



Animal Sexual Abuse: Legal Gaps, Risks, and the Need for Reform

A briefing from the 2021 Naturewatch Foundation (assisted by the UK Centre for Animal Law) report titled *Sexual violence towards animals in England and Wales*.

Key findings

- 73% of extreme pornography cases (2019–2020) involved animal sexual abuse.
- This is consistent with research carried out by Dr Hannah Bows and Professor Clare McGlynn, Durham Law School, Durham University, which found that 85% of extreme pornography charges during the period from 2015–2017 were for possession of animal sexual abuse images.
- Sexual abuse of animals rarely happens in isolation from other crime. The UK's first ever conviction for female genital mutilation (FGM) was linked to distribution of indecent pictures of children and animal sexual abuse.
- 1,042 prosecutions in one year alone for possession of extreme pornography.
- Only 10 charges and one conviction for committing sexual acts involving animals.
- In one police force area, 93% of relevant sex offenders were linked to such material.

Introduction (England and Wales overview)

Animal sexual abuse, previously referred to as “bestiality”, is a serious but often overlooked form of abuse affecting thousands of animals each year.

It encompasses a wide range of acts carried out for sexual gratification, many of which are recorded and distributed online. Increasingly, evidence shows that this behaviour is not isolated, but linked to other forms

of harm, including child sexual abuse, coercion, and exploitation.

In England and Wales, the legal framework remains limited and inconsistent. Section 69 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 criminalises only specific acts involving penile penetration between a human and a living animal.

This narrow definition excludes a wide range of abusive conduct, including oral acts, non-penetrative sexual contact, and the use of objects.

By contrast, the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 criminalises possession of “extreme pornographic images”, including a broader range of sexual acts involving animals.

This creates a significant legal gap: conduct that is illegal to possess in image form may not itself constitute a sexual offence if it is actually carried out.

In many cases, such acts are instead prosecuted under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which, despite recent sentencing increases, does not adequately address the sexual or safeguarding dimensions of the offending.

It is therefore a missed safeguarding opportunity.

Evidence from England and Wales suggests that animal sexual abuse is widespread but under-investigated.

Freedom of Information data reveals that while over 1,000 cases of extreme pornography were prosecuted in a single year, only a handful of cases involving the direct commission of offences were pursued.

This indicates that enforcement is largely reactive, triggered by the discovery of images, rather than proactive in identifying and preventing abuse.

Case examples further illustrate the overlap between animal sexual abuse

In May 2026, thanks to Naturewatch Foundation and others working together, the Crime and Policing Act expanded animal sexual abuse offences, strengthening protections for both animals and people from violent abuse.



and other serious offences:

- In Derby, an offender was found with over 1,000 indecent images of young children alongside hundreds of images depicting sexual acts with animals.
- In Leeds, a man who fantasised about abusing children also filmed his partner engaging in sexual activity with a dog.
- In Manchester, thousands of images of child abuse included material involving animals and very young victims.

These cases reinforce concerns that animal sexual abuse is often part of a broader pattern of exploitation, rather than a standalone offence.

The United States

In the United States, the legal landscape is fragmented.

While most states criminalise sexual acts with animals, the scope and severity of offences vary widely.

Some states classify the behaviour as a minor offence, while others treat it as a serious felony.

Many jurisdictions fail to capture common abusive acts such as oral contact or penetration with objects, and only a limited number explicitly address animal pornography.

There is no overarching federal law prohibiting sexual acts with animals, although related material may fall under obscenity or animal cruelty provisions.



Animal Sexual Abuse: Legal Gaps, Risks, and the Need for Reform (continued)

Enforcement is further complicated by the division of responsibilities between general law enforcement, animal protection officers, and wildlife authorities, which can hinder coordinated investigations.

Research from the United States highlights strong links between animal sexual abuse and other criminal behaviours.

Studies suggest that over half of offenders have prior convictions for offences such as violence, burglary, or drug-related crimes.

Around one-third are also involved in child sexual abuse, sometimes coercing children into acts involving animals or forcing them to witness such abuse.

In one case, a dog found in a public park had been subjected to extreme sexual violence and killing, requiring coordination between multiple agencies to identify and prosecute the offender, illustrating both the severity of the abuse and the complexity of enforcement.

Canada

Canada offers a more recent example of legislative reform. Historically, the offence of bestiality was narrowly interpreted to require penetration, following the Supreme Court decision in *R v DLW*. This excluded many abusive acts from prosecution.

In response, the government introduced Bill C-84, which expanded the definition to include any sexual contact with an animal.

This reform was informed by evidence that abusers often use animals as part of grooming and coercion strategies, particularly involving children.

It also recognised that limiting offences to penetrative acts failed to reflect the reality of abuse and undermined both animal welfare and public protection.

Recommendations

1. Broaden the legal definition

Expand the Sexual Offences Act 2003 to include all forms of sexual contact with animals, aligning it with the wider scope already present in image-based offences.

2. Close legislative gaps

Ensure that any act which is illegal to possess in image form is also illegal to commit in practice.

3. Include a wider range of acts

Explicitly criminalise non-penetrative sexual contact, digital penetration, oral acts, penetration with objects, and acts involving dead animals.

4. Strengthen sentencing powers

Increase the maximum sentence for offences under Section 69 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 to reflect the seriousness of the conduct and align with recent changes in animal welfare sentencing.

5. Improve offender management

Include animal sexual abuse offences within Schedule 15 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 to ensure offenders can be managed under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA).

6. Enhance investigation and data collection

Require consistent recording, monitoring, and reporting of offences across police forces to better understand the scale of the issue.

7. Promote cross-agency collaboration

Strengthen coordination between police, animal welfare organisations, and safeguarding agencies to address links with child abuse and other crimes.

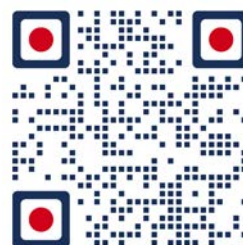
8. Increase awareness and training

Provide training for law enforcement, prosecutors, and frontline professionals to recognise, investigate, and respond effectively to animal sexual abuse cases.

This evidence demonstrates that animal sexual abuse is not only a serious welfare issue but also a broader safeguarding concern.

Addressing legal and enforcement gaps will improve protection for animals, strengthen responses to related criminal behaviour, and enhance public safety overall.

For more information, visit the Naturewatch Foundation website.



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Naturewatch Foundation is a UK-registered charity advocating for animals since 1991.

We engage in peaceful campaigns against animal abuse, lobby for stronger animal protection laws, and raise awareness through educational initiatives.