



Consultation Response

FROM THE EXTERNAL AFFAIRS WALES DEPARTMENT

National Assembly for Wales – Communities, Equality & Local Government Committee Inquiry, General Principles of the Gender-based Violence, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Bill

September 2014

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to input into the Communities, Equality & Local Government's Committee enquiry into the general principles of the Gender-based Violence, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Bill.

It is a tragic fact that domestic abuse impacts upon many individuals and families across Wales, whether it be physical, emotional, psychological or sexual. The RSPCA has experienced how family pets are often used as a tool to manipulate and control victims; often preventing vulnerable individuals or families from fleeing abusive relationships. Pets, as such, are often utilised by perpetrators as a form of coercive control to inhibit a victim's freedom; and as such often become victims of abuse themselves.

Much of the empirical research on this issue has focussed on the United States of America: but parallels can be drawn with Wales. This suggests that an extremely high number of victims have an inability to flee abusive situations due to the presence of pets. Shockingly, a survey for Paws for Kids found that 66 per cent of abusers had threatened to harm pets, whilst 94 per cent had said it would have been easier to leave abusive situations had pet fostering services been available.

An individual may have concerns as to what will happen to a family pet should they flee an abusive situation; or the perpetrators of abuse may themselves use threats or violence against pets as a vehicle to control a victim's actions or decisions. We have harrowing examples of this which can be outlined to the Committee if necessary. It should be noted that evidence suggests animal cruelty is often linked to other forms of offending behaviour.

LINK BETWEEN ANIMAL ABUSE AND INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

The Links Group is a network for animal and human welfare NGOs, where research and operational practices are discussed. The RSPCA has been an active member of this group since its

inception; and the Society is keen to further this work, which may be helpful in developing Guidance related to this legislation.

It may surprise the Committee that, when investigating complaints, RSPCA Inspectors often find themselves in situations whereby they may witness or suspect other forms of violence of abuse within a domestic setting. In such circumstances, there are protocols for joint-reporting, with appropriate agencies.

PET FOSTERING SCHEMES

RSPCA Cymru believes the Welsh Government's decision to legislate on the issue of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence offers opportunities to support, further and increase awareness of the options which exist for victims finding themselves in such situations, namely pet fostering.

Since 2002, the RSPCA has operated the PetRetreat scheme. This seeks to arrange foster care for the pets of those fleeing domestic abuse. The RSPCA was the first animal welfare organisation to deliver such a service. Within the scheme, care for animals can be offered, via a network of fosterers, until the owner has a new, safe place to live. This scheme has the backing of support groups for victims.

The scheme has assisted in enabling many individuals to escape abusive relationships, thanks to the knowledge that their pets are being kept in a safe environment, and that they will be reunited at an appropriate time. Furthermore, confidentiality is integral to the scheme's successes and the RSPCA ensures no one can trace a family through their pets.

In 2013, PetRetreat across England and Wales provided assistance to 104 families and 180 pets. This was the scheme's second most active year, following 2012, in which 184 and 281 animals received help. Due to the sensitive nature and circumstances involved within this type of fostering, and therefore the role of the animal fosterer involved, the scheme looks set to continue not to meet demand in the future. Certainly, one of the primary barriers to the scheme's success in Wales is the lack of fosterers. We understand this is synonymous with trends across the sector, with demand outstripping delivery. Increased availability of pet fostering schemes is crucial to meet demand.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT & UNDERSTANDING ESSENTIAL

It is welcome that Assembly Members have previously acknowledged the importance of pet fostering. The Communities and Culture Committee, for example, in December 2008 noted that the RSPCA's scheme was among those which help "people overcome barriers to getting out of an abusive situation". It called for the recruitment of more volunteers, and financial support for their training. Such assertions remain as relevant as ever, and highlight the importance of the

Communities, Equality & Local Government Committee noting this issue as part of its deliberations into the Bill's General Principles.

Welsh Government data suggests that 43 per cent of households in Wales own at least one animal. Therefore, where abusive relationships exist, the presence of pets will be exceptionally common. Furthermore, we understand calls undertaken by the All-Wales Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence helpline often include concerns in relation to pets. Any support, therefore, which can be provided by the public sector in supporting and promoting the availability of schemes, such as PetRetreat, could play a key role in empowering many individuals to gain confidence to leave an abusive relationship or setting.

