

EVIDENCE BASED INSIGHTS

WHEN SCRUTINY BECOMES HARASSMENT



Compassion. Evidence. Change
The Stray Dog Solidarity Alliance



00 IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER

Please read before using this guide

This publication is provided for general educational and informational purposes only. It does not constitute legal, regulatory, insurance, safeguarding or other professional advice and should not be treated as a substitute for advice based on the particular circumstances of an organisation or individual.

Laws, reporting duties, regulatory requirements and available remedies differ between countries and jurisdictions and may change over time. Organisations facing allegations, threats, harassment, safeguarding concerns or potential legal action should seek advice from an appropriately qualified professional in the relevant jurisdiction. Where insurance cover may apply, the insurer should be contacted promptly and its notification requirements followed.

Nothing in this publication is intended to discourage legitimate scrutiny, responsible criticism, whistleblowing, the reporting of genuine animal-welfare or safeguarding concerns, or cooperation with law-enforcement and regulatory authorities. Animal-welfare organisations should remain accountable, maintain appropriate records, answer reasonable questions and respond properly to credible concerns.

The term “harassment” should not be used to dismiss criticism simply because it is uncomfortable, persistent or damaging to an organisation’s reputation. Whether conduct amounts to harassment, defamation, malicious communication or another legal wrong will depend upon the facts and the applicable law.

Any examples referred to in this publication are presented in a generalised form to illustrate common risks and response principles. They should not be interpreted as findings or allegations concerning any identifiable person or organisation.

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00 ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Protection without secrecy. Accountability without mob rule.

Animal-welfare organisations must be accountable. They should answer reasonable questions, maintain accurate records, comply with the law and cooperate with regulators. None of those obligations gives social-media users the right to present suspicion as fact, invent criminal conduct, coordinate malicious reports or demand confidential records without limit.

This guide explains how organisations can prepare for and respond to online allegations while remaining transparent, professional and focused on animals. It is designed for international use. Laws and reporting systems vary, so organisations should obtain advice in their own jurisdiction.

The purpose of this publication

To help organisations distinguish legitimate scrutiny from harassment, reduce preventable risk, preserve evidence, support affected people and respond through proper processes.

Important limitations

This booklet provides general information, not legal advice. It does not determine whether any particular allegation is defamatory, criminal, malicious or protected expression. It does not recommend silencing criticism. Serious animal-welfare, safeguarding, financial or governance concerns should always be reported to the appropriate authority.

Publication and use

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A practical route from prevention to recovery

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01 THE EMERGING THREAT

Why this is more than “social-media negativity”

Animal welfare carries unusual emotional force. Images of suffering animals create urgency, grief and anger. Organisations often need to explain complicated clinical decisions, request funds quickly and communicate from chaotic or dangerous environments. Those conditions create genuine accountability challenges, but they also create ideal conditions for misinformation.

A modern attack rarely begins with a complete body of evidence. It often begins with a missing piece of context, a delayed update, a misunderstood public record, an unfamiliar fundraising practice or a disagreement about treatment. A person selects the worst possible explanation and publishes it before checking the facts. Repetition then converts allegation into apparent consensus.

This pattern resembles other online movements built around institutional distrust. Registration, veterinary records, audited accounts or regulator correspondence may be dismissed as part of the deception. If an organisation answers, it is called defensive. If it remains silent, silence is treated as an admission. If a regulator finds no breach, the regulator is accused of failure or complicity.

The defining problem

The organisation is no longer being asked to provide evidence. It is being required to disprove a conclusion that the accuser has made unfalsifiable.

Why animal-welfare organisations are exposed

- They publish urgent, emotional material because animals need immediate help.
- Their work may involve death, euthanasia, difficult prognosis and imperfect outcomes.
- Small teams often lack dedicated legal, communications or compliance staff.
- They rely on public confidence and can be harmed by uncertainty alone.
- International work can involve language barriers, currency differences and fragmented records.
- Algorithms reward outrage more reliably than careful clarification.

02 ACCOUNTABILITY OR HARASSMENT?

A decision framework

Not every inaccurate statement is malicious, and not every persistent critic is a harasser. Organisations should assess conduct rather than label people. The following framework helps identify the difference.

