on snares indicates that 94.1% of respondents favoured the Department's proposals. Only 5.9% believe that the use of snares should be prohibited altogether. We fully support the Department's proposal to move forward on the basis of the favoured option, and we have the full support of our members on that stance. However, we are fully aware that it is an issue that is close to the hearts of many members of the Committee, and we are in favour of the introduction of a licensing scheme to make the use of snares more professional, more visible and more ethical.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for a comprehensive look at a range of issues.

Mr Boylan:

I will leave some questions for the rest of the members to ask. I want some clarification on numbers. We have had some issues with that in the past when we have heard presentations and scientific research into how many hares there actually are. The last presentation we received — it may have been 18 months ago or two years ago — was about people standing on the bonnets of cars with binoculars or lamping at night; I use that term loosely. That is how scientific it got. How robust are those figures? What scientific research into the number of hares has actually taken place? We need clarification on that.

Professor Ian Montgomery (Queen's University Belfast):

It is a little bit more complicated than simply standing on top of vehicles. That is part of the fieldwork that is done by trained people. The estimates are based on distance sampling, which is a recognised ecological and mathematical method to estimate numbers over a particular area; provided that area is representative, we can extrapolate from it. We started that work in the mid-1990s, when we estimated the number of hares at around 14,000, plus or minus 6,000. That was based on daytime, but it became clear that that was not the best technique. We were fortunate to receive funding from the NIEA and its predecessor to develop the techniques. As we do so, the

data becomes more precise and more robust.

This year we are completing the final estimate of a series, and we will be back-calculating. I doubt if that will change the overall numbers much, but it will increase the precision with which we estimate. The current figure — which was calculated in 2009 — is around 27,000, plus or minus around 25%. That is not particularly precise, but it is indicative of the actual number. We have estimates for the whole of the island of Ireland, based on similar methods, of between 400,000 and 800,000. Somewhere around 600,000 might be the robust figure. However, it is like chasing jelly; the numbers change quite rapidly. That is one the major lessons to have arisen from our research. The numbers can go up or down by a factor of three or four in one or two years. We are not exactly sure how or why that occurs. Our earliest estimates happened to be made at a time when numbers were very low. However, there have been a number of years during the past decade when numbers have risen to quite high levels.

Mr Ford:

The Countryside Alliance's written submission says that the curlew is fully protected elsewhere in the UK, where there are about 100,000 breeding pairs, compared with about 1,700 in Northern

Ireland, according to the last estimate, which is now a decade old. On the basis of those figures, is there not a logic to placing the curlew on schedule 1 for full protection, at least temporarily, rather than carrying out further scientific studies, during which the curlew may continue to decline significantly?

Mr Plant:

The curlew is fully protected elsewhere in the UK, and evidence does not show that shooting has a detrimental effect on the resident population. There has been no scientific study of the wading bird population since 1995. We fully support a voluntary moratorium on shooting curlew, and, to maintain the buy-in from the shooting community, a high-level predator control management activity during the breeding season to ensure that the numbers of curlew increase.

Mr Ford:

I understood from what the RSPB said that a voluntary moratorium had not worked.

Mr Plant:

Countryside Alliance Ireland clubs have confirmed to me that they are observing a moratorium on shooting curlew. Our main areas for clubs are Lough Neagh and Carlingford Lough.

Mr Ford:

Are you saying that the voluntary moratorium has worked, or are you saying merely that your clubs have observed the moratorium, but they do not control all shooting?

Mr Plant:

Yes.

Mr Ford:

In other words, it has not worked as a voluntary moratorium.

Mr Plant:

It did not work because the RSPB did not enter into negotiation with Countryside Alliance Ireland. This is a voluntary act by our organisation to conserve the curlew, and to benefit the habitat of not only the curlew but also the lapwing and Irish hare, because they have similar habitats.

Mr Ford:

Your submission on the Irish hare states — and I am not sure whether it refers to Countryside Alliance Ireland and the Irish Coursing Club together or separately — that you have:

“members in literally every parish and townland”.

Mr Plant:

That is correct.

Mr Ford:

How many members do you have in the townland of Barnish, County Antrim?

Mr Plant:

I do not have my membership database with me.

Mr Ford:

On what basis do you claim membership in every townland?

Mr Plant:

We claim membership in every townland because we have members throughout the whole of

Northern Ireland, in every county —

Mr Ford:

A county is a bit larger than a townland.

