



INTRODUCTION PET ANIMAL INDICATORS

There are about 23 million owned pets in the UK with nearly half (43 per cent) of the population owning a pet¹. Cats and dogs are the most popular animals to be kept as pets, with populations of eight million each¹. Bearing these figures in mind it is not surprising that the welfare of pet animals can be compromised owing to a number of factors especially irresponsible pet ownership, which is often due to ignorance or lack of understanding of animals' welfare needs. Unfortunately, there are also people who intentionally cause animals pain, suffering and cruelty.

For the purposes of this chapter, the majority of data and statistical information concerning pets has been obtained from the RSPCA's own internal data-collecting sources. Many statistics concerning pet animals are not collected at a national level or by a central source in the UK, therefore the information the RSPCA collates and publishes must be regarded as an objective reflection of pet issues, as little else exists. It will hopefully be considered representative of England and Wales, if not the whole of the UK.

With the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (AWA) in England and Wales and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 coming into effect in 2007, there is an expectation that the results may be quite different to previous years especially those concerning the new welfare offence, which places a duty of care on those responsible for animals to provide for all of their animals' welfare needs²:

- a proper diet (including water)
- somewhere suitable to live
- any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- allowing animals to express normal behaviour
- protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

During 2008, the following events occurred in the area of pet animal welfare.

- The Companion Animal Welfare Enhancement Scheme³ was set up by the Welsh Assembly Government to promote companion animal welfare in Wales. The scheme provides funding for Welsh local authorities to broadly assess compliance levels with the Animal Welfare Act.
- The Welsh Assembly Government issued two codes of practice, one for cats⁴ and one for dogs⁵, under Section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act. Both codes came into force in November 2008 with the purpose of providing advice on how to meet the welfare needs of cats and dogs. The codes only applies to Wales.
- The first dog fighting related prosecution was brought under the Animal Welfare Act 2006⁶. A man was sentenced to 18 weeks in prison after pleading guilty to four charges.
- A BBC One documentary *Pedigree dogs exposed*, investigated some of the serious health and welfare issues experienced by many pedigree dogs as a result of the way they are bred⁷.
- The RSPCA commissioned an independent scientific report on pedigree dog breeding in the UK⁸. The report showed that the welfare and quality of life of many pedigree dogs is seriously compromised as a result of established selective breeding practices.
- The Welsh Assembly Government proposed that electric-shock dog collars would be banned⁹.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-figures-.htm
- 2 Section 9. Animal Welfare Act 2006.
- 3 <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/cawescheme/deliveringpetwelfareinwales/?lang=en>
- 4 <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/081205catcodesummaryen.pdf>
- 5 <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/081205dogcodesummaryen.pdf>
- 6 www.birminghammail.net/news/black-country/2008/04/16/walsall-man-clayton-beard-jailed-for-18-weeks-for-new-dog-fighting-offences-97319-20770225
- 7 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7569064.stm>
- 8 www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/issuesindepth/pedigreedogs/position
- 9 <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/?lang=en>

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of unwanted healthy animals taken into the care of the RSPCA

RSPCA concern

In the UK nearly half of all households, around 23 million, own a pet¹ the majority of which are cats and dogs. Currently, the cat and dog population stands at around eight million of each with nearly two million smaller animals such as rabbits, hamsters, gerbils and rats being kept as pets. More 'exotic' animals, about 200,000 snakes and more than 100,000 turtles/tortoises, are also being kept as pets.

With so many pet animals in the UK it is perhaps not surprising that there is an abundance of unwanted animals that need new homes. Unfortunately, not all pet owners are aware of the long-term commitment they are taking on when initially getting an animal, and some are unable to continue to provide the suitable environment or care for their chosen animal. In extreme cases these animals can suffer either physical or emotional cruelty or are simply abandoned. When an animal is no longer wanted or the owners' circumstances change, the RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations are often turned to for help.

It is a concern that some animals suffer unnecessarily due to the irresponsibility of the very people who should ultimately be responsible for them. The RSPCA would like to see the number of unwanted animals in the UK significantly reduced until the problem no longer exists.

Background

There are many reasons why the UK has a problem with unwanted pets and why many of these animals will end up being cared for by animal welfare organisations and other parties until new homes can be found for them. This can be the result of impulse buying, availability of animals, lack of research carried out before an animal is acquired, irresponsible and indiscriminate breeding and changes to owners' circumstances. Pets are often purchased when they are small and look cute, with little thought given to what owning an animal actually means. Impulse buying can result in rabbits spending the majority of their time alone in a small hutch, dogs not given any or enough exercise and hamsters ignored when a child becomes bored with them.

Lack of forethought about the implications of owning a pet can also result in animals being unwanted and in need of a new home. Appropriate behavioural training is often neglected, and is one of the many reasons that a significant number of unwanted animals pass through rehoming and rescue centres. Other reasons why a pet may need to be found a new home include changes in family, health or financial circumstances.

In the UK, there are more than 100 rehoming and rescue centres for pet animals² run by animal charities. These include the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA) and the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA). Many more rehoming centres are run by smaller organisations. These organisations, and other establishments, have a finite amount of space and funds so are unable to take in all the animals that may need a new home.

The RSPCA, like many other organisations, aims to find new homes and owners for every animal that enters into its care, however as discussed on page 60, this isn't always possible. Unwanted animals that do not end up in the care of the RSPCA or other animal welfare organisations, are advertised via websites or in newspapers, given away to family and friends or some may even be euthanased by vets at the request of the owner. In some instances animals are simply abandoned or allowed to stray, as they are no longer wanted. Bearing in mind that animal rehoming centres are usually full with animals in need of new homes and organisations work tirelessly to promote the responsible pet ownership message, it can be concluded that there is a continuing problem with unwanted pets in the UK. To begin to gauge the scale of the problem, the number of healthy animals entering the care of the RSPCA in England and Wales each year is focused on here.



THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR

The indicator figures

Ideally, this indicator would look at the number of unwanted healthy animals in the whole of the UK. The figure would incorporate the number of animals euthanased by vets at the owners' request, the number of animals the RSPCA care for and the number of animals that enter non-RSPCA establishments. Currently, there is no nationally-established format to identify the total number of unwanted pets that are dealt with each year in the UK and therefore the information used is RSPCA data that is collected on an annual basis.

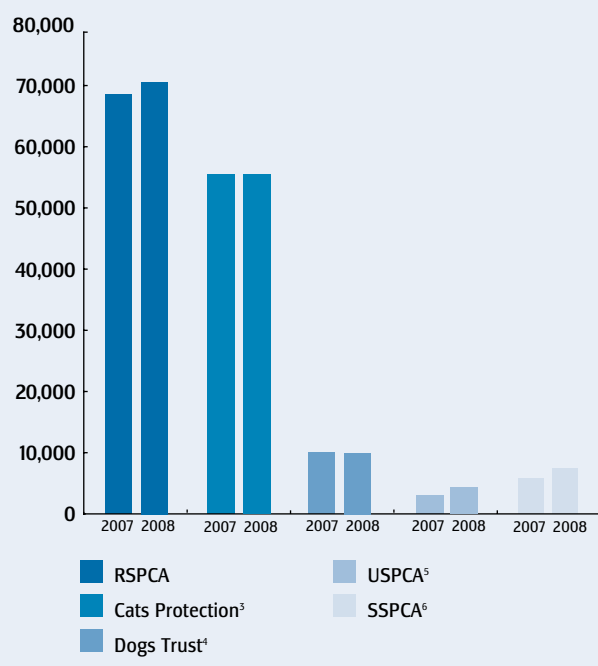
In an attempt to establish the true extent of the problem, a search of other organisations websites and annual reviews/reports helped to identify the number of animals rehomed each year. Figure 1 shows the approximate number of animals the different organisations rehome each year. The five largest animal welfare organisations in the UK annually rehome a combined total of about 145,000. However, it is expected that thousands more animals are unwanted and are dealt with by other organisations, vets, local authorities or individuals.

For the purpose of this indicator, RSPCA data has been used, but in future it is hoped that year-on-year figures can be obtained from many other organisations in the UK so as to give a more accurate and representative picture of the problem regarding unwanted animals.

The number of unwanted animals is calculated by combining the number of animals rehomed by the RSPCA and the number of healthy animals euthanased. This figure includes cats, dogs, equines, birds, and small mammals, and non-domestic or exotic animals such as snakes, lizards and terrapins. Figure 2 shows that over the past five years the number of healthy animals entering the care of the RSPCA has remained relatively constant at about 75,000. Between 2007 and 2008, the figure rose by about four per cent with just over three thousand more unwanted animals being dealt with by the RSPCA. The amount of healthy animals euthanased was at its highest in five years, although more animals were found new homes within the same period. It is disappointing that in 2008 and previous years thousands of unwanted animals were placed into the care of the RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations, most of which are charities and rely solely on the generosity of the general public and other donors.

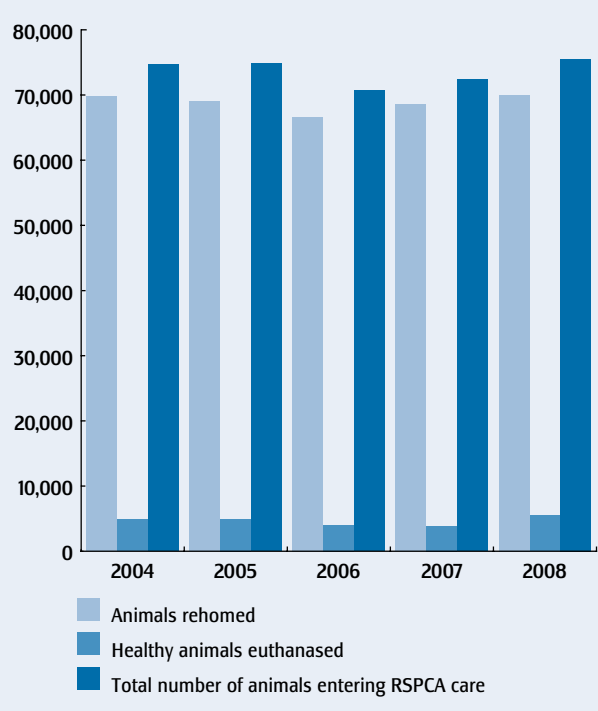
The majority of animal organisations in the UK also promote neutering, microchipping and responsible pet ownership, in an attempt to help avoid the problem of unwanted pets and to encourage pet owners to think about the long-term issues that arise from owning a pet. However, with at least 150,000 animals in the UK needing new homes, much more needs to be done to reduce the number of unwanted animals and prevent the suffering that can be caused to them. There still remains a huge problem with breeding, impulse buying of pets and general irresponsible behaviour that leaves many animals needing new homes and animal welfare organisations and others left to pick up the pieces.

Figure 1: Number of animals rehomed in the UK by animal welfare organisations, 2007–2008



Data source: RSPCA, Cats Protection, Dogs Trust, USPCA and SSPCA.

