The Kennel Club campaign to prohibit the use sale and distribution of electric shock collars

What are electric shock collars and why are they different from other electronic training aids?

Electric shock collars train dogs through a fear of further punishment, rather than a natural willingness to obey. There are various models (approximately 170) readily available, ranging from £10 to £200 plus. The cheaper collars will normally have one setting, whilst the more expensive collars have a range of settings, some from 1-100. At a very low setting, the collar may emit little more than a vibration, but when used above a 20 setting, they emit more of a shock to the dog which gets greater the higher the setting is. Any negative method employed to prevent a particular behaviour in dogs has to be extremely aversive and painful enough in order to stop the undesired behaviour from reoccurring. Unlike the other electronic devices mentioned above, there is conclusive evidence which proves that they cause physical and psychological harm to dogs. As a result, unlike with the other devices, they are already banned in many other countries.

Why would dog owners purchase electric shock collars?

Given the manner in which products are marketed, and the wide range of retailers that offer them for sale, we believe that dog owners who purchase electric shock collars are not normally doing so with the intention of causing physical or psychological harm to their pets. Afterall, if a dog owner was intent on harming their animal, they would be able to do so through other means.

As an example, this is how an online retailer describes a remote control electronic shock collar: ‘This training system is ideal for times when you take your dog along without a leash. It lets you interrupt your dog's unwanted behavior with a harmless static correction. Dogs quickly learn to associate the static correction with their prohibited behaviour’. http://www.drsfostersmith.com/product/prod_display.cfm?c=3307+9+30+24569&pcatid=24569

Similarly, the few dog trainers in the UK who encourage the use of training dogs with electric shock collars advertise their training days in such a way that it appears harmless to the average dog owner.
Are electric shock collars banned in other countries? How successful have these bans been?

Electric shock collars were banned in Wales under the Animal Welfare (Electronic Collars) (Wales) Regulations 2010. The Electronic Collar Manufacturers Association challenged the regulations under Judicial Review on the basis that the regulations breached the European Convention of Human Rights, but the Royal Courts of Justice found in favour of the Welsh Assembly and the regulations remain unchanged following a routine five year review. We are not aware of any dogs being put to sleep in Wales owing to their owners not being able to use an electric shock collar on them (this is the most common justification for their use – explained below).

In January 2018 the Scottish government announced plans to ban the use of electric shock collars.

The use of shock collars is banned Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia, and Germany and in some territories of Australia, including New South Wales and Southern Australia.

What support is there for electric shock collars to be completely banned?

Within just one month, a Change.org petition calling for the use of shock collars in Scotland to be completely prohibited attracted 15,000 signatures.

Prior to this, surveys commissioned by the Kennel Club have shown:

- 73% of the British public disapprove of the use of electric shock collars on dogs (Kennel Club commissioned survey, 2014)
- 82% agree that positive reinforcement training methods can address behavioural issues in dogs without the need for negative training methods (Kennel Club commissioned survey, 2014)
- 74% of the British public would support the government to introduce a ban on electric shock collars (Kennel Club commissioned survey, 2014)
- There is currently a petition on the Parliament website calling for a ban the sale of electronic training aids for dogs with 5,000 signatures
In addition to this, all the leading welfare, veterinary and training and behaviour organisations have joined forces in calling for a complete ban on shock collars to be brought forward including: the Kennel Club, Scottish Kennel Club, Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Edinburgh Dog & Cat Home, the British Veterinary Association, the Animal Behaviour and Training Council, the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors, the COAPE Association of Applied Pet Behaviourists and Trainiers, and Kennel Club Accredited Instructors.

The training and behaviour organisations listed represent around 2,000 professional dog trainers, all of whom have signed a code of conduct against using electric shock training devices.

**Can electric shock collar use be justified as a last resort?**

Many agree the general use of electric shock collars is unacceptable, but there are some that believe that there may be a need for them as a last resort, when all other methods have failed, and that the use of a shock collar could save a dog’s life. This is wholly untrue.

Below are the most commonly cited justifications for using a shock collar:

1) They may be particularly effective for specific types of dogs, including some working dog breeds, which have a very strong instinct to chase other animals and which may not respond to other training cues.

However, training methods which are punishment-based and dependent on inflicting pain or creating fear suppress behaviour without addressing its underlying cause or the motivation behind it. Dogs have a natural inbuilt flight or fight response when put in a situation that causes pain and fear, meaning the dog either escapes from the source of pain (flight) or becomes aggressive in response (fight). As a consequence, electric shock collars can cause further behavioural problems in addition to the one(s) being treated. The risk is that the dog can develop ‘superstitious fears’ to objects in its environment that were heard or seen at the time of receiving the electric shock. This is why cases of dogs attacking other dogs, their owner or another animal close by at the time of the shock are quite common. It is our view that using an electronic collar for this purpose is wholly unnecessary given that most dog walkers will simply keep their dogs on leads when around livestock. This is also the advice of the National Farmers Union.

2) They have helped owners with recall who would otherwise be unable to let their dogs off lead.

