



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
AGRICULTURE AND  
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
(Hansard)

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**Dogs (Amendment) Bill:  
Veterinary Northern Ireland**

12 October 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Dogs (Amendment) Bill: Veterinary Northern Ireland

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr P J Bradley

Mr Trevor Clarke

Mr Willie Clarke

Mr Pat Doherty

Mr William Irwin

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Mr Francie Molloy

Mr George Savage

**Witnesses:**

Mr Andy Mayne )

Mr Brian McAuley ) Veterinary Northern Ireland

Mr Des Thompson )

**The Chairperson (Mr Moutray):**

We have before us today Brian McAuley, Andy Mayne and Des Thompson from Veterinary Northern Ireland. Good morning. You are very welcome. Please give your presentation and then we will leave some time for members' questions.

**Mr Des Thompson (Veterinary Northern Ireland):**

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to present the views of the veterinary profession in

Northern Ireland on the Dogs (Amendment) Bill. I will introduce you to the team. Brian McAuley is president of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) and Andy Mayne is president elect of the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland (AVSPNI).

The veterinary profession in Northern Ireland would like to offer support to the majority of the provisions in the Dogs (Amendment) Bill. The basic concept of dogs in society is that responsibly kept dogs are of enormous benefit, both physically and mentally, to the whole community. It is a question of recognising that in the Western World dogs are integrated into the family in a high proportion of households. That also applies to non-family households and, in particular, people living alone. It is absolutely essential that anyone who keeps a dog is not only physically and mentally capable of looking after that animal but also that the dog is kept in such conditions that it can exercise the five freedoms: freedom from hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury and disease; fear and stress; and the freedom to express normal behaviour. The areas where we wish to specifically comment on the proposals are microchipping, control of dangerous dogs, licences for elderly and underprivileged owners, dogs attacking other dogs, dog bites in children, and control in public places.

We fully support the exemption from the licence fee for all assistance dogs but believe that they too should be identified by microchipping. We support the proposal to make microchipping compulsory as part of the licensing procedure. It is essential that the proposals are backed by the latest information on microchips. There are many different forms of microchips and scanners on the commercial market. Although there is compatibility between most microchips and scanners, not all microchips can be read by all scanners, which could potentially create a major management problem for the authorities. Those issues must be addressed adequately before the Bill is enacted.

Adequate qualification and training of the personnel who will be implanting microchips must also be addressed. There are significant dangers to the health and welfare of dogs if the personnel implanting microchips are inadequately qualified and trained. Having said that, properly implanted microchips are safe and are the best way to positively identify any animal.

Electronic identification is now also the normal means of identifying all horses, cattle and sheep. Once the implanting is carried out, the whole procedure can be of value only if there is a

well-controlled database backing the system. That must be available 24/7 to be of value, as incidents involving stray and poorly controlled dogs frequently occur at weekends and outside business hours.

Microchips and the databases that back them in the UK are controlled by the Microchip Advisory Group, which is hosted by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA). In the pack that I have given the Committee are papers explaining the working of that group. I do not have a copy for every member, but you have that backup information.

Should we be unfortunate enough to have a rabies outbreak as a result of the reduction of quarantine restrictions on imported animals from many parts of the world, microchip identification of dogs would be invaluable for control.

We are surprised and disappointed that no attempt has been made to amend the Dangerous Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. We fully support efforts to control and eliminate dog fighting and the breeding and training of fighting dogs. The 1991 Order refers to dogs of the pit bull terrier type, yet it makes no reasonable effort to define such an animal. There is no such breed of dog, and, as a result, its interpretation is impossible.

The veterinary profession worldwide, backed by veterinary behaviourists, is totally opposed to any attempt to classify dangerous dogs according to breed. A report by the scientific committee of the BSAVA states that:

“Variable results as to breed risk for aggression has been found”

However:

“No evidence exists that the currently listed ‘dangerous’ breeds in DDA 1991...show an increased frequency of biting behaviour as compared to other breeds.”

The report also found that the only fair way of dealing with dangerous dogs is to employ the “deed not breed” principle. Each situation should be dealt with according to the evidence presented at the time of an incident, irrespective of the breed involved.

