



# Fireworks and animal welfare: making a difference

*Ensuring animals have a good life by advocating on their behalf*

## Key facts...

- ★ Whilst fireworks can bring much enjoyment to some people, they can cause significant injury, problems and fear to 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 are particularly stressful for them.
- ★ The RSPCA believes the law is failing as it does not prevent or sufficiently reduce the risk of fireworks causing distress, injury or anxiety to people, and death, injury or distress to animals.
- ★ A recent OPSS survey found that 65% of people would support further time limits on the sale and use of fireworks and 52% would support limits on the noise levels of fireworks.
- ★ The RSPCA believes that there should be tighter restrictions on the sale and use of fireworks, noise levels should be reduced to 90dB, public displays should be licensed and greater awareness about the negative impact of fireworks should be communicated.

## What is the impact on animal welfare?

The RSPCA acknowledges that fireworks are used by people throughout the year to mark different events, e.g. Bonfire Night, New Year, Chinese New Year, Diwali, etc. 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 them<sup>1</sup>. Being unpredictable, as well as intermittent and relatively infrequent, also makes it unlikely that animals will acclimatise to fireworks noise<sup>2</sup>.

Polling undertaken by the RSPCA in October 2019 found that 62% of dog and 54% of cat owners surveyed reported their pets show signs of distress during the fireworks season<sup>3</sup>. In polling carried out in 2020 only two in five (41%) of UK adults said they were confident that they could care for a pet, horse or other animal that was distressed due to fireworks<sup>4</sup>. Animals affected not only suffer psychological distress but can also cause themselves injuries, sometimes very serious ones, or even, sadly die, as they attempt to run or hide from the noise.



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

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

<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> Kantar Onlinebus poll for RSPCA, October 8 -10 2019

<sup>4</sup> Savanta Comres poll for RSPCA, October 2020.

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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.

There is widespread public concern about the effect that fireworks can have on animals and the RSPCA receives hundreds of calls about them every year. For example in 2019 we received 237 calls from people concerned about fireworks (in England and Wales); although the figure was considerably lower in 2020 this was during the Covid-19 pandemic.

	2020	2019 <sup>5</sup>	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Grand total <sup>6</sup>	113	251	458	382	291	370	299
England	96	218	402	370	267	341	279
Wales	9	19	36	18	24	29	20

### Current legislation: the Fireworks Act 2003 and the Fireworks Regulations 2004

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 property<sup>7</sup>. The Fireworks Regulations were introduced under the Act. 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.

### How can the situation be improved?

The Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS) published a research report in April 2021<sup>8</sup> which looked at consumer behaviour and attitudes towards fireworks. The report identified a number of interesting points:

- While the majority of those surveyed indicated they enjoyed fireworks, a third said they did not, with reasons varying from concerns about safety, the environmental impact, anti-social behaviour and misuse, through to distress to individuals and animals, including pets.
- 63% of respondents stated they preferred public displays to private displays as a good way to mark important occasions with 55% saying that private displays disturb the peace and quiet in their area.
- 65% of those who responded to the survey indicated that they would support further time limits on the sale and use of fireworks by members of the public and 63% said they would support time limits on organised public displays.
- 52% of respondents indicated they would support proposals to limit the noise fireworks can make.

The Scottish Government has looked at this issue and an advisory panel has just set out an action plan to tackle anti-social behaviour involving fireworks<sup>9</sup>. Their recommendations include changing the way fireworks are

<sup>5</sup> The RSPCA moved to a new recording system for complaints and therefore data from 2019 onwards cannot be compared with previous years.

<sup>6</sup> Includes calls from other countries as well as England and Wales

<sup>7</sup> Fireworks Act 2003, Section 2

<sup>8</sup> Office for Product Safety and Standards, April 2021, [Consumer Behaviour and Attitudes to Fireworks in the UK](#)

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government. [Tackling anti-social fireworks use](#). 3 November 2020

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bought and used, for example restricting the days and times when they can be let off and also creating 'no-firework' zones. The Scottish Government is currently considering how these recommendations can be implemented. The RSPCA believes a number of actions can be taken in England and Wales:

### **1. Raising awareness**

The RSPCA believes there is a real need to raise awareness about the impact of fireworks on animals in the general public to encourage them to be more considerate of pets, horses and livestock as well as local wildlife. We welcome the UK Government's commitment to do this and will continue to work with the OPSS. In addition, there is a need to raise awareness amongst pet owners about fireworks phobia and that it can be treated (in dogs at least) in the long term.

### **2. Further limits on when fireworks can be sold and used**

At present fireworks can be sold from 15th October to 10th November and this can prolong the period where fireworks are let off. The restrictions for the sale of fireworks for other traditional dates are much tighter (only a few days). Based on the experience of New Zealand we believe the sale of fireworks for Bonfire night should be limited from 29th October to 5th November. In addition, the RSPCA believes there should be restrictions introduced limiting the days that fireworks can be let off thereby restricting the period over which animals are exposed to fireworks (similar to what is proposed in Scotland).



### **3. Consideration for firework control zones**

We believe that central and local government should give serious consideration to the use of firework control zones to provide better protection for vulnerable people and animals. Such zones are used elsewhere in the world and we feel they could be used effectively to protect animals, in particular in localised areas, for example no fireworks being allowed near where horses are kept, sensitive wildlife areas, farms, zoos, etc.

### **4. Reduce the maximum noise level of fireworks**

The RSPCA would like to see the maximum permitted noise level of fireworks for public sale reduced from 120 dB to 90 dB and the introduction of a labelling system identifying the noise level of fireworks (e.g. 'loud' or 'low noise') to allow consumers to make an informed decision. Setting the limit at 90 dB would be consistent with the approach in other countries and encourage manufacturers to design and produce quieter fireworks. We welcome the OPSS commissioning research<sup>10</sup> into the noise levels of fireworks currently being sold to the public and look forward to seeing the results.

### **5. Licensing of all public firework displays**

The RSPCA would like to see all public firework displays licensed by the relevant licensing authority, with information about the proposed display provided in the local area several weeks in advance (allowing mitigating measures to be put in place) and a process for local residents to appeal against the granting of the licence. This process should also apply to people seeking to hold private displays at special events (such as weddings).

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<sup>10</sup> Office of Product Safety and Standards. [Evidence base on fireworks](#). October 2020