



## anti-social behaviour **ONLINE**

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### Weapon dogs

#### The problem

The issue of dangerous dogs received an increasing amount of public attention during 2008/09 with data indicating that dog-related crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) is a growing problem in London. Evidence from a large number of agencies has shown a significant increase in the number of 'weapon' dogs in the capital - dangerous dogs used in crime, ASB, and to cause fear and intimidation.

Both the RSPCA and the Metropolitan Police have been involved in an increasing number of raids and arrests relating to illegal dog breeding and animal cruelty. The number of suspected dangerous dogs seized by the Metropolitan police rose by 60% in the last year, while court cases involving dangerous dog offences rose by 50% between 2006 and 2007. In the last five years, London's hospitals have seen admissions for dog bites increase by 79%, compared to 43% nationally. The RSPCA regularly receive dogs with bite wounds and fight injuries caused by other dogs. They have also seen an increase in reports of dog attacks on other animals. The number of stray dogs in the capital is also increasing. Bull breeds now account for 47% of the dogs homed at Battersea Cat and Dog Home. This is almost double the proportion of 5 years ago.

#### 'Weapon' dogs and status

One of the reasons for the increase in 'weapon' dogs is the trend for causing fear or intimidation - 'looking hard' - by having a powerful and dangerous dog. The dog of choice for those wishing to gain 'status' in this way tend to be Bull breeds and dog ownership of this type is predominantly young males.

#### How the rise in weapon dogs is affecting communities

Both the Metropolitan Police and the RSPCA have seen a dramatic increase in the number of public complaints about dangerous dogs. Some residents have complained that they fear leaving their homes and have stopped using their public parks due to the threat posed by dangerous dogs and irresponsible owners. A quarter of the animal attacks recorded by London Ambulance Service were identified as assault.

One disturbing trend is the practice of owners forcing 'status' dogs to hang on to the bars of playground equipment or tree branches for periods of time in order to toughen their jaw muscles and increase aggression. This had led to a significant rise in tree damage and play equipment in public spaces. Damage is also caused by irresponsible owners allowing dogs to strip bark and rip branches.

#### Dangerous Dogs and the law

Current legislation is widely considered to be ineffective in tackling the problem of dangerous dogs. The Greater London Authority has stated an intention to examine the most appropriate way to tackle this growing problem through changes to current legislation.

The rise in 'weapon' dogs may in part be explained by the penalty for owning them being so much lower than for carrying a knife or gun. While the maximum sentence courts can impose for owning a banned dog is six months imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of £5,000 the term for carrying a weapon can be up to five years imprisonment.

There are two key sections to the Dangerous Dogs Act introduced to the UK in 1991:

- **Section 1** bans the breeding and sale or exchange of four breeds: pit bull terriers, Japanese tosas, the dogo argentinus, and the fila brasileiros. Cross-breeds of those dogs are covered by the law. The 1997 amendment to the Act permits ownership of these types, although strict requirements are made.
- **Section 3** makes it a criminal offence to allow any dog to be dangerously out of control in a public place, or a place where it is not allowed. Legal action may be taken against the dog owner or person in charge of the dog at the time of the offence. This could lead to a custodial sentence of a maximum of 6 months, a fine of up to £5,000, or both. The dog may also be destroyed and the owner disqualified from owning a dog for a specific period of time.

However, identifying banned breeds is not an easy process even with some level of expertise. The problem has been exacerbated by the cross-breeding of bull breeds with many Staffordshire Bull Terrier cross breeds being visually very similar to a banned Pit Bull type.

In 2009 an initiative aimed at getting courts to process cases involving dangerous dogs more quickly provided training to around 60 London magistrates and court staff to improve their knowledge of dogs, help them accurately identify banned breeds from other similar breeds and improve their understanding of the law.

#### What's being done to tackle the problem?

A range of initiatives at both the regional and local levels are aiming to tackle the problem of 'weapon' and dangerous dogs.

While there is clear evidence that a large number of dogs are being trained for fighting and to be aggressive towards people, many owners will not have acquired a dog with these intentions. Many owners acquire their pet without considering the full responsibilities that accompany dog ownership, or knowledge of the training and care necessary to ensure their dog does not get out of control, become a nuisance to neighbours, or worse.

There is a general consensus amongst all agencies involved that responses to the problem need to focus on dog owners as well as on dangerous dogs.

The [London Dangerous Dogs Forum](#), set up by the Metropolitan Police Service in 2008, brings together the Greater London Authority (GLA), local authorities, police and welfare organisations in a bid to address the underlying issues of dangerous dogs, backed up with enforcement by officers from the Status Dogs Unit (see below). Various strands such as education, welfare, public affairs, responsible ownership, joint initiatives and legal processes are being progressed.

[The People With Dogs Project](#) has produced an education pack aimed at young people, which looks at the issues around dog ownership and explores topics such as irresponsible dog breeding, inappropriate exercise areas and organised dog fighting. The project has been developed by Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, The Blue Cross and the RSPCA - with the Greater London Authority, the Metropolitan Police and Wandsworth Council.

On 2 March 2009 the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) launched the [Status Dogs Unit](#) (SDU). The Unit's officers are accredited experts known as Dog Legislation Officers (DLO). SDU activities include seizing dogs, intelligence gathering, responding to emergency situations and providing expert examination of dangerous dogs.

Since its inception, the SDU has seized over 719 dogs in London suspected of being illegal, dangerous or both. They work very closely with the RSPCA, councils and others to encourage responsible dog ownership and to share information. It also delivers training to Safer Neighbourhood Teams on the law, and has worked closely with Operation Blunt in relation to the link between weapon dogs and knife crime.

In addition to these developments, at the local level, councils may also use a number of powers and laws at their disposal including Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Dog Control Orders and tenancy agreements to tackle irresponsible dog ownership.

#### Most recent developments

On 9 November 2009, a summit aimed at tackling the increasing number of "weapon dogs" in London was held at City Hall. The Conservative deputy mayor of London, Kit Malthouse, hosted the meeting with the RSPCA, Metropolitan police and representatives from the capital's 32 boroughs.

A number of speakers and a discussion paper highlighted many of the consequences of how weapon dogs are affecting Londoners and suggested proposals on how local areas can work together to develop better solutions to tackle the problem. All representatives were in agreement that more action needed to be taken and further meetings are planned for 2010. Visit the [GLA website](#) for updates on progress.

**More info:** Guardian article: [City Hall summit over rise in 'weapon dogs' on London streets](#)



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