

November 2009

Weapon dogs

The situation in London

London has, and continues to experience, a serious rise in the number of dangerous and status dogs. These are increasingly being used in crime and as weapons for intimidation - 'weapon' dogs. There has been an increase in attacks on young people and Londoners feel that it is only a matter of time before someone is killed. The media regularly reports attacks on people and incidents in parks; rumours circulate about dog-fights and chain fighting; and residents are concerned about damage to trees from dogs being trained to be aggressive. Action needs to be taken to develop and deliver solutions that will eliminate this abhorrent feature of London life that blights neighbourhoods, terrorises residents and is linked to serious crime.

The Law

1991 Dangerous Dogs Act

The Dangerous Dogs Act was introduced in the UK in 1991. There are two key sections to the Act:

- Section 1: Banned four types of dog (Pit Bull Terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentinos and Fila Brasileiros). However, the 1997 amendment of the Act permits ownership of these types although strict requirements are made.
- Section 3: Refers to any type of dog that is dangerously out of control in public or is being used by owners to intimidate the general public.

Section 3 creates a criminal offence of allowing any dog to be dangerously out of control in a public place or a place where it is not allowed. A dog can be regarded as being dangerously

out of control on any occasion where it causes fear or apprehension to a person that it may injure them. Furthermore, if that dog does injure a person then the offence is aggravated. Legal action may be taken against the owner and/or the person in charge of the dog at the time. Thus, Section 3 can apply to any breed of dog and the judgement of whether that dog is 'dangerous' is made in court.

The maximum penalty for owning a banned dog (under Section 1) is a fine of £5,000, or six months imprisonment, or both.

The 1991 Act was amended in 1997 which removed the mandatory destruction order provisions.

Identifying dogs that would be banned under Section 1 of the Act is not an easy process. Due to cross breeding of all bull breeds, many dogs, especially the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (SBT) cross breeds, are visually very similar to a banned Pit Bull type. In some cases, only dog experts trained in identification can classify the difference between the two. As a result there are some owners who, inadvertently, possess a banned type of dog, especially as the SBT is the fourth most registered breed by the Kennel Club. Conversely there are some owners whose dog resembles a banned type, but as it is not one, they do not have to adhere to the strict ownership requirements.

'Weapon' dogs in London

The evidence collected from a wide range of agencies indicates huge increases in the number of 'weapon' dogs in London compared with other cities in the UK and a rise in the problem of irresponsible dog ownership.

'Weapon' dogs and 'looking hard'

Causing fear or intimidation by having a powerful looking dog is one of the reasons for the increase in 'weapon' dogs among young people. Bull breeds are generally the dog of choice for those wanting to improve their status by owning a dog, and dog ownership of this type is predominantly by young males. Between 2007/08 and 2008/09 the number of Pit Bulls seized by the police increased by 65 per cent, and young males aged 20 to 24 account for the greatest proportion of those accused of dangerous dogs offences.

Dangerous dog or irresponsible owner?

There is no doubt that a proportion of Pit Bulls and other 'weapon' dogs are being deliberately trained to attack people and for dog fighting. Both the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and the RSPCA have been involved in an increasing number of raids and arrests relating to criminal gangs, illegal dog breeding and animal cruelty. The number of individuals taken to court in London for dangerous dog offences increased by 50 per cent in 2007 compared to the previous year. Many owners are now being prosecuted by the RSPCA for causing neglect by delaying treatment for their dog following organised fights.

However, many owners may not have fully considered the responsibilities involved in owning a dog and have a lack of knowledge

about how to train and care for their dog. Without adequate training a dog can easily become too much of a handful for its owner. At a minimum these dogs may cause a nuisance to neighbours or cause damage to their local environment but, on a more serious level, they can become dangerously out of control. In many cases the dog is no longer wanted and becomes a stray. Bull breeds now account for 47 per cent of the dogs homed at Battersea, which is more than double the proportion five years ago.



What 'weapon' dogs mean to Londoners

The social and financial implications of dangerous dogs cut across many agencies.

Attacks on people

There has been a 119 per cent increase in the number of young people admitted to A&E for dog bites over the past five years and a 63 per cent increase for adults. A quarter of the animal attack incidents recorded by the London Ambulance Service were identified as an assault. London figures from the Department of Health show that the number of hospital admissions for dog bites has increased steadily.

