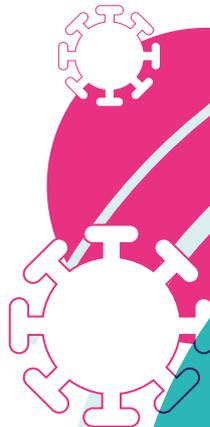


Pandemic  
in focus



# PAW

PDSA ANIMAL WELLBEING

# REPORT

# 2021



The essential  
insight into  
the wellbeing  
of UK pets



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## Welcome to the PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2021

The 2021 PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report comes at a time of great change for many in UK society. The events of the past 18 months, through the initial course of the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in wide-ranging changes to the way we live, work and play. However, the effects of the restrictions on our animal companions have proved harder to evidence.

With 11 years of data, robust methodology and a peer-reviewed scientific publication, the PAW Report is in a unique position to provide an accurate and reliable assessment of the changes to the welfare of the UK's pet dogs, cats, and rabbits over the past 18 months.

Our 2021 survey was undertaken in May, just as the UK was emerging from COVID-19 restrictions, with widespread vaccination of the human population providing much needed light at the end of the tunnel. This survey builds on our 2020 PAW Report and focuses on welfare areas that the 2020 Report suggested would be particularly impacted by the pandemic: pet population, pet acquisition, behaviour, obesity and preventive healthcare.

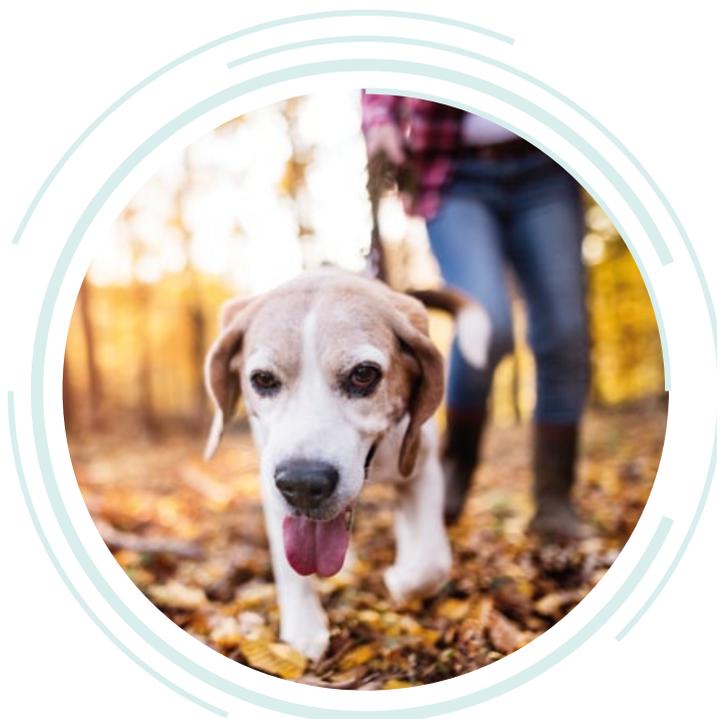
We're able to compare this data to findings from our surveys in February and August 2020, which gave us insights into pet wellbeing immediately before the

first lockdown and as restrictions initially lifted over the summer. It is encouraging to see that many of the areas of concern were not realised. The data are telling us that pet populations have not exploded, owners are mainly continuing to source their pets responsibly, and levels of essential preventive healthcare have been largely maintained or recovered from the initial impact in many areas. However, areas of concern remain, in particular, the rising numbers of pets sourced from abroad, continued issues around pet obesity, and a range of behavioural problems which are impacting the welfare of pets, many of which may be associated with a lack of socialisation and positive life experience.

The unique data contained in this Report will allow interventions to be targeted in the areas most in need of improvement for the welfare of UK pets. The PAW Report continues to be the benchmark for understanding dog, cat, and rabbit wellbeing in the UK.

# The Methodology behind the PAW Report

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



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

The first Report was launched in 2011; this provides us with 11 years of trended data allowing reporting on how owners are meeting the 5 Welfare Needs of their pets, insights from the veterinary profession, and estimates of the UK pet dog, cat and rabbit populations.

## **Data sources used in the PAW Report:**

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

## **Annual survey of pet owners**

In conjunction with YouGov, each year we survey a large and demographically representative sample of UK dog, cat, and rabbit owners using YouGov's panel methodology. Details of the number of respondents in each survey is included in the methodology section of each Report.

In the latest Report, based on a survey in May 2021, the sample totalled 4,579 cat, dog, and rabbit owners over the age of 18 and living in the UK. Therefore, when talking about 'owners' throughout the Report, we're discussing cat, dog, and rabbit owners, not owners of other types of pets.

In 2021, data was gathered between 4th and 25th May through an online survey where demographic quotas are set to ensure data gathered is as nationally representative as possible. Any small errors in the final sample are corrected through weighting where necessary. The demographic quotas and weighting that this method uses are determined by a separate YouGov panel survey of 10,000 UK adults which provides demographic information such as regional breakdowns as well as age and gender profiles of owners.

## **Survey of veterinary professionals**

Periodically we survey veterinary professionals online via an open survey. We surveyed last in 2020 where we collected responses from 623 veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, students, nursing support staff and veterinary academics who are currently working in practice.

Fieldwork was undertaken between 18 January and 16 February 2020, hosted by YouGov using an open link. Due to the nature of this survey these figures are not collected in line with any demographic quotas or weighted as per the survey of pet owners. Details of the survey are shared via social media and professional networks to encourage participation. Participants are usually invited to be entered into a prize draw to win a prize relevant to veterinary practice e.g. a continuing professional development (CPD) package.

4,579  
pet owners  
surveyed  
in May 2021



87,000  
respondents  
in total over the  
last 11 years

The unique data contained in this Report will allow interventions to be targeted in the areas most in need of improvement for the welfare of UK pets.



### **Pet population calculation**

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

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

### **Data presentation**

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

**For example, to calculate the estimated number of dogs not receiving regular booster vaccinations:**

Estimated dog population (May 2021) = **9.6 million**

Percentage of dogs not receiving regular booster vaccinations = **23.01%**

$9.6 \text{ million} \times 23.01\% = 2,208,960$

The figure is then rounded and presented as: **2.2 million** dogs not receiving regular booster vaccinations.

Where differences between figures are communicated (e.g. there is an increase in the proportion of rabbits living alone from 42% in February 2020 to 48% in 2021) the differences are statistically significant and validated by YouGov (C.I. = 95%,  $p < 0.05$ ).

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



## Key findings



9.6 million  
pet dogs are living in the UK

26%  
of UK adults own a dog

14% of dogs  
acquired since March 2020  
came from abroad

2% of owners  
who acquired from abroad said  
it was to get cropped ears

22% of dogs  
owned before March 2020 are  
showing new behaviours

27% of dogs  
owned since March 2020  
are showing behaviours that  
could be related to a lack of  
socialisation

9% of owners  
say their dog has gained weight  
since March 2020

23% of dogs  
have not received regular  
boosters



10.7 million  
pet cats are living in the UK

24%  
of UK adults own a cat

17% of cats  
owned before March 2020 are  
showing new behaviours

34% of cats  
owned since March 2020  
are showing behaviours that  
could be related to a lack of  
socialisation

5% of owners  
say their cat has gained weight  
since March 2020

39% of cats  
have not received regular  
boosters

10% of cats  
have not been neutered



900,000  
pet rabbits are living in the UK

2%  
of UK adults own a rabbit

48% of rabbits  
live alone

22% of new  
rabbit owners  
say that owning rabbits makes  
them stressed

27% of owners  
of single rabbits don't want to  
own more than one rabbit

6% of owners  
say their rabbit has gained  
weight since March 2020

50% of rabbits  
have not received regular  
boosters

63% of rabbits  
have been neutered

### Population

No significant  
increase in pet  
populations



### 2 million

pets acquired  
since March 2020



### 47%

of owners who  
acquired a pet since  
March 2020 had never  
owned this species as  
an adult before

### 95%

of pet owners say  
that owning a pet  
makes them happy



“This year's PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report is so relevant as it covers the months during the pandemic and so it gives us some insight into the effects or not the pandemic has had in some areas.”

