

PIC CREDITS: RSPCA, DAMION DIPLOCK, TIM SAMBROOK/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY. HELEN BALL, MINDA BHOGAL.

# INTRODUCTION PET ANIMAL INDICATORS

In 2007, there were over 15 million pet animals in the UK with more than 40 per cent of the population owning a pet<sup>1</sup>. Bearing these numbers in mind it is not surprising that the welfare of pet animals can be compromised by irresponsible pet ownership, which is due to ignorance or lack of understanding of animals' welfare needs, or by intentionally causing animals pain, suffering and cruelty. For the purposes of this report, the majority of data and statistical information concerning pets has been obtained from the RSPCA's own internal data-collecting sources. Unfortunately, statistics concerning pet animals is not collected at a national level or by a central source in the UK. Therefore the information the RSPCA collates and publishes must be regarded as an objective reflection of pet issues, as little else exists, and will hopefully be considered representative of England and Wales, if not the whole of the UK.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 (AWA) is one of the most significant pieces of legislation to affect pet animals in the UK. Coming into effect in 2007 the Act introduced the welfare offence, placing a 'duty of care' on all those responsible for animals to provide for their animals' needs, which is one of the most significant components of the new law<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the AWA, there were a number of other events that occurred in 2007, which impacted on the welfare of pet animals.

- The law banning the docking of dogs' tails for cosmetic purposes came into force in England<sup>3</sup> and Wales<sup>4</sup>. In Scotland, all tail docking of dogs (unless for medical reasons) became illegal<sup>5</sup>. The first RSPCA prosecution for the offence was taken under the AWA in Wales in June 2007.
- The welfare of about 60,000 racehorses will be improved due to a new ruling that was introduced by the Horseracing Regulatory Authority (HRA) in April 2007<sup>6</sup>. It is now mandatory for all jockeys competing in flat races to carry cushioned whips.
- The Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare showed that 13,500 greyhounds bred for racing are considered 'surplus' to the greyhound racing industry in England and Wales every year<sup>7</sup>. The organisation also said that almost 5,000 greyhounds are unaccounted for, presumed killed by the age of three or four when their racing days are over.
- Cruelty investigations by the RSPCA rose by 10.5 per cent in 2007 on the previous year<sup>8</sup>. Neglect was once again the most common form of cruelty. Animal rescues and collections, with the majority being pet animals, increased by eight per cent.

## FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Pet Food Manufacturer Association's data: [www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-ownership.htm](http://www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-ownership.htm)
- 2 Section 9, Animal Welfare Act 2006.
- 3 [www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/act/docking.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/act/docking.htm)
- 4 <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/Companiondomesticanimalwelfare/taildocking/?lang=en>
- 5 [www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/02/07102500](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/02/07102500)
- 6 The Horseracing Regulatory Authority. Modification of 'The orders and rules of racing' H8 whips – specifications (rule 149(ii)).
- 7 [www.apgaw.org/reports.asp](http://www.apgaw.org/reports.asp)
- 8 [www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)

## **WELFARE INDICATOR:** The number of unwanted healthy animals taken into the care of the RSPCA

### RSPCA concern

In the UK, about 43 per cent of the population own a pet with the majority owning cats and dogs<sup>1</sup>. There are just over 14 million pet cats and dogs and a further 1.7 million small animals including rabbits, hamsters, gerbils and rats. Increasingly, more 'exotic' animals are being kept as pets; these non-domestic animals include snakes, lizards, turtles, frogs and chinchillas.

With so many pet animals in the UK, it is not surprising that there is also an abundance of unwanted pets needing new homes. Unfortunately, not all pet owners are aware of the long-term commitment they are taking on when initially getting an animal, and some are unable to continue to provide the suitable environment or care for their chosen animal. In extreme cases these animals can suffer either physical or emotional cruelty or are simply abandoned. When an animal is no longer wanted or the owners' circumstances change, the RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations are often turned to for help. It is a concern that some animals suffer unnecessarily due to the irresponsibility of the very people who should ultimately be responsible for them.

The RSPCA would like to see the number of unwanted animals in the UK significantly reduced until the problem no longer exists.

### Background

There are many reasons why the UK has a problem with unwanted pets and why many of these animals will end up being cared for by animal charities until new homes can be found for them. It is at least partly the result of impulse buying, lack of research carried out before an animal is acquired, irresponsible breeding and changes to owners' circumstances. Pets are sometimes purchased when they are small and cute looking, with little thought given to what owning an animal actually means. Impulse buying can result in rabbits spending the majority of their time in a small hutch, dogs not given any or enough exercise and hamsters ignored when a child becomes bored of them. Appropriate behavioural training is often neglected and a significant proportion of unwanted animals pass through rehoming and rescue centres for this reason alone. Other reasons why a pet may need to be found a new home include changes in family, health or financial circumstances.

In the UK, there are more than 100 rehoming centres<sup>2</sup> run by the most well-known and largest animal charities. These include the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, the Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), and the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA). Many more rehoming centres are run by smaller organisations. Pet animals are taken into the RSPCA's care in a number of ways: by RSPCA inspectors, animal collection officers, and by owners who are directed towards their local RSPCA branch or animal establishment. In 2007, the RSPCA nationally operated 17 regional animal centres, four hospitals and five clinics. The RSPCA's branches operated a further 39 centres and 40 clinics. Collectively these establishments have a capacity to care for more than 6,300 cats and dogs at any given time. A network of about 700 volunteer animal fosterers and 150 private boarding establishments are utilised for animal rehoming and accommodation. This national network of specialists not only provides a safe haven for the huge variety of animals that are rescued, abandoned or voluntarily signed over to the Society, but also offers them a second chance of a new home. The RSPCA, like many other organisations, aims to find new loving homes for every animal that enters into its care.

The number of healthy animals entering the care of the RSPCA each year is used to indicate the scale of the unwanted pet problem in England and Wales.

