SUBMISSION FROM THE SCOTTISH SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS (SCOTTISH SPCA)

The Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals welcomes the chance to submit written evidence to the Education Committee on the Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Bill, hereinafter referred to as “the Bill”.

The Scottish SPCA is Scotland's oldest and largest animal welfare organisation. The Society's main objective is to prevent cruelty to animals and to promote kindness and humanity in their treatment. The Scottish SPCA is a recognised reporting agency for animal welfare offences to the Crown Office. Inspectors are also authorised by Scottish Ministers to enforce the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act. All Inspectors are subject to standard Disclosure Scotland checks under Schedule 4 of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Order 2003.

The Scottish SPCA welcomes the Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Bill, and considers that, due to the links that exist between animal abuse and child abuse, animal welfare agencies may have an important role to play in sharing information about vulnerable children under part 3 of the Bill. The Scottish SPCA therefore respectfully requests that the Committee consider extending the information sharing requirements under part 3 of the Bill to include animal welfare inspectors. This written submission explains why.

The Links between Animal Cruelty and Human Violence

Since it launched its “First Strike Scotland” campaign in 1997, the Scottish SPCA has actively sought to highlight the links between animal cruelty and human violence, and to promote systems of cross-reporting of animal abuse and interpersonal violence. In promoting these systems, the Scottish SPCA draws on the experience of many states in the United States, where cross reporting of animal abuse and child abuse/domestic violence are formalised by law. Case histories from Scottish SPCA Inspectors and extensive academic research into these links, has demonstrated that where an animal is abused, people are at risk; and where people are abused, animals are at risk.

Four key issues are of relevance to this Bill when looking at the links between animal cruelty and human violence.

1) An abused animal may often be the first visible victim in an abusive household

The Scottish SPCA deals with several cases every year in which an Inspector called in to see an animal, witnesses or suspects abuse or neglect of a child or other vulnerable person. In such cases, the Society will endeavour to forward such reports on to the relevant social work department or the police.

In 2004 a Scottish SPCA Inspector was called out to investigate an allegation of cat neglect. On arriving at the house, the Inspector found two cats in extremely poor condition. The owner would not let the Inspector into the
house, and appeared in a poor physical and mental state herself. The Inspector revisited the house, and eventually gained co-operation from the owner, who confessed to having agoraphobia which had meant that she never left the house.

On the fifth visit to the house, the Inspector suspected that there was a child in the house. The Inspector eventually confirmed this suspicion when she saw a two-year old child, appearing to be severely neglected, thin and dirty, staring blankly from the window of the house, whilst his mother shouted and screamed at the Inspector. On informing the social work department, it became clear that the child was indeed seriously neglected and needed to be removed from the house, and that the mother was in crisis and required to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act. The child was eventually removed, and it later transpired that the mother had been known to social services in England, where she had also had children removed.

This case study demonstrates the value of Scottish SPCA Inspectors reporting child protection concerns to their relevant social work department. Almost every Inspector has a similar story to tell.

The Scottish SPCA’s experience is backed up by academic research, mainly carried out in the United States, where recognition of the “link” is integrated into compulsory cross-reporting schemes in several states.

In the USA higher rates of animal abuse by parental figures have been found in substantiated cases of child physical abuse than in the general population.

In a New Jersey study (Deviney, Dickert and Lockwood, 1983), abused animals were found in 88 per cent of the homes of 57 families where child physical abuse had been substantiated.

In the UK, Hutton reported in 1981, that of 23 families investigated by the RSPCA for animal abuse or neglect, 82 per cent were also known to local social services departments as having “children at risk”.

Much more research into this is available, and the Scottish SPCA can make it available to the committee if required.

2) Animal abusers are more likely to “progress” to more serious forms of violence than non-animal abusers

A key theme behind the “First Strike Scotland” campaign is the idea that abusing an animal is sometimes “practice” for abusing people, or as a way of exerting power and control over vulnerable people, such as women and children. Again, this theory is backed up by case histories and by academic research.

In one case dealt with by the Scottish SPCA, two women cleaning out an acquaintance’s house found the decomposed carcase of a six-year-old white Alsatian bitch in a cupboard. When Scottish SPCA Inspectors found the man and questioned him, he told them: “I took it out the back about seven months
ago and pulled its legs apart and burst its heart. I don’t know how it got into the cupboard.”

His brutal act didn’t immediately kill the dog, but condemned it to a prolonged death in the under-stair cupboard. When he came to court, the dog’s owner was also fined for assaulting his ex-wife. This was a man who hit out, regardless of the species of his victim.

In another case, a little puppy, only three months old, was brought into the Scottish SPCA’s Lothian Animal Welfare Centre one summer night. His owner had kicked him and thrown him repeatedly against a wall in a drunken attack. That same night he also assaulted his wife and children.

In the 1970s, a groundbreaking study by Kellert and Felthous showed that aggressive adult criminals more commonly had a history of childhood cruelty to animals than did their non-aggressive counterparts.

In 1985, 72 women in refuge from domestic violence responded to a survey by Quinlisk. 86 per cent of them had animals in the home – an unusually high percentage. Of these, 80 per cent reported that their abuser had also been violent to pets.

