

Postcode Lottery in Domestic Abuse Response Puts Pets and Survivors at Risk

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A new report (One Response) by the animal welfare charity Naturewatch Foundation reveals a troubling “postcode lottery” in how police forces across England and Wales are trained to handle coercive control involving pets — a critical but often overlooked aspect of domestic abuse.

Despite the scale of domestic abuse – affecting an estimated 2.3 million adults in the year ending March 2024, and 12.6 million people (one in five adults) over their lifetimes – only 60% of police forces currently include training on how animals are used as tools of coercion, punishment and manipulation by abusers.

With 60% of UK households owning a pet, the intersection of domestic abuse and animal abuse is no small issue. It is a national safeguarding blind spot. There are an estimated 900,000 crime scenes a year where a pet is present - that’s 900,000 opportunities that might be missed to protect animals and protect people too.

“Survivors often form deep emotional bonds with their pets, particularly in the context of abusive relationships. Abusers frequently exploit this connection to exert further control. If we are truly committed to addressing Violence Against Women and Girls, a consistent and robust police response must be the standard,” said Mark Randell, Campaigns Manager at Naturewatch Foundation and former Senior Detective. “It’s concerning that, although this issue is recognised in domestic abuse risk assessments, it remains absent from mandatory police training.”

Naturewatch Foundation submitted 43 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to police forces in England and Wales. While 41 forces confirmed they provide training on coercive control, just 26 reported that their training includes the role of pets in domestic abuse. Greater Manchester Police declined to respond.

The report also highlights the voices of 687 concerned supporters of the charity, who wrote to their Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) calling for stronger protections for both people and animals. While some Commissioners responded constructively, many cited operational limitations or passed the concern on without firm commitments.

Naturewatch Foundation is calling for:

- **Mandatory training** for all frontline officers on the use of pets in coercive control.
- **National consistency** in safeguarding policies related to pets.
- **Greater collaboration** between domestic abuse professionals and animal welfare experts.

Despite being recognised in official risk assessment tools like DASH and DARA, the link between animal and human abuse remains under-addressed in many areas.

“We shouldn’t be relying on luck or geography when it comes to keeping us safe,” Mark added. “Victims and their animals deserve a coordinated, informed response - no matter which police force is responsible for our home. Domestic abuse response must be consistent across all regions. Support shouldn’t be determined by postcode. There should be one response.”

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