



**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine
meeting on the topic of
“Impact of rising veterinary costs on dog ownership/surrenders and
abandoned dogs”.**

**Opening Statement by Ms. Deirdre Kelly, Head of Social Inclusion and
Communities Unit in the
Department of Rural and Community Development.**

6th December 2023

**Leinster House
Dublin 2**



I would like to thank the Chairman for this opportunity to address the Committee in relation to the topic of the 'Impact of rising veterinary costs on dog ownership/surrenders and abandoned dogs'.

I am joined this evening by my colleagues Ms. Catherine Burns, Assistant Principal Officer and Ms. Michelle Casserly, Higher Executive Officer in the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has policy and legislative responsibility for two areas relating to dogs: The Control of Dogs Acts, and the Dog Breeding Establishments Act. As my colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) will outline, a number of areas relating to dog ownership fall under the remit of DAFM.

Under the Control of Dogs Act 1986 local authorities have responsibility for all operational activities. They have the power to appoint dog wardens, provide dog shelters, seize dogs, impose on-the-spot fines and take court proceedings against owners. Similarly, under the Dog Breeding Establishments Act, local authorities have powers in relation to the licensing and inspection of Dog Breeding Establishments. I will discuss these areas in more detail shortly.

Furthermore, Local Government falls under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, while littering offences including dog fouling fall under the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

In relation to the general topic of dog ownership, the Committee will be aware that Ministers McConalogue and Humphreys established a working group on dog control in January of this year.



The Report of this Working Group was published in March, and recommended a number of changes to the dog control landscape. DRCD are committed to implementing the recommendations assigned to our department and will work in collaboration with our colleagues to support the implementation of the remaining recommendations.

Since the establishment of this group, we have continued to meet regularly and have strengthened the close working relationship between our departments working towards a coordinated approach to dogs issues as in practice, there can be a considerable degree of overlap between policy issues such as dog control, dog welfare, strays and surrenders and other related public concerns.

In terms of the legislation and policy we are responsible for, The Control of Dogs Act 1986 provides for the licensing and control of dogs and the manner in which dogs may come into the possession of dog wardens and pounds. Operational matters are the responsibility of the local authorities.

DRCD collates and publishes annual statistics on local authority dog related activities. These include, for example, information on stray and unwanted dogs, dog licences, enforcement actions, and the operation of local authority dog shelters and dog breeding establishments. The statistics are available on the gov.ie website.

In February, DRCD advised the Committee that it was our intention to undertake analysis of the statistics and I'm pleased to advise this was published in July of this year for operations to end of 2022.



Statistics for 2023 will begin to be collated early in the New Year for analysis and publication. In order to better inform policy making, DRCD are considering what, if any, additional statistics could be reasonably gathered and requested from local authority dog control operations from the year beginning 2024.

The statistics offer some useful data in relation to the number of dogs entering pounds and shelters whether by straying or surrender. As evidenced through licensing figures, pet dog numbers in Ireland remained relatively stable in the years leading up to 2020 and the onset of COVID. The notable rise in dog ownership over that time also corresponded with a fall in the number of dogs surrendered to pounds. However, surrender rates have begun to trend back upwards post COVID and from conversations with colleagues in dog control and the charities sector, we are expecting that 2023 statistics will show further increases in surrenders.

Anecdotal reports from dog welfare charities suggest a return to life post lockdown, resumption of in-office working and reopening of travel and wider society has left many dog owners struggling with dogs that had been accustomed to more attention and time. When coupled with a housing crisis, and reports that landlords may be reluctant to accept dog owners as tenants, exacerbated by a cost of living crisis, it is clear that some dog owners have struggled to cope and feel no alternative but to surrender their dogs.

We are minded that some of this crisis may be avoided by a better understanding amongst the public of the commitment and cost involved in dog ownership and for that reason have been working with DAFM on an initiative to raise awareness of obligations that we intend to roll out shortly via dog wardens and charities. We will work to support training for dog wardens in 2024 to include capacity building in outreach activities in schools and communities, and



we are pleased to advise that Minister Humphreys has secured funding for a large awareness campaign in 2024.

It is intended that a portion of this additional funding will also be used to roll out a neutering campaign. The exact details of this are yet to be scoped, particularly in terms of how best to target this initiative, however we look forward to engaging with colleagues to ensure it achieves the maximum impact possible.

We are aware that pounds are already under pressure so we have provided €2m in capital funding to local authorities in 2023 to upgrade and improve their facilities, however we would prefer to be in a position whereby stray and surrendered dog numbers were lower.

Having partnered with the animal welfare charity MADRA and with Galway County Council to conduct a census of dogs in charities and pounds for World Animal Day this year, we do recognise there is more that can be done to highlight this issue to the public, and to encourage conversations about dog ownership, obligations and choosing to adopt a dog for rehoming rather than shopping.

Legislative and Policy responsibilities in relation to the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010 and Control of Dogs Act 1986 transferred to us from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in July 2017 when DRCD was formed. DRCD published Dog Breeding Establishment Guidelines in 2018. These Guidelines were issued under Section 15 (4) of the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010 (the Act) following a public consultation process, and set standards that must be followed not just in



relation to the structures, but also the management of the establishment. This extends to exercise, socialisation, enhancement and enrichment of the dogs. Local authorities are responsible for the licencing and inspection of Dog Breeding Establishments, however it is an area that DRCD are keeping under close review. In line with the recommendations of the Working Group Report and this Committee, DRCD have implemented a national, centralised database of registered Dog Breeding Establishments, which will be regularly updated and is accessible on Gov.ie.

The area of dog control is complex with many varying opinions on what is the best way forward. It is our intention to work closely with stakeholders and experts as we progress our work, particularly on legislative changes. This has meant that progress is not as quick as we would like, however we do feel there is value in having the conversations now so that any changes are fit for purpose and deliver the optimal outcomes for communities, for dog owners, the public and indeed for dogs themselves.

I hope that I have given members of the Committee a good overview of the Department's responsibilities in respect of dogs and our role in moving policy forward. My colleague and I will be pleased to answer any questions the Committee may have.