Animal abuse is also found in the background of many of society’s most brutal killers. The FBI routinely takes animal abuse into account when profiling offenders and views it as an important predictor of future behaviour. In the UK, it has been suggested that Thomas Hamilton, Luke Mitchell and the killers of Jamie Bulger had “rehearsed” their actions using animals.

While the links to serial killers are worth some consideration, tragic cases of this nature are mercifully rare in the Scottish experience. It is the everyday violence on the streets and within households that Scottish SPCA Inspectors are more likely to encounter in the course of their animal welfare work.

3) The nature of an animal welfare inspector’s work means that he/she may be exposed to child abuse or neglect that is hidden from social workers or child protection officers

When a Scottish SPCA Inspector visits a domestic situation, the subject of his/her investigation is aware that the Inspector is “only” there to look at the animal. For this reason, Inspectors may see situations that a social worker or child protection officer may not see when specifically visiting to look at a child. Scottish SPCA Inspectors verify this statement with a number of case studies.

In the 1990s a Scottish SPCA responded from a call from a concerned member of the public in Edinburgh regarding a dog urgently in need of veterinary treatment. When the Inspector visited the house to see the dog, he witnessed the owner’s boyfriend violently assaulting the young child in the household. The Inspector managed to step in and stop the violence, but was extremely concerned for the child’s welfare, and suspected that the child had been physically abused before. On leaving the situation, the Inspector
informed the local police of the situation, and the abuser was subsequently arrested for his behaviour.

The Inspector witnessed blatant abuse in this case simply because he was "only" there to look at the dog. Again, Scottish SPCA Inspectors have cases like this on a regular basis, and feel that sharing their experience gained in penetrating abusive households could be of huge benefit to child and vulnerable people’s protection groups.

4) There are proven parallels between Non Accidental Injuries (NAI) in children and in animals

In 1996, Helen Munro, Fellow of the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh, pointed out the similarity between the physical abuse of children and of companion animals through a series of papers on the phenomenon of “battered pets syndrome”. Munro’s work showed that the four categories of child abuse now widely recognised by childcare professionals (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect) might equally be applied to animal abuse.

In 2001, Munro, along with her colleague Dr Michael Thrusfield, published four papers casting new light on the circumstances, the nature and the classification of animal abuse. This work was instrumental in new guidelines urging veterinary surgeons to report suspected animal and/or child abuse to the relevant authorities.

Munro and Thrusfield’s work, based on an extensive survey of veterinary surgeons in the UK documented features that aroused suspicion of non-accidental injury in veterinary patients. Many of these features are also significant where child abuse is suspected, and are recognised by professionals with an interest in NAI in humans. Some of these features were:

- The history given to account for the injury is inconsistent with the injury (usually the injury is too severe to “fit” with the history)
- A discrepant history (i.e. changes in the telling, or from person to person)
- Repetitive injury (has a high index of suspicion)
- Previous injury/death in another animal in the same household, particularly when this animal’s death is unexplained
- The existence of violence in the home is known or suspected

Munro and Thrusfield’s work confirms the suspicion that parallels exist between animal abuse and child abuse, and helps explain the phenomenon described above that abusing an animal may be “practice” for abusing others.

Information Sharing

The Scottish SPCA believes it has a moral obligation to share information about children and other vulnerable people at risk. It is clear, both from
practical experience and from academic study that there are proven – and overlooked – links between animal cruelty and human violence.

Whilst the Society can – and does – report concerns regarding vulnerable people to the relevant authorities, there is no guarantee that their concerns will be taken seriously or acted upon. For this reason, the Scottish SPCA strongly welcomes the provisions in the Bill aimed at enshrining this practice, and considers that its own Inspectors could usefully feed into this process.

In at least four states in America and in Washington DC “humane officers” (animal welfare inspectors) are either required or permitted to report suspected or known child abuse by state legislation. These states are California, Connecticut, Florida and Ohio. In California and Colorado veterinarians are mandated to report suspected child abuse. In many other states, animal welfare workers are encouraged to report child abuse. Some states also require or encourage the reporting of animal abuse by child or family protection workers.

The concept of cross-reporting or information sharing is not just confined to the United States. A recent study of a cross-reporting protocol between the Guelph Humane Society and the Family and Children’s Services in Wellington County in Ontario, Canada has demonstrated the value of information sharing and cross reporting. A copy of this information can be made available to the committee. Additionally, the Royal New Zealand SPCA and the New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children are currently working on a formalised protocol for cross reporting.

Conclusion

The Scottish SPCA believes that cross-reporting, or information sharing can help the various agencies involved in working with the victims of abuse – whether they be animals, children or other vulnerable groups. This written submission has aimed to highlight that Scottish SPCA Inspectors sometimes find that they are dealing with a household where the animal is not the only victim of abuse, and that their experience and roles in penetrating abusive households could be valuably utilised in the context of the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Bill.

Coupled with the growing body of academic evidence demonstrating a link between animal abuse and child abuse, the Scottish SPCA wishes the committee to consider the possibility of requiring animal welfare workers or inspectors to share information about children at risk under part 3 of the Bill.