



A link in the chain:

Tackling mental health, poverty and loneliness through pet ownership

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A personal message from Chris Packham

The day before was the one and only time in their lives I had lost my temper with them. They'd trashed the car with mud when my back was turned and I'd screamed at them and had been feeling very guilty as a result. Now I was standing under the balcony with a coil of rope and a stool, on my own, in a remote part of rural France. I had made up my mind to hang myself.

There isn't the scope or the need to explain here how I got to that point but, ultimately and sadly, lots of people also do and many die as a result. I'm only alive today because of two things: Itchy and Scratchy my two black miniature poodles. They came and sat and looked at me with confused chestnut eyes and I just couldn't forsake their love. You see, I was not one depressed mentally ill man, we were three; three companions bound by a bond of unconditional love.

I recovered and we shared that love for many more beautiful years. I cannot stress strongly enough my belief in the benefits of companion animals when it comes to mental health issues, loneliness and isolation so I hope this report is widely read and its recommendations implemented.

Chris Packham, 2019



A personal message from James Bowen

Our pets are capable of influencing our lives in so many positive ways. They can save us from loneliness and soothe our mental health. They can give us hope when all else seems lost. To me, there's no question that the companionship of a cat or a dog can make all the difference. Which is why I believe passionately that pet ownership should be available to all, not just to the wealthy. And why I have long supported Blue Cross, in particular.

A decade or so ago, they helped me when I had nothing in the world but the love of my ginger cat Bob. We'd met when my life was at a low ebb. I'd been struggling to survive. He gave me a purpose and direction but I wouldn't have made it without Blue Cross and their mobile clinics. They helped me keep Bob fit and healthy. Their vets were always on hand to ensure our special partnership survived - and thrived.

My fortunes have changed since then, but I have never forgotten the help I received and try to give back to Blue Cross as much as I can. I think it's vital that we do all we can to help them fund their essential clinical services. There are many more special partnerships out there who need our help.

James Bowen, 2019





Foreword

When you think of a charity like Blue Cross, you think of the pets we help, and rightly so, they are at the heart of everything we do. But let us not forget that behind every pet is an owner, and in many cases, if we can help the person, we can help the animal.

It is impossible not to be touched by the stories of the people who use our services. Often, we see people at their most vulnerable and it is our job to provide them with support, no matter their situation.

The work of the animal welfare sector to support pet owners in times of need should not be overlooked. The three themes of this report - mental health, loneliness, and poverty and low income - are issues our service users experience every day and the teams in our rehoming centres, hospitals, pet care clinics and shops regularly bear witness to the difficulties these challenges present.

In a perfect world, our services are redundant; there is no need for free or low cost veterinary treatment and no need to find pets a new home. But until that world exists, charities across all sectors are there to help provide support for those that need it most.

Sally de la Bedoyere
Chief Executive
2019



Executive Summary

This report paints a picture of the hugely beneficial role pets can play in our lives; it outlines specifically how pets can help alleviate symptoms of loneliness and mental health and how meaningful pets can be to owners on lower incomes.

The report also examines the barriers that exist within each of the three areas that make pet ownership more difficult and, in some cases, impossible. It points out that there are ways to overcome these barriers if organisations collaborate to look for workable solutions and develop new ways of supporting their service users.

The report shows charities and organisations, both small and large, are working hard to support pet owners in crisis but more work is needed to ensure that this support is available nationwide.

It also shows that there is great potential for more fruitful partnerships between organisations working with animals and those working with people. People and their pets will benefit from this growth of cross-sector work.

The mental health section of the report aims to:

- Provide an overview of the current mental health situation in the UK
- Examine the benefits pets can play when it comes to mental health
- Look at the potential barriers to pet ownership and ways in which they can be overcome

The loneliness and isolation section of the report aims to:

- Provide an overview of isolation and loneliness in the UK and the areas of society it affects the most
- Explore the roles pets can play in alleviating isolation and loneliness
- Examine the potential barriers to pet ownership and ways in which they can be overcome

The poverty section of this report aims to:

- Provide an overview of the current statistics on poverty in the UK
- Look at the effect poverty can have on pet owners
- Assess the current support available to owners and examine the opportunities to do more for the pet owners who are most in need

Recommendations

Blue Cross propose the following recommendations for, among others, government, the NHS, local authorities and Blue Cross itself. Some will involve forging new partnerships and encourage new ways of thinking; others will require ambitious commitments and long-term strategic thinking. Nevertheless, we believe them to be achievable and are committed to campaigning in the years ahead to try and bring them to fruition so that as many people as possible can experience the joy and happiness that pet ownership can bring.

Mental health

- Blue Cross to work with other organisations in partnership with the government to promote the mental health benefits of pet ownership for UK society, such as the creation of a national Benefits of Pets day
- We recommend the government includes pet ownership in the prevention agenda for the NHS
- We recommend the mental health service user's relationship with their pets should be included in any psychological and psychiatric assessments and included in any care or crisis plan by Community Mental Health Teams
- We recommend mental health professionals receive training in the five freedoms enshrined in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to enable them to support their service users
- We recommend that NHS Mental Health Trusts commission evaluations of the use and benefits of Animal-assisted Therapy (AAT) to their service users and that the Department of Health and NHS England undertake a wider detailed comprehensive review into the use of AAT for mental health patients across the UK
- We recommend that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence draw up guidelines for best practice in AAT
- Blue Cross to invest in more mental health training for all members of staff so they can recognise and support clients who may be experiencing mental health difficulties in our hospitals and rehoming centres
- Where possible, Blue Cross to develop a protocol to work with mental health professionals in local Community Mental Health Teams to better support Blue Cross clients and their pets.
- We recommend better signposting of AAT to mental health patients and their families so people can choose it as a therapeutic course of treatment. This will provide more control and autonomy for people in choosing the therapeutic treatment they perceive to be suitable for their individual circumstances.

Isolation and loneliness

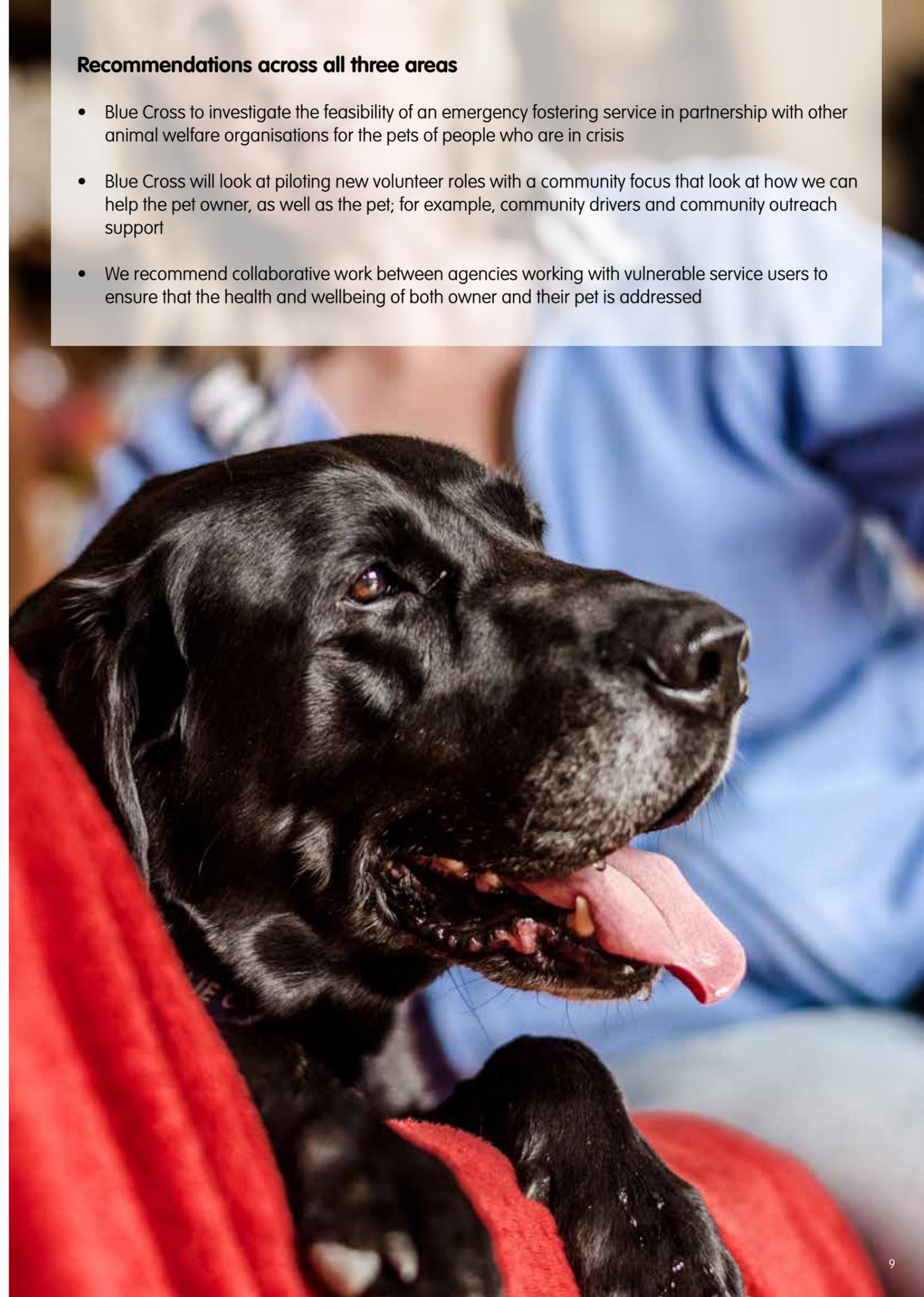
- We recommend more research is conducted to show the positive impact pets can have on the health and well being of older people to help build a strong evidence base
- We recommend that housing and care home providers develop workable pet friendly policies, provide adequate training for staff and share best practice
- More scientific research needed on the health and wellbeing benefits of pet ownership on alleviating loneliness
- We recommend that the government consider developing a strategy for an integrated and accessible rural transport system which better supports pet owners in isolated communities
- Blue Cross will develop more cohesive and integrated links within the local community, including establishing relationships with local social prescribing link workers to share knowledge and to signpost clients to relevant support services

Poverty and low income

- We recommend sharing best practice for supporting low income pet owners with other organisations, including with the private veterinary sector
- We recommend that horse welfare organisations form a working group to look at possible support options for low income horse owners
- Blue Cross will continue to expand the referral voucher scheme and look at eligibility criteria to ensure pet owners in need can access support
- Blue Cross will look to work together with other charities providing support for low income pet owners to develop a map of low cost vet care provision that can not only be a resource for teams but also, ultimately, for pet owners across the country
- Blue Cross will continue to expand our Emergency Care Fund partner practices so that more low income pet owners can access support when needed
- Blue Cross to investigate the feasibility of a pet food bank to provide pet food and other necessary items for owners in need

Recommendations across all three areas

- Blue Cross to investigate the feasibility of an emergency fostering service in partnership with other animal welfare organisations for the pets of people who are in crisis
- Blue Cross will look at piloting new volunteer roles with a community focus that look at how we can help the pet owner, as well as the pet; for example, community drivers and community outreach support
- We recommend collaborative work between agencies working with vulnerable service users to ensure that the health and wellbeing of both owner and their pet is addressed





Introduction

The UK has often been described as a nation of pet lovers. It is estimated that in 2018, 49% of UK adults owned a pet - 25% of the UK adult population own a cat (11.1 million cats); 24% of the UK adult population have a dog (8.9 million dogs) and 2% of the UK adult population have a rabbit (1.0 million rabbits)¹. These numbers will be swelled by the numerous other animals we share our lives with, the so-called 'small furrries' – guinea pigs, hamsters, rats. They are clearly a major part of many people's lives and ubiquitous within our society. They give us joy, warmth, companionship, enhance our physical health – they are our friends.

Pet ownership doesn't just provide benefits for individuals and families. **One study has estimated that savings on healthcare expenditure in 2013 would have been around £2.45 billion due to the existence of companion animals, equating to £47 million per week².** In times of austerity, such figures are important and should be celebrated.

At Blue Cross, we have been helping sick, injured, abandoned and homeless pets since 1897. We believe in helping pets because pets help us in so many different ways. Our vision is that every pet will enjoy a healthy life in a happy home. We know just how important pets are to people – and we believe this report will prove that.

This report will focus on three themes which we believe highlight the benefits pet ownership can bring to individuals, the pets themselves and, ultimately, to society as a whole:

- Mental health
- Isolation and loneliness
- Poverty and low income

Why choose these three specific themes? Firstly, they cannot be treated separately – for many people they form an unholy trinity. Poverty often goes hand-in-hand with other problems, such as poor mental health, isolation and loneliness. Often, these factors act in a circular fashion – poor mental health can lead to living in poverty which can then lead to social isolation and loneliness, which, in turn, can exacerbate poverty and mental health problems. To those trapped in this cycle, it can seem a gruelling and relentless experience.

Sadly, these three issues have also attracted a degree of stigma and prejudice. Mental health is probably the most talked about but people on benefits are often referred to in derogatory terms in public discourse – 'shirkers' vs 'strivers' – and admitting to feeling lonely or isolated can tap into stereotypes of the solitary loner, whose personality or way of life renders them unfit for a normal sociable existence. This stigma can become internalised – 'self-stigma' – which can have negative impacts on the person's self-esteem and sense of self. People can often feel shame or guilt, or even humiliation, and may therefore be less likely to seek out the help and support they may need.

“

92% of mental health trusts tell us that changes to universal credit and benefits are increasing demand for services, as are loneliness, homelessness and wider deprivation³.

