



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Dogs (Amendment) Bill: Dogs Trust

19 October 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Pat Doherty

Mr Simpson Gibson

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Mr Francie Molloy

Mr George Savage

Witnesses:

Mr Chris Laurence) Dogs Trust

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):

Mr Laurence, welcome to this meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. It is good of you to attend and to present your evidence. The floor is yours for between 10 and 15 minutes to make a presentation to the Committee, and I will then open it up to questions from Committee members.

Mr Chris Laurence (Dogs Trust):

Thank you for inviting me. I am sorry that I was unable to make it last Tuesday, I was speaking at another meeting, and it was not possible for me to be here.

Dogs Trust is the largest canine welfare charity in the UK. We deal with approximately 16,000 dogs each year and 10% of those come from Northern Ireland. We have 18 centres, with one centre in Ballymena, one in the Republic, two in Scotland, one in Wales and the rest in England. I practised as a veterinary surgeon for 30 years, I worked with the RSPCA for five years, and I have been with Dogs Trust for a little over seven years.

In discussing the Dogs (Amendment) Bill, I want to give the Committee some data on stray dogs in Northern Ireland. I have some graphs for the Committee, which show the proportion of stray dogs in Northern Ireland versus the whole of the rest of the UK. The top graph shows that roughly 10% of the stray dogs in the UK are picked up in Northern Ireland, which, relative to the human population, is a significantly high proportion.

The second graph shows that a very significant proportion of stray dogs that are euthanized as a result of there being nowhere for them to go are from Northern Ireland. Thankfully, that number is reducing, but almost 40% of those dogs came from Northern Ireland last year, which is a big concern to Dogs Trust. Interestingly, Northern Ireland is alone in the UK in having dog licences, and one wonders what value the dog licence has in reducing strays and controlling the euthanasia of unwanted dogs. On that basis, Dogs Trust wants dog licensing to end in Northern Ireland. I recognise that I may be a fairly lone voice in saying that, but it is a point that I must make.

I have also provided members with documents on microchipping. One of the other roles that I have is as the chairman of the Microchip Advisory Group (MAG). That group was established by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) primarily to look at the veterinary consequences of microchipping. It has developed over the years to keep data on adverse reactions to microchips and to produce codes of practice for the distributors of microchips and those who operate the databases. I am aware that some of the evidence that the Committee heard was against microchipping, and I want to correct some of the misapprehensions about it.

The document gives the Committee an idea of the proportion of adverse reactions to microchipping, but I must put that data in perspective. Between five million and six million microchips have been implanted in dogs, cats and other small animals in the UK since the inception of microchipping in the mid-1990s, and we have received just over 400 reports of adverse reactions. It is unreasonable to assume that every adverse reaction has been reported, but, even if there was significant under-reporting, the proportion of adverse reactions would still be very small.

The document also shows that almost 60% of the adverse reactions were caused by migration, which, in itself, is not a significant problem if dogs are properly scanned. Scanning a dog properly involves starting behind the ears and scanning all the way back to the bottom of the ribcage and as far down as its elbows, because that is where microchips are. There is another good reason for scanning that whole area, because in the UK we implant microchips between the shoulder blades on the top of the neck, whereas in continental countries almost all microchips are implanted in the left side of the neck. Therefore, if one does not scan the whole area, one will miss imported microchips. Migration makes up 60% of the adverse reactions, but I do not consider it to be a significant problem as far as the efficacy of microchips is concerned.

I touched on the codes of practice that MAG introduced. The first of those is for distributors, and it deals with the type of microchip that is implanted, but I will return to that in a moment. It also deals with the training of those who implant the microchips, because the technique of implantation is extremely important to how well the microchips work. The second code of practice relates to the databases and the functioning of those databases to ensure that they work effectively. The microchip simply contains a 15-digit number, and it is of no use without the database, which contains the contact details of the dog's owner. That code of practice deals with things such as keeping proper backups and providing a 24-hour service.

The Deputy Chairperson:

We were briefly inquorate. However, a member has just joined us again and we are back in quorum. You may continue. Sorry about that.

Mr Laurence:

As I said, the code of practice requires there to be 24-hour contact with the database. That means that if a dog is found at any time of day, the data can be retrieved and the owner contacted.

That brings me on to some points about the draft legislation that need to be addressed. There is nothing in the legislation that makes it compulsory to update the name and address of the keeper of the dog, which is clearly vital information. As I said, the microchip on its own is simply a number, and unless there is some compulsion to update the data, you run the risk of detecting microchips but being unable to find the owners. That is critical, and without that update of data, the system runs the risk of being ineffective.