### The indicator figures

To gauge the scale of the problem of unwanted healthy animals, this indicator focuses on the animals that are taken into RSPCA care in England and Wales. A true figure would incorporate the number of



**THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR.**

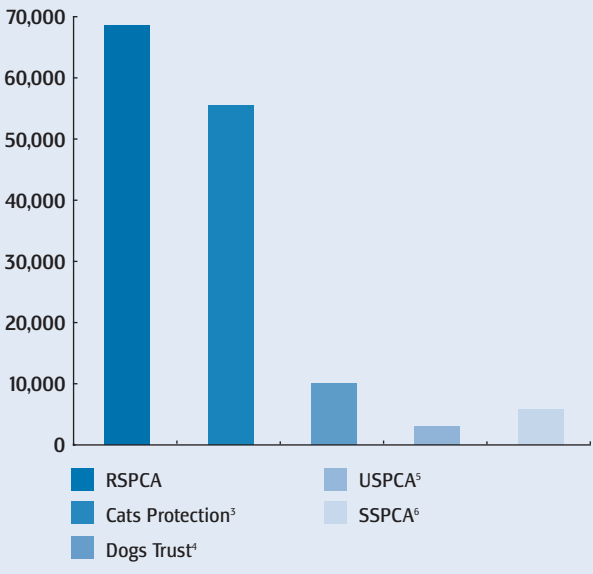
animals euthanased by vets at the owners' request and the number of animals that enter non-RSPCA establishments. Currently, there is no nationally established format to identify the total number of unwanted pets that are dealt with each year. Figure 1 demonstrates the number of animals rehomed by organisations that provide details on their websites or in their annual reports/reviews. In 2007, five of the biggest animal welfare organisations in the UK rehomed nearly 150,000 animals. It is to be expected that thousands more animals will be rehomed by other organisations, vets, local authorities or individuals.

For the purpose of this indicator, RSPCA data is used. In future it is hoped that year-on-year figures can be obtained from many other organisations in the UK so as to give a more accurate and representative picture of the problem regarding unwanted animals. The number of unwanted animals is calculated by combining the number of animals rehomed by the RSPCA and the number of healthy animals euthanased. This figure includes cats, dogs, equines, birds, small mammals such as rabbits and non-domestic or exotic animals such as snakes, lizards and terrapins. Figure 2 shows that over the past five years the number of healthy animals entering the care of the RSPCA has decreased by around 3.5 per cent, with just 2,516 fewer animals coming into the RSPCA in 2007 than in 2003. The amount of healthy animals euthanased was at its lowest in five years, with more animals finding new homes than the year before. It is disappointing that in 2007, thousands of unwanted animals were placed into the care of animal welfare organisations, many of which are charities and rely solely on the generosity of the general public and other donors. The majority of animal organisations in the UK also promote neutering, microchipping and responsible pet ownership, in attempt to help avoid the problem of unwanted pets. However, with at least 150,000 animals in the UK needing new homes in 2007, much more needs to be done to reduce the number of unwanted animals and prevent the suffering that can be caused to them. There still remains a huge problem with breeding, impulse buying of pets and general irresponsible behaviour that leaves many animals needing new homes and animal welfare organisations and others left to pick up the pieces.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

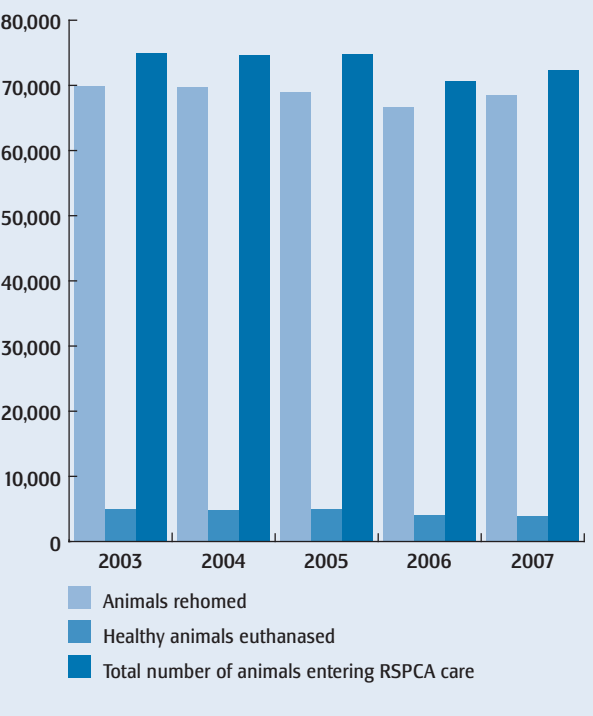
1 Pet Food Manufacturer Association's data: [www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-ownership.htm](http://www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-ownership.htm)  
2 Information gathered from the websites of the following animal welfare organisations in the UK: RSPCA, Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the Mayhew Animal Home, Dogs Trust, the Blue Cross, Cats Protection and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.  
3 [www.cats.org.uk/workwedo/howwework.asp](http://www.cats.org.uk/workwedo/howwework.asp)  
4 [www.dogstrust.org.uk](http://www.dogstrust.org.uk)  
5 [www.uspca.co.uk](http://www.uspca.co.uk)  
6 [www.scottishspca.org](http://www.scottishspca.org)

Figure 1: Number of animals rehomed in the UK by animal welfare organisations, 2007



Data source: RSPCA, Cats Protection, Dogs Trust, USPCA and SSPCA.

Figure 2: Number of unwanted animals taken into the care of the RSPCA, 2003–2007



Data source: RSPCA.



## **WELFARE INDICATOR:** The number of non-microchipped cats and dogs taken into RSPCA care

### RSPCA concern

Microchipping is an inexpensive way of ensuring permanent identification of pet animals and being able to link animals to their owners. Although a dog owner has a legal requirement to ensure that their dog while on a highway or in a public place wears a collar with the name and address of the owner inscribed on it<sup>1</sup>, there is no legal requirement for a dog to be microchipped and there is no equivalent legislation for cats. Collars and tags are an important but unreliable method of identification – collars can break and ID tags can fall off or be taken off the dog. It is much harder to reunite a dog with its owner by just relying on a collar and ID tag. When fitted with a microchip, dogs, especially, are more likely to be reunited with their owner if they become lost.

The RSPCA believes that all cats and dogs should be fitted with a microchip and that microchipping should be encouraged as part of responsible pet ownership.

### Background

Microchipping is a simple procedure where a small 'chip', the size of a grain of rice, is inserted under the skin between animal's shoulder blades. The microchip bears a unique code number that is entered onto a national database alongside the owner's details. A hand-held scanner, carried by RSPCA inspectors, vets, animal centres and local authority dog wardens, can then read the details of the microchip if a lost, injured or dead animal is found.

