

Gene editing creates potential to protect the nation's environment, pollinators and wildlife

Plans to consult on gene editing – which could unlock substantial benefits to nature, the environment and help farmers with crops resistant to pests, disease or extreme weather and to produce healthier, more nutritious food – will be set out today (7 January) by Environment Secretary George Eustice in his speech at the Oxford Farming Conference.

The way that plants and animals grow is controlled by the information in their genes. For centuries, farmers and growers have carefully chosen to breed stronger, healthier individual animals or plants so that the next generation has these beneficial traits – but this is a slow process.

Technologies developed in the last decade enable genes to be edited much more quickly and precisely to mimic the natural breeding process, helping to target plant and animal breeding to help the UK reach its vital climate and biodiversity goals in a safe and sustainable way.

Gene editing is different to genetic modification where DNA from one species is introduced to a different one. Gene edited organisms do not contain DNA from different species, and instead only produce changes that could be made slowly using traditional breeding methods. But at the moment, due to a legal ruling from the European Court of Justice in 2018 gene editing is regulated in the same way as genetic modification.

The [consultation](#) announced today will focus on stopping certain gene editing organisms from being regulated in the same way as genetic modification, as long as they could have been produced naturally or through traditional breeding. This approach has already been adopted by a wide range of countries across the world, including Japan, Australia and Argentina.

Government will continue to work with farming and environmental groups to develop the right rules and ensure robust controls are in place to maintain the highest food safety standards while supporting the production of healthier food.

Speaking at the Oxford Farming Conference, Environment Secretary George Eustice will say:

Gene editing has the ability to harness the genetic resources that mother nature has provided, in order to tackle the challenges of our age. This includes breeding crops that perform better, reducing costs to farmers and impacts on the environment, and helping us all adapt to the challenges of climate change.

Its potential was blocked by a European Court of Justice ruling in 2018, which is flawed and stifling to scientific progress. Now that we have left the EU, we are free to make coherent policy decisions based on science and evidence. That begins with this consultation.

Consulting with academia, environmental groups, the food and farming sectors and the public is the beginning of this process which, depending on the outcome, will require primary legislation scrutinized and approved by Parliament.

Professor Robin May, the Food Standards Agency's Chief Scientific Advisor, welcomed the consultation and said:

The UK prides itself in having the very highest standards of food safety, and there are strict controls on GM crops, seeds and food which the FSA will continue to apply moving forward.

As with all novel foods, GE foods will only be permitted to be marketed if they are judged to not present a risk to health, not to mislead consumers, and not have lower nutritional value than existing equivalent foods. We will continue to put the consumer first and be transparent and open in our decision-making. Any possible change would be based on an appropriate risk assessment that looks at the best available science.

Sir David Baulcombe, Regius Professor of Botany in the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Cambridge, said:

The overwhelming view in public sector scientists is that the Nobel Prize winning methods for gene editing can accelerate the availability of crops and livestock for sustainable, productive and profitable agriculture. I welcome the DEFRA consultation that will help with a broader assessment of gene editing as an appropriate technology in agriculture.

Aside from gene editing, the consultation will also begin a longer-term project to gather evidence on updating our approach to genetic modification by gathering information on what controls are needed and how best to deliver them. We want our regulations to be in step with the current science and the knowledge we have learned from 30 years of existing regulation.

The consultation will run for ten weeks from Thurs 7th January to Weds 17 March at 23:59. The full consultation document will shortly be [available here](#) on Citizen Space when published at 00:15 and applies to England only.

During his speech at the Oxford Farming Conference, the Environment Secretary

is also expected to pay tribute to the farming industry after a challenging year and note the beginning of the [Agricultural Transition Period](#) announced in November.

GOVERNMENT REFORMS MAKE IT EASIER AND CHEAPER FOR LEASEHOLDERS TO BUY THEIR HOMES

- Millions of leaseholders will be given a new right to extend their lease by 990 years
- Changes could save households from thousands to tens of thousands of pounds
- Elderly also protected by reducing ground rents to zero for all new retirement properties.

Millions of leaseholders will be given the right to extend their lease by a maximum term of 990 years at zero ground rent, the Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick has announced today (7 January 2021).

Today's measures come as part of the biggest reforms to English property law for forty years, fundamentally making home ownership fairer and more secure.

Under the current law many people face high ground rents, which combined with a mortgage, can make it feel like they are paying rent on a property they own. Freeholders can increase the amount of ground rent with little or no benefit seen to those faced with extra charges. It can also lengthen and lead to increased costs when buying or selling the property. Today's changes will mean that any leaseholder who chooses to extend their lease on their home will no longer pay any ground rent to the freeholder, enabling those who dream of fully owning their home to do so without cumbersome bureaucracy and additional, unnecessary and unfair expenses

For some leaseholders, these changes could save them thousands, to tens of thousands of pounds.

Housing Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Across the country people are struggling to realise the dream of

owning their own home but find the reality of being a leaseholder far too bureaucratic, burdensome and expensive.

