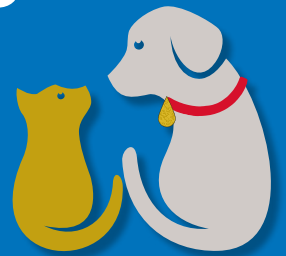




# Understanding pet ownership challenges in the UK

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Dr **Janine Muldoon**  
Professor **Jo Williams**



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH



Pets change lives  
We change theirs



# BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Building on work undertaken in Scotland from 2020 to 2021, Blue Cross commissioned The University of Edinburgh to carry out a piece of UK-wide collaborative research. The aim was to understand the full range of challenges experienced by pet owners, and the impact of financial hardship, particularly with the onset of the cost-of-living crisis. Blue Cross staff were keen to identify where and how they could have the greatest impact in order to:

- Ensure services/support are available, and tailored, to everyone who needs them.
- Ensure any services/support are accessed, through targeted promotion and embedded services (linking with other providers) that address the barriers that prevent people from seeking support.
- Intervene early to prevent the downward spiral that leads to negative welfare and wellbeing for pets and owners (where initial difficulties experienced with pets become worse over time).
- Enhance both pet and human welfare and wellbeing through positive reciprocal relationships/interactions.
- Help people and pets stay together, preventing stressful experiences of relinquishment.

## The Team

### **The University of Edinburgh**

Dr Janine Muldoon, Research Fellow

Professor Jo Williams

(Applied Developmental Psychology)

Laura Wauthier, Research Assistant

### **Blue Cross**

Tracy Genever, Head of Education Services

Johanna Neufuss, Animal Welfare Research Officer



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## METHODOLOGY SNAPSHOT

A nationally representative sample targeting pet owners, aged 18+, who were experiencing challenges (no matter how small) with their animals, completed an online survey. This was developed in collaboration with Blue Cross and administered via Prolific (an online recruitment platform) in the summer of 2022 and 2023. Data were exported into SPSS (Version 27) for analysis. A comprehensive qualitative study with 20 Blue Cross service users was also developed to understand the impact of the financial crisis and experiences of accessing support. Semi-guided narrative interviews were carried out between November 2022 and April 2023, and NVivo 12 was used to support data analysis.

## 1 / INTRODUCTION



### Understanding the challenges of pet ownership

There is no doubt that pets can be beneficial for people's health and wellbeing (e.g., Hoy-Gerlach, Rauktis, & Newhill, 2020; McConnell et al., 2011; Victor & Mayer, 2022; Zablan, Melvin & Hayle, 2022), especially during difficult periods of life (Brooks et al., 2018, Irvine, 2013). However, pets can also present a series of challenges (Applebaum et al., 2021). Pet illness or injury (Podrazik et al., 2000) and difficult behaviours (Brooks et al., 2018; Buller & Ballantyne, 2020) can be especially stressful and impact everyday life. People also worry about the burden of responsibility and their ability to meet pet needs (Merkouri et al., 2022). In the UK, little is known about the specific issues that are most problematic for pet owners, how these are dealt with, and how they affect the owner, as well as the animal/s in their care. Moreover, the specific impact of economic vulnerability has rarely been considered (Toohey & Rock, 2019).

UK animal welfare charities provide a range of support services for pet owners, including financial support (free and reduced cost veterinary care) for those who are eligible. However, they are aware that not everyone who is eligible comes forward to take up this support (Blue Cross, 2021). The reasons behind this are not well understood at present, though pride, shame, and stigma inevitably play a role (Baumberg, 2016). It is vital that we understand both the impact of financial hardship on pet owners and the barriers that stop people from seeking support. Only then can charities work effectively to ensure animals and their owners receive the right kind of support and care, thus preventing neglect and relinquishment. The qualitative research, as this report highlights, has shed light on these issues which are discussed further in three publications that are currently under review (Muldoon & Williams a; b) or being prepared (Muldoon & Williams c).

It is important to establish the extent to which people are aware of available services. Perceptions and experiences of support received are also invaluable in helping charities identify what they are doing well and where they need to focus their attention. Knowing which people/families or areas are most vulnerable to experiencing challenges is vital. These are likely to ebb and flow in people's lives depending on the situation they find themselves in. Keeping track of how needs change over time is essential for charities, so they can adapt and alter practice accordingly. Our recent research with 25 animal welfare charities in the UK and overseas (Muldoon & Williams, 2021a; 2021b) highlighted the need to form a strong research-led evidence base to support charities as they develop their policies and practices. Accordingly, this project was designed to provide the evidence required to identify support needs, especially when people are struggling financially, as well as barriers to seeking support when difficulties are experienced, tracking ways in which they change over time.

## 2 / RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- 01 IN THE UK, WHO IS EXPERIENCING THE GREATEST CHALLENGES CARING FOR THEIR PET/S?**
  - Are there specific geographical areas or groups of people/families living in UK that are experiencing greater challenges?
- 02 HOW ARE PETS SOURCED AND WHAT DO PETS MEAN TO THEIR OWNERS?**
  - Where are pets sourced, what kind of support/advice is provided when purchasing, and how do owners feel about the pets they are experiencing challenges with and the impact on their lives?
- 03 WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH CARING FOR PETS?**
  - What type of challenges are owners experiencing with their pets, what impact do they have, do specific types of pet animal pose greater challenges, and has the cost-of-living crisis made pet ownership more difficult?
- 04 TO WHAT EXTENT ARE PET OWNERSHIP SERVICES OR SUPPORT ACCESSED?**
  - To what extent have pet owners accessed support services that are available to them through Blue Cross and other charities, and if some people are reluctant to access support, why?
- 05 WHAT FACTORS ARE INVOLVED IN THE RELINQUISHMENT OF A PET?**
  - What are the main reasons for relinquishment, was support sought prior to making this decision, to what extent is it distressing, and what support or service might prevent this from happening?
- 06 WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SEEKING SUPPORT WHEN CHALLENGES ARE EXPERIENCED?**
  - What prevents people seeking support when they need it? What action might animal welfare charities take to encourage people to come forward when they are struggling?

## 3 / METHODS



Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Clinical and Health Psychology Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh [CLPS245].

### Online survey

The online survey developed for this research was a shortened version of the one used in the 2021 Scottish study to fit within an allocated time of 15 minutes. Participants were paid for survey completion based on its duration. Demographic/employment questions were updated to reflect their current form in the Census, The updated survey was piloted with four volunteers to ensure that questions were clear and that it took the expected amount of time.

The survey was structured in five sections and was primarily comprised of Likert-scale responses and option selection, with a few open-ended questions to allow participants to provide more information if they wished. A full information and consent procedure had to be completed before the survey could begin, and at the end of the survey, a debrief section provided further information, links to relevant support organizations, and the researcher's contact details. Below we provide a brief overview of the content of each section.

#### Part 1: Information about you (demographics)

This section asked participants for basic demographic information including age, sex, and country/region of residence within the UK. It also comprised more detailed questions relating to participants' living arrangements, family circumstances, and employment status. To establish financial situation, participants were asked if they were in receipt of any means-tested benefits, and if they had used a human food bank and/or a pet food bank in the past 12 months (only 'food bank' was used in 2022, when pet food banks were scarce). Participants were also asked if they were registered disabled and the extent to which day-to-day activities were limited because of a health problem or disability (including problems relating to old age). Many of the questions in this section were taken from established sources such as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the UK Census.

#### Part 2: Current pets

This section included questions relating to the number/type of pets currently owned, Motivation for getting their pet/s was assessed with a 7-item measure and the option to add their own reason (e.g., companionship for a child, wanting an animal to care for/love, helping others out when they could no longer look after their pet/s). We also asked if anything had made it difficult to meet the costs of looking after their pet/s. Seven options were presented (e.g., delayed benefits payment, increased cost of living, reduction in income), along with the option to add other issues or select 'none of the above'.

### Part 3: Challenges with current pets

This section asked participants about the pet that was giving them most cause for concern or presenting them with the most significant challenges. First, participants were asked to indicate the type of pet and their age, how long they had owned the animal, the breed (for dogs, cats, rabbits and horses), where they sourced their pet, and whether they were given any advice on seven different aspects of caring for their specific animal (e.g., providing for basic needs – food, shelter, exercise, past experience of the pet, their health background, how they should be handled, etc.). Subsequently, participants completed a 9-item measure of attachment to their pet, which was developed using (and adapting) 6 items from the General Attachment sub-scale of the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS; Johnson, Garrity & Stallones, 1992) and 3 items inspired by the People-substituting subscale. For this scale, participants have to indicate agreement with each statement (e.g., “my pet is a great companion”) on a four-point scale from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree. The scale had very good internal reliability in the current sample ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Participants were also asked if they were the main carer for the pet, if the pet had been insured, registered with a vet (private or charity), neutered (where applicable), or received specialist behavioural support.

Participants were asked a series of questions about the specific types of challenge/s they were experiencing with this pet. A 20-item measure (with very good internal reliability  $\alpha = 0.90$ ) developed for the Scottish study in 2021, was used to assess the whole range of ‘pet ownership challenges’, with the same response categories as the attachment scale. This measure has 4 broad dimensions of challenges; items within each are listed:

#### (1) Pet behavioural challenges (6 items, $\alpha = 0.83$ )

My pet is a nuisance to others (e.g., makes a lot of noise, chases other animals, annoys neighbours); My pet is aggressive towards, or is a threat to, other animals or people; They are destructive and damage things in the house/garden/enclosure; My pet is difficult to look after/train; My pet is hard to live with (e.g., they need a lot of attention); Having my pet prevents me from seeing my friends or having visitors.

#### (2) Financial challenges and anxiety (3 items, $\alpha = 0.65$ )

I cannot afford the costs associated with feeding, vet bills or specialist equipment; Looking after my pet has cost me far more than I expected; I am anxious about what might happen to my pet (illness, injury, escape, stolen).

#### (3) Socio-environmental challenges (6 items, $\alpha = 0.85$ )

I am not well enough or able to give my pet the care or attention they need; It is difficult to look after my pet at the moment due to other family commitments; Changes in my living arrangements mean it is difficult for me to look after my pet; Personal/family challenges mean that my pet is not right for me/us anymore; I can't leave my pet in the care of other people that live with me; I do not have enough support to help me look after my pet.

#### (4) Pet health challenges (5 items, $\alpha = 0.75$ )

They have toileting issues; They have health issues; My pet does not seem happy; My pet shows other signs of distress; Changes in my pet (in their behaviour/health) mean it is more difficult to look after them.

A 10-item measure was developed to assess the impact of the challenges, with the same four response categories as the other scales. Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed that the challenges were having the following impact on their quality of life through:

**(a) Constraints on life** (6 item,  $\alpha = 0.87$ )

These challenges... 'make life stressful and tiring', 'make me feel angry/resentful towards my pet', 'upset my family', 'cause problems with neighbours', 'prevent me from doing the things I want to do', 'prevent me from seeing other people or inviting others to my home'

**(b) Financial and emotional concern for the animal's wellbeing** (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.84$ )

These challenges... 'make me feel anxious', 'are creating financial pressure', 'make me feel guilty/sorry for my pet' 'have been more stressful as a result of the financial crisis'.

Finally, participants were asked if they felt responsible for dealing with the challenges they were experiencing with their pet, and whether they had considered giving up the pet. If participants reported that they had thought about it, they could select the three main reasons for doing so from a list of seven options, which were developed specifically for this and the 2021 study. The items were adapted from the Commitment to Pets Scale (Rauktis *et al.*, 2021), with four additional items created for this study.

#### **Part 4: Access to support and services**

In this section, participants were asked whether they had ever accessed support or services to help them care for their pet. If they had, they were asked what type of support they had accessed and which organizations provided the support (Blue Cross, another animal welfare charity, a veterinary practice, or other). If participants had not accessed support, they could indicate all the reasons which applied to them, from not needing any support, to not knowing support was available, or not being able to access services.

#### **Part 5: Giving up/rehoming a pet**

In the final section, participants were asked if they had ever had to give up a pet animal through rehoming, leaving them, or having them put to sleep by a vet. If yes, they were asked to provide more information about one particular animal, including the type of pet and their age. Participants were asked to specify up to three reasons that they had to give up the pet from a list of seven options (e.g., issues with behaviour, health, financial cost). Participants were also asked whether they had accessed any support prior to giving up the pet, whether they were aware of support available, and what support might have been helpful. Finally, participants were asked to explain how giving up the pet had made them feel ('relieved', 'sad/distressed', 'disappointed', 'guilty/ashamed', 'other feelings'). They were asked where they had taken their pet and their views on any support they had received since giving them up.



## Procedure

Data were collected in July 2022 and June 2023 via Prolific, an online platform connecting researchers to participants who get paid for their time. Participants from the UK were screened for pet-ownership and non-participation in our previous survey and to ensure a representative spread across sex. Participants were provided with an information sheet within Prolific giving a description of the study aims so they could decide if they wanted to take part. They were then re-directed to Qualtrics where the survey was hosted. Participants completed a full consent procedure and provided their Prolific ID, which allowed their answers to be anonymously matched to their Prolific data. Once participants had completed the survey, they were provided with a code they could enter when re-directed back to Prolific to confirm a complete response. Once all responses had been received and screened, they were approved for payment.

## Data analysis

Data were imported from Qualtrics into SPSS v. 27 for analysis. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Direct Oblimin rotation was used to explore the factor structure of the measures developed for this study (e.g., the pet challenges scale and the impact of challenges scale). Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies and percentages) were used to provide an indication of how common different issues were, and tests of mean difference (e.g., t-tests and ANOVAs) were used to detect differences between groups (e.g., males vs. females). Where applicable and where there is no significant difference, we report the statistics for the overall scale rather than for each subscale, for brevity. We also report effect sizes: Cohen's  $d$  when using t-tests (0.2 = small effect, 0.5 = medium, 0.8 = large), and eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ) when using ANOVA (0.01 = small effect, 0.06 = medium, 0.14 = large).





## Interview study

Individual interviews were used to explore participants' experiences of accessing support from Blue Cross, from the problems that initially lead them to reach out for support, the extent of the challenges, and any reluctance to access services, all the way through to how the care received had impacted them. A narrative approach was used (Butina, 2015; Wong & Breheny, 2018) which foregrounds participants' stories, with the researcher providing the opportunity for them to narrate their experiences instead of using a strict question-answer format. In recognition that some people find it difficult to tell their story in this way (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016), a semi-structured method was used, with a set of guiding questions to help capture the chronology of events.

