Microchipping Alliance Briefing
Compulsory Identification
Introduction

The Microchipping Alliance comprises animal welfare charities, assistance dog charities, veterinary organisations, dog membership organisations, and other organisations that are affected by dog issues.

The Microchipping Alliance wants to make permanent identification (microchipping) compulsory for all dogs, raise public awareness of microchipping and its benefits to all companion animals. The Alliance considers that the time is right for the government to make permanent identification mandatory and urges ministers to recognise the importance of this issue.

This briefing sets out the key findings of independent research compiled for the Alliance from May - October 2011 and sets out the economic consequences of:

1. maintaining the status quo of voluntary microchipping;
2. making it a legislative requirement that all dogs over six months old are microchipped within a set date of the legislation;
3. making it a legislative requirement that all dogs changing hands by sale or gift are microchipped as of the date of legislation.

Background: current situation

Existing legislation

• Under the Control of Dogs Order 1992, made under the authority of the Animal Health Act 1981, all dog owners are required to ensure their dog, with a few exceptions for working dogs, wears a collar with their name and address on it, or on a plate or badge attached to it if the dog is on a public highway or in a public place
• If the dog is not identified in this way, the order empowers a local authority officer to seize the dog as a stray under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

Dog population

• Accurate figures on the UK dog population are difficult to obtain as there is no central database recording such numbers, but on the basis of data compiled by the Pet Food Manufacturers Association there appears to have been an increase over the last decade from 6.1 million dogs in 2000 to around 8 million dogs in 2011, with 22% of UK households now owning a dog.

Numbers of stray dogs

• In 2010/11, 126,176 stray dogs were handled by UK local authorities, a significant increase of 30% from the 2008 figure of 96,892. This follows the change in legislation during 2008 when responsibility for dealing with stray dogs was transferred from the police to local authorities alone.

Stray dogs returned to owners

• There has been a disappointing 2% fall in the number of stray dogs in the UK returned to their owners, from 61,908 in 2010 to 60,564 in 2011
• UK local authorities were unable to return over half (52%) of stray dogs in 2010/11, a total of 65,612 dogs, as they were unidentifiable
• The most recent data available for England alone show that 48% of stray dogs were unreturned to their owner by local authorities in 2010/11. This amounts to a total of around 43,000 dogs
• Microchipping assisted in the return of 19,380 dogs in 2011, down from 21,667 in 2010. This represents a decrease in the proportion of dogs returned through microchipping from 35% in 2010 to 32% in 2009. This decrease shows why the extra push for compulsion is needed and that the voluntary scheme has plateaued.

Rehoming and euthanasia

• There has been a notable increase of 18% from 6,404 in 2010 to 7,571 in 2011 of the number of dogs being put to sleep by local authorities. Though some local authorities may merely be passing on that responsibility to charities
• After local authorities have kept non-returned stray dogs for the statutory seven days, (apart from those dogs put to sleep) they are re-homed either directly or by being given to animal charities. The average length of stay in kennels run by the RSPCA, Dogs Trust, Wood Green The Animals Charity, The Blue Cross and Battersea Dogs & Cats Home is 30.5 days
• On the basis that 27,173 stray dogs, were placed by English local authorities in animal welfare establishments for potential rehoming during 2010/11, they required an estimated total of 828,776 kennelling days.

Fees charged by local authorities

• Over and above the statutory fee of £25, there is considerable variation and inconsistency in the fees charged by local authorities to dog owners for return of their stray dog. Daily reclaim charges for local authorities surveyed vary between £25 and £79, and seven day reclaim charges range from £85 to £185.

Permanent identification of dogs

Why microchipping?

Microchipping was first introduced into the UK in 1989 and is internationally recognised as a permanent method of identification that greatly improves the identification and traceability of dogs and their owners. The EU recognises it in the Rabies Directive 2003/998/EC.

The most important reason for microchipping is to enable a lost or straying dog to be returned promptly to its owner. Permanent identification has a number of advantages over the use of a collar and tag. Some dogs are not left with their collar on at all times and dogs stolen from owners’ premises are likely to have their collars removed if they are wearing them at the time. Permanent identification is effective at all times and is impossible to alter and extremely difficult to remove.
However, the microchip number itself is meaningless. Owners need to register the microchip number as well as their details with an appropriate computerised database. A PIN number is needed to access each of the databases and they can only be accessed by authorised bodies such as animal wardens, the police, animal welfare centre personnel and vets. It is essential that the databases are kept up to date and that dog owners update their personal details. It is also vital that any database is available 24 hours a day, and all databases are compatible and communicate with each other.

