

BVA and BSAVA position on the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) and dog control

Executive summary

The Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) was introduced in the UK following a series of serious, and in some cases fatal, dog attacks on humans. Its stated aim is to:

“prohibit persons from having in their possession or custody dogs belonging to types bred for fighting [...] to enable restrictions to be imposed in relation to other types of dog which present a serious danger to the public; to make further provision for securing that dogs are kept under proper control; and for connected purposes.”¹

However, the breed-specific legislation contained within the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) does not represent an evidence-based approach to dog control and we consider that the Act more widely has been ineffective in delivering its stated aims.

A review five years after the implementation of the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) found no significant reduction in dog bites.² In fact, a study published in 2021 found that adult hospital admission rates for dog bites tripled in England between 1998-2018, and the incidence of dog bites in children had remained consistently high.³ The same study found that between the financial years 2009/2010 and 2017/2018 the total estimated direct costs of dog bite admissions to hospitals were £174,188,443.⁴

All dogs, whatever their breed type or size, are capable of showing aggression. It is important to recognise that multiple factors can contribute to the development of canine aggression and dog biting incidents, including a dog's socialisation,^{6,7} rearing and training,^{8,9,10,11,12} environmental circumstances

1 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1991/65/contents>

2 Klaassen B, Buckley JR, Esmail A. Does the dangerous dogs act protect against animal attacks: a prospective study of mammalian bites in the accident and emergency department. *Injury*. 1996 Mar;27(2):89-91. doi: 10.1016/0020-1383(96)83411-5. PMID: 8730379.

3 Tulloch, J.S.P., Owczarczak-Garstecka, S.C., Fleming, K.M. et al. English hospital episode data analysis (1998–2018) reveal that the rise in dog bite hospital admissions is driven by adult cases. *Sci Rep* 11, 1767 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-81527-7>

4 Tulloch, J.S.P., Owczarczak-Garstecka, S.C., Fleming, K.M. et al. English hospital episode data analysis (1998–2018) reveal that the rise in dog bite hospital admissions is driven by adult cases. *Sci Rep* 11, 1767 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-81527-7>

5 Ibid.

6 Serpell, J. and Jagoe, J. (1995). Early experience and the development of behaviour In: J Serpell (eds) *The domestic dog: Its evolution, behaviour and interaction with people*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 79-102.

7 Appleby, D. L., Bradshaw, J. W. S. & Casey, R. A. (2002) The relationship between problematic canine aggression and avoidance behaviour, and experience in the first six months of life. *Veterinary Record*, 150, 434-438.

8 Schöning, B. and Bradshaw, J.W.S. (2005). A behavioural test of aggression for adult dogs. *Proceedings of the 37th International DVG Meeting of Applied Ethology, Aktuelle Arbeiten zur Artgemeassen Tierhaltung 2005*, KTBL-Schrift 441. KTBL: Darmstadt, pp. 103-114.

9 Bennett, P.C. and Rohf, V.I. (2007). Owner-companion dog interactions: relationships between demographic variables and potentially problematic behaviours, training engagement and shared activities. *AABS* 102, 65-84.

10 Blackwell, E.J., Twells, C., Seawright, A. and Casey, R.A. (2008). The relationship between training methods and the occurrence of behaviour problems, as reported by owners, in a population of domestic dogs. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research*.

11 Herron, M.E., Schofer, F.S., and Resiner, I.R., (2009). Survey of the use and outcome of confrontational and non-confrontational training methods in client-owned dogs showing undesired behaviors. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* 117, 47-54.

12 Hiby EF, Rooney NJ and Bradshaw JWS (2004). Dog training methods: Their use, effectiveness and interaction with behaviour and welfare. *Animal Welfare* 13, 63-69

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^{13,14,15,} neutering¹⁶ and human-associated risk factors. ^{17,18,19,20,21,22} Canine aggression and dog biting incidents should therefore be considered as complex public health and social issues, which require multifactorial prevention strategies.²³

Consequently, the UK governments should prioritise an evidence-based ‘deed-not-breed’ approach to dog control. This can be achieved through:

- Repealing and replacing Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991);
- Consolidation of existing dog control legislation;
- Adequate resourcing to allow for effective enforcement of existing dog control legislation;
- Establishing a centralised dog bite incident database that would be part of a more comprehensive database which records all incidents where dogs are out of control and pose a threat to public health and safety. The collected data should be used to commission additional research to inform future strategy; and
- Promoting safe dog-human interactions and responsible ownership through education and campaign programmes based on human behaviour change science principles.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) should be repealed and the UK governments should prioritise an evidence-based ‘deed-not-breed’ approach to dog control.

Recommendation 2: Once Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) is repealed, the UK Governments should ringfence and redirect resources that would have been used to enforce breed-specific legislation towards:

- The effective enforcement of individual pieces of dog control legislation;
- Provision of appropriate training in dog behaviour for enforcement officers; and
- The central collection of data on how these powers are being used to permit ongoing assessment of their effectiveness

Recommendation 3: Consideration should be given to consolidating the separate pieces of dog control legislation across the UK to simplify enforcement for local authorities, clarify responsibilities for dog owners, and ensure that there are targeted dog control provisions (eg. Dog Control Notices) in legislation.

Recommendation 4: A centralised database should be established to collect data on the context and severity of all dog bite incidents that result in medical treatment. This would ideally be part of more general recording of all incidents where dogs are out of control and pose a threat to public health and safety.

Recommendation 5: There should be further research into human and dog-associated risk factors for canine aggression.

Recommendation 6: In collaboration with the veterinary profession, animal welfare organisations and dog behaviour experts, the UK governments should develop a nationwide education initiative and awareness campaign to promote safe dog-human interactions and responsible ownership across all age groups which is built around human behaviour change principles.

Recommendation 7: The UK Governments should place particular emphasis on developing interventions based on human behaviour change principles which are aimed at promoting safe dog-child interactions including:

- Building on animal welfare in the national curriculum alongside education about understanding dog behaviour; and
- Undertaking a systems analysis of stakeholders to identify interactions and possible interventions to positively impact on human behaviour change relating to dog

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behaviour and aggression. This is likely to include both children and their carers to promote safe dog-child interactions.

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- 13 Appleby, D. L., Bradshaw, J. W. S. & Casey, R. A. (2002) The relationship between problematic canine aggression and avoidance behaviour, and experience in the first six months of life. *Veterinary Record*, 150, 434-438.
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- 16 <https://www.veterinary-practice.com/article/effects-of-neutering-on-undesirable-behaviours-in-dogs>
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- 19 Cullinan, P., Blackwell, E.J. and Casey, R.A. (2004). The relationship between owner consistency and 'problem' behaviours in dogs. *Proceedings of the European Society for Veterinary Clinical Ethology*, Cremona, Italy.
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