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## **Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee consultation: General Principles of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill**

**January 2020**

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's consultation concerning the general principles of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill. The RSPCA works extensively with local authorities on animal welfare - including operationally, in developing policy, and by formally recognising best practice via our PawPrints scheme.

It would be both ultra vires and inappropriate for the RSPCA to comment on much of this Bill, given our remit. As such, our remarks are kept limited and focussed to very specific areas of the proposed law's purpose or wider intention - or to bring the Committee's intention to pertinent RSPCA work-streams which we believe relevant to this process.

### **Participation in citizenship - RSPCA's Great Debate**

We note the Bill's ambition to increase public participation in local democracy, and - in addition - plans to extend the franchise for local government elections to younger voters. While the RSPCA would not have a particular view on extending the franchise, we wanted to draw the Committee's attention to the RSPCA's Great Debate programme as a tangible example of a programme inspiring young people to become active citizens and participants in democracy at a local and national level.

Our 'Great Debate' concept is an integral part of the [RSPCA's Generation Kind](#) initiative - a series of programmes aimed at children and young people, urging them to have a better understanding of animal welfare and to inspire a sense of compassion and empathy.

The RSPCA first launched the Great Debate in Wales in 2015 at the National Assembly for Wales. Now entering a sixth year, the scheme is set to reach more young people than ever before. It brings together pupils aged 11 to 14 to discuss and debate a host of ethical animal welfare topics - nurturing key skills in research, deliberation and communication.

Regional heats are held at hubs of democracy across the country - including town and county council chambers, with the grand finale in Wales held at the National Assembly for Wales. Parallel events, too, are held in England - again utilising council chambers and venues in Westminster.

In addition to inspiring interest in animals and their welfare, the event has been credited with developing young people's interest in citizenship and democracy; providing access as to the process from which decisions impacting animals are made at both a local authority and national level.

We hope the programme will inspire a future generation of increasingly compassionate and empathetic activists. We are always eager to work with more local authorities, and the Assembly Commission themselves, to further develop this initiative and the impact it is having on young people's participation with the decision-making process and, indeed, feel much of the ethos of the Great Debate programme is wholly consistent with the wider aims and objectives of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill.

### **Increasing awareness of what councils do**

As part of any plans to promote access to local government, the RSPCA would welcome any measures that increase public understanding as to what local authorities have, or do not have, responsibility for. Our 24-hour emergency line often receives calls on issues to which the RSPCA has no remit, as statutory responsibility rests with Councils - for example, dealing with stray dogs - to which callers are often signposted to their local authority instead.

The RSPCA's work with local authorities has recently seen numerous notices of motion debated at a local authority level, focussed on specific policy changes which impact animals. Examples have included the banning of pets as prizes, and action to mitigate the risks associated with fireworks to animals. We often see considerable interest from the public on our social media channels to such developments - so acknowledge the role web-casting of all Council meetings would play in fostering increased engagement, and encouraging members of the public to urge their Councillors to further act in the interests of animals.

### **Voluntary mergers & collaborative working**

It would not be appropriate for the RSPCA to have a particular view on how many local authorities should exist in Wales, nor to whether particularly local authorities should be seeking voluntary merger.

However, with this legislation seeking to make provisions for the voluntary merger of principal Councils, the RSPCA wishes to highlight the importance of any future mergers not weakening the provision or delivery of animal welfare services at a local level - particularly given the raft of animal welfare issues which local government has statutory or lead responsibility for.

Indeed, local authorities have a huge amount of enforcement responsibility with regards to animal welfare - from regulating dog breeding, to microchipping, tackling fly-grazing and much more. However, the prevalence of particular animal welfare issues varies drastically on a geographical basis - necessitating a situation whereby one local authority may, at present, have far more experience dealing with one particular animal welfare issue than their neighbouring authority.

As such, we seek assurances that the Welsh Government proposed system - during the process of voluntary merger - of shadow councils and transition committees will adequately consider what steps need to be taken to ensure the merger does not weaken a new, bigger Council's ability to enforce regulations, such as those that will have a direct impact on the welfare of animals.

