

Care and welfare of pets in emergencies: advice to adult social services

Pets hold a special place in people's lives. They can provide companionship, emotional support and unconditional love, as well as routine and responsibility, which contribute to the physical health and social connections of their owners. The welfare of their pets is likely to be hugely important to pet owners and have a direct impact on their own welfare.

Unfortunately, there are occasions when a person who has one or more pets may need to be taken into emergency care at short notice. In these instances emergency workers and responders such as paramedics or police officers need to know how to ensure the care and wellbeing of the pet(s) while that person is in care.

In the first instance, if the person is conscious and not otherwise incapacitated, and/or there are relatives, neighbours or friends available, the responder should consult with them on immediate arrangements for the care of the pet(s). It is important to ensure they can meet the welfare needs of those animal(s) as set out under Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Where this is not possible, local authorities have a duty under legislation in England¹ and Wales² to make provision for the protection of moveable property (which includes pets) of people within their area who are taken into hospital, or some other forms of care involving a stay away from their home. There are similar provisions where someone is hospitalised under the Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended). This means that if there are no friends or relatives of the person who can care for those animals, the local authority must make provisions for board (including payment) and care for those animals.

Delivering the local authority duty for pets

In order to deliver this duty, adult social care services are advised to:

- 1 Have in place positive and proactive policies and procedures** for ensuring the welfare of a range of animals can be adequately protected, both when the person is known to services and when they are not. People do not just keep cats and dogs as pets, so policies and procedures should facilitate the appropriate care of a wide variety of animals, including rabbits, fish, reptiles, birds, exotic mammals, equines, and invertebrates such as spiders, etc. These policies and procedures should set out clear steps for recording the necessary information about the animal(s) – for example, their name, age, medication, vaccination status, etc. – so that it can be passed on to family/friends or a boarding establishment.

¹ Care Act 2014

² Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014

- 2 **Develop good working relationships with local partner services**, such as dog and animal welfare wardens, who may be able to assist in dealing with planned and unexpected situations. Housing teams may also have lists of properties they manage that have pets within them, and you may be able to work with them to encourage forward planning by those residents.
- 3 **Develop good working relationships with local vets, boarding establishments and reputable charities** who may be able to assist in dealing with planned and unexpected situations. In certain limited situations, a charity called [The Cinnamon Trust](#) may be able to help, so it is worth developing a good working relationship with them too as part of proactive work. The RSPCA is unlikely to be able to assist with moving or boarding animals due to limited resources; however, it is beneficial to have good working relationships with the local team of inspectors, as they may be able to advise on more unusual pets.
- 4 **Support people to have a plan in place for their pets** in the event that they may be admitted to hospital or some other form of care involving a stay away from home. To do this for:
 - **People known to adult social care.** Ensure that the identification of pets, and the development of contingencies, is integrated into regular assessment processes. Remember, not all animals may be easily seen. While some animals such as dogs may be seen with the person, and there may be signs of others, such as a cat litter tray, vivariums/tanks, other animals such as rabbits or birds may be kept in gardens, and some such as horses may be kept a considerable distance away. It is considered good practice to ask people who have the mental capacity to answer, and/or their relatives/neighbours/friends, whether they have any animals that need taking care of. Consider how this information will be kept up to date, such as through the review process.
 - **People at a higher risk of being admitted to hospital but not otherwise known to adult social care.** Commit to working with local partners to raise awareness of the need to make contingencies for their pets. This may include regularly sharing the 'In an emergency' flyer with local housing associations, homecare providers, carer centres and other community and voluntary organisations, so they can give them to the people they come into contact with.

Developing policies and procedures

It is beneficial to have positive, proactive policies and procedures in place that are clear, consistent and effective, so you can plan as far as possible for a range of situations and scenarios. This can help to ensure a swift response as well as protect the health and welfare of the person and their animal(s). It is also important to ensure they are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect any changes in the law or needs within the area. The RSPCA can work with adult social care teams in advising and reviewing these. When developing positive and proactive policies and procedures to provide for the care and welfare of pets, adult social care services are advised to consider the following:

- 1 **Some general principles of animal welfare:**
 - **Whoever takes responsibility for the animal(s) (whether that is a friend, family member, or council, etc.) has a duty under Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to ensure the welfare needs of the animal(s) are met.** Failure to do so could result in a prosecution (this includes the local authority). When adult social care is made aware of an animal, and there is no friend or family member available to care for the animal, it is really important they take action, as they could be liable for prosecution if they do not. You can find useful information about meeting the welfare needs of different animal(s) [here](#). In addition, Defra has produced a number of statutory codes of practice for certain species of pets kept in England, as has the Welsh Government for Wales. You can find these [here](#) and [here](#) respectively. There is also a non-statutory [code of practice](#) produced for ensuring the welfare of rabbits in England.

