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The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2014, 23: 39-46
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.23.1.039

Prioritisation of companion dog welfare issues using expert consensus

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Abstract

Resources for tackling animal welfare issues are often limited. Obtaining a consensus of expert opinion on the most pressing issues to address is a valuable approach to try to ensure that resources are wisely spent. In this study, seven independent experts in a range of disciplines (including veterinary medicine, animal behaviour and welfare science and ethics) were consulted on the relative prioritisation of welfare issues impacting companion dogs in Great Britain. Experts first anonymously ranked the priority of 37 welfare issues, pre-defined from a literature review and an earlier published survey. In a subsequent two-day panel workshop, experts refined these issues into 25 composite groups and used specific criteria to agree their relative priorities as a Welfare Problem (WP; incorporating numbers of dogs affected, severity, duration and counter-balancing benefits) and a Strategic Priority (SP; a combination of WP and tractability). Other criteria — anthropogenicity, ethical significance and confidence in the issue-relevant evidence — were also discussed by the panel. Issues that scored highly for both WP and SP were: inappropriate husbandry, lack of owner knowledge, undesirable behaviours, inherited disease, inappropriate socialisation and habituation and conformation-related disorders. Other welfare issues, such as obese and overweight dogs, were judged as being important for welfare (WP) but not strategic priorities (SP), due to the expert-perceived difficulties in their management and resolution. This information can inform decisions on where future resources can most cost-effectively be targeted, to bring about the greatest improvement in companion dog welfare in Great Britain.

Keywords: *animal welfare, companion animal, dog, expert, priority, stakeholder*