

Press release: Government crackdown on misuse of laser pointers

The government is today (12 August 2017) launching a call for evidence into the regulation of laser pointers, including the potential value of retail licensing schemes, advertising restrictions, and potential restrictions on ownership in order to address serious public safety concerns.

The move comes in response to an increase in laser incidents in recent years. A survey of UK ophthalmologists reported over 150 incidents of eye injuries involving laser pointers since 2013, the vast majority of these involving children.

In addition, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has reported an increase in incidents of laser pointers being directed into the cockpits of helicopters and planes on take-off and landing. Last year an Air Ambulance helicopter pilot was rendered temporarily blind by a laser attack that could have had catastrophic consequences.

The government is seeking responses from business groups, aviation and transport bodies, retailers, health bodies, and the general public, to identify and tackle the problem, while enabling legitimate businesses to continue to trade.

The government will consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of licensing schemes, advertising bans, and an awareness raising campaign to educate people about the dangers of laser pointers. The government is already working with online retail sites such as Amazon to ensure that where unsafe laser pointers are identified they are removed from sale.

Under current regulations, only laser pointers that are considered safe for their intended use should be sold to consumers. However, there is evidence that these regulations are not always adhered to, and there have been reported cases of high-powered lasers being sold – sometimes unwittingly – for general use. Licensing schemes exist in countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Sweden and the United States of America. The government will look at the case for a similar scheme that could be rolled out in the UK where the retailer or consumer must apply for and obtain a licence for a high-powered laser pointer.

Business Minister, Margot James, said:

Public safety is of the utmost importance and we must look carefully to make sure regulations are keeping up with the increased use of these devices. Whilst we know most users don't intend any harm, many are not aware of the safety risks and serious health implications of shining laser pointers directly into people's eyes. Used irresponsibly or maliciously, these products

can and do wreak havoc and harm others, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

That's why we want to hear from business groups, retailers and consumers about the best way to protect the public from this kind of dangerous behaviour and improve safety.

Professor John O'Hagan of Public Health England, said:

This consultation will allow us to explore what more can be done to minimise the risks associated with lasers available to the public. Mislabelling of products, counterfeit products, imports of powerful devices from the Far East and cheap novelty products bought innocently on holiday can put consumers, and particularly children, at risk of eye injuries.

Brian Strutton, General Secretary of the British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA), said:

When a laser is shone into a pilot's eye, they experience a bright flash and a dazzling effect. This can distract them and leads to temporary loss of vision in the affected eye. Startling, dazzling and distracting a pilot at a critical stage of flight has the potential to cause a crash and loss of life. This is especially a problem for helicopters, which operate close to the ground and are sometimes single pilot operations.

There is also a growing concern that, as the power of available lasers increases, the possibility of permanent damage being caused to pilots' and passengers' eyes increases.

We would like to see the laser threat taken very seriously before there is a fatal accident and BALPA therefore supports the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in their call for evidence.

The call for evidence is launched today and will be open for responses for 8 weeks, closing on Friday 6 October.

Under Article 225 of the Air Navigation Order (ANO) (2016), "A person must not in the United Kingdom direct or shine any light at any aircraft in flight so as to dazzle or distract the pilot of the aircraft". This is a summary only offence; the maximum penalty for this offence is a fine up to £2,500.

In addition, Article 240 of the ANO has been used to prosecute offenders who have shone a laser at an aircraft. Under this provision, "a person must not recklessly or negligently act in a manner likely to endanger an aircraft, or any person in an aircraft". This legislation is not an effective tool for the

police because in practice, it is very difficult to prove endangerment of an aircraft. This means the powers and penalties this offences comes with are not able to be used.

Laser beam attacks against the rail network are also an increasing concern. Records from British Transport Police show that between 1 April 2011 and 31 October 2016, a total of 466 laser incidents were recorded. This equates to approximately 85 incidents per year. We believe these incidents are under-reported since these offences are not currently recordable as a crime.

There are also some reports of laser beam attacks against motor vehicles and sea vessels however, as with rail, the true extent of the problem is less well defined in the absence of a specific offence to deal with laser pointers.

Laser pointers are readily available within the UK and from sellers overseas via the internet, high street shops and markets. They are also easy to buy abroad and bring back to the UK. If high-powered laser pointers are marketed for general use Local Authority Trading Standards officers have existing powers to require these products to be removed from the market.