Figure 2: Number of unwanted animals taken into the care of the RSPCA, 2004–2008



Data source: RSPCA.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Pet Food Manufacturer Association's data: www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-figures-.htm
- 2 Information gathered from the websites of the following animal welfare organisations in the UK: RSPCA, Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the Mayhew Animal Home, Dogs Trust, the Blue Cross, Cats Protection and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
- 3 www.cats.org.uk/workwedo/howwework.asp
- 4 www.dogstrust.org.uk
- 5 www.uspca.co.uk
- 6 www.scottishspca.org

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of non-microchipped cats and dogs taken into RSPCA care

RSPCA concern

Microchipping is an inexpensive way of ensuring permanent identification of pet animals and being able to link animals to their owners. Although a dog owner has a legal requirement to ensure that their dog while on a highway or in a public place wears a collar with the name and address of the owner inscribed on it¹, there is no legal requirement for a dog to be microchipped and there is no equivalent legislation for cats. Collars and tags are an important but unreliable method of identification – collars can break and identification tags can fall off or be removed from the dog. It is much harder to reunite a dog with its owner by just relying on a collar and a tag. When fitted with a microchip, dogs, especially, are more likely to be reunited with their owner if they become lost or stray.

The RSPCA believes that all cats and dogs should be fitted with a microchip and that microchipping should be encouraged as part of responsible pet ownership.

Background

Microchipping is a simple procedure where a small 'chip', the size of a grain of rice, is inserted under the skin between animal's shoulder blades. The microchip bears a unique code number that is entered onto a national database alongside the owner's details. A hand-held scanner, often carried by RSPCA inspectors, vets, animal centres and local authority dog wardens, is used to read the details of the microchip if a lost, injured or dead animal is found.

Every year, the RSPCA, other animal welfare organisations, vets, police and local authorities handle a large number of animals that are reported as strays, are sick or injured, have become trapped or have wandered from their owners. They also deal with reports of dogs and other animals that are lost or may have been stolen. Many animals are never reunited with their owners, often because the owner or pet cannot be identified.

In 2008, just under half of all dogs identified as strays in the UK by local authorities were returned to their owners. If all of these dogs had been microchipped, it is likely that many more would have been returned to their owners, or at least their owners could have been located. Microchips are most commonly used in cats, dogs and equines, but can also be used on smaller animals such as rabbits, ferrets and birds. This method of identification is a requirement of the Horse and Pet Passport schemes², however there is no legal obligation for pets to be microchipped if they are not going to be taken out of the UK.

Microchipping can help with proving ownership of an animal and can be very useful when dealing with incidents of pet theft, straying animals and cruelty, and is one of the most reliable methods of tracing pets or their owners, although this is very much reliant on pet owners keeping their details up to date on the relevant databases. In 2008, the Petlog³ reunification service assisted with more than 97,000 telephone calls from people who had either lost their animal or had found animals that were microchipped, an increase of nearly 10,000 calls on the previous year. Sweden is a good example of where responsible dog ownership and microchipping has resulted in the country having limited problems with unwanted dogs and straying animals. Unlike the UK and most other European countries, in Sweden it is a legal requirement for all dogs to be registered and permanently identified from four months of age⁴, with microchipping being the preferred method of identification. This has resulted in more than 90 per cent of dogs that have strayed, and/or are not accompanied by their owners, being reunited with their owners within 24 hours.



THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR

Although microchipping is not compulsory in the UK, many organisations are making concerted efforts to encourage pet owners to microchip their animals. Every June, the Kennel Club coordinates National Microchipping Month⁵ throughout the UK in an endeavour to promote microchipping and to encourage responsible pet ownership. The RSPCA, and other animal welfare organisations, councils and vets also organise events where microchipping is offered at discounted rates or free of charge. The RSPCA promotes microchipping as the preferred method of animal identification, specifically through its rehoming efforts, as every animal leaving the care of the RSPCA is fitted with a microchip unless it already has one. The RSPCA also offers a welfare microchipping service that is carried out at the request of pet owners.

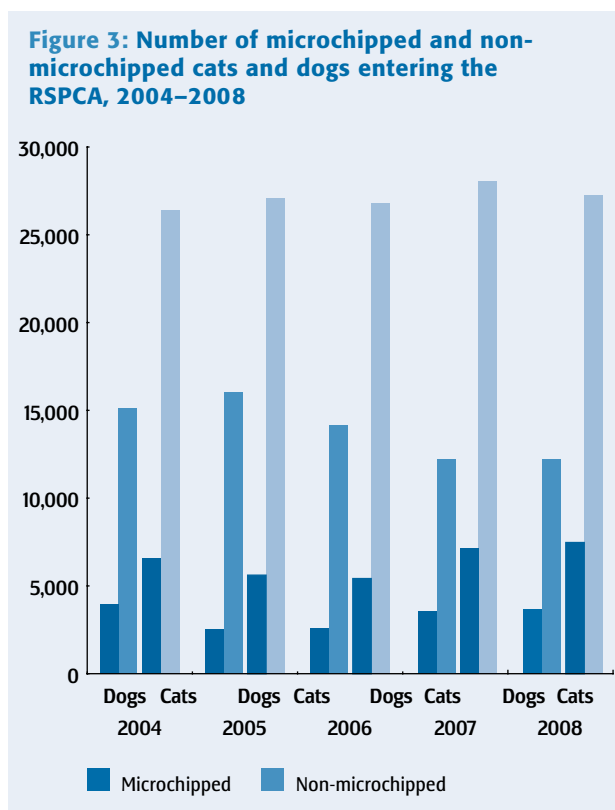
The indicator figures

This indicator aims to establish if the microchipping message is being effectively communicated and understood by owners and keepers of pet animals. It will help to assess whether more needs to be done by local authorities, vets, breeders and welfare organisations in promoting the benefits of microchipping as a part of responsible pet ownership.