Although we cannot support the breed-related legislation, it is essential that an appeals procedure is available to anyone who is unfortunate enough to acquire a puppy, which, on maturity, may resemble a pit-bull-terrier-type dog, whatever that may be. Those dogs can be picked up, impounded and kept in solitary confinement indefinitely when the owner refuses, with total justification, automatic euthanasia. The current working of the legislation is not acting in

the best interests of dogs' welfare. Included in members' packs is the joint response from the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and BSAVA on the consultation on the revision of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 in GB and a report from the scientific committee of the BSAVA on the dangerous dogs legislation.

We fully support the concept of a reduced licence fee for those over 65 and those on supplementary state benefits. In many cases, dogs are an enormous support for owners who live alone or who are on a low income. We firmly believe that the physical and mental well-being of the elderly is greatly enhanced by the companionship, and, in many cases, the security, that they enjoy from a companion animal. Society should not put financial barriers in the way of that potential benefit.

We note that those individuals would be restricted to having only one dog. Although the principle of such a restriction is acceptable, there are occasions when one dog approaches the end of its life, and, in some cases, it is best to have an overlap period with a new animal to prevent the owner being deprived of their only companion. That overlap period would, of necessity, be short. One other excellent proposal is that neutered dogs will incur a lower licence fee.

There is the possibility that a dog in any household would automatically be registered under a grandparent's name, while the true owner is the son, daughter or even grandchild. It is difficult to advise on how that anomaly can be countered, but thought should be given to that loophole. One helpful way to identify the owners is with the microchip.

We fully support continuing the exemption from the licence fee for guide dogs and its extension to cover all assistance dogs. However, the Government has an extra educational obligation to ensure that the privileges given to guide dogs, such as entry to shops and onto public transport, whether land, sea or air, are automatically given to the variety of assistance dogs that are so useful in the community.

There is a serious deficiency in existing legislation on the issue of dogs attacking other dogs, and the veterinary profession fully supports the matter being included in the Bill. We regularly see dogs with injuries inflicted by other dogs. The vast majority of such cases simply involve two dogs getting into an argument, with equal blame on both sides. We occasionally see cases when one dog has been severely injured by another. In most cases that is a one-off and first occurrence.

Unfortunately, on occasion, it is a recurring incident and may recur in the future.

Existing law makes the dog warden's job extremely difficult, as the best that he or she can do is advise that the dog is kept properly under control. There is no power to prosecute the owner of the attacking dog. The proposed legislation gives the power not only to prosecute but to ensure that owners are responsible for covering veterinary fees for any treatment required.

It would be sensible to include in the Bill a prohibition on encouraging dogs to attack people, livestock or other dogs. It would be more comprehensive if that were not species specific and covered people, livestock or any protected animal as defined in the Animal Welfare Bill. Cats are attacked on occasion, and there is no provision in this legislation to prevent that. The penalty for urging a dog to attack a person or another dog should be significantly greater than for an accidental attack.

Although there is no doubt that responsibly kept dogs are an asset to the whole community, it is equally true that irresponsible dog ownership is a plague on society. Worldwide research shows that dog bites are more commonly inflicted on children by the family pet rather than the unfamiliar dog. Epidemiology tells us that children who are brought up with dogs benefit greatly in many ways from the experience. However, we must accept that there are risks, regardless of how small, and it is up to society to identify those risks and, at best, do all that is possible to eliminate them or, at worst, to minimise them.

Many educational programmes in European countries, including Germany, Italy and Switzerland, to name a few, look at ways to reduce the risk of dog bites to children. A selection of papers is in members' information packs.

The programme that is readily available for schools and individuals in this country is the Blue Dog programme. That comes with a booklet and interactive CD and is aimed at primary-school children between three and six years of age. The programme was thoroughly researched by a multidisciplinary team of veterinary surgeons, behaviourists, child psychologists, paediatricians, ethologists, paediatric surgeons, general physicians and educationalists.

According to a Belgian study, 65% of dog bite accidents occur in the home during everyday activity, mostly involving children with a median age of five years and dogs familiar to them. Of

those, 86% were triggered by an interaction initiated by the child. The vast majority occurred when no adult was present. That research and collaboration between that multidisciplinary body of professionals led to the development of the Blue Dog interactive programme.

