



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons
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Our ref: MC2024/06976/SH

10 April 2024

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 18 March to the Home Office on behalf of several of your constituents regarding the Animal Welfare Investigations Project and the use of catapults to harm or kill animals. Your email was passed to Defra and I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

I recognise your constituents' concern that the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which protects all wild birds and some wild animals in this country, lists weapons that a person must not use to kill an animal and catapults are not included on that list. Nonetheless, it is still illegal under this Act to deliberately attempt to kill, injure, or harm protected species. Significant sanctions are available to judges to hand down to those convicted of these wildlife crimes - up to an unlimited fine and/or a six-month custodial sentence. Indeed, under provisions in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006, there are a range of offences around deliberate attempts to kill, injure or inflict harm on wildlife and in the event that a member of the public believes such an offence has taken place, they are encouraged to report the matter to the police. In particular, where pets and livestock are concerned, it is an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to cause an animal any unnecessary suffering. The Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 realises the Government's manifesto commitment to increase the sentences available to our courts for the most serious cases of animal cruelty by increasing the maximum penalty for this offence to five years' imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

I am also aware that some groups are sharing images of catapults being used against animals on social media. The Online Safety Act 2023 requires social media firms to take action to tackle content that results in the unnecessary suffering of animals, or that encourages activity that causes the unnecessary suffering of an animal. This includes removing such content.

Your constituents raise a further point concerning resourcing in local police forces to tackle wildlife crime. The Government takes crimes against wildlife seriously, including those involving the use of catapults. In 2022 Defra more than doubled its funding of the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) from a total of £495,000 over the three previous years to £1.2 million for the three year period of 2022-25. The NWCU helps prevent and detect wildlife crime by obtaining and disseminating intelligence, undertaking analysis which highlights local or national threats and directly assisting law enforcers in their investigations. The use of catapults against animals, and the sharing of disturbing imagery associated with such use on social media, is an issue that has been relayed to Defra officials by certain local police forces and the NWCU. I am informed a new national group has recently been created to address the catapulting of wildlife, focusing on education, prevention, detection and justice. Officers from Essex Police and the Metropolitan Police are leading the group, named Operation Lakeshot, and they are working in partnership with the RSPCA and Nature Watch.

Thank you for taking the time to raise this important issue.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Rebecca Pow', with a stylized flourish at the end.

REBECCA POW MP