

BRIEFING:

THE ANIMAL WELFARE IMPLICATIONS OF PETS IN CARE HOMES

PETS IN CARE HOMES



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This briefing draws on findings from the research project, 'He means the world to me: Human rights implications of separating older people from their pets in residential care/nursing homes'. Conducted over three years and funded by the Dunhill Medical Trust, this research project explored the experience of older people with pets who are moving into a care home. The research was carried out in two areas in England and predominantly focused on care homes in rural areas. Interviews were carried out with older people living in care homes, care home staff, relatives, animal charities, veterinary surgeons and social care staff. If you would like to find out more about the project, please go to: www.petsincarehomes.com/

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing focuses on what we found when we talked to animal charities explicitly about the challenges of ensuring animal welfare is protected in care homes but also addresses issues pertaining to animal management and care raised by care home managers, staff, older persons and their relatives. It also considers the consequences for animals who cannot accompany their owner if they have to move from their home. It canvases a range of factors which may be taken into account by care homes in deciding whether it is appropriate to admit pets, and how to help care for them in a care home.



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Separating an older person from their pet/s often has negative consequences for the animal concerned

In extreme cases, and especially if the animal is older and/or has experienced veterinary issues or developed behavioural problems, the animal may be euthanised

Alternatively, animals may be passed on to friends or neighbours who may lack the resources, including time and experience, to care for them

Other animals may be relinquished to animal charities or rehoming organisations. There are many excellent rehoming organisations, but finding the right one at a time of crisis may be difficult. Many rehoming organisations are experiencing significant demands for their services which has been exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic

It may therefore appear that the best option is for the pet/s to move to a care home with their owner. But this too raises welfare concerns. Such a move is a major transition for older people, but it can be an equally disorienting experience for their pet/s. They may need to adjust to unaccustomed limitations on their freedom, as well as a new environment. It is important to consider whether moving to a care home is in the interests of the animal as well as the older person

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 (applicable to England and Wales), the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 contain provisions to safeguard the welfare of animals. They impose legal obligations on the person/s responsible for animals to provide them with a suitable environment

Assessing the needs of the particular animal/s, and who is responsible for meeting them, can be complex in the care home setting

DECISION-MAKING ABOUT PETS

When an older person who lives with pet/s has to leave their home this entails a decision about whether their pet/s can and should accompany them. If they are not able to accompany their owner the issue arises of whether they can and should be rehomed, and by whom. In some cases there may also be a question of whether it is in the animal's interests to be put to sleep.

SEPARATION IS SOMETIMES NECESSARY FOR ANIMAL WELFARE REASONS

'there are situations that aren't working and there are barriers to care and people are not in a good place and the animals aren't in a good place, they're constrained, they weren't choosing to be a mental health support worker, they weren't choosing to be the only family member, the only family carer.' (Animal Charity interview 2)

In some cases we were told about it became apparent that an older person who is no longer able to remain in their home may have been struggling to care for their pet/s for some time, so that some kind of intervention to rehome the pet/s may be necessary in the animal's interests.

REHOMING TO FRIENDS/FAMILY

The project has shown that often moving to a care home with pet/s is either not an option or is assumed not to be an option.

However, even where care homes were willing to accept pets sometimes older people made the choice not to take them. Some older people acknowledged that, although they were able to care for the pet/s while living at home, they felt it would not be in the best interests of a particular pet to move to a care home. In some cases it was thought this would mean risks for the animals:

'Well I wouldn't want them to go wandering in a strange garden. I couldn't be absolutely sure that they couldn't escape in some way' (Family interview 3)

In other cases, the concern was that living in a care home would impose too many constraints on the pet's life.

Whatever the reason for this decision, alternative arrangements need to be made to care for the pet/s. One possibility is that any pet/s are rehomed with a family member or friend. This may be a good outcome for the pet/s if they can live with someone who knows them and their needs. Often this would also mean that the older person would maintain some contact with the animal if the new owners were allowed to visit the care home with the pet concerned.

However, taking on someone else's pet/s is a significant commitment. If the decision is taken in a moment of crisis there may not be sufficient attention to important issues, such as whether the new home has the necessary time, space and experience to care for the pet/s:

'some of those routes might actually lead to behaviour problems developing for the dog, maybe the dog has separation anxiety and if the owner has to go into hospital or a hostel for long periods of time and a family member

is maybe taking care of that dog, maybe the dog's been used to having their owner around all the time but if they go to stay with a family member who's working, that can lead to separation anxiety, then that person relinquishes the dog for behaviour reasons rather than a change of personal circumstances, then that dog might be more difficult to rehabilitate and find a home for' (Animal Charity Interview 4).

