

Questions to the Minister for Rural Affairs, North Wales & Trefnydd

Date of Questions:	Tabled By:
29 June 2022	3.30pm on 22 June 2022

Recent Animal Welfare Updates

New essay collection and Animal Kindness Index unveiled by the RSPCA. As part of our mission to ensure that animal welfare becomes central to the formation of mainstream policy in both Wales and England, the RSPCA has launched a new collection of essays which highlight the urgent need to rethink our relationship with our fellow living creatures. [What Have Animals Ever Done for Us?](#) sees 19 global thought leaders explore a diverse array of topics - including animals in religion, the economic value of the natural world, what technology can teach us about our feelings towards animals, and how animals have shaped the legal system over the last 200 years. The launch of the new essay collection marks the first activity the RSPCA will be undertaking to demonstrate the need to consider animals in all aspects of society, ahead of our 200-year anniversary in 2024. This month, the RSPCA has also unveiled its new Animal Kindness Index, to track evolving public attitudes and behaviours towards animals; and we look forward to engaging with Members of the Senedd over the coming months and years to discover how a greater focus on animals could help secure important developments in Wales.

Concern as pet owners impacted by the cost of living crisis. With the rising costs of living impacting many pet owners across Wales, RSPCA Cymru is concerned that spiralling costs could potentially compromise animal welfare and lead to further increases in abandonments if more support is not made available for those who are currently struggling most. Concern about the cost of living was one of the stand-out finds in the RSPCA's new Animal Kindness Index - with 19% of pet owners worried about being able to afford to properly care for their pet. As the majority face rising energy and fuel costs, it is likely that pet owners will find themselves with less money to provide for their pets' basic needs, which could leave some with no choice but to consider rehoming their beloved companion animals. Worryingly, many rescue and rehoming centres across Wales are already at capacity and are also struggling with rising costs - demonstrating the urgency of the Welsh Government revisiting a commitment made in 2018 to explore providing financial support for vet bills for those on the lowest incomes in Wales.

Uncertainty over Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill LCM. On May 25, the Welsh Government laid a Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM) on the UK Government's Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, which aims to enable the implementation of the recently-signed Free Trade Agreements with the two southern hemisphere countries. Minister for Economy, Vaughan Gething MS, has recommended that the Senedd reject the Bill in its current form because of concerns that it gives powers to UK Ministers to make regulations in devolved areas, without any requirement to obtain Welsh Ministers' consent. With no vote on the LCM scheduled in the Senedd as it stands, the future of the Trade Bill and how it will eventually be applied to Wales remains to be seen - but, regardless, the RSPCA hopes the Welsh Government will continue to be a strong voice against FTAs creating an unlevel playing field for Wales' farmers or undermining domestic standards around animal welfare.

An updated Code of Practice for rabbits is much needed in Wales. With Rabbit Awareness Week taking place between June 27 - July 1, RSPCA Cymru is urging the Welsh Government to commit to updating its Code of Practice (COP) relevant to these popular pets, to ensure that owners have access to contemporary best practice advice that helps them meet the needs of their fluffy friends. While many consider rabbits to be ideal starter pets, they are also among the most neglected as some owners struggle to understand their complex needs - hence the need for the Welsh Government's decade-old COP to be reviewed, updated and promoted. Rabbits were obtained under Covid lockdown as an "easy pet" but are now being abandoned to rescues such as the RSPCA. Our centres in Wales are experiencing a 40 per cent reduction in the number of people coming forward to offer new homes for bunnies, along with a worrying rise in calls concerning rabbit welfare concerns and alleged neglect. So, we are calling for any focus on support for pet owners against the backdrop of the rising costs of living to include owners of smaller companion animals to help encourage the responsible ownership of animals such as rabbits and other small furries in Wales.

New essay collection and Animal Kindness Index unveiled by the RSPCA

With the 200th anniversary of the first animal welfare law to apply to Wales - Martin's Law - taking place in July, we have published a collection of essays from global thought leaders as part of our mission to reposition animal welfare from a niche to a more mainstream policy position. Covering an array of topics that examine our relationship with animals and the various roles they play within our modern society, [What Have Animals Ever Done for Us?](#) features 19 essays with journalist Henry Mance, environmentalist Tony Juniper CBE, author Melanie Challenger and professor and former White House advisor Cass Sunstein amongst the authors, while renowned primatologist, Dr Jane Goodall, from the Jane Goodall Institute, has provided the foreword. It is hoped the collection will spark a debate around some of the groundbreaking changes proposed in the essays to sustain a future for humans and animals together, while emphasising the need for Wales, the UK and the wider world to take a fresh look at humankind's relationship with animals.

