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Mark Allen

The Hunting with Dogs Bill

NIAR 196-25

This Bill paper provides an overview of the Hunting with Dogs Bill as introduced to the Assembly on 27 April 2026. This paper is complemented by [NIAR 148-26](#) which deals with the potential cost implications of the Bill.

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Key Points

- The Hunting with Dogs Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 27 April 2026 and seeks to prohibit hunting wild mammals with dogs, prohibit trail hunting and prohibit terrier work through amendments to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.
- Northern Ireland is currently the only UK jurisdiction without specific legislation restricting or prohibiting hunting wild mammals with dogs, although hare coursing has been prohibited since 2011.
- Existing legislation in Northern Ireland permits certain forms of hunting involving dogs, subject to wildlife protection and animal welfare provisions.
- The Bill would create offences relating to:
 - ❖ Hunting wild mammals with dogs;
 - ❖ Organising or participating in hunting with dogs;
 - ❖ Trail hunting;
 - ❖ Terrier work; and
 - ❖ Knowingly permitting prohibited hunting activity on land.
- Proposed penalties include:
 - ❖ Up to 12 months imprisonment and/or a £20,000 fine on summary conviction;
 - ❖ Up to 5 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine on conviction on indictment.
- The Bill provides exemptions for:
 - ❖ Hunting rats and mice;
 - ❖ Management of wild mammals above ground for specified purposes;
 - ❖ Relieving the suffering of injured wild mammals;
 - ❖ Searching for dead wild mammals; and

- ❖ Training dogs to follow animal-based scents for lawful purposes.
- Most exempted activities are subject to strict conditions, including:
 - ❖ A maximum of two dogs;
 - ❖ Dogs being under control;
 - ❖ Landowner permission; and
 - ❖ Requirements intended to minimise animal suffering.
- The Bill broadly mirrors the approach taken in the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, but contains notable differences including:
 - ❖ No licensing scheme for activities involving more than two dogs;
 - ❖ No exemption for environmental benefit activities;
 - ❖ No exemption for the use of dogs below ground.
- Hunting with dogs remains a highly contested issue:
 - ❖ Supporters emphasise pest control, biodiversity management, rural traditions and economic benefits;
 - ❖ Opponents emphasise animal welfare concerns and the prevention of unnecessary suffering.
- Available evidence suggests there are approximately 20 active organised hunts in Northern Ireland involving foxhounds, harriers, beagles, bloodhounds and draghounds.
- Consultation on the Bill attracted 12,011 responses, including 4,864 responses from Northern Ireland residents.
- A majority of respondents supported:
 - ❖ Banning hunting wild mammals with dogs;
 - ❖ Banning trail hunting;
 - ❖ Holding landowners liable where they knowingly permit illegal hunting activity.

- Consultation responses demonstrated strongly polarised views, particularly regarding:
 - ❖ Animal welfare;
 - ❖ Pest and predator control;
 - ❖ Wildlife management;
 - ❖ Rural traditions;
 - ❖ Employment impacts; and
 - ❖ Enforcement costs.
- The paper identifies several areas where further clarification may be required, including definitions of:
 - ❖ Participation;
 - ❖ Organising;
 - ❖ Dogs being "under control";
 - ❖ Cover;
 - ❖ Enclosed spaces;
 - ❖ Reasonable steps;
 - ❖ Serious damage; and
 - ❖ Lawful purpose.
- The absence of definitions for key terms may create challenges for:
 - ❖ Enforcement agencies;
 - ❖ Prosecutors;
 - ❖ Landowners; and
 - ❖ Individuals undertaking exempt activities.
- Questions are raised regarding the proposed ban on trail hunting, including whether current definitions could create unintended loopholes.
- The Bill would prohibit all forms of terrier work and the use of dogs below ground, going further than current legislation in England, Wales and Scotland.

- The Bill does not include defence provisions similar to those available under hunting legislation elsewhere in the UK.
- The proposed two-dog limit may raise practical questions regarding:
 - ❖ Predator control activities;
 - ❖ Conservation projects;
 - ❖ Dog training exercises; and
 - ❖ Other wildlife management activities.
- The paper highlights the absence of any licensing regime comparable to that operating in Scotland for certain exempt hunting activities.
- Potential economic impacts on rural industries and activities connected to hunting with dogs have not been comprehensively assessed.
- Questions arise regarding the future welfare of dogs and horses currently involved in hunting activities if the Bill is enacted.
- The need for education of participants and those with enforcement responsibilities may need further consideration.
- The Bill would come into operation six months after Royal Assent, raising questions about transitional arrangements.
- The paper suggests that statutory guidance may be necessary to support consistent implementation and enforcement of the legislation.
- The Bill requires DAERA to review the operation of the legislation at least once every five years, although implementation is likely to involve multiple public authorities including DAERA, the Department of Justice and PSNI.

- Overall, the Bill represents a significant change in wildlife management and animal welfare policy in Northern Ireland and raises a number of legal, practical, enforcement and policy issues that may warrant detailed Committee scrutiny.

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1 Background

Whilst Northern Ireland does not currently have dedicated and specific legislation either banning or regulating the hunting of animals with dogs, we do have legislation designed to protect wildlife as follows:

- The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Northern Ireland) Act 2011;
- The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The 2011 Wildlife and Natural Environment (Northern Ireland) Act saw the introduction of a ban on organised hare coursing but the fact remains that it currently remains possible to hunt a range of wild animal species within Northern Ireland, and this includes by the use of dogs, as there are no prescriptions specifically against their use.

Appendix 1 within this paper provides an overview of the main provisions within the two specific wildlife protection oriented pieces of legislation, but key features of both are summarised below:

In addition to specific legislation for the protection of wildlife, the 2011 Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland)¹ includes provisions to prevent unnecessary suffering of animals (Section 4), but under Section 3 of the Act these provisions do not apply to wild animals being hunted or coursed unless they are released in an injured, mutilated or exhausted condition or are being hunted or coursed in an enclosed space from which they have no reasonable chance of escape.

In effect existing legislative provisions within Northern Ireland enable the hunting of certain wild mammals under certain conditions.

Table 1 below sets out the main provisions of the existing legislation in Northern Ireland which incorporate provisions covering the hunting of wild animals.

¹ [The Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

Table 1: Table 1: Existing legislation in Northern Ireland which incorporates provisions for the hunting of wild animals

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
Intentions/Aims	➤Protection of wildlife and wild plants through prohibitions on certain methods of killing or taking and in relation to sales. Prescription of protected species.	➤Makes biodiversity provisions, amends Wildlife Order in terms of protections for certain species and prohibits hare coursing events.
Specific reference to hunting with dogs	➤No	➤Yes – in relation to hare coursing and the prohibition of the same
Animals covered by legislation	➤‘Wild animals’ - any animal (other than a bird) which is or (before it was killed or taken) was living wild; ➤ ➤Schedule 5 details animals that are protected at all times and includes: • Badger • Pine marten • Red squirrel ➤ ➤Schedule 6 details specific wild animals which cannot be killed or captured by certain methods and includes: • Badger • Fallow deer • Red deer • Sika deer • Brown hare • Irish hare • Hedgehog • Pine marten • Common otter • Red squirrel ➤ ➤Schedule 6a details animals which may not be killed or taken by trapping or snaring including (introduced as result of The Humane Trapping Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019⁴) : • Badger • Pine marten	➤Builds on the animals covered by the 1985 Wildlife Order. ➤ ➤More specifically the Act amends a number of the Wildlife Order Schedules in terms of protected animals as follows: ➤ • Schedule 5 – animals that are protected at all times -adds a series of marine species; • Schedule 6 – animals which cannot be killed or captured by certain methods - adds a series of marine species; • Schedule 7 - animals which may not be sold alive or dead at any time – adds a series of marine animals – removes the fox from the list. ➤ ➤New Section 38 introduces a ban on hare coursing.

² [The Wildlife \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1985](#)³ [Wildlife and Natural Environment Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)⁴ [The Humane Trapping Standards Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2019](#)

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
	• Common otter • Stoat ➤ ➤ Schedule 7 details animals which may not be sold dead or alive at any time including: • Badger • Fox • Hedgehog • Pine marten • Common otter • Red squirrel ➤ ➤ Schedule 9 – animals to which Article 15 of the Order applies (Article 15 deals with the introduction of new species etc): • Grey squirrel • Black rat • Golden pheasant • American Mink • Goshawk • Canada Goose • Barnacle Goose • Ruddy Duck • Carolina Wood Duck ➤	
Any references to hunting with dogs	➤ No	➤ Yes – in relation to hare coursing and the prohibition of the same
Enforcement	➤ Police and wildlife inspectors authorised by the Department	➤ Police and Wildlife Inspectors as authorised by the Department
Offences	➤ As they relate to wild animals only as follows: • Article 10 - intentionally killing, injuring or taking any wild animal included in Schedule 5. • Article 10 - having possession or control any live or dead wild animal included in Schedule 5 or any part of, or anything derived from, such an animal. • Article 10 - intentionally: ➤ (a) damages or destroys, or obstructs access to, any structure or place which any wild animal included in Schedule 5 uses for shelter or protection;	➤ As they relate to wild animals only as follows: • Section 5 - amends a number of existing offences within the Wildlife Order which will mean that action which, when carried out recklessly, causes harm to wildlife, will be treated in the same way as action carried out intentionally to cause such harm – applies to Articles 10(1) (4) and 16(1)(a) in Wildlife order 1985. ➤ • Section 6 - anyone who knowingly causes or allows someone else to carry out certain unlawful acts which

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
	➤ (b) damages or destroys anything which conceals or protects any such structure; or ➤ (c) disturbs any such animal while it is occupying a structure or place which it uses for shelter or protection; • Article 10 - knowingly causing or permitting to be done an act which is made unlawful by any of the foregoing provisions of this Article. • Article 12 - In addition there are offences linked to the killing or taking of wild animals by prohibited methods .such as snares, by missiles not from a firearm and by the use of decoys. • Article 16 – wildlife refuges – within the designated are it is an offence to kill, injure or take any wild animal, take/damage/destroy any structure an animal uses for shelter or protection, disturbs the dependent young of an animal. • Article 16 – entry into a wildlife refuge unless authorised. ➤ • Articles 19-23 - In addition, there are a range of offences linked to the killing of deer out of season, during darkness or by using prescribed (schedule 11) firearms/ammunition or any firearm from any mechanically propelled vehicle. Also offences linked to deer poaching. Further deer specific offences around removal, marking or tagging of live deer. Deer can only be killed by shooting. • Hares may only be hunted using firearms or dogs and only within open season. They can't be hunted at night or on Sundays.	cause harm to wild birds, animals and plants is committing an offence. • Section 10 – amended existing offences relating to use of snares as set out in Article of the Wildlife Order 1985. • Section 11 – Added a new Article 12A to the Wildlife Order 1985 in relation to the use of offences linked to the use of spring traps. • Section 14 – Added a new Article 15A to Wildlife Order 1985 in relation to offences linked to the Prohibition on sale, etc. of invasive, non-native species. • Section 15 – Added a new Article 15A to Wildlife Order 1985 in relation to offences linked to the possession of pesticides harmful to wildlife. ➤ • Section 19 - make it an offence for anyone to be in possession of any article that is to be used for committing an offence under the Wildlife Order, for example, persons with spades and dogs in the pursuit of badger baiting – through the creation of a new Article 24A within the Wildlife Order 1985. • Section 22 – new Article 25B under the Wildlife Order 1985 - person who, with intent to deceive, falsely pretends to be a wildlife inspector is guilty of an offence. ➤ • Section 22 – new Article 25B under the Wildlife Order 1985 - person is guilty of an offence if he intentionally obstructs a wildlife inspector acting in the exercise of powers conferred by paragraph Article 25(3). ➤

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
		• Section 38 - Introduced new offences related to hare coursing as follows: ➤ Offence for anyone to participate in, attend or knowingly facilitate a hare coursing event or permit his land to be used for the purposes of such an event. ➤ Offence for any person to enter or permit a dog to be entered for a hare coursing event, or for any person to control or handle a dog in the course of or for the purposes of a hare coursing event. ➤ Anyone who nets, transports or holds hares for the purpose of a hare coursing event, will also be committing an offence. ➤
Exemptions/defences	➤ Article 2(7) of the Wildlife Order 1985 - Nothing in this Order shall make unlawful anything done under the [1981 NI 22] Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. ➤ ➤ Notwithstanding anything in Article 10 (which deals with the protections of certain wild animals), an authorised person (owner or occupier, or any person authorised by the owner or occupier, of the land on which the action authorised is taken, or any person authorised by the Department) shall not be guilty of an offence by reason of the killing or injuring of a wild animal included in Schedule 5: • if he shows that his action was necessary for the purpose of preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber, pasture or any other form of property or to fisheries]; and • he notifies the Department immediately after taking such action. ➤ ➤ Licences issued by the Department under Article 18 within the Order enable the following with regards to wild animals other than birds. ➤	➤ Section 16 - Licences under Article 18 of the Wildlife Order 1985 – ➤ The provisions of Article 10(4), (dealing with the deliberate damage or destruction of any structure or place which any wild animal included in Schedule 5 uses for shelter or protection) do not apply to anything done for the purpose of any development, if it is done under, and in accordance with the terms of a licence granted by the Department. – “development” has the meaning given in Article 11 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. ➤ ➤ Section 16 – changes to Article 18 of the Wildlife Order 1985 ➤ In paragraph (1)(a) after “scientific” insert “research”. ➤ Section 16 - After paragraph (2)(a) insert—“(aa)for the purposes of the re-population of an area with, or the re-introduction into an area of, wild birds, including any breeding necessary for those purposes; ➤ (ab)for the purpose of conserving flora or fauna ➤ Section 17 – adds a provision for the shooting of certain deer as it relates to the taking, killing or injuring any Chinese water

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
	➤ Articles 10(1) (2), 12 (1)(2) and 16 do not apply to anything done with a licence for the purpose of: • scientific or educational purposes; • for the purpose of photography; • for the purpose of preventing the spread of disease; or • for the purpose of preserving public health or public or air safety. ➤ ➤ Similarly Articles 10(1)(2), 12(1) and (2) and 14(1), and orders under Article 16, do not apply to anything done with a licence: • for the purpose of ringing or marking, or examining any ring or mark on, wild animals; • for the purpose of conserving wild animals or wild plants or introducing them to particular areas; • for the purpose of protecting any zoological or botanical collection; or • for the purpose of preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber, pasture or any other form of property or to fisheries. ➤ ➤ Also licensing provisions within Article 18 that enable the use of prohibited methods of killing, taking or restraining a wild animal included in Schedule 6A so long as the trap/snare is certified and meets approved design conditions. ➤ ➤ Article 21 – specific licensing provisions for deer that enable them to be killed, injured or taken out of season or under darkness in for scientific or educational purposes; or for the purpose of removing deer from one area to another. ➤ ➤ Article 22 – prevention of deer poaching. A defence exists for offences under this Article in relation to anything done in the reasonable belief that the person accused of the offence:	deer (<i>hydropotes inermis</i>) or muntjac deer (<i>muntiacus reevesi</i>). ➤ ➤ Section 18 - In Article 21 of the Wildlife Order (licences for purposes of Article 19) for paragraph (2) substitute— • “(2) Article 19(1) does not apply to anything done for the purpose of: ➤ (a) preserving public health or public safety; ➤ (b) conserving the natural heritage; or ➤ (c) preventing serious damage to property. ➤ if it is done under and in accordance with the terms of a licence issued by the Department. ➤ ➤

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
	- would have the consent of the owner or occupier of the land if the owner or occupier knew of his doing it and the circumstances of it; or - has other lawful authority to do it.	
Penalties	➤ Set differing levels of fine for different offences including the following as they relate wild animals other than birds: - Level 5 fine on summary conviction for offences relating to: ➤ Article 10 (killing, injuring or taking and animal on Schedule 5) ➤ Article 12(1)(2) (use of prohibited means for killing or taking wild animals, e.g. snares, spring traps or certain firearms) ➤ Article 13 (1)(2) (sale etc. of live or dead wild animals) - Level 5 fine on summary conviction, in a case where the offender will be subject to a special penalty for offences relating to: ➤ Article 12 (6) (a landowner/manager permitting or suffering another person to use a prohibited method to kill or take a wild animal) ➤ Article 12 (7) (selling or exposes for sale any self-locking snare with a view to it being used to kill or take a wild animal) ➤ Article 16 (breach of wildlife refuge protections for wild animals) - Level 3 fine, on summary conviction, in instances where offender will not be subject to a special penalty for offences relating to: ➤ Article 12 (6) (a landowner/manager permitting or suffering another person to use a prohibited method to kill or take a wild animal) ➤ Article 12 (7) (selling or exposes for sale any self-locking snare	➤ Section 24 Standardised the maximum fine available for many existing offences under the Wildlife Order 1985 and several new offences. ➤ ➤ More specifically the following offences, as they relate to wild animals, on summary conviction, are liable to either 6 months imprisonment or a level 5 fine (£5,000) or both: - Articles 4 to 14 within the Wildlife Order 1985; - Article 15B within the Wildlife Order 1985 - Article 16 within the Wildlife Order 1985 - Part 3 (Articles 19 to 23) within the Wildlife Order 1985 - Article 24 within the Wildlife Order 1985 - Article 25B(7) A person guilty of an offence under Article 15 or 15A of the Wildlife Order 1985 shall be liable (a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum, or to both; (b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years or to a fine, or to both. ➤ ➤ Section 38 – new Hare coursing offences – on summary conviction individual liable to a fine up to a maximum of the standard scale i.e. level 5 (£5,000)

Legislation	The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 ²	Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ³
	with a view to it being used to kill or take a wild animal) ➤ Article 16 (breach of wildlife refuge protections for wild animals) ➤ • Level 4 fine or imprisonment up to 3 months, or both, on summary conviction, for offences relating to: ➤ Article 19 (protection of deer) ➤ Article 22(1)(2)(5) (prevention of poaching) ➤ Article 23(2) (sales and purchases etc. of venison) ➤	
Convictions data	➤ Unable to identify any offences or prosecutions statistics relating to offences under the Order	➤ Unable to identify any offences or prosecutions statistics relating to offences under the Act

1.1 Animal welfare legislation in Northern Ireland

The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011⁵ forms the legislative basis for animal welfare standards and enforcement in Northern Ireland.

