

Protecting Animals, Protecting People:

‘The Link’ and its Relevance in Social Work and Social Care

Rebecca Stephens

Associate Professor in Social Work.

Links Group Trustee.

Dr Andrea Lynch

Links Group Strategic Delivery Lead.



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Could you tell if this was an accident?



Links Group

Raising awareness of the link between the abuse of people and animals through support, training and inter-agency working

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We will explore:

- The relevance of the human-animal bond for human services professionals.
- An introduction to 'The Link,' research findings and relevant legislation.
- Animal abuse as a strategy of coercive control.
- Types and indicators of animal abuse.
- 'The Link' in practice.
- Safety planning for the whole family.



Content Notice

The UK Context

Pet ownership (D,C,R only)	51%
Improves life	91%
Happiness	94%
Improved mental well-being	88%
Reduced loneliness	85%
Improved physical health (D)	84%
Pets considered family	95%*

Indoor fish tanks **21%**

1M rabbits v. 2.8M birds (aviary & fowl)

Over 7,000 assistance dogs**

PDSA PAW Reports 2023/24 & UK Pet Foods Pet Population Survey 2024

*Blue Cross Big Pet Census 2022

**Assistance Dogs UK



One Health, One Welfare

“Although the subject matter of ethics is often said to be human welfare, the bigger picture also includes the flourishing of animals and the whole ecosystem.”

(British Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (2021:14))





Animals in family life

Impacts human welfare.

Companionship.

Attachment figure.

Influences child development.

Routine and purpose.

Assistance and support.

Safety and protection.

Promotes civic engagement.



“The Link”

“When animals are abused, people are at risk, and when people are abused, animals are at risk.”

(Phil Arkow)

Why is this important?

Co-occurrence rate where pets used as a strategy of coercive control

89%

(Wakeham, 2025)

Animals given as a 'gift' who were used as a tool to control and coerce

94%

(Wakeham, 2021)

Domestic abuse professionals said that owning pets has been a barrier for survivors getting to safety (Cats Protection, 2023)

9 in 10

Animal abuse occurring in families where physical abuse of children has been reported

88%

(Jegatheesan et. al., 2020)

Extreme pornography charges were for possession of images of animal sexual abuse

85%

(McGlynn & Bows, 2019)

Offenders found with child abuse imagery were also found to have images of animal sexual abuse (Naturewatch FOI requests looking at 1042 cases)

73%

Children aged 13-15 witnessing animal abuse (highest level on social media)

45%

RSPCA (2025)



In the News

‘Vile rapist held terrified victim against her will in Scots flat and tortured XL Bullies.’

(Daily Record, [13 November 2024](#)).

‘Women jailed over sadistic monkey torture videos.’

(BBC News, [13 November 2024](#)).

‘Isle of Wight man jailed for domestic abuse and strangling dog.’

(County Press, [16 November 2024](#)).

‘Teenage gang fed Chunky the chihuahua drugs, set him on fire and broke his neck before dumping him on a tip – but he SURVIVED.’

(Mail Online, [24 November 2024](#)).

‘Stephanie Watson’s Shocking XL Bully Dog Abuse Exposed’

(Social Media, [November 2024](#)).



