Hidden Lives

Exploring the lived experiences of pet owners and those supporting them in tackling pet related challenges



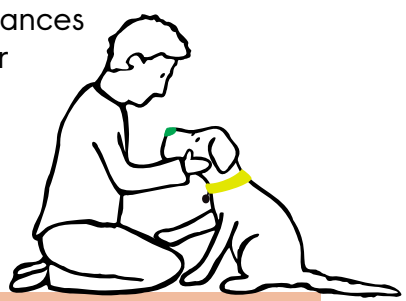
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Helping pets and their people

Hidden Lives: Lived Experience

Woodgreen's Hidden Lives research is building a **deeper understanding of the challenges affecting pets and their people behind closed doors** – challenges that can remain unseen until they reach crisis point.

Earlier Hidden Lives research explored the scale and nature of these challenges, drawing on the experiences of professionals working across communities. It revealed a consistent picture: pets are often deeply loved, but pressures around finances, behaviour, health, housing, access to services and changing life circumstances can make it increasingly difficult for people to meet their pets' needs.



"They can't get their pet to the vet because they **struggle to leave the house**."

Katherine, Woodgreen community outreach

"It's difficult when you live somewhere rural and you don't drive, **it's a big challenge.**"

Tamara, pet owner



"We often find **people are reluctant to engage in things like hospital appointments...** because they don't want to leave the pets in the house and **there's no other option** for them to be looked after."

