

# Licensing Service Contribution to Animal Welfare

## Overview of the Licensing Function

1. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's Licensing Service plays a key regulatory role in supporting and promoting high standards of animal welfare through the administration and enforcement of statutory licensing regimes.
2. The service is responsible for licensing a range of activities involving animals under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018
3. These are:
  - Dog breeding
  - Selling Animals as Pets
  - Animal boarding (including kennels and catteries)
  - Day care for dogs
  - Hiring out of horses
  - Keeping or training animals for exhibition
4. Through these functions, the Licensing Service ensures that businesses operating within the Borough meet national welfare standards and are subject to ongoing inspection and compliance monitoring, data is available at Appendix 1.

## Regulatory Approach and Enforcement

5. The Licensing Service adopts the Council's enforcement policy and statutory guidance to ensure fair and proportionate enforcement. This includes:
  - Pre-application advice and visits to assess suitability, competence, and compliance
  - Star rating issued at grant, reflecting both risk and welfare standards
  - Statutory interim and routine inspections of premises
  - Investigation of complaints relating to licensed and unlicensed premises including unannounced compliance inspections
  - Use of formal enforcement powers where necessary, including:
    - Licence refusal, suspension or revocation

- Formal warnings and improvement notices
  - Reduction of star rating (see Appendix 2)
  - Prosecution for serious breaches and illegal activity
6. The service works closely with Animal Welfare Officers, Environmental Health, and external partners (including the RSPCA and veterinary professionals) to ensure a coordinated approach to safeguarding animal welfare.
  7. Licensing of businesses that provide animal activities licensing continued to increase in 2025-2026. The service licensed 83 animal activity premises and carried out 133 inspections, investigations and advisory visits.
  8. Enforcement actions include issuing of cautions for illegal dog breeding alongside ongoing efforts to disrupt activity linked to organised crime.

### **Supporting High Standards of Animal Welfare**

9. Licensing contributes to animal welfare outcomes by:
  - Ensuring that licensed premises are suitable, safe, and hygienic
  - Verifying that operators are competent, trained, and fit and proper persons
  - Promoting higher welfare standards through the ratings system, encouraging best practice
  - Providing advice and guidance to businesses to support compliance and improvement
10. The Licensing regime therefore acts as a preventative control, reducing the likelihood of poor welfare conditions and minimising the need for reactive enforcement by other services.

### **Links to Animal Welfare and Kennelling Review**

11. The Licensing Service supports the broader animal welfare system by:
  - Regulating commercial operators, reducing pressure on enforcement services
  - Identifying welfare concerns early through inspection activity
  - Sharing intelligence with Animal Welfare Officers, Police, other local authorities and utilising the national Information Data Base (IDB)
12. This contributes to a more joined-up approach to managing:
  - Stray and abandoned animals
  - Irresponsible breeding and sales
  - Cases that may ultimately result in animals requiring kennelling

## Training and professional development

13. The regime requires all officers undertaking inspections to be a qualified inspector. The inspector must have a Level 3 Qualification (or equivalent) granted by a body recognised and regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual). The training must cover the application of the licensing conditions for all licensable activities and must contain a practical element.

## Regional Work

14. The established North East Animal Forum, chaired by a Stockton-on-Tees Licensing Officer, meets on a quarterly basis brings together local authorities from across the region, to discuss emerging issues, share intelligence and promote consistent regulatory approaches.
15. The forum provides a platform for joint working, enabling colleagues to improve enforcement outcomes, and develop best practice in relation to animal licensing and welfare. The forum also cascade training, the most recent being the Primate Training in November 2025.