Every year, the RSPCA, other animal welfare organisations, vets, police and local authorities handle a large number of animals that are reported as strays, are sick or injured, have become trapped or have wandered from their owners. They also deal with reports of dogs and other animals that are lost or may have been stolen. Many animals are never reunited with their owners, often because the owner or pet cannot be identified. In 2007, only half of all dogs identified as strays in the UK by local authorities were returned to their owners (see page 29). If all of these dogs had been microchipped, many more are likely to have been returned to their owners, or at least their owners could have been located.

Microchips are most commonly used in cats, dogs and equines, but can also be used on smaller animals such as rabbits, ferrets and birds. This method of identification is a requirement of the Horse and Pet Passport schemes<sup>2</sup>, however there is no legal obligation for pets to be microchipped if they are not going to be taken out of the UK. Microchipping can help with proving ownership of an animal and can be very useful when dealing with incidents of pet theft, straying animals and cruelty, and is one of the most reliable methods of tracing pets or their owners. In 2007, the Petlog<sup>3</sup> reunification service assisted with more than 89,000 lost and found telephone calls from people who had either lost their animal or had found animals that were microchipped. Of course this is very much reliant on pet owners keeping their details up to date on the relevant databases.

Sweden is a good example of where responsible dog ownership and microchipping has resulted in the country having limited problems with unwanted dogs and straying animals. Unlike the UK and most other European countries, in Sweden it is a legal requirement for all dogs to be registered and permanently identified from four months of age<sup>4</sup>, with microchipping being the preferred method of identification. This has resulted in more than 90 per cent of dogs that have strayed, and/or are not accompanied by their owners, being reunited with their owners within 24 hours.

Although microchipping is not compulsory in the UK, many organisations are making concerted efforts to encourage pet owners to microchip their animals. Every June, the Kennel Club coordinates National Microchipping Month<sup>5</sup> throughout the UK in an endeavour to



**THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR.**

promote microchipping and to encourage responsible pet ownership.

The RSPCA, and other animal welfare organisations, councils and vets also organise events where microchipping is offered at discounted rates or even free of charge. The RSPCA promotes microchipping as the preferred method of animal identification, specifically through its rehoming efforts, as every animal leaving the care of the RSPCA is fitted with a microchip unless it already has one. The RSPCA also offers a welfare microchipping service that is carried out at the request of pet owners at RSPCA animal centres, hospitals, clinics and individual RSPCA branches.

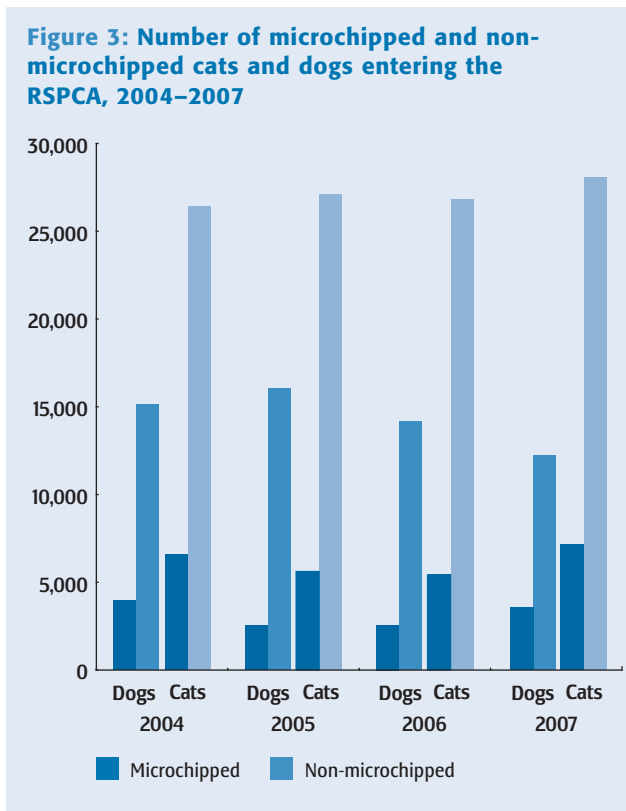
The indicator figures

This indicator aims to establish if the microchipping message is being effectively communicated and understood by owners and keepers of pet animals. It will help to assess whether more needs to be done by local authorities, vets, breeders and welfare organisations in promoting the benefits of microchipping as a part of responsible pet ownership.

Although the majority of animal welfare organisations and rehoming centres microchip animals before they leave their care and promote microchipping via publications and websites, it is still difficult to establish the extent of the microchipping work that each organisation is carrying out as there is no central method of collating this data. Therefore, the information used for this indicator primarily focuses on the cats and dogs the RSPCA microchips as they leave its care and enter new homes. Figure 3 shows that the majority of cats and dogs that came into the care of the RSPCA over a four-year period, were without a microchip. In 2006 just 16 per cent of cats and dogs were already microchipped, however this figure has increased to 21 per cent in 2007. These statistics suggest that the microchipping message is slowly, but surely, being taken on board by animal owners with more people understanding the benefits of microchipping.

Although the figures are positive the vast majority of cats and dogs (around 80 per cent) are still not microchipped when they come into the care of the RSPCA for rehoming. It can perhaps be assumed that someone who gives up their cat or dog is perhaps less likely to have had their pet microchipped because they have not considered the long-term impact of pet ownership, did not know about

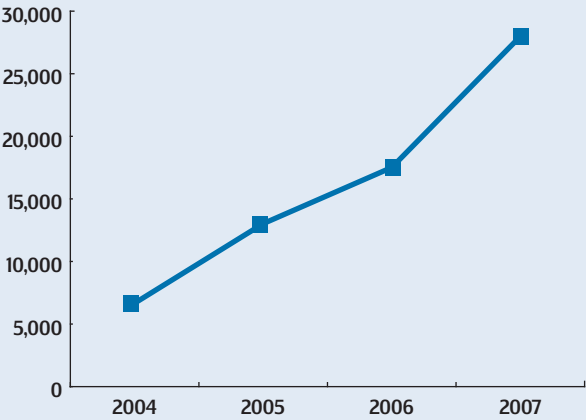
microchipping or perhaps thought it was not important. However, to try and put these figures into context, Figure 4 demonstrates the amount of welfare microchipping that is carried out by the RSPCA on the request of cat and dog owners and by RSPCA microchipping initiatives. Since 2004 the number of owned animals being microchipped by the RSPCA has dramatically increased. In 2004, 6,669 owned cats and dogs were microchipped and this rose to 27,985 in 2007. This equates to a rise of more than 400 per cent.



Data source: RSPCA.

