



INTRODUCTION

PET ANIMAL INDICATORS 2005–2009

There are about 24 million owned pets in the UK with almost one in two households owning a pet (47 per cent)¹. The most popular animals to be kept as pets are cats and dogs with the population of between eight and 10 million each^{1,2}. With these numbers in mind it is not surprising that the welfare of pet animals can be compromised from a number of factors especially irresponsible pet ownership, which is often due to ignorance or lack of understanding of animals' welfare needs. Unfortunately, there is also the intentional causing of pain, suffering and cruelty. The majority of data and statistical information concerning pets in the UK has been obtained from the RSPCA's own internal data-collecting sources. Unfortunately, many 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.

Over the past few years much has occurred in the area of pet animal welfare with arguably the most important being the introduction of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

2006

The Animal Welfare Act 2006, is probably the most groundbreaking and significant piece of legislation to affect pet animals in the England and Wales not only over the past five years but in nearly a century. Similarly in Scotland the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 was enacted. Receiving Royal Assent on 8 November 2006, the Animal Welfare Act came into effect in April 2007. The Act brought together and updated all of the main animal legislation that had existed since the 1911 Protection of Animals Act. The Animal Welfare Act updates the offences of cruelty and fighting of animals but crucially introduces the welfare offence which places a 'duty of care' on all those responsible for animals to provide for their animals' welfare needs³, that is:

- a proper diet (including water)
- somewhere suitable to live
- any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- allowing animals to express normal behaviour
- protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

2007

- The law banning the docking of dogs' tails for cosmetic purposes came into force in England⁴ and Wales⁵. In Scotland, all tail docking of dogs (unless for medical reasons) became illegal⁶. The first RSPCA prosecution for the offence was taken under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 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 2007⁷. 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 year⁸. It also highlighted that 5,000 greyhounds are unaccounted for, presumed killed, by the age of three or four when their racing days are over.

2008

- The Companion Animal Welfare Enhancement Scheme⁹ was set up by the Welsh Assembly Government to promote companion animal welfare in Wales. The Scheme provides funding for Welsh local authorities to broadly assess compliance levels with the Animal Welfare Act.
- The Welsh Assembly Government issued three Codes of Practice – cats¹⁰, dogs¹¹ and equines¹² – under section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act. The cats and dogs codes came into force in November 2008 with the purpose of providing advice on how to meet the welfare needs of these animals. The codes only apply to Wales.
- More than 100 horses, ponies and donkeys were removed from horrific conditions at a farm in Amersham, Buckinghamshire¹³.
- The first dog fighting related prosecution was brought under the Animal Welfare Act¹⁴. A man was sentenced to 18 weeks in prison after pleading guilty to four charges.
- A BBC One documentary *Pedigree dogs exposed*, investigated some of the serious health and welfare issues experienced by many pedigree dogs as a result of the way they are bred¹⁵.
- The RSPCA commissioned an independent scientific report on pedigree dog breeding in the UK¹⁶. The report showed that the welfare and quality of life of many pedigree dogs is seriously compromised as a result of established selective breeding practices.



- The Welsh Assembly Government proposed that electric shock dog collars would be banned¹⁷.
- The Pet Obesity Task Force was established to try and reduce the levels of pet obesity in the UK's cat and dog populations.

2009

- Following on from the *Pedigree dogs exposed* programme, the Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) funded an inquiry into the health and welfare issues surrounding the breeding of pedigree dogs.
- 'The independent inquiry into dog breeding' commissioned by the Kennel Club and Dogs Trust, is written by Professor Sir Patrick Bateson, who concludes that: "...dog breeding raises a number of serious concerns about the welfare of dogs"¹⁹.
- The RSPCA's Special Operations Unit worked with the police to combat one of the UK's biggest dog fighting gangs.
- The Welsh Assembly Government issued a rabbit Code of Practice under section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 in November²⁰.
- The RSPCA sent a team of frontline staff to assist with the floods in Cumbria in November where more than 250 domestic animals and livestock (as well as people) were rescued.

2010

- Codes of Practice for the welfare of cats, dogs, horses and privately kept non-human primates came into force in England in April. The codes provide owners and keepers with information on how to meet the welfare needs of their animals as required under the Animal Welfare Act²¹.
- The RSPCA launched a new report *Improving dog ownership: The economic case for dog licensing*. Based on research by Reading University, the report detailed how an annual dog licence fee could help reduce the number of strays and help tackle irresponsible dog breeding²².

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-figures-.htm
- 2 Murray J, Browne W J, Roberts M A, Whitmarsh A and Gruffydd-Jones T J. Number and ownership profiles of cats and dogs in the UK. *Vet Record* 2010. 166: 163–168.
- 3 Animal Welfare Act 2006. S9.
- 4 www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/welfare/act/documents/tail-docking.pdf
- 5 <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/dockingofworkingdogtails/thedockingofworkingdogtails/?lang=en>
- 6 www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/02/07102500
- 7 The Horseracing Regulatory Authority. Modification of 'The orders and rules of racing' H8 whips – specifications (rule 149(ii)).
- 8 www.apgaw.org/reports-a-publications/greyhounds
- 9 <http://cymru.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/cawes/?lang=en>
- 10 <http://cymru.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/codesofpractice/081205catcodesummary/?lang=en>
- 11 <http://cymru.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/codesofpractice/081205summarycodeofpractdogs/?lang=en>
- 12 <http://cymru.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/codesofpractice/081205equinecode/?lang=en>
- 13 www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/horses/amershamappeal
- 14 www.birminghammail.net/news/black-country/2008/04/16/walsall-man-clayton-beard-jailed-for-18-weeks-for-new-dog-fighting-offences-97319-20770225/
- 15 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7569064.stm>
- 16 www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/issuesindepth/pedigreedogs/position
- 17 <http://wales.gov.uk/newsroom/environmentandcountryside/2008/3990121/?lang=en>
- 18 www.apgaw.org/reports-a-publications/pedigree-dog-report
- 19 <http://dogbreedinginquiry.com/>
- 20 <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/091109rabbitsumen.pdf>
- 21 www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/pets/cruelty/
- 22 www.rspca.org.uk/ImageLocator/LocateAsset?asset=document&assetId=1232721594783&mode=prd

Welfare indicator: The number of unwanted healthy animals taken into the care of the RSPCA

RSPCA concern

There are around 24 million owned pets in the UK with nearly half of all households owning a pet¹, the majority of which are cats and dogs. Research shows that in the UK the dog and cat population stands at between eight and 10 million^{1 2} respectively, with more than two million smaller animals such as rabbits or guinea pigs being kept as pets. Other more 'exotic' animals such as turtles, snakes, lizards and frogs are also widely available and increasingly kept as pet animals. With so many animals, so easily available it is perhaps not surprising that there are many unwanted animals that need new homes. 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 and or neglect or are simply abandoned or even euthanased at the owner's request. 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

Impulse buying, availability of animals, lack of research carried out before an animal is acquired, irresponsible and indiscriminate breeding and changes to owners circumstances can all result in pet animals being unwanted and without a home.

Pets are easy to obtain from a wide variety of sources, including pet shops, specialist breeders, online and newspaper advertisements or via friends, family and neighbours. Animals can be bought on impulse and are often obtained when they are small and cute, with little consideration given to what owning an animal actually means. Such impulse buying can result in a rabbit spending all of its life alone in a small hutch, dogs becoming destructive as they are not given any exercise and hamsters ignored and forgotten when a child becomes bored of them.

Lack of forethought about the implications of owning a pet can also result in animals being unwanted and in need of a new home. Appropriate behavioural training maybe neglected, and is one of the many reasons that a significant number of unwanted animals pass through rehoming and rescue centres. Reasons why a pet may need to be found a new home include changes in family, health or financial circumstances. Other reasons include owners just not wanting the animal anymore, they have become bored of it, or are unable to cope.

In the UK, there are hundreds of rehoming and rescue centres for pet animals run by animal charities and welfare organisations covering a wide range of species. The most well known organisations include the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA) in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA). Many more rehoming centres are run by smaller organisations that may focus on a particular breed such as Border Collie Rescue or a certain species such as Rabbit Rescue. Each organisation, and other establishments, often receive little funding apart from donations from members of the public and have a finite amount of space so are unable to take in all the animals that may need a new home. All aim to find new owners for every animal that enters its care, however this isn't always possible and sometimes euthanasia is an unfortunate consequence of too many unwanted animals and not enough homes. Animals that do not end up in the care of the RSPCA or other animal welfare organisations, are advertised via websites or in



THERE HAS BEEN LITTLE CHANGE OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS.

newspapers, given away to family and friends or some may even be euthanased by vets at the request of the owner. In some instances animals are simply abandoned or allowed to stray, as they are no longer wanted.

