



# Dogs Trust Consultation Response

## **Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into the private rented sector, May 2023.**

### **Introduction**

Dogs Trust is the UK's largest dog welfare charity. We usually care for around 14,000 dogs per year through our network of rehoming centres across the UK. In 2022 we cared for 1,322 dogs in Wales, from our sites in Bridgend and Cardiff. We welcome the decision of the Local Government and Housing Committee, to conduct an inquiry into the private rented sector (PRS) in Wales, specifically how pet ownership can be a barrier to accessing the PRS for many people in Wales.

### **Key Messages**

- A lack of pet friendly homes in the PRS is one of the key drivers of people handing over their dogs to our rehoming centres in Wales. Between December 2022 and the end of March 2023, 118 people enquired about handing over their dogs to our rehoming centres in Wales citing “a change in accommodation or rental agreement” as a reason for wanting to relinquish their dog(s) to us.
- Research shows considerable health and wellbeing benefits for people associated with pet ownership, which supports the aims and objectives of a number of Welsh Government strategies.
- YouGov data commissioned by Dogs Trust shows a disparity between landlords and letting agents' perceptions of pet-related issues, compared to actual, reported issues experienced by PRS landlords in Wales.
- Dogs Trust is opposed to blanket “No Pet” policies across all types of tenure, including the PRS.
- We believe there must be societal and legislative change in Wales to remove barriers for pet owners in the PRS. With proposed legislative work expected to strengthen tenants' rights to keep pets in England and Scotland, we are concerned that renters in Wales risk being left behind and the continued lack



of pet friendly PRS accommodation in Wales will have a negative impact on the welfare of dogs and their owners in Wales.

## **Pet Friendly Housing in Wales – The Issues**

As the Minister for Climate Change stated the housing crisis in Wales is a “huge and complex” issue<sup>1</sup> with many component parts. We recognise the lack of pet friendly housing within the PRS is one part of a wider issue affecting the rented sector, such as a lack of supply, unaffordability and insecurity, but we believe it is an important issue which – if solved – will have a beneficial impact on the lives of many people in Wales.

The recently implemented Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 has offered additional protection to renters across tenures in Wales, such as extended eviction notice periods and protection from eviction during the first 6 months of a tenancy. However, the Act unfortunately does little to offer any additional protection to tenants who wish to keep pets in their property.

An additional cause for concern with regard to the lack of pet friendly housing in the PRS, is the growing number of people living in temporary accommodation<sup>2</sup> in Wales. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 means that local authorities are able to discharge their duty to homeless applicants via an offer of private rented accommodation. However, the lack of pet friendly housing in the PRS can mean that for many people, this offer may not be suitable and would require them to relinquish their dog, remain stuck in temporary accommodation or potentially run the risk of being considered “intentionally homeless” by refusal of an offer of perceived suitable accommodation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/19421295.climate-change-minister-julie-james-visits-st-davids-announce-housing-crisis-action/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/homelessness-accommodation-provision-and-rough-sleeping-january-2023>



Between December 2022 and end of March 2023, Dogs Trust's data shows that 118 people who enquired about handing their dogs over to our Bridgend and Cardiff rehoming centres cited "a change in accommodation or rental agreement" as a reason for relinquishing their dog(s) to us. UK-wide, Dogs Trust received over 50,000 handover enquiries last year – our busiest year on record – and around 1 in 10 dog owners calling us cite issues with housing as the reason for needing to rehome their dog.

In a recent YouGov survey commissioned by Dogs Trust, only 8% of renters with pets say their home was advertised as pet friendly. Dogs Trust's data shows a significant need across South Wales for pet friendly housing. Given that this data only covers our two rehoming centres in Bridgend and Cardiff and to Dogs Trust services users, we are concerned about the scale of this need across Wales.

The recent pressures caused by the cost of living crisis are also exacerbating the housing crisis in Wales.

