

Comment

Dangerous dogs and the law

THE Government's consultation on reforming dangerous dogs legislation in England and Wales, including possible repeal of the Dangerous Dogs Act, is welcome and overdue. Contentious from the start, the Dangerous Dogs Act was introduced in haste in 1991 after a series of horrific and well-publicised dog attacks on children. It has since proved ineffective and hugely unpopular. In many respects, this isn't too surprising. As the *Veterinary Record* said at the time, tackling dangerous dogs is a complicated issue which should be handled with care. However, as it also pointed out, the Government of the day seemed to be approaching the issue with all the finesse of a pit bull in a china shop.

This time around the Government seems to be taking a more considered approach, as demonstrated, perhaps, by the fact that it is consulting on the issue in the first place. However, both the consultation document and the Government's press announcements last week leave little room for doubt that the aim of the exercise is to toughen existing laws aimed at protecting the public from dangerous dogs, as well as to tackle the problem of 'weapon' or 'status' dogs. In 2010, as in 1991, the issue is being considered at a time when a General Election is approaching. As the BVA President, Bill Reilly, pointed out last week, it should not be allowed to become a 'political football' during the election campaign (*VR*, March 13, 2010, vol 166, p 310). The consultation represents a rare opportunity to try to improve the situation and the last thing anyone needs is a knee-jerk response on party political lines.

Options considered in the consultation document include extending dangerous dogs laws to cover all places including private property; giving police and councils more powers to tackle the problem of dangerous dogs by the introduction of dog control notices; and removal or better implementation of the current exemption rules that allow some people to keep banned types of dogs following a court order. It also seeks views on whether all dogs or puppies should be required to be identified by microchip, so that dogs can be more readily traced back to their owners, and a proposal that owners should be required to take out insurance against their dogs injuring third parties.

The BVA has long been opposed to breed-specific legislation and has been lobbying for reform of the Dangerous Dogs Act for some time. Breed-specific legislation is difficult to apply because of problems in defining breeds and breed types, nor does it discriminate between individual members of a breed, many of which may not be disposed to aggressive behaviour. It also engenders a false and dangerous perception that breeds not included will not show aggression. For these and other reasons, the BVA believes that legislation should be based on the principle of 'deed not breed' (targeting dogs for their actions, not what they look like) and wants to see new legislation that tackles the actions of irresponsible pet owners that can cause dogs to become aggressive. It therefore supports the concept of control notices, which is currently being pursued in Scotland through the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Bill (*VR*, February 20, 2010, vol 166, p 220).

The BVA also supports the proposal for compulsory microchipping. This would bring benefits that go beyond encouraging responsible pet ownership and helping to counter some of the problems caused by dangerous dogs and owners. Compulsory microchipping of puppies was, for example, one of the recommendations made by Sir Patrick Bateson in his recent report on tackling inherited diseases in dogs (*VR*, January 23, 2010, vol 166, pp 90, 91-92).

The problems caused by dangerous dogs will never be solved until owners appreciate that they are responsible for the actions of their animals. Legislation will always be necessary, and needs to be enforceable, but the aim must be to prevent dog attacks, not just mete out punishment after the event. Education will clearly have a vital role to play in this and, looking beyond the immediate scope of the current consultation, the aim must be to educate owners about the responsibilities of owning a dog and how best to meet them safely and effectively. Education of children, who, regrettably, are more at risk of injury from dog bites than other age groups, is also important and, in this respect, initiatives such as the Kennel Club's Safe and Sound Scheme and the Blue Dog project, which aims to educate parents and children about the safest way to interact with their dog in the home, should be supported. Issues surrounding 'weapon' or 'status' dogs can be seen as part of a wider social problem for which the dogs themselves cannot be held responsible.

■ The Government's consultation document is available at www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/dangerous-dogs

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