



Animal Welfare Pathway

**Advancing Animal Welfare in
Northern Ireland 2025-27**



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

On request, we can arrange to provide other formats of this document, such as:

- Paper Copy
- Large Print
- Braille
- Other Languages

To request an alternative format, please contact us:

Email: Animal.Welfare@daera-ni.gov.uk

Post: Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Animal Welfare
Jubilee House
111 Ballykelly Road
Ballykelly
Limavady
BT49 9HP

Contents

Ministerial Foreword	4
Introduction	7
Animal Welfare Policy Reforms	10
Improving The Lives Of Companion Animals	10
1. Prohibition of Third-Party Pet Sales	10
2. Review of Dog Breeding Regulations	12
3. Microchipping of cats	14
4. Strengthening Microchipping requirements	15
5. Animal Welfare and Responsible Dog Ownership Campaign	16
6. Day Care and Home Boarding	17
7. Review of Dog Licence Fees	18
8. Aversive training devices	19
9. Regulation of Rescue and Rehoming Organisations	20
Improving Farmed Animal Welfare	22
10. Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) in Slaughterhouses	23

Ministerial Foreword

Since taking up office, a top priority for me has been furthering animal welfare. That is why it is now front and centre as a key pledge within my Department's 10-point Corporate Plan 2025-27 which commits DAERA to deliver a range of new animal welfare priorities to protect domestic and farmed animals.

In the early stages of my tenure, I have already brought in powers to enable pet theft to be prosecuted in a way which reflects that companion animals are more than just objects. Additionally, I acted swiftly to protect public safety in relation to XL Bully type dogs. The high levels of compliance with the new legal requirements demonstrate that the vast majority of dog owners are responsible.

In addition, my Department has established robust and dynamic working relationships with statutory bodies such as local councils and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to combat the persistent issue of puppy smuggling. This collaborative effort ensures that animal welfare standards are upheld and that those involved in illegal activities are brought to justice. This unified approach not only safeguards the well-being of animals but also promotes public awareness and compliance with existing laws, thereby creating a safer environment for both pets and their owners.

Animal welfare is an important focus for my Department, and there is an opportunity to update our laws. However, due to the limited duration of this mandate, it is necessary to prioritise tasks, as there is not enough time or capacity to accomplish everything.

That is why I have engaged and listened to organisations who look after and care for animals and identified a set of measures which can deliver the most immediate and transformative outcomes. The engagement has resulted in this document - my Animal Welfare Pathway - Advancing Animal Welfare in Northern Ireland 2025-27.

The proposals below represent only the policy and legislative reforms, identified as priorities, that can practicably be achieved in the time ahead. I would highlight that in addition to this there continues to be a huge amount of ongoing work by my officials in both enforcement and administration to ensure the ongoing welfare of our animals.

These proposals will help further strengthen existing animal welfare legislation, help tackle problems effectively and re-define how we interact or treat our animals. This document recognises the significant place that animals have in our lives, and the changes that it recommends will further protect them, whether they are in our homes, on our farms, if they are used for breeding, if they are being offered for sale, or if they are put on display.

Working together with other stakeholders and the wider public, we recognise that we can only make progress by partnership working, involving all organisations and individuals with responsibility for, and an interest in, animal welfare. We strive to enhance the overall welfare



of animals, so they receive the care and protection they deserve. It is important to stress that to achieve a good quality of life for our animals, raising awareness of good practice and educating owners is as important as effective legislation and a strong enforcement regime.

However, I am mindful that in many important areas, we are still reliant on legislation that is almost 50 years old. Clearly, there is much more to do. Better ways of safeguarding welfare and further reform are imperative. Therefore, I am also determined to make sure I create strong foundations for an even more ambitious programme for the next Assembly term.

This pathway demonstrates my desire to deliver meaningful improvements for NI and highlights that, working together, we take proactive and meaningful actions to further promote, enhance and protect the welfare of all our animals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A Muir', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Andrew Muir MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

21st May 2025

Introduction



Introduction

For almost 40 years, the main primary legislation regarding animal welfare was the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (the 1972 Act). The 1972 Act allowed intervention, and prosecution actions to be taken, only after cruelty or unnecessary suffering had occurred.