## Procedure

Online interviews took place between November 2022 and April 2023. Initially, an email from the research team with an information sheet and link to an online consent form in Qualtrics was forwarded by Blue Cross to clients who had given permission to receive emails for marketing/research purposes. They were advised of the £20 Amazon voucher for taking part. Emails were sent to hospital clients in London and Grimsby and those who had used the behavioural or rehoming services. Staff at pet food banks also promoted the study to visiting clients. Once a consent form was completed, the researcher organised a date/time to meet. Interviews were carried out in Microsoft Teams and took approximately 40 minutes. As part of our ethics protocol, we did not ask explicit questions about personal finances or probe difficult experiences, and at the end of the interview participants were thanked for sharing their experiences and offered the opportunity to ask questions. A debrief email was sent with details of supportive organisations (Blue Cross, Samaritans, NHS 24, Citizens Advice Bureau). Interviews were audio-recorded using Online Broadcasting Software (OBS). The transcribe function in Word generated an initial transcript, which was reviewed and amended. Pseudonyms were created for people and pets.

## Data analysis

An in-depth case-driven inductive approach was used to analyse data, with an eye to broader narratives at play (reflecting wider societal norms, attitudes or values). Anonymised transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 and analysed in turn, applying codes to each person's file to capture all their experiences and views. With each subsequent participant, quotations were added to existing codes, which were refined/extended, or additional ones generated. A summary of each person's experiences was created, alongside several working documents that concentrated on key themes: experiences of support, type and impact of financial difficulties, challenges of pet ownership, and reluctance to seek support. These included tables of illustrative quotations to enable comparison across cases. These were reviewed by the second author to ensure the integrity of the analysis process.

Key findings from the interviews are summarised in three sections relating to different RQs and entitled **'Insights from the qualitative study'**

(1) relates to RQ3 = pages 30-31, (2) to RQ4 = pages 35-36, and (3) to RQ6 = pages 40-41.

For a summary that brings together just the qualitative findings, please see Muldoon & Williams (2023).

## 4 / THE SAMPLE



### Online survey

A total of 500 adult pet owners took part in 2022, with 1000 new participants in 2023. Details are provided in Table 1. There was an even distribution across males and females, and across age in 2022 (with the exception of the 70+ age group). In 2023, there was a fairly even distribution across three age groups (30 to 49-year-olds were over-represented, 70+ under-represented). The sample was closely representative of UK population distribution and with respect to rates of receiving means-tested benefits and foodbank use. A rate of 16% for benefits was reported by the Department of Work and Pensions (2022). According to the Trussell Trust (2023), an estimated 2.5% use pet food banks, 7% some form of food aid.

**Table 1 The distribution of the sample**

Demographics		2022 n (%)	2023 n (%)
Area of residence in the UK	England	407 (81.4%)	826 (82.6%)
	Scotland	47 (9.4%)	86 (8.6%)
	Wales	31 (6.2%)	55 (5.5%)
	Northern Ireland	15 (3%)	33 (3.3%)
Age	18-29 years	95 (19%)	153 (15.3%)
	30-39 years	101 (20.2%)	273 (27.3%)
	40-49 years	93 (18.6%)	213 (21.3%)
	50-59 years	84 (16.8%)	160 (16%)
	60-69 years	113 (22.6%)	154 (15.4%)
	70+ years	14 (2.8%)	47 (4.7%)
Sex	Female	249 (49.8%)	499 (49.9%)
	Male	249 (49.8%)	496 (49.6%)
	Prefer not to say	2 (0.4%)	5 (0.5%)
Receiving means-tested benefits		72 (14.4%)	154 (15.4%)
Used a food bank in the past year (human in 2023)		14 (2.8%)	50 (5%)
Used a pet food bank in the past year		not asked	21 (2.1%)

The majority of participants described themselves as being White (95% 2022; 94% 2023), Asian or Asian British (2% both years), Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (2% both years), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (1% 2022; 2% 2023), and another ethnic group (<.05 % both years).

## Interview study

There were 20 English-speaking participants in the on-line interview study; 15 female and five male. Their ages ranged from 29 to 67 years ( $m = 51.35$ ,  $s.d. = 10.96$ ). 15 were registered with the Blue Cross veterinary hospitals (VH), seven using the Grimsby VH in Northeast Lincolnshire and eight the London VHs (in Victoria and Hammersmith). 10 people had only accessed a VH, two females had also used the bereavement support service, one female the behavioural support service, and a male/female couple a pet food bank.

Of the remaining five (all female from Southern England or the Midlands), four were not experiencing financial hardship. Three had just used the behavioural support service, two for a dog and cat rehomed from Blue Cross, and one for a dog bought from a breeder. One female participant had just used a pet food bank.

Participants mostly discussed their current pets, but several shared experiences with pets who had now passed away. 17 participants had dogs (now or in the past), seven had cats, and two, ponies. One participant talked about having small mammals in the past, one ferrets, and one a reptile.



# 5 / FINDINGS

**RQ1** People experiencing challenges

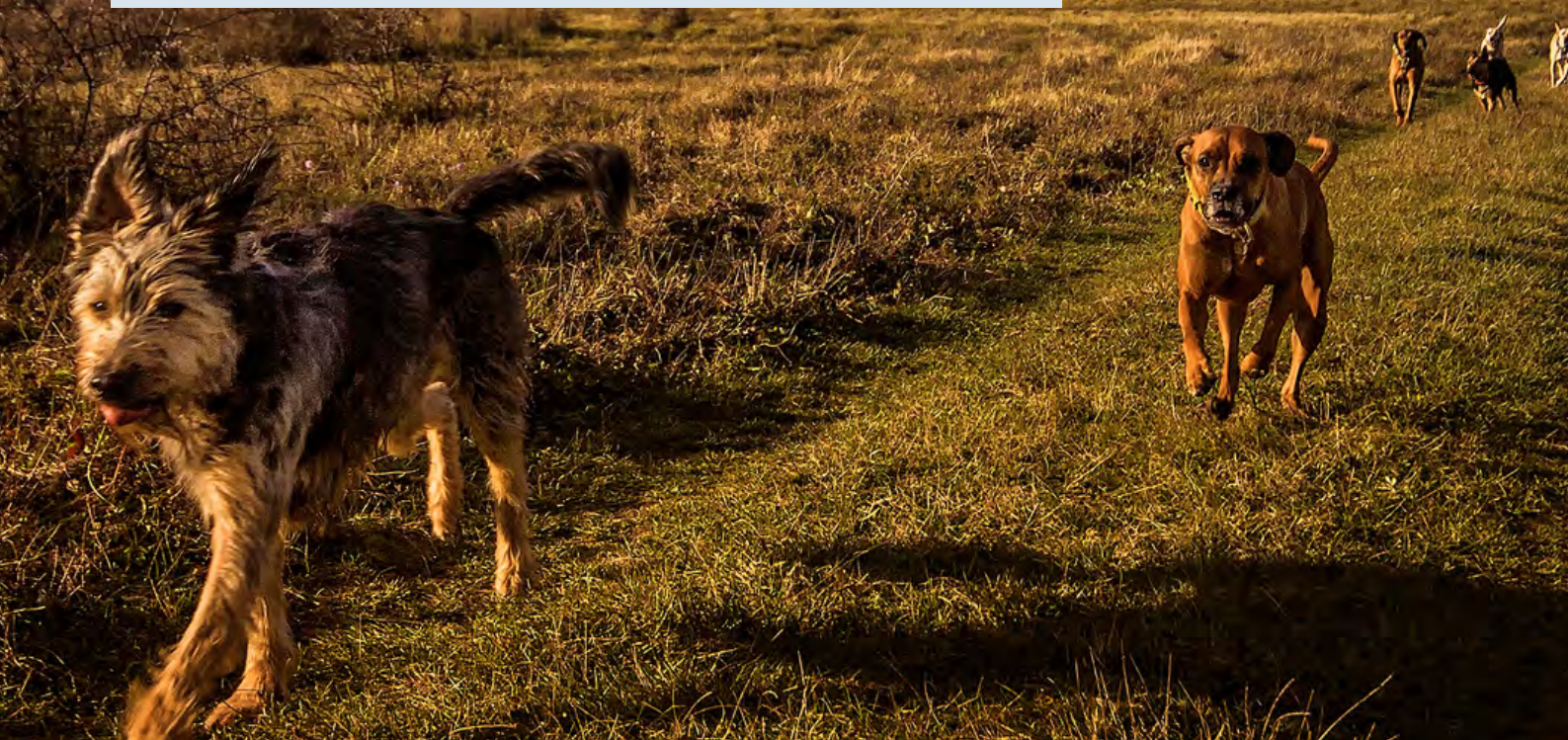
**RQ2** Sourcing pets and their significance

**RQ3** The challenges of pet ownership

**RQ4** Accessing support

**RQ5** Relinquishing pets

**RQ6** Barriers to seeking support when in need



## RQ1 / PEOPLE EXPERIENCING CHALLENGES



### Challenges with pets in 2022 and 2023

Prior to examining regional and other demographic influences on the experience of challenges with pets, we first highlight key differences between 2022 and 2023 data (Figure 1.1).

There was a small but significant increase in the overall mean score on the 20-item challenges measure ( $t(1,1488) = -3.323, p < .001, d = -.18$ ). This was due to increases in socio-environmental challenges ( $t(1,1488) = -4.252, p < .001, d = -.07$ ) and pet health issues ( $t(1,1488) = -2.750, p < .05, d = -.15$ ). There was no difference between 2022 and 2023 in experiences of difficult pet behaviours ( $t(1,1488) = -1.684, p = .09$ ) or financial challenges and anxiety ( $t(1,1488) = -1.567, p = .12$ ). However, the latter has been the most prominent area of challenge over the past two years.

The impact of the challenges also appears to have increased (2022  $m = 1.70, s.d. = .57$ ; 2023  $m = 1.82, s.d. = .59$ ,  $t(1,1488) = -3.764, p < .001, d = -.21$ ). This year people felt greater constraints on life and more financial and emotional concern for the animal's wellbeing.

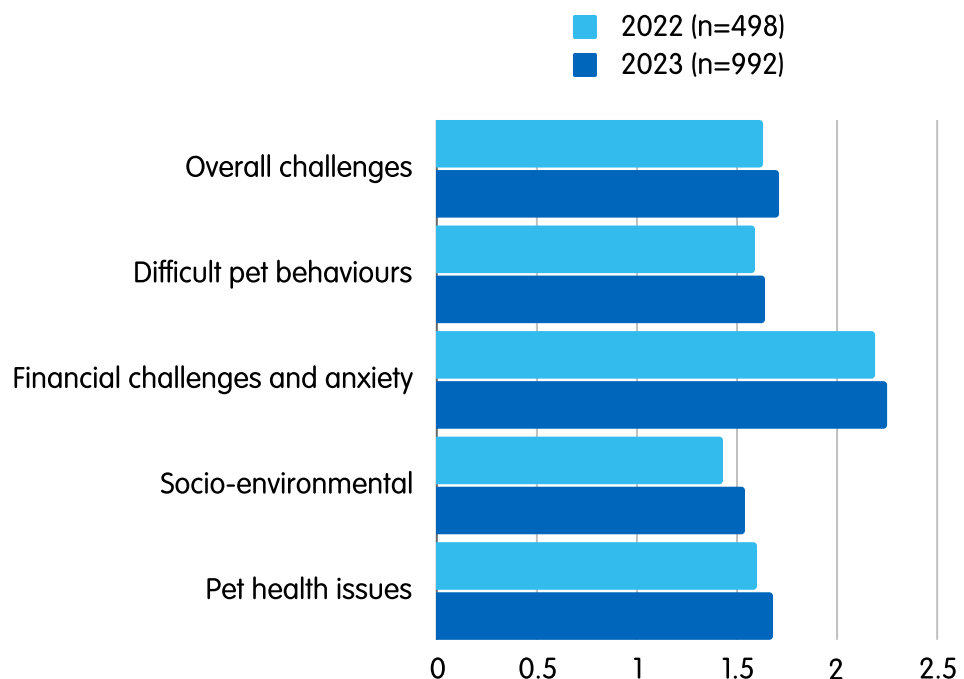


Figure 1.1 Mean scores on the challenges measure and the four sub-scales in 2022 and 2023

One-way ANOVAs and t-tests were used to examine differences between the following groups on the four sub-scales relating to pet ownership challenges:

- Location in the UK (countries and regions)
- Age, ethnicity, and sex
- Financial measures (means tested benefits, use of food banks, employment/non-employment status)
- Family circumstances (number of people living in household, number of children, household composition, marital status)
- Living arrangements (type of property and type of rental)
- Perceived health, activity limitations (disability, health/aging issues) and carer responsibilities

### Location, age, and ethnicity

There were no age-related ( $F(6, 1489) = .966, p = .45$ ), ethnicity-based ( $F(4, 1489) = 2.005, p = .09$ )\*, or country (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales) differences ( $F(3, 1489) = 1.953, p = .12$ ) in the experiences of pet ownership challenges. Although very small effects, participants in London scored higher than many other areas in England on the socio-environmental challenges sub-scale ( $F(8, 1224) = 2.798, p < .005, \eta^2 = .02$ ). Those living in West Central Scotland also scored higher on the financial challenges and anxiety sub-scale than those in Southern Scotland ( $F(4, 130) = 2.663, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$ ).

### The influence of sex

While the overall statistics for the pet challenges scale revealed no difference between male and female scores ( $t(1, 1481) = -.989, p = .32$ ), this was due to each group scoring higher on different dimensions of challenges. Male participants scored higher than females in their experiences of difficult pet behaviours and socio-environmental challenges (Table 1.1). However, females reported greater financial challenges and anxiety connected to their pet. There was no difference in pet health challenges.