The programme has been operating in many countries for several years. It has been found to be most effective when a parent is involved with the child. It has been shown that the interactive CD is an effective way to teach children the practicalities of living and interacting with dogs. Introducing the Blue Dog programme to the primary-school educational system would help to reduce the number of intra-family dog bite incidents. That could significantly reduce the burden associated with those injuries on the National Health Service.

Part of responsible dog ownership is ensuring that a dog is adequately under control, whether on private property or in a public place. The difficulty is that the legal interpretation, as defined in the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983, which is being amended by the Bill, is:

“in relation to a dog, means restrained by a chain or other sufficient leash held by a person exercising proper control over the dog;”

That definition is adequate when one is considering public roads where there is a significant danger of causing a road traffic accident. It is also reasonable in children’s play parks; however, when one considers the definition of “a public place” and “under control”, there is nowhere, other than the owner’s property, where it is legally permissible to have a dog off a lead.

One of the five freedoms that are essential to support acceptable animal welfare standards is the freedom to behave normally. Many dogs have no space to run freely. It has been shown conclusively that dogs deprived of regular free exercise are more likely to develop behavioural problems. Aggression is one such problem that the Bill aims at least to reduce and, at best, eliminate. It is essential that local authorities recognise that free exercise in any urban environment is vital for dogs. Interpreted literally, the Bill would eliminate any possibility of an urban dog getting free exercise without going into a rural area, where livestock chasing and worrying become more likely. It is essential that the definitions of “under control” and “public place” are adjusted to ensure that responsible dog owners can facilitate free exercise.

The other factor that needs to be addressed sensibly deals with dogs on their own property. Dogs on private property should be under control, and it is unacceptable for a dog to attack a person delivering post or any goods to that property. It is equally unacceptable for an owner to be penalised if the dog attacks an intruder.

In summary, the veterinary profession supports the principles of the amendments proposed to the Dogs (Amendment) Bill, with some provisos. We support compulsory microchipping of all dogs, provided that adequate provision is made for the use of standardised chips and readers, a good centralised database is available 24/7 and personnel are adequately trained.

We support the principle that dangerous dogs must be controlled but cannot support breed-related legislation. We fully support the exemption of licence fees for assistance dogs and the reduced licence fee for neutered dogs and those belonging to elderly or underprivileged owners.

We support the aspect of the Bill that deals with dogs attacking other dogs, but we believe that it should also cover other protected species. There is nothing new in the proposed legislation that would be likely to reduce dog bites on children. However, it would be helpful if the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), in conjunction with the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were to put some resources into the Blue Dog educational programme. Support for that project may significantly reduce the incidence of dog bites on children.

We support the principle of dogs being kept under lead control on or near public roads to prevent traffic accidents. We believe that the definitions of “public place” and “under control” should be amended to ensure that the facility to freely exercise is available at all times to urban dogs and their owners.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you for your presentation, Des. Why do you believe that there need to be two systems of dog identification, namely microchipping and licensing?

**Mr Thompson:**

Microchipping is the more important. The fact that we already have dog licensing means that there is a system that works to some degree. It is probably easier to marry the two systems than operate them separately.

**The Chairperson:**

Your association is opposed to breed-specific legislation. Does that mean that it would allow



currently banned dogs back onto the streets in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Thompson:**

We would be happy for the legislation to be changed so that it is not breed specific but relates to the activities of an individual dog, rather than a breed. We have no reason to believe and no information has been published anywhere to say that one particular breed of dog is more dangerous than another. Common sense dictates that a large dog is more dangerous than a small dog, but a Jack Russell will fight just the same as a Great Dane. My colleagues may have something to add to that.

**Mr Beggs:**

You made the point that there are various chips and scanners and they are not all compatible. We do not want to introduce a system where someone has to go around with two or three scanners. There would be an additional unnecessary cost to that, but, at the same time, one would not want to be prescriptive in identifying one particular brand or make, because the element of competition would be lost. Where can we get information on a definition that will ensure compatibility of chips and between different types of scanners? That could be included in our recommendations to ensure an efficient operation.

**Mr Thompson:**

Thank you for that sensible and reasonable question. The Microchip Advisory Group gets all the manufacturers and databases together, and only one chip, the Trovan chip, which is available in the USA and rarely occurs here, is not truly compatible. All of the other chips are compatible. There are different chips, but all scanners will read all the chips other than the Trovan one. The Microchip Advisory Group will guide you on that. It is a very effective group, and it is internationally based. It does not control the French and German markets, but then no one controls the French anyway.

