

Natural England Hen Harrier Programme

Hen Harrier Southern Reintroduction

Closing Phase - Summary of Reasons



Hen Harrier Southern Reintroduction – Summary of Closure Reasons

Background

Hen harriers used to breed widely across the UK, but their numbers dropped sharply from around 1830 due to changes in land use and human persecution. Although populations have started to recover in Scotland and Wales, they haven't returned to southern England. A 2016 survey found 545 breeding pairs in the UK, with only a few in northern England. This led to DEFRA creating a plan to boost hen harrier numbers in England, including reintroducing them to the south.

Southern England no longer has the threats that caused the original decline, and most local and national stakeholders - including farmers, conservationists, and sporting groups – have supported the reintroduction. Opposition is mainly from those who want broader changes to grouse shoot management, not the reintroduction itself.

The goal was to release at least 100 young hen harriers over five years from Parsonage Down National Nature Reserve (NNR) in Wiltshire. This area borders Salisbury Plain, which has ideal habitat and prey for hen harriers. The birds would come from a conservation breeding programme using a small number of rescued or non-releasable birds imported from Europe, so there was no risk to wild populations. The site also supports other native wildlife, helping balance ecological outcomes.

Reintroductions like this can help restore species in suitable areas and strengthen populations across Europe. The project aimed to:

- Create a self-sustaining population in southern England.
- Learn more about hen harrier behaviour and movements.
- Raise public awareness and involvement in raptor conservation.

Project Timeline

The original plan was to bring young hen harriers from Europe to release in the UK. However, working with European partners took longer than expected, and new post-Brexit import rules made things harder. Quarantine requirements meant birds would be released in autumn, when survival chances are lower due to poor weather and less food.

Instead, a captive breeding programme began in late 2022 using adult birds from France and Spain.

By late 2023, 12 adult birds (7 females, 5 males) were part of the programme. Although breeding behaviour was seen in 2024, no mating occurred, and the eggs laid were infertile.

Two birds died over winter, leaving four pairs in 2025. This was the first year breeding was realistically expected, but again, no successful mating happened.

Modelling showed that releasing 100 fledglings over five years was needed for success. Starting in 2025, this would require consistent breeding and funding. Failing to meet this target could lead to project failure and reputational damage, as well as breaching international conservation standards.

Reasons for Closing the Project

1. Funding Cuts

- DEFRA funded the Hen Harrier Programme for several years, but no funding was allocated for 2025/2026.
- Natural England experienced a 50% cut in both its budget and staff for species recovery work. This reduction affected the organisation's ability to support long-term projects like the reintroduction.
- Although some capital funding was secured under the broader Species Recovery Programme, it wasn't enough to cover essential costs like staffing and operational expenses.

2. Limited Breeding Success

- Ten birds remain, forming only four male-female pairs. At best, they could produce 20 chicks per year.
- With birds aged 4–5 and a wild lifespan of about 7 years, hitting the 100-chick target would be difficult.
- Without proven breeding success, European partners won't provide more birds.

3. Stakeholder Availability

- Natural England has spent heavily on outsourcing breeding to ICBP, with the agreement ending in March 2026.
- A two-year extension was approved due to early delays, but ICBP wants to raise its fees.
- A five-year commitment is needed for success, but ICBP prefers only two more years.
- Extending beyond that would require further negotiations, and the costs are already a concern.

4. Focus on Northern Monitoring

- The Northern Monitoring team tracks hen harrier populations and habitats in northern England.
- Their work supports licensing decisions, habitat management, and enforcement against illegal killings.

- Satellite tagging is a key part of this work.
- To maintain this essential work, resources will be redirected from the reintroduction project to support the Northern team.

Project Outputs

Through undertaking this project several research avenues have been explored and supported by Natural England and partners in science and academia. Ecological modelling has taken place to assess available hen harrier habitat and threats to the species across England; genetic studies are currently underway, potentially informing our knowledge of hen harrier biology (including, for example, disease resistance and susceptibility); and long-term observation of individuals held in captivity for the conservation breeding programme has improved our understanding of hen harrier welfare, breeding behaviour and more, which can help to inform conservation in the wild as well as other reintroductions of hen harriers or similar species in future. In addition, a full report will be produced as part of the project's closing phase which will include lessons learned, to further inform future conservation efforts.