

Antisocial behaviour with dogs challenged by joint initiative

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Robin Fearon, features editor, reports on an initiative to influence antisocial behaviour with dogs through education

ANTISOCIAL behaviour is the quintessential modern urban problem. Just imagine gangs of wayward youths roaming the streets acting aggressively, disturbing the peace, and proud of it. Now add a Staffordshire bull terrier to that image. A dog used to intimidate, a macho accessory. It is a scenario that instils fear in many.

That may be too simplistic for many people, after all antisocial behaviour is hardly a modern (or particularly urban) issue, but it is exactly what the People With Dogs (PWD) project aims to tackle. Launched in Brixton on February 27 as a joint collaboration, its mission is to challenge antisocial behaviour through education.

Project organisations include Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, The Blue Cross, the RSPCA, the Metropolitan Police and the Greater London Authority (GLA). Each contributes in its way to dealing with the problem caused by antisocial behaviour with dogs, and each hopes the PWD educational pack will curb that problem.

The pack includes a short, gritty film about young people with dogs that addresses everything from training aggressive behaviour to illegal breeding. The DVD includes interviews with dog-attack victim Mike Ebberson, and canine behaviourist Robert Alleyne from BBC3's *Dog Borstal*, and an interactive electronic workshop to stimulate debate.

Anything that makes young people look at the consequences of their actions is a step in the right

direction, says John Duffy, policy director of the GLA. “We want to decrease the number of people using dogs as accessories to their lifestyle,” he says. “We also want to stop intimidation. I think those with large or bull-breed dogs forget the effect it has on other people, the elderly and mothers with babies particularly. No dog is a bad breed, but there are bad owners and that’s what we want to deal with. We want to disassociate dogs from criminal activities, and education is where we start.”

At first the group was unsure how to influence the situation at all admits Ali Taylor, head of animal welfare training at Battersea. “We looked at things like training clubs, breeders, whether we should target certain estates, but I don’t think it would have the same impact because we wouldn’t be reaching the people we need to. Let’s face it, none of these kids is going to turn up to a training club.

“We got in contact with community workshops that were already dealing with antisocial behaviour and crime, because they had a lot of success with a similar educational campaign, using video and local kids. A lot of kids are already involved in workshops, some are involved in crime. They are made to open up and discuss their actions, and that’s who we are targeting.”

Persuasion

Nigel Griffiths is head veterinary surgeon at The Blue Cross hospital in Victoria. The charity treats a lot of bull breeds and bull crossbreeds, so it has developed a policy to neuter free of charge. This is not popular with a certain cross-section of clients - mostly young men - who have a macho attitude to the procedure.

“If you talk about it too much then you put off the very group that you’re trying to influence,” he says. “We persuade them by referring to behaviour problems and the massive surplus of unwanted puppies that are produced and left at rehoming and rescue centres across the UK. Some are simply bursting at the seams with unwanted staffies.”

Often puppies are sold on to friends or via websites and essential care issues, such as vaccination against fatal diseases like parvovirus, go unheeded. According to Nigel, nearly 100 per cent of Blue Cross parvo cases are staffies.

His staff have also been attacked by poorly socialised, aggressive animals and Nigel’s approach to the problem is business-like. “We need to get their dogs vaccinated, neutered, trained and socialised at the right time,” he maintains. “This is a trendy breed for young people, especially boys, and unfortunately it is a breed that comes with a lot of complicated issues.

“Unless they are socialised and trained properly when they are young, they can be destructive, prone to separation anxiety and barking, biting people and other dogs. All these things can be corrected by proper socialisation. People do not know how to look after their dog, but they breed

them for cash and it is getting out of control.”

On the same day that PWD launched in Brixton, across London in Westminster the Liberal Democrat Party revealed NHS figures showing a staggering 40 per cent rise in bite injuries over the past four years. During that period, the number of patients under 18 treated for dog bites in London more than doubled.