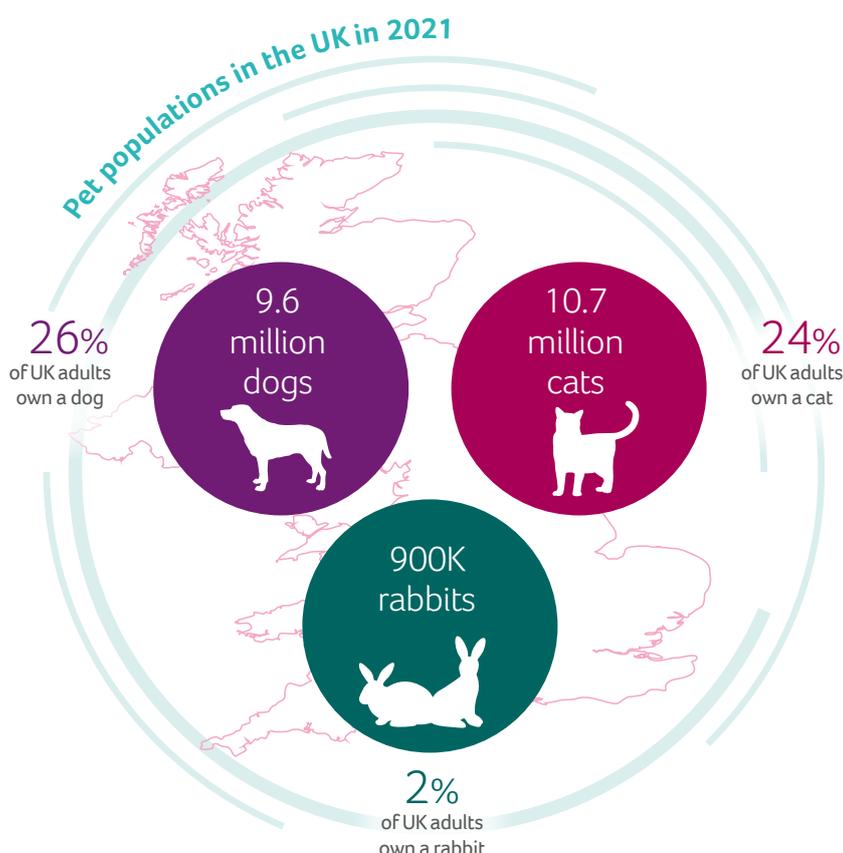
**Dr Mandisa Greene** BSc, BVM&S, MRCVS, President of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons\*

# Pet populations across the UK

Using nationally representative data and government statistics ensures we can accurately determine the proportion of the population who own a pet, and also the population estimates of dogs, cats, and rabbits. The methodology for this calculation has been applied consistently throughout every PAW Report giving us 11 years of robust pet population estimates.

There has not been a statistically significant increase in the estimated population size of the UK's pet dogs, cats and rabbits since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, despite some reports of estimates to

the contrary. Nor was there an increase in a younger population of pets; the percentage of dogs, cats and rabbits under 1 year of age remained at 3%, 2% and 4% respectively.



These figures are not significantly different from February or August 2020.

## Survey findings

Our survey did find that 2 million owners (equating to 9% of all owners) acquired their pets over a 14 month period from March 2020 to May 2021. This percentage was significantly higher for rabbit owners, with 13% saying that they had got their pet in this time, than was the case for cat owners (8%), or dog owners (10%). Whilst not directly comparable, due to the 2 month difference in timescale, in February 2020 we found that 2.4 million owners (11% of dog owners, 10% of cat owners and 16% of rabbit owners) had owned their pet less than a year.

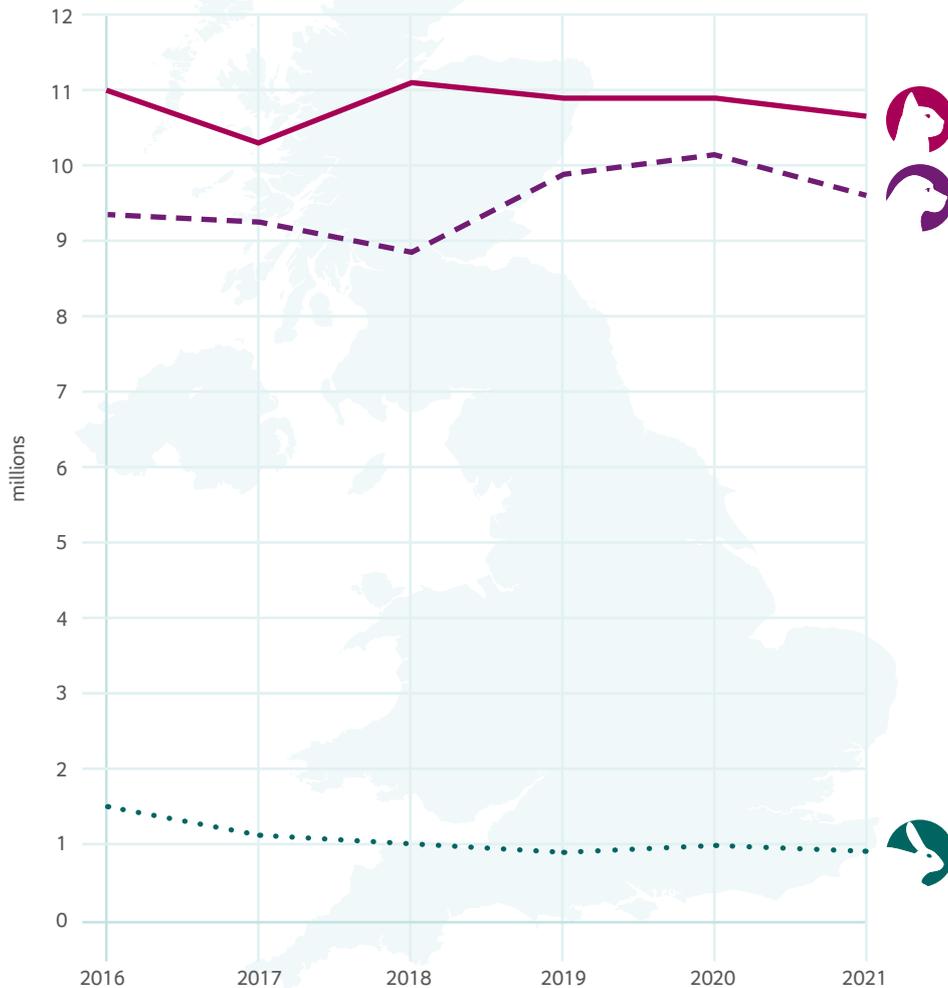
Interestingly, a third (34%) of all owners told us this was their first experience of owning a pet, or this species of pet, as an adult. 21% of owners had not previously owned any pet at all as an adult. Significantly more pet owners who said they had acquired their pet since March 2020 told us that this was their first experience of owning a pet (or this species of pet) as an adult (47%) compared to those who had acquired their pet before March 2020 (33%). So while pet populations have stayed the same overall, it appears that a high proportion of people who got their pet in the first 14 months of the pandemic are new owners. We do not have data from previous years on the proportion of owners who consider themselves to be 'new' but it is an area we will continue to monitor.

