



Pets change lives
We change theirs

It's a dog's life

Our manifesto
2024



About Blue Cross

Our charity has been helping sick, injured, abandoned and homeless pets since 1897. We help thousands of pets in need – dogs, cats, horses and small animals – every month, providing veterinary care and expert behaviour help. We also find loving homes for pets who need them, run pet food banks, provide advice and education for current or future pet owners, and offer a pet loss support service.

We're passionate about achieving our vision of a world where all pets enjoy a healthy and happy life with people who love them.

Introduction

There are an estimated 11.1 million dogs in the UK. Dogs are the nation's favourite pets, and our relationship with them is profound and enduring. Their presence in our lives brings great joy, companionship, and comfort – but having a dog also comes with great responsibility. The vast majority of owners are responsible and conscientious, but we know a minority are not, which leads to compromised dog welfare.

The legal framework governing dogs is complex, with numerous different pieces of legislation covering issues from dog control to fouling. Where legislation has been passed, it often contains loopholes which can be exploited. And a lack of comprehensive and effective enforcement means those who flout the law often evade justice and instead make large profits at the expense of dogs' health and welfare.

This manifesto charts the course of a dog's life, highlighting the areas where legislative change is needed to ensure our pet dogs can lead a healthy and happy life. We hope you find it thought-provoking and stimulating.

Blue Cross looks forward to working with you throughout this Parliament on improving and maintaining the highest standards of dog welfare. They deserve no less.

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Dog breeding

The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 state that dog breeders need to obtain a local authority licence for dog breeding if they either:

- breed three or more litters of puppies a year
- run a breeding business for profit

The fundamental problem is that public demand for puppies outstrips the supply available from licensed breeders, leading people to look elsewhere for their pet. The scale of unlicensed dog breeding is of huge concern. Our polling found 79.3 per cent of people are concerned about irresponsible breeding. Estimates suggest that as many as 88 per cent of puppies born in Great Britain are bred by high volume, low welfare unlicensed breeders. And thousands, if not tens of thousands, of puppies are believed to be imported annually from European countries to meet public demand, with many of those sellers also unlicensed.

We believe the most effective way to deal with problems with the breeding and selling of dogs would be by introducing a comprehensive system of registration and licensing for anyone breeding and selling an animal. This would bring much needed visibility and traceability to the trade, increase consumer protection, and better protect the welfare of dogs bred and sold across the UK.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to introduce a system of registration and licensing for all those who breed and sell dogs to ensure full traceability and increase transparency
- The creation of a centralised database of all registered and licensed breeders and sellers for enforcers – to include those sellers who advertise online, whether on classified websites or social media





Responsible dog ownership

Blue Cross wants all dog owners to be responsible and ensure their dogs are always under control, whether out in the community or at home. We know that irresponsible dog ownership and dog control issues are inextricably linked and can be a major problem in local communities, causing problems for other residents and pet owners. Responsible dog ownership is an essential aspect of effective dog control and has positive impacts on the dog's health and welfare. It also places responsibility for the dog's behaviour on their owner rather than simply demonising the specific breeds.

Encouraging responsible dog ownership within a community requires collaboration between agencies, early intervention, and a focus on education.

Blue Cross currently runs a Responsible Dog Ownership Course (RDOC) that supports dog owners and their dogs at a critical point, reducing reoffending and increasing community safety. It's available to anyone aged over 18 who has committed a suitable low-level dog-related offence, including aggravated and non-aggravated Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 Section 3 cases. Offenders may be offered the course through advisory action, conditional caution, community resolution or other pathways of restorative justice. Our partners have also had some success with voluntary recommendations for earlier intervention.

We've conducted RDOC in collaboration with West Midlands Police since 2019 and South Yorkshire Police since 2022. In 2023 Blue Cross expanded RDOC and promoted the intervention to other areas.

We currently have 20 partner police forces across England and Wales, and we're in conversations with several further potential partners. In 2022 we received 53 referrals. In 2023 we received 331 – an increase of 525 per cent.