The indicator figures

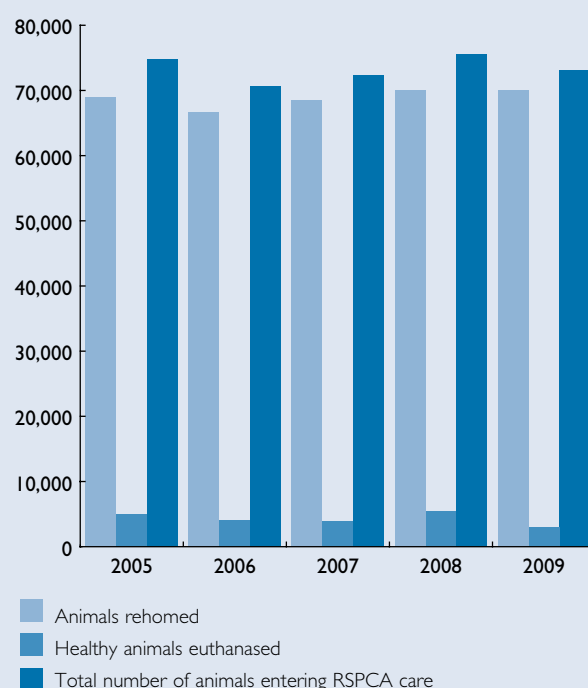
Currently, there is no nationally-established format to identify the total number of unwanted pets that are dealt with each year in the UK. To gain a true, representative insight into the number of unwanted healthy animals in the UK, data from all animal establishments that rehome animals and information from vets about healthy animals euthanased at the request of owners is required. Further information would also need to be obtained from classified adverts, online adverts and other forums where unwanted animals are advertised.

Ideally, this indicator would look at the number of unwanted healthy animals in the whole of the UK. The figure would incorporate the number of animals euthanased by vets at the owners' request, the number of animals the RSPCA care for and the number of animals that enter non-RSPCA establishments plus those animals that are advertised in other areas by their current owners. Unfortunately, as this information is not easily available, the data used will focus on statistics from the RSPCA, local authorities and other large animal welfare organisations.

In an attempt to establish the true extent of the problem, a search of other organisations websites and annual reviews/reports helped to identify the number of animals rehomed each year. Seven animal welfare organisations³ were looked at in detail in addition to RSPCA figures and local authority information concerning the number of animals that were rehomed in 2009. Collectively more than 200,000 animals were rehomed by animal welfare organisations and local authorities⁴. It is expected that thousands more animals are unwanted and are dealt with by other organisations, vets and individuals. The numbers could be just the tip of the iceberg, because whilst these animals are recorded, and therefore appear as a statistic, it is likely that many more are not. These figures also do not include euthanased healthy animals. 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 rather than just a snapshot of it.

The RSPCA calculates the number of unwanted animals by combining the number of animals rehomed and the number of healthy animals euthanased. This figure includes cats, dogs, equines, birds, small mammals and non-domestic or exotic animals such as snakes, lizards and terrapins. Figure 1 shows that over the past five years the number of healthy animals entering the care of the RSPCA has remained relatively constant at between 70,000 and 75,000. This indicates that the Society's animal rehoming centres are working to full capacity the majority of the time and suggests that there is a continuing problem with unwanted animals.

Figure 1: Number of unwanted animals taken into the care of the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

It is disappointing that in 2009, and in previous years, thousands of unwanted animals were placed into the care of the RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations. The majority of animal organisations in the UK promote neutering, microchipping and responsible pet ownership, in an attempt to help avoid the problem of unwanted pets and to encourage pet owners to think about the long-term issues that arise from owning a pet. However, with at least 200,000 animals in the UK needing new homes, 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. Bearing in mind that animal rehoming/rescue centres are usually full with animals in need of new homes and organisations work tirelessly to promote the responsible pet ownership message, it can be concluded that there is a continuing problem with unwanted pets in the UK.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-figures.htm
- ² Murray J, Browne W J, Roberts M A, Whitmarsh A, and Gruffydd-Jones T J. Number and ownership profiles of cats and dogs in the UK. *Vet Record* 2010. 166: 163–168.
- ³ Information gathered from the websites of the following animal welfare organisations in the UK: Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Mayhew Animal Home, Dogs Trust, Blue Cross, Cats Protection and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
- ⁴ Between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009, local authorities in the UK rehomed 13,078 dogs to the public and gave 33,866 to rehoming establishments. For more details about local authorities and strays see page 20.

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 it¹, there is no legal requirement for a dog to be microchipped and there is no equivalent legislation for cats or other pets. Collars and tags are an important but unreliable method of identification – collars can break and identification tags can fall off or be removed from the dog. It is much harder to reunite a dog with its owner by just relying on a collar and a tag. When fitted with a microchip, dogs, especially, are more likely to be reunited with their owner if they become lost or stray.

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 an 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, often carried by RSPCA inspectors, vets, animal centres and local authority dog wardens, is used to 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.

Between April 2008 and March 2009, 45 per cent of all dogs identified as strays in the UK by local authorities were returned to their owners (see page 20). If all of the dogs that had strayed had been microchipped, it is likely that many more would have been returned to their owners, or at least their owners could have been traced.

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 schemes², 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, although this is very much reliant on pet owners keeping their details up to date on the relevant databases. In 2009, the Petlog³ reunification service received more than 108,000 lost and found telephone calls from dog wardens, vets, and police, who were all trying to assist with reuniting pets with their owners.

In Sweden 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 age⁴, with microchipping being the preferred method



THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CATS AND DOGS BEING MICROCHIPPED.

of identification. This has resulted in more than 90 per cent of dogs, compared to 45 per cent in the UK, 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 Month⁵ throughout the UK in an endeavour to 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 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.

A study commissioned by the RSPCA in January 2010⁶, reported that a comprehensive, affordable and well-enforced dog licensing scheme could be run to pay for costs arising from dogs, currently funded by central and local government. Part of the proposed licensing scheme would include the compulsory microchipping of dogs.

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 by looking at numbers of cats and dogs that are microchipped each year. This 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.

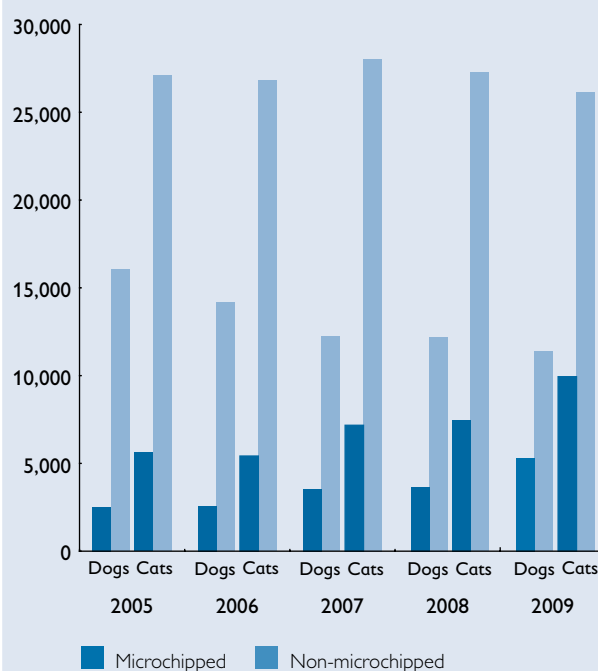
Although the majority of animal welfare organisations and rehoming centres microchip animals before they leave their care and promote microchipping via publications and websites, it is still difficult to establish the extent of the microchipping work that each organisation is carrying out as there is 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 2 shows that the majority of cats and dogs that came into the care of the RSPCA between 2005 and 2009 did not

have a microchip. In 2009, however, the percentage of cats and dogs that did have a microchip rose to 27 and 32 per cent respectively. This is a significant growth over a five-year period, with the biggest change occurring in 2009. In 2005, just 14 per cent of dogs that entered the RSPCA were microchipped. Five years later, the figure rose to nearly one-third of all dogs (32 per cent) having a microchip. Similarly for cats there was quite a change in the number of animals already microchipped when figures were compared for 2005 and 2009. In 2005, just 17 per cent of cats had a microchip, five years later this rose to 27 per cent. More significantly for cats was the numbers rehomed. Over 3,000 more cats were rehomed in 2009 than in 2005, yet 4,000 more cats were microchipped.

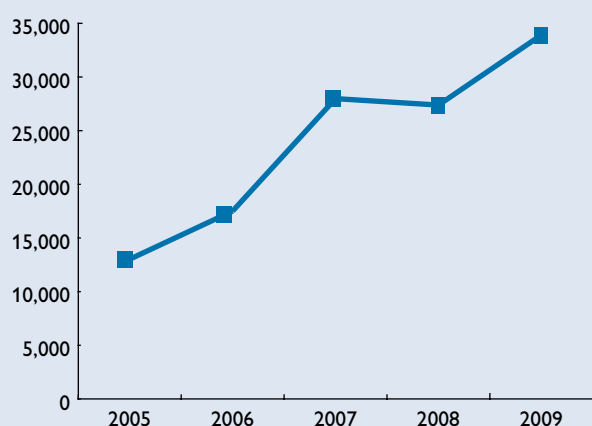
For both dogs and cats, the figures show a positive trend with the increase of microchipping for both species. The data suggests that the microchipping message is slowly being taken on board by some animal owners as part of being a responsible owner. Another explanation is the growing number of organisations such

Figure 2: Number of microchipped and non-microchipped cats and dogs entering the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 3: Dog and cat welfare microchipping performed by the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

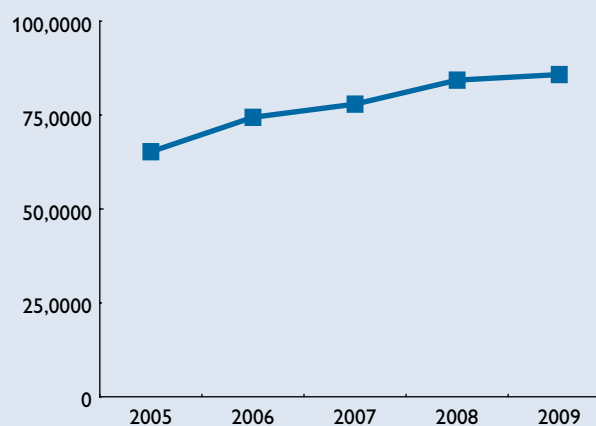
as the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection and local authorities who offer free or subsidised microchipping.

