



Debate on a Member's Legislative Proposal: A Bill on Pet Abduction
(Carolyn Thomas MS, Wednesday 8 January 2025)

The purpose of the Bill would be to:

- a) make the abduction of a pet a specific criminal offence in Wales;
- b) recognise that cats and dogs are not inanimate objects but sentient beings capable of experiencing distress and other emotional trauma;
- c) recognise the significant and unique distress caused to an owner when a pet is stolen; and
- d) bring Wales in line with legislation in England.

Blue Cross Position Statements

- We are strong supporters of Carolyn Thomas's Legislative Proposal for a Pet Abduction Bill and would like to thank her for introducing this much needed legislation. The Pet Abduction Act 2024 introduced a similar offence in England and we believe Wales should follow suit. We urge politicians from all parties to support the proposed Bill;
- The abduction of a beloved family pet is one of the most distressing and traumatic events in any owner's life. The corrosive anxiety as to their whereabouts, and the agonising uncertainty as to their fate, can cause lasting and deep-seated emotional and mental suffering;
- We have always argued that the status of pets is fundamentally different from 'property'; they are not inanimate objects, they are sentient creatures and irreplaceable members of the family and should be treated as such. **It is clear that the law in Wales as it stands is simply too lenient and clearly does not act as a deterrent to pet thieves.**

- **We would welcome a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment for this offence to align with the Pet Abduction Act 2024 in England.** This would reflect the gravity of the offence and the devastating emotional impact on both the owner and the abducted pet. This would send a strong message that society does not tolerate any form of cruelty to our beloved pets, and animals in general.
- Each police force in Wales should appoint a specialist pet abduction officer to lead the fight against this cruel crime;
- Police forces in Wales should be provided with the training and resources necessary to deal with these sensitive cases and to be able to highlight sources of further information to owners;
- A co-ordinated way for all police forces to record pet abduction in the same way should be introduced, to ensure accurate statistics are available.

Current Situation

Pet theft is covered by the Theft Act 1968 in Wales and is not a specific crime in its own right. In effect, pets are simply classed as 'property' which means the crime is given the same legal standing as theft of a laptop or TV, despite the fact that an animal is a living, sentient being and will suffer greatly from being wrenched away from its home, often violently. Pets are not inanimate objects; they are irreplaceable members of the family. They bring us joy and laughter, companionship and comfort. They immeasurably enrich our lives - they are not, and never have been, just property.

Blue Cross believes that the abduction of a pet is fundamentally different from the theft of other personal belongings and the time has now come for a change the law in Wales to reflect this unique status.

Scale of Pet Theft

Comprehensive and reliable data on the true scale of pet theft in Wales is very difficult to collate due to the lack of a central database. Research by Direct Line Pet Insurance did find that:

- 2,290 dogs were stolen across the UK in 2023, an alarming six per cent increase on 2022

- Just one in six (16 per cent) stolen dogs were found and returned successfully, the lowest level since Direct Line started tracking data in 2015
- English Bulldogs, French Bulldogs, and XL Bullys were the most frequently stolen breeds.¹

These statistics still reveal a considerable level of human and animal suffering – and there may will be significant under-reporting of cases. Pet theft is seen as an attractive crime to commit with a low chance of being caught and, if caught, convicted.

The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 enshrined in UK law the principle of animal sentience, a major step forward in finally acknowledging that animals lead rich, complex sensory and cognitive lives. This Bill will augment that recognition and definitively express the unique status of pet dogs and cats in their owners' lives.

Cats

We recognise that the theft of cats is not as widespread a problem as theft of dogs – but it is still a major problem. Blue Cross conducted research into pet theft in 2019, including issuing Freedom of Information requests to 45 police forces in the UK. It found that the number of stolen cats rose by a third from 2017 and 70 per cent since 2015.² Freedom of Information data returns for the Cat Theft Report 2022 showed that recorded cat theft crime is up by 40 per cent on a like-for-like basis, with the annual total more than quadrupling between 2015 and 2021. There were only two prosecutions in 2021 and four cautions meaning barely 1 per cent of recorded cat thefts resulted in some form of legal action.³

¹ <https://www.directlinegroup.co.uk/en/news/brand-news/2024/dog-theft-on-the-up-in-2023.html>

² Blue Cross has FOI data on pet theft from 2010 – 2018. FOI 2018 33/45 police forces provided data on stolen cats totalling 353. In 2017 34/45 provided data totalling 262 stolen cats and in 2015 31/45 forces reported 207 cats.

³ <https://pettheftawareness.blogspot.com/2022/03/the-cat-theft-report-2022.html>

Other species - Equines

Our Big Pet Census⁴ revealed that 87 per cent of the horse owners we spoke to very much view their horse as part of the family; 47 per cent of respondents are worried about horse theft across the UK. Blue Cross itself experienced the abduction of four ponies – two mares and their foals – from our Rolleston rehoming centre in September 2022.

