

**RSPCA Cymru response to the National Assembly for Wales
Communities and Culture Committee inquiry into domestic abuse.**

The following are the RSPCA's responses to some of the issues the Committee has indicated they wish to cover:-

The availability and accessibility of support for different groups; including counselling services for - men, women, children, people from ethnic minority communities, older people and disabled people;
N/A
The provision of services for adults and children who have suffered sexual abuse within a domestic context;
N/A
The response of different sectors to domestic abuse, including, criminal justice, health and social care agencies;
<p>The RSPCA offers a pet fostering service called PetRetreat, specifically for animals belonging to people fleeing from domestic violence. For many women, men and children who leave violent relationships, the options open to them regarding their pets are very limited. In such situations they can feel torn between escaping and leaving their pets behind to an unknown fate since the abuser will often threaten the safety of the pet in order to try and make the victim stay. PetRetreat helps victims of domestic violence to escape their situation, enabling them to turn to the RSPCA to look after their pets until they get back on their feet.</p> <p>Pets are often victims of domestic abuse too</p> <p>The sad reality is that an animal in this situation may well come to the RSPCA's attention at a later date, either through being abandoned, cruelly treated or simply for re-homing. The society has taken the view that if it can work with the animal's owner at an earlier stage, the welfare of that animal can be better protected. It takes an average of seven years for a victim to leave an abusive partner with many being unwilling to leave without there being a place of safety for their pets. Pets are frequently threatened, injured or killed by the perpetrator as a means of frightening and intimidating their partners and children.</p>
How the national strategy is delivered at a local level, the ways in which different bodies and agencies work with each other to ensure the best response;
<p>The RSPCA works in partnership with other animal welfare organisations, in England but operates the scheme alone in Wales. Co-operation with national organisations and other networks such as Women's Aid is crucial to the success of the scheme.</p> <p>Most refuges are unable to accept pets (usually due to health and safety concerns), but they can in turn contact PetRetreat for assistance. Women's Aid in Cardiff have been instrumental in assisting in the recruitment of fosterers for the scheme.</p>
The allocation of resources to tackle domestic abuse and any potential conflict between the aims and objectives of different funding sources;

Animal welfare organisations receive no funding for this vital work, instead relying wholly on donations from the public and the generosity and goodwill of the volunteer fosterers who look after the animals while they are in the scheme. Fosterers are in short supply. The RSPCA would appreciate any help with recruiting candidates to become fosterers – through funding and/or perhaps public campaigns and literature.

In order for the RSPCA to help pet owners flee domestic abuse, pet fosterers are required who are willing to take an animal into their home on a temporary basis.

The scheme is fully committed to the animals that are caught up in domestic abuse and fits hand in glove with the work that we already do within the RSPCA. By helping these animals, as we do in our every day work, we are in a position to be able to help the families involved.

Statistical evidence of the rates and nature of domestic abuse, including incidences of murder, conviction rates, geographical trends;

PetRetreat has been in existence since 2002. Since it started a huge array of animals have been cared for by RSPCA foster homes, from large animals such as horses to very small animals such as rats and mice. In total, more than 400 animals have been cared for by the RSPCA – helping 257 families which has included 265 children. *[This scheme operates in Wales and parts of Western England and the figures come from the whole scheme].*

The impact of isolation exacerbated by, geographical, cultural and individual factors

N/A

Processes for monitoring and evaluating outcomes.

The RSPCA acknowledges that it can play a valuable role in data collection. As a result, from 2007, details such as the number of enquiries to the scheme and the types of animals concerned will be recorded and used for analysis in order to determine whether there are any trends or specific areas that need greater resource commitments.

Since these recording methods started we have received 221 animal related calls, involving 458 individual animals. The figures are substantial when considering the limited nature in which the scheme is marketed.

Carolyn Southwell – RSPCA PetRetreat Manager

Invaluable help for both people and animals

"The scheme is fully committed to the animals that are caught up in domestic abuse and fits hand in glove with the work that we already do within the RSPCA," says RSPCA PetRetreat manager Carolyn Southwell.

