



Unionist
Ulster Unionist Party

Doing what's right for Northern Ireland

Animal Welfare



April 2016

Introduction by Party Leader

It has been said that the greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated.

As a society we do well, but we could do better.

Northern Ireland is renowned for its deep care and understanding of animals. We really are a Province of animal lovers with almost half of all local households sharing their homes with at least one pet.

Pets provide us with an endless source of companionship, but there is also a building evidence base which suggests pets promote their owners' physical and psychological health and sense of wellbeing. In addition, the social aspects of owning a pet should not be underestimated.

Most of us are appalled at the thought of animals being neglected or harmed, but unfortunately there are those in society who think it is acceptable to inflict suffering on what are most often totally harmless animals. Too many people either choose to ignore, or worse, take some twisted, sickening satisfaction from the fact that animals feel pain and suffering, just the same as humans can.

I, like many people, have been disgusted with some of the recent stories in the media about defenceless animals being brutally attacked or mutilated. Whether it is family cat being shot once with an air rifle, or horses being left to starve to death in horrendous conditions, it doesn't really matter. Anyone who can inflict such suffering on an animal cannot be trusted, with animals, or for what they could do to their fellow human beings.



Whilst over recent years there has been progress towards safeguarding animals across Northern Ireland, I firmly believe that there is still much more that needs to be done.

We have broadly the right level of protections enshrined in law. Unfortunately the difficulty very often comes down to implementation. That is not just a problem unique to animal welfare, but one that is endemic right across the different arms of the local institutions. However, with the right level of political will, it can be overcome.

It's not just for pets that the Ulster Unionist Party has developed this latest 2016 policy paper. The necessity for animal welfare amongst our wildlife and on our farms is just as important. In addition, animals involved in the provision of 'entertainment' for local people must be treated with the same level of care and compassion.

The need for appropriate animal welfare in whatever circumstances has long been accepted in the public and political psyche. It's time to move to the next step and tackle the gaps and flaws that still clearly exist locally. I believe the proposals contained in this paper will go some way to securing that.

Mike Nesbitt
Leader, Ulster Unionist Party

A feeble implementation of the law



For a country of animal lovers, Northern Ireland still produces too many and all too regular horror stories of animals being neglected, mutilated or abused. The widely held public perception is that the perpetrators of this cruelty often get away with incredibly light punishments that do not fit the nature of the crime.

To a large extent, that public perception has been proven to be correct. Too many people have been responsible for unthinkable acts of cruelty, and have got away either unscathed or with a very minor reprimand.

The 2011 Welfare of Animals Act introduced a range of new measures, including new enforcement powers to allow action to be taken to prevent animals from suffering, as opposed to simply waiting until suffering has occurred. Whilst the new legislation did make important steps towards improving the safeguards for animals across Northern Ireland, the wholly inadequate number of subsequent convictions confirms that its implementation was totally flawed.

There is no clearer illustration of this failure than the shockingly low number of custodial sentences. In 2010, the year before the new Act, there were four custodial sentences. In 2012, the year after the supposedly stronger law came into operation, there were only three custodial sentences and by 2013 this had fallen to two.

Whilst we had strong safeguards in legislation, the law simply was not being implemented and therefore many of the provisions remained worthless.

Only recently have the Departments of Justice and Agriculture & Rural Development agreed to improve

the implementation. We welcome the long overdue progress towards tougher sentencing for the more serious offences and the new powers for the Director of Public Prosecutions to challenge sentences for undue leniency. However, it should not have taken five years from the passage of the Act to secure what many had been advocating long before.

Northern Ireland's farmers produce food to animal welfare standards that are among the highest in the world. The vast majority of local farms are responsibly run and managed, recognising the huge importance of good animal welfare and husbandry. Consumers increasingly recognise the importance of high animal welfare standards when making their choices at the checkout.

In recent years, EU wide legislation has set out minimum welfare standards in a range of areas, including the transportation of animals, banning cages for laying hens and introducing the sow stall ban. The industry in the UK has led the way in complying quickly with welfare rules ahead of other member states; this has come at considerable cost. This highlights the importance of ensuring that existing welfare legislation is properly implemented and enforced before new rules are considered. Animal welfare legislation is most effective when it is as simple as possible, based on sound science and is workable on the ground.

Given the standards that local producers adhere to, it is essential that they are not placed at a competitive disadvantage as a result of imports produced to lesser animal welfare rules. This is something consumers also rightly find unacceptable.

The Ulster Unionist Party's proposals to further improve animal welfare;

1. The creation of a central register of people convicted of animal cruelty

In the last five years alone, over 17,000 animal welfare cases have been investigated by Councils. In addition, over 7,000 animal welfare issues have been reported to the PSNI. Whilst only a small number are pursued to prosecution, and an even smaller number see successful convictions, there is a strong case to improve the information currently collated and stored regarding those found guilty of inflicting suffering on animals.

Given the varying levels of responsibility allocated to local enforcement bodies – the DOJ, DARD, the PSNI and Local Councils – it is essential that they are able to quickly and effectively share the conviction data amongst themselves and the wider public.

