

Fireworks and Animal Welfare

February 2021

Key Facts

- With no public fireworks displays taking place in Wales from March 2020, in line with the Covid-19 restrictions, it is estimated that there was a **12 percent** increase in private displays, particularly in gardens within residential areas¹.
- Polling suggests that **72 percent** of people in Wales recognise that fireworks can negatively impact on animal welfare².
- It is estimated that **62 percent** of dogs show signs of fear when they hear fireworks, while **54 percent** of cats and **55 percent** of horses also experience distress³.
- The RSPCA receives on average **400** calls each year relating to fireworks, highlighting the impact that the irresponsible use of fireworks can have on services across Wales.
- Polling suggests that **67 percent** of Welsh residents agree that fireworks laws should be changed to better protect animals⁴.
- **Eleven of Wales' twenty-two** local authorities have already taken action on fireworks, but greater measures are needed to mitigate the impact that they have on animals and vulnerable people.

The Context

The RSPCA receive on average 400 calls each year relating to their use across England and Wales and sadly, around 62 percent of dogs show signs of distress as a result of their loud, unpredictable bangs and bright flashes.

Such a problem was likely to have been exacerbated in 2020 amid a 12 percent rise in private displays, often happening in close proximity to residential areas which can play home to a large number of pets and wildlife. Additionally, this could be a major factor in causing distress for many vulnerable people and potentially putting added pressures on the police force and NHS.

To date, eleven of Wales' 22 local authorities have taken action to mitigate the potential negative impacts of fireworks, but with a likely increase in private displays during 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions, concerns have arisen regarding how we can protect our pets and loved ones within this context. The

¹ RSPCA Fireworks Polling 2020 - Polling conducted by Savanta ComRes - 2,274 UK adults were interviewed between 16-19 October 2020. Data is demographically representative of the UK by age, gender, region and social grade.

² Ibid

³ Study was conducted in England and Wales via Kantar OnLineBus. A sample of 1,137 adults aged 16+ were interviewed in October 2019. 345 dog owners and 320 cat owners and 20 horse owners responded to the question: 'Does your pet/animal show signs of distress during the fireworks season?'

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RSPCA continues to call for further measures at a national level in Wales to prevent further distress being caused to thousands of animals and people each year.

Fireworks Statistics

Reported incidents to the RSPCA related to fireworks						
Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Incidents	367	425	514	434	501	411

We receive on average around 400 calls per year relating to fireworks - and these statistics only show the number of incidents reported to the RSPCA concerning the welfare of animals affected by fireworks. Sadly, it is likely the figure of incidences witnessed are far higher.

The Impact of Fireworks

It is estimated that 62 percent of dogs show signs of fear when they hear fireworks, and 54 percent and 55 percent of cats and horses also experience distress respectively⁵. Animals impacted not only suffer psychological distress but can also cause themselves injuries as they attempt to run or hide from the noise.

Although most reports of welfare problems caused by fireworks relate to domestic pets, other animals can also experience fear, distress and/or injury as a result of them. Farm livestock and horses are easily frightened by loud noises and sudden bright lights and can be at risk of injuring themselves on fencing, equipment and fittings within their housing if startled.

Debris produced by fireworks can also pose a hazard to horses and farm livestock on the land, as well as disturbing and causing distress to the great deal of wildlife found in parts of Wales.

Case Study - Solo the Horse

In November 2018, in Swansea, the owner of a horse was left heartbroken after her horse became so scared of fireworks that he ran himself to death.

On Bonfire Night, his owner had stayed with him in his stable most of the night to calm him down as a result of the noise. However, a week later, she thought the fireworks were over and left him overnight.

Solo's owner was called by neighbours after they spotted him in his field in agony. Sadly, he had become so anxious as a result of fireworks that he had run around his field, twisting his gut. The vet said that there was nothing that could be done and so he had to be put to sleep.

Solo's owner said she would not have left him alone if she had known there was going to be another fireworks display, highlighting the importance of greater awareness, advertising and regulations of the use of fireworks.

