



ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Panel Report

Public

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Title: Seagulls

Report of: Angela Culleton

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Summary:

From time to time the council receives complaints regarding seagulls. The majority of the complaints relate to seagulls attacking individuals during the nesting/breeding season. The majority of the complaints are related to industrial estates although some concern the town centre.

There are a number of methods for controlling seagulls; these include disturbance methods, manipulation of nests, manipulation of food sources, restricting breeding success and removal of adult birds.

Any action must take account of the legislation that is in place to protect wild birds. Only the Herring Gulls, Lesser Black-backed Gull, and Greater Black-backed Gulls are treated as pests species.

The Council currently provide an advisory service for gull control as well as the street cleaning services which reduce food sources.

There is not a significant seagull problem in Carlisle; however there are a number of options for the council to consider:-

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers: None

1. Provide a public service to control seagulls
2. Maintain the current pest control position
3. Employ reactive city centre control measures

It is recommended that the council adopt the second and third options by continuing to provide advice, educating the public to stop feeding birds in the town centre and encouraging businesses to proof their buildings. In addition work with Hesperin Wood and other partners to assess the effectiveness of their gull control and continue the street cleaning programme to remove food accessibility.

It is also recommended that the number of seagull complaints is kept under observation and if the situation deteriorates, consideration could be given to the use of disturbance techniques.

Questions for / input required from Scrutiny: That they consider the content of the report.

Recommendations: That the Council continues with the current service in relation to the public provision of a gull control service and in addition to employ proactive city centre control measures to:-

- Dissuade the public from feeding birds in the town centre
- Encourage businesses to take action to proof their building against nesting gulls
- Maintain a high quality street cleaning service.

To keep under observation the number of complaints received regarding seagulls and if the situation deteriorates consider non intrusive gull control i.e. disturbance by noise or birds of prey.

Contact Officer: Angela Culleton

Ext: 7325

INTRODUCTION

Complaints regarding seagulls in Carlisle are received from time to time by Environmental Health. The complaints tend to arise during the breeding season when seagulls will 'dive bomb' people who get too close to their nesting area.

Complaints regarding seagulls tend to be made in relation to the attacking people or the noise that they make. The Council currently do not provide a service to treat seagulls, due to staff resources, financial implications, ineffectiveness of control measures, legal restrictions and public perception. The report however aims to outline the natural history of the seagulls, possible control measures and issues that may result due to action or inaction taken in tackling the situation.

Natural History

CHARACTERISTICS

Seagulls are large birds and can range up to 68cm from bill to tail and have a wingspan up to 85cm. Although most refer to all gulls as being seagulls, and therefore assume that all species are 'pests', only three species are classed as pests.

These are as follows:-

- a) Herring Gulls
- b) Lesser Black-backed Gull
- c) Greater Black-backed Gull.

The Herring Gull:- on average is 56cm in size. It has a pale grey back and wings with black and white wing tips and a red spot on its yellow bill. Its legs are usually pink.

The Lesser Black-backed Gull:- on average is 53cm in size. It has a grey to dark grey back and wings. Its legs are usually yellow or orange in colour.

The Great Black-backed Gull:- on average is 68cm in size. It has a black back and wings and pink legs.

BEHAVIOUR

More and more seagulls are moving into built up areas to nest. The main reason for this is that food sources are readily available both from people deliberately feeding them and the amount of takeaways and other food refuse strewn around roads and back streets.

Breeding pairs court in April and commence nest building from early May onwards. In towns the nests tend to be constructed from straw, grass, twigs, paper and any other material the gull can conveniently use. These nests can be large and if they are made of material accumulated over several years, they can become quite heavy. This means that if a breeding site is established, then the gulls will return year after year.

LIFE CYCLE

Eggs are laid from early May onwards with two or three being the usual number. The eggs take about three weeks to hatch which means that the first chicks are seen around the beginning of June.

The chicks grow quickly and are quite active which means that they often fall from nests. In towns this often means that they are unable to return to their nests. Small chicks will die if they are not returned, but the larger chicks will be protected by their parents and fed on the ground.

The chicks generally fledge in August and then take about three years to reach maturity when they in turn will start to breed. The life expectancy for gulls can be up to 20 years.

