

Review of the welfare of three popular companion animals in the UK

The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) is a UK-based charity, whose mission is to care for the pets of people in need by providing free veterinary services and promoting responsible pet ownership. Recently, the PDSA has published a report reviewing the welfare of dogs, cats and rabbits in the UK with the aim of providing a baseline for annual assessment of the well-being of these animals. The current populations of these pets in the UK are listed as 8.3 million dogs, 11.9 million cats and 1.6 million rabbits.

Since the Animal Welfare Act 2006 came into force any person responsible for an animal, including companion pets, has a duty of care to ensure, within reason, that the following five animal welfare 'needs' of that animal are met: the need for a suitable environment; the need for a suitable diet; the need to be able to express normal behaviour patterns; the need to live with, or apart from, other animals; and the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease. The report uses these five needs (under the headings: Environment, Diet, Behaviour, Companionship and Health, respectively) as a framework and scores each, according to how well the needs are met, out of 100, and gives an overall index score (the mean index score of the five needs).

The PDSA worked in partnership with YouGov (a research company based in the UK) to canvas the opinion, online, of over 11,000 dog, cat and rabbit owners and approximately 140 veterinary professionals. The survey results are presented by giving an 'Ideal scenario', a 'PDSA overview' and the 'Key findings' for each need for each pet, along with a separate general section covering ownership. Overall, the PDSA Animal Well-being (PAW) report concluded that rabbits are the pet whose welfare is most compromised; with an overall index score of just 53. This compares to 62 for dogs and 65 for cats.

The PAW report provides a general overview of the welfare of dogs, cats and rabbits within the UK, in relation to factors considered important by the PDSA, and highlights areas in which the welfare of these animals could be improved.

The PDSA Animal Well-being (PAW) Report 2011 (2011). A4, 38 pages. Published by The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals. Available online at: <http://www.pdsa.org.uk/pet-health-advice/pdsa-animal-wellbeing-report>.

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New animal welfare legislation comes into force in Northern Ireland

Following a lengthy period of consultation, the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 has recently come into effect. The legislation is similar in format and structure to the Animal Welfare Act (England and Wales) 2006 and updates the previous Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. The new legislation contains 60 clauses and five schedules. There are a number of new protective measures and penalties and, as in Great Britain, the major change is the introduction of a 'duty of care'. It is now compulsory that any individual who is responsible for a protected animal, whether on a permanent or temporary basis, takes reasonable steps to ensure that the welfare needs of an animal in their care are met and failure to do so will be considered an offence.

As in England and Wales, Northern Ireland has chosen to ban the routine docking of dogs' tails but has allowed an exemption for certified working dogs (Scotland has banned all docking of dogs' tails, including working animals). Other additions include: a strengthening of penalties for dog fighting; greater enforcement powers for inspectors, including the issuing of improvement notices; raising the minimum age that a child may be sold an animal to 16 years of age; and incorporating a means of issuing Codes of Practice at a later date.

The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is a promising step forward and addresses the imbalance between the previously limited protection given to companion animals.

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (2011). A4, 44 pages. Published by the Stationery Office Limited, UK. Available online at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/16/2011-03-29>.

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