Londoners feeling scared and intimidated

Both the police and the RSPCA have seen an increase in the number of complaints made about dangerous dogs. Safer Neighbourhood Teams have prioritised dangerous dogs in 40 wards and the number of dogs seized by the MPS has increased by 44 per cent (2007/08 to 2008/09). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many residents do not want to leave their houses or make use of their local parks because of the intimidation and threats posed by dangerous and aggressive dogs and irresponsible owners. The terror that can be created either from the fear of being bitten, or as a result of a dog attack incident cannot be underestimated. This problem seems to be more prolific in areas of social housing.

Attacks on other dogs and animals

There has been an increase in reported injuries to other dogs and other animals. The RSPCA, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home (BDCH) and Mayhew Animal Home all regularly receive dogs with:

- bite wounds caused by other dogs
- consistent fight injuries

- health problems in bitches that have been over-bred.

The RSPCA has also seen an increase in the number of complaints regarding attacks to other animals and more cats suffering from dog bites are now presenting to their hospitals.

Stray and abandoned dogs

Local authorities have the responsibility for stray animal collection and have noticed that stray dog numbers have increased and the proportion of bull breeds has increased. It is likely that this is linked to the status dogs problem due to breeding techniques to accentuate certain 'qualities' of dogs. Bull breeds do not kennel as well as some other breeds due to issues such as size and interaction with other dogs. This therefore reduces the capacity for the number of dogs that animal welfare charities can take in on a daily basis.

Damage to trees and parks

Owners allow dogs to strip bark, gnaw buttresses/exposed roots and rip branches which causes severe tree damage and can even kill trees. There is also a more alarming pattern of status dogs being forced to hang on swings and tree branches to toughen them up and strengthen their grip. The London Tree Officers Association (LTOA) has identified a significant rise in tree damage. The LTOA is undertaking a survey to gauge the extent of the problem, identify practical preventative measures and assess the financial implication of replacing trees. Local authorities also need to consider the costs of replacing playground equipment. Due to the cross cutting nature of the problem a co-ordinated response is essential. New responses are needed that focus on the owners as well as on the dogs.

Work in progress

The MPS launched the **Status Dog Unit** (March 2009) in recognition of the numbers of Pit Bull type dogs being used like weapons in crime, or to protect gang members. The MPS Status Dogs Unit (SDU) is made up of one police sergeant and five constables.

The activities of the SDU fall into the broad categories of seizing dogs, gathering intelligence, responding to emergency situations and providing an expert examination service of dangerous dogs for identification purposes for the MPS. The SDU has been supporting Operation Blunt activities, as police analysts have found a link between locations where dogs were used as weapons and where knife crimes have occurred. The team has also worked with partners across London to help tackle the rise in the number of 'weapon' dogs taken to large public events such as Notting Hill Carnival and other music events that take place across the city.

The SDU has trained magistrates to ensure appropriate sentences/outcomes are achieved in the courts and to reduce delays in the court process, which brings down the cost of kennelling seized dogs. It has also delivered training to Safer Neighbourhood Teams on the law and the practical action needed to tackle the problems and works closely with the RSPCA.

Although the SDU has achieved considerable success already, it is unable to meet the demand

caused by the continual increase of dogs being bred and sold across London.

The London Dangerous Dogs Forum¹ was set up in 2008 by the MPS in response to the perceived increase in the number of dangerous dogs in London.

The People With Dogs Project educational pack for young people was developed by Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, RSPCA, the MPS, the Greater London Authority (GLA), the Blue Cross and the London Borough of Wandsworth. The pack consists of workshop notes and a DVD that explores topics such as irresponsible dog breeding, inappropriate exercise areas and organised dog fighting. It aims to influence young people by asking them to think about the impact of their behaviour and the responsibilities of dog ownership. Battersea Dogs and Cats Home is administering this project across London and running training courses for agencies that would like to deliver the workshop. It is particularly suitable for group work with young people and can be used by a range of agencies.

A number of boroughs and other agencies have also started to try and tackle the problem of dangerous dogs at a local level. Usually those partnerships include local police, local authority wardens, RSPCA, housing providers and other animal welfare organisations.

¹ The LDDF was set up in July 2008 to bring together relevant, interested parties to support a London-wide strategy, led by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), to deal with dangerous and status dogs.

