

New legislation to crack down on cruel illegal hare coursing

Plans to strengthen the powers and penalties available to tackle the barbaric practice of hare coursing were set out by the Government today (Tuesday 4 January 2022).

Brown hares are widespread across the UK but numbers are declining. Their population is estimated at less than half a million in England and they are listed as a priority in the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan. An iconic sight in the British countryside, the brown hare is known for its long, black-tipped ears and fast running – it can reach speeds of 45mph – and is most commonly found on arable land and open grassland. They face a range of threats, including poaching and habitat loss.

Hare coursing is an illegal activity – where dogs are used to chase, catch and kill hares – and is a serious problem in some rural areas. Not only does hare coursing involve cruelty to wild animals, it is also associated with a range of other criminal activities, including theft, criminal damage, violence and intimidation.

In amendments tabled to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill today, the Government has set out measures to strengthen law enforcement for hare coursing by increasing penalties, introducing new criminal offences and creating new powers for the courts to disqualify convicted offenders from owning or keeping dogs – this includes an order to reimburse the costs incurred when dogs are seized in kennels.

The proposals include:

- Increasing the maximum penalty for trespassing in pursuit of game under the Game Acts (the Game Act 1831 and the Night Poaching Act 1828) to an unlimited fine and introducing – for the first time – the possibility of up to six months' imprisonment.
- Two new criminal offences: firstly, trespass with the intention of using a dog to search for or pursue a hare; and secondly, being equipped to trespass with the intention of using a dog to search for or pursue a hare both punishable on conviction by an unlimited fine and/or up to six months' imprisonment.
- New powers for the courts to order, on conviction, the reimbursement of costs incurred by the police in kennelling dogs seized in connection with a hare coursing-related offence.
- New powers for the courts to make an order, on conviction, disqualifying an offender from owning or keeping a dog.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

There are persistent groups who illegally perpetuate hare coursing

creating challenges for the police.

These new measures will give the police the additional powers to bring prosecutions and confiscate dogs from owners involved in hare coursing.

To deliver these measures, the Government will be tabling amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill for debate at Lords Report stage in January.

Home Secretary, Priti Patel, said:

Illegal hare coursing has blighted rural communities for too long, resulting in criminal damage, threatening violence and intimidation against farmers and landowners.

Those responsible are often involved in other criminal activities – including drugs and firearms offences. I have been a longstanding supporter for essential reforms to our laws to stop hare coursing which is why we will act to prevent more people from suffering as a result of the actions of a law-breaking minority.

We are introducing new measures in the Policing, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to empower and equip the police and courts with the powers they need to combat this crime. They will deter those breaking the law, and send a clear message that we will do all we can to keep our rural communities safe.

RSPCA chief executive Chris Sherwood said:

We're pleased to see proposals to crackdown on hare coursing; a barbaric bloodsport that sees hare cruelly chased, caught and killed by dogs. It's time hare coursing was consigned to the history books, where it belongs.

Hare coursing gangs inflict fear and suffering on their targets – the hare – but our rescue teams have also seen many dogs, used for coursing, coming into our care having been injured during the sport or abandoned when their owners no longer have use for them. This new legislation will give police and the courts more powers to end this cruel practice and the suffering it causes.

NFU Deputy President Stuart Roberts said:

The NFU welcomes government plans to table amendments which would strengthen the law and finally give rural police forces and the courts the necessary powers to tackle hare coursing and the wider problem of organised crime.

Our members have had to deal with the impact of illegal hare coursing for far too long and will be relieved that after much campaigning by the NFU and others over many years there is now light at the end of the tunnel.

I hope this will signal the start of a real crackdown on these organised gangs of criminals who break into fields to let dogs loose to chase hares, causing huge damage to crops and farm property and intimidating people living in rural communities.

In May 2021 Government announced, as part of the Action Plan for Animal Welfare, plans to introduce legislation to crack down on illegal hare coursing. Today's announcement marks the Government's recognition of the need for urgent action.

This is part of Government's wider commitment both to improving animal welfare and to supporting the work of the police in protecting our rural communities.