To this end, given the seriousness of this issue, and its potential impact in prolonging abusive relationships, we would urge the Welsh Government to ensure it is acknowledged as part of their National Strategy and, if relevant, detailed within Annual Progress Reports. Focus on this issue is a notable omission from the Welsh Government's previous 'Right to be Safe' Strategy.

It is also imperative that any Ministerial Adviser on Gender-based Violence, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence understands how pets can be used as a tool against victims. We would be eager to engage with any Adviser on this issue; and to discuss ways in which schemes such as PetRetreat can be supported and promoted via their office's resources, and we would hope this would feature within their Annual Plan & Report.

As identified, there is a lack of research focussed on this issue within the context of Wales or, more broadly, the United Kingdom. It is thus our belief that a Ministerial Adviser would be well-placed to fund research into this topic, which could further inform the public sector's response.

STATUTORY GUIDANCE – TRAINING & RAISING-AWARENESS

We note that, as part of the proposed legislation, the Welsh Government may issue relevant authorities with statutory guidance. This could include, among other things, training which members or staff of a relevant authority require in exercising their functions under the Act, steps required to raise awareness and circumstances in which a relevant authority may ask a person if he or she is suffering or at risk of abuse. RSPCA Cymru would be happy to assist, where possible, with the development of this.

RSPCA Cymru believes it is vital that front line professionals coming into regular contact with victims of domestic abuse understand the role that pets may be playing within a particular abusive setting. Crucially, this issue must thus be acknowledged within any National Training Framework, to raise awareness among those within the public sector. Additionally, as part of the 'Ask and Act' process, an understanding of circumstances in which pets may be a factor within a domestic abuse setting is crucial.

ROLE OF THE THIRD SECTOR – LOCAL STRATEGIES

It is welcome that local strategies, prepared by a Local Authority and Local Health Board, will be able to include provisions related to actions to be taken by, with their approval, voluntary organisations.

In many instances, the third sector could play a key role in the delivery of proposed local strategies. To this end, RSPCA would welcome opportunities to work with Local Authorities and LHBs to ensure the options available via the PetRetreat are acknowledged and promoted, and to ensure the scheme's availability within a locality is emphasised at appropriate levels.

Straightforward steps, such as public campaigns and literature, could play a key role in recruiting volunteers and raising awareness. Local Authorities and LHBs will often be well placed to take such steps. The lack of fosterers in Wales has already been identified, and support from the relevant authorities in recruiting volunteers could play a key role in assisting many victims in fleeing abusive relationships.

We would encourage Local Strategies to explore the need for provision of pet fostering schemes, and consider any funding possibilities which may exist to ensure delivery. From the RSPCA's perspective, PetRetreat is reliant almost entirely on public donations; and finding fosterers can often be problematic; so resources are always likely to be an inhibitor for schemes offering pet fostering support to victims.

CONCLUSION

Support required for victims of domestic abuse often necessitates a focus on the role of pets within such settings. It is hoped the Welsh Government's decision to legislate on this issue provides opportunities for relevant public sector agencies to further promote the availability of schemes such as PetRetreat. To summarise, our key recommendations at this stage are:

- Communities, Equality & Local Government Committee to acknowledge the importance of pet fostering schemes in tackling domestic abuse; and how legislative proposals provide scope to ensure schemes receive promotion and support, and must be utilised.
- Welsh Government to fully consider and understand this issue. We would urge for it to be acknowledged as part of the Welsh Government's National Strategy, and noted within the Ministerial Adviser's Annual Plan & Report.
- Statutory guidance to relevant authorities should include training needs to identify issues whereby pets may be acting as a barrier to individuals or families escaping abusive settings. This should be considered within the Training Framework and as part of 'Ask and Act'.
- Research gaps concerning the role of pets in domestic abuse settings to be addressed. Any Ministerial Adviser would be well-placed to do this.

- Local strategies undertake engagement with relevant third sector and voluntary organisations. RSPCA would be happy to outline services available within a locality and discuss how Local Authorities and LHBs can assist in supporting and promoting schemes.