”

It is also the case that these three issues have risen up the political agenda in recent years. Every MP will have dealt with constituents who are undergoing difficulties with claiming benefits, or who are struggling financially. MPs of all parties have been pushing hard for mental health to be given the necessary funding to meet the need: **the NHS 10 Year Plan includes a funding increase of at least £2.3bn a year by 2023-24 for mental health services.** Some MPs have also been very open about their own mental health difficulties. The Government appointed the first Minister for Loneliness in January 2018 and published its Loneliness Strategy in October of the same year.

Poverty and low income

Recent years have seen a number of economic challenges for people in receipt of benefits, including: the much-reported difficulties experienced by new Universal Credit (UC) claimants; the 'benefits freeze'; and the increasing levying of sanctions for failure to comply with the rules for receiving a benefit. It has been a very challenging time for a lot of people. A sudden change in circumstances can often have a devastating impact on people's lives – and their ability to care for their pet.

Mental health

Mental health is one of the biggest challenges facing UK society today. The resulting costs to the NHS, the economy, and to individuals is immense and growing. Keeping a pet has long been thought to help many people with their mental and physical wellbeing.

Recent years have also seen an increase in the provision of AAT in a variety of therapeutic settings. This report examines the use of AAT in NHS Mental Health Trusts and provides an overview of its prevalence and efficacy.

Isolation and loneliness

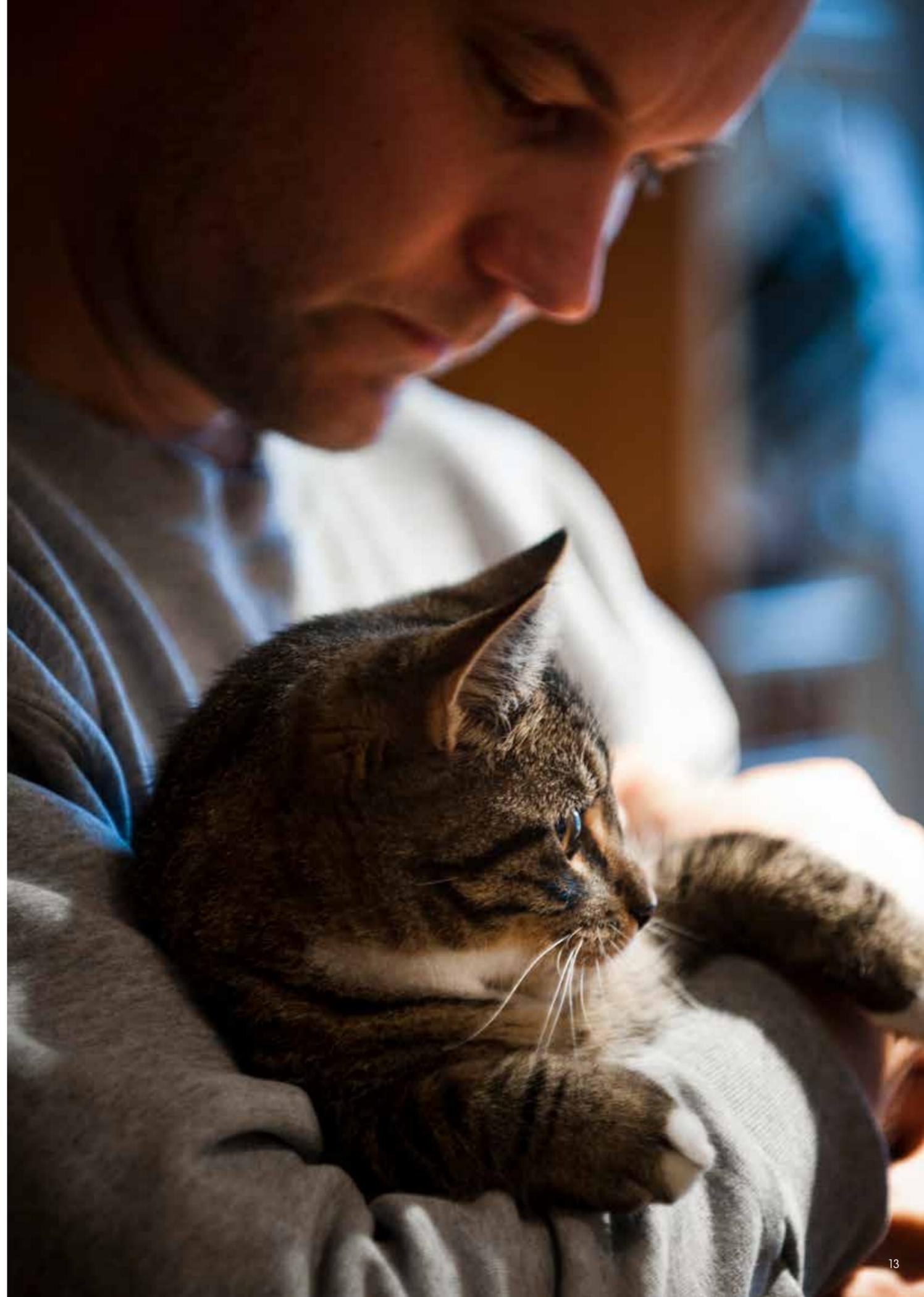
One of the fundamental aspects of human beings is that we are social animals; we have evolved to live in groups, to share our lives with others. Modern societies offer a wealth of new technological and leisure opportunities for people; in many ways, people have never been more connected – yet UK society seems increasingly haunted by the problem of loneliness, and not just amongst older people, who have traditionally been seen as the main age group vulnerable to such feelings: younger people too are now reporting increasing levels of loneliness.

Blue Cross sees clients who have to give up their pet for rehoming, often for reasons connected with the three themes of the report. This is obviously a very distressing experience for all involved. Sadly, we also deal with cases of neglect, sometimes deliberate, sometimes due to the inability of the pet owner to cope with the responsibilities and legal duties that accompany owning an animal. This report will not avoid these often uncomfortable and difficult issues.

It is not the purpose of this report to debate the rights and wrongs of benefits policy or the quality of mental health care in the NHS. Instead, we seek to provide a snapshot of what it is like living in the UK with these various challenges, and how that impacts on pets and pet ownership. In so doing, we aim to show just how beneficial pets can be for people who face some, or all, of these challenges and, therefore, how beneficial pets are for UK society as a whole. We use case studies to prove how life-enhancing and soul-enriching pet ownership can be.

It is important to stress that many people will also face significant barriers to owning and caring for a pet and this report will examine those too. For some people, for whatever reason, pet ownership is not a viable option.

Ultimately, this report will point to a profoundly important truth for Blue Cross – **pets change lives.**





Mental Health

Overview of the problem

The scale of mental health problems in the UK is difficult to assess definitively; there are a wealth of statistics available from a wide variety of sources. Much of the scale of the problem may even be hidden from view: a third of people (36%) who self-identified as having a mental health problem in the 2014 Adult Psychiatry Morbidity Survey (APMS) have never been diagnosed by a professional.

It is, however, estimated that approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will suffer a mental health problem at some point each year⁴; mental health problems are also the largest single cause of disability in the UK⁵.

The mental health of children and young people has been the subject of increased concern in recent years; one in eight young people aged five to 19 had a mental health difficulty in 2017⁶. One survey of over 8,000 teachers found that 83% had noticed a change in the number of pupil/student mental health problems since 2017⁷.

The cost of poor mental health to the economy as a whole is estimated at a staggering £105 billion a year – roughly the cost of the entire NHS⁹. The scale of the problem clearly inflicts a massive toll, both individually, societally, and economically.

Poor mental health at work costs the UK economy between **£74 billion** and **£99 billion** per year⁸



For many years, the powerful stigma attached to mental health problems led many people to suffer in silence. Thankfully, this stigma has eased in recent years, thanks to the campaigning work of charities such as Mind, and initiatives like Time to Change and Mental Health at Work First Aid courses. Attitudes are undoubtedly changing but work still remains to root out discrimination and prejudice.

There is also still plenty of work to do until mental health achieves parity of esteem with physical health in the NHS, as legislated for in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. **Shockingly, people with severe and prolonged mental illness are on average at risk of dying 15 to 20 years earlier than people without such an illness**¹⁰. Funding for mental health services has long lagged behind the level for physical health: mental health problems account for **28%** of the burden of disease but only **13%** of NHS spending¹¹.

Treatment

Treatments for mental health problems have traditionally relied heavily on medication: figures show that a total of 70.9 million prescriptions for antidepressants were dispensed in England in 2018, up from 67.5 million in 2017¹².

In recent years talking therapies, such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, have increasingly been prescribed through the NHS Adult Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme. In 2018-19 in England, there were 1.6 million referrals to talking therapies, up 11.4% from 1.44 million in 2017-18¹³.

Pets and mental health

“

What do they do, these pets, for our damaged psyches? They are company; they breathe near us and that in itself is consolation. They offer affection without analysis. They are an exercise in mindfulness....¹⁴

”

Can owning a pet, or interacting with a companion animal, improve a diagnosed mental health condition or simply improve the quality of mental wellbeing?

One joint survey by Cats Protection and the Mental Health Foundation found that 87% of people who owned a cat felt it had a positive impact on their wellbeing, while 76% said they could cope with everyday life much better¹⁵.

A recent study also found that adopting a pet could offer respite to those with severe depression that has low rates of remission and cannot be easily treated with antidepressant medications or psychotherapy¹⁶.

It is important to note at the outset that owning a pet can never be a panacea for mental health problems and it would be absurd to claim otherwise. Although there are certain symptoms that are common to each mental health condition, each individual's experience of them will be unique. This means that for some people the identified benefits of pet ownership will be experienced as a barrier to pet ownership and vice versa.

However, we do want to highlight that for some people, at certain very difficult points in their life, ownership of a pet has helped them to cope with and live with, even recover from, their mental health

problems. We also have to be realistic – the nature of mental health problems will sometimes mean that some people, when they become ill, will be unable to continue looking after their pet properly and may, sadly, have to give them up for rehoming.

Benefits of pets to mental health

“

A pet can be a great source of comfort, companionship and motivation for their owners. In many ways, pets can help us to live mentally healthier lives.¹⁷

”

One major study has identified 'ontological security' as being a major benefit of pet ownership for people with mental health problems¹⁸. This refers to "a sense of order and continuity derived from a person's capacity to give meaning to their lives and to maintain a positive view of the self, world and future." Suffering poor mental health can often fracture this sense of security through relationship breakdown, instability, stigma; pets can help to heal it by providing that meaning and positivity.

There are a number of identified ways in which owning a pet can help people with their mental health condition:

Love and company



Increased social interaction



Motivation and purpose



Exercise



Trust



Humour



Distraction from symptoms





Love and company

Being loved can be very difficult to imagine for a depressed person as it is often accompanied by strong feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing. This can be one of the most distressing and alienating experiences for any person with mental health problems.

The consistent love and loyalty shown by pets has one defining characteristic: it is perceived as unconditional. A cat, dog or rabbit does not know when somebody is suffering from a mental health problem and does not judge. This can be a very powerful attraction for somebody who feels unlovable and misunderstood. A pet is always there in a way that humans often are not and this can contribute powerfully to feelings of emotional and mental stability. For some people, who do not have strong family or social networks, their pet can be their only source of love and support.

In our public poll of people who self-identified as having a mental health problem, 58% of respondents stated that love and loyalty was the most beneficial aspect for their mental health of owning a pet – the most popular reason cited. 50% said company was the most important aspect, while 55% agreed that “they are my best friend.” Love and loyalty seemed particularly important for people with Generalised Anxiety Disorder with 69% believing love and loyalty was the most important to them. One respondent said pets provide “unconditional love no matter what state you are in.”¹⁹



Motivation and purpose

One of the defining characteristics of depression is the feeling that fundamentally life is not worth living; that everything you do is ultimately meaningless and futile. Owning a pet can often provide the very sense of purpose that is so cruelly absent. The very act of getting up in the morning to let the pet out, performing basic tasks such as feeding it or giving it a drink, can provide some element of purpose and a sense of routine; a sense of structure in what can be a chaotic and confusing time. Recovering a sense of meaning and purpose is frequently a fundamental building block of recovery from a mental health condition.

“When I’m feeling really low, they are wonderful because they won’t leave my side for two days. I will get up and I will let them out to the toilet and I will feed them but I am straight back in bed and I won’t even get myself any food or water and then they’ll just come straight back up and just stay with me until I’m ready to come out of it.”²⁰



Trust

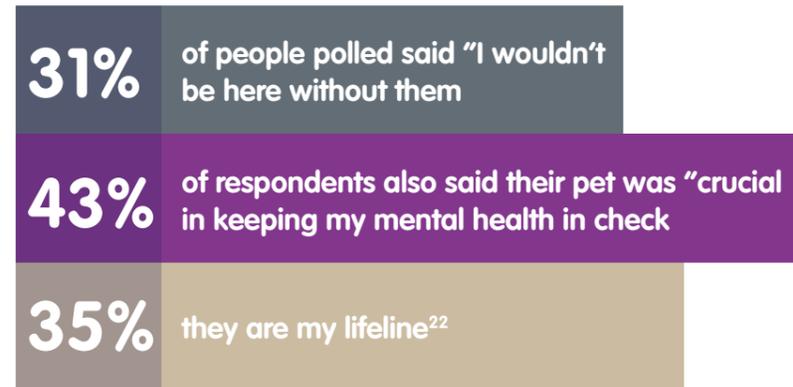
Being able to trust someone is often the first step on opening up about a mental health problem. Trust is therefore vitally important in any therapeutic relationship; it is very difficult to open up and reveal intimate personal feelings if there is an absence of trust. One review of the scientific literature noted: “Pets constituted a source of support which people could trust and rely on compared with other social network members; they provided simple relationships free from conflict and they did not overstep boundaries.”²¹



Distraction from symptoms

For many people, dwelling on the symptoms of mental illness – catastrophising, suicidal impulses – can create a negative echo chamber that makes it almost impossible to think about anything else. Interacting with a pet can help break this cycle, providing an outward focus for thoughts and emotions. Stroking or playing with a pet can encourage appreciation of the present moment, rather than reflecting on the past or despairing of the future.