I am aware that there is some opposition to compulsory microchipping as part of the licensing process. The one question that no one who opposes the concept has been able to answer for me is how it could conceivably make things worse. We are talking about a relatively small amount of money given the lifetime cost of keeping a dog. The Dogs Trust generally charges £10 to implant microchips and will do it for nothing if an owner is on earnings-related state benefits. Veterinary practices charge about £30. That is an insignificant amount compared to the total cost of a dog over its lifetime and is not even a huge amount of money when compared to the licence fee; therefore, the cost of microchipping is not a disincentive. Microchipping also has a number of advantages. Microchips cannot be lost or removed when dogs are stolen, and, if there is ever an argument about ownership, that can easily be resolved by looking at the data that is held about the microchip on the database. Dogs Trust considers microchipping to be a very significant advantage, and we strongly support its compulsory use.

One thing that is not clearly defined in the draft legislation is whether a control order must be imposed when a licence is issued or whether it can be imposed at any time in between. It makes no sense that if a dog is transgressing in some way and a dog warden wants to impose a condition on the licence that that should have to be done on the spot. If the dog is not microchipped, the dog warden should be empowered to implant a microchip there and then. It is not difficult to train dog wardens to implant microchips, and significant numbers of Dogs Trust staff are so trained.

We also strongly support the introduction of the offence of a dog attacking another dog. We seem to be getting an increased number of reports of dogs attacking dogs. That is particularly true of large dogs attacking small dogs in parks, and it is very easy for a large dog to kill a small dog. We are very happy to see that in the Bill, but I wonder why it is restricted to dogs attacking dogs and why it has not been broadened to dogs attacking protected animals as defined in the Welfare of Animals Bill. As a welfare issue, if a dog attacks a cat or a pet rabbit it is as significant as if it attacks another dog.

There is a list of conditions in the Bill that may be imposed as part of a control order by a dog warden. That list is very reasonable, but it does not cover all the things that one might conceivably wish to have imposed in an order. I would like the statement “this list is not exhaustive” to be attached at the end of the list to make it clear that a dog warden can impose other issues on a dog as part of an order. That is all that I have to say. I am very happy to answer any questions that you may have.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation. Given the nature of the discussions, I declare an interest as a local councillor for your information. Other Committee members may wish to do the same.

You said that the Dogs Trust implants dogs, and you do not see why wardens cannot do it directly. In doing that implanting, have there ever been any complaints from people who did not specifically ask you to implant their dog?

Mr Laurence:

No. Not that I know of. Implantation is a relatively skilled job. A big needle is used, and if the dog is not properly restrained while it is being implanted and the person is not skilled in doing it, it is very easy for it all to go wrong. The moral of the tale is never microchip your sister-in-law's dog when it has not been properly restrained by your sister-in-law, because, if you do, the microchip will fall out onto the floor two weeks later. I hold my hands up and plead guilty to that particular crime. Therefore, it is important that it is done properly.

We limit the staff who are allowed to microchip so that they do it regularly and, therefore, become skilled at doing it. There is some evidence, albeit anecdotal, that the skill of the implanter is a very significant factor when it comes to the loss or migration of microchips.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you maintain your own database of animals that are microchipped, or how is that process managed?

Mr Laurence:

Four databases run across the whole of the UK: Petlog, which is a not-for-profit arm of the Kennel Club; Anibase, which is a commercial database run by Animalcare; AVID, which is international and holds a series of databases around the world; and Pet Protect, whose database is run from Canada, but it is a UK insurance firm. Those databases all run pretty well to the code of practice that I talked about, which MAG introduced. They are available 24/7 and function extremely well. A load of back-up information is held on those databases to make them work.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Finally, I agree that if we are going to have such a system, it is essential that the information is accurate and up to date. It would be logical to make it compulsory for people to update, but is there not a huge variety in the costs of updating on the different systems?

Mr Laurence:

There is not a huge variety. There are essentially two ways of doing it, and there are two schemes run by the databases. First, you can pay an enhanced registration fee when the microchip is implanted, and that costs about £15. That enhanced registration fee allows you to update your contact details as regularly as you wish to do so for the life of the dog. Therefore, if you wanted to move house every day, you could do that, and there would be no further cost.

The alternative is that you pay every time you update the database, and the charge for that varies from £5 to £7. Therefore, it is not a significant amount of money against the total cost of the dog.

