

Left Behind:

How Policy is Pushing Rural Workers Off the Land

Submitted by Tim Weston, Director of Policy, Politics and the Environment | National Gamekeepers' Organisation | March 2026

About the National Gamekeepers' Organisation

The National Gamekeepers' Organisation (NGO) was founded in 1997 by a group of gamekeepers who recognised that their profession was threatened by public misunderstanding and inadequate political representation. Today the NGO represents approximately 13,000 members - gamekeepers, deer managers, stalkers and those who support the profession - across England and Wales.

The NGO defends and promotes gamekeeping, works to ensure high professional standards across the sector and engages directly with government, regulators and the media on behalf of its members. It is the authoritative voice of the gamekeeper in England and Wales, and it is in that capacity that this briefing is submitted.

Executive Summary

The NGO commissioned a survey of gamekeepers, deer managers and stalkers across England and Wales to provide ministers with an honest picture of the human impact of current and proposed restrictions on game management and rural shooting. The findings are unambiguous: an entire way of life, and the rural communities it sustains, is under acute threat.

Since that survey was completed, the situation has deteriorated further. In March 2026, the Welsh Government launched a formal call for evidence on gamebird release in Wales. That same week, Defra signalled in England's first Land Use Framework that it will explore wider licensing of recreational gamebird release. These announcements compound an already deeply uncertain picture created by the ongoing collapse of the GL45 general licence system at protected sites. The cumulative effect is a profession under siege from all sides.

77%

very or extremely concerned about their future

69%

say shooting's end would be "life changing"

95.8%

say government does NOT support rural communities

A Rapidly Deteriorating Regulatory Picture

The survey data presented in this report was gathered between May and July 2025. In the months since, the regulatory environment has worsened significantly. Ministers should understand the cumulative and compounding nature of these pressures, each individually challenging, together potentially catastrophic for the sector.

England: The Land Use Framework and Proposed Licensing

On 18 March 2026, alongside the publication of England's first Land Use Framework, Defra announced that it will explore wider measures, including potential licensing for recreational gamebird shooting and release in England, beyond the existing rules near protected sites. Defra is expected to launch a call for evidence and public consultation on these proposals.

The National Gamekeepers' Organisation has urged Defra to reconsider, warning that further regulation risks undermining vital conservation work already delivered privately by the sector - equivalent to £500 million per year - without improving environmental outcomes. Sustainable shooting is not the problem; it is part of the solution. Imposing blanket licensing on an activity that already funds most of the practical conservation management in rural England requires robust, balanced justification, which has not been provided.

Wales: Call for Evidence on Gamebird Release

The Welsh Government launched an independent call for evidence on gamebird release on 18 March 2026, examining environmental impacts and informing potential future policy. This follows years of sustained pressure from anti-shooting lobby groups and the Welsh Government's own previous proposals to restrict or ban gamebird release in Wales, which were resisted strongly by the rural sector.

Wales is home to a significant gamekeeper population. The survey respondents include gamekeepers from North Wales, Mid Wales and South Wales. Many manage land that borders or overlaps with conservation designations. Any restriction on gamebird release in Wales would have direct and immediate consequences for their employment, housing and families compounded, for many, by the tied-accommodation risk already documented in this report.

⚠ Combined Effect: Uncertainty on Both Sides of the Border

Gamekeepers in England now face the prospect of new licensing under the Land Use Framework.

Gamekeepers in Wales face a formal review that could lead to restrictions on release.

Both come on top of the ongoing GL45 licensing crisis at protected sites (see below).

This simultaneous multi-front pressure is generating severe anxiety across the profession, at precisely the moment when survey data shows confidence in the future is already at a low point.

The GL45 Licensing Crisis: A Case Study in Regulatory Failure

The treatment of the GL45 general licence which covers the release of pheasants and red-legged partridges on or within 500 metres of a Special Protection Area (SPA), illustrates precisely why gamekeepers have so little confidence in the regulatory system. What was once a simple, workable general licence has been dismantled step by step, creating significant operational and economic uncertainty for shoots near protected sites.