Then, the foundations of comprehensive animal welfare protections were laid with the introduction of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the 2011 Act). This Act specifies that animal owners/keepers have a legal duty of care to ensure their animals' welfare needs are met.

Under this Act the five needs of animals were enshrined in law: a suitable environment; a suitable diet; the need to exhibit normal behaviour patterns; the need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals; and the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease. The 2011 Act also created the offence of unnecessary suffering and has provided the ability to impose a custodial sentence of up to five years where a person is found guilty of this offence, which was a UK first. The 2011 Act paved the way for regulations to protect animals from mutilations, regulate dog breeding and make specific protections for our service animals.

The 2011 Act marked a major step forward for animal welfare and introduced a duty of care in respect of all “protected animals”, that is, animals under the control of any person whether permanently or temporarily and provided new enforcement powers to allow action to be taken to prevent animals from suffering.

Our ambition is for Northern Ireland to be recognised within the animal welfare sphere for its exemplary standards, its adoption and sharing of best practice, its engagement with key stakeholders, its development of effective, supportive and sustainable mechanisms for enforcement, its contribution to research, and its championing of education and responsible ownership for the benefit of our own and future generations.

This document sets out the breadth of work we are undertaking in relation to specific animal welfare policies, and our intention to drive forward reforms which will improve the lives of companion animals by examining how best to strengthen regulations around the breeding, advertising and sale of pups and kittens; and reforming farmed animal welfare by taking into account the latest developments and proposals within the UK and Ireland, as well as the European Union. We will seek to establish parity with Great Britain by bringing forward a consultation on mandatory closed-circuit television in slaughterhouses.

This work will be delivered through a programme of legislative and non-legislative reforms.

The 2011 Act established that the Department would be responsible for farmed animal welfare, the PSNI would enforce requirements relating to animal fighting, while councils were designated as the enforcement and regulatory body for non-farmed or companion animals.

There is no intention, under these animal welfare priorities, to revisit the roles established and previously agreed when the 2011 Act was passed into law. However, it is recognised that any expansion of enforcement or regulation of companion animal welfare would place an increased demand on councils. The proposed reforms will be explored in detail with all stakeholders and subject to full public consultation. That will also include completion of detailed impact assessments, including regulatory impacts, to determine any consequences on public services, citizens, industry, the third sector and any other relevant parties.

Animal Welfare Policy Reforms



Animal Welfare Policy Reforms

Improving The Lives Of Companion Animals

The role of pets and the part they play in daily life has changed immeasurably since the first major piece of animal welfare laws were enacted in Northern Ireland in 1972. We wish to put in place robust and cohesive legislation to complement and enhance existing laws and deter those who seek to exploit animals through illegal breeding, selling or the supply of pet services.

We recognise that pets provide more than just companionship and form an intrinsic part of household and family life across Northern Ireland. Prospective owners of companion animals want to be able to rehome or purchase a pet with confidence, from breeders or establishments that adhere to the highest standards.

Dog owners, in particular, have made it clear that they want greater rigour around how their prospective pup has been bred and greater transparency on the origins of animals which are bought and sold. There is now a need for a robust system for licensing and inspecting dog breeding establishments, not just to promote welfare and ensure responsible dog ownership, but to allow buyers to make fully informed choices. There is also a need to ensure that those businesses involved in the breeding and selling of pups are recognised as achieving an agreed, rigorous standard and that persons outside the regulatory system, who only wish to exploit dogs and treat them as commodities are robustly dealt with.

1. Prohibition of Third-Party Pet Sales

There is currently no law prohibiting the commercial sale of puppies and kittens by third parties in Northern Ireland, however, the Department is aware that people want to see a ban on this activity.

Similar legislation has already been enacted in the rest of the UK and is commonly known as 'Lucy's Law'. The legislation takes its name from a rescue dog who had suffered abuse at an illegal breeding establishment, where profit was prioritised over animal health and welfare. A petition calling for Lucy's Law in Northern Ireland attracted just under 3,000 signatures.

