



Northern Ireland

**Companion Animal
Welfare Group**

NICAWG Policy Priorities



About us

Northern Ireland Companion Animal Welfare Group (NICAWG) is a sector group that brings together specific expertise and focus, with the aim of improving the welfare of companion animals in Northern Ireland.

Established in 2019, the group includes Assisi Animal Sanctuary, Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, PDSA, USPCA and Mid Antrim Animal Sanctuary. Collectively our organisations provide services and support for thousands of companion animals across Northern Ireland including pet care clinics, rehoming services, community and school education as well as a range of other services. There are an estimated 700,000¹ owned dogs and 230,000² owned cats in Northern Ireland.

Using our collective voice, we have identified eight priority areas that need to be actioned to advance animal welfare for companion animals across Northern Ireland.

1. **Robust Legislation to address the Third-Party Sale of Puppies and Kittens.**
2. **Regulation of Breeding Establishments.**
3. **Licensing of Activities Involving Animals – Rehoming, Boarding, Walking, Doggy-Daycare and Grooming.**
4. **Pounds and Kennelling Facilities.**
5. **Enforcement.**
6. **The Compulsory Microchipping of Cats.**
7. **Responsible Pet Ownership.**
8. **Seized Animals and Rehoming Timeframes.**

Contact us

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1 <https://www.pfma.org.uk/cat-population-2019>

2 https://www.cats.org.uk/media/jnnarkza/ed_688-cats-report-2023_ireland_digi.pdf

1. Robust Legislation to address the Third-Party Sale of Puppies and Kittens

Northern Ireland badly falls behind the rest of the UK in legislation on breeding and sale of puppies and kittens. This existing legislation only goes so far, and further measures are needed to crack down on unscrupulous breeders and sellers to protect the welfare of these animals. Legislation to prohibit the third-party selling of puppies and kittens, if introduced alongside other measures, would be a welcome step forward. However, the law introduced in England to prevent third party sales known as 'Lucy's Law' has significant loopholes. For example, puppies and kittens can still be imported from outside the UK and sold on by unscrupulous sellers (if they are also the breeder) to an unsuspecting public. It is therefore critical that any new legislation in Northern Ireland avoids similar issues.

We want to see:

- | Animal Welfare Establishments and sanctuaries to be regulated through licensing and inspection. Currently, anyone can set themselves up as a rehoming organisation which leaves a gaping loophole for immoral breeders and sellers to continue their trade.
- | Increased and secured funding for Animal Welfare Officers and Local Councils to ensure proper enforcement of new licencing and inspection of Animal Welfare Establishments, and animal welfare training for all officers conducting inspections.
- | Full traceability and transparency to be introduced by registering anyone who is breeding or selling a litter of puppies, along with licensing and inspection for those breeding or selling more than one litter, so third-party sellers can be identified and captured by a ban on third-party sales. To achieve full traceability, there should be a requirement for all adverts for the sale of dogs to include a registration or licence number.
- | The introduction of a centralised, publicly accessible list of all registered and licensed breeders and sellers. This would also benefit buyers as it would allow a simplified system that would be easily accessible for people to verify where they are buying a dog or cat from in an increasingly online, nationwide marketplace.
- | Harsher penalties for the unscrupulous breeders and traders involved in this abhorrent activity who would not be deterred by a ban on third-party sales.

Our ask:

NICAWG supports an end to the third-party selling of puppies and kittens under 6 months and believes this can best be achieved by introducing a ban on third-party sales as part of a comprehensive package of co-ordinated measures including the above, so we can be confident that it will have the success we all want to see.

2. Regulation of Breeding Establishments

NICAWG members have several concerns about the animal welfare requirements for licensed breeding establishments. Currently, anybody keeping three or more breeding bitches and breeding, advertising, or supplying three or more litters of puppies must be licensed. We would like to see the current regulations strengthened, so anyone breeding, selling, or transferring the ownership of more than one litter of puppies, regardless of any financial transaction or gain, should be licensed.

