



Subject:	Public Consultation on Proposed Animal Welfare Policy Reforms in Northern Ireland
Date:	9 June 2026
Reporting Officer:	David Bone, City Services Manager
Contact Officer:	Helen Morrissey, City Protection Manager

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? Yes No

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes No

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
<p>1.1</p> <p>1.2</p> <p>1.3</p> <p>1.4</p> <p>1.5</p> <p>1.6</p>	<p>To make Members aware that The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has launched a public consultation on proposed Animal Welfare Policy Reforms in Northern Ireland. The consultation was launched on 5 May 2026 and closes on Tuesday 30 June 2026.</p> <p>The consultation seeks views on proposed changes across four key policy areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. <p>In addition, the consultation includes a call for evidence on the mandatory microchipping of pet cats.</p> <p><u>The Proposals</u></p> <p>The consultation proposes local councils will be the enforcement and regulatory body for licensing of rescue and rehoming organisations. Officers note that this creates a proposed statutory regime for regulation relating to animals which are outside the scope of current statutory duties for Councils e.g. dangerous wild animals, wildlife, farmed animals.</p> <p>1. Regulation of Rescue and Rehoming Organisations</p> <p>Rescue and rehoming organisations currently operate without formal regulatory oversight. The Department is proposing the introduction of a licensing regime to set uniform welfare standards, enhance transparency and accountability, and strengthen public confidence and protecting animal welfare. This would align with the approach to other animal related businesses and organisations such as animal boarding establishments and pet shops, which are regulated by DAERA</p> <p>The proposed measures are intended to be proportionate and ensure compliance with animal welfare standards without introducing excessive bureaucratic burdens. Proposals include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A requirement for rescue and rehoming organisations to obtain a licence from the council, where more than 5 animals are rehomed within a 12-month period, or where 8 or more animals (or 5 or more dogs) are cared for.

- A requirement for rescue and rehoming organisations to comply with minimum welfare standards or licence conditions, based on the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH) standards relating to animal numbers, staffing, environment, diet, enrichment, rehoming, handling, and protection from suffering, injury and disease.
- A requirement for all licensed organisations to be listed in a public register maintained by the council.

1.7 **2. Dog Licence Fees**

At present, anyone who keeps a dog must obtain a licence from the council. Licence fees were last reviewed and updated in 2011, with the current fee £12.50 for a single dog, £32 for a block licence, and £5 for concessionary licences. Those on income related benefits, or who have had their dog neutered, may pay a reduced fee of £5. Over 65s may obtain a free dog licence for their first or only dog.

1.8 The Department proposes an inflationary increase for licence fees to ensure that they remain appropriate, proportionate and reflective of councils' enforcement and administrative resource requirements. The Department anticipate that by raising the fees, councils will be able to direct more resources to deliver the dog control services, benefiting both dog owners and the wider community.

1.9 The proposed fees are £18.50 for a single dog licence, and £47.50 for a block licence. It is proposed that concessionary fees will be retained, with an inflationary increase to £7.50. Over 65s would continue to receive a free licence for their first or only dog.

1.10 **3. Aversive Training Devices**

The Department proposes to ban the use of handheld remote controlled electric shock collars (e-collars), choke collars and prong collars on cats and dogs in Northern Ireland. It is considered that these aversive training devices present the highest risk of deliberate misuse and direct harm to animal welfare.

1.11 The use of electronic containment type fencing, and spray collars was considered as part of the proposal, they were both assessed as presenting lower risk of potential deliberate misuse, and therefore it is proposed that these types of devices would not be banned.

1.12	<p>4. Strengthening Microchip Requirements for Dogs</p> <p>The Department proposes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it an offence for dog owners to not update ownership details on microchip databases, such as a change of address, within a specified time (i.e. 14 days). • Require owners / keepers to declare that they are also the breeder of the dog, to enable database providers to record breeder details where the breeder is also the keeper of the dog. • Require all owners / keepers to microchip their dogs, by eight weeks of age.
1.13	<p>5. Call for Evidence on microchipping of pet cats</p> <p>The Department is gathering views, evidence and information on whether microchipping of pet (owned) cats should be considered in Northern Ireland.</p>
1.14	<p>This Call for Evidence is intended to gather information to help assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether mandatory microchipping of cats would improve animal welfare and responsible ownership; • What benefits such a requirement could deliver; • What risks, barriers, costs or unintended consequences might arise; and • What concerns stakeholders may have, including practical, ethical or enforcement-related issues.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to agree the proposed consultation response as attached in Appendix 8 and to agree to officers forwarding the response to the Department by the closing date of 30 June 2026 and advising it remains draft and subject to full Council ratification and call-in period in August.</p>
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p><u>Background</u></p> <p>Members will be aware that councils currently have a statutory responsibility for the enforcement of Welfare of Animals (NI) Act 2011 in respect of non-farmed animals e.g. companion animals and equines (horses and donkeys) and are also responsible for all aspects</p>

of licensing and enforcement activities under The Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983, including dog breeding establishments.

