



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP 2016/0128, 24 June 2016

Dog fighting

This pack has been prepared ahead of the debate on **dog fighting** to be held in Westminster Hall on Wednesday 29 June 2016 at 9.30am.

Dr Lisa Cameron MP initiated the debate

Oliver Bennett
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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

1. Summary

Welfare implications of dog fighting

Dog fighting has serious animal welfare implications, both for fighting dogs and any animals that are used to train the dogs:

1. Injuries from the fights, which can sometimes lead to death;
2. Suffering caused by a lack of proper veterinary treatment. Owners of fighting dogs may be reluctant to take their animal to a vet in case they arouse suspicions;
3. Suffering caused by the long hours of training the dogs are forced to do;
4. Suffering caused to 'bait' animals, such as cats and dogs, which are used to train the dogs to fight. The bait animal may be killed or injured by the dog being trained.¹

Legislation and penalties

Dog fighting has been an offence since the 1800s.

Current provisions for making dog fighting an offence can be found in the *Animal Welfare Act 2006* in England and Wales, and the *Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006*.

These acts create specific offences related to animal fights. These are set out in [Section 8](#) of the *Animal Welfare Act 2006*, with penalties of up to 51 weeks' imprisonment, a fine, or both. [Section 23](#) of the *Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006* carries penalties of up to 12 months' imprisonment, a fine of up to £20,000 or both.

Prevalence and organisation

Exact data on the extent of dog fighting is not available due to its covert nature. RSPCA stated that there had been a resurgence in dog fighting since the 1970s.²

[A report](#) by the League Against Cruel Sports (LACS) estimated that one dog fight was happening per day in the UK. It said that dog fights ranged from informal street-based fights (where little or no money is involved) to highly organised 'pit' fights (where large sums of money may be gambled).

The LACS report described three broad 'levels' of dog fighting activity, with different organisational structures and funding:

Level One: Impromptu street fights or 'rolls'

- One on one fights in urban parks and housing estates
- Dogs may be tethered on a chain or taken off for the fight

¹ [Betrayal of Trust](#), League Against Cruel Sports, November 2015

² [Dog fighting - understanding the issue and tackling the cruelty](#), RSPCA, 15 June 2016

- Arranged on the spot, no referee or rules, fight over in a few minutes
- Predominantly young urban males, may have gang connections, part of street culture
- Little or no money involved
- Likely to occur somewhere in the UK every day

Level Two: Hobbyist

- Series of fights in abandoned buildings, garages or even living rooms/bedrooms that have been converted into a 'pit'
- Operate on a localised fighting circuit
- Often gang affiliated with gambling involved
- Takes place in urban and urban fringe areas
- Likely to occur somewhere in the UK every couple of weeks

Level Three: Professional

- Sophisticated dog rings with highly trained dogs of reputable bloodlines
- Always takes place in a pit
- Includes spectators, rules, referees, timekeepers
- Contracts drawn up between dog owners stipulating date, location, dog weight, referee and betting stake
- High stakes gambling with £100,000s wagered
- Travel around UK or internationally to enter dogs in fights or attend fights
- Highly secretive, invitation only
- Likely to occur somewhere in UK every few months³

Stakeholder views

LACS and the RSPCA have called for changes to the way in which dog fighting is being tackled, and both support an increase in penalties for the offence. RSPCA said:

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 statement made by Defra in late 2015 that the Government recognises the seriousness of fighting offences and is looking at legislative opportunities to increase the maximum penalties for this.⁴

LACS made the following recommendations:

1. Dog fighting should be recorded as a specific offence in order to improve data quality and correctly assess the scale of the

³ [Betrayal of Trust](#), League Against Cruel Sports, November 2015

⁴ [Dog fighting - understanding the issue and tackling the cruelty](#), RSPCA, 15 June 2016

problem as well as providing intelligence and information that could be used to identify the required policing resources and cultural/regional specific problems. For the sake of clarity we consider that the existing offence of animal fighting should be retained and do not necessarily make the case for dog fighting to be made a separate offence, unless this is the only mechanism through which local and national recording of dog fighting offences can be achieved.

2. The penalty for dog fighting and dog fighting offences should be brought in line with similar legislation in other European countries in order to achieve consistency. Currently the maximum sentence for animal fighting is a term of imprisonment of up to 51 weeks (for Animal Welfare Act 2006 offences). But in some European countries it is two years (e.g. France) or three years (Germany, the Czech Republic). We would argue for raising the tariff to two years on grounds of consistency, noting also that the Law Commission's (2015) approach to other animal (wildlife) offences recommends extending the penalty for the most serious offences from six months to two years in prison.

3. The Government should ensure that the police and other agencies have adequate resources and support to respond to dog fighting problems, including appropriate resources to develop multi-agency approaches.