As most cats and dogs are still not microchipped when they come into the care of the RSPCA for rehoming, it can 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, or perhaps thought microchipping was not important.

In attempt to try and put this into context, Figure 3 demonstrates the amount of welfare microchipping that is also carried out by the RSPCA on the request of cat and dog owners and by RSPCA microchipping initiatives. Since 2005 the number of owned animals being microchipped by the RSPCA has dramatically increased from 13,025 to 33,913 in 2009. Part of this is due to the Society's Community Animal Action Week initiative, now in its fifth year, which aims to help owners and pets by providing free animal advice, neutering vouchers and discounted microchipping.

In a further attempt to try and find out how pet owners in the UK are responding to microchipping messages, the four UK microchipping database companies are contacted each year to find out how many cats and dogs are being registered, and therefore microchipped each year. The database companies contacted were Identichip⁷, Petlog⁸, Petrac⁹ and Virbac¹⁰. As with previous years, three out of the four companies provided figures for cats and dogs over the last five years. Figure 4 shows the total number of cats and dogs that have been microchipped and registered annually by

Figure 4: Total number of cats and dogs registered each year on the Virbac, Identichip and Petlog databases, 2005–2009



Data source: Virbac, Identichip and Petlog.

the three companies between 2005 and 2009. Over this period the total number of cats and dogs registered on the databases has increased by nearly one-third (31 per cent). The increase between 2008 and 2009 is 14,849, with more cats registered on the three databases than ever before. The information from the three databases still shows the large difference between cats and dogs being microchipped. More than half a million dogs were registered in 2009 compared to about 330,000 cats.

Research shows that there are between eight million and 10 million cats and dogs^{11,12} in the UK, yet far more dogs are microchipped than cats. This suggests that more targeted public awareness is needed to encourage owners to microchip their cats¹³. It also indicates that the status of cats within the UK is seen as lower than dogs, which could 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.

As part of the RSPCA's stray dog survey, local authority practitioners, that is environmental health officers, dog wardens, and others who are responsible for stray dogs, were asked: "In your opinion, what is the one thing that would make the most positive difference to tackling the stray dog issue?". The majority of the responses mentioned microchipping as a way of dealing with straying dogs. This goes hand in hand with the RSPCA's call for a national dog licensing scheme that would be an essential part of a successful stray control strategy.

There are caveats that must be addressed for microchipping to be effective. Firstly, all microchipped animals must be registered with the owners details on one of the available databases, change of ownership or address need to be updated when necessary and local authorities, welfare organisations, vets and other who come into contact with lost, abandoned or straying animals need to have scanners and for them to be routinely used.

The past five years show a positive trend with more animals being microchipped each year. However, there is still more to do with promoting the responsible pet ownership message and encouraging owners to see microchipping as part of this.

THE DATA SUGGESTS THAT THE MICROCHIPPING MESSAGE IS SLOWLY BEING TAKEN ON BOARD BY SOME ANIMAL OWNERS AS PART OF BEING A RESPONSIBLE OWNER.

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
- 3 www.petlog.org.uk
- 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.petlog.org.uk/petlog-for-pet-owners/national-microchipping-month
- 6 Upton et al. 2010. Dog licensing and registration in the UK. Reading University. A report to the RSPCA.
- 7 www.identichip.co.uk
- 8 www.thekennelclub.org.uk/meet/petlog.html
- 9 www.avidplc.com/petrac.asp
- 10 www.virbac-backhome.co.uk/pages/what.htm
- 11 Murray J, Browne W J, Roberts M A, Whitmarsh A and Gruffydd-Jones T J. Number and ownership profiles of cats and dogs in the UK. *Vet Record* 2010. 166: 163–168.
- 12 www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-figures.htm
- 13 In 2005 and 2009, 413,713 and 525,600 dogs respectively were registered on the three UK databases. Compared to 238,780 and 332,371 cats respectively registered during this period.

Welfare indicator: The number of healthy dogs being euthanased due to irresponsible pet ownership

RSPCA concern

There are many reasons why animals are put to sleep or euthanased, including injury, illness, and behaviour. Healthy animals are also reluctantly euthanased by vets, local authorities and animal welfare organisations due to the animals being unwanted and/or an inability to find them new homes.

With dogs, some are too aggressive or are sick or injured and therefore euthanased for medical or behavioural reasons. Unfortunately, there are also a large number of healthy, fit dogs that require new owners but as there are not enough people offering these dogs new homes, they may be euthanased¹.

There are a number of factors that can result in the preventable humane destruction of healthy dogs and other pet animals, including irresponsible pet ownership, overbreeding and social economic circumstances.

The RSPCA would like to see a future where no healthy dog (or any pet animal) in the UK is euthanased unnecessarily. This can only be achieved through animal owners, keepers and breeders adopting more responsible attitudes towards pet animals.

Background

Each year, more than 200,000 animals are rehomed by animal welfare organisations in the UK. Many thousands of these will be dogs that charities such as the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home endeavour to find new homes for. Local authorities, who are legally responsible for receiving stray dogs, also work to rehome and reunite dogs with their owners. Recent figures show that more than 13,000 stray dogs were subsequently rehomed by local authorities with a further 34,000 given to rehoming establishments².

In an ideal world all healthy unwanted and/or straying animals would be found new owners, however in some instances this is not possible. With the majority of dogs (and other animals), euthanasia occurs if the animal is sick, injured and, particularly with dogs, if they are a danger to the public. Unfortunately, healthy and rehomeable animals are also euthanased when they cannot be found a new home, or at the owner's insistence because the animal is no longer wanted.

In some 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, other animal welfare organisations, individual owners and vets use different methods to aid rehoming of unwanted animals including putting adverts in the local press, on websites and transferring long-stay animals to different parts of the country. The RSPCA transfers long-stay animals to animal centres around England and Wales giving different members of the public an opportunity to view them, with the aim of finding them a new owner.

The RSPCA is opposed to the long-term confinement of animals due to the distress and mental suffering that can be caused. It accepts, "with great reluctance, that euthanasia may be necessary because there are no appropriate homes available and the animal would therefore endure long-term suffering through deprivation of basic needs"³. While the RSPCA and other organisations make every effort to find dogs and other animals a new home, there is sometimes no other option than to euthanase, once all possible methods of rehoming have been exhausted.

The RSPCA has seen time and time again that many unwanted dogs are purchased as puppies and are signed over to the Society when they are between two and four years old. This can happen for a number of reasons including owners becoming bored of the dogs once they are adults, owners being unable to cope with behavioural problems caused by inadequate training, and failing to make long-term plans for



THERE HAS BEEN A SLIGHT OVERALL CHANGE OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS.

the care of the dogs. Other potential reasons for euthanasia are the indiscriminate breeding of dogs to make a profit and certain trends that cause a certain type of dog to be overbred. Recently, there has been an upsurge in the breeding and ownership of so-called status dogs, that is dogs of any breed or type that are kept and used to intimidate people and are often used as 'weapons'. Such breeds include mastiffs, Staffordshire bull terriers (Staffies) and Rotwelliers and tend to be large, powerful dogs. The cost of such breeds has reduced as the market has been flooded with puppies and this has led to many being abandoned or neglected as they have less value to their owners. In 2009, 615 Staffies and Staffy-crosses were taken in by 13 RSPCA regional animal homes – one rehoming centre reported that "75 per cent of dogs...are bull breeds"⁴.

Responsible pet ownership is key to reducing the euthanasia of healthy, rehomeable dogs. Simple, practical actions can be implemented by owners and keepers of dogs, and other pet animals. Neutering of dogs will prevent unwanted pregnancies and help control the dog population; microchipping would assist local authorities with reducing the number of stray dogs by helping to locate owners. People who sell dogs, that is breeders, pet shops, and rescue centres, could also improve the animals' welfare by providing information and guidance to potential and/or new owners.