The provisions within the Act were both informed by, and designed to protect, the globally recognised ‘five needs’ of animal welfare as follows:

- the need for a suitable environment;
- the need for a suitable diet;
- the need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns;
- any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals; and
- the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

In terms of scope, the provisions within the 2011 Act apply to domesticated or animals under the control of man and as such these animals are referred to as ‘protected’. Animals living in a wild state (i.e. not under control of man or

⁵ [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

commonly domesticated) are not protected or covered by the provisions within the Act. These distinctions are set out in Section 2 of the Act.

Building on the previous point, it should be noted that Section 53 of the Act confirms that none of the provisions within the Act applies in relation to anything which occurs in the normal course of hunting or coursing any animal, not being a protected animal, unless:

- (a) the animal is released in an injured, mutilated or exhausted condition; or
- (b) the animal is hunted or coursed in an enclosed space from which it has no reasonable chance of escape.

2 Existing hunting of mammals provisions in Great Britain and Ireland

In order to provide a legislative context Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 provide an overview of legislative provisions relating to the hunting of mammals within GB and Ireland.

It should be noted that the provisions within GB are more comparable to each other as they primarily relate to managing hunting with dogs whilst the legislation in Ireland is primarily focused on protection of wildlife, whilst including hunting activity requirements.

In this regard the current legislation in Ireland is currently more directly comparable to the existing provisions in Northern Ireland.

It should however be noted that a private Member's Bill entitled the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Fox Hunting) Bill 2025 reached second stage in Dail Eireann. The Bill as introduced⁶ proposed amending the 2013 Animal Health and Welfare Act to achieve the following:

- Banning the hunting of a fox or foxes with a dog or dogs;

⁶ [Animal Health and Welfare \(Ban on Fox Hunting\) Bill 2025](#)

- Prohibiting the use of a dog or dogs to flush or dig out a fox or foxes from below ground;
- Prohibit the trapping or snaring of a fox or foxes in order to kill the fox or foxes; and
- Prohibit trail hunting.

Unlike the Acts that currently apply in GB, the Bill, as introduced, had no provisions for exceptions relating to either hunting with dogs or trail hunting. The Bill fell at second stage.

At the time of writing DEFRA has now completed a public consultation⁷ on a proposal to ban trail hunting within England and Wales. These proposals, which were a Labour Party Manifesto⁸ commitment in the 2024 general election, would likely require the development of new primary legislation. According to press reports⁹ there have been approximately 100,000 responses to this consultation, with the suggestion that 85,000 of the responses have been against the proposed ban. However in the absence of DEFRA analysis of the responses and further clarity on the Government's stance it remains unclear as to what the next steps will be.

2.1 Prosecution and conviction data for Hunting laws – UK and Ireland.

As highlighted in Section 2 and Appendices 1 and 2 of this paper, as things currently stand, neither Northern Ireland or Ireland have laws banning the hunting of wild mammals using dogs.

Northern Ireland did ban a form of activity that could be loosely termed as a form of hunting using dogs, namely hare coursing, under section 38 of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. **An FOI request to the Public Prosecution Service in 2021¹⁰ revealed that between 2011**

⁷ [Consultation on Proposals to Prohibit Trail Hunting in England and Wales, DEFRA, 26 March 2026](#)

⁸ [Change, Labour Party Manifesto 2024, page 59](#)

⁹ [85,000 voice opposition to Labour ban on trail hunt-ing, Daily Telegraph, 20 June 2026](#)

¹⁰ [FOI 851/21-22, Public Prosecution Service, 17 August 2021](#)

and 2020 there had been two prosecutions for the offence of hare coursing, neither of which resulted in conviction.

On the wider issue of wildlife crime within Northern Ireland, correspondence with the PSNI¹¹ reveals that from January 2020 to August 2026 there have been 2,737 reported wildlife incidents, but the PSNI advise that not all of these will be crime related.

In England and Wales, **the number of individuals proceeded against under the 2004 Hunting Act provisions between 2005 and 2025 was 1,100, of which 640, or 58% were convicted. The vast majority of those convicted, 578, had to pay a fine.** Total fine income from the Act's introduction to 2025 was £176,700, **with the average fine in 2024 being £454**¹².

Turning to Scotland, the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 has only been in force since October 2023 and the level of offending data is more limited than that found in England and Wales. **The latest Police Scotland data¹³ shows that there were 22 hunting with dogs offences recorded in 2024-25, compared to 73 in 2023-24.** Of the 73 offences recorded in 2023-24, 50 occurred in Fife. It has not been possible to access data on how many of these recorded offences led to convictions as the Scottish Government only publishes data for aggregated wildlife crime categories, which includes hunting with dogs offences.

3 Hunting with dogs: a contested issue

Hunting continues to be an issue which divides opinion. Whilst England, Scotland and Wales have developed legislation to either ban or restrict hunting with dogs since 2004, the public debate on the issue continues.

¹¹ Email from PSNI Executive Support team – 13 August 2026

¹² Data derived from NIAR 148-26

¹³ [Hunting with dogs, Wildlife crime in Scotland 2024 statistics, Scottish Government, 27 February 2026](#)

Advocates of hunting with dogs point to the role that this activity can play in managing pests and in the enhancement of bio-diversity and wildlife, whilst opponents of the activity point to what they see as the imposition of cruelty and unnecessary suffering on wild animals.

This context is important to highlight as Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK without legislation prohibiting or restricting the hunting of wild mammals with dogs.

Whilst it is not possible within the limited confines of this paper to give a full account of the divergent views on hunting with dogs, table 2 below provides an overview of some of the arguments presented in defence and opposition to the practice by two of the leading voices. It should be noted that whilst some of the benefits identified by the Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association are fox-specific, other stated benefits could be applied to other hunting activity involving dogs.

Table 2: Overview of arguments in support of and in opposition to hunting with dogs

Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association¹⁴ – hunting with dogs – reasons for advocacy	League Against Cruel Sports¹⁵ – hunting with dogs – reasons for opposition¹⁶
Plays a critical role in habitat management and preservation – sees the protection of small bogs, coverts and hedgerows as quarry animal habitat – helps other non quarry species.	Hunting with dogs is cruel - foxes, deer and hares suffer physiological and psychological stress when chased by a hunt, and this suffering occurs whether or not they are eventually killed – cite the Burns Report from 2000. ¹⁷
Contributes to the rural economy - many trades and professions that earn some of their income through hunting are the farmers and feed merchants who sell hay, straw, haylage and oats to local horse owners, equestrian centres who provide hirelings, livery or who sell horses, farriers, saddlers, vets, hoteliers and publicans. Cite a 1995 UCD research report which estimated the overall value to the economy from	Hunting with dogs is unnecessary: • No evidence that fox numbers in England and Wales increased following the passing of the Hunting Act in 2004²⁰; • Fox predation does not have a significant 1.impact on farming incomes - studies consistently show that predators and

¹⁴ [Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association website, 22 August 2026](#)

¹⁵ [League Against Cruel Sports, website, 22 August 2026](#)

¹⁶ [A case against hunting with dogs, League Against Cruel Sports](#)

¹⁷ [Report of Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales, 9 June 2000](#)

²⁰ Wright, L.J., Newson, S.E. & Noble, D.G. (2014). The value of a random sampling design for annual monitoring of national populations of larger British terrestrial mammals. *European Journal of Wildlife Research*, 60:213-221.

Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association¹⁴ – hunting with dogs – reasons for advocacy	League Against Cruel Sports¹⁵ – hunting with dogs – reasons for opposition¹⁶
fieldsports as being approximately €100 million annually. ^{18 19}	misadventure (e.g. going missing) account for only 5% of annual UK lamb losses.
Left unchecked, fox populations would expand and destroy the delicate balance of nature and cause widespread damage.	Hunting with dogs is not about fox control – a League investigation in May 2015 revealed 16 fox cubs held captive in a barn linked to a fox hunt.
Other methods of fox control - snares, traps, gassing and poisoning - all carry a high risk of a lingering death not only to the fox but to other mammals, while the hunted fox is either killed outright or gets away.	Hunting with dogs also kills hares and deer.
Recreational and cultural value.	The 2004 Hunting Act is effective – GB's most successful animal welfare law – workable and successful.
Specific value to the development of horsemanship ²¹ and horse breeding lines.	The 2004 Hunting Act is popular – cite a 2014 IPSOS MORI poll showing that 8 out of 10 people on GB think fox hunting with dogs should remain illegal.

4 Hunting activities involving dogs

Table 3 below provides an overview of some of the main forms of hunting that involve dogs within Northern Ireland at present.

Table 3: Overview of main forms of hunting that involve dogs

Activity	Description	Species of Quarry hunted
Terrier work ²²	Terriers introduced into burrows to flush out targeted animals with quarry animal then trapped and shot	Foxes Rats Mink
Hunting with hounds	Trained hounds track, chase and kill animal if	Fox

¹⁸ Corbally, Alison F; O'Connell, John J; Connolly, John Augustine, The economic significance of field sports in the Republic of Ireland, Department of Agribusiness and Rural Development, University College Dublin, 1997

¹⁹ Accessing the UCD report reveals that the economic contribution to the Irish Economy was valued at IR£67 million in 1997 – which taking account of inflation would amount to approximately €161 million today.

²¹ [The Huning Heritage, The Irish Field newspaper, 6 September 2024](#)

²² [National Working Terrier Federation website, 25 August 2026](#)

Activity	Description	Species of Quarry hunted
	caught followed by hunt members on horseback or foot – in case of deer generally killed by huntsman through shooting rather than by hound.	Deer
Trail hunting with hounds ²³	Uses an animal derived scent (mainly fox urine) which is laid over a route and trained hounds then track and chase the scent followed by hunt members on horseback or foot.	Advocates focus on laid scent of quarry species rather than actual quarry species – accusations that hounds can end up chasing and killing a prey animal.
Drag hunting ²⁴	Uses a non-animal derived scent (commonly aniseed) laid over a route and trained hounds then track and chase the scent followed by hunt members on horseback or foot.	None – hounds are trained on non-animal scent
Clean boot hunting	Trained hounds accompanied by hunt members on horseback or foot follow the scent of a human volunteer who effectively lays a trail over a route.	None

²³ [British Hound Sports Association website, 26 August 2026](#)

²⁴ [All about drag hunting, Save Me Trust website, 26 August 2026](#)

Activity	Description	Species of Quarry hunted
Beagle work	Using packs of beagles to follow an animal scent. Beagle handlers follow on foot. Beagles pursuit continues until they either lose the scent or catch and kill the targeted animal.	Mainly hares but rabbits and foxes can also be hunted by this means.
Falconry hunting	Dogs play a role in finding, flushing or retrieving quarry which is actually killed by a bird of prey.	Many species but can include: Rabbits Hares Pheasants Partridges
Shooting	Shooting can be recreational, focused on wildlife control or about providing food and can see the dogs being used to either flush animals to guns or to retrieve animals that have been shot and killed.	Multiple species (including non mammalian species like birds)

5 Current extent of hunting with dogs activity in Northern Ireland

Making an assessment of the current extent of hunting activity involving dogs in Northern Ireland has proven challenging.

As evidenced from the data in table 3 above there are many forms of activity to cover and it should be noted that some of these can involve either organised packs of dogs or individual dogs.

Baily's Hunting Directory²⁵ provides data on current organised hunts that involve packs of dogs and table 4 below provides an overview of those hunts which are currently active within Northern Ireland and voluntarily registered with Baily's, where the hunting takes place, what species of dog they utilise, the number of dogs and the quarry which is hunted.

Table 4: Current organised and active hunts in Northern Ireland

Name of hunt	County	Dog type	Hunt quarry	Number of dogs	Meet
Dungannon Foxhounds	Tyrone	Foxhounds	Fox	n/a	Sundays, occasional Saturdays and Wednesdays in season
East Down Foxhounds	Down	Modern English Foxhounds	Fox	n/a	Tuesday and Saturday in season – Autumn and Winter
Iveagh Foxhounds	Down Armagh	Foxhounds	Fox	n/a	Wednesday and Saturday in season
North Down Hunt	Down	Foxhounds	Fox	56	Wednesday and Saturday, 12 noon in season
South Tyrone Foxhounds	Tyrone Monaghan	TBC	TBC	70	Saturday and Thursday 12 noon in season
Down Bloodhounds	Down	Bloodhounds	Clean Boot	15	Saturdays at 12 noon between October and Mid March

²⁵ [Baily's Hunting Directory](#)

Name of hunt	County	Dog type	Hunt quarry	Number of dogs	Meet
East Antrim Harriers	Antrim	TBC	TBC	80	Saturday at 12:30 in season
Mid Antrim Harriers	Antrim L/Derry	TBC	TBC	49	Wednesday and Saturday at 12:30 in season
Oriel Harriers	Louth Monaghan Armagh	TBC	TBC	22	Sundays at 12:30 in season
Newry Hunt	Down	TBC	TBC	44	Wednesday and Saturday at 12:30 in season
Route Harriers	Antrim	TBC	TBC	40	Saturday at noon in season
Tynan and Armagh Harriers	Armagh	Foxhound	Fox	30	Saturday 12 noon and some Wednesdays in season
Armagh and Richhill Beagles	Armagh	TBC	TBC	43	Saturdays and Thursdays at 12 in season
Sunnyland Beagles Hunt Club	Antrim	TBC	TBC	35	Saturdays and bye days in season
West Down Beagles	Down	TBC	TBC	n/a	Saturdays and occasional bye days in season
Braid Draghounds	Antrim	Draghounds	Drag lines or trails	n/a	n/a

Name of hunt	County	Dog type	Hunt quarry	Number of dogs	Meet
County Down Staghounds	Down	TBC	TBC	n/a	Tuesday and Saturday in season
Farney Harriers	North Louth Monaghan South Armagh	TBC	TBC	35	Sunday at 12 – season TBC
Fermanagh Harriers	Fermanagh Cavan Monaghan	Modern and Old English hounds	TBC	40	Saturdays and occasional bye days at 12 in season
The Glens of Antrim	Antrim	TBC	Fox	N/A	N/A

In summary the data in table 4 highlights the following:

- **There are approximately 20 active organised hunts using dogs within Northern Ireland according to Baily's Hunting Directory;**
- **Of these 20 active hunts the biggest number of those hunts which identified their quarry (6), identified the fox;**
- **There were two organised hunts which did not have a quarry species – focused on clean boot or trail hunting;**
- **Whilst not all hunts identified the number of dogs they utilised, the total of those recorded which did not deploy clean boot or trail hunting amounted to 544 dogs. It has not been possible to determine if any of the dogs/packs are shared between organised hunts.**

Baily's Hunting Directory also lists a number of hunts previously active within the island of Ireland which have now been disbanded. One of these was based in Northern Ireland and data relating to it is set out in table 5 below.