Although the majority of animal welfare organisations and rehoming centres microchip animals before they leave their care and promote microchipping via publications and websites, it is still difficult to establish the extent of the microchipping work that each organisation is carrying out as there is no central method of collating this data. Therefore, the information used for this indicator primarily focuses on the cats and dogs the RSPCA microchips as they leave its care and enter new homes. Figure 3 shows that the majority of cats and dogs that came into the care of the RSPCA over a five-year period were without a microchip. In 2007 and 2008 just one-fifth of all cats and dogs were already microchipped – this figure has remained steady over the past five years. These statistics suggest that the microchipping message is slowly being taken on board by some animal owners with more people understanding the benefits of microchipping. Although the figures are positive the vast majority of cats and dogs, around 80 per cent, are still not microchipped when they come into the care of the RSPCA for rehoming. It can perhaps be assumed that someone who gives up their cat or dog is perhaps less likely to have had their pet microchipped because they have not considered the long-term impact of pet ownership, or

perhaps thought it was not important. However, to try and put these figures into context, Figure 4 demonstrates the amount of welfare microchipping that is also carried out by the RSPCA on the request of cat and dog owners and by RSPCA microchipping initiatives. Since 2004 the number of owned animals being microchipped by the RSPCA has dramatically increased. In 2004, 6,669 owned cats and dogs were microchipped increasing to 27,985 and 27,385 in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

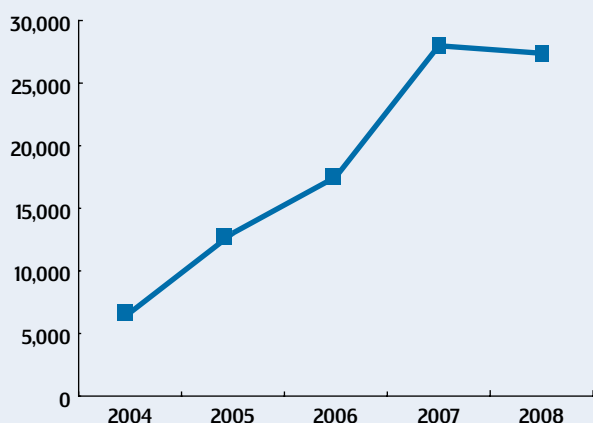
To try and find out how pet owners in the UK are responding to microchipping messages, the four UK microchipping database companies were approached to find out how many cats and dogs are being registered, and therefore microchipped each year. The database companies contacted were Identichip⁶, Petlog⁷, Petrac⁸ and Virbac⁹. As with previous years, three out of the four companies responded and provided figures for cats and dogs over the last five years. Figure 5 shows the total number of cats and dogs that have been microchipped and registered by the three schemes between



Data source: RSPCA.

THE RSPCA BELIEVES THAT ALL CATS AND DOGS SHOULD BE FITTED WITH A MICROCHIP AND THAT MICROCHIPPING SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED AS PART OF RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP.

Figure 4: Dog and cat welfare microchipping performed by the RSPCA, 2004–2008

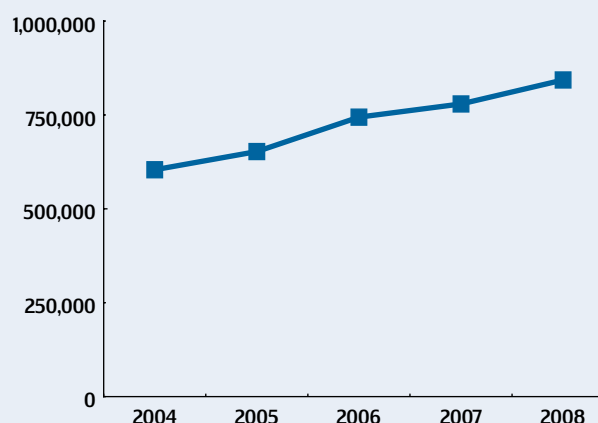


Data source: RSPCA.

2004 and 2008. Over the past five years the total number of cats and dogs registered on the databases has increased by about 28 per cent. In 2008, 63,886 more cats and dogs were microchipped than the previous year. This is likely to be due to increased public awareness and education about microchipping during national microchipping month and other events. Nationally, the number of cats and dogs that are microchipped each year is rising, yet the number of microchipped cats and dogs entering RSPCA centres is remaining fairly low, indicating that while the microchipping message is getting through to some people, the overall responsible pet ownership message needs to be improved.

There are about eight million cats and eight million dogs in the UK, yet far more dogs are microchipped than cats. This suggests that more targeted public awareness is needed to encourage owners to microchip their cats¹⁰. It also indicates that the status of cats within

Figure 5: Total number of cats and dogs registered each year on the Virbac, Identichip and Petlog databases, 2004–2008



Data source: Virbac, Identichip and Petlog.

the UK is seen as lower than dogs, which could be because dogs are seen more as part of the family than cats and therefore owners have a more responsible attitude towards them. Ideally every cat and dog in the UK will be microchipped.

For microchipping to be effective, not only do all pets need to be registered but details such as change of ownership or address need to be updated when necessary. Local authorities, welfare organisations, vets and others who come in contact with lost, abandoned or straying animals need to have microchip scanners and for them to be used routinely. It is positive that more animals are being microchipped each year, however the number of pet animals is increasing therefore this could explain the rise. It seems that the responsible pet ownership message is not getting through to many pet owners.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 A badge or plate is also acceptable. Control of Dogs Order 1992, SI 1992/901, art 2 (1).
- 2 EC Regulation 998/2003 of 13 June 2003 on the non-commercial movement of pets. www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/quarantine/pets/procedures/support-infor/guide.htm
- 3 www.thekennelclub.org.uk/caring/petlog
- 4 *Stray Animal Control Practices (Europe). A report into the strategies for controlling stray dog and cat populations adopted in thirty-one countries. 2006–2007.* RSPCA International and WSPA.
- 5 www.thekennelclub.org.uk/item/578
- 6 www1.identichip.co.uk
- 7 www.thekennelclub.org.uk/meet/petlog.html
- 8 www.avidplc.com/pettrac.asp
- 9 www.virbac-backhome.co.uk/pages/what.htm
- 10 In 2007 and 2008, 492,107 and 525,227 dogs respectively were registered on the three UK databases. Just 287,129 and 317,895 cats respectively were registered during this period.

