

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home 2016

Dog Bites: what's breed got to do with it?



Foreword

As one of Britain's best-loved dog welfare charities, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home cares for almost 6,000 dogs every year. We have been working since 1860 to provide new homes for the lost and abandoned dogs of London, picking up the pieces when others can't, or won't, care for their dogs.

Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was designed to effectively eradicate the Pit Bull Terrier in the UK, which it has failed to do. Last year almost 100 Pit Bull "types" came into Battersea. The law was designed to protect the public from dog bites, and yet a quarter of a century later dog bites are still rising. The Dangerous Dogs Act is widely viewed as poorly thought-out, knee-jerk legislation that pays no regard to the consequences of its flaws.

Yet rescue centres like Battersea must deal with these consequences every day. Battersea cannot by law rehome these banned breeds, and so they must be put to sleep.

Battersea carries out the same behavioural assessments on banned breeds that we do for any other dog, and in 2015 our experts found that some 71% of the Pit Bull types in our care could have been safely rehomed without this law. They were happy, friendly animals that died needlessly because of this law – as you will see in this Report.

Dangerous dogs do exist of course, and there are many factors that make dogs dangerous around people, but breed is not one of them. This is why we consulted over 200 leading dog behaviour experts, to ask whether they felt breed was an appropriate way to predict if a dog will be dangerous. I would like to thank each and every one of them for their responses. The results are clear, with 74% dismissing breed as either not important or only slightly important in determining canine aggression. By contrast, 87% said that better education of the public in reading dog body language could help prevent dog bites.

This survey confirms that the Dangerous Dogs Act fails to understand what makes dogs aggressive. 25 years since the adoption of this failed law, it is time for the Government to work with animal welfare charities, dog behaviour experts and the Police to identify a fresh and more appropriate approach to the dangerous dogs issues in the UK, and help stop dogs that pose no risk from being put to sleep simply because of their breed.



Claire Horton
Chief Executive
Battersea Dogs & Cats Home



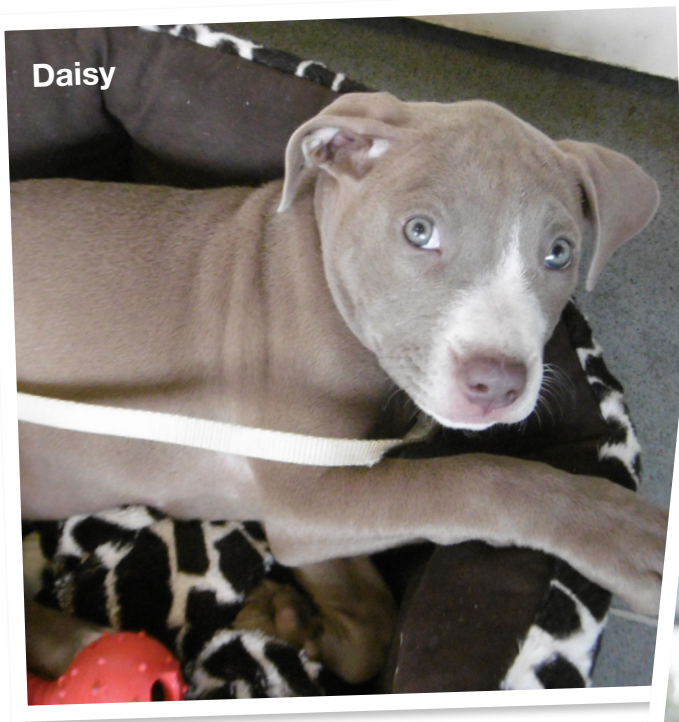
Acknowledgements

Battersea would like to thank all the behaviourists and trainers who took time to complete this survey. In particular we would like to thank the following for their help in distributing the survey to their members: David Montgomery (Animal Behaviour and Training Council), Lorna Winter (Association of Applied Pet Behaviourists and Trainers), Rosie Barclay (Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors), Stella Bagshaw (Association of Pet Dog Trainers UK) and Jo-Rosie Haffenden (Institute of Modern Dog Trainers).