“

Those of us who have worked in animal welfare for many years think that the situation has gradually improved, but actually all we know is that we **think** things are getting better unless we look at proper data. Peer reviewed data as the PAW Report is, is absolutely critical to measuring where improvements are happening and then pointing us in the direction of where we can make things better after that.”

**Chris Laurence** MBE, QVRM, TD, BVSc, FRCVS, Chair of the Canine and Feline Sector Group

## Pet populations over the last five years



One possible explanation for the stable population estimates in the face of apparent increased demand for pets,<sup>\*</sup> could be that the negative media reporting of ‘pandemic purchases’<sup>1</sup> of pets has discouraged a section of the owner population who might otherwise have been in a position to purchase a new pet. Price increases of both puppies and kittens<sup>2</sup> could also have deterred some potential owners.

Lifestyle changes driven by COVID-19 restrictions were seen by some as a good time to get a new pet. Increased home working and reduced travel for both holidays and work created more time for new owners to spend with their pets. 23% of owners who got their pet after March 2020 did so because pandemic-related lifestyle changes meant it was a good time to get a pet. This was significantly higher for dog owners (29%, 290,000 dogs) than cat owners (18%, 160,000 cats). The reasons for this are not clear but could fit with owners being at home more and having increased time available for dog walking, training etc.

The increase in demand for dogs and cats must be acknowledged, with other sources documenting increases in internet searches around puppy purchasing<sup>3</sup> and, in some cases, dramatic price increases<sup>2</sup>. Online pet supply companies have also reported increased sales<sup>4,5</sup>. However, these increases are likely to be multifactorial, with the change in the UK population’s shopping habits driving online sales for pet supplies, while smaller businesses potentially struggled with the resources to facilitate this change.

It is also important to note that the production of new litters of puppies and kittens cannot solely be driven by demand; breeders may have chosen to delay breeding to comply with movement restrictions and social distancing, and the size of the UK breeding population cannot be increased overnight.

Unfortunately the current situation does offer unscrupulous breeders the opportunity to step in, with the increased potential for puppy farms to operate, as well as possibly driving owners to look to international sources for their new pet.

\* Separate PDSA analysis of the average number of monthly search results via Google for search terms associated with getting a dog: In 2020, since the beginning of lockdown in March there was a 222% increase in internet searches around the topic of getting a dog compared with the preceding 12 months, with a peak in May 2020.

<sup>1</sup> BBC News (2021) When your Pandemic Puppy Doesn't Work Out <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-55719338>

<sup>2</sup> Pets 4 Homes (2020) The Impact of COVID-19 on the Pet Landscape <https://www.pets4homes.co.uk/pet-advice/pandemic-pets-how-covid-19-affected-pet-sales-and-pricing-in-2020.html>

<sup>3</sup> RSPCA (2020) Fears recession and ‘lockdown puppies’ could spark dog welfare crisis <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-fears-recession-and-lockdown-puppies-could-spark-dog-welfare-crisis>

<sup>4</sup> Pets at Home. (2021). Pets at Home Group Plc Annual Report and Accounts 2021. <https://investors.petsathome.com>

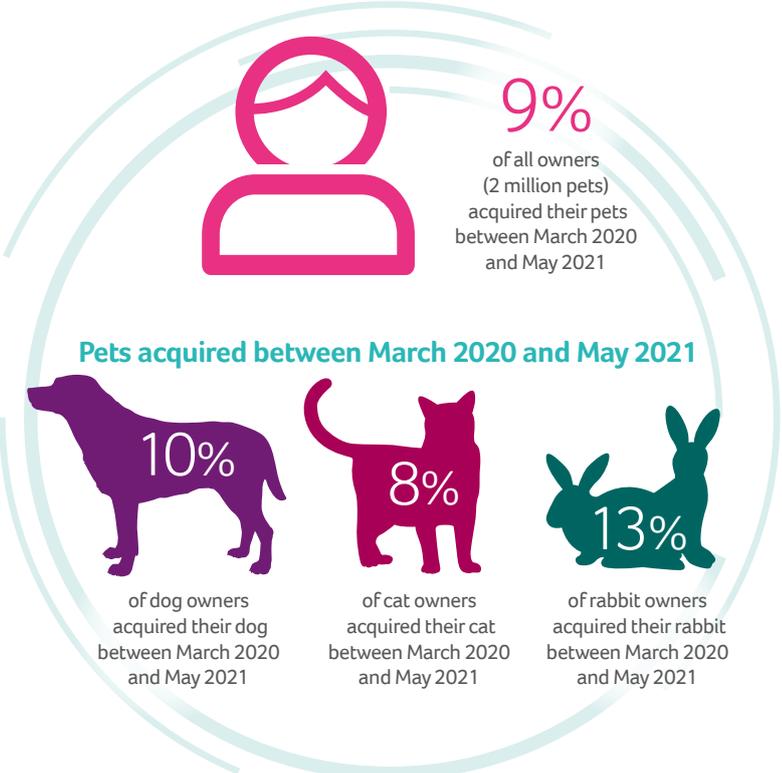
<sup>5</sup> Retail Gazette. (2021). Pets at Home revenue reaches £1bn for first time - Retail Gazette. <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2020/05/pets-at-home-revenue-reaches-1bn-for-first-time-ever/>

# Pet acquisition

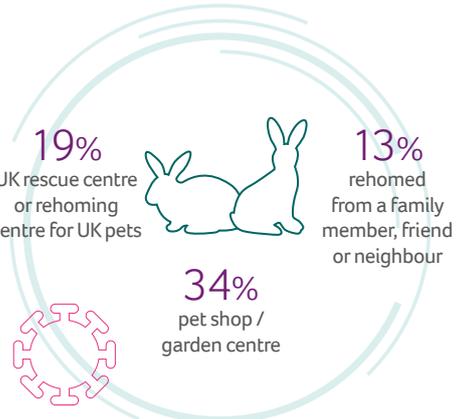
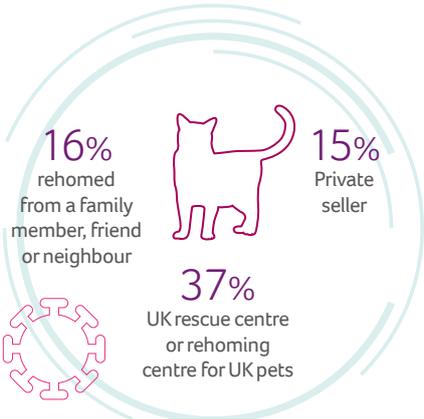
The most common places to get our dogs, cats, and rabbits from have remained largely the same as they were pre-pandemic. The top answer for dog owners was a UK breeder of one specific breed (31%), for cat owners, a UK rescue centre or rehoming centre for UK pets (37%) and for rabbit owners, a pet shop or garden centre (34%).

New owners\* were significantly less likely to have got their pet from a UK rescue or rehoming centre for UK pets (21% compared to 29% for experienced owners). This may be due to the relatively lower numbers of young pets available in rescue centres and inexperienced owners wishing to have pets from a young age to allow full knowledge of pets' early experiences.

