

Press release: Environment Secretary publishes bill to strengthen animal welfare

A new law will ensure animal abusers are jailed for up to 5 years and animal sentience is reflected in domestic law, under plans published by the Environment Secretary today.

The Government has published a draft bill which would increase the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty tenfold, from six months to five years, in England and Wales. The draft bill also sets out that the government “must have regard to the welfare needs of animals as sentient beings in formulating and implementing government policy”. Subject to consultation on the draft bill, the government will legislate to deliver both aims.

The plans underline the government’s commitment to raising animal welfare standards, ensuring there will be enhanced protections for animals as we leave the EU.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

As we leave the EU we will deliver a Green Brexit, not only maintaining but enhancing animal welfare standards.

Animals are sentient beings who feel pain and suffering, so we are writing that principle into law and ensuring that we protect their welfare.

Our plans will also increase sentences for those who commit the most heinous acts of animal cruelty to five years in jail.

We are a nation of animal lovers so we will make Brexit work not just for citizens but for the animals we love and cherish too.

The plans to increase maximum sentences follows a number of recent shocking cases where courts have said they would have handed down longer sentences had they been available, including a case last year when a man trained dogs to ruthlessly torture other animals, including trapping a fox and a terrier dog in a cage to brutally attack each other.

The move has been strongly welcomed by animal welfare groups and follows dedicated campaigning from Battersea Dogs & Cats Home.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home’s Chief Executive Claire Horton said:

Battersea is greatly encouraged by the Government’s willingness to

see sentences for the most shocking cases of animal cruelty increase from six months to five years and today's Defra announcement takes a significant step in that direction.

Battersea is very much at the front line of animal welfare and it's heart-breaking to see truly shocking cases of animal cruelty and neglect come through our doors, where dogs and cats have clearly had to endure so much suffering.

The current maximum cruelty sentence of six months in England and Wales is neither a punishment nor a deterrent but Battersea believes today's publication of a draft Bill could help to achieve both.

The draft Bill is part of a wider programme of reform to cement the UK's position as a global leader on animal welfare. Earlier in the year, we announced plans to make CCTV mandatory in all slaughterhouses and we have committed to taking steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter as we leave the EU.

1. Cases of extreme cruelty are rare – while on average about 1,150 people per year are convicted for animal cruelty, fewer than five of them receive the current maximum sentence. The change in law will ensure that offenders are properly punished in those rare but shocking cases.
2. Under the government's plans, courts will retain the ability to hand out an unlimited fine and ban an offender from owning animals in the future, but crucially they will also have the ability to sentence the worst cases appropriately. The move will bring maximum sentences for animal cruelty in England into line with other countries such as Australia, Canada and the Republic of Ireland.
3. Some of the recent shocking cases in which courts commented they would have handed down longer prison sentences had the law allowed them include:
 - A man who systematically abused and killed several puppies by beating, choking and stabbing them, sentenced to the maximum six months' imprisonment and banned from owning animals.
 - A man who kicked his girlfriend's dog to death, given a custodial sentence of just over five months, fined £1,000 and banned from owning animals.
 - A man who fed his dog aspirin and paracetamol to try to kill her, before beating her to death with a shovel, sentenced to four months in prison and banned from owning animals.