



MINUTES OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE VISITING SCHEME
HELD BOTH IN PERSON AND REMOTELY ON TEAMS
27TH APRIL 2026 at 6:00 PM

PRESENT: Stephen Lewis – Chair, Animal Welfare Visitor – (SL)
Helen Lawless – Animal Welfare Visitor (HL)
Andrew Watkins – Animal Welfare Visitor (AW)
Kirsty Buckland – Animal Welfare Visitor (AW)
Louise Crawford – Dogs Trust (LC)

Geraint Hopkins - Sergeant - Roads Policing Specialist, Operations (GH)
Nicola Warren - Scheme Administrator, OPCC (NW)
Ceri Hiscox – Assistant Scheme Administrator, OPCC (CH)

The meeting commenced at 6:06pm.

	Notes and Actions	Action
1.	Apologies	
	Apologies for absence were received from Sarah Fowler and Inspector Emma Smith – RSPCA.	
2.	Minutes and Actions from Previous Meetings	
	SL welcomed Sgt Hopkins to the meeting. Action 3 - GH confirmed that actions relating specifically to stab-resistant equipment had been progressed. All handlers had undertaken a trial of a non-ballistic vest supplied by a local company. It was noted that these vests were significantly cheaper; however, although they provided a high level of safety for the dogs, they did not offer ballistic protection. GH reported that a second option was now being trialled. This was the type of dog vest used by the Tornado Team at Crufts, and the supplier was due to provide trial units within the coming weeks. These vests were considerably more expensive due to the ballistic protection they offered.	

	Both options would be presented to senior management, who would be asked to approve the rollout of protective vests to all handlers. It was confirmed that each dog would have its own vest rather than using a rotation system. The intention was to adopt the higher-specification option across all dogs, with no distinction between firearms and general-purpose deployments. Action 3 - GH confirmed that the dogs were now being weighed using the new scales. A second set of scales had been obtained and placed at both hubs, with one located in Newport and the other in Blackwood. It was explained that during extended periods of training, such as when an initial course was running, a set of scales would be brought to the venue that was being used for most of the training. This ensured that dogs could be weighed consistently and that a clear system was in place. GH reported that several new forms had been introduced, including a new weight-recording system. This replaced the previous Excel-based process, which required handlers to email information and was described as outdated. The new system allowed handlers to record weights easily on their phones with minimal input. Weights were required to be recorded weekly, and GH would monitor compliance and progress. It was noted that this matter had been raised at the previous meeting, particularly in relation to policy requirements for dogs to be weighed and their body condition recorded. GH confirmed that the relevant information could be provided so that assurance could be given that the process was being followed. GH to forward records to NW GH explained that the new weighing system would inevitably show gaps in the data. They noted that, from an external perspective, it might appear concerning if a dog had not been weighed for several weeks. However, such gaps could be due to legitimate operational or welfare reasons, including periods in kennels, handler leave, training courses, or deployments, during which weights were not recorded. GH stated that they were comfortable with this and emphasised the need to avoid assuming that a missing weekly entry indicated a problem, as the system would not operate with perfect weekly regularity. Action 4 - GH reported that the situation with exercising the dogs remained complex because the section continued to rely on the goodwill of local farmers to access land. Although warning signs and marked vehicles were used, the land remained private, and members of the public still entered it, creating an unavoidable level of risk. The issue had been raised with the Health and Safety Team and progressed through to the Estates department. GH explained that the proposed exercise and training facility at Vantage Point would include four distinct areas: a training area, an exercise area, an agility area and a designated toilet area for the dogs.	GH
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	An airlock system was planned so that officers could enter, secure the vehicle door behind them and ensure that dogs could not escape. The site would also be double-fenced to prevent members of the public from approaching the perimeter and risking injury. GH added that discussions were ongoing regarding the installation of portacabins on the site to accommodate the training unit. This was described as the preferred “gold standard” arrangement. However, there were ongoing considerations at Senior Management level regarding whether staff should be based in portacabins or within the main building, and the timeline for implementation remained under discussion. GH emphasised that the planning stage remained very early, and confirmation was still awaited regarding what facilities would ultimately be provided. They reiterated that securing the exercise area remained the priority and that they would be satisfied with that outcome alone if necessary. GH confirmed that, even with the development of the new facilities at Vantage Point, the issue of off-duty exercising would continue. If the new site was completed, handlers would have 24/7 access while on duty and could also use it off duty if they wished. However, there would be no policy requirement compelling them to use it as their primary exercise area. For handlers living at a distance, it would be impractical to travel to Vantage Point, and they would therefore continue to rely on existing off-duty exercise locations. GH confirmed that a policy was already in place governing off-duty exercising and that handlers were required to follow the established protocol. The new facility would nonetheless reduce risk by providing a safe, controlled environment for on-duty exercising. GH to forward information regarding training dates. NW to circulate to visitors. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record.	GH/NW
3.	Scheme Update	
	NW welcomed Sgt Hopkins to the meeting. NW advised that Vicky Waite had stepped down from the scheme as she was no longer able to commit. She had sent her best wishes, and the group had thanked her for her contribution. The scheme would continue with five volunteers for the time being, although if concerns were raised about the sustainability of the scheme with the current numbers a recruitment drive would be required. NW asked whether the current monthly frequency remained manageable or whether it needed to be reduced. Discussion followed regarding the possibility	

