POLICY BRIEFING

THE COMPULSORY PERMANENT IDENTIFICATION OF DOGS
The Compulsory Permanent Identification of Dogs

In 2008 nearly 97,000 dogs were picked up as strays by local authorities in the UK. Half of these animals were successfully reunited with their owners. A policy that required all dogs to be microchipped would have ensured that many more would have been returned home.

Dogs Trust, the UK’s largest dog welfare charity, is calling on the government to make it a requirement for all dogs to be permanently identified.

Dogs Trust wants to ensure that more stray animals are reunited with their owners, thus ultimately reducing the number of dogs destroyed every year.

Compulsory microchipping would also reduce costs for local authorities.

What is the current situation?

At present the Control of Dogs Order 1992, made under the authority of the Animal Health Act 1981, imposes a requirement on all dog owners, with a few exceptions for working dogs, to ensure their dog 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. This is often referred to as a ‘collar and tag’. If the dog is not so identified the Order empowers a local authority officer to seize the dog as a stray, as defined in the Environmental Protection Act 1990, with all the relevant procedures and consequences.

Permanent identification, particularly by microchip, has become increasingly popular over the past decade and is now the most common means of reuniting a stray dog with its owner. Although the number of strays dealt with by local authorities has reduced there are still significant numbers of dogs found straying every year, with over six thousand euthanased as a result. Dogs Trust considers that the time is now right to review the Control of Dogs Order, to make permanent identification a mandatory requirement and use the opportunity to ensure databases are also kept up to date by dog owners. However, we do not consider that this should be in any way related to the reintroduction of a dog licence.

For twelve years Dogs Trust has undertaken a survey of local authorities to ascertain the number of dogs seized or picked up as strays. The results are at Annex A. The survey has also asked more recently how many dogs have been returned to their owners and the proportion identified. There are still a significant number of dogs picked up as strays that are not identified and it therefore appears that the current legislation is not effective. While there is some speculation about the reasons for the lack of efficacy, the survey data shows that the proportion of dogs being identified as a result of a microchip has increased very significantly.

Dogs Trust has also undertaken a survey of the general public. A summary of results is at Annex B. The data shows clearly that there is general public support for microchipping.

Dogs Trust considers that the time is now right to review the Control of Dogs Order.
Why compulsory identification?

Dogs Trust, the UK’s largest dog welfare charity is calling on the government to make it a requirement for dogs changing ownership (whether by sale or gift) and all dogs over the age of six months to be permanently identified. Microchipping a dog also infers legal ownership and reinforces the responsibilities of the owner under the Animal Welfare Act. This will benefit the welfare of the dog.

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 virtually impossible to alter and extremely difficult to remove.

Because of the relatively sophisticated technology now available to microchip databases, it is possible to retain a significant amount of other information on either a temporary or permanent basis. For instance it is possible to register a holiday address or a boarding kennel’s details and with the more sophisticated systems this can be done online while password protected. Multiple contact points can also be registered so that owners can be quickly reunited with their dogs even when away from home or on holiday.

As access to the microchip details is restricted by the database it is also more difficult to institute some other criminal offences. With a collar and tag with the owner’s contact details as defined in the Order, it is relatively easy to kidnap a dog and hold it to ransom as the owner is identifiable to anyone. That would be impossible with a microchip as only authorised persons can access the database. The detection of the increasingly common crime of dog theft would also be much easier if dogs were permanently identified by microchip. However, Dogs Trust would want to see this added to the current regulations and is not advocating replacing the collar and tag with a microchip.

No legislation is effective without enforcement and it has been argued that lack of enforcement of the Control of Dogs Order has been part of its poor efficacy. However to the best of our knowledge there has never been any campaign to encourage compliance with the Order. We consider that a campaign to support compulsory permanent identification would be much better supported by welfare organisations, veterinary surgeons, and the microchip industry.

A significant advantage of compulsory microchipping is that it would enable clear identification of a dog’s owner when prosecution is being considered. Currently there is no specific legislation that says that the person to whom a microchip is registered is the owner of the dog in which it has been implanted, although this is generally accepted to be the case. The proposed change in legislation would clarify that the person to whom a microchip is registered is responsible for the welfare and actions of the dog in which it is implanted.

Another minor advantage is to allow puppies bred on so-called puppy farms to be traced to their source. As many of these dogs suffer from infectious disease or inherited defects, the tracing of such puppies is important to enable Trading Standards officers to act under the Sale of Goods Act. As puppies can safely be microchipped from about six weeks of age, depending on size, it would not be considered a restriction of trade for dog breeders.

How would this policy be enforced?

There are two points of contact when we consider that enforcement would be appropriate. The first, and most likely, is if a dog is found straying. Any dog found not to be permanently identified would have to be so identified on return to its owner and this would be enforced by the local authority officer who could be trained to implant a microchip. Many local authority officers are already trained. The dog’s owner would pay for the microchip to be implanted and registered on the database.

