



Consultation Response

FROM THE RSPCA IN WALES

Consultation: Priorities for the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee September 2021

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE COMMITTEE'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES SHOULD BE OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS? WHAT DO YOU THINK THE COMMITTEE'S LONGER TERM OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES SHOULD BE FOR THE TERM OF THE SIXTH SENEDD?

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the new Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee's consultation on its priorities for the sixth Senedd. The RSPCA is proud of its close working relationship with the Senedd's Committees. Throughout the Fifth Senedd term, the charity worked closely with the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs (CCERA) Committee, in addition to others, such as the Petitions Committee. Additionally, we continue to value a close working and productive relationship with the Senedd Research team, too - and hope to work closely with the new Committee's Members, clerking team and researchers in the years ahead.

Prior to the dissolution of the previous Senedd, the RSPCA [responded to the CCERA Committee's consultation on its legacy](#). This emphasised the benefit bespoke animal welfare enquiries and Committee deliberations have had - and the Committee's work clearly influenced the policy agenda on a host of topics, such as the use of snares; paving the way for an anticipated ban in a forthcoming Agricultural (Wales) Bill.

Animal welfare is of the utmost importance to the people of Wales - with 47 percent of households owning a pet¹, while Wales has a rich abundance of wildlife and a proud agricultural heritage. Given the portfolio remit of this new Committee, the RSPCA hopes that animal welfare issues will continue to be prominent in Committee deliberations; and that their exposure will not be limited by competing with new issues, such as those related to the Welsh economy. We would very much welcome assurances as to the Committee's intentions to ensure animal welfare matters are a central focus of its work plan.

Indeed, some of the biggest economic and trade issues in Wales at the moment have a very particular animal welfare dimension - particularly following Wales' withdrawal from the European Union, and the subsequent negotiation of trade deals by the UK Government with nations across the world. Brexit has provided both opportunities and threats for animal welfare - but the impact is likely to be seismic for animals in Wales. These range from positives - such as divergence from those poorer EU standards, or the ability for Wales to ban the live export of animals (likely via LCM to the UK Government's Kept Animals Bill); to negatives - like Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) opening the borders in Wales to lower welfare imports placing pressure on Wales' farmers and undermining the nation's animal welfare standards.

The UK Government has recently established a DiT Wales Hub to consider the impact FTAs may have on [Wales, while - in terms of scrutiny - the House of Commons' Welsh Affairs Committee recently held a one-off session on the Implications of the UK-Australia FTA for Wales](#)². However, since Brexit, the general

¹ Welsh Government - National Survey for Wales 2014 - 2015, Pet Welfare

² Welsh Affairs Committee, [One-off session on the implications for Wales of the UK/AUS FTA \(Non-inquiry session\)](#), 4 August 2021

involvement of devolved decision-makers in the Trade Deal process has been relatively limited; and the new Committee is well placed to help fill that void and explore the impact new UK Trade Deals are having, or will have, on Wales - including the consequences for the agricultural sector, and any possible impact on the welfare of animals. Agreements continue to be negotiated to varying degrees with Australia, New Zealand, the USA, India, EFTA and others; so this issue will be hugely pertinent in the early life of the new Committee.

Last November, the RSPCA [responded to CCERA's enquiry into Covid-19](#), highlighting the impact the pandemic was having on animal welfare. One issue that has had significant focus is the increased interest in the adoption or purchase of pets during Covid-19 restrictions; likely due to people spending more time at home and feeling in a position to make such an acquisition for their household or family. During Covid-19 restrictions, UK-based Google searches for 'puppies near me' increased more than six times (650%) between pre-lockdown January 2020 and July 2020. UK Government figures also show the number of Intra Trade Animal Health Certificates issued for the commercial import of dogs more than doubled from 5,964 (June - August 2019) to 12,733 for the same three-month period in 2020; highlighting how an appetite to adopt dogs during Covid-19 restrictions likely fuelled the potentially exploitative and damaging puppy importation trade.

Recent research showed that the increase in dog ownership was primarily confined to new, potentially naive, dog owners during the pandemic who go to dogs for companionship and exercise³. RSPCA Cymru and the wider animal welfare sector remains concerned that as people return to their normal lives beyond lockdowns and restrictions, and the harsh economic reality emerges, we could see more animals coming into our care or being abandoned. There's also concern families will relinquish pets due to behaviour problems that have emerged due to changes in routines and set-ups caused by lockdown, then subsequently abruptly altered - potentially placing added pressure on a sector which received no dedicated financial support from Welsh Government during the pandemic. As such, a review or exploration into the steps the Welsh Government could take to protect animal welfare as the nation emerges from Covid-19 restrictions would be a hugely worthwhile exercise for the Committee. This could include a broad focus on ensuring the responsible sourcing of pets in the future - coming at a time that the UK Government's Kept Animals Bill is set to enable the Welsh Government to introduce regulations to raise the legal age for importing puppies; and as RSPCA calls continue for the Welsh Government to revisit their intention to not support all recommendations made by the Animal Health and Welfare Framework's review into dog breeding legislation.

Beyond these more immediate priorities, there are a host of longer-term animal welfare issues which should be on the Committee's radar over the next five years. These include calls to regulate animal welfare establishments, the consolidation of Wales 'complex and fragmented wildlife legislation, slaughterhouse welfare standards, and whether sufficient support is provided in Wales presently for vulnerable pet owners. Furthermore, with local authorities set to get more powers to enforce pet sale licensing, and the licensing of primate ownership, there remains a need for a wholesale review concerning the ability of Local Authorities and other agencies to enforce legislation that impacts upon the welfare of animals - and, in tandem, the potential of formally empowering RSPCA officers to take pressure away from statutory bodies in Wales.

Additionally, the Agriculture (Wales) Bill will offer the biggest opportunity in the history of devolution to further farm animal welfare; and scrutiny of the impact incentivising farmers to deliver high animal welfare on their farms as part of any new post-Brexit payments scheme would be both timely and helpful. Finally, big question marks remain over how future Welsh Government policy will be scrutinised for its impact on animal sentience; given the progression of the UK Government's Animal Sentience Bill, which will mean all UK Government policy will be scrutinised by a Committee for its impact on animal welfare and sentient beings - but devolved policy will not; potentially creating a scrutiny deficit for animals.

RSPCA Cymru looks forward to working with the new Committee in the years ahead and would be happy to provide any further information which may be helpful as its work programme is formulated.

³ Royal Veterinary College - consequences of extreme demand for puppies during COVID-19 Pandemic, 25 August 2021