However, it is the experience of the 2,000-plus members of training and behaviour organisations which ban the use of shock collars, that recall can be effectively achieved through positive training methods and that using electronic devices for recall is wholly unnecessary.

3) Most of those who use electronic training aids use them properly. Anything can be open to misuse, but there is no particular association with electronic training aids – if someone is determined to abuse an animal they will find a way to be cruel or neglectful.

However, electronic training aids themselves are very difficult to use correctly and create a risk that the animal associates coincidental events with the punishment, especially if that punishment is poorly timed, or for boundary fence systems, if the animal is not able to see
the boundary markings. There are much more effective and humane positive reinforcement training methods available.

4) Finally, proponents of electric shock collar training claim that the existing legislation is sufficient to protect animals as it is clear that causing unnecessary suffering to an animal – whether with an electronic training aid or by any other means – is against the law.

However, the existing animal welfare legislation is not sufficient to protect animals, not least because it does not prevent the use of static pulse collars. The ‘unnecessary’ suffering referenced in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 is a subjective concept which is potentially difficult to prove. It is also difficult to prove psychological damage which cannot always be seen easily. As stated previously, most users of such devices are unlikely to intend to cause their pet to suffer but would have been misled by how the devices are marketed. They may therefore not have deliberately caused suffering, and the suffering may not be obvious to an enforcement officer because even within a single breed, dogs have been shown to have a variable capacity for coping with aversive stimuli (Vincent & Mitchell, 2006).

What evidence is there that shock collars are harmful?

Scientific evidence

Prior to studies paid for by Defra and carried out by the University of Lincoln, there was already a lot of evidence to show the harmful effects of using shock collars on dogs. Studies have focused on the physiological effects, psychological effects and the impacts on learning through the use of electric shock collars. The following studies have all indicated the negative impact that electric shock collars can have on the welfare of the animal.

- Tsevtkov et al. (2002), Sang et al. (2003) and Lindsay (2005) concluded that electric shock collars can cause high levels of distress and emotional harm to dogs and further contribute to intense anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder which makes fears instilled in animals resistant to elimination.
- Schilder et al. (2004) found signs of stress, high-pitched yelps, barks and squeals, avoidance and redirected aggression as well as a continued display of stress when there was no electric shock collar on the dog while in the company of their handler. The researchers concluded that shock collar training is stressful, receiving shocks is a painful experience to dogs and that the shock group of dogs evidently learned that the presence of their owner announced the reception of shocks, even outside of the normal training context.
- Hilby et al. (2004) studied the effectiveness of positive and negative training methods and concluded that the results showed when using rewards, the incidence of problematic behaviours, including aggression toward people and other dogs, fear, repetitive behaviours, overexcitement, anxiety and separation issues were greatly reduced in comparison to when the electric shock collar was used.
- Reisner (2003) examined aggression in dogs and the author argued that in order to reduce aggression, all circumstances, provocations, and aversive interactions associated with the dog’s aggression need to be avoided. Many aggressive dogs are anxious or fearful, and punishment of any kind should be avoided. The author states that aversive tools such as electric shocks can increase anxiety and therefore increase the risk of biting; in addition, they are likely to lead to treatment failure.

The findings of Defra-funded studies published in 2010 and 2011 (AW1402 and AW1402a) are also significant. The first Defra project concluded that there was great variability in how
electric shock collars were used on dogs and showed that owners worryingly tended to either not read or follow the advice in the manuals. The main conclusion was that there were significant negative welfare consequences for some of the dogs that were trained with electric shock collars in the study.

The second study was designed to use electric shock collars on dogs by trained professionals according to industry standards. For this reason, the Electronic Collar Manufacturers Association (ECMA) were asked to design both the training protocol as well as recommend industry trained professionals to take part in the study. The study concluded that even when the collars were used by professionals following an industry set standard, there were still long term negative impacts on dog welfare. Lastly, the studies also demonstrated that positive reinforcement methods were effective in treating livestock chasing, which is the most commonly cited justification of their use.

‘Even with best practice as advocated by collar manufacturers and trainers, there were differences in the behaviour of dogs that are consistent with more negative emotional states (including anxiety and aversion) in some dogs trained with e-collars. Further, the results indicate that there is no statistically significant nor clinically relevant differences in the efficacy of an e-collar training protocol combined with rewards and a reward based programme that does not use an e-collar for the management of dogs presented with comparable levels of livestock chasing, which is one of the most commonly advocated justifications for the necessity of e-collar training.’

The academics from the University of Lincoln who conducted the Defra study subsequently conducted some re-analysis as a result of drawing on studies not available at the time of the original project. The findings have been published in a peer reviewed, scientific journal – but this has not been publicised by Defra and cannot be found on the Defra website. The published article concludes:

‘(Accordingly), it seems that the routine use of e-collars even in accordance with best practice (as suggested by collar manufacturers) presents a risk to the well-being of pet dogs.’

