




Animal Welfare Policy Reforms - Consultation response and way forward

Department of
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

An Roinn
Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe

Depairtment o'
Fairmin, Environment an' Kintra Matthers

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Introduction

Background

On 5 May 2026, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs ('the Department') launched an eight-week public consultation seeking views on four proposed animal welfare policy reforms in Northern Ireland, from the Animal Welfare Pathway published in May 2025. These proposals included changes across key policy areas:

- the regulation of rescue and rehoming organisations;
- an inflationary increase in dog licence fees;
- a ban on specific aversive training devices; and
- strengthened microchipping requirements for dogs.

Additionally, the consultation included a call for evidence on the mandatory microchipping of pet cats. The evidence gathered will be used to inform the way forward. The Department wishes to thank all stakeholders and members of the public who took the time to respond to the consultation.

The consultation closed on 30 June 2026, and 747 responses were received. This included 721 responses via the online consultation tool, Citizen Space, and 26 responses via email/post. Responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders, including 677 responses from members of the public, nine from local government in Northern Ireland and 61 from a range of organisations, including animal rescue and welfare charities, veterinary and clinical associations, dog training and behaviour professionals, species-specific welfare groups, owner and canine associations, licensing and legislative bodies, and rural and environmental organisations.

A list of the organisations who agreed to be named can be found at **Appendix A – List of Respondents.**

Respondents could comment on any or all proposals. Responses totalled 489 for rescue and rehoming, 359 for dog licence fees, 706 for aversive training devices and 385 for strengthened dog microchipping requirements. While most respondents provided clear answers to the consultation questions, some did not. All comments have been considered and reflected where appropriate, however their responses are unable to be accounted for in the quantitative analysis. Responses from individuals and anonymous organisations are treated confidentially, while those from organisations and charities are generally attributed.

This document is not intended to be a comprehensive report of every view expressed by consultees but rather a broad summary of the issues raised by respondents and the Department's next steps. During analysis, it was identified that three submissions had been received from individuals representing the same organisation, The Association of

Responsible Dog Owners (ARDO). For the purposes of quantitative analysis and respondent classification, these submissions have been treated as a single organisational response. However, all comments and evidence submitted were considered as part of the Department's assessment.

Digital tools were used to support quality assurance during drafting and editing. Human oversight was maintained throughout, with all content reviewed, verified and approved by officials.

Key Findings

Overall, the majority of respondents supported the Department's proposals. The key findings from the responses are as follows:

Regulation of Rescue and Rehoming Organisations

- 89% agreed that all rescue and rehoming organisations that rehome more than five animals annually should be inspected and licensed.
- 90% supported the proposed licence conditions.

Increase in Dog Licence Fees

- 62% supported the proposed inflationary increase across all categories of dog licence fees.

Ban on Specific Aversive Training Devices

- 50% agreed that the use of handheld remote controlled electric shock collars (e collars) on dogs and cats should be banned.
- 53% agreed that the use of choke collars on dogs and cats should be banned.
- 54% agreed that the use of prong collars on dogs and cats should be banned.

Strengthened Microchipping Requirements for Dogs

- 93% agreed that owners be required to update any changes onto the relevant microchip databases within a specified time, such as 14 days.
- 93% agreed that the owner must indicate if they are / are not the breeder of the dog.
- 78% agreed that all dogs should be microchipped before they are older than eight weeks.

There was a total of 251 responses to the call for evidence for mandatory microchipping of pet cats. A short summary is provided at the end of this document and the information provided will be used to inform future policy proposals.

Responses to proposals for rescue and rehoming

Respondents to the consultation were asked to consider three questions relating to specific proposals regarding the introduction of new licensing requirements for rescue and rehoming organisations. A total of 489 valid responses were received.

Question 1 – Do you agree that all rescue and rehoming organisations that rehome more than five animals annually should be inspected and licensed?

A total of 489 valid responses were received. Overall, 437 respondents, or 89%, agreed with the proposal, while 52 respondents, or 11%, disagreed. Support was highest among organisations and individuals. Council responses were more mixed, with four of the nine councils in agreement.

Respondent type	Total responses	Number in agreement	Percentage in agreement
Organisations	36	33	92%
Individuals	444	400	90%
Councils	9	4	44%
Total	**489**	**437**	**89%**

Overall, the majority of respondents (89%) supported introducing licensing and inspection for organisations that rescue and rehome more than five animals each year. Five of the nine councils that responded did not support the proposal as drafted; their feedback is set out separately at the end of this section.

The feedback provided by those in support of the proposal recognised that regulation would improve animal welfare standards, increase transparency and accountability, and help identify organisations which may be operating illegally (posing as charitable organisation when really operating as a business). This was a recurring concern in responses. Examples were provided where rescues are operating with inadequate welfare standards, insufficient behavioural assessment, poor rehoming practices, or limited transparency regarding the use of donations.

Furthermore, many respondents considered regulation necessary to prevent overcrowding, inadequate veterinary care, poor record keeping, and situations where well-intentioned individuals become overwhelmed by the numbers of animals in their care. Some respondents considered that regulation would improve public confidence by allowing prospective adopters to identify legitimate operators and by providing a mechanism for intervention where standards fall below acceptable levels.

Northern Ireland Companion Animal Welfare Group (NICAWG) considered that

*'**the introduction of a licensing and inspection regime is essential to ensure that all organisations involved in the rescue, rehabilitation and rehoming of animals are accountable and operate to consistent welfare standards'*** whilst highlighting ***'the need for effective enforcement powers, clear reporting routes for non-compliance, and consistency across all providers, including local authority facilities, council-contracted services and foster-based rescues'.***

While overall support for the policy intention was strong, many respondents noted concern about the potential impact on small, volunteer-led and foster-based rescues. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue noted that

'While high standards in animal rescue are important, the proposed licensing model is disproportionate, unsafe and unworkable for Northern Ireland's rescue landscape, where many animals are supported by small, home-based, volunteer-run rescues operating through foster networks rather than large premises-based charities'.

Many respondents noted the additional burden regulation would bring in relation to licensing costs, inspection fees, infrastructure requirements and administrative requirements could force smaller organisations to reduce activity or cease operating altogether. Several suggested that any licensing regime should be proportionate, risk-based and tailored to the scale of operations. Several respondents called for funding for rescues or for free or heavily subsidised licences for charitable organisations.

Foster-based rescue models featured prominently in responses. A number of respondents argued that proposals appeared to be designed around commercial kennel-based organisations and did not adequately recognise the role of foster homes. Clarification was sought regarding whether foster carers, foster homes or only the overarching organisation would be subject to licensing requirements. Several respondents considered foster-based care to deliver superior welfare outcomes and cautioned against imposing requirements that could undermine this model.

A smaller minority opposed the proposal entirely. These respondents argued that the proposed threshold of five animals was too low and risked capturing informal rescue activity by individuals serving an important community role. Others contended that regulatory effort should instead focus on breeders, puppy farms, illegal imports and existing enforcement shortcomings rather than introducing new licensing requirements for rescue organisations.

Council Feedback

Four councils supported the policy proposal including Mid Ulster District Council (MUDC), Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC), Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC) and Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council (ANBC). Five councils opposed the proposal including Belfast City Council (BCC), Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

(CCGC), Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC), Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEA) and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC). However, whilst five councils responded no to this question, they all noted support for the policy objective of improving animal welfare standards, increasing transparency, and addressing gaps in the currently unregulated rescue and rehoming sector.

The feedback from all councils included a principal concern that the threshold was too low, and would capture small-scale, volunteer-led and foster-based activity. Several councils including DSCDC, ANBC, FODC and MUDC recommended a tiered or risk-based model focused on larger and more structured operations.

Six of the councils (ABC, BCC, MEA, LCCC, FODC and DCSDC) explicitly stated that they were not in favour of becoming the licensing or enforcement authority or argued that the function should sit with DAERA, arguing that responsibility would align more closely with DAERAs existing animal licensing functions. The other three councils, whilst not explicitly in opposition, noted concerns about what they consider to be the continuing transfer of additional enforcement responsibilities to councils without dedicated and sustainable funding support from DAERA and emphasised that existing council services are already operating under significant financial and staffing pressures. Other concerns highlighted included a lack of specialist expertise in councils and the need for veterinary input.

Councils also requested clarification regarding the definition of rescue and rehoming activity, the status of foster homes, how animal thresholds would operate in practice, and whether individual foster carers would require licensing.

Several councils highlighted the potential unintended consequences of reducing rehoming capacity, discouraging volunteers and increasing pressure on council services if smaller organisations ceased operating.

Question 2 - Do you agree that all rescue and rehoming organisations that care for eight or more animals (or five or more dogs) should be inspected and licensed?

Views expressed in response to Question 2 were broadly consistent with those recorded under Question 1. Overall, 441 respondents, or 90%, agreed with the proposal, while 48 respondents, (10%), disagreed. Support was highest among organisations and individuals. Council responses were more mixed, with four of the nine councils in agreement.