In addition, we believe the collation and accurate storage of conviction data would allow non-statutory bodies such as our local animal welfare charities to more confidently make decisions such as re-homing.

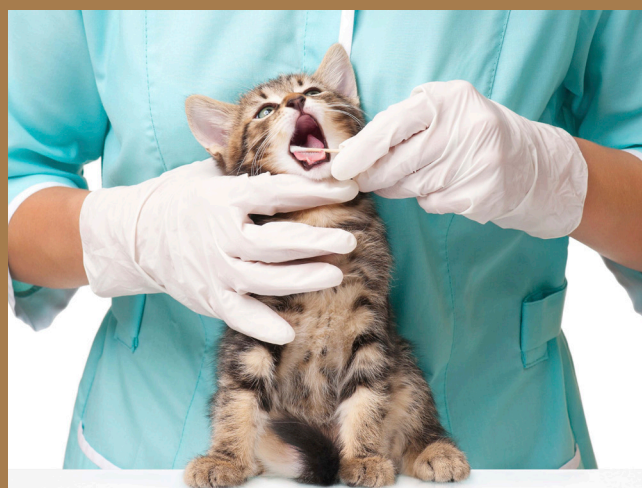
The Ulster Unionist Party therefore supports the creation of a central register of people convicted of animal cruelty offences.

2. The Online advertising and sale of pets

A regrettable result of the upsurge in the usage of the internet has been the explosion of the sale of living animals online. It remains largely unregulated and whilst it can be a useful vehicle for sourcing pets and new potential owners, we are greatly concerned the scant information provided in classified adverts makes it very easy for unscrupulous breeders and even puppy farms to sell their animals to unknowing members of the public.

Whilst everyone should share the responsibility of trying to source their new pets from reputable providers, we believe that online buy and sell websites also have a duty to abide to a minimum set of standards as set by a range of industry and animal welfare stakeholders.

Ultimately however, the Ulster Unionist Party believes that, given these decisions involve the sale of live animals, voluntary compliance is only a temporary measure and further formal intervention is required to tighten the trade of animals online.





3. Improving welfare at slaughter

Meat consumption has a central role in the diet of the vast majority of people across Northern Ireland. We believe, however, that animal welfare must remain paramount during the birth, husbandry and later the slaughter of every animal produced for meat.

We want to respect all religious beliefs and practices. However, we also believe animals should be slaughtered under the most humane conditions possible. Evidence clearly indicates that slaughter without pre-stunning can cause unnecessary suffering. As such, we believe animals should be stunned before slaughter.

In the meantime, we believe that all meat products should be labelled clearly to include the method of slaughter.

In addition, whilst we have a high degree of confidence in the professionalism of local slaughterhouses, in order to retain public confidence, the Ulster Unionist Party believes that CCTV should be installed in all areas where live animals are kept and killed.

4. A review of the effectiveness of Breed Specific Legislation

The Dangerous Dogs Order 1991 designates four types of dog that it is an offence to breed from, sell or exchange and to possess. In addition, it empowered Courts to order the destruction of these dogs.

The Ulster Unionist Party, like many of our most esteemed animal welfare experts and charities, now believe the current implementation of rudimentary breed-specific legislation is a flawed approach as a dog's behaviour is more likely to be the result of the way that it has been brought up or trained, rather than simply its genetic makeup. We believe that responsible pet ownership is by far the best approach to protecting the public.

We would, therefore, carry out a formal review to explore the benefits of the retaining or scrapping of our breed-specific legislation.



5. Greyhound racing

Track racing in Northern Ireland is currently controlled by the Irish Coursing Club and while it continues to provide an umbrella of authority and administration, we are concerned that it may not provide the same level of regulatory scrutiny that should be expected for a spectator sport which relies heavily on the use of live animals. Our local tracks at Drumbo and the Brandywell find themselves in the difficult situation of self-regulating.

Like many observers, including greyhound racing spectators, we remain concerned by the lack of transparency from the industry in relation to figures on injury statistics and the number of dogs put to sleep.

Steps that the Ulster Unionist Party believes that could and should be taken include an introduction of a new regulatory framework for Northern Ireland, a new duty on trainers and/or owners to register every dog, the roll-out of a passport tracking scheme which records on a central database dogs from birth to death and finally the collection of injury and PTS statistics.

6. Additional measures

- **Resist any attempts to weaken either the EU Habitats or Birds Directives;**
- **Make an attack on a guide dog or assistance dog an aggravated offence;**
- **Explore the introduction of Dog ASBOs, as have already been introduced in Scotland and are currently being considered for other regions in Great Britain;**
- **Make animal protection and wildlife crime, such as the theft of rare-bird eggs, irresponsible use of snares and the trade in endangered species, a core policing responsibility supported with appropriate resources to enable real protection to happen in practice.**
- **A fundamental review of the horse passport system in order to improve the traceability of horses and better promote responsible ownership.**



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