### **Spock's story**

Spock was a former racing greyhound adopted via Dogs Trust. He moved in with his new family in rented accommodation and had permission from the landlord. The family had lived in the house for many years and felt very settled. However, as the cost of living began to rise, the family were forced to find new, more affordable housing. They were unable to find pet friendly accommodation, despite having references from the existing landlord. The family were forced to hand Spock back into the care of Dogs Trust. He has gone on to find a new home.

Our research demonstrates there are a wide range of benefits associated with owning a dog<sup>3</sup> or pet. The PRS in Wales and across the UK is a huge barrier to many people accessing and benefitting from pet ownership, yet research shows that companion animals such as dogs provide benefits to people with mental health

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/getting-dog/dog-ready/benefits-of-owning-a-dog>



conditions<sup>4</sup>, more than 90% of pet owners reported that their pet helped them cope through lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>5</sup>. Dog ownership is strongly linked to a longer life, especially among heart attack and stroke survivors<sup>6</sup> and a further study showed that pet ownership can be a “catalyst” in developing networks and relationships between people in local communities<sup>7</sup>. More broadly, statistics show<sup>8</sup> an average pet owner in the UK reporting that pet ownership positively impacts their physical and mental health. We do not believe that private renters should be excluded from experiencing these health benefits, nor simply the joy of pet companionship.

Despite the clear benefits of pet ownership, the lack of protection for tenants wishing to keep pets is an ongoing concern. It is important to understand why so many PRS landlords do not support renting to pet owners, particularly as pet ownership can support key priority areas of the Welsh Government such as Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales<sup>9</sup> and Connected Communities<sup>10</sup>.

In our recent YouGov survey, nearly 1 in 4 landlords (24%) said that nothing would make them allow pets in their properties. A 2022 survey by Shelter Cymru<sup>11</sup> showed that over half of landlords surveyed (57%) said they don't, or would prefer not to let to people with pets. This shows why legislative change is needed, in addition to changing societal attitudes and/or perceptions.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://bmcpsonychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2#Sec4>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/research/pets-survey-lockdown-loneliness/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://newsroom.heart.org/news/dog-ownership-associated-with-longer-life-especially-among-heart-attack-and-stroke-survivors>

<sup>7</sup> <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0122085#sec006>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1331597/pet-health-benefits-for-owners-in-the-uk/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/healthy-weight-strategy-healthy-weight-healthy-wales>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/loneliness-and-social-isolation-connected-communities>

<sup>11</sup> [https://sheltercymru.org.uk/policy\\_and\\_research/can-i-get-a-home-barriers-to-getting-a-private-rented-home-in-wales/](https://sheltercymru.org.uk/policy_and_research/can-i-get-a-home-barriers-to-getting-a-private-rented-home-in-wales/)



Dogs Trust's findings show that nearly two thirds of landlords (64%) choose not to rent to pet owners for fear of damage to the property. Complaints from neighbours (47%) and potential flea infestations (31%) were also common responses from landlords. Yet only a small minority (16%) of landlords reported damage to properties caused by pets, or complaints from neighbours and only 8% of landlords reported issues with fleas, suggesting a significant gap between perceived issues and actual issues relating to tenants with pets. 31% of landlords who have never been asked to keep a pet said they would decline this request if made by a tenant. This suggests a perception problem with regard to tenants with pets, as opposed to being based on a landlord's prior experience of problems.

Only 16% of landlords reported that the Renting Homes (Fees Etc.) (Wales) Act 2019 would make them less likely to let to a tenant with pets, compared to 51% of landlords who reported that the Act made no difference to this decision.