The top three breeds of dog referred are:

- German shepherd (29)
- XL bully (24)
- Staffie (21)

RDOC has currently recorded 0 per cent reoffending rates, and we're now implementing a new impact measurement framework to evaluate attitudes, examining any longitudinal attitude and behaviour change. Ultimately, we aim to expand the course nationwide to reduce dog-related incidents and reoffending, increase safer communities, and improve behaviour and welfare for dogs on a lifetime of restrictions.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to invest in the nationwide provision of responsible dog ownership courses. These would then be an option for anyone who commits a low-level dog offence and, in time, lower the number of offences nationwide and improve public safety, as well as the health and welfare of dogs.





Health – brachycephalics

Blue Cross is deeply concerned about the growth in popularity of brachycephalic breeds of dogs, such as pugs, French bulldogs, and bulldogs.

These breeds suffer from inherent, and often significant, health and welfare issues because of their exaggerated physical traits.

Issues include:

- breathing difficulties (Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome – BOAS)
- obesity
- recurring skin infections
- eye diseases (corneal ulcerations)

Research from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) reveals that pugs are almost twice as likely to experience one or more disorders annually than other dogs – and the breed is almost **54 times** more likely to suffer from BOAS.

17 per cent of the dogs Blue Cross took in in 2022 were brachycephalic breeds – in 2023, the number rose to 25.5 per cent. The popularity of these breeds has in part been caused by an increased number of brands using brachycephalic breeds in advertising and on products. Sadly, many people have no idea of the health implications inherent to these breeds, and there's much more we can and will do to educate the public.

Ultimately, we'd like to see an end to the poor breeding of flat faced animals and a focus on ensuring only those animals with the best conformation for welfare are bred from. We're committed to working with our counterparts in other European countries who have legislated in this area to learn more about potential legislative solutions in the UK.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to ensure the robust and comprehensive enforcement of existing legislation that prohibits licensed breeders from breeding dogs when it can be reasonably expected – on the basis of their genotype, phenotype or health – that this would lead to welfare problems for the mother or the puppies
- The new Government to commission a wide-ranging review of the health and welfare of brachycephalic pets, including the poor breeding practices associated with the breeds and legislative frameworks used in other European countries, such as the Netherlands and Norway





Dog control

Breed specific legislation – Section 1 Dangerous Dogs Act 1991

It has now been over 30 years since the infamous Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was passed. This piece of legislation is renowned for being ill-considered, hastily created and poorly drafted.

Section 1, which prohibits the ownership of four types of dog – the pit bull terrier, Japanese tosa, dogo Argentino and fila Brasileiro, has caused intense controversy and arouses strong passions in animal welfare charities and among the general public. In 2023, the Government added another type to the banned list – XL bully type dogs. We strongly opposed this move, which repeated the mistakes of the original legislation – a knee-jerk response, no consultation period – and has led to yet more perfectly well-behaved dogs, who would make ideal family pets, being needlessly euthanised.

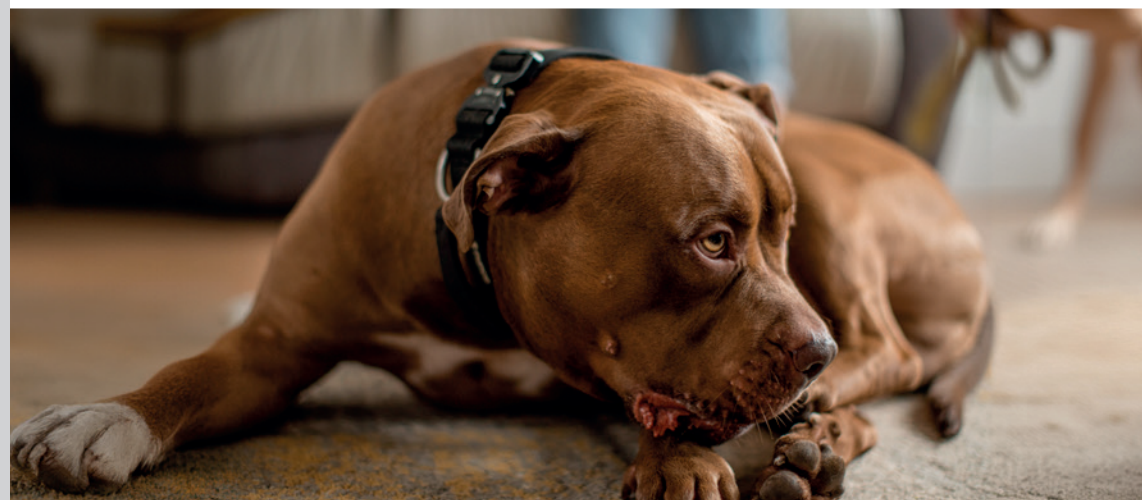
The legislation in its current form is clearly not working – it fails to protect the public, harms animal welfare and can be devastating for owners. Our polling shows 72% of people cannot say for sure the ban has reduced the number of fatalities.

