

APPENDIX 1 - DRAFT LETTER

Being dealt with by: [Name]
Ext: [Extension]
Date: [To be inserted]

Dr. Janice Thompson, Committee Clerk
Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Room 285
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Dr. Thompson,

RE: SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR THE ANIMAL WELFARE SERVICE

I am writing to you regarding the recent correspondence submitted to the Committee on 16th April 2026 concerning the funding of the Animal Welfare Service. We were encouraged by the questions raised during that session and would like to provide further representations on behalf of Belfast City Council regarding the current challenges facing this vital regional service.

As you are aware, the 11 councils have enforced the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 for non-farmed animals since 2012. This collaborative model was designed and established in partnership with DAERA. While we understand the Department's difficult budgetary position, the decision to withdraw the annual £1.25M funding has left councils in a challenging position. Although the High Court recently clarified the procedural expectations regarding these funding decisions, our primary goal remains finding a constructive, long-term solution that ensures service continuity.

Operational Impact and Risks

The current lack of a sustainable funding commitment has created a "grey area" regarding the scale of service councils can realistically provide. Currently, the service is being maintained at a significant cost to local ratepayers, which is increasingly difficult to justify as veterinary, legal, and accommodation costs continue to rise.

Furthermore, the uncertainty has forced many councils to rely on short-term staff contracts. We are concerned that a loss of experienced enforcement officers will lead to a reduction in expertise and a weakened ability to undertake proactive investigations or complex prosecutions. Without a stable framework, there is a risk that councils may eventually be forced to prioritize only the most extreme cases, potentially leaving other vulnerable animals at risk for longer.

Pending Puppy and Kitten Regulations

Our concerns are compounded by the upcoming introduction of new legislation aimed at tackling puppy and kitten smuggling and improving breeding standards. While we wholeheartedly welcome these legislative advancements, they will undoubtedly place additional statutory demands on enforcement teams. To ensure this new legislation is effective and not merely a "paper exercise," it is essential that the enforcement of these new rules is backed by a stable funding model. We believe it is in our shared interest to ensure that the service is properly resourced to meet these new challenges from the outset. To be clear currently our Council would now have the capacity to take this on as additional new work.

Collaborative Path Forward

Belfast City Council, along with our partner councils, has acted responsibly to avoid any gap in animal welfare protection during this period of uncertainty. However, the current arrangement is not sustainable indefinitely. We remain eager to move past recent legal and procedural challenges to re-establish a partnership that reflects our shared commitment to animal welfare.

We would be grateful if the Committee would seek assurances from the Department that it will work closely with councils to establish a sustainable long-term funding and governance framework. This is essential to provide the stability needed to protect animals through a properly resourced and effective enforcement system.

Thank you for your time and for the Committee's ongoing work in this area.

Yours sincerely,

XXXX