

## Briefing document

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### Reducing dog bites and enhancing responsible dog ownership in Wales

October 2024

#### Introduction

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to brief our partners in Wales ahead of the launch of our new report - *Taking the Lead: Alternative approaches to effective dog control in the UK*.

Between 2014 and 2022, the number of dog-related hospital admissions increased by 55 per cent in Wales<sup>1</sup> with a number of deeply distressing and tragic dog bite fatalities having also occurred in recent years. As such, Wales currently has a higher incidence of dog bites - and a faster rate of growth - than both England or the Republic of Ireland, with Swansea Bay having the highest number of hospital admissions for such incidences in both Wales and England according to recent research<sup>2</sup>. Such trends have made dog control issues a key social and political concern in Wales and further afield, which has led to a greater focus on measures to reduce dog bites. Since the UK Government's announcement of its intention to add the American Bully XL to the list of the UK's prohibited breeds in 2023, the Welsh Government has undertaken a proactive approach in terms of gathering the relevant stakeholders to discuss how best to approach the various complexities that lead to aggression in dogs. The prohibition of a fifth type of dog and the extension of existing UK breed specific legislation via the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is in stark contrast to scientific evidence which shows that breed is not a good predictor of aggressive behaviour. This approach is also widely condemned by veterinary and animal welfare organisations due to its impact on dog welfare and the need to destroy many dogs whose behaviour poses no risk to public safety. Recent data collected by the RSPCA highlights how the unintended consequences of the aforementioned ban are having a detrimental impact on animal welfare, the sector and our public services<sup>3</sup>, with further challenges also anticipated.

Our new report examines global approaches towards dog control in order to address the current evidence gap that exists in terms of how other countries with similarities to the UK address the relevant issues. It is hoped that this report will help provide the basis for discussion and highlight what action can be undertaken by the Welsh Government, with the support of other stakeholders, to protect both human and animal welfare in the coming years.

#### Report summary and recommendations

In 2022, the RSPCA commissioned Associate Professor Jennifer Maher at the University of South Wales to look internationally at alternative dog control strategies that may be relevant to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0033350624001975>

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2024/07/03/wales-sees-significant-rise-in-hospital-admissions-due-to-dog-bites>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-neglect-of-xl-bullies-up-230-since-ban>

the UK context. This research included a systematic review of global dog control policies, and identified five mini case studies for further evaluation: Ireland; Victoria (Australia); Multnomah County (USA); Vienna (Austria); and Calgary (Canada). Calgary was explored in further depth due to its international recognition for high licensing compliance rates, low stray and euthanasia rates and the promotion of dog welfare, as well as its rejection of breed specific restrictions and reports of reduced dog bite rates.

The aforementioned case studies illustrate many examples of good practice and there are notable features that could provide possible measures for enhancing Wales' response to dog control, as outlined below.

- ❖ Using licensing or registration to support traceability, enforcement, and service costs
- ❖ Having the flexibility to attend to local issues through legislation and bylaws
- ❖ 'Responsibilising' dog owners using incentives, punishment and education, and engendering a culture of care and compliance
- ❖ Ensuring consistent and robust enforcement with consequences
- ❖ Making positive human-dog engagement the responsibility of dog owners and the wider community
- ❖ Taking an evidence-based educational and information approach
- ❖ Having IT infrastructure that supports robust data collection and monitoring and enforcement
- ❖ Taking a tiered and nuanced approach to identifying, and responding to, dangerous dogs
- ❖ Paying attention to wider dog welfare concerns and harms as part of the dog control response
- ❖ Adopting a holistic and collaborative approach or One-Health Model

Responsible dog ownership and engagement was a key theme and a consistent core focus across the five case studies. According to our research, successful approaches to reducing dog bites and increasing responsible dog ownership are holistic, multi-method and multi-agency and are capable of responding to the many variables influencing dangerous dogs via the agreement and coordinated action from multiple stakeholders. Moving towards this sort of model in Wales - and the UK as a whole - is critical and, encouragingly, our research has shown that achieving an approach that protects public safety and safeguards dog welfare is possible. However, for Wales to make this shift, we need attitudinal, behavioural and cultural change, as well as funding, to enable the implementation of systems that underpin, promote and support a new approach.