**Table 1.1 Female/male differences in mean scores for the challenges sub-scales**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales	Sex	N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Difficult pet behaviours	Female	742	1.58	.56	$t(1,1481) = -2.395, p < .05, d = -.12$
	Male	741	1.65	.53	
Financial challenges & anxiety	Female	742	2.30	.69	$t(1,1481) = 4.104, p < .001, d = .21$
	Male	741	2.15	.65	
Socio-environmental	Female	742	1.47	.48	$t(1,1481) = -2.045, p < .05, d = -.11$
	Male	741	1.53	.49	
Pet health issues	Female	742	1.64	.54	$t(1,1481) = -1.093, p = .27$ (N.S.)
	Male	741	1.67	.55	

\* Note, there were insufficient data from different ethnic groups (see page 12) to permit robust analysis

## Financial situation

Participants who were receiving means-tested benefits experienced greater challenges overall than those who were not ( $t(1, 1460) = 3.085, p < .005, d = .22$ ). Differences were only significant with respect to socio-environmental challenges and financial challenges/anxiety, and not for difficult pet behaviours or pet health issues (see Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2 Differences in mean scores for the challenges sub-scales based on means-tested benefits**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales	Receiving benefits?	N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Difficult pet behaviours	Yes	225	1.65	.59	$t(1,1460) = 1.122, p = .26$ (N.S.)
	No	1237	1.61	.54	
Financial challenges & anxiety	Yes	225	2.40	.72	$t(1,1460) = 4.241, p < .001, d = .32$
	No	1237	2.20	.66	
Socio-environmental	Yes	225	1.60	.50	$t(1,1460) = 3.644, p < .001, d = .26$
	No	1237	1.48	.48	
Pet health issues	Yes	225	1.69	.72	$t(1,1460) = 1.210, p = .23$ (N.S.)
	No	1237	1.64	.66	

In 2022, we asked participants if they had used a food bank during the past year, and the only area of difference was on the financial challenges and anxiety sub-scale. In 2023, we distinguished between human and pet food banks (see Tables 1.3 and 1.4). Differences in challenges experienced were still evident with respect to financial challenges/anxiety, but those who had used a human or pet food bank during the past year also scored higher on socio-environmental challenges. Those using a pet food bank also scored higher on pet health issues, though this needs to be interpreted with caution due to small sample size.

**Table 1.3 Differences in mean scores for the challenges sub-scales based on human food bank use (2023 data)**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales		N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Difficult pet behaviours	Yes	50	1.74	.66	$t(1,983) = 1.420, p = .16$ (N.S.)
	No	935	1.63	.53	
Financial challenges & anxiety	Yes	50	2.61	.77	$t(1,983) = 3.967, p < .001, d = .58$
	No	935	2.22	.68	
Socio-environmental	Yes	50	1.73	.59	$t(1,983) = 2.948, p < .005, d = .43$
	No	935	1.52	.49	
Pet health issues	Yes	50	1.78	.72	$t(1,983) = 1.398, p = .29$ (N.S.)
	No	935	1.67	.53	



**Table 1.4 Differences in mean scores for the challenges sub-scales based on pet food bank use (2023 data)**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales	Pet food bank use?	N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Difficult pet behaviours	Yes	21	1.81	.67	$t(1,985) = 1.558, p = .12$ (N.S.)
	No	966	1.63	.54	
Financial challenges & anxiety	Yes	21	2.65	.90	$t(1,985) = 2.749, p < .01, d = .61$
	No	966	2.24	.68	
Socio-environmental	Yes	21	1.80	.60	$t(1,985) = 2.494, p < .05, d = .55$
	No	966	1.53	.49	
Pet health issues	Yes	21	1.94	.72	$t(1,985) = 2.242, p < .05, d = .50$
	No	966	1.67	.54	

There was no difference in the challenges of pet ownership based on participants' employment status ( $F(5, 1489) = 1.379, p = .23$ ). However, those reporting that in the past week, they had not been working and described themselves as long-term sick or disabled were experiencing greater financial challenges/anxiety than those who were retired (see Table 1.5).

**Table 1.5 Differences in mean scores on the financial challenges/anxiety sub-scale of pet owners who were not working**

Non-employed status	N	Mean	S.D.	Anova results
Retired	142	2.09	.63	$F(4, 306) = 3.117, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$
Studying	24	2.03	.53	
Looking after home/family	75	2.24	.76	
Long-term sick or disabled	44	2.45	.75	
Other	22	2.30	.57	

The findings from the interview study shed light on the nature of the challenges people experience with pets and how these interact when they are struggling financially. A summary can be found in [Insights from the qualitative data \(1\)](#) on pages 30-31, which illustrates just how stressful the situation can become when the challenges mount up.

### Family circumstances

The only area where differences were evident in the extent of challenges experienced as a result of family circumstances was in relation to **socio-environmental challenges**. As a reminder, this sub-scale included the following items:

- I am not well enough or able to give my pet the care or attention they need
- It is difficult to look after my pet at the moment due to other family commitments

- Changes in my living arrangements mean it is difficult for me to look after my pet
- Personal/family challenges mean that my pet is not right for me/us anymore
- I can't leave my pet in the care of other people that live with me
- I do not have enough support to help me look after my pet.

There were differences on this measure depending on the number of people living in the household (Table 1.6). Households with two people experienced fewer challenges than those with three or four people. Those with no children ( $n= 820, m= 1.46, s.d.= .46$ ) also scored lower than those with children, though the difference was only significant when comparing against households with two children ( $n= 276, m= 1.58, s.d. = .53, F(5, 1489) = 3.342, p < .005, \eta^2 = .01$ )

**Table 1.6 Differences in socio-environmental challenges according to number of people in household**

N of people in household	N	Mean	S.D.	Anova results
1	153	1.55	.49	$F(5, 1489) = 4.687, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$
2	586	1.43	.46	
3	314	1.57	.40	
4	309	1.53	.52	
5	99	1.53	.49	
6 or more	29	1.60	.45	

Examining household composition, Table 1.7 shows that couple households without children experienced fewer socio-environmental challenges than all other groups. Lone parents had the highest score. Similarly, participants who were separated appeared to be experiencing greater challenges than all other groups (see Table 1.8). They also scored higher on the other sub-scales, but these differences did not reach the required level of significance. Caution in interpretation is also required given the small sample size. However, this does reinforce the finding above, suggesting that those living alone, without a partner, or lone parents, experience greater challenges.

**Table 1.7 Differences in socio-environmental challenges according to type of household**

Type of household	N	Mean	S.D.	Anova results
Single person	167	1.58	.50	$F(5, 1489) = 8.370, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$
Lone parent	111	1.64	.56	
Couple (no children)	486	1.40	.45	
Couple (with children)	593	1.52	.49	
Other (no children)	109	1.55	.44	
Other (with children)	24	1.62	.58	

**Table 1.8 Differences in socio-environmental challenges according to marital status**

Marital status	N	Mean	S.D.	Anova results
Single (never married or had a civil partner)	327	1.53	.49	<b><math>F(6, 1489) = 5.299, p &lt; .001, \eta^2 = .02</math></b>
Married (includes civil partnerships)	701	1.48	.49	
Co-habiting	315	1.44	.45	
Widowed (or surviving civil partner)	33	1.49	.45	
Divorced (or legally dissolved civil partnership)	80	1.65	.55	
Separated	22	1.90	.48	

### Living arrangements

Participants who were living in a house ( $m = 1.48, s.d. = .48$ ) experienced fewer socio-environmental challenges than those who were living in a flat, maisonette or apartment ( $m = 1.60, s.d. = .50, t(1, 1481) = -3.213, p < .001, d = -.24$ ). Those who owned their own home ( $m = 1.48, s.d. = .48$ ) also experienced fewer socio-environmental challenges than those who rented ( $m = 1.54, s.d. = .50, t(1, 1481) = -2.284, p < .05, d = -.13$ ). There was no difference between those in private or local authority rentals ( $t(1, 452) = -.309, p = .76$ ).

### Self-perceptions of health and activity limitations

As Table 1.9 shows, self-reported health status interacted with some of the challenges owners experienced ( $F(3, 1488) = 11.934, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ ). Owners in very good health reported significantly fewer socio-environmental challenges than all other owners, and fewer pet health issues than those in fair health. Owners in very good or good health reported fewer financial challenges/anxiety than those in fair or poor health. There was no difference between these groups in challenges relating to the animal's behaviour.

There were no differences between participants who reported they had a disability ( $n = 102$ ) and those who did not ( $n = 1379$ ) in the challenges experienced with pets ( $t(1, 1479) = .890, p = .375$ ). However, there were differences between those who reported that their day-to-day activities were limited by health issues, including problems relating to old age ( $n = 303$ ) and those who felt they were not limited ( $n = 1097, t(1, 1488) = .387, p = <.001, d = .23$ ). The former experienced greater socio-environmental, financial challenges/anxiety and pet health issues (see Table 1.10). Those with carer responsibilities (i.e., who look after, or give help/support to others because they have long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses, or problems relating to old age) were experiencing greater financial challenges and anxiety ( $n = 315, m = 2.35, s.d. = .66$ ) than those who did not have this responsibility ( $n = 1175, m = 2.19, s.d. = .67, t(1, 1488) = 3.612, p = <.001, d = .23$ ).

**Table 1.9 Differences in mean scores on the challenges sub-scales based on self-reported health status**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales	Perceived health	N	Mean	S.D.	Anova results
Difficult pet behaviours	Very good	304	1.57	.52	$F(3,1488) = 1.666, p = .172$ (N.S.)
	Good	722	1.63	.55	
	Fair	370	1.66	.54	
	Poor/very poor	93	1.57	.60	
Financial challenges and anxiety	Very good	304	1.99	.67	$F(3,1488) = 28.331, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$
	Good	722	2.20	.66	
	Fair	370	2.39	.62	
	Poor/very poor	93	2.54	.74	
Socio-environmental challenges	Very good	304	1.37	.44	$F(3,1488) = 12.988, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$
	Good	722	1.50	.48	
	Fair	370	1.59	.50	
	Poor/very poor	93	1.61	.50	
Pet health issues	Very good	304	1.57	.53	$F(3,1488) = 4.495, p < .005, \eta^2 = .009$
	Good	722	1.65	.54	
	Fair	370	1.72	.56	
	Poor/very poor	93	1.69	.54	

**Table 1.10 Differences in mean scores for the challenges sub-scales for those with and without day-to-day activity limitations**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales	Day-to-day activities limited?	N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Difficult pet behaviours	Yes	393	1.63	.57	$t(1,1488) = .472, p = .64$ (N.S.)
	No	1097	1.62	.53	
Financial challenges & anxiety	Yes	393	2.39	.66	$t(1,1488) = 5.637, p < .001, d = .67$
	No	1097	2.17	.67	
Socio-environmental	Yes	393	1.59	.51	$t(1,1488) = 4.453, p < .001, d = .54$
	No	1097	1.47	.47	
Pet health issues	Yes	393	1.72	.56	$t(1,1488) = 2.722, p < .01, d = .50$
	No	1097	1.63	.54	

## RQ2 / SOURCING PETS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE



Of the full sample, 99% (n=1490) currently had at least one pet. The majority (55%) had one pet animal, just over a quarter had two pets, and 8% had three, 10% had 4 or more animals. As Table 2.1 shows, dogs and cats were the most common type of pet that our participants owned and the animals that were most likely to be causing challenges or concern.

**Table 2.1 Types of pets owned and those presenting challenges for their owners**

Type of pet	Pet ownership		Concerns about or challenges with pets	
	n with this pet type	% of sample	n with concerns about this pet type	% of sample
Dogs	889	59.3	825	55.9
Cats	713	47.5	556	36.5
Rabbits	38	2.5	17	1.2
Other small mammals	88	5.9	30	1.9
Reptiles/amphibians	43	2.9	12	0.8
Birds	56	3.7	18	1.3
Fish	101	6.7	20	1.4
Horses/ponies	13	0.9	12	0.9

Pets had been sourced primarily from a rescue/rehoming centre or animal welfare charity (2022  $n=144$ , 29%; 2023  $n=252$ , 25%), followed by a breeder (2022  $n=131$ , 26%; 2023  $n=273$ , 28%), someone the owner knew such as a friend or family member (2022  $n=96$ , 19%; 2023  $n=221$ , 22%), an online website or via social media (2022  $n=91$ , 18%, 2023  $n=170$ , 17%), or another source (2022  $n=36$ , 7%; 2023  $n=76$ , 8%). There were no significant differences on any of the pet challenges subscales based on where owners had sourced their pet from ( $F(6, 1489) = .405, p = .88$ ). Table 2.2 shows the support or advice given to owners when they purchased their dog or cat. It is notable that a quarter of those purchasing dogs and over a third of those purchasing cats received no support or advice from the person or organisation providing the pet.

A small percentage of people received information relating to costs/insurance or the availability of support to manage the animal's behaviour. The most common form of support or advice provided by people/organisations selling pets was information on providing for basic needs (over half of dog owners and just under half of cat owners received this advice). People purchasing cats received less support/advice overall than those purchasing dogs.

**Table 2.2 Support/advice provided when the dog or cat was acquired**

Type of support/advice given	Dogs (n = 825) n (%)	Cats (n = 556) n (%)
Providing for basic needs (food, shelter, exercise, routine care)	480 (58.2%)	252 (45.3%)
Information about typical natural behaviours	302 (36.6%)	127 (22.8%)
Characteristics of the animal/health conditions associated with breed	303 (36.7%)	128 (23.0%)
Past experiences (history of aggression, lived with animals/children)	239 (39.0%)	136 (24.5%)
The health background of the animal (chronic illness/dietary reqs)	325 (39.4%)	149 (26.8%)
The way they should be handled (what they like/dislike)	247 (29.9%)	113 (20.3%)
Availability of support to help manage the pet's behaviour	123 (14.9%)	33 (5.9%)
Costs associated with caring for the pet/recommended insurance	132 (16.0%)	81 (14.6%)
I was given no advice by the person/organisation I got the pet from	212 (25.7%)	229 (41.2%)

As shown in Table 2.3, three quarters of our participants reported acquiring pets because they wanted an animal to care for/love or as a companion. There was no difference in the reasons given by participants in the 2022 and 2023 cohorts. The findings relating to the bond or attachment they had with a pet confirm the important emotional role that pets play in people's lives. Participants completed a nine-item scale on their attachment to the pet which was giving them the most cause for concern or presenting them with the most challenges. Those with dogs had a stronger bond ( $n= 825$ ,  $m= 3.44$ ,  $s.d.= .48$ ) than those with cats ( $n= 556$ ,  $m= 3.23$ ,  $s.d.= .55$ ),  $t(1, 1379) = 7.590$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d= .42$ ). Attachment to pets correlated negatively with socio-environmental challenges ( $r= -.281$ ,  $p < .001$ ), difficult pet behavioural challenges ( $r= -.292$ ,  $p < .001$ ), pet health issues ( $r= -.293$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the impact of the challenges in terms of both constraints on life ( $r= -3.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and their emotional and financial impact ( $r= -.125$ ,  $p < .001$ ). By contrast, there was no association with financial challenges and anxiety ( $r= -.017$ ,  $p= .52$ ). It may be that challenges experienced with pets threaten attachment, or alternatively having a strong bond may be protective and make participants less likely to experience challenges as acutely. All correlations between scales can be found in the Appendix in Table 8.1.