We would also like to thank the Association of INTO Dogs.

Contents

| | page |
|---|------|
| Foreword | 2 |
| Executive Summary | 5 |
| 1. Background | 6 |
| 2. About this survey | 7 |
| 3. Why are some dogs aggressive towards people? | 8 |
| 4. What role does breed play in dog aggression? | 9 |
| 5. What measures would prevent dog bites? | 12 |
| 6. Conclusion | 14 |
| 7. Appendix | 15 |



Executive Summary

July 2016 marks the 25th anniversary of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 – legislation brought in to eradicate certain breeds of so called ‘fighting dogs’ and to tackle dog bites on people. A quarter of a century on, how effective has it been?

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home conducted a survey of 215 professional canine behaviourists and trainers to provide an informed and contemporary view of the causes of dog bites to people, including the role of breed, and what measures might prevent these in the future.

In relation to the causes of dog attacks on people:

- 74% said that breed was either not important at all or only slightly important in determining dog aggression levels
- For those who felt that some breeds could be more aggressive, there was little agreement on which breeds these were, with collies and small terriers cited as often as German Shepherds, bull breeds and perceived ‘guarding breeds’. The four breeds outlawed by the Dangerous Dogs Act were not singled out as being the most dangerous to the public
- Socialisation of the dog is the critical factor – 86% said that the way it is brought up by its owner, and 73% said its upbringing by the breeder before it is sold, are the most important reasons why some dogs are more aggressive towards people
- Size of the dog was only considered relevant in relation to the outcome of an attack, not its likelihood.

In terms of prevention:

- 87% said that educating the owners and others on how to read dog body language is crucial for preventing dog bites, with even a small amount of understanding likely to have an impact
- 78% supported the compulsory training of new dog owners
- 77% want to see all breeders who sell dogs registered
- 98% of expert behaviourists believe that adding more breeds to the banned list would have no effect in preventing further dog attacks. Breed-specific legislation should therefore be repealed.

The survey results provide a clear direction for future policy on public protection from dog bites and attacks:

1. Legislation which aims to protect the public by banning certain breeds, breed specific legislation (BSL), cannot be justified – the vast majority of behaviourists agree that breed is not the determining factor in dog attacks.
2. There should be at the very least, a requirement for owners and others to understand the basics of dog body language and the needs of dogs.
3. Tighter regulation of the dog industry – if the most important factor is the socialisation of the dog, there should be good quality controls and advice available for those who breed and train dogs.

1. Background

July 2016 marks the 25th anniversary of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. The Act was introduced following increased reports of attacks by dogs on children, and focused particularly on eradicating so called 'fighting dogs' from the UK. It:

- made it a criminal offence to allow a dog to be dangerously out of control in a public place, or in a non-public place where the dog was not permitted to be
- outlawed four breeds (in Section 1) – dogs of the type known as the Pit Bull Terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino and Fila Brasileiro. The penalty for having possession of one of these dogs included the mandatory destruction of the dog. If you already had a dog which came within one of these types, it could be exempted if it was registered on the Index of Exempted Dogs and complied with a number of conditions such as being muzzled & on a lead in public and neutered. The Index closed to owner-led registration a few months later.

The breed specific offences in Section 1 of the Act have been particularly controversial, on the grounds that they result in the unnecessary destruction of perfectly healthy and good natured animals with little added protection to the public.

The Act has undergone a number of changes over the years. In 1997, mandatory destruction of banned breeds was removed and the Index of Exempted Dogs re-opened for dogs the Courts believed posed no risk to the public. There are now over 3,000 live dogs registered on the Index.