Table 5: Previously active hunts within Northern Ireland

Name of hunt	County	Dog type	Hunt quarry	Number of dogs	Meet
Holestone Farmers Bloodhounds	Antrim	Bloodhound	Clean Boot	21	Saturday at 12 in season

In addition to the activity highlighted in tables four and five, and building on the information highlighting hunting activities in table 3, the following observations are made:

- According to Department of Justice data, there are around 54,000 Firearms Certificate (FAC) holders in Northern Ireland and approximately 90 firearm and shotgun clubs²⁶. It is not possible to determine how many of these FAC holders or clubs are engaged in hunting activity that would involve dogs on either an individual basis or as part of a club or organisation.
- The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) does not publish data on its total membership in Northern Ireland but is part of a joint BASC and Ulster Farmers' Union Pest Control Scheme²⁷. The control of pest mammals is included under this scheme but there is no indication as to how many BASC/UFU members participate and how many dogs are used in this activity or how they are used.
- The Irish Working Terrier Federation's (IWTF) website²⁸ suggests that there were approximately 10 registered working terrier clubs operating in Northern Ireland in 2013 but it has not been possible to assess if this number remains accurate in 2026.
- With regards to falconry hunting, the Irish Hawking Club²⁹ is the representative body on the island of Ireland and the organisation's

²⁶ [Consultation on Proposed Amendments to Firearms Licensing Fees and the "Banded System", Department of Justice, March 2026](#)

²⁷ [NI/UFU Pest Control Scheme, British Association for Shooting and Conservation website, 26 August 2026](#)

²⁸ [Irish Working Terrier Federation website, 26 August 2026](#)

²⁹ [The history of Falconry in Ireland, Irish Hawking Club website, 26 August 2026](#)

website suggests that there are no more than 100 participants in the sport active at any one time. The Irish Hawking Club provide no geographical breakdown on their membership but there appears to be at least one commercial operator in Northern Ireland who provide hunting experiences with birds of prey³⁰. It is, however, unclear as to whether this centre utilises dogs as part of these hunting experiences.

6 Overview of Bill

The Hunting with Dogs (Northern Ireland) Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 27 April 2026.

The Bill consists of fourteen clauses and table 6 below provides an overview of the main provisions within the Bill.

It should be noted that the Bill is an amendment Bill and would introduce additions (a new Part 3A) to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The primary objective of the Bill is to:

Prohibit hunting wild mammals with dogs; to prohibit trail hunting; and to prohibit terrier work.

Table 6: Overview of Bill Clauses and provisions

Clause	Provisions
Clause 1 – Hunting with dogs	• Adds a new Article 23A to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Establishes that a person participates in hunting with dogs if they are hunting a wild mammal using one or more dogs, trail hunting or terrier work. • This applies whether or not the person is responsible for any dog used. • Participation in hunting also includes a reference to participation in another activity (such as pursuit by a dog of an artificial or human scent) in the course of which a dog hunts a wild mammal. • Defines what a ‘wild mammal’ includes: ○ a wild mammal that has been bred or tamed for any purpose; ○ a wild mammal that is or has been held in captivity or confinement; ○ a wild mammal that has escaped or been released from captivity or confinement; and ○ any mammal that is living wild.

³⁰ [Hunting Experiences, Falconry Experiences NI website, 26 August 2026](#)

Clause 2 – Offences – hunting wild mammals using dogs	• Adds a new Article 23B to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Makes it an offence to hunt a wild mammal using one or more dogs; • Makes it an offence to organise or participate in the hunting of a wild mammal using one or more dogs; • Makes it an offence for the owner or occupier of land to knowingly cause or permit another person to hunt a wild mammal using one or more dogs on that land; • Establishes that these offences do not apply in respect of exempt hunting (as set out in proposed new Articles 23E to 23H to the 1985 Wildlife Order); • Defines “hunting a wild animal” in this part as including searching for and pursuing.
Clause 3 – Offences – Trail hunting	• Adds a new Article 23C to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Makes organising or participating in trail hunting an offence; • Makes it an offence for the owner or occupier of land to knowingly cause or permit another person to hunt a wild mammal using one or more dogs on that land; • Establishes that this does not apply in respect of exempt hunting as set out in the proposed Article 23I amendment to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Establishes that ‘hunting a wild mammal’ within this part of the Bill includes searching for and pursuing.
Clause 4 – Terrier work	• Adds a new Article 23D to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Makes it an offence to organise or participate in terrier work; • Defines terrier work as meaning inducing one or more dogs to enter a hole in the ground or an enclosed space in order to flush out or otherwise force a wild mammal to leave the hole or enclosed space or make it easier or quicker to dig a wild mammal out of the hole or enclosed space.
Clause 5 - Penalties	• On summary conviction, a person committing an offence is subject to imprisonment for up to 12 months, to a fine up to £20,000 or both; • On conviction on indictment, a person committing an offence is subject to imprisonment for up to 5 years, to an unlimited fine, or both.
Clause 6 – Exempt hunting – rats and mice	• Adds a new Article 23E to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Makes the hunting of mice and rats with dogs exempt from the Bill provisions;
Clause 7 – Exempt hunting – management of wild mammals above ground	• Adds a new Article 23F to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; • Would make management of wild mammals above ground an exempt hunting with dogs activity if it is for the purpose of searching for, stalking or flushing from cover a wild mammal with the intention of killing for one or more of the purposes detailed hereafter; • Would make management of wild mammals above ground an exempt hunting with dogs activity if it is for the purpose of searching for retrieving a wild mammal which has been killed as a result of the activity in the preceding paragraph; • Establishes four purposes – at least one of which must be met as follows: ○ preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber or pasture, ○ preventing the spread of disease, ○ preserving human health, ○ preventing serious damage to the biological diversity of an area.

	- Also sets conditions – all of which need to be met as follows: - the activity does not involve the use of more than two dogs, - any dog used is under control, - reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, - permission has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, - the wild mammal that is being searched for, stalked or flushed is shot dead as soon as reasonably possible, if the attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in sub-paragraph (e), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
Clause 8 – Exempt hunting – Relieving the suffering of injured wild mammals	- Adds a new Article 23g to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; - Would make the use of dogs to relieve the suffering of wild mammals above ground an exempted activity; - Only if the person hunting a wild mammal is using a dog above ground to search for, stalk or flush from cover a wild mammal which the person has reasonable grounds for believing is injured, with the intention of treating, capturing or killing it for the purpose of relieving its suffering, and so long as the wild mammal was not deliberately injured for the purpose of allowing the activity mentioned in sub-paragraph (a) to take place; - Also need to meet all of the following conditions: - does not involve the use of more than two dogs, - any dog used is under control, - reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, - either— (i) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii) the person carrying out the activity is a constable exercising a power of entry, or (iii) the person carrying out the activity is a wildlife inspector exercising a power of entry under Article 25B, - the wild mammal which is being searched for, stalked or flushed is, as soon as reasonably possible, either— (i) given treatment to reduce or alleviate its pain or discomfort before being allowed to escape without being pursued or killed, (ii) captured for the purpose of being given treatment to reduce or alleviate its pain or discomfort (whether at that place or at another place), (iii) shot dead, or (iv) observed and allowed to escape without being pursued or killed, - if an attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in sub-paragraph (e)(iii), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
Clause 9 – Exempt hunting – Searching for dead wild mammals	- Adds a new Article 23H to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; - Would make searching for dead wild mammals using dogs an exempted hunting activity so long as the dog is being used above ground and all of the following conditions are met: - the activity mentioned in paragraph (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, - any dog used is under control,

	○ reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, ○ either— (i) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii) the person carrying out the activity is a constable exercising a power of entry, or (iii) the person carrying out the activity is a wildlife inspector ○ exercising a power of entry under Article 25B, ○ reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.
Clause 10 – Exempt hunting – Training dogs to follow an animal based scent	• Adds a new Article 23I to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 • Would make training dogs to follow an animal based scent using dogs an exempted hunting activity so long as the dog/s are directed to find and follow an animal based scent which has been laid for that purpose. • Would also exempt laying an animal based scent for a dog to find and follow; • In both instances this needs to be for a lawful purpose and the following conditions must all be met: ○ the activity does not involve the use of more than two dogs, ○ any dog used is under control, ○ reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, ○ permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, ○ reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.
Clause 11 - Enforcement	• Adds the proposed new offences to the existing enforcement responsibilities under the Wildlife Order 1985
Clause 12 – Review	• Establishes that DAERA must review and publish a report about the operation of the provisions of this Act from time to time – at least once every 5 years.
Clause 13 – Commencement	• Establishes that Bill – if enacted – would come into operation 6 months after receiving Royal Assent.
Clause 14 – Short title	• Establishes that the Act may be cited as the Hunting with Dogs Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The second stage debate³¹ for the Bill was held on 26 May 2026 and the Bill passed to the Committee stage by 60 votes to 15.

7 Consultation

As part of the bill development process the Bill proposer undertook a public consultation exercise between 21 October 2024 and 20 January 2025³².

³¹[Official Report: Tuesday 26 May 2026, Northern Ireland Assembly](#)

³²[Hunting Wild Mammals with Dogs Consultation Synopsis, John Blair MLA](#)

The Bill proposer utilised what could be characterised as a twin track approach in their public consultation exercise. As well as utilising an e-consultation platform (Survey Monkey) the Bill proposer also had engagement with a range of stakeholders in forms including email, phone calls and face-to-face meetings, and the consultation summary document reflects this approach to the data gathered.

The online survey was made up of 17 questions and received 12,011 responses over the thirteen week consultation period. Nine of the 17 questions within the online survey had yes or no options and the responses to these are summarised in table 7 below.

It should also be noted that the data in table 7 also includes the number of responses received from people claiming residence within Northern Ireland, with the specific NI resident data being presented within brackets.

Table 7: Overview of responses to questions with yes/no answers

Question	Number of respondents (NI residents)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Question 4: Should all hunting, searching, coursing, capturing or killing wild mammals with dogs be banned in Northern Ireland?	12,011 (4,864)	62.92 (72.27)	37.08 (27.73)
Question 5: Terrier work, and flushing, is a legal activity in Northern Ireland and the term describes dogs being put underground to attack and potentially kill a wild animal. Once a wild animal has gone to ground, is it acceptable to use dogs to attack or cause the wild animal to flee from its cover?	12,011 (4,864)	32.81 (26.54)	67.19 (73.46)
Question 6: Should trail hunting, the process in which one or more dogs are induced or permitted to follow the scent of a wild mammal (whether the trail of scent has been laid naturally or by human intervention) be banned in Northern Ireland?	12,011 (4,864)	61.51 (69.74)	38.49 (30.26)
Question 7: Should the law make landowners vicariously liable for any illegal hunting activity that takes place on their land, if the landowner has granted permission for the activity?	12,011 (4,864)	63.52 (72.57)	36.48 (27.43)
Question 8: Should people who make their dogs available for hunting, even if they don't hunt themselves be liable to prosecution?	12,011 (4,864)	62.94 (72.06)	37.06 (27.94)
Question 11: Do you foresee any unintended consequences of the proposed law? If yes,	12,011 (4,864)	35.23 (27.36)	64.77 (72.64)

Question	Number of respondents (NI residents)	Yes (%)	No (%)
what safeguards could be put in place to mitigate against these?			
Question 15: Do you have any suggestions as to how the ambitions of the proposal could be improved?	12,011 (4,864)	17.33 (13.82)	82.67 (86.18)
Question 16: Is ending hunting wild mammals with dogs important to you?	12,011 (4,864)	73.84 (80.45)	26.18 (19.55)
Question 17: Do you think the cost of implementation and policing the proposed Act is acceptable?	12,011 (4,864)	62.37 (71.36)	37.63 (28.64)

Table 8 below provides a summary of the information collected for those questions utilised in the questionnaire which had the provision for multiple responses. Column two within the table provides the overall responses and column 3 highlights those for responses from people declaring their residence as being within Northern Ireland.

Table 8: Overview of data collected for questions with multiple response provision

Question	Overall responses	Northern Ireland resident
Question 1: This question asked respondents whether they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.	Total responses – 12,011 • Organisation – 1.54% • Individual – 98.36%	Total responses – 4,864 • Organisation – 1.09% • Individual – 98.91%
Question 3: This question asked respondents where they lived.	Total responses – 12,011 • NI – 40.5% • GB – 44.45% • Rep of Ireland – 12.41% • Elsewhere – 2.64%	Total responses – 4,864 • NI – 100%
Question 9: What sort of penalties should be available for persons found guilty of offences under the proposed bill?	Total responses – 12,011 • Imprisonment, using the same Sentencing Schedule currently in place for the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011 – 37.86% • Fixed penalty notices – 2.06% • Fines – 3.06% • A mixture of the above – 26.04% • None of the above – 30.99%	Total responses – 4,864 • Imprisonment, using the same Sentencing Schedule currently in place for the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011 – 41.18% • Fixed penalty notices – 1.56% • Fines – 2.57% • A mixture of the above – 31.44% • None of the above – 23.25%
Question 12: To what extent do you support the ambitions of the Bill?	Total responses – 12,011 • Fully – 61.07% • Mostly – 1.94% • Unsure – 0.64%	Total responses – 4,864 • Fully – 70.35% • Mostly – 2.08% • Unsure – 0.51%

Question	Overall responses	Northern Ireland resident
	- To some extent – 1.24% - Not at all – 35.11%	- To some extent – 0.86% - Not at all – 26.19%

A number of questions within the questionnaire were either open ended or had an open ended component. The consultation synopsis report provided by the Bill proposer provided a sample of the responses received to these questions and this data is provided in table 9 below.

Table 9: Sample of open ended response question responses

Question	Sample of responses
Question 10: What exemptions, if any, do you believe should be included or excluded (from the Bill)?	"Pest control should be an exemption" "If the person didn't know their land was being used for sport" "Conservation purposes and protection of red listed species" "Trail hunting should be included and kept to allow the continuation of British tradition" "If wild mammals are causing harm and destruction to property, then hunting said mammals should be allowed" "If a dog escapes from its owner and singularly attacks a wild animal" "All registered Hunts" "No exemptions which equal loopholes" "Using terrier type dogs to hunt and kill vermin (rats/mice)- terrier type dogs were bred for this type of activity, and are more effective and less damaging than poisons for this type of pest control" "For serious, necessary culling in which saves other animals lives e.g. Infection control"
Question 11: Do you foresee any unintended consequences of the proposed law? If yes, what safeguards could be put in place to mitigate against these?	"Wild life will flourish and hopefully people will lose their lust for a blood sport which is completely barbaric" "Increased crop damage" "Less dogs with hunting injuries. Less pet dogs being injured/caught up in the hunt." "Wildlife and farm animals will be safe" "Owners whose pet dogs get an opportunity to chase cats from time to time (i.e. escaping their home to do so) should not be penalised if its purely accidental" "The nonsense that is trail hunting. People are still hunting. Wildlife policing needs to be better" "If the law is not sufficiently enforced illegal hunting will take place" "The decline in community, mental health and many job opportunities lost" "Evidence from Scotland shows that there are no unintended consequences" "Inability to effectively control pest species" "Rehoming of dogs previously used for blood sport. Rescue kennels and rehoming programme and stopping breeding those breeds used for blood sport"
Question 13: If you do NOT agree with the Bill proposal, what additional measures would convince you to agree?	"The removal of fox, badger, rabbit and hare is essential and flushing with dogs, using dogs below ground and using dogs to track scent is vital. This cannot be ignored" "Licensing of hound packs"

Question	Sample of responses
	"Permit trail/drag/bloodhounds" "Appropriate consideration for the impact on rural industries and communities" "Clear, honest instructions on what will be put into law and what will be and not be effected" "Sensible licensing" "Allow trail hunting if policed" "A focussed approach which ACTUALLY brings us into line with general GB legislation and does not go beyond" "Country sports people involved in drawing up the bill" "Exemptions for people passing exams demonstrating their knowledge of natural systems and the importance of the balance of nature and the role hunting in conservation"
Question 14: If you do NOT agree with the Bill proposal, what alternative proposal, if any, would you support in respect of hunting mammals with dogs?	"A fair governing body" "A strict code of conduct adhered to" "More stringent, more complete, stronger rules" "A voluntary code of practice" "Limited government involvement required. Allow governing bodies to ensure standards are adhered to" "Engage with the stakeholders before introduction. Focus on evidence-based approaches addressing animal welfare, while letting legitimate hunting to continue" "Have a season for when it can be done and a quarry list of species" "Maximum number of dogs allowed to be used at one time" "Seasons and permitted licensing" "Proper regulation and control"
Question 15: Do you have any suggestions as to how the ambitions of the proposal could be improved?	"More education in schools and to the public to learn to respect wild animals" "A plan to rehome hounds used hunts" "That the PSNI and courts enforce the law fully" "Ban hunting for profit. Subsistence hunting allowed across the board. Do not allow people to pay for hunting services" "An outright ban on breeding the dogs that are used for hunting. Any breeding of dogs for financial returns should be outlawed" "Only to ensure the law is fully upheld and that penalties are severe enough to act as a deterrent" "Strengthen welfare laws for all animals" "Give land owners/farmers power to prevent, stop and remove people hunting on their land" "Further genuine consultation with land owners and stakeholders" "Use a license"
Question 16: Is ending hunting wild mammals with dogs important to you?	"It is illegal already so is not an issue" "It is part of a very traditional way of life and shouldn't be interfered with" "It is a sport, and not for human survival anymore. As a sport it is barbaric and unnecessary for animals to suffer in this way (both wild, and dogs used to hunt)" "Hunting is important for rural communities, livestock farmers and wildlife management" "There is no place in society for humans enjoying the killing of other sentient beings."

