

PAW

PDSA ANIMAL WELLBEING

REPORT

2023

FOCUS ON
COST OF
LIVING AND
FERTILITY
CLINICS

THE ESSENTIAL INSIGHT INTO THE WELLBEING OF UK PETS



PAW REPORT 2023

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As well as the usual in-depth analysis of the state of health of our pet nation, the 2023 PAW Report focuses on the contemporary issues of cost of living and the awareness of fertility clinics and licensing regulations of dogs

Welcome



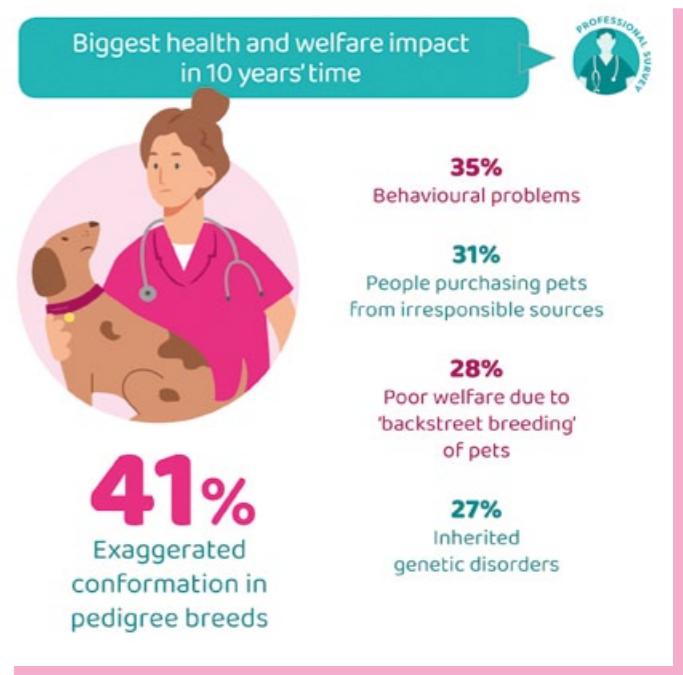
Since 2011, PDSA has worked with one of the UK's leading research companies, YouGov, to produce the annual PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report. In that time, it has become a highly respected source of statistics in the animal welfare sector, used to stimulate collaborative working, inform government research, policy and legislation and inspire innovative approaches in veterinary clinical practice.

Each year, the Report surveys a nationally representative sample of dog, cat and rabbit owners to accurately estimate pet populations and help us understand how these animals' 5 Welfare Needs are being met. Robust methodology, consistently applied, enables accurate comparison of data and identification of trends, and allows assessment of the impact of national events and welfare initiatives.

Over the past three years, our unique dataset has allowed us to accurately assess how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the welfare of the UK's pets, and this year we are also able to see how the cost of living crisis is affecting owners' ability to care for their pets. In this year's Report, we have repeated our survey of veterinary professionals, giving us valuable insight from the people who sadly see the impacts when the patients they treat are not having their welfare needs met.

The 2023 Report gives valuable insight into welfare concerns that have emerged in recent years, including pets acquired from abroad, canine fertility clinics, and the latest trends in the online sale and advertising of pets, as well as continuing our monitoring of ongoing issues such as inadequate housing and companionship for rabbits, inadequate resources for cats, and preventive healthcare uptake and obesity across all three species.

The data contained in this Report give us a deeper understanding of how the UK's pets are cared for and how, between us, we can all continue to support owners to provide the best life for the animals in their care. It remains the benchmark for gaining insight into how UK owners provide for the needs of their pets.



Methodology

The PAW Report is the largest annual survey of pet wellbeing in the UK and is demographically representative of dog, cat and rabbit owners.

By working with YouGov, our annual PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report is representative of the UK pet owning population. This creates an accurate picture of pet wellbeing across the nation.

The first Report was launched in 2011; this provides us with 13 years of trend data allowing reporting on how owners are meeting the 5 Welfare Needs of their pets, insights from the veterinary profession, and estimates of the UK pet dog, cat and rabbit populations.

Data sources used in the PAW Report:

- Annual nationally representative survey of pet owners
- Surveys of veterinary professionals
- YouGov data on the incidence of pet ownership in the UK (used in the pet population calculations)
- ONS data (used in the pet population calculations)



Annual survey of pet owners

In conjunction with YouGov, each year we survey a large and demographically representative sample of UK dog, cat, and rabbit owners using YouGov's panel methodology.

In the latest Report, the survey sample totalled 5,507 cat, dog, and rabbit owners over the age of 18 and living in the UK. Therefore, when talking about 'owners' throughout the Report, we're discussing cat, dog, and rabbit owners, not owners of other types of pets.

The data was gathered between 23 December 2022 and 18 January 2023 through an online survey where demographic quotas are set to ensure data gathered is as nationally representative as possible. Any small errors in the final sample are corrected through weighting where necessary. The demographic quotas and weighting that this method uses are determined by a separate YouGov panel survey of 10,000 UK adults which provides demographic information such as regional breakdowns as well as age and gender profiles of owners.

Survey of veterinary professionals

Periodically we survey veterinary professionals online via an open survey. We repeated this survey in 2023 and collected responses from 745 veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, students, nursing support staff, veterinary academics, practice owners, partners and managers.

Fieldwork was undertaken between 6 January and 13 February 2023, hosted by YouGov using an open link. Due to the nature of this survey these figures are not collected in line with any demographic quotas or weighted as per the survey of pet owners. Details of the survey are shared via social media and professional networks to encourage participation. Participants are invited to be entered into a prize draw to win a prize.

Crunching the numbers

Pet population calculation

We work with YouGov to annually calculate estimates of the pet dog, cat and rabbit populations. Three data sources are used in this calculation:

- Separate sampling from the YouGov online survey panel to determine the percentage of UK adults who own each species of pets (n=10,000).
- Data from the PAW Report survey of pet owners on the number of pets owned by each owner.
- Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on the number of households.

Data presentation

Percentages throughout the Report are rounded to the nearest whole number. Other figures, such as the estimated numbers of pets, are rounded to two significant figures. When calculating these we have taken the total estimated population figure for that species of pet and multiplied it by the percentage taken at two decimal places. The resulting figure is then rounded to two significant figures.

Further information

Further details of the PAW Report methodology can be found in our peer-reviewed paper published in the Veterinary Record. 'Driving evidence-based improvements for the UK's 'Stressed. Lonely. Overweight. Bored. Aggressive. Misunderstood... but loved' companion animals' (Wensley et al, 2021), available via open access.

For example, to calculate the estimated number of dogs acquired from abroad:

Estimated dog population (March 2023) = 11.1 million

Percentage of dogs acquired from abroad = 8.20%

$11.1 \text{ million} \times 8.20\% = 910,200$

The figure is then rounded and presented as: 910,000 dogs acquired from abroad.

These estimated numbers of pets are calculated by PDSA.

Where differences between figures are communicated (e.g. there is an increase in the proportion of UK adults who own a pet from 51% in Feb 2020 to 53% in 2023) the differences are statistically significant and validated by YouGov (CI 95%, $p < 0.05$).

Key Findings



Dogs

11 million
pet dogs in the UK



29%
of UK adults own a dog

8%

of dogs were found through social media



8%

of dogs have been acquired from abroad



97,000

dog owners have used a canine fertility clinic in the last 12 months

13%

of dogs are showing signs of distress when left alone



44%

of owners don't know their dog's ideal weight



81%

of dogs have received regular booster vaccinations



61%

of dogs are insured



Cats

11 million
pet cats in the UK



24%
of UK adults own a cat

6%

of cats were found through social media



11%

of cats are pedigree breeds



64%

of owners don't know their cat's ideal weight

On average

1.49

litter trays



in households of 2 or more cats



63%

of cats have received regular booster vaccinations



87%

of cats are neutered



25%

of cats aren't microchipped



Rabbits

1.1 million
pet rabbits in the UK



2%
of UK adults own a rabbit

29%

of rabbits were acquired because owners wanted their children to have a pet



12%

of rabbits were found through social media



22%

of rabbits live in inadequate housing



42%

of rabbits live alone



70%

of owners don't know their rabbit's ideal weight



52%

of rabbits have received regular booster vaccinations



57%

of rabbits are neutered



Vet professionals



In the last two years...

67%

of veterinary professionals have seen an increase in the pet population



In the last two years...

64%

of veterinary professionals have seen an increase in pets imported from abroad



78%

of veterinary professionals say there should be further improvements to the regulations for online sales of all pets



In the last two years...

55%

of veterinary professionals have seen an increase in dogs with cropped ears



In the last two years...

61%

of veterinary professionals have seen an increase in exotic diseases



56%

of veterinary professionals say that more of their clients are not able to afford unexpected vet bills because of the cost of living crisis



48%

of veterinary professionals have seen dogs previously treated at a canine fertility clinic and had welfare concerns resulting from the clinic



In the last two years...

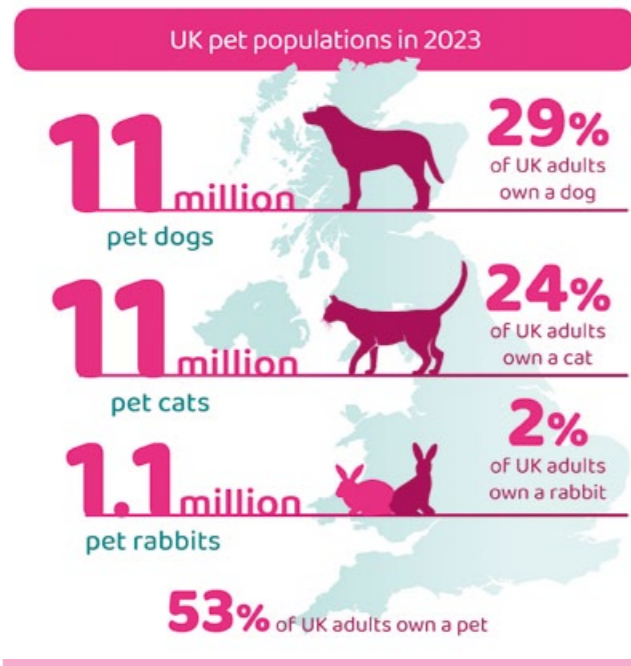
60%

of veterinary professionals have seen an increase in dog behavioural issues



Pet Populations

Since 2011, on an annual basis, the PAW Report has collected nationally representative data to accurately determine the proportion of people in the UK who own a pet and to estimate the total population of the UK's pet dogs, cats, and rabbits*. Consistent methodology, applied over the last 13 years, enables us to compare the data and provides a true picture of how UK pet populations are changing over time.



Our data show that the estimated population of pet dogs in the UK has increased to 11 million since February 2020 when it was 10.1 million. However, there has not been a statistically significant change in the estimated population size of the UK's pet cats or rabbits over the same time period.



In 2023, 53% of UK adults own a pet, (increased from 51% in February 2020) with 29% owning a dog, 24% a cat and 2% a rabbit**. This is a higher proportion for dogs compared to February 2020, when 26% of UK adults owned a dog. 40% of cat owners own more than one cat, compared to only 27% of dog owners.

Although there have been some fluctuations across the 13 years of data, the estimated dog population has risen overall from 8.3 million in 2011 to 11 million in 2023. The consistent methodology of the PAW Report enables us to see that this has been an ongoing overarching gradual increase, and there has not been a dramatic jump in the dog population since 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the dog population in 2023 is higher than in February 2020, this appears to be in line with the ongoing gradual increase, albeit with some fluctuation along the way.

36% of all owners acquired their pet in the last three years, meaning that 8.3 million pets (4.1 million dogs, 3.7 million cats and 580,000 rabbits) have been acquired since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. This is higher for rabbit owners (53%) compared to dog owners (37%) and both are higher than cat owners (34%).

67% of veterinary professionals say they have seen an increase in the pet population in the last two years, with 71% of those saying they think this is because they are seeing more pets in their practice, and 54% because they are seeing more new pets in their community.

The financial commitment of owning a pet could mean that the rising cost of living has the potential to influence people's decision to get a pet. However, our findings do not yet show an impact on pet acquisition – 13% of owners have acquired their pet in the last 12 months (13% of dog, 13% of cat, and 18% of rabbit owners). This is not significantly different to any other recent years (2017 to 2022), although it is higher than in February 2020 (11%).



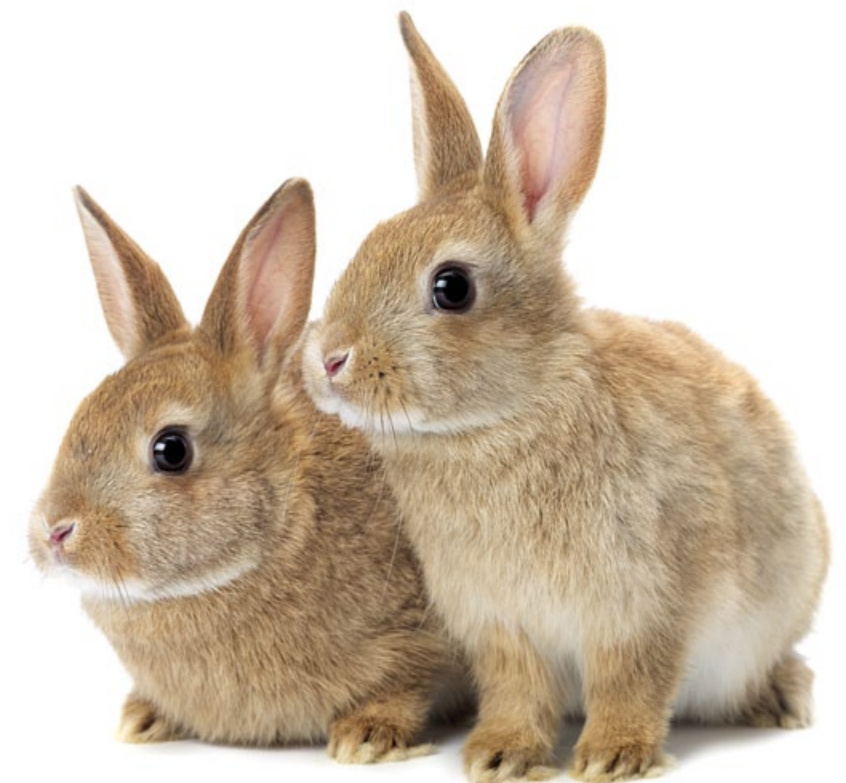
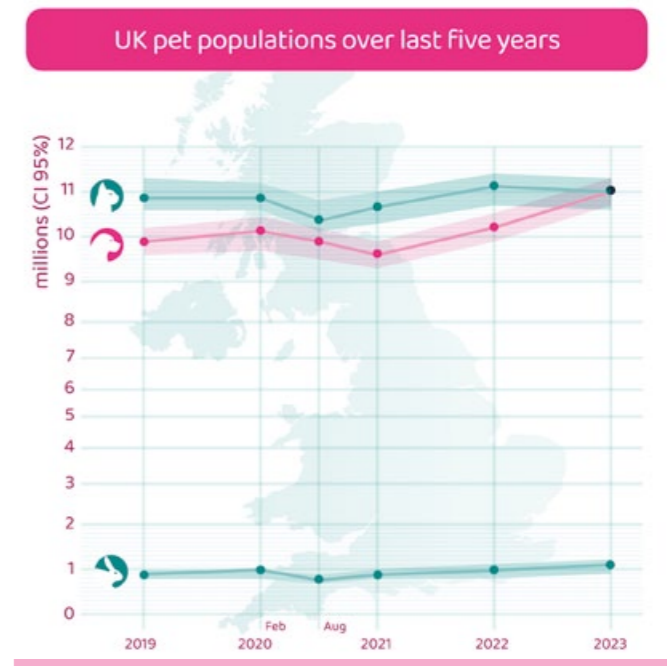
The proportion of all pet owners classed as 'new' in 2023 (38%) has increased since 2021 (34%) and 2022 (36%)

23% of all pet owners told us they have not previously owned any pet as an adult (increased from 21% in both 2022 and 2021), and 38% of all pet owners told us this is their first experience of owning this species of pet as an adult, which we have defined as 'new' pet owners. More rabbit owners (51%) are 'new' owners than dog owners (41%), and both are higher than cat owners (34%). The proportion of all pet owners classed as 'new' in 2023 (38%) has increased since 2021 (34%) and 2022 (36%), driven by a higher proportion of new dog owners in 2023 (41%) compared to 2021 (34%). In 2023, the demographics of these 'new' pet owners are very similar to our findings in 2022, i.e. more likely to be aged under 45, have a higher household income and be working full time.

