

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: Fireworks, HC 1929

Tuesday 11 June 2019

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Members present: Helen Jones (Chair); Martyn Day; Mike Hill; Paul Scully; Daniel Zeichner.

Questions 1 - 38

Witness

I: Sue Kerr, Petitioner.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Susan Kerr – written evidence](#)

Examination of witness

Witness: Sue Kerr.

Q1 **Chair:** I welcome Sue Kerr, who is the administrator of the Fireworks Abatement UK group. She is here to speak not only on behalf of herself but on behalf of a number of other people, too. The Committee is here to hear about your experiences and concerns. We would like to hear how the Fireworks Abatement UK group came to be in the first place. What led to it being set up?

Sue Kerr: Julie Doorne set it up to start with, primarily after she saw how stressed animals were getting. Dogs were bolting during walks, and horses were running through fences and aborting foals, and so on. Almost immediately, it became apparent how many people were affected by fireworks as well; they were contacting us and telling us how they were affected. We now represent anybody who is affected by fireworks, human or animal.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. We have had quite a lot of people contact us with concerns about animal welfare, but you are saying that is not your only focus and that it is about people, too? Can you give us some examples from your experience of how people have been affected by fireworks?

Sue Kerr: Quite a lot of health issues are affected. We have them all listed in our report; there are too many to go into. One of the main ones would be veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, who cannot cope with sudden loud noises. One of the others, which surprised me to start with, but it is obvious when you think about it, is people with hearing difficulties who wear hearing aids. If they have a hearing aid switched on and a firework suddenly goes off, it is very painful for them.

Q3 **Chair:** That is something we have not thought about, so it is interesting to hear.

Sue Kerr: We have heard of people who either live with that sudden pain every now and again or, for the entire firework period, switch them off.

Q4 **Chair:** We spoke last month to some military veterans, who were quite badly affected. Their evidence was powerful. It is interesting to hear that they are part of your group, too. You are saying that there are a whole host of issues affecting humans and animals?

Sue Kerr: Yes, absolutely.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. I shall hand over to Paul Scully, who wants to ask you about animals in particular.

Q5 **Paul Scully:** Thank you very much for coming this afternoon, Sue. You talked in your evidence about your own example with your dog. Could you tell us exactly what happened with the fireworks and how that encapsulates your campaign?



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Sue Kerr: I first got involved with the campaign with my previous dog. I had two dogs; one was not bothered at all and the other was terrified of fireworks. That is when I got involved. I was walking my present dog the Sunday before Christmas last year; it was about 4 o'clock, not quite dark, and three or four very loud fireworks suddenly went off right next to us. I had no idea that it was going to happen. My dog was terrified; she tried to run away, although I managed to hold on to her.

Q6 **Paul Scully:** She was on the lead at the time?

Sue Kerr: She was on the lead, yes. How on earth was I supposed to know that was going to happen? They may or may not have told their immediate neighbours they were going to do it—I do not know—but not anyone just walking past, as I was.

Q7 **Paul Scully:** Is your dog normally nervous on bonfire night, and those sorts of thing, in the house?

Sue Kerr: She does not like them. She is not as bad as a lot of examples we have seen, but that day she was.

Q8 **Paul Scully:** You have had plenty of examples of other dogs, from dog owners responding to you?

Sue Kerr: Yes, lots and lots. They go to the very extreme, where some dogs have had heart attacks. It has gone to that extreme.

Q9 **Paul Scully:** You mentioned your hearing, as well.

Sue Kerr: Yes, because it was right beside me, my ear hurt for three or four weeks. I was worried that I wasn't going to get my hearing back.

Q10 **Paul Scully:** You said that you would not own a horse or a cat until you could be sure of keeping them safe from fireworks.

Sue Kerr: That's right.

Q11 **Paul Scully:** Are there any other incidents you have come across?

Sue Kerr: Having a cat is a nightmare if fireworks are going off, because you do not know when you can let them out and when you need to keep them in. You cannot reasonably keep them in for three or four months of the year. During the rest of the year, you do not know what is going to happen anyway.

It is the same with horses. If you have a horse in livery and a dog at home that is worried about fireworks, you cannot be in two places at one time. If you are at home calming your dog, you cannot be at the yard calming your horse.

Q12 **Daniel Zeichner:** Thank you for coming to see us. We have heard from others, and it was suggested in your evidence, that the season has been gradually getting longer.

Sue Kerr: Yes.



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Q13 **Daniel Zeichner:** How long is it, in your experience? How long has this been going on? When was it first noticed?

Sue Kerr: It has noticeably got longer since the millennium. Fireworks got more popular then.

Q14 **Daniel Zeichner:** We have already heard about the effect that is having. How long would you put it at? Is it now fully from October through to new year and beyond?

Sue Kerr: It tends to start the first week of October or so, and goes on well into the new year.