Mike Ebberson is determined not to be another statistic. The Londoner was walking his dog, a staffie bitch called Millie, in the Wandsworth district when they were attacked by two roaming dogs. It was relentless, he says, an American pit bull terrier attacked Millie and the other dog - a cross breed - circled to stop people coming to his aid. When he tried to end the attack he was savaged and needed multiple stitches in an arm wound.

It lasted for half an hour but, he says, it felt like an eternity. The dogs were so ferocious that a police armed response unit was dispatched to deal with the situation. “It was a killing machine,” he says. “I never want to see eyes like that again in my life. It took Millie’s legs out one at a time and when I tried to stop it they went for me.

“This dog had been so badly treated - starved, hung up on a tree and let bounce there for an hour to strengthen its jaws, and beaten so that it would show aggression. When they opened up its gut at the postmortem they found raw liver injected with steroids.”

Think twice

As shocking as the memory is, Mike insists that good can come from it. He gives a candid account on the DVD contained in the PWD education pack and he thinks his experience will make others think twice before training a dog to be vicious. “With this film I think we’re starting down the right track. I certainly don’t want Millie to have died in vain.

“I would endorse a dog licensing scheme and I’d make microchipping your dog a legal requirement,” he adds. “But, ultimately, it is how you treat them that matters. Give me any dog as a puppy - even one of the bull breeds - and you would see a totally different animal. My staffie was the most loving dog I’ve ever had. She’s sadly missed.”

The Blue Cross’ Nigel Griffiths agrees that dog licensing makes sense. “It isn’t Blue Cross policy, but if there was a registration programme linked to vaccination and neutering it would improve the situation. These young dogs are going to be around for 12 or 14 years, and many of them are going to be bred from, we need to control that.”

While control remains a distant possibility, teaching young people about the pitfalls is the only viable route. Robert Alleyne of TV’s Dog Borsal believes that people must be completely re-educated about the meaning of dog ownership. He says it is no coincidence that staffies and other

bull breeds are popular, and people are getting them for entirely the wrong reasons.

“There has been a huge change in the way people perceive dogs,” he says. “Fifty years ago people bought dogs for a particular role: working dogs. The same thing is happening now, but it’s the wrong role. In those days people bought dogs to catch vermin or to hunt with, but now they’ve become a status symbol.”

There is a real advantage to Robert’s inclusion on the DVD. He is, he says, the only black canine behaviourist he knows and it gives him an advantage on the streets of south London. Young men recognise him and can relate to him. After all, he is a world removed from the tweedy, slightly barmy Barbara Woodhouse generation of dog trainers.

“I do find it easier to get through to these people than others might, but like most trainers I spend little time training the dogs, if at all. We spend enormous amounts of time training the owners. My approach has always been to talk people into understanding rather than intimidate them or make them feel stupid.

“Neither of those approaches works well. A lot of these kids I talk to have already been labelled in some way and the dog is a defence mechanism to something in their lives. It is far better to get them to try to understand rather than bully them into being good.”

Both he and Battersea’s Ali Taylor believe the DVD needs massive circulation and a coordinated campaign to get its message across.

We need to go back to basics in local schools,” says Ali. “If you look at primary schools, for example, most teachers will tell the children that a waggy tail means a friendly dog. Well that could also mean the dog is aggressive. And if we are doing this in primary schools, are we missing the kids on the street who don’t go to school? We must tackle the idea that it is cool to have your dog off its lead. We must make it less easy to get dogs from the internet or free ad papers, there are a number of problems to be solved.”

Like Nigel Griffiths, she stresses that veterinary staff are on the front line when it comes to people with dogs. They see the dogs with bite wounds, they deal with the aggressive breeds and antisocial behaviour from owners. Most of all, she sees history repeating itself and she does not like it.



The People With Dogs project was launched in Brixton, with the aim of influencing some antisocial behaviours.



The PWD information pack contains a short film, which addresses issues such as training dogs into aggressive behaviours, neutering dogs and the problems associated with “out of control” breeding of fashionable dogs just to make money.