Mr Molloy:

I declare an interest as a local councillor in Dungannon. In relation to stray dogs, are any of the 10% that are transferred out of the country from Dogs Trust?

Mr Laurence:

They are indeed. We take roughly 1,000 dogs out of Northern Ireland to be rehomed in the UK, and we rehome about 500 or 600 dogs a year from the Ballymena centre. That is where the figure of 10% of intake dogs comes from.

Mr Molloy:

Do you not see the need for a dog licence and microchipping at the same time?

Mr Laurence:

It is really a question of the licence system's function. If it is to raise money, which goes back into the dog warden service, one should accept that that is the sole function of the licence, because if you have effective microchipping, and if the majority of dogs are compulsorily microchipped, you do not need the licence. However, that raises the issue of how you fund the dog warden service, but we have to be clear about the purpose of the licence. If it is purely to fund the dog warden service, one should at least accept that as a fact.

Mr Molloy:

If people want to link their dog's licence to a microchip, do you see a mechanism for a lifetime licence with a set fee at the beginning?

Mr Laurence:

That would be a reasonable option to offer. Given that the average life expectancy of a dog is around 11 years, if someone wanted to microchip a puppy, a fee based on multiplying the annual licence fee by a factor of 10, which would include a discount, might be attractive to some dog owners. The disadvantage is that it is a bit of a disincentive to keeping the database up to date. If dogs have to be licensed annually, contact details are more likely to be kept up to date because of annual contact with dog owners.

Mr Molloy:

Do you accept that something similar to the Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN) system for cars would be a deterrent against people not keeping their contact details up to date? Under such a system, if people did not register change of ownership, they would be liable for a dog's misdemeanours over the next 10 years?

Mr Laurence:

I was going to raise that point during our session on the Animal Welfare Bill. The Bill clearly states that the owner of a dog is responsible for its welfare 24/7. It would be nice to have some provision in the Bill for a form that showed that the name and address registered on the microchip database is that of the owner and, therefore, the person responsible. That would be a reasonable impetus for keeping data up to date. We would like, exactly as you said, the sort of system that exists for vehicle licences. In fact, some microchip companies already provide a tear-off bit at the bottom of the registration form that owners get after registering their dog. That allows the current owner and any new owner to sign the form, send it back to the database and, therefore, keep the database up to date. To me, that seems to be a logical system for the implementation of compulsory microchipping.

Mr Molloy:

I was interested to hear that microchipping is a fairly skilled job and that the chip can fall out. Depending on what data is on the chip, if a chip falls out, it could be re-implanted in another dog, which would distort the records that are kept.

Mr Laurence:

Let me make it clear that a microchip is a sterile implement when it is implanted. As it is an electronic device, it cannot be sterilised by boiling, because that would kill the electronics. Sterilising a microchip is a fairly skilled task that requires a very toxic gas, ethylene oxide. Taking a microchip out of one dog and putting it into another dog, while maintaining its sterility in between, would be very difficult.

It is actually quite difficult to find a microchip in a dog. Occasionally, with a very thin-skinned dog, such as a lurcher, the microchip can be felt. However, for the average dog that is not the case. For example, my golden retriever has a microchip, and I have absolutely no idea where it is, because I cannot feel it. However, the scanner can detect it.

Mr Molloy:

Are you saying that, if a microchip is not properly implanted, it could fall out onto the ground?

Mr Laurence:

Yes. To microchip a dog, a needle is put in and the trigger is pushed to eject the microchip from the end. The end of the needle should be held while it is withdrawn so that the withdrawing of the needle does not encourage the microchip to come back to the surface. Massaging the skin tends to seal the hole. In some species, for example, with tortoises, a little bit of glue is put on the skin to seal the hole, because tortoise skin is much less elastic than dog skin. That is why doing it properly and implanters being properly trained are such important issues.

Mr Molloy:

At least with tagging people, the tag is on the outside. I wonder how many people would like to have a microchip implanted in them.

Mr Laurence:

Around a year or 18 months ago, Dogs Trust did some survey work that asked members of the general public whether they would support the compulsory microchipping of dogs and whether there was any opposition to that. Overt opposition was much less than 10% and approximately 70% of people would support compulsory microchipping. Another 10% to 15% were not strongly supportive of it, but not against it, and the residual portion of people were neutral.

Mr Molloy:

Are you talking about microchipping dogs or microchipping humans?

Mr Laurence:

I am talking about microchipping dogs.