Steven Barker: **Animal Abuser, Baby Abuser, Rapist**

**PEOPLE WHO ARE
VIOLENT TOWARDS ANIMALS
RARELY STOP THERE**

Report cruelty to animals immediately **PETA**



Types of Animal Abuse

Physical

Emotional

Controlling

Coercive

Sexual abuse

Economic abuse

Neglect

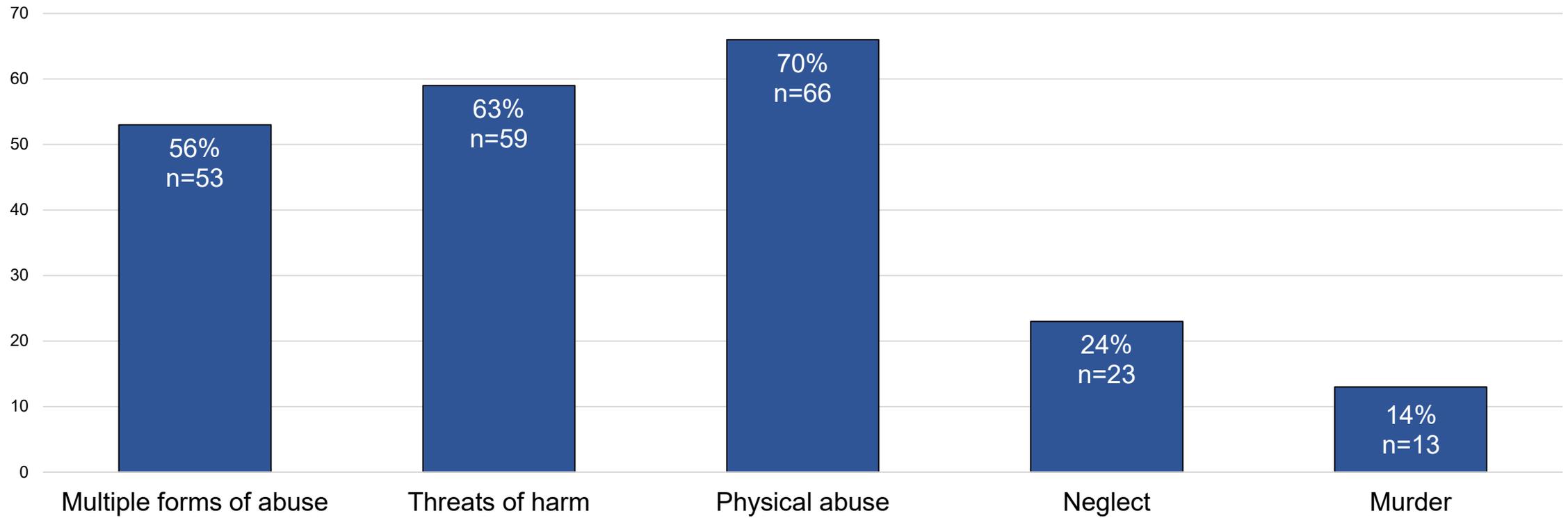


Animal Abuse as a Strategy of Coercive Control



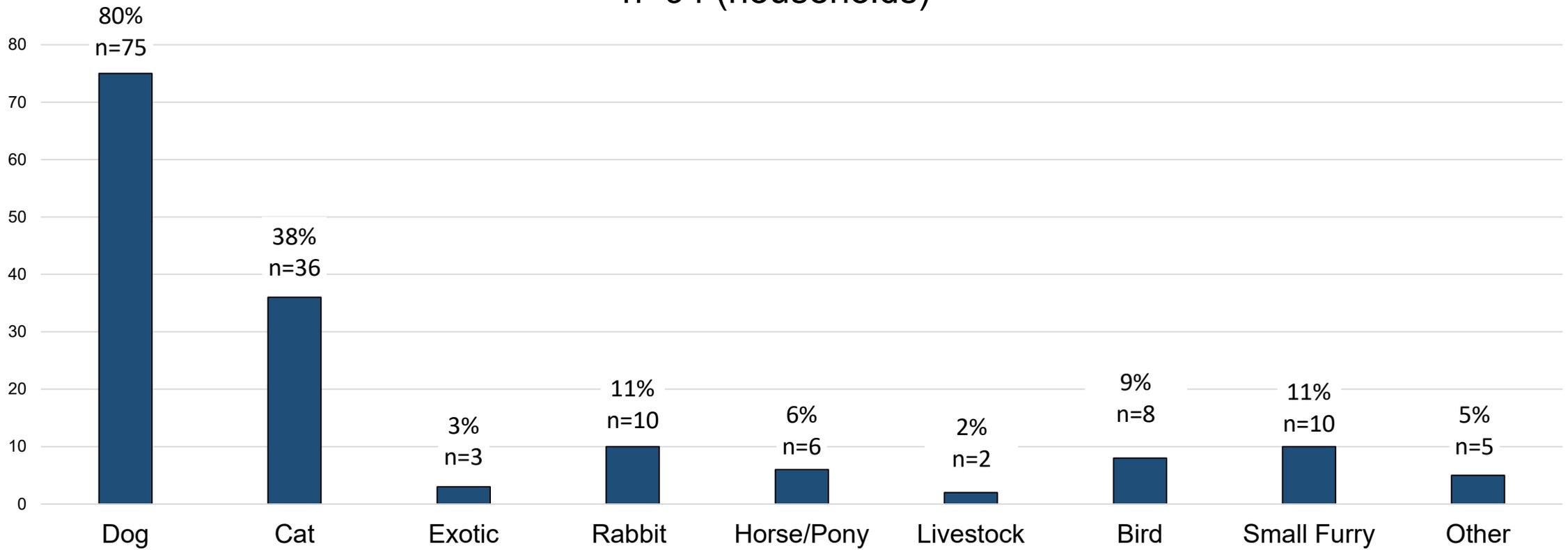
Type of Animal Abuse (Wakeham, 2025)

Types of Animal Abuse Across Households
89% n=94



Types of Animals Abused (Wakeham, 2025)

Types of Animals Abused in Households
n=94 (households)



Types of Animal Abuse

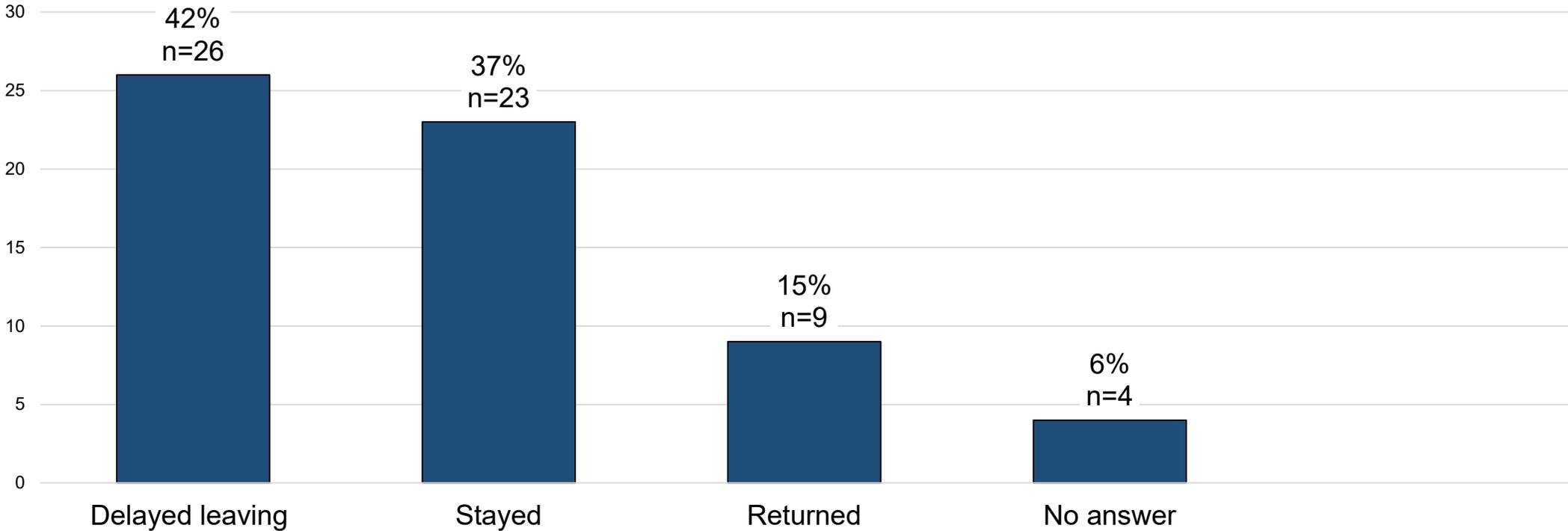
- Budgie **stamped** on and **kicked** across room
 - Dog repeatedly **punched** - died from internal injuries
 - **Attempted drowning** in kitchen sink
 - Cat **stabbed to death with a pen**
 - Dog killed from its **throat being slit**
 - Dog **stabbed to death**; knife still in situ when police arrived
 - Cat **microwaved**
 - Dog **decapitated** with a spade
-
- Dog **thrown out of a first floor window**
 - Cat repeatedly **swung by its tail**, hitting the wall
 - Hamster **strangled**
 - Gerbil **thrown against a wall**
 - Cat killed by **putting in freezer**
 - Finches **stabbed to death in front of the children**
 - Family pet **hung from the light fitting**
 - Budgie **thrown on an open fire**
 - Cat's **tail cut off in front of children**



“It was a form of control, a threat of violence; ‘I can do this to the dog, I can do this to the cat. You’d better toe the line or you will be next.’”

The Impact of Animal Abuse (Wakeham, 2025)

