

PE1396/I

STAFFORDSHIRE RESCUE SCOTLAND SCO42285

This recently formed charity was involved in the submission of the above petition to the Petitions Committee in that Lisa Hird, who supported Ian Robb, is a trustee and treasurer of our organisation.

This charity was established by a group of people who have worked for other rescue organisations in the past but felt that the problems with staffordshire bull terriers needed to be tackled before rehoming was required. Our charitable purpose is Education, Training, Neutering and Rehoming. When we are approached regarding a dog we will first attempt to assist an owner to keep the animal by providing behavioural and training advice and support and encouraging neutering. Only if this is either not possible or fails will we seek a suitably vetted new owner, to whom we will also provide necessary support. We are also in touch with South Lanarkshire's Integrated Children's Services with a view to providing a package for school children on responsible dog ownership, in the hope of preventing future exploitation of the fecundity of all dogs, but especially Staffordshire Bull Terriers.

Having the advantage of being able to peruse submissions has enabled us to offer the following for consideration.

Canine Concern makes the point that there is a risk of the petition being used as an excuse for breed specific legislation. It is not the intention of Staffordshire Rescue Scotland to promote such an idea. There is no question but that the plight of Staffies today echoes that of German Shepherds, Dobermans and Rottweillers in the past and indicates that of other breeds in the future. It is indeed fortunate that MSPs on the committee had the insight to recognise that the problems are not breed specific and that any legislation exclusive to one breed would only move the difficulties to another. I would confidently predict that the present dreadful situation of Staffies will transfer eventually to Akitas or American Bulldogs, both of which are becoming 'status' dogs in certain strata of society.

The SSPCA has made the point that microchipping of all dogs should not be a choice but a necessity. The present legislation which requires a dog to be chipped after some infringement of law has taken place brings words like 'horse', 'stable' and 'door' to mind. There is little point in being able only to trace a dog to its owner or breeder after a proven offence has occurred and caused that dog to be made identifiable. The work of rescue organisations and animal charities as well as that of Dog Wardens would be facilitated immensely by the introduction of compulsory microchipping of all dogs before they leave the breeder's premises. Such a change would also, in the long run, improve the welfare of dogs in general by making it possible to account those responsible for failure to provide proper care to or abandoning animals.

Dogs Trust has underlined the statistics and the difficulties for Staffordshire Bull Terriers but has also pointed out that the problem of over and indiscriminate breeding,

especially of some quite bizarre crosses, generalises into the whole dog population. Any legislation directed at one particular breed would have little or no effect on the overall problem. Our organisation cooperates with various other rescues, not least Dogs Trust and we admire the work which they carry out, however, this has also served to highlight for us the fact that all of these organisations are being steadily overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the problem.

The Dog Wardens Association brings hope to the table. Their advice on the success of the neutering programme already carried out in Clackmananshire must surely be the way to proceed. They have pointed out that not only did the programme work but that the long-term outcome of rolling out such a programme over the whole country would be a saving to the public purse, not a cost, and would improve the welfare of dogs enormously. We would wholeheartedly support this advice and urge the committee to pay particular heed to the people who are confronting the problem on a daily basis.

The response from the Rural and Environment Directorate causes me such surprise that I must address it point by point:-

The recognition that dog fighting is illegal is rather belated. Dog fighting was illegal for well over a century before the 2006 act. Dog fighting is alive and well and happening somewhere near you today! The invention of the video camera has removed the requirement for a crowd of spectators. A dog fighting pit can now operate in seclusion with the whole sordid and unimaginably cruel process being recorded for distribution. It is not safe to leave a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, or, for that matter, any other breed, staffies being merely a favourite target, tied up outside a shop, not because it is a danger to anybody but because it is quite likely to be stolen for the purpose of fighting or to be used as bait to train a fighting dog. It is well known in the dog world, but, sadly, unprovable because of the difficulty of penetrating the murky world in which the activity persists (just ask the SSPCA about this) that dog fighting is on the increase along with immigration from parts of the world where the behaviour is, if not socially acceptable, at least tolerated.

Section 19 of the Animal Health and Welfare Act is routinely ignored. This is not necessarily because people are motivated to flout the law, but is more probably the result of sheer unadulterated ignorance. When one is able to remark to a person whose dog is being assessed for rehoming that the dog is not neutered the response 'How do you know?' comes as a surprise. Even greater surprise is caused by the need to tell the owner that the dog 'still has his balls' before understanding dawns. The crude terminology had to be used because the person in question did not understand the words 'genitalia' or 'testicles'. People do not know the requirements of the Act. People do not care about the requirements of the Act. People are abysmally unaware of the consequences of allowing un-neutered dogs to roam, to the extent that some of them must wonder where the puppies actually came from before they offer them for sale or exchange on Gumtree!

The Breeding of Dogs Act 1973 was never worth the paper it was written on. It made it quite legitimate to keep as many bitches as you liked and breed them as you liked, so long

as the production of pups for sale was not your primary purpose. If you could demonstrate that you were breeding to show and only selling surplus or poor quality pups the Act had no relevance. The current Act on the Breeding and Sale of Dogs may well regulate the commercial breeding of dogs in Scotland, I have no information or statistics to confirm or refute this suggestion. What I do know is that it has no effect on the back street breeder who can boast that his dog has sired ninety-eight pups, none of which are KC registered nor carry a five generation pedigree. Most of the Staffordshire Bull Terriers coming into rescue do not originate with the show fancy but with those, not necessarily members of the drug sub-culture, who produce a litter of pups for the purpose of acquiring untaxed pecuniary gain! They are neither aware of the legislation nor affected by it.

