



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA



DUNCAN BAKER MP
LOCAL, LISTENING, LONG TERM

Steve Blatch
North Norfolk District Council Offices
Holt Road
Cromer
Norfolk
NR27 9EN

7th September, 2021

Dear Steve,

Harassment of Seals

Following recent press coverage and the launching of an online petition, a significant number of constituents have been in touch with me regarding the harassment of seals and other wildlife at various locations along the North Norfolk coast: most particularly at Horsey, but with other reports of incidents at Wells, Weybourne and elsewhere.

It is increasingly clear that education and awareness campaigns are having a limited impact on this longstanding problem, and that we now need to consider what effective enforcement options might be available in the longer term.

As I see it, there are two issues:

- An increasing number of anecdotal reports (from coastguards, rangers and wardens working for our landowners and wildlife organisations, and members of the public) suggest that we now have so many warning and/or instructional signs across the district (placed both by NNDC and others) that it is having the effect of making everyone 'sign blind'.

Whilst it is entirely understandable that, during Covid, there was a necessity for signage warning of the dangers and reminding the public of the need to wash hands, maintain effective social distancing etc, there is now perhaps a need for a rationalisation, across the district, as to what signage is strictly necessary in the present environment. The effect of signage warning of the dangers of, for example, climbing on cliffs or rocks, or keeping away from wildlife, is negated by the sheer number of warnings about other things. Put simply, there are now so many signs telling people what to do, that they are ignoring all of them.

- Whilst the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 criminalises the intentional or reckless damaging, disturbing, or destroying of wildlife habitats, with seals protected under Schedule 5 of the Act, the question of jurisdiction on a coast is a complex one.

Inland, issues such as these would often fall within the remit of a police service's Rural or Wildlife Crimes Unit, but to take Horsey as an example, it is somewhat unclear as to whether an incident should be responded to by the police, the RSPCA, the Marine Management Organisation, the local authority, the National Trust, or the Wash and North Norfolk Marine Partnership.

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With so many agencies involved, I believe we need to work together to reach some clarity as to how incidents such as those taking place along our coastline can be responded to effectively.

An obvious solution is to introduce local byelaws to protect our seal habitats, along with some form of effective enforcement – such as a seal warden. Given NNDC's recent expertise in introducing covid wardens to our streets, the council seems like an important potential partner in any further exploration of these matters.

Given the challenges involved, I would be grateful for a conversation with you about how we might move towards a point of co-operation and communication between the various different agencies, and how such co-operation might be facilitated. It is clear that, together, we need to find a solution to the situation given the evident public concern, and the ongoing risk of harm and distress to our seal colonies.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'DB', written in a cursive style.

Duncan Baker MP
Member of Parliament for North Norfolk