Respondents supported animal-number thresholds as a practical means of safeguarding welfare by identifying for inspection and licensing organisations that retain substantial numbers of animals or take responsibility for more animals than they can adequately care for, which annual rehoming figures alone may not reveal. FOUR PAWS UK noted that welfare risks arise from the point animals are taken in, housed, grouped, isolated, treated, fostered, transported or advertised; an organisation with low turnover could still face overcrowding,

disease transmission, behavioural stress or inadequate veterinary care. Science for Animal Welfare similarly regarded simultaneous occupancy as an important welfare measure because higher numbers require structured management, competent staffing, individual monitoring, disease control and suitable facilities. Dogs Trust supported inspection and licensing for organisations caring for five or more dogs, including dog pounds and organisations rehoming internationally.

Other organisations supported regulation but proposed different thresholds. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home answered no because it favoured a single threshold of five animals, regardless of species, as it considered this simpler to understand and enforce. Naturewatch Foundation also favoured five for species with complex needs, particularly cats and equids. Cats Protection supported the eight-animal threshold but cautioned against excluding kittens born in rescue care, as an organisation could otherwise become overwhelmed by nursing queens and litters without becoming licensable.

The main opposing argument was that a numerical threshold could be triggered by normal rescue activity rather than sustained organisational scale or poor welfare. Respondents referred to kitten season, litters, emergency intakes, welfare seizures and temporary placements. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust stated that a small rescue might hold 8–20 cats during kitten season or 5–10 dogs following a welfare seizure and argued that licensing in those circumstances could lead organisations to refuse emergencies, reduce foster capacity or cease operating. It also raised financial, administrative, privacy and safeguarding concerns for home-based volunteers.

The treatment of foster-based rescue activity again emerged as a significant concern. Respondents questioned how animals held in foster homes would be counted and whether thresholds would apply to individual foster carers or the parent organisation. FOUR PAWS UK recommended that “care for” should include animals under an organisation’s effective control in foster homes, temporary holding locations and transport, so activity could not be divided between addresses to avoid licensing. Redwings Horse Sanctuary warned against separate or inconsistent treatment of premises-based sanctuaries and organisations operating through remote foster networks. Respondents sought clear rules defining the licensed organisation’s responsibility for foster carers and specifying when and where an animal counts towards the threshold.

Across supportive and opposing organisational responses, the recurring recommendations were clear counting rules, provision for short-term emergency exceedances, risk-based or tiered requirements, proportionate fees and implementation support, and enforcement focused on welfare risk rather than numbers alone.

Council Feedback

Council responses were largely consistent with their comments on Question 1. Supporting councils agreed with regulation in principle but considered the proposed threshold potentially disproportionate. Opposing councils did not reject regulation as an objective but raised concerns regarding the proposed scope, enforcement implications and the burden on smaller operators.

Councils repeatedly highlighted the need for:

- clearer definitions of rescue and rehoming activity;
- clarification regarding foster homes and foster carers;
- a tiered regulatory model;
- DAERA-led licensing and enforcement arrangements;
- sustainable funding and veterinary expertise.

Question 3 – Do you agree with the licence conditions as proposed?

A total of 486 valid responses were received. Of these, 437 respondents (89.9%) agreed and 49 respondents (10.1%) disagreed. Most respondents considered the proposed conditions an appropriate baseline for welfare and operational standards. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Science for Animal Welfare and the BVA Northern Ireland Branch welcomed their alignment with Association of Dogs and Cats Homes standards and the Scottish framework. Frequently supported elements included suitable accommodation, species-appropriate environments, competent staffing, enrichment, isolation and disease control, veterinary oversight, records and traceability, and information for prospective keepers.

Many supportive respondents nevertheless sought stronger or more detailed conditions. Dogs Trust recommended fuller health disclosure, clear expectations for veterinary examination, adopter suitability checks, behavioural assessments, post-adoption support and acceptance of returned animals. FOUR PAWS UK, NICAWG, the USPCA and Causeway Coast Dog Rescue Ltd proposed comprehensive intake-to-rehoming traceability, microchip verification, reporting for imported animals, behavioural rehabilitation protocols, emergency and evacuation plans, standards for foster networks, licence numbers on online advertisements, records of transfers and euthanasia decisions, and evidence that staffing capacity matches the animals' needs.

Species-specific and outcome-based guidance was a recurring issue. Naturewatch Foundation recommended minimum ages for rehoming, documented biosecurity and emergency procedures, and an appropriately qualified member of staff or the volunteer team. Science for Animal Welfare emphasised enrichment assessed by outcomes and veterinary assessment responsive to each animal's health history, rather than reliance on an annual establishment visit alone. The BVA Northern Ireland Branch supported trained, competent

and independent inspectors able to assess animal-based welfare measures across species and manage actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

Concerns focused on whether general wording would produce consistent decisions. Respondents requested clearer definitions and objective assessment criteria for reasonable animal numbers, suitable environments, staffing competence and welfare outcomes. They also sought practical rules for foster networks, online and international operations, residential premises, isolation facilities, wildlife release and imported-animal disease risks.

As with Questions 1 and 2, respondents raised concerns about costs, administration and applying premises-based requirements to small, volunteer-led, home-based or foster-led organisations. The minority opposing the conditions did not express a single view: 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust considered the package disproportionate and designed for large commercial-style premises, citing financial, safeguarding and operational risks for home-based rescues; Redwings Horse Sanctuary considered the proposals insufficiently detailed rather than inherently objectionable and recommended more precise welfare language, consideration of animal type and complexity, and clearer requirements for handling, staff responses and environmental conditions; and the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund queried whether basic preventive healthcare, including neutering and vaccination, should be explicit licence requirements.

Council Feedback

All nine councils supported the proposed licence conditions in principle. However, councils consistently highlighted practical implementation issues. They sought clearer definitions of key terms, particularly the meaning of “establishment”, the treatment of foster networks and responsibility for compliance in foster-based models.

Councils also raised concerns regarding:

- what they felt was subjective wording around maximum animal numbers and suitability of premises;
- consistency of enforcement;
- competence requirements for inspectors;
- costs associated with inspections, administration and compliance monitoring; and
- the potential impact of requirements on small and volunteer-led organisations.

Several councils recommended veterinary involvement in inspections and highlighted the need for dedicated funding if any licensing regime were to be successfully implemented.

Impact Assessments

Regulatory Impact Assessment

Nineteen organisations commented on the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA). Respondents stressed that the policy must be proportionate, properly resourced and suited to Northern Ireland's rescue sector. Key concerns included potential underestimation of council enforcement costs, including staffing and training; disproportionate impacts on small and foster-based rescues; reduced rescue capacity; and unintended animal welfare consequences.

A consistent concern was that small charities, home-based rescues, foster networks and species-specific rescues should not be inadvertently disadvantaged. Respondents noted that many rescues operate without paid staff, dedicated premises or administrative capacity, and that different models, including foster-based care, should be recognised.

Several respondents raised concerns about the affordability of licence fees, inspection fees and wider compliance costs. They considered that a flat licence fee could be unfair, particularly for small rescues dependent on donations and grants. Veterinary costs were also identified as a significant pressure, with suggestions including VAT relief or capped veterinary fees for registered organisations.

Some respondents questioned assumptions in the RIA, including the number of organisations in scope, the time required for inspections, and whether most charities already operate close to ADCH equivalent standards. Several called for stronger evidence, more detailed cost modelling and clearer justification for assumptions they considered insufficiently reflective of Northern Ireland's rescue sector.

Respondents repeatedly emphasised that rescue and rehoming organisations provide an important public service by caring for abandoned, stray, surrendered and neglected, thereby reducing pressure on councils. They argued that the RIA should assess not only the costs of regulation, but also the social, economic and animal welfare benefits provided by the sector.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment and Equality Screening

The responses generally supported the principle that rescue and rehoming organisations should be regulated and that minimum welfare standards should apply across Northern Ireland. However, many respondents stressed that the Rural Needs Impact Assessment should better reflect the practical realities of rural rescue work, including reliance on volunteers and foster networks, long travel distances, limited public transport, access to veterinary services, digital exclusion, transport costs and the risk that regulation could unintentionally reduce local rescue provision. Several respondents emphasised that rural organisations often provide the only local safety net for abandoned, stray or surrendered animals, and that DAERA should ensure requirements are proportionate, supported by clear guidance, training, reasonable lead-in periods and constructive engagement with councils.

In relation to the equality screening, most respondents did not object to the conclusions but recommended ongoing monitoring to ensure there are no unintended impacts on smaller organisations, disabled volunteers, older people, carers or vulnerable individuals involved in rescue work. Some respondents argued that the screening should give fuller consideration to potential barriers arising from administrative requirements, inspections in private homes, safeguarding concerns, digital systems, costs and access to support. A number also suggested that DAERA should review the impact of the legislation after implementation to ensure the framework remains proportionate, effective and does not adversely affect rural communities, protected groups or animal welfare provision.