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of healthy dogs being euthanased due to irresponsible pet ownership

RSPCA concern

Every year the RSPCA, vets, local authorities and other animal welfare organisations reluctantly carry out the humane destruction of healthy dogs that are no longer wanted and/or are unable to be rehomed. Some dogs cannot be rehomed due to aggression, ill health or injury, however there are a large number of dogs that need new owners but there are simply not enough people to give these animals a new home. Irresponsible pet ownership and other factors can result in the arguably preventable humane destruction or euthanasia of healthy dogs and many other pet animals when new owners cannot be found.

The RSPCA would like to see a future where no healthy dog or any pet animal in the UK is euthanased unnecessarily. This can only be achieved through animal owners, keepers and breeders adopting more responsible attitudes towards pet animals.

Background

There are a number of reasons pet animals, such as dogs, are euthanased. These include if they are sick, injured or, with particular reference to dogs, are a danger to the public. Euthanasia is always carried out by trained operators such as vets using approved, humane methods. Unfortunately, some healthy animals are also euthanased for non-medical reasons, such as when they cannot be found new homes, or at the owners' insistence because the animals are no longer wanted.

In certain areas of the UK, the number of unwanted and stray dogs is so large there are not enough people able to offer them homes. The RSPCA, other animal welfare organisations and vets use different methods to aid rehoming of these unwanted animals including putting adverts in the local press, on websites and transferring long-stay animals to different parts of the country. The RSPCA transfers long-stay animals to animal centres around England and Wales giving different members of the public an opportunity to view the dogs, which hopefully results in them finding a new owner. The RSPCA is opposed to the long-term confinement of animals due to distress and mental suffering that can be caused. Whilst every effort is made to find dogs and other animals a new home, there is sometimes no other option than to euthanase, once all possible methods of rehoming have been exhausted.

Each year thousands of unwanted pets in the UK end up in the hands of animal charities and welfare organisations that attempt to find new homes for these animals. The RSPCA has seen time and time again that many unwanted dogs are purchased as puppies and are signed over to the RSPCA when they are between two and four years old. This can happen for a number of reasons including owners becoming bored of the dogs once they are adults, owners being unable to cope with behavioural problems caused by inadequate training, and owners failing to make long-term plans for the care of the dogs. Sadly, not all of these animals will be found new homes. The number of healthy dogs put to sleep by the RSPCA and others could be reduced with a combination of simple, practical actions. Microchipping would assist with locating pet owners and could reduce the number of strays. Neutering of dogs could prevent unwanted pregnancies and help control the size of the dog population. The provision of suitable information and guidance from pet sellers could also improve the welfare of the animal concerned. Generally, a responsible pet ownership attitude needs to be adopted by every potential and current pet owner, so as to avoid dogs (and other animals) being needlessly euthanased. Ultimately, before anyone decides to adopt or purchase a dog, the question: "Are you able to care for a dog, or make sure he/she is cared for,



THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF HEALTHY DOGS EUTHANASED.

every single day of his/her life?”, needs to be asked and answered positively. This refers to providing exercise, companionship, training and understanding the financial commitment required amongst other things. By considering this question and the implementation of other activities, this would potentially reduce the number of unwanted animals and therefore reduce the need to euthanase healthy dogs.

The indicator figures

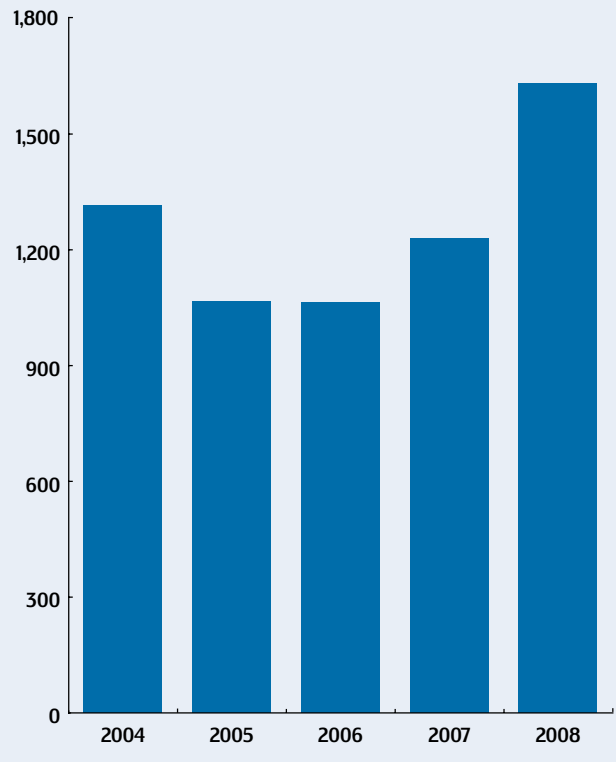
This indicator measures the number of healthy dogs the RSPCA has to euthanase each year. The total number of healthy dogs euthanased each year in the UK is likely to be a lot higher, however there is no easy way to find out what this figure is. Local authorities, vets (at the owners’ request), and some animal welfare organisations will euthanase unwanted healthy dogs, but these statistics are not widely available or collected nationally.

A search of other animal welfare organisations’ websites and annual reviews could not find any figures on the euthanasia of the dogs that are taken into their care.