Nevertheless, Section 1 of the Act continues to be highly contentious as an effective and proportionate response to the problem of dangerous dogs. As part of the Act, ownership of a banned breed cannot be transferred except in very limited circumstances. The reality of this is that each year, hundreds of perfectly friendly, rehomeable dogs will have to be destroyed. As an organisation that exists to help all dogs, it is tragic for Battersea to have to follow this instruction. Each year, the vast majority of the Section 1 dogs that come into Battersea are friendly and potentially rehomeable, if the law permitted it – in 2015 this figure was 71%.

Lucy



2. About this survey

This survey sought to provide an up-to-date assessment of the extent to which breed is a factor in dog aggression towards people, drawing on the experience of expert professional canine behaviourists and trainers across the country.

Respondents were asked about the causes of aggression, including the role of breed, and what measures might prevent such behaviour. It was sent to members of six prominent professional organisations, and we thank them for their partnership in this survey:

- Animal Behaviour and Training Council
- Association of Applied Pet Behaviourists and Trainers
- Association of INTO Dogs
- Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors
- Association of Pet Dog Trainers UK
- Institute of Modern Dog Trainers

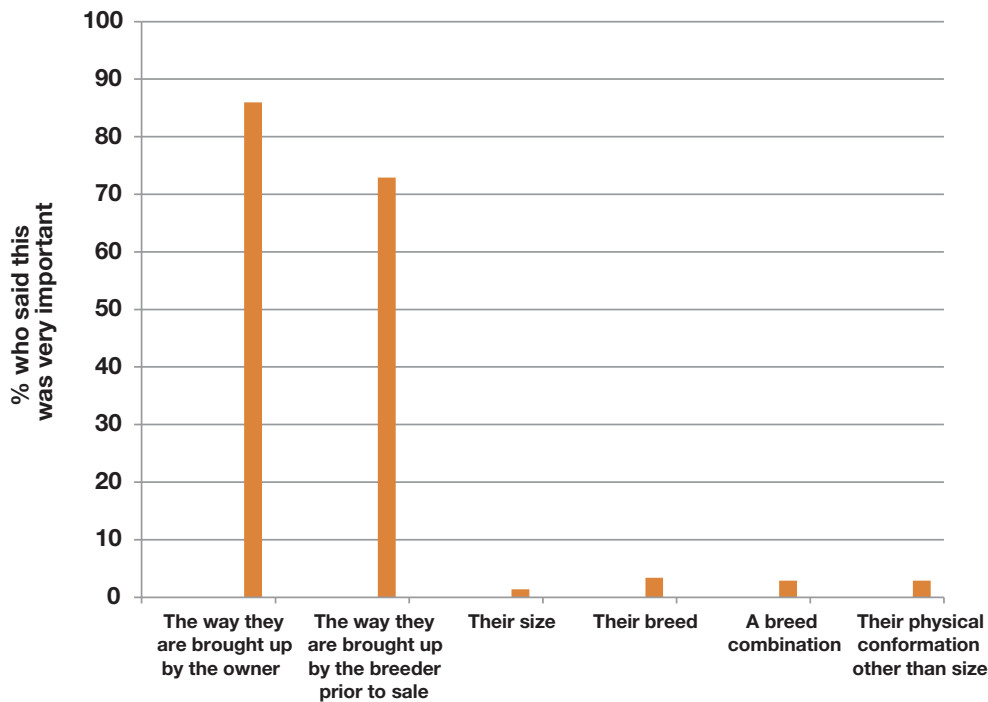
A total of 215 members of these organisations completed the survey with their views about why, in their experience, some dogs can be more aggressive towards people than others.



3. Why are some dogs aggressive towards people?

The experts were asked to say how important a number of factors were as a cause of dog aggression towards people. Figure 1 below shows the proportion of experts who rated each factor as 'very important' – the highest rating.

Figure 1 Why are some dogs more aggressive towards people than others?



The survey showed overwhelming agreement that

- Socialisation of the dog is the most important factor in determining aggression levels
 - 86% said that the dog's upbringing by its owner is very important
 - 73% said its upbringing by the breeder before it is sold is very important
- In comparison, other factors are negligible
 - only 3.4% said that breed was a very important factor

As one of the respondents explained:

“Any dog of any breed can be aggressive to people if early and positive socialisation is not undertaken and equally any breed can be very people friendly if handled right from the start.”