LEGITIMATE SCRUTINY	POTENTIAL HARASSMENT OR ABUSE
Asks a specific question	Publishes the most damaging conclusion first
Uses relevant evidence	Relies on insinuation, repetition or guilt by association
Allows a reasonable time to respond	Demands immediate public access to confidential material
Considers the response	Rejects every possible answer in advance
Corrects material errors	Repeats a claim after receiving contrary evidence
Uses regulator or complaints routes proportionately	Mobilises followers to report, contact donors or overwhelm services
Focuses on organisational conduct	Targets family, employers, addresses or unrelated private life
Seeks remedy or improvement	Seeks humiliation, closure, financial damage or personal punishment

A necessary safeguard

Evidence of genuine wrongdoing must never be dismissed as “harassment” merely because it is uncomfortable, persistent or damaging. Assess the evidence, conduct, proportionality and reporting route separately.

Five questions before responding

1. What exactly is being alleged?
2. Is the statement opinion, a factual claim, a threat or a request for information?
3. What evidence does the organisation already hold?
4. Is there an immediate risk to animals, people, funds, systems or reputation?
5. Which response route is most proportionate: answer, correct, document, report, refer or take no public action?

03 HOW A CAMPAIGN DEVELOPS

The escalation pathway

1. Trigger

A record cannot be found, an update is delayed, an animal dies, a clinical decision is disputed or an account follows a controversial person.

2. Suspicion

Questions become insinuations: “something does not add up.”

3. Accusation

Fraud, cruelty, theft or deliberate harm is stated or strongly implied.

4. Amplification

Screenshots detach from context. Other accounts repeat the allegation as established fact.

5. Mobilisation

Followers are encouraged to contact donors, payment providers, employers, platforms, police or regulators.

6. Entrenchment

Corrections are reframed as intimidation. Evidence is dismissed. The campaign develops its own community and status.

7. Real-world harm

Income falls, inspections occur, staff withdraw, legal costs rise and animal services are disrupted.

Warning signs of coordination

Several reports are not automatically malicious or coordinated. Look for evidence such as identical wording, shared screenshots, public instructions to report, sudden clustered contacts, repeated tagging of the same authority or references to a central post or group. Record the pattern without speculating about identities you cannot establish.

04 WHAT IT DOES TO ORGANISATIONS

Operational, financial and human harm

Operational diversion

Leaders and volunteers stop delivering services to capture screenshots, answer supporters, brief regulators and manage platforms. Small organisations may lose days or weeks of productive capacity.

Financial harm

Donors may quietly cancel without asking for an explanation. Payment providers or fundraising platforms may pause services. Legal, insurance and professional costs rise.

Regulatory burden

Authorities may need to assess repeated complaints even where the organisation already holds compliant records. Inspections and correspondence consume further time.

Chilling of transparency

Teams become afraid to show difficult cases or discuss clinical decisions. Reduced communication is then misrepresented as secrecy.

Partnership damage

Potential partners avoid perceived controversy. Existing partners may request reassurance or withdraw to protect their own reputation.

Loss of people

Founders, trustees, staff and volunteers experience anxiety, sleeplessness, anger and exhaustion. Some leave the sector entirely.

Record the invisible cost

Track lost donations, diverted hours, professional fees, delayed projects, volunteer departures, sickness absence, security changes and services reduced. “Online negativity” becomes measurable organisational harm.

05 WHAT IT DOES TO ANIMALS

The hidden beneficiary impact

The final impact is borne by animals. A campaign may claim to protect them while weakening the organisations providing food, veterinary treatment, transport, shelter, sterilisation and advocacy.

IMPACT	CONSEQUENCE FOR ANIMALS
Reduced treatment	Lost or delayed donations can mean fewer diagnostics, operations, medicines and follow-up appointments.
Reduced capacity	Teams may pause intake, decline complex cases or postpone programmes while managing the crisis.
Lost expertise	Experienced rescuers who leave cannot be replaced quickly, particularly in specialist or high-risk environments.
Broken cooperation	Organisations become reluctant to share cases, funds, transport or facilities for fear that controversy will transfer.
Poorer public understanding	Genuine welfare concerns become harder to distinguish from vendettas, weakening trust in evidence-based investigations.

Keep the beneficiary visible

Every crisis decision should ask: what protects the organisation while causing the least disruption to animals and essential services?

06 BUILD PROTECTION BEFORE AN INCIDENT

Governance, records and security

Create a public verification page

Give reasonable people one authoritative place to check the organisation. Include the full legal name, legal form, Companies House or other registration number, any regulator links, leadership, reports that can legally be published, complaints route, governance policies and a clear explanation of how donations are used. This applies to charities, community interest companies and not-for-profit companies limited by guarantee, including those registered only with Companies House. Explain that public registers may not display every item held by a regulator.