4. The Government should initiate and fund research into the prevalence, nature and enforcement of dog fighting.⁵

⁵ [Betrayal of Trust](#), League Against Cruel Sports, November 2015

2. News items

BBC

Dog fighting: Campaigners call for action against owners

Tom Symonds Home Affairs correspondent 24 May 2016

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36365619>

Your Dog Magazine

Tougher action needed to tackle dog fighting

May 2016

<http://www.yourdog.co.uk/The-Your-Dog-Blog/tougher-action-needed-to-tackle-dog-fighting.html?highlight=WyJkb2ciLCJkb2dzliwiZG9nJyIsImRvZydziwiZG9ncyiLCJkb2cnLiIsIidkb2ciLCJkb2cnLCIsImRvZ3MnLiIsImRvZ2dlZCIsImRvZ3MnLCIsIidkb2dzliwiZmInaHRpbmciLCJmaWdodCIsImZpZ2h0cyIsIidmaWdodCciLCInZmlnaHRpbmciZG9nIGZpZ2h0aW5nIl0=>

Dogs Monthly

Dog Fighting Awareness Day

8 April 2016

<http://dogsmoonthly.co.uk/2016/04/08/dog-fighting-awareness-day/>

Dog World Magazine

Report on dog fighting reveals world of 'machismo, money and suffering'

7 December 2015

http://www.dogworld.co.uk/product.php/149704/1/report_on_dog_fighting_reveals_world_of_%E2%80%98machismo,_money_and_suffering_%E2%80%99

3. Press releases

League Against Cruel Sports

Dog fighting peril in UK cities - undercover investigation leads to fears of resurgence in brutal bloodsport

24 May 2016

MPs and stars back call for tough penalties and 'national register' to tackle offence 'which is gateway to drug and gun crime'

Dogs slammed into walls to toughen them up for fighting, cats and dogs used as 'bait' to train fighting dogs, dead dogs dumped in the countryside – these are among the disturbing findings of a ground-breaking investigation into dog fighting in the UK today.

Developed and instigated by the League Against Cruel Sports as part of its campaign to end dog fighting in the UK, *Project Bloodline* was a six month investigation designed to understand why, when and where dog fighting takes place – and how we can stop it.

Working collaboratively with 60 partners in a 'typical' UK urban area, the League Against Cruel Sports unearthed intelligence which included:

- Prohibited dogs bred and sold in a clandestine market in order to supply the high demand for status and fighting dogs with Pitbull 'type' puppies being sold for £1,000
- Before a fight has even taken place animals are left severely injured or are even killed having been subjected to brutal training methods including body or head slamming
- A feral cat colony being kept to supply 'bait' for dog fighting
- A Staffordshire Bull Terrier which had been used for 'bait' had its teeth crudely pulled and broken with pliers so that it could not defend itself
- The bodies of dead dogs, which had been used for fighting, dumped near farmland

Eduardo Gonçalves, CEO of the League Against Cruel Sports, who will be launching the report of Project Bloodline in Parliament on Tuesday, 24th May, said:

"If anyone thinks dog fighting is a thing of the past, then sadly they are wrong. Last year we commissioned a ground-breaking academic report which said that a dog fight was taking place every day in the UK. This year we've taken to the streets to find out exactly what was happening, and the results are frightening.

"Dogs are being bred and sold specifically for fighting, pet animals are being used to provide a steady supply of torture victims for cruel training exercises where they are tethered down or used as dangling 'bait' for dogs being trained to fight for 'fun' – the cruelty behind this

underground world is endless and it's happening right under our noses.

"We want appropriate penalties to be introduced, and for appropriate action to be taken against perpetrators. Dog fighting is barbaric and we cannot allow it to be part of a modern Britain."

Ricky Gervais in response to the League's findings said:

"I am deeply saddened to hear that illegal dog fighting is apparently on the rise in the UK. Anyone who likes the spectacle of two terrified animals fighting is a psychopath. Dogs are naturally loyal friends, who have to be abused and mistreated to act in this way. They don't want to be part of this. They are literally fighting for survival. Please never attend anything like this and if you suspect such a disgusting event may be taking place somewhere, then please report it immediately. This has to stop."

A 'gateway' crime

Dog fighting is not purely a matter of animal welfare. Evidence from the UK and abroad points to the activity being a 'gateway' crime to serious and organised offences, such as drug and gun crime. In the United States dog fighting is recognised as a Grade A felony by the FBI and the practice of tackling dog fighting to prevent other crimes is well established.

The League Against Cruel Sports worked closely with Michelle Welch, Virginia's Assistant Attorney General, who has vast experience of tackling dog fighting in the USA. She said:

"Dog fighting is a major crime that here in the States is closely linked with a wide range of other law-breaking. Statistics show that more than half of those connected with dog fighting are gang members, and seven out of ten have previously been arrested for felonies and/or drug offences. Where there is dog fighting, there are drugs."

"Dog fighting is hidden, so the work being done in the UK by the League Against Cruel Sports is exactly what needs to happen. Collaboration between agencies, strong penalties and a greater understanding of the level of this activity is vital. The League Against Cruel Sports should be commended for Project Bloodline as without this kind of work, dog fighting will grow and have an ever-increasing negative impact on individuals, communities, and of course on the dogs."