Question	Sample of responses
	Its barbaric and not entertainment" "It trains dogs to become aggressive" "It is a part of the fabric, culture and history of Great Britain and is therefore of great importance to the nation" "It's being a tradition for years and brings country folk together get them out of the house socialise and meeting old friends and some people that's all they have" "This is probably the least important issue we are facing today especially when compared to inflation, poverty, grooming by gangs, knife and gun crime and illegal immigration"
Question 17: Do you think the cost of implementation and policing the proposed Act is acceptable?	"John Blair's Bill closely follows the Hunting With Dogs legislation in Scotland. This Act came into force in October 2023 and has not resulted in any extra financial burden on the farming community, Government agencies or Police Scotland" "How can we put a price against inhumanity?" "There are better things for the police to do such as knife crime and gang violence" "Enforcing most crimes is expensive. Fining those responsible will cover some of the costs" "I would pay more taxes to ensure this is policed" "Can we spend money on policing crime and fixing our nation's health crisis" "The cost to implement the UK Hunting Act has been unjustified and ineffective" "A total waste of time and tax payers money" "Police resources are already stretched" "The funds required to uphold a law are a necessity, therefore acceptable. There is no point in implementing a law and not enforce it in its entirety when protection from suffering is at the heart of it"

Turning to the issue of stakeholder engagement beyond the e-consultation, the Bill proposer's synopsis report highlights that at its time of publication there had been three types of additional stakeholder engagement as follows:

- Email submissions and phone calls – 6 received ;
- Offers made by the Bill proposer to brief a range of stakeholders on the Bill provisions in person – four of which had occurred.
- Offers made by the Bill proposer to brief a range of stakeholders on the Bill provisions in person – 10 of which had not occurred.

Tables 10 and 11 provide this information as it relates to the first two categories.

Table 10: Stakeholder Email submissions and Phone call summary

Email submissions and phone calls - stakeholder	Summary
Dogs Trust	Email response from Dogs Trust within the timeframe of

	the consultation. They asked for their response to be considered but not published
The Workers Party	Received an email response from the Workers Party within the timeframe of the consultation. The Workers Party expressed its strong support for my proposed Bill and indicated no concerns.
Northern Ireland hunting club	Sought information on whether drag hunting would be banned through the proposed Bill. He was informed that whilst this cannot be assured at this stage of the process, it is not the current intention of the proposed Bill to ban drag hunting.
Causeway Coast Dog Rescue	Sought clarity on funding predictions for the proposed Bill and suggested that funding should be made available for rescue charities if they are confronted with a large number of hunting dogs being surrendered to them for rehoming.
Member of the public	Telephoned my Constituency Office seeking information on the proposed Bill in relation to game shooting. He was informed that game-shooting would not be considered within the parameters of the proposed Bill.
Member of the public	Called my Constituency Office to voice his support for the proposed Bill, citing his frequent observations of the damage caused by hunts. These include livestock disturbances due to hounds, land damage, open farm fences, and blocked public roadways

Table 11: Completed in person briefings

Completed in person briefings for stakeholders	Summary
February 2025, Bill proposer hosted a second round-table discussion with MLAs in Parliament Buildings..	Bill proposer, supported by the USPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports. This was another opportunity to answer their questions about my proposed Bill. Questions were also put to the Scottish Official who worked on the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023
British Association for Shooting and Conservation	No additional details provided
Countryside Alliance	No additional details provided
British Veterinary Association	No additional details provided

With regard to those stakeholders who were offered a briefing on the Bill by the proposer but for which the briefing offer had not been taken up at the time of the consultation synopsis publication, the following fall within this category:

- The North of Ireland Veterinary Association;
- The Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland;
- The Ulster Farmers' Union;
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, as well as all Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Queen's University Belfast Student Union President;

- Ulster University Student Union President;
- Stranmillis Student Union President;
- Ulster Wildlife;
- National Trust;
- Field Sports NI.

In summary:

- **The consultation received 12,011 responses, including 4,864 from people identifying as Northern Ireland residents. Most respondents were individuals rather than organisations (around 98%).**
- **A majority of respondents supported key elements of the Bill proposals, including banning hunting wild mammals with dogs (63% overall; 72% of NI residents), banning trail hunting (62% overall; 70% of NI residents), and making landowners liable where they knowingly permit illegal hunting activity.**
- **Views expressed in open-ended responses were highly polarised, with supporters citing animal welfare and the prevention of cruelty, while opponents raised concerns about pest control, wildlife management, rural traditions, employment impacts and enforcement costs.**

8 Potential issues for consideration

This section of the paper identifies a number of general and specific issues for consideration in relation to the provisions within the Bill.

8.1 Questions relating to the consultation process and associated synopsis document – residency and individuals/organisation status

The level of response to the public consultation relating to the Bill has been significant with over 12,000 total responses having been collected.

It should be noted that the Survey Monkey survey was evidently widely disseminated/publicised and that responses were collected from a wide range of stakeholders across many locations. The Bill proposer had clearly recognised

this potential whilst designing the e-consultation and specifically included a question asking respondents to identify if they were resident in Northern Ireland.

As a result of the 12,011 responses received 4,864 (40%) identified as being resident within Northern Ireland.

The Bill proposer sought to recognise this potential through the provision of a Northern Ireland resident specific response section within their consultation synopsis report.

In addition to respondents being asked to identify their place of residence they were also asked to identify whether they were responding as an individual or an organisation. The result was that 98.36% of overall respondents reported as individuals with the remaining 1.54% reporting as on behalf of an organisation. With regards to respondents identifying as Northern Ireland residents, 98.91% stated they were responding as individuals with 1.09% responding on behalf of an organisation.

The data provided by the Bill proposer in their consultation synopsis document is extensive but there are a number of specific questions relating to residency and status as either an individual or speaking on behalf of an organisation as follows:

- **Were there any checks conducted or evidence required for a questionnaire respondent in terms of proof of residence? Is this an important issue?**
- **Were there any checks conducted or evidence required for a questionnaire respondent in terms of whether they said they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?**
- **More specifically, in relation to stated status as an individual or on behalf of an organisation, were there many stock/common responses submitted, particularly with regards to those questions with open ended components? If this occurred how were these responses treated?**

Answers to these questions are not critical to the overall scrutiny of the Bill, but they may better inform Members in terms of the weight they may decide to give to the consultation responses.

8.2 Consultation process – volume and sampling of responses to open ended questions.

The consultation synopsis report provides an overview of headline percentages collected for each of the 14 questions that made up the Survey Monkey online survey. As referenced in section 7 of this paper, and specifically highlighted by table 9, a total of seven questions within the online survey were either open ended questions or had an open ended component.

Given the volume of responses to the overall e-consultation it would be extremely challenging to reflect all of the comments collected. In light of this the Bill proposer's consultation synopsis document adopted the approach of providing a sample of recorded comments to each of the aforementioned seven questions and these are reproduced within table 9 of this paper.

In light of the approach taken the following questions may be of value to Members:

- **What was the total number of open ended and supplementary text responses received to the seven questions within the e-consultation that had these provisions?**
- **Were there particular questions that had a greater likelihood of receiving open text responses? If so, which ones?**
- **Unlike the closed response questions, the Bill proposer's synopsis document does not provide a Northern Ireland resident filtered summary of open ended and supplementary text responses. Was the incidence of the comments common across NI residents and others or was there any difference in response rate?**
- **How many of the sampled comments within the synopsis report are from people claiming to be resident in Northern Ireland?**

- **What was the methodology used to sample open ended and text component responses and was this applied consistently across all questions?**
- **Is the Bill proposer confident that the sampling method used to select open ended and text component responses in the synopsis report is representative of the overall data collected?**

8.3 Were amendments made to Bill proposals as a result of consultation responses – how does the introduced Bill reflect these?

Within the consultation synopsis report³³ there is a section titled ‘Proposals to Develop Ambitions and Goals’ which provides an overview of some of the questions/issues raised during the consultation process. These issues are summarised as follows:

- Valid questions concerning ‘trail hunting’, ‘drag hunting’ and ‘clean boot hunting’ under the provisions of the proposed Bill - ‘trail hunting’ in other regions, primarily its misuse as a “smokescreen” for illegal hunting activities;
- The need to regulate the fox population, particularly concerning farmers’ rights to protect their livestock;
- Concerns about the potential prosecution of dog walkers if their dogs chase and kill wild mammals during walks.

In addition to highlighting these issues, the Bill proposer identified within the consultation synopsis report, what they planned to do in response to these issues as part of their Bill drafting process and these proposed actions are summarised as follows:

- For ‘drag hunting’ and ‘clean boot hunting’, I intend to implement a ‘Recklessness Clause’ in the proposed legislation, akin to one from my previous Bill. This clause would prohibit the use of ‘drag hunting’ or ‘clean boot hunting’ as a cover and impose a duty of care on hunts to

³³ [Hunting Wild Mammals with Dogs Consultation Synopsis, John Blair MLA](#)

safeguard wildlife and their environments. For example, if a hunt chases an animal during a 'drag hunt', it would constitute an offence under the Recklessness Clause for failing to control the hounds properly.

- Additionally, hunts must follow a designated route marked by an artificial scent, and the clause will ensure that the scent is not laid near livestock or across public roads or railway lines. Violating this provision would result in an offence. If hunts are authentically participating in 'drag hunting' or 'clean boot hunting', they should have no issue with this clause's inclusion.
- In relation to fox population control - I recognise that this matter requires careful attention when finalising the Bill. The Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 emphasised the significance of enabling predator control, and I intend to include comparable protective provisions in my Bill.
- Concerns about the potential prosecution of dog walkers - I plan to clarify in the wording of my Bill, again, based on the Hunting Wild Mammals (Scotland) Bill 2023, that accountability lies with the individual. Essentially, the individual must be showing intent to hunt a wild mammal with their dog and this intent would have to be proven.

Members may wish to confirm with the Bill proposer how and where these proposed actions were incorporated into the Bill as introduced.

8.4 Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM) – areas for clarification

The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM)³⁴ that accompanied the Bill has a number of areas which may benefit from clarification and these are looked at below.

8.4.1 Definitional and application issues

³⁴ [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, Hunting with Dogs Bill](#)

A number of paragraphs within the EFM, more specifically the commentary on clauses, make reference to the intended application and interpretation of the Bill as follows³⁵ :

Clause 1

This clause makes it a crime to hunt a wild mammal using a dog, or to be involved in the hunting of a wild mammal with a dog. These are all active rather than passive, they require organising, participation, or planning. A person is not hunting if they are walking their dog and their dog happens to pick up a scent and chases after it. This becomes a factual point, for example, it will be hunting if the person deliberately goes out to find a scent and encourages their dog to chase it down, or sets their dog on a wild mammal.

Clause 2

...There is a related offence if the owner of land allows others to hunt wild mammals on their land. Under the terms of this clause, fox-hunting and hare coursing would be made unlawful.

Members may wish to consider the following questions relating to these paragraphs:

- **Does the Clause 1 commentary relating to a person ‘...not hunting if they are walking their dog and their dog happens to pick up a scent and chases it’ constitute statutory guidance? Does this provide effective protection for dog walkers from the offences cited in Clause 2 of the Bill?**
- **Does the Bill proposer intend to develop or require DAERA and others to develop statutory guidance to enable enforcement of the Bill provisions?**
- **Why does the Clause 2 commentary make reference to the clause making hare coursing unlawful, as hare coursing is currently**

³⁵ [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, Hunting with Dogs Bill](#)

banned under Section 38 of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Northern Ireland) Act 2011?

8.4.2 Costs and economic impacts

Paragraphs 20 to 23 within the EFM detail the financial effects of the Bill. [RaiSe paper NIAR148-26](#), which complements this Bill paper, considers these issues in greater detail as they relate to the public purse implications. This paper can be accessed [here](#).

There are, however, other wider economic implications that could result from the Bill provisions coming into force. As alluded to in table 2 within this paper, hunting with dogs activity does generate economic benefits to certain stakeholders within the rural economy.

The cited UCD report from 1997³⁶ valued the contribution of Irish field sports to the economy as being IR£67 million in 1995 – which taking account of inflation would amount to approximately €161 million today.

The ‘Burns Report’ commissioned by the UK Government and completed in the year 2000³⁷ drew the following conclusions on the impacts resulting from a ban on hunting with dogs in England and Wales:

In view of all the uncertainties, it is not possible to give a precise figure for the number of jobs which would be lost if hunting were banned. In terms of national employment statistics, the short-term loss would be limited, and extend not much further than those employed by the hunt, and some employed by those hunt followers who immediately reduced their use of horses. In the medium term, say three to five years, more losses would occur as hunt followers brought their horse numbers into line with current use. Losses would also arise in the wider rural economy, in particular the

³⁶ Corbally, Alison F; O'Connell, John J; Connolly, John Augustine, The economic significance of field sports in the Republic of Ireland, Department of Agribusiness and Rural Development, University College Dublin, 1997

³⁷ [Report of Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales, 9 June 2000](#)

horse economy, although in part they would be offset by other changes, including expenditure being diverted into other activities. In the long term, say seven to ten years, most (if not all) of the effects would be offset as resources were diverted to new activities and the rural economy adjusted to other economic forces.

Additionally, there have been more recent specific assertions around the impact of a potential trail hunting ban in England and Wales on the horse industry³⁸:

So if the Government follows through on its manifesto commitment to ban trail hunting, the knock-on effects will be felt at both the grass-roots and professional levels of the sport.

A trail hunting ban does not provide an existential threat to Cheltenham Festival itself, but the almost certain loss of the amateur sport of point-to-pointing would have unintended consequences for elite racing. Not for nothing is jump racing known as National Hunt racing; the two are inextricably linked.

In light of this information Members may wish to consider the following questions:

- **Has the Bill proposer either undertaken or are they aware of the economic contribution of hunting with dogs activity to the Northern Ireland economy?**
- **More specifically has there been any assessment of the potential negative economic impact on particular professions that might support or benefit from hunting with dogs activity?**

8.4.3 Lack of a Regulatory Impact Assessment

There is no requirement for Members to conduct a Regulatory Impact Assessment as part of the Members' Bill process.

³⁸ [Horse racing needs trail hunting – a ban would be disastrous, Daily Telegraph, 9 March 2026](#)

Paragraphs 24 and 25 within the EFM³⁹ that accompanied the Bill included a rudimentary assessment of equality impacts and human rights issues that could be impacted by the Bill provisions. These paragraphs concluded that the Bill proposer was satisfied that the Bill does not contain any provisions which are incompatible with either rights defined by the Human Rights Act 1998⁴⁰ or which discriminated against any of the Section 75 equality groups identified within the Northern Ireland Act 1998⁴¹.

However, there may be merit in exploring whether the proposer gave more detailed consideration to any potential equality or more particularly rural impacts during the course of the Bill's development.

Section 1(1) of The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016⁴² places the following duty on public authorities:

1—(1) A public authority must have due regard to rural needs when—

(a) developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and

(b) designing and delivering public services.

What constitutes a 'public authority' is defined in the Act's Schedule and includes all Northern Ireland Executive Departments and the PSNI.

In light of this the following questions may merit investigation:

- **Did the Bill proposer conduct any more detailed equality or rural impacts assessment as part of the Bill development and if so, what conclusions were drawn?**
- **If no more formal Regulatory Impact Assessment components were completed to date, and if the Bill becomes an Act, will it be subject**

³⁹ [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, Hunting with Dogs Bill](#)

⁴⁰ [Human Rights Act 1998](#)

⁴¹ [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#)

⁴² [Rural Needs Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#)

to detailed consideration by DAERA or any other Executive department or agency?