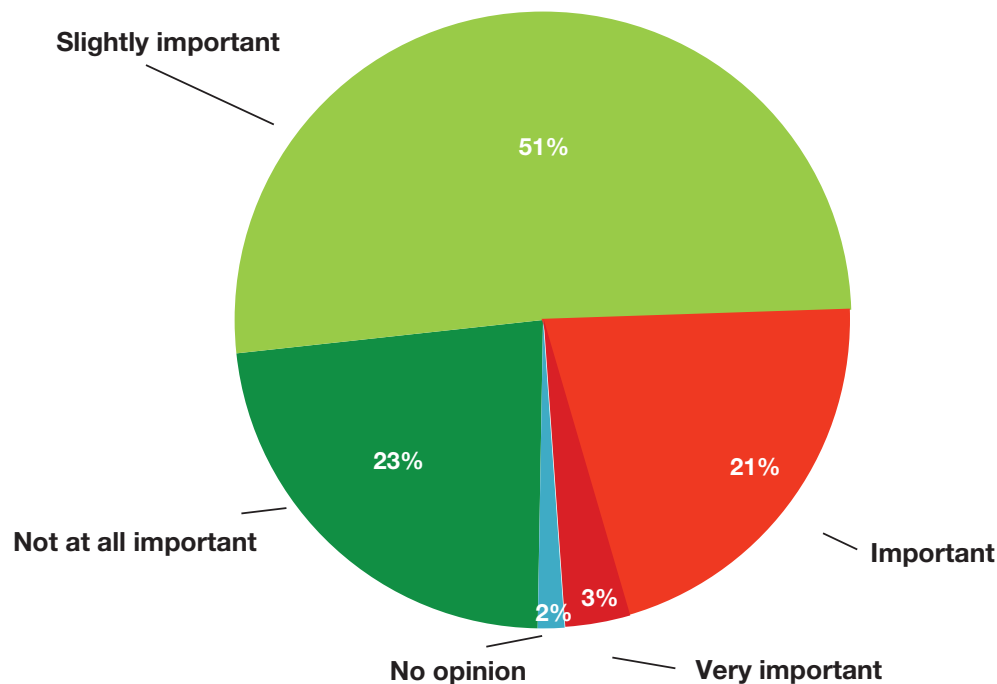
A number of people cited 'other reasons' as being very important for dog aggression. These were primarily:

- pain, if the dog is suffering from a painful medical condition or injury
- fear, if the dog is by nature anxious or fearful or has had previous traumatic experience such as having been attacked.

4. What role does breed play in dog aggression?

Figure 2 shows how experts rated the specific factor of breed in dog aggression towards people.

Figure 2 How important is breed as cause of dog aggression towards people?



The 24% of respondents (51) who felt that breed did play an important role were asked to say which breeds. 25 did so. There is little agreement:

- 17 breeds or breed groups are mentioned, at least one breed from each of the six Kennel Club breed groups
- breeds mentioned most often are:
 - Border Collie (by 7 respondents)
 - German Shepherd (7)
 - Jack Russell Terrier (6)
 - Chihuahua (4)
 - Dachshund (4)
 - Staffordshire Bull Terrier (3)
- Some identified breed types rather than breeds
 - Bull breeds (including pit bull 'type' terriers) (5)
 - 'guarding' breeds (4)
 - small terriers (3)
- the three other breed types prescribed under Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act are not mentioned at all