How Animals Impacted Victim-Survivor's Decisions About Leaving
n=62

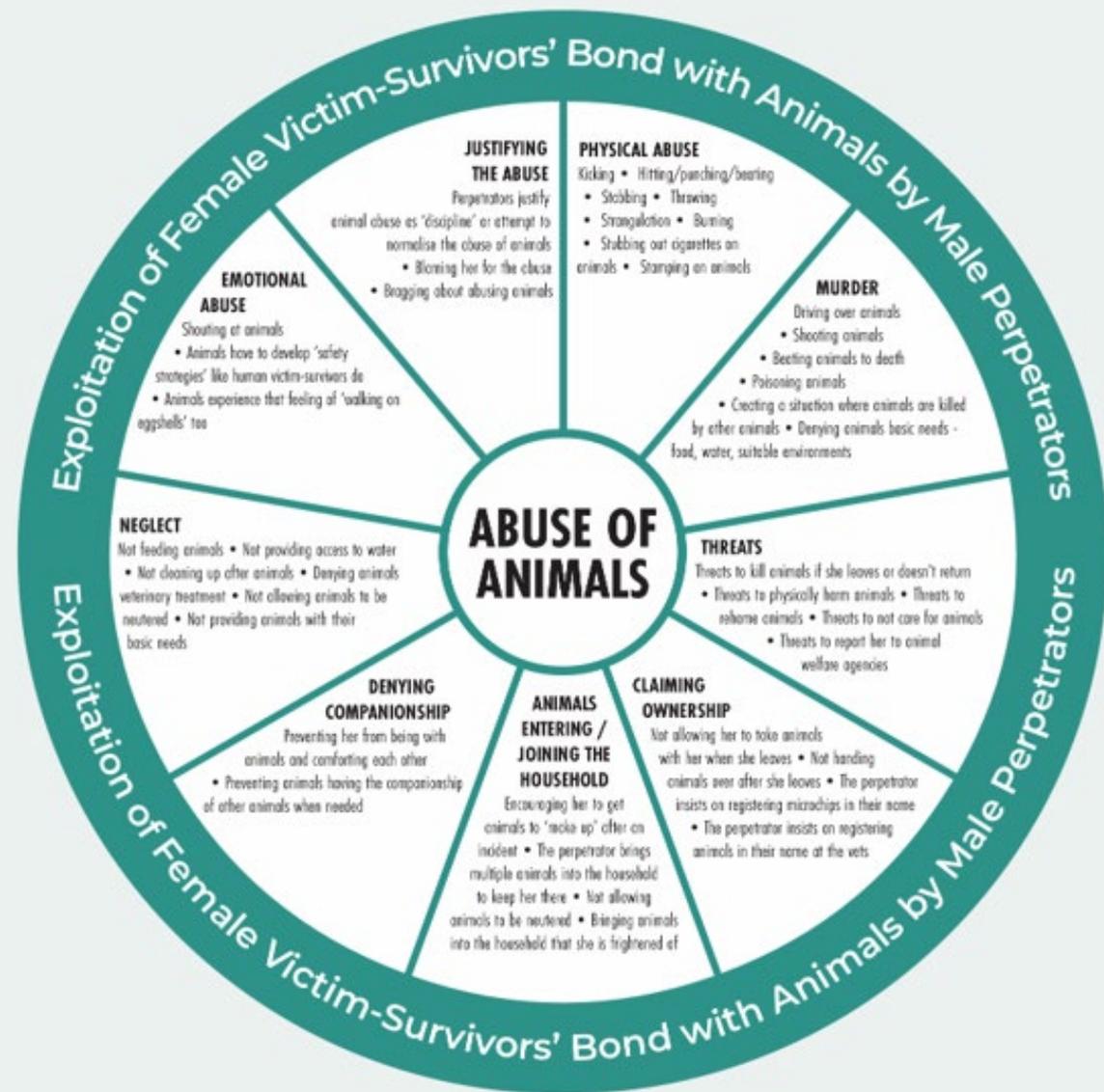
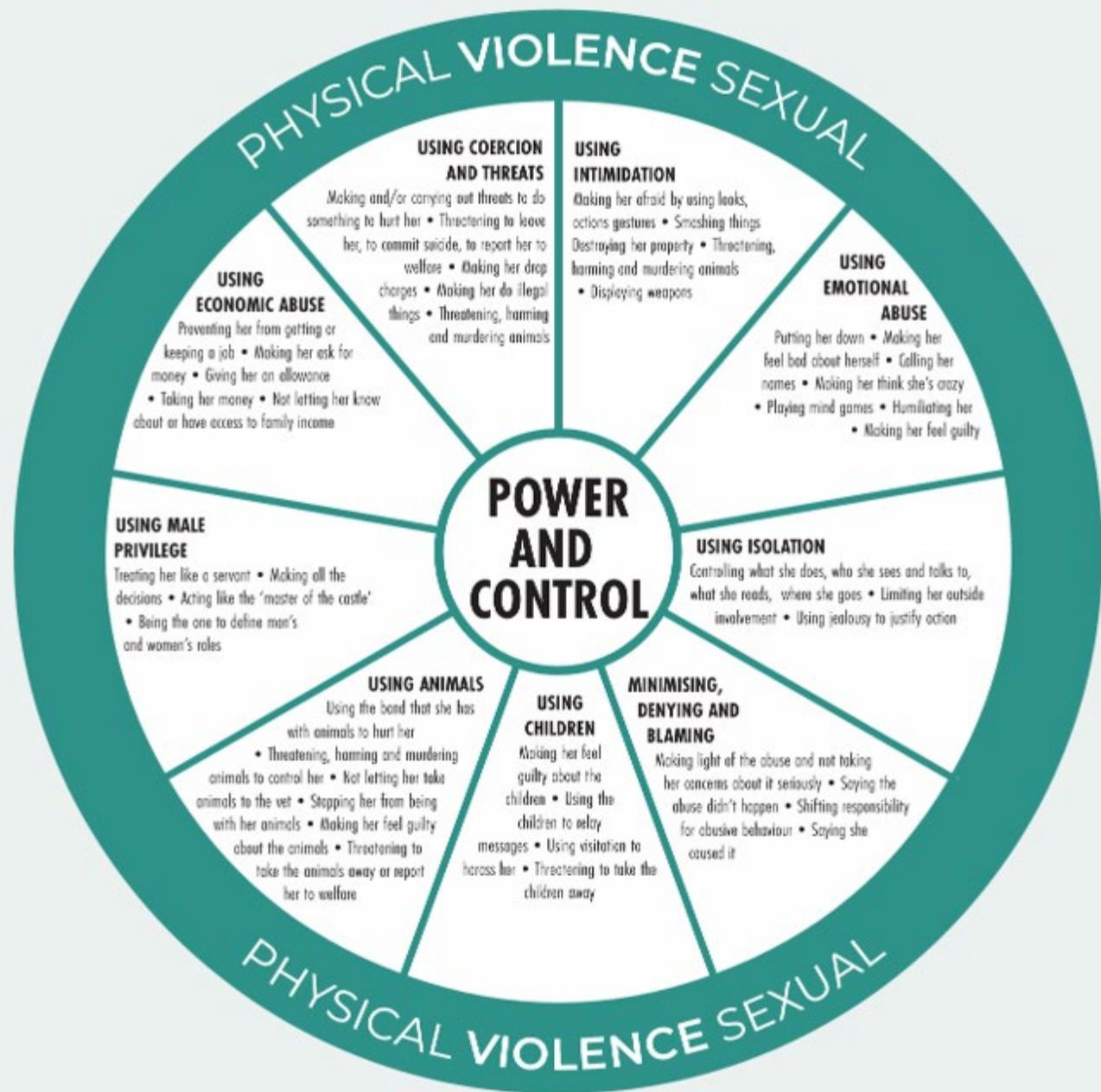


A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and black jeans, stands on a rocky path. A large, grey and white dog is sitting next to her, looking up at her. The background shows a hilly landscape with sparse vegetation and a few buildings in the distance under a clear sky.

“He told me if
I tried to leave,
he would kill
my dog.”







Examples from ASSIST NI

Physical/sexual abuse & killing

- ...physical violence on their **pet boar and dogs**. Following report to Police, he fled the address to the farm fields and barns ... In anger he **beat and kicked the family pet goat until deceased**. Found committing same act upon police arrival.
- The **dogs were intentionally burned alive**, locked and restrained in the caravan.
- Victim-survivor disclosed upon completing DASH that the abuser **would ask her to kill 'small animals'** by crushing them using high-heeled footwear as **part of their sexual relationship**.