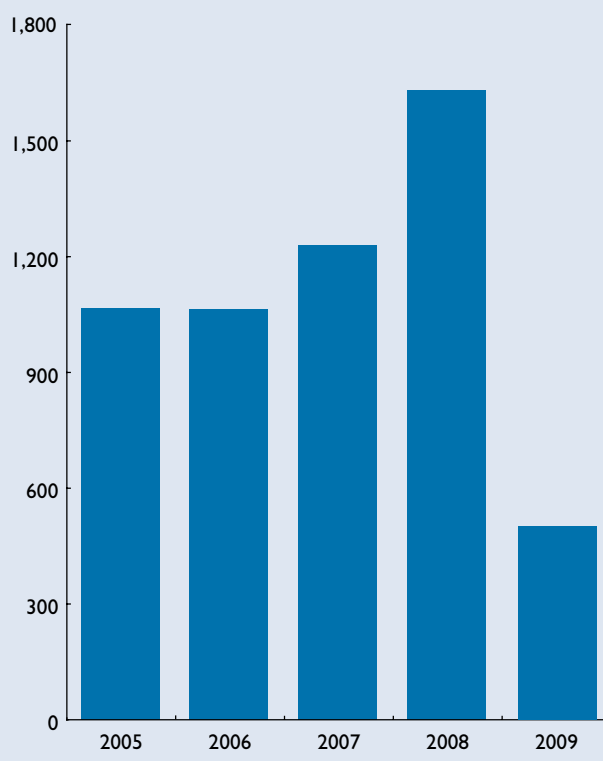
Generally, a responsible pet ownership attitude needs to be adopted by every potential and current pet owner to avoid dogs (and other animals) being needlessly euthanased. Ultimately, before anyone decides to adopt or purchase a dog (or any pet animal), the question: "Are you able to care for a dog, or make sure he/she is cared for, every single day of his/her life?", needs to be asked and answered positively. This refers to providing exercise, companionship, training and understanding the financial commitment required and the implications of the dog's lifespan, amongst other things.

By considering this question and implementing other activities, the number of unwanted animals would potentially be reduced and therefore the need to euthanase healthy dogs would also be reduced.

The indicator figures

This indicator focuses on the number of healthy dogs the RSPCA and local authorities in the UK have to euthanase each year. The total number of healthy, rehomeable 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. Vets (at the owner's

Figure 5: Number of healthy dogs euthanased by the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

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 how many dogs taken into their care are euthanased.

In 2008, 2009 and 2010, the RSPCA wrote to each local authority in the UK in an attempt to determine the stray dog problem and find out how many healthy dogs have been euthanased. In an attempt not to duplicate figures collected by the Dogs Trust, which commissions an annual UK survey⁵ about the number of stray animals local authorities euthanase each year, the RSPCA utilises the Freedom of Information Act 2000, to obtain this information from local authorities.

A number of questions were asked about dogs that were euthanased for both medical and non-medical reasons. Not all local authorities distinguish between medical and non-medical and some have contracts with local animal shelters that could

subsequently euthanase but these figures do not show in the local authority data. Between April 2008 and March 2009, the RSPCA local authority survey revealed that of the 113,000 stray dogs collected by local authorities 7,285 dogs (around six per cent) were euthanased in the UK². Of these, 1,322 were euthanased on medical grounds and 1,846 (one-quarter) were euthanased after a seven-day period on non-medical grounds. There was no explanation for the remaining 4,117 majority of dogs. Although the number of strays euthanased has remained fairly constant over a three-year period, it is a concern that so many healthy dogs are still being euthanased. And with nearly 60 per cent of stray dogs being euthanased without explanation in 2008/2009, it would seem reasonable to suggest that at least some, if not the majority, of these were healthy animals

Figure 5 shows the number of healthy dogs the RSPCA has had to euthanase over the past five years between 2005 and 2009. In 2005, 1,066 healthy dogs were euthanased by the RSPCA compared to 538 in 2009, a decrease of 50 per cent. The numbers in 2009 are dramatically down from the previous year by around 66 per cent from 1,595 to 538. However over the five-year period it is hard to identify any definitive trend by looking at these figures as the number of dogs euthanased year-on-year has varied.

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 – 16,659 dogs were rehomed by the RSPCA and its branch centres combined in England and Wales during 2009. Three per cent of the dogs that have rehoming potential were euthanased by the RSPCA. This has dropped considerably compared to the previous year when nine per cent of healthy dogs were euthanased.

To gain a more accurate picture of what is happening with regard to dog euthanasia in the UK, local authority information is combined with RSPCA figures in an attempt to gauge how big the problem is. Therefore in 2009, at least 2,384 healthy dogs were euthanased. It is highly likely that some of the 4,117 unclassified euthanased dogs that local authorities dealt with were also healthy. Therefore a broad estimate would be around six thousand dogs. In 2008, combining RSPCA and local authority data for healthy dogs, 3,687 were euthanased. Once again this figure does not include a large number of dogs outside of this figure that were euthanased without explanation. An estimate for 2008, using this unclassified figure would be around 6,500. For 2008, 2009 and previous years, it is expected that

the actual figure is far higher, however without data from vets and other animal organisations, it is difficult to assess how big the problem is. Without clear, transparent figures to indicate how big the issue of unwanted, healthy dogs is and how many of these are euthanased, it is difficult to find a real solution that will ensure that this doesn't happen. To try and measure this accurately, further publication and collation of figures from other organisations is required to gauge the extent of the problem in the UK.

Although the number of healthy dogs being euthanased is falling, the figure is still unacceptable. Ideally no rehomingable dog or indeed any animal would be euthanased.

Even with more responsible pet ownership campaigns and messages that promote the benefits of neutering and microchipping, and explain what owning a dog for life entails, animals will continue to be euthanased unless pet owners, breeders and keepers accept and consider the full responsibility of the animals in their care.

It is hoped that over the next five years, there will be a home available for every healthy animal in the UK and the euthanasia of healthy dogs and other animals will be a thing of the past.

WITHOUT CLEAR, TRANSPARENT FIGURES
TO INDICATE HOW BIG THE ISSUE OF UNWANTED,
HEALTHY DOGS IS AND HOW MANY OF THESE
ARE EUTHANASED, IT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND A REAL
SOLUTION THAT WILL ENSURE THAT THIS
DOES NOT HAPPEN.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The euthanasia of an animal, for whatever reason, is always carried out by trained operators such as vets who use approved, humane methods.
- 2 See page 20.
- 3 RSPCA policies on animal welfare: www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/aboutus/whoweare/mission/policies
- 4 www.gettoknowadog.co.uk
- 5 www.dogtrust.org.uk/az/politics/straydogssurvey2009summaryreport.pdf

Welfare indicator: The provision of quality written husbandry information on rabbits in a sample of retail outlets

RSPCA concern

Rabbits are common pets in many western European countries¹ with an estimated one million rabbits kept as pets in the UK, making them the third most popular mammalian pet after dogs and cats².

The welfare needs of pet rabbits are often poorly understood by potential and existing owners and the RSPCA is concerned that this lack of knowledge, together with many inappropriate traditional housing and husbandry practices, has a detrimental impact on pet rabbit welfare. In addition, the thousands of rabbits abandoned or given up to the RSPCA³, and other welfare organisations every year, indicates that the full responsibility of caring for rabbits is often not considered when the rabbit is acquired.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales places a legal duty of care upon owners to meet the welfare needs of their animals⁴. Before acquiring a rabbit it is essential that the person who will be responsible for its care understands the responsibility and commitment that is involved and considers carefully whether they will be able to provide for the rabbit's welfare needs.

The RSPCA believes that anyone selling or rehoming a rabbit has a responsibility to provide good-quality husbandry advice to help inform potential rabbit owners.

Background

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 clearly recognises the responsibility of any pet owner to take reasonable steps to meet the welfare needs of the animals in their care⁴. The Animal Welfare Bill's Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) also recognised the responsibility of vendors to help educate prospective buyers in the husbandry and care of animals on sale⁵. The RIA therefore advocated that all commercial vendors of pet animals should issue comprehensive care information to purchasers about the animal that they were buying⁶; a requirement that may be incorporated into new pet vending regulations. Expert reviewed information leaflets were suggested as an appropriate format for delivering this information⁷.

It is estimated that one million rabbits are kept as pets in the UK² but very few studies have investigated the source from which rabbits are acquired. In a UK study conducted in 2006, it was found that 22 per cent of the 102 rabbits surveyed were acquired from a pet shop⁸. Similarly, a survey conducted by the Pet Food Manufacturers Association (PFMA) found that 20 per cent of the UK's pets were acquired from a pet shop⁹. A more recent unpublished survey of rescue centres in the UK¹⁰ suggests that the number might be greater, with 52.1 per cent of the rabbits entering rescue centres between January 2009 and July 2010 originally obtained from pet shops, pet superstores or garden centres, where origin was known. Although the actual number of rabbits procured from pet shops is unknown, pet shops can play an important role in helping to educate the pet-buying public about the needs of rabbits and what equipment and long-term care is required once the rabbit(s) is taken home; thereby potentially improving rabbit welfare. In recognition of this, the RSPCA has carried out research into the provision of quality written care information on rabbits in pet shops.



INSUFFICIENT DATA ARE AVAILABLE.

The indicator figures

A sample of pet shops in England and Wales was surveyed between March and June 2010, to investigate the number of rabbits on sale and the availability of free written information on rabbits in each outlet. The number of rabbits on sale and details of any written information about rabbits on display near enclosures ('signs') were recorded, and a copy of any free rabbit care sheets, available to be taken away for reference by those considering buying or intending to buy a pet rabbit, were collected. Pet shops in England and Wales were identified using the Yellow Pages telephone directory. It is intended for this survey to be carried out on an annual basis.