In 2008 and 2009, the RSPCA wrote to each local authority in the UK in an attempt to determine the stray dog problem including focusing on how many healthy dogs are euthanased. In an attempt not to duplicate figures collected by the Dogs Trust¹, which commissions an annual survey² throughout the UK about the number of stray animals it euthanases each year, the RSPCA utilised the Freedom of Information Act 2000. A number of questions were asked about dogs that were euthanased for medical and non-medical reasons, as previous studies have never separated this data. Between April 2007 and March 2008, the RSPCA local authority survey revealed that 6,032 dogs were euthanased by local authorities in the UK³. Of these, 1,198 were euthanased on medical grounds, 2,032 were euthanased after a seven-day period on non-medical grounds, and there was no explanation for the remaining dogs. Although the number of strays euthanased has remained fairly constant over a two-year period, nearly twice as many dogs were euthanased for non-medical reasons, that is they were healthy for the period 2007–2008. Previously, in 2006–2007, more dogs were euthanased for medical reasons and less healthy animals were euthanased. It is a concern that this change has taken place and indicates that there are less avenues and resource for these unwanted stray dogs.

Figure 6 shows the number of healthy dogs the RSPCA has had to euthanase over the past five years. In 2004, 1,315 healthy dogs were euthanased by the RSPCA compared to 2008 when 1,595 dogs were euthanased. Between 2007 and 2008, the number of healthy dogs euthanased has increased by 365 dogs or 23 per cent. The percentage increase is fairly large, however in real terms the number

Figure 6: Number of healthy dogs being euthanased by the RSPCA, 2004–2008



Data source: RSPCA.

of dogs being euthanased by the RSPCA is still relatively low when compared to the number of dogs the RSPCA rehomes – 15,872 dogs were rehomed in England and Wales during 2008.

Combining the figures from local authorities in the UK and the RSPCA’s own figures for England and Wales, at least 3,627 healthy dogs were euthanased in 2008. It is expected that the actual figure is much higher if data was available from vets and other animal organisations.

This euthanasia figure is still unacceptable, as ideally no healthy dog will be euthanased by local authorities, the RSPCA or any other organisation. To try and measure how many dogs are euthanased nationally, further publication and collation of figures from other organisations is required to gauge the extent of the problem in the UK. It is hoped that with more responsible pet ownership campaigns that promote the benefits of neutering and microchipping, and explain what owning a dog for life entails, the number of animals euthanased will decrease until ultimately there is a home available for every healthy animal in the UK.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The Dogs Trust survey doesn’t distinguish between dogs that have been euthanased for medical reasons and healthy animals.
- 2 www.dogstrust.org.uk/press_office/pressreleases/2008/straydogsurvey.htm
- 3 See page 23 for more information.

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of organised animal fights in the UK

RSPCA concern

Animal fighting, that is pitting one animal against another, is viewed by the RSPCA as one of the most barbaric areas of animal cruelty. Although UK animal baiting and animal fighting legislation was first introduced in 1835¹, and subsequently up-to-date laws that protect animals such as badgers² have followed, there is still grave concern about such activities continuing and also new areas of animal fighting developing. Organised animal fighting activities are deliberate, calculated, and by their very nature cause a great deal of unnecessary suffering to the animals involved.

The RSPCA and other agencies are working to combat these barbaric activities in an attempt to see the eradication of all forms of organised animal fighting within the UK.

Background

Traditionally, animal fighting has been clandestine and covert and therefore extremely difficult to combat. The RSPCA's Special Operations Unit investigates three main areas of animal fighting involving dogs, cockerels and badgers³.

■ Dog fighting

Dog fighting traditionally involves a large number of people coming together to 'pit' one fighting dog against another, with large amounts of money being placed as bets on the outcome of the fight. The dogs used in organised fights are almost exclusively American pit bull terriers, a breed that is banned in the UK by the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991⁴. The fights take place in a pit, constructed to a size and standard recognised by the dog fighting fraternity, with the dogs being fought according to strict rules enforced by a referee. The fights can vary in length from a matter of minutes to a couple of hours and dogs may suffer from a large number of bite wounds. The owner of the dog will probably treat these injuries and any subsequent infection. Treatments will include suturing wounds and administering steroids and antibiotics. It is unlikely the dogs will be taken for veterinary treatment because of the breed of dog involved and the nature of the injuries inflicted on the dogs. Recently, more impromptu, less organised dog fights have started to take place. Such fighting usually takes place in public areas such as streets or parks. The dogs involved are usually so-called 'status' dogs. The term status dog is often used by the media to refer to dogs associated with young people and used in aggressive or intimidating ways towards other animals and the public. The dogs involved tend to be tough looking dogs such as pit bull-type dogs, Staffordshire bull terriers and mastiffs.

■ Cockfighting

Cockfighting usually involves a large number of people watching and betting on fighting cockerels in a pit area with a referee enforcing strict rules. The birds are conditioned to fight and may have the natural spurs on their feet sharpened so as to inflict the maximum damage to their opponents, other cockerels. Alternatively the natural spurs may have been removed and replaced with sharpened 5cm steel spikes, which are fitted and bound to the birds' legs. Bouts may last anything from a few seconds to one hour. Often one of the birds is killed and many others receive severe injuries.

■ Badger digging/baiting

Badger digging is carried out by small groups of people and involves terrier dogs entering badger setts to locate and corner badgers deep in the tunnels of the sett. The dogs usually wear electronic transmitter



THERE HAS BEEN A RISE IN THE NUMBER OF REPORTS OF DOG FIGHTING.

collars that provide a signal, which the diggers can detect on the surface of the sett. When a dog has cornered a badger the signal will become stationary and the diggers can then dig down to where the dog and badger are located, irreparably damaging the badger sett in the process. At this time both the dog and the badger are likely to receive severe bite injuries because a badger will fight fiercely when cornered. Once the diggers reach the dog and badger, both will be removed from the sett. The badger may then be killed with a knife or a spade. On other occasions the badger may be set free on the surface and several dogs set upon it to kill it, with the badger often suffering a slow and painful death.

More organised baiting of badgers also takes place with badgers taken away from the sett and baited in a pit with several dogs attacking it at once. The badger is not the only animal that suffers, as the dogs involved will receive serious bite injuries, which may be treated by the owners rather than receiving proper treatment from vets.