Manipulation and control

- He **fed his dog and starved hers almost to death** and then **reported her to animal welfare**. The dog was removed from the home and she was issued with a legal ban revoking her right to have any animal in her care.
- ...he **put the cat in the microwave** for 5 seconds and then **threatened to kill himself if she left him**.
- **Paramilitary involvement**.

Local Examples

Images from Derry Now and BBC NI

Man jailed for kicking pregnant partner in stomach



Kavanagh was sentenced at Bishop Street courthouse on Monday

3 March 2025

A man who kicked his partner in the stomach on the night she told him she was pregnant has been jailed for 18 months, with the same period on licence.

Jordan Kavanagh, 29, from Rathbrady Road, Limavady in County Londonderry, also grabbed his partner by the throat and punched her in the face while her mother was trying to help her, a court in Londonderry was told.

He also kicked an 11-week-old puppy during the attack on 13 December 2023.

Derry Court: Dog cruelty accused jailed for driving and criminal damage offences at Foyle Golf Club



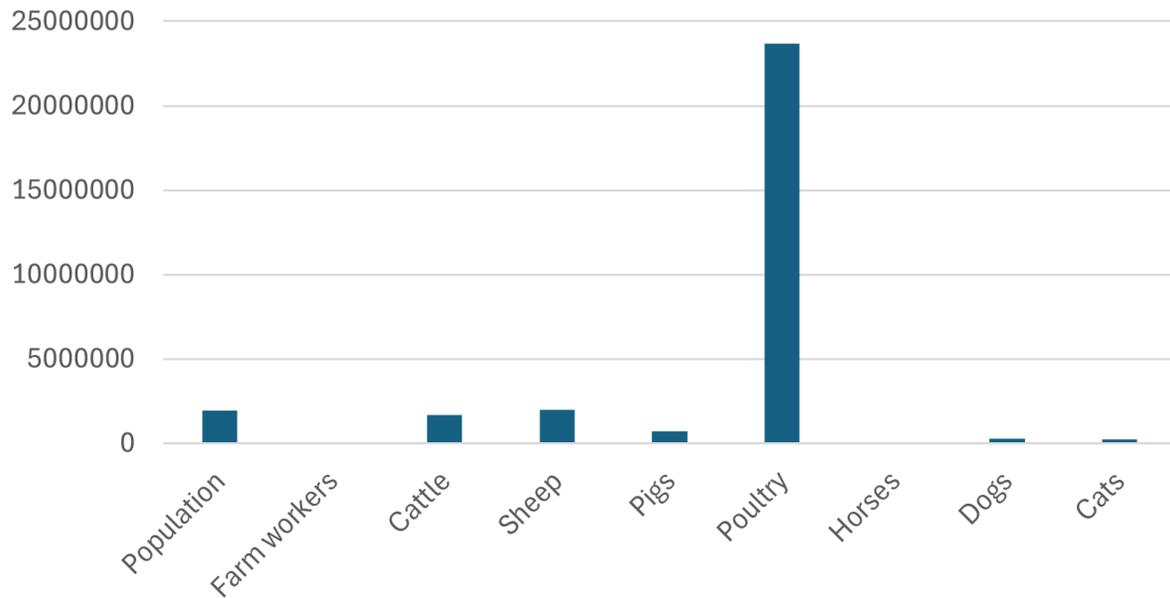
Londonderry: Man, 29, granted bail after dog partially buried alive

© 18 March 2023

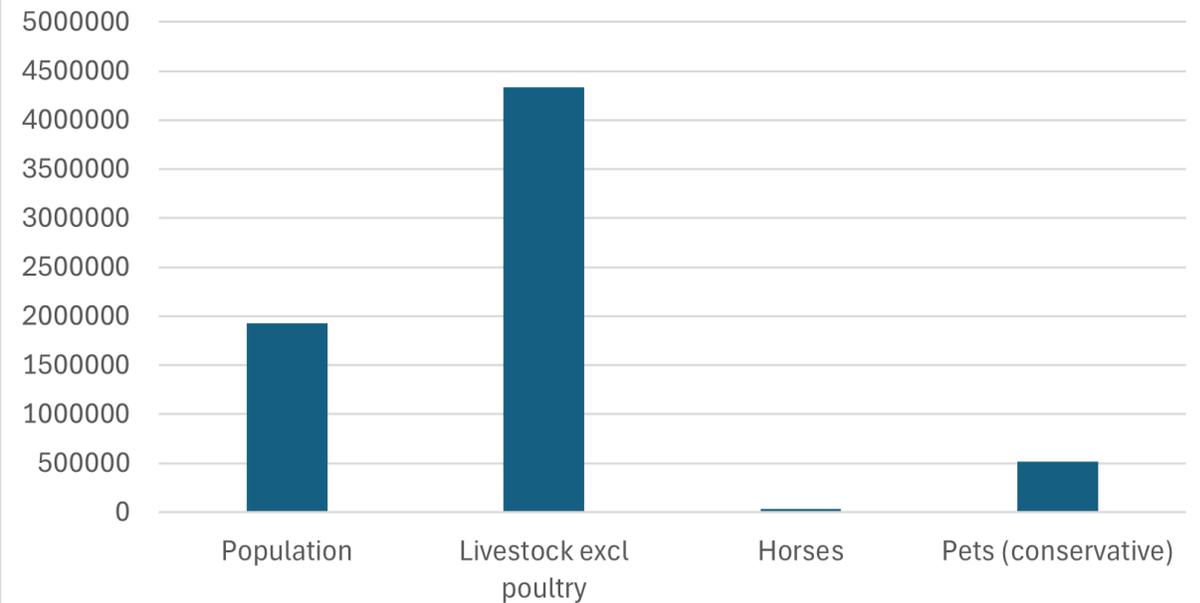


Why Ask About The Animals in Risk Assessments?

NI population by 'species' incl. poultry



NI population by animal groups excl. poultry



Data from NISRA, DAERA, 2024



Agriculture accounts for:

1% of the working population in Northern Ireland

47% of all deaths in the workplace.

(HSENI, 2023/2024)

Dangerous places?

The reality?

Isolation?

Culture?

Rural domestic abuse?

Are there potential routes to support?

“Nip it in the Bud” A One Health Initiative in Northern Ireland

- Farming Community Network
- Macmillan Cancer Support
- Vet CPD including human health and communication skills for healthcare conversations with farmers.
- Vets deliver awareness-raising leaflets about the importance of early diagnosis, and signpost farmers to doctors.

Vets drafted in to help with human health in 'UK first'



| Vet Melanie Spahn says farmers frequently ask her health related questions

Elaine Mitchell

South west reporter, BBC News NI

17 November 2025



Indicators of Animal Abuse & Animal Welfare Legislation

Animal Welfare & the Five Domains/Needs

1. Nutrition.

2. Environment.

3. Health.

4. Behavioural interactions.

5. Mental health.



Indicators of animal welfare issues in the context of domestic abuse

- Physical injuries.
- Poor/unsuitable environment.
- Abandonment.
- Behaviour (fear AND appeasement).
- Parasite infestation/poor basic healthcare.
- Neglect/restriction of resources (access to food, water, veterinary treatment/economic abuse).
- Breeding, ear cropping, dog fighting – associations with serious & organised crime.



