

Fireworks and Animal Welfare

Key Information

- Whilst fireworks can bring much enjoyment to some people, they can cause significant injury, problems and fear to other people and animals. There is increasing evidence that fireworks can have negative effects on the behaviour and wellbeing of animals.
- The RSPCA believes that the UK Government should introduce legislation that brings in tighter restrictions on the sale and use of fireworks including measures such as; the introduction of firework control zones, reducing noise levels to 90dB and when appropriate, promoting the use of alternative fireworks.

Impact of Fireworks on Animal Welfare

The RSPCA acknowledges that fireworks are used by people throughout the year to mark different events. Whilst they can bring much enjoyment to some people, they can cause significant injury, problems and fear for other people and animals.

From an animal welfare perspective, aversive stimuli, such as loud noises, that are unpredictable and out of an animal's control – as is the case with fireworks – are particularly stressful for them¹. Being unpredictable, as well as intermittent and relatively infrequent, also makes it unlikely that animals will acclimatise to fireworks noise².

Horses and livestock are easily frightened by loud noises and sudden bright lights and can be at risk of injuring themselves on fencing, farm equipment or fixtures and fittings within their housing if startled. Although there is limited direct evidence, it is also likely that fireworks and their debris will cause a disturbance to wildlife, and are likely to cause suffering or distress, depending on the distance from the explosive and the noise level. Debris produced by fireworks can also pose a hazard to animals, such as horses and farm livestock if found on the land.

Current Legislation

The Fireworks Act 2003 and the Fireworks Regulations 2004 (as amended) are the main pieces of legislation concerned with regulating firework usage. The 2003 Act was introduced with the aim of reducing the noise, nuisance and injuries caused by the misuse of fireworks. The Act conferred powers on the Secretary of State to make Regulations to ensure there is no, or minimal, risk that fireworks will cause death, injury or distress to people or animals or damage to property³. The Fireworks Regulations were introduced under the Act.

¹ Bassett L & Buchanan-Smith HM (2007) Effects of predictability on the welfare of captive animals. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 102: 223-245

² Wright AJ, Soto NA, Baldwin AL, Bateson M, Beale CM, Clark C, Deak T, Edwards EF, Fernandez A, Godinho A, Hatch LT, Kakuschke A, Lusseau D, Martineau D, Romero LM, Weilgart LS, Wintle BA, Notarbartolo-di-Sciara G & Martin V (2007) Anthropogenic noise as a stressor in animals: a multidisciplinary perspective. *International Journal of Comparative Psychology* 20: 250-273

³ Fireworks Act 2003, Section 2

The main provisions of the Regulations are:

- A curfew on the use of fireworks between 11pm and 7am (though this is later on November 5th, New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year and Diwali).
- A ban on the sale to the public of fireworks whose noise level exceeds 120 decibels.
- A ban on the sale of fireworks outside of the specified dates without a licence from either the Local Authority, Fire Service or Health and Safety Executive.

RSPCA's Position and Recommendations

The RSPCA believes that the current legislation does not prevent or sufficiently reduce the risk of fireworks causing death, injury or distress to animals. We have partnered with the Social Market Foundation – a cross-party think tank – to investigate the harm, explore alternatives, and provide solutions. We therefore would like to see the implementation of the following recommendations – based on SMF's independent research – on a local and national level:

UK Government:

Recommendation 1: Reduce the maximum decibel level of all traditional fireworks from 120 dB to 90 dB, as is the case in New Zealand.

Recommendation 2: Limit sale of consumer fireworks to Category F1 and F2, and only to specialised/licensed shops.

Recommendation 3: Follow the example of Scotland, and allow Local Councils to designate “firework free zones” in areas where fireworks are likely to have a greater impact on animals, the environment and vulnerable peoples.

Recommendation 4: When firework free zones are in place, Local Councils should organise their own alternative displays and draw on examples from other countries, such as Japan, to harness the economic opportunity that high-quality displays can yield in terms of tourism.

Recommendation 5: Given the economic potential of alternatives, and given the benefits to wildlife and the environment, the Government should review regulations surrounding alternatives to fireworks, such as drone displays. Reducing bureaucracy for companies that are wishing to invest in higher quality displays would be positive, particularly as it would allow new companies to enter the market and push up quality through greater competition.

Local Authorities:

Recommendation 6: Local authorities should also explore opportunities to incorporate the use of drone displays, light shows, and “quiet fireworks” into traditional displays. This will help introduce them and their use to the public, which our polling indicates will in turn increase their popularity.

Recommendation 7: Local authorities without existing bans consider implementing policies to restrict the use of loud fireworks on council-owned land, as seen in the successful example of Sunderland City Council. These policies promote quieter fireworks and encourage local suppliers to stock them, reducing the negative impact on the environment and individuals with noise sensitivities.