

TACKLING ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR BY ENCOURAGING RESPONSIBLE DOG OWNERSHIP

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There is strong evidence to show that over the past few years there has been a sharp rise in the problems associated with irresponsible dog ownership. For example, the total number of adults sentenced for offences relating to dangerous dogs has increased by 39%, from 855 in 2009 to 1192 in 2010²⁷. Getting dog owners to take responsibility for their pets is key to tackling the growing problem caused to the public by dogs that are out of control. Irresponsible dog ownership can cause ASB (as well as sometimes leading to violent attacks), and a number of dog charities responded to our 2011 consultation, including Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club and the RSPCA. They

all emphasised the importance of animal welfare and focusing on supporting dog owners to look after their dogs responsibly as one of the ways of dealing with dog-related ASB.

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To help encourage responsible dog ownership there are a number of local community-based projects in England and Wales operating in areas with high levels of dog-related problems. These typically involve the local authority working with the police and dog welfare charities to engage with dog owners through a range of events, for example workshops and activities in estates, youth clubs, schools, etc. Often free micro-chipping and neutering is offered to dog owners. Proactive action of this kind often prevents dogs either becoming a nuisance or danger to the community or owners having to be prosecuted for dog welfare offences. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is working with key welfare organisations to look at evaluation processes and ensuring a more joined up approach between local initiatives, to include the sharing of good practice.

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For those owners who still fail to take responsibility for their dogs, the proposals set out in chapter three will give agencies the flexibility to deal with a wide range of problems and protect victims:

- Informal interventions such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts can be used to nip emerging issues in the bud, where the owner recognises the impact their behaviour is having on the community, and understands that continuing will trigger more formal consequences;

- Where a more formal response is required on the spot, the Community Protection Notice will allow professionals to require an owner to stop behaviour they judge is affecting the community's quality of life. That could include, for example, requiring an owner to repair inadequate fencing if their dog regularly escapes and attacks other dogs. In addition, the Directions Power will allow the police to move an owner on if, for example, their aggressive dog was frightening parents and children outside a school.

- In the most serious cases, an irresponsible owner could be given a Crime Prevention Injunction very quickly which could prevent them taking their dog to certain locations at certain times, require them to muzzle their dog in public and require them to attend dog training classes. Or if an individual is convicted of having a dangerous dog, they could be given a Criminal Behaviour Order preventing them from owning a dog again in the future.

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This flexibility means we do not believe it is necessary to legislate for a dog-specific power, as may have happened in the past. However, we will continue to work with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and a range of groups representing the interests of dogs and their owners to ensure our final proposals are of maximum benefit in dealing with dog-related anti-social behaviour.

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In addition to using the new flexible ASB powers to protect victims of dangerous dogs, the Government considers that the law on dangerous dogs needs changing to promote more responsible ownership of dogs and to reduce the number of dog attacks. Defra is currently consulting on a package of measures to do this. Included in the consultation are proposals for the compulsory micro-chipping of puppies and extending the current law on dangerous dogs to cover private property as well as other plans to improve the standards of dog ownership. The consultation can be found on the Defra website: www.defra.gov.uk.