We will consider the merits of a requirement that sales of puppies or kittens takes place in front of the breeder, and that these breeders, who are also the sellers, must show the puppies or kittens interacting with their mother at the place of birth. We are committed to making laws which will enable purchasers to feel confident that they are buying from a reputable breeder who has given the puppy the best start in life, and who ensures the welfare needs of their animals are met.

We will also explore all links in the selling chain and develop legislation that will ensure that sales activities protect animal welfare; combat the illegal trade in puppies; and enhance regulations for online sales.

We will do this by:

- **prohibiting the sale of puppies and kittens by third-parties in Northern Ireland, that is by anyone other than the breeder.**

This is a significant step forward; however, we are also aiming to go much further by including requirements which will improve the traceability of pups and kittens and make it easier for prospective buyers to identify reputable sellers.



2. Review of Dog Breeding Regulations

One of the first pieces of bespoke legislation which was made using the powers under the 2011 Act was the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 (the Dog Breeding Regulations).

These regulations define a commercial dog breeder as anyone who keeps three or more breeding bitches, and who also either breeds, advertises, or supplies, three or more litters of pups in a twelve-month period, or advertises a business of breeding or selling pups in Northern Ireland. Any person falling outside of this definition is known as a hobby breeder and does not need a licence.

Under this piece of law, councils are required to inspect breeding premises. Councils must consider whether the accommodation and environment are appropriate; whether there are suitable whelping facilities; as well as the diet, health and mating requirements of the dogs. These regulations also compel breeders to keep records and have formal plans for the socialisation of the pups bred on the premises.

A licence is only issued when a council inspector is satisfied that these conditions have been met. The licence is valid for one year and the full inspection process must be completed successfully for a premises to be re-licensed.

Any commercial breeding establishment that does not demonstrate to a council that it meets the licence conditions will not receive a licence to operate. This law also enables the council to prosecute unlicensed establishments or any premises that are found to be in contravention of the conditions set out in the regulations.

Stakeholders and members of the public have made it clear that they want to see a review of dog breeding regulations and they believe there is scope for increased controls and greater transparency. This includes a requirement to make it mandatory to publish registers of licensed breeding establishments.

We will do this by:

- **establishing an expert advisory group to review the effectiveness of current dog breeding regulations who will be empowered to make recommendations for further legislative controls where evidence shows these are needed.**

Canine Fertility Clinics

There has been a significant increase in businesses which describe themselves as canine fertility clinics. In 2020 a Veterinary Record investigation reported that there were in the region of 37 such businesses in the UK; now, it is believed there are in excess of 300. These businesses are typically undertaking procedures related to dog breeding, such as progesterone testing (a blood test to determine when a female dog is “on heat”) and artificial insemination of animals.

It is recognised that underground, unregulated canine fertility clinics can promote unlicensed breeding and unethical practices, such as facilitating the breeding of dogs that suffer from poor health and welfare, like brachycephalic breeds. Brachycephalic dogs are those with shortened snouts, such as French Bulldogs, and Pugs. Breeds with shortened snouts are prone to breathing issues, especially under exertion or on very hot days. There is no legislative regime which enables the formal licensing of canine fertility clinics in Northern Ireland and this position mirrors the situation across the rest of the UK.

Section 5 of the 2011 Act makes it an offence for any person to carry out a “prohibited procedure” on a protected animal. A prohibited procedure is defined as a ‘procedure which involves interference with the sensitive tissue or bone structure of an animal’.

Exceptions do exist under the law for registered veterinarians, who are deemed to be qualified under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. Consequently, vets are allowed to carry out prohibited procedures, where the purpose is to diagnose disease or treat an animal.

In June 2023, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Standards Committee specifically stated that lay people should cease offering intravaginal artificial insemination breeding services for dogs. Therefore, a non-veterinarian would be in breach of the 2011 Act and the Veterinary Surgeons Act, should they continue to perform such procedures.

The Department recognises the need for legislative clarity and an effective licensing and enforcement regime.