**Mr Molloy:**

Was Mr Thompson talking about French dogs or French people?

**Mr Thompson:**

Both, presumably.

**Mr Irwin:**

Thank you for your presentation. The Dangerous Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 talks of the pit bull type. You said that there is no such breed of dog, and I have sympathy with that because, on my council, I have had experience of having to bring in experts from England to identify a dog because no one could identify it locally.

**Mr Thompson:**

I am not sure that the experts from England identified it either, but that is beside the point.

**Mr Irwin:**

That is probably right. You also said that each situation should be dealt with on the evidence provided at the time of an incident, but surely we are trying to reduce the number of incidents as much as possible. I agree that identifying dangerous dogs is difficult, but, somewhere along the line, we have to find a way of eliminating incidents. How do we do that without identifying dangerous breeds?

**Mr Thompson:**

I know exactly where you are coming from, and I accept entirely that it is bad legislation that waits for a problem before doing something about it. However, there is no evidence to indicate that one particular breed of dog is worse than any other. The whole veterinary profession and behaviourists are opposed to that view. For my sins, I am the president of the companion animal behaviour therapy study group. A lot of work has been done to try to identify aggressive breeds and dogs that may or may not be aggressive in later life, but even the experts working on that have not been successful.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Thank you for the presentation. Do you concede that some breeds should not be with children? I am not saying that they should be banned, but should the likes of pit bulls play with children, particularly in an urban environment where there is little room for the dog, never mind the family? Do you concede that an opinion exists that, if they attack a child, certain breeds of dog would be more likely to kill the child?

**Mr Thompson:**

Certainly, on the latter point, there is no doubt that the pit-bull-terrier type, if you accept that it

exists, and, similarly, the Stafford bull terrier and the American bull terrier have very strong jaws — stronger jaws that probably most other breeds. However, there is no evidence anywhere to indicate their temperament. The difficulty lies with the people who own them. At the BVA congress a couple of weeks ago, we had a presentation on that, and it is a question of status dogs owned by jobs. That is where the problem lies.

As regards dogs living with children, my children, who are now aged 40 and under, were brought up with German shepherd dogs. I have no hesitation in saying that that is a perfectly sensible and satisfactory thing to do, provided that the parents are prepared to be there and to control the dog.

**Mr McAuley (Veterinary Northern Ireland):**

There is a lot of variation in the breeds, and I agree with that point. Some of the larger breeds are really tame and make excellent pets. At the same time, however, some of them are used as guard dogs. I accept your point, but behaviour is not breed specific. A lot depends on how the dog is trained and brought up.

**Mr Mayne (Veterinary Northern Ireland):**

It is a bit like saying that you will lock a person up because he is more likely to commit a crime. We do not do that with people.

**Mr W Clarke:**

They usually do that with the working classes.

There is a suggestion that microchipping can endanger a dog's health. I am not sure whether it is scientifically proven, but people have e-mailed the Committee to say that it has not been fully tested.

**Mr Thompson:**

In the members' packs there is a leaflet that relates to reactions to microchips. There is a system whereby all reactions to microchips are identified. Out of about 500 microchips that have been implanted, there are around 400 reports. It is a very low incidence. The simplest thing to say is that microchipping is safe and does not cause problems in dogs unless it is poorly done. Infection can be introduced, as it can with anything. If a needle is stuck in any animal incorrectly, infection

can be introduced.

**Mr W Clarke:**

To go back to the individual breeds and where they are held during court cases, you have tabled some papers on the trauma that is caused to the pet, never mind the owner. Will you expand on that for the record?

**Mr Thompson:**

It is within the facility of a dog warden to pick up a dog and identify it as a pit bull terrier. If the dog warden believes that it is a pit bull terrier, he is legally allowed to pick the dog up, and, according to the legislation, it will be destroyed if the owner does not appeal. The dog will be locked up, possibly for weeks or months while the appeal proceeds. That does not help any animal.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Finally, as members of the veterinary profession, have you any information or data on how many dog fatalities occur as a result of dogs being attacked by other dogs?

**Mr McAuley:**

There are no statistics for that. However, it would not be uncommon, and it certainly occurs.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Can you provide some information?

