



Oifig an Ard-Runai
An Roinn Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara, Baile Átha Cliath, DO2 WK12
Office of the Secretary General
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Dublin, 002 WK12.

Telephone: (01) 607 2184 / 2134
Facsimile: (01) 662 1739

**Opening Statement Dept. of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine 06.12.2023**

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

Opening Statement by Dr Eoin Ryan, Head of Animal Welfare Division in the
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

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 colleague Dr Robert Doyle, Assistant Secretary.

Dogs can be wonderful companions, enriching our lives in many ways, as we can enrich theirs through being responsible owners. Dog ownership is a significant commitment, however, and a dog should not be taken on lightly or without serious thought and consideration. Dogs can live for many years, during which time a responsible owner will devote time to taking care of them, training and exercising them, and will spend substantial sums of money over the years on feed, veterinary costs, dog licensing and microchipping and other expenses. The Department's guidance on responsible dog ownership highlights these points: is a dog the right choice for the person, for the family, for the home circumstances and lifestyle? Are financial resources available to cover the likely expenses? Will the dog be responsibly sourced? Is the person aware of the legal responsibilities of a dog owner, including dog control, licensing and microchipping? Unfortunately, some owners do make the decision to surrender or even abandon their dogs. The reasons given may vary with each case having its own circumstances. There is no published scientific research on the factors cited by owners influencing dog surrender in Ireland in recent years; a 2012 study on stray and surrendered dogs in Cork did not identify veterinary costs as a factor.

The Department has responsibility for five general areas relating to dogs: the pet sales register, pet passports, the movement and trade of dogs internationally, the microchipping of dogs and the provisions of the 2013 Animal Health and Welfare Act, which applies to dogs. I will discuss these areas in more detail shortly.

In relation to the issue of control of dogs, Ministers McConalogue and Humphreys established a working group on dog control at the start of this year. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine chairs and provides the secretariat for this working group. The group has produced a report which was approved by Cabinet and subsequently published. This report contains a number of recommendations relating to the control of dogs. The group continues to meet and work is ongoing to implement these recommendations.

The Department has an important role on dog welfare, in the context of its overall policy responsibilities for animal welfare. The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 was introduced after public and stakeholder consultation, and with the legislative expertise of this Committee.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has a strong history of supporting the welfare of animals, and animal welfare has never had a more important place in terms of policy, resources, and practical implementation. The Department has well in excess of 200 authorised officers under the Act who carry out welfare inspections in every county and are out on the ground every day, providing advice and support to the keepers of animals. Members of An Garda Síochána as well as ISPCA and DSPCA inspectors are also authorised under the Act.

When necessary, legal sanctions are imposed, and prosecutions are taken when other efforts to ensure compliance have failed or there is blatant disregard for an animal's welfare. To date there have been 151 successful prosecutions have been taken under the Animal Health and Welfare Act, of which 96 relate to dogs, and a number of other investigations are ongoing.

In 2021, Minister McConalogue launched *Working Together for Animal Wel/bre'*, Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025. Ireland's first stand-alone animal welfare strategy, reflects the significant animal welfare commitments in the Programme for Government. Real progress has already been made.

Delivering on the Strategy and in response to the Programme for Government commitment to advance initiatives on responsible pet ownership, Minister McConalogue has established a new independently chaired Advisory Council on Companion Animal Welfare. Independent members with a range of expertise and experience have been appointed, including members from Veterinary Ireland, UCD, the ISPCA, the DSPCA, the Dogs Trust and others. This Council therefore is a critical stakeholder grouping which will assist the Department in prioritising and advancing policy initiatives relating to companion animals.

The Council was instrumental in the development of the Department's approach to the animal welfare issue posed by brachycephalic (flat-faced) dog breeds. These breeds have a high risk of health and welfare issues, including difficulty breathing, eye disease, spinal problems and skin infections. Many of these dogs require surgery to improve their quality of life. The Council advised the Minister that the use of images of brachycephalic dog breeds in advertising, marketing and news media has contributed to increasing demand for brachycephalic dogs in this country. An open letter was therefore issued by the Department on behalf of the Council to media and advertising organisations, requesting that they refrain from unnecessary use of images of these dogs in publications, on merchandise or for product endorsement.

The Council is also advising the Minister on responsible pet ownership initiatives, which will contain guidance and information for pet owners and those considering acquiring pets. Through education, awareness raising and engagement, it is hoped that many welfare problems, including the surrender of dogs to shelters and charities, may be avoided or reduced.

Turning to another recent initiative on dog welfare, in September Minister McConalogue introduced new regulations (SI 412/2023) on the cropping of dogs ears. This is an unnecessary, cruel practice which causes severe pain and lifelong problems for dogs. Cropping of dogs' ears has been illegal in Ireland since 2013. These new regulations extended existing prohibitions on ear cropping, to protect dogs across Ireland from this unjustifiable and needless mutilation.

The Department acknowledges the valuable work done by animal welfare organisations, and our officials work closely with many of them every day. Since 2002, the Department has provided financial support to eligible NGOs, and what started as a modest scheme has grown strongly, with record assistance of €5.8 million awarded by Minister McConalogue to 99 animal welfare organisations last December. Of this, almost €4.7 million went to 73 organisations directly supporting canine welfare, and the Department has thus met the

Programme for Government commitment to double funding within two years. This funding recognises the importance of the role such charities play in education, awareness raising and dissemination of knowledge to improve animal welfare-, this is particularly relevant for encouraging responsible pet ownership, which can help to reduce the number of dogs abandoned or surrendered to charities.. The animal welfare grants for 2023 are due to be announced shortly, and will again recognise the important work carried out by animal welfare charities, providing them with significant financial support.

The Department has responsibility for the Microchipping of Dogs Regulations, 2015. The primary policy objectives of this legislation were to protect the welfare of all dogs, assist in uniting stray dogs with their owners, to act as a deterrent for those who abandon dogs and assist in identifying marauding dogs.

Data indicates a high level of compliance, with over 700,000 dogs microchipped since 2017, including over 122,000 registered in 2022.

The Department is responsible for the Animal Health and Welfare (Sale or Supply of Pet Animals) Regulations 2019 (SI 681 of 2019). The regulations apply to anyone selling 6 or more pets in a calendar year. Advertisement of a dog for sale or supply must include minimum information about the seller, origin, age & microchip number.

The Department has responsibility for policy on the movement of dogs into and out of Ireland, including intra-community trade and movements to or from third countries. 29,706 pet passports were issued in 2022, with 2,330 provided free of charge to animal welfare charities. The majority of these would relate to dogs.

The provision of veterinary services is a private sector business and the Department does not have a role in setting or determining the prices charged by veterinary practitioners. We do recognise the pressure that animal welfare charities, and particularly dog charities, are under, and this is taken into account in the animal welfare grants, including in the 2023 animal welfare grants. We regularly engage with the charities to which we provide funding. For example, we hold an annual seminar for charities in receipt of Department grants, which is a valuable forum for discussion and for us to listen to those engaged in this difficult work every day.

I will conclude by stating that the Department operates a confidential, dedicated Animal Welfare Helpline, through which members of the public can report concerns about the welfare of any animal by phone or by email. The helpline can be contacted at 016072379, or by email [at animalwelfare@agriculture.gov.ie](mailto:animalwelfare@agriculture.gov.ie). The Department received 1,251 animal welfare reports in 2022. Each report is followed up by a Department official or an ISPCA or DSPCA authorised officer, as appropriate.

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