The increase in the proportion of 'new' owners is an interesting trend, and we will continue to monitor it through future PAW Reports. While we may still be seeing the effects of lifestyle changes due to the pandemic, when spending more time at home meant people felt they had the opportunity to own a pet, there is some nationwide evidence of a return to pre-pandemic behaviours, with a decrease in home working and a return to the workplace, possibly driven in part by the rising cost of living¹.

55% of dog owners told us that their dog was a pedigree and 28% that their dog was a crossbreed. These proportions have not changed since 2020, although the proportion of pedigree dogs is lower than in 2017 (61%). 14% of dog owners told us their pet was a 'specialist' crossbreed (e.g. labradoodle), which has steadily increased over the last five years (8% in 2017, 9% in 2018, 10% in 2019, and 11% in Feb 2020).

86% of cat owners told us that their cat is a 'moggie' (domestic shorthair or longhair), and 11% told us their cat is a pedigree. These proportions have fluctuated over the last few years and there are no clear trends in the data.



* A 95% confidence interval is used to determine the lower and upper limits where the true mean (population mean) is likely to fall within.

** The proportion of UK adults owning a cat is lower than the proportion owning a dog despite similar population sizes due to a higher number of cats per cat owner than dogs per dog owner.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1207746/coronavirus-working-location-trends-britain/>

Pet Acquisition

As might be expected from a nation of animal lovers, many people told us they chose to get a pet for an emotional connection and bond.

The most common reason owners gave for deciding to get their pet was that they make them happy – 51% of dog, 45% of cat, and 35% of rabbit owners. 45% of dog, 36% of cat, and 30% of rabbit owners told us they got their pet for love and affection, and 37% of dog, 30% of cat, and 20% of rabbit owners got their pet for companionship.

In 2023, rabbits continue to be a frequently chosen pet for children, despite their complex health and welfare needs, with 29% of owners telling us they got their rabbits because their children wanted a pet and 14% as companionship for their children. A much lower proportion of cat and dog owners gave these reasons – 12% of cat and 11% of dog owners got their pet because their children wanted them, and 7% of dog and 5% of cat owners got their pet as companionship for their children. A further 11% of rabbit owners told us they got their pet because they wanted their children to have more responsibility in life (a higher proportion than the 3% of cat and 3% of dog owners who said the same).

Pets can be a great way for children to learn empathy and responsibility². However, the welfare of the pet must always be a priority when the decision is made to bring a pet into the family. Rabbits are a prey species and are likely to find the noise and unpredictability of children stressful. In addition, children often wish to pick up and handle their pets, which many rabbits do not enjoy. Incorrect handling techniques can also leave rabbits at risk of severe injuries³. It is essential that both parents and children are supported and educated on how to care for, and behave around rabbits to minimise the risk of stress and injury.

Rabbits were also more likely to be an impulse buy for their owners, with 7% (equating to 72,000 rabbits) saying this is why they decided to get their pet, compared to 2% of dog owners (equating to 250,000 dogs) and 1% of cat owners (equating to 160,000 cats). Also, 7% of cat owners got their pet because they just turned up - this was a higher proportion than for dog (2%) and rabbit owners (3%). Both these findings could imply a lack of proper forethought and research by an owner before choosing their pet. It is essential that owners take the time to learn about the needs of their pet fully prior to obtaining them in order to understand whether they have the time, finances, and knowledge to adequately care for them. **33% of veterinary professionals chose 'lack of adequate pre-purchase education regarding suitable pet choice' as one of the top welfare issues they would choose to resolve tomorrow.** Additionally, 24% chose 'lack of adequate pre-purchase education regarding suitable pet choice' as one of the top issues that would have the biggest health and welfare implication in ten years' time if not tackled.



Where did people get their pets from?

As we found in 2022, the most common places for people to get their dogs, cats and rabbits from have remained largely the same over the last 13 years. Dog owners were most likely to get their pets from a breeder (33%), cat owners from a rescue or rehoming centre (UK or abroad) (31%) and rabbit owners from a pet shop or garden centre (36%).

In 2022, we found that the number of cat and dog owners acquiring their pets from a UK rescue centre rehoming UK pets had fallen. This downward trend appears to have stabilised – the proportion of owners acquiring their pets from this source is unchanged in 2023 (13% of dogs and 29% of cats) compared to 2022 (14% of dogs and 27% of cats). In 2021, 17% of dog and 37% of cat owners told us they had acquired their pets from the same source.



Online pets

65% of owners told us they found their pet online, equating to 15 million pets, a significantly higher proportion than in 2022 when it was 53%. This proportion has increased for all species and is higher for dog owners (72%, 63% in 2022) than for cat (57%, 43% in 2022) and rabbit (55%, 45% in 2022) owners. The most common online sources for pets were dedicated websites, including online advertising sites (17% of all pet owners – 22% of dog, 13% of cat, and 14% of rabbit owners), rescue centres' websites (16% of all pet owners, 14% of dog, 20% of cat, and 10% of rabbit owners) or individual breeders' websites (10% of all pet owners – 14% of dog, 5% of cat and 7% of rabbit owners). This highlights the importance of the work that bodies like the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) are doing to ensure that advertising of pets for sale online is done legally and ethically.

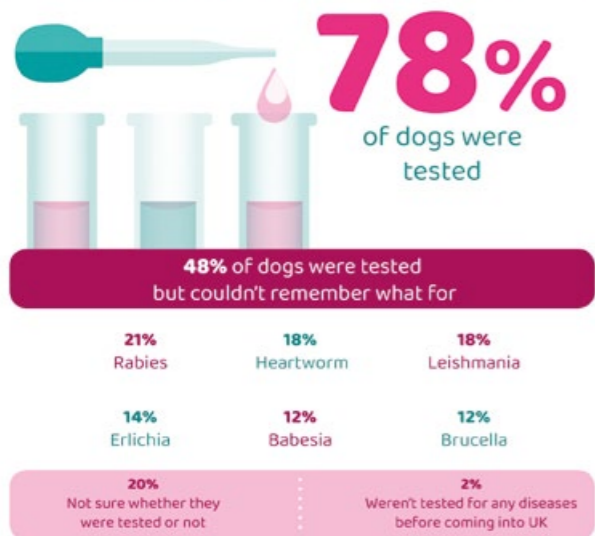
8% of pet owners told us that they had found their pet on social media – 8% of dog, 6% of cat and 12% of rabbit owners. This has increased for dog owners from 5% in 2022, despite rules prohibiting such activity being in place on many of these platforms. The lack of any formal regulation and oversight of these channels means that this is a concerning finding. It is important that owners continue to be supported to help them understand safe and ethical means of acquiring pets.

78% of veterinary professionals agree that there should be further improvements to the regulations for online sales of all pets.

2. Aral, N., Körükçü, Ö., & Kadan, G. (2022). Investigation of the Effect of Keeping Pets at Home and Playing Musical Instruments on the Empathetic Tendencies of Children. *Theory and Practice in Child Development*, 2(2), 58-71

3. Buseeth, M.E., & Saunders, R. (2014). *Rabbit behaviour, health and care*. CABI

What diseases did owners say their dogs were tested for before coming to UK?



Pets from abroad

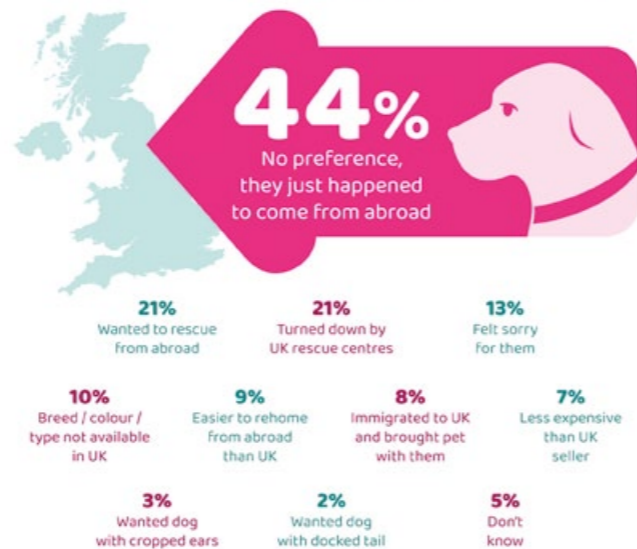
Over the last few years, our findings have shown an increase in the proportion of pets coming from abroad. This increase seems to have slowed in 2023 when 6% of pets were acquired from abroad, which has not changed overall since 2022 – 3% from a UK based rescue centre for pets from abroad, 2% from a rescue or rehoming centre based abroad and <1% each from a breeder of one specific breed based outside of the UK or a breeder of multiple breeds based outside of the UK.

However, the proportion of dogs acquired from abroad has increased to 8% of the total population, from 4% in August 2020, 6% in 2021 and 6% in 2022, equating to 900,000 dogs from abroad currently living in the UK. The proportion of cats acquired from abroad is lower in 2023 (3%) than in 2022 (5%) but still remains higher than in 2021 (1%) or 2020 (1%). 3% of rabbit owners told us they had acquired their pet from abroad (equating to 35,000 rabbits), no different from 2022 (3%) and 2020 (2%), although higher than 2021 (1%).

64% of veterinary professionals say they've seen an increase in pets imported from abroad in the last two years.

It is important for owners to know what country their pet has come from so they can be aware of any potential disease risk in the country of origin that could be different to the UK. In recent years, this has been a particular concern due to the introduction of exotic diseases in UK dogs. Out of the owners who acquired their dog from abroad*, 14% were not sure which country their dog had come from. 32% said their dog had come from Romania, with 7% from Spain, 6% from Cyprus and 6% from Ireland. Although brucellosis is endemic in several European countries, the rise in cases of brucellosis in UK dogs since 2020 has been partly attributed to the increased number of dogs entering the country from Romania⁴.

Why did owners acquire their dog from abroad?



We asked owners of dogs from abroad if they knew what diseases, if any, their dog had been tested for before being imported. 78% of owners told us that their dog had been tested, which includes the 48% of all owners who didn't know what diseases they had been tested for. 21% of owners told us that their dog had been tested for Rabies, 18% for Heartworm and 18% for Leishmania, but only 12% for Brucella. The first dog to human transmission of Brucella canis in the UK was reported in August 2022 and has led to calls for the mandatory testing of dogs for the infection prior to importation⁵.

61% of veterinary professionals told us they have seen an increase in exotic diseases in the last two years, including 30% who have seen an increase in leishmaniasis, 20% who have seen an increase in brucellosis, 17% who have seen an increase in heartworm and 13% who have seen an increase in ehrlichiosis.

As we had found in previous years, when we asked owners why they had chosen to obtain their pet from abroad, the most common reason was that they had no preference for where their pet came from, they just happened to come from abroad (37%). However, there was an increase in owners who told us they got their pet from abroad both because they were turned down by a UK rescue centre (18% in 2023, compared to 7% in 2022) and those who said they wanted to rescue from abroad (20% in 2023 compared to 8% in 2022), whereas those who said they got their pet from abroad because it was less expensive than buying from a UK seller has decreased (7% in 2023 compared to 12% in 2022).

3% of dog owners who got their pet from abroad told us they did so because they wanted a dog with cropped ears, meaning that in 2023 there are an estimated 29,000 dogs that have been imported because their owners wanted them to have a cosmetic mutilation surgery that is illegal in the UK. In addition, 2% of owners said they had chosen to import their pet because they wanted a dog with a docked tail (an estimated 22,000 dogs). **55% of veterinary professionals say in the last two years they've seen an increase in cropped ears.**



A professional view

With the PAW Report highlighting a growth in people buying their pet via online adverts and social media, it's more important than ever that buyers spend time asking the right questions to avoid untrustworthy sellers. It's also imperative that prospective pet owners seriously consider whether a particular pet is a suitable choice for them.

The rising numbers of pets obtained from overseas poses disease risks for pets in the UK and, in some cases, to humans. Anyone looking to adopt from overseas should make sure that the animal has been appropriately tested for non-endemic diseases such as Brucella canis and Leishmania before importation. Additionally, prospective adopters must avoid importing dogs with mutilations such as cropped ears and docked tails.