**Table 2.3 Reasons why participants acquired their pet**

Reasons for getting a pet	2022 n (%)	2023 n (%)
I wanted an animal to care for/love	376 (75.2%)	749 (74.9%)
Companionship for me	233 (46.6%)	440 (44.0%)
Another adult who lives with me wanted a pet	130 (26.0%)	267 (26.7%)
Companionship for another adult who lives with me	101 (20.2%)	185 (18.5%)
A child in the household asked for a pet	80 (16.0%)	181 (18.1%)
Companionship for a child	53 (10.6%)	136 (13.6%)
I was helping others out when they could no longer look after their pet	51 (10.2%)	74 (7.4%)
Other	30 (6.0%)	38 (3.8%)

Within the interviews, it was clear how important pets were. Participants described them as family members or even children. A strong theme emerged when they were talking about both the significance of the animal and the challenges. This centred on the notion of ‘sacrifice’. Participants spoke of always doing everything they possibly could to make sure their pets were well looked after and had the best life possible. This often meant going without themselves (e.g., the pets had better quality food than them, they would forgo other ‘luxuries’ in favour of making sure their pet was happy and healthy, heating would be put on for the pet not for them).



## RQ3 / THE CHALLENGES OF PET OWNERSHIP



Before taking a close look at the key challenges that have been experienced by pet owners with dogs and cats respectively, we consider first the financial situation for pet owners in general, key differences in challenges experienced in 2022 and 2023, and how different types of pet care provision related to challenges participants were experiencing.

### Financial constraints

As highlighted earlier, it was clear in both 2022 and 2023 that financial challenges and anxiety connected to what might happen to a pet were the major concern. There was no change in mean scores on this sub-scale over the 2-year period. However, participants were asked a series of questions about the affordability of pet care, including situations that had made it difficult to meet the costs of care in the past, and any concerns they had in relation to the emerging cost of living crisis. In 2022, just over half the participants (n=268, 54%) reported at least one issue that had made pet care difficult to afford. This increased to nearly two thirds of the sample in 2023 (n=618, 62%). By far the most common issue was increased cost of living followed by reduction in income (Table 3.1). When asked if they had ever found it difficult financially to ensure their pets are really well looked after and their needs met, there was also an increase in the proportion of people saying yes, from 153 (31%) in 2022 to 362 (36%) in 2023.

**Table 3.1 Problems making it difficult to meet the costs of keeping a pet**

Problem posing difficulty	2022		2023	
	n	% of sample	n	% of sample
Increased cost of living	249	50%	580	58%
Reduction in salary or joint incomes	64	13%	124	12%
Reduction or delay in benefits payments	10	2%	37	4%
Moving into private rental accommodation	33	7%	52	5%
Redundancy	24	5%	47	5%
Increased childcare costs	21	4%	51	5%
Study/education costs	18	4%	40	4%



Over a quarter of participants reported being ‘concerned’ (2022 n=137, 28%; 2023 n=277, 28%) or ‘somewhat concerned’ (2022 n=202, 41%; 2023 n=410, 41%) that the rising cost of living would impact their ability to care for their pet. The source of most concern was being able to afford veterinary care (2022 n= 305, 61%; 2023 n=585, 59%), followed by medications or vaccination (2022 n=185, 37%; 2023 n=364 36%), food costs (2022 n=144, 29%; 2023 n=295, 30%), pet insurance (not asked in 2022; 2023 n=265, 27%), professional services such as grooming or training (2022 n= 63, 13%; 2023 n=89, 9%), and toys or enrichment (2022 n=25, 5%; 2023 n=37, 4%). As these figures demonstrate, the concerns remained stable across the past two years.

### Key differences in challenges from 2022 to 2023

Owners chose to report challenges with 293 dogs in 2022 (532 in 2023), 167 cats in 2022 (389 in 2023), 15 small mammals in 2022 (22 in 2023), and 23 other types of animals in 2022 (49 in 2023). In 2023, the majority of participants reported that responsibility for this pet was shared with others in the household (n= 538, 54%). 303 (31%) said they were the main carer with occasional help from others, 108 (11%) the only carer, and 40 (4%) reported someone else being the main carer.

As highlighted on page 14, the only sub-scales where a difference was evident between 2022 and 2023 were those relating to socio-environmental challenges and pet health issues. Higher mean scores were evident in 2023, indicating an overall increase in challenges experienced. Among dog owners, there were only socio-environmental differences. Table 3.2 shows the mean scores on the individual items that differed significantly between the two years. Among cat owners, the same pattern was also evident (see Table 3.3), but across a wider range of issues. A full list of proportions of dog and cat owners who strongly agreed/agreed that individual items on the challenges scale applied to them is provided in the Appendix (Table 8.2).

**Table 3.2 Specific socio-environmental challenges that were greater among dog owners in 2023 relative to 2022**

Item on socio-environmental challenges sub-scale	2022 (n = 293) m (s.d.)	2023 (n=532) m (s.d.)
Having my pet prevents me from seeing my friends or having visitors	1.64 (.72)	1.75 (.77)*
Personal/family challenges mean my pet is not right for us anymore	1.33 (.58)	1.44 (.62)*
I can't leave my pet in the care of other people	1.46 (.69)	1.56 (.73)*
I do not have enough support to help me look after my pet	1.49 (.65)	1.59 (.70)*

\* p values all <.05

### The impact of pet care provision

In this section, we provide some information on the animals that were presenting their owners with the greatest challenge or concern. Owners were asked some basic questions about how they were caring for the animal. In 2022 we did not distinguish between charity and private vets, so the figure for that year incorporates both. It is only in 2023 that we can see how many people are registered with each sector providing veterinary care.

**Table 3.3 Specific challenges that were greater among cat owners in 2023 relative to 2022**

Individual items on the pet challenges sub-scales	2022 (n= 167) m (s.d.)	2023 (n= 389) m (s.d.)
<b>Difficult pet behaviours</b>		
They are destructive and damage things in house/ garden/enclosure	1.56 (.77)	1.72 (.82) *
My pet is hard to live with (e.g., they need a lot of attention)	1.45 (.62)	1.60 (.71) *
I can't leave my pet in the care of other people	1.35 (.58)	1.59 (.70) ****
<b>Financial challenges and anxiety</b>		
I cannot afford the costs associated with feeding, vet bills, equipment	1.77 (.73)	2.00 (.76) ****
Looking after my pet has cost me far more than I expected	1.99 (.82)	2.25 (.88) ****
<b>Socio-environmental challenges</b>		
I am not well enough or able to give my pet the care they need	1.31 (.49)	1.44 (.38) *
It is difficult to look after my pet due to other family commitments	1.45 (.57)	1.58 (.64) *
Changes in living arrangements mean it is difficult to look after my pet	1.43 (.60)	1.60 (.63) ***
Personal/family challenges mean my pet is not right for us anymore	1.31 (.54)	1.46 (.58) **
Changes in my pet mean it is more difficult to look after them	1.60 (.81)	1.77 (.79) *
I do not have enough support to help me look after my pet	1.43 (.64)	1.59 (.63) **
<b>Pet health issues</b>		
They have toileting issues	1.50 (.75)	1.66 (.83) *
My pet shows other signs of distress	1.49 (.63)	1.63 (.67) *

\* p <.05 \*\* < .01 \*\*\* < .005 \*\*\*\* < .001

The majority of pets were registered at a vet practice in 2022 (total n= 463, 93%; 100% of rabbits, ponies/horses, 99% of dogs, 94% of cats), or private vet practice in 2023 (total n= 851, 86%; 100% of ponies/horses, 93% of dogs, 84% of cats, 70% of rabbits, 50% of small mammals and reptiles/amphibians). 72% of dogs, 67% of ponies/horses, 50% cats, and 41% rabbits had also been insured (totals; 2022 n= 303, 61%; 2023 n= 592, 60%). Three quarters of pets had been neutered (2022 n= 371, 75%; n= 732, 74%; total of 93% of cats, 68% dogs, 71% of rabbits, 50% of ponies/horses, and 17% of small mammals). However, only a small percentage had ever received behavioural training (2022 n= 72, 14%; 2023 n= 160, 16%; 27% of dogs overall, 17% of ponies/horses, and 1% of cats), or been registered with a charity vet (no data for 2022; 2023 n= 68, 7%, 6% of dogs and 9% of cats).

The following analyses compared those who had provided these forms of care with those who had not.

**Registration with a private vet:** There was no difference in the challenges experienced overall between those whose pets had or had not been registered with a private vet (2023,  $t(1, 985) = -2.291, p = .20, d = .21$ ). However, when examining the individual sub-scales, those who had registered their pets experienced significantly fewer socio-environmental challenges ( $n = 851, m = 1.53, s.d. = .48$ ) than those who had not ( $n = 136, m = 1.63, s.d. = .56, t(1, 985) = -2.156, p < .05, d = .20$ ).

**Pet insurance:** Those who had insured their pet reported fewer socio-environmental challenges than those who had not taken out insurance (insured  $n = 895, m = 1.47, s.d. = .47$ ; not insured  $n = 577, m = 1.56, s.d. = .51, t(1, 1470) = -3.525, p < .001, d = -.19$ ). They also experienced fewer pet health issues (insured  $m = 1.60, s.d. = .52$ ; not insured  $m = 1.74, s.d. = .57, t(1, 1470) = -4.836, p < .001, d = -.26$ ).

**Neutering:** Owners of neutered pets reported fewer difficult behavioural challenges ( $n = 1103, m = 1.60, s.d. = .54$ ) compared with those who were not neutered ( $n = 359, m = 1.68, s.d. = .55, t(1, 1460) = -2.427, p < .05, d = -.15$ ).

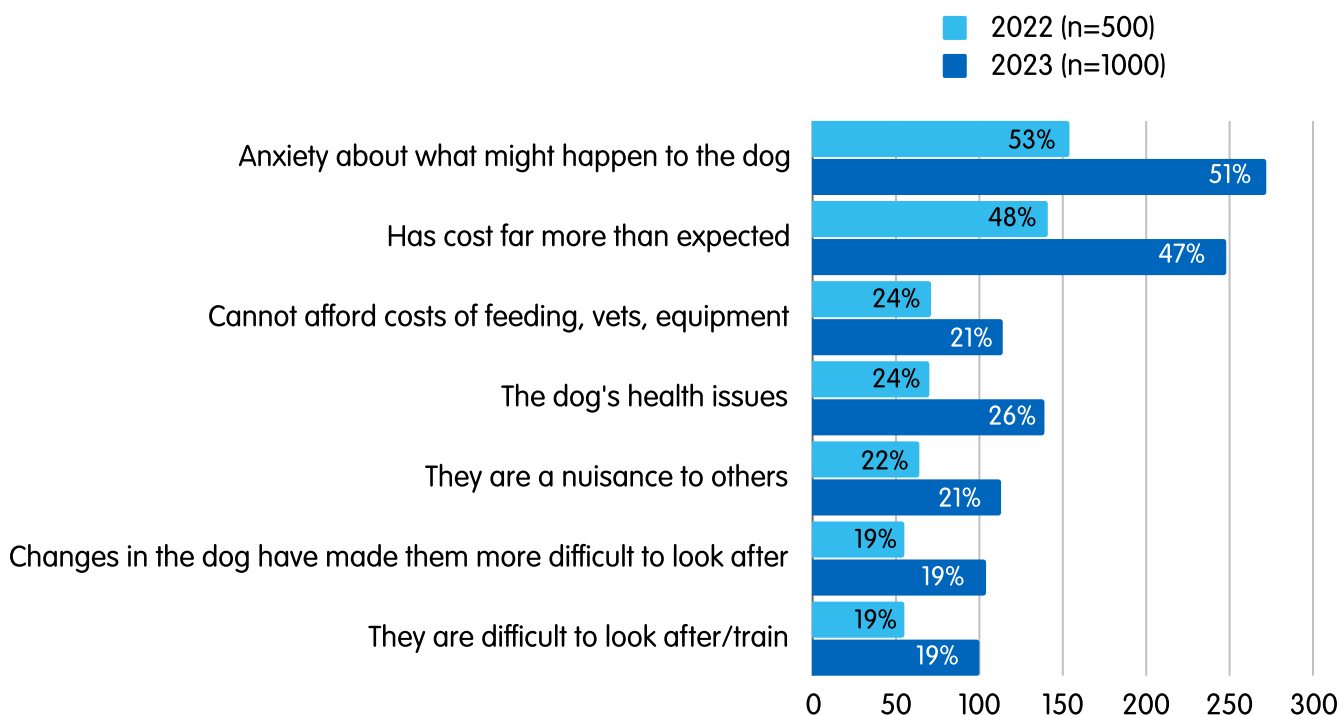
**Behavioural training:** Finally, participants whose pets had received behavioural training reported greater behavioural challenges ( $n = 232, m = 1.91, s.d. = .60$ ) than those whose pets had not received training ( $n = 1136, m = 1.59, s.d. = .52, t(1, 366) = 8.211, p < .001, d = .60$ ). This is perhaps not surprising in one sense, as you would be more likely to seek out behavioural training if you were having problems with the animal. Experience of training may also equip people with the skills to effectively identify a problem. However, it also suggests that those difficult behaviours had not been completely ameliorated by attending training.

### Differences between dog and cat owners

We highlighted earlier ways in which challenges with dogs and cats differed between 2022 and 2023. In this section, we look specifically at the ways challenges differ for those with dogs and cats. Overall, dogs were presenting greater challenges in terms of difficult behaviours ( $n = 825, m = 1.69, s.d. = .58$ ; cats  $n = 556, m = 1.53, s.d. = .48, t(1, 1379) = 5.482, p < .001, d = .30$ ). There was no difference on the other challenges sub-scales. However, those with dogs perceived greater impact of the challenges in terms of constraints on life ( $n = 825, m = 1.68, s.d. = .60$ ) than those with cats ( $n = 556, m = 1.56, s.d. = .52, t(1, 1379) = 3.846, p < .001, d = .21$ ). A similar percentage of dog and cat owners had considered giving their pet up as a result of the challenges ( $n = 68, 8%$  of the former,  $n = 53, 10%$  of the latter). The main reasons for considering relinquishment were financial difficulties/costs of pet care ( $n = 64, 4%$ ), the animal's behaviour ( $n = 53, 4%$ ) and the stress of looking after them being too much ( $n = 43, 3%$ ).