### **Zoe and Rudy\* – a Hope Project<sup>12</sup> Case Study from Wales**

*"I have been staying on friends' sofas for about 6-7 months now. Unfortunately, having a dog makes it so much more difficult for me to find any housing. There is such a stigma around dogs, people think they are dirty and always cause damage to furniture.*

*As soon as I say to a landlord that I have a dog, they are not interested in me because of their blanket bans on pets. I have offered to pay a higher deposit and have suggested more frequent inspections but I have had no success so far. Even the emergency accommodation I was initially offered refused to accept Rudy.*

*I don't think they understood how much we had been through together and they suggested kennelling for him, I just couldn't do it. I rescued Rudy when he was 7 months old. We have been together 4 and a half years now. Rudy is everything to me – he's the reason I get up in the morning. He gives me a purpose – I take him to the*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dogstrusthopeproject.org.uk/>



*beach, he runs around. And simply watching him being free and happy is the reason I don't give up. He reminds me that it's not worth giving up on everything. My worries and anxiety are still there but as soon as he puts his head on me, I feel such comfort. No matter how alone I feel sometimes, with him I'm never alone. The fear disappears when I see him in the morning.*

*The Hope Project has been such a relief for me. I know that if Rudy needs any vet treatment, he will be taken care of. I don't feel like a bad owner anymore. The Hope Project has changed my life and Rudy's life immensely – I don't feel guilt and I don't feel like I am letting him down anymore. To be completely honest, you have helped me keep my dog. I used to think he would be better off with another family who could afford to look after him properly. But he has been able to stay with me thanks to your help. And I can't put into words how much I appreciate this.*

*The pandemic has been so difficult for me because of my anxiety. And if I didn't have Rudy, I probably wouldn't have made it through the pandemic. He gives me the stability I need to face everything on a day-to-day basis”.*

***\*Names altered for anonymity***

## **Pet Friendly Housing in Wales – The Solutions**

While we recognise that the lack of pet friendly housing in the PRS is one part of a wider issue, this is clearly exacerbating an already challenging situation.

Dogs Trust is opposed to blanket “No Pet” policies across all tenures, including the PRS. We do support housing providers who act reasonably against genuine cases of nuisance and/or irresponsible behaviour. We would, however, emphasise that the vast majority of dog owners are considerate and responsible, as the data above shows, given the low numbers of reported issues by landlords in the Welsh PRS.

There are a wide range of benefits for both tenants/contract holders and landlords in the PRS relating to pet ownership. 1 in 5 renters (19%) say they would stay in a home longer if they were allowed to keep a pet, and more than 1 in 3 (37%) of landlords said they would allow a pet if it would make a tenant stay longer.





A key part of the solution to this issue is to improve understanding between landlords and tenants, and to address some of the myths and stigma around pets living in rented properties. The Welsh Government and Senedd have a key role to play in this respect, driving this awareness and working with stakeholders, including local authorities and the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector, to generate impact via culture change. Dogs Trust is leading the way, with our Lets With Pets<sup>13</sup> scheme providing advice and support to tenants, landlords and letting agencies with the aim of improving access to the PRS. Through this scheme, we have seen many positive experiences from landlords who have agreed to pets in their properties, illustrated by data from a 2021 YouGov survey commissioned by Dogs Trust showing that 73% of landlords who allowed have allowed pets have reported no problems.

The Minister for Climate Change has made reference<sup>14</sup> to pet friendly housing being subject to UK consumer protection laws, however given that both housing and animal welfare is devolved to Wales, we believe that the Welsh Government should act to equalise access to housing across all tenures for pet owners, with the PRS being the priority, given the particular struggles that private renters face in finding suitable accommodation. .

Policy proposals are already developing in Scotland<sup>15</sup> and England<sup>16</sup>, strengthening renters' abilities to keep pets in their home, which have received strong support from renters and animal charities. In England, the UK Government's *A Fairer Private Rented Sector* white paper states that the government will "legislate to ensure landlords do not unreasonably withhold consent when a tenant requests to have a pet in their home, with the tenant able to challenge a decision." In Scotland, 94% of responses to the Scottish Government's "*New Deal for Tenants*" consultation<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.letswithpets.org.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://record.senedd.wales/WrittenQuestion/86865>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/a-new-deal-for-tenants/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-fairer-private-rented-sector>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-deal-tenants-analysis-report-responses-consultation-exercise/>



thought that the right to keep pets should be introduced as a right in the social sector, and that any approach should be tenure-neutral. Dogs Trust highly recommends that these plans are similarly adopted in Wales, both to protect dog and human welfare and improve tenants' rights.