Gulls are social creatures and once roof nesting gets a hold, other gulls will start to move into an area and nest on adjacent buildings, until their numbers build up sufficiently that a colony is established.

Many people find gulls to be a nuisance for a number of reasons.

The main reasons are listed below:-

- Noise caused by calling gulls and their heavy footsteps.
- Mess caused by their droppings, fouling washing, cars, gardens, people and walkways.
- Damage to properties caused by gulls pecking at roofing materials and by nests which block gutters or hold moisture against the building structure.
- Birds can dive bomb and swoop on people and animals.
- Gas flues can become blocked by nesting materials which can have serious consequences (sometimes these can be fatal) if gas fumes are prevented from escaping correctly.
- Mites and other insects can get a hold in houses from the old, abandoned nests, once the chicks have fledged.

Gulls are becoming more common in cities and in Carlisle they tend to congregate in the city centre, where there is often a ready food source and on the industrial estates where a lot of factory roofs provide ideal nesting locations. Kingstown Industrial Estate often experience problems with seagulls, due to its gently sloping roofs and its close proximity to Hespian Wood Landfill site.

It should be noted however that there are large open areas of farm land in the area that can also provide food sources for gulls, especially during ploughing.

METHODS OF CONTROLLING URBAN GULL POPULATIONS

The City Council do not provide any service for controlling gulls. There are however, a number of methods that are used around the UK. These are:

- 1 Disturbance Methods** – It should be noted that once adult gulls have selected a site on which to nest, they can show marked attachment to it regardless of disturbance. Therefore, non-lethal disturbance methods may prove ineffective for deterring breeding birds. However, even if the survival rate of breeding adult gulls in urban colonies is very high (perhaps around 90% per annum), there will still be a proportion of birds (perhaps 10%) that will be breeding for the first time each year. If pre-breeders roosting in or close to urban colonies are subjected to suitable disturbance methods, then it may be possible to deter these more mobile birds from 'selecting' the urban colony in which to breed and use this as a long-term strategy for reducing the size of urban colonies.

- a. Broadcasting sounds**

The playing of the recorded distress calls of gulls has been used successfully to reduce the numbers in some circumstances. The broadcasting of other sonic deterrents, such as bangs, is considered less effective as gulls readily get used to these within urban areas, methods that involve the broadcasting of distress calls or use of pyrotechnics (if the latter were a safe option at all) could prove to be as disturbing to local residents as the gulls themselves.

- b. Use of birds of prey**

The flying of falcons has been used to scare gulls from sites such as airport runways, although this is generally only considered an effective deterrent to gulls if they are flown at least daily. The flying of hawks appear to reduce the proportion of gulls (predominantly Lesser Black-backed Gulls) but the effect, may not be long lasting, suggesting that the birds become used to its presence.

In general, it is believed that birds of prey must be flown daily, over a prolonged period of the breeding season (to deter breeding birds) or a large part of the year (to deter birds at landfills), and that further work is required in subsequent years to produce a long-term effect. The use of Harris Hawks has been reported as being effective in flushing birds from buildings, which can then be secured or protected.

Deterrence work with hawks has been carried out by McVities in Carlisle. The Hawk was flown three times each day, prior to and during the breeding season.

c. Human Disturbance

A trial in Lancashire found that disturbance by humans was the most successful of the non-lethal techniques tested. Human disturbance methods involve using hydraulic platforms to reach sites or scaffolding. However, the locations must be safe to reach.

2 Manipulation of nesting areas

A range of methods and devices have been designed specifically for excluding gulls from nesting areas, such as buildings.

a. *Methods for preventing access, landing or nesting*

Suspended monofilament lines have successfully prevented gulls from occupying established nest sites along with suspended wires.

Even where effective, a general problem with erecting lines or wires is the potential for gulls, and also non-target species, to become entangled within them.

When used specifically in urban areas, the practicality of physical barriers will depend on whether effective arrays of wires or lines can be attached securely in areas where gulls nest or might potentially nest. On flat roofs, any array of lines will need to be extensive to effectively deter nesting gulls.