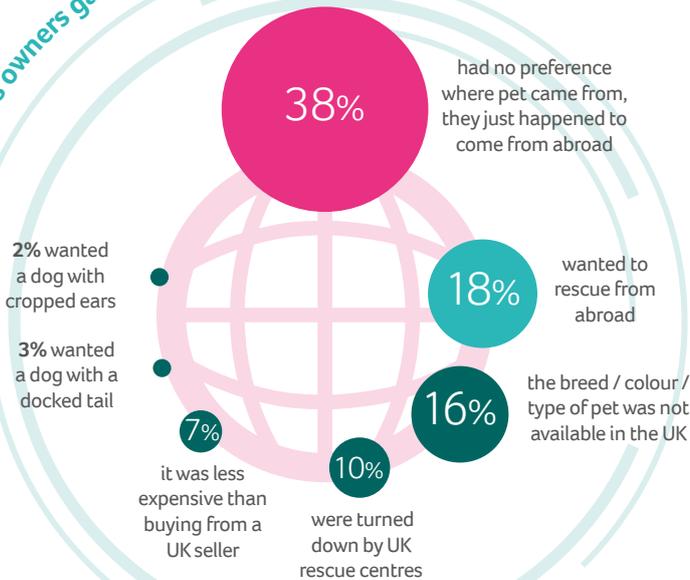
Unfortunately, significantly more dog owners who acquired their pet after March 2020 (8%) said they got them from a breeder of multiple breeds based in the UK, compared to those who had acquired before March 2020 (3%). Having multiple breeds or litters for sale can in some cases be a sign of a puppy farm, and could potentially reflect unscrupulous breeding in the face of increased demand and prices.



## How owners acquired their pets



## Reasons owners gave for getting their pet from abroad



## Owners getting pets from abroad

The overall percentage of owners who told us that they got their pet from abroad has remained unchanged at 4% (higher for dog owners at 6% than for cats and rabbits, 1% each) compared to August 2020 (3%). However, significantly more owners who acquired their pet after March 2020 said that they got their pet from abroad (10%) compared to those who acquired their pet before March 2020 (3%). This is again higher for dogs, with 14% of dog owners who acquired their pet after March 2020 saying that they got their pet from abroad compared to 5% who acquired their pet before March 2020. This equates to 140,000 dogs obtained from abroad between March 2020 and May 2021.

The increase in owners telling us that they got their dog from abroad could have been in response to reported shortages of puppies bred in the UK<sup>1</sup>. However, when we asked pet owners why they had chosen to get their pet from abroad, the most common reason given was that they had no preference where their pet came from, they just happened to come from abroad (38% of all owners, 43% of dog owners). 2% of all dog owners whose pet came from abroad told us it was because they wanted a dog with cropped ears, which equates to 9,700 dogs imported because the owners wanted them to have a cosmetic mutilation that is illegal in this country.

Owners who got their pets after March 2020 were more likely to be aged 25-34 and less likely to be 65 or over, compared to those who purchased before March 2020.

They were also more likely to have an education level of university degree or higher, an average household income of £50,000 and over, and are more likely to be employed (full or part time) and less likely to be retired.

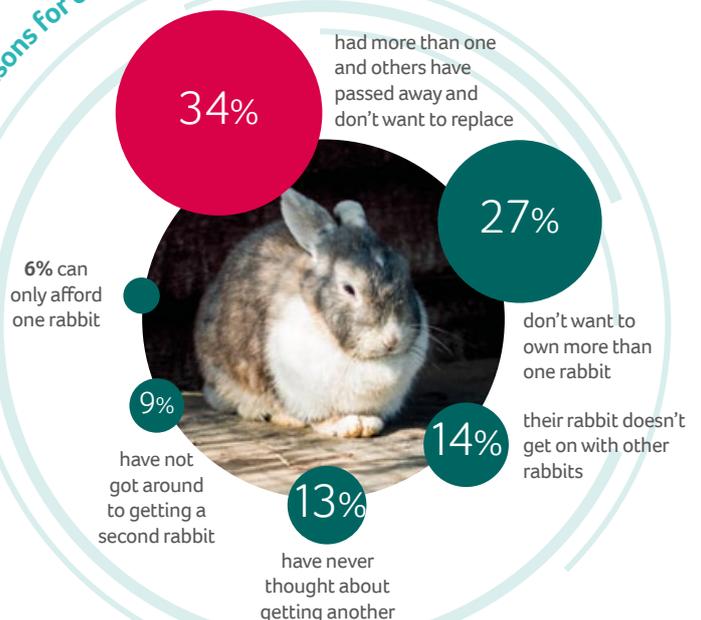
## Reasons for only having one rabbit

In 2021, we found that 48% of rabbits live alone, this has increased from 42% in 2020. This is a worrying reversal of the general trend over the last 10 years, where we have been seeing the proportion of solitary rabbits decreasing steadily, and will need to be closely monitored. Rabbits living alone were not more likely to have been obtained after the start of the pandemic, or to be owned by a new owner.

The most common reason owners gave us for their rabbit to be living alone was that they had more than one previously and others have passed away, who they don't want to replace (34%). While this is understandable for owners who feel they are coming to the end of their rabbit owning time, it remains a welfare issue for the remaining solitary rabbit, and is an area that needs to be addressed.

However, 27% said they didn't want to own more than one rabbit, 13% said they'd never thought about getting another rabbit and 9% said they hadn't got around to getting a second rabbit. These reasons could reflect a lack of awareness of the vital importance of companionship for rabbits. Pre-purchase education, particularly at the place of sale, is essential to ensure potential owners are aware of the companionship needs of rabbits.

## Reasons for only having one rabbit



<sup>1</sup>A new owner is defined as one that has not previously owned this species as an adult

<sup>1</sup> Financial Times. (2020). UK faces puppy shortage as demand for lockdown companions soars. <https://www.ft.com/content/1d14541e-0c11-48bb-90a1-3f7dc05258a6>

## Happiness and stress in owners

Pets remain an important part of our lives; 95% of pet owners agree that owning a pet makes them happy. This is statistically significantly higher for dog (96%) and cat (94%) owners than rabbit owners (90%). 87% of pet owners say owning a pet makes them mentally healthier. This is significantly higher for dog owners (90%) than cat owners (85%) and both are higher than rabbit owners (81%).

However, 16% of pet owners agreed with the statement that owning a pet makes them stressed. This is significantly higher for rabbit owners (22%) than dog (16%) or cat (15%) owners. Significantly more owners who acquired their pet after March 2020 say that their pet makes them stressed (27%) compared to those who acquired before March 2020 (15%). Owners who got their pet from abroad were more likely to agree that owning a pet makes them

stressed (23%) compared to those who acquired from other sources, including owners who got their pet from a UK rescue centre for UK pets (15%). 'New' pet owners were more likely to agree that owning a pet makes them stressed (21%) compared to those who did not consider themselves to be new owners (13%).

It is possible that 'pandemic purchases' were not fully thought out and prepared for, leading to unrealistic expectations and stress, particularly for inexperienced owners, which we know there are more of since the start of the pandemic. Dogs from abroad, especially those who have been rehomed from a previous life as strays or 'street dogs' may experience behavioural problems and reduced quality of life as they struggle to adjust to a new environment and family life, which could be one explanation for their owners to report that owning a pet makes them stressed.



