

Written evidence submitted by PDSA to the Petitions Committee's inquiry on fireworks (FWS0351)

About PDSA

1. Founded in 1917 by animal welfare pioneer, Maria Dickin CBE, [PDSA](#) is the UK's leading veterinary charity. Through a UK-wide network of 48 Pet Hospitals, every year PDSA provides free and reduced cost veterinary care to 470,000 pets of people in need and promotes responsible pet ownership. Through our mission to treat illness, prevent diseases and educate owners we work tirelessly towards our vision of a lifetime of wellbeing for every pet.
2. Following the introduction of the Animal Welfare Acts 2006 (2011 in Northern Ireland) PDSA (in collaboration with the leading research agency YouGov) launched the annual [PDSA Animal Wellbeing \(PAW\) Report](#) in 2011 to meet the need for an overarching means of assessing, monitoring and improving the wellbeing of the UK's pet dogs, cats and rabbits. The Report uses nationally representative samples for the entire UK pet-owning population for these three species. Now in its ninth year, the PAW Report continues to be a respected source for assessing the state of the UK's pets and is widely respected throughout the animal welfare and veterinary sector.
3. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation on a topic that we know causes welfare issues for the UK's pets.

Executive Summary

4. Our research shows that a significant proportion of UK pets (40% of dogs, 34% of cats and 18% of rabbits) are afraid of fireworks and 51% of veterinary professionals say they have seen an increase in pets with phobias such as fireworks in the last two years. ([PAW Report 2018](#))
5. This is sadly reflected in the number of firework-related issues that we see in our national network of Pet Hospitals (1,200 animals seen for firework related issues such as phobias and injuries between July 2016 and July 2017). Very many pets require sedative medication, alongside veterinary behavioural advice, to support animals and owners in coping with and addressing these fears.
6. A significant proportion of veterinary professionals (83%) and pet owners (78%) agree that fireworks should be regulated to allow use for licensed events or on certain dates only. ([PAW Report 2018](#))
7. When asked if they thought that more silent fireworks should be available for sale, 69% of UK pet owners agreed (of which 71% agreed strongly). ([PAW Report 2018](#))
8. As well as causing distress to pets and their owners, fireworks cause injuries to adults and children, have an impact on PTSD sufferers, can exacerbate anti-social behaviour, and, in extreme cases, can be used as weapons.
9. We feel strongly that the use of all fireworks, except for category 1, should be restricted to public events on set dates only and for all public events to be licensed by local authorities. This will ensure predictability for those affected adversely by fireworks.

10. We also support a compulsory reduction in decibel limit of all fireworks to 97 dBAI at 15 metres.
11. Owners should be educated to ensure that as many pets as possible are socialised to the noise of fireworks prior to 'firework season', and that owners looking for support for pets with behavioural issues are directed to appropriately qualified behaviourists (APBC and ABTC).
12. We will continue to provide support to the Animal Behaviour and Training Council, and its aim to provide appropriate accreditation and registration of animal behaviourists in this currently unregulated area.

Does the law provide an appropriate balance between allowing for the safe enjoyment of fireworks by the public and minimising the risk of fireworks harming people, property or animals?

13. Whilst there is significant legislation around the sale and use of fireworks currently, we do not feel that these go far enough and do not provide adequate protection for those most vulnerable in society. Animals in particular have more sensitive hearing than humans and are therefore more greatly affected by the loud and high-pitched noise of fireworks, with some individuals becoming extremely sensitised. As documented in [BVA's position](#) on this issue pets' fears can lead to behaviours that significantly affect their own health (such as stress and fear responses, injuries and loss of life) and greatly impact their owners.
14. Data from the [PDSA Animal Wellbeing \(PAW\) Report](#) shows that a high proportion of UK pets are afraid of fireworks (40% of dogs, 34% of cats and 18% of rabbits in 2018). This is borne out by figures from our Pet Hospitals showing a high number of firework-related issues requiring veterinary intervention (e.g. 1,200 animals seen for firework related issues such as phobias and injuries between July 2016 and July 2017).
15. [The PAW Report 2018](#) also showed that 51% of veterinary professionals say they have seen an increase in pets with phobias such as fireworks in the last two years, and 83% of veterinary professionals agreed that fireworks should be regulated to allow use for licensed events or on certain dates only.
16. 24% of the UK population own a dog, 25% own a cat and 2% own a rabbit ([PAW Report 2018](#)). 78% of pet (dog, cat and rabbit) owners in the UK agreed that fireworks should be regulated to allow use for licensed events or on certain dates only. Of these, 75% agreed strongly with this statement showing that there is widespread support among a large proportion of the UK population for change ([PAW Report 2018](#)). When asked if they thought that more silent fireworks should be available for sale, 69% of UK pet owners agreed (of which 71% agreed strongly) ([PAW Report 2018](#)).
17. Other scientific research has shown that a fear of fireworks is the most common noise phobia in dogs and the incidence of noise phobias due to fireworks may be higher than reported because not all owners recognise the signs of fear ([Blackwell 2013](#)).
18. It is common for dogs suffering from firework phobias to receive psychoactive medication to help them cope during 'firework season'. Across our PDSA Pet Hospitals hundreds of pets in this way every year, and this is a common picture in veterinary practices across the UK. However, it is worth noting that it is not possible for owners to always predict when firework noise will occur and therefore it's impossible to always protect their pet in this way.