The physical blocking of nest sites in urban areas may prove successful locally in that gulls are excluded from a single building or part of a building. The techniques were almost 100% successful if the design and placement of the devices were correct for each specific building. Bendy plastic spikes have also been used.

The high levels of site tenacity shown by many gulls to their breeding sites mean that exclusion of individual pairs from a building, or group of buildings, may simply lead them to settle on neighbouring buildings as long as suitable nesting sites are available there. For such techniques to be effective across the scale of the city, gull excluders may need to be erected, and importantly

maintained, to cover all potential gull nest sites over a wide area. There are many practical problems to overcome if the Council wish to achieve such coverage, including the major ones of gaining access to private properties, health and safety considerations and cost.

b. Manipulation of the nesting substrates

The manipulation of the substrates on which gulls chose to nest has been tried with varying success. Although this technique may be an option for gulls nesting on 'natural' substrates within urban areas, it is clearly not an option for deterring roof-nesting gulls.

c. Creation of alternative nesting areas

Although rarely tested for gulls, it may be possible to encourage urban colonies to switch breeding areas so that colonies are concentrated at sites where there is less perceived conflict with human interests. Such a process would probably need to involve: (i) creation of suitable nesting habitat (suitable substrate in a setting that rendered nesting areas free from ground predators; in a location away from human interests; (ii) pro-active attraction of the gulls to the area, perhaps with the use of decoys/sounds; and (iii) use of suitable methods to disturb gulls from current breeding locations that are perceived to be problematic.

3 Manipulation of food sources

The overall availability of all food sources (both natural and human-generated) within or close to urban areas must be a contributory factor influencing the distribution and abundance of urban gulls, as this is an essential requirement for survival and reproduction. Although no studies rigorously quantify the diet of urban gulls in Britain, it is widely perceived but not substantiated that garbage, both at tips and as litter in streets (e.g. remains of take-away food) is important.

The importance of refuse tips for providing food for gulls appears to vary geographically. The importance of refuse in the diet can also differ between individuals, with some specialising in garbage, and the use of such discards can also vary seasonally.

The elimination of garbage as a food source for gulls in urban areas is likely to be effective only in the absence of suitable alternative food supplies within a suitable ranging distance and, clearly, this is likely to vary between specific locations. Gulls may readily switch to alternative feeding sites and food types.

The control of urban gull colonies through limiting food availability does appear to be an option worthy of fuller investigation. In order to predict the likely effects of action to limit the food availability of birds at any given colony, it would be necessary to have knowledge of (i) the current food sources used by the gulls, (ii) the likely limits to the foraging range of the species, all other potential food sources within the likely foraging range, even if these appear not to be of current importance.

4 Restriction of breeding success

Gulls are relatively long-lived bird species, the longevity of adults and also the 2-4 year period of immaturity before breeding will tend to make control via the restriction of breeding success a lengthy process. It is also strongly suspected that traditional egg collecting by humans limited some gull colonies in Britain until at least the 1950s. Therefore persistent and long-term control measures to limit breeding success could potentially be effective for some sites and species, but effectiveness is likely to depend on several factors, notably choice of an effective treatment method, thorough control (treatment of a high proportion of nests) and low levels of immigration from other productive colonies: the presence of adult birds at a site, even with a small number only rearing young, might still attract some potential recruits from other sites.

a. Treatment or removal of eggs or nests

Methods of limiting or preventing successful breeding that have been documented include the removal or destruction of eggs and chicks, puncturing, shaking eggs or injecting eggs to kill the embryo, and coating eggs with oil (such as paraffin) to suffocate the embryo. Gulls can lay replacement clutches following the destruction or removal of eggs necessitating repeat visits to destroy or remove eggs, although the frequency of relaying is reduced if eggs are destroyed late during incubation, and the same applies if chicks are destroyed.