“The data shows us that there have been 2 million pets in total purchased since the start of the pandemic and significantly more of these pet owners who said it was their first experience of owning a pet. There is a worrying trend showing an increase in pets rehomed from abroad, particularly dogs, and sometimes for even more concerning reasons such as body modification. It's not just dogs and cats showing some concerning trends, but there has also sadly been an increase in rabbits being kept alone, which is a reversal on previous years' trends.”

**Jo Oakden**, RVN, ISFMCertFN, CertCFVHNut, President of the British Veterinary Nursing Association

# Pet behaviour

During the pandemic, animal welfare organisations and veterinary professionals have identified two main areas of concern for emerging behavioural problems in our pets: separation related issues and lack of socialisation opportunities.

Lockdown restrictions have inevitably increased the amount of time that owners spend at home. Many pets will have appreciated this but others may have needed space and more time alone. As lockdowns start to ease and owners begin to spend more time away from home again, those pets who have become accustomed to being with us constantly may find it difficult to adjust back to being left alone, putting them at risk of not being able to cope when alone and developing separation related problems.

Our survey found that 22% of dog owners (equating to 2.1 million dogs) and 17% of cat owners



of dogs acquired before March 2020 have shown new signs of distress when left alone



of dogs acquired since March 2020 have shown signs of distress when left alone

(equating to 1.7 million cats) who had acquired their pet before March 2020 reported that their pets have shown new behaviours since March 2020. This includes 5% of dog owners who have seen new signs of distress when their pet has been left alone. 18% of dog owners who obtained their pet after March 2020 report that they are showing signs of distress when left alone – these dogs may never have experienced longer periods of time alone.

5% of dog owners who had acquired their pet before March 2020 reported that their pet was spending more time in quiet areas of the home.

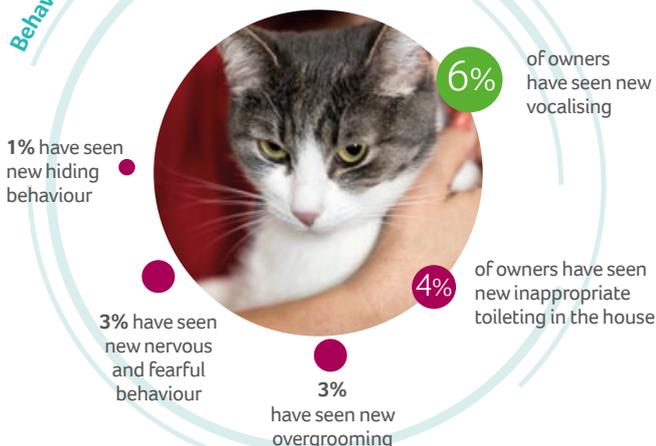
## Behaviour of dogs acquired before March 2020



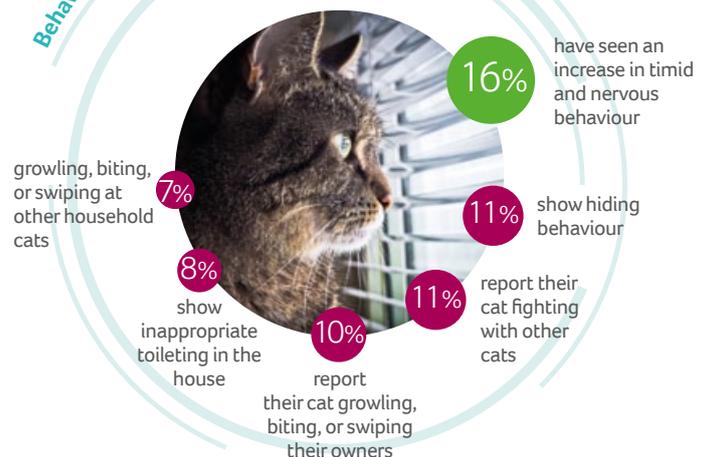
## Behaviour of dogs acquired since March 2020



## Behaviour of cats acquired before March 2020



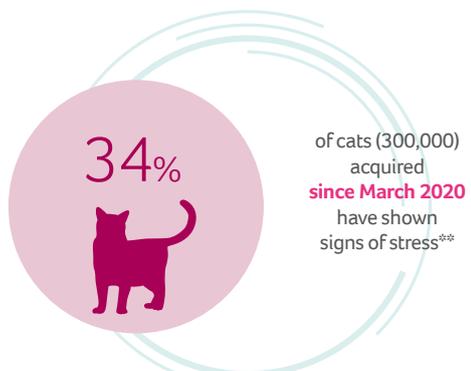
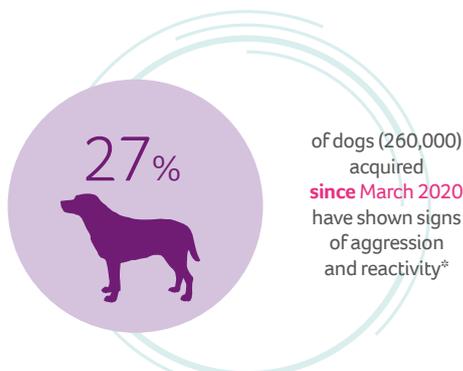
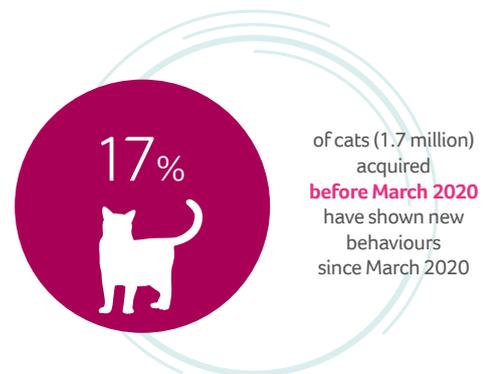
## Behaviour of cats acquired since March 2020



## Problem behaviours

Young pets purchased during lockdown restrictions may have missed the opportunity for vital early socialisation. This can result in problem behaviours, especially as these pets approach adolescence. 27% of dog owners and 34% of cat owners who obtained their pet after March 2020 report that they are showing behaviours that could be related to a lack of socialisation. For dogs this includes showing signs of fear (15%), and growling, snapping or biting unfamiliar dogs (11%), owners/carers (3%), or another household dog (2%). For cats, this includes an increase in timid or nervous behaviour (16%), hiding away (11%), and growling, biting or swiping their owners (10%) or unfamiliar people (3%).

Interestingly, a significantly higher proportion of dogs acquired before March 2020 who are not registered with a vet have shown new signs of aggression and reactivity\* (14%) since the pandemic, in comparison with those who are registered with a vet (5%). Potential explanations for this could be that owners not registered with a vet would not have access to advice from veterinary professionals about helping dogs adjust to change, or that dogs who are predisposed to being anxious may be less likely to attend veterinary practices anyway, and the pandemic has enhanced signs of anxiety in these dogs.



\*these include growling, snapping or biting owners / carers, another household dog, unfamiliar dogs, and showing signs of fear

\*\*these include growling, swiping, biting owners/carers, household cats, unfamiliar people, increase in timid, scared, nervous behaviour

## What have owners done about pet behaviour?

We asked owners whose pet has shown one of the behaviours listed\*\*\* what they had done about their pet's behaviour. The most common answer for both dog and cat owners was to look on a website (31% and 27% respectively), showing the great opportunity for providing education this way, but also raising the concern about inaccurate and potentially misleading information available online. Only 15% of dog owners spoke to a veterinary professional for advice about their pet's behaviour. This proportion was higher for cat owners (25%).