The Way Forward - PUP

Based on the intelligence and experience gathered from Project Bloodline, the League Against Cruel Sports is calling for the implementation of a national dog fighting action plan which can be rolled out in any area where dog fighting is prevalent.

Based around three areas of Prevention, Understanding and Prosecution (PUP), recommendations include:

- The formation of a National Task Force, led by a senior figure in Government, to ensure sufficient collaboration and action takes place to tackle dog fighting across the country.
- Details of individuals banned from keeping dogs should be held on a national register by statutory agencies, helping to prevent further offences being committed whilst increasing opportunities for enforcement action.
- Legislation and penalties for offenders must be clarified and strengthened; the League is calling for a minimum three year custodial sentence for convicted dog fighters. Sentencing should reflect the spectrum of offending in relation to dog fighting (from street level dog fighting to organised crime). Rehabilitation programmes should be offered as part of the sentencing mix.
- The Dangerous Dog Act should be reviewed as a matter of urgency as we believe breed specific legislation is fundamentally flawed.

Celebrity and political support for campaign

The League's campaign to end dog fighting in the UK has been backed by a list of celebrities and cross party MPs including: Ricky Gervais, Amanda Holden, Paul O'Grady, Russell Tovey, Nicky Campbell, Peter Egan, Tony Robinson, Bill Oddie, Dave Spikey, Marc Abraham, Alison Steadman, Ben Fogle, Gemma Atkinson, Carol Royle, Henry Smith MP for Crawley and Co-Chair of the All-Party Group for Animal Welfare, Kelvin Hopkins MP for Luton North, John Pugh MP for Southport, Margaret Ritchie MP for South Down, member of the Commons Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee and Lisa Cameron, MP for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow.

Commenting on the issue and the League's campaign, Henry Smith MP, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare said:

"Dog fighting is an abhorrent pastime belonging to the past. Convicted perpetrators need to face appropriate punishments, however currently our courts lack the vital power to impose these – this needs to change if we have any chance of stopping dog fighting for good.

"I support the League Against Cruel Sports with their campaign to both increase the available custodial sentences to at least three years and their call for a national register of animal abusers."

Britain's Got Talent judge, Amanda Holden said: *"I can't think of many things worse than making two dogs fight each other. Dogs are loving animals, to abuse them like this is horrific."*

Eduardo Gonçalves concluded:

“Dog fighting is one of the most serious animal welfare issues in Britain today and it is also a serious issue of crime and community safety. Animal abuse has consistently been shown to be a reliable predictor of some of the most serious and most violent crimes in the community, including child abuse, domestic violence and abuse of the elderly.”

The League Against Cruel Sports believes there has been a resurgence in dog fighting in urban areas in the UK. A range of different factors have led to this conclusion, including the results of Project Bloodline, increases in UK hospital admissions due to dog bites, increases in the number of muscly dogs on the streets and the apparent growth in the number of stolen dogs, possibly used for bait. Dog fighting might not be easy to see, but we ignore this evidence at our peril.

“The League will now be stepping up its ongoing investigation into dog fighting in Britain. We will be stepping up engagement with local communities to prevent those at risk from being drawn in. We will be doing further research to help policy-makers and law enforcement agencies better understand the causes, and the potential solutions. We will be partnering with a range of agencies to support the rehabilitation of rescued dogs.”

The League Against Cruel Sports has started a petition calling for the government to more effectively tackle dog fighting, including increasing sentences for convicted dog fighters. The petition can be signed at www.league.org.uk/dogfighting.

Anyone with information about dog fighting taking place in their community can confidentially contact the League Against Cruel Sports Animal Crimewatch service on 01483 361108 or at www.league.org.uk/crimewatch.

- Project Bloodline follows on from the League’s 2015 report, [Betrayal of Trust: The Tragedy of Dog fighting](#). The first investigation under the new pilot scheme focused on the Bedfordshire urban areas of Luton, Bedford and Dunstable. Based on the methodology used by Police dealing with terrorism and criminal activity at a community level, the project involved both overt and covert operations.
- The four page briefing Dog Fighting and Serious Crime: The Facts and the Way Forward and the full report are available on request.
- *Celebrity quotes of support for Project Bloodline:*

Peter Egan, BAFTA award winning actor, animal lover and League Against Cruel Sports Vice President said: *“Dog fighting is a crime committed against our best friends, by humanity’s worst enemies, the criminals making money from indescribable cruelty. Where are we as a society if we allow our dogs to be abused in*

this way? The League Against Cruel Sports report shows us that we must do better."

Bill Oddie, Wildlife campaigner and Vice President of the League Against Cruel Sports: *"Dogs are perhaps the most beloved and valued animal on earth. Humans look after them, and they look after humans. They represent companionship, affection and loyalty. I can think of few evils so perverted -and cruel- as dog fighting. This is humanity at its worst."*

Emmerdale Actress Gemma Atkinson and League supporter said:

"Dog fighting to me is barbaric. To force any animal to fight is disgusting but to do it to one of the most loyal, loving, caring of animals, a 'man's best friend' is sickening. A pet should be kept to love and protect and build a bond with, not forced to fight."