The treatment of eggs to prevent them from hatching (whilst leaving the nest and eggs intact) will generally prevent gulls from relaying and thus reduce the need for repeated treatments per nest, as long as the birds continue to incubate the treated eggs. Repeated visits to a colony will normally still be necessary if the aim is to treat all eggs.

b. Introduction of predators

The introduction of nest predators, as a potential alternative method for controlling breeding productivity, has been used successfully on some island

gull colonies in North America (using foxes). Such an approach often has limitations in that non-target species can also be taken by the predators and the predators will require alternative food if they are to remain in the long-term and prevent gulls from recolonising. In urban areas, where predators of eggs and chicks, such as rats and cats, are generally abundant in any case, it is likely that gulls will be nesting in areas that are largely inaccessible to them in the first place and hence this is unlikely to be a suitable option for the control of urban gull colonies.

c. Contraception

In principal, contraceptive techniques could be used to restrict the breeding success of gulls and may have applications in future.

5 Removal of adult birds

The live capture and transportation of fully grown gulls away from problem areas is potentially practical, although relocated gulls would probably (or even certainly) return to the area of capture.

An alternative to killing gulls at breeding colonies is to target them at feeding sites, such as refuse dumps. Here there may be more potential to trap and kill, shoot or poison. The local breeding birds that survive might also become deterred by the disturbance caused by either trapping or shooting, however, and learn to avoid the feeding areas where such activities are undertaken, such that only a proportion of the colony is removed.

a. Use of narcotics

Narcotic baits, such as alpha-chlorolose, do not generally kill birds immediately on ingestion but, rather, result in 'drowsiness' and death over a period of hours. In practice, where baits are administered at colonies, access needs to be restricted to prevent disturbance and to maximise the proportion of birds that die whilst sitting on or close to nests. Carcasses can then be removed and appropriately disposed off. If disturbance to the colony occurs, gulls that have ingested baited food may fly away and die elsewhere. The control of gulls in urban areas using narcotic baits at nests is only likely to be practical in situations where (i) access to nest sites is possible (for placing the baits), (ii) baited areas can be sealed from human disturbance temporarily and (iii) carcasses can be cleared up for disposal. Such criteria are unlikely to be met in city centres or residential areas but such techniques might be practical on some industrial sites with restricted public access. In addition a licence for the use of narcotics has to be obtained.

b. Shooting

The shooting of gulls at breeding colonies, as well as targeting breeding birds, may also eliminate potential recruits (young birds attending colonies) and potentially also scare birds away through disturbance. The shooting of gulls has been proven effective as a control measure on some small islands. Issues of access and safety are obviously likely to limit the use of shooting within urban areas, however, and, as with all control measures, it is essential that appropriate licensing is in place. The perceptions of the public to the use of shooting in urban areas must also be a major factor when considering the use of this control technique

6 Legislation to protect wild birds in England

Countryside Act 1981, which is underpinned by the European Union (EU) Birds Directive (79/409/EEC). The requirements of the Birds Directive to protect, manage and control all species of naturally occurring wild birds were met by the relevant sections of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (WCA)1981.

Subject to the provisions of Part 1 of the amended WCA1981, it is an offence under Section 1 of the Act if any person intentionally or recklessly:

- kills, injures or takes any wild bird;
- takes, damages, destroys or otherwise interferes with the nest of any wild bird while that nest is in use or being built;
- at any other time, takes, damages, destroys or otherwise interferes with any nest habitually used by any wild bird included in Schedule A1;
- obstructs or prevents any wild bird from using its nest; or
- Takes or destroys an egg of any wild bird.

In addition to the three actions listed above, Article 5 of the Birds Directive also states that Member States should prohibit:

- Deliberate disturbance of any wild bird particularly during the period of breeding and rearing, in so far as disturbance would be significant having regard to the objectives of this directive; and
- Keeping birds of species the hunting and capture of which is prohibited.

Section 16 of the amended WCA 1981 gives the power to authorities to grant licences that permit the killing and taking of wild birds for certain reasons, however, when there is no other effective solution and on a selective basis and in respect of a small number of birds. The amended WCA 1981 also gives these authorities the power to amend the list of prohibited methods of killing or taking wild birds, by adding methods to, or omitting methods from the list. The availability of these additional

powers stems from Article 9 of the Birds Directive, which states that Member States may derogate from the provisions of Article 5 (the killing and taking of wild birds or their eggs or nests) for certain reasons:

- in the interests of public health & safety;
- in the interests of air safety;
- to prevent serious damage to crops, livestock, forests, fisheries, and water;
- for the protection of flora & fauna;
- for the purposes of research and teaching, of repopulation, of re-introduction and for the breeding necessary for these purposes; or
- to permit, under strictly supervised conditions and on a selective basis the capture, keeping or other judicious use of certain birds in small numbers.