‘Dogs showed a number of additional changes in behaviour in the period following electric stimulus presentation, compared with behaviour prior to stimulus presentation. Dogs showed an increase in vocalisation, with none recorded prior to first stimulus compared to a total of 13 “yelps” and 5 “whines” after exposure. There was a change in tail carriage from principally an elevated carriage prior to exposure (with only 2% of time was the tail between legs) to the tail being between legs 20% of the time following exposure. Prior to stimulus application the dogs were generally described as being in a neutral (40% of time) or investigatory (20%) state with only 10% of time described as tense; whereas afterwards, dogs were tense for 50% of the time and spent only 5% of their time engaged in investigatory behaviour. A small number of yawns and paw lifts were observed after stimuli, but none seen before exposure. Bouts of lip licking and body shaking were recorded before and after exposure at approximately the same rate.’

‘Taken together (with the findings of the preliminary study), these results are consistent with exposure to a significant short term stressor in the form of an aversive and probably painful stimulus during training.’ (The Welfare Consequences and Efficacy of Training Pet Dogs with Remote Electronic Training Collars in Comparison to Reward Based Training, Jonathan J. Cooper, Nina Cracknell, Jessica Hardiman, Hannah Wright, Daniel Mills , PLOS, September 3, 2014).
In the later study by the University of Lincoln, three out of four randomly selected professional dog trainers did not follow manufacturer’s best practice. Therefore it is reasonable to expect that a significant proportion of shock collar users do not follow ideal practice.

This reinforces our view that shock collars should not only be banned, but that even working with the industry to draw up guidance for dog owners and trainers to advise how to use e-collars ‘properly’ would be unwise given the inconsistencies in how even professional dog trainers use them, and also that they are not necessary in dog training in the first instance.

The ECMA have effectively, written off the above research as ‘highly subjective and ill-informed opinion and hearsay which does not recognise the technical capabilities and safety of the latest generation of quality modern-day electronic collar products.’ They concluded that a legislative ban would create a problem for all those involved and would be counterintuitive to the well-being of dogs. However they have published materials outlining when it is appropriate to use electronic training aids and how to use them in a way that is safe, supervised and effective. This includes for instances of dog fouling.

**Anecdotal evidence**

There is much anecdotal evidence put forward by pro-shock collar dog owners who claim to have ‘saved’ their dogs by using an electric shock collar. We do not believe this evidence can be verified. Afterall, those who opted to use a shock collar for their intended purpose will not know the psychological harm they may have caused their dog in doing so, and would not have taken their dog to any of the hundreds of dog trainers or behaviourists based in the UK who claim to be able to train any dog using positive training techniques (i.e. members of the organisations listed previously).

Animal trainers, animal behaviourist and animal welfare organisations have also put forward much anecdotal evidence regarding the detrimental impact of shock collars. In terms of the impact on the dogs concerned, there were reports of:

- Anxiety-related behaviour or panic responses to seeing a collar or hearing the noise associated with their use. It was suggested that many users will increase the level of stimulation if they do not achieve immediate results and that this often results in the animal attempting to escape or avoid the stimulus. It was also suggested that animals may fail to show a pain response despite increased levels of electronic stimulation or may become habituated to the pain and endure it. It was noted that the pain and stress caused in such situations has a significant effect on an animal’s physiology, increasing cortisol levels and heart rate.
- Dogs shutting down psychologically, including global suppression of behaviour or learned helplessness. It was suggested that this is frequently mistaken for an animal being trained, as the animal is subdued and tends not to act or react. In extreme cases, it was suggested that animals may refuse to perform any behaviour – learned helplessness – and will isolate themselves to avoid incurring electronic stimulation.
- Re-directed aggression towards other dogs, their owner or members of the public. It was suggested that animals may suppress aggression which may resurface at any time, without warning and generally in a more severe form. More specifically, it was reported that using electronic stimulation to reduce behaviours such as barking, lunging and growling may simply suppress the behaviour which could warn of more serious imminent behaviour such as biting. It was further suggested that people and other animals will have no warning before the animal subjected to punishment feels forced to bite.
- Physical injuries to the animal and to the neck in particular.
Further anecdotal evidence was presented to a court in 2001, in a dangerous dogs case after Ostarra Langridge was prosecuted when one of her dogs attacked and killed another dog whilst on a walk. A control order, rather than a destruction order, was imposed as the magistrates accepted the defense that Miss Langridge’s dog’s aggressive behaviour was attributable to the effects of the shock collar. ‘Miss Langridge sought the help of a behaviourist when her dogs started to run away from her on their walks along the beach. The dogs were given shock collars, which Miss Langridge was told to keep on for three months and activate whenever they misbehaved. But the first time the dogs got a shock was by mistake, after a small dog they were walking past made Miss Langridge jump. From then on her pets associated the shocks with small dogs and became afraid of them. When Miss Langridge described the day in July when her dogs turned on a Shih Tzu she had tears in her eyes. She stated “They connected the pain of the electric shock with little dogs because of the first time I used the collar. The day that machine came in this house I regret.”’ (The Argus, Collars Turned Dogs into Killers).

This is why we believe that banning these devices to the clearest and most enforceable means of addressing this issue.