The participants and organisers of animal fighting and animal baiting are often involved in other areas of serious criminality, especially those involved in dog fighting. Due to their criminal background and knowledge of investigative techniques, the perpetrators are difficult to trace and track, requiring investigators to employ specialist skills and techniques to bring them to justice. There are a number of factors that make investigating animal fighting extremely difficult.

■ National and international boundaries

Those involved are prepared to travel long distances to participate in their chosen area of animal fighting. Different enforcement agencies are required to coordinate investigations as police, county and international boundaries are crossed. Suspects crossing police force boundaries who are stopped/arrested are unlikely to be linked to any previous offences in other police force areas.

■ Animal injuries

Animals that have been used in fighting will often have distinctive injuries. Therefore owners will not take them for veterinary treatment as this could raise suspicion about the source of the injuries.

Consequently animals are treated by their owners when injured, so it is rare for vets to see animals that have been used in fighting.

■ Communication

With advanced communication networks such as mobile phone technology and the internet, it is now easier for information to be transferred undetected. New factions of animal fighters are constantly emerging, as access to information becomes more available and international travel becomes easier.

■ Prosecution

It appears that animal fighting participants are willing to risk being prosecuted. The current penalties/sentences do not seem to be a deterrent, as there are many repeat offenders.

■ Profile

It is extremely difficult to identify or profile the type of person who is involved in animal fighting because a 'typical' animal fighter cannot be identified by a particular socio-economic group, race, nationality or age.

Due to the difficult nature of getting information on the perpetrators of animal fighting, investigations are extremely costly and the cost of bringing cases before the courts is also very high. In terms of RSPCA manpower, the time, specialised training and equipment required, makes the cost per conviction higher than any other area of the RSPCA inspectorate's investigative work. Typical operation costs involved in prosecuting animal fighting include: investigators' man-hours, prosecution costs, dog boarding costs, veterinary fees, expert witness fees and legal fees. Animal fighting, despite being prohibited for many years, still occurs in the UK. This is an important welfare indicator because of the intentional cruelty and the suffering it causes, and due to the fact that long-established laws are still being broken. Dog fighting in particular has cross-border implications where information, techniques and even dogs work at an international level. Many countries with their own animal fighting problems look to the UK, with its long legislative history and status as a nation of animal lovers, to help solve the problem, yet the problem still exists in the UK.

ORGANISED ANIMAL FIGHTING ACTIVITIES ARE DELIBERATE, CALCULATED, AND BY THEIR VERY NATURE CAUSE A GREAT DEAL OF UNNECESSARY SUFFERING TO THE ANIMALS INVOLVED.

The indicator figures

Due to the criminal and covert element of animal fighting activities, it is difficult to establish the scale of the problem in the UK. Unlike many other areas of animal cruelty that are openly reported to the RSPCA⁵, relatively few complaints are received from the general public about animal fighting. With other types of animal cruelty, reporting issues to the RSPCA can be seen as a good indication of how big a problem is, but unfortunately with animal fighting this is not a definitive way of measuring the extent of the issue.

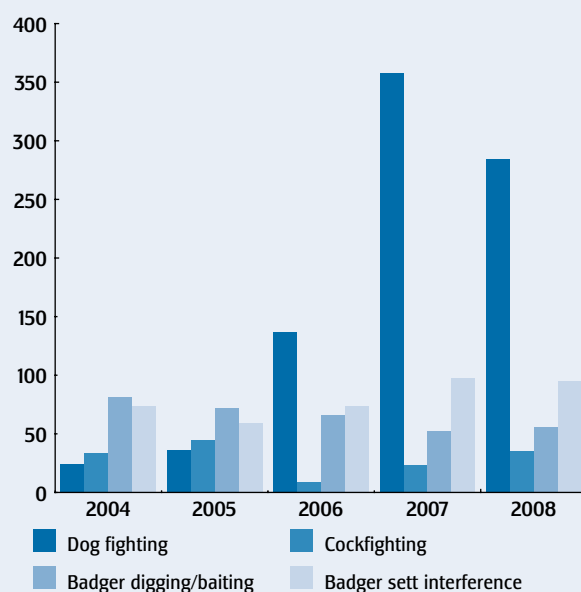
Figure 7 identifies the number of reports of animal fighting the Society received between 2004 and 2008. In 2008 the RSPCA received more than one million telephone calls to its cruelty and advice line and investigated 140,575 cruelty complaints, yet received just 470 complaints about animal fighting. Reports of cockfighting, badger digging/baiting and sett interference have remained consistent and relatively low over the past five years. Due to the secretive nature of these activities it is unsurprising that the figures are extremely low.

Since 2004, reports of dog fighting have increased from 24 to 358 in 2007 and 284 in 2008. There are a number of reasons why more calls were received in 2007 than in the previous four years including the widely publicised tragic death of five-year-old Ellie Lawrenson in Liverpool who was killed by an illegally owned pit bull-type dog. In addition the UK's first pit bull amnesty took place in Northern Ireland during January 2007 and two high-profile dog fighting cases in the West Midlands area may have prompted more reports as the public became more aware of dog fighting and dangerous dog offences.

Figure 8 identifies the reports of dog fighting to the RSPCA that relate to instances where youths or 'hoodies'⁶ were allegedly fighting dogs in public areas such as streets or parks. Although reports of dog fighting have fallen over the past year, the number that include dogs such as Staffordshire bull terriers and pit bull-type dogs being fought in public places has risen considerably. In 2007, 37 per cent of reports concerned dogs and street fighting, in 2008 two-thirds of all calls are related to this.