Departmental Response

The consultation demonstrated overwhelming support for the regulation of rescue and rehoming organisations, with around 89% of respondents supporting the proposals in principle. The Department recognises this strong support and agrees that rescue and rehoming activity should be subject to appropriate and proportionate regulation. Such oversight would improve animal welfare standards, increase transparency and accountability, strengthen public confidence and help address gaps in the current regulatory framework.

The Department also acknowledges the concerns raised by respondents, including the potential impact on small, volunteer-led and foster-based rescues; the proportionality of the proposed thresholds; licensing, inspection and administrative costs; and the need for clear definitions and practical arrangements for foster networks. Respondents also highlighted the risk that requirements which are not proportionate and workable could reduce rehoming capacity, discourage volunteers or place additional pressure on other animal welfare services.

Councils raised particular concerns about enforcement responsibilities, sustainable funding, staffing pressures, specialist expertise and access to veterinary support, as well as the need for clarity and consistency in implementation.

Additionally, the European Commission has recently introduced legislation which sets minimum standards for animal shelters, which are deemed to be equivalent to the rescue and rehoming sector here. While it is not yet clear whether this piece of European law will apply in Northern Ireland, it has highlighted the need to consider whether there would be merit in developing a regulatory regime that is more broadly reflective of the standards and competences to be adopted and implemented across Europe. Therefore, the Department will take time to consider these matters further and develop the regulatory model, including the scope of the proposals.

Responses to proposals for inflationary increase to dog licence fees

Respondents to the consultation were asked to consider the proposal for an inflationary increase to all categories of dog licence fees. A summary of the responses received is below.

Question 4: Do you agree with the proposed inflationary increase across all categories of dog licence fees as set out above?

A total of 359 valid responses were received. Of these, 224 respondents (62%) agreed with the proposed inflationary increase across all categories of dog licence fees and 135 respondents (38%) disagreed.

Respondent type	Total responses	Percentage in agreement
Organisations	27	81%
Individuals	323	59%
Councils	9	44%
Total	359	62%

Respondents who supported the proposal generally considered the increase to be reasonable, proportionate and overdue, particularly as dog licence fees had not increased for a considerable period. A number of respondents accepted that the cost of administering licensing and dog control services had increased and that fees should be adjusted to better reflect current costs. Some supporters also considered the proposed fee levels to remain modest when compared with wider dog ownership costs, including food, veterinary treatment, insurance, grooming and training.

However, much of this support came with conditions. Many respondents who agreed with the increase stated that additional licence income should be transparently ring-fenced and reinvested in dog control, enforcement, responsible ownership initiatives and animal welfare outcomes. Several respondents emphasised that any increase should not simply be treated as general revenue, but should be linked to visible service improvements, improved enforcement against unlicensed dog ownership, better responses to straying and dangerous dog incidents, public education, and support for the management of stray, abandoned and surrendered dogs.

Organisations including Dogs Trust, Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), Northern Ireland Companion Animal Welfare Group (NICAWG), Causeway Coast

Dog Rescue Ltd (CCDR) and Science for Animal Welfare supported the proposal in this context, recognising that fees had not increased for a significant period and that current levels no longer adequately reflected the costs of administering and enforcing dog licensing, dog control and wider animal welfare responsibilities. They highlighted the need for reinvestment, transparency, stronger enforcement capacity, increased staffing and specialist training, consistent enforcement standards across councils, investigation of irresponsible breeding and unlicensed ownership, and improved welfare outcomes.

A recurring theme among supportive responses was that the licensing system should be better enforced. Respondents frequently commented that increasing fees would only be effective if councils also improved checks on compliance and acted against those who do not licence their dogs. Some argued that responsible dog owners already comply with the law and that any increase should be accompanied by stronger penalties, proactive checks or clearer evidence that non-compliance is being addressed. Dogs Trust, USPCA and NICAWG referred to licence compliance concerns, citing figures indicating that licences issued represent approximately half of the estimated dog population in Northern Ireland, and urged consideration of measures to improve compliance, traceability and responsible ownership, including closer alignment between dog licensing and microchipping systems.

Several organisations felt that the proposed increase would help but would not fully address the wider pressures on resources. FOUR PAWS UK supported the inflationary increase but stated that it should not be presented as sufficient in itself to address broader enforcement challenges. It highlighted that dog control and wider animal welfare enforcement depend on local authority capacity and recommended that licence income should support proactive compliance activity, stray dog services, investigations into unlicensed breeding and selling, complaint follow-up and improved use of microchipping and licensing data. The Institute of Licensing similarly supported self-funding licensing regimes where possible and recommended an automatic annual index-linked increase to avoid static fees becoming outdated.

A number of supportive respondents also recommended wider reform of the licensing model. Suggestions included regular review of fees, index-linking future increases, retaining incentives for neutered or sterilised dogs, reviewing concessionary arrangements, introducing clearer public reporting on how licence income is used, linking licensing more closely with microchipping data, or embedding licensing within a broader responsible dog ownership strategy. Some respondents proposed that licence fees could be used to fund education, owner awareness, training, welfare checks or stronger action against irresponsible breeding and abandonment. While supportive of the proposed increase, Dogs Trust cautioned that future increases should not become prohibitive for owners, particularly in the context of cost-of-living pressures.

NICAWG and USPCA also stressed that increased fees alone would not improve welfare outcomes unless accompanied by investment in frontline services, enforcement capability and partnership working across the companion animal welfare sector.
Opposition to the proposal was substantial and centred primarily on affordability, fairness and doubts about effectiveness. Many respondents who disagreed argued that the increase would penalise responsible owners who already licence their dogs, while those who do not comply would continue to avoid the system. This concern was expressed repeatedly by individual respondents, who viewed the increase as unfair to law-abiding owners and unlikely to improve compliance without stronger enforcement. Some respondents stated that the system already lacks visible enforcement and that increasing fees could further discourage licensing.

Affordability was another major concern. Respondents referred to wider cost-of-living pressures, rising veterinary costs, food, insurance and other expenses associated with dog ownership. Some considered that even a modest increase could affect low-income households, older people, people with multiple dogs, rural households, working dog owners, or individuals for whom dogs provide companionship or support. A number of respondents warned that higher fees could reduce compliance, discourage rescue adoption, increase abandonment or add pressure to rescue organisations. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust opposed the increase on this basis, arguing that it would disproportionately affect low-income households, risk reducing compliance and place further pressure on rescues unless enforcement, ring-fencing and council capacity issues were addressed.

Some respondents rejected the principle of dog licensing altogether. They considered dog licensing to be outdated, ineffective, poorly understood or an additional tax on responsible ownership. A number of individual respondents pointed to other parts of the UK where dog licensing does not operate and questioned the continued need for the system in Northern Ireland. The Royal Kennel Club opposed dog licensing and encouraged a review of the overall merit of the licensing regime, arguing that compliance is low and that licensing operates as an inefficient and unfair tax on those willing or able to pay.

A further strand of opposition focused on the purpose and transparency of the fee. Respondents questioned what dog licence fees fund, whether income is ring-fenced, and whether dog owners receive any direct benefit from licensing. Some stated that councils should improve enforcement of existing licensing requirements before increasing fees. Others argued that the current model does not provide proof of ownership, does not adequately ensure traceability and should be better aligned with microchipping. Best Bark opposed the increase as currently presented, stating that dog owners should not be asked to pay more without clearer transparency, accountability and measurable outcomes.

Some respondents proposed alternative approaches rather than a simple inflationary increase. These included retaining lower fees to encourage uptake, increasing penalties for non-compliance, introducing education or training requirements, offering discounts for rescue

dogs or neutered dogs, providing multi-dog discounts or caps for working households and farms, introducing a one-off lifetime licence, removing block licences, or replacing licensing with a lower-cost registration model. Others suggested that public awareness campaigns, stronger enforcement and improved microchip database reliability would be more effective than increasing licence fees.

Overall, the main consultation dataset showed majority support for the proposed increase, but this support was often conditional on transparency, reinvestment and stronger enforcement. Opposition was not limited to disagreement with the amount of the increase; it also reflected wider concerns about the fairness, effectiveness and purpose of the licensing regime.

Council Feedback

All nine councils that responded supported the proposed inflationary increase. Council support was generally framed as support for the principle of increasing fees to reflect inflation, while also emphasising that the proposed increase would remain insufficient to achieve full cost recovery. Several councils stated that dog control services in Northern Ireland are not currently delivered on a full cost recovery basis and that existing dog licence income does not cover the costs of licensing, dog warden services or wider enforcement activity. Councils noted that service demands continue to increase, including as a result of additional statutory duties and recent pressures associated with XL Bully controls.