Maintain a private assurance file

- Registration documents, filings, submission receipts and regulator correspondence.
- Board or trustee decisions, conflicts records and policy versions.
- Fundraising records, restrictions, payment reports and campaign reconciliations.
- Veterinary invoices, clinical records, consent and treatment decisions.
- Contracts, insurance, licences and partnership agreements.
- Evidence-retention schedule and secure incident archive.

Adopt a board-approved response policy

Assign responsibility for monitoring, evidence capture, public responses, platform reports, regulator contact, legal escalation and staff support. Define who may speak for the organisation and who can authorise a formal statement.

Arrange specialist legal and insurance protection

Identify a law firm with relevant experience before an incident occurs. Serious false allegations may require expertise in defamation, media and reputation law as well as knowledge of charities, not-for-profits or animal-welfare organisations. Keep the firm's contact details and engagement procedure within the crisis plan so advice can be obtained before an unsuitable public response is made.

Review insurance rather than assuming protection exists. Depending on the organisation, relevant cover may include legal expenses, directors' and officers' or trustees' liability, cyber and data incidents, crisis communications or reputational support. Check exclusions, excesses, notification deadlines, territorial limits and whether the insurer requires use of an approved solicitor. Notify the insurer promptly where the policy may apply, because taking action first can sometimes affect cover.

Prepare before the allegation

A specialist solicitor and suitable insurance are most useful when they have been identified before a crisis. The organisation should know whom to call, what evidence to provide and who has authority to instruct advisers or notify the insurer.

Strengthen digital and personal security

- Use unique passwords and multifactor authentication.
- Limit administrator access and review it when people leave.
- Keep recovery details under organisational control.
- Remove unnecessary personal addresses and family information from public pages where legally possible.
- Back up websites, records and contact lists.
- Prepare for impersonation and fraudulent fundraising pages.

Do not over-publish

Transparency does not require exposing donor data, staff details, private addresses, passwords, raw medical records or identifying information about vulnerable people. Share proportionately and lawfully.

07 RESPOND WITHOUT FEEDING THE CAMPAIGN

The first 72 hours

First two hours: stabilise

- Do not reply impulsively.
- Capture the original content, context, account, link, date and time.
- Check for immediate danger, doxxing, account compromise or animal risk.
- Alert the designated incident lead and one board-level decision maker.
- Preserve normal animal-care and emergency functions.

First day: establish facts

- Write the allegation in one neutral sentence.
- Identify the records needed to test it.
- Separate confirmed facts, disputed claims and unknowns.
- Check whether insurers, legal advisers or regulators should be notified.
- Decide whether a short holding statement is necessary.

Days two and three: choose the route

- Answer a reasonable question once with evidence or an authoritative link.
- Correct a material false statement concisely.
- Report content under the platform's relevant rule.
- Brief a regulator where substantial harm or coordinated complaints are foreseeable.
- Seek legal advice for serious allegations, threats or continuing publication.
- Stop public engagement when repetition no longer serves a reasonable audience.

Suggested holding statement

We welcome legitimate questions and respond through our published complaints process. The organisation is correctly registered and maintains records for its regulator and professional advisers. We will not conduct a trial by social media or disclose confidential information in response to unsupported allegations. Relevant material is being preserved and referred through the appropriate channels.

What not to do

Do not encourage supporters to attack the accuser, speculate about mental health, publish private information, make legal threats you have not been advised to make or release confidential records in panic. Do not repeat inflammatory allegations more widely than necessary to correct them.

08 MASS REPORTING AND REGULATOR CONTACT

Evidence-led engagement

A responsible organisation should cooperate with regulators. It should also help them distinguish independent concerns from a coordinated campaign.

Prepare a regulator briefing

- A neutral one-page summary of the issue.
- The organisation's legal identity and relevant registration details.
- A chronology of the allegation and escalation.
- The records that directly address the concern.
- Evidence of public calls to report, where available.
- Steps taken to protect animals, people, funds and services.
- A named contact authorised to respond.

Do not describe complaints as malicious unless there is evidence. Use precise language such as “multiple reports followed a public request to contact the regulator” and attach the relevant screenshot.

When proactive contact may be appropriate

Consider early contact where allegations threaten substantial funds, operations, safeguarding, personal safety or reputation; where a mass-reporting call is visible; or where the regulator is likely to receive a misleading account without context. Routine criticism does not require regulator notification.