The abduction of any pet, no matter the species, is a traumatic event for the owner and the animal concerned. **Blue Cross would therefore welcome the inclusion of the abduction of equines in the scope of the offence.**

Effect of Pet Abduction

The abduction of a beloved family pet is one of the most distressing and traumatic events in any owner's life. The corrosive anxiety as to their whereabouts, and the agonising uncertainty as to their fate, can cause lasting and deep-seated emotional and mental suffering. Thankfully, some are reunited with their pet, particularly if they have been microchipped - but many will never see them again. Blue Cross is acutely aware of the nature of this emotional torment. Our [Pet Loss service](#), staffed by volunteers, has provided guidance and counselling for people who have lost their pet in various circumstances, including abduction.

Diane James, Head of Blue Cross Pet Loss service says:

"All loss is difficult, but the abduction of an animal causes even more despair for the people left behind. We call it ambiguous loss as grieving without knowing or having any ending to the loss is so difficult causing some people years of worry and suffering. When we have a person contact us because they have had their animal abducted, we support them at one of the most difficult times in their lives. The guilt they carry is often the most often discussed thing: what more could they have done? is it their fault? The not knowing is the hardest part of the loss and, I cannot emphasise this enough, the animal may be the only thing that they had in their life, the animal could

⁴ <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/all-about-horses-and-ponies>

be the last connection to a loved lost person, or part of family unit. The impact can be far reaching or even life changing in some cases.”

Owners can contact the Pet Loss service by telephone or email. More information can be found at:

<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss>

Data Collection and Enforcement

Treating pet abduction as one offence should aid consistency and clarity in sentencing such cases and also enable the collation of comprehensive data on the scale of the problem. This will enable enforcers to identify any regional variations in Wales in incidences of pet abduction and devote resources to those areas. It should also enable data on which specific breeds are being targeted by thieves.

However, legislation is never a panacea and it is imperative any new law is enhanced and strengthened by increased resources being devoted to preventing and tackling this abhorrent offence. Police forces also need sufficient training to be able to deal with pet abduction in a sensitive manner and highlight where owners can turn for support. Currently, it is very difficult to collate definitive statistics, principally due to different methods of recording by different police forces and pets not being differentiated under the Theft Act 1968.

Blue Cross believes there should be a co-ordinated and standardised system for police forces in Wales to record all instances of pet theft to ensure robust and comprehensive data is available to determine the true scale of the problem.

One example which could be replicated is the Met Police’s stolen animals dashboard.⁵ This records the yearly and monthly data, the type of animal stolen, the number of offences in each borough and how many animals were subsequently recovered. The dashboard showed that 654 animals were stolen in the year up to November 2023. Dogs were the most common victims

⁵ <https://www.met.police.uk/sd/stats-and-data/met/stolen-animals-dashboard/>

with 335 stolen but other species stolen included cats, fish and birds. Just six percent of stolen animals in London were recovered in 2023.

Blue Cross also supported the decision of Nottinghamshire Police to appoint Chief Inspector Amy Styles-Jones as the first specialist dog theft lead in the country⁶; Devon and Cornwall Police subsequently announced a similar appointment⁷. **Blue Cross would urge each police force in Wales to appoint a specialist pet abduction officer to lead the drive against this abhorrent crime.**

Case Study – Rosie

The following case study does have a happy ending for but graphically portrays the severe health and welfare consequences suffered by dogs who are abducted:



Rosie, a Springer Spaniel, was admitted as a stray with two other Spaniels on 7 December 2023. They had been found with a note that said "please rehome me". Rosie was not microchipped. They were all filthy and in a bad state of health on arrival but were very loving and friendly. Rosie had a lot of lumps, terrible dental disease and looked as though she had been bred from several times. Sadly, the other spaniels had to be euthanased due to their poor health.

A Blue Cross team member was scrolling through photos of Spaniels on the Dog Lost website and came across one who had been stolen from a home in Lincolnshire in April 2021 - she looked just like Rosie. After further online

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-56373922>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-57241048>

research, we were able to locate the original owner. Owner and Rosie were reunited on Christmas Eve.

Keeping Pets Safe

Blue Cross issues the following advice for pet owners:

- When at home avoid pets being seen by strangers passing by and be vigilant when they are in the garden – ensure gardens are secure.
- Don't leave dogs tied outside a shop or pets left in the car – even for a few minutes.
- Vary your dog walks and be wary of strangers asking questions.
- Neuter your pet and note this on their tag, along with your name address and a mobile number, avoid putting the dog's name on their tag.
- Make sure cats and dogs are microchipped to ensure a greater chance of being reunited if the worst happens and they are lost or stolen.
- Think twice before sharing photos of pets on social media if you are also revealing your home or frequently visited locations. When using Instagram, don't use location tags or make it obvious from photos that you are often in the same place at the same time with your pet.

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