A common council concern was that the proposed increases would provide only a modest uplift in income. Belfast City Council (BCC) stated that proposed inflationary increases would not meet growing service demands and highlighted the impact of concessionary and free licences on the income base. Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) similarly agreed that the proposed increase was proportionate but stated that no council in Northern Ireland provides its dog control service on a full cost recovery basis. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC) also considered the increase to be only a marginal increase in council income against a background of increasing demands on the service.

Several councils highlighted structural issues within the current licensing model, particularly the high proportion of licences issued free of charge or at concessionary rates. BCC referred to the proportion of licences issued free of charge or at concessionary rate within its area. Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council (CCGC), Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC) and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEA) referred to the wider impact of concessionary licensing on councils' ability to close funding gaps. Some councils recommended removal of the concessionary fee, a higher concessionary fee, review of eligibility criteria, or a nominal administrative fee for currently free licences, including licences issued to persons over 65.

Automatic index-linked increases were also recommended by several councils. Mid Ulster District Council (MUDC) suggested consideration of future automatic index-linked increases to avoid repeated legislative amendments. BCC, CCGC, ABC and MEA also supported incorporating an automatic annual index-linked inflationary increase within the legislative amendment.

Councils also made recommendations for wider review of the dog licensing regime. BCC suggested that a wider review should examine the purpose and effectiveness of licensing, compliance rates, enforcement powers, devolved fee-setting powers and the role of licensing in promoting responsible dog ownership, animal welfare and public safety. It also suggested dog licensing should form part of a wider responsible dog ownership strategy, including microchipping compliance, breeder traceability, neutering incentives, behavioural support and public education.

Several councils emphasised the need to retain incentives for responsible dog ownership. Some supported retaining a reduced fee for neutered or sterilised dogs as an incentive to promote responsible ownership and reduce unwanted dogs. Others noted that increased fees should be balanced against the risk of discouraging licence uptake, particularly where councils are seeking to improve compliance. DCSDC specifically noted concern that any increase could affect licence uptake, while still accepting that the proposed increase was proportionate.

Council comments also reflected broader resource and service delivery concerns. The councils consistently linked dog licence fees to the wider pressures on dog control and animal welfare services. They stated that the increase would not, of itself, resolve funding pressures, and that growing statutory responsibilities would continue to require sustainable resourcing. This was particularly emphasised where councils referred to increasing enforcement demands, the administrative burden of licensing and the limits of relying on licence fee income where many licences generate limited or no income.

Where councils made similar comments, the main themes were support for an inflationary increase; concern that the increase would not achieve full cost recovery; concern about concessionary and free licences limiting the income base; support for index-linked future increases; potential review of concessionary arrangements; and the need for a broader review of the dog licensing regime and its contribution to responsible dog ownership, enforcement and public safety.

Impact Assessments

Regulatory Impact Assessment

A number of respondents (21%) made comments on the Regulatory Impact Assessment. Respondents generally accepted an inflationary uplift as reasonable, but many considered it insufficient on its own. FOUR PAWS noted that the increase would provide additional income but remain well below the reported cost of council dog control services. Science for Animal Welfare supported the preferred option as a proportionate alternative to either no change or immediate full cost recovery.

A recurring theme was that additional income should be clearly linked to enforcement, dog control, animal welfare and responsible ownership outcomes. USPCA, NICAWG and CCDR said revenue should be transparently reinvested in frontline services and enforcement activity, with suggested benefits including improved enforcement capacity, more effective investigation of animal welfare concerns, public education on responsible ownership, and support for the management of stray and abandoned dogs. Best Bark sought annual public reporting on how licence income is used and whether measurable outcomes improve. Council responses emphasised operational and financial pressures. Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and councils considered that the RIA underestimated staffing, training, enforcement, administration and communications costs. BCC and others highlighted the high proportion of free or concessionary licences, limiting cost recovery.

Suggested changes included clearer compliance data, regular reviews, modest administrative fees for free licences, and better estimates of unlicensed dogs.
A minority opposed the assessment. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust argued that the RIA did not sufficiently assess affordability, rural impacts, rescue costs, enforcement capacity, multi-dog households, or potential effects such as reduced compliance and abandonment.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment
Most respondents asked for rural impacts to be monitored after implementation. FOUR PAWS noted that rural dog ownership may involve working dogs, multi-dog households, block licences, longer travel distances and livestock worrying. Countryside Alliance Ireland similarly highlighted cumulative costs for rural owners keeping working or multiple dogs.

USPCA, NICAWG and CCDR supported retaining concessions but recommended monitoring access to veterinary services, transport and animal welfare support in rural areas. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust disagreed with the RNIA, arguing that it did not adequately reflect rural poverty, digital exclusion, limited services, rural rescues or farm dog ownership. Councils did not provide specific comments on rural needs. However, wider council responses noted that dog control demand and enforcement pressures apply across council areas and that additional statutory duties may increase operational pressures.

Equality and Disability Screening Exercise
Several organisations accepted the screening conclusions because existing safeguards remain, including exemptions for assistance dogs and concessions for older people. Dogs

Trust considered assistance dog owners unlikely to be affected. FOUR PAWS noted that the increase would be modest for many owners, particularly where concessionary fees apply, but still recommended monitoring impacts on households under financial pressure.
USPCA, NICAWG and CCDR supported continued promotion of concessionary arrangements. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust raised minority concerns that the screening did not sufficiently consider disabled people, people with mental health conditions, carers, older people and low-income households who may rely on dogs for support and companionship.

Council responses were mainly focused on the financial implications of concessionary and free licences rather than equality impacts. Councils suggested reviewing concessionary arrangements or introducing modest administrative fees for some free licences, while recognising the need to balance cost recovery with affordability and continued licence uptake.

Departmental Response

The Department notes the overall level of support for the proposed inflationary increase in dog licence fees, including the unanimous support expressed by councils that responded to this question. The Department also acknowledges the supportive comments from a number of organisations and respondents who considered that fees have remained unchanged for a significant period, that an uplift would be reasonable and proportionate, and that additional income could assist councils in delivering dog control, enforcement, responsible ownership initiatives, traceability and animal welfare outcomes. The Department further recognises the constructive suggestions made in relation to transparency, reinvestment of licence income, improved compliance activity, public awareness, continued incentives for responsible dog ownership and future consideration of wider reform to the dog licensing regime.

However, in light of prevailing cost-of-living pressures, the Department has decided not to proceed with the proposed inflationary increase to all categories of dog licence fees at this time. The Department will continue to work collaboratively with councils to improve compliance with the existing dog licensing regime and to address matters relating to its operation, enforcement, cost recovery, transparency and the effective delivery of dog control responsibilities. The Department will also consider the broader issues raised by respondents, including measures to promote responsible dog ownership through the Department's Responsible Dog Ownership campaign and to support positive animal welfare outcomes across Northern Ireland.

Responses to proposals for banning specific aversive training devices

Respondents to the consultation were asked to consider three questions relating to proposals to prohibit the use of handheld remote-controlled electronic shock collars, choke collars and prong collars for cats and dogs. A summary of the responses received is provided below.

Question 5 – Do you agree that the use of handheld remote controlled electric shock collars (e collars) on dogs and cats should be banned?

A total of 706 responses were received. Of these, 356 respondents (50.4%) agreed that the use of handheld remote-controlled electronic shock collars (e-collars) on dogs and cats should be banned, while 350 respondents (49.6%) disagreed.

Respondent type	Total responses	Percentage in agreement
Organisations	51	68.6%
Individuals	646	48%
Councils	9	100%
Total	706	50.4%

Supporting respondents commonly argued that handheld remote-controlled e-collars can cause pain, fear, anxiety, stress or confusion, and that aversive stimulation may suppress visible behaviour without addressing its underlying cause. They considered reward-based training to be a more appropriate and humane alternative.

Dogs Trust, Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), Northern Ireland Companion Animal Welfare Group (NICAWG), Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, FOUR PAWS UK, Naturewatch Foundation, Causeway Coast Dog Rescue (CCDR) along with 28 other welfare and veterinary respondents supported prohibition on animal welfare grounds.

Some supporting respondents recommended that any prohibition should be accompanied by public education, access to appropriately qualified behavioural advice and clear guidance for owners.

Opposing respondents commonly argued that remote collars may have a limited role in specific or high-risk circumstances, including serious recall problems, livestock chasing and cases in which permanent restraint, relinquishment or euthanasia might otherwise be considered. Countryside Alliance Ireland did not support routine use but argued that properly controlled, last-resort use could be relevant in circumstances such as sheep worrying. The

National Association for Professional E-Collar Training argued that modern remote collars can be used responsibly within structured training programmes, and that evidence-led regulation, professional standards and owner education would be more proportionate than a blanket prohibition. The respondent did not explain what they considered to be a 'modern' remote electronic collar or how they may differ from other remote-controlled electronic shock collars. The Department considers all remote-controlled electronic shock collars to present potential animal welfare risks.