In order to protect both human and animal welfare, we want to see key policy and decision makers make a clear commitment to a focus on the fostering and development of communities where responsible dog ownership and engagement is emphasised. Our new report provides the basis for these discussions and identifies key actions that governments can take to shift and enhance our approach towards dog control. We are calling on the Welsh Government to:

**1. Support further research to explore the potential benefits of an annual licensing/registration system for Wales.**

Robust traceability and detailed data on dog bites is critical to effectively monitoring dangerous dogs and targeting enforcement. Furthermore, a modest annual registration and/or licensing cost could provide local authorities with an opportunity to ringfence much-needed funds to tackle other issues associated with dog ownership including dog health and welfare,

anti-social behaviour, fouling and straying. Research and analysis into the costs associated with dog control and the potential benefits of a licensing or registration scheme, and other alternatives, could provide a valuable insight as to whether such an approach could be suitable for Wales in the future.

## **2. Implement legislation that enables the development of responsible dog ownership and engagement while paying regard to dog welfare**

- a. **Introduce strengthened Wales-wide legislation to better protect the welfare of dogs.**  
An updated version of the Animal Welfare (Breeding of Dogs) (Wales) Regulations 2014 that reflects today's breeding industry is needed, along with specific, welfare-compatible legislation that seeks to encourage and promote responsible dog ownership. Reconsidering legislation similar to the previously proposed Control of Dogs (Wales) Act could enable a greater focus on responsible dog ownership as well as consistency. The robust enforcement of such legislation by dedicated dog control and/or animal welfare officers with access to welfare-compatible, evidence-based powers, including incentives and punishment, would enable a proportionate response to a range of incidents, with support from other partners.
- b. **Create a legal framework that allows for flexibility at a local level.** Our research shows that the ability of regions, states and communities to attend to local issues, recognise and address vulnerabilities specific to their communities and tailor responses that allows for the complexity of dog bite incidents is important. For example, our research suggests that lower socio-economic communities are more likely to see more incidents of dog aggression and bites than more affluent areas. Thus, creating an overarching legal framework - potentially under the legislation suggested above - that also enables dog control policy at a local level is a critical step towards this. Such action could enable those most impacted to undertake swift action to protect their communities, without needing to rely on others who are less impacted to undertake similar steps too.
- c. **Regulate the dog behaviour and training industry.** These professionals play a vital role in responsible dog ownership and responding to dangerous dogs. It is therefore important that they are qualified to do so and are subject to external oversight to ensure they are undertaking their duties in accordance with best practice.

## **3. Influence the UK Government to address critical gaps around dog control using centralised and bespoke systems.**

- a. Accurate and detailed recording and monitoring of dangerous dog incidents across the UK is key. The UK's current recording system is inconsistent in its approach and level of detail. In the absence of this information we are unable to fully understand the scale of dog bites and their causal factors, nor to inform effective public health and safety strategies.
- b. Robust traceability of dogs across the UK is necessary for data and to inform enforcement. While microchipping is mandatory for dogs across the UK, the current systems are not comprehensive enough to provide robust data and monitoring. We need to know how many dogs there are in each nation, where they are located, and who is responsible for them. Robust traceability coupled with detailed data on dog bites will enable effective monitoring of dangerous dogs and targeted enforcement. Importantly, this also has the potential to fund enforcement.
- c. Defining levels of 'dangerousness' and allowing tailored responses to prevention and intervention recognises the complexity of dog aggression. To achieve this, we need a more nuanced and measured approach to defining and responding to dog bite incidents.

#### **4. Create and evaluate innovative multi-agency pilots to test recording of dangerous dog incidents, traceability and dangerousness dog-assessment systems**

Effective dog control through the recording of incidents and improved traceability is reliant on systems that work for Wales - and the wider UK - as well as the involvement of a range of agencies, thus requiring partnership and collaborative working. Pilots related to any legislative proposals or new approaches towards the recording of dog bites and/or similar incidents before they are implemented would enable the identification of key stakeholders, as well as testing and modifications, before upscaling for wider rollout. In some cases, pilots will likely be facilitated through the extension of existing collaborative efforts, such as established dog safety partnerships.

#### **5. Map and evaluate existing initiatives/schemes that encourage a culture of care**

In recognition of the range of initiatives and schemes already in use - such as LEAD (Local Environmental Awareness on Dogs), for example - research and/or a review is required to identify and evaluate existing measures that encourage a culture of care. This will enable the development of a strategy that complements existing initiatives for wider rollout and/or continuation at a later date.

#### **Conclusion**

With the number of dog bites having increased in Wales - and throughout the UK - in recent years, it is clear that the current legislative approach which prioritises 'breed over deed' is not effective in terms of ensuring public safety. While the urgent need to protect both public safety and animal welfare is without doubt, the relevant measures must be evidence-based, effective and compatible with good dog welfare. We therefore encourage the Welsh Government to support and adopt the recommendations above and to continue working with the RSPCA and other relevant stakeholders towards a new approach which prioritises both human safety and animal welfare in Wales.