

Cross-Party Group Minutes

Meeting Minutes:

Cross Party Group Title:	Cross Party Group on Animal Welfare
Date of Meeting:	05/12/2022
Location:	Zoom

In attendance:

Name:	Title:
Carolyn Thomas MS	Chair and Member of the Senedd for North Wales
Jane Dodds MS	Member of the Senedd for Mid and West Wales
Dan Rose	Staff of Carolyn Thomas MS
Sam Swash	Staff of Carolyn Thomas MS
Will Morton	League Against Cruel Sports
Billie-Jade Thomas (secretariat)	League Against Cruel Sports
Carl Lloyd	RSPCA Aberconwy
Nic de Brauwere	Redwings/Animal Welfare Network Wales
Rob Simkins	Dogs Trust
Claire Wilson-Leary	Dogs Trust
Daryl Gordon	Cats Protection
Scott Fryer	Battersea
Tim Doyle	Greyhound Rescue Wales
Vanessa Waddon	Hope Rescue
Peter Hambly	Badger Trust
Fiona Pereira	Animal Aid
Teresa Amory	Gower Bird Hospital
Chris Topping	Justice for Reggie

Apologies:

Name:	Title:
Sioned Nikolic	RSPCA Cymru
Mal Ingham	Badger Trust

Summary of Meeting:**1. Welcome & latest updates**

CT welcomes everyone to the meeting and thanks them for their attendance. Provides an update of the latest developments in the sector since the group met last. The ongoing issue of avian flu has led to the Welsh Government (WG) requiring all birds to be kept indoors. The Charity Commission has opened an inquiry into a rescue centre in South Wales. Mentions the recent prosecution of an individual from North Wales for animal welfare offences, which was eventually reduced to a non-custodial sentence on appeal. The cost-of-living crisis is escalating and having an impact on animal welfare, with Almost Home Dog Rescue estimating that around 20% of people are giving up their pets. Desperate times for animal rescues have been making the headlines in many newspapers, with some centres experiencing a nine month wait to take in animals. For example, Jackson's Animal Rescue has 89 cats and 37 rabbits on their waiting list. RSPCA is spending £26k a week on private boarding as their centres are so full. As a result, people are being encouraged to keep their animals at home rather than abandoning them. Hope Rescue's greyhound racing petition which was signed by 35k+ people has strong support among the public and in the Senedd, with a debate and discussions with the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd expected in the near future.

Last meeting minutes – agreed

2. Cost of living crisis

Carl Lloyd (CL) – RSPCA Aberconwy has been running a veterinary mobile clinic for 10-15 years in North Wales. The clinic operates four days a week, offering two-hour surgeries at eight venues. It was started to deliver an option to communities/people who struggle to access private vets because of funding, transport issues etc. The clinic has two vets and a team of volunteers at each of the eight venues, seeing around 3k animals a year. However, the clinic is currently under lots of pressure as they have experienced a significant increase in requests from new clients when all of their venues are already booked up three weeks in advance. Many clients are having to choose between priority bills and treatment for their pets. Some are also struggling to keep up with regular and essential/preventative treatments such as vaccinations and parasites treatments. In one instance, a cat with a cancerous lump in their ear had to be put to sleep because their owner couldn't afford treatment. A chronic lack of vets throughout the UK is also adding pressure. Food security is an issue as people are having to choose between feeding themselves or their pets. Because of this, RSPCA branches in Wales have set up a pilot food bank scheme called Paws, People, Planet with has three distribution hubs distributing across Wales. 60K servings of food have been provided to date. While RSPCA Aberconwy branch doesn't take in

many animals, other RSPCA branches do. Will forward this presentation on to CT to be shared around. (BJT/DR to send around).

Daryl Gordon (DG) will send around list of statistics that have been compiled by Cats Protection (BJT/DR to send around). Their recent Cats and Their Stats (CATS) report, which provides an annual analysis of Wales, looked at the cost of living. 38% of Welsh cat owners expressed significant concern about being able to afford their bills and living costs over the next 12 months. For 20% of owners, the cost of treatment is the biggest barrier in them taking their cat/s to a vet on a regular basis. 18% worry that they wouldn't be able to afford a large vet bill as it stands, which could lead to an increase in serious illnesses in cats. The Companion Animal Welfare Groups (CAWGW) recently held an event in the Senedd which provided some more statistics. Battersea conducted some analysis into recent Google trends which found that searches for 'cheap dog food' have increased by from 480 to 1600, which is an increase of 164%.

Research from the ADCH (Association of Dogs and Cats Homes) found that 74% of pet owners have seen increased food costs, with 95% of centres seeing an increase in external veterinary bills. 85% of pet owners would prioritise their pets' needs over their own. It is clear that many pet owners are struggling to keep their pets. People who could previously comfortably afford their pets now cannot. A few schemes have been launched such as their Community Kitty Scheme which works with food banks. A joint campaign with the RSPCA provides £5 vouchers so that people can microchip their pets. Support for owners on low incomes has been raised in both Westminster and the Senedd but there are no legislative/policy proposals to date.