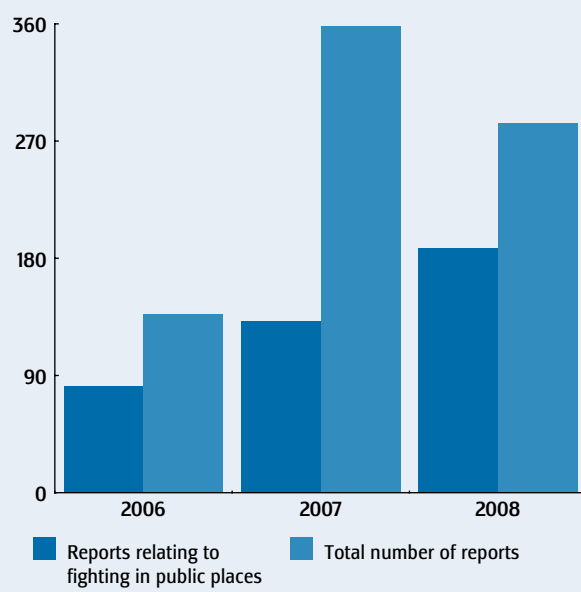
The RSPCA's figures are supported by Metropolitan Police figures, which show a massive increase in the number of dogs seized in London under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Between 2003 and 2006, the numbers averaged out to about 38 dogs a year. This increased to 173 between May 2006 and April 2007 and leapt to 719 between May 2008 and April 2009. Of the total figures, about 80 per cent of the dogs are pit bull-types, with the remainder being dogs that are dangerously out of control⁷.

Figure 7: Reports of animal fighting given to the RSPCA, 2004–2008



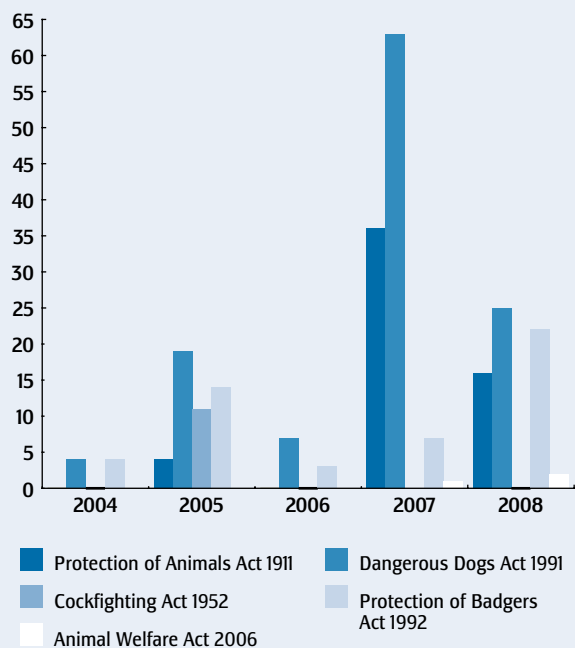
Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 8: Reports of dog fighting to the RSPCA, 2006–2008



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 9: Successful convictions for animal fighting obtained by the RSPCA, 2004–2008



Data source: RSPCA.

ORGANISED ANIMAL FIGHTING IS A CONTINUING PROBLEM AND IT IS EXTREMELY CHALLENGING TO MEASURE HOW BIG THE ISSUE IS.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 An Act to consolidate and amend the several laws relating to the cruel and improper treatment of animals and the mischief arising from the driving of cattle (Pease's Act) 1835.
- 2 The Protection of Badgers Act 1992. (Consolidating the Badgers Act 1973, the Badgers Act 1991 and the Badgers [Further Protection] Act 1991).
- 3 Although badgers and cockerels are not pet animals, it is important to include them when discussing animal fighting.
- 4 Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, s1.
- 5 The RSPCA's 24-hour cruelty and advice line number is: 0300 1234 999.
- 6 The terms 'hoody' and 'hoodies' are common phrases used to describe young people that wear hooded jackets or jumpers, and is used by members of the public when reporting possible incidents of animal cruelty involving young people.
- 7 Metropolitan Police figures refer specifically to the year this number of dogs left the police system.
- 8 The project brings together three well-known animal charities (Battersea Dogs Home, The Blue Cross and the RSPCA) with the Greater London Authority, the Metropolitan Police and Wandsworth Council.
- 9 Animal Welfare Act 2006, s8.

In 2006, the RSPCA produced a leaflet and poster encouraging owners of status dogs to provide adequate care for their dogs and highlighting the legislation that protects dogs such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (AWA) and the Control of Dogs Order 1992. The RSPCA is extremely concerned that more reported incidents of dog fighting seem to involve young people in public places. In February 2008, the Society became involved with an education initiative, the People With Dogs Project⁸, which aims to reduce intimidating and anti-social behaviour on London's streets.

Another way to identify the scale of animal fighting is to look at the number of successful animal fighting convictions over the past five years (Figure 9). The Animal Welfare Act 2006 has repealed the Cockfighting Act 1953, therefore such offences are now taken under the new Act. The AWA has created new animal fighting offences and in 2008 two convictions under the Act were secured⁹.

It is useful to look at the number of convictions, as this demonstrates that animal fighting is still taking place and perpetrators are being caught, however it does not clearly represent the true scale of the problem. More convictions in a given year does not necessarily mean the problem is worsening, it could just mean more people were caught or many people were involved at one event and subsequently convicted. Conversely, if the number of convictions dropped, this isn't necessarily a sign that fighting is occurring less, as it could simply mean those involved are not being caught. With regard to dog fighting convictions, there can be a big difference between the number of cases reported and the number of convictions because of the delays in bringing the cases to court. It is possible for a large number of convictions to take place in a year although the relevant arrests occurred the previous year. The fact that people are still being convicted for animal fighting clearly demonstrates that there is an ongoing problem with these illegal activities.

Organised animal fighting is a continuing problem and it is extremely challenging to measure how big the issue is, which makes it difficult to statistically gauge whether animal fighting is increasing or decreasing. However, with new types of dog fighting factions appearing, more reports of incidents and a higher number of convictions, it must be concluded that animal fighting, especially dog fighting, is increasing.