Non-Accidental (Intentional) Injuries in Animals: inconsistent, discrepant, repetitive

Injuries not consistent with accidental trauma.

Injuries that can't be explained by the owner/inconsistencies in explanations.

Reference to how injury was sustained similar in domestic abuse eg "fell down the stairs."

Injuries similar to those seen in NAI in children, including bruises, fractures, burns, sexual abuse.

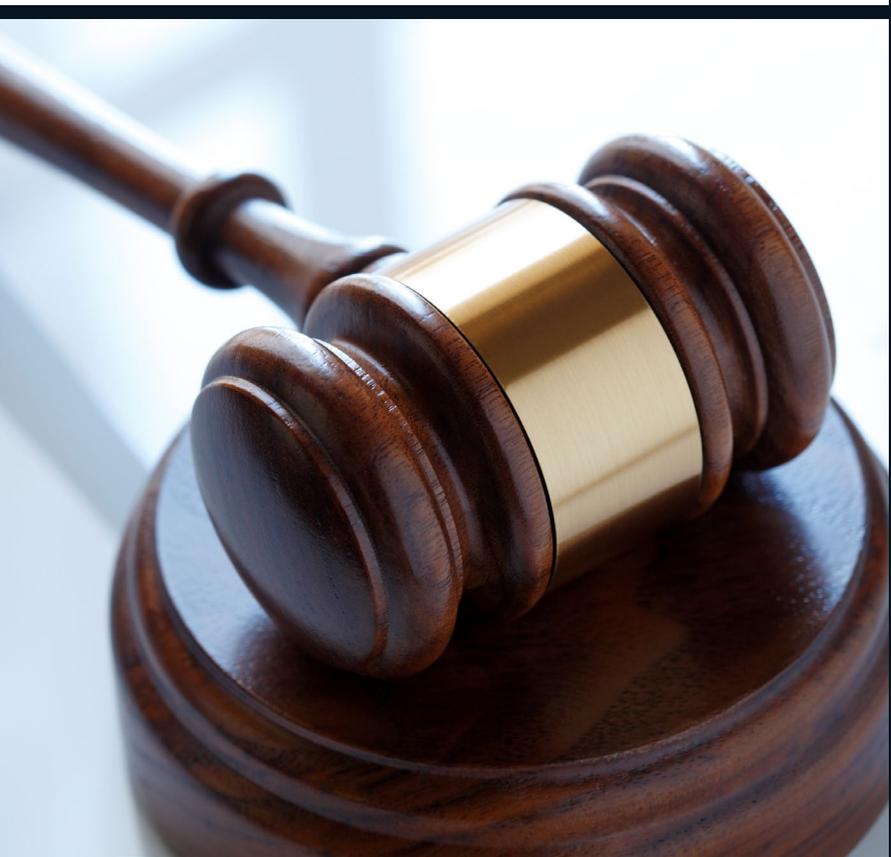
Might be a sign of abuse in the home.



Animal Hoarding

- Recognised psychological condition.
- Invariably, they believe that only they can care for these animals appropriately, despite the animals being in poor conditions and poor health.
- May cause problems with access to property.
- Property is usually highly insanitary.
- Likely to be reluctant to allow entry and to refuse transfer to the hospital.
- Be aware of the high risk of zoonotic diseases, e.g. ringworm, salmonellosis.
- Be mindful of spreading disease to your own/other animals – biosecurity.

Relevant Legislation: Animals



Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2001

- Prohibits the unnecessary suffering of animals.
- Places a **positive duty of care** on owners/keepers to meet their animals' needs.

Animal Welfare (Sentience Act) 2022

- Animals formally recognised as sentient beings in UK domestic law.

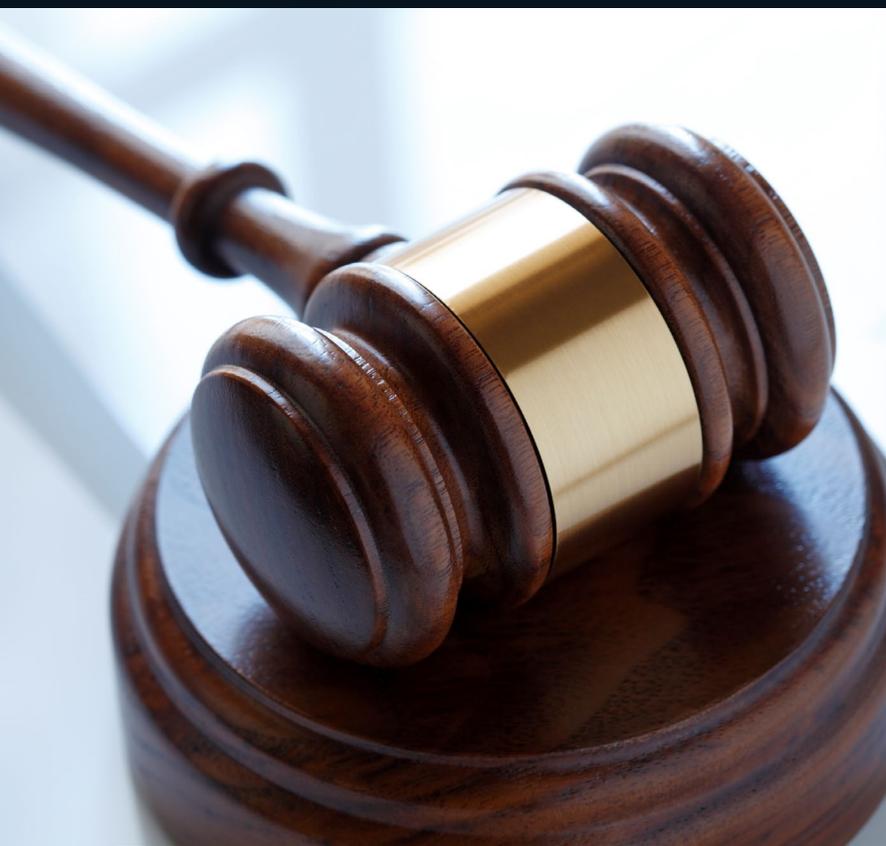
Pet Abduction (England & Northern Ireland) Act 2024

- It is an offence to abduct animals commonly kept as pets.

Relevant Legislation:

Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021

Explanatory notes & statutory guidance



Frightening, humiliating, degrading or punishing a partner/connected person

This could include, for example:

- threats to hurt or kill them;
- threats of institutionalisation (particularly for those that are disabled, elderly or have mental health issues);
- using abusive names to humiliate them whether in private or in company;
- repeatedly yelling or shouting at them, constantly criticising them or repeatedly putting them down and telling them that they are worthless;
- controlling their access to the toilet;
- forcing them to eat food off the floor;
- threatening to reveal or publish private information, including via photos or the internet e.g. threatening to 'out' them or disclose details of sexual activity or a medical condition;
- placing false or malicious information about them on social media;
- trolling them online;
- threats to hurt their child or pet;
- mocking them about their disability, gender, sexual orientation or physical appearance;
- threatening to kill themselves or self-harm;
- threatening a child, including inappropriately restricting access to them; or
- playing mind games to cause them to doubt their sanity.