Alternative proposals included mandatory training, competency assessment, restrictions on purchase, and use only under appropriately qualified professional supervision. A further recurring argument was that existing animal welfare legislation already provides a basis for action where use causes unnecessary suffering.

Respondents on both sides also raised concerns about enforcement while the devices remained readily available for sale, supply or online purchase and questions were raised about how prohibited handheld devices would be distinguished from vibration-only or other electronic equipment, how online purchases would be addressed, and whether enforcement bodies would have sufficient powers to investigate suspected offences and seize prohibited devices.

Question 6 – Do you agree that the use of choke collars on dogs and cats should be banned?

A total of 705 valid responses were received. Of these, 373 respondents (52.9%) agreed that the use of choke collars on dogs and cats should be banned, while 332 respondents (47.1%) disagreed.

Respondent type	Total responses	Percentage in agreement
Organisations	50	70%
Individuals	646	50.9%
Councils	9	100%
Total	705	52.9%

Supportive respondents generally considered choke collars to be aversive devices that tighten around the neck and can cause pain, distress and physical injury, including pressure on the airway, trachea and surrounding neck structures. Organisations such as Dogs Trust, USPCA, NICAWG, CCDR, Four Paws UK, Science for Animal Welfare and BVA/BSAVA supported a ban, generally linking their position to the availability of positive, reward-based alternatives.

Supportive responses often framed choke collars as part of a wider concern about outdated training methods based on physical correction. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home opposed aversive methods such as choke collars on the basis that they can cause unnecessary suffering and confusion, while the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors also supported the proposed ban, stating that training equipment which relies on the application of pain or discomfort risks compromising both animal welfare and behavioural outcomes.

Opposing respondents frequently argued that the central welfare issue was misuse rather than the device itself. Some accepted that choke collars should not be used as a routine or primary lead system but considered that experienced handlers may use particular forms of tightening collar or lead safely in limited circumstances.

The Association of Responsible Dog Owners opposed prohibition and argued that education, regulation and responsible use would be more proportionate. Other proposals included mandatory training, professional standards, clear fitting guidance and reliance on existing welfare legislation where suffering is caused.

This question generated concern about the scope of any legislative definition. Respondents asked whether a prohibition might inadvertently capture slip leads, martingale collars, check chains, show leads, grooming loops, veterinary restraint leads or rescue-handling equipment. These concerns were especially relevant to rescue, veterinary, grooming, training and working-dog contexts, where short-term restraint or safe handling may be required. Respondents sought clear definitions, practical guidance and, where justified, tightly drawn exemptions.

Question 7– Do you agree that the use of prong collars on dogs and cats should be banned?

A total of 706 valid responses were received. Of these, 384 respondents (54.4%) agreed that the use of prong collars on dogs and cats should be banned, while 322 respondents (45.6%) disagreed.

Respondent type	Total responses	Percentage in agreement
Organisations	51	70.6%
Individuals	646	52.5%
Councils	9	100%
Total	706	54.4%

Supporting respondents generally regarded the devices as inherently aversive because metal prongs apply pressure around a dog's neck when tension is placed on the lead. Dogs Trust,

USPCA, NICAWG, FOUR PAWS UK, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Naturewatch Foundation, CCDR, Science for Animal Welfare and 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust supported prohibition. Their submissions referred to pain, discomfort, fear, injury and longer-term behavioural harm, and to the availability of non-aversive alternatives.

Science for Animal Welfare noted that, even where pressure is distributed around the neck, the mechanism still relies on discomfort or pain. FOUR PAWS UK similarly argued that the devices suppress behaviour without addressing the underlying reason for pulling lunging, panic or reactivity.

Opposition focused on control, handler safety and proportionality. Some respondents argued that prong collars can assist handlers managing large, powerful, fearful or reactive dogs and may enable safer exercise where other equipment has not been effective.

A recurring minority concern was that removing this option could reduce exercise, increase relinquishment or contribute to euthanasia in severe behavioural cases. Opponents commonly favoured regulated access, professional fitting, mandatory training or use under appropriately qualified supervision.

The National Association for Professional E-Collar Training argued that, when properly fitted and used by competent handlers, prong collars can provide control while avoiding sustained pressure from other equipment. It advocated education, competency, welfare standards and proportionate regulation rather than prohibition.

Council Feedback

Nine councils responded, alongside the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). All supported the proposed bans on handheld remote-controlled e-collars, choke collars and prong collars. No district council or local government respondent opposed the proposals.

Council responses strongly supported the animal welfare objective. Several expressly endorsed positive reinforcement and reward-based training, while the council and local government submissions collectively focused on whether a prohibition could be implemented and enforced effectively.

Eight councils raised the need for Fixed Penalty Notice provisions and/or powers to seize prohibited devices.

A number of councils also expressed desire for restrictions on the sale and supply of aversive training devices. Belfast City Council (BCC) expressly favoured controls extending beyond use, while Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC), Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC), Causeway Coast and Glens Council (CCGC), Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council (ANBC), Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Council (ABC), Mid and

East Antrim Council (MEA) and Mid Ulster District Council (MUDC) considered that continued availability would undermine compliance or enforcement. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC) recommended engagement with businesses to encourage a phased withdrawal from sale.

Several councils considered that narrowly defined exemptions might be necessary for specialist operational environments, including Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) or Ministry of Defence use. Any exemption was generally expected to be prescribed, limited to exceptional circumstances, supported by strict protocols and subject to appropriate oversight.

NILGA supported the proposed bans but emphasised the need for clear offences, practical guidance, proportionate enforcement powers and realistic expectations regarding any role for councils.

Impact Assessments

Regulatory Impact Assessment
Supporting respondents generally emphasised the anticipated animal welfare benefits of intervention. Opposing respondents emphasised proportionality, alternative regulatory approaches and possible operational or economic consequences. Concerns were raised regarding potential effects on dog trainers and associated businesses that currently provide services involving these devices, including the potential reduction in demand for training approaches that incorporate them. Others considered that regulation through licensing, accreditation, competency requirements or professional standards would be a more proportionate means of addressing animal welfare concerns than prohibition.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment
Comments relevant to rural needs considerations highlighted concerns regarding the practical management of dogs in rural settings. Respondents referred to the circumstances of rural dog owners, farmers, livestock keepers and working-dog owners.

Livestock worrying, off-lead control and the management of dogs at a distance were recurring concerns. Some respondents considered that the proposed prohibition could reduce the tools available to address these issues and affect the management of working dogs in rural environments.

Conversely, supporters of prohibition maintained that these circumstances did not justify methods that may cause pain, fear or distress and pointed to alternative training and management approaches.

Equality and Disability Screening Exercises
Comments relevant to equality and disability considerations were also divided. Respondents expressing concern suggested that people with disabilities, reduced mobility or limited

physical strength may face additional challenges in managing larger or stronger dogs without access to aversive devices.

In contrast, supporters of prohibition argued that welfare protections should apply consistently and pointed to alternative training, behavioural and management methods that do not rely on devices capable of causing pain, fear or distress.

Departmental Response

The Department notes that support exceeded opposition for each of the three proposed prohibitions, although responses were closely divided, particularly in relation to handheld remote-controlled electronic shock collars. The consultation results have not been considered in isolation but alongside the available scientific and veterinary evidence, legal advice, the associated impact assessments and the practical implications of implementing and enforcing the proposals.

The principal arguments supporting prohibition concerned the potential for pain, fear, anxiety, stress, physical injury and adverse behavioural effects, together with the availability of reward-based training and management approaches. Respondents opposing prohibition generally argued that welfare concerns resulted from misuse rather than from the devices themselves and advocated education, professional standards, licensing or regulation rather than prohibition.

Respondents opposing prohibition maintained that the devices could, when used competently or under professional supervision, assist with reliable recall, livestock-worrying, challenging behavioural cases, handler safety and the management of large or reactive dogs. Some also considered that removing access to these devices could contribute to greater restriction, relinquishment or behavioural euthanasia in particularly difficult cases.

Whilst poorly fitted e-collars, excessive intensity, poor timing or use by an inexperienced person may increase the likelihood and severity of harm, the Department does not consider that the welfare concerns arise solely from misuse. Electric shock collars, prong collars and choke collars are designed to influence behaviour through the application, or threatened application, of an aversive stimulus, and the Department considers that welfare risks remain even where a user intends to use a device responsibly.

The Department's assessment is informed by peer-reviewed research and veterinary evidence. Studies by Cooper et al. (2014) and China et al. (2020), which assessed the welfare consequences and efficacy of remote electronic collar training, identified behavioural indicators of welfare concern and did not establish a consistent general efficacy advantage over reward-based approaches. While some studies have reported benefits in specific training scenarios, the Department considers that the overall evidence identifies risks of pain,

fear, stress, anxiety, injury and adverse behavioural effects and does not demonstrate that the use of these devices is necessary to achieve effective management or training outcomes.