Paula Boyden MRCVS, Veterinary Director at Dogs Trust and Chair of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group

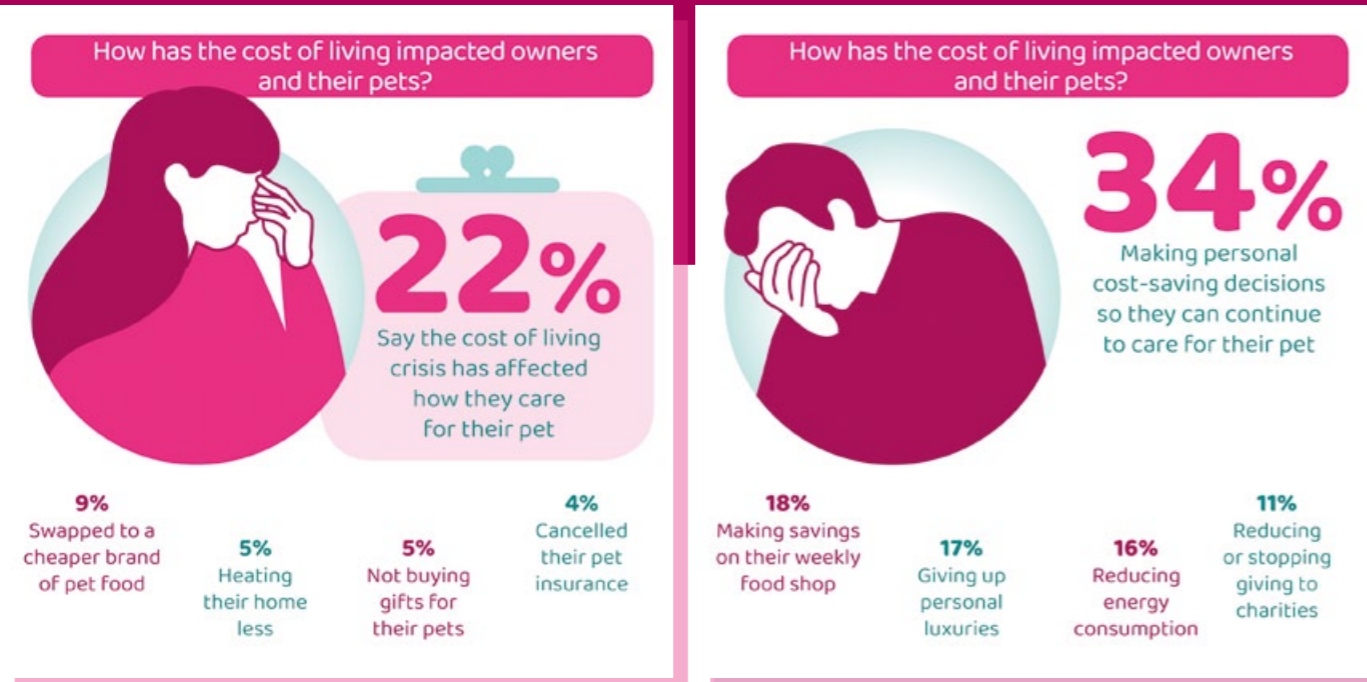
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* Excluding those owners who moved to the UK from abroad and brought their pet with them
 4. Calls for vigilance following B canis cases in imported dogs - Veterinary Record - Wiley Online Library
 5. Compassion v biosecurity: are dog rescues driving disease emergence? (wiley.com)



Cost of Living

Over the past 18 months, the UK has experienced a significant increase in the cost of living, with prices rising rapidly on a range of goods and services, from grocery shopping to fuel and mortgage rates⁶.



The resulting fall in disposable income for many people has led to concerns about the potential impact on pet welfare. Rehoming charities including RSPCA⁷, Cats Protection⁸ and Dogs Trust⁹ have reported an increase in the number of people calling their helplines and citing rising costs as a factor in the need to rehome their pets. At the same time, many organisations are reporting a drop in the number of people coming forward to rehome pets¹⁰. These concerns are reflected in our findings as 83% of owners told us they were concerned that the cost of living crisis would have a negative effect on the welfare of pets in the UK.

Unsurprisingly, given the rising price of goods and services, 86% of owners told us that the cost of owning their pet has increased, and 33% said that owning a pet was more expensive than they expected. This was higher for rabbit owners (46%) than for either dog (34%) or cat owners (29%). It is possible that people may view owning rabbits as a cheaper option to other species, especially if choosing a rabbit as a pet for their children, and therefore do not understand the true cost of rabbit ownership. Our data show that a significant proportion of all owners (60%) underestimate the minimum monthly cost of owning a pet, and this is higher for cat owners (78%) than rabbit (62%) or dog (45%) owners.

It is essential that people understand the need to fully research the financial commitment of pet ownership before taking on a new pet.



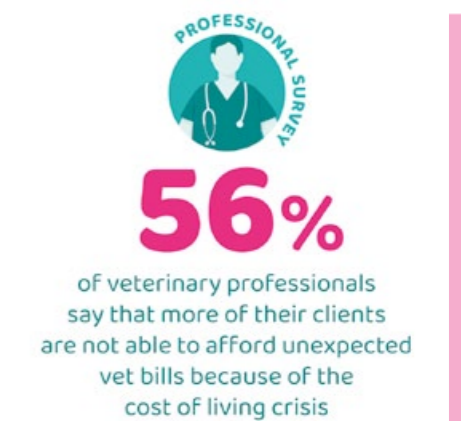
⁶ Harari, D., Bolton, P., Francis-Devine, B & Keep, M. (2023) Rising cost of living in the UK <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9428/CBP-9428.pdf>
⁷ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-figures-show-more-animals-in-shelter-rehoming-slows>
⁸ Waiting lists for cats soar amid cost-of-living crisis
⁹ Cost of living crises hits dog owners across the UK | Dogs Trust
¹⁰ Costoflivingimpactsurvey-briefing-for-Members.pdf (adch.org.uk)

Rehoming charities have reported an increase in the number of people calling their helplines and citing rising costs as a factor in the need to rehome their pets

22% of pet owners, equating to 5 million people, told us that the cost-of-living crisis has affected how they care for their pets, with 9% swapping to a cheaper brand of pet food and 5% heating their home less to pay for their pet's food, vet bills etc. Worryingly, 2% (equating to 370,000 pets) have considered giving human medicine to their pet to avoid the cost of vet bills, and 28% of veterinary professionals say that owners are attempting to use human medications on pets as a result of the cost of living crisis. Many human medicines can be dangerous if administered to other species, or require significantly different doses, and should never be given without veterinary advice. In addition, 1% of owners said they were having their pet put to sleep (230,000 pets), and a further 1% said they were giving them up for rehoming (140,000 pets) as a result of the crisis.

Pets are still a priority when it comes to how owners spend their money. 34% of owners have made personal cost saving decisions so they can continue to care for their pet – a higher proportion of dog owners (35%) than cat (32%) or rabbit (29%) owners.

These decisions include 18% who are making savings on their weekly food shop, 17% who are giving up personal luxuries and 16% who are reducing energy consumption. A further 11% are reducing or stopping giving to charities, and 3% (equating to 770,000 owners) are going without necessities (e.g. skipping meals).



The proportion of owners who say they haven't currently registered their pet with a vet because it's too expensive has increased in 2023

What are vet professionals seeing?



56%

Say more clients are not able to afford unexpected veterinary bills



The cost of living crisis is also impacting veterinary practices, with 25% saying that fewer clients are attending their veterinary practice as a result. There is also concern that the long-term impacts could affect veterinary services, with 34% of veterinary professionals concerned that their practice may have to reduce or limit the range of services offered, and 25% that their practice may have to limit or reduce its size or the number of vets due to the cost of living crisis. 63% stated that charity veterinary care might not be able to cope with the demand for services. Only 4% of veterinary professionals didn't think there would be any long-term impacts of the cost of living crisis on their practice.

PDSA continues to be a lifeline for many owners struggling with the rising cost of living, providing veterinary care to those experiencing financial hardship. 93% of pet owners say that a pet's health and wellbeing should not suffer due to owners' financial hardship, and 88% of pet owners say that a charity providing free and reduced cost veterinary treatment to the most vulnerable in society is important in helping people and pets in times of financial hardship.

Veterinary care

We also found that a higher proportion of owners had not had their pet neutered because it was too expensive - in 2019, 7% of pet owners told us this, compared to 10% in 2023. The proportion of owners citing expense as the reason for not providing their pet with regular boosters has not changed between 2022 and 2023 (18% in 2023). However, the proportion of owners who say they haven't currently registered their pet with a vet because it's too expensive has increased in 2023 (17%) compared to February 2020 (11%), although this is unchanged from 2022 (16%). 39% of pet owners who haven't insured their pet say it's because it's too expensive, which is unchanged from 2022. **46% of veterinary professionals say that more clients can't afford preventive healthcare such as vaccinations and 33% that owners are cancelling their pet insurance, both as a result of the cost of living crisis.**

9% of owners told us that they had delayed taking their pet to the vet when they were ill because of the cost. This is an increase from 6% in 2019, 5% in 2020 and 7% in 2022. When faced with an unexpected vet bill, 30% of owners would use pet insurance as the main way to pay, 26% would go into debt*, 22% would use their savings, and 16% would use their income or current account as the main way to pay.

56% of veterinary professionals say that more of their clients are not able to afford unexpected veterinary bills because of the cost of living crisis and 52% say that more clients are delaying bringing their pet to a vet when ill.



A professional view

With over a third of owners making cost saving decisions in order to be able to continue to care for their pet, and 86% saying that the cost of owning their pet has increased, this year's PAW Report has clearly demonstrated the cost of living crisis is impacting pet owners, and potentially their pets. This highlights the need for an organisation like PDSA, who has provided a safety net for UK pet owners in times of financial hardship and crisis for over 100 years. Our free and low cost veterinary care helps keep pets and people together, and we'll continue to do so for those that need us most."

Steven Howard MRCVS, Head of Clinical Services, PDSA

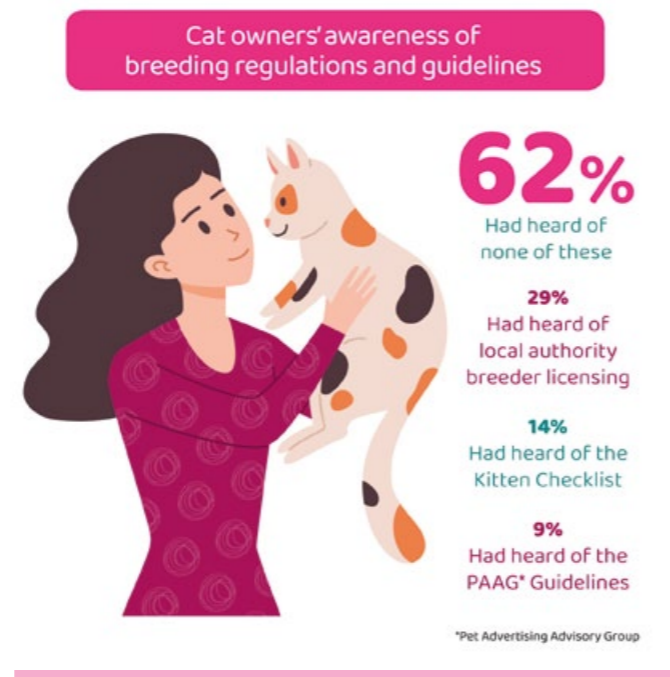
Fertility Clinics and Licensing Regulations

In 2020 in England, and followed in 2021 by Wales and Scotland, legislation was introduced to prevent the selling of puppies by third parties¹¹. Known as Lucy's Law in England, the legislation stated that puppies and kittens should only be sold from the place they were bred and by the person who bred them. This and other legislation, including breeder licensing, aimed to prevent the unscrupulous breeding of puppies in poor welfare conditions.



* Pet owners who said that the main way they would pay for an unexpected vet bill would be by borrowing from family / friends, using a credit card, loan or overdraft, or through a payment plan with their vet practice.

¹¹ The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, Wales: The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (Wales) Regulations 2021, Scotland: The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (Scotland) Regulations 2021



Our findings show poor awareness of the regulations among owners.

35% of pet owners (8 million pet owners) had not heard of any of the guidelines or regulations we listed*. Out of the legislative requirements, 39% of pet owners knew that puppies should be microchipped before eight weeks old (52% of dog owners), 35% had heard of local authority licensing of breeders (41% of dog owners, 29% of cat owners), and 35% knew that, by law, puppies for sale should be seen with their mother (43% of dog owners).

An even lower proportion of owners were aware of the guidelines that welfare organisations have produced in collaboration to help owners source their pets responsibly. 11% had heard of the Puppy Contract (15% of dog owners), 10% had heard of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) Guidelines, and 9% had heard of the Kitten Checklist (14% of cat owners).

Out of those dog and cat owners who had acquired their pets from a breeder, 42% of dog and 35% of cat owners said they had checked that the breeder was licensed by the local authority, and 26% of dog and 30% of cat owners did not know whether the breeder was licensed or not. 15% of dog owners and 19% of cat owners said they didn't know how to check whether a breeder was licensed.

It is important that owners know how to spot an unscrupulous breeder or low welfare breeding establishments to avoid inadvertently driving demand for pets from such places. Although our findings show that owner education and awareness need improvement, it is also important to consider whether the legislation as it stands provides a suitable framework, as currently not all breeders need to be licensed, which may not be clear to potential owners. **76% of veterinary professionals agree that anyone breeding puppies should be registered.**



Canine Fertility Clinics

Canine fertility clinics have emerged and grown in popularity in the UK over recent years, with the number of clinics increasing from just 37 in 2020, to over 300 in 2023¹².

These clinics tend to focus on the most in-demand breeds, such as French Bulldogs, who often struggle to mate and whelp naturally¹³. Fertility procedures such as artificial insemination and ultrasound are offered, potentially without veterinary involvement, which can result in welfare concerns for the bitches. **68% of veterinary professionals have seen a dog in their practice that had been treated by a canine fertility clinic, and almost half (48%) of veterinary professionals surveyed stated they had welfare concerns about the dog resulting from their attendance at a canine fertility clinic.** Reported incidents from other sources¹⁴ have included cases when serious diseases have been misdiagnosed as pregnancy. Anecdotally, many fertility clinics appear to have a strong association with unethical breeding, including the production of puppies with extreme conformation, causing severe health and welfare issues¹⁴.

1% of dog owners (equating to 97,000 dogs) told us that they had used a fertility clinic in the last 12 months.

To improve the welfare of dogs treated at these clinics, and to protect owners who may be unaware of the potential concerns, further regulation of canine fertility clinics is urgently needed, as called for by BVA and many other regulatory bodies. One way to achieve this could be for a requirement for these clinics to be inspected and licensed by local authorities.

Activities involving animals

Currently, several pet services used by owners are either not regulated at all or have regulations that are outdated. It is important that owners are able to easily check if a service provider is licensed and to have confidence that the licensing system helps them to know they are entrusting the care of their pet to a suitable person.

In the last 12 months, 12% of dog owners have used dog boarding kennels, 8% home boarding and 2% have sent their dog on a pet holiday / boot camp. 8% of dog owners have used a doggy day-care facility – these facilities are useful to ensure dogs do not have to endure long periods alone but can be a stressful experience for some dogs if not managed appropriately. In the same timeframe, 13% of cat owners have used a cattery, and 6% have used home boarding.