Will



Karma



Rex



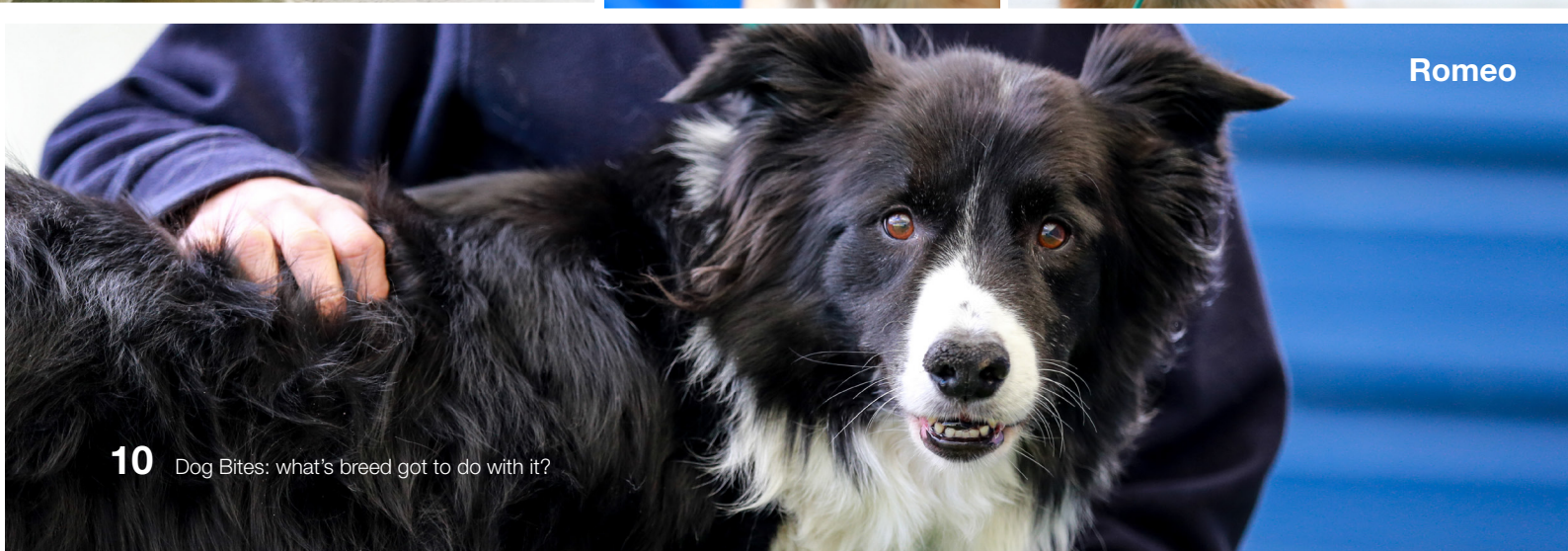
Linda



Honey



Rossi



Romeo

What does a breed determine?

Breed is clearly not a significant issue in determining levels of aggression. Naturally, some dogs require more stimulation and exercise and are therefore higher maintenance so their behaviour is a more acute reflection of the quality of ownership. If an owner was to neglect the basic needs of this breed of dog, it could impact on the frustration levels the dog encounters:

“Some breeds are more high maintenance in terms of exercise, owner input, stimulation, enrichment etc — and if these are not fulfilled by the owner there is a higher danger of frustration, which can lead to behavioural issues”

What about size?

When asked about the impact of a dog's size in terms of its aggression levels, it was very clear that size did not increase the likelihood of an attack. Small dogs are just as likely to attack as larger dogs, but naturally larger dogs have a capacity to inflict greater injury and damage:

“larger heavier dogs are more difficult to control if they ‘go wrong’ so could do more damage and the owner can find it more difficult to restrain a larger dog that can then get free to attack other dogs or people”