**Mr Thompson:**

I doubt very much whether we would be able to acquire that information. It would be a personal view. However, during my 50-odd years in veterinary practice, I have seen it happen about half-a-dozen times. That is just from my memory, which is fading.

**Mr W Clarke:**

In my constituency, I am aware of at least two or three incidents in the past three or four years where larger dogs have attacked smaller dogs and just ripped them apart.

**Mr Mayne:**

I guess that a lot of those cases may not be reported if the dog is dead. If a dog is killed in such an incident, it might not be taken to a veterinary surgeon.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Maybe there would be police reports.

**Mr McAuley:**

That would be one of the benefits of microchipping. If an incident like that occurred, you could scan the attacking dog, and that would bring you to the owner. If it happened again, you could pick it up again on another scan. It is a means of identification.

**Mr W Clarke:**

I agree with you that introducing the education programme at primary school will produce better citizenship as well as better management of dogs.

**Mr Savage:**

I agree that all dogs should be microchipped. You have covered a lot of ground this morning, Mr Thompson. We are now coming to the time of year when dogs attack sheep and other animals, and that is one of the biggest worries in the farming community. Those microchips are all very well, but how do you envisage that the farming community can be protected better than it is at present? Those dogs are a nightmare. Once a dog gets a taste for worrying sheep, it is nearly impossible to knap it out of them.

**Mr Thompson:**

I will defer to my colleagues, as they both do farm practice, but I do not at the moment.

**Mr McAuley:**

It is very difficult to bring in controls to require that dogs have to be on a leash. Over the years, one of the big problems that I have found with sheep worrying is that you will eventually get the dog — sometimes the farmer shoots the dog — and there is a need to identify who owns it, because there is a big liability in some cases. It happened to us in my own —

**Mr Savage:**

When a dog is microchipped, can you go back to the owner?

**Mr McAuley:**

The dog can be scanned in order to identify the registered owner. That can be tied in with the licence by putting the microchip number on the licence. With almost all legislation that deals with dangerous dogs, and with dogs attacking other dogs or elderly people, identification of the dog is at the heart of the matter. The same applies to sheep worrying. The big problem with sheep worrying is that, when the dog is found, the owner totally disowns it and says it is not their dog. In one particular case, the dog ran up and licked the owner, and it was quite obvious that it was his dog. Control of the dog relates back to the regulations that dogs have to be tied up or closed in at night. It is an offence to allow a dog to roam the streets at night.

**Mr Savage:**

If the microchipping controls the traceability, then it is a good thing. Given the price of sheep and other animals at present, anybody who owns dogs half a mile down the road from a farm has to control them.

**Mr McAuley:**

Thousands and thousands of pounds.

**Mr Savage:**

If they fall out of line, somebody somewhere is going to have to pay the price.

**Mr McAuley:**

The microchip will identify that owner.

**Mr Savage:**

If the microchip can solve that problem, it should be brought in.

**Mr Thompson:**

Microchipping is relevant to every point I have made today.

**Mr McAuley:**

It has been very successful in identifying horses.

**Mr Savage:**

Someone told me that, when an animal that has been microchipped is put down, the chip has to be taken out of it. Is that true?

**Mr McAuley:**

No.

**Mr Savage:**

OK.

**Mr Molloy:**

Thank you for your presentation. On the issue of dangerous dogs, I think you agree that the problem is not dangerous dogs but dangerous owners. Apart from identifying the owner, how will microchipping stop the dog being trained in that way?

**Mr Thompson:**

Unfortunately, that is a question for society.

**Mr McAuley:**

It will bring more responsibility to the registered owner of the dog.

**Mr Molloy:**

I agree that a Doberman, just as much as any other dog, can be friendly or vicious. Could a microchip be taken out or changed by someone who knows how it is done?

**Mr Thompson:**

In theory, that is possible, but, in practice, it is extremely difficult.

**Mr Molloy:**

In relation to the licence being linked to the microchip, do you see a need for a continuing licence, or would it be possible to have a one-off licence linked to a microchip? The Department

told us that there would not be enough information on the microchip to do away with the licence, but you seem to be indicating that a microchip can link the dog to the licence. Therefore, a one-off licence identifies the owner, and, in the same way as you change your car, when you change your dog, you pass on that information. Is that possible?