	of fixing a regular date each month for visits, for example the third Thursday of every month, to support rostering and planning. It was suggested that, between the five volunteers, it should be possible to identify a consistent date that worked for all, considering individual availability. The group agreed that cooperation had always been strong and that a predetermined date should be achievable. NW emphasised that any arrangement needed to work for everyone involved. Organising visits required significant coordination, as it involved volunteers, officers and a supervising lead. They expressed concern about volunteers arriving for visits only to find that officers were unavailable due to scheduling difficulties. A fixed date would allow GH to plan the rota up to 12 months in advance, allocating specific dogs to each visit and providing clarity for all parties. The group agreed that this approach should be explored further. NW thanked everyone who had covered visits, expressing appreciation for their support. A recruitment campaign would be progressed in due course. NW reported that information received to date showed that only two dogs out of twenty-one was awaiting visits, which represented a significant improvement compared with previous years, where the number was typically around five. NW acknowledged that volunteer numbers remained low. NW invited volunteers to put their names forward for the Waterton visit if they wished, emphasising that participation was optional. It was confirmed that the Waterton arrangements remained unchanged. GH confirmed that the policy regarding retired dogs remained unchanged, whether the dogs were retired due to age or medical reasons. Retired dogs were still permitted to be housed in the kennels, although this did not affect the scheme as retired dogs were not subject to visits. SL confirmed he was willing to attend the Waterton visit alongside AW. NW advised that arrangements should only be made once it was confirmed that dogs were present in the kennels, to avoid unnecessary travel. Volunteers were asked to notify the NW when they wished to attend so that checks could be made in advance. GH confirmed that the outstanding home kennel visits remained those previously identified. Two handlers had also recently moved address—they both now required either initial visits or revisits. GH noted that these would be added back into the schedule.	SL/AW
4.	Operational Update from the Dog Section	