Mr Molloy:

They might not be so much in favour if it were microchipping humans. What type of information is held on a microchip? There seems to be a variety of opinion. Some people seem to argue that you need the licence in order to link to the owner and that the microchip would not necessarily do that. Can it do that?

Mr Laurence:

It can. The microchip contains a 15-digit number and nothing else. The first three digits of that indicate the name of the manufacturer of the microchip. Those numbers are allocated by the International Standards Organisation, so there is a guarantee that every microchip is a unique

number. There is also a tracing system from the manufacturer to the distributor to the implanter to the dog owner, data on all of which is kept on the database. If a dog owner moves house and does not update the database, I can trace the microchip back to the person who implanted it. Occasionally, people do not update the data; the dog is found as a stray, and it has been implanted by a veterinary surgeon. You can ring the veterinary surgeon and ask whether Mrs Bloggs who used to live at 24 Acacia Avenue is still his or her client and ask where she lives now? There is, therefore, a secondary way of tracing the microchip, even if the primary route goes wrong.

Mr Savage:

Is a dog on a farm classed as a farm animal?

Mr Laurence:

Under the Animal Welfare Bill, it would be classed as a protected animal.

Mr Savage:

I ask the question because inspectors who come from the farm quality assurance scheme see the farmer's dog and want to know whether it has been wormed and whether the farmer has proof of that from the vet. Do you believe that the microchipping of dogs should be compulsory?

Mr Laurence:

I do. One of the issues is the ability to identify a dog. That is relevant in a number of areas. You mentioned a situation in which someone will want to know whether a particular dog has been wormed. The only way that you can be sure that a dog has been wormed is if it has a microchip in it. One Border collie looks very much like another Border collie. If you present your Border collie to me, in my capacity as a veterinary surgeon, and I inject the appropriate wormer, I can only write a certificate to say that it is definitely that dog that has been wormed if the dog is microchipped. I will scan the dog at the same time as I inject it. The same applies to the rabies legislation, which comes into effect when owners want to take their dogs abroad. You could argue that any vaccination certificate for a dog should have the microchip number on it, because that is the only way that you know that it is that individual dog.

Mr Savage:

That is part of the traceability; you can trace that dog back to the farm.

Mr Laurence:

Yes. As part of the compulsory microchipping system, we would like to see a requirement for puppies to be microchipped before they leave their breeder. If that were done, the puppies could be traced all the way through their lives. I am sure that you are aware that inherited disease in dogs has been a significant issue, following a BBC programme from a couple of years ago. One way to control that and to gain good data on inherited disease is through traceability back to the breeders. Microchips have lots of functions. The function in relation to straying is the primary function, but there are traceability issues and, in particular, issues in respect of dogs that have a dog control order. The only way that you can be sure that a particular dog has a dog control order is if it is microchipped at the time.

Mr Savage:

I am conscious of traceability. I am glad to hear you say that, because I think that there has been some doubt about the compulsory element over the past few days. There is a query over whether a dog on a farm is classed as a farm animal. If it has to comply with regulations, has to be wormed and has to meet the requirements expected of the inspectors who come round from the farm quality assurance scheme, surely it must be classed as a farm animal?

Mr Laurence:

That is a moot point. The EU does not class a dog as a farmed animal, because it is not eaten.

Mr Savage:

That answers my question. No matter what trouble a dog gets into, the single farm payment received by its owner will not be affected, because the EU does not recognise it as a farm animal.

Mr Laurence:

The EU legislation does not recognise dogs as farm animals; it recognises them as companion animals, which is one of the reasons why there is much less legislation from Brussels about dogs than about farmed species. All of the farm animal legislation from the EU is based on the fact that the animals are eaten, so the issue is food safety.

Echinococcus is a form of tapeworm, which is one of the major risks from dogs. One of the reasons why we have a derogation from the EU rabies directive is that there is one particular type of echinococcus that is prevalent in the middle part of Europe — Switzerland, France and northern Italy. If that type gets into humans, its effects mirror that of a terminal cancer. So, if you get it, it may kill you. That is one of the reasons why traceability and proper worming of imported dogs is critical.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You have highlighted the high number of stray dogs in Northern Ireland. In your written submission, you state that 60% of all dogs euthanized in the UK were Northern Ireland dogs. That is an unacceptably high level.

