

Rùnaire a' Chaibineit airson Cùisean Dùthchail, Biadh agus an Àrainneachd
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and the Environment

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John Pentland MSP
Convener of the Committee
Public Petitions Committee
Room T3.40
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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6th June 2015

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 29th April 2015 to Aileen McLeod, Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, regarding Petition PE1555 on electric shock and vibration collars for animals. This calls on the Scottish Parliament 'to urge the Scottish Government to ban the cruel and completely unnecessary use of electric shock and vibration collars on animals in Scotland'. I am replying as animal welfare falls within my own portfolio.

I note that you are aware of the speech that Aileen gave on my behalf at the debate held in the Scottish Parliament on 8th January 2015. You may also be aware of the Parliamentary Question S4W-25302 on this topic, to which I responded on 5th May. You ask in particular for the rationale for not supporting a ban and whether this view has changed since the debate in January.

The question of whether or not to ban electronic training aids is a long running one – it was debated during Parliamentary scrutiny of what is now the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. However, for a ban to be introduced on welfare grounds there would need to be clear evidence that electronic training aids were inherently harmful to the welfare of dogs. The information on electronic training aids that the Scottish Government has based its position on to date is:

Consultation - Full public consultation in 2007, which was also specifically targeted at around 300 organisations that were considered to have an interest in dog welfare (<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2007/09/04164628/2>), elicited only 164 responses. Although there was support for a ban from some animal welfare organisations, there was also strong opposition from other organisations and views amongst individual respondents were very mixed.

Research - Defra projects AW1402 and AW1402A, which completed in 2011, (<http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=15332#Description>; <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=17568#Description>) showed that some dogs did react to

being trained with e-collars; however they did not show that e-collars cause harm to all dogs, and for most dogs, the use of an e-collar was shown to have no negative welfare impact. The work also showed that other factors such as the approach of the trainer could affect a dog's emotional well-being. The projects did not investigate boundary or anti barking collars.

Review –The Companion Animals Welfare Council (CAWC) report published in 2012 (<http://www.cawc.org.uk/sites/default/files/120625%20CAWC%20ecollar%20report.pdf>): revealed only ten publications of direct relevance to the specific use of electronic training aids in dogs; noted there were significant limitations in the quality of reporting and conclusions that could be drawn; concluded that there are sound animal welfare-based arguments both for and against the use of electronic training aids in theory and a lack of relevant research to inform the debate; suggested that there is inconsistency in attitudes towards the use of electric current with animals, with general acceptance for livestock; suggested that regulated use of manual devices may be acceptable with safeguards; makes recommendations on the design and use of electronic aids, of which Defra has already undertaken to take some forward.

Reported welfare issues - From January 2011 to December 2014, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA) received 23 complaints about electronic collars, all were investigated and advice given, no further action was considered to be required.

Existing legislation – If any of the above investigations had uncovered unnecessary suffering being inflicted on dogs using electronic training aids, this would already be an offence under Section 19 of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006.

The previous view, therefore, was that there was insufficient objective evidence to support a ban. However, after considering the points made in the debate in January, I share the strong concerns expressed regarding the potential for misuse of these devices and I have asked for further information on the use of electronic collars in Scotland, and other countries, and the basis for the ban in Wales. Officials are currently in the process of gathering this information and have had discussions with animal welfare organisations, the Electronic Collar Manufacturers Association (ECMA) and animal behaviourists.

I hope this information is helpful. I will continue to keep this matter under review, and look forward to the views of the Committee.

RICHARD LOCHHEAD