- **Will DAERA and any other Departments and Agencies with responsibility for the delivery of the Act's provisions be in a position to complete any required Regulatory Impact Assessment work prior to the Act coming into operation 6 months after Royal Assent?**
- **Given the requirements under the Rural Needs (Northern Ireland) Act 2016, will DAERA and the PSNI have obligations under the Act, namely to have due regard to rural needs? This question relates to whether the Bill proposals represent '...the development, adoption, implementation and revising of policies, strategies and plans and to the design and delivery of public services'?**
- **If DAERA do have obligations to meet under the Rural Needs (Northern Ireland) Act 2016, will these be completed before commencement of the powers in the Bill, which would take effect six months after the Act received Royal Assent?**

8.5 Definitions utilised within the Bill – areas for clarification

The Bill as introduced deals with a range of issues, and clear and concise definitions will be central to the successful implementation of associated provisions. With this in mind there follows an analysis of definitions utilised within the Bill which might benefit from clarification.

8.5.1 Clause 1 – participation independent of controlling any dog used

Subsection 1 within Clause 1 of the Bill states that a person participates in either hunting a wild mammal using one or more dogs, trail hunting or terrier work, whether or not the person is responsible for controlling any dog used.

At first reading this could potentially equate to a catch all term and raises an obvious question as to whether there should be actual levels of participation associated with the named activities and associated offences. In effect, there would appear to be a need to clarify if passive or active participation are equivalent within the Bill.

The EFM⁴³ that accompanies the Bill, and more specifically, the Commentary and Clauses section, includes the following information under the overview of clause 1:

This clause makes it a crime to hunt a wild mammal using a dog, or to be involved in the hunting of a wild mammal with a dog. These are all active rather than passive, they require organising, participation, or planning.

Questions which may be relevant include:

- **Would participation in these activities, whilst being responsible for controlling a dog used, result in a higher penalty if the person/s were convicted?**
- **For someone not in control of a dog used what is the evidential bar for participation – would proximity during the activity or planning or organising of the same suffice?**
- **Could a person be passively involved in participation, organisation or planning of the hunting activities that the Bill seeks to ban?**
- **Does the EFM explanation for clause 1 suggest that organising and planning are a subset of participation or are these separate activities in their own right? In effect, would planning or organising an activity which would be banned under the Bill provisions, but which did not take place, constitute an offence?**
- **What would constitute non-participation?**
- **Has the Bill proposer given consideration to the need for statutory guidance to enable implementation of the provisions within the Bill in this area?**

8.5.2 Clause 1 - Definition of controlling a dog

Building on section 7.5.1 what constitutes controlling a dog within clause 1?

⁴³ Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, Hunting with Dogs Bill

8.5.3 Clause 1 – Subsection 2 participation including participation in another activity

Subsection 2 of Clause 1 makes a further clarification on what constitutes participation by including participation in another activity (such as the pursuit by a dog of an artificial or human scent) in the course of which a dog hunts a wild mammal.

- **This raises a potential question, namely why is only one such other activity named? Does this apply to all activities named within the Bill?**
- **Additionally what implications does this have for dog walkers? Whilst the Bill does not say anything on dog walking, if a dog is being walked and this was the planned activity, but through the course of this activity the dog unintentionally hunts a wild mammal such as a rabbit, is the dog walker then a participant in hunting with dogs?**
- **The Clause 1 commentary within the EFM that accompanies the Bill effectively says that dog walkers have nothing to fear from this Clause as the hunting activity included is active requiring planning, organising and participation, but Members may wish to explore this issue further. Would there be merit in amending the Bill to exempt dog walking more explicitly?**

8.5.4 Clause 2 – organising is not defined

Subsection 1b of Clause 2 makes it an offence to organise or participate in the hunting of a wild mammal using one or more dogs.

There is, however, no definition proffered for what constitutes organising.

This issue also applies to Subsection 1 of Clause 3 and Subsection 1 of Clause 4.

- **In terms of a question, does organising have to be around an activity that actually occurs?**

8.5.5 Clause 2 – definition of searching and pursuing

Subsection 4 with Clause 2 provides a definition of what constitutes 'hunting a wild mammal' by stating that this includes searching and pursuing.

- **It would be useful to clarify the meaning of searching and pursuing here and whether these apply to a human, a dog or both? This clarification would have particular value given the points raised in Section 7.5.3 as they relate to dog walkers.**

8.5.6 Clause 3 – animal-based scent

Subsections 3(a) and 3(b) within Clause 3 define 'animal-based scent' either a scent derived from a wild mammal or a scent that mimics, replicates or resembles the scent of a wild mammal.

This very narrow definition of what constitutes an 'animal-based scent' could present potential challenges in relation to trail hunting, as set out in Section 7.6 of this paper.

- **Is there a potential need to broaden the definition of 'animal-based scent' within the Bill?**

8.5.7 Clause 4 – definition of enclosed space

Subsection 2 of Clause 4 defines terrier work as 'inducing one or more dogs to enter a hole in the ground , or an enclosed space', but the Bill provides no definition of what constitutes an enclosed space.

- **Can an 'enclosed space' be above or below ground?**
- **Does enclosed mean on all sides and to the full extent of these sides?**
- **Would there be value in either providing a definition for what constitutes 'enclosed space' within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.8 Clause 7 definition of cover

Subsection 1a(i) of Clause 7 makes reference to flushing a wild mammal from cover but fails to provide a definition of what constitutes cover. This also applies to subsection 1(a) of Clause 8.

This has become a significant issue in Scotland despite the Hunting with Dogs Scotland Act 2023 providing the following definition of what constitutes ‘cover’ in Section 27⁴⁴ of the Act:

“cover” means a place above ground in which a wild mammal may be concealed from sight, but does not include an enclosed place from which a wild mammal could not be flushed.

Section 3 of Nature Scot’s 2024 Hunting with Dogs Licensing Review 2024: Licensing Report⁴⁵, highlights the issue being faced in Scotland around this issue as it relates to the issuance of licences for excepted hunting with dogs activity:

In regard to the concerns raised around the definition and relevance of cover, we would note that the definition of cover, as stated in the Act, is clear. To avoid the potential for any confusion, we have already removed the reference to “dense woodland” or “gorse or other thick vegetation” in our guidance – which was provided as example. We are conscious that there is no blanket approach that can be taken to determine what vegetation is and is not ‘cover’..... We are creating a portfolio of examples of cover to help our licensing officers assess this element in an equitable and consistent manner.

- **Given this context would there be value in either providing a definition for what constitutes ‘cover’ within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.9 Clause 7 – more than two dogs

Subsection 3(a) within Clause 7 makes it a condition for an exempted activity that the activity does not involve the use of more than two dogs.

⁴⁴ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023, Section 27](#)

⁴⁵ [Licensing Report: Hunting with Dogs Licensing Review 2024, NatureScot](#)

Subsections 2(b) of Clauses 8, and Subsections 2(a) of Clauses 9 and 10 include the same condition.

The Bill does not clarify if this is the total number of dogs that can be involved in the exempted activity or if this is the total per person engaged in the exempted activity. It seems reasonable to assume that a number of the exempted activities may involve more than one person concurrently.

- **Would there be value in either providing a more concise definition for what constitutes 'more than two dogs' within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.10 Clause 7 – any dog used is under control

Subsection 3(b) of Clause 7 makes it a condition that any dog used in the exempted activity of management of wild mammals above ground is 'under control'. This issue also applies to Subsection 2(b) of Clauses 8, 9 and 10.

This is a significant issue, the condition of a dog being under control is an essential condition for three of the four proposed exempted hunting with dogs activities within the Bill.

The Bill does not, however, provide a definition of what constitutes a dog being 'under' control'.

- **Does under control refer to a physical restraint such as a collar or lead or can a dog be under control if it responds to commands or both?**
- **Once again could clarity be provided by the addition of a definition within the Bill or by the production of statutory guidance?**

8.5.11 Clause 7 – reasonable steps

Subsection 3(c) and 3(f) make reference to reasonable steps being taken in relation to ensuring that dogs do not join with others to form packs and killing an injured wild mammal in a way that causes it the minimum possible suffering.

There are similar uses of the term made within Subsections 2(c) and 2(f) of Clause 8, and Subsections 2(c) and 2(e) of Clauses 9 and 10.

The Bill does not provide a definition of what would constitute ‘reasonable steps’

- **Would there be value in either providing a definition for what constitutes ‘reasonable steps’ within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.12 Clause 7 – reasonably possible

Subsection 3(e) within Clause 7 makes reference to a wild mammal that is being searched for, stalked or flushed is shot dead as soon as reasonably possible.

Subsection 2(e) of Clause 8 also references the term.

The Bill does not provide a definition of what would constitute ‘reasonably possible’.

- **Would there be value in either providing a definition for what constitutes ‘reasonably possible’ within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.13 Clause 7 – serious damage

Subsection 2(a) of Clause 7 makes reference to preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber or pasture.

Subsection 2(d) of Clause 7 refers to preventing serious damage to the biological diversity of an area.

The Bill does not provide a definition of what would constitute ‘serious damage’.

- **Would there be value in either providing a definition for what constitutes ‘serious damage’ within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.14 Clause 8 – reasonable grounds

Subsection 1(a) of Clause 8 includes the requirement for a person to have reasonable grounds for believing a wild mammal is injured.

The Bill does not provide a definition of what would constitute ‘reasonable grounds for believing’.

- **Would there be value in either providing a definition for what constitutes ‘reasonable grounds for believing’. within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.5.15 Clause 10 – lawful purpose

Subsection 1(a) of Clause 10 makes reference to training a dog/s to follow an animal based scent for a lawful purpose.

The Commentary on Clauses section of the EFM⁴⁶ which accompanies the Bill references an example of a lawful purpose as training police dogs to follow a scent, but the Bill itself does not provide a definition.

- **Would there be value in either providing a definition or definitive list for what constitutes ‘lawful purpose’ within the Bill or to consider how this could be dealt with in terms of statutory guidance or examples?**

8.6 Proposed ban on trail hunting

Clause 3 of the Bill proposes a complete ban on the organising of or participation in trail hunting.

For the purposes of the Bill, trail hunting is defined as ‘...*inducing or permitting one or more dogs to follow an animal based scent (whether the trail of scent has been laid naturally or by human intervention)*’.

⁴⁶ [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, Hunting with Dogs Bill](#)

At present within England and Wales trail hunting remains a legal activity and is not referenced within the Hunting Act 2004⁴⁷. Building on their 2024 manifesto commitment⁴⁸, the current Labour government is, however, committed to introducing a ban on trail hunting within England and Wales, but to date there have been no legislative developments to deliver on this commitment. As highlighted previously in section 2 of this paper, DEFRA have now completed their public consultation on proposals to ban trail hunting. Press reports have suggested that there have been approximately 100,000 responses, with 85,000 of these expressing opposition to the proposal. To date there has, however, been no further word from DEFRA or the UK government in terms of timescale and action.

Within Scotland, trail hunting has been banned since October 2023 under the auspices of the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023⁴⁹.

Given this context, the Bill would introduce a prohibition which is only currently in statute within Scotland, but may potentially become so within England and Wales.

Trail hunting effectively emerged as an activity within England and Wales in response to the prohibitions around hunting with dogs introduced by the 2004 Hunting Act. It should be noted that trail hunting remains a contentious issue with accusations from some stakeholders that it is being used as a vehicle for contravention of the hunting with dogs provisions within the 2004 Act. The issue remains a prominent one within England and Wales with the National Trust's Trustees for example announcing their plans in 2021 to no longer issue licences enabling the activity on their land, although drag hunting can continue⁵⁰. The former government response to a House of Commons petition calling for a ban

⁴⁷ [Hunting Act 2004](#)

⁴⁸ [Change, Labour Party Manifesto 2024, page 59](#)

⁴⁹ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023](#)

⁵⁰ [Our position on trail hunting, National Trust website, 26 August 2026](#)

on trail hunting, which was issued in January 2021, revealed that the government would not be amending the Hunting Act 2004 to ban trail hunting⁵¹.

Within GB the practice of drag and clean boot hunting remain legal. Drag hunting is a country sport based upon a pack of hounds following either an artificially laid scent or the scent of a human over a pre-determined route, with the hunt generally following on horseback. There is no intention to either chase or catch an animal when drag hunting. The origins of the sport in the UK seem to in the 1800s and according to the Masters of Draghounds & Bloodhounds Association website⁵² there appeared to be 18 active hunts across the British Isles during the 2019-20 season.

It should be noted that Section 16⁵³ of the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 includes an exception to the potential offence of engaging in or participating in trail hunting. This exception relates to the training of dogs to follow an animal based scent in order to train a dog for a lawful purpose. There are a number of conditions, all of which must be met, if the exception is to apply as follows:

- the activity does not involve more than two dogs;
- any dog involved in the activity is under control,
- reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog involved in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs;
- permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place; and
- reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.

The Bill as introduced will closely mirror the provisions in the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 as they relate to trail hunting.

⁵¹ [Ban Trail Hunting petition, UK Parliament and UK Government, 12 January 2021](#)

⁵² [Masters of Draghounds and Bloodhounds Association, Members webpage, 26 August 2026](#)

⁵³ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023, Section 16](#)

Clause 10 of the Bill also includes provision for an exemption around training dogs to follow an animal based scent for a lawful purpose, which is once again very similar to the provisions under Section 16 of the Scottish Act.

Potential questions in relation to this issue are as follows:

- **Are the proposed ban on trail hunting and the restrictions around training dogs to follow an animal-based scent within the Bill an effort to pre-empt any efforts to potentially circumvent the ban on hunting wild mammals with dogs that would be delivered by Clause 1 within the Bill?**
- **Is there any evidence to suggest that trail hunting either occurs in Northern Ireland at present or would be likely to after any potential ban on hunting with dogs?**
- **Given the wording in Clause 3 in relation to trail hunting being premised on the scent of a ‘wild mammal’ is there an implication that trail hunting using scent from another animal that is not a wild mammal would still be legal?**
- **If the Bill passed into law unchanged, would Clause 3 effectively mean that there could be ‘legal’ trail hunting i.e. trail hunting which involved one or more dogs being induced or permitted to follow the scent of an animal other than a wild mammal?**
- **The previous question raises a potential theoretical loophole in relation to any potential ban on trail hunting. If, during the course of a ‘legal’ trail hunt utilising the scent of an animal other than a ‘wild mammal’, dogs detected the scent of a ‘wild mammal’ and subsequently followed and killed the wild mammal would an offence have been committed?**
- **Could this theoretical issue be addressed by widening the definition of ‘animal-based scent’ utilised within clause 3?**

8.7 Proposed ban on terrier work

Clause 4 of the Bill proposes a complete ban on the organising of or participation in terrier work without exemption.

Furthermore, none of the exempted hunting with dogs activities cited in the Bill have any provisions for using a dog below ground.

This proposal goes further than the current legislative provisions within England and Wales and Scotland.

Schedule 1 of The Hunting Act 2004⁵⁴, which applies in England and Wales, includes an exemption for use of dogs below ground to protect birds (wild or game) for shooting subject to further conditions being met around permission to do so on the land involved and not using more than one dog below ground at any one time.

Section 5 of Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023⁵⁵, provides an exemption from the prohibitions for using a dog under control to search for or flush a fox from below ground subject to the meeting of certain purposes and conditions. The referenced purposes set out in Section 5(1) are:

- preventing serious damage to livestock, woodland or crops;
- preventing the spread of disease;
- protecting human health; and
- relieving the suffering of an injured or dependent fox.

The associated conditions for this exception as set out in Section 5(3) are as follows:

- activity does not involve more than one dog;
- dog involved is under control and fitted with a device to allow tracking of the position of the dog underground;
- reasonable steps are taken to prevent the dog becoming trapped below ground and if the dog becomes trapped below ground, to ensure that it is recused as soon as reasonably possible;
- permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place;

⁵⁴ [Hunting Act 2004, Schedule 1 :Exempt hunting](#)

⁵⁵ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023, Section 5](#)

- no steps are taken to prevent the fox from being flushed or emerging from below ground;
- if the fox which is being searched for or flushed is found or emerges from below ground, it is shot dead, or killed by a bird of prey, as soon as reasonably possible;
- if an attempt to kill the fox, as mentioned in paragraph (f), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.

The Irish Working Terrier Federation's (IWTF) website⁵⁶ suggests that there were a number of active affiliated clubs within Northern Ireland in 2013 when a map was created of their distribution. Identified clubs were as follows:

- Mid Ulster working terrier club;
- Abbey working terrier club;
- North East working terrier club;
- North Belfast working terrier club;
- Cuchulann working terrier club;
- Gullian View working terrier club;
- Dungannon working terrier club;
- Tyrone working terrier club;
- North West working terrier club; and
- P and G Pest Control Services.