You said that you do not think the licensing scheme is effective. What would be effective in reducing the number of stray animals and preventing such high numbers of dogs from being euthanized? I appreciate that you are involved in some of the organisational aspects of education and have worked with about 8,000 schoolchildren. What are the key aspects that should be concentrated on to get those figures down?

Mr Laurence:

If you look at the history of stray dogs and euthanasia for the whole of the UK and the Republic, the numbers have come down very significantly over the past 10 to 15 years. Two issues seem to have had the most influence: education of dog owners and better control of breeding. Over the years, we have spent a lot of money subsidising neutering schemes for dog owners, including in Northern Ireland. It is interesting that the most relevant data comes from the Republic, where we started subsidising neutering schemes about five years ago. The number of dogs euthanized as unwanted strays has dropped dramatically since we started doing that. Before that, the rate had been drifting downwards. So there is quite good evidence that those two issues have a significant influence.

Quite why the work that we have done here has not had as much of an effect as it has in the rest of the UK is a wee bit of a mystery. Much better co-ordination is required between the Bill's provisions, local authorities and dog wardens to better get across the message to dog owners that chucking the dog out for a walk on its own is not the thing to do.

One of the good things in the Welfare of Animals Bill, which we will look at this afternoon, is the abandonment clause, which makes it a specific offence to abandon dogs. So there are some legislative measures that could be taken, but we would like to co-ordinate much better all of the interested parties in educating dog owners on how to properly look after their dogs.

The Deputy Chairperson:

What additional information do you suggest? Is there a lack of literature going out from the Department? How would you co-ordinate the various parties?

Mr Laurence:

There has to be a carrot and stick approach. The stick will be the Welfare of Animals Bill when it comes into force. If licensing is retained, the carrot could be a reduction in the price of having an animal neutered, which makes sense because it would help to control the dog population.

There is a syndrome in some areas whereby people get a dog, it accidentally gets pregnant, little Jimmy from next door turns up and says, "Oh, lovely puppies", takes one home, gets cuffed around the ear by his mother, but is told that he can keep the dog after all, and, lo and behold, in six or seven months, that bitch is pregnant, and the whole cycle starts again.

We have to get much better at targeting the sorts of areas where that is an issue. That is not something that we have done particularly in Northern Ireland, but we did it in south Wales, where it seems to be having an effect. Rather than waiting for people to come to us, we go to them.

If we put together a scheme, local authorities say that if you keep a dog in local authority housing stock, you have to have permission to do so. The dog has to be microchipped. That then gives us a list of people who we can go and see and say: "We know you have a dog. Has it been neutered? If not, why not? Can we help you to get that done?" A more proactive approach, co-ordinated by local authorities or the Assembly, would produce a better result. However, we are talking about a number of years before seeing any significant results.

The Deputy Chairman:

Where has that type of scheme operated?

Mr Laurence:

We have done very well in south Wales, where we have gone to a number of estates. They have not reached the point where the local authority is registering dogs. We went round, knocked on every door, asked, "Have you got a dog?" and followed it on from there. We collect the dog, take it to the vet, get it neutered, and deliver it back.

That has worked very well in south Wales. There is a very proactive dog warden team in Wandsworth in London, and the council has introduced in its tenancy agreements a requirement that if someone keeps a dog, it has to be microchipped and registered with the local authority. They have seen a significant reduction in nuisance dogs, unwanted dogs, and straying dogs. Those two schemes put together would be much more effective.

Mr McCarthy:

People living in a large estate can be tormented by barking dogs from morning to night. What can those innocent people do to have some sort of a decent way of life?

Mr Laurence:

Again, that comes back to tenancy agreements. Dogs bark all day because, more often than not, they have separation-related anxiety. In other words, dogs are a social species, and want to be with people or other dogs. If you leave them alone for eight hours a day when you are at work, the dog is, frankly, terrified and barks at everything that goes past. You then get the public nuisance problem.

The issue is not simply stopping the dog from barking because that does not resolve the welfare problem for the dog. We would not, for instance, rehome a dog with a person who was out at work all day unless we were satisfied that there was some contact with other people during that time. We need to take that welfare-focused approach with those dog owners, and point out to them that what they are causing by leaving their dog to bark is not just a nuisance to the neighbours, but that the dog is barking because it has a significant welfare issue.

People are generally empathetic with their dogs, and if you say that a dog is barking not because it wants to be a nuisance but because it is really upset, they will then realise the issues. Frankly, many of those people should not have a dog.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you for your wisdom. Some of that goes beyond the remit of this Bill, but it was useful information. Again, thank you for your evidence.