“ 22% of dogs and 17% of cats have shown new behaviours since lockdown, representing almost 4 million animals.

For dogs, this includes signs of fear and reactivity as well as distress when left home alone.

For cats, new behaviours include vocalising, house soiling, overgrooming and signs of fear. These newly reported behaviours raise cause for concern due to their effect on the welfare of the animals involved, and the potential impact on the human-animal bond. ”

**Dr Kevin McPeake, BVMS, PGDip(CABC), PhD, AFHEA, CCAB, DipECAWBM(BM) MRCVS, Lecturer in Clinical Animal Behaviour at the University of Edinburgh**



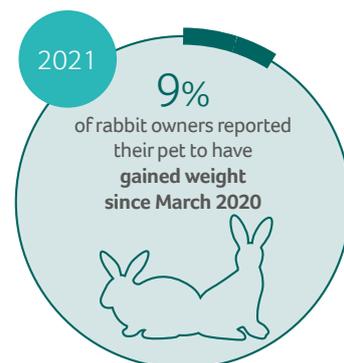
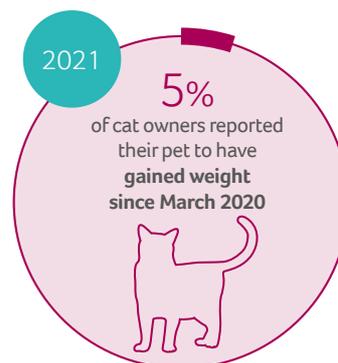
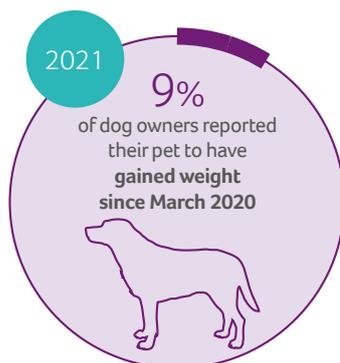
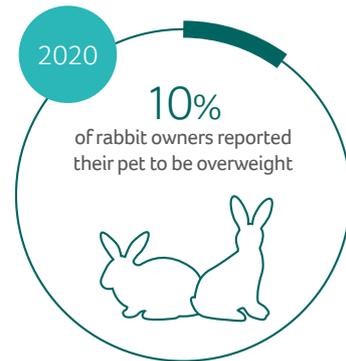
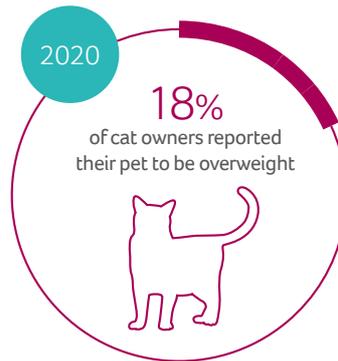
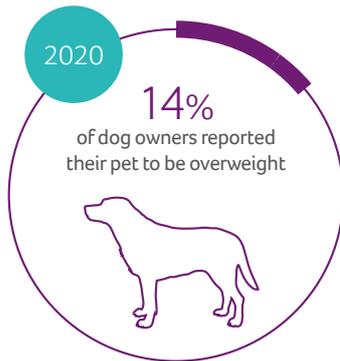
\*\*\* For dogs: barking or vocalising for more than a minute at a time at someone out of the window, jumping up at people, growling, snapping or biting another household dog, growling, snapping or biting owners / carers, growling, snapping or biting unfamiliar dogs, signs of distress when left alone e.g. scratching, destructive behaviour, prolonged barking, crying or howling, or toileting in the house, not coming back when called, showing signs of fear, spending more time in quiet areas of the home, behaviour towards my children that worries me.

For cats: Growling, swiping or biting owners / carers, growling, swiping or biting other household cats, growling, swiping or biting unfamiliar people, inappropriate toileting in the house, hiding, howling / miaowing / vocalising, increase in timid / scared / nervous behaviour, overgrooming, killing wildlife, fighting with other cats



# Diet and obesity

In 2020, 78% of veterinary professionals told us that they had seen an increase in pet obesity over the last 2 years. Obesity has remained a top concern of veterinary professionals since we collected data for the first PAW Report in 2011, consistently being chosen as one of the top 5 welfare issues facing dogs, cats, and rabbits in the UK. Despite this, in 2020, only 14% of dog owners, 18% of cat owners and 10% of rabbit owners reported their pet to be overweight or obese.



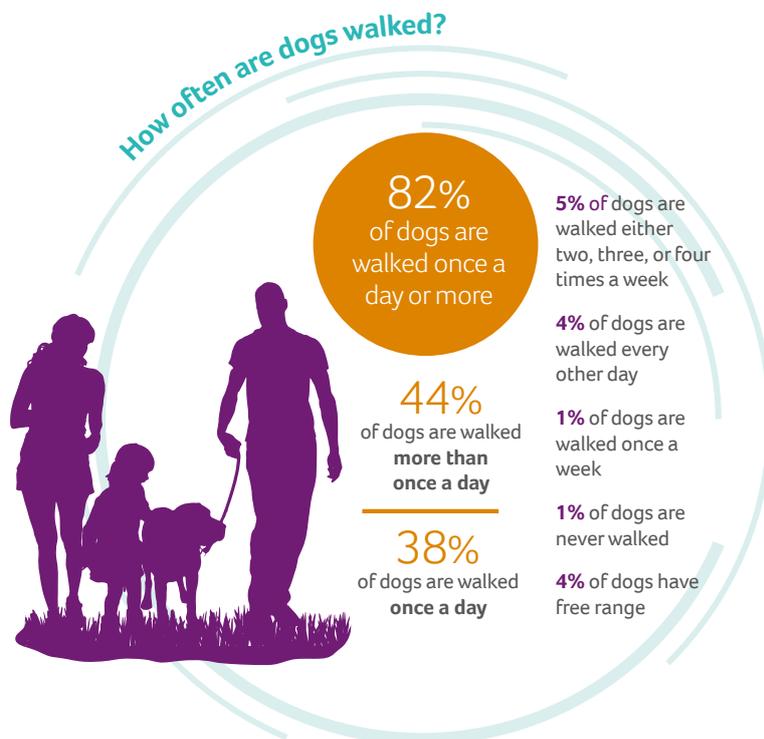
## Weight gain in pets during the pandemic

With many owners spending more time with their pets since the start of the pandemic, weight gain due to increased feeding, particularly of treats, was a potential risk, although for dogs, the opportunity to be walked for longer could have mitigated this.

In 2021, 9% of dog owners, 5% of cat owners and 9% of rabbit owners told us their pet had gained weight during the pandemic, while 9% of dog owners, 5% of cat owners and 4% of rabbit owners told us that they had fed more human treats during the pandemic.

Dogs are being walked less frequently, but for longer durations than before the pandemic. Fewer dogs are being walked more than once a day (44% in 2021, 49% in February 2020) whilst more are walked once a day compared to 2020 (38% in 2021, 33% in February 2020).

The highest proportion of dogs are still walked for 31 minutes to one hour (41%), no significant change to 2020 (43%). But less are walked for 11 to 30 minutes (29% in 2021, 39% in February 2020) and more are walked for one to two hours (20% in 2021, 13% in February 2020).