It remains unclear as to whether all of these clubs remain active or if any new clubs have been formed since 2013.

The IWTF website makes specific reference to the role that terrier work plays in pest control and also highlights the code of conduct that IWTF members adhere to.

Potential questions in relation to this issue:

⁵⁶ [Irish Working Terrier Federation website, affiliated clubs webpage, 26 August 2026](#)

- **What rationale does the Bill proposer have for not including a potential exemption in relation to either terrier work or using a dog below ground within the Bill, subject to conditions, as the inclusion of such would mirror provisions in GB?**
- **Whilst the focus of Clause 4 within the Bill is on terrier work to either flush out or dig out a wild mammal, could the introduction of a ban here potentially divert people involved in such activity to utilise other species? A key question here is whether the purpose of Clause 4 to protect wild mammals, improve dog welfare or both?**
- **Has the Bill sponsor been able to establish either the current scale of terrier work within Northern Ireland or the impacts of the activity on pest control?**
- **What engagement did the Bill proposer have with those involved in terrier work and how did this engagement inform the Bill proposals?**

8.8 Exempt hunting – exempt species

Clause 6 of the Bill would enable the continued hunting of rats and mice with dogs.

By way of comparison, schedule 1 of the 2004 Hunting Act⁵⁷ which applies in England and Wales identifies the hunting of rats and rabbits with dogs as being exempt from the legislation providing the hunting is taking place on either land owned by the hunter or with the permission of the occupier or owner.

In relation to Scotland, the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, in the way in which it defines wild mammals, makes it clear that the hunting of rats and mice with dogs is exempt from the provisions in the legislation (Section 1, 3(b)).

On the specific issue of the hunting of rabbits, the failure of clause 6 within the Bill to include rabbits as an exempt species for the Bill provisions would set Northern Ireland apart from the provisions under the 2004 Hunting Act in

⁵⁷ [Hunting Act 2004, Schedule 1 :Exempt hunting](#)

England that apply in England and Wales. This would align Northern Ireland with the approach taken in the 2023 Act in Scotland, which only applies exemptions to the hunting of rats and mice.

By way of context, the Pests Act 1954⁵⁸ treated rabbits as pests in England, Scotland and Wales but did not extend these powers to Northern Ireland. Under the 1954 Act, and the associated Orders that accompanied it, land occupiers were enabled to:

‘...take such steps as may from time to time be necessary for the killing or taking of wild rabbits living on or resorting to the land, and, where it is not reasonably practicable to destroy the wild rabbits living on any part of the land, for the prevention of damage by those rabbits...’

Northern Ireland has no such provision specifying rabbits as pests but rabbits are generally recognised as pests by farmers here who may seek to control their numbers to protect crops or land.

Rats and mice are recognised as pests in Northern Ireland under the auspices of the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949⁵⁹ and these powers extend to Northern Ireland.

Rabbits, like all vertebrate animals are protected from unnecessary suffering under the Welfare of Animals Act but it should be noted once again that under Section 53 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011⁶⁰:

(1) Nothing in this Act applies in relation to anything which occurs in the normal course of hunting or coursing any animal, not being a protected animal, unless—

*(a) the animal is released in an injured, mutilated or exhausted condition;
or*

⁵⁸ [Pests Act 1954](#)

⁵⁹ [Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949](#)

⁶⁰ [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011, Section 53](#)

(b)the animal is hunted or coursed in an enclosed space from which it has no reasonable chance of escape.

With regards to the use of dogs in the control of wild rabbit populations, there appears to be limited data in relation to the extent and nature of this activity. Some commercial pest control companies, such as Evergreen⁶¹, do clearly utilise dogs but it remains unclear as to how the dogs are actually used, and whether they actually kill any of the rabbits targeted for control or removal.

Given this context Members may wish to consider the following questions:

- **What was the Bill proposer’s rationale for only making the hunting of rats and mice with dogs exempt from the provisions of the Bill?**
- **Was consideration given to include rabbits as an exempt species, which would be in line with the provisions in England and Wales?**
- **Has the Bill proposer made any assessment of any potential impacts on agriculture and forestry resulting from the extension of the Bill provisions to rabbits?**
- **Did the Bill proposer engage with any agricultural or forestry stakeholder groups on this issue and how did any such engagement shape the Bill proposals?**

8.9 Exempt hunting – purposes and conditions

Clauses 7, 8, 9 and 10 deal with exempt hunting and as such would permit certain activities involving dogs providing that certain conditions and purposes are met. These activities and the associated conditions and purposes are set out in table 12 below.

Clause 6 of the Bill, which deals with exempted hunting in relation to rats and mice is considered in section 5.5 of this paper.

⁶¹ [Rabbit Eradication webpage, Evergreen Rabbit Control website, 26 August 2026](#)

Table 12: Exempted Hunting with Dogs Activities within Bill and associated purposes and conditions

Activity	Required Purposes	Required Conditions
Clause 7. Management of wild mammals above ground: • (i)include searching for, stalking or flushing from cover a wild mammal • (ii)searching for and retrieving a wild mammal killed through activity in (i)	Yes – one or more of the following (a) preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber or pasture, (b) preventing the spread of disease, (c) preserving human health, (d) preventing serious damage to the biological diversity of an area.	Following conditions must be met (a) the activity does not involve the use of more than two dogs, (b) any dog used is under control, (c) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d) permission has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (e) the wild mammal that is being searched for, stalked or flushed is shot dead as soon as reasonably possible, (f) if the attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in sub-paragraph (e), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
Clause 8. Relieving the suffering of injured wild mammals:	No cited purposes	Following conditions must be met

Activity	Required Purposes	Required Conditions
• (a) the person hunting a wild mammal is using a dog above ground to search for, stalk or flush from cover a wild mammal which the person has reasonable grounds for believing is injured, with the intention of treating, capturing or killing it for the purpose of relieving its suffering, • (b) the wild mammal was not deliberately injured for the purpose of allowing the activity mentioned in sub-paragraph (a) to take place.		(a) the activity mentioned in paragraph (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, (b) any dog used is under control, (c) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d) either— (i) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii) the person carrying out the activity is a constable exercising a power of entry, or (iii) the person carrying out the activity is a wildlife inspector exercising a power of entry under Article 25B, (e) the wild mammal which is being searched for, stalked or flushed is, as soon as reasonably possible, either— (i) given treatment to reduce or alleviate its pain or discomfort before being allowed to escape without being pursued or killed,

Activity	Required Purposes	Required Conditions
		(ii) captured for the purpose of being given treatment to reduce or alleviate its pain or discomfort (whether at that place or at another place), (iii) shot dead, or (iv) observed and allowed to escape without being pursued or killed, (f) if an attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in sub-paragraph (e)(iii), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
Clause 9. Searching for wild mammals the person hunting a wild mammal is using a dog above ground to search for and retrieve a dead wild mammal,	No cited purposes	Following conditions must be met (a) the activity mentioned in paragraph (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, (b) any dog used is under control, (c) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d) either—

Activity	Required Purposes	Required Conditions
		(i) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii) the person carrying out the activity is a constable exercising a power of entry, or (iii) the person carrying out the activity is a wildlife inspector exercising a power of entry under Article 25B, (e) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.
Clause 10. Training dogs to follow an animal-based scent: the person trail hunting— (i) directs a dog to find and follow an animal-based scent which has been laid for that purpose, or (ii) lays an animal-based scent for a dog to find and follow, in order to train a dog for a lawful purpose	No cited purposes	Following conditions must be met : (a) the activity mentioned in paragraph (1)(a) does not involve more than two dogs, (b) any dog involved in the activity is under control, (c) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog involved in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on

Activity	Required Purposes	Required Conditions
		which the activity takes place, (e) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.

Appendices 3 and 4 provide an overview of the exempt hunting with dogs activities under the 2004 Hunting Act and Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 as well as associated conditions.

Considering the data in table 12 and Appendices 3 and 4, a number of factors become apparent, as follows:

- The exempted hunting activities contained within the Bill are broadly similar to those utilised in the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 in terms of format (use of purposes and conditions) and content;
- Scotland does, however, have more specific and separate exceptions than those set out in the Bill, with notable examples being environmental benefit.
- Two of the exempted activities in Scotland, namely Section 3: management of wild mammals above ground and Section 9: environmental benefit are licensed activities. No similar licensing approach exists either in England or Wales or the Bill as introduced.
- The Bill as introduced has only five explicitly exempted forms of hunting with dogs and it is notable that none of these exemptions would enable the use of dogs underground, unlike the situation in the rest of the UK.

Having considered this information Members may find the following questions to be of interest:

- **Did the Bill proposer consider adding additional provisions for exempted forms of hunting activity with dogs such as those utilised in England and Wales, and Scotland?**

- **What were the specific reasons for not including any provisions for exempted activities underground given that these exist in the rest of the UK at present?**
- **Did the Bill proposer consider utilising the licensing approach taken to certain exempted activities in Scotland? What was the rationale for not following this approach?**

8.10 Lack of licensing provision for exempted/excepted activities

Under the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act, and as highlighted previously in table 13, two of the exempted hunting with dogs activities in Scotland operate under a licensing scheme. These activities are as follows:

- Section 3 – Exception of management of wild mammals above ground;
- Section 9 – Exception of environmental benefit.

NatureScot have responsibility for the management and implementation of this licensing scheme and they have committed to carrying out an annual review of the Hunting with Dogs licensing scheme for the first five years following its introduction.

The most recent review into the licensing scheme was published⁶² in December 2025 and covered the years 2023-24 and 2024-25. Table 13 below provides an overview of the key licence data for the first two years.

Table 13: Key licence data for Excepted Hunting with Dogs Activities in Scotland, 2024

	Year 1 2023-24	Year 2 2024-25
Licences applied for	72	89
Licences issued	43	77
Licences Refused	27	6 (6 no longer required)
Utilised Licences	34	64
Licences Attended by NatureScot (%)	4(12%)	12 (19%)
Dog Handlers Observed (%)	*redacted for data protection* (50%)	*redacted for data protection* (86%)
Mammals Taken Under Licence	87	109

⁶² [Licensing Report: Hunting with Dogs Licensing Review 2024, NatureScot](#)

All licences issued across both years have been for the control of foxes.

Some of the key observations from the December 2025 review report include:

- *In accordance with the provisions of the Act, we licence applicants to use the minimum number of dogs considered to be effective for the activity. This approach results in issued licences noting the maximum number of dogs that are permitted to be used. In short, licence holders must use as few dogs as possible, and the licence dictates the maximum number that they are allowed to use.*
- *We also consider that the use of too many dogs may increase the chances of a wild mammal being caught and killed by the dogs within cover before it is flushed. We have issued one licence allowing the use of up to 25 dogs, and the majority of licences are issued with 18-20 dogs maximum. The decision to licence a particular number of dogs is taken on a case-by-case basis and is based on a series of factors including the size of the licensable area, and the nature of the cover.*
- *There is currently a condition applied to all HWD licences that requires 25% of dogs used for licensable activity must be fitted with a GPS tracking device. This is a compliance condition and allows the Dog Handler to track the position of the dogs and staff to view. Data may also be used to prove whether or not the dogs have remained working within the licensable area and can form part of evidence in the case of a reported breach of licence conditions.*

It is clear from the most recent licensing report that there are issues around implementation of the scheme including the complexity of the application forms, need for clarification of published guidance and the interpretation and definition of cover.

At present there is no charge for a licence for these excepted activities but NatureScot is currently undertaking their latest review and this situation may change going forward.

Potential questions which Members may wish to consider in light of this information include:

- **Did the Bill proposer consider the utilisation of a licensing scheme to facilitate the operation of any or all of the exempted hunting with dog activities within the Bill? Did any such consideration include costs?**
- **If this was the case what was the rationale for not including licensing provisions within the Bill?**
- **Was the Bill proposer's reluctance to utilise a similar licensing approach to that utilised in Scotland influenced by the fact that the adoption of a licensing scheme could theoretically see more than two dogs being utilised in exempted activities?**

8.11 Lack of a hunting defence for persons accused of committing an offence

Section 4 of the 2004 Hunting Act⁶³ makes it a defence for a person charged with an offence under section 1 of the Act (i.e. hunting a wild mammal with a dog, unless his hunting is exempt) in respect of hunting to show that they reasonably believed that the hunting was exempt.

Section 2(4) of the 2023 Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act⁶⁴ similarly makes it a defence for a person charged with an offence under subsections 1 and 2 (knowingly causing or permitting another person to hunt using a dog) to show that the person reasonably believed that any of the exceptions in sections 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 or 9 of the Act applied to the hunting. These exceptions are specifically as follows:

- Management of wild mammals above ground;
- Management of foxes below ground;
- Falconry, game shooting and deer stalking;
- Relieving the suffering of injured wild mammals;
- Searching for dead wild mammals; and

⁶³ [Hunting Act 2004, Section 4](#)

⁶⁴ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023, Section 2](#)

- Environmental benefit.

Additionally, Section 14(6) of the 2023 Act⁶⁵ makes it a defence for a person charged with a trail hunting offence to show that the person reasonably believed that the exception in section 16⁶⁶ applied to the trail hunting. This exception relates to training dogs to follow an animal-based scent for a lawful purpose.

Notably the Hunting with Dogs Bill as introduced appears to have no similar provisions to those found within England, Scotland and Wales.

This raises a number of questions as follows:

- **Did the Bill proposer consider incorporating an explicit defence mechanism for persons accused of committing an offence within the Bill?**
- **Should the Bill include defence provisions for individuals accused of committing an offence in line with what exists across the rest of the UK?**
- **If such a defence was to be incorporated into the Bill should it follow the approach taken in Scotland, namely to limit any such defence to specific hunting with dogs actions or should it be the approach taken in England and Wales, which is broader?**

8.12 Potential implications from the two dog limit for exempted hunting

As highlighted in section 5.5 of this paper, two of the excepted hunting with dogs activities under the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, can theoretically and in practice result in more than two dogs being utilised under licence.

Other than in relation to the exempted species of rats and mice, however, the Bill as introduced, places a two dog limit on each of the following exempted forms of hunting with dogs by way of condition:

⁶⁵ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023, Section 14](#)

⁶⁶ [Hunting with Dogs \(Scotland\) Act 2023, Section 16](#)

- Clause 7 – Management of wild mammals above ground;
- Clause 8 – Relieving the suffering of injured wild mammals;
- Clause 9 – Searching for dead wild mammals; and
- Clause 10 – Training dogs to follow an animal-based scent.

This raises a key question around whether the two dog limit might potentially limit the viability of some or all of these legitimately exempted hunting with dogs activities.

This could be of particular concern in relation to the management of wild mammals above ground and the training of dogs to follow an animal-based scent.

In the first of these instances the AERA Committee visited CAFRE's Glenwherry Hill Farm in 2025 and a briefing from officials on the Glenwherry Hill Regeneration Partnership (GHRP) provides food for thought. As part of the GHRP, the Irish Grouse Conservation Trust has provided predator control and this activity along with other management practices has seen Red Grouse numbers increase from 37 in 2009 to over 300 by 2019⁶⁷.

The GHRP has also delivered significant biodiversity gains for other species:

- Irish Hare increased from 70 to 400 (density ~33-39/km²).
- Breeding waders have increased with Snipe moving from 5 pairs in 2012 to 31 in 2021.
- Curlew returned in 2017, fledging 12 young since then.
- Lapwing have returned with 3 fledged in 2021 and this year 5 adults on the site.
- Skylark and Meadow Pipit numbers have more than doubled, 26 to 70 and 55 to 126 respectively.

CAFRE's overview of the project in these areas states that the success has been,

⁶⁷ [Glenwherry Hill Regeneration Partnership \(GHRP\) webpage, CAFRE website, 7 August 2026](#)

‘....primarily achieved by predator control of fox, crow and rat.’

Turning to the lawful training of dogs to follow an animal-based scent exemption, there are questions around both the scale of this activity and the numbers of dogs that would be involved at any one time.

Given these observations Members may wish to consider the following questions:

- **Would a two dog limit restrict the effectiveness of those legitimately seeking to use the cited exempted hunting with dogs activities?**
- **Has the Bill proposer conducted any assessment of the potential unintended impacts on projects such as the Glenwherry Hill Regeneration Partnership arising from the two dog limit?**
- **What methods of fox control has the Glenwherry Hill Regeneration Partnership utilised and how central are dogs to this activity? Would the number of dogs utilised be similar in other projects?**
- **How often would the likes of the PSNI, who are cited in the EFM Commentary on Clauses, utilise more than two dogs concurrently as part as their training to follow an animal-based scent?**

8.13 Penalties and additional sanctions

Table 14 below highlights how the penalties within the Bill compare to similar provisions within the 2004 Hunting Act and the 2023 Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act.