3.2 **Council have no role in relation to the breeding, sale, licencing, microchipping, ownership or management of cat behaviour. Furthermore, Council have no role in relation to rescue and rehoming organisations, ‘doggy day care’, pet shops, boarding kennels, including home boarding, all of which are either unregulated or a regulatory function of the Department of Agriculture and Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).**

3.3 In May 2025 the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Minister published proposals within an Animal Welfare Pathway (**Appendix 1**) setting out measures to improve animal welfare in Northern Ireland through delivery of a number of policy and legislative reforms, including a review of dog breeding establishments, regulation of rescue and rehoming organisations and prohibition of third-party pet sales.

3.4 Members recently approved a consultation response, in August 2025, in relation to proposed new rules for selling and supplying puppies and kittens.

3.5 Collectively through Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), Councils continue to raise their concerns of the financial and resource implications of the implementation of new legislation. At the SP&R Committee Meeting on 22 May 2026, Members agreed to write to the Chair of the AERA Committee to highlight on-going concerns in relation to the lack of Animal Welfare funding from DAERA.

3.6 The Northern Ireland Dog Advisory Group (NIDAG) has engaged with the expert advisory group established to review the Dog Breeding Regulations. A copy of their report can be found at **Appendix 2**. This too, will have resourcing implications for councils.

3.7 DAERA is now considering the next phase of proposals and has launched a public consultation on proposed reforms to Animal Welfare policy in Northern Ireland. Councils, via NIDAG have raised their concerns on several occasions that this time period does not adequately allow councils to consider the proposals and have requested the Department extend the deadline by 3 weeks. The Department have not yet agreed to the extension request.

3.8 The consultation seeks views from those with an interest in Animal Welfare, stakeholders who work within the animal welfare sector, individuals or organisations involved in animal rescue and rehoming, and councils which have responsibility for enforcement of companion animal welfare.

3.9 Consultation

Full details of the consultation, including all supporting documentation can be found in **Appendices 3 – 7.**

3.10 Officers have drafted a Council response can be found at **Appendix 8.**

3.11 Key comments

3.12 Whilst Officers welcome strategies and policies to improve Animal Welfare, we do not agree that councils should be required to take on new and additional statutory responsibility for the regulation of rescue and rehoming organisations and enforcement of additional offences without the regulatory and financial impacts being fully assessed and consulted upon with councils.

3.13 These proposals would create additional responsibilities for premises and activities which are either un-regulated or currently dealt with by other agencies including DEARA.

3.14 Councils are still dealing with the impact of the legislation on XL bully safeguards and incurring ongoing costs, which are being absorbed by rate payers. The XL bully legislation is still impacting on Dog Warden Service capacity, with other enforcement activities having to be re-prioritised.

3.15 The consultation proposals reflect a concerning and growing trend which concerns officers, whereby central government seeks to devolve enforcement responsibilities to local government without a corresponding transfer of financial resources, powers or legal protections.

3.16 While we understand the Department's difficult budgetary position, the decision to withdraw the annual £1.25M NI funding for Animal Welfare has left councils in a challenging position. In the absence of any commitment of future allocation of funds to councils, the cost of providing our current Animal Welfare Service continues to be borne by the ratepayers.

3.17 Other key points made in the response:

Regulation of Rescue and Rehoming Organisations

3.18 Officers appreciate the role of rescue and rehoming organisations play in the rehoming of abandoned, stray and unwanted animals.

- Officers are of the view that regulation of the sector aligns much more closely with DAERA's current licensing functions of establishments such as boarding kennels, zoos and pet shops and should sit with them.
- As the Regional Lead Authority the Licensing and Enforcement Regime would be best placed with DAERA to ensure a cost-effective delivery model and consistent enforcement across Northern Ireland. This could be implemented within the existing frameworks by authorisation under existing legislation and / or allocation of legislative powers to DAERA.
- It is likely there will be unintended consequences for small volunteer-led rescues, leading to risks in a reduction of capacity, closures and the risk of reduced rehoming availability.
- Further clarification is needed on animal foster care networks linked to rehoming charities, including definitions of what falls within the scope of the legislation.
- We would not be able to deliver the proposed enforcement regime within existing resources.