Some respondents proposed a alternatives to prohibition, including licensing, accreditation, mandatory training, competency assessment, professional supervision and technical standards. The Department notes these views and acknowledges that such measures could reduce some instances of incorrect or inappropriate use. However, the Department remains of the view that prohibition represents the most appropriate and proportionate means of addressing the identified welfare concerns.

The Department has also considered the argument that existing animal welfare legislation provides sufficient protection. While the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 remains an important means of addressing unnecessary suffering, it operates primarily on a case-by-case basis once concerns have arisen. The Department considers that a specific prohibition would provide clearer and more preventative protection against the identified welfare risks associated with these devices.

Comments on the associated impact assessments have also been considered. Regulatory Impact Assessment comments included concerns regarding potential impacts on dog trainers, associated businesses and training providers, particularly in relation to demand for their services, and again suggested alternative proposals to prohibition such as licensing, accreditation, competency requirements or professional standards. Rural Needs Impact Assessment comments concerned livestock-worrying, off-lead control, control at a distance and the management of dogs in rural and working environments. Equality and disability comments included concerns that some people with reduced mobility or limited physical strength could experience additional difficulty managing larger or stronger dogs. The Department notes that some respondents also raised concerns regarding electronic containment fence systems. Such systems are not included within the scope of the proposed prohibition and are unaffected by the policy being taken forward.

The Department acknowledges that the proposals may require some owners, trainers and businesses to adapt their existing practices and recognises the importance of livestock protection, public safety and the ability of people with disabilities or reduced mobility to manage dogs safely. However, it does not consider that these issues outweigh the animal welfare justification for prohibition or require a change to the final policy position.

The responses also raised issues concerning enforcement powers, seizure, Fixed Penalty Notices and the distinction between prohibited devices and legitimate restraint or handling equipment. The Department acknowledges these concerns and recognises the importance of legislative clarity and enforceability. A number of respondents highlighted that the term “choke collar” could encompass a broad range of collar types and designs, creating the potential for uncertainty regarding the scope of any prohibition. For clarification, the prohibition will apply to choke collars that do not incorporate a stop mechanism. This

approach also aligns with the wider direction of travel in European companion animal welfare standards.

The consultation responses also highlighted concerns regarding the potential impact of a prohibition on service dogs and other specialist operational uses. Respondents stated that such dogs may be required to operate in exceptional circumstances and that specific operational requirements may arise in limited circumstances. The Department has considered these representations and engaged with relevant stakeholders regarding operational requirements. While the Department remains satisfied that a general prohibition is justified on animal welfare grounds, it recognises that narrowly defined exemptions are appropriate in specific circumstances. The legislative proposals will provide for exemptions for specified service dogs, including dogs used for policing, defence or other prescribed operational purposes. These exemptions will apply only where the use of a specified device is necessary and proportionate and will be subject to appropriate conditions and safeguards.

A number of respondents and councils advocated for restrictions on the sale and supply of the devices. However, restrictions on sale and supply do not form part of the policy proposal. The Department considers that a prohibition on use represents the most appropriate and proportionate means of addressing the identified animal welfare concerns. The Department also notes that restrictions on sale and supply could be undermined where the devices remain available for purchase from other jurisdictions, including through online sales.

The Department has also taken account of developments in other jurisdictions. Regulation (EU) 2026/1818 on the welfare of dogs and cats and their traceability establishes common welfare and traceability requirements for dogs and cats across the European Union and reflects the wider direction of travel towards enhanced companion-animal welfare protections. While the Department's position is based primarily on the animal welfare evidence and its assessment of the consultation responses, the proposals align with European welfare standards.

Having considered the consultation responses, the available scientific and veterinary evidence, the proposed regulatory alternatives, the associated impact assessments, practical enforcement considerations and developments in other jurisdictions, the Department's final policy position is to proceed with legislation prohibiting the use of handheld remote-controlled electronic shock collars, choke collars that do not incorporate a stop mechanism, and prong collars on dogs and cats in Northern Ireland. The Department considers that this represents the most appropriate and proportionate means of reducing the identified welfare risks.

Responses to Proposals for Strengthening Microchipping Requirements

Respondents were asked to consider three questions on proposals to strengthen current microchipping requirements for dogs in Northern Ireland. A summary of the responses received is set out below.

Question 8 – Do you agree that owners should be required to update any changes onto the relevant microchip databases within a specified time, such as 14 days?

A total of 384 responses were received. Of these, 359 respondents (93%) agreed and 25 respondents (7%) disagreed that owners should be required to update any changes onto the relevant microchip databases within a specified time, such as 14 days.

Respondent Type	Total Responses	Percentage in Agreement
Organisations	27	96%
Individuals	348	92%
Councils	9	100%
Overall Total	**384**	**93%**

Respondents who supported the proposal generally considered that microchipping is only effective if the information held on the database is accurate, current and accessible. Many comments linked up-to-date records to quicker reunification of lost, stray or stolen dogs with their owners, reduced pressure on councils, veterinary practices and rescue organisations, and improved accountability where dogs are abandoned, transferred or involved in incidents. Several respondents also considered that a clear statutory period would be easier to understand and enforce than a requirement to update records “as soon as reasonably practicable”. FOUR PAWS UK stated:

“The current requirement to update details ‘as soon as reasonably practicable’ is too vague. A clear 14-day deadline would create a simple, understandable and enforceable rule.”

A significant theme was that the proposal should operate as part of a wider traceability system, rather than as a standalone administrative requirement. The Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), the Northern Ireland Companion Animal Welfare Group (NICAWG), FOUR PAWS UK, Causeway Coast Dog Rescue (CCDR) and Battersea

Dogs & Cats Home all emphasised that accurate records support enforcement, breeder accountability and welfare investigations. CatsMatter similarly stated that microchipping is only effective when records are kept current and argued that timely updates would reduce ambiguity around ownership, legal responsibilities and enforcement. North Coast Cat Rescue also supported maintaining accurate contact details to improve the reunification of lost animals with their owners. Tuks Law Scan Me also highlighted the role accurate microchip records can play in ensuring animals are returned to appropriate keepers during periods of vulnerability.

A recurring view was that the current microchip database system is fragmented, with multiple providers, differing processes and, in some cases, fees for updating records. Some organisations, including Legal Academics of the School of Law, University of Liverpool, Dogs Trust, USPCA, NICAWG, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home and FOUR PAWS UK, called for stronger regulation of database operators and/or a centralised database or single search portal to support traceability and enforcement. More generally, respondents considered that simpler and more consistent database arrangements could improve record management, support owner compliance, reduce administrative burdens and assist councils, veterinary practices, rescue organisations and other relevant bodies. Respondents also noted practical difficulties where owners do not know which database holds their dog's details, assume a vet updates the record automatically, or are unable to amend records because a previous keeper or breeder has not transferred ownership.

Several respondents recommended that the requirement should be accompanied by public education, annual reminders from database operators, simple guidance for owners and proportionate penalties. Dogs Trust suggested that database operators should send annual reminders and that DAERA should consider joint messages with dog licence renewals. The Royal Kennel Club supported the principle but cautioned that microchipping should not become a "backdoor route" to punishing owners, recommending an education-first approach. The British Veterinary Association Northern Ireland Branch (BVA NI) and British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) supported the 14-day window and suggested that the Department consider whether current fixed penalty levels are sufficient enough to provide an adequate incentive for compliance.

Although support was high and most respondents considered 14 days reasonable, some respondents expressed reservations about the practical operation of a 14-day deadline. Of these, 19 respondents including Countryside Alliance Ireland and Northern Ireland Hen Rescue suggested a longer timeframe, most commonly 21, 28 or 30 days, particularly where an owner is moving house, dealing with bereavement, experiencing personal difficulties, or trying to resolve database access issues. Some individual respondents raised equality and affordability concerns, noting that update fees could discourage compliance, particularly for low-income households, multi-dog households or those who move frequently.

A minority (7%) opposed the proposal or considered it unrealistic. Reasons included the perceived shortness of the timeframe, costs charged by database providers, difficulty accessing records, concerns that responsible owners could be penalised for system failures, and a small number of objections to microchipping more generally.

Council Feedback

The nine councils that responded to the consultation supported the proposal to specify a timeframe in principle. They considered that accurate and timely microchip records would improve traceability and responsible ownership, help reunite lost or stray dogs with their owners, and support animal welfare.

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) supported improved dog microchipping and traceability, including up-to-date ownership records. It considered responsibility for updating microchip records should remain with the owner.

