

Hunting Wild Mammals with Dogs Consultation Synopsis
John Blair MLA

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION..... 2

WHAT IS THE CASE FOR REFORM? 2

CONSULTATION SUMMARY..... 3

INPUT FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS GATHERED SEPARATELY 4

E-CONSULTATION SUPPORT FOR THE PROPOSAL 5

OPPOSITION TO THE PROPOSAL..... 7

PROPOSALS TO DEVELOP AMBITIONS AND GOALS 9

PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES TO THE LEGISLATION..... 10

WEIGHTING OF RESPONSES 10

CONSIDERATION OF CONVENTION RIGHTS AND OTHER COMPETENCE ISSUES..... 10

CONSIDERATION OF FINANCIAL IMPACT..... 11

CONCLUDING REMARKS 12

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?..... 12

A NOTE ON DATA..... 12

ANNEX ONE: BREAKDOWN OF ALL E-CONSULTATION RESPONSES 12

ANNEX TWO: BREAKDOWN OF NI-ONLY E-CONSULTATION RESPONSES..... 24

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide an analysis of responses to the consultation on my proposed Members' Bill to ban the hunting of wild mammals with dogs in Northern Ireland.

The proposed legislation would prohibit the use of dogs to hunt, attack, or kill wild mammals. It may also incorporate preventative measures to close off any potential loopholes that could allow the use of dogs for flushing in large groups or where trail hunting becomes more prevalent in Northern Ireland.

The legislation will reflect on the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 and the Hunting Act (England and Wales) 2004, whilst addressing issues identified in these pieces of legislation. The legislation will also take into account Lord Bonyon's review, which examined Scotland's previous 2002 Act and the Burn's inquiry into hunting with dogs in England and Wales. By exploring and implementing measures put in place by other jurisdictions, I can ensure that my proposed Bill is as effective as possible and prevents the creation of any loopholes.

What is the Case for Reform?

Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom without a ban on hunting live mammals with dogs, which includes hunting foxes. There has been a strong lobby in Northern Ireland to ban hunting with dogs, and other cruel sports. Indeed, there have been some changes, for example hare coursing has been illegal in Northern Ireland since 2011.

The Northern Ireland Assembly, since its inception, has failed to deal with this issue. In 2021, I brought forward a similar Members' Bill, but unfortunately, it was narrowly defeated during the second phase of the legislative process, where bills are reviewed and debated before moving forward. I am determined to reintroduce a revised Bill in this mandate and have carefully considered the concerns raised during the debates on my previous Bill.

Since my previous bill, Scotland has passed its Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, which is now arguably the most robust hunting law in the United Kingdom. My new Members' Bill's aspirations are comparable in ambition to Scotland's Hunting with Dogs Act, as the latter ends illegal hunts and closes loopholes in the previous 20-year-old legislation.

There has been consistent public support in Northern Ireland for a ban on hunting with dogs. Polling over the years has consistently shown this trend, with the most recent opinion poll in 2024 further confirming it. The poll was conducted by LucidTalk Limited and commissioned by the USPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports as part of the Together campaign. It ran in February 2024, receiving responses from 1,050 people. The poll found that: 87% of respondents said deer hunting should be banned; 76% would ban fox hunting; 82% would ban hare hunting; and 77% would ban rabbit hunting. Indeed, the findings from this polling are similar to my consultation findings.

The poll also highlighted a known issue within Northern Ireland: only 53% of respondents knew it was legal to use dogs to hunt live animals in Northern Ireland. Therefore, 47% of respondents were unaware that hunting is still legal.

I frequently hear reports from farmers regarding problems arising from hunts, including trespassing, damage to fences, harm to livestock, and biosecurity threats due to potential disease spread. Despite public calls to end this practice, including fox hunting, a minority continue to enjoy it, highlighted by events like the Boxing Day hunt. Northern Ireland's lack of hunting legislation allows for animal cruelty, particularly in terrier work, where dogs can suffer serious injury in the fight with prey.

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs informed me that he has no plans to introduce hunting legislation and supports a Members' Bill aimed at prohibiting hunting live mammals with dogs. This legislation is necessary to enforce a ban and enable prosecutions, serving as a future deterrent.