In the last 12 months, 8% of dog owners and 2% of cat owners have used a trainer or behaviourist, 12% of dog owners (1.3 million dogs) have used a dog walker, and 35% of dog owners (3.8 million dogs) have used a groomer.

Currently, although the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC) sets and maintains the standards of knowledge and practical skills needed to be an animal trainer, training instructor or animal behaviour therapist,

there is no legal requirement for pet trainers or behaviourists to have any qualifications at all, and it can therefore be extremely difficult for an owner to know whose advice to follow. Using outdated or inhumane training techniques can have a detrimental effect on a dog's welfare and behaviour, so further regulation and guidance are needed.

In addition, statutory protection of the title 'Veterinary Nurse' is long overdue, not only to safeguard animal and public health but to recognise the essential role that Vet Nurses fulfil. The BVNA 'Protect the Title' campaign calls for statutory protection of the title 'Veterinary Nurse' as part of proposals for wider legislative change to the 1966 Veterinary Surgeons Act.

A professional view

The rapid increase in unregulated canine fertility clinics, operating with no veterinary oversight, is a serious concern for our members. The PAW Report identifies the scale of the issue by quantifying for the first time the number of dogs directly impacted, and makes for deeply worrying reading. It shows the significant threat these clinics pose to animal welfare, particularly given their links to irresponsible dog breeding for in-demand breeds with innate health problems, such as French Bulldogs. This new data is a wake-up call for the Government to reform the current regulations around dog breeding as well as ensuring adequate funding and resourcing of welfare enforcement agencies.

Malcolm Morley MRCVS, President of the British Veterinary Association

* Owners were asked if they had heard of any of the following pet breeding and selling guidelines and regulations: Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) Guidelines, Puppy Contract, Kitten Checklist, puppies should be microchipped before eight weeks old, puppies for sale should be seen with their mum by law, puppies should be sold by the person who bred them by law, puppies should be sold from where they were bred by law, or licensing of breeders by a local authority.

¹² <https://naturewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Canine-Fertility-Clinics-A-new-frontier-in-the-fight-against-puppy-farms-2022.pdf>

¹³ Evans, K.M, Adams, V.J. (2010). Proportion of litters of purebred dogs born by caesarean section. J Small Anim Pract. 2010 Feb;51(2):113-8

¹⁴ <https://naturewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Breeding-beyond-limits-Canine-Fertility-Clinics-in-the-UK-October-2022.pdf>

Dogs

In 2023, veterinary professionals selected the following as the top welfare issues that need to be addressed for dogs:



Veterinary teams continue to play a vital role in tackling pet obesity - 57% of dog owners look for advice from their vet or vet nurse when deciding whether their pet is the correct weight.



¹⁵ German, A. J., Woods, G. R., Holden, S. L., Brennan, L., and Burke, C. (2018). Dangerous trends in pet obesity. *Veterinary Record*, 182, 25

¹⁶ Linder, D. E., & Parker, V. J. (2016). Dietary aspects of weight management in cats and dogs. *Veterinary Clinics: Small Animal Practice*, 46(5), 869-882



Diet and Obesity

Previous PAW Reports have consistently found that the majority of owners perceive their pet to be an ideal weight, with 81% of owners telling us this in 2022 and 79% in 2020 and 2019. In contrast, findings from our survey in 2023 show that, on average, **veterinary professionals estimate that 46% of dogs are overweight or obese**. Additionally, published studies have shown that up to 65% of the UK's pet dogs are overweight or have obesity¹⁵. This discrepancy between owners' and veterinary professionals' perceptions is concerning and may reflect a lack of awareness amongst owners about how to recognise their pet's ideal weight.

Despite 91% of owners reporting having weighed their dog within the last 12 months, (a significantly higher proportion than for either cat (75%) or rabbit (70%) owners), 32% of dog owners (4.8 million people) do not know their pet's current weight, and only 56% (8.5 million people) knew what their dog's ideal weight is. An even higher proportion of owners (80%) did not know their dog's current body condition score (BCS). Dog owners (68%) were more likely to know their pet's current weight than cat (47%) or rabbit (37%) owners and were also more likely (56%) to know their pet's ideal weight than cat (36%) or rabbit (30%) owners.

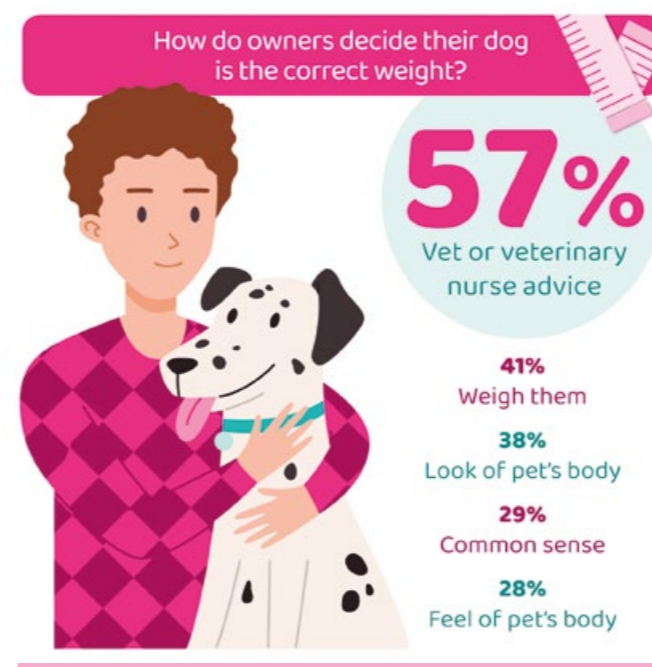
5% of dog owners last weighed their pet more than 12 months ago, equating to 520,000 dogs. Of those owners, 51% (270,000 dog owners) told us they didn't feel it was necessary, 17% (86,000 dog owners) said they didn't want to pay to take their dog to the vets to get them weighed and 14% (74,000 dog owners) said it was difficult to get their dog to the vet to be weighed. For owners who are reluctant to visit their vets for weight loss advice, easily accessible, evidence-based information on how to keep their pets at the ideal weight is essential.

Veterinary teams continue to play a vital role in tackling pet obesity - 57% of dog owners look for advice from their vet or vet nurse when deciding whether their pet is the correct weight. This has not changed from last year (55%) but is lower than in February 2020 (63%). 41% weigh them (higher than cat owners at 20%), and 38% decide by the look of their pet's body. However, only 28% said they decided whether their dog was the correct weight by feeling their body (decreased from 31% in 2022), an essential step of the BCS technique.



There is a huge amount of information on pet diets available, which is sometimes confusing and contradictory, and it can be difficult for owners to know what advice to follow. 34% of owners told us they chose their dog's food by sticking to the brand they have always bought, and 32% took advice from their vet or vet nurse. 19% of owners decide how much to feed their dog based on their pet's weight or body shape, and 17% follow packet guidelines. It is vital that owners are able to recognise when information is reliable and evidence-based to help them make the best choices for their dog's nutrition.

To ensure balanced nutrition and appropriate calorie intake, treats should not make up more than 10% of the daily calorie allowance for dogs¹⁶, with a corresponding reduction in calories from their main diet. We asked dog owners why they gave their pets treats (other than for training). 46% said to make their dog happy, and 40% that they were part of their dog's daily diet (higher than for cats, 28% or rabbits, 24%). Owners also used treats to distract their pet (23%) or to occupy them when they were not at home (20%). 28% of veterinary professionals who reported seeing a rise in pet obesity said that it was due to pets being fed too many treats.





Behaviour

Unwanted behaviours remain a serious welfare concern for UK dogs and can be a cause of stress for owners. Perceived problem behaviours can damage the bond between pets and their owner¹⁷ and are one of the top reasons for dogs to be surrendered to rescues¹⁸.

60% of veterinary professionals say they have seen an increase in dog behavioural issues in the last two years, 57% say they have seen an increase in dogs showing signs of fear in practice, and 48% say they have seen an increase in dog euthanasia due to behavioural issues in this timeframe. Of those veterinary professionals who said they'd seen an increase in dog behavioural issues over the last two years, 75% felt this was due to lack of socialisation, 66% due to owners not being able to understand canine behaviour and communication, and 64% due to lack of puppy training.

Changes in lifestyle over the last three years due to the pandemic have led to animal welfare organisations and veterinary professionals identifying two main areas of concern for emerging behavioural problems in our dogs: separation related issues and lack of socialisation opportunities¹⁹.

The 2022 PAW Report found that dogs were being left alone for longer periods of time as people returned to their workplaces and reduced the amount of home-based work hours after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were no longer in place. If owners have not properly prepared their dogs for this change, there is a risk of them developing separation related behaviours. In 2023, 13% of owners (1.4 million dogs) reported that their dog was showing signs of distress when left alone*; this is no different from 2022. A higher proportion of dogs acquired since 2020 are showing this behaviour (14%) compared to dogs acquired more than three years ago (11%).

¹⁷ Hoffman CL, Chen P, Serpell JA, Jacobson KC. Do dog behavioral characteristics predict the quality of the relationship between dogs and their owners? Hum Anim Interact Bull. 2013;1:20-37

¹⁸ Powdrill-Wells, N., Taylor, S., & Melfi, V. (2021). Reducing dog Relinquishment to rescue centres due to behaviour problems: identifying cases to target with an advice intervention at the point of Relinquishment Request. Animals, 11(10), 2766

¹⁹ <https://bsas.org.uk/blog/article/has-covid-19-caused-behavioural-changes-in-domestic-dogs>

²⁰ Puurunen, J., Hakanen, E., Salonen, M. K., Mikkola, S., Sulkama, S., Araujo, C., & Lohi, H. (2020). Inadequate socialisation, inactivity, and urban living environment are associated with social fearfulness in pet dogs. Scientific reports, 10(1), 1-10

²¹ NHS Digital (2012) Hospital Episode Statistics, Admitted Patient Care - England, 2011-12. Hospital Episode Statistics, Admitted Patient Care - England, 2011-12 - NHS Digital NHS (digital) (2022) Hospital Admitted Patient Care Activity, 2021-22. Hospital Admitted Patient Care Activity, 2021-22 - NDRS (digital.nhs.uk)

²² <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2022/10/06/defra-response-to-reported-recent-increase-in-fatal-dog-attacks/>



It is important that dogs are exposed to a variety of positive experiences at a young age to help them to become happy, friendly and confident adults²⁰. Opportunities for these socialisation experiences may have been lacking for some dogs over the last three years. 25% of owners said their dog was growling, snapping, biting, or showing signs of fear, behaviours that could be related to a lack of socialisation as a puppy. This has increased from 23% of dogs in 2022. Dogs acquired from rescues rehoming dogs from abroad were significantly more likely to be showing signs of fear (31%) compared to 16% of dogs rescued from the UK.

Hospital admissions in England as a result of being bitten or struck by a dog have increased over the last ten years²¹, with an unusually high number of fatal incidents in 2022²². Several incidents have involved children, each one a tragedy, although the overall number remains low. We asked owners whether their dog had ever been bitten or had bitten or chased other animals or people. 83% of owners told us that their dog had never been involved in any of these situations. Owners of dogs who had been owned for up to three years were more likely to say that none of the options applied to them (88%) compared to owners of dogs owned for over three years (81%).

Hospital admissions in England as a result of being bitten or struck by a dog have increased over the last ten years²¹

However, 6% (700,000 dogs) of dogs have been bitten by another dog outside the home, where veterinary care was needed, 3% (370,000 dogs) have bitten an unfamiliar dog and 2% (190,000 dogs) have bitten a familiar dog. Also, 3% (290,000 dogs) have bitten an owner, carer or stranger where professional medical care was needed. These proportions are not significantly different to the findings of the 2022 PAW Report.

It is important to note that we do not know in what context these bites occurred, and there are multiple potential factors, both human and dog related, involved in the increase in dog bite incidents. However, incidents may be reduced by people understanding how to behave around dogs and recognising when a situation may be making a dog uncomfortable.

We asked all pet owners how they know how to stay safe around dogs. The majority of all owners (84%) told us that they knew something about how to stay safe around dogs, with a large proportion citing personal experience (63%) and 20% saying they have learnt how to behave around dogs from a friend or family member. Unsurprisingly, more cat (12%) and rabbit (11%) owners stated they do not know how to remain safe around dogs than dog owners (3%), and more cat (8%) and rabbit owners (8%) said they avoid dogs because they are scared of them than dog owners (2%).

Education is an important part of reducing the incidence of dog bites, especially among children and parents²³.

14% of all owners said they learnt about how to stay safe around dogs through books and / or websites, and 8% through a training / educational course or online webinar. Dog training and socialisation, human behaviour change interventions and environmental modification (such as installing baby gates etc.) are also key to reducing dog bite incidents²³.

²³ Jakeman, M., Oxley, J. A., Owczarczak-Garstecka, S. C., & Westgarth, C. (2020). Pet dog bites in children: management and prevention. BMJ paediatrics open, 4(1)



A professional view

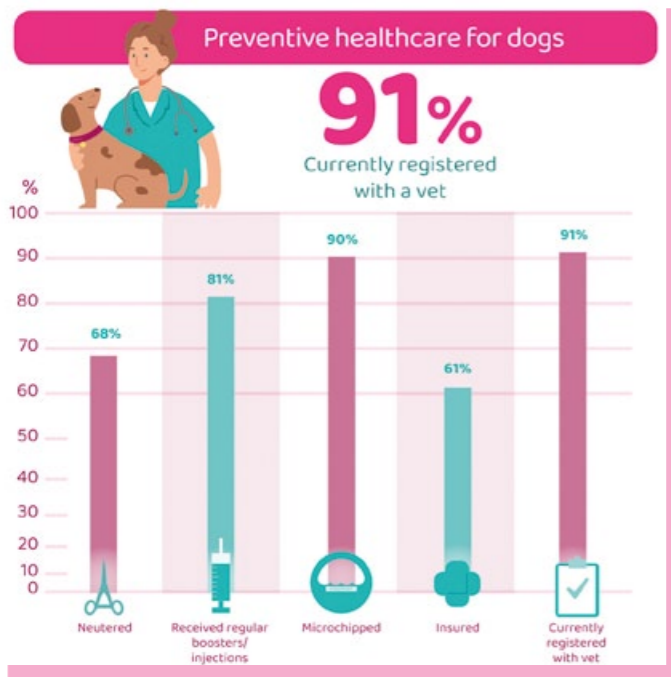
Data from both veterinary professionals and owners suggest that behavioural issues such as fear or growling and snapping are increasing. This is in line with what we see in hospital admissions for dog bites which are increasing yearly.