We want to reinforce the security that home ownership brings by changing forever the way we own homes and end some of the worst practices faced by homeowners.

These reforms provide fairness for 4.5 million leaseholders and chart a course to a new system altogether.

The government is also now establishing a Commonhold Council – a partnership of leasehold groups, industry and government – that will prepare homeowners and the market for the widespread take-up of commonhold.

The commonhold model is widely used around the world and allows homeowners to own their property on a freehold basis, giving them greater control over the costs of home ownership. Blocks are jointly owned and managed, meaning when someone buys a flat or a house, it is truly theirs and any decisions about its future are theirs too

Professor Nick Hopkins, Commissioner for Property Law at the Law Commission said:

We are pleased to see Government taking its first decisive step towards the implementation of the Law Commission's recommendations to make enfranchisement cheaper and simpler. The creation of the Commonhold Council should help to reinvigorate commonhold, ensuring homeowners will be able to call their homes their own.

Under current rules, leaseholders of houses can only extend their lease once for 50 years with a ground rent. This compares to leaseholders of flats who can extend as often as they wish at a zero 'peppercorn' ground rent for 90 years. Today's changes mean both house and flat leaseholders will now be able to extend their lease to a new standard 990 years with a ground rent at zero.

A cap will also be introduced on ground rent payable when a leaseholder chooses to either extend their lease or become the freeholder. An online calculator will be introduced to make it simpler for leaseholders to find out how much it will cost them to buy their freehold or extend their lease.

The Government is abolishing prohibitive costs like 'marriage value' and set the calculation rates to ensure this is fairer, cheaper and more transparent. An online calculator will be introduced to make it simpler for leaseholders to find out how much it will cost them to buy their freehold or extend their lease.

Further measures will be introduced to protect the elderly. The Government

has previously committed to restricting ground rents to zero for new leases to make the process fairer for leaseholders. This will also now apply to retirement leasehold properties (homes built specifically for older people), so purchasers of these homes have the same rights as other homeowners and are protected from uncertain and rip-off practices.

Leaseholders will also be able to voluntarily agree to a restriction on future development of their property to avoid paying 'development value'.

Legislation will be brought forward in the upcoming session of Parliament, to set future ground rents to zero. This is the first part of seminal two-part reforming legislation in this Parliament. We will bring forward a response to the remaining Law Commission recommendations, including commonhold, in due course.

- The Law Commission published their report on enfranchisement valuation 'Leasehold home ownership: buying your freehold or extending your lease Report on options to reduce the price payable' in January 2020 and their reports on enfranchisement, commonhold and right to manage in July 2020. These reports are available here: <https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/project/leasehold-enfranchisement/>
- A freeholder owns both the property and the land it stands on while leaseholders only own the property.
- Marriage value assumes that the value of one party holding both the leasehold and freehold interest is greater than when those interests are held by separate parties. Today's announcement will remove marriage value from the premium calculation.
- 'Modern ground rent' is the rent (determined under section 15 of the 1967 Act) payable during the additional term of a lease extension of a house (under the current law). It is calculated by valuing the "site", and then decapitalising that value.
- Many long leases specify an annual ground rent of a 'peppercorn.' A peppercorn rent is used in circumstances where it is deemed appropriate for there to be no substantive rent payable. Under the current law, any lease extension of a lease of a flat under the 1993 Act must be granted at a peppercorn rent. Today's announcement means that both house and flat leaseholders will now be able to extend their lease to 990 years with a ground rent at zero.
- The formula used to work out the cost to leaseholders for buying the freehold or extending the lease includes a discount for any improvements the leaseholder has made and a discount where leaseholders have the right to remain in the property on an assured tenancy after the lease

expires. These existing discounts will be retained, alongside a separate valuation methodology for low-value properties known as 'section 9(1)'.

[PM call with business leaders: 6 January 2021](#)

Press release

Prime Minister Boris Johnson hosted a call with almost 250 business leaders.



This afternoon the Prime Minister hosted a call with almost 250 business leaders alongside the Chancellor, Business Secretary and Trade Secretary.

He opened the call by recognising 2020 has been a tough year for businesses across the country, thanking them for their huge efforts helping to keep the country moving and looking ahead to the rollout of the vaccine as a source of hope this year.

On the agreement reached with the EU, the Prime Minister committed to working with British businesses to realise the vast opportunities on offer as the UK forges an independent future, and welcomed that firms can now look with certainty at the year ahead.

He set out the government's urgent ambition to unite and level up across the country by investing in education, skills, technology and infrastructure.

Referencing the rollout of gigabit broadband and the substantial investment in green technology announced in December, the Prime Minister also outlined his vision for building back better from the pandemic.

The Chancellor also spoke about his optimism for the UK economy in 2021 and committed to using all the levers at his disposal to drive growth across the entire UK which meets our climate ambitions.