Case study 1 | Lambeth - Multi-agency Partnership Action Plan

A Dog Control Task Group has been set up, made up of identified Single Point of Contacts (SPOCs) from key services and partners. These include Community Safety, Environmental Health, Parks, Streetcare, the MPS Status Dogs Unit, RSPCA and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home (BDCH) as well as Lambeth Living (local ALMO) and other registered Social Landlords. The group undertook a Problems Dogs Profile to ensure they had an intelligence lead approach to their partnership response. They have met twice and reviewed and monitored progress against a multi-agency Partnership Action Plan which focuses on:

- enforcement (targeted operations and use of powers),
- prevention,
- promoting reassurances including effective publicity and communications,
- improved partnership working through intelligence led approaches
- joint patrolling in parks.

Contact: Chris D'Souza, Community Safety Manager, Lambeth Council

Case study 2 | Lewisham – Education/working with young people

In June 2008 due to both the increase in the numbers of stray dogs in Lewisham and the reported increase in antisocial behaviour with dogs, Lewisham Council decided to set up a BARK project², with the emphasis being on education rather than enforcement. Under the BARK scheme, Lewisham Councils Animal Welfare Officers have been promoting the People With Dogs Project in the borough's secondary schools. The aim of this project is to educate young people aged 13 to 18 about responsible dog ownership. It is hoped that by targeting this age group they can reduce the number of incidents of anti social behaviour with dogs. Lewisham has also piloted this with their Youth Offending Team who felt that it would benefit the young people they work with. They are due to meet with Battersea Dogs and Cats Home to see if they can develop the scheme further.

Contact: Kay Foley, Animal Welfare Officer, Lewisham Council

² BARK - Brent Action for Responsible K9s. London's first multi agency partnership forum, BARK was officially launched in January 2007 to tackle the irresponsible use of dogs in the borough.

Case study 3 | Lewisham – Wandsworth – bye-laws and housing tenancy agreements

Wandsworth Council has established three dog bye-laws that are effective in the borough. The bye-laws have been introduced to encourage dog owners to act responsibly and reduce the impact they have on other residents. Effective from 1 July 2006 a bye-law now covers the walking of multiple dogs, and the licensing of multiple dog walkers for parks and open spaces. Wandsworth Council also enforces dog bye-laws for housing land which covers dog ban areas, dogs being kept on leads and fouling. New dog control orders will be launched in January 2010.

As a result of a number of dog attacks and following a consultation with tenants, Wandsworth Council introduced a compulsory dog registration scheme in January 2009 as a part of their municipal tenancy agreements, and offered free micro chipping to help facilitate this.

Contact: Mark Callis, Head of Dog Unit, Wandsworth Council

Case study 4 | Islington – Tree damage

Islington parks officers and local residents identified an increase in damage to trees both in parks and on the streets. Two factors contributing to this are irresponsible owners who do not keep their dogs under control and the growing trend for training ‘weapon’ dogs to hang from trees in order to strengthen their jaws.

In response to this, there is a joint initiative planned involving the arboricultural manager, the parks officers and the senior dog warden to provide education in local schools, which will explain the consequences of damaging trees and responsible dog ownership.

This will be followed by a community tree planting exercise, funded by the local housing organisation. This will give the community a sense of ownership and responsibility for the trees and a better understanding of how to minimise damage to trees in the future.

Contact: Jake Tibbetts, Arboricultural Manager, Islington Council

Case study 5 | Camden - Dog HUB Community Project

Camden has implemented the Dog HUB³ Community Project to seek to reduce dog related anti-social behaviour. It offers remedial training, support and advice, with the aim of avoiding formal interventions. It takes an incremental approach to the problem:

- a Local Authority Dog Control Orders to deal with fouling, dogs not being under control and irresponsible dog owners.
- b ASB legislation and housing management options where there are persistent issues around ASB linked to the intimidating control or deliberate misuse of dogs or breach of tenancy conditions.
- c Direct intervention by police working with partners to deal with serious crime such as assault, dog fighting, intimidation and breaches of legislation regarding dangerous dogs, leading to prosecution through the criminal justice system.

Contact: Tom Preest, Head of Antisocial Behaviour and Street Population Services, Camden Council

3 The HUB philosophy is:

Humane and holistic approaches to problems

Understanding support and help without judgement

Benefits not only to dogs, but to the whole community.

