

Briefing on status dogs

The RSPCA is the leading animal welfare charity that deals with aggressive and dangerous dogs on a regular basis in partnership with the police and local authorities.

In the past the RSPCA has only directly enforced dangerous dog legislation in a relatively limited area, namely in connection with dogs kept or used for organised dog fighting. However, the Society has become aware of an increasing problem of anti-social behaviour where dogs are used in an aggressive or intimidating way towards the public and other animals, often involving the fighting of these dogs. The media has often referred to these dogs as 'status' or 'bling' dogs because of the image/lifestyle they are associated with.

These dogs are traditionally, but not exclusively, associated with young people on inner city estates and those involved in criminal activity (for example there have been significant problems in London, Birmingham and Liverpool). This is a trend that has been seen in the USA and now appears to be established within the UK. There are concerns that this impromptu dog fighting could go on to become organised fighting, with the associated gambling. This has already been evidenced in Birmingham.

The use of such dogs is often another 'symptom' of the social problems caused by the gang culture and violence. Knife and gun crime is well recognised, but it is often the case that individuals involved in such activities will possess such a dog. The Society does acknowledge the steps taken by the Government in the Policing and Crime Bill to provide enforcers with powers to seek injunctions against the ownership of such animals by some gang members. RSPCA inspectors and the police are also often finding welfare problems with these dogs, whether it is inadequate care of them or cruelty.

- In 2007 the RSPCA received 358 calls specifically about dog fighting¹ compared with 137 in 2006. This is a **15-fold increase** on the 24 complaints received in 2004. Of the 358 calls last year 132 referred to youths or 'hoodies' fighting their dogs in the street or park. It is also of concern to the Society that of the incidents of dog fighting reported, a large number appear to involve young people in public places.
- In 2007-2008 the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) seized and dealt with 481 dogs under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 compared with 173 in 2006-2007. **In 2008-2009 they seized 719 dogs**.
- In an answer to a parliamentary question² the Department of Health stated that between 2005-2006 1,187 people under 18 and 2,281 adults were treated in accident and emergency departments for dog bites.
- In the UK it is estimated that **5,000 postal workers require medical treatment for dog bites** every year³. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) is currently campaigning on this issue.

Clearly from these statistics alone there is a problem that needs to be addressed and the RSPCA's workload has been affected by the rise in irresponsible dog ownership. While many people, including the RSPCA, are critical of aspects of current legislation – in particular, often, the lack of focus on animal welfare - it does have the potential to have a significant impact on the problem if it is effectively enforced.

The RSPCA believes there should be a two-pronged approach to tackling this increasing problem with short-term and long-term aims.

¹ This covers everything from genuine accidental scraps to organised fighting but the majority of incidents concerned anti-social behaviour with dogs.

² Hansard, 5 February 2008, col 1078-1080W

³ Morgan, M. & Palmer, J. (2007) Dog bites. British Medical Journal, **334**, 413-417



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In the short-term community engagement and education could have a positive impact in protecting human safety and animal welfare. For example a number of initiatives have been set up in London where the RSPCA has worked closely with the MPS, the London Boroughs and charities:

- Borough Action for Responsible K9s (and similar BARK-type projects) have been set up in a number of London boroughs to primarily encourage positive engagement with local communities about responsible dog ownership by the RSPCA, local authority and other agencies. It also aims to tackle irresponsible ownership and anti-social behavior with dogs through effective enforcement by the local safer neighbourhood teams.
- Policing festivals e.g. the Notting Hill Carnival. The RSPCA and the MPS have worked together to ensure human safety and animal welfare is protected. The police address issues concerning prohibited dogs and where necessary seize illegal animals, whilst the RSPCA provides advice and guidance on ensuring animal welfare.
- Community Animal Action Events (CAAEs) the Society has set these up with local authorities, safer neighbourhood teams, and housing providers to address welfare problems in areas we receive a high number of complaints. The aim of the initiative is to work with the local community to provide advice and assistance such as microchipping and neutering of pets to improve the animal welfare conditions and educate the owners at a local level.

Defra has produced guidance⁴ for enforcers on good practice and how to tackle irresponsible dog ownership through effective enforcement of the law. The document is aimed at local authorities and police forces.

All these should help to improve the situation in the short-term and enable the authorities to target their resources by working in partnership. However the RSPCA believes that ultimately the current legislation is in need of consolidation and updating.

Any future legislation should focus on the 'deed rather than the breed' of the dog. It is the action of the owner and what they encourage or allow their dogs to do that is important rather than the breed or type of dog it is. Unfortunately our inspectors and many police officers and local authority wardens are seeing more and more different large powerful dogs on the streets.

The Society is also concerned that s1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (DDA) has not had the desired result of preventing four types of dogs (traditionally used for dog fighting) from becoming established in the UK.

Any future legislation concerning the control of dogs should focus on the action of the owner and preventing irresponsible dog ownership. Irresponsible owners can own dogs of any type and no dog should be penalised just because of its genetic make-up.

However, if legislation governing the control of dogs is to be effective then it must be easily enforceable. The costs⁵ of boarding seized dogs prior to a case and identifying them as prohibited types can be prohibitive for police forces⁶ and other enforcement bodies. The Dogs Act 1871 and the DDA have positive and useful aspects and the RSPCA believes that these could be streamlined into more easily enforceable legislation.

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⁴ http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/domestic/dogs-guide-enforcers.pdf

⁵ For example, it costs the RSPCA £300 per dog per month to maintain them in kennels while a case is prepared (this excludes veterinary fees, etc)

 $^{^{6}}$ In 2007-2008 financial year the MPS spent £1.3M on boarding dogs seized under the DDA