Marc Abraham, a practicing veterinary surgeon, author, and animal welfare campaigner said: *"As a veterinary professional I'm aware of what animal suffering looks like. If that suffering has been inflicted deliberately, it makes me sick and very angry. Any dog used for dog fighting is a victim, not just the one that loses the fight."*

Actress Carol Royle said: *"Man's best friend, or man's best 'weapon'/money-making tool/object for abuse'...they love you unconditionally, is this man's repayment? Man is capable of so much more...they have to have their eyes opened to the pain they cause....once opened, they too could be friends with one of the most loving and loyal creatures on earth."*

- Please contact the League's Press Office on 01483 524250 (24hrs) or email press@league.org.uk for any image, comment or interview requests

League Against Cruel Sports is a registered charity in England and Wales (no.1095234) and Scotland (no. SC045533) that brings together people who care about animals. Like the majority of the public, we believe that cruelty to animals in the name of sport has no place in modern society.

Battersea Dogs' and Cats' Home

Battersea welcomes League Against Cruel Sports report

24 May 2016

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home condemns dog fighting in any form, and welcomes the report from League Against Cruel Sports, which again shines a light into the cruel and brutal world of dog fighting. This practice has been illegal since 1835 yet dogs are still being trained by

their owners to fight or placed in situations where they are forced to defend themselves.

Battersea regularly takes in dogs bearing the physical or mental scars of dog fighting – traumatised animals with tell-tale bite marks, filed down teeth or evidence of having had mouths wired shut. In many cases these dogs are simply cast out when they fail to serve their purpose. Battersea is there to help them but for many of these dogs it's sadly too late.

For a nation of animal lovers, it is deeply distressing that this practice continues today, and still more so that the weak sentences available to the Courts in cases of animal cruelty offer no deterrent. We have continually called on the Government to review sentencing for animal cruelty, where England and Wales have the joint second-lowest maximum sentence in Europe, and believe that [this Report](#) from League Against Cruel Sports only strengthens the case for reform

League Against Cruel Sports

Call for rest of UK to match N. Ireland's stringent new jail sentences for dog fighting offences

11 February 2016

As prison sentences in N. Ireland are lengthened substantially for the worst types of animal abuse, including dog-fighting, the League Against Cruel Sports is calling for equally severe punishments to be implemented in the rest of the UK.

The Northern Ireland Assembly's decision to drastically increase penalties from a maximum of 2 to 5 years imprisonment and fines up from £5,000 to £20,000 means it will have the most stringent legislation within the UK relating to animal cruelty offences.

Dog fighting is very cruel. Organised dog fights can last up to five hours with horrific injuries sustained by the animals involved. Brutal training methods involve putting a smaller 'bait' animal – often a cat or a rodent – just out of reach for hours whilst the dog strains against a tether. Eventually the tether is removed and the dog is let loose to attack the bait animal.

Last year, the League Against Cruel Sports launched the first [national report on state of dogfighting in UK](#), which revealed that every day, a dogfight takes place somewhere in the UK.

Eduardo Gonçalves, Chief Executive of League Against Cruel Sports said: *"We strongly welcome Northern Ireland's decision to increase punishments for dog fighting and urge the UK government to follow suit. The UK has very lenient sentencing compared to other European countries, and we are in danger of being seen as a soft touch by the dog fighting world."*

"Dog fighting is one of the most barbaric and depraved forms of animal abuse. Harsher penalties throughout the UK will provide a more

effective deterrent to help stop this horrific cruelty being inflicted on man's best friend."

This change in Northern Ireland's law comes in the wake of public outrage and lack of confidence in its judicial system after the infamous Belfast Dog Fighting gang walked free from court in 2014, despite their case being described as the worse example of animal cruelty in Northern Ireland's history.

The public outcry from this incident triggered the N Ireland's Department of Justice to hold a public consultation into the unduly lenient sentences which were being handed down for animal cruelty offences.

The League Against Cruel Sports' detailed submission to this consultation recommended much more severe penalties. The animal welfare campaigners also advised that defendants who had demonstrated an appetite for particularly violent acts against animals and a prolonged, premeditated and sustained cycle of animal abuse should automatically be referred to the Crown Court in order to allow the maximum penalty to be imposed.

League Against Cruel Sports

A Dog Fight Every Day – New Report Exposes Extent of 'Banned' Sport in UK

8 December 2015

A new report into dog-fighting - 'Betrayal of Trust: The Tragedy of Dog Fighting' - reveals at least one dog fight is likely to take place every day of the year somewhere in the UK despite the barbaric 'sport' having been outlawed almost 200 years ago.

