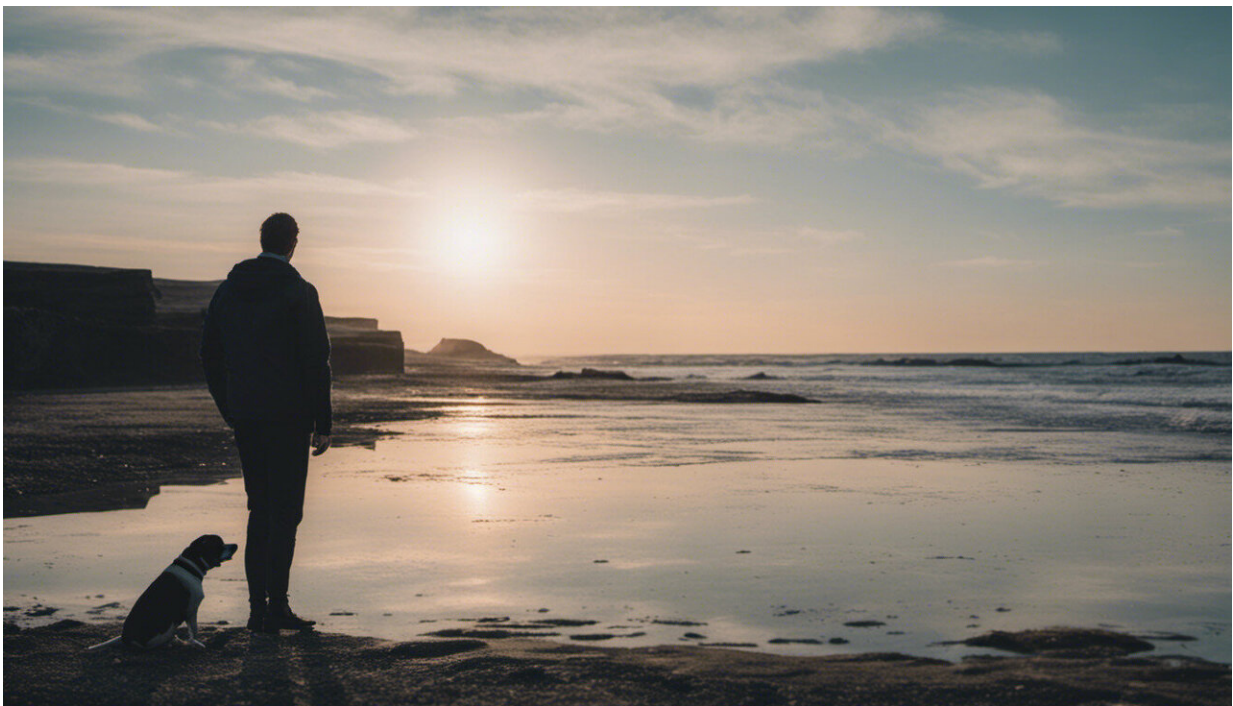


Commentary: Why it's time for the UK to introduce mandatory training for new dog owners

February 20 2023, by Angus Nurse



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With recent reports suggesting there has been an increase in fatal dog attacks in the UK, it's clear the status quo isn't working. Records indicate that in an average year there would be three dog fatalities. But in 2022 there were [nine](#).

The reasons why records show an increase are complex but already in 2023 there have been two tragic incidents, one [a dog walker](#) who died from bites to the neck. The other attack, which is still being investigated, involved the death of a [four-year-old girl](#).

In 1987, the UK government discontinued its dog licensing system as politicians felt the old license scheme cost too much for the limited benefits it gave. It was replaced by dog controls in the [Environmental Protection Act 1990](#) and the [Dangerous Dogs Act 1991](#). But people told my research team that most [dog bites](#) are preventable, meaning the system is letting down both dogs and humans.

One idea researchers have discussed is that when an owner has a problem with an out-of-control dog they should have to take [training](#), similar to the kind of "speed awareness" courses for drivers in the UK.

Veterinary experts in the Netherlands already do something like this. They have researched aggression in dogs and found training can [help prevent it](#), especially training of both the owner and the dog. Training can help owners recognize potential behavior issues and reduce it through proper socialization, which training can help with too.

In some other countries, including Spain, where potentially dangerous dogs must be licensed before you can become a dog owner, you have to show that you are a "fit and proper person" to do so. Our previous research didn't specifically call for dog licenses. But it did find knowledge of dog behavior before and during ownership of a dog was desirable. So too was compulsory dog training following a dog attack.

The problem with the old license scheme was that it was almost impossible to enforce. The UK government estimated only around 50% of dog owners complied with the old scheme and registered their dogs.

You still need a license to own a dog in Northern Ireland, where a license costs £12.50 and lasts for [12 months](#). But it is thought that [less than 40% of owners](#) register their dogs.

UK law makes microchipping of dogs mandatory. Although government figures suggest 95% of dogs are [chipped](#), it is doubtful every dog owner has done this.

Tracking attacks

In the UK there are laws that deal with dog fouling, stray dogs and dogs that are dangerously out of control, whether in public or private. But dog attacks continue.

We don't know exactly how many dog attacks there are each year in the UK. A figure often used by the media is that over 7,000 people go to hospital [each year](#) for dog bite treatment.

But research suggests [this figure may be too low](#). One study of a community in Cheshire, England, found only a third of dog bites needed medical treatment and just 0.6% resulted in a hospital admission.

After dog attacks the people affected often call for more action to [deal with dangerous dogs](#) or say dog licenses should be brought back. By itself, dog licensing would not solve everything.

For our 2021 [research paper](#) on dangerous dogs and [responsible dog ownership](#) we spoke to charities, local authorities, police and dog experts. We found the main issue was people could get a dog without knowing how to train or look after it.

Even with new measures like [Lucy's Law](#) to tackle puppy farms and [the 2019 licensing for breeders](#), dogs are still sold to people without checks

on whether they can properly care for their new pet.

If an owner is trained to spot the early signs of problem behavior or situations that might trigger an incident, simple things like keeping dogs on a lead or using a muzzle in busy public places could prevent attacks or make them less serious.

Time for owners to step up

If we are serious about addressing dog control problems we should think about how to deal with the fact dogs often end up in the hands of people who are unable to care for them and deal with behavior issues.

We aren't the only ones who think this. Many members of the public understand the importance of prevention: a petition launched in 2022 to change dog laws to focus on early intervention attracted over [100,000 signatures](#).

No scheme or law will eliminate all dog control or attack issues. But the old style of paper dog license was really just a tax on dog owners. Instead, it may be time for a form of registration or certificate that requires knowledge of dogs before a person can have one and that imposes ownership conditions, such as a suitable home, understanding of the duty of animal welfare that [already exists in law](#), and a requirement for training when something goes wrong.

Registration should accompany sale and also be linked to the existing microchipping requirements. A new registration scheme would need resources to properly enforce, a big ask in a time of rising living costs and government austerity measures. But even if we can't afford a new enforcement scheme, encouraging dog owners to develop the skills they need would be a good start.

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