We will do this by:

- **including canine fertility clinics in the scope of the dog breeding review. The Expert Group will be tasked with considering the best available research and expertise to determine if and how this sector should or could be regulated.**

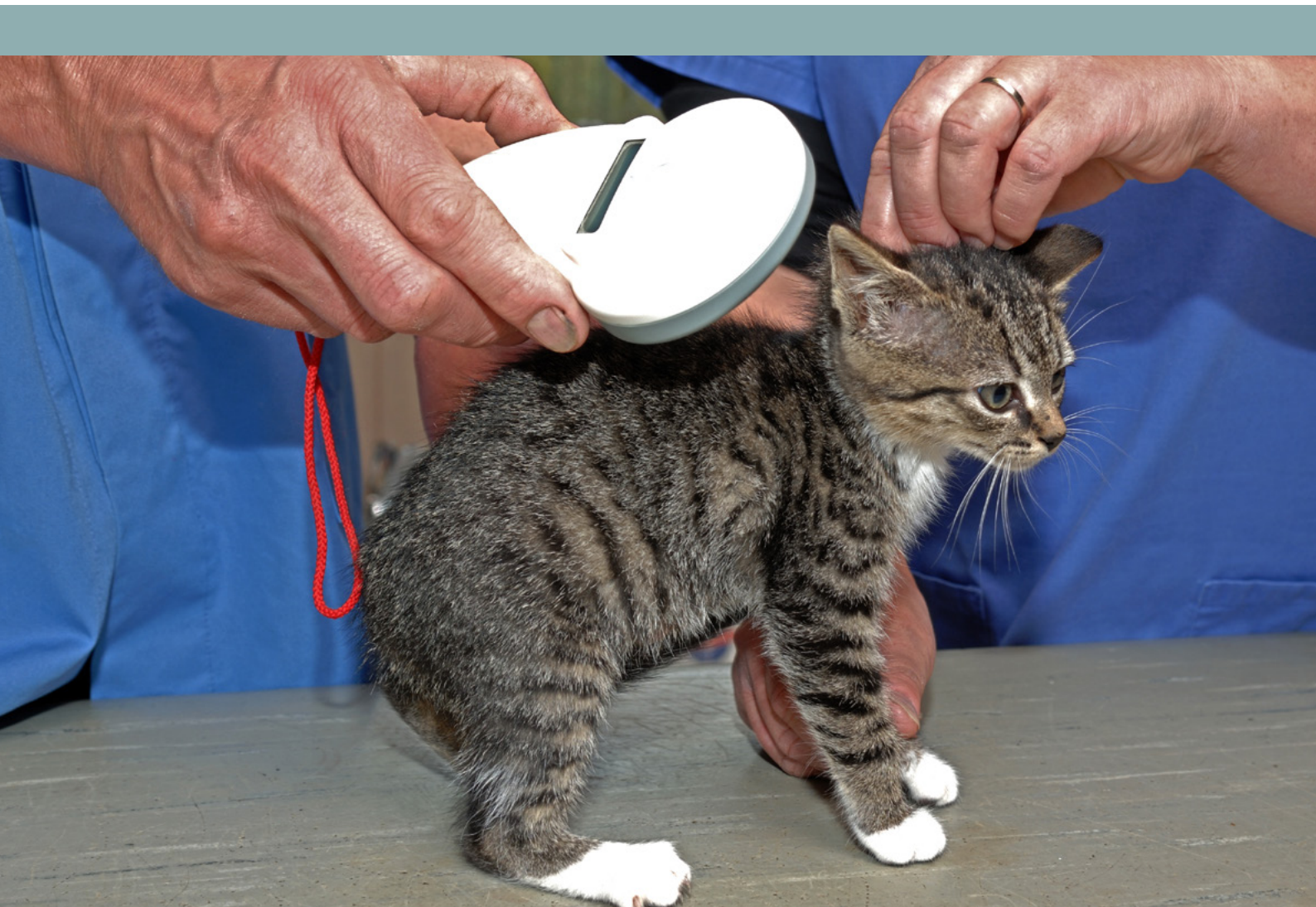
3. Microchipping of cats

The law does not require cats to be microchipped or licensed. The Department's Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats recommends that owners ensure their cats are identified using either a collar or microchip, so that they can be treated quickly if injured when away from home or returned if lost. The Code also advises that cat owners should keep the microchip database up to date with any changes to contact details.