Mr Plant:

And in every townland.

Mr Ford:

How can you make such a sweeping claim about having members in every townland?

Mr Plant:

I will evaluate the information on our database to clarify that point, and send the information to the Committee.

Mr Ford:

When you make such a sweeping claim, it is difficult to take account of some of the other things.

A Member:

You would not think this was the Alliance.

The Chairperson:

Hold on now.

Mr Ford:

Even on your figures, Mr Plant, you claim 10,000 members for the Countryside Alliance in Ireland.

Mr Plant:

Right.

Mr Ford:

If every one of them was a farmer in Northern Ireland, that would be approximately one third of

the farmers in Northern Ireland. We can presume that possibly some of them live in towns, there may be more than one member in some families, and some may even live in the Republic. Therefore, what proportion of the land of Northern Ireland do your members control with regard to the sweeping claims that you have made about your contribution to conservation of the Irish hare, compared with any other landowners?

Mr Plant:

We do not control any land.

Mr Ford:

I said your members.

Mr Plant:

Some of our members are landowners; some are members of coursing or shooting clubs. They carry out that activity only as a result of the goodwill of the farming community of Northern Ireland. Therefore, with the goodwill of that community and the expert conservation measures

carried out by our members, our club plays a positive role in the Northern Ireland environment and ecology.

The Chairperson:

Mr Ford, I think we need to —

Mr Ford:

I am just asking a simple question. What proportion of Northern Ireland do you control on which to exercise your good conservation measures? A rough answer will do.

Mr Plant:

One third.

Mr Plant:

If our membership of 10,000 relates to the number of farmers in Northern Ireland, it is roughly a

third of that.

Mr Ford:

However, that assumes that you have no urban members and none in the Republic. However, the

Chairperson thinks I have spoken long enough.

The Chairperson:

I think you have. Bearing that in mind, Mr Weir, ask only one or two questions, please.

Mr Weir:

I will ask one large, encompassing one, then. From what I understand of your position on the

Irish hare, option 1 on schedule 5 is essentially to maintain the current regulatory status quo — a

rolling blanket ban, which is imposed on a yearly basis. If I am picking you up right, you are

opposed to that. Is that correct?

Mr Plant:

No. We agree with the status quo.

Mr Weir:

The status quo is statutory protection on an annual basis, whereas your submission talks about:

“a lengthy closed season during which it is unlawful to kill or take Irish hares by any means”.

Is the current position not that, on a yearly basis, there has been a protection put in place for the Irish hare?

Mr Plant:

Yes. However, that is a special protection Order under the game laws. The Irish hare is a game species and under the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928, a special protection Order is issued to coincide with the all-Ireland species action plan to deliver its results.

Mr Weir:

It is special protection, but it protects the Irish hare on an annual basis. Is that not right?

Mr Plant:

No. Protection is only for a specific period. It is protected during the closed season for breeding.

It was only implemented because the first survey for the Irish hare showed that the numbers were low. We were worried about it and we completely agreed with the Minister. We proceeded on a joint basis with him to conserve the Irish hare.

Mr Weir:

Would you be happy enough with option 1, which is to have the special protection Orders?

Mr Plant:

Yes, in order to ensure that the all-Ireland species action plan —

Mr Weir:

There is one thing that I cannot understand in relation to the curlew. You say that your members have, on a voluntary basis, observed a moratorium on shooting curlew?

Mr Plant:

Yes. We have a moratorium on shooting curlew. We shoot predators that prey on the curlew chicks.

Mr Weir:

If there is a voluntary moratorium, what is the problem with that becoming a statutory protection?

Mr Plant:

Some of our members want to benefit the curlew, which is their chosen bird. They wish to protect its habitat, and they go out and do that.

Mr Weir:

I am talking about a protection purely for the curlew, to stop it being shot. You have no problems with that?

Mr Plant:

No.

Mr Weir:

So you have no problem with that moving to schedule 1?

Mr Plant:

We have no problem with that until we see the scientific evidence. As the RSPB stated, there has been no survey of any wading birds since 1999.

Mr Weir:

From what I understand, you had a voluntary agreement not to shoot the curlew that could not be enforced across all the clubs. What, then, is the problem with having statutory protection of curlews? If you are willing to agree not to shoot the curlew voluntarily, what is the problem with a statutory ban on shooting it? You have described the proposal of a blanket protection of the curlew as “unwieldy”.