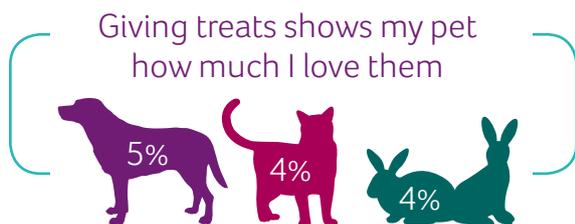
When we asked owners what was preventing their pet from losing weight, the most common response chosen was “my pet doesn’t need to lose weight” (48% of dog owners, 49% of cat owners and 57% of rabbit owners). Unfortunately, from previous PAW Report<sup>1</sup> data we know that some owners struggle to recognise when their pet is overweight or obese and in need of weight loss. Of those who had told us that their pet was overweight, the most common factors preventing their pet from losing weight were that owners give in when they beg for food (29%), they like feeding treats to their pet (19%), their pet is fussy with food (19%), and giving treats shows how much they love them (15%).

Worryingly, the detrimental health effects of obesity in our pets do not appear to be well recognised amongst owners, with only 69% of pet owners agreeing that overweight pets are more likely to suffer from serious diseases and 65% agreeing that overweight pets are less likely to live as long as other pets. Owners whose pet was not registered with a vet were much less likely to agree with both these statements (46% and 43%, respectively).

This demonstrates how important regular contact with the veterinary team providing owner education is for this aspect of pet welfare.



## Reasons owners gave for their pet's weight gain



“There’s a lot in this report that we’re going to need to discuss. One of the pertinent things I think really though is the effect that the pandemic has had on the health of the nation’s pets, particularly potential for causing obesity. There are changes in the way people have been feeding their pets, and the use of treats, as well as obvious changes in the way they’ve been exercising them.”

**Professor Alex German**, BVSc(Hons), PhD CertSAM, DipECVIM-CA, FRCVS,  
Professor of Small Animal Medicine, University of Liverpool



# Preventive health

When the first COVID-19 lockdown came into force in March 2020, in line with RCVS guidance most veterinary practices suspended routine preventive appointments in order to avoid non-essential travel and minimise risks to veterinary staff and clients. This resulted in concerns around the potential for infectious disease outbreaks due to loss of vaccine protection, and population increases due to the lack of neutering, particularly in cats.

During subsequent lockdowns later in 2020 and the beginning of 2021, many practices were able to continue to offer routine appointments. However, the requirement for social distancing and COVID-19 secure ways of working reduced the number of pets that could be seen daily<sup>1,2</sup>. Despite these restrictions, our data show very little effect on the proportion of dogs, cats, and rabbits in the UK who have received preventive healthcare\*.

## Uptake of preventive health measures in pets

Overall, there was no significant change between August 2020 and May 2021 in the proportion of dogs who have received preventive care. However, primary course vaccinations, regular boosters, worming and being currently registered with a vet are lower when compared to pre-pandemic levels. In 2021, 23% of dogs (2.2 million) are not vaccinated with regular boosters (18% in February 2020) and 29% (2.8 million) are not neutered (29% in February 2020).

In cats, a higher proportion have been neutered (86% in February 2020, 90% in May 2021), microchipped or insured when compared to pre pandemic levels. However, the proportion who have received regular boosters, a primary course of vaccinations when young or who have been wormed is lower. In 2021, 10% of cats (1 million) are not neutered (14% in February 2020) and 39% (4.2 million) have not received regular boosters (36% in February 2020).

For rabbits, a higher proportion have been neutered and are insured, while the proportion who have received regular boosters and have been wormed have decreased when compared to pre-pandemic levels. Both the proportion of rabbits that had been microchipped or treated for fleas had decreased in our August 2020 survey, but have now returned to pre-pandemic levels. In 2021, 37% of rabbits (340,000 rabbits) are not neutered (43% in February 2020) and 50% (450,000 rabbits) are not receiving regular boosters, which is higher than pre-pandemic levels (42% in February 2020).

\* vaccinations, neutering, insured, microchipped, registered with a vet, receiving flea and worming treatment

1. RCVS. (2020). RCVS publishes results of Covid survey conducted during November lockdown - Professionals. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/news/rcvs-publishes-results-of-covid-survey-conducted-during/>

2. RCVS. (2021). Sixth Covid impact survey finds improvement to practice cash-flow - Professionals. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/news/sixth-covid-impact-survey-finds-improvement-to-practice-cash/>

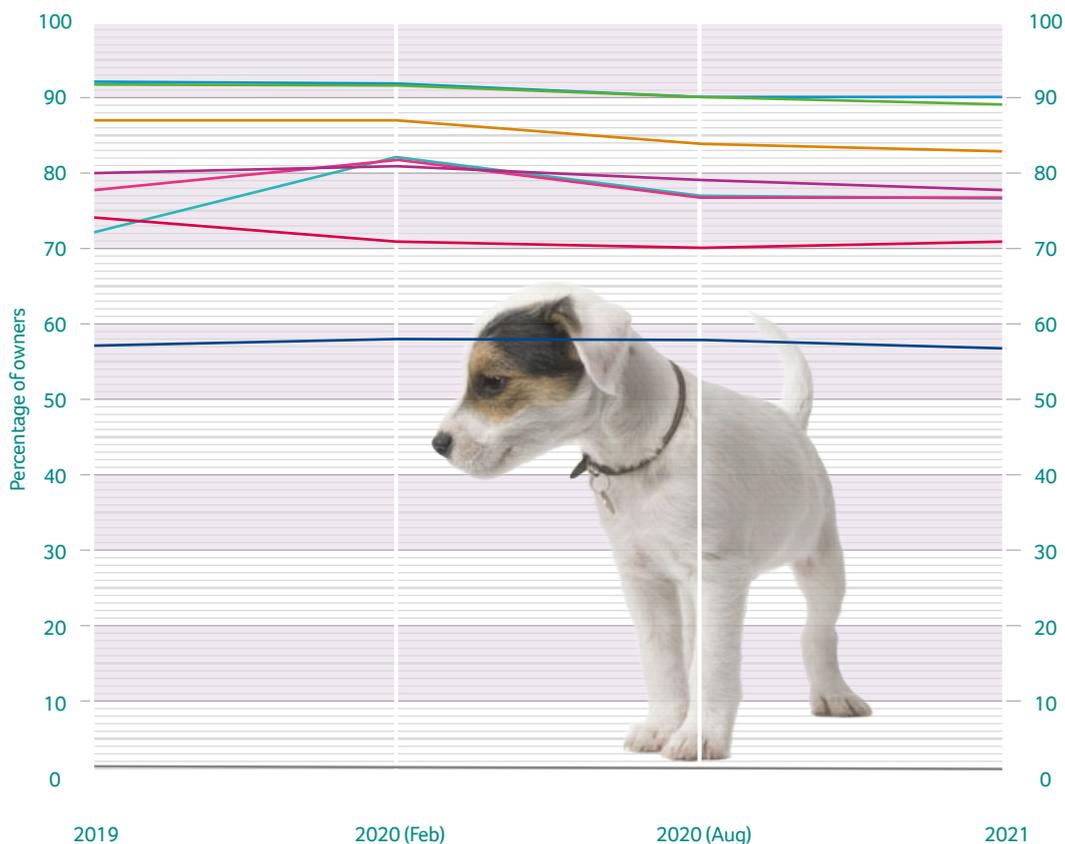
## Preventive healthcare issues due to the pandemic

We asked owners if there had been any issues with getting appointments for routine vaccinations due to factors related to the pandemic. 8% of owners told us that they had struggled to get an appointment with the vet for a booster vaccination, of which 6% said their practice had a waiting list for vaccinations and 2% said their practice was not offering vaccinations. However, the vast majority (86%) said they had not had either of these issues (7% said they didn't know or couldn't recall).

