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Animal Welfare Inquiry

Written evidence submitted
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and Liz Spruin

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Executive summary

- While it is believed that the Animal Welfare Act is a valuable document, enforcement of its remits need to be strengthened
- A range of recommendations are made focusing on the following areas:
 - The effectiveness of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 with regard to domestic pets
 - Regulation surrounding the sale of domestic pets, including online sales and advertising
 - Enforcement of current animal welfare legislation, including prosecution of offences by the police, local authorities, the RSPCA and others
- Recommendations include
 - Introduction of an effective licensing system (for breeders and dog owners)
 - Bans on selling and advertising dogs on the internet
 - Community education events for dog owners
 - Introduction of a competitive system to decide on the authorised animal welfare enforcement agency
 - Greater investment in ground services such as number of inspectors

Introduction of the authors and our evidence

We are a group of social science researchers and people involved in small independent animal charities, particular centred around dogs. Anke Franz, Ana Fernandez, Liz Spruin and Nicole Holt are researchers at Canterbury Christchurch University, Lisa Ashdown is volunteer coordinator at Redwood Rescue and Rehome Sanctuary and is also a DogLost Coordinator, Lucy Hirst is a DogLost Coordinator and Heather Moore is a volunteer for Pet Welfare and Education Enterprise (PWEE).

We started to collaborate in early 2015 with the aim of exploring solutions to the increasing number of dogs ending up being given to animal charities.

The expertise contained in our partnership lies particularly within three of the four areas of remit of the inquiry:

1. The effectiveness of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 with regard to domestic pets
2. Regulation surrounding the sale of domestic pets, including online sales and advertising
3. Enforcement of current animal welfare legislation, including prosecution of offences by the police, local authorities, the RSPCA and others.

Therefore the evidence provided will focus on these particularly with regard to dogs.

1. The effectiveness of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 with regard to domestic pets

The partner rescues frequently highlight that the animals that come into their care suffer serious abuse or neglect, e.g. fear of being touched or severe emaciation. The number of animals within these conditions that come into the partner organisations seem to be on the increase, with Redwood Rescue and Rehome Sanctuary reporting taking in a particularly high number of emaciated dogs during late 2015 to now. This illustrates that the Animal Welfare Act does not seem to protect animals from suffering. This could be due to a range of factors: High number of backyard breeders with inadequate knowledge about animal welfare trying to make an income from selling puppies (Example A below), lack of resources to enforce the act (also see section 3) or a lack of awareness by owners what the needs of the animal are and what appropriate ownership means.

Example A:

Redwood was involved in rescuing a group of puppies kept in a shed in a garden. The puppies were about 4 months old but the size of two month old puppies due to malnutrition. They also had serious health issues such as viruses. The owner was at first reluctant to give the puppies up as they had planned on selling them.

Recommendations to improve animal welfare

- Require dog owners to hold licenses
- Only allowing licensed breeders to breed puppies
- Develop community interventions to increase awareness of responsible ownership and needs of a pet

2. Regulation surrounding the sale of domestic pets, including online sales and advertising

As discussed above, the lack of a license system for breeding dogs means that it can be seen as an easy income stream. As Grazia magazine states: “Breed pets for extra pocket money” (<http://dogsinthenews.co.uk/?p=3411>, accessed 16/03/2016). This means that people who do not know (or care) how to ensure the welfare of bitch and puppies can produce unhealthy puppies without any regulation on the number of litters churned out. Often new owners are not vetted or educated about general and training needs, with increasing numbers of dogs being unwanted by new families or ending up being abandoned by breeders who could not sell them. In an environment where most animal rescues have waiting lists for taking on unwanted dogs, this is an unsustainable situation.

In addition, the lack of a license system also allows the import of dogs from puppy farms in other countries and the existence of puppy farms within the UK. Puppy farms often violate the Animal Welfare Act by not ensuring the well-being of a dog with regard to basic needs, such as a suitable environment, diet, exhibiting normal behaviours, special housing needs and protection from pain, injury and disease. As such most puppy farms would be in direct violation of the Animal Welfare Act and should be under strict observation and control if not shut down.

In addition, the unregulated sale of puppies on the internet, can lead to a free market for criminals involved in dog fighting to acquire ‘training material’ for their fighting dogs, or the dog being passed on from home to home because of undisclosed behaviour issues.

Social media frequently highlights the risk of dogs being given away for free ending up being used as bait dogs in the training of fighting dogs. Two of our partners, PWEE and Redwood Rescue, have first-hand, dealt with the aftermath of this by taking in and rehabilitating bait dogs. This requires not only dealing with the physical wounds but also often involves intensive socialising with dogs and people to allow the dog to overcome fear responses such as aggression.

Recommendations with regard to the sale of animals

- Ban the sale of puppies or dogs via the internet
- Ban the advertisement of puppies and dogs unless advertised by licensed breeders
- Ban the advertising of free puppies, dogs or cats on websites

3. Enforcement of current animal welfare legislation, including prosecution of offences by the police, local authorities, the RSPCA and others

Our partners have expressed some disillusionment with regard to the effectiveness of the enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act, and the handling of this by the RSPCA (see Examples C and D below). This includes RSPCA call centre staff having a very uncaring attitude towards cruelty calls, RSPCA inspectors not being prepared to respond to calls reporting potential cruelty, as well as a lack of awareness by dog wardens and the police regarding laws such as the Theft by finding law.

There seems to be concern about the resources that the RSPCA puts into recruiting inspectors, with not enough inspectors on the ground to actually investigate cruelty claims or prepare for court. While the RSPCA has been under attack for being too focused on prosecution, it has to be remembered that there are cases that need to be prosecuted, and the case officers need to be able to prepare for these adequately. In addition, more inspectors would also help to enforce bans or restrictions.

Finally, the courts also need to back prosecutions by handing out stiffer penalties.

Example C:

Redwood Rescue was contact about some dogs being kept in appalling conditions. They tried to get the RSPCA involved but were unable to do so for a sustained period of time.

Example D:

Molly was stolen from outside Morrisons in Herne Bay Kent. Her owner took about 3 months to put her on doglost. She was held in the house next door to me. Within a week of her being added to doglost my next door neighbour came home and beat her. I called the RSPCA and said the sounds of the hits and her crying out suddenly stopped. I didn't know if she was dead or alive. They said they couldn't help.

Considering the lack of confidence and trust with regard to the working of the RSPCA within our partnership, but also across the wider public as illustrated in continuous news coverage, it might be useful to put tighter controls and regulations upon the RSPCA with regard to e.g. spending priorities.

It might also be useful to consider developing a system where animal charities that fulfil certain criteria can tender to get the right to seize animals and prosecute offenders. This would mean that the RSPCA would have to illustrate that they are the best suited to do this vs holding a monopoly on this role.

Recommendations regarding enforcement

- Greater training of RSPCA call centre staff
- More inspectors on the ground to deal with cruelty investigation
- More control over the RSPCA priorities and spending
- Courts to enforce more severe punishments
- Competitive system to tender for the powers to seize animals and prosecute offenders.