- **No animal can be left unattended at a property without an agreed plan for their removal or care in-situ.** The maximum time an animal can be left unattended will depend on a number of factors, such as their age, species, health status, the weather conditions, etc. As a guide, no animal, regardless of their age, should be left unattended for longer than is likely to cause suffering and/or 24 hours. Every animal is an individual, so this must be considered when determining the best course of action. Be especially alert to very young, old or sick animals, as well as those that may have already been left for a long time. Warm or cold weather will significantly reduce the time any animal can be left unattended – in such circumstances, animals should be removed or have care provided for sooner. Also be aware that not all animals will show obvious signs of illness or poor welfare (e.g. reptiles) and it may not be possible to assess the suitability of the environment without some specialist knowledge or testing equipment (e.g. water-quality testing kits for fish). If you have concerns about the health or welfare of animals in the property then a vet check must be arranged for at the earliest opportunity. The local authority is liable for costs in these cases; however, a prior agreement/relationship with local practices can be of value.
 - **Mental and physical suffering can be caused through fear, loneliness, anxiety, pain, injury, disease, an unsuitable environment and a lack of access to food or water (note, this list is not exhaustive).** Some animals, such as rodents, cats and horses, may be kept in ways that allow them to be left safely for a 24-hour period providing their welfare needs are met, i.e. their environment is safe, they have plentiful access to water and food, and the individual animal appears happy and healthy. More information about meeting the welfare needs of different species can be found on the RSPCA's website. However, others will likely suffer if left alone for any period of time. This can include young and unweaned animals who need frequent access to food and water as well as regular monitoring. It can also include some dogs who struggle to cope when left alone, displaying behaviour such as excessive vocalisation or destruction. It may also include those animals who are reliant upon carefully controlled environments, such as reptiles.
 - **This is likely to be a stressful situation for all concerned, including any animal(s).** For this reason animal(s) may exhibit fear-related behaviour, which could manifest as aggression, so careful handling of them is essential. At all times, remember the animals are very likely to be scared and anxious. With regard to dogs, you may find the information in this [document](#) helpful. For many exotic animals, it is recommended that an expert is called in to handle and remove them.
 - **Always consider what is in the best welfare interests of the animal as well as the person.** Long-term kennelling of an animal may not be in the best welfare interests of that animal, especially if that animal is elderly or has significant health or behavioural problems, and some people may be hospitalised for a long time or are unable to care for their pet in the same way when they come out. In such circumstances, discussions with the individual should take place at the earliest opportunity to consider what is best for their pet – for example, can a relative or friend help them care for the animal or would rehoming through a reputable charity or, in certain cases, euthanasia be in the best interests of the animal (for health or behavioural reasons)? While such conversations can be difficult and incredibly sensitive, they should be had.
- 2 Provision for the collection and transport of animals.** The responsibility to collect and transport animals sits with the adult social care teams within councils (see Section 47 of the Care Act 2014 and Section 58 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014). It can be advantageous to work with teams in environmental health to deliver this, e.g. the dog warden. For those teams based in a county council, this may mean working with environmental health and dog wardens or animal welfare officers in multiple district councils across the county. It is important to ensure that they have the correct training and equipment/vehicles to do this.

- 3 Provision and management of appropriate veterinary care.** It may be beneficial to have one person responsible for developing and managing the relationship and any contracts with local vet teams that you use as part of your response. It is important to have agreements (and prices) in place for their services and support, e.g. for having animals checked over for illness or injury, for vaccination and potentially even operations. Having agreements in place can help manage costs and ensure access to those services in a timely manner.
- 4 Provision and management of short-term and – where appropriate – medium-term care for animals.** Again, it may be beneficial to have one person responsible for developing and managing the relationship and any contracts with local boarding establishments and charities that you use as part of your response. Services must ensure that any provider, e.g. cattery, kennel, etc., is licensed and complies with the Animal Welfare Act 2006. In the case of commercial dog and cat boarders in England, they must also ensure they have a licence from their local authority under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018; and in Wales, under the Animal Boarding Establishments Act 1963. It is also important that the person who manages this makes regular checks at the private boarding establishment to ensure the welfare needs of the animal(s) are being met, including any veterinary treatment. For certain non-domesticated/exotic species³ there are also legal restrictions around the keeping, transportation and/or commercial use (e.g. display to paying customers) of animals, so checks must be made to ensure animals are handled and boarded legally. Note that unlike the Animal Welfare Act 2006, these apply to some invertebrates (i.e. insects, etc.) as well as vertebrates (i.e. birds, mammals, etc.).
- 5 Contingencies for pets where a return to the care of their owner is unlikely or no longer in the best interests of the person and/or the animal(s).** It is important to have a policy and procedure in place for dealing with these circumstances. Consideration should be given to whether relatives or friends have the means to care for the animal(s) or if rehoming through a reputable charity or, in certain circumstances, euthanasia of the animal is necessary. Again, it is worth liaising with the local dog warden and animal welfare teams to seek advice and learn from their policies and procedures.
- 6 Financial responsibility.** There is often confusion over whose responsibility it is for dealing with and paying for the care of animals in these circumstances – and poor practices impact on people, animals and the organisations concerned, as well as increase costs. While it appears to be generally accepted that such provision is an ‘emergency’ response and costs should be met by the council in the first instance, there are provisions where reasonable costs can be recouped from the person, assuming they have the means to pay. For this reason, it is essential that adult social care teams have clear, proactive policies and procedures in place for managing the pets of residents who are hospitalised.

This advice has been developed by the RSPCA in collaboration with NW ADASS in 2025. It is part of a wider toolkit that is being developed.

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³ For example, anyone keeping a species listed on the schedule to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 (e.g. lemurs, crocodiles, rattlesnakes) must hold the appropriate licence from their local authority, unless they are exempt (e.g. licensed zoos or licensed pet sellers). Any commercial use of species (e.g. some tortoises, parrots) listed on Annex A of GB Wildlife Trade Regulations, which includes having them on display to paying customers, requires valid certificates for the animals. There are also strict controls around the keeping and transportation of ‘invasive alien species’ (e.g. red-eared terrapins).

RSPCA.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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