Dog fighting - understanding the issue and tackling the cruelty

IMPROVING THE WELFARE...OF PET ANIMALS

Key facts...

★ Dog fighting was banned in the UK in 1835 yet despite this there has been a resurgence in this activity since the mid-1970s.
★ This is an area of animal cruelty that the RSPCA is a leading expert on with a dedicated intelligence and undercover team who work tirelessly to combat the cruelty.
★ There are roughly three main types of dog fighting; traditional/organised, cultural, and street/chain. Each has slightly different characteristics and motivations.
★ Dog fighting is an offence under section 8 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and a person convicted may receive a prison sentence of up of six months and/or an unlimited fine.
★ The RSPCA believes dog fighting is one of the cruelest activities concerning animals and while we have been successful at infiltrating these rings we recognise that the punishment may not always seem to fit the crime.
★ There should be stiffer penalties for causing this level of organised, premeditated cruelty to animals. The RSPCA hopes that the Government finds an opportunity at the earliest convenience to increase the penalties for such offences.

Overview

Dog fighting was banned in the UK in 1835 however the RSPCA and police noticed a resurgence of organised dog fighting in the 1970s-1980s. This coincided with the importation of the first pit bull terriers into the UK. Through effective infiltration, investigation and prosecution by the RSPCA this cruel activity died down but we have seen a rise again since 2000.

Dog fighting is one of the cruelest activities that the RSPCA deals with and those involved in the ‘sport’ are motivated by the prestige their dogs bring them both in the ‘pit’ but also breeding ‘grand champions’, and the money that can be made from gambling. Grand Champions can be worth significant sums of money both from a gambling perspective and with regard to stud or sale. Dog fighters will look for ‘game’ dogs and those who show no desire to fight or are aggressive towards humans will not be used and instead disposed of.

In the RSPCA’s view dog fighting can be broken down into roughly three types:

- **traditional/organised**

This tends to involve white, working class men and is very organised and regimented with strict rules followed to ensure a ‘fair fight’. For example a ‘keep’ is kept for the dog to train it for the fight with a strict regime (lasting six weeks), only those dogs that are evenly matched will be pitted against one another, and there are strict rules governed by a referee in the pit when they are fought. This is very much an underground activity involving large sums of money gambled on dogs. Pit bull terriers are almost exclusively used for such fights. Owners and trainers of these dogs will often treat them themselves when they are injured and stitch up (or even staple) wounds and so they do not see a vet.

The individuals involved in this form of fighting may well be associated with other forms of organised

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1 This is the area the dogs fight in.
2 This is the title given to dogs who win five fights and remain undefeated.
3 Gameness refers to the willingness of a dog to fight.

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crime.

● cultural

This tends to involve British-born men of Pakistani-origin with a range of breeds and types of dogs, including Pit bull terriers but also Bully Kuttas and other large mastiff-type dogs. As any prohibitions of dog fighting are not well enforced in Pakistan and other countries like Afghanistan, etc the tradition is very culturally ingrained and so communities will often bring such traditions to the UK despite it being banned. This form of fighting is not so organised or structured. As with organised fighting these dogs rarely see a vet if they become injured.

● chain/street

This covers a new trend for dog fighting often (but not exclusively) seen in inner-city areas where young men use their dogs to settle scores or show their standing within their community. These can involve individuals who are members of gangs or on the fringes and it is an informal form of dog fighting. With few rules, other than bringing two dogs together to encourage them to fight. The dogs are very often bull-breed types.

It is an offence under section 8 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to cause, take part in, be present at, publicise, knowingly receive money for admission to, advertise or make or accept a bet on an animal fight. Additionally it is an offence to have anything in possession in connection with an animal fight (e.g. break stick, scales, treadmill, etc) or keep a premises for such a fight. The penalty if convicted is a maximum of six months imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. Additionally the individual can receive disqualification and deprivation orders with regard to the dogs.

Statistics

There are a number of statistics we can use to look at this issue from prosecutions through to complaints the RSPCA has received from concerned members of the public. Please see the table below for further information:

Table 1 - RSPCA data on dog fighting prosecutions and complaints received

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total no of convictions secured(^\text{a}) (8 AWA)</th>
<th>Complaints received to NCC about ‘dog fighting’(^\text{b})</th>
<th>Complaints to NCC ‘organised dog fighting’(^\text{c})</th>
<th>Grand total of complaints received pa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the table the RSPCA has seen a steady rise in the number of complaints received about dog fighting. While not all these complaints will lead to sufficient evidence for an investigation and prosecution it is clear this is an area the public remains concerned about. Additionally we have seen an overall rise in convictions secured for dog fighting offences (although a slight drop in 2014).

\(^{a}\) A defendant could have more than one conviction

\(^{b}\) It should be noted that due to the way in which Her Majesty’s Government collect statistics in relation to summary offences these statistics may not accord with those produced by the RSPCA relating to its own prosecutions.

\(^{c}\) This is a very general term capturing a range of activities including chain or street fighting, cultural fighting as well as organised fighting.

\(^{d}\) This is a specific log used which only refers to organised fighting.

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**Sentencing**

When considering sentencing for such offences it is clear that the Courts may not impose the maximum penalties available and there are calls for increases in sentencing. From data supplied by the Ministry of Justice in answer to a parliamentary question it is apparent that between 2010-2012 no one who was convicted of a dog fighting offence was given a custodial sentence. In 2013 one person was convicted but did not receive a custodial sentence and in 2014 three people were convicted and received a custodial sentence.

**Tackling the cruelty together**

The RSPCA advises anyone who is concerned dog fighting is taking place should report this to our national cruelty line on 0300 1234 999 or to the police. Information can be taken in confidence to protect all concerned.

Politicians can assist the RSPCA by supporting calls for tougher sentences for fighting offences and ensure the Courts do consider and use custodial sentences to their full potential. This is something the Ministry of Justice has previously shown some interest in as there is recognition this is not being used effectively at present. The RSPCA believes that such offences should carry a maximum custodial penalty of two years.

The Society welcomes the recent statement from Defra that the Government recognises the seriousness of fighting offences and is looking at legislative opportunities to increase the maximum penalties for this.

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8 Source: Justice Statistics Analytical Services - Ministry of Justice
9 Ref: 334-15 PQs 6366-6368
10 Hansard, 25 November 2015, HL3573


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