

Stopping coercion by animal abuse

ACT is announcing a policy to tackle the problem of coercion by animal abuse, so no victim is trapped in a violent home by fear for the animal they love. By keeping families and their pets together and safe, we remove one more tool of control and help more victims escape abuse.

Family violence doesn't only harm people. It is sometimes inflicted on the pets they love. Abusers threaten, harm or take a family pet to control and coerce their victim, and fear for an animal's safety is one of the most common reasons victims delay leaving.

In one study, more than half of victims stayed longer than they wanted to because they felt responsible for their pets, and partners in abusive relationships were eleven times more likely to have deliberately harmed an animal. Yet Police, the courts and animal welfare agencies still work under separate rules, with no coordinated way to keep a household, pets included, safe. ACT will close those gaps, so protecting a victim means protecting every member of the household. These measures have been shaped, and largely endorsed, by the SPCA and Pet Refuge.

01 Crack down on abusers using pets as leverage

Abusers often use family pets as tools of coercion, threatening to harm them to punish or control a victim. Currently criminal law does not recognise the unique seriousness of using animal abuse as a weapon against another person.

ACT will create an offence in the Crimes Act for coercion by animal abuse, with a penalty of up to 7 years in prison.

02 Ensuring pets are secured by protection orders

The Family Violence Act already treats harming a pet as psychological abuse, but that only covers causing an animal pain or distress – it does nothing about an abuser who withholds, sells or gives away a pet purely to punish or coerce a former partner.

ACT will make protection orders expressly prohibit withholding, selling or otherwise disposing of a pet, closing a gap that abusers currently exploit.

03 Keep the pet with the protected person

When a protection order is granted and there is a dispute over a pet, the Courts must consider which person is safest for the animal to stay with, just as such arrangements are made for children. The evidence from the SPCA and Pet Refuge is clear: keeping victims and their pets together reduces trauma for both and eases the pressure on shelters already running at capacity.

ACT will ensure pets are not left with abusers who could harm or exploit them.

04 Record pets on Police family harm forms

When Police attend a family harm callout they already record whether there are children in the household, but not pets or harm done to them. Adding pets ensures Police are aware of the pets and builds the reliable national data New Zealand currently lacks on how often animals are caught up in family harm.

ACT will add pets to the reporting requirements on Police family harm forms.

05 Let Police take an at-risk pet to safety

When a victim flees, the family pet is sometimes left behind with the alleged perpetrator, endangering the animal and handing the abuser ongoing leverage. Police and inspectors technically have a power to remove an animal at imminent risk, but it is not built into family harm protocols and officers are not trained or resourced to use it.

ACT will give Police explicit statutory authority and clear operational guidance to take an at-risk pet to a place of safety, such as Pet Refuge, the SPCA or a partner boarding facility, when an officer has reasonable grounds to believe the animal is at risk of harm or of being used to coerce the victim.

For too many New Zealanders, leaving a violent home means abandoning a member of the family. This plan makes sure it doesn't have to, so no victim is kept in danger by fear for the animal they love.