In extreme cases, owning a pet can provide a bulwark against wanting to end one’s life – the ultimate benefit:



Increased social interaction

Suffering from a mental health problem is frequently associated with a reduction in the quality and quantity of social interactions. Severe anxiety, for instance, can lead to people being unable to leave their homes for long periods as they avoid any situations that could lead to increased levels of stress and vulnerability.

Walking a pet, usually a dog, can help to alleviate this self-imposed isolation. As any dog walker will attest, they can provide a bridge to increased communication with strangers. The presence of the pet can provide confidence and make it easier to interact with people who might otherwise have been avoided.

Increased social interaction

During 2016, Paul had some major surgery that resulted in him being in a lot of pain; as a consequence his mental health deteriorated. After doing his research, Paul bought a dog who has helped increase his social interactions:

“When you’ve got a dog, there is like a secret social club. You suddenly get talking to all sorts of people.....People nod and smile at you, but you also can get into long conversations. The pooch is a great talking point, it starts off about the dog, but they can easily turn into 15-20 minute conversations. People just seem to open up when you’ve got a dog - and vice-versa too. It’s a fantastic way of meeting people.”²³



Elsie

“

The unconditional love of a dog beats everything else and, seeing how much we've achieved together in the year that I've had her, has been incredible.

”

“Elsie always knows if something is wrong”

“I've battled mental health issues for quite some time now and am currently being assessed for autism. When I first got Elsie I found it ridiculously hard; the craziness of a new puppy was new and intense and I didn't think I could cope. But both of us have grown together and now I absolutely couldn't be without her.

“Having Elsie has changed my life entirely, it's given me routine and purpose. I get up every morning to go for a walk or run with her. I have a purpose in raising and training a puppy! It's hard work but it's incredibly rewarding and that, combined with the obvious cuteness, is a recipe for happiness!

“The most incredible thing Elsie has done for me is helped me through suicidal episodes in many ways. She always knows if something is wrong, she provides constant comfort and distraction. I always know that she would miss me if I went anywhere so I have to keep fighting for her! Don't get me wrong, it doesn't fix everything, I've still had suicide attempts in the time that I've had Elsie but even with that she has been my motivation to recover.

“The unconditional love of a dog beats everything else and, seeing how much we've achieved together in the year that I've had her, has been incredible.”



Exercise

Walking a dog or riding a horse in the open air, observing and participating in the animal's enjoyment and excitement, is a source of joy and elation for owners. As well as increasing social interaction, walking a dog can have a beneficial effect on mental health: regular activity can reduce the risk of depression by 30%²⁴. There are also recognised benefits to mental health of being in contact with green spaces and nature as a whole.

“Natural, green environments are places to relax, escape and unwind from the daily stresses of modern life; places to socialise and be physically active, thus having a positive effect on our wellbeing.”²⁵



Humour

There is one final, possibly underrated, benefit of pets: they make us laugh. As any pet owner will know, humour is a major part of owning a pet. Inadvertently, they can provide joy and humour in otherwise bleak days.

Blue Cross to work with other organisations, in partnership with the government, to promote the mental health benefits of pet ownership for UK society, such as the creation of a national Benefits of Pets day

Barriers to pet ownership

Owning and caring for a pet is a big responsibility for anyone. For someone living with a mental health issue there are more considerations than just the financial commitment and impact on daily life of owning a pet. Other barriers to pet ownership can include:

Potential inability to provide proper care for the pet

Coping with a mental health problem is exhausting: all reserves of emotional and mental strength can be drained away by the simple act of getting out of bed in the morning. Some days, even this apparently basic task is completely beyond people in the grip of despair and suffering. Maintaining a daily routine and structured life becomes impossible; when life becomes chaotic and fragmented, caring for another living being can become equally difficult. A quarter of people polled cited this reason as a barrier to owning pets for people with mental health conditions.

It is important to stress that people in perfect mental health can neglect their animals. Sadly though, in some cases, the symptoms of a mental health problem can lead to welfare issues for a person's pet. Walking a dog, for example, is impossible for someone unable to leave the house, and the pet's welfare can be compromised as a result.

In some cases, keeping the pet becomes untenable and the only solution is to rehome. At Blue Cross, we see people who have had to undertake this course of action because of a mental health problem. It is obviously very upsetting for a pet owner with a mental health condition to give up their pet, especially if that pet has been providing motivation to make it through the day.

Concern about caring for a pet in moments of crisis

Sadly, some mental health problems are so severe that people are sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983, or voluntarily assent to be psychiatric inpatients. What happens to their pet in such situations? A family or social support network can be vital in such circumstances, providing the owner with peace of mind that their pet will be looked after. Unfortunately, this is not always possible for everyone. Worries about who and how their pet will be cared for can exacerbate mental health problems. People may also delay or cancel the treatment they need because they are worried about the care of their pet.²⁶ 36% of people polled identified this as a barrier to owning pets for people with mental health conditions.²⁷

Coping with bereavement

For any pet owner, the loss of their pet can be as distressing and traumatic as losing a loved relative or partner; for someone trying to cope with a mental health problem it can be particularly difficult. If a pet has been the main, or even sole, source of emotional comfort, then their loss can have devastating consequences. All the benefits of pet ownership are suddenly taken away, resulting in a loss of routine, structure and social contact.

Blue Cross has always been aware of the corrosive nature of pet bereavement which is why, 25 years ago, we launched our Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS). Owners can contact the charity through email and telephone regarding the loss of their own pet, receiving support from professionals. In 2018, 12,966 calls and emails were answered by the PBSS, 4,736 more than in 2017.

This fear of losing a pet clearly resonates with people with a mental health problem: **in Blue Cross's survey, 38% cited coping with the potential loss of a pet as the main barrier to owning pets – the highest response.**²⁸

Overcoming barriers

The theme that emerges from examining the barriers and difficulties of pet ownership and mental health is the need for reliable and easily accessible sources of support, and the opportunity to find ways to help a person keep their pet by their side.

Eliminating Out of Area Placements (OAPs)

One aspect of mental health services highlights this particular problem: OAPs. This is where an adult who needs acute inpatient care is admitted to a unit that does not form part of the usual local network of services.²⁹

There are circumstances where this might be appropriate – eg safeguarding reasons such as domestic abuse – but where the reason is solely or primarily because of the unavailability of a local bed, they are known as inappropriate OAPs. Sometimes, a patient can be sent many miles away from their home, family, friends, and their pet. Being in such unfamiliar surroundings can be a disorientating and upsetting experience, and is not the best environment to enable them to recover swiftly from a mental health crisis.

Terry Proudfoot, who experienced an inappropriate OAP, was placed in a hospital 40 miles from her home and family. She was reported as saying that not being able to see her dog was a barrier to her recovery: "I don't feel complete without a dog with me."³⁰

The government itself has recognised the damaging aspects of OAPs and has committed to ending inappropriate OAPs by 2020-21.

Being sent many miles away from a beloved pet can either exacerbate a condition or prevent recovery. NHS data for 2018 revealed a total of **7,655** OAPs in England for people experiencing a mental health problem. Of these, 6% were inappropriate. In total, OAPs cost the NHS over £112 million in 2018.³¹

Blue Cross supports the government's target to eliminate inappropriate OAPs in acute inpatient units by 2020-21. However, considerable work is needed if the government is to meet its target in order for pet owners to receive treatment as close to their homes as possible.

Incorporating pets into care and treatment plans

Another solution could be for care coordinators, mental health support workers and social workers to assess the nature of the relationship between the patient and their pet in order to ensure it is taken into account when drawing up care and treatment plans. This should also apply to any psychological or psychiatric assessments. One study concluded that it appears:

"Relationships with companion animals are not considered or incorporated into health care planning or wider health related discussions or consultations. The contrary appears to occur where individuals are advised against pet ownership, or experience negative attitudes from health professionals in relation to their pet."³²

Because of the profundity of many people's relationships with their pet it is surely necessary that any assessments of their mental health problem takes account of this relationship. To omit to do so carries the risk of ignoring a fundamental relationship in the person's life: "Those experiencing mental health problems need to have their relationships with animals understood and respected, and be offered support to ensure the welfare of all."³³

We recommend that mental health professionals receive training in the five freedoms enshrined in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to enable them to support their service users

Where possible, Blue Cross to develop a protocol to work with mental health professionals in local Community Mental Health Teams to better support Blue Cross clients and their pets

Pets as prevention

Medication and talking therapies, by their very nature, treat a mental health problem once it has become established and symptoms have become diagnosable. The biggest challenge facing mental health treatment is stopping people becoming ill in the first place. Preventative measures are now seen as vital aspects of treating mental health problems. In 2017, the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health, which aims to facilitate local and national action around preventing mental health problems and promoting good mental health, was signed by, among others, the NHS, local authorities and community and voluntary organisations. The Government also published a Prevention green paper in July 2019.³⁴



Providing extra support for people to keep their pets, or to receive treatment close to their pets, could be an integral part of this programme; the more people who are prevented developing mental health problems, or who are enabled to recover more rapidly, the greater the savings to the NHS and the economy as a whole.

We recommend the government includes pet ownership in the prevention agenda for the NHS

Help with transport issues

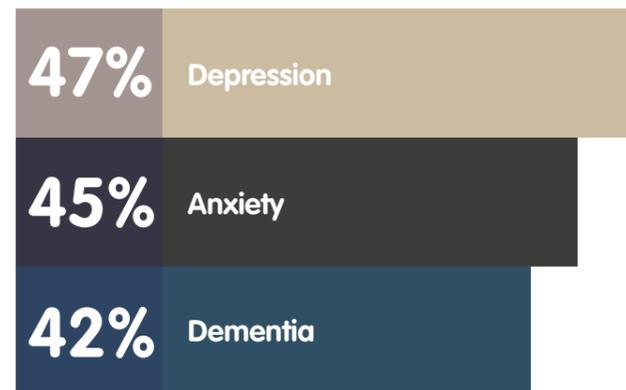
Living with a mental health condition often leaves the sufferer unable to leave their home for long periods. In certain areas of London, Blue Cross has an ambulance service that will transport animals owned by housebound people, who are unable to bring their pet to and from the London hospitals themselves.

How else could pets help?

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT)

As part of this report, we wanted to determine the extent of AAT currently available on the NHS so we sent Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to all the NHS Mental Health Trusts in England, and their equivalents in Scotland and Wales. The results were encouraging: **of the 76 who responded 60 per cent stated that they do provide some form of AAT for their patients.**³⁵

The responses from the NHS Mental Health Trusts reveal that AAT is mainly used for:



Other conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and psychosis were also treated with this method.

The responses also showed that spending on AAT is minimal, or not recorded, with the AAT almost exclusively provided by volunteers on an informal basis. The most spent by any trust that recorded this information was the £51,372 spent by North West Boroughs Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust in 2018/19. Judging by the popularity of AAT, and the number of Trusts which provide it, the NHS must be making considerable savings from its use on an informal level.

Support for the provision of AAT is shown by our public polling with 58% stating that AAT should be available in all NHS Mental Health Trusts in the UK. 17% of respondents have received AAT more than once, 12% just once; this leaves 70% who have never received it. Interestingly, when asked "what would you do if you couldn't have AAT?", 35% said they would "seek help from a charity which provides it" while 35% said "my condition would worsen."³⁶

At Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, therapy dog Marley has been attending Emotional First Aid (EFA) groups for children and young people for over a year now.

"During the group Marley welcomes young people to the room. He is very enthusiastic and his presence helps young people to settle in. Marley has been very well behaved in the group but has a big personality and this creates a talking point for young people with staff as well as each other. During his time at work, Marley's behaviour has been brilliant and we have not received any negative feedback from young people, families or members of staff³⁷."

The Trust has received very positive feedback to its use of AAT from the young people involved:



Feedback from the staff has been similarly positive:

"At each session the young people involved in the group have appeared happy to see him; I don't recall any young person not wanting to receive attention from Marley. I feel that Marley has very much acted as an icebreaker for the young people, not only to interact with staff, but also to interact with one another.

I have also been involved in the EFA when Marley has not been present and I feel that the young people involved are a lot quieter and interact less than when Marley is present. I feel that Marley helps to reduce the anxiety levels within the group as once they begin to interact with him they appear more relaxed."

We recommend that NHS Mental Health Trusts commission evaluations of the use and benefits of AAT to their service users

We recommend that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence draws up guidelines for best practice in AAT

We recommend better signposting of AAT to mental health patients and their families

Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

Well aware of the therapeutic benefits of dogs, Dr Mel Moss, a Consultant Psychiatrist at Mill View Hospital, Hove, had always wanted to work with her Pets as Therapy (PAT) qualified dog, Mutley. Mel got her chance with Harry, 22, a young man who, aged seven, had been diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum. In 2017, Harry became very unwell and was sectioned after six police officers had to restrain him in the street, an extremely distressing experience for Harry and his family. Harry spent months going in and out of hospitals – but nothing seemed to work.

Harry was eventually diagnosed with bipolar disorder and, in 2018, was accepted as an inpatient at Mill View. He had always had a strong bond with dogs and when he heard about Mutley, he immediately asked if he could see him.

The bond between the pair was immediately apparent. Previous to their meeting, Harry had been awake for two weeks – as soon as he met Mutley, Harry said: “Right, I can go to bed now.” Harry’s parents, Vanessa and Kevin, were amazed at the impact Mutley had. “We could see the change in Harry and that was fantastic. Pet therapy is such an important way to avoid relying too heavily on medication.”