The second point of contact, is when an owner allows a dog to transgress under other relevant legislation such as a Dog Control Order made under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act or the Dangerous Dogs Act. In either case we would expect the appropriate officer to scan, or arrange to have scanned, the dog that is said to have been involved in the offence.

The penalty for failing to comply with the proposed legislation should be enforced by fixed penalty notices (FPN) of the same amount as offences under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act, usually £75. Failure to pay the FPN would result in a court appearance and an escalation of the fine to £1,000.

Local authority staff could conduct routine checks on dogs in public areas where there was a particular concern, such as youths encouraging their dogs to be aggressive. Although we consider that such concerns are not primarily ‘dog’ issues, but social and environmental, we consider enforcement of permanent identification may be helpful in such cases.

We consider that there should be reasonable notice of the introduction of the Order to enable existing owners to comply. As there is a very small proportion of owners who object to microchips in principle, a tattoo should be accepted as an alternative to a microchip. The Order should create an offence of selling or giving a dog to another person unless it is permanently identified.

The new Order should include a requirement to keep the relevant database up to date with the current name and address of the owner. By including this in the legislation the possibility of a permanently identified dog being found that cannot then be reunited with its owner will be significantly reduced.

COMPULSORY MICROCHIPPING WOULD ENABLE CLEAR IDENTIFICATION OF A DOG’S OWNER WHEN PROSECUTION IS BEING CONSIDERED

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How much would this cost?

The ability to rapidly identify a stray dog and return it to its owner has a clear welfare benefit for the dog. Dog wardens are already equipped with microchip readers and therefore there is no additional cost to local authorities. However, there are financial benefits to local authorities in returning strays rapidly as no kenneling costs are incurred and, in many instances, the local authority officer will spend less time with the dog. Euthanasia costs would also be reduced.

Dogs Trust understands that at this time local authorities are under significant financial strain and is keen to emphasize the benefits of this policy. The implementation of compulsory microchipping would be relatively easy for local authorities, requiring no additional man power or equipment. At present authorities are required to employ a person, usually a dog warden, to deal with stray dogs locally. These individuals are already equipped with scanners. At present depending on whether or not a dog is identifiable the officer or warden picking up the dog has to deal with the animal, either arranging for the dog to be returned to its owner in a timely fashion or taking the dog to a local authority kennel and then deciding what to do with the animal should it not be claimed.

Microchipped dogs can be returned to their owners and the appropriate action taken if it is considered necessary by the official, for instance a fixed penalty notice issued to an owner that repeatedly allows their dog to stray or become a nuisance. Non-microchipped dogs are not so easily returned and will require extra paperwork to be filed in and their details added to a register of stray dogs, they will also need to be dealt with at the end of the eight days or destroyed, which has a financial cost to the authority.

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The introduction of compulsory microchipping would significantly impact on the workload of all those dealing with stray dogs. It would save time, reduce kenneling costs and also allow easier identification of persistent offenders, who can then be dealt with accordingly. Rapid return also allows the local authority officer to emphasise to the dog’s owner that straying is not acceptable and hopefully the education provided will lessen the likelihood of the dog straying again.

The unit cost of a microchip at list price is of the order of £5 - £6 although significant discounts are available for multiple purchase contracts. In addition the person implanting the microchip is likely to charge a fee. The total cost will vary but in veterinary practices this may be of the order of £25. Many welfare organisations will implant microchips for those on benefits or in financial difficulty at less than half the cost, or in some circumstances free of charge.

People can get their dog microchipped at any Dogs Trust rehoming centre for £10. The dog does not need to be from Dogs Trust to obtain this service. Our standard health check includes microchipping and for those on means tested benefits we microchip for just £5.

Most local authorities already offer a microchipping service. If all dogs were required to be microchipped those dogs that are not could be chipped by the local authority at the expense of the owner.

In all instances microchipping is a single cost unless there is a requirement to alter data. The cost is small compared to the cost of purchasing and total lifetime cost of caring for a dog and is therefore unlikely to be a significant disincentive to owning a dog.

The cost of altering an entry on the databases varies significantly. Some allow multiple changes performed on line free of charge, whereas others charge £15 for multiple changes over the lifetime of the dog when purchased by post. There are a range of costs between these extremes. In any circumstance, the cost is minimal to ensure database details are up to date.
POLICY BRIEFING

ThE CoMpuLsORY PERmaNENt IDENTIFICaTIOn OF dOGs

About microchipping

The process of microchipping has been in operation in the UK for over a decade and is recognised internationally as an effective and reliable means of identification for dogs. The EU recognises it in the Rabies Directive 2003/998/EC. In the UK microchipping is a requirement for registration under the Dangerous Dogs Compensation and Exemption Schemes Order made under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Most recently draft government regulations suggest that the newly formed Greyhound Board of Great Britain (GBGB), the body that now regulates greyhound racing, will be required to ensure that all racing greyhounds are identifiable by microchip. Consequently we consider that microchips should be the preferred means of permanently identifying all dogs at all times.