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 highlight the key issues for dog and cat owners in 2022 and 2023. There was no change in the proportions of dog owners experiencing the key issues, whereas those with cats were more anxious in 2023 about what might happen to them and more concerned about the financial impact and difficult behaviours. It is possible that with increasing financial vulnerability, challenges are more keenly felt, especially when they are unanticipated. People may choose a cat over a dog for financial reasons; therefore the impact of increasing costs has a greater impact. Owners' anxieties may also be passed on to the cat, explaining increases in challenging behaviours.

# KEY ISSUES FOR DOG OWNERS



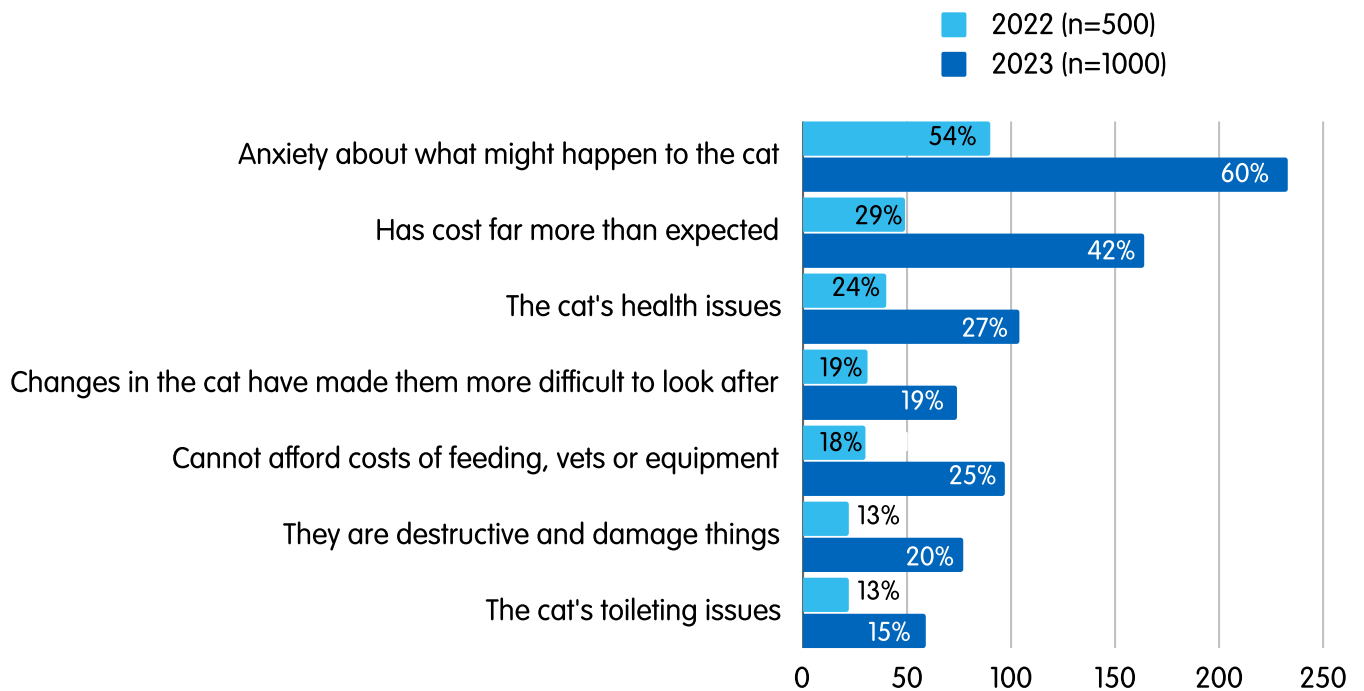
**Figure 3.1** The seven most common challenges among those with dogs: the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed this was a concern (n and %)

### Box 3.1: The most common breeds of dog that were described as presenting challenges (breeds with n<20 not included)

- 9% Mongrel/cross-breed - medium (n=71)
- 8% Labrador Retriever (n=67)
- 6% Mongrel/cross-breed – small (n=53)
- 6% Border Collie (n=47)
- 5% Cocker Spaniel (n=40)
- 4% Jack Russell Terrier (n=36)
- 4% Cockerpoo (n=35)
- 4% Another breed not listed (n=32)
- 3% German Shepherd (n=27)
- 3% Dachshund (n=26)
- 3% Mongrel/cross-breed – large (n=25)
- 3% Staffordshire Bull Terrier (n=22)
- 3% Golden Retriever (n=21)



# KEY ISSUES FOR CAT OWNERS



**Figure 3.2** The seven most common challenges among those with cats: the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed this was a concern (n and %)

### Box 3.2: The most common breeds of cat that were described as presenting challenges:

- 29% Domestic short-hair moggie (n=160)
- 20% Unknown breed (n=113)
- 18% British short-hair (n=100)
- 8% Another breed not listed (n=43)
- 4% Domestic long-hair moggie (n=21)
- 3% Domestic semi long-hair moggie (n=18)
- 3% Maine Coon (n=15)





## INSIGHTS FROM THE QUALITATIVE STUDY (1)

### Relating to RQ3 - Challenges with pets



The stories of those who had sought support from Blue Cross, usually as a result of a crisis situation or because they had found themselves really struggling and were advised by others to check if they were eligible (see page 35), show just how stressful challenges with pets can be. Common challenges are traumatic enough, but these are magnified and more complex when people are economically vulnerable. Several strategies are adopted in order to cope. These findings are summarised below, but are described in more depth in Muldoon and Williams (a; b under review), and Muldoon and Williams (c in preparation).

#### Challenges experienced with pets and the impact

- Financial stressors (cost of vet care, cost-of-living crisis, pet food, insurance, medication/treatment) are especially difficult for those used to living frugally long term or those experiencing a traumatic life event.
- Animal's health issues are very stressful, whether they are long-term chronic conditions, acute/emergency situations when an animal is suddenly unwell, injured, or needs a significant operation, or the result of multiple issues often associated with aging/end of life.
- Emotional and financial issues are entangled when a pet is ill. Limited finances can mean difficult decisions need to be made. People are not always in a position to be able to afford investigations to determine the problem.
- Having a dog with difficult behaviour (due to prior mistreatment, obtaining from a non-recommended source, lack of knowledge about dog or breed, lack of socialisation, or not being a good match for the family). Difficulties with behaviour impact all areas of life (visiting vet, walking dog, not being able to leave alone or with others, being tied down, not being able to have visitors to the house, cost of behavioural support).
- Knowing that your pet is not going to get better and losing them are extremely traumatic experiences with long-lasting effects.
- Other less prevalent stressors include changes in people's own health that impact on their ability to care for their pet and their finances, having to rehome an animal (due to housing limitations or behaviour), not being able to secure support due to complex circumstances.



## The impact of financial hardship on pet owners

- Financial strain is a stressor even for those who are relatively financially secure (e.g., paying for a behaviourist or specialist care when these were unanticipated). All participants alluded to the costs of having a pet (vet care especially) and some mentioned the increased cost of all aspects of pet care due to the cost-of-living crisis.
- The majority had struggled financially in recent years in a way never experienced before due to changes in circumstances. Others had been on a low income for the long-term. The latter were well versed in being thrifty, but when there is no financial buffer, events can spiral out of control.
- Seeking support in more recent years was often the result of a health issue or emergency with a pet, when people were faced with the dilemma of what to do to help their pet, with some describing these times as the most stressful in their lives.
- There appears to be a continuum from worrying about one form of financial outlay to multiple areas with far-reaching implications. This happens when numerous challenges coincide that impact on, and are impacted by, pets, and thus intensify financial as well as emotional strain.

## How people cope when experiencing financial strain

- People make sacrifices themselves so their pet does not go without, or seek financial support from friends.
- Cut-backs have to be made (pets go without treatment/investigation/vaccination/neutering, people may wait out a health situation rather than immediately go to the vet).
- Sometimes there is no choice (people are forced to rehome beloved pets or have them put to sleep).



## RQ4 / ACCESSING SUPPORT



This section examines differences between participants who had sought support and those who had not, and how any patterns of help-seeking behaviour differed between those taking part in 2022 and 2023.

### Participants who had accessed support

Participants were asked if they had ever accessed support to help them care for any pets they'd had. In 2022, 16% had done so. This figure was 14% in 2023. Participants had most commonly accessed veterinary care, pet care support/advice, pet walking/sitting services, and behaviour training (Figure 4.1). Please note that we distinguished between private and charity vets in 2023, only asking about veterinary care generally in 2022, hence the missing data in the chart. Very few people reported accessing support from an animal welfare charity (16 people from Blue Cross, and 34 from other charities),

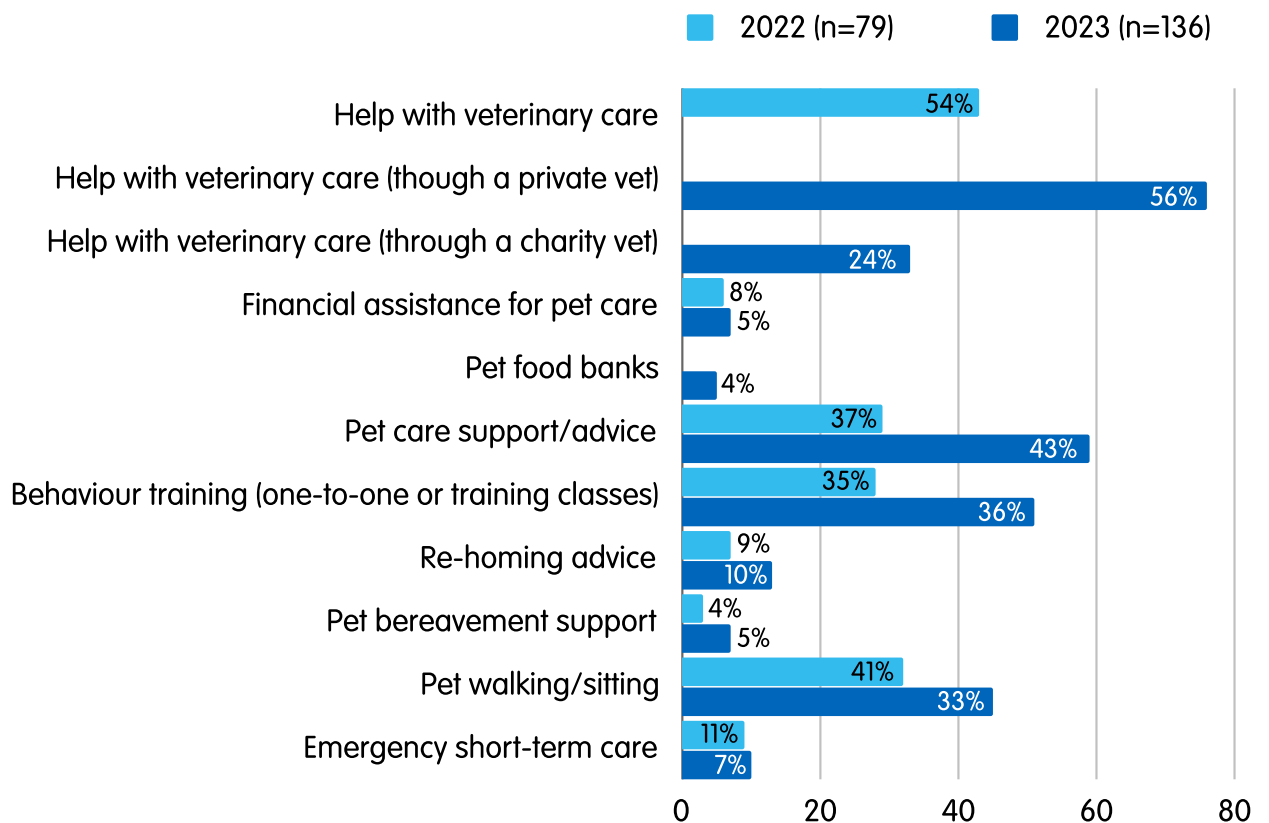
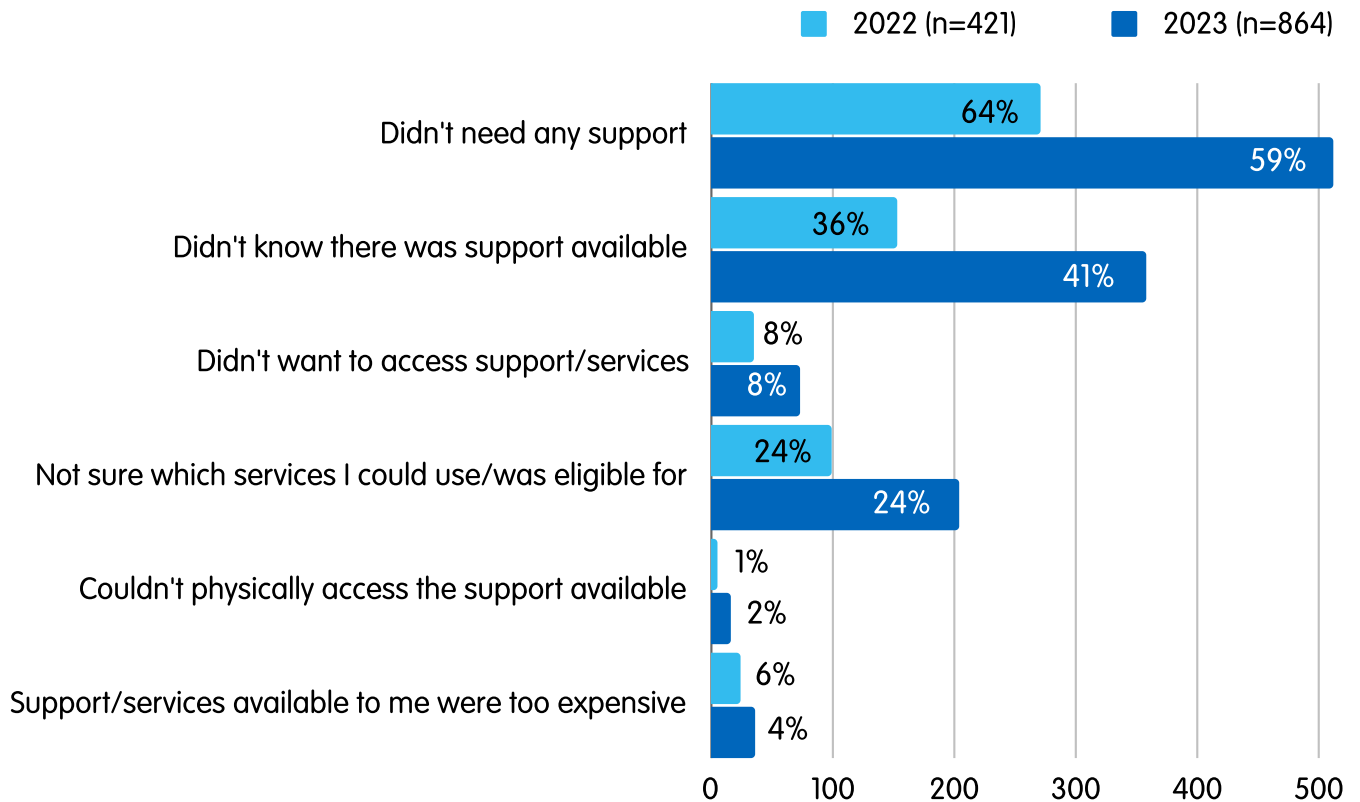


Figure 4.1 The types of support for pets that were accessed in 2022 and 2023 (n and %)



## Participants who had not accessed support

In 2022, 84% of pet owners reported that they had not accessed support to help them care for a pet. In 2023 this figure was 86%. By far the most common reason provided for not accessing support was not needing it (Figure 4.2). However, over a third of participants reported not knowing there was support available, and a quarter were not sure which services they could use. They did not know if they would be eligible.