The largest licensed breeding establishment in Northern Ireland currently has a licence for up to 695³ breeding bitches. Breeding on this industrial scale calls into question the provision of minimum welfare standards and whether the dogs and pups are being kept in conditions which meet the five welfare needs, as outlined in the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. In addition, we would question if the minimum standards required by The Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013⁴ regarding behaviour, socialisation, and enrichment are being met in such large establishments, where significant staffing, space and resources would be needed. Socialisation is mentioned in the 2013 Regulations, stating that a breeder must have a socialisation plan, with no further requirements given. The staff-to-dog ratio for breeding establishments is set very high, at one full-time attendant to twenty adult dogs, and does not take the number of puppies into account. Working on a basis of an average litter size of six to eight puppies, one attendant could be responsible for up to 180 adult dogs and puppies at one time.

The traceability of a litter, and of breeders, is of utmost importance. Significant traceability would be gained if there was a requirement for microchip databases to include a mandatory field at first registration to ask if the keeper registering their details was the person that bred the puppy. In the case of them not being the person who bred the puppy, it shouldn't be possible to complete the remaining requirements to achieve compliance with the microchipping regulations, until the details for the breeder have been completed.

Another major concern is that cat breeding is currently unregulated, with no adequate safeguards to protect cats and their kittens. Female cats in ill health may be overbred, giving birth to repeated litters in poor conditions and producing kittens that are sick and diseased. This is exacerbated by the trend in owning pedigree or purebred cats⁵, as with an increase in demand there is an increased risk of disreputable breeders operating. We would like to see the introduction of cat breeding regulations in Northern Ireland.

We also recommend a regional hub of suitably trained inspectors is developed which could be utilised by all Local Councils across Northern Ireland to carry out inspections of breeding establishments, much like the pilot scheme of a centralised group of inspectors being trialled in Wales⁶. These inspectors would work alongside the existing Animal Welfare Officers, or more Animal Welfare Officers could be employed to properly carry out these additional duties. Before this can happen, inspectors must have the full support of both the Government and their Local Council to enforce the right standards.

3 FOI data obtained by Dogs Trust Jan 2020

4 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nidsr/2013/9780337989957/contents>

5 https://www.cats.org.uk/media/jnnarkza/ed_688-cats-report-2023_ireland_digi.pdf

6 <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-puppy-breeding-wales>



Our ask:

NICAWG calls for the Northern Irish Government to introduce regulations on cat breeding. We recommend that anyone who breeds two or more litters of kittens a year must obtain a cat breeding licence. Regulations should require regular inspections of licensed breeders. Regulations should also set limits such as the number of litters a female cat can have and a maximum age after which breeding should cease. The regulations should also prevent cats with extreme conformations, behaviour or ill health from being bred.

We ask the NI Assembly to introduce new legislation to ensure there is full traceability across anyone breeding and selling puppies, through a robust system of registration and licensing, and to require anyone breeding two or more litters of kittens per year to be licensed. We also ask that the inspections of breeders and breeding premises are carried out by those properly trained in animal welfare standards. Local Councils should be given resources and training to carry out these duties.

3. Licensing of Activities Involving Animals – Rehoming, Boarding, Walking, Doggy-Daycare and Grooming

NICAWG would like to see licensing of all animal welfare establishments in Northern Ireland, to include rehoming centres, sanctuaries, and dog pounds. Currently, there is no legislation in place so anyone can set up their own rehoming organisation or sanctuary. There is little to proactively safeguard the animals involved as Local Councils are not required to, and so do not inspect these premises. Poor welfare can have a knock-on effect when an animal is rehomed, leaving more animals at greater risk of requiring further ongoing behavioural and medical support or possible euthanasia.

New activities involving animals, such as doggy day care, dog walkers and pet groomers have also emerged, which are not properly covered by existing legislation. The current legislation on pet boarding is outdated and in urgent need of updating to better protect animal welfare.