Some of the lawyers we spoke to told us that pets could in some cases be passed from one home to another so that it became difficult for the original owner's carers or representatives to trace them.

RESPONSIBLE SURRENDERING

Where family or friends are not able to help with rehoming pet/s, then surrendering them to a reputable animal charity or rehoming organisation may be an option. In contrast to informal rehoming arrangements these bodies often have the resources and experience to properly assess the best home for the pet. However animal rehoming organisations are largely unregulated, and in a moment of crisis the older person and their family or carers may not be well placed to do the necessary research. Moreover, these organisations are already over stretched and pet/s in this situation may present particular challenges when it comes to rehoming:

'Roughly 5% of relinquished dogs come from these circumstances. The dogs tend to be elderly and often come with costly veterinary needs as the older person hasn't recognised problems developing. Rehoming of older dogs is also more difficult as potential owners want younger dogs. We often end up putting the dogs with foster homes [and] bear the veterinary costs through their lives.' (Animal Charity interview 7)

As our research project has demonstrated, for older people who need to move to a care home it can be difficult to access information about taking pet/s with them. Likewise, it can be hard to access information about rehoming organisations and to assess which one is appropriate to rehome a pet. Some general advice is available for those seeking to rehome dogs and cats. The Association of Dogs and Cats Homes acts as an umbrella group for dog and cat rescue and rehoming groups across the British Isles, although the majority of rehoming organisations are not members. In the case of dogs, the Kennel Club keeps a register of breed specific and general rescues which is a useful starting point. Charities dealing specifically with older people and animals, such as the Cinnamon Trust and Oldies Club, may also be relevant sources of help and advice.

However, a major concern is that many rehoming organisations need time to assess the animal/s and many are already stretched to or beyond capacity.

IS EUTHANASIA EVER APPROPRIATE?

'If it's not a good relationship and it's in any way causing distress, at some point it may mean that there needs to be appropriate palliative care and end of life decisions and euthanasia' (Charity interview 2)

In exceptional cases euthanasia may be deemed to be in the best interests of an animal – for example, where the animal is older and suffering from health or behavioural issues which would make it difficult to adjust to a new home. Difficult ethical dilemmas may arise if the older person or their family wishes a pet to be put to sleep.

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeon Guidance (2021) provides that:

The veterinary surgeon's primary obligation in assessing whether an animal should be euthanised is to act to relieve the suffering of an animal.

However the guidance acknowledges that *'account must be taken not only of the animal's condition, but also the owner's wishes and circumstances. To refuse an owner's request for euthanasia may add to the owner's distress and could be deleterious to the welfare of the animal'* (para 8.7).

Clearly if their pet is euthanised as a result of a decision that an older person move to a care home that is another major loss or bereavement for the older person. However, euthanasia can mean that they do not have to worry about what is happening their pet.

PLACING PETS IN A CARE HOME

'we want dogs to stay with their owners for as long as possible, but we also have to realise that going into a new environment, especially when the owner might not have the autonomy, can also be very stressful for the dog and for other dogs and other pets maybe living within that environment and also the people as well, whether that's other residents or staff or volunteers or visitors' (Animal Charity interview 4).

Given the importance of the animal-human relationship to both parties and the fact that making other satisfactory arrangements may prove difficult, there are clearly good reasons for care homes to attempt to accommodate pets. However, the possible stress, and welfare implications, of such a move should be recognised. Where care homes are willing to accept animals, then a range of factors need to be taken into account and care plans formulated.

RELEVANT LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 imposes obligations on those responsible for animals to avoid causing them suffering and ensure their welfare.

- A person commits an offence under s. 9 if they do not take reasonable steps to meet the needs of an animal, for whom they are responsible. These include the animal's need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury or disease, to be provided with a suitable diet, and kept in a suitable environment
- The AWA also aims to make someone responsible for animals. S.3 (3) of the Act stipulates that a person who owns an animal shall always be regarded as a person who is responsible for it.
- However, other people may also be deemed to be responsible for the animal on a permanent or temporary basis. For example, a member of care home

staff or a volunteer who walks a dog may be regarded as 'being in charge of that animal for the purposes of s. 2(2)'.

- Within a care home, where multiple people may be involved in the animal's care, this may lead to practical problems, as responsibility for the animal can be fragmented.
- Who will be deemed responsible is one of the issues that needs to be considered and clearly addressed at the outset.

PROMOTING ANIMAL WELFARE IN CARE HOMES

In assessing their ability to accommodate pets, care homes need to consider a range of factors, many of which are broader than animal welfare. These include the needs of other residents, attitudes of other residents to animals and the risks that animals may pose to the owner, other residents or staff, such as allergies and tripping hazards.