The data suggest that rises are being driven by changes in dog and ownership demographics rather than dogs becoming more aggressive. In particular, importing dogs from abroad, who may be more fearful, is becoming more common.

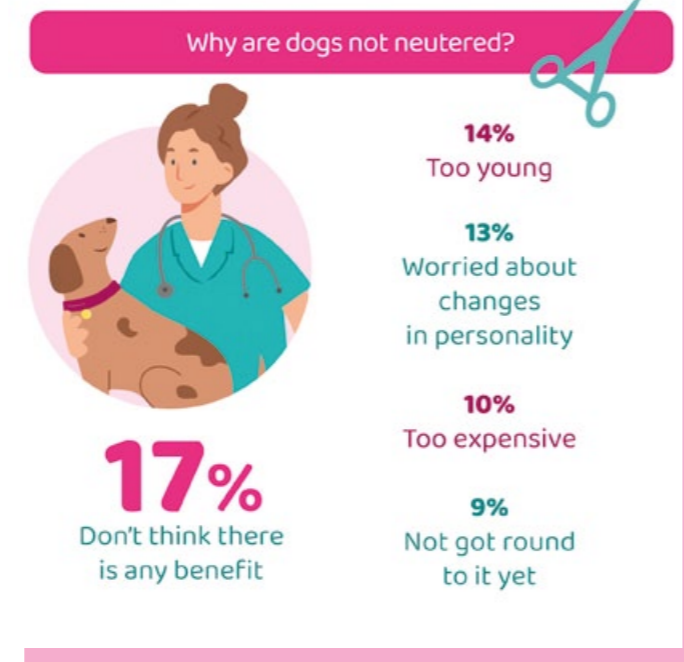
Key to dog bite prevention is education on safe interactions with dogs; the appropriate breeding and sourcing of a dog with a friendly temperament; and appropriate socialisation and training during the critical early months of a puppy's life.

Prof Carri Westgarth BSC MPH PHD PGCERT FHEA ABTC-CAB, **Chair in Human-Animal Interaction, University of Liverpool**





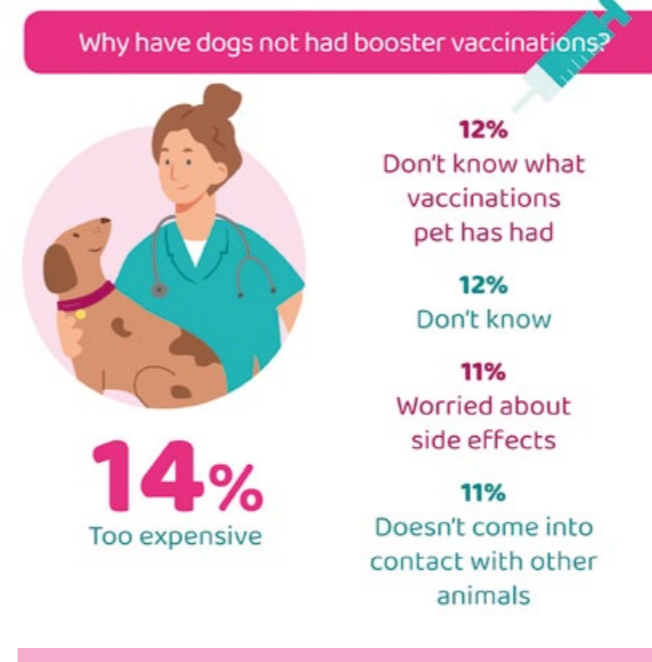
3% of dog owners told us that they were cancelling their pet insurance due to the rising cost of living



Preventive Health

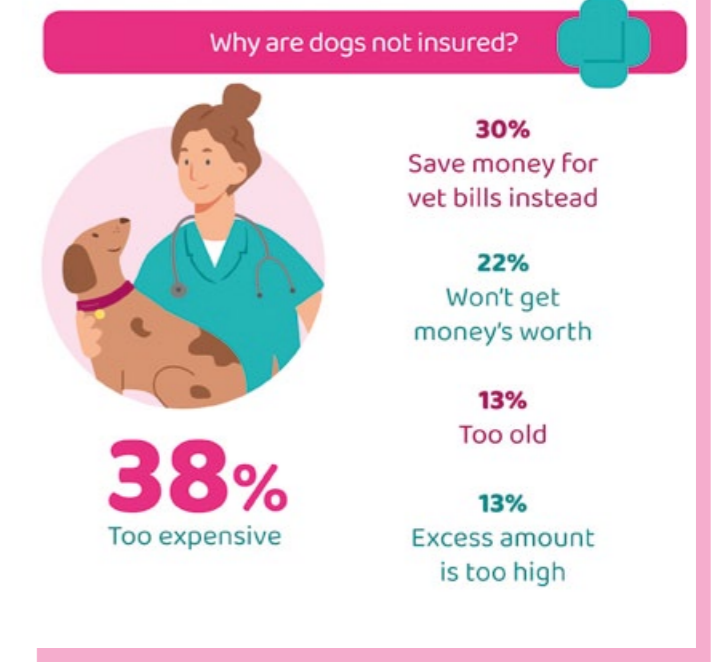
The rising cost of living has meant many owners are looking for ways to reduce their spending and may look at preventive healthcare as one expense to be cut. In 2023, we found that 68% of dogs are neutered, a decrease from 74% in 2019, but the overall trend is relatively stable. Of those pets who are not neutered, 17% of owners told us they didn't think there was any benefit to their pet being neutered, which was more likely to be said by owners of male dogs (24%) than females (7%). 13% were worried about changes in their pet's personality and 10% of owners told us it was because it was too expensive.

As in 2022, there remain serious concerns about capacity in veterinary practices with continued reports of staff shortages²⁴. Of the 9% of owners who told us their dog is not currently registered with a vet, 10% (approximately 93,000 dogs) said it was because practices in their area are not taking on new clients (an increase from 6% in 2022). Additionally, some owners reported that their practice wasn't currently providing neutering, vaccination, or microchipping procedures (3% of owners who haven't had their dog neutered, 2% of owners whose dog hasn't had regular boosters, and 4% of owners who hadn't had their dog microchipped).



81% of dogs have received regular booster vaccinations, no different from 2022, but an increase from 77% in 2021 - such fluctuations have occurred repeatedly over the past 13 years. Of those owners whose dogs have not received regular booster vaccinations, 14% of owners said it was because it was too expensive. 11% were worried about side effects, which has increased from 7% in 2022.

51% of veterinary professionals say they've seen an increase in cases of parvovirus, and 35% have seen an increase in cases of leptospirosis in the last two years; both are diseases which can be prevented by regular vaccinations.



61% of dogs are insured. This proportion has remained the same since last year, although in 2023, 3% of dog owners told us that they were cancelling their pet insurance due to the rising cost of living. While it can seem a reasonable monthly expense to drop, cancelling insurance could leave owners struggling to afford to pay if their pet were to suffer unexpected injury or illness. 38% of dog owners who didn't have insurance told us it was because pet insurance was too expensive, and 30% said they were saving money for vet bills instead.



90% of dogs are microchipped - this proportion has remained unchanged for several years following the introduction of legislation making it compulsory in 2016²⁵. 11% of owners whose dog was not microchipped told us it was because they were worried about side effects, and 11% said they had never heard of microchipping. Similar to our findings in 2022, 17% of dogs acquired from abroad are not microchipped.

²⁴ <https://www.vettimes.co.uk/news/staff-shortages-leave-vet-sector-facing-ticking-time-bomb/>
²⁵ Microchipping of dogs legislation (2015) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/978011125243>

Cats

This year, veterinary professionals selected the following as the top welfare issues that need to be addressed for cats:



49% of veterinary professionals say they've seen an increase in pet obesity in the last two years

Diet and Obesity

Obesity in cats remains a concern for veterinary professionals, with 26% identifying it as one of the top welfare issues affecting cats in the UK today. Obesity is a risk factor for many serious conditions in cats, including diabetes and urinary tract disease²⁶, so it is vital that owners understand how to keep their pet at a healthy weight. 53% of cat owners don't know their pet's current weight, 64% don't know their cat's ideal weight and 84% don't know their cats' current body condition score (BCS) – these proportions were all higher than for dog owners (32%, 44% and 80% respectively).

²⁶ Teng KT, McGreevy PD, Toribio JALML, Raubenheimer D, Kendall K, Dhand NK. Associations of body condition score with health conditions related to overweight and obesity in cats. J Small Anim Pract. 2018 Jul 22

²⁷ Brooks, D, Churchill, J, Fein, K, Linder, D, Michel, K.E., Tudor, K., Ward, E. and Witzel, A., (2014). 2014 AAHA weight management guidelines for dogs and cats. Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association, 50(1), pp.1-11

²⁸ Riemer, S, Heritier, C., Windschnurer, I., Pratsch, L., Arhant, C., & Affenzeller, N. (2021). A review on mitigating fear and aggression in dogs and cats in a veterinary setting. Animals, 11(1), 158



75% of cat owners have weighed their pet within the last 12 months – this is a lower proportion than for dog owners (91%). Regular monitoring of a pet's weight is important to allow early recognition of any changes, both to detect illness and to allow dietary manipulation to avoid obesity²⁷. Of those owners who had not weighed their cat in the last year, 60% said it was because they didn't feel it was necessary, 21% said it was difficult to weigh their pet at home, 20% said they didn't want to pay their vet to get their cat weighed, and 15% said it was difficult to get their pet to the vets to be weighed.



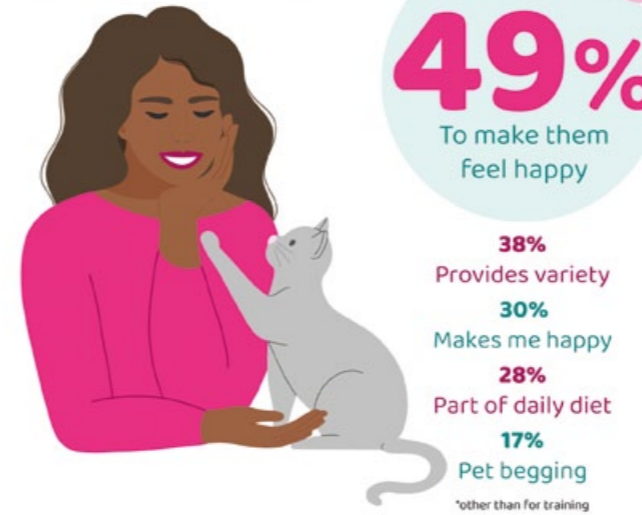
Many owners find taking their cat to the vets to be a stressful experience²⁸. Initiatives such as the ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic Scheme help address these issues by supporting vets to create a less stressful environment within the veterinary clinic.

Educating owners on how to weigh their pets at home, as well as how to recognise other ways of identifying weight gain, such as body condition score, is an essential tool in tackling obesity.

53% of cat owners told us they decide whether their pet is the correct weight by seeking advice from a vet or vet nurse, which is no different from 2022 but is still lower than in 2020 (56%). 38% look at their cat's body, 27% feel their cat's body and 20% weigh their cat, which has increased from 17% in 2020.

49% of veterinary professionals say they've seen an increase in pet obesity in the last two years, which is lower than in February 2020 when it was 78%. 22% of veterinary professionals said they'd seen a decrease in pet obesity in the last two years (increased from 1% in February 2020). 54% of veterinary professionals who said they'd seen a rise in pet obesity felt it was due to a lack of owners' understanding of a healthy body shape and weight of a pet, and 40% said it was due to owners not understanding the health implications of obesity. In the 2021 PAW Report, we found that 31% of pet owners did not think overweight pets were more likely to suffer from serious disease and 35% of pet owners did not think overweight pets were less likely to live as long as other pets.

Why do owners give their cat a treat?



How do owners choose what food to feed their cat?

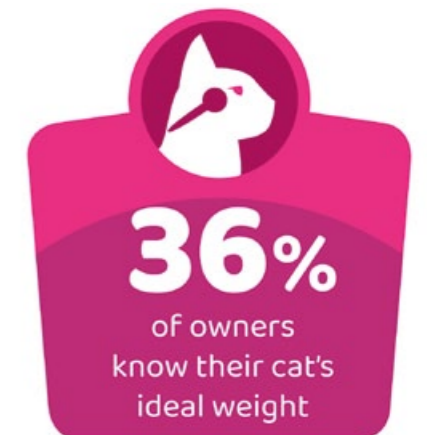
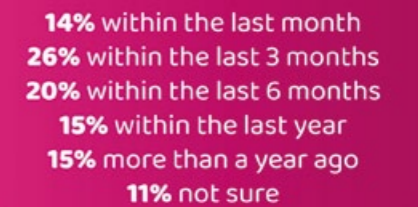


It's important that owners are able to access accurate, reliable information to help them choose what and how much to feed their pet. We asked owners how they chose what food to give their cat. Cat owners were more likely to stick to the brand they've always bought (41%) than dog owners (34%), and more likely to choose a brand that's easily available (35%) than dog (21%) or rabbit (18%) owners. 23% of cat owners chose their pet's food by getting advice from a vet or vet nurse, a lower proportion than either dog (32%) or rabbit (33%) owners.

60% of veterinary professionals agreed there is not enough evidence-based information available to help owners understand their pets' dietary requirements.

We also asked owners how they decided how much food to feed their cat. 19% told us they used common sense (higher than for dog owners at 15%), 15% relied on past experience with their pets (higher when compared to 12% of dog owners), and 13% used packet guidelines (lower than dog owners at 17%). Fewer cat owners (12%) take advice from vets or other veterinary professionals compared to dog (17%) or rabbit (17%) owners. This may possibly be related to the concerns owners have about taking their cat to the vets.

When did owners last weigh their cat?