Mr Ford:

He said “cruel and unwieldy”.

Mr Weir:

Personally speaking, I question whether not getting shot would be the thing. Rather than being unwieldy, surely a complete blanket ban on shooting the curlew is the very converse of unwieldy?

Mr Plant:

This is about participation and involvement for people who want to carry out their activities in a

lawful manner. Some people who shoot curlew, and would like to continue to do so, benefit in that the controls for —

Mr Weir:

I perfectly understand how the case can be made —

The Chairperson:

There are five other members still to speak.

Mr Weir:

With respect, it is an important piece of legislation.

The Chairperson:

It is.

Mr Weir:

I perfectly understand the argument that it is for the benefit of those people who want to be able to continue to shoot curlew. However, I fail to understand how it can be seen as unwieldy. Surely, not shooting a particular species is a fairly black-and-white situation, whereas the opportunity for it to be shot at some stage is a greater degree of uncertainty. Surely that is more unwieldy.

Mr Plant:

It is about looking to the future. As I said, it is down to participation. If our members wish to be able to shoot curlew in the future, we, and the Department, need their participation, and that of members of other shooting organisations, to do the proper predator control out there. The Department does not have the available resources to go to every site during the breeding season to protect chicks. Our members do. However, there has to be a light at the end of the tunnel. When our members help to get curlew numbers up, they will be able to shoot them.

Mr Weir:

That almost sounds like a form of blackmail. Quite frankly, you are saying that we have to do it the way that you want or you cannot guarantee co-operation.

Mr Plant:

No. Not from my clubs.

The Chairperson:

There are five other members, so I would appreciate precise questions — and precise answers.

Mr McKay:

Can you elaborate on your views on snares? Obviously, you propose that a licensing system be put in place.

Mr Plant:

Sorry, I did not hear the question.

Mr McKay:

Can you elaborate on the licensing system that you propose?

Secondly, can you tell us more about the new snares that are being developed and whether those will be beneficial and more humane? If you are saying that that is a good development, could they be introduced and all the old snares banned outright?

Mr Plant:

There are 22 full-time gamekeepers in Northern Ireland and 137 clubs that raise and rear pheasants and so forth. The majority of those gamekeepers use snares only during the breeding season, during which time we want to protect birds such as lapwing and curlew. It is estimated that, each year, 30% of all foxes controlled by gamekeepers and shoot managers are caught by snares. Yesterday, I spoke to the gamekeeper on the estate where our office is. He said that, last

year, out of 50 foxes, 38 were snared and the rest shot by lamping. A licensing system would mean that, in order to use a snare, people would have to seek a licence from the NIEA and get a registered number. Snares would have to be set in a legal position and marked with that number, so that that snare could be looked at by a wildlife officer who could refer back to the licence that was issued. Shoot managers and gamekeepers have no problem with that whatsoever.

At the moment, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust is investigating new snares that have a specific breakaway point for non-target species that get into the snare. Also coming on stream is an aircraft-type wire that does not twist, cannot tangle, does not rust, and, therefore, is easier to maintain and of a higher specification.

Mr McKay:

If those developments come to pass and those snares are introduced, will you support the more lethal forms of snare that currently exist? Surely that would make sense.

Mr Plant:

Yes.

Mr Bell:

Is there evidence of any loss or damage to those birds' habitat at Strangford Lough, which takes in a considerable part of my own constituency of Strangford? Your paper says that the largest single factor in population decline is damage to habitats and that Strangford Lough is one of the most important wintering sites.

Mr Plant:

It is down to farming practices. Over the years, research throughout Northern Ireland has shown that, as land has been drained to make it more productive, habitats have been lost in that way. That happens around Strangford Lough as well.

Mr Bell:

Is there any link between the Countryside Alliance and groups such as the Ulster Farmers'

Union? I imagine that there is considerable crossover between the Countryside Alliance and much of the farming community in Strangford.

Mr Plant:

We work very closely to promote the agrienvironment schemes and to ensure that farmers sign up to them. That benefits the habitat and creates extra areas where nesting birds can thrive. We promote that to all our members.

Mr Bell:

Professor Montgomery, your paper says that a detailed research programme is being undertaken. Who is undertaking that? The concluding paragraph mentions “proven scientific evidence”. What level of scientific evidence is required before it is considered “proven”? What sort of study needs to be undertaken to provide that information?