The timeline of events tells the story:

- **Previously:** Gamebird release near SPAs operated under a straightforward general licence (GL45), requiring no individual application.
- **2023–2024:** Following legal pressure from Wild Justice, Natural England declined to reissue GL45 as a general licence. Shoots near SPAs were required to apply for individual licences instead, creating significant administrative burden.
- **2024:** Following engagement with Defra - including on-the-ground meetings with estates, which the NGO commended as the right approach - an improved individual licensing process was introduced for the 2024 season.
- **June 2025:** Defra published its formal decision not to issue GL45 for 2025, citing the risk of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) spreading to protected bird species within SPAs. Individual licences were required for all affected releases.

- **April 2025:** Natural England wrote to the NGO setting out a three-tier classification of SPAs: those where applications were likely to succeed with standard mitigation; those requiring delayed release; and those where release was highly unlikely to be permitted at all unless exceptional circumstances applied. Natural England published a list of SPAs in each category.

The NGO is extremely disappointed that Natural England did not replicate Defra's approach of meeting estates in person and understanding how birds move across individual landscapes. The category system, while intended to provide clarity, has instead created a new layer of uncertainty - particularly for shoots in the third category, who face effective prohibition without having had meaningful opportunity to demonstrate their specific circumstances.

The GL45 trajectory is a microcosm of the wider problem: a sector that previously operated under light-touch, workable regulation has been progressively burdened with individual licensing, category classifications and the prospect of outright refusal, year by year. Each step reduces certainty, increases cost and erodes confidence; exactly the conditions that cause shoots to close and gamekeepers to lose their livelihoods.

The Survey: Who Responded and What They Told Us

Between May and July 2025, the NGO surveyed gamekeepers, deer managers and stalkers across England and Wales. All responses were anonymous. 84% are currently employed in the profession, 47% full time, 37% part time. Nearly 49% have worked in the profession for more than 20 years. This is not a transient workforce. These are skilled, experienced, deeply rooted rural professionals.

Housing, Family and the Risk of Homelessness

43% of respondents live in accommodation tied to their employment. Of those, 38% say they would have to leave their home if their employment ended. For these families, losing the job would simultaneously mean losing the house.

45% have children living at home. The end of game shooting would not merely mean a change of career; it would mean losing income, housing, schools and community in one moment.

"My family, including two young children, are dependent on my income and house that comes with my job. If grouse shooting suddenly ceased, I cannot currently afford a deposit on a mortgage for even the smallest house."

Survey respondent, June 2025

Employment, Local Roots and the Limits of Mobility

- 53% said it was unlikely they would find other local employment if their role disappeared
- Only 9% said it was very likely they could find other local work
- 71% said staying in their local area was very important to them
- 71.7% have strong family or generational roots in the area where they live

Gamekeeping is not easily transferable. Many keepers have spent their entire adult lives developing highly specialised skills in land and wildlife management that have few equivalents in other rural industries. In areas with limited employment markets, the loss of a shoot is not a manageable inconvenience. It is a community-level catastrophe.

Gamekeepers: An Uncosted Public Service

Beyond their professional duties, gamekeepers provide an extraordinary range of unpaid community services that would simply vanish if the profession were diminished. Of our respondents:

- 89% assist with conservation work
- 82% help local farmers or neighbours in emergencies
- 79% assist with fallen trees or blocked lanes
- 70% report or deal with fly-tipping
- 46% clear roads in snow or storms
- 40% assist with wildfire prevention, monitoring or response
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Only 3.2% said they did none of the above. Gamekeepers are, in practical terms, an essential and uncosted rural public service.

Britain's Largest Privately Funded Conservationists

The conservation case for gamekeeping is not a matter of opinion. It is documented in independent scientific research. A nationwide survey carried out jointly by the NGO and the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association and independently analysed by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), found that gamekeepers manage more than 1.6 million hectares (over four million acres) across England, Scotland and Wales. This equates to approximately 65% of sites designated for conservation, including SSSIs, Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas.

The same research found that gamekeepers responding to the survey:

- Provide 23,426 tonnes of supplementary food for farmland birds in winter
- Plant an average of 47.3 hectares (117 acres) of trees per respondent
- Privately fund over £2.2 million worth of wild bird cover, benefiting red-listed species including yellowhammer and tree sparrow
- 38% of moorland keepers are actively rewetting moorland, reducing flooding and improving habitat.