We believe that legislative change – such as is being proposed in England and Scotland - is required in addition to any culture change, as a safeguard for future generations and their right to benefit from pet ownership. Consensus on tackling “No Pet” clauses already exists cross-party in the Senedd. In July 2022, Luke Fletcher MS led a debate<sup>18</sup> on a Member’s Legislative Proposal calling for a ban on “No Pet” clauses in rented accommodation. The motion was supported by 30 Members, including the Leaders of both the Welsh Conservatives and Plaid Cymru and every Welsh Labour MS outside of Government<sup>19</sup>.

Additionally in 2020, Dogs Trust partnered with Jack Sargeant MS and a number of Welsh housing organisations<sup>20</sup> to produce our ‘Pet Friendly Paw-licy’ document, giving guidance on supporting pet owners living in, or trying to access temporary accommodation.

Dogs Trust believes that the Local Government and Housing Committee can play a key role in fostering this cross-party support, bringing stakeholders together to propose recommendations to the Welsh Government with the aim of equalising access for pet owners across tenures, but specifically the PRS.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://record.senedd.wales/Plenary/12901#A73329>

<sup>19</sup> <https://record.senedd.wales/VoteOutcome/12901#V3783>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.leaderlive.co.uk/news/18825856.jack-sargeant-ms-teams-six-national-charities-call-pet-friendly-paw-licy/>





## **Pet Friendly Housing in Wales – What Dogs Trust is Doing**

Lets with Pets was set up by Dogs Trust in 2009 to encourage landlords and letting agencies to accept tenants with pets and to make the house hunting process easier for pet owners in the PRS. Sadly, one of the main reasons people hand over their dogs to us is problems finding rental accommodation that will accept pets. As the PRS accounts for more than 200,000 households<sup>21</sup> in Wales, people giving up pets because of accommodation issues is a problem that has been increasing over the last few years.

The Hope Project is a combined scheme running for almost 30 years that helps dog owners experiencing homelessness with access to homelessness and support services and veterinary care. The Veterinary Scheme provides free veterinary treatment to dogs whose owners are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Dogs who are registered on the scheme are able to access free flea and worming treatments, vaccinations, neutering and microchipping. Dogs Trust will also cover the cost of most additional essential and emergency treatments that the dogs may need.

The scheme, run with the help of local veterinary practices and homelessness organisations, can support any dog owner experiencing or at risk of homelessness across the UK. We work with partner vet practices in five towns and cities in Wales.

The Welcoming Dogs endorsement scheme works with homelessness services and housing providers to encourage them to accept clients with dogs. Dogs Trust offers bespoke advice and support to homelessness services around becoming dog-friendly so that we can ensure that people and their pets can stay together.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Housing/Dwelling-Stock-Estimates/dwellingstockestimates-by-year-tenure>



The Freedom Project, which expanded to Wales in 2022, is a free specialist fostering service for dogs belonging to people fleeing from domestic abuse. Freedom was set up over 18 years ago and has been operating in several English regions and across all of Scotland. Research indicates a strong link between animal abuse and domestic abuse, with perpetrators often threatening or harming a pet in order to intimidate and control their partner. Families and individuals fleeing domestic abuse are usually unable to take their pets with them into a refuge so in many cases they are reluctant to leave their home until they know there is somewhere safe for their pets. Dogs Trust, alongside other specialist pet fostering services in the UK, offers a solution.

Through our work on these projects, we know dogs can have a hugely positive impact on a person's quality of life, providing companionship, a sense of purpose and love, and in some cases, a reason to live. With this and the huge number of dogs acquired during the pandemic in mind, we welcome the renewed debate in Wales, on how best to encourage more pet-friendly properties.