Rehoming organisations and sanctuaries need to be regulated through licensing and inspection, to safeguard the welfare of animals at a minimum in line with Association of Dogs and Cat Home minimum standards (ADCH).⁷

We would like to see all such activities involving animals licensed, with regular inspections against mandatory minimum standards to ensure the welfare requirements of the animals are met. We believe licence fees should be proportionate to the size of the establishment, charitable enterprise, or type of business. We would also like any regulations on animal establishments to include those individuals who import animals from overseas for rehoming, irrespective of whether they have a premises. As with any welfare organisation, if licensing of animal establishments was introduced, NICAWG members would also be subject to such regulation. We see this as a positive move to improve overall standards across rehoming organisations and animal sanctuaries as well as businesses involved in animal care across Northern Ireland.

To ensure new legislation is effective, increased resource would be needed to enforce the licensing of activities involving animals. Animal Welfare Officers could be responsible for this, but more funding is vital to ensure their current animal welfare duties are not compromised and that inspection and licensing is carried out consistently across Northern Ireland.

England, Wales, and Scotland already have legislation on activities involving animals. The Scottish Government has already passed legislation to introduce licensing of Animal Welfare Establishments⁸ and those engaging in animal rehoming activities, which came into force in September 2021. In addition, both Westminster and the Welsh Government are due to consult on their proposals for the regulation of rehoming organisations.

Our ask:

NICAWG calls for the introduction of a system of licensing of all rehoming centres and sanctuaries without delay which is robust and enforceable, alongside the introduction of up-to-date regulation of other activities involving animals, to truly protect the animals involved.

⁷ <https://adch.org.uk/minimum-standards/>

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/sdsi/2021/9780111048474>



4. Pounds and Kennelling Facilities

Between April 2022 and March 2023 there were 2241⁹ stray dogs impounded in Northern Ireland, which is a 35% increase from the same period last year. Stray dogs and cats are sent to both Local Council run and privately owned kennel facilities, depending on the region.

There is also limited information available on the contracts Local Councils have with such facilities, and how the tender process works or inspections are carried out. We believe there should be full transparency in the award of these contracts, to ensure these facilities are properly inspected and able to carry out their remit of caring for and rehoming animals.

Research using dogs and cats kennelled for a variety of reasons has shown that many find kennel life challenging¹⁰ and experience poor or compromised welfare as a result. For this reason, it is crucial that these establishments are operating the best practice in welfare standards to ensure the wellbeing of the animals in their care. All pounds and kennelling facilities should be registered with the ADCH, or show they are working towards registration, until any new Animal Welfare Licensing regulations are introduced.

Our ask:

NICAWG calls for the regulation of pounds and kennelling facilities to be included in any new Animal Welfare Establishment Licensing legislation, to ensure animal welfare standards are consistently high in any such establishment in NI.

There needs to be transparency of the value of contracts awarded and the associated terms and conditions.

Prior to the introduction of any new Animal Welfare Establishment Licensing regulations, we ask Local Councils to amend future contracts/tenders to only award to facilities which are ADCH registered or working towards ADCH registration.

⁹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/council-dog-summary-statistics>

¹⁰ Assessing the welfare of kennelled dogs—A review of animal-based measures <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7126575/>

5. Enforcement

Local Councils play the leading role in the enforcement of legislation to protect the welfare of companion animals in Northern Ireland¹¹.

When we consider enforcement more broadly across Local Councils, the number of formal cautions and improvement notices issued is proportionally low compared to the number of complaints received (Animal Welfare Report 2021). In 2021, 5916¹² concerns were received across all councils of which 844 led to follow-up actions. Only 31 convictions were subsequently secured.

It has been our experience that the responses from Councils to complaints on animal cruelty is not consistent. A lack of communication on complaints made by both by animal welfare charities and members of the public provides little confidence that action has been taken.

Currently, there are up to ten Animal Welfare Officers working across NI. The limited capacity of Animal Welfare Officers working Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm also hinders Councils' ability to respond in a timely manner. Making sure funding is ringfenced and protected to offer a robust animal welfare service is essential.

The Welfare of Animals Act (2011), which provides the statutory enforcement powers, needs to be updated to provide enforcement agencies with the tools needed to respond better to animal welfare concerns.

