



Government response to the Animal Sentience Committee: Renters (Reform) Bill report



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Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Levelling
Up, Housing and Communities by Command of His Majesty

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Summary

This document sets out the Government's response to the report published by the Animal Sentience Committee (ASC) regarding their views on whether the policy outlined within the Renters (Reform) Bill has due regard to the welfare of animals as sentient beings.

Introduction

The Renters (Reform) Bill will improve the rights and security of tenants and landlords in the private rented sector (PRS) in England. The government understands that pets play a significant role in their owners' lives, bringing joy, happiness and comfort. Many tenants are unable to benefit from pet ownership as nearly half of landlords are unwilling to let to tenants with pets¹. The Government wants to support responsible pet ownership and help tenants make where they live feel like home.

The Renters (Reform) Bill aims to support responsible pet ownership within the PRS by:

- requiring landlords to fully consider all requests from tenants to keep pets and not to unreasonably withhold consent,
- amending the Tenant Fees Act 2019 to provide that landlords can require insurance covering pet damage as a condition of granting consent,
- setting a maximum timeframe for the landlord to respond to any requests made by the tenant so that the tenant is not kept waiting for too long for a decision, and
- tenants will be able to escalate a complaint about unreasonable decisions by the landlord to the PRS Ombudsman or through the courts.

We will also amend the Tenant Fees Act 2019 using delegated powers so that landlords can charge the cost of insurance covering pet damage back to the tenant if the landlord would prefer to take out the insurance themselves.

Overview of the ASC report

The government welcomes the committee's report and its recommendations and is grateful to everyone who contributed their time and expertise in its preparation.

The Animal Sentience Committee was appointed in 2023 and started engaging with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the policy in September 2023, after the introduction of the Renters (Reform) Bill in May 2023. In preparing this report, the committee engaged with officials at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and they noted that the department worked with a range of stakeholders such as tenant and landlord groups as well as animal and pet organisations in developing these reforms.

¹ 45% of landlords are unwilling to let to tenants with pets. English Private Landlord Survey 2021

Recommendations

The committee makes the following recommendations:

- That when drawing up guidance for landlords on what might be considered reasonable in terms of animal welfare, the government should liaise with a wider range of animal welfare organisations to ensure the needs of all pets (not only dogs and cats) are considered.
- It is made clear in guidance documentation that the bill permits tenants to request more than one pet. This will be necessary to ensure the welfare of certain social animals.
- That the welfare needs of existing pets are considered further, particularly the need to avoid disruption and the risk of re-homing at the start of a tenancy.
- That further consultation is undertaken with stakeholders such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), local authority welfare inspectors and animal rescue and rehoming centres regarding the resource implications of the likely increase (and timing of increase) in the pet population as a result of the bill.
- That the Ombudsman redress scheme incorporates training for the Ombudsman in the welfare needs of pet animals. Claims about animal welfare are likely to feature in disputes about whether landlords reasonably or unreasonably refuse tenants' requests to keep a pet.

Government response to each of the recommendations:

Recommendation 1: When drawing up guidance for landlords on what might be considered reasonable in terms of animal welfare, the government should liaise with a wider range of animal welfare organisations to ensure the needs of all pets (not only dogs and cats) are considered.

We agree with the recommendation that the scope of any guidance should encompass a wider array of animals not just the most common pets (such as dogs and cats). To achieve this, we have initiated dialogue with a range of relevant stakeholders such as animal welfare organisations which focus on less common pets (such as reptiles, amphibians, birds etc). We are also working with our counterparts at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to ensure that the bill is consistent with the government's wider policy objectives on animal welfare and the environment.

Recommendation 2: It should be made clear in guidance documentation that the bill permits tenants to request more than one pet. This will be necessary to ensure the welfare of certain social animals.

We welcome the committee's suggestion and acknowledge the importance of ensuring that landlords and tenants are clear on their rights and responsibilities. We think that the committee's suggestion may be based on a misunderstanding that the Renters (Reform) Bill restricts tenants to only one pet. The Bill does not restrict tenants from requesting and keeping more than one pet if it is reasonable to do so and we understand that for welfare reasons some animals should not be kept alone.

Private tenants have the same responsibility to take into consideration the welfare needs of their pets, such as their social behaviour, health, and comfort, as all other pet owners. We will make these points clear in guidance.

Recommendation 3: That the welfare needs of existing pets are considered further, particularly the need to avoid disruption and the risk of re-homing at the start of a tenancy.

The Renters (Reform) Bill gives tenants the right to request a pet that landlords cannot unreasonably refuse. This applies for the duration of a tenancy. We believe that this provision will encourage a more positive and flexible attitude towards pet ownership in the private rented sector, as landlords will become more familiar with the benefits and challenges of letting to tenants with pets. Allowing landlords to require, or charge for, insurance covering pet damage will provide reassurance for landlords that the cost of any damage caused by pets will be covered by the tenant and lead to a more pet friendly PRS. As a result, we expect that over time, landlords will be less likely to reject prospective tenants simply because they have pets.

Recommendation 4: That further consultation is undertaken with stakeholders such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), local authority welfare inspectors and animal rescue and rehoming centres regarding the resource implications of the likely increase (and timing of increase) in the pet population as a result of the bill.

As part of the policy development process for the Renters (Reform) Bill, the department has consulted with various organisations that represent the interests and views of animal welfare, pet owners, and landlords. These include Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Dogs Trust, and Cats Protection, which are some of the leading charities in the UK that rescue and rehome dogs and cats and are supportive of these measures. We have also worked closely with the relevant policy teams at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), which is the government department responsible for animal welfare legislation and policy. We appreciate the valuable input and feedback that these organisations and teams have provided to us. We are committed to an ongoing dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, including those that the Animal Sentience Committee (ASC) has suggested, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. We will continue to seek the expertise of these organisations as the Bill progresses.

Recommendation 5: That the Ombudsman redress scheme incorporates training for the Ombudsman in the welfare needs of pet animals. Claims about animal welfare are likely to feature in disputes about whether landlords reasonably or unreasonably refuse tenants' requests to keep a pet.

We will ensure the PRS Ombudsman has the skills and knowledge to handle complaints and disputes between tenants and landlords in a fair and effective manner. We are exploring training for the Ombudsman on a range of topics that are relevant to the Renters (Reform) Bill, such as the new pets' measures, and the private rented sector in general. The aim will be to provide the Ombudsman with clear guidance and best practice on how to assess and resolve such requests, taking into account the interests and rights of both tenants and landlords, as well as the welfare of the animals involved.

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