Welsh Government Consultation
New approach to surveys in Wales: consultation on topics
February 2015

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Welsh Government's consultation regarding the adoption of a new approach to surveys in Wales, and associated topics.

As part of this process, we are eager to emphasise the potential importance of Welsh Government-commissioned, large-scale surveys. We very much welcome the Welsh Government's focus on this area; and believe such surveys are well-placed to provide a clear evidence base for informing the need for policy development and raising awareness of key issues which impact upon the welfare of animals. As such, RSPCA Cymru believes this is an important consultative process.

Importance of animal welfare data

Obtaining, mining and analysing relevant data can prove imperative in informing the state of animal welfare in Wales.

To this end, RSPCA Cymru produces - among many other publications - an annual Indicators report which seeks to explore, in detail, a particular animal welfare issue by, primarily, drawing together a collection of data. These reports have been prepared in conjunction with the Welsh Government. Whilst compiling such data provides many challenges, these reports have helped inform a series of RSPCA Cymru recommendations, many of which have been taken forward as Welsh Government policy.

Furthermore, significant baseline data on a number of animal welfare topics was gathered as part of the Companion Animal Welfare Enhancement Scheme (CAWES), an initiative funded by the Welsh Government which ran from 2008 to 2011. This data helped inform many policy and legislative developments in Wales including, notably, the recent introduction of new dog breeding regulations governing the licensing of establishments in Wales.
Whilst the CAWES data remains a vital resource, the information collected by the scheme is becoming harder to use, given it is a number of years old. Generally, there is a clear need for timely data concerning animals in Wales to be collected.

**National Survey questions & future surveying**

The inclusion of questions related to companion animals in the 2014/2015 National Survey is a very positive development, and a much-needed addition which should be retained in future surveying work. The included questions relate to levels of pet ownership, the species, where pets were acquired, and whether the animal is insured and, in the case of dogs, microchipped.

Gathering species-specific data on pet ownership across Wales is hugely important. A key benefit of this is to identify the prevalence of pets in Wales with complex needs, such as exotic animals. Presently, no Code of Practice exists for the keeping of these animals, despite a widespread lack of knowledge regarding the complex care they require. Additionally, there remains no legal restriction in Wales concerning the keeping of primates as pets, and additional data on the prevalence of this activity is imperative to informing the scale of the problem in Wales. This is testimony to the importance of gathering data to inform evidence-based policy decisions.

Additionally, the proposed question on microchipping is important, and this issue should be a focus of future Welsh Government surveying work. Given the intended introduction of compulsory microchipping of all dogs in Wales in the spring of 2016, this area of questioning will assist in determining the level of compliance with the law. However, whilst conscious of the Welsh Government's desire to reduce costs associated with the commissioning of large-scale surveys, it seems prudent to expand the question on microchipping to include other species which should have identification, such as cats.

With regards to the Welsh Government’s intended new approach to surveys, RSPCA Cymru would urge any questions related to animals to be included on an annual basis, as opposed to at longer-term intervals. Certainly, trends in pet ownership, the popularity of particular species and the prevalence of establishments selling animals can fluctuate significantly and quickly, as demonstrated by the proliferation of the puppy breeding trade in recent years. Based on the questions contained within the 2014/2015 National Survey on companion animals, annual questioning would help map such trends and ensure organisations such as the RSPCA can seek to tailor their activities accordingly.

Mapping findings on a geographic basis is key. It would seem logical to do this via Assembly electoral regions. RSPCA Cymru has noted significant variances in different areas of Wales with regards to animal ownership; so findings through future surveys focussed on animals should be presented on a regional basis. From the RSPCA’s perspective, this could assist with targeting educational and awareness campaigns, such as advice and neutering schemes, or the provision of subsidised care; and could also prove useful for the Society's branch network. Presenting and
analysing the findings of this data via the core topics, as outlined in the consultation documentation, could further enhance the scope of this targeted work.

There are areas in which the Welsh Government could include additional questions which may, subsequently, help inform the need for future improvements related to animal welfare in Wales.

The Welsh Outdoor Recreation Survey, for 2014, looks at the reasons members of the public go outdoors, and what outdoor places they visit. Dog walking activities are likely to form a considerable body of responses. There are concerns that, if used by enforcers without appropriate training, powers contained within the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime & Policing Act 2014 may unintentionally and unwittingly compromise dog welfare, such as by unduly restricting dog access to such walking spots. As such, including questions on the availability of areas for dog walking, and any restrictions to undertaking such outdoor recreation, could provide a key evidence base as to one potential consequence of this legislation; further to the Welsh Government's commitment to monitor the impact of this new law in Wales, including on the issue of dog welfare.

Surveying the general public in Wales provides a key opportunity to assess awareness regarding key pieces of legislation and guidance regarding the keeping of companion animals; for example - an owner's responsibilities under the Animal Welfare Act, adherence with relevant Codes of Practice and so on. Enhancing knowledge of the wider public's understanding of their responsibilities will further help with the targeting of education, awareness-raising and other schemes and could, as a consequence, prevent animal suffering and encourage responsible pet ownership.

Improving the availability of information concerning trends in companion animal ownership can also assist with informing approaches to disease control. There are, of course, widespread implications for Society for disease outbreaks; whilst some illnesses, such as zoonosis or zoonotic conditions, can be passed from companion animals to humans.

Conclusions

Animal welfare is an issue high up the public's consciousness, and attracts a large, passionate activism base. Additionally, the far-reaching consequences of issues related to the animal welfare sphere are often forgotten, as are its interconnections and links with human welfare. Indeed, the RSPCA works closely on issues related to youth justice, poverty and tackling domestic abuse.

If issues related to animal ownership are absent from future surveys, this may also be a counterproductive move with regards to public sector budgets. Members of the public are likely to seek to obtain information from other sources - such as information requests to Local Authorities and Welsh Government.

Generally, as noted, the inclusion of such questions can play a key role in informing the need for
policy developments, targeted schemes and awareness-raising, and can contribute greatly towards improving standards of responsible pet ownership across Wales.

In summary, it is vital - as part of any process to amalgamate the National Survey, the Welsh Health Survey, the Arts in Wales Survey, and the Welsh Outdoor Recreation Survey - that a clear focus on the collection of data which will enhance our understanding of animals in Wales is included. RSPCA Cymru would be very happy to provide further information in the hope this important aim is realised.