# Keir Starmer’s plan to ease bat and newt protections risks EU trade breach



Sir Keir Starmer's recent move to relax protections for bats and newts as part of a broader initiative to streamline planning regulations has sparked significant controversy and concern regarding its potential implications for the UK’s post-Brexit relationship with the European Union. According to a leaked report from the EU, these plans may infringe upon the non-regression clauses established in the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) designed to ensure that environmental standards are not undermined after Brexit.

The document, which surfaced through Politico, highlights that the government’s efforts to roll back environmental measures aimed at facilitating development could contravene the commitments made under the TCA, agreed by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The report explicitly notes that alterations to environmental planning rules, intended to expedite construction efforts, could lead to breaches of international agreements. Analysts have highlighted that the intent to critique and reduce what officials label "red tape" not only poses risks to biodiversity but might also jeopardise vital trade relations with the EU, especially as the TCA is scheduled for review next year.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves has frequently pointed to the presence of bats and newts as obstacles to economic growth, labelling them as impediments in various public addresses. A government spokesperson remarked that reforms are essential for halting the deterioration of environmental conditions while simultaneously addressing the pressing need for housing and infrastructure. While the government asserts the need for a balanced approach, critics argue that this rhetoric undermines the effective environmental protections that have been in place.

Legal experts maintain that the TCA's provisions do require the UK to uphold certain environmental standards. The flexibility to pursue different regulatory paths does not imply an unbridled right to weaken existing protections. This divergence from EU standards could result in significant environmental consequences, as highlighted by analysis from various sources indicating potential degradation of water quality and increased use of harmful pesticides.

Environmental groups have been particularly vocal against the government's stance. The Bat Conservation Trust has condemned the rhetoric around bats, characterising it as both misleading and damaging to conservation efforts. It warned that proposed planning reforms could negatively affect bat populations by removing essential safeguards such as site surveys and mitigation measures crucial for their habitats. Chris Packham, renowned environmental campaigner and president of the Trust, has expressed concern over what he termed the scapegoating of these species, insisting that such narratives divert attention from addressing broader systemic issues affecting wildlife conservation.

Moreover, the Zoological Society of London has expressed dismay over plans to repeal over 500 environmental policies inherited from the EU, arguing such a reversal would severely impede efforts for biodiversity and climate action. They stress that these protections are not merely bureaucratic hurdles but essential frameworks that underpin environmental health, which ultimately benefits human society as a whole.

As the government charts its course in the post-Brexit landscape, the challenge remains to balance developmental ambitions with environmental stewardship. Proponents of reform argue that a more permissive planning regime is critical for economic recovery, while opponents caution that undermining ecological protections could lead to long-term, perhaps irreversible, damage to the UK’s natural heritage. This ongoing debate will likely intensify as stakeholders from all sides prepare for the upcoming review of the TCA, where the intersection of economic growth and environmental integrity will undoubtedly come under scrutiny.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 1, 2, 6
3. Paragraphs 3, 4
4. Paragraphs 3, 6
5. Paragraphs 5, 6
6. Paragraph 6
7. Paragraphs 3, 6

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-starmer-newts-bats-reeves-b2748022.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/19/brexit-divergence-from-eu-destroying-vital-environmental-protections> - An analysis by The Guardian reveals that post-Brexit, the UK is diverging from EU environmental standards, leading to the erosion of vital protections. The UK is weakening environmental regulations, including those related to water quality, pesticide use, and chemical bans, while the EU is strengthening its legislation. This divergence could result in dirtier water, increased pesticide use, and the continued use of chemicals banned in the EU, potentially affecting trade relations and environmental health.
3. <https://www.whitecase.com/insight-alert/environmental-law-after-brexit> - White & Case LLP discusses the implications of Brexit on environmental law, focusing on the 'level playing field' provisions in the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). The TCA requires the UK to maintain high environmental standards post-Brexit, with 'non-regression' clauses to prevent weakening of protections. However, the UK has the flexibility to adopt its own environmental rules, leading to potential divergences from EU standards.
4. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/lords/media-centre/house-of-lords-media-notices/house-of-lords-media-notices-2017/february-2017/lords-report-highlights-impact-of-brexit-on-environment-and-climate-change-policy/> - The House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee published a report highlighting the impact of Brexit on environmental and climate change policies. The report emphasizes the complexity of disentangling UK environmental laws from EU regulations and the need for effective enforcement mechanisms post-Brexit. It also discusses the potential for the UK to influence EU environmental policies and the importance of maintaining high environmental standards.
5. <https://www.bats.org.uk/news/2025/01/planning-reform-bad-for-bats> - The Bat Conservation Trust expresses concern over proposed UK government planning reforms that could negatively impact bat species. The reforms include removing requirements for site surveys and mitigation measures in certain planning applications, which could harm bat populations and their habitats. The Trust emphasizes the necessity of these protections for the conservation of bats and other wildlife.
6. <https://www.zsl.org/news-and-events/news/zsl-deplores-proposed-uk-government-move-to-weaken-environmental-protections> - The Zoological Society of London (ZSL) criticizes proposed UK government plans to abandon over 500 environmental protection policies inherited from EU law. ZSL argues that such moves would undermine the UK's commitment to climate and biodiversity action and could have detrimental effects on nature and human well-being.
7. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-11-15/debates/CCA31A38-EE50-4F30-AFAE-B4DDA5F2161B/BrexitFoodEnvironmentEnergyAndHealth%28EuropeanUnionCommitteeReport%29> - The UK Parliament's Hansard records a debate on the House of Lords European Union Committee's report on the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). The report discusses the TCA's provisions on environmental standards, emphasizing the UK's commitment to high environmental standards post-Brexit and the importance of maintaining a 'level playing field' in environmental protection.