Consultation Summary

The public consultation was conducted according to Assembly guidelines between 21st October 2024 and 20th January 2025. The consultation was originally scheduled to finish on 13th January 2025, however, I decided to extend the consultation by a period of one week due to the Christmas holiday period.

The thirteen-week consultation received 12,011 responses.

The majority of respondents (62.92%) said all hunting, searching, coursing, capturing or killing wild mammals with dogs should be banned in Northern Ireland. 72.27% of those who said they lived in Northern Ireland said they supported the ban.

- 67.19% of respondents said 'terrier work', the activity to use dogs to attack or cause the wild animal to flee from its cover, was unacceptable.
- 63.52% of respondents said the law should make landowners vicariously liable for any illegal hunting activity that takes place on their land, if the landowner has granted permission for the activity.
- 62.94% of respondents said people who make their dogs available for hunting, even if they don't hunt themselves, should be liable to prosecution.

When asked what sort of penalties should be available for persons found guilty of offences under the proposed bill:

- 37.86% said imprisonment, using the same Sentencing Schedule currently in place for the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011
- 2.06% said fixed penalty notices
- 3.06% said fines
- 26.04% said a mixture of the above

- 30.99% said none of the above

73.84% of respondents said ending the hunting of wild mammals with dogs was important to them, and 61.07% of respondents said they ‘fully’ supported the intentions of the proposed Bill.

Looking only at responses from those who said they lived in Northern Ireland, a staggering 80.45% said ending hunting wild mammals with dogs was important to them, and 70.35% said they ‘fully supported the intentions of the proposed Bill.’

You can find a complete breakdown of the consultation responses in Annex One, which includes all responses, and in Annex Two, which focuses specifically on Northern Ireland responses.

Input from Key Stakeholders Gathered Separately

Engagement outside of the e-consultation platform:

1. Dogs Trust – I received an email response from Dogs Trust within the timeframe of the consultation. They asked for their response to be considered but not published.
2. The Workers Party – I 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.
3. A 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.
4. 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.
5. A 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.
6. A 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.
7. In February 2025, I, supported by the USPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports, hosted a second round-table discussion with MLAs in Parliament Buildings. 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.

Information on the proposed Bill was shared with, and meetings were offered to the following organisations/individuals:

- The British Veterinary Association
- The North of Ireland Veterinary Association
- The Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland
- The British Association for Shooting and Conservation
- The Countryside Alliance
- The Ulster Farmers' Union
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, as well as all Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly
- Queens University Belfast Student Union President
- Ulster University Student Union President
- Stranmillis Student Union President
- Ulster Wildlife
- National Trust
- Field Sports NI

Meetings with key stakeholders are ongoing. So far, I have met with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Countryside Alliance, and the British Veterinary Association.

E-Consultation Support for the Proposal

Out of the 12,011 respondents, 7,557 supported the proposed Bill to outlaw hunting with dogs, including trail hunting.

3,515 (72.27%) respondents who said they lived in Northern Ireland said they supported the ban, with as high as 80.45% saying ending hunting wild mammals with dogs was important to them.

Responses to the public consultation were received from animal welfare organisations and animal rights activists including, but not limited to:

- Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals – Supported the Bill
- Crosskennan Lane Sanctuary – Supported the Bill
- Irish Council Against Blood Sports – Supported the Bill
- League Against Cruel Sports – Supported the Bill
- Mid-Antrim Animal Sanctuary – Supported the Bill
- Northern Ireland Badger Group – Supported the Bill
- PETA (UK) – Supported the Bill
- USPCA – Supported the Bill
- Ban Hunting NI – Supported the Bill
- Protect the Wild – Supported the Bill
- Association of Hunt Saboteurs Ireland – Supported the Bill
- Freedom for Animals – Supported the Bill
- Justice for Animals – Supported the Bill


- Professor Marie Fox and Dr Sarah Singh (School of Law, University of Liverpool) – Supported the Bill
- The Concerned Residents Ardtanagh Group – Supported the Bill
- Wild Animal Welfare Committee – Supported the Bill
- Badger Trust – Supported the Bill
- Lost and Found Dogs Buncrana – Supported the Bill
- Equine Halfway House Pony Rescue & Refuge Equine Welfare Network – Supported the Bill
- Born Free Foundation – Supported the Bill
- Equine Unlimited – Supported the Bill

Examples from the reasons provided for supporting the Bill:

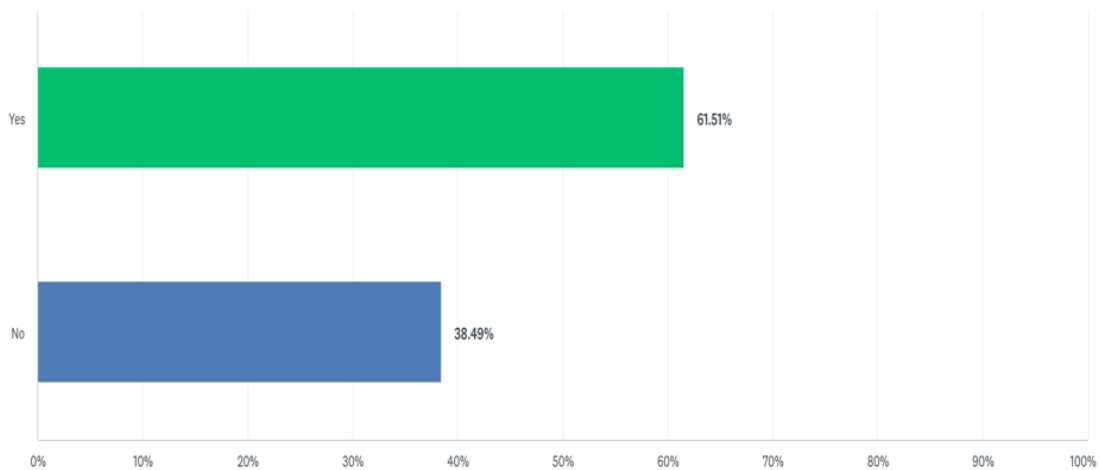
- “I think how we treat animals says a lot about the type of people we are. We should not find it acceptable to actively hunt down, allow dogs to rip apart, and then kill innocent wild animals all for the sake of fun and tradition. I think accepting this sets a precedent for how we could treat the most vulnerable in our society”
- “Inhumane way to be hunted torn to shreds its unacceptable also a few domestic pets have been killed by the dogs entering private owners grounds which is wrong on all levels. It’s disgusting and it’s also cruel to the dog many go into busy roads only to be knocked down and could cause a nasty accident to drivers drivers with children. Huntsmen don’t really care they are so bloodthirsty. It needs to end”
- “As a keen sportsperson and horse rider I struggle to see how hunting with dogs can be classed as a sport. It is cruel on so many levels and even drag hunts can result in dogs picking up a live animal scent and hunting it”
- “If wild animals "belong" to anyone, they "belong" to everyone and I don't want "my" wild animals chased, threatened, mauled, injured, killed or otherwise harassed by dogs and "hunters””
- “The packs of dogs also target farm animals, ruin crops, run over roads and rail lines; this when they are supposedly following a scented trail. If they are following a trail, there doesn't seem a need for a pack of dogs which are intimidating for the general public”
- “I feel strongly that there is no case nowadays where the hunting and killing of wild animals anywhere for any excuse should be legally permitted. Especially now where our wildlife is under huge threat of extinction we should do everything to protect it”
- “Not only from an ecology perspective but from an animal rights perspective. In order to progress as a society, we must stop seeing other animals as commodities, hobbies, or objects to be played. It is unfathomable to me that is practise is still in place in 2025”
- “Barbaric, outdated, inhumane and ineffective way of controlling wildlife - not to mention the huge detriment to residents and pets having to endure packs of hounds largely out of control”
- “I am a farmer and believe all animals shouldn't suffer, especially at the expense of crazy people. I believe that hunting is necessary but stress and suffering to animals should be minimal as possible and never a sport”

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?

Result: 61.51% of respondents said 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. 38.49% of respondents thought the practice was acceptable.

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 sc... 

Answered: 12,011 Skipped: 0



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?