Just three weeks after Mutley’s first visit, Harry was well enough to go home and is now planning to study psychology at university.

Mutley has also facilitated greater interaction between staff and patients, acting as a bridge between the two. Staff and patients now mix more than previously and the amount of activities on the ward has increased massively – Mutley participates in walks, chats and even ‘ran’ an art group. The patients often spend time stroking and playing with Mutley, frequently congregating around him when he tours the ward. He is also great for supporting staff at stressful times and his friendly nature means he has time for everyone to pat and hug him.

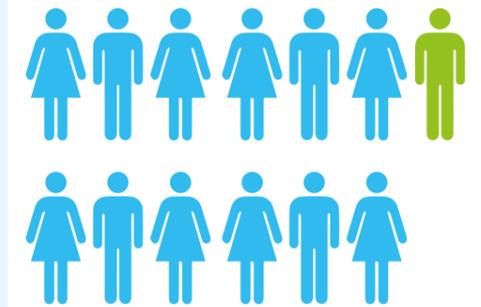
Dr Moss says: “He has been so helpful with patients who struggle with severe emotional distress and paranoia, giving them a sense of safety and the ability to talk at times when they might struggle to confide in people.”



Equine therapy and PTSD

PTSD is often suffered by armed forces veterans and emergency service workers who encountered horrific scenes during their service. For some, trauma occurs when they are still young. Symptoms include hypervigilance, flashbacks, nightmares and avoidance or emotional numbing.

Research from *King's College London* suggests **one in 13** young people in the UK have had **PTSD** before reaching **age 18**.³⁸



Equine-assisted therapy is growing in popularity for PTSD sufferers. One study examines why this might be the case: “As prey animals, horses are hypervigilant until they learn they are not in danger. Unlike with many dogs, who trust unconditionally, horses require humans to work to gain their trust. Because of their own hypervigilance, veterans with PTSD easily understand and can relate to the trust and hypervigilance in a horse.”³⁹

Conclusion

There are many ways that pets can provide people with mental health problems with invaluable and powerful companionship, support and love. The widespread use of AAT in NHS Mental Health Trusts is evidence that the therapeutic value of well trained and cared for animals is gaining traction among clinical professionals.

Sadly, there are also barriers to people with mental health problems owning a pet. What is clear is that the support and treatment of people with mental health issues should include taking account of their pets. To treat a mental health problem you have to treat the individual as a whole – ‘whole person treatment’ or ‘integrated care’ - and this should include taking account of their emotional relationship with their pets. To ignore this can lead to increased distress and worsening of mental health problems.



Equine therapy



The feedback from people taking part has been incredibly positive.



Horsemanship for Health is a Community Interest Company (CIC) based in Devon whose primary aim is to promote lifelong learning and healthy personal development for people through equine and animal assisted education. Its horses have worked sensitively with people recovering from illness, depression, trauma and deep loss.

Co-founder and director Belinda Seaward explains:

“We give people who may be suicidal; in recovery from trauma; mentally or physically unwell a chance to discover their own wholeness and wellness through healthy interactions with horses, other animals and people.”

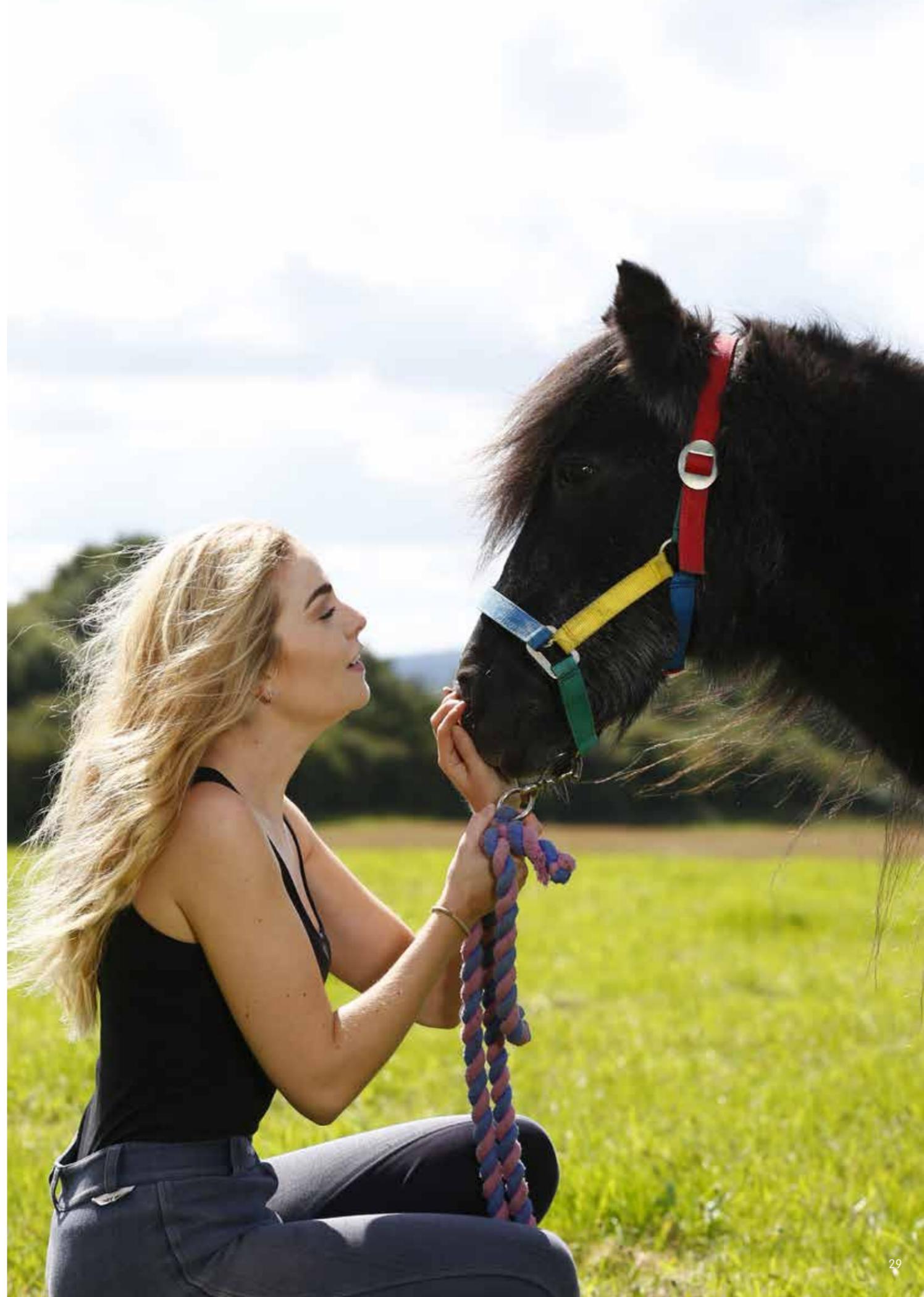
The team works mostly with groups, including patients from Langdon Hospital, Dawlish, which is part of Devon Partnership NHS Trust. The team have also completed a project with the Royal Navy and Royal Marines in recovery from mental health experiences, including PTSD.

The responses from the people who have connected with the horses has been inspiring.

Phil, who served in the Royal Navy for 19 years, said: “The horse doesn’t care what you do for a living. You arrive with a blank sheet. When I’m with the horse, I don’t feel all the pain and the niggles and the worries – all that just switches off.”

Scott, a Royal Marine Major, who once commanded troops of 120 men reflected, “When we’re with the horses we’re naked. No badges, just you and the horse. I had no idea how long we’d been with the horses because I had lost all sense of time and there was no thought in my mind.”

The University of Exeter has launched a new research project to assess Horsemanship for Health’s impact on wellbeing and mental health. Dr Donna Poade, Lecturer in Management, said: “The feedback from people taking part has been incredibly positive. What we want to do is to measure the impact, the benefits and value of the programme, with the results then shared with policy makers and NHS professionals who consider the options for treating those with mental health conditions.”





Loneliness

“

Living in a world that's full of busy people is like living in a world alone. - **Heraline, Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, 1821**

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Overview of the problem

The feeling of loneliness is subjective and therefore hard to define. It can be described as a feeling that occurs when an individual believes they are lacking desired social interactions with others.

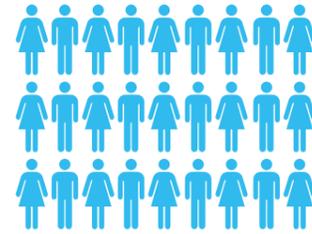
Most people experience loneliness at some point in their lives. For many it is short-lived, but for a growing number of people, loneliness defines their life. Loneliness can also be associated with mental health problems, stress and poor physical health.

A range of factors can cause or contribute to loneliness. These may include any or all of the below:

- Health issues - an individual may be housebound or have mobility issues, they may have deteriorating health conditions such as dementia, or may have a sensory impairment such as sight or hearing loss.
- Social issues - an individual may live alone, have lost their partner, or may not have close family or friends.
- Individual circumstances - this may include age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or location of residence.

Loneliness is an increasingly recognised problem across society in the UK. A study by The Co-op and the British Red Cross revealed that over nine million people in the UK across all adult ages are either

A study by *The Co-op* and the *British Red Cross* revealed that over **nine million people** in the UK across all adult ages are either always or often lonely.



always or often lonely. The research found that loneliness could have a combination of biological, psychological and behavioural impacts on an individual⁴⁰. Experiencing any or all of these impacts can further exacerbate a person's feelings of being disconnected.

A lack of social connections can also be linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular health risks, increased death rates, and blood pressure⁴¹. The Royal College of General Practitioners has argued that loneliness puts people at a 50% increased risk of an early death compared to those with good social connections, and it is as bad for health outcomes as obesity.⁴²

Isolation

Isolation and loneliness are not always mutually exclusive; a person may be lonely but not isolated and vice versa. However, they are closely related and can result in the same or similar physical and emotional symptoms. Unlike loneliness, social isolation can be measured by looking at the number of relationships and/or social contacts an individual has with other people. Isolation can occur when an individual is cut off from normal social networks, perhaps through unemployment, health issues or a disability. Such instances can lead to little or no access to existing services or to the local community.

Isolation or loneliness in an urban setting

It is a common misconception that just because a person is surrounded by others, they cannot experience feelings of loneliness or be socially isolated. Urban living has its own unique set of challenges. Time Out surveyed 18 global cities in 2017 and London topped the list of loneliest cities with 55 per cent of Londoners stating the city made them feel lonely sometimes⁴³. Urban areas often have less open or public spaces and more built up areas. Residential housing, such as high rises, can increase a person's feeling of isolation as they can often have little in the way of communal space.

A report by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport found that people living in urban areas were more likely to feel lonely 'often or always' than those living in rural areas.⁴⁴

Isolation or loneliness in a rural setting

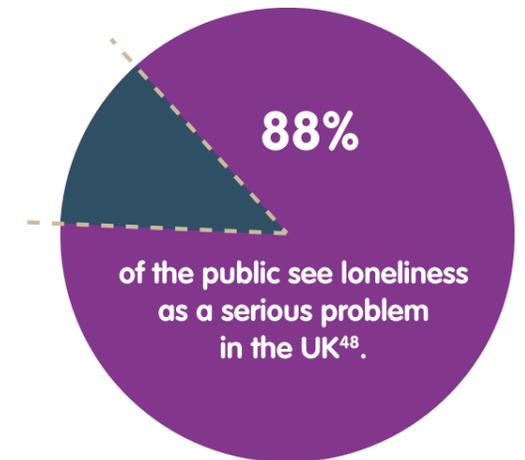
Living in a rural setting can also pose its own set of challenges for residents. A reduction in public spending has contributed to the isolation of some communities, with less access to a range of services, from post offices, to public transport and health provision. **In fact, only 80 per cent of rural residents live within four kilometres of a GP surgery, compared with 98 per cent of the urban population⁴⁵.** As the younger workforce migrates, rural populations tend to have a higher proportion of older residents with 23 per cent of residents over the retirement age compared to 18 per cent in urban areas⁴⁶. This can then lead to higher rates of disability and mortality which can further exacerbate social isolation.

Loneliness across society

"Loneliness is the pain of being alone, and is damaging. Solitude is the joy of being alone, and is empowering⁴⁷."

There has been a noticeable increase in awareness of the prevalence of loneliness, much of which can be attributed to the work of Jo Cox, who was a strong parliamentary voice in the fight to combat loneliness in society. Following her tragic murder, the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was taken forward with the aim to expose the growing crisis of loneliness and to look for practical solutions to reduce it.

A survey conducted in 2016 found that 88 per cent of the public see loneliness as a serious problem in the UK⁴⁸. It is a feeling that many people can relate to and can affect an individual at any time in their life.



Loneliness and young people

Loneliness is often associated with specific groups such as the elderly, but wider research has shown that people across all walks of life are increasingly experiencing loneliness.