While councils were generally supportive of improved traceability, they consistently raised operational and enforcement concerns. Several councils stated that there should be no direct council enforcement role, or that any enforcement role would need to be properly resourced. Councils also considered that 14 days may be too restrictive with most suggesting 21 to 28 days as a more practical period. Mid Ulster District Council (MUDC) similarly stated:

"The notification period should however be practical and realistic for dog owners to comply with, 14 days is unreasonable, suggest between 21 - 28 days maybe more appropriate".

Councils also raised concerns about disproportionate enforcement action for what may be regarded as a relatively minor administrative offence. Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC), Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council (ANBC) and others requested Fixed Penalty Notice provisions to allow proportionate enforcement and avoid costly prosecution. Councils also highlighted the need for a single access portal or centrally searchable database system, reflecting previous views raised through Northern Ireland Dog Advisory Group (NIDAG) about the difficulty of searching multiple microchip databases.

Several councils commented that the Regulatory Impact Assessment did not adequately quantify the likely enforcement, staffing, IT and administrative costs, particularly given the estimated number of dogs not microchipped in Northern Ireland and the potential requirement to check compliance, investigate outdated details and follow up failures to update records. Councils stressed that existing dog control and animal welfare services are already under pressure and that additional duties should not be imposed without sustainable funding and appropriate enforcement powers.

Question 9 – Do you agree that the owner must indicate if they are / are not the breeder of the dog?

A total of 385 responses were received. Of these, 358 respondents (93%) agreed and 27 respondents (7%) disagreed that the owner must indicate whether they are or are not the breeder of the dog.

Respondent Type	Total Responses	Percentage in Agreement
Organisations	28	100%
Individuals	348	92%
Councils	9	100%
Overall Total	**385**	**93%**

Respondents who supported the proposal generally considered that identifying whether the owner is also the breeder would improve traceability, accountability and enforcement. Many linked the proposal to concerns about irresponsible breeding, puppy farming, illegal sales, abandonment and poor welfare standards. There was support for using microchip records to create an audit trail from breeder to subsequent owner, particularly where puppies are sold, transferred or rehomed. Dog Welfare Reform NI emphasised identifying breeders at first microchipping and tracing later ownership changes through the microchip.

Dogs Trust, USPCA, NICAWG, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, FOUR PAWS UK, Naturewatch Foundation and Causeway Coast Dog Rescue supported the recording of breeder information within microchip records. Several of these organisations also commented that breeder details including the breeder's name, address and, where applicable, breeding licence information should be recorded. Dogs.ie highlighted that:

"We strongly recommend that the breeder's details be permanently retained on the microchip record for the lifetime of the dog, to support traceability and accountability in breeding should any issues arise"

Naturewatch Foundation and the BVA NI /BSAVA supported recording parental microchip details where known. NICAWG, USPCA and CCDR further recommended recording the dam's microchip number and sire details were available. CatsMatter, Best Bark and The Malinois Collective supported retaining breeder information to improve traceability and accountability, with respondents noting that it could help identify irresponsible breeding activity, poor practice and welfare concerns. Respondents also considered that breeder information could help councils and enforcement agencies identify unlicensed breeders, repeat litters and patterns of poor practice.

Some respondents viewed the proposal as a consumer protection measure, noting that a clear breeder record could help prospective owners understand a dog's origin, assist rescues in managing complex cases and enable authorities to identify circumstances where breeders failed to transfer ownership or provided inaccurate details. Several respondents noted that responsible breeders would already provide this information but considered a mandatory requirement necessary to address non-compliance among less responsible sellers.

Concerns focused mainly on accuracy, verification and fairness. Several respondents questioned whether individuals involved in irresponsible breeding would answer honestly and argued that a self-declaration would only be effective if linked to verification against licensing or registration systems.

A minority opposed the proposal or considered it unnecessary, citing doubts that dishonest breeders would comply, concerns about administrative complexity and the view that the key issue is whether a dog is microchipped and traceable rather than whether the owner is also the breeder. However, even some more cautious respondents accepted the principle of breeder traceability where information could be reliably recorded and used proportionately.

Council Feedback

All nine councils that responded supported the proposal. Councils generally considered that the proposal would improve traceability and assist in identifying unlicensed breeders. Several councils stated that the value of the requirement depends on breeder information being recorded and retained on the microchip database. Belfast City Council (BCC), Mid Ulster District Council (MUDC), Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council (CCGC), Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC) and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEA) specifically stated that breeder information should remain as a secondary contact to support tracing and targeted interventions. Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council (ANBC) and Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) made similar comments, noting that retaining breeder information would help trace multiple litters back to unlicensed breeders.

NILGA supported the inclusion of breeder information to support traceability. NILGA also supported proposals by council officers for the Department to explore a single point of entry web-based portal to reduce administrative burdens.

Councils also raised a consistent operational point that they did not see a direct role for councils in enforcing this requirement. Several councils considered that responsibility should rest with the implanter to record and provide breeder information, where known, at the point of microchipping.

Question 10 – Do you agree that all dogs should be microchipped before they are older than eight weeks?

A total of 385 responses were received. Of these, 300 respondents (78%) agreed and 85 respondents (22%) disagreed that all dogs should be microchipped before they are older than eight weeks.

Respondent Type	Total Responses	Percentage in Agreement
Organisations	28	89%
Individuals	348	76%
Councils	9	100%
Overall Total	**385**	**78%**

Respondents who supported the proposal considered that microchipping before eight weeks would strengthen traceability from the earliest stage of a dog's life and ensure that puppies are identifiable before sale, transfer or rehoming. Many stated that puppies should not leave the breeder without being microchipped and that the breeder should be recorded as the first keeper.

Organisations supporting the proposal emphasised the importance of early traceability. Dogs Trust viewed microchipping before eight weeks as a crucial intervention point to ensure traceability before puppies can be separated from their mother, while FOUR PAWS UK considered it important for establishing a dogs identify before sale or transfer and helping to close loopholes around unlicensed breeding. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home commented that:

"An eight-week limit promotes responsible ownership and acquisition. Compulsory microchipping links the puppy directly to the breeder before they are sold."

Several respondents further proposed that it should be an offence to sell or transfer a puppy without a compliant microchip record.

The most frequent concern was that eight weeks may be too early for some puppies, particularly very small breeds and those that are underweight, unwell or medically fragile. A number of respondents suggested that 10 or 12 weeks would be more appropriate, or that microchipping should occur at the first or second vaccination appointment. Some also considered that the requirement should be framed as "before leaving the breeder" rather than strictly before eight weeks.

A veterinary exemption was the most common recommended safeguard. Dogs Trust recommended a certificate of exemption where a veterinarian or other suitable authority

considers that microchipping is unsafe due to size or health reasons. Several other respondents, including Best Bark, Science for Animal Welfare and the Institute of Licensing, also supported exemptions or flexibility on health, welfare or size grounds. The BVA NI / BSAVA supported a consistent requirement across all dogs and highlighted the importance of appropriate competence and training for those implanting microchips.

Opposing respondents generally supported microchipping in principle but objected to the fixed eight-week timing. Reasons included welfare concerns for small breeds, pain or distress, veterinary advice to delay microchipping, and the view that 12 weeks would better reflect when some puppies are rehomed. Countryside Alliance Ireland opposed the proposal, arguing that current requirements are sufficient and that there are circumstances where microchipping before eight weeks may be inappropriate, including where a puppy is small, sick, weak or has recently undergone a legal tail docking procedure. 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust opposed mandatory microchipping before eight weeks, citing concerns about welfare and behavioural impacts, the need to preserve veterinary discretion and existing exemptions and cross-border microchip issues.

Council Feedback

All nine councils supported the proposal. Council comments were generally supportive of strengthening microchipping requirements, although most councils emphasised that exemptions should remain available where microchipping before eight weeks is not appropriate. Common examples cited included very small breeds, health conditions or circumstances where implantation could cause an adverse effect. Several councils also recommended that exemption criteria be developed in consultation with the Northern Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA).

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC) suggested that microchipping could be coordinated with the puppy vaccination schedule, usually around eight weeks, but noted that this could extend to 12 weeks where puppies remain with their mothers until that age.

Councils also raised resource and enforcement concerns. Several stated that they did not see a council role in enforcing the requirement beyond existing dog licensing processes, where councils already require and record microchip details. Councils warned that, if they were expected to enforce strengthened microchipping requirements, there would be significant financial and staffing implications, particularly in light of the estimated number of unmicrochipped dogs in Northern Ireland, the need to check compliance, investigate failures and undertake public engagement.

A recurring council recommendation was that Fixed Penalty Notices should be available as a proportionate enforcement tool. Councils considered that proceeding directly to prosecution would be disproportionate and inconsistent with enforcement approaches for other dog control offences.

