

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL: PROPOSED REVIEW OF COUNCIL POLICY ON USE OF LAND BY CIRCUSES WITH ANIMALS

SUBMISSION BY ONEKIND



Introduction

OneKind is pleased that East Ayrshire Council is considering extending its policy on the use of Council land by circuses using animals, and grateful for the opportunity to submit views on this matter.

The issue of travelling circuses using wild animals is currently under consideration by central government both north and south of the border, with the overwhelming majority of public opinion in support of an outright ban on these entertainments. Many local authorities in the UK have already made the decision not to let their land to circuses with wild animals and a number will not accept domesticated animals either.

OneKind and other animal welfare charities would prefer not to see any animals used in travelling circuses. The training and performance of domesticated animals such as horses and dogs in circuses may initially appear less objectionable because these animals are more easily trained and are not naturally stressed by contact with humans. However, it is essential to remember that the circus life does not just involve one performance or a few days on the road, but a year-round regime of travel, confinement, being made to perform, and being deprived of natural interaction with other animals. Domesticated animals are also just as vulnerable to abuse and harsh treatment as wild animals.

Circus animals are transported throughout their life cycle, regardless of age, condition or reproductive status. They live in temporary facilities for most of the year, either on a lorry or in stables, and may remain tethered for long periods of time while workers are busy, or on breaks. Some circuses make an effort to provide exercise space, but this is unlikely to be sufficient for the animals' long-term needs.

OneKind believes that entertainment is not a sufficient reason to impose a barren, unnatural lifestyle on sentient animals. While human performers may choose to live the circus life, the animals have no choice in the matter.

Performance

The Circus Working Group of the Associate Parliamentary Group on Animal Welfare at Westminster concluded in a 1998 report into circuses that performance was potentially one of the most stressful situations experienced by a circus animal, but the area which had received the least attention in research. The report called for further research into the impact of performance on the welfare of animals, with particular emphasis on factors such as noise, audience presence, and issues related to the safe movement of animals to and from the ring.

OneKind and other animal welfare organisations such as the Captive Animals' Protection Society (CAPS) regularly receive complaints from the public about circuses. Complaints concern the use of spurs, tight harness, the condition of the animals or apparent harsh treatment.

Horses may wear tight bridles to keep their heads down towards their chests during performance. A horse will be made to stand on its hind legs and turn round several times on the spot, encouraged by the cracking or flourishing of whips. Horses may develop arthritis and joint pain caused by the repeated performance of unnatural behaviour.

In 2009, a horse fell in the ring at one circus. According to eyewitnesses, two horses collided while running around a small ring. Once up, the horse was not taken out of the ring for checking but continued the performance.

Conditions in stables

Animals spend very long periods in stables. Horses and ponies are gregarious social animals, but after being unloaded from their horse boxes or transporters they are often confined in tents, separated from their companions by stalls, which do not allow for socialising or mutual grooming. Prolonged tight tethering in small pens has often been observed, covering most of the time that the horses are not performing or rehearsing

Visitors to a circus in Perth in June 2009 paid £1 each to go into the stables to see the animals. Apart from the camel and elephant that travelled at that time with the circus, they saw several small dogs in two cages. The observers commented that the dogs looked thin and dirty and had no access to water. One dog was seen repeatedly circling its cage which for around ten minutes, suggesting that the dog was engaging in stereotypical behaviour as a result of living in an impoverished environment

Loading and transport

Touring circuses may cover thousands of miles a year, carrying animals from site to site in transporters and cages on the backs of lorries. Moving location each week means that they spend most of the year in temporary accommodation.

The animals may be confined for hours, even days, in their travelling cages, with their only respite being either limited time in an exercise cage, being rehearsed, or performing. It is impossible for a travelling menagerie to provide wild or domesticated circus animals with the facilities they need.

Circus operators often point out that the distances between venues are relatively short. That is often the case, but the animals still spend long periods confined on vehicles. For example, after a stay at Cardross in Dunbartonshire in July 2011, one circus travelled to Kelburn in Ayrshire, a distance of less than 40 miles.

The stable walls were taken down during the 2.30pm show and workers prepared to pack down the stable units as soon as the show was over. After the final horse act, the horses were led back into their stable units. At approximately 4.35pm, ten minutes after the end of the show, the last horse was put into the back of a lorry. The vehicles did not start leaving the Cardross ground until approximately 8pm. The first trailers and caravans began arriving at Kelburn at 10pm with the horse lorry arriving at 10.40pm. The stables had been erected on the night of arrival and assuming that the horses were put into the stables on the same night, they would finally have been returned to their stables at approximately 11.45pm. Thus, for around one hour in terms of actual travel, the horses spent seven hours on their trailer.

While animals may tolerate an occasional seven-hour journey, or more, under exceptional circumstances with time to recover afterwards, this travelling is routine for circus animals. While they may appear to become habituated to the regime, most of the research into transport stress relates to single journey, and some authorities take the view that repeating an experience does not necessarily make it less traumatic, but may in fact sensitise it to the trauma.

Previous observations by Animal Defenders International (ADI) reported one journey in 2006 by a British circus that involved 3 hours 25minutes of travelling time, but over 17 hours on the transporter for horses, ponies, reindeer and llamas; and 27 hours on beastwagons for the lions and tigers. In 2003, ADI reported a journey of 15 miles that took just 26 minutes; however the camels remained in their transporter for 4 hours and the tigers in their beastwagon for 24 hours.

Scottish council policies

A number of Scottish councils have already decided that they will not let their land to circuses using wild animals or, in some cases, any animals. OneKind surveyed the 32 local authorities in Scotland in 2009 and found that the following councils would not let their land to circuses with any animals, wild or domesticated: Dundee, East Lothian, East Renfrewshire, Edinburgh, Fife, Highland (three areas),

Renfrewshire and West Lothian. In addition, Stirling had no in-house policy but contracted out site management to a company with a policy of not letting property to circuses with animals.

In other areas including Clackmannanshire, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar), the councils had not had any applications to use their land.

Conclusion

OneKind believes that it is unethical to impose stress, unnatural conditions and in some cases outright cruelty on sentient animals, in the name of entertainment. Modern society has access to a wide range of media for seeing, learning about and interacting with animals and to use animals in this way is outmoded and unethical.

We believe that it would be forward-looking and progressive of East Ayrshire Council to extend its policy on the use of Council land, to prevent its use by circuses that travel with any animals. Such a decision would be a proportionate response to our growing knowledge of animals' sentience and their behavioural needs.

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