Information scoring

The type of information recorded and scored was based on the five main welfare needs of animals as outlined in the Animal Welfare Act 2006: an animal's need for a suitable environment; a suitable diet; to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns; to be housed with, or apart from, other animals; and to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

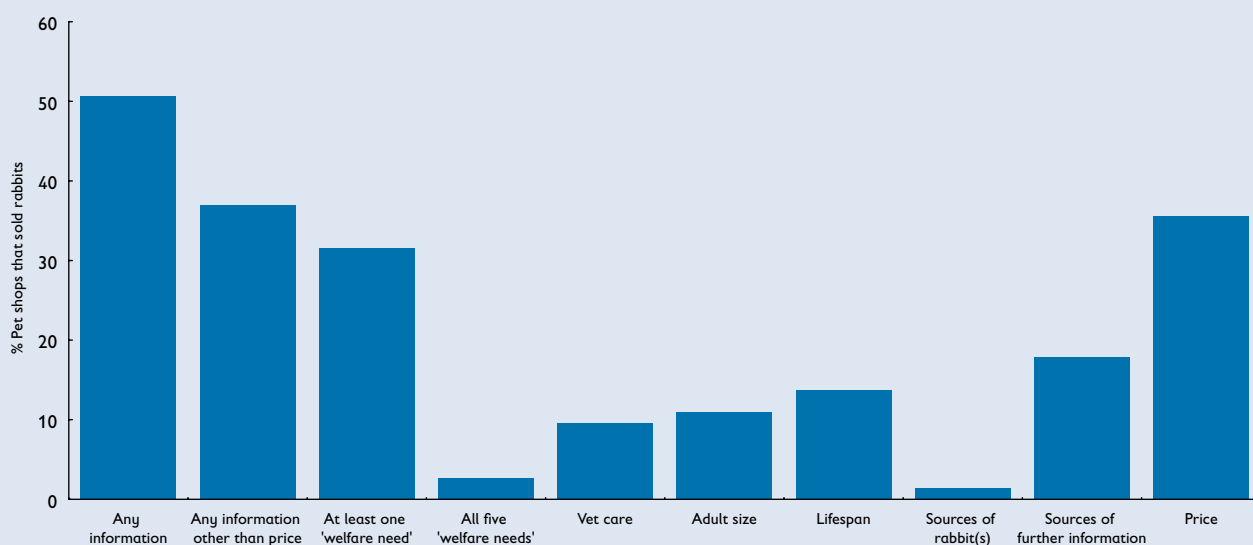
The information on signs was scored according to whether information about the five welfare needs was available. For example, surveyors recorded mention of the required enclosure size, provision of a suitable diet and water, provision of appropriate substrates to allow natural behaviour, appropriate

social groupings and the need to seek veterinary care. The free care sheets were analysed in more detail, by comparing the information provided with the RSPCA's information on rabbits' welfare needs¹¹, which was written and reviewed by a panel of experts in rabbit veterinary, behaviour and welfare science¹². Other issues considered desirable for pet shops to cover included: adult size, lifespan, source, price and sources of further information (e.g. websites, free care sheets, advice from members of staff). Surveyors were also asked to note whether staff approached them and volunteered any care information without prompting.

Rabbits on sale

Out of 175 pet shops investigated, 73 sold rabbits. A total of 301 rabbits were on sale in these pet shops. The average number of rabbits on sale was four, but ranged from one to 13 per shop. Breed of rabbit was recorded for 63 of the 301 rabbits surveyed, with giant, lop and dwarf breeds being the most commonly reported breeds respectively. Although not every pet shop across England and Wales was visited in this study, data gathered from the surveyed sample can be used to get an estimate of the total number of rabbits on sale. Assuming a similar proportion of non-surveyed pet shops sold rabbits, and in similar proportions, it is estimated that there are approximately 4,000 rabbits on sale in pet shops in England and Wales.

Figure 6: Availability of written rabbit-related information on signs displayed in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

● Care information provided to potential buyers – on signs

Results relating to the availability of rabbit information on signs in pet shops are presented in Figure 6. Of the pet shops that sold rabbits at the time of the survey, 50.7 per cent displayed some written information about rabbits on signs. However, only 37 per cent of pet shops displayed information in addition to cost.

It is important for any potential rabbit owner to know how big their animal is likely to grow so that they can purchase suitable housing, but only 11 per cent of shops displayed information about the likely adult size. Information about the lifespan of rabbits, and therefore the length of commitment required by buyers, was displayed on signs in only 13.7 per cent of shops selling rabbits. Only one pet shop displayed information regarding the source of the rabbits it sold and less than 18 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits displayed signs that mentioned sources of further information.

Information relating to one or more of the welfare needs of rabbits (environment, diet, behaviour, company, health) was found on signs in 31.5 per cent of pet shops that sold rabbits and on 62.2 per cent of all rabbit signs. However only two shops with rabbits for sale displayed information on all five of their welfare needs, equating to just 5.4 per cent of all rabbit signs.

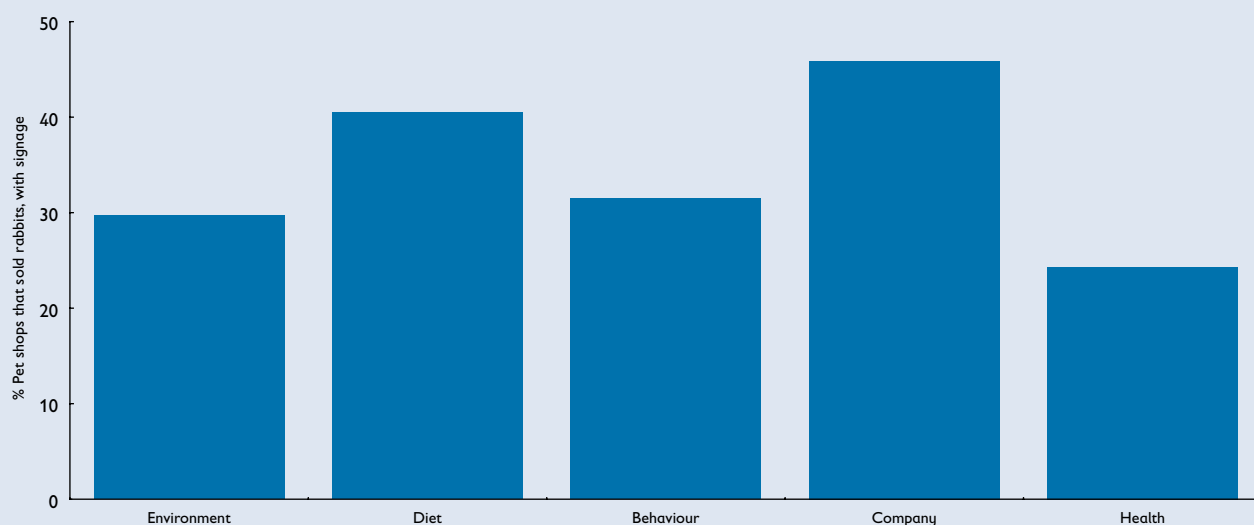
As presented in Figure 7 when rabbit-related signs were available, information relating to some aspect of rabbits' social needs, i.e. company (45.9 per cent) was provided most often, followed by the need for a suitable diet (40.5 per cent), the need to exhibit natural behaviour patterns (35.1 per cent) and the provision of a suitable environment (29.7 per cent). Health-related information was provided least often, being displayed in only 24.3 per cent of pet shops with signage. Fewer than 10 per cent of pet shops with rabbits for sale displayed information on signs regarding the need for veterinary care.

● Care information provided to potential buyers – free written information to take away

Results relating to the availability of free rabbit-related care sheets are presented in Figure 8. There were free rabbit-related care sheets available to take away in 33 per cent of pet shops that sold rabbits. In several shops (8.2 per cent) information was provided either verbally or via care sheets when a rabbit was purchased, rather than being available to help inform prospective owners and allow them to make an informed buying decision before the point of sale.

Rabbit-related care sheets were also found in six pet shops that did not have rabbits for sale at the time of the survey. The leaflets from these six shops were excluded from the

Figure 7: Availability of information on rabbits' welfare needs on rabbit-related signs



Data source: RSPCA.

results as the shops did not have rabbits for sale at the time of the survey, although two of the shops confirmed that they normally sold rabbits and both held a care sheet on rabbits. One shop usually held a rabbit care sheet, but this was out of stock at the time of the survey. Therefore, around one-third of the shops that sold rabbits usually held free rabbit-related care sheets.

Many of the care sheets collected were taken from a single pet shop chain, Pets at Home. Out of 19 surveyed Pets at Home stores that had rabbits for sale, 11 had rabbit-related care sheets, meaning that when Pets at Home stores are discounted, only 17.8 per cent of surveyed pet shops held rabbit care sheets.