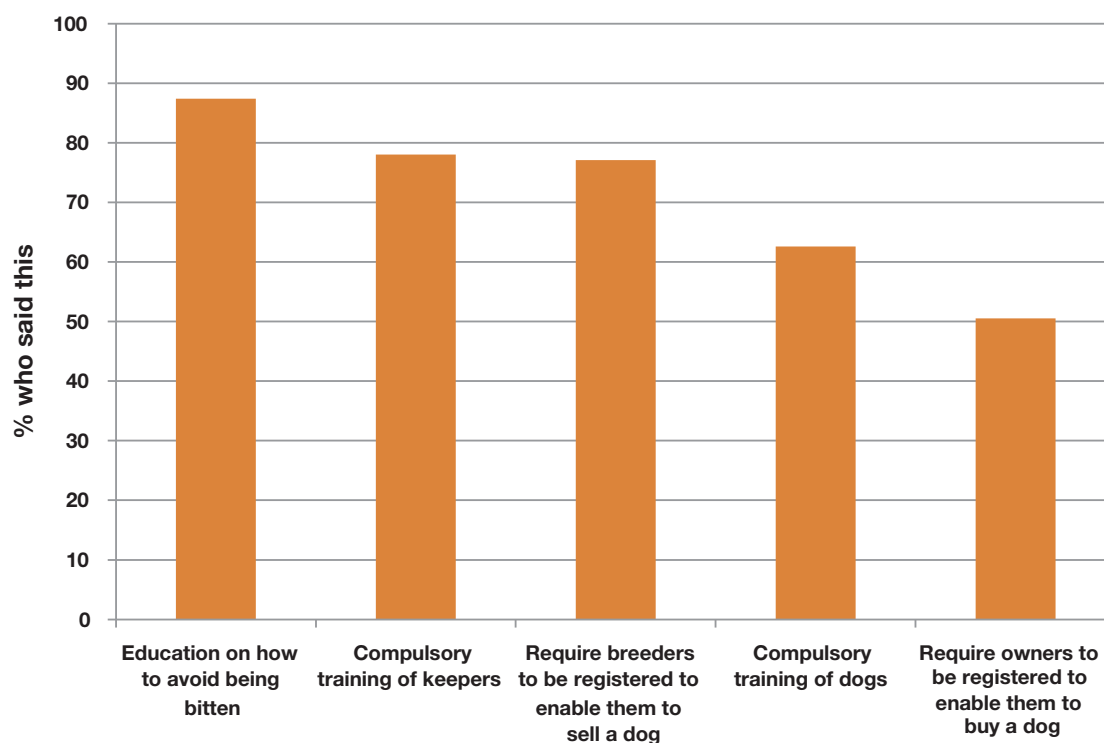
Conversely, however, there was a view that larger dogs might better communicate their intentions than smaller dogs prior to an actual bite, so that physical damage is **less likely:**

“A larger dog is more likely to make people back off before he needs to take it further whereas people might ignore the warnings from a little dog”

5. What measures would prevent dog bites?

The experts were asked to say what measures would help to reduce the number of dog bites. Figure 3 shows the results.

Figure 3 What measures would lead to a reduction in dog bites?



The overwhelming view (87%) is that the education of owners and others living and working with dogs is the most crucial factor in preventing dog bites, arguing that better understanding of dog body language, recognising signs of stress and how to approach dogs would have an impact.

Currently the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 makes no provision for this, or any other of the leading factors suggested by the expert behaviourists. With 74% of respondents deeming that breed is 'not important at all' or only 'slightly important', **it is clear that the focus of this legislation is pointed firmly in the wrong direction. Breed specific legislation should therefore be repealed.**

The survey concludes that the more effective ways of preventing dog bites would be education and training programmes — these might be included in the school curriculum, or as a compulsory training scheme when people purchase a dog.

"An awareness of the dog's body language is vital - clear signals from a dog are often completely misread"

“Many keepers (owners) of dogs (including /especially small breeds) do not understand the importance of socialisation and how to go about it appropriately. Keepers of small dogs often do not consider training to be necessary, and thus dogs are (a) less well trained, (b) frequently more anxious and hence ‘snappy’”

78% of respondents support the compulsory training of owners and 50% compulsory registration of owners, although the practical difficulties in how this would be provided and enforced were recognised. This included the need to use only quality-assured training providers, to ensure that bad practice was not passed on to owners.

