

Letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Covid-19 support measures – deer management

I write in relation to the Scottish Government Coronavirus mitigation measures and in particular the business rates relief for “retail, hospitality and leisure” businesses which, apparently on Government guidance, is not being extended by local authorities to “deer forests” or “shootings”. While the general rates relief of 1.6% for all payers of business rates is naturally welcome, this falls far short of the treatment of other hospitality and leisure businesses where all rates are relieved in the current crisis year. A number of businesses in our sector benefit from the Small Business Bonus Scheme and are relieved of rates but many deer management businesses do not and it is on their behalf that the Association of Deer Management Groups urges you to consider extending this measure to “deer forests”.

When sporting rates were reintroduced in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 it was on the basis that the rating treatment of sportings was anomalous and that country businesses should be treated like any other business sector. Now it would appear that sportings have been singled out by being excluded from business support measures made available to other sectors.

May I also make a plea for extending the Coronavirus small business support grants and business loans to deer management businesses on the same basis as for other businesses.

Deer management is an essential environmental and climate management function and, as such, is under regular Parliamentary scrutiny to ensure that wild deer populations are being sufficiently controlled. A review is ongoing at present. In most situations deer management receives no direct support from public funds and is largely funded by the letting of stalking which is a part of Scotland’s tourism offer attracting visitors from across the world; also by the sale of venison. In a survey commissioned by ADMG in 2014, consultancy Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC) estimated that deer management generates £140.8m for Scotland’s rural economy and supports 2532 jobs. There is a real likelihood that a significant proportion of those jobs will be lost if the Covid-19 support measures are not made available and either no lettings take place this year, or the epidemic leads to many cancellations, of which some are already occurring. I should also mention that the venison market is currently closed and that if that continues very little deer management can be done until it reopens.

I attach a heartfelt plea which I recently received from Winston Churchill who operates a deer management service and venison business in Argyll. Winston is well known to your Ministerial colleague Mike Russell. He refers to the devastating effect on his business should there be no letting or no reopening of the venison market this year. I also attach a recently received request from Alex Macdonald of Achnacarry Sporting and Country Pursuits from Lochaber. Both speak for themselves and offer good examples of how deer management businesses could be affected if they remain unsupported through the current crisis, as well as illustrating the real concerns of many in the industry and the frustration that the deer management sector has been excluded from key Scottish Government Covid mitigation measures available to other businesses.

I shall be pleased to discuss this further with you either by telephone or virtual meeting. I am copying in your Ministerial colleagues Roseanna Cunningham, Fergus Ewing and Marie Gougeon for information.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Cooke
Chair
Association of Deer Management Groups