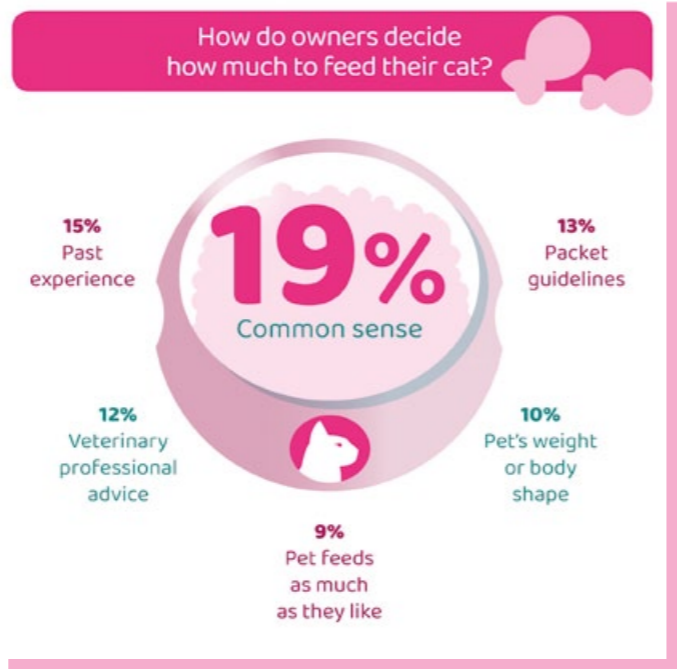
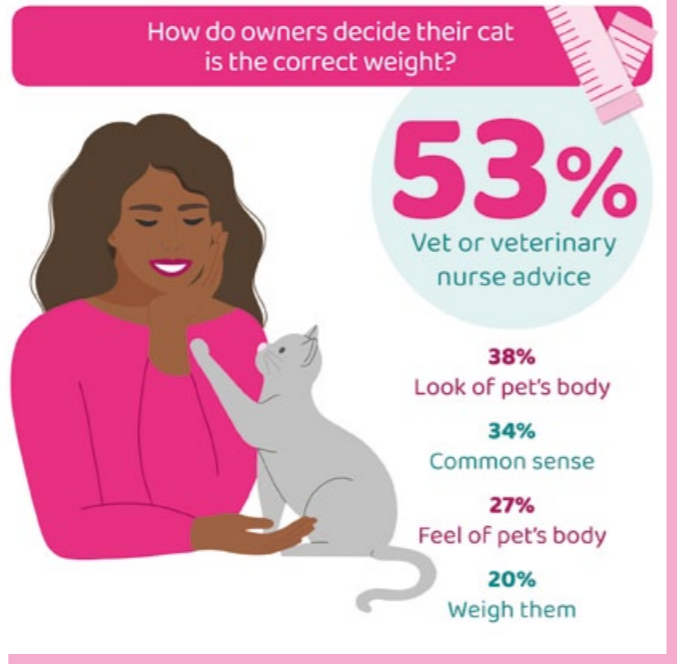


A professional view

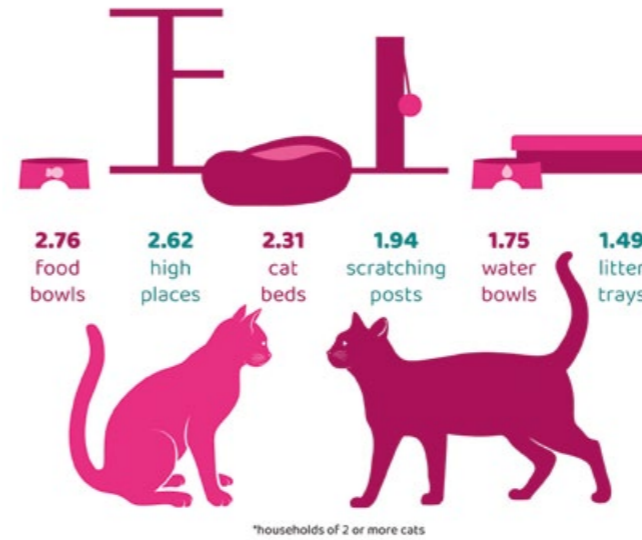
Obesity and its detrimental effects remains a welfare concern in dogs, cats and rabbits, though it is still frequently overlooked. The PAW Report has again highlighted the need for veterinary practices to increase the education they are providing to their clients about healthy weight and ideal body condition score (BCS).

Without body weight and BCS being used in conjunction, the weight of the pet is just a number, making a judgement of ideal weight more difficult for an owner to identify. Therefore, promoting regular weight checks together with BCS should form a vital part of every visit to the veterinary practice.

Georgia Woods-Lee BSc (Hons) RVN CERTCFVHNUT VTS (NUTRITION), **ROYAL CANIN® Weight Management Clinic Nurse, University of Liverpool**



Average number of resources in multi-cat* households



Environment

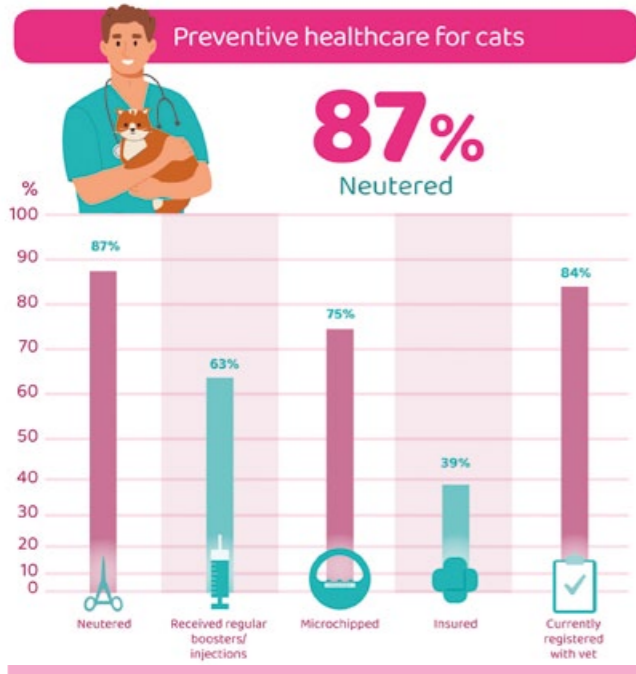
From previous PAW Report data, we know that two in five of the UK's pet cats live with one or more other cats (42% in 2022). In multi-cat households, it is important that every cat has access to sufficient resources to minimise stress. Inadequate provision of resources runs the risk of creating tensions amongst cats within a home, increasing their likelihood of developing an undesirable behaviour, negatively impacting their welfare and potentially their relationship with their owner.

It is recommended practice to provide one of each resource per cat plus one extra²⁹, spread out around the house to allow cats to avoid each other if they wish to. This year, we found that many cats are still having to share their resources with other cats in their household. In particular, we found that the average number of litter trays in households with two or more cats is 1.49, which could cause stress and increase the risk of cats developing inappropriate toileting behaviours. Veterinary professionals selected multi-cat households (38%) and inadequate resources (35%) as two of the top welfare issues that need addressing for cats, along with chronic stress (35%). **66% of veterinary professionals recommend environmental modification for reducing stress in cats**, 64% recommend multiple resources in multi-cat households, and 64% recommend additional litter trays.

²⁹ Ellis, S. L., Rodan, I., Carney, H. C., Heath, S., Rochlitz, I., Shearburn, L. D., ... & Westropp, J. L. (2013). AAFP and ISFM feline environmental needs guidelines. *Journal of feline medicine and surgery*, 15(3), 219-230

Inadequate provision of resources runs the risk of creating tensions amongst cats within a home, increasing their likelihood of developing an undesirable behaviour





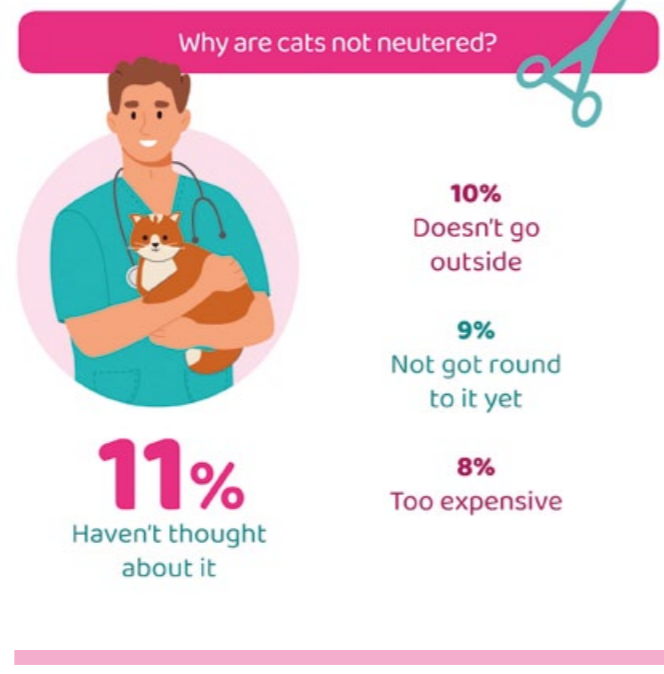
Preventive Health

The rising cost of living has led to concerns that the uptake of preventive healthcare for pets could fall, as owners look at ways to save money. We found that the proportion of owners who reported they had chosen not to provide their cat with preventive healthcare because it was too expensive has not changed from 2022 (8% of owners who haven't had their cat neutered, 120,000 cats, 21% of owners whose cat hasn't had regular boosters, 830,000 cats, and 8% of owners who hadn't had their pet microchipped, 230,000 cats). However, of the 16% of owners whose cat is not currently registered with a vet, the proportion of those saying it was because it is too expensive has increased from 11% in February 2020 to 16% in 2022 and 19% in 2023.

The current recruitment crisis in the veterinary profession may lead to concerns that owners could potentially struggle to access preventive healthcare for their cats. Of the 16% of cat owners whose pet is not currently registered with a vet, 7% (130,000 cats) say this is because practices in their region are not taking on new clients – this is unchanged from 2022. Additionally, some owners reported that their practice wasn't providing neutering, vaccination, or microchipping procedures (5% of owners who haven't had their cat neutered, 1% of owners whose cat hasn't had regular boosters, and 5% of owners who hadn't had their pet microchipped). Again, these proportions are unchanged from 2022.

³⁰ Wongsangchan, C., & McKeegan, D. E. (2019). The views of the UK public towards routine neutering of dogs and cats. *Animals*, 9(4), 138

³¹ Yates, D., & Leedham, R. (2019). Prepubertal neutering in cats and dogs. *In Practice*, 41(7), 285-298

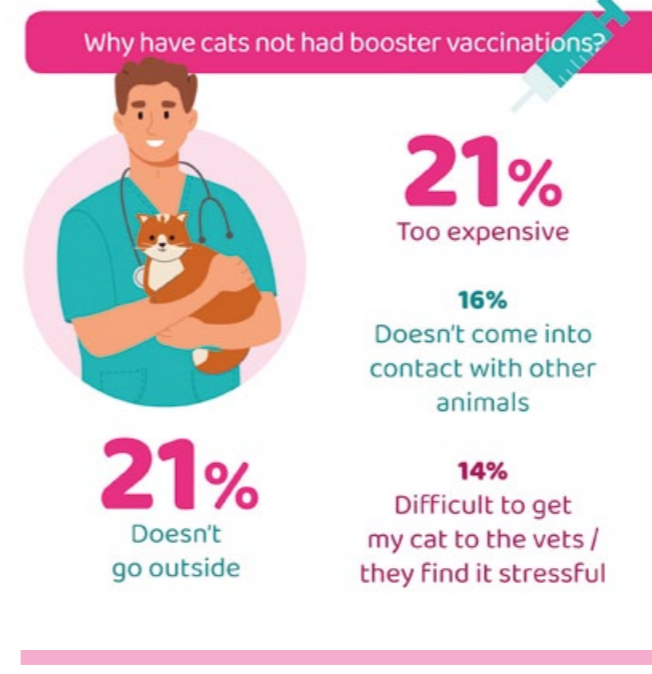


This year, 87% of pet cats in the UK are neutered, this is a decrease from 90% in 2021. However, this figure has fluctuated over the last seven years. The most common reason owners selected for not neutering their cat was that they hadn't thought about it (11%) or that their cat doesn't go outside (10%). Although many owners may consider neutering their cat primarily for prevention of unwanted litters³⁰, there are important health benefits that also should be considered³¹. A higher proportion of cats acquired from rescue or rehoming centres were neutered (93%) compared to those acquired from breeders (77%) or family / friends / neighbours (86%).

Neutering cats from four months of age can have the potential to decrease the number of unplanned litters – recent collaborative campaigns across the animal welfare sector have aimed to raise awareness of neutering at four months old among cat owners. **39% of vets routinely recommend neutering cats at four months of age** – this is a lower proportion than in 2020, when 58% said this.

This year, 63% of cats have received regular booster vaccinations, a similar proportion to 2022. 21% of owners whose cats haven't had booster vaccinations told us it was because their cat didn't go outside, 21% stated it was too expensive and 16% that their cat doesn't come into contact with other animals. 14% said their cat had not received booster vaccinations because it was difficult to get their pet to the vets, or their cat found it stressful, a higher proportion than for dog owners (7%).

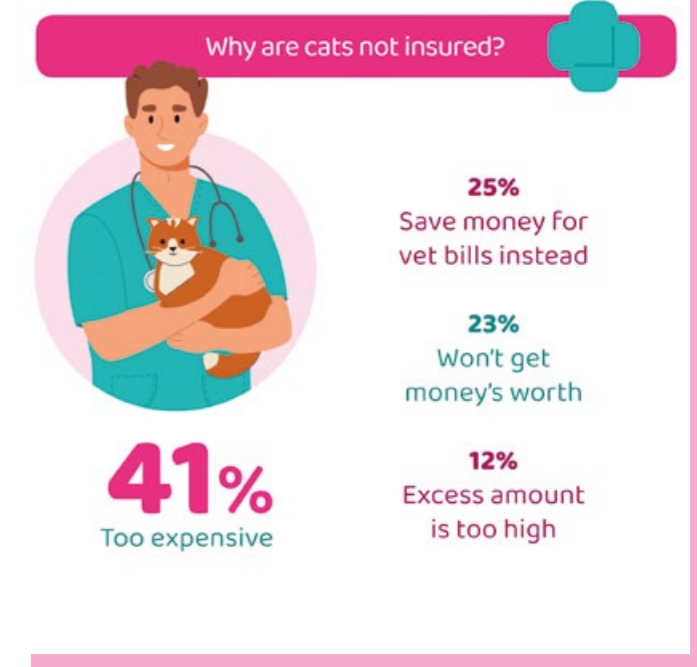
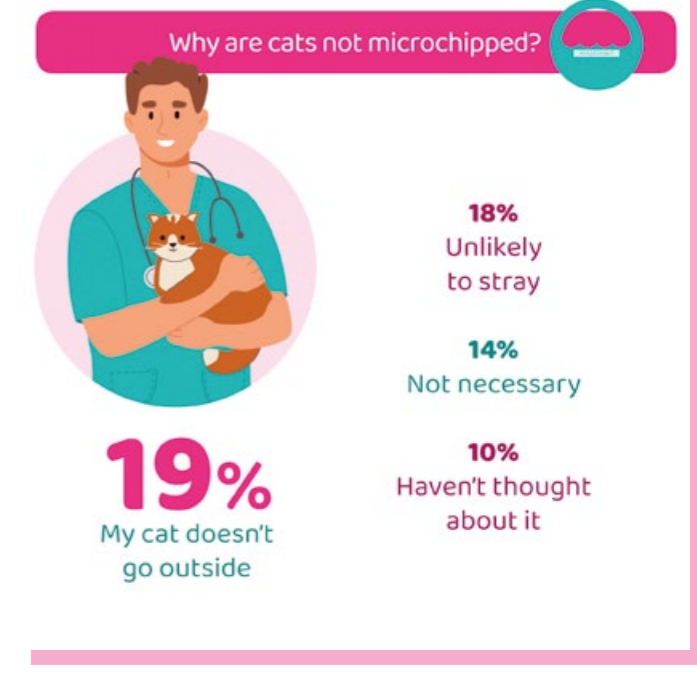
Recent collaborative campaigns across the animal welfare sector have aimed to raise awareness of neutering at four months old among cat owners



75% of cats are microchipped – after a continual increase from 46% in 2011, this trend appears to have slowed since February 2020, when 74% of cats were microchipped. 67% of cat owners are unaware that legislation due to be introduced in 2024 will mean that all cats must be microchipped. It appears that a significant amount of work is needed in the next 12 months to raise awareness of this legislative change.