The Department has received calls for the introduction of mandatory microchipping for cats. In researching this matter, the Department is aware that other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom have introduced, or are considering mandatory microchipping of cats. The Department intends to consider introducing a requirement to microchip cats in Northern Ireland.

The Department will do this by:

- **promptly gathering an evidence base, including the experience to date in England and practical issues associated with the implementation of legislation prior to consulting on how to progress with making the microchipping of cats mandatory.**



4. Strengthening Microchipping requirements

Northern Ireland has in place, significant legislation providing for dog control and the licensing of dogs. Since 1983, under the Dogs Order (Northern Ireland) 1983, anyone who keeps a dog must obtain a yearly licence from their council. The Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, then specified that a licence will not be considered valid unless the dog is also microchipped.

The Dogs (Licensing and Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 sets out the technical requirements for microchipping, and specifies that microchip numbers must be registered on a database, and accompanied by details such as the keeper's name, address and telephone number, and details about the dog. The person who carried out the microchipping must notify the database operator of the details within seven days, and any changes to these details must be notified to the database operator, by the keeper of the dog, as soon as reasonably practicable.

The Department has received calls for the strengthening of microchipping requirements, from a wide range of stakeholders and for various reasons including: improving tools available to enforcement officers, increasing transparency regarding origins of the dogs, shining a light on breeders and breeding practices, and placing more robust requirements on microchip implanters, dog owners, and database providers.

The Department intends to consider how best to strengthen microchipping requirements, and explore the merits of:

- **bolstering the current database requirements to ensure that Northern Ireland dog owners' information is recorded, accessed and utilised in line with industry standards and facilitates pet traceability**
- **making it an offence for dog owners to not update ownership details on microchip databases.**



5. Animal Welfare and Responsible Dog Ownership Campaign

The Department recognises that it has a duty to educate animal owners and the wider public on animal welfare. It is vital that everyone knows their roles and responsibilities. The Department will initiate a comprehensive communications campaign in collaboration with key stakeholders. The goal is to increase awareness of the responsibility of all individuals, including farmers, pet owners, and the general public, to protect animal welfare, thus reducing instances of neglect, abandonment, and abuse. A key focus of this will be to promote responsible dog ownership, with messaging covering issues, such as:

- Proper identification and microchipping
- Regular health checks and vaccinations
- Spaying and neutering to prevent unwanted pregnancies
- Proper nutrition and exercise
- Socialisation and training to ensure good behaviour
- Understanding legal obligations including licensing requirements
- Providing a safe and comfortable living environment
- Recognising and addressing signs of distress or illness



6. Day Care and Home Boarding

Under the law in Northern Ireland (the 1972 Act), a person needs a licence if they run a business which offers accommodation for other people's cats or dogs. Licences are issued by the Department, after the applicant has paid the required fee, and after the Department has carried out any inspection of the establishment and found that it meets legal requirements. The requirements are known as 'licence conditions', and they are set out in a separate piece of law (the Animal Boarding Establishments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1974). The conditions that must be met by the establishment relate to matters like management, accommodation for the animals, and record keeping.

As the legislation was made in 1972, it was reflective of the needs present at that time. Boarding providers at that time offered 'kennelling', and, for example, animals were kept in single pens constructed of durable material.

Although boarding providers now provide a wide range of dog and cat boarding, where the animals are not kept in individual pens, the legislation itself has not been updated in almost 50 years, but remains in place as originally made. This means that some establishments that wish to offer boarding for other people's dogs inside their own home, or in a designated area which does not include pens, experience difficulty in working towards compliance with the legislation, and obtaining a licence, particularly regarding the requirement to keep the animals in individual pens.