Important

A regulator finding no breach does not prove that every critic acted maliciously. It establishes only what the regulator assessed. Report outcomes accurately and avoid overclaiming.

09 PROTECT PEOPLE

Staff, volunteers and leaders

Online attacks often attach to one visible person. Protecting the organisation therefore requires protecting that individual.

Rotate monitoring

The targeted person should not spend every hour searching for new posts. Assign evidence capture to someone else and use fixed review times.

Set contact boundaries

Move enquiries to one organisational address. Keep direct contact with a harasser to a minimum and do not debate through personal accounts.

Provide practical support

Offer time away from public channels, a named internal contact, legal or counselling support where available and clear reassurance that the matter is being managed.

Escalate safety risks

Threats, stalking, doxxing, impersonation, account intrusion and attempts to interfere with private life require a safety response, not merely a communications response.

Record health impact carefully

Where a person wishes, document sickness absence or medical impact as part of the organisational harm record, while keeping health data confidential and access-controlled.

Immediate danger

Use the emergency route in your jurisdiction where a threat is immediate. Do not wait to complete an evidence bundle before seeking help.

10 RECOVERY AND SECTOR SOLIDARITY

Learning without retreating

Conduct a post-incident review

Review what happened, what worked, where information was difficult to retrieve, which services were disrupted and what should change. The purpose is resilience, not blaming the person who was targeted.

Rebuild confidence proportionately

Publish a factual outcome where it helps supporters understand the position. Avoid naming private individuals unnecessarily or restarting a resolved dispute. Continue normal reporting so the organisation is not permanently defined by the allegation.

Create mutual aid between organisations

Alliances can provide model policies, a trusted evidence-capture partner, signposting to legal and wellbeing support, and a neutral place to share lessons. They should never become counter-mobs or automatically defend a member without assessing evidence.

A sector standard

Believe evidence, not status. Support fair process, not automatic loyalty. Protect organisations from harassment without protecting wrongdoing.

What good solidarity looks like

- Verify before sharing.
- Ask the affected organisation what support it needs.
- Do not expose confidential evidence.
- Correct misinformation without attacking individuals.
- Keep animals and essential services visible.
- Withdraw support if reliable evidence establishes serious wrongdoing.

11 ANONYMISED CASE PATTERNS

What recent events reveal

The following illustrations are deliberately anonymised. They are included to identify recurring organisational risks, not to reopen individual disputes, identify the people involved or adjudicate every contested claim.

A sustained “scam” allegation

A registered animal-welfare organisation was publicly described as a scam and people were told that they should not donate to it. The accusation was pinned prominently and was reinforced through continuing comments supporting the same claim. The organisation preserved the posts, reported the content to the platform and referred the evidence for legal review. The lesson is that repetition and prominent placement can turn an unsupported allegation into continuing reputational and fundraising harm.

A rescue-related miscommunication

An established international animal-welfare organisation said that a miscommunication connected with a rescue had escalated into accusations of fraud and personal attacks. It argued that the resulting social-media hostility was distracting attention and resources from animals. The lesson is that complicated rescue work may require clearer communication, but uncertainty or disagreement should not be converted into allegations of dishonesty without evidence.

An organisation drawn into an ideological conflict

A registered animal rescue became a target after its online associations were interpreted as evidence of a wider political position. The dispute developed beyond questions about animal care and drew complaints to outside bodies. The organisation later stated that an inspection had been positive. The lesson is that an animal-welfare organisation can become a proxy target in an unrelated ideological conflict, with real operational consequences even where online claims remain unresolved.

A shooting accusation

While a dog was alive and receiving treatment for a shooting injury, the person caring for the dog was accused of having shot the animal herself in order to collect donations. This account is included as an anonymised illustration, not as an independently adjudicated finding about the people involved. It shows how suspicion around fundraising can escalate into an allegation that a rescuer deliberately caused the very injury she was treating.

Shared pattern

Different triggers, same machinery: worst-case interpretation, public accusation, amplification, donor interference, reporting and operational harm.

