

Lord Black's speech in the House of Lords on 26 March in which he calls for inclusion of the five animal welfare needs in the new primary science curriculum

Lord Black of Brentwood: I want to talk about animal welfare and its place in the national curriculum, in particular relating to domestic animals and pets. It is proper for me to declare a feline interest as an owner of a venerable Russian Blue cat, Victoria, who is 17 next month. I had her and her welfare very much in mind while I have been putting together these remarks.

Despite the wonderful work of many animal welfare charities – I think in particular of Cats Protection, which is the UK's leading feline welfare charity and has helped more than 1 million cats in the past five years – there is still an endemic problem within our society relating to animal welfare. In 2011, the last year for which a full set of statistics was available, more than 126,000 dogs were allowed to stray by their owners, which represents an increase of 30% in three years. In the same year, Cats Protection rehomed and reunited 48,000 cats and kittens. Blue Cross experienced an increase of 57% in the number of unwanted rabbits that they were asked to rehome. Most worryingly, PDSA research shows that of the estimated 22 million pets in the UK, more than 10 million may not be having their welfare needs met.

The reasons behind such shocking and alarming figures are no doubt complex. In some ways they reflect the state of the economy, among other things. However, it is inevitable that education, or indeed lack of it, about animal welfare is one of those reasons. Problems of neglect, cruelty and abandonment often happen because people do not understand what a pet needs and how to care for it. One of the best ways, over time, to tackle this issue is therefore to ensure that children are taught properly about how to care for pets. Children, after all, are the pet owners of the future. Yet, currently only 16% of children are taught about caring for a domestic animal, despite the fact that more than 60% of children will be from homes keeping a pet. This is not a marginal issue but one that clearly relates to the majority of children.

Our animal welfare charities, which so often are unsung heroes, do what they can to train young people in animal welfare issues. Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, Cats Protection, Dogs Trust and PDSA delivered education talks to more than 175,000 children in 2011. There is a big appetite in schools for information and training in this area. A survey for the Pet Food Manufacturers Association in 2012 found that 78% of primary school teachers and 70% of secondary school teachers agreed that it was important to teach younger children responsibility through learning to care for pets. The RSPCA ran courses for nearly 4,000 teachers in 2011.

However, there will always be a limit to what voluntary bodies with tight resources, limited manpower and uneven geographical spread can achieve – and here the national curriculum is therefore vital. It is very good that the draft curriculum makes reference to the basic needs of animals within the year 2 primary science curriculum, but this relates only to survival and the need for water, food and air. However, an animal's needs are not limited to those. There are, in fact, as the Animal Welfare Act 2006 sets out, five basic welfare needs – environment, diet, behaviour, companionship, and prevention of pain, suffering and disease – which contribute to a healthy and happy life for our pets. All need to be learnt.

A new subject does not need to be added to the curriculum to deal with this issue, nor does it cross the vital line that my noble friend mentioned of becoming involved in how a teacher teaches. All that is necessary is for the current reference to basic needs to be amended slightly to allow teachers the flexibility and scope to teach about all five welfare needs, linking them to scientific knowledge and concepts within their lessons. In short, the concept of development needs to be placed alongside survival in the year 2 curriculum. Such a tiny change could bring benefit of real significance, not just to many defenceless animals in the future but to the way in which children grow and develop. Teaching children from an early age about the importance of caring for pets will help them to integrate effectively with others and understand the importance of responsibility, something that has profound benefits for society as a whole.

It is, as they say, a win-win scenario that I urge my noble friend to accept, and one which will not make any greater burden on teachers or require surgery to the draft curriculum. I hope that my noble friend the Minister will undertake to look further at this matter.

Lord Nash: My noble friend Lord Black of Brentwood commented on animal welfare. It is not the role of the national curriculum to prescribe everything that might valuably be taught to children. We are slimming down the national curriculum to focus on essential knowledge in core subjects. The draft primary science curriculum requires pupils to be taught about the needs of animals, including food, water and so on, and the care of animals is something that we would expect all good schools to cover in their wider curriculum as part of the soft skills. However, we will look further into this matter.