

Animals Count views on the Dangerous Dogs Act and other dog related issues

1) Does Animals Count have any views on amending the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 in any way or have any particular plans with regard to dog control legislation?

Animals Count believes that the 1991 DDA was rushed through Parliament in response to a child being seriously bitten by a dog, which received widespread media attention. Nearly 20 years later, many organisations realise that the Act is ineffective, costly and unworkable, and the number of dog bites is increasing every year. Similar legislation in the Netherlands to control 'dangerous' dogs has led to similar conclusions.

Together with the British Veterinary Association (BVA) Animals Count is very disappointed with the response the BVA received at their recent Parliamentary briefing that 'No government will give Parliamentary time for new legislation on dangerous dogs'. The BVA campaigns for repeal and reform of the DDA, and we agree.

A huge number of animals, pitbull-type dogs in particular, are euthanised by shelters every year, due to lack of rehoming opportunities. Most dogs bite out of fear and few are aggressive biters. It is the irresponsible owners, some of whom deliberately train animals to fight and attack, that we need to target. 'Dangerous' status dogs, or 'dogs as weapons' are considered fashionable within certain subcultures. A wider social approach is required to address such antisocial behaviour, including humane education. In addition, Animals Count seeks a compulsory identification and registration scheme, tougher penalties for animal abuse and strict enforcement, and more local council animal welfare officers on the street. Breeders need to be regulated too. Human and animal agencies need to collaborate to tackle these issues. These problems affect both animals and people, and the root causes must be addressed via coordinated strategies.

2) With regard to the DDA, does Animals Count have any views on the Breed Specific Legislation contained within the Act?

Animals Count believes that the specific breeds mentioned in the DDA are arbitrary. Whilst it may be true that the breeds listed are more frequently owned by people more likely to engage in unacceptable social behaviour - leading to safety risks to other animals and the public, other dog breeds may bite as well. Rottweilers, for example, may be high up in the bite index. In fact, any breed can be selectively bred to become more aggressive. A breed-specific ban is undesirable. However, compulsory individual aggressive dog behaviour tests, and a ban on breeding dogs that do not meet certain criteria (e.g. dogs that fail behaviour tests), are likely to be more effective.

3) Does Animals Count have any plans to introduce compulsory dog registration or licensing?

Veterinarians encounter deficiencies in basic, responsible pet care on a daily basis. To help encourage responsible pet care, a companion animal licensing system should be established. Mandatory requirements would include increasing the minimum age of licence-holders, and the successful completion of a responsible animal care certificate, appropriate to the species in question. Annual maintenance of the licence would require mandatory neutering of all companion animals by sexual maturity or earlier, other than in very special circumstances; compliance with basic preventative healthcare measures such as vaccination and parasite control; annual veterinary checkups; mandatory identification and registration, through both externally-visible identification and microchipping. Maintenance of companion animal insurance designed to fund unexpected medical or surgical expenses should be encouraged. Limitations would be imposed on numbers of animals that may be kept at each address, related to type of housing.

4) Does Animals Count have any policy relating to legislation on Puppy Farming?

Tens of thousands of stray cats and dogs are caught by authorities and kept in overcrowded pounds before being killed, due to lack of suitable homes. Yet certain individuals continue to profit from the commercial breeding and sale of companion animals. 'Puppy farms' are establishments where bitches are continuously bred, which often impairs their health. Living conditions and preventative healthcare standards are often poor.

Animals Count would seek to:

- Introduce an effective and humane stray animal management action plan.
- Ensure that local authorities are fully equipped to house and adequately care for abandoned animals. Each area should have at least one Animal Protection Officer with expertise in animal welfare and powers of seizure, who can investigate complaints, and enforce the licensing system.
- Regulate breeders and breeding facilities.
- Ban the sale of puppies and kittens in shops of any kind in order to avoid impulsive purchasing decisions.
- Strengthen the Animal Welfare Act, improve Border control (on animals traded into the UK), carry out spot checks, and increase penalties for offenders.

5) Does Animals Count have any views of plans relating to the breeding (and exhibition) of pedigree dogs and any concerns relating to inherited genetic defects which some breeds suffer from? Also, will Animals Count seek to work with acknowledged canine experts, including the Kennel Club?

Breeding of companion animals to meet breed standards, or for other purposes, that result in hereditary anatomical, physiological or other impairments likely to be contrary to good welfare, must always be prohibited. Whilst pet overpopulation and mass euthanasia of companion animals continues, all breeding establishments must be independently inspected and tightly regulated.

Animals Count seeks and welcomes expert opinions from a wide range of disciplines, including veterinarians, animal welfare scientists, canine experts, policy-makers and other stakeholders that put animal welfare interests first, ahead of commercial or economic gain.

6) Does Animals Count have any plans to tackle the growing problem of dog theft in the UK?

Responsible owners are the key to preventing dog thefts. Microchipping and externally-visible 'Identification and Registration' systems, as well as keeping animals on a leash or otherwise close to owners, will greatly minimise the risk of dog theft. Dog thefts may be driven by economic gain, e.g. through the trade in stolen rare and expensive breeds. The consumer demand for such animals should be decreased through education. Only licensed breeders must be allowed to sell animals, and they should be required to provide certificates of origin for animals sold. Penalties for offenders should be increased.

Other relevant Animals Count policies include:

- The provision of a basic animal health care system comparable to the NHS should be established. The system would seek to utilise existing private veterinary clinics and hospitals, and charities, by providing government funding to extend the provision of basic healthcare and emergency services. Rescue centres, rehabilitation and re-homing facilities for domestic and wild animals would also receive subsidies.

- To millions of households, companion animals matter. Some people, for example elderly people, may have reduced social networks, and their companion animal is extremely important to them. Yet sadly, many social housing corporations and care homes do not allow companion animals. This should change.
- There is evidence of a link between domestic violence and cruelty to animals, which needs to be addressed effectively by all relevant stakeholders (animal protection, social and child care, police, prosecution, etc.).
- Legislation and regulations against animal neglect and abuse should be strengthened, through a range of measures, including:
 - increased powers of inspection and seizure for police and licensed inspectors,
 - mandatory completion by offenders of a responsible animal care certificate (see above) appropriate to the species in question, regardless of any prior certification,
 - increased penalties for offenders.
- Resources for the implementation and enforcement of such legislation and regulations against animal neglect and abuse should be increased.
- Organisations and animal shelters that conduct inspections, animal seizures, provide shelters for animals, or prosecute animal abusers, should receive adequate government funding. Statutory regulation of animal sanctuaries should be introduced.
- Establishments selling animals should be subjected to mandatory regulation in accordance with best practice principles, including with respect to stocking densities, health and husbandry standards, independent, unannounced inspections, and a range of penalties that could include revocation of licences, fines and custodial sentences, where violations are apparent.

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January 2010