With the new school curriculum which will give educators more flexibility to teach students about empathy and compassion as part of the new Areas and Learning Experiences (AoLEs) being introduced in Wales in September, RSPCA Cymru is continuing its calls for animal welfare to be covered in schools, with the aforementioned essay collection providing an excellent example of the type of topics that teachers could potentially cover. The role education could play in helping raise young people and children's awareness of animal sentience and responsible pet ownership was acknowledged by the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd earlier this year, with this being something she vowed to consult with her officials about¹. An update on whether any progress has been made in this respect and any discussions with the Minister for Education which may have taken place would be especially timely, with just a few short months to go until the new curriculum is rolled out in Wales.

As part of the aforementioned programme of activities leading up to our 200th anniversary in 2024, the RSPCA has also launched an Animal Kindness Index to track evolving public attitudes and behaviours towards animals and help give an indication of where we need to focus our work. The Index's inaugural report was published on June 16, giving an early glimpse into the public's current thoughts and feelings towards animals. Positively, the report found that over two-thirds (69%) of the public describe themselves as 'animal-lovers', and that 75% of people said they'd carried out an act of kindness for animals in the past 12 months². Interestingly, 89% of people surveyed in Wales stated that they would support animal welfare being taught in schools, showing that there is a clear public appetite for this to happen. The data collected via the Animal Kindness Index will help shape our future education and campaign work to create a kinder, more compassionate world for both humans and animals alike - and we hope will help inform the Welsh Government's decision-making too.

The launch of our Animal Kindness Index is especially relevant to Wales at the moment, with there currently being no confirmation with regard to how the Welsh Government intends to acknowledge animal sentience in the devolved policy making process. RSPCA research has shown that approximately 73% of our inspectors believe that animal cruelty is committed because people do not understand that animals are sentient with feelings and emotions³. With the RSPCA's emergency line receiving more than one million calls annually⁴, we are concerned that a lack of understanding of animal sentience is a factor. Because of this, news on any developments relevant to recognising animal sentience during the policy-making process in Wales would be welcome, to ensure that animals here do not find themselves under less legal protection than those in other areas of the UK for a prolonged period of time - following the UK Government's Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 receiving Royal Assent in April. The Welsh Government has highlighted its intention to "determine (its) own direction on sentience, recognising that animals are sentient beings"⁵ - but it remains unclear how, or when, this will be done.

Questions to consider:

- 1. Can the Minister confirm if she has held any discussions with the Minister for Education with regard to encouraging schools to teach pupils about animal sentience and responsible pet ownership under Wales' new curriculum?**
- 2. Can the Minister provide an update on the Welsh Government's plans to acknowledge animal sentience in the devolved policy making process?**
- 3. Does the Minister support the creation of an independent body for Wales who would be tasked with scrutinising all devolved policy for its impact on animal sentience?**

¹ [Record of Proceedings](#), 27 April 2022

² The survey was carried out by YouGov 13 April - 25 April. The total sample was 4,102 UK adults and the results have been weighted to be representative of the UK population aged 18+

³ Ibid

⁴ RSPCA News - [RSPCA welcomes Sentience Bill and calls for 'meaningful' committee to hold ministers to account](#), 13 May 2021

⁵ [Record of Proceedings](#), 27 April 2022

Concern as pet owners impacted by the cost of living crisis

As individuals and households across Wales face spiralling living costs, the RSPCA is among the many animal welfare organisations concerned that struggling pet owners may soon find themselves faced with the heartbreaking decision to consider rehoming their animals, as they find themselves with less money to meet their basic needs and seek veterinary treatment where necessary. The risk of a further rise in animal abandonments in the coming months is particularly concerning, with such rates already high following the Covid-19 pandemic. RSPCA Cymru has long been anxious about the risk of a rise in pet abandonments following the easing of Covid-19 restrictions and we are already seeing an impact on our services as we return to normality. In the first four months of 2022, we took in 79% more rabbits and 18% more cats than last year, with more dogs with behavioural issues also coming into our care - possibly as a result of them struggling to adapt to their owners' post-pandemic routines.