A study from the Office for National Statistics found that 10 per cent of young adults were "always or often lonely" – three times higher than people aged 65 and over, the highest proportion of any age group⁴⁹. Research conducted by academics at King's College London into the prevalence of loneliness in young adults found that loneliness occurs equally within many different types of neighbourhoods, irrespective of urbanicity, population density, deprivation, or crime.⁵⁰

The Samaritans interviewed young people to better understand their experiences of loneliness and found that it played a significant role in causing their suicidal thoughts.⁵¹

Loneliness and older people

According to the Campaign to End Loneliness, there are over two million people aged 75 and over living alone in Great Britain and it is believed that around over half are chronically lonely.⁵²

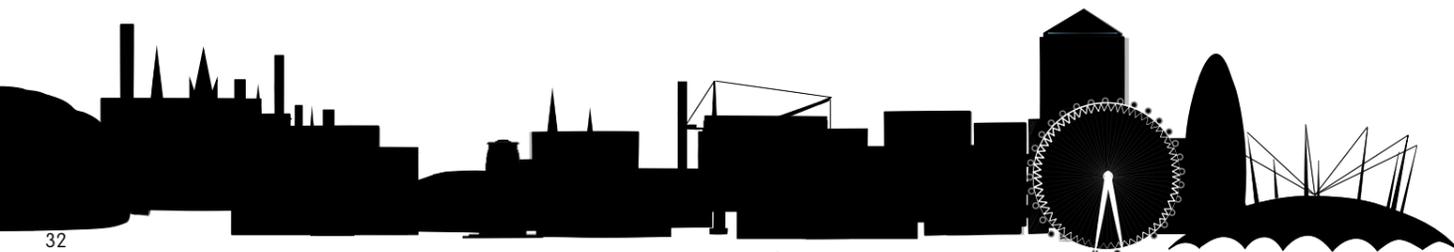
Due to their age, an older person may be more at risk of experiencing a combination of the factors that contribute to loneliness. Problems with health or mobility may also leave an older person more isolated from the community.

The problems associated with older age are well known, and there are many organisations who work to help alleviate the issues. Some aim to offer advice, others provide a befriending service, or offer practical support such as providing transportation. These services provide a much needed lifeline to those who may otherwise feel invisible.

Loneliness, disability and illness

Section 6.1 of the Equality Act 2010 states that a disability can be a "physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities."⁵³

Scope estimates there to be around **13.9 million disabled people in the UK** and it is thought that up to 50 per cent will be lonely on any given day⁵⁴. Many people with mobility problems find venues and



public transport are not physically accessible which can increase isolation and feelings of loneliness. Surveys have shown that those with a limiting long-term illness or disability are more likely to say they feel lonely 'often or always' than those without⁵⁵.

As well as issues with accessibility, people with a learning disability may also face other barriers to forming meaningful relationships. Almost one in three young people with a learning disability spend less than one hour outside their home on a typical Saturday and experience high levels of loneliness⁵⁶. A lack of support and accessible information about local services and events contribute to this.

Government strategies for tackling loneliness

England

In October 2018, the government launched its first loneliness strategy which sets out the measures to be put in place to tackle loneliness. As part of this strategy, the government have confirmed that all GPs in England will be able to refer patients experiencing loneliness to community activities and voluntary services by 2023. The practice, known as 'social prescribing', allows GPs to direct patients who may not need medical treatment to community services that can provide practical support. The government also appointed the first Minister for Loneliness.

Scotland

In December 2018, the Scottish government launched a national strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness. The strategy aims to make improvements to health and social care, more accessible transport and investment in digital connectivity to help create more connected communities.

Wales

The Welsh government announced plans to develop a nationwide and cross-government strategy to address loneliness and isolation in its Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021 programme. In October 2018, a consultation on tackling loneliness and social isolation was launched. The National Survey for Wales, 2016-2017 found that nearly a fifth of the population feel lonely, which amounts to nearly half a million people⁵⁷. At the time of writing, the Welsh government is yet to publish the final strategy.

NHS provision

While loneliness and social isolation cannot solely be treated with medicine or a hospital visit, GPs are well placed within the community to identify lonely and/or isolated people as they may be the only contact that person has.



Integrated care systems (ICS)

In an ICS, NHS organisations, in partnership with local councils and others, take collective responsibility for managing resources, delivering NHS standards, and improving the health of the population.

This is to try and ensure that local services can provide better and more joined-up care for patients. For staff, improved collaboration can help to make it easier to work with colleagues from other organisations. ICSs' can better understand data about local people's health, allowing them to provide care that is tailored to individual needs.

By working alongside councils, and drawing on the expertise of others, such as local charities and community groups, the NHS aims to help people to live healthier lives for longer, and to stay out of hospital when they do not need to be there.

ICSs' aim to empower people to direct their own care and support and to receive any care they need in their homes or in the local community. Care can be organised around groups of people with similar needs and care plans include self-care, community services and the voluntary sector. As of June 2019, a third of England's population is now covered by an ICS⁵⁹.

Social prescribing

Social prescribing is a means of enabling frontline healthcare professionals to refer patients to link workers, who can provide relationship-based care and support, that can ultimately help an individual reconnect to the community. Care follows a person-centred approach and is tailored to the individual's needs.

In its Long Term Plan, NHS England committed to recruiting and training 1,000 new social prescribing link workers by 2020/21 so that at least 900,000 people will be referred to social prescribing by 2023/24⁶⁰. In 2018, the Department of Health and Social Care announced plans to create a national academy of social prescribing. This will be an additional resource to help share expertise and guidance, as well as highlighting what they can offer people in their communities.

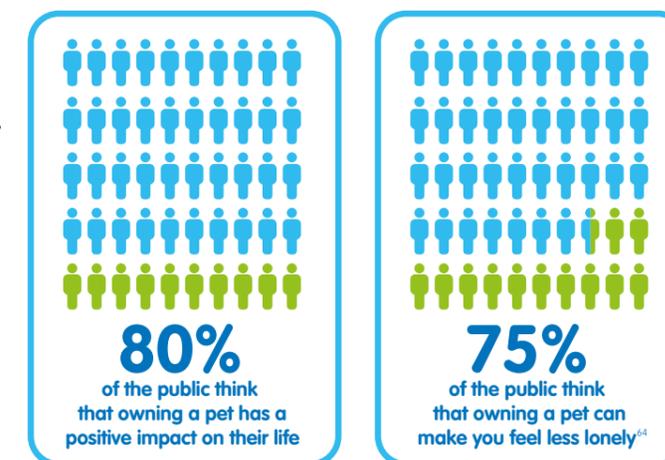
While social prescribing may be a fairly new term, it is a practice that many third sector organisations have been involved with for decades. The British Red Cross recently commissioned research into the effectiveness of their Connecting Communities service which is run in partnership with the Co-op. The Connecting Communities service is a form of social prescribing, where Connectors and volunteers work to re-connect people feeling lonely or socially isolated back to their communities by signposting to groups and activities in their area and providing emotional and practical support. **The research found that the service had supported 9,000 people between May 2017 and April 2019 and helped over two thirds of the people to feel less lonely⁶¹.**

Pets and loneliness

There is scientific evidence to show that owning a pet can have beneficial impacts on an owner's mental and physical health^{62,63}.

While the charity does not believe that owning a pet is the 'cure' to alleviating loneliness in society, Blue Cross has seen that, in some cases, ownership of a pet has helped an individual to overcome some of the challenges feeling lonely presents.

There are several ways in which owning or interacting with a pet can help people experiencing loneliness or isolation. A key symptom of loneliness is feeling disconnected from society and others. A pet can help alleviate



this in many ways, including by encouraging exercise and routine, providing companionship, and encouraging social interactions with other pet owners.

Pets and young people

Pets can play a very important role in the lives of young people. Owning or interacting with an animal can help increase a young person's empathy and can teach responsibility⁶⁵. Pets can also provide a silent support system, communicating in a way that adults and peers cannot.

88% of 16 – 24 year olds believed that owning a pet could make them feel less lonely, compared to 62% of 55+⁶⁶.



Harry had been unable to go into a classroom for five months and had refused to engage in anything remotely educational, leaving him "isolated and losing confidence fast".

Harry has been working with Vader since March 2017 whose owner, Tracey Berridge, is the founder of Dogs Helping Kids (DHK) charity. Harry visits the DHK headquarters once a week to learn about all aspects of dog ownership.

The sessions have become the undeniable "highlight" of his week, and have given him the drive and enthusiasm to learn again – with the goal of achieving a career working with animals.

Pets and older People

Pets can offer much needed companionship for older people: 62% of over 65s surveyed by care home provider Anchor, stated that having a pet makes them less lonely⁶⁷. Research by Age UK found that nearly half of over 65s say that the television or pets are their main form of company⁶⁸.

They can also have health benefits, with studies showing that walking with a dog may be better for stress levels than walking alone in elderly individuals⁶⁹.

Old age can be a time of change and the gradual loss of independence can lead to feelings of worthlessness. Pet therapy has been shown to reduce depression and anxiety in elderly care home residents⁷⁰.

After losing her sister, Joyce, aged 78, was left feeling alone in the world. That all changed when she rehomed Rocky: "Rocky gave me a reason to get up and out the house every day. Having him is such a social thing, I am always having conversations with other dog owners in the park. I just wish I had got him earlier."



Badger

“

Badger was evidently a more confident dog and seemed happy with Elwyn.

”

Elwyn Parsons spends six days a week with his beloved wife at the nursing home she now lives at. By his feet, always, is his loyal companion, Badger.

The 74-year-old rehomed the jack russell from Blue Cross Newport two years ago and the former stray immediately brought some joy back into his life following wife Carolyn's devastating dementia diagnosis which has left her needing full time residential care. Elwyn had a very specific criteria; any dog had to be able to accompany him to Carolyn's care home as his world revolves around being by her side as much as possible.

Thankfully, the home in Newport, Wales, which is a specialist Alzheimer's care facility allows dogs. "I don't think I could have had a dog if I couldn't have taken him in the home. It's marvellous that they allow it, they've always said that dogs can come in."

Badger has brought Elwyn a new sense of purpose. He said, "Before him all I would be doing was going from this chair down to the car and to the home where Carolyn is, getting out of the car and walking a few steps. Now I take three walks a day with him. I think he's brilliant. My brilliant little boy."





Fudge

“

I love being able to help people in the community look after their pets. I get the benefits of having a dog in the home, but can still have the freedom to travel

”

Pets, disability and illness

With changes to welfare, accessibility issues, and fewer employment opportunities, living with a disability or long-term illness can often see people become detached and disengaged from everyday society.

When Judith Margolis, a former university lecturer started to need a wheelchair due to a progressive brain disorder 13 years ago, she felt totally isolated and unable to leave her home.

“You become invisible in a wheelchair,” she said. “Sixty-five per cent of people say that if they see someone in a wheelchair they won’t talk to them because they don’t know what to say, so it’s very lonely.” Judith rehomed Fudge, a border terrier cross from Blue Cross Thirsk in 2016. With the help

of Support Dogs, Fudge has made the grade as an assistance dog.

“It’s easy to say ‘well I’m just going to sit here and not do anything’, but with a dog I have to get up and go out, and just that pressure alone makes

such a difference. So he’s saved my life, really.” Lorraine, an Anchor Hanover resident, pet sits for friends and family, she said, “I love being able to help people in the community look after their pets. I get the benefits of having a dog in the home, but can still have the freedom to travel.

One of the dogs I look after is owned by someone who was diagnosed with cancer. I am able to look after his dog for him on days when he has to attend hospital for treatment”

Barriers to pet ownership

While owning or having regular contact with a pet may help to alleviate the symptoms of loneliness, there may be many factors stopping an individual from getting a pet, or keeping one they already have.

Cost

More Than research has shown that 64% of pet owners aged 65+ do not have pet insurance. 40% of these stated that it was because they could not afford it⁷¹. 90-year-old Elaine lives with her 10-year-old shih tzu, Amber. She says, “The cost of insurance is so expensive. I did have insurance for a while, but had to cancel it as I couldn’t afford it. When she gets sick it is a big worry for me.”



Accessibility to services

One issue isolated pet owners can face is access to both veterinary and non-veterinary services. In 2017, local bus passenger journeys made up 59% of all public transport journeys in Great Britain⁷². Yet, in the same year, local authority bus budgets in England and Wales were cut by over £20 million. Since 2010, there has been a reduction of £172 million from supported bus services in England, a 46% decrease⁷³.

There are just under 10 million older and disabled concessionary travel passes held by members of the public and statistics show that adults with mobility difficulties take 39 per cent fewer trips than those with no mobility disability⁷⁴.

Transport services are often limited or unreliable in rural areas, and some services may not be easy to use for a pet owner with a disability. Many taxi firms are unequipped to carry animals in their vehicles. Michelle Meadows, Head Receptionist at Blue Cross Grimsby Hospital said, “Many of our clients struggle to bring their pets to the hospital for appointments. Some clients have to wait hours for a willing taxi driver.”

We recommend that the government consider developing a strategy for an integrated and accessible rural transport system which better supports pet owners in isolated communities

Ability to provide care

In some cases, an individual who could benefit from the companionship of a pet may be unable to provide the necessary level of care due to deteriorating health, often associated with older age. With an ongoing health problem, which often meant frequent treatment in hospital, Jim found it increasingly difficult to manage on his own at home. He made the painful decision to move in with a relative which meant giving up his beloved dog, Barnie. The move, and the loss of Barnie, left Jim feeling distraught and lonely.

Housing

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a steady increase in the number of privately rented homes in the UK as more and more people struggle to afford to buy. **Eight million households in the UK rent their homes, with 3.4 million of these renting from social landlords**⁷⁵. Research by Cats Protection has shown that landlords are often reluctant to allow tenants to keep a pet, with just under a third of private and social landlords allowing them as part of the tenancy⁷⁶. Many of the animals

that come into Blue Cross care are as a result of an owner being forced give up their pet as a result of moving into rented or sheltered accommodation. This may be due to a change in circumstances such as a separation or unemployment, or because the individual requires greater assistance.

Overcoming barriers

While the barriers to pet ownership identified previously can be challenging, with the right initiatives in place there are ways many of them can be overcome. New approaches to established ways of working can have a profound affect on the ability of people who are vulnerable to loneliness to benefit from the companionship of a pet.

Accessible services

Blue Cross offers follow-up appointments by telephone for clients whose pets have received treatment, avoiding unnecessary or difficult trips to the hospital. Clients are asked to take pictures of the treatment area so a vet can assess the injury or wound and provide further advice. This has really helped to free up time and resources for both the client and the hospital.