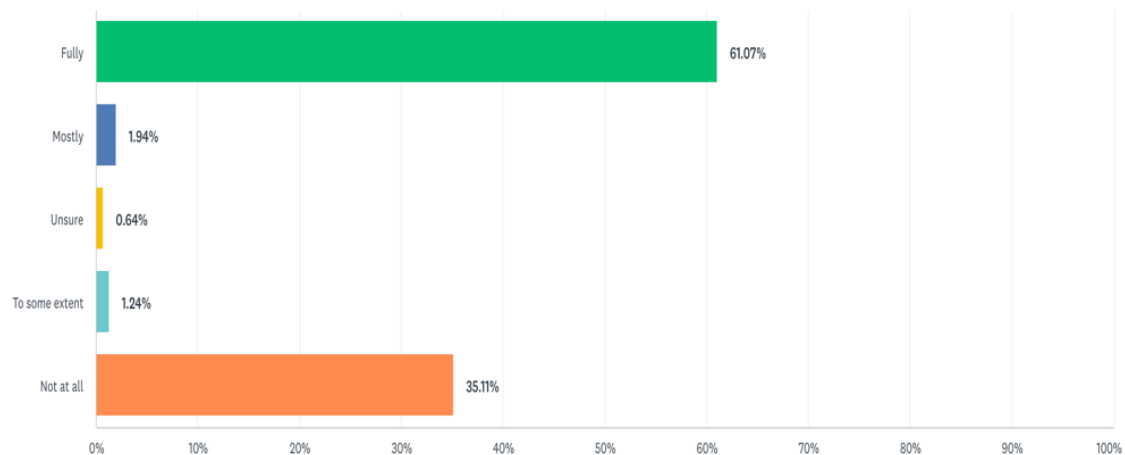
Result: 63.52% of respondents said the law should make landowners vicariously liable for any illegal hunting activity that takes place on their land, if the landowner has granted permission for the activity. 36.48% of respondents opposed this suggestion.

- 61.07% said **fully**
- 1.94% said **mostly**
- 0.64% said **unsure**
- 1.24% said **to some extent**
- 35.11% said **not at all**

To what extent do you support the ambitions of the Bill?



Answered: 12,011 Skipped: 0



Question 13: If you do NOT agree with the Bill proposal, what additional measures would convince you to agree?

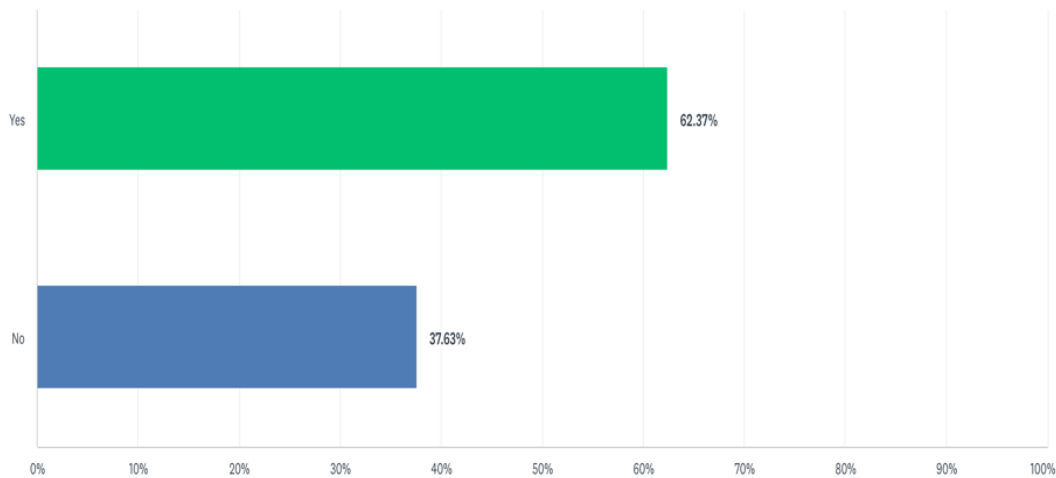
Result: Sample of responses provided below:

- “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”
- “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”

Do you think the cost of implementation and policing the proposed Act is acceptable?



Answered: 12,011 Skipped: 0



Annex Two: Breakdown Of NI-Only E-Consultation Responses

This section concentrates exclusively on the answers from participants who indicated in Question 3 that they reside in Northern Ireland. This focus is essential as it offers a more precise depiction of the overall opinion of the Northern Ireland public regarding the proposed Bill, especially considering that 59.5% of responses came from individuals who reported not living in Northern Ireland.

Given the high volume of responses received, only closed-ended questions are included in this section.

Question 1: This question asked respondents whether they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.

Result: 98.91% of respondents who said they lived in Northern Ireland said they were responding as an individual, with 1.09% responding on behalf of an organisation.

