

Dogs Trust submission to the Public Bill Committee on the Renters' Rights Bill

1. About Dogs Trust

Dogs Trust is the UK's largest dog welfare charity and normally cares for around 14,000 dogs across its network of 21 rehoming centres in the UK and one in Dublin. Since Dogs Trust was founded in 1891 (formerly National Canine Defence League), we have always campaigned on dog welfare issues.

Sadly, many people are unable to find rental accommodation that will accept pets. Around one in seven people contacting Dogs Trust to rehome their dog cite issues with accommodation, such as being unable to find suitable rental accommodation, forcing them to make the difficult decision to rehome their dog.

For over a decade, Dogs Trust has been working with landlords, letting agencies and the property industry on the issue of pets in private rented properties. Lets with Pets was set up by Dogs Trust in 2009 to encourage landlords and letting agencies to accept tenants with pets and to make the house hunting process easier for pet owners in the private rented sector.

Dogs Trust has also launched a Pet Friendly Housing Pilot in Scotland. This is a 3-year project aiming to improve the experience of current and future pet owners accessing social housing. Dogs Trust is currently partnered with Manor Estates Housing Association to enhance their pet friendly offer and positively impact all tenants, staff and the local community.

2. Executive Summary

Many pet owners across the UK struggle to find accommodation that will accept a pet in either the private or social rented sectors.

Dogs Trust welcomes the Renters' Rights Bill which will introduce a new legal right for renters to request to keep a pet in their property, which the landlord cannot

unreasonably refuse. We are particularly pleased that our previous recommendation, to lower the maximum time limit for landlords to respond to a request for a pet to 28 days, has been implemented.

This will be instrumental in affording tenants the joys of pet ownership, and reduce time spent in kennels for the thousands of dogs currently waiting for a home.

However, there are a number of areas where we believe that the Bill could be strengthened:

- An extension of the right to request a pet to those in social housing
- A non-response from a landlord within 28 days deemed as consent having been granted
- Measures to ensure that permission for a pet cannot be easily revoked, forcing the tenant to choose between their home and their beloved pet
- Clarity on what merits a 'reasonable' refusal
- A time limit for responses from superior landlords
- A reasonable time period set for tenants to respond to a request for supplementary information

It is important to note that though these proposals will be beneficial for those with existing tenancies who are seeking to get a pet, it will not increase the overall availability of pet-friendly housing. We would urge the government to work with the private and social rental sectors to increase confidence in renting to pet owners so that they are not disadvantaged when seeking to access suitable accommodation.

We also have concerns relating to the plans to amend the Tenant Fees Act 2019 to allow landlords to require insurance to cover any pet damage. Given the current rising cost of living and the importance of protecting tenants from unreasonable payments, as well as our research showing the vast majority of pets cause minimal damage to rental properties, if at all. Our research has also shown that in most cases where damage does occur, the existing security deposit is sufficient to cover the cost of any repairs. We urge the Government to reconsider this measure.

We would also encourage the Government to commence the provisions on the right to request a pet as soon as possible following Royal Assent of the Renters' Rights Bill to

enable more dogs in the care of rehoming organisations to find their forever families sooner.

3. The data on pets in rental properties

In 2023 Dogs Trust received around 45,400 handover enquiries, and around one in seven of those owners contacting us cite issues with housing a reason for needing to rehome their dog.

The most common reason we hear for landlords refusing permission for a pet is a fear of their property being damaged. However, our research¹ found that damage caused by pets is rare in tenancies where pets were allowed, despite common misconceptions. When surveyed, 73% of landlords who have allowed pets reported no problems, such as damage to the property, furnishings, fouling, or complaints from neighbours. In fact, research published by Battersea Dogs and Cats Home² early in 2024 found that there may be greater financial benefits for those landlords who rent to tenants with pets.

4. Our recommendations for strengthening the Bill

a. An extension of the right to request a pet to those in social housing

There are multiple proven benefits to pet ownership (see below) which is why Dogs Trust strongly advocates for an extension of the right to request a pet in social housing. According to the English Housing Survey 2022 to 2023: rented sectors³, those in the social rented sector are more likely to be older and live on their own. According to Age UK⁴ 1.4 million older people in the UK are often lonely. Loneliness and social isolation can be hugely detrimental to health and wellbeing.

In addition, further data from the English Housing Survey revealed that more than half (56%) of all social renting households had at least one member of the household with a

¹ <https://www.letswithpets.org.uk/media/yougovresearch>

² https://bdch.org.uk/files/The_Financial_Impact_Pet_Ownership_Rental_Properties.pdf

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2022-to-2023-rented-sectors>

⁴ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/>

long-term illness or disability. Of those 41% of social renters reported suffering from poor mental health.

One way in which this could be addressed is through getting a pet. According to our National Dog Survey⁵, 98% of those surveyed told us that their dog makes them feel happy. 96% said that owning a dog is good for their mental health and 89% said that their dog provides emotional support. Studies have also shown that having a pet can bring about benefits to those suffering from long-term mental health conditions.⁶

Furthermore, pets can also be hugely beneficial for children. Research has shown that having a pet at a younger age is associated with a lower risk of developing anxiety as an adolescent.⁷ Given that just under 30% of those in social housing have dependent children, expanding the right to request a pet to this sector could have a hugely beneficial impact on the mental health of these children, both now and in the future.

