

Committee Secretariat
Petitions Committee
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

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By Email

Submission on the petition of Melinda McGregor: Councils need clear guidelines of required actions following a dog attack

The New Zealand Veterinary Association Te Pae Kīrehe (NZVA) is the largest membership organisation representing veterinarians in New Zealand. We support members through leadership, education, standard setting and wellbeing support.

The NZVA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Petition of Melinda McGregor, which calls for the implementation of clear, mandatory guidelines for councils to follow in the aftermath of a dog attack. The Companion Animal Veterinarians Branch of the NZVA (CAV) is making this submission on behalf of members. We support this petition's intent and consider it both timely and critical.

As a profession committed to the health and welfare of animals, people and communities, we see firsthand the complex and often preventable nature of dog aggression. The current legislative framework under the Dog Control Act 1996 does not go far enough in supporting local councils to effectively and consistently manage dog attacks or to promote responsible dog ownership. In particular, the NZVA believes the Dog Control Act and associated regulations are now outdated and should undergo a comprehensive review to ensure they reflect current best practice and community expectations.

The NZVA supports the introduction of a nationwide, stepped approach for managing dog attacks, one that offers councils clear, enforceable guidelines and removes ambiguity in decision-making. A tiered framework that classifies dog bites according to their severity would be a vital component of this. Such a system would allow authorities to respond proportionately, support early intervention, and avoid unjustified outcomes for both victims and animals. The NZVA has long advocated for a behaviour-based, multi-tier classification system, which recognises the context of each incident and moves away from the oversimplified and ineffective breed-specific provisions that are currently embedded in legislation.

We echo the petition's call for consistency. Clear, enforceable guidelines would help eliminate subjectivity in decision-making, reduce the administrative burden on councils, and improve public confidence in dog control systems.

Importantly, the NZVA believes that the classification of dogs following an attack must be grounded in objective behavioural assessment. The current definitions of "menacing" or "dangerous" under the Act lack nuance and are often based on outdated or flawed assumptions, particularly regarding breed. The NZVA does not support the automatic classification of dogs based on breed or appearance, as there is overwhelming international evidence that breed-specific legislation is ineffective at preventing dog bites. Instead, we advocate for classifications that reflect the dog's behaviour, the severity and context of the incident, and the risk of reoffending.

Our submission also highlights the role of dog owners. NZVA believes dog ownership is a privilege that comes with significant responsibility. We support the introduction of mandatory owner licensing to ensure

that all prospective dog owners are informed and capable of managing their animal responsibly. Education should be a cornerstone of any reform, particularly for first-time owners, families with young children, and those acquiring dogs for high-risk purposes such as guarding.

In addition to owner licencing, we believe that strengthening the regulation of dog breeding would be a targeted and effective measure. Breeding dogs should be subject to specific permits issued by territorial authorities, and we recommend exemptions be granted only to those breeders who belong to organisations that uphold strict ethical standards that consider both the health and husbandry management of the breeding dogs and puppies. There should be a focus on responsible breeding for good temperament, early puppy socialisation, and selection of appropriate homes for dog type and behavioural needs.

Effective reform also depends on accurate data. Currently, dog bite statistics are fragmented and inconsistently reported. We urge the development of a national reporting system that enables the collection and analysis of dog attack data. This system would support targeted interventions, improve public understanding of dog aggression, and allow for meaningful evaluation of any legislative changes.

Ultimately, dog aggression is not solely a dog problem; it is a societal issue that reflects a complex interplay of factors, including genetics, early socialisation, training, environment, owner behaviour, and community attitudes. A collaborative, whole-of-system approach is needed to bring together local government, veterinarians, behaviourists, educators, breeders, and the public.

The NZVA welcomes the opportunity to work alongside Government and councils in developing and implementing clear, consistent, and evidence-based guidelines that will reduce the incidence of dog attacks and enhance community safety. We believe the measures proposed in this submission align with our Safe Dogs and Responsible Dog Ownership position statements and offer a practical and effective way forward.

The NZVA believes a clear and enforceable framework will equip councils with the tools needed to make consistent decisions, provide dog owners with a clear understanding of their responsibilities, and ensure a uniform approach to managing dog aggression across all communities.

Recommendations

While the NZVA supports the use of a structured bite-level classification system, we note that our proposed framework does not fully align with the recommendations of the petitioner. In particular, the petition suggests immediate euthanasia for dogs involved in Level 4 attacks, whereas the NZVA advocates for urgent assessment by a Companion Animals New Zealand (CANZ) accredited trainer, behaviour consultant or veterinary behaviourist. We believe this approach allows for more accurate risk assessment while still prioritising public safety.

To support a nationally consistent and evidence-based approach to managing dog attacks, the NZVA recommends that councils adopt a classification system based on the widely recognised Ian Dunbar Dog Bite Scale. This scale offers a practical, behaviour-based method for assessing bite severity and informing proportional responses. The NZVA suggests the following council powers and actions be linked to each level:

Levels 1–2 (Warning or Minor Contact)

- **Council Action:** No euthanasia. Provide education on responsible dog ownership. Recommend or require attendance at accredited dog training.

- **Rationale:** These dogs are not considered dangerous. Incidents often stem from fear or poor training. Early intervention can prevent escalation.

Level 3 (Single Moderate Bite)

- **Council Action:** Mandatory attendance at a training programme with a CANZ-accredited trainer, behaviour consultant or veterinary behaviourist. Require desexing and muzzling in public.
- **Rationale:** Prognosis is fair to good with appropriate intervention. Council oversight and training compliance are critical at this stage.

Level 4 (Serious Bite Causing Deep Wounds or Shaking Behaviour)

- **Council Action:** Immediate referral for behaviour assessment by a CANZ-accredited trainer, behaviour consultant or veterinary behaviourist within a defined timeframe (e.g. 72 hours). Euthanasia should not occur without the input of a CANZ-accredited trainer, behaviour consultant or veterinary behaviourist.
- **Rationale:** This level poses serious risk. While prognosis is poor, professional assessment is essential to determine if the dog is salvageable under strict conditions. Councils must be empowered to enforce confinement and muzzling pending assessment outcomes.

Level 5–6 (Multiple Severe Bites or Fatal Attack)

- **Council Action:** Councils should be given immediate authority to euthanise without the need for court proceedings when supported by veterinary or medical evidence.
- **Rationale:** These dogs are considered extremely dangerous. Delaying action may endanger public safety. Avoiding court proceedings in these cases reduces trauma for victims and conserves council resources.

Nāku iti noa, nā,



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