



Consultation Response

FROM THE EXTERNAL AFFAIRS WALES DEPARTMENT

National Assembly for Wales – Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee, Inquiry into General Principles of the Housing (Wales) Bill – January 2014

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee in relation to its inquiry being undertaken into the general principles of the Housing (Wales) Bill.

The mission of the Society is to prevent cruelty, promote kindness to and alleviate suffering of all animals. As such, we approach all such discussions with this focus and, given this, it would be inappropriate for RSPCA Cymru to comment on much of the contents of the Welsh Government's proposed Housing (Wales) Bill, which sit outside of the scope of our remit.

However issues connected to housing can undoubtedly have a considerable impact on animal welfare, and we would urge the Committee to acknowledge this as part of their deliberations and, consequently, encourage the Welsh Government, local housing authorities and private landlords to take appropriate action. Positive consequences of this can include encouraging responsible pet ownership, reducing anti-social behaviour and facilitating healthier, happier tenants.

Where facilities exist for proper care, RSPCA Cymru does not believe landlords should discourage pet ownership. According to Welsh Government data, 43 per cent of households in Wales own at least one animal¹, and it can be anticipated that a significant number of these live in private rented accommodation or social housing, demonstrating the potential offered by this bill to improve animal welfare in Wales. Crucially, responsible pet ownership can offer an array of benefits for both landlord and tenant.

CAWF HOUSING FOOTPRINT

In England and Wales, the RSPCA has, since 2008, operated the Community Animal Welfare Footprints (CAWF) scheme. These cover four areas of service covered by the public sector, including a designated award for housing.

In 2013, 28 organisations in England & Wales gained recognition in the CAWF Housing Footprint, with Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association and Merthyr Valleys Homes receiving bronze awards. The number of organisations applying for this award has increased substantially since its launch.

Local authorities and registered social landlords (RSLs) have earned bronze, silver and gold footprints for clear and positive pet policies, useful information for tenants, clear enforcement, good partnership working, innovative education work and more. As ever, RSPCA Cymru is eager to work with local authorities and RSLs interested in obtaining a CAWF Housing Footprint, and would urge the Committee to commend this scheme as a means to assist the promotion of good practice in relation to animals in social housing.

¹ Welsh Government's National Survey for Wales, 2009/2010, Chapter 12 – Pet Ownership. See: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2011/110224sb142011en.pdf>

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL LANDLORDS

Proposals in the Housing (Wales) Bill include placing a requirement on local authorities to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS), which would essentially place standards of accommodation for all social housing on a statutory footing.

Many challenges are posed by the keeping of pets in sheltered, social or council accommodation; and dealing with these issues should be an important consideration for social landlords. These can largely be negated through the existence of a well-enforced Pets Policy, perhaps linked to a tenancy agreement – which can clearly outline a tenant’s legal obligations in terms of what is required of them and the consequences for failing to adhere to the policy.

A robust Pets Policy should include clear guidance on how many pets a tenant may own and any restrictions on particular species, which should depend on the suitability, style and size of the accommodation in question. Further to this, it should detail that an owner is responsible for the welfare of these animals as defined under the Animal Welfare Act (2006).

Furthermore, a Pets Policy should,

- outline that an owner must ensure animals do not cause a nuisance or be used in an anti-social manner
- include measures to tackle indiscriminate breeding,
- provide rules on neutering or spaying, and
- lay out conditions related to pets which may be left behind in a property.

Additionally, given that it is anticipated to soon to become a requirement for all dogs in Wales, landlords may also wish to outline to their tenants their legal obligation in relation to microchipping and identification.

WHQS does not solely deal with the physical conditions of properties, but also integrates social, environmental and economic concerns. In setting standards to be met by local housing authority, the Welsh Government may wish to consider the scope which exists - whether through the WHQS, associated guidance or otherwise - to ensure animal welfare issues are appropriately considered, which can - if properly addressed - yield significant social, environmental and economic benefits.

PRIVATE LANDLORDS - TRAINING AS PART OF REGISTRATION

The aforementioned issues in relation to a Pets Policy are equally applicable to private landlords. The Citizen's Advice Bureau, for example, highlights the keeping of pets as a common problem associated with renting a property², and appropriate steps from private landlords can avoid the escalation of unnecessary issues.

Proposals in the Housing (Wales) Bill would see private landlords needing to register with local authorities and become licensed. As part of this process, staff would need to undertake training, approved by the local housing authority, as part of the accreditation process. Whilst the scheme will operate its own approved course, it is proposed that local authorities will be able to approve alternative courses for private landlords to undertake as part of the licensing process.

Should these proposals become a reality, RSPCA Cymru would urge local housing authorities to ensure the training requirements set for private landlords include an animal welfare element. Such issues should be regarded as key in the management of a rental property and, if addressed accordingly, could potentially save the public purse significant amounts of money in tackling possible pet-related issues, which could include noise nuisance, anti-social behaviour etc.

² Citizen’s Advice Bureau website – Common problems with renting, accessed 17 Jan 2014. See: http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/wales/housing_w/housing_renting_a_home_e/common_problems_with_renting.htm

Training could highlight to private landlords issues they may wish to include in their tenancy agreements, the benefits of a Pets Policy, as detailed above, and procedures they may wish to be aware of to tackle common pet-related problems. Crucially, such training should be administered by an appropriately qualified individual or group, and RSPCA Cymru would be happy to provide advice to local housing authorities considering tailoring training in this way.

GYPSY AND TRAVELLER SITES

The issue of gypsy and traveller sites is also covered by the proposed Housing (Wales) Bill, including a statutory duty on local authorities to provide new Gypsy & Traveller sites where a need has been identified. The Welsh Government states that proposals will lead to more gypsy and traveller communities being able to “access accommodation appropriate to meet their cultural need”.

As part of the Stage 4 debate on the Control of Horses (Wales) Bill, the issue of ensuring gypsy and traveller communities understand the implications of that vitally important legislation was discussed. As part of this process, both local authorities and the Welsh Government should give adequate consideration to appropriate engagement, including when new sites are being developed once a relevant need has been identified.

As part of any such engagement, there is also scope for seeking to ensure increased levels of compliance with relevant passporting and microchipping legislation.

HOMELESSNESS

The Bill, as introduced, looks in detail at the issue of homelessness, including placing a duty on local authorities to carry out a homelessness review and formulate a strategy based on the review’s findings.

For many homeless people, pets provide vital, cherished companionship. This must be a key consideration for local authorities when drawing up any strategy. The draft Bill proposes to empower the Welsh Government to specify the matters to be taken into account when determining whether accommodation is suitable. To this end, in seeking to address homelessness, whether owning a pet is proving a barrier to some taking up places in social accommodation, must be discussed.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped this consultation response provides an overview of the potential offered by the Housing (Wales) Bill to improve animal welfare standards in Wales. We look forward to working closely with the Welsh Government, Assembly Members and other stakeholders during the Bill’s anticipated legislative journey, and would be happy to provide any further information required by the Committee at this stage.