19. As highlighted in previous House of Commons debates, owners also go to great lengths to protect their pets at times of fireworks such as travelling away from areas of noise, but due to lack of predictability, this isn't always possible or practical.
20. In addition to the effect on pets, fireworks can also be significantly detrimental to human health and communities. For example, research has shown the high rate of injuries caused by fireworks to children ([Edwin et al 2008](#), [RoSPA website](#)) leading to calls from senior doctors for firework packaging to show graphic images of the types of injuries caused ([BBC 2018](#)). Charities supporting armed forces veterans are also campaigning for changes to protect post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sufferers ([Shoulder to Soldier website](#)). In addition there have been examples of fireworks being used to attack others; for example, an attack on a homeless former Army serviceman ([Huffington Post 2018](#)) and attacks on emergency services ([Sky News 2018](#)).

Should there be specific rules to protect animals?

21. Yes, we strongly feel that firework regulations should be changed to achieve better control and reduce suffering in pets. We would like to see the use of all fireworks except category 1 to be restricted to organised, public displays only and for these events to be licensed by local authorities. The dates of such displays should be restricted to coincide with the traditional use of fireworks (e.g. 5th November, Diwali, New Year).
22. Alongside such restrictions, we also feel that the decibel limit of fireworks should be significantly reduced, through legislation as it is currently determined by the human pain threshold and needs to take into account the needs of animals too. As proposed by the BVA and RSPCA we support reducing the maximum noise level to 97 dBAI at 15 metres to coincide with the maximum measured household level. Additional research is required to determine whether this level should be further reduced for the benefit of animals. It is also extremely important for adequate resources to be made available so that existing and new regulations can be enforced by Local Authorities.
23. It is also important that pets are as adequately prepared for the noise of fireworks as possible. This begins with adequate socialisation and habituation at a young age whilst with their breeder. We hope that this will be considered in guidance around the new [Licensing of Activities Involving Animals Regulations 2018](#) where socialisation and habituation plans are required to be put in place by breeders.
24. Socialisation of young pets should be continued by owners when they take on their new pet and it is important for owners to be educated about what this requires. Owners should be educated in how to do this and directed to resources such as the PDSA webpage on [puppy socialisation](#) and [kitten socialisation](#).
25. Where pets have developed fears and phobias it is essential that owners receive appropriate advice as incorrect advice can make a situation much worse and potentially dangerous for pet and owner alike. Owners should be advised to contact their vet initially who can then refer them to a suitably qualified animal behaviourist if necessary. As animal behaviourists are currently unregulated, we welcome work by the [Animal Behaviour Training Council \(ABTC\)](#) to bring regulation to this area to ensure that pets get the help that they need from appropriately qualified and registered professionals.

Are the public and event organisers sufficiently aware of the necessary safety precautions when using fireworks?

26. We feel that more can be done to ensure that the public and event organisers are aware of what they need to do to ensure that the use of fireworks is safe for all.

27. For example, we support clearer labelling showing the sound qualities and levels of different types of fireworks to enable those that are quieter to be chosen. A national, co-ordinated public awareness campaign on the adverse effects of fireworks would help educate the public. Communications through firework associations would also help raise awareness among those involved in trading and the commercial use of fireworks.

Further information

28. If you have any questions about this response or require any further information please contact Emma Tipton, Evidence and Policy Manager, tipton.emma@pdsa.org.uk.

References

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