

PE1485/B

Petitioner Letter of 13 October 2013

Dear Chris

I have prepared my response to Mr MacAskill's answers and it is attached. If there is any further information that the Committee would like I am more than happy to help.

There was one issue that I didn't get the chance to touch upon fully with regards to pest control. According to a report partially sponsored by the Scottish Government Rabbits cost over £56,000,000 of damage to crops in Scotland alone. This does not take into account damage to other land. Airguns are an essential tool in controlling the rabbit population and in many cases it is the safest option. I can provide this report if the Committee would like further details.

Best Wishes,

Dave Ewing

Question

What is the proposed timescale for the introduction by the Scottish Government of proposed legislation which covers airgun licensing in Scotland?

Mr MacAskill's answer

On 3 September the First Minister announced the Scottish Government's Programme for Government for 2013-14. The programme includes a new Licensing Bill, to be introduced during the course of this parliamentary year, which will include provisions to regulate air weapons using the powers newly devolved under the Scotland Act 2012.

My response

I would still like Mr MacAskill to offer some evidence as to why he thinks licencing is the best route to go down. The current Government proposals are based on a manifesto pledge made years ago when airgun crime was at a high which stated that airguns "should" be licenced. It is no longer relevant thanks to a successful programme of enforcement and education. Crimes involving airguns are down by 71% in the past 5 years, therefore the evidence shows that the current system is working.

There is no public support for the licensing proposals with 87% of respondents to the public consultation against the proposals. If the people of Scotland really wanted licencing then they had the chance to make their feelings known through this process.

Even the police have spoken out against airgun licensing with the Association of Scottish Police Superintendents publishing a report criticising the proposals.

Question

Do you agree with the statistics and estimated figures, such as those for the number of airguns in Scotland and the cost of implementing airgun licensing, that were stated by the petitioners during the oral evidence session at the above meeting of the Committee?

Mr MacAskill's Answer

No. In November 2011 I convened the Scottish Firearms Consultative Panel (SFCP), comprising shooting and weapons experts and stakeholders, to help us develop our proposals for a new licensing regime. As part of their work the Panel, which included Dr Shedden who gave evidence to your Committee, sought to estimate the potential number of air weapons in circulation in Scotland. An upper limit of 500,000 guns was arrived at with the aid of the Gun Trade Association and other stakeholders, and was agreed in discussion by the Panel. In the foreword to our public consultation paper *Proposals for Licensing Air Weapons in Scotland*, which I launched on 14 December 2012, I noted that it is not appropriate “that there can be up to half a million unregistered, uncontrolled and often forgotten firearms in circulation”. This is different to Dr Shedden’s statement to the Committee that: “The 500,000 estimate is a minimum figure, which is based on information from the Gun Trade Association that was supplied to the Scottish Government through the Scottish firearms consultative panel. The panel accepted that as a minimum figure...”

In fact, that was not what the Panel agreed.

My response

I have been assured by Dr Shedden that the statistics are correct as put forward by the members of the Firearms Consultative Panel, **publication of the minutes would show this to be the case.**

Mr MacAskill's response to cost issue

In terms of the financial estimates suggested to the Committee by Mr Ewing, he appears simply to have taken this figure of 500,000 air weapons and multiplied it by a round figure of £200, referring to work done by the Association of Chief Police Officers in England and Wales on the full costs of licensing firearms and shotguns under the present arrangements. In doing so, Mr Ewing arrived at a figure of £100 million to introduce the new regime in Scotland. I do not accept this estimate. Mr Ewing’s figures take no account of the fact that we aim to introduce an efficient and practicable system of licensing modelled on existing arrangements. In addition, we anticipate that a significant number of unwanted air weapons will be surrendered or disposed of by their current owners; that a single application process will be used to cover multiple weapons held by a single user; and that the new system will include payment of a fee on application which will offset the costs of operating the scheme.

In developing our detailed proposals for legislation I will, of course, be preparing the required supporting documents for the Bill, which will include clear estimates of the anticipated costs of the air weapons licensing arrangements. We will develop these figures in consultation with the Police Service of Scotland and other stakeholders.

My Response

It is simple logic that attempting to bring over 500,000 airguns and their owners into an administrative system such as the one that exists for firearms and shotguns will be very expensive due to the huge administrative burden and manpower required. I am very interested to see Mr MacAskills projected figures for this project. **The Association of Scottish Police Superintendents share my concerns regarding the costs and practicability of the proposals.**

Also the financial impact on businesses has not yet been properly assessed with the Regulatory Review Group stating that a Business Regulatory Impact Assessment has not been carried out by the Scottish Government in relation to this proposal.

Question

What organisations and clubs has the Scottish Government consulted with on this issue?

Mr MacAskills Answer

As noted above, our public consultation paper launched on 14 December 2012. This was sent to more than 100 organisations, clubs and other stakeholders, as well as individuals.

A full listing of the organisations notified is set out at Annex E of the consultation document, which can be found at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/>

My Response

I would just like to reiterate that 87% of responses were against the proposal.