Commissioned by the League Against Cruel Sports, the report is the first comprehensive look at dog fighting in the UK, and also highlights:

- Three distinct 'levels' of dog fighting: Street Rolls, Hobbyist and Professional
- Horrific injuries patched up by 'street' surgeons using only superglue or staples
- Training methods using 'bait' animals such as cats
- Organised dog fights that can last up to 5 hours

The authors of the report, criminologists Dr Simon Harding and Dr Angus Nurse spoke to a large range of people including those involved in dog fighting, and examined the practices, motivations and extent of dog fighting as well as the means to tackle it.

Tom Quinn, Campaigns Director for League Against Cruel Sports said: *"The UK's dog lovers will be sickened to learn that the cruelty of dogfighting, which can result in torn flesh, blood loss, disembowelment or even death, continues to go on in this country."*

“Traditionally dog fighting was hidden away in rural areas and managed almost to a professional level. Now we’re seeing a move to urban areas, where dog fighting is becoming a way of establishing dominance, often related to gang activity. Either way, it’s often about machismo and money, and the dogs will inevitably suffer.”

The three levels of dog fighting identified in the report are:

Level One: Street Rolls:

- One on one fights in urban parks and housing estates
- Arranged on the spot, no referee or rules, fight over in a few minutes
- Little or no money involved
- Likely to occur somewhere in the UK every day

Level Two: Hobbyist

- Series of fights in abandoned buildings/bedrooms converted into a ‘pit’
- Operate on a localised fighting circuit in urban areas
- Often gang affiliated with gambling involved
- Likely to occur somewhere in the UK every couple of weeks

Level Three: Professional

- Sophisticated dog rings with highly trained dogs of reputable bloodlines
- Always take place in a pit, with rules, referees, timekeepers, spectators
- High stakes gambling with £100,000s wagered
- Dogs entered in fights both in UK and internationally
- Likely to occur somewhere in UK every few months

Dr Simon Harding, author of the report, and Senior Lecturer in Criminology in Middlesex University’s School of Law said: “From our interviews with people who involve their dogs in fighting, and analysing data from a wide range of sources, we found clear evidence of dog fighting in the UK ranging from the every-day impromptu street fights or ‘rolls’, through hobbyists to professional fights where huge amounts of money changes hand.

“It is clear that regardless of the level of dog fighting, these people are all connected by a common thread of secrecy, callousness and links to other crimes.”

Dr Harding continued: “Dog fighting is a cruel and violent practice which has no place in 21st century Britain. Offenders take ordinary animals, manipulate and exploit them for profit and reputational gain. It is a serious concern that this activity, outlawed 180 years ago, remains, and in some communities, thrives even today. We should all work together to eradicate this practice once and for all”.

Pain and Suffering

The suffering of the dogs involved not only includes the pain – and sometimes death – inflicted during the fights themselves, but also from brutal training methods, particularly at the Professional level. Dogs reared for fighting are engineered so they are robbed entirely of their natural social behaviour and designed to fight regardless of pain or risk.

Tom Quinn adds: *“As a visit to the vet would lead to awkward questions, fighting dogs are often denied proper medical attention and horrific injuries are left to be patched up with superglue or staples, often with fatal consequences.”*

Links to Other Crimes

From analysing data provided by the Metropolitan Police and other sources, the report identified that young men who owned ‘dangerous dogs’ or ‘status dogs’, as defined under the Dangerous Dogs Act, were widely associated with or involved in an extensive range of criminal activity, including Robbery, threats to kill, Actual Bodily Harm and Drug Possession.

In Merseyside, 23 out of 25 dangerous dog owners had 87 convictions amongst them, while in the West Midlands 79 out of the 126 ‘dangerous dog’ owners had other criminal convictions.

The Law

The specific offence of dog fighting does not exist in the UK; it is contained within the broader offence of animal fighting prohibited under Section 8 of the Animal Welfare Act with a maximum penalty of 51 weeks in prison.

By contrast, in the US dog fighting is a felony offence in all 50 states with a maximum penalty of several years in prison. But because of the clandestine nature of the activity, it is very difficult to obtain convictions.

Tom Quinn added: *“Disappointingly low conviction rates highlight the difficulties of enforcing the law when it comes to such a clandestine activity and we believe more resources and research into the problem is essential. In addition, we are recommending measures that could help make the law on dog-fighting more enforceable, including the mandatory recording of dog fighting offences and strengthening penalties to bring them into line with other European countries”*

4. Parliamentary material

4.1 PQs

[*Dog Fighting*](#)

Asked by: Baroness Jones of Whitchurch

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will consider introducing stronger sentencing powers against those involved in illegal dog fighting.

Answering member: Lord Gardiner of Kimble | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Government recognises the seriousness of offences involving illegal animal fights. We will look to increase the maximum sentence when a legislative opportunity arises.

HL Deb 25 November 2015 | PQ HL3573

[*Dog Fighting: Crime*](#)

Asked by: Davies, Philip

To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, how many (a) prosecutions and (b) convictions there were for dog fighting in 2014.