Blue Cross runs a mobile clinic that travels to four different locations in London. Registered clients can use the service. Roger, a disabled pensioner, would struggle to access or pay for treatment for Lil if Blue Cross help wasn't just round the corner from his Islington home said, "I'm not sure what I'd do otherwise, as I'm a pensioner, so I'm very thankful".

Blue Cross has recently trialled discounted membership for clients to *PawSquad*, an online veterinary advice service. This innovative service allows clients to connect to a vet via a smartphone or computer at a time and location that suits them. Using video chat, if successful it will help to overcome one of the difficulties isolated pet owners face in accessing qualified veterinary advice.

Some owners may struggle to provide enough exercise for their pet due to mobility issues. Blue Cross provides veterinary treatment for Irena's seven year old Chihuahua Maja at its hospital in Victoria. Since 2016 Blue Cross has also provided volunteer dog walkers who visit her home and help to walk her dog since Irena's eye sight and mobility have declined.

Irena said, "It's getting difficult for me to take Maja out for a walk but Blue Cross has provided me with a number of kind people who visit me and take Maja out. Although I have friends and family who visit, Maja is my constant companion and brings such joy to my life and means I don't get lonely. I don't know where I would be without her."

Blue Cross will look at piloting new volunteer roles with a community focus that look at how we can help the pet owner, as well as the pet. For example, community drivers and community outreach support.

Assistance with pet-related costs

Give a Dog a Bone is a charity that supports the over 60's to afford a rescue pet by providing help with monthly food and/or insurance costs and/or covering the cost of rehoming fees for an adopted animal. The charity also runs an initiative in Scotland called Companionship in the Community, offering free activities for over 60s and drop in times for the whole community to pop in to meet the dogs and have a chat.

Louise from Give a Dog a Bone said: "In the past six years, we have helped hundreds of rescue animals, and their older adults, to live a happier life - together."

In partnership with private practices, Blue Cross offers financial support of up to £200 towards emergency procedures for struggling pet owners registered with the practice. The Emergency Care Fund (ECF) is specifically for emergency or urgent cases and not for cases where treatment can be delayed until the owner is able to make financial arrangements. The ECF can be used at the discretion of the private practice but is intended to help those most in need, whether in receipt of benefits or low income. Since the fund was established in 2017, 201 practices have signed up.

Maintaining contact with pets

Blue Cross has seen many cases of animals that are relinquished because the owner can no longer effectively look after themselves, let alone a pet. However, that does not mean they cannot enjoy the benefit of having an animal in their lives.



Fosse House has 81 residents and is part of not-for-profit organisation Quantum Care, which strongly believes in the importance of pets in people's lives and is open to animals living in its homes. In 2017, Fosse House rehomed Libby, a cat from Blue Cross Kimpton.

Zoe Hiscox, Manager of Fosse House said: "Many of the residents here have high levels of dementia but for those that don't remember Libby it doesn't matter, because in the moment it gives them that good feeling. If they can't walk or talk, it's something for them to look at and engage with. And it can bring back to them fond memories of when they've had pets. Libby has also been known to comfort some of our really sick residents in their final days. It's like she just knew."

One of the many residents whose days are lit up by Libby is Derek Parkes, who was heartbroken to leave behind a cat of his own when he started to need round-the-clock care for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

"It's nice having her around. I had a cat before I was here who I really miss and it reminds me of her."

"There has been a massive knock-on effect in that Libby and the other animals encourage younger visitors," said Zoe. "Care homes to children can be really scary places, but now we've got a few families with little ones who really want to go and see grandma because of the pets."

We recommend more research is conducted to show the positive impact pets can have on the health and well being of older people to help build a strong evidence base.

Encouraging pet-friendly housing

In recent years, animal charities such as Battersea, Cats Protection, Dogs Trust and RSPCA have all encouraged housing associations and local authorities to have pet friendly policies. **Research by Battersea has shown that pet owners are 60 per cent more likely than non-pet owners to get to know people in their neighbourhoods and develop stronger community ties⁷⁵.**

Anchor Hanover is the largest provider of specialist housing and care for people in later life in England. It provides 54,000 homes, including over 100 residential care homes and operate in more than 90% of local councils in England. Anchor Hanover has a pet friendly policy and around 4,800 residents own at least one pet.

Nick Sedgwick, Director of Service Development at Anchor Hanover said, "Anchor Hanover, is committed to supporting and improving the health and wellbeing of people in later life. We see our pet friendly approach as one of the key elements in making our homes and communities places where people will love living."

Harry is a nine year old miniature Shetland pony. While most of his time is spent in the fields, occasionally he accompanies his owner Emma on visits to local residential homes. Emma said, "Harry is a very special little pony and seems to have an instant connection with the residents each time he has visited. He amazes us all with how calming his presence is to the residents. Nothing fazes him and I am so proud of him. It really is so rewarding to see the impact it has on the people he visits. I really feel like he makes a difference in the time that we are there."



Harry at Penhurst Gardens care home

We recommend that sheltered housing and care home providers look to develop workable pet friendly policies and provide adequate training to staff.

Connecting individuals within the local community

It is clear that more and more people across all age groups are feeling increasingly disconnected from society. For some, there is no longer a sense of belonging. One way this can be alleviated is by encouraging services to work together in the local area. Whether these services are government funded; charity run or local initiatives; medical services; community groups or volunteer led; all play an important role in creating a greater sense of community.

Pets Against Loneliness (PAL) is a group of volunteers in north London bringing together older members of the community with well-behaved dogs and their owners for the purposes of joy and the alleviation of loneliness. PAL is guided by three key values: Community, Companionship, and Kindness. PAL hosts monthly morning gatherings facilitating connections between visitors, particularly encouraging younger people to bring older friends, neighbours or family members who may benefit from these meetings. Lyn Ambrose, Founder of PAL said, "PAL was born from the twin beliefs that older members of the community are often undervalued in our society - sometimes leading to isolation and feelings of loneliness - and that animal companionship can make a big difference to this".



Blue Cross will develop more cohesive and integrated links within the local community, including establishing relationships with local social prescribing link workers to share knowledge and to signpost clients to relevant support services

Conclusion

In the right setting, pets can help combat against loneliness in everyday life and, in some cases, can lessen the symptoms of social isolation by encouraging social interactions. These positives are not limited to the owner; animal interactions can also bring together people in the community together to form wider connections.

As a charity, Blue Cross has seen how pets can greatly help some individuals who may identify as lonely. However, there is still a need for more scientific research on the health and wellbeing benefits of pet ownership on alleviating loneliness.

We would like to see the government recognise the role pets can play in alleviating loneliness in the future development and implementation of the government's loneliness strategy. This recognition could be the starting point for further collaborative work across multiple different agencies.



Poverty and low income

Overview of the problem

The UK is one of the richest countries in the world but poverty and low income are still major problems for many people⁷⁷. People can move in and out of poverty a number of times over the course of their lives, sometimes even during the course of one year; being born into poverty does not necessarily mean a life spent in poverty, as it did for the vast majority of people in the past.

So how is poverty and low income measured? It is important to note first of all that there are a number of different definitions of poverty, be it absolute or relative. The common definitions of poverty are:

- Relative income poverty, where households have less than 60% of contemporary median income
- Absolute income poverty, where households have less than 60% of the median income in 2010/11, uprated by inflation

The independent Social Metrics Commission concluded that the total number of people living in poverty is 14.2 million, 4.5 million of whom were children and 8.4 million were working-age adults. 30% of UK children live below the poverty line⁷⁸.

Since 2008, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has developed a minimum income standard for the UK. It is based on the items that members of the public think households need to be able to afford in order to meet material needs such as food, clothing and shelter, as well as to have the opportunities and choices required to participate in society. **In order to reach a minimum acceptable living standard in 2019, a single person needs to earn £18,800 a year and a couple with two children need to earn £20,600 per parent⁷⁹.**

Behind every number is a person, with their own unique dreams, desires and aspirations – and pets. The psychological, emotional, and physical effects of living in poverty and low income, the qualitative aspects are equally relevant to this report.

Poverty, mental health and isolation are intrinsically linked. It is known that poverty “increases the risk of mental health problems and can be both a causal factor and a consequence of mental ill health”⁸⁰. The same can be said of isolation: “the link between social isolation and poverty is an obvious one – and a catch-22. Social isolation can lead to missed economic opportunity, and poverty often means that social resources are inaccessible”⁸¹.

The current climate

Benefits system

The Government spends a lot of money on the benefits system. In 2018/19, the total bill for the social security system is likely to be around £222 billion⁸².



£222 billion

In recent years, governments of all political persuasions have embarked on ambitious and far-reaching changes to the benefits system with the aim of creating an integrated system which is fit for purpose and can properly support people when they are struggling.

Benefits cap

In 2010, the coalition government announced it would be bringing in a ‘benefits cap’. The 2015 Budget limited the total amount a household can receive in benefits to £20,000 per year for families (£13,400 for single people) outside London, and £23,000 per year for families (£15,410 for single people) in London. The House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee, made up of MPs from all political persuasions, in its report into the benefit cap, stated: **“We are hearing harrowing stories from all over the country of people going hungry, parents struggling to feed their children, families shivering in their homes because they can’t afford heating, and tenants building up crippling rent arrears.”**⁸³

Benefits freeze

In 2015, the coalition government announced the so-called ‘benefits freeze’, whereby working-age benefits and tax credits would be frozen in cash terms until 2020. Between 2016 and 2020, the benefits freeze will have affected more than 27 million people and pushed 400,000 into poverty⁸⁴.

Universal Credit

The most wide-ranging of all welfare reforms, though, is the introduction of Universal Credit (UC). This will eventually combine six benefits into one, intended to simplify what can be a complex system. However, a number of elements of UC have been identified as causing severe problems for claimants: the five week wait for the first payment – introduced to reflect how people in paid employment are usually paid - has caused problems for people who used to receive their benefits fortnightly⁸⁵.

Low income

The traditional view of poverty has usually associated it with people who, for whatever reason, do not work. However, one of the most noticeable aspects of poverty in Britain in recent years has been the increase in families living in poverty where one or more members is in work. This is partly due to weak wage growth since the 2008 financial crisis: the earnings of many of the lowest paid have simply not kept pace with the standard of living.

Food banks

One of the most noticeable indicators of increasing poverty has been the proliferation of food banks, run by charitable organisations such as the Trussell Trust. Figures from the Trussell Trust show that between April 2017 and March 2018, its food bank network distributed 1.6 Million three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, a 19% increase on the previous year⁸⁶.

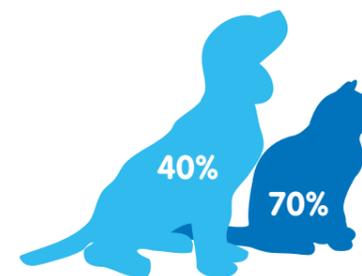
Pets and poverty

It is very difficult to put an accurate figure on the exact numbers of pet owners who live in poverty. As outlined above, people move in and out of poverty over time and the figures are constantly changing.

Blue Cross recently surveyed a group of people from the lower socio-economic bracket (C2DE)⁸⁷. Of those surveyed, 67% were pet owners. While not all of those people would fall in the category of low income or poverty, many will. Blue Cross would like to see further research undertaken to ascertain how many pet owners are currently living in poverty and how best to support them.

Pet insurance

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the issues pet owners living in poverty face relate to the provision of vet care and insurance. Recent surveys have suggested that vast numbers of cat and dog owners do not have insurance for their pets.



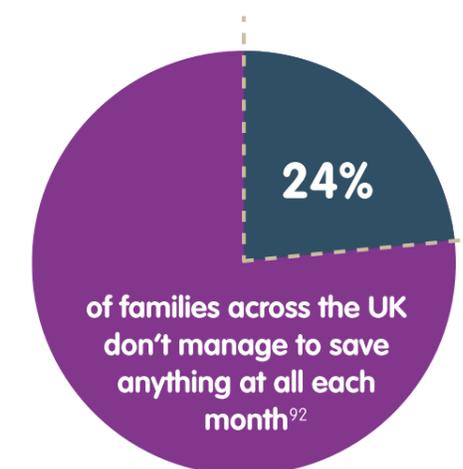
40% of dog owners and around 70% of cat owners have no insurance for their animals^{88,89}.

This worrying trend is leaving many pet owners in crisis when an unexpected injury or illness affects their much-loved pet.