	GH provided an update on the transition following the structural changes within the department. It was explained that the structure had changed in that the dog section no longer existed as a standalone unit. Handlers and their dogs now sat within the Roads Policing and Specialist Operations (RPSO) shifts, while all training functions fell under the Operational Training Unit (OTU). This created a two-pillar system in which operational deployment and training were managed separately. GH stated that they currently covered training responsibilities but, due to the absence of a Dog Section Sgt (DSS), they were also informally covering elements of that role. This arrangement was still in a period of trial and adjustment. The lack of a DSS created challenges, as RP Sgts did not necessarily have specialist knowledge of dogs or dog handling. As a result, handlers tended to approach him directly rather than their own supervisors. It was noted that this system had been in place for several months and appeared to be functioning well, with no issues reported to date. GH explained that, as part of the structural changes discussed earlier, work was underway to develop a formal training rota. Historically, dog training had been inconsistent and lacked structure. The new system would provide dedicated training periods, with handlers receiving advance notice of three scheduled blocks per year. Depending on the rota, handlers would attend either four or six days per block and would receive a minimum of ten dedicated training days annually. GH explained that the introduction of the new training rota would be the most effective way to structure future training. However, due to complications arising from the appointment of a new instructor, who had started that day, it was unlikely that the rota could be fully implemented before September. As a result, there would be limited training activity between the present time and September, although efforts would be made to arrange some sessions where possible. NW asked when visitors could observe training and GH confirmed that an Explosives course was scheduled to begin in September and suggested that this would be an ideal opportunity for visitors to observe training. The course would include two new dogs; both were currently on trial with the section. One, had been collected the previous week and had been rejected as a gun dog due to excessive noise, which made him unsuitable for that role but well-suited for police work. The second, had been collected that day and came from a breeder who supplied several police forces with dogs for explosives detection. GH agreed that a visit to a training session should be arranged for September, ideally within the first two weeks of the course.	
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	It was noted that none of those present had attended a training session for over a year, despite the requirement to do so annually under existing criteria. The group agreed that a visit should therefore be prioritised. GH asked for clarification on what level of detail was expected, as they were still becoming familiar with the requirements of the scheme. NW explained that operational updates would normally include information on recent dog deployments, successes, general performance and welfare. It was also noted that the group could raise any issues relating to the scheme itself, including matters arising from visits or areas where improvements could be made. GH reported that there had been significant change within the section during the previous six months. A new lead instructor had commenced his role that day. He was an ex-Armed Response Sgt who had retired. He had previously held the equivalent supervisory position within his former force's dog section and was well known nationally for his work with the NCTAS (National Canine Training and Accreditation Scheme) team in designing and writing national training manuals. GH stated that he would be a strong addition to the team and expressed optimism about the appointment. GH reported since the last meeting, two dogs had been retired. PD Callie, originally licensed as a GP dog and later redeployed as a drugs dog, had been medically retired. She had experienced stress-induced behaviours, particularly in vehicles, where she became highly anxious. As a result, she could not be retained operationally. She had been rehomed in South Wales with someone who worked with welfare dogs. Although Callie was not being used as a welfare dog, she had settled well and was reported to be thriving. GH confirmed that they continued to receive updates and photographs. GH reported that the second dog, PD Freya, had been subject to performance concerns relating to consistency and operational engagement. She had been brought in for review, which she passed. Following this, her handler changed shift and Freya was assigned to a national instructor for further development. After completing additional training, she met the national accreditation requirements and was deemed suitable to return to operational duties. However, a subsequent operational incident occurred in which she disengaged and failed to carry out required tasks. This led to further concerns about her reliability. The decision was made that the relationship between the dog and handler had broken down so alternative options had to be considered. Freya had subsequently been transferred to South Wales Police as an experienced dog and was undergoing licensing that day. GH reported that Freya had reportedly performed very well in her new environment. He suggested that the improvement could be due to something as simple as a change from a male to a female handler or instructor, reflecting the psychological dynamics that sometimes-influenced working dog performance. He emphasised that, when engaged, Freya had been one of the	
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	best dogs in the unit, but for reasons unknown she had ceased to work effectively within the original team. GH confirmed that two explosives' dogs were currently being trialled and would remain so for approximately three more weeks. If successful, they would be retained and would begin their course in September, increasing the unit's number of explosives dogs by two. GH reported that the new lead instructor had started with the unit that week and would be attending his drugs instructors course the following week, which was the only qualification he did not yet hold in this field. This would provide the unit with an additional drugs instructor within a matter of weeks. GH stated that training remained a key priority for the unit and that the current shortage of instructors had made it essential to introduce a model with one instructor on each shift. This approach would significantly improve the consistency and availability of training across the department. GH reported that several new recording systems had been introduced. These included the new weight-recording system, a veterinary recording system and a new risk-assessment document. Handlers were now required to complete a risk assessment each time they walked their dogs, and these were being submitted and stored centrally. In response to a query about the veterinary system, the GH explained that any veterinary visit or medical intervention for a dog must now be recorded. Handlers completed the record on their phones, noting the reason for the visit, the duration and any actions taken. NW asked about the provision of first aid kits and whether all handlers, including new recruits, continued to receive the required training. GH confirmed that first aid training formed part of the initial course for all new handlers. Following completion of the initial course, handlers then attended a one-day session with Advanced Canine Solutions, which provided training on the use of shock shields and related equipment. GH explained that work was underway to train internal instructors so that shock-shield training could be delivered in-house in future. This would remove the need to send handlers away for external training and would streamline the process. Some compliance and policy considerations were still being addressed as part of this transition. GH provided an additional update regarding PD Max. He explained that Max had recently undergone significant surgery after it appeared he had inhaled a foreign body. The surgery had been extensive, but Max had recovered well	
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	and had been signed off to return to duty. GH reported that Max was performing excellently and that the team was very fortunate to have him fully operational again. GH explained that the previous month had been relatively quiet operationally due to a combination of handler leave and dogs being taken offline. Despite this, there had still been a number of positive results, several of which had been highlighted on social media. GH reported that PD Akela had achieved a successful outcome on a burglary incident, tracking and locating two suspects hiding in bushes, both of whom were arrested with property found in their possession. PD Hades had also achieved two strong results with his handler. One notable incident occurred in Pill, where PD Hades tracked a suspect across hard surfaces from the ambulance base, over the main road and into a basketball court, ultimately locating the individual at a doorway. The suspect's clothing matched witness descriptions and drugs were recovered. PD Vespa had also secured a positive result in relation to a stolen vehicle at D-Camped, where both suspects were detained.	
5.	AOB	
	LC raised a query regarding the weighing of dogs, noting that dogs should be weighed both on entry to kennels and on exit. GH confirmed that this was happening however, the issue was that the weights were not being captured on the unit's own system. This gap had been identified in recent weeks, and work was underway to resolve it. GH was seeking access to the South Wales system so that they could oversee all associated call-handling and kennel documentation. LC informed the group that an online seminar for visitors would be held on 10 August. Once the official details were available, a Teams invitation would be circulated to CH. LC asked that it be circulated to all visitors. She confirmed that the seminar would take place from 17:00 to 19:00. A brief discussion followed regarding the future of the PCC role. It was noted that the post was expected to be removed in May 2028. NW explained that a White Paper had been produced but that no further detail had been provided by the Government. As a result, the organisation did not yet know how the changes would affect its structure or where the scheme would sit in any new arrangements. NW to provide an update as soon as more information became available.	LC/CH NW
	Date of Next Meeting	
	The next meeting will be held at 6pm, 15th July 2026.	

Meeting concluded at 7:00pm

Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent

I confirm that I have considered whether or not I have any personal or prejudicial interest in this matter and take the proposed decision in compliance with the Code of Conduct.
The above request has my approval.

Signature:

04.08.2026

Date:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. M. M. M. M.', is written over the date field.