12 PRACTICAL TEMPLATES

Ready-to-adapt tools

Template 1: incident record

Incident reference	
Date and time first identified	
Incident lead	
Platform or location	
Account or publisher	
Exact allegation	
Direct link	
Immediate risks	
Evidence preserved	
Actions taken	
Reports and reference numbers	
Operational or financial impact	
Next review date	
Closure decision	

12 PRACTICAL TEMPLATES

Evidence and decision tools

Template 2: evidence checklist

- ☐ Full-page screenshot showing context
- ☐ Exact wording copied without alteration
- ☐ Account name, profile link and identifier
- ☐ Direct post link
- ☐ Date, time and time zone
- ☐ Reposts, replies and quoted versions
- ☐ Public instructions to report or contact others
- ☐ Platform reports and reference numbers
- ☐ Regulator, police, insurer or solicitor correspondence
- ☐ Donation cancellations or partner concerns
- ☐ Staff and volunteer hours diverted
- ☐ Secure location and retention review date

Template 3: response decision record

QUESTION	ASSESSMENT	DECISION / OWNER
Is the claim material?		
Is evidence available?		
Is anyone in immediate danger?		
Does confidentiality restrict the response?		
Is a public answer useful to a reasonable audience?		
Should a regulator, insurer, police or adviser be contacted?		
When will engagement stop?		

12 PRACTICAL TEMPLATES

Statements and briefings

Template 4: short public correction

Adapt before use

[Organisation] is correctly registered with [authority] under [number]. The claim that [state the narrow claim without inflammatory repetition] is incorrect. [One sentence identifying the authoritative record.] We welcome reasonable questions through [complaints/contact route]. We will not disclose confidential information or continue repetitive social-media exchanges. Relevant material is being preserved and handled through the appropriate channels.

Template 5: regulator briefing

- Legal identity and registration number
- Named authorised contact
- Neutral summary of the allegation
- Chronology of publication and escalation
- Records directly addressing the issue
- Evidence of coordination or public reporting calls
- Risk to animals, people, funds and services
- Actions already taken
- Specific assistance or clarification requested

Template 6: post-incident review

- What triggered the incident?
- What was factually correct, incorrect or unresolved?
- How quickly could records be retrieved?
- Which services were disrupted?
- What financial and human impact occurred?
- Did the response protect confidentiality?
- What will change in policy, training, security or public information?
- Who owns each improvement and by when?

Board approval

Templates should be adapted to the organisation, jurisdiction, regulator and insurance arrangements. Approve them before a crisis where possible.

13 UK APPENDIX

Official routes and guidance

This section is a starting point for UK organisations. Charity, CIC, company, data-protection and criminal-law obligations differ. Obtain advice appropriate to the organisation's legal form and circumstances.

Charities

The Charity Commission's guidance recommends a social-media policy covering responsibility, approvals, risk and the response when problems arise. Trustees must also consider whether a serious incident requires reporting. A qualifying report should explain what happened and how the charity is responding.

Community interest companies

CICs file through Companies House and are regulated by the Office of the Regulator of Community Interest Companies. A CIC should retain submission receipts and correspondence and provide the regulator with accurate context where a serious campaign threatens the company or its community benefit work.

Not-for-profit companies limited by guarantee

A not-for-profit company limited by guarantee may be registered with Companies House without being a charity or a CIC. "Not-for-profit" describes how the organisation operates; it is not a separate Companies House legal form. These companies remain subject to company-law filing and governance duties and should publish their full company name and number, retain filing receipts and explain clearly which regulator or registration framework applies. They should not imply that Charity Commission or CIC regulation applies where it does not.

Police

Police.uk states that stalking or harassment can be reported online or through 101. Evidence is useful, but a person does not need to complete an evidence bundle before reporting. Use 999 where there is immediate danger or a crime in progress.

Data protection

Evidence files may contain personal data. Limit access, retain only what is necessary for a defined purpose, secure the material and review retention. Do not publish private information merely because it has been collected as evidence.

Legal advice and insurance

Identify a specialist firm experienced in defamation, media and reputation disputes and, where possible, the relevant nonprofit or animal-welfare context. Check legal-expenses, cyber, directors' and officers', trustees' and crisis-support cover before an incident. Confirm notification requirements and whether the insurer specifies which solicitor must be used. Early specialist advice may help preserve evidence, assess statements and choose a proportionate route without beginning proceedings.

UK principle

Use the proper authority for the issue: regulator for governance, police for safety or suspected crime, platform for platform rules, data-protection advice for personal data and a qualified lawyer for legal rights and remedies.

14 REFERENCES

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Case material should be revisited before any future edition because posts, investigations and organisational statements may change. Accessed 3 August 2026.

STRONGER TOGETHER FOR STRAY DOGS

Alone we rescue. Together we reform.

The Stray Dog Solidarity Alliance unites rescue organisations worldwide to amplify voices, share resources and create lasting change for stray dogs.

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