

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

UPDATE ON DOG BREEDING REVIEW, ANIMAL WELFARE PATHWAY AND SALE AND SUPPLY OF PUPPIES AND KITTENS

Published at 9.30am on Monday 6 July 2026

Mr Andrew Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The purpose of this written statement is to provide Members with an update on current progress in delivering my Department's Animal Welfare Pathway. These priorities for companion animal welfare include the recently published review of dog breeding regulations and advancing legislation for a ban on third party sales of puppies. I know that progress on these important policies is of significant interest to many across the House, to key stakeholders and the wider public.

Animal Pathway Reforms

Significant progress has already been made across several key areas, including the dog breeding review and Lucy's Law – further detail is outlined below.

Work is, however, advancing on the other strands. Legislation to introduce mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses has now been approved by the Assembly, while the Animal Welfare and Responsible Dog Ownership campaign has been launched to support improved awareness and behavioural change.

In parallel, my Department has launched a comprehensive public consultation covering multiple elements of the Pathway, including licensing reform, microchipping, dog licence fees, aversive training devices, and rescue and rehoming. The consultation closed on the 30 June 2026. Subject to the outcome of consultation and the necessary approvals, my intention is to publish the consultation response and way forward for the Animal Welfare Pathway early in the autumn, and to bring forward priority legislative measures for consideration by the Executive and Assembly.

While delivery remains dependent on Executive and Assembly timetables, and subject to the outcome of the public consultation, I will prioritise those measures which are most impactful and capable of being implemented within the mandate period.

Dog Breeding Review

A review of dog breeding regulations was identified as a key priority within my Animal Welfare Pathway, reflecting the need to address public and stakeholder concerns about standards within the sector and to ensure that our legislative framework remains fit for purpose.

As a first step, I commissioned experts to undertake an independent review of the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013. This group commenced work in 2025 and has been chaired by Gareth Arnott, Professor in Animal Welfare at Queens University Belfast, alongside Susan Cunningham, a Cambridge-qualified veterinary surgeon with over 35 years' experience in small and companion animal practice here and abroad and Vanessa Barnes, a solicitor who specialises in animal welfare law and policy, who serves as the legal adviser to the Westminster based All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare.

The Group completed its report at the end of April, and it has been published on my Department's website.

The report makes eleven headline recommendations covering maximum dog numbers at breeding premises; mating rules; protections for active stud dogs and retired breeding dogs; veterinary

oversight; statutory minimum standards for socialisation and enrichment; minimum staffing levels; proof of fitness to breed; individual identification and listing of adult dogs on breeding licences; and training for animal welfare inspectors and inspection procedures. It also includes a recommendation on the sale or transfer of puppies to new owners, which directly relates to separate proposals on the sale and supply of puppies and kittens.

This Review has demonstrated that reform of dog breeding is needed in Northern Ireland, and new protections are required to enhance the welfare of dogs and their puppies. However, I also recognise that some of the recommendations in the report are novel and would make Northern Ireland a world leader. Implementing these recommendations in full will require my Department and delivery partners to break significant new ground.

I am willing to take on that challenge, but I also recognise that as this Report is wide-ranging; policy development, legislation and the implementation of revised standards will take time and necessitate a phased approach. We cannot just simply switch from one way of doing things to a completely different way of doing things overnight. There is a need to engage, plan and share ideas with councils, dog breeders, veterinary bodies and animal welfare organisations, amongst others.

My officials have already begun this process. I have asked them to identify up to ten recommendations that can be brought forward for public consultation in the autumn. Once that consultation has concluded, I intend to move quickly to consider the outcome and approve a way forward for the regulation of dog breeding regulation in Northern Ireland.

Sale and supply of puppies and kittens in Northern Ireland (Lucy's Law)

Since taking office, I have made the introduction of Lucy's Law a priority and this was also reflected as a key commitment in my Animal Welfare Pathway. This important legislation has long been called for by stakeholders and the public and is needed to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Last summer I conducted a public consultation on proposals, which would ban the third party sale of puppies and kittens and require all sellers and suppliers of puppies, and kittens, to register with their local council. The registration element would ensure the proposals were robust and enforceable, providing animal welfare officers with a means of checking and verifying ownership of the mother of the dog.

I acknowledge that more work needs to be done to establish a new registration system, in particular, councils will need time to prepare for implementation, which includes the potential procurement and delivery of appropriate IT systems. However, I want to deliver my objective of ending third party sales at the earliest opportunity.

Therefore, in line with my public commitment under the Animal Welfare Pathway, as outlined when my department published the consultation responses and way forward document, I intend to bring forward a Statutory Rule to ban third party sales. The legislation will prohibit the sale of puppies and kittens, and the supply of puppies, by anyone who did not breed the animals, and will require all sales or supplies to take place at the premises where the animals were bred.

The legislation will also introduce a range of important safeguards, including conditions governing sales and advertising. These measures are intended to promote higher standards and greater transparency, and will cover restrictions on the sale of unweaned animals and animals under eight weeks of age; requirements for sales to take place in the presence of the animal's mother; the disclosure of relevant medical treatment; specified information in advertisements; the provision of welfare guidance to new owners; and appropriate record keeping. Further regulations to establish the registration scheme will be brought forward at a later stage and I have asked officials to establish an implementation group with local councils to drive forward this work.

Conclusion

The Animal Welfare Pathway and progress outlined above represents a significant programme of reform and a clear commitment to strengthening protections for companion animals. I remain focused

on delivering improvements for animal welfare and on ensuring that the progress made during this mandate provides a strong foundation for future action.