The RSPCA's Animal Kindness Index was launched on June 16, identifying the cost of living crisis as the most urgent threat to pet welfare as present⁶. While the report shows that animal welfare is a key concern for many, the report also revealed that the rising cost of living and the cost of pet ownership could threaten our love for our pets - and demonstrates the benefits governmental intervention could have. According to our report, 65% of people surveyed in Wales said that the cost of looking after their pet had become more expensive over the last 12 months, while 19% said they were worried about being able to afford to properly care for their pet and 18% said they were worried about the cost of feeding their pets. RSPCA research shows that internet searches for 'help with vet bills' have also increased in recent months, as has the number of owners seeking advice on self-treating their pets, as many find themselves seeking help and support during these challenging times.

Support for pet-owners on low incomes is an issue that has received significant political attention in the Senedd as of late, with the RSPCA being one of the many animal welfare charities that offers such support. For example, there is an RSPCA-branch run mobile clinic in North Wales which provides advice to pet owners as well as low-cost consultations and treatments, as well as our clinic in Merthyr Tydfil which offers support to pet owners on low-incomes, with this including discounted veterinary treatment. Many RSPCA branches also offer means-tested vouchers for procedures such as neutering and microchipping, while more than 20 branches across England and Wales have set up partnerships with food banks, with this being an initiative that we hope will be expanded. While we continue to promote [our resources](#) to new owners and promote pet insurance, we're keen for the Welsh Government and local authorities to push these messages out too.

In terms of other action from the Welsh Government, the Minister previously stated in June 2018 that she wished to "explore what veterinary provision, assistance and advice is available to people who need help in caring for their pets"⁷ - and, four years on, the ongoing cost of living challenges highlight the importance of this, especially to pet owners who may have fallen on hard times. However, as of yet, the Welsh Government is yet to announce any new package for those on low incomes. In addition, there are currently permanent public awareness campaigns relevant to responsible pet ownership and support for animal owners running in both England and Scotland, and a similar campaign in Wales, perhaps a permanent expansion of the ongoing *Paws, Prevent, Protect* scheme, would be much welcome.

During the last round of Ministerial questions in May, the Minister stated that her officials are considering a survey by the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes, of which the RSPCA is a member, on the impact of coronavirus on Welsh animal rescue organisations and what potential actions can be taken from it in consultation with third sector partners⁸. With many rescue and rehoming centres under significant pressure from a demand and cost perspective, and with the cost of living crisis having the potential to cause further issues, it is important that provisions are put in place to ensure that animal welfare is not compromised in Wales as both pet owners and the sector face significant financial challenges.

Questions to consider:

- 1. Can the Minister provide an update on how the Welsh Government intends to support pet owners who are facing financial hardship with costs such as vet bills?**
- 2. What consideration has the Welsh Government given to the provision of regular public awareness campaigns on responsible pet ownership to help counteract the risk of an rise in animal abandonments as a result of the current cost of living crisis?**
- 3. How does the Welsh Government intend to support animal welfare organisations who are struggling with high demand and rising costs?**

⁶ The survey was carried out by YouGov 13 April - 25 April. The total sample was 4,102 UK adults and the results have been weighted to be representative of the UK population aged 18+

⁷ Welsh Government - [Steps to further improve animal welfare of pets unveiled](#), 19 June 2018

⁸ <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/12844#C428590>

Uncertainty over Trade LCM amid ongoing FTA negotiations

Following the recommendation by Minister for the Economy, Vaughan Gething MS, that Members of the Senedd should reject the current terms of the Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM) for the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill that was laid by the Welsh Government on June 15, the future of how and when the terms of the agreed Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the two southern hemisphere nations will be applied to Wales remains uncertain. According to the LCM, while the Minister agrees that it is appropriate for the UK Parliament to legislate for Wales and that 'there is insufficient time available to bring forward an equivalent bill in the Senedd', concerns have been raised with regards to legislative responsibilities as the bill 'also gives... powers to UK Ministers without any requirement to obtain Welsh Ministers' consent'⁹. While this Bill essentially allows procurement provisions within the FTA to be enacted, more generally, the Welsh Government has also long acted as a strong voice against UK Government FTAs creating an unlevel playing field for farmers, or undermining domestic standards around animal health and welfare. As the agreed FTAs with Australia and New Zealand progress, it is hoped Welsh Ministers will use any further discussions around powers contained in this Bill to also continue to raise these points, including in the context of future FTAs also being negotiated.

