



# Livestock worrying: why the law needs to change

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

## Key facts...

- ★ The animal welfare impacts of livestock worrying can be devastating for the animals concerned, with those not killed outright left with serious injuries often having to be euthanised.
- ★ When APGAW considered this it was thought around 15,000 sheep had been killed by dogs in 2016 and in 2019 NFU Mutual estimated the cost to be around £1.2 million.
- ★ The majority of livestock worrying incidents take place between January and March.
- ★ In 2017, the RSPCA conducted a survey of over 3,000 dog owners which found that 24% reported that their dog chased livestock and/or wildlife and/or other animals in the past or currently.
- ★ Livestock worrying is an incredibly complex issue with a number of factors that need addressing.
- ★ Dog owners can play a key role in avoiding livestock and where unavoidable, ensuring their pets are under control on a lead and adequately socialised and trained to pose no risk to livestock.
- ★ Farmers and livestock owners can ensure there is adequate and visible signage around fields where there is livestock and ensure they report any incidents to the police.
- ★ The police should ensure they have effective systems in place to record and investigate any incidents reported to them.
- ★ The current law is very outdated and is in urgent need of updating to make it relevant to today.

## What is the problem?

Increased use of the countryside by people allows them to appreciate nature and should be seen as a positive. However, where houses have been built and people have moved in, sometimes with pets, this has had an impact on those who keep livestock in some areas. In particular, irresponsible dog owners who do not ensure their pets are kept securely at home when they are out, or those who walk their dogs without taking care around livestock unfortunately have led to an increase in the number of attacks on livestock being reported to the police.

When the All-Party Parliamentary group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) considered this issue it was thought around 15,000 sheep had been killed by dogs in 2016<sup>1</sup>. In 2019 NFU Mutual stated it cost the sector £1.2 million<sup>2</sup>. The NSA's annual survey on livestock worrying in 2020 found 95% of respondents had experienced livestock worrying on their farm, with the average cost being £1,134<sup>3</sup>.

The majority of livestock worrying incidents take place between January and March and this coincides with lambs being born. With sheep, it can lead to mis-mothering, with lambs dying of starvation or hypothermia if they become separated from their mothers. Ewes can also lose or abort their lambs as a result of being attacked or worried by dogs. Animals can be severely affected by such attacks suffering the most horrendous injuries and apart from the welfare impact of such incidents the veterinary costs can be incredibly high. In addition, these attacks are not something that is just limited to sheep, but also other animals including cattle, alpacas, horses, etc.



Sheepwatch UK reported to APGAW that in 2016 at least 49 dogs had been shot and killed for chasing or killing sheep. Thus the impact on animal welfare does not just concern livestock but also dogs, causing distress to the owners of both.

<sup>1</sup> APGAW, [Tackling Livestock worrying and encouraging responsible dog ownership](#), 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.farminguk.com/news/livestock-worrying-cost-farmers-1-2m-last-year\\_55003.html](https://www.farminguk.com/news/livestock-worrying-cost-farmers-1-2m-last-year_55003.html)

<sup>3</sup> National Sheep Association, [livestock worrying survey](#) results.

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In 2017, the RSPCA conducted a survey of over 3,000 dog owners which found that 24% (around a quarter) reported that their dog chased livestock and/or wildlife and/or other animals in the past or currently<sup>4</sup>. Of those who reported this behaviour 29% had sought help and of these 47% had sought that help from online sources, 38% from a pet shop and 28% from a vet. Perhaps more worryingly 43% did not consider this behaviour a problem and did not seek any advice or help. As such the majority of dog owners, whose dogs cause such problems, are either simply not aware of the consequences and do not take it seriously. There is therefore a need to change attitudes and behaviours such that owners are better aware of the risks and take appropriate preventative measures to avoid livestock worrying.

### Why does the law not work?

The main piece of legislation relevant to this issue is the [Dogs \(Protection of Livestock\) Act 1953](#) but it is nearly 70 years old. It creates a criminal offence for an owner (or person in charge) of a dog to allow it to worry livestock on any agricultural land. The legislation provides for a limited power of seizure and very limited fines if convicted of an offence. However there are no powers of search and seizure for the police and the definition of livestock is quite limited nor are there any post-conviction powers such as control orders to enable the issues to be addressed adequately. The [Animals Act 1971](#) and the [Dogs Act 1871](#) can also be used in some instances but again there are limitations on their usefulness.

### What needs to be done?

This is an incredibly complex issue with a number of factors that need addressing. It would seem most livestock worrying incidents occur with unaccompanied dogs (e.g. those who have escaped from gardens) as well as, to a lesser degree, dogs being walked by their owners indicating this is as much a dog welfare problem as it is a livestock welfare issue.



Dog owners can play a key role in avoiding livestock wherever possible but where unavoidable ensuring their dogs are kept on a lead and adequately socialised and trained so that their pet does not pose a risk to livestock. Owners should also ensure their property is secure to avoid incidents where dogs have escaped from their homes. Many of the major charities offer advice and resources on how to train and manage their dogs and owners can also seek help and advice from reputable dog trainers and behaviourists.

Farmers and livestock owners can also take measures to ensure there is visible signage on fields where livestock are present and to swiftly report any incidents to their local police. In addition it is also important the police record accurately all incidents reported to them as well as investigate them to build a better picture of the scale of the problem but also instil confidence in their response to the issue. However the RSPCA believes the law is in urgent need of updating. In particular we believe there are areas of the law that need amending including:

1. Updating the language of the 1953 Act to ensure it is clearer and more relevant for today.
2. Widen the scope of the definition of “livestock” to include “camelids, deer, donkeys” etc as well as extending the scope of the law to cover any land where livestock is permitted to be.
3. Provide certain defences for people where they or their dog was put at risk by the livestock or whereby they can show they reasonably believed the dog was under the control of someone else at the time.
4. Enable a Court to grant a warrant for police to search for and seize evidence of an offence and also provide an interim exemption scheme for the police to use on a case by case basis for dogs that are seized.
5. Allow for offences to be triable either way and set out a list of actions a Court may take to deal with instances of livestock worrying, from control orders, disqualification orders, through to deprivation orders, destruction orders and a greatly increased fine as well as imprisonment.

<sup>4</sup> [Being #DogKind: How in tune are we with the needs of our canine companions?](#) RSPCA report. 2018

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