

## **Public Access Around Livestock – Discussion Paper**

Landowners and occupiers recognise the important contribution that access makes to the rural economy. Farmers and other land managers are happy to welcome public who take responsible access to their land. Issues arise where access is not responsible, managing this can be very difficult, and cause real issues from an emotional and economic perspective for those affected.

Despite high profile campaigns over many years we are still seeing too many incidents of livestock attacks and trauma in our rural areas, often where dogs are being let off the leash or being left unattended and escaping from homes and gardens. It is not always possible to identify those responsible for livestock worrying attacks, meaning that a new approach is needed to try to convey the message that this form of anti-social access is not acceptable.

### **Livestock Worrying**

One issue which has been consistently occurring for several years, is where access takers are accompanied by a dog that is allowed to be out of control and worry livestock. Injury or death of livestock caused by dogs in the countryside that are not under control is a growing problem. Issues occur year round, but seem to increase with warmer weather, when the public are more likely to take access to the countryside. Peri-urban areas and areas on well used paths, areas which see heavy footfall such as regional parks, and viewpoints seem to be hot spots for repeated livestock worrying occurrences by multiple individuals. In these areas, the affected farmers are at a loss as to what they can do to try to manage this problem.

Where livestock worrying occurs, the consequences for the farmer involved are devastating. There is a serious emotional impact of dealing with what is often multiple dead or horribly injured livestock. In addition, this issue is a serious animal welfare issue.

Often, farmers have cared for the affected animals since birth, through several generations. As a last resort farmers have the ability to shoot a dog they find worrying livestock, this in itself is something which causes them both great distress and regret, as well as the potential for a lengthy police and court process. Where this course of action is taken there can be repercussions, NFUS is aware of several occasions where farmers have been subject to vile online abuse and death threats against themselves and their families.

In addition to the emotional impacts of this problem the financial implications can be severe. Losses incurred are ongoing vets bills, or the loss of valuable livestock. In addition, losses to pedigree herds can lead to loss of valuable and rare bloodlines which have been a lifetimes work. Rural insurer NFU Mutual has reported that claim costs in Scotland have more than quadrupled, with the total cost to industry from this problem reported as £1.6 million.

### **Addressing the Issue**

Initially, when the land management organisations raised this issue there was a campaign to raise awareness of dogs in the countryside. In addition, there were also case studies for

innovative methods of managing dog access. NFUS cannot report any decrease in the number of instances from either trying to raise awareness amongst the public or offer some best practice options.

In more recent attempts to reduce this problem both NFUS, SLE and the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime have concentrated efforts on raising awareness further. NFUS will continue to raise awareness in 2019 with a major campaign around responsible dog ownership in the countryside. However, despite ongoing considerable time, effort, and finance, the problem has not reduced and is still occurring countrywide with disappointing regularity.

NFUS and partners have spent considerable time on working within the current Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Whilst it remains mostly fit for purpose, it is clear that the potential for uncontrolled dogs that are off a lead around livestock cannot be mitigated unless there is a level of amendment.

### **Mitigation – NFUS position**

NFUS believes that a simpler and stronger message must be given to the public, that dogs must be on a lead around livestock. This change is clearer and easier for the public to understand, can be easily reflected in appropriate signage, and gives farmers and land managers a stronger footing when dealing with issues that arise. Several NFUS members have reported that where land managers have made specific request to keep dogs on lead via specific signage, this is largely complied with-and the level of associated dog fouling has also decreased.

#### **The Code notes:**

*‘If you go into a field of farm animals, keep your dog(s) on a short lead or under close control and keep as far as possible from the animals’*

*This current definition,*

NFUS feels that this should be amended to say: ***‘if you are on any land where livestock are grazing, you must keep your dog on a lead and keep as far as possible from the animals. You should remove all dog faeces and dispose of these in a bin ’***

In order to reflect the obvious dangers posed by cattle, who can be attracted towards dogs. NFUS feels that it may be prudent to insert a sentence relating to cattle such as **‘where cattle are present, access takers are reminded that these can be attracted by dogs, and may act aggressively, posing a significant hazard to personal safety.**

### **Conclusion**

The land management organisations wish to work with NAF on this persistent, countrywide, and ongoing problem, but the time has come for some tangible progress or reducing occurrences of this issue. The cost to agricultural industry is real, and not one which can or should be sustained, particularly where clearer messaging could make a real difference.

**Gemma Cooper (NFUS) January 2019**