**IN 2007, ONLY HALF OF ALL DOGS IDENTIFIED AS STRAYS IN THE UK BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES WERE RETURNED TO THEIR OWNERS. IF ALL OF THESE DOGS HAD BEEN MICROCHIPPED, MANY MORE ARE LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN RETURNED TO THEIR OWNERS, OR AT LEAST THEIR OWNERS COULD HAVE BEEN LOCATED.**

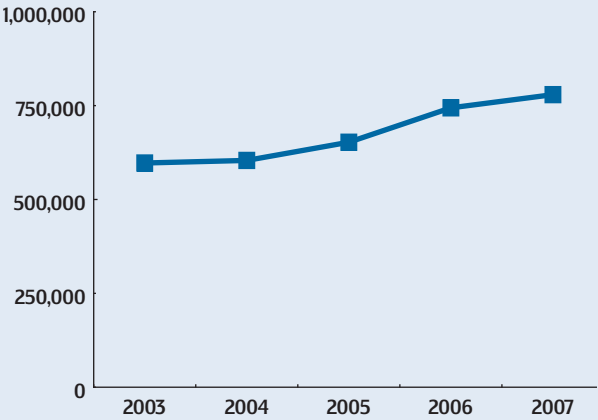
**Figure 4: Dog and cat welfare microchipping performed by the RSPCA, 2004–2007**



Data source: RSPCA.

In attempt to try and find out how pet owners in the UK are responding to microchipping messages, the four UK microchipping databases were approached to find out how many cats and dogs are being registered, and therefore microchipped each year. The databases contacted are Identichip<sup>6</sup>, Petlog<sup>7</sup>, Petrac<sup>8</sup> and Virbac<sup>9</sup>. For the second year running, three out of four responded and provided microchipping figures for cats and dogs over the last five years. Figure 5 shows the total number of cats and dogs that have been microchipped and registered by the three schemes between 2003 and 2007. Over the past five years the total number of cats and dogs registered on the databases has increased by 23 per cent. In 2007, 35,000 more cats and dogs were microchipped than the previous year. This is likely to be due to increased public awareness and education about microchipping during national microchipping month and other events. Nationally, the number of

**Figure 5: Total number of cats and dogs registered each year on the Virbac, Identichip and Petlog databases, 2003–2007**



Data source: Virbac, Identichip and Petlog.

cats and dogs that are microchipped each year is rising, yet the number of microchipped cats and dogs entering RSPCA centres is remaining fairly low, indicating that while the microchipping message is getting through to some people, the overall responsible pet ownership message needs to be generally improved.

There are about 7.2 and 7.3 million cats and dogs respectively in the UK, yet far more dogs were microchipped in 2007 than cats. This suggests that more targeted public awareness is needed to encourage owners to microchip their cats<sup>10</sup>. It also indicates that the status of cats within the UK is seen as lower than dogs, which may be because dogs are seen more as part of the family than cats and therefore owners have a more responsible attitude towards them.

Ideally every cat and dog in the UK will be microchipped. Although more animals are being microchipped each year, the message is still not getting through to many animal owners.

**FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES**

- 1 A badge or plate is also acceptable. Control of Dogs Order 1992, SI 1992/901, art 2 (1).
- 2 EC Regulation 998/2003 of 13 June 2003 on the non-commercial movement of pets. [www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/quarantine/pets/procedures/support-infor/guide.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/quarantine/pets/procedures/support-infor/guide.htm)
- 3 [www.thekennelclub.org.uk/caring/petlog](http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/caring/petlog)
- 4 *Stray Animal Control Practices (Europe). A report into the strategies for controlling stray dog and cat populations adopted in thirty-one countries. 2006–2007.* RSPCA International and WSPA.
- 5 [www.thekennelclub.org.uk/item/578](http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/item/578)
- 6 [www1.identichip.co.uk](http://www1.identichip.co.uk)
- 7 [www.thekennelclub.org.uk/meet/petlog.html](http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/meet/petlog.html)
- 8 [www.avidplc.com/petrac.asp](http://www.avidplc.com/petrac.asp)
- 9 [www.virbac-backhome.co.uk/pages/what.htm](http://www.virbac-backhome.co.uk/pages/what.htm)
- 10 In 2007, 492,107 dogs were registered on the three UK databases. Just 287,129 cats were registered during this period.

## WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of healthy dogs being euthanased by the RSPCA due to irresponsible pet ownership

### RSPCA concern

Every year the RSPCA, vets, local authorities and other animal welfare organisations reluctantly carry out the humane destruction of healthy dogs that are no longer wanted and cannot be rehomed. Quite simply, there are not enough people available to rehome all the dogs waiting for new owners and some dogs cannot be rehomed for a variety of reasons including aggression and ill health. Irresponsible pet ownership can result in the humane destruction or euthanasia of healthy dogs (and many other pet animals).

The RSPCA would like to see a future where no healthy pet animal is euthanased. This can only be achieved through animal owners and keepers adopting more responsible attitudes towards their pets.

### Background

Dogs are euthanased if they are sick, injured or a danger to the public, and this is carried out by trained operators such as vets using approved methods. Some healthy animals are also euthanased for non-medical reasons, such as when they cannot be found new homes or at the owners' insistence because the animals are no longer wanted.

In certain areas of the UK, the number of unwanted and stray dogs is so large there are not enough people able to offer them homes. The RSPCA uses different methods to aid rehoming of these unwanted animals including putting adverts in the local press and on websites, and transferring long-stay animals to different parts of the country. The transfer system relocates animals to centres around the country after three months, giving different members of the public an opportunity to view the dogs.

When all possible methods of rehoming have been exhausted, a dog may be euthanased, however this always happens with great reluctance and only after everything has been done to find the dog a new owner. The RSPCA is opposed to the long-term confinement of animals, but it is sometimes inevitable, despite the devoted care given by staff, that distress and mental suffering can be caused to the animals concerned.

Many unwanted dogs are purchased as puppies and are signed over to the RSPCA when they are between two and four years old. This can happen for a number of reasons including owners becoming bored of the dog once it's an adult, owners being unable to cope with behavioural problems caused by inadequate training, and owners failing to make long-term plans for the care of the dog. The number of healthy dogs put to sleep could be reduced with a combination of simple, practical actions. Microchipping would assist with locating pet owners and could reduce the number of strays. Neutering of dogs could prevent unwanted pregnancies and help control the size of the dog population. The provision of suitable information and guidance from pet sellers could also improve the welfare of the animal concerned. These activities would potentially reduce the number of unwanted animals and therefore reduce the need to euthanase healthy animals.