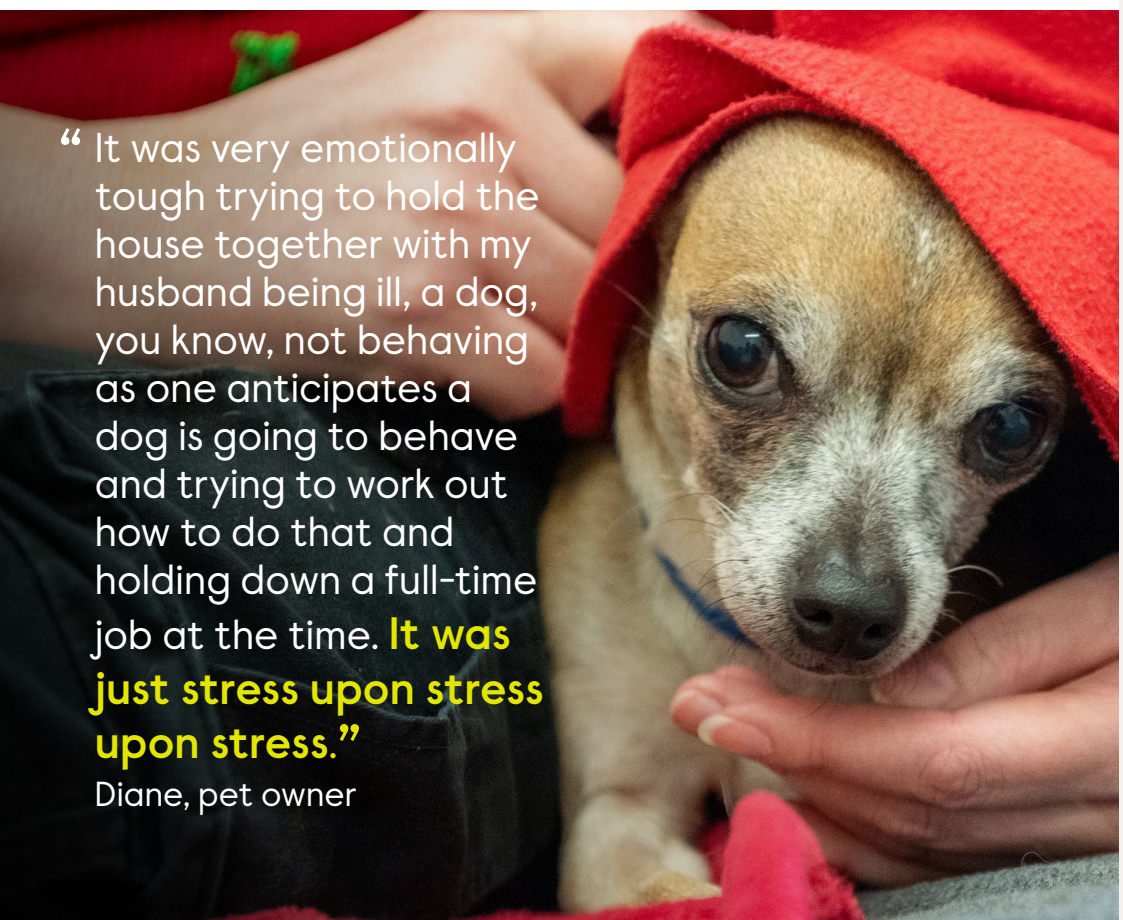
Beth, community professional

It also demonstrated that these challenges rarely exist in isolation. What begins as a problem relating to a pet can become intertwined with financial hardship, poor health, difficult housing circumstances, social isolation or other pressures affecting the household.

This phase of Hidden Lives research builds on those earlier findings by focusing on understanding the lived experiences of those closest to the issue.

It draws on in-depth conversations with pet owners who have experienced challenges, alongside community professionals including frontline workers like Woodgreen's community outreach services.

Through their experiences, the research highlights how challenges are experienced in everyday life, what can prevent people from seeking help, and what happens when the right support is available.



When caring for a pet becomes difficult

The experiences shared through this research reinforce a central finding from Hidden Lives: **struggling to care for a pet is not the same as not caring about them.**

People described

- financial pressures
- behavioural difficulties
- gaps in knowledge
- pet health problems
- barriers to accessing veterinary care and pet support services

Their experiences also demonstrate how quickly circumstances can change.

Illness, bereavement, a change in income, caring responsibilities or a move to unsuitable housing could turn something previously manageable into a significant challenge.

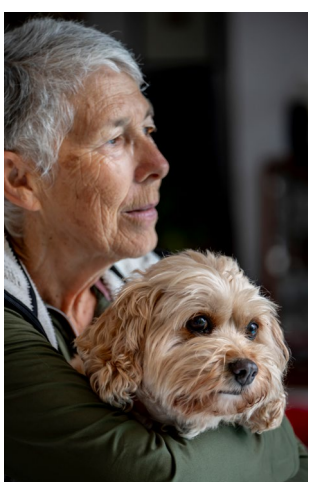


Difficulties can also compound one another. A behavioural problem could restrict somebody's ability to leave their home; a health problem could create unexpected costs; financial pressures could delay veterinary treatment making a manageable condition becomes more serious.



"She only had two cats but her husband lost his job and was really struggling to find more work. So **their financial situation had massively downturned,** then one of her cats got thyroid issues and she **obviously couldn't afford the treatment.**"

Kirsty, Woodgreen community outreach



The result is rarely one simple problem requiring one simple solution. The impact on people can be significant and the consequences are not confined to pet welfare alone.

Owners described anxiety, guilt, frustration and distress. Some changed their daily lives around their pets, became less able to see friends or family, or felt increasingly isolated.



"you never think that you're going to end up on benefits and not working."

Anne, pet owner

Relationships could also come under pressure, particularly where behavioural difficulties, caring responsibilities or veterinary costs affected the wider household.

"There are times **I will sit and cry,** like sob, **because it's hard.**"

Molly, pet owner

These lived experiences add an important dimension to Hidden Lives. Understanding pet welfare challenges requires an understanding of the wider circumstances affecting the person caring for the pet.

Why people don't always ask for help

One of the clearest findings of the Hidden Lives research is that **even where support is available, it does not necessarily mean that people are able to access it.**

Fear of talking about the difficulties they were experiencing in caring for their pets was a recurring barrier. We learnt that owners often worry about being judged as a bad owner or believe that admitting they were struggling might result in their pet being taken away from them or euthanised.

