

Who should be licensed?

Dog attacks. Who hasn't seen the news of the fatality in Northland or the two attacks in Christchurch and Timaru, all just in February this year?

Make no mistake — attacks are an issue for everyone involved in the dog world because if dogs are labelled a problem, then further restrictions will soon come which are likely to impede on the freedoms of law-abiding and good owners. Being an election year, politicians are likely to seek the most expedient option and one they think will earn them votes.

Dogs, like cars or guns, can be dangerous in the wrong hands. What should New Zealand do next to enhance responsible dog ownership? A registration tag on the dog certainly doesn't seem enough.

New Zealanders are familiar with a licensing system that registers the dogs with the local authority. But around the world, several countries and regions take a different approach. Instead of licensing the dog, they license the person responsible for the dog.

Countries that license the owner aim to ensure that anyone who chooses to keep a dog has the knowledge, competence, and resources to do so responsibly. This approach often sits within broader animal welfare or public safety frameworks. Growing international trends highlight the potential benefits of holding owners to higher standards.

Switzerland is one of the clearest examples of licensing the owner rather than the dog.

Swiss dog laws place the emphasis on responsible ownership by requiring new dog owners to undertake a theory test and a practical handling course. Although Switzerland still maintains dog registration, the standout feature is that the owner must prove competence.

Key elements include:

- A mandatory theory exam for first time owners
- A practical handling course soon after acquiring the dog
- A legal expectation to understand care requirements, training principles, and animal welfare laws

This system treats dog ownership more like operating a vehicle: you must demonstrate capability before being trusted with responsibility.

Germany requires owners to pay a dog owner's tax (Hundesteuer) rather than licensing each dog individually. This is not merely a financial measure: it is designed to encourage responsible ownership. Municipalities set the tax level and can raise fees for additional dogs to discourage excessive or irresponsible ownership.

While Germany also requires microchipping and registration, the

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taxation system emphasises that responsibility lies with the person, not the pet.

In Vienna, Austria, a four-hour course is mandatory for all first-time dog owners.

In Singapore, owners wanting to keep a high-risk or large breed dog must provide proof of their handling ability and attend mandatory training courses as part of their owner certification.

All the above regulatory schemes offer aspects of a different approach that New Zealand can consider:

1. Mandatory education

Swiss style mandatory training could greatly improve animal welfare and reduce dog related incidents; we have all met owners who seem oblivious to their dog and their own responsibilities.

2. Accountability should start with the person

Making owners, not just dogs, traceable and accountable creates a stronger culture of responsible ownership. Over time, when handlers are in public and clearly not abiding by the community's expectations of dog behaviour, peer pressure comes into play, something that can become more prevalent than relying on enforcement alone.

3. Prevention is better than enforcement

International research suggests that requiring owner training or screening reduces cases of neglect, bite incidents, behavioural problems and abandonment rates.

4. Strengthen the social licence to own dogs

As cities become denser, responsible dog ownership becomes more important to community acceptance of pets. If communities become anti-dog, dog lovers and dogs are the losers.

New Zealand already has solid dog registration requirements, but owner licensing models from Europe and beyond show there is room for our system to evolve.

Licensing the owner, through training, taxation, or eligibility rules, can support happier dogs, safer communities, and stronger welfare standards.

A shift in focus would also support organisations like Dogs New Zealand and animal professions in being recognised for the expertise and skills they offer in support of responsible dog ownership and communities more generally. 🐾