



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Health and Environmental Health Committee
Subject:	Safety of Dog Wardens
Date:	4 th August, 2010
Reporting Officer:	Siobhan Toland, Head of Environmental Health, Ext. 3281
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Relevant Background Information

The Council's Dog Wardens deliver a comprehensive dog control service to the whole of the city. They encourage responsible dog ownership through advice and education and are responsible for the enforcement of the provisions of the Dogs Order, including dangerous dogs. They also enforce the provisions of the Litter Order as it relates to dog fouling. Much of their enforcement work can be confrontational and there have been incidents in the past when staff have been verbally abused or even assaulted.

A recent incident involved the dog wardens seizing a dog which they considered to be a pit bull terrier, a breed type which is proscribed under the Dangerous Dogs (NI) Order and, therefore, cannot legally be kept by an owner. The dog is currently being kennelled by the Council pending legal proceedings. As a consequence of this action however a website has been set up seeking public support to have the dog released back to its owner. Following on from that there have been a significant number of comments on YouTube and several social networking sites. Unfortunately, some of the comments are highly offensive and threatening and many have been directed at the specific member of staff who seized the dog.

In addition, an anonymous letter was received by this member of staff at their place of work. The letter contained obscene language and offensive comments directed at the officer. There was also an implied threat that the author of the letter was aware of the officer's car and registration number. Subsequently, the warden's car tyres were slashed at her home.

The matter has been reported to the PSNI both by the individual and by their manager. Management have also taken steps to ensure that the employee's safety is protected.

Key Issues

- Dog Wardens seized a dog which they had identified as a proscribed dangerous dog.
- A website has been set up seeking public support for the dog's release.
- Offensive and threatening comments relating to the dog warden have been placed on social networking sites.
- An offensive letter has been delivered to one of the officers at their place of work.
- The warden has had her car tyres slashed at her home.
- The matter has been referred to the PSNI.
- Priority has been given to the safety of the individual officer and the other dog warden staff.
- Corporate Communications have prepared a holding statement for response to the e-mails received and an article on the dog warden service will be published in the August edition of City Matters.

Resource Implications

- The internet campaign has resulted in significant requests for information from the public which impacts on the work of administrative staff.
- As a consequence of the risk assessment carried out in respect of the officer, who is the principal subject of these implied threats, she is now always accompanied by a fellow officer when patrolling the city, pending a further review.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note this report.

Decision Tracking

There is an ongoing review of the safety of the dog warden staff and, where appropriate, control measures have been put in place to minimise any potential risks.