

Organisations unite behind multi-agency solutions to irresponsible dog ownership

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home	Guide Dogs for the Blind Association	RCVS
Blue Cross	IIRSM	RSPCA
BSAVA	Kennel Club	UNISON
BVA	National Dog Wardens Association	USDAAW
CWU	Police Federation	Unite
Dogs Trust	Prospect	Wood Green, the Animals Charity
GMB	Royal Mail Group	

The issue of irresponsible dog ownership covers many different areas, from allowing dogs to foul or stray, to encouraging them to be dangerously out of control, contributing to anti-social behaviour or even using them as a weapon. There is much evidence that dog ownership has a benefit to society when the dog is well trained and the owner is responsible.

The organisations listed above cover a wide range of interests and areas but are united in their agreement that the current law relating to irresponsible dog ownership is inadequate and that public, worker safety and animal welfare are not effectively protected. Furthermore, in this age of austerity the costs to the public purse of enforcement is unsustainable and new approaches are needed that genuinely prevent incidents, thus saving money in the short and longer-term.

We believe there are six key areas (in no particular order of importance) that should be addressed:

1. Any Bill must: consolidate legislation concerning dog control; give greater flexibility and discretion to enforcers and the courts; improve public safety and animal welfare; include a genuine preventative effect; update some offences; and reduce the costs of enforcement.
2. Breed specific legislation is not effective in tackling the real cause of the problem, which relates to the owner's actions or omissions rather than the type of dog concerned. We believe that if the political will is not there to repeal breed specific legislation, then amendments must be made to ensure better canine welfare and a clear strategy put in place to regularly review its effectiveness and with the intention of ultimately phasing out breed specific legislation.
3. The scope of updated legislation must be extended to cover all places, including private property, to ensure better public safety and animal welfare yet must also provide suitable defences for responsible dog owners, e.g. where someone is attacked and their dog defends them.
4. To assist with encouraging more responsible dog ownership all dogs should be permanently identified, i.e. through microchipping so that animals can be matched to their owners and traceability can be improved.
5. To support this there needs to be sufficient funding streams for dog wardens and police Dog Legislation Officer (DLO) roles so that the law can be adequately enforced and public safety and animal welfare improvements can be seen in practice. Both in the short and long-term this will save money for the public purse (for example through savings to NHS costs, costs of kennelling seized dogs, etc) rather than see ever increasing costs due to reactive enforcement.
6. Education and engagement (especially with hard to reach communities) should go hand-in-hand with any changes to the law and many animal welfare organisations can provide resources for this. However, central government should play a lead role in coordinating such work and ensuring it is properly evaluated for its effectiveness.

We call on the coalition government to deliver on their agreement that enforcement agencies should “target irresponsible owners of dangerous dogs” by introducing a government Bill in the Queen’s Speech next year updating and consolidating current law into one single piece of legislation to improve public and worker safety as well as animal welfare and reduce the costs of enforcement to the public purse.