Answering member: Andrew Selous | Department: Ministry of Justice

10 defendants were proceeded against at magistrates' courts, and five were found guilty at all courts of offences related to dog fighting in England and Wales, in 2014.

This information was obtained from a manual review of court case files that centrally held data indicated may be relevant, and as such has not been through the same quality assurance processes as for routinely published data.

These figures relate to persons for whom these offences were the principal offences for which they were dealt with. When a defendant has been found guilty of two or more offences it is the offence for which the heaviest penalty is imposed. Where the same disposal is imposed for two or more offences, the offence selected is the offence for which the statutory maximum penalty is the most severe.

HC Deb 16 September 2015 | PQ 9486

[*Dog Fighting*](#)

Asked by: Davies, Philip

To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, how many (a) prosecutions and (b) convictions there have been for dog fighting in each of the last five years.

Answering member: Mike Penning | Department:

It has not been possible to answer the question within the timeframe as the information is being assembled from a variety of statistical sources, but I will write to the Honourable Member as soon as it is available. A copy of the letter will be placed in the House Library.

[See [Deposited Paper DEP2015-0382](#)

Letter dated 23/03/2015 from Mike Penning MP to Philip Davies MP regarding the number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts and found guilty at all courts of offences related to dog fighting, 2009-2013. Incl. table. 2p. deposited 23 Mar 2015 | Deposited papers | House of Commons]

HC Deb 25 February 2015 | PQ 223989

[Dog Fighting](#)

Asked by: Lord Hoyle

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to end dog fighting.

Answering member: Lord De Mauley | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Dog fighting has been banned in this country for over 100 years. It is an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and punishable by up to six months' imprisonment and a fine of £20,000 or both. In addition, the police have powers to investigate allegations of dog fighting as well as powers of arrest against those suspected of being involved in this barbaric practice.

HL Deb 23 February 2015 | PQ HL4937

[Dog Fighting](#)

Asked by: Davies, Philip

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what steps she is taking to encourage police forces to allocate adequate resources towards reducing the incidence of dog fighting.

Answering member: Mike Penning | Department: Home Office

Whilst the government takes the issue of dog fighting seriously, the allocation of police resources to tackle this abhorrent practice is a matter for individual police forces, and we have introduced Police and Crime Commissioners to ensure that police force priorities across England and Wales better reflect those of the communities they serve.

HC Deb 12 February 2015 | PQ 223985

4.2 EDM 64

ORGANISED DOG FIGHTING

That this House regrets, despite it being illegal for 200 years, that organised dog fighting is still a daily occurrence in the UK; abhors this horrendous abuse as among the worst that can be inflicted on an animal; believes that penalties should be increased to ensure that the punishment reflects the severity of the crime and that a national register of individuals with banning orders is necessary to prevent repeat offences; and commends the League Against Cruel Sports for its report on dog fighting in local communities, and its call for a national dog fighting strategy.

23 May 2016 | Early day motions | Open | House of Commons | 64 (session 2016-17)

Primary sponsor: Hopkins, Kelvin

4.3 Extracts from debate:

Sentencing Tariffs (Offences Against Animals) Westminster Hall 15 October 2015

Adrian Sanders MP: It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Weir. I am delighted to see the new Minister here. It is wonderful that a fellow west country Member of Parliament—the real west country: Devon and Cornwall—is in a ministerial position.

Animal baiting and fighting legislation was first introduced in the United Kingdom in 1835. Yet more than 175 years later, these most barbaric and cruel activities remain alarmingly prevalent. Despite dozens of individuals being prosecuted every year, acts of animal cruelty continue to a horrific extent. Additionally, the practice is associated with other criminality, such as drug dealing and firearms sales.

We in England and the United Kingdom cherish our pets. The fact that dogfighting still occurs today would astonish most people. A lot of people describe dog and cockfighting as sports, but there is nothing sporting in watching two dogs being made to tear each other apart. Sadly, examples of such barbaric animal cruelty are still too numerous in our society. It is astonishing that people still cause untold suffering to animals in this way. There have been all too many examples of the practice over the past few years.

Last year, in Derbyshire, a mutilated puppy was found by rescuers from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The dog, a west highland terrier cross, was found in a filthy, mangled state, abandoned in a box dumped in a country lane. Half of both his ears had been cut off and he was riddled with fleas. Cutting ears off is apparently a standard procedure for dogfighting, as they can be bitten by other dogs during a fight. To make dogs last longer in the pit, the ears are cut off by the gangs beforehand. It can also be done to make the dog look more aggressive. It would have been excruciating for this

terrier, done by an unprofessional person with no anaesthetic. The dog was still terrified when found by its rescuers; he flinched whenever vets went near his ears, so he obviously associates them with pain.

The RSPCA said that the terrier was probably an abandoned or unwanted pet and added that many such pets end up in dogfighting pits. Often, families struggling to make ends meet can no longer cope with paying for pets, which oftentimes are left on the streets. There has been an increase in strays. The RSPCA warned that these pets can be picked up by dogfighting gangs.