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[PM call with Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada: 6 January 2021](#)

Press release

Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke with Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada.



The Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada this afternoon.

They discussed the international response to the coronavirus pandemic and the work underway in the UK and Canada to roll out vaccines as quickly as possible.

The leaders also spoke about the growing trading relationship between our countries, as well as foreign policy issues, including the recent arrests in Hong Kong which they agreed were deeply concerning.

The Prime Minister said he looked forward to welcoming Prime Minister Trudeau to the UK for the G7 Summit later this year, and to working together during the UK's G7 Presidency to advance common interests and address shared challenges.

The leaders also looked ahead to the COP26 Summit in Glasgow in November, and agreed on the importance of ambitious international action to tackle climate change.

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Oral statement on new COVID-19 regulations

Thank you very much Madam Deputy Speaker, I beg to move these regulations are approved.

The new variant of the coronavirus, Madam Deputy Speaker, presents us with a renewed challenge – here in Britain and around the world.

And our strategy throughout has been to suppress the virus until a vaccine can make us safe. And while collectively, our efforts were working on the old variant, when faced with a new variant that is between 50 to 70% more transmissible, there has been no choice but to respond.

And I understand that these regulations that we debate today have serious consequences and I regret the huge costs that they bring.

But I know, just as surely, that these costs are by far outweighed by the costs that we would bear without action.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when I have come to this House before, to ask for the House's support for national restrictions, we've had to take it on trust that there would be an exit before the vaccine is approved.

Today, I come to the House seeking approval of these regulations knowing from the huge pressure on the NHS right now, that this action is necessary today but also with the certain knowledge that we have a way out.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before turning to the details of the regulations I just want to set out that plan for how we get out of them because that is critical.

This country was the first in the world to deploy not one, but 2 vaccines.

And more than 1.3 million have already been vaccinated already including a quarter of the over-80s.

And from the middle of next month we plan to have offered the first dose to everyone in the 4 top-priority groups, and they currently account for more than 4 out of 5 COVID fatalities. And I am not sure this is a point that has fully been addressed, which is, because of the strong correlation between age and fatality from COVID, sadly, it means that we will be able to vaccinate those groups that account for 4 out of every 5 fatalities within the top-4 cohort. Now it does then take 2 to 3 weeks from the first dose to reach immunity but the vaccine, therefore, is the way out of this pandemic – and it's the way to a better year ahead.

But, Madam Deputy Speaker, this hope for the weeks ahead doesn't take away from the serious and immediate threat posed now. And I just want to turn now to what is in the regulations and the actions we need to take now.

The Office for National Statistics has reported that 1 in 50 of the population has the disease – some with symptoms, some without.

The latest figures show that we have 30,074 COVID patients in UK hospitals – and that the NHS is under significant pressure.

Admissions are now higher than at any point in the pandemic. And so, on Monday, all 4 UK Chief Medical Officers [recommended we move the country to COVID-19 alert level 5](#).

In practice, this means they believe that, without action, there is a 'material risk of healthcare services being overwhelmed'.

It's for this reason that we have placed England into a national lockdown, alongside action taken in each of the devolved nations.

And every single citizen needs to take steps to control this new variant, and this personal responsibility is important, and to give the NHS a fighting chance to do its vital work – of saving lives – it is on all of us to support them.

These regulations set out that everyone must stay at home, save for a limited number of reasons permitted in law, including:

- essential shopping
- work – if you cannot reasonably do so from home
- education or childcare – if eligible to attend
- medical needs – including getting a COVID test or getting vaccinated
- exercise
- escaping domestic abuse
- and for support bubbles, where people are eligible

These regulations are based on the existing Tier 4 regulations, with some additional measures, which reinforce the stay at home imperative.

These include:

- stopping the sale of alcohol through takeaway or click-and-collect services
- closing sport and leisure facilities – although allowing playgrounds and allotments to remain open

Now I know that these further restrictions are difficult. But they are unfortunately necessary because we have to absolutely minimise social interaction to try to get this virus back under control.

And these measures came into force first thing this morning under the emergency procedure and will remain in force subject to this House's approval today.

I just want to return for the moment to the support that has been outlined because we are providing an additional £4.6 billion of support to businesses including to those in retail, hospitality and leisure who have been forced to

close their doors once again, on top of, of course, our £280 billion plan for jobs, which includes the extension of the furlough scheme until April.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will close now just by reiterating that if we don't act now we know that eventually the NHS will not be able to cope.

And I know that no member of this House wants to see the scenes we have witnessed elsewhere in the world, of hospitals overrun or of doctors forced to make the choice of who to treat and who to turn away.

And we know that while the winter weeks will be difficult, we now know what the way out looks like.

And accelerating the deployment of our COVID vaccines, making the most vulnerable groups safe, and everyone playing our part on the way to get us there – that is the route out of this pandemic.

And in the meantime, Madam Deputy Speaker, we must stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

And that eventually will carry us to a brighter future.