Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

ANIMAL WELFARE REFORMS: CONSULTATION RESPONSE AND WAY FORWARD

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Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): It is my intention with this statement to provide an update on my programme of animal welfare reforms and inform members that I will be publishing my Department's response to the recent consultation on future animal welfare policy this afternoon Thursday 19 November 2026.

Animal welfare is not just a priority for me, but it is an issue that is close to many of our hearts and the public rightly expects Northern Ireland to enforce the highest standards of protections. That's why my focus for remains firmly on delivery, progressing reforms within my Animal Welfare Pathway and prioritising those changes that will have the largest impact on the welfare of our pets and farmed animals.

Earlier this year my Department consulted on a significant package of animal welfare reforms. In total, we received 747 responses to the consultation: 677 from individuals and 70 from organisations, including nine from local councils. I was pleased to see a broad support for the proposals overall and I am now moving to implement key elements of that package.

In taking this work forward, it is my ambition to see Northern Ireland leading other jurisdictions on these islands with a ban on aversive training devices used on dogs and cats, which will include handheld remote-controlled electronic shock collars, choke collars without a stop mechanism and prong collars. Such devices are a cruel and ineffective form of punishment, causing pain fear, anxiety, stress, physical injury and longer-term behavioural harms. My decision has been informed by the evidence gathered through consultation, consideration of animal welfare risks and peer-reviewed research and veterinary evidence.

Whilst there were some calls for exemptions from various organisations, it is my position that a broad list will undermine the ban, blur the lines for prosecution and insufficiently protect animals from inhuman treatment. Further, sufficient alternative forms of control exist with clear evidence showing that reward-based training is the most effective. I do, however, recognise the need for a narrow exemption for specified service dogs to ensure there is no operational impact on our police and prison service. I am satisfied that the use of aversive devices is limited and effective safeguarding is in place within Police Service of NI and NI Prison Service. This exemption will therefore be included in the legislation.

I look forward to seeing this ban in place before the end of the mandate, protecting pets and working animals alike.

Recognising the trend to use pet day care and home boarding as alternatives to traditional kennelling, I want to give owners more assurances that their dogs and cats are being well looked after by a licenced and regulated business. There is a clear desire from both owners and businesses to see these types of settings covered by Northern Ireland's animal boarding regime and our outdated legislation updated accordingly. Therefore, I have asked my officials to progress changes to the animal boarding legislation to bring day care and home boarding into scope of the existing licensing framework. Draft regulations and associated licence conditions are being developed, alongside a

targeted consultation, and officials are working hard to see the legislation updated before the end of the mandate.

I will also be bringing forward legislation to strengthen dog microchipping requirements in Northern Ireland. Such a move will promote responsible ownership, help reunite more pets with their owners when lost, support the work of enforcement officers to tackle animal cruelty, and deliver more transparency on breeding practices. These reforms will require dogs to be microchipped by eight weeks of age, set a deadline for microchip records to be updated when ownership or keeper details change, and require the keeper to declare where they have also bred the dog. Legislation has been drafted and the necessary approvals will be sought imminently.

I previously highlighted the public's desire that we rapidly progress and enhance animal welfare protections. I have sought to meet that expectation with the range of proposals that I have brought forward. However, the feedback from the councils within the consultation is that the pace of change is placing an increasing regulatory burden on local government. Whilst this is disappointing for both myself as Minister and the general public, I have listened and further consideration will be given before progressing with some aspects of the Animal Welfare Pathway.

Similarly with dogs, mandatory microchipping of cats would improve traceability, helping to reunite more pets with owners, and improve accountability for responsible ownership. The call for evidence on mandatory microchipping of pet cats attracted 279 responses with broad support from citizens and animal welfare stakeholders. I firmly believe there is merit in making the microchipping of cats compulsory with tangible benefits for owners, pets, shelters and rehoming organisation, and wider society. I also note that mandatory microchipping of cats has been in place in England since 2024. However, given the concerns that councils have raised around enforcement, more work will be undertaken to develop this policy before its introduction.

Likewise, I also firmly believe that there is a need for a licensing and inspection regime for the rescue and rehoming sector. This would give those seeking to rehome an animal, and indeed those donating to such organisations, the confidence that the welfare of the animals within their care meets a minimum standard. I know this is a measure that the sector itself is keen to see implemented. It is regrettable that Councils have again raised concerns about their capacity to operate and enforce this new regime, and more consideration will need to be given as a result.