**Mr Thompson:**

The problem is that it is a question of resources. It takes money to run any scheme. Some people think that an annual licence scheme is a penalty on responsible owners. If you take that fee over the rest of the cost of keeping a dog, it is an infinitesimally small fee at £12.50. The cost of keeping a dog is high, and not everybody recognises that when they get a dog. That is why dogs are sometimes taken on and then abandoned. However, at least if they are positively identified, we can get the people who abandon them.

**Mr Molloy:**

So you are talking about a taxation system. Should the taxation system be for the person who keeps the dog or should it be on society to protect the dog?

**Mr Thompson:**

You should try arguing that with people who do not like dogs.

**Mr Molloy:**

I am arguing it with a vet. Vets seem to be aware of what goes on in this Committee. I received a letter from your counterpart, the British Veterinary Association, which seems to take offence to the fact that we said that vets also have a responsibility and a vested interest in the whole process. We need answers from you on that.

**Mr Thompson:**

Will you repeat the question, and we will try to answer it?

**Mr Molloy:**

Do you propose a continuous taxation on dog owners, or do you think that society should pay a tax for its protection from dogs?



**Mr Thompson:**

It is up to society to protect itself, but, as a dog owner, I genuinely believe that it is perfectly reasonable for me to pay more than someone who does not like dogs. Why should my neighbour who does not like dogs pay for my dog?

**Mr Molloy:**

So you should only pay for a hospital when you go into it and not for having the service?

**Mr Thompson:**

No, that is not the same argument. I can see where you are coming from, but that is not the argument. I have the pleasure of having the dog. I do not have the pleasure of having hospital attention. People who do not take ill do not have displeasure, because they do not have hospital attention.

**Mr Mayne:**

The National Health Service is a deep-rooted thing in society in this country. Another argument you could have made was that, if someone owns a car, should everyone else pay for the insurance on that car? If someone has a dog, they should take responsibility for that dog; it is not the responsibility of everybody else in society.

**Mr Molloy:**

Is there something that attracts stray dogs out at the weekends? You said that incidents involving poorly controlled dogs frequently occur at weekends. Are there nightclubs that they go to? Is that not poor ownership rather than bad dogs?

**Mr Thompson:**

Yes, there is no question about that.

**Mr Molloy:**

I do not think that the argument stands up that the majority of strays are found at weekends. I see stray dogs all the time. I know of one incident that occurred last weekend in Dungannon, where half a dozen dogs created a problem for someone who was walking with an assistance dog. When the person contacted the council, they were told that the dogs were all licensed, and there was nothing that it could do about them. Therefore, how would microchipping or licences reduce the

amount of stray dogs or reduce the harassment that some dogs cause?

**Mr Thompson:**

Microchipping just adds to the question of the identification. As I said originally, it is a question for society. Society is the reason for those status dogs and for badly controlled dogs.

**Mr Molloy:**

Should society not pay for it then?

**Mr Thompson:**

If you wish to argue that, it is up to you, but I find great difficulty with it. It has been said that we have a vested interest. If we have a vested interest in increasing the dog population, one would think that we would argue that society should pay for them. However, we are not arguing that.

**Mr Molloy:**

You would have some vested interest in microchipping, because a lot of people will go to vets for the microchipping. What does it cost for microchipping by a vet?

**Mr Thompson:**

The vast majority of microchipping is not done by the veterinary profession; it is done through the charities. The Dogs Trust does it for £10 and will do it for nothing for needy people. The veterinary cost of microchipping could be £20 to £30.

**Mr Beggs:**

I declare an interest as a local councillor. You said that the annual licence fee of £12.50 is a small proportion of the cost of keeping a dog. Do you have any figures on the average cost of keeping a dog, including its food, veterinary insurance and so on? What proportion of the overall cost of keeping a dog does that fee amount to? It is important that people realise that dogs are not just for Christmas and that there is a significant ongoing running cost for its food, health and well-being.

**Mr Thompson:**

There are certainly figures on that. However, my failing memory does not allow me to outline them. My colleagues might know.

**Mr Mayne:**

I estimate that keeping a dog in the first year of its life will depend on the size of the dog. The bigger the dog, the more it eats. For example, if somebody buys a Labrador at £300, it will cost £1000 in the first year. Therefore, the £10 cost of microchipping at the Dogs Trust is pretty insignificant.

