

Community resolutions and education about dogs

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Practice note: Using responsible dog ownership and assembly talks in schools to reduce dog attacks

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For the last two years I have worked to raise awareness and improve investigative standards around dangerous dog offences and related legislation to frontline response officers, neighbourhood policing officers and police community support officers (PCSOs). Working within the Chippenham Neighbourhood Policing team at Wiltshire Police, I have created several educational guides and resources which now circulate on Wiltshire's intranet.

Blue Cross responsible dog ownership course

After noticing an increase in dog-related offences, I conducted a review of crime recording statistics from offences surrounding dangerous dogs. I realised that disposal method rates could be improved by using community resolutions (CRs) and community protection warnings (CPWs).

For the last 18 months, Blue Cross, a registered animal welfare charity, and I have had discussions around improving safety in the community and utilising their resources to encourage responsible dog ownership. In the early stages, we talked about out-of-court disposals and CRs to improve outcomes for owners of offending dogs. We then started utilising Blue Cross's online intervention called the responsible dog ownership course (RDOC), which originally was piloted in 2019 by West Midlands Police and then South Yorkshire Police before being offered out to wider forces and local authorities.

Offences range from low-level injuries to dog-on-dog attacks, dogs worrying livestock and out of control dogs. The course is aimed towards low-level, first-time offenders who commit offences under [Section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991](#) and [Section 2 of the Dogs Act 1871](#). It places an emphasis on empowering the dog owner through education as opposed to punishment.

The offending dog owner attending the course will cover a wide range of topics on being a responsible dog owner, including:

- dog legislation and responsibilities
- dog safety and canine communication
- dog control and management

Blue Cross supplies the user of the RDOC with resources from the course to support continued learning and dog ownership into the future. This includes one-to-one virtual training and behaviour assessments with trusted behaviourists signposted by Blue Cross.

A lack of understanding and education by dog owners can be a significant factor when it comes to dog bites. It's very unusual for a dog to simply attack and bite without provocation. Dog behaviour experts refer to the 'canine ladder of communication' when it comes to dog bites. This is an 11-step ladder where a dog displays signs of anxiety or fear. This ranges from simply yawning or lip smacking at level one to 'tail tucking' and 'crouching' at level six, all the way up to biting at level 11.

Although this ladder is not always a linear journey of expressed behaviours, it allows the owner to understand escalation of behaviours in simple terms so that these signs are not mistaken or overlooked. The RDOC covers this ladder in depth, giving the owner a chance to spot these signals from their dog.

From the 2023/24 financial year, we have had reoffending rates of 0% and Wiltshire currently sits in the top five (of nearly 30) police forces and local authorities for referral numbers.

Blue Cross safety around dogs assembly talk

During my review into dog bite incidents, I discovered that many incidents (70%) happen in people's home address, with the highest percentage of victims being children. In 2023, Blue Cross and I arranged training for 58 attendees, made up of police officers, PCSOs and the council dog warden to deliver the Blue Cross safety around dogs assembly talks, aimed at Key stage 1 and 2 children.

The talk focuses on the areas where we see the most common dog bite scenarios: when the dog is eating and when the dog is sleeping. Children are taught how to safely deal with dogs, following the

'Three Cs'.

1. Check with the dog's owner if they can stroke the dog.
2. Call the dog over (giving the dog a choice).
3. Count three strokes on the shoulder before asking permission once again.

The assembly also gives an input on very basic dog body language and warning cues. The training and safety talks are centred around the following key points:

- dog safety
- understanding dog body language
- positive relationship with pets (giving them space and choice)

Our aim is to encourage a behaviour change across a generation and take a preventive approach in reducing dog attacks on young children. The assembly talks are specifically designed to engage young people, evoke empathy and help develop successful people/pet relationships both now and in the future. Blue Cross conduct regular research to ensure knowledge and empathy change are measured through impact measurement.

In the last quarter of 2023, the school assembly talk reached over 1,400 young children from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures.

If you are interested in becoming an RDOC partner or having your force trained to deliver school assemblies, please contact RDOC@Bluecross.org.uk

- This article was peer reviewed by PC John Rankin-Hill, Dyfed-Powys Police

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