

## Opinion

# Shock collars – training aid or cruel tool?

Jamie Penrith, dog trainer and campaigner for responsible dog ownership, questions the wisdom of an outright ban.

IN AUGUST 2018 MICHAEL GOVE MP announced the Government's intention to ban the use of hand-held electronic training collars – sensationally dubbed '6000v shock collars' – on the grounds that they cause "harm and suffering" to dogs. Having hounded SMPs to do likewise in 2017, animal 'welfare' charities set about throwing their wealth and influence behind a concurrent campaign in England. A spoon-fed media promptly regurgitated factual inaccuracies, evidential omissions and anecdotal exaggeration. Dogs Trust produced a marketing cartoon showing a Disney-like dog, whimpering and crouching to the buzz and crackle of electrical current. 'Crufts' became a platform for Mayfair's (since imploding) Kennel Club to preach about ethics, while the RSPCA and Battersea unified against the clear and present danger posed by these 'barbaric' and 'cruel' devices. Dogs Trust and the Kennel Club made sure to keep their competing 'training interests' below the media radar.

This is not the first time that the charitable armies have gone over the top on this matter. It has been an ongoing battle between sensationalistic, emotive rhetoric, versus observable evidence and objective reasoning for over a decade.

In 2012, the findings of an independent Companion Animal Welfare Council review, recommended further studies into electronic training aids before banning. Consequently, in 2014 the results of a £500k Defra-funded study provided insufficient evidence to support a ban on welfare grounds.

'Insufficient evidence' has since been Defra's stance, confirmed in a letter to the RCVS at the end of February 2018. Suddenly within a two-week period, 'in light of emerging evidence', Defra

made an abrupt 180 degree turnaround. Both electronic training and electronic containment collars, were now 'punitive devices' and the Government wanted rid... immediately. A short public consultation was announced without any prior

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stakeholder discussion. In stating "the time is now right to impose a legal ban", Defra made it clear that the forthcoming 'impartial' consultation process was essentially a box-ticking exercise. They badly misjudged public opinion. The results revealed that merely 8% of respondents supported a total ban, with an undeniable 64% directly opposing it.

So what of the 'emerging evidence' that Defra announced? Responding to a freedom-of-information request, they admitted: "There is no new evidence."

Perhaps then, the answer lay in cruelty prosecutions, or canine victims of abuse?

Apparently not. Despite approximately 150,000 neglect and cruelty investigations per year, there has never been a conviction for cruelty

relating to the use of electronic training collars and no 'victims' to uphold allegations of abuse.

No support. No evidence. No prosecutions. No victims?

Consequently, Scotland decided not to ban, but to issue strict guidance to accompany perfectly adequate, existing legislation.

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Electronic training collars can help owners prevent their dogs from engaging in illegal activities such as hare coursing.





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Used in the wrong way, these devices can arguably “cause harm and suffering” to dogs. But used in the right way they might prevent a wayward dog meeting a worse end. What do you think?

Michael Gove back-peddled again, announcing that electronic containment fence collars will be exempt, since they support welfare by keeping pets safe from venturing into “dangerous territory”. So the gardens of Chelsea and Kensington are more deserving of protection than our countryside and wildlife? With this concession, the Government admitted that in itself, electronic pulse presents no threat to animal welfare. This leaves responsible

owners in the preposterous position of being law-abiding on their lawn, but criminals beyond their boundary.

Anyone who has ever experienced a dog suddenly take off after sheep, deer or game, will appreciate that it is all but impossible to stop, recall or reprimand such dogs mid-chase using the recommended pure reward mantra. Given the appropriate context, even an otherwise incredibly well trained dog can wreak havoc in the countryside,

causing much embarrassment, frustration and worry. Beyond a mere nuisance, a lack of responsiveness in rural locations risks lives. Controlling dogs with keen prey drive can prove challenging for even the most experienced owner; this is where electronic training collars can prove invaluable. Used appropriately, proportionately and fairly, quality electronic collars are life-saving for many dogs, livestock and wildlife. With 15,000 deaths per year, the NFU report livestock worrying has risen 67% in the UK, having quadrupled in Scotland in just two years. Since banning electronic training aids in 2010, livestock killing figures in Wales have soared. This rising trend coincides with the disturbing popularity of the ‘fur-baby’ mentality, and appreciation, respect and proper control gets labelled as archaic, uneducated and lazy.

Opposing a collar ban is about more than protecting a tool; it is a rejection of the outlandish claims that one-size-fits-all. A working German wire-haired pointer will never be a commuter-belt pug. It is a defence against a sustained attack upon our rights to manage, train and protect our dogs as their requirements and environments demand. With calls in Westminster for dogs to be kept permanently on leads in rural locations, together with the demonisation of simple slip leads and all ‘unpleasant learning’ left unchallenged, this shocking proposal represents the thin end of a dangerous fundamentalist wedge.

**YOUR VIEWS**

The NGO is minded to support responsible use of electronic training collars, in line with our typically robust and evidence-based policy-making. We invite NGO members to contact us with their thoughts. We will assess the reaction from members and then and move forward to a new policy position for the NGO informed by it.

**TO EXPRESS YOUR VIEW ON THIS SUBJECT, PLEASE CONTACT NGO HQ VIA EMAIL AT [INFO@NATIONALGAMEKEEPERS.ORG.UK](mailto:info@nationalgamekeepers.org.uk) USING ‘E-COLLARS’ AS THE SUBJECT HEADING.**

**NOTE IT**

Jamie Penrith FdSc Canine Studies, is a full time professional dog trainer/behaviourist. He is a former operational police dog handler; former behavioural adviser to a national welfare charity regional branch specialising in predatory behaviour/livestock worrying. He is also national media lead for ethical electronic training aid users and a campaigner for responsible dog ownership, highlighting welfare, safety, freedom and control. Jamie is founder of the Association of Responsible Dog Owners.

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