Our ask:

NICAWG asks for better partnership working with animal welfare charities and a robust, timely and consistent approach to enforcement across Local Councils.

There needs to be a review and update of the Animal Welfare Act, with more resources dedicated to Local Councils so they can better respond to animal welfare concerns.

¹¹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/animal-welfare-enforcement-responsibilities-and-contacts>

¹² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/council-dog-summary-statistics>

6. The Compulsory Microchipping of Cats

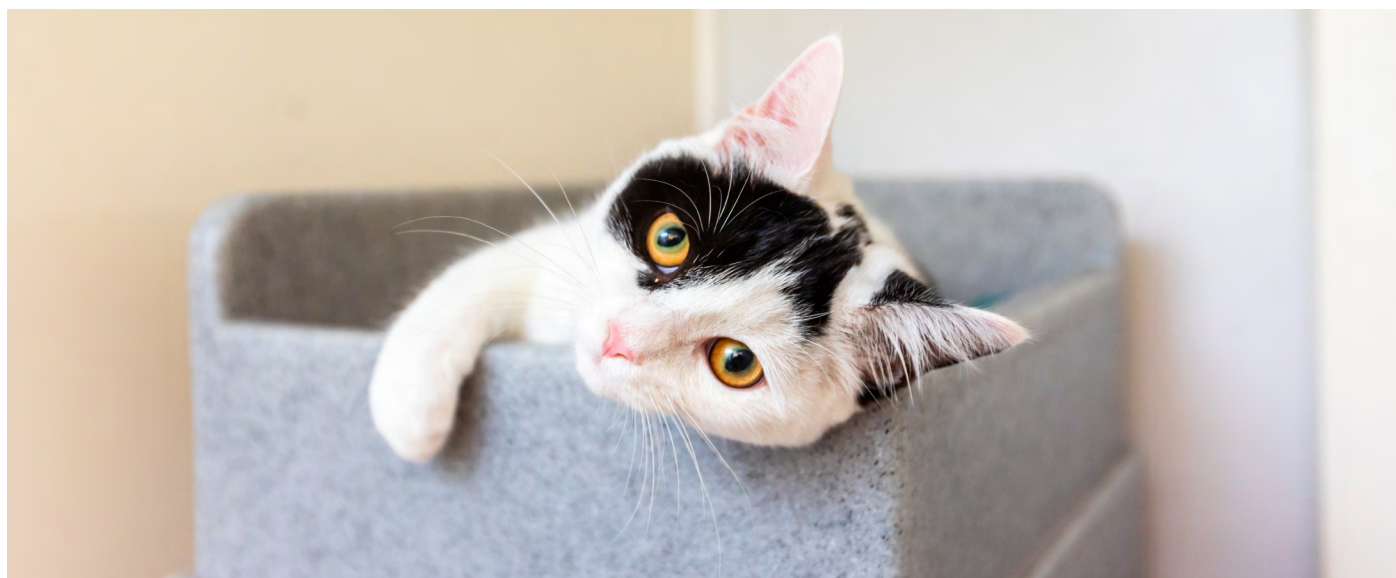
Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of microchipped cats in the UK, with 76,000 cats (29%) still not microchipped¹³. It has been compulsory for dogs to be microchipped since 2012 and NICA WG would like it to also be compulsory for pet cats to be microchipped. Cats are known for their inquisitive nature and can become lost or injured – even those that live indoors can slip outside unnoticed. It is heart-breaking for an owner when a cat goes missing, and without a microchip they may never be reunited or informed if their pet is killed on the roads.

A lost cat without a microchip places a burden on animal welfare charities. Eight out of ten stray cats coming into Cats Protection's centres are not microchipped. While efforts are made to find the owners, this is not always possible and sadly many unchipped-owned cats end up being rehomed, all at the expense of the charity or rescue that finds the cat.

The UK Government is introducing compulsory microchipping of pet cats in England in June 2024 and NICA WG would like the Northern Irish Government to introduce similar regulations to give cats the same level of protection as their canine counterparts.