It is important that owners are aware of which database their pet's microchip is registered to so they are able to update contact details as needed – **60% of veterinary professionals told us that they had experienced owners' details not being up to date on microchip databases**. 62% of cat owners (5.1 million cats) whose cat has been microchipped do not know what database their cat's microchip is registered on, which was slightly higher than dog owners (58%). A small proportion (less than 1%) say their cat is registered on a database that is not on the list of those meeting government standards, a similar proportion to dog owners (2%).

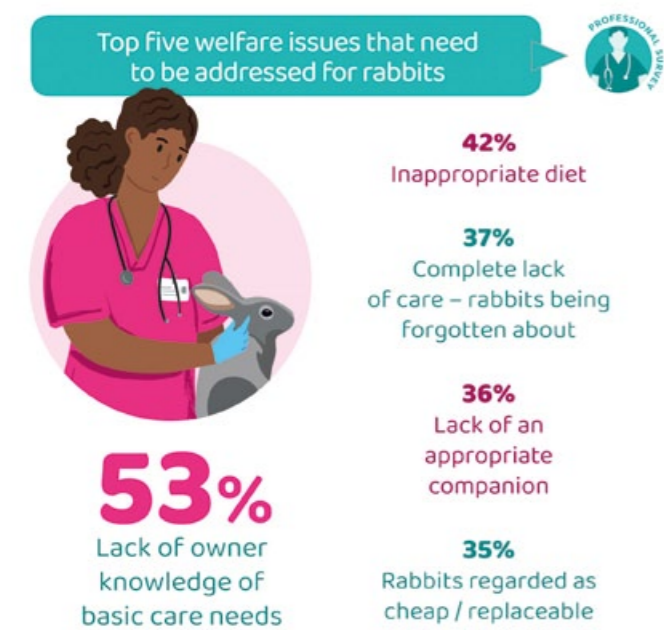
51% of veterinary professionals had seen pets who were microchipped but not registered to any databases, 40% reported it was difficult to search some databases, and 37% said it was difficult to get owner details from some of the databases. 28% had seen pets registered on databases which are not on the official government list, and 17% had seen pets who were registered on multiple databases. A centralised microchip database system would help to reduce many of the current problems.



The uptake of pet insurance amongst cat owners (39%) remains lower than for dogs (61%). Of cat owners who had not insured their cat, 41% told us this was because insurance is too expensive, 23% didn't think they would get their money's worth and 25% save money for vet bills instead.

Rabbits

As in previous years, a large proportion of rabbits are not having their welfare needs met. Owners' lack of awareness of the welfare needs of rabbits continues to be of concern to veterinary professionals, who selected the following as the five most important welfare issues that need to be addressed for rabbits:



A complete lack of care has been one of the top welfare concerns of veterinary professionals since we first asked the question in 2014, together with inappropriate diet and inadequate housing. In many cases, it appears that rabbits may still be perceived as a low maintenance pet and often chosen as a pet for children, despite their complex husbandry requirements. It is essential that owners receive education when they acquire their rabbits on how to care for them and are supported to continue to appropriately provide for their 5 Welfare Needs throughout their lives. PDSA has worked with other organisations to create a non-statutory Welfare Code for Rabbits to help owners understand their pets' needs; further awareness of this code amongst rabbit owners is needed.

³² Meredith, A. L., Prebble, J. L., & Shaw, D. J. (2015). Impact of diet on incisor growth and attrition and the development of dental disease in pet rabbits. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 56(6), 377-382

³³ Meredith, A. L., & Prebble, J. L. (2017). Impact of diet on faecal output and caecotroph consumption in rabbits. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 58(3), 139-145

³⁴ Adji, A. V., Pedersen, A. Ø., & Agyekum, A. K. (2022). Obesity in pet rabbits: A narrative review. *Journal of Exotic Pet Medicine*, 41, 30-37

³⁵ Stapleton, N. (2021). Guide to behavioural issues in rabbits. *In Practice*, 43(1), 18-25

³⁶ Stapleton, N. (2014). The chubby bunny: a closer look at obesity in the pet rabbit. *The Veterinary Nurse*, 5(6), 312-319

³⁷ Lafamme, D. (2015). Why the Concern Over Obesity: An Introduction. *Companion Animal Nutrition Summit*, 1-4



Diet and Nutrition

42% of veterinary professionals identified an inappropriate diet as one of the five most important welfare issues that need to be addressed for rabbits.

13% of owners feed muesli mix as one of the main types of food their rabbit eats. These diets have been implicated in a variety of health problems, including obesity, dental disease and gastrointestinal disease^{32,33}. Encouragingly, this proportion has continued to decrease since 2017, when it was 25%. However, 150,000 rabbits are still being fed a diet which could have adverse effects on their health.

Only 73% of owners told us that they feed hay as one of their rabbits' main foods, a figure which has been relatively stable over the last seven years. Hay should make up the majority of a rabbit's diet - inadequate hay provision is associated with rabbit obesity³⁴ and affects their ability to express some of their natural behaviours³⁵, primarily their need to spend a large proportion of their time grazing and feeding.

When choosing their pet's food, rabbit owners were more likely to stick to the brand they've always bought (42%) than dog owners (34%). They were also more likely to seek advice from a vet or vet nurse (33%) than cat owners (23%), or to seek advice from animal welfare charities (21%) compared to dog (6%) and cat (7%) owners.

Rabbit owners were also more likely to seek the advice of animal welfare charities when deciding how much to feed their pet (6%) than dog (2%) or cat (1%) owners, and more likely to seek advice from a vet or other veterinary professional (17%) compared to cat owners (12%). 18% of rabbit owners relied on common sense, and 14% on past experience with pets. Easily accessible information is essential to continue to educate owners on the appropriate diets to choose for their rabbits.

Obesity in rabbits remains a concern for veterinary professionals, who, on average, estimate that 32% of rabbits are overweight or obese. 10% selected it as one of the top five welfare issues that need to be addressed for rabbits. Obesity in rabbits increases the risk of heart disease, arthritis, liver disease, flystrike, and skin problems such as urine scald and infections³⁶.

How do owners decide their rabbit is the correct weight?



Awareness of their pet's weight and body condition score is a valuable tool for owners to manage their pet's weight³⁷. 37% of rabbit owners know their pet's current weight, a lower proportion than for dog (68%) and cat (47%) owners, and 19% know their pet's current body condition score. Rabbit owners (30%) were less likely to know their pet's ideal weight compared to dog (56%) and cat (36%) owners. 70% of rabbit owners told us they had weighed their rabbit within the last 12 months, lower than for dog owners (91%).

When deciding if their pet is the correct weight, 44% of rabbit owners rely on advice from their vet or vet nurse, a lower proportion than for either cat (53%) or dog (57%) owners. 36% of owners look at their pet's body, 30% use common sense, and 30% rely on the feel of their pet's body. Only 18% weigh their pet to decide whether they are the correct weight, a lower proportion than dog owners (41%).

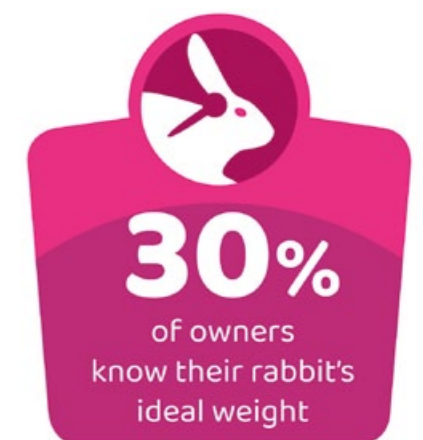
52% of rabbit owners told us they chose to give their rabbit a treat to provide variety for them, 45% because it makes their rabbit happy, 29% because it makes the owner happy, and 24% as part of their daily diet. 15% use treats to occupy their pet when they aren't there, and 11% to distract them.

Why do owners give their rabbit a treat?



When did owners last weigh their rabbit?

- 10%** within the last month
- 24%** within the last 3 months
- 19%** within the last 6 months
- 17%** within the last year
- 15%** more than a year ago
- 15%** not sure

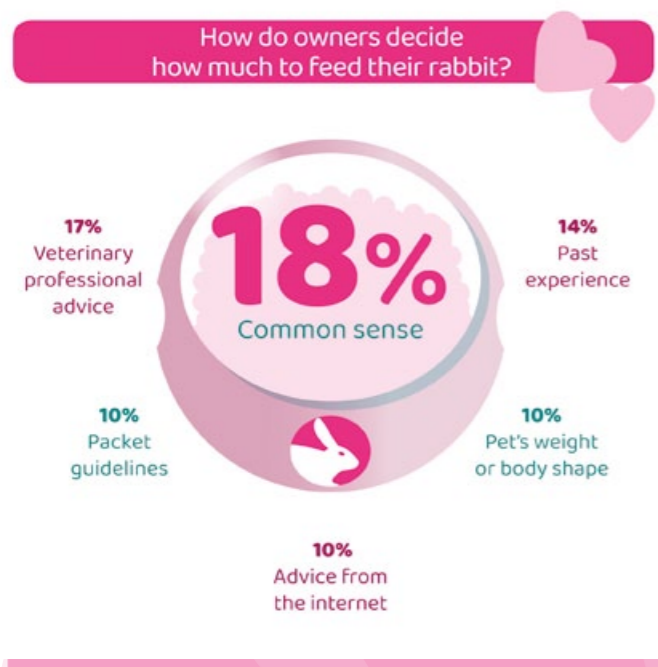




Companionship and Environment

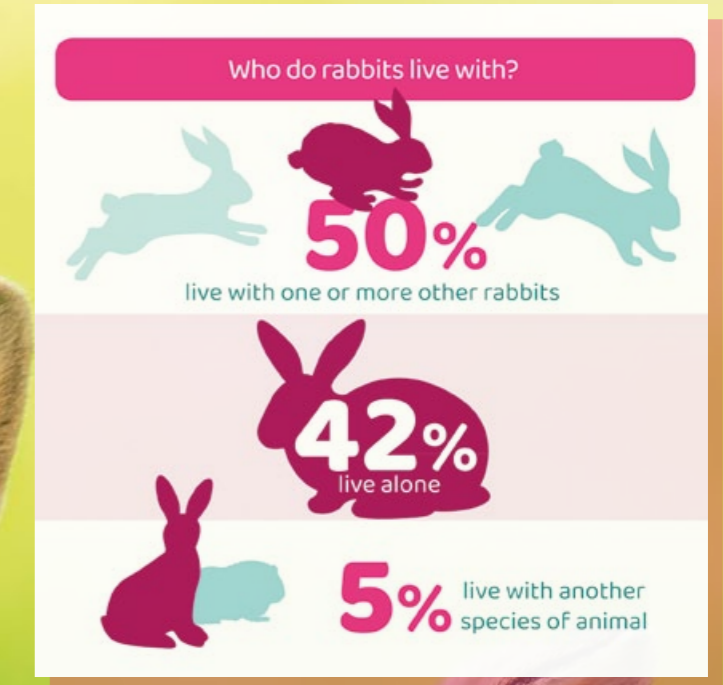
Rabbits are highly social animals and should always live with another compatible rabbit companion where possible³⁸. This year, 42% of rabbits live alone, with a further 5% living with another species of animal, meaning that an estimated 530,000 rabbits (48%) are still not having their companionship needs met appropriately. While this proportion has improved since the first PAW Report in 2011 (when 67% of rabbits lived alone), this trend has not continued since February 2020. Concern for the companionship needs of rabbits is reflected in our veterinary professional survey, with 36% of respondents identifying 'lack of an appropriate companion' as one of the top welfare issues for rabbits.

51% of rabbits (560,000) live predominantly inside their owner's house, a higher proportion than in August 2020, when 39% of rabbits did so.



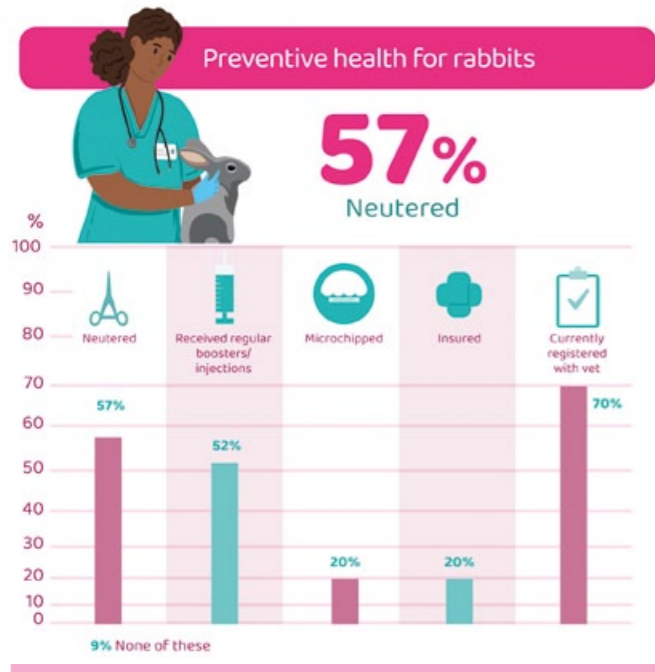
Whether living inside or out, rabbits need to have the space to stretch, jump, run and dig³⁹. Smaller hutches or cages simply don't allow for these natural behaviours, making them unsuitable accommodation. We found that 22% of rabbits live in inadequate housing (small hutches with minimal or no run space). This proportion had improved since 2018, when 28% were kept in this way. However, 250,000 rabbits still do not have the space to exhibit normal behaviours. The proportion of rabbits living in unsuitable housing was similar for both the indoor (10%) and outdoor (12%) environments.

