Developing a strategy on dogs

IT is unfortunate that Government attention relating to dog ownership tends to focus on the negative aspects, such as dog attacks, and that it should consider such issues in isolation, when a much more holistic approach is needed. This point was well made by the parliamentary Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee during the Government’s review of dangerous dogs legislation. The committee argued, as it turned out unsuccessfully, that the review provided an opportunity to consolidate legislation relating to dog ownership and welfare and develop a comprehensive strategy (VR, February 23, 2013, vol 172, p 195; April 27, 2013, vol 172, p 432).

The continuing need for such an approach is firmly underlined by a report last week from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGA W), which makes a strong case for developing an England-wide strategy for dogs.1

The report has been produced by a subgroup involving Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, the BVA, Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club, PDSA and the RSPCA, with input from cross-party politicians. It argues persuasively that there needs to be ‘a clear vision’ for dogs in England that encourages responsible ownership. As Rob Flello MP, the subgroup’s chairman, commented on publication of the report, ‘Dogs are the most popular companion animal in England and most of us come in contact with them in some form on a daily basis. There is a range of legislation relating to dogs, but many argue that it is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. . . . There needs to be a clear vision for dog breeding, selling and ownership in England; one that encourages responsible ownership in a proportionate way that both raises the standards of animal welfare and ensures public safety.’

In the report, the APGA W sets out a vision for dog ownership, or ‘guardianship’, which is the term it prefers. The vision is, ‘For all those responsible for dogs in England to ensure their welfare is maintained at the highest possible standard and to be aware of and have consideration for that dog’s interaction with people and animals in their community.’ Having done so, it makes a number of recommendations aimed at achieving this vision which take account of changes in the understanding of dog welfare and behaviour that have occurred since much of the existing legislation came into being, as well as the changing position of dogs in society.

Among points made in the report are that technology (in the form of the internet) and international trade are affecting the way that dogs are acquired. Meanwhile, reduced resources for local authorities and the police, as well as among animal charities, will inevitably have an impact on the ability of these agencies to deal with the ‘continual problem’ of stray dogs and other issues that arise. It also makes the point that deciding what responsible dog ownership and guardianship should look like is not as easy as it sounds. As Mr Flello puts it, ‘The answer is complex and it is important that any future strategy recognises the interactions between irresponsible breeding and trade with dog control and animal welfare as well as the many benefits that come from dog ownership.’

The report makes 21 recommendations in all, covering dog control, dog breeding and trading, dog identification, responsible ownership, and resources. While many of these issues are interrelated, it discusses each of them in turn.

On dog control the APGA W’s recommendations include updating and consolidating all relevant dog control legislation and making sure that it is evidence based, investigating all serious dog-bite incidents fully, and identifying a suitable industry standard and independent regulatory body to ensure that owners can be confident about finding a suitable behaviourist or trainer. On breeding and trading it calls for a more consistent approach to licensing and enforcement; one suggestion here is that self-regulation could form part of this, with some form of local government oversight. On dog identification, including plans for all dogs in England and Wales to be microchipped from April 6, 2016, it calls for clear, consistent and up-to-date messaging from animal welfare organisations, public sector bodies and government. On responsible ownership, it recommends, among other things, that the Codes of Practice under the 2006 Animal Welfare Act should remain statutory codes.

Underlying most of the recommendations is the need to find a way of ensuring that sufficient resources are available to deal with dog-related issues, and the report includes a number of suggestions for how this might be achieved.

It would be hard to disagree with recommendations in the report, which also provides a useful overview of the situation as things stand. The question is, will they be taken forward? With a General Election looming, the prospect of anything happening in the next six months is unlikely. However, coming from an all-party group, the recommendations, like dog issues happening in the next six months is unlikely. However, coming from an all-party group, the recommendations, like dog issues themselves, should not be party political. Is it too much to hope that politicians from across the political spectrum will take them up and commit to implementing them in the next Parliament?


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