Q15 **Daniel Zeichner:** My city may be slightly different from others. It has a world-famous university, with lots of colleges. I have noticed that quite a lot of corporate events go on, and part of the discussion is about whether there should be public displays or whether we should do something about private sales. It seems to me to be somewhere in between. Is that something your campaign has come up against? On some evenings in Cambridge, completely out of the blue, suddenly the sky is lit up and there is a lot of noise. I get no sense that people are being prepared for it.

Sue Kerr: It is very difficult even around fireworks night. Last year, over four nights, I think we had 12 professional displays all within easy hearing distance of my house. They just went on and on, and, in between, you had all the private displays as well. As you say, it seems that any occasion is an excuse for fireworks now.

Q16 **Daniel Zeichner:** My sense is that, among some groups for whom perhaps money is no object, it is an additional extra that is laid on. I am sure that the people there enjoy it. From your campaign's point of view, is that something you would want to see tackled, as well as the individual? I am probably putting words into your mouth.

Sue Kerr: Definitely.

Q17 **Daniel Zeichner:** Presumably, you have people in your campaign reporting to you from across the country. I suppose what I was getting at is whether there is a wider experience that you are coming across.

Sue Kerr: Yes, definitely. It seems to be any occasion, even people firing their loved one's ashes into the atmosphere via fireworks.

Q18 **Daniel Zeichner:** Really.

Sue Kerr: Yes. We have noticed that there are several companies now that offer to put ashes into fireworks for you. There is even one, unbelievably, that has a do-it-yourself version, where you can put your own ashes in—not your own.

Daniel Zeichner: Yes, that would be slightly mind-boggling.

Sue Kerr: Probably better not to.



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Daniel Zeichner: It could be deferred, maybe.

Q19 **Chair:** When we debated the last petition, a lady wrote to me who lived near a wedding venue. She and others were disturbed by fireworks in the way Daniel described. Has your group any views on how you would cope with what I suppose we would call semi-public displays? Would you want a cap set on the number that could happen in a particular area, or would you want each one separately licensed? Do you have any thoughts?

Sue Kerr: I think you would have to. It is all very well saying that you have to inform people, but if one person informs you that they are having fireworks on Friday night and somebody else says that they are having them on Saturday night and somebody else on Sunday night, what can you do? They are telling you that it is going to happen. Yes, I would say, definitely.

Q20 **Mike Hill:** You have a free rein on this one, because my question is about the obvious thing. Locally, who do you complain to? What kind of responses have you got back? In particular, I mean the local authority, and the kind of replies that have come back to you. I know you are disappointed with some of the points that you have put to the local police as well. It would be interesting to hear what your opinions are on the complaints system, on the answers back and the difficulties you have encountered.

Sue Kerr: Most of the problems come when fireworks are legal, so there is no comeback really. You cannot complain to the local authority, because there is nothing it can do, unless it is the same person setting them off all the time, which it tends not to be. It tends to be a range of people in a locality, and there is nothing it can do, because they are perfectly legal.

We have also heard lots of times, on social media, that when somebody complains that fireworks are being used illegally and you suggest they ring the police, their response is always, "What's the point? They won't do anything; we've tried that before. They won't even give an incident number." We have been told that most police forces do not know the laws on fireworks, and when people have phoned after 11 o'clock, for example, they have had to be told that it is illegal to have them after 11 o'clock, because they did not know.

Q21 **Mike Hill:** Do you find that there is frustration among the enforcement authorities about how to deal with this? A firework goes off and that's it, isn't it?

Sue Kerr: Yes.

Q22 **Mike Hill:** In terms of noise pollution, and so on, I imagine it would be difficult for them to enforce anything.

Sue Kerr: Yes, absolutely.

Q23 **Chair:** What about illegal sales of fireworks? Has your group had people



giving you examples of where that has happened, and how it has been dealt with or not dealt with? Do you think that trading standards officials have enough manpower or powers to deal with it?

Sue Kerr: That is something I do not really know about. We have been told, and people have noticed, that the only advice we can give is to go to the local authority or trading standards.

Chair: That is fair enough.

Q24 **Martyn Day:** We have had four very large e-petitions on the fireworks issue in recent years. How do you feel the Government response has been to those? What have you thought of the debates so far in Parliament?

Sue Kerr: We do not seem to be getting anywhere. That is what we feel. We feel that, yes, there have been petitions, which have taken less and less time to reach the 100,000 threshold. There are also lots of petitions on other platforms; we have a Change.org petition at the moment, which around 390,000 people have signed, and it is still going up. People keep signing petitions, because they do not feel there is anything else they can do.

Q25 **Martyn Day:** We share your pain, which is why we are having this inquiry.

Sue Kerr: We feel that everything has always been biased towards the fireworks industry, to be honest, and the effect on the public is not taken into account.

Q26 **Martyn Day:** Through this process, we are going to look at a range of options and possibilities. Obviously, you would prefer organised events and a ban on regular sales, but if we did not manage to persuade the Government to do that, what other methods do you think would help?