**Current number of dogs microchipped**

- It is estimated by Dogs Trust that, on the basis of results from a random sample survey of dog owners in 2008, around 59% of all dogs in the UK are microchipped.
- Petlog (the largest UK database) similarly calculate that around 4.6 million out of 8 million dogs are registered, equivalent to 58%.
- However, an online survey demographically representative of the UK’s pet population, undertaken by PDSA in 2010, indicates the figure may be as high as 70%.
- Nonetheless, the proportion of stray dogs in the UK already microchipped based on records of stray dogs, is currently estimated to be only 23% of strays received and 32% of dogs returned to their owners.
- So whilst the proportion of microchipped dogs is over 50%, it is clear that some irresponsible dog owners are costing the tax payer money.

**Welfare benefits of microchipping**

There are clear welfare benefits for dogs that are microchipped, in particular the ability to rapidly identify a stray or lost dog and return it to its owner, so reducing kennel time. Rapid return also allows local authority officers to emphasise to the dog owners concerned that straying is not acceptable, the intention being that this education will lessen the likelihood of the dog straying again.

**Additional welfare benefits include**

- reinforcement of responsibilities of the owner under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 by reuniting an animal to its owner.
- easier identification of owners who persistently allow their dogs to stray or cause nuisance.
- all puppies being traceable to their breeder thereby helping reduce the problem of puppy farming of dogs; and lessening the incidence of infectious disease and inherited defects from which many of these dogs suffer.
- deterrent to dog theft.
- assistance in resolving ownership disputes.
- easier identification and subsequent arrest of owners culpable of animal cruelty.
- enables veterinary surgeons to contact dog owners for emergency procedures.
- allows identification of dogs in properties in emergency situations so that dogs and owners can be moved and reunited more quickly.

**International experience**

- Some countries have introduced national compulsory microchipping for dogs including: France, Denmark, Slovenia, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel and Japan. In other countries, certain regions or areas have done so, for example, Prague in the Czech Republic, and several states in Australia.
- In some European countries with compulsory microchipping, there are high levels of compliance with 80% to 90% of dogs estimated to be microchipped.
- Evidence available from those countries, that have introduced compulsory microchipping, indicates clear welfare benefits, particularly in terms of increased proportions of stray dogs being returned to their owners.
- In Sweden it is a legal requirement for dogs to be registered and permanently identified from four months of age. Dogs must be registered with the Swedish authorities within four weeks of being transferred to a new owner. As a consequence, over 90% of stray dogs are reunited with their owners within 24 hours of being collected by the authorities.

**Introducing compulsory microchipping**

Regulations to make the microchipping of all dogs compulsory could be achieved by repealing the existing Control of Dogs Order (1992), but retaining the collar and tag element, and introducing new regulations under Section 12 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

**Economic Costs and Savings**

The cost of enforcement is unlikely to be significantly different to the current enforcement of the Control of Dogs Order and the local authority duty under the Environmental Protection Act. Local authorities have already been provided with microchip readers and all dog wardens should already be equipped with them. Most veterinary practices are also already equipped with scanners.

The table overleaf sets out three potential options available to government relating to microchipping alongside the costs and savings of implementing and enforcing each.
Summary

The Microchipping Alliance considers that the introduction of compulsory microchipping should help to improve animal welfare by reuniting stray and lost dogs with their owners more quickly and also provide government with solutions to a large number of issues relating to irresponsible dog ownership.

A cost impact analysis of three possible legislative options as outlined above estimates that Option Two, is by far the most beneficial option in terms of cost savings. The annual cost savings relating to dog welfare alone would be between £20.8 million to £23.2 million, at minimum, from the first year of introducing the legislation.

Nonetheless, there would also be notable cost savings resulting from the introduction of Option Three. If this option were pursued there could be incremental annual cost savings over ten years ranging from at minimum £2.08 million to £2.32 million, amounting to between £20.8 million and £23.2 million after a decade.

If the government decided to take no action to make microchipping compulsory, there would be no cost savings to be gained and such inaction also goes against public attitudes which indicate that 83% are strongly in favour of compulsory microchipping.