There should be no confusion between permanent identification and the reintroduction of a dog licence. The function of the microchip is solely to identify the dog’s owner and infers no regular charge or tax on the dog. This paper addresses only the issue of permanent identification in the context of aiding the return of stray dogs to their owners, although we recognise that the ability to identify a dog’s owner may be advantageous in proceedings under the Animal Welfare Act.

Every dog that is microchipped is issued with a certificate to show the details registered on the database. We propose that the format of the certificate should be altered to include a tear-off section that is returned to the database when the dog changes ownership. The tear-off section would include the name and address of the new registered owner as well as the dog’s microchip number and would need to be signed by both old and new owners as verification. The proposed system mirrors that used for vehicle registration.

As with any other electronic device, the microchip is not infallible. The British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) has run an adverse reaction scheme for microchips through its Microchip Advisory Group (MAG) for ten years. Although it is accepted that not all adverse reactions are reported, the number of reports has never exceeded seventy-five a year. It is estimated that total sales of microchips are in excess of half a million a year, although sales data is regarded as confidential by distributors. This gives a reported failure rate of less than 0.015%. There would need to be a contingency in any revised legislation to allow the owner of a dog whose microchip has been lost or failed to be able to show that the dog had been chipped.

About Dogs Trust

Dogs Trust, formally known as the National Canine Defence League (NCDL), is the UK’s largest dog welfare charity. Established in 1891 to protect dogs from torture, cruelty or ill usage of any kind, we have long campaigned to improve the welfare of man’s best friend.

Dogs Trust has a network of seventeen rehoming centres across the UK, working to provide a happy home for thousands of dogs every year. We believe that no healthy dog should ever be destroyed and that all dogs should be protected, wanted, suitably homed for life and cared for by responsible owners. Dogs that cannot be rehomed will always have a home at our rehoming centres.

Dogs Trust also invests significant resources in education and the promotion of responsible dog ownership across the UK, and we work internationally to promote dog welfare issues.

Dogs Trust is the only dog welfare charity in the UK that represents all dogs, regardless of their circumstances. As such we fully appreciate the advantages that the introduction of compulsory microchipping could have on individual dogs and more generally on communities.

For more information on compulsory microchipping or to find out what you can do to help promote animal welfare and responsible dog ownership in your area please contact:

Rachel Cunningham
Public Affairs Manager
rachel.cunningham@dogstrust.org.uk
020 7833 7620

THERE SHOULD BE NO CONFUSION BETWEEN PERMANENT IDENTIFICATION AND THE REINTRODUCTION OF A DOG LICENCE.
This research was commissioned to establish the dog owning general public’s opinions towards microchipping their dogs and the introduction of compulsory identification of dogs.

The responses to this specific research are given by members of the public who currently own a dog or dogs, and are responsible for paying for any vet bills or making decisions about the dog(s).

Respondents were asked to identify which statement best described how they would feel if a law was passed which made it compulsory to permanently identify their dogs in this way. Respondents were also told that the aim of this law would be to ensure that any lost or stray dogs were reunited with their owners as quickly as possible. Chart 1 describes the responses to this question.

This research was conducted over 3 waves of GfK NOP’s omnibus survey with fieldwork starting on the 25th September and ending on the 28th October 2008.

The omnibus interviewed adults aged 16+ using random location sampling. All respondents were interviewed in home by fully trained Market Research interviewers using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI).

Respondents were selected using a random location method using probabilistic methods and individuals in each sampling point were selected by quota. Quotas were set by sex within age and by working status. The data has been weighted in line with the national profile.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of stray dogs</th>
<th>Number put to sleep</th>
<th>Number of dogs returned to Owner</th>
<th>% returned</th>
<th>Returned to owner due to microchips</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>136,500*</td>
<td>21,840</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>135,000*</td>
<td>20,250</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
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<td>21,360</td>
<td>53,240</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>122,000*</td>
<td>17,080</td>
<td>58,560</td>
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<td>14,755</td>
<td>52,210</td>
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<td>12,925</td>
<td>54,079</td>
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<td>11,703</td>
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<td>48,446</td>
<td>50%</td>
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*Please note: figures are rounded up/down to the nearest 100
# Data not available

For Annex A, please refer to the chart provided for a visual representation of the data.
To find opening times and directions for any of our Rehoming Centres please visit: www.dogstrust.org.uk/rehoming/ourcentres/ insert name of centre here.