Blue Cross believes now is the time for a complete repeal of breed specific legislation. Until this happens, well-behaved, good-natured dogs will continue to be needlessly put to sleep. We will continue to vigorously campaign for them to be allowed to live the happy and healthy lives they deserve.

The legal framework for dealing with dangerous dogs is extremely complex, with a myriad of different pieces of legislation covering the issue. It can be difficult for enforcers to know which piece of legislation to use in any given case. Combining all dog control measures in one comprehensive, overarching piece of legislation, based on the latest scientific evidence, would provide clarity and certainty for enforcers.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- A complete repeal of Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991
- As an interim measure, the new Government should allow Section 1 dogs who are behaviourally sound and pose no risk to the public to be rehomed by animal rescue centres
- The new Government should introduce a centralised database to record information on dog bites, including the breed involved, the severity, and the circumstances of the incident
- The new Government should introduce one piece of consolidated, evidence-based, breed-neutral legislation that covers all aspects of dog control. The focus of this consolidated legislation should be education and prevention, allowing enforcers to step in at the first sign of trouble and support the people involved to become responsible dog owners. This should include the introduction of Dog Control Notices, which are preventative, evidence-based and proportionate. They're currently used in Scotland and have been shown to be effective at dealing with low level dog offences.





Dog behaviour

Blue Cross behaviour experts believe the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis have had significant impacts on dog behaviour. Many people purchased a pet dog for the first time, often online, without undertaking adequate research and, as a result, made a poor choice of pet for their circumstances.

Our behaviourists dealt with an unprecedented number of complex dog cases following the pandemic and lockdowns. Many dogs missed essential socialisation due to the restrictions - for some this led to issues such as wariness of strangers, noise sensitivity and intolerance to being handled. These behavioural problems have caused immense difficulty and distress to many owners.

The cumulative impact of the restrictions and the lack of access to the right kind of behaviour and training support has created a significant cohort of dogs who exhibit challenging and problematic behaviour. Charities such as Blue Cross are left having to deal with the consequences: in 2019 our behaviour team carried out 583 consultations on dogs in our rehoming centres – in 2022 this rose to 730.

The cost of living crisis has exacerbated the problems. Many owners who would have employed a qualified, reputable behaviourist or dog trainer, such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council, to help manage the behavioural difficulties can no longer afford to do so. Our survey found over 25 per cent of owners can't afford the cost of behavioural training for their pet over the next three months.

The animal behaviour and training industry is not regulated in the UK, meaning anyone can set themselves up as an expert dog trainer or behaviourist – even with no experience or qualifications. This regulatory gap has been exploited by unscrupulous and inexperienced dog trainers who increasingly purvey bad, even dangerous, advice – often on social media. Many advocate 'quick-fix' solutions and punishment-based training, which is stressful and unpleasant for dogs. It can also make the situation worse and increase the dog's suffering.

Blue Cross research found that only 8 per cent of people have sought pet behaviour advice from qualified behaviourists, while 22 per cent admit they have relied on YouTube channels and TV programmes.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to publish a consultation on the regulation of dog behaviour and training services





Dog grooming and walking

There are several other commercial activities which involve dogs, such as dog walking, dog boarding and dog grooming. None of these activities are currently statutorily licensed or regulated, meaning anybody can set up a business regardless of their level of experience or understanding.