**Figure 4.2 Reasons for not accessing support/services in 2022 and 2023 (n and %)**  
% is of the total number who reported not accessing support/services

## Differences between those who sought support and those who have not

Those who had accessed support to help them care for their pets had higher mean scores on the challenges scale than those who had not ( $t(1,1488) = 3.628, p < .001, d = .27$ ) and higher scores on the impact scale ( $t(1,1488) = 4.245, p < .001, d = .31$ ). If we take the qualitative findings into account, these findings are not surprising. People tend to only seek support as a last resort, when they are really struggling or in a crisis situation (Muldoon & Williams, b, under review). As highlighted in the previous section (RQ3), the impact of problems is also more keenly felt when under financial pressure (see page 30-31). For in-depth discussion, see Muldoon and Williams (a, under review). As Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show, those who had accessed support for their pet/s scored higher than those who had not on all sub-scales of the challenges and impact scales, with the exception of socio-environmental challenges.

This suggests that difficult pet behaviours, pet health issues and financial challenges are more likely to lead people to access support. Other factors people may have more control over.

**Table 4.1 Differences in mean scores on challenges sub-scales for those who had/had not accessed support**

Pet ownership challenges sub-scales	Accessed support for pet/s?	N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Difficult pet behaviours	Yes	215	1.76	.59	$t(1,1488) = 4.199, p < .001, d = .31$
	No	1275	1.60	.53	
Financial challenges & anxiety	Yes	215	2.32	.65	$t(1,1488) = 2.240, p < .05, d = .17$
	No	1275	2.21	.68	
Socio-environmental	Yes	215	1.53	.47	$t(1,1488) = .967, p = .334$ (N.S.)
	No	1275	1.50	.49	
Pet health issues	Yes	215	1.78	.54	$t(1,1488) = 3.715, p < .001, d = .27$
	No	1275	1.63	.54	

**Table 4.2 Differences in mean scores on the impact sub-scales for those who had/had not accessed support**

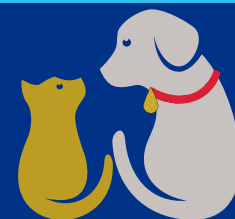
Impact of the challenges sub-scales	Accessed support for pet/s?	N	Mean	S.D.	T-test results
Constraints on life	Yes	215	1.78	.59	$t(1,1488) = 4.246, p < .001, d = .31$
	No	1275	1.60	.56	
Emotional and financial impact	Yes	215	2.17	.74	$t(1,1488) = 3.361, p < .001, d = .25$
	No	1275	1.98	.76	





## INSIGHTS FROM THE QUALITATIVE STUDY (2)

### Relating to RQ4 - Accessing support



Within the interviews, we tracked participants' experiences from initially experiencing challenges with their pet and reaching out for support. Acknowledging that this can be difficult, we summarise below what led people to seek support, how they felt, and what their experiences of receiving support had been like. A detailed feedback report was produced for Blue Cross to guide their own practice, but the summary points below may prove useful for other animal welfare charities as well as organisations that support people when they are struggling. Service users' recommendations are especially important.

#### Why people sought support

- Participants who were registered with Blue Cross had sought their support due to financial reasons. They had been on low income long-term, or faced a recent reduction in income (a change in employment circumstances or they were unable to work due to illness, injury, trauma, or carer responsibilities).
- In many instances it was the cost of vet care when there was a health issue or emergency with their pet that prompted them to look for support (they struggled to pay for what had been required or simply couldn't afford the amount quoted to have the investigation/operation).
- The recipients of behavioural support (a paid service open to all) were prompted to seek support due to difficulties dealing with dogs they had rehomed and in one case a cat.

#### Experiences of support from Blue Cross

Most participants had only heard about Blue Cross via word of mouth. People had friends who were already using Blue Cross, or they had been advised by others to check out if they were eligible for support. Some participants who had been on a low-income for a long time talked about a history of family involvement with Blue Cross. People's first impressions of using Blue Cross were overwhelmingly positive and comparisons were made with other vets and organisations that didn't seem to care or appeared 'money-grabbing'.

#### Positive aspects of accessing support from Blue Cross

- Supportive, kind and caring staff (welcoming, friendly, empathic, non-judgmental).
- Quality of care/an organisation you can trust (confidence in the abilities of staff to provide best care).
- Effective organisational systems and processes (efficient set up, responsive, and have a great App).
- The importance of proximity (services need to be close, especially when you have an anxious pet).
- A lifeline/safety net (considered a vital service by users, like the NHS for humans, participants hugely appreciative and enthusiastic to 'give back').



### *Difficulties experienced by people using Blue Cross services*

Whilst everyone praised Blue Cross for various aspects of their services, and many could not suggest significant improvements because they go 'above and beyond', some people had noticed a deterioration that began with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, or they had experienced difficulties during an especially traumatic time. These can be summarised as follows:

- Communication (difficult to get through on the phone).
- Suspended services and unavailability of vaccinations (neutering suspended, long waiting lists).
- Covid-related issues (staffing, shortage of vets, and increased demand for services).
- Getting to a clinic and waiting room experiences (travel costs, dealing with an anxious animal).
- Unexpected costs and uncertainty about eligibility (some confusion about what is/is not covered).
- Personal experiences during traumatic events (unique and complex situations).

### **Participants' recommendations**

Participants made a number of recommendations to ensure support that is on offer from animal welfare charities is addressing pet owner needs and accessed by all those who are eligible and need it. They also made suggestions for new or expanded services (things that are currently missing). See also page 41.

### *Increasing awareness of services/support available*

- Participants explained that at no point in the process of registering to receive means-tested benefits are pets mentioned. The focus is on human dependents. Therefore, people only find out about financial support for pets via informal sources.
- Blue Cross and other animal welfare charities need to advertise in the right places to reach those who are struggling most (doctors' surgeries, food banks, public transport, hospitals, charity shops).
- Support is very important to help people deal with the loss of a pet. It is not clear whether people know this is available.

### *Suggestions for new/expanded services*

- People are generally not aware of support to help them manage the behaviour of dogs (apart from expensive private behaviourists). Socialisation classes are available for very young dogs, but there appears to be a gap in service provision for older dogs. This would likely prevent unnecessary escalation of problems and associated stress as well as relinquishment.
- Animal welfare charities might usefully expand opportunities to educate people about finding the right animal for them (knowledge of breeds, age-related health and behaviour issues, all costs involved throughout the lifetime of the pet).

## RQ5 / PET RELINQUISHMENT



In this section, we examine data relating to pet relinquishment, the reasons why animals were 'given up', the characteristics of those animals, the types of support people were aware of or thought would have been helpful to them, and feelings associated with the loss.

Around a quarter of participants (26%,  $n=129$  in 2022; 21%,  $n=208$  in 2023) reported having had to relinquish or give up a pet through rehoming, leaving them, or having a vet put them to sleep. Owners reported that the animal they most recently had to rehome/give up were dogs (2022  $n= 68$ , 53%; 2023  $n= 117$ , 56%), followed by cats (2022  $n= 49$ , 38%; 2023  $n= 67$ , 32%), rabbits or small mammals (2022  $n= 9$ , 7%; 2023  $n= 13$ , 6%), birds (2022  $n= 2$ , 2%; 2023  $n= 4$ , 2%), a pony or horse ( $n= 1$ , 1% in both years). In 2023, 2 people (1%) gave up fish, and 4 (2%) a reptile/amphibian. Most of the animals that had to be given up were adults ( $n= 160$ , 48%), followed by seniors ( $n= 115$ , 8%), and finally young ( $n= 62$ , 18%). Due to small sample size, subsequently when looking at differences between different types of pet, we only report data relating to dogs and cats.

In 2023, we asked what had happened to the pet they had to relinquish, the majority had them put to sleep (39% of dogs, 40% of cats), around a third rehomed to someone they knew (31% of dogs, 27% of cats), around a fifth rehomed them to a charity (19% of dogs, 21% of cats). 4% and 2% sold their dogs and cats respectively. The main reasons provided for giving up dogs and cats in 2022 and 2023 are outlined in Figures 5.1 and 5.2. Participants were asked to choose up to three main reasons that applied to their situation. Comparing the charts, it is possible to discern, as previously highlighted, an apparent increase in challenging issues with cats between the two years.

Before giving up the pet, participants were asked if they had sought support from a range of sources. In 2022, of the 129 people that reported having to relinquish a pet, 48 (37%) had accessed support from a veterinary practice. In 2023, from the sample of 208, 55 (26%) had done so through a private veterinary clinic and 8 (4%) through a charity vet. Across the two years, 4 people (2%) had sought support from Blue Cross and 47 (14%) from other animal welfare charities. Across the full sample, 28% ( $n=93$ ) were aware that support was available from Blue Cross, 40% ( $n=132$ ) were aware of support provided by other animal welfare charities. Just under half the full sample knew about support provided by veterinary practices. 31% ( $n=63$ ) were aware of charity veterinary support.

Participants were asked what type of support would have been helpful and might have prevented them losing/having to give up their pet. Figure 5.3 shows their responses. The majority reported that nothing would have helped. Also confirmed by the qualitative research findings, this is usually the result of the animal being so unwell that nothing could have helped. A quarter did not know what would have helped.

Among the concrete forms of support available, help to understand and train the animal, temporary foster care for the pet, and free online consultations were considered the most helpful (Figure 5.3).

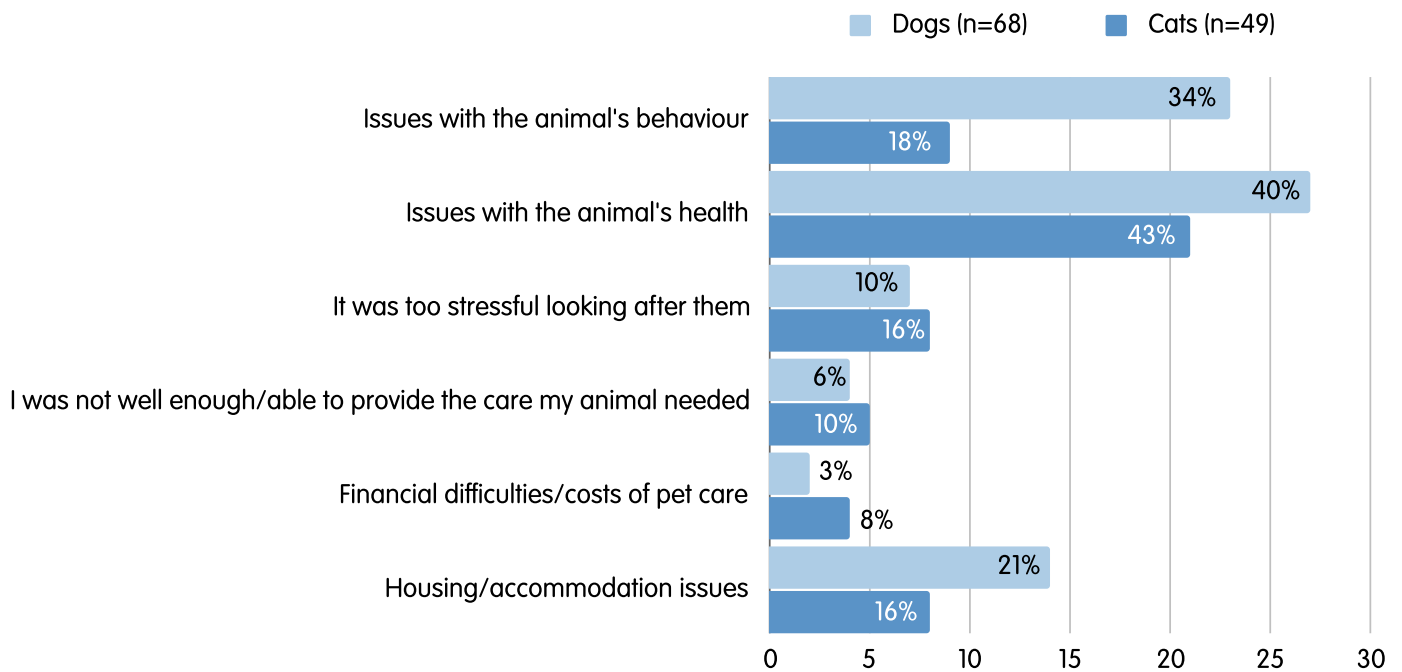


Figure 5.1 Reasons for relinquishing dogs and cats in 2022 (n and %)