Note that there is no provision to derogate from either the provisions of the EC Birds Directive or the amended WCA 1981 on the basis of noise, or damage caused to human property by gulls or their droppings.

7 Options available

Given the legislation and methods outlined above, the Council have three main options.

a. The Council provide a public service to control seagulls

This would require manpower and equipment and thus have significant implications. The effectiveness of the treatments would not be instant and sometimes action would not be appropriate due to health and safety or wildlife legislation implications.

It is therefore likely that the provision of such a service would not meet customer expectations.

b. Maintain the current position in relation to the Pest Control Service

This would be to give advice and/or recommend that the complainant contact a pest control company specialising in gull control.

c. Employ reactive city centre control measures

This would involve integrated working within Local Environment to dissuade the public from feeding birds in the town centre and encourage businesses to ensure that their food waste is disposed of correctly. Manipulating food sources maybe an effective technique for the city as it has been noted that individuals within the city centre are feeding gulls and pigeons, this will only encourage their presence. At the same time work with Hespian Wood and other partners to assess the effectiveness of their gull control measures. In addition explore the opportunity of

improving the street cleaning programme on Sundays to remove potential food sources.

The effectiveness of the measures should be kept under observation and the number of enquires regarding seagulls should be logged.

Potential Future Actions

If the situation relating to seagulls in Carlisle significantly deteriorates then consideration could be given to disturbance techniques, namely:

None intrusive disturbance techniques, this could include the use of noise or the use of a hawk. The use of noise in the city centre especially bangs etc, it is not considered appropriate as the city centre is also residential and some individuals have a nervous disposition.

Thus the use of a hawk/falcon could be considered, but as mentioned in the main body of the text it is believed that if this method is used the birds of prey must be flown at least daily over a prolonged period.

8 The current problem in Carlisle

The Council do not hold records on gull populations and complaints regarding gulls made by telephone. Customers are currently advised that removing gulls is not a service that the Council currently provide.

In the past few years we have had approximately half a dozen complaints made by companies on the industrial estates regarding seagulls attacking members of staff. This is the most common complaint, but it tends to only take place when people get close to nesting or fledgling birds. In addition as most of these complaints arise from companies on industrial estates, they do have measures to restrict nesting in the vicinity of their work force. Other reasons for complaint have been gull droppings contaminating cars out for sale and a guest at a hotel who complained about the noise made by the seagulls.

Table showing number of written complaints regarding gulls

	Gull complaints	Other
2008	1 City	1
2009	1 City	4
2010	0	0

Officials report that the only complaints made by the public in relation to seagulls have been where they have attacked individuals who have inadvertently got too close to a nesting area or where the seagulls in town have flown too close to individuals making them feel uncomfortable. Other complaints have arisen where people feed birds and neighbours complain about gull droppings on their windows, cars and washing.

Gull complaints although not currently logged are presently few in number though some of the complainants are very persistent in their desire for action.

9 Recommendations

That the Council continues with the current service in relation to the public provision of a gull control service and in addition to employ proactive city centre control measures to:-

- Dissuade the public from feeding birds in the town centre
- Encourage businesses to take action to proof their building against nesting gulls
- Maintain a high quality street cleaning service.

To keep under observation the number of complaints received regarding seagulls and if the situation deteriorates consider non intrusive gull control i.e. disturbance by noise or birds of prey.

Impact assessments

Does the change have an impact on the following?

Equality Impact Screening	Impact Yes/No?	Is the impact positive or negative?
Does the policy/service impact on the following?		
Age	No	
Disability	No	
Race	No	
Gender/ Transgender	No	
Sexual Orientation	No	
Religion or belief	No	
Human Rights	No	
Health inequalities	No	
Rurality	No	

If you consider there is either no impact or no negative impact, please give reasons:

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If an equality Impact is necessary, please contact the P&P team.