What happens next

More engagement by local authorities and other agencies is required to better identify the scale of the problem and to start implementing a response. The problem differs across London and therefore it is the responsibility of all local agencies to work in partnership and deliver targeted local solutions. London is leading the way in developing and delivering an innovative response to 'weapon' dogs, however there are a number of areas which continue to need serious thought and action. These include:

1 Housing management standards

It is important to build a strong pets' policy as part of housing management activity that encourages responsible pet ownership but sets out clear, enforceable and enforced policies. Social landlords can promote micro chipping, be alert to dog breeding taking place in residential flats and houses, check all empty properties, garages and other storage areas especially recently vacated properties for abandoned pets.

In areas where the subject of dangerous dogs has been raised as a significant issue, we would ask housing organisations to look for evidence of housing tenancy minimum standards and changes to tenancy agreements to tackle the problem. This could include requiring tenants to register their pets, place a ban on breeding or selling animals and review conditions of tenancy to include the prohibition of owning dangerous dog breeds as identified in the Dangerous Dogs Act.

Proposed action

Tenants Services Agency/London G15 Group to work with social landlords to develop some

standards procedures and policies, including standard clauses for tenancy agreements.

2 Exploring changes to Dangerous Dog legislation

This current legislation is not considered to be effective and there should be more onus on the owner of the dog being responsible for the dog's behaviour.

London local authorities can also introduce or make use of a number of laws or powers to address some of these issues at a local level, including: ABC and ASBO powers, dog bye-laws, dog control orders and tenancy agreements/enforcement.

Proposed action:

The GLA will continue to explore, with London partners and animal welfare charities, the most appropriate way to tackle this growing problem through changing the current legislation. The work will explore the way dogs are used as weapons and the appropriate sentencing surrounding offences that include possession of a weapon. It will also look at the type of dogs used, taking account of irresponsible ownership, but also the dangerous risks relating to certain breeds and types of the dog.

Local Authorities to undertake joint work to develop guidance/options across a range of legislation which could be utilised, including: environmental, anti-social behaviour, nuisance, noise etc to identify and implement appropriate powers or bye-laws.

3 Stamping down on illegal breeding

The Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999 clearly sets out when a breeder requires a licence. Under this Act, the local authority can determine that anyone with a dog breeding business for commercial gain will need a licence, regardless of the number of litters involved. Many of the breeders across London are working illegally and breeding excessive litters without a licence, this increases the availability of 'weapon' dogs in the city by making it easy to get hold of one and it brings down the price. There are huge welfare concerns involved in the illegal breeding of these dogs.

Proposed action:

Local Authorities to work with Trading Standards/LOTSAs and tax and benefits agencies to explore how to tackle illegal breeding and follow up with effective enforcement to tackle the rising number of illegal breeders.

4 Working with young people

'Weapon' dogs tend to be mostly owned by young males; the predominant offenders of dangerous dog's offences are young men as well as being the predominant victims of dog bite incidents.

Young people should have access to wider education about responsible dog ownership and understand that they are responsible for the behaviour of their dogs. They need to be made aware of the ways dangerous or aggressive dogs affect the wider community and understand animal welfare issues. There are various courses/packs available including the People With Dogs project and Kennel Club Good Citizens Award.

Caring for a dog can be a very positive activity for a young person. Programmes for youth offending teams could include a wide range of training and education elements, young people should be involved in activities which make them understand the consequences of their actions, whether this is irresponsible dog ownership or using a dog as a weapon in a gang.

Proposed action:

Local authorities' Youth Offending Teams to work with other youth based partners and local animal welfare charities to identify and develop universal and targeted educational programmes.

5 Improved co-ordination of micro-chipping and neutering

Many authorities are already offering micro-chipping events. This needs to be part of an integrated strategic approach to try and alleviate the number of stray dogs and ensure that owners are identified and responsible for their dog's behaviour if involved in an incident. By keeping the cost of micro-chipping to a minimum, residents are more able and likely to chip their dog. The unit cost of micro chipping or tagging a dog is greatly reduced when bought in bulk.

Local campaigns could also promote neutering and local veterinary centres, or local animal welfare charities which may offer discounted or free neutering schemes.