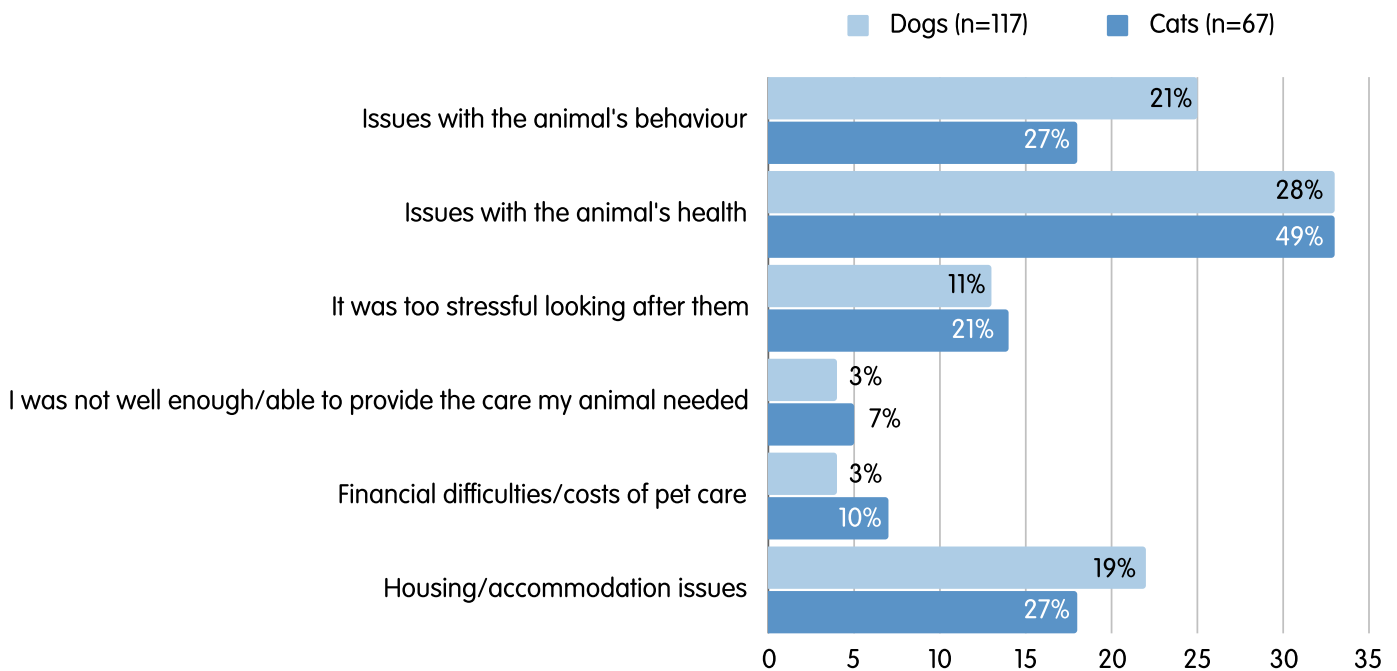
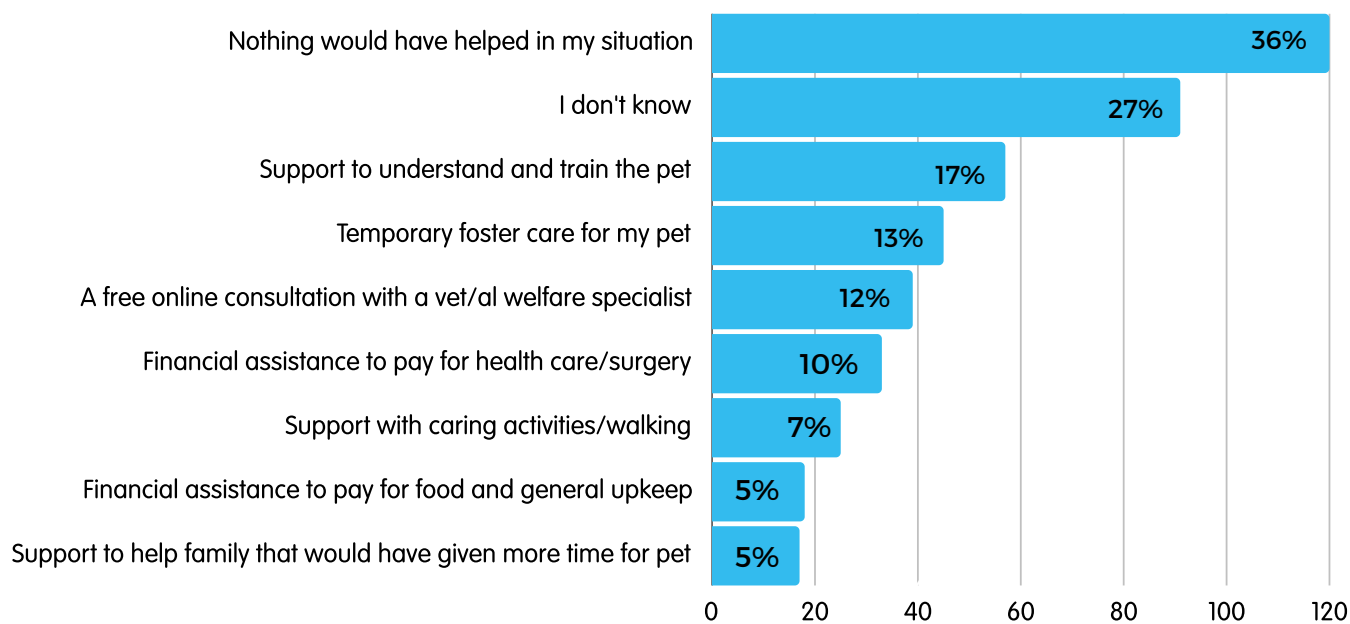


Figure 5.2 Reasons for relinquishing dogs and cats in 2023 (n and %)



**Figure 5.3 Participants' responses to the question of what would have been helpful and might have prevented them relinquishing a pet in (n and %)**

Giving up a pet is clearly not easy. It was associated with sadness/distress for over four fifths of the sample, and just under half felt guilty or ashamed (see Table 5.1). Evidence from the interviews suggests that losing a pet (no matter what the circumstances) is extremely stressful. From feeling like you have no choice but to rehome a pet because you need a roof over your head, to making the decision to put a pet to sleep (due to health reasons and a poor prognosis), losing a pet and the context surrounding this are traumatic. People rely heavily on advice from vets as they want the best for their animal, and any decisions are not taken lightly. For example, there can be confusion around the need for euthanising when the animal, on the surface, does not appear to be suffering. It was also clear just how much previous pets were missed, with several participants showing clear signs of sadness when they began to think about them. Often they had not accessed bereavement support as they did not feel 'ready' and thought they would break down/lose control of their emotions. However, they did talk openly with the researcher, suggesting that some specialist support would have been beneficial.

**Table 5.1 The impact of giving up a pet**

Feelings experienced	n (total=337)	Proportion of people relinquishing a pet
Relieved	70	20.7%
Sad/distressed	<b>267</b>	<b>85.2%</b>
Disappointed	80	23.7%
Guilty/ashamed	<b>158</b>	<b>46.9%</b>
Other feelings	34	10.1%

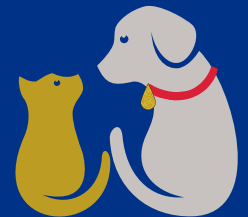
## RQ6 / BARRIERS TO SEEKING SUPPORT



As highlighted in Section 4, only a small proportion of participants had accessed support to help them care for their pet, with very few approaching animal welfare charities. While the majority of those who had not accessed support said this was because they did not need it, over a third reported that they did not know there was support available. A quarter were not sure which services they could use and did not know if they would be eligible. Lack of awareness or research undertaken by pet owners is likely to play a role here. However, our qualitative study revealed that those who had accessed support felt services and support for pet owners were not well advertised (see [Insights 2](#)). Our findings are consistent with other literature on help-seeking behaviour, suggesting that many people only reach out to support services when they have exhausted other options or are in an emergency/crisis situation. Survey findings show that difficult pet behaviours, pet health issues and financial problems are the challenges that lead people to access support. However, the interviews shed greater light on the range, and nature, of potential barriers.



### INSIGHTS FROM THE QUALITATIVE STUDY (3) Relating to RQ6 Barriers to seeking support



**Within the interviews, we specifically asked participants why they thought others who need support with their pets do not necessarily come forward as they have done. Their own descriptions of experiencing challenges that initially led them to Blue Cross also illuminate possible barriers. These are described briefly below and discussed in depth in Muldoon & Williams (b, under review).**

The participants in our study tended to describe having no problem seeking support. To some extent this was because they were putting their own feelings to one side and prioritising their animal, making sure they got the best care available. However, their experiences provide hints as to why some may not seek help even when they need it. Some alluded to not being judged by Blue Cross staff, suggesting they had felt like that elsewhere. When participants were also asked to reflect on why they thought people might be reluctant to seek support, overwhelmingly, they described pride/shame as big issues. This was connected to the stigma of being on benefits/in poverty or not being able to cope independently, and a perception that they would be judged. Guilt was also mentioned in terms of feeling that you should be doing better and not need to ask for help, and a concern about putting pressure on charities, especially when there were people in worse situations.





To a lesser extent, the following were mentioned by participants, though some also recognised that available services may not even meet current demand (let alone *more* people) given the events of the past few years.

- Assuming there is no support there/seeing others as more in need, or wanting to manage independently.
- Financial and associated implications of seeking support (i.e., if I go for help, I won't be able to afford or do what is required, people may think badly of me for not looking after my pet as well as I should).
- Daunting/intimidating (do not know what to expect).
- Mobility issues or difficulty transporting pet to a service.
- Difficulty accessing services due to own issues (mental health).
- Not having the capacity to look after the animal if there are alcohol/drug issues.
- Not caring about the animal (putting themselves first).

Importantly, the pet owners in our study were adamant that they would pay Blue Cross back for the treatment/ services they had received for free or at low cost when they were in a position to do so, and talked about doing other things (taking part in the charity lottery, donating items to the charity's shops, wanting to volunteer). Although this shows their appreciation, it also highlights a wider societal view that you should not take without giving back. It was also interesting that some participants criticised those they felt 'abused the system', who never gave a donation for services/treatment when they could clearly afford it (were wearing branded clothes, had a smart phone, talked about regularly going to the pub, etc.) While most acknowledged that people's circumstances can change, there was a strong sense that a lot of those receiving support from Blue Cross take advantage of the charity's kindness, leaving them with limited capacity to reach those who really need help. These attitudes may well explain, in part, why people do not come forward. They do not want to be thought of in this way.

### Participants' recommendations

Following on from the recommendations highlighted on page 36, the points below relate specifically to the theme of barriers to seeking support.

- Participants suggested that people should be asked about pets in the process of identifying available support and that services and organisations should be signposted (via Government websites, Welfare Officers, the Citizens' Advice Bureau). They could also be advertised in places where people who are struggling are likely to see them (doctors' surgeries, food banks, public transport, hospitals, charity shops).
- Messaging in advertising is important to minimise the possibility of people not seeking help because of the stigma associated with poverty and being on benefits (e.g., NHS service for pets, 'vital service', creative collaborations with organisations [Kleenex/Mind], 'reframing' similar to food banks who advertise along the lines of saving food from landfill. This service is for you – it's very purpose is to help people through difficult times). 'Discrete' signposting is important, as people feel guilty about seeking support/accepting financial assistance.
- To combat issues concerning lack of mobility/transportation, animals' anxiety when travelling, owners' health issues, and a reluctance to make contact with support services, several participants suggested a mobile or pop-up service (also useful to support homeless people with pets).

## 6 / SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS



### RQ1 PEOPLE EXPERIENCING CHALLENGES WITH PETS

- 1.1 Financial challenges and anxiety were the most prominent challenges with pets in 2022 and 2023. Socio-environmental challenges and pet health issues were greater in 2023 and people felt more constraints on life and more financial and emotional concern for their animal's wellbeing.
- 1.2 There were no marked geographical, age-related, or ethnicity-based variations in pet challenges, but males reported greater socio-environmental challenges and difficult pet behaviours, while females experienced greater financial challenges and anxiety.
- 1.3 Participants who were receiving means-tested benefits or using food banks experienced greater socio-environmental and financial challenges/anxiety than those who were not. Those living in a house and owning their own home experienced fewer socio-environmental challenges than those renting and/or living in a flat/ maisonette/apartment. Those with carer responsibilities also experienced greater financial challenges/anxiety.
- 1.4 Couple households with no children experienced fewest socio-environmental challenges, Lone parent families and people who were separated experienced the most.
- 1.5 Owners in good health reported fewer socio-environmental and financial challenges/anxiety than those in fair/poor health. Disability did not appear to play a role, though people whose day-to-day activities were limited (health issues/old age) experienced greater socio-environmental, financial challenges/anxiety and pet health issues.

### RQ2 SOURCING OF PETS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

- 2.1 There were no differences in challenges based on where owners had sourced their pet from. However, a quarter of those purchasing dogs and over a third of those purchasing cats received no support/advice from the person or organisation providing the pet. Few people received information relating to costs/ insurance or the availability of support to manage the animal's behaviour. Information given centred on basic needs, and people purchasing cats received less support/advice than those purchasing dogs.
- 2.2 People acquire a pet because they want an animal to look after and love, or as a companion. Overall, the bond people have with their pets is strong even when challenges arise. Those with dogs have a stronger bond than those with cats.

- 2.3 Attachment to pets correlated negatively with socio-environmental challenges, difficult pet behaviour challenges, pet health issues, and the impact of the challenges in terms of both constraints on life and the emotional and financial impact. By contrast, there was no association with financial challenges and anxiety. It may be that challenges experienced with pets threaten attachment, or alternatively having a strong bond may be protective and make participants less likely to experience challenges as acutely.
- 2.4 Within the interviews, a strong theme emerged around the notion of ‘sacrifice’; participants going without in order that their pets get the best possible care. This is a concern when there is no financial buffer, because people who care about their pets will always sacrifice their own care in order that their pet does not suffer.

### RQ3 KEY CHALLENGES PET OWNERS ARE FACING

- 3.1 In both 2022 and 2023 financial challenges and anxiety connected to what might happen to a pet were the major concerns. There was no change in this measure over the 2-year period. However, there was an increase in the number of participants reporting at least one issue that had made pet care difficult to afford and in the number finding it difficult financially to ensure their pets were really well looked after. The biggest issue was the impact of increased cost of living on pet care, especially being able to afford veterinary treatment. The impact of not managing financially is captured in **Insights 1** in Section 3 and discussed in-depth in Muldoon and Williams a (under review). Muldoon and Williams c (in preparation) provides an in-depth exploration of the challenges, including the measures that were developed for this study.
- 3.2 Among dog owners, the only differences between the two years were increases in socio-environmental challenges. By contrast, there were many differences for cat owners, mostly relating to socio-environmental challenges and pet health issues. More cat owners were anxious in 2023 than in the previous year about what might happen to their pets and more felt the financial impact was challenging.
- 3.3 The majority of pets were registered at a veterinary practice, had been insured, and neutered. Those who had registered their pets and/or insured them experienced fewer socio-environmental challenges than those who had not. Those with insurance also reported fewer pet health issues. This may be due to having sufficient finances to keep your pet well. Undoubtedly having insurance and reliable vet care is reassuring, and may mean any challenges with respect to an animal’s health and wellbeing do not create as much anxiety. By contrast, as we have seen from the qualitative data, those who are struggling to pay for the care their animal needs are likely to experience a range of challenges, as this adds extra pressure.
- 3.4 Overall, dogs were presenting greater challenges than cats in terms of difficult behaviours and their owners felt the impact of these challenges more keenly in terms of constraints on life. Owners with neutered pets experienced fewer difficult behaviour challenges. Very few pets had received behavioural training, but the owners who had sought training reported greater behavioural challenges.
- 3.5 A small but similar proportion of dog and cat owners had considered giving their pet up as a result of the challenges. The main reasons were financial difficulties/costs of pet care, the animal’s behaviour, and the stress of looking after them being too much.