Many commercial dog walkers and groomers provide a professional level of service – but some do not. Careless, irresponsible dog walkers can cause serious harm to the welfare of dogs in their care. They can also create issues for other dogs and dog walkers and have a damaging impact on the environment.

Grooming is essential for a dog's welfare – it prevents their coat getting matted, as well as removing dead hair, dirt and dandruff. It requires expert knowledge and a high level of skill. Some equipment used by groomers, such as drying boxes, can cause serious injury or even death if used incorrectly or carelessly. The groomer is responsible for the welfare of any dogs in their care, so it's vital they adhere to the highest standards.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to introduce a statutory licensing system for dog walkers, groomers and boarders. This should help drive up and maintain standards across the sector, increase transparency and accountability and lead to enhanced dog welfare





Shock collars

Blue Cross has long campaigned for a ban on aversive training methods, such as electric shock collars, as they pose a serious animal welfare issue. They are outdated, impact negatively on animal welfare and have no place in 21st century dog training. Dogs should be treated with kindness and respect, and we support reward based training techniques.

There is no evidence that shock devices deliver better or more effective results than reward based training methods do. In fact, causing pain or fear to a dog has a detrimental effect on the relationship between owner and pet and can cause problems such as anxiety and other related issues.

We believe that training techniques that cause pain and fear compromise welfare and are therefore in contravention of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Wales took the lead, banning these devices in 2010. And the Government introduced legislation in 2023 to bring in a ban in England, but it was subsequently dropped.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to ban shock collars in England





Dogs in sport – greyhounds

Greyhound racing is a danger to the dogs involved, and there are significant inherent issues associated with the industry. These include dog fatalities and injuries, issues with the safety and design of tracks, races going ahead in extreme weather, poor conditions at trainers' kennels, and the fate of greyhounds retired from the sport.

Participation in greyhound racing leaves a legacy of physical and psychological trauma for the dogs involved.

Regulation within the sector is disjointed and ineffective, with a lack of transparency into industry practices, and questionable enforcement of regulatory standards.

We do not believe the racing industry has done enough to improve these standards. The absence of a sustainable and consistent source of income for the sector has grossly jeopardised any meaningful change for the dogs involved.

Blue Cross, along with Dogs Trust and the RSPCA, wants to see an end to greyhound racing announced as soon as possible. We expect the phase-out to be feasible within five years, allowing the racing industry and animal welfare organisations to carefully plan and coordinate the care of the many dogs affected. The Welsh Government has recently consulted on the future of greyhound racing, and there's a Bill before the Scottish Parliament that will prohibit the activity – it is time for the next UK Government to act to protect greyhounds from further injury and death.

We have over 110,000 petition signatures calling for an end to greyhound racing.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- The new Government to introduce legislation to prohibit greyhound racing in England





Saying goodbye

The hardest part of sharing our lives with a beloved dog is when the inevitable happens and they leave us. This can occur naturally, allowing us to prepare, but also in more shocking circumstances, such as a sudden accident or theft.

The loss of a pet impacts everyone differently. Feelings of loneliness and despair can be overwhelming. Some people experience deep pangs of guilt and self-doubt, particularly if they had to make the difficult decision to euthanise or rehome a pet. To help people manage their grief, Blue Cross runs a unique pet loss support service. Our volunteer Pet Loss Support team have been there for grieving pet owners since 1994. In that time, we've helped thousands of pet lovers of all ages and from all walks of life.

We also run a free 'Pet Peace of Mind' scheme, which takes in and helps find loving homes for pets when their owners pass away, providing them reassurance that their pets will be looked after when they are gone.

You can find more information on the Pet Loss Support service at:
bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss

And more on Pet Peace of Mind can be found here:
bluecross.org.uk/pet-peace-of-mind

Blue Cross is calling for:

- Employers to extend their bereavement leave to include the death of a much loved family pet



Thank you for reading.

X @BlueCrossPA

bluecross.org.uk/our-campaigns



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