Table 14: Comparison of penalties provisions in the Bill and in GB

Legislation	Penalties
Hunting with Dogs Bill	All offences in Bill • Summary conviction – imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months, or to a fine not exceeding £20,000, or both; • Conviction on indictment – imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years, or to a fine, or to both. Additional sanctions None at present
2004 Hunting Act	All offences in Act • Summary conviction - fine not exceeding level 5 (£5,000) on the standard scale up to 2015

	Due to Section 85 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012⁶⁸ – no limit on fine levied for offences committed since 2015 when the Act came into effect. Additional sanctions Section 9 of Act also highlights provisions for a court to impose forfeiture of any dog, hunting article or vehicle used by a person committing a hunting offence
2023 Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act	Offence of hunting a wild mammal using a dog - Summary conviction - imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or a fine not exceeding £40,000 (or both); - Conviction on indictment - imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years or a fine (or both). Offences of knowingly causing or permitting another person to hunt using a dog - Summary conviction - imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or a fine not exceeding £40,000 (or both); - No conviction on indictment provision. Offence of providing false information to obtain a licence - Summary conviction - imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or a fine not exceeding level 5 (£5,000) on the standard scale (or both). Additional sanctions Sections 21, 22 and 23 of Part 3 of the Act gives a convicting court a range of powers to either deprive a convicted person of a dog or horse for destruction, sale or another disposal or to disqualify them from activities including dog ownership, transporting a dog or working with or using a dog. These additional powers can be used in addition to or instead of any other penalty imposed in relation to a relevant offence.

As highlighted in table 14 the maximum fine level that the Bill would introduce in Northern Ireland on summary conviction would be potentially less than those provided for in England and Wales, and Scotland. If the Bill passed as introduced there would be the provision for unlimited fines within Northern Ireland on indictment, which is the same approach as currently utilised in Scotland. This situation would differ with England where there is the potential for unlimited fines on summary conviction since 2015, although as highlighted in appendix 2 the average fine for individuals convicted of breaching the Act came to just £457 in 2024.

⁶⁸ [Legal aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, Section 85](#)

With specific regards to the proposed £20,000 fine on summary conviction under offences within the Bill in Northern Ireland, this would bring the provisions in the Bill in line with those under Sections 4, 8(1) and 8(2) of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011⁶⁹ as they relate to unnecessary suffering and dog fighting. It should, however, be noted that the proposed £20,000 fine on summary conviction for offences within the Bill would not be aligned with the penalty for the offence of Hare Coursing within the Wildlife and Natural Environment (WANE) (Northern Ireland) Act 2011. Under Section 38 of the WANE Act 2011⁷⁰, a person guilty of the offence of hare coursing is on summary conviction liable to a fine not exceeding level 5 (£5,000) on the standard scale .

The Scottish Government does publish wildlife crime statistics but these statistics only relate to recorded offences, not convictions, and as a result it is impossible to determine either the level or value of fines collected under the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023.

Under the 2004 Hunting Act there is no provision for imprisonment whilst the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 has provisions for imprisonment for specific offences with terms ranging from a maximum of 6 months to 12 months.

The Bill provisions as introduced would effectively place Northern Ireland in the middle of the regimens operating in GB in terms of effects.

A notable area where the Bill provisions are unique is that there are no additional sanctions such as those utilised in the other UK jurisdictions, as set out in table 14. The lack of Bill provisions in this area also means that the Bill does not match other similar provisions within associated Northern Ireland primary legislation such as Sections 32 and 33 of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 which deal with deprivation and disqualification powers respectively.

⁶⁹ [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

⁷⁰ [Wildlife and Natural Environment Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011, Section 38](#)

It has, however, not been possible to determine how often these additional sanctions have been utilised as court statistics in England, Scotland and Wales in these areas do not appear to be published.

Potential questions that Members may wish to consider include:

- **What was the Bill proposer's rationale for not including additional sanctions such as deprivation/forfeiture orders and disqualification orders as utilised in other parts of the UK and within the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011?**
- **Did the Bill proposer give any consideration to potential variation in fine levels for different offences within the Bill as they relate to summary conviction, similar to the approach in Scotland?**
- **The Bill as introduced would see penalties being utilised which match those utilised under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Did the Bill proposer consider adopting the same penalties utilised within Section 38 the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 as it relates to the offence of hare coursing – namely a level 5 fine on summary conviction?**
- **Does the Bill proposer believe that the Bill as introduced will generate significant fine income, given the relatively small fine income in England for summary conviction despite the unlimited fine provisions?**

8.14 Exempted hunting activities – eligibility threshold around conditions

As already highlighted in Section 8.9 of this paper, there are a number of forms of exempt hunting with dogs activity which can take place under particular circumstances.

Other than the blanket exemption around using dogs to hunt rats and mice set out in Clause 6, all of the other exempted activities have to meet a series of conditions, a number of which are broadly consistent in terms of their makeup as follows:

- the activity does not involve more than two dogs;

- any dog involved in the activity is under control;
- reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog involved in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs;
- permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place.

The meeting of these conditions, and others unique to each exempted activity within Clauses 7 to 10 of the Bill, is absolute, there is no basis for partial adherence.

This raises a number of questions as follows:

- **How realistic is it for any of the proposed exempted hunting with dogs activities other than the hunting of rats and mice to actually go ahead given the stringent conditions?**
- **In particular (and as highlighted by Section 8.5) how would the lack of definition around certain conditions such as the dogs being under control and reasonable steps being taken to stop dogs forming a pack be enforced? Would the lack of definition act as deterrent or encourage potential participants in exempted activities?**
- **Where would the burden of evidence exist around these conditions – does it lie with the participant to prove that they were met or with the enforcer to prove that they weren't? In such instances what would be acceptable as evidential proof of either?**
- **Do these potential complications around proving that exempted activity conditions have been met further enhance the argument for a potential licensing scheme as set out in Section 8.10 of this paper?**

8.15 Animal welfare issues for dogs or horses that are currently engaged in hunting activity if the Bill is enacted

If the Bill as introduced is enacted, as set out in Clause 13, the Act and the provision within it will come into operation 6 months after Royal Assent.

This six month period raises a number of questions around what happens to any dogs or horses currently engaged in hunting with dogs activity.

There is precedent in this area given the existence of legislation either banning or limiting hunting with dogs activity within the rest of the UK.

The Burns report in 2000, which was a UK government instigated Committee review into hunting with dogs activity, sought to consider the activity through the lenses of its impact on animal welfare and rural life, and the practicalities of implementing a ban. As part of this process the Committee engaged with a range of stakeholders in seeking the best possible evidence.

With regards to the impact that a ban on hunting with dogs activity might have on dogs or horses involved the Committee concluded the following⁷¹:

There are other concerns about the hunts practice in putting down hounds which are considered too old to hunt and about the numbers of hounds which might be put down in the event of a ban. Similarly, there are concerns over the fate of surplus horses if hunting were to be banned, and of retired racehorses. Strictly speaking, these matters do not raise animal welfare concerns provided that the hounds and horses are destroyed humanely. Rather, they raise ethical issues, which are outside our terms of reference. But any need to put down hounds or horses, in the event of a ban, could be minimised if there was a suitable lead-in time before it was implemented.

In light of this information Members may wish to consider the following questions:

- Has the Bill proposer conducted any assessment of the potential number of dogs or horses that may need to be put down or rehomed in the event of the banning of activities set out in the Bill?

⁷¹ [Report of Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales, Paragraph graph 6.85, 9 June 2000](#)

- Is 6 months from Royal Assent to coming into operation a suitable lead in time to enable dogs or horses that could face destruction to be potentially rehomed?
- If rehoming is not a viable option will all costs of destruction be the responsibility of the animal owners?
- Is there a need to potentially consider financial support for this process to ensure that it complies with animal welfare legislation?

8.16 Education on new provisions within the Bill

Given the significant changes that would potentially impact on existing hunting activities within Northern Ireland if the Bill, as introduced, receives Royal Assent, there will be a need to ensure that those engaged in hunting understand their responsibilities.

Whilst some of these issues may be dealt with through the development and dissemination of statutory guidance, there may need to be a wider education and public awareness campaign.

In addition to the issue of public awareness of any changes, those with enforcement responsibility will also need to be brought up to speed. Email correspondence⁷² with the PSNI has established that there are two staff within the Central Wildlife/Animal Welfare team who provide advice and training to frontline PSNI officers in Local Policing Teams, Neighbourhood Policing Teams and District Support Teams. Training has been provided to 1,172 officers between 2023 and 2026. Training generally consists of a 90 minute session which covers the following areas:

- Describe the role of the Animal Welfare Officer;
- Know PSNI's legislative responsibilities;
- Be aware of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, Animal Order 1976 and Wildlife (NI) Order 1985;
- Recognise the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime;

⁷² Email from PSNI Executive Support team – 13 August 2026

- Identify the different roles of the council, police and animal welfare officer;
- Be aware of the different types of traps/snares for capturing animals;
- Recognise the different Operations ongoing re animal Welfare and Wildlife Crime.

Within this context the following questions may be of value to Members:

- **Has the Bill proposer given active consideration to the development of resources to inform the hunting fraternity and wider public of any obligations under the Bill as introduced?**
- **Has the Bill proposer given consideration to what support and time the PSNI will need to adapt their training to officers?**
- **Has any of this been costed and who would have responsibility for paying for and delivering it?**

8.17 Statutory guidance – will it be developed and when?

A common theme throughout this Bill paper has been that the production of statutory guidance may be of value or necessity for both those responsible for implementing the provisions within the Bill, and those seeking to avail of them, should they become law.

Within this context the following questions may be of value:

- **Does the Bill proposer recognise that there may be a value or need for statutory guidance to enable the effective implementation of the Bill provisions?**
- **Who would have responsibility for delivering any such statutory guidance and would this be available prior to the Bill provisions coming into operation?**

8.18 Review of the Bill every 5 years

Clause 14 of the Bill commits DAERA to undertake a review of, and publish a report on, the operation of the provisions within the proposed Act once every five years.

In considering the Bill it seems clear that responsibility for implementation of the contained provisions will extend beyond DAERA to include the Department of Justice and the PSNI.

Given this reality the following questions may be of value to Members:

- **Does the Bill proposer acknowledge that there will be a potential need for other Departments and agencies including DOJ and PSNI to be involved in the 5 year operational review completion?**
- **Does the Bill proposer believe that DAERA should have lead responsibility in this process?**
- **If this process results in cross departmental and agency working or consideration will there be an agreed terms of reference for this work and will these terms of reference be subject to scrutiny by the appropriate Assembly Committees in advance of work commencing?**

9 Appendix 1: Legislative provisions relating to Hunting with dogs in GB

	England + Wales	Scotland
Legislation	Hunting Act 2004 ⁷³	Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 ⁷⁴
Intention	Bans the hunting of wild mammals with dogs	Prohibition of hunting wild mammals using dogs and makes provision about the prohibition of trail hunting
Enforcement responsibility	Police	Police
Animals covered	“Wild mammal” includes, in particular— (a) a wild mammal which has been bred or tamed for any purpose, (b) a wild mammal which is in captivity or confinement, (c) a wild mammal which has escaped or been released from captivity or confinement, and (d) any mammal which is living wild.	“wild mammal” means any mammal (other than a human)— (a) which— (i) is living in a wild state, (ii) is of a species recognised as living in a wild state in the British Islands (as defined in schedule 1 of the Interpretation Act 1978), or

⁷³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/37/contents>

⁷⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2023/1/contents>

	England + Wales	Scotland
		(iii) has been deliberately released from temporary or permanent human control. Legislative provisions do not apply to rats, mice or any mammal living under temporary or permanent human control.
Offences	• Hunting a wild mammal with a dog, section 1; • Permitting land to be used for hunting a wild mammal with a dog, section 3(1); • Permitting a dog to be used for hunting a wild mammal with a dog, section 3(2); • Participating in, attending, facilitating or permitting land to be used for the purposes of a hare-coursing event, section 5(1); and • Entering/permitting/handling a dog in a hare-coursing event section 5(2). • Failing to comply with a forfeiture order	• Hunting a wild mammal using a dog unless an exception applies • Knowingly causing or permitting another person to hunt using a dog unless an exception applies • Providing false information to obtain a licence for hunting • Engaging or participating in trail hunting unless the exception of training dogs to follow an animal-based scent applies • Trail hunting - person commits an offence if they are an owner or occupier of land, and knowingly cause or permit another person to engage or participate in trail hunting on that land, unless the exception of training dogs to follow an animal-based scent applies • Trail hunting – person commits an offence if they own or are responsible for a dog, and knowingly cause or permit another person to use the dog for trail hunting, unless the exception of training dogs to follow an animal-based scent applies • Breaching a disqualification order

	England + Wales	Scotland
		• Contravening any reasonable direction made by a constable exercising a relevant • Power • Intentionally obstructing a constable in the exercise of a relevant power
Penalties	A person guilty of an offence under this Act shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 (£5,000) on the standard scale for offences committed up until 2015. Since 2015 however, as a result of provisions under Section 85 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012⁷⁵, fines on summary conviction are now unlimited Also potential forfeiture of any dog or hunting article which—(a) was used in the commission of the offence, or (b) was in the possession of the person convicted at the time of his arrest	Offence of hunting a wild mammal using a dog: • On summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or a fine not exceeding £40,000 or both. • On conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years or a fine (or both). Offence of knowingly causing or permitting another person to hunt using a dog: • On summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or a fine not exceeding £40,000 (or both). Offence of providing false information to obtain a licence: • On summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or a fine not exceeding level 5 (£5,000) on the standard scale (or both). Offences relating to trail hunting:

⁷⁵ [Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, Section 85](#)

	England + Wales	Scotland
		- On summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or a fine not exceeding £40,000 (or both). Offences relating to obstructing or contravening a reasonable direction by a constable: - On summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 (£5,000) on the standard scale In addition to fines and custodial sentences there are provisions for the following: - Deprivation orders – persons convicted of an offence can be deprived of possession of a dog, horse or both that was used in or present at the commission of the offence. - Disqualification orders – persons convicted of a relevant offence may be subject to a series of disqualifications which can include owning or keeping a dog (or both), transporting a dog, working with or using a dog (or both). Seizure orders where disqualification orders are breached – someone owning or keeping a dog in breach of disqualification orders can be deprived of the possession or ownership (or both) of a dog.
Exemptions/Defences	Stalking and flushing out a wild mammal for certain purposes, with a view to its being shot forthwith, and not using more than two dogs – conditions for activity include purpose of either	Defences:

	England + Wales	Scotland
	preventing or reducing serious damage which the wild mammal would otherwise cause to livestock, game birds/wild birds, food for livestock, crops (including vegetables or fruit), growing timber; fisheries, other property, to the biological diversity of an area (within the meaning of the United Nations Environmental Programme Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992), obtaining meat to be used for human or animal consumption, or participation in a field trial; • Use of not more than one dog at a time below ground in the course of stalking or flushing to protect birds for shooting; • Hunting rats; • Hunting rabbits; • Retrieval of shot hares; • Flushing a wild mammal from cover in connection with falconry; • Recapture of accidentally escaped wild mammal; • Rescue of wild mammal believed injured using not more than two dogs and no dog below ground; and • Observation and study of a wild mammal, using not more than two dogs and no dog below ground. • Accidental hunting – i.e. unintentional.	• Defence for a person charged with offence of knowingly causing or permitting another person to hunt using a dog if the person reasonably believed that any of the exceptions in sections 3,5,6,7,8 or 9 applied to the hunting. • Defence for a person charged with trail hunting to show that the person reasonably believed that the exception in section 16 of the Act applied to the trail hunting. Exceptions: • Management of wild mammals above ground. • Management of foxes below ground. • Falconry, game shooting and deer stalking. • Relieving the suffering of wild animals. • Searching for dead wild mammals. • Environmental benefit. There is also a specific exception in relation to trail hunting as follows: • Training dogs to follow an animal-based scent – can be no more than 2 dogs.