While matters relating to trade are reserved to the UK Government, the proposed Trade Bill gives Welsh Ministers powers to make regulations in devolved areas, with Members of the Senedd needing to pass an LCM for the provisions of the bill to be applied to Wales. The UK Government's signing of FTAs with other nations since our departure from the European Union has been a key talking point in the Senedd in recent months, amid concerns that such agreements could unfairly disadvantage farmers in Wales by enabling cheaper food that has been produced using lower standards to hit supermarket shelves here in the immediate future. RSPCA Cymru is among the organisations who responded with the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee's recent consultations on the impacts of the FTAs with Australia and New Zealand on Welsh agriculture, because of our concerns about lower standards in animal welfare in countries such as Australia and the potential impact of the agreements on farmers in Wales at a time when the Welsh Government is preparing to launch its post-Brexit support scheme (the Sustainable Farming Scheme) for farmers as part of the Agriculture (Wales) Bill, anticipated in the autumn. RSPCA Cymru has identified the Sustainable Farming Scheme as the biggest opportunity in the history of devolution to improve farm animal welfare and reward farmers who adhere to higher-welfare standards for their efforts. With good husbandry practices playing a key role in our own food assurance scheme, RSPCA Assured, we know that many farmers work hard to ensure a good quality of life for their animals and rewarding farmers for the production of higher-welfare produce could provide a vital line of support to Wales' agricultural sector while reducing the need to cut costs in order to compete with cheaper imports.

With negotiations for FTAs with countries such as India, Canada and Mexico currently underway, RSPCA Cymru is continuing our calls for consideration to be given as to how the import of animal-derived products into Wales has the potential to undermine our high welfare standards. The ongoing current negotiation of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) following our exit from the European Union poses profound challenges for the future of food production in Wales, particularly if an FTA allows the importation of agricultural products reared to standards lower than domestic rules allows or products produced by methods that will increase, rather than mitigate, climate change, such as beef produced on deforested land in Australia, for example.

With higher-welfare production methods tending to be more costly than more intensive systems, RSPCA Cymru is concerned that adhering to higher welfare standards may prove unsustainable for farmers in Wales if they are required to compete with cheaper imports as a result of the incoming Free Trade Agreement (FTAs) with Australia and others, unless they are provided with adequate funding from Welsh Government. Because of this, we are calling for future post-Brexit farm payments to be clearly linked to good husbandry and higher welfare practices to ensure that Wales' high animal welfare standards on farms do not become a casualty of the aforementioned FTAs.

Questions to consider:

- 1. Can the Minister confirm what conversations are being held with the UK Government with regard to the current disagreements relating to the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, and what amendments does the Minister wish to see made to recommend passing the LCM?**
- 2. What plans does the Welsh Government have to ensure its post-Brexit support scheme for farmers under the Agriculture (Wales) Bill offsets any disadvantage for farmers potentially caused by the signing of FTAs with countries with lower welfare standards?**
- 3. What conversations has the Minister had with the UK Government about the negotiation mandates of potential Free Trade Agreements with countries such as Canada, Mexico and India?**

⁹ <https://senedd.wales/media/143lqnxi/lcm-ld15123-e.pdf>

An updated Code of Practice for rabbits is much needed in Wales

[Rabbit Awareness Week](#) (RAW) takes place between June 27 and July 1, with this year's 'Room for Rabbits' theme focusing on the type of environment these popular pets need. While bunnies are traditionally among the UK's most popular pets, they have complex welfare needs that are often misunderstood by their owners. According to The Rabbit Awareness Action Group, of which the RSPCA is a member, 38 percent of vets think rabbits' environment is the most neglected welfare need, with over a quarter of the UK's bunnies being kept in inadequate housing conditions, and almost half of them living alone¹⁰.