None of the pet shops that sold rabbits gave details about the price of the rabbits on sale in the care sheets they provided. The responsibility of owning a rabbit was mentioned in care sheets in 26 per cent of shops selling rabbits. The fact that rabbits are prey animals was mentioned in care sheets in only three of the pet shops that sold them; this fact is important in helping owners understand rabbit behaviour and their rabbit's needs. A high proportion of pet shops provided care sheets that included valuable information about the expected lifespan and signs of good health for rabbits. Adult size was mentioned in care sheets in 12.3 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits. The source of the rabbits available for

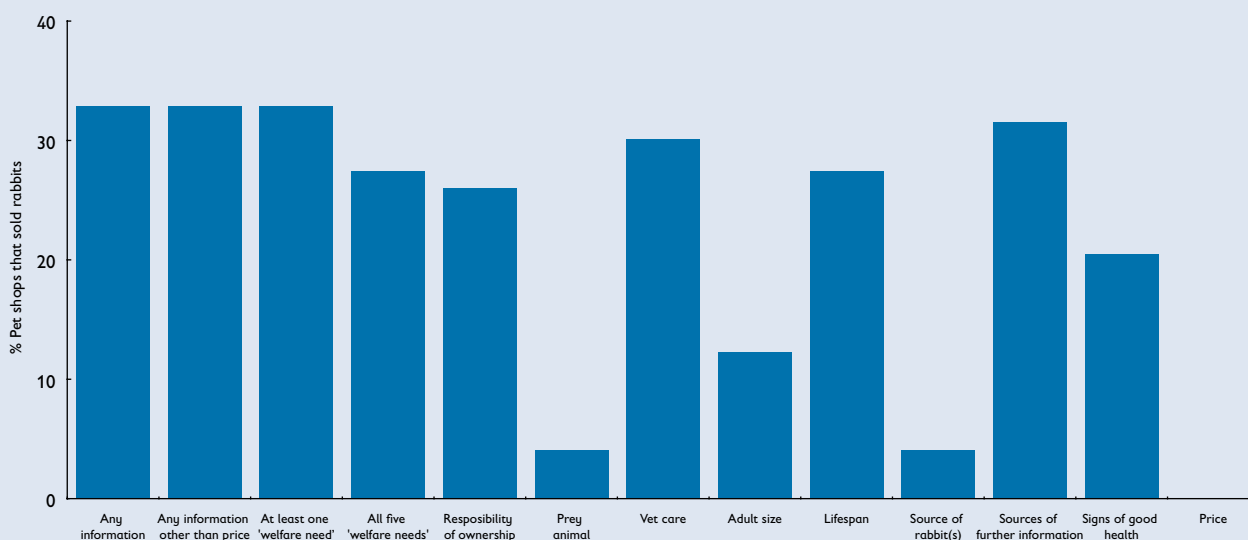
sale was only mentioned in care sheets found in three shops. Sources of further information were given in care sheets in 31.5 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits.

Of the pet shops that sold rabbits, 33 per cent held care sheets containing information on at least one of the five welfare needs and all the rabbit care sheets collected from shops that sold rabbits held some information on at least one need. 27.4 per cent of shops that sold rabbits had care sheets that contained all five welfare needs, whilst 83.3 per cent of the rabbit leaflets collected from shops selling rabbits contained information on all five welfare needs.

When rabbit care sheets were provided (see Figure 9), all of them contained information about some aspect of rabbits' dietary needs, most contained information about environmental and companionship needs (95.8 per cent), whilst behavioural and health needs were covered slightly less often (87.5 per cent). However 91.7 per cent of rabbit care sheets mentioned the need for veterinary care. There is therefore much more information on rabbits' welfare needs provided in care sheets, when they are available, than on signage. However when compared with the RSPCA's expert-derived information on rabbits' welfare needs, it was clear that the information provided in care sheets was not necessarily comprehensive or accurate.

Overall, slightly more information was provided via signs than care sheets, with 37 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits

Figure 8: Availability of written rabbit-related information in free care sheets in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

displaying rabbit-related information on signs (excluding those displaying price only) and 33 per cent providing free rabbit care sheets.

Free rabbit information was available in some form (either on signs in store or in free care sheets) in 68.5 per cent of surveyed shops that sold rabbits. When the price of the rabbits on sale is excluded, just over half of the shops that sold rabbits (56.2 per cent) had free rabbit information available in some form (see Figure 10).

Welfare-related information, covering at least one of the five welfare needs was provided in some form in 50.7 per cent of pet shops that had rabbits for sale at the time of the survey. However, only 27.4 per cent of shops that had rabbits for sale had written information available that covered all five welfare needs.

Very few pet shops provided details of the source of the rabbits for sale. Sources of further information were provided via signs and/or free care sheets in just over 40 per cent of shops that sold rabbits.

Overall information on rabbits' dietary needs was provided most often via signs and/or care sheets, being present in 45.2 per cent of shops that sold rabbits (see Figure 11). Information in some form on rabbits' health needs was provided least frequently in only 33 per cent of shops selling rabbits. Only 34.2 per cent of shops with rabbits for sale mentioned the need for veterinary care either on signs and/or care sheets.

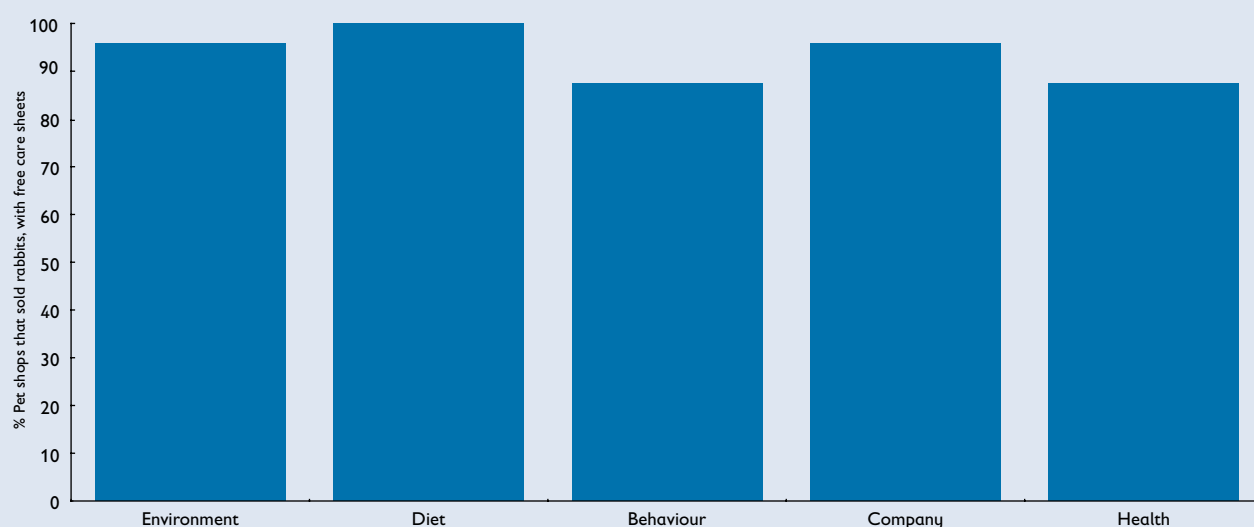
Information provided by staff

An additional method of information delivery is via staff in store. Surveyors reported that they were approached by members of staff in over half of the shops that sold rabbits (52.1 per cent), and received unprompted advice in 39.5 per cent of these shops. Surveyors described staff in several stores as 'helpful' and in one store as 'knowledgeable' about rabbit care.

Rabbits are popular pets and under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, all pet owners now have a legal 'duty of care' to meet their animals' welfare needs. Despite this, just under half of the pet shops surveyed did not provide any free written information relating to rabbits' needs to help potential owners make an informed choice before deciding to buy a rabbit, and to help them to meet their responsibilities if they obtained a rabbit. Where information was provided, it was not always comprehensive and was sometimes inaccurate.

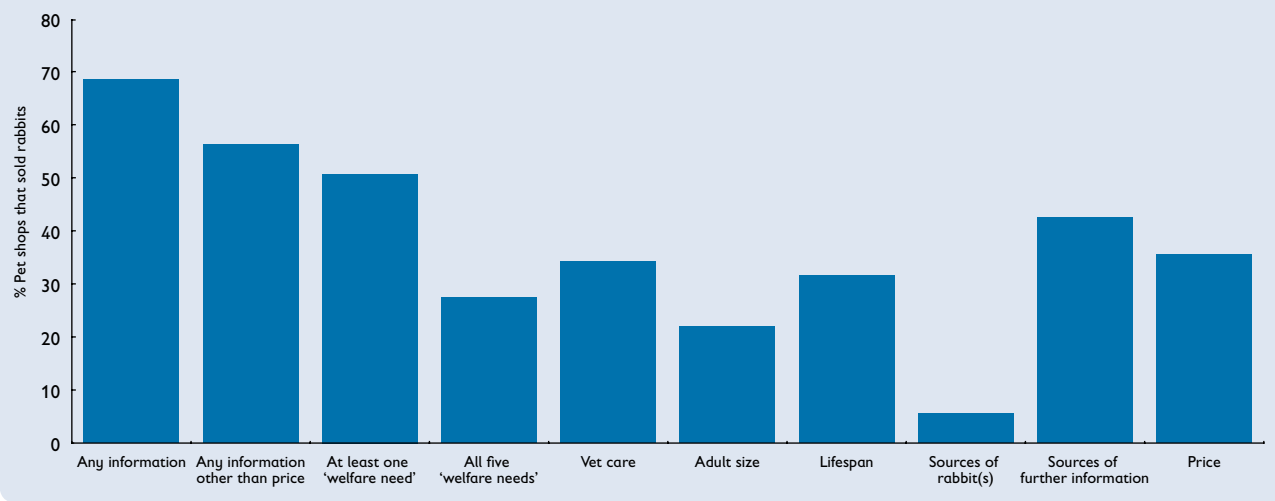
Improvements could be made to the availability, scope and detail of rabbit-related information provided on signs in store and in free care sheets. Ensuring that buyers fully understand the responsibility of owning a rabbit before sale is an important obligation of any seller. Despite potentially having financial implications for stores, free, good-quality care sheets provide an important route of information delivery as potential owners can take them away to read and consider before making the