	England + Wales	Scotland
		All of these exceptions require that any dog used in the activity is under control and permission for the activity must have been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place. Licences are also required for anyone looking to use more than two dogs whilst engaged in the excepted activities of management of wild mammals above ground and Environmental benefit.
Conviction data	• Wildlife and Countryside Link (WCL) reports compile Ministry of Justice statistics for hunting crime in England and Wales. • The most recent report⁷⁶ includes data from 2024, which reveals 20 prosecutions for breaches of the Hunting Act in 2024. 14 of these prosecutions resulted in convictions. • The maximum penalty for conviction under the Hunting Act is a fine – which is unlimited in nature since 2015; • In 2024 the average fine for individuals convicted of breaching the Act came to £454	The 2023 Act came into force on 3 October 2023 Police Scotland data for wildlife crime in 2024⁷⁷, published in February 2026 includes specific data on hunting with dogs offences as follows: Seventy-three hunting with dogs offences were recorded in 2023-24, second only to the peak of 85 offences in 2020-21 in the six-year period 2019-20 to 2024-25. Of the 73 offences recorded in 2023-24, 50 occurred in Fife

⁷⁶ https://wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/WCL_Wildlife_Crime_2025_DIGITAL.pdf

⁷⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-crime-in-scotland-2024/pages/hunting-with-dogs/>

	England + Wales	Scotland
		Looking at the species most commonly targeted in these 73 offences in 2023-24, there were 36 offences involving hares, 15 involving deer and 10 involving foxes. In 2024-25, hunting with dogs offences fell to 22, including a substantial decrease in Fife with just two offences recorded compared to 50 the previous year. In 2024-25, hares were again the most commonly targeted species (14 offences), followed by badgers, deer, foxes and rabbits (2 offences each).
Review	None to date Labour Party committed to banning trail hunting in 2024 Manifesto DEFRA has now completed a public consultation of proposals to ban the activity.	Act includes a commitment to review the operation of licensing for more than two dogs in relation to the excepted activities of the management of wild mammals above ground (section 3) and environmental benefit (section 9). The first review under subsection must be carried out no later than 31 December 2028. Subsequent reviews must be carried out no later than the expiry of the period of 5 years beginning with the date on which the last report on a review was published

10 Appendix 2: Legislative provisions relating to Hunting with dogs in Ireland

	Ireland
Legislation	Wildlife Act, 1976⁷⁸ Wildlife (Amendment) Act, 2000⁷⁹ Wildlife Amendment Act, 2010⁸⁰ Wildlife Amendment Act, 2012⁸¹ Heritage Act 2018⁸² – as it relates to wildlife provisions which extend the 1976 Act provisions
Intentions/provisions as they relate to hunting with dogs	Protection of wildlife - Hunting of certain species with dogs is permissible under licence whilst it is explicitly banned for others
Enforcement responsibility	Police or person authorised by the Department
Animals covered	Certain wild mammals remain fully protected from hunting as set out in legislation as set out in schedule 5 of the original Act to include: • Badger • Bat species • Deer species

⁷⁸ [Wildlife Act, 1976](#)

⁷⁹ [Wildlife \(Amendment\) Act, 2000](#)

⁸⁰ [Wildlife Amendment Act, 2010](#)

⁸¹ [Wildlife Amendment Act, 2012](#)

⁸² [Heritage Act 2018](#)

	Ireland
	• Hare species • Hedgehog • Otter • Pine Marten • Red Squirrel Certain species such as deer and hares, whilst being protected, can be hunted – exempted animal status - with dogs or guns, on foot, but a licence is required, there are open seasons and there must be permission from the landowner. It was possible to hunt otters – under licence – until the introduce of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 Hare coursing is also permitted with a valid licence
Offences	• Hunting on land without the landowner's permission • Hunt or injure in the course of hunting with a shotgun a protected wild animal other than a hare otherwise than under and in accordance with a licence or permission granted in that behalf by the Minister • For a person to hunt deer with 2 or more dogs who doesn't have a licence or permission from the landowner • Capture or humanely kill a protected wild animal – i.e. animals set out in schedule 5 • Hunt or disturb for the purpose of hunting any wild animal by means of mechanically-propelled vehicle, vessel or aircraft, whether it is being so propelled or is stationary • Anyone aiding or abetting in the commission of an offence under the 1976 Act is guilty of an offence
Penalties	Person guilty of an offence not under the following sections of the Wildlife Acts 1976-2018 (28,33,34,38,45,47,51,52,53A, 58(3)(b)) is liable on summary conviction to a class A fine - €5,000. It should be noted that this would include hunting deer with dogs without a licence or permissions from the landowner. Persons committing an offence as set out above can also be subject to a fixed payment notice issued by either the Police or an authorised person – can be up to the value of €500.

	Ireland
	Higher financial penalties and custodial offences available for specific offences but not specific to offences relating to hunting with dogs. Also powers of forfeiture but seem to relate to firearms and vehicles – no mention of dogs.
Exemptions/Defences	• Hunting foxes and other unprotected animals with dogs is still permitted at certain times of the year as foxes are not a protected species (i.e. not listed in Schedule 5) • While engaged in agriculture, fishing or forestry or in zoology or in any other scientific pursuit, unintentionally to injure or kill a protected wild animal • While so engaged to interfere with or destroy the breeding place of such an animal, or while constructing a road or while carrying out any archaeological operation, building operation or work of engineering construction, or while constructing or carrying on such other operation or work as may be prescribed, to kill or injure such an animal or to destroy or injure the breeding place of such an animal; or • To capture an injured or disabled wild animal for the purpose of killing it humanely, or tending it and later releasing it; • Commit the offence for the purposes of preventing a damage of the type specified in Section 42(1), Section 23(8). e.g. damage to agricultural crops, flora, other fauna etc.
Convictions	Wildlife Crime Ireland website⁸³ provides wildlife crime data sourced from the National Parks & Wildlife Service⁸⁴. These statistics reveal that in 2018, there were 20 cases of wildlife crime prosecuted of which 3 had been successful and 17 were outstanding. The available data does not however specify the nature of the cases beyond a broad title so it is not possible to determine if the offence related to hunting with dogs Data for 2024⁸⁵ reveals 30 new prosecutions for breaches of wildlife legislation were initiated in 2024.

⁸³ [Wildlife Crime Ireland, prosecutions data webpage, 30 November 2020](#)

⁸⁴ [National Parks and Wildlife Service website 30 November 2020](#)

⁸⁵ <https://animallaw.ie/blog/national-parks-and-wildlife-service-2024-in-review/>

	Ireland
	29 wildlife crime cases were heard in Irish courts – no indication of outcomes however
Review	Doesn't appear to have been a formal review but numerous amendment Acts reflect evolution of legislation between 1976 and 2018.

11 Appendix 3 - Exempt hunting with dogs activities under the 2004 Hunting Act—includes associated conditions

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
Hunting Act 2004 - set out in Schedule 1 of Act	Stalking and flushing out	Following conditions must be met: Condition 1 (a) preventing or reducing serious damage which the wild mammal would otherwise cause: (i) to livestock, (ii) to game birds or wild birds (within the meaning of section 27 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (c. 69)), (iii) to food for livestock, (iv) to crops (including vegetables and fruit), (v) to growing timber, (vi) to fisheries, (vii) to other property, or (viii) to the biological diversity of an area (within the meaning of the United Nations Environmental Programme Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992),

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(b)obtaining meat to be used for human or animal consumption, or (c)participation in a field trial. Condition 2 stalking or flushing out takes place on land: (a)which belongs to the person doing the stalking or flushing out, or (b)which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs. Condition 3 stalking or flushing out does not involve the use of more than two dogs. Condition 4 stalking or flushing out does not involve the use of a dog below ground otherwise than in accordance with conditions around exempted activity of use of dogs below ground to protect birds for shooting. Condition 5 (a)reasonable steps are taken for the purpose of ensuring that as soon as possible after being found or flushed out the wild mammal is shot dead by a competent person, and

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(b)in particular, each dog used in the stalking or flushing out is kept under sufficiently close control to ensure that it does not prevent or obstruct achievement of the objective in paragraph (a).
	Use of dogs below ground to protect birds for shooting	Following conditions must be met: Condition 1 the stalking or flushing out is undertaken for the purpose of preventing or reducing serious damage to game birds or wild birds (within the meaning of section 27 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (c. 69)) which a person is keeping or preserving for the purpose of their being shot. Condition 2 the person doing the stalking or flushing out: (a)has with him written evidence: (i)that the land on which the stalking or flushing out takes place belongs to him, or (ii)that he has been given permission to use that land for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs, and (b)makes the evidence immediately available for inspection by a constable who asks to see it Condition 3

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		the stalking or flushing out does not involve the use of more than one dog below ground at any one time. Additionally, in so far as stalking or flushing out is undertaken with the use of a dog below ground in accordance with this paragraph, paragraph 1 shall have effect as if for the condition in paragraph 1(7) there were substituted the condition that— (a)reasonable steps are taken for the purpose of ensuring that as soon as possible after being found the wild mammal is flushed out from below ground, (b)reasonable steps are taken for the purpose of ensuring that as soon as possible after being flushed out from below ground the wild mammal is shot dead by a competent person, (c)in particular, the dog is brought under sufficiently close control to ensure that it does not prevent or obstruct achievement of the objective in paragraph (b), (d)reasonable steps are taken for the purpose of preventing injury to the dog, and (e)the manner in which the dog is used complies with any code of practice which is issued or approved for the purpose of this paragraph by the Secretary of State.
	The hunting of rats	No conditions Exempt if it takes place on land: (a)which belongs to the hunter, or

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(b)which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs.
	The hunting of rabbits	No conditions Exempt if it takes place on land: (a)which belongs to the hunter, or (b)which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs.
	Retrieval of hares which have been shot	No conditions Exempt if it takes place on land: (a)which belongs to the hunter, or (b)which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs.
	Falconry – flushing a wild mammal from cover	No conditions exempt hunting if undertaken: (a)for the purpose of enabling a bird of prey to hunt the wild mammal, and

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(b)on land which belongs to the hunter or which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs.
	Recapture of wild mammal – which has escaped or been released from captivity or confinement	Following conditions must be met: Condition 1 hunting takes place— (a)on land which belongs to the hunter, (b)on land which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs, or (c)with the authority of a constable. Condition 2 (a)reasonable steps are taken for the purpose of ensuring that as soon as possible after being found the wild mammal is recaptured or shot dead by a competent person, and (b)in particular, each dog used in the hunt is kept under sufficiently close control to ensure that it does not prevent or obstruct achievement of the objective in paragraph (a). Condition 3 the wild mammal—

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(a)was not released for the purpose of being hunted, and (b)was not, for that purpose, permitted to escape.
	Rescue of wild mammal	Following conditions must be met: Condition 1 the hunter reasonably believes that the wild mammal is or may be injured. Condition 2 the hunting is undertaken for the purpose of relieving the wild mammal's suffering. Condition 3 The hunting does not involve the use of more than two dogs. Condition 4 the hunting does not involve the use of a dog below ground. Condition 5 the hunting takes place— (a)on land which belongs to the hunter,

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(b)on land which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs, or (c)with the authority of a constable. Condition 6 (a)reasonable steps are taken for the purpose of ensuring that as soon as possible after the wild mammal is found appropriate action (if any) is taken to relieve its suffering, and (b)in particular, each dog used in the hunt is kept under sufficiently close control to ensure that it does not prevent or obstruct achievement of the objective in paragraph (a). Condition 7 the wild mammal was not harmed for the purpose of enabling it to be hunted in reliance upon this paragraph.
	Research and Observation	Following conditions must be met: Condition 1 Hunting is undertaken for the purpose of or in connection with the observation or study of the wild mammal. Condition 2

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		The hunting does not involve the use of more than two dogs. Condition 3 The hunting does not involve the use of a dog below ground. Condition 4 The hunting takes place on land— (a)which belongs to the hunter, or (b)which he has been given permission to use for the purpose by the occupier or, in the case of unoccupied land, by a person to whom it belongs. Condition 5 Each dog used in the hunt is kept under sufficiently close control to ensure that it does not injure the wild mammal.

12 Appendix 4: Exempt hunting with dogs activities under the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 – includes associated conditions

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 – set out in Sections 3, 5,6,7,8,9 and 16	Exception – Section 3: management of wild mammals above ground	One or more of the following purposes must be met: - a)preventing serious damage to livestock, woodland or crops, (b)preventing the spread of disease, (c)protecting human health. Following conditions must also be met: either— (i)the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, or (ii)the activity is carried out in accordance with a licence granted under section 4, (b)any dog used in the activity is under control, (c)unless paragraph (a)(ii) applies, reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d)permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place,

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(e)the wild mammal which is being searched for, stalked or flushed is shot dead, or killed by a bird of prey, as soon as reasonably possible, (f)if an attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in paragraph (e), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
	Exception Section 5: management of foxes below ground	One or more of the following purposes must be met: (a)preventing serious damage to livestock, woodland or crops, (b)preventing the spread of disease, (c)protecting human health, (d)relieving the suffering of an injured or dependent fox Following conditions must also be met: (a)the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than one dog, (b)the dog used in the activity is— (i)under control, (ii)fitted with a device to allow tracking of the position of the dog below ground, (c)reasonable steps are taken—

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(i)to prevent the dog becoming trapped below ground, and (ii)if the dog becomes trapped below ground, to ensure that it is rescued as soon as reasonably possible, (d)permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (e)no steps are taken to prevent the fox from being flushed or emerging from below ground, (f)if the fox which is being searched for or flushed is found or emerges from below ground, it is shot dead, or killed by a bird of prey, as soon as reasonably possible, (g)if an attempt to kill the fox, as mentioned in paragraph (f), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
	Exception Section 6: falconry, game shooting and deer stalking	Conditions that must be met: (a)the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, (b)any dog used in the activity is under control, (c)reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs,

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(d)permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (e)the wild mammal which is being searched for, stalked or flushed is shot dead, or killed by a bird of prey, as soon as reasonably possible, (f)if an attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in paragraph (e), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
	Exception Section 7: relieving the suffering of injured wild mammals	Following conditions must be met: (a)the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, (b)any dog used in the activity is under control, (c)reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d)either— (i)permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii)the person carrying out the activity is a constable exercising a power of entry,

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(iii)the person carrying out the activity is exercising a power of entry under section 14M or 14N of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, or (iv)the person carrying out the activity is exercising a power of entry under section 15 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, (e)the wild mammal which is being searched for, stalked or flushed is, as soon as reasonably possible, either— (i)given treatment to reduce or alleviate its pain or discomfort before being allowed to escape without being pursued or killed, (ii)captured for the purpose of being given treatment to reduce or alleviate its pain or discomfort (whether at that place or at another place), (iii)shot dead, or (iv)observed and allowed to escape without being pursued or killed, (f)if an attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in paragraph (e)(iii), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
	Exception Section 8: searching for	Following conditions must be met: (a)the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs,

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
	dead wild mammals	(b)any dog used in the activity is under control, (c)reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d)either— (i)permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii)the person carrying out the activity is a constable exercising a power of entry, (iii)the person carrying out the activity is exercising a power of entry under section 14M or 14N of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, or (iv)the person carrying out the activity is exercising a power of entry under section 15 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, (e)reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.
	Exception Section 9 : environmental benefit	One or more of the following purposes must be met: (a)preserving, protecting or restoring a particular species (which may include controlling the number of a species for its welfare) for environmental benefit, (b)preserving, protecting or restoring the diversity of animal or plant life, (c)eradicating an invasive non-native species of wild mammal from an area.

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		The following conditions must be met: (a) either— (i) the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve the use of more than two dogs, or (ii) the activity is carried out in accordance with a licence granted under section 10, (b) any dog used in the activity is under control, (c) unless paragraph (a)(ii) applies, reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog used in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d) either— (i) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (ii) the person carrying out the activity is exercising a power of entry under section 14M or 14N of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, or (iii) the person carrying out the activity is exercising a power of entry under section 15 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, (e) the wild mammal which is being searched for, stalked or flushed is either—

Act and specific component	Excepted activities/exempt hunting	Purposes/Conditions
		(i) captured (whether or not with the intention of subsequently releasing or relocating it) as soon as reasonably possible, (ii) shot dead, or killed by a bird of prey, as soon as reasonably possible, or (iii) observed and allowed to escape without being pursued, injured or killed, (f) if an attempt to kill the wild mammal, as mentioned in paragraph (e)(ii), results in it being injured but not killed, reasonable steps are taken to kill it in a way (other than by using a dog) that causes it the minimum possible suffering.
	Exception Section 16 : training dogs to follow an animal-based scent	The following conditions must be met: (a) the activity mentioned in subsection (1)(a) does not involve more than two dogs, (b) any dog involved in the activity is under control, (c) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that any dog involved in the activity does not join with others to form a pack of more than two dogs, (d) permission for the activity has been given by the owner of the land on which the activity takes place, (e) reasonable steps are taken to ensure that no wild mammal is pursued, injured or killed.