Professor Montgomery:

Sorry; you are quoting from a paper that I do not have in front of me. I am not sure that the

question is specific enough.

Mr Bell:

It says that:

“The poor survival rate of young birds is known to be a key factor in the decline of curlew at Northern Ireland sites and a detailed research programme is being undertaken to establish the exact extent of the problem and provide solutions to it.”

Professor Montgomery:

That is a question for the RSPB, not me. I am not involved in curlew research.

Mr Bell:

Are you not here to represent the Countryside Alliance?

Professor Montgomery:

No, I am here as a scientific expert on the Irish hare.

Mr Bell:

Sorry; that excerpt is from the Countryside Alliance's paper. Can anybody from the Countryside

Alliance explain that detailed research programme and the proven scientific evidence?

The Chairperson:

If you are unable to answer the question now, you can supply the answer at a later time.

Mr Plant:

The research programme refers to the Glenwhirry project, which was done in conjunction with

the RSPB and the BASC and finished in 2009. We are still waiting —

Mr Bell:

What is the Glenwhirry project?

Mr Plant:

It is in County Antrim. We believe that it proved, as the previous research in 1993 did, that predation was the cause of the loss of 74% of curlew and lapwing chicks.

Mr Bell:

Does the “proven scientific evidence” that is mentioned in the concluding paragraph refer to the Glenwhirry project, or do you want an additional project to be undertaken?

Mr Plant:

I have a copy of that; I will forward it to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

That is fine.

Mr Plant:

The 1993 study confirms what was found at Glenwhirry.

The Chairperson:

Any further information can be sent later.

Mr Beggs:

Your paper indicates that you believe that hare hunting makes a positive contribution to Irish hare conservation. It then talks about predator control and habitat management. How does hunting hares improve hare numbers?

Professor Montgomery:

We were fortunate enough to have some contact with a coursing club in County Donegal. This is specifically about coursing, not hunting, which I would distinguish.

Mr Beggs:

The Countryside Alliance paper refers to “hare hunting”.

Mr Plant:

I will answer that point after Professor Montgomery finishes.

Professor Montgomery:

As regards coursing, we are about to publish a paper that compares the numbers of hares on coursing club preserves against those on similar habitats in the surrounding area. Effectively, it shows that when habitat differences are taken into account, the number of hares on preserves managed by coursing clubs is about three times greater. Overall, it is greater by a factor of about 18, but when all other confounding variables are taken out, it remains clear that the number of hares is about three times greater per unit area than in unmanaged areas.

Mr Beggs:

Are there any preserves in Northern Ireland?

Professor Montgomery:

I am not sure. While there are two clubs, I am not certain that they manage preserves.

The Chairperson:

Well, if there is any —

Mr D J Histon (Countryside Alliance):

The two clubs referred to are in Ballymena and Dungannon. Neither of them has coursed in the North since the introduction of the special protection Order. We are a bit like players on the sideline; we are ready to take part in the game. The Committee and the Countryside Alliance want the same thing, which is to ensure a thriving Irish hare population. Coursing clubs, particularly the two in question, can play a positive role in achieving that, a fact that is backed up by independent research conducted by Quercus.

We could look at negotiating the terms of how that might happen. I suggest that a joint meeting would be of benefit. We could agree the terms of a licence for the window during which hares could be netted, taking account of their breeding season and other considerations. The Irish Coursing Club is currently conducting a hare husbandry programme that involves producing a DVD. Our second hare seminar will be held this year in Clonmel, and I will make it compulsory for the Ballymena and Dungannon clubs to attend.

Mr Beggs asked how hunting benefited the hare. The work of coursing clubs is not confined to the two days of a meeting. It is a 12-month exercise, insofar as a strong hare population must be ensured in order to have hare coursing for those two days. To do that, a club works closely with its local farming community, reporting and preventing illegal hunting, which, in the current environment, does not get aired very much but is a real threat. The hare expertise of coursing clubs, which have existed since 1916, means that we can provide substantial data and work closely with organisations such as Quercus to generate independent scientific data to prove that coursing clubs can benefit the Irish hare population.

To look at the bigger picture, roughly 0.5% of the total Irish hare population would be used to accommodate a joint meeting involving Ballymena and Dungannon, and, on conclusion of that meeting, a healthy and robust hare population would be released back into the countryside to proliferate the breed. In my opinion, that would enhance the overall Irish hare population.