3.26 It is important to note that behaviour includes saying or otherwise communicating something as well as doing something. It also includes intentionally failing to do, say, or communicate something. This could include intentionally not passing on times and dates of medical appointments or important messages. It might also include deliberately not feeding the family pet to cause distress to the victim.

3.27 It should be borne in mind that behaviour can be either direct or indirect. For example, behaviour could be targeted at property, which could be shared property, social housing, or property belonging to parents. Property is not just limited to housing and includes any item that can be owned, for example cars or mobile phones. Property would also capture pets or other animals, such as agricultural livestock, whether belonging to the victim or others.

Proposed Amendment No. 316 Crime & Policing Bill 2025 (England & Wales)



The
Chartered
Society of
Forensic
Sciences



The Chartered Society of
Forensic Sciences Animal
Related Crime Working Group

**Briefing: Amending existing legislation to protect children and animals from
sexual abuse**



‘The Link’ in Practice





United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2023)

“Children must be protected from all forms of physical and psychological violence and from exposure to violence, such as domestic violence or violence inflicted on animals.”

General Comment 26. Section G: Right to Freedom from all forms of violence (article 19), paragraph 35.



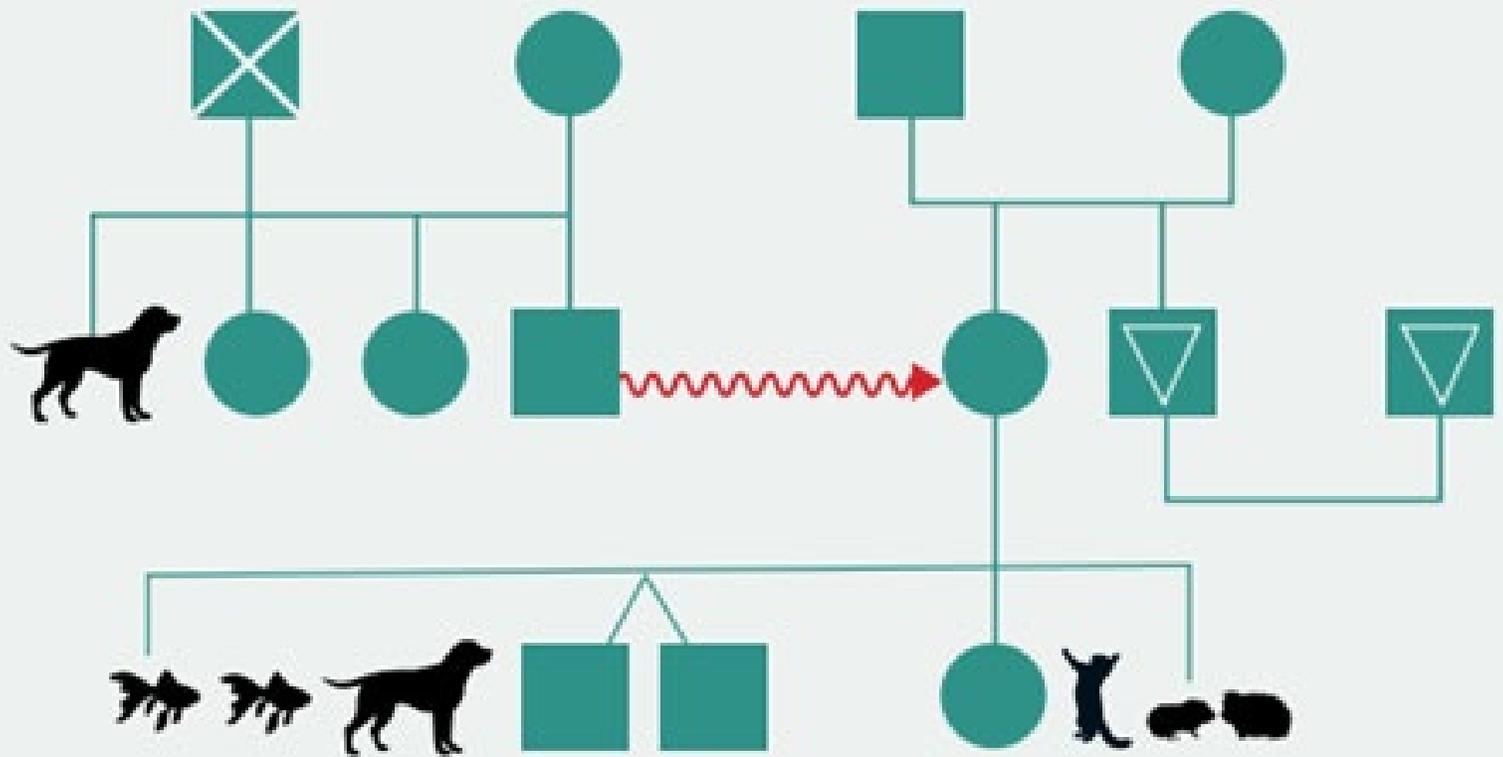
Practice Opportunities

- **Trust & Rapport**
 - People may feel safer talking about their pets' experiences before disclosing their own.
- **Human-animal bond / interactions**
 - Helps identify risk & resilience factors.
- **Animals' behaviour and physical condition**
 - Clues to family functioning and dynamics.
- **Any threat to the bond**
 - May result in vulnerability for both.