**THE NUMBER OF HEALTHY DOGS BEING EUTHANASED HAS INCREASED.**



The indicator figures

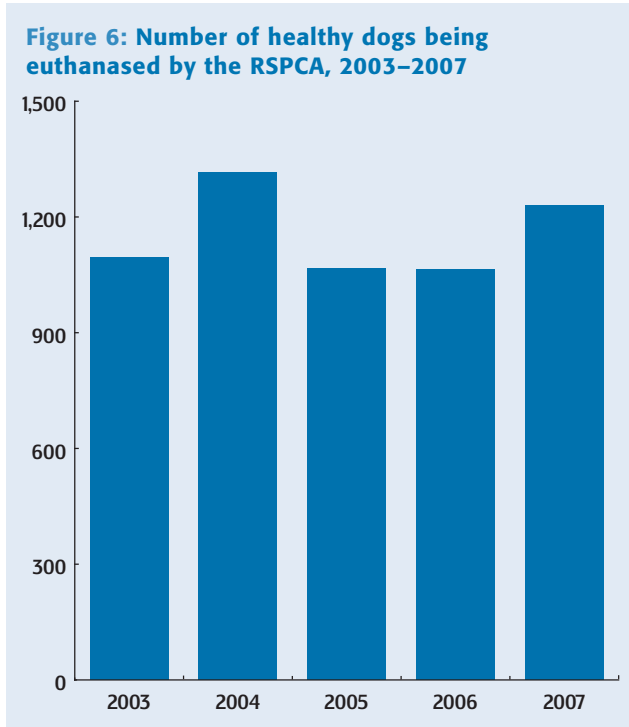
This indicator measures the number of healthy dogs the RSPCA has to euthanase each year. The total number of healthy dogs euthanased each year in the UK is likely to be a lot higher, however there is no easy way to find out what this figure is. Local authorities, vets (at the owners' request), and some animal welfare organisations will euthanase unwanted healthy dogs, but these statistics are not widely available or collected nationally.

A search of other animal welfare organisations' websites and annual reviews could not find any figures on the euthanasia of the dogs that are taken into their care.

At the beginning of 2006 and 2007, the RSPCA wrote to each local authority in England and Wales in an attempt to determine how many stray animals end up in their care and how many of these animals are euthanased. In 2008, the survey was extended to cover Northern Ireland and Scotland. In an attempt not to duplicate figures collected by the Dogs Trust<sup>1</sup>, which commissions a local authority survey throughout the UK about the number of stray animals it euthanases each year, the RSPCA utilised the Freedom of Information Act 2000. A number of questions were asked about dogs that were euthanased for medical and non-medical reasons, as previous studies have never separated this data. Between April 2006 and March 2007, a RSPCA local authority survey revealed that 6,328 dogs were euthanased by local authorities in the UK<sup>2</sup>. Of these, 2,526 were euthanased on medical grounds, 1,101 were euthanased after a seven-day period on non-medical grounds, and there was no explanation for the remaining 2,701 dogs. Further data was obtained from the Welsh Assembly Members Research Service in 2006<sup>3</sup>, which contacted each local authority in Wales and requested information about the number of dogs 'put down' between April 2005 and March 2006. A total of 281 dogs were euthanased during this 12-month period. There is no distinction between healthy and non-healthy dogs.

Figure 6 shows the number of healthy dogs the RSPCA has had to euthanase over the past five years. In 2003, 1,095 healthy dogs were euthanased by the RSPCA compared to 2007 when 1,230 dogs were euthanased. Between 2006 and 2007, the number of healthy dogs euthanased has increased by 167 dogs or 15.7 per cent. The percentage increase seems fairly large, however in real terms the number of dogs being euthanased by the RSPCA is still relatively low when compared to the number of dogs the RSPCA rehomes – 15,787 dogs were rehomed in England and Wales during 2007.

This euthanasia figure is still unacceptable, as ideally no healthy dog will be euthanased by the RSPCA, local authorities or



Data source: RSPCA.

any other organisation. It is hoped that with more public awareness responsible pet ownership campaigns promoting the benefits of neutering and microchipping, the number of animals euthanased will decrease until ultimately there is a home available for every healthy animal in the UK.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The Dogs Trust survey doesn't distinguish between dogs that have been euthanased for medical reasons and healthy animals: [www.dogstrust.org.uk/press\\_office/stray-dog-survey-2007](http://www.dogstrust.org.uk/press_office/stray-dog-survey-2007)
- 2 See page 29 for more information.
- 3 Members Research Service enquiry. Dogs put down in Wales 2005–2006. 15 November 2006. National Assembly for Wales.

## **WELFARE INDICATOR:** The number of organised animal fights in the UK

### RSPCA concern

Animal fighting, that is pitting one animal against another, is viewed by the RSPCA as one of the most barbaric areas of animal cruelty. Although UK animal baiting and animal fighting legislation was first introduced in 1835<sup>1</sup>, and subsequently up-to-date laws that protect animals such as badgers<sup>2</sup> have followed, there is still grave concern about such activities continuing. Organised animal fighting activities are deliberate, calculated, and by their very nature cause a great deal of unnecessary suffering to the animals involved.

The RSPCA and other agencies are working to combat these barbaric activities in an attempt to see the eradication of all forms of organised animal fighting within the UK.

### Background

Traditionally, animal fighting has been clandestine and covert and therefore extremely difficult to combat. The RSPCA's Special Operations Unit investigates three main areas of animal fighting involving dogs, cockerels and badgers<sup>3</sup>.

#### ■ Dog fighting

Dog fighting usually involves a large number of people coming together to 'pit' one fighting dog against another, with large amounts of money being placed as bets on the outcome of the fight. However, other more impromptu, less organised fights take place, for example in public parks. The dogs used in organised fights are almost exclusively American pit bull terriers, a breed that is banned in the UK by the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991<sup>4</sup>. The fights take place in a pit, constructed to a size and standard recognised by the dog fighting fraternity, with the dogs being fought according to strict rules enforced by a referee. The fights can vary in length from a matter of minutes to a couple of hours and dogs may suffer from a large number of bite wounds. The owner of the dog will probably treat these injuries and any subsequent infection. Treatments will include suturing wounds and administering steroids and antibiotics. It is unlikely the dogs will be taken for veterinary treatment because of the breed of dog involved and the nature of the injuries inflicted on the dogs.

#### ■ Cock-fighting

Cock-fighting usually involves a large number of people watching and betting on fighting cockerels in a pit area with a referee enforcing strict rules. The birds are conditioned to fight and may have the natural spurs on their feet sharpened so as to inflict the maximum damage to their opponents, other cockerels. Alternatively the natural spurs may have been removed and replaced with sharpened 5cm steel spikes, which are fitted and bound to the birds' legs. Bouts may last anything from a few seconds to one hour. Often one of the birds is killed and many others receive severe injuries.

#### ■ Badger digging/baiting

Badger digging is carried out by small groups of people and involves terrier dogs entering badger setts to locate and corner badgers deep in the tunnels of the sett. The dogs usually wear electronic transmitter collars that provide a signal, which the diggers can detect on the surface of the sett. When a dog has cornered a badger the signal will become stationary and the diggers can then dig down to where the dog and badger are located, irreparably damaging the badger sett in the process.



**THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASE IN REPORTS AND CONVICTIONS FOR ANIMAL FIGHTING.**

At this time both the dog and the badger are likely to receive severe bite injuries because a badger will fight fiercely when cornered. Once the diggers reach the dog and badger, both will be removed from the sett. The badger may then be killed with a knife or a spade. On other occasions the badger may be set free on the surface and several dogs set upon it to kill it, with the badger often suffering a slow and painful death.

More organised baiting of badgers also takes place with badgers taken away from the sett and baited in a pit with several dogs attacking it at once. The badger is not the only animal that suffers, as the dogs involved will receive serious bite injuries, which may be treated by the owners rather than receiving proper treatment from vets.

The participants and organisers of animal fighting and animal baiting are often involved in other areas of serious criminality, especially those involved in dog fighting. Due to their criminal background and knowledge of investigative techniques, the perpetrators are difficult to trace and track, requiring investigators to employ specialist skills and techniques to bring them to justice.

There are a number of factors that make investigating animal fighting extremely difficult.

#### ■ National and international boundaries

Those involved are prepared to travel long distances to participate in their chosen area of animal fighting. Different enforcement agencies are required to coordinate investigations as police, county and international boundaries are crossed. Suspects crossing police force boundaries who are stopped/arrested are unlikely to be linked to any previous offences in other police force areas.

#### ■ Animal injuries

Animals that have been used in fighting will often have distinctive injuries. Therefore owners will not take them for veterinary treatment as this could raise suspicion about the source of the injuries. Consequently animals are treated by their owners so it is rare for vets to see animals that have been used in fighting.

#### ■ Communication

With advanced communication networks such as mobile phone technology and the internet, it is now easier for information to be transferred undetected. New factions of animal fighters are constantly emerging, as access to information becomes more available and international travel becomes easier.

#### ■ Prosecution

It appears that animal fighting participants are willing to risk being prosecuted. The current penalties/sentences do not seem to be a deterrent, as there are many repeat offenders.

#### ■ Profile

It is extremely difficult to identify or profile the type of person who is involved in animal fighting because a 'typical' animal fighter cannot be identified by a particular socio-economic group, race, nationality or age.

Due to the difficult nature of getting information on the perpetrators of animal fighting, investigations are extremely costly and the cost of bringing cases before the courts is also very high. In terms of RSPCA manpower, the time, specialised training and equipment required, makes the cost per conviction higher than any other area of the RSPCA inspectorate's investigative work. Typical operation costs involved in prosecuting animal fighting include: investigators' man-hours, prosecution costs, dog boarding costs, veterinary fees, expert witness fees and legal fees.

Animal fighting, despite being prohibited for many years, still occurs in the UK. This is an important welfare indicator because of the intentional cruelty and the suffering it causes, and due to the fact that long-established laws are still being broken. Dog fighting in particular has cross-border implications where information, techniques and even dogs work at an international level. Many countries with their own animal fighting problems look to the UK, with its long legislative history and status as a country of animal lovers, to help solve the problem, yet the problem still exists in the UK.

**THIS IS AN IMPORTANT WELFARE INDICATOR BECAUSE OF THE INTENTIONAL CRUELTY AND THE SUFFERING IT CAUSES, AND DUE TO THE FACT THAT LONG-ESTABLISHED LAWS ARE STILL BEING BROKEN.**

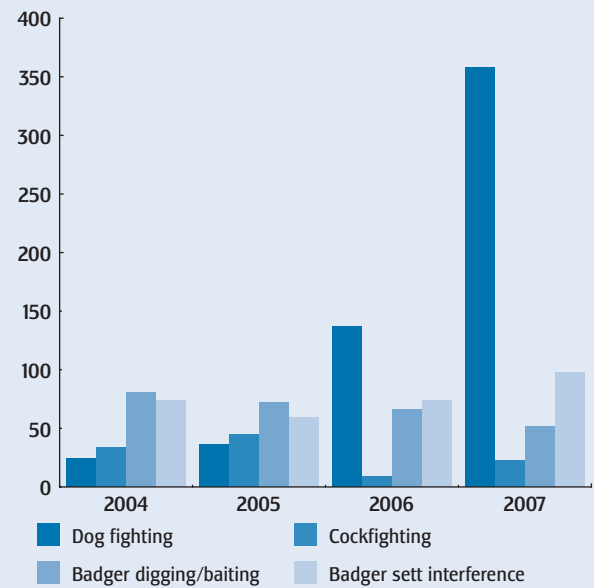
The indicator figures

Establishing the scale of the animal fighting problem in the UK is extremely difficult due to the criminal and covert element of the activities. Unlike many other areas of animal cruelty that are openly reported to the RSPCA's cruelty and advice line<sup>5</sup>, relatively few complaints are received from the general public about animal fighting. With other types of animal cruelty, reporting issues to the RSPCA can be seen as a good indication of how big a problem is, but unfortunately with animal fighting this is not the case. Figure 7 identifies the number of reports of animal fighting the Society received between 2004 and 2007. In 2007, the RSPCA received more than one million telephone calls to its cruelty and advice line and investigated 137,245 cruelty complaints, yet received just 531 complaints about animal fighting.

Since 2004, reports of dog fighting have increased from 24 to 358 in 2007, and have nearly trebled since 2006. There are a number of reasons why more calls were received in 2007 than in the previous four years including the widely publicised tragic death of five-year-old Ellie Lawrenson in Liverpool who was killed by an illegally owned pit bull-type dog. In addition the UK's first pit bull amnesty took place in Northern Ireland during January 2007 and two high-profile dog fighting cases in the West Midlands area may have prompted more reports as the public became more aware of dog fighting and dangerous dog offences.

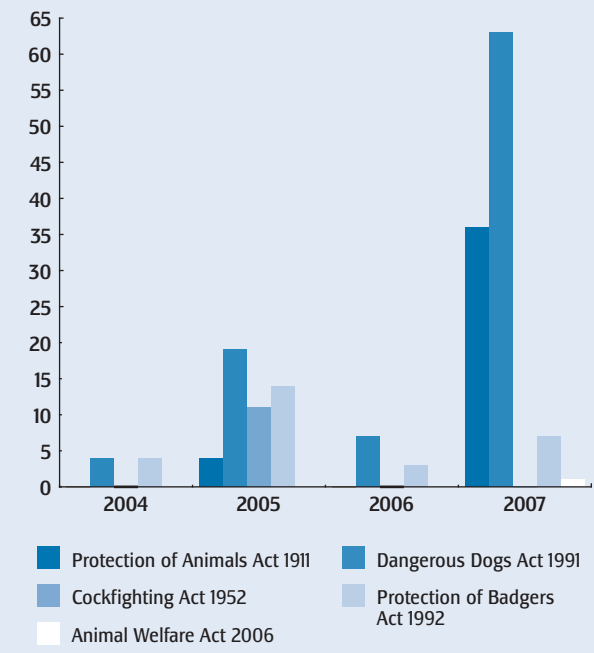
Of the 137 reports of dog fighting in 2006, and 358 in 2007, 82 and 132 of these respectively were related to instances where youths or 'hoodies'<sup>6</sup> were reported fighting dogs in public areas such as on streets or in parks. Often the dogs involved are so-called 'status' dogs. The term status dog is often used by the media to refer to dogs associated with young people and used in aggressive or intimidating ways towards the public and other animals. The dogs involved tend to be tough looking dogs such as pit bull-type dogs, Staffordshire bull terriers and mastiffs. The RSPCA's figures are backed up by Metropolitan Police figures, which show a massive increase in the number of dogs seized in London under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Between 2003 and 2006, the numbers averaged out to about 38 dogs a year. This increased to 173 between May 2006 and April 2007 and leapt to 480 in the 12 months up to April 2008. Of the total figures, about 80 per cent of the dogs are pit bull-types, with the remainder being dogs that are dangerously out of control'. The RSPCA produced a leaflet and poster in 2006 encouraging owners of status dogs to provide adequate care for their dogs and highlighting the legislation that protects dogs such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Control of Dogs Order 1992. The RSPCA is extremely

Figure 7: Reports of animal fighting given to the RSPCA, 2004–2007



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 8: Successful convictions for animal fighting obtained by the RSPCA, 2004–2007



Data source: RSPCA.

concerned that more reported incidents of dog fighting seem to involve young people in public places. In February 2008, the Society became involved with a new education initiative the People With Dogs Project<sup>8</sup>, which is aimed at reducing intimidating and anti-social behaviour on London's streets.

In an attempt to try and identify the scale of animal fighting, Figure 8 shows the number of successful animal fighting convictions between 2004 and 2007<sup>9</sup>. It is useful to look at the number of convictions, as this demonstrates that animal fighting acts are still taking place and perpetrators are being caught, however it does not clearly represent the true scale of the problem. More convictions in a given year does not necessarily mean the problem is worsening, it could just mean more people were caught or many people were involved at one event and subsequently convicted. Conversely, if the

number of convictions dropped, this isn't necessarily a sign that fighting is occurring less, as it could simply mean those involved are not being caught. With regard to dog fighting convictions, there can be a big difference between the number of cases reported and the number of convictions because of the delays in bringing the cases to court. It is possible for a large number of convictions to take place in a year although the relevant arrests occurred the previous year.

Organised animal fighting is a continuing problem and it is extremely challenging to measure how big the issue is, which makes it difficult to statistically gauge whether animal fighting is increasing or decreasing. However, with new types of dog fighting factions appearing, more reports of incidents and a higher number of convictions, it must be concluded that animal fighting, especially dog fighting, is increasing.

**THE RSPCA'S FIGURES ARE BACKED UP BY METROPOLITAN POLICE FIGURES, WHICH SHOW A MASSIVE INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF DOGS SEIZED IN LONDON UNDER THE DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991.**

**FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES**

- 1 An Act to consolidate and amend the several laws relating to the cruel and improper treatment of animals and the mischiefs arising from the driving of cattle (Pease's Act) 1835.
- 2 The Protection of Badgers Act 1992. (Consolidating the Badgers Act 1973, the Badgers Act 1991 and the Badgers [Further Protection] Act 1991).
- 3 Although badgers and cockerels are not pet animals, it is important to include them when discussing animal fighting.
- 4 Section 1, Dangerous Dog Act 1991.
- 5 The RSPCA's 24-hour cruelty and advice line number is: 0300 1234 999.
- 6 The terms 'hoody' and 'hoodies' are common phrases used to describe young people that wear hooded jackets or jumpers, and is used by members of the public when reporting possible incidents of animal cruelty involving young people.
- 7 Metropolitan Police figures refer specifically to the year this number of dogs left the police system.
- 8 The project brings together three well-known animal charities (Battersea Dogs Home, The Blue Cross and the RSPCA) with the Greater London Authority, the Metropolitan Police and Wandsworth Council.
- 9 The Animal Welfare Act 2006 came into force in April 2007 and therefore just one conviction occurred under the Act. In subsequent years, it is expected that this figure will rise.



## **WELFARE INDICATOR:** The number of animal welfare complaints investigated by RSPCA inspectors

### RSPCA concern

In 2007, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 came into force. The new legislation updates the 95-year-old Protection of Animals Act 1911 and consolidates more than 20 pieces of animal welfare legislation. One of the most important aspects of the new laws is the introduction of the welfare offence<sup>1</sup>. This imposes a duty on any person who is responsible for an animal to take such steps that are reasonable in all circumstances to ensure the needs of that animal are met to the extent of good practice<sup>1</sup>. Under the previous legislation people were only prosecuted for cruelty to animals once there was sufficient evidence that unnecessary suffering had already occurred. This could mean that animals endured long-lasting suffering or, in extreme cases, died. With the changes in law, action can now be considered and where necessary taken, beyond just giving advice, before suffering or cruelty has occurred to the animal. For the first time, the RSPCA and other agencies are able to help prevent an animal enduring unnecessary suffering.

It is hoped that the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (AWA) and Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 together with animal owners taking a more responsible attitude towards their animals will prevent many animals from suffering unnecessarily.

### Background

The specific needs of an animal can vary both between and within species. Until March and April 2007 (prior to the new law coming into effect into Wales and England respectively), the RSPCA used a standardised measurement system to assess the welfare needs of the animals the Society was investigating. This was implemented under its welfare assessment form that was first used in 2005. RSPCA inspectors used the form every time they visited a home, farm or other establishment, to identify any animal welfare concerns. The form consisted of a checklist that expanded on a set of principles known as the Five Freedoms.

The Five Freedoms are:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst.
- Freedom from discomfort.
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease.
- Freedom to express normal behaviour.
- Freedom from fear and distress.

Once a welfare assessment of an animal was made and if problems were identified, such as a dog did not have access to clean drinking water or was thin but not malnourished (that is, was not suffering unnecessarily), the RSPCA inspector would offer advice about how to rectify the situation. This would hopefully prevent the problem from worsening and developing into a more serious cruelty case. For example, advice would be given about how to provide a dog with a nutritionally adequate diet and allow access to clean water. Under the Protection of Animals Act 1911, animal owners were under no legal obligation to follow the advice given and could choose to ignore it. The inspector would revisit the animal to see if improvements had been made and whether or not the advice had been followed – in the majority of cases improvements would have been made. However there were incidents where the situation had worsened and the animal(s) would be found to be suffering unnecessarily. In such instances, more serious legal action may have been appropriate.



**FURTHER ANNUAL DATA ARE REQUIRED.**

With the introduction of the AWA in England and Wales, RSPCA inspectors still give advice if welfare problems are identified. However, the welfare offence means they are now able to consider taking legal action before unnecessary suffering (or cruelty) has occurred. The RSPCA's welfare assessment form has been modified to reflect the new offence and set out new provisions such as the need for a suitable environment. Since April 2007, once an inspector has seen an animal that has given cause for concern, an RSPCA improvement notice is issued with a set timescale or compliance period for positive changes to take place. This notice is effectively a warning (although it has no statutory weight) to the person responsible for the animal that they need to take action to address the welfare needs of their animal. If they fail to take heed of the notice and make no attempts to improve the welfare of the animal in question, then a prosecution (welfare offence) under the AWA may follow. Ideally, if a welfare concern is raised then with advice and guidance, improvements will be made without the need for legal action.

## The indicator figures

In 2007, the RSPCA investigated about 137,000 complaints of alleged cruelty to animals, the majority of which were pet animals. Figure 9 demonstrates an increase of about 10.5 per cent in the number of complaints that were investigated from the previous year, similar to the 11 per cent growth between 2005 and 2006.

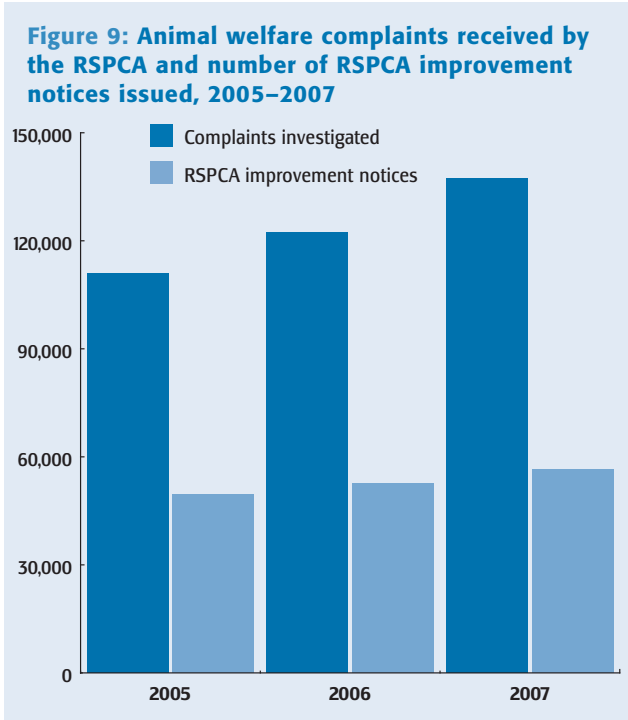
Although the number of cruelty complaints investigated has increased by around 15,000 the level of telephone calls from the public to the RSPCA cruelty and advice line has remained fairly static with about 1.2 million calls being received each year over the past two years.

With more complaints being followed up, it is not surprising that about six per cent more RSPCA welfare improvement notices were issued in 2007 than the previous year. This could indicate a number of things: that inspectors were seeing more animals living in conditions where their welfare needs were not being adequately met, but the animals were not legally suffering; that inspectors are naturally issuing more welfare improvement notices

**WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE ACT 2006 IN ENGLAND AND WALES, RSPCA INSPECTORS STILL GIVE ADVICE IF WELFARE PROBLEMS ARE IDENTIFIED. HOWEVER, THE WELFARE OFFENCE MEANS THEY ARE NOW ABLE TO CONSIDER TAKING LEGAL ACTION BEFORE UNNECESSARY SUFFERING (OR CRUELTY) HAS OCCURRED.**

as they become accustomed to using them following the introduction of the AWA; or it could suggest that RSPCA inspectors have become more efficient. The conclusion that cannot be made is that more animals are not having their welfare needs adequately met. Any rise in complaints could suggest there is more awareness about who to contact if it is believed an animal is suffering, especially considering the high levels of publicity surrounding the introduction of the AWA. From 2007, the change in law means that in cases where the improvement notice and advice is not adhered to then a prosecution can be brought. Ideally, nobody would be prosecuted under the welfare offence of the AWA.

It is hoped that over the coming years the number of animal welfare complaints will reduce as owners become more aware of their animals' needs due to improved education and awareness.



Data source: RSPCA.

IT IS HOPED THAT OVER THE COMING YEARS THE NUMBER OF ANIMAL WELFARE COMPLAINTS WILL REDUCE AS OWNERS BECOME MORE AWARE OF THEIR ANIMALS' NEEDS DUE TO IMPROVED EDUCATION AND AWARENESS.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Animal Welfare Act 2006, section 9.