## Future Planning

16. Looking ahead, several emerging issues are likely to impact the Licensing Service and its role in supporting animal welfare:
  - **Increase in online advertising and selling:** Increasing use of social media and online platforms for pet sales and boarding presents ongoing challenges in identifying and regulating unlicensed activity.
  - **Legislation:** Potential for future changes to animal welfare legislation and guidance, including bringing in other areas of animal activity.
  - **Financial and Workload:** Increasing operating costs for businesses (e.g. veterinary care, insurance) may impact compliance and sustainability, with a potential increase in enforcement demand.
  - **Partnership working opportunities:** Opportunity to further strengthen joint working at both regional and national levels to share intelligence, best practice, and resources.
  - **Public awareness –** Educating the public of the borough in relation to licensed vs unlicensed operators
  - **Resource considerations –** Busy inspection programme and ensuring officers remain up to date and confident across a wide range of specialist areas.

## Conclusion

17. The introduction of the Regulations in 2018 introduced a standardised inspection regime, minimum welfare conditions, and a national star rating system designed to improve transparency and improve standards.

18. The Licensing Service provides an essential regulatory framework that underpins animal welfare standards within the Borough. While it does not directly deliver animal welfare interventions (such as kennelling or stray dog provision), it plays a critical preventative and enforcement role, ensuring that animal-related businesses operate safely, responsibly, and in compliance with the law.

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**Number of licensed premises 2018 - Present**

2018	19
2019	31
2020	33
2021	40
2022	52
2023	58
2024	68
2025	82
31/04/26 - 2026	83

There has been a steady and continuous increase in licensed premises, application numbers have risen from 19 in 2018 to 82 in 2025. This represents a significant overall growth in demand for the service, more than quadrupling over the eight-year period, due to business growth and proactive enforcement in this area.

**2025 - 2026 Enforcement activity**

During 2025–2026, the service received and dealt with a total of 23 animal activity complaints, the majority of which (18) related to unlicensed activity. All complaints were thoroughly investigated, and appropriate enforcement action was taken. This included the issuing of written warnings and the provision of advice where necessary.

The service prioritises engagement and education, aiming to achieve compliance through guidance wherever possible. Formal enforcement actions, such as cautions and prosecutions, are considered only when proportionate and necessary.

**2026 - 2027 Proactive enforcement activity**

In response to the continued growth in demand for licensed activity and the increased workload associated with this, the service will focus on maintaining high levels of compliance across existing licensed businesses, while continuing to provide guidance and support to help operators meet required standards.

A key priority will be to build on the current proactive approach, using engagement and education to encourage good practice and early compliance.

Alongside this, there will be an increased focus on identifying and reducing unlicensed activity, particularly where this presents risks to animal welfare and public safety. This work will involve targeted investigations, intelligence led enforcement, and partnership working where appropriate, recognising that these cases can be complex and time intensive.

Through this balanced approach, the service aims to support responsible businesses, protect the welfare of animals, and safeguard the wider community.

## Use of Star Ratings in Animal Activities Licensing

Under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, licensed animal businesses are assessed using a national star rating system, ranging from 1 star (lowest) to 5 stars (highest).

Ratings are determined through inspection and are based on two main factors:

- Welfare standards – whether the business meets the minimum legal requirements or goes beyond them
- Risk level – including compliance history, management standards, and any previous enforcement issues

These factors are combined to give an overall rating, which is then used in the following ways:

### 1. Licence duration

- Higher-rated, lower-risk businesses (typically 4–5 stars) may be granted licences for up to three years
- Lower-rated or higher-risk businesses (1–2 stars) are usually issued shorter licences, allowing for closer monitoring

### 2. Regulatory approach

- Lower-rated premises are subject to more frequent inspections and closer oversight
- Higher-rated premises benefit from fewer inspections and a more proportionate approach

### 3. Transparency for the public

- Star ratings must be clearly displayed at licensed premises and are often published online
- This helps the public make informed choices and supports well-run businesses

### 4. Encouraging improvement

The system is designed to encourage and support better standards by:

- Promoting higher levels of animal welfare
- Providing a clear incentive for businesses to improve
- Allowing officers to focus time and resources where they are most needed

Overall, the star rating system supports a consistent and proportionate approach to regulation, helps maintain public confidence, and promotes continuous improvement across the sector.