3.19 Dog Licence Fees

- Officers broadly support the proposed fee increases but note the marginal increase in income falls short of full cost recovery.
- The proposed inflationary increases provide a modest rise in income and do not meet growing service demands. Dog Warden Services are resource-intensive and demand continues to increase, resulting in costs which have to be absorbed by ratepayers.
- In November 2025 NIDAG, having worked in conjunction with Ulster University, provided data to DAERA which demonstrated that an annual dog licence fee in the region of £25 without concessionary discounts, would be considered reasonable, justified and provide full cost recovery to some but not all councils.
- Around 70% of dog licences are either free or concessionary (fee of £5.00). Officers recommend the removal of the concessionary licence fee as current administration costs outweigh the licence cost, particularly where documentation / verification checks are required prior to a licence being issued. A greater outlay would promote more careful consideration before making a decision to own a dog, aligning with the aim of promoting responsible dog ownership. Current concessions are available where a dog

has been neutered / spayed and those in receipt of income related benefit or a member of a couple that receives an income-related benefit.

- Officers would also suggest a nominal fee for the current free licences which are automatically provided to those over 65 years of age (first dog licence is free, and then £5 for each additional dog).
- A dog license is not required for a puppy under six months old and kept by the person who was also the keeper of the bitch that gave birth to the puppy; an assistance dog used by a disabled person; a dog kept, and on offer for sale, in a licensed pet shop; a police dog; or a dog kept under a block licence, on the premises to which the block licence relates.
- An automatic annual index-linked inflationary increase should be incorporated within the proposed legislative amendment so that councils do not have to wait for further review and legislative changes to allow for future increases.

3.20 Ban on Specified Aversive Training Devices

Whilst officers strongly support a ban on the use of handheld remote controlled electric shock collars (e-collars), choke collars and prong collars on dogs and cats, we would prefer a ban on the SALE and possession of these devices. It is felt that further effective enforcement should include powers to seize devices and the use of Fixed Penalty Notices.

3.21 Strengthening microchipping requirements for dogs

Whilst officers support the objective of improving traceability, the Regulatory Impact Assessment does not adequately reflect the operational and financial burden on councils. In particular, the absence of quantified enforcement, staffing, IT, and administrative costs presents a significant gap. The proposals assume improved outcomes without recognising the scale of current non-compliance or the resource required to achieve behavioural change.

3.22 Call for evidence on microchipping of pet cats

In general, officers agree that the microchipping of cats assists with the traceability and identification of 'owned cats'. **However, we see no role for councils in the enforcement of any mandatory microchipping of cats.**

Where owners keep their details accurate and up to date, databases play an important role in reuniting these animals with their keepers. Council officers recognise microchipping may

	<p>assist in reuniting lost cats with owners, help identify cats involved in traffic accidents and assist in identifying former owners where cats have been abandoned.</p> <p>The proposed limited enforcement tools and the potential financial burden of enforcement and prosecution, raise concerns about the proportionality and practicality of the proposals. We believe the objectives can be achieved without the imposition of a mandatory legal requirement to microchip cats, through the promotion of overall responsible cat ownership led by DAERA, including promoting the health and welfare benefits of microchipping, neutering and vaccination to owners. Other interested stakeholders such as Cats Protection and similar animal charities are best placed to deliver such campaigns with the appropriate level of funding from DAERA and supported by councils.</p> <p>3.23 <u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>The Department has completed several Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) (Appendices 4 - 7). There are significant concerns about the potential financial and resource implications of these proposals and our concerns have been highlighted throughout our response to the consultation.</p> <p>3.24 <u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The Department has completed several Equality and Disability Screening Exercises (See Appendices 4 - 7) and several Rural Needs Impact Assessments (RNIA). We have made comments on both in our response – see Q9, Q10, Q12, Q17, Q18 and Q20.</p>
4.0	Appendices
	<p>Appendix 1 – DAERA Animal Welfare Pathway</p> <p>Appendix 2 – Review of Dog Breeding Regulations in NI, with recommendations to improve animal welfare</p> <p>Appendix 3 – Consultation on proposed animal welfare policy reforms in Northern Ireland</p> <p>Appendix 4 – Rural Needs Impact Assessments</p> <p>Appendix 5 – Rural Needs Impact Assessments</p> <p>Appendix 6 – Rural Needs Impact Assessments</p> <p>Appendix 7 - Rural Needs Impact Assessments</p> <p>Appendix 8 - Consultation response on Proposed Animal Welfare Policy Reforms in Northern Ireland</p>

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