Figure 9: Availability of information on rabbits' welfare needs in free rabbit care sheets



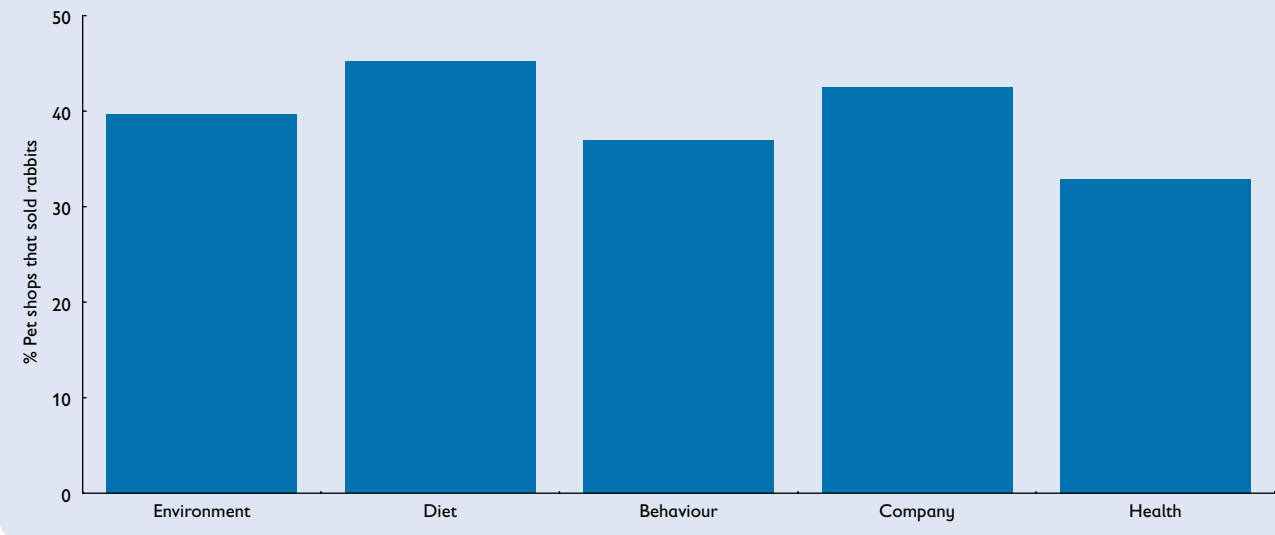
Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 10: Availability of any sort of free written care information on rabbits, in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 11: Availability of any sort of free information on rabbits' welfare needs, in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE FACT THAT THERE IS CURRENTLY LIMITED COMPREHENSIVE, ACCURATE INFORMATION ON RABBITS' WELFARE NEEDS, AND THAT RABBITS' NEEDS ARE OFTEN POORLY UNDERSTOOD, THE RSPCA IS CURRENTLY PLANNING A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN ON RABBIT WELFARE.

decision to purchase a rabbit. Furthermore, freely available information is available from the RSPCA¹¹ and other welfare organisations.

Pet shop regulations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 have yet to be drafted. It is hoped that the regulations will improve the availability and quality of care sheets in pet retail outlets.

The Welsh Assembly Government has produced a code of practice on the care of rabbits¹³, which provides details of rabbits' welfare needs and how to meet them, and which could form the basis for care sheets provided by pet shops in Wales.

In recognition of the fact that there is currently limited comprehensive, accurate information on rabbits' welfare needs, and that rabbits' needs are often poorly understood, the RSPCA is currently planning a national campaign on rabbit welfare. Part of this campaign includes funding studies into both the state of rabbit welfare in the UK and the spatial needs of socially-housed pet rabbits.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Schepers F, Koene P and Beerda B (2009). Welfare assessment in pet rabbits. *Animal Welfare* 18, 477–485.
- 2 Pet Food Manufacturers Association's data (2010): www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-2008.htm
- 3 Many thousands of rabbits are abandoned or given up to the RSPCA each year. In 2009 the RSPCA rehomed a total of 4,663 rabbits.
- 4 Animal Welfare Act 2006 S9.
- 5 Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2005). Proposed and possible secondary legislation and codes of practice. In: Fourth Special Report. www.archive2.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm62/6252/6252.pdf.
- 6 The RSPCA believes that good-quality husbandry information should be available to prospective owners before the point of sale, to allow them to make an informed decision before buying an animal.
- 7 Defra (2004). Launch of the Draft Animal Welfare Bill, page 75. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmenvfru/385/38507.htm
- 8 Mullan S M and Main D C J (2006). Survey of the husbandry, health and welfare of 102 pet rabbits. *The Veterinary Record* 159, 103–109.
- 9 Pet Food Manufacturers Association's data (2008): www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-pop-08.htm
- 10 Make Mine Chocolate – campaign to stop the impulse purchase of rabbits. Rabbit rescue survey (May 2010). Further information about the campaign is available at: www.makeminechocolate.org.uk
- 11 RSPCA (2009). Rabbit welfare needs information available at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits by clicking on the five welfare needs (environment, diet, behaviour, company, health and welfare) listed on the left-hand side of the webpage.
- 12 Details of the experts who contributed to the RSPCA rabbit welfare needs information are available at: www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/companionanimals/reportsandresources/expertcontributors
- 13 Welsh Assembly Government (2009). Code of Practice for the welfare of rabbits. <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/091109rabbitcodeen.pdf>

Welfare indicator: The number of organised animal fights in the UK

RSPCA concern

Often viewed as one of the most barbaric areas of cruelty, organised animal fighting remains a major area of concern to the RSPCA. Although animal baiting and fighting legislation was first introduced in the UK in 1835¹, and has been subsequently updated^{2,3}, such activities still continue with new areas of animal fighting developing. 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 and illegal activities in an attempt to see the eradication of all forms of organised animal fighting within the UK.

Background

Organised animal fighting tends to be clandestine and covert, and ultimately causes an incredible amount of suffering to the animals involved. The three species that are used in organised animal fighting are dogs, badgers and cockerels.

Traditionally, dog fighting involves a large group of people coming together to 'pit' one fighting dog against another. Large sums of money are placed as bets on the illegal fight's outcome. The dogs used in organised fights are bred and trained to be aggressive against other animals. They are selected for their stamina and their strength and are almost exclusively American pit bull terriers, a breed that is banned in the UK by the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991⁴. A pit is 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. Fights vary in length from a matter of minutes to a couple of hours causing dogs to suffer a large number of bite wounds. The owner of the dog will probably treat these injuries and any subsequent infection themselves with 'DIY' vet kits. It is unlikely the dogs will be taken for veterinary treatment due to the breed of dog involved and the nature of the injuries inflicted.

Cockfighting also 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 cockerel opponents. 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.

Unlike organised dog fighting and cock fighting, badger digging and baiting involves setting one species against another – a dog against a badger. Badger digging involves terrier dogs, wearing electronic transmitter collars, being sent into setts to locate and corner badgers deep in the tunnels. When a dog has cornered a badger the signal from the collar 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. 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 or it 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.



INSUFFICIENT DATA ARE AVAILABLE.

More organised baiting of badgers takes place with badgers taken away from the sett and baited in a pit with several dogs attacking it at once – the badger and dogs suffer horrific injuries. As with organised dog fighting, the terriers used in badger digging and baiting are unlikely to receive treatment from vets.

The participants and organisers of animal fighting, especially organised dog fighting, are often involved in other areas of serious criminality. Due to their criminal background and knowledge of investigative techniques, the perpetrators are difficult to trace and track, requiring investigators such as members of the RSPCA's special operations unit to employ specialist skills and techniques to bring them to justice. There are many factors that make investigating animal fighting extremely difficult. Those involved are prepared to travel long distances to participate, making it difficult for the different enforcement agencies that 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. The animals that have been/are used in organised fighting will often have distinctive injuries that are likely to be treated by their owners rather than a vet, as taking the animals for veterinary treatment may raise suspicion about the source of the injuries. Even though there is legislation, and prosecutions are taken against animal fighting participants, the current penalties/sentences do not seem to be a deterrent, as the fighting continues and there are many repeat offenders.

Worryingly, more impromptu dog fights have recently started to take place. Fighting usually takes place in public areas such as streets or parks and is less organised and different to the traditional fighting of pit bull terriers in a pit. The injuries inflicted from these 'rolls' or 'chain fights', as they are sometimes known, are also distinctive and tend to occur to the front of the dog's body and again it is unlikely the dogs will be taken to the vets for treatment. The dogs involved tend to be so-called 'status' dogs, a term often used by the media to refer to dogs associated with young people who use them in aggressive or intimidating ways towards other animals and the public. The dogs involved tend to be big, tough-looking, powerful dogs such as bull breeds and mastiffs. The use of status (and dangerous)

dogs is an important issue for animal welfare and its links to anti-social behaviour, crime and human safety.

The indicator figures

Unlike many other areas of animal cruelty that are reported to the RSPCA, 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 the problem is. Unfortunately, in the case of fighting this is not a definitive way of identifying the extent of the problem because of the criminal and covert nature of the activities and lack of reporting. Due to the secretive nature of these activities it is unsurprising that compared to other reports of cruelty to the RSPCA the figures are fairly low.