“I think it would be helpful if owners had to attend a class or classes so that they understood about dog behaviour and how to train and manage a dog”

“Compulsory training of people is important but the quality of trainers to do this would have to be regulated”

Tighter regulation of the dog industry as a whole was also widely supported, with 77% saying that all breeders should be registered to enable them to sell a dog.

“Regulation of all people working in the industry, setting and implementing standards to ensure people are appropriately skilled and qualified and working within their capabilities in all areas of dog care. People should also be made accountable for the repercussions regarding the advice they give to dog owners”

There was little support for continuing a breed-specific approach, with an overwhelming 98% of expert behaviourists suggesting that adding more breeds to the banned list would have no effect on reducing dog attacks.

“Removing BSL (breed specific legislation) will remove the fallacy that some dogs are inherently dangerous and others are ‘safe’”

“BSL is unjustifiably deflecting blame for bites and is absolving the rest of society (not just dog owners) from the responsibility for understanding dogs”

6. Conclusions

It is clear from the results of Battersea's survey of expert behaviourists that the breed specific approach in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is not in line with current expert advice on preventing dog attacks on people. This survey shows:

- 74% of behaviourists asked said that the breed was either not important at all or only slightly important in determining dog aggression levels.
- Of those who felt that breed had a role to play, there was little agreement on which breeds these were and no suggestion that the four prescribed types are in fact the most dangerous
- Socialisation is the most important individual factor in determining a dog's behaviour – 86% of respondents said that its upbringing by the owner, and 73% its upbringing by the breeder before it is sold, were very important factors
- Size was only considered relevant in relation to the outcome of an attack, not its likelihood, with larger dogs capable of inflicting greater damage
- 87% said that educating owners and others on how to read dog body language is crucial for preventing dog bites, with even a small amount of understanding likely to have an impact
- 78% supported the compulsory training of owners
- 77% want to see all breeders registered to be able to sell a dog
- An overwhelming 98% of expert behaviourists believe that adding more breeds to the banned list would have no effect in preventing further dog attacks.

Banning specific breeds cannot be justified when faced with this evidence – it implies that some breeds are dangerous and others are safe, an approach rejected by behaviourists. Breed specific legislation should therefore be repealed.

Protecting the public through better regulation, including compulsory training and registration of breeders and owners, is widely supported, though the practical challenges this brings are well recognised. Nevertheless, the Government has already shown willingness to consider tightening up the regulation of the breeding and sale of dogs. This survey provides strong and informed support for that, a clear direction for further improving the law around dogs and future measures aimed at protecting the public from dog bites.

Appendix

Why are some dogs more aggressive towards people than others?

| | Not at all important | Slightly important | Important | Very important | No opinion | Total |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|-------|
| the way they are brought up by the keeper | 0.00% 0 | 0.93% 2 | 13.08% 28 | 85.98% 184 | 0.00% 0 | 214 |
| the way they are brought up by the breeder prior to sale | 0.47% 1 | 1.40% 3 | 25.23% 54 | 72.90% 156 | 0.00% 0 | 214 |
| their size | 74.04% 154 | 15.87% 33 | 6.73% 14 | 1.44% 3 | 1.92% 4 | 208 |
| their breed | 22.97% 48 | 51.20% 107 | 21.05% 44 | 3.35% 7 | 1.44% 3 | 209 |
| a breed combination | 25.24% 52 | 45.63% 94 | 20.39% 42 | 2.91% 6 | 5.83% 12 | 206 |
| their physical conformation other than size | 57.28% 118 | 21.84% 45 | 12.14% 25 | 2.91% 6 | 5.83% 12 | 206 |
| some other reason (please specify below) | 11.59% 16 | 0.72% 1 | 18.84% 26 | 50.72% 70 | 18.12% 25 | 138 |

Further Information

Barry Webb

Researcher

D: 020 7501 2632

E: B.Webb@battersea.org.uk

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home

4 Battersea Park Road

London SW8 4AA

Telephone: 020 7622 3626

battersea.org.uk