4m+ acres

of land managed by gamekeepers across England, Scotland & Wales

65%

of conservation-designated sites managed with gamekeeper involvement

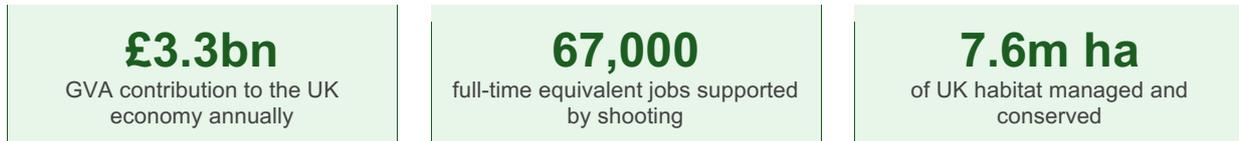
£2.2m+

of private investment in wild bird cover annually

Professor Nick Sotherton of the GWCT has stated that without gamekeepers' considerable contribution to conservation, "wildlife and landscapes would be much the poorer." The NGO asserts: gamekeepers are Britain's largest privately funded group of conservationists. They manage more land for conservation than all National Nature Reserves combined. Any policy that reduces the gamekeeper population does not help the environment. It damages it.

The Economic Case: Value of Shooting 2024

The independently commissioned Value of Shooting report (2024), produced by Cognisense on behalf of 24 leading rural organisations, documents the national economic contribution of the sector:



Shooting providers and volunteers carry out £500 million worth of conservation work each year - equivalent to 26,000 full-time jobs and 14 million workdays. Shooters spend £4.4 billion annually on the UK-based supply chain, much of it in rural economies with no alternatives. This is not a marginal pastime. It is a sector that quietly underpins enormous swathes of the rural economy, conservation estate and community infrastructure.

Political Confidence: A Warning Sign for Government

Gamekeepers were asked which political party best supports them. The results reveal a profession that feels profoundly abandoned by the political mainstream:

- 38.5% named Reform UK as most supportive, the single largest response
- 27.3% named the Conservative Party
- 15.9% selected "None of them"
- Only 0.4% named Labour

Asked directly whether they feel the current government supports rural communities: 95.8% said No. This level of alienation from a significant, historically rooted working population should concern any government that claims to be serious about rural Britain.

An Already Regulated Sector: The Case Against Further Licensing

A central argument advanced by those calling for new licensing of gamebird release and game shooting is that the sector operates in a regulatory vacuum. This is demonstrably false. Game shooting in England and Wales is already one of the most comprehensively regulated rural activities in the country, governed by an extensive framework of primary legislation, statutory instruments and licensing conditions built up over nearly two centuries. The tools government needs to address any genuine concerns already exist. What is lacking is not legislation; it is enforcement and political will to use the powers already on the statute book.

The existing statutory framework includes the following legislation, all of which is currently in force and directly applicable to gamekeeping and game shooting:

- **The Game Act 1831** - the foundation of game law in England and Wales, still substantially in force today. Establishes close seasons for pheasant (1 October to 1 February), partridge (1 September to 1 February), grouse (12 August to 10 December) and other species during which killing is a criminal offence. Prohibits shooting on Sundays and Christmas Day. Prohibits the taking of game at night. Makes it an offence to lay poison baits. This legislation has protected game birds for nearly 200 years. It does not need to be supplemented; it needs to be enforced.

