



Fireworks and animal welfare

TOGETHER WE CAN...IMPROVE ANIMAL WELFARE

Key points...

- ★ The RSPCA supports calls to restrict the private use¹ of fireworks to certain traditional dates such as November 5th, New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year and Diwali.
- ★ Fireworks can be a source of fear and distress for many animals. This can have a considerable negative effect on their welfare.
- ★ The current legislative framework, primarily the Fireworks Act 2003 and Fireworks Regulations 2004, has had some success in restricting the private display of fireworks. We would like to see it go further.
- ★ Firework phobia in domestic pets is a treatable condition and should not be ignored. The RSPCA has produced species specific advice for the most common pet animals which we would urge concerned owners to follow.

The need for reform

Fireworks can be a source of fear and distress for many animals. In particular the sudden, loud noises that many fireworks make can cause fear. For example, it is estimated that 45% of dogs show signs of fear when they hear fireworks. Animals affected not only suffer psychological distress but can also cause themselves injuries, sometimes very serious ones, as they attempt to run or hide from the noise.

Although most reports of welfare problems caused by fireworks relate to domestic pets, other animals can also experience fear, distress and/or injury as a result of them. Livestock are easily frightened by loud noises and sudden bright lights and can be at risk of injuring themselves on fencing, farm equipment or fixtures and fittings within their house if startled. Debris produced by fireworks can also pose a hazard to livestock if found on the land. Although there is limited direct evidence, it is also likely that fireworks and their debris will cause a disturbance to wildlife, including waterfowl, and are likely to cause suffering or distress, depending on the distance from the explosive and the noise level.

There is widespread public concern about the effect that fireworks can have on animals and the RSPCA receives hundreds of calls about them every year. For example in 2015 we received 386 calls from people concerned about fireworks. This figure has been increasing in recent years. The total number of calls in 2015 represents an increase of 34% from the total number of calls in 2011.

Current legislation: the Fireworks Act 2003 and the Fireworks Regulations 2004

Although there is a slew of legislation regulating the sale, display and safety of fireworks, the [Fireworks Act 2003](#) and the [Fireworks Regulations 2004](#) are the main pieces concerned with regulating firework usage. The Fireworks Act was introduced with the aim of reducing the noise, nuisance and injuries caused by the misuse of fireworks. The Act conferred powers on the Secretary of State to make regulations to ensure there is no, or minimal, risk that fireworks will cause death, injury or distress to people or animals or damage to property².

The Fireworks Regulations were introduced under the Act. The main provisions of the Regulations are:

¹ 'Private use' in this case refers to the display of fireworks by the general public.

² Fireworks Act 2003, Section 2

- A curfew on the use of fireworks between 11pm and 7am (though this is later on November 5th, New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year and Diwali),
- A ban on the sale to the public of fireworks whose noise level exceeds 120 decibels (db (A)),
- A ban on the sale of fireworks outside of the above mentioned specified dates without a license from either the Local Authority, Fire Service or Health and Safety Executive.

Penalties under the Regulations include fines, imprisonment and fixed penalty notices. For example, people who break the curfew can receive a fine of up to £5,000 and/or six months imprisonment, or a fixed penalty notice of £80.

Noise nuisance caused by fireworks can, in theory, also be subject to the [Environment Health Act 1990](#) and the [Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003](#). In practice, however, the short-lived nature of firework noise makes it difficult to locate the exact source and so for Environmental Health officers (responsible for enforcing both Acts) to take any action.

Proposed amendments to the Fireworks Regulations

The RSPCA supports calls to restrict the private use of fireworks to agreed traditional dates such as those included in the existing Regulations (ie November 5th, New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year and Diwali). These dates are already recognised as being exceptional in the Regulations and we believe that the existing prohibition on sales at all other times could and should be extended to include use as well.

We would also like to see the maximum permitted noise level of fireworks for public sale reduced to 95 decibels (db (A)). Noise level studies³ have indicated that this level - equivalent to a car door slamming - is likely to minimise distress to animals. The current allowed level, 120 decibels, is equivalent to a jet aircraft taking off. Fireworks above 96 decibels should only be used at licensed public displays. We would also like to see fireworks labelled as 'loud' or 'low noise' to allow consumers to make an informed decision if they do buy fireworks.

Finally, we would like to see all public fireworks displayed licensed by the relevant licensing authority, with information about the proposed display provided in the local area and a process for local residents to appeal against the granting of the license. This process should also apply to people seeking to hold private displays at special events (such as weddings).

Treating firework phobia

Firework phobia in pets is a treatable condition which owners should not ignore. There are lots of simple things pet owners can do to help their animals cope with fireworks such as ensuring that dogs and cats are kept securely indoors, masking the noise of fireworks by closing windows and curtains and using music or the TV to mask it and providing pets with a safe place to hide if they feel frightened. Small animals who live outside should be provided with lots of extra bedding to allow them to burrow and should have some of their enclosure covered with blankets to mask the noise. Concerned owners can also talk to their vet who will, if necessary, refer them to a professional clinical animal behaviourist.

General and species specific advice for helping treat firework phobia in pets can be found on the [RSPCA website](#), as well as information for people concerned about [livestock](#) and [wild animals](#) affected by fireworks and their debris.

³ *Quiet Please*, RSPCA (2003)

[http://www.rspca.org.uk/servlet/BlobServer/Download%20Quiet%20please%20\(2mb\).pdf?blobtable=RSPCABlob&blobcol=urlblob&blobkey=id&blobwhere=1044103655242&blobheader=application/pdf](http://www.rspca.org.uk/servlet/BlobServer/Download%20Quiet%20please%20(2mb).pdf?blobtable=RSPCABlob&blobcol=urlblob&blobkey=id&blobwhere=1044103655242&blobheader=application/pdf) (accessed 30.03.16)

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