Mr Beggs:

It has been recognised that there has been a large decline in the curlew population. You have indicated that that is due to changes in agricultural practices. Nevertheless, the decline has been significant, and those that remain, particularly the resident curlew population, face a degree of risk. When your members shoot a curlew, how do they know whether it is a resident or a curlew with a passport? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Plant:

I just want to say that none of my members shoot curlew, because there is a voluntary moratorium on them. However, it is the same as asking how you know whether a teal has come in from Russia or somewhere else: you do not.

Mr Beggs:

The species is under threat.

Mr Plant:

If the point is to establish whether it is migratory birds or the resident population that are being shot during the game season or the wildfowling season, my instinct as a wildfowler of years ago in Scotland is that most birds shot are migratory. However, that is only as a rule of thumb.

Mr Beggs:

Do you appreciate that that is very unsatisfactory in terms of the effect on the resident population?

Mr Plant:

If research was to be carried out and a ringing programme conducted on the resident population, true figures would be available as to what is resident and what is not. I recommend that such

work be carried out, and we would work closely with the RSPB and other organisations to ring the chicks to establish what is right.

Mr Dallat:

I certainly do not question the size or influence of the Countryside Alliance. A long time ago, Ronan Gorman told me that you are a powerful organisation, and he almost convinced me of that.

You said that you support the new, humane snares. Your submission says that the snares can restrain animals until they can be humanely dispatched. Does that mean that you release the animals back into the wild, or do you shoot them?

Mr Plant:

It depends whether the animal is from a target or non-target species. If the animal is from a targeted species, it will be dispatched; it will be shot.

Mr Dallat:

By “dispatched”, you mean “shot”.

Mr Plant:

Yes. If the animal is from a non-target species, you put on special gloves, release the snare and release the animal.

Mr Dallat:

Why do you not decide that lethal snares are barbaric, cruel and obscene? I say that because I have a childhood memory of coming across a fox that had managed to chew off its leg before it died. Who could support that?

Mr Plant:

Even we would not support that; that must have been caused by a snare that was not set correctly.

We support all legal activities, and we support a licensing system to ensure that snares are set correctly and that everything is above board and professional.

The Chairperson:

Mr Kinahan has to leave at 12.00 pm, so I will let him ask his question.

Mr Dallat:

I give way to my superior colleague.

Mr Kinahan:

You may not feel that way after I speak. *[Laughter.]*

I declare an interest. I do shoot, and I am part of the shooting community.

Mr Dallat:

I should not have given way.

Mr Kinahan:

I am probably one of the worst shots that there is.

My experience of the shooting community is that they are some of the best people at managing the ground and the habitats and increasing the wildlife. That may seem illogical, but that is the way that the shooting community is. The people of the land look after it. You mentioned the licensing of Irish hares in the long term. I like the status quo, and licensing should be kept in mind. I know that there are three beagle packs, and when I asked how many hares were caught in a year, I was told that they maybe catch one a year, perhaps on a good day. Is licensing the way forward?

Mr Plant:

Yes, especially for coursing, which gets such bad press across the water. Irish coursing is completely different to that. Along with the Irish Coursing Club, I believe that a licensing system that mirrors the system that operates in the Republic is the way forward. It would be open, transparent and completely professional.

Mr Histon:

In the Republic, the Minister for the Environment issues netting licences with 22 conditions attached. There is an order that allows coursing matches to take place between the end of September and the end of February. Each meeting must comply with those conditions. Wildlife rangers do not attend every meeting, but they can do so. They supervise the meeting to ensure that the conditions of the licence have been upheld, and they supervise the release of hares back into the wild.

We are happy with that structured system because everyone complies to the same standard. Our organisation has its internal rules, coupled with the hare husbandry programme that I mentioned. It is in our interests to ensure that we release healthy hares into the wider countryside, because that enables us to continue with our activity and has major benefits for biodiversity in relation to the hare.

Licensing is the way to go, which is why I ask the Committee to consider some type of limited

coursing under certain conditions at a joint meeting. We would gladly work with the Committee and the Department on those conditions. That would have a major benefit overall for the Irish hare.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for coming along this morning and engaging in a fairly robust exchange of views.

Mr Boylan:

Is there any extra information, such as statistics, that can be passed on to the Committee?

The Chairperson:

I did say that any further evidence should be sent to the Committee.

Mr Histon:

I can certainly provide additional information to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

Thank you.