Rob Simkins (RS) reiterates that the picture is 'bleak', with Dogs Trust currently experiencing increases in handovers to both their centres in Wales, including a 53% increase in Cardiff. 13% of dog owners are being forced into debt to care for pets. 46% of people in Wales are struggling to care for their dogs in comparison to last year. 50% of respondents to a recent poll support subsidising vet costs while many supporting cutting VAT on dog food to reduce costs. 66% would not consider adopting a dog at the moment, which is heavily impacting rescue centres. These cases are not unique to Wales but reflect what is happening throughout UK. A food bank scheme is being piloted by Dogs Trust but isn't in South Wales yet, although they are working with FareShare and the Trussell Trust to support dog owners in Wales. They also have their Hope Project with focuses on targeting housing and homelessness to support dog owners who are experiencing/at risk of homelessness. In 2021, the team running Hope Project received 59 calls but are now receiving 1k+. As so many dogs with behavioural issues are coming through their centres, their Dog School is currently heavily discounted to try and keep dogs in loving homes. This school is provided both at their centres and online. Their current call to action is largely targeted at the UK Government, calling for the removal of VAT on both pet food and medicines.

CT mentions that people may be struggling to afford insurance.

Nic de Brauwere (NdB) sits on the National Equine Welfare Council who are concerned about what is looming in the future, as opposed to now. Horse owners are accustomed to warnings about rising costs. Notes that smaller pets tend to be impacted by rising costs first, such as during the 2009 financial crisis when the value of people's horses went down. However, horse prices recovered during the pandemic. Rising costs will be the main threat to horse owners – while lots of people organise hay during the summer months, it is likely that many will look to feed horses' cheaper hay in the near future. The horse sector is expecting the crisis to get worse next year, as opposed to it being a current issue. Horses are currently facing an obesity crisis.

While the British Horse Society runs castration clinics, it is hard to stop irresponsible breeders from breeding horses.

3. Renting with pets

Sam Swash (SS) mentions the petition he created calling for blanket bans on pets in rental properties to be outlawed in Wales. However, the Minister is misunderstanding the problem and is currently engaged in a comparison exercise between the Welsh and UK Governments. The Minister is also using the current terms of the Consumer Act 2015 as a reason not to act – but most tenants cannot be expected to know or understand this law. While the WG is looking to call on UK Government to ban adverts that state ‘no pets’, the Minister has ruled out a blanket ban on no pets’ clauses and is seemingly misunderstanding the wording used in the petition. Thinks the Minister seeing how this impacts people would be helpful.

Jane Dodds (JD) mentions the work that is being done around greyhound racing and how effective it has been, resulting in hundreds of emails being sent to MS. Asks if the same could be done with pets in rented accommodation. Asks CT whether they could approach Plaid Cymru/the Welsh Conservatives to get a debate on this topic in the Senedd to get a response from the Minister. CT been told by the Minister that it’s not a big issue and that people have the option of paying more of a deposit to rent with a pet here, where they don’t in England. Mentions a relevant debate brought forward by Luke Fletcher MS a few months’ back.

Scott Fryer (SF) states that pets in housing is a big issue for Battersea. In 2017, the charity found that issues relating to keeping pets in housing was the second most common reason for animals being handed over to them. They have worked with housing associations in the past and are now looking at the private renting sector, focusing on the physical/mental health benefits of pets. Pets save the NHS £2.5billion a year. Found the consultation on the Renting Homes (Wales) Act to be very restrictive and pets are not acknowledged in this new legislation. On Zoopla, only 7% of landlords state that their properties are pet friendly, with only 28k pet friendly properties available throughout the UK. While they are not calling for a complete shift as not every property is not suitable for pets, they are asking for statutory presumption in favour of pet ownership to readjust the balance. With regards to the Renting (Homes) Act, there is no robust guidance of what a pet’s policy should look like and what ‘reasonable grounds’ are, neither is there any guidance on how much of a deposit pet owners should pay. The model tenancy approach in England could be applied to Wales. Battersea, Dogs Trust and RSPCA have model policies available, but tenants are not aware of their rights. Guidance on pets in the Consumer Act has been withdrawn. Statutory guidance and new policy would help conversations. Scotland has consulted on a statutory right for pets.

In terms of the relevant White Paper for England, the UK Government are not going to change the amount of deposit that can be charged. Battersea are currently working on alternatives so that more properties could be pet friendly. Optional extra pet damage insurance is popular with UK Government and rental industry. Lots of animal welfare organisations are currently looking at the feasibility of this via a taskforce.

CT mentions an upcoming housing committee meeting she will be attending, asks SF to email her specifics to mention during that. SF agrees and mentions Street Vet for homeless pet owners – an accredited hostel scheme to enable more to be pet friendly. Will send more information to CT.

RS also keen to work on this and will get in touch with CT. DR suggests writing to the Minister.

