BRIEFING PAPER

RESPONSIBLE DOG OWNERSHIP

Although responsible ownership should be a permanent feature in every dog’s life, some will have irresponsible owners, or owners that train their dogs to behave aggressively. The Kennel Club runs the Good Citizen Dog Training Scheme which provides training from a basic to an advanced level and works to strengthen the bond between people and dogs. However, the influence of human behaviour on dogs is largely ignored by current legislation which instead defines certain types of dogs as inherently dangerous.

We believe that to better address the issue of dangerous dogs, government should focus on the ‘deed not breed’ of the dog, and target those persons responsible for any type of dog that behaves aggressively.

‘DANGEROUS’ DOGS

There is currently a plethora of legislation addressing ‘dangerous’ dogs, with at least nine pieces of legislation dating back to 1871. This causes confusion amongst enforcers and courts about which legislation to use and when.

Currently the law on dangerous dogs refers to specific breeds of dogs as ‘dangerous’. The Kennel Club believes breed specific legislation ignores the most important factors that contribute to biting incidents – primarily anti-social behaviour by irresponsible dog owners who train their dogs to be aggressive or do not train their dogs adequately. All dog owners must take responsibility for their dogs as any dog in the wrong hands has the potential to be dangerous – as is demonstrated by the number of biting incidents involving types of dogs that are not classified as dangerous under current legislation.

Consequently, current legislation based on assumed breed traits that ignores the influence of the dog’s keeper in training and socialising their dog has failed to prevent a significant number of dog attacks or dog related incidents (there were 6,740 admissions for dog bites and strikes in 2013)\(^1\) and kenneling costs associated with breed specific legislation have been described as ‘considerable’\(^2\). Furthermore, it has made banned breeds fashionable and attractive to people who want to flout the law and use dogs to be aggressive and intimidating. This contributes to the problem of creating so called ‘status dogs’. The Kennel

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Club firmly believes that repealing breed specific legislation would lessen the appeal of these dogs and also reduce cases of animal cruelty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At present there is a lack of detailed data to explain why dog bite related incidents may occur in order that prevention measures can be put in place. In order to aid this understanding, more data would need to exist – for example, on the medical and behavioural history of the individual dog involved, what those involved did at the time of the incident, and the connection between dog behaviour and the severity of bite inflicted. Research suggests there are a range of factors that may contribute to dog biting incidents and dog-related fatalities, though each incident is specific to the circumstances. Better investigation of dog bite incidents would result in greater understanding of the potential triggers which could assist in preventing such incidents occurring. At present there is little incentive to gather data relating to dog biting incidents.

With 71 percent of respondents to a Defra consultation agreeing that breed specific legislation should be repealed, we believe that all relevant dog control legislation should be updated and consolidated and replaced with preventative legislation based on current scientific understanding of dog behaviour, instead of stereotypes regarding specific breeds.

In the meantime, if breed specific legislation cannot be removed it should be time-limited with a ‘sunset clause’ commitment from the government to reassess the issue at a specified period.

IN SUMMARY TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH AND WELFARE OF PUPPIES BEING BRED, WE BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Update, consolidate and, where necessary, replace existing legislation on dog control with preventative legislation and measures based on the principle of ‘deed not breed’
- Investigate all serious and fatal dog bite incidents using the services of a suitable behaviourist to understand the causes, and aid effective preventative measures
- Support education programmes such as the Kennel Club Good Citizen Dog Training Scheme, which teaches people about responsible dog ownership
- As a minimum, time-limit breed specific legislation with a ‘sunset clause’
