



## **Animal Sentience Committee report: XL Bullies and the Dangerous Dogs Act**

### **Introduction**

Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act (DDA) includes a list of types of dog that are deemed to be '[bred for fighting](#)'. Amongst other things, Section 1 prohibits people from:

- breeding, selling or giving away specific types of dog
- allowing them to be in public without a muzzle and lead, or permitting them to stray

Dogs listed in Section 1 are the:

- Pit Bull Terrier
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentino
- Fila Brasileiro
- XL Bully

It is an offence to possess a dog of the XL Bully type without a valid Certificate of Exemption. As well as keeping the dog on a lead and muzzled in public, the owner must have public liability insurance.

There was, and is, considerable controversy around the addition of the XL Bully to Section 1. There are a range of views around the most effective approaches to identifying 'dangerous' dogs and reducing the risk from them.

The Animal Sentience Committee (ASC) briefly described some of the most immediate animal welfare implications in a [letter to Defra in February 2024](#). In the same letter, the ASC set out a list of questions which we have been discussing with Defra and stakeholder groups holding a range of viewpoints. Our conclusions are set out here.

### **Animal welfare impacts of adding the XL Bully to Section 1 of the DDA**

We concluded that the direct, negative impacts on animal welfare are associated with:

- seizure of dogs
- prolonged kennelling if there is a long wait for animals to be assessed for 'type'
- lifelong behavioural restrictions for individuals who are (or appear to be) of a 'banned' type

These restrictions include muzzling and keeping on a lead in public places, and potentially limited exercise if people feel stigmatised for owning Section 1 dogs and are reluctant to take them out. If dogs are occupying kennels at rescue centres that could have been used to house other dogs in need, there may also be indirect animal welfare impacts. Euthanasia can cause distress, however humanely it is administered.

These welfare impacts were exacerbated by the time it took for the government to add XL Bullies to Section 1. This is irrespective of whether the decision, in itself, paid due regard to animal welfare impacts. Defra initially estimated that there were [10,000 XL Bully dog types in the UK](#). However, at the time the policy decision was made, there were over [50,000 registered XL Bullies in the UK](#).

When reviewing policies, the ASC considers the nature and level of welfare impacts, and the number of animals affected. As the number of XL Bullies affected was around five times greater than the initial estimate, we conclude that the animal welfare burden was significantly greater than anticipated.

An indirect negative impact of the DDA was the level of resource expended on attempting to enforce the Act. This resource may well have been better spent on other policies or initiatives to improve dog welfare (and public safety).

For example, in January the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) stated that the cost of kennelling and veterinary bills alone was expected to total over £25 million by the end of the financial year (a 500% increase). This placed huge additional demand on resources. The NPCC lead for dangerous dogs stated that ["the bigger picture is a focus on responsible dog ownership"](#).

Other indirect welfare impacts are associated with the scope of the DDA, which currently only specifically mentions humans and assistance dogs in Section 10(3). This regards a dog as being dangerously out of control when there are grounds for a reasonable apprehension that the dog will cause injury, regardless of whether this actually happens.

There is a civil liability for owners if their dog attacks certain livestock (for example, under Section 7 of the 1906 Dogs Act), but this does not take account of the suffering caused to these animals, nor are wild animals included.

## **The quality of the evidence base for breed-specific legislation**

All stakeholders we consulted agreed that there is a critical lack of accurate and comprehensive data on dog bites and strikes. Existing data and information relies heavily on hospital admissions and media reports. These are often incomplete, inaccurate and lack essential information around the context in which the incident occurred.

It is not compulsory to report or record dog bites, so there are currently insufficient robust statistics on bite rates across a range of different breeds. There is no accurate, reliable database to document all dog bites and strikes, so it is not possible to monitor and analyse incidents, or understand all the relevant causal factors.

These include many factors that could culminate in a serious incident, such as:

- genetics
- breed
- development during gestation and early life
- training
- experiences in the run-up to the bite or strike (meaning, what triggered it)
- understanding of the dog's potential mental state during the incident

All of the above is coupled with a need for a more consistent and standardised way of reporting dog bites, for example, using the Dunbar Dog Bite Scale which includes a six-point severity scale. Opportunities are also missed to photograph, measure, and extract DNA from dogs following incidents especially when they have been killed at the site.

We support the suggestion that an inquest-like approach could be taken to bites or strikes. This would enable the collection of meaningful data that could inform more effective approaches to minimising risks from dogs.

## **The Responsible Dog Ownership Taskforce**

In December 2021, Defra published research in collaboration with Middlesex University to investigate measures to [reduce dog attacks and promote responsible ownership amongst dog owners with dog control issues in the UK](#). The Responsible Dog Ownership (RDO) Taskforce was established in response, to undertake a detailed consideration of the recommendations suggested by the Middlesex University report.

One recommendation (page 73) was for:

“Research into collection of data concerning dog incidents by all police forces and local authorities. Our research identified variations in how data are currently

recorded and classified and variation in the extent to which reliable data on dog attack issues exists.

“We recommend further research into data collection practices and that a trial of standardised data collection take place to assess levels of incidents and their characteristics.”

The RDO Taskforce has not published any of its considerations around this recommendation. Its activities have not been clear over the last few years, [which has lead to Parliamentary questions](#). The Taskforce was reconvened in May 2025; while the ASC understands that consideration of Breed Specific Legislation is outside the scope of the Taskforce, it has a subgroup which is looking at recording and use of data on dog incidents.

As of 30 June 2025, Ministers were ‘look[ing] forward to receiving the findings and recommendations from the taskforce in due course’.

## **Conclusions**

The ASC understands that the Government was under substantial pressure to act on this issue. However, we concluded that, because of the lack of adequate data to provide a sound evidence base for this decision, policy makers were unable to fully understand the impact of the policy decision on the welfare of dogs when adding the XL Bully to Section 1 of the DDA.

Despite this, the direct welfare impacts of the DDA are clear. Paying due regard to the way this policy decision would impact on animal welfare would have meant taking every reasonable step to ensure that policies around risks from dogs have a robust evidence base – this goes beyond breed-specific legislation.

Failure to prevent the stagnation of the RDO Taskforce has left an evidence void at the heart of this legislation. The ASC recommends that this group be given a clear remit by government to ensure that the evidence requirements of this policy are fulfilled. This will help enable future policy considerations and decisions to be made in good time, preventing avoidable suffering to high-risk dogs, other animals and the public.

Looking forward, it is clear that some dogs are a danger to humans and other animals, and that policies will need to continue to prevent incidents, as far as possible. Some stakeholders suggested the unification of all dog control-related legislation in the UK into a single Act, coupled with a cultural shift in how dog control is viewed. The ASC believes this is worthy of consideration, particularly if it were to encompass the welfare of all animals. This includes companion animals other than service dogs, farmed and wild animals.

In the more immediate future, ensuring that comprehensive data and information around dog strikes and attacks are adequately obtained, recorded and analysed will

help to enable policies, and their implementation, to pay due regard to animal welfare.

Animal Sentience Committee, August 2025