Our ask:

NICA WG calls for the introduction of compulsory microchipping of pet cats to be introduced in Northern Ireland.



¹³ https://www.cats.org.uk/media/jnnarkza/ed_688-cats-report-2023_ireland_digi.pdf

7. Responsible Pet Ownership

NICAWG believes that promoting responsible pet ownership is integral to improving the standards of companion animal health and welfare throughout Northern Ireland. It is vital that owners have a good understanding of the welfare needs of their pets, including adequate exercise and enrichment, regular meals and a balanced diet, regular vet visits, flea and worm treatments, annual vaccinations, legal requirements for microchipping and any training needs.

A better understanding of companion animal health and welfare would result in an improvement in some of the animal welfare issues which impact on our society today, such as animal cruelty cases and neglect.

Education is a priority for NICAWG, and our members deliver educational talks to a range of audiences including schools and community groups. This helps to ensure a basic understanding of how to care for pets, but more needs to be done to ensure every member of society is aware of the welfare needs of their pets. The focus of education in schools is on human behaviour change, shaping behaviours in children who are already interacting with pets. The purpose of this is to ensure safety, and to prevent behaviours that could lead to dog bites, which can have more damaging consequences for the dog than when an adult is bitten, such as punishment, relinquishment, and euthanasia.

Our ask:

NICAWG asks for DAERA to publish guidance, in partnership with NICAWG, on the five welfare domains¹⁴ and their application, with the aim of increasing public awareness and educating pet owners to ensure high standards of companion animal health and welfare.

NICAWG calls for animal welfare to be included as a mainstream topic in the National Curriculum, ensuring any resources used by teachers are designed by leading animal welfare charities. Children are the pet owners of tomorrow and it's essential they leave school with a basic understanding of how to respect and care for animals. Animal welfare education has further benefits for children, helping them to develop key life skills such as empathy and responsibility.

¹⁴ <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4273/full-bva-position-on-animal-welfare.pdf>

8. Seized Animals and Rehoming Timeframes

Under existing legislation, animals seized on welfare grounds cannot be rehomed until any criminal case against their owner is concluded¹⁵. This means they may spend months or even years in a third-party pound at a huge cost to the public purse. In addition, long-term kennelling can have a detrimental impact on animals, exhibiting in stress-related behaviours which suggests it may be harder for them to relax in a shelter environment¹⁶.

NICAWG would like to see a change to existing legislation, to provide the enforcement agencies with the relevant powers to rehome animals after 21 days.

In 2020, Scotland brought in this legislative change¹⁷, which is likely to have improved the lives of countless animals. Under the Scottish legislation, the Scottish SPCA can rehome an animal after 21 days of seizure, speeding up the process of getting an animal into a permanent, loving home.

There are positive reasons for driving this change in Northern Ireland, including:

- | A dramatic reduction in the timeframe of animals kept in kennels, pending the outcome of court cases, allowing them to be rehomed. Therefore, animals would be in kennelling facilities for a shorter time, minimising the risk of them developing related behavioural issues.
- | Significant cost-savings: currently, DAERA, Local Councils and PSNI must pay for the kennelling of seized animals, so a shorter time in kennels means a lower cost to these agencies and therefore the public. Prior to legislative change, the Scottish SPCA spent over £2.1 million providing refuge to animals they had to keep in their temporary care from 2016 – 2020.¹⁸
- | Animal Welfare Establishments could help in rehoming these animals after the initial period, ensuring they have the best chance of finding their forever homes.

Our ask:

NICAWG calls for the Northern Irish Government to amend existing legislation to reduce the timeframe of disposal orders to enable an animal to be rehomed after 21 days, similar to the Scottish legislation.

¹⁵ <https://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2022-10/Animal%20Wildlife%20%2013th%20March%202020.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7830969/#:-:text=The%20physical%20wellbeing%20of%20long,relaxing%20in%20the%20shelter%20environment>

¹⁷ Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2020/14/contents/enacted>

¹⁸ <https://www.scottishspca.org/temporaryrefuge#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20we%20provide%20care,over%20%2C%2A3500%2C000%20per%20annum>