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Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Annual report of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee 2023-24



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Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, with the exception of matters relating to land reform, natural resources and peatland, Scottish Land Commission, Crown Estate Scotland, and Royal Botanic Garden.



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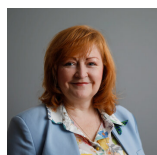
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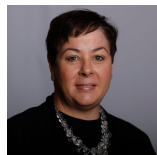
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Emma Harper
Scottish National Party



Emma Roddick
Scottish National Party



Elena Whitham
Scottish National Party

Introduction

1. This report outlines the work of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee during the parliamentary year from 13 May 2023 to 12 May 2024.
2. The Committee's remit is to consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, with the exception of matters relating to land reform, natural resources and peatland, Scottish Land Commission, Crown Estate Scotland, and Royal Botanic Garden.



32

Committee meetings



Bills scrutinised



Reports published



SSIs considered

Membership changes

3. The following changes to the Committee's membership occurred during the course of this parliamentary year—

Members:

- Christine Grahame resigned from the Committee on 27 June 2023 and was replaced by Kate Forbes (27 June 2023 to 10 May 2024).
- Jim Fairlie resigned from the Committee on 9 February 2024 and was replaced by Elena Whitham (20 February 2024 to date).
- Karen Adam resigned from the Committee on 14 February 2024 and was replaced by Emma Harper (20 February 2024 to date).
- Kate Forbes resigned from the Committee on 10 May 2024ⁱ.

Substitute members:

- Edward Mountain (substitute member) left the Committee on 28 June 2023 and was replaced by Jamie Halcro Johnston (substitute member) (28 June 2023 to date).
- Emma Harper (substitute member) left the Committee on 29 June 2023 and was replaced by Evelyn Tweed (substitute member) (29 June 2023 to 5 September 2023).
- Evelyn Tweed (substitute member) left the Committee on 5 September 2023 and was replaced by Christine Grahame (substitute member) (5 September 2023 to 31 October 2023).
- Christine Grahame (substitute member) left the Committee on 31 October 2023 and was replaced by Emma Harper (substitute member) (31 October 2023 to 20 February 2024).
- Mark Ruskell (substitute member) was appointed to the Committee (28 November 2023 to date).
- Emma Harper (substitute member) left the Committee on 20 February 2024 and was replaced by Karen Adam (substitute member) (5 March 2024 to date).

ⁱ Emma Roddick was appointed to the Committee to replace Kate Forbes at the beginning of the succeeding reporting period, on 14 May 2024.

Meetings

4. The Committee met 32 times during the reporting period. Of these meetings, three were held entirely in private and 19 meetings included at least one item taken in private. Ten meetings were held entirely in public. The reasons for taking business in private were to consider—
 - the Committee's work programme;
 - draft reports;
 - evidence gathered through calls for views; and
 - the evidence heard during committee meetings.
5. [The agendas and minutes of the Committee's meetings, including details of the its current and future work plans, are available on the Committee's web-pages.](#)

Legislation

6. This section covers the Committee's scrutiny of primary legislation, subordinate legislation, and legislative consent memoranda for UK primary legislation.

Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill

7. The [Wildlife Management and Muirburn \(Scotland\) Bill](#) and its accompanying documents had been introduced by the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport during the previous reporting period, on 21 March 2023.
8. According to the policy memorandum, the Bill sought "to address raptor persecution and ensure that the management of grouse moors and related activities are undertaken in an environmentally sustainable and welfare conscious manner". The Bill was an implementation of the recommendations made by the independent [Grouse Moor Management Review Group which reported](#) in November 2019.
9. Following on from a call for views which had received over 5,700 responses in the previous reporting period, the Committee took evidence at Stage 1 over six meetings from May to November 2023. The Committee also visited Roxburghe Estate in the Scottish Borders to visit moorland managed for grouse moor shooting. The Committee [published its Stage 1 report on 20 November 2023](#). The Stage 1 debate took place on 30 November 2023.
10. The Committee considered the Bill at Stage 2 at its meetings on 7 and 21 February 2024.
11. Following the Stage 3 debate on 21 March 2024, the Bill passed by a vote of 85 for, 30 against, and zero abstentions. The Bill became an Act on 30 April 2024.

Committee members with representatives of Roxburghe Estate and Scottish Land and Estates on a visit to Byrecleugh Moor, 19 June 2023.



Source: The Scottish Parliament

Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill

12. The [Agriculture and Rural Communities \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced by the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands on 28 September 2023, and referred to the Committee for consideration at Stage 1.
13. The policy memorandum states that the Bill seeks to introduce a framework “for the measures the Scottish Ministers will use to develop the support that farming and rural communities need in order to adapt to new opportunities and new challenges, and to prosper in a changing world”. Through this Bill, the Scottish Government intends to deliver its 'Vision for Agriculture' and to replace common agricultural policy legislation which had been retained after the UK's exit from the EU.
14. The Committee's Stage 1 scrutiny of the Bill built upon [a programme of pre-legislative work on future agriculture policy in Scotland](#) which began during the previous reporting period and concluded in November 2023. During its pre-legislative scrutiny, the Committee took evidence from farmers, crofters, academics, and stakeholder organisations within the agriculture and food supply chain. The Committee also went on evidence gathering visits to an arable farm in Berwickshire in June 2023 and several dairy farms in Kirkcudbrightshire in August 2023.

Members of the Committee on a fact-finding visit to Littleton Farm, a dairy farm in Kirkcudbrightshire, 30 August 2023.



