



New report: 'Act to Protect'

Background

In December 2025, the UK Government announced two reports:

1. *Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A Cross-Government Strategy*¹
2. *Animal Welfare Strategy for England*²

Both strategies uniquely recognise the overlap between animal and human welfare, particularly in domestic abuse situations.

The Government commits to delivering ambitious reforms in both domains.

Regarding Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), it emphasises that protecting women and children requires long-term, cross-government commitment and shared accountability, and must be a core responsibility of every institution, not a reactive response to tragedy.

Regarding animal welfare, it states: "As a government, we are committed to delivering the most ambitious animal welfare programme in a generation".

We have re-drafted these strategies using the CONTEST-style model³ (Protect, Prepare, Prevent, Pursue), highlighting areas where enhanced animal welfare can actively keep people safer.

"Protecting the vulnerable is at the heart of policing – whether it's a victim of domestic abuse or an animal in harm's way.

Every act of protection builds trust and strengthens our communities."

Detective Sergeant Viran Wiltshire KPM – Network of Women Executive Board | Domestic Abuse Employee Policy Expert | Mental Health First Aider | Leading for London Coach | White Ribbon Champion

"On paper, we can see that the Government is committed to delivering the most ambitious animal welfare programme in a generation and that the Prime Minister has set the national goal of halving violence against women and girls in a decade.

We now need to see the words in that strategy put into action. The animals and humans experiencing coercive control and domestic abuse deserve that."

Samantha Billingham – Survivor and business owner of Stronger Beginnings

Protect

Goal: Strengthen immediate protection for victims of domestic abuse by reducing perpetrator control and removing barriers to escape, including risks linked to pets.

• Strengthen legal protections:

Ensure that Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) and Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) when in place can include pets as advocated by the 'Ruby's Law' campaign⁴. Improve automatic sharing of Non-Molestation Orders so victims are protected without repeated disclosure.

• Mandatory risk assessment training:

Ensure front-line professionals are trained in Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment (DASH⁵) and Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA⁶) frameworks. Recognise animals as part of the family and the importance of the human-animal bond in domestic abuse risk assessments, treating harm or threats to animals as indicators of coercive control and escalation.

• Develop Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs):

Improve national consistency and effectiveness, explore statutory footing, and ensure

pet-related risk is routinely considered in high-risk case discussions and safety planning.

• Support and expand pet fostering services:

Increased awareness, access, and funding for confidential, accredited pet fostering schemes, enabling victims to flee abuse without fear for their animals' safety.

• Protect victim data:

Strengthen the pet microchipping regime to prevent perpetrators from using pets to track, harass, or control victim-survivors.

Prepare

Goal: Strengthen system readiness and professional capability so agencies can identify risk early and respond effectively.

• Awareness of human and animal sexual abuse overlap:

Ensure sexual abuse specialists recognise the links with animal sexual abuse.

• Strengthen criminal justice alignment:

Fully recognise animal and child sexual abuse within legislative crossover opportunities.

• Prepare workplaces to respond to domestic abuse:

Ensure all businesses adopt 'Sharon's Policy'⁷ to embed domestic abuse support alongside other HR policies.

Continued overleaf...



This 'Act to Protect' report was co-authored by Naturewatch Foundation and Refuge 4 Pets, a registered charity that helps people and animals escape domestic abuse.

refuge4pets.org.uk

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.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-from-violence-and-abuse-a-cross-government-strategy>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-strategy-contest-2023>

⁴ <https://rubyslaw.co.uk>

⁵ <https://safelives.org.uk/resources-library/dash-risk-checklist>

⁶ <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Domestic-Abuse-Risk-Assessment-Rationale-2022.pdf>

⁷ <https://domesticabuseeducation.co.uk/sharons-domestic-abuse-policy>



New report: 'Act to Protect' (continued)

Prepare (continued)

• Train and support veterinary professionals:

Equip vets and practice staff to recognise non-accidental injuries to pets as potential indicators of domestic abuse and respond through safeguarding pathways.⁸

• Embed evidence-led planning:

Use research on links between animal abuse and domestic abuse to inform policy, training, and frontline practice.

• Coordinate activity:

Engage with MATAC⁹ (Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination) domestic abuse programme meetings to share intelligence and coordinate action.

Prevent

Goal: Stop abuse before it happens by addressing root causes, societal attitudes, and early risk factors.

• Education and culture:

Ensure education programmes promoting respect for people also include respect for animals and the environment. (See also MATAC above.)

• Community prevention:

Expand youth work and positive community engagement to reduce isolation and harmful behaviours among young men, particularly abuse involving wildlife.

• Online and technology:

Strengthen online safety through tighter regulation, banning harmful synthetic intimate image tools, and tackling content that normalises violence towards animals.

• Evidence-based early intervention:

Use research on links between animal

abuse and domestic abuse to identify risk patterns and inform prevention strategies.

• Veterinary professionals as frontline sentinels:

Train vets and practice staff to recognise non-accidental injuries to pets as potential indicators of domestic abuse, enabling early intervention before escalation.

Pursue

Goal: Identify, disrupt, and hold perpetrators to account using coordinated law enforcement and justice system action.

• Policing and enforcement:

Strengthen public protection by incorporating serious animal abuse convictions into MAPPA processes for high-risk offenders and expand the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme ('Clare's Law') to explicitly include animal abuse as a recognised marker of coercive and controlling behaviour.

• **MARAC and multi-agency coordination:** Improve effectiveness and explore statutory support for MARACs, ensuring high-risk case information, including animal-related indicators, is consistently shared and acted upon to disrupt perpetrators. (Also include MATAC as above.)

• Animal harm as intelligence:

Integrate evidence of non-accidental injury to pets into multi-agency risk assessments. Use this to strengthen intelligence sharing and support prosecution and safeguarding pathways.

Conclusion

This action plan demonstrates that protecting animals and protecting people

are intrinsically linked. By integrating animal welfare into domestic abuse risk assessment, early intervention, and offender management:

Victims benefit: Faster identification of risk, safer escape routes, and more coordinated multi-agency support.

Animals benefit: Early detection prevents harm, and fostering schemes provide safety and care during crises.

Society benefits: Shared safeguarding responsibility strengthens communities, reduces repeat victimisation, and promotes a culture of respect for all living beings.

Implementing this plan ensures that safeguarding efforts are holistic, proactive, and mutually reinforcing, delivering measurable protection for both people and animals.

An inclusive safeguarding approach

Safeguarding policy must be inclusive of all victims and all risk contexts. While women and girls are disproportionately affected, evidence shows that around one in six men will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and male victims are significantly less likely to disclose or access support due to stigma and lack of tailored services.

Abuse also disproportionately impacts people from minoritised communities, including Black and minority ethnic survivors, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, migrants, and those with insecure immigration status, who often face additional barriers such as mistrust of authorities, language barriers, cultural stigma, and fear of repercussions.

Animals can be used as a tool of control across all these groups, regardless of gender, sexuality, culture or background.

Recognising the animal-human bond as a safeguarding factor therefore strengthens equality, diversity and inclusion by improving identification of hidden victims, enabling earlier intervention, and ensuring that no one is excluded from protection because they do not fit a narrow victim profile.

Inclusive, evidence-led safeguarding is not a dilution of the VAWG agenda; it is essential to achieving its goals.

Protect all animals. Protect all people.

⁸ <https://thelinksgroup.org.uk/veterinary-team-guidance/training>

⁹ <https://www.college.police.uk/support-forces/practices/multi-agency-tasking-and-coordination-domestic-abuse-programme>

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