For instance, most care homes can probably accommodate caged pets or fish with relative ease, since these will be confined to an older person's own room. However, consideration still needs to be given to public health risks, possible disease transmission etc. as well as who actually cares for these pets.

Other types of pets pose greater challenges:

'with the animal assessment it has to be healthy, it has to be well behaved, I mean, cocking its leg everywhere is not going to be ideal, but also the animal has to have the right personality and emotional predisposition and, you know, I think we do overlook – animals – dogs apparently don't particularly like being hugged but they will tolerate it – but they're conflicted – and essentially they're doing it because they want to please, but they don't really like it.' (Animal Charity interview 2)

Assessing the suitability of different types of animals to care home life is challenging. For instance, charitable representatives we spoke to differed in their views on whether in general dogs or cats were better suited to living in a care home. In the case of dogs, breed is another important factor – for instance, a greyhound is likely to be a more suitable breed than a border collie.

The provision of proper care for pets is also crucially dependent on having a network of people able and willing to support the older person in caring for the animal within the care home. This may include family support in undertaking or arranging exercise, grooming, vet care etc or the willingness and availability of care home staff, or volunteers.

INDIVIDUAL CARE PLANS FOR PETS

If a care home is able to accommodate their pet/s when an older person moves, and has adopted clear criteria about the type of animals that can be accommodated, an individual assessment then needs to be carried out when a pet is considered for admission. At this point a care plan needs to be drawn up to make sure that the needs of the particular animal are clearly identified. Social workers we

spoke to provided us with helpful examples of such plans. The following factors may usefully be taken into account:

1. Who will be responsible for the animal's care?
2. Does the older person have a support network to help, or are there charities or volunteers locally who can help with the animal's care?
3. Does the animal have any health (including dental) issues? Who is responsible for vet check ups, bills/ insurance?
4. How fit/mobile is the animal, and what exercise needs do they have?
5. What are the animal's dietary and grooming needs?
6. What is the animal's temperament like? Do they enjoy human interaction and attention?
7. Where will the animal spend their time, and will they have adequate stimulation?
8. In the case of dogs and cats, will they be confined to the resident's room or able to wander or share communal spaces? Is there a garden? Is it secure? How are different animals accommodated in shared spaces?
9. How long is the animal expected to live, and will their needs change over the course of their time in a care home?
10. What will happen should an older person predecease an animal for whom they are responsible?

'if you're wanting animals in the care sector in care homes, you can't just go into the care home with the animal without there being good planning, good policies and a good setup. If there are pet friendly policies and there is good operating procedures, a lot of support and what ifs, then a lot of these situations can work for everybody. And also if decisions, difficult decisions have to be made and difficult decisions are appropriate [e.g.] euthanasia for when it is in the best interests of the welfare of the animal and because a lot of people leave it too long.' (Animal Charity interview 2)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Care homes should be clear what they mean by advertising themselves as 'animal/pet friendly' and be clear in advance what types of animals they are able to accommodate.**
- **Care homes should also be clear where animals are allowed in the home and whether there are limitations in terms of numbers. For instance, should there be only one dog or cat per floor?**
- **Care homes should have clear policies for assessing the needs and welfare of particular animals and be clear about who is responsible for the animal's care.**
- **Care homes need to be clear about what will happen if the older person should become physically or mentally incapacitated to the point where they could no longer be responsible for the animal/s care. They also need to address what would happen to an animal if the owner dies.**
- **Provisions in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 about who is responsible for the care of an animal could**

be clearer, as the current law allows responsibility to be fragmented. Furthermore it is difficult in the care home context to enforce the legislation.

- **It would be useful to have guidance for Care home staff on assessing and caring for animals along the line of the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs and Cats issued under the Animal Welfare Act (see below).**
- **Our research has shown that a number of professionals may become involved in managing the transition of an older person to a care home, including social workers, lawyers and vets. A clear gap in current provision is the absence in this jurisdiction of professionals who work across these professional boundaries, such as veterinary social workers.**
- **There is also a need for better information about rehoming organisations, especially for pets other than cats and dogs.**

RESOURCES:

Cinnamon Trust - www.cinnamon.org.uk

Oldies Club - www.oldies.org.uk

Kennel Club Approved Rescues

www.thekennelclub.org.uk/getting-a-dog/are-you-ready/breed-rescue/

Association of Dog and Cat Home Members

www.adch.org.uk/find-a-rescue/

Animal Welfare Act Code of Practice

www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697953/pb13333-cop-dogs-091204.pdf

Veterinary Guidance:

www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/euthanasia-of-animals/

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