

Hen Harrier Reintroduction - Options Appraisal

Background

A key component of the 2016 Joint Action Plan, the reintroduction aims to establish a self-sustaining farmland breeding population to help bring about Favourable Conservation Status for hen harriers in England. The release location at Parsonage Farm NNR is fully equipped to host the reintroduction with infrastructure comprising offices, CCTV welfare monitoring system, food preparation and storage units, bird management and release aviaries and a ground predator-proof field specifically for translocations. Strong links with conservationists and academics in France and Spain have yielded invaluable guidance and a collaborative research programme on the spatial ecology of hen harriers in Europe. Project spend to date (capital and seasonal staff costs) is in the region of £280-£300k.

An early decision was to obtain founders from wild populations, with France being the obvious first port of call due to its large hen harrier population, active conservation programmes and geographical proximity. Although potential collaborators remain supportive of the reintroduction itself, they are currently unable assist in provision of wild donor stock due to an objection over the brood management trial, fearing their hunting groups could seek similar measures ex-situ raptor management more widely in France. Ground-level communications and research collaborations stay active and positive.

As sourcing from France was not possible in the short term, the project has since focussed on securing permission from the Junta de Castilla y Leon to collect wild birds from the Salamanca area. An initial formal request was made in January 2019, followed by a revised proposal in October 2019 (also re-submitted in January 2020). Verbal feedback in February indicated that Junta were unaware there was a material difference between our original and the revised proposal. As we understand that the Junta were still willing to discuss our revised proposal, we requested an urgent meeting. Unfortunately this request coincided with the COVID19 outbreak across Europe. Communications were paused, with the aim of re-opening discussions as soon as appropriate. Meanwhile, the project continues to explore other potential sourcing locations and Countries, including other autonomous regions in Spain.

Our discussions with prospective donors have been subject to negative interventions in France and Spain, with the SEO (Birdlife partner) actively lobbying the Junta de Castilla y Leon not to support the reintroduction. The lack of engagement from Spanish authorities to date, latterly exacerbated by COVID19 restrictions on travel and fieldwork, have made it impossible to translocate birds in 2020. The pandemic has also highlighted some vulnerability in sole reliance on sourcing from abroad, which may be subject to ecological stochasticity, periodic third party interventions and other events beyond our control

In the light of the above, the project team has been commissioned to undertake an appraisal of all available options, evaluating risks and benefits of each and making a clear recommendation for progression of the reintroduction programme. The **full appraisal is set out in Table 1**, with the overall most viable option presented as the recommended pathway below. Further contextual information for each option is provided on page 3.

Recommendation

The recommendation is to twin track the development of a conservation breeding programme, alongside broadened pursuit of wild donor stock. Dialogue with authorities and collaborators in Spain and France can be re-framed in this regard, while opening new discussions with countries such as Finland, Belarus, Sweden and Norway, amongst others.

Table 1 Options appraisal

Option	Sub-option	Risks	Benefits	Overall viability
Cessation	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NE & Defra reputational risk • Undermines HH recovery plan • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost saving 	Zero
Deferral	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stagnation, leading to cessation • NE & Defra reputational risk • Undermines recovery plan • Loss of Governmental political and financial support • Loss of skills, experience and contacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for potential change in political dimension • Interim cost saving 	Zero
Partner delivery	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NE and Defra reputation risk • No partners willing to deliver due to negative associations • Partner experiences identical barriers and is unable to deliver 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider support base • New expertise • Alignment with partner delivery agenda 	Low
Wild stock (only)	Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued negative interventions & political obstacles • Lengthened timescales and financial commitment • Language barrier and approach to conservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds upon strong ground level support • Potential alternative regions • Spatial ecology research collaboration unlocks official approval 	Medium
	France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above but with ongoing specific objections to the Brood Management trial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide network of contacts • Ease of transport • Large HH population • Extensive conservation programmes and research 	Medium
	Scandinavia & Belarus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above but may fetter alternative options below • No existing project contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different personalities and political dimension • Reduced language barrier 	Medium
	Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above but with elevated political tensions • SNH Resistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No import/export approvals • Ease of transport 	Low
Conservation breeding programme (only)	In-house	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential uplift in overall project costs • Ongoing liabilities • Possible planning consent • Lack of in-house expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-stop shop • Reduced sourcing obstacles • Research and demonstration • Public engagement 	Medium
	Contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of NE public engagement and demonstration opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing facilities and staff • Cost efficiency • Expertise increases success • Improved sourcing • Reduced liabilities 	Medium-High

Table 1 Options appraisal (continued)

Option	Sub-option	Risks	Benefits	Overall viability
Combined conservation breeding & augmentation with wild stock	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above but potential for negative interventions & political obstacles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programme autonomy reduces political obstacles Increase in annual numbers released Reduced programme length and costs Maximises chances of success 	High

Context of optionsCessation, deferral or delivery by 3rd party

While presented for completeness, none of these options would seem viable due to the associated reputational risk to Natural England and Defra from failure to directly deliver to the reintroduction; a key component and Government commitment to the Joint Action Plan to increase the English hen harrier population.

Wild stock (only)

Our current proposal is founded on a broader harrier conservation collaboration with the local group of the SEO in Salamanca, requiring an investment of NE staff time and funds in the associated fieldwork and infrastructure required to facilitate collection. Whilst supply has up to now focused on Spain (and NE France), Finland, Belarus, Sweden and Norway also hold substantial breeding populations and may be willing to supply birds. Furthermore, English is widely spoken in Scandinavian countries which will aid opening and ongoing communications.

Conservation breeding programme (only)

A breeding programme based in southern England using rehabilitated captive adult birds from France and/or Spain to produce a core number of progeny for the reintroduction. An initial breeding programme will inherently be small in scale due to initial availability of suitable stock but can be expanded over time, based on success. Please see the attached full proposal for further details.

Combined conservation breeding with augmentation from wild stock

Although it is likely that translocated birds will encounter and breed with native harriers in time, periodic supplementation with some wild stock will increase both total numbers released and genetic heterogeneity, while shortening the total length and improving the overall effectiveness of the reintroduction programme.

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Date: July 2020