I would agree that there is nothing to indicate that imposing a levy on legitimate, licensed breeders would serve any useful purpose. The problem lies in the hands of illegitimate (sic) unlicensed casual breeders who operate entirely outwith all the laws on animal welfare and, frequently, in incredible ignorance.

There would be little or no cost involved in setting up a national microchipping database since the database already exists. I am astonished that the respondent seems to be unaware of this!

The commendable statistics on the treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts, whilst interesting, are utterly irrelevant to the problem. Staffordshire Rescue Scotland does not hold the substance-addicted population responsible for the plight of the staffie today. There may well be, indeed there undoubtedly are, addicts who exchange dogs for drugs. There are, equally, many more non-addicts who regularly exchange dogs for money or barter them for goods, just have a look at Gumtree, abuse them, use them as weapons or to launder money, abandon them and tell lies to rescue organisations to have them taken away.

The statement 'the breeding and sale of animals seems an ambitious and lengthy route to funding an addiction' is obviously qualified by the word 'seems'. This suggests a complete lack of understanding not only of the problem but also of the mechanics of reproduction. All that is required to produce a litter of pups is a bitch in oestrus, a willing dog, a disregard for the welfare of the bitch and a complete lack of concern for the fate of the pups! There is no difficulty involved. There is no long-term plan involved. No license will be sought or granted and the number of dogs in the population will increase exponentially when the people who take the pups breed to recoup their costs, or, perhaps even more problematically, to replicate the dog which they already have, a reflection of the fact that no knowledge of genetics is necessary either. There are streets in Scotland where all the Staffies are related because one person has a dog and everybody else has a bitch, a sort of extended family which makes a mockery of breeding legislation.

I suggest that the respondent from the Rural and Environment Directorate spend a day or two in the company of a Dog Warden, an SSPCA Inspector or a rescue volunteer.

The submission from Kay Hamilton hits the nail absolutely on the head in one word. Again, whilst her description of a weekend in the life of a rescue reinforces the extent of the problem, that one word goes right to the heart of the matter. The word is ‘humans’. There is actually no problem with dogs. Dogs are dogs and do what dogs do. Dogs do not arrange fights, dogs do not sell each other, dogs do not seek lurid and misleading headlines in the national press. People either deliberately for gain or stupidity, or accidentally through carelessness or ignorance, cause and permit these things to happen.

It is true that the old dog licensing scheme was ineffective and it is probable that dog licensing would have no effect today either, although the Isle of Man seems to manage their licensing scheme remarkably well. Perhaps it would be better and more effective to look at people licensing. You cannot drive a car legally without a license obtained by passing a test. The same could be made to apply to the possession of a dog or dogs. Admittedly, there would be a cost involved, but, as the Dog Wardens have already pointed out, the cost of what is happening now is much higher than is immediately obvious in terms of police and court time and the burden on the NHS and other services. A licensing scheme could, in the long run, be self-financing. The comment on the effect on the less well off is easily countered by the statement that if you cannot afford the license, how can you possibly afford to care properly for the dog. The fact that there are people who are in such poverty is a matter for another forum and should have no bearing on the purpose of the petition.

Our recommendations are as follows:

- Compulsory microchipping of all dogs.
- Councils and Housing Associations to prohibit unlicensed breeding of dogs. This could be included under that part of tenancy agreement relating to pet ownership.
- An education and training programme to provide staff, e.g. Social workers, working with people who indiscriminately breed their dogs. This could be provided by rescue organisations such as ourselves (we have an education/training programme ready to deliver). Training would include encouraging clients to access neutering/ spaying and microchipping for their dogs.
- Many rescues, including ourselves, offer assistance with neutering/spaying, and ensure that all dogs rehomed are neutered/spayed, however, not all dogs are suitable for neutering. Neutering can be detrimental to dogs who suffer from fear and anxiety and can exacerbate these problems.
- The best course of action would be to suggest that the Scottish Government provides funding to enable Local authorities to work with vets and rescue organisations to offer reduced or cost-free neutering and spaying of all dogs regardless of breed. This would tackle the problem of overbreeding as a whole, would obviate the transfer of the problems with Staffordshire Bull Terriers to other breeds and, in the long run, save public funds.

- This solution has been proven to work in Clackmananshire where, in the past, the Council, dog owners and vets split the cost of neutering. Evidence from Dog Wardens in this area shows that the scheme has had a positive impact on the population in Clackmananshire with regard to their attitude to neutering/spaying.

Les Hunter
Secretary/Trustee
Staffordshire Rescue Scotland

Addendum.

We have been informed that the Petitions Committee will consider the matter again on 15th. November. Unfortunately we have already convened a meeting of all interested parties to discuss the matter on that day and will be unable to attend the Parliament in support of the Petitioner. We will, however, be pleased to provide the Committee with the results of that meeting as soon afterwards as possible.