One such gang was broken up in Oxfordshire in 2011, when a father and son admitted to training dogs for organised fights. They were jailed and banned from keeping dogs, following a major RSPCA investigation. The father admitted using equipment such as treadmills, weighted collars and rudimentary veterinary equipment to train the dogs. RSPCA inspectors discovered an emaciated bull terrier, as well as shocking footage of dogfighting, when they searched his home.

In March last year, another gang was broken up, following another covert operation by the RSPCA. It was found goading animals into fighting, as well as training dogs. Those convicted received 20-week custodial sentences.

It is welcome that these people are being brought to justice. The sentences they receive send a clear message to others involved in dogfighting or thinking of taking part. Sadly, these individuals are not the first people to be sent away for the brutal practice and they will not be the last. Furthermore, dogfighting is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ongoing animal cruelty.

In a cockfight, two roosters fight each other to the death, watched by people placing bets on the victor. If the birds survive, the organisers let them suffer untreated injuries or throw them away. They lie dead or dying in heaps. Left to themselves, roosters almost never hurt each other badly. However, in cockfights the birds often wear razor-sharp blades on their legs and get injuries such as punctured lungs, broken bones and pierced eyes, even when they survive.

Last October, a father and son were convicted of taking part in such a sick competition. RSPCA inspectors raided their homes and found evidence that they were at the heart of a global network of cockfighting. Together, they owned 484 birds bred for fighting, including 97 mature fighting cocks, and a cock-fighting pit. There were magazines and photographs, too, as well as evidence that the pair had travelled as far as South America to watch cockfights.

The RSPCA called the scene a "cockfighting factory". It found more than 60 pairs of spurs, which are attached to birds' feet to increase the damage inflicted, together with leg muffs, leg bands, beak muzzles and other blood-splattered veterinary items. Indeed, the pair were internationally renowned for their brutal practice. The father had featured on the front cover of an Asian cockfighting magazine. They exported the birds for fighting to Brazil, the Philippines and France, among other countries. Their birds had been fed with steroids to

increase strength and stamina. Both men were given suspended sentences, large fines and community service, thanks to the RSPCA's efforts. The question is, is that enough?

I highlight those cases to bring home the fact that animal cruelty in its most brutal form continues to plague our society and occurs even in this country. The most recent legislation on animal welfare is the Animal Welfare Act 2006. It was a welcome updating of the law on animals' well-being, much of which was almost 100 years old. It simplified the legislation for enforcers and animal keepers by consolidating more than 20 pieces of legislation into one and eliminated many loopholes in the system.

The 2006 Act also ensured that people who organise animal fights, train animals for fights or publicise or record a fight, face the full force of the law. It sought to strengthen deterrence for persistent offenders by increasing penalties. For example, those causing unnecessary suffering to an animal could face up to 51 weeks in prison, a fine of up to £20,000, or both.

Despite that welcome legislation, the reports I mentioned show that more must be done to deter gangs who are organising these brutal blood sports. An already stretched RSPCA can only do so much to find the gangs carrying out these acts. It only has so many resources to pursue them through the courts. This is why we need to send a strong signal to individuals who may be, in any way, involved in the organisation of any sort of animal fighting, wrestling or baiting.

I suggest that penalties be doubled, allowing for custodial sentences of up to two years for particularly egregious cases of animal cruelty. That would send out a powerful signal to those engaged, or considering becoming engaged, in this brutal competition. It would give judges the necessary leeway to impose sentences they felt were appropriate to the crimes involved and ensure that people such as those I have mentioned faced the full force of the law and paid for their criminal brutality.

We are at something of a disadvantage in that the provisions for tougher sentences in the 2006 Act were never enacted. Will the Minister explain why? The most someone is likely to get, even for serious cases of animal cruelty, is a six-month sentence; in reality, they will probably only serve eight weeks.

Finally, I pay tribute to the tireless efforts of the RSPCA. Every year, it rescues and collects almost 120,000 animals. It finds new homes for about 60,000 of them. Another 60,000 animals are microchipped, helping them to stay safe. Ever since it was founded in 1824, the RSPCA has been a voice for animals throughout Britain. Despite facing countless difficulties in this time, it has always stayed true to its central charitable mission—namely,

“by all lawful means, prevent cruelty, promote kindness to and alleviate suffering of all animals”.

It is a charity that cares for all our animals, whether pets or companions, on farms or in laboratories.

Last year, the RSPCA secured more than 3,000 convictions by private prosecution. Its internal investigations unit looked into more than 160,000 complaints of alleged cruelty. It is especially worthwhile to highlight the work of the RSPCA at a time when donations are falling. The proportion of people giving to charity fell from 58% to 55% in 2011, according to the Charities Aid Foundation, and it is expected to have fallen again in 2012. As we all struggle with austerity, so do charities.