"By helping these animals, we are in a position to be able to help the families involved. A human victim of domestic abuse once said to us, 'If I did not own pets then I would have left years ago.' Our scheme offers such victims a safe home for their animals for as long as they need it.

"If we can step in and break that cycle, we will be doing a tremendous amount to help both people and animals."

Case studies

We were approached via an Inspectorat to see if PetRetreat could help in the foster of a 6-year dog called Petra. Petra, the Staffordshire Bull terrier, lived with the perpetrator of the abuse, his partner and 2 children. As the lady and her children were planning to leave the abusive situation and go into a refuge we were able to offer to help them by fostering Petra. This is Petra's story - she is a lovely natured dog but she only has 3 legs because the abuser broke her hind leg in several places by kicking her. Sadly she had to live with the pain of the injury for many days because she was not taken to the vet for immediate treatment, as she should have been. Once the Inspector had been made aware of the situation Petra was taken for treatment - the result of which was that she had to have one of her hind legs amputated. The Inspector successfully prosecuted the perpetrator. This was the next chapter in what had been a very unhappy life not only for Petra but also the lady and her children who had been court up in much of the abuse. The lady was hospitalised to recover from the injuries received and the children faced many months, if not years, of counselling. Sadly because of the long and painful journey the lady and her children faced she took the decision that she would sign Petra over to the RSPCA to re-home. That selfless decision was in the best interest of Petra's welfare.

A lady called 'Lyn' contacted PetRetreat. Lyn was trying to plan leaving her abusive husband with the help of a women's refuge. She was most concerned about her 2 dogs. The support worker at the refuge informed her that they were unable to accept pets into the refuge. Lyn said that she was unwilling to leave without been able to find somewhere safe for her pets. The support worker said that she had seen an advert in the local paper about a scheme called PetRetreat that the RSPCA ran and although the ad was asking for foster carers it may be worth contacting them for some advice. Lyn contacted us at 2.30 on a Monday afternoon. After explain her situation we felt compelled to help her and the 2 dogs. So by 11.30 the next morning the dogs were safe in our care and Lyn was safe in the refuge. An excellent example of what working together can achieve. Lyn's story sadly is a common example of Domestic Abuse in that it went on for a number of years and that the perpetrator controlled her whole way of life. Lyn had been married for over 20 years, after falling pregnant after the first few months of marriage she had been abused from that point onwards. She has 3 grown up children who had left home. Hence the reason that her dogs had become her focus and reason to leave the abusive situation. Lyn has now been reunited with her 2 dogs, gone back to college and has started the long journey to get her life back on track. We received a letter from Lyn to thank us for the help we had given her and here is a quote from that letter - "Being looked after myself by the refuge, all those people on both sides have made everything easier for me to get away from the HELL that was my life. I can now get back my respect and self-pride. Without you I don't know where I would be, as I wouldn't have left the dogs. There is no amount of words I could say to express my gratitude from all the help I have received from you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart".

Fosterers - the most important resource

The scheme cannot work without fosterers and they are in short supply. The RSPCA would appreciate any help with recruiting candidates to become fosterers – through perhaps public campaigns and literature.

It takes a special person to become a PetRetreat fosterer, as a pet can come into their care for anything from a few days to several months. They mainly care for dogs and cats, but could potentially look after other breeds such as rabbits, guinea pigs or birds.

All animals are assessed before they go to a foster home. It is an immensely unsettling time for them and some, particularly dogs, may have behavioural problems due to their past life.

Fosterers must have patience and understanding to allow for the time and space that the animals need to adjust to their new surroundings. All fosterers should also have experience of owning a pet and may already have pets of their own.

One such special person is Bernice Dawes who has been a PetRetreat fosterer since 2004. During this time she has fostered over 10 cats. "It is immensely rewarding as in your little way you are doing something to help people at what is an awful time in their lives", said Bernice.

"I would highly recommend being a pet fosterer to any animal lover. You have all the advantages of owning a pet without the costs and the inevitable heartache when you lose a much-loved pet. It can be very hard to let go when its time for the animal to return to their owner. Still, you know that they're going back to a home that cares about them, and that you've really helped somebody to get out of an awful situation. Seeing an animal and owner happy when they are reunited makes it easier to part with the animal when it is time for them to go home."