Theoretical Perspectives

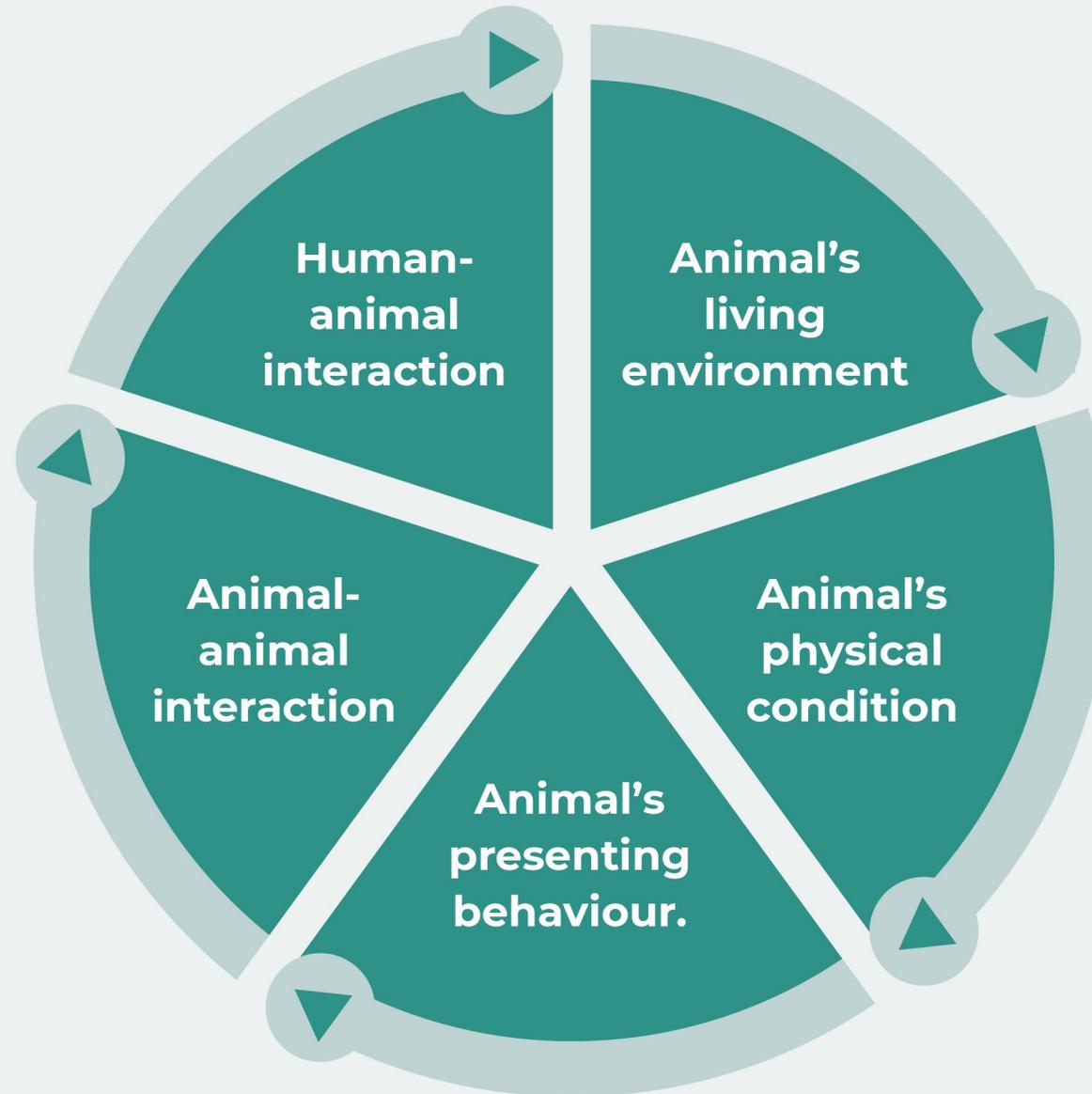
- Attachment
- Social support theory
- Object relations
- Social learning
- Intersectionality
- Systems-bio-ecological
- Family systems
- Trauma
- Relationship-based
- Loss and grief
- Continuing bonds
- Power and control/Feminist



A simple family genogram that includes companion animals.



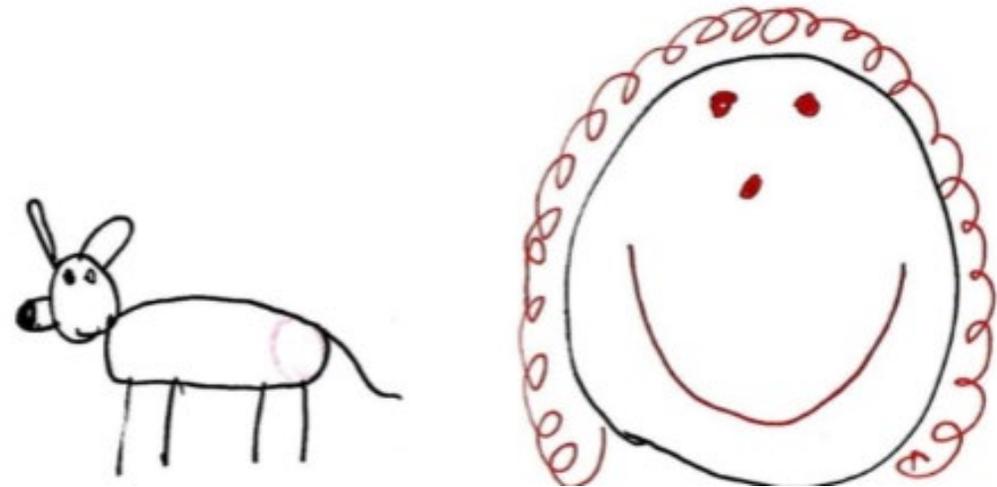
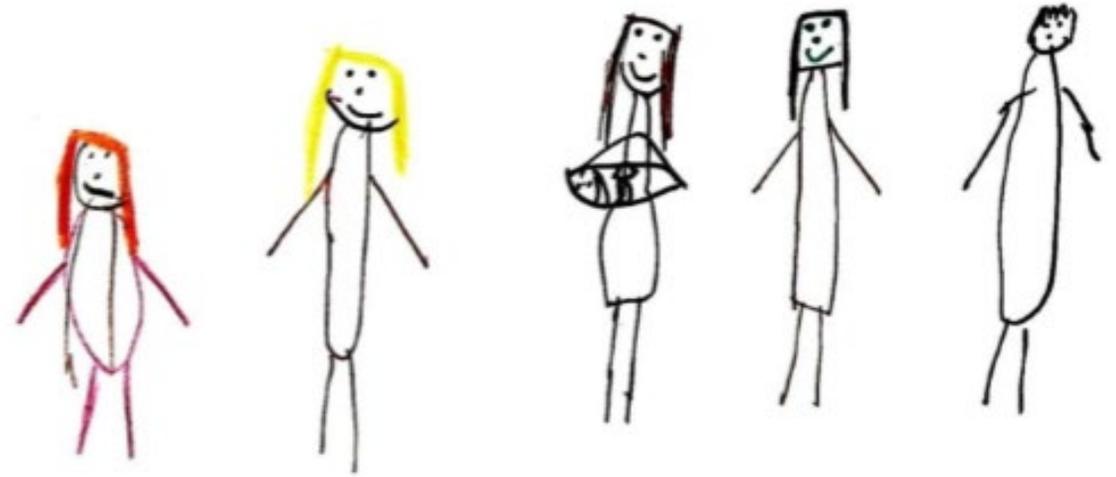
Key observations to make during home visits



Children's experiences in the context of domestic abuse

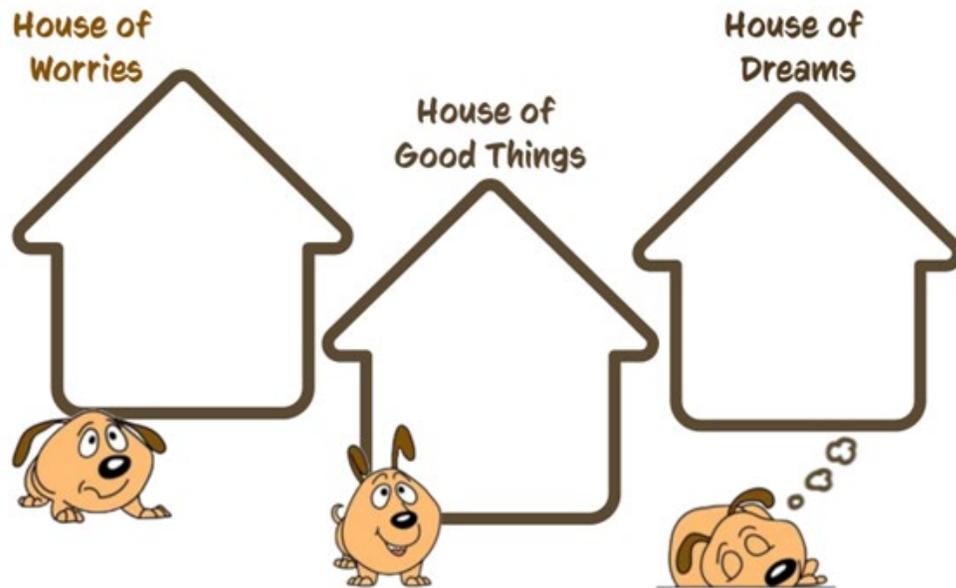
- Part of the family
- Caring for animals
- Listening and support
- Control and abuse
- Disruption, uncertainty and loss