Sue Kerr: The group has always said that it did not want a complete ban on public sales, but to keep them to the traditional celebration dates. Personally, I would go for a complete ban on sales and use by the public. I do not know that you can police it unless you take them away from the public. As you say, a firework goes up and it has gone. Who knows where it has come from, sometimes? There is nothing you can do about it.

Q27 **Chair:** We have had evidence from various people. When we have had debates in the past, we have had people giving evidence to us. What is your view of people who say that 5 November is traditional? Obviously, some religious groups use them for religious celebrations, such as Diwali, Eid and so on. How in your view could their objections be coped with, if you went to public displays only?

Sue Kerr: To be honest, I do not know, which is why the group has always said to take them back to traditional celebration dates, to include 5 November, new year's eve, Diwali and Chinese new year. There are several.



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Q28 **Chair:** You want sales restricted to a very short window around those dates. Is that right?

Sue Kerr: Yes.

Q29 **Chair:** I do not want to misinterpret what you are asking for.

Sue Kerr: The other thing would be to look at how fireworks are sold. At the moment, around 5 November, when you go into any large supermarket they are right at the entrance, in brightly coloured packaging. I do not know that that is the best way to sell fireworks. They can be bought on impulse.

Q30 **Chair:** You want them to be limited for sale at certain places only?

Sue Kerr: Yes.

Q31 **Chair:** How much of it do you think is about restricting sales, and how much is about the lack of respect and understanding between neighbours, the community and so on? Could it be coped with by trying to increase public awareness of the harm fireworks can do to some people?

Sue Kerr: It would be nice to think that. With the numbers that go off, it is very difficult. It is all very nice to have one neighbour saying to their next-door neighbours that they are going to have fireworks, but how far will they go to warn people? They can be heard over a very large area. Plus the next-door neighbour might say that they are going to have them the next night and somebody else might say that they will have them the next night. It can go on and on. Once they have told you that they are going to have them, you cannot say, "Sorry, that's inconvenient for me; I won't be there to look after my animals. Can you have them another night?" I do not see that that is going to happen.

Q32 **Chair:** I think that is the point. When I was growing up, everyone had their fireworks on 5 November, but they now spread out to weekends around that time, don't they? I see that point.

This question is theoretical, and I would just like to get your take on it. How would you answer people who say, "Well, I'm not doing any harm. I'm entitled to let off a few fireworks in my back garden; it's a tradition."? People have written to me saying that this is the nanny state. What would be your answer to those people?

Sue Kerr: I think people do it because they can. If they were not legal, most people probably would not mind. They would probably prefer to go to an organised display. Fireworks are expensive. It is obviously better for everybody involved to go to organised displays, where you get a better display anyway.

Q33 **Mike Hill:** My memory has come back. Do you feel that parents in particular feel obligated to buy fireworks at certain times for their children?



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Sue Kerr: Yes, quite often. It comes back to having them in the entrance to the supermarket. If you go in with the kids, there is going to be pester power to have them.

Q34 **Chair:** We have heard from some people, too, that fireworks are getting stronger and noisier. Does your group have any evidence of that from people who have contacted you?

Sue Kerr: Evidence, no.

Q35 **Chair:** Anecdotal?

Sue Kerr: Yes, absolutely. It feels like they are getting louder.

Q36 **Chair:** Is there anything you would like to add, Sue, to the evidence you have given us today?

Sue Kerr: Yes. It is about the logging of incidents. We were trying to find out how often things were happening, and we were looking at how police forces logged incidents. We found that there is no usable information to come from them, because they all log them differently. Some of the freedom of information requests were coming back saying, "Sorry, there's just too much; we can't possibly go through it all." We found that the information was worthless.

Q37 **Chair:** We cannot tease out the extent of the problem, because it is not being recorded. Is that what you are saying?

Sue Kerr: Not until they start recording it in a uniform way across the country.

Q38 **Chair:** That is a very useful and interesting piece of evidence. Thank you very much indeed, and thank you for coming today. It has been very useful to hear what you have to say.

Sue Kerr: Can I say one other thing? We were looking at garden sizes, because category 2 fireworks now have a safety distance of 8 metres, which means you have to have a 16 square metre empty space in which to fire category 2 fireworks. I know that my garden is nowhere near that size, and none of my neighbours' gardens is anywhere near that size, so I do not understand how it can be said that most people use fireworks safely when they are setting them off in gardens that are far too small.

Chair: That is also very useful.

We are grateful to you for coming. We know that sometimes being asked up here in front of a Select Committee is a bit disconcerting for people, but we have been interested to hear what you have to say. We will be taking other evidence in time, and we will produce a report with recommendations to the Government. As always, if there is anything you think of when you have gone, or you think, "Oh, I should have said that, and I didn't," feel free to email us and let us know what we have not asked you that we should have asked you. We are very grateful to you for coming today. Thank you very much.