⁵ Study was conducted in England and Wales via Kantar OnLineBus. A sample of 1,137 adults aged 16+ were interviewed in October 2019. 345 dog owners and 320 cat owners and 20 horse owners responded to the question: 'Does your pet/animal show signs of distress during the fireworks season?'

What Can We Do to Mitigate the Impact of Fireworks?

The RSPCA appreciates that fireworks is a largely non-devolved issue with the existing legislation - the Fireworks Act 2003 and the Fireworks Regulations 2004 - introduced over 15 years ago. However, there are numerous steps that the Welsh Government can take to further mitigate the potential impacts of fireworks on Wales' pets, wildlife and livestock - as well as the elderly and other vulnerable people.

While the Fireworks Act 2003 is a non-devolved piece of legislation, the Welsh Government has shown a willingness to act to ensure fireworks in Wales are less frightening for animals - and the RSPCA will be closely monitoring this progress. In response to a [written question](#) In November 2019, the Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs stated that the Welsh Government would be liaising across a range of departments to establish where they can best focus efforts in Wales to reduce the negative impacts of fireworks on people and animals - as well as urging the UK Government to take a strong response to the House of Commons Petitions Committee's recent inquiry and its subsequent recommendations. The Minister has recently added that the Welsh Government would be seeking a trilateral meeting with the UK Government and Scottish Government to determine what more can be done to tackle this issue at a Great Britain level⁶.

The [Scottish Government Fireworks Review Group](#) recently put forward the following proposals to help tackle the issues associated with Fireworks, in light of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic:

- **A nationwide 'Impact of Fireworks' campaign to improve people's understanding of the impact fireworks can have on people, including those with sensory issues, our armed forces veterans, and on pets and livestock.**
- **A Fireworks 'Rules and Regulations' campaign, in partnership with Crimestoppers to help improve understanding of the existing rules, regulations and how to report fireworks misuse.**
- **A fireworks safety information leaflet providing advice and guidance on the safe and appropriate use of fireworks is being distributed by participating retailers to individuals purchasing fireworks⁷.**

From a Welsh Government perspective, such measures should be introduced in Wales in conjunction with the RSPCA's key asks of local authorities as laid out by our [#BangOutOfOrder campaign](#), including:

- **to require all public firework displays within the local authority boundaries to be advertised in advance of the event, allowing residents to take precautions for their animals and vulnerable people**
- **to actively promote a public awareness campaign about the impact of fireworks on animal welfare and vulnerable people – including the precautions that can be taken to mitigate risks**
- **to encourage local suppliers of fireworks to stock 'quieter' fireworks for public display.**

At a local authority level, the RSPCA has been urging Councils to adopt a motion (available online - [ENG](#) / [CYM](#)), implementing such measures to help encourage the responsible use of fireworks and mitigate risks to animals and vulnerable people.

⁶ Senedd Cymru / the Welsh Parliament, Record of Proceedings, 18 November 2020

⁷ Scottish Government, Fireworks Review Group Update to Parliament, 3 November 2020

Conclusion

The unpredictable, loud and high intensity noises that many fireworks make can cause fear and stress. Animals not only suffer psychological distress but can also cause themselves injuries that are sometimes very serious, as they attempt to run or hide from the noise.

The RSPCA is inundated with calls each year relating to the impact of fireworks on animals' health and welfare - with pets, horses, livestock and wild animals all being affected. While the RSPCA understands that fireworks are enjoyable for many, it is our view that small changes and measures can be taken that allow people to continue to enjoy fireworks responsibly, while going a long way to mitigating the risks associated with fireworks for a range of animals.

There has been a clear shift in public attitudes towards fireworks in recent years, with 72 percent of Welsh residents now acknowledging the negative impact that fireworks can have on animal welfare⁸. RSPCA Cymru believes that now is the time to further restrict the use of fireworks in Wales, encouraging public only displays and preventing more distress for animals.

⁸ RSPCA Fireworks Polling 2020 - Polling conducted by Savanta ComRes - 2,274 UK adults were interviewed between 16-19 October 2020. Data is demographically representative of the UK by age, gender, region and social grade.