- **The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)** - the primary legislation protecting wild animals, plants and habitats in the UK. Protects all wild birds and their nests and eggs under Section 1; creates criminal offences for intentionally killing, injuring or taking any wild bird. Governs close seasons for wildfowl and other quarry species. Added pheasant and red-legged partridge to Schedule 9 (non-native species requiring a licence to release near protected sites) via statutory instrument in 2021. The powers to regulate releasing near protected sites already flow directly from this Act. No new primary legislation is required.
- **The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000** - substantially strengthened SSSI protection and gave Natural England greatly increased enforcement powers, including the ability to combat neglect and prevent damaging activity on designated sites. Increased the maximum fine for SSSI damage to £20,000 on summary conviction, with unlimited fines on indictment. The powers to act where any activity, including shooting, causes damage to a protected site already exist under this Act and have done for over 25 years.
- **The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017** - implements the EU Habitats and Birds Directives in domestic law (retained post-Brexit). Provides for the designation and protection of Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation; requires Habitats Regulations Assessments for any project that may significantly affect a European site; makes it a criminal offence to deliberately disturb, injure or kill European Protected Species. Notably, Natural England's own 2022 assessment found that gamebird releasing "in general, is currently having a limited effect on the designated sites network in England" and that pheasant rearing was identified as a risk at just 2% of all terrestrial European Sites. The regulatory framework to address those cases already exists within these Regulations.
- **The Animal Welfare Act 2006** - makes it a criminal offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal, including captive-bred gamebirds during the rearing period prior to release. Any operator rearing or releasing gamebirds irresponsibly is already liable to prosecution under this Act. Existing welfare concerns do not require new licensing; they require enforcement of the law that already exists.
- **The Firearms Acts 1968–2017** - all shotguns used in game shooting must be held under a valid shotgun certificate issued by the police following background checks; rifles used for deer stalking require a firearms certificate with additional conditions. Every person who shoots game in England and Wales is already individually licensed by the state. This is not an unregulated activity.
- **The Deer Act 1991** - establishes closed seasons for all six species of deer in England and Wales; prescribes the only legal methods of killing; prohibits shooting deer at night except under licence; creates offences for taking or killing deer without lawful authority. Deer stalkers and managers are already operating under one of the most detailed statutory frameworks of any land management activity.
- **The Pests Act 1954 and Spring Traps Approval Orders** - regulate the use of traps for predator and pest control. Only approved trap types may be legally used; traps must be sited and checked in accordance with statutory requirements; records must be kept. Gamekeepers operating any form of trap are already subject to detailed and enforceable legal conditions.
- **The Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996** - makes it a criminal offence to mutilate, crush, drown or otherwise inflict unnecessary suffering on any wild mammal. Applies to all pest and predator control activities carried out by gamekeepers.
- **The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006** - places a statutory duty on all public bodies to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity; established Natural England with powers of enforcement and direction. The duty to protect biodiversity already rests on every public body in England. It does not require a new layer of licensing to give it effect.

This is not a sector without rules. It is a sector with more rules; more oversight and more individual licensing of its participants than almost any other rural activity. The NGO's position is clear and principled: where there are genuine instances of non-compliance with existing law, the appropriate response is enforcement of that law, not the creation of yet another bureaucratic layer that punishes the overwhelming majority of responsible operators for the failings of a small minority, while adding cost, uncertainty and administrative burden that will push marginal shoots to close and put gamekeeper families out of their homes.

What We Are Asking of You as a Rural MP

Your constituents include gamekeepers. They live in tied cottages on estates in your constituency. Their children attend local schools. Their partners work locally. They clear the roads after snowfall, help farmers in emergencies and quietly fund the conservation of the countryside your constituents walk, enjoy and depend upon. They are asking for your help.

The NGO is not asking for special treatment. We are asking for gamekeepers to be treated with the same respect and consideration afforded to any other skilled worker whose livelihood is affected by government policy. There are five specific things you can do:

- **Meet your local gamekeepers.** Visit an estate in your constituency and see first-hand the conservation work, the habitat management and the community contribution that no government budget funds. We will arrange it. The evidence speaks for itself when you are standing in it.
- **Use GL45 as a catalyst for a broader conversation.** Not every constituency will have shoots affected by the GL45 licensing regime, but the story of GL45 - a workable general licence progressively dismantled without adequate rural consultation, leaving gamekeepers facing prohibition on their livelihoods - is emblematic of how rural workers feel treated by regulation more broadly. We ask you to raise this with ministers as an example of that wider experience, and to seek assurances from government that any consultation on the release of game birds will include a full socio-economic assessment; one that looks beyond the environmental case in isolation and properly accounts for the impact on rural employment, tied housing, family stability and the wider community groups who depend on the sector.
- **Write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.** Ask that the NGO and its members be formally consulted before any licensing framework consultation for gamebird release is progressed. Rural workers should not be the last to be consulted on policies that will end their livelihoods and displace their families.
- **Speak up for rural communities in the debate on the Land Use Framework.** The countryside is not an abstraction. It is people, families, villages and livelihoods. Use this briefing and the survey data it contains to make that case on the floor of the House.
- **Speak to us directly.** The NGO wants to have a discussion with you about the work of gamekeepers and the shooting community and to meet with as many MP's from across Parliament to help build the true picture of game management activities.
- **Reject proposals to license the release of game birds in England.**

The countryside does not ask for much. It asks to be understood.

Behind every statistic in this report is a family; often one that has served the British countryside for generations, privately funding the conservation work that government celebrates but does not pay for. The NGO stands ready to work constructively with ministers. We hope that invitation will be accepted before it is too late.

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