As well as promoting RAW, the RSPCA is continuing our work to dispel the myth that rabbits make ideal 'starter pets' and are somehow 'easier' to look after than cats and dogs. Rabbits have life spans of eight to 12 years and have many needs that include the provision of company (rabbits should always live in pairs), stimulation, exercise and the appropriate vet care including vaccinations and neutering. As well as calling for prospective owners to consider the commitment involved in meeting the welfare needs of a rabbit before purchasing some, we are also urging current owners to consider neutering their rabbits to prevent the risk of unwanted litters, which could put further pressure on pet owners if they are not in a position to keep the baby rabbits and rescues should they need to be rehomed, and stop fighting amongst same-sex rabbits as they mature too.

Our focus on rabbits coincides with a recent reduction in the number of people coming forward to offer them new homes from our national centres - while the RSPCA has also seen a worrying rise in calls relating to rabbits. During 2021, we saw a 44 percent increase within Wales in the number of calls relating to rabbit welfare concerns from members of the public in comparison to the previous year. In 2020 we received 135 reports of incidents relating to pet rabbits in Wales, with this rising to 194 in 2021. Meanwhile, the number of rabbits rehomed by the RSPCA in Wales fell by 40 percent between 2020 and 2021 - from 68, to 41 the following year. A similar decline in adoption - 40 percent - was observed across England and Wales, as the number adopted from our national centres fell from 459 to 274 - with this figure not including any reduction in rabbit adoptions that our branches may be experiencing too.

To ensure that current and prospective owners have access to contemporary best practice advice that helps them meet the needs of their rabbits and ensure that potential adopters understand the responsibilities involved, RSPCA Cymru is calling for the Welsh Government's Code of Practice (COP) for the Welfare of Rabbits to be reviewed, updated and promoted. As this particular COP was first published over 10 years ago, it is currently at risk of becoming outdated, with Rabbit Awareness Week providing an ideal opportunity for the Welsh Government to turn its attention to these ever popular pets.

With the issue of support for pet owners on low incomes likely to gain more political attention in the Senedd over the coming months against the backdrop of the cost of living crisis, RSPCA Cymru is calling for a focus on support for those who own rabbits and other small companion animals, as well as cats and dogs. The Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd recently confirmed that a discussion paper on the issue of veterinary care support for those on low incomes is currently in preparation for the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group¹¹, and it is hoped that this paper will contain specific references to treatments for rabbits and other small companion animals too.

Questions to consider:

- 1. Can the Minister confirm if the Welsh Government has any plans to promote Rabbit Awareness Week, which takes place between June 27 and July 1?**
- 2. Can the Minister confirm if the Welsh Government has any plans to update, review and better promote their Code of Practice on rabbit welfare; and how does it measure the success of these codes?**
- 3. What steps can the Welsh Government take to work with the animal sector to encourage responsible, informed prospective owners to successfully adopt rabbits?**

¹⁰ <https://www.veterinary-practice.com/2022/raag-room-for-rabbits-theme-for-raw-2022>

¹¹ Record of Proceedings - Written Questions tabled on 04/03/2022 for answer on 11/03/2022

RSPCA Cymru incidents February 2022 - April 2022

From February 2022 to April 2022, the RSPCA responded to 3,547 incidents across Wales - a 12 percent decrease on the same time period last year. This potentially marks an increased degree of normality on the frontline, following an initial increase in calls to the RSPCA's emergency line as Covid-19 restrictions were eased last year.

Local Authority	February 2021 - April 2021	February 2022 - April 2022
Blaenau Gwent	97	79
Bridgend	159	140
Caerphilly	201	187
Cardiff	401	394
Carmarthenshire	237	214
Ceredigion	98	74
Conwy	225	180
Denbighshire	189	165
Flintshire	205	192
Gwynedd	153	143
Isle of Anglesey	97	95
Merthyr Tydfil	58	64
Monmouthshire	90	88
Neath Port Talbot	230	188
Newport	208	165
Pembrokeshire	150	117
Powys	139	137
Rhondda Cynon Taff	256	213
Swansea	363	307
The Vale of Glamorgan	157	132
Torfaen	99	122
Wrexham	200	151
TOTAL	4,012	3,547

More information on the work of the RSPCA, and bespoke briefings on all of our campaigns can be found on the [PoliticalAnimal website](https://www.politicalanimal.wales) - a dedicated resource for politicians and their staff. The news section of the website also features updates per Senedd region which may prove useful for supplementary questions.