Impact Assessments

Regulatory Impact Assessment

Of the 66 respondents who provided comments on the Regulatory Impact Assessment, there was broad support for strengthening microchipping requirements to improve traceability, owner accountability and animal welfare. Respondents highlighted benefits such as improved ownership records, greater breeder traceability, and better prospects for reunifying lost dogs with their owners. Concerns focused mainly on implementation, including the effectiveness of existing microchip databases, potential compliance costs, administrative burdens and the need for effective enforcement arrangements.

Council responses were supportive of the policy objective but raised concerns about the RIA. Councils contend that the assessment does not fully capture the potential financial, staffing, IT, administrative and enforcement costs that could arise if councils were expected to enforce the new requirements. Concerns were also raised regarding high levels of non-compliance, the absence of Fixed Penalty Notice powers and the fragmented nature of existing microchip databases, with several councils calling for a centralised database or single search portal. Overall, respondents supported the proposed outcomes but emphasised the need for proportionate enforcement and robust supporting systems

Rural Needs Impact Assessment and Equality and Disability Screening Exercise

Of the 21 respondents who provided comments on the Rural Needs Impact Assessment and Equality & Disability Screening document, views were generally supportive of the proposal and its anticipated benefits for animal welfare, traceability and responsible ownership. Respondents largely considered that the measures would have limited adverse impacts provided implementation arrangements are accessible and proportionate.

The main issues identified related to practical accessibility. Respondents highlighted that rural dog owners may face longer travel distances to veterinary services and microchip providers, while older people, disabled individuals and those with limited digital access could experience difficulties updating records. As a result, respondents emphasised the importance of accessible, affordable and straightforward compliance arrangements, including non-digital options and clear guidance.

Departmental Response

Update changes within a specified time, such as 14 days

Taking account of the overall support for this proposal, the Department intends to take forward regulations requiring keepers to update their dog's microchip records following a change in ownership or keeper details. The Department has carefully considered the consultation responses, including the concerns raised by councils and other respondents

regarding the proposed 14-day period. In light of this feedback, the Department intends to provide for a 21-day timeframe, which is considered a more practical and proportionate period for compliance while still supporting accurate and up-to-date microchip records.

Owner must indicate if they are / are not the breeder of the dog

Consultation responses showed strong support for recording whether the keeper is also the breeder, particularly because this information would assist traceability, accountability and enforcement. The Department intends to take forward regulations requiring the keeper to declare if they are also the breeder and for this information to be recorded on the database.

All dogs should be microchipped before they are older than eight weeks

Given the majority support for this proposal, the Department intends to take forward regulations requiring all dogs to be microchipped before they are more than eight weeks old. The Department acknowledges and has carefully considered the concerns raised by respondents and the councils in relation to age, size, health and other circumstances where microchipping before eight weeks may not be appropriate. In such circumstances, a veterinary exemption certificate will apply were implantation, or continued implantation, of a microchip would have an adverse effect on the health of the dog, similar to the position under existing microchipping legislation.

Call for Evidence on Microchipping of Pet Cats

The Call for Evidence on the microchipping of pet cats received 279 responses, of which 251 provided information or evidence. Overall, responses indicated strong support for the mandatory microchipping of owned pet cats in Northern Ireland, particularly from cat owners, animal welfare organisations, veterinary stakeholders and rescue groups. Respondents highlighted potential benefits including improved reunification of lost cats with their owners, greater owner accountability, enhanced animal welfare outcomes, and stronger support for tackling abandonment and neglect.

Respondents also identified issues that would need to be considered in any future policy development, including the cost of microchipping, the importance of keeping ownership records up to date, and practical matters relating to enforcement and compliance. The Department is also aware that there are concerns about increasing the regulatory burden on councils and managing the expectations around how any future policy or legislation would be enforced.

Therefore, the Department will carefully consider all evidence submitted through the Call for Evidence, including the concerns and suggestions raised by respondents, and analyse this information to inform the way forward for any future policy proposals, which, when finalised, will be subject to public consultation.

Next steps

Rescue and Rehoming

Before finalising proposals, the Department will review the proposed licensing thresholds to ensure they are proportionate and risk-based; develop clearer definitions of rescue and rehoming activity, including the treatment of foster-based models; establish an implementation group with councils to consider enforcement arrangements, guidance and operational requirements; develop detailed guidance to support consistent inspection and enforcement; consider enhancements to behavioural welfare provisions and inspector competency requirements; and draft the necessary legislation, with final proposals remaining subject to Ministerial approval.

The Department considers that these measures will address the principal concerns raised during consultation while ensuring that all organisations engaged in rescue and rehoming activity operate to appropriate and consistent animal welfare standards.

Dog Licence Fees

The Department has decided not to proceed with the proposed inflationary increase to all categories of dog licence fees at this time. The Department will continue to work collaboratively with councils to improve compliance with the existing dog licensing regime including measures to promote responsible dog ownership through the Department's Responsible Dog Ownership campaign.

Banning specific aversive training devices

The Department will now take the necessary steps towards introducing legislation to prohibit the use of handheld remote-controlled electronic shock collars, choke collars that do not incorporate a stop mechanism, and prong collars on dogs and cats in Northern Ireland. A narrowly defined exemption will be provided for specified service dogs, including dogs used for policing, defence or other prescribed operational purposes in specific circumstances and subject to appropriate conditions.

Microchipping enhancements

The Department intends to bring forward legislation which will mandate: a 21-day timeframe in which keepers must update their dog's microchip records following a change in ownership or keeper details; the keeper to declare if they are also the breeder and for this information to be recorded on the database; and for all dogs to be microchipped before they are more than eight weeks old.

Appendix A – List of Respondents

- 7th Heaven Animal Rescue Trust
- Animal Psychology Clinic
- Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council (ANBC)
- Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC)
- Aqua Dog Hydrotherapy LTD
- Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors
- Balanced Canine
- Battersea Dogs & Cats Home
- Belfast City Council (BCC)
- Beautiful Beasts Dog Training
- Best Bark
- Blue Sky Dogs Dog trainer and Behaviourist
- British Veterinary Association (BVA NI) and Northern Ireland Branch British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA)
- Can Do Dogs Shetland
- Canine Welfare Alliance
- Cat Community Lost & Found N.I
- CatsMatter
- Cats Protection
- Causeway Coast Dog Rescue Ltd (CCDR)
- Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council (CCGC)
- Countryside Alliance Ireland
- Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC)
- Dog Welfare Reform NI
- School of Law, University of Liverpool
- Dogs.ie
- Dogs Trust
- ECMA - Electronic Collar Manufacturers Association
- Empower Dog Coaching

- Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC)
- Four Paws UK
- GoodK9 Companion Dog Training
- Hop to Save Rabbits
- International Association of Canine Professionals
- International Canine Legislation Action Committee
- Just Pawing About
- K9bootcamp
- Lagan Rivers Trust
- Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC)
- Maximum K9 Training
- Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEA)
- Mid Ulster District Council (MUDC)
- National Association for Professional E-collar Training
- Natural Balance Dog Training LTD
- Naturewatch Foundation
- North Coast Cat Rescue
- Northern Ireland Companion Animal Welfare Group (NICAWG)
- Northern Ireland Exotic Sanctuary
- Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
- Northern Ireland Hen Rescue
- Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund
- Redwings Horse Sanctuary
- Science for Animal Welfare (formerly known as Universities Federation for Animal Welfare)
- The Association of Responsible Dog Owners (ARDO)
- The Dog In Me
- The Institute of Licensing
- The Malinois Collective
- The Pet Professional Guild
- The Royal Kennel Club
- Tuks Law Scan Me

- Tyrone Husky Rescue
- United Canine Services Ltd
- Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA)
- Five anonymous organisations

Appendix B – Breakdown of Responses to Each Question

Consultation Question	Yes	No	Total
1. Regulation of Rescue and Rehoming Organisations			
Q1. Do you agree that all rescue and rehoming organisations that rehome more than five animals annually should be inspected and licensed?	437	52	489
Q2. Do you agree that all rescue and rehoming organisations that care for eight or more animals (or five or more dogs) should be inspected and licensed?	441	48	489
Q3. Do you agree with the proposed licence conditions?	437	49	486
2. Increase in Dog Licence Fees			
Q4. Do you agree with the proposed inflationary increase across all categories of dog licence fees?	224	135	359
3. Ban on Specific Aversive Training Devices			
Q5. Do you agree that the use of handheld remote controlled electric shock collars (e collars) on dogs and cats should be banned?	356	350	706
Q6. Do you agree that the use of choke collars on dogs and cats should be banned?	373	332	705
Q7. Do you agree that the use of prong collars on dogs and cats should be banned?	384	322	706
4. Strengthened Microchipping Requirements for Dogs			
Q8. Do you agree that owners be required to update any changes onto the relevant microchip databases within a specified time, such as 14 days?	359	25	384
Q9. Do you agree that the owner must indicate if they are / are not the breeder of the dog?	358	27	385
Q10. Do you agree that all dogs should be microchipped before they are older than eight weeks?	300	85	385

For further information:

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