**Mr Thompson:**

We can get those figures if it would be helpful.

**Mr McCarthy:**

My question is about dogs attacking other dogs. Your statement that, in the vast majority of cases, two dogs get into an argument with equal blame, seems a bit simplistic. Is that not a bit unfair? I am thinking, in particular, of a case in my own constituency this week in Ballywalter, where a completely innocent party was with their dog, and it was attacked and almost mauled apart by a bigger dog. There was no argument; it seems that the bigger dog just went for the smaller dog. It would be the same if, on a Sunday afternoon, when somebody is out walking with a poodle, another dog comes and tears it apart. Is your argument simplistic? Do you accept that?

**Mr Thompson:**

Absolutely. I am saying that one-to-one confrontation occurs all the time. Regrettably, we see that situation far too often. Through existing legislation, neither the dog warden nor anyone else has any power whatsoever to do anything to the owner of that dog. That is the problem.

**Mr McCarthy:**

In the case that I mentioned, the owner of the attacking dog gave the wrong information, and the innocent party was lumbered with the excessive veterinary fees. Where would microchipping come in there?

**Mr Thompson:**

It is fairly simple.

**Mr McCarthy:**

It is useless.

**Mr Thompson:**

No; it is not useless. That animal would be scanned, and we could then identify the owner, who could not deny that he or she own the dog.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Are there ways and means of finding out the identity of the owner despite the fact that they give the wrong information?

**Mr Thompson:**

Yes. The microchip will automatically identify the owner through the database. If that owner has changed, the database should be aware, but it may not. However, that has to happen. If a dog changes hands, there is an obligation to update the information. However, we could still go back to the original owner and ask why they did not identify the dog again.

**Mr Molloy:**

Who makes the decision? Who adjudicates on which dog struck first?

**Mr Thompson:**

Any court of law will have to —

**Mr Molloy:**

A court will not go around following dogs. Therefore, the court will get that report two or three months later. Who makes the decision on which dog struck first? Does a wee dog or big dog not have the right to defend itself? I know of a situation where a small dog bit and killed a large Labrador. The wee dog bit it from underneath. Does that wee dog not have the right to defend itself?

**Mr Thompson:**

It has the right to defend itself but not the right to attack.

**Mr Molloy:**

Who makes the decision? Who adjudicates on which dog struck first? You say that microchipping will ensure responsibility for covering the veterinary fees and any treatment

required.

**Mr Thompson:**

In most cases, but not all, it is fairly obvious.

**Mr Molloy:**

Who decides which is obvious and which is not? Does the microchip tell you that as well?

**Mr Mayne:**

Are you saying that there should be no blame attached to either party?

**Mr Molloy:**

I asked who adjudicates.

**Mr Moyne:**

The courts.

**Mr Thompson:**

If there is not an agreement, the case will eventually end up in a court.

**Mr Molloy:**

If the microchip does not give you that information, what is the benefit of it?

**Mr Moyne:**

The microchip is not there to say who did what. The microchip is there to say who owns the dog.

**Mr Molloy:**

You are saying that the Bill will give new powers. Where is the difference?

**Mr McAuley:**

The difference is in recognition and ownership.

**Mr Molloy:**

So, if two dogs, both of which are leashed, attack each other, who decides which owner is in the

right?

**Mr McAuley:**

The court.

**Mr Molloy:**

If it was two children, who would make the decision? The parents of both children would defend their own children.

**Mr McAuley:**

The court.

**Mr Molloy:**

How does a court decide?

**Mr McAuley:**

It decides on the basis of the evidence before it.

**Mr T Clarke:**

I want to ask about change of ownership and microchipping. By the way, I support microchipping. Do you agree that there should be something in the legislation to make it the responsibility of the person who registers the microchip to pass on information if there is a transfer of ownership and that, if the person does not pass on the information, he or she should be responsible for any attack that the dog carries out?

**Mr Thomson:**

If there is a transfer of ownership, there should be an obligation on the person who owned the animal in the first place to re-identify with the new owner. There has to be an obligation on the original owner or twelfth owner — whoever ownership is transferred from.

**The Chairperson:**

Members have asked their questions. Thank you for attending the Committee.