It is vital that we continue to support the work of charities such as the RSPCA, and any other animal welfare organisation, at this time. All the while, their workers and volunteers continue their efforts to ensure that vulnerable pets and animals receive the care they deserve. The examples of dog and cockfighting that I have raised today are proof that their work is much needed.

Animal cruelty in its worst form continues to take place in Britain. If we really cherish our pets in Britain, we should have an appropriate legislative framework to protect their well-being. We must give judges the power to punish the most egregious acts of animal brutality, and the measures I propose would do just that. The Government need to conduct a thorough review of sentences for issues beyond—

[...]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Weir. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr Sanders)—he is a fellow west country MP—on securing the debate and raising an issue that attracts a great deal of interest. He has always championed it, and I join him in praising the RSPCA for how it pursues some of the horrific cases that he outlined in his introduction.

I was personally interested in this area before I joined the Government. I served on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and earlier this summer, as part of my research, I read an interesting report called “Unleashed”, which was written by an academic called Simon Harding. It looked at the phenomena of status and weapon dogs and tried to understand why we are seeing an increase in some types of dog fights.

There are three key types of dog fight. First, there are those awful dog fights where bets are placed. They often take place in private venues, and that is the type of thing that my hon. Friend mentioned. Secondly, there is what they call “back of van” fights or trunking, which are awful. The idea came from the US, where they lock dogs in the boot of a car to fight it out. The third type, which some of the evidence suggests has had the greatest increase, is chain rolling, where dogs are used as an alternative to a knife and there are impromptu fights in parks. There has been a significant increase in reports to the RSPCA of illegal fights of that sort.

A further problem has been the growth of the internet, which has made some of these crimes easier to commit. That point has been highlighted

by a great many of the animal welfare charities. We have the awful problem of the different terms and code words used in internet advertising for dogs designed to be sold for fighting, such as red-nosed, game-proven, game-bred and blocky. I welcome what the Pet Advertising Advisory Group has done to try to tighten that up by creating a new code of conduct for those companies that advertise pets.

The Government deplore acts of animal cruelty and believe that offenders deserve the full force of the courts. Our responsibility is to ensure that the legislation is fit for purpose. My hon. Friend asked whether we would review the legislation. We reviewed the main legislation that protects the welfare of kept animals—the Animal Welfare Act 2006—in 2010.

The report prepared by my Department and sent to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for its consideration concluded that there was broad agreement that the 2006 Act has genuinely had a positive impact on animal welfare. It successfully brought together a number of different pieces of legislation into a comprehensive whole and placed a duty of care on those who are responsible for animals. The 2006 Act also introduced a preventive measure that has allowed action to be taken without animals suffering unnecessarily. Although the consultation highlighted some concerns that more could be done to speed up court cases involving seized animals, it did not cast doubt on the adequacy of maximum sentences.

Of course, legislation must set maximum penalties. It is then for the courts—usually the magistrates court for animal welfare cases—to take a view on what sentence should be given. Judges and magistrates have a great deal of discretion in sentencing. In coming to a view, they are helped by specific sentencing guidelines produced by the Sentencing Council, which has been responsible since 2010 for providing detailed guidance to courts on the appropriate sentence for individual cases.

Sentencing guidelines help to achieve consistency in deciding the type and length of sentence and set out the factors that should be considered in those decisions. The guidelines set out how a judge or magistrate can decide on the seriousness of a particular offence, and then determine the appropriate sentence. Of course, the circumstances of different cases can vary quite widely and that can explain the different sentences handed out. The guidance to magistrates covers cases of animal cruelty for offences committed under the 2006 Act and helps magistrates to impose an appropriate penalty. Those guidelines were last updated in 2008 and reflect the current penalties available.

The Government's responsibility is to ensure that the courts have the flexibility to impose the appropriate sentence within acceptable ranges. To that end, the 2006 Act makes it an offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to an animal. That offence carries a maximum penalty of six months' imprisonment or a fine of £20,000 or, crucially, both. Someone found guilty of organising or participating in a dog fight, along the lines that my hon. Friend described, could receive both a fine of £20,000 and a prison sentence of six months. Six months is the highest sentence

available to a magistrates court and the fine is much greater than the usual £5,000 limit.

In addition, the 2006 Act makes it an offence to fail to provide an animal with its welfare needs. That offence can attract a maximum penalty of six months' imprisonment or a fine of £5,000, or both. The offender can also be disqualified from owning an animal in future.

5. Useful links and further reading

League Against Cruel Sports *Betrayal of Trust: The Tragedy of Dog Fighting* December 2015

<http://www.league.org.uk/~media/Files/LACS/Publications/Betrayal-of-Trust-Report.pdf>

League Against Cruel Sports *Bloodline: Tackling Dog Fighting in the Community* April 2016

<http://www.league.org.uk/~media/Files/LACS/Publications/Project-Bloodline-full-report.pdf>

RSPCA *Tackling Dog Fighting*

<http://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/tacklingdogfighting>

RSPCA *Dog fighting - understanding the issue and tackling the cruelty*

<http://politicalanimal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Dogfighting-1.pdf>

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