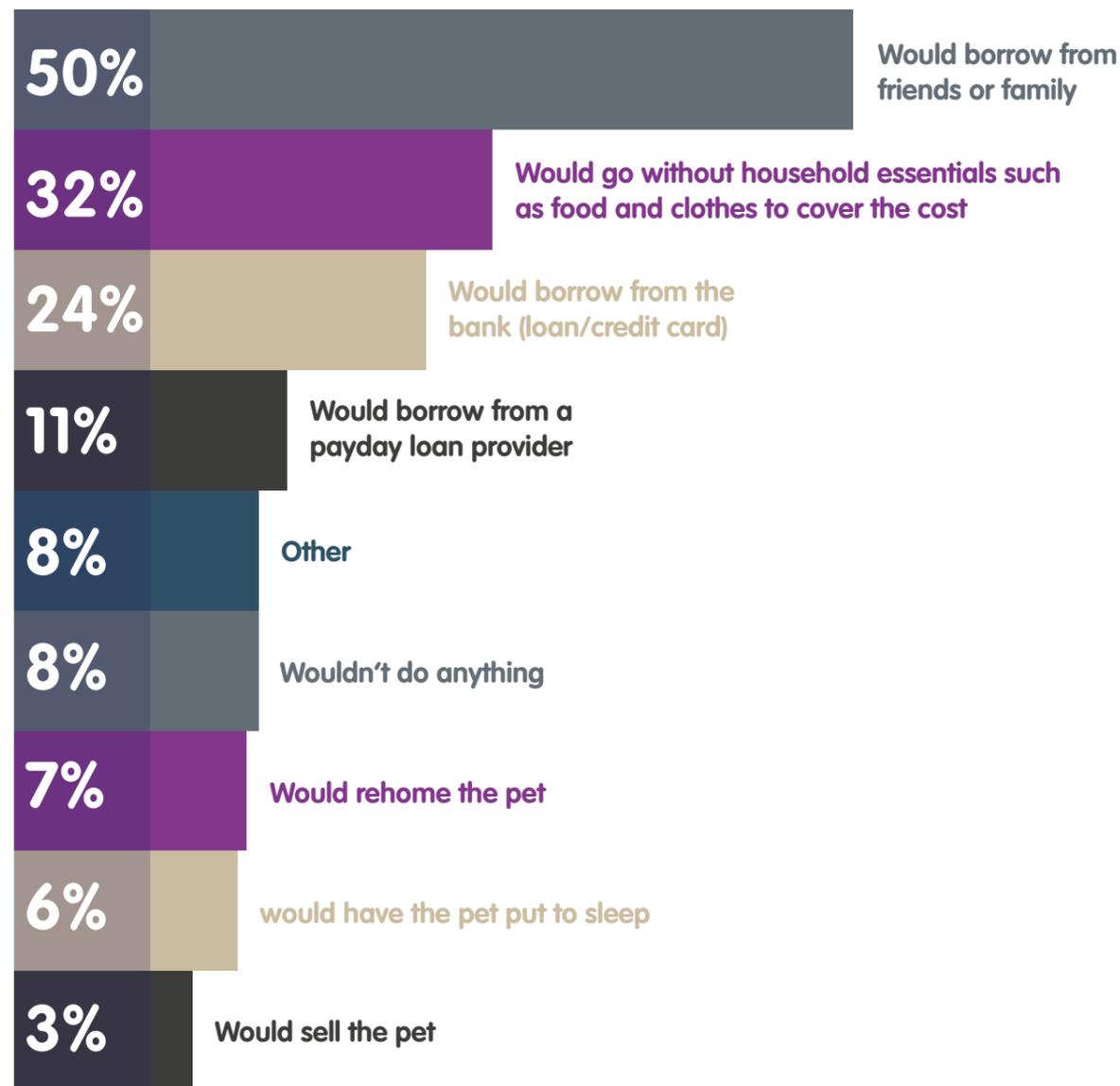
We have looked at the average cost of six common veterinary procedures required for both cats and dogs and compared this to a range of data on average weekly earnings and average savings to see how affordable these procedures are for pet owners who don’t have insurance.

Veterinary Procedure	Cost
Cat involved in a Road Traffic Accident	£1344
Cat Spay	£63
Puppy Inoculations	£51
Ligament damage in the knee (large dog)	£1896
Treatment for infected womb in a medium dog	£650
Euthanasia of a small dog	£160

JRF data looking at the average weekly incomes of the populations shows that those in the lowest fifth percentile of the population have on average £174 a week to spend after having paid their housing costs⁹⁰. Research by Aviva found that on average a low income family has just £95⁹¹ in savings. With little spare disposable income, and very limited savings, it is clear how one of the above common veterinary procedures could be near enough impossible for low income owners to finance without getting themselves into further debt.



Our public polling showed that if the pet needed urgent veterinary care which the owner couldn't afford⁹³:



Insurance companies have the opportunity to work together with the animal welfare sector to support low income pet owners - this is something Blue Cross would like to see insurance providers prioritise in 2020.

Homeless pet owners

There are growing numbers of people who are homeless or rough sleeping in towns and cities across the UK. Recent estimates put the figure at around 320,000; however, this is likely to underestimate the 'hidden homeless' who are sofa surfing, or living out of view in cars or sheds⁹⁴. It's difficult to know how many homeless people own dogs. People who are rough sleeping can be the most visible on our streets, and a number of those do have dogs beside them.

Clients of homelessness charity St Mungo's say there are many reasons people living on the streets may choose to look after an animal, usually a dog, occasionally a cat. One of the key reasons is companionship; living on the streets is not only dangerous but also incredibly isolating. Having a dog provides company, security, warmth and friendship; the bond between owner and dog is incredibly strong. David, a St Mungo's client and member of their Outside In client representative forum described

the role pet ownership can play in helping people start to rebuild their lives: "If a pet is your life, having it would help the owner to sort their life out. So owning dogs can lead to living better and wanting to do better."

"If a pet is your life, having it would help the owner to sort their life out. Owning dogs can lead to living better and wanting to do better."

It is, however, important to note that having a dog can be a barrier to people rebuilding their lives away from the streets. This can be a particular problem when people move from rough sleeping on the streets into hostel accommodation and then on into more permanent rental accommodation, often private rented. Many hostels, for various understandable reasons, do not allow pets which means owners have the tough choice between accepting a bed at a hostel, but having to give up their pet, or continuing to live on the streets with their pet. Given the strength of the bond described above, it is unsurprising that people would rather continue to live on the streets than accept a bed which would mean giving up their best friend.

St Mungo's recognises the benefits pets can play in their clients' lives and therefore have developed a pet management policy which means many of their hostels are able to house clients with their dogs. At any one time the charity estimates that there are up to 40 dogs living with their owners across their range of hostels and accommodation services in London. This enables people, who may have otherwise struggled to find temporary housing away from the streets, to begin to get settled and focus on their futures.

One St Mungo's client is Mandy. After a family breakup, she ended up on the streets with her Staffordshire bull terrier named Skye. She was offered temporary accommodation through the local authority but wasn't able to take Skye with her. She wasn't willing to be separated from Skye so ended up sleeping rough on the streets of London. Mandy slept rough for two and a half weeks and felt so despairing she attempted suicide. Fortunately, with the support of St Mungo's, she was found accommodation in a housing project in Islington which allowed dogs. Mandy is now moving forward with her life⁹⁵.

People with pets can also struggle to access support services for their health because they don't have anyone who can look after their pet while they access treatment. Again, this can mean that they are unable to get the help they need to move on and recover. The Mayhew, an organisation based in North London that focuses on supporting not only animals, but the wider community of pet owners, has developed a project to help in this area. Their pet refuge scheme is focussed on providing emergency short-term fostering for pet owners in need. It can be extremely beneficial for people who are homeless, including clients of St Mungo's, who need respite from looking after their pet, to access services such as drug or alcohol rehabilitation courses or surgery in hospital for ongoing medical conditions.

One such owner is Wully who was able to use the Pet Refuge scheme so he could access treatment for his alcoholism.

There is a range of support currently available for homeless pet owners, including veterinary support



Wully

“

I wouldn't have been able to go to rehab if Zoe hadn't offered foster care for my dogs at Mayhew.

”

Ten years ago Wully Struthers found himself homeless on the streets of London with his dog after his girlfriend died and the council wouldn't pass on the tenancy of the flat they shared.

Drinking since he was 11 years old, he is convinced he would not have survived much longer had staff at Mayhew not persuaded him to put his dogs into the Pet Refuge programme and go to rehab. By the time he was an adult, Wully had become addicted to alcohol and soon graduated to four bottles of super strength cider a day. Unable to give up, he was lost and feeling hopeless until Zoe Edwards, Head of Animal Welfare at Mayhew, walked into the Broadway Homeless Day Centre and met him.

Zoe paid regular visits to Wully's squat over a number of years where she offered advice, support and provided a range of preventative health treatments, such as flea and worm treatments and microchipping. She also convinced Wully to get his dogs neutered and offered Pet

Refuge for his dogs whilst he sought help for his problems.

Wully said: "I'd been drinking since I was young and I really wanted to get clean. I had mental health issues and alcohol problems and badly needed help. I wouldn't have been able to go to rehab if Zoe hadn't offered foster care for my dogs at Mayhew. It was a huge weight off my mind knowing they were safe and being looked after."

"Zoe is the salt of the earth and helped me get my act together. I really believe I would have ended up dead without her."

Zoe added: "We kept up our visits with Wully over the years providing support to him and his dogs. He finally agreed to let us help him by putting his dogs into Pet Refuge whilst he went into detox and rehab, on two separate occasions, to overcome his drug and alcohol addictions. He was successful and has now been clean for a few years."

"I remember going to see him a couple of years after, as he was one of my ongoing welfare cases, and he gave me £100 that he had raised for Mayhew, which was so good of him. I am extremely proud of Wully, he is a lovely kind man and it was a privilege to help him and his two lovely Staffies."

Wully has been clean for over three years and now works as a healthcare advocate for the homeless. He lives in West London with Gallis and Azzy.

such as that provided by Dogs Trust as part of their Hope Project, now in its 25th year. The Project helps support homeless people in 110 towns and cities across the UK by funding veterinary care. In London, Blue Cross is one of the organisations that provides veterinary care to Hope Project clients.

Blue Cross also recently set up a partnership with the Westminster St Mungo's street outreach team to trial the use of our vet care vouchers. These vouchers will be distributed by the outreach teams to people sleeping rough who have no recourse to public funds and therefore, would fall outside of our normal eligibility criteria. They will then be entitled to 12 months of treatment at a Blue Cross hospital.

With the numbers of people living on the streets on the rise, and homelessness not just being contained to large metropolitan areas but spreading to towns up and down the country, animal charities must ensure we work in partnership to deliver the most effective support solutions for homeless pet owners.

It is also important that the animal welfare sector works together with the homeless sector to ensure that we can tackle some of the issues that prevent people from moving on to permanent accommodation. For example, encouraging pet friendly policies in hostels, and within the rental sector, and the provision of more emergency fostering schemes.

We recommend that housing providers develop workable pet friendly policies, provide adequate training for staff and share best practice

Impact of benefits changes on pet owners

As detailed earlier, the benefits system has undergone some major changes over the last few years. Whilst more research is needed, our public polling suggests that for some pet owners, these changes have impacted on their ability to afford the costs associated with keeping their pet⁹⁶.

17%

of those receiving means-tested benefits stated that a delay in their payments had caused them difficulties in meeting the costs of keeping a pet.

14%

of owners stated that benefit sanctions had made it difficult to meet the costs of keeping a pet.

15%

of owners had experienced difficulties in proving eligibility for low cost veterinary services because of the new online system.

There is more the animal welfare sector can do to help pet owners in need and Blue Cross suggests that as a sector, we should work together with other agencies working with this client group to look for solutions to help vulnerable pet owners more effectively nationwide. This will enable more owners to not only keep their pet but also to properly provide for their health and welfare.

Inability to afford pets

As a rehoming organisation, we have thousands of pets given up to us each year. There are a range of reasons why people have to give up their animals but one of the most commonly cited is an inability to afford to look after the pet, whether that is paying for veterinary care, food or other associated costs.

It is all too often the case that a lack of money for a small veterinary bill, or a few weeks' worth of food, can lead to people being forced to give up their much loved companion. Kayleigh Hill, Rehoming Centre Manager, Manchester said, "The saddest cases we see are often those where a responsible owner is forced to give up their pet because they simply cannot afford the cost of basic necessities. Wherever possible, we would always prefer to see these animals stay in their loving homes."

Each year, we see many cases where a small financial cost has led to rehoming. Blue Cross on average spends around £517 rehoming a cat and £618 rehoming a dog. The process of rehoming can be stressful, for the owner and the pet, may take weeks or months to find the perfect new home at an ever increasing cost to the organisation; all of this because, in some cases, the owners didn't have access to a small amount of spare income.

In the long run, it would be more cost effective, not to mention better for the welfare of all involved, for charities to develop a model which helps support low income pet owners to keep their much-loved animals. This would also free up time and resources to spend caring for and rehoming stray, neglected and abandoned animals whose immediate needs are greater.

A number of charities, including Blue Cross, RSPCA and PDSA, provide free and subsidised veterinary care. However, without national reach of these services, there will always be pet owners who are unable to access the support we provide. It is therefore important that we work together to develop new models, but it is not only down to the charity sector.

There is more the private veterinary sector can and must do to support owners. Some veterinary practices provide subscription models for owners where they can pay a monthly fee to cover them for an annual consultation as well as vaccines, flea and worm treatment. Flexible approaches like this enable many owners to spread the cost throughout the year, and this area should be explored further.

Understanding the true cost of pets

As well as trying to support owners in difficult financial times, it is also important that as a sector, we do more to educate the public about the realistic lifetime costs of keeping a pet. Many owners drastically underestimate the lifetime costs of keeping an animal; for example our public polling showed that almost 60% of people underestimated the cost of keeping a cat; in fact, 27% of those people believed that the cost would be £3000 or less when the reality is that the cost of a cat over its lifetime is on average around £12,000⁹⁷. Blue Cross believes that many potential pet purchasers spend very little time on pre-purchase research. We want to ensure that all current and potential pet owners are aware of the cost and commitment involved in the lifetime care of a pet. This would help owners to make a more informed decision and assess whether they can afford or access support to enable them to look after their animal properly.

Effect of poverty on horse owners

The cost of keeping a horse can easily end up at tens of thousands each year and, with horses living as long as 30 years, it is a significant financial commitment⁹⁸. It is, therefore, unsurprising that a change in circumstance such as a job loss, home move or relationship breakdown can often leave horse owners in a very difficult position where they are unable to afford to keep their horse. Unlike with smaller companion animals, no charity we came across provides low cost vet care for horse owners.

With many horse charities at capacity, an owner seeking help to rehome their horse may not be able to find an organisation who can help. The reality of this is that horse owners are often left with very few options and nowhere to turn for support. They may end up having to try and sell the horse or be put into the unenviable position of having to consider euthanasia.