Additionally, the British Heart Foundation⁸ has estimated that healthcare for heart and circulatory diseases costs the NHS roughly £12 billion every year. Companion animal owners have both a lower risk for developing cardiovascular disease and experience improved outcomes should they suffer a heart attack or stroke. In a study of patients hospitalised due to heart attack, myocardial infarction or severe chest pain only 5.7% of the pet owners died compared to 28.2% of the non-owners.⁹ A study from Uppsala University looked at data from more than 3.4 million Swedes aged 40 – 80 in order to evaluate the association between dog ownership and long-term cardiovascular health.¹⁰ Based on information from individuals from 2001 on who had no prior cardiovascular disease, the researchers analysed data from their 12-year follow-up health checks. This

⁵ <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/national-dog-survey>

⁶ *For example* - Brooks, H.L., Rushton, K., Lovell, K. *et al.* The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence. *BMC Psychiatry* **18**, 31 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2>

⁷ Gadomski, A., Scribani, M.B., Tallman, N. *et al.* Impact of pet dog or cat exposure during childhood on mental illness during adolescence: a cohort study. *BMC Pediatr* **22**, 572 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-022-03636-0>

⁸ <https://www.bhf.org.uk/-/media/files/for-professionals/research/heart-statistics/bhf-cvd-statistics-uk-factsheet.pdf>

⁹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1422527/>

¹⁰ <https://www.uu.se/en/news/2017/2017-11-17-dog-ownership-linked-to-lower-mortality>

revealed a 33% reduction in the risk of death and an 11% reduction in the risk of cardiovascular disease when comparing dog owners with non-dog owning peers. This suggests that expanding the right to request a pet to those in social housing, and positively supporting the dog owning population in England, could contribute towards an overall improvement in heart health and contribute to a reduction in NHS costs.

Other nations across the UK have already recognised this issue. In Wales, the provisions of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016, which allow for a tenant to request to keep a pet, apply to both the social and private rented sectors. Furthermore, the Housing (Scotland) Bill which is currently passing through Holyrood will also seek to create parity between private and social rented housing with both being given the right to request a pet.

Many social housing providers across England are already implementing more pet-friendly policies to enable people to get pets and ensure that pets and their owners can be kept together, recognising the hugely beneficial impact that these pets can have on their owner's mental and physical health. However, the availability of this pet-friendly social housing depends solely on where you live in the country.

By extending the right to request a pet to social housing, it will create a legislative baseline for all social housing providers to work from and ensure that more pets can be kept with their families.

b. A non-response from a landlord deemed as consent having been granted

Currently the Bill does not specify what happens if a landlord does not respond to a request to keep a pet. We believe that this could represent a loophole for landlords to not respond and so by default does not allow the tenant the opportunity to scrutinise their reasons for refusing the request.

We would like to see consent automatically being granted if no response is given by the deadline. By making a non-response affirmatory, it will encourage greater transparency between landlords and tenants and drive better outcomes for both parties.

c. Measures to ensure that permission for a pet cannot be easily revoked, forcing the tenant to choose between their home and their beloved pet

The Bill does not currently set out the period in which the consent to keep a pet applies. We are concerned that this ambiguity could see tenants having consent for their pet withdrawn at short notice and left facing the prospect of having to relinquish their dog. We would like to see measures added to the Bill to ensure that permission for a pet cannot be easily revoked.

d. Clarity on what merits a ‘reasonable’ refusal

Clarity is needed on what merits a ‘reasonable’ refusal, and a clear bar should be set for this.

We appreciate the need to avoid placing too many specifics within the legislation regarding ‘reasonable’ grounds to refuse a pet request, given the diversity of landlord portfolios. However, Government should provide clear statutory guidance on the application of this measure after the Bill has become law, which should include specific reasons of what does not constitute a reasonable refusal, to promote best practice and ensure that landlords are not placing ‘blanket bans’ on pets in their properties. For example, in our own rehoming policy, Dogs Trust does not have set rules that would prevent rehoming the right dog to a flat. We believe this should also be the case for landlords, and that situations should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

It is essential that the owners of Section 1 dogs who have been added to the Index of Exempted Dogs are not discriminated against when requesting permission to keep their pet in a rental property. Any guidance around what constitutes “reasonable” refusal must state clearly that these owners cannot be refused on the grounds that they have an exempted Section 1 dog.

e. A time limit for responses from superior landlords

We encourage a measure to ensure that the ‘superior landlord’ is required to provide a timely response to such a request from a tenant via their immediate landlord – i.e. also

within 28 days of the request being communicated to them, and superior landlords should also be subject to condition of not unreasonably refusing such requests. If no response is given within the timeframe, this should be taken as tacit consent.

A reasonable time period set for tenants to respond to a request for supplementary information

The Bill should also set a reasonable time period for tenants to respond to a request for supplementary information.

5. More information

If you would like more information about our work on housing, you can email: publicaffairs@dogstrust.org.uk