More generally - and in light of the proposals for joint working contained within the Bill - the RSPCA sees the benefit on a daily basis of working in collaboration and partnership to improve animal welfare outcomes. Strong examples of collaboration already exist in Wales - for example - in its most established

form - between Bridgend Council, Cardiff Council and the Vale of Glamorgan Council in the formation of Shared Regulatory Services.

With regards to this Bill, we note proposals for joint, cross-Council committees to be established, either at the instigation of two or more principal local authorities, or Welsh Ministers. The RSPCA, certainly, could envisage situations where the establishment of joint committees could help tackle animal welfare issues which cross territorial boundaries. As an example, the instigation of a joint committee following the recent BBC expose into dog breeding, involving the impacted local authorities, could be regarded as a proportionate and appropriate response to ensure necessary action. Indeed, we have, or have had, representation on less formal cross-Council committees exploring issues such as stray dog provision, and fly-grazed horses. As such, we believe the input and involvement of relevant third parties into these joint committees - depending on the issue being discussed - would likely be beneficial for the local authorities involved.

### **Recognising local authority performance - RSPCA PawPrints**

We wanted to draw the Committee's attention to the RSPCA's PawPrints scheme, formerly known as the Community Animal Welfare Footprints (CAWF). The scheme is the only awards programme recognising good practice from public bodies, particularly local authorities, in relation to animal welfare. It was first established in 2008, and in 2019 enjoyed its most successful year - recognising more public bodies than ever before<sup>1</sup>.

Awards are divided into five PawPrint categories, awarded to bronze, silver or gold standard. They recognise the achievements of public service organisations for their stray dog services, contingency planning, housing policy, animal activity licensing and kennelled dog welfare - providing recognition for meeting scientifically-rigorous criteria.

We recognise establishing a more regularised measure for the performance of principal Councils will be a complex process, involving the likes of the Auditor General for Wales, Estyn and the Care Inspectorate Wales. However, we did wish to highlight the existence of third party accreditation schemes - such as PawPrints - which play their own role not only in analysing and recognising performance; but works with local authorities over a prolonged period of time to advise on improved service delivery in a specific area.

### **General power of competence - encouraging innovation**

We note plans to introduce a new general power of competence to empower local authorities, which could lead them to become more effective, capable and innovative.

RSPCA Cymru welcomes steps which will encourage local authorities to explore innovative solutions to improve animal welfare. Indeed, the aforementioned PawPrints scheme already includes a special Innovator category, through which independent judges recognise examples of innovation delivered by public bodies in the interests of animals.

While local government functions are limited by legislation, they are increasingly plentiful in the field of animal welfare - despite sometimes stretched resources. However, animal welfare problems - as noted - vary significantly across Wales. Indeed, prior to Welsh Government action at a national level, localised legislation - namely the Cardiff City Council Act, Mid Glamorgan County Council Act and the West Glamorgan Act empowered certain local authorities to act on the issue of fly-grazed equines;

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<sup>1</sup> [Record year for animal welfare scheme which recognises public bodies](#), 27 September 2019

acknowledging historical regional challenges. Meanwhile, local authorities in West Wales deal with significant amounts of licensed dog breeding establishments, while the issue is far less commonplace in other parts of Wales.

As such, empowering local authority to potentially look beyond legislative constraints to help animals is potentially very welcome, and beneficial - and could encourage Councils to look beyond a legislative toolkit to improve welfare outcomes.

Nevertheless, it is equally important that any decisions made which impact animals are done with the full possession of any necessary experience, knowledge and training in the sphere of animal welfare; so that any policy moves do not unwittingly compromise welfare. This advice is given in a similar vein to that issued by the RSPCA with regards to the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. That law empowers Councils; for example when introducing Public Space Protection Orders, to prohibit or require specific things being done to prevent activities taking place that will have a detrimental effect on the quality of life within a locality.

### Further information

The RSPCA's work with local authorities is widespread - and, while this response is limited via our organisational remit, we would be happy to provide any further information we can which may be of interest to the Committee. Additional detail about the RSPCA's work with principal and community councils across Wales can be found on our [PoliticalAnimal](#) website.