There is a clear need to enact brand new legislation to regulate these businesses, however, this would require repealing the 1972 Act, which is unlikely to be achieved in the time remaining in this mandate. Therefore, as a mitigation, the Department will explore if the 1974 Regulations, which set out the licence conditions, can be revoked and 'replaced' with guidance. The effect of this would be that the Department would still be required to licence any establishment which provides accommodation for other people's dogs and cats but would not be obliged to attach the 1974 conditions to each licence it grants. Instead, it would attach conditions, derived from guidance, which were appropriate to the business model of the establishment.

We will:

- **explore the potential to facilitate the continued granting of licences to people who offer boarding kennels, and to enable the granting of licences to people who offer doggie day care and home boarding.**

7. Review of Dog Licence Fees

To obtain a licence for a dog, owners must pay the relevant council a yearly fee. That fee is enshrined in legislation and since 2011, is set at £12.50. Certain dog keepers can pay a reduced fee of £5, for example those who receive an income-related benefit and those whose dogs are neutered. Licences are also free for those aged 65 or over for either their only or first dog.

The Department intends to work with councils and establish if the fees they receive for these licences are enough to cover the cost of administering licences and delivering dog control services, via the network of dog wardens. The Department has already been made aware of council concerns regarding the cost to council, of various activities related to licensing and gathering fees, and is committed to reviewing the current dog licence fee regime.

We will do this by:

- **Reviewing the dog licence fee system to determine if it remains fit for purpose and how best to encourage increased compliance.**



8. Aversive training devices

Electric shock training collars, also known as e-collars, are aversive training devices which enable electronic pulses to be given to pets by their owners. An aversive training device is a device designed to make the animal stop an undesirable habit by causing them to associate with an unpleasant effect such as pain.

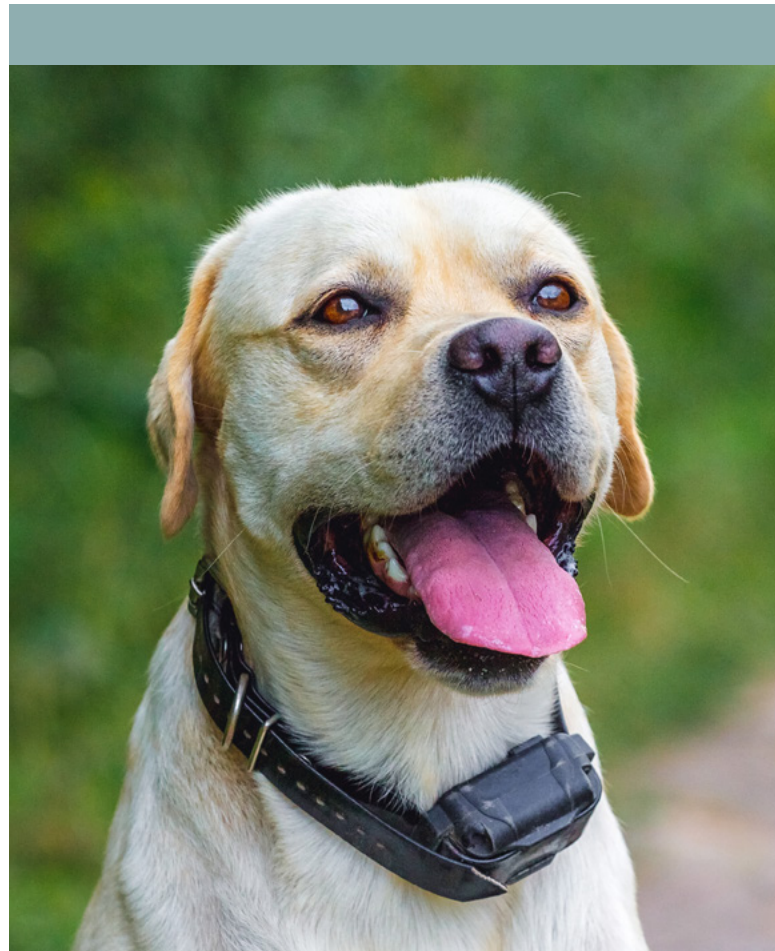
The use of e-collars is not banned in Northern Ireland although the animal fitted with the e-collar remains protected by the 2011 Act. This means that a person can use an e-collar on an animal if it does not cause the animal any unnecessary suffering. For example, if a person sets the level and intensity of the signal given to the pet at one which was too high, they could be causing that animal unnecessary suffering, and this is an offence under the 2011 Act.