## RQ4 ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

- 4.1 A small proportion of survey participants had sought support to help them care for their pet. They most commonly accessed veterinary care, pet care support/advice, pet walking/sitting services, and behaviour training. Very few people reported accessing support from an animal welfare charity. The majority of support accessed is from veterinary practices.
- 4.2 The most common reason given for not accessing support was not needing support. However, over a third of participants reported not knowing there was support available, and a quarter were not sure which services they could use. They did not know if they would be eligible. **Insights 2** in Section 4 highlights experiences of accessing support from Blue Cross, what led them there and how they found it.
- 4.3 We know from the accompanying qualitative research (see **Insights 3** in Section 6 and Muldoon and Williams b, under review) that people often feel a strong sense of personal responsibility for the animal and express a desire to manage on their own. There is also stigma associated with asking for help. These factors all contribute towards a reluctance to seek support. People tend to do this as a last resort.
- 4.4 Those who had sought support had higher mean scores on the challenges and the impact of challenges scales than those who had not. Again the qualitative work has shown that the impact of problems is greater and more complex when under financial pressure, and this makes support-seeking more likely (see **Insights 1** in Section 3 and Muldoon and Williams a, under review). There were differences between those who had/had not accessed support on all sub-scales of the challenges and impact scales, with the exception of socio-environmental challenges. This suggests that difficult pet behaviours, pet health issues and financial challenges are more likely to lead people to access support. Other factors people may have more control over.

## RQ5 PET RELINQUISHMENT AND ITS EFFECTS

- 5.1 Around a quarter of participants reported having had to relinquish or give up a pet (usually a dog or a cat). In 2023, the majority of these pet owners had their animal put to sleep, around a third rehomed to someone they knew, and around a fifth rehomed them to a charity. The main reasons for giving up dogs and cats were health issues and behavioural challenges, though housing/accommodation was also a contributory factor. As previously highlighted, the data on relinquishment also points to an increase in challenging issues with cats between the two years.
- 5.2 Around a third of owners reported accessing veterinary support prior to relinquishment. A small percentage also accessed support from an animal welfare charity. Only between a quarter and two fifths of participants were aware that support was available from Blue Cross and other animal welfare charities.

- 5.3 The majority of participants who relinquished a pet reported that nothing would have helped in their situation (usually the result of the animal being so unwell that nothing could be done). A quarter did not know what would have helped. However, help to understand and train the animal, temporary foster care for the pet, and free online consultations were considered the forms of support that would have been most helpful.
- 5.4 Giving up a pet is not easy. It was associated with sadness/distress for over four fifths of the sample, and just under half felt guilty/ashamed. There were clear signs in the interviews of deep sadness around a lost pet. Few people had sought bereavement support from Blue Cross or elsewhere, but their eagerness to talk about the pet who was no longer with them suggests that this would have been beneficial.

## RQ6 BARRIERS TO SEEKING SUPPORT AND HOW TO ADDRESS

- 6.1 Pride and shame were highlighted by interviewees as the main reasons why people do not seek support when they really need it. Feeling this way was connected, more often than not, to wanting to manage independently. Some mentioned stigma associated with not being able to cope and needing help, being on benefits, and taking without giving back. In short, people feel they will be judged. Guilt was also mentioned, people felt they should be doing better and not putting pressure on charities, especially when there were people in worse situations. People tend to think others are more in need of help than them.
- 6.2 There are perceptions among some Blue Cross service users that others take advantage of the system (take free vet care, etc. without giving back at any point, via donation or other ways of contributing. Animal welfare charities might usefully counteract this concern about equity in their communications.
- 6.3 Not being able to access services either because you have a very anxious animal that you cannot transport, or as a result of pet owners' mobility/health issues or access to transportation was highlighted by some participants. They suggested mobile services or pop-ups within vulnerable communities would be useful.
- 6.4 At present, pets do not feature in the process of identifying people's financial situations and support services available. Participants argued that these should be signposted (via Government websites, Welfare Officers, the Citizens' Advice Bureau). They could also be advertised in places where people who are struggling are most likely to see them.
- 6.5 Messaging in advertising was highlighted as important to encourage people to come forward when they need to. 'Discrete' signposting in particular was considered vital, as people feel guilty about seeking support/accepting financial assistance. Some suggested a 'reframing' of services and creative collaborations with other organisations supporting people through difficult times.

## 7 / IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



### Who to target and why

- Given there were no geographical differences, but greater challenges for those experiencing financial difficulties, it would be useful to target areas of deprivation and areas lacking in service provision.
- Lone parent families, people who are living alone, or those whose activities are limited due to health/age could be targeted for additional support. Social marketing should ensure information about services reaches them.
- There is a case for promoting support directly to men through appropriate social marketing of services and inclusive imagery. However, women's greater anxiety and financial concerns are also worthy of investigation.
- Further research is required to examine the influence of health status and specific challenges experienced by highly vulnerable or marginalised groups (e.g., people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, or those who are struggling with their physical or mental health).

### A central resource

- Although individual animal welfare charities all provide information and pet care advice on their websites, there is a strong case for collaborating to produce a central resource that is effectively advertised as **the** place to go when considering whether or not to acquire a pet. This would act as a one-stop-shop for people to find information about all aspects of choosing and caring for a pet. Ideally, people would be able to access full information about different types of pet and breeds and how to source them, so that they can make an informed choice as to the best animal for their lifestyle/resources/family and time available.
- Outlining common health and behavioural issues that affect specific types of pet or breed (including as a result of aging) and how to deal with them would also help owners anticipate and better prepare for the challenges.
- A website similar to the the Pet Education Partnership (PEP) but geared to potential and current pet owners and is promoted widely might prove to be the best way forward.

### Foci for animal welfare education

- It is important that prospective pet owners are fully aware of **all** the costs (emotional, logistical and financial) associated with introducing an animal into the family. This should be a focus for animal welfare education.
- Attachment to pets can protect against animal harm and is negatively related to experiencing challenges. Promoting positive relationships and understanding of the human-animal bond is valuable in campaigns, animal welfare education and support. However, strong attachments mean that when a pet becomes very

unwell, it is stressful for owners. Not wanting to let go of the animal can lead to delayed euthanasia that may prolong suffering. Education around this issue is important (see <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/advice/dog/time-to-say-goodbye-to-your-dog>) but needs to be accompanied by support to help people deal with loss (see below).

- People should be encouraged to think carefully about the long term implications of being a pet owner, how a pet might fit the person/family, and what might happen if there are changes in living circumstances.

### Advertising existing services to reach those most in need

- Pet owners are often unaware of the full range of services available, including those that could support **them** as well as provision specifically for the animal. Marketing strategies need to acknowledge and respond to people's reluctance to seek support and the strong sense of personal responsibility they often feel about taking care of their pet/s on their own (using discrete signposting and collaborating with other organisations).
- It is important to note that animal welfare charities are already stretched. Reaching out to more people may make existing practices unsustainable or they may be in the unenviable position of having to turn people away. Charities clearly have to identify key priorities.
- With sustainability in mind, animal welfare charities and other organisations providing financial support to families need to find creative ways of reaching people who may not come forward for help until it is too late. Encouraging people to reach out might be facilitated through some re-branding of support. Participants in our qualitative research (Muldoon & Williams a; b, under review) suggested reframing the services as a form of NHS for pets or vital service. It also seems important to acknowledge people's desire to 'give back' when they benefit from support themselves (volunteering may be especially useful).

### Expanding services

- It is vital that animal welfare charities work with organisations that support those experiencing difficulties, including government agencies. Services need to be clearly signposted by Welfare Officers, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, etc. A list of organisations/services providing support to pet owners experiencing difficulties is essential, alongside details of eligibility.
- Services that support **owners** through difficult times when their pet is ill or exhibiting troubling behaviours (in addition to pet care/behavioural support for the animal, would alleviate stress and help owners cope better. Short online courses or an advice line on pet behaviour, health challenges, and welfare needs might help people facing crisis challenges with pets that can result in relinquishment.
- Providing community-based support in targeted areas should reach those who would otherwise not receive support for the reasons outlined in this report. Dog walking and other pet services and support (e.g., temporary foster care) would enable some pet owners to keep their pets.
- Pet owners need to be supported through the process of relinquishment and pet loss, as it is important for both human and animal welfare. If feasible, expanding the Blue Cross Pet Loss Support service might be beneficial.

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## 9 / APPENDIX



Additional data tables are presented here. Table 8.1 shows the correlations between key scales and sub-scales in the survey (highlighted in the section relating to RQ2). The numbers across the top of the table represent the scales and sub-scales presented in the far left column (e.g., 1 is the attachment scale; therefore if you read down Column 1, you can see the correlations between attachment and all the other scales). Table 8.2 provides details of the specific problems experienced by dog and cat owners in 2022 and 2023.

**Table 8.1 Pearson correlations between attachment, perceived challenges, and the impact of the challenges**

Scale/sub-scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>1 - Attachment</b>	1	-.30**	-.28**	-.29**	-.29**	-.02	-.24**	-.30**	-.13**
<b>2- Challenges</b>	-.30**	1	.83**	.82**	.82**	.63**	.81**	.79**	.66**
3- Socio-environmental	-.28**	.83**	1	.57**	.56**	.42**	.66**	.66**	.52**
4 - Difficult behaviours	-.29**	.82**	.57**	1	.56**	.29**	.64**	.74**	.40**
5 - Pet health issues	-.29**	.82**	.56**	.56**	1	.43**	.63**	.59**	.55**
6 - Financial challenges	-.02	.63**	.42**	.29**	.43**	1	.59**	.40**	.68**
<b>7 - Perceived impact</b>	-.24**	.81**	.66**	.64**	.63**	.59**	1	.91**	.89**
8 - Constraints on life	-.30**	.79**	.66**	.74**	.59**	.40**	.91**	1	.63**
9 - Emotional/financial impact	-.13**	.66**	.52**	.40**	.55**	.68**	.89**	.63**	1

n= 1490, \*\* correlations significant @  $p < .001$

**Table 8.2 Specific pet ownership challenges faced by owners of dogs and cats in 2022 and 2023**

Difficult pet behavioural challenges	dogs n (%)*		cats n (%)*	
	2022	2023	2022	2023
1) They are a nuisance to others (e.g., makes a lot of noise, chases other animals, annoys neighbours)	64 (21.8%)	113 (21.2%)	16 (9.6%)	28 (7.2%)
2) My pet is aggressive towards, or is a threat to, other animals or people	33 (11.3%)	67 (12.6%)	7 (4.2%)	25 (6.4%)
3) They are destructive and damage things in the house/ garden/ enclosure	45 (15.4%)	64 (12%)	22 (13.2%)	77 (19.6%)
4) They are difficult to look after/train	55 (18.8%)	100 (18.8%)	<u>6 (3.6%)</u>	<u>21 (5.4%)</u>
5) My pet is hard to live with (e.g., they need a lot of attention)	48 (16.4%)	91 (17.1%)	<u>11 (6.6%)</u>	<u>42 (10.8%)</u>
6) Having my pet prevents me from seeing my friends or having visitors	<u>35 (11.9%)</u>	<u>88 (16.5%)</u>	8 (4.8%)	23 (5.9%)
<b>Financial challenges and anxiety</b>				
1) I cannot afford the costs associated with feeding, vet bills or specialist equipment	71 (24.2%)	114 (21.4%)	<u>30 (18%)</u>	<u>97 (24.9%)</u>
2) Looking after my pet has cost me far more than I expected	141 (48.1%)	248 (46.6%)	<u>49 (29.3%)</u>	<u>164 (42.2%)</u>
3) I am anxious about what might happen to them (illness, injury, etc.)	154 (52.6%)	272 (51.1%)	90 (53.9%)	233 (59.9%)
<b>Socio-environmental challenges</b>				
1) I am not well enough or able to give my pet the care they need	9 (3.1%)	24 (4.5%)	<u>2 (1.2%)</u>	<u>15 (3.9%)</u>
2) It is difficult to look after my pet at the moment due to other family commitments	17 (5.8%)	50 (9.4%)	<u>6 (3.6%)</u>	<u>24 (6.2%)</u>
3) Changes in my living arrangements mean it is difficult for me to look after my pet	18 (6.1%)	36 (6.8%)	<u>9 (5.4%)</u>	<u>29 (7.5%)</u>
4) Personal/family challenges mean that my pet is not right for me/us anymore	<u>9 (3.1%)</u>	<u>30 (5.6%)</u>	<u>4 (2.4%)</u>	<u>13 (3.3%)</u>
5) I can't leave my pet in the care of other people that live with me	<u>24 (8.2%)</u>	<u>55 (10.3%)</u>	<u>7 (4.2%)</u>	<u>35 (9%)</u>
6) I do not have enough support to help me look after my pet	<u>23 (7.8%)</u>	<u>53 (10%)</u>	<u>11 (6.6%)</u>	<u>27 (6.9%)</u>
<b>Pet health challenges</b>				
1) They have toileting issues	31 (10.6%)	52 (9.8%)	<u>22 (13.2%)</u>	<u>59 (15.2%)</u>
2) They have health issues	70 (23.9%)	139 (26.1%)	40 (24%)	104 (26.7%)
3) My pet does not seem happy	20 (6.8%)	37 (7%)	8 (4.8%)	35 (9%)
4) My pet shows other signs of distress	23 (7.8%)	37 (7%)	<u>12 (7.2%)</u>	<u>36 (9.3%)</u>
5) Changes in my pet (in their behaviour/health) mean it is more difficult to look after them	55 (18.8%)	104 (19.5%)	<u>31 (18.6%)</u>	<u>74 (19%)</u>

\* The number and proportion of dog and cat owners who agreed or strongly agreed that the specific challenge applied to them. Underlined = significant difference in mean score between 2022 and 2023, underlined and red = significantly more people agreed in 2023.



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## MORE INFORMATION

Please contact Dr Janine Muldoon if you have questions or feedback on this study.

[janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk](mailto:janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk)

More information on our other research relating to human-animal relationships can be found on the University of Edinburgh website (search caar) and on our Facebook and Twitter feeds.



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