



Dogs Trust Pet Abduction Bill Briefing, May 2024

We welcome the Pet Abduction Bill, and we are pleased that the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is considering a Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM) to bring this important legislation into force in Northern Ireland. It's important that the Bill delivers the following key recommendations:

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Dog Theft to become a specific offence with its own code. This will enable accurate data recording and build visibility of the true scale of the issue.
- Tougher sentencing in line with animal cruelty sentencing guidelines. We recommend a maximum sentence of 5 years, which recognises the sentence of pets and the emotional impact of having a pet stolen.
- Single access point to the microchip databases to help connect lost pets with their owners.

SCALE

Statistics on pet theft are inaccurate and inconsistent because police forces aren't required to record instances of pets being stolen separately in cases of theft. As 'pet theft' currently does not have its own unique identifier code, there is no way of distinguishing which instances included pets alongside other stolen property.

Sadly, most stolen dogs never make it back to their homes. Below is the number of dogs reported stolen each year and their return rates (data from FOI and Direct Line Pet Insurance):

- 2017: 2,126 (average of 25% return rate)
- 2018: 1,848 (average 21% return rate)
- 2019: 1,689 (average of 25% return rate)
- 2020: 2,438 (average of 22% return rate)¹
- 2021: 2,760 (return rate not available)
- 2022: 2,160 (return rate not available)²
- 2023: 2,290 (16% found and returned successfully)³

According to Direct Line, the 10 most stolen dog breeds in 2023 were as follows⁴:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. English Bulldog (50) | 6. Dachshund (16) |
| 2. French Bulldog (37) | 7. Shih Tzu (15) |
| 3. XL Bully (37) | 8. German Shepherd (15) |
| 4. Staffordshire Bull Terrier (34) | 9. Labrador (15) |

¹ <https://www.directlinegroup.co.uk/en/news/brand-news/2022/number-of-dogs-stolen-reaches-a-seven-year-high.html>

² <https://www.directlinegroup.co.uk/en/news/brand-news/2023/300320230.html>

³ <https://www.directlinegroup.co.uk/en/news/brand-news/2024/dog-theft-on-the-up-in-2023.html#:~:text=2%2C290%20dogs%20were%20stolen%20across,started%20tracking%20data%20in%202015>

⁴ Ibid.



5. American Bulldog (19)

10. Chihuahua (14)

Additionally, we have received the following number of views on our 'Dog Theft Advice' webpage:

- 2021: 2,500
- 2022: 1,691
- 2023: 3,097

HUMAN-CANINE BOND

A survey found that 99% of dog owners consider their dogs to be a family member and dog-human bond has been linked to the bond between a parent and a child. Dog ownership has shown to improve physical health, psychological wellbeing as well as reducing loneliness.⁵

It's not surprising that a loss of a dog has a profound impact on its family, particularly on those who have little support from elsewhere. Owners of stolen dogs often feel 'ambiguous loss', which is the term for grief in response to a missing person, due to lack of closure and full understanding of what had happened, as well as 'disenfranchised grief', which describes grief that is not acknowledged by society, causing griever to feel that they cannot grieve openly for fear of not being taken seriously – for example being faced with unsympathetic comments such as 'it's just a dog'. This only extends the time for the griever to recover or come to terms with their loss.⁶

It is important that the Bill does not leave a loophole for perpetrators to take possession of their victim's dog to be used as a form of coercive control or emotional abuse. A study has found that 71% of pet owners who suffered domestic abuse reported that their perpetrator had threatened, injured or killed family pets and 75% have had violence against them used as a threat or means of control.⁷

SENTENCING

Therefore, we believe that current Sentencing Guidelines are not appropriate. In addition to equating animals to 'property' and denying them the right to be considered sentient beings, the Guidelines classify theft based on a combination of the monetary value of the 'property' stolen and the additional 'harm' the crime causes to victims or others. While the harm caused by the theft of a much-loved pet can be taken into account, the sentencing is dictated in part by the monetary value of the dog. Only under extraordinary circumstances would a dog be valued at more than £10,000 which is required for Category 1 sentencing, meaning the courts are limited in handing down tough sentences.

⁵ Stoeckel, L.E; Palley, L.S; Gollub, R.S.; Niemi, S.M.; Evins, A.E. Patterns of Brain Activation When Mothers View Their Own Child and Dog: An fMRI Study. PLoS ONE 2014

⁶ Planchon, L.A, D.I; Stokes, S.; Keller, J. Death of a Companion Cat or Dog and Human Bereavement: Psychosocial Variables. Soc. Anim. 2002

⁷ <https://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk/>



We would like to see tougher sentences in line with animal cruelty sentencing guidelines, recommending a maximum 5-year sentence to recognise the emotional impact of pet theft on the pet owners as well as the suffering of the animal which has been ripped out of their environment.

MICROCHIPPING

Reunification of stolen pets is currently hampered by the lack of a single access point to microchip databases. Cross-checking with such a large number of databases is an administrative burden, while the differences between database provider requirements, charges, processes and standards present an additional risk to pet owners when deciding which database to choose, not knowing whether it is legitimate.