The Department's Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs recommends to the public that only positive reward-based training should be used, and potentially painful or frightening training methods such as e-collars should be avoided.

In response to concerns raised about the use of e-collars, and about dogs fitted with these collars/devices without the owner's knowledge, the Department intends to look at the use of e-collars and explore bans put in place in other jurisdictions such as in Wales, where they have been banned since 2010.

We will:

- **engage with stakeholders to determine issues associated with a ban on aversive training devices in Northern Ireland and take forward the necessary consultation and legislation informed by this engagement.**



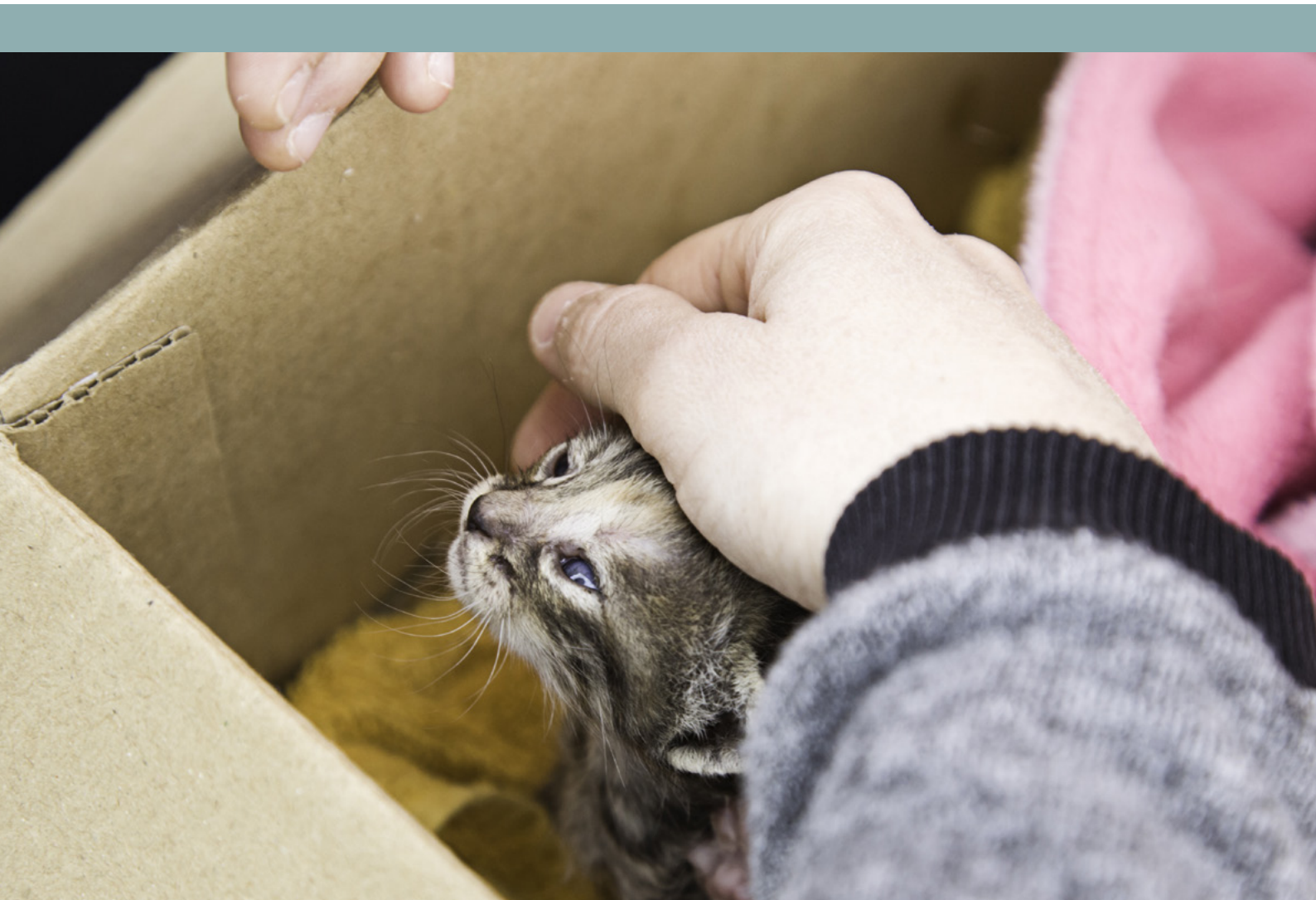
9. Regulation of Rescue and Rehoming Organisations