Source: The Scottish Parliament

15. Following the introduction of the Bill, the Committee ran a call for views on the general principles between 27 October and 24 November 2023 and received 72 responses. [The responses to the call for views are published on the Committee's web-pages](#). The Committee took evidence at Stage 1 through six evidence sessions, including four roundtable discussions with agriculture and rural community stakeholders, from October 2023 to February 2024. Members of the Committee also undertook a fact-finding visit to the Hill and Mountain Research Centre at Scotland's Rural College, Crianlarich, in October 2023.
16. The Committee held a consultative event with approximately 40 farmers, crofters, other land managers and representatives from rural community and development organisations on 19 February 2024. The purpose of the consultation was to engage directly with agricultural practitioners to hear their views about future agriculture policy and the Bill. Delivery of this event involved a collaborative approach between the Committee's clerks, the Parliament's Participation and Communities Team, and SPICe. The contributions made by participants at the event helped to inform the questions posed by members in an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary and shaped several of the recommendations within the Committee's Stage 1 report.

Committee members with participants at a consultative event on the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, 19 February 2024.



Source: The Scottish Parliament

17. The Committee [published its Stage 1 report on 18 March 2024](#). The Stage 1 debate took place on 27 March 2024.
18. The Committee considered the Bill at Stage 2 at its meetings on 8 and 15 May 2024.

Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill

19. The [Welfare of Dogs \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 20 June 2023 and was referred to the Committee for consideration at Stage 1.
20. The policy memorandum states that the purpose of the Bill is to “improve the health and well-being of dogs throughout their lives, by establishing a more responsible and informed approach to acquiring and owning a dog; and by making provision for the regulation of the selling and transferring of puppies from unlicensed litters”. The Bill succeeds an earlier Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill which was introduced in Session 5 and fell at dissolution.
21. The Committee ran a call for views between 30 June and 11 August 2023. The call for views included a questionnaire for the general public, which received 95 responses, and a more detailed survey for stakeholder organisations, which received 23 responses. The Scottish Government set out its views on the Bill in a

memorandum to the Committee on 15 August 2023.

22. The Committee took evidence from the Law Society of Scotland and animal welfare organisations on 20 September, from the Minister for Energy and the Environment and Scottish Government officials on 25 October, and from the member in charge of the Bill, Christine Grahame, and clerks from the non-government bills unit on 22 November 2023.
23. The Committee [published its Stage 1 report on 5 March 2024](#), and the Stage 1 debate was held on 7 May 2024. The Committee will consider the Bill at Stage 2 during the next reporting period.

Subordinate legislation

24. During this reporting period, the Committee considered 27 Scottish statutory instruments (SIs) of which nine were considered under the affirmative procedure and 18 under the negative procedure. The Committee also considered one UK SI, which was subject to the affirmative procedure.
25. In addition to the subordinate legislation outlined above, the Committee also considered:
 - one document subject to Parliamentary control; and
 - 23 proposals for UK SIs under the Statutory Instrument Protocol.

Legislative consent memorandum

26. At its meeting on 31 January 2024, the Committee considered a legislative consent memorandum from the Scottish Government on the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill. [The Committee's report, published on 2 February 2024](#), recommended that the Parliament approve the legislative consent motion.

Other areas of consideration

27. During this parliamentary year, the Committee also undertook work on various subjects within its remit, including:
- budget scrutiny for 2024 to 2025;
 - the National Islands Plan annual report;
 - bracken control;
 - UK common frameworks; and
 - PE1758, a petition to end greyhound racing in Scotland.

Budget scrutiny, 2024 to 2025

28. At its meeting on 28 June 2023, the Committee considered and agreed its approach to [scrutiny of the budget for 2024 to 2025](#). The Committee agreed to continue to take a dual approach to pre-budget scrutiny which focused on:
- the impact of the resource spending review on the overall Rural Affairs and Islands budget; and
 - detailed scrutiny of the policies and funding commitments made in relation to the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the national islands plan.
29. To inform its pre-budget scrutiny, the Committee ran a call for views between 30 June and 11 August 2023. Nine responses were received and these have been published on the Committee's web-pages.
30. The [Committee wrote to the Cabinet Secretary outlining its comments and recommendations relating to its pre-budget scrutiny on 22 November 2023](#).
31. Following the publication of the draft Scottish Budget for 2024 to 2025, the Committee held an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform Islands and Scottish Government officials on 17 January 2024.

National Islands Plan annual report, 2022

32. On 24 May 2023, the Committee held an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands and Scottish Government officials on the National Islands Plan annual report 2022. The purpose of the session was to scrutinise the Scottish Government's progress in delivering on the objectives set out in the National Islands Plan, and to draw on the Committee's pre-budget scrutiny for 2023 to 2024 which had focused on the projects funded through the islands programme.

Bracken control

33. The Committee took evidence on the control of bracken in Scotland from the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity and Scottish Government officials on 13 September 2023. The purpose of the session was to discuss the extent to which bracken is a problem in some parts of Scotland and what options are available to control its spread.

UK common frameworks

34. Following on from an evidence session that was held during the previous reporting period with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, the Committee [wrote to the Scottish Government to set out its views on the common frameworks in its remit on 20 December 2023](#).

Petition PE1758: End greyhound racing in Scotland

35. The Committee continued its consideration of [petition PE1758: End greyhound racing in Scotland](#), submitted by Gill Docherty on behalf of Scotland Against Greyhound Exploitation. This petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to put an end to greyhound racing in Scotland.
36. After a review of the evidence gathered during the previous parliamentary year, the Committee wrote to Greyhound Racing Ireland for information about the breeding of greyhounds in Ireland for export to Great Britain and, at its meeting on 20 March 2024, held an evidence session with greyhound trainers and breeders registered with the Greyhound Board of Great Britain. The Committee intends to conclude consideration of this petition during the next reporting period.