(Callaghan et al., 2023:7-8)



“My cat always seems to be there and sits with me. At night, I sometimes get nightmares, but when she’s in my room, I don’t.” (Emma, 17)

Example Questions: Children



www.SocialWorkersToolbox.com

Build Rapport:

- What is your pet's name? How old is Fluffy?
- How did you get Fluffy?
- Is this your first pet or have you had others?
- What do you like best about Fluffy?

Explore:

- What does Fluffy like to eat?
- Where does Fluffy sleep? Can you show me their bed?
- Who cares for Fluffy?

Assess Risk:

- Do you think Fluffy likes living here? What does Fluffy like/dislike about living here?
- What happens if Fluffy is naughty like chewing a shoe or has an accident like weeing on the floor?
- What makes Fluffy happy/sad?
- Do you have any worries about Fluffy? What worries do you have?
- Has anyone ever hurt Fluffy?



Example questions when there is a *suspicion* of animal abuse

- How would you describe your relationship with your pet/s?
- How would you describe your children and partner's relationship with your pet/s?
- Who would you say is the main caregiver for your pets?
- Is there anything worrying you about caring for your pet or meeting their basic needs?
- Are you concerned about any aspect of or recent changes to your pet/s temperament or behaviour?
- Do you need any help with caring for your pet/s?



Example questions when there is a *disclosure* of animal abuse

- Has your partner ever threatened to harm or kill your pet/s previously?
- Have your children ever harmed, been coerced, or forced to be involved in harming your pet/s?
- Do your pet/s needs impact your decision to seek refuge or leave this relationship?
- Do you have a safe place for your pets to stay if you need to leave quickly?
- Whose name is on your pet/s microchip?



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Protecting Animals, Protecting People

“The Link”: Promoting Human & Animal Inclusive Social Work Practice in NI

By protecting animals you can help protect people, potentially saving the lives of both.

Research from the UK and North America indicates that there is a need for social work practitioners to better understand the connection between the abuse of animals and people. It is important to recognise how pets can be used as a strategy of coercive control to manipulate, threaten, and silence family members. Understanding the significance of the human-animal bond and how it can be exploited is crucial. This awareness will help ensure that animals are included in family genograms, risk assessments, and care and safety plans.^{1,2}

“I think Local Authority Social Workers should be encouraged to include animals in their assessments and to be mindful of how important pets can be in family life. There is currently no guidance on what to do if there is suspected animal abuse, how to record or how to intervene. It would be useful to think about how to approach these difficult conversations and any interventions that can be implemented with families.” Survey respondent.²

Dilemmas

**Maintaining rapport vs
duty of care**

What if reporting my concerns means I lose their trust?

Breaching confidentiality

Where animal welfare or the public interest might be compromised.

**How severe does the
abuse need to be to
report ?**

You need only report on suspicion, not evidence.

**Reporting
responsibilities**

You are not legally bound to report concerns, but you do have a professional responsibility to do so.

**What if I report and my
suspicions were wrong?**

What if my suspicions were right and I didn't report?



Safety Planning

- Explore options for temporary care.
- Consider safe removal of the pets.
- Understand microchip abuse.
- Check for GPS trackers on the pets, on leads, bedding, feed, cages, etc.
- Assess perpetrator animal-related risks.
- Protect the veterinary history where possible.
- Evaluate the safety of pets being cared for locally, and the people caring for them.
- Be cautious of social media 'lost pet' posts.



 **Endeavour** For people and their pets



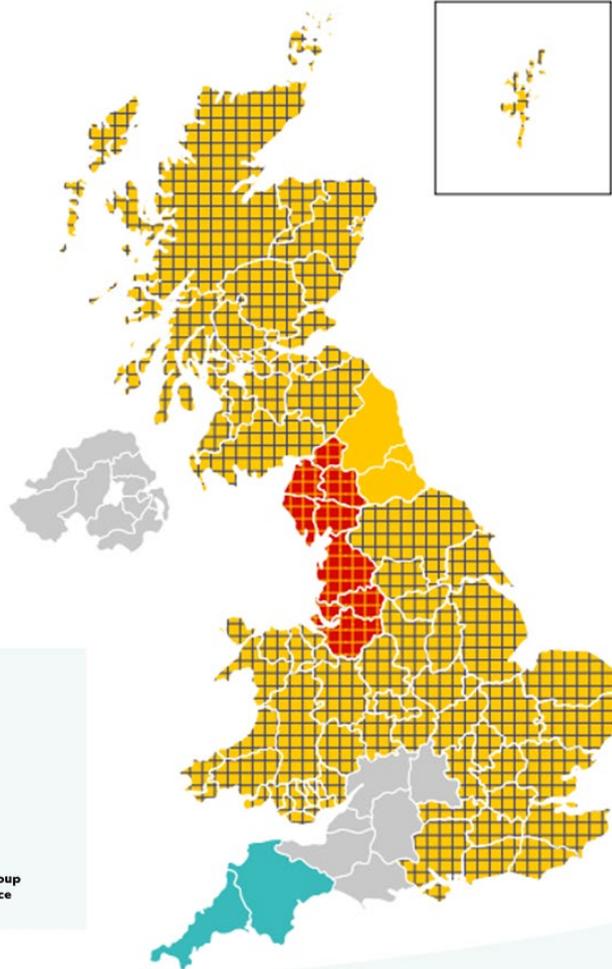
Freedom A specialist service by



Links Group

Accredited Specialist Domestic Abuse Animal Fostering Service

Specialist Pet Fostering Services



Cats Protection Lifeline: London & Northwest, East Anglia, Yorkshire, Midlands, Wales and Scotland.

Dogs Trust Freedom: London & Southeast, East Anglia, North of England, Midlands, Scotland and Wales.

Refuge4Pets: Devon and Cornwall

Endeavour: Northwest of England

Our goal is for all postcodes to be covered by a specialist pet fostering service.

In 2024 we supported 1088 victim-survivors to escape domestic abuse by fostering 1500 animals...

NI has ~266,000 dogs, 250,000 cats, probably many more...

Protecting Animals, Protecting People: in the Home

Protecting Animals, Protecting People in the Home

A course for those working in or around
homes where they may encounter
abuse of people and animals



Pets
Foundation



Virtual Learning

Free, online, modular course & resources

Available on our virtual learning hub:
thelinksgroup.org.uk/virtual-learning/

Thank You

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