A rescue and rehoming establishment is one that rescues, rehabilitates, and rehomes animals. Each will have its own requirements for people wishing to rescue one of their animals and will have its own pricing/rehoming fee. Rescue and rehoming centres are not regulated or licensed in Northern Ireland. There are no specified legal requirements which provide a minimum standard for provision of accommodation and care, or a licensing and inspection system.

The Department is of the view that licensing will enable improved monitoring and ensure these vulnerable animals are able to be given an appropriate level of care and accommodation, to ensure a high quality of life. Indeed, it has been noted that rescue and rehoming organisations have called for themselves to be licensed to help tackle those with poor standards and to give the public confidence in those with good standards.

The Department will:

- **examine the case for inspecting and licensing rescue and rehoming organisations and bring forward legislation.**



Improving Farmed Animal Welfare



Improving Farmed Animal Welfare

Although animal welfare policy is devolved, farmed animal welfare in Northern Ireland is largely regulated by the European Commission, and regulations on farmed animals, transport, and slaughter continue to apply under the Windsor Framework. The EU has proposed revisions to existing legislation for the welfare of animals during transport and new laws for dogs and cats, and the Department is monitoring the progress of these and the potential impacts.

The Department also continues to work with the UK Government, Scottish Government and Welsh Government on agreed policy approaches/proposals for farmed animal welfare, where there is an evidence based need to develop a consistent UK wide approach.

Additionally, animal welfare is a mandated area of cooperation under the North South Ministerial Council, and there is regular engagement between the Department and the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine to discuss and develop areas of cooperation, with a focus on upholding and enhancing the standards of farmed animal welfare.



10. Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) in Slaughterhouses

Specific laws are in place in Northern Ireland to protect the welfare of livestock animals when they are killed. The law is enforced by the Department. Departmental Official Veterinarians maintain a permanent presence in approved Northern Ireland slaughterhouses during the hours of slaughter. They are responsible for monitoring animal welfare at slaughter and verifying that operators fulfil their obligations under both meat hygiene and animal welfare legislation. The majority of slaughterhouses in Northern Ireland are already in a strong position to comply with any potential new legislation, however, there are still gaps across the industry at large with some slaughterhouses having only partial or no CCTV coverage whatsoever.

There is currently no domestic or European legislation that requires CCTV for monitoring or verification of animal welfare in slaughterhouses. However, England, Scotland and Wales have made it compulsory for all slaughterhouses to slaughter animals under the coverage of CCTV. This is because CCTV has been identified as offering real benefits in slaughterhouses as an important complement to official physical observation and verification of slaughterhouse practices, and effectively recording animal welfare abuses.

The Department is committed to providing the best possible welfare standards of animal welfare at slaughter. The benefits of CCTV in slaughterhouses are considered to be achievable through the current voluntary route, however, the introduction of compulsory CCTV would ensure comprehensive coverage and monitoring of all areas where live animals are present in every slaughterhouse.

A public consultation on the proposal launched on 26 March 2025 for eight weeks.

We will do this by:

- **bringing forward legislation making the use of CCTV at the time of killing mandatory, establishing parity with neighbouring jurisdictions, thereby demonstrating our commitment to progressive animal welfare standard.**

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Animal Welfare
Jubilee House
111 Ballykelly Road
Ballykelly
Limavady
BT49 9HP

Email: Animal.Welfare@daera-ni.gov.uk



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE®
We invest in people Standard