Rosie Mogford, Senior Horse Rehoming Manager for Blue Cross said, "The cost of euthanasia is a big issue, many people avoid it under the veil of not wanting or needing to do it, when really it is because of the cost."

We recommend that horse welfare organisations form a working group to look at possible support options for low income horse owners

Ways to improve support for low income pet owners

Provision of low cost veterinary care

Charities such as Blue Cross, PDSA and RSPCA provide low cost and free vet care to people on means-tested benefits and low incomes. However, despite charities spending millions each year providing these services, there are still large numbers of pet owners struggling to access low cost vet care. Charity low cost vet care is not currently available nationwide and there are pockets of the country with no provision whatsoever. Blue Cross believes that an essential first step is to create a map of all low cost vet care provision available across the country so charities and the private sector can develop targeted services in areas of need. It would also enable owners to have a greater understanding of the services available to them.

As issues of poverty and low income have changed over recent years, with more and more working families now falling below the poverty line, traditional ways of identifying who requires help may need to be revisited. The sector needs to work together to ensure that we are supporting the clients that need us most.

Blue Cross will continue to expand our Emergency Care Fund partner practices so that more low income pet owners can access support when needed

Our public polling of low income pet owners found that around 60% of people felt there wasn't enough support available.



Hospitals

“ The hospital helps a broad range of clients within the community, from young parents to elderly pet owners. ”

Blue Cross hospitals and pet care clinics provide low cost veterinary care for people on means-tested benefits. Last year, we treated over 30,000 pets.

Our hospitals are not only places where clients can seek veterinary care and advice for their pets. They often act as a community hub and source of support for pet owners. Many of our clients have been registered with us for a number of years and we have worked hard to build up a trusting relationship between staff and clients. There are also examples of multiple generations of families using Blue Cross services to support their pets because they trust Blue Cross to deliver an excellent service and provide them with the help and support they need to be good pet owners.

The Blue Cross hospital in Grimsby is in an area of extreme deprivation. **Almost 50% of children growing up in the East Marsh area of the town,**

where the hospital is located, are living in poverty, compared with a national average of 33%^{99,100}. The rate of unemployment in the area is also high at 6.4%, almost double the national average^{101,102}.

Faith Woodcock, Hospital Manager said, “Since the hospital opened its doors in 1959, we have seen the need for our services continue to grow. Our hospital acts as a lifeline to local pet owners and is often the main reason owners are able to keep their pets. The hospital helps a broad range of clients within the community, from young parents to elderly pet owners.”

The service provided at the Grimsby hospital is very much tailored to the particular needs of its clients. One example of this is the introduction of remote consults (see page 40), particularly useful for clients who do not have access to their own transport and struggle with the costs of taxis.

Identifying and reaching new clients

With the range of pet owners requiring help no longer limited to those receiving means-tested benefits, Blue Cross recently launched a community referral programme. This enables us to help owners who don't meet our usual eligibility criteria but would still be considered to be on low income. The scheme works by providing vouchers to partner organisations, who then issue them to their clients. A voucher entitles the client to access vet care for 12 months at their nearest Blue Cross hospital or clinic. While still in its early days, the scheme is working in partnership with food banks, homeless hostels, and other relevant community groups and has great potential to help a wider range of clients access low cost veterinary care.

After building relationships with local organisations around Merton through community events, Blue Cross now provides community referral partners such as Age UK Merton, social prescribers and Wimbledon Guild with vouchers for vet care registration. These vouchers are issued at the discretion of the referral partners and allow the bearer to bypass our usual benefit checks. The voucher gives the person one year registration for our animal hospitals, entitling them to free and low cost vet care. Louise Newman, Practice Manager, Merton hospital said, “Many people assume they cannot afford veterinary care and don't realise that hospitals like Blue Cross are there to support them, which is why it is important to link up services.”

Blue Cross will continue to expand the referral voucher scheme and look at eligibility criteria to ensure pet owners in need can access support

Provision of non-veterinary support for low income pet owners

Low income families can face a sudden reduction in their income for a range of reasons. When this happens, it can be hard to meet even the basic costs of pet ownership and they may face a choice between providing for themselves or their pet.

One possible solution is to replicate the network of food banks that exists for families with a network of pet food banks, giving owners in crisis access to pet food and other necessary items. There are small local pet food banks in operation across the country but the numbers are limited and there is currently no national network, meaning that large numbers of pet owners are unable to access support with pet food. A coordinated, national network of pet food banks, whether stand alone, or run in collaboration with organisations like the Trussell Trust, has the potential to help thousands of struggling pet owners. Around 66% of owners said they would use a pet food bank in their area if one existed¹⁰³.

Blue Cross to investigate the feasibility of a pet food bank to provide pet food and other necessary items for owners in need.

What our hospitals mean to our clients

It is clear that the service Blue Cross hospitals provide is really meaningful for our clients. The care provided can be the difference between them being able to keep their pet and being forced to either give it up or not adequately provide for its health and welfare requirements.

Blue Cross regularly surveys clients to find out how we can improve the service we offer and also to find out what our service means to them. Below are some quotes from current registered clients:

What difference does Blue Cross Clinic make to you and your pet?

'makes looking after my pet more manageable'

'a massive difference, hate to see my dogs suffering and now we can get quality care when needed'

'a lot of difference, they are an amazing team and I am extremely grateful for the service'

What would you have done if Blue Cross weren't able to support your pet's treatment?

'I really don't know who I would have turned to for help'

'Give him to Cats Protection if I couldn't get treatment so he wasn't suffering'

'I couldn't afford to take her to the vets. She would probably have to be put to sleep'

Conclusion

From the stories our clients tell us we know that their pets are a fundamental part of their lives. Many clients live really tough lives dealing with multiple challenges just to make ends meet. Having a pet is a source of support and comfort for them.

Our public polling shows that pets are incredibly important to low income families for a wide range of reasons; they help their owners in their daily lives, improve their quality of life and for many owners, they are simply their best friend.



For over a hundred years, Blue Cross has supported pet owners in times of need to help them afford the veterinary care their animal requires. We are proud of our clinical work and the support we provide to tens of thousands of pet owners each year and we are committed to highlighting the positive benefits pets bring to our clients lives. We are also committed to looking to develop new models that mean that we can grow and advance the support we can provide for low income pet owners up and down the UK.

It is important to point out that, with the help and support of organisations like Blue Cross, low income families can be fantastic pet owners. In return, their pets provide comfort, support and companionship. While the benefits of pet ownership are universal regardless of income, it could be argued that in some ways people on low incomes may experience these benefits on a more intense level. This is because sometimes their pet can be one of the only comforts in their lives. As this report has shown, there is a link between poverty and the other issues we have analysed in this report: mental health and isolation. Those on lower incomes are more at risk of falling into these categories and, therefore, the role their pet plays in their lives can take on even more meaning.



Appendix

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, I would like to make the following request for information.

1. Do you use any form of Animal-assisted Therapy within your Mental Health Trust?

YES NO

2. Is the AAT used primarily for patients with: (please tick the relevant box)

Depression
Anxiety
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
Dementia
Other

3. How many instances has AAT been used for each of the above in the last five years?

2018
2017
2016
2015
2014

4. Do you have a standard operating procedure or protocol in place for AAT? If so, please provide a copy of this.

5. How much money is spent each year on AAT within your Mental Health Trust?

6. Has the Trust published any evaluation reports on the effectiveness of AAT? If so, please could you provide a copy.

Blue Cross conducted three surveys with Censuswide, a polling company who abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles. Details of the three surveys and the questions used in the report are detailed below:

(A) The research was conducted by Censuswide, with 1,004 respondents who suffer from mental health problems in UK, between 25.07.2019 - 29.07.2019.

What do you think are the main barriers to owning pets for people with mental health conditions? (Tick up to three)

- Coping with potential loss of the pet
- Concern about who will care for pet in moments of crisis - hospitalisation, etc.,
- Costs associated with keeping the pet
- Potential inability to provide proper care for the pet
- Housing issues
- Concerns about coping with pet's health issues or behaviour
- Impact on mental health condition
- I don't think there are any main barriers to owning pets for people with mental health condition

Other, please specify

What aspects of owning a pet do you think are most beneficial for your mental health? (Tick up to three)

- Love and loyalty
- Company
- Providing sense of purpose and meaning in life
- Physical exercise
- Motivation
- Trust
- Social support
- Self-esteem
- I don't think any aspects of owning a pet are most beneficial for mental health

Other please specify

What does your pet mean to you? (Tick all that apply)

- They are my best friend
- They help me in my daily life
- They are crucial in helping me keeping my mental health in check
- They are my lifeline
- I wouldn't be here without them
- They are my gateway to an active lifestyle (e.g. walking with pet, running etc.)
- My pet doesn't mean anything to me

Other, please specify

Have you received Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) as part of the treatment for your mental health condition?

- Yes, more than once
- Yes, once
- No
- Prefer not to say

What would you do if you couldn't have AAT? (Tick all that apply)

- Seek the help of a charity who provides AAT
- My condition would worsen
- Get a pet myself at home
- Find another private provider of AAT
- No longer get treatment for my condition
- I wouldn't do anything / this wouldn't affect me
- Prefer not to say

Do you think AAT should be available in all NHS Mental Health Trusts across the UK?

- Yes definitely
- Yes, possibly
- No

B) The research was conducted by Censuswide, with 1,001 respondents who are pet owners and non-pet owners (gen pop) in UK, between 25.07.2019 - 29.07.2019.

Do you think owning a pet has/would have a positive impact on your quality of life?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, possibly
- No

Does/would owning a pet make you feel less lonely?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, possibly
- No

C) The research was conducted by Censuswide, with 1,010 respondents who are from lower socioeconomic group C2DE, between 25.07.2019 - 30.07.2019. C2DE comprises of skilled manual workers, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers and state pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only.

Do you feel that there is available support for pet owners struggling with the cost of keeping a pet?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, some support
- No, not really
- No, definitely not

What would you do if your pet needed urgent veterinary care and you couldn't afford it? (Tick all that apply)

- Borrow from friends or family
- Gone without household essentials (food, clothes etc.) to cover costs.
- Borrow from the bank (loan / credit card)
- Borrow from a pay day loan provider
- Other, please specify
- I wouldn't do anything
- Rehome your pet
- Have the pet put to sleep
- Sell your pet
- Prefer not to say

What do you think the average lifetime cost of keeping a cat is?

- Less than £1,000 please specify
- £1,000 - £3,000
- £3,001 - £8,000
- £8,001 - £15,000
- £15,001 - £20,000
- £20,001 - £30,000
- £30,001- £50,000
- £50,001 - £100,000

What aspect of owning a pet would be or has been most beneficial to you?
(Tick up to five)

- Love and loyalty
- Company
- Trust
- Providing sense of purpose and meaning in life
- Physical exercise
- Motivation
- Social support
- Self-esteem
- No aspect has been / would be most beneficial
- Other

Do you receive means tested benefits?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Have you experienced any of the following issues? (Tick all that apply)

- Delayed benefits payment making it difficult to meet the costs of keeping a pet
- Benefits freeze making it difficult to meet the costs of keeping a pet
- Online benefits system making it harder to show paperwork to prove eligibility for low cost/ free vet care
- Benefits sanctions making it difficult to meet the costs of keeping a pet
- None of the above

Would you use a pet food bank if there was one in your area (if you owned a pet) ?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, possibly
- No

What does your pet mean to you? (Tick all that apply)

- They are my best friend
- Helps improve my overall quality of life
- They help me in my daily life
- They are crucial in helping me keeping my mental health in check
- They are my lifeline
- They are my gateway to an active lifestyle (e.g. walking with pet, running etc.)
- I wouldn't be here without them
- My pet doesn't mean anything to me

Other, please specify

Alongside the above research, workshops were held with staff and volunteers from across the organisation including rehoming centres, hospitals, education, PBSS and insights over a five month period.

To help the compilation of the report, we held workshops with Blue Cross staff across the country, from London to Lewknor, Newport to Torbay. Their invaluable experience, knowledge and expertise has enabled the report to capture a snapshot of what it is like to be a pet owner whose life is shadowed by our three themes.

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Useful links and numbers

Charities providing low cost vet care

Blue Cross

Website - bluecross.org.uk/veterinary-locations
Telephone – 0300 790 9903

PDSA

Website - pdsa.org.uk/
Telephone - 0800 731 2502

RSPCA

Website - rspca.org.uk/
Telephone - 0300 1234 999

Mental Health

Dogs for Good

Website - dogsforgood.org/
Telephone - 01295 252600

Horsemanship for health

Website - belindaseaward.com/horsemanship-for-health/

Mind

Website - mind.org.uk/
Helpline Telephone – 0300 123 3393

Pets as Therapy

Website - petsastherapy.org/
Telephone - 01865 671440

Samaritans

Website - samaritans.org/
Telephone – 116 123 (free call)

Isolation and loneliness

Age UK

Website - ageuk.org.uk/
Free advice line - 0800 678 1602

Give a Dog a Bone

Website - giveadogabone.net/
Telephone - 07969 742 858

Pets against Loneliness

Website - petsagainstloneliness.com/

Support Dogs

Website - supportdogs.org.uk/
Telephone - 0114 261 7800

Poverty and low income

Dogs Trust Hope Project

Website - moretodogstrust.org.uk/hope-project/hope-project
Telephone - 020 7837 0006

Mayhew Pet Refuge

Website - themayhew.org/community-support/pet-refuge/
Telephone - 020 8962 8000

St Mungo's

Website - mungos.org/
Telephone - 020 3856 6000

A link in the chain:

Tackling mental health, poverty and loneliness through pet ownership

Find out more online at bluecross.org.uk/link-chain

For more information publicaffairs@bluecross.org.uk

Blue Cross is a charity that has been helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.

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