Over a third of veterinary professionals identified inadequate space for exercise (34%), and 31% chose small hutches as two of the top five welfare issues that need to be addressed for rabbits. The Welfare Code for Rabbits provides guidance on suitable accommodation, and the 'Hutch is not Enough' campaign by the RWAFA (Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund) is working to increase owner awareness of the environmental needs of their rabbits.



³⁸ Burn, C. C., & Shields, P. (2020). Do rabbits need each other? Effects of single versus paired housing on rabbit body temperature and behaviour in a UK shelter. *Animal Welfare*, 29(2), 209-219

³⁹ McBride E.A., Magnus E., Hearne G. 2004. Behaviour problems in the domestic rabbit. In: Appleby D. (ed). *The APBC Book of Companion Animal Behaviour*. Souvenir Press Ltd., London, UK, 164-182



Preventive Health

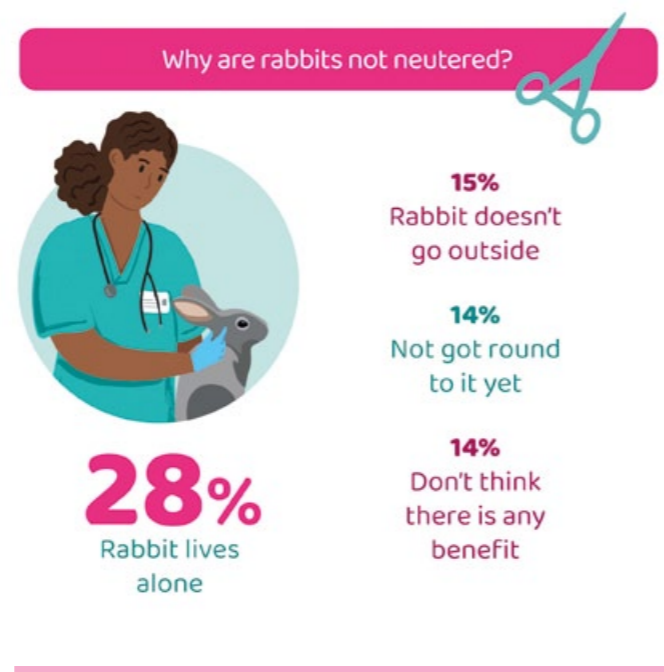
In 2023, 43% of rabbits are not neutered (470,000 rabbits). This proportion has not changed over the last 7 years. Neutering provides health benefits, particularly for female rabbits⁴⁰, as well as allowing rabbits of the opposite sex to live together without the risk of unwanted litters. 28% of owners whose rabbit was not neutered told us it was because they lived alone, and 15% because their rabbit didn't go outside. 14% told us they didn't see any benefit to the procedure, and 14% said they had not got around to it yet. Rabbits can breed from three months of age⁴¹, so any delay in neutering male and female rabbits kept together could result in accidental pregnancies, a concern raised by rehoming organisations who are currently struggling with the demand from owners needing to rehome unplanned litters⁴².

In the UK, rabbit vaccines are available against myxomatosis and rabbit (viral) haemorrhagic disease (R(V)HD). 52% of rabbits have received regular booster vaccinations, leaving 48% (530,000 rabbits) vulnerable to these common and often fatal diseases. 36% of owners whose rabbits had not received booster vaccinations told us it was because their rabbit doesn't come into contact with other rabbits, and 29% because their rabbit doesn't go outside – as both viruses can be spread through insect bites, these rabbits are still vulnerable to the diseases so should receive vaccine protection. R(V)HD is a significant

⁴⁰Richardson, V. (2012). Urogenital disease in rabbits. In Practice, 34(10), 554-563

⁴¹ McClure, D. (2022) MSD Veterinary Manual. Breeding and reproduction of rabbits <https://www.msdevetmanual.com/all-other-pets/rabbits/breeding-and-reproduction-of-rabbits>

⁴² RSPCA (2022) RSPCA reports huge influx of rabbits as charity sees intake rise by a THIRD in a year <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-influx-of-rabbits>



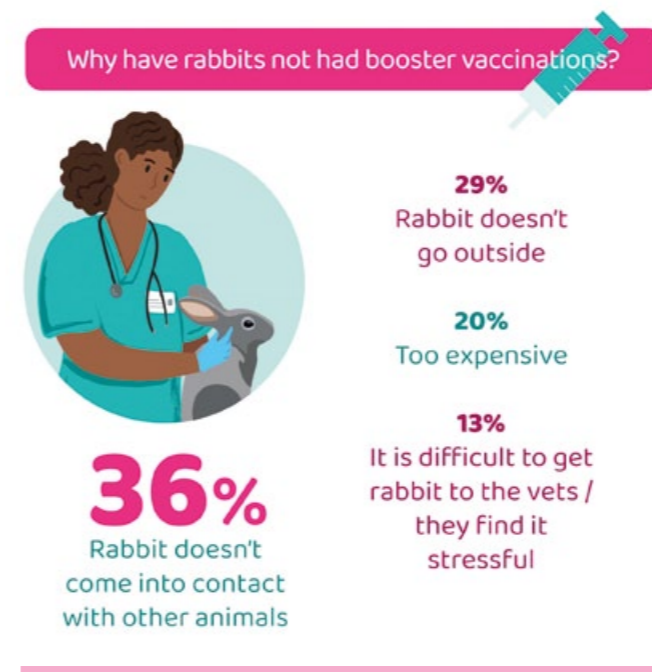
concern, particularly with the emergence of a new strain in recent years – **22% of veterinary professionals reported that they had seen an increase in R(V)HD cases in rabbits over the last two years.**

20% of rabbits are microchipped, which had decreased further from 2021, when it was 29%. 28% of those who had not microchipped their rabbit said it was because they felt their pet was unlikely to stray, and 27% said their pet doesn't go outside.

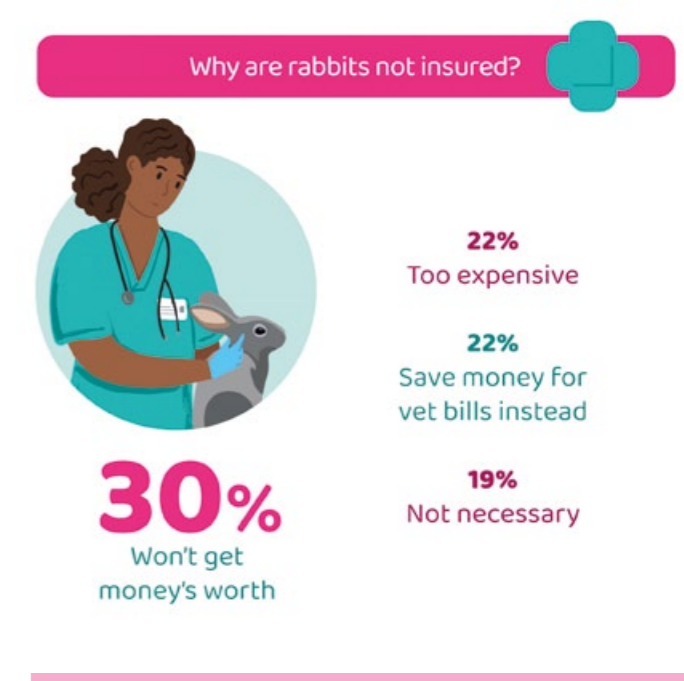
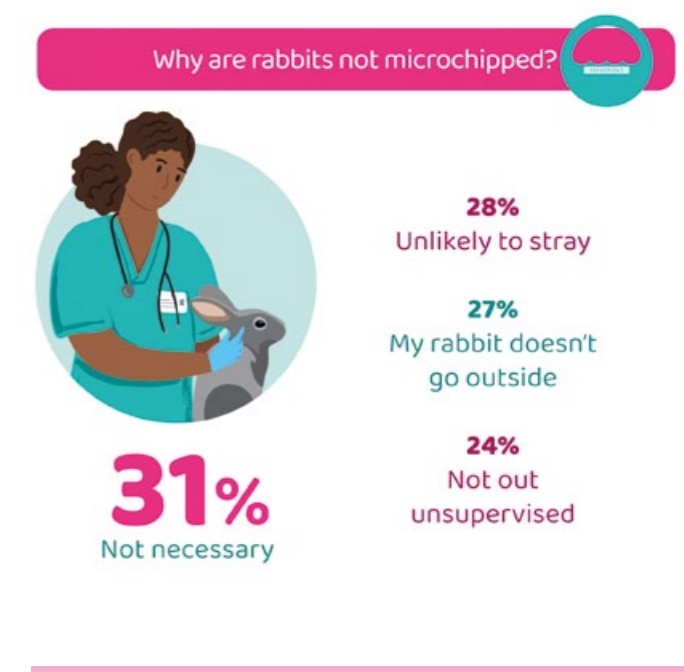
20% of rabbits are insured, a much lower proportion than either cats (39%) or dogs (61%). 30% of owners who do not have their rabbits insured said it was because they didn't think they would get their money's worth, which was a higher proportion than either dog (22%) or cat (23%) owners. 22% said it was too expensive (a lower proportion than either dog – 38%, or cat owners – 41%), and 22% said they save money for vet bills instead.

70% of rabbits are currently registered with a vet – this proportion is not significantly different from the last seven years.

31% of veterinary professionals identified inadequate routine rabbit healthcare, including preventive care, as one of the top welfare issues affecting rabbits in the UK in 2023. 9% of rabbit owners reported that their rabbits hadn't received any of the preventive care options, a higher proportion than either cats (1%) or dogs (1%).



Rabbits can breed from three months of age⁴¹, so any delay in neutering male and female rabbits kept together could result in accidental pregnancies



Concluding Thoughts

From our Director of Veterinary Services, Richard Hooker



The PAW Report continues to provide high quality, reliable evidence on how well the UK's pet dogs, cats and rabbits are having their 5 Welfare Needs met. We know how much owners care for their pets - 94% of owners say their pet makes them happy and 90% say owning a pet improves their life. But the findings also show that this love for pets may not always translate into the best care for them.

Concerns raised in this year's Report include rabbits living without the companionship of their own species or in poor environments, cats living with inadequate resources, and dogs struggling with behavioural issues, some of which may have been exacerbated by their early experiences.

As shown in the Report, as a profession we continue to see the negative welfare impacts from pets being bred for specific looks and exaggerated conformation. 39% of veterinary professionals selected exaggerated conformation in pedigree breeds as the top issue they would choose to resolve tomorrow, and 41% selected it as the top issue they believe will have the biggest health and welfare impact in 10 years' time. Couple this with the ongoing demand for dogs with cropped ears, and it seems that too many people are choosing their pet's appearance over their health and wellbeing.

In the majority of cases, owners want to provide the best care for their pets - 94% told us they see pets as part of their families. So what can be done to help improve the wellbeing of the pets we share our lives with?

Effective change can be brought about through evidence-based interventions based on the human-behaviour change theory⁴³. Findings from 13 years of the PAW Report can contribute to this process by highlighting and tracking changes in the issues raised, reporting on owners' levels of knowledge and awareness, and through findings about the underlying reasons behind why owners do or don't undertake certain actions associated with their pets.

It is clear from the Report that owner education needs to start before the pet comes into their homes. Owners need support to understand the commitment of owning a pet, how to source their pet responsibly, and how to ensure they are able to provide for their needs throughout their lifetime.

Legislation, including the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, has been introduced to improve the protection of both pets and owners from fraudsters and low welfare breeders. However, the Report shows that awareness amongst owners of these regulations remains low, and further

guidelines produced by animal welfare organisations are also not widely recognised. The legal regulations are due to be reviewed across the devolved nations in 2023, and PAW Report data continues to be invaluable to evidence where updates are needed, including the addition of further sectors such as canine fertility clinics.

Legislation is only one part of the process to change behaviour - communication and education is needed as well. It is important that owners understand the potential implication of issues such as the importation of dogs or the use of fertility clinics and understand their responsibilities to the animals in their care. Collaborative work between animal welfare organisations is essential to raise awareness, and we know it can make a difference. Monitoring of trends with PAW Report data allows us to see changes over time - on rabbit diets and dog and cat microchipping, for example.

Alongside a lack of knowledge of the welfare needs of their pets, it seems that owners may not always be prepared for the financial commitment of pet ownership. 60% of owners underestimate the minimum monthly cost of owning their pet, and 33% of pet owners told us that owning a pet is more expensive than they expected. In the current economic climate, awareness of potential costs before committing to pet ownership is essential to reduce the risk of owners having to rehome their pets if unable to afford their ongoing care.

Pets remain such an important part of their owners' lives, alleviating stress and improving mental wellbeing. In times of financial hardship and crisis, for over 100 years, PDSA has been there for millions of pet owners who had nowhere else to turn. As we look to the future, we will continue to strive for a lifetime of wellbeing for every pet. The insights provided by this year's PAW Report help guide planning for the future and allow us to monitor which interventions are most effective and we will continue to work collaboratively to tackle the issues raised in the PAW Report.

Richard Hooker BVMS (HONS), MRCVS,
PDSA Director of Veterinary Services

Pets remain such an important part of their owners' lives, alleviating stress and improving mental wellbeing.



85%
of pet owners
say owning a pet
makes them
feel less lonely

90%
of pet owners
say owning a pet
improves
their life

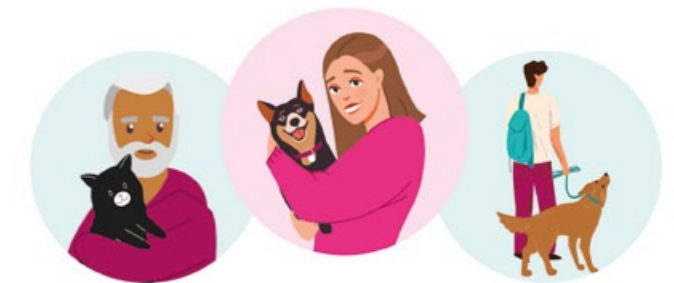


94%
of pet owners
say owning a pet
makes them
happy

87%
of pet owners
say owning a pet
makes them
mentally
healthier



67%
of pet owners
say owning a pet
makes them
physically
healthier



44%
of pet owners say owning a pet
has been a lifeline for them
during the cost of living crisis

⁴³ Animal welfare: the human element. By Suzanne Rogers and Jo White. In Changing Human Behaviour to Enhance Animal Welfare. Edited by: Rebecca Sommerville, Dog Behaviourist, UK. September 2021 | Paperback | 208 Pages | 9781789247237 CABI

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Thank you to everyone who is
already working alongside us
to improve pet wellbeing.
We can't do it alone.