

Working dogs, rural life and the law: why this matters beyond one tool

by **Jamie Penrith**, dog trainer and founder of the Association of Responsible Dog Owners

The recent amendment to the Dogs Protection of Livestock Act 1953, now passed and due to come into force (see also page 30), has understandably focused attention on livestock worrying and dog control.

Much of the public discussion has centred on pet dogs and irresponsible handling. For those who live and work in the countryside, however, the implications are broader – and far more consequential.

This article is not intended to oppose sensible protection for livestock. It is intended to explain what the amended law actually changes, how it applies to working dogs, and why a separate, but related, policy direction should concern anyone whose livelihood depends on working animals, land management, and continued access to the countryside.

Working dogs: exempt, but only when genuinely working

Working dogs remain exempt under the amended Act when they are being used in a legitimate working capacity – for example during pest control, gamekeeping duties, livestock management, or recognised sporting activity under handler control.

That exemption is situational, not permanent.

A working dog that is exercising off duty, being walked recreationally, or running free outside a defined task is not exempt simply by virtue of its breed, role, or kennel status. When not actively working, the amended Act applies to working dogs in exactly the same way it applies to any other dog. This distinction matters more now than ever.

What the amendment actually changes

The amended Act significantly widens the scope of what may constitute an offence. This is all set out in the previous article on page 30. On paper, these changes appear robust. In practice, they expose a deeper problem.

When penalties rise but incidents do not fall

Dogs worrying livestock can already be lawfully shot to protect animals, and many

others are destroyed by veterinary surgeons when no known viable alternative exists. As a result, destruction of perfectly healthy and much-loved dogs is frequently viewed as the only responsible option.

“A dog has no moral or legal compass.”

Owners may now face unlimited fines, and in some jurisdictions the prospect of custody – yet farmers, landowners, and rural crime teams consistently report no appreciable reduction in attacks. This mirrors what has already been observed in Scotland. The reason is straightforward: increasing penalties after the event does not change the decision-making of a dog before the event.

A dog has no moral or legal compass. It does not weigh sentencing guidelines or financial consequences. Its decision to approach, chase, or attack livestock is made entirely on experience. From the dog's perspective, the question is simple: has experience shown me that approaching this animal is worthwhile – or not? No amount of post-incident punishment alters that calculation.

Why human deterrence fails – and dog training matters

This is a point the Association of Responsible Dog Owners and I have made for many years. Enforcement alone addresses opportunity *after* failure. It does nothing to address desire *before* failure.

It is only by changing a dog's internal decision – from yes to no – that incidents are prevented.

That requires experience, not restraint. Leads break. Gates are left open. Dogs escape. A restrained but untrained dog remains a risk the moment control fails.

Where “aversive” begins to unravel

In Scotland, sustained lobbying led to the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission being

asked to explore restrictions not merely on devices, but on entire categories of training approach under the broad label of “aversive”.

It is worth pausing briefly on what that term actually means.

Quite simply, an aversive is anything an animal will work to avoid or remove. There is no fixed list and no objective threshold. One dog may find raised voices aversive; another barely notices them. One may tolerate physical restraint; another finds it deeply stressful.

Some dogs find kennelling aversive; others relax more readily there than anywhere else.

Once viewed through that lens, the scope of what could be labelled “aversive” becomes effectively limitless.

Why electronic collars sit apart

I fully acknowledge that there are alternative methods people



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use to stock-proof dogs. Many are well intentioned. Many are also context-dependent, fallible, harsher in practice, and ultimately less effective.

Long lines, repeated exposure, or punishment delivered at the wrong moment often increase frustration or risk. Yet there is remarkably little robust evidence examining their efficacy or welfare impact under real livestock conditions.

Electronic training collars are different. They are the most robustly researched means of addressing predatory behaviour in dogs towards livestock. Used responsibly, they allow a precise, proportionate experience to be delivered at the exact moment a dog makes the wrong decision – something no other method reliably achieves.

Crucially, they change the dog’s internal calculation. Dogs do not attack animals they have been trained to avoid. That is not ideology. It is outcome.

This is not just about dogs

At this point, it becomes clear that this conversation is not really about one tool.

Across gamekeeping, shooting, fishing, farming, and land management, the same

pattern repeats: a narrow issue is selected, stripped of context, emotionally reframed, and used as a lever to challenge wider rural practice. Electronic training aids are simply an access point.

I am currently engaged in discussions with representatives across multiple rural sectors, and a consistent concern emerges: that rural ways of working are increasingly challenged not because they fail, but because they do not align with a preferred philosophy.

Why unity matters

Electronic collars may not concern everyone. But the logic used to remove them does not stop there.

Slip leads, crates, kennels, confinement, restriction of movement – all have already been criticised as “aversive” under the same reasoning.

Incremental loss thrives on fragmented defence. This article is not a call for outrage. It is a call for awareness – and for rural voices to recognise shared interests before decisions are made on their behalf.

Closing note

Stronger penalties may satisfy a political

FURTHER INFORMATION

If this article resonates with you, the Association of Responsible Dog Owners® is an entirely voluntary, non-funded association that represents dog owners at local and national political level on issues relating to dog control and responsible ownership – an area of animal welfare that remains a live and evolving issue.

Support does not require membership or commitment. If you would like to register your support, simply email info@joinardo.com with the words “Support – Keeping the Balance” and visit www.joinardo.com to find out more. ●

demand to be seen to act. They do not prevent livestock worrying. Only training that changes a dog’s experience does that.

If we care about livestock, dogs, and the future of working practices in the countryside, we must be willing to defend what works, not simply what photographs well. ●

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Jamie Penrith runs Take The Lead Training and, in 2018, he founded the Association of Responsible Dog Owners® (ARDO) which now represents thousands of responsible owners at political level. With nearly 25 years’ experience (including 10 years as a police dog handler), he focuses on fair, effective training that maximises control, protecting highly driven dogs, livestock, and wildlife in real countryside conditions. ●