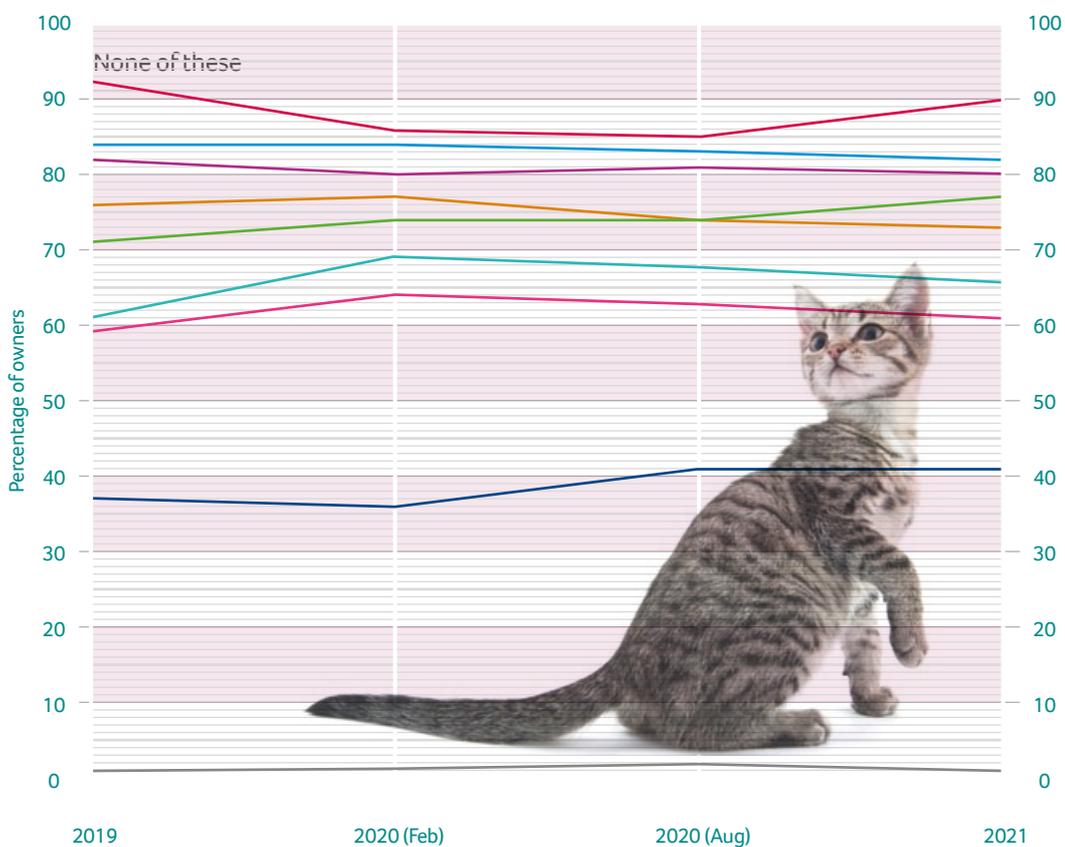
With the first lockdown coming in springtime 2020, a drop in the proportion of cats who were able to be neutered could have easily resulted in a high number of unwanted litters at this time. In response to this concern, many veterinary and welfare organisations, including PDSA, produced information for owners on how to care for their cats if they were unable to have them neutered. Although 14% of owners of female cats told us that their cat had had at least one litter prior to being spayed, and 62% of these said that the litter was unplanned, these proportions have not changed significantly since we last asked these questions in 2017.

The financial impact of the pandemic continues to be felt, although at the time of writing the government's furlough scheme is still in place and will be providing support for many. 7% of owners told us that they are increasingly worried about how they'll pay for vet bills if their pet falls ill or gets injured and 2% say they have had to get help from others (e.g. family, friends, loan) to pay for vet bills since the start of the pandemic.

### % Preventive health uptake in dogs



### % Preventive health uptake in cats



- Vaccinated – primary course (when young)
- Vaccinated – regular boosters
- None of these
- Neutered
- Microchipped
- Insured
- Wormed
- Treated for fleas
- Currently registered with a vet

## % Preventive health uptake in rabbits



“Over the pandemic, the veterinary professions have had to change their ways of working almost overnight, with increased remote working, and for a period of time, going down to emergency services only. There was real concern that this would have an impact on the brilliant work we have done when it comes to preventative healthcare in our pets over the last few years. Primary vaccinations, booster vaccinations, worming, flea treatment and neutering. But the brilliant news is that the results actually showed that despite all the challenges, the veterinary profession has managed to maintain services when it comes to preventative healthcare, and in fact, in the case of cat neutering, the numbers have gone up.”

**Dr Daniella Dos Santos**, BSc, BVetMed, FRCVS, Senior Vice President of the British Veterinary Association

# Concluding thoughts

The 2021 PAW Report provides the opportunity to objectively assess the effects of the first 14 months of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of the UK's dogs, cats, and rabbits. Using the insights gained from this Report, we can identify the areas most affected and plan ways to improve as we build back to a new normal.

As ever, human behaviour change methods (such as tailored education campaigns) are key to improving the welfare of our pets, not least with regards to the number of owners who identified as 'new'\*. Some of our data (such as the percentage of new owners who told us that their pet made them stressed, and the proportion of dogs and cats acquired since March 2020 who now have behavioural problems) suggest that a relatively high number of inexperienced owners may now be struggling with the realities of owning a pet for the first time. The veterinary professions, working with welfare organisations, are in a unique position to help these owners, for example, through online and face-to-face resources in order to prevent potential welfare issues that could be building up for the future.

Behavioural problems that have developed since the start of the pandemic, or in pets obtained during this time, highlight the need to support and educate owners. As in many areas, owners look to the internet for information and it is vitally important that credible sources promoting humane, evidence-based approaches are easily available.

Pet acquisition remains an area of concern; there appears to be a worrying trend of increasing numbers of pets being imported from abroad, particularly dogs. Also of concern is the increase in puppies who came from a breeder of multiple breeds - a potential indication of being bred for profit over welfare, possibly under puppy farm conditions. Both these increases could be a consequence of increased demand and a lack of reputable UK breeders. While many imported dogs may come from genuine

rescue organisations abroad, there are growing concerns that poor breeding establishments are involved in the international puppy trade. The increase in both these sources is currently small, however this is an area to watch closely and we will continue to monitor trends. With the new legislation around third party puppy sales due in Wales in September, and legislation in Scotland to follow, this provides an ideal time to further help owners understand how to avoid unscrupulous breeders.

Certainly, many positives can be taken from this year's Report. Pet populations have remained stable and overall levels of preventive healthcare have been maintained or have recently recovered in the face of significant challenges experienced by many veterinary practices, but we must recognise that many continue to face ongoing challenges today. The work done by all of the hard-working veterinary teams to keep delivering care vital for the wellbeing of the nation's pets must be recognised and applauded.

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



“ This year's PAW Report begins to reveal the impacts of the pandemic on our pets. Given the widely reported changes to many of our routines and behaviours there is likely to have been many consequences for our pets and this will need careful and ongoing monitoring. PAW helps transform anecdotes into evidence. It doesn't seek to answer all of our questions, but it does help us to understand how we can best respond to concerns for the welfare of the pet population, and how we can work best collaboratively. We will need to do this in the months and years ahead in order to safeguard the 5 Welfare Needs of the UK's pets. ”

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

\* A new owner is defined as one that has not previously owned this species as an adult

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