4. Greyhound racing

Tim Doyle (TD) gives an overview of the recent developments at Valley Greyhounds in Ystrad Mynach. The track is the only one left in Wales and is both unregulated and independent. An application has been made for it to become registered with the Greyhound Board of Great Britain (GBGB). If this happens, the number of surplus of dogs would increase as there would be multiple races a week as opposed to one race a week. There has been significant supporter action to reject a planning application to make track compliant with GBGB's standards. As the application was of poor quality, it was rejected although it is not clear whether concerns for animal welfare were among the reasons why. A previous reply from Caerphilly County Borough Council listed the potential for improvements to animal welfare via GBGB as a consideration, therefore the Greyhound Rescue Wales (GRW) are calling for clarity. A second planning issue has been submitted. While objections from first application cannot be carried over, it could be rejected on the same grounds.

A new campaign has been launched by GWR, Hope Rescue, RSPCA, Dogs Trust and Blue Cross. Lots of MS are now in favour of a phased end to greyhound racing in Wales. The Senedd's Petitions Committee has heard a lot of evidence, with a report from them expected soon. The sector is looking to ensure that the possibility of a ban remains on the table. As lots of infrastructure is needed for greyhound racing, it cannot be pushed underground as previously suggested by some. The sector is trying to build more structured data on injuries/fatalities and is looking to gather more data on the breeding sector too. A peer reviewed article is currently in the pipeline.

VW mentions the significant pressure the rescue industry is under – GBGB's takeover of Valley Greyhounds would add more pressure and increase the number of surplus dogs in Wales.

CT calls for facts to be ready ahead of the debate on Hope Rescue's petition.

VW wants the WG to consider a ban as well as regulation. In Wales, it would be easier to introduce a ban as we only have one track. A phased end to greyhound racing would include stopping any expansion of the track in Ystrad Mynach. A local cabinet member in Caerphilly has written to the Minister, local Plaid and Labour councillors have come out in support too. Lots of MS and MPs have also voiced their support for a ban.

5. Agriculture (Wales) Bill/snaring ban

BJT provides a brief overview of the progress of the Agriculture (Wales) Bill that was published in September. Includes a proposal to ban the use of snares and glue traps, along with the potential for farmers who adhere to higher animal welfare standards to be rewarded financially. The Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee has been taking evidence from stakeholders such as the League Against Cruel Sports (LACS), the RSPCA, National Anti-Snaring Campaign and the British Veterinary Association – all of whom support the proposed bans, and would like to see the sale, possession and manufacture of these devices outlawed too. The Committee also heard evidence from the pro-shoot lobby who are calling for an exemption for 'humane cable restraints' – something which would weaken the proposed ban. Asks all to champion the ban on snares and glue traps where they can as farmed animals and pets can also become trapped in them.

6. Sentencing for animal welfare offences

Will Morton (WM) gives an overview of a recent case where an individual (David Thomas) was convicted of animal cruelty offences, following a raid by North Wales Police and the RSPCA where 34 dogs were seized. This individual had previously been convicted of animal fighting offences and was already banned from keeping dogs for eight years at the time of his arrest. He was initially given a 24-week sentence, but this was reduced on appeal to a suspended sentence due to mitigating circumstances such as the fact that his family/children rely on him financially. There has been concern about when the terms of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act will kick in, although these powers are starting to be used. The RSPCA has highlighted the new use of tougher sentences – in one case, an individual was given an eight months' suspended sentence for poisoning multiple cats (six months was the previous limit). Updated guidelines for the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) were published in May 2022. Definitive guidelines should be published in the spring and should come into force in late 2023. LACS are concerned about draft guidelines which advises that sentences of up to three years' should be considered for animal welfare offences, instead of five as included in the legislation. Advocates for Animals pointed out that any sentence of two years or less can be suspended. LACS were disappointed at the initial order of disqualification given to David Thomas. They would like to see disqualification orders used more widely and have raised this with the sentencing council. The availability of a five-year maximum sentence for animal welfare offences via the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act highlights the disparity between those and wild animal offences. The League would be supportive of more parity between the two.

NdB would like to see greater clarity of how animal welfare offences impact society/animals and notes that we're a long way from appreciating the true impact of animal welfare offences. Notes that mitigating circumstances, as happened in the Thomas case, are tempting for judges/magistrates to fall for. There is no consistency in animal welfare cases and fewer cases reach crown courts than the public expects. The sector needs to do more in terms of professional evidence gathering but it is also a political issue.

Peter Hambly (PH) supports an increase in sentencing for crimes involving badgers/wildlife from six months to five years to give police more resources. This would also enable relevant statistics/reports to be gathered. Crimes need to be notifiable to allow for better tracking and stronger sentences are needed for them to be a true deterrent. Crimes against wildlife/animals are also linked to other crimes. Animal abuse is also being shared on social media channels.

CT agrees that animal crimes are not being taken seriously enough but notes the pressure on the legal/magistrates' system. States that the wrong message is being sent out as people know they will likely be given suspended sentences/low punishment.

Next meeting: Monday, February 6th