

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Animal Welfare Pathway 2025-27

Published at 09.30am on Thursday 22 May 2025

Mr Andrew Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The purpose of this statement is to inform members that I will be publishing my Animal Welfare Pathway - Advancing Animal Welfare in Northern Ireland 2025-27 – at 09.30 this morning (Thursday, 22 May 2025). This Pathway sets out of the ambitious reforms I intend to advance during the remainder of the mandate to enhancements animal welfare standards. Members will be able to download a copy of the Pathway document from my Department's website.

Since I took up post as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I have made clear that animal welfare is one of my top priorities. I am dedicated to ensuring that the policies I propose, and the legislation I take forward, provides my Department and our enforcement partners with robust powers and effective penalties to deter those people who wish to exploit animals. I have already introduced powers to enable pet theft to be prosecuted in a manner that acknowledges companion animals as more than just objects. I also moved swiftly to mitigate the risk to public safety, following attacks by XL Bully type dogs, by introducing new legal safeguarding measures.

The importance of animal welfare is reflected as one of the key pledges within my Department's new ten-point Corporate Plan 2025-27. Specifically, it commits my Department to delivering a range of new animal welfare measures to protect companion and farmed animals. However, due to the limited duration of this mandate, it has been necessary to prioritise workstreams, as there is not enough time or capacity to achieve everything that I would wish to amend or reform.

To determine what these priorities should be, I engaged with and listened to the sectors within our community organisations who are responsible for the day-to-day wellbeing of animals to help shape and define a range of legislative and non-legislative measures which can deliver the most immediate and transformative outcomes.

That engagement has resulted in the publication of this document – my Animal Welfare Pathway – Advancing Animal Welfare in Northern Ireland 2025-27 which is the first meaningful series of animal welfare reforms since 2014.

I am acutely aware of the limited time remaining in this shortened mandate, so these proposals represent what I believe my Department can readily achieve within this period, to benefit the lives of animals and the citizens of Northern Ireland. This will be in addition to the significant amount of work already undertaken by my officials to enforce and administer animal welfare law, in close collaboration with local councils and the PSNI.

Current work

The overwhelming majority of issues which are brought to my attention, relate to the welfare of companion animals. Early in my tenure I committed to introducing a version of Lucy's Law for Northern Ireland which will goes beyond banning third-party sales of puppies and kittens. I am proposing to introduce a registration requirement for anyone seeking to sell or supply a pup or kitten under six months old. Sellers and suppliers will be required to register with their local council and will be required to meet specific conditions to help ensure the welfare of the animals and improve transparency.

I have also been struck by the depth of feeling expressed by stakeholders and citizens about the licencing and inspection of commercial dog breeding. It is essential that if people want to buy a dog,

they can determine that it came from a breeder they can trust. I have already launched a recruitment competition for an expert group to independently review the current breeding regulations operate and to make recommendations to me. In addition, these experts will be asked to examine if canine fertility clinics require bespoke regulation.

Furthermore, I launched a public consultation in March on making the use of CCTV in mandatory in all areas of a slaughterhouse where animals are kept. Slaughterhouses in Northern Ireland already demonstrate a high standard of welfare, however, this new legislation will ensure parity with other jurisdictions in the UK.

New Reforms

In order to complement and supplement the proposal for selling and supply kittens and pups, I want to improve the traceability of cats and dogs. Microchipping a cat or dog with an owner's details provides clear benefits when an animal is lost, but it also has the potential to enhance traceability when these pets are being sold or exchanged. I am keen to consult on whether there is merit in making cat microchipping mandatory, but I wish to learn from the experience in England, where this is already compulsory. Work will also be undertaken to determine how best to enhance current microchipping database standards to ensure dog owners in Northern Ireland properly record, access, and use information for pet traceability.

Animal rescue organisations play a crucial role in safeguarding the welfare of animals. These groups operate tirelessly to rescue, rehabilitate, and rehome animals that have been abandoned, neglected, or abused. Currently these organisations are unregulated; my Department will examine the case for inspecting and licensing and bring forward legislation.

Another issue which I want to address is the use of aversive training devices, and to consult on the use of electric shock collars.

I also want to review the dog licence fee to determine if it remains fit for purpose and how best to encourage increased compliance.

My Department recognises that it has a duty to educate animal owners and the wider public on animal welfare. It is vital that everyone knows their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, a comprehensive communications campaign will also be taken forward in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Conclusion

These proposals aim to enhance existing animal welfare legislation, address issues effectively, and redefine our interactions and treatment of animals.

The Pathway acknowledges the important role that animals play in our lives and recommends changes that will provide additional protection for them, whether they are in domestic settings, on farms, used for breeding, offered for sale, or displayed. Working together with other stakeholders and the wider public, we recognise that we can only make progress by partnership working, involving all organisations and individuals with responsibility for, and an interest in, animal welfare. We strive to enhance the overall welfare of animals, to achieve a good quality of life for our animals, so they receive the care and protection they deserve.