"**They feel guilty about not being a good pet owner.** It can affect their mental health in a negative way because if they're **worrying about stuff constantly,** it can be really, really stressful."

Kirsty, Woodgreen community outreach

Cost created another barrier, particularly where veterinary or behavioural support was needed. In some cases, people delayed seeking veterinary help because they were worried they wouldn't be able to afford it. This resulted in conditions deteriorating and impacting pet welfare for longer, before help was accessed.

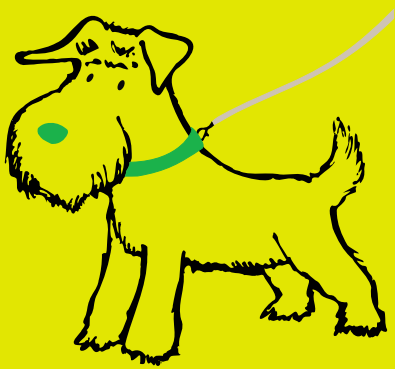


In other cases, people simply did not know that preventative support was available. Some owners had not considered approaching an animal welfare organisation for help as they associated them with rehoming rather than community based support. The research also found that sometimes people want to ask for help but don't know where to turn. Identifying and accessing the right help is another complexity for people to navigate.

"When we were out walking when he was young, there was a woman that used to do lots of dog walking there. And in naivety **I assumed that someone that did dog walking knew all about dogs and behaviour. And I said he keeps stealing stuff, you know, just don't know how to stop it.**

And she said just take it off him, don't let him have it. So that's what we did. And **I now know that's the worst thing you can do,** because that's what creates possession."

Diane, pet owner.



What support is most valued

This research shows that what people value in community based support, is both the types of interventions offered and how they are delivered.



Pet owners who received practical interventions and support valued

- flexibility
- regular communication
- support tailored to the individual circumstances of the pet and owner
- feeling listened to and understood
- being treated with compassion rather than judgement

Owners reported that **receiving support increased their confidence in managing their pet's needs.** Others described reduced anxiety or improvements in their pet's health or behaviour.



These experiences suggest that effective preventative support is about more than resolving an immediate welfare problem.

Trust, relationships, flexibility and the ability to respond to the circumstances surrounding both pet and owner can all influence the effectiveness of an intervention.

"The most common type of support I provide to struggling pet owners is reassurance. It can be really distressing and sometimes just **reassurance that they're not a terrible owner, they're doing the best they can."**

Melissa, Woodgreen community outreach





Understanding the depth of Hidden Lives

The lived experience focus of this research **brings the pet and human perspective to the core of the understanding** developed through the Hidden Lives work.

Earlier research helped reveal the scale of hidden pet welfare challenges and the role that professionals working in communities can play in identifying them.

This lived experience research **provides greater depth, showing how challenges develop, how they affect people and pets, why support may not be sought, and what can make preventative intervention effective.**

Together, the findings raise important questions for the wider pet welfare sector.

- How can preventative support become more visible and accessible?
- How can trust be built with people who may be frightened of asking for help?
- And how can support create lasting change rather than simply responding to an immediate crisis?



This research also highlights an opportunity to strengthen understanding of which interventions are **most effective in keeping pets and people together, where this is the right outcome** for both.

Hidden Lives continues to build this picture over time – combining evidence about scale with the lived experiences behind it, and using that growing evidence base to **strengthen understanding of how pets and people can be better supported within communities.**

What's next

At Woodgreen, we know rescue goes beyond shelter and rehoming, to supporting pets and their people to stay together where appropriate.

By thinking differently, sharing knowledge and building partnerships, we can end the hidden pet welfare crisis together.

To find out more about our research and next steps, get in touch with us at hiddenlives@woodgreen.org.uk

> "**It's made my life smaller** because I've not got the flexibility to go out and about... because I live on my own, **I found that really isolating.**"
>
> Molly, pet owner





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