Promoting neutering may help to curb the increase in bull breeds and to improve the behaviour of dogs.

Proposed action:

Local authorities and social landlords should identify opportunities for discounted costs for micro chipping and neutering with local animal welfare charities and veterinary centres. They should also co-ordinate and promote events in targeted areas to encourage take up by residents.

6 Damage to trees

Practical methods are needed to guard against further tree damage, along with education messages delivered as part of a wider multi-partnership approach to promoting responsible dog ownership.

Local authorities should look to work in conjunction with the Tree Officers Association to ensure they address the damage that is taking place to trees across London. The London Tree Officers Association is currently undertaking a survey across London to look at the extent of damage by dogs, and is developing a good practice guidance to reduce the likelihood of damage to trees in the future. This should be available by the end of the month on the LTOA website: www.ltoa.org.uk

Proposed action

The LTOA is to hold a joint event with other relevant partnerships to promote the environmental and community safety measures contained within the survey and good practice guide.

7 Improve data and sharing of good practice

While the evidence presented here provides a good starting point to validate the growing problem of ‘weapon’ dogs, the issue and the responses remain new and will continue to change. The GLA will continue to improve data collection to provide a London perspective and scope good practice. If you have any suggestion for data or possible interventions we should be aware of please contact:

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Conclusion

Londoners are increasingly concerned by the number of 'weapon' dogs on their streets and in their parks, and are rightly concerned by the possible consequences if no one takes firm and fast action to tackle the rise.

A wide range of agencies are affected by dangerous dogs in London and the problem is only increasing. The problem is not evenly spread across London, and partners must carry on feeding into evidence collecting activity to ensure the problem continues to be fully understood. It

is clear that both the individual and the type of dog need to be the focus of attention. It is important that local partners take responsibility for building their picture locally, establishing the scale of the problem in order to provide an effective co-ordinated response.

The GLA will continue to take a lead on this issue and will hold a good practice event in 2010 to bring together further developments and to provide an update on the proposed actions outlined above.

Appendix

Summary of findings from the 'weapon' dog evidence base

Changing dog profile

- Bull breeds now account for 47 per cent of the dogs homed at Battersea Cat and Dog Home. This is almost double the proportion five years ago.
- More male and younger bull breeds presented to the London RSPCA hospital than other areas in the UK.
- Image and availability/ abundance were more likely to be mentioned in London as a reason for obtaining a dog.
- Between 2007/08 and 2008/09 the number of Pit Bulls seized by the Police has increased by 65 per cent.
- The number of stray dogs arriving at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home to be re-homed has increased by almost two thirds over the past five years.

Handlers/Owners

- The number of individuals taken to court in London for dangerous dog offences increased by 50 per cent in 2007 compared to the previous year.
- In recent years London has a lower success rate of persons proceeded against and then subsequently found guilty. Over the past three years London has achieved a 58 per cent successful conviction rate whilst the UK average is 63 per cent.
- Young males aged 20 to 24 account for the greatest proportion of those accused of dangerous dogs offences.
- Many owners have been prosecuted by RSPCA for causing neglect by delaying treatment for their dog.
- Research by the Dogs Trust shows owners in London are more likely to obtain their bull

breed dog from a friend compared to a non-bull breed dog.

Victims/Patients

- The rise in London A&E admissions for dog bites is greater than the increase found nationally. Over the past five years there has been a 79 per cent increase in admissions in London compared to a 43 per cent increase nationally.
- Increased A&E admissions of young people presenting with bite injuries by 119 per cent over the past five years.
- Sixty per cent of the ambulance patients were male, with the 10 to 19 years age group predominating.
- A quarter of the animal attack incidents recorded by London Ambulance Service were identified as an assault.
- RSPCA state that an average of two dogs per day are presenting to their hospital with bite wounds caused by another dog.

Impact on agencies

- The health problems in dogs caused by the indiscriminate breeding of bull breeds have caused additional demands on animal welfare charities.
- The police have launched a Status Dogs Unit in recognition of the problem.
- Around 6,000 postal workers are attacked by dogs in the UK every year, with 70 per cent attacked on private property.
- A number of London boroughs are undertaking proactive schemes to try to tackle the problem.
- Animal welfare charities find it difficult to re-home dogs due to the negative impact of the media in relation to bull breeds.