Additionally, I consider it appropriate to reflect on the direction of travel at a European level regarding the regulation of the rescue and rehoming sector. The European Commission has recently introduced legislation which sets minimum standards for what it calls animal shelters, or what we refer to as rescue and rehoming organisations. While it is not yet clear whether this piece of European law will apply in Northern Ireland, I have written to the Rt Honourable Hamish Falconer, MP Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and European Relations, to express my support for its application here. The development of this legislation has highlighted the need to consider whether there would be merit in developing proposals which more broadly reflect the standards and competences being adopted across Member States. My Department will continue to develop these policy proposals, including through further engagement with councils and the sector itself, where appropriate.

Finally, the consultation also sought views on the proposal to apply an inflationary increase to dog licence fees. The majority of respondents supported an inflationary rise and I appreciate there would be valid reasons to do so. However, given the prevailing economic climate and cost of living pressures, I do not believe it is right that I sanction an increase at this time and add to the financial burdens of ordinary households. Instead, my Department will encourage and support councils to increase dog licence fee income by closing the compliance gap and pursue a range of methods to ensure that all dog owners across Northern Ireland are fulfilling their civic duty and licensing their dog properly.

To date, I am proud of the range of enhanced protections for animals that I, as Minister, and this Department have brought forward in what has been a reduced mandate.

In addition to the work progressed in my Animal Welfare Pathway I have also secured the necessary support to introduce the Pet Abduction Act in Northern Ireland, making it an offence for a dog or cat to be taken from a person with lawful control of the animal. In addition, I secured Assembly approval for

the Legislative Consent Motion to extend to Northern Ireland powers contained in the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill. That Bill has now completed its legislative passage to become an Act and when commenced, my Department will have the necessary powers to bring forward regulations to restricting the import of cats and dogs that have been subjected to painful and unnecessary practices, such as declawing and ear cropping.

I know that all animal lovers will join me in celebrating another important milestone as I progress the final steps to introduce Lucy's Law to Northern Ireland, banning the third-party sale and supply of puppies and kittens. This will ensure our pets have a better start in life and the same protections as exist elsewhere, as well as providing additional safeguards around how puppies and kittens are advertised, sold and transferred.
This legislation will provide extensive protections for puppies and kittens at the most vulnerable time in their lives. While the original policy proposal consulted on included a registration scheme, I made the decision to delay that element of the policy to allow sufficient time to prepare for implementation and to ensure that the delivery of meaningful protections was not compromised now. New advertising and record-keeping requirements, supported by existing licensing and microchipping information, will improve transparency and traceability and give councils the information needed to investigate suspected breaches.

Momentum is also gathering on strengthening regulation of dog breeding establishments, an issue that I know that people in Northern Ireland care passionately about, following the independent review into dog breeding legislation. The Expert Advisory Group's report contains wide-ranging recommendations covering licensing, the number of dogs kept at breeding establishments, veterinary oversight, breeding practices, accommodation, socialisation, health testing, retirement of breeding animals, and the sale and transfer of puppies.

I am determined to take action to address real concerns about breeding establishments through a range of targeted interventions which tackle key issues. Given the scale of the recommendations from the extensive Expert Advisory Group's report reform will necessarily be phased. I intend to progress a first phase by seeking public views on significant recommendations from the Expert Advisory Group and gathering evidence on their effectiveness, benefits, costs, proportionality, practicality, enforceability alongside any possible unintended consequences. This includes consideration of the recommended maximum of 25 adult dogs at a licensed breeding establishment and associated measures intended to prevent circumvention of any limit. The consultation will launch soon, bringing additional protections for puppies and their mothers that one step closer.

In relation to farmed animal welfare, mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses has already been delivered during this mandate, strengthening oversight at the time of killing. Work continues on wider farmed-animal welfare issues, and we have participated in DEFRA-led consultations including banning the use of laying-hen cages, castration and tail docking of lambs and carbon dioxide stunning of pigs. This work must also take account of the evolving UK and EU regulatory landscape and Northern Ireland's obligations under the Windsor Framework.

Together, these measures form a substantial programme of animal welfare reform. My aim is to sustain this delivery through the remainder of this mandate, securing stronger protections for animals in Northern Ireland, and build on that momentum into the next.