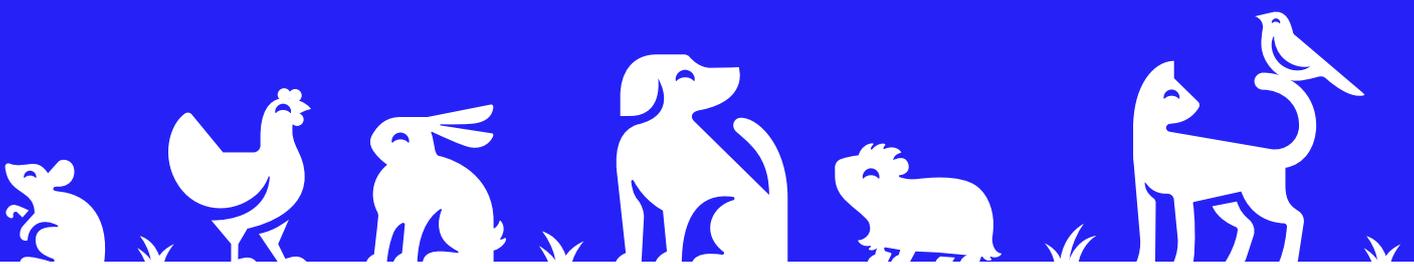


Making provision for pets following the sudden death of an owner



Sometimes, when there's a sudden, unexpected death in a property animals can be found at the address. It can be challenging to know how best to deal with the animals to ensure both their short-term and longer-term welfare.

We recognise that different agencies will have different priorities when it comes to these situations. However, it's important that a partnership approach is taken to ensure the welfare of the animals concerned.

This document aims to guide responders, providing an overview of the actions to take when a deceased person is discovered and has one or more animals at their property.

General principles

- Whoever takes responsibility for the animal(s), whether that's next of kin, police or the council, 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. You can find useful information about meeting the welfare needs of different animals [here](#). Defra has produced several statutory codes of practice for certain species of pets kept in England, as has the Welsh Government for pets that are kept in Wales. You can find these [here](#) and [here](#) respectively. In addition, there's a non-statutory [code of practice](#) to ensure the welfare of rabbits in England.
- Not all animals may be easily seen. While some, such as dogs, may be seen with the deceased individual, and there may be signs of others, such as a cat litter tray, animals such as horses may be kept a distance away. It's considered good practice to look around the property, inside and out, for any signs of animals that need taking care of.
- No animal can be left unattended at a property without an agreed plan for their removal or care in situ. The maximum time limit an animal can be left unattended before suffering will occur will depend on several factors, including their age, species, health status, location, and the weather conditions.
 - Mental and physical suffering can be caused by 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 safely left for 24 hours, providing their welfare needs are met, i.e. their environment is safe, they have plentiful access to water and food, and they appear happy and healthy. More information about meeting the welfare needs of different species can be found on the [RSPCA's website](#).
 - Some animals 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 and regular monitoring. It can also include some dogs who struggle to cope when left alone, displaying behaviour such as excessive vocalisation or destructive behaviour. It may also include animals who are reliant upon carefully controlled environments, such as reptiles.
- 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, and 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. Also be aware of warm or cold weather, as this will significantly reduce the time an animal can be left unattended. In such circumstances, the animal should be removed or have care provided for sooner.
- This is likely to be a stressful situation for all concerned, including the animal. The animal may be fearful, which may manifest as aggression, so careful handling is essential. At all times, remember the animal is very likely to be scared and anxious, so an empathic and gentle approach is key. With regard to dogs, you may find the advice in [this document](#) useful.
- An organisation's policies and procedures should set out clear steps for dealing with such situations, including having agreements in place with suitable boarding establishments for the care of animals if required. Boarding establishments need to be compliant with all relevant animal welfare legislation and licensed by the local authority. An organisation should also have one person responsible for managing such a contract, conducting regular reviews of animals on site and ensuring their welfare needs are met (including veterinary treatment if needed), as well as a procedure for rehoming the animals if a next of kin can't be found.

Step-by-step approach RSPCA

1. Often, it's the police or a council officer who will find the deceased individual following a call from a friend or family member, although we recognise that Fire and Rescue and the Ambulance Service can also come across such individuals. The usual procedures to confirm the death can take some time, so it's important to immediately try and identify if there's a next of kin and check for signs of animals. Remember, not all animals may be easily seen, so check all rooms and any outside space.
2. If an animal is present, check the condition of the animal and whether they need urgent veterinary treatment. Speak with your organisation and confirm the protocols for taking animals to a vet. At this point, Fire and Rescue or the Ambulance Service should contact the local council to ask them to take responsibility for the animal and locate the next of kin if they haven't already been identified.
3. If the animal is in good condition, and you have located the next of kin, ask if they can take responsibility for the animal. If they can, make arrangements for them to do this as soon as possible.
4. If you can't make contact with the next of kin, or they can't assist that day, then it's the responsibility of the police or council to take care of the animal. This will require either caring for them in situ or their removal and transport to a boarding facility. However, if the animal is neglected or suffering then they must be taken to a vet for assessment before further steps are taken.

Unfortunately, the RSPCA is unlikely to be able to assist in such situations. If the person has a next of kin then it's their responsibility to make provisions for that animal, either to rehome them or to provide the necessary care for the animal until a new home can be found. If next of kin can't be located, then the RSPCA may be able to offer some assistance, depending on local resource availability.

If the animal is registered with the RSPCA's 'Home for Life' scheme then we would be able to assist. (This can be discovered from the Will, but it may be that neighbours or next of kin are aware and can advise you.)

Help in tracking down the next of kin

Trying to identify the next of kin can be challenging. However, most councils should have a team who deals with bereavement. They have access to a national database that helps locate next of kin. The local council team should be able to assist so you can make contact and discuss the animal(s) concerned.

RSPCA.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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