To put these figures into context, during 2009, as with previous years, the RSPCA received more than one million telephone calls to its cruelty and advice line and investigated over 140,000 cruelty complaints. Yet as Figure 12 demonstrates, between 2005 and 2009 calls concerning animal fighting were extremely low with the largest number received in 2007. In 2009 just 489 calls were received. Reports of cock fighting and badger/digger and sett interference have remained consistent and relatively low over the past five years, however there was a huge rise in the number of reports to the RSPCA about badger sett interference in 2009. In 2005, 59 reports of sett interference were received – this has risen to 166. There was also a large increase between 2008 and 2009, with 95 and 166 reports respectively.

The increase in reporting of sett interference could be due to more crimes against badgers taking place or more people knowing who to report the incidents to. The rise in calls, for whatever reason, is of concern as it indicates that not only is badger crime continuing, it is also increasing.

In 2005, 36 reports of dog fighting were received. Calls peaked in 2007 with 358 reports of dog fighting incidents and then dropped in 2008 and 2009 (284 and 204). There are a number of reasons why more calls were received in 2007 including the widely publicised death of five-year-old Ellie Lawrenson who was killed by an illegally owned pit bull-type dog. In addition, two pit bull amnesties in Northern Ireland

ORGANISED ANIMAL FIGHTING ACTIVITIES ARE DELIBERATE, CALCULATED, AND BY THEIR VERY NATURE CAUSE A GREAT DEAL OF UNNECESSARY SUFFERING TO THE ANIMALS INVOLVED.

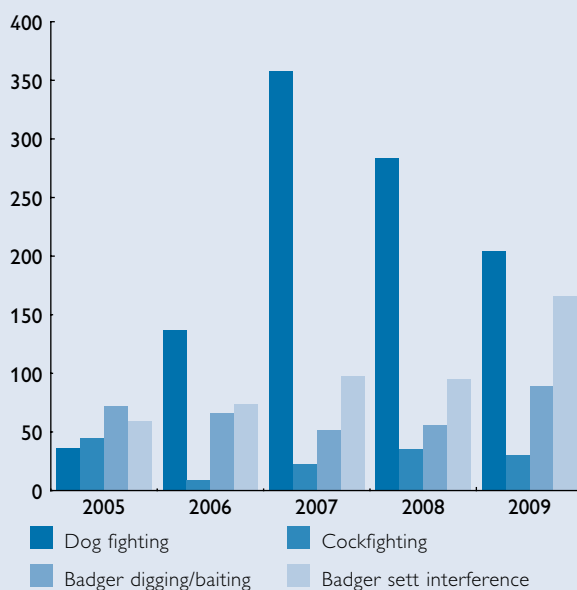
and Merseyside during January 2007 and two high-profile dog fighting cases in the West Midlands area may have prompted more reports as the public became aware of dog fighting and dangerous dog offences.

In addition to organised dog fighting, there is a growing concern about status and dangerous dogs being used to intimidate and cause injury to people and other animals. Dangerous dogs are powerful animals of any breed or type. Often victims of cruelty themselves, these animals can be encouraged to be aggressive and maybe forced to fight other dogs in public places. Therefore, reports of dog fighting to the RSPCA have subsequently been broken down to identify instances that relate to dogs that are being fought in open spaces or public areas such as streets or parks – Figure 13. Overall, reports to the RSPCA of dog fighting have fallen since 2007 whereas the incidence of young people fighting dogs has increased. In 2007, 37 per cent of reports concerned dogs and street fighting. The following year two-thirds of all calls related to this and 55 per cent in 2009 were about dogs fighting in public places. In October 2009, one RSPCA animal hospital treated 22 dogs for dog fighting injuries, indicating that there is a problem with dog fighting, as this figure is for a single establishment, in one area of London during one month.

Figures produced by the Metropolitan Police 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 38 dogs a year. This increased to 173 between May 2006 and April 2007 and leapt to 719 between May 2008 and April 2009. Between May 2009 and April 2010 1,152 dogs were seized by the Metropolitan Police. 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 control⁵. In response to this growing problem, the Metropolitan Police set up a status dogs unit.

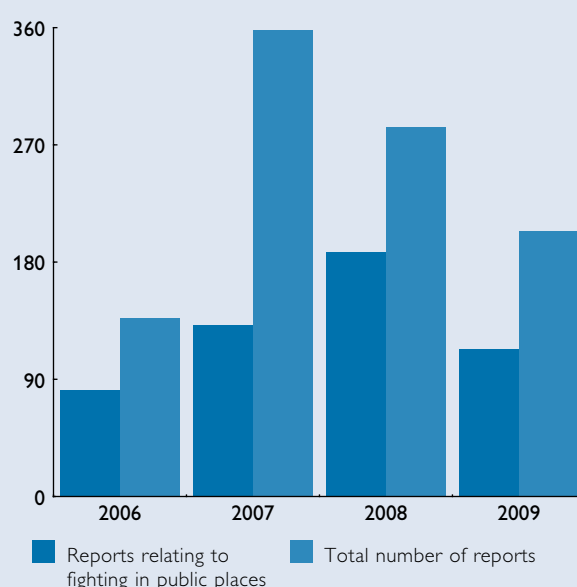
In 2006, the RSPCA produced a leaflet and poster encouraging owners of status dogs to provide adequate care for their dogs and highlighting the legislation that protects dogs such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Control of Dogs Order 1992. The RSPCA is extremely concerned that more reported incidents of dog fighting seem to involve young people in public places and in February 2008, the Society became involved with an education initiative, the People With Dogs Project⁶, which aims to reduce intimidating and anti-social behaviour on London's streets. More recently, the police, local authorities,

Figure 12: Reports of animal fighting given to the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 13: Reports of dog fighting to the RSPCA, 2006–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

social landlords and the RSPCA are working together to educate local communities about responsible dog ownership and to encourage the effective enforcement of dog control legislation. The RSPCA, and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home are working with the Metropolitan Police to develop targeted approaches in London boroughs to tackle these problems including providing advice and encouraging microchipping and neutering. In spring 2009 the RSPCA hosted its first Status Dogs Summit bringing together police, local authorities and other frontline enforcers to discuss and develop practical responses for dealing with irresponsible dog ownership. In November 2010 the second conference will take place.

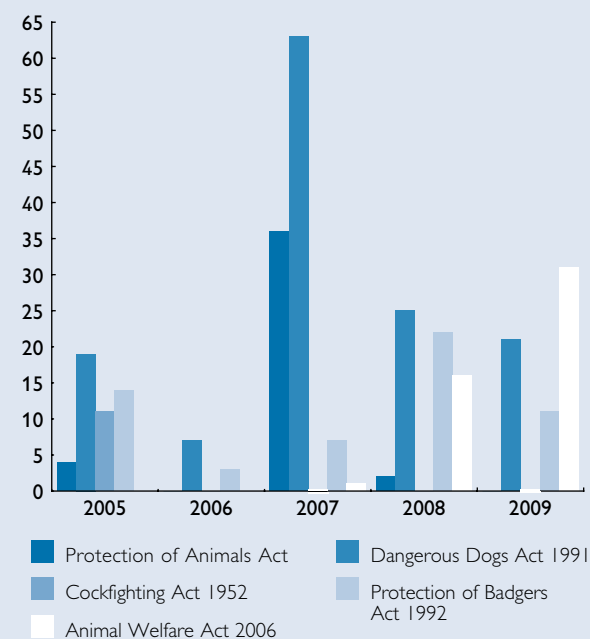
Another way to try and identify the scale of organised animal fighting is to look at the number of successful animal fighting convictions over the past five years. Although useful, because it demonstrates that animal fighting is still taking place and perpetrators are being caught, it does not clearly represent the true scale of the problem. An increase in the number of convictions in a given year does not necessarily mean the problem is worsening, it could mean more people were caught or numerous people were involved at one event and subsequently convicted. Conversely, if the number of convictions drops, 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 one year but the relevant arrests will have occurred the previous year.

Figure 14 shows the number of convictions obtained by the RSPCA over the past five years. During this period, the largest number was obtained in 2007 with more than 100 convictions. Subsequently convictions have been lower with 65 and 63 in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Although it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the number of convictions, the fact that people are still being convicted for animal fighting clearly demonstrates that there is an ongoing problem with these illegal activities.

With new types of dog fighting appearing, more incidents reported, a consistent number of convictions and reports of badger sett interference nearly trebling in the past five years, it must be concluded that organised animal fighting is increasing.

For many reasons this is an important animal welfare indicator; the intentional cruelty, the suffering that is inflicted on the animals

Figure 14: Successful convictions for animal fighting obtained by the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

that are forced to fight and the fact that long-established laws are still being broken. Many countries around the world have their own animal fighting problems and look to the UK, with its long legislative history and status as a nation of animal lovers, to help solve the problem. Yet in 2010, the problem still exists within the UK as it does in other parts of the world.

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 Animal Welfare Act 2006, s8.
- 4 Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, s1.
- 5 Metropolitan Police figures refer specifically to the year this number of dogs left the police system.
- 6 The